We’ll always have Hololive

A DiGreatDestroyer fanfic

Dedicated to the me I was,

to the me I hope to always be,

and to every other me out there.

*Note: Due to format differences, this is better enjoyed if you read it from a download. I tried my best to mind page breaks and even use them for dramatic effect, so if you can afford it, please don't use the online viewer, and read the document on its native Word format. Thank you.

PREFACE

This is an elseworld (alternate universe) story, on the vein of DC titles like Earth-2, Injustice: Gods Among Us, Future's End, and DCeased. One of the most interesting things of elseworld stories, to me, is how they make use of the baggage of knowledge the reader carries, and play with it to upend their expectations. That, and the reintroduction of familiar events or concepts in a new context, or carrying a new meaning altogether. That's this story, at its core.

As such, I ask of you, dear reader, to please grant me the benefit of the doubt. If on the last chapter you read something that you know is not that way or is a contradiction of something else, then that may be on me. If you do so on the first few chapters, I ask you to please accept what is told to you, and stick with the story until an explanation is provided. You never know in which ways this world differs from our own, after all…

If you, dear reader, know nothing of Hololive, should you, then, considering what I just said, refrain from reading this story? Absolutely not! I tried my best to write an interesting story first and foremost. I think you will find great pleasure should you read this story, and happen to later discover one of the elements you thought was surely an original idea of mine, is actually a reflection of something that in fact happened for real. What's more, this story really is big a departure from our world, not just a slight variation of it. In fact, it may be too big a departure, which brings me to my next point…

Is there something as knowing too much, when reading this story? I'm afraid that may indeed be the case. I don't claim to be an expert on Hololive. My knowledge of it is, I admit, limited. I can only respect and incorporate the things I myself am aware of. Who is most likely to enjoy this story? Probably someone whose knowledge of Hololive is close to mine. That's why, if you are a fan of generation 4, specially of Tsunomaki Watame, Tokoyami Towa, and Amane Kanata, I really encourage you to read this story. You will most likely enjoy it. If I have to point out which characters I'm sure to have done a faithful representation of, my answer is those three.

The other face of that is I know some representations must, necessarily, not be faithful. If you don't like what I did with, or did to, your favorite character, I apologize. I can only

hope my shortcomings don't prevent you from suspending your disbelief and enjoying the story.

I took liberties, some really big. You'll see them as you read the story, but a couple I should mention here. I have written AZKi's name as it is pronounced, "Azuki". Suisei's last name was locked on "Hoshimati". For Sakura Miko, Sakura is name and Miko surname (I myself understand it as a nickname, "*Sakura no Miko*"). Houshou Marine and Minato Aqua are, on this story, sisters. I hope that if any transgression isn't enjoyed, it will at least be forgiven.

This fanfic features images of various kinds. Stock images; official images; fanarts. I have sourced every fanart I used on the last page of this document.

I should also make a comment on my writing and the language employed. I must admit English is not my native language. Therefore, I ask that you forgive any grammatical crimes I may have committed. Punctuation, too, may be a particularly offending matter to some. I'm afraid I may have carried over some of the quirks of my mother tongue, along its tempo. I can only say this: More than taking care to write a proper English, I used words in the English language to convey a story I wanted to tell. I hope you understand and forgive the difference.

If this story managed to make one of its readers laugh, or cry, then that'd be to me the biggest praise it could possibly be bestowed with. I, however, know my limitations. My writing must have many shortcomings. I am the most amateur one can be: this is my first fanfic, ever. Therefore, I need to temper my expectations. If this story makes you think "He, that's funny", "Oh, that'd be so sad", "Mm, this is interesting", if its mysteries pique your curiosity a bit, if a segment receives any sort of appreciation from you; in other words, if you derive the most fleeting enjoyment out of it, then sharing it with you has been worth it.

I must, however, end this afterword with a declaration: I wrote this story for myself. I wanted to see an interesting Hololive story, and realized that if I wanted to see one that rang all the right notes for me, I had to write it myself. I am truly proud of this story. Writing it has already been worth it, for me. Whether it's liked, hated, or ignored won't change that in the slightest.

That said, I'm curious to how it will be received, so I will stop taking your time, and allow it to be spent on what you have come here for: my story. May you enjoy it. May you enjoy "We'll always have Hololive".

-DiGreatDestroyer, July of 2020

"-But what about us?

-We'll always have Paris.

We didn't have it, we'd…

We'd lost it, until you came to Casablanca.

We got it back last night."

- "Casablanca" (1942).

A QUICK GUIDE TO HOLOLIVE, FOR THE NON-INITIATED

Talent not part of a generation:



-Tokino Sora
-Roboco
-Sakura Miko
-Hoshimati Suisei
-Azuki

First generation:



-Shirakami Fubuki
-Natsuiro Matsuri
-Akai Haato
-Aki Rosenthal
-Yozora Mel

Second generation:



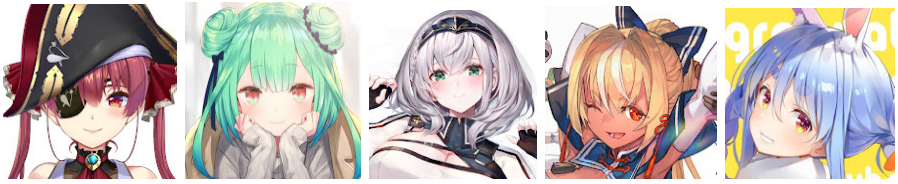
-Minato Aqua
-Oozora Subaru
-Murasaki Shion
-Yuzuki Choco
-Nakiri Ayame

Hololive Gamers:



-Shirakami Fubuki
-Ookami Mio
-Inugami Korone
-Nekomata Okayu

Third generation:



-Houshou Marine
-Uruha Rushia
-Shirogane Noel
-Shiranui Flare
-Usada Pekora

Fourth generation:



-Amane Kanata
-Tsunomaki Watame
-Tokoyami Towa
-Himemori Luna
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PART 1:

CURRENT DAY TO DAY LIFE

CHAPTER 1: A (MOSTLY) NORMAL DAY…

The girl who was named after the sky looked at herself in the mirror. Brown hair, and lovable features. The face of Tokino Sora looked back at her. It wasn't something recent, months had gone by already, but it still bothered her: she had trouble recognizing herself on that face. Every morning, she faced the mirror like this, hoping to find something, some point that allowed recognition. Maybe the eyes? They were a different color than the ones she was born with, but deep down, deep in them, she could see the same fire that had made her start on the road that had led her to where she was now. Or at least, she wanted to think that. It was always the eyes. When she thought that about them, she ceased her inspection, practiced a smile, and moved on with her day. She, after all, had things to do. Maybe someday she would have a certainty. For today, once again, a possibility would have to suffice.

She left for the office. It was a sunny day. A nice day to wear a skirt. She made a point to start her walk with an energetic cadence, engaging her arms, trying to embody optimism. It was a show of courage, an attempt to be strong. It always lasted only up to when she came across the first person on her commute. Instinctively, she then took a more guarded stance, a more rapid pace, her shoulder bag tightly gripped. This time it was a man. She looked at her, naturally. A young girl, a youthful body, a playful skirt. Anyone watching the scene would have thought it was a case of harassment. It was nothing of the sort. This man was not that kind of man at all. And the girl knew it. Women stared at her too. Even young children. It wasn't because she was a pretty woman, it was because Tokino Sora was an idol. A famous one at that. "Mommy, look, Sora-chan!" said an excited young girl, walking in the opposite direction. People recognizing her, calling her by that name, it caused a lot of complicated emotions in her. She dealt with them daily. Internally, of course. Tokino Sora couldn't be seen like that, so she didn't show all that whirlwind of emotions externally. She let a

smile bloom on her face. She waited without moving, and when the girl reached her, she crouched down to be at her same height. The girl didn't seem to know what to do, but then, out of nowhere, she jumped forward and hugged her. It was an incredibly strong hug. After some time, the girl let go, and still smiling, half said, half screamed "When I grow up I want to be an idol just like you! Right, mommy?!" The woman who watched the exchange was also smiling. "That's right, Akane-chan really loves you, Sora-chan. She's always talking about your pretty voice, how it always cheers people up, and how she's going to be just like that in the future." The idol smiled. "I have a bit of a cold today, so my voice isn't as pretty as usual, sorry you can't her it live," she said, apologetically. The girl didn't seem to mind, nodding to reassure her. "Akane-chan, you will make a great idol one day. You already cheered me right up, I'm overflowing with energy to start my day!" She then gave her a blooming smile, her first half-honest one of the day.



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The girl was led away by her mother. She waved goodbye, and screamed as she left, "Sora-chan, I hope you start posting videos again soon!" The idol waved back. She then turned around, and wiped a couple of tears. The warmth, and the pain, they always came hand in hand. It was a balancing act, as easy as it was hard. Don't let the pain bring you down, let the warmth propel you forward. The idol started walking again, engaging her hands, trying to embody optimism. It was a show of courage, an attempt to be strong. This time it lasted up until she reached the office. Everyone walking down the street got to see Tokino Sora smiling back at them that day, and everyone who came across those people saw them smiling too. An unusual amount of smiles were seen on the faces of everyone commuting through the city streets for the rest of the day. To think it all started due to a young girl… a girl called Akane.

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The girl who had become the right-hand woman of the girl who named herself after the sky entered the office. It was a big building, 4 floors in height. Not that many floors, considering how they took the stairs straight from the street to the second floor, bypassing the first completely, on which a goods store was nested. Second floor had the reception, and beyond it the common areas; these included the lounge/cafeteria, the kitchen, and a gym, which doubled as their dance practice floor. The third floor was where recording could take place, should they wish to do it here instead of on their own homes. Finally, the fourth floor was where the administrative offices were, and also were the meeting room was. This fourth floor had become her kingdom, these past 6 months. And that meeting room was where she was headed this morning. Truth be told, this building was fairly recent. They had a smaller one, before. Before… yeah. Before she become the sole manager of everyone.

"A, wait for me!", said the girl with brown hair. Seems she had spent too long reminiscing, and had given the leader the chance to catch up. Carelessness she would pay for, no doubt. She eyed the elevator, already lamenting the fate she knew could not be avoided. "Hey, S, you sure look energetic today. Did something good happen?" The girl who was named after the sky just chuckled, with a cute "hehe". She didn't do that much. Seems something good had indeed happened. A smiled. Good. That was good. She then proceeded to push her non-optical glasses, and poured all her hopes into her next sentence. "Anyway, nice timing. I was just about to take the elevator to the fourth floor, let's go". "Uh, what are you talking about, A? We are going up the stairs, of course! God, I can't believe you are so lazy! Let's go, let's go!" Her hopes dashed, as she knew they would be, A had no chance but to be led by the unusual bundle of energy up the stairs.

They arrived at the meeting room. The first ones to do so, of course. There was still plenty of time before the others made their arrival. This was their usual routine. A would prepare reports and design the main points of the meeting, and S would receive a handy digest, that she would go through right before the meeting started, to be able to direct it in an appropriate fashion. Yeah, a digest… She froze. The brown-haired girl was babbling about something or another. They knew each other before, of course; they were, after all, members of the same group. But them working together like this, fulfilling these new roles, leader and manager respectively… only 6 months, yet they had a strange synergy right from the start. A well-oiled machine, they were. Whether it was because of their similar talents, or due to what they went through together, that A couldn't tell. Still, she was glad they made such a good team. But that didn't mean they didn't have crisis, like this one. "So, anyway, A, since you aren't paying me any attention… mind handing me the digest?", said the

brown-haired girl. A had, of course, forgotten it when leaving her home. “Give me a moment, I’ll write you a new one.” “What do you mean, the meeting is about to start!” The time they had suddenly didn’t seem so plentiful.



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It was an unusual sight indeed. Almost seemed to have come right out of a work of fiction. On the top floor of their office building, their meeting was about to start. They even had a formal, rectangular meeting table for it and all. This part had nothing unusual to it. What was unusual about the meeting were those attending it, more precisely their appearances. No two outfits were alike. They all oozed personality, most of them with bright, vivid colors. Any observer who didn’t knew better would think this was play-believe time for a group of delusional young women. It was nothing of the sort, nor did such an observer exist, probably. This group was famous, after all. This was a **Hololive** meeting. A group with an important mission to fulfill. A group whose members all shared a passion. And, after what happened, a group with a heavy, strong legacy to carry into the future.

They made a point to meet once a week. It was kind of their ritual. The date made today’s meeting special, there where its contents did not. Chairing the meeting, as always, was the brown-haired girl who had the most experience when it came to idol matters, their current leader, S. Standing next to her was A, acting as her assistant, and the current manager of the group. Their similar backgrounds had allowed them to work well together, and act their parts without problems. Critical ones, at least. Still a little flustered by their recent mishap, they surveyed the room.

The first chair at the table’s lateral was occupied by Shirakami Fubuki, the oldest Hololive member. Next to her sat Inugami Korone. Both were girls with animal traits. There was a time where that

didn't matter. On the first chair of the opposite lateral sat Minato Aqua, the mermaid, with a silent mer. *He*. They loved that joke. Next to her sat Tsunomaki Watame, Hololive's newest member, but one of its most successful. Finally, on the opposite end of the table, facing them, was a girl dressed in a tight crimson outfit. Houshou Marine. She was as brazen as her sister was shy. And for each ounce of brazen in her, she had two of caring. Marine gave them a look, and it brought them back. No point waiting to start, seeing as they had full attendance, once again. Hololive's finest, the 6 sitting were. Half of the current members. "Thank you once again for attending our weekly meeting…"



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The meeting ended satisfactorily. The main event of it was reviewing collaborations and partnership offers. These were some of the first they had gotten since then, so it was special for them. On the anniversary too, although the leader ended up not mentioning the date at all. Conscious decision or slip of the mind, she wasn't sure of it herself. Despite everything, things were looking good for the group. Everyone was over 1 million subscribers. Viewership numbers were great too. Well, for those that had them. The leader, for some reason, hadn't uploaded a video in 6 months.

She appeared on the big gaming collaborations and regular programs of the other members, but she didn't utter a word. There were theories about it, of course, although the majority of the public could understand her reasons. Or at least, they thought they could. Truth was, only the Hololive members knew the truth. She was worried they may bring up the topic, but they had never done so. Whenever they saw each other, they smiled warmly at her, and didn't touch the issue. They were all so kind, and that kindness was the reason Hololive was so popular. Both now, and before.

They all said their goodbyes and left. Watame paused for a moment on the door to give a wave of the hand to A before crossing it last. Only the leader and her assistant the manager remained. "What do you think, A?", said the girl sitting at the head spot while looking at the closed door. "About

what?", replied the girl who kept herself busy by neatly gathering the documents. "About them, about me… about us", said the girl used to sad smiles. A finished neatly organizing the papers before answering. "I think they are doing their best, and you are too. That's all you can ask of someone, really. It's plenty. Enough."

Enough, no doubt about it. For the leader, A's words were comforting enough.



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Houshou Marine left the meeting first, her being closest to the door and all. Man, she got meetings were necessary, but she couldn't wait for that one to end! Not because it had been particularly bad or anything of the sort, of course. It was because she couldn't wait for what came after it, for what her and her comrades had planned! And speaking of the devil, here was one. Cute gothic dress, cute pink hair, cute pretty face. She had been waiting for her and for the meeting to end, no doubt. She made a cute, earnest expression, and said "Come on Marine, everyone is with their partner but me!"

-"Well well Rushia, don't tell me Pekora and Miko are making fun of you again!".

-"Noel and Flare too this time!".

-"Well, guess this is the start of our revenge, then! Everyone, it was a lovely time but, as you know, destiny waits for no woman! Neither do the karaoke places where you have a reservation!"

Making that grand declaration, Marine prepared to leave, but stopped once she noticed Aqua, leaving the meeting room and then leaning against the wall, sighing with her eyes downcast. She closed the distance in a moment, and before Aqua could look up…

"Now now, what are you mopping around for?" she said while messing her hair.



That these were sisters that loved each other very much, was clear for everyone to see.

And that sister love was perhaps the most annoying kind of love, was made very clear too.

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Tsunomaki Watame left the meeting last, being farthest from the door and all. She stretched her arms on the hallway with her eyes closed. Another meeting over with! Another week to tackle to the best of her abilities ahead of her! She opened them again, and noticed the commotion in the hallway. She chuckled as she observed the sisters bickering, then noticed Rushia approaching while her partner was fooling around. “Watame-san, Fubuki-san, Flare sends her regards.” Only then did Watame notice that Fubuki had come to stand by her side at some point. They sent Flare their best regards too, then saw Rushia depart with Marine towards the karaoke time gen 3 had planned, once the latter had finished making a mess out of Aqua’s hair. “Must be nice…”, said Fubuki, as Aqua cursed the sister she so dearly loved. Watame understood what she meant. Not having a sister, but having generation comrades; having them all no less. Both Fubuki and Watame were, after all, the only remaining active members of their respective ones. Aqua would be too, if not for…

“Hey hey hey, why does gen 3 get to have all the fun!”

…the bundle of energy called Oozora Subaru who appeared out of nowhere, and tackled Fubuki and Korone, standing beside her, with a hug. Watame observed them smiling. They were part of the

same unit in Hololive once, hence why they were so close. OKFAMS was its name. These 3 were now the only remaining members.

“Let’s go do something too! It’d be too weird to imitate them and go to a karaoke too, but let’s grab a bite! Let’s go, let’s go! Aqua, you are coming too!”, said Subaru before grabbing her hand and running away, just seconds before the poor girl had a chance to fix her hair, messing it up for the second time that day. No one opposed the idea, of course. Only Aqua protested her poor hair’s fate. People like Subaru turned a B minus day into an A plus one by virtue of just being there. Fubuki and Korone followed silently. Watame stretched again, then ran after them while saying “Wait for me!”



CHAPTER 1: A (MOSTLY) NORMAL DAY… : PAUSE

Tsunomaki Watame character song – Bubble Love

https://youtu.be/2I3oQIF6UaU

Is the world, so complex a thing?
I want to be told the secret words please!
Do your best me, even more than usual,
today too, like tomorrow, the world will go on.

If today, the same day comes
then I have to do more than usual,
yes!



To have a talk, ah how hard,
no matter what, I lack what it takes to convey it.

No matter how many, how many times I try my best,
there may also be things I can’t do,
but if I don’t quit there, one day for sure,
I’ll be able to reach you.

If I must write it down,
I feel my feelings would get lost,
so how about I recite our secret magic instead?
Do your best me, be bold at times,
today too, at your side, we walk the world.
Actually, when I get angry,
I get scary and jealous,
yeah.



Ah, isn't it nice, that sweet magic,
like an *ice-cream* you've never seen before.

These hidden feelings, sometimes make my heart beat beat beat,
and the overflowing words make me go red,
I can't say "it's fine with everyone" well,
but despite that, I'd like us to be together.

Why are words this difficult and complex?
Can you tell me the secret words please?
Do your best me, even more than usual,
today too, like tomorrow, the world will go on.

Always from now on, with everyone that I love so,
getting in fights and making up, more, and more,
if that calm continues, wouldn't that be… fine?



If I must write it down,
I feel my feelings would get lost,
so how about I recite our secret magic instead?
Do your best me, be bold at times,
today too, at your side, let's walk the world.

Is the world, so hard a thing?
Can you tell me the secret words please?
Do your best me, even more than usual,
today too, like tomorrow, the world will go on.
Today too, with everyone, we walk the world.

CHAPTER 1: A (MOSTLY) NORMAL DAY… (CONT.)

It was a nice sunny day outside. Watame walked without paying too much attention to her surroundings, and thought back to the meeting that had just finished. She admired S and A for their strength. What they had sacrificed, and the obligations they had to shoulder… not producing content in solitary was understandable, but they probably tried to compensate for that by dealing with all the management duties by themselves. The importance of the administrative role they played couldn't be overstated. It was thanks to them that Hololive ran so smoothly. If you asked any fan for the reason of the success they enjoyed, he would probably point towards the content they were all producing, but truth was, having to just worry about producing said content made that task much easier. Especially when administrative and production related things wasn't your forte, as Watame sheepishly had to admit.

Right, the success they were having. Everyone was over a million subs already, and some were well on their way to reaching two. Watame would know, because she currently sat at the top of Hololive, due to her number of subscribers. She felt joy at her hard work paying off, however she wasn't conceited enough to think it was all thanks to her. This, like every achievement a Hololive member obtained, was a group effort. Being number 1 was both an honor, and a responsibility. The responsibility to earn that spot each day, and to push forward the heights of that success even further. Thankfully, because, once again, she was a Hololive member, she was not alone on this endeavor. Marine and Subaru, Hololive's number 2 and number 3 respectively, were very close by. There was some distance between them, true, but in this business those distances could shrink without warning. Watame couldn't let her guard down if she wanted to retain her spot. She wasn't obsessed with it, but she did have some pride to maintain, and a healthy competitive spirit shared by everyone meant that, by trying to overtake each other, they all climbed higher and higher without really noticing it.

If the top 3 could be considered a "young wind" in regard to Hololive, then the top 6 was completed by members of the "old guard". Aqua was number 4. She was the one who best managed to transition and retain her popularity from before, and carry it into the present. Fubuki and Korone were number 5 and number 6. They had been big before, and they certainly were no slackers now either, but that they had been overtaken by the new top 3 was undeniable. Still, Watame was very thankful to them. It was thanks to their efforts that there was a place called Hololive for her to join in the first place. She always made sure not to forget that. In the same way they had, she hoped she too could leave Hololive a bigger, better, stronger place for the future.

Thinking about those things, Watame walked without paying too much attention to her surroundings. That's probably why she didn't notice the individual that suddenly approached Aqua out of nowhere, until the whole group had stopped due to it.

A fan stopping them out of nowhere wasn't such a rare occurrence, yet it still made everyone a little nervous, because fans were as varied as they came, and there was no predicting what they would do. On top of that, there was the possibility that the one who approached wasn't a fan at all; this prospect was the more terrifying. If this individual was in fact a fan, it would be a peculiar one. First was the gender. She was a female. Even though they were all girls, or precisely because of that, most of their fans were men. They really wished to have more female fans, but alas, that's how it was. It appears they enjoyed a lot of popularity with little girls, and as the age went up, the popularity with the female segment went down. And that was it: the second weird thing was her age. Most of their fans were young people, but this woman was middle aged. Getting a good look at her, she seemed to have some bruises and bandaged cuts on her arms and face. It was hard not to wonder what her story was, and even harder to guess it. Thankfully, they didn't have to wonder too much, because she suddenly spoke, as suddenly as she had approached: "Thanks for saving my son's life!"



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They reached the Karaoke place. They were more or less regulars in this establishment. It had a nice system that allowed them to keep score and see who won the night. Of course, the main goal was to have fun, but a little competition never hurt anybody. The system in question registered the reaction that a performance produced after it had ended. The more cheers and applauses got the win. It was a very smart system, it accounted for different voices and clapping rhythms, so having a noisy partner

didn't guarantee you a win. Oh, that's right. They formed teams of couples. Noel-Flare, Marine-Rushia, Sakura-Pekora. They drew lots, and this time Noel and Flare were selected to start. They had two rounds, and alternated, so the first couple would sing first and fourth, the second one second and fifth, and the third one third and sixth. After talking it out amongst themselves, Flare would sing first.

Shiranui Flare made her selection. It was a game song, but a very fitting one for her, due to how elegant it was. *Reset*, by Ayaka Hirahara. The instruments first notes started playing, and Flare concentrated. Then she started singing.

https://youtu.be/i3FQDpTA_lE

Even though the scattering petals…

Gave color to the town…

The final time has come …

Is what I was told by the wind.

Because the stations come and go…

There's no need to worry…

The moon I came across back then…

Told me with its light.

Always doing nothing but

shedding the same tears I'll continue,

because without losing,

you'll never realize...!

If I could have a single wish come true,

it'd be to say goodbye to the me of yesterday.

If there is such a thing as a feeling that doesn't change,

they'll certainly always reside under the sakura tree.

So the promise of that day,

doesn't fade…



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Inugami Korone placed her order. She didn't even need to look at the menu, she did so just out of habit. "Eh, you are having that one again, Korone-san~?" She always used to tease her like that. Well, looking at the menu was both out of habit, and out of need. It seems everyone had made a wordless agreement to not utter a word, until after placing the orders. They were sitting at a nice table on the café of their choosing. It was quite a way away from the office, but since the attention was nice, the decorating was pretty, and the confections were tasty, when the time came to choose there was no other option. Eventually everyone did, and Subaru broke the silence: "Well, that happened."

The tale of the mother was as follows: She had been in a car accident with her two sons, and her eldest one ended pretty badly hurt. Fortunately, her youngest one was a fan of Aqua, and the mother herself spent some time watching her with him, in an attempt to both control the entertainment his son enjoyed, and to bond with him. And Aqua just happens to be the host of a program dealing with first aid and emergency response techniques, airing regularly on Saturday's. Thanks to her helpful tips, both the mother and youngest son knew what to do to help the eldest one, and it seems he was expected to make a full recovery. Whether Aqua's streams actually saved his life or not only a doctor would be able to tell, but since the wounds must have been serious enough for the mother to think so, and since opportune treatment was one of the biggest factors in getting a good outcome in any medical emergency, they very well may have.

Korone took a glance at the girl in question. She didn't seem to know what to make of that: even though she made sure to accept the gratitude of the mother to the best of her ability, Aqua was now very silent. Even so, Korone felt the news would end up making her glad. Without a doubt, it was with the intent to help people avoid sad results that Aqua had started her weekend program. It wasn't that unusual, if you thought about it. Someone who tasted a bitter pain, trying to spare others from it. Maybe the remembrance of that event had been prompted, and that made her silent. Korone was not one to talk, because she was silent too. It wasn't like she didn't have memories of her own, after all.

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"You really are amazing, Aqua-san", Tsunomaki Watame said. Even though the girl was silent, she was really happy for her. No doubt, it was with the intent to help people avoid sad results that Aqua started her weekend program. Incidentally, Watame had one too, also on Saturdays, only hers was about cooking. At first it was only simple desserts, but she used her free time to study the culinary arts, and thanks to that she currently teaches how to make some really interesting main dishes on it as well. Granted, it's not on the same category as Aqua's life saving one, but still… "Watame-san, I got a boyfriend thanks to your sweets!", "Watame-san, with this I don't feel bad about not having a girlfriend!", it wasn't unusual that she got messages such as those. Seems to some, her program had managed to be live changing, after all. That's why she felt happy that Aqua's had managed to achieve the same, and that she got to taste that heart-warming gratitude firsthand. It was nice, feeling that all your efforts had not been in vain, seeing them actually pay off.

"That's right, way to go, Aqua! You are super amazing, and so is your program!", Subaru said. Watame turned her attention and thoughts towards the girl. She also had a weekend program of her own, on Sundays, centered around maintaining a good physical health. In other words, an exercise program. Aqua and Marine were the regular cohosts, although every Hololive member was welcomed to join any given week, and they all had at some point, even S and A. These regular weekend programs seemed to do wonders for popularity. In fact, out of those present, the only ones without one were…

-

Inugami Korone, sitting next to Shirakami Fubuki, had her thoughts on Subaru. She too had a weekend program, like Aqua and Watame. In fact, these programs seemed to do wonders for popularity. There was a clear correlation between having one and their spot in terms of subscribers in Hololive. Of the top four, three had one. Watame had her wonderful cooking show, Aqua her

useful medical training show, and Subaru her excruciating, but very useful for young girls trying to stay fit, exercise show. The alpha and the omega they were, Watame's wonderful confections and Subaru's draining exercises. They balanced each other out perfectly, as many fans, herself included, could attest. Ahem. Getting back to the matter of popularity, Marine was the only exception. Number 3, and no program. But she always appeared on Subaru's program, without exception. Aqua did so as well. Korone suspected Marine dragged Aqua to it. She did that a lot, now that she thought about it. Since Subaru was number 3, and Aqua number 4, by all rights it should be Subaru attending the weekly meetings. No doubt both Marine and Subaru had made the request to swap spots. With Aqua, an excuse to drag her out periodically and make her interact with others was always a good thing.

Thinking about that, Korone looked around, and caught Watame staring straight at her.

-

Ah. She had been caught staring…

-

Oh? Was Watame staring? Perfect opportunity to engage in some mischief…

-

-"Pray tell, Watame-san, what were you thinking about, looking at us so intently?"

-"Eh, well, you see…"

-"You were thinking about how we don't have a program of our own, right?"

-"Eh…"

Busted.

-"That's ok, we are aware and sorry for it. We are sorry we can't do more, save stick to our regular old content. You guys grabbed all the good ideas! Now we are here, falling behind in subs, not needed by anyone, not being of any help to any…

-"That's not true."

-

Everyone turned to look at the girl who had spoken last. Minato Aqua. She had suddenly broken into the conversation, interrupting what was most likely Korone's daily attempt at humor. "That's

not true", the maid dressed girl repeated. "You being there is enough". A pause, just as their confections arrived. Once they were on the table, she continued. "How do you deal with all that happened?" Silence. "I know Marine will always be there for me, but I don't want to always be just a bother to her. So, sometimes I prefer to call one of you guys. Sometimes it's hard… and you always pick up. So you are needed. At least I need you. And at least, I think you are all amazing."



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It was the Marine-Rushia pair first turn. Houshou Marine would take it. Song selection, done! It was an anime opening. Rushia probably already knew which one it was. Marine liked singing it a lot to her. It was one of those contradictory songs, where the sad lyrics were betrayed by an upbeat tune. No one felt sad by hearing it, everyone always happily sang along. To portray sadness in such a light was therapeutic in a way, it was a "sing your sorrows away" type of exercise. That's why Marine picked it, probably. She wasn't one to sigh her life away, after all. The song was *Freckles*, from Rurouni Kenshin. And here came the buildup, and the chorus.

If we could go…

Farther, together…

Just that, would make me happy…

The memories are always beautiful but,

With only that you'll hunger.

Even though it’s a really sad night…

I have to ask why,

Is it that I can’t remember their smile.



--

Shirakami Fubuki couldn’t help but smile at Aqua’s words. She felt compelled to speak her thoughts on the state of the group, so she did. “You know… at least I don’t mind not being the number one of Hololive anymore. Of course I wanted to reach 1 million subs, and I’m happy I achieved that goal, but I’m even happier that everyone did as well.” A pause. “It just feels this is the way it’s meant to be, wouldn’t you say? Sharing our success, sharing our happiness.” A lot had happened. But, despite it all… she still loved every day she got to spend with them. The truth was, not a day went by without her feeling happiness in her heart.

-“I bet you are really enjoying not having all that pressure on you, right?” said Korone, mischievously.

-“You can say that again”, came Fubuki’s reply. Then, she addressed someone who also had a stake in that conversation. “Watame: Because I know what’s it’s like, I’m going to keep doing my best to support you, ok? We’ll all do that, right guys?” Everyone nodded. “Let’s all…” Ah.

Uh-oh. She'd done it, alright. She could see Watame's eyes tearing up already. She always cried straight away. Cute, true, but still, sitting amongst the ones comforting her while being the one who caused it really was as awkward as it got… a hero, please… that's what Fubuki asked for, and that's what she got. A loud one, it was.

"Yeah, yeah, that's very nice and all, but…! We are talk, talk, talk, and the cakes got here an hour ago, or at least that's what it feels like to me! Can we, pleaseeeee?"

Everyone laughed at that, Watame too. Phew, crisis averted. Nice one, Subaru, thought Fubuki.

"So… let's all share the burdens, let's all share the happiness, and please, please, let us all share the cakes!"



--

It was the final song… of the first round, anyway. The Miko-Peko pair time to shine had come. And the one who would carry that duty would be none other than… the Elite Sakura Miko! And for her song selection... "We already lost, Peko. You always pick songs no one but you knows of, Peko-yo." Sakura felt a vein pop on her head. "Shut up, Pekora! Trying to ruin my performance because you know yours is gonna kill us?! … Ahem, sorry for that~". Smiling, Sakura Miko made her pick. It was, of course, a visual novel opening. The song started; it was a very catchy tune. She could but smile. She had fond memories of it, after all.

Back when her popularity was but a fraction of what it currently was, she had a slip while streaming. She actually started the eroge that featured this opening, and everyone heard it. If you asked anyone, that was Sakura Miko's relationship to this song. But it was much deeper than that.

Sakura really liked eroges. Scratch that, she loved them. Granted, they had plenty of lewd fanservice, but they also featured warm stories and characters, that made you company on lonely days of your life. *Son of a Witch* was no exception. Its protagonist was a gloomy young man, who decides to turn his life around and try to fill the hole in his heart, both figuratively and literally. He's a stand in for the player, you see. It's very on the nose, but that didn't make it less effective. Playing it, Sakura thought that maybe she, too, should try to… well, she should try. She entered Hololive not long after that.

Nowadays, she rarely played eroges anymore. She didn't have time for it. They held a special place on her heart, of course. But she had other things filling it with warmth now. Occupying an honor spot amongst them were the people in this room, those hearing her sing now. Speaking of which, here came the chorus.

https://youtu.be/riScAYR6vio?t=47

Gather the fragments of your heart!,

And give, a kiss, to the pain that burns your chest!

Tomorrow will be a favorable wind;

Your future will be wrapped in light…!

Tears are jewels,

maidens of love!



That’s how the Hololive girls spent their days. Smiling. Laughing. In each other’s company.

They had tasted a fair bit of pain. But despite that, or precisely because of that…

They worked for the happiness of others, while making sure not to neglect their own.

They made sure to value each day. To treasure each moment.

To them, every second was a gift.

…

Or, at least, that was true for most of them…

The brown-haired leader of the group was exhausted. It was well into the evening, and all the day had been spent doing administrative work, herself and A the only ones engaged in the boring but necessary grind. It was now finished, which meant they were finally able to go home. The girl didn’t do so right away. She sprawled herself on the table, she stretched out, she did a lot of silly things. But after all of them, the silliest of them all: she opened the first cabinet out of her desk.

Inside there was a picture. Of her and someone else. It was a picture taken before, of course. She ran her fingers through it.

She then felt compelled to speak her thoughts on the state of the group, so she did. “You know… at least I don’t mind that Tokino Sora is not the number one of Hololive anymore. Of course I wanted to reach 1 million subs, and I’m happy I achieved that goal, but I’m even happier that everyone did as well.” A pause. That was a funny thing to say. “Everyone”. Of course, that everyone was “everyone still part of the group”. There was a bigger “everyone”, the everyone of before.

“It just feels this is the way it’s meant to be, wouldn’t you say? Sharing our success, sharing our happiness.” If only, if only this current success could have been enjoyed by that bigger ‘everyone’ of the past. That’s how things were meant to be. Before.

They had achieved a lot. But, despite it all… she still mourned every day she didn’t get to spend with them. The truth was, not a day went by without her feeling sadness in her heart.

“I bet you are really thinking how silly all this is, right?”

“You can say that again”, answered A. “S: Because I know what’s it’s like, I’m going to keep doing my best to support you, ok? Not just me, but everyone as well, ok?” The brunette nodded. “Let’s go home. Pleaseeee?” The leader laughed.

“Let’s share the burdens, let’s share the sadness, let’s share the pain, and please, please, let’s keep sharing all the tedious, boring, necessary administrative work!”

That was Hololive.

They had lost quite a bit. But despite that, or precisely because of that…

They worked to soothe the pains of others, while taking care of their own.

They did that each day. Each moment.

To them, every second was a fight. A fight they couldn’t afford to lose.



-

Just a group of girls, trying to live their lives to the best of their abilities.

Just a group of girls, trying to make this world a better place, even if by a little with.

Even so, sadly, tragically, some people still had problems with that.

The brunette leader of Hololive and her assistant were ready to head home. This time, the elevator would do. They took it, from the top floor to the second. From there, stairs and then the street. They first had to pass through reception, though. They did, and the receptionist greeted them. “Hey, Sora-chan, A-chan, someone left you guys a package, it seems!” A saw her tense up. At first she thought it was her natural response to being called by that name, but then she followed her eyes and saw it was more serious than that. “They must have been a shy one though, because I went for the ledger in case they wanted to leave you a message, and they disappeared. Left their bag in their hurry and all!” Problem was, the bag made a sound. Tick, tock. Tick, tock. Tick tick tick tick tick…

“Uh, is there a clock in here?” said the receptionist, bringing the bag closer to his face to hear better. There was nothing they could do for him anymore. Still, the brunette leader didn’t fail to let out a warning, as she lounged for the window. “BOMB!” She grabbed A and jumped through it.

The girl named after the sky soared through the air. Her impulse forward turned into a descent down. She used that instant to shift, and make sure that she was the first hitting the ground, shielding A from the impact. THUD. The move was a success. A seemed to have been spared the pain that now ran through her back, right shoulder, and head. Pain was good. Hurt was good. It meant she was still alive. No time to waste. She got on top of A, to shelter her from any debris, and waited. And waited. And waited… in vain. She looked up. No explosion, no bang. Nothing abnormal, save for the window she had broken in an apparent fit of madness.



She knew better though, so she got up, ignoring the pain. She was quite good at that, after all. She went up the stairs, ignoring the hurt. 6 months of relentless practice had made her quite proficient at that. She clenched her fists, and lifted her gaze high, as she made for the second floor. She may have never walked with as much determination in her life. She found the receptionist, shocked at what had transpired, with the bag still in his hand. No ticking anymore. She ignored him, took the bag from him trying her best not to be rude, and opened it. Inside, something had indeed exploded. It was filled with party paper, the kind you would see at a birthday or any other celebration. Someone had made it so it exploded on a timer, a disgusting joke.

The note that accompanied it was more disgusting still.

“It’s been six months already. What do you say we put an end to it once and for all?

I’ll be waiting there on Friday… you know, on the place where it all started with your first move.”

END OF PART 1, UNIQUE CHAPTER:

A (MOSTLY) NORMAL DAY, 6 MONTHS AFTER TRAGEDY.

PART 2:

TALES FROM THE PAST

CHAPTER 1: WILD HUNT

Those were really happy days for them.

It all started with an unusual sight.

A person, with more appendages than normal.

A couple of peculiar ears here, a couple of horns there, tails for good measure…

On the year 2018, individuals with abnormal traits started appearing en masse.

No one knows why. No one knows why the phenomenon was localized only to Japan.

Rumors spread, about superhuman powers and abilities these individuals possessed.

Japan's government sought to keep them in check, in the interest of public safety.

Strict surveillance of these individuals was proposed and approved.

Obviously, voices were also raised in protest, for the sake of protecting their rights.

A compromise was achieved. And a new type of entity was created.

It was the birth of the Virtual Surveillance Through YouTube initiative.

Special individuals that signed for the program would have their surveillance lifted.

In exchange, they had to stream their lives in a regular fashion, so the public could be at ease.

To avoid a sense of discrimination, humans were encouraged to sign up for the program as well.

Hand in hand, humans and special individuals would show the way to a future of coexistence.

The first group, the test group of this initiative, was called **Hololive.**

Both because it was short for Virtual Surveillance Through YouTube…

And because these individuals virtually put their lives for all to see on YouTube…

They received the name of **V-tubers.**

The work of Hololive, V-tubing, grew popular, and before long others imitated them.

The leader of Hololive, Tokino Sora, the first V-tuber, was a worldwide sensation.

Hololive had its ups and downs. In two years, it gained more members, and lost some as well.

In general, they had made the world a better place.

In particular, they seemed to have achieved their goal.

They had mostly erased the fear of those who were different.

Mostly.

-

It was a really tragic day for them. June 2020.

It all started with a warning. A warning they may have been better off not receiving.

It was nothing new under the sun, as far as humanity was concerned.

People who hated those who were different, those they did not understand, still existed.

Jaegers was their name. “Hunters”, in German.

According to the reports, they sought the extermination of those with animal traits.

Of course, it wasn’t like special humans were welcomed with open arms by everyone.

But a group with such an intent posing such a credible threat? It was a first.

The intelligence services of the Japanese government had collected disturbing information.

Hololive members were going to be targeted by this group in the near future.

This group whose symbol was the silhouette of a head with animal ears, with a hole in the middle.

A gunshot.

-

Hololive was, after all, part of a government initiative. It was a group with government oversight.

The one who managed the group was a promising individual from the private sector. Alias: Yagoo.

He was the group’s liaison with the government.

Once Hololive was threatened, the government stepped in.

They proposed a bold plan to Hololive.

And when a proposal comes from the one who controls your fate…

The dictated proposal had no choice but to be carried out.

Hololive would lure out the Jaegers with a trap, a bait and switch tactic.

This project can’t be put in jeopardy, any elements that threaten it must be removed.

They gave a reason like that. No doubt, Defense interests had a big say in it.

Individuals with non-human traits were rumored to have powers, if you remember.

Well, those weren't just rumors. They were the truth.

Hololive members, in general, had little to no combat experience.

But their capabilities had to be assessed, to ensure they didn't pose too much of a risk.

The specialists who did concluded that they had the potential to, at least, handle this by themselves.

No police or military support would be given. Risk of a leak too high, was the reason given.

By now you may have noticed, but the government had a lot of reasons for everything.

It fell upon Yagoo and Tokino Sora, the leader of the group.

They had to devise a plan to carry out the strategy. So they did.

The day came, and the plan was carried out. You would call it a mistake, but they didn't have a choice.

DURIN, DURIN!

The doors of the convenience store made their iconic sound, and opened to allow passage to the one who wished to engage in the ancient human ritual of buying a last-minute snack and refreshment combo. The girl who was named after a celestial body passed through them. Having fulfilled their entrusted duty, the guardians of this temple closed once again, not ones to ever deviate from their assigned role.

"Welcome!", said the clerk, a man who was long past the prime of his life. The girl acknowledged him with a nod of the head, then made her way to her intended target, the objective of this visit. That was weird. This type of job usually fell to younger people, people her age. Although with Japan's demographic pyramid and its track record of caring for the elderly economically… yeah, maybe this kind of thing would become more and more common.

While thinking that, she found it. The beverages section. After she left the store, this shelf would find itself missing six of its inhabitants. It lay there, always ready to make the sacrifice… should the one who took from it also be willing to depart with something, of course. Give and take, that was the axiom of life that reigned supreme in this establishment. Outside of it, too, there seemed to be no escaping its rule. It lorded over everything under the sun, ever present.

The girl took two black cans. This black coffee was for herself. Two more. And this one was for someone else. She then took two bottles, filled with a pale-yellow liquid: Apple juice. It, too, was for someone else. Her next objective awaited.

The impeccably mopped floor received her low heels. The lights that gave illumination to every nook and cranny in this store hummed gently as she made her way to the next shelf. It lay in wait for her.

The sandwich shelf. She took six. Since they were three people, she took two for each one. With this, her mission was close to being a success. Her first one of the night, that is. Her easiest one. Now that she had all she needed, she just needed to pay for what she had taken. She walked towards the counter.

She had all she needed.

The floor received her heels.

What she had was enough.

The lights gave their illumination and their hum.

Two and two for each. Plenty.

The snack shelf laid in her path, expectant. Always waiting. Always willing to part with an inhabitant.

For a price.

-

“Will this be all, miss?”, said the clerk, after registering all her products and placing them in a plastic bag, the staple of a successful transaction between two individuals. These bags hurt the environment in the long run, but short term they were cheap. They sacrificed a better future for a more convenient present. A give, and take. The axiom of life, lording supreme, over all that was to be found under the sun.

“Yes, that will be all”, she said to the man with a gentle smile. He smiled back at her, and was about to press a button on the cash register… when he stopped. He looked at her, questioning on his face. Then, recognition. Or some, at least. “Could you… could you please… give me a moment?” said the man. She nodded. She thought maybe it wouldn’t happen, since he was an older individual, but it seems that was not to be the case. It didn’t bother her. She was used to it. Although… yeah, it usually didn’t go like this.

He took out a phone, and started typing on it. Slowly. He held the phone two handed, as a young person would hold a handheld gaming device. If he had been playing a game, he’d probably have lost minutes ago. Eventually, he stopped typing, and looked at the phone. Then, he looked up at her. Down again. He brought the phone up, to compare the image on it, and the girl standing in front of him. Eventually, he spoke.

“Are you… Hoshi…. Hoshimati… Suisei… -san?”

“That I am”, answered Suisei with a smile. She had been wearing a hoodie over her uniform and head, to avoid someone recognizing her. Well, someone who looked at her from afar in the street, obviously. She expected a clerk at this distance would have no trouble. That it had taken so long due to his age had been pure chance. It wasn’t anything that concerned her either, because she was inside the store.

“I think… I think my grandson is a fan of yours”, said the man with a smile, looking down at the phone. A tender smile. Love was on his eyes, but she could see some sadness on them, as well. Also…

“Think?”

“Yeah. He… he and I, we don’t speak too much. But I… With this, I check his… his…”

“Social media?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I check his… ‘social media’. It’s such a blessing, for an old folk like me. It’s like… like he posts all his life there, for me to see.”

Suisei nodded.

“You… you usually show up. Also… there’s two images, that for some reason… for some reason never change. You… you are in them. Here, take… take a look.” Saying that, he offered the phone to her, to show her what was on the screen.

Indeed. On the social media page that the phone showed her, Suisei could see herself, both on the profile picture and on the profile banner. The banner was a promotional image of her, smiling with her hands on her chin, laying down on a bed. A Gravure shoot, where she modeled for the camera. She had her uniform on though, Suisei… Suisei tried to charm her fans with her smile and her talent, not her body. Some took a different path, and on that Suisei thought, all the power to them. It was just that, she knew what parts of herself she felt proud and comfortable with putting out into the world… and it wasn't that.

But back to the pictures.

On the other one, the profile picture, a boy appeared. He had one of her shirts on, a head band with her name of it, and a couple of light blue glowing sticks on his hands – cyalume, the trusty companion of any fan on a concert. On the background, she saw a promotional banner, with her name, "Hoshimati Suisei", on it. She recognized it. It was, of course, one of her concerts. Yeah, the boy was her fan, for sure. She smiled, looked at the man, and told him as much.

"Could I… could I take a picture of you? For him? I'm sure… I'm sure Shin would appreciate it…"

It would also give him an excuse to talk to him.

"So his name is Shin?"

The man nodded. "Yeah, such a bright boy… my son, my son never tells me anything about himself when we talk. It's all Shin. Since… since he is his pride… he's mine, as well." Another tender smile.

"So he does well in school? Or college? Or is he perhaps already working?"

"No, no. He… he is in school, yes. He does well… well enough. His father tells me… tells me he could be the best academically, if only he applied himself to it."

Mm. Well, probably every parent liked to think that about their sons. "He could do it if he tried."

For Suisei, in life putting in the effort made all the difference. She spoke from experience. It was easy to call yourself underappreciated, when you lacked consistency. It was easy to lament others didn't value what you had to offer, when you didn't try to put it in display for them to see.

"But… but he is very good at sports, too. The captain of the football team, he is. So… so even if his grades aren't the best… his father is proud that academically he is good, and that he is the best at the sport he practices. Won championships, he has, yes."

Oh. Yeah, Suisei could see that. So he did have achievements to his name. And regardless… regardless, that's what he chose to highlight on his social media. Her. Her love for her. She smiled again.

"What age is he?"

"Oh, that's the thing! He's so young, only 16."

Sixteen. A boy that age…

"Ok. Here's what we'll do."

-

She put her hoodie back on, and stood in front of the doors of the store.

DURIN DURIN!

They made their iconic sound and opened to allow passage to the one who wished to part, having completed the transaction. The girl who was named after a celestial body passed through them. Having fulfilled her mission, the guardians of this temple closed behind her. She was not one to deviate from her chosen path.

She had left something for the boy. A couple of things, actually. Now the elderly clerk would be able to talk to him. And it would be smiling fully. The boy would smile too. Maybe scream in joy even.

Give and take. The axiom of life. To obtain something, you must sacrifice something. It lorded supreme over all the things under the sun. Hoshimati Suisei was named after a comet. A celestial body, that soared the skies. She still was bound by that axiom. She embraced it. She believed in it, with all of her being.

She gave her time. Her effort. In exchange, she was able to make others smile. That's the path she believed in. Because Hoshimati Suisei was an idol. To be one had been her dream, since she was a little girl. She had fought tooth and nails for it. A lot of sweat and tears, was what she offered.

What she got in exchange? Every morning after waking up, when she looked at the mirror, an idol looked back at her. Every day, she got to live her dream. It was thanks to all the effort she put in, yeah. But it was also because she had gotten accepted into Hololive. At first, she had been rejected. But she persevered. Eventually, they let her in. President Yagoo later admitted to her that as far as he was concerned, letting her in had been one of the best decisions Hololive had ever made. Suisei

knew all the effort that she had made for that to happen. She still didn't let those words get to her head. Hololive had done a lot for her, too. Allowed her to be things she alone couldn't be. And she also loved everyone that formed part of it, all of her comrades. A couple of them were waiting for her to return at that very moment. She made her way to them, plastic bag with all she had bought in hand.

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DURIN DURIN!

Inside of the convenience store, the elderly clerk watched as the girl crossed the doors and departed. He then looked down at his phone. The screen showed him a picture. One he had just taken. On it, was the girl who had just left. She had taken off her hoodie, and revealed her beautiful uniform, hidden underneath. She then asked him if he had pen and paper. After writing a message, she posed. She held the message to her face with both hands from above, hiding her face behind it, save her eyes. And those eyes gave a shy look, pleading even. It was an extremely cute pose. The message said:

[Shin-kun, I'm so so proud of your achievements in sports.

Keep doing your best, and make sure to also be the best academically.

Do it for me, ok?]

It was such a cute pose, and coupled with the message on it… It was like an earnest girlfriend, sending a message to their beloved. The man smiled, remembering his own youth. And, seeing those blue eyes, he himself felt compelled to try his best. He almost even forgot why he asked for it. Almost. He for sure had to send this to his grandson. The girl had also made sure to tell him to guard the message safely. That since she had written it, it would be like a treasure for his grandson, and that he'd come to the store for it. After so many years, he'd see his grandson again. Smiling, he guarded the message in the safest safe he had.

There were some things the man ignored.

He ignored that Suisei had written something on one corner, at the other side of the paper. It read.

[Hey, Shin-kun. Your grandpa asked me for a picture for you. Showed me what a big fan you are of me. I was so touched… I also had a really pleasant conversation with him. In fact, I'm thinking of going back to the store, to see him again. Since he showed me your profile… maybe I'll hit you up to schedule a date. That way, maybe you can be there too, and he can take a picture of both of us, ok? H.S.]

He also ignored things he had no way of knowing then.

That that would be the last time those blue eyes would be captured in a photo for a fan.

That that would be the last message for one to be signed H. S.

The elderly man died some months later. It was a peaceful, tranquil death. The death everyone deserves, but not everyone gets. Up until the day it happened, his grandson talked to him over the phone every day without exception. He also visited him once a month, at least.

When his grandpa died, Shin-kun transferred schools. Someone so talented at sports found no problems at all. His school was sad to see him go. His football coach really regretted his decision. He also left behind a couple of broken hearts amongst his female classmates.

In his new school, he quickly became the captain of the football team once more. He also excelled academically, and soon found himself the best in that area, too. His father didn't think he could be prouder of him. That's why he acceded to his request, weird as it was.

Shin baffled teachers and classmates alike. He was the best academically. He was the captain of his football team. And somehow, he still managed to handle a part time job at night? Thinking it may hurt such a talented individual, the director of the school spoke with his father. When he heard of how his grandfather had worked on that convenience store up until his death, and how for some reason they had grown very close just before it, the director understood, and left it be. Shin could handle it.

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On the convenience store, Shin mopped the floor. He left it impeccable.

He made sure the doors worked without fault.

He made sure every shelf was fully stocked.

He went behind the counter, and started his shift.

The lights gently hummed and gave their illumination.

This was a temple. Here, an axiom of life reigned supreme.

Give, and take. Sacrifice, to receive.

Shin gave his best effort. Sacrificed his time.

In exchange, the store was kept in pristine condition.

Everyone thought he did this for his grandfather.

But the truth was, Shin was waiting.

Waiting. For a certain girl.

And sounds that would never come like he intended them.

He was waiting for the doors to go DURIN DURIN! due to her crossing them one good day.

He was waiting for the sound of her low heels on the impeccably mopped floor.

On that convenience store, Shin had a safe.

Inside, he stored some items.

A message, with an unfulfilled promise.

A shirt, the one he intended to wear.

A picture, that he had sent to print and frame.

On the dark night, the street was illuminated by the lights of the convenience store.

Inside, a boy, just waiting for a picture to be taken.

Of him, and her.

On the dark night, Hoshimati Suisei made her way to her comrades.

She reached the van where they were waiting, and opened the door to the driver's seat, sitting on it.

"I'm back", she spoke, stating the obvious.

"Welcome back~", said two voices in reply.

She took off her hoodie. She took out a black coffee, and handed it to the girl sitting next to her.

“Thanks.”

She then took out a bottle of apple juice, and turned to offer it to the girl that was on the back.

“Here.”

“Thank you, Suisei-senp-”

Before she could finish and grab the bottle, Suisei retracted her hand a little.

“No bathrooms breaks. You sure you’ll be ok?”

“Come on, Suisei-senpai! I’m not a little girl…”

“Yeah, Suisei, stop bullying the poor girl.”

“Azuki-senpai…!”, exclaimed the bullied girl, touched at her support.

“Ok, ok. Here you go.”

Suisei handed her the bottle, and the girl opened it, and took a drink out of it right away. “Ah, this apple juice is tasty! Thank you, Suisei-senpai!”, she smiled warmly at her, then at Azuki. Them being friends had been a surprise to Suisei at first, but it made sense when she thought about it. Similar interests, and all. She was thinking that, when the girl added: “And… to eat?”

“I got us six sandwiches, two for each. More than enough to last the night”, she said, as she showed her the bag. Truthfully, there was nothing else to eat but the sandwiches. The girl she was addressing kept smiling, but there was some stiffness in that smile too, less light in those eyes.

“Really, Suisei?”, said Azuki.

“Really”, replied Suisei. As she did, she pulled out a can of potato chips from the stomach pocket of her hoodie. She saw the girl’s face light up as she saw them. “That’s why, these are for all of us to share.” She then offered the girl the can. When she was about to take it, she retracted it a little. “Remember: for all of us to share.” She then handed it to her.

The girl opened the can, and eat a couple immediately. Suisei knew no sharing would happen that night. She was fine with that. That girl’s smile was worth it. She wanted to protect it.

Sadly, she knew she’d be unable to do that. All she would be able to do, was protect the girl itself.

The evacuation van was how the van they currently were in was designated. It was because it's supposed mission would be to aid whoever needed it. It was currently parked in a certain alley, the alley where it would spend the whole night, until the mission was over.

Suisei checked the hour.

Then, she looked at the monitor they had been provided with.

The girl had made her way to the church. It was about to start.

She prayed for everything to be ok, for no one to get hurt.

It would end up being an unanswered prayer.

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The girl had arrived at the church. Or better said, at the stairs that lead up to it.

It was time. Time for her to climb them, and make her way inside. So she did.

Her black boots landing against each steps echoed in the night.

It was cold, and wind blew past.

It made her cape, pink in the inside, white on the outside, flutter in the wind.

It also made locks of golden hair do the same.

Locks of the golden hair that covered her head. A couple of horns did, too.

She reached the top, and walked up to the doors.

She placed her hand against one of them. Once inside… once inside, it would start.

Everything would depend on her strength, hers and hers alone.

If she failed… if she failed, only her would be in danger. At least tonight.

And she… she was fine with that. She pressed the door, and entered the church.

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Roboco saw the sheep enter the church through the monitor she had been given. It was about to start. Unknown to her, a murderous will waited close by. It was watching her. It already determined her time of death. Three seconds, after the monitor she was looking at turned blue. It couldn't wait.

--

Oozora Subaru was on the offensive. She carried a relentless, merciless attack, the object of which were her nails. Today was the night where Hololive would seek to lure out, and hopefully take down, the Jaegers. Police would not take part, they'd only respond to any emergency that happened as the night went on. That was a fancy way of saying they were on their own. This was to prevent leaks of the plan, and so whatever needed to be done could be done. This last bit was a fancy way of saying what exactly, Subaru didn't want to think about. She would rather think about the plan. Right, the plan. On the living room TV, she could see a real time digital map of the city. She bit her nails while keeping her eyes glued to it. On it, every Hololive member current status and location showed up. A cute profile pic, and their vital signs, as markers on the map. All made possible, thanks to smart devices like the one that she currently wore around her neck. Government R&D, for the win! This was the only way they had of keeping track of one another. No radios would be used, and neither would cellphones, of course. Once they were notified of the details of the plan, the government was baffled, but they had to accept. Subaru had doubts too, but since this had been an idea that the president and Sora-chan had come up with, she decided to trust them.

She saw herself and her generation on their current location, naturally. This was the second generation safehouse, one of the five that Hololive would make use of tonight. It was nice, having government backing. It meant that assets like this nice two-story house could be at your disposal without a long prior notice. Not to mention the fancy equipment. It also meant you got to have an armed escort! Subaru excitedly turned to glance at the big, reliable men with submachineguns that guarded the garden on the other side of the windows… and saw no one there. Of course, no one had been assigned. They were, truly, on their own. Subaru had no fancy powers, so she couldn't will them into existence (not that she was aware anyone had that kind of power). Trying hurt no one though, right? Thinking that while it was nice having government backing and support it certainly could be better, Subaru turned her attention back to the screen again.

She saw generation 1, accompanied by Tokino Sora; generation 3, accompanied by Sakura Miko; and Gamers. Each group had a safehouse of their own. Generation 1 was the safest, an underground panic room, sitting right under the Hololive building, on the northwest part of town. Generation 3 had a similar one to generation 2, a nice house in a residential neighborhood; both were on the west side of town, but while "House 2" was suburbs proper, "House 3" had a more central location. Gamers was using a building on the north outskirts of town, on hill and tree country.

The orders they had received were, stay safe, pay attention to any developments and react to the best of your ability. A fancy way of saying, “Hope nothing happens, and if it does, figure it out”. It made sense, though. Gamers was made up of only individuals who were likely to be targeted, and gen 3 had Pekora. Accordingly, Gamers had been provided no vehicle, because it was deemed too high a risk for them to move; gen 3 a motorcycle, so any attempts at support would not involve all the members, given that the risk of moving Pekora was great, and some needed to stay behind to protect her; gen 2, having no members with animal traits, was provided with a van to move all its members if judged necessary.

Of course, generation 4 had one safehouse as well, but as many members were in it as outside. It could very well be said that this operation centered around them, and hinged on the particular strength one of its members brought to the table. One of them would act as bait, and sure enough, she could see the sacrificial lamb on the planned location, just about to enter the premises. She could also see another member of that generation on the evacuation van, accompanied by Suisei and Azuki. That van had a mobile monitor fitted to it, that would allow it to keep track of the situation even on the streets. The plan called for them to rush and provide the sheep with means of escape, should the trap go badly; they also had the power to evacuate any safehouse, in the unlikely event that the occupants of one found themselves in danger.

Finally, the support unit, Roboco, was on standby. She also had the ability to keep track of the status of all the members while on the move. Her part to play was to quickly go to their trap to provide support to the sheep if required, or to a safehouse if its members were to find themselves in trouble.

Everything seemed optimal, so the op was given the go ahead. The background of the monitor changed from grey to yellow. Once the clock hit midnight, it changed again, this time to a light blue. The operation had started. One second passed. Subaru was nervous. Another second. Seeing everyone’s signs on the monitor gave her a little comfort, at least. Another second. It didn’t last.

A warning appeared on the screen. One of the members trackers had failed. Roboco’s. No vital signs, said the screen. “Hey, hey, hey, what just happened?!”, Subaru screamed while standing up from the sofa in which she had been sitting. “We got a malfunction on the equipment on such an important night? And why right when the op starts? This was supposed to be the best stuff available, government issued and all!” She glanced around. Aqua was completely shocked, her hands to her mouth. Choco, Ayame and Shion looked at the screen with worried expressions. It was the latter of them who broke the silence.

“This… may be something much worse”, said Shion.

“Are you thinking the same thing I am?”, replied Choco.

“We’ve probably been had”, Shion again.

“What do you mean?”, Subaru asked.

“They took out the mobile element first”, Ayame explained calmly, “That probably means they knew we were trying to lure them out. The only way for them to target Roboco is to know of our plan.” Choco continues where she stopped: “It means that not only is the sheep at risk, but Gamers too, at least. And we have only one evacuation van, they can’t evacuate everyone at the same time. Their first role is going to be to get the lamb out, only then will they assist Gamers. It may be too late then.”

Subaru understood just this last part “Got it, this is not the time to sit idle by. I’m taking our van and checking up on Gamers.” Before she had a chance to run off, Aqua said “I’m going too. Not to Gamers, but can you drop me off near the sheep on the way there? Maybe they’ll go after the evacuation van too, and then she’ll be cut off from support. If I’m there, then maybe I can be of some help.”

“But... if I drop you off, how are you going to come back?” “It’s simple: just come back for me once you have Gamers with you.” Then, after a pause. “We have the monitors, but she has nothing. She’s the only one who may not know that something is off. If she does know, I hate to think she may be alone at such a time. Please, drop me off there.”

“That’s probably a good plan”, Ayame said, and the other two agreed.

“Got it”, said Subaru. “Let’s go Aqua, to our friends”.

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They saw them go. “They took the bait”, said Murasaki Shion. It was a terrible plan. The three that stayed knew it. Sadly, it was the best chance of survival those two had. They were normal humans, so they had been kept in the dark about some information. It was not confirmed, but it was a possibility with high chances of being true, the one that the president and Sora had discussed just with them three. The alluded fact was, that Jaegers wasn’t just a group with the goal of taking out those with animal traits: it was a group that sought to take out anyone who didn’t fit the historical mold of humankind. That meant they were after demon-kind, elf-kind, and any type of magic users as well.

In other words, the two safehouses most likely to be targeted this night were, the Gamers building, and the house they were currently on, that of gen 2. It was likely that each would be targeted by a different Jaegers division: they theorized two existed, one focused on animal traits, and the other focused on demons and users of magic. Gen 1 and Gen 3 would probably be safe tonight. Gen 1, because it lacked any non-human members, and Gen 3, not because of who they lacked, but of who they had. That was the speculation they had with the president and Sora-san, at least. This would later prove to be half right, and half wrong. Shion, Ayame, and Choco had no way of knowing it then, and they would have no chance of knowing it, ever.

“I’m afraid to say… it seems they are here”, said Choco, looking up towards the nearby rooftops.

“Been the happiest days of my life”, said Ayame, before going to get her weapon.

“Took care of that, Shion?”, said Choco, addressing the shortest girl.

“Of course. I left it in the van… Man, I’m really hoping she makes it, and gets to see it.”

“She will, don’t worry. They both will.” Choco reassured her.

“I… I’m not good at expressing myself. Sorry for not making one,” said the just returned Ayame.

They looked at her.

“I don’t want them to think that I didn’t care, nor do I want them to not know how much they mean to me, but I just was unable to make one, so… so now that I can’t do anything about it, I’m regretting it.” With that, she cast her gaze downward, and hugged her sword tight.

“Don’t”, said Choco. “That’s right”, ventured Shion. “They won’t think that, and they will know.”

“Yeah… you are right,” said Ayame, smiling. She then looked up again. “I mean…”

They all smiled at each other, then put their hands together. And, in unison, said

“““““We are gen 2 after all!!!”””””





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He saw the van go. Then spoke through the radio. “JM here, it is scenario number two.” That meant, normal humans left the house while *majin* stayed. “Over there?” “JA here, copy that” came the swift reply. “Lights went out before she made her move.” A pause. “She said, do it before 3, but she’s lucky I’m impulsive, if I went within the first 2 seconds it was due to that, not because I took her seriously”. How the Animal Extermination Division Leader was so unprofessional, the leader of the Majin Extermination Division would never understand, he thought as he heard his counterpart wasting important time. Luckily for him, a chance to cut the conversation short came soon enough. “I guess she’s onto her personal objective now.” “Pay it no mind. If she’s successful we could benefit, but remember, the important objectives of this operation are on us. The plan is a go, move at your discretion, and good hunt.” “Good hunt”, came the reply. He turned the radio off and brought another one to his mouth. “JM here. Rookie, everything went as planned with the lights and the machine, it is scenario number two over here. Plan will go ahead; you are free to act at your discretion.” “Acknowledged,” came the curt reply. That’s why he liked the kid. He didn’t waste time. “Good hunt”, he said, turning off the radio without waiting for a reply, and threw them both into the group backpack. “You guard it”, he said to the individual that was tending to it. “Wait here, we’ll be back before long.”

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“What is that idiot doing?!”, Houshou Marine screamed at the monitor on Gen’s 3 house. She saw how Subaru and Aqua were leaving, in the van judging by the speed by which they moved on the map, and were northeast bound, through a route that would take them close to where the sheep waited for someone to spring the trap. Their intentions were to be back up after seeing Roboco taken out, no doubt. “Everyone, I’m taking the bike. I can’t let that idiot…” “We understand,” said Noelle. Then, in a lower tone “Go, me and Flare will keep Rushia safe for you.” Marine was moved at having such good comrades, then took off on the motorcycle.

Shirogane Noelle watched her go. She then motioned to Flare: she wanted to confide with her, while Miko, Pekora and Rushia were keeping each other nerves at bay. Noelle in particular had received military training, and had a good grasp on strategy. She took a look at the monitor. “Seems a lot of us are moving to rescue our comrades… yet our evacuation van has yet to move at all…”. Suisei’s, Azuki’s, and the lone gen 4 member trackers showed them, in fact, all still in the same alley.

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Shirakami Fubuki's eyes were on the monitor. There was nothing on it. "Man, what a bad time for the lights to go out…~" said Okayu, then Korone playfully added "Mio-chan is really bad with horror games, bet you are terrified right now, right, Mio-chan?". The clearly terrified Mio denied the accusations to the best of her abilities. If how convincing she was needed grading she would be failing, as hard as she would be passing with flying colors how cute she looked doing so. They were Gamers, a unit within Hololive. They all also had animal traits. They thought the time had come where that didn't matter. Turns out, to some it still did. Their current situation was proof of that: hiding away, and trying to lure out their would-be attackers. It was a nonsensical operation, if you took the part about them all being young girls into account, but given the fact that they had special humans amongst them, their handlers judged that they were up to the task. They had the potential to handle it, due to the powers they possessed. Due to the powers someone like Fubuki, and the rest of her friends, possessed. She didn't feel particularly reassured. Her own power was the only thing supposed to keep them safe, no matter what may happen? If something did happen, would she be forced to… she didn't like that possibility. She considered the building they were in: at least it wasn't so bad. Two floors, bathrooms on each one. On the second floor, where they currently were, there were five rooms, two and three on each respective side. They all had doors to the hallway, and big glass windows. This seems like a miniature office building, she thought upon first seeing it. They occupied the biggest room on the floor, in between the smallest ones. Opposite to them were two rooms of equal size. Save for the one on their room, all doors opposed another.

Thankfully they just needed to stay in their safehouse. They weren't supposed to see any action. Then again, neither were the lights supposed to go out the second the operation started: this way, they had no way of knowing were something to wrong. They had... no way…

-"Guys. I think we should-"

"…be on the lookout" is the phrase she didn't manage to end. The windows of the room shattered. Cold night wind entered the room. That probably wasn't the reason why everyone felt a chill on their blood. That would most likely be the handful of individuals who were now standing on the far end of the room, with drawn swords and firearms filled with fatality waiting to be unleashed. "The door!" Okayu screamed, and grabbed Korone's hand. BANG, and a bullet grazed Mio's temple; it seems that she was targeted due to being the closest to the men. The one who had fired, their apparent leader, spoke: "Only warning: You can run, but you'll die tired." Saying that, he holstered the weapon, and proceeded to draw his sword, to fall in line with his four comrades. Strange move.

“Four in front of us, but how many out there! Government is making a mess of this, and I’ve heard worrying info about clandestine groups of these freaks not playing by the rules! Today we cleanse, and we train! Wouldn’t want this to end before we have a chance to sharpen our teeth. Strong capabilities, but lack experience. That’s the report on these ones. We get the experience today, to also face those who will have it tomorrow!” There it was. Okayu resumed her frozen intentions. It was instinctive, really. Go anywhere else. Somewhere else may not be safe, but it was better than there, were there was no doubt about it. Go to the first floor, and escape. Fubuki followed them. Everyone was on the same page. All of them, but one. Fubuki felt the door close and its lock click behind her as soon as she was through, and turned around to see her: Mio had locked herself in the room. They made eye contact, and Fubuki felt her strength drain. Mio’s powers. “I’m sorry, Fubuki. I’m borrowing your strength.” She turned to face the men, and Fubuki saw nothing else, because Okayu and Korone made her move on. Fubuki was too tired by the effects of what Mio had done and by the absurd of the situation to protest.



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The stairs. Get to the stairs. That was all Nekomata Okayu thought about. That was her tactical approach to her strategic goal: ensure Korone’s safety. That’s all she cared about. And the first step to that were the stairs. She didn’t notice Korone and Fubuki had fallen a little behind until she had reached them, and turned back to see why they hadn’t. She was, after all, the fastest out of them all, part of her powers. Korone and Fubuki were close enough, about to clear the doors to the last rooms of the floor. Then came a small perpendicular corridor for the bathrooms, and the stairs. But the doors were opening. Okayu had no time to warn them, just to move. The doors opened, and two of the same blackcladed men emerged from them, one out of each one, and thrust their swords to stab

Korone and Fubuki. Okayu made it just in time. Just in time to push them, and end up herself in the path of the swords.

“Okayu…” said Korone, her face conveying what her words did not. “…Keep Korone safe, Fubuki”, was what Okayu said in return. Fubuki nodded, and when their eyes met, she seemed to have regained a good deal of her strength. She took Korone’s hand and went for the stairs with her. She wasn’t letting it be in vain. Good. The men made to remove their swords, and Okayu coughed up blood. They hurt. She wanted them gone, out of her body. Yet she grabbed their arms, and prevented them from moving away. She even made the effort to pull them further in, while shaking her head. More crimson, on the blades, on her clothes, on her coughs. Tears streamed down her face; due to the pain or something else, she couldn’t tell. One of the men made a fist, and punched her with all his might, square on the face. “Stupid thing, don’t you see it’s time already?” Adrenaline was one of hell of a thing. It may very well have been the best punch the man had delivered on his life. Okayu’s head went sideways violently, and she used that instant to see into the hallway behind her. No one there.

They had made it. She smiled. She turned her face back to the men, a savage smile on her face.

“It’s time alright, I was just waiting for them to clear the stairs. If there’s one thing I wouldn’t want Korone to see, is me doing this.” One moment later, Okayu was the only thing alive on the hallway. Not for much longer, in all likeliness. If she said so herself, it was a rather cold night. No lights, on top of that. She felt like laying down. Saw a couple of comfy looking heaps right next to her, and thought of using them as pillows. They were a little wet: that Korone really didn’t know how to care for stuff around here, it seemed. Smiling, she decided to indulge on her one daily guilty pleasure: go to sleep while thinking of her. She moved, and a sharp pain stung her. “Gah…!”, and a hellish agony followed. Seems shock had some limits to it too. The pain probably never went way, simply getting used to it was what allowed her to think clearly once more. “It’s time already, huh?”, she said. Nothing lasts forever, and Okayu knew it. It was just that, when you stumble upon one of the most beautiful things the world has to offer… “I just wish I had more time with her, you know?” Smiling and thinking of Korone, Okayu closed her eyes.



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The leader of the Jaegers Majin Extermination Division had landed on the garden. He could see one inside. He drew his sword, then opened the big glass window. “I’ll be intruding upon this house”, he said as he stepped in. He would never do something as stupid as announcing his presence without good reason. In this case, there was no need to keep quiet, on account of the woman sitting cross legged on the kitchen counter, looking straight at him. “Go right ahead… are you here to play with me, perhaps~?”, said the slutty woman. A succubus. She could influence the feelings of weak men… so she was no immediate threat to him. Due to her relationship to men, she could sense them, though. That’s probably why she had been waiting for him. She knew they were moving. That said, she had absolutely no combat capabilities whatsoever. Taking that into account, this was an obvious distraction tactic. Considering who remained in the house, he knew who he should be on the lookout for. He took another step forward, towards the woman. Someone leaped towards him from the left, from his blind spot. Blind spot he had purposefully left open, of course. He bent his knees and collapsed on them while leaning backwards and slicing vertically. He connected. Neck? The body crashed on the floor to his right, sword on hand, still moving, horned head still attached. Not deep enough, then. No matter. A second passed, and 3 of his men were kneeling next to her, their swords deep in her back. “A…” started to say the succubus, but someone yelling “AYAME!!” from the stairs interrupted her. The witch. Was she a brewing potions witch, or a spellcaster witch? It wasn’t clear, and he was not going to wait to find out. He already had his weapon ready: a slingshot, attached to his hand. He let loose, aiming for her stomach. His aim was true, and the surprise of the impact was evident on the witch’s face. She bent, and then fell forwards with a thud. A big stone sphere will do that to you. For a spellcaster, the diaphragm is vital. They can’t cast without speaking. Just disrupt their ability to do so to neutralize them. That was his theory of them, at least. The succubus tried to run to her side. She never reached her, thanks to one of his men, who quickly leaped forward.



He couldn't help but be impressed, but also wondered if he had done what he did purely to impress him. The neck was hard to hit, when both you and the target where moving, yet he had done just that. Something to consider for later. He approached the witch, who was still prostrated where she fell. He could hear his men on the second floor, so he stopped to address the first that descended the stairs. "We are done here, go back". Seeing his nod, he turned his attention back to the witch. Forehead and one clenched hand against the floor, her other one grabbing her stomach. He positioned himself perpendicular to her. This girl was a human. Not that race mattered in the least to him, anyways. He made a point to end his opponents lives as quickly as possible, no matter what. The girl still struggled for breath, yet turned her head sideways to look at him. He could see tears on her eyes. Tears of pain, although most likely not just from the slingshot hit. Pain from the death of her comrades, and her own inevitable one. Pain that he was causing.

"What… did we ever do… to you…?", said the girl, with great effort.

Nothing. That was the undeniable truth. They had done nothing to him. But they had the power to.

He raised his sword.

They had done nothing to him. And everything he did tonight, was to make sure it stayed that way.

He brought his sword down.

…

Necks 3 out of 3, was the balance of the night. One hand signal, and everyone left the house.

Rooftops again. He nodded towards the one he had left there. "Op went perfect.", he added.

Another hand signal, and everyone fanned out into the night.

The man thought about it, but ended up deciding against doing it in front of them.

He was confident, but the risk wasn't zero. That's why he wanted to, now that it had gone well.

Since he was alone now, he might as well indulge in it.

As the leader of the Jaegers Majin Extermination Division met with the night,

he allowed one satisfied smile to bloom on his face.

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Houshou Marine's bike ate the streets below it. She was angry beyond measure, yet she didn't lose her focus. She had somewhere to be, and she got there as fast as she could. She couldn't afford mistakes, so she didn't make any. Speed was more important than not being noticed, so she only stopped at the stairs. The stairs leading up to the church, building that looked down on her from above. The point where they had laid their trap, and where she knew Aqua was going. And indeed, there Aqua was, about to open the doors. She was about to call out to her, when someone else caught her attention and stopped her. Someone that came from the sky.

An angel, its wing extended, carrying a girl with pink hair on its arms. These were members of generation 4, Amane Kanata, and Himemori Luna. Marine rushed up the stairs. "Marine-san?!", was the greeting they gave her. Aqua, the most shocked out of them all, didn't say anything at all. Marine was angry, and out of breath, but she didn't lose her focus. There were things to do. "Inside", she told them all. Just on the other side of the door, she was waiting for them. White dress, yellow hair. The sacrificial lamb Hololive had selected to draw their hunters out of hiding. Since she was a member of generation 4, it made sense her comrades had come to her. "I thought I heard you outside, with that noisy bike, that's why I came to the doors to check. What's…" "Kanata, Luna, explain what's happening to her. Aqua, we need to talk." That's what Marnie said, interrupting her. The trio of gen 4 members gave them some room, while Marnie and Aqua stayed by the door. "Marine…" Aqua began, but Marine didn't let her finish. She still had her motorcycle helmet on her hand. She was angry. She didn't lose focus. Before anything else, she made sure to put the helmet on Aqua, so she would be safer. "Marine, what are you doing?", came the surprised reply.

-"What are *you* doing?"

Silence.

-"We both know…"

It was Marine turn to be interrupted. The interruption came from the sound of one's of the church's windows shattering, the closest one to the entrance. The trio of generation 4 members was in front of it. They were unhurt, but unmoving. Something at their feet drew their attention immediately after the window did. It was a bullet hole. Some moments later, a big explosion rocked the church, the point of impact of the rocket that caused it being the very spot where the bullet hole had hit.

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Tokino Sora and president Yagoo stood side by side. They were shielding the present members of generation 1, and A-chan, from the assailant that stood in front of them. They had prepared for a lot of things. They had prepared for the trap they were laying to be reversed on them, as it had been. They had prepared to lose members, as they had already done, something to which the monitor served as proof. They even had prepared for the impenetrable safe room underneath the Hololive headquarters, where they currently were, to be breached, as it had been. They hoped their plans in that regard would prove to be enough. But they didn't prepare, they would have never expected, to be facing who was currently in front of them that night.

The girl spoke. "Longtime no see, Sora-chan, president, guys. I'm sorry. Truly sorry, that I did not get to play with Roboco as much as I would have wanted. Sadly, the plan called for her to be taken out as soon as possible, and if I spent too much time there, well… I wouldn't have been able to make it here, to our appointment. But don't worry, oh, don't worry. I'm going to make sure to take as much time as possible with each one of you~. Think of it as, me having to forgo the appetizer so I could have room for the main dish, hahahahaha. Let's get started, shall we?", said the girl, combat knife in hand.

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It was taking some time for the dust to settle in the church. Despite that, he had a good visual of it, and what was inside. He had made sure to select an appropriate vantage point, and then his weapon of choice had done the rest. He was quite fond of it, and the ingenuous mechanism it had incorporated so you could make sure to hit the target. You could fire a rifle round, see where it landed, then fire the rocket knowing where it would hit. He had used the rifle round to shatter the glass to get a visual and, he admitted, he had had a fair share of luck. They were on the perfect spot. He had waited until the adequate moment to maximize casualties, and it seemed to have paid off.

He had gotten Amane Kanata, Himemori Luna, and the one they were using as bait. He was pretty sure of it, it having landed at their feet and all. Minato Aqua and Houshou Marnie were in the building as well, but they probably still had their lives. He could go and confirm the kills, and make sure no one escaped with their life, but the risk was too great. Depending on how the two divisions carried out their missions, one or two, very worried, angry, and most of all, powerful groups of individuals may be converging on the location at this very moment. Live to kill another day, that's what he would do. He wasn't particularly fond of the act committed to get there, what mattered to him was the end result he sought. He was trying his best for the sake of that, of an end result. He wasn't like the girl, who right now was most likely happily, crazily, indulging in the act. Not looking to take in the scene, not taking joy in what he had done, he left to dispose of the weapon, and carry on with the mission. His.

--

Tsunomaki Watame opened her eyes. She looked around. Everything was as it had been when she closed them moments ago, as it had been for a while now, for all the time she had spent inside of Hololive's evacuation van. She felt worried, but then, who wouldn't? Her dear comrades were out there, risking their lives. Risking their lives, so she could be safe.

Tonight was the night were Hololive would seek to lure out, and hopefully deal with, the Jaegers. They had received intel from the government about this group's intentions and objectives, and they were now executing a plan in the hopes of anticipating their move. Their handlers provided an outline, that president Yagoo and Sora-chan completed. If the group wanted to hurt those with animal traits, they would give them someone with animal traits to hurt. They had one of Hololive's staff members contact the group. He told them how he had some compromising stuff on Tsunomaki Watame, and how he would blackmail her to meet with him at a certain church, at midnight. They wouldn't miss such a good chance, and would go after her.

What then, was Watame doing in the evacuation van? It was most simple, if you thought about it. It wasn't that Watame was powerless: like anyone with animal traits, she had abilities normal humans lacked. But, doesn't it make sense to send the most powerful individual available for an operation such as this? If you compared them, demons were more powerful than those with animal traits. Hololive had demons to spare, so they sent the most powerful out of all of them to the church. That's right, Tokoyami Towa had gone disguised as Tsunomaki Watame.

Towa had volunteered for the role. Watame really appreciated that gesture. She was putting her life on the line to stop those who would hurt her. Watame really thought that after today, she should do a better job of letting Towa know how appreciated she was. After all…

Well, it wasn't time for those thoughts. She had a role to fulfill. When the president and Sora-san came to her, asking her to please be on the evacuation van that would help Towa get away should anything happen, she accepted straight away. It was the least she could do.

Of course, she wasn't alone. At wheel of the van, and next to her, were, respectively, Hoshimati Suisei, and Azuki, two other Hololive members. They were keeping an eye on the mobile monitor that showed the position and situation of everyone. They suddenly looked at each, then nodded. They then turned towards Watame.

-"How does it look?", the 4th gen asked.

-"We are about to move, Watame-san", replied the girl with the light blue hair. "Before we do, there are some things you should know."

"First,", said Azuki, "something has happened. We have been attacked at out safehouses."

Watame was shocked at the news, but said nothing. It wasn't the moment to interrupt.

"Second," Azuki continued, "we won't be going to the church."

"But the plan-", Watame started, needing to interrupt, before being interrupted herself.

"The plan you know of is not the one that's actually being carried out. Only a handful of people know about it. About the real one I mean. The president, Sora-san, A-chan, and the two of us. Some details of the plan you were briefed on may make little sense, if you think about them. Why can't we communicate with radios, when that would be the most efficient way to know what's happening, and to coordinate in the face of any eventuality?" Watame was silent. "It's so we, the evacuation van, couldn't hear our comrades cries for help, if they came. It would have been too cruel. Because the truth is, Watame, that this evacuation van is destined to evacuate no one, but you."

Watame just listened to Azuki.

"The president and Sora knew this plan could be turned against us. That's why we rejected the government's idea to keep all the members in one location. If somehow the plan were to be leaked,

like it seems to have been, it would be too big a risk. That's why we asked for a lot of separate safehouses. It considered the possibility of Jaegers being made up of multiple divisions, and it hoped that they wouldn't have enough members to attack us all across all the different locations. Seems that bet paid off, somewhat. We have been hit. We have suffered loses. But a lot of us are still here. And even if all the safehouses fell, Sora and the president decided to have an insurance policy."

"You. They decided to entrust the future to you."

--

Korone just stood there, without moving. She was tired. Of everything. Someone was in front of her. Fubuki. She was shielding her. In front of them both, facing them, was someone else. A man, clad in black, with a weapon in his hand. A submachinegun.

After making it to the stairs, they moved as quickly as they could through the first floor, as quickly as they could without throwing caution to the wind. They couldn't afford another mistake like the one that had cost them Okayu. Okayu… that's all Korone thought about. In truth, it was Fubuki who had gotten her out of the building, keeping wisely to one side of the corridor, then checking with Korone to see if her hearing picked up anything when approaching each room. It was a fast process, but they had made it, without any pursuers catching up to them. They had left the building, and further ahead, in the street, this was waiting for them. Him.

"He must have told you, didn't he?", said the man. "*You can run, but you'll die tired"*.

Korone was tired. Of everything. Okayu…

"2 out of 4, huh? Seems like training didn't go as swiftly as expected. This is going to look badly, so I'll make him a favor, and let him run you through with swords instead of filling you with bullets right this instant, ok? Just be good girls and wait a little. Sit if you want, they won't be long."

Korone was tired. Of everything. Okayu…

Okayu must have been in pain, standing hurt like that. Yet, until she went down the stairs and took a last look back, Okayu was still standing, still struggling. And Fubuki… Fubuki had seen as much as she had. Yet she still stood bravely in front of her, offering her what little protection she could. And Mio, she had made a stand against all those men, despite the odds being completely stacked to only one outcome. Something in Korone knew, that there was a meaning in standing tall, despite everything. If her end was coming, she would wait for it standing, no matter how tired she was. She refused to sit.



So she waited. And waited. One minute passed. Two. Then five. Then ten, maybe? It was hard to keep track of time. The undeniable, plain fact was that no one came. The men who should have finished Mio off and moved on, those who should have done the same to… Okayu… they were nowhere to be seen. The man standing in front of them tried to deny it at first, with comments like "they are sure taking a long time!", but there was nothing to do but acknowledge reality now: they weren't coming.

"Are you kidding me?! Ten of us, and I'm the only one left?! Against beasts without experience, and only two at that?! Don't fuck with me!", he shouted. Despite everything, Korone smiled a little. They had put up a good fight; Mio and Okayu had.

The man saw that, and he grew even more agitated. "What are you smiling at?! I'm going to make you regret that, you hear?! I'm going to-", he said, raising his weapon. He didn't finish. Tunnel vision, it appears the phenomenon is called. That's probably why he didn't see or hear the van that rammed into him at a high speed, making him part with his weapon. He was sent flying, and ended up several meters away. He wasn't getting back up soon. Maybe never again. Korone turned her attention to the van. Inside, Subaru was tightly gripping the wheel, looking down, apparently in shock. Eventually, she turned her head, and screamed at them "Fubuki, Korone, are you alright?!", with a worried look.

Korone was tired.

Finally acting according to that, her legs gave and she fell on her knees.

--

Minato Aqua opened her eyes. An explosion had taken place meters away from her. It appears it had sent her flying. Despite that, she didn't feel much pain at all. If anything was weird, it was the hard thing that encased her head. A motorcycle helmet. That's right, Marine had put the helmet on her just before it happened. Marine!

She didn't have to look far. Because right next to her, laying on the floor right next to the wall, was Marine herself. Aqua didn't need to see more to understand what had happened. Marine had protected her. Somehow, she had managed to shield her from the blast of the explosion, and also from the collision with the wall. It defied reason that she had managed to do so, but Marine was no stranger to doing extraordinary things like this from time to time, for the sake of those she cared about. Aqua started to tear up a little. No one but herself. No one but herself to blame, again. Because that's what she had decided, and had failed to carry out. No one but herself. If someone was getting hurt tonight, it would be no one but herself.

Aqua took off the helmet, and got closer to her sister. "Why are you so stupid… Why did you come here?!" She didn't look badly hurt, but an impact to the wall was sure to bring some pain with it. "What if something happened to you? How would Rushia-san feel? Noel-san, Flare-san, Pekora-san? Coming for me, giving me the helmet, protecting me from the explosion and the impact… Why do you risk yourself, despite all those who would be saddened were something to happen to you?" Marine reply came without Aqua expecting it. "Because you risk yourself as if no one would be if something were to happen to you."

"Uh?", was all Aqua got to say, caught off guard, both by what Marine said, and by her trying to stand up. Aqua helped her sit against the wall. Marine proceeded, without opening her eyes.

"Why did you come here?" "Because I wanted…!" "…to help, I get that." Marine let out a sigh. "We both know how Subaru is, impulsive, jumping in first and thinking later. We also know you aren't like that, you have a good head on your shoulders that you actually use. Why didn't you ask Shion to tag along?" Aqua bit her lip. "Because…" "Because it would have been too much of a risk for her, right? Too risky for her, a witch with magic and alchemy on her side, but an acceptable risk for you, a human whose only power is to mess up the breakfasts she attempts to make? How does that work?"

Aqua just stared at the ground. "…Marine, are you angry?" She certainly had seemed so before.

"At you? Of course not. I love you. I'm angry at myself, for not telling you the important stuff enough." Marine opened her eyes, and straightened up as much as she could. "Time to say it again."

"Aqua, you are loved. You are important. You matter. If there are things you don't like about yourself, just work on that day to day, while showing off the traits you are proud of. No one will judge you. If someone does, we'll be right there to kick their ass. You are loved."

Aqua tried to speak, "I know… that's why…", but the tears just wouldn't let her. Marine, somehow, knew what she wanted to say. That's a sister for you. Or that's Marine, at least. "I know. It's precisely because these people love you, that you want to protect and help them, prevent harm coming to them, right? That's not a bad thing. But Aqua: if you put your life on the line thinking that you losing it is one of the best possible outcomes… if you do that, you won't achieve the best possible future. You always gotta try for an outcome where everyone, including you, makes it out alive and smiling. You don't want others to be hurt, but understand this: you dying would hurt them the most."

Saying that, Marine brought Aqua to her chest. She just kept crying, while being patted on the head.

-

Houshou Marine hugged her, telling her that is was alright, while surveying the church. They, after all, had just been attacked. It was weird no follow up had happened, so she was on alert should any occur, although frankly, if there were attackers they could well wait in line. There was something more important to her, and it was the girl crying on her chest. That took priority above all else. That said, there was one other important thing that required her attention. It could wait, a while at least.

When Aqua calmed down, Marine kissed on the forehead. "Let's go", she said standing up. "We haves comrades to check up on." Aqua nodded, and let herself be guided by the hand by Marine. Deep into the church, they found those they were looking for, in the state the explosion had left them.

--

Tsunomaki Watame kept hearing what Suisei and Azuki had to say.

"Rest easy, it seems a lot of out comrades are converging on the church right now, or are already there. It comes in handy, this monitor. Shows all the locations of our members, and its current status. It was so, were anything to happen, those in the safehouses had time to prepare, or even

assist others, as they would most likely want to do. On that front, we are the exception, because our locations are doctored. We show up in a completely different spot of town than the one we are currently in. Even if the monitor info were leaked, hacked, or acquired by the Jaegers as the night went on, we would be safe. As we are."

Watame was silent.

"I'm sorry for lying to you. We had no choice but to carry out the orders of the President and Sora-san. This, all of this, was done to ensure that, were everyone in Hololive to die tonight, at least you would survive. This was born out of a belief that Hololive's continued existence had to be protected by any means necessary, due to its importance to society, and that you, Watame, had everything required to make sure Hololive would endure and achieve its goals, even if you were its only remaining member. It's a lot to take in, and rest assured, there will be time to digest everything. Of course, we'll be there to help you every step of the way. But now, we will move. We have, at T+20 minutes, declared the operation a failure, even though the main objective of keeping you safe was a success, and will contact the police. They will secure both the remaining safehouses and keep us safe."

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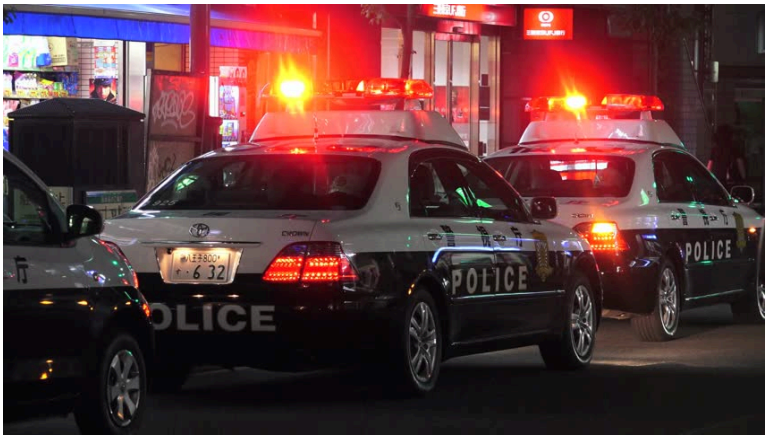
Houshou Marine stood at doors of the church. A van had just arrived. Nice timing. She descended, paying attention to not losing her step. She faced the driver seat, in which was Subaru, a shocked expression on her face, no doubt shocked at what had transpired with Gamers, and what she was seeing now. After all, Marine could only see Fubuki and Korone, huddled close in the back of the van. Only an idiot would have asked why Mio and Okayu weren't there too. "It will be just a moment, Subaru." The van increased its number of passengers, and then hit the road again.

Marine was riding shotgun, next to Subaru. "Where to now?", said Subaru, on edge. "Subaru, I know this may be egoistical of me but… could we please go the safehouse of gen 3 first? With you and Aqua here, not only are there more members there, but…" "You also want to check in on Rushia, now that Aqua is safe, right?" Marine just nodded. Before she could speak, Subaru did. "Marine, me and all of generation 2 are indebted to you, for keeping Aqua safe. I know she's your sister, but she's also our dear generation comrade. No one would object to going there first, I certainly won't."

As soon as they parked in front of generation 3's safehouse, the door opened, and Noel came out. Marine felt a relief she had not felt since the night started. "We've been keeping track of you in the monitor. Outstanding job, Marine." "I did nothing. This was all Aqua and Subaru", said Marine, because that's how she really felt. She knew Aqua was taken aback by her words, despite being occupied at the moment. "Pekora, Miko, we need you here!", Marine shouted, then "Noel, I'm counting on you and Flare to provide security. We have urgent stuff in our hands but I…" "Also want to check the monitor? Let's get everyone inside first. I have covered it up, so don't worry. I want you to see it first."

Suddenly, they heard cars approaching fast. They tensed up a little, but then saw the sirens.

"Seems we won't be needed in security after all. They finally decided to show up."



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Houshou Marine was alone on the living room. Noelle had talked with the police, and then had communicated to her what they had to say. It fell upon her to now relay the news, to everyone who arrived with her, and was in condition to hear them, of course. Everyone who was in the house when the night started knew already. Pekora, Sakura, Flare, Noel. They seemed to be taking it… as well as one could. But Rushia… she hadn't even seen her. According to Noel, she was in her room, for her own good. Everything had hit her especially hard. This was something else Marine needed to take care of…so much to do, and not enough time. But she had to focus. First, delivering the news. Right. Her right leg started trembling. She bit her lip to calm down.

"Marine?", said a funny voice.

Subaru's. She was on the threshold of the living room. "Thought I'd find you here", she said with a smile, then plopped down on one of the sofas, with all the carelessness of the world. "Man, I'm beat." Marine couldn't really look at her. The time had come. "Where is Aqua?", she said, because she wanted to delay and she truly wanted to know. Telling them both at the same time might be for the best. "Upstairs, still tending to the others", said Subaru. "Your sister sure is strong, isn't she?" Marine nodded. "Yeah, she is." Subaru continued. "She… she told me she would probably not come down tonight. Down here, to talk to you, I mean. She's still coming down to pick what Flare and Noelle are baking at the kitchen. Man, that bread was super good!" Marine just remained silent. "So… so it's just me. Good old Subaru." Marine couldn't look at her. "You… you don't need to worry, ok? I.. I already know, more or less." Marine couldn't help but look at her. She was playing with her hands, and looking down. "I tried to keep myself busy, to delay it… but I guess there's no point, right? Better to face reality soon, healthier. If they were alright, you would have told me already. Like how they told everyone that the evacuation van… that Watame, Suisei and Azuki were alright. So, there's no need to soften the blow or anything. I'm ready."

That was the harsh truth. The only survivors not on the house where those in the evacuation van.

"Subaru, I'm sorry." That's all Marine could say. Subaru nodded, stood up, and sat next to Marine. "Don't be. It wasn't your fault. All of this, it wasn't the fault of any of us. It wasn't." She then added, "I'm ok, ok? I'm ok."

Marine nodded.

"How about you, Marine, are you ok?"

Marine was surprised by this question.

"What do you mean?"

"It's just that… how to say it… everyone knows to worry about me. I was Mio and Okayu's friend. I was Shion, Choco, and Ayame's generation comrade. Everyone is going to check how I'm doing, it's natural. I saw you, and it just crossed my mind… that maybe no one would think to check up on how you were doing."

Subaru was right. No one had done so.

"You managed to rescue Aqua. Rushia is safe. But they are both hurt. And you are probably thinking what you can do to make things better, right? Even though you just returned from trying to

help, you feel the pressure to act again. Even though losing comrades must be very hard, on you too. It would be hard on everyone, so of course it'd be hard on you."

Subaru was smiling as she spoke. But, at some point, she had started crying too.

"I'm hurt. Of course I am. But I'm ok. I don't know why, if it's because I have someone to be weak in front of or what, I don't know if I'm making much sense, but… I know you are hurt, Marine. Of course you are. I just wanted to ask you if you were ok."

Marine hugged her. Subaru hugged her back. Marine could feel her crying on her shoulder.

Subaru was right. Marine was hurt. But her checking up on her… her words…

Thanks to that, somehow Marine was sure that she would be ok, too.

On the living room, two girls cried while hugging each other.

One cried loud and hard, the other subtly and silently.

On the kitchen, Flare and Noel baked one thing after another, focused, no words spoken.

Aqua paced between the rooms, checking on everyone and bringing them freshly baked food.

Peko and Sakura sat against the wall of their room, leaning their heads together.

Rushia had locked herself on her room, alone.

END OF PART 2, CHAPTER 1

INTERLUDE 1

He made it to the safehouse after disposing of the weapon and waiting the prudent time. No point wondering what was on the other side of the door. He brought his hand closer, and the bracelet at its end unlocked the electronic lock. He stepped in.

The leader of the Majin Extermination Division was sitting at the table. He turned his attention to him. "So it's you, Rookie. How did it go?" He sat down as well. "Couldn't confirm. Probably got some, but not all." Wait… "Why are you asking? Haven't you checked?" If he was interested... "Oh, I just thought hearing it directly from you would be better." Where was this sentimental stuff

coming from? "…your hunt?" …lost any members, perhaps? "Oh, it went fantastic. Everyone was in sync. Worked together like a charm." Oh, so he was proud and wanted to boast. Didn't think he was the type, but it wasn't that strange either. Proud of his group, or proud of himself… well, that was another matter entirely. Feeling a little sullen at having taken the bait, and at the amusement that had caused the man, he could do nothing but sigh. Then the two of them waited… and waited… and waited…

"I guess no one else is coming."

Just as he finished saying that, the door opened, and the girl entered. She was wearing an unusual blue hoodie. The night was cold, yes, but she made sure, with no exceptions, to always show up and depart on her uniform. An exception like this was a first. Although it seemed a lot of firsts were happening tonight.

"We had taken you for dead already. How was your hunt?"

"Let this speak for itself", she said, removing the hoodie. So that was it. Her uniform was completely drenched in blood, to the point you couldn't see original colors anymore.

They just stared at it.

"What's with you two? Cat got your tongue? And anyways, why are you asking? Don't say you haven't taken a look yet!"

Saying that in an almost offended tone, she turned the TV on, and on the monitor they could see a real time digital map of the city. On it, every Hololive member current status and location showed up. A cute profile pic, and their vital signs, as markers on the map. Two of them had seen such maps tonight, on the places they had been.

"Seems Animal Division isn't coming back…", said the girl, after noticing some targets had escaped.

"Knew the idiot would underestimate them", said the remaining division leader.

"Seems like you didn't, good job!"

The leader allowed himself a subtle smile.

"And you, 'Rookie'…

…got some, but not all, huh? Not bad! Didn't have much faith in you, to be honest."

Whatever.

"So, what now?"

"Now, you both… leave it all to me", said the division leader with intent.

"Fine by me! I don't want to see them all gone so soon, I want to see them break, bend, suffer this for a time!", said the girl. She then playfully added, "Although I'm wishing for your success, obviously~".

"You know I'm ready to go and finish this if you require me, but I'll lay low if you prefer."

"Indeed. We have achieved the main objective of the night. We struck them, and hurt them deep. We inflicted casualties. Right now, they are most likely crying their dead. That'll be our angle."

Hololive had tried to lure them in with a bait. It was their turn now. And they weren't going to be satisfied with just that. Their plan was just like using bait to catch a fish, then using that first fish as bait for a bigger fish, your real objective all along.

The bigger fish was, of course, the remaining Hololive members.

The bait would be all those they had killed today.

Who, then, would be the fish to catch with said bait, who would be used as bait for the bigger fish?

The answer was obvious. They all looked at her on the monitor.

Green hair. Small body. A necromancer. Her comrades had died.

Sooner or later, she'd try to use her powers to bring them back.

That's when they would strike.

Interlude 2

Houshou Marine sat on the kitchen table. She was browsing YouTube, looking for music to listen to, when something caught her eye. It was a video, on the recommendation section. It was an Amane Kanata cover. She selected it as if drawn to it. She listened to the music start through her earphones.

A distorted, scratched spring,

even without anesthesia I walked;

deep in my body it resonates,

a strong “you haven’t lived enough”.

I can still taste the flavor of that chewing gum,

in this heart unable to grow cold;

at the end of losing them, one after the other,

this was the thing that remained.

If this is not love, then how do you call it?,

I have no idea.

Call it by a flower’s name, just one,

one made to be ripped apart.

You touch, the tip of my nose,

my breathing stops,

I’m ok with the pain not disappearing.

Tired, what are those eyes saying to me?,

I walked while concealing my wounds;

in the shadow of that habit I scattered roses:

I wanted you to notice.

Can you still walk? The taste of the chewed sand,

the nocturnal dew on top of the grass;

on my chest bloom inquisitive words:

It’s too soon for this to be the end, right?

To smile so no one would be sad

is something I was unable to do quite right.

Even though just one, just protecting one,

would have been enough.

A very foolish one,

that wish, won’t disappear:

It’s my soul, that no one can steal from me.



(…)

You touch the tip of my nose,

my breathing stops,

I’m ok with the pain not disappearing.

A very foolish one,

that wish, won't disappear,

it's eternal.

She had a nice voice. Amane Kanata did. She herself didn't seem to like it, and Marine agreed that it certainly could be a little noisy at times. Marine herself liked it more when she spoke and when she sung in low tones, as opposed to in a high pitch, but… it was a very pretty voice, all things considered. Two weeks had passed since she had heard it last.

This song. She remembered Aqua talked to her about it. Before. She liked it quite a lot. It had a play with meanings, she said. At first it got you thinking it was a song about death. Then the chorus hit, and you thought, no, it's a song about love. Then it started again, and you once again thought that it was about death after all. By the time the second chorus rolled around, you thought it may very well be about both. At its core, she had said, it was a song about someone who wished to keep on suffering, because they wished to keep on living. That's the song Amane Kanata decided to make a cover of.

Hakanasa. The fragility and evanescence of life. Kanata embodied it, and how beautifully bright one could shine in that short time. Everyone in Hololive had thought that. "A strange kind of force, one that doesn't strike but sinks into the soul like heat from a hot spring or fire from a sake bottle, bringing sorrow and solace in equal measure." That's how a reporter had described the concept once.

When Marine thought about what had happened to Kanata… no, what they had done to her… when she remembered what she had seen inside of the church two weeks ago once the dust settled… rather than sorrow or solace…

She didn't want to listen to songs anymore. She stood up, and left the kitchen.

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Interlude 3

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Uruha Rushia felt asphyxiated. She was inside of some kind of bag. She knew it intuitively: a body bag. She was afraid. She couldn't hear anyone nearby, and feared that she had been killed, and left in a morgue somewhere, cold, alone, forgotten. She was on an operating table. She also knew that. Before anything bad could happen to her, she struggled, and finally freed herself from the bag. Indeed, it had been a body bag, on an operating table, inside of a morgue. At least she was alive, but when she looked around, she started crying, despite that. Because next to her lay, unmistakably dead, some of her dear comrades. She cried green tears, and the corpses seemed to react to them.

"WWWHY CRY, RUSHIAAAA?", they said in anguished and scary voices.

"YoU, AfTER AlL, CAn BrING uS BaCK!"

Rushia woke up from her nightmare. The necromancer sat on her bed. The bag had been a dream, the table had been a dream, the morgue had been a dream. Her tears, only those, had been real, for she could feel their warmth on her face, and saw how they had wet her pillow. The words of the nightmare stayed with her, along with all that she had felt.



CHAPTER 2: BACK FROM THE GRAVE (I)

Houshou Marine walked into the living room. It was the living room of the safehouse of gen 3. They had been using the same house for the past 2 weeks. Suisei and Azuki had volunteered to take over the management and administrative stuff of the group, so they were coordinating many things. Chief amongst them, was getting a new office. With what had transpired below the previous one… there was no way they were using it again. Aqua, Subaru and Watame were staying with them, in an undisclosed safe location. Gen 3, and Sakura Miko, had decided to remain in the house. They decided to remain together. Frankly speaking, they didn't have the energy to move right now.

Sprawled on one of the living rooms sofas was Pekora, the bunny girl, just staring at the roof. Marine didn't even bother to ask. The living room had a TV, the same monitor where they had kept track of the happenings of that night, but there was no point in turning it on. All every channel talked about was what had happened to them. First it were breaking reports, then rumors, then came the official statements, and now it was the time for speculations. "What's going to happen to Hololive now? Which members made it out ok, and which ones lost their lives? How many are hospitalized?" That crap was all that was on air. She got it, she really did. Journalism was just a job, journalists had to eat too. Those trying to get a scoop, trying to break the news, they weren't lining their pockets with money, or anything like that. They were not getting a story away from getting cut, most likely. Maybe she had a little less sympathy for the commentators, though. But she understood it, she really did. It didn't make all the media attention less tiresome. Still… somehow, their current location hadn't been leaked. Not that she wasn't grateful for it, but she wondered how. The police cars would be unusual on any neighborhood like the one the house was located in. This was a government provided house, a government asset. She wondered who, if anyone, was inhabiting the surrounding houses…

Her train of thought was interrupted by someone else walking into the living room. Loose hoodie, towel around her shoulders, sweat on her tender skin. Sakura Miko. The girl had just been exercising, probably with Noel and Flare. Exercise was important. Healthy body, healthy mind and all that. Marine couldn't help but think back to that night, how quickly she tired rushing up the church's stairs that night. Her stamina was bad. Something she had decided to fix. That very night. On this very room.

She spent quite a lot of time with Subaru here. The whole night, maybe. Of course, she didn't cry for hours on end, neither of them did. They calmed down eventually, still hugging each other.

Subaru apologized. Marine told her she had not nothing to apologize for, that she was thankful. She smiled. Then made a comment about how nice Marine's body was to cry against. The reply came, that that body grew exhausted right away, and that it had nothing on a sporty type like Subaru. They both laughed, then, after some convincing, Marine agreed to let Subaru prepare a training regime for her. She was still waiting on it. Thankfully.

Houshou Marine thought about all of that when she saw Sakura Miko enter the room. They greeted each other briefly. This seemed to have caught Pekora's attention. "Hey, what were you doing, Sakura?", she said, still sprawled on the sofa, but now with her gaze focused on the girl.

Sakura started doing gym poses, and said, "This youthful, sexy body doesn't take care of itself, you rabbit! With this body, and my killer personality, no way any man can resist!"

"Stop fooling around, peko-yo", said the girl looking back at the roof. "If your personality is a killer of anything, it's of your chances to not end up alone and sad all your life."

A vein appeared on Sakura's head. She turned her attention to Marine. Huh-oh. This was bad. Being used on this dispute was on her immediate future. "Say, Marine… you know… I actually would like to go out with Pekora, take a walk… but those ears of hers dash all of our chances to pass unnoticed. That's why poor old me can't but throw herself onto this training", said the girl, shrugging her shoulders. Marine looked at Pekora over Sakura's shoulder. Her attention was back on her.

"So I'm a bother to you, is that it?"

"Don't put words on the mouth of others", replied Sakura, sounding more serious all of a sudden.

Pekora stood up. "You think you are so smart, Miko."

Sakura walked up to her. Right up to her. "What if I think I am, *rabbit*. What are you gonna do, uh?"

Was it Marine's idea… or they weren't joking around anymore?

Pekora grabbed Sakura by the neck of her clothes. Yup, definitely not joking around anymore. After what happened, who could fault them for being stressed, for exploding so suddenly? She had to do something, though.

Pekora and Sakura stared each other down. Suddenly, Pekora threw her aside.

Sakura tried to maintain her balance, and did so surprisingly well, but in doing so tumbled over a vase on the central table, which broke against the floor. Ok, she had to do something, now.

“Say, Pekora…! We are running out of supplies for the kitchen…! I… I was thinking of going in a restocking run. I need someone to help me with the bags, and Sakura is tired from her exercise, Noel and Flare are about to train, so… what do you say?”

Pekora took one last look meaningful at Sakura, then said “I’ll go change” and went upstairs.

Marine turned to Sakura next, who was already taking care of the vase. If she thought that’d be enough to avoid her, she had another thing coming, though.

And another thing did come, as Marine was about to speak. Green hair, small body, cute dress.

Rushia was standing on the stairs.

“Marine… did something happen? I heard a noise… and came across Pekora… she looked angry…”

Marine made some hand signaling, telling Rushia to drop it.

Truth be told, she was more worried about the girl that had just appeared on the stairs, than about the two that almost fought over nothing moments ago. Rushia looked really bad. Bags under the eyes, as if she hadn’t been sleeping much and crying a lot. She had yet to have a chance to have a meaningful conversation with her. Rushia seldom left her room. And this timing… the vase hadn’t fell so long ago. Rushia must have been out of hers before that. She must have finally wanted to talk to her.

“Say, Rushia, noise aside, did you want to talk about something?”

A pause. She did.

“…no, you seem busy…”

Yup, she sure did. Damn it, this timing.

“Look... I’m going to go grab supplies with Pekora real quick, ok? Once I’m back, I’ll go up with some hot chocolate, and we can have a nice talk, ok? How does that sound?”

Rushia just nodded while smiling sadly, then quietly went up the stairs.

In her place, Pekora suddenly appeared.

God damn this timing. While Marine thought that, they both left the house.

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Sakura Miko saw them go. She smiled. She took care of the vase, leaving it on the “to be recycled” section. Only fools threw ceramic to the trash, after all. She then stretched. She was not a fool. She was just plain stupid.

Of course it pained her, to make Pekora angry like that. But she needed to. She needed to… because Sakura Miko was a stupid coward, who preferred to trick others instead of being honest with them. She left the house and made for the garden again.

This house wasn’t so big, but it had a big enough garden. Big enough to exercise, and to train. Noel and Flare were already on it. They trained every day. Miko wanted to train, too. To protect Pekora.

That’s why Pekora couldn’t know. She would think of herself as a burden if she did. And Sakura didn’t want that. If someone had a problem with those like Pekora, that was their problem. Pekora didn’t have to suffer for that. But Sakura couldn’t turn her eyes away from reality either. There were those who wished to harm her. Since he wished to protect her, she needed to have the means to make sure that on that clash of wishes, hers came up on top.

She had tried to rile Pekora up and get her to leave the house so she could train, but she had done so poorly. Proof of which was how little effort it took. She didn’t want to, but due to how stupid she was, she ended up touching the sensitive nerve she most wanted to avoid: she had stirred Pekora’s feelings of being a burden. Stupid stupid stupid.

Flare was already training. She practiced her bow accuracy. She, by all rights, was one of the fastest archers in the world. Her technique was superb. And her accuracy, almost perfect. Firing as many arrows as she did, she was bound to miss a few times. She didn’t show it much, but Sakura could tell. How each failure bothered her. You, after all, didn’t train to get it right, you trained so you could not get it wrong. Sakura was smart enough to understand at least that much.

Noel, on the other hand, was waiting. Waiting for her. Sakura hurried up. Noel saw her, and threw a sword at her. A practice one. “I’m guessing Pekora leaving the house was handled with supreme delicacy on your part?” Sakura said nothing, and picked up the sword. “I can tell you are having an internal conflict. It looks cute to me, I want to hug you. To your opponent it will look cute too, but they’ll want to use it as a way to hurt you, kill you. Control your emotions, or you won’t control your body.” Sakura knew this. She tried her best. She tried to get a sense for the practice sword. “Don’t think too much about the sword. You aren’t a knight like me, not is this an era like that. You

don’t need to familiarize yourself with one weapon, not that you would be ever need to with a practice sword.”

Sakura blushed. “The important thing”, Noel continued, “to know and familiarize yourself with is your own body. Control it and master it so you have a reliable asset on your side, regardless of what weapon you have at hand, if any. Feel how it responds to you. Mold it accordingly through training, following the needs you feel arise.” Sakura tried to adopt a fighting posture. Noel appreciated it, then swept one of her feet, making her fall to the ground. “Exercise on your free time all you want. Never practice alone. It will reinforce all your bad habits with no one to correct you.” Sakura stood up, embarrassed. “All this rough treatment…” “Is for my own good, I know”, said Sakura, interrupting her. Noel stopped pacing around. She looked at Sakura, and smiled. “Oh no, my dear Sakura. Only an idiot believes in hurting others ‘for their own good’.” Sakura was silent. Noel came closer. “This rough treatment is a warning: learn to treat Pekora, or I’ll make you learn. For your own good.” Ending that line with a wink, Noel took distance again. “Enough fooling around, you are here to train. Like I said, first thing is your body. Let’s go over posture…”

Sakura Miko endeavored to be better while the training lasted. Better at everything.

Better at controlling her center of gravity.

Better at expressing her emotions.

Better at making her footwork seamless.

Better at not hurting those she cared about.

For the good of everyone.

She remembered Noel’s words, her tone of voice.

For her own good, too.



Without them noticing, a small, green haired girl checked up on them from her room on the second floor. As quickly as the curtains opened for her to do so, they closed.

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Houshou Marine walked alongside Usada Pekora, in silence. A silence that didn't last long.

"I'm sorry, Marine. I ruined it."

"Don't say that, Pekora. No one liked that vase much anyway." It was, in fact, Marine's favorite.

"I came across her on the stairs… I know she wanted to talk to you, and because of me, you aren't with her right now."

"Hey, don't worry about that. Nothing some hot chocolate can't fix."

Silence.

"I… I'm sorry about that thing with Sakura. It's just… we are using the same house we used that night and I…"

"It's hard on you, right?"

"I mean… yeah, of course it is. It is hard. But… this is not what this is about."

Pekora stopped walking, and Marine turned her full attention to her.

"Noel and Flare train restlessly… like… like they are preparing for a fight. Like they want it. And… and despite how much she's trying to hide it from me, I know Sakura is training behind my back too, for the same reasons. They are all preparing to fight. And if we go down to it, the reason is

me. It's because I'm there. Jaegers is after those with animal traits. After me. I'm their target, and I'm putting everyone in danger. If… if I wasn't there, then…!"

"Pekora, you really don't know me if you think I'm letting you finish that sentence. Don't ever follow that same train of thought, ever again." Marine interrupted her and walked up to her.

"But…!"

"There's a couple of things you got wrong. First: the moment they touched one of us, a future where us and them don't face off ceased to be possible. There's gonna be a fight, and it has nothing to do about wanting one. There's gonna be a fight, whether you are here or not."

"Second: Even if we could sit this one out by forsaking you… if by abandoning you, we could avoid facing the hell the others faced that night…well, then that hell better prepare its best red carpet to welcome us, because you better believe we will gladly choose any hell over the most beautiful paradise, if it's the only way to be with you."

"Third: We just lost a lot of friends. And… it's hard. It's very hard. So I'm not going to allow no one, no one, not even you talking about yourself, to say that things would be better off if less of us were here. We lost friends for the last time, is that clear?"

"We need you here, Pekora. We want you here. You being here isn't leading us into a fight. We are approaching a fight, because we want you here."

"So… hey Pekora, are you crying?! Come on, you won't have any energy left to carry the bags and I'm gonna have to get them home by myself, aren't I?! Hey, rabbit, face this way!"

Pekora, in fact, ended up crying so much, Marine had to lead her to a nearby playground so she could sit down and allow her to cry on her lap. She fell asleep too, and Marine could do nothing about it, save caress her hair to pass the time, while thinking how silly she was. She also looked at the sky. Despite already being summer, it was looking to be a cloudy day.

One sleeping, the other looking at her and the sky, they didn't notice the hooded figure, that making its way to the closest bus station through the street next to the park, stopped briefly to look at them.

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Houshou Marine and Usada Pekora finally made it back from their grocery trip, just when Sakura Miko finished her training. They meet each other at the entrance of the house. An awkward silence

followed, but not a hostile one. Thinking that that was ok, Marine saw them both head for the living room, left them to their own devices, and after leaving the bags in the kitchen, went up the stairs.

She knocked on the door to Rushia's room. Gently.

"Hey, Rushia… I'm back. I'm sorry I took so long."

Silence.

"I... I'm going to prepare that hot chocolate, ok?"

Silence.

"Right. I'll… I'll be right back, and we can that talk. Just… wait for me, ok?"

Saying that, Marine left, not knowing who was, or wasn't, behind the door.

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Usada Pekora had just returned home. She had left it after fighting with her best friend, and she had cried outside after listening to the words of one of her closest comrades. She'd even fallen asleep for a while, but it was understandable for her to still be a little tired. She knew right away that the girl in front of her, Sakura Miko, said best friend, was even more tired than her. Exhausted.

She had exercised earlier. When Pekora was out, she had been training. She knew this, despite how much she tried to hide it from her. But even if she didn't know beforehand, it was evident know. This girl was exhausted, and her face, her clothes, everything was a tell about what she had been doing. She deserved a rest. Everyone did. Everyone was exhausted, and deserved a rest. And it had nothing to do with physical exertion. But this girl, despite how exhausted she was, instead of having a well-earned rest, was looking at her, nervously, anxiously, awaiting what she had to say. This had to stop. She would put a stop to it, now.

"Look, Sa-"

"Pekora, I'm sorry for being the way I am! Thank you, for accepting me, despite that!"

What the hell. She had interrupted her with the exact words she was about to say. A very nice bow to accompany them, too. Almost as if she had practiced that as part of training, too.

"Lift your head, Sakura, don't be stupid. I… I had a talk with Marine. And it made me realize how wrong I was about some things, and how I had been overlooking some others. So, I'm sorry for

being the way I am. I know you are training to protect me, so… thank you. For that, and for accepting me despite how I am. Train all you want. Just… be open about it."

Sakura looked at her. "I'm sorry for not being sincere about what I did and what I felt before, Pekora! I'm training so I can be useful, should we ever need it in a fight. You are my best friend. Of course I want to protect you… I was an idiot, for hurting you being that my goal. I'm sorry. Just… don't think you are a burden, ok? You are big plus. Who else would put up with an idiot like me?"

Smiling, both girls hugged each other. They were so tired, the hug could have lasted the whole day. Alas, it was to be interrupted before long.

CRACK!

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Shirogane Noelle was taking care of the practice equipment, while Shiranui Flare observed her.

"What do you think?", came the question from the elf.

"I'd say she has a lot of potential. She acts like an idiot, but she has a good head on her shoulders. She actually grasped most of the concepts pretty quickly. She just needs to practice, and she might be a nice rival for me some day. Her body isn't bad either. I mean… they are big, but not as bothersome as mine…"

"Oh? Someone has a complex, it seems", said Flare teasingly. "And, more important than that… I don't know whether you are overestimating Miko or underestimating yourself… but where are you looking?"

She had gotten serious out of a sudden. Noel decided to dedicate her her full attention.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"A nice rival for you? You expecting me to die or something? I thought I was your rival."

Oh, so that's what this was about.

"Of course not, Flare… I mean…"

Yeah. If anything, that was what was going on here.

"I have watched you train. Because I train next to you each day, after all."

Noel looked across the small garden.

“By the time I manage a second swing, you have already…”

Flare was just silent.

“Bow and arrow may still stand up to this era in your hands, but swords? Against guns? The days of the sword wielder are over, I’m afraid. I fear I may be doing something cruel to Sakura, training her in this art that I myself see as having no future. Perhaps it’s nigh time I picked up a different weapon.”

“What a joke. You inspected the scene, right? Our enemies don’t seem to think that.”

That was true. The Jaegers favored swords, and other bladed weapons. Most of them did, anyways.

That meant Noel could still be useful in a fight. Still…

“Sheesh, you do have a complex Noel, and it isn’t the one I was joking about”

“You aren’t just your strength in a fight. And a fight isn’t just strength. Your tactical prowess is a skill more valuable than any level of mastery one could have with a weapon. Don’t forget that. Also, you have many good points outside of fights. Don’t forget that either.”

“Seems you have your fair number of good points outside of combat too. Not only a master bowman, but a poet as well? You sure aim to impress, Flare.”

“That I do.”

They both smiled.

“Still, your words are honey now, let’s see if your actions are so sweet when we are in a fight together. Try to leave some for me, would you kindly?”

“Yeah, yeah. You just keep training Sakura on using that stick of yours, up until I decree that there’s no need for it anymore, and that you shall exclusively focus on other matters.”

They both laughed.

“And I must say, for all my mastery with a bow, you sure know how to teach someone *how* to bow! Keep that training up as well! It’s sure to be useful to Sakura in the future, with how gifted she is at offending others.”

“Haha, you reckon she’ll make good use of it?”

“That I do.”

“She better, she suffered a great deal to learn it, after all.”

They laughed again, recalling the lessons Noel had harshly imparted Sakura, “for her own good”.

CRACK!

They looked at the house, then at each other.

“Spoke too soon, it seems. Let’s go check it out.”

Saying that, they both left the garden and hurried inside.

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Houshou Marine was preparing hot chocolate in the kitchen.

Hot chocolate made everything alright.

Or so she wanted to believe, anyways.

Truth be told… she wasn’t sure what she would say to Rushia.

What she could say, to make things better.

She tried to find the perfect words, a sentence so good that it would dispel it all.

Fears. Regrets. Sorrows.

But, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t find them, find it.

She wondered if maybe they didn’t exist. Or…

Or if maybe, she wasn’t… adequate enough to find them.

Maybe she wasn’t the right person for the job.

But, if she wasn’t adequate enough to help her, then… what could she even be good at?

What she told Aqua… what she told Pekora… were those the adequate things to say?

Maybe they were stupid words. All she could really do… was be there for them.

She was, at least, adequate enough to prepare hot chocolate.

Maybe that was enough. Maybe that was alright.

Maybe not having the answers beforehand was good.

How could she help Rushia, without listening to her?

She would be there for her. She would listen to what she had to say.

She'd go from there.

It was simple, but losing sight of the simple things was the simplest thing out of them all.

Feeling better about it, she took two cups of hot chocolate, and went up the stairs.

It'd be alright. Somehow she knew. Once Rushia drank this, it'd be alright.

They were going to have a talk. They would figure it out. Together.

She stood in front of the door.

"Hey, I have the hot chocolate! How about you let me in before it loses the hot part?"

Silence.

"Hey… if now is a bad time… just tell me, ok?"

Silence.

"Rushia… please, talk to me."

Silence.

Was she sleeping?

Marine couldn't really knock, one cup on each hand.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, so she decided to try and open the door.

To her surprise, it was unlocked.

Maybe she was sleeping, and left it unlocked so she woke her up when she returned?

She entered Rushia's room.

CRACK!

Soon after she had stepped on the room, both cups were shattering loudly against the floor.

She had made them to warm a heart. They ended up warming the tables of the floor.

The sound they made by breaking, set the events in motion.

A sound soon followed by footsteps quickly running through the corridor.

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“What was that noise?,” said Pekora, as she pulled away from the hug she was sharing with Miko.

“Hey, what was that noise?”, said Noel, as she entered the house followed closely by Flare.

“HEY…!”, shouted Marine, as she descended the stairs. Everyone turned their attention to her.

“Rushia…! Rushia…! Rushia is about to…!”

…do something very stupid.

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There was, of course, no one in the room. Rushia had left. Her laptop had been left on. On her browser, one tab was open. Her twitter. She had been reading all the replies fans had written in response to the vague statement the company had put out in response to the incident. They hadn’t identified anyone yet, neither victims nor survivors. Fans wondering if their favorites were ok, saying what would happen to them if they lost them, both about people who were, in fact, alive and well, and about others who… were not. And amongst those replies, there were certain ones that could be seen regularly. “Rushia, please, bring everyone back”. They had tagged her and everything. Well-meaning, worry-driven, grief-stricken fans, no doubt, but foolish, nonetheless. How many times had Rushia received messages like those, read replies like those. Marine saw the number of notifications and… she had to find Rushia. She had to. What did she feel, reading stuff like that for two weeks. Her message tab was open. Full of messages too, no doubt asking for the same. One stood out. It was her last read one. The conversation was still open. After reading it, Marine dropped the cups, and took up running across the hallway.

“Just a tip: No guards on the lab today.”

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The lab referred to the police forensics lab were the bodies of the Hololive members that had died that night were being kept. They were on the subterranean morgue underneath it. No guards? On a police station? It made no sense. But, things had no time to make sense anymore. Not for Houshou Marine, at least. Only thing that mattered was getting to Rushia, before someone else did.

“I’m taking the bike. I’m going to-”

“To die?”, interrupted Noel. “*You* are going nowhere.”

“But-!”

“*We*. We are going. As a group. I know how important Rushia is to you, Marine, but don’t forget: she’s important to all of us. And whoever lured her out, knows it. This is a trap. Of course, we can’t abandon Rushia. And we won’t. But we aren’t rushing in to get all killed, either.”

Silence. Marine knew by now what Noel would say. Everyone did.

“Listen to me: I have a plan.”

--

Uruha Rushia stood in front of the police forensic lab building. It was an unassuming multi-story building, you could walk right past it without knowing what was inside. Rushia knew, so she walked in. Empty, as promised. Further and further she went. She found, thanks to the signaling, what she was looking for. The stairs, leading down the morgue. Down and down she went. She reached it.

It was a cold, underground room. The stairs ended on one of its corners. On the opposite end, the closed metal doors of an elevator could be seen, no doubt to transport the bodies to and from here. On the wall of the room opposite to it, there were a couple of fixed beds. Cold, metallic beds for bodies, so they could be examined by the forensic personal. There was, in fact, one body, in the bed farthest from the stairs. Rushia almost didn’t pay it attention. Because on the wall next to it, lay what she had come here for. What had been calling to her. The body lockers. Row after row of metallic lockers, each containing or waiting to contain a finished story, a source of sorrow.

There was something wrong with them, though. Something that made tears appear on her eyes.

Some were open, the moving metallic beds inside of them pulled outwards. As if someone had been interrupted on the middle of his examination. And on those beds, of course, there were bodies. The bodies of the deceased Hololive members. On full display, for her to see. But a white blanket, covering them. She couldn’t see their faces, unless she stood next to them. But she could read the tags. “Nakiri Ayame”. “Yuzuki Choco”. “Murasaki Shion”. “Akai Haato”. “Natsuiro Matsuri”. “Akira Tsukimi.” “Tokino Sora”.

She started walking, trying to see everyone. She really, really wanted to see them again. She started with the bodies belonging to gen 2. Neck wounds, all of them. Decapitated, even. She had to pause when she reached gen 1. What she saw was too cruel. Worse than she would ever have expected. She thought she wouldn't be able to reach A-chan, and by the time she ended, she had to lean on Sora's bed. She then started crying, loudly than she had ever cried since that night. It took her a while to calm down.

She looked at Sora again. Such a beautiful face. Such a beautiful body. Full of wounds.

She remembered the times they had interacted. Such a beautiful person. Taken, before her time.

She reached out her hand. Not to touch her. To revive her.

Uruha Rushia was, after all, a necromancer.

She could do it. For a price.

Her own life.

Or part of it, at least. Truth was, she had never attempted it. She could raise skeletons to do her bidding... for a time. Everyone knew that. They called it "raising the dead", and in a way, it was just that. Reviving them… reviving them was a different process entirely.

She could "activate" the remains of a body, summon the energy that was part of it in life, supply her own energy where needed, and have it be animated, as long as she was around and could maintain said energy supply. Some very small memories and quirks sometimes came back. There were theories to explain it, but none she believed fully.

Her own understanding of it… was that the soul left an imprinting on the body. If the soul was who the person was… then by that soul being in the body, by the person living its life for a long time, said soul ended up leaving "marks" on the body. Some part of the body, maybe the brain, maybe its life energy, was molded after the soul. It ended up showing who the person was, in part. Kinda like how paper oiled up, when you used it to grab greasy food. …it was a gross example, but the only one that got Marine to understand her thoughts when she tried to explain them to her.

But just like a paper greasing up didn't make it something you could eat, having a body retain said imprint wasn't enough to truly bring someone back. You had a vessel shaped by the contents, and lacked the truly important part, the contents itself.

Reviving the dead, then, required you to bring back said contents. You needed to bring back the soul. But where did it go? Necromancers didn't have that answer. But through trial and error, they had discovered a method. To bring the soul back. To commute with whoever, wherever said souls were property of now. You had to offer part of your own. Doing that, the body regained its soul, and lived again, after you supplied it with the energy required to restart its vital processes. And assuming all its wounds had been healed beforehand.

There were theories about this too. Did the guardian of souls give you the original soul back, moved by the sacrifice you did? Willing to help you, but unable to give you a soul back, did it take the part of your soul you offered, and overwrote it, copying the soul you wanted on it? Was it an equivalent exchange, were they received part of your soul, and you received part of that soul back?

Rushia didn't know, and didn't care that much. She had never seen the process in person, only read about it. And what she read gave her hope. It seemed those brought back could live normal lives again. The same was not true of the necromancers who carried out the ritual. Shortened lifespans, if they managed to survive the process, in the first place.

Rushia didn't care. Living hurt too much. And if her death could make others happy…

She thought back on all the fans that had sent her messages. She looked at the girls on the tables.

They didn't want to die. She had been asked to bring them back. She was willing.

What more was there to think about?

She… she could probably not bring everyone back. Maybe just one. Two, at most.

Her hand had been stretched over Tokino Sora for a while. It was time.

For some reason, she thought back to generation 3.

On her way here, she had seen them all. They would be fine. They had each other.

She thought back on Marine.

How she had stopped to talk for a moment against her door every day for these past two weeks.

Receiving nothing but silence in return. Yet she kept doing it.

She wanted to have hot chocolate with her.

"…I'm sorry…", said Rushia weakly, tears on her face again.

On the cold, underground morgue, one of the bodies sat upright.

It was the body that Rushia had mostly ignored. A body clad in full black.

“Don’t be sorry. Your comrades on those tables… I put them there.”

The leader of the Jaegers Majin Extermination Division had arrived at the building not long after the message to Uruha Rushia had been sent. First, he needed to make good on his word. He took out the guard, who patrolled the building on this day off all the personnel had received. Non-lethally, of course. There was no good reason for him to die, so he was currently bound and tied on one of the upper floors. Next, he needed to set his device by the door, a handy motion sensor that would alert him, should anyone trip the infrared wire, that someone was entering the building. But, it seems he had arrived too early. Maybe consciously, maybe subconsciously. He made his way down to the cold morgue.

He couldn’t get that image out of his head. That smiling young girl, completely drenched in blood.

He… he wanted to see for himself, just what she had done.

So he looked for them, and he opened them. He opened the lockers of all those she had killed.

He saw four beautiful girls, full of horrific wounds. No rhyme or reason to them, save…

…save for the fact it seemed she had avoided anything that would mean a quick death, on purpose.

She had toyed with them. Prolonged their suffering. For what end? For what reason?

He looked at the next three lockers. He knew the names. The ones inside were his handywork.

He opened them too. He didn’t spend much time on the demon or the succubus.

They had been his explicit targets.

He hadn’t personally killed them. He just studied the work of his men before moving on.

On the witch, he stopped for a while. A long while.

“Murasaki Shion”, said the tag.

He studied the face. The doctors had done a good job. She looked peaceful.

Nothing at all like the face full of pain he saw when he went to sleep.

“What did we ever do to you?”

Nothing. That was the undeniable truth.

What had he done to them?

He had killed them.

The girl had stiches on her neck, reattaching what he so swiftly had severed.

He considered his and his men’s work. Methodical, clinical, chirurgical… the work of professionals.

He considered the work of the girl. Savage, raw, cruel… the work of a monster.

They were nothing alike.

He took distance from the bodies. It was good to get a sense for the room, but he didn’t do it for that.

From this distance, you couldn’t see the wounds. All you could see, were girls devoid of life.

Girls whose lives had been taken, by him and the girl.

They were the same.

He went back to the witch.

He had two missions here today.

One was his official one. The other was personal.

He didn’t know what good it would do.

But he had learned to listen to himself.

And he knew that, for his own good, he had to do this.

With a clear voice, clear enough to be heard, he spoke. To her.

“That night… for the briefest moment…”

“After raising my sword… but before bringing it down… I had a stupid thought.”

“Seeing your face…

…I thought that maybe I should spare you.”

Brrrrr.

His wristband vibrated. The motion sensor he had installed by the door had been triggered.

The necromancer was here. He had taken too much time.

He couldn't put the bodies back. Not enough time, and he'd be heard.

Think.

He looked at the witch again. At Shion.

What a twisted turn of events.

Going to one of the fixed metallic tables on the wall, the farthest from the stairs, he laid down.

And he waited.

-

He listened to everything the necromancer did. He listened to how she inspected the bodies.

He listened to how she cried, after seeing what the monster had done.

Not the monster that laid down pretending to be dead. The other one.

He had been listening, without doing nothing, for a while.

But when she said "I'm sorry" in a trembling voice, he couldn't do nothing anymore.

He had gotten too close. Too emotionally close.

He had wanted that, at first. That's why he advocated for the use of swords over guns.

Swords made you get close to who you fought, who you killed.

You saw faces.

And he had seen one. One that stuck with him.

One was enough. That was why today, he carried a gun.

Somehow, he just felt it wasn't who he was.

But letting a girl cry, shouldering his own guilt?

That, for sure, wasn't who he was. Or at least, he wanted to believe that.

He wanted to believe he had honor. At least some honor, left.

So he spoke.

“Don’t be sorry. Your comrades on the tables… I put them there.”

He was ready to put a round on her should he need to. He wasn’t going to betray the mission.

It was too late for that, anyways.

But somehow, he felt the girl posed no immediate danger to him.

She felt… like Shion had.

She reacted with surprise, retracted the hand she extended over a body, and looked at him.

Understandably, there was fear on her face. He would cause more than fear. For the mission.

Right, the mission. There was something he had been asked to find out, too.

It had to do with the girl in front of him.

It all worked out in the end.

“Say… is it true you can bring the dead to life?”

He addressed her with equal parts caution and wonder.

She backed down, understandably. But… perhaps she sensed he was no immediate danger, as well.

After a while, she spoke.

“I… I don’t know. I… was about to try. When you interrupted me.”

Well, that was…

Brrrrr.

The wristband vibrated again. The motion sensor had been triggered again. As planned.

He looked up. The girl did as well.

“Seems your comrades have come for you.”

The girl was terrified.

“Please…!”

“I’m sorry.”

He walked over to the center of the room.

His own comrades would soon be on the building, having felt the vibration on their own wristbands.

Only an outcome was likely.

“I’m going to put more of your comrades on those tables”

Then he added.

“And afterwards, I might ask you to bring one of them back.”

He wouldn’t betray a mission. That wasn’t who he was.

And he had two.

An official one, and a personal one.

He’d achieve them both.

“I have a plan”. That’s what Shirogane Noel had said.

On their motorcycle, Houshou Marine and Shirogane Noel stopped in front of the forensic building, then they quickly made their way inside.

“I inspected the safehouse of the second generation, after the fact. I also… asked for reports on the bodies. In person. I know the building. And I believe I know the enemy.”

Before long, a van stopped in front of the building. It was the van of the second generation, that had been left at the third’s safehouse since that night. Usada Pekora was driving, but no one got out.

“They prefer to use swords for some reason. And they prefer to be on the attack. This is just a hunch but… I don’t think they would choose to defend a location, even if it’s when setting up a trap. A group so good at attacking rarely refrains from being on the offense, if they can afford it. I think they will let us into the building, then storm it when we are inside. Also, Ayame, Choco, and Shion… there is obvious traces that many were involved on their deaths, but… I believe their plan relied on one expert, a master swordsman, who could have easily taken the 3 out by himself. I think… he, and he alone, is likely to wait for us already inside, with Rushia. He engages us, takes most of us out, and his comrades finish off any of us still standing by the time they get there.”

“The way you make it sound… Who would win if you were to fight him one on one, Noel?” was the question she received.

She pondered it for a while, even though she already knew the answer. She wanted to find the right words to share it with them. “If we were both physically unhurt, emotionally stable, and I didn’t manage to catch him by surprise… I think he’d win every time.”

“But don’t worry… I think we can make this work. Here’s what we’ll do.”

A second van stopped behind the first one, in front of the forensic building. Black cladded men drove it. Sensing its arrival, the back doors of the first van opened. Inside, there was a single, young girl. She wielded a sword on her hand. A practice sword. It was Sakura Miko.

The two men in the driving compartment saw her, and in unison descended the van, drawing their own, real swords. They seemed angry, perhaps they thought she was mocking them. She may well have been. Sakura Miko was exhausted, after training all day. She was only familiar with the practice sword, and Noel didn’t have a real spare. Her posture and stand was too stiff, it betrayed a newbie. Behind her, driving the van, was Pekora. The reason she had decided to train on the first place. This moment gave it all meaning. And sadly, it wouldn’t even be a fight. These men would kill her right away. There was no other possible outcome to that fight. That’s why her comrades wouldn’t allow it to happen.

The men took one step forward.

One second passed.

Then both fell dead, an arrow on the back of their necks.

The doors of the second van opened. The girl standing behind it saw 7 black cladded men.

One second passed.

Two men fell dead, without making it out of the van.

Another second passed.

Two men managed to fall out of the van, dead.

Another second passed.

Two men wondered what the sound on the roof of their van was, and fell dead looking at it.

Another second passed.

The final man was charging the girl. He died still trying to do so.

In the span of 10 seconds, the girl had killed all 9 men by herself, using just a bow and arrows.

On 2013, a video was posted on YouTube. It was called “Reinventing the fastest forgotten archery”. On it, a Danish man called Lars Andersen demonstrated how fast he could fire his bow. He could get 10 arrows out in 5 seconds. The video was an internet sensation for a while, and Lars became famous. This would have no relation to our story, save for the fact that in 2019 Shiranui Flare saw the video. Flare, obviously, knew how to shoot a bow beforehand. She was an elf. A hunter. But she had never worried about how she did what she did. She just did it. Seeing the video changed that.

On it and on subsequent ones, Lars explained how he had studied historical records, and discovered how archery was done in the ancient ages. It was, apparently, completely different than how archery is conceived on fiction, or how modern archery is understood. It took him years to forget all he had learned, and to teach himself from scratch all of its principles. Flare didn’t need to forget anything. And she already had some of the principles engrained in her. She just needed to pick a couple of them she was lacking, put a lot of practice into it, and the result…

…was that she now had managed to kill 9 people in under 10 seconds.

Shirogane Noel stood in the roof of the van. The enemy van.

Only Sakura, on their own van, and Flare, on the opposite side, remained standing.

Everyone else was dead. By her hand.

“So this is how it is, Flare…”

This was not the plan they had agreed upon. Noel would help her, and take some out herself.

She looked at Flare. She looked back. Their gazes met.

Her eyes were… disgusting, determined eyes.

The eyes of a killer.



After the desired impression had been made, they changed.

They softened a little. Became pleading, even.

What disgusting eyes.

The eyes of liar.

Noel couldn’t stand to look at her anymore.

Luckily, Marine spoke at that very moment. Above her.

“Hey, you done? Hurry up!” she said, in hushed tones, then went back inside.

Out of the second-floor window she had just peeked out of, a rope dangled, for Noel to climb.

Noel grabbed it. She didn’t even spare Flare a glance.

“So this is how it’s gonna be…”, she said while testing it to make sure it was firmly secured.

She then turned her attention to Sakura, still standing, surprise on her face at what had transpired.

“Sakura: Once I return, your training will continue. I expect great things from you, because you have the makings of a great warrior. It isn’t skill or anything like that. You develop those with practice. Picking up a weapon to protect someone dear to you, that’s the base a great warrior is built upon.”

Saying that, she made short work of the rope and was inside the building again.

--

The Leader of the Jaegers Majin Extermination Division stood in the center of the room. Since hearing his motion scanner go off, a good minute had passed. Yet no one had arrived. Why?

Suddenly, he could see the elevator had begun descending.

His men? Did they take everyone out themselves? But then, why hadn’t the motion sensor activated again? Had they avoided it just to impress him? Or…?

He took a step back from the elevator.

It was way too obvious to attack from there. But a trap… or the elf.

Her weapon of choice was the bow. A bow could take him out in an instant.

He took another step back.

He aimed at the elevator. Two hands of course. Then crouched for good measure.

The elevator reached the floor. DING, announced the bell.

The doors opened. No one inside.

One moment passed.

Then…!

He turned around, standing up in the same motion, one step back, and sure enough.

Someone was already making its way into the room from the stairs.

Someone in a crimson suit.

It took a good sniper 3 seconds to acquire his target.

How long did it take for a master swordsman with a handgun?

The girl ran at him.

But he had her on his sights already.

It was over.

The girl knew it. That's why she gritted her teeth. Regardless, she kept running. Of course she did.

She didn't want to die. She wanted to live. For that, until the end, she fought.

Like they had.

"MARINE!", screamed the small necromancer. An anguished, painful cry.

So her name was Marine.

So Marine would be the name on the tag of the next body he would put on a metal table.

He had picked a gun over a sword for this, but it was no good. It was no different.

He could see her face. Marine's face. He had gotten too close, regardless.

She was close. Way too close.

He could see her gloved hand, Marine's hand, grabbing his weapon, and pulling it downwards.

He fired.

But she was no longer on his sights. The round went past her and exploded against the wall at her back. The girl had the momentum, so he'd just have to roll with this one. He felt a gloved hand hit him on the face. He tried to move the gun, and confirmed she still grabbed it. He pulled with more strength, and the girl grabbed him from the neck of his clothes. He fell diagonally, and made her fall with him. He placed his foot against her stomach, and when his back was against the floor he launched her past him. The girl took the gun, then crashed against one of the open metallic beds. Shion's. The corner of it must have dug hard into the back of the girl. She stood up, slowly, painfully. She threw the gun into the elevator. He readied his stance accepting the challenge, but it seemed baffling she had chosen to fight. Her left arm was limp at her side, a result of the collision doing a number on her, no doubt. She raised one white gloved fist next to her face. Then spoke.

"Just you wait, Rushia, I'll be right over there!"

She had good eyes. Full of determination. Mismatched color, too.

Maybe his own eyes should have been mismatched, like the things he felt and the things he did.

He made the first move. Whoever takes the initiative wins, is what he had always believed. This girl could only use one arm. He stepped in. She tried to defend with her right, but her left was completely open. He threw a powerful jab with his right, aimed at her face. She turned on it to soften the blow. That's when he saw it. Too late. Her left arm, going for his chin, over his arm. Not hitting it, placing itself below it. Her right, grabbing his extended hand. This move… her right arm pulling towards her, her left leg swiping his own, her left arm pushing him downwards… He crashed against the ground.

One moment passed.

She went to walk past him.

He tried to stand up.

She turned her attention to him, and his was of course on her.

Their eyes locked.

He saw what he had seen before. Determination.

He wondered, what did she see on his?

Whatever it was, it made her ignore him, and make her way to the necromancer.

One moment passed.

-

"Marine! Are you alright?!"

"Of course I am, can't you tell?", she said, while giving her a pained smile.

"Marine…"

"Are you ok, Rushia? I…"

That's when she noticed, for the first time. The open lockers. The bodies.

Silence reigned in the room for a little while.

"Let's… let's get out of here, ok?"

“Marine… I’m sorry… It’s just… I’ve been having these nightmares… I’ve been seeing those messages… how everyone misses them… and I do too… I miss them so much…” Rushia started crying, without moving from where she was.

Marine remembered what she had thought on the kitchen. How she needed to listen, so she could help. She had been waiting two weeks to speak with her. If it was happening now… so be it. Maybe it needed to be here.

“I just wanted to see them again… and I thought… and I thought that if I could use… use my powers to bring them back… then, then I should… no matter the cost…!”

She was crying harder. Marine wanted to embrace her, interrupt her, but not yet. Not yet.

“I don’t want to die…! But… but it just hurts so much and… and I don’t know what to do to make it better…! I’m the only one with the power to do something, but I don’t know what! What should I do? I want to be with you… be with everyone… everyone! But… but I can’t! What should I do, Marine?! Just what?!”

Marine waited a moment, and confirmed that Rushia wasn’t going to add anything more.

She then walked up to her.

“Rushia… our comrades are right here, aren’t they?”

“They are…! They are, that’s why… that’s why I came here… to…”

“No. Not there, on those tables. Here.”

Saying that, she brought a hand to Rushia’s chest.

“You saw my fight, right? Saw the move I used to defeat the master swordsman over there? Matsuri taught it to me. It was from Attack on Titan, and I had seen it, but she took the time to learn it and teach me how easy one it was to perform with some little practice.”

“We lost our comrades. They were taken from us. But we didn’t lose the time we spent together with them. The times we laughed together, the things we went through together, the things we learned together… They still remain.”

“So… so I’m not a necromancer. Nor am I smart. I don’t know how to raise the dead, how to bring them back to life. But… I do know now that I don’t need to do that, for them to still be here, with me.”

“And I… I think you are beautiful, ok?”

-

Uh?

-

“And I’m saying that, so you don’t think too deeply on the comparison I’m about to make, ok?”

“When you tried to explain your theories regarding necromancy to me… when I was too stupid to understand what you wanted to say… you used an example that helped me get it, right?”

“You said, ‘the body is to the soul, what paper is to greasy food’.”

“You said that just like greasy food left its mark on the paper, a soul left its mark on the body.”

“But what if… what if, you leave your mark on others in the same way, as well?”

“What I’m trying to say, Rushia, is that you are an oiled-up paper! A beautiful oiled-up paper!”

“On you, the marks of all those you have held dear remain. Whether they are still here or not.”

“If… If you have nightmares, let me shoo them away for you. If you have reasons to hurt… let me give you reasons to smile…! If others have left you marks that cause you pain, let me shape you too! Let me leave marks in you that make you happy, that fill you with joy!”

“So… so, don’t throw your life away, Rushia. Please. Don’t throw your beautiful life away, your beautiful life filled with so many marks others have left in you. Don’t throw those marks away.”

“Our comrades will always be here with us, as long as you are. Thanks to you, we… no, everyone can see them again, and not because you are a necromancer! Because…”

“Because I’m a greasy, oiled up paper. Yeah, yeah.”

-

“Sheesh Marine, you are so stupid.”

He.

Rushia started crying and laughing at the same time.

So, so stupid…

“But…”

When she had touched her… when she had felt her warmth…

On her hand… on her words…

“I think you just oiled me up in just the right way.”

She smiled at her.

-

How long.

How long had it been since she had seen that smile last?

Too long.

She smiled too.

She was happy Rushia ended up not using her powers.

That she preserved her life, all of it.

“Let’s go home, Rushia.”

They started to make their way to the stairs.

“Let’s…”

BANG!

Marine froze. Ahead of her, Rushia turned around, terror written on her face.

“Marine…?”

Marine, slowly, looked behind her.

Maybe… maybe not checking that dude for more weapons had been a bad idea…

-

He never carried just one. That was his creed. Not swords. Not guns.

He couldn’t shoot her face to face.

With her back turned, though?

He thought it’d be easier.

He… had to try to see if it would be easier.

It was just who he was, he guessed.

Still…

True, he wasn't completely free of fear.

The girl… the girl could bring back the dead back to life.

That was a great power.

But… after hearing them speak…

He, at least part of him, was at ease.

Part of him was happy.

Maybe… maybe he'd been oiled up, too.

It just happened that he was an idiot, through and through.

-

Marine turned her attention back to Rushia. "Let's… let's go home. I bought a lot of hot chocolate with Pekora… Let's go have some, ok? I'll make enough for everyone."

"Just… just let her handle it."

They left the room.

On it only Noel remained, having just came out of the elevator, a smoking gun on her hand.

-

"Wait a little."

On the first floor, Marine picked something she had left stashed away.

Then she walked over to Rushia.

"Marine, what…"

"That was a close call. A very close one."

It was way too big. Obviously. But it didn't matter. It looked cute. She did.

“You know I want to always be with you, right?”

This part here… this was the important part.

“Of course I’m going to do my best to always be there, physically next to you.”

“But I need to reinforce this idea.”

She placed her hat on Rushia’s head. With her jacket, it made a nice combo.

“Rushia, no matter what, I’m always going to be with you, ok? Let’s go home.”

He took her hand and lead her outside, without any idea of the mark she had left on her.



-

Shiranui Flare saw them exit the building. Marine looked hurt. Noel wasn’t with them.

“Is everything…?”

“Everything is ok”, came the swift reply. “I engaged him. I won. It wasn’t easy.”

She tried to rotate her left shoulder for emphasis, and her face said it all. It hurt.

Still, seeing her closer…

“Noel made him sound formidable, and you received no major wounds?”

Not that she wasn’t happy about that, mind you.

“No, Flare. Noel was completely right. He was formidable.”

“Just… just remember what she said.”

“‘If we were both physically unhurt, emotionally stable…’”

“He had me dead. 100%. But part of him… part of him didn’t want to kill me.”

“He didn’t use swords, he used guns this time. It had no right to be a fight.”

“Yet he didn’t shoot me. He didn’t pull his second gun out on me.”

“It’s strange but… when he saw me, I guess he saw something in me.”

-

What, Houshou Marine really wanted to know.

When their eyes locked, she wondered what the man saw.

As for her, she had seen a tired, suffering man.

A man that seemed to be fighting her out of habit, without his heart in it.

That’s why she threw the gun away.

He had the same look Rushia later had.

The look of someone that knows they have to do something, but doesn’t know what.

The look of someone pleading for a path to take.

It was weird…

…or maybe it wasn’t. Who knew?

That man had killed her comrades.

But she still didn’t want him to die.

Maybe the two things didn’t have to be a contradiction.

She explained the rest to Flare.

-

“I see…”, came the reply.

So Noel would handle it. And her presence was no longer needed here.

“You guys take the van. Let Noel take the bike.”

“And you?”

“I feel like walking home. I hope you understand.”

They did, and she saw the van go. She walked past the other van.

Inside, she had placed all the bodies of the enemies she has struck down.

She started walking home.

It was fun. While it lasted.

Being Noel’s friend had been fun.

But she had chosen her path.

Did she want her to understand? To not understand?

She really didn’t know.

The road home was long. And for Flare, lonely.

-

After a lot of walking, she came across a bridge.

A bridge she had crossed on the way here, before the van dropped her off close to the building.

It was true, what they said.

No one could cross the same river twice. Neither the person nor the river would be the same.

She had chosen her path. She wasn’t the same.

She hoped at least Noel would be. Foolish as that hope was.

Living meant changing.

She started crossing the bridge.

When she was halfway across, a bike stopped next to her.

Noel was riding it.

“Don’t be stupid, Flare. Let’s go home together. Marine made enough hot chocolate for everyone.”

What a stupid thing to say. By the time they reached home, it would be cold.

Still, she rode the bike.

It was nice. It was nice that Noel wanted to have cold hot chocolate with her.

The events at the morgue became public knowledge.

The fact that Hololive had defeated its attackers, that is.

It being a morgue, there was one logical assumption: Uruha Rushia was involved.

And with her involvement, rumors ran rampart for a time.

“She revived them all.”

“She may have revived some.”

After realizing how insensitive those comments were, they stopped.

Truth is, after a time, a Tokino Sora and an A-chan appeared.

But, before that tale, there’s a couple more you should hear…

Three weeks had passed since the attack. One since the fight at the morgue.

Noel had acquired some intel that day, that she shared with them all.

Jaegers was composed of two divisions, of ten members each. Both had been taken down.

There were two individuals still out there. A girl and a boy.

They may yet attack, but doing it on their own… it didn’t seem likely to happen soon. Maybe never.

They should be on the lookout but… but maybe it was over.

Following that, generation 3, accompanied by Sakura Miko, made a public appearance.

They were the first members of Hololive that let their fans know they were ok.

Obviously… obviously not everyone was.

Minato Aqua sat in front of her PC.

She just stared at the screen, no programs open.

Due to the lightning, she could see herself reflected on it.

She looked back at her reflection.

Who did that reflection belong to?

A depressed girl?

What Marine had said, back in the church…

…at least that's what she seemed to think of her.

Was she, really? Depressed?

Marine seemed to think so.

But…

But Aqua had trouble admitting to it.

Was wondering about the meaning of life depression?

Was not knowing how to move forwards in life, depression?

Was desperately wanting to live like those that knew, depression?

Was thinking someone else's life had more worth than yours, depression?

She looked back, at the case that sat on her table, next to the PC.

She had found it that night, all those weeks ago, inside of the van of the second generation.

It was a DVD case. There were two, actually, but only one was addressed to her.

She opened it. It contained a disk, of course.

Written in marker, was a single phrase.

"Aqua: From Shion, with love."

All those nights ago, in the church, Marine had said something to her.

“Why didn’t you ask Shion to tag along?”

Was… was thinking someone had died because of you, depression?

--

What was inside of the DVD?

Oozora Subaru didn’t know.

She needed to find out, but she was afraid of doing so, at the same time.

It’s over.

That’s what Noel had said.

Over.

… a painful word.

The time she had with her comrades… yeah, it was over.

That’s why, watching this DVD, that Aqua had found, was something she was so reluctant to do.

When you lose someone… you treasure everything they left behind.

Because that’s it. That’s all. You won’t get new moments anymore.

She opened the case. On the disk, written with marker, was a single phrase.

“Subaru: From Choco, with love.”

That wasn’t all, though.

It had a kiss as well. Her lipstick, the proof of where her lips had been.

Subaru couldn’t help but chuckle.

That was Choco for you.

It was as good a moment as ever, she guessed.

Opening her PC’s lector, she introduced the disk on it, and waited for it to play.

--

This was the last chance Shion would have.

Of saying things to her.

What was Aqua afraid of?

Shion… Shion was her friend.

Someone she could rely on.

They were very much alike, and they understood each other.

It was so egoistical… she knew it, but she couldn't help it.

More than hearing her voice again…

…what Aqua wanted was to rely on her one last time.

And she was afraid…

…afraid of not being able to do that, never again.

And afraid that once the video finished playing, she'd still have questions unanswered.

Questions that may remain unanswered forever.

Aqua… Aqua may have been weak. Too weak to come up with all the answers herself.

But who wasn't?

Shion…

Shion, somehow, seemed to have figured out more things than her.

That's why she looked up to her.

That's why she wanted to be like her.

That's why she didn't ask her to come to the church.

Because, if something were to go wrong…

It should be the weak girl, who was always relying on others.

Not the strong one, who was always there for others to rely on.

She could feel tears in her eyes.

“Shion… it should have been me…”

She saw her reflection on the screen due to the lighting.

She opened the disk reader, and inserted the CD. She fixed the screen to fix the lightning.

She opened the video, and the one showing on the screen was Shion.

“I think it should have been me…”

She knew it was egoistical…

“Shion… what do you think?”

…but she still did it. She hit play, hoping to rely on her one last time.

--

“Hey, Choco here~”

--

“Yo, Aqua. Shion here.”

That day, two girls saw their friends for the last time, three weeks after their deaths.

“Yo, Aqua. Shion here. If you are watching this… well, yeah.”

“It’s kinda weird, doing a video like this… what should I say? Where to start?”

“Here, I guess: It wasn’t your fault, ok? We… we knew we would most likely be attacked.”

“We talked it out. The three of us. We likely proposed or encouraged you two to get out of the house, didn’t we? So… we knew. It wasn’t your fault. It really wasn’t. Please don’t think that.”

“You are probably struggling with the why as well, right? Why are we… dead, and you alive?”

“And the thing is, I don’t have an answer for that. I don’t know why. Maybe… maybe there’s no reason at all. That’s life. Sometimes things happen, and there’s no good reason behind them at all. Yeah. That’s life. You don’t get to have all the answers all the time. You have some, make some guesses, and go from there. At least that’s what I did. I had no secret or anything like that.”

“So… try not to dwell on what happened on the past too much. Think about what you want to do going forwards, into the future. No one can change the past. But we can all help shape the future. So…”

“I’m glad I met you, Aqua. I’m glad I could be your friend. I… I didn’t really have that many, so thank you, for being mine. Friends make everything better, and… it was thanks to you, that I realized that. So… I hope you met some wonderful friends in the future. They’ll be so lucky, to get to meet someone like you.”

“Why? You probably asked yourself that, right? Aqua, please hear what I’m about to say:”

“You make the lives of those around you better, just by being there.”

“…How did that sound? Like the truth? To me… to me it’s true. But what’s important is how did it sound to you. And… and if it sounded like a lie, you just gotta try to make it sound true, you dummy!”

“How… well, the how is for you to figure it out. But, it seems to me you already have some pretty solid ideas. I mean, just look at your channel! 500k subs! That’s amazing. That’s how many people are willing to spend a part of their day with you. I know you’ll make it worth their while. You always did, when I was with you.”

“I had a lot of happiness, and no one can take that away from me. Being part of Hololive played a big part in that. I’m happy that I got to meet you, and the others. So… you watching this video, means I’m no longer there, but also that you are. As long as you are there, the Hololive that brought me happiness will exist. As long as people have that Hololive, they’ll have happiness.”

“I don’t want to saddle you with pressure, but if I could ask one favor out of you…”

“Make it so that for years to come…”

“When someone has a bad day…”

“When someone is going through a hard period in life…”

“They will be able to say,”

“at least we’ll always have Hololive.”

The video ended, and Aqua saw, once more, only her own image on the screen.

Her crying image, all by itself.



--

“Hey, Choco here~. How’s everything going, Subaru? If you are watching this… yeah. What a tragedy, right? To think the world is going to be deprived of my beautiful voice… but that’s ok! Why? Because it will have you! You, and your…”

“Hey Choco, why the hell are you pausing?! ‘…your beautiful voice’ was fine, just say it!”

“…your voice. Yeah. It’ll be fine. Most likely fine. Probably?”

“…”

“Well, miracles do exist in this world, after all!”

“HEY!”

“Ahem. I’m sorry. There’s… there’s one important thing I have to tell you, so please, listen to me, Subaru. It’s important, both for you, and for Hololive’s future.”

She had gotten serious out of a sudden. That’s right. This video… yeah. It was serious, after all.

“On my PC… I have a folder. It’s named after you. Please, have a good look at it.”

Subaru couldn’t help but wonder what was in it…

Had… had Choco discovered some dark secret, and that’s why…

“It’s about ASMR tips, and exercises to train your voice! I know you need them, so… I had no choice but to compile them, for your own good, and the good of your fans! I know you will make me proud, so give it your best, even with that voice! Quack quack!”

With that, the video ended.

…

“ARE YOU JOKING, CHOCO?!

PART 2, THIS BETTER HAVE A PART 2!”



--

Minato Aqua cried, while considering what Shion had.

“You make the lives of those around you better, just by being there.”

Was that true?

Was it true that night?

In the church… she hadn’t managed to protect anyone…

She herself, had to be protected by Marine.

What…what good had she been? How did she make anything better?

“Outstanding job, Marine.”

“I did nothing. This was all Aqua and Subaru.”

She suddenly recalled that exchange, between Noel and Marine.

Had… had Marine meant it?

Marine, nothing? That was a lie.

Without Marine, in the church…

But… but why was Marine there?

Because you were there.

And, in the van…

In the van, Aqua had tried to help.

Fubuki and Korone were in shock, so it fell on her to help the wounded.

She didn’t have specialized knowledge, but she tried her best.

And maybe… maybe she did help.

If only she knew more, she could have helped more.

But… but even if she had been useless then… and maybe she hadn’t…

“You make the lives of those around you better, just by being there.”

“If it sounded like a lie, you just gotta try to make it sound true, you dummy!”

“Try not to dwell on what happened on the past too much.

“Think about what you want to do going forwards, into the future.”

“No one can change the past. But we can all help shape the future.”

Aqua cried again, harder this time, and tears rolled down her face.

For one last time, Shion had been there for her.

Even after she died, when Aqua went to rely on her, she had come through.

She knew how to move forward now.

She just needed to do what Shion had done for her.

She needed to be there for others.

No one had all the answers required to get through life.

But maybe… maybe they could find them together.

There had to be more people like her. Weak people, who needed to rely on others.

Maybe Hololive could be something for them to rely on.

Maybe she could be someone for them to rely on.

Sometimes, a person feels a revolution has taken place in their life.

As if a clear cut had divided it in two, a before and after. Their life up to that point, and their life from that point on, they both seem completely different, almost unrelated.

However, after some time has passed, and said person looks back, both at said revolution and at what came before it, they can see it was, in fact, not a total departure.

The person is able to see threads that were already present before it happened, that all lead into the revolution that occurred.

The revolution, then, ends up looking more like the process of all those threads coming together to form a firm rope.

The revolution, even though it may really feel that way at first, doesn't give you something, it doesn't give you new threads. What it does, is give meaning to what you already have, it groups the threads of your life together, a rope formed around a moment, an event, a person, an idea. A purpose.

In the case of Minato Aqua, it took her some time, to understand some things.

To understand that Hololive had always been something people had been able to rely on.

To understand that herself, had always been someone people had been able to rely on.

"You make the lives of those around you better, just by being there."

"To me… to me that's true."

"Friends make everything better, and… it was thanks to you, that I realized that."

“As long as you are there, the Hololive that brought me happiness will exist.”

It took her some time, to understand the true meaning of those phrases Shion had said.

At first, her goal was to make Hololive something, to herself be something.

When she realized that they were already those things, she strived so they kept being them. So they both would be those things, day in and day out. So they would be a better Hololive, a better Aqua, than they had been the day before.

What Minato Aqua really obtained by watching Murasaki Shion’s goodbye video, was a purpose.

Her life before and her life after shared many things. She did many of the same things.

But having the clarity of why she did those things? That made it all different.

A revolution had, after all, occurred. She had found a purpose. She had been granted one.

All the threads of her life… what she had been, what she had been through…

They were now a tight rope, to be used for a purpose. And that purpose was…!

--

But, as previously said, it took her some time to realize these things.

As she wiped her tears, she felt no continuity, nothing but the change that Shion had produced.

She recalled one last phrase from her.

“Just look at your channel! 500k subs! That’s amazing.

That’s how many people are willing to spend a part of their day with you.

I know you’ll make it worth their while.”

I will, Shion…

I promise you I will.

She felt the need to do. To get moving. To not waste any time.

She thought back to that night once more.

On the van.

If she had more knowledge, she could have done more.

She needed to prepare, should anything like what happened happen again.

And… maybe help others prepare, too.

No one had all the skills required to get the best results out of unexpected events.

But maybe… maybe they could develop them together.

Yeah… maybe…

Maybe a program centered on that wouldn't be a bad idea…

--

Oozora Subaru had scissors, paper, tape, and marker ahead of her.

She used the scissors to cut a strip of paper, tape it into the DVD case, then used the marker to write on it. She wrote "rubbish", then threw it into the garbage bin at the corner of the room. She would, of course, later pick it up and treasure it as it deserved. But she felt letting it be there for a while was the least she could do now, to let Choco know what she thought of her last message. Agitated, she sat back on the chair, deflated against it, let out a sigh, then allowed herself a satisfied smile.

"Seriously, who does that? Seriously…"

She wanted Subaru to do ASMR again? Truly, Oozora Subaru finally understood that Yuzuki Choco had been, without anyone realizing it, the greatest threat to Hololive's continued existence. To think she'd joke about unleashing a WMD like that back into the world.

She thought back to the training regime she had promised Marine. That's right, she had yet to devise it. She better got right to it: she needed a distraction, before she fell prey to her lower impulses and sat fire to the garbage bin in the garden.

As she got out pen and paper, she said it again.

"Seriously, who does that? Seriously…"

Surely people would rather hear hers or Marine's tired breathing when exercising, than…

Wait.

Wait.

That…

That wasn't actually such a bad idea…

--

Houshou Marine was waiting on Rushia. She had been waiting for a while. She was up to something, and everyone was in on it, except her. She'd overheard something about her requiring "Pekora's expertise", not that she had any idea what that was, save hair miracles, and "Sakura's help", whatever the help of someone whose forte was taking care of her appearance was… not to mention Noel's and Flare's obvious attempts to distract her, asking her help with made up, super simple tasks. She was beginning to get impatient, when she got a text from Aqua.

In not many words, it told her she had seen Shion's video. And that thanks to it, Marine probably wouldn't have to worry about her as much. That it had been eye opening, in many ways.

Marine was both happy and curious at these news, and went to reply, but before she was able to do so, a call from Subaru came in. Now what? She answered.

"Hey, Marine! I hope you are doing ok, because… well, I saw Choco's video and…"

Oh. She had too. Then…

"Are you ok, Subaru? Want me to go over to talk for a while?"

"Uh? Yeah, yeah, I'm perfectly fine. Seriously, that Choco…"

Was that… irritation on her voice? Marine wondered what that was about…

"Anyway, listen here, thanks to that idiot I got a great idea! Let's do an exercise program!"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"You wanted an exercise routine, right? Because of how crap your physical condition is, how poorly you are treating your body, how much you are accumulating down th…"

Hey hey.

"Subaru, tell me where you are. I think we need to meet after all", said Marine while making a fist.

"I'm telling you, there's no need! So, like I was saying, just like you who completely neglects a proper healthy lifestyle…"

That's it. Subaru wasn't seeing the sun rise tomorrow.

"…there's bound to be many of our fans like that too, right? Well, what better way to improve their lives than to lead with the example! We exercise once a week in front of them, remind them that

they should take their time each day to so, and they'll gladly do it, because they'll think of us, like warriors undertaking a mission for their liege lord! Genius, right?! Healthy body, healthy mind, and all of that!"

That… wasn't a bad idea, actually. Just as she was about to say something, the lock to Rushia's room clicked, and out came Pekora, who gave Marine a weird look, then motioned with her head towards the room, and moments later out came Sakura too, who blushed at Marine's sight and immediately looked away. Huh? What the hell?

"Hey, Subaru, that sounds great… count me in. Aqua too. I'll get her to take part against her will if necessary, just leave that to me. We can discuss the details later, but something that requires my attention came up, so… bye."

She hung up without waiting for a reply. Better this way for Subaru. Marine's ire had some time to subside, her hurt pride had some time to recover…

But more important than that, was the door in front of her.

From inside, came Rushia's voice.

"Marine… you can come in…"

There was something in that voice… Marine didn't know what… that made her gulp.

Something serious was about to go down.

She just had a gut feeling.

She entered the room.

And inside, she saw Rushia as she had never seen her before.

…

No, not naked. Had someone expected that, they'd certainly be a perv.

Marine hadn't nor wasn't, no sir, no way.

…

Her hair… her hair was a different color, and on top of that it was a different hairstyle.

Even her clothes were different.

She looked pretty. Really pretty. And cute. Very cute.

“Rushia… what…?”

Rushia smiled shyly had her.

“Hehe… seems I’ve made a favorable impression…”

“Always”, said Marine, wanting to take control of the situation.

Yeah. Marine was the cool one. Not the one who blushed when called out.

Not like she had done just now, after Rushia’s comment.

Rushia blushed at her reply too, but her smile also got bigger.

“You don’t need flattery, Marine. You get pretty far with me without that, after all…”

Gulp.

“What you said on the morgue… about marks…”

“We’ll, I just thought I’d let my appearance reflect the mark you had left on me.”

She delivered that sentence very sincerely. No undertones. No games.

Just a girl, laying her heart bare.

For her.

To Marine, that was…



Rushia walked up to her, and pulled her down by the jacket.

On her ear, she whispered…

"…you have no idea. It's as if you rebuilt me up from scratch. Shaped me completely."

Marine could feel it. The truth in her words, it never left. But they had something more.

Something seductive to them. Her warm breath so close, making her skin feel funny…

Rushia let go, and Marine slowly straightened up.

"I want to see what Noel and Flare think now."

Saying that, Rushia walked past her, outside of the room.

Inside, Marine stood alone, frozen in place. Only one thought crossed her mind.

Building an altar to Pekora and Sakura.

Outside, Rushia stood alone in the hallway, frozen in place. Only one color bloomed on her face.

A deep, deep crimson. She was so, so embarrassed, she could really die.

What she had said… what she had done…

She brought her hands to her face, to try to cool down the heat she felt on her cheeks.

She thought back to Marine's reaction, and she felt more heat on her face, but also a smile.

It had been worth it.

It also had been true.

To Rushia, the effect Marine had had on her, on that moment…

It felt as if she had been reborn.

It felt as if Marine had truly brought her back from the grave.

A complete and utter revolution.

She changed her entire appearance to always reflect that, to never forget it.

Not that she thought it would be possible, but…

…with something so important, she just wanted to be sure.

Calming down a little, she started walking again, and made her way down.

Thinking all the while…

how she should build an altar to Pekora and Sakura…

for making this moment possible…

and how on that altar, she'd pray every day…

to remind herself of this moment…

and to ask for the courage she had lacked to…!

In Hololive, a lot of members had someone else, right next to them.

Sometimes, those someones were people who were not longer physically there.

That helped them get through what happened. That helped them get through the loss.

But one member… one member ended up having no one.

No one they felt comfortable relying on.

They buried themselves into their job, trying to bury their pain too by doing so.

The government needed to test something.

And this member… this member was willing.

She accepted.

And the result… the result was Tokino Sora, seemingly back from the grave.

But before finally telling that tale…

there's one last…

one last story that needs to be told first…

Tsunomaki Watame woke up.

She opened her eyes with a melancholic smile on her face.

Once again, she had had a dream with them.

Kanata, Towa, Luna. Her dear generation comrades.

The comrades she had lost.

She had dreamt with them again.

It had been a wonderful dream.

Tsunomaki Watame stretched.

Light filtered through the window.

That meant, it was time to start the day!

She slapped her cheeks a couple of times, then got up.

Barefooted, she walked to the kitchen.

She started preparing her breakfast, while humming Hoshino Gen's *Koi.*

Once she was ready, she brought it to the table.

"Tasty!"

She ate it happily, smiling to herself.

"Thanks for the food!"

She carried everything to the sink, and washed the dishes straight away.

No time like now.

A meaning? There's none, apart from people just living their lives.

Tsunomaki Watame happily washed the dishes, one month after that night.

-

She walked into the living room, and saw the couch.

It called for her to lay in it and laze the day away.

She shook her head.

"Not today."

She opened her text conversation with Flare, while heating the oven.

She followed the recipe to the best of her abilities.

She then poured the dough, to the best of her abilities.

"Looking good!"

And now…

She just had to wait.

Back to the living room, and there was the sofa again.

"Ok… maybe yes today, but just for a bit!"

With a smile on her face, she jumped on it, and laid waiting for the cookies to be done.

In all honesty… she had spent more time than she wanted to admit on that couch.

Entire days, even.

Maybe… for a week?

Yeah, a week sounds right.

The first week, after that night.

It wasn't just losing her comrades. That hurt her, of course.

But… but knowing that the one goal of the mission…

The one person Sora and the president had made sure would be ok…

Had been her?

That they had decided to entrust the future of Hololive to her?

The weight of that knowledge… the weight of that responsibility…

It had been too much, at first.

Watame didn't feel particularly bad about it, thinking back on it.

Most likely, anyone would have been crushed by that weight.

She was, too, at first.

But then…

Then she remembered.

It was ok to fail. What wasn't ok was to not try.

Was she good enough to carry Hololive's weight on her shoulders?

She had spent a lot of time worrying about that.

She had to succeed. She had to. Too much was riding on it.

But… in the end, all that pressure made her stagnant.

Not capable of taking the next step.

So… she realized that doing her best, and failing, was better than doing nothing out of a fear of failing.

She just had to do her best. Like she had been doing up to that point.

Maybe Sora and the president were right. Maybe they were wrong.

Watame… Watame only could be the best Watame possible, and hope it was enough.

Watame wanted to prove them right, of course.

But… if she ended up proving them wrong…

At least, people should say "In the end Watame's efforts weren't enough."

Them saying "Watame didn't even try" was the one future she could not allow.

So she tried.

And when Tsunomaki Watame tries…

Well, there's a reason why the future of Hololive had been entrusted to her, after all.

"It's easy for the words 'I'll do my best effort' to leave your mouth, I think.

I want to be someone that, when she says that, backs it up with her actions."

That's what Tsunomaki Watame said, time and time again.

While laying on that couch, she tried to talk to some of her remaining friends.

After some days had passed, that is.

She texted Fubuki. She told her what she had done once the mission was declared a failure.

Fubuki, in turn, told her about what had happened on the house of gen 3.

Watame had been one of the few surviving members who didn't end up on that house.

On that house, where…

Well, yeah.

Fubuki told her how she could do nothing, but hug Korone. It was a very cold night, and the entire world seemed so cold, Fubuki even wondered if there was any warmth left in it. And then, she says, Aqua went to check up on them. She had some cookies, that Flare and Noel had baked.

They were warm.

They talked some more, but that stuck with Watame. She even shed a couple of tears.

She got what Fubuki tried to convey, completely. Something so simple, having such an effect…

It warmed her heart too.

She fell asleep thinking that. And, in the following day, was when she decided to stop worrying about being good enough to carry the weight that had been entrusted to her, and simply give it her best try.

And for that, one of her ideas was to have a regular program, where she taught people how to make cookies, sweets, and all kinds of nice bakery. She thought it'd be useful, and it was also a way to never forget. Never forget about what Fubuki had transmitted to her on that text exchange. The tremendous impact a small thing can have on someone going through a bad moment.

DING!

The cookies were ready. She had asked Flare for the recipe, but she had sent it just some days ago.

It had been busy days, after all. They had taken out the other Jaegers division two weeks ago.

After learning that, Watame had asked for permission. Permission to resume her activities.

It had been granted. And today would be the day.

The day Hololive would truly be back, on the eyes of the public.

She had to let them know, we are still here.

She ate one of her cookies.

It was good.

-

She got dressed. Not quickly. Not in a hurry. She took her time. Did her hair. Made sure her cape was in perfect condition. Everything was good, so it was time to set out. She stopped in front of the door. Her boots were there. She had to put them on, to go out. Of course she did. It's just that…

She sat, and looked at them.

[-Let's talk about things of the future. Even stuff of tomorrow is fine.

-Stuff of tomorrow?

-Yeah. Stuff of tomorrow. Anything is fine. For example…

Tomorrow, your breakfast will be Japanese style or Western style?

Will you put your shoes starting with the right foot or with the left foot?

Even silly stuff like that is fine.

No matter how silly it is, it's because you have a tomorrow, that you can talk about tomorrow.]

There was an anime she liked. *Starting my life on another world from zero*.

It had a scene where that dialogue took place between two characters.

Looking at her boots… she had to do this.

Because she still had a tomorrow.

And there were many who no longer did.

And more than that, because many others also had a future…

...but it wasn't one they were looking forward to.

It was a cold future, like Fubuki's world that night, before Aqua brought warmth filled cookies to her.

Watame… No, Hololive, tried to be that warmth for the people who came to watch them.

When Sora and the president entrusted the future of Hololive to her…

Them thinking she was capable of carrying that weight…

It meant that they thought she would be capable of warming people's lives, no matter what.

Watame considered what she was about to that day.

She'd try. Try to do just that. Be warmth.

Not with cookies… not today, anyways.

Today, it would be with songs.

Wiping her tears, she put her boots on, one after the other, stood up, and left the house.

-

The virtual concert was about to start.

Tsunomaki Watame was alone on stage.

Doing things alone was hard.

And a lot of things she thought she'd get to do with them, she'd have to do alone.

But… but maybe they could be with her, after all.

On this first step, at least.

They had been planning to hold a concert together.

They had recorded one of their early rehearsals, to study it and see what could be improved.

Watame asked for that recording, and thankfully, it had been found.

They were supposed to sing the chorus with her, for her number.

Today, they would.

"Music, start!"



https://youtu.be/25wGzLctaj0?t=3273

Oh oh oh oh oh oh oh,

Oh oh oh oh oh oh oh.

When your courage rises,

the door of destiny will open.

Will that be a dawn,

or eternal darkness?

Let's ask this fist of steel!

Into the distant universe, I let loose my arrow of light!

I can fly! (**Yay!**)

You can fly! (**Yay!**)

We can fly! (**Yay!**)

More and more!

Skill my heart!

Until the end of the galaxy, letting my hot dreams burn, is ***all I can do!***

Skill my soul!

Awakening my soul, as long as the era is guiding me, I'm invincible!

All right!

Oh oh oh oh oh oh oh,

***(*The ultimate *battle* ever!**)

Oh oh oh oh oh oh oh.

A giant sword that rends the heavens,

revives the strength of miracles.

My beloved friends,

listen to the steel *beat* of my hot chest!

A new legend, is what I'll carve with these hands, right now!

I can fly! (**Yay!**)

You can fly! (**Yay!**)

We can fly! (**Yay!**)

More and more!

Skill my heart!

Beyond the dimensions, may this story soar, and ***I'll never die****!*

Skill my soul!

Time and time again, I'll stand up,

as long as the future is guiding me, I'll be immortal!

"Thanks for singing with me! You guys are the best! Thank you!"

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah,

I'm Tsunomaki Watame!

Into the distant universe, I let loose my arrow of light!

I can fly! (**Yay!**) *You can fly!* (**Yay!**) *We can fly!* (**Yay!**) **More and more!**

I can fly! (**Yay!**) *You can fly!* (**Yay!**) *We can fly!* (**Yay!**) **More and more!**

I can fly! (**Yay!**) *You can fly!* (**Yay!**) *We can fly!* (**Yay!**) **More and more!**

I can fly! (**Yay!**) *You can fly!* (**Yay!**) *We can fly!* (**Yay!**) **More and more!**

More and more! More and more! More and more!

"You really are the best, thank you!"

Skill my heart!

Until the end of the galaxy, letting my hot dreams burn, is ***all I can do!***

Skill my soul!

Awakening my soul, as long as the era is guiding me,

I, Watame, will be invincible!

All right!

Oh oh oh oh oh oh oh,

(An eternal all-out battle for the future!)

Oh oh oh oh oh oh oh.

Note: In this song, the underlined words are “Towa” and “Kanata” in the original, respectively.

“Thank you, truly thank you, for tuning in!”

“This was Tsunomaki Watame, of Hololive’s 4th generation!”

“Everyone… we are back!”



A great show. Everyone who saw it agreed. There was no other reaction possible.

Watame collapsed on a chair. She was exhausted. But she was happy.

She wanted a sip of water. She reached for a water bottle, but she lacked the strength to open it.

Truly, she was out of practice. Lazing in the couch, never again.

Smiling again, she closed her eyes, and inclined her head back.

“I hope I made you proud, guys.”

“You sure did. Now, let me get that bottle for you, ok?”

-

Tsunomaki Watame opened her eyes.

In front of her, was someone in a crimson suit.

Houshou Marine.

“Marine-senpai… why…?”

No one was supposed to be in the building, save for herself and Azuki. Maybe Suisei.

But they were in the top floor, the fourth. Watame was in the third.

In fact, she hadn’t seen them in a week. Not even today.

Apparently they were so busy, that while Azuki could handle the technical side, she’d have to do it from there and not next to her as would usually be the case, to immediately attend to matters once the concert was over. She understood. Many things had to be put in place still, so it made sense for them to not be able to accommodate her completely. What they had done for her already was plenty, it was huge.

But Marine… Marine didn’t have any reason to be here.

“Here’s your water”, the girl said, handing her the opened water bottle.

Watame took it and drank, while keeping her eyes on her.

“Why? Because one of us is giving it her all. There’s no way we could stay at home.”

“Right, guys?”

Watame looked at the door, and saw how, one after the other, Flare, Noel, Rushia, Pekora, Sakura, Subaru, Aqua, and Fubuki entered the room. Everyone, but Korone.

They gave their answer to Marine’s question but not with words.

Instead, they started applauding Watame.

“Congratulations!”

Seeing that, she felt the tears come to her eyes.

There was nothing to be ashamed of.

Everyone already knew she was a crybaby, after all.

-

Fubuki approached Watame, and explained how for Korone coming to the building today was too soon. Watame understood. They hugged. Flare approached and they talked. Everyone came to Watame, and told her how proud they were of her, and what they had liked most out of her show.

Right then, some things were decided. The programs would start. Watame’s, Aqua’s, and Subaru’s, this last one with Marine’s and Aqua’s participation, although everyone would be invited. Seeing how exhausted she got, Watame thought she’d have to make good on that invitation. Also, streaming would restart as well. Of course, everyone would do so at their own pace, when they felt ready, but most already did. There was no doubt, in anyone’s mind. Hololive was back.

They’d also have to announce those that had been lost, finally. This needed to be done, but… that it was a painful subject was understandable, but even so, Watame felt some awkwardness when the topic was brought up, for some reason. Before she could put her finger on it, Marine spoke. “But seriously, where are those two? We come all the way to the building, and they can’t take 10 minutes to go down a floor? Let’s go search for them and get them to buy us something to celebrate.” Saying that, she left the room. They all exchanged glances, some laughed, some shrugged, they all followed.

Houshou Marine was standing in front of the main office. Everyone else was some distance away. She knocked, and knocked, and got no answer. When she started to seriously consider knocking the door down, she got a reply. Azuki's voice. "Hey, Marine. I heard you. I'm sorry, but could guys go home without us? We are kinda busy with some stuff, and…"

"Hey, get out of there for a minute at least, all that work is gonna drive you guys insane! Let's take a picture to celebrate Watame's concert, now that most of us are here, at least!"

"I… I really don't think that's a good idea. I feel we'd really ruin the moment."

"Don't be stupid, what…" And that's when she heard it. Sobbing. And it wasn't a gentle sobbing either. It was a heart-rending sobbing. It wasn't Azuki's either, despite coming from the office. In fact, it sounded like…

"Azuki, get away from the door. I'm kicking it down."

Without giving her time for a response, she did. She entered the room, and saw what was inside. Who was inside. When the rest saw it, they were equally shocked. "What…"

"Told you. Told you we'd ruin the moment."

END OF PART 2, CHAPTER 2.

Interlude 4

In the second karaoke round, Shirogane Noel had just finished her rendition of *My heart will go on*. It was Uruha Rushia's turn to sing. She stepped up. There was a song she always sung. Today, she would pick a different one. She had made up her mind. No backing down now. The piano started. It was an anime ending, *prover*. https://youtu.be/xahEdP2eJs4

I stepped into *the shadowland*,

there's no paradise.

Rusty *old remedies*,

I have no faith in them.

Even so, I'll *go up the river*,

just a *ladder* to hold on to,

the day when even my tears will shine,

is my one and only *sign*, my one and only *light*.

May my song not break even in a night that knows no dawn.

May my dreams not get twisted by my wandering after losing my way.

May I not look back at the footsteps that I pass along the way.

May, should I ever lose my footing, at least not let go of your hand.

I'm the prover. *I am the prover*.

May I stand my ground even against a world that knows no end.

I'm the prover, the voice of life,

Will resonate again when I'm with you,

Both in a ship that can't be sunk.

She breathed. 2nd cour. Here it comes, Rushia. Look at her.

So the *iron rain* that pours down

may be reduced to *zero* I *pray*.

We saw the same loneliness,

so you should understand, right?

Look at her.

Even so, I'll *go up the river*,

if we can ever meet again,

the day when this love will shine,

is my one and only *sign,* my one and only *light*.

Look at Marine.

May my song not break even in a night that knows no dawn.

May my dreams not get twisted by my wandering after losing my way.

May I not look back at the footsteps that I pass along the way.

May, should I ever lose my footing, at least not let go of your hand.

Now. Walk towards her now.

If you can't find your way! / (I won't give up on you)

Everything is not lost! / (Cause I'm standing with you)

Even if this is a world where things don't ever return,

I'm here for you / (*I'm here for you*)

I'll live for you.

Now. Standing right before her, do it no-

But Rushia didn't need no one to told her that. She already was.

She knew the song by heart. She had practiced it many times.

Specially this part. This part with no lyrics.

She had counted every second. Every wonderful second. She knew how much time she had.

23. 23 wonderful seconds.

She imagined it many times. This, the real thing, blew every single one out of the water.

There was no comparison.

Eyes closed, she wanted to recall every detail forever.

23 seconds. How could they last so long…

23 seconds. It felt eternal. Like all of life itself was contained in the moment.

It was love.

23 seconds. How could they last so little…?

22…

She parted, out of breath.

“Ah… ah…”

Panting, she went to resume her song. Sitting on top of Marine, as she was.

I’m the prover, I am the prover…

Out of breath, she had trouble getting the lyrics out.

Marine thought it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen, heard, felt.

Tasted.

May I stand my ground even against a world that knows no end.

Rushia didn’t have the power to read minds. But that face told her everything. She smiled.

I am the *prover*, the voice of life,

Will resonate again when I’m with you,

Both in a ship that can’t be sunk.

She felt tears on her eyes. She didn’t know why. She left them be. They deserved to flow freely too.

A ship that will go on forever.

As soon as the song ended, she went for another kiss. This one didn’t have a time limit.

-

Interlude 5

“Hey… Hey, Rushia…

Can I have the mic back, please? Our time is almost up, and I kinda want to sing, too….”

Usada Pekora had waited what she considered a prudent time, then waited double that, for good measure. She ended up having to speak up, regardless. Everyone else had suddenly discovered how pretty and interesting the roof, the walls and the floor were, and were focusing their whole attention on admiring them, so it fell on her. Because, it was true. It was her turn.

Rushia and Marine parted once again.

“Ah… ah…”

Both panting heavily.

Understandable, that. Have a nice day and all, just… give me the mic… please…

Rushia’s body heaved up and down on top of Marine’s.

Heavy breathing leaving mouths, their eyes just staring into the other’s.

When Pekora was ready to call it a day, Rushia suddenly thrust out her left hand.

“The mic. Yeah. Right. Sorry. Take it. Please.”

Pekora did.

“Thank you. Really. As thanks… want me to grab you a drink? You know… to cool down?”

“Eh? Why? I’m good. Seriously. I’m perfect. I’m… I’m…”

“Ok then, forget I asked.”

Sharply turning around, Pekora went for the stage, her face more crimson than Marine’s suit.

Uruha Rushia only had eyes for Marine.

Her heart only had room for Marine.

Her mind could only think of Marine.

She wanted more. More of Marine. Right now.

She went for another kiss…

And felt a sharp pain on her forehead.

Marine had flicked her with her finger.

“Rushia… calm down… let Pekora sing… ok?”

…seriously?

Well, she’d just have to endure, she guessed.

And… true. Pekora deserved to sing, too.

That’s the least she could do, after the help she had received from her.

She made to stand up but… she was too exhausted…

How lucky.

“Hey… I don’t… I don’t think I can stand up…”

Marine gave her a look. Then sighed, in between her breaths.

“That’s ok… we’ll make something work…”

Yes!

She changed her position and got comfortable, laying against Marine.

Ah… this was happiness itself…

Her heart was still beating rapidly, her body was still hot, her breathing was still hard.

But… but enduring like this wasn't so bad, either.

She may be able to calm down like this. Emphasis on may.

Too exhausted to stand up? Was that a real thing?

That she could have done a bigger effort, was something no one but her needed to know.

Laying on top of Marine, Rushia thanked whoever thought of that in the first place.

-

Houshou Marine felt Rushia's small body on top of her.

…

Cocky necromancer, thought she was so smart.

This called for a swift revenge…

Just when she was thinking of what to do, an ice cold can appeared next to her face.

She looked up. Noel held it.

"I know Rushia said no, but I insist."

She accepted it, and also took Rushia's.

Noel gave one to Pekora and Sakura as well, before sitting next to Flare, them each having one too.

She looked at it. Peach flavored juice. Not bad. She opened it, and took a sip.

Ah… that hit the spot. She needed that, too.

She felt as exhausted as if she had been doing any of Subaru's exercises.

It was nice to cool down her body.

"Hey, hey… Marine… where's mine?"

“I have it Rushia, here…”

She looked at Rushia. At her loose dress. Perfect.

“Here you go.”

Saying that, she slid the can down her back.

“…!

Marine, what…?!”

Rushia tried to stand up, but…

“We can’t have that now, can we? You, Rushia, are too exhausted for that, after all…”

…Marine held her down.

“Marine…! Ngh…! Ah…! Please…! Cut… cut that out! Ngh…! Ngh…!”

Whoa, this response… this response was bad…

She looked around the room.

Yup, definitely bad.

Pekora was coughing on stage, choking on the peach juice she had been drinking.

Sakura shyly covered her mouth, and alternated between looking at them, then looking at the roof.

Flare was looking at her nails.

Only Noel…

Yeah. Only Noel looked straight at them.

Her look, plus the smile on her face said

“Cut that out, or I’m grabbing my sword and cutting some things myself”.

“Hey, Rushia, stop squirming, I’m getting it out, so cut the moaning too, ok?”

They ended up having to pay for an additional 15 minutes. Marine and Rushia that is, of course.

They both sat properly, side by side, like misbehaved children.

They drank their juice, waiting for Pekora to recover and sing, finally.

“I… I didn’t have a chance to say it, but that performance was… wow.”

“I don’t need you to tell me that, Marine… I could tell what you thought of it.”

“Your singing, idiot. Not… not the other stuff.”

She was out of juice by now. She still bought the can to her lips, pretending to drink.

“I really liked the song. Really. But... why didn’t you sing your usual one? I kinda missed it.”

“Sheesh, Marine. Doing the same over and over again is no fun, right? You gotta spice life up.”

She delivered that line with a wink, then got embarrassed.

Had… had all that came after the song… what Rushia considered spicing life up?

If so… this was gonna be a wild ride, no doubt about that.

Once again, Marine brought the empty can to her lips.

Before she could bring it down, Rushia took the chance, and laid into her again.

Not invasively, like before. Gently. Almost like a sleeping stranger on the public transport.

“I’m… I’m so happy, Marine. You have no idea. I’m… I’m sorry, if that was too much.”

“Don’t worry. We can talk about it later.

I didn’t hate it, but… taking it down a notch may be good, yeah.”

Rushia smiled.

“Yeah, I can do that. I can behave, most of the time…”

Most?

“Anyways. The song. Truth is, there’s a couple of reasons.

First among them was, Pekora asked me to let her sing it this time.”

Pekora? Marine looked at the bunny girl, going to hit play on the song.

“And… and the other reason…

Was this time I wanted to sing it just for you, closely, like this.

Sing it right next to you.

Don't worry, I won't disturb her.

Here goes…"

Saying that, Rushia started singing in almost a whisper, in such a way only Marine could hear.

Everyone else only heard Pekora.

Well, thank you so very much, Rushia, thought Usada Pekora. I asked you to let me sing the song this time, but what good is it, when you took all the romance out of the situation. She looked at Sakura Miko. She looked at the couple, and blushed. Then she looked at Pekora, and averted her gaze, too. Just perfect. *He*. Pekora couldn't help but smile. This was gen 3 after all. You couldn't predict what would happen. And that's why she loved them, and every moment she spent with them. She would sing this for them all, then. It could be that kind of song, too. *Ai wo Komete Hanataba wo* started.

https://youtu.be/XW7ZhzF_JAs?t=3330

Let's take a picture,

with this nostalgic scenery.

I want you to show me the same pose,

you struck that day.

Looking up, at the blue of the sky,

the clouds flow whimsically.

Pretty, aren't they? Pretty things that are so,

because they are far away.

Being with you, as promised,

made me really glad to have come here;

if this rising feeling, is not love,

then I have no idea what love may be.

This is… a bouquet made up of love,

it may be an exaggeration but please accept it,

as for the reason,

don't ask me about it, ok?

Just for now, forget about everything,

don't laugh, just take it,

don't get embarrassed.

Today is looking very similar to yesterday,

both a casually branching road.

Understanding that, the choice I made,

was probably due to cowardice, right?

I am, really good at crying,

and from the start I relied on any comfort I had.

Regardless of how many times, I end up choosing the wrong path from now on,

I’ll keep coming back here, where things feel so right.

Going round and around, going past time,

always to the place where I’m with you,

my heart, will return fluttering to it.

More than the ideal I forced myself to draw,

the smiles of today,

make me infinitely happier.

Violet, indigo, black and blue,

flame yellow, purple, sky blue,

pink, yellow, green, ash, brown,

these are all the colors you give to me.

Going round and around, going past time,

always to the place where I’m with you,

my heart, will return fluttering to it.

Without even saying thank you,

I was so spoiled, until coming here today:

This is a bouquet made up of love,

it may be an exaggeration but please accept it,

as for the reason,

don't ask about it, ok?

Just for now, forget about everything,

don't laugh, just take it,

It’s really my,

‘stay by my side forever’.

Note: Pekora replaced “anata” and “futari” with “minna”. Rushia sang it to Marine without changes.

Generation 3 left the Karaoke. They didn’t look at the score. That wasn’t what truly mattered. They had spent time together with those they loved most in the world, so they were all winners today.

As soon as they were in the street, Noelle addressed Marine and Rushia.

“So, how is this gonna work?”

“What do you mean, Noelle?”, came Marine’s question.

“You and Rushia, tonight. We all saw you inside. Are you getting a hotel room, or should we?”

Damn. That was a loaded question, if Marine ever saw one.

A question with only one answer.

She looked at Rushia.

She took her hand.

Rushia gulped.

Marine spoke.

“Rushia… you already know what I’m about to say, right?”

Rushia knew. She dreaded it, but she knew.

“It’s time for the Houshou family secret technique.”

“Marine, come on…”

“RUN, RUSHIA!”

Saying that, she took off running, leading her by the hand.

Rushia, of course, couldn’t run as fast as Marine. Shorter legs, and all.

Realizing that, Marine slowed down, and in one swift motion picked her up bridal style.

She then picked up the pace and kept running away. Where, even herself didn't know.

Rushia was embarrassed at first, but then started smiling happily.

Marine laughed and boasted while running.

"WAHAHA, MY TRAINING PAID OFF!!"

People turned to look at them.

Some smiled. Some laughed. Some shook their heads. No one ignored them.

Those two idiots, running down the street.

Not knowing where they were going, not caring where they had come from.

Just being together was enough for them.

It was enough to feel they had all the happiness of the world on their hands.

When they joined them, they truly did.

Interlude 6

Houshou Marine stopped running.

"Hey, this is totally not because I'm tired of carrying you around, it's totally not that, but…

where are we going?"

"I don't care Marine. I don't care what happens or doesn't tonight, as long as I'm with you."

Gulp.

Well, that was…

RING!

Oh, saved by the bell!

"Hold on a sec, Rushia, I just a text. It's from… A?

-

"So, what did it say?", said Uruha Rushia, after giving Marine time to read the message.

“It said we were cancelling all activities for the week.

That we should take the day off tomorrow, then attend an emergency meeting on Wednesday.”

They looked at each other. Something happened. What? They’d find out on Wednesday.

More important than that…

“You hear that, Rushia? This means we don’t have to call it a day just yet!

The evening is still young, so…

Wanna go watch a movie?”

!

Was this the legendary “movies and chill”?!

“Your house or my house?”

“Hey, idiot, we both live on the same house. I meant in a cinema.”

They did, in fact, live in the same house. All of generation 3 did.

It was the same safehouse they had used that night.

They had grown used to it, grown fond of it, having lived there through their hardest moments.

Having overcome their hardest moments while living there.

It was also a sign defiance. It was obvious Jaegers had known the locations they were using.

Yet they weren’t going to hide. At first they wanted a fight, and they had gotten one.

Although it happened on the morgue.

But, after taking care of the second division… them keeping the house, it was a sign of their victory.

And with the government willing to allow them to keep it, and housing not being cheap these days…

Well, it worked out for everyone.

“Oh, sorry, I forgot.”

“You seriously forgot that?!”

“Yeah, I forgot you were an idiot unable to recognize the most obvious jokes.”

“Hey, you know I can make you hit the floor any moment, right?”

“So, a movie! Are you ok with watching one with me?”

“Why wouldn’t I be? Wait. You aren’t thinking about doing a karaoke v2, right?”

“That, my dear Marine, is entirely up to you. I gladly accept your invitation”, said the necromancer, a devilish smile on her face. “May I inquire what movie you had in mind, if any?”

--

The girl named after the sky sat at her desk. Her assistant A had notified the members that they should cancel all their activities for the week, and that they would meet on Wednesday. She’d inform them then, of the Jaegers “invitation”. No need to worry them beforehand. Before that meeting, there was something she needed to take care of. And before taking care of that something… she needed to have a moment. She needed to ground herself. She needed to make sure she wouldn’t break down, fall apart. She couldn’t allow herself that, not now. Going home, and doing it there, that would be optimal. But… she wasn’t sure she would last the trip. She had learned she needed to be honest with herself, regarding this. If she wasn’t, she’d end up being a pain for everyone, more so than she was now. And the honest truth was, she could feel herself at her limit. One breeze away from breaking down.

The package. The window. The street. The invitation. It had affected her, greatly.

She could feel her eyes, they were starting to feel funny. If she didn’t do something, before long she would cry. And if she cried… if she cried, then it may be too late to do something anymore.

Eyes closed, she did breathing exercises. Everything was ok. Everything would be ok. You are strong. Stronger than you think. She repeated that a few of times. You’ve been through this before, you’ve overcome this before. Remember who you are. Don’t lose sight of that. Remember who you are.

Easier said than done, when you couldn’t rely on your name for that.

“I am… I am part of Hololive. I am a member of Hololive.”

That’s right. That’s the most important thing.

“I am… A girl who wants to be an idol. That’s who I was, when I was little. It’s who I still am.

It's who I want to be. My dream."

That's right. Good.

But… that's also who *she* was, you know? Wasn't that *her* dream, as well?

No, don't cry. You can't cry. Don't cry. Don't cry don't cry don't cry don't cry don't cry don't cry.

She bit her lip. She gripped the desk in front of her, tightly. Yeah. Something physical. If you feel yourself slipping away, grab something physical. She opened her drawing, no, not a drawing, her drawer, and she took out, not a drawing, a picture. A framed picture. She didn't look at it, she just needed to feel it. Feel it was there, in the moment. Like she was. That's right.

She felt a little better. She still needed a little more. Music.

She got her smartphone out. YouTube.

This song.

It's fitting that it's this song.

She started listening to Amane Kanata's cover of *Uma to Shika*.

She had a nice voice. Amane Kanata did. She herself didn't seem to like it, but she loved it. Her low tones, her high pitches… a very pretty voice, no matter what. Six months had passed since she had heard it last.

This song. It had a play with meanings. Death, love, it was about one, the other, both.

She would know. She herself had helped arrange Kanata's vocals, and edited the video that accompanied it. That's right. This song… this song was something she had helped create. This is what she needed. She felt a calm start to bloom inside of her. Her eyes… she had avoided crying. That was good. She felt so thankful. So, so thankful, to Kanata.

She recalled her conversations with her. They had talked, many times, about a lot of things. They were friends. She remembered what she had to say about this song. She said that, at its core, it was a song about someone who wished to keep on suffering, because they wished to keep on living. That's the song Amane Kanata decided to make a cover of. She liked heavy handed meanings, she really did.

That's right. Suffering wasn't bad, in the sense that it reminded you that you were still alive. It beat the alternative, even if no suffering was to be had in it. Yeah. Remember this, don't forget it.

Shouldering the suffering of life, due to its beauty. That's what this song was about. And Kanata… of course she would like this song. That's what she was about, too.

Hakanasa. The fragility and evanescence of life. Kanata embodied it, and how beautifully bright one could shine in that short time. Everyone in Hololive had thought that. "A strange kind of force, one that doesn't strike but sinks into the soul like heat from a hot spring or fire from a sake bottle, bringing sorrow and solace in equal measure." That's how a reporter had described the concept once.

When she thought about what had happened to Kanata… no, what they had done to her… when she remembered what she later heard had happened inside of that church sixth months ago… rather than sorrow or solace…

That was enough. She was grounded. She was ok. She opened her eyes.

In four days, she would go to that same church. She needed to take care of some things before.

She *would* take care of those things. The meeting on Wednesday, and before, her business tomorrow.

She looked at her desk. A framed picture was on it, face down.

That's right, she had relied on that to ground herself too.

She picked it up, and looked at it.

Two girls smiled. Two friends. They both wanted to be idols.

"It's ok… I know who I am…"

She took the picture out of the frame, and slipped it into her pocket.

"I'm the one who's gonna put an end to this."

Saying that, Hololive's leader got out of her office, ready to finally head home.



CHAPTER 3: BACK FROM THE GRAVE (II)

Tuesday afternoon. *The Devil's Den*. That was the name of the bar the girl named after the sky was looking at. She had business inside. Accompanied by her assistant, A, she prepared to enter. She herself was not a fan of bars. A probably wasn't, either. And this bar, in particular… she had promised to never step foot inside of it. To completely forget of its existence. But, in three days… in three days, Hololive would meet its remaining attackers. And for that meeting, they needed their strongest member. For that, she was ready to break her promise. Steeling her resolve, she made to enter the premises.

Since this was a subterranean bar, she had to descend a flight of stairs first. Inside, the attendance was zero. That said nothing of the health of the bar's concurrence, nor of its quality. Drinking hours were still far away. Most bars weren't even open at this time. The only ones that did, were bars who had a homely feel to them. Bars that cared for their clientele, who built a strong following, and repaid that loyalty, by trying to always have their doors open, should someone need a respite after an unexpected event. The fact that they were open, spoke a lot about the type of bar the *Devil's Den* was.

The attendance was zero, but that didn't mean no one was inside. She could see a maid making use of this idle time to clean the tables. A literal maid. A young girl, dressed in a maid uniform. Was this that type of place? She wouldn't know. Many things stood out in the girl. First, she had animal traits. Ears, white like her hair. What… what animal did they resemble? She tried to get a look at her tail to get a better idea, and… the girl didn't have one. Instead, she had an electrical cord. What… what was this girl? In a moment's time, all these thoughts passed through her head.

In the meantime, the girl had quickly noticed their presence. Of course. It would speak poorly of her to not do so. She put her cleaning utensils aside, faster than the eye could follow she took out a pen, and was about to pick her notebook to go take their order, when… when someone else spoke.

"That's ok, Roro-chan, I'll see to them. You keep up the cleaning, ok? Great job, as always!"

This second girl had appeared from backstage, and was smiling at the girls from behind the bar. She was pretty. Very pretty. Almost too pretty to be working at a bar. She… she looked like an idol. Her uniform was idol like. If she managed the bar… she could see this place being very popular. "Now now, don't be shy! Welcome to the *Devil's Den*! It's always nice to see a couple of girls walk in through those doors, not enough do for my taste", she said with a cute pout.

She then made a hand gesture and added, "What's your poison?"





“Come on girls, nothing like a drink to break the ice, am I right? Tell you what. I’ve never seen your pretty faces around here, so, this one will be on the house. Just… don’t tell the boss, ok? She’s out right now, so you guys are lucky. So, what will it be, what will it be! Hurry up, decide quickly, she’ll be back any minute now!”

She considered whether to do casual small talk with the girl, or come clean that they, in fact, had come to this place only to see her boss. If she was out… that was a problem. Thankfully, it seemed she’d return before long.

The girl behind the bar didn’t take long to speak again, either. “I… I haven’t seen you around here, right? There’s not that much illumination where you are, we don’t wanna put the spotlight on the costumers, you see. Make them uncomfortable and what not. So… I’m not 100% certain, but something about you guys seems kinda familiar…”

She was right. The entrance was poorly lit. If the reason was what the girl had said… this place was very considerate to new arrivals. Everything she learned made her impression of it better and better.

Not wanting to be rude to the girl, even knowing what would happen, she stepped into the light.

A, of course, followed. But there was no denying who would make the biggest impression.

“You… you are Tokino So-Sora-san! Inside of the *Devil’s Den*?! Roro, Roro, pen, paper! Please, an autograph! I’m… I’m one of your biggest…!”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, Sio.” Someone else had said the words she wanted to say every time she saw that reaction. Someone who also called the girl by name. The boss, the one they had come to see, was here. But she didn’t need clues to figure it out. She could never mistake that voice. A grave voice. A voice that came from behind them. She turned around, and the owner of the voice continued speaking. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, but that’s not Tokino Sora.”

A short haired girl stood on the final steps of the stairs. The girl who gave this place its namesake. The devil who made this her den.

“Longtime no see, Towa.”

“Longtime no see, Suisei. You broke your promise.”



Kusunoki Sio understood some things, and some she really did not. Obviously, she knew of Towa's affiliation to Hololive. Everyone did. Of course, that meant she knew all of its members as well. The fact that none had dropped by, for all the months she had been working at the *Devil's Den*… she understood Towa wanted out of the public eye. And that she even pretended to be… yeah. But, still, no visits, not even one? Well, that told her enough, about the kind of parting they must have had. Not an amicable one, probably. And now, on the first visit some of them had done, a (broken) promise was brought up. What was that about?

And… and more than that… the girl standing there wasn't Tokino Sora? When she looked at her, it was clear beyond doubt. There's no one else she could be. This was… this had to be, one of the persons Sio most admired… one of the persons she looked up to… one of the persons she aspired to, one day, be like.

Yet… yet Towa had called her Suisei. Suisei? As in, Hoshimati Suisei? The Hololive member? Sure, she was pretty great too, but… but she and Sora looked nothing alike. Nothing alike at all. Hair color could be dyed, hair style could be changed, contacts could be used for the eyes… but

their faces… they were completely different. And their bodies, too... Sora-san had… a great body. Yeah. Great is the word. Suisei… Suisei had a nice body, but it lacked… a couple of big things, in the eye-catching department. Yeah. Things the girl in front of them had. Padding, maybe? But up to that level…!

“I had a good reason to do it. Please, believe me.”

The voice of the girl brought her out of her stupid train of thought. She was addressing Towa. Towa… Towa just walked past them, deeper into the bar. Then, she said…

“Oh, I believe you. Everyone always has a good reason to break a promise, after all.”

She then addressed them. “Sio, Roro. We are going to hold a meeting with these ladies by the door.”

They all sat down on a corner of the bar. Fixed sofa-seats with cushioning formed an L around a table. Hololive’s leader and her assistant sat on one side of it. Towa, Sio, and Roro took the other. Towa choose to sit herself in the farthest position from the center, a clear message.

“Don’t worry about someone coming in. Roro here is keeping an eye on the door. Aren’t you, Roro?”

“I am, Master”, spoke the maid.

“See? She’s currently patched into the discrete cameras I have installed on the alley.”

Hololive’s leader took a look at the girl. The girl looked back at her. One of her eyes had changed. It displayed… a targeting reticle, on a pink colored iris. Just what…

“Just what… is she?”

“She is my assistant. Her name is Roro, as you probably picked out by now.”

“It is a pleasure to make the acquaintance of one of Master’s old…”

“Colleagues. We were colleagues.”

Not comrades. Not friends. That’s the word Towa used. Colleagues. It wasn’t a lie. They had never been particularly close. Still…

“Doesn’t she seem familiar to you?”, spoke the short haired girl, interrupting her thoughts. “Roboco’s creator created her for me. I sought him out, independently of course, and asked him to.”

This took her by surprise. “That’s right, Suisei. You aren’t the only one who can’t let go of the past. Anyways. As a security measure, her eye changes whenever she’s using any feature that’s not part of her basic locomotive, vocal, or cognitive functions. That way, I always know when she’s doing something ‘special’. That’s what he said when he explained the feature to me, anyways. Had I known, I’d have told him to not bother with such an invasive thing.”

“I would never hide anything from you, Master.”

“I know you wouldn’t, Roro. I don’t need underhanded features to trust you.”

She seemed to be fond of the robot. Of Roro. If she was like Roboco, then she wasn’t a thing. She was a who. She needed to think of her as a person, because that’s truly what she was, if that creator was her father. The Inventor. He was the leading robotics and AI expert in the world. Japanese born and raised. And he was close to cracking the final barrier. He was close to achieving the singularity. Those of them who knew Roboco… they would testify that he already had. However, her first assessment would happen after 5 years of operation, and she had been destroyed… killed, after only 2. If what Towa said was true… and she had no reason to lie… then he had taken another shot at it. Despite swearing he wouldn’t.

No. He swore he would never cooperate with the government again. Towa… Towa was acting solo. Had she really contacted him just because she wanted someone to remind her of Roboco? Or was it because she didn’t want that promising mind to give up, one step away from such a goal, as a result of the tragedy? This being Towa… this being Towa, both things must have played a part on it. If she was like this… if she was like this, still, then maybe… maybe there was hope.

“So, here’s how it’s going to work”, spoke the short haired devil. “I tell my story, and you tell yours. I’m curious about some things myself, so I may as well use this chance to sate my curiosity. Sio and Roro, of course, will listen to it all. They themselves don’t know everything about what went on, so this is a good chance as any to tell them. What do you say? This works out for everyone, in the end.”

Hololive’s leader held her gaze, and saw she was serious. She then closed her eyes, and considered the offer. It was such a small thing, but for her… for her, recalling her past… recalling the early days… it was always a risk. The chances of her having an episode, again… they weren’t zero.

“Towa… is this truly what you want?”

“It is. That’s my price.”

“Then, if I do it… will you help me?”

“Come on now. I don’t know what you need my help with, but it can’t be anything pleasant, I imagine. You do this, and I’ll hear you out. Then we’ll see what happens.”

It was such a big risk, for only a chance. But… but if she succeeded… if she convinced her to help…

“I think it’s the least you can do, right? Sio here is a big Tokino Sora fan, after all. One of them deserves to know the truth at least, wouldn’t you say?”

Those words. They hurt, deep. And that kind of hurt, for her… it was dangerous.

“Look, I’ll even make you the favor of going first, so… what will it be?”

She remembered what happened yesterday, in the office. Who are you? She reached into her pocket. She touched the picture. The picture of herself, and Kanata. She couldn’t explain it. She really couldn’t. But when she did… somehow, she felt… stronger. She remembered the song. Remembered all that Kanata was. All that she could have been. All that she was prevented from being. Who are you? “I’m the one who’s going to put an end to this”. That’s what she had said. If she had to risk it all, to have a chance to make true on her word… then it was worth it. She opened her eyes.

“All right, I accept. I’ll do it.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear!”, said Towa, a big grin on her face. Then she added. “Guess I have to make good on my word, right? I’ll go first. Yeah. Roro… could you please prepare some apple tea for me? And whatever the girls want. Alcohol is fine, too, of course, but… well, this isn’t that kind of talk. Or, put in a better way… it’s too much that kind of talk.”

“At your service, Master. What would you all prefer, Sio-san, esteemed guests?”

Tokoyami Towa was about to start recording her cover. It was *Kuroi Hitsuji*, “Black Sheep”.

https://youtu.be/ZQ3gmQzpvBM

Is the semaphore blue, or perhaps is it green, which one is it?

I want to clarify uncertain things.

To cut through the crowds on the shopping street at dusk is a pain!

Crossing the railroad crossing, I go home, taking a detour.

I dislike classrooms after school is over,

just by being there you can understand them,

since they won't speak I grow bored and silent,

say what you want to say and let's get this over with,

to hope for that is just too optimistic.

Someone let out a sigh.

Yeah, that's what they really think, isn't it?

If only the black sheep that I am weren't here everything would be fine!

If that happened the stopped hand of the clock would start moving again, right?

One that everyone agrees with, is there such an answer?

If I am the only one that's in opposition, then no biggie, ignoring me is fine.

To instead have everyone try to convince me makes me more uncomfortable.

I observe my comrades:

To them I'm nothing but a bother.

I'm standing out in a flock of immaculate white,

me, the only jet-black sheep,

is what I said, but I don't want to be dyed in the same color.

When do the lights turn on in a dim room, anyways?

On my *smartphone*, only a past without love, remains.

To properly reciprocate a human relationship is something I can't do!

If I hadn't been there, that would have been fine, is what I start to regret.

Most of your life won't go as planned,

it's full of things you can't accept,

and I was told 'give up',

but if I did that, then, that'd be doing something I can't accept, after all,

and on that occasion, like on many others, they spat at me,

couldn't they bite instead?

Tokoyami Towa tried to stand up. Her face felt hot. She was bleeding. A cut on the head. But… nothing major. No major injuries, from the explosion that had just rocked the church. Her disguise was torn and even burned in places, though. That's right. Her sheep disguise. She had come to the church disguised as Watame, in case someone decided to attack. And someone just did. And she had escaped that attack without major injuries. All thanks to… Kanata. And Luna. Where… were they?

No… no… no… no…

Everything

is

my fault.

She looked up. A solid wooden bench stood in front of her. It had mostly shielded her from the explosion. The explosion that took place right where she had been standing moments ago. Before Kanata… Kanata, and Luna. She stood up. Slowly. Too slowly. She had to find them.

Kanata… Kanata was an angel. But all that meant, was she was a normal human, with only her wings going for her. No. Kanata… Kanata had many great things to her. Everyone loved her, and it had nothing to do with the wings. What Towa meant to say, was that only her wings were something akin to a special ability. They could increase in size, to the point of allowing her to fly with them.

And with those wings… with those wings Kanata had saved her. After the bullet shattered the window and landed at their feet, Kanata could sense the danger, and acted fast. Increasing them in size she dug one into the floor, best as she could, and used it as a pivot. In a very fast spinning motion, she used her arms to grab Luna tight, and with her other wing, she grabbed Towa and… and threw her. Towa saw it all play out again. Kanata and Luna had come to a stop at the other side of the wing she had used as a pivot. It afforded them little protection. Towa getting farther and farther… the rocket hitting, the flames spreading, the impact hitting her. It managed to burn her costume… her sheep costume was charred, completely. Missing sections, even. What remained, including one of the horns on her head, was jet black. But Kanata's throw had put her behind the bench just in time. She avoided major damage. Kanata had saved her. Her. She had to find her. Them. Luna was there, too…

If only the black sheep that I am weren't here everything would be fine!

If that happened the stopped hand of the clock would start moving again, right?

They both had come to warn her. Kanata and Luna. But her thoughts kept drifting back to Kanata. Everyone loved Kanata. Towa did too. Because, the truth was…

The truth was, Towa was weak. Too weak. When she became a member of Hololive, that didn't change. But Kanata… For some reason, Kanata was always someone she could rely on.

She started walking while supporting herself on the bench, to find her. Them. Kanata… and Luna.

Even on her first trip to the office, when being introduced to the staff, she had gotten too shy, and had ended up hiding behind her, grabbing her sleeve like a lost kid. Kanata didn't mind, and smiled at her. Kanata… Kanata never minded. She always smiled.

She got to the end of the bench, and started walking towards the center of the room.

Not once. Not once had Kanata not been there for her. Out of all the times she needed someone. And there were many, many times. Towa… Towa really liked Hololive. Watame. Watame was so kind, a better friend than anyone deserved. Certainly, better than Towa deserved. And Kanata… Kanata was too. Way better than she deserved. But… due to that. Due to that…

Some things had happened. She… fucked up, in a big way. She always did. Mistakes, failures. Those were Tokoyami Towa's specialty. And… and afterwards, she could never get rid of the feeling that she was dragging Hololive down. That she was a burden. That she was in the way of her wonderful friends, someone who hindered them, not someone who helped them. When. When had she done something good for them? Never. Never. Never never never. It was always the other way around.

Not a day went by where Towa didn't think of herself as dead weight.

But… but she always had Kanata, to turn to. It must have tired her. Of course. It would tire anyone. But Kanata never showed it. Never showed how tired she was of listening to her cry, cry due to the same doubts, due to the same insecurities. She always listened, and she always told her the same thing.

"Towa, that's not true."

She always told her she wasn't a burden. Not a day went by where Towa didn't think of herself as dead weight. But… when it got really bad, and she had to call Kanata… when Kanata told her that that wasn't true… Towa, for a very brief, really short period of time… believed what she heard.

A burden. That was Tokoyami Towa. That's why… that's why when she heard of their plan, she volunteered straight away. It was so fitting. If they needed a sacrificial lamb… it should be her. The burden. The black sheep, taking the place of the white one. Watame needed to be protected. Towa lacked any value worth protecting. If she didn't volunteer, Kanata would. That's who that girl was.

Always putting others in front of her. Why? Why? Why save her? Why save Tokoyami Towa? Instead of Luna? Instead of herself? Who does that? As the questions kept repeating, she reached them.

I observe my comrades:

To them I'm nothing but a bother. I understand that.

Kanata's wing, the one she had used as pivot, the one she used as an improvised shield, was completely destroyed. It wasn't the only damaged thing. Towa crouched down. These wounds… with these wounds… Kanata… and Luna… that they would never, never again, sing, dance, happily

run around… that was beyond question. But… but, as she observed them… what Towa wondered was... with these wounds, could you survive?

“Why… why…?”

That’s all Towa could say.

“Why save me… me…?”

“To… wa…?”

Kanata spoke, weakly. Once again. When Towa wanted to talk, Kanata was always there for her.

Her body… the only reason it wasn’t more damaged, was because hugging Luna had made the latter receive part of the impact too, acting as an inner shielding for Kanata, beyond her wing. Could Kanata still speak? Could she still see? Could she still hear? Could she still survive? Looking at her, Towa had only more of the same. Unanswered doubts.

“Towa…”, said Kanata, trying to… trying to… what do you call that, when someone who can no longer stand up, tries to get as far away from the floor as possible? Kanata tried to do that. With her arm, and her hip, she managed to raise herself, sit almost. It took her a lot of effort. Effort she shouldn’t be making. Kanata always did. For everyone. For Towa too. She always pushed herself. Beyond her limits. Disregarding her health. This was no different.

She breathed with effort. And blood… blood came out, not only out of her wounds. A thin line fell from her mouth. Towa couldn’t tell due to the wounds that surrounded it, but her left ear, too, seemed to have blood flowing out. And a red line also feel down from her left eye, which was closed. Kanata was literally crying blood. Why? For her. Due to her. It was all… her fault.

Towa moved forwards. She had meant to support Kanata, but ended up hugging her instead. With her wounds, maybe she shouldn’t. She knew she shouldn’t. But… but she still did. Kanata…

“Why…?”

“Towa… I’m sorry…”

For what. For what could she be sorry for? She instead. She instead was the one who had things to be sorry for. Sorry for always bothering you. Sorry for never doing fun things with you. Sorry for this.

“I think… you hit your head… ‘Why?’, because… you are my friend… silly…”

She tried to push her away, like she had never tried before. Like Towa always tried. She wanted to tell her something, while looking at her. Towa… the least Towa could do, was help her with that. She ended the hug, and made some distance, taking care to still support her, and causing her as little pain as possible in the process. Kanata breathed hard. Mouth open, blood still pouring. Suddenly, she gritted her teeth, and looked at her. A determined gaze.

"Towa, you… you aren't a burden, I… I myself, don't like… don't like many things, about me… my voice… but… despite that, Hololive… Hololive welcomed me in. Hololive… Hololive always has a place for… people like us…"

People like us? She thought they were similar, despite being nothing alike? Who did Kanata think Tokoyami Towa was? Who, if not a burden? What, if not a burden?

The reply came without her making the questions.

"I… I was always… always very sheltered so I don't… I don't know much about the world, but… but Towa, out of the things I know… out of the things I know exist in this world, you… you, Tokoyami Towa… are one of the best."

"You… You'll be an asset… wherever you are… even if it's not Hololive. An asset. A friend."

"Thank you… for coming to me… with your problems.

I know… it couldn't have been… easy.

I'm sorry… I never came… to you… with mine.

Too… damn… proud…"

She said that with a smile. A self-deprecating smile. Then, Towa could see the light fade from her open eye. Her expression slowly crumbled, and before long, Kanata's body did as well. Towa reacted too late to prevent her fall. Useless, even here.

Tokoyami Towa, one of the best things that exists in the world? In what world?

Tokoyami Towa. That name means "Eternal Darkness".

Crouching next to… her friends… seeing them slowly bleed out… and doing nothing… nothing to stop it… that name was a fitting descriptor. A fitting descriptor for the world she felt part of.

But, before long, someone came into that world. A couple of someones. Someone in a crimson suit, accompanied by someone in a blue one. Houshou Marine and Minato Aqua. Members of Hololive. Like her. If she recalled correctly… yeah, she saw them enter the church, right before the explosion. They arrived with Kanata and Luna. Kanata… and Luna…

The girl in a blue suit was too shocked to do anything. That was fine. Nothing wrong with that. Towa was useless, too. But then, she gritted her teeth and moved to try and help the girls. That wasn't surprising either. Towa was the only truly useless one.

The one with the crimson suit approached her. She got to her level. Towa was crouched by the bodies, after all. The first thing she said was something stupid. "Are you ok?!" Who would be? Since she didn't want to hear stupid things anymore, she stopped hearing what she said next. But it was fine. The entire world was stupid. She still looked at the girl, and her mouth, her expressions, they all seemed to try to reassure her. She put a hand on her shoulder, and looked towards the doors. With a gesture of the head, she got her message across. She wanted her to go there. She also seemed to say, something about her taking care of things here. That's what her hand on her chest seemed to indicate, anyways. Going to the doors. That was simple. Towa could do that, at least. So she stood up, and she started walking. Slowly, without hurry. The red girl came running past, then back again, with her jacket on her hands the second time. For bandages, maybe? That was smart. They were so smart.



She stood by the door, for how long? Eventually, Marine opened the door, and peeked outside. A van had come. She went and picked Kanata, then brought her outside. Aqua followed, with Luna on her arms. She had trouble with that, but she still made the effort. They left her alone, by the door. That was ok. They had taken everything of value with them already.

Obviously, moments later Marine came back. Someone always helped Towa when she needed it.

In the van, she sat across a shocked Fubuki and Korone. In the middle, Aqua was doing her best, tending to both Kanata and Luna. They reached the house of gen 3. Noel was waiting outside. Pekora and Sakura came soon enough. Moving quickly, they took the girls inside. Towa didn't need a prompt. She followed them. Up the stairs, into one of the rooms of the second floor. They laid them on the double sized bed there. Towa crouched by the wall.

She saw many different people come in and check on the girls, many people trying to help them. Marine, Aqua, Flare, Noel, Pekora, Sakura, Subaru. Towa did nothing. She just sat, by the wall.

Eventually, people stopped coming into the room. Only Aqua kept doing it from time to time, to check on the girls. She saw if she could do anything for them, checked her bandages, but frankly, she had done all she could. And… and once, she also came, with freshly baked cookies on a tray. She offered Towa some. This girl… this girl and Kanata, they were very similar. Perhaps that's why Kanata adored her. Both always caring for others. Caring for her. Once again. Once again, someone taking care of her. Once again, being a burden. She refused. Aqua left the room. With that, Towa knew. She'd always be a burden, as long as she was part of Hololive. She tried to grab her hair, to give a twirl, and that's when she realized for the first time. The explosion had burned some of it. She felt it, felt its new length… and her fingers brushed against something in her neck. That's right, the tracker. The tracker that they used to monitor the position and status of Hololive members. As long as she was part of Hololive, she'd be a burden to her comrades. So she would leave it. Making that resolution, she crushed the tracker.

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Somehow… somehow, that woke her up. Out of her shock. Maybe she had gotten an electrical shock from destroying the device. Regardless, she felt herself thinking clearly, for the first time, since she saw Kanata fall to the ground. She looked at her, on the bed. Still alive, but for how much longer? She thought on what she had said. Was… was it true? Was Towa, for Kanata, really one of the best things that the world had? She stood up, and went to her bedside. "Wherever you are, you'll

be an asset. A friend." That's what Kanata thought of her. She was not a burden. She was her friend. The matter was what Towa thought. She thought back on what she thought before crushing the tracker.

And she still agreed with that. That wasn't the shock speaking. As long as she was part of Hololive, she'd feel like a burden. She couldn't understand why, but just knew, deep inside of her, that it was true. It wasn't what someone else thought. Kanata, and Watame, had let her know many times. They didn't think Towa was a burden. They thought she was their friend. Towa wanted to be their friend, but couldn't stop feeling like a burden to them. Why? It was… it was because she had done nothing to deserve them. Nothing to gain them. She just entered the group, and was blessed with wonderful comrades, out of sheer luck. Comrades she had no right to have. Or maybe she did, but she needed to feel she had gained them, that she had done something to earn them, to truly stand proud at their side. That's when she truly sealed her decision. She'd leave Hololive. To truly honor what Kanata thought of her. To truly be one of the best things the world had. She caressed her cheek. "Rest easy, Kanata. I won't be a burden to anyone else, and I will strive to never feel like one, either. I'm sorry. I'm leaving the group. But, you know… Hololive is just a name. What matters are the bonds you forge, the friends you make." She let her hand fall, towards Kanata's neck. "Thank you for thinking of me as yours. I… I don't know how much time you have left but… you'll always be mine." That's the only thing that mattered. Kanata living on, on Towa's actions from now. As if to seal that vow, she crushed Kanata's tracker, as gently as she could, then, gently as well, she removed it, and put in on her pocket. She also crushed Luna's, before making her way out of the room.

She searched for Aqua, and asked for a cookie.

The smile she received in turn almost made her regret the decision she had taken.

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Early next morning, she asked to talk to everyone in the house. She told them her decision, without giving them her reasons. Everyone accepted it without questioning. She also asked everyone to not tell Watame of her survival. Let her think the collar being broken meant she had died. This, they didn't accept as easy. They tried to convince her, but Towa insisted. She wouldn't take no for an answer on this. So they finally had to accept. It was egoistical, she knew that, but she needed it. If Watame knew she had survived… she'd come for her. And Towa needed to enter this new stage alone, it needed to be a true fresh start. Watame would always make her feel like a burden, and she couldn't have that. Only by dying could that stop. And she couldn't die, because she needed to

honor what Kanata thought of her. She wanted to honor that, honor her. So she did the next best thing. She faked her death, in the eyes of the world and her remaining friend.

That's what she lived, that night and the morning after, before departing the house.

What she told Suisei, Azuki, Sio and Roro… was a condensed version of the story. She obviously kept her darker feelings out of it. She was vague, there where she didn't omit completely. She didn't make the tale more complicated than it needed to be. Hololive's learning of the Jaegers existence. The plan to lure them out, and her part on it. How it went to hell, and the hell she herself lived. How… how her best friend lost her life that night. How she decided to honor her, by doing her own thing, something she could be proud of. How she started by breaking her tracker, and asking Hololive to fake her death. How her remaining friend didn't know of her survival to this day.

How later she invoked a clause from her contract. A trauma clause. She could retire from the program, and the government would still honor the suspension of her surveillance. She could live under the radar, like any normal human.

How she asked the one who had taken charge of Hololive's operations, Hoshimati Suisei, for money. To ask the government for money, on account of her. They had really dropped the ball on the operation, so they were open to any requests at the time. They didn't care what the money was for. Suisei included it on the budget, made some stuff up, then handed it to her on hard cash. No trace left.

How she used the money to buy this place, and try to run a bar.

At times… at times telling the tale was hard. That was natural. But… but the girl next to her noticed. When that happened, Sio squeezed Towa's hand, gently. That made Towa smile, and gave her the strength to carry on. Because, seeing that, she realized her tale had a happy ending. A happy ending born out of a tragedy.

Six months. Six months after speaking to her best friend for the last time… she had gained a new one. Someone that didn't make her feel like a burden. No. Someone with whom she herself had managed to not feel like a burden. She had something to be proud of. The *Devil's Den*. Something she truly built up from scratch. She had made good on her promise to Kanata. She realized that know. And part of her, a bigger part than she would have thought, was happy that Suisei had come here today.

The rest of her was in equal parts curious, and wary.

“There’s one last thing. When I asked for the money… when she handed it to me… I asked her to promise me something. I asked her to forget I was alive. In exchange, I told her what I would do. I even, foolishly, told her the name I had in mind. How she found me, no doubt. I vividly recall making her promise she’d never step foot inside. And I recall that all that went on with Hoshimati Suisei. So, Suisei: *Why are you here, and why do you look like Tokino Sora?* Your turn to tell your tale.”

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So it finally came. Her turn.

“Before that, I gotta ask. Was it so obvious, who I was?”

“To the general public, maybe not. But to someone who knows who survived, and who had taken up operations… not seeing Suisei again after Sora reappeared… yeah, it was pretty obvious to me. Gotta say, really smart thing you have going with the S there though. Same to you, with the A. …you are Azuki, right?” The girl that looked like A-chan nodded as a response. “I figured. So… care to explain?”

Here it came. Be strong. For them. She looked at A, who gave a gentle smile back. It would be fine… If anything happened, if she lost it, she would be here. She’d take care of things. And… this was a safe place. A safe space. After hearing Towa speak, feeling the same pain on her voice… she still felt afraid, but part of her knew, deep down, that everything would be alright. She touched the picture for a final time. She was ready.

“It’s not that complicated, really…”

That night, Hoshimati Suisei had been given a mission. To keep Tsunomaki Watame safe, make sure she survived. It wasn’t a hard mission, in terms of the actions she needed to take to ensure a successful outcome. She just needed to sit on a van, doing nothing. But, in terms of the emotional effort it asked of her, monitoring how their comrades kept dying… that effort was tremendous. Too much, even. Obviously, that night Hoshimati Suisei achieved the mission entrusted to her, and kept Tsunomaki Watame safe.

They later went to a safe location. Watame asked for some time alone. That was the least she could give her. Azuki, who was also with them, also needed it. Everyone did. So Hoshimati Suisei found herself alone. She made her way to a bathroom, so she could wash her face. After letting her face be hit by the cold water, she raised it, and looked at her reflection on the mirror. She thought back at what Sora had said. “Make sure Watame-chan survives. If she makes it, Hololive will surely survive. She is strong and skilled enough to do it. I have no qualms about entrusting the future to her.” There was… there was something about that that bothered her. Why her? Why Suisei? Anyone could have kept Watame safe. Anyone. And, the chances of Watame being the only member of the van to survive were very slim. It would be all three of them, or none of them. Sora must have known that.

That’s when it hit her. The way Sora said it. The way she looked at her. How she smiled at her, placing a hand on her shoulder. What Sora truly intended, was to entrust the future of Hololive to the three of them. To Watame, to Suisei, and Azuki. Just… just like Watame had been kept in the dark, about the true objective of the plan, so were they, too. Had Watame known it was all to protect her, she would have surely protested. In the same way, had Suisei and Azuki been told Sora wanted them in the van because she was entrusting them the future along with Watame, they would have protested. Surely, someone else was more worthy of it, more capable… right? Why her? Why Suisei? Why…

“Why not you, Sora? Why does the future need me, but not you?”

You can’t be serious.

“You can’t be serious!”, said Suisei, as she hit the wall next to the mirror with her gloved fist.

It was hard to tell if the drops running down her face were the water she had splashed on earlier, or tears she had just started to shed.

She took over the administrative role. She dealt with the aftermath of it. PR. Dealt with the government. Dealt with everything.

Then, after two weeks, something happened. The third generation engaged and defeated most of the remaining Jaegers. It was all over the news. Who was there, where it took place. Rushia was there, of course. On the morgue, were the bodies were kept. The rumors made themselves. Had Rushia tried to revive them? Had she… had she succeeded? Suisei had received a full report, so she knew

the truth. But still, seeing the messages of the fans of those she knew were no longer there… specially Sora fans, the most numerous of them all… it affected her.

She then received two proposals, two requests.

The first one was from Tsunomaki Watame, one of the few people who understood her. Who knew what it was like to have the entire weight of the world put on her shoulders. How much it weighted you down, how unable it left you to do anything. Watame sometimes texted her. She, just like Suisei, was too diminished by the task at hand to do anything. And somehow… somehow having someone else going through the same, made it better for her.

That changed when she read her proposal. She was ready. Ready to move on. Ready to hold a comeback concert. Virtual only, of course… but still. Watame was moving on. Only Suisei didn't.

She was alone, the only still stuck on the bog of the task entrusted to her. Watame had broken free. She… she needed to, too. She needed to do something, anything.

And that's when she turned her attention to the second proposal. It was from the government.

They had developed a new procedure. A revolutionary procedure. A procedure they wanted to test. They thought she'd be an ideal candidate for it. Its codename was the Reincarnation initiative.

They had developed it consulting on Uruha Rushia. She provided them their theories, regarding the body, and the soul. That the body merely held the soul, was something more or less everyone understood. How she could manipulate souls, and her thoughts on the "molding" the soul did on the body… that was revolutionary. They based it on that.

They came up with a two-stage procedure. First, a body would be created, from scratch. Then, a soul would be placed in said body. These two phases wouldn't take place independently: the same person who created the body would have its soul moved into it. It was all possible thanks to stem cells. Not human stem cells. The stem cells of the individuals with animal traits.

They created a bundle. A bundle of stem cells. The individuals with animal traits sometimes used powerful abilities, that were destructive to their own bodies, at a cellular and tissue level. There were also "connections" on their bodies, between the animal parts and the humanoid ones, that needed constant rebuilding as well. To repair the damage, their cells were wired to develop fast, adapting to what was required. Rushia said that the soul, just by being there, shaped the body. And a soul that wasn't just there, but performed a shaping consciously directed by the mind? What could it do?

After seeing what individuals like Rushia could do, by applying their minds to it… they were willing to bet a lot. So a process for quickly transforming the bundle into a body, and then transferring your soul into it, both things by employing the power of your mind, was developed. Pretty cool, right?

They gave her many reasons. Think of the possibilities, they said. The medical applications. People born with malformities. People with chronic illnesses. People who had had life changing accidents. People who didn't felt comfortable with the type of body they had, the sex their bodies had… The possibilities to better the world were endless. And wasn't that what Hololive was all about? Plus, if the procedure is a success, no one will ever dare to reject those with animal traits anymore, this being possible thanks to them! And… and with this… with this… you can even bring one of your comrades back. Sort of. You can take up their mantle. In fact, we'd love if you could replicate Sora's body. She's the first V-tuber, you see. The most popular one. She has so many fans… it'd be a shame for them all to be left sad. With this… if you accept this… they won't have to.

Suisei knew. Upon hearing this last part, she knew she was being manipulated. The government didn't care about that. The government… the council of five members who acted as Hololive's supervisors… they only cared about five things, one each: Military strength. National Security. Maintaining a traditional society. Furthering research. Reforming society.

They all were different people, with different interests. They represented different factions. Sometimes they clashed, sometimes they worked together. Regardless, on any scenario, any way she arranged the pieces, she couldn't see any of them caring for their fans in that way. She was being manipulated, most likely by The Researcher. But… But when she thought that Sora decided the future didn't need her, but that she, that Suisei was needed instead… she felt the need to prove her wrong. The need to prove Tokino Sora was in fact still needed. That her being there would be a bigger plus than Hoshimati Suisei being there could ever be. So she accepted.

The procedure required you to enter a vat filled with a green liquid. That's where the body you left would be preserved. In front of it was another vat, with a bundle inside. That's where the new body would be formed. As for the procedure itself… even Rushia couldn't explain the theory behind manipulating souls, save it being a very intuitive thing. It was like… tapping into an underlying plane of existence, an underlying force. Will had a big part to play on it. Putting your mind into it, willing it, was what did it. That's all she could say with certainty. Apparently, this liquid made the connection to said underlying force stronger; a bath of animal traits stem cells, it would also

preserve her body. Her blood was injected into the bundle to form a connection. So Suisei only had to will it.

And she did. She willed for that bundle to turn into the body of Tokino Sora. And for her to have it. To ensure a steady procedure, they put her on a semi-coma, and played videos on the vat for her to see, with all the required parts of a body, for internal organs. Appearance, Suisei took care of.

Hoshimati Suisei opened her eyes. She was laying down on the ground. On the impeccably mopped ground, of a convenience store. Except there was no store. Just the ground of it, stretching on forever, in all directions. Into eternity. She sat on the floor, and looked up. Above her, a night sky, upon which a long comet soared through, sailing the universe.

No. That wasn't what comets did. Comets fell to earth. They came too close, finding themselves pulled by Earth's gravitational pull; those that didn't burn against the atmosphere, ended up crashing against the ground. The Greeks had a myth. Icarus was its protagonist, a boy who used his wings to get too close to the sun, and was rewarded with death, after it burned his wings and sent him crashing against the sea. Comets were the Icarus of nature, only inverted. Their shine was their burning fall.

Or… or were those shooting stars? Yeah. Those were shooting stars, not comets.

Shooting stars burned against the atmosphere, while comets soared the universe.

…right?

What… what were shooting stars, again? Weren't… weren't they comets, that ran out of energy?

A comet, without energy, became a shooting star. If it ended up getting close to a planet, that is.

Not every comet became a shooting star. True, every comet ran out of energy…

…but only some found themselves pulled against a planet. Only some had a burning fall.

Her name… her name was Hoshimati Suisei. It had "Star" and "Comet" in it.

Would… would she too… become a comet that, running out of energy, turned into a shooting star?

A shooting star that had a burning fall against the earth?

Why… was she thinking this?

Why… was she here?

Where… was here?

She looked around. No one. Just convenience store ground.

She looked up. Ah.

The comet, against the night sky. It had run out of energy. It was going to crash.

Burn and crash, against the Earth.

And it did.

It came crashing down, landing right in front of Suisei, against the convenience store floor.

-

Somehow, there was very little dust. Was it because the floor was impeccable?

Suisei was unhurt. Once the dust dissipated, she saw the floor was intact.

No crater, no comet, nothing. In its point of impact, stood a girl.

A girl of about her age. A girl she knew. Yeah. This girl… she was the reason Suisei was here.

“Sora…”

Yeah. It was Tokino Sora.

“Suisei.”

“Where… where are we?”

“Where, I wonder?”, came the reply. “And I think… I think only you are, here.”

Where… where didn’t matter. Why. Why was she here. That was the important part. She was here... she was here to bring Tokino Sora back. That’s what she needed to do. What she wanted to do. Yeah. Yeah, that was it. How could someone not want that? Not want Tokino Sora back? Everyone loved her. Everyone would be so happy. She just needed to bring her back. That’s why she was here. She already found her. Good. All she needed now was a way back. A way back…

As soon as she thought that, a door appeared, some distance away.

They both looked at it.

Suisei knew what she had to do. She stood up.

“Sora, I’m here to bring you back. Please, come with me.”

Tokino Sora shook her head. “I can’t, Suisei. I’m sorry.”

“Why?” Why did Sora…

“WHY?!”, she screamed at her with all she had, surprising even herself.

She had grown agitated out of a sudden.

The why. That was the important part.

“You’ve been wanting to ask me that, right, Suisei?”, asked Tokino Sora. She wasn’t fazed by the scream. She smiled kindly at her, and her eyes were full of comprehension, and just a little bit pained… that face… when she saw that face, Suisei really wanted to know. The why.

“Why you, and not me? Why me, and not you?”

Why did Sora decided she wanted Suisei to survive and not herself. Why.

“Look at that.”

On the opposite side of the door, there was the corner of a convenience store.

An old man smiled, while taking the picture of a girl who posed cutely with a message.

The girl was, of course, Suisei.

“Suisei, you… you have no idea how much the world needs you. It really does.”

“And not you? You think it doesn’t need you, Sora?”

“I can’t cross that door, Suisei. The dead… the dead don’t come back to life. They aren’t mean to.”

“And I know someone who can cross it easily, who is very much worthy of it.”

When she said that, in between them a girl walked past.

Blue hair. Blue outfit, white sleeves.

It was Hoshimati Suisei, before she joined Hololive. She walked towards the door.

They looked at her, and Sora spoke.

“That girl… that girl has always had a dream. Ever since she was a little girl. To be an idol.”

“And not you? You didn’t want that since being little, as well?”, replied Suisei.

Sora kept looking at the Suisei that walked towards the door.

“She worked so hard. So, so hard. Sweat and tears. And finally, she achieved her dream. Every morning, when she looks at the mirror, an idol looks back at her. Every day, she has a chance to live her dream. I think… I think she deserves to keep living it. I really do.”

“And not you, Sora? You didn’t work hard? Sweat, tears, you never knew them? Weren’t you living you dream? Didn’t you deserve to live it, too? Didn’t you deserve to live, period?”

“That girl”, said Sora, never taking her eyes off the Suisei that walked towards the doors, “That girl believes in something.” An axiom of life. Give and take. Sacrifice to receive. “She believes in putting in effort, in sacrificing her time, so in turn, she can grant smiles to others. I think that’s beautiful. I think this world really needs that, right now. I think the world needs you, still, Hoshimati Suisei.”

Saying that, Tokino Sora started walking in the opposite direction, away from the door.

Hoshimati Suisei stood in place, while the other Suisei kept walking towards the door.

She looked at her.



She then looked at Sora.



Yeah. Everything Sora said of Suisei was true. But wasn’t it true too for Sora? Didn’t Sora believe in making others smile? Didn’t she put in the effort and sacrifice the necessary time to obtain that?

Suisei… Suisei thought that was beautiful. The world really needed that, right now. Yeah. The world still needed Tokino Sora. Even if she herself disagreed.

“Go through that door, Suisei”, said Sora while walking away, as if to answer her. “Just let me go.”

Suisei looked at the Suisei that walked towards the door. She was almost on it.

Suisei wasn’t allowing her to cross. She came here for a reason. To bring someone back.

Someone the world still needed, but that they had lost. She would give her back to the world.

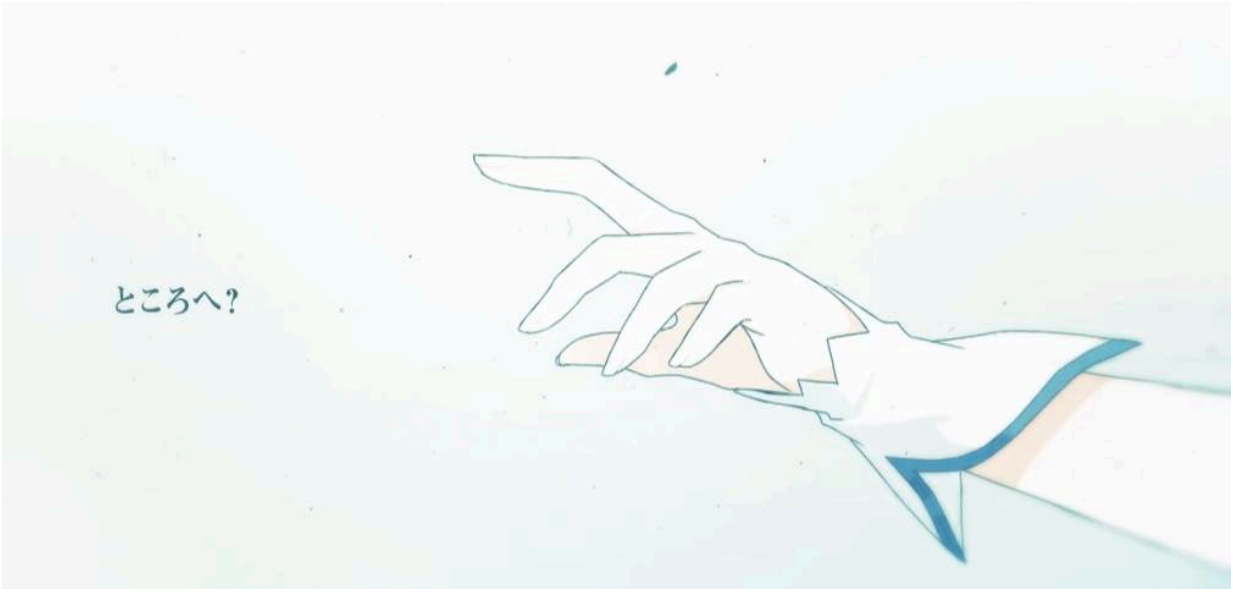
Whatever the cost. Give and take, sacrifice to receive.

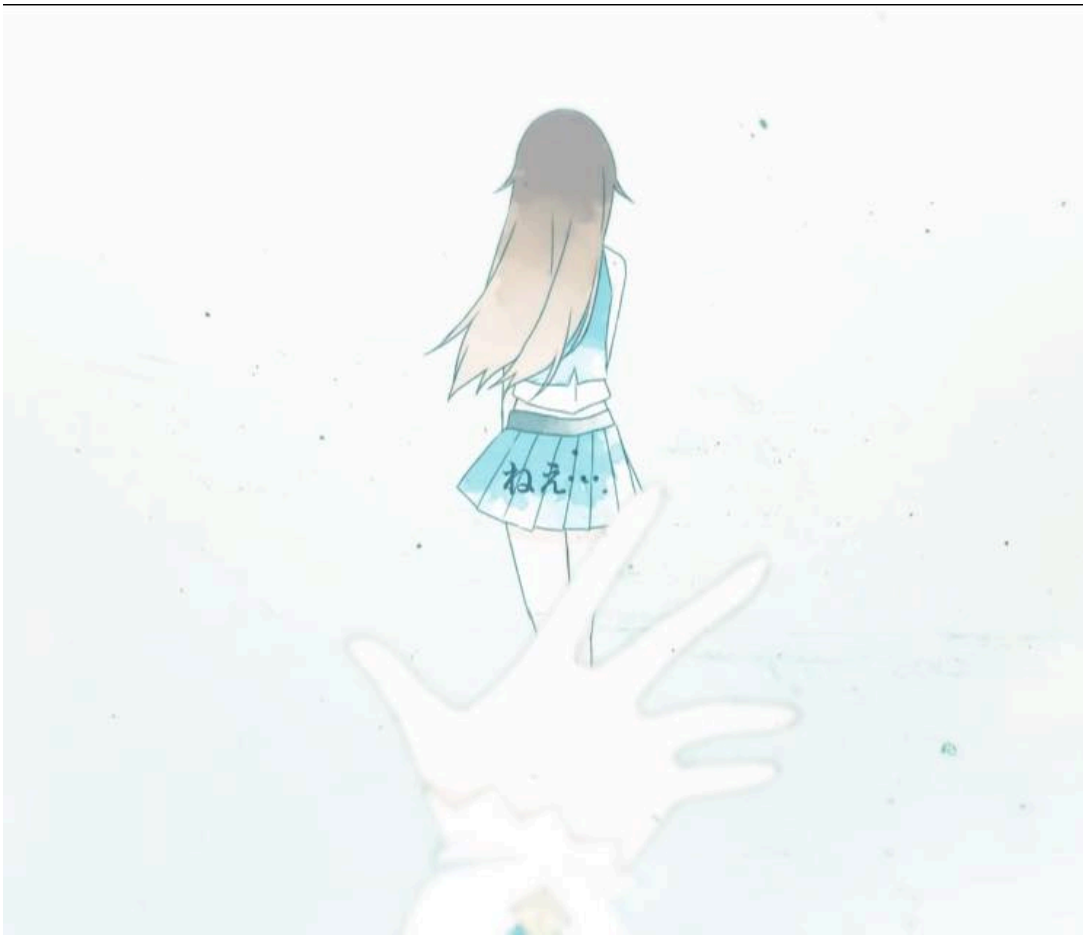
She turned towards Sora, who kept walking away.

“Where?”

“Where am I going to let you go to, Sora? You really think I can do that?”

After saying that, she ran towards her.





She reached her. Touched her. Looked back at the door. The other Suisei had disappeared.

Hoshimati Suisei let out a sigh of relief, and smiled.

She then grabbed Sora's hand. "Let's go home, Sora. Together. You and me."



They started walking towards the door.

Sora didn’t speak. Suisei looked forwards resolutely. She squeezed Sora’s hand regularly.

She didn’t want to let her go. Who would?

The why. The why was important.

Why should she let her go?

They walked hand in hand, in silence, towards the door in the distance.

Above, the sky had changed. It wasn’t night anymore. It was a dawn, about to break.

Light was starting to fill this world. Suisei could feel it. This was the right decision.



They eventually reached the door.



It was a very simple design.

Sora, for the first time in a while, spoke.

“We can’t both go through it.” She raised the hand Suisei was grabbing for emphasis.

It was true. The door wasn’t wide enough, obviously.

Suisei… for some reason, Suisei thought a convenience store door would have been fine.

One of those that made DURIN DURIN! as you crossed them.

She smiled at that, for some reason. And… and she felt… felt like she was forgetting something.

About a convenience store. A promise, maybe?

There was… there was one back there, right?

She turned her head to look for the corner of convenience store that had appeared.

The one that had an old man taking a picture of her.

It wasn’t there.

While Hoshimati Suisei looked backwards searching for the door, Tokino Sora spoke.

“After all… after all, I really think you, and you alone, should cross this door, Suisei.

There are people waiting for you. Don’t you… don’t you remember them?”

That’s right. Suisei had people waiting for her. Her fans. She wasn’t leaving them behind, alone.

But…

She squeezed Sora’s hand.

Looked at her.

Then she hugged her. Sora didn’t move. But Suisei hugged her as tight as she could.

“There are also people waiting for you, silly. Don’t you remember?

They are gonna be so, so happy to see you.”

Saying that, she looked at the door once again, hand in hand with Sora.

“Like I said… we can’t both cross it at the same time.”

“Don’t worry about it, Sora.”

“I… I have an idea.”

-

She didn’t vocalize it.

Sora still went ahead and did what Suisei had in mind.

She stood one step from the door, and held its frame with both hands, one on each side.

She was laying into it. Suisei stood a little behind her. That position… that pose…

If Suisei had been a boy… this scene may have even looked erotic.

No.

It was. It was erotic. Somehow, it felt like it was.

In fact… in fact Sora had started heaving up and down a little, even.

Her breathing was hard, labored. She was panting. She looked back at Suisei, and spoke.

“Suisei… are you… really… really sure… you want… to do… this?”

Suisei could feel herself getting hot too, for some reason.

Something… something was happening.

She brought a finger to her neck, and tried to make her choker give her some breathing room.

She had started sweating. Heavily.

She removed the blue ribbon with a star decoration at her chest. She needed to unbutton her shirt.

She did. She still felt hot. Too hot. She was getting hotter by the minute.

She realized for the first time that in this vast expanse no wind was blowing.

She took off the black glove that hugged her right hand. Removed her bracelets too.

She threw them to the ground. But it wasn’t enough. Of course it wasn’t.

She undid her belt, the one that hugged her waist, and took her big one piece uniform off.

In the process of doing that she ended up removing her hat, too.

She now stood with just her shirt on in the upper part of her body.

On the lower part, she still had her shoes and stockings on, but not much else.

Her shirt managed to cover anything that may have been deemed sensitive, but…

…it was still a very risqué look.

Suisei still felt too hot, but removing more felt pointless.

She tried to inhale and exhale to cool down her body, to no effect.

Was this… was this how it feel to pose… pose in a risky pose, with not much on…?

With heavy studio lights bearing down on you… with people looking at you…?

Suisei… Suisei wouldn't know…

She… she never had done a photo shoot like that.

She… she didn't feel comfortable, showing her body to others like that…

And… and…

She looked at Sora.

She still was laying against the frame of the door, waiting on her, looking back at her.

Sweat ran down her neck, her arms. She still heaved up and down, a little.

And… and her chest…

Yeah… Sora's breasts, too, heaved noticeably, rhythmically, following the movement of her body, and her breathing… you could even say… they hanged a little…

Suisei… Suisei didn't have much that warranted showing her body, either…

The difference between her, with just a shirt on, and Sora, even with her uniform on… it was too big… too, too big…

Suisei… Suisei had trouble thinking straight…

What… what was she thinking about…?

This was… this was… this was serious…

Something… Something serious was going on…

This was…

This was about bringing Sora back.

Suisei bit her lip and looked straight ahead, at the door, to focus herself.

Yeah. This was to bring Sora back.

Sora… Sora was waiting on her.

She had asked her a question.

She still had to answer it.

What… what was the question?

She brought a couple of fingers to her choker, and tore it off.

Yeah.

Something like, “Suisei, are you really sure you want to do this?”

Yeah. Yeah, she was pretty sure.

She wanted Sora back. Who wouldn’t?

“Yeah, Sora. I am sure. Very very sure. More sure than I have been about anything in my life.”

Suisei couldn’t know it. But behind her, the Suisei that had been walking to the door was standing.

When Suisei said that, it turned around, and walked in the opposite direction, like Sora had intended.

This time, there was no one to stop her.

Suisei took off the ribbon that kept her hair on a side tail, and let it all fall loose.

Her hair style now matched Sora.

She took off her shoes. She now had taken off every piece of clothing that contained a star.

“Hold on, Sora. Here I come.”

Saying that, she gritted her teeth, and walked into Sora.

Sora tried to suppress a scream, but didn’t do a very good job at it.

Suisei just gritted her teeth. She could feel it. Their bodies merging.

She tried to imitate the same pose Sora had on the door.

She made their bodies overlap, with hers being inside of Sora's.

-

Tokino Sora was reclining against a door frame. That's what anyone observing would have told you.

But there was no one. No one on this vast expanse.

No one but her. She took her hands off the door.

She looked around. No one, no one at all.

Above her, the sky was a pure blue.

It had started as a night. Then it was a dawn about to break. It was now a very pretty sky.

The girl smiled.

After she did, clouds started to appear in the sky.

They weren't dark clouds or anything like that. Just white clouds, passing through.

That was fine.

Clouds did appear from time to time.

But just as they arrived unexpectedly, they too, left when you least expected it.

Things would be fine.



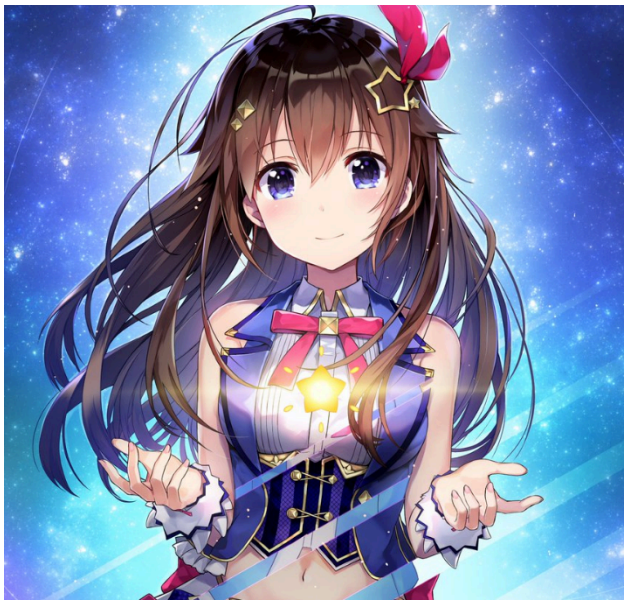
She saw the clothes she had taken off. They were a mess, in the ground like that.

As she thought that, the clothes levitated in the air, and merged.

All the clothes, and all the stars they carried. They turned into one little star, shining bright.

What a shame. No “Hoshi” on her name. Still, as long as the world had a Sora…

She cupped the star on her hands, without touching it. Then she released it.



She watched it fly, towards the sky. That's when she realized. The sky had turned back to night.

A pretty, starry night. That was fine, too.

The star became a comet. Very pretty, as well.

Then it ran out of energy.

That was kinda sad, but… those things happened.

But look! It turned into a shooting star!

She watched its burning fall. She also made a wish.

You are supposed to wish on shooting stars, after all.

She wished for the world to be kind to Tokino Sora on this, her second coming.

She faced the door once more. She was ready to cross it.

But, not checking up with her would have been rude.

"Hey, Sora, are you ready?"

…

No answer. Weird. And her voice… it was… kinda weird, too. But now, what mattered…

"Sora, are you there?"

…

She opened her eyes. In front of her, as if reflected on a mirror, she could see a girl. A fragile body. That blue hair, that face, recognizable even under the respiratory device fastened to it… she knew it immediately. It was her body. But… but something was wrong. She was looking at it but… but it had its eyes closed and… why was she in a liquid filled vat, again? She made to move her hand, and the mirror in front of her didn't reflect the movement. She looked at them to confirm she had indeed moved them and… she saw a couple of things that weren't there before. Big things. And… she also paid attention to the strands that were freely floating around her for the first time. Hair. Hers. But not hers. Brown. Unlike her sky blue. What… what was… what was happening?

Suddenly, a voice spoke through speakers.

"Test subject number 1, codename S. Calm down. Subject has woken up at 21:00 hours, 5 hours after the start of the procedure. First visual assessment leads me to believe the result is a success. Subject seems disorientated. Will try to assess its condition on more detail. Like I said, calm down. Don't look at her. Look at you."

Saying that, suddenly the glass of the vat changed, and no longer allowed her to see the exterior. Instead, it became a type of mirror, reflecting the inside. And she could see a girl, surprise on her face. She knew the girl. Everyone knew who the girl was. Tokino Sora. And her movements… her movements somehow reflected her own. Was… was that girl her? Was… Tokino Sora the name she was born with? She… she couldn't really… remember…

The memory loss was deemed to be temporary. Subject S eventually regained her awareness of the experiment, was able to answer the battery of questions presented to her satisfactorily, and so, the experiment was deemed a success. A successful body creation, and a successful soul transfer.

"Or at least… at least that's what seemed to be the case, at first". On the bar, S spoke. "My mind… my brain…", she touched her head for emphasis, although she didn't feel the instability that usually prompted that gesture. Seems she really was managing. Thanks to what exactly, she couldn't say. Oh, right. The explanation. "Yeah… there's something wrong, with me. With my head. Rushia… Rushia says the body is a container for the soul. But that it's also shaped by it, that it adapts to it.

Discussing it afterwards… naturally, this process is gradual. Body and soul develop hand in hand, at the same time. But transferring a developed soul, onto a brand-new body, even one of a mature age? That spells trouble. Rushia thinks that what the soul molds in the body is the brain. And… and it seems that the one in this body didn't form quite right, for me. There's nothing wrong with it, nothing that shows up on medical examinations. But it's not about being medically correct. That's the consensus among the researchers, and I believe it too. I didn't manage to form a proper, molded brain for my soul to reside in. Maybe… in some ways the mold it's too big… maybe it's too small, in others…"

"I… I sometimes think of a second explanation. I sometimes think that maybe… maybe I did what Rushia would do, were she to revive someone. Maybe I paid a part of my life and… and I got Sora's soul in turn, connected with it on the transfer… and she's inside of me, right now, too…"

Don't cry. Hang in there. You are doing so great. You are so strong.

"I… I sometimes have trouble. Trouble remembering who I am. And once, I even…"

Not long after the procedure, S had gone back to work. The office was deserted, so there was no problem with that. No one to see her. She didn't feel ready to show herself. Not yet. Then, she still had hope that all the problems that bothered her were temporary, that they would disappear on their own with enough time.

But then came the day of Watame's concert. She needed to be on the building, so she holed herself on the top floor with A, who had also undergone the procedure. A helped Watame, while S just watched. And watching her… watching her…

"Watching her, I realized something. Until… until I saw her, there was something I held on to. That… that I was being very stupid, very weak, but that anyone… anyone would break under the weight of the mission we had been given. But when Watame took to the stage… I understood that that was a lie. The only weak one… the only broken one… the only who was unable to move forward… the only one who did stupid, self-destructive things… was me. That I was alone. And feeling alone like that… that truly broke me."

"I started crying. And I couldn't stop. I didn't want to stop. I could no longer be Suisei, and I had failed to become Sora. I had thrown away the expectations others placed on me, and failed the

duties I had placed upon myself. I had nothing. I was… nothing. I didn't even have a name. S. A letter. That was all that I was. S, of stupid. Who I was, who I wanted to be. It no longer mattered. I threw it all away, muddied everything up. Even my voice was a strange middle ground. Not one, not the other. Just a broken, sad mess." Yeah, her voice. That's why she didn't post any content, up to this day.

"That's how they found me. Someone kicked down the door. They must have been shocked. Of course they would be. Two comrades, who had died, who were dead… one crying, the other one trying to console her… but… but they still, were so, so kind. So understanding. A explained as best as she could, and they never looked at me with the eyes I deserved to be looked at."

"Regardless of who I was, they still wanted me as part of Hololive, they said. So, I kept doing what I had been doing. The only thing I was still good for. Behind the scenes work."

-

"So, there you have it", said S, the girl named after the sky, after finishing her tale.

Towa's expression was very grave.

"It's good you didn't undergo the procedure, Towa. I know you were in talks with The Researcher and…"

"How do you know that?", came a quick, dry reply. If Towa's eyes could kill…

"I… while on a checkup, on the facility, I saw a document. I… I never feel too good on that place. I almost felt like a zombie, on the graveyard he was resurrected. So, as I'm struggling to make my way out of it, I don't tend to pay attention to things that much. On a corner, a researcher suddenly appeared. I guess he was in a hurry and… we crashed. He dropped the clipboard he was carrying. It landed close to me, so I picked it up. I had a glance at it. It was very brief, you normally wouldn't understand it…

But me being a subject of the project and all, I'm kinda kept on the loop about some things. I guess they think that if I know what's at stake, that'll make me get better out of sheer force of will, to net them a success, as if I could control it… Anyways, here's what I know: apparently, they only received funding to develop 12 vats, enough for 6 sets. They need results or breakthroughs before 2 years, or… I doubt the project is getting dropped so early, but the staff may. If the project loses momentum, even The Researcher may be kicked out of the council.

So, anyways. I know that about the project, and I know my code as part of it. I know A's code too. So when I saw rows with codes, I understood that it was a status report of sorts. Since it was the first page, it had no detailed info, just a brief overview. It said 'x2, Hololive Project, checkups', and it had our codes. Below it, it said 'x2, land of the elements, insider', and two more codes. And… the last row said 'x2, devil, talks'. Obviously, it was a report on every vat set they had. I handed it back to the research. He seemed worried at what I had seen, but glad I gave it back quickly. He said… he said he was rooting for me to get better, that he would do his best to fix me, and to please, please not tell anyone. I just nodded. He breathed a sigh of relief and ran, the clipboard close to his chest."

"I see…" said Towa, pondering what she had said. "Well, no point denying it. I've met with The Researcher. Just once, thought. He offered me the sets of vats, yeah. Tried… tried to sell me the same thing they sold to you. Guess he wanted to test the effects it would have on a devil. And, given what you know of the project, I guess he's desperate for more fools to try it. I… I do have talks with one of his researchers from time to time, ok? Just came back from one, in fact. Guess… Guess they really want a devil to do it, and I'm the only one they know of, or something."

Towa… Towa's response seemed a little shifty. Had she really… had she really not accepted? But why would she? She looked just like she did back then, only a haircut and clothing choice of difference… there was no way she had underwent the procedure. The girl, though… Sio, was her name… she was a pretty girl. Too pretty, in fact. Could… could that beauty be a result of…

"Hey. Whatever you are thinking, Sio has nothing to do with it. She was already this pretty when I met her."

Towa's reply came quickly. The girl at her side smiled and blushed slightly. They seemed to get along well. S was glad.

"Since you are getting inquisitive about my friends, let me return the favor." Saying that, the devil looked at her companion. At A. "So, Azuki, what's your angle on all of this? Why did you undergo the procedure? You… you don't seem to have the problems S described." Oh, so she could tell at a glance?

"Before you speak, A," S preempted her. "It's better if Towa gets a straight answer, and the only one who can give her that is me. I know… it'd be awkward for you." She looked at the devil. "It has to do with your mental state, your emotional balance, when you undergo the procedure. That's our working hypothesis, at least." She smiled at her use of the word "our". Seems all that talk the researchers gave her had succeeded in making the project grow on her and feel she owned a part of it. Whatever. "When I underwent the procedure… I was a mess. Regret. Insecurity. A lot of dark

thoughts. I didn't do it for hopeful reasons or anything like that, so… that's probably what prevented the formation of a good mold. As for A… well, you tell them."

"It's simple," the bespectacled girl said. "I did it so she wouldn't go through it alone."

It was that simple, in fact. When Azuki learned of what Suisei would do, and she couldn't stop her… all she could do was join her. She felt a little bit the weight of being trusted with Hololive's future by Sora, something she had realized as well, she did, but… more than that, she really wanted to help Suisei. Any way she could. Why… she in part wanted to send a message. She'd be at her side. If Suisei would try to become Sora, then who Azuki would try to become was natural. Her assistant. She'd go through the same, and that understanding of a shared experience would allow her to help her better. They'd go through it together. The Researcher was thrilled to have another willing subject, so he took care of everything. They underwent the procedure the same day, at the same time.

"See? She did it with determination. A clear thought on her mind. A pure intention. That's what is required, it seems, to form a proper mold for the soul. A is the golden standard for the researchers. She's proof that the procedure can be a success. They are just trying to figure out how to avoid defects like me." She smiled, and even though she had harsh words for herself, her thoughts were elsewhere.

S… she was so thankful for what she had done. It was true. She had problems. A lot of them. A lot of issues. Many times, they seem like too much for her to handle. On one occasion, they proved too much, and she broke down. When she felt truly, utterly alone. But she hadn't been paying attention to her. Having A there… it meant she never was truly alone. And that was enough. S sometimes didn't know who she was. But she knew that whoever that was, that someone had a damn good friend. That alone, made things bearable for her.

She smiled at her, and gave a gentle squeeze to her hand. Very brief. But very meaningful.

Then she turned her attention to Towa.

"I paid your price. Now I get the products. Here's what I came here to tell you."

--

“I see…”, said Tokoyami Towa. So they were back. And they needed her help to deal with them. What a pain. “And you are holding a reunion tomorrow to inform everyone and plan it out?” What a pain. “Well, I said I’d hear you out, and I did. I never promised any particular answer, nor giving you one. Hold your reunion. I may drop by, if I feel like it.” The girl just gave her a glare. “You know where the door is.”

--

Towa and Sio watched them go. Roro went to resume her interrupted labor, cleaning the tables. Towa stopped to pick something that had fallen under their table, and Sio spoke. “So… are you helping them?”

Towa gave an absentminded answer. “Of course I am.” Her attention was on the object she had picked up. After a moment she decided to give a more detailed one. “Didn’t you see her face when I said she had to tell her story for me to hear her out? Didn’t you see how much she struggled to accept, yet found the courage to do so? And after hearing it, how hard it must have been, risky even? She went through with it, because she wanted a shot at recruiting my help. Of course I would help. When she accepted I had already made up my mind.”

Truth was, when she had seen them on the stairs, she was already in. She knew that Suisei, no matter how much she had changed, wouldn’t break a promise, unless there was a truly good reason for it. And the real reason she wanted Sio and Roro to hear… the biggest reason, anyways… was so she had no choice but to accept. Even if going to that church again scared her… to not betray what they thought of her, she would overcome anything, stand up to anything. Plus…

“I also need to give this back to her.” Saying that, Towa showed Sio the picture. The picture of Suisei, and Kanata. She must have dropped it. Slipped out of her pocket, or something. If nothing else, she would help her due to this picture. This was proof that they were very similar. Like she had said near the start of the conversation, Suisei wasn’t the only one who couldn’t let the past go. It seems she wasn’t the only one who clung to Kanata, either. Towa pocketed Suisei’s picture, and took out her own. This one was a drawing. A drawing they had gotten done once, by a street artist, on their way back from the office.

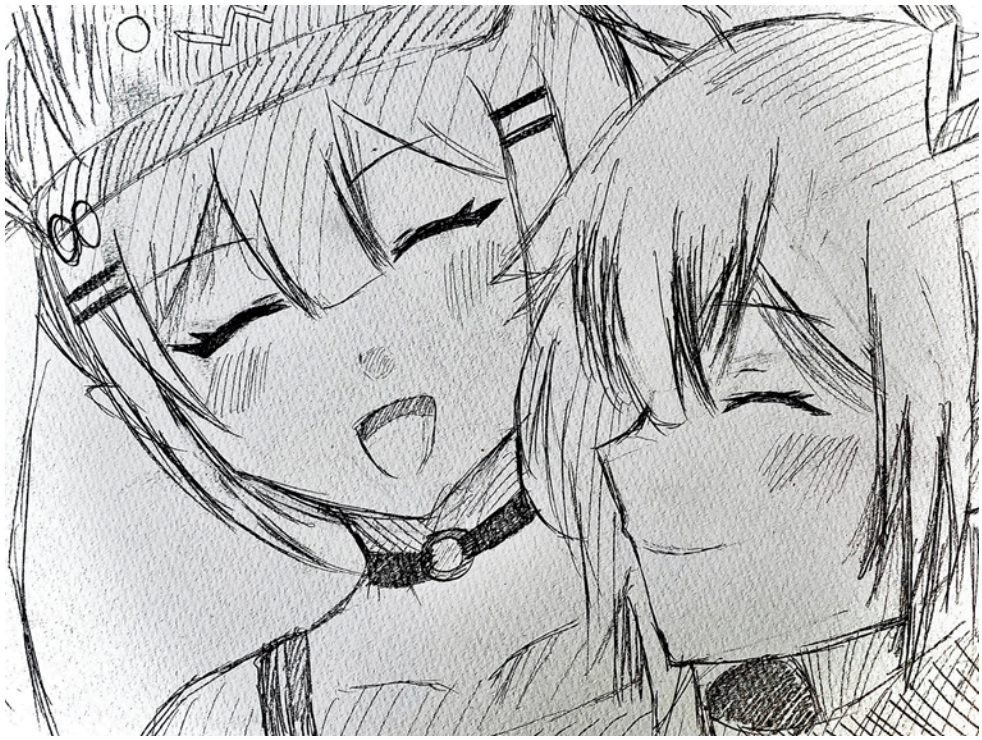
“I can’t disappoint Kanata. She’d get angry at me later.”

Sio answered the words she heard with a smile.

Tokoyami Towa understood she was a big asset.

She was also a friend. A friend who strived to not disappoint.

To not disappoint either her comrades of the present, nor those of the past.



Tsunomaki Watame was, very uncharacteristically for her, running late. Today, Wednesday, was when the extraordinary meeting would be held. And she was running late to said meeting. Literally running. Maybe… maybe joining up to more of Subaru's exercise programs wouldn't be such a bad idea… all the food she baked and cooked was doing a number on her, it seems… yeah, it was nice to fall back on excuses like that to mask the fact that you never had that much stamina to begging with.

She finally made her way to the building, and took the elevator to the fourth floor. She went to the conference room. Opened the door. Everyone turned to look at her. "I'm sorry for being late!", she screamed. "Don't sweat it, Watame, we are still waiting on S and A, why not take a seat?" came Marine's reply. Watame did. Breathe in, breathe out. Man, was she tired. "Here, Watame-san," said Aqua offering her a cup of water. She gladly took it. "Thanks, Aqua!", she said, after drinking it on

one go. She really needed that. Aqua just smiled back at her. She sure was kind. Everyone was. She looked at everyone. It was true. Everyone was so kind. But also what Marine said, that was true too. Everyone was there, save for S and A. The ones who called the meeting.

Just as she was thinking that, the doors opened, and they entered the room. They thanked everyone for their assistance, apologized for being late, then went to take the spots at the head of the table. They sat there, and waited. And waited. And waited. They didn't start the meeting.

"Uh… Everything ok? Will you guys start this, or what?", said Marine, asking what was on everyone's mind. "No, we won't", came the reply from S. She said that with a serious face, but afterwards she let a smile appear on her face. What was going on? Everyone was looking at them. Then, a voice from behind them all spoke.

"I will. I will start this meeting."

Uh? That voice…

Everyone turned to look at who had just spoken.

Tokoyami Towa was standing on the other side of the table. She had slipped into the room unnoticed.

Wait… Towa?

Uh?

"I'll get straight to it, since I don't intend to waste your time: The Jaegers are back."

Uh?

END OF PART 2

Interlude 7

Wednesday, noon.

A plan was agreed. A simple one. They would all show up, and hear what they had to say, if anything. If they wanted a fight, they would give them one. They'd be ready for one. All of them. Some more detailed things were agreed, but nothing too fancy or overly complex. No government involvement this time, either. They would only be notified afterwards. Following the attack, due to how much they dropped the ball in protecting them, the government oversight of Hololive had gotten laxer. Yagoo believed in relying heavily on them, and so he did. S was different. She held a

much more cynical view of the government. That's why they were being kept out of this one. And that was good. No government involvement meant no leakers involved.

Yeah, the leaks. That their plan had been leaked to the Jaegers six months ago was evident. Only explanation for them to target Roboco, and the safehouses. Obviously, you couldn't have that in a government operation, like Hololive was. So the government, outraged at the leaker, decided to find him, and excise him. And they did, right away. Only the five members of the council of oversight, president Yagoo, and Hololive members knew of the plan. What had happened? Well, the explanation was obvious. One of the members of Hololive had made the mistake of trusting one of their managers, who either trusted the wrong person in turn, or was himself in covert cooperation with the Jaegers. It was such a smart explanation. As expected, of the government. It was very convenient how no one could refute it, on account of the possibility that the one who confided on said staff member was among the dead. The leaker couldn't be expected to step up voluntarily, so only one choice was left: Hololive did away with all its staff. This is, by the way, why S deals with all the administrative work on her own, and A does all the management duties of the whole group by herself. With that solution, the leaker was sure to have been removed. Situation swiftly resolved. As expected, of the government. It was such a good explanation. So convenient. Almost as if they had prepared it beforehand.

Some knew better. That day, before the meeting, Tokoyami Towa had in fact been the first to arrive at the building, to meet with S. They had a prolonged discussion on her office. They discussed what Towa would say, amongst other things, but they also wanted to discuss the government. They were in quick agreement to keep them in the dark. Because, the truth was, both of them had reasons to distrust the government.

Towa, since that night, wanted nothing to do with the government. True, she ended up getting entangled with a council member, but that was out of need. Just two individuals, who struck a mutually beneficial deal. That she could still accept. But working with them as an entity? No. No police involvement? Expecting them to deal with the attackers on their own? Them not providing any support… Towa felt the government had practically killed her comrades, due to negligence. She held that opinion, until she spoke with Roboco's creator. The Inventor… talking with him, and hearing why he vowed to never work with the government again, what he thought had truly

happened… well, after that meeting, Towa felt more strongly that the government had killed her comrades, but less sure about it being negligence.

S, for her part, was one of the only three people who knew of Sora's true plan that night. Watame was too kind-hearted, good natured, naïve, to suspect anything. A… A had too much on her hands to think of other stuff. But S? S wasn't a really stable individual, and she let her mind wander and have many very stupid thoughts. But some of those stupid thoughts… once she played with them, considered them more and more, ended up being not so stupid. And her having to deal with the government on a constant basis, doing the reports to them, going to their facilities for medical checkups… the government was part of a lot of her stupid thoughts. So one day, once more thinking of the events of that night, she had one. A stupid thought, that on careful consideration ended up being not so stupid. Sora… Sora's final twist on the plan was an insurance policy, in case it would be leaked. That's why those in the van had doctored their trackers. But… would Sora really be the kind of person to not trust them? To not trust the Hololive members? She asked them to please not discuss the plan with anyone. Would she really have so little faith in them, that she would prepare a countermeasure that meant abandoning some of them, based on a suspicion that a leak would come from them? That's not the Sora she knew. If Sora suspected someone… if Sora so strongly suspected that the plan would be leaked, there was only one group of people she could suspect: the five members of the council of oversight. Once she had that thought, she never let it go. She started to understand some things. No police involvement. Them dealing with the attackers on their own. A leaker. It was… it was almost as if someone wanted what happened that night to happen to them. As if they had planned things so the result was what it had been, if not worse. Why? After giving thought to that question, a lot of reasons quickly came to their mind. None of them stupid. Sharing her own thoughts with Towa only had seen them confirmed, when she told her that The Inventor had reached the same conclusion.

They both knew the number of their enemies was bigger than those who would be waiting on the church, bigger than the group known as Jaegers. But they had to deal with them first. They proposed no government involved on the basis no benefits were to be had. Their thoughts, they didn't share.

Interlude 8

Thursday.

Oozora Subaru was helping Minato Aqua pack a couple of bags full of medical supplies. As she did, Aqua did her best to explain to her any things that may prove remotely useful. Even after the packing was done, the training Subaru received continued.

Sakura Miko and Shirogane Noel were training on the backyard. Not a hard training, of course, just a light one to clear their minds. Noel wasn't training Sakura; they were training together. Side by side, as partners. Sakura had really become a dependable fighter. Noel had even gotten her a proper sword, that she wielded with determination and pride. As for Noel, she… she no longer trained with Flare. Or better said, Flare no longer trained with her. She always asked when Noel planned to train, then adjusted according to that. It took just a couple of times of Flare excusing herself and ending her training when Noel attempted to join her for her to get the message. "Something on your mind, Noel-sensei?" "Yeah… but, isn't that what this training is for? To clear it? ...and I told you, Noel is fine now!", said the warrior, before sending a powerful blow her way, that Sakura half blocked, half deflected on ingrained training alone. They both were shocked, both at what Noel had done and at how Sakura had reacted. Then, they both smiled at the same time, and laughed together. "I think it's nigh time for a break, right?" "Yes!" Usada Pekora watched them from inside the house. She smiled… although she didn't deny she felt some jealousy. Shiranui Flare could also hear them, and she smiled as well… although her smile contained some melancholy. On the couch of the living room, Marine and Rushia were watching a movie, snuggled up under a blanket, drinking some hot chocolate.

The girl who was named after the sky wondered where she had misplaced her picture with Kanata. Surely… surely she couldn't have lost it? She prayed with all her being for that to not be the case, but… she guessed she'd have to postpone the search. She had some things to deal with, before tomorrow. Strangely, though, a part of her… a part of her felt she would soon have no need of it anymore. After going to the *Devil's Den* and telling Towa her story… she somehow felt better with herself. She smiled, and decided to go buy some pudding. Energetic cadence, engaging her arms, embodying optimism. This wasn't a show, or an attempt at anything. It reflected how she sincerely felt, on that moment. Happy.

Shirakami Fubuki and Inugami Korone didn't speak with each other. They did everything in silence, each one absorbed on their own thoughts.

Tsunomaki Watame had no one to speak to, as well. She also prepared in silence, thinking about what had transpired yesterday. About the ghosts of the past, that had once again appeared on her life…

Interlude 9

Friday, early afternoon.

Tokoyami Towa was waiting. Waiting for Kusunoki Sio. She never arrived this early, but today she would. They had decided that the *Devil's Den* would work as usual today. Towa wanted Sio to be distracted instead of worried, and it seems Sio herself agreed that to be for the better. "She's here, Master", said Roro. And in fact, moments later Sio appeared at the door. Roro knew Towa. Knew she didn't like to show herself looking worried in fronts of others, in front of Sio. But, truth was, today she didn't mind. No. She had bigger things to worry about. She still did the best she could to greet her with a smile.

"Wow, I better get my crying dress ready, if you look so gloomy!"

What the hell?

"Hehe. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Coping with humor, and all…"

"Whatever. Want to eat?"

"Yeah, let's! Let's have your last supper!"

"Shut up, jinxer!"

-

"So… how did the reunion with Watame-san go? You didn't tell me yesterday."

That's right. Towa had not. And yeah. The meeting with Watame...

"Well…"

On Wednesday, Tokoyami Towa explained to the Hololive members what had happened on Monday. The "invitation" the Jaegers had done to them, to meet on the church, Friday night. Seems they had gotten tired of waiting, and wanted to have a final showdown. How S had requested her help. She looked at their faces. After the initial shock, they had turned to determination. Seems even without a discussion there would be a unanimous agreement of what would happen. They would show up, and end this. Good. There was one face, though, that she tried to skip over as fast as possible, one face that she tried to not even glance at. A face that was fixed on her. Watame's.

"That being the case, we will now discuss what we will do."

-

Once everything was settled, the Hololive members left the room. No one stopped to talk to Towa. They all knew better. Only one of those present in that meeting had thought, up until that day, that she had died. The rest knew the truth. So the rest left. And that someone stayed. Towa also stayed in the room. It was the least she could do. She looked at Watame, and Watame was looking back at her. No sign of her wonderful smile on her face. That was fine, Towa… Towa didn't deserve it. Watame stood up, and started to walk towards her. Not taking her eyes away from her, never smiling. She deserved it. Condemnation. Anything that Watame threw her way. All the lashing out she would surely do, she deserved it all. She would take it all. It was the least she could do. But still… seeing her walk silently towards her with that blank expression made her uncomfortable… she looked away, and scratched the back of her head. "So, Watame…"

Towa felt Watame's walking speed get faster, and before she could look at her again, she felt her hug.

It was a strong hug. It was silent, too.

Towa felt Watame hug get gradually tighter, felt her pressing against her more, but the girl didn't seem to mind. This was strange. A strange reaction from Watame. Not the hug, but her being silent. Watame… Watame was a crybaby. Everyone knew that. Towa knew that. Yet she didn't cry. Towa didn't hear her weeping, as she had expected. She simply hugged her tightly, and did nothing. Said nothing.

"Hey, Watame…"

The hug got tighter still, after trying to speak. She still said nothing, and did nothing.

Trying to find an explanation for that, Towa suddenly remembered a scene from a manga she had read. Tokyo Ghoul. The dialogue went something like this.

[-How would you feel, if you found out someone you thought had died, was in fact still alive?]

[**-I'd be afraid, I guess.**]

[**-Afraid?**]

[**-Yeah. I'd be afraid that they might leave me again.]**

Hell… so that's what's was going on here….

That was in fact what was going on. Towa couldn't see it, but Watame had her eyes closed. She had made the mistake of closing them when hugging her, and was now too afraid to open them. Afraid to open them, and having her not be there. Afraid of opening them, and realizing that this was but another of the wonderful, painful dreams she usually had. Afraid to wake up, like many times before, on her bed, with a sad smile on her face, accompanied only by the thought of, "what a wonderful dream that was…" She thought she had gotten used to it, used to accepting the dreams for what they were. But this one… this one felt so real… she hugged the Towa of this one tighter… so, so real… she really didn't want to let it go. She was too afraid to even cry. Her tears might make her wake up, and waking up to a wet pillow once again... five more minutes, please… I know… I know I have to wake up, but… this one just feels so… so real…

So that's what was going on here, thought Towa. To think she'd cause this much pain to her friend… and for what? Due to what? Due to her own fears and insecurities. On that conference room, Tokoyami Towa felt for the first time the full extent of how stupid she had been. But… but being hard on herself solved nothing. What she could do for the girl hugging her was what mattered.

"Hey, Watame…", she said, as she started stroking her hair. Watame hugged her tighter than she ever had so far. Sheesh… Towa just kept stroking her hair, with an awkward smile. Maybe… "Tsu…" She started, but stopped straight away. This was… come on, Towa. This is your fault. Is the least you can do. Saying that, Towa started singing. Loudly. With her grave voice.

Tsunomaki, maki, Tsunomaki, maki,

she is Watame of the 4th generation.

Tsunomaki, maki, Tsunomaki, maki,

she is a fluffy, fluffy sheep.

She likes potato chips,

and hates peppers;

she likes yellow,

and smells like a beast!

Tsunomaki, maki, Tsunomaki, maki,

she is Watame of the 4th generation.

Tsunomaki, maki, Tsunomaki, maki,

she is a fluffy, fluffy sheep.

Born in June,

by singing songs,

she'll make everyone,

smile.

Towa was as red as she had been for a while. Maybe ever. That was Watame's song. Made by herself, to sing it herself. With her cute, smooth voice. Towa's raspy, grave one, on the other hand… In the early days she swore she'd never sing it. She stood by that, no matter how much Watame, Kanata and Luna insisted. Watame had never heard her sing it. So…

Yeah. She had sung with her eyes closed, looking up. When she stopped, she opened them, but just now she took her gaze down. Watame still hugged her, but she had taken some distance, to look at her face while she sung. Damn sheep.

She smiled. "Watching your face while you sung that… it was worth the risk of waking up. Yeah, it was definitely worth it." Her smile grew wider. Damn sheep. "So… this really isn't a dream?"

"Gosh, how I wish it were! Hey, go stand in the hallway, Watame. I've been suspecting for a while that they have this room bugged, and I can't let them have a recording of that. That, I won't allow! I'm destroying everything here, just to be sure!"

"What are you saying, idiot?", she said, as she hugged her again. She closed her eyes again, but this time she was smiling, and she was no longer afraid of opening them. "As if I would let you go."

Towa let her stay that way for a while, letting her embarrassment slowly be replaced by happiness as she stroked her hair.

-

But since all things must come to an end, eventually…

“Hey, Watame, I… have to go. I… I have a bar, and I need to open it. I need to let my coworker… well, I guess she’s technically my employee… I’ve got to let her in, so… I need to go. It’s a really nice place, you would like it. I’m really proud of it. You are welcome to come in anytime; I’ll give you the details later. You can drop by… and we can have a talk. If you want.”

Watame once again took some distance to look at her.

“Oh, you bet I want. And you better bet we are gonna have a talk.”

She slowly removed her arms from around her. She then stood there, and did nothing.

So… so could she go now? Was that like a cue or something? It was, wasn’t it?

“So… yeah. Later.”

Towa made for the door. As she grabbed the handle and opened it, Watame spoke.

“Towa… I missed you.”

Towa looked at her, and gave a small chuckle.

Yeah. No joke.

--

Watame stayed alone in the conference room. She smiled, but… but she still wiped a couple of tears. She was happy. Happy that they didn’t wake her up. And happy that she waited until Towa left to shed them. If she was really back… and it really seemed to be that way… then she didn’t want her to think she was still a crybaby. Even though she still was.

After hearing Sio’s question, Tokoyami Towa recalled the meeting… and her singing. She had gotten red again. The embarrassment… the embarrassment would be eternal. “Well… it was alright”, she said, as she brought a glass of water to her lips and looked away.

“Eh? What’s with that reaction? Don’t tell me! You kissed?!”

Towa did a spit take, and it landed on Roro, who was just passing by their table.

“What the hell is wrong with you?! She’s my friend! Look at what you made me do! Roro, are you ok?! Won’t you short-circuit?!”

“I won’t. And, thanks for that, Master.”

“WHY THE HELL ARE YOU THANKING ME?!”

Towa thought to maybe change the name of the bar to *The loonies’ den*, on account of these two.

It was time for Towa to go. Before that, there was something she had to do. She took her key from her pocket, the same one where she kept the drawing of herself and Kanata, and entered the basement level of her underground bar, a level no one but her had access to. She sometimes let Roro in with permission., but never Sio. She took something out, then locked it again.

Kusunoki Sio saw her walk up to her with… a hat on her hand? She had never seen it before. Never in person, anyways. Since she knew Towa from her Hololive activities, she knew what it was. Bibi, her demon protector. Would… would she take it with her tonight?

Towa instead put Bibi on Sio’s head. She then addressed him. “Hey, Bibi. This is my friend, her name is Sio. I’m sorry I haven’t introduced you before. I’m taking care of some things tonight, so I need you to keep her safe for me, ok? Also, you know Roro. Keep her safe too. Keep this place safe, and everyone inside, ok?” Sio could feel the hat shifting slightly, probably to acknowledge Towa’s words.

She then saw Towa, looking at her. “Sio, I’ll be going now. Once… once I’m back, I’ll show you the basement, and all the contents that I’ve always kept a secret from you, ok? I think it’s time.” For emphasis, she touched the pocket where she kept the key.

“What’s with that Doctor Jaeger impression? You demons get more powerful the more flags you trigger, or something? … Just get back safely, you silly.”

“Of course I’m coming back! *I’d come back even if I got killed*, you hear?”

“Seriously, stop with the Jaeger family impressions. You do know what happens to them, right?”

“Nope. Only saw up to the first half of the 3rd season.”

“Oh...! Then you really, really have to come back! We’ll watch it together!”

“Hey, who is doing the flag thing now? And like I said. I’ll come back for sure. If I don’t, you are going to ruin this place with all the free drinks you’ll offer. Well, later!”

Kusunoki Sio saw Tokoyami Towa leave. Roro saw her as well.

Maybe it was because it detected her feelings, but Bibi jumped from her head, and adopted a puppy like form, more fitted for her to hug. Tonight was, no doubt, going to be a long night for her… no, for them. For everyone who loved the demon called Tokoyami Towa.



You can hide your fear,

can lie, my dear…

Tokoyami Towa left the *Devil's Den*. The sun was starting to set, but there were still hours to go for her to have to meet with the Hololive members. The truth was, she left this early, because she had a different meeting to attend to, beforehand. An important meeting, one she couldn't miss.

Like a fallen angel,

by the winds of time,

swept away,

and falling down,

into the starry night…

Singing that song in a low voice, Tokoyami Towa slowly made her way to her underhanded meeting.

PART 3:

HUNTERS

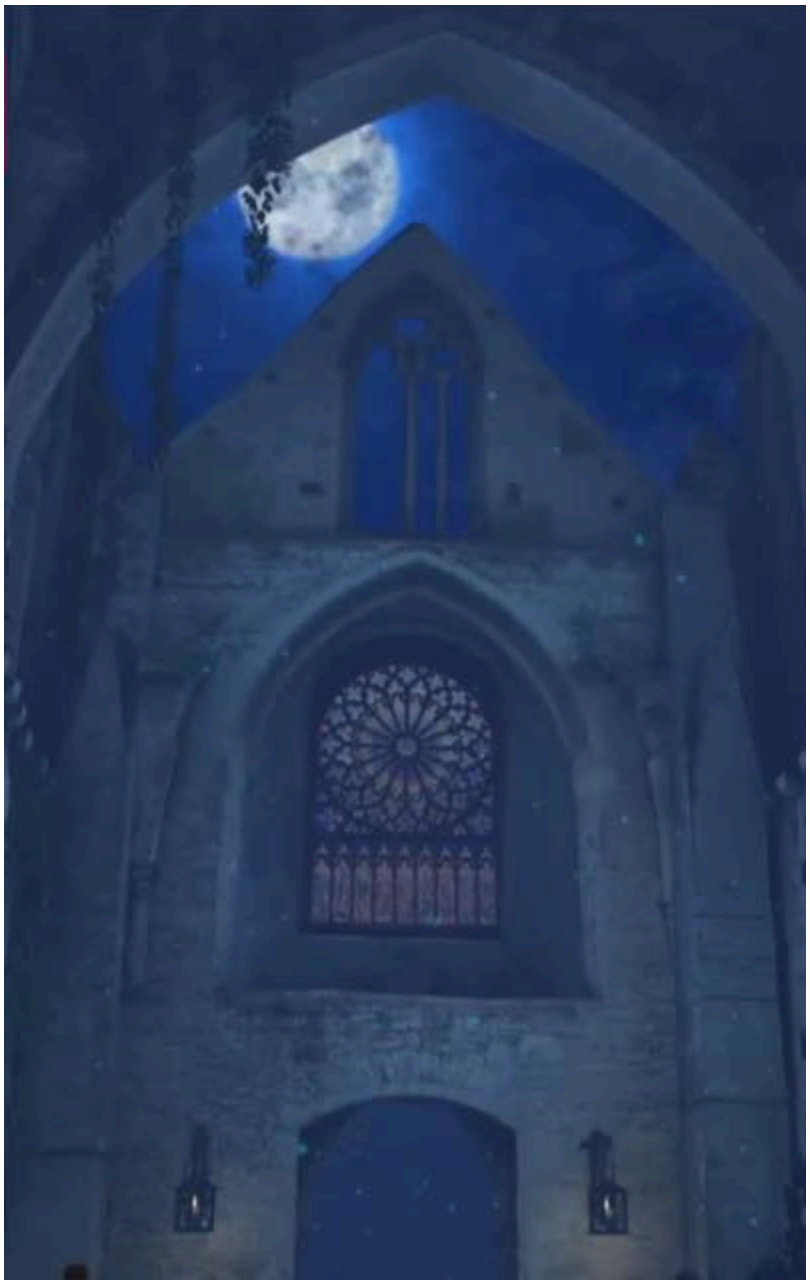
OF MISGUIDED DESIRES

-

CHAMPIONS

OF THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

UNIQUE CHAPTER: THE CHURCH OF THE FALLEN FAKE GOD.



Friday. Midnight.

The Hololive members met at their office, then all went together from there to the church. Nothing was said on the way there. Aqua and Subaru carried backpacks with medical supplies. Noel and Sakura carried their swords, scabbards in hand. Flare carried her bow in one hand and her arrows on the other. Apart from those things, they all carried an unyielding determination to put an end to this. They arrived at the stairs. Here they were meant to deal with everything six months ago. They sent one lone member. They failed. They lost comrades. Tonight would be different. They would deal with everything, for real this time. Everyone came to this fight, no one was willing to sit it out. Tonight, they would succeed. Tonight, they wouldn't lose anyone. Each one vowing that on their hearts, they made their way up the stairs, and entered the church.

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The boy and the girl were waiting for the Hololive members inside of the church. The girl wanted a direct confrontation. The boy wanted an ambush. They had reached a compromise. They would wait for them in plain sight, and the girl would have a shot at it. If she were defeated, the boy could trigger the trap. To honor that, the girl had just finished setting up the bombs that would bring the roof down on everyone, should the boy activate them with the controller on his pocket. He saw her work, and nodded approvingly. The girl gave him a smile. She then picked up a raincoat, and put it on. "Wouldn't want to ruin the surprise", she said. "I'm sure they'll be so shocked; you'll be so thankful you agreed to this when you see their faces!" "Yeah, we'll see to that…", said the boy, not impressed or amused. She looked at girl. "By the way, for a direct confrontation, you don't seem to have any weapons on you, will you be fine?" The girl grinned at him. "Silly. All I need is my trusty. Old. Friend." Saying that, she brought out her combat knife. "I used this to carve them out last time, would be a pity to leave him home now…" "Well, whatever floats your boat." He didn't like the Hololive members. He was here to kill them, after all, but… after learning what he wanted to learn, he was just hoping they would get here soon. This girl was unstable, and it made him nervous to be alone with her. When Mr. Master Swordsman was with them it was different, because maybe… maybe he could take her. But the boy? He was no fighter. He was The Rookie, after all. "Say…" Great. "For someone who doesn't intend to fight them directly, that's a very big weapon you have, yourself." She was talking about his Desert Eagle. He had 3D printed it himself. Made the bullets himself. He was really proud of it, and… hoped it would be enough. He really did. "I brought it to deal with the demon." "Uh? Demon? I thought Master Mister Swordsman had taken care of them

all?" "You'll see." The girl gave him a quizzical look, but then, right at that moment, the doors to the church opened. Saved by the bell. "Seems they are here", said the boy, and watched them enter. The girl did as well.

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They entered the church. It was a single corridor, with wooden benches on either side. At the end of it, near the altar, a boy with an uninterested look on his face and a girl on a yellow raincoat that hid her features and her clothes were waiting for them.



Noel and Sakura took the lead. Side by side, their swords drawn, they made their way deeper into the church, sticking as close as possible to the benches. Flare, with her bow and arrows at the ready, moved from bench to bench, on Noel's side, diagonally to her. S and A walked side by side, a couple of rows behind Flare. Behind them walked Aqua, Marine and Pekora. Behind them Subaru, Rushia and Watame brought the rear. They stopped when Noel and Sakura decided it was appropriate.

Everyone stood in silence. No one said anything. Everyone waited. And waited. And waited.

Suddenly, the girl in the raincoat thrust her right hand to the side. Flare didn't even have time to think of letting her arrow loose. That's how fast the movement was. No more movements followed. On her extended a hand, she grasped a combat knife. "This knife! Six months ago, I used it to carve up some of your comrades. I heard you met with some of mine on the morgue a couple of weeks later. Surely those of you who were there will know which bodies were my work." She delivered

that with a smile. Those who had seen the bodies up close, Rushia and Noel, felt their blood chill and boil, respectively. However, no one was left indifferent by the declaration. This meant that girl had been the attacker who killed everyone on the panic room below their old headquarters. The one who killed Sora, A-chan, Matsuri, Haato, and president Yagoo. The boy raised one hand, like a student in a class. “Might as well say it now, but I was the one who remodeled this church with my rocket that night.”

He said that nonchalantly, as someone who didn’t thought much of it. Some glared at him. “Well, if you want to see that me, I’ll gladly oblige.” Saying that, his posture changed. His eyes, too. He met their stone gazes with new eyes. Not the cold eyes of a killer. Not the excited eyes of a psychopath. His eyes… were the eyes of someone who was about to do their best for something they believed in. They didn’t fit his role in this more than his previous attitude did. What was up with that boy?

S spoke. “You, in the yellow coat. When I checked the weather today no rain was announced. Some of us like that color, so why don’t you take that off before you make us hate it?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. It’s just last time, I ended up getting my uniform completely drenched with blood! You just can’t wash that off! Believe me, I tried. I ended up having to throw it in the trash… luckily for me, I had a spare! I was hoping this would catch your blood instead, but if you insist…” Saying that, the girl made to remove her hoodie. She grabbed the hem of it with the hand that held the knife, and was about to pull it backwards, when she spoke again. “Wait. I’m not the most stable person, so I thought I might be dissociating there for a moment, but… Tokino Sora, I remember taking my time with you last time.” She removed her hand from the hoodie, leaving it in place. “And with you as well, A-chan.” She grinned wide. “To think you’d come back for a second round! I’m touched, flattered! I’ll make it more special! I’ll give you more attention!” She was growing agitated… excited. “In the videos, I thought I might be imagining you there, but to think you were the real deal!”

“I’m not that Tokino Sora. I don’t have the same kind heart she did. And just so you know… I’m not the most stable individual either.” Her own comrades felt a sense of unease at her words. They had an edge to them… something that they never would have expected. “I’m afraid you may be biting off more than you can chew. And not just with me. You’ll find no one here is who they were six months ago.” That was true. Everyone had changed in some way… for better or worse. “If you think you both can against us all, you have another thing coming. The gun won’t help you much, either. And for the last time. The hoodie. Or Flare will take a shot at removing it to show us your face. And maybe her aim will be unstable too.”

“*He*. That was a funny joke, Sora! You always were a funny girl! The both of us, against you? No, my dear. It will be me, against you. The boy is just a backup plan. Also, Flare, check this out.” Saying that, she slashed at the air with her knife. Quickly. Too quickly. A position was achieved and another was already completed. And it wasn’t just speed. It was precision. The movements. They were precise. Flare couldn’t keep up and “read it”, but she had a hunch. She tried to check it out, and when she saw she was right, she let her arrow loose. Without any killing intent. The girl understood it, and kept her movements until she was done. Her last one ended in just the right spot to deflect the arrow.

“Amazing, Flare! So you could read what I wrote!”

“No. I only had a hunch, you obsessed psycho.”

She had been “writing” [HOLOLIVE] with her slashes. Flare fired at the spot where she would end the final motion of the E. Every letter she saw once she guessed the pattern was perfect. Same height, same length. That’s how she was able to shoot an arrow at the end without interrupting her, by having the certainty of where the knife was going to go. That’s how precise this girl was. A precision at a speed no one could follow.

“Well, that was a nice demonstration but, where were we? Oh, right. The hoodie. Pardon. Truth be told, I’ve been wanting to do this ever since you walked in here. I think we have some nice momentum going, so if you’ll allow me.” Grinning, she went once again to remove her hoodie by grabbing the hem of it with the hand that held the knife, and once again she stopped before doing it. “No.” she said. “This way is better”. Saying that, she firmly grabbed the collar of her coat with her left hand, and with her right hand she made a quick motion that for a second made it look as if she would stab herself, but then the knife stopped travelling towards her, and moved downwards instead. She had used it to cut the coat vertically, top to bottom all the way. Having done that, she made a spin in which she deftly removed it, ending in a cutesy pose with one foot on the air, and delicately let the coat fall from her hand. Afterwards, she struck a pose. Her signature pose. She also wore her uniform.

The response was shock. Everyone knew her.

Not personally, no. But everyone knew who she was.

“Hey, hey, hey…!”

“What the hell?!”

“No way…”

“What’s the meaning of this?!”

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?!”

The bespectacled girl just smiled.

Then felt it was appropriate to add something.

“This response… it’s better than the one those at headquarters gave me.”

[**If an angelic being fell from the sky, and tried to live in this world of ours**,



I think even they would commit many wrongs.



I wonder in what colors their purity would be dyed…]

“Yeah, I’m Hitomi Chris~! How’s that for a reveal?”

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“HAHAHAHAHA”, echoed Chris’ laughter on the church. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Oh, I truly am. Your faces… your reaction… you should see them… better than I could have ever hoped they would be. There’s so much I want to tell you guys. So much I want to make you feel. But I have already gone against myself long enough. You see, talking and talking, that’s a foreplay I myself don’t enjoy. No. I prefer to talk as I move my hands.” Another grin, the most murderous out of all the ones she had given so far. “So, I will start. But, before that, I gotta ask? Where is my dear friend Shirakami Fubuki? I have yet to catch a glimpse of her. I know she survived the attack my friends pulled on her… even if not all her friends were so lucky! So, where is she? I’m dying to introduce her to my knife! Or better put, introduce it! Hahahahaha!”

“I am here, Chris.”

When she said that, everyone in Hololive reacted. That was one of the possible signals they had agreed upon. “I am here.” When Fubuki said it, everyone turned and made their bodies parallel to the walls, as close as possible to the benches, like guards standing on attention. But they weren’t

looking straight ahead. No. They were looking at Chris. And the place where their comrades would soon be.

And they soon were there. Shirakami Fubuki and Inugami Korone ran across the open corridor. They carried someone with them. They weren't as fast as Chris. But they still were individuals with animal traits. They ran pretty fast. They stopped, almost crouching in front of Chris and the boy. Fubuki didn't spare Chris a glance. Neither did Korone. They both said, instead: "We leave it in your hands, Towa." Then used their speed to retreats to the others.

In front of Chris and the boy, only Tokoyami Towa remained. After being carried by Fubuki and Korone, she had ended up in a pose similar to a standing sit up, her upper legs parallel to the ground. From that pose, she was looking straight ahead, not at any of them in particular. She suddenly thrusted her hands out, and gave them both the middle finger. She then hid it and thrusted out her index fingers instead. Then she pointed them both sharply downwards.

Chris fell to one knee immediately, and she looked to be struggling to even maintain that posture. The boy seemed to struggle a great deal more, but he stood taller than her: hunched over, his knees bent, but fighting with all he had to oppose what was happening.

It was [Pressure]. A unique ability to demon-kind. Specifically, devils.

It was said that in terms of combat potential, any demon-kind beat any individual with animal traits. This was due to the vast array of techniques and abilities at their disposal. It was for this reason Towa ended up as a suitable candidate to face whatever came her way six months ago. Against any of the two 10 men divisions of the Jaegers, or maybe against them both combined, she probably would have won, thanks to her abilities.

Pressure was the most basic, the most widely shared by every devil. In a way, it was them making use of home. In a small scale, a devil weakened the boundary between the underworld and the human plane of existence. It made those standing in that weakened boundary drawn to the underworld. It couldn't drop anyone down there… or at least, that's what Mr. National Defense and Mr. National Security, members of Hololive's oversight committee, had gathered with the small sample of demons at their disposal. Towa was one of said demons. And she herself wasn't sure if she could drop someone down. But she knew she could hold them down. Crush a few bones, even. In practical terms, when a devil used pressure, it multiplied the strength of the gravity felt by those caught up in the technique. She needed to be close for it to have a powerful effect, but she could also focus it on specific individuals. It didn't need to be an Area of Effect attack. She could increase or weaken the pressure felt by any one of them. All she needed to do was concentrate.

Right now, Towa was making these two feel the pressure, literally. She wasn't going all out, because she didn't want to kill them, despite everything. But still, this much… this much should have them both down. The girl was on her knees, so maybe she could go a little easy on her. But the boy… the boy held on and refused to kneel, out of pure force of will. What… what was so important to him? And… and Towa needed him down. He had a big gun on his hand. He could kill her, or any of her comrades, if she didn't put him down. But more than this… more than this, and in that pose, his spine could break. She looked at the boy. The boy met her eyes, gritting his teeth. Could she… could she go back to the *Devil's Den* and smile at those she held dear after doing that? For her… for her it was a true dilemma. One not fitting a devil.

One she ended up not needing to solve.

"Oh, so this is pressure," spoke the straight standing, bespectacled girl, no sign of effort on her.

Uh?

Crap, wasn't she down?! How, a ruse?! But even this, for a normal human to ignore it completely…!

"Hey, demon."

Click.

She looked back at the boy.

He had let the magazine fall from his weapon. It now lay against the ground. What…?

"DON'T UNDERSTIMATE ME!"

While he screamed that, he thrust the hand he held his weapon in out, his gun inclined sideways, positioning it right next to Towa's head. Pointing away from her. He then pulled the trigger.

The round he fired was the only one the gun had. That made the slide go out, and with the additional impulse of the recoil, was enough to be a significant impact to her head.

"FUCK!"

"NOEL!"

The round he fired… did it… hit Noel...?

Towa didn't react. She looked at the boy. Pressure was off, like her focus. Saw him put his hand back.

Flare did react. She let loose at the boy, two arrows in a second.

Chris steeped in front of him and deflected them both with her knife, smiling in a condescending way, while shaking her head slowly. “No, no”, she seemed to say.

The boy hit Towa with the gun with all the strength he could muster.

The devil was sent backwards by the blow, a good few paces away from them.



-

Chris laughter once again echoed through the church.

On the corridor, all the Hololive members were pale. Fubuki and Korone were crouched down, a pained expression on their face. To do a suicide run and try to get Towa out… but, did they even have enough energy to spare for an attempt? Their forte wasn’t speed, like Okayu’s had been. Going that fast took a lot out of them. They… they probably couldn’t do it again.

Towa was the focus, the one in most immediate danger, but Noel had been hit. Thankfully, it seemed to have been a grazing shot, that only had perforated her armor, a sticking piece of her forearm guard. However, the destructive power of the boy’s gun… it had made that armored guard a mess. Shattered and twisted the metal. Metal that now dug into her arm, deep, painfully. A line of red started to streak out. Some of those standing close where concerned, but Noel gave them a deadly glare. Gone was her kind and cool demeanor. They really had no time to worry about her now, this not being a major injury. Could she still fight? The metal bit into her flesh more when she tried to move the arm. Poor consolation that it was her left. Against lesser enemies it would be a

serious handicap. Against that girl… against that girl it was a death sentence. Even uninjured, Noel probably couldn't keep up with her. Flare couldn't. She saw Sakura, moving to be the vanguard of the group. She had no chance, but she was a true warrior. She wanted to protect Noel, and the rest. But now… now the one who everyone should be concerned about was Towa. She was out of their reach, at the complete mercy of their enemies. A comrade it that position would be a tragedy. Their trump card in that position? It would be a massacre. Noel… Noel didn't see a way to win this. They had lost. Maybe… maybe Watame and Pekora could get a couple out… but who…

The boy picked his magazine up, checked it for damage, introduced it in his gun, and let the slide put a round in the chamber. He then stood in place, diagonally behind Chris, observing her. She finally stopped her laughter, held her glasses on one hand, and wept a couple of tears.

"Oh, that was, that was a-ma-zing! We gotta do it again, we gotta do it again! Oh, what a shame. What a shame you all came here today. To think this may be the last time I get to have this much fun… but I can't hold back. Too much excitement already. There's a lot of things I have to share with you all, I want to share, I need to share." She looked completely unhinged, more and more as she spoke. She grasped her knife firmly, and approached Towa. "You, my little demon… you are cute. I will leave you for last." She then looked at the rest. "Prepare yourselves. Like I said, too bad I only get to do this once. Well, at least I'll have the boy! He's something else, you know?! He knew this demon here was coming, and I had no idea! Gun sure came in handy, eh?"

"No, Chris", spoke the boy. She turned to look curiously at him. His gun was pointed at her.

"The demon I was talking about was you." Saying that, he fired.

Chris reacted impeccably, and intercepted the round with her knife. But this was a Desert Eagle. And the boy was using .50 rounds. The knife was shattered, and a big shard of the blade dug into her arm. The only reason she didn't lose her head to the round was because she moved it aside.

Flare, however, didn't miss this chance. Two arrows in a second. They dug into Chris' leg.

She winced in pain. The boy fired again. This time the round blew her head open.

Her body was thrown by the impact, and hit a bench. The boy walked over to it.

He fired another round at the head, to destroy it completely.

He also fired three rounds into her heart.

Blood quickly covered the ground. The boy put the slide of his emptied gun on its original position.

Not everyone had seen. Most averted their eyes.

Still, everyone was in shock.

Towa, specially, had her eyes glued to the body lying next to her.

The boy ignored her, and spoke.

“If you can still hear me, Chris, it was nothing personal. I couldn’t let you kill them in a frenzy, before I told them why they were dying. It’s important. Sorry.” Then he looked at everyone in the corridor. “Guess that doubles as an explanation to you all. I must confess, though… that girl gave me the creeps. But I digress. You still need to hear the reason.”

He then put a hand in his pocket. Towa still wanted to observe Chris’ body, but something told her that in that pocket, was a danger that required her immediate attention.

“I did it in the name of Justice.”

Uh?

“I did it to fight injustice.”

Uh?

“Who am I does not matter. However, if you must know me by a name… ‘Hater’ is appropriate.”

“I hate. That’s what I do. And I hate you. I hate how popular you guys are. It’s easy, getting to the top and remaining there, when you are part of a company. When you are government backed. Meanwhile, all the little guys and girls, as talented as you, more talented than you? They get your scraps, whatever falls through the cracks.” He pointed his gun at Towa. “How many subscribers did she have, before her debut?! MORE THAN WHAT MANY GET IN YEARS! WHY?!” He breathed deeply, to came himself down. He let the arm with his weapon fall at his side. His other hand was still in his pocket.

“Because she’s part of Hololive. That’s why. Because you have a label, a brand, that gives you all the recognition. That’s all. You don’t know what it’s like. To try and try and not obtain anything to show for it in turn. Where that drives people.” He closed his eyes as he said this, seemingly reliving something.

“I’m glad. I’m glad I stopped Chris from killing you. You, dying to the personal vendetta of a

crazed individual? I couldn't allow it. I had a mission to fulfil, and I think I have done it. I'm glad I managed to convey their collective sorrow, their collective pain." Saying this, still eyes closed, he brought the hand with the gun to his chest, and stayed like that. He seemed at peace. Glad.

Did he… did he really take part in this for that… For that reason? That was… that was..

"Wait!" Tsunomaki Watame said, making her wait to the front of the corridor. She looked desperate. "Wait, if it's that, we can, we can talk-"

"Talk?", said the boy, opening his eyes. He shook his head. "No. I didn't come here to talk."

He shifted his stance a little, showing them the side with the pocket he had his hand in.

"I came here to make sure you, and I, all die here tonight."

"No, don't-!"

Towa lunged for him.

He was faster.

He put the gun to her head. He pressed the button and pulled the trigger at the same time.

-

The bombs Chris had set on the roof all went off, collapsing it on the structure.

-

"TOWA, TOWA!"

The boy walked across the corridor. Deeper, into the church.

"Calm down, calm down!"

He came to a stop in front of the altar.

"TOWA, TOWA!"

He placed his gun on it, almost as an offering to God, if one was out there to accept it.

"Marine, calm down or I'm gonna knock you out!"

He sat on the stairs leading up to the altar.

"TOWA! Let me go, Noel! TOWA!"

He looked at what was happening in the corridor.

“SAKURA! Help me drag her out!”

What an idiot he had been. He chuckled. He forgot he had fired all seven rounds.

On the center of the church, Tokoyami Towa, Hololive’s devil, was hunched over.

In great pain. In great effort.

The roof? It was falling, alright. It would fall any time, now.

But it would probably be too late. They would get out.

It was suspended. The roof. It’s fall.

Black tendrils were responsible. Tendrils from hell itself.

They spawned straight from the ground, filling up the church, and held the falling roof midair.

--

Come on. Get out of the church.

That’s all Tokoyami Towa thought about.

Get out of the church. Come on.

She didn’t have the strength to look backwards and check the progress of her comrades.

It was either resting her forehead on the ground and looking down, or resting her chin instead to look straight ahead. And straight ahead was the altar, with the boy sitting at the steps. Looking straight at her. Their eyes locked. Idiot.

She saw the tendrils, everywhere across the corridor.

What she was doing now… she shouldn’t have been able to.

This was an advanced demonic ability. Towa knew. But not because she knew the ability itself. She may have heard about it back there, but… her being able to use it? She triggered it on instinct, so she was just finding out she could. No. She knew it was advanced, because of what it took out of her to use it. This level of exertion… And abilities of this kind, you couldn’t just use them whenever. A certain condition needed to be met. Demon blood needed to be spilled. Only when a significant amount was spilled did the boundary between the underworld and this plane weaken enough to manifest these abilities. For a demon, this usually meant your own. Not a life-threatening

amount, but not something you'd like to do every day, either. The blood acted as a road for the ability to manifest, by weakening the boundary between planes of existence, but also as fuel for it. The body of the demon acted as conduit, and took a toll, but the spilled blood was what mostly made possible the manifestation. A demon being as crippled by it as Towa was, unable to move, was because she was a weak demon, manifesting a strong ability.

But she shouldn't have been able to. She had spilled no blood. She didn't have time to, nor thought of it. The blow the boy gave her hurt, but it drew no blood. And blood from a wound like that was too little anyways. Noel had been hit. She may have been bleeding. But she was no demon. What blood was acting as the fuel here? The only one… the only one whose blood was spilled today…

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"GUYS!"

Everyone turned to look at who had screamed last. She had drowned every other scream out. Tsunomaki Watame. The closest one to Towa.

"Guys, I can get them out! I know I can! Please, trust me!"

Everyone considered her words. A comrade was asking them to trust her with eyes full of determination, on such a critical moment. Only one answer was possible.

Marine stopped screaming. "Good luck, Watame!", she said as she made her way out of the church.

Everyone left similarly, save for those with animal traits. Pekora looked at her. Fubuki looked at her. Korone looked at her. Watame held their gazes, in turn. Each time she did, she felt a surge of energy. This was [Energy Sharing]. An ability unique to those with animal traits. It's what Mio and Okayu had done that night, taking and giving strength from and to Fubuki. When the eyes of those with animal traits locked, it was possible to transfer something akin to stamina, as long as both trusted the other. Consent in the moment was not needed, but a deep trust was. That's why Mio had been able to seep Fubuki's energy. Inversely, even if both parties were willing, if the deeper bond wasn't present, this ability would not work. After sharing their energy, Pekora helped Fubuki and Korone out of the church, and Watame hurried further in.

-

She reached Towa's side. She crouched next to her. She seemed to be in a lot of pain. She… she was hugging herself, her stomach. What she was doing, this… miracle. Holding the roof of the entire church so they could get out. It took a lot out of her. It was evident.

She placed a hand on her back.

“Towa.”

“Watame…?”

“How are you holding up?”

“It’s hard, but… I can do it. I can do this. Don’t worry about me.”

Watame smiled at her words, and Towa did her best to turn her face and show her smile too.

A voice addressed them from the recesses of the church. A mocking voice.

“Hey, sheep girl! Tell your devil friend she’s an idiot! She’s wasting her energy with what she’s doing! Holding up the whole roof, when she could conserve energy by letting the tendrils drop a part, say, two rows of benches from where she is and deeper! She needs only to hold the roof in place above her and between her and the exit! If she does that, she might be able to get out!”

Hearing that Watame stood up. Towa gritted her teeth, and looked straight ahead.

“Hey, idiot! I can’t do that!”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because you are on the part of the church you are telling me to drop the roof on, idiot!”

No reply came. Not immediately, anyways. When it did, the mocking tone was gone.

“And what if I am?”

“Watame, you explain it to him.”

Watame nodded, then addressed the boy sitting at the steps of the altar.

“We had a comrade! Amane Kanata! You… You… …with your rocket. Here, on this church.”

The boy averted his gaze. No. He looked at the crater his rocket had done.

“So? Drop the roof on me and get even! It works perfect for you, does it not?!”

“We can’t do that! Because…! Because Kanata believed in something! She believed in making everyone happy! Everyone! Making everyone smile! If I don’t try to help you here, I’m turning my back on what I loved the most about her!”

Towa agreed completely.

“And also, that’s something I believe in, too! So, I won’t betray myself by leaving you here!”

Silence.

“So…! So get out, please! If you do that, I can get my friend out of here!”

Silence. He seemed to be considering her words.

Eventually, he chuckled.

“I think I am quite fine on these stairs, thank you.”

“Understood!”

Watame looked at Towa. Towa looked at her with determination. She tried to nod, do anything to reassure her. It got across perfectly.

“Understood! Stay there! I’m coming to you, then!”

Saying that, Watame left Towa behind, and made her way deeper in, towards the altar, and the boy.

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The Hololive members, save for Tokoyami Towa and Tsunomaki Watame, all left the church. “Hey, let’s get some distance! Give it some breathing room! Let’s not make Towa’s job more complicated, alright?!”, said Noel. They all nodded and stood a ways from the church, right next to the top of the stairs leading up to it. “They’ll be fine, don’t worry about it.” No one had that certainty, of course. But they all wanted to believe, and trust in their comrades.

What Watame had said… everyone caught up on it. “I can get them out.” *Them*. She was going to try and rescue the boy, as well. There were mixed feelings about it, even though everyone understood that that was who Watame was. Some were like that, too. And three of them understood her particularly well. Subaru, Marine and Noel. They each had had a moment like that. A one to one with their enemy. You know of Marine’s. As for Subaru’s and Noel’s….

Oozora Subaru grasped the wheel of the van tightly. Her eyes were wide. Her breathing hard. The reason for that? She had just run someone over. Rammed into him at high speed, and sent him

flying. And it wasn't an accident. She had to do it. Had to. Because he was pointing a submachine at two of her dear comrades. Shirakami Fubuki, and Inugami Korone. That's right… how were they?

"Fubuki, Korone, are you alright?!", she said, once her shock dissipated.

She looked at them. Korone fell to the ground. Fubuki tried to check on her, and fell at her side.

They were now sitting, seemingly unable to stand. And… and Mio, and Okayu?

Hololive Gamers had four members. She only saw two. Two of the ones she spent her time with on the OKFAMS Unit. Okayu, Korone, Fubuki, Ayame, Mio, Subaru. That was the meaning of the acronym. They were her closest friends. Specially Mio. Where… was she… where were they?

She got out of the van. She ran up to them. "Mio, and Okayu?!"

Their faces answered for them. She looked at the building, and made to go and enter it.

Fubuki grabbed her arm. Subaru looked at her. She shook her head sideways, not looking at her.

"No way…"

After that, only someone moved.

"You fucking… fucking traitor…"

She looked back. The guy she had run over. He survived.

And he was trying to stand up. He was in all fours, no doubt hurt from the impact.

He had a submachine gun. The collision made him part with it. But…

But on his right hand, he had a gun.

Subaru ran to the van. She picked up a tire iron from the copilot seat through the window.

She knew they were under attack. She didn't come empty handed. It wasn't much, but…

Taking it out, she looked at the man. Still in all fours. He didn't move.

She thought that maybe she could approach cautiously, sneak up on him.

"A fucking human… helping them…"

She started approaching the man, slowly.

"Helping those… those fucking beasts…"

She stopped dead in her tracks.

“Those fucking animals…”

She started walking again, with a brisker, more determined pace. She didn’t care if he noticed.

“What a fucking joke…”

She was almost on him. He noticed. He tried to put his arm out to shot her.

She gave a quick swing and knocked the gun away. Out of reach, and of sight.

The man gritted his teeth, sat on his legs, and looked at her.

“Why? WHY?! You are a human, like me! You don’t have a tail, you don’t have ears, like those… those monsters! So, WHY…?!”

“Hey.”

Subaru spoke coldly. She stood straight in front of the man. She gripped the tire iron firmly.

“Look at them.”

Too firmly.

--

From his position, he couldn’t see her eyes. A shadow covered them.

“I said, look at them.”

Something in that voice… something chilled his blood. He obliged, despite himself.

He looked at them. At the two… girls that were sitting in front of the van.

The girls he had been pointing his submachine at before.

Before… before they weren’t girls. Not to him, anyways.

The dog had dead eyes. The fox had defiance in them, but that? Cornered animals had that, too.

That was then.

Now…

Now they both were sitting on the ground.

The… girl with dog ears was crying. Her whole body was limp. She just cried, looking up.

The other… girl, with fox ears, and tail, was hugging her. He couldn't see her face, but he could see her stroke the other girls head. And the way her body heaved up and down… she must have been crying, too. Just like her… friend.

The girl in front of him spoke again. Her same cold voice.

"Do those feelings look like a beast's to you?"

"Do those tears look like an animal's to you?"

"Do they look like monsters to you? My friends?"

He didn't give an answer. Even though he knew. He knew the answers. They didn't. They weren't.

But the girl… the girl didn't care either way.

"The only one that looks like a monster to me here, is you."

When she said that, she shifted her face a little.

And that was when he had no doubt.

He was going to die.

Because looking down on him, were the eyes of a murderer.

--

"And if I understand your group's ideology correctly, monsters need to be put down. I agree."

Oozora Subaru gripped the tire iron. She looked at the man in front of her.

How many would it take? Would one do it? She'd find out.

The night was cold. The wind blew hard.

The street was empty, save for them.

The man no longer looked at her.

He was looking down at the ground, like a repenting believer, waiting to be handed a punishment.

She would be it. His punishment. His judge. His reaper. She was ready.

She raised her arm, bringing the tire iron up.

She gripped the punishment firmly, so it could be delivered properly to the sinner.

And then…

Time stopped.

No.

It slowed down.

And she heard something.

“But… if I drop you off, how are you going to come back?”

Her own voice. She had said that, less than an hour ago.

That’s right, how… how was she going to come back?

“It’s simple: just come back for me once you have Gamers with you.”

Yeah… she… she needed to come back.

Someone… Aqua… Aqua was waiting for her.

Time’s normal flow resumed again.

She brought her arm down, and the tire iron with it.

--

For a moment, for some reason, the wind stopped.

And the thunderous sound of the tire iron hitting was heard all across the street.

A second passed.

The man looked up at the girl.

Her arm was limp at her side, having let the tire iron fall from it, into the street.

There was some sorrow on her face, on her eyes. She looked… really dejected.

And she wasn’t looking at the man.

She was looking at some point on the road next to him, at nothing in particular.

“I… I have a friend. She’s… somewhere else.”

Her voice wasn't cold anymore. It carried a lot of emotion.

"I… I need to come back to her. She… She is waiting for me."

"Maybe… maybe someone is waiting for you, too."

That…

"I'm sorry for running you over, I… I had no choice…"

He could see tears start to form on her eyes. A lot of pain on her voice.

For some reason, he could start to feel tears on his, too.

"I don't think you killed anyone, right? You were outside… and they… in the building…"

She wiped the tears from her eyes. They still kept coming out, and she kept her hand there.

"Just… just make sure you go back, before you are unable to."

Saying this, she turned her back on him, and for a moment, cried alone, on the street.

Then, she started running towards the van, wiping the last of her tears as she did.

She drove it out of the street, next to her friends.

She got them inside. Then she went back, and took the road she had come from.

The man was left alone, on the street.

The truth was… he had no one. No one waiting for him.

He stood up. He felt his ribs. Nothing seemed broken, or out of place.

A miracle.

With a hit that like you never knew, but… it seemed he would survive.

He had to, after that.

He looked at his submachine gun, laying on the road.

He left it there.

Leaving the street, he stepped into the green at the side of road, and went deeper into the trees.

He left. Somewhere else.



--

Shirogane Noel stepped out of the elevator, into the morgue, a smoking gun on her hand.

The gun Marine had thrown in, mid fight.

The gun she had taken from him.

From The Master Swordsman, who today preferred guns, and who was now in a crouched position, completely still after Noel's warning shot. He had his hand over a gun holster on his ankle. She had been observing him for a while. How he listened to Marine's and Rushia's conversation. How he looked at the first's back. How he lifted his pants, to reveal the gun. How much he hesitated.

How much he hesitated, before going to grab it once he realized they were leaving.

She waited until then to shot, inches from his head. He must have felt it.

"Don't be an idiot", she said, and walked up to him. She took the holster, gun and all, and threw it into the open elevator. She had been laying down on one side, out of sight, holding the "keep the doors open" button the whole time. With her not doing so anymore, the doors closed not long after the holster was in, and the elevator departed to its default position on another floor of the building.

The Master Swordsman just looked at it go with a melancholic smile on his face. "I'm sorry, can't help what I am." Noel walked past him. "An idiot through and through." Towards the lockers. The open body lockers, where her comrades laid. Cold, dead. "I let the necromancer go… someone with such power…" Noel stood in front of Sora's body. She looked at it. Put the hands on the table. On one she still held the gun.

“Individuals like that… what they may do…”

Rooom. Thud. Lock. Noel had pushed the table with Sora in, closed the door, and locked it.

“Going around, with so much power…”

Rooom. Thud. Lock. Noel pushed the table with Akira, “A-chan”, closed the door and locked it.

“What they could do… people won’t be able to sleep in peace.”

Rooom. Thud. Lock. Noel pushed the table with Matsuri. Left the door closed and locked.

“What they will do… the world won’t be safe.”

Rooom. Thud. Lock. Noel pushed the table with Haato. Door closed. Locked.

She stood in front of the table that had Choco on it. Rested her hands on it. This was the first one. The first one the Master Swordsman, or his men, had taken out. It was obvious. She knew where everyone had been that night, obviously. But anyone would be able to tell. The wounds were different. Wound, on this case. On the neck. It was clean. Quick. Not like whoever carved the previous bodies out, with a serrated blade. Taking their time. Enjoying it. He and his men, they didn’t enjoy it. They just did it. And their reason was what he had been explaining to her. It was her turn now. To explain.

“I… I have a friend. Outside. She’s an elf. A great archer.”

She felt her hand gripping the table, hard. She was so much more than that.

“She killed all your men, alone. They didn’t stand a chance. She did it in ten seconds flat.”

Rooom. She pushed the body in.

“I see. Those boys, I… I trained them myself, you know? I was so proud of them.”

Thud. She closed the door.

“So, she killed them. Like you are going to kill me, with that gun.”

Lock. She looked back at him.

“That’s what you do, when you have power. That’s why I tried to do what I did… why I shouldn’t have failed, like I did. More will come, and I won’t be there… Even though I am strong, I failed the duty that carries… To make sure those weaker than me were spared…”

She didn't answer him. She went to the next table. Ayame's. A wound to the neck. Three more on the chest area. She placed her hands on the table, and spoke. She tried to not let the emotion show on her voice. She didn't do a very good job at it.

"That wasn't the plan. We were supposed to take them down together. I would take some, and she would take some. I… I would kill some, too." She gripped the table harder. "She did what she did, because she didn't want me to become a killer. She decided by herself that she'd be the only one to become one, today. To carry all that weight, alone. The only one… The only one to change."

Rooom.

"So, me killing you…?"

Thud.

"I..."

Lock.

"I won't do that."

Marine had gotten hold of the weapon during the fight, but threw it to Noel. She risked herself to keep him alive. Flare didn't want Noel to become a killer. The wishes of their comrades played a part, true. But Noel's own wish did too. And the reason she didn't want him to die was…

She looked straight at him.

"Tell me, how many did you kill? All three? Just one? Maybe… none?"

"The succubus, one of my boys got… The demon… the demon's throat I slit; she would have died anyways but… but three of them finished her off. The only… the only one I really killed by myself was…"

Did he have the right to call her by name?

--

"Shion."

"Yeah. I… I only killed Shion."

"My friend killed nine. Your boys. Nine lives."

She walked over to him.

“If there’s no hope for you, there’s no hope for her, either.”

She stopped in front of him.

“But… but if there’s hope for you, then maybe there’s hope for her, too.”

She crouched next to him.

“Listen to me: The duty of the strong? To spare those weaker than them? Did they ask you to that? You decided that by yourself, didn’t you? You think you know what’s best for them. You don’t.”

She thought back to Flare. Her eyes.

The eyes of a killer. “This is what I want.”

The eyes of a liar. “Please… understand that this is what I want.”

Disgusting eyes. The same ones the man looking at her right now had.

This man, and Flare… Utter idiots, the both of them.

“You don’t even know what’s best for you.”

“Power is what you make of it. Why are you so scared of those more powerful than you? I think… I think because deep down, your true fear is you yourself misusing the power you may obtain.”

“Power is but a tool. It’s doesn’t control you. You control it.”

Saying that, she took his hand, and placed the gun on it.

What… what was this woman doing? With this… with this he was back in the game…

“Being strong doesn’t mean you are forced to do stuff.”

She stood up.

“Having power doesn’t mean you will crush someone.”

She turned his back to him. The gun was on his hand. This weight… it was loaded.

He could kill her. He could survive, and still fix this…

The woman started walking towards the lockers.

“Destroying something to preserve something… that’s not how this works.”

She stopped.

“That’s not how it should work.”

He… he took aim.

“Tell me… why did you become strong? Why did you gain strength? To become a slave to it?”

He… he could do it. He was strong, yeah, but… with this gun, he didn’t need to be. He had power.

“Why did you train your ‘boys’? Just so they would be slaves to it?”

That’s right… the friend of this girl… she killed them all… and thought nothing of it…

“Imagine this. You achieved your objective today. You killed Rushia. You killed Marine. You killed me. You killed everyone. Would you be happy?”

That’s right… he had failed… but, there was always tomorrow… he could still succeed tomorrow…

“Two weeks ago, you achieved your objective. You killed everyone. Were you happy?”

Saying that, she used a foot as a pivot and turned on it. By doing that, she was no longer giving her back to him… but more importantly than that, she had revealed what she was obstructing. The last body on the metallic bed, waiting to be put back into the locker. Shion’s.

The Master Swordsman was aiming straight at Shion.

After killing her… after killing her… was he happy?

Yeah. Yeah, he was. He remembers he smiled.

Happy at how well his boys worked together.

Happy no one had died.

But that night… that night he had his first dream. Of her.

“My friend…”

The woman spoke again.

“My friend is an idiot, so I know… I know she’s walking home all by herself right now…

And I… I don’t think she’s happy.”

He looked at her and… she was crying.

“So… how can you be so damn strong, and so damn weak? How…?”

Shion… Shion had been crying too.

She, and this girl. Crying, for what he did.

Why did you become so strong?

Because he wanted to be able to choose. His future.

Only the strong were allowed to choose their path in life. The weak were forced onto one.

Was that the future he wanted? Girls crying for what he did?

Why did he train his boys? So they could choose.

And he had chosen for them. Chosen a bad path. A dead end.

Like he was choosing for humanity.

He had killed in its name. He killed Shion.

She was… she was the friend of the necromancer. Yet… yet she didn’t look at him with hate.

Marine… Marine didn’t, either. And… and this girl… there was pain, sorrow, but… no hate.

He would never get so lucky. When he thought about this girl’s friend killing his boys…

The hate he felt… how he wanted to take it out on her…

Someday, a friend of those he had killed would feel the same, towards humanity.

Did he want to keep making that bet? That no one would lash out?

And that on every fight, everyone he cared about would always survive?

He had made it twice. The first time, fortune smiled on him. This time… this time it did not.

He feared others would misuse their power.

If someone wouldn’t misuse it… surely… surely it would be the comrades of these girls.

These girls, with no hate on their eyes after what he had done.

The girls belonging to this group.

The girls of Hololive.

The girls he had killed.

He. He had misused his power. He really had.

He looked at the lockers. Some were occupied by those he and his associates had killed.

Many more were waiting. Waiting to be filled. Waiting for someone willing to fill them.

Did he want to? Be that someone? Help fill those lockers?

He looked at Shion. “Shion”, said the tag.

Did he want to write another name in a tag? What would the next one say?

What face would be on his dreams? Did he want it?

What name would be on a tag?

…

Yeah. He didn’t know. The name.

“Hey, girl. What’s your name?”

“Noel. Shirogane Noel.”

He had his answer.

He was an idiot. Despite everything, he still smiled.

He lowered his gun. He stood up. He walked towards the lockers. He stood on the opposite side of Shion’s table that Noel was at. He looked at Shion, then at the lockers. Not at Noel. She was crying. Or had been, at least. He wouldn’t look at her in that state. It was about honoring the dignity of someone so worthy of respect. “Shirogane Noel. Your bravery is something I had never encountered. You have the courage required for the utmost form of bravery: trusting others. I… I did not.” Strength allowed you to fight for what you believed in. Courage allowed you to believe in something that was worth a damn. He was strong, but had proved to be nothing but a coward. Coloring reality with his own doubts. Hurting others in the name of his fear. For that, he would never be able to atone enough. However… he still had to try. That’s what warriors did, after all. Face what they did, and own up to their choices. “I have no right to ask this of you. However, I still must. Reject me if you want. But I would like to ask two favors out of you.”

Two gloved hands held a table. Gripped it tightly. They belonged to two different people.

A knight, and a warrior. They grabbed the table as hard as they possibly could.

For the knight it was a goodbye, and the warrior wanted to honor that.

For the warrior it was a vow, and the knight wanted to honor that.

“I’m ready”, said the knight.

“I’ll follow your lead”, said the warrior.

He mirrored her.

On unison, Shirogane Noel and The Swordsman pushed Shion’s table into the locker.

For Noel it was goodbye, not only to her, but to all the rest she had had no time to say goodbye to.

For The Swordsman it was a vow. This would be the last body he would put in a locker.

The door was on his side. He wondered if he should do it.

Noel spoke. “Go ahead.” Such a kind voice.

But… he had a thought.

“Wait.”

There was something he did want to seal away in a locker.

The one next to Shion was empty.

He opened the door, and threw his gun inside.

He made a prayer that it may remain there forever, not replaced by a body.

It was a foolish prayer but… it was a foolish wish worth believing in.

A foolish wish worth fighting to protect.

He held the door of the locker.

“I’m ready,” said the warrior.

“I’ll follow your lead,” said the knight.

She mirrored him.

On unison, The Swordsman and Shirogane Noel closed the doors, and locked them for good.

That was request one taken care of.



Shirogane Noel made her way to the stairs leading out of the room without looking at him.

Guess his second request had been denied. It was understandable.

He wanted to talk.

As he was thinking that, he saw Noel sit on the stairs.

He was… a pretty good Swordsman, yeah. Good at predicting the moves of his enemies.

The moves of this girl? There was no predicting them.

He walked up to her. She let out a sigh. He knew it wasn't due to him.

She had to be tired. She had been crying. Her life had been on the line.

And… and her friend. Yeah, she spoke of one. She must want to check on her.

Yeah. He needed to do this quick.

Sitting at her side? No way.

He'd address her standing. Standing taller than her wasn't what he deserved, but… well, no choice.

He looked at her to say his part… and looked away.

He… he wouldn't look at her like that.

It was about… honor… dignity… respect…. Yeah, it… it would be, un-unbecoming….

This dude was a swordsman. Emphasis on the man part.



What-what was going on with that uniform, anyways?

Ma-maybe sitting wasn't that bad an option.

Noel opened her eyes. It was cold, this morgue.

The swords*man* sitting next to her wanted to remove his face gear, due to how hot it had gotten.

They left the morgue together.

Only a bike and a van, both with the keys on, remained.

No bodies on the street.

“I… I’ll go check it out, ok?”

“No, there’s no need for that. Thank you for your kind offer.”

Saying that to Noel, the Swordsman walked up to the backdoors of the van.

He opened them, and saw what was inside.

He observed the bodies for a couple of moments. Their weapons were there as well.

Then, he stepped inside, and, after careful consideration, he grabbed one, and exited.

He locked the door, and walked up to Noel.

She eyed the weapon.

“Please, don’t… it’s… it’s not that.”

He really had no intentions of hurting her. He had made a vow he intended to never break.

“It’s just that, I’ve taken so much from you, I felt I needed to give you something back, at least.”

“More than what you gave me back there?”

“Yeah. Something… something physical. This sword was Kenji’s.”

Saying that, he brought it out of the scabbard.

It was a magnificent sword. Well made.

“I… I’m in charge of a dojo. I have a lot of swords entrusted to me there.”

“There’s one particular set. Ten swords. It… it was said you should only entrust one of them to someone you were willing to tie your fate to. Someone you considered family, related not by blood, but by stronger bonds. I… I entrusted the swords to them, and kept one myself”

Sadly looking at the sword, it was obvious who he was referring to.

“Kenji took one of the second-floor rooms that night. This sword hasn’t spilled blood this century. Please, I want you to receive this sword from me.”

Noel regarded the man.

“You want to entrust something so important to me? Why?”

“It was also said that as long as a single sword of the set remained in use, Sakura trees would keep blooming. See here, the Sakura engraved on the hilt? It represents that. It’s… it’s tied to what I told you earlier, about who you should entrust it to. Together, it was meant to symbolize that as long as us warriors had love in our hearts, as long as love was shared in the world, beauty would keep being a part of it. I… I wanted to protect humanity, but I sullied the meaning of the set. I’m burying the rest, but I’d like to keep one in use. Because… because the final thing that was said about it, was that as long as one sword in use kept the Sakura blooming, every user to ever wield a piece of the set would live on in their petals. Please, I can’t think of anyone more worthy of receiving this from me.”

Noel looked at the man directly on the eyes.

“I have a sword already, and it may be hard for me to part with it.”

“That’s fine. I know you will entrust it to someone worthy of it, who will honor what it represents.”

Noel nodded. The man put the sword on its scabbard, and gave it to her.

Noel took it out immediately, and gripped it tightly. She admired it as it’s wielder. Then put it back on the scabbard again. She wanted to convey to the man that she was willing to be a link in the chain of users, even if only for a brief period of time.

“Thank you.”

“No. Thank you. I can now be at peace.”

The way he said that…

“Will you be ok?”

“I will. I… I will bury them at the dojo, with the swords. I will bury Kenji with mine. Like I said, they were meant to be entrusted after all. Maybe I can try and make Sakura grow on the spots of the graves.” He gave her a smile. “Maybe one day I’ll join them and have someone plant a Sakura on me, but I’ll endeavor that that day is many years removed from now, don’t worry.”

They nodded, then made their way to their respective vehicles.

As Noel was about to mount the bike, after securing the sword at the side, he spoke again.

“One last thing. About your friend…”

He looked at him. She only saw his back.

“First, I don’t resent her. It’s the least I can do, after none of you resented me.”

“It’s not my place either, seeing as how we were the ones who initiated the attack on you.”

“Also, of all the things you said on the morgue, one was untrue.”

“Her salvation and mine aren’t tied. If I had been beyond hope, that’s doesn’t mean anything for her. Every person is different, that’s why we can never talk with certainty about the future.”

“All of that is a preamble for this: Because I don’t know her, I can’t say for sure things will be ok. But… but looking at you, I can say there’s many reasons to have hope.”

“May this world be as good to you as you are to it, Shirogane Noel.”

Saying that, he opened the door to the van and climbed inside.

Noel put her helmet on, and took to the streets to find Flare.

While riding her bike, she recalled what the man he had parted with had told her.

It was… too much. Too much to take at once. And… and there was more still…

He had requested a talk. But it was more of a one-sided monologue. He informed her of a lot of things about his group, and shared some theories with her. Some worrying theories, that made a lot of sense.

“Here’s my third and final warning: it’s about the boy and girl I mentioned, our remaining members. Like I said, they both hate you, due to their personal grudges. I have good and bad news on that front.”

“The good news is this: I was the only one who had contact with our benefactor. The leader of the other division never cared. I never let those two contact him either. Chances are, they will still be able to use the assets and equipment we had left, but not be able to request assets and assistance to the level we had been able to, or at all, really.”

“The bad news is that their hate runs so deep, that that won’t stop them. It may slow them down, but they’ll try to hit you eventually. Be ready for them.”

“Now, this girl… this girl is bad news. Really bad news. I know we haven’t fought, and I really regret that, I truly do, but you saw… saw what I did. I think you more or less know what I’m capable of, am I wrong?”

“Yeah. I know I have no chance of beating you one on one.”

“That’s exactly how I feel regarding this girl. She’s something else entirely. Not… not human. Maybe your archer friend could take her, if she’s as good as you said she is, but… but I doubt it. Don’t go easy on her. Going easy on her is dying. I’m talking about truly unstoppable, short of running her over with a bulldozer, bringing a building down on her, or doing a suicide bombing to get her. If you see her… if you see her, I don’t think even running is an option. Ambush her if possible. Ambush. Don’t try to trick her with mind tricks or talk. Her mind is unstable, and she’ll never trust you. She lets no one close. No one, save for the boy. And he won’t help you.”

“Yeah. The boy. He’s not a formidable fighter like the girl, but he’s crafty. And the hate he has… it doesn’t fit the reason he gives. A hate like that… there’s got to be deeper, more personals reasons than the ones he gives at first. You don’t fuel a hate like his on a general cause… he feels wronged, personally. Like the girl.”

“So, here’s my final warning and advice: Don’t go easy on the girl. Maybe if you pin her under a slab of concrete you could talk to her, otherwise it just won’t be safe for you. And even then, I’m not sure there’s anything you can do save keep her there forever. The boy… you may be able to reach the boy. But first, you will need someone strong enough to survive his lashing out. And determined, compassionate enough to want to talk to him, despite all he will try to do. He will try to kill you. He may even taunt you. You need someone strong enough to hold the weight of what he’s going to bring down on you, if you want to survive. You also need someone determined enough to catch up all the pieces of what he will shatter, someone compassionate enough that won’t even allow those pieces to fall on him and crush him. Someone who won’t fall victim to his hell, and who will also want to bring him out of it. I… I don’t know if you have someone like that. I don’t know if someone like that exists.”

Shirogane Noel was sitting on the top of the stairs leading up to the church. Minato Aqua was tending to the wound on her arm. Doing her best, anyways.

“Noel, I’m… I’m sorry, there’s… not much I can do. You need a specialist to remove this, if I pull it out it’s going to do more harm than good. And… and I’m guessing you want to confirm everyone is ok before going to one, right?”

“Of course.”

“I figured, so… so, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I can’t help you.”

“Hey, don’t be gloomy, Aqua. I’d have yanked it out without you telling me, so thank you. You may not be able to do anything to make it better, but you helped prevent it from getting worse, and isn’t that as valuable?”

Aqua gave a small smile, and nodded.

“That said…”

Noel looked elsewhere. Obviously, what she said had been a lie. Not taking out shrapnel without a proper medic close was common sense to her. However, if it was to cheer Aqua up, she would tell a thousand lies. She was a member of Hololive, after all. Wasn’t cheering people up what they did?

Noel looked at church. That she wanted to confirm everyone was ok… that couldn’t be more truth.

She remembered the morgue. The man who he had meet there. What he told her.

Inside… inside this church, there was someone similar to him.

Sakura saw her looking, and walked over to her, her sword at her side.

“Hey, Noel, you ok?”

“Yeah. You?”

“I’m… worried. What… what do you think? Will… things be alright?”

“Sakura: no one can talk about the future with certainty. I can’t say for sure things will be ok.”

She looked at sword the girl carried. At the sakura on the hilt.

But… but looking at you, I can say there’s many reasons to have hope, she thought.

--

It hurt. It really did. It was… it was hell. The pain she felt.

This church, too. This church was hell too.

Black tendrils raising for the ground held the roof in place.

They were all over. It was a truly hellish scene.

Tsunomaki, maki, Tsunomaki, maki,

she is Watame of the 4th generation.

Tsunomaki, maki, Tsunomaki, maki,

she is a fluffy, fluffy sheep.

She… she saw her. Watame. She was walking across the corridor. Her cape… she saw her cape…

She likes potato chips,

and hates peppers;

she likes yellow,

and smells like a beast!

She saw her hair. Her yellow hair. It… it wasn't as intense as what was next to her.

The yellow raincoat that torn, laid on the ground.

She felt torn, too, laying in the ground as she was.

As for the smell… she could smell iron.

Blood. Not her own.

But that hair… she really liked that hair…

Tsunomaki, maki, Tsunomaki, maki,

she is Watame of the 4th generation.

Tsunomaki, maki, Tsunomaki, maki,

she is a fluffy, fluffy sheep.

It… it was true. It was a really fluffy hair.

She remembered caressing that hair, on the meeting room of the office.

The song she sung to her then. Her song.

For some reason… for some reason she had started hearing it, after Watame left her side.

After she started walking deeper into the church, moments ago.

It grew louder.

Born in June,

by singing songs,

she'll make everyone,

smile.

Yeah. June. Six months ago. Six months ago, on this church…

Towa… Towa felt her consciousness slip away…

She opened her mouth… and she bit her lip, hard. Hard enough to draw blood.

The pain that shoot through her overrode all the exhaustion the other constant pain caused her.

She couldn't fall unconscious...

If she did, the tendrils would disappear.

She would die. And worse… Watame would die too.

She had trusted her. She herself had asked her to please trust her.

Towa… Towa just needed to keep the roof up.

Keep the roof up a little longer, and everything would be all right.

So… she bit her lip again.

Fall to the ground. Fall.

If her blood fell to the ground it meant the roof wouldn't.

So… she would continue to shed it. May it feed the tendrils. That's what it was good for.

Time. That's the only thing Watame needed.

Six months ago, the boy had thrown a rocket at Towa.

Kanata and Luna paid the price.

Towa had been impersonating Watame.

That's what she got.

There was no comparison to the original.

Today, the boy… the boy would be saved by Watame.

Towa knew it. She just needed time.

Another bite. More blood.

Time Towa would give her.

That's what the black sheep would do, allow the white sheep to do what she did best.

The boy would be alright.

Because… because Watame had a power Towa could never have.

She had animal traits, and had powers related to that, yeah.

She could run fast. Harden her body to resist blows. Maybe some other things.

But Watame's greatest power wasn't any of them.

Watame's greatest power was that anyone who saw her… anyone who saw her was filled with hope.

Towa looked at Watame.

Black tendrils, all over the place.

And in the midst of it, Watame, golden hair, immaculate white dress.

A light, shining in the dark.

Towa… Towa could feel herself crying. It had nothing to do with the pain.

It was just that… seeing Watame…

Somehow, somehow made everything hurt a little less.

Somehow the tendrils didn't look that scary to her anymore.

Somehow… somehow she knew she could hold the roof up, for as long as it took.

She… she licked her lips. She knew she didn't need to bite them. Not anymore.

Looking at Watame was enough.

--

Tsunomaki Watame walked across black tendrils towards the altar of the church.

Towards the boy that sat on its steps.

She reached him.

"Hello", said the boy.

"Hi", answered Watame.

She then sat next to him, on the stairs.

She waited a couple of seconds.

Looked at her boots, moved them while using their heels as support.

Then she spoke.

"I… I want to talk to you."

"Yeah. I could tell."

She rubbed her hands together.

"What you said… is that really why you are doing this?"

"Why would I lie to you?"

She fiddled with a strand of her hair.

“It’s just that… hearing you… I kinda got the feeling that what you said wasn’t the whole story.”

The anger on his voice. How he closed his eyes and seemed to remember something.

There was something personal to it.

It was obvious.

Watame looked at him. He looked away.

“I… I had something I wanted to tell you. Before you made the bombs go off. Do you mind if I do?”

The boy kept looking away, and said nothing.

“So… Back in June.”

“I… I was born on June. June sixth. The day of the sheep. Put it on a song, even.”

“Back in June, for my birthday, I got a lot of gifts. Many, many gifts. I felt so happy.”

“But… these gifts, they were too many, after all. Too many for me to carry home alone.”

“So Sora-san and A-chan… they offered to help me carry them home.”

“As we made our way, Sora commented on much my fans loved me.”

“It really… it really was heartwarming, for me. I… I cried when I saw them. All the gifts.”

“I’m… I’m a crybaby. I cry right away, at anything and everything.”

“Anyways. When Sora said her comment, A-chan replied how Hololive almost made the mistake of the century, by almost not letting me into the group.”

“You see… I was the last one out of gen four to get accepted. Kanata, Luna, Towa… if we 4 had had to fight over 3 spots, they would have gotten them. I would have been the one rejected.”

“If they had decided to just open 3 spots, instead of 4… then I would have never received so many gifts, gifts that I alone couldn’t carry. Those who sent them would have never know of my existence. I… I would have never been known as Watame the crybaby. I wouldn’t have shed the liters and liters of tears of happiness that I have. My life… my life wouldn’t be as happy as it is now. As full.”

“I… I sometimes wonder who was number 5. Who was the last one to get cut, the first one to not get in. The one who was one spot away from getting in.”

“I sometimes ask myself questions. What was her name? Would we have been friends? How long was her hair? What was she most proud of? What was her favorite color? Yellow, like mine? Did she dislike anything? Maybe peppers, like me? And… what kind of life does she lead, now. Is she happy?”

“So…, so, after hearing what A-chan said, Sora-san stopped. And she said to us…”

“She said to us, that she felt we had such a big audience, such a big platform, that we truly could be doing more to help the little guys. Give them a boost. Introduce them to our public. This… this isn’t a zero-sum game. We are all working to make the world a better place, so… so, others being successful was a boon to us in the long run. That’s what Sora said. She said she would speak to president Yagoo, and to the oversight committee, about this. She… she was the first V-tuber. The leader of the group. I’m sure… I’m sure she herself, after seeing five, four, three new members join, must have wondered who was the sixth, fifth, fourth. The one that didn’t get in.”

“I think… I think she really felt strongly about it. She wanted to make a strong case, write down reasons that couldn’t be rejected. She was in the middle of that, when… when we learned of you. And she had to shift her focus to coming up with a plan. And then… then that night happened.”

She once again rubbed her hands.

“I… I don’t like thinking about June. So… I forgot. I forgot, until I heard you scream what you did.”

“I’m… I’m sorry. I… I shouldn’t have. For six… five months at least, I could have done something, and didn’t. I’m sorry.”

The tendrils twitched.

Towa still held them in place. She was so strong. Stronger than Watame could ever hope to be.

“Heather”, said the boy, too low for Watame to catch it well, distracted as she had gotten.

“I’m sorry? Don’t… don’t call yourself that… I think you… you are more than your hate. You… you said that Towa should drop the roof, and escape. You want her to survive, and… and want to…”

“Not Hater. Heather.” His voice cracked a little when she said the name.

Watame looked at him. He was crying. Here it came, then. His reason.

“My sister was named Heather.”

Was named.

“She… she liked peppers.”

Watame bit her lip.

“But… but I think you would have been friends. She liked yellow, too.”

Harder.

“Yeah. She… she tried to get into Hololive. Didn’t made the cut.”

The tendrils twitched.

“But she didn’t give up then.”

Then.

“She still tried to be a v-tuber, but independent. It… it wasn’t the same.”

“She tried harder than anyone. She really did. I… I loved her content.”

“With her name, she played Western games. Really fun ones.”

“They… they aren’t as popular here… nor there, when you don’t know the language.”

“She… she was trying to learn, but, you know. It’s hard.”

“Yeah,” said Watame. “It is.” She knew.

“We… we had a 3D printer at home. I still have it. She liked to make stuff with it.”

“One day, it ran out of materials. Right in the middle of something she was really excited to print.”

“I went to buy more. It’s kinda hard to find the stuff if you don’t order, so I had to travel a long way.”

“When I came come…”

Watame… Watame rubbed his back.

The tendrils twitched again.

“One day… One day, while watching her videos, I got a recommendation.”

“Some other girl was playing her same game. She was livestreaming and… she didn’t have viewers.”

“I tuned in and… and I really liked her. It… it really reminded me of my sister. It helped me cope.”

“Then one day, she posted a video. And never posted again.”

The tendrils twitched, once more.

--

The boy knew. Knew the girl next to him had done nothing wrong.

Knew the girl twitching in pain had done nothing wrong.

Knew those… those he had killed had done nothing wrong.

Why?

Why didn’t you care more?

Why didn’t you do more?

Why didn’t you realize?

Their pain. Why did you ignore it?

All the blame he knew was his.

He shifted it to others.

To survive.

He needed to fuel his life with something.

He had chosen hate.

Who?

Him, staying alive.

Who had benefited from that?

On this church. Outside of it. All over this town. All over the world.

Everywhere, there were people whose lives he had made worse.

Lives his life had made worse.

It was enough.

It was time to stop causing pain.

--

“Now you know why. I… I hope it can give you some closure, at least.”

“You and your group have nothing to be sorry for. It was me who did nothing but ruin lives.”

--

Why did he blow the church up?

Why did he bring the roof down?

Part of him… part of him was angry.

Angry at them.

Because, six months ago, he expected them to show it to him.

That he wasn’t a monster. That all it took was one bad day, or a couple.

Hololive had had a bad day. A couple.

They stood back up. They didn’t lash out, like he did.

They showed him. He was the only weak one. The only miserable one.

The only one who used his pain to justify causing pain to others.

It was enough.

It was time to stop causing pain.

And for that… for that the roof only needed to fall on him.

That would be enough.

However…

--

“You can get out of the church. Take your friend. Right now. Save yourselves.”

“I know. I… I always could.”

“You want me to leave too.”

“Yeah. I really want that, yeah.”

--

These girls wanted him to survive.

--

“So… So, I get out of those doors. With you.”

“Yeah.”

“And then what? I do what? I am what?”

“I… I’d like it if we could try and do what Sora wanted. Try to prop up little guys. Due to what I told you, it’s important to me as well. I feel it’s important to Hololive, too. It’s… it’s important to everyone. I… I’m going to propose it. I’ll make sure we take steps towards that. And, if we do… when we do… we are going to need someone. Someone to point them out to us. We also need new members. We have been six months without welcoming anyone new. This… this was a family that got stronger each day, because we kept growing. We stopped doing that. Be kept gaining viewers, but we haven’t accepted any new members. We haven’t even hired new staff. In six months.”

Tsunomaki Watame knew.

Six months ago… they lost something. Not just people they loved. They were so close to losing so much, they… they were now happy to still be as much of what they were back then as possible. And by not seeking big changes, Hololive changed. Hololive was formed to change society. To make it a better place. They couldn’t do that, if they conformed themselves with the current impact they had on it, if they conformed themselves to what they currently were. They needed to keep evolving, to once more be the revolutionary entity they were created to be.

She… she saw glimpses of it. Rushia changing her look. Aqua, Subaru and herself, doing new segments. That was a big facet of Hololive’s spirit. Still present. But subdued. They needed to unearth it. They needed to be unexpected, revolutionary once more. Watame knew… somehow, she knew, that by walking out of the church with this boy, they would be able to be what they were always meant to be. The drive they were missing, the one they had lost… he’d make them get it back.

If he could give himself a chance.

--

“Become our first new staff member. Point little guys that need a hand to us. Help us scout new talent, so they become new comrades, new friends. You took a part of us. A part we won’t ever replace. But we need new parts. Hololive is always in need of them. You can be one, if you want. I… I want you to be one.”

What the girl in front of him said…

It was so… from the heart. Idealistic.

He… he wanted to believe it.

He really did.

But…

He knew better.

Sadly, he knew better.

“I’m sorry. We… we both know that can’t happen. That won’t happen. Me, working with you? Your comrades will never forgive me. No one will.”

He looked at her. At how she looked at him.

She deserved something. Something, at least.

To let her leave empty handed, after all she did, all she risked…

She thought back to her sister. How much she tried, how much effort she put.

How she got nothing to show for it. Life… life really was unfair.

“No one, but you. So, thank you. I… I know you will make Hololive what it needs to be, for everyone. I know you’ll take care of them, of the little ones. Thank you, for forgiving me.” He smiled at her. He hoped it would be enough. “Now get out of the church. It’s not your fault, but… we both know no one else will.”

“I DO!”

He looked at the devil.

“I FORGIVE YOU!”

She still hugged her stomach with one arm.

With the other one, the right one, she was raising herself up from the ground, as much as she could.

She was exhausted. Blood was on her mouth. From… from when he hit her?

He looked up. All this… all this couldn't be easy. How could it be. And yet…

"Those were my comrades, the ones hurt by your rocket! Kanata, and Luna. I forgive you!"

She looked at him with determination, despite all her pain. Pain he caused.

"Why? Why would you forgive me?"

--

The tendrils twitched.

"We… we already told you."

The tendrils twitched.

"We had a comrade."

And twitched.

"Her name was Kanata."

And twitched.

Light filtered through the window of the kitchen. A pot shimmered on one of the burners.

Her hair was tied to one side. She had an apron on.

While chopping vegetables on the kitchen, Amane Kanata sung, in a very delicate way.

She really had a pretty voice.

If my chosen…

Justice…

Ends up being all a mistake then that's fine by me…

As long as I can protect the things in which I believe in…

This was her kitchen. Towa's. This was her house.

Kanata was cooking for her.

Towa… Towa had fucked up.

Been granted a one-week suspension.

She… she wanted to be alone.

Tokoyami Towa dealt with her problems on her own.

Love… Kindness…

Her burdens. Her mistakes. Her insecurity. Her insufficiencies. Her doubts. Her failures.

Getting rid of them all, that's fine, too…

They were her weight her to carry. No one else's. Her walls to overcome. By herself.

On this, she made no exceptions, for anyone. Never did. Never would.

As long as I'm able to find the things I've lost…

Or at least, that's what she thought. Until she met Amane Kanata.

That day, she showed up at her door, unannounced.

She carried some bags. She wanted to make hot pot for her. See… see how she was.

And Towa… Towa didn't mind.

Even if ending up hurt is my fate,

my heart will still give off color.

Goodbye, Judas,

turn to ash…

Dust to dust, and may my weakness too, one day…

Towa sat on the table. Kanata laid a bowl in front of her.

This covered on scratches, heart of *glass*,

"You really like that song, eh, Kanata?", Towa said, smiling, looking at the bowl.

Will see lit a long-forgotten warmth on it.

"Of course I do, Towa. Because…"

"Kanata wanted to make everyone in the world happy."

She looked at the boy. At the girl standing at his side.

Watame did too.

As for Towa…

"And I…"

Oh last *stardust*, dance,

dust to dust, ash to ash,

and go beyond.

"And now…. Now I have another reason to like it too."

Fragments of my wish,

become eternal.

Amane Kanata smiled. "Now I like it because it has both of our names on it, too"

Note: on the above lyrics, the underlined words are "Kanata" and "Towa" in the original.

"And I…! I think everyone makes mistakes!"

Towa grabbed the bowl. It was warm. Very warm. Not as warm as what Kanata had said.

One of her tears fell on the bowl. Messing it up.

"That's ok Towa. Mess that one up. I made plenty. Enough for both of us."

"I've made mistakes! A lot of them! Some, some I'm making right now! I'll make more, again!"

"Mistakes don't destroy you, unless you let them!"

Saying that, she could no longer hold her arm up, and had to support herself on her forearm.

Kanata squeezed Towa's hand. That hand… that hand was somehow warmer than the bowl, too.

The boy was no longer looking at the devil.

The girl at his side wasn't either.

At their feet, black liquid started to appear.

It formed a little pond.

From the middle, something appeared.

The liquid disappeared gradually. The thing absorbed it all.

Was this… was this how the tendrils were formed?

This one was small. It only reached up to their waist.

Not like the meters long ones that were all over the place.

It moved, slowly, towards them.

Towards the boy.

Towards its arm.

It wrapped itself around it.

It pulled. Once. Twice. Thrice.

The tendrils… they were stronger than they looked. They held the pieces of the roof, after all.

This one… the pull of this one was weak. No. It was gentle.

Like a kid, grabbing one of his parents by the sleeve.

Asking him to go home.

All across the church, the tendrils wouldn't stop twitching.

He looked at the devil. Hunched on herself on the floor.

One hand on her stomach. The other one with the forearm against the floor.

She was looking at him. And her look… she was asking him.

He grabbed the tendril on his arm with his other hand. Squeezed it. And took it off.

As quickly as he could, while still being as careful as possible. He… he didn't want to damage it.

He looked at Watame. "Let's go," he said, in a pressing way.

"Ok, I'll carry you."

She did, princess style.

Well, wasn't that something, thought the boy.

--

"Towa, I'll be right back!"

Just hold on a little longer, were the words Watame didn't speak. A little longer, please.

She let her eyes say that instead.

Towa smiled at her.

Once she had ran past, she looked down at ground, still smiling.

The tendrils started to disappear.

The roof started to fall.

A big slab fell on the altar. Shattered it completely. The altar, with the gun of the boy on it.

It destroyed the little tendril, as well.

"I'm sorry…"

Towa looked up, towards the destroyed altar.

More roof fell, and destroyed all the benches. Splinters flew all over.

More of it fell once again on the altar. Buried it completely.

"If you are out there… I'm sorry… But… I am a devil, after all."

She smirked.

Above her, and also behind her, the fall of the roof was still prevented by the tendrils.

The boy was right. It was easier this way.

She had let the roof fall in a controlled way, up to two benches in front of her.

She would hold until Watame came back. There was no way she was leaving her alone again.

She felt the key on the pocket. She also… she also needed to show the contents of the basement to Sio. She would be creeped out if she didn't explain properly. And…

And even without that need, she still wanted to come back. To her. To everyone in the *Devil's Den*.

But… with this small time, before Watame came back… she wanted to check one thing.

Advanced summoning like the one she had just done…

A demon's blood fell all the way to hell itself.

Sensing one was in danger, it sent… that liquid… yeah, it was probably blood… that black liquid back. Liquid devils could control. A drop of spilled blood turned into a small pool of the liquid. Towa had bleed only a little, when she bit her lip. She used that blood to form the little tendril. All the rest…

She got on all fours. She could do this much, now that some tendrils had disappeared.

Controlling that liquid took a toll on you: the more inexperienced you were, the more it did.

But it didn't take blood from inside you, or anything like that.

These tendrils were formed with the shed blood of another demon. Another devil.

Once Towa was in danger, Hell, already in wait, sent the liquid. Liquid she, as a devil, controlled.

She looked at a closer tendril. Periodically, black liquid kept appearing at its root, and was absorbed in turn by it. It kept feeding the summoning. And someone in turn kept feeding the liquid.

There was only one answer. She looked at it. At the body of the girl with glasses.

The boy had destroyed her head completely. Her brain matter was…

Towa could feel the bile on her throat. The tendrils all twitched, dangerously.

Yeah, better not to look at that.

As for her chest… the boy may have as well cut her in half.

And that was the thing. There was no blood. She watched her wounds.

From the edge of a wound, a drop of blood fell. A little later it disappeared.

That confirmed it. This girl… this girl had demon blood running on her veins.

“Hey~! Hitomi Chris here~! I… I’d like to talk about something. There’s a tale I would like to tell. If you would be willing to listen, of course… If you don’t want to… just say so, ok?”

She smiled when they answered with silence. It meant “it’s ok, Chris, go on.”

“Thanks”.

“So, in 2018, we have all these… different individuals, appearing out of nowhere. A big shock! But very exciting, too! Just imagine the possibilities! The unknow, always provoking fear and excitement in equal measure!”

“Fear and excitement, that’s what I felt when I saw the government was looking for individuals to form part of a group. To form part of **Hololive**. A pioneer initiative, to smooth over all the fears, and make sure everyone shared in the excitement! Fear and excitement… that’s what I felt when I got accepted. Like I said… imagine the possibilities. The possibilities, turning into reality.”

“Turns out, there were many, many possibilities, in many fronts. Medical was one of them. I saw them develop some interesting stuff out of our pals with animal traits, ‘reincarnation’ or something, was the code name. New types of individuals meant new type of cells and genes to mess around and experiment with, and all that mumbo-jumbo. And, if you recall, Hololive didn’t have only individuals with animal traits. They had demons, as well. Fear and excitement…”

“They asked me to take part on the program to test demon blood. It was close to our debut. ‘If this is a success, think of the possibilities! Getting stronger, faster, healthier! How many would benefit!’ they said. ‘Do it for your country, they said.’ If I can be honest with you… and I know I can… I didn’t feel excitement then. Just fear. But I didn’t really have a choice now, did I? They would get rid of me, find someone else, someone more willing. There is always someone else. Someone else to ask. But in that moment, it was me. I was being asked. There was only one thing to say. So I said yes.

“I did it because… you see, I like comics. Not our manga, American comics. I love them. Have you read Tom King? You missed out if not, great writer. He said something, on his Rebirth Batman run. ‘**Everyone gets scared. But all that means, is that everyone gets an opportunity to fight that fear. Everyone gets the chance to be brave**.’ *What would you do if you had no fear***,** you know? So

I said yes. Because I was afraid they'd dispose of me, sure. But more than that, because I was afraid of being afraid. I wanted to try to be brave. For once at least."

"I… I started to feel under the weather. I'll admit it was… hard. It was hard to be on my best behavior. I tried, ok? I tried asking nicely. I asked my manager, the one who had relayed the government's request to me. I asked him to make me better. When he seemed hesitant about what to do, I asked again. Not so nicely."

"I… I was surprised. He was taller than me. I shouldn't have been able to lift him like I did. To throw him like I did. To wreck the room like I did. He shouldn't have been that injured. That surprised me."

"You know what hurt me? When I went to check on him, he looked at me, as if he wasn't looking at a human. 'You are a monster', he said."

"Funny, huh? They made me that, yet I'm the monster. That hurt me, yeah."

"When I looked around, I saw that my comrades were watching. The other girls in gen 1. I… I just wanted them to say it. To say 'That's not true. Chris is not a monster.' They were scared, and couldn't speak. I get that. Everyone gets scared. But… but they didn't fight that fear. The only one who had tried to be brave was me. The only one who was hurt because of that, was me. That hurt me the most."

"They removed me from the group. Replaced me anyways. They locked me up. For days. Weeks. Months. Years. Then, one day, the lock to my cell unlocked in the middle of the night. The cameras were off, power was down, and the blinking emergency lights led me to the exit. Was that an accident, or did someone free me? I don't know, and I don't care. Thanks, if someone deserves them."

"Someone reached out to me afterwards. And I ended up with this group. That's my story."

"I… I still cry from time to time, when I'm alone and think about it. It hurts. But… all that hurt made me who am I today, you know? I don't want to separate myself from it anymore. I am able to smile now. To accept who I am. At the end of the day, isn't that what's important? …and…"

She brought what she was holding close to her chest. Closing her eyes, she smiled kindly.

“There’s this boy. He… When I hear him, hear his reasons, and what he wants to achieve… I feel understood. Not alone. He’s really aloof but… hehe.” Her smile got bigger. She opened her eyes.

“Anyways, I should be going now.”

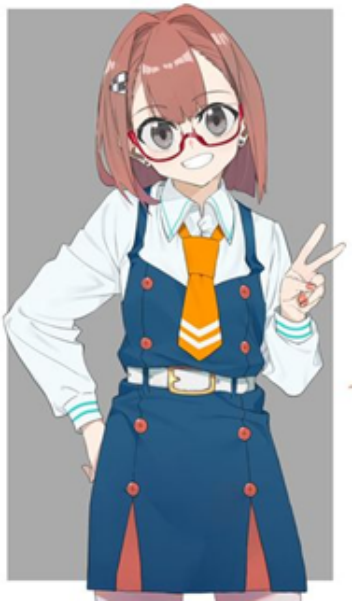
Hitomi Chris stood up. Smiling. Happy with who she was. With what she had to look forward to.

The girl she had been crouching over said nothing. Tokino Sora had, after all, been dead for a while.

“Thank you, truly, for listening to me. I really wanted to share this with you! Bye now~”

Hitomi Chris left the panic room underneath the Hololive headquarters, holding her combat knife.

Five bodies full of grotesque wounds stayed behind.



Tokoyami Towa looked at the body.

Something… something about it, called out to her…

“Towa. Don’t… don’t look at it. I’m picking you up, ok?”

Watame had come back for her. She took her on her arms and ran. Towa let the tendrils disappear.

Gravity once again received its due respect, and the roof finally fell. It buried everything inside.

All the benches were shattered. The carpet of the corridor would never see use again.

A torn yellow raincoat. The shards of a shattered combat knife. The body of a girl.

No longer would prayers echo on this church. Nor would the contents buried inside receive them.

END OF PART 3, UNIQUE CHAPTER:

THE CHURCH OF THE FALLEN IDOL.

Epilogue 1: Pain relief

They both sat side by side. The devil, and the boy. The sheep had left them close together.

She was currently speaking with the rest of the members, at the top of the stairs, far from them.

Informing them… informing them of what she had proposed. Him working with them.

A lot of gazes suddenly feel on him. Guess it had just happened. They… they weren't friendly.

He couldn't see what expression the sheep was making. He could only see her back.

He also couldn't see the expression the devil next to him was making.

He couldn't see that the nastier glare in that scene belonged to her.

A glare she gave to the other girls, until she made them look away.

--

Truth was, she knew. The one who deserved that glare the most, was herself.

She… she had some explaining to do.

Still… she wouldn't allow them to look at him like that.

She didn't care if they had the right.

If you had seen the scene from above, the first you'd have seen depart would have been Shirakami Fubuki and Inugami Korone. Both left in silence. Or tried to. They were very tired, after using their powers. S and A helped them, and they all left together. Truth was, the latter two would probably

have to deal with the boy on a daily basis. So, at least, they didn't want to do it now. Oozora Subaru hesitated, then went to follow her friends.

Houshou Marine understood. Uruha Rushia didn't care, as long as she had Marine. Usada Pekora and Sakura Miko also didn't care as long as they had each other. Shirogane Noel also understood. And Shiranui Flare thought it was time to get Noel to a hospital. They all left together.

The boy saw them leave, one after the other. He looked downwards.

"Hey."

It was the devil speaking.

"Surely you didn't think they would all forgive you, and certainly not right away, right?"

"Some people make you earn their forgiveness. Whether it's right, or wrong… it's just like it is."

"Work hard."

She made to stood up. Still… still too early for that.

"Also... I have a bar. The *Devil's Den*.

A cute girl serves the tables and a pretty one is in charge of the bar.

If you ever feel like drowning your sorrows… We could use your patronage.

First drink is always on the house."

Regardless of how much Towa hated that. Damn Sio…

"I… I'm not really a drinker. I don't like beer, wine… But… yeah. I may take you up on that. This feels like a good time to start, doesn't it? Something strong…"

"Hey now. Don't become a drunk. We'll kick you out. Out of the bar, and out of the company."

Certainly… certainly don't become a drunk because of me, said Towa.

She looked towards Watame. What was taking her so long?

Oh. Uh-oh.

She tried to stand up. She really needed to, now.

Watame smiled. She helped Towa up when she reached her.

“If you’ll excuse us”, said Watame, and moved away with Towa.

The boy remained. But not alone. Minato Aqua was standing in front of him.

She crouched down in front of him.

She was smiling kindly.

“Hey. Are you ok? Injured somewhere? Feel pain anywhere?”

“I… I am Minato Aqua. I’m a maid, although I kinda became a nurse, too. For the group, at least.”

“Seeing as you are going to be working with us, I felt I needed to check up on you, too.”

The boy looked at her.

“Are you perhaps hungry? I get that! I myself get hungry quite easily.”

She got close to his face, covered her mouth with her hand, and said something to him.

“Don’t the tell the others, but this medical pack has a pouch dedicated exclusively to my snacks.”

She took distance, and nodded at him gravely.

“Here, I’ll show you.”

Saying that, she opened a pocket, and took out a cereal bar.

“It’s a healthy snack, obviously. Wouldn’t be much of a nurse if it wasn’t, right?”

She then got close again, once again covering her mouth to whisper to him.

“Only the ones at the top are healthy. Those at the bottom…”

She took distance again, and winked at him.

“Our little secret.”

“So… do you want it? It’s fruit flavored.”

He took it.

“Thank you.”

He opened, and started eating it, while looking down at the ground.

It… it wasn't bad.

"You know…"

"You make the lives of those around you better, just by being there."

Surprised, he looked up at her. "Excuse me?"

"'If it sounded like a lie, you just gotta try to make it sound true, you dummy!'"

"I… I had a friend, who once said that to me."

"'Try not to dwell on what happened on the past too much.'"

"'Think about what you want to do going forwards, into the future.'"

"'No one can change the past. But we can all help shape the future.'"

"The others… the others are really kind girls. They all are."

"They just need time, ok?"

"Just… just work hard, and everything will be ok."

"I'm glad to have you onboard. I look forward to working with you…"

She didn't get to finish.

He had hugged her suddenly.

She could hear his sobbing.

"…from now on."

She smiled, put a hand on his back, and stroked his hair.

Minato Aqua wasn't that smart. Baqua, she was jokingly called.

But this… she could do this, at least.

And that meant she could help.

Just like he also could.

One step at a time.

…or stroke, in this case.

Tsunomaki Watame and Tokoyami hadn't gotten far enough yet.

They smiled too. The kid would be alright.

End of Epilogue 1: Pain relief

Epilogue 2: Songs Carnival

New Year came and went. On the first karaoke night of the new year, the Miko-Peko pair time to shine had come. And the one who would carry that duty would be none other than… the Elite Sakura Miko! And for her song selection... "We already lost, Peko. You pick songs no one out but you knows of, Peko-yo." Sakura felt a vein pop on her head. "Shut up, Pekora! Trying to ruin my performance because you know yours is gonna kill us?! … Ahem, sorry for that~". Smiling, Sakura Miko made her pick. It was, of course, a visual novel opening. The song started; it was a very catchy tune. She could but smile.

https://youtu.be/GwQWdOG8McU

The morning sun's light,

more than rising it's already bearing down,

I gotta do something about my bangs.

I need a new cologne,

if I were to stretch a yawn might go out,

business as usual in *a girl's life*.

Make your *footwork*, lighter,

bring the *music* you like, with you…

Hi! My mood is *up*,

that's my *update*,

just a little more to go for my *date*…

Ready? Go.

This is a *carnival* of doing your best every day,

I'm a girl so it's ok!

Even if I'm late,

even if I oversleep, *cheers*,

charge up, and see you tomorrow, *yeah*!

Ready, *girl*?

This is a *carnival* of doing your best every morning,

a girl can't have any sleep;

look over your shoulder,

and study up on some tactics,

make the whole wide world go wild…

Girls carnival, let's have a wild time…

Everyone in gen 3 enjoyed the song, and could feel themselves enjoying the rhythm.

No one knew the songs Sakura sung, true.

They all loved them, regardless.

When she saw on their faces how much they enjoyed them…

When she sometimes caught them humming one on their house…

Well, there was a reason Sakura Miko always tried her best to pick a new song, every time.

A song they had never heard before.

End of Epilogue 2: Songs Carnival

Epilogue 3: Backstabbers Galore

On the house of the third generation, Shirogane Noel stood on the kitchen.

Late at night, she had felt like drinking milk, so she opened the fridge.

She took out the glass bottle marked “NOEL”.

Someone had drawn a pattern on it with marker, too.

Black spots, and spots that were colored white by the milk inside.

A cow pattern.

A vein popped on her head, and she accompanied it by a forced smile.

Seems the house would find itself a member short, as soon as she found out who the traitor was.

As she was thinking that, she felt a bent finger dig into her back.

It almost made her drop the milk, then she overcompensated her grip and almost broke the bottle.

“Sorry, Noel… It’s just that, your back was defenseless… be careful who you show it to…”

It was Flare. And she was close. Very close. She whispered on her ear. Seductively.

“How’s your back? Feeling any pain? Want me… want me to give you a massage?”

“I’m… I’m alright, Flare. Don’t worry…” Noel gripped the bottle… uncomfortably.

Everything screamed that term. Her tone, her posture.

Flare noticed, and backed down. “I… I’m sorry. Have a good night.”

Shiranui Flare made her way up the stairs.

Stupid. That's what she was. How she felt.

She took another sip of the bottle.

A sake bottle.

Shiranui Flare had been drinking in the backyard, late at night.

When she saw Noel, illuminated by the light on the fridge in the middle of the dark kitchen…

Stupid.

Another sip.

She had betrayed her.

What did she think she was doing, making proposals like that?

She opened the door to her room.

Closed the door, then rested her back against it, and slid down.

Another sip.

She had tried. Noel tried. To keep things as usual.

And she had pushed her away.

And now, she suddenly wanted to play? Drunk?

As if Noel would even be up for that.

Stupid. Another sip.

Flare started crying, against the door.

She kept taking sips from the sake bottle.

But truth was, the bottle had been long empty.

Many, many sips ago.

The only liquid that flowed on that room were Flare's tears.

Noel still held the bottle.

Truth was, she hadn't noticed.

She didn't notice Flare's own bottle.

She didn't really notice her breath.

Her thoughts… her thoughts were elsewhere.

She didn't even register her proposal.

She only could think of what Flare had said.

"Be careful who you show your back to."

Someone said that to her, six months ago.

Someone sitting by her side. A man clad in full black, on a cold morgue.

He couldn't tell her everything, of course. He wouldn't betray those left.

But he'd share what he could. She deserved that, at least.

"Jaegers was an idea of two people. Mine, and of one other individual. He wasn't the most brilliant, but that's how it went. I wanted to get rid of individuals with dangerous powers. Animal traits was included on that, of course, but it wasn't a priority. I wanted to protect humanity because I love it, but… he wanted to kill everyone not included in it because he hates them. A racist."

"Because we had the idea of the group together, we each would have equal power. That's why each of us had a division. In practice, I was the leader who figured everything out regarding operations and logistics. I let him pick the name. He went with something German. Guess why. Yeah."

"You took him out, along with most of his division two weeks ago. We… we can check it out. Of them, nine bodies were found, his included. Only one of his men seems to have survived, and he didn't return to us. It's not hard, so we can only assume he decided to call it quits. I wouldn't worry about him. My men… you know what happened to them. I'm the only one left. And you don't have to worry about me either."

“Here’s what you should worry about: First. Noel, do you… do you trust your comrades in Hololive? Do you trust them to never do anything behind your back that may hurt you?”

Noel considered his question. She thought of the faces of everyone left. Also, the lockers on this room contained her dead comrades. They were only steps away, bearing witness. She only had one answer to give.

“I do. Of course I do.”

“Then, don’t trust anyone else completely. You realize your plan was leaked, right?”

“Yeah. It was obvious. We… the council of oversight fired all our staff, to get rid of the leaker.”

“That’s what I’m talking about, Noel. They are the ones you should trust the least. That night… that night we had a monitor to track your movements and locations.”

“And that’s not all. Do you think everyone in this building having a day off today was a coincidence? I asked for that day off to be granted. We receive a lot of support, in money, means and other things. All we need to do is ask. After we had the idea for the group, someone contacted us. He knew about our intentions, and decided to nurture us. Help us achieve our goals. I don’t know who it is. But I know they have a lot of power.”

“And… your plan? No police? You facing off against us, when most of you aren’t experienced warriors? Noel… Our benefactor asked us if we were ready to take you on. We said we were ready. Guess what? Some time later you learn of our existence, and then we get your plan, which had a lot of handicaps against you. And who else could propose or impose those handicaps? I have no proof, but I also have no doubt: Someone in that council has it out for you. They want you dead. Or at least, in deadly situations. Please, I’m… I’m really grateful you showed your back to me like you did, but be careful who else you show it to, because someone is dying to stab a knife on it.”

This… this was too much for Noel. She looked at the man next to her with very open eyes, and only managed to utter: “…ok. Understood.”

“I’m so sorry to do this to you, but… there’s more. Here’s the second thing I wanted to tell you:”

“Apart from the two ten members divisions, our group has two more members. A boy and a girl. They… they came to us. They found out of our existence. It was after we said we were ready to take you. They both said someone reached out to them, and told them where to find us.”

“I thought it would surely be our benefactor, so the next time I contacted him I brought it up, asking why he felt the need to play behind our backs like that, sending people our way without talking it with us first. He replied that he had no idea what I was talking about, and that it seems I had leaks. He also said that he thought I would have been smart enough to figure it out, seeing the circumstances in which he initiated contact. He said one day, he got an anonymous tip about us out of nowhere.”

“Worried, I tried to find out what I could about the leak, to plug it. I questioned them both. They didn’t seem shifty about it, and always said the same. ‘Someone reached out to me and told me where you were.’ They both said they didn’t know who, that it was someone they had never seen before, and that she seemed to know very personal things about them. Yeah, that’s the one thing they knew about that someone. That it was a girl, who appeared in front of them with a cloak.”

“Now, these two… these two hate you. For different reasons. That’s the only thing they have in common. I know my benefactor has it out for you, like I said. We… well, you know what we wanted to do. So, here’s my second warning: Someone else is out there, taking moves to group together those who would do you harm. They don’t act as directly as my benefactor but… seeing as there’s no way he’s not a member of the council of oversight… this someone, this girl, they are willing and able to use some very powerful people as pawns in their game. So, Noel: whatever that game is, make sure you don’t end as another pawn on it, make sure you kick the board on them and let all the pieces fly free. Obviously, don’t risk your life for fools but… I’d like you to be mindful of their place, so you free as many as possible and cut down as few as possible. Like… like you freed me, instead of taking me out. Please, be on the lookout for them too. For the controller, and the controlled.”

“Ok. I will.”

That’s what the swordsman had told her, six months ago.

What had Noel done? She told everyone what she learned of the boy and the girl then, of course.

But warning them about the council of oversight? About that other someone, that cloaked girl?

She… she didn’t want to worry them. So she had carried that knowledge alone.

She remembered one of the questions the swordsman had made.

“Do you trust your comrades in Hololive to never do anything behind your back that may hurt you?”

She… she had kept info behind their back. If something happened tomorrow…

Then… then wouldn’t she be to blame?

She held the milk bottle.

Looked at the drawn pattern.

Whoever… whoever drew this… may pay for what she had done. For what she was doing.

She was a traitor.

She…

She no longer wanted any milk.

She went to put it back.

And then… at the last second… she saw it.

She saw a reflection of the underside of the bottle, just before it touched the fridge shelf.

There was something written on it. With marker.

She brought it up again to read it.

It said “Sorry Noel. We Love You ^_^”

As Noel stood silently on the kitchen at night, a tear rolled down her face.

She closed the fridge door, and went up the stairs, the bottle on her hand.

She opened the door to her room.

Closed the door, then rested her back against it, and slid down.

Against the door, she drank the bottle, while crying.

Then she went and washed it with a lot of care, to not remove the drawing, nor the words.

She placed it on her room, on a visible but safe spot, where it wouldn’t fall or be knocked over.

Whenever she had a fight with or felt bothered by a member of the house, she thought of the bottle.

Whenever she needed to push herself especially hard when training, she thought of the bottle.

She looked at it every day, after waking up but before leaving the room.

It was her reminder that even backstabbers could be forgiven.

End of Epilogue 3: Backstabbers Galore

Epilogue 4: Everybody Comes to the Devil's

In a table of the *Devil's Den*, four girls were sitting.

The girl who was named after the sky, Tsunomaki Watame, Tokoyami Towa, and Kusunoki Sio.

Today, the bar was closed. Towa had a confession to make to them.

"So…", said Watame "How did you two and Towa-chi meet? I'm really curious about that."

"Well…", started to say Kusunoki Sio.

"Sio." Said Towa. "While you tell that, I'll go fetch them." It's time, is what she wanted to convey.

Sio looked at Towa, her mouth slightly agape with surprise, but then nodded.

Yeah. Yeah, it was time. This was why the bar was closed today, after all.

Tokoyami Towa excused herself, then went for the inner parts of the building, behind the bar.

Sio helped herself to a glass of water before telling the tale.

"Wow… To think Towa would be so embarrassed to even excuse herself…"

Sio did a spit take at Watame's comment, and it all landed on S.

S didn't even move as Sio coughed. She was red, and not only due to choking on the water.

"Watame-san! It's… It's not like that! Suisei-san, are you alright?! I'm so sorry… your face… your hair… I got it all drenched… Roro-chan, bring us a towel, please!

"Right away, Mistress."

"I told you to not call me that! Why does only Towa get to be Master?"

To… To Watame the reason was pretty clear…

As Sio got ready to tell her story, the girl named after the sky cleaned her face and dried her hair while saying "don't worry about it, these aren't even mine to begin with…". Watame snacked on potato chips Roro had brought them, ready to listen to her friend's… friend. Yeah. Totally just friends.

Sio brought her hands together, and looking down and smiling melancholically, started her tale.

"It's not that complex a tale, really. When Hololive debuted, I became a fan of the content, of the format those under the virtual surveillance program employed. I really like the mostly laid-back day to day content, and the occasional idol like performance, in concerts and stuff. That last part… That last part I really liked. You see this suit? I made this suit myself," she said, smiling. "I prepared myself. Taught myself how to keep and audience, how to act natural… how to perform on stage. I decided to give it a shot. I applied to Hololive."

At this, Watame stopped her hand, mid travel to deliver a potato chip to her mouth.

"Did you… did you get rejected?", she said.

Sio looked at her, and smiled sadly, then shook her head from side to side.

"I applied 8 months ago."

With that timing…

"Yeah. That night happened and… well, you didn't take new members anymore. Understandably."

"I thought that that was it. Hololive was done, everything was over. But… but I guess you proved me wrong. Watame-san, I… I cried when I saw your comeback concert. I really did."

Watame could feel her eyes get a little watery. Come on Watame, not in front of Sio, too…

“And then… and then my favorite came back. Tokino Sora did.”

At the mention of the name, the girl named after the sky stopped moving, mid stroke of her hair.

“I thought… if Sora-san is strong enough to try again, to stand up again, after that… I felt so inspired.” She looked at the girl who had the face of Tokino Sora. “Thank you, Suisei-san. Don’t… don’t feel bad about it, ok? You… you taking up that face wasn’t in vain.”

S nodded silently. That may be so but… she still felt uncomfortable. Every time someone told her something like that. She had done it in part to provoke exactly that, but seeing people given hope… based on a lie… it didn’t make her feel good. She remembered that little girl, Akane…

“It truly wasn’t in vain. You’ll see why with what I’m about to say but, it’s like the movie quote, you know. [**Sometimes truth isn’t good enough. Sometimes people deserve more. Sometimes people deserve to have their faith, rewarded**].”

That… that may be so, but…

What happened in the sequel? Maybe… Maybe this farce needed to end…

“Anyways, like I said, I felt inspired, and decided to try again. But, obviously, Hololive wasn’t taking in new members. So… so I went to idol agencies, normal ones. Tried to get into a unit but… every single one rejected me, without even giving me a chance. You see, outside of Hololive… those different really don’t find doors open to them in the business. Even for an elf like me, these pointy ears were enough to earn me an immediate rejection.”

“So, I felt so wrong that… on the way home from the final one, I just wanted to sit down and cry. I came across this alley. I… I sat on the stairs. And I did. I cried. And then… then the door at the end opened, and Towa came out. Invited me in. I don’t really drink that much but… it really meant so much to me that someone allowed me in, to anything, after so many rejections. So Towa let me cry on one of the tables. Had Roro made me a nice tea. She… Towa doesn’t really like to drink, either, you see. So, once I calmed down, I told Towa why I was crying. Once she heard the reason, she got really angry and…” Shio smiled, and color appeared on her face. “She screamed that those agencies were idiots, rejecting someone as pretty as me. She told me she was thinking about hiring a cute bartender to attract public, since she doesn’t really like dealing with clients, and… and she offered me the job. I of course accepted.”

Smiling, Kusunoki Sio looked up at them. She was blushing.

“So… so thank you, for taking on Sora-san’s identity, Suisei-san! Without you doing so, I wouldn’t have met Towa! I’m… I’m so grateful I did…”, she said, then let her gaze drop on the table, still smiling.

“Whoa, way to go, Towa!”

“That’s Towa for you, yes sir, that’s her!”

Two voices suddenly spoke. Two girls flanked Towa, who was back. They had uttered the words.

Towa, for her part, was completely red, looking at Sio.

When Sio looked at her, Towa averted her gaze.

Her tail however, which she had out today, twitched every once in a while.

“You really went and did it, Sio. You have the damndest timing…”

“Why-why are you blaming me?! You were the one who came back! If anyone’s timing is at blame here, it’s yours!”, said Sio, looking mortified and grabbing her skirt with her hands.

These two were so cute, thought Tsunomaki Watame.

But, speaking of a couple of cute looking girls…

The girl named after the sky spoke first. She wanted to bail them out, no doubt. Such kindness.

“Hey, Towa, care to introduce your friends? Don’t think we’ve met before.”

After hearing that, Towa’s tail stopped twitching. It got rigid, then it dropped.

Sio, too, changed. She looked at Towa, in a way that seemed to try to reassure her, and nodded.

“Ye-yeah. Yeah, I’ll… introduce you, alright.”

“These two are…”



Tokoyami Towa was standing outside of the house of the third generation. They… They had come to take Amane Kanata and Himemori Luna. Everyone else said their… goodbyes already, but Towa wanted to be with them… until the end. Or until they left, at least. They had been loaded into an ambulance like truck already but, for some reason, they still hadn't departed. It really felt like this prolongation was happening only to torture her. Suddenly, out of it came a man, in a suit.

"Tokoyami Towa. I believe we haven't met. Everyone calls me The Researcher, so please, feel free to do so as well. We being all but cogs on the machine, seems it's easier to remember someone's role than their name. Kinda shows how stable these roles of us are."

The Researcher… that was… that was one of the five members of the government's oversight committee for Hololive. He was important. What… what was he doing here? Checking on the survivors?

Anticipating her question, the man spoke. "You see, I was called here."

"Called here? By whom?"

"I was kinda hoping you'd tell me that. As for *what* called me here… recognize this?" Saying that, he took out a tracker like those they had worn on their necks out of his pocket. Like the ones Towa had crushed. "I was monitoring you last night. I am sorry about your comrades." Towa really wanted to say, don't say that unless you mean it, but she stayed her tongue. She was too tired, anyways. "Me being The Researcher, I'm in charge of technology for the group too, even though my forte lies in biological type of research. But I digress. I saw three trackers go offline at nearly the same time last night, here, where so many of you were, and were no attack seems to have happened. Surely not a coincidence? I needed to check. Seeing as we have you, and those two, written off as dead in our latest situation report, seems my hunch was right. Know anything?"

"Yeah, I… I crushed them. All three. Sorry. I… I wasn't really myself. Sorry." The crushing of the trackers had a deeper meaning for Towa, but no point explaining it to him. She had betrayed it already too, seeing how she still was out here, waiting for them to depart.

"Understood, and understandable. Don't apologize, you took a weight off my shoulders with that answer. One less problem to deal with, and… maybe I also needed the fresh air. Do try to be more careful with the equipment in the future. Government budget, and all."

“There won’t be a next time. I’m quitting the group. I’m invoking the trauma clause.” Did this… did this make it official?

“You need to fill in paperwork to notify us. I know you could say you did it by talking to me, but we still need a paper trail. Government stuff, and all.”

He really had a knack for anticipating her questions. Was Towa so easy to read? She… she also saw how he had no hurry to leave. To leave, and take Kanata and Luna to the hospital. Then, that really mean that…

“There’s… there’s nothing you can do for them? Are they really… going to die?”

“I checked them. That damage, that blood loss… it’s a miracle they are still alive. They may last some hours, some days, but… I don’t think it’s possible to come back from that. The blood loss already almost certainly guarantees a coma. I’m sorry.”

That’s why… only say that… if you mean it...., thought Towa, as she looked away, a couple of tears starting to form. The Researcher looked away as well, into the distance. Some moments passed.

“Seeing as I took care of what I came here to check, I’ll be departing. I’m dropping your comrades off to a hospital, then I’m going back to my lab. Some interesting projects we are working on there.”

Towa didn’t care.

“There’s this one, a project upon which my continued place as The Researcher is contingent, you see. Really interesting stuff. Just two years left of funding before results are expected of me.”

If it couldn’t help Kanata and Luna, she didn’t care.

“We have these vats, filled with a liquid based on the stem cells of your animal trait friends. As I’m sure you are aware, your animal trait friends got superior regenerative abilities. It’s thanks to those cells. We have reason to believe that the liquid reacts to wounds and helps with their healing. We have yet to test it on living, breathing individuals, though.”

Hearing that… hearing that Towa started to see what he was saying. What he was proposing.

“Well, sorry for taking your time. Not leaving my lab much made me develop a chronic case of verbiage that flares up any time I leave it. I know you must be grieving, and don’t care for a boring science project. Like I said, I’m dropping your comrades to the hospital, and then I’m off to my lab. I can give you a ride so you can be with them until the end, if you want.”

He turned her back on her. Towa turned her head to look at him. He wasn't leaving.

"Or we can skip the hospital and all go to my lab, where I have this project I told you about, waiting for some test subjects. But I need *you* to ask *me*. Easier to justify in front of the rest later. I don't think the liquid is able to regrow limbs, I'm afraid… however, it doesn't need to. What the project really is intended to do… well, that can wait. I'm probably gonna need you to stay a week on site anyways."

There was only one answer to give. Tokoyami Towa struck a deal with the devil.

While on road to the lab, The Researcher couldn't but smile. As a result of the night, he had already filled two thirds of the vat sets he had developed. He couldn't know it then, but before a month he'd have filled them all as a result of it. Even so, at that point, he felt like a winner. He stole a glance at the girl sitting next to him. She was looking out of the window, hand on chin, not paying attention to him. He brought up a handheld monitor that was next to the door, and stole a furtive glance at it. This one was similar to the one the Hololive members and Jaegers had been provided with, but different in one aspect: when a tracker no longer sent signals, all the other monitors listed them as dead. This one actually differentiated between someone being dead, or the tracker being destroyed. He looked at the five "tracker destroyed" signals on screen. To everyone else, they appeared as dead. Three were in that truck with him in that moment. As for the other two… well, that is a tale for another time.

He thought about how four of the five would end up, or already were, on a vat. Seems the project would pull through after all. That's all he cared about. As he entered the command for the monitor to brick itself and scramble all the data, then confirmed it with finger recognition, The Researcher felt like a winner, indeed.

Tokoyami Towa was about to enter the devil's den. She was already this far in, no backing down now. She didn't waste time unnecessarily. Her path was already decided. She opened the doors, and entered the office.

Yeah. The office of The Researcher, right in the heart of his research compound, otherwise known as "the lab" by those who spent a lot of time in it and called it home. Tokoyami Towa entered, and The Researcher was waiting for her at his desk. As he of course would be. They, after all, had an appointment.

“Miss Tokoyami. I’m delighted you could make it.”

Not hard, when she had stayed in site for the past week.

“Please, sit down.”

Towa obliged.

“Am I correct in assuming you have read all the reference material we sent to your quarters?”

Towa nodded.

“Good. I’m glad to see you are taking this seriously. You, after all, will be the one taking care of them. Hard to do that, when you don’t understand the theory behind it.”

Towa nodded.

Wait… taking care of them?

The researcher put his hand over some documents on his table. “I just received a comprehensive report on their state, compiled by all the teams that I have working on the project. You, of course, will leave this office with it, but I need to brief you in on the important details for this conversation to be fruitful.”

Towa nodded.

“As expected, the liquid stabilized them. Them dying is unlikely.”

Towa nodded. Good news. But expected.

“On the other hand, as expected, the liquid only does that, only stabilizes. To say it simply, if out of three links in a chain the middle one is missing, it is able to act and make the sequence whole again. It is ‘smart’ enough to extrapolate the missing parts out of the existing ones that surround them. Blade and bullet wounds, given due time it should be able to fix. But it can’t extrapolate where nothing is present. It can’t rebuild from scratch. So, we have confirmed it is unable to regrow limbs.”

Towa nodded. Bad news. But expected. He had told her as much, when he made the offer.

“On top of that, the neurological report is… not the best. They both entered cardiac arrest before they could be placed in the vats. They were stabilized, of course, but it took too long. If they were to

be taken out of the vats, they would be in a coma. Most likely, a permanent one. We have confirmed brain atrophy, due to the lack of oxygen caused by the blood not reaching the brain while the SCA lasted."

Towa looked down, then nodded slowly a couple of times.

That… that sealed it. There was nothing to be do now, she had to move forward with it.

Only that procedure could fix it. And she needed to allow it. She would.

The Researcher looked at the little devil nod while looking down.

Good. That was a good face. A face that had decided. That's the face he wanted.

The fact that he had not so subtly implied to the head of the responsible team that it'd be good for cardiac arrest and brain atrophy to happen, so the girl in front of him had no choice… that was something no one needed to know.

"The situation your comrades find themselves in is not uncommon. Many across hospitals all over the world are currently in it, and many more are like you right now. Wanting to speak to them again. Wanting to hear them laughing again. If this conversation happened last year, I would have only been able to tell you how sorry I am. But we are in the year 2020, and we have individuals with animal traits, and their cells to work with. Miss Tokoyami, I am in conditions to offer you a path forward, should you wish to take it. You know what it is."

Towa nodded. She did.

"After all, you read our material. The procedure we constructed using Miss Uruha's thoughts on the soul and the body. She is able to manipulate souls, bring them back to their body. We believe everyone can do the same, and move at least their own soul at will, thanks to the liquid in the vats. It makes it easy for anyone to do what she does, connect with an underlying plane of existence, accessing the highway of souls. Granted, it's not the same one she has access to. She's able to truly grab any of the many that transit it. For everyone else using the liquid, it's just a deserted road, but they can use it to at least move their own soul through it. This obviously has no purpose, if it has no place to go, no other body to be sent to. That's why we also found a way to build another body from scratch. By using a bundle of animal traits stem cells, any individual who injects its blood into it,

forming thus a connection, is able to shape it. Miss Uruha thinks the soul shapes the body in almost imperceptible ways over an individual's lifetime. She thinks said molding takes place specifically in the brain. All our research shows she's right, on both accounts. If the soul has that power, when not directed by the mind… what's it's limit, when directed by it? When directed against cells predisposed to be molded? We believe it can turn that bundle of cells into a functioning body. Any appearance that's willed is possible. The cells we use are wired to develop fast."

Towa knew all of this. She had read the material.

"We believe a conscious individual can shape a body and transfer its soul in 6 hours."

Towa knew. But their friends weren't conscious.

"But, as you know, your friends aren't conscious. As I told you, that's the case for many people. Some, are very dear people to some very powerful, very important people. So we need to test and see if this process is possible with an individual on the conditions your friends are in. In a coma."

Towa nodded. It all led up to this.

"Don't worry, miss Tokoyami. I fully believe miss Uruha is right. The body is but a container for the soul. Your friends' brains may be damaged, but it is my hope that their souls are intact. It is suspected an individual in a coma registers what happens on its surrounding environment. We believe the liquid amplifies that. We have developed a video that they will be made to see, it contains all the necessary information for someone to form a body, all the components, everything. It's hours and hours of content. It would take days to see. For a brain working at the pace of an awake individual, that is. We believe the brain can absorb information faster when the individual is actually not awake."

"That's why even for conscious individuals, the procedure calls for them to be put in a state akin to a semi coma, after they input an appearance. The walls of our vats, they are high technology, you see. The video will play on them. Fragmented, cut into many parts. They will all play at once, and the brain will register them all."

"Also, we are unsure of the effects an individual's mental and emotional state may have on the procedure, as it is powered by the power of the mind. Side-effects may show up. And this is in regard to conscious individuals. Individuals that can input their will. Because that's what this procedure is powered by. Will."

Towa nodded. Here it came. The elephant in the room.

“How, then, can an unconscious individual perform the procedure, if it can’t express their will?”

Silence.

“It’s simple: they don’t need to express it. That’s the bet we are banking a success on, anyways. That the will not being expressed doesn’t mean it’s not there. We don’t know what goes on in a coma. Does the person dream? Are they, perhaps, trapped in a world of pure white, or pure black, doomed to transit it forever, not knowing what’s going on? Seeing figments of their lives manifested, without rhyme or reason to them?”

Towa imagined Kanata and Luna like that, running around, or perhaps sitting, in a vast expanse with nothing on it. Nothing, but maybe a gigantic shuriken or a candy ribbon in the background. She really felt her heart ache at that prospect.

“We are going to bet that with all the stimuli we will perform while they are submerged in the liquid vats, the procedure is going to show up, say, as a door in said world, that they will have to cross. Once they do, they will initiate the procedure, form a body, and transfer the soul into.”

“Do you, Miss Tokoyami, agree to your friends undertaking this procedure, in the hopes of freeing them from whatever mental prison their current bodies are trapping them in, and allowing them to walk, talk, laugh in this world once more?”

Towa looked at him.

“I do. Of course I do.”

“Good.”

In that moment, the two devils struck a mutually beneficial deal.

“First, some considerations. It may be that their will has been fragmented, and that there are many versions of them inside; if that’s the case any one of them may open the door. It may also be that their base versions have been warped, and one of their traits has been amplified many times. It may be a positive trait, a negative trait, a ridiculous trait, we won’t know. Also, while an individual that’s awake can input an appearance, theirs will depend on something subconscious. Maybe a long-held desire, an insecurity, a memory, we won’t know.”

“Miss Tokoyami, last chance to back out: Knowing this, do you still wish to move forward?”

Towa nodded. Yeah. Yeah, she did. Her friends… she wanted to see her friends again.

Any version of their friends.

And… and she also knew… deep down, she knew…

That nothing bad could be on their hearts.

And that if there was, all the good inside would overpower it, and win out.

Their friends would come back. The friends she knew.

“Ok. Here’s the final consideration, and how this will work: We don’t know an individual’s perception of time while in a coma. Let’s say I put a girl under for six hours for her to complete this procedure. Maybe she will spend six months trapped in her inner mind, with whatever effects that may have on her psyche, time she may not be able to remember, all while in our world only six hours passed. The inverse may also be true. The procedure is fast. But it may take an individual months to trigger. Maybe, in their world, the door will appear after 3 hours, and after 3 more of consideration, they will cross it. Only in our world, each of those hours was a month, instead. We suspect this will be the case for individuals who are in a coma, like your friends, or otherwise unconscious.”

“Thing is, they can’t remain here long. It’s morally questionable, doing this without their consent. I would get in trouble if found out, unless it’s a *fait accompli* with a good outcome. That, I believe I can get away with. As her closest comrade, you authorized this. You will activate their trauma clauses. They will be on your charge. We will register them as dead. Once we succeed, we tell the truth. Everyone forgives us. I get the results I need. You get your friends back. Everyone wins.”

Towa… where… where could she take them? She had nothing.

“I have something in mind. Ever thought of running a bar?”

“Ask whoever the new leader of Hololive is to hand you enough money for it. Hard money, so it doesn’t leave a trail to you, if possible. She will in turn ask it of us, and I’ll make sure it’s accepted. This much should be enough. Once, a long time ago, I played with the idea of running a bar for a time.” He smiled as he remembered the childish thoughts of his youth. “I more or less know what’s required. I took the liberty of writing a set of recommendations. You can read them, or not. Feel free to disregard them, I won’t control how you run it, where you put; do what you want with it. All I care about it is this: make it stay afloat. I do recommend this to you though: make it subterraneous;

no one will be able to tell there's layout not in use. Maybe add an extra basement, and keep the vats there."

"The liquid can keep the bodies preserved almost indefinitely, so don't worry about that. You are going to need to drop some nourishment in the vats, the cells will take care of the rest. Here's a list of what you'll need. Pay for it with the earnings of the bar, for as long as it takes. Afterwards, once this is success, you can keep it. The bar, I mean. You are young, having your own thing at that age… that's something to be proud of, if you ask me. No one is going to hold your hand on this, so… I can always bail you out if you are in trouble, because I'd prefer it if the vats aren't found in the street, for obvious reasons, but that amount of money should be enough for a capable individual to stay afloat. Try and be one, would you? It's more interesting that way, anyways."

"Also, there's an old acquaintance of mine from my university days. He's known as The Inventor. He's the creator of your friend, Roboco. He's actually also the one who developed the tracker technology. I really wanted to try and get him in the oversight committee, could use someone else with his priorities straight there, but he vowed to never work with us, after what happened."

"I'd like for you to talk to him. He's close to a great breakthrough. Some say he already achieved it. The singularity. With Roboco destroyed, he refuses to create another robot or anything else for the government, ever again. I want you to change his mind, and get him to build one for you, now that you are running solo. Something of that importance… he can't give up, not now. It would also serve you to have a helper in the bar. Someone you knew you could trust. Someone with fighting capabilities to keep you safe. I'd really hate for you to die and have the vats be forgotten, or for them to be destroyed. Also, if she's cute, she can attract clients, so even better."

"And also…"

When he said this, his tone got serious. Really serious.

"It would do you well, Miss Tokoyami, to listen to what he has to say. To listen to the reasons he has for not working with us. What he thinks really went on that night. I hope you understand what it means, coming from me, a member: there are some very wicked people in the oversight committee."

He said that so she'd trust him more. You never knew when you'll need an unlikely friend. He knew he himself could be considered a wicked individual. But, in that committee… in that committee, they really had him beat. He took advantage of situations. They caused them.

“It would really benefit you to develop a working relationship with The Inventor. Who knows, maybe he’ll be granted a seat in this committee once a member bites it, or a new one will be created for him. As long as his developments merit it. Make sure to help prove he achieved the singularity, get him in the committee. Just a small side-job in case your life gets boring after we find success on this project, you are free to ignore it if you don’t care. But having a good guy like him on a powerful position benefits everyone, and having a good friend in a powerful position benefits you. Remember that.”

“That should be all, Miss Tokoyami. Aiko will be your liaison with us. You will report to her periodically on the state of your comrades. Preferably, in person. She will help you make sense of anything that you find too complex. I believe you both have a good relationship, and if this is a success, as we are all hoping it will be, her being the one in charge will look good on her resume. Just a little bit more of motivation. Not that I think you need it, but, better than left unsaid, right?”

Aiko was a capable researcher. She was also very pretty. That’s why The Researcher had her on board. He, personally, was a results oriented individual. Superficial things like that, he couldn’t care less about. However, he was also a pragmatist. He knew how the world worked, and he adapted to it. And in all his years of experience, he had learned how, if someone with oversight powers made a visit, and you had a pretty face for them to see on it, you almost always got a little more money, a little longer deadline. Seems not everyone was results oriented like him. But since he was, he had made sure to hire the best… out of the pretty ones. That had been Aiko.

When he arrived at the facility with the little devil, he summoned Aiko. A devil is a valuable research subject. Their blood holds many mysteries, and they hoped to unlock them. They had given it a shot in the past, and the result was less than optimal. They had to keep a girl locked up for 2 years, until she suddenly vanished. That still gave him the creeps. Obviously, research had its risks, and he was willing to take them. He would experiment with demon blood again. But not now. The most things you juggle, the more likely you are to see them all crash down at your feet. The vats first.

So, understandably, Aiko’s excitement at being summoned to The Researcher’s office, seeing him with his hand on a devil’s shoulders, and thinking that she had been deemed good enough to be on charge of some kind of test that involved her, quickly turned to disappointment when he tasked her with making sure she had a good shower, received a proper haircut for her burnt hair, and to see that

fitting clothes and any other things a woman may need for a one week stay in the facility were bought.

Aiko took the girl with a look of "this doesn't end here, Researcher", but she still did everything he asked, and they seemed to have developed a good rapport. She was smart. If the devil trusted her, then she was most likely to agree to experiments in the future. Once again, Aiko proved that The Researcher had indeed picked the best… out of the pretty ones.

He had let Aiko be the liaison on account of her good relationship with the devil, but also as a favor to her. She had done what was asked of her and the little devil had had a good stay in the facility. That allowed her to read the material and also to trust them enough to accept the procedure. It was time to repay that. You couldn't expect your people to take care of you, if you didn't take care of them. The Researcher truly believed that. So, he would use this chance to make her look good.

Yeah, that was the reason. It wasn't because he feared the talk Aiko had promised. Totally not that.

Truth was, The Researcher was happy he had hired Aiko. Everyone here bowed their heads to him. She also did, but threw a bark or two his way as she did. That much, he was ok with, and appreciated. It spiced the monotony of the lab up. He was results oriented. That didn't mean he didn't appreciate something good, interesting or different every once in a while. He could always chalk it up to mood increasing productivity or something, to save face regarding the image of himself he had.

But yeah. The talk… he still dreaded the talk…

--

Seeing as The Researcher had become trapped on some kind of remembrance… a very… interesting one, from the expressions he was making, Towa thought it was time to take her leave.

She excused herself, and stood up.

The Researcher saw her leave. Truth was… maybe he would miss seeing that little tail, just a little.

Yeah. The tail. When she had opened the doors and was about to cross them, he called out to her.

"Miss Tokoyami! Do you have a name? For the bar, I mean. Because I…

I think I found a really great one, just now."

She looked at the man. This office. She had also found a great name, just then.

Here it came. Time to reveal what she had been hiding.

What she had built this place for.

The thing that made her ask for Roro.

The thing that made her meet Sio.

The thing that caused her to have underhanded meetings.

Although she admitted she liked Aiko, the particular researcher she was in contact with.

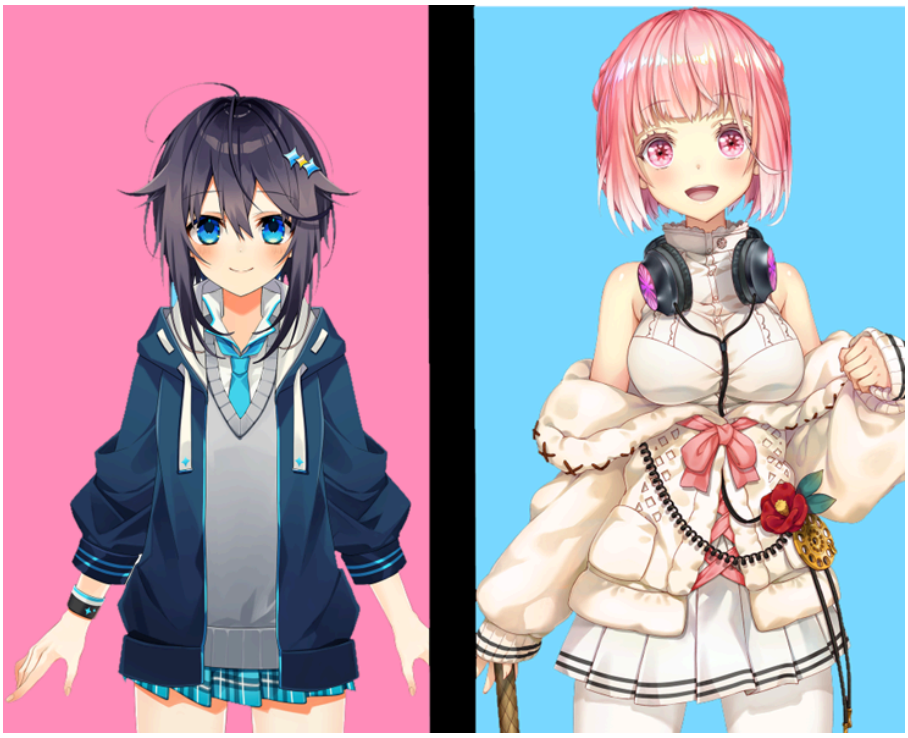
Tokoyami Towa always carried a key on her chest pocket.

Its weight was nothing, compared to the weight this had on her heart.

Was she right? Was she wrong? Only others could judge. Time to allow them to do it.

On the *Devil's Den*, Tokoyami Towa said:

“These two are Amane Kanata and Himemori Luna.”



Silence. You could hear Towa's tail move.

"It's… it's what Suisei and Azuki did. Basically the same procedure."

"Don't… Don't worry, they woke up last week. I checked them, interacted with them all week."

"They don't have sequels like you, Suisei. They have no problems."

"They are… they are the same girls we've always known. I can vouch for that."

That… that was mostly true. The Researcher said their will could be fragmented, that there could be many versions inside of them, that their base will may have been warped, one of their traits amplified. As far as Towa could tell, none of that had happened. Their personalities were the same.

Or mostly. Luna didn't say "Nano-ra" anymore, seeing as she no longer looked like a baby. The Researcher said the appearances could be born of a desire, an insecurity, or a memory. Where these appearances had come from… was anyone's guess. She guessed Luna was tall now as the product of an insecurity regarding her height, but that was it. Speaking of insecurities… yeah, maybe one other had played a part in something too. But it had nothing to do with appearance, nor personality.

"H-hey… Kon-Kanata~…"

The girl with black hair and blue eyes spoke.

Yeah. That was it.

"Towa… Towa explained everything to us, but… to think everything could change, and I kept this same, noisy voice… I may ask this Researcher you speak of for another go at it", she said, pouting.

Yeah. It was 100% Amane Kanata's voice. No doubt about it. The same wonderful voice.

A voice they had all been dying to hear.

After speaking, she made her way to the table. Sio had stood up, allowing those reunited space.

Kanata sat down next to Suisei. Next to the girl who looked like Tokino Sora.

Like she had said, Towa had explained everything.

She also had asked one favor of Kanata.

"Hey, Suisei… Long… long time no see, uh?"

No response came.

Suisei was crying.

She just let the tears run down her face at first, not moving any part of her body, just looking at her.

Then she brought her hands to her eyes, and she cried on them, while screaming hard.

Kanata just rubbed her back. It took her a while to stop screaming.

“Kanata, I… I’m so sorry… I’m really, so, so sorry…”

“Sorry? For what, Suisei-chan?”

“You… You have no idea, no idea… No idea how stupid I was… I missed you so, so much…, and after what happened… Every day… every day I feel like I’m failing everyone… like I’m failing you… I… I feel like I’ve done things that I can’t fix, things I don’t know how to fix…! I threw away my face… my body… my voice… and I… I don’t know if I can get them back… I even threw away my name… when I look at the mirror every morning, I don’t know who I am, who I need to be… I’m no one, no one anymore… I’m so happy… so happy, at what Towa said… So happy you aren’t a failure… a failure… like me…”

“Suisei-chan, you aren’t a failure. Just… just come here.”

Saying that, Kanata hugged her, trying to let her rest her face on her shoulder.

Sora’s body was too tall. Kanata’s new one was too small.

Kanata stood up, and allowed Suisei to hug her stomach.

“Just… just close your eyes, ok?”

Suisei did. Kanata also did, and begun stroking her hair.

“Suisei-chan, you worked so hard, didn’t you? I’m so proud of you.”

Suisei started trembling, while hugging Kanata.

“How many people rely on you, Towa told me all about it”

Towa has said that, yes.

“Who you are? You are my friend. Who you need to be? No one, but who you want to.”

Suisei grabbed Kanata harder, and trembled uncontrollably.

“Things you can’t fix? There’s nothing like that.”

“Things you don’t know how to fix? I’ll help you figure it out.”

“You can lose your face. Your body. I did, too.”

“You can lose everything, and it’ll still be alright because…”

“Because you’ll never be alone.”

“In Hololive, you’ll never be alone.”

“As long as long as Hololive is there, no one… no one is truly alone.”

“Things will be alright because… we’ll always have Hololive! And it’s thanks to you!”

“Just… just look at me.”

Suisei opened her eyes, and she looked up.

Kanata wasn’t there.

It was her picture. The one she had misplaced.

Kanata held it and hid behind it.

“Why did you keep this picture?”

“This… this is just a piece of paper with ink on it, is it not? Why… why did you keep it?”

“It’s not what you can see, silly. It’s all that’s behind it. Who cares about a face, or a name?”

“To me… to me this is still true.”

Saying that, she flipped the picture.

On its backside it had something written.

[“To the best friend I have in the world.

Let’s take one on top of the Budokan one day.

- The one that by meeting her became the luckiest girl in the world.”]

“Let’s take a new picture. I’ll write the same thing once again. Because it’s still true. It’s still us.”

“This body… this body has no problems! So, I can be with you longer!”

“Let’s go to the Budokan together, Suisei!”

Suisei had never stopped crying. She still felt a flood of tears on her eyes at that moment.

She grabbed her, and looking downwards…

“KANATAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

…gave a scream so loud, Towa feared for everything crystal and glass in the bar.



Meanwhile, Himemori Luna had gone and sat next to Tsunomaki Watame. She was crying and shaking uncontrollably while hugging her, too, all the time Kanata spoke to Suisei. Not even her scream made her stop. She just caressed her head. Her fluffy, fluffy hair. Everything Towa and Kanata said was true. They were still themselves. She looked at Towa. How she tried to hide her tears, and how the girl next to her rubbed her back, smiling. If she recalled… this place was called the *Devil's Den*. Right now, inside of the *Devil's Den*, no one was alone. Everyone had someone. Someone to cry against, someone to comfort them. Towa had apologized to them for what she had done but… Towa had done the right thing. Seeing everyone crying tears of happiness, that was clear. Luna couldn't be happier. Happier to be alive. Happier to be able to caress Watame's fluffy hair like this. And she was the tallest one of them all, out of the four members of generation four! Hehe. She smiled, still caressing Watame's hair.

…

Wait.

…

Four?

Did… did generation four always only have four members?

The… the tallest one?

If… if Luna recalled correctly…

[NO. IT'S WAY TOO SOON FOR THAT.]

[YEAH. WAY TOO SOON.]

Himemori Luna… Himemori Luna found herself staring blankly at the wall.

Had… had she been thinking about something? She felt like a thought just slipped her mind.

Well… it couldn't have been anything that important, if she forgot it like that.

If it was, it'd surely come back to her.

She smiled, happy to be alive, and got back to caressing Watame's hair.



End of Epilogue 4: Everybody Comes to the Devil's

Epilogue 5: These unburied comrades of mine

Akai Haato	*Natsuiro Matsuri*
Friend	*Friend*
Australia's Greatest Export	*Pretty Pure Princess*

That's what the graves Shirakami Fubuki stood in front of said.

She put flowers on both of them. Red for Haato, yellow for Matsuri.

Then she looked at them. Red and yellow, against a green background.

It was the first visit of the new year.

Fubuki, once again, couldn't help but think the same thing she thought of every time she came here.

Every time she laid those flowers there.

"This isn't how it was supposed to be."

It really wasn't.

After a concert.

After their successful Budokan concert.

That's when Fubuki should have been presenting these bouquets to them.

To celebrate what had just happened. Not to remember what happened long ago.

And she was sure. Sure it would have been a success. A Budokan concert, of these two.

Both were really eccentric. They really did a lot of things that made a lot of people raise eyebrows.

But when they put the idol suit on? They changed.

Proper idols, through and through.

Fubuki thought they did a good job then, as proper idols.

But, truth was… the side she loved the most… the side she missed the most… yeah.

It was their eccentric side.

A side they would never show again.

To think it would come to this…

To think Chris would do what she did…

They had been generation comrades once. For a very short while, but a couple of days.

Maybe… maybe she could have done a better job.

Of caring for her. Of checking how she was doing.

She understood Chris must have been hurt.

But, really, to think she would go that far?

She had paid for it with her life. It didn't make Fubuki feel better.

Haato and Matsuri were still under the ground.

Like Sora, Akira ("A-chan"), Shion, Ayame, Choco, Kanata, Luna.

Roboco was gone.

Nothing could bring them back.

Hololive lost a lot of members.

Generation 1 lost two, caused by someone who had also been part of it.

They had been five. They were just three now.

"Hey, Fubuki. Sorry for being late."

"Yeah, we are truly very very sorry, really sorry!"

He.

What a silly thing to say.

Fubuki…

Fubuki was just glad they were here.

It really meant so much to her. To still have them at her side.

“Hey guys. I’m glad you could make it.”





Yeah. In generation one, Shirakami Fubuki, Aki Rosenthal, and Yozora Mel were still alive.

They had both survived that night, on account of not being there.

It wasn’t just dumb luck, just some chance of the day, no.

They both carried long-term problems, that ended up saving them.

Aki Rosenthal had some health problems. She had been in the hospital.

She was better now.

Yozora Mel had some really ugly problems with her direct manager. She was on break due to that.

All the staff had been fired to remove a leaker. She had no reason to be on break with him gone.

Well, not anymore, now that they had taken care of every Jaeger.

After what happened, it was decided it would be better if they stayed out of the public eye.

Safer that way.

They hadn’t explained the reasons for their absence.

A V-tuber disappearing and everyone assuming they had died… it wasn’t unusual.

Better to let the Jaegers think they were out of the picture completely.

Seems it had worked. She was glad.

They all acknowledged each other with a nod, then crouched down.

Aki touched Haato's grave with one hand. The other one held one of Fubuki's.

Fubuki was in the middle of them both. With the hand that didn't held Aki's, she held one of Mel's.

Mel's, in turn, mirrored Aki and, while holding one of Fubuki's hand, touched Matsuri's grave.

In the graves, laid the bouquets of flowers Fubuki had left. Red and Yellow.

She had arranged them in such a way, that they both touched right in the middle of the graves.

Generation 1 formed a circle, connected.

Just two. There being only two graves allowed them to do this.

With three graves, and two people, doing this would be impossible.

They vowed to do it every year. It was their vow, and prayer, to never lose anyone else.

-

Fubuki fixed the bouquets so they both were straight and in the middle of their respective graves.

She took distance to let Aki and Mel have a moment.

Since she had arrived first, she had plenty of time for remembrance. It was just they did, too.

She looked around the graveyard. They weren't the only members of Hololive here, no.

Minato Aqua and Oozora Subaru tended to the graves of generation 2.

Gamers… Gamers had graves as well. But Inugami Korone wasn't tending to them.

She was instead a little removed, and looking into the distance, while hugging her arms.

Fubuki went to approach her.

--

Oozora Subaru saw Shirakami Fubuki walk.

She followed her path with her gaze and found Inugami Korone.

Yeah. That was expected. It happened every time.

“You can go too, if you want.”

Minato Aqua had said that, smiling, while she tended to Murasaki Shion’s grave.

“Mio was also your friend, was she not?”

Yeah. Yeah, she was. Maybe even her best friend.

“Yeah, but…”

But somehow…

“Somehow, this feels more personal to them than me.”

Saying that, she went back to fixing Yuzuki Choco’s grave.

--

Shirakami Fubuki reached Inugami Korone’s side.

Korone noticed, and acknowledged her with a small nod, then went back to observing the distance.

“How are you, Korone?”

“Angry. At myself.”

Fubuki knew when silence was the better answer.

“I’m... angry at me… for being jealous. After so long, I still am.”

--

Inugami Korone felt jealous towards everyone else in this graveyard.

Everyone but Fubuki, that is. And maybe Subaru.

Jealous that they had bodies to grieve.

It was such a stupid thing to be jealous over.

The pain… having a body didn’t make the pain go away.

But seeing them… seeing them Korone could feel it. Feel it helped.

It gave closure, at least.

She couldn’t have Okayu back. A part of her knew it.

But she really wanted closure. A body to talk to, at least.

Nekomata Okayu and Ookami Mio, the Gamers members who had died, had graves.

There were coffins inside. But nothing inside of the coffins.

The next day, police went to the building they had used as a safehouse.

They found 9 bodies. The 9 bodies of the members of the Jaegers division that had attacked them.

1, Subaru had let escape. That completed the 10.

He had no reason, and he alone couldn't take two bodies.

The bodies of Okayu and Mio, that weren't in the building.

The trackers were found, destroyed.

Someone had taken them. For what reason, no one knew.

"It's so cruel, Fubuki."

Inugami Korone shook a little. She had begun crying.

"It makes me feel things I shouldn't be feeling."

"Sometimes I feel hope, that maybe… maybe Okayu somehow is still alive…"

"Sometimes I feel worried, that maybe… maybe she's having a bad time, suffering, somewhere…"

"Why did they take them, why?!"

Fubuki knew when to step in.

She turned Korone around gently, and hugged her. Let her cry against her.

It was Fubuki's turn to look at the distance.

She thought of Mio, her best friend.

Why did they take them. Yeah. Fubuki also wanted to know the answer to that.

End of Epilogue 5: These unburied comrades of mine

Final Epilogue: Prologue to the next arc!

Ookami Mio unlocked the door, and walked out into the corridor.

There were two swords, sticking out of her back.

Inside of the room she had just left, there were five dead individuals, all clad in full black.

She walked slowly, her arms hanging at her side.

She saw something up ahead. In the corridor.

She eventually reached it.

Two more individuals clad in full black, dead as well.

And Okayu.

She sat at her side.

Her face had a smile. Her eyes were slightly open.

There was no light in them.

Was… was Okayu dead?

Okayu couldn't be dead. Korone would get sad.

What… what could Mio do.

Fubuki.

She had taken a lot of energy from her via [Energy Sharing].

Maybe… maybe she could share it… again…

It was probably that energy that had kept Mio alive so far.

But Okayu…

Mio opened her eyes, and looked deep into them.

She didn't want Okayu to die.

And…

And Okayu was more to Korone than Mio was to Fubuki. It made sense.

She felt weaker and weaker.

She sat on top of her legs and let her arms hang at her side.

Her head hanged as well.

Suddenly, two doors busted open, at the other side of the corridor.

This floor had 5 rooms. A big one with two small ones on one side, and two medium ones on the opposite. 5 Jaegers had attacked the big room. These two being on the corridor seemed to show each one had taken a room, for an ambush. It made sense that the rooms at the other side had been taken by one each, as well.

The men stopped to peak into the room Mio had left.

They walked towards her slowly, swords drawn.

Their steps were heavy.

“You… you monster…”

“You killed them all!”

“Those were our comrades, we trained with them!”

They both stood right behind Mio, each at one side.

They had decided to deliver one single combined strike.

Each one from his side, they would both chop off her head the same time.

They would pull all their anger, all their indignation into that blow.

For their comrades.

They prepared their swords, and then…

Then that final blow of indignation never came.

Both men fell, dead.

A single figure had taken them out in one swift move. A figure with animal ears.

Their partner crouched in front of Mio. They had animal ears too.

They waved a hand in front of her face, then looked at their partner.

“Unconscious. Doesn’t have long.”

They then checked on Okayu. Took her pulse.

“No pulse, but still warm. I can perform CPR, but with these wounds…

I’m gonna run her dry before long. Call it in.”

They grabbed Okayu with care, then moved her a little, so she was flat on the ground.

As the figure rolled their sleeves up, they spoke to her.

“I’m sorry. If this works, it’s going to be very painful for you.”

They took some cloth from the men laying there, and rolled it around her torso so it covered the wounds. Not too loose, not too tight. It was faster than it was quality, but this was a race against time. Then they started to perform CPR.

As they did, their partner called someone else.

“We secured two critical here. You?”

“They are cornered. I’m watching. We both are.”

“Tch. I hate it, I really do, but we have our orders.

Without big injuries we can’t intervene, even life-threatening ones have to be allowed.”

That was the price they had to pay.

They didn’t have many friends. They couldn’t afford to pass up the chance to make a new one.

Especially when he had reached out to them.

It really pained them, but… letting someone die today may allow them to save thousands tomorrow.

They still wanted to save everyone if they could, though.

Leaving one of their own for dead really didn’t sit right with them.

“He’s pointing at them with a submachine gun.”

“I know, but…”

“Wait. Someone just ran him over. One of theirs. A human friend.”

“…ok. Retreat to the rendezvous then.”

“Roger.”

“Hey, I told you to call it in, didn’t I? She’s almost here.”

“Attention, truck we…”

Before they could finish, Okayu woke up.

It shouldn’t have been possible. When you lose blood and your heart stops beating, you don’t get up like that as soon as it starts again. But they didn’t know Mio had pumped her with her remaining energy moments before.

So Okayu woke up as she was being pumped, and blood quickly accumulated on her mouth. She spat it all at once, right into the face of the one performing CPR. She grabbed one of their arms, the closest one to her face, a lot on it. Pain, fear, questions.

The one who had received her blood to the face didn’t care about that in the least. Instead, they used their free hand to support Okayu’s head, show her they were a friend. They locked eyes, then saw hers go slightly up.

“That’s right, see the ears? We are friends.

I know it hurts, but hang in there. Everything is going to be all right.”

“Ko… Koro… …ne?”

“…she’s fine. One of your comrades just rescued her and Fubuki.”

They, of course, knew their names.

“Go… good…”

“And we are here to rescue you, so hang in there, ok? I know it hurts, but just hang in there.”

Okayu just smiled, and closed her eyes slowly.

“Hey, hey, stay with me, stay with me” said the figure while hitting her on the face with her palms repeatedly, “Hey, stay with me!”

“Truck, we have two critical here, get the vats ready!”

Saying that, they carefully removed the swords from Mio, crouched in front of her, and stood up, with her on their back. Her breathing… did she even have one?

The other figure grabbed Okayu on their arms. Her breathing was harder, labored. The pain, no doubt. Her staying conscious would come with her share of suffering, that much was clear; however, it beat the alternative by a mile.

They departed the building through a window, and made for the truck. All after crushing their trackers, of course. They made for the truck that had the vats that would save their lives, and that would take them to the ship upon which they would cross the sea.

“That’s pretty much the tale of Hololive. It’s also the history of V-tubing. One and the same.”

Someone with animal ears on their head was speaking to someone who didn’t have them.

He had finished telling her a story. The story of why Hololive was formed.

What it wanted to achieve. Why it was attacked. How it overcame that.

“Hololive, the first v-tubing group.”

“Or at least, that’s the history the public knows of.”

“Before the Hololive initiative, the government had two others.”

“Two similar groups, five members each. No human involvement then.”

“A group of animal traits, and a group of demon queens from hell.”

“Both groups centered on the same concept. Centered around a café.”

“Guess what happens, right before the existence of ours projects is to be made public?”

“That’s right. We are attacked. Not by Jaegers, the group didn’t exist back then.”

“You wouldn’t be wrong to think about them as their predecessors, though.”

“We lost two members. They lost one. Both projects had to be cancelled.”

“We invoked our trauma clauses, and here we are.”

“I bet you already figured it out, right? Our existence, our location, it was leaked to them.”

“That damn committee of oversight…”

“I can think of reasons for many of the members. The Old Guard doesn’t want society to change, and if that’s the express motive of V-tubing, of course he’d want to see it fail. Mr. National Security, I think he’s in line with what a part of the Jaegers thought: Demons, animal traits, too risky to have individuals with such power running around. Mr. National Defense, I think he might have wanted to test our combat capabilities, see how much we could do, see if we could give Japan an edge against other countries in the region. Those are my prime suspects.”

“The Researcher, maybe he wanted more bodies to do tests on, more material. He provided us with these vats you are seeing, and also with trackers to see what would go on with the Hololive members, told us to rescue a couple and drop them in. Needed test subjects and all that BS. He says he didn’t plan the attack and only learned of it later, but he could have stopped it, and didn’t. He’s a self-serving bastard, who only cares about his own interests.” They still had one of his crew on board, though.

“As for The Reformer… if he wants society to change, that should make him V-tubing greatest ally. But… you don’t spend that much time mingling with such a rotten bunch before the rot spreads to you. I don’t think he’s as innocent as he looks at first glance. No human is.”

The human he was addressing didn’t react. She knew she wasn’t innocent.

“We are just pawns in their games. They don’t want society to change, to get better. If they can get something out of you, they do. Like these vats, made using our cells. Before the attack, they had already started developing them thanks to us. I heard they took blood from the demons of the other group, and planned to inject a human with it. I hope they weren’t so stupid, but that Researcher… yeah, they probably did it.”

“If they can use you, they do. If you serve them better dead, they kill you. We are second class beings, and why? Because we are different. We are tracked. No benefit of the doubt, they are wary of you just by the virtue of your existence, of your birth. We gotta prove we are trustworthy, by streaming our lives. And we tried. We were gonna give it a shot. But they wouldn’t allow it. They still don’t want to allow it: the girls on those vats are proof of that. We’ve had enough. Enough of us being the only ones who contribute dead to this dynamic. That’s why I’m ending it.”

“We are. We are bringing down this wicked society of theirs. In a big, smoldering fire. We are burning it to the ground completely. Throwing away all the debris. Building a better, more just one in their place. Hololive methods of working from the inside sound nice. They get nothing done. They will never give up their privileges, if we don’t force them. So that’s what we’ll do. We’ll force them.”

“But… I guess you don’t care about any of that. Just good old payback for you, am I right?”

The girl nodded.

That was fine.

He looked at the vats again.

“Would you look at that. Seems they are about to walk amongst us once more.”

Ookami Mio was in a room she had never seen before. On the bed, clothes had been arranged for her. She put them on. She then left the room. She was led to a bigger, common room, where she was to wait. At one point, a girl she had never seen before entered it too. A girl with animal traits, like everyone here. The girl looked at her, but didn’t break the silence. Some time passed. Eventually, a door opened, and in walked a boy, with animal traits, like everyone here. Black hair. Blue eyes. Maybe purple. He addressed the other first.

“Whoa, looking good, Okayu!”

Okayu? Was that girl… was that girl Okayu?

She looked at her. She looked… different. But she guessed she could see a certain resemblance, yeah.

Mio herself... How did Mio herself look?

“Hey, Mio, you don’t look too bad, yourself!”

“I know you haven’t had a chance to look at your new appearance yet, so here, a mirror.”

She took it, without thanking the boy.

She looked at her reflection.

…

Of course.

Of course she’d look like her.

Like the person who caused her to feel the most love…

…and the most hate.

The most pain.

It couldn't be any other way. Mio could never escape her, and her big, long shadow.

She looked like Shirakami Fubuki.



"Now, there's a lot to explain! Everything will be explained, I assure you! But first, I'm sure you both must be hungry. So, let's have your first meal of 2021! I hope you don't mind Korean food, it's… it's all we have. Although here, it's just called food. I'll notify the kitchen, and the rest."

He almost left the room, but when he had only one foot left on it, he stopped, and gave a step back.

"I'm sorry. How rude of me to depart without saying this much:

Please, let me welcome you to our group! The group that will change society, once and for all!

Welcome to Animal Revolution! **Animare**, for short."

Saying that, he left the room.



End of the final Epilogue: Prologue to the Animal Revolution arc!

This story will be continued in…

We'll always have Revolution.

~~Release planned mid October 2020, at the latest.~~

~~To be released before 2020 is past!~~

To be released before the first half of 2021 is over

(There's a small tease about plot points and characters at the end of the afterword,

be sure not to miss it!)

Afterword:

Hololive is written with an H of "Hope".

If you are reading this afterword after reading all of my fanfic, then, dear reader, mine came true.

…

How's that, to guilt trip you to read it all, if you grew bored and decided to check the last page? While also not making you feel *too* bad, by acknowledging that I considered the possibility? Truly, a genius. Ahem. Dear reader, it's so good to see you have made it all the way to the end! How I want you to tell me what you thought of it! Did you like it? Did you love it? Did you hate it? Did you find it interesting, at least? Oh, how I hope it did not leave you indifferent! There's so much I want you to tell me, but I guess the reason of this afterword is for me to tell things to you, so I better get to it. Where to start, where to start… how about some facts? I wrote this fanfic in a month's time. Guess what you should first hear is my why. Why write this story. Or how. How did I think of it. It's all so foggy now but… I'd say it's born out of wanting to see two things. The first of them has to do with a fact: Hololive, the core female Japanese Hololive branch, has never lost members (save for Hitomi Chris, who was active for only one day.) For this to be so, they've had to overcome a lot of difficulties, and struggles. After becoming a Hololive fan with the debut of gen 4, I many times learned of a situation or saw it happen, that made me think, maybe we were one, two steps away from this member leaving the group. That's when I had a thought. A wicked one. What if all those situations that were resolved favorably, weren't? What if every time Hololive could have lost a member, they had done so? What if after crying in December Ookami Mio left the group? Kiryu Coco has always been tight roping with her attitude and content, what if she was kicked out as a result of that? Amane Kanata always gave me a "may disappear any given day" vibe, what if she did? What if Himemori Luna quit? How would Hololive look? I started thinking about that. And somehow, I couldn't see this Hololive diminished in members, diminished in attitude. I saw them shining just as strongly, if not more. I started to want to see that. The second notion was that, back

then you had two stars that outshone all others: Shirakami Fubuki, due to her subscriber count, and Kiryu Coco, due to her rapid growth. You thought of Hololive and you thought of them. They seemed to carry the group, in a way. To carry it forwards, into the future. I myself have always been a Tsunomaki Watame fan. I started thinking, and what if it had been her, instead of Coco, with the rapid growth. What if she was where Fubuki was, at the top spot in terms of subscribers. In short, I started wanting to see a Hololive carried by other members. I thought they'd be as capable. I started to imagine it, that group, that story.

Kiryu Coco isn't there right off the bat. Shirakami Fubuki and Inugami Korone are diminished, having lost their best friends. Tsunomaki Watame, Houshou Marine, and Oozora Subaru are the new trinity driving Hololive into the future. Minato Aqua is the one link between past and future, popular already but also capable of reinventing herself. That's the story I wanted to tell. It would always be a story set in the future. In this case, it takes place in December of 2020. I originally envisioned this as a manga. Many chapters would happen, that would slowly introduce the readers to the state of things. Very slowly, very subtly, hints would be dropped regarding what had happened, what made things end up like they had. A reveal arc would start around chapter 50. It just happens that I myself have 0 skill whatsoever to draw. So I couldn't draw that manga. Then one good day I said, what if I wrote it instead? Chapter one of this fanfic represents the original story I wanted to tell: of a Hololive where the members that are currently in the background, stood front and center as the heroes. I wanted that to be most of the book. However, because I lack skill to write interesting slice of life stories, it ended up being just a chapter, and this book quickly turned into a more narrative driven story, with me setting up twists, situations, mysteries, a narrative that revealed its pieces slowly and slowly explained them as well; I think I ended up being quite skilled at it. Personally, I feel I didn't quite manage to highlight Oozora Subaru as I would have liked. For Houshou Marine and Tsunomaki Watame I hope I did a better job. Maybe Tsunomaki Watame was the only one who I made "a hero in normal times", with her concert. The rest where all "heroes in troubled times". That said, I quite like how this turned out. As for the story structure, I always planned it like it is presented, disjointed and not chronologically ordered. The Oozora Subaru scene in the street and the Shirogane Noel scene at the morgue would always be told right before the final conversation in the church. This book is truly structured around that: conversation battles. Subaru's in the road, Kanata and Towa in the church, Marine and Rushia in the morgue, Noel in the morgue, Towa and Watame in the church. Those are the pillars the story is centered around. However, due to how I structured it, with Towa being gone at the start and only being revealed as alive in a later twist, I couldn't show the conversation in the moment it happened. That's why the Marine and Aqua conversation happens in the church, to replace the Towa and Kanata one. They happen at the same

time. In my mind, they always did. I personally wasn't too happy with the Marine and Aqua one, I reworked it a lot, but I still felt it was kind of weak, or forced. Knowing this fact, I still decided to keep it instead of removing it, and build on that. Have the conversation achieve nothing, and need for Shion to help Aqua posthumously, and also have Marine later realize that maybe she shouldn't start identifying the problems of others and firing away, but listen to them first and then speak. I think this proved to be a good decision, and now I think the Marine Aqua conversation is fine for what it is. Now, I should explain the logic of why the narrative is presented the way it, chronologically wise. For that, I want to first refer to the title of this fanfic.

This fanfic is titled "We'll always have Hololive" as a reference to Casablanca, that much I said. The name of epilogue number 4, "Everybody comes to the Devil's" is also a reference: a reference to "Everybody comes to Rick's", the name of the original play upon which Casablanca is based upon. I need to make a confession: I have not watched the film. I came across the quote after I had already started writing, when translating a Mochizuki Himari video. A viewer sent her a long Marshmallow referencing the Japanese equivalent of "Here's looking at you, kid", so I needed to see the scene to see if more references were hidden in the viewer's message. A great scene. After I finished translating that video and came back to writing this, I knew what my title would be. I just felt so right.

[We'll always have Paris.

We didn't have it, we'd… we'd lost it, until you came to Casablanca. We got it back last night.]

That quote speaks to you in such a visceral level. About a valuable thing, that you can't take for granted. Not even something as intangible as a memory. It being there is not guaranteed, it's there because those involved made it be there, through their actions. That's truly this story, at its core: It shows that Hololive being there, both it just existing and it existing as what it's meant to exist as, is not for granted. It can be lost. In some cases, it was about to be lost. It wasn't, because a character did something, said something. When Roboco dies in the narrative, Hololive dies, too. Then moments later it's brought back, by people springing into action. And so it goes. When someone said something hopeful, they kept Hololive alive. When someone stood up despite their pain, and helped others stand up too, they kept Hololive alive. When someone smiled, and made someone else smile, despite everything, Hololive was kept alive. That's why the narrative is the way it is. Subaru "defeats" the Jaeger in the street, and so does Noel in the morgue. Both are shown in the end of the book, because before I showed the girls defeating others, I wanted to show them defeating

their inner demons. Defeating their pain, their doubts. In the end, I still needed to try to hype the final fight, but in my mind that battle was as good as won as soon as Hololive presented themselves to it. Sun Tzu said:

[Victorious warriors win first and then go to war,

while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win.]

By all their actions up to that point, Hololive had won that fight before presenting themselves to it. Once Towa says she'll help, they weren't losing that fight. They may have lost it, had they done something different. Hololive will pull through. Of course they will. We all know that. When Roboco dies, that notion is shattered. They can die. Some do. Some don't, by a hair. When they show up at the church, they have their invincibility. They didn't always have it. They lost it. But they got it back. If this book managed to convey one idea well, I hope it's the one contained on this page.

Something that to me really reflects the weight, the impact little things can have, is epilogue number 3, Backstabbers galore. On it, Noel rejects Flare's advances due to being distracted by her words, and the latter ends up as an emotional wreck. Maybe if Noel had agreed to a massage, they could have had a moment, and she would have been fine. Noel herself is about to be overcome by her negative feelings, but at the last second, she sees a message: a message of someone who loves her, telling her everyone in the house does. Her ending the novel happy wasn't granted. It was one action that made it so. Flare doesn't receive an equivalent action, for whatever reason, and she actually doesn't end up happy. This too was of utmost importance to me: to have multiple outcomes, to not have everyone end up in the same state, and to make it so that those that did, didn't all end up like that for the same reasons. What I mean here, I can illustrate with two examples. In the morgue, Rushia is wrecked by grief: she lost her comrades. Marine comes, and gives her a simple comfort: they may be gone physically, but they are still with you, in some way. That works for Rushia. At the same time, Suisei is also wrecked by grief, for the same reason as Rushia: she lost her comrades. However, for her the comfort that was given to Rushia is not enough. She sees Sora's face in the mirror every day. She sees Azuki wearing A's face too. She has Kanata's picture. That a part of their comrades remains is obvious to her, yet she needs more than that, in a way Rushia did not. That's the first example. The second one has to do with the conversation battles with the enemies. Subaru spares the first Jaeger because she doesn't want to kill, and because he hadn't killed anyone. Then, those reasons don't apply to the second Jaeger that Noel spares: he killed. Noel spares him, hence, for a different reason: she wants it to be possible to come back from killing, because she doesn't

want Flare to be destroyed by what she did. Then, we have the boy in the church. As far as Watame knows, he killed Kanata and Luna. No one dear to her has killed. Again, the previous reasons can't apply. Yet she still saves him. Because it's who she is. Nothing less than a complete hero, shining in the dark, cape fluttering in the wind.

I want to briefly address something here: you might be wondering why there seems to be no judicial repercussions or persecution for the Jaegers. I did not include judicial sanctions because they would have gotten in the way of the forgiving. Now, ain't that a quote. I always thought the committee of oversight was protecting them, even after their defection. In future volumes, if a character breaks the law, they'll go to jail. Wait till you see who I'm going to put in there, and for what. You'll wish things had stayed the way they were on this volume.

I guess I should now speak about the tone. I promoted this with the following tag: "This is Hololive, as you've never seen it before. A tale of lights and shadows, of loss and hope." Why does this story have this tone? I truly, truly didn't want to write Hololive propaganda. Pink tinted glasses propaganda. I think that's doing a disservice to the group. Showing all the girls painting their nails together, and overcoming the great difficulty of one of them being insecure about her hair… Hololive can be more than that. They can overcome the big themes of life. Death. Intolerance. Distrust. Hate. They can be Life, Acceptance, Faith, Love. I didn't want to show them being pretty flowers in a dome, I wanted to shatter that dome and show the world, "hey, I think Hololive can very well still bloom flowers on a battlefield, that's how cool and determined they are." That's why this story pushed them to where they have never been pushed before. I really go in hard with some things. I touch upon some prohibited story. I drop the story on their desk and say, "Well, what about Chris, what happened to Chris?", for example. That's why I feel kinda uncomfortable about sharing this story on r/Hololive. I may end up doing so despite that, and if you are reading this having come from there, hey, have a good chuckle at what I just said, haha. I don't know if any Hololive girl would like this story. If one of those that knows English reads it, would they like it? It'd be a dream come true for Coco, Artia, Civia, Risu, Iofi or Moona to read this and like it. However, I didn't pull any punches, nor spared anyone. Some characters have made up traits, but I also played with some negative ones that are very real (or seem so to me, at least). I love these girls. But I wanted to tell the truest story possible, and for that, I couldn't self-censor myself. That's my one vow to the readers. I won't be afraid of putting something on (digital) paper if I want to put it, come what may. However, I never intended to be edgy for the sake of edgy, I hope I managed to not come across as that type of author. I love dark elements, but they are just like a condiment when cooking: you want to let it be in the food in just the right amount for it to taste like you want, if you throw it in because

you like to see how it falls, the end result won't be good. This story has lighthearted and ridiculous moments as well. I take this as me inserting myself in the school of what may be my three biggest inspirations: Tokyo Ghoul, Shingeki no Kyojin, and Terra Formars. A world with no hope is a world that isn't fun. And a story that isn't fun… well, it's not a story I want to tell. This is, before everything else, a story I myself would have wanted to see someone else write, and since the chances of it are close to nil, I took it upon myself to write it and unleash it upon the world. I guess I should take the chance to say that's it's thanks to these three series I mentioned that I managed to face this story as I did, with all the complex elements that it ended up having: tons of characters, each one getting the spotlight at least once; the mysteries that were hinted at like a drip, drop by drop; and the jumping around in time. Originally I didn't intend for every girl to get a spotlight, it just ended up happening, the only one who ended up not getting one was Azuki. I could have given her a big moment or something, but I kinda decided it'd be better to have her be just a secondary character. It reflects the original idea, and in our world, in any group of magnitude like Hololive you are going to have members like that, putting in work constantly but silently, unnoticed. I'm a softy, and still gave her her one own scene, though.

This story features some distinctive elements. The first of which are songs. Originally it was going to only feature one song, *Son of a Witch's* OP, sung by Sakura Miko. The reason is I love the verse:

[**Tears are jewels, maidens of love!**]

Again, such a visceral thing. Your pain can make you more beautiful, if you wear it proudly instead of hiding it away. I really wanted it in the story. Then I said, why not have Flare and Marine sing too, a song per pairing? I had watched a Marine singing stream not long ago, where she sang Freckles, that's why she sings that. In the case of Flare singing *Reset*, that song was featured in *How a Realist Hero Rebuilt the Kingdom*, a novel that features many songs (although only by name, never lyrics, like I did). I think I always wanted to have Kanata's and Towa's covers, *Uma to Shika* and *Kuroi Hitsuji*, in.

Then, once Rushia is saved by Marine, I wanted to close the cycle in a way: She started the story anxious about going to the karaoke, so after showing her journey in the past, I think it was appropriate to show what she looked forward to in the present. *Prover* just made sense. The lyrics, plus the image of Gilgamesh walking onwards while all the comrades he had lost were looming over him… it just fit, for Rushia. Fun parenthesis: I originally intended to have no romance. Then thought about having some in the later volumes. Then, after I had decided Rushia would sing the first cour of the song, I listened to the full version, and…

[I'm here for you.

I'll live for you.]

…followed by that long lyrics-less pause? "Yeah, there's no way Rushia sings this to Marine and doesn't end up kissing her." That's why I wrote that scene. I was more or less forced to write it. When I wrote it, that was the first scene that made me go, "Fuck, this thing I just wrote is so good." I think my eyes even got teary eyed. That happened quite a lot, I'll admit. It's also one of the few scenes I wrote in advance. Most of this I wrote in the order I presented. Only her dream, that kiss scene, and Chris' flashback were written in advance. Although I did rewrite the entire chapter one after I had written chapter two. In chapter two, I only added one scene afterwards: the attack on the gen 2 house. I wasn't going to show it, but I'm glad I did, I felt proud of that scene too, it may be my best action scene. It felt fast and tight, like a good action scene. Oh, and before leaving that Rushia scene: I also went a little ecchi on the next one. After writing it I thought, hey, might as well leave it in. I intend to feature some ecchi moments, but not on every volume. Yeah. There's one character in particular I want to do a lot of ecchi things with. It'll start with something tame, then a "that escalated quickly" thing, and then... we'll, you'll see.

So, anyways, back to the songs. The Watame concert was an idea I had while writing. All I knew was "I want Watame to be important", but I had no idea where to place her in the narrative, apart from the climax. And then her 3D debut happened. After listening to her singing *SKILL* with the voices of the rest of gen 4? Yeah, I knew what my Watame scene would be. And it went from there. I gave a song to Noel but didn't have her sing it. I had played around with the idea of having Rushia sing *Ai o Komete Hanataba wo*, decided on Prover, but since I still wanted it in I gave it to Pekora. Changing "anata" and "futari" to minna" was something Watame did for her birthday stream where she sung it, that's where I first heard the song. I think songs ended up becoming a staple of this. I can't guarantee every volume will have them, but 2 and 4 will, for sure. For 4 I have almost a full round of karaoke decided for a certain group of individuals, you are so gonna love it. I can't wait to write it.

The other distinct element of this fanfic are the images it features. I originally intended to only have a few at key moments, but ended up having many many more. I haven't counted them but, I guess there are probably over 30, at least. You may have noticed, but some scenes and storylines were built around the images: Towa's in particular may be the best example of this, with the image for her cover shaping the whole plan of the night and what happened in the church, and a short hair fanart of her being the reason she has a bar. It's not the same fanart featured here. I'm planning to

feature it in volume 2. Fun fact: that fanart made me decide to have Towa come back as a twist, instead of having her stay dead. I thought it'd be so cool, everyone thinking her dead, and then the reveal that she was alive, and them coming to her for help in a moment of need. Rest easy though, this is way before I started writing, back in the days where I pictured the story as a manga. Many of the characters featured here, I wasn't clear if they'd survive the first attack or not, back then. By the time I decided to start writing this, I already had many overarching plots and stories I wanted to develop and tell with them. Towa is going to be one of the main characters of the whole series. Or at least, one of the mains for the first volumes. It may be obvious due to the role they play in this story, but Amane Kanata, Himemori Luna, Aki Rosenthal and Yozora Mel weren't always going to survive, and were in fact the last whose survival was decided. Again, rest easy, their survival was decided before I started writing the actual fanfic, but yeah, it was after I had a rough outline for the first volume. On June 24 Yozora Mel came back. I loved that stream so much, I decided I was gonna have her survive. On the first days of July, Sorahoshi Kirame and Meiro Kingyozaka started posting on Twitter. I think that gave me an out to have Kanata and Luna survive. I believe I started writing this story on July 7. I really intent to take responsibility and do interesting things with them.

But, I now need to address the elephant in the room: at the end, three Hololive members adopted the appearances of Nijisanji characters. These characters are the previously mentioned Sorahoshi Kirame, Meiro Kingyozaka, and Siu Lee. Korean Fox Mio (final name pending) is going to be one of the most important characters of volume 2 and volume 4. Volume 4 is a story I really, really want to tell. I want to tell every story I have a concept for, and that so far is roughly 11 volumes. I planted the seeds from some late, endgame level plot points here already; at least one post endgame arc is planned, too. I want to tell them all, and I hope I can see it fully to completion. That said, I know for sure, for sure, I would really hate to drop this before Volume 4. Its name is going to be "We'll always have Peace." For that story, I need Korean Fox Mio (final name pending (Oh, "K-Fox Mio" sounds cool, doesn't it?)). I hope you understand. For King-sized Luna (final name pending) there's something I want to do with her and a character that will be introduced in volume 3. Kanata is also going to play a minor role in that dynamic. That volume is going to be called "We'll always have Rainbows", so you can probably guess what it's gonna be about. Truth is, there's no way you can have any idea. But yeah, you can guess which characters may show up. I want to ask for the benefit of the doubt until then.

I want to say this though: I want to give Sorahoshi Kirame justice. Not the Amane Kanata you saw at the end, Sorahoshi Kirame. That much at least I want to do. However, it's gonna take a long time.

As for Siu Lee and Meiro, I don't want to discard the possibility completely, but I also feel the more and more I "fix" things to normalize them, the less and less impact a weird take on a character has, because you'll be thinking "meh, he'll fix this later anyways." I won't fix everything. I can assure you that.

Speaking of fixing… this fanfic features death as an element. Hololive characters died. This time, the story started in media res, and they had died in the past. Going forward, will I kill characters? Not my original characters, but V-tubers? Yes, I will. Not on every volume, but on most of them.

Here's how I see this saga currently: I have solid ideas for volumes 2, 3 and 4. By that I mean, I have a good grasp of who I'm introducing, how I'm using the characters, what is gonna happen to them, etc. For comparison, for this volume this would be: Story starts in media res, Hololive has lost members. Flashback chapter, members die. Rushia is lead to the morgue where a battle ensues and Jaegers is wiped out. Towa is revealed to still be alive. A battle in the church happens. Chris is revealed as the villain. Boy kills Chris out of nowhere. 2 flashbacks of Hololive members forgiving their attackers, then they forgive the boy. Towa reveals Kanata and Luna survived and look different. In a cemetery we see Mel and Aki were alive. Flashback of what happened to Mio that night, Animare manager narrates, Mio wakes ups, sees herself looking like she does, he welcomes her and Okayu to Animal Revolution, Animare. It's like Hajime Isayama says: I got islands I want to write.

Up to volume 4, those islands are pretty much set, I just need to build the bridges between them. Some bridges, if you understand them as particular scenes, I already have too, some I will need to come up with.

From 5 onwards it's vaguer. I may have an island here, a bridge there, but if I woke tomorrow and had to start writing volume 5, I'd have some trouble. Volume 3 and specially 4 I could start writing now. Still, that doesn't mean I'm not gonna have to do some research for 2. I didn't have an outline for 1 written down, I had it in my head. Every piece just fell into place. For 2 I'm having a lot of narratives running parallel to the other, so I need to see how to tell them in a way that feels cohesive. I also relied on twists, flashbacks, and mysteries for this volume. I feel this made this end up as a really interesting story. But, I have also seen people call a narrative that's not in a chronological order a chap attempt to look like a genius, and I somewhat agree. Maybe my writing isn't the best, and I relied on my twists to carry me through. I really want to prove myself with volume 2. I plan to have the story go from start to finish without jumping around in time. I also feel this volume lacked interesting actions scenes. For reference, in this Attack on Titan video:

https://youtu.be/r1XE8ON8fos?t=171

…this fanfic had mostly 2:51-2:57 scenes. Even my fights were heavily emotional. I want to have some 2:59-3:08 sequences too! That said…

I guess it's time to tease some stuff about volume 2.

Why "We'll always have Revolution"? I knew I wanted the girls to receive a blow in this volume. I needed an excuse to hurt them. I came up with three: Intolerance/racism, Distrust, and Hate. However, I feel that intolerance and racism is such an important theme, that it deserves to be looked at in detail and not just with a passing glance, like what was done here in this volume. In this volume I had a character discriminate and then be like, "yeah, discriminating is bad." I want to show that issue from the other side. I want to show those discriminated rising up, saying "enough". I want to show what drove them to that. I want to show how people in line with the establishment react. How do "bystanders" react. Do they oppose them? Do they join them? Do they stand aside and see what happens?

The government was not in this story at the start. But since I needed no police, and the girls to follow a plan that involved dealing with their attackers by themselves, it just ended up making sense to have them be a government dependent group, since the government could tell the police to stand aside, and it was a boss that had underhanded motives to propose things not always on their best interests. Plays nicely on what it means to be a part of an agency too.

In this next volume, Hololive is going to be asked to act like what it is: a project of the government. It was a project created to smooth over intolerance in a gradual way. Suddenly, here comes Animare, a group who wants to eradicate discrimination once and for all, swiftly, whatever the cost. Even if it means burning down some things. Even if it means burning down a lot of things. They'll rile up those mistreated. They'll try to exacerbate tensions. The government is having none of that, and will ask Hololive to step in to preserve the peace.

What will Hololive do? Some members know how wicked the government is.

Will they still obey them? Will they defend an imperfect peace?

Will they join forces with Animare? Will they demand a more perfect justice?

And… how will they react when they see they were the ones who took Mio and Okayu?

How will the reunion of Hololive Gamers go?

This is one narrative.

There's a south Korean V-tuber, named Gao. In this story, he's a she.

Her country took her friends away from her.

Now she wants to destroy it.

This is another narrative.

Hololive, revolution or not, still needs to fulfill some duties. Its leader needs to, that is.

While everything else is happening, she still needs to find new members.

The Researcher wants to test some new things.

So she'll hunt for them. New members for the group. Maybe new test subjects for him.

This is yet another narrative. (And don't worry, she's a getting name. A cool one, you'll see.)

Tokoyami Towa is no longer part of Hololive.

Her deal with The Researcher left both satisfied.

She owns a bar, and is free to do whatever she wants.

When revolution comes knocking at her door… what will she do?

This is the final narrative.

See how these four narratives interact, intertwine and clash, in "We'll always have Revolution"!

Featuring:

Hololive.

Animare.

The *Devil's Den* crew.

South Koreans.

Police.

A certain "angry girl" (who won't be angry).

A group of demon queens from hell.

A certain cocky demon, who has but one name, and also a mask on her head.

A beat reporter.

A girl who wants to connect the world with love, and two girls related to her.

A goddess without any followers.

A company mascot.

A certain rabbit and vampire duo.

A drag queen.

A grieving but resolute fan.

And a squirrel.

From "V-TUBING", Two Groups were Born.

HOLOLIVE VS. ANIMARE

An Unavoidable Battle, Waged by your Favorites.

This story will be told in…

We'll always have Revolution

A DiGreatDestroyer fanfic

~~Release planned mid October 2020, at the latest.~~

~~To be released before 2020 is past!~~

To be released before the first half of 2021 is over

"V HAS COME TO."

https://youtu.be/fqyAXOdWUsA

Are we prey? No, we are the hunters!

We are the hunters!

We are the hunters!



ANIMARE

Without knowing the names of the flowers they trample,

the fallen birds, await for a new wind.

Elevating prayers will not change anything,

what can change the present, is the resolution to fight.

VS.

Oh you pigs who laugh,

at the will to step over corpses and press on…!

Yours is the welfare of livestock,

the prosperity given by an illusion,

and the freedom of starving wolves!

HOLOLIVE!

The humiliation of imprisonment

are our arrows of counterattack!

We are *hunters* who,

beyond the castle walls,

slaughter their prey!

While surging impulses scorch our bodies,

we'll pierce the twilight with crimson bows and arrows!



I started wanting to write a Hololive story, but when this volume was nearly finished, I thought of an analogy that couldn't be more appropriate, considering all I plan to do moving forwards. This saga is the Fate Grand/Order of V-tubing. You never know what role a character will play in it, and some things may feel like they happen because I just felt like it. That said, I hope you'll stick with this story, I really want to try to make something enjoyable each time I write a page. I may not achieve that every time, but I did write a lot of pages, so I'm sure at least a couple made all that came before worth it. I know they did. I want to keep writing pages like that into the future.

-DiGreatDestroyer, August 2020

PS: I am u/DiGreatDestroyer on reddit and @valdivia_ja on Twitter. Hit me up with your thoughts!

Storyboard of an opening, based on Fate Grand/Order Cosmos in the Lostbelt OP 2

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGwvNG_DWE0)

-

If I what I hold in my hands is victory,

would letting it go, be defeat?

A world where no one is hurt…

It may be too beautiful a thing,

but I still would like to try betting on it again.

On…



Guy with his face distorted by digital effects on a televisor. He wears a suit

…a moonlit night like this…



A group of black claded individuals are being briefed by the previous individual in the televisor.

…I hear a bell telling the time.



One of them crosses path with a girl.
He's looking forward,
due to the suit you can only see his eyes.
She's looking in the opposite directio,
but a shadow cover her eyes.



He stops, and makes to look at her.
Discreetly, maybe he just thoughts about doing so. The girl is Shirogane Noel.

♫♪♫♪♫♪



Gloved hand fixes gloved hand.
The gloves are white, and belong to Houshou Marine.



Girl laces up her boot. This boot belong to Tsunomaki Watame.

Its reverberation…



Here, a weary looking Inugami Korone (on her newest outfit) imagines Nekomata Okayu on the wall. Make it so it's her head and part of her back that's vissible.
She isn't looking at Korone.

…in the empty me…



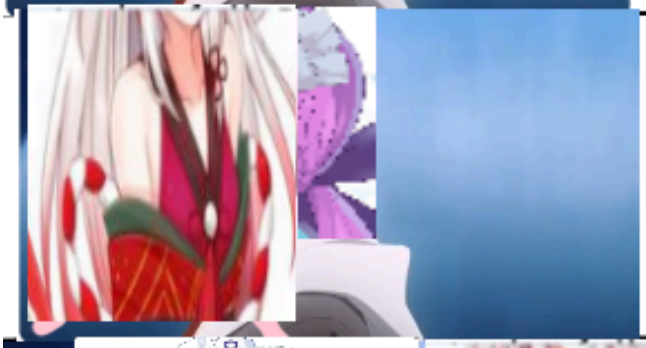
Then, Shirakami Fubuki, (on her newest outfit) looks at ghost images of herself (in her first outfit) and of Ookami Mio walking together.
You can only see the legs, maybe the tails, and the lower part of their stomachs.

Fubuki reacts to that with surprise,
then walks away resolutely.

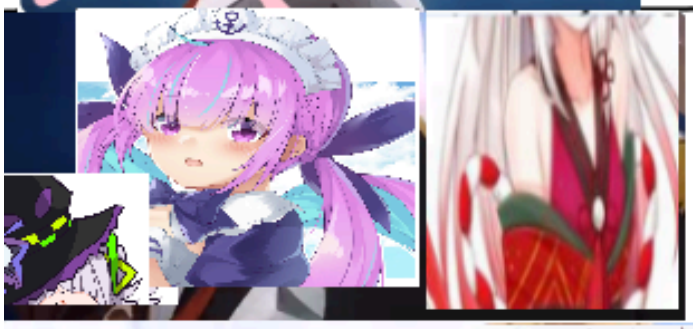
…feels like…



Sad looking Minato Aqua walks on a corridor.
She's sad, not destroyed by grief, but sad.



Then Nakiri Ayame walkes past.



She turns to look at her,
and Murasaki Shion also walks past.

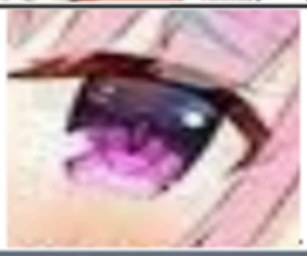


Nakiri Ayame smiles at her.
Shion waves at her.
On the background,
Choco also smiles.

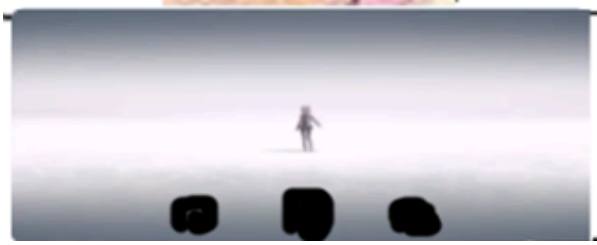
…my everything has been laid bare.



Aqua, mid turn,
smiles after seeing her friends.



Closeup of her eye.
Surprise, and realization.



She has finished turning.
She's in a graveyard, alone,
looking at three graves:

Wrath and desolation… it takes but a moment…

For people to receive them and hand them over…



Now as a black sihoutte,
Aqua looks behin here, where
images of Natsuiro Matsuri,
Akai Haato, Himemori Luna,
Amane Kanata and Roboco are.



A lighthing strikes,
and the images dissapear.
Aqua bends. Overcome by grief,

♫♪♫♪♫♪

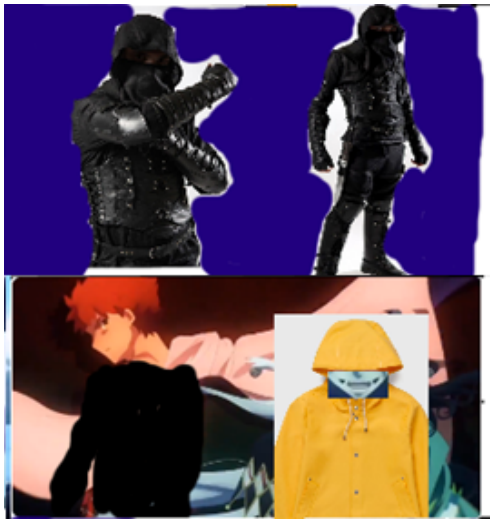


Tokino Sora looks at the camera with determination, a hand on chest. On the background, a starry night, upon which Hoshimati Suisei's comet can be seen.

The Researcher laughs at how well his schemes turned out.

…Creating enemies, there where they don't exist,

fighting and burning!



On a blue blackground, two black-claded individuals stand. One is closer than the other. Their uniforms are the same, their attitudes differentiate them: One is cooky, impatient, dying to fight; the other stands on guard, taking in the scene, no movement he does is wasted, a true professional in the art of killing.

A boy on a black shirt or sweater looks hatefully at the camera. Someone (a girl) on a yellow raincoat grins/does a wicked laugh, with only part of her face being visible.

We'll 

always have Hololive

Get running!

no matter how ridiculous your reason may be!

Get hot, and do it fast!

Let them resound, your words that tell no lies,

and lend your ears,

only to that throbbing!

April 2021 Note

Hey there! DiGreatDestroyer here again! This is just a short note to let you know this version you read has been completely spell-checked and proof-read for continuity with later developments, so you can read hard into it and share it around without qualms! Took a lot of time to do so, uh… the only significant difference in content from the original release is the inclusion of Bubble Love between pages 14 and 15 of the original. Not using that Watame cover was one of my biggest regrets with this story, so I couldn't endure any longer and included it. I hope you enjoyed it, and if you didn't due to it, at least you know it was the me of many months later who messed up the masterpiece of the me of many months ago haha

I also wanted to let you know I'm still working hard on volume 2! I have written over 500 pages since publishing this introductory volume! 235 of them are precisely from volume 2! But I also published a volume 1.5, that totals 250 pages (+70 from a Christmas special). You can find the details about it… right here!

We'll Always Have a Volume 1.5

https://drive.google.com/file/d/101zfotB8eNc6xTetpd_7ji3q_lQVzBAd/view?usp=sharing

This release contains two short story collections:

"The dreaming Man the World once had" - "The Calm before the Storm"

The first is a companion to volume 1, my love letter to a man and his dream!

The second is a bridge between volume 1 and volume 2!

This is Yagoo, as you've never seen him before.

A collection of Hololive origin and every-day stories.

And a tease of things to come!

Released on: November 6th, 2020 - Page count: 250 (+ a 70 pages Christmas special)

I would like to explain in detail why I've taken so long with volume 2, but… I already did on the preface and afterword of that volume, so please check it out for the answers! The rest will be on volume 2 itself! I really wish I could make this note longer, but I'm quite pressed on time. For one, I still need to proofread volume 1.5 itself once again!

~~But that's not the only reason, it's because tomorrow, in less than 13 hours, I'm releasing an Akai Haato short story, Red Heart! 25 pages! So, I still need to prepare some things for it (the announcements, etc). I neglected that a bit, since I figured it was better to get this volume up to speed before it saw the heavy traffic that I hope the short story brings to it! Oh, I hope I don't regret the decision haha!~~ Release went great, woho!

As you see, I've been working hard, hehe. I will continue to do so! Once more, thanks for giving my story a chance, for making it all the way to the end, and I hope to see you again on my pages! Take care, and do your best too!

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Also, I started a tip jar in Kofi! In this release I used stock images, fanart, and official art, but I'm trying to relay less on that and have my stories feature as much original art as possible. Since that costs quite a bit, here's my plug for it, shamelessly copy-pasted from the short story I mentioned above! Please consider donating!

My releases will always be free, but if you wish to, you can donate to my Kofi!

https://ko-fi.com/vtuberfanfiction

All the donated money will go into commissioning art ^_^!

If you can't donate, don't worry!

Please do think about sharing my work with others though!

Preferably with your billionaire best friend who *is* able to donate!

No, but seriously, every share helps, so I'd really appreciate any!

Oh, I almost forgot! I did a Twitter thread explaining some trivia about this release that I didn't get to cover in the original afterword! If you are interested in knowing all the inspirations and references I put in this, please have a look!

https://twitter.com/valdivia_ja/status/1379178902501855239

In case you aren't feeling like tackling another 300 page volume, here's some options!

Summer Stardust – The Bird

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hZH6v2jDJtWh8axreTx5FCKCxfxQjY5l/view?usp=sharing

These are two short stories taken out of my 2020 Christmas special.

The first is a feels-heavy love-centered story.

It tells of the Natsuiro Matsuri and Sara Hoshikawa date, as it happened on this world.

The second is Oozora Subaru's origin story for this elseworld.

Page count: 30.

Red Heart

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rwHeL1zgcttQI2sZGT8ujtfopLYR7dCs/view?usp=sharing

Be advised, this is a **dark** release.

It pushes the limit of how much fiction can make use of real world events.

I consider it my love letter to storytelling.

In many ways it can be said to contains two stories.

The story of a girl who spends her days in a foreign country.

Also the story of her father, who fights his way through life in a certain city.

Released on: April 9th, 2020 – Page count: 25.

List of songs featured:

1- *Bubble Love* (Cover by Tsunomaki Watame): https://youtu.be/2I3oQIF6UaU

2- *Reset* by Ayaka Hirahara: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3FQDpTA_lE

3- *Freckles* (sung by Houshou Marine): https://youtu.be/MWrWMVnnBL8?t=2796

4- *Koseiyo otome!* (NSFW video): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riScAYR6vio

5- *Uma to Shika* (Cover by Amane Kanata): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGXZNHNhI0I

6- *SKILL* (sung by Tsunomaki Watame): https://youtu.be/25wGzLctaj0?t=3273

7- *My heart will go on* (just mentioned): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3gK_2XdjOdY

8- *Koi* by Hoshino Gen: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhOVibLEDhA

9- *Ai wo Komete Hanataba wo* (sung by T. Watame): https://youtu.be/XW7ZhzF_lAs?t=3330

10- *Prover* by milet: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xahEdP2eJs4

11- *Tsunomaki Watame's song*: https://youtu.be/yLcJr-2cU2s?t=16

12- *Red Swam* by Yoshiki: https://youtu.be/r1XE8ON8fos

13- *Last Stardust* by Aimer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILS8ITPBCz0

14- *Girls' Carnival*: https://youtu.be/GwQWdOG8McU

15- *Guren no Yumiya*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5eGSqxrRUk

16- *Yakudou*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGwvNG_DWE0

List of fanarts used:

1: https://twitter.com/dennoucathacha/status/1283433534166712320

2: https://twitter.com/kikiD_02/status/1221306501488234497

3: https://twitter.com/yamabuki7979/status/1228749830433828864

4: https://twitter.com/AliceInDollLand/status/1283972156469071872

5: https://twitter.com/Sco_ttie/status/1272833840734593024

6: https://twitter.com/Sco_ttie/status/1286240102172131328

7: https://www.pixiv.net/en/artworks/78101020

8: https://twitter.com/kakage0904/status/1272891537165295627

9: https://twitter.com/_Lilica_l/status/1265236247460458499

10: https://twitter.com/speckticuls/status/1277575153321414656

11: https://twitter.com/thuyoponnu1010/status/1235753702306136070

12: https://twitter.com/kouzuka46/status/1238111305111764992

I also took illustrations from the Sora Record 4-koma manga:

https://twitter.com/i/events/1270094240119271426

And, I also took illustrations from the following covers:

Tsunomaki Watame's *Bubble Love*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2I3oQIF6UaU

Amane Kanata's *Uma to Shika*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGXZNHNhI0I

Tokoyami Towa's *Kuroi Hitsuji*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQ3gmQzpvBM

H. Suisei and T. Sora's *Hanamuke no Tori*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5yDNEmcKQFY

The rest are all either screenshots I edited out of a stream;

poses the members themselves shared (the case of the 3D model images),

or editing done based on their 2D models.