

Virtual Youtubers.

That was once the name given by the precursors of today's stars. Those who shine brightly across the internet, who within their smiles contain the beautiful power to bring happiness and inspiration to every corner of the world.

To the girl standing in the rain, they were nothing less than magic.

She looked up towards the giant billboard in front of her. The glowing neons penetrated the haze of this rainy weather, lights gathered in reflections inside the little pond formed on the sidewalk. Within it, another figure glows beautifully, smiling. In the gloomy, gray, raining world, she was the only shade of brightness.

The girl reached forward with her hands, as if wanting to touch the glowing mirage.

The lights flickered. The rain poured ever harder.

The basement is always a degree or two too cold when Noelle Moon wakes up. She searches for her phone frantically to turn off the alarm noise, and even though her eyes are still painfully sore from the glowing screen in the darkness, she squints, reaching to open the email application.

There are no new messages.

Noelle sighs.

It's expected, she tries to comfort herself, it's only sixteen days after she sent in the last audition. They still have plenty of time to reply. Maybe they just haven't got to her application yet. After all, SpectrumEN is literally the most popular VTuber agency in existence. If the rumors are true, they probably receive close to a hundred applications every single day.

Even though it is Noelle's 13th time applying – once every three months when she is allowed to apply again, like clockwork, over a span of three years; Even though, in the past 13 times, Noelle has never heard back from them even a single time.

Sometimes she just likes to think maybe all her auditions in the past just got sent into the wrong folder. Maybe they are just testing her, like how main characters always go through failures before they have their big moment. Maybe this time it will be different. Maybe if they just watch her new audition video a little bit longer – what was the previous record she had again? Noelle remembers a few months ago when, from the Youtube statistics page, she saw that her audition video was opened the first time. They only watched five seconds – but that's better than nothing, isn't it? She's getting closer. Noelle celebrated that breakthrough by treating herself with some

bubble tea. They are pretty expensive nowadays, a cup would cost almost half of her hourly salary, so Noelle saves them for special occasions.

The chances of getting accepted aren't zero, right?

As long as the chances aren't zero, she can hope. With that hope still alive and burning somewhere deep inside her, she feels like she has the strength to keep going just a little bit longer.

Eyelids still feel heavy. The cheap mattress on the floor still feels like a sweet and soft embrace. Noelle wants to close her eyes again, but she knows she shouldn't – if she falls asleep again there won't be another alarm waking her up, and she is going to miss the time for work. Instead, she simply chooses to stare at her phone screen – on the wallpaper is a smiling anime girl with warm brown hair, wearing simple fantasy adventurer's clothing with a skirt, belt and cape. On the side, a line of scribbled cursive sits next to an equally scribbled but cutely signed autograph. They read:

*Don't give up! I will always wait for you!*

*Nanami Misora*

Noelle fixes her eyes on that line, hoping the words and her Oshi's smile would wake her up enough to face this cold Tuesday morning. It works. The 21-year-old reluctantly climbs out of the bed, into the dark and cold room filled with posters, acrylic stands, and pillows imprinted with that brown-haired anime girl, and shiveringly begins another routine.

She lets her muscle memory take over her body. Brushing teeth. Washing face. Wiping it clean using a towel that itself could probably use a wash. Change into a set of boring and inconspicuous working clothes. Standing in front of the mirror, glancing into the slim, pale, soulless, and tired figure. By some standards she could have been considered pretty, but it's been so long since she could spare her efforts to complete her skincare routine, or put on a set of makeup every morning, that the girl's face in the mirror only appears wan and bleary under layers of similarly messy and unkempt hair. Noelle takes a deep breath. The clock on the wall strikes close to seven. It's time to go.

Wallet. Transit card. Keys to the basement. A bottle of water. Smartphone with a cute Misora keychain. Noelle Moon haphazardly stuffs them into a small backpack, itself adorned with a little charm depicting a smiling Nanami Misora, and unlocks her door leading out the basement suite before turning back into the dark room filled with Misora merch one last time.

*Ittekimasu.* Noelle quietly whispers to the empty room.

She imagines Nanami Misora, the cute isekai adventurer VTuber, to suddenly appear behind that empty, dark hallway. What would Misora say? What would she do before sending her off to work?

“Itterasshai! Have a nice day at work, Noelle-chan!”

The brown-haired girl peeks out half of her upper body from behind the corner of a wall, smiling, waving her hands at Noelle. It ends up making Noelle blush a little, as if feeling embarrassed by this fantasized kindness – but the working girl did feel an intricate sense of sweetness diffusing inside her. Noelle waves back towards the empty hallway, turns around, and locks the door.

*Just wait for me, Misora. One day, I will be by your side.*

It's around a five-minute walk from her parent's house – and in an extension, Noelle's basement, to the nearby bus station which she takes five days a week to work. A light drizzle accompanies the crisp temperatures of a Canadian November morning, but Noelle is used to the light rain, especially in this season. It wakes her up just enough for an 8-hour shift pushing carts at Walmart.

Definitely not a great gig by any measure – paying just 25 cents over the minimum wage, but Noelle really couldn't ask for much more: she never finished her university degree, didn't have any sort of qualified training, and neither owns a car or lives on the Skytrain line to be able to get to places easily. In this economy where even minimum wage jobs have students and immigrants lined up to apply, Noelle considers herself pretty lucky – at least she isn't a cashier, doesn't need to face the customers directly, and can occasionally even sit down to take a break. Checking in on the machine. Exchange a couple of stiff greetings and smiles. Then it's the sounds of metals bumping rings as the girl collects the shopping carts together until they form an orderly long line. Another day at work, just like the day before, and just like the day before that. In a couple of hours she will finish this shift, step on the bus home, have a couple of hours to herself, and then do it all again tomorrow. Then, every fourteen days she would receive a check with roughly fourteen hundred dollars on it. Seventeen an hour, seven hundred a week, fourteen hundred in each paycheck, twenty-eight hundred Canadian dollars a month – and that's if she gets the full forty hours. The average monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment in this city costs over three thousand. A bowl of ramen is twenty-five dollars. If it wasn't her parents allowing Noelle to stay in their basement for only eight hundred a month, this meager salary is not only grossly inadequate for a future, it would not even be sufficient to maintain her own survival.

But everything is okay – at least for now. She has a roof over her head. She can afford food and clothes to keep herself warm and well-fed. Noelle even has spare money to spend on PC upgrades and streaming assets, and then some more for her Oshi Misora's merch.

And she can still dream.

Noelle's mind slowly drifts as she wanders around the grocery store and its surrounding parking lot, pushing scattered carts together under the dull gray sky.

What would you be up to now, Misora?

She imagines that girl going through her daily routine, somewhere in some corner of this world. Playing games, having meetings with SpectrumEN staff, planning for the upcoming streams, maybe cooking herself a breakfast while she humming the melody of a still to be released new original song. Noelle shakes her head, as if trying to toss those thoughts out of her mind. It feels wrong to fantasize about it. It feels so wrong to imagine Misora's private life.

Even though it feels like she has known Misora for years.

Noelle still remembers that evening three years ago. Everything was closed from the coronavirus, going outside was essentially prohibited by the government, and she was stuck there, inside the basement, while her parents argued upstairs on top of a poorly insulated floor panel. It was her 18th birthday and the girl didn't have a cake, so she spent that evening devouring what resembled a cake the most in her refrigerator: a loaf of bread. But perhaps more importantly, it was the debut date for Spectrum -CHOSEN-, and it was the date when Noelle found her.

What people today call Virtual Youtubers are in fact a relatively recent phenomenon. Not even a decade has passed since the early pioneers from Japan started using anime-style avatars to represent themselves when making video content, but through the years – especially during the coronavirus era, this method of content creation has quickly garnered popularity.

At the forefront of this explosion was Japan-based company Spectrum. Originally a tech startup focused on making video game characters with augmented reality, it only became a VTuber agency after two girls, still in high school at the time, convinced the CEO to do so. What sounded like an anime plot was in fact the actual origin story for Spectrum – now a billion-dollar public company listed on the Tokyo Stock Exchange with over five hundred employees.

By the time the pandemic rolled around the corner, Spectrum, alongside another major agency Kurotako, already dominated the domestic Japanese market, but it was really the company's English branch and their first EN generation -CHOSEN-, cemented their position as the undisputed industry leader.

Debuting at the peak of the English VTuber explosion, Spectrum -CHOSEN- 's four members are themed around a group of adventuring friends in a stereotypical Isekai anime. There are Investors, managers and businesspeople use many buzzwords to describe Spectrum Corporation. Innovative. Growth-oriented. Metaverse. Creator economy. But to Noelle, when thinking about what words she can use to describe Spectrum as an agency, she can only think of one.

Magical.

Noelle loved every single member of SpectrumEN, their little interactions, their smiles and laughs as if it's really friends having fun together – but her favorite member by far was Nanami Misora, the summoned heroine of -CHOSEN-. Brown-haired, soft spoken, a little bit shy in the beginning, everything from the character design to personality to her voice pulled on Noelle's heart strings in a way that nothing else ever did before. But more than everything, was a feeling that got increasingly obvious to her over time as she got to know Misora more and more from her streams.

Nanami Misora was just like her.

A second-generation East Asian immigrant girl that grew up somewhere in Canada. Went to university but ultimately couldn't finish it due to mental health reasons. Lived with parents with unrealistically high expectations, struggling with self esteem and loneliness, until the admission from SpectrumEN changed her life. Everything except the last part somehow seemingly perfectly traced Noelle's own journey in this world, and it sparked a little flame inside the girl. Maybe I can make it. Maybe I can be just like her.

Ever since that night, days, weeks and then years have gone by. It's now been over three years since that quiet evening when Noelle first encountered her Oshi, and she had witnessed Misora's journey from that newly debuted, shy streamer into the idol that's being loved by fans across the world. She has witnessed Misora surpass a million subscribers, and then two million. She watched as Misora performed on the stage in front of tens of thousands in Spectrum's annual concert in Japan, when the ocean of waving glow sticks in the dark all suddenly changed into her color. Yet, as Noelle still struggled to find a place in this world, unable to make a name in the industry she wholeheartedly loved – as the distance between herself and Misora grew and grew, that little fire inside of her not only lived on, but only burned ever brighter.

Maybe her breakthrough is close. Maybe just a few months down the line, something amazing is going to happen, and everything will change and her dream will come true. Noelle imagines that her latest audition to Spectrum is sitting in a pile of documents somewhere in an office, and

someone just gazed upon it for the first time. Maybe they click open her audition video and find it charming. Funny. Unique. Maybe that worker is currently drafting the email notifying her that she is advancing to the next round – or maybe better, hired on the spot? No, that is a little too much, a big company like Spectrum wouldn't make a decision so quickly. Noelle likes to keep her daydreaming plausible.

"Hey, you! Yes, you! What are you staring at the ground at! Come in to stock the shelves!"

But just as she is about to start simulating in her head, for the ten thousandth time, where she finally passes every round of audition to join Spectrum, and gets to interact with her oshi Nanami Misora for the first time, the voice suddenly drags her back to the real world. Noelle is still here, standing aimlessly in the rain, in front of a pile of oversized shopping carts, being yelled at by an unpleasant manager.

"Go do your job, quickly. You ain't being paid to stand here doing nothing!"

It's only half a dollar above the minimum wage. She must have only been standing here for like three minutes. A brief break from working basically non stop for three hours. But she swallows her words and arguments, only leaving an awkward response.

"O-okay..."

But the manager isn't done yet.

"Come to my office when you are done," he adds.

Noelle let out a quiet sigh.

Slowly she drags herself inside, to the isles and the endless mazes of shelves, from storage room moving out boxes after boxes of material into the brightly lit but windowless and sterile space. It is a couple more hours later, right when her shift is about to end, she eventually finds herself in the manager's office.

Contrary to her expectation, the man is appearing more calm and collected than the person she is familiar with. He even smiled, albeit in a stiff and somewhat unnatural manner, when he pointed at the chair in front of his desk, ready for Noelle's arrival.

"Please sit," the manager announced. His eyes fixated on the screen on another side of the desk.

Noelle sits down.

"Noelle Moon."

"Y...yes?"

"Some concerns have been raised, about your recent performances, and the suitability for you to stay as a member of the Walmart crew." He sighs a little bit, "For two months now, there have

been numerous occasions when you are seen to not be fully present and concentrate on the task at hand.”

Noelle doesn't know how to respond. After a moment of silence, she lowers her head, fingers playing with the little chibi Misora charm hanging from her phone.

“I'm sorry.”

“Take this as a warning. A final one, if I may,” the manager's smile fades, as he finally turns his head from the monitor to the girl, still in the blue Walmart apron, sitting uncomfortably in a chair in front of him, “You know, I actually liked you. I would prefer to leave you here – but this cannot continue. You will either need to completely focus on your tasks that have been given and fulfill your duties as a member of the crew, or, when the next time something like this happens again, we may have to unfortunately terminate this contract of our mutual at-will employment.”

Noelle bites her lips.

“It won't happen again.” She says.

“Good. Your shift today is over, and I expect better performance from now on.”

The aspiring VTuber but substandard Walmart employee thanked the manager, and hurriedly left for the next bus home. Her day job is over, but her day is not. She still has more to do.

The dream won't chase itself, after all.

When she passes by the familiar streets and intersections once more sitting in the last row of this bus, as the Canadian winter sky grows ever darker seemingly only a few hours after dawn, she checks her email again. Holding her breath while the page is loading, waiting for that fated notification from an address ending with spectrum.com telling her of something. Anything.

There are no new messages.

Noelle arrives at home just when everything is about to get dark. Unlocking the door to the basement, taking her shoes off while pressing the switch to turn on the lights at the same time. Inside the familiar yet empty room, the images of her familiar idol still hangs, awaiting her with a familiar smile.

...*Tadaima*. Noelle whispers once more.

The girl sits down in front of the computer as the machine buzzes to life once more. She is already a bit late today, and even though deep inside her Noelle knows it doesn't matter, she still prefers to be consistent every day in turning on VTube studio and OBS, and hitting the go live button on Twitch to meet her audience of sometimes one, and sometimes, zero.

Getting into SpectrumEN is not easy. As the most popular VTuber agency in the world by a significant margin, having some sort of content creation experience before joining is practically a requirement. Most accomplishes this by becoming an independent VTuber – those who do not

operate under, and thus lacking the support of, an agency. The most well known of them have a level of popularity that can rival the largest of Spectrum's talents, but for the vast majority, they are, and will stay as a drop of water in the internet's ocean, never gaining any noteworthiness, staying in the shadow of obscurity until one day simply fading away.

Noelle – or as her username on Twitch states, YuzukiVT, doesn't like to admit she belongs to the latter. Even with only 68 followers, even with a premade free VTuber model, even with zero to one viewers, she still turns on the stream at least five days each week, hoping that something will happen, something will change for the better.

After all, if she never acts upon her dream, then it will stay as a dream forever.

Noelle Moon takes a deep breath, and clicks the 'start streaming' button in OBS studios. The same button turns blue, as on the bottom of the screen a red dot appears on the app icon, indicating that she is currently live. Five minutes of waiting screen comes and goes, and at the end of it, before she is about to switch to a scene with her gameplay, Noelle decides to take a look at the viewer count on the side of the monitor. Nobody is watching.

"...Hello! Good evening~ did you miss Yuzuki-chan? I know I missed you! Today we are playing Fortnite again!"

The chat box is still, as always, empty. She doesn't expect there to be anything, but still, Noelle quietly sighs.

It's okay. It's just like any other day. Even if no one is watching, she would still need to do her best at streaming – what if someone does show up? She joins a match, plays the game like how she always does, dies like how she always does, and then glances at the side of the screen once more. Nobody is watching.

"You know... I wish there was someone else here right now." Suddenly, she has an urge to say something. Not to complain – no one will hear it anyway, right? Noelle simply feels like she needs to say something. Anything. To keep the stream going a bit longer, even if it's a boring, cringe monologue that no one will hear.

"It... it would be really special to me right now, you-know? I just really wants someone to show up, to be here, so that I know... at least someone is there watching at the other end of this screen, and everything I do, everything I say, will mean something--"

"Because... I really don't know... how long can I keep going like this."

She allows herself to fall silent for a moment, not knowing what to continue. Noelle couldn't help but to think about Misora once again – every time she goes live, in addition to the thousands of fans always there waiting for her, and the superchats of different colors flying across the screen

like a rainbow, there are always unending messages of love rolling through the chat so quickly that it becomes difficult to read. Even just a fraction of those things – even just a tenth, is something that Noelle can only dream to achieve one day.

The girl sighs once more. Almost subconsciously she turns her head slightly and takes one more look at the viewer count, and, to her surprise, someone is there.

The cold, brutal, soul-crushing zero is no longer there. Replaced by a simple, yet infinitely hopeful symbol – a vertical line with a little serif on the top.

One. The symbol of hopes and dreams. The symbol of that fire that always burned in Noelle's heart. The symbol of that future that she wanted so hard to make into reality. It means that by some chance, for some reason, that someone has found her – and she, in front of this computer, is no longer alone.

Noelle opens her mouth. She has to say something. What should she say?

“...Oh! Hello! I... I noticed there is one new viewer here! I... I just want to say hello... and I really, really appreciate you being here!”

For some reason a warm and fuzzy feeling is starting to fill up Noelle's heart. It feels good to not be alone anymore. It feels good to... actually matter. No matter who that person on the other side of the screen is, she suddenly has the urge to keep them happy, to keep them here, so that they don't go away – and leave Noelle alone once more.

“You-you know? I've been streaming alone for so long that I kind of forget how having a viewer is like ... aha-ha... It's a weird feeling right? Someone, somewhere, is watching me right now – isn't that an amazing thing? Anyways, I just want to say I really, really appreciate you being here...”

Even if there are no chat messages. Not even a hi, a greeting, an emoji, but Noelle can feel it. She can feel the other person being here.

“If you don't want to say anything in chat and just like to lurk here, it's okay.” She smiles, “do you want to know a little more about me? You can call me Yuzuki or just Yuzu... that's okay too. I stream here almost every day, and a lot of the time I'm here alone... Do you have a game that you prefer to watch? I don't know what people like these days, so I play a lot of Fortnite, and sometimes some Overwatch and League of Legends as well!”

There are still no messages in chat, but it feels ok. Noelle feels like it's okay. She knows some people don't like to post in chat, but as long as they are here, as long as that number on the right side of her screen keeps showing one instead of zero, she feels like it's giving her the hope and strength she needs to chase that dream a little bit further.

"I... I know it's probably a trivial thing for you, to come here and to show up, to watch me for just a little while, but I promise it means a lot to me, it really, really does... You know? I didn't have the best day today. I didn't do well at work, and my supervisor said if I do it again I will get fired. I've been trying to make it as a VTuber too, but as you can see it hasn't worked out well, and I'm starting to lose hope that I'll see the light at the end of the tunnel... but... you coming here today, it really made the difference and you are making me hopeful about the future again..." Noelle feels like she is almost crying. The world feels blurry. She raises her arm and wipes her eyes, then glances at the viewer count once more. That anonymous person has to still be there, right?

Her heart sinks the next second. On the side of her screen, where the red text just moments ago had given her fuel to her dream, just to ruthlessly take it away from her once more. The viewer count returned to zero, as if no one had been here in the first place.

Noelle feels like words still come out of her mouth simply due to inertia and her fear of silence, but they no longer have any meaning. For one more hour she tries to stream herself playing this game, yet that lone viewer did not return, nor did anyone else show up. Sixty eight followers. Zero to one concurrent viewer. Same as the day before, and the day before that, and also the day before that.

"I... I think I'll end the stream here, okay? Thank you all for coming to my stream today... I... I sometimes really don't know how to keep going anymore, but... I don't know... I don't know."

"Good night. See you tomorrow... or maybe not. I don't know anymore."

Noelle clicks the button to stop streaming, and the room around her falls silent again.

The aspiring VTuber girl stands up from her chair, contemplating stretching her tired arms, but ultimately feels like she is too tired to even do that. Instead, Noelle drags herself towards the kitchen, turns on the electric kettle and opens a package of instant noodles, before waiting for the noodles to heat up in complete silence.

She takes her warm bowl of noodles on to her computer desk, and realizes that Misora is streaming. A collaboration with her genmate and friend Lumia Runeplex. Noelle stirs the noodle, while the beautiful and soothing sound of her Oshi's voice appears in her headphones.

"...Lumia!! Did you steal my diamonds again?"

"No...No??"

Noelle smiles, but she doesn't know if she should. Nanami Misora, with her seven thousand average concurrent viewers and 1.8 million youtube subscribers, and Lumia Runeplex, with her six thousand average concurrent viewers and 1.52 million youtube subscribers – are genmates and members of SpectrumEN's -CHOSEN-, the most popular VTuber group in existence. In

lore, Lumia is the grand librarian and sage of the human kingdom who summoned Misora as the heroine to save the world. In real life, they would often have collabs and interactions together, both online and offline, leading to speculations – although never confirmed – that they live in the same city, or at least are physically close by.

For Noelle, finding out which part of the world her Oshi lives in isn't that difficult of a task, and the result is pleasantly surprising to her too. Misora – and Lumia too, would usually stream slightly earlier or later than her, both use the Pacific time zone, and have mentioned in some way that they are from Canada. Unless they are by some chance from the sparsely inhabited territory of Yukon, only one province in Canada uses the Pacific time zone – the one where Noelle lives in: British Columbia.

If that is the case, then there is a fair bit of chance that they both live in the only major metropolitan area in the province, even closer to where Noelle is. She cherishes this coincidence in life – sometimes, the girl will look up into the sky, or out towards the window, and imagine that her Oshi is so close to her in somewhere not too far away, in the same city, under the same sky.

For now, that is how far she is willing to let her curiosity go into researching her Oshi's life. She wants to know more. She wants to know Misora personally, like how Lumia does – like how a real friend does, but now it's not the time.

After she makes it into Spectrum... if only she makes it into Spectrum.

On the screen and inside her headphones, together Misora and Lumia are making an announcement. They will be going on a vacation together next April, to the Maldives, and will be absent from streaming for two weeks. Noelle stares at the screen, all the way until Misora's ending screen finally fades to black, and she realizes her still untouched bowl of instant noodle has gone completely cold.

Before going to bed, Noelle Moon decides to check her email one last time. It's morning in Japan, she wants to hope. She yearns for this cruel life to give her something.

There are no new messages.