

# SHERLOCK SAM

and the  
**DIGITAL  
DETECTIVES** on  
INSTANOODLEGRAM



**THE DIGITAL  
DETECTIVES  
DUOLOGY  
BOOK 1**

By  
**A.J.  
LOW**

**“Like Sherlock Sam, I love food and a good mystery. The latest in the series kept me drooling, as it has lots of references to food such as chicken wings, devil’s curry, beef stew and my all-time favourite ham and cheese sandwich. Not the normal ones but the elevated French version known as croque-monsieur.**

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# SHER SAM

# LOCK

and the **DIGITAL DETECTIVES**  
on **INSTANOODLEGRAM**

By  
A.J.  
LOW

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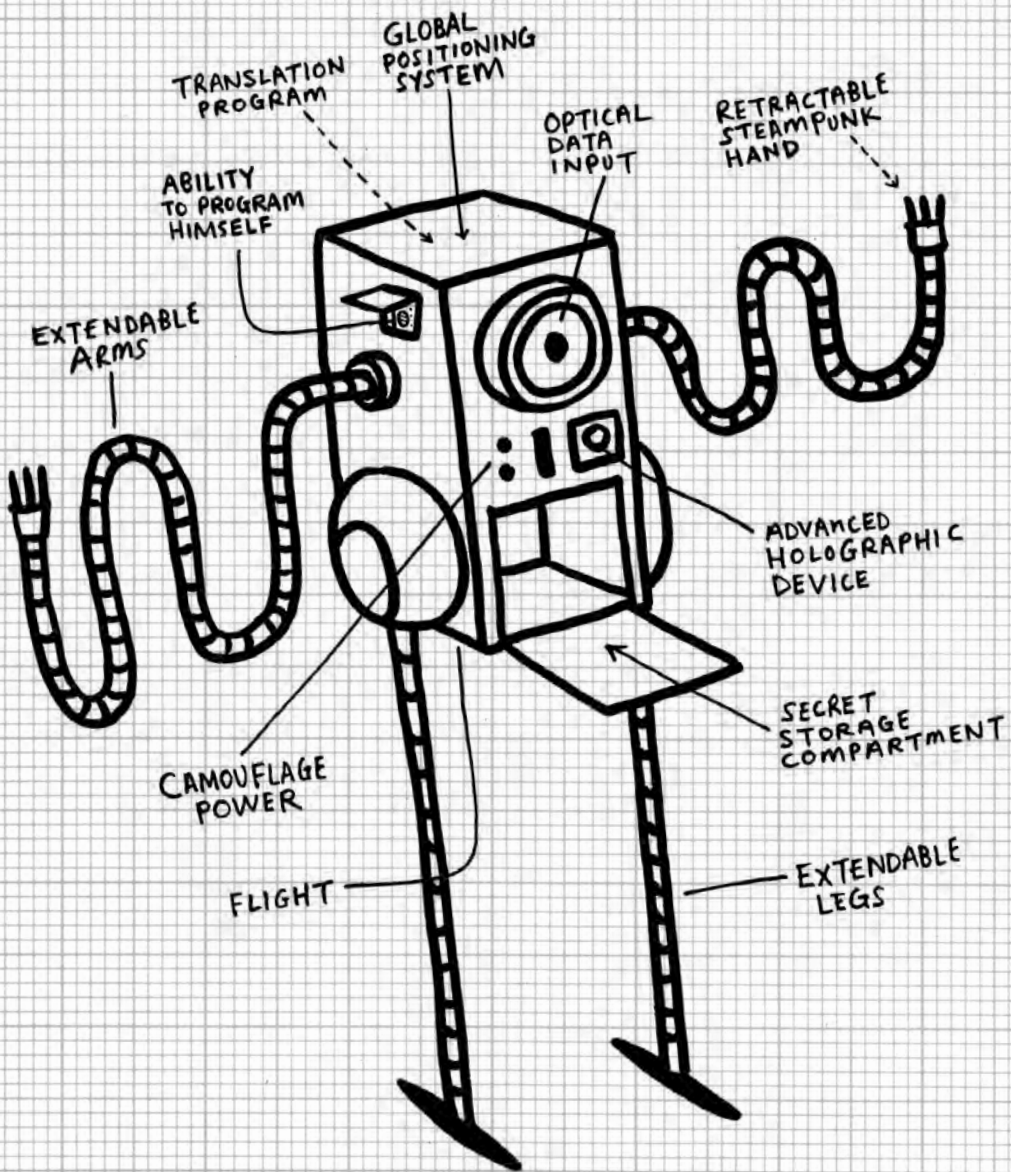
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**For Dan.  
We miss you.**

**For Sivesh.  
Thank you for making us smile with  
your Watson costume.**

**For Caleb.  
We hope your stories continue to inspire.**





# CHAPTER ONE



The scene in front of me was carnage.

My big sister, Wendy, was kneeling on the living room floor. There was a huge mess around her. Vermilion liquid stained her fingers. Her face was streaked with it. I had been calling her name for a few minutes, but she hadn't heard me. The surrounding noise was overwhelming.

I took a deep breath and cupped my hands around my mouth. "Wendy!"

My sister's head snapped up, and her eyes were wide with shock.

“What?!”

“You need to turn the volume down! No one can think when you have the TV on so loud!” I gestured at my head with both hands, my fingers miming my brain exploding.

My sister sighed in a deliberately pained manner. She wiped her hands on the apron she was wearing—smearing red paint all over the already stained brown cloth—and reached out to pause the video. The decibel level in the house immediately returned to a bearable volume.

“I’m trying to learn Chinese calligraphy but got tired of using the brushes, so I decided to try with just my fingers. The background noise helps me focus, Sam. I need to *feel* the words.”

I looked down at what my sister was working on. Several large sheets of white paper she had laid out on the living room floor were covered in a mix of black and red lines, criss-crossing and intertwining with each other. I could read some of the characters, but not many. The individual characters had a lot of brush—no, finger—strokes, indicating Wendy was trying to write in traditional

Chinese. They looked complicated. I spied an open book to the right of the painting. Wendy must have been copying characters from the book. My sister’s inability to master the Chinese language is legendary. In the future, stories will be told about it.

“You were supposed to have been done half an hour ago. In case you’ve forgotten, we have an actual case. Watson’s being even grumpier than usual. Quickly clean up and come online!”

Wendy slapped her forehead, giving herself a bright red palm print right at the top of her head. “I forgot! I was distracted by Jill Su’s latest video on SeeFood about this new Taiwanese video game. It uses Chinese characters as part of the puzzle solving, so I thought it would help me.”

Wendy was a big fan of video game-related channels on SeeFood these days. SeeFood was a streaming service that was part of Instanoodlegram’s social networking platform. Instanoodlegram had started off as a site mainly for sharing food photos and videos, and we had used it to help us solve the Case of the Obento

Bonanza in Tokyo. They had recently expanded their services to include the video-sharing site SeeFood, the video conferencing service LunchBox and the virtual meeting space SnackTown.



Mom and Dad had given us permission to sign up for accounts, which we used to stay in touch with our friends overseas and to discuss cases when meeting up in-person was not possible.

I raised my right eyebrow. “Is that why you were yelling at the TV just now? Anyway, this video isn’t live, right? This one was pre-recorded. You can watch it later.”

“Her chat is live! She’s answering questions from viewers!”

“Is it in Chinese? Don’t pretend you understand.” I grinned.

I liked teasing Wendy, but to be honest, her Mandarin had improved quite a lot, especially since she started watching more TV shows and movies in Mandarin. Her favourite was *Pili*, a wuxia puppet show from Taiwan which has beautiful cinematography and awesome fight sequences. Dad introduced it to us after his and Mom’s recent trip to Taipei, and now we were all hooked. Watson would hum the theme song when he was reading.

“I thought maybe I would see Eliza online since she was the one who recommended Jill’s channel to me—but no,” Wendy replied. She tucked a wayward lock of hair behind her right ear and grimaced. “She’s vanished.”

It had been three months since Eliza’s parents had sent her to an all-girls boarding school in Taipei, Taiwan. After our last case, they decided she could no longer be a part of the Supper Club, unless we stopped investigating cases. They felt it was too dangerous, and it might also ruin their family name. When she first reached Taipei, Eliza would send us messages multiple times a day on

Instanoodlegram, but as more time went by, she messaged less and less—until one day, she stopped altogether. We kept trying to make contact, but we never heard back from her. Mom and Dad checked in with Eliza’s parents, but they couldn’t get any information out of them other than Eliza was fine, and we should leave her alone. Even though they were divorced, Eliza’s parents both remained in Singapore. Eliza was alone in Taipei.

More than anyone, Wendy missed her best friend. It was why she was suddenly interested in all things Taiwanese. It helped her feel closer to Eliza. I didn’t like seeing my big sister so despondent, and I knew exactly how to distract her.

“What’s that?” I gestured at two rows of three vertical Chinese characters.

My sister pointed at the first row. “Oh, that’s Jill’s Chinese name, Su Yiju. She used it as an example in the game.” She pointed at the next row. “And that’s my Chinese name.” She smiled at me, looking pleased with herself.

“That’s your Chinese name?”

“Yes.” My sister's eyes narrowed. “How do you

not know my Chinese name?”

“I know your Chinese name.” I paused, grinning. “I didn’t think *you* knew your Chinese name.”

The power of Wendy’s glare increased by a factor of 1,000.

“Are-the-two-of-you-done? We-have- an-important- case-we-need-to-discuss. Inspector-Lestrade-is-going- to-call-us-for-updates-tomorrow. We-need-to-log-in- to-SnackTown-to-meet-the-others-in-ten-minutes.” Watson, our little brother and robot investigator, had walked into the living room. He was radiating grumpiness.

“Actually...” Wendy said, cocking her head and smiling, “...I was doing research.”

“Show-me-the-evidence-of-this,” Watson replied, his single eye narrowing in a way that was eerily close to Wendy’s earlier expression. “Also-your- forehead-is-red.”

Wendy held a finger up. “Well, Jill Su is a top gamer in Taiwan, and her merch is one of the prizes in the TeaMe bubble tea art contest! She autographed five sets of gaming console sleeves!”



I offered my sister the clean edge of one of the damp rags she had been using while painting. She muttered her thanks and began cleaning her face and hands.

“That-is-extraneous-at-best,” Watson said, but his eye returned to normal. He also understood why Wendy was so engrossed with Jill Su’s video game streams. He might not admit it to anyone, but I knew he also missed Eliza. If there was anyone who could match him sarcastic comment for sarcastic comment, it was our absent friend.

“The only reason any of you even heard of TeaMe bubble tea before Inspector Lestrade contacted us was because I had entered the art contest,” my sister huffed, crossing her arms.

“That-is-true. Though-I-suspect-Sherlock-would-have-found-out-eventually. He-is-addicted-to-oolong-milk-tea-with-extra-tapioca-pearls.”

“I always ask for 25% sugar level. That’s healthy... ish.” I coughed. “Anyway, back to the case.”

“I really can’t believe TeaMe could fool everyone for so long,” Wendy said.

TeaMe was an extremely popular bubble tea

franchise from Taiwan that was supposed to have opened its first store in Singapore a month ago. They stood out from the very crowded bubble tea market by branding themselves as eco-friendly and socially conscious. TeaMe did not allow any single-use plastic containers and straws, and would only serve customers who brought their own reusable containers. They also sold a range of beautiful reusable cups designed by famous artists. As part of their Singapore launch publicity, TeaMe was running a contest for people to send in their artwork to win prize money and a chance to get their art printed on a TeaMe cup. Wendy had entered the kids’ category, and I personally thought she had a very high chance of winning.

Unfortunately, TeaMe’s claims of being eco-friendly and socially conscious were thrown into doubt when it was uncovered three days ago that not only did they use materials that were not eco-friendly and ethically sourced, but they also didn’t pay the workers who made the products a fair wage. Nothing had been proven yet, but a

cosplaying friend of Inspector Lestrade's asked her for help. Her friend also happened to be a police officer in Taipei, but since TeaMe was a multinational company, it was outside of her jurisdiction. Inspector Lestrade couldn't officially help as an INTERPOL agent, so she contacted us. She had never heard of bubble tea before, but she was now addicted. She claimed it was in the name of investigating the case.

*"It-helped-that-Jordan-Chen-was-the-owner-of-the-brand. His-wholesome-and-clean-cut-image-as-a-multilingual-actor-and-singer-made-it-hard-for-anyone-to-suspect-him-or-TeaMe-of-any-wrongdoing."*

"But it was all a lie!" Wendy exclaimed. "Urgh. And Eliza and I thought he was so cute too. His last movie was so popular!"

"Nothing has been proven yet, Wendy," I reminded my sister. As detectives, it was our job to review and assess all the evidence before arriving at a conclusion. As far as we were concerned, this was still an open case. Inspector Lestrade had sent us eight cartons of documents, which

she had received from her friend, that related to TeaMe, Jordan Chen, Blue Lightning Agency (the talent agency representing Mr Chen) and all their business dealings. But it was like looking for a specific needle in a very large pile of needles. It didn't help that some of the documents were written in Traditional Chinese script. We also weren't sure why she hadn't just sent us a zip file or a thumb drive.

*"It-is-time-for-our-meeting,"* Watson reminded us. *"I-already-told-Mom-and-Dad-we-were-going-online-and-they-said-okay."*

It was a late Monday afternoon, and our parents were out.

"Yah, I can watch the rest of the stream later," my sister said. She had carefully packed away all her artwork and tools and cleared the newspaper she had used to line the ground so paint wouldn't stain our floors. Her forehead was now only slightly red, and it was mostly because of the rubbing. "I'm going to stay in the living room since I'm already set up."

Watson returned to our room, and I made my

way to the small table in the kitchen where Mom had made some hei bee hiam sandwiches as a pre-dinner snack. While munching on the simple but delicious dried-prawn-with-chilli sandwich, I logged on to SnackTown and clicked to enter our private town, careful not to drip oil and butter onto the keyboard.

Immediately, a digital environment popped up. It was a cheerful-looking garden with colourful street stands selling food and drinks. Each stand belonged to the inhabitants of the town—it was by invite only—and all were taken up except for one. At the moment, there were five stands that were “open for business”, which meant five of the town’s inhabitants were logged in. I saw five cute little avatars wandering around. Jimmy was a tiny popiah with rosy chilli cheeks, Nazhar was a skinny satay stick with square black glasses, Watson was a mini reusable battery in a bright pink cape and Wendy was a little cup of bubble tea with a straw for a ponytail. I was a small but delightful chicken wing with round glasses.

We could design our stands and avatars,

which was really cool and fun. Because we were the Supper Club, and our town was called The Supper Club Town, we had all picked characters we wanted to snack on for supper. It took me days to decide. Finally, Wendy wrote down all my options, made me close my eyes, spin around in a circle ten times, then randomly point and pick. I might have been a chocolate biscuit if fate had not intervened.

“Hi, guys!” Popiah-Jimmy beamed as he ran around in circles. Little towgays peeked out from the top of his head.

Satay-Nazhar smiled, his avatar’s little arm waving enthusiastically.

“We-are-waiting-for-two-more-attendees,” Super Battery-Watson said.

“We are?” Bubble Tea-Wendy asked. “Who else are we waiting for?”

She didn’t have to say it, but I knew she was hoping Watson would say Eliza. However, before he could respond, two more stands opened for business and two avatars appeared on-screen in quick succession—a bowl of udon with oversized,



JIMMY'S  
MAMA'S

POPIAH

SHERLOCK'S

CHICKEN  
WINGS

Wen Di's  
Bubble Tea

温蒂珍珠奶茶

NAZHAR'S  
SATAY

SUPER  
WATSON'S  
BATTERIES

THE  
SUPPER  
CLUB

Ad



round wire-framed glasses and a tamale in a Naruto T-shirt. They were Chihiyo and Luis.

Luis and his family, who we'd met during the Case of the Sinister Letters in Bras Basah, had moved from Singapore to Mexico City, and Chihiyo, who had assisted us with the Obento Bonanza case, was in Tokyo, Japan. We had stayed in touch via Instanoodlegram, and because TeaMe was also in Mexico City and Tokyo, and Luis and Chihiyo were big fans, we asked them to help with the investigation. They didn't really help out regularly, but irregular help was still welcome.

We had to investigate from Singapore because Inspector Lestrade could not fly us to Taipei. A "lack of understanding of how bubbles and tea interact to become delicious" was not enough for her superiors to approve an investigation in Taiwan, which was not a member of INTERPOL. Plus, they had already been asking too many questions about her use of INTERPOL planes for not-quite-officially-sanctioned cases. She had also tried to get into contact with Eliza over there, but she had about as much luck as the rest of us.

"¿Como estan, minasan?" Udon-Chihiyo said. Her huge digital eyes were shining behind her glasses.

"Ohayo, amigos," Tamale-Luis greeted in reply, grinning.

Chihiyo and Luis had never met in person but had become good friends on Instanoodlegram. They had been trying to learn each other's languages and were having a lot of fun in the process. They were also trading food recipes and coming up with delicious fusion dishes. Whenever they posted a photograph on Instanoodlegram, it made me want to visit both of them.

"Thank-you-for-joining-us-everyone," Super Battery-Watson said. He had been the one to organise the online gathering, and I was very proud of how he had been taking on more responsibility in our investigations. He would still complain grumpily, but I was beginning to suspect it was more a force of habit than anything else. Not that I'd ask him about it, of course.

"Ah, Luis, I really want to eat a tamale now!" Popiah-Jimmy said, his little digital hands pressing

against his chilli rosy cheeks. “The last time Mama used your mum’s recipe, I ate so many I couldn’t walk for the rest of the day!”

“And I miss popiah!” Tamale-Luis exclaimed. “I miss all the food in Singapore. I want to visit you guys soon!”

“Before-we-start-talking-about-food-again-which-usually-lasts-for-an-hour-perhaps-we-could-discuss-the-case-first.”

Everyone looked a little chagrined. I loved the emotions function our avatars had. I didn’t know a chicken wing could look so much like me, but it did. It was uncanny. It had captured my essence. Not that I was Chicken Essence. That was something entirely different and did not involve capturing the soul of a chicken, in case anyone was wondering.

Unfortunately, no one had anything new to report. Like in Singapore, TeaMe was facing a lot of backlash in Mexico and Japan, as well as other international locations. Their stores were temporarily closed, according to Luis and Chihiyo. People were protesting on Instanoodlegram,

and users had created lots of digital stickers condemning the brand. However, what did not exist was any proper evidence—only speculation and opinions. Watson had scanned through some of the documents and shared them with Luis, Chihiyo and two other overseas friends, but they hadn’t found anything either.

“I’m sorry, guys,” Udon-Chihiyo said with a sigh. “I have to do homework now, but I’ll keep investigating.”

“I have to get ready for school,” Tamale-Luis added, stretching his arms above his head. “Can we meet a little later next week? Waking up at 6am is making me really sleepy in class.”

We agreed to meet an hour later next time: 8pm, Singapore time; 9pm, Tokyo time; and 7am, Mexico City time. Luis and Chihiyo logged off, as did Jimmy and Nazhar, who said they also had homework to finish and would see us in school tomorrow.

“I’m not really sure how we can help Inspector Lestrade without being there to investigate in person, Sam,” Bubble Tea-Wendy said. “There’s

just too much noise online, and it's hard to tell what's fake and what's not."

"I know. And constantly researching bubble tea just makes me want to drink more bubble tea, but—"

Suddenly a doorbell sounded, and a text box appeared at the top of our screens. It was a request to enter the private virtual space.

"No way," Bubble Tea-Wendy whispered, her hands flying to her mouth.

Super Battery-Watson immediately extended his long arm, reached up and clicked on the YES button.

The last empty stand in our town was finally open for business. A piping hot bowl of devil's curry with arms and legs appeared next to our avatars.

"Hi, guys," Devil's Curry-Eliza said, steam wafting around her. "Is the Wonderful Watson's Online Detective Agency accepting new cases?"

ooo



## CHAPTER TWO

"Is that really you, Eliza?" Bubble Tea-Wendy asked, her hands pressed against her cup face in shock. "How are you?! Why haven't you—"

"Wait-a-moment. Let-us-switch-to-video-call-on-LunchBox," Super Battery-Watson said.

I knew what he was thinking. It had been so long since Eliza had contacted us, and he wanted to make sure it was really her and not someone impersonating her avatar. It was always important to be extra careful when we were online, especially when Mom and Dad weren't home.

SnackTown vanished and was replaced by the LunchBox video-call function. All our faces appeared in small lunch boxes on the screen.

It really was Eliza.

But something was definitely wrong. Horribly, horribly wrong.

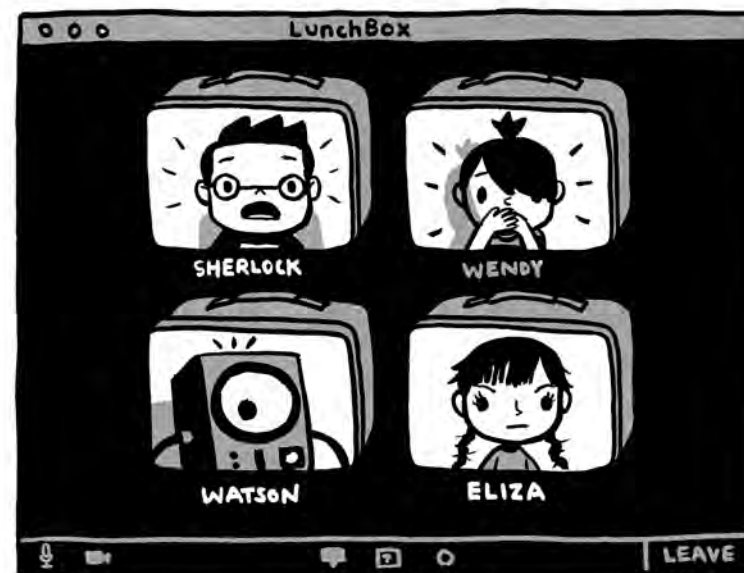
Wendy gasped, her hands flying to her mouth.

“Your-your...” Watson trailed off. I had never heard him hesitate like that before. His single eye went huge. “Eliza’s-hair-is-not-neat.”

“What have they done to you?” my sister said, her voice muffled behind her hand.

“Calm down, everyone,” I said. “Let Eliza speak.”

Eliza’s neat hair was just as legendary as Wendy’s bad Mandarin. We had been through so many cases together—she had been over hills and under water and battled against high humidity levels—but her hair, in its twin braids, was almost always perfect. There was that one time during the Case of the Mysterious Mastermind in Seoul when a single braid had come slightly undone, but otherwise, she literally never had a hair out of place. It was her superpower.



“No! If Eliza wants to have messy hair, she should be allowed to have messy hair! Girls don’t need to conform to ridiculous gender expectations!” Wendy shouted, springing up and waving her fist in the air (I assumed; I couldn’t actually see anything above her stomach since the camera didn’t move with her). “I support you, Eliza! Down with combs! Be free, flyaway hair! Be free!”

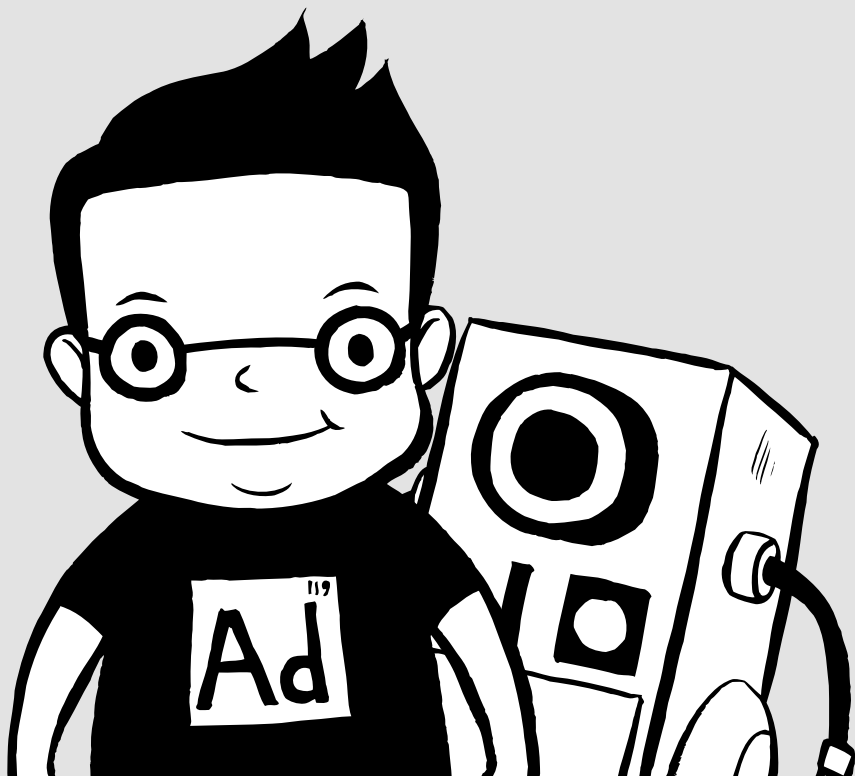
On-screen, Eliza stared at us silently, her face expressionless. It was how she usually looked before she scolded us for being ridiculous.



# THE VIDEO GAME IS AFOOT!

Watch out for *Sherlock Sam and the Kidnapped Gamer in Taipei* as the adventures of the Supper Club continue!

In the next book of the Digital Detectives Duology, Sherlock Sam, Watson and the Supper Club rush to Taipei to meet up with Eliza and investigate the disappearance of star video gamer Jill Su! How is Jill still streaming on SeeFood? Who is the mastermind pulling the strings behind the scenes? With the assistance of international Supper Club members, Sherlock, Watson and friends have to rush to save the day before Jill Su runs out of extra lives.



Eliza finds herself alone and friendless in her new school. When she suspects a famous video game influencer has gone missing, Eliza immediately calls Sherlock Sam, Watson and the Supper Club to investigate. However, the facts point to Eliza making it all up. Will Sherlock and the Supper Club discover what's really going on before Eliza gets into even more trouble? Or will her number of likes plunge below a socially acceptable status?



“Years from now, this will be a perfect anthropological study on how we got through the pandemic times and kept our friendships alive through virtual worlds and social media. Fair warning...arm yourself with some snacks. You’ll be hungry when you’re done.”

—CHARLENE SHEPHERDSON, POET



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