

「とある魔術の<sup>バーチャロン</sup>電腦戦機」  
発売記念  
特別読み切り短編!

ブースターズ・カップ  
開催前夜、バーチャロン一色に  
染まる学園都市で  
女と女の戦いが  
密やかに始まる——!

とある魔術の禁書目録×電腦戦機バーチャロン

# とある魔術の 電腦戦機

バーチャロン

御坂美琴のでんじゃらすていーぱーてい

鎌池和馬

イラスト/はいむらきよたか

# Table of Contents

- [A Certain Magical Virtual-On: Vooster's Cup, The Day Before](#)
- [A Certain Magical Virtual-On: Misaka Mikoto's Dangerous Tea Party](#)
- [Credits](#)

# A Certain Magical Virtual-On: Vooster's Cup, The Day Before

“Kamijou-san, Index-san, this way, this way.”

At a time when school was out but the sky was still blue, a clear girl's voice rang out in a corner of Academy City's District 7. She must not have been the type to raise her voice much because you could tell she was making an effort to speak loudly. Her voice contained a strange power that kept it from being drowned out by the surrounding hustle and bustle.

The monument commemorating the opening of the subway station was commonly used as a meet-up point, but it had been swapped out for a bronze statue of Temjin for a limited time. That caused some brief confusion.

A blonde girl wearing a white blouse, a frilly miniskirt, and a dark blue vest was hopping up and down and waving both hands in the station plaza. It was cute, but she could have been a little more conscious about the length of her skirt. She had the unique silhouette of a ballerina or figure-skater, yet she was perfectly approachable. She was a strange girl with the atmosphere of a small animal.

Her name was Furashina Ririn.

Just like with Kazakiri Hyouka, an aggregation of the city's AIM diffusion fields, Index had a habit of befriending the strangest people.

The spiky-haired high school boy named Kamijou Touma jogged over to her.

“Ohh, Furashina. ...You really are here.”

“Why would I stand you up when I was the one that invited you?”

Furashina Ririn placed a hand over her mouth and laughed quietly, but that was not what Kamijou had meant. They had communicated a bit via portable devices since *that incident*, but they had not met in person.

Doubt had gnawed at the back of his mind.

What if she only existed in the data?

He could not help but wonder after just how unrealistically *that incident* had ended.

Index, a silver-haired girl in a nun's habit colored white and gold like a fancy teacup, spoke with a calico cat on her head.

"Ririn, what are we going to do today?"

"Well, I would rather not discuss this on our feet, so let me show you to somewhere we can take a seat."

From the moment she had asked to meet them here, it had been obvious Furashina Ririn had some kind of plan. Kamijou decided to go along with it. Since they did not board a train or bus, their destination had to be in District 7.

They walked along the road together.

Everyone did that, but it seemed incredibly valuable right now.

80% of Academy City's population was some kind of student, so morning and afterschool were the main rush hours. A crowd of many types of people had formed below the slowly-turning wind turbines. The crowd would look different depending on whether elementary school, middle school, high school, or college just let out, but this was the time when the crowd was changing from elementary to middle school.

Some men in work jumpsuits were swapping out a billboard in front of the station. Kamijou watched a group of elementary schoolers with portable devices strapped to their backpacks walking below the shocking pink Fei-Yen on the billboard.

"Oh, yeah. You've settled on a name, haven't you?"

"Yes. It will be called the Vooster's Cup. I thought using the tournament's name itself would help get people accustomed to the new rules and regulations. And there was no plan to auction off the naming rights to a major corporation."

Furashina sounded casual enough, but she was apparently good at reading

the flow of people. She took short steps like a baby chick, but she slipped smoothly through the smallest gaps in the crowd, so Kamijou would have been left behind if he had not kept a careful eye on her blue back.

“Dammit, and when I was trying to be sentimental too! This is when we’re supposed to walk slowly while remembering everything that happened! You’re acting too natural here!!”

“W-wait, Ririn!” shouted Index.

“?”

The spiky-haired boy managed to catch up when the crosswalk light turned red and he finally arrived by her side while holding Index’s hand so she did not get separated too.

“Doesn’t that frilly clothing cause problems? I’m surprised people’s bags and stuff aren’t catching on it in this crowd.”

“Eh heh heh. Kamijou-san, you would understand if you tried wearing a skirt. Girls are always aware of their surroundings while walking around.”

...That seemed at odds with how the gust of wind from a passing Garayaka *itasha* blew her miniskirt dangerously high, but Kamijou decided it was safer not to point that out. It was said that fires and fights were the flowers of Edo and Kamijou was the type to dump a bucket of water over his head and rush to the scene as soon as something happened, but he was not suicidal. Did he want to be bitten to death by Index? No, he did not.

The crosswalk light turned green.

While nearly losing sight of her a few more times, he somehow managed to keep up with Furashina as they left the main road. Areas of perpetual shade were another side of District 7. If he lost sight of her swaying blonde hair and her small butt, he would have been left behind in a strange dungeon made of concrete and asphalt.

“Wahp!?”

“Pant, pant. Okay, Furashina just tripped over nothing at all, so we won’t be stranded here. Let’s use this to catch up, Index!”

Like someone who had spotted a desert oasis, Kamijou gathered his last few ounces of strength and rushed over. There, he found Furashina lying flat on her face with her arms held out forward. She finally managed to raise her head and pout her lips.

“U-uuh. And I was hoping to make myself look good today...”

“Yes, that was a real disaster, but just get up, Furashina. I can see everything.”

“!? Y-you saw my true face...?”

“If you have time to cover that half of your face, I think you should really do something about your short skirt. You were really dedicated to the ‘blue with white frills’ look, weren’t you!? And didn’t you just say girls are always aware of their surroundings!?”

This would take a turn for the worse if Index saw, so he quickly patted her butt to pull her skirt down. Index had a perfect memory, so any points lost with her would not be coming back any time soon! Despite the confusion, the calico cat calmly hopped down from the nun’s head and rubbed himself against the damp wall to mark his territory. He was trying to win the territorial fight of feline society.

“How much further, Ririn?” asked Index.

“W-we’re almost there.”

That was what she said.

And yet once she got up and resumed walking, they nearly lost sight of her two or three more times. They nearly lost her when she tripped again, her panties were visible again, and Index bit Kamijou on the back of the head. But that was when she turned back toward them.

“Oh, this is the place. Hm? What’s the matter?”

“Pant, pant... Let’s take her to the supermarket during a limited-time-only sale sometime. Or to the fight over *fukubukuro* during New Year’s. She would be unstoppable there...”

They had arrived at a small shop in a back alley.

Not only did the small path get little sunlight, but the shop’s entrance was to

the north. That reminded them of something.

Index tilted her head.

“Are they intentionally avoiding the sunlight? Ririn, does this place sell old books?”

“Something similar. Now, come in.”

When Furashina smiled and opened the cheap plywood door, a soft and muffled bell rang. ...For a complete commoner like Kamijou, not being able to see inside the store from outside was a bit frightening, but it seemed to be a familiar safe zone for Furashina.

Kamijou hesitantly peered inside, worried it was the kind of intellectual place where mathematicians sat around discussing sines, cosines, and tangents.

“Huh? Is this a café? But...”

“There are lots of toys!!”

Index excitedly rushed inside.

It felt like a place that took good care of its wood. It was not that large a place, but the layout and color scheme made it feel oddly spacious. There were few counter seats, but there were a lot of square 4-person tables instead. And in another odd choice, there were no partitions between the tables. They must have known there would be no sunlight because the space was dimly lit by gentle indirect lighting as if from a fireplace. They had probably adjusted the wavelength or something to not damage their “products”, but Kamijou did not need to remember any of that since there would be no battle this time. The entire space contained a scent similar to old paper, but it was completely different from that of a used bookstore.

And Kamijou had a question.

“Do they allow cats in here?”

“It shouldn’t be a problem. Their policy is to never reject a customer.”

Plus, they had already gone inside.

The most noticeable trait was the one Index had shouted about before. Thick

books, colorful dice, wood-carved game pieces, and analog calculators that would look at home with a typewriter or an old cash register were contained in what looked like a bookstore's picture book section or the special glass cases in seal stores that showed off some samples on a rotating pillar. Just like the tables, the glass cases were lined up at set intervals and gave the entire place an odd atmosphere.

“This is a specialty store for TRPGs. Oh, and that means tabletop role-playing games.”

“I've heard of them, but that's all...”

RPGs were usually a type of video game, but Kamijou had heard from Tsukuyomi Komoe that RPGs which used paper, pencils, and dice had existed before home computers were common. But when he had asked that 135cm teacher how old she was, she had teared up and cutely hit him with her fists.

Furashina Ririn showed them to a random table and sat down while flattening out the butt of her miniskirt to make sure it did not get wrinkled.

When Kamijou sat down too, he found the cushion to be softer than expected.

He was not quite sure what a TRPG was, but he began wondering if they took a long time to play.

“This store apparently started out selling imported German board games, but they have since expanded to things like TRPG starter manuals and TCGs – trading card games.”

“Magic cabals use these things too! Board games and doll houses are convenient to explain ritual magic before actually setting the real stage!!”

“What does that matter, Index?”

When his life was not on the line, Kamijou did not need to burn the details of magic into his neurons. ...*Or do I?* he worried as he let those facts slip by him. It was similar to the feeling of regret when you left the bookstore and realized you should have bought that manga volume after all. Whenever that happened, you would always have trouble finding it when you went back later.

They were likely premade, but the elderly manager carried over some ice water and a small naporitan as an appetizer. People could be picky about their pasta being al dente or whatever, but there were people who insisted that the Japanese-born naporitan was actually best when the noodles were a little soggy.

Kamijou summed up what he had learned.

“So this place is like an analog game version of a book café?”

“It is a TRPG version. You can play any of those options for free. And as long as they have a copy in stock, you can even buy the game to bring home with you.”

“Just like with smartphone manga, the whole system gets confusing when the basic version is free. Maybe this is just the way of the future...”

The lack of partitions between tables was apparently so everyone could gather around and watch a game in progress. It may have been similar to the multiplayer games in an arcade.

While the calico cat sat at their feet devouring some mincemeat boiled in water and with the oil removed, Kamijou glanced toward the retro manuals and game mats lined up by the wall.

“Can we really use these? Do you call it premium? Or vintage? Regardless, these look like valuable antiques, so I don’t like the idea of using them while we eat. I can’t pay if I spill something on them.”

“Slurp, slurp.”

“Wait, Index!! You’re British, so why are *you* the one slurping up the noodles!? This...this is naporitan! You can’t be that careless with the great demon king that reigns alongside curry udon!!!!!!”

He may have gone too far in teaching her how to eat the commoner’s food of soba.

But perhaps because she wore a white habit on a daily basis, Index could eat or drink any kind of food in a hurry without getting any of it on her clothes. It was not really something she could brag about, but Kamijou felt like her

technique was so impressive that uploading it to a video site would get her treated like some kind of expert.

Furashina spread out a paper napkin on her lap and giggled.

“The ones used at the tables are like the sample cellphones at the front of a store, so don’t worry. You’re meant to enjoy playing the games without worrying about damaging or staining them. With analog games, the first challenge is gathering enough people to play, so it is not unusual for specialty shops to have play spaces like this. Whether a game is fun or not is what really matters, so demonstrating how fun they are is more important than design or price when it comes to getting sales.”

“Is that how it works?”

“Webcams are common these days, so it is almost always possible to gather players if you really want to. Even if it means rolling the dice through a screen. This kind of thing may be more of a psychological restraint.”

“Munch, munch. Huh? The food’s already gone.”

Index had devoured her small plate of pasta, so Furashina spoke quietly to place an order with the manager without ever opening the small notepad of a menu.

“Oh, you’re fine with my recommended drink, I hope?”

“Does this monster look like she’s even remotely picky?”

Since Furashina’s small animal aura had receded and her shoulders were much more relaxed, she apparently visited here a lot.

Kamijou was relieved to see it.

*That incident* had been resolved, but that had not been the end. Life went on, so there was more to the story. Furashina Ririn would have been tossed into Academy City without any idea what to do, but she had apparently figured out how to make a place for herself.

Tea and coffee took time to make when done right, yet the manager was back quite soon. But Kamijou doubted he had this premade too.

And Kamijou looked surprised when he saw what was carried to them.

“Huh? Cocoa?”

“It is hot chocolate. This is my recommendation. They stock cacao as a secret flavor, but they don’t normally serve it as its own drink. You could call it part of a secret menu.”

Furashina smiled gently and explained while lifting the mug with both hands.

This may have used different oils and sugar than normal cocoa.

Kamijou did not know much about the varieties and brands of chocolate, but there had to be a lot to it if a professional café had prepared it.

Kamijou took a sip.

“Hmm, it just tastes like cocoa to me.”

“I said it’s hot chocolate, didn’t I?”

Furashina may have been the kind of person that got angry if you referred to pancakes as hotcakes.

“Ririn, coffee jelly was the most you could drink, right?”

“Wha-!? That’s not why! This is an adult luxury...!”

Furashina panicked, so was this “secret menu item” actually something the manager had whipped up because she could not drink the normal tea or coffee?

The sweet drink left them wanting food. But it was not that Kamijou and Furashina were slow. Index’s starting dash had simply been nonsensical. He and Furashina finally started on their small plates of pasta.

“Do you come here often?”

“Yes, I practically live here, so I even wanted to work here if I could. But I have no way of proving my age and I don’t have an Academy City ID, so that was off limits.”

“Eh?”

“Eh?”

Mugs in hand, Kamijou and Index spoke up in unison.

They had realized that the white nun's age was similarly unknown, she had no Academy City ID, she did not attend school, and she simply lived in Kamijou's dorm, eating food and lazing around.

And Furashina seemed to only now realize that space was available.

"What? Wait... That was an option!? Why didn't you say so!? I wouldn't have had to work so hard finding somewhere to sleep!!"

"That last part has me worried! Where have you been spending the night until now!? You haven't been buried in the garbage bags at a park again, have you!?"

"..."

"Touma, what do you make of Ririn's silence?"

The way she immediately clammed up could not have been more worrying, but a look at her hair and clothes was enough to know she was not actually living under a bridge or in the station plaza. Kamijou could only pray there was no deep meaning to the fact that she had not invited them to her home.

Furashina seemed to intentionally construct a dividing line within herself.

"Ahem. I used this shop while building up a new Virtual-On after the *previous incident*. In that way, you can think of it as my second home."

"Hm? You made that cutting-edge VR game in this retro place?"

Virtual-On had been rereleased as a free game and both Kamijou and Index had already downloaded it. Some functions, like the Material Analyze, had been removed, but it had grown quite popular as an even more addictive game than before.

That seemed like the polar opposite of these analog games that used dice and pencils...

"It's pretty unusual for that digital disaster Index to touch anything electronic without fear."

"It's even more unusual for Mr. No Hobbies to make time for just having fun."

"That's because you never help with the housework!!"

"Don't say that!!"

Kamijou and Index started grappling. It was interesting how what sounded the world like an argument never developed into a normal argument.

A few different dice sat in the center of the square table along with the salt and pepper shakers. They were made of translucent glass, so if you failed to notice the numbers carved into each face, you might confuse them for interior decoration.

Furashina's slender fingertips grabbed a 10-sided dice – numbered from 1 to 10 – which was an unusual sight for the Japanese.

“Ones numbered from 0 to 9 might be more common,” she said. “But the entirety of a game is contained in here.”

“?”

Their grappling had just about stripped away the habit held together by no more than safety pins and the white monster's maw was beginning to widen, but the hero and dragon focused on Furashina instead.

“Of course, that isn't to say the outcome of the dice is everything.” She lightly rolled the oddly-shaped die in her soft-looking palm. “Analog dice and dice reproduced in a digital space do not actually produce identical results. ...This one has the number carved into it instead of simply painted on. That creates a difference in weight, changing the results from a digital die that uses the pure random probability.”

“Hmm. Is that how it works?”

Kamijou gave a noncommittal response because he did not really get her point.

Then the elderly manager carried out some more food. Despite the chic atmosphere of the shop, it was a pile of thick sandwiches. They may have been what were commonly known as club sandwiches. Three slices of bread had plenty of ingredients placed between them, so there was a lot of thinly-sliced boiled egg, tomato, fried chicken, and more. This really was not the kind of place a pretentious person could use to pass the time with an English newspaper in one hand. It looked perfect, but the details were overpowering.

“Munch, munch, chomp, chomp!!”

“W-watch out! She’s already making her attack! If not for the chaff and flares, would that have happened to my head...!?”

With her maw opened wide, Index shifted her aim from Kamijou’s head to the sandwiches.

Kamijou recalled hearing the theory that these had been developed so people could eat without getting their fingers dirty when playing cards. Did that mean the shop also had *tekka maki* on the menu?

Kamijou was not suicidal enough to interfere. He sipped at his cocoa...no, hot chocolate, but he felt like he was finally starting to appreciate it. It had cooled with time, but it still tasted good. Whatever the food or drink, the best ones kept their flavor when the Hot-Hot Magic wore off.

“So what does that die have to do with Virtual-On?”

Furashina smiled a bit at that and tossed the glass die onto the table. Her one visible eye followed it as it noisily rolled along the table, avoiding the large plate of sandwiches.

“The theory alone is simple enough, but perfectly recreating this is no easy task. There is so much more you have to calculate: the difference in center of gravity based on the grooves on each face, the friction with your hand, and so on. For example, even fictional video game worlds have gravity. Have you ever found yourself oddly irritated by an action game even though the graphics and sound were not bad? That might be because the unseen physics calculations are not set up properly.”

Furashina Ririn paused there.

The die had stopped on 5. It was neither a good nor a bad result for a 10-sided die numbered from 1 to 10.

“The problem here is that perfectly recreating the real world’s laws of physics does not necessarily make a fun game.”

She poked at the die with her slender fingertip.

The extra force gave it one more roll that conveniently placed the 10 face on top.

“The entertainment business throws around the word ‘realism’ like it’s an *intro* from a *jidaigeki*, but they must never forget that realism is only useful when it is used to make the product more entertaining. When you run, jump, and slide for the transition, you want to feel a rhythm that makes pulling a single lever a lot of fun. Before worrying about the polygon density or number of vertices, you need the fictional equations for what you can call the ‘meta physics calculations’. Of course, to make a world that is more fun than the real world, you need to perfectly recreate the gravity and fluid dynamics of the real world and then tweak the parameters from there.”

“Uhhh, uweh?”

Index seemed confused by all of this. It was rare for that incarnation of hunger to freeze in place while holding a sandwich.

Kamijou gave the frozen nun a sidelong glance before responding.

“Oh? The laws of physics for a fictional game, huh? That sounds like a lot of wor-...”

“Oh, it really is! But it’s the most fun part! You’re not just creating a bunch of code and flowcharts! You’re creating an entire world!! It’s easy to forget, but the most important part is the ‘sliding’ calculations. When you take an action like swinging a sword or firing a gun, players feel more like they actually did something when there’s a follow-through motion or recoil that causes the character to freeze and leave their control! It might seem like it would be best to increase freedom and never take control away from the player, but it’s quite the opposite! The lack of freedom between periods of freedom is what gives the player a real feel for the action they took! This might be confusing, so let me give an example! Yes, how about this!? All the foreign big-budget urban open world games have unfortunately caused a decline in racing games, but let’s focus on them. Now, racing games feature a wide variety of vehicle types: F-1, motorcycles, carts, off-road, streetcars, and even decotora and flying cars. But the most important aspect is not simply using the accelerator and brake! The real fun comes from the curves and steering! The horizontal slipping of the tires is a form of restriction, but how that works is a never-ending problem! Drifting is even used as a selling point on the packages, but the various physics calculations are whittled down in order to turn more realistic drifting into

something more extreme that allows you to make clean turns with simple inputs! I focused on that with the sliding known as 'transitions' in Virtual-On, so I made sure you could do everything from protect yourself by dodging enemy shots or attack by moving into your opponent's blind spot with a single action! Woof, woof!!"

The hot chocolate in their mugs had completely lost its steam.

While she clenched her fists and leaned forward, Furashina must have noticed that Kamijou was staring blankly at her small nose instead of focusing on her words because that developer blushed and lowered her butt back into her seat.

She hung her head a bit so her blonde hair hid her flushed cheeks and made a barely audible statement.

"...S-sorry about that. I got too focused on myself."

"It's fine, it's fine. I could watch your nose whistling like that all day."

"Y-you don't have to unwittingly provide a finishing blow with such a bright smile, you know? M-moving on...!"

The whistling had stopped. She had grown a lot shyer suddenly.

Kamijou took some time to work through the mountain of knowledge even if it took him longer than everyone else.

"So to put it simply, it's easier to make an exciting game out of a beam cannon that aims on its own than a strict handgun that never seems to hit?"

"Y-yes. That said, it comes down to personal taste, so there is no one right answer. You can end up with any number of results by fine-tuning it for the target demographic. Based on my research, Americans generally prefer things to be stricter and more realistic while the Japanese prefer things to be more fun even if that means distorting reality. And there are apparently some cases where the same title has its hidden parameters adjusted when it crosses borders. The urban legends of the American version of a game being brutally hard may come from that difference in how the games 'feel'."

"Yeah, I've seen some articles on games sites talking about the differences in gaming culture. Like how female characters end up being square-jawed and

macho, or why the Japanese love legendary swords so much.”

“Hmm. When the Japanese design them, everyone ends up with such big heads. And there are no wrinkles on their faces, so they look like smooth Martians.”

“Index, you’re not supposed to say that, dammit.”

No one wanted visible laugh lines on the faces and no one was interested in graphics so detailed you could see all the dirt in every pore on the characters’ skin. Please understand this.

Furashina did not seem to take either side here.

“Well, Americans love ninjas and samurai to death, so everyone has their oddities. They don’t seem satisfied with a game world unless someone with a katana can slice through a Vulcan cannon bullet from head on. They must think karate and kendo are types of psychic powers.”

“And the Japanese practically worship magnums.”

“In games, .44 calibers carry a god of destruction inside. Even though a normal assault rifle would have a higher muzzle velocity and has rapid fire.”

Their discussion was losing focus.

Kamijou pushed aside his glass of ice water, which had been supplied separately from the mug of hot cocoa, to make sure the condensation did not drip down onto the die.

“So you were talking about physics calculations, right? If it’s just about things like gravity and friction, couldn’t you have used something other than dice to explain?”

“I mentioned German board games earlier, but these analog games also have differences between Japanese and foreign versions. And TRPGs tend to be more foreign. They were a convenient tool to study what makes a game fun.”

“Hm? I’ll admit karuta and sugoroku get all the focus in Japan, but there’s a lot more than just that!”

As a self-styled highly literate boy, Kamijou wanted to protest this, but a gambling manga would not begin without explaining the rules in advance.

Sadly, it might be best to return to the basics. Even with hanafuda or roulette, it was worth going over the rules first.

But even the basics had been improved with time.

It was too simple to think that video games were fun because they were video games. They had become fun after the underlying values were thoroughly adjusted. During the debugging phase, they remained “plain” and playing them was like endlessly chewing flavorless gum. ...Although Kamijou only knew about this from Aogami Pierce when he had returned dead-eyed from a labor camp.

But that was not Furashina Ririn’s point as she shook her mug to swirl around the cooled hot chocolate.

“The Virtual-On spread by the Blue Stalker during the *previous incident* was based on weapons of war. That was quite well done. You could say they were the perfect tool for enjoying the thrill of murder with none of the guilt. That was why everyone grew so hooked on that unknown experience. Only a few people like Academy City’s #1 had a resistance to that feeling and thus questioned it.”

“...”

The being known as the Blue Stalker had originally lived in a world of war and ruin.

He may not have chosen that out of malice. It may simply have been the first thing that came to mind when trying to figure out what people would find fun and thus play.

That thought made Kamijou incredibly sad.

The aggregation of delusion that had tried to resist the course of *a completely different* era had also been bound by that same era.

“When redistributing it as a free game, I of course couldn’t rely on that same thrill. I had to overturn all of those completed equations and build up a new form of fun. The only part I hoped to retain was the idea of it being a sport rather than a war.”

Index left her seat and shouted excitedly that there were some Virtuaroids. As

all of you wise people have surely surmised, the large plate of club sandwiches had been fully consumed.

The Virtuaroids were probably game pieces for a board game.

Index spun around one of the glass cases lining the shop like square pillars and grabbed a small figurine. The figurines were about thumb-sized and made of a material halfway between plastic and papier-mache. They were small, but their proportions were not deformed and all the small details were present. They were likely hand-made pieces that did not belong to a specific game. It was obvious who must have made and painted them.

“Neat. They stand up without a pedestal or other support.”

“Look, it’s detailed in here too.”

“Don’t flip Fei-Yen upside down, Index!!”

“My Bal-Rloon is here too!” shouted the nun while ignoring him entirely.

That was not a standard model. It was Index’s original Virtuaroid that was altered to use her Boost Weapon. Only someone who knew her well could have reproduced the details that well.

“Virtuaroids were originally used as weapons of war, so the center of gravity and balancing were fine-tuned from the start. I was the one that made those and it surprised even me.”

Was she impressed or exasperated?

Furashina breathed a gentle sigh.

“Meanwhile, Virtuaroids are materialized from data, so they can simply ignore forces like inertia. That makes them very different from stealth aircraft that end up looking the same no matter what country makes them. That’s why a single jump provides such a unique movement that differs from a long throw of a baseball.”

“Hmm. Well, it is kind of amazing that Dordray and Fei-Yen are in the same category, now that I think about it. Did that take a lot of work?”

“...Yes, a *lot* of work...”

A distant look entered her eyes and a low voice escaped her lovely lips. She seemed to be expressing her resentment for the Blue Stalker who had retired ahead of her. This might be the ultimate fate of a programmer who worked until they had withered up like dried squid.

Since she could create Temjin or Cypher by kneading some putty, she may have worked with the Virtuaroids to the point that they showed up in her dreams. If so, she had been working much too hard.

“I had to create a new kind of fun distinct from the original weapons of war, so it was a good opportunity to look into the origins of video games and learn what makes them fun.”

“Oh?”

“Want to try it out? There are plenty of short games that can be played in 5 or 10 minutes and don’t require creating a full character sheet.”

With that, Furashina pulled out one of the paper napkins supplied on the table and spread it out. She drew out a house plan with practiced hand.

Kamijou frowned.

“Hmm? Why are you drawing a diagram? And this looks like it has a shower, bathroom, kitchen, and bed all in the same room. That’s pretty crazy.”

“This is a masterpiece for beginners known as ‘RV’. The players wake up inside an RV and find that a special lock has them trapped inside, so they investigate the RV to find a way to escape. Unlike a fantasy or space opera, there’s no expansive world to learn about and the limited space makes it easy to imagine. All you need to play are two 10-sided dice and enough game pieces for everyone.”

“Hm. Is that how it works?”

“Um, these games require a player known as the GM who keeps the game going, so I will be the GM for-...”

Furashina trailed off when the shop’s manager approached them.

Since there were no other customers, he would apparently take the GM role.

“Ririn, we use these? Then I choose Bal-Rloon!”

Index carried a variety of small game pieces to the square table and Kamijou grabbed the Temjin. It was kind of amusing imagining the Virtuaroids desperately working to escape an RV. Furashina had trouble choosing between Apharmd and Dordray, but then...

“Cypher?”

“It just feels right.”

With that casual response, Furashina picked up Index’s Bal-Rloon instead of her Cypher.

“Now, let’s decide on the initial positioning. Take another player’s piece and place it wherever you like. That is where he or she will wake up.”

“Okay, then I’ll do Touma! ...Hmm, I’ll place him outside the RV.”

“Wait, Index! You have no idea what an escape game is, do you!?”

“That is fine. This level of freedom and how the GM responds to a player’s pranks is part of what makes tabletop games so much fun. You can place him on the roof, below the RV, or in New York if you want. However, there is no guarantee that the outside of the RV is safe, so a player on the outside may not be able to return to the danger zone and help the other players.”

“I have a bad feeling about this...!”

At Kamijou’s desperate insistence, Index placed his piece inside the RV. He ended up in the crazy position of waking up in a cross-legged Zen meditation pose right on top of the gas burner, but he did avoid being taken out of the game as soon as it began.

Kamijou placed Furashina’s Cypher in the shower space and Furashina placed Index’s Bal-Rloon on top of the sofa bed.

The blue girl raised one slender finger.

“There is only one rule. This is a role-playing game, so the fun is found in really getting into the role. Do not hold back any ideas that come to mind. Try anything and do whatever you want. A program-controlled game doesn’t allow for that, so it is the best part of a game between people.”

They had to escape the mystery RV.

And with that goal in mind, it was time to begin.

“Yawwwn... Nnn, I sure feel rested. And I’m a bit hungry, so let’s find some food.”

“...Just make yourself at home there, Index. So why won’t the door open? Let’s try grabbing the doorknob.”

When Kamijou approached the stainless steel door, the store manager told him to roll two dice.

He got a 1 and a 1.

“Oh, that is a fumble.”

Right off the bat, a high-voltage current flowed through the doorknob and the Temjin piece was knocked onto its side. Also, the manager rolled up Kamijou’s sleeve and struck his wrist with two fingers.

“Um, what!? If there were punishments, you could have said so!!”

The blow to his right hand may have been a way of syncing him to his character grabbing the doorknob. The old man was thorough and seemed like an expert finger-striker. He was really good at it, so it hurt!!

“What kind of escape game explains the tricks in advance? There are a number of ways to judge a dice roll: even or odd, more or less than the midpoint, doubles or not. The worst result is double 1s, so that’s a fumble where you always fail. The best result here is double 10s, so that’s a critical where you always succeed.”

Furashina smoothly explained it all, but then she made another remark.

“By the way, I drew up the original plan, but the location of the traps was redrawn on a different napkin by the GM when he took over, so I don’t know where they are.”

Furashina apparently could not leave the shower space. The room was as small as a phone booth, but it was locked and could not be opened from the inside or outside.

“Hmm, then maybe the fridge,” said Index. “Drool. I bet there’s a big secret there!”

“There are more important things here, like escaping the RV or rescuing Furashina! And opening the fridge is a bad idea! I bet you’ll find a black mass of hair covered in roaches or something!! It’ll be the remains of the previous victim that failed to escape!!”

Index ignored Kamijou’s warning and opened the fridge. The GM had her roll two 10-sided dice.

5 and 6. The total was odd.

“Oh. It seems there is some rotten turkey inside.”

“Gwahhh!?! This cheese smells like a wet shoe sole!”

The manager took a chunk of a smelly dairy product for experts only and tossed it into Index’s mouth. It seemed to affect her eyes more than her tongue as she writhed in pain. This seemed silly, but no source of edible food meant they had a definite time limit for their search. It now came down to how long a human being could last on water and salt. A single dice roll could put them in real danger.

Once those two had recovered from the electric shock and horrific odor, they found they could not break the stainless steel door or wire-reinforced windows with their bare hands.

“What do we do? I don’t think we can dismantle these with just a screwdriver.”

“Oh, is it a Phillips head? The shower uses a metal pipe on the wall instead of a rubber hose, so we could get a metal pipe if I had that screwdriver.”

“Ohh, then we could break the window and escape!”

The shower space’s door could not be opened from within. According to the shop manager, it had a 3-digit dial lock.

“Come to think of it, there was a memo held to the fridge door with a magnet. Oh, I see. So the combination is 072!”

“You idiot. A number placed in plain sight is obviously going to be fake!”

As soon as the idiot entered the number, a trap activated.

The nozzle inside the closed shower space sprayed out sugar water at full blast.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

The three players fell silent because they had no idea what that punishment would mean. Their confusion naturally produced a more relaxed atmosphere.

Now, let us think about what has happened thus far. What causal relationship has there been between the players and the roles they are playing? Except these were merely suggestions and were not required. Yes, they were not required.

And yet...

Furashina Ririn poured sugar in her glass of ice water and then dumped it over her head.

Kamijou Touma trembled in fear of her bizarre action.

“You...what!? Do you think you’re standing on the winner’s podium or something!?”

“Tremble tremble... Th-this is a lot worse than I was expecting. Not only is it really cold, but it sticks to your skin more than normal water. I’m all sticky now, so this might be a lot like the punishments using mosquitos and lacquer.”

Was playing a role in a tabletop game really this harsh?

Water dripped from Furashina’s long blonde hair as it plastered to her small face. Her white blouse must have stuck to her skin because her bright flesh color showed through. She was wearing a blue vest over her blouse, but it was designed for form over function because it only covered her stomach area. It left the modest bulges of her breasts completely unguarded. In fact, they were resting on top of the vest. If not for the large blue ribbon at her neck, it would have been a lot worse. ...And Index nearly chomped down on Kamijou rather than Furashina who was trembling in displeasure.

Anyway, the girl's blue lips reminded them this was a tense death game.

To rescue Furashina from the sugar water shower, Kamijou and Index searched all over the RV and eventually focused on the rotten turkey the nun had found. They placed it on a cutting board and chopped it open. They found a second memo in there, entered its combination into the dial lock, and finally freed soaked Furashina from the shower.

"...If this wasn't rotten, Index would've just eaten it all and we would've been screwed..."

"W-w-w-w-well, that's how these games work. Anyway, is there a towel anywhere? I want to get out of these wet clothes..."

They assumed Furashina meant in the game, but then she actually reached for her wet blouse. Kamijou and Index rushed over and stopped her.

The avatar in the fictional RV left the player behind as she dried off with a towel and warmed up with a hair dryer.

"...No fair..."

"Don't curse your own game character! Anyway, I removed the shower pipe with the screwdriver, so let's break through this reinforced glass."

But in the tabletop dimension, everything was decided by the roll of the dice.

It was a mistake to leave their final attempt in the hands of *the* Kamijou Touma.

"1 and 1..."

"Why do you have to fumble here, Touma!?"

He did succeed in breaking the window, but the small impact caused the entire RV to wobble. Half the RV was jutting out over the edge of a cliff, so it tilted like a seesaw and fell into the ravine. Kamijou and the others were transformed into waste material and their lives came to an end.

"Oh, c'mon!! All our effort and that's what happens!? Such...wahhh, such misfortuuuuuuuune!?"

"Hmm. Dice are such devilish things."

Once they finished their game of the eternal masterpiece known as RV, the elderly manager was no longer needed as GM, so he left the table.

Furashina had a towel on her head and held a new mug of hot chocolate while lovingly sipping at the contents. (Meaning she had not actually solved the whole see-through problem.)

“As you can see, the ability to adlib through a series of unexpected events is the highlight of tabletop. Modern open world games allow for a large variety of choices and freedom, but they still can’t hope to match a serious TRPG.”

“Freedom, huh?”

Furashina smiled while blowing on the source of the steam.

“That is the all-in-one for games. Even in Virtual-On, you have to find your own way to enjoy it. A developer shows off their skill by seeing how far they can take that within the limited space, materials, and code available. The meta physics calculations I mentioned are directly connected to what you want to experience when playing a game. Do you want to run, jump, slash, or shoot? When constructing it as a game, you have to create an experience you could never find in reality. No matter how realistic it looks, a game is essentially another world entirely. Even with foreign war games and crime action games, the parameters of the physics calculations have been tweaked, so you see a world where the atmosphere and gravity are composed differently from reality.”

“Hm? Even when the game is played within the real Academy City as an AR game?”

“You seem to have a strong belief in realism, but making a game that is truly identical to reality would mean to force all the restrictions and restraints of reality into your leisure time as well. There is generally no market for ‘mere reality’ with no alterations whatsoever. Well, that might not be true if you were the president of a superpower or the CEO of a multinational corporation, but there is no point in creating a game for a single person.”

Furashina made her entire argument quite smoothly.

Some spite entered her words toward the end, but that may have been her long days of exhaustion catching up to her. People were fragile when soaked with sticky sugar water.

She must have researched all of this. She was saying that actual realism and valuable “realism” were different things.

When taking a photo for a restaurant menu, the food would be allowed to cool so there was no steam in the way, it would be covered in paint and wax, and lights would be set up at multiple angles to really make it shine. It would be completely inedible if served that way, but the photo still inspired hunger.

And as odd as it might sound, if you took the secret menu hot chocolate that Furashina so adored and snapped a photo of it in the mug as soon as it was made, it would not look all that delicious.

This may have been the same as how the front-on expressionless photos taken for student IDs and driver’s licenses made the person look like a criminal. When taking selfies with a smartphone, someone would pay careful attention to the angle, make a duck face, and even alter it with photo-editing software.

True realism was quite bland.

Now that she had warmed up, Furashina breathed a heated sigh.

“In that sense, the inclusion of the Boost Weapons might have been the most troublesome part. Still, I had to include a new system to make up for the elimination of the dangerous defections and the Material Analyze.”

“Oh, you mean the system that lets you include your powers or physical abilities into the Virtuaroid?”

“Yes, except those powers and abilities are not included ‘as is’. Do that and Academy City’s hierarchy would simply be transferred into the game, making it a mere copy of boring reality. After going out of my way to tweak the laws of physics to create the meta physics calculations that only exist in the game world, it would have been a waste to let reality creep back in. However...”

“If it strays too far from reality, the espers would feel something off about their powers in the game?”

Furashina watched Index use her Bal-Rloon figurine to kick a 10-sided die across the table.

“That requires a delicate balance. To an outsider like me, esper powers look meta, but to the residents of Academy City, they’re a familiar part of reality. For everything else, I went for the extreme of either fiction or realism, but I felt the need for something different here.”

Was that how it worked?

Well, what seemed familiar and what seemed strange differed from person to person. For example, the spread of dryers meant no one hung their clothes out to dry in sunny California and restaurants automatically served ice water in Japan even though water was plentiful.

“For this, you have to feel out what seems right,” bluntly stated Furashina Ririn. She also used the notepad-sided menu to keep the 10-sided die from falling off the table as Index’s Virtuaroid kicked it. “I redistributed Virtual-On as a free game, but that was limited to Academy City. Powers are normal here and the general public wants a world where they can overturn the real hierarchy. Once I figured that out, tweaking the parameters wasn’t that difficult.”

“Yeah, the higher the level, the fewer espers there are...”

There were only seven Level 5s in all of Academy City. When weighing 2.3 million people against 7, it was obvious which one to prioritize.

“And for that...”

Furashina caught the 10-sided die kicked by Index’s Virtuaroid. She then took another color of glass die from the container that also held the salt and pepper shakers. The small animal of a girl rattled them together in her hand and casually rolled them onto the square table. The jewel-like dice came to a stop at the Virtuaroid’s feet.

The result was two 1s.

...If that was not a coincidence, then did she have some way to control the result?

“I took inspiration from the concept of fumbles found in TRPGs. Even experts

can die instantly if the dice don't like them. But that disadvantage maintains the tension and makes the game more fun. Forcing a disadvantage on the player does not necessarily make it no fun to play. Adding that in took a lot of courage on my part, but it helped to have such a successful precedent."

"I can't really say anything since I've never made a game, but does it make that much of a difference?"

"Yes. I considered a lot of other things as well. For example, TRPGs have NPCs controlled by the GM – the game master. You know, characters like Villager A who help guide the players along. Well, other than them, there are no recurring characters prepared, like a protagonist or heroine. The players in each game get to decide where they come from and even whether they will take part in the adventure. ...Well, there is no need to reveal that Virtuaroids were originally weapons of war. And when the player has provided their own coloring to a Virtuaroid and added in a Boost Weapon based on their own traits, they are meant to provide their own text and play the part they have written for themselves."

Kamijou did not know much about where the fun of modern games had originated, but with cards and dice, there had to have been a time long ago when people thought it was fun simply to flip over a card or roll a dice. Of course, cards were not fun just because they were cards. They were fun because so many people had helped develop them and gradually worked out the kinks in the rules. There might be a single continuous line of development stretching from the past to the future. Furashina had arrived at these retro analog games because she had wanted to get a look at that full line.

"Virtual-On only functions as a game when people interact with it," she said.

The small figurine Index held only looked like a soccer striker because she was moving it around to kick the die. On the other hand, the result of the rolling die was irrelevant and might as well have been a meaningless pattern. Even though that same "meaningless pattern" had held a crucial meaning that determined the fates of their characters during the RV game.

Of course, they would both be no more than a trinket decorating the store if no one did anything with them.

“The spread of portable devices and wireless networks means people don’t have to physically meet up anymore, but this may have originally been the kind of thing to play at a physical location like an arcade. That was why board games and TRPGs that are played around a single table were such good reference materials.”

However.

Everything she said relied on a certain assumption.

And it was something that Kamijou had not quite worked out yet.

“We played one just now, but are different TRPGs really that different?”

“Hee hee.”

Furashina Ririn covered her mouth and laughed quietly.

The elderly manager must have picked up on something about her behavior because he removed a game set from one of the rotating glass cases and carried it to the table.

It was probably a recommended game.

“I gave you a simple lecture on dice rolls before, remember?” Furashina lifted up a manual the size of a small encyclopedia and smiled. “Then how about we try a more serious game this time?”

The sun had completely set.

The café was set up to avoid the sun in order to preserve the retro analog games, so it was hard to keep track of time. Time seemed to fly by in that shop while playing a vintage game rarely seen anymore even in America or Germany, but Kamijou and Index were no longer there.

Furashina had enjoyed the time they had spent there.

The elderly manager worked to restrain himself while on the job, but now he smiled and spoke to her.

“That is the first I’ve ever seen you talk so much, Ririn-chan.”

“Yes, I suppose.”

She was aware how talkative she had been.

Was she becoming more like the original L'Ln Plajiner, or was she moving in the opposite direction? Furashina Ririn could never answer that question because she had not gone to "the other side" as the Tangram's control device.

Now.

Had she talked so much because she had been enjoying herself or because she had not wanted them to realize what she was really up to?

"Manager."

"Yes?"

That shop seemed left behind by time and the manager probably assumed the same cycle would continue tomorrow and the day after that.

That meant the girl had to be the one to leave.

She had to leave this gentle cycle that swirled around like hot chocolate in its mug and she had to enter the outside world.

She bowed with the accuracy of a clockwork doll and accurately pronounced the words she had to say.

"Thank you for everything."

Before he could ask what that meant, she opened the thin plywood door and set foot in the outside world.

Into a world where the sun had set and night had fallen.

Now.

It was finally time for the Vooster's Cup Virtual-On Tournament to begin.

# A Certain Magical Virtual-On: Misaka Mikoto's Dangerous Tea Party

“Took you long enough. Hurry the hell up, Shokuhou.”

Misaka Mikoto, a middle school girl with short chestnut hair, looked utterly irritated and breathed a heavy sigh. The way she talked here sounded nothing like a Level 5 who was a target of adoration within a prestigious girl's school.

It was afterschool and she was meeting someone in front of District 7's subway station. ...So why was she so displeased with the arrangement?

She was at the Raiden statue in the station plaza.

That said, the large station had several exits and she was using a less popular zone located directly behind the shopping district. A dull and shaded air hung over that area and Shokuhou Misaki's shoulders were slumped as she arrived.

She was Academy City's #5. Her Mental Out power was the Level 5 at the top of the psychological powers.

Mind reading, brainwashing, memory erasure, hallucinations, telepathy, confessions, absentmindedness, *etc.* Her power was so broad that even she could not grasp it all without dividing it up through her use of different remote controls.

She had long and flowing honey-blonde hair and curvy proportions that could charm anyone regardless of sex or age. Even at a school of high class girls, the combination of a middle school blazer and a luxury brand bag would not have looked more convincing on anyone else.

The Queen snapped her fingers which were covered with a thin white glove.

“Everyone, that is enough caution ability. It seems Misaka-san really did come alone, so I will handle the rest☆”

With obvious footsteps that scraped their shoes against the asphalt, uniforms

identical to Mikoto's appeared all around her. A few were hidden behind roadside trees or vending machines and some had even been on the station building's roof. Girls in Tokiwadai Middle School uniforms had been blending into the scenery to keep an eye on the dull plaza. They had revealed their presence to abandon that advantageous positioning as a courtesy that indicated they meant no harm.

They had a variety of hairstyles: short, twintails, wavy, strait and long, and ponytails. Some gently fanned themselves with an iron fan and others carried a heavy-looking instrument case over their shoulder. The Western and Eastern high-class girls may have come in even more varieties than there were remotes in Shokuhou Misaki's bag. That may have been what made the school's largest clique so powerful.

But on the other side was Mikoto.

She was Academy City's #3. As the Railgun, she had the strongest electric power.

She must have been scanning her surroundings with EM waves and other methods because she showed no sign of surprise when dozens of high-level espers appeared around her. That was a sign that she knew she could defeat them all on her own if it came to that.

Mikoto winked and sighed.

"What is with you? Are you so sheltered you're afraid to leave the girl's-only School Garden without an escort?"

"You know, Misaki-san. Anyone would be surprised to receive a sudden invitation to such a gloomy place when we aren't really friends. The natural assumption is that I'll meet a fate worse than being beat up in the kitchenette."

"Yes, yes, kitty. I'll be more careful next time. Anyway, I have something to discuss with you, so come with me."

"Are you serious? This gloomy place isn't the worst of it!?"

The willful girl began complaining, but Mikoto had no intention of caring.

After lightly waving toward the clique members who bowed deeply toward

her, Mikoto confidently dragged Shokuhou out into the District 7 streets which were known for being a mix of bright and dark.

It was Shokuhou, who was supposedly a queen, who looked confused.

She puffed her cheeks out like a child and used her white gloved fingers to toy with her honey-blonde hair.

“...Why did every single one of them look like a parent telling someone to take care of their unruly daughter?”

“If you get how they see you, why not restrain yourself more?”

The tournament had yet to begin, but the streets were decked out for the Vooster’s Cup. Banners of Virtuaroids like Angelan or Cypher hung from the pedestrian bridges and the sign informing drivers of a temporary lane change for roadwork had a Dordray doll with a large drill waving its hands like windshield wipers. Everywhere they looked, they saw advertisements: “Improve our society by playing Virtual-On like crazy!” “Let’s all enter the Vooster’s Cup to defeat a previously incurable disease!!” “The future of medical simulation is counting on Virtual-On!!!!!!”

There was Virtual-On everywhere. The wind turbines must have had program-controlled LEDs installed because a different version of Apharmd was depicted with each rotation.

Shokuhou stretched her arms upwards while walking through the chaotic crowd.

As soon as she bent backwards, her large breasts pushed out at her blazer from within.

“Hmm. This is nice every once in a while. Freedom is the ultimate luxury.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ha ha. Ah... I don’t have much opportunity ability to walk through the streets on my own two feet. I generally sit in the back seat while someone drives☆”

“I bet I could make the world a better place by punching this girl.”

The strained atmosphere surrounding those girls did not mean it was that time of the month. However they might act around others, they were almost

always like this together.

The Level 5's of prestigious Tokiwadai glanced over at wrapped truck with loud internal speakers advertising the latest book by a crossdressing celebrity known as the diet emperor.

"Misaka-san, do you prefer red meat or fish?"

"Fish. There might be a lot of recipes for beef, but the original ingredient has such a strong flavor that everything ends up tasting the same, whether it's broiled, grilled, made into curry, or made into a stew. You get sick of it if you have it every day."

"I also hear it's dangerous to remove too many carbs from your diet."

"Of course it is. Just like salt and fat, sugars are a necessary nutrient. You can't have too much, but too little is also harmful."

"Hmm? Is that how it works?"

"Say you're alone on a snowy mountain during a blizzard and your only food is yakisoba bread which is just carbs + more carbs. Are you going to kill yourself by avoiding that and only eating zero calorie snow?"

They thought it had passed them, but the wrapped truck got stuck at a light and they caught up to it. Through pure force of will, that celebrity was demonstrating enough effeminate personality to not be overpowered by the Virtual-On focus. The gigantic LCD screen switched over to a video of that celebrity doing something with oddly soft movements of his joints. More than 5000 yen had seemed like a lot when it was not even hard cover, but it apparently came with a video disk and a ticket to a talk show. He knew what he was doing.

"The greatest enemy of health has got to be stress. ...Not that you would know since you ignore what everyone else is doing even more than that celebrity is with Virtual-On."

"A-anyway, Misaka-san, are you interested in hot yoga? Mutter, mutter."

"Are you serious...? Isn't it a waste to spend so much time on nothing more than getting some exercise? Like with prison time, there's so many better ways

to spend your life. To me, it seems a lot faster to just change your everyday habits. For example, how about you download a pedometer for your portable device?”

“Ehhh!? Pedometers aren’t fashionable at all!!!”

“Oh, it’s all about looking good? So you just want to show off that you’re doing something? If it’s just to take photos for social media, then I’m not interested.”

Mikoto was a little surprised that Shokuhou had started this conversation.

Shokuhou Misaki had created the largest clique in Tokiwadai, so she had a lot of hangers on. If she posted a single word on social media, she would end up with such a cascade of replies that she would never be able to scroll through them all.

But to the clique girls who adored her beauty, their Queen’s beauty was simply an accepted fact. Perhaps she could not discuss this kind of daily effort with them.

The coldhearted Queen held her hands together near her mouth.

“Hey, hey, Misaka-san. I’m a little afraid to go to a sports club and try it myself, so let’s go do some hot yoga together. You can download Virtual-On’s soundtrack from the internet right now, so the latest trend is to watch the demo videos on a large screen and match your breathing to the rhythm of the music.”

“What kind of poses is that going to be!? Aren’t you going to end up doing that weird dance from Bal’s victory pose!?”

After passing by a group of high schoolers doing some kind of live broadcast with a portable device’s camera, Mikoto and Shokuhou arrived at a multi-tenant building facing the main road. But instead of entering the major convenience store or gyudon shop on the first floor, they climbed the narrow stairway to the extremely minor 6th floor. There was no elevator. For people who just walked around the city, it may have been even less familiar than a store in a back alley. Shokuhou Misaki was of course fed up with this.

The honey-blond Queen placed a hand on her slender waist, breathed a

dissatisfied sigh, and looked up.

“Hold on. I can be quite picky with my food, you know? I’m not about to eat anything as full of chemical seasonings as cup noodles or frozen foods. I hope this place serves something decent.”

“You’re just picky about everything. Now let’s go.”

“Are you serious? ...C’mon, it’s not even registered in my Meal Memo app...”

“We’re only on the 3rd floor. If you want to complain, you can do so once we reach the 6th floor.”

“Pant, pant... You had...ugh...you had better not...underestimate me...Misa... Misaka-san...ugh, gh.”

“Why are you so out of breath you’re about to vomit just from climbing to the 6th floor!? How can you brag about eating healthily when you’re this out of shape!? Not to mention wanting to do hot yoga!!”

“Pant, I am not...out of...shape... And I think I can manage hot yoga...since you only have to move...slowly...”

She was so exhausted that her excuses fell away. Mikoto recalled that exhaustion and sleep deprivation were used as forms of torture to get people to talk.

Instead of taking care of the clique’s unruly daughter, she felt more like she was a caretaker for someone’s grandmother. She was a teenage girl who would even make a flower blush and she was carefully selecting fancy super foods, so if this was enough to have her gasping for breath with her heart pounding, just how low was her base potential?

Mikoto looked utterly exasperated, but she ultimately lent Shokuhou her shoulder while guiding that newcomer to a metal door that looked as much like an emergency exit as it did a shop entrance.

“Misaka-san, why are you so good at supporting people on your shoulder?”

“My papa and mama end up in a pretty sad state when they’re drunk.”

The interior had chairs and tables colored the red, blue, yellow, and green of a 12-color paint set, making it reminiscent of an indoor amusement park’s

nursery or a foreign burger shop. The seats were made of cheap synthetic leather and the walls were covered with thick plastic, so Shokuhou feared they were sandwiched between asbestos in here. The chemical-filled space's design covered her in goose bumps before they were even served the initial ice water.

With the expression of a nervous cat someone had dumped water on, she tearfully pressed her index fingers together in front of her large chest and trembled while speaking up.

“...Um, Misaka-san. I really, really can't stand synthetic colors or artificial sweeteners, so it would be great if you would spare me this...”

“Here, take off your glove and place your hand on the counter here.”

“Hm? Like this???”

“Welcome!! Two of you, huh? Well, take these welcome drinks or whatever.”

The part-time girl dressed as Fei-Yen did not even reach the bare minimum of expected politeness and Misaka Mikoto took something from her with a smile. The label was of a common carbonated drink, but the green bottle of cider had to contain more than a full liter. Shokuhou frowned because she had never seen that product before. Instead of a plastic twist-off cap, it had a metal cap that required a bottle opener. It may have been a special industrial model for restaurants and parties.

And for some reason, Mikoto held the bottle upside down.

She held the narrow neck like it was a club.

“Shokuhou.”

“Wh-what is it, Misaka-san? I'm already feeling groggy and we haven't even begun...”

She showed no mercy.

Still smiling, Mikoto hit Shokuhou over the head with the large bottle, producing a loud crash of shattering glass.

“Ah? Oh!! Nwehhhh???”

Shokuhou Misaki doubled over and widened her eyes while all coherent

thought vanished from her mind. She had no idea what had just happened to her. It had been such a shock that she failed to notice the complete lack of pain despite a large bottle hitting her on the top of the head with enough force to shatter.

No.

A bottle of cider had supposedly smashed over her head, yet she was not even damp.

What had that been?

“Ah ha ha!! Of course it isn’t a real bottle! It’s a sugar sculpture like they use when filming dramas. This is the Rude Café where you can blow off some steam by safely hitting the club leader or adviser that’s been pissing you off. With this, the overbearing husband karaoke where you can flip over the tea table over any little thing, and the combat ration restaurant where you can eat a light meal while having an airsoft battle, Saten-san really knows how to find the weirdest places. See, isn’t this the perfect place for us?”

After tossing aside the bottleneck which now had jagged edges, Mikoto held her stomach and laughed loudly.

“The latest business trends are self-esteem building and stress management. The former is done with social media sites that half smother you with compliments. The latter is done with functional food chocolates like you see in convenience stores. *I took you here because you’re so excessively worried about your health.* This is the best place to get some exercise while working off your stress. Shokuhou, didn’t one of the girls in your clique submit a paper about this? What was her name again?”

Meanwhile, Shokuhou was still doubled over with her head lowered.

“ ~”

“Huh? What’s wrong, Shokuhou? I know you’re not a stickler for the rules, so you can’t convince me this isn’t for you.”

“...Hee, hee hee. Hee hee ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!! Give me a break, Misaka-saaan!!”

With a roar, Shokuhou grabbed a large cider bottle from the Fei-Yen part-time girl's tray and swung it toward Mikoto's head for revenge. It was a murderous horizontal swing toward the temple.

Once she actually tried it herself, she found it did not feel at all realistic in her hand. The sugar bottle shattered before the weight of the object could reach the target and the vectors scattered in every direction.

Would it be simpler to describe it as swinging a thick balloon to hit a spiky cactus?

And the hit did not stop Mikoto's laughter.

"Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!!"

"Hey, is this any time to laugh!? If this is made of sugar...oh, honestly. There are small shards all through my hair and clothes. Once our body heat starts melting them, it's obvious what kind of tragic ability will befall us. And if they're imitations, they have to be full of synthetic colors. Agh!!"

The shards were smaller than grains of sugar and some must have gotten inside the back of her clothes because Shokuhou began hopping around, making her large breasts bounce, but Mikoto had a more pressing focus.

Namely, she was laughing too hard to breathe.

This was probably a third side of her that she could not let show in the high-class space of Tokiwadai Middle School or around that spiky-haired boy she knew so well.

"Hee hee. Shokuhou, you should've seen your face. Hee!! I could almost see the chicks and stars spinning above your head. Peh heh heh. I never thought I'd see a fighting game's dazed heroine animation in real life! Da sha sha sha sha!!"

"...Don't tell me you dragged me here because you wanted to try this out but have no friends."

"Okay, Shokuhou. This is the legendary pie throw from old comedy acts."

"Wai-...!!!???"

The sexy blonde girl did not have time to raise her voice in protest. Yes, Mikoto was holding a birthday-cake-sized mass of cream on a paper plate. The

out-of-shape Queen had no hope of dodging this. Tokiwadai's Queen could turn anyone's head, yet an old-fashioned cliché covered her entire pretty face with cream.

A wet splat rang out.

There was no pain.

The cream must have been fairly sticky because the large paper plate fought gravity to remain stuck to Shokuhou's face.

Since no one stopped Mikoto, this special space must have had its own unique social rules.

The Japanese constitution did not apply here.

"Bfh!? Ah ha ha ha ha ha!!"

"...I'm hoing ho hill hou, Mihaha-han. (I'm going to kill you, Misaka-san.)"

Meanwhile out on the streets.

"???"

Shokuhou's clique was the largest within prestigious Tokiwadai Middle School, but its high-class girls stood in front of the café with their heads tilted like heads of wheat blowing in the wind. They adored Shokuhou Misaki to the point of loyalty, but this was a separate issue. Their Queen could be surprisingly careless in some areas, so they were worried sick that she was being a nuisance.

Whether they had twintails, a ponytail, or ringlet curls, the wide variety of high-class girls discussed the issue.

"Kobayashi-sama, Kobayashi-sama. What is going on inside there?"

"Wait, um, that can't be... Shokuhou-sama has the strongest psychological power and Misaka-sama has the strongest electric power, so having them in the same place must be distorting the information. Is my telepathic interception simply not working?"

A difficult expression covered the face of a girl with a black bob cut.

Those faithful servants could not bring themselves to leave even after being

instructed to, but they did not know what else to do either. After all, the two great peaks of Tokiwadai had gone out of their way to leave the school for a top secret meeting. This was more than just a dinner date. It was possible the very history of the country would change later that night. And because these girls pampered her on a daily basis, they knew how their seemingly perfect Queen was actually full of flaws they were willing to overlook. They were worried sick that Shokuhou Misaki would make some kind of careless mistake!!!!!!

...Just to be clear, this is a story about middle school girls, but that does not really matter here.

“Come on, Kobayashi-sama! Can’t you just explain it to us!?”

“...Um, then I will simply tell you what I can see... Um...first, Misaka-sama hit the Queen over the head with a large bottle and then the Queen hit her back.”

“The Sakuradamon Incident!!!???”

Again, this is a story about middle school girls.

A girl with gorgeous ringlet curls clenched her fist. She was the #2 of Shokuhou’s clique and, if you include anime, she has already appeared in a total of four different series.

“Argh, I can’t stand this! To protect Japan’s future and our Queen’s life, I will infiltrate this café myself!!”

“Ahh, Hokaze-saaan!!”

Inside the strange café, Shokuhou still had the paper pie plate stuck to her face.

The two of them were finally shown to one of the bright 12-color paint set tables, but the wet towels they were given had a different purpose from a normal restaurant. This was no time to feel like only old men wiped off their face. This was a seat in the underworld. It was a legit battlefield where sugar vases were flying and knives and forks made of silver-dust-coated chocolate glinted in the light.

(Wait. This pie feels like...?)

“Pwah☆”

After managing to recover from a state she could not allow her clique to see her in, Shokuhou realized the meaning behind the café’s interior decoration. The cheap synthetic leather and thick plastic covering the floor and walls were there to catch the stains that would otherwise hit the walls and floor when the customers threw imitation objects and missed their marks.

“Sigh. Misaka-san, my mascara hasn’t come off, has it? I have a lot of pride ability in these eyelashes.”

“What? They look fine I gue-...”

“Never mind. Someone as unrefined as you wouldn’t have a clue one way or the other...”

“That was like 0.3 seconds! You only asked me so you could say that, didn’t you!?”

After getting some revenge, Shokuhou pouted her lips in a childish way that conflicted with her sexy appearance.

“You should count yourself lucky I have breasts and a heart larger than the Pacific Ocean. If I was really mad, I could have taken this to court.”

“Don’t try to slip that bragging by me, you selfish queen. Besides, that wouldn’t work. You removed your glove and pressed your hand against a scanner when we came in, right?”

“Hm? ...A scanner???”

“That was an agreement for the activities here. Since you agreed, you don’t get to complain even if you die here. No one wants to mess with all that.”

“What kind of dangerous contract ability did you drag me into!?”

Shokuhou bristled and shouted, but Mikoto did not seem to care.

“Liability waivers are pretty common with things like bungee jumping. It’s perfectly normal in the West I imagine you love so much.”

“Could you not assume things based on my appearance? I have not forcibly dyed my hair blonde because I love the West.”

Instead of salt or sugar, the table contained several mysterious bottles of a thick red liquid. ...They were made of a soft and spongy material, so were the customers supplied with fake blood like it was salad dressing? The multiple varieties suggested a strange attention to detail.

Mikoto seemed to have recovered from the first wave of laughter, so she wiped tears from her eyes and placed her butt directly on the table instead of in the seat.

“Relax. This café uses its natural ingredients as a selling point. They use plants and minerals for all the colors. It’s just like a comedy show that makes sure everything on the surface is flawless to avoid a rush of complaints if an offensive joke upsets some people. It’s all directed by their lawyers and troubleshooters.”

“ ...”

“Look at the menu here. They work so hard to make sure these beer bottles, hammers, flower pots, glass ashtrays, metal bats, and golf clubs are perfectly safe that it’s surprising they don’t have a JIS symbol on them. Anyone is free to play out scenarios like ‘You thieving cat!!’ or ‘I-I didn’t mean to. The blood just rushed to my head, and then...!!’ to their heart’s content. So choose whatever you want. Because I want to discuss something with you today.”

“D-do they have any knives I could use...?”

“Oh? That’s a pretty decent first choice. So what’ll it be? A carving knife? A sashimi knife? For larger ones, they have bread knives and noodle knives.”

“Eh? They have that many knives!?”

“Look, try actually reading the menu. Okay, we can save some money by going with the kitchen assortment set.”

“Assortment set? Seriously...???”

“They have a lot of options: a garage toolbox set, a wealthy family inheritance conflict set, a Limited War set, and so on. Order things one at a time and you’ll run out before your fight is over. But the kitchen set is probably best for us. I want to hit you in the head with a pestle.”

Loud crashes rang out from the other tables and private rooms. And laughter always followed. They looked like middle school, high school, or college clubs, but there were a lot of people ignoring the partitions and moving into other people's space. There was a poster of a hand-drawn Grys-Vok holding up a mysterious sign that said "Hits from stray shots earn three hits in retaliation." ... Those thrown pies may have been something along the lines of the classic "Eh? I didn't order this." "That is from the madam over there." The one-person seats along the counter seemed to be a safe zone, so the customers who had been hit by too many sugar bottles and pies would take a short break there. That also seemed to be a gathering point for true gentleman connoisseurs who enjoyed watching more than participating.

"Yes, you really know where to focus," said Mikoto. "That old man is the manager."

"What?"

"He prefers watching games to playing them and he used to manage a café with his twin brother, but that partnership fell through after they got in an argument over an arcade fighting game."

If everything here was real, it would be a post-apocalyptic scene, but Academy City's frightening level of technology allowed everyone to safely laugh it off.

With her honey-blond hair spread out behind her, Shokuhou still seemed unable to shed the skin of a high-class girl. She sat straight up in her chair and childishly pouted her lips.

"I have no problem hitting you, Misaka-san, but do they have any normal food here?"

"They do, but only finger food like sushi, vegetable chips, and tortillas. I mean, if there were real plates and utensils here, someone might get confused and cause an accident."

Meanwhile, Mikoto had fully shed her skin and entered her rude mode, so she impolitely pointed at their table. Surprisingly, paper cups of tea and clear plastic packs of food were soon piled up there. The paper and plastic would be because ceramic plates and glasses would be dangerous, but it looked

incredibly cheap. They were boldly selling a lineup only allowed at a midsummer festival or a seaside restaurant. Those kinds of things had the mask pulled back when they were exposed to flat indoor lighting.

As a pure high-class girl, Shokuhou Misaki was not installed with a sense of frugality, but she was not foolish enough to happily pay a lot for a blatantly cheap product.

“...Are you serious?”

“About what? If you take issue with the flavor or appearance, you can always call over an employee and hit them. That option is why the prices are so high. You’re losing out if you just eat and drink.”

...In that case, the impolite service when they first arrived may have been an introduction to that sort of service.

In a way, this café was like heaven for people who always found fault with the waiter’s service, but the busty blonde high-class girl named Shokuhou Misaki did not know how to put herself in that gear.

The entire café seemed to run on violence because Mikoto pounded on the table to call over a waitress. The Tokiwadai teachers would probably faint if they saw that behavior, but the corners of the colored tables seemed to be sandwiched between a special plastic material. Just like the children’s plastic sandals that produced a slapping noise with each step, the table produced a silly noise with each hit.

“There are no hand bells here. Once again, because including something real increases the chances of an accident.”

“...They’re really showing off their design ability in the weirdest places,” muttered Shokuhou while resting her head in her hand.

They had perfectly combined the café’s atmosphere with a way to call over a waiter without holding anything up. It was true that an elegant bell would ruin the violent post-apocalyptic mood and it would also be dangerous.

A part-time waitress came over to take their order and also placed a small plate in front each of them.

“Hi, here’s your appetizer! It’s cheese and sliced fish on crackers...”

“Wah hah hah!! We didn’t order that!!”

Mikoto grabbed a toy slipper from the tray and swung it around as casually as someone playing the *tsukkomi* role. The part-time girl laughed and looked relieved, so her training may not have explained what to do if the customer did not hit her on the head.

Shokuhou gave the small plate in front of her a skeptical look and reached out her gloved fingers. She grabbed a cracker and bit off just the very end.

(Ugh...I can’t stand it. I thought this would be terrible, but it’s actually pretty good.)

To be blunt, it was good enough that she would have welcomed a large plate full. It was a shame that it was only a small appetizer portion.

While she waited for the party set and light meal Mikoto had ordered for them, Shokuhou slumped down on the table, pressing her boobs against it, and started talking.

“So what did you want to discuss today? ...Since you brought me all the way to this danger zone, I assume it’s something stressful enough to have us attacking each other.”

“I want your opinion on something.”

Mikoto answered with her butt still resting directly on the table and her legs dangling down.

But unlike before, her voice had grown ice cold.

“...It’s about the upcoming Virtual-On tournament: the Vooster’s Cup.”

“...”

The high-class girls of Tokiwadai Middle School gulped right outside the multi-tenant building.

“Hokaze-san, Hokaze-san. Can you hear me?”

A girl with a black bob cut spoke those words as quietly as magic words

muttered under one's breath afterschool. Oh, but she was not the girl controlled by Shokuhou in New Testament 7, so do not get confused. Anyway, Hokaze Junko, the Level 4 Rampage Dress user, had been unable to wait any longer and infiltrated the scene on her own.

Kobayashi, an unassumingly important character and a plain but capable girl who had an eye for details, pouted her lips a bit as she spoke.

"Hey, giant ringlet curl girl and extreme Gekota-phile."

"I read you loud and clear. And I will remember you said that."

The bob cut girl had a minor coughing fit before continuing.

"I-it would seem there was some interference from another line, so I have no idea what you are talking about. More importantly, how are things inside? What are the Queen and Misaka-sama doing? How chaotic is it!?"

"Um, wait just a moment. What? Place my hand here? Eh? Eh? What was that crashing noise? Eh? What is going on?"

"Hokaze-san!?"

"Kyaaaah!! There are knives flying through the air! And that person is swinging a glass ashtray toward someone's head!? What in the world is happening in here!?"

"Hokaze-san? Hokaze-saaaan!!"

...The other girls who did not have a telepathic link to Hokaze were not sure what to make of this.

Shouting someone's name twice and receiving no response was something straight out of a suspense story. Had the hunter become the hunted?

Meanwhile, there was a new development.

"Oh? Hokaze-san, what are you doing here?"

"Qu-Queen!?"

"I believe I told you to leave us. Oh, honestly. This just makes me sad. If you hadn't followed me here, I wouldn't have had to direct my cruelty ability toward you..."

“W-wait just a moment, Queen! Is this the legendary pie throwing seen in the school’s archive footage!?”

“Do not worry. I would never do something to you I wouldn’t want done to myself. So I won’t hit you in the face.”

“Phew...”

“Now, place your hands on the table and stick your butt out toward me☆”

“Whaaaat!?”

“Just to be clear, I am quite serious. Yes, I think I’m starting to understand this café’s system. As a show of warrior’s mercy, I will do it over your skirt.”

“No, wait! Why are you using a brown bitter chocolate pie!? That is cruel, Queen! This back attack is far too cruel! Waaaaaahhhhhh!!”

The bob cut girl’s face grew pale as she telepathically received a series of wet splatting sounds.

(N-not even Hokaze-san’s Rampage Dress was enough to save her from that tragedy. Does a direct conflict between Level 5s create an abnormal space of distorted physical laws...?)

And then...

To be very, very careful, the bob cut girl had been avoiding directly accessing her, but the Queen’s words reached her through ringlet curl Hokaze’s ears and mind.

The Queen was likely whispering into the ear of her dazed #2.

“My, my. I assume you are ‘listening in’ here too. Well, are you, Kobayashi-saan?”

This had reached the level of light horror.

When a truly beautiful girl snapped, she could create an indescribable terror. Despite being blonde, she had perfected the aesthetics of a Japanese ghost painting.

And despite having a black bob cut, Kobayashi succumbed to the Japanese atmosphere and gave a tearful shout.

“R-retreat!! Everyone retreat before the Queen attacks!!!!!”

“Sigh...”

Shokuhou Misaki was aware she had silently changed modes.

That might have made them stand out even more, but this warranted it.

*Misaka Mikoto would not be aware despite being the one to bring it up*, but Virtual-On had already caused a major incident that had threatened to destroy the world.

Shokuhou wanted to believe things would work out better this time, but...

“I had those impolite girls leave, so feel free to get started again.”

“I feel really bad for the one with the cream-covered butt...”

Mikoto breathed a sigh of exasperation, but it could have been worse. It had still been so much of a shock that the ringlet curl girl passed out, so she was being carried into the staff room that doubled as a medical room. The Queen slowly shook her head as she watched.

Even Shokuhou Misaki had people she did not want to get involved in anything dangerous.

“Let’s get down to business.”

“Sure thing☆”

Shokuhou replied while looking at the wok the waitress had carried over like a large plate. The kinds of imitation knives and kitchen tools used when filming dramas were arranged around the edge of the wok like flower petals. According to the waitress, the frying pan in the bottom and the wok itself looked tough but would readily dent, so they were safe to grab and throw. It was likely the same idea as building crumple zones into cars so they would absorb the shock of an accident.

Mikoto might have introduced Shokuhou to this crazy café because she wanted to nullify the legitimately dangerous atmosphere of their discussion.

Of course, that had not worked.

“You know how some things are free to use?” Mikoto sat down in the seat as she started. “For example, the map and weather apps that come preinstalled on your phone. Or, Shokuhou, that Meal Memo gourmet app you were looking at. But there is no such thing as a truly free service.”

“Yes, I have a question.”

With that, Shokuhou took a meat tenderizer from the wok and hit Mikoto in the head.

It was of course hollow and made from a thin layer of aluminum, so the jagged hammer portion dented in.

“Don’t they have those obvious banner ads to support them, just like the ads on commercial TV broadcasts?”



“There’s more than that. Point card systems were started in order to create a database of the customers’ sex, age, and occupation. And nearly a third of the Crimson Wing’s fundraising is collected to fund the management organization’s activities and advertisements. Smartphone maps and weather forecasts are convenient, but in exchange, they submit the user’s current location to a big data database that can calculate out the population distribution and flow of people through a shopping district. I assume I don’t have to spell it out for a gourmet app. They’ve created a giant advertisement medium that doesn’t go through an advertisement agency full of vested interests, so of course the creators are benefitting from it.”

“Ladle and spatula dual wielding!”

“Stop poking at my chest from both sides. When we use any kind of convenient service, we need to assume we are supplying something to them: data, time, trust, location, popularity, reputation, *etc.* Whether or not that can actually be converted into money, the world’s systems wouldn’t work if the act of gathering people could not lead to a give-and-take relationship.”

“So are you wondering what we are providing to the Vooster’s Cup based on the free Virtual-On game?”

Shokuhou tossed aside the imitation kitchen tools and collapsed onto the table in apparent exhaustion.

She traced her finger along the yes-or-no compatibility test at the bottom of the menu to find her recommended Virtuaroid.

“Hey, Misaka-san. Simply changing the normal flow of people can be incredibly valuable, you know? I suppose that would be ‘reputation’ among the cards you presented. Think of when two similar convenience stores are built at the same intersection near a subway station or along a major road. Customers will not visit them both equally. ...The number of customers is clearly influenced by proximity to the station, a bus stop, a park, a school, a hospital, a pay parking lot, or other landmarks. Having to use one extra crosswalk makes a large difference. People just won’t put up with that extra traffic light and 30 more seconds of stress.”

“ ... ”

“That Hokaze girl released an interesting social anthropology thesis on the subject,” added the Queen about one of her clique members. “Virtual-On began as a free game and I do not know what purpose its creator had. Maybe a brilliant but lonely geek simply wanted to give form to the ideas in their head and share them with a lot of people. ...But the Vooster’s Cup has transformed the entire city into a giant festival, so a lot of money is going to be changing hands whether the people behind it planned it that way or not. Starting a fad will always alter the way people walk around the city. Remember what I said about a single intersection and the 30 seconds spent waiting at the light? If the flow of people changes like a river’s bank has broken, the influence ability is far greater. It’s scary, really. Message boards and social media are filled with little stories like a dolphin that wandered into mouth of a river or a gathering point for cute cats, but whenever those create a temporary landmark, the flow of people can change, putting stores out of business and putting people out in the cold. Yet none of the people posting those things feel any responsibility for what happens.”

The compatibility test seemed to have settled on Angelan.

Still collapsed on the table, Shokuhou removed her finger from the menu and reached for the wok full of weapons.

“The remaining question is how much the creators were focused on those things when designing it. But since they swapped out the symbols for common meet-up points with statues of Temjin or Raiden, I’m guessing they knew what they were doing.”

Mikoto placed the menu over her head to block the large noodle knife casually swung down toward her and Shokuhou used an ice pick made of tightly-wrapped aluminum foil to poke at Mikoto’s thighs below the table.

“If they cheaply bought unpopular shops and then changed the landmarks to intentionally alter the flow of people and briefly but explosively increase the number of customers, they could gain quite an impressive profit ability. Just like buying and selling stocks over a short period of time, business deals made just during the tournament can earn a lot of money.”

Short chestnut-haired Mikoto grabbed a small fruit knife instead of the pestle

she had mentioned before.

“Be honest. Do you really think this is something so ‘normal’?”

“Hmm... So we’re going with that, are we?”

Shokuhou Misaki finally got up from the table.

She sounded casual enough, but she also looked like she was watching carefully to see what Mikoto’s next move would be.

Academy City’s #5 prompted her to continue while spinning a thick metal barbecue skewer in her hand.

“So what about this to do you find so odd? ☆”

“First of all, Virtual-On is a completely free game. No one is making any money as more users download it. So even if it gets millions of downloads and becomes the next big thing in the city, it shouldn’t have gathered enough funds to throw a big festival like this one in Academy City.”

“Well, yes. Renting out a large stadium, hiring guards and workforce management people, and buying various forms of advertisement to get the word out could not have come cheap. And the costs had to be several times higher since they’re holding this in all 23 districts.”

Shokuhou must have realized that the poking was doing no damage because she started tracing the tip of the fake skewer along Mikoto’s bare leg below the table.

“But the Vooster’s Cup is being run by more than just the developer of the free game. It’s being backed by an advertisement agency, a soft drink company, an ISP, and other adults who are always on the lookout for a chance to profit. By announcing their support for the popular Vooster’s Cup and putting out officially licensed goods, they can create a special demand like during the Olympics or World Cup. Do you really see some conspiracy ability behind them funding the tournament as a form of investment? Poke, poke, poke.”

“Nn, hey...that tickles. And that isn’t the problem here.” Mikoto swung around her fake fruit knife. “Shokuhou. The sponsor system you mentioned shows they already have a complete income cycle. The tournament is sure to

succeed and those adults will make all the profit they had planned for. But in that case, doesn't a part of the picture look superfluous?"

"..."

"After all," continued short-haired Misaka Mikoto. "The Vooster's Cup is assisting in the development of a new drug for a previously incurable disease, right?"

Shokuhou showed no sign of surprise.

She must have known the conversation was headed this way.

And Mikoto winked as she continued.

"These are battles between data, so they are using the Virtuaroid battles to have the different possibilities for a new drug compete against each other in a chemical formula refinement simulation. So as the tournament continues, the possibilities are refined until the winner has created a completed design. ...It saves the people suffering from the disease and the winner receives a large cash prize paid from the new drug's patent money."

Shokuhou noticed the tip of the skewer had crumpled, so she searched through the wok for a new weapon. Adjusting to any environment seemed to be a special human ability.

"Oh? Isn't that what you call win-win?"

"It is true there is also a parallel simulation project that hooks together a lot of next generation game systems to analyze the genetic structure of deadly bacteria."

Shokuhou had set up that hurdle despite knowing the answer. She also grabbed a tall and narrow salt mill in her right hand and pepper mill in her left. She spun them around like batons to find they had the same weight as a pestle.

Mikoto slowly sighed.

"As I said, the Vooster's Cup already has an income cycle using the sponsor system. There's no need to also include the development of a new drug and they could get the prize money from one of the sponsor companies."

"Maybe the greedy adults are simply trying to grab as much cash as possible."

“That can’t be it. The sponsor system is part of the advertisement industry, but the new drug development is part of the pharmaceutical industry. They’re entirely different fields. When so much money is changing hands, the adults wouldn’t want to invite in any ‘outsiders’ that they couldn’t control. I mean, after investing so much money into the tournament, they’ll end up in debt if they screw up and can’t make the profits they’re planning on. So the people who paid money up front aren’t going to make that kind of gamble. They’ll want to remain in complete control to ensure they get a return on their investment.”

Yes.

When just looking at the possible profit, the new drug development was a good deal, but when the adults viewed money, they looked at more than just the amount.

Let’s say you can leave a million yen with a friend and have it grow to two million. But then a stranger you have never met says they can bring it up to three million. Now, where will you back out of the deal? At one million, two million, or three million? Which sum of money seems “safe” and “a sure thing”? ...Anyone who goes for the three million just because it is more money is not very smart. They do not know how to assess the risks. They are as dumb as someone who truly believes they would be happy if they robbed a bank.

Adults would not do that.

And yet they had.

“There’s something more to this,” said Misaka Mikoto.

She tossed the fruit knife in the air and caught it after exactly six rotations.

“There’s something beyond simple profit here. I don’t know if it was there back when Virtual-On was developed as a free game or if it was introduced for the Vooster’s Cup tournament, but the new drug development simulation part is unnaturally superfluous.”

“If it exists outside the normal income cycle, could it involve some kind of childish idealism ability?”

“That doesn’t mean this isn’t dangerous.”

Mikoto did not seem to care that Shokuhou was using the salt and pepper mills to pound on her back like a drum.

“Mass producing Level 5s. And creating a path to a never-before-seen Level 6. I know you know how things can get out of hand when real power is placed behind childish dreams.”

“...True enough.”

Shokuhou must have gotten bored with the drumming because she grabbed the most noticeable item in the wok (a bread knife), broke it in two, and found it was a hard urethane foam model with aluminum foil carefully wrapped around it so there were no wrinkles.

“Developing a new drug for people suffering from an incurable disease. ... That’s the kind of unassailable sob story that leads people to treat you like a bad person if you even question it. And it kind of pisses me off that I can’t just honestly believe in it.”

“Plus, the experiment that drove those many military clones to their deaths was originally a simulation in a machine.”

Mikoto traced her index finger across the tip of the fake fruit knife.

“Whatever is happening below the surface here, I’m not going to wait around until it’s actualized. Maybe I’m being too sensitive, but I want to make absolutely sure this is safe. ...That’s my stance, but what about you, Shokuhou?”

“Surely you aren’t asking me to help you with this, Misaka-san.”

“It’s not for me.”

Academy City’s #3 sighed in her seat.

And she spoke.

“But before I started, I wanted to see whether you would be willing to let *the same thing* happen again. If you think I’m worried over nothing, then you don’t have to do anything. I’ll figure this out on my own, so you can just go enjoy the tournament like normal. *Just forget everything I said.*”

“Hmm,” said Shokuhou Misaki as if thinking about something.

Meanwhile, her slender hand reached for the wok. She grabbed the kind of imitation carving knife used for filming dramas, sighed, and gave a full-faced smile as if changing her train of thought.

“Misaka-saaan.”

“What?”

“You really are a nasty person.”

The feeling must have been mutual because a fruit knife clashed with a carving knife.

The two of them had left the café.

“...This was the worst day,” said Shokuhou.

“Is that anything to say after I treated you to a meal?” complained Mikoto. “And you were clearly more into that fight than I was.”

“Do you really think that is enough to soothe my ennui???”

“Yes, yes. So you’re the kind of person who never gives anything more than four stars. Wow, nothing wins any awards this year. How incredible.”

Mikoto and Shokuhou were arguing, but they were still inside that multi-tenant building. They had entered a gym on a different floor.

There were no tables or chairs here. It was simply a large space lined with 2m plastic mats. Mikoto and Shokuhou lay on those in a tank top and bike shorts while following a female instructor’s directions to bend and stretch their joints, arch their back, or ball up their stomach.

The entire floor was not as bad as a sauna but still more hot and stuffy than one would expect.

This was known as hot yoga.

“I didn’t expect them to have such connective ability between services here. Although I had thought it was odd that the pies seemed to have collagen jelly mixed in☆”

“Don’t bother pretending you had it all figured out from the get-go. We

couldn't exactly leave here while covered in that stuff, could we? So of course they have a laundry service in the same building. They have other services for killing time, but you had already said you were interested in this." Mikoto arched her back while lying face down. "They wash and dry your clothes, and it takes about half an hour even with quick drying. It's like the cellphone shop in a department store. The nearby bookstores or cafés make money off the people needing to kill some time. It's a give and take relationship."

The front wall was a giant flat-screen monitor and it was playing a demo movie made with high-density polygons. The music it played had no connection to India, where yoga originated. It instead played unique tones that sounded like they came from a synthesizer.

All of the songs played were from the Virtual-On soundtrack which was available for free online, so the monitor was synced with the copy on Shokuhou's portable device. Was that like cooking dinner using the fish sold at a shop on a wharf full of fishing boats?

"Misaka-san, you are surprisingly thoughtful about these things... You would never admit it, but you clearly put a lot of research into this☆"

"I don't want your praise."

"Really, why do you insist on boosting your isolation ability so you're all alone?"

"Do you want to head back upstairs for another round?"

"No, I've had enough of that."

Was she full after the meal, or did she simply not want to move now that she had experienced the hot yoga she had so wanted to try? Shokuhou sounded drowsy as she lay on the floor alongside Mikoto.

"I mean, we already got so sticky and dirty..."

"That's because you got carried away when they brought out the (somewhat) low temperature oden. The egg and konjac are fine, but the daikon had soaked up all the hot broth!! What choice did I have but to order a (somewhat) low temperature pizza and aim for your face?"

“That is not my point. The other customers were wearing aprons like when you get your hair cut! They might have a cleaning service, but why weren’t we wearing those!?”

The Queen shouted back and an unpleasant cracking sound rang out.

Tensing up too much while arching her back like a seal must have placed an odd burden on her body. She failed to even get on all fours and ended up sticking her butt in the air like a broken table while holding her lower back like an old woman, so the female instructor ran over with an expression they had never seen before.

Mikoto noticed all that but ignored it.

“Don’t you hate how those things feel around your neck, though? Why would I want to wear something that pissed me off when I’m trying to work off some stress? The pros don’t do that. And everyone applauded how well we were stabbing, hitting, and throwing, didn’t they?”

“Fhoh, fbah... ☆”

...That was only the true gentleman connoisseurs using their powers of observation to watch lovely maidens grapple in something like a catfight or mud wrestling, but Shokuhou Misaki, the old lady with a bad back, could not get the words out. And providing a detailed explanation of that felt like it would defile her own mind as well.

Once the trial course was complete, their Tokiwadai Middle School uniforms were cleaner than when they had arrived.

That was the result of cutting-edge science and putting them on felt as wonderful as jumping into a futon that had been dried in the sun.

“Ohh, industrial cleaning is so much different,” said Mikoto. “Do the dryer use an ultraviolet heater? Maybe I should buy one of those and donate it to the dorm. Being able to experience this every day would be well worth the price.”

“If you care that much, start with the detergent and fabric softener. They use really nice ones here.”

The two of them finally left the multi-tenant building and Mikoto stretched

her arms upwards.

“Ahh, I feel so light. Okay, Shokuhou, that’s what I have to say about the Vooster’s Cup.”

“Uuh, my back is finally feeling better... Well, I was already planning to participate in the tournament by remote controlling a clique member, but please make sure no one from your group of friends gets jealous.”

“That’s why we have to do this.” Mikoto winked. “Let’s investigate this suspicious part as quickly as possible so we can actually enjoy Virtual-On afterwards, okay?”

The sun had already set as the girls once more set foot in the streets.

It was finally time for the Vooster’s Cup Virtual-On Tournament to begin.

# **Toaru Majutsu no Index — Virtual-On SS**

*Vooster's Cup, The Day Before*

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