

「とある魔術の^{バーチャロン}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——!

インデックス
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ぃーぱーてぃ

鎌池和馬

イラスト/はいむらきよたか

“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-blond 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, straight 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, Misaka-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-blond 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-blonde 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-saaaaan!!”

...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-saaan?"

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. “Does 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.