

日常へと溶け込んだ
富良科に導かれ
非日常の世界へ――

-M S B S Ver. 55.55-

とある魔術の
電脳戦機
バーチャロン

ブースターズ・カップ、
その前日

まち かすま
鎌地和馬

イラスト：はいむらきよたか

“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 135-centimeter 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 *inro* 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.”

“Gwahhhh!? 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 role 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 misfortuuuuuuune!?”

“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.