

## Chapter 1: Prologue

There, in the center of a plaza you may have seen once or twice before, on an gray Autumn day, stood an otherworldly fox. Right across from it, behind the glass of a cafe shop window, sat a woman, staring at the animal. She pondered it in a way many would have reacted to seeing such a creature.

“That’s not a fox.” She thought, sipping her afternoon cup “It couldn’t be. A real wild fox would never sit so still with that envelope in its mouth. A real fox would never sit still enough to put makeup on it. Yes, makeup, that’s what those red markings all over it must be.” A picture was forming in her mind. “It’s probably one of those genetically modified foxes you hear about online, made to be more obedient, or maybe even a dog bred to look like a fox, and the envelope it’s holding on to is part of some sort of promotional stunt. Maybe for a restaurant. Maybe there’s a coupon inside.”

It was at that point, in a moment of sonder, the woman began to take notice of all the people passing by the animal, all walking off in their own directions to go about their own business, refusing to spare the slightest glance at the beast before them, let alone call animal control. The woman realized that her personal train of thought was more like a public subway. All the adults in that scene lived with an inner child on life support, brutally beaten down by a society that only had tolerance for two things, cold cynicism and what little could be rationalized by high school level physics. All of them made the same assumptions about the fox, all of them stupendously wrong, lacking the childlike imagination necessary to perceive the truth. The woman got out of her chair, propelled by a strong desire to distinguish herself amongst all the other adults with hearts too cold to donate a moment of their precious time to greet the fox. First was the chime of coffee shop door, next, the underwhelming crunch of soggy Fall leaves, and

then, a few more paces after that before the woman and the fox were standing in front of each other, eyes locked and unblinking, swelled with curiosity as the two drank in every detail of the image before them. She knelt down, eye level to him and cautiously motioned her hand, not towards the envelope, but behind his ear, giving it a nice scratch which he graciously accepted. She rolled her eyes, now even more convinced that her theory was dead on, then shot a quick glance behind her to see if there were any hidden cameras before returning her attention to the letter. The fox put up no resistance, letting go of the red envelope once it was firmly in the woman's grasp. She stood back up.

“Aren't you a well mannered little guy?” she chuckled, “I'm starting to lean more to dog. You're way too patient to be a fox.” Little did she realize she was about to be caught up in a game concocted by the most patient fox who ever lived.

Opening the ornate wax seal on the letter was a telling sign that something was off. Instead of the free boba tea voucher she had confidently visualized in her head, it was an invitation. “Have you ever wished to prove yourself?” it read, “Have you ever wished to see all that reality has to offer? Have you ever wished for anything at all? If you are reading this, you are not simply lucky, but blessed by fate. A being of supreme grace and undeniable omnipotence, she who is known only as the Godeater, invites you to show your strength and resolve. Face challengers from other worlds, timelines, and even dimensions to earn the favor of the Godeater in the legendary Cross Tournament. Become the champion and you shall be rewarded whatever you could possibly wish for. All you need to do is accept this invitation.”

The woman grinned as wide as her mouth would allow. Never in her life did she ever come across what, as far as she was concerned, was the most out of nowhere joke she read, and it was a joke she felt in the mood to oblige.

Toffee raised the letter in the air, as if to brag to any bystanders that her inner child was still alive and well. With the cartoonish bellow of a medieval knight, she cheered "I accept!" That's when all her assumptions of normalcy began to crumble, and it all started when she realized that her hand held in the air felt heavier than it did only a moment ago. She lowered it to see with widened eyes that the weightless piece of paper she was just holding had been replaced with a red and gold magatama necklace. "Wuh?..." That was the only sound that escaped her mouth before a sudden flash and all turned black.

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Everything was gone, the fox, the plaza, and every bystander that had existed as fleeting blurs in the corner of Toffee's eye. Did they all disappear or was it she who was wiped from existence. Was this death? No. She could still feel her arms, legs, and the magatama she held in a locked grip. There was no time to ponder the question further as the darkness disappeared as quickly as it had swallowed everything, revealing an entirely new world. For a moment, it felt like there were only two colors in all of existence, a clean sapphire sky and infinitely spanning emerald plain of grass, separated by a horizon crafted out of distant blurs that looked to be mountains. The breeze against her skin was proof this was not a dream, if only because she knew her imagination was not powerful enough to simulate such a sensation. A proper adult would have left that fox alone. A proper adult would have left that letter alone. Even in the most unlikely scenario where a proper adult opened that letter, they surely would have thrown it in the trash without a second thought. What did this girl in her mid 20s prove by going against all that? Maybe it wasn't about proving anything to all those bystanders she disappeared right in front of. Perhaps she truly was seduced by the promises of this so-called Cross Tournament.

Toffee closed her eye and began to meditate. It didn't matter why she was here or how she got here. All her focus was directed towards adjusting herself to the situation. Magic, a concept that actively spat in the face of her precious high school level physics understanding of the world, or in this case, now worlds plural, was real. The moment she started walking in any given direction, she would eventually wander into something supernatural, just like that 'makeup coated' fox, and when that happened, she would not cry, scream, or panic. She would act with the utmost composure. This is the promise she made to herself. Toffee stood there for what felt like and very well could have been hours, imagining every possible beautiful and horrifying thing she could encounter with neither excitement or horror.

"Can I ask how long you are going to be standing there? Your legs must be tired by now." The one such voice broke the silence behind her.

"I am not turning around until you answer my questions." Toffee replied in a low monotone. She desperately tried to force a serene facade, but the failed attempt sounded more robotic.

"Aw come on, don't tell me you think I'm some sort of monster. What's going to happen if you do turn around? Am I going to steal your face?"

"I may have seen a tv show where something like that happens, but that's beside the point. First question, are you part of the Cross tournament?"

"What, you mean my mom's little get together? If I was actually participating, you'd be better off forfeiting. I doubt a fight against me could be considered fair."

“You’re mom? I’m guessing you’re referring to the God Eater, right? Are you her son?”

Fearing that showing too much surprise might be seen as a sign of weakness, Toffee’s voice remained dry, but slightly raised.

“Yup, Tenki the Enigmatic Gale, at your service. How many questions do we have to go before you can turn around? Just looking at you like this is giving me such an awful crick in my neck” He rolled his head.

“Just one more.” Toffee took in a deep breath before asking the question she feared the most. “Do I get to go home after all this?”

There was a slight pause before a roaring laugh. “BAHAHAHA! Of course! That’s the question that has you so on edge. You can leave whenever you please. You have the means to do so right there.”

Toffee looked around her inventory for a split second before realizing there was only one thing he could possibly be referring to. “You mean this?” She lifted the magatama, still in her death grip, to her side.

Tenki nodded “Yup, That necklace is your tag. It’s what we use to keep track of the contestants. Just throw it aside and say the magic words ‘I’m a little quitting coward’, and you’ll be sent back home with all the same amount of ease that brought you here. Coincidentally, if you’re having second thoughts, and it really sounds like you are, that is exactly what you should do. Wasting time like this helps neither of us, wouldn’t you agree?”

Toffee's shoulders lowered. She had the answer she wanted to hear. This wasn't a prison, just a much needed vacation. Things will go back to normal the moment it's too much for her, right? All she had to do was go with the flow. What was the harm? "No, I don't think you have to worry about me quitting just yet. It's like the invitation said. I'm not just lucky. I'm blessed. Let's give this a go Mr. - GHA WOAHH SCALY TITS?!" She turned around a little too quickly. In all fairness, flustered was not one of the reactions she promised herself to avoid.

"Aw come on! That's the first thing you notice about me after all that?" He pouted

"Look, I'm sorry! You're relatively handsome for a dragon guy, a real solid 8 of 10, but could you please just put on a shirt?"

"Wow, I'm the first 'dragon guy' you've probably met in your life and all I get is an 8? I'm just providing people with a nice view, same as you were while your back was turned this entire conversation."

Toffee took note of her attire before grimacing. "Whatever, Scaly Tits..."

Tenki chuckled with a sliver of bitter sarcasm sprinkled in. "Ha ha. You're very lucky that I'm obligated to explain the rules of the tournament to you, so while I'm stuck with you, why don't you make yourself more useful and help me out."

Toffee watched as he casually drew a circle in midair with his finger. At first she could only see the edge of it, which looked like a blur. Then, the inside of the circle took form. It looked like a window into a separate room in a building far far away. This circle was a rift in space. It was the sort of magical phenomenon she had mentally prepared herself to encounter, yet it

shook her all the same. It took every neuron in her brain to force herself to pretend this was normal, and while her mind was at war with itself, her body returned the uncomfortable stiffness from before. She saw his hand reach into the dimly lit room and grab a quaint little brown sack that jingled slightly when picked up. Tenki tossed it over to her. She almost forgot to react, but was able to catch it in her free hand at the last moment.

“That’s your allowance for your stay during the tournament.” Tenki explained “Enough for food, lodging, and whatever pretty little souvenirs you’d like within reason. I can leave you to find your way to town on your own, or you can use that pouch to buy me a drink. I need something to loosen myself up.”

Toffee snapped out of her confusion. It was as if the bitter frustration at Tenki’s tone outweighed the shock of the magic she just witnessed. “Well golly gee! I’ve been here for like, let’s say, five minutes, and I’m already getting extorted. Tell me smartass, why bother handing me money just to make me buy you things with it when you could have just stolen the money in the first place?”

“And where would I put the coins?”

“In your pockets!”

“Well I don’t have pockets.”

“Why the Hell do you not have pockets?!”

“Bha! If you’re asking me a question like that, you clearly don’t understand the virtues of living light.” Tenki chuckled, “Either way, The bar will close if we waste anymore time like this, so try to keep up.” He turned around and bolted into a sudden sprint, or atleast, that’s how it looked at first.

“Hey!” Toffee hastily shoved the coin pouch into her coat pocket and placed the magatama necklace around her neck before giving chase. Something was off however. In a single step she had covered half the gap between herself and the ‘sprinting’ Tenki. It seemed as if every step she took traveled 5 steps in distance. Tenki wasn’t running at all, and neither was Toffee at this point. At first, she thought that the space around her was being warped somehow, but then she looked up at the sky and realized that the movement of the clouds was speeding up as she walked. It wasn’t space; it was time! All she could do was move forward, one foot in front of the other until she had almost entirely caught up with Tenki.

After moving a distance that, no doubt, had to have been miles, she finally saw the massive city that served as the Godeater’s domain, Cross Roads. It was as if the city itself was eager to flaunt its magnificence, a trait inherited from its progenitor. Toffee was met by a vibrant red bridge, arched over a rushing current, that directed her towards an imposing white gate with a statue of a ferocious Tiger at the top. After her already disorientating stroll, she had gotten so dizzy staring up at the beast, she almost forgot about the walls flanking it. They were so perfectly pristine, it was as if they dared you to see if you could ever scratch them.

“You’re welcome by the way.” Tenki rolled his eyes at Toffee, uninterested at the architecture he had seen thousands of times over already. “That grassy plain we were standing in is what the locals call the Shifting Meadow, and as far as the tournament is concerned, it’s a metaphorical kill zone.”



Toffee shook her head back into focus before raising an eyebrow “Alright, I’ll bite. What do you mean by that”

“Well ya see, time stretches and contorts itself at random while you’re in there, making travel last anywhere between a few seconds and an entire month, something that can be quite problematic when dealing with a tournament that lasts only three days. If it wasn’t for my power to guide you through there, you could have been stuck there for days, only reaching here in time to find out you were disqualified long ago. Maybe there is some truth to that cocky one liner you said about being blessed.”

This could have been a lie to garner some of Toffee’s praise, but after what she saw, she felt obligated to believe him.

“... and now” Tenki continued “this way to the Fox Den!” He crossed the bridge, this time, at a far more sensible pace. The rest of the trip wasn’t as traumatizing. Entering the city, the streets were filled with people going about their business. Finally, Toffee felt genuinely at ease. She was an alien in an even more alien world, and yet that’s not how anyone seemed to react. Street vendors and traders passed around coins in exchange for various odds and ends, cycle rickshaws carried passengers from one side of the city to the other, and absolutely nothing skipped a beat despite the presence of a new tournament constant. It seemed that these denizens of Cross Roads were used to travelers from other worlds. That made sense assuming these tournaments were a common occurrence.

After a rather conveniently short trip, Toffee and Tenki made it to the Fox Den. Toffee followed Tenki in as he brazenly swung open the door, only to be met with a cold welcome. It

was an awkward afternoon period after lunch and before the after work rush, so there were only two sets of eyes. One of them belonged to a bright pillar of neon pink. The girl looked to be a pop star. Compared to everyone and everything that Toffee had seen, this girl seemed the most tame, or at the very least, that would have been the case if she wasn't transparent. The other was the bartender, a juxtaposed oni tapestry of beastly muscles and a refined demeanor. Toffee's face went as pale as a ghost as these two stared daggers in her direction, until she realized it wasn't her they were looking at.

"Hey there, you two!" Tenki called out "Now Toffee, the see-through girl next to the bar is my sister, X. She's a spirit, so don't let the whole intangibility business bother you. As for the Amazonian tending the bar, that's Saki."

"Well, hey there. Like Tenki said, my name is Toffee, and I'm here to compete in the Godeater's tournament." Toffee waved in a rather formal and straightforward manner. By this point, being teleporting to a new world and watching a draconic man use unheard of powers to bend the fabric of space and time, Toffee had come to terms with the supernatural reality she was currently experiencing, and was now willing to accept that she was initiating a conversation with a hologram and a yokai without questioning it.

Miss X adjusted her immaterial clothes and put on the most energetic expression she could as she shifted her attention. "Greetings Toffee," She cheered "I am the fabulous Miss X, the hottest idol in all of Crossroads and the master of ceremonies for the God Eater's Cross Tournament! Thank you so much for participating, and please, let me know of any questions you may have!"

Saki waved back. "Hello there miss." Her greeting was dry, a tired voice you would expect from someone who has already greeted multiple people before. It made sense given how many people must have been around earlier, and even more so assuming she has already met multiple contestants before. Toffee didn't take any offense after thinking it over.

"Well now, come on Toffee." Tenki nudged with a grin. "Do you have any funny nicknames you want to give these two?"

"Wha...? Oh, no, no, no!" Toffee sprung to life "Ya see, a good nickname isn't something you can force out at will. It's something you gotta come up with in the heat of the moment. Regardless, I doubt there's any names for these fine ladies that I could come up with that would ever match Scaly Tits, am I right Scaly Tits?" The only thing worse than having a bad nickname was being the only one with a bad nickname. Tenki was desperately hoping to soften the blow of his curse by egging on Toffee to come up with something like 'Big Red' or 'Ghost girl', but unfortunately, Toffee read him like a book, and denied him any satisfaction.

"Hehehe, Scaly Tits?!" Miss X tried to contain herself and keep her juvenile laughter from boiling over into undignified snorting. Saki, on the other hand, was much more mature, only curling the corner of her lips ever so slightly.

Toffee watched as Tenki's pure white cheeks turned red with a smidge of embarrassment. It dawned on her that the being she was standing next to was a powerful entity who could most likely kill her with a single thought, but in this single fleeting moment, she was able to score a small victory. It would probably be for the best not to push him any further, but there was a nice sense of comfort as Toffee was hitting her stride.

She chuckled before strolling over to the bar with a new sense of confidence. "Alright Tenki, time to hold up my end of our bargain. Hey Saki, I'll have one Old Fashioned for myself and one of whatever Tenki's usual drink of choice is." She tilted her head with her eye closed, trying to simulate a wink as best she could with only one eye.

Saki swiftly turned around and grabbed the necessary ingredients. Within a few seconds and even fewer fluid motions, they were poured into the shaker, sloshed together, and poured back out. The end result was a cocktail full of a pleasant orange drink that gave off a delightful glow as the afternoon light passed through it and a much less impressive cylinder glass of almost nothing. "One Old Fashioned on the house for the girl who looks like she's had a rough day so far and one glass of water, no ice, for the little shit who has spent the entire day trying to clear out my top shelf."

"The entire day?" Toffee's ears twitched "Have you been pulling this trick with other people too, trying to get everyone to pay for your booze?"

"W-what on earth would make you jump to a conclusion like that?" Tenki stuttered.

"You already admitted that you don't carry around your own money, and it sure didn't sound like Saki has been giving you freebies this whole time." Toffee motioned her hand towards the cup of water, just about to splash it in Tenki's face, when everything was suddenly interrupted by a sudden scream.

"Right on cue..." Tenki murmured under his breath

“Help! Somebody!” It sounded like an old woman from outside. Toffee didn’t hesitate as she bolted out the door to the sight of a thief with their face concealed by rags prying a lady’s bag out of her hand.

There was a split moment where Toffee and the thief locked eyes with each other before the thief tore the bag free from the old lady’s grip and bolted off towards the residential district. Toffee gave chase. The busy crowd of the city grew smaller and further away, eventually replaced with narrow roads, houses flanking on each side. The two ran as fast their legs could carry them. The thief would try to lose Toffee at every corner he turned, but no matter how many times he turned she was always behind him, closing the distance. He started to get desperate, grabbing whatever random boxes and rocks he could find and throwing them behind him in her path, but all it managed to do was lose him even more ground as she dodged the debris, maintaining her focus on him.

“How the hell are you so fast?!” The thief eventually cried out, sputtering out words as he began to run low on oxygen.

“I was second place on the highschool girl’s track team.” Toffee boasted

“Second place? That doesn’t sound all that brag worthy.”

“You’re just saying that because you never met first place. Besides, I’m still going to catch you either way. Why are you even out here stealing at a time like this? The Godeater’s tournament is going on right now, which means this place is crawling with people all across the multiverse, right? I’m a contestant. Aren’t you at least a little worried I might be a super powered cyborg or a freaky wizard.”

“It doesn’t matter if there’s a tournament or new years party going on. Rent is still due just like any other time of the year, and lucky for me, instead of getting caught by any real contestants who could cause real trouble, I ended up with you. Here’s a tip, the only people who bring up high school are losers who never had any accomplishments beyond that!”

“Hey!-” The thief’s words cut Toffee deep, deep enough that she lost her focus and her footing. The comfortably flat roads of the city had been replaced with uneven dirt of the residential district. She planted face first in a rather undignified manner.

The thief only made it a few feet away before being met by a wall of red. The city guard, the Cross Guards, sprung forth from hiding and surrounded him instantly, as if they were there all along. With nowhere else to go, the thief dropped to his knees, putting up little resistance. The guards closed in on him and immediately bound his hands behind his back within seconds. A lone guard walked past the circle and towards Toffee, still on the ground.

“May I help you?” The guard asked, offering a hand.

“Nah, just leave me here. I need a moment.” Toffee let out a muffled sulk, her head still facing down.

“I overheard your conversation with the thief. Was it true?”

“Which part? The one about me being a contestant or the one about me being a good for nothing no-lifer.”

“Now, now, putting words in other peoples’ mouths is both rude and unhelpful.”

“It’s the truth, though. I should be home right now, but instead, I decided to stay in this tournament on a total whim all because my everyday life is so boring. What will I even do when I’m the one encountering cyborgs and wizards when I can’t even catch some random punk? No amount of luck is going to help me then.”

“You mean, you don’t even have a wish prepared?” The guard’s voice raised with a hint of curiosity.

“Didn’t even think that far ahead...”

The guard pulled up Toffee with relative ease, and dusted her off “First off, this tournament is not going to be as difficult or dangerous as you might think it will be. Even without any magic, anyone can win, and that includes you. You would never have received the invitation otherwise. Second, if you’re truly that directionless, maybe this tournament is exactly what you need, a chance to find yourself.”

Toffee chuckled a little “Heh, what? Like every rich girl flying to Europe on mommy’s credit card.”

“I can tell just by looking at you that you’re smart enough to know that’s not what I’m talking about. This tournament will give you the opportunity to meet all sorts of new people and push yourself to overcome obstacles with skills you didn’t even know you had. The Cross Tournament changes people for the better. I’ve seen it myself.”

“I guess I have no choice but to take your word for it, Miss...”

“My name is Chifu, and I am captain of the guard.”

“Well damn, I would have dusted myself off sooner if I knew I was talking to someone that important. Captain Chifu, would it be alright if one of the guards over there gave me some directions back to the bar I was just at.”

“Not to worry, I’ll escort you there myself.”

“Are you sure that’s not a problem?”

“It’s none at all.”

Toffee and Chifu walked back towards the bar. For a moment, Toffee stopped and thought she should mention the old lady the thief had stolen from, but the thought slipped away. Something about Chifu’s aura calmed her down. She was sure the guards would handle the situation and make sure the bag was returned to its rightful owner.

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The guards waited for a few moments until Toffee and Chifu were out of earshot before untying the thief. One of the older ones then patted him on the back. “You did pretty good for a rookie. Tell me kid, what’s your name” he asked.

“It’s Kuro,” the thief replied, taking off the rags concealing his face. “I just finished training a couple of days ago. Is something like this common for new recruits?”



“Kuro, or in other words, black, eh? Your parents must have had quite the sense of humor giving you that name with hair as white as that. Either way, to answer your question, yes and no to some extent. We go through drills like this all the time. However, we were told that this was something special involving the tournament. Don’t worry too much about it. Just take a break over in the hot springs and then change back into your uniform. You’ve earned it.”

“I see...” Kuro’s voice dulled. He was left with more questions than answers, but pushing his commanding officer any further seemed like a bad idea.

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“You know what the definition of insanity is?” Tenki asked, rubbing his temples, “Doing the same thing over and over and over, while expecting a different result, and that’s exactly what we’ve been going through. Someone shows up with the magatama. We go through the same song and dance, greeting them. Then, they get put through the exact same test, only for mom to show up and tell them that they failed before taking the magatama back just so that we can start the process all over again. I thought dealing with the regular contestants would be bothersome, but we’ve gone through this loop 6 times now! Even the two that actually caught the ‘thief’ still got sent home.”

“Oh as if you have any right to complain!” Miss X dropped her idol grace “You haven’t done anything. I have been the one greeting all the magatama contestant candidates, explaining the rules of the tournament to them, and then you show up at the last minute and try to convince them to buy you junk in exchange for made up secrets on how to win. I bet mom figured out where you were hiding and dropped that Toffee girl on your lap just to force you to

help out instead of being a mooch.” It seemed that despite not having a physical body capable of regular exhaustion, the constant repetition of the day took its toll.

Tenki frowned. His posture stiffened up slightly as he was confronted with the consequences of his childlike behavior. “You’re right.” He painfully confessed. “From here on out, I’ll try to help out more with the tournament business going forward.”

“Heh, if you can actually manage to keep that promise. I might actually pour you a glass without spit in it.” Saki chimed in.

Miss X pouted. She couldn’t stay mad at her brother “I’m sorry for lashing out. I’m just as confused as you are. Mom said that the magatama contestant needed to be someone very specific. She mentioned something about an experiment she was working on, and it required someone with no magic of any kind that might interfere with it. You would think that would make it easy to find someone, but she’s being very picky about it for some reason.”

“It’s all good. Just be more careful when yelling about half naked women in my lap.”

It was then that Toffee and Chifu had returned. Tenki, Miss X, and Saki all did their best to hide their reaction with varying degrees of success. Lucky for them, Toffee was too tired to notice.

“Hello everyone.” Chifu chimed. “I just stopped by to drop off this lovely lady. You have a fine contestant here.”

Toffee waved at the three before returning to the drink she had abandoned earlier. She was the only one in the room oblivious to what was going on. She didn’t see Chifu’s face, right

behind her, looking at her with a malevolent smile, the exact kind that a fox would give to its prey. In Chifu's eyes, Toffee really was the perfect contestant, enough stamina to keep pace with a relatively young and fit guard, yet shallow enough to be broken by a humble jeer, and just as easily put back together with a few sappy little words of encouragement. A simple minded, empty vessel for the God Eater to mold her however she pleased.

Continued in Chapter 2: My Story Begins at the End of Yours