

Chapter 2: My Story Begins at the End of Yours

Bidi-beep! Bidi-beep! Bidi-be-

A hand flailed down on the alarm clock, christening in the new day. The room began to spring to life as the apartment's automatic system opened the blinds, flooding the room with piercing sunlight. The TV flipped on to the morning news, filling the room with catchy jingles and the beaming voice of the daily talk show host spouting off celebrity gossip and trivia. It was hardly the 'good morning' that the hungover Nerassa would have liked, as she fought through the head splitting repercussions of last night's drinks.

Eventually, the blurred red lines of the clock came into focus, reading 8:30 AM. Funny. a lifetime ago, she would have been fully geared up and mobilized 3 hours earlier. Nerassa took a somewhat ironic sense of pride in her sloppiness. It was her cathartic little way of showing spite towards the people who had trained her to be an unsloppy soldier. Afterall, the best form of vengeance is to live happily. She wasn't truly happy yet, but she was closer to it than ever before.

"... and in today's trading news, Lifetechs stock continues yesterday's downward trend of five percent after the disappearance of the company's CEO, Gloria LifeTech. A LifeTech chief representative assured shareholders that Gloria had left due to personal reasons and that the company's value will stabilize after new leadership is elected." Just a few moments ago, the TV host was discussing a spicy celebrity lover affair in the exact same tone.

Nerassa chuckled to herself. Stock market updates, that was the closest thing that the public would receive to actual reports on the secret ongoing war between LifeTech and the

Verdant Avengers. 'I must aid LifeTech in crushing any opposition it faces in order to protect the city'. It was a comforting lie that Nerassa had told herself a thousand times over so that she could justify the humiliation of working for that wretched company she despised while groveling at Gloria's feet. Now that she was finally free of the petty squabble, Nerassa no longer cared who won. The Verdant Avengers may be psychotic vigilantes, but whatever change they vowed to bring to the city couldn't possibly be any worse than living under Lifetech's boots.

Even still, she could have stayed in that previous life, continuing on the same rat race up the corporate ladder in search for more power, but if there was one thing that Nerassa learned from the Summer Leagues tournament almost a year ago, it's that true power should never come with caveats. What was the point of having billions of dollars if you had to live the rest of your life on the run like Gloria? What was the point in having enough magic to kill a man with a single flick of the wrist if it branded you as a deranged terrorist like Bertha? Nerassa had neither money nor magic now, and yet she possessed a power far greater than either, the ability to walk outside on a Sunday morning in a bright yellow t-shirt and jeans without the fear of being instantly killed. She washed her face, got dressed, and stepped out of her apartment, making sure not to slam the door on her new tail and locking it with her perfectly organic hands.

No matter how mundane it may sound, she was the only one to walk away from that endless war of endless expendable magitech supersoldiers, taking back control of her own destiny, and in that sense, she was practically a god compared to all those corporate nobodies she left behind. As of now, this god was on her way to the train station for a quick grocery run.

Bidi-beep! Bidi-beep! Bidi-be-

Toffee spastically scrambled out of bed, grabbing her phone and turning off the alarm. The digital display read 8:30 AM. She had slept through the first three alarms. Based on the tournament itinerary she was given, this meant she was going to be late for the opening ceremony and miss the round 1 matchup announcements. Toffee was indeed sloppy, but she did not take any pride in it. In all honesty, she barely took any pride in herself at all. It was only those pleasant words from Captain Chifu that kept her going. She was blessed and given the opportunity to prove that she was more than just another Sunday morning slob watching morning television. That's what she kept telling herself.

Toffee gathered all of her things, sprinted down several flights of stairs, and leapt out of the front door of the Kit Inn. The colosseum was conveniently close, being right next door to the hotel. Unfortunately, the entrance was on the opposite side. Toffee ran the half circle distance of a monument that could have easily made the Roman Colosseum seethe in jealousy. Eventually, she made it to the towering entrance arch. Two crossguards stood at each side of it. She was too out of breath to say anything, so she just waved at them. They stood as still as statues, barely acknowledging her.

She made her way inside only to find the arena was totally barren. No crowds in the seats, no contestants grouped up in the center of the arena, only Miss X, rapidly tapping her incorporeal foot.

Toffee took a few gasps before straightening herself out and giving the most business appropriate smile she could muster. "Well geez, is everyone late or am I just early?", she joked.

“I’m not in the mood for games Miss Brown.” Miss X pouted. “This is a big event for everyone in Cross Roads from the humble citizen all the way to the God Eater herself. Your match is at noon. I expect you to be here and ready, or else, you will be disqualified, and we will move on with no hesitation! Understood?”

Toffee lowered her shoulders. This so-called vacation Toffee was hoping for was starting to feel more like another gig, barking manager included, but despite the authoritative tone, Toffee could still see Miss X’s point of view. She just wanted to make the people of CrossRoads happy, and it meant a lot to her that everything ran properly and on schedule for that to happen. The fake smile was replaced with a sincere gaze as Toffee nodded. “Got it. From now, until the end of the tournament, I’ll do my best to avoid causing you any worries. In the meantime, could you tell me who I’m supposed to go up against, and if possible, where I might be able to find them? I wanted to speak with them before the match if that’s alright.”

Miss X sighed “Well, assuming you plan on keeping your promise, you’re in luck. They wanted to speak with you too.”

Nerassa sat across from Quinton, half of her face was lit orange from a small magical flame that she conjured in her hand to light her cigarette while the other was cloaked in the shadow of the Fox Den’s corner.

“What’s your thoughts on the no show?” Quinton asked.

Nerassa took a puff before responding. "Either we're dealing with an unprofessional punk, or someone who doesn't like to be seen. Hopefully, if it's the former, they'll take up our bait any minute now. Otherwise, if we're dealing with the latter, they'll probably spend the rest of the time we have cooped up in their room. We'll just be stuck waiting here until moments before our round starts. Keep your guard up regardless. This is a tournament, and we are not here to make friends or listen to any sob stories about how this poor Taffy Brown needs us to forfeit the tournament so that she can use the God Eater's wish to cure little Timmy's athlete's foot."

"Hey there!" Toffee waved at Nerassa and Quinton from the entrance before zooming towards their table.

"Speak of the devil, and she will come..." Nerassa murmured under her breath

Toffee invited herself to sit. "I'm grateful Miss X told me where I could find you and what you guys looked like. There's so many people of all shapes and sizes here in Cross Roads that it's almost impossible to tell contestants apart from average citizens. Quick name exchange, I'm Toffee Brown, and you two must be Nerassa Sweptsnow and Quinton Salzar. Before we get down to business, I couldn't help but see that magic flame you had in your hand. I bet you're a super cool wizard with a bunch of crazy laser spells, am I right? What's that all about?"

Quinton had a confused squint plastered over their face, caught off guard by a barrage of peppy pleasantries. Out of all the potential combatants from all the corners of the multiverse, this random woman was the one they were matched up against? There had to be some sort of catch. Maybe she was actually a powerful shapeshifter, waiting for the right moment to reveal her true form at the beginning of the match, something more than just this. Come to think of it,

Toffee did seem to have a wrinkle in her jacket that reminded them of when they first met Nerassa.

Nerassa grinned. It seemed like she was a little impressed. "That was really cute, but you can drop the act."

Quinton's eyes darted to Nerassa. "What act?", they asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Nerassa chuckled, "We're dealing with a good old fashioned blood sucking lawyer. It's one of the oldest tricks they got. Act dumb and say something that urges your target to correct you. Nine times out of ten, they'll unintentionally give away added information in the process or accidentally imply something they didn't want to reveal. 'Oh no, Miss Brown, I can't cast any laser spells. Here, let me go over my actual spell list'. You were hoping I'd say something along those lines, weren't you?"

Toffee scratched the back of her head. "Well geez, read like an open book. Earlier, I was talking to the Crossguard Captain Chifu about how scared I was that my opponent could be either a wizard or a cyborg, and just my luck, I ended up with someone who is both, and pretty sharp to boot. Surely, you can't fault a girl for using the few tools she has in her arsenal, and even still, you gotta give me some credit for getting you to admit that you can use magic. I had no way of proving that fire was magical. For a second, I thought it might have been just a lighter built into your cybernetic hand. You were pretty close with the lawyer guess, but I'm actually a private investigator."

Nerassa nodded. "Well in that case, touché. You already seem to be pretty good at your job, and that's coming from someone coincidentally in the same line of work."

“Woah! You’re a P.I. too? Did you get any chances to solve any real cases?”

“What do you mean *real* cases?”

“Oh, well when I was a kid, I used to love murder mystery shows, good guys solving puzzles and bringing bad guys to justice. It was the big reason I became a detective, but unfortunately, like a lot of dreams you have as a kid, things didn’t turn out the way I wanted them to.” Toffee started to look away and twiddle her thumbs. “If there were any murder cases, those would get handled by the cops. The only jobs I would get hired for were paranoid wives, wanting me to stalk their cheating husbands. Eventually money started to dry up and I had to take a bunch of other jobs. I’ve tried being a delivery girl, plumber, handiworker, and basically anything else you can do with a 15 minute tutorial. Still, I like to hold out hope that I can get that big case where I walk up to the criminal mastermind and throw out a cool ‘gotcha’ one-liner. That’s what I’d call a real case.”

It was then that a white haired crossguard, carrying two envelopes, stepped forward and politely said the one thing Nerassa and Quinton were both thinking but didn’t want to say out loud.

“Man, you really know how to fill up a conversation with the sound of your own voice!”

Toffee looked up, completely startled. “I recognize that voice. You’re that thief from last night!”

The crossguard smirked. “Hey there, track star.”

“Hey nothing!” Toffee jumped out of her seat. “Guards! Guards!” she yelled.

Another crossguard nonchalantly walked over. "What, what's all the commotion around he-", he was caught off upon seeing the thief in the crossguard uniform. "Kuro?! What the hell are you doing here? You're supposed to be out on patrol!"

Kuro shrugged. "Relax Blaze, my schedule got shifted around because of that special event we have later on, so right now I'm on break. As for the yelling, this girl was just startled by something. Don't worry about it. I got the situation handled"

Underneath his crossguard mask, Blaze was rolling his eyes. It was so easy to tell Kuro's words were BS, but Blaze had little interest in getting caught up in whatever games he was playing. "If you say so." He walked away with just as little interest as when he walked into the situation

"W-wait... but he-, I-i" Toffee stumbled over her words, but by the time she snapped out of her confusion, Blaze had already left. Toffee sat back down, growling at Kuro. "Just who the hell are you and what's going on?!"

"Do I really need introductions?" Kuro asked, trying and failing to hide his enjoyment. "You already heard my name. I'm Kuro, just your average crossguard, born and raised here in CrossRoads, fulfilling my duty of keeping an eye on Summer Leagues competitors and making sure they stay out of trouble. The better question is who are you." He slammed the first envelope on the table. A photo flew out. It was a headshot of Toffee, scraped off social media. "Toffee Brown, age 26, raised by a single mother. Your combat experience consists of a couple self defense courses and a very nasty altercation in South America you don't like people talking about, which is also where you lost your eye. Your weapon of choice and the only one you have on hand is the 45 ACP pistol that you keep hidden under your jacket."

Quinton perked up. She had a gun on her this whole time, just like he had suspected. Toffee sat with a blank look on her face. She was at a total loss for words.

“Aw come on, Miss Brown,” Kuro laughed. “Did you honestly think that we would just let a stranger from another universe walk into our homes without vetting you first? Don’t worry yourself too much. This is just whatever intel the boys and girls in the crossguard information gathering sector could cobble together from word on the street. As long as your dark secrets have nothing relevant to do with the tournament or the safety of CrossRoads, they are perfectly safe and sound. Speaking of which, that brings me to…” Kuro slams the second envelope down. This time, the picture was Nerassa’s LifeTech ID photo. “Nerassa Sweptsnow, age 28, war orphan turned war veteran and current employee of the LifeTech magitech arms manufacturing corporation. Your arsenal is a tad bigger, consisting of a pistol, some wrist mounted shotguns in your prosthetic arms, a couple of grenades, and… a block of C4? Whao, better make sure that doesn’t go off in here or else I won’t have anywhere to hide when I’m supposed to be out on patrol.”

Nerassa looked through the papers, speed reading through as much as she could to make sure none of the information written included any of her darker secrets Kuro mentioned. She then leaned back and opened up her jacket revealing an array of magazine clips, grenades, and gadgets just like the file listed. “Well Miss Brown, it seems there’s no point in acting coy anymore. Mr. Kuro here has already figured out that the only reason either of us are here is to size each other up and get a good look at the other’s inventory.” Nerassa was conflicted about the situation. Giving away most of her weapons in exchange to find out about Toffee’s gun was a reasonable trade of information, especially when she still had her naga bloodstone hidden, but she still didn’t like this Kuro fellow. For now, he was a distraction to be confronted after today’s match was over.

Kuro shrugged. "It's what everyone does in these sorts of tournaments. It's practically a Summer Leagues tradition. I just thought I would do my due diligence to help expedite the process."

Toffee was starting to lose the color in her complexion. This was a checkmate. Kuro was here for the same reason as everyone else, to gather more information on the people at the table by poking and prodding them to see how they react, but why? Why her? What made Toffee into Kuro's target? She couldn't ask that with Nerassa focused on her with laser-like precision. Toffee revealed her gun in its holster, slowly and carefully. "Everything Kuro mentioned was true. Both of us are armed, but this is exactly what I wanted to discuss. Neither of us have to fight, and I'm sure that, just like me, you don't want to either. I talked to Saki about it, and she told me that instead of fighting, we can come up with any other sort of competition to decide who wins the round. As long as we can figure something that both of us and the God Eater would approve of, no one would have to get hurt, and if neither of us can come up with anything, I'll drop out of the tournament, no mess, no fuss."

Nerassa looked to Quinton and gave a wink followed by blinking her eyes twice. That was the signal. "Well I'm sure with the time you have before the match, you can figure out your own proposal for an alternate competition. Until then, Quinton and I will see you in the arena." The two stood up and walked out of the Fox Den entrance.

Toffee chased them outside. "Wait, wait! Why can't we just figure this out together right now?"

Smack!

Toffee was so busy running that she didn't notice the random pedestrian that bumped into her.

“Hey!” Quinton yelled at the passerby. “Watch where you’re going!” They yelled just loud enough to make it sound like they cared about the situation. It wasn’t the diversion that Quinton and Nerassa had planned, but Quinton wasn’t going to hesitate at the opportunity either.

Toffee was totally fixated on the stranger. She couldn’t make out any details of who they were or what they looked like other than a figure draped in a cloak who slipped back into the crowd. Something was off though. The force of the stranger bumping into Toffee was hard to the point that it almost knocked her to the ground, as if it was intentional, and for a split second after, she could have sworn that she felt a strange warmth inside of her. She was so preoccupied that she didn’t notice Quinton making his move. While Toffee was staring off into the distance, Quinton’s hands moved with an almost inhuman grace, unbuckling and pulling out her gun without her feeling a thing, all in a single motion. They tossed the gun over to Nerassa.

She only had one or two seconds before Toffee turned around and saw her holding it. Luckily that was all she needed. With the strength of her cybernetic hands, Nerassa bent the hammer of the gun, making sure it couldn’t be fired. Then, she hunched down and rolled the gun back into the doorway of the fox den. The gun was positioned perfectly where the shadow just barely hid the sabotaged flaw. She was already back upright by the time Toffee turned around to her. “Look Miss Brown, we aren’t interested in talking anymore. We got all that we came for. Coming up with your own competition is your problem, not ours. By the way, you should check the strap on your holster. Your gun fell out while you were running.” Nerassa pointed at Toffee’s gun.

Ever the responsible gun owner, Toffee's first priority was to leap for the gun and immediately holster it. When she got up to make yet another hollow attempt to bring Nerassa back to the negotiation table, she had already left.

Quinton whispered to Nerassa as they snuck into the crowd. "Is that really all we can do?"

Nerassa whispered back. "That depends, do you think that she had any other weapons on her that Kuro did not mention?"

"No, it seemed that he was telling the truth. Being blunt, an outfit so revealing couldn't possibly hide anything bigger than that gun."

"Then that's that. Unless we jump her and break her legs before the match, or something equally brutal, there doesn't look like there's any other way to sabotage her, and I have zero interest in taking unnecessary risks that could get us caught."

Little did Nerassa know, she had already been caught. Kuro saw everything. The gears were turning in his mind. He could easily tell Toffee everything that just happened, but he quickly realized that there was so much more to learn by letting things play out undisturbed. Right now, Toffee was going into the tournament with no magic, no robotic prosthetics or implants, and now, not even a weapon. This would lead to one of three scenarios. Scenario one, the God Eater wants Toffee to lose, either so that she could rig the tournament in Nerassa's favor for an unknown reason or simply as a cruel joke. Scenario two, the God Eater wants Toffee to win, and once she finds Toffee about to lose against Nerassa, she will intervene. Scenario three, regardless of the God Eater's meddling, Toffee wins all on her own, proving herself to be a

potential ally. No matter what happened, he would be at least one step closer to figuring out the God Eater's intentions.

Toffee walked up to Kuro, not knowing why he had such a smug look on his face at the moment, which only made her more upset. "Happy now you, bastard? You messed up everything!" She barked.

"Like I said earlier, all I did was expedite the process. Nerassa only came to find out whether she had a chance of beating you, which she would have figured out regardless of me. Now that she knows that she has the advantage over you, she's not going to agree to anything that would force her to give up that advantage. Your plan was doomed from the start."

"None of that explains why you're here. You've been withholding something. Out with it!"

"I will, but first tell me what you think is going on. I wouldn't want to say anything redundant that you've already figured out."

Toffee closed her eyes for a moment, fought through the confusion of the last few minutes and pieced together what was going on. "Last night's robbery was a set up. The reason the other crossguards caught you was because they were in on it. The only reason why they would do all this would be for the sake of a test, but that doesn't make any sense. I failed to catch you."

"And yet, out of the six candidates we tested, you were chosen. No one else had to go through these tests to find out if they were worthy of their tag. It was only you and that

magatama necklace. For whatever reason, the God Eater saw something special in you. As a detective yourself, you gotta admit that you're curious too?"

"Yeah, just not enough to get shot in the face or blown up."

"Ugh, you are not going to blow up, you big baby." Kuro lied through his teeth.

"You're right, because I'm only going to compete if I can do it without fighting."

"Which is not going to happen because Nerassa is clearly a batshit insane mercenary"

"Now you're just assuming the worst in people."

"Because that's literally both of our jobs!"

"Well, maybe I like to do it with a bit more optimism."

Kuro sighed "... and that's why you're stuck working as a plumber."

Time flew by. Nerassa spent the remainder of it in her hotel room, making sure all of her equipment was in working order, dismantling, cleaning, and reassembling her gun. As a final precaution, she took some string and used it to fashion her naga bloodstone into a necklace. She was as prepared as she would ever be. There was no point in over thinking and over planning, just beat the girl and move on to the next round.

Toffee was a bit more lax as she strolled around the business district, shopping for new clothes. She didn't pack anything when she was first warped to CrossRoads, so either she'd win today's match and would need something to wear tomorrow, or she'd lose and would at least have something to take home as a souvenir. It was a pleasant excuse to explore the city, talk with the locals, trade around gossip, and everything else a tourist could do.

Eventually, the time came for the two to face each other. Both of them arrived on time, standing at opposite ends of the arena. Between them was a massive raised platform with Miss X at the center, raising her fist towards an excited crowd with a deafening cheer.

"What an excellent match we just witnessed! Will the next be able to top it?" Miss X cheered. "We'll have to wait and see what fate has in store for us as we welcome our following challengers! Two sleuths with scars on their bodies and in their hearts shall enter the ring, but only one of them can seize victory. Introducing Nerassa Sweptsnow and Toffee Brown."

Well, no point in stalling anymore. It was time for the show. Toffee walked forward and took her first step up the stairs to the platform. That's when there was a flash from her magatama.

Toffee opened her eyes to see nothing but darkness. There was no ground beneath here, yet she did not feel like she was falling. There was no air to breathe, yet she did not feel like she was choking. She was just existing in the void. Toffee remembered this place. It was where she found herself right before showing up in the Shifting Meadow. Her eyes shifted around until she saw a small light off in the distance. She 'walked' towards it.

It looked like a TV screen playing out Nerassa's life. Toffee watched Nerassa get out of bed, go through her morning routine, and put on a yellow t-shirt before going outside. It was uncanny, as if she was watching a completely different person wearing the same face. The cool and serious mercenary had been replaced by just an average woman who looked calmer and perhaps even happy.

"I'm assuming you have a lot of questions for me." a voice spoke up from behind.

This time, Toffee didn't hesitate to turn around, and what she saw in front of her was a being of near blinding light. There was only one person this could possibly be, the God Eater.

"Welcome, Toffee Brown, to the world between worlds." The God Eater stretched out her arms towards the expanse. "You'll have to pardon me for using the power of the magatama to bring you here right before your match. Don't worry too much. You'll be transported to the exact moment in time you left once this is over. What you're seeing right now is the future where Nerassa won. What do you think of it?"

Toffee was taken back by how upfront this extremely powerful being was. She wasn't particularly terrified. Once you've met one being powerful enough to kill you with a thought, meeting another doesn't have the same impact, even if that second being was the much more powerful mother of the first. "I feel like this just shows that I have even less reason to be here. Is that what you wanted, to show me that other people are more deserving of winning and tell me that I should drop out?"

“Good grief, no!” The God Eater chuckled. “The opposite actually. I was really hoping that if you saw someone and their reason for fighting, you would find your own. I want you to compete.”

“But why, though? What’s so special about me that everyone wants” Toffee yelled, only to realize that she wasn’t expending oxygen. She was talking and hearing with her mind alone.

The God Eater leaned in close. “I chose you to wear that magatama for the same reason I hosted these tournaments in the first place. Because I want to witness potential realized. The first time I looked into your eyes and peered into the depths of your soul, I saw white, the bright and clean white of a fresh canvas. I want to play a game, but games are only fun when you play them against your equals. You may call me a liar, but I believe you could become that equal, Toffee.”

Toffee felt perplexed. Based on what the God Eater said, it seemed like she had her answer. She was here for the God Eater’s entertainment. It wasn’t much of a surprising answer at all. After all, that’s what she had assumed she was chosen for when she had first stepped foot in CrossRoads, but something didn’t feel right about any of this. There had to be more than what the God Eater was saying. There were also those words ‘the first time’. The God Eater was watching her from the start. No matter how much information the God Eater gave, it always felt like she was leaving something out, but unlike Kuro, it wasn’t obvious what it could be.

The God Eater continued. “I’d like to make a deal. If the wishes of others matter to you so much, then continue through the tournament. Prove yourself, and become the champion. Then, you and I will play a game. If you win that game. I will grant everyone’s wish.”

“As long as there is no catch at all, fine.”

“Just fine, eh” The God Eater tilted her head with a hint of disappointment. “I heard that you didn’t want to fight, and that you were trying to come up with an alternative. Now honestly, there’s no shame in that. As long as I get to witness two souls willing to put their dreams on the line, I’m fine with most options. Fighting just happens to be the most straightforward method. Tell me, what did you come up with?”

Toffee looked a bit embarrassed “Well I came up with three options. The first would be a race. I’m pretty good with my legs. The second was an eating contest. I may have gotten a bit hungry while coming up with that one. The third would be some sort of fake murder we’d have to solve or an escape room, to see who is the better detective.”

“First option sounds rather dull, if I’m being completely honest; the second sounds like it would be gross to watch, but I appreciate your willingness to throw ideas at the wall; and the third sounds like it was going in the right direction, but it’s a bit too vague to make it into something entertaining for the colosseum audience. I’m going to be honest, Toffee. Right now you’re boring me a little, and please, don’t blame yourself for that. It’s actually my fault. For all my talk about potential, the biggest problem with it is that potential is a lot like a stick of dynamite. It’s useless unless you give it a spark. Even with our deal in place, you don’t sound like you have much motivation at all.” The God Eater rubbed her chin. “Maybe it’s not a spark. Maybe, in your case, it’s a push.”

Toffee tried to figure out what she meant by that before feeling a sudden burst of raw kinetic energy blast her backwards, straight into the TV screen behind her.

Nerassa was walking down the streets of uptown Visalia when she was met with a ghost from her past. She watched in shock and a small amount of dread as Toffee seemingly materialized on the ground out of nowhere.

“Ouch! Warn me next time you do that, asshole!” Toffee yelled at thin air. She got back to her feet, assessed her surroundings and turned around to find Nerassa.

Nerassa looked at Toffee with a slowly increasing amount of horror on her face, as if Toffee was an existential threat. She took a step back.

Toffee took note. This didn't seem like the behavior of a supposed Summer Leagues champion. Still, she tried to defuse the situation. “Hey there. Before you say anything, this whole situation is just as weird for me as it is for you.”

“You couldn't possibly begin to understand how ‘weird’ this is for me. You're not supposed to be here!” Nerassa yelled. “You're-!... No, this has to be more of Chifu's trickery.”

“Hold no! Captain Chifu was the God Eater?!”

Nerassa's fear was slowly being replaced with irritation. “Of course she is! How did you not realize that? They had the same face, you fucking moron!” Nerass shook her head. “Gah, you're throwing me off focus! Why are you here?”

“It’s like you said, it’s the God E-... I mean... Chifu’s trickery. Honestly, I’m hoping you might be able to figure it out. She said I was missing my motivation for fighting. Since you won the tournament, do you have any advice?”

Nerassa calmed down and turned away. “That’s not my problem. None of this is. Now, leave me alone.”

“Wait!” Toffee called out “Just one question, and then I’ll be out of your hair for good if that’s what you want. What did you use the wish for?”

“What I wished for?” Nerassa turned back to Toffee with a clenched fist. “That’s just it. You couldn’t possibly understand what I wished for, and you wanna know why? It’s because you’re a goddamn civilian. I still remember that stupid speech you made about wanting a ‘real case’. That’s not what real cases are like or what real life is like in general at all. It’s your own romanticized TV bullshit. Just like every other civilian, you take the peaceful life you have for granted by constantly whining about how much you wish it was just like you goddamn shows. Unlike you, I had to go to war, I had to kill people, and then after all that, it took the power of a literal god for me to get a small taste of the life you get to freely waste. Now that I think about it, I’m actually glad that Chifu dropped you right in front of me because now I can finally say the one thing I never got to tell you when I heard you give that speech. Toffee Brown, you are pathetic.” Those were her last words as she walked away.

Toffee wasn’t sure what to make of that conversation. It sure didn’t feel motivating whatsoever. She didn’t try following Nerassa. Figuring out how to get back to CrossRoads was a bigger concern. She spent a few minutes wandering around. That’s when she heard someone.

“Excuse me, Toffee Brown, could I speak to you for a moment?” A young woman walked up to Toffee and asked.

“Alright, sure, but how do you know my name?”

“It’s a very long story. Would it be alright if we talked things out over some boba tea?”

Toffee couldn’t help but get a sense of déjà vu. She was transported to somewhere far away from home, and had no choice but to follow a stranger in hopes for answers. The repetition was starting to get irritating, but what can you do other than go with the flow in a situation like this? Toffee sighed “Lady, that’s all I wanted since the very beginning of this...”

This wasn’t what Toffee wanted at all. She and the mysterious young woman sat across from each other. Toffee was quietly sipping her milk tea as she uncomfortably tried to avoid looking at or bringing attention to the giant black square right next to them.

“It’s okay.” The woman assured Toffee. “Right now, you are shrouded in my nondetection magic. From the perspective of everyone else, we look like indistinguishable blurs, and no one can hear what we’re saying. As for the black square, only you and I can see it.”

That last thing had to be true since no one else in the diner seemed to acknowledge it. As for the first two, there was only one way to tell if that was the truth. Toffee stood up and yelled at the top of her lungs. “Penis!” She looked around the diner. There was no response.

“Well then... Now that you have your confirmation that I am telling the truth. Please give me your hand.”

Toffee shrugged. What did she have to lose? She did as the woman said. The woman grabbed it, holding it in a firm grip. It was then that Toffee suddenly felt a strange chill inside her. There was something familiar about the sensation. “What was that?”

“That was a curse that I removed just now. It was designed to turn you into a living bomb. I knew it was there because I am the one who put it on you in the first place. My name is Ruth, and I killed you.”

Toffee slowly leaned back. Something like that would have shocked her normally, but after everything she had seen in the past day and a half, she was more suspicious and angry than surprised. “This is the part where you give me the context on what the hell that means.”

“Nerassa and I were part of a team along with two over girls, Alice and Bertha. The four of us fought against these being called the eidolons that threatened our home. We succeeded, but at the cost of our leader, Alice. After that, we split up. The next time we met, Nerassa decided to swear vengeance against us, presumably for abandoning her, so she tricked Bertha into murdering my father. That’s when the tournament invitation arrived. I tried to confront Nerassa, but she beat me within an inch of my life. I let her assume that I was unconscious, and then, used my invisibility to follow her through the portal into CrossRoads without her noticing.”

“You were that stranger that bumped into me before the match. I’m guessing you tried to use me as a bomb, but things didn’t work out.” Toffee’s eye narrowed.

Ruth paused “I was so blinded by vengeance, that I ended up murdering you for nothing. Not only did I fail, but Nerassa went on to win the rest of the tournament and get her wish. She erased herself from everyone’s memories. I like to assume I was the only one spared thanks to my nondetection magic, but in reality, I think the God Eater was simply too lazy to look for me, so she put a barrier around Nerassa that prevented me from interacting with her in any way, shape, or form. I actually studied interdimensional travel magic just in case the God Eater decided to finish me off, which was how I was able to detect your arrival.” Ruth shook her head in a defeated manner as she got back on track. “Nerassa had the power of a god! She could have used it to rewrite all of her wrongs and bring peace to this entire city, but instead, my father is still dead, and my friend has been traumatized because she doesn’t even understand why she killed him. Nerassa probably prefers it this way. She likes that we’re suffering while she gets to walk away, completely unharmed.”

Toffee took in every detail of Ruth’s story without flinching. Her face was completely blank as she refused to show any emotion. “So, what now then?”

“Now, just do what you were planning on doing. Saving you now does not undo the sin of murdering the version of you from the other timeline, but it does give me some closure. You can go through that black square and it will take you back to your CrossRoads timeline. After that, if at all possible, I would like you to stop Nerassa from winning the tournament. I know that there’s nothing you owe me, but I still want her brought to justice.”

There was a voice in Toffee’s head, filled with violent rage. It screamed “Forget the tournament! You killed me! I don’t have any reason to believe anything you said after that, let alone do what you tell me to.”, but it never left her mouth. Toffee was too preoccupied with what she saw before her, a young woman who looked calm and collected on the outside, but was a single hair

away from bursting into tears. She truly had nothing, and Toffee knew there would be no satisfaction in making it worse.

After a moment of thought, Toffee softly spoke. "I only promise to try, but first, there's something I'd like to ask you to help me find to make it possible."

Thankfully, just like the God Eater said, Toffee reappeared exactly where she was before the incident, at the first step of the stairs leading up to the platform. Nerassa was unnerved. From her perspective, she saw Toffee step forward with a dopey smile on her face only for that expression to change into an upset but focused scowl the moment she started climbing the stairs.

"Alright!" Miss X cheered "Before we start, let's get a few words from our contestants. First up is Nerassa. Any spicy diss for your opponent?"

Nerassa nodded and looked at Toffee, still trying to piece together the sudden shift in her mood. "Toffee, if you're smart enough, you'll already know that I have absolutely no intentions of playing any game you've come up with. Don't waste my time, your time, or the time of everyone else in this arena. Stick to your promise and forfeit, now."

"W-well now, those words sure were spicy" Miss X stuttered. This was definitely not in the script, and a forfeit match didn't seem like something the crowd would enjoy. "Any response, Miss Brown?"

Toffee stared down Nerassa. "I'm going to have to go back on my words. This is no longer just about the tournament." Her next words were cold as ice. "Nerassa, I talked to Ruth."

Nerassa choked for a moment. "How is that possible? That name shouldn't even be able to exist inside your brain!" She barked.

"Oh I remember her name, clear as day, just as I remember everything else she told me!"

"Whatever she told you was a lie!"

"No! You're the liar! How could you do something as horrible as tricking your own friend into murdering an innocent man?!"

"Bertha is not my friend!" Nerassa yelled at the top of her lungs.

"..."

"..."

"Really..." Toffee's stoic face began to wilt. Deep inside, there was still a part of her that was genuinely holding out hope that Ruth really was just lying about everything. "That's the only part of the accusation you want to refute?"

Nerassa realized the trap she was caught in all too late, the old lawyer's trick. The pitter patter of whisper and gasps from the audience washed over her like a brewing storm. "Calm yourself Nerassa." She told herself. "This bitch, dressed like a \$15 dollar whore, is just doing the

same thing she's been doing since you met, get under your skin. You strike at her now, before Miss X starts the match, and it's all over. All you need now is to win and get that prize. You didn't confess to anything, and even still, the opinions of these idiots here won't matter when you go home with the power of a wish in your hands. You just have to remain focused." Nerassa took a deep breath. "I have nothing more to say to you."

Toffee nodded. "That's the only thing you could say now that I'd be willing to believe."

"Woah." Miss X chimed in "I don't think any of us could have expected this turn of events, but now that we know what's all the line here, I think we could use a thematically appropriate battlefield. Tenki, if you please" She snapped her fingers.

Tenki, who was up in the VIP observation booth, sitting next to his mother, raised his hands. Within an instant, a circle of pure energy appeared at the center of the arena, and expanded outwards, replacing the stone tiles with the terrain of sand and jagged rocks, the perfect setting for an spaghetti western style showdown.

Toffee and Nerassa got into position and stance.

Miss X, just as tense as everyone else, took a few paces back so that she wouldn't be in the middle of what was about to go down. "The match will begin on my mark. Ready..."

"Set..."

"Go!"

Bang!

The two ladies drew their weapons. Nerassa was clearly the more experienced in both combat and murder. She drew first and fired, aiming perfectly at Toffee's center mass. It would have been a killing blow if Toffee had not dodged.

It is common knowledge that jumping to the side in a pistol duel is a reckless and near suicidal tactic. You would be lucky if you manage to get out of the way of your enemy's shot, and even still, you would be left defenseless on the ground while your opponent simply adjusts their aim and fires a second shot. The only thing you could do to put the odds in your favor would be to try shooting your opponent at the same time you dodge, but aiming a gun at someone while jumping would be nearly impossible. Luckily, you don't need to be accurate when throwing a grenade.

Toffee rolled out of the way and pulled out the EMP grenade she asked Ruth for. It was nothing more than an ordinary wad of plastic and metal, but Toffee poured every drop of every emotion she felt in that exact moment into that little black ball as she threw it in a perfect arc towards Nerassa, and in that very moment, one could argue that grenade had more true magic in it than any of the alien energies flowing through Nerassa's veins.

Blzzrt!

A pulse of blue energy erupted from the grenade as it landed at Nerassa's feet. She dropped her gun as her prosthetic arms shut down and went limp.

Toffee got back on her feet, panting slightly from the intensity of the last few seconds. “Now” She huffed, “I think it’s you who should forfeit.”

Miss X piped up “Toffee is right. Miss Sweptsnow, your arms don’t look like they’re working anymore. If you are unable to fight, Toffee will be declared the winner.”

Nerassa ignored the two. With a simple maneuver, she had lost access to all the weapons in her personal inventory, except for one. She flailed her limp arm against her chest.

“Nerassa, it’s over. Calm down.” Toffee started to look worried. What was Nerassa doing? Did she finally snap?

Nerassa continued on, hitting herself over and over until...

Crack!

The naga bloodstone necklace shattered, releasing a massive wave of malevolent red energy and a blood curdling shriek. Nerassa screamed as her body absorbed the unholy energy. Then, two massive blades burst out of her elbows, tearing through her useless prosthetics as if they were made of cardboard. She yelled as loud as she could. “This isn’t over, Toffee Brown!” She charged at Toffee like a wild animal.

Caught completely off guard, Toffee drew her gun and aimed at Nerassa, but was met with despair as she realized what Nerassa had done to it. “Gah!” Toffee screamed as she threw the sabotaged gun at Nerassa.

Nerassa grinned with savage catharsis as she swatted the useless projectile. Nothing was wrong. Everything was still going exactly how she planned. She just needed to plunge her blade into Toffee's chest, and move on to the next battle.

Fwip!

Nerassa heard a strange noise as a sudden jolt of stinging pain surged throughout her ankle, knocking her off balance, causing her to face plant straight into the ground. This was followed up by a painful thud as Toffee took the opportunity to jump right on top of her, pinning her to the ground. Nerassa's greatest weapons were now her biggest weakness as she flailed her blade arms like bird wings, helplessly unable to pick herself up from under Toffee's weight. What could have possibly knocked her off her feet at such an important moment. Could it have been... a whip? Nerassa roared "Ruth! Damn you!" Her animalistic cries were barely heard as she was drowned out by the crowd counting down.

Quinton couldn't let it go down like this while doing nothing. He sprinted out of his seat and jumped into the arena. He looked up at the platform, directly at Toffee, and yelled "Please stop! You don't understand what we need that wish for. Our city is under attack and that wish is the only thing that could save it!" Quinton felt the bitter taste of hypocrisy stain their mouth as they remembered what Nerassa said about guiltting the enemy into forfeiting the tournament, but it was their own tool at their disposal.

Toffee glared at Quinton and yelled back. "After everything you just heard and saw, do you honestly think that a woman like this would ever be willing to use the wish on someone other than herself?"

Quinton paused. They had spent a large portion of their life, not sure of who or what they were fighting for, yet here they were, putting their blind faith in a woman they met two days ago, enough faith to follow her into another universe. At the time, Nerassa seemed like a dignified and sophisticated mercenary, someone Quinton could use as an excuse to further run away from everything he abandoned, but now, they felt a stabbing pain of embarrassment, seeing the animal on display.

The countdown continued undisturbed.

“Five! Four! Three! Two! One!” Miss X cheered “And with that, Toffee Brown is our winner!”

While Miss X was keeping up her professional persona and trying to act unphased, Tenki was not. “Haha! That’s our ‘blessed’ Toffee. I can’t believe she pulled it off. You really did see something in her!” He looked towards his mother.

The God Eater smiled with a pleasant amount of satisfaction. “All she needed was an opportunity to play the role of the hero for her to rise to the occasion. I knew talking to Ruth would set her on the right course. Sadly, she’s a bit too predictable for my liking, but hopefully, that’s something that will get fixed.” She leaned over to Tenki. “I have some business to attend to. Don’t worry. The crossguards should be able to handle things while I’m gone.”

Gloria sat in her lavished office overlooking the city of Visalia. Her lips were curled in a subtle arrogant smirk as she opened up her laptop. There was a window open, showing a livestream of a poor tiny fox covered in red markings. It didn’t appear to be severely harmed, but

it was clearly upset, a reasonable response to being probed with needles and locked in a cage. Gloria was satisfied that it had not managed to escape yet. It was then that she got a video call. She clicked on the phone icon immediately. The footage she was watching was replaced with a body cam. It was a live stream of Nerassa's match.

"Nerassa has lost the match." The caller whispered. "All members of strike team one are scattered throughout the audience, dressed as civilians. Strike team two is getting into position. Once we have confirmation from strike team two's leader, we'll be ready to engage at your command."

The camera zoomed in on Nerassa as her blade arms turned to dust and the rest of her body went limp, exhausted from her magical transformation. "Just as expected," Gloria thought. "That pathetic and over emotional girl couldn't even make it past the first round. None of that matters now. With the DNA sample we gathered from the God Eater's familiar, I was able to open my own portal and send in my own troops. It's laughable that I ever pretended to need her, let alone pretended to play by the rules of this so-called God Eater's tournament."

"Hold on, folks!" Miss X yelled towards the crowd. "That was an intense match. I think before we move on to the next battle, we should celebrate Miss Brown's victory with some fireworks!" She pointed to the sky followed by a barrage of rockets bursting upwards out of hidden compartments under the arena.

"What?" Gloria adjusted her glasses. "This wasn't part of the tournament itinerary. What the hell is going on!" She leaned forward towards the computer screen. What she saw next was unnerving. Everything on the stream went black as the agent she was monitoring was dropped down into a trap door. All he was able to get out of his mouth was a small yelp before the drop

which was easily covered up by the explosions of fireworks. None of the audience members noticed his sudden disappearance either because they were all busy looking up at the sky. One by one, Gloria could hear a series of thuds as the other agents were dropped into a dark room underneath the colosseum.

“Let me tell you the difference between us guards and you mercenary punks.” A grim voice echoed out from within the darkness. “You serve investors because they are too weak to take things for themselves. We serve a god because you don’t deserve the privilege of inconveniencing her.”

The feed was cut out. The fate of those men would be left ambiguous, just as the God Eater likes it. The situation only got worse as a call came in.

“Strike Team Two, we were given bad intel! It was a setup! I repeat, it’s a-”

Again, silence. That’s when Gloria felt a presence behind her. She turned around with a look of terror as she locked eyes with none other than the God Eater.

The God Eater grinned, delicately holding the now freed familiar like a baby. “Tell me, dear child,” She asked Gloria. “What do you know about convergent evolution?”

Gloria ignored the question. She turned back towards her desk, mashing every security and panic button available. None of them did anything.

“You don’t seem very wise, so I’ll keep it brief. Despite how it sounds, it’s a very simple concept. It’s when two unrelated animals evolve into the same form.”

Reaching total desperation, Gloria reached into a drawer, pulling out, not one, but three naga bloodstones. She smashed all of them into the desk letting out a shriek of energy. Yet still, nothing happened. It was finally setting in that the God Eater did not abide by the rules that dictated Gloria's extremely narrow minded understanding of the supernatural.

The God Eater continued, fully confident, knowing that she would not be interrupted again as the hopelessness of Gloria's situation finally settled in. "Then there's the most common example of convergent evolution, carcinisation, a recurring case where multiple animals evolve to take on the form of a crab. This led many to make up a joke prophecy that crabs were the pinnacle of evolution and that it was the fate of all life to evolve into crabs. The truth is that I never found such a joke funny. Just imagine, a world made up of nothing but the same creature, void of thought, endlessly scuttling left and right, picking at scum for all eternity. No more excitement, surprise, art, beauty, or any other sort of diversity. I'm humble enough to admit that I've been a very lazy deity, but the one duty I have taken up, which I take very seriously, is to prevent the carcinisation of all worlds. Do you get what I am trying to say Gloria?" She placed her hand on the CEO's trembling shoulder. "You're a crab. A creature that lacks any imagination. You plotted to capture and kill me, but the greater unforgivable crime you committed was boring me. What would you have done if you actually succeeded? Continue to grovel at the feet of investors from all across the multiverse like every other magitech corporation across the multiverse? So much power, yet your kind always manages to find the most mundane and pathetic application of it. A bleak status quo, masquerading as ambition, progress, and evolution. That is what you are, and what I must stop." The God Eater leaned in close. "I look into your eyes and I see nothing but gray, the death of potential. Tell me, what do you see when you look into mine?"

What happened next made Gloria feel as if a chunk of her soul had been ripped out. Whether this was literal or merely metaphorical was once again ambiguous, just as the God Eater likes it. Still, while Gloria stood there, visibly unharmed, the pompous business woman, audacious enough to challenge a god, was dead, never to be heard from ever again.

Everything went down within barely a minute or two, which is why Toffee was so caught off guard by what happened next. She had spent the time, standing at the opposite end of the arena, a safe distance away from Nerassa while she caught her breath. That's when a bunch of crossguards encircled Nerassa. From far away and with such identical uniforms, Toffee barely realized that the one taking the lead was none other than Kuro. He swiftly pulled Nerassa up, slapping a scrolling on her back scribed with magic sealing runes.

Too exhausted to fight back, but very upset, Nerassa barked. "What the hell is this? Let go!"

"I'm afraid I can't do that." Kuro chuckled. "Nerassa Sweptsnow, you are under arrest for conspiring with the Lifetech corporation in attempted terrorism. For as long as the God Eater shows mercy upon you, you have the right to legal representation and to abstain from any self perjury."

"Terrorism?" Nerassa was just as shocked as everyone else until she pieced together the situation. Her eyes widened. "Gloria, you idiot, what have you done..."

Toffee and Quinton approached, eager to figure out what was going on. Quinton raised their voice. "Hey punks, didn't you hear what she just said? Get your hands off of her before this gets ugly!" They readied themselves to unsheath their blade.

"That's enough!" Nerassa snapped. "I already saw you just standing there while Toffee had me pinned to the ground. There's no use trying to make up for it now, so just spare me your pity."

"Nerassa, I-..."

"If it makes you feel any better, this is my fault. I dragged you into this because I wanted to find someone I could trust, but the truth is that I've made too many enemies and allied myself with too many soon-to-be enemies. You'll just end up serving as my meat shield if you try to stick around me. Someone with your talent deserves more than to waste their life on that. If you cooperate with these guards, they'll take you home safely. In the meantime, I'll be fine. I can figure my way out of this."

There was a sharp stabbing pain in Quinton's chest. There she was, the original Nerassa that Quinton knew, and she returned just to say goodbye. Quinton took their hand off their sword. For now, they would remain as they were, a sword without a cause or master to fight for.

Kuro nodded. "For what it's worth, you made the right choice." He glanced over to one of the other guards. "Take them to the headquarters and give them a ride home."

Quinton and the guard walked off.

“Thanks for not interrupting.” Nerassa turned her attention to Toffee, who had been standing there the whole time. “Well, get it over with. Let me have it.”

“Have what?” Toffee asked, trembling slightly.

“The one-liner. This is what you wanted right? That ‘real case’ you talked so much about? To think that would get your wish so soon and without having to win the tournament.”

Toffee did everything she could to hold back the storm of emotions inside her. She saw the life Nerassa could have had and she talked to Quinton with subtle compassion, showing that there was more to her than just a manipulative murderer. Was this the only option? Was this justice? “I-... I didn’t want this.”

“Of course you didn’t. In order to fulfill the dream of solving a case, there needs to be a case in the first place, and for that to happen, people have to get hurt. To think I was the protagonist of my own story, when I was the villain of yours, Detective Slut.” Nerassa joked with venom on her tongue.

“You’re not a villain, Nerassa.”

“Of course I am! That’s how you see me. That’s why you were so gungho in hearing Ruth’s side of the story while completely disregarding mine!”

Toffee glanced off in the distance. There was a woman in a cloak. No one seemed to be paying attention to them, almost as if they were hiding with the aid of nondetection magic. Toffee snapped back to Nerassa, now with more focus. “You can wallow in self pity as much as you

like, but you showed your true colors when you tried to kill me, not just once, but twice. You're not a villain. I'll say that again because I don't believe anyone is a villain, but even still, Nerassa Sweptsnow, you need to get some fucking help. Goodbye." Toffee walked off.

"Hey," Kuro called Toffee out. "Where are you headed off to?"

"There's someone I need to talk to."

Kuro left Nerassa in the hands of the other guards and leaned in close so that no one could hear his whisper. "Well, whatever you gotta say to them, make it quick. We need to talk, and we need to do it before the clean up crew arrives. There's something I need to show you in the spirit forest."

Toffee nodded before walking away and approached the cloaked figure. The figure tightly gripped their whip, a bit anxious.

"Who are you? Why would you help me after what I was about to do?"

That was a good question. Toffee didn't just have two near death experiences today. She had three, and she was staring at the person who made the first attempt, not just the culprit, but the exact multiversal iteration of said culprit. "I'm just a girl who has had a weird day, and in hindsight I'm not sure. I was just doing what I thought seemed right at the moment. CrossRoads is a crazy place, overlapping with other timelines from what I've heard. All those what ifs could drive someone mad if they think too hard about it. Just do good and do your best at doing good. That's going to be my modus operandi going forward, and I suggest you do the same." Those were her last words before walking off to the spirit forest.

Toffee made her way to the spirit forest. By this point, Kuro had figured out how to read her like a book, giving just enough information to spark her curiosity. He never gave her directions of where in the spirit forest he wanted them to meet, but he didn't need to. It only took a small stride before Toffee saw the warzone.

Bodies, everywhere. Limp soldiers were scattered around an opening in the middle of the forest. It was a horrible sight, like the aftermath of a war, and at the center of it, sitting on a stump was Kuro.

"Good! You made it" He glanced over.

Toffee felt ready to vomit. "What is this?"

"What you're looking at is the best case scenario. After you beat Nerassa, the corporation she worked for sprung forth their contingency plan to take over all of CrossRoads. We couldn't have that, so we gave them false intel, and tricked them into wandering in here, where they were immediately trampled over by the local yokai that reside here. It was the only way we could guarantee no civilians could get hurt." He stood up and glared at Toffee. "It's quite a dilemma, being a crossguard. Your duty is to protect the people of CrossRoads, but the most common threat is the competitors brought in by the deity you serve. Every year, at least one contestant plots to take over CrossRoads, and if not them, then one of the disgusting monsters they drag along with them does. Our friends and family are put through constant danger, just to keep up the ritual of this stupid tournament. Everything you see around here right now is the

consequence of all that!” Kuro dropped his cool facade by this point. “All I want to do is get close enough to the God Eater to ask why this needs to go on. That’s the only reason I took up this job in the first place, and you were my only lead. That is the full reason I was following you.”

Toffee clutched her magatama. The dark thoughts started to creep into her mind, wondering if she was responsible for this, but she fought them off. She couldn’t allow the words she told Ruth to be hollow. “If that’s the case, maybe we can help each other. This tag that the God Eater gave me holds a special power. If I can figure out the secret behind it, we could either figure out what’s going on in her head or use its power to prevent things like this from happening.”

Kuro regained his composure. “You really know how to look at the positive side of things. It suits a wannabe hero like you. Does this make us partners?”

“Yeah, partners!”

Continued in Chapter 3: Me, Myself, and You