

Chapter 3: Me, Myself, and You

"Is something wrong? You look disappointed. I-is there anything I can get you?"

"No... it's just that I found out that... Toffee is going to lose."

The Fox Den was in its usual state of midday disarray. Glasses clinked against each other, waiters ran back and forth, and patrons yelled in an attempt to pierce the wall of sounds. It seemed that even during the peaceful periods of rest between rounds, there was still chaos and noise in Crossroads. On one end of this messy scene, Toffee was sitting in a corner, accompanied by Pandora, a sophisticated android composed of nanobots, molded into the shape of a metallic woman. On the opposite end of the bar, at the entrance, was a rather flashy amazonian who went by the alias Overdraw, accompanied by the exact same metallic woman.

"Do we really need to have this whole meeting?" Overdraw asked her iteration of Pandora. "It seems a smidge rude dragging Toffee here after I just talked to her this morning."

"Well," Pandora glared "if you were so concerned with taking up her time, or more importantly, my time, you would have alerted me when you met her so that the three of us could establish rules of engagement for our upcoming fight." The android tried and failed to hide her sass behind a professional facade. "If we are going to win this tournament, you are going to have to start taking our encounters more seriously, rather than sharing brunch with our assigned opponent at Sugar Glass' place!"

"Aw come on!" Overdraw snapped back. "Is the time I spend hanging out with Toffee any less serious than you going shopping with Graz?"

"Th-that's irrelevant!"

“Is it though? You do know that assuming we win this round, there’s a nonzero chance we might have to go up against him. It sounds like you’ve been palling around with our enemies just as much as me.”

“The situation between Nalagrom and me is entirely different!” Pandora pouted like a child, letting her sterile facade slip.

“Hey hey, I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with it. All I’m asking is that you tone down the kill-or-be-killed paranoia and offer Toffee the same courtesy. She’s a really nice person, not the kind you need to play 4D chess with.”

At that moment, Toffee caught a glance of the two, midconversation. “Hey Becky, over here!” She called out to Overdraw by her secret identity with the same tone and familiarity of a long time friend. The amazon sat down while the android merged with her doppelganger who had invited Toffee here. “Glad you made it! Pandora told me you wanted to talk about tournament business, but first, you up for another game of Gin?”

Overdraw felt like something wasn’t right. Toffee was dressed in the same clothes as yesterday, but earlier today, she was wearing an elegant white blouse. Then there was the deck of cards Toffee was eagerly pulling out at that exact moment. It seemed a bit odd to ask for another game right after their previous one at the Shatter Sugar Connection Cafe. Maybe Overdraw was overthinking the situation. Perhaps she had to change her clothes after getting a stain on her blouse, and the card games were just her way of cutting the stress of the situation. “How about we put that aside for now and discuss the tournament.”

“Oh yeah!” Toffee exclaimed “Your round against Zeke was wild. Getting warped to another world for a kaiju battle was like some action movie level insanity!” She sighed with a little bit of disappointment. “I just wished my round could have been a bit more fun like that.”

Overdraw had been pulled away during Toffee's fight, only returning to see her pinning Nerassa to the ground, but she heard about what happened. It was quite unfortunate that Nerassa wasn't the person Overdraw thought she was, and a near death experience probably wasn't enjoyable for a civilian like Toffee. "Yeah, but hey! Let's put that behind us and focus on our round!"

"Yeah... that sure would have been cool, but then again I doubt that things would have turned out any differently."

Pandora leaned in, optical scanners squinting. "Are you alright?"

Overdraw nervously laughed. "Yeah Toffee, we don't have time to joke about this sort of stuff. We came here to talk to you about our round 2 matchup against you."

"I-i'm not joking" Toffee coughed. "I'm out. I got on stage, saw Nerassa pull out her gun, and got scared, so I forfeited then and there. There is no round 2! Right?"

Overdraw's lips were dry and cold. Her forehead was hot, and there was a small twitch in her arrow plucking hand. She nervously asked the following question.

"Toffee... who was I playing cards with this morning?"

The Crossguard lookout tower was in its usual state of stillness. Leaves danced in the air, guards stood in silence, and pedestrians walked in the direction of their intended business. It seemed that even the chaotic Crossroads had a few corners where order reigned supreme. Toffee stood at the entrance. She was a mess, wearing a mismatched ensemble of clothes she bought yesterday. Some would say her black Crossroads souvenir hoodie looked comfortable. Others would call it frumpy. She casually held up

her magatama to the guards in front of the gate. "Contestant Toffee Brown, here for the appointment I scheduled." She muttered. Her tired and grumpy attitude hid her conflicting feelings. Half of her felt like this meeting was a terrible idea. The other half was convinced it was something she needed to do. All of her wanted to get it over with.

One of the guards pulled up the clipboard hooked to his belt before nodding to the other. Without needing to exchange words, the two pushed the doors open. A third guard was waiting inside to guide the contestant to her destination. Toffee and the guide walked down several sets of stairs before arriving at the cell containing Toffee's round one opponent, Nerassa. There was a peculiar paper tag stuck to her clothes, and she was still missing her arms, but even in her defeated state, Nerassa raised herself to her feet with all the dignity of a soldier.

"Well well now," Nerassa hissed. "This is the first time I've seen you fully clothed. Is there any reason you're here, or did you come all this way just to gloat."

"Relax, I just came to check up on you. Are they treating you alright?"

Nerassa spat. "I've been through way worse, not that you'd care. Let's get one thing clear, rabbit. Your little tricks had nothing to do with why I'm locked up here. I admitted to nothing during our fight, and it's only a matter of time before these idiots let me out once they realize I'm telling the truth when I told them that I had nothing to do with Life Tech's attempted raid."

A liar confidently relying on others to tell whether she's being honest. Despite knowing the situation, Toffee still found such a situation funny. Part of her wanted Nerassa to stay there longer, even if she was being imprisoned for the wrong crime, but that wouldn't be justice, and she knew it. "I'm sure they will, and you'll be sent back like none of this ever happened, but before then, I wanted to hear your side of the story, the part you said I didn't hear out. It might be too late to make amends for things, but maybe when you go home, you could start over and-"

“Shut up and spare me your pity!” Nerassa let out a small glint of her inner monster, the one that almost stabbed Toffee right through the heart without hesitation. “You wouldn’t get it even if I wasted my breath on you.”

“Right because I’m a civilian...” Toffee murmured

“What was that?” Nerassa, or rather the Nerassa from this timeline, had no clue what Toffee was referring to.

“I-it’s nothing.” Toffee shook her head. “Anyways, if you don’t want to talk, then the other reason I’m here is your gun. I’m in need of a replacement, thanks to you, so I figured why the hell not get an upgrade.”

“Oh you bitch! That thing is worth more than you make in a year!”

“Woah woah woah, I already said I was taking it, there’s no need for you to sell me on it.” Toffee giggled, reclaiming a small fragment of her pre-tournament pep before returning to a more somber tone. “You tried to kill me twice. I take your gun. That’s a pretty generous trade on my part.” She turned and began walking away.

Nerassa let out one more defeated growl. “You took more than that...”

Toffee continued forward, pretending not to hear such a painful sentence, but still thinking of the other Nerassa in the yellow shirt.

Toffee and the guard made their way back to the ground floor entrance. Just as they reached the door, the guard spoke up

“This might be an unfortunate time to tell you this, but I’m afraid we can’t loan you Miss Sweptsnow’s gun. It’s currently locked away in the evidence lockers.” The guard muttered.

“What?! Dude! Why didn’t you speak up about that?”

“I didn’t want to interrupt your conversation. It was getting pretty intense, and it didn’t seem like there was a good moment to bring it up.”

Toffee pondered her current dilemma. *‘Calm down Toffee’* She thought. *‘You didn’t need that gun anyways. Killing’s not your style, and waving a firearm while yelling empty threats won’t work the farther I get in this tournament. You’ll just have to figure out something else to use instead.’* She turned her attention back to the guard. “I guess that’s alright. I’ll just get going, but before I do, I have a quick question. First off, what’s your name?”

“You can call me Officer Myui.”

“Right, Myui, I noticed there was a paper tag on Nerassa. What was that about?”

“Well that’s a magic suppression tag. You simply stick it on to your target and it creates a magic nullification field around them. Obviously, we’d need to use them on someone as dangerous as a contestant like Miss Sweptsnow or else she might have used her powers to conjure those blade arms she used yesterday and try to escape.”

“Hmm.” Toffee stroked her chin. “Something like that seems really convenient. You wouldn’t happen to have a few spares that I could potentially... ya know... borrow?”

“What?!” Officer Myui jumped. “O-of course not! We can’t just hand out valuable Crossguard equipment to any random person who asks, let alone the very contestants we’re in charge of surveying! The only way I’d even consider it is if you went through our deputy program, received approval from a senior officer, signed the-”

“Okay okaaaay.” Toffee groaned. “I get it. Can’t blame a girl for asking, can ya?” She shrugged. “If the answer is no, then that’s everything I came for.”

Myui adjusted her uniform. “In that case, please have a safe and pleasant rest of your day.”

Toffee signed. “Ya know Myui, as a contestant, that’s a real hard thing to do, but I’ll give it a go, just for you.”

Toffee walked out of the Crossguard lookout tower until she was at the aristocrat district gate. She glanced at her phone to check the time, looked over her shoulder to make sure there were no guards watching or following her, and immediately ducked around the corner to find Kuro waiting for her with a vanilla envelope tucked under his arm.

“Hey hey, track star!” Kuro chuckled

“Guh, how long do you plan on calling me that?”

“Until I come up with something funnier. Anyways, I got what you asked for. Take a look.” Kuro handed Toffee the envelope.

She opened it up, and the first thing she found was another magic suppression tag “Hey how did you know that-”

“You asked to meet here, which means there was something you needed to do in the aristocrat district, otherwise, you would have picked a less crowded meeting spot. Visiting Nerassa’s cell is the only thing you’d have any interest in doing, which is where you would see her tag, ask about it, and immediately get rejected. How’s Myui doing by the way?”

“Okay, that’s a little creepy.”

“And that’s why I’m the better detective. You’re on my home turf and you’re way too easy to read. Even if my theory was all wrong, you’d still need it against your next opponent. I got a lot riding on you winning this tournament. It’s the only way to get close to the GodEater and figure out her motives.”

“Is that so, detective? It seems like you’ve been pretty close to the GodEater this whole time.”

Kuro grimaced. He was still processing what Toffee told her about Captain Chifu being the GodEater in disguise. Tainted memories of sharing drinks with her and all the other recruits after their first day of training were etched in his head. “That’s a low blow, track star. Let’s just get back on course.”

She pulled out the rest of the papers in the envelope and found what she was looking for. It was the Crossguard files on Overdraw and Pandora. “Let’s see here. We got a superhero and a T-1000 terminator. Before this tournament, I would have said that I don’t stand a chance. Maybe it’s the magical necklace or the win against a crazy cyborg, but I feel a little better about my odds.” She shuffled the papers around and kept speed reading. “Alright, the hero shoots kid friendly arrows, and the robot operates on a bootleg version of Asimov’s laws of robotics. Not bad, not bad... hm... Hold on. What’s this?” Toffee pulled out a red piece of paper. “I don’t remember one of these when you showed my file.”

“That’s because your file didn’t have a red sheet. Nerassa’s did, but I didn’t think it was relevant when I showed you her file. Now that we’re working together, I figured I’d include it since more intel is better than less.”

She stared at the paper with a stern look. "I'll say. Do you mind if I keep this?"

"Hmm... If you think it's that important, then sure, but I'll need the rest. Can't let anyone know these went missing."

Toffee put the magic suppression tag in her left pocket and the red sheet in her right before handing the envelope back to Kuro. "Alright, here you go."

"Thanks. Anything else you want to discuss"

"Yeah. Before you go, there's just one more thing I want to ask. What are your thoughts about what the GodEater said about the wishes? That if I won the tournament and played a game, she would grant everyone's wishes."

Kuro grit his teeth. "The GodEater is a trickster. Obviously she's lying because she wants you to stay in the tournament, but that doesn't tell us anything we don't already know. Don't tell your opponents about the deal. They'll just assume you're making it up in order to guilt them into forfeiting... unless your goal is to piss them off of course. If that's everything, I should get back to my patrol route. I gotta be extra careful now that I know the GodEater is watching me."

"Alright, take care."

"You too. Stay on your toes, Toffee." Kuro marched off to the center of town.

Toffee watched him walk away until he was out of sight. That's when she felt a sudden chill. After yesterday, Toffee knew better than to ignore such a feeling. She quickly turned around to find a cloaked figure standing in front of her.

“Cute informant you got there! Wish I had one of those. It definitely would have made this tournament a lot easier.”

Toffee froze. That voice was familiar, too familiar, more familiar than any other voice, and that's because it was hers. The stranger removed her cloak. It was another Toffee, and she was wearing a white blouse and an orange magatama around her neck.

“Hey hey, track star. Hehe” White blouse joked with a bit more sarcasm.

“Pfft, hey yourself.” Black hoodie grinned, standing her ground.

“Aw come on! I was waiting this whole time just to see your reaction. You're not even a little surprised to see a carbon copy of yourself?”

“Nope, you're looking at a new and improved Toffee who is two steps ahead of everything and refuses to be caught off guard by anything. You're me from another timeline, and you used your magatama to sneak into mine! Either that or just the GodEater in disguise. I can tell because after figuring out how the magatama worked, I spent all of last night in my room, coming up with every single edge case scenario that could occur, and a plan to go along with it!”

White blouse squinted. “Ya know, I believe that you believe that what you just said was very smart and not at all like raving paranoia!”

“Is it paranoia if it turns out I was right?”

“Unless you get lucky enough to use up all your other contingencies, yes, yes it is.”

“Bah nevermind then.” Black hoodie pulled out a deck of cards. “Here, draw a card.”

“What for?”

“So we can pick out names for each other. I figured that this would be a better system than just fighting over which one of us gets to be Toffee Prime.”

“Wow, you really *did* think of everything.” White blouse shrugged with slight concern. “Fine then, call me Queen.”

“Well no, that’s not how this wor-”

“Apapap! Yes it is.” Queen retorted. “I’m not going to draw a card just so I can get stuck with the name 8 of clubs or something equally stupid. I play by my own rules.”

“Fine,” Black hoodie chuckled. “but you missed your chance to draw something like this!” She pulled a card off of the top of the deck, and without hesitation, proudly presented the joker.

“Oh you slippery bastard!” Queen laughed, recognizing Joker’s sleight of hand.

“Heh, takes one to know one! Come on, let’s find somewhere to sit down and talk.”

“Before we do, I have a question.” Queen raised her hand. “Do you know how to play Gin?”

“The card game?” Joker scratched the back of her head. “Well yes and no. I used to play it all the time as a kid, but then I found out that the rules my mom taught me were all wrong. I haven’t played it since.”

“I see.” Queen had a look of curiosity on her face. “Then it seems we have a problem.”

Toffee sat with her jaw dropped, staring at the visual display Pandora created. She saw a recording of herself walking onto the colosseum platform, exposing Nerassa, fighting her, and then being declared the victor. “That’s not me. I don’t know what else to say other than that. I remember everything from yesterday crystal clear. I was hanging out with Overdraw, watching her fight, and then surrendering to Nerassa. That’s it.”

Pandora glared. “Well one of us has to be lying,” She growled. “and I’m the one with the evidence.”

Overdraw tugged at her collar. “Calm down, this is a weird situation for all of us and we’re not going to get to the bottom of it if we-”

“We’re not getting to the bottom of this because she’s clearly messing with us!” Pandora cut her off.

“Everything she’s saying is a total fabrication meant to cause needless confusion. That’s the only logical assumption worth making based on irrefutable facts.”

Toffee lowered her head. She desperately wanted to tell Pandora that it was all wrong, but all she would be able to do is repeat what she already said. If only there was someone who could back up her words. That was when another voice that wasn’t there before chimed in.

“If I may join in, I think I can help clarify the situation at hand.” The voice chuckled from behind Pandora.

The android’s head spun a full 180 degrees, directed straight at the enigmatic figure. It was that strange childish mage, the one that was known only by her attire, Red Hood. Pandora’s human-like sense of pride wouldn’t allow her to admit that she was startled or caught off guard. Instead, she uttered one word “Elaborate.”

“Well, under normal circumstances, I usually try to avoid interfering with others’ stories. People have their own fates, and no one likes spoilers, but I was the only one who saw what happened, or at least, the only one who would be willing to tell you what happened, so I guess it falls upon me. You see, what Pandora displayed is the truth, but what Toffee said is also true.”

Pandora grew more frustrated at the increasingly bizarre situation. “When I say ‘elaborate’, that doesn’t give you free reign to say ridiculous things that only lead to more questions than answers. That’s completely illogical.”

“Good!” Red Hood laughed. “Logic has nothing to do with what has happened, for you see, the cycle of cause and effect has been shattered. Two separate timelines have been merged together! One where Overdraw shared pleasant conversations with Toffee, and another where Toffee never spoke with anyone other than her opponent.”

Pandora looked at Toffee, then back to Red Hood before taking a few moments to think it over.. “...I’d laugh if it wasn’t plausible given the nature of our host.”

“I knew this tournament was weird, but this is just on another level” Toffee sighed. “You’re telling me I have a doppelganger running around?”

“Two actually... wait... three?... No definitely two, and they are most likely plotting Overdraw’s downfall as we speak.” Red Hood nodded.

“Oh... oh no!” Toffee hiccuped. She just realized something.

“What is it?” Overdraw asked cautiously.

“Well right before my fight against Nerassa, I remember everything going pitch black. I saw a vision of the GodEater. She told me about the special power my tag had, that it could allow me to travel to other timelines. I told her I didn’t want to use such a thing, given that I was already far enough from home as it was, but if the other me used it or was maybe forced to use it...”

“Then that version of you would have access to the multiverse, and by extension any weapon she could possibly need, just like that EMP grenade she used on Nerassa!” Pandora exclaimed. “Why didn’t you tell us about this at the beginning?!”

“Hey dude, no need to shout!” Toffee jumped “It happened so quickly that I thought it was a dream or some sort of hallucination. Besides, I’m still grappling with the fact that there are two clones of me running around town as we speak, up to who knows what!”

“There is *plenty* of need to shout.” Pandora sassed. “Figuring out how to crunch the entire multiverse into my calculations of battle strategies will be a nightmare.”

“Hmm...” Overdraw tried to assess the situation. “It is sounding like this is going to be something very challenging to get around.”

“Well wait a second here!” Toffee piped up. “It might not be me specifically who you’ll be up against in that arena, but something doesn’t sit well with the idea of you having to punch my face. What if instead, we tried talking things out with them. That version of me in that video you showed me had the exact same outfit, so I’m sure she has roughly the same personality as me, and if she and I are the same, then I could totally bet that she would be willing to hear us out.” She turned to Red Hood. “Hey Red, you said that there were two of them. That must mean you saw where they were... or sensed them with your weird magic stuff, right? Is there any possible way you could help us set up a meeting with them?”

Red Hood grinned, it was as if she had already predicted this question. "I thought you would never ask. I can, but it will cost something."

"Alright, name it!"

Red Hood leaned in, not towards Toffee, but to Overdraw.

A tall, overworked shopkeeper scratched his mangy hair as he looked down at two identical customers. "Ho there, Toffee... Sorry for asking this, but have there always been two of you or is there something wrong with my eyesight here?" Much like many Crossroads citizens, the man was rather desensitized to magical phenomena, but that didn't make him clueless. He narrowed his eyes, knowing something was off.

"Hey Monty..." Joker trembled with embarrassment. All of that contemplation on what to do in so many scenarios, she forgot to consider how suspicious it would look, walking around with her double. "...well, you see uh-"

"I'm her twin sister, Tawny. Toffee has told me all about this place." Queen piped up. Joker looked at her and noticed that her magatama was already tucked under shirt. Queen had this already planned out before they walked through the door.

Monty leaned in. "Two identical twin sisters who happen to have the exact same missing eye?"

"Oh this?" Queen laughed without skipping a beat. She raised her eye patch to reveal an intact left eye in healthy condition. "After my sister lost her eye in an accident, I like to wear this out of solidarity. Unless there's any other questions, I'd like a table for 2, please."

Monty was still suspicious, but also knew he wouldn't get any answers by continuing the conversation, and so he gave up, just as Queen wanted. He grumbled a few inaudible mutters before showing the two a table. "Just wave to me when you're ready to order." He said before walking back to the front counter.

"You could use a little more work on your improv there, Miss Contingency." Queen chuckled.

"I mean... fair enough," Joker's voice trailed. "But hey! If you had a normal eye this whole time, *why do* you wear an eye patch?"

Queen gave a wide grin. "That's just it. I don't." She lifted her eyepatch again, but this time, something was very different. The eye flickered back and forth between its previous state and a gruesome torn iris, just like Joker's eye. It was illusion magic.

"Alright then, I'll bite. How did you do that?"

Queen leaned back. "Simple, by spending plenty of time traveling. Read a tome found in one timeline, beat a fey creature at gambling in another, and chase it all down by injecting yourself with a vial of dragon's blood swiped from a third. Magic is exceptionally cheap once you have access to the full multiverse. The 'how' is straightforward. The 'why' on the other hand might take a bit more time, but I guess that's the whole reason you wanted to sit down."

Joker chuckled. The situation of listening to an alternate timeline stranger tell their story while lounging around in a diner felt familiar, hopefully with less bombs with time. She cautiously leaned forward. "Alright, go on."

"After losing my round against Nerassa, which went a lot less rough than what I heard happened in your fight, I should mention, I wasn't sure what to do. There was nothing left for me in Crossroads, but I

didn't want to go home empty handed. That's when the GodEater lifted the restraint on the magatama and told me to go nuts. I had heard that the GodEater didn't just host one tournament, but multiple tournaments in parallel across other timelines, with completely different contestants we never met, so I thought that I would start off small and visit one of them. There, I met one of the champions." There was a momentary sparkle in Queen's eye as she spoke those words. "She was incredibly strong, just as you'd expect, of course. It was already amazing to meet someone like her, but then I listened to her story, how the trials and tribulations of the tournament taught her the necessity of standing up and living for herself. I wanted to be just like her, and I figured that using the magatama to its fullest was the best way to get where I wanted to go." Queen's smile started to waver. "That's when I realized I had made the right call. While studying magic, I learned that the magatama doesn't have any real power of its own. It's just a node, connecting you to the GodEater's power. Imagine, She could have cut the power at any moment, and I would have been stranded in another timeline with no way of ever going home. Luckily, I was able to learn both two things, a return spell to bring me home on my own, and the valuable lesson of never relying on things that were given to you on loan. Now, I'm just cruising around as a humble tourist, ticking items off my bucket list and occasionally checking up on my variants like you, or at least that's what I plan on doing until our friend Chifu decides to cut me off."

Joker lifted her magatama and gave it a good look. "Well now, that's a lot to take in..."

"My advice is to ditch that thing sooner rather than later."

Joker's grip tightened "I'm not sure it's that easy though. This is my only advantage I got compared to the other contestants. What am I supposed to do without it?"

"Ya stop worrying about things, that's what you do. Look, I saw the recording of your previous fight. That emp grenade was a genius move, but did things turn out the way you wanted them to?"

"Ohoho, dear God no!"

“Right, and yet, you’re still here! You can have the magatama and full access to anything you could desire from all across the multiverse, but you’re still at the mercy of Murphy’s Law.”

“I...I guess that’s true.” Joker nodded

“Damn right, I am! You just have to play the cards you’re dealt and figure things out as you go along. Even still, you should have an easier time against a sweet hearted do-gooder like Overdraw.”

Joker gave a grim and twisted smile. “Ha! I bet that’s exactly what she wants you to think of her!”

Queen’s eyebrow raised. “She seemed alright when I talked to her? Did something go wrong when you met her?”

“I haven’t spoken with a single one of the other contestants. I’m done with all of this dishonest bullshit where we try to pretend we’re pals and buddies while secretly sizing each other up or even potentially plotting to kill one another. From now on, I’m going to rely only on what I can read, and that’s it.”

“Right, from the file you got from that guard earlier. It sounded like you read some really juicy gossip.”

“Well, let’s just say that in terms of who is more of a heartless bitch, I’m starting to have a hard time picking between Nerassa and Overdraw.”

“Aw come on! That just makes me want to know what you read even more! Listen, I spilled my heart out to you, telling you my whole story. The least you could do is return the favor.”

Queen was doing a terrible job at holding in her curiosity and excitement, but unfortunately for her, the conversation was then smothered in a cloak of red as a peculiar mage stood beside the two copies.

“My my” Red Hood giggled. “I would say that it was hard to find you two, but honestly, it’s a miracle the entire city hasn’t figured out where you are, given how loud the conversation is.”

Joker jumped out of her seat with a menacing glare. “I’m starting to get sick and tired of people butting in on my conversations, so let’s just get to the point. How long have you been standing there, what did you hear, and what do you want?”

Red Hood raised a finger. “Answering those questions in order, a while, nothing that I wasn’t already aware of, and to serve as a messenger. Your opponents would like to have a meeting with you in order to discuss your upcoming fight and any rules you would like to agree upon.”

Queen’s eyes darted back and forth between Joker and Red Hood. All the while, there was a single thought running through her head. *‘Could this work to my advantage?’*

Joker rolled her neck “Alright then, where do they want to meet?”

“Hold on!” Queen interrupted. “Are you sure about this after everything you said?”

“Yeah.” Joker replied. “We’re not going to exchange fake pleasantries. This is just going to be business.”

“And you’re not worried about whether this is a trap?” Queen asked.

“Mmm, no.” Joker shrugged. “If contestants could freely attack each other before the match, there would be anarchy in the streets. They could play some nasty trick anyways, but all we’d need to do to

avoid that is keep our distance. Besides that, I'm sure Overdraw won't try anything stupid. She might be evil, but more than that, she's totally spineless."

At the Phoenix Coast, things were relatively peaceful. The waves made a pleasant woosh noise and gave off a calming scent of salt. Unfortunately, this is juxtaposed by a thick layer of tension in the air. Overdraw, Pandora, and their friend Toffee were walking down the streets towards the docks until they could see two figures standing off in the distance, Joker and Queen. Queen stood with a relaxed pose, crossing her arms while Joker was far more interested in looking back and forth between her targets and the red piece of paper she had in her pocket from earlier. There was a look of disgust on Joker's face. She stuffed the paper back into her pocket and tried to put on a more calm demeanor. Queen took note of this.

The two of them waited until their opposition was close enough to hear them before Joker spoke up. "I'll get the introductions out of the way. To avoid any confusion, we chose nicknames. I'm Joker, this is Queen, and on the way over here, we decided that nickname for... your friend there... would be Jack. Is that good with everyone?"

Toffee, now Jack, shivered. She was looking across at two nearly identical copies of herself, and they both had a somewhat hostile attitude about them. "I guess that's alright."

"Hey you!" Overdraw piped up. "The one in the white shirt, Queen! You're the one from the cafe this morning!"

"Hehe," Queen laughed. "Hey to you too. The pancakes were marvelous. Remind me to ask Sugar Glass for the recipe."

"Y-yeah, well... You suck at Gin!" Overdraw tried to counter.

“Lower your volume.” Pandora interjected “We haven’t even started negotiations. You can’t let her get under your skin this quickly.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down.” Overdraw barked. “She was spying on me this whole time, trying to gather intel.”

“Really, and you weren’t trying to gather intel on us from Jack?” Joker pointed out.

Overdraw stuttered “W-well no we-”

Jack spoke up. “They didn’t ask anything about you. They were too busy figuring out the conundrum of the three of us.” She paused for a moment. “I’m sorry. I told them about the magatama all on my own.”

Queen jokingly gave a theatrical reaction. “Oh gasp! Traitor!”

Joker calmly raised her hand. “No, it’s fine. You did what you thought was right given your situation. I won’t fault you for that. Even still, this is all just par for the course. This is a tournament. We’re both trying to gather information and use it against each other. That’s just how all this works.”

Jack had a look of disappointment as her eye trailed off to the side. It was obvious which one was the girl from the video Pandora showed her, the one that Overdraw would have to fight. “You sound like you’ve been through a lot, Joker...”

Joker looked away for a moment. “Thanks, but that’s not what we’re here to discuss.”

Pandora nodded. “At least someone here is taking the situation seriously.”

“Yes, the fight.” Queen spoke up. “Just so that everything is clear. Both of you are fighting the one of us wearing the black hoodie. Got it?”

“Understood.” Pandora replied.

Joker spoke. “Good. Now as far as rules go, I am not agreeing to anything that would involve me giving up my advantage, and I’m not interested in playing any sort of games for the hell of it either. All I want is a default fight with default rules. Knock out the opponent or take their tag, and the fight takes place in the colosseum, no nonsense where Tenki transfers us to another world. The only rule change I’ll agree to is no killing.”

Overdraw twirled her hair “Geez, for someone with the power of traveling anywhere and doing anything, you don’t have much of an imagination.”

Joker twitched. “Unless you have anything you want to negotiate, I suggest you can it.”

“Woah!” Overdraw was taken aback by Joker’s sudden change in tone. “There’s no reason to fight until we get into the ring, right?”

“Actually,” Jack intervened. “This is what I wanted to discuss. What if there was no reason for any of you to fight at all.” She took a few steps forward towards Joker. “If at all possible, would you be willing to consider dropping out of the tournament?”

Joker was caught off guard by this. “What kind of question is that?!”

Jack took another step “I’m not going to pretend to know what you’re thinking. We might have the same look and same name, but that doesn’t guarantee we’re the same person. That being said, I want to understand. Why are you continuing with this tournament? I dropped out because I couldn’t figure out

what I was fighting for, and I didn't want to get hurt or hurt others for nothing. I'm sure you're different, and that you have your own reason, but whatever they are, maybe we could work them out."

Joker was starting to tremble at what should have been a simple question. "My reasons are not negotiable. I want to protect this city." There was a small shiver as Joker remembered the pile of LifeTech mercenary corpses.

Overdraw's ears were burning hearing Joker saying that. Was Joker also aware of the threat of Nalagrom and Baladeth? Did the GodEater strike a deal with Joker too?

Jack took another step forward. "Why are you concerned with that then? Nerassa is no longer an issue, and the other contestants haven't gotten up to anything too severe. If that's all you're worried about, then why not let Overdraw win and proceed to the final round. She's a superhero, and can easily stop anything bad from happening with the help of the Crossguards."

Joker stood her ground. "That's... that's not something I can trust her to do."

Now, Jack was standing in front of Joker. "Why is that? Is it because she doesn't have the magatama? Were able to get it to work?-"

Questions, questions, questions. Jack just kept pummeling Joker with questions that involved information she didn't want to divulge and wouldn't let up. Joker had enough of it. "Look! Could you just back off?!" What happened next was intended to be a light shove, but to everyone around Joker, it looked like anything but.

"Aaahhh!!!" Jack was knocked to the ground and began writhing in pain. What made the situation more bizarre was that there looked to lines moving across her body, stretching and shrinking like some sort of TV static.

Overdraw moved with blinding speed, picking Jack up, and leaping back. "What did you just do to her!" She yelled at Joker.

Joker shuddered "I don't know, I didn't mean for that to-"

"Liar!" Overdraw countered, clutching her friend.

A bright light shot out of Pandora's eyes as she scanned Jack's body. "Overdraw, this doesn't look good. It looks as if her molecules are violently jittering back and forth. We need to find help immediately!"

Queen spoke. "I know you have no reason to trust us right now, but if that's the case. The only one who could would probably be the GodEater, and as far as that goes, there's something you need to know. Chifu's the GodEater, so if you find one, you'll find the other. Judging by the time, there should be a break between rounds right now, so she should be in Chifu's quarters."

Overdraw and Pandora nodded. Queen was right, they had no reason to trust her, but they had no other options. The two of them sprinted off at inhuman speeds, carrying Jack.

The Fox Den was much more quiet at this hour, up until Overdraw, Pandora, and Jack burst through the front door. Saki was standing at the bar. Completely unphased.

"Saki!" Overdraw called out. "We need your help to-"

Saki interrupted Overdraw. "I already know. Catch this!" She tossed a key over Pandora who had their hands free. "Just go upstairs and that key will unlock Chifu's room."

“How?!” Overdraw befuddled.

“I don’t know, and I don’t want to know! Chifu just told me that you were going to arrive at this exact time and I should give you the key. Now hurry up!”

Overdraw, Pandora, and Jack ran upstairs, all with a sick feeling in their stomach. Overdraw felt suspicious about how Chifu was able to predict their arrival. Was Queen telling the truth? Is Chifu really the GodEater? Pandora was less concerned about Chifu and more of Joker and Queen. Was it the right decision to leave them alone, allowing them to plot and scheme who knows what? Who could tell? If she had it her way, she would have stayed behind while Overdraw ran off with Jack, but unfortunately, her ever so infuriating programming would never allow her to abandon someone in need. Last was Jack, who felt the worst of all three of them, not because of any doubts in her head, just the fact that she was currently dying, twitching back and forth while trying to hold in the pain, letting slip an occasional grunt of discomfort. Pandora used the key to unlock the door, but what the three of them saw was anything other than a normal bedroom. Looking through the door frame, what they saw was a completely mesmerizing dark blue void, covered in stars with a piercing bright light shining down from above. The only solid ground in front of them was an extremely long staircase made of glass leading to a platform off in the distance. Overdraw and Pandora rushed forward, climbing the stairs while trying their best to avoid looking down.

As expected, when they reached the top, they found a radiant being, wrapped in the finest silk, casually resting on a bed made for royalty. It was the GodEater. “Hello there my children.”

“GodEater please- ” “GodEater please- ”

Overdraw and the GodEater spoke in perfect unison.

“I beg you we don’t have time for-” “I beg you we don’t have time for-”

“Stop! Stop i-... Damn it, why are you doing this!” “Stop! Stop i-... Damn it, why are you doing this!”

“Hahaha, you’ll have to forgive me my child” the GodEater swayed. “I would take your situation more seriously, but I am quite literally unable to do so.”

Overdraw laid Jack on the bed. “Help her now, explain later!”

The GodEater sat up, looking down upon the mortal next to her. “Ah Toffee” Chifu brushed Jack’s hair. “It’s quite odd how unnaturally lucky you tend to be. Even now, fate has spared you. Unfortunately, that’s what makes you a failure.” She placed her hand on Jack’s forehead. The two of them began to glow as the GodEater imbued Jack’s body with a mysterious energy. It seemed that Jack’s affliction was fighting back as the shaking became more violent as well as the pain. It got even worse as the GodEater’s hand began to shake just like Jack’s body. Overdraw could have sworn that she saw the GodEater’s eyebrow nervously twitch, but her face returned to its calm demeanor swiftly and the light subsided. Jack was finally healed.

The room was dead silent for a few minutes as Jack laid motionless with her eyes closed until Overdraw broke the silence.

“Is she alright now?”

“Yes, just resting. All that stress took its toll on her body, but nothing that should be permanent.”

“If that’s that, then out with it! What’s with all the cryptic nonsense you were just spouting!” “If that’s that, then out with it! What’s with all the cryptic nonsense you were just spouting!”

"Hmhmhm, tell me, when Red Hood told you that two separate timelines were merged together, did you figure out who was behind it?"

"Obviously it had to be you. No one else could have been capable of it. The question is why and what does that have to do with the current situation."

"Well you see, I have been experimenting with Toffee, or rather several thousand or so variants of a single green haired cyclops bunny. I handed out a magatama to each and every one of them, shooting them into every random corner of the multiverse, but none gave me the desired effect. That's when I had the idea of accelerating the process by forcing two Toffee variants into contact with each other."

"... that's how we ended up with two timelines, one where I met Toffee and another where she fought Nerassa on her own, merged together."

"Correct. After that happened, I received a vision of every single event that would occur today, including my own actions. In theory, as a god, I am not forced to follow what I saw, but I need these events to come to fruition in order to see whether my experiment was successful."

"So you foresaw Joker and Tof-... Jack making contact with each other, along with what would happen to Jack, and then, you only saved Jack because you foresaw yourself saving her?"

"Also correct. Now your next question is going to be 'would I have saved Jack if I didn't receive my visions' and my response to that would be to ask you to check the time. If you look at your watch, you'll be able to see that you're going to be late for your round. Would you like to show up on time, or would you rather be disqualified for failing to show up while I go over the list of every single Toffee variant I've sacrificed?"

Overdraw remained silent. She had so many questions left, but it was hopeless to argue with not only a god, but one that had full knowledge of every single move you could make. Pandora probably figured this out from the very start which was probably why she didn't say anything this entire conversation. One important thing was revealed however. The GodEater was not a being that cared for innocent life.

"That's what I thought. I'll have Jack brought down to the bar where Saki will look after her. If you leave now, you will make it in time."

Overdraw gave a defeated nod before turning around.

"One last thing. I know you were going to ask about Queen and what she has to do with any of this. Don't worry about her. She's not your problem yet."

Round 2 was about to begin. The roar of the crowd was near deafening. On one end of the platform stood a powerful warrior with powerful magic coursing through her veins accompanied by an indescribable marvel of technological advancement hiding its true power and potential behind the deceptive shape of a woman. On the other end was a girl in a black hoodie going by the nickname of 'Joker'. Miss X stood in the middle, her practiced idol smile masking a sense of unease she felt in her otherwise hollow core.

"Alright!" Miss X cheered as she had done several times over already. "The match between Toffee and Overdraw is about to begin. Tell me competitors, do either of you have any desired destinations you would like Tenki to send you to for this fight?"

“That won’t be necessary.” Joker spoke. “We already agreed to a simple and clean match on the flat surface of this colosseum and nothing more. Besides, I think that Tenki might be a bit preoccupied right now.”

“Y-yeah.” Miss X gave a forced giggle. “That’s my brother, drinking when he should be on the job.” Her improvised joke mustered up a few laughs from the audience.

“Hey Joker!” Overdraw called out. “Before we begin, I wanted to tell you that we met the GodEater. Jack is alright, and it turns out that what happened to her wasn’t your fault!”

“Oh?” Joker looked surprised. “Oh well that’s very good to hear. Now that you figured out that it was an accident, you can go into this fight knowing everything I’m about to do will be very very intentional.”

“There’s that hostile attitude from earlier!” Overdraw pointed out. “What’s wrong with you?!”

“It’s like I said earlier,” Joker puffed up her chest “this is a tournament. I’m not here to be your friend nor was that ever the case.”

Pandora stepped in. “I couldn’t agree more! Prepare to lose. I’ve already calculated every possible scenario involving your magatama, and created counter measures for each.”

“Hehe, you know a beautiful face once warned me about planning for every edge case, but don’t worry yourself. I won’t need the infinite power of the magatama. You’re going to lose the old fashioned way, and you’ll have no excuse when that happens.”

Miss X, noticing the rising tension, intervened. “It sounds like the three of you are more than ready for this fight. If no party has anything left that they need to address, then it’s time for us to get this fight underway. On the count of three, and not a moment sooner, be prepared to battle”

“1... 2... 3... Begin!”

Overdraw and Pandora immediately took formation as they practiced. The Amazonian hero sprouted her majestic spectral wings, taking to the sky, and firing down a barrage of magical arrows. Joker sprinted, dodging the attacks as best she could. At first, she was doing a relatively decent job of ducking, juking, and leaping out of the way of the ongoing multi colors arrow rainbow rainbow. That's when the massive metallic gray wall of nanobots appeared where Pandora once was. It grew in size, slowly eclipsing the sun. The situation only grew worse and worse as the wall began sprouting new segments, metallic tentacles, and all matter of abstract shapes, cutting off each of Joker's intended routes. Between Overdraw's relentless arrows and Pandora's ever expanding labyrinth made out of her body, Joker was starting to run out of options, and yet her confidence refused to waver.

A wall emerged right in front of Joker. Half of Pandora's humanoid form sprouted from the wall. “This is checkmate Joker! Stand down and take the easy way out before you get yourself hurt.”

Joker ignored Pandora's threat and charged straight towards her. “Hey little Miss Pinocchio, your red sheet said that you wanna be alive! How about I help you figure out your existentialism!” At that moment, a small blue light materialized in Joker's hand.

Once again, the air was filled with soothing waves and a salty scent.

Gasp

Toffee burst up. Everything was a hazy blur as her senses slowly caught up with her body. She realized that she was laying on the sand, hidden right underneath the docks she was just standing on only moments ago. Trying to figure out how she ended up here, she sifted through her memory for the last

thing she saw. The vision in her head was of Overdraw and Pandora running off with Jack. She was just about to try explaining what had happened to Queen. That's when a ball of blue light appeared in Queen's hand which was immediately smacked into her forehead. Then everything went dark. Queen must have used her magic to knock Joker out. Joker clenched her fist, realizing the betrayal. That's when she felt a peculiar draft. She looked down and realized that she was completely naked, save for her magatama. Startled, her eyes darted back and forth until she found that there was a neatly folded pile of clothes, including a clean and elegant white blouse. It was then that she had a disturbing realization. Queen was missing, and her clothes were missing, but much more important than that Queen was missing *with* her clothes. Joker slapped herself awake, jumped to her feet, and got herself fully dressed as fast as she could before sprinting towards the colosseum. Running as fast as her legs could carry her, there was one word running through her head, over and over.

"Stupid! Stupid, stupid, stupid! How could you let this happen? All that overconfidence just to end up like this." Her mind stabbed daggers into itself all the way until she finally reached the front gate of the colosseum.

"Halt, who- " One of the two guards flanking the sides of the entrance called out to the mad dashing stranger approaching him. "Hey wait! Aren't you the contestant that's supposed to be inside right now? What the heck is going on!"

Joker coughed. This was really bad. How was she supposed to explain that she was the real contestant, let alone while wearing Queen's clothes. She could almost feel the two guards grip on their spears tighten as their suspicion grew.

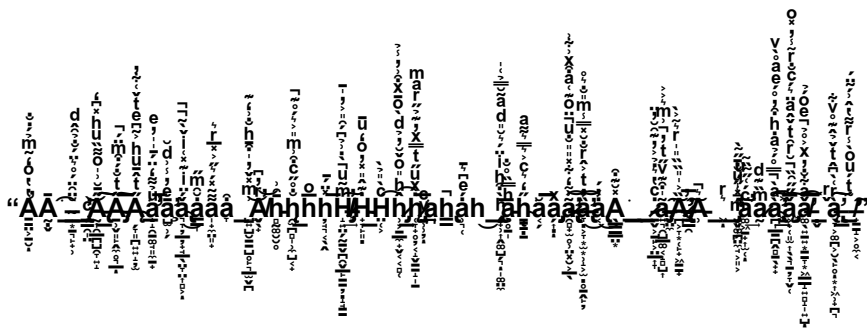
"Stand down!" a mighty and divine voice boomed. A massive wave of relief came over Joker as she realized exactly who that was. A massive magical circle appeared between Joker and the guards. The circle turned into a window into a void of darkness, and out of that darkness, Tenki stepped forward.

“Tenki!” Joker immediately took the opportunity. “Tenki, please, you gotta listen to me. The person in the arena right now isn’t who they say they are. I’m the real Toffee! Come on, remember the jokes we shared? 8 out of 10? scaly tits?... T-tenki!” Her erratic rambling began to trail as she noticed that Tenki didn’t look all too happy.

Tenki was never a people pleaser, but he still hated to be hated. His eyes sagged in a look of regret. “I’m sorry Toffee. This was my mom’s order.”

Joker’s eye narrowed in terror. She wasn’t going to ask what he meant by that. The situation was obvious. There was a literal demi god standing in front of her, and he was not on her side. Immediately, she turned and ran. Unfortunately, no speed would have been fast enough to prevent Tenki from catching her. The ground beneath her feet instantly gave way as she fell through a portal into a pitch black room. She landed unceremoniously right on her face, on to a cold hard stone floor. Pumping with adrenaline, Joker shrugged off the pain and got back on her feet. “Tenki! Wait!” She cried out, but it was too late as the portal above her closed, taking the light with it.

She was all alone in a nearly pitched black room. That’s when she heard a disturbing and distorted scream of pain.



Joker knew exactly who made that sound, and by extension where she was, or to put it more accurately, where she was under.

Queen, wearing a black hoodie and a mischievous grin, had pressed her hand against Pandora's forehead. The nanobot swarm shrieked, letting out a horrifying noise no organic being could replicate. The walls shrunk, recoiling back into Pandora's decaying form, barely keeping its shape. It was a horrifying sight as this approximation of a human swayed and convulsed back and forth, unnatural, yet clearly in pain, like a spike running through what she would call a head. She screamed and screamed, and screamed yet more until finally, the tortured audio cut out, and all that remained was a half melted statue of gray metal.

Overdraw swooped down to her comrade's frozen body. "Pandora! No no no! Oh God no! Not again!" It was then that she remembered what she heard before the round began. This was intentional. Her eyes met Toffee with hate and malice that wasn't present during their encounter at the dock. "What did you do!"

"A really simple sleep spell."

"You call this sleeping?!"

"Well that's just it. Magic and machines don't mix at all. Don't worry too much. Based on what I've heard in regards to AI across the multiverse, if she was a truly conscious being with an actual soul, she should regain consciousness just like any other living person would."

"And if she doesn't?!"

"Well going off of our established rules, you can't kill something that was never alive."

Evil. Only a genuinely evil person could say something in such a callous tone. Not evil like the villains Overdraw was used to fighting, but a devil wearing the face of a friend. Of course, there was no point in holding back against something like that, right? The flashy hero dropped her facade and shifted

into a wild predator. No words, just attack. Queen jumped, juked and strafed out of the way. At first, it appeared as though Queen was speeding up, no longer hindered by Pandora's walls, but sadly, Overdraw was just getting sloppy as more of her arrows began to shoot off course with wasted wrath.

Queen was panting heavily. She took inventory of her remaining stamina and the mental state of her opponent. She still had an ace to play, but the situation wasn't lined up perfectly yet. The trickster had to wait just a little bit longer. Unfortunately, Overdraw wasn't interested in playing Queen's game of attrition. This time, Overdraw's arrows turned green as she fired a massive barrage. Queen leaped again, thinking she was safe, but as they whirled past her, she could hear them homing in as they redirected towards her back. Her eye widened. She quickly turned around and waved her hands, trying to cast a shield spell. At the very last moment a shimmering magical pain of glass appeared, blocking the assault, but Overdraw wasn't done.

"Hey!" Overdraw roared.

Queen turned back towards Overdraw only to take a massive punch to the stomach. The force of the attack felt like the might of ten men and it sent her flying like a ball punted into the air. The fall back down to the ground wasn't any more pleasant as she crashed onto the colosseum pavement several feet away. It took a few moments for Queen to stumble back to her feet. Not even she could hide the pain she was in. Queen was already starting to get tired before the punch, now she could barely stay upright. However, despite everything, she was still smiling. This entire fight, she did not land a single blow upon her opponent, and yet, Overdraw was in a similar state, panting and huffing in an attempt to recover the energy she recklessly burned through. It was almost time.

"Why!" Overdraw cried out in sorrow. "Why did you hurt Pandora?" She chose her words carefully, refusing to believe the worst. "What did she ever do to you?!"

“Oh her?” Queen took a pause between words in a slightly slower version of her usual bravado.

“Absolutely nothing. My only problem was that she was standing in my way of getting to you!”

“This again? What is it?! What do you have against me?!”

“Evidence!” Queen gave a gleeful smile as she pulled out a red piece of paper out of Joker’s right pocket.

“You see, the ever so diligent Crossguards have been writing up files on all of us contestants. These files contain plenty of juicy information on all of your strengths and weaknesses”

“Why would they need something like that?” There was a small break in Overdraw’s rage as she asked the question with genuine innocence.

“Because you’re a threat, of course! Do you know how dangerous it is to let in strangers with the power to destroy an entire city into your homes? You’d be an idiot not to spy on them and figure out how to contain them if necessary! That being said, there’s one thing more dangerous than the contestants. Do you know what that is?”

“What?”

“Their wish.” Queen playfully flicked the paper. “That’s where the red sheet comes into play. This document contains any and all information that could possibly be used to deduce what you might wish for. Gotta dead sibling you wanna resurrect? It’s on the paper. Did your evil uncle take over the father’s kingdom? That’s here too. Have you made any unforgivable mistakes recently?”

“N-no... wait...”

“Oh? So you know what I’m talking about, the good ol’ Wisconsin blizzard of 2007.”

“Please stop.” Overdraw began shaking.

“It says here that it was recorded as the worst blizzard in history. Winds that cut like glass, snow stacked so high it could bury people alive, and like the good, kind, and caring hero that you are, you were tasked with helping innocent people find shelter”

“...stop...” Overdraw’s voice was getting weaker.

“Oh wait, I misread that. No, you were sent into the ghettos to force people out of their homes!”

“I-i...I had no choice, they were going to take away my powers if I didn’t follow orders.”

“Ah yes, your powers. Can’t afford to lose those, or else, you’d be forced to go back to the nobody you truly are behind that bootleg Wonder Woman costume. Can’t have that. Better to let innocent people suffer instead.”

“What was I supposed to do!” Overdraw screeched.

“I dunno,” Queen laughed. “maybe don’t commit a human rights violation while prancing about as a so-called ‘hero’. Here’s a little tidbit for ya. When people freeze to death, they don’t die all at once.” Her lips were covered in poison as she spoke the next words. “It’s the children who go first.”

“**GRAAAHHH!!**” Overdraw cried. Queen’s intended mental image of mothers clutching the stiff corpses of their young had pierced her heart in a way no arrow ever could. “**Shut up!!**”

Without any hesitation, Overdraw fired a magical arrow, covered in pitch black malice. It flew at the speed of a bullet and struck the dead center of Queen’s gut before bursting into a ebony sphere of all consuming darkness. It lasted barely more than a second before subsiding, leaving behind a perfectly

see-through circle in what used to be Queen's torso. No more theatrics. Queen immediately collapsed, her body completely motionless. Overdraw fell to her knees. She was a murderer. She didn't want to be one, nor did she intend to be one, but how could she deny the scene in front of her? All she was thinking at the time was to make this monster that was tormenting her go away, and the most sickening part was that for a brief moment, Overdraw actually felt relieved. What if Queen was right, what if Overdraw wasn't just a nobody? What if she was far worse? Her muscles shriveled up. Her hair turned from a shining golden blond to a dull brown. Overdraw was no more as Rebecca took her place. The magical arrowhead, the source of Overdraw's power emerged from Rebecca's skin, almost as if the sharpened rock and the girl came to a mutual agreement that she could no longer be trusted to wield it, and landed on the ground with a weak thud.

Now!

Rebecca heard a loud crunch. She turned to her side to see a shoe stamping on the now broken fragments of the arrowhead. Trembling uncontrollably, she looked up to the horror of a very much alive Queen. Her eyes shot back to the corpse which was now dissolving into dust. It was all an illusion!

Queen took a step back and leaned down to Rebecca's level. "If it's any consolation, I didn't mean anything I said. I was just saying what Joker would have said if she was here."

It's then that everything began to click for Rebecca. This wasn't her intended opponent. This was an imposter. The GodEater said that she foresaw all of the events of today, which means she knew about this and lied directly to Rebecca's face. Then there's the GodEater's children and tournament hosts. All of them were given the power to see who was a genuine contestant and who wasn't, which means...

"You knew too, didn't you?" Rebecca's tear filled eyes were pointed at Miss X who was uncomfortably watching the fight.

Miss X stood in painful silence. She was much like her brother, also hating to be hated, and she couldn't find any words that would make the situation better. The lack of a response was all Rebecca needed to hear as she scooped the sharp and jagged fragments of the arrowhead, ignoring the pain as they dug into her skin, and gave one more sorrowful look towards the disfigured statue of Pandora before running away, hoping no one would follow her. Miss X sheepishly walked to Queen.

"Alright!" Miss X unconvincingly cheered. "The victor is Toffee. That was quite a unique fight. Care to tell us your thoughts on how that turned out?"

"My thoughts are that A, you people need to do a better job at picking out a higher caliber of people for your tournament, and B, you should drop the act so that I can move on to my next fight" Queen looked up at the sky. "Tenki, I know you can hear me! Bring out my real opponent!" Another one of Tenki's magic circles instantly appeared, just as Queen asked.

"Woah!" yelled a very startled Joker dropping out of the portal, barely managing to land on her feet. The crowd was a symphony of murmurs as they tried to piece together what was going on.

"Citizens of Crossroads," Queen announced. "My name is Toffee Brown, but I am not the woman you saw yesterday. I am from a separate timeline where I lost my match against Nerassa. However, I was not satisfied with my loss, so I struck a deal with the GodEater. Defeat Overdraw, and if I win, I could take on this timeline's variant of myself for her spot in the tournament. For any of you folks in the audience who might whine about how unfair or against the rules this might be, all I have to say is that I'm sorry. Sorry that you needed me to explain the basic fact that you live under the rule of a mad god, and her word is law."

"Queen!" Joker spoke up. "The hell is wrong with you?! You're taking all this way too far. Is all this really worth it to find out why the GodEater brought us here and gave us the magatama?"

“Hehe, as if that’s what this was about!” Queen rolled her eyes. “I don’t need to win the tournament to figure that out. We’re here because she was bored. There is no great mystery to it, never was, and you want to know how I know that? It’s because she’s a god. Throughout the multiverse, there’s two types of gods, Misses Capital G herself and then all of the other petty immortals with way too much time and power on their hands, and guess which category the ‘*GodEater*’ falls under. You can walk up to her, right now, and ask her what your purpose here is and she’ll shower you with flowery poetic trite about ‘testing the souls of mortals’ or some other crap like that.” Queen cocked her head to the side. “But hey, deep down, you already knew all this. You were just trying to throw out a new excuse for why you’re still here after Jack poked one too many holes in your previous line of ‘protecting Crossroads’ or in other words, doing the job the Crossguards already had covered.”

Joker’s mouth was open, but the only thing that left it was dry air. Queen had her dead to rights.

“That’s the difference between you and me.” Queen continued. “I don’t make excuses, not since I decided to carve out my own path. The only people mad enough to enter a tournament like this are the greedy and the desperate, and you better believe that I am not ashamed to admit that I’m the greediest bitch here, so why don’t you make your choice. Step away from everything, taking the precious moral high ground with you, or step up and prove that you’re just as greedy as me. Either way, I plan on leaving this tournament with the IOU of a god in my hands.”

Joker started to sweat bullets. What choice should she make? Was there even a point in fighting someone who could read you better than anyone else in the multiverse? If not, then why wouldn’t her legs move? Why couldn’t she just walk away? Once again, everything went dark.

"I honestly can't decide whether I should be beaming with pride or burning with fury towards Queen." The GodEater made no effort to introduce herself as she walked up from behind Joker. "I've always had a bit of a love-hate relation with those who are either brave or stupid enough to disobey me."

"Oh hi, Toffee! You look stressed. Is it because you've been nearly shot, nearly stabbed, nearly blown up, and now, actually betrayed by your own clone? How about a warm glass of cocoa to take the edge off things, along with an apology for randomly plucking you out of reality and dropping you in a plane of never ending darkness!" Joker's intentionally poor GodEater impression was oozing with sarcasm.

The GodEater leaned back, unable to contain her chuckle at the frantic mortal's tantrum. "Hmhm, did that outburst help to vent some of your frustration, or should I call for Saki to make you that cocoa?"

Joker straightened her face, realizing that any further outbursts of emotions would only result in my laughter at her expense. "Alright, elaborate on what you meant by 'disobey', and then, tell me why you pulled me in here this time."

"Well she ruined the experiment of course! I brought you here because I have spent tournament after tournament and timeline after timeline growing weary of mages and cyborgs fighting for my amusement. For once, I wanted to see if it was possible for an ordinary mortal to rise above them all, with a little guidance of course. Now that Queen has taught herself magic, she's no different than all the mages that came before her, and so, I have no more interest in her, or at the very least, I have no more interest in watching her win. For you on the other hand, she could prove to be your greatest challenge yet, which is why I agreed to her deal. Leading into your next question, I want you to see this through to the end, but much like yesterday, I could tell that you were unsure of yourself, and so, I figured that it would only make sense to solve the problem the exact same way by giving the one thing you are missing to make your decision, time."

Dingalingaling!

The restaurant door swung upon as Toffee burst through the door. "Monty! I need your help!" She called out.

A tall, overworked shopkeeper scratched his mangy hair as he glared down at the lone stranger. "Help is for paying customers. If you need it so badly, how about you start by telling me who you are and how you know my name."

Joker stuttered. How could she forget? This was a version of Monty from a timeline where they never met. Of course he didn't know who she was. "M-my apologies. I'm Toffee, and I was told by a friend that you were someone who knew a lot of ins and outs around the city. I need to find the champion, and I don't have a lot of time to do so."

"Ins and outs? Yes. The exact location of every contestant running around the city? No, and I don't plan on leaving my hole in the wall just to help a stranger look, so unless you plan on sitting down and ordering something, you're on your own." It seemed that even if timelines had changed, one thing stayed the same, Monty's low tolerance for suspicious behavior.

"Alright... Thank you for your time." Joker turned away and stumbled out of the restaurant in an almost drunken fashion. She walked down the streets at a rather brisk pace, and all the while, a chill began to creep down her back again. It wasn't the supernatural type that she was now on the lookout for. This time, it came from a sense of unease from the new yet familiar streets she walked. It was startling when Joker was first transported to the lands of Crossroads. Then, there was the confusing mess that came from being unceremoniously flung into Nerassa's world, but this was different. This was the first time she had ever travelled to an identical copy of a world she was already familiar with, and it filled her with sadness. She thought back to when she first arrived in Crossroads, saying hello to the various locals

and meeting as many vendors as she could. Now, in a timeline where she had never existed, she was currently surrounded by echoes, ghosts, and reflections of people who never knew of her, just like Monty. It was a dizzying and soul crushing experience.

“Toffee?”

Hearing her name, the very acknowledgement of her own existence, felt like a warm hand reaching out to pull her to safety from drowning. She turned around, almost ready to hug the source of that voice. There, right in front of her, stood a Goliath woman, towering over even the likes of Overdraw.

“Y-you’re the champion.” Joker spoke in awe. “I mean, you have to be, right? This isn’t some sort of Yoda situation, is it?”

“Is this part of some joke?” The figure inquired.

“No no no! Listen!” Joker frantically jabbered. “I’m not the woman you spoke to earlier. I mean... I guess that’s an easy mistake to assume given that I’m wearing her outfit, but I... I uh...I’m so sorry, I need a moment to collect my thoughts. This is a bit of an embarrassing question to ask, but what’s your name?”

The champion felt a twinge of discomfort over the situation, yet whether it was out of warm empathy or unfortunate pity, she was compelled to humor the sad and confused girl. “I am Rakurai Fyuujiin, Wind of the East.”

“Damn it now I get why the other me fell head over heels for you. Even your name is badass! Look, Miss Fyuujiin, after getting kicked out of her tournament, the woman you spoke to wanted to get back in, so she cut a deal with the GodEater to fight me and take over my spot in my tournament, going on in my separate timeline.”

Rakurai squinted. It was equally possible that what this 'Toffee' was saying was either completely plausible given the otherworldly nature of Crossroads or just completely delusional gibberish. "... and how would I be able to help this situation?"

"That's kinda the thing. I don't know." Joker's voice slowed and lowered itself, revealing a few notes of defeat. "The GodEater said that in order to level the playing field, she would let me travel to any timeline in the multiverse I wanted, but I would only be allowed to stay for a few minutes, and I wouldn't be allowed to take any objects back with me, which means the only thing I could take back is knowledge. The other me was inspired by you, so I figured, maybe I could ask you for some advice too. What should I do? Is there any hope of defeating another me? Is there any reason to fight in the first place?"

Rakurai scratched her head. She was never used to this sort of flattery. Still, the amusement of the conundrum Toffee presented her with helped her to ease up, if only slightly. "It's never one's place to tell another what their reason to fight ought to be. That is something you would have to figure out on your own, but as for your other question about fighting a copy of yourself, I see no reason to give in to despair. If you are her, and she is you, then you already know what you need to win. It's simply a matter of turning your own weaknesses into strength."

Joker looked away "... I don't know if I can do that."

"Are you saying that you have no weaknesses to speak of? If that's true, I would be more than willing to spar with you to see if that's true."

"No no! It's not that. It's just that I could go through all of this deep self reflection, but that's not going to matter. She's not just me. She's me with more experience than me. I know that you just have to play the cards you're dealt and figure things out as you go along, but what do you do when you're playing against someone with more cards in their hand than yours?"

“Then use what you know about yourself in order to deduce what you don’t know about her and turn that into strength as well.” Rakurai said sternly. “It’s becoming more obvious that this fight of yours is more internal than external. Your enemy isn’t this other you, it’s the you that’s standing right in front of me, telling yourself that it’s all pointless. Listen, as generic as it may sound, you have to believe in yourself. She’s the one who is chasing after your position in the tournament after she lost her own. If she’s capable of losing, that means you’re capable of winning, the only thing that’s stopping you is figuring out the right reason to move forward.”

“The right reason?” Between all this talk about self reflection and those two words, the gears in Joker’s head finally began to turn. She realized something, and it was indeed the spark she needed to move forward. All of a sudden, she felt lighter. Unfortunately, it wasn’t because of the metaphorical weight that was lifted off her shoulders. She looked at her hand to see it was translucent. “Well now, I guess that I’m getting pulled back to my timeline. I’m not sure if we’ll ever get the chance to meet again, but I really appreciated this pep talk. ‘Ichigo ichie’ as they say.” Joker closed her eyes and disappeared.

When she reopened them, she was back where she was, without skipping a beat.

“So,” Queen goaded, “ what’s your answer?”

Joker smiled. “That I’m a greedy bitch.”

“Well now, finally tossing away that fake ass hero shtick? See, it wasn’t so bad.”

“I’m not done.” Joker’s eyes tensed up, but her smile remained firm. “Yeah, I’m a greedy bitch. I wanna win this tournament so that I can wish for a billion dollars and buy a giant gold statue of myself flipping off every other contestant in Crossroads. Ya know what else? I’m also a coward, a wimpy little coward who wants to run back to her apartment, curl up in a blanky, and forget everything I saw here.

Even still, between those two polar extremes, I have so many reasons, not just one, for why I want to stay and fight or leave here and now. Some of them might be selfless, others might be selfish, but they're all part of me, and I bet behind that overly confident act you're putting on, they're a part of you too. You're more than just a greedy bitch, but right now, you're drunk on power, hurtling down a dark path, and if this continues, that's all you'll be. That is why, among so many other reasons, I'm going to stop you!"

Queen was frozen like a sculpture. This wasn't just a matter of the shoe being on the other foot compared to the start of the conversation when she was the one picking apart Joker. Being so thoroughly criticised, and accurately no less, by your past self is a uniquely brutal experience, the kind that forces you to question every single choice you have ever made. There is no witty, nonchalant, or graceful way to come back from something so existential. "Fuck you." The words left Queen's throat with a dry heave. "Let's just get this over with."

Miss X chimed in. "That was quite the speech from the contestant to her challenger!"

"Oy! See-through bitch!" Joker cut Miss X. "I know Tenki wasn't the only one who was in on this whole scheme. After being thrown in a pit, I'm not so sure I'm in the mood for pageantry, so how about you just give us the count down."

Miss X gave an unlady-like frown before recovering her professional persona "If you wish to start the match here and now with absolutely no delay, then it will be assumed that you two will be competing using our standard rules. Are there any objections?"

Joker took her position on one side of the ring. "None here."

Queen hunched down into a fighting stance on the opposite end, completely silent.

Miss X took their respective responses giving a quick nod to both. "Then let the best Toffee win!"

“1... 2... 3... Begin!”

The first move was made by Queen as she sprinted towards Joker. She ran as fast she could, carried by a second wind, but still slower than during her fight against Rebecca. As soon as she made it half of the distance, she jumped to the right... or rather, the left. It was hard to tell which, as there were now two of them. Another case of Queen’s illusion magic.

Joker only had a few seconds to discern which one was the real Queen and what she should do in response. Her first thought was that the copy approaching her left was the real Queen. If that was the case, Queen could take advantage of Joker’s blindspot from her disabled left eye. There was only one problem with that assumption. That was exactly what Toffee would think. Joker lunged with as much force as possible towards the copy to her right. Her decision was proven right as Queen crossed her arms to block while the illusion faded into dust.

The two collide, wrestling each other, trying to grab the other’s limbs and neckless, but it was of little use. They were of equal strength, and neither could gain an advantage over the other. It was time for them to play their final cards. A ball of blue light formed in Queen’s hand. With this spell, she planned to end this fight.

At the same time Queen was preparing her spell, Joker dug into the pouch of her stolen hoodie, pulling out the magic suppression tag she had saved. She was just a fraction of a second faster, slapping it on to Queens chest. The blue light in Queen’s hand was shunted back into her body with a painful zap.

“Gyah!” Queen grunted from the pain, clutching her hand.

Joker took advantage of the distraction, grabbing Queen's necklace and delivering a powerful kick to Queen's stomach, in the exact same spot as Rebecca's punch, knocking Queen away and stripping her of her necklace in a single blow.

Miss X began the countdown. "10!... 9!... 8!... 7-"

"Stop the count!..." Queen yelled with what little lung capacity she had left. "I give..."

Miss X raised her fist in the air. "Ladies and gentlemen. Toffee has defeated Toffee, making our winner Toffee Brown!"

Joker approached Queen who was taking much more than a 10 second count down to get to her feet.

"You really were a greedy bitch, one with enough greed to convince yourself you could win two fights back to back."

"How?..." Queen wheezed. "How did you know where the magic suppression tag was?"

"Simple!" Joker cheered. "As someone versed in magic, it was highly likely you would recognize the tag for what it was, and assuming that, you would clearly keep it as a failsafe if your stunt with the red sheet wasn't enough to beat Overdraw, but in addition to being your most valuable backup, it was also your greatest liability, which is why you moved it to the pouch, where you thought I wouldn't find it."

"B-but that's all just blind speculation!" Queen said in a baffled tone. "What if I threw it away? What if I put it back in the same pocket or somewhere else?"

"What can I say?" Joker gave the most smug smile possible. "I rushed in without thinking too much, hoping you would do exactly what I thought you would do. In other, I guess you could say that I put a little faith in myself."

“Gaaaaah!” Queen sulked. “To think I lost to someone so dorky, and that dork was me.” She straightened up her back, finally upright. “You better win this tournament and use that wish to buy five gold statues for the both of us.”

Joker put her hand on Queen’s shoulder. “Damn straight I will!”

Queen’s eyes wilted. “I’m sorry for everything. Do you have it in you to forgive me?”

“Weeeelll, it is something pretty hard to let go of, but I guess it is what they say. No harm, no foul.” Joker gestured to her left. Queen turned and realized something. The Pandora statue was gone.

Miss X approached the two women. “Alright, so to the one of you in the black hoodie, we can offer you a place to stay at the Kit Inn while that magic suppression tag wears off and then send you back home. As for you, the one in the white blouse...” Her voice dropped in tone. “Come to the Fox Den. Mom said she wants a word with you.”

“You were supposed to lose.” The GodEater said with uncontrollable excitement on her face. She sat criss-crossed on her bed, eye to eye with Joker

“Yes, I guess that’s all part of the experiment, right?” Joker scratched her head. “A regular mortal like me shouldn’t have been able to win against Queen.” Joker realized that since the GodEater knew of Queen’s nickname, it implied that the GodEater had been watching her every move from the very beginning, a fact that Joker had no choice but to ignore, given her situation.

“Toffee, my dear sweet treat,” The GodEater cooed in a patronizing tone. “or should I say, Joker, part of me was genuinely hoping you would figure out that I was lying when I said all of that. That’s not what the experiment is at all.”

“... Then what is it?” Joker gulped.

“Breaking fate, of course! I received a vision, and in that vision I saw that you, standing here, out of every single infinite variation of every being in the multiverse, would reach into the wrong pocket and lose, and yet you didn’t. You broke away from the prophecy bestowed on to me, a god, by the forces of reality itself. With the seemingly most mundane action imaginable of moving your hand, you did something that should not be possible.” The GodEater’s tone was beginning to become more erratic and unsettling.

Joker looked down at her hand. Nothing about it had changed. It was still a completely ordinary mortal hand.

“Don’t let all this go to your head. The truth is that it was all as I had desired it to be. Tell me, how many times have you teleported between timelines?”

“Well...” Joker was so nervous she was struggling to maintain eye contact. “Once when I first arrived, twice when you first brought me to the world between worlds, 3 times when you shoved me into Nerassa’s world, 4 when I returned, and then an additional 3 times today for a total of 7.”

“Yes, 7,855,932.”

“What?”

“Every time that you thought you were being teleported directly from one universe to another, I had shot you across millions of worlds in a fraction of a second so tiny, you never noticed. You have traveled to a total of 7,855,932 worlds. Just as Achilles' mother dipped her son in the River Styx, I have flung you to as many corners of the multiverse in order to destabilize the molecules in your body, a process that was greatly accelerated when you made contact with Jack.”

Joker looked down at her body. She began frantically patting herself down for any sort of abnormality.

“Oh please, don't bother with that. From your perspective, absolutely nothing has changed whatsoever. You will have to take me at my word when I tell you that every square centimeter of your body, down to your very soul, is now a free radical particle, unbound by the laws of fate. From this day forward, angels and devils will have no sway over you. Gods themselves will never be able to touch you without your consent, and even still, their grip on you will be slippery at best.”

“You told me that I would become your equal...” Joker's breath was shallow. “This is what you meant.”

“Exactly! Now you're starting to catch on! I wanted to play a game, but in order for the game to be enjoyable, it needs to be against someone you are capable of losing against. Someone like you. No, exactly you. You have a balanced soul, Joker. Beings with weak souls can't survive the destabilization process I put you through. That's why Jack almost died. You need a strong soul, but the problem with that is that strong souls come with strong conviction. Souls like Queen refuse to do what you want them to do. That magic flowing through her body undid everything and ruined what could have been your replacement. Not weak enough to run away, not strong enough to rebel, just enough determination to meet the expectations put in front of you, that is what you are.”

“If everything you said just now was true,” Joker tried to muster up a bit of courage, “then what's stopping me from walking away from all this? It's like you said, gods can't touch me without my consent. That must include you.”

“Oh dear, Joker, that’s the fun part of all this,” The GodEater’s smile was showing off her fangs like a fox ready to sink into a rabbit’s throat “but before I get there, humor me for a moment.” Joker felt a warm gust pass by her. It circled round and around the GodEater until it began to coalesce into physical form as a tiny white fox, resting in the GodEater’s arms. The only discernible difference between it and her usual familiars was that this one had a green collar for whatever reason. “I love my familiars, almost as much as my children, but I have so many that it becomes a pain to bother naming them. This one, however, is very special, and so, I want you to give it a name.”

Joker felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. There was something familiar about that familiar. “Fine... Tsubaki.”

“Tsubaki! A marvelous choice!” The GodEater clapped her hands like a child. “You see, many people from across the multiverse are brought to Crossroads, but how do they find their way home? It’s simple! Every being is wrapped in strands of fate, tethering them to their original timeline. Sending them home is simply a matter of pulling on their string. Then there’s you. You don’t have any strings anymore. You have Tsubaki. For you see, the reason Tsubaki is special is because she was the exact familiar who gave you your invitation, and now, she is the only being in all of existence who remembers your home world and how to get there.”

At that moment, Joker felt the same chill as she did when she visited Rakurai’s timeline, except this time, it had taken over her entire body. She was a speechless corpse.

“Your choice is simple. Spend the rest of eternity, chasing after infinite echoes of your loved ones, or do as I say.”

What stumbled down the stairs to the main floor could barely be considered alive. Joker's face was pale as a ghost. All of the friends and family she had made all of precious memories with, unique to her alone, were now a needle in a comic haystack. She couldn't tell what hurt more, the thought that she might never see them again or the guilt that she was in this position solely because she didn't think about them until now.

Waiting for her at the bottom of the stairway was a very eager detective, wreaking tobacco, and a girl wearing her face.

"Good news!" Kuro obliviously chimed. "Tenki is absolutely miserable right now. Usually when that happens, he throws himself a pity party, getting drunk and high in the process. He sang like a canary. Based on his account along with your... sister here... I was able to piece together everything that happened, and I'm all caught up, so it's time to spill the gossip. What intel did the GodEater say?"

"The truth..." Joker said in a dry tongue.

Jack realized what Kuro was too proud to notice, that something was seriously wrong. "What truth was it?" She asked in a slow and careful voice.

Joker ignored Jack's question. Instead, her head snapped towards Kuro with a painful rigor mortis twitch. All she felt towards him in that moment was disgust. It was because of that unearned pride written on his face, like an elementary school student who thinks they're one step closer to unlocking the secrets of the universe because they successfully memorized the names of the planets in the solar system. "This little investigation of yours was never going to give you the answers you wanted because they were staring you in the face the whole time. You just couldn't accept them, could you? So, you tried to find meaning in something where there was none..."

Kuro's face wilted. Only now, was he starting to notice Joker's wretched state. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying wake the fuck up already!" Joker lashed out already. "Do you really need the same message spelled out for you a second time today? You live under the rule of a mad god. A childish monster that can kill you with a thought. If that idea is too horrible for you to accept, then go! Pack your shit, gather the friends and family you get to have, and leave! There were no secrets behind the GodEaters motives. Despite all the lies and tricks, she's exactly what you think she is and nothing more!"

Hurt people hurt people. That was the old saying running through Kuro's mind. Joker was definitely hurt, and with the dagger of words she was jamming into his ribs, he felt hurt too. His face remained still, refusing to give her any satisfaction of dragging him down to her level. "I'm not your mirror, Ms. Brown, so don't talk to me like that's what I am." He turned away. "We'll talk when you get your head back on straight." With that, he walked away.

As Kuro left, Joker's attention turned to Jack. As Joker's eyes locked on, Jack flinched, expecting a similar verbal lashing, but as she looked into Joker's eyes, she didn't see rage or disgust. She saw a swirling vortex of emotions that was slowly beginning to settle. A choice was about to be made.

At this point, the contestant, Toffee Brown, also known as Joker, has transcended fate, and is no longer bound by a single path. It is now up to you, the reader, to choose which decision she will make. If you would like Joker to stay and talk things out with Jack, read Ending A. If you would like Joker to reconcile with Rebecca, read Ending B. If you would like Joker to find Queen, read Ending C.

Ending A: A Tender Moment

It seemed that Kuro had taken the worst of Joker's anguish. She had just barely enough energy to pull up a chair and sit down. With a softer, more human voice, she asked, "Hey Jack, could you... could you tell me what your family is like?"

Jack pulled up a chair as well. She wanted to handle the situation with care while still standing her ground. "Tell me what happened between you and the GodEater first."

The two sat in silence for a while as Jack waited patiently for Joker to gather her thoughts. Eventually, Joker began to open up. Over the course of a few minutes, she spoke the same way a newborn would walk, stumbling, going off in the wrong direction, and picking herself back up, but eventually getting to where she was trying to go. It became harder and harder to hold back the tears, but she made it to the end before her eye started leaking.

"So you see..." Joker continued. "I asked you about your family because I was hoping that maybe I could take some solace knowing that there was at least one version of me who could be happy and reunited with the people she cares about."

"Joker," Jack retorted. "I don't think something like that would help. You have your own family, and you need to focus on getting back to them. It's too soon for you to give up hope."

"Jack... please..."

Seeing Joker's wavering will, Jack decided to humor her. "Well uh,... There's my brother, Malt. He's a bit of a trouble maker, trying to make it big as an actor. Then my mom, Adzuki. She's strict as hell, but she keeps the house in order. Last is my dad, Maple-"

"Holy shit!" Joker exclaimed, indulging in a distraction from her plight "You have a dad?!"

"Uhm, yeah? You don't?"

"No. Your mom and brother sound exactly like mine, but my dad walked out right before I was born. Hell, part of the reason I wanted to become a detective was so that I could track him down one day."

“Wait? You’re a detective?”

“Yeah. What are you?”

“I’m just a writer. I’ve never done any sort of job that involves roughing people up or holding a gun. That’s a big part of the reason I immediately forfeited the tournament unlike you or Queen.”

“Really? In that case, what happened to your eye?”

“Camping trip accident. Don’t ask for details”

Joker shook her head “Hah! Well damn. We look so similar on the surface, and yet everything else is so different underneath.” Joker returned to her more somber voice, albeit with a bit more spirit. “All the more reason I have to get my timeline. It doesn’t matter how many other worlds are out there and how similar they might look to home. I only have one, and damn it all, I can’t let that GodEater take it away from me!”

“So, are you ready to fight back then?”

“Yeah, I think I am.”

Ending B: The Path of Atonement

“So what did you think of that Toffee vs Toffee battle.”

“Oh that was total bullshit. I bet my left ass cheek the entire thing was staged!”

“Awe come on! You say that about every fight!”

“Yeah but think about it. They set up the black shirt Toffee as the heel, the white shirt one shows up to give that whole hammy speech, and then boom, the whole fight’s over in a single kick!”

“That’s because black shirt was worn down by the superhero and metal slime girl.”

“Which was even more staged! Black shirt literally beat little miss ‘Bootleg Wonder Woman’ by waving a piece of paper in her face.”

The two pedestrians continued their conversation as they walked down the street, completely oblivious of the window they were walking past and the girl on the other side of it.

Rebecca sat in her booth at the Shatter Sugar Connection Cafe, alone with nothing to comfort her other than a piping hot cup of hot cocoa. She had plenty of friends that could have shown up to sit besides her, but sadly they all had made the same unfortunate mistake, assuming that the girl, who felt abandoned by the world, needed space. The powerless girl stared blankly into her cup, watching the bubbles circle in her recently stirred drink.

“I take it that things didn’t turn out the way you would have hoped.”

Rebecca looked up at the voice across from her with fresh hatred. It was difficult to tell whether this anger was directed towards the new guest, Crossroads, or herself, probably all three. She dug into her pocket and slammed down a fist full of jagged stone fragments. “...but they turned out exactly how you wanted them to, didn’t they, Red Hood? You said you’d help find the other Toffee and in exchange, if anything happened to my arrowhead, I’d give you a piece of it.” She shoved the pile towards the sorcerer.

“Go on then, take it all!”

“Your destiny isn’t over yet. The arrowhead can be reforged. I only wanted one of the pieces for safe keeping.”

“Bullshit! Don’t act like you suddenly care about my destiny! You knew this would happen, just like everyone else. It was all rigged from the start, a sick joke with me as the punchline.”

“I’ll be honest. When the GodEater merged the timelines together, I saw all of the events leading up to Toffee fighting herself, and then everything went black, as if covered in an impenetrable darkness. I had admittedly succumbed to my greed and curiosity just like the GodEater, wanting to see it through, and to that end, for whatever it is worth, I am sorry. Even still, it wouldn’t sit right with me if I let your story end here. You still have so much potential.”

“Potential for what?! All I wanted was to be a game developer. Then when I found out how much it actually sucks, I got the opportunity to become a real life superhero, straight out of the comic books, only for that to end in a horrific disaster. Every time I try to follow my dreams they turn into nightmares.”

A third voice intervened. “It sounds like the real problem wasn’t that you had dreams or even that you tried to pursue them. It was that those dreams ended up being corrupted by bullies and thugs who didn’t care about what they meant to you.”

Rebecca jumped back in terror. Standing in front of her was a friend, a foe, and a devil, Toffee. “W-which one are you and why are you here?!” Her voice trembled.

“I’m Joker, and I just came here to say that I agree with Red here.”

“Why!” Rebecca laughed in genuine confusion. “You read my paper. This whole time, you hated me for what I did, and you were right.”

“You were manipulated by selfish people.” Joker said firmly “I shit talked you behind your back and to your face because only because I didn’t understand what that was like. I know better now. I know that when something like that happens, it’s so easy to just give up and accept your fate as a puppet because everyone around you is so much smarter and stronger than you, but if there is one thing that this tournament has taught me, it’s that you can always fight back. So long as there are people who are better than you, they will look down on you. So long as they look down on you, they’ll underestimate you, and when that happens, they’ll be left helpless when you catch them off guard.”

Rebecca curled up slightly. “You sound like you’re talking to yourself more than me.”

“Maybe I am to an extent, but that’s only because we’re both in a situation where we can either pick ourselves back up or drown in our misery. I believe there’s hope for you, Overdraw, and as long as there is hope that you can get back up, then I’m willing to believe that there is hope for me too.”

“You don’t get it! I’ve hurt people! I-...” Rebecca’s lips quivered “I’ve ki-”

Joker cut her off “And do you want everything to end there?! Do you want one bad day to define the rest of your life, or do you want to fight back? I know that you can because Jack wouldn’t be here if that wasn’t the case!”

Rebecca’s eyes darted back and forth. “I think... I think I just need some time to think things over.” She hurriedly grabbed the pile of arrow head fragments, leaving behind a single shard, and ran.

“Poor thing left her hot cocoa behind.” Red Hood lamented. “Now it’s just going to get cold.”

“Enough funny talk, weirdo.” Joker jabbed. “What’s your angle in all of this?”

“Well, depending on how my fight against Nalagram goes, I might be your opponent, next round, but aside from that, I’m just an observer. I genuinely have no clue as to what is going to happen next from this point onwards, but if I may say, as far as this game between the GodEater and you goes. I hope you win.”

Joker shrugged off another set of eyes spying on her. “You and me both.”

Ending C: Nihilism Rejected

Queen sat on the bed of her room in the Kit Inn. She looked down at the magic suppression tag and tried to grab it, but unfortunately, her hand phased through it. There was no use trying to get rid of it. The real magic suppression tag was bound to her soul, no longer existing on the physical plane. The piece of paper stuck to her chest was nothing more than a hollow illusion. She wasn’t too mad about it, as it would wear off with enough time. Her mind was more preoccupied with the same questions most people run into now and then, ‘what now?’. It weighed on her like a brick while she contemplated her options. She wasn’t going to stop adventuring for sure, but things are going to be much much slower without that magatama. Maybe, despite everything she told Joker, she was getting too dependent on it. Maybe seeing her friends and family would do her some good after being away from home for a little too long. Maybe, just maybe, losing this tournament was a good thing.

Knock knock

Queen heard someone tapping at the door. She got up to answer it. “Oh hey, it’s you.”

On the other side of the doorway was who else but Joker. She stood with an upright posture and a vibrant look on her face. Hope, willpower, these were shallow ideals that fools cling to when they lacked a proper plan of attack. ‘Keep your damned hope’ were the words written on her smirk. “Hey there, sis.”

“If you’re here because you want your hoodie back, tough shit. This thing is comfy as hell.”

“Go ahead and keep it. I’m here because the GodEater screwed me over and I want to get even.”

Queen crossed her arms, leaning on the doorway with piqued interest. “Really? After all that talk about how high off my own fumes I was, now you wanna fight a god.”

“At first, I thought that she had me in checkmate, but it’s like you said. She’s not capital G, just an immortal with too much time on her hands. Even they can screw up, and that’s exactly what happened when she started bragging about how she played me. She gave away a small nugget of information. It might not seem like a lot, but it’s enough for me to take the first step forward, and that’s all I need.”

“Alright, and what is this first step?”

“Queen, you’re going to teach me magic!”

To be Concluded in Chapter 4: Jokers Wild