Meet Again

by northpen

Summary

Thousands of years into the future, Cole and Zane meet their friends again.

Notes

Welcome to my fic! Be warned that it is long and occasionally uses images. I hope you enjoy it!
When Cole turned twenty-seven, it occurred to him that he was no longer aging. The other ninja were growing, appearing older with each passing year. But not Cole. He never changed, and on his twenty-seventh birthday, he realized that he was never going to look different than he did when he was twenty-one.

Going from human to ghost to human again had severed his body from the effects of time. He wasn't immortal, and knew he never would be. He could still be killed by a knife or a bullet or even a big fall, but old, failing organs would never get to him. The first century, it kept him awake at night, scared of facing eternity when most of his friends would be long gone and anyone he met would disappear after any handful of years, too. What kind of existence was that?

He didn't want to die, though. The thought of death scared him more than eternity, so he found himself staying put in the land of the living. Besides, it would have felt selfish to leave Zane alone with no one but PIXAL until the end of time.

They learned that Lloyd's lifespan was longer than average. But after 150 years of living, whatever Garmadon vitality had kept him alive for so long died and so did the green ninja. The funeral was a national affair, the public mourning the person they'd come to see as the face of good in a world so often plagued by evil. Cole was asked to write a eulogy, so he sat down and wrote a long-winded speech—as he had for everyone else—and practiced in the mirror the night before the funeral but never presented it because he didn't go.

He didn't go to any of their funerals. Saying goodbye to people he'd gone through so much with felt impossible, so Zane would speak on Cole's behalf and he'd spend the day and following weeks holed up in his room, staring at the ceiling or watching the same movies over and over again or eating an unhealthy amount of ice cream because during those times he couldn't bring himself to care about anything, let alone himself. Zane left him alone after Lloyd's funeral, checking in on him occasionally but knowing to stay out of his way until he was better.

And he did get better. It was easy to fall into some kind of depression when life made no sense anymore and yet it was going to last forever, but even if it took years upon years he was always able to pull himself out again. Sometimes, a new foe was his only reason to get out of bed and go out into the world, but it gave him a chance to dedicate his life to something worthwhile again. Fighting without Jay, Kai, Nya, and Lloyd always left a dull ache in his chest, but it ebbed away after the third century passed. His deceased friends slowly turned into happy memories, memories of his first lifetime that made him feel nostalgic if he ever took a trip to visit Destiny's Bounty or Steeper Wisdom. Sometimes, Zane came with him and they reminisced about old times, laughing about something Jay said or the time when Kai gave in to his impulses and tried to climb the mast of the Bounty, only to fall and hurt his arm on the way down. Cole and Jay had stood off to the side, laughing to themselves as Nya chewed him out for nearly getting himself killed.
Cole began to see his past in lifetimes. His times with the ninja were his first lifetime, his favorite lifetime. Every century became a lifetime. In earlier lifetimes, Cole travelled around and made appearances at public gatherings or the history museum. Some lifetimes, the eternity depression hit and he spent years laying in bed, watching society and culture develop from a distance.

At first, they didn't need money. By the end of their ninja careers, they'd amassed a fortune in donations and awards. But Cole could see that they would run out eventually, so by his sixth lifetime, he sucked it up and got a job. He was far less famous than he'd been back in the ninja prime years, so finding a quiet flower shop on a street corner in Ninjago City was ideal for living life on the down-low.

Urban sprawl made people want to fill their homes with plants to remind them of the country side, so the shop boomed even as technology continued to grow and influence their lives. When his first boss retired, Cole was put in charge of the shop and guaranteed job security as long as he could keep the shop open. He stayed there, hiring students and teenagers that were only interested in working for a few years or the summer to make sure his secret was kept hidden.

He found himself in a routine for many more lifetimes. He no longer lived with Zane, but made sure to visit at least a few times a month. He didn't make many friends, the fear of falling back into a depression when they inevitably died keeping him from making meaningful connections with anyone he met. He'd never been one to make friends as a child anyways, and some habits carried over into young adulthood. He was perfectly content with casual acquaintances and keeping up with Zane.

It was during his thirty-first lifetime that he got a sudden voice call from Zane. He blinked three times to answer. Zane's robotic voice spoke directly into his brain.

"I met someone familiar at Borg Tower today," Zane said.

Cole leaned back in his office chair, covering his mouth as he yawned. "Who'd you meet?"

"Feel free to sit down so you may jump up in excitement," Zane said. Cole rolled his eyes. "There was a new intern today. I thought she looked familiar, so I approached her to say hello. Her name? Nya."

"That's not exactly an uncommon name," Cole commented.

"I'm not finished. I used my facial recognition scanner on her, and the results said that she was the same Nya we knew so many years ago. Her voice has not changed, either. How is this possible? Do you suppose that somehow, she's come back to life again?"

Cole sat up straighter. "What? Did you ask her anymore questions?"

"I didn't want to pry, but she mentioned an older brother. I believe this may very well be Kai."

"If she comes back in tomorrow, ask her more questions. Find out what her brother's name is. If this is really them through whatever cosmic coincidence brought them back, Jay and Lloyd may be alive, too."

A pause.

"Are you sure seeking them out is the best idea? I'm afraid of what will happen when they die a second time."

A valid concern. Cole's fingers tapped his desk as he thought of what happened last time, how he shut himself in for months after their funerals. Was it worth it?
He decided that he didn't care. Self-indulgent as it was, he would do anything to meet his friends again. Even if they didn't remember him or everything they'd been through so many years ago.

"I'll be okay. Thanks for giving me the heads up, talk to you tomorrow."

By the time he went home, he was barely able to contain his excitement as he rode the elevator up to his apartment. Once inside, he flopped down on his couch and brought up Chirp before his vision.

During his third lifetime, Chirp began to delete the accounts of anyone inactive for more than five years. This way, old usernames were released for new users and millions of inactive accounts no longer clogged their database. Cole was sure to create a new account every eighty years to avoid any potential suspicion, be it from the Chirp developers or the odd history buff determined to locate the two living ninja. Some were still out there, and it had been so many years since Cole had last appeared publicly.

He brought up Chirp's search bar and typed in 'fire13'.

A little more than a thousand chirps. This user had been active for quite a few years, but the chirps didn't catch his attention as much as the bio on the side of the page. He felt his heart beat faster at the prospect of photos.

you cant handle this heat
fire13
18. Kai. Follow my insta kai_fire13

He clicked the link and an Instagram page opened. Kai was just as active here, the pictures he uploaded showing a face identical to the Red Ninja of Fire laid to rest thousands of lifetimes ago.

Nya and Kai were alive again. Memories or not, Cole wanted to talk to them again. Laugh with them again. Hang out again. Meet again.

He followed Kai on Instagram and Chirp. Kai didn't know him yet, so Cole hoped the quick succession of sudden follows would catch his attention. He couldn't remember Jay or Lloyd's social media handles—Jay had a new username every few months and Lloyd had always preferred talking in person, so both of them would be impossible to track down over the Internet. Kai made himself easy to find, and Cole was thankful for it.

He went back to Chirp and scrolled through Kai's profile. He didn't understand most of the chirps since he had no context, but some of them made sense, like when he talked about his day or made a stupid joke. Kai uploaded the occasional video of him following through on a dare, like dropping a water balloon on an unsuspecting nindroid officer from a high-rise building or touching electric fences. For his birthday, Kai went to the beach with his friends. Apparently, this version of Kai didn't share the same fear of water. Huh. As Cole read Kai's recounts of the day, he wondered what other differences existed between this Kai and the past Kai.

Tears began to sting his eyes and by the time he reached last year on Kai's feed, his chest ached with the same ache he'd felt after their funerals and his face felt hot as tears streamed down his cheeks. He closed his eyes and breathed. Four seconds in, four seconds out. Just like Zane taught him.

He didn't open Kai's Chirp page again for the remainder of the night. It was hard to concentrate on anything but his resurrected friends at the flower shop the next day, so he found himself staring at the wall, lost in thought until Zane finally called him.

"I spoke with Nya again today," Zane said. "Her older brother's name is Kai. It may have been
insensitive of me, but I asked if she had any plans for Mother's Day in two weeks. She told me that her family was planning on spending the day together, nothing complicated. Their parents are alive. Do you think there are any other differences?"

"I checked out Kai's social media last night," Cole said. "He isn't afraid of water."

"That's interesting. I will attempt to become Nya's friend so the two of us may discuss her life in greater detail. If you genuinely think you'll be okay to meet them again, feel free to contact Kai. I'm sure he's as social as ever."

"Yeah, I'm sure he is. I'll find a way to get in touch with him."

Over the course of the day, Cole checked Kai's Chirp account often. When Kai uploaded a new picture to Instagram, Cole liked the picture to try to catch his attention. Nothing. Kai had too many followers to notice someone new, apparently.

Time to be bold. Cole scrolled down until he reached the photos from two years ago, older pictures of Kai when he was sixteen. And then he liked one.

The action made him cringe, but it would certainly grab Kai's attention. He could only hope that Kai would react and give him an opportunity to talk to him.

After liking the picture, Cole spent the rest of the day ordering an assortment of roses, lilies, tulips, and other flowers to create bouquets for Mother's Day. He'd almost forgotten. It wasn't like he'd ever had much reason to celebrate in the first place.

At 16:40, a message popped up in his Instagram DMs.

kai_fire13
who even r u?

Kai was as confrontational as ever. Okay. Cole could do this. No reason to panic. It was only a conversation with someone he used to call his brother.

flintcole
A history nerd. I just noticed you look a lot like the red ninja from way back when.

kai_fire13
i thought there was only a green one

flintcole
What did your school even teach you? There were six of them. Red, black, white, blue, green, and magenta/cyan.

kai_fire13
kinda sounds like they ran out of ideas on that last one

kai_fire13
are u sure i look like one of them? send a pic and ill be the judge of that

kai_fire13
if they even had pics back then

flintcole
They did. One second, I'll find a good picture.

Cole rummaged through his photo gallery until he found the picture they'd taken of Kai and Nya when Nya had first become a ninja. On the physical copy of the photograph, 'ninja siblings' was written on the back in felt marker.

He sent the picture.

flintcole
See the guy? He looks just like you.

kai_fire13
wtf ur right

kai_fire13
hes almost as hot as me

kai_fire13
the chick looks like my little sis too

flintcole
Really?

kai_fire13
yeah like they have the same hair and everything

kai_fire13
ur not messing with me tho right? this is real?

flintcole
100% authentic.

kai_fire13
send me more

Cole sent forward whatever pictures featured Kai and not himself or Zane. He didn't want to blow their cover just yet.

kai_fire13
this is wild like its blowing my mind man

kai_fire13
im showing these to the sis when she gets home shell love it

flintcole
Is she at school, or?

kai_fire13
she finished school early so now shes some intern at borg

kai_fire13
im not into all that techy stuff so i dont ask questions

flintcole
Wow, she must be smart. I'm pretty sure the magenta one was really smart, too.

**flintcole**  
She was also the only girl.

**kai_fire13**  
girls are lame so this is understandable

**kai_fire13**  
i never said that

**kai_fire13**  
nya would kill me

**flintcole**  
Her name is Nya? I have a friend who works at Borg that met an intern with the same name. Any chance they're the same person?

**kai_fire13**  
does this friend happen to be some nindroid named zane

**kai_fire13**  
heard hes been laying the moves on her

**flintcole**  
Zane has a girlfriend. I'm pretty sure he isn't interested in your sister.

**kai_fire13**  
man you know you cant trust anyone :/

**kai_fire13**  
not even emotionally stunted robots

**flintcole**  
Take my word for it, Zane is /not/ flirting with her. He's just a little awkward at times.

**kai_fire13**  
fine flintcole

**kai_fire13**  
is your name flint or cole

**flintcole**  
My name is Cole.

**kai_fire13**  
so is that username a rock pun

**flintcole**  
I guess, yeah.

**kai_fire13**  
you gotta get a better name dude
flintcole
Your name is literally "fire13" on Chirp. Are you serious? That's so basic.

kai_fire13
do you understand how hard it is to get a username with any variation of the word fire in it

kai_fire13
i worked hard for this username flint

kai_fire13
fkn blood sweat and tears

kai_fire13
not mine tho

flintcole
Are you implying that you killed the previous 'fire13' so you could have their username?

kai_fire13
. . . maybe

Cole covered his hand with his mouth to stifle a laugh. He shouldn't be doing this at work, not when they were preparing for Mother's Day, one of the busiest times of the year. But this was important and he couldn't bring himself to say goodbye.

Fortunately, Kai did it for him.

kai_fire13
my parents are out tonight and nyas still gone and i just realized theres nothing to eat

kai_fire13
gotta head out and get some stuff

kai_fire13
u seem chill tho wanna talk tomorrow?

flintcole
Sure.

kai_fire13
k ttyl flint

The rest of the day was spent preparing further. He closed the shop around dinner and returned home. After making a quick dinner, he sat down on the couch and scrolled back through his conversation with Kai as he ate, cherishing each message sent back and forth with his old friend.

And then he felt heat behind his eyes and he had to stop. Remembering the old Kai and seeing him in this new one felt like ripping old wounds. Like cutting into scars and letting them bleed again. Fear and elation fought in his core, one telling him to cut ties and the other telling him to risk everything and indulge himself.

Zane was right, this wasn't good for him. But he'd be damned if he let the opportunity go to waste.

"Nya showed me photos of her past-self and Kai today," Zane said during what had become their
daily update call. "You must have finally contacted him. How did it go?"

"It went fine. He wants to talk again today," Cole replied. "Did Nya give you any other info?"

"Nothing worth mentioning."

Cole laughed. "Did you know she thinks you're hitting on her?"

"I—what? No, I'm not. I swear." Zane sighed. "PIXAL is laughing at me."

"I think Kai is going to beat you up. Do you want that, Zane? Do you want Kai to beat you up?"

"I highly doubt that either version of Kai could defeat me in combat."

For the following month, Cole spoke to Kai everyday. He learned a lot more about him, like how this Kai also lived in Ninjago City, where he was finishing his last year of high school. He didn't know what he wanted to do when he was older. He felt he was destined for something big, but his low grades and lack of academic charisma had ruined those chances a long time ago.

Rather than being trained by his father and then Wu, Kai was training to fight at a nearby dojo. He liked to compete in tournaments all over the country, and spent a lot of his free time practicing. He was one of the best around, apparently. Pictures of his trophy shelf only proved this.

flintcole
If you're so good at fighting, why not work at a dojo or something?

kai_fire13
i dont think i could ever successfully train a kid in my life

They video-called for the first time. At the sight of Kai's living, moving face talking to him, Cole panicked and closed the call. The night sky beyond the window called to him, so he threw on his ninja garb and climbed up to the rooftop of his building.

His legs dangled over the edge of the roof. Looking down gave him vertigo so he kept his eyes to the sky, staring at the dark sheet of the starless night. He sighed. He'd grown up here when the city wasn't so suffocating, but even back then the stars had lost their battle against light pollution and disappeared from the sky. He missed the missions in the small villages far away from here, where the stars shone bright and Jay would teach him about the constellations that decorated the sky.

Maybe when this whole Kai and Nya fiasco was over, he'd leave. But he didn't know if Jay and Lloyd were around again, and while the idea of moving somewhere on the other side of the country excited him, he knew he couldn't leave until he found out if they were here—if somehow, his best friend and reluctant leader were back from the dead, reincarnated with no memories of the people they used to be.

Right now, none of this mattered. His attention was on Kai. And through Kai and Zane, he could meet Nya. He only had to bring himself to do it first.

flintcole
Sorry, something's wrong with all my tech. Don't think video-calling is going to work until I get it fixed.

kai_fire13
no prob its fine
kai_fire13
do you think we could meet up irl tho

kai_fire13
not to sound too forward but weve been talking for awhile and i think it would be cool

kai_fire13
if thats alright w you

flintcole
It's fine. When and where?

The meeting was scheduled for two days later. The day before, Cole tried to keep himself busy but the upcoming reunion (if it could be called that) loomed over his thoughts like a dark, expanding cloud.

The morning of their meet-up, Cole woke up too early out of anxiety and took an excessively long shower to pass the time. When he was finished, he spent half an hour picking clothes out of his closet and laundry bin and threw them around his room as he tried to figure out what to wear. He caught glimpses of himself in his mirror and worried that he would look too intimidating. He didn't have any pictures of himself on Instagram, and Kai had only seen his face for a few seconds at this point. His hair had grown out over the years, reaching his shoulders if he didn't tie it up in a bun. He didn't wear much other than black—the color was comforting to him, reminding him of his first lifetime and the duties he still had today. He wasn't as bulky as he was back in the prime ninja days, having given up the intense training regimen, but he still exercised and his element gave him extra strength if he was ever stuck in a bind. He appeared strong and rough around the edges—definitely not the person potential employees expected to see for a job interview at a flower shop.

Did Kai even care about appearances in the first place? Was he overthinking this?

Cole chose to wear one of his casual outfits, wearing black jeans and combat boots and a black rain jacket because it was spring and it always rained during the months leading up to summer. After making sure he had everything he needed—wallet, keys, and a ninja mask to cover his lower face just in case—he was ready to go.

The meeting place was decided to be a small mall connected to the light-rail system, easy for both of them to get to. The various rail lines were suspended above the city, weaving between the skyscrapers that poked into the clouds like spears. The areas beneath the city were considered historical artifacts after several Serpentine murals and remains were found scattered in the sewers and tunnels below the surface, so the only place to build the system was up in the clouds.

He arrived ten minutes early on purpose, giving him enough time to find where Kai wanted to meet him and wait there. It also allowed him to get a scope of the mall. Like wearing black, this was also a remnant habit from being a ninja: whenever he entered somewhere new, he noted possible escape routes and potential hiding places. Every five steps, he looked over his shoulder. Nothing threatening was there. Nothing was going to jump him from behind. His overworked survival instincts just gave him no other choice than to be jumpy in public spaces.

He found the store and stood off to the side as he waited. Five minutes in, a message popped up from Zane.

zjfalcon
Are you all right?
Don't worry, I'll be fine. It's only Kai.

Okay. You can call me if you ever need help.

Thanks, mom.

The message was read but Zane never responded. Cole swapped between apps anxiously, playing games for a minute before trying to read and then browsing social media before he scrolled through past conversations with Kai to emotionally prepare himself. Then he played games again and the cycle repeated itself.

are u the grunge looking guy

Probably.

are u the grunge looking guy

Okay, I see you omw

Cole closed the windows in his vision and looked around. No spiky hair in sight. Where was he?

Cole felt a tap on his shoulder and it took all self-control not to turn around and punch his assailant into the next dimension. Instead, he jumped a little and twisted on the ball of his left foot to come face-to-face with none other than Kai himself.

Kai looked him up and down with dark eyes and laughed. "Are you always this jumpy?"

"I—" Cole tried to speak but his words caught in his throat, sudden fear of this person he had no right to be afraid of (they were still brothers, right?) building a wall between them as Cole stared into familiar eyes and tried to speak, to break the silence. He coughed and swallowed, ready to try again.

Kai's ringtone went off.

Kai pulled his phone out of his pocket and frowned. Handheld devices were still popular among teenagers, as biotech wasn't available for anyone under 25. It was too dangerous for the developing brain. Since Cole was no longer growing, Zane was able to pull some strings at Borg and soon enough, he was laying on the operating table and ready for the first round of tech upgrades available to the public.

"Sorry," Kai mumbled. He declined the call. Cole saw a name flash briefly on the screen: Nya.

Curiosity kicked down the wall between them. "Is everything okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, everything's fine. My sister's just being annoying."

"Oh. Why?"

"She's two years younger than me but she acts like my mom sometimes," Kai replied. "It doesn't matter. What do you want to do?"

"I've never really been in this area before," Cole said. "You live around here, right? What do you
"You're a history nerd that owns a flower shop. I don't think you're up for what I do with my friends."

Cole laughed. "Oh, I'm sure I can handle whatever you throw at me."

"Fine. Follow me, then."

They travelled several blocks on foot. Kai turned off one of the big streets and onto a little side street, and then a smaller alley, and then another, and then another, until Cole felt officially lost. Kai kept going, hand trailing behind on the metal sides of the buildings. He knew this place, knew it well. With a different person, Cole would have turned back and refused to continue into the unknown. But this was Kai—a different Kai, but someone he trusted nonetheless.

"We're here," Kai announced. Cole followed his gaze to a sewer cap in the ground.

He pointed to the cap. "Is that where we're going?"

Kai nodded and walked forward. The sewer cap wasn't grated, but flat, heavy metal. If Cole looked closely, he could see a faint design in the metal, most likely eroded after several years.

A snake.

"You like history, don't tell me you've never heard of the Serpentine tomb beneath the city," Kai said as he dug his fingers under the metal and then began to lift. He lifted the cap a few inches, but made no further progress. He dropped it and a loud sound echoed in the alleyway. "Ugh. Sorry, I usually have more people with me when I go here. The lid's really heavy. Want to give me a hand?"

This was bad news. The tombs were guarded to stop the destruction of artifacts. Nindroids were set on patrol down there. Cameras were mounted on every wall, tucked away in every corner. If they were caught, they'd be arrested. No warning granted.

"Are you sure this is the best idea?"

"It's fine. I do it all the time. They tell us it's high security, but there's usually only one nindroid and a bunch of cameras down there. If you hide your face with sunglasses or a bandana, they won't catch you. DNA tests only work if you're in the system, and guess who isn't? Me. You've never been arrested, right?"

"No, I haven't," Cole said.

"Good." Kai reached into his pocket and pulled out a red bandana. "You got anything for your face?"

Cole pulled his mask from his pocket and showed it to Kai. "Yeah, I've got something."

"Put it on," Kai instructed. "There's nothing in this alley, but a camera faces up the passage down there."

Cole did as he was told. His faceguard fit comfortably over the bridge of his nose. "Okay, I'm ready."

"Come here and help me lift." Cole kneeled down next to Kai, and on the count of three, they lifted the cap together. Cole only used a fraction of his strength, making sure he looked like he was
struggling with the cap's weight. When they were done, they pushed the cap to the side and looked down into the hole. A small, red light shone in the darkness. Kai was right, there was a camera looking up at them.

"You still think you can take it?" Kai asked. Cole rolled his eyes.

"Just because I own a flower shop doesn't mean I never participated in teenage rebellion," he said. Did running away from home count as teenage rebellion? He wasn't sure.

"All right. The ladder isn't safe at the bottom, so just jump in and you'll be fine," Kai said. "Be quiet when we get down there, okay? Whispering only. And close the lid on your way down. Let's go!"

Kai jumped into the hole and Cole heard him land a few seconds later. Kai called out to him quietly to tell him he was fine and out of the way so Cole could come down, too.

Cole dropped into the hole slowly, pulling the sewer cap with him so it would slide into place before he took the plunge. The fall was longer than expected, and upon hitting the ground, he rolled a few times before coming to a stop. The ground was dry beneath his fingertips. He felt around for the wall, but found nothing.

A bright light illuminated the tunnel. Cole turned around to see Kai holding up his phone, its flashlight turned on maximum brightness. "You have biotech, right? Do me a favor and turn on your night vision. Nindroids may have night vision, but they won't catch us if we're sneaky and using a real flashlight is a dead giveaway."

"Are all your friends over 25? How do they have biotech?"

Kai laughed quietly. "Yeah, like you're 25 yourself. Some of my friends got theirs done in some of those underground places, just like you did. I would get it myself, but Nya would kill me. She's already on my ass about everything else, I don't need her freaking out about potential brain damage, too. Now come on and hold my hand and I'll tell you where to go."

Cole activated his night vision. His surroundings came into vision, illuminated in non-existent pale green light. The tunnel was short but wide, and seemingly stretched on for a long while. He reached out and grabbed Kai's hand in his, then turned back to face the wall. There were two directions. "How are you supposed to know where to go if you can't see?"

"I've been to this place enough to know the way. Face the wall opposite of the ladder and go left."

Cole did as he was told. There were drawings on the walls, images of snakes and humans fighting. There was the occasional drawing of six figures, reach red, blue, black, white, green, and magenta respectively. There was some graffiti too, but most of it was nonsensical. Apparently, other people had made their way down there aside from Kai's gang of friends.

Eventually, they reached a fork in the tunnel.

"We're at a fork. Which way do I go?"

"Go right."

For the next few tunnels, Cole reported to Kai when they reached another fork and Kai would instruct him on which way to turn. As they went deeper and deeper, Cole felt his heartbeat accelerate. He'd never been one to break the law and the threat of being caught was releasing adrenaline into his system. This feel of adrenaline was . . . exciting, not terrifying like he was used to. He could understand why Kai had always been such an adrenaline junkie.
Cole turned a corner and found himself staring straight at the grand doors to the old Serpentine tomb where Skales and the others had inhabited so long ago. He stopped in his tracks, memories flooding his mind and pulling his attention away from reaching their destination.

He'd fought the Serpentine once. They were his enemies, but then they became his allies. They warned him and the other ninja of a dangerous threat on the horizon. For that, both Ninjago and himself owed them a great deal.

"Why'd you stop? If the nindroid isn't there, keep going. Nothing's alive in here aside from us, I promise. I've been in the actual tomb tons of times."

Right. They were once his allies, and now they were gone. Dead.

Kai shoved Cole from behind and Cole continued towards the doors. Once there, he looked over his shoulder at Kai. "The doors are sealed shut. How are we supposed to get inside?"

"On the right wall there's a small crawlspace we can go through. They don't station nindroids inside so once we're through, we're home-free."

The crawlspace was located between the door and the right wall, dug out of the rock that remained from the original tomb. The tomb was a historical artifact, so it had yet to be transformed into indestructible metal like most of Ninjago City. Cole kneeled down and leaned low, looking inside. It was a direct path into the tomb, maybe ten feet long. There were cracks in the ceiling and walls of the small tunnel. It was falling apart.

"Have you never seen these cracks? The thing's about to crumble," Cole said.

"Who cares? Just go and hope it doesn't crash on you."

Cole sighed and let go of Kai's hand. He twisted around so he would enter the crawlspace feet-first. He took Kai's hand in his again. "I'm going in backwards. Follow my lead."

As Cole went through, he kept his other hand on the wall of the tunnel, crawling backwards by pushing on his elbows and knees. His hand on the wall channeled his Earth abilities, willing the tunnel to hold itself together as they crawled through. When he reached the end, he sat back and pulled Kai through the rest of the way.

"Turn off your night vision, I'm turning on my flashlight."

Cole turned it off. His surroundings became pitch black, then Kai turned on his phone's flashlight, shining it around the tomb. Cole followed the light with his eyes, comparing the illuminated parts of the large cavern to what it looked like in his memory. The bioluminescent rocks no longer shone, and the small river running through the center of the cavern was dry. The tomb was dead, lifeless.

The same shiver from before returned to his spine. This felt wrong. He didn't want to stay here anymore. "Kai, I think we should—" he began to say.

The heavy guitar of Kai's ringtone interrupted him. Kai held his phone close to his face, the screen's light revealing a frown and narrowed eyes. "Will you stop?" Kai demanded out loud, then declined the call. The tomb fell back into silence.

"Was that your sister again?"

He looked back to Cole. "Yeah, it was Nya. Do you see why I find her annoying now? She won't leave me alone."
"What if it's an emergency?"

"If it were an emergency, she'd call twice in a row and text me. We have a system set up," Kai said. "She's just pissed at me. You know, I'll come back home after hanging out with my friends or whatever, and I walk through the door and it's like, 'Where were you? You should have been working on this or studying for that!'. We can barely have normal conversations anymore—everything just turns into a lecture or whatever."

"Why is she mad at you today? Are you supposed to be studying for something?"

Kai's laughter was sharp. "No, no. She's just mad because I'm going out during my final exam period even though I've got nothing on. She just takes things too seriously, you know?"

"My dad was a pretty serious guy. I get it," Cole said. "But I thought you two were like, best friends. What happened?"

"We used be best friends," Kai corrected. "We did everything together. My friends always made fun of me for hanging out with my little sister, but I guess I never really had much of a choice in the first place. Our parents are never really around that much. As soon as I was old enough to be left alone with Nya for a few hours, they started leaving for weeks at a time. I barely see them anymore. I wound up taking care of Nya; helping her with homework, sitting through her lessons at the dojo, and whatever else my parents were supposed to do but never did.

"A couple years ago, she got into a motorcycle accident and messed up her knee. She got surgery for it, but we waited too long and there was some permanent damage. She used to do martial arts with me, but she fell behind and then couldn't compete anymore so she gave up completely. I don't really know what happened after that—she started to care about her grades, enough so that getting anything other than a perfect score was like a fail to her. Now, she gets mad at me for not putting in the same effort as her. It's like she cares too much and thinks I don't care enough. I miss the times when we got along. It was never easy, but I liked it a whole lot better than whatever is going on now."

*zjfalcon*  
Are you still with Kai?

*zjfalcon*  
It says you are online. Please don't ignore me, I just heard some alarming news from Nya.

Kai groaned. "Ugh, why am I even telling you any of this? I don't tell my friends anything!"

"It's okay, dude. I'm all ears," Cole said. Kai's homelife was so similar yet so different at once, he couldn't quite wrap his head around it. He didn't know what to say.

"Okay. Do you want to know what my problem is? My problem is that Nya is always chewing me out and telling me to think about my future. What future?" The flashlight bounced on the walls as Kai gestured frantically. "More school? Working until I die? How am I supposed to bring myself to care when that's all there is waiting for me?"

*zjfalcon*  
Sent exam_sched.png
As we speak, Kai is missing his science theory final. This exam is worth 50% of his overall grade, and given his already low grades in the subject, means he will fail science this year. Passing this course is mandatory for receiving a high school diploma.

"You're only twenty-one; tell me about one meaningful thing you've done. One time where you actually did something to help people."

"I . . ." Cole wanted to answer, but he couldn't. Not without giving away his secret.

"Sorry, that was mean. But do you understand where I'm coming from? The idea of doing nothing, of being nothing—I don't think I could handle that," Kai said. "I can't just live, you know? What's the point of existing if I'm never going to do anything?"

If you don't understand, Kai will not be graduating anytime soon because he elected to skip his science final.

Please answer. Nya has been trying to reach him all day but he has yet to answer his phone.

"That's a pretty loaded question," Cole replied. "What do you think you're going to do? What do you want to do?"

"I don't know. I guess I'm just trying to figure that out."

"Uh-huh. Does part of this 'figuring out' process include skipping your science exam?"

Kai looked him dead in the eyes. When Kai used to get angry, Cole could have sworn that he could see flames flickering in his eyes. He'd assumed it was an Elemental quirk, like when Jay shocked himself during bad dreams and woke up with a scream in the dead of night. But maybe he was wrong. He swore he could see it now. Fire danced in Kai's narrowed eyes, twisting and bending as his feelings of betrayal manifested themselves into anger, into a refusal to accept what was happening to him.

There was a reason nobody ever liked to upset Kai.

"Have you been talking to her this whole time?"

Her.

Nya.

"No, I haven't. I swear."
Kai didn't look over his shoulder as he backed away, moving towards the crawlspace in the wall. He pointed an accusatory finger at Cole. "Fuck you, yes you have! How else would you know? Do you think I'm that stupid?"

"No, I don't. I was talking to Zane, okay? My nindroid friend that knows Nya? She was having him relay messages to me."

"Yeah, like that makes it so much better. Nice to know there's a whole chain of people getting involved in my shit, now!" Kai said. "I only met you a month ago. You're not my best fucking friend, okay? Stay in your lane."

Cole swallowed, unable to think of a way to make it better without making it worse. When Kai was angry back when they were ninja, everyone would step back and let him have the training deck to himself to blow off steam. No one—not even Nya—knew words that could calm down a Master of Fire. Cole was starting to think that maybe, none existed in the first place.

Kai reached the wall. He looked at the crawlspace and then back at Cole. "Are you coming?"

Cole blinked in surprise. "What?"

"I'm not an asshole, I won't leave you behind if you don't know how to get out of here. But don't talk to me. Just follow my lead."

Kai kept his flashlight on as he ducked down and pulled himself through the tunnel. Cole chased after him, sliding into the crawlspace and crawling the rest of the way through. Kai was waiting for him on the other side, back to him. His flashlight was still on, casting bright light all over the tunnel.

Confident that Kai wasn't watching him, Cole turned around and placed his hand on the rock wall next to the crawlspace. He closed his eyes and concentrated, using his connection with earth to create a mental map of his surroundings. He located the crawlspace and pushed down on the wall harder.

A loud crash echoed throughout the tunnels. He heard Kai swear and pulled away from the wall, looking at the crawlspace to observe his work. The ceiling was caved in, blocking the only entrance into the tomb.

No one would trespass there ever again.

"Holy shit," Kai muttered as he stared at the collapsed entrance. "That was close."

"Yeah. Let's get going."

Kai led the way, his phone's flashlight bobbing up and down with each step he took. Cole was careful as they walked, taking quiet steps and looking over his shoulder every five seconds, just as he'd been trained to do in situations like this. The patrolling nindroid was still out there, even if they'd yet to see it.

flintcole
Sorry for not getting back to you. I don't know if there's anything I can do about it, though. He's already missed it.

zjfalcon
Unfortunately, you're correct. Nya has asked me to tell you that she wants him to go home so she may talk to him when she's finished here today.

flintcole
Okay, sure. I'll bring it up to him when we don't have to be quiet anymore.

**zjfalcon**
Quiet? Where are you?

**flintcole**
Seeing a movie. You know the one about the dog? It's cute, but I wouldn't see it twice. It's ending soon so I'll get back to you when we leave.

**zjfalcon**
Are you texting during the movie? Don't be a Tommy Texter!

**flintcole**
I hate you :')

As they walked, his stomach grew heavy. He couldn't have messed this up with Kai during their first time together. They hadn't always gotten along when they were ninja, but they were still friends. They trusted each other, depended on each other in the field. The bonds Cole had with the members of his team were stronger than those of any other relationship he'd ever had, forged by facing death and making it out alive over and over again. Maybe in a world where they weren't ninja, he and Kai weren't meant to be good friends. If they went to school together, would they have ever spoken to each other? Would they hate being lab partners, working in group projects together?

It didn't matter. He would make this work. He didn't want this to be the last time he saw Kai—present or past—ever again.

"HALT. STOP WALKING AND STAND STILL IMMEDIATELY. YOU ARE TRESPASSING."

Cole spun on his heel. He'd forgotten to check over his shoulder.

"Aw, fuck," said Kai from behind.

The harsh, blue light of the nindroid's eyes blinded him. He rubbed his eyes and looked off the side, keeping an eye on the approaching figure with his peripheral vision. Okay. They had ten more seconds until it reached them.

"DO NOT ACTIVATE NIGHT VISION OR ANY OTHER SENSORY AUGMENTATIONS. I WILL KNOW IF YOU DO."

"Turn off your flashlight," Cole whispered, raising his hands above his head. Up, and up, and up, feigning surrender until his fingertips touched the ceiling of the short tunnel. The mental image of the tunnels came back as his surroundings were plunged into darkness, the nindroid's eyes the only source of light. Soon, they would have to turn left, continue straight, and then turn left again. They were not too far from the exit. This was doable.

He pushed up again. A tiny piece of a ceiling fell down to the floor a few meters behind the nindroid, echoing loud enough that it turned around. Cole turned on the ball of his foot and grabbed Kai's arm as he sprinted past, pulling him along.

Kai wasn't as fast as his past-self was, and Cole could feel it slowing them down. When they turned the first corner, Cole stopped and kneeled.

"Get on my back."
"What? Like, a piggy-back ride? I'm too heavy, we aren't going to go any faster."

"I'm stronger than you think. Do you trust me? Get on my back or it'll catch us."

Kai finally conceded, jumping on his back and wrapping his arms around his neck and legs around his torso. Cole took off again, running alongside the wall so his fingers could graze the wall as they passed and maintain the mental map. Another turn in a few more seconds.

"EVADING ARREST WILL LEAVE YOU SUBJECT TO MORE CHARGES. I HAVE NIGHT VISION. YOU DO NOT. THIS IS NOT THE LOGICAL CHOICE OF ACTION FOR EITHER OF YOU."

"Shit, shit, shit, hurry!"

Cole turned again, pounding down the pavement until he was at the ladder, ready to climb up. "Turn on the flashlight, you need to see now."

Kai turned on the flashlight and shone it on the bottom of the ladder, revealing broken rungs. 
"Remember how I said the bottom of the ladder is unsafe? I need to get off your back so you can boost me up, I'm too short to make the jump. You're tall, can you jump up and grab one of the higher rungs on your own?"

"Stay on my back. If I can jump by myself, I can jump with you on me. The hole is wide enough for the both of us. Hang on tight."

It had been many, many years since he'd last performed airjitzu. It had taken him the longest to master out of his friends, and even several years after the race to the peak of the Wailing Alps, he could feel the air falter and threaten to fall apart beneath him. He concentrated on feeling the gravity around him, staring at the rung he was aiming for. He felt the air around him grow heavier, as though it were forming a shape around him. For long distances, airjitzu required a spin to keep the air moving, but just a jump would do for now.

He jumped as high as he could. The air pushed him up, giving him the boost he needed to grab onto the rung and then pull himself and Kai up onto the safe portion of the ladder. For a brief moment, he closed his eyes and thanked the air for cooperating with him today. It wasn't always his friend in situations when he needed it most.

"Did you feel that draft? The lid is closed. Do you think there's another entrance somewhere?"

"Probably. I'm sure the Serpentine had many ways to get in and out of this place."

Cole reached forward to push the cap.

A small, red dot shone on the back of his hand.

"STOP. I HAVE BEEN AUTHORIZED TO USE SEDATIVE ROUNDS SO YOU MAY BE APPREHENDED. CLIMB DOWN FROM THE LADDER OR BE SHOT DOWN."

"I have an idea," Kai whispered. "Get ready to push the lid off."

The beam of Kai's flashlight pointed away from the cap, and Cole followed it with his eyes until it pointed directly at the nindroid. The nindroid's night vision was still activated, so it would be the temporarily blinded for the next few seconds. The red light disappeared from Cole's hand. He understood that was his cue to take action.
Using his real strength, Cole pushed the cap off in one push and sent it skidding a few feet away from the hole. Kai still on his back, he climbed out swiftly and pulled himself out of the hole just as he heard a shot ring out. He stood up, kicked the cap back into place, and ran away from the alley. He travelled deeper and deeper into the maze of alleyways, only stopping when he felt it was safe.

Kai slid off his back. Cole turned around to face him, mouth open to ask where to go. He was lost, he had no idea how to get to a main street from here. But then Kai started to laugh.

It sounded hysterical. Kai placed a hand on Cole's shoulder and doubled over, body shaking as he sucked in breaths between fits of laughter. "Holy fucking shit," Kai breathed. "We made it."

Cole had seen this kind of laughter before, back when they had just started their missions and there was a certain type of fun to be found in the life-threatening danger they faced every other day. It was the laughter they shared after escaping the enemy, after coming out of a mission alive even if the odds were stacked against them. It was the pure, unimaginable ecstasy of facing death and surviving anyways.

Over time, this laughter died out. Zane died and suddenly, the dangerous missions weren't so fun because they didn't feel invincible anymore. Cole could remember the change, how his confidence before missions dwindled and Nya's call for action over the Bounty's intercom created a storm of dread in his body.

Cole felt something bubble up inside of him and then he started laughing, too. Kai leaned on him more, and more, and more, until Cole felt like he was holding his whole body weight. He moved to push Kai's hand off his shoulder so they could leave, but touched something wet and sticky when he did. Cole pulled his hand back and found himself staring at smeared blood.

He looked at Kai's hand. There was a tiny puncture in his skin, right in one of the blue veins travelling across the top of his hand. Oh, no.

"Kai, are you okay?"

Kai's laugh was airy, like he couldn't put enough force into it. "Yeah, dude, I'm good. Stupid 'bot shot me, though."

"With the sedative rounds? The ones that make you all loopy and eventually pass out?"

"Is that what sedative means? Huh."

Cole groaned. "Okay, I cannot take you home on public transportation if you're acting like this. Does Nya have a car?"

"Nah. And she doesn't like her moto—motor—motorcycle anymore. You should see it in the garage, man. It's all covered in fairy dust."

"Fairy dust?"

"Maybe just regular dust. I don't know."

Cole groaned again, this time louder as he pulled up Zane's contact. The closest movie theatre was several blocks away, so he would have to admit to lying about where was. Zane was programmed to follow the law like it was his own code of ethics, but he could be forgiving at times. Trespassing wasn't exactly the most heinous of crimes for a teenager to commit, anyways. Even if the other person with him was thousands of years-old.
"Hello?" came Zane's voice when he picked up. "Is everything all right?"

Cole winced. "Uh, not really. We're in a bit of a situation here."

"Please elaborate."

"I may have, uh . . . lied to you about what we were doing."

"I know."

"What?"

"That dog movie does not premiere for another week, Cole. I greatly enjoy animal movies. I would know. However, this is beside the point. What happened?"

"Well, I let Kai choose what to do and we wound up in the Serpentine tomb beneath the city. The nindroid caught us and shot Kai with a sedative round. He's really out of it, so I was wondering if you could pick us up?"

Zane's words dripped with disappointment. "I suppose I could. Where are you?"

"Somewhere downtown. I'll find the closest main street you can drive on."

"Let me know when you arrive."

The call ended. Kai was now leaning on Cole completely, eyes glazed over as he stared at nothing. Cole slapped his cheek. "You still there?"

"Where else would I be?" Kai mumbled. He sounded sleepy.

"Can you walk?"

"Yeah man, I learned how to do that years ago," Kai said. He took a step and Cole had to catch him before he collapsed to the floor. "Now that I think-a it, maybe not."

"This is almost as bad as the time the Venomari got you," Cole muttered. He maneuvered Kai's arm so that it was draped over the back of his shoulders. Cole tucked his own arm beneath Kai's free arm and held onto his side, supporting him so he could stand straight.

"What'd you say?"

"Nothing. Can you hop on one leg for me? It's less suspicious if people think you hurt yourself."

Kai hummed in agreement and shifted his weight onto his right leg. Cole looked around. Okay, now it was time to figure out how to get out of here.

Cole refused to backtrack towards the tunnel entrance, so he continued to delve deeper until he found an alleyway that connected to one of Ninjago City's moderately busy streets. Waiting on the street corner with Kai, Cole sent his location to Zane and waited for his response.

zjfalcon
I will be there in ten minutes.

zjfalcon
I updated Nya on the situation. Do not worry, I assured her that you are a good influence and do not usually trespass or break other laws. She says that she looks forward to meeting you.
Ten minutes later on the dot, a silver car pulled to a stop at the edge of the curb. Zane waved at them through the window. Cole practically threw Kai in the backseat and then climbed into the passenger seat, shutting the door behind him. He stared out the window to avoid looking at Zane. "Hey, is this your dad?"

Kai leaned forward, placing his body between the two front seats to get their attention. He pointed to Zane. "Hey, is this your dad?"

Cole brought himself to look at Zane. He laughed at the horrified expression on his face, and after a few moments, Zane laughed, too.

After arguing back and forth with Kai until he fastened his seatbelt—Zane refused to drive if otherwise—they finally left the curb and made their way through the city. PIXAL's voice occasionally spoke through the car's speakers, telling them when to turn as she followed the directions to Kai and Nya's home address.

Kai was knocked out in the backseat when they finally arrived. Cole threw him over his shoulder, memorized the code to the front door given by Zane, and then walked up the short flight of steps to Kai's home.

He lived in a quiet, residential neighbourhood filled with townhouses and duplexes and public parks on every other street corner. It was a few blocks away from the closest main street, so it was cut off from busy traffic during the daytime. Cole inputted the code to the door and nudged the door open with his foot.

Outside, their home looked clean and well-kept. Inside, however, was a different story. Coats and shoes were thrown all over the front hallway, flowers that died a long time ago were still on tables in the halls, and Cole could only imagine what their kitchen must have looked like. He didn't venture that far, instead climbing up their carpeted stairs to find Kai's bedroom. There were three bedrooms, but Kai's bedroom was easy to distinguish from the others. Old stickers decorated the white door, phrases like "No Girls Allowed" and "Kai's Evil Lair" written in angry red and black print. The stickers were peeling. Kai must have had them for a long time, now.

Kai's room was cleaner than expected. His desk was stacked with textbooks, some of which were open. He'd at least done some studying, though probably because Nya forced him to. His bookshelf didn't have many books, instead filled with trophies and framed photos of young children. Kai and some childhood friends. One of the little girls had curly, red hair, reminding him of Skylor from so many years ago. Was she back, too?

Cole stopped snooping around Kai's room and finally put his unconscious friend to bed. He pulled the blankets over Kai's shoulders for good measure, then closed the door behind him. He left the house and typed in the code again to lock the door. Zane was still in his car, but his voice could be heard as he talked to someone through the car window. As Cole got closer, he saw who he was talking to: a teenage girl in a leather jacket, and straight, black hair cut at the shoulders. Cole nearly tripped over his feet.

It was Nya.

She glanced up at him and waved him over. She said something to Zane and then walked around to the back of the car, where she waited until Cole built up the courage to approach her.

She smiled and shook his hand. "Nice to meet you. I'm Nya, Kai's sister."

Cole swallowed. "I'm Cole."
"Oh, I know. Don't tell him I said this, but Kai talks about you a lot. He was really excited to hang out with you. I just didn't expect it to happen today," she said with a laugh.

"Yeah, sorry about that. I had no idea," Cole said.

"Ah, it's all right. How were you supposed to know?" she said. "Between you and me, I don't think he was going to pass that exam in the first place. Science isn't really his strong suit. Honestly, I'm just glad he got home safe. Thanks for not just ditching him on the sidewalk, or something. Then I would have a problem with you."

"Hey, what kind of friend would I be if I didn't help him escape from the cops?"

"Probably like his other friends. They're not very supportive." She looked over Cole's shoulder at their house, then back to him. "I got to leave early by claiming a family emergency, so I should probably go inside. But hey, feel free to come over anytime. I think having a friend that has his shit together will be good for him."

They said goodbye and then Cole and Zane were driving away, Cole filling him in on everything Kai had told him back in the tomb. Zane narrowed his eyes as he stared at the road.

"Do you remember when we time travelled?"

"When we kidnapped Nya?"

"Yes. If I remember correctly, Kai had no interest in becoming a ninja unless Nya was put in danger," he said. "I find it interesting that he has this drive now. Maybe there is more to all this than we initially thought."

"What do you mean?"

"It is easy to conclude that they have been reincarnated in some way. They look the same, sound the same, and have the same base personalities. Kai and Nya's childhood has been altered slightly, but remains the same at the core. Nya is an intern in security at Borg, and she confided in me that she chose this career because she wants to make Ninjago City a safer place. Do you find this as interesting as I do?"

"I'm sorry. What are you getting at here?"

"I'm saying that they both have the same drive they had to protect people not before they became ninja, but after they became ninja. What if they have retained their 'ninja' mindset?" Zane said. "When your father forced you to become a dancer, why did you quit?"

"Uh, I quit because I didn't feel like it was right for me. It wasn't what I wanted to be when I was older."

"Exactly. So what if Kai struggles because the one thing he wants to be is the only thing he can't be?" Zane pulled onto Cole's street and parked next to his building. "I do believe they have been reincarnated. But I do not believe they were given a 'blank slate', so to speak. I believe they are the same people they were when they died. What they lack now is the opportunity to help people by being ninja. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Huh. I'd never thought about that."

"That's okay, you do not have my processing power." Zane smiled. "If you notice anything else, feel free to 'hit me up' as you like to say."
"That was a thing three thousand years ago. I'm getting out of this car right now. Bye, dad!" Cole pushed open the door and stepped out. He slammed the door.

He heard the window roll down. "I thought I was your mother!"

Kai was inactive on all social media for the next three weeks. Choosing to be patient, Cole busied himself by redecorating his flower shop and then bickering with his employees when they told him it looked ugly. When he could no longer re-arrange flowers and vases, he got in contact with Zane to see what Nya was up to. Zane told him to be patient, and that he would let him know if something new came up.

Boredom started to become a problem. Sitting in his office and doing nothing was making him itch with the urge to get out and do something. Stupid Kai and his stupid rant about doing nothing, making him conscious about wasting time.

It made him wonder when was the last time he'd donned his ninja robes and fought evil with Zane. A few lifetimes at least, maybe five. The big bads just didn't pop up as much anymore.

Hmm. He hadn't looked forward to fight in a really, really long time.

This was an interesting feeling.

Three weeks after the tomb, Kai messaged him.

**kai_fire13**
yo just thought id let you know im alive

**kai_fire13**
hows it going flint?

**flintcole**
I'm bored.

**flintcole**
How were exams?

**kai_fire13**
uh just got my results back yesterday

**kai_fire13**
i failed science theory obvi but didnt fail the lab so theres that

**kai_fire13**
haha funny story there were a couple questions on my history exam about the ninja

**kai_fire13**
i got them right bc i knew their colors and how many of them there were

**kai_fire13**
thanks for that btw i passed by like 2%

**kai_fire13**
i passed everything other than math tho
kai_fire13
nya is such a fkn nonbeliever im telling ya

flintcole
So, are you doing summer school or something for the stuff you failed?

kai_fire13
guess i kinda have to¯\_(ツ)_/¯

flintcole
Okay. I have a serious question.

kai_fire13
hit me

flintcole
When is your next lesson at your dojo?

kai_fire13
are you gonna come watch? lmao dude trust me its boring if youre spectating

flintcole
No, I don’t want to watch. I want to join you.

kai_fire13
DUDE

kai_fire13
i know youre like fast and strong and all that but my class is wayyyyyyyyy too advanced for a beginner like you

kai_fire13
your ass would get demolished

kai_fire13
maybe by me maybe by my coach

kai_fire13
idk by who but it would happen okay

flintcole
What if I challenge you to a fight?

kai_fire13
ooooooh man youve done it

kai_fire13
youre in for it now dude

kai_fire13
sending you the address asap

kai_fire13
meet me there tuesday at 20:30

Kai's dojo was located in the heart of downtown. Cole was impressed by its size, yet its most impressive feature was the amount of ribbons, trophies, and plaques displayed in their windows. Most of their competitors had won nationals every year for the past decade, and they prided themselves on being the best. When Cole arrived, Kai brought him to a private practice area separated by a curtain and laid down the rules. No attacking the head, no moves that could theoretically hurt someone, and first to knock the other onto the mat three times was the victor.

All three matches ended with Kai on his back. Kai stared at him incredulously, one word breaking the silence.

"How?"

"I was trained by a guy who studied the ninja," Cole explained. "There aren't any good videos around anymore, but there are old reports of their activities. They used a unique fighting style, one designed to counter, not attack. It was ideal for fighting new types of people every few years."

"Can you teach me?"

"Teach you?"

"Yeah. Or at least introduce me to this guy you know."

"You don't need it. Why would you learn it if you don't need it?"

"What, and you do? Don't be a hypocrite."

"I didn't have much of a choice in the matter."

"Unless you're about to dump your tragic backstory on me right now, I don't see why I can't learn it. Hear me out: every year since I was ten, I've lost nationals to the same person. If you teach me this ninja stuff, I can win. I can be the strongest fighter in my age group in the whole country."

"Where would we practice? We can't do it here."

"My basement. Nya and I used to practice down there all the time."

Cole paused to think. He could trust Kai not to use it for the wrong purposes. It certainly wouldn't do the world any harm to have another trained ninja.

Not that Cole would ever let him near a real fight. It was too risky.

"Fine. But just know that I'm a pretty strict teacher. No one I train with likes me for very long."

"You think I could get this far if I couldn't handle a strict teacher? When do we start?"

"When are nationals?"

"A month away."

"We start tomorrow. You have a lot to learn."

Cole neglected to tell Zane about his new partnership with Kai. Kai promised that Nya wouldn't care, but chose to keep it a secret so she wouldn't accidentally spill the beans to Zane. He forwarded Cole his summer schedule, circling the times he was free in red. His classes were only in the
afternoon, making him available and Nya-free from eight in the morning until noon. Four hours a
day was good enough to get down most of what he needed by the time nationals rolled around.

Cole updated his employees to tell them that he would be busy every morning for the next month and
they could call him if something was wrong. He arrived at Kai's house at eight AM the next day,
unlocked the door with the code, and shook Kai awake when he didn't respond to his name being
called from the front hall. Kai complained all the way through a quick breakfast and getting changed,
claiming it was too early to be awake during the summer. Cole disagreed and then forced him to
push all the furniture against the walls until they had a flat, used carpet to practice on.

The first session was spent teaching Kai the basics of blocking. Cole taught him not to anticipate his
enemy's attacks, but to react to them on time. To make things interesting, Cole ended the session with
another spar, allowing Kai to practice what he'd learned on a real, moving target.

Cole still won. But he could see improvement.

By the end of the first week, Kai was blocking Cole's attacks and landing hits and when Cole met up
with Zane for lunch, he was forced to wear a long-sleeve shirt to hide his bruises. Zane didn't inquire
into his odd choice of summer apparel, but sent a few strange glances his way that Cole pretended
not to notice.

The second week went just as smoothly. On Friday, Kai forgot to take his phone out of his back
pocket and landed on it, shattering its screen. When he told Nya, she used her internship to get him a
free version of the latest model and made him promise up and down not to "trip on the stairs" while
holding it ever again. Kai laughed about it over their messages, saying he should break things more
often if he was going to be rewarded for it.

The following Monday, Kai wandered into Cole's flower shop with a laptop and sat down in his
office. He explained that his courses were online, so it didn't matter where he was so long as he was
logged into the virtual classroom. Cole accused him of only being there to use his bandwidth, to
which Kai shrugged, mumbling something about watching too many videos and not wanting to pay
a fee if he wanted to continue.

They found themselves spending entire days together. The mornings were spent training and the
afternoons were spent in the flower shop, Kai lounging around in the office while Cole did whatever
he had to do that day. Sometimes, Kai asked him a question about homework and Cole would
frown, try to remember, and then excuse his ignorance by saying he attended performing arts school
and couldn't help him with science or math.

That bit of knowledge really threw Kai for a loop.

"You were a dancer?"

"Yep. Nya thinks I'm a good influence, so don't tell her this bit: I quit."

"Quit dancing?"

"I quit school. Ran away and didn't look back for more than a year."

Kai bit the inside of his cheek, looking thoughtful. "Oh."

On the Thursday of the third week, Nya came home early when she forgot her laptop and snuck
downstairs because she heard them practicing and feared there were burglars in her house. She found
Cole in the middle of throwing a punch at Kai, yelled in surprise, and distracted Kai enough that
Cole's fist connected with Kai's right cheek and knocked him into the table next to the wall.
Kai was back up in an instant, throwing himself between Cole and Nya before she could jump to her brother's defense.

"It's not what it looks like," Kai said, arms spread out as though he were protecting Cole from Nya's wrath.

"Not what it looks like? What is it supposed to look like? He punched you into the freaking wall!"

"He's teaching me how to fight."

"What? Don't you already know how to do that? What is he teaching you that you don't already know? How to defend yourself from our now-broken coffee table?"

Cole glanced at the table Kai'd crashed into. The two front legs were broken, facing in and putting the tabletop on an angle. Whoops.

"He's better than I am, okay? He's helping me train so I can finally win nationals."

She gasped. "Wait, is this why you broke your phone?"

"Uh, maybe?"

"I hate both of you," she hissed. She pointed at Kai. "You are so lucky I'm in a rush and have to leave." She pointed at Cole. "I assume this is supposed to be a secret, so I won't tell Zane. Just make sure my brother wins, okay?"

"He'll win," Cole said. "I promise."

The end of the fourth week—their last week training—was cause for celebration. On the last day, Kai finally gained the upper hand over Cole and knocked him to the floor. Kai cheered and kicked a nearby chair into the wall out of excitement. Cole stood up and laughed when Kai put Nya on speakerphone to tell her what happened, but she couldn't stay on the phone for long so she congratulated him and hung up to go work on something.

The next weekend was the tournament. It was being hosted at a huge sports complex located outside the city, so Cole convinced Zane to come and they all piled into his car and drove out into the country, fighting over the radio until Nya eventually won by pulling an aux cord out of her bag, and the last hour was spent listening to the horrendous mix of genres that was her music library. Zane knew the words to every pop song and Cole switched places with Nya so he could sit in the back with Kai and shred air guitar whenever a song they both knew played over the car's speakers.

Kai tried to call his parents to let them know what he was doing, but all he got was dialtone so he vowed to call them later and brushed off Cole's concerned look by saying he was used to it. Kai found his coach and took off, waving goodbye and promising to meet up with them again so they could go home together. Cole and the others found close seats in the stands and waited for Kai to come on while they watched the other competitors from Kai's division duke it out on the platform.

Cole smiled as he watched them. Kai was going to cream everyone in this tournament.

"Oh! Do you see the girl down there? She's the one that wins every year."

Nya pointed to a girl with familiar red curls and an orange gi.

Cole exchanged a look with Zane.
"What's her name?" Cole asked.

"Skylor. She isn't so bad herself, but her dad's an asshole. He's been mean to Kai ever since they started competing against each other in tournaments."

Another glance with Zane, but this one out of concern. Skylor was one thing, Chen was something else.

Skylor was quick on her feet, dodging attacks until she saw opportunities to strike. Cole hadn't seen much of her during the Tournament of Elements, but knew that mastering an element like amber required flexibility. She was adaptable.

Cole understood why she'd beaten Kai so many years in a row. She fought like a ninja, but most importantly, fought like Nya. Nya, who could take on the green ninja and win during their sparring matches, who could beat every ninja in a fight because she knew how to adjust her style for every opponent even before Wu taught her to.

Skylor was adaptable. But now, so was Kai.

The finals were going to be interesting.

When Kai walked onto the platform, they cheered so loudly that the people sitting in front of them twisted in their seats and shot them annoyed glares. They were even louder when Kai won, slamming his opponent onto the mat in a matter of seconds by using a special technique Cole had taught him. Kai faced them and offered a thumbs-up.

Both Kai and Skylor won every round they fought until finals rolled around in the late afternoon. The competitors that lost sat together on the sidelines, passing what looked to be candy between them until two piles formed on one end. Nya explained that they had a tradition of betting on the final competitors, although usually one pile was bigger than the other since Skylor won without question every year. This time, however, the piles were equal.

"Kai really surprised everyone. I hope he surprises Skylor, too."

The match began and they circled each other, neither attacking yet. Cole saw Skylor's lips move. She was talking to Kai, and he was responding. Skylor laughed at something he said.

How typical of them.

Skylor wound up striking first. Kai blocked and went to counter with a kick, to which she jumped out of the way. When Kai attacked, she dodged but didn't attack back. Cole knew she was gauging him, trying to understand the way he was fighting.

Cole could only hope that Kai would realize this too and attack while he had the upper hand.

Kai managed to land a lucky blow during a tussle, knocking her back a few feet. All of the competitors on the sidelines gasped. She recovered quickly, shifting back into her fighting stance. They were evenly matched, exchanging blows and blocking one another's attacks until the match dragged on for longer than any of the others in the tournament.

But then, like most of Kai's practice sessions, the fight ended with him on his back after Skylor blocked a punch and kicked his legs out from under him. She reached out to him, offering her hand. Kai didn't have a chance to accept it before her father came stomping onto the platform and yanked her back. His voice carried over into the audience as he screamed in her face.
The scene was familiar to Cole, a father yelling at their child for what he deemed to be a mediocre performance. He found himself staring at his feet as a strange weight settled in his core. He hated that even after he'd made up with his dad, even after he'd been dead for thousands of years, he could still feel his eyes staring him down and his disappointed voice ringing in his ears.

His presence was just as imposing—just as suffocating—in death as it had been when he was alive.

They cheered just as loud when Kai won the second place trophy, but Kai didn't look as happy as everyone else was pretending to be. They were all disappointed, not in Kai but in the results. They knew he'd done his best. They just wanted him to finally win.

As they waited for Kai to exit the platform, Cole saw Skylor place a hand on his shoulder and whisper in his ear. When she pulled away, he smiled a little. Cole remembered the picture of the girl with red curls in Kai's room and wondered if there was more history to them than Nya was letting on.

The car ride home wasn't as fun. Nya tried to cheer him up by pointing out that their fight had been equal, telling him that Skylor only won because she was lucky and that he could win next year if he tried his hardest. "She didn't win because she was lucky, she won because she's better than me," Kai muttered in response as he stared out the window. Nya caught Cole's eye in the rearview mirror and shrugged. There really wasn't much she could say to make it better.

Zane dropped off Kai and Nya first, and when he pulled up in front of Cole's building, started talking.

"You taught Kai to fight like that, didn't you?"

"He wanted to learn. I don't know, it just seems like he loses a lot. I wanted him to win something."

Zane frowned. "I understand. But Chen has returned. What if other enemies have returned as well? If Pythor chose to attack, what would stop Kai from wanting to help now that he has the ability to do so? We know he wants to help people. Now he can."

"If he wants to help, there isn't much we can do. What's the issue?"

There was a pause before Zane spoke again.

"I do not wish to see him die again because I failed to keep him safe from a life of danger."

Kai started coming to the flower shop in the morning and staying until the late afternoon. As his exams approached, Cole found himself quizzing him on subjects he didn't know. It reminded Cole of listening to Jay rant from the top bunk, babbling about whatever came to mind late into the night. Sometimes, he talked about robotics and science and Cole would ask questions because he didn't always understand. Jay would always happily explain, detouring the conversation to go into detail about something Cole couldn't wrap his head around.

"I like talking to you," Jay would say. "You listen. Other people just wait for their turn to speak."

Kai wasn't as happy to explain a concept, grumbling as he flipped back to his notes from earlier in the semester to read them out loud. By the time his exams came around, Cole felt like he knew about as much science as Kai did. Something about learning a little made him want to learn more, and he wondered if neglecting to return to school even after all these years was a bad decision.

On the morning of Kai's make-up exams, Cole sent him a few encouraging messages that were read but never responded to. Later in the day, Kai got back to him and said that he thought the exams
went okay but wasn't getting his hopes up. Apparently, he had a habit of studying and then failing anyways.

On September 2nd, Kai contacted him over DMs.

**kai_fire13**  
guess whose exam results just came in the mail  

**flintcole**  
Yours?  

**kai_fire13**  
you know it  

**kai_fire13**  
k so i did pass math but really the mark is nothing to celebrate  

**flintcole**  
Science?  

**kai_fire13**  
72%  

**kai_fire13**  
B)  

Kai never signed up for university, so he couldn't attend any classes until next fall. With nothing to do for a year, he promised both Nya and Cole that he would spend his time training so he could finally beat Skylor at this year's nationals. Two weeks into his gap year, Kai walked into the flower shop with a duffle bag and said he was ready to start his ninja training.

Cole couldn't miss every day of work and didn't want to train at night and disturb Nya while she was sleeping, so he asked where they were going to train if the basement was no longer an option. In response, Kai pulled a single key out of his pocket. His coach trusted him enough to grant him access to the dojo whenever he wanted, so it looked like they were finally going to have a real practice space.

Cole told him used to get to sleeping during the day because they were going to train during a ninja's preferred time of day: nighttime. They practiced from 22:00 until the early hours of the morning, fine tuning what Cole taught him before nationals and developing new skills and techniques to use for next year's tournament. Cole had Zane send him a video of Skylor's fight with Kai, then forwarded it to Kai so they could review it before each practice. He pointed out her adaptability, and during their third session, settled on a game plan with Kai.

"When you go into the match with her, I want you to use your old fighting style to start. She'll get used to being on the defense. When she starts to win, switch over to the ninja style. You can win using the element of surprise."

"Sounds to me like you have a history of planning out battles. You sure you've never coached before?"

"I'm sure."

The first few months were spent building up his speed. Cole wanted Kai to be fast, faster than Skylor
and faster than Jay ever was. He trained him to throw punches and kicks that could scare even a Master of Speed, then trained him to block moves just as fast. By the time Day of the Departed rolled around, Kai was moving as fast as he had back in the ninja days. The next step was building up his power.

Day of the Departed was weird this year. It was usually spent watching old videos with Zane and laughing over Jay's running commentary as he made stupid vlogs about their daily lives, and then settling down to watch horror movies and get sick on candy until Cole passed out on Zane's couch and awoke with a disgusting taste in his mouth after eating chocolate and candy before sleeping. This year, they both had trouble watching the videos. It felt a little strange to honour people that weren't quite-so-dead anymore.

Cole still got sick on candy, though. Some traditions were never meant to die.

It never snowed in Ninjago City, even during winter, and Kai confessed that he'd never actually touched snow in person. Cole knew that Kai had always preferred warm weather, but now he was no longer afraid of water so maybe this had changed, too. Cole convinced Zane to drive them and Nya far into the countryside so they could make snow angels and have a snowball fight so competitive that Zane only won by using his ice powers to manipulate the snow around him. Cole couldn't accuse him of cheating in front of Kai and Nya, so he silently seethed in the car all the way home and yelled at him over messages later.

zjfalcon
I did nothing of the sort. :)

Spring came around and sunshowers took over their lives, everyone wearing raincoats even in the warm weather because getting rained on was a chance no matter what the forecasts said. Kai could now beat Cole in half their fights, and although the change was slow, Kai was turning into the fighter he used to be. He was quick and smart and if he didn't beat Skylor, Cole would be genuinely surprised.

Kai chose to hang out with Cole on his actual birthday, and along with Zane and Nya, they went to Mega Monster Amusement Park despite the rain and then ate at Kai's favorite restaurant for dinner. Kai pulled out his phone every few minutes like he was expecting something important, checking his messages even though the counter was still at zero. When nothing happened by the end of dinner, Kai turned off his phone and gave it to Nya, telling her to hold onto it until the next morning.

They opened presents at Kai and Nya's house because Cole's gift, in particular, wasn't something that could be opened in public. The present came in a long black case, and Kai jokingly asked if he'd been gifted a guitar before he unlatched the case and opened it up.

The excited grin on Kai's face after receiving an authentic katana was something Cole would never forget. Nya gave him a look that said why would you buy this for him, he's actually going to hurt himself and it's going to be your fault but slapped Kai on the back and told him he should learn how to use it anyways.

The next day, Kai canceled training so he could celebrate his birthday with his high school friends. Cole took the night off, glad to finally have some alone time. At three in the morning, he awoke to fifty new messages after he'd forgotten to turn on 'night mode' before falling asleep.

kai_fire13
fpweojim so opfcked uprn

kai_fire13
Cole rubbed his eyes and forced himself to feel awake enough to answer.

flintcole
Are you lost? Please don't tell me your friends ditched you after hanging out on train tracks or whatever it is you guys do.

kai_fire13
nonononono nononono

kai_fire13
nonot ewthqose assholes

kai_fire13
the,, otweftjer ones

flintcole
What? What are you talking about?

There was no answer. A few hours later, Cole gave in to paranoia and contacted Nya to ask if she had any idea where Kai was. She sounded tired over the phone as she told him that Kai had come home and passed out after a night of partying with his friends.

"I'd hoped that he was done with them. Just between you and me, I've always hated them. Friends are supposed to be nice to each other, right? All they do is make fun of each other and force each other to follow through on dangerous dares. Like, I get it. Teenagers are supposed to be mean and stupid. But do you know what they did last night? They got super drunk and tried to get Kai to let them into the dojo so they could trash the place. Thankfully he'd left the key here, so he couldn't really do anything, but then they wanted to break in, and they gave Kai a lot of shit for it when he refused. Well, that's what I was able to understand. You got text messages from him, I'm sure you can imagine what that sounds like out loud. It makes me a little sad, though. I don't think he's had a very fun birthday this year."

Kai got into contact with Cole after dinner. He was feeling okay, and despite a headache, was willing to train tonight. Cole tried his best to teach Kai, but there was a hollow look in his eyes that made Cole take a step back and let them just spar for the night. Kai came at Cole hard, regressing back to his old style and not being particularly careful, crashing onto the floor before getting back up and trying to beat Cole again and never quitting until Cole finally called it off and told him the session was over. Kai went home with a few more bruises than usual that night.

When they met outside the dojo before their next session, Kai awkwardly apologized for his
behaviour by explaining that he'd been angry about something that he refused to disclose. He was looking forward to their training session so he could clear his head and focus on something else.

They were interrupted halfway through their session by the sound of Kai's ringtone going off. Kai stopped what he was doing and ran across the floor, diving for his bag and pulling out his phone. He stared at the screen for a few seconds, taking in deep breaths. Then he accepted the call and pressed his phone to his ear.

When Kai spoke, his voice was barely a whisper.

"Dad?"

Cole couldn't hear what his dad was saying. But listening to Kai was enough to know what was happening.

"No, it's okay, you didn't wake me up . . . Thanks, I guess, but you're three days late . . . I know you're busy, it's fine . . . What about mom? Where is she? . . . Whatever, it's not like either of you can ever come to the phone anyways . . . No, I'm not mad, I'm just— . . . Yeah, yeah, I know . . . When's the next time you're going to be home? . . . No, I don't need anything, I just haven't seen you in over a year . . . Yes, it has been that long. You cancelled Mother's Day and couldn't make it to grad . . . I know, I know you're busy . . . You have to go? . . . Okay, I'll talk to you soon . . . Where even are you? . . . Dad?"

Kai pulled the phone away from his ear. It dropped from his hand and fell into his bag. Kai zipped it up, wiped his eyes, and then turned to face Cole.

"I'm done for the night. Do you want to go do something?"

It was Cole's idea to go up to his roof. They sat close to each other as they looked out at the city, taking in the rainbow of neon lights around them. There was a light breeze that ruffled their hair and made them both scoot in closer because even though Ninjago City was usually warm, it cooled down at nights and their thin spring clothes weren't enough to keep out the cold.

They were silent for a long time before Kai spoke up.

"I had this weird dream," he said. He yawned into the back of his hand. "It was on my birthday. I know you're not supposed to admit to dreaming about your friends, but everyone does it so shut up and don't judge, okay? We were on a beach together, and there were some other people I couldn't recognize. We were waiting for something—something important, I think. It was so vivid; I could hear the waves crashing against the shore, feel the sand beneath my feet. It felt more like a memory than a dream. It made me think that maybe, we knew each other in a past life. Wouldn't that be cool?"

Cole clenched his fist and tried not to think about how true it was.

"Yeah. It would be cool."

Kai slept over at Cole's apartment, passing out on the couch with no blanket or pillow and not even stirring when Cole woke up in the morning and went through his usual routine. Before he left, Cole placed a spare key on the coffee table with a note that told Kai to lock up when he went home.

Cole let Kai keep the key, and by the time the summer sun was scorching the city, Kai was staying over at Cole's place a few times a month to avoid Nya after an argument or just because he felt like it. He started to stress about university, still not sure what he wanted to go into and once again expressing his fear of doing nothing with his life.
"I don't want to do any of this," he said as he scrolled through Ninjago City University's list of programs, showing them to Cole. "Look at these! They're all such bullshit. Who wants to be an accountant for the rest of their life?"

"I mean, if it makes you feel any better, you almost failed low math. I don't think you could be an accountant in the first place."

"Is that what an accountant does? Math? That's so sad."

"Agreed."

It took several hours of research, career aptitude tests, and encouragement for Kai to finally settle down on a major. On the same day Kai sent off his application, he received a call from his dojo asking him to help demonstrate moves to a class of young students. Kai was always one to show off, so he accepted without hesitation and found himself teaching kids basic moves at least twice a week. At their practice sessions, Kai would talk about how much the kids loved him and practically begged him to come back to every lesson. "They think I'm the coolest person ever because I can beat their teacher in a fight. I've got to admit, I kind of agree with them. Since when could I beat the dojo masters?"

The two weeks leading up to nationals were spent training harder and longer. Cole refused to show Kai any mercy during their spars, using some of his real strength to throw him off and force him to adapt. Cole would imitate Lloyd's fighting style, and when Kai adapted, switched it over to Jay's, then Zane's, then his own, and for the last few days he only used Skylor's. Kai was fast. Strong. Adaptable. Smart. Balanced.

He was everything a ninja was supposed to be.

It was during their last practice session that Kai called his parents and asked them to come to nationals, saying that he was finally going to win and wanted them there to see it. They actually accepted and Kai spent their practice time talking about his parents, telling Cole about how even though they weren't around that much, they were really cool and he couldn't wait for them to see him compete at nationals. They hadn't seen him fight since he was little, so Kai was pretty sure his improvement was going to knock their socks off.

Nationals were being held seven hours away, located in the heart of Skylor's home town. They piled in Zane's car again and left a day early, making a road trip out of it by stopping in small towns along the way. By the time they checked into their hotel rooms the sun had set beyond the horizon, so they called it a night and decided that they would explore the town tomorrow after finals.

In the morning, Kai called his parents but they didn't pick up. He said they were only supposed to get there in the afternoon anyways, so they were probably driving or something and couldn't answer. Nya shot Cole a worried look but told Kai that he was probably right, and they would be here soon.

They arrived at the complex early and Cole sat down with Kai before he ran off with his official coach to go over the plan again. "Aggressive first. Ninja second," he said. "You adapt to her, she doesn't adapt to you. You got this." Kai wasn't a huggy person so Cole settled for a high five and promised to cheer him on from the stands with the others.

Skylor hadn't changed much since the previous year. Chen watched in the background as she fought with the same style, letting her opponent attack first and then taking them down once she saw a pattern. When she won her first match, she looked back for Chen's approval. He nodded. She'd done well.
Cole could only imagine the pressure. She was competing in her hometown, and after last year's close call, had a lot at stake. Cole felt sorry for her. If Kai won, Chen's reaction wasn't going to be pretty.

Kai was so fast and so strong that he tore through his opponents like they were practice dummies, ending some of his matches only seconds after they began. After his fights, he always turned towards Cole and the others and frowned when he saw the two empty seats occupied by Nya's bags. During the semi-finals, Kai stole a glance at the stands and opened himself up for a kick that almost made him lose the match. He recovered and won anyways, but only by using his old, aggressive style to pummel his opponent into submission.

It was 15:50 and there were ten minutes until the final match. The other competitors were sitting on the sidelines again, passing candy amongst themselves to make the betting piles. Skylor was on a bench with Chen, talking animatedly about what Cole could only assume was going to be her strategy for the fight. And then, there was Kai.

His coach was talking to him, but Kai kept looking up at the stands, not really paying any attention to the conversation. He chewed on his thumbnail as he glanced back and forth, right foot tapping rapidly against the floor.

Nya was on her phone, calling the same number over and over again but no one was picking up. She gave up and shoved her phone in her pocket. She turned to Cole. "I'm going to go talk to him. You should come, too."

They jumped the railing and landed in the arena. Nya excused herself to Kai's coach and then pulled her brother away, finding an empty corner where they could talk.

"What's wrong?"

"They promised they were going to come," Kai said. "They told me they were proud of me. They wanted to see me compete because they felt bad for being so busy these past what, ten years? They said they wanted to see you, too. They said they missed us. So where are they? Whenever they cancel, they always call. Why haven't they called us? I don't know if I did something wrong or if they decided this wasn't worth the time, and I wouldn't blame them because it's not like I have a great track record of winning these stupid competitions, let alone anything in general. What have I ever done to make them proud? Why would they want to see me or call me on time for my birthday? It's not like I've ever given them a reason to love me."

When Nya comforted someone, she wrapped her arms around them, held them close, and whispered encouraging words into their ear. Cole remembered when she did it to him, acting as an anchor in the world when he was no longer human and felt himself losing touch with reality. She sat with him and talked to him until he felt better, and it was in her embrace that he felt something for the first time that day.

So when Nya was confronted with an emotional Kai, the last thing he expected her to do was yell.

"You know what, Kai? *Fuck our parents.*" She put her hands on his shoulders. "If they're not here to see you win, it's their loss. The people that actually care about you are here, so stop getting hung up on people that don't give a shit about you—" she pointed to Skylor "—and go kick her ass!"

"I—" Kai began to say, but Nya interrupted his sentence by stepping forward and hugging him.

"I'm sorry they're not here," she said softly. "But don't lose because of them. You can do this. I believe in you."
She pulled away and the coach told them they had to leave, so Cole offered the only comfort he could — "Remember what I taught you. Even if your head isn't in it, instinct will take over. You're a natural fighter. You got this." — and he jumped back over the railing with Nya and sat down. With a shared look, they took her bags off the empty seats and set them on the floor. Nya crossed her arms and told him she was done saving room for people that were never going to show up.

The match lasted a total of three minutes. Cole spent those three minutes on the edge of his seat, and by the end of the match his fingers hurt from gripping the plastic seat so hard. He watched as Kai took off, attacking Skylor with a flurry of kicks and punches that she blocked, dodged, and eventually learned to counter. During tussles, she landed hits and knocked Kai to the side. At two minutes in, Kai could no longer attack without getting hit back. "Come on, Kai," Cole whispered. "Switch over."

Skylor kicked him hard enough that he almost fell to the mat. Kai regained his balance, took a step back, and then shifted his stance. Skylor didn't approach, keeping her distance. There was no playful banter this time around—they both knew what was at stake. For only the second time in her life, Skylor was being genuinely challenged by someone for her throne in her division. One wrong move would knock her down to second place.

There was nothing wrong with how she chose to attack. She tested the waters with a unique move, something Cole hadn't seen from her yet. It ended with a kick, going straight for Kai's chest. But reacting was the core of this fighting style, and Kai did exactly what he'd been taught: he blocked with one arm and used his other to slam into her chest so hard that she crashed against the mat at his feet.

And just like that, he'd won. Cole, Nya, and Zane jumped from their seats, cheering and clapping so hard that Cole's hands stung by the end of the awards ceremony, stopping only to watch Nya take pictures of Kai and his first place trophy with her phone. For a few pictures, Skylor and Kai put their arms over each other's shoulders like they were teammates instead of rivals. Cole looked around for Chen, but he was nowhere to be seen.

The crowds and other competitors were leaving when they were finally able to meet Kai on the arena floor. Nya gave him another hug, but this time he didn't accept it as graciously as last time and pushed her away after thanking her. Kai started to introduce Cole and Zane to Skylor, but couldn't finish before a large hand grabbed his shoulder and spun him around.

It was Chen.

Cole instinctively took a step back and glanced at Zane. Zane's eyes were narrowed, but he stood still.

"Congratulations on your victory! You deserved to win, you really did."

"Um, thanks. Skylor fought well, too."

"Now, I'm curious: how did you manage to improve so dramatically these past two years?" Chen asked.

"Oh, the reason's right here." Kai took a step back and threw an arm over Cole's shoulders. "Best coach I've ever had."

"Uh huh. And he isn't a coach at your dojo?"

"No. Why do you ask?"
Chen smiled. "I was just thinking that I should hire him to coach my daughter, too. Then maybe she could take back her title."

Cole gulped. He would never do it to begin with, but the thought of being in close quarters with Chen on a regular basis was enough to make his skin crawl.

"Sorry, I'm only training Kai because we're friends. I'm not exactly a professional or anything."

"No worries, it's fine. Skylor, come with me, won't you?"

Chen turned around and walked away. Skylor followed him, walking backwards so she could face them and shrug her shoulders. She mouthed the words see you later to Kai before pivoting to catch up with her father.

And see them later, she did. When everyone arrived back at the hotel, Kai confessed that he'd made plans with Skylor so they could hang out now that they had a chance for the first time in nine years. Skylor showed up in the hotel lobby, and Kai introduced her to Cole without interruption.

"This is Skylor. We used to be best friends when we were little, even if we only got to see each other at tournaments. Then we grew up and it got a little competitive, so we haven't had the chance to hang out in forever," Kai said. "Skylor, this is Cole. He's a good friend."

Cole and Skylor exchanged awkward greetings. Kai laughed at them and then dragged Skylor away, promising Cole and the others that he'd be back around midnight. Cole, Nya, and Zane did get to explore the town a little bit. They found a small restaurant so they could eat dinner and walked around the main area, admiring the small shops but never going inside. If Cole looked up, he could see the stars in the sky. But he couldn't remember the constellations Jay had taught him to recognize, so he kept his eyes on the architecture around him to avoid thinking about how he couldn't remember something so important.

Everyone was pretty tired on the ride home. They didn't make any stops, everyone voting to just drive without stopping and get to the city as early as possible. Nya's phone died halfway through the ride, so Kai plugged his into the car and let his rock music take over the car for the last three hours.

Kai came over to the flower shop every day for the last week of summer, anxiously checking his email every hour to see if NCU had finally gotten back to him about his admission. He'd been put on a waiting list, so his chances of getting in weren't very high. Cole tried to offer encouragement, but Kai would tell him to stop bothering because no amount of Cole's words would change the university's decision.

Tomorrow was the last day NCU was sending out acceptances. Kai had given up on his email, opting to sit in Cole's office chair and lay his head face-down on the desk as he tried to figure out what he was going to do if he wasn't accepted.

Chen's timely phone call didn't make matters much easier, either.

Kai answered the call on speaker phone so Cole could hear what he had to say.

"Kai, how great to speak to you again. I have a few questions regarding the official rule book."

"Okay? I don't really know anything and you should probably be calling the league for this, but shoot away, I guess."

"Just this morning I was looking it over and noticed something pretty interesting. Did you know that just last year they banned secondary coaching?"
Cole felt his stomach drop. Oh, no.

". . . What?"

"It says here that it's against the rules to train under a coach unaffiliated with your dojo. It also says that any competitor caught breaking this rule would be disqualified, lose their title, and be suspended from competing in nationals for up to five years. So, tell me: what was the name of that friend of yours, again? The one that was training you in his spare time?"

Kai rubbed his face with his hands, mouthing a string of curse words as he stared at his phone. Chen had got them. He hadn't asked about Cole because he cared, he'd asked so he could get Kai—Skylor's only real competition—kicked from the league.

"Judging from your silence, you must be as surprised as I am. But don't worry, I won't report you. Not when I don't even know if you'll be competing next year."

"I . . ."

"It would be such a shame if you were caught cheating. I suppose you only have two options: come clean and face the consequences, or accept this year's victory and quit forever. I'm really sorry that you won't be able to compete next year either way. Honestly, I blame myself. I completely forgot to include your dojo in the email I sent out to inform everyone of the changes made to the rules. How irresponsible of me! So, Kai, what will you do?"

"Fuck you."

"I need an answer now, Kai."

"Fine. You win. I quit," Kai spat. "I hope Skylor has fun collecting medals for the rest of her life. Just make sure to remember that they're not yours."

"I'm pleased by your decision. I'll elect to forget about this cheating scandal when I hear you've officially left the league."

Chen hung up. Kai leaned forward and buried his face in his hands. Cole was never very good at dealing with emotional people, so when Kai started to cry, he didn't know what to say or do. In a matter of minutes, Chen had managed to take away one of the few things Kai actually cared about. Cole struggled to find something to say. As he thought of what to do, he texted Nya to update her on the situation and she promised to swing by in twenty minutes to talk to Kai on her own.

"I knew people like that when I was a dancer," Cole decided to say. "Parents always hated it when I was chosen for a solo over their own kid. They would bitch until they were told to fuck off or got their way. This sucks, though. Accusing you of cheating after deliberately not sending you the updated rules? What a dick."

"I wish there was some way to fight back," Kai mumbled. "But there isn't. We're expected to read the updated rule book every year, but no one does. The stupid e-mails are sent out of courtesy, so I can't even complain about being left out on purpose. If I go to the administration, they'll just tell me that I should have read the rules in the first place and let him get away with it. Chen's gotten other kids kicked out by pulling similar shit, too. I guess it's about time that he finally sniped me."

Even in this new life, Chen hadn't changed. He was still just has manipulative and willing to cheat to get his way. Cole hadn't thought it was possible to hate Chen more than he already did, but watching Kai now made him want to drive back to that small town and personally punch Chen in the face. Full Earth strength. No restraint.
Chen would probably die. Cole was oddly okay with the prospect.

Nya showed up a little earlier than promised so she could take Kai home and figure out what he was going to do next year. Cole tried to remind her that the university still had one day left to send out acceptances, but she didn't seem very optimistic. Neither did Kai, who exited the office with a red face and glassy eyes. The sight created a weird feeling in Cole's stomach. He wasn't used to seeing Kai cry—wasn't used to seeing him so openly vulnerable.

They left and Cole called Zane to tell him about what happened. Zane was angry with Chen, but especially with himself for not catching the lie when it was being told right in front of him. Cole assured him that it wasn't his fault, but like Nya, Zane wasn't very interested in listening to his words.

Kai never got in contact with him for the rest of the day. Cole was worried about him but knew there was nothing he could do to help, so he sat on his couch and watched TV as a sinking feeling of dread took over his body. He wound up falling asleep on the couch, and when he woke up, the TV was playing, sun was shining in through his windows, and there was a single message waiting in his inbox.

[sent at 2:03 AM]

kai_fire13
if i dont get into uni what am i supposed to do with my life

Cole got up and made breakfast. He only responded when he was sitting on his couch and eating a bowl of his favorite cereal.

flintcole
I don't know, man.

kai_fire13
its okay

kai_fire13
neither do i

flintcole
Look, I didn't exactly graduate high school and I'm still doing okay.

flintcole
Just because life isn't going the way you'd planned it to doesn't mean you won't end up fine.

kai_fire13
ok

It was Saturday, so Cole found himself sitting alone at home all day as he waited for Kai's response. He kept himself busy by watching more movies, choosing to watch weird, low-budget documentaries about historical conspiracies until Nya contacted him and made him promise to bring Kai out tonight because she figured he'd rather be with a friend than his sister right now. By his fourth documentary, Cole was trying—and failing—to come up with an idea for how to make Kai feel better.

With no news from Kai at the end of the day, it became apparent that post-secondary education wasn't going to be a part of his immediate future. The feeling of dread returned and pulled Cole's attention away from both the documentaries and planning, only allowing him to focus on either/or for
a few minutes before he was distracted again.

Around dinner, a documentary ended and another one popped up in his recommendations.

**Elemental Ninja: Ninjago's Historic Protectors**

Cole stared at the title for a long time. And then he had an idea.

**flintcole**

Come over. I know you're not busy.

**kai_fire13**

it depends

**kai_fire13**

are your parents home

**flintcole**

Oh, haha. Are you coming or not?

**kai_fire13**

sure i guess

**flintcole**

Awesome. One last thing: what's your favorite ice cream flavor?

Like that night in late spring, Kai and Cole sat side-by-side on the rooftop, legs dangling over the edge as they both ate from their own pint of ice cream. Kai hadn't gelled his hair today, so it rustled in the light summer breeze in a way Cole had never seen before. Kai had never been one to let go of his appearance for anyone.

Sitting there made Cole think of Kai's dream. They were both waiting for something. Kai, for official rejection. Cole, for finally breaking the silence and telling Kai something he needed to hear.

Cole ate the last bit of chocolate ice cream in the container and set it to the side. It was time.

"Kai, do you remember why I started talking to you?"

"Uh, I remember calling you out for stalking my social media. Then I found out you weren't a *total* creep because you were only doing it because I look like one of the ninja. I look like the red one, right?"

"You're right. But it's always been a little more than that."

Kai frowned. "What?"

Cole paused before he finally asked the question.

"Would you believe me if I told you I was the black ninja?"

"Bullshit. They're all dead."

"That's not true, though. Kai, I'm thirty-one hundred years-old. I've looked twenty-one for *centuries*. Zane's in the same boat as I am. He's the white ninja."
There was a pensive look on Kai's face. He wasn't looking at Cole, but at the streets below, the city lights reflecting off his eyes. He put his unfinished ice cream beside him and gripped the edge of the building.

"This is really fucking stupid. I think this is a stupid prank and you're trying to take advantage of me while I'm an emotional mess, but if you did tell me you were the black ninja, I would believe you. It would explain why you could fight so well, why you were so strong and fast, why Zane wouldn't leave my sister alone at Borg. But I want to know what this has to do with me. Is it because I look like an old friend of yours? Is that the only reason why you care? Let's be real here, if I didn't look like the red ninja, you wouldn't have given a shit about me in the first place. You probably would have kept running your shitty little flower shop until I died and you just kept right on living until the end of the world. I guess I should think this is the coolest thing ever, but I just can't bring myself to be excited about it. It feels like we're only friends because you miss someone that looks like me. Tell me if I'm wrong to feel this way."

"You're not. I'll admit that the only reason I wanted to talk to you was because you looked like the red ninja, but trust me when I say this is so much deeper than that. The red ninja's name was Kai. His younger sister, the magenta ninja, was named Nya. There are too many similarities for this to be an appearance-based coincidence."

"Tell me about him."

"Huh?"

"Tell me about Kai. The red ninja."

"He was a hothead. He was stubborn. He never thought anything through. He was quick to jump to action even if the situation didn't call for it. He . . . cared a lot. He cared too much. He would have done anything for the people he cared about. He would willingly sacrifice the mission—or even himself—if it meant saving his teammates. He was protective of Nya. He was good with kids because he'd basically raised his sister on his own. He was best friends with the green ninja. He was best friends with everyone. He—" Cole hiccuped "—he didn't always get along with me because I would yell at him for not following the plan. He got over it as time went on and we became best friends, too. He was compassionate and passionate and everything in between and I really, really miss him."

"He raised his sister? What about his parents?"

"They died when he was little. He gave up school and everything so he could take care of Nya."

"Oh," Kai said. "So . . . what are you trying to say?"

Cole wiped his eyes and swallowed. "I think you're the red ninja. I think you're reincarnated or reborn with no memories of the person you used to be or however you want to explain it. All I know is that I've spent more than a year getting to know you and wouldn't be telling you this if I didn't think it was true."

"They had pictures back then. Do you have any videos?"

"Yeah. I have them saved on my laptop downstairs."

"I want to see them."

They crowded next to each other on Cole's couch in the dark. The laptop was placed on the coffee table, video player up and running. Cole leaned forward and pressed the spacebar, starting the video.
"Hello, future us! This is Jay with vlog number six, documenting the lives of Ninjago's very own secret ninja force."

"Jay, why are you doing this? What's the point?"

"This is history in the making. Cole. They're gonna like, show this in schools and shit in a few years from now."

"If your goal is to get this into the education system, you may want to stop swearing. What's that line you always say? 'You shouldn't swear, it's a sign of weak vocal skills'? Also, don't point the camera at the floor. But hey, I'm not the director here. What would I know? Keep up the good work."

"Fucking arts students," Jay mumbled. The camera was pointed at his feet as he walked out of their room. "So pretentious."

Jay pointed the camera up when he entered the kitchen. Kai, Nya, and Zane were sitting on the counters, eating breakfast and talking. They stopped and looked up when Jay entered the room.

"All right, time for a round of interviews!" Jay walked right up to Zane and shoved the camera in his face. It focused on his face, and only his face, so nothing else could be seen. "Zane, how do you feel about our recent victory?"

"We defeated the Great Devourer, so I am proud of the whole team for their contribution in saving all of Ninjago. However, I am a little disappointed that Garmadon now has the Golden Weapons to use whenever he pleases. Who knows what he will do with them?"

"Great question idea!" Jay moved on to Nya, although he took a step back so the camera could see her upper body and head, not just her face. "Nya, what do you think Garmadon will do with the Golden Weapons?"

"Hm, I'm not sure. Maybe he'll kill you and spare us from your stupid vlogs."

"Why is everyone being so mean today?" Jay cried. He moved on to Kai, who frowned as he swallowed his cereal. "Ninja of Fire, how does it feel to know that I totally made out with your sister last night?"

"You fucking what?" Kai demanded. He jumped off the counter and smacked the camera out of the Jay's hands. The camera wound up facing the wall, so only muffled audio could be heard as Jay screamed and his footsteps pounded on the floor as he ran away.

The video ended. Kai spoke up.

"The one that was filming . . . which color was he?"

"Blue. His name was Jay."

"He dated my sister?"

"Yep."

"He sounds kind of annoying, no offense."

"Yeah, he comes off that way. But he grows on you, he really does."

"Huh. Okay. Are there more videos?"
"I have a bunch of them. Zane and I couldn't recover all of them, but we managed to salvage a little under half."

When Jay got his first smart phone, he used it to film the others when they weren't even aware it was happening—his own way of cherishing genuine, authentic memories without the pressure of being on camera. No one had ever known about them, not before he died and Cole, Lloyd, and Zane had gone through all of Jay's saved video files to find old videos.

Jay was right. They hadn't cared about the videos when they were alive, but now that everyone was dead and Cole could feel his memories of that first lifetime fading, he valued them more than ever. He only wished Jay could have realized his important his videos were—how important he was—when he was alive.

The camera was face-down on whatever surface Jay and Kai were sitting on. There was no real video, only audio to be heard.

"... I know the Preeminent has been defeated. I know Lloyd is safe. I know it's been a few months since then and I should stop dwelling on it, but I can't get it out of my head. Am I an idiot? Why would I follow the sun? Why would I try to outsmart Ronin? What the hell is wrong with me? I wasted so much time—Lloyd could have died because I kept slowing us down. What if he died? What if Morro won? What if the Preeminent had won? What if... what if it was all my fault?"

"I know what it's like to lose someone like that," Jay mumbled. "You want to find them and save them, no matter the cost. We always expect ourselves to keep a level head, but truth is, we do stupid things for the people we love. You can't blame yourself for caring too much. If you did, then I'd have no trouble calling you an idiot."

The rest of the video was ambient noise until it clicked off.

"If Nya and I are back, what are the chances the blue and green ones are, too?"

"I have no idea. I don't know how to find them."

"You tracked me down on social media. You can't do the same for them?"

"Jay was never a fan, and there's a chance Lloyd is only a little kid. I don't exactly know a whole lot of people, either. Networking has never really been my thing."

Kai put his arm over Cole's shoulder. In the dim light, Cole could see a familiar expression on Kai's face. It was one of optimistic determination, the kind he wore before going into a fight he was confident he would win. He'd always looked like the first Kai, but now he did more than ever.

"Well, it's a good thing you finally told me. If anyone can track them down, it's me. I know people that know people that know people. I know everyone. The kid may be hard, but Jay shouldn't take too long. Just give me some time."

"You're actually going to find Jay in a city as big as this one? There's millions of people."

"You shouldn't doubt my ability, Cole," Kai said with a smile. "Also, I can't fight anymore and I'm not going to university so even after I get a job I'm really going to need something bigger to work on. I'm not the kind of guy that likes to do nothing with my life, man. I'll find Jay for you. And after I find Jay, I'll get my hands on Lloyd. I promise I'll find them for you. Well, for us. You, me, Zane, and Nya. She was a ninja, too."

"Uh, thanks man. This means a lot. Is there any way I can help you find him?"
"I'll need all of his personal information that you can remember. Full name, social media accounts, pictures, age, what he was doing in school, clubs or community stuff, and all that. The more I have, the better."

"I'll put it all in a document and send it to you. I'll see what I can squeeze out of Zane without rousing suspicion, too," Cole said. "Speaking of which, please don't tell him. I didn't discuss revealing this to you with him and I have a feeling he'll be pissed if he finds out through you and not me. Same goes for Nya. Zane and I will tell her ourselves."

"No prob', I can keep a secret. Just get used to having a new partner, all right? You can't tell me that I'm the reincarnation of a ninja and then not expect me to become one."

Cole pointed at Kai and spoke with his harsh, ninja-leader voice. "You are not going to missions with us. I know you can hold your own in a fight, but you're not an Elemental Master and I don't want you to die at nineteen because you tried to fight some evil warlord on your own or something. Your 'ninja task' is to find Jay and Lloyd, nothing more. Got it?"

"Fine, dad. I'll be your social media monkey and not some cool, bad ass ninja. I will be throwing a temper tantrum every time you do something without me, though."

And so, it was settled. Kai would spend his free time searching for Jay and Lloyd and update Cole whenever he found something pertaining to either of them. Cole felt giddy and scared at the prospect of meeting them again. What kind of people would they be? What kind of life was Jay living? What kind of life was Lloyd living? Jay's life was pretty normal, so Cole could imagine it being similar. But Lloyd? Lloyd was going to surprise him no matter what his life ended up being like.

Kai slept over and Nya called Cole to thank him for having him over. Kai had seemed to be doing better in their texts, and she didn't know what Cole did to make him feel better, but she was thankful for it. "I was afraid he was going to feel like he had no future," she told him. "I'm glad he doesn't seem to think so."

Kai took a break from everything to relax for a few days, and the day he was going to go job hunting, he received an e-mail from his dojo regarding his future with them now that he could no longer compete. He'd called Cole the moment he'd received it, barely able to form a coherent sentence as he tried—and failed—to read out loud to him over the phone.

"Kai, please. Take a deep breath and try again."

"Okay, okay, sorry. I'll start over," Kai said. "It says, 'Due to your history of volunteering with the young students at this dojo, we have recognized your ability to work well with young children. Given your limbo-like state in the league, we would like to offer you a full-time job managing our various social media accounts and teaching classes to students of all ages. We need young people like you if we wish to continue to beat the competition at tournaments across the country. We understand you have school and may not be available, so please let us know what you decide to do ASAP.'"

Kai started a few days later. Every night, he would message Cole and tell him about all the shenanigans he got up to with the kids he was teaching. Apparently, he was the kind of coach that also used his practice slots to let his trainees booby trap the room for its next users, or create elaborate games that required them to use the skills they'd learned to win. Cole told Kai he was the kind of trainer he'd wished he had when he was a dancer, because strict teachers at a performing arts school coupled with a strict father were not the best combination for keeping someone that wasn't a fan of the art in the first place motivated to stay. Kai said he could remember long, boring sessions when he was younger. He was trying to avoid boredom with all his might.
Kai came over one weekend in September. He told Cole that the search for Jay was a lot harder than he'd initially thought, and he was either using a fake name online or didn't exist in the first place because he wasn't anywhere on the web. Cole assured Kai that if anyone was alive and in the city, he could find them. He just had to keep looking.

The phone call came in as they were going to sleep. Kai frowned at the caller ID, and Cole caught a glimpse of who it was: his mom.

"Hello?" Kai asked. He sounded impatient, annoyed. Cole wasn't used to hearing him talk to his parents this way. "What do you want?"

Cole was close enough that he could hear his mother's voice.

"How are things going? We heard you didn't get into university. Is everything okay?"

"Mom, that was three weeks ago. Are you serious?"

"Why are you so angry, sweetie? First, you refuse to speak to your father, and now this? What did we do?"

"I'm mad because you used to leave me alone with a baby for hours when I was only five. I'm mad because when I was eleven, you started leaving me alone with my nine year-old sister for weeks at a time. I'm mad because I always wanted you to be a part of my life but you never were," Kai said. "So it's not about what you did, it's about what you didn't do. Which was just about everything, by the way. Of course, I'm mad. I'm done making excuses for you guys so I can convince myself that you actually care about me. Nya gave up on you a long time ago and I think I have, too. See you in a few years when you decide to finally drop in to say hello. If you decide to come back in the first place. Not that it really makes a difference."

"Everything we do is for this family. How can you speak to me this way?"

"What fucking family? All I see are me and my younger sister and our two parents that are out in the middle of nowhere doing who knows fucking what because they never talk to us. It's like—it's like you're dead. You can stay out there forever, I don't care anymore."

Kai hung up. His face was red, the kind of red it had been when he'd left the office after the phone call with Chen. Nya wasn't there to come to his rescue this time, so Cole reached forward and put his hand on Kai's shoulder. Kai didn't retreat like he normally did under physical affection, so Cole leaned over and wrapped his arms around Kai.

Kai sniffled. "I want to hate them. But I can't, because I still love them."

It was late fall when Nya got into contact with Cole. The two months after Kai's call with his parents had gone by smoothly, and everyone was slipping back into their routines as the year went on. Kai was busy during the day so Cole wound up alone at the flower shop again, Nya was studying hard to do well during senior year, and Zane was helping out at Borg Industries like he always did.

nyarai
You know, there's a long weekend coming up for holidays. There's this place Kai keeps telling me about, and I think we should all go there on the Saturday if we can.

flintcole
Oh yeah? Where is it?

nyarai
It's some old ship or something. I looked it up, and it's called 'Destiny's Bounty'. It seems pretty cool, don't you think?

Destiny's Bounty was located a few miles outside of the city, blocked off by a number of fences and nindroid guards that Zane convinced to let them in even though the exhibit was closed on holidays. They all wore earmuffs and mittens because snow was starting to fall, covering the ship in a thin layer of white that looked almost surreal because the Bounty had never been still long enough for it to gather any kind of snow or dust.

They climbed the metal staircase up onto the wooden deck. The snow crunched beneath their boots as they walked around, and Cole eventually broke off with Kai to show him where he used to sleep and train and eat and live. The rooms in the lower decks were blocked off by metal chains and there was a snack bar for tourists in one of the walls that Cole had never known how to feel about. Kai laughed as Cole told him stories and when they made their way back to the deck, Zane and Nya were sitting on the edge of the ship and watching the snowfall. Cole and Kai joined them, wiping away the snow before sitting down and kicking the side of the ship with their heels as their legs swung back and forth over the edge.

As the snow fell around them and decorated their hair, Cole realized that even if Jay and Lloyd weren't alive, he was perfectly fine living out the next few decades with two people he knew and trusted. Memories or not, they were still his best friends, still his family—and nothing could ever change that.

**RED | FIRE**

**MAGENTA | WATER**

**BLUE | LIGHTNING**

**GREEN | ENERGY**

**TOGETHER | UNITY**
"I'm a little sad, Cole. Every time you visit me, you look the same, but I'm always changing." A cough. "Look at you, you're so young, and I'm so old. We used to be the pretty ones, you know. Now I guess it's only you."

"How would Jay feel if he found out you didn't think he was the hottest guy in the group?"

"I don't think Jay will care."

Sometimes, the reminders felt like kicks to the gut. Cole shifted in his chair and sucked in a deep breath to retain his composure.

Of course, Jay wouldn't care—he died four years ago.

Nya reached forward and tucked a loose strand of hair behind his left ear. She'd always hated long hair, so she'd never understood his decision to grow it out. She told him it was going to get in his way, but Cole disagreed. His life was changing. His friends were leaving him behind, and soon enough, he would be pushed into a new era of life. One with only him and Zane and maybe Lloyd and none of the other people he cared about. He couldn't look in the mirror and see the same person in the photographs from eighty years ago. Life was going to be different. He wanted to look different, too.

She pulled her hand back and rested it on his cheek. She locked eyes with him and stared him down with the intense, inspired look in her eyes that had never quite gone away.

"Cole, you have an eternity ahead of you," she told him. Her voice sounded weak. "I know you always felt like what you did in life was never up to you. Now it is. Please go do the things you've always wanted to do, be the person you've always wanted to be. Live your new life for Kai, and Jay, and me. But most importantly, live it for yourself. You've been taking care of us for so long. Go take care of yourself for once. Go be you."
Two weeks later, the invitation for her funeral arrived in the mail. When Lloyd died sixty years after her funeral, Cole swore to never return to the hospital again. Within those few decades, it transformed from a place of life and healing to a place of death and grieving. He promised he would never step foot inside the clean, white walls of the facility ever again.

So when he got a phone call from the emergency ward one year after the trip to the Bounty with Kai, Nya, and Zane, he didn't know what to do.

The year between was a time for growth. When they returned home from the Bounty, Cole went to Zane’s apartment and finally told him that he’d let Kai in on their secret. Zane wasn't angry, but made Cole promise to stop keeping secrets from him as they dealt with all this reincarnation business. They needed to do this together. They were friends, partners, brothers—they needed to trust each other as they tread through these strange, new waters.

In the late spring, Kai started to leave town for weekends at a time. His new job as a martial arts coach demanded that he take his students to their qualifying tournaments all over the country, so he grew evermore absent as summer approached. However, he made sure he was home for Nya's high school graduation. He snuck Cole into the ceremony by pretending he was a cousin and the two of them sat as close to the front as possible, cheering loudly whenever she was called up to the stage to make up for the lack of family there to see her. The convocation doubled as an awards ceremony, and by the end of the night, Nya had not only a scroll with her name on it but handfuls of trophies and medals and scholarships for some of NCU’s hardest programs. Kai took several pictures, some of which wound up as backgrounds for his phone and laptops and other devices. Kai claimed they were only there to embarrass her, but after seeing Kai wipe away more than one proud tear during her graduation, Cole knew he wasn't telling the truth.

In August, Zane and Cole were invited to Kai's house to discuss his search for Jay. It had almost been a year since Kai started looking, and despite many, many attempts to find him, no one seemed to know the ever-elusive Jay Walker.

"I'm not entirely sure that Jay exists," Kai said. They were seated at his kitchen table, with his laptop open in the centre for all to see. He’d taken screenshots of fruitless social media searches and inconclusive DM conversations with people he knew from all over the country, and then put them into a poorly-designed slideshow that made Cole's artistic side die a little. "When I went to all those martial arts tournaments, I asked around to see if there was a chance he didn't live in the city. Nothing came up. I know you said he'd grown up in some scrapyard in the middle of the Sea of Sand, but because everything is recycled, those don't really exist anymore. I have no leads, no information. Either he hasn't come back or I just can't find him. Either way, I'm sorry. I wanted this to work out."

Cole had refused to get his hopes up during the wait, knowing that the chances of Jay being dead were greater than the chances of being alive. But it still hurt. No matter how impossible it was, he'd wanted to see his best friend again.

"What will you do now?" Zane asked.

"I'm going to keep looking for Jay until Day of the Departed. If nothing comes up by then, I'm going to start searching for Lloyd," Kai replied. "Hopefully he'll be a little bit older, but if he's a kid, I'll still try my best. Most of them lie about their age online so they can get social media early, anyways. I know I sure did."

Zane and Kai dove into a conversation regarding tactics for finding Lloyd. Cole leaned on his elbow as he listened, trying to follow their quick words and plans but failing. The more they spoke, the more an idea pushed to the forefront of his mind and refused to leave. By the time they were starting
to write down their ideas on a document on Kai’s laptop, Cole was clenching his left hand into a fist so hard he could feel his nails bite into his palm.

Cole was a good actor. He knew how to lie, how to pretend, how to convince people he was feeling emotions that he wasn’t. Attending a performing arts school that taught him the basics of acting and having a father he had to lie to on a regular basis had trained him for success; he didn't need to be loud and funny to cover up how he was feeling, like what Jay used to do when he didn't want anyone to ask what was wrong. He knew how to imitate subtle body language, making small gestures that would go unnoticed by the untrained eye and registered subconsciously. When Cole acted, no one knew what he was really feeling. There was no way for them to know otherwise.

But sometimes, his façade crumbled and others could see right through it. Through his blurry vision, Cole could see Zane nudge Kai to get him to stop talking and gestured to Cole.

Zane spoke up. "Cole, are you all right? What is troubling you?"

Cole wanted to brush it off, but he'd made a promise to stop lying. So he told the truth.

"What if we missed them?" he asked. "What if they came back to life and never ran into us and then died without us knowing? What if we missed our opportunity to meet them again? What if this is all for nothing, and Kai and Nya are the last ones to come back?"

Silence. There was nothing to say, no reassurance to be offered because there was a possibility of Cole's fears being true. They didn't know how the reincarnation worked—there was even a chance that Kai and Nya were a freak accident and the other ninja would never get the chance to live again.

The meeting came to a close soon after. Before Cole could leave, Kai pulled him to the side and whispered to his ear.

"I'll find out if they've come back or not." His eyes were ablaze with determination, the kind Cole was used to seeing before an important mission. Seeing it now almost gave him whiplash. "I promise."

Cole went home, and for one of the first times since Kai started looking, he tried to find Jay on his own.

A search for 'Jay Walker' brought up different people, traffic laws, and even the odd history website talking about the original Jay Walker. Cole tried to search by image, running one of Jay's pictures through a variety of reverse search engines. Nothing.

"Come on," he whispered to himself after another failed search. "Please be here."

And still, nothing.

Until the end of summer, Nya and Kai had nothing but good news to tell. After Kai’s students performed well at nationals, he was invited back to the dojo to coach for another year. Nya was finally accepted into her first-choice program, posting a picture of her acceptance letter on her Chirp because she was so excited and relieved that she wanted to show everyone she knew.

The letter read:

**Welcome to Ninjago City University's Biomedical Engineering Program**

After over a month of school, Nya messaged Cole out of the blue one week before Day of The Departed.
You're looking for Jay, right?

What?

Come on, don't play stupid. I know he's a friend of yours.

I don't think Kai ever told you, but I was invited to join the security team at Borg part-time. I have access to all of our facial recognition software, CCTV cameras, etc. It's pretty cool.

Kai asked me to run a picture of your friend through our scanners. Said he was a childhood best friend or something, and you couldn't find him on the Internet after you had dropped out of school.

Cole groaned. Of course, Kai would eventually turn to Nya.

Anyways, I did exactly what he told me to. 'Cause, you know, I'm a cool sister like that.

I found someone with the exact same face. Maybe he got married and took his partner's family name or something, but whatever the reason, he has a different name than expected.

Your friend is in the city, but his name isn't Jay Walker.

It's Jay Gordon.

Around closing time, Nya arrived with a blue folder in her arms. They moved to the office, where Cole pushed all of his papers off of his desk to make room for all the files Nya was delivering. She spread them out on his desk and went through each one with him.

"These are all of the government files we have on him," Nya began. "I'm sure there's a lot here you already know, but I'll just show you what's what." She gestured to one half of the desktop. "These are all of his adoption files. The city is required to check up on him at least once a year to make sure his parents are treating him well, and he hasn't been transferred yet, so that's a good sign." She gestured to the other half. "These are whatever files were also publicly available. He was either home schooled or went through private school, because we have no information on his academics. Most of these files are medical stuff. Did you remember if he had any medical conditions? He goes to the doctor a lot, apparently."

"I'm not sure, but he was always kind of paranoid. I wouldn't be surprised if he went to the emergency room because he thought his cold was a terminal illness."

She laughed. "Sounds fair. I've got to get going and catch up on homework, but I'll see you around." She waved goodbye, and after permanently changing the course of this lifetime for the second time, walked out like nothing of importance had just occurred.

As soon as he heard the shop's door close, he called Kai and thanked him one million times over—even though he was still a little angry that he'd taken a huge risk with Nya—and by the time their
phone call was over, Kai was on his way to the flower shop for an impromptu meeting and Cole was contacting Zane to see if he could come over as well.

By the time the other two had arrived, Cole had already skimmed through each document and was coming up with a plan on how to go about actually finding him. He wanted to get started as soon as possible, because now that he knew Jay had returned too, the thought of waiting even another minute to talk to his dead best friend was unbearable.

But of course, nothing ever really turned out the way he wanted it to.

They began the meeting by looking over all of the files. Jay's parents shared the same full names, Ed and Edna Walker, but were instead listed as adoptive parents. They worked on the assumption that Jay was homeschooled as he had been in the past, and the more they read through Jay's documents, the more they realized that they still knew nothing about him.

Nya had been careful in selecting what she brought to them. There was no location-based information, so if they wanted to find Jay, it would be by name. With Nya's help, they were back at square one, but this time with an advantage: they knew Jay's real name.

"Before we dive into this, I have some good and bad news," Kai said. Cole looked up from the paper he was reading and raised an eyebrow. Kai met his eyes and continued. "My kids all did really well at nationals, so I was invited to a little village on the other end of the Sea of Sand to help set up their own martial arts programs so their students don't have to travel all the way to the city to train. I leave next week, and then I'll be gone for another two weeks before I come home. I know this means a lot to both of you—it means a lot to me, too—but if you want my help, finding Jay will have to wait until next month."

Cole looked at the documents on the table. He saw the promise of his best friend, of someone he cared about so much it would make his heart hurt to think of him for too long. He'd waited three thousand years for him. He could wait another month.

He looked back to Kai and nodded. "Take all the time you need. We'll find him next month."

Kai had never been away from home for more than a few days at a time, so he invited Cole over to help him pack and sort out what he needed to bring. Cole and Kai worked together to dig through his drawers to find all the clothing he would need, and made sure to save room for all of Kai's martial arts equipment in his small suitcase. Cole was always a meticulous person and would fold each article of Kai's clothing before putting them inside, something that made Kai laugh at him because he'd apparently never folded anything in his life.

By the end of the night, Kai was ready to go. He was going to take the train early the next morning and Cole made sure he had a printed and digital copy of his ticket before he let him off the hook and they spent the rest of the night together, hanging out in the living room while Nya studied at the kitchen table in the next room over and occasionally laughed at some of the things they would say.

Cole stood in the doorway before he said goodbye. Kai didn't let him leave until he promised to look after Nya while he was gone, because the small town had little cell reception and he was worried about her being alone for so long with no one to contact if anything went wrong. Cole knew she could handle herself, but went along with what Kai said and made the promise, assuring him he would check in on her every day and make sure she was doing all right. They waved goodbye before Cole left and Kai went away for what would become the longest two weeks of this lifetime.

The next day, Cole sent Nya a message to let her know that she could let him know if she needed help, but he wasn't going to pester her every day for updates. She replied quickly and told him that
she would keep it in mind.

On the second day of Kai’s absence, she went offline on all social media.

On the third day of Kai’s absence, Cole tried to message and call her. His texts were left unread and his calls went straight to voicemail. He found himself growing worried, anxiously wondering if anything had happened to her. By the time the sun had set and Nya had yet to reply, he put on his winter jacket and prepared himself to brave the cold and walk to their house to see if she was there.

He was lacing up his boots when he received a phone call.

"Is this Cole?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for responding at such a late hour. We would like to request that you come to the emergency ward of Ninjago City Hospital as soon as possible."

"What? Why?"

"Nya was admitted yesterday evening after an accident left her with severe injuries. We need a family contact to approve a number of medical procedures that must go underway."

"I'm not—" the receptionist hung up, and Cole was left with a the dead ringing of a dropped call.

Cole ran his hands through his hair. NCH was on the other side of town and public transit didn't come nearly often enough at night for him to get there as soon as he wanted to. He settled on calling Zane, who never slept and offered to pick him up in a heartbeat when he learned of the situation.

A familiar silver car pulled up in front of his building a few minutes later. Cole left the lobby and sat in the passenger seat of Zane's car, slamming the door a little too hard and sitting completely still as his eyes stared at the dashboard until Zane prodded him and demanded he put on his seatbelt before they began to drive.

Cole tapped his hands rapidly on his legs and chewed on his tongue like gum as the city lights passed by and the memories of his last few visits to the hospital returned and attacked him with anxiety and fear and such a horrible sense of dread that he couldn't take his mind off of it long enough to respond to Zane's voice as he asked questions Cole was incapable of answering. Zane's voice sounded muffled. Cole didn't think he would have been able to hear him even if he could take his focus away from his friends on their white deathbeds, connected to a million tubes and machines in a room that smelled of lemon and decay.

The car pulled to a stop. Cole peered out the window and saw the white building and leaned forward and buried his face in his hands because he was worried he was going to vomit if he looked at it for too long.

Minutes passed. Cole didn't feel any better.

"It's been three thousand years and I can't bring myself to go inside a hospital," Cole whispered to no one in particular. "I'm a fucking ninja and I can't go inside a stupid building. Why can't I do this?"

"Cole, I understand that they asked for you, but I believe it would be best if I joined you. I don't think you're in any position to go in there on your own."

"No, no, no, no, no—you can't. They wanted family."
"You are not related to them, in case you have forgotten."

"But I'm human. I don't look like Nya or Kai but I can at least pretend to be adopted, or something."

"Unlike me?"

"Sorry, I don't mean for it to sound this way, but yes. You couldn't pass for family. I can. I need to do this alone for tonight."

Zane hummed in understanding. The car fell silent again.

More time passed. Cole glanced at the clock in the corner of his vision, watching the minutes tick by. He was wasting time. But he couldn't move.

Bright lights flooded the car. A car horn honked behind them. Cole realized they'd been parked in front of the entrance to the emergency ward for twenty minutes.

Cole unclipped his seatbelt. "I'm going now."

"How are you getting home?"

"I don't know. I'll figure it out," he said. He opened the door. The fresh night air hit his face and he felt his stomach churn again. "Thanks for the lift. I'll let you know how it goes."

He stepped out and closed the door. He sucked in a deep breath—then another, and another, and another—and then made his way inside. Zane only drove away when the glass doors shut behind him. Cole was officially on his own.

The interior of the hospital looked different than he remembered. This provided some comfort as he made his way to the receptionist desk, trying to force back the memories that were apparently trying to kill him.

There were a number of people behind the desk, all of whom looked busy. It took a few seconds for one of them to notice.

"Oh, hi!" one of them said with a smile. "How can I help you? Are you here to visit? You should know our visiting hours ended two hours ago."

"I'm not here to visit, I'm here to—I'm here to approve something for someone named Nya. I was called and asked to come in half an hour ago."

"Ah, I think I know who you're talking about. I'm going to call her nurse. She'll give you all the paperwork you need to fill out."

"Paperwork?" he asked, but the receptionist didn't hear him. She'd already picked up the phone and was speaking to someone over the line.

Cole glanced around, watching the various people streaming through the front hall. There were a number of nindroids as well, but they only filled service positions and were few and far between. Although it was nighttime, it was still busy as ever and the rush of seeing people made him want to vomit all over again.

A voice came from behind. "Hello, are you Cole?"

The nurse had neat, straight hair pinned back into a clean bun. Cole felt more than disheveled in her vicinity.
Cole confirmed his identity, and she invited him to follow her into the ward. It was rather calm inside, but most of the patients were asleep, so not much was happening at this hour. The nurse pulled him into a small office and instructed him to sit down in a chair. She sat across from him on the other side of a metal desk. Cole read her name tag: Naomi M.

"So," she began, "Nya was admitted yesterday night. I am not sure if you have been updated, but she was involved in an automobile accident. She's currently unconscious in a room down the hall."

"An accident?" Cole asked. "What happened?"

"She was struck by an unknown vehicle while walking home last night. The police have yet to find the driver, and at this point, we don't know if they will," Naomi said. "But this isn't what you're here for. Her brother is listed as her emergency contact, but he's unfortunately out of town for the next while. We were able to get into touch with him after calling him for the fifth time, and even then, it was patchy. He told us to contact you—said something about you being her only immediate family in the city."

"We need you to fill out a few forms. We legally cannot operate on a non-consenting patient, so your word trumps her silence in this case. I'm going to ask you a question I hope you know the answer to: Are you her husband?"

Cole hesitated. Naomi raised her eyebrows in faux curiosity; an acting trick Cole could spot from a mile away. She wanted him to lie.

"Are you Nya's husband?" Naomi asked again. "I need a 'yes' or 'no' answer."

Cole didn't hesitate this time.

"Yes. Yes, I am."

There were piles of paperwork. They needed consent to perform a number of operations, of which included more emergency knee surgery. Cole thought back to his conversation with Kai in the Serpentine tomb. Nya already had permanent damage in her knee, would this accident make it worse?

He signed all the papers. During his first lifetime as a ninja, he'd witnessed his friends take serious injuries that they didn't have time to fix, like the time Kai fractured his leg while on a mission and had to continue until the end despite it because it was too dangerous to take any time to do something about it. By the time Kai returned to the bounty, it was swollen and disjointed and he had to take more than three months off to let it rest. If Nya could be helped on time, Cole wasn't about to stop her from getting the treatment she needed.

Cole wasn't allowed to see Nya yet. Naomi told him that he was welcome to stay in the hospital as long as he liked, but visiting hours were technically over and he couldn't hang around in the emergency ward anymore.

The seating area turned into his own personal hell. Over a few hours, his fear of the hospital turned into agitation. The chairs were uncomfortable and none of the games he usually played on his biotech were capable of satiating his boredom. At three in the morning, he contemplated leaving and going for a walk.

He was zipping up his jacket when Zane messaged him.

*zjfalcon*

How is it going?
flintcole
Nya should be fine. She's not critical, but her bad knee took some damage.

zjfalcon
I hope it will turn out fine. Did they tell you what happened?

flintcole
Yeah, it was a hit and run. Probably a drunk driver or someone that wasn't paying attention. The police weren't able to catch the car, so the driver is a bit of a mystery.

zjfalcon
Really? There are no leads?

flintcole
Nope.

zjfalcon
Huh.

zjfalcon
It's late. Do you want me to bring you home?

flintcole
No, I'll stay here until I find out more tomorrow. Then I'll go home unless something new happens.

zjfalcon
Okay. Let me know if you need anything. I will contact you again soon.

Despite his discomfort, Cole fell asleep.

He awoke the next morning to Naomi tapping his shoulder.

"Sir, please wake up. I have some news."

Naomi didn't take him to her office. This time, she took him to Nya's room.

Nya was covered to her waist in thick, green blankets. Her arms laid beside her on the bed, unmoving and plugged with a few tubes. Her closed eyes looked towards the ceiling, a neutral expression on her face. Stitches covered a large scar on her left cheek. Bruises covered her visible skin. Patches of white bandages covered what Cole could only assume were gashes and scrapes.

It would be a lie if he said he hadn't seen her in similar conditions. But she was always fighting, always alive. Seeing her here, helpless and vulnerable, reminded him of her past-self's final few weeks in the hospital. He covered his mouth with his hand and looked away.

"Are you all right? If you're squeamish, we can talk somewhere else," Naomi said, pulling him out of his thoughts. "I just assumed you'd want to see her. Since you're married, and all."

Cole turned his head to look at Naomi. "I'm fine. What did you need to tell me?"

Naomi started to speak. Cole found himself staring at Nya's broken body once again.

"She's getting knee surgery later today. After that, we're going to keep her unconscious for three days to let her recover a little. We'll determine how long she needs to stay here when she wakes up."
Cole left soon after. He didn't ask Zane for a lift. He figured he could use the walk to let everything settle.

Nya was going to be unconscious for the next three days. As he came to terms with it during his walk home, it began to rain. It started light, softly pattering the roads around him. By the time he arrived home, it was a storm.

Water crashed down onto the city, creating streams along the curbs of the road that poured into sewers and puddles so wide it would take bursts of airjitzu to cross them. The ocean lapped at the shore, creeping up on the sand dunes that separated the beaches from the hard, concrete streets of the city. Power outages swept the city, taking away electricity and internet and heat during the times people needed it most for hours at a time until their lights came flickering back to life in the dead of night.

During these days, Cole didn't leave his apartment. When he had power, he used the Internet to search for any information about Nya's accident. There had been a few news reports before the extreme weather took over all media, but none had any video clips or images that would help Cole locate whoever had hit Nya. He didn't even know why he was looking. How was he supposed to find them? Even if Nya remembered the car, it wouldn't help the investigation since several hundred more most likely existed in the city. Everything was a dead end.

On the third day, Zane arrived in the morning unannounced at Cole's apartment, clutching the case of Cole's favorite movie in his hand. Cole sighed, smiled a little, and then let him inside.

They spent the day together, cuddled up under a blanket as movies played and rain pelted his windows. After the tiring days he'd had, Cole fell asleep on Zane's lap before the sun set in the sky and when he awoke, Zane was still patiently sitting on his couch, watching whatever was on his TV at a volume so low Cole had trouble picking it up.

"Thank you for being so patient with me," Cole found himself mumbling. "Thank you for being here. I don't know what I would have done if you weren't with me all this time."

Zane ran his hand through Cole's hair, a habit he'd picked up after comparing Cole's habits to that of a cat for so many years. "I should be thanking you. During our early years as friends, I never would have thought I'd have someone to keep me company in my later years. Eternity is lonely—I'm glad we have each other."

Cole got up and showered. Zane and Cole ate breakfast, then drove to the hospital together. Cole tried to get Zane to come inside with him to visit Nya, but the nindroid declined, claiming that Nya would likely feel overwhelmed if more than one person greeted her upon her awakening.

Naomi was in the lobby when he entered. She smiled at him from where she was standing next to the receptionist's desk. She brought him to Nya's room, and before she opened the door, she warned him, "Nya's on some strong pain meds right now. For the next few hours, she'll be pretty honest about everything. Don't take anything she says to heart."

Then she left Cole inside alone and closed the door.

Nya looked up at him. A puzzled look crossed her tired face.

"Where's Kai?"

Cole gulped. "He's in that town teaching martial arts, remember?"

Nya pouted.
"I don't want you. I want my brother."

Cole leaned against the wall. He didn't move any closer to her bed.

"Hey, I wish he was here, too. It would make this less awkward. But he's not here, so both of us will have to make do."

"Fuck, that sucks. I hate you."

"What? Why?"

"I mean, I don't hate you. I like you. Not like-like you, but you're all right, I guess. But you and Kai make me sad and jealous sometimes."

"Why?"

"Because Kai's allowed to know your secret and I'm not. Why can't I know you're a ninja, Cole? Do you hate me? I thought I was one of the cool ninja. Have I changed that much?"

Cole felt his stomach drop. "How did you know?"

"When Kai showed me those pictures of us a couple of years ago, I dug a little deeper—" she pinched her thumb and forefinger together "—and figured it out. The black and white ninja never died. That means you've been alive for all these years, pretending to be a bad florist when you're actually a really, really old ninja master."

"I—"

"No, don't speak. I'm mad at you. I don't want to hear your voice anymore."

Cole closed his mouth and crossed his arms. Nya stared at him, eyes narrowed and blazing with a silent anger he'd only ever seen directed to Kai or Jay when they did something she disapproved of. Cole and Nya had always seen eye to eye. This sudden adversity felt foreign to him.

There was a knock on the door. Naomi entered the room, a sheepish smile on her face.

"Hi, sorry to potentially interrupt your reunion, but we need to move on with our plans for the day."

She gestured for Cole to come towards her. "We need to go over her recovery plan alone. You can see each other again later in the day."

"Hold on," Nya called out as Cole was about to leave the room. Naomi poked her head back inside.

"Do you need anything?"

"No, but why does he get to know before me? What makes him so special?"

"Aren't you a med student? I thought you would have known that we go over prognoses with family members alone."

"Family members? What the fuck are you on about?"

"Ouch, rough marriage. I'll come check in on you soon, Nya!"

"Rough marriage? What do you mean rough—"

Naomi pulled Cole through the doorway and shut the door. She laughed for a moment, then regained
her composure and took him to her office. Cole sat down in the same chair as last time and watched as she pulled out Nya's file and laid it on the table.

"The surgery was somewhat successful. The surgeons were able to fix her knee, but the damage has been worsened by the accident. She's lost a lot more movement; walking up stairs, getting into cars, climbing things—these will likely become big challenges for her. The nerves in that region also took a hit, but we won't know the effect of the damage on her until she begins to move around a bit.

"Now, we've arranged for six months of physiotherapy. If everything works out, she'll just need to stick on a brace when she goes out for more than a few hours and her nerves won't cause a problem. This is what we hope will happen, but there is always a chance her body won't recover to the extent we want it to. We'll make different arrangements if this is the case."

Cole's fingers tapped his leg as he heard the news. "How often will she be going to physio?"

"Twice a week for two hours at a time. Of course, this will only begin once she's left the hospital. We figured that she'll only need to stay here for another week before she's good to go."

Nya would be released next Monday. This was also the date Kai was returning home.

It was going to be an eventful day.

Naomi instructed Cole to sit in the waiting room as she repeated everything to Nya. Once again stuck in the uncomfortable chairs, Cole texted Zane to update him on the situation. He texted Kai out of courtesy, but figured his messages wouldn't be seen for quite some time.

*zjfalcon*
Tell Nya I'm proud of her!

When Cole was allowed inside Nya's room a few hours later, he did exactly what Zane told him to do.

Nya scoffed. "What is he proud of me for? Getting hit by a car?"

Cole shrugged. "He's just a bit awkward with this sort of thing. He's just glad that you're fine."

"I'm glad I'm fine, and I'm also glad that those dumb pain meds are wearing off," she said. She threw her head back on her pillow and groaned. "I cannot believe I told you that I know your secret. I was waiting for you to tell me because you trusted me. Honest Nya is Bad Nya. I don't like her."

"If I'm going to be honest, I trust you a lot more than I trust Kai with this sort of thing. Not everyone takes it well."

"I can imagine." Nya patted the side of her bed, inviting Cole to sit down. "Come on. Now that we're open with each other, I want you to tell me about yourself. Not the florist version of you, but the real you. The person only Kai and Zane are allowed to know."

Cole sat on the side of Nya's bed.

And then they talked.

In the first lifetime, Cole and Nya didn't speak with each other very often. When Jay wasn't hogging Nya, he was hogging Cole, so the two of them never got to spend much time together. But during Nya's last few months, they spent nearly all their time together. They would sit together and talk about anything, sometimes reminiscing over memories or gossiping about other patients in her ward.
Hours were spent in conversation, in building a stronger bond between them that they hadn't quite reached before.

Sitting here on her bed now reminded him of those days in such a way that it made his heart hurt. But he didn't leave. He wanted to build that bond now, when she was young and had decades left to live.

They could become better friends than their past-selves. They just had to put in the effort.

"Sounds to me like your life was really interesting for a while and then got really boring," Nya commented with a smile. "I cannot believe you've been alive for this long. How do you deal with humanity's garbage for over three thousand years?"

"It's kind of like a really long movie," Cole admitted. "I like watching mindsets change. I like watching society change. Everyone dreams of travelling to the future, and I've been given the chance to do it. The travel part just takes a very long time."

The sun set, and after another half hour, Naomi came into the room and forced Cole to leave.

Nya called out to him before he left.

"Go to my house and grab my laptop! I need it to survive!" Cole promised he would and then Naomi closed the door and Cole was escorted from the ward.

flintcole
So, Nya knows we're ninja.

zjfalcon
Did you tell her without my permission? :[

flintcole
She figured it out on her own. She's known since I first started talking to Kai.

zjalcon
Knowing Nya, I'm not surprised. Thank you for updating me.

The next morning, Cole took public transportation to Kai and Nya's home and input the code to the front door, only for it to beep at him to tell him that the door was already unlocked. He pushed open the door and went inside, his heart sinking as he feared that Nya had forgotten to lock the door and they'd been robbed during her absence.

Nothing was missing. All was the same, except for a pair of shoes he didn't recognize neatly pushed against the wall. He studied them, noting that they were ten years out of style.

"Hello? Who's there?"

An unfamiliar voice. Female. Older, maybe middle-aged. Came from the kitchen down the hall, but still out of sight.

Cole shifted his weight, ready to bolt if needed. Or fight. If his gut feeling was correct, he wouldn't do either, because he already knew who was here.

A woman appeared in the archway that led to the kitchen. Cole recognized her from the photos he'd seen in his first lifetime and those he'd seen in recent times.
Kai and Nya's mom.

Maya.

A kitchen knife held in her clenched fist gleamed in the light.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

A wave of conflicting emotions ran through him. The thought of the first Maya brought back fond memories, but the sight of the new one filled him with anger. Kai and Nya's deceased mother, since turned neglector because the universe had a cruel sense of humor and needed to teach Kai and Nya the same lessons as before.

She was a pawn. But she'd still hurt his best friends, and for that, he allowed himself to hate her.

He raised his hands in surrender. He could act his way out of this one.

"Nya sent me here to grab her books for her. She's in an exam right now, and forgot her textbook for her class afterwards. I came to get it for her so she doesn't have to rush through her exam."

Maya took a step towards him. "How do you know my daughter if you're not taking the exam with her? You're not in the same program."

"I'm in microbiology. We have a few shared classes during the first semester."

Maya nodded. She took a step back. Cole heard the blade of the knife clang against the counter. When she drew her hand back and placed it in front of her body, it was empty. She believed his story.

She approached him then, reaching forward and taking his hand to shake it without waiting to see if he would. There was a smile on her face, but there was a coldness to her eyes that told him she wasn't as friendly as she was pretending to be.

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Nya's mother. Call me Maya."

Cole panicked. "My name is Griffin Turner."

"Oh. What a unique name, are you from one of the rural areas? They have all kinds of different names over there."

"I moved when I was really little. I've basically lived here my whole life."

"That explains your lack of dialect," Maya said. "I live on the west coast with my husband, and I can still find myself confused by what some people are saying."

Cole was itching to leave. But he continued to speak. "Why are you on the west coast?"

"Nya's father and I are both anthropologists. It involves a lot of field work, so we're away pretty often. Nya and Kai—her older brother—are strong and independent. Try not to worry, we care about them a lot. We wouldn't leave them alone if we didn't think they could handle it."

Cole could do nothing but stare. You made him cry.

"Anyways, I'll let you go find Nya's stuff. Don't want to make you late."

Cole nodded, thanked her, and then bolted up the stairs. As soon as he was in Nya's bedroom, he
took a few deep breaths to calm his beating heart. The insistence that they cared and loved them while they hurt them was too familiar to take lightly.

His father was overbearing. Kai and Nya's parents were barely present.

Similar effect—complete and utter detachment.

Cole took her textbooks and put them in the empty backpack on his shoulders. He found her laptop charging next to her bed and put it in as well, then neatly wrapped the charging cable before putting it in as well. Looking around, he located other items she could find useful. Earbuds, an old portable music player that still worked, notebooks, and a pencil case full of writing materials. He also packed the worn-out stuffed lion sitting on top of her pillow.

He made his way down the stairs quietly, but Maya was waiting for him at the door, so his attempt at a quick escape was fruitless.

She smiled again. Her rosy lipstick failed to conceal the cracks in her lips.

"We only got here today, so we're not sure if Nya knows we're here or not. She won't answer her texts. Tell her we're here, won't you? We don't get to see her often and it would be a shame if we missed her before we took off again."

"How long are you here for?"

"Another two days. We leave on Thursday."

Cole nodded. "I'll make sure to tell her. I promise."

During his walk to the light-rail station, he almost vomited.

He rode the train all the way to the hospital. He watched the scenery go by with disinterest, listening to his favorite music as he did to try to keep his mind off of what had just happened. It was the first sunny day this week, so the city looked especially optimistic and cheerful, even if Cole didn't feel the same way. By the end of the ride, he found that staring at the blue sky had made his mood marginally better, although not by much.

Everyone inside the hospital was in a good mood. The nurses and receptionists smiled pleasantly, and even those in the waiting room seemed a little more hopeful than usual.

But not Nya. When Cole entered her room, she was staring out the window, a scowl on her face and an angry look in her eyes. Her arms were crossed over her chest.

She didn't hear him come in. Cole knocked on the wall to get her attention.

"Hey, how's it going?"

She sighed. "Okay, I guess. I'm just annoyed."

Cole kept his distance again, opting to sit against the wall and sink to the floor. He put his bag next to him.

"Why?"

"A couple of cops came in here a few hours ago to ask about what happened. I couldn't really remember much, so there wasn't anything for me to tell them, and they looked really disappointed. I asked them why. They told me that they have no leads on who hit me. I guess I'm not really that
mad, it was late at night and I don't exactly wear bright clothing, but it's kind of disheartening to know that whoever did it could have killed me and kept driving. I don't even know if the driver stopped. They just . . . kept going. And they won't fess up, even though I'm alive. The cops also refuse to use the CCTV cams. My case isn't a good enough use of their money, I suppose."

"I did a little searching myself, but there's nothing to find. If I was better with technology I probably could have found something, but my knowledge is kind of locked back in ancient times."

Nya pointed to Cole's bag. "Did you bring my laptop?"

Cole brought it her. He kneeled next to her bed to watch her use it, and she tilted the screen in his direction. Her computer connected to the Internet immediately.

"Since Borg and the hospital are connected facilities and I'm a Borg employee, I get their good Internet. Fastest in the country. None of that garbage for guests." She opened an app on her laptop, one titled **BCONT** that displayed a number of different number sequences. She clicked one. Then her computer changed entirely. The operating system was different, as well as the language and time. She opened up the browser as Cole attempted to figure out what had just happened.

"What did you do?"

"Basically, I pay money to people that let me remotely access their computers. Then that computer remotely controls another, and then another, and then another until I'm accessing the Internet through a few different computers. Borg hates it, and it causes a lot of trouble for us when we try to catch hackers. It's kind of funny—when you learn how to secure the Internet, you learn how to break it, too."

"That sounds vaguely illegal."

"Your existence in this century sounds vaguely illegal. Suck it up."

Nya typed in a URL in the address bar. A blank screen came up in her browser. Using one finger, she pushed her screen back. In the bottom corner, a faint number five could been seen against the otherwise white background. She pulled her screen back and the number disappeared. She opened a new tab and went to another website, this time Chirp. She typed into the search bar what appeared to be a random sequence of letters and numbers. A number of Chirp handles came up in the results.

qMPxjCRpPbU1
qMPx2jCRpPbU
qMPxjCRpP3bU
qMPxjC4RpPbU
qM5PxjCRpPbU
qMPxjCRpPb6U

She selected the one with the number five hidden in its handle. The account seemed to tweet nothing but senseless garbage, but Nya knew better. She selected the pinned Chirp—one made that morning—and clicked 'inspect', bringing up the coding behind that specific element of the page. In the fifth line of code, there was another random sequence of letters and numbers. She highlighted it and copied it to her clipboard.
She returned to the blank page. In the address bar, she added a slash onto the end of the URL and pasted the sequence. Then she hit 'enter'.

A different web page opened, this time a real website. It contained a number of links, each leading to a variety of message boards. Nya clicked on the one titled:

cep - current_events_politics

Cole only caught a glimpse of the page before Nya began to create her own post. The single page he saw filled him with dread.

"Nya, what website is this?"

"One full of bad people. We're not supposed to monitor websites at Borg, but we tend to keep an eye on this one, no matter what the law says. People come on here anonymously shittalk groups of people they don't like. The majority if it is just guys hating on girls, though. It's kind of like a preschool playground but for grown-ups that never got into touch with society."

Nya created her post.

>ANON67283 this dumb bitch got hit by a car last week. i wanna see it happen. did anyone get a pic or vid?

>ANON239 kek did she die

>ANON67283 nah

>ANON239 rip

>ANON9586 did she have short black hair and leather jacket

>ANON239 that is 2/3 girls in ninjago city how the fuck do you determine someones id from that

>ANON67283 she had short black hair but idk about the jacket

>ANON9586 i think i know what ur talking about

>ANON9586 it happened right outside my apartment

>ANON9586 i have a security cam that faces the street outside my balcony door just in case

>ANON9586 the driver did stop for a sec after making contact so i got a clear pic

>ANON9586 since im not moron that buys low quality shit, my cam caught everything. even the license plate.

>ANON9586 you want the vid file?

>ANON67283 yes pls that would amazing

>ANON9568 dm me

-ANON67283 has opened a private chatroom!-

-Messages are encrypted end-to-end. Conversation will be deleted 24 hrs after closure. Other users will be notified if screenshots are taken-

>67823: do you have a link? im not downloading anything you send me
>9586: ur smart but naive

>9586: you can have a link

>9586: but you gotta pay for it

>67823: how

>9586: meet up with me

>9586: and bring cash

>9586: none of that traceable etransfer shit

>67823: where do you want to meet up?

>9586: meet me here: [link]

>9586: not to sound like a drug dealer but come alone

>9586: will arrange time and price later

-ANON9586 has closed the chatroom!-

Nya groaned. "Smart-ass."

"What did he do?"

"He's testing my determination, or whatever. I need to keep this session open until he talks to me. If I stop using my computer reroute or close the page, I'll have lost my handle. I won't be able to talk to him. He'll probably only talk to me in a couple of days from now."

"Well, it's a good thing you're stuck in the hospital and aren't expected to be up and doing anything."

Nya smirked. "You're right. This should be easy."

The waiting game had begun. Nya set up her laptop so it wouldn't automatically fall asleep, and then Cole took her charger from his bag and found an empty outlet to plug it into. Nya set a timer on her laptop, one that would count the hours and days and minutes since they'd made the deal. Cole wasn't quite sure why, but she said that she liked to be on top of timings and such things. Cole didn't question it further.

They set the laptop down on the floor so they could go through everything Cole had brought for her. She took the bag and put it on her lap so she could dig through it herself. She pulled out her textbooks and notebooks, setting them aside first so she could go deeper. She laughed at the sight of the music player, telling Cole that she hadn't used it since middle school and it was full of music she found a little embarrassing now. Embarrassing or not, she turned it on and put it on shuffle, letting the older pop and over-emotional rock music fill the gaps of silence in their conversation and provide nostalgic music Cole could recognize but didn't really know the words to.

But Nya did. She held the same level of confidence as her past-self, but it was placed elsewhere—she no longer held confidence her abilities, but in herself as an individual. Cole could remember her reluctance to embrace parts of her people looked down on, her rejection of anything that would cause anyone to see her as anything but strong and brave. Anything remotely embarrassing, like singing
with an untrained voice, was something she would have avoided with all her might. It seemed that now, she no longer cared. She laughed as she sang, and when Cole refused because he didn't know the words, she playfully slapped his arm in feigned anger.

Nya stuck her arm into the bag again and took out the stuffed lion. She cooed at it upon sight, then brought it to her chest for a tight hug. "I cannot believe you brought Optimus Prime. I missed him so much."

"Optimus Prime? Are you serious?" Cole asked with a laugh.

Nya glowered at him. "I was five years-old, okay? I don't think anything is cooler to a five year-old than a lion named Optimus Prime. You try to come up with a better name right now, huh?"

"Okay, let's go simple. Sim—"

A notification from Nya's laptop rang out over the music.

Cole leaned down and grabbed the laptop. Nya took it from his hands and put it on her lap, once again angled towards Cole so he could see it.

But the notification didn't come from the website. It came from a messaging app.

**Mom**

Honey, where are you? Your friend told me he would tell you to come home. Don't you want to see us?

Nya snapped her head to look at him. "Did you meet my mom? Was she home when you got my stuff?"

"She was home," Cole said. "We only talked for a little bit before I left, though."

"Does she know I'm here?" Her voice was sharp.

"No."

And then the tension dissipated.

"Oh, thank goodness," Nya said. She sighed. "Thanks for not telling her. The last thing I need is for them to come here and try to dote on me for a few days before they leave again."

Cole raised an eyebrow at her tone. "You seem a little less excited at the prospect of seeing them than Kai ever was."

"Not to make fun of Kai or anything, but he was a total suck-up to our parents. He'd had more time to bond with them than I did, so I guess he kind of always misses them, even now," she said. "But I never really got to know them. It's hard to describe it, but they always . . . they felt like babysitters. They didn't feel like they were my real parents."

Nya reached forward to put her fingers on the keyboard.

**nyarai**

Can't. See you next time.

On Friday, the rain returned. It began in the early morning, disrupting the predicted forecast of sunny skies and returning Ninjago City to its previously grim mood. Cole wore a rain jacket when he went
outside, walking to the flower shop for the first time in days. Nya had insisted he go back, telling him that she would talk to her friends from school on her laptop to chase away boredom during his absence and that she would update him if the video guy got back to her.

It was a slow day. No one was ever in the mood for flowers on rainy days, so he holed up in his office and took out Jay's files from the drawer in his desk. Ignoring the adoption-related papers, he spread out the medical reports Nya had found in Borg's system. For a moment, Cole wondered if Nya was supposed to have access to this information or not. Would she have offered up Jay’s medical history to someone she didn’t believe had a history with him? If Cole was any other person?

No. Definitely not.

There were many reports, the majority depicting the same scenario over and over: Jay arriving in the hospital, experiencing symptoms, and then the doctors failing to come to any final conclusion on his problems.

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**NINJAGO CITY EMERGENCY**

**DATE: 4/06/84**

**MEDICAL EXAMINATION REPORT**

Surname: **GORDON**

Patient ID: **JGOR983 No. 23977**

Name: **JAY**

Age: **16**

**Described symptoms**

- Nausea, fainting, lightheadedness, drowsiness, heart palpitations*

**Examiner's Note:**

Patient exhibits all symptoms, but no cause is known. Patient will not consent to a blood test or urinalysis. Will keep him under our watch until he stabilizes. Possible sources include: malnutrition, dehydration, seasonal illnesses**, insomnia or lack of sleep, drug abuse, physical exhaustion.

*Unrelated to previously diagnosed G.A.D

**Colds or flus or common bugs.

**Testing Methods Used:**

The patient consented to undergo a number of tests, but none that would investigate his internal functions. No conclusive diagnosis could be made without these tests.
Jay had never had these problems on a regular basis before. What had changed?

The question occupied his thoughts well into the weekend, chasing away all else as a familiar feeling of dread grew present in his belly and he felt nothing but worry and stress for someone he'd never met but knew like the back of his hand. Someone he loved and missed so much that at times it ached and now that Jay was in his grasp he missed him more than ever and he would give anything to just meet him again.

On Sunday, Nya cried. Cole had slept in and only arrived later in the day, and when he did, Nya was furiously punching at her keyboard and there were tears streaming down her red cheeks.

"There was a new nurse today," Nya told him. "They didn't know not to touch my laptop. They closed the screen and set it to the side. I lost my session with the website. I can't talk to the guy anymore."

For the next hour, Cole tried his best to comfort her. He would speak empty words, promising Nya that everything would be all right and they could still find the guy if they tried hard enough. Nya nodded along, but he could see her frustration. She didn't like losing—didn't like giving up. Nothing Cole said would be enough right now.

Cole stuck around until visiting hours were over, doing his best to start conversation but he knew Nya's attention lay elsewhere. Before he left for the night, Nya spoke up.

"Don't tell Kai we tried to find the guy that hit me."

"Why not?"

"Because if you do, he'll try to find him himself."

"Do you seriously think he'd be able to find him?"

"Maybe. But I don't want him to find him. I want to catch that motherfucker myself."

Kai was due to return the following day. Cole was elated at the thought of reuniting with his friend, and found himself grinning when Kai's messages came in around midday.

kai_fire13
I HAVE SERVICE AGAIN

kai_fire13
i have so many fun stories to tell you holy shit

kai_fire13
but first im gonna see nya

kai_fire13
oh fuck gotta go, i could only msg you bc we'd pulled into a small town on the way back to the city

kai_fire13
back to the empty abyss of the countryside i go

kai_fire13
ttyl dude
Cole and Nya tracked Kai's train on the company's website, watching it make its way through various towns until it pulled into Ninjago City's train station. On his way to the hospital, Cole had stopped by Nya's house to pick up some clothes so she'd have something to change into on her release day. She changed after his arrival, sporting jeans and an old 'Ninjago MMA National Championships' t-shirt with peeling letters that looked like it had seen years of use. She was unplugged from all machines, and a new knee brace given by the hospital was secured to her leg. Her injuries were healed, but a scar remained on her left cheek. Naomi had warned them that there was no certainty it would heal well, and it seemed her guess was correct.

Kai arrived in the afternoon. He'd come straight from the train station, so he dropped his bag on the floor when he opened the door and darted across the room to lift Nya into a hug. He dropped her back down onto her bed and then pivoted to face Cole. They fist-bumped.

Kai turned back to face Nya. "You doing all right?"

She shrugged. There was a smile on her face. "I'm doing pretty okay, now. Can we go already? I'm sick of this place."

Kai laughed. "Yeah, sure. Let's get out of here."

Zane was busy, so they took a cab home. Cole went along with them so he could explain Nya's recovery plan to Kai on the way, and they went their separate ways when the cab arrived at their home so Kai and Nya could have some alone time after what was probably a very stressful week on both of their parts.

Later that night, when Nya was in bed early so she wouldn't be tired for her first day of school, Kai video called Cole to talk about his time teaching in the rural town.

"Okay, so like, I was originally kind of worried that I was going to be super bored during my spare time because I had no Wi-fi and no friends, right? But the kids were super cool. The oldest one was sixteen, and I hung out with him all the time, even if he was kind of lame. He just liked to play video games, so I watched him play a lot but sometimes he'd pull out this fighting game and teach me how to play."

"So, he taught you virtual fighting and you taught him real fighting?"

"Yeah, you're right," Kai said. "On the last night, all my kids—"

"Your kids."

"My kids, yeah. They threw me this little party, and they made me this huge cake as payment for being there, or whatever. You could tell it was made by a bunch of kids though, because they'd used a million different frosting colors and just thrown sprinkles all over it. It was cute."

"Did they only pay you in cake?"

"Yeah, I guess," Kai said. "It was kind of like volunteering—I did it for free. My own dojo pays me pretty well, and since I'm some A-list coach now I could probably demand for a lot more, but I don't. Sports shouldn't be only for those that can afford it, you know? It kind of ruins the spirit if good fighters can't compete because they don't make enough money."

"Are you going to keep doing stuff like this?"

Kai shifted. He was lying prone on his bed, his chin in his hands. He looked pensive as he replied, "Sure, why not? I train my regular kids hard enough that they deserve little breaks from me here and
"You're a good person, Kai."

"I'm a ninja, aren't I?"

Cole rolled his eyes but couldn't stop the cheesy grin that spread to his face.

Nya's first few days back at university went well. She and Cole communicated regularly now, messaging between her classes and during her breaks. She was never as active during the evenings, spending her time studying to catch up with her classes and stay on top of her work.

Cole returned to the flower shop regularly. As things settled back into routine, he organized meetings with Kai and Zane to begin their official search for Jay. Finding free time during Kai's busy schedule was difficult, but they succeeded in planning something for next Saturday when everyone was free.

Cole was excited and nervous. He wanted to find Jay. He wanted to know more about him.

But he knew Jay was sick. And that scared him.

During Nya's second week back, Cole got a message from Kai.

kai_fire13
nya asked me to pick her up from school for some reason but I cant cause im in the middle of a lesson. can you do it?

flintcole
Sure, no problem.

He found Nya sitting on the steps to her school's main entrance, clutching an umbrella as the winter rain fell around her. She wasn't crying, but something was wrong. She was wincing.

She looked up at the sound of his voice.

"Are you okay? What's up?"

She looked down again. "Kai sent you, didn't he?"

"Yeah. Do you mind?"

"I guess not."

"Do you want to talk about what's wrong while we walk home?"

"That's the problem, Cole."

"What is?"

"I can't walk home."

Nya wound up at the hospital again three hours later. Cole and Kai waited together as she saw a doctor, this time in a different ward: the pain centre. When the doctor came out to go over her prognosis Cole and Kai nodded and pretended to understand but didn't really because neither of them had even been very good at science, so when they got a lift with Zane on the way back home, Nya had to explain everything for them so they could understand in simpler terms.
"They think my nerves might be sending off fake pain signals," she explained. "The nerves think my knee is still injured, even though it's not. But it may go away soon as I do more physio. The only thing we can do is wait and see."

And so, the second waiting game began.

To make it easier, Nya accepted lifts to and from school from Zane and found her old crutches to use again while she moved between classes. Her physiotherapist adjusted their program and for a while, the pain wasn't too bad, given that she didn't walk. Things returned to a routine and they could learn to accept it.

In this acceptance, they held meetings for the search for Jay. They revealed to Kai that Nya had figured out they were ninja—he was angry because he'd wanted to tell her himself but like Zane, wasn't very surprised in the end—and officially invited her to their meetings. Since Jay was presumably identical, they wouldn't need to use new photos of him, but they needed to figure out where he lived and what he did in his free time if he wasn't anywhere on social media. Kai began to search for 'Jay Gordon' in place of 'Jay Walker', and Nya poured over his medical reports to search for any noticeable patterns they could exploit to uncover any information on him. Cole and Zane, feeling rather useless during this search, cheered them on from the sidelines.

Jay became a waiting game, too. Cole didn't know how much patience he had left within him.

In the midst of this newfound frustration, Cole re-visited the website Nya had shown him. He signed up for a free-trial for a VPN so he wouldn't be caught, and followed the steps Nya had in order to gain access. Once on the website, he scrolled through several days' worth of content until he came across Nya's post on the current events page.

The dealer's comments caught his eye.

> ANON9586 i think i know what ur talking about
> ANON9586 it happened right outside my apartment
> ANON9586 i have a security cam that faces the street outside my balcony door just in case
> ANON9586 the driver did stop for a sec after making contact so i got a clear pic
> ANON9586 since im not moron that buys low quality shit, my cam caught everything, even the license plate.
> ANON9586 you want the vid file?

A camera outside a balcony door.

A physical marker.

[sent at 23:14]

flintcole
How's your knee?

nyarai
I'm chugging ibuprofen by the bottle, so it's tolerable.

flintcole
Can you sneak around on it?

nyarai
Weird question, but probably.
flintcole
Meet me outside your place in an hour.

flintcole
And wear dark clothes.

Cole didn't wear his ninja garb—it would catch too much attention—but wore comfortable black clothes, a face mask to conceal his identity, and a bandana to keep his bangs out of his eyes. Nya came out in similar attire, wearing not only a mask but also heavy eye makeup that almost made her look like a different person. In her gloved hands was a USB, something she promised to explain to Cole on the way there.

To ease stress on her knee before they arrived, Cole piggy-backed her all the way there. She gave him directions, telling him where to turn or continue walking until they arrived at the collision site. It was a residential area full of small condo buildings and duplexes, notably made of bricks and stone rather than metal. It was in an older, preserved part of the city—one that had refused to create its buildings out of new metal like the others.

They stopped on the sidewalk. Nya climbed down and faced him. She put the USB in his hands and closed them with her own, holding onto them as she explained. "This is called a rubber ducky," she said. Her voice was deep, serious. She continued. "It disguises itself as a keyboard so any computer will accept its contents. I've coded it to install a keyboard logger on his computer. This way, I'll get a feed of whatever he types onto my own computer. We can use this to figure out passwords, addresses, locations, or whatever we need. With this info, I can figure out who he is and blackmail him into giving me the plate number."

"And he would do that?"

"No one wants to be known for browsing that website. He'll do whatever I say to keep that part of him hidden from his public life."

Smart. Devious. Probably a little illegal.

But he supposed justice wasn't always feasible through legal means.

They wandered out onto the crosswalk. Cole activated his night vision and peered around, scanning the nearby buildings until his eyes landed on a balcony with a noticeable black bump sticking out of its back wall. It was on the third floor—a little hard for someone like Nya to climb without aid.

"I'll need to carry you up there," Cole said. He pointed to the balcony so Nya could see it. "It'll be impossible for you to get up there on your own."

"Go without me," Nya said. When Cole started to protest, she interrupted him to speak again. "I don't have a vendetta against this guy. If something goes wrong, I don't want to slow you down and blow our only lead. Get this guy on your own. I'll go with you to the real target."

Cole nodded. And then he began to climb.

Three stories was nothing to him, so he hauled himself up the balconies and bricks with ease. Once he stood on the balcony, he dug into his pockets for lock picks with one hand and then gave the balcony door a tug with his other just to see if it was unlocked.

It slid open with no resistance. For someone so paranoid they had a camera outside their door, this was a little surprising. Cole took it as a blessing and stepped inside quietly, making no noise as he put
his weight onto the wooden floor of the apartment. It was an old building, so he made sure to walk near furniture so the floor wouldn't creak as he made his way through what appeared to be the living room. The lights were off. He hoped the person was asleep. And their computer wasn't in their bedroom.

Luck was on his side again, because in a small room off to the side of the living appeared to be a computer room. Three monitors screamed 'gamer' at him as he approached, careful with his footsteps as he crossed the empty floor. When he reached the computer, he pulled the rolling chair out of the way and kneeled down to get a look at the computer case held in a separate compartment in the desk. There was a visible USB port in the side. He took Nya's rubber ducky and plugged it in.

The computer screens turned on, emitting bright light into the room. He squinted to continue looking at the screen. A small window popped up, only a black box until white script began to fill it. It was over in a minute. The window closed. Cole removed the USB and backed out of the room.

He crept across the floor and exited onto the balcony. He closed the sliding door and vaulted over the railing.

A three-story fall wasn't much for a ninja. He landed, rolled once, and then stood. Nya was nowhere in sight.

"Ny—"

"Shut up, I'm over here."

She was sitting against the man's building, out of sight of the balcony camera. Smart move. Even in this new life, her field intelligence was still strong. She'd always been a natural.

On the way back, Nya began to laugh into his shoulder as she held onto his back.

"I understand why Kai used to do this stuff with his friends," she said. "It's pretty fun."

"It's also illegal."

"You're illegal. Do you even pay taxes?"

"Why do you keep assuming I'm illegal? If anything, I'm extra-legal. Do you know how many times I've saved this stupid city, let alone the country?"

"I think you mean to say, 'How many times we saved the city'."

"Yeah, okay. Sure."

It wasn't like she was wrong.

"I found someone that knows Jay," Kai said at their next meeting. He showed everyone screenshots of his conversation with someone that claimed to be Jay's old classmate.
"He went to LLC? Ugh, I hate those kids," Nya said. There was a look of mild disgust on her face.

"What's LLC?" Cole asked.

"It's awful," Nya said. "It's very competitive, and students are basically pitted against each other in some kind of messed up academic deathmatch. It costs a lot of money to go there, and they're not exactly afraid to kick you out if your grades slip, either. It's not uncommon to hear about students sabotaging each other so they can get higher marks than average on a math test or something."

"But Jay is there on a scholarship," Zane said. "What does that mean?"

"It means he's probably pretty smart," Nya replied. "I didn't even know they gave out scholarships. I thought it was pay-only. Was he like this before?"

"He was a bit of a genius," Cole admitted. "But only with this kind of stuff. He couldn't plan missions to save his own life."

"Sounds like a typical LLC student," Nya said.
Kai and Nya high-fived.

Grey clouds crowded the sky and blocked out the sun and a cold snap gripped the city, plunging its temperature into the negatives for the first time in over a decade. Cole dug into his closet to find his warmer clothes and Zane didn’t change at all, apparently finding the sudden cold comforting. Kai chose to vent about the weather on Chirp.

But with sudden weather changes came a new challenge for Nya. She disappeared off of social media, and didn’t respond to any texts Cole sent her way. He brushed it off, assuming she was busy studying, and continued about his week, yawning out of boredom in the flower shop and checking his message notifications every few minutes just in case she’d gotten back to him. But she never did.

Four days into the cold snap, he got a message. He perked up and opened his inbox.

His enthusiasm deflated when he saw it was only a message from Kai.

**kai_fire13**
sorry to keep doing this but are you busy

**flintcole**
No one buys flowers in the winter so no, not really.

**kai_fire13**
cool can you go to my house

**flintcole**
Do you need me to pick something up for you?

**kai_fire13**
nah i need you to check on nya

**kai_fire13**
i thought she was in school but her friends just texted me to ask if she was okay
apparently she's not responding to messages and lied to me about being in class

**kai_fire13**  
shes been at home for the past four days

**flintcole**  
I'll head over now.

The front door creaked as he opened it. Cole stepped inside Kai and Nya's home, closing the door behind him. He checked the basement, finding nothing but the broken coffee table and empty carpet. They'd never cleaned up after Kai's training sessions. It all felt like it was so long ago.

The main floor was empty as well. This left only one other option.

Cole knocked on Nya's bedroom door.

"You're not Kai, are you?" came Nya's voice.

"How'd you know?"

"He never knocks. It's actually a really bad habit," she said. "But he asked you to come, didn't he?"

"He's just worried. He's always been like this."

"Well, he can fuck off. He doesn't need to have you babysit me. I'm an adult. I know what I'm doing."

"Nya, can I come in?"

"Only so I can say something to your face."

Cole opened the door. Nya sat on her bed, her left leg stretch out in front of her. She wore shorts despite the cold temperature. Her hair was wild and greasy, like she hadn't brushed or washed it in a few days and her school books were scattered across the floor as though they'd been thrown around.

"Do you know what a pain flare is, Cole? Because I just found out," she began. "Sudden changes in temperature make my knee feel like it's on fire. Isn't that amazing? And now you're standing in my room, staring at me mid-breakdown and reminding me of everything I hate about myself. You're this . . . ageless ninja master and you stare at me with familiarity in your eyes and it kills me. It kills me, Cole, because when you look at me, you see a ninja just like yourself. Someone that could control the sea, scale buildings, fight monsters—someone that could walk up a flight of stairs without taking a break because it hurts so much."

"I wish I could be that person. I wish I could be the person you expect me to be. But I can't do the things you or Zane can. I can't do the things Kai can do. I used to be a better fighter than him. I was supposed to be at nationals. But instead, it was only him. I had that dream taken away from me. When you and Zane stepped in my life, I hoped I could join you. My knee was good enough to start fighting again if I practiced. But that was stolen from me, too. My grades are dropping. Every time I work hard for something, I lose it. I have no control. Why bother anymore? Why should I put any effort into anything if it'll just fall apart?"

"Nya, I—"

"No. I have only one request for you, black ninja: kindly escort yourself out of my house. And don't come back."
A knot tied itself in his stomach and never went away. It continued into the spring, when the flowers began to bloom and the clouds finally left the sky. The days went by slowly, dragging on for an eternity before the sun finally disappeared and Cole had an excuse to go to bed. He would often lay awake at night, eyes staring at nothing as he thought of anything that came to mind but Nya was always an undercurrent, poisoning his thoughts and feelings with guilt over something he knew he couldn't control but wished he had stopped nonetheless.

Kai did his best to comfort him—"She doesn't hate you, she just hates who you are"—but it never worked. Cole supposed he would just have to accept it. There was nothing he could do.

Mother's Day approached. Cole found himself busier than ever, ordering flowers and getting his displays ready for one of the most high-demand holidays of the year. There was no longer time to review Jay's documents or spend his time playing games, and he was almost thankful for the distraction from his personal life even if it was only due to last a week.

On the holiday itself, the shop was packed from opening hours until a lull in the early evening. Most people were celebrating with their families, so Cole took a small break to catch a breather when no one was present in the shop. Worried about missing a customer if he turned on his biotech, he played with a coin left in the tip jar, flipping it and spinning it on the table like a bored child.

He fumbled the coin and it fell to the floor. He leaned down to get it and the bell above his door ringed, signalling that someone had entered the shop.

"Uh, hello? Is anyone here?"

On the way up, Cole smacked the back of his head on the counter corner. He rubbed the back of his head and looked up at the visitor.

Auburn hair. Freckles. Blue eyes.

"Whoa, are you okay? That looked pretty rough."

Cole couldn't speak.

"Heh, you're pretty quiet. I respect that. I work customer service jobs, too. Being nice to customers sucks." He approached the counter. He looked around and then back to Cole. "Cute shop. I'll just pick something and get out of your hair. Don't worry 'bout me. Pretend I'm not even here."

He made that pretty difficult.

"...what's the difference between all these flowers, anyways? They all look the same but have different labels. You must have the memorization skills of a god. More respect to you, dude."

He finally picked something. He gently placed the bouquet on the counter as to not damage the petals.

"You're probably wondering why I'm here so late. Okay, it's a bit of a long story. Obviously, it's Mother's Day. I forgot," he began. "I forget every year. It's a really, really bad habit. I forget everything, now that I think about it. I can't remember a time when I actually called someone on time for their birthday. It's always the day after! But maybe I just can't remember the times when I actually did remember. Anyways, this is beside the point. I forgot to get my mom something. Normally, I'd just show up with nothing because they always tell me, 'You know Jay, you don't need to give us anything but a big hug' but do you see what time it is? It's late afternoon, almost dinner.

Do you know what I was doing this morning? I was sitting alone in my dorm, wearing nothing but boxers, and stuffing my face with microwavable mac n' cheese while playing video games on the
floor. Sunday Blues hit me hard, okay? But yeah, I completely forgot about Mother's Day because I was busy being a useless piece of shit all day. Then my dad called me and asked where I was. I was like, 'Why do you even care? I'm like, sixteen. You can stop coddling me now, thanks'. He got kinda mad at me because apparently I'd missed Mother's Day. Classic. Wonderful. Thanks, Jay, for disappointing your parents for the millionth year in a row. And get this: they live two hours out of the city. I have a two hour bus ride ahead of me. I'm literally going to miss dinner. Not only am I going to be stuck in a bus, starving, for two hours, but I'm going to be stuck in this bus knowing that I'm driving to my own death. My father is going to kill me. My mom is going to kill me. So yeah, I need some flowers to make up for it."

Jay dug into his pocket, put a bill on the counter, and then walked out.

Cole snapped out of his trance. He ran through the store, almost knocking over a display in a rush to catch Jay before he disappeared. He threw open the door.

Jay was nowhere to be seen. In a matter of seconds, he'd become one with the sea of crowds travelling the city streets.

"You mean to tell me that Jay walked into your shop, talked to you for five minutes, bought flowers, and then left and you didn't do anything?" Kai demanded over a voice call. "I cannot believe you. I've just lost two years off my lifespan. This is what you do to me, Cole."

Kai came over to the flower shop that evening. Together, they combed through the security camera footage to search for any kind of hints regarding his personal life. Jay carried a brown messenger bag, and a number of pins lined its single strap over hanging from his shoulder. Cole couldn't recognize them. But Kai could.

"These are video game pins. They're characters from that fighting game the sixteen year-old from the rural town made me play with him." Kai pointed to one pin. It was a red with a single black line cutting across at a diagonal. "This one is a little different. Skylor has one on her training bag. She said it's some kind of linguistic pride emblem. He said he was from the Sea of Sand, right? Checks out."

Cole paused the video. There was a grin on Jay's face as he spoke to Cole over the counter.

He would find Jay soon. He would track him down and become friends with him again.

He missed that stupid smile.

Nya called him three days later. Her voice was hoarse, like she'd been crying. "Hey. Come over. We need to do something."

Nya was waiting for him in her driveway, sitting crossed-legged in front of her open garage. Cole had never seen its interior. A motorcycle rested inside, a layer of dust settled on top. Cole could remember Kai mentioning that Nya hadn't used it since her first accident.

"I got a call from the pain clinic today. I tested positive, so yay for me, and I'm also barely passing my university courses, so another yay for that, and now that I've isolated myself for a couple of months I think it's time for me to do something about my life."

She stood up. Cole pretended not to notice her wince.

She wandered over to the garage. She plucked a helmet off of a hook and passed it to Cole. Cole caught it and stared at Nya inquisitively.
"What are you doing?"

Nya pulled another helmet off a hook. She put it on.

"I'm facing my fears. And you're going to help me."

Cole sat behind her on the motorbike. Nya instructed him to wrap his arms around her waist and lean in close. She revved the engine. Then they took off.

At first, she drove slow. A few cars honked as she pulled onto busier streets, urging them to go faster and obey the speed limits posted on the sides of the roads. She didn't give in but Cole could feel her clench at each honk that ripped through the air. When she turned onto the highway, a national road that stretched across the country, she picked up speed. She zipped past cars and trucks and other motorbikes, weaving through traffic with so much control and precision that Cole found it hard to believe she could have been in a motorcycle accident to begin with.

They didn't drive for long. Twenty minutes out of the city, she turned around and headed back. But she didn't take them back home. She parked in front of Borg Industries, which had over time become a series of building spanning two city blocks in the heart of downtown. She brought him along inside, leading him through its bright halls and into a larger room with several computers and workstations. She stopped and sat down at one of the computers, logging in and then opening a file filled with random strings of text Cole couldn't understand upon looking at them.

"This is the keyboard logger," Nya explained. "It's rooted in my laptop, but I shared it to my work computer so I could monitor it at work. Pull up a chair and sit down—I think it's about time we cracked this case together."

Cole sat down and watched her sift through the contents of the logger. She continued to explain as she did.

"I'm searching for passwords. They usually come after e-mails. I can grab his log-in info, then check what URL he entered to figure out which website the password and e-mail are for. Pretty cool, huh?"

"That's scary. You're scary."

"Please. You're some kind of pseudo-immortal with supernatural powers that, for the most part, have disappeared from Ninjago. That is scary." She paused. "You and Zane are the only Elemental Masters left, aren't you?"

"We think so. We kept tabs on the others, and the last known Elemental Master died with no kids about four hundred years-ago."

"I wish I had had those powers. It must be really cool."

"It has its ups and downs. You know the green ninja? Everyone was always trying to steal his powers. It sucked for him and for us because we had to keep rescuing him."

Nya began to laugh. "That's everyone's favorite joke in history class. We learn about you other ninja a little bit, but focus mostly on the green one. Our history textbook had a five-page compilation of all the times he got kidnapped. I feel kind of bad to laugh about it in front of you, but man, it was pretty funny to just flip through the book and read it. Poor kid had such a hard time."

Cole frowned at the memory. "Yeah, it was pretty rough."

Nya re-focused on the screen. She created a collection of information regarding the log-in
information. She logged into his accounts, then collected information on his person. The man's name was Jack. Thirty-six years-old. Ran a thrift store in the east end of the city. Spent his free time on the Internet.

They did one last sweep check of the man's activity from the past few weeks. Then something caught their eye.

14:43:21 > IN BROWSER > "https://www.confessanon.com" >
whats_the_worst_thing_ive_ever_done?

14:45:57 > IN BROWSER > "https://www.confessanon.com" >
i_was_driving_home_and_some_chick_in_black_suddenly_started_to_cross_the_road._i_rammed_into_her._didnt_fess_up_to_it.

14:46:30: > IN BROWSER > "https://www.confessanon.com"
i_tried_to_scam_someone_into_paying_me_for_footage_of_the_accident_that_i_didnt_have_by_pretendin

14:49:15 > IN BROWSER > "https://www.confessanon.com"
nah_i_wasnt_caught._law_enforcement_in_the_city_is_a_fucking_joke._nothing_gets_done_because_thet

Their following actions that night were only logical.

After the individual ninja died, their gi were put on display in the history museum. But these gi were fake—copies of the originals to show to the public. The originals were split between Cole and Zane. Zane held onto Kai's and Lloyd's. Cole held onto Nya's and Jay's.

This worked out in his favor.

They got ready in his apartment. Cole dressed up in his own, carefully putting on his old uniform. It always felt comfortable, made him feel like himself again. He missed it, sometimes.

And then Nya changed into hers. It was like something out of a photograph, out of a memory. The magenta and cyan still suited her just as well. Cole's chest tightened. Nya put her hand on his shoulder to comfort him.

"I'm not her. Maybe I act like her. Maybe I look like her. But we're not the same."

"I know. That's the problem."

Cole swallowed his feelings and they took off. Nya climbed onto his back again and Cole made his way through the city over the rooftops, using airjitzu to cross large gaps between buildings and praying each time that the air wouldn't fail him. He felt the air wobble a few times, but it seemed at peace with him today. As they approached Jack's block, they climbed down to the street and travelled through the alleyways to avoid street cameras and other pedestrians.

They reached the man's building. Cole gave Nya a boost and she got up on her own, struggling a little to put weight on her left leg but making it up after a few attempts to heave herself over the balcony's railing. Cole scampered up quickly afterwards.

They peered in through the balcony window. Light streamed into the living room from the computer room.

Nya threw open the balcony door. And then they stepped inside.

Despite a slight limp, she strode confidently across the living room floor. Cole followed quickly behind her. She stopped dead in the doorway to the computer room. Cole looked over her shoulder.
On the computer screen was a livestream of the balcony. In Jack's hand was handgun pointed at Nya's head.

Jack pointed the gun at Cole. "You. You broke into my home, didn't you?"

The familiar voice gave him whiplash. Looking closely, Cole could see his poorly-shaved face, long hair in a ponytail, and dark eyes. His left arm glinted in the computer screen's light. A prosthetic.

It all came together at once.

"Ronin. You're Ronin."

Jack—Ronin—stood up. "How do you know that name?"

"You . . . it's just your name."

"No, it's not. That's my dealing name." Ronin took a step forward. "But it doesn't matter. You're not leaving this apartment alive. Step into the room."

Nya went into the room. Cole didn't follow.

"Step inside. You think I'm afraid to pull the trigger? Don't be an idiot. If you know my name, you know what kind of person I am."

Cole placed his hand on the wall. He could feel the stone foundations of the building, the bricks that supported it. Perfect.

"I don't know much about you, Ronin. I know the person you used to be. You used to be clever. I hope you still are and don't think you can win this," Cole said. He gestured to himself and Nya. "Who do you think we are?"

"I don't know. Cosplayers?"

Nya spoke up. "Wrong. We're actually ninja."

Ronin laughed. "Yeah, okay. The ninja that are still alive don't care about me. They don't care at all anymore. When was the last time they stepped in to do something?"

"They haven't stepped in because they don't need to," Nya replied.

"What about the Serpentine? Did they deserve what happened to them? Why didn't the ninja step in for them?"

Cole looked away as guilt washed over his body like a wave.

"The Serpentine died due to a computer error," Nya said. "Borg tested a new security system to protect the city in a case of invasion. It closed the vents going down into the tunnels beneath the city. When the trial was lifted, there was a glitch in the system and the Serpentine were locked inside with no air or way to escape. They couldn't contact the outside world. The ninja couldn't have stopped it if they didn't know it was happening in the first place."

"But they never held Borg accountable, did they? But hey, why would they? The white ninja works for them. Nobody ever wants to betray their masters."

"Nobody controls me!" Cole said. His grip on the doorframe tightened. The building shook for a moment, then stilled again.
Ronin looked Cole up-and-down. He smiled. "I didn't know the Earth Ninja was in my home. Now, I know she's not the real deal—" Ronin gestured to Nya with his gun before pointing it to Cole again "—but you're legit. The black ninja. Famous for . . . sorry, I'm drawing a blank. Did you do anything notable other than being replaced as leader?"

"He—" Nya began to say.

"Don't bother. He was useless on the team. I know it. He knows it. His old teammates probably knew it, too." Ronin put his gun down flat on the table. "But I can recognize a threat. For once, black ninja, you are in control of the situation. I know you can topple this building as long as you're in here. What do you want from me?"

"It's not what I want. It's what she wants."

Nya walked until she was in front of Ronin. Then she smashed her palm into his nose.

Ronin stumbled backwards, crying out and holding his nose with his hand. While he was stunned, Nya took the gun off the table and passed it back to Cole. Cole wasn't used to guns, so he fiddled with it until he found the safety and then threw it behind him into the living room. They could get it later. He wanted both of his hands free in case something happened.

"You know, I originally just wanted to figure out who you were and then hand you over to the police. But you're right. They didn't care about my case when you hit me, and they wouldn't care now," Nya said. "Now you've brought something else to my attention. What exactly do you do, Ronin? That's your dealer name, isn't it?"

"You're here because I hit you with my car?" Ronin demanded. "You had the black ninja break into my home, probably bug the place now that I think about it, and then break into it again along with you, smash my nose, and threaten me just because I accidentally hit you with my car? You didn't even die! And I'm the one that called the ambulance, by the way. I'm not heartless. I'm just avoiding jail time."

"Don't dodge the question. What do you do? What do you deal?"

"Biotech. I deal biotech to gangs."

"How do you deal in biotech? How does that work?"

"Biotech is just a chip and a few nodes in your brain. I can't do the surgery, but gangs find people that can. I just give them the technology to do it."

"Which gangs?"

"Most of them are small. I only deal to one big one. Ever heard of The Second Rise?"

"No. I work in Borg security. Why haven't I heard of them?"

"A Borg employee and a ninja working together? Classic," Ronin said with a snide grin. "The Second Rise is a huge underworld force. They're smart. There's a few leaders, but they don't commit the crimes. The ones that do are the only ones that can't have a criminal record. No criminal record means no gang record. It's pretty smart."

"No criminal record? Who can't have . . ." Nya trailed off. "Wait. Are you serious?"

"Completely. I'm at your mercy, sweetheart. I won't lie to you."
"What's he talking about? Who can't have criminal records?" Cole asked.

Nya turned around. He could see pain her her eyes. "Kids, Cole. Minors."

Cole felt his stomach drop.

Nya faced Ronin again. "I should have you arrested right now. You may not be part of the gang but you're an accomplice."

"If you arrest me, they'll kill me. And then your only lead is dead, they'll figure out who snitched on me, and then you and black ninja will be dead, too. Let's be honest here, all right? Black ninja over here is the only Elemental Master still alive that can theoretically pass down his powers. Do you want to effectively kill off such a historically-important group of people because you wanted revenge? Justice? Safety? That's how the Serpentine went out too, sweetheart. It's a dangerous road to travel."

"So what should I do? Let you roam free? Let The Second Rise continue to work under the radar?"

"That's exactly what you should do. For now. Do you think I'm a fan of them, either? I'm not. But I don't want to risk my life to bring them to justice. So let's make a deal: I'll gather information on them through our deals, report them to you, and then you can arrest them without bringing me into the mix."

"What's in it for you?"

"You don't arrest me. How about that?"

Nya looked over her shoulder. "Do you think I can trust him?"

Cole sighed. "He'll stick to his word to save his own skin. Trust me."

"Okay." Nya put her hand forward. Ronin shook it. "Report information to me. But slip up once, and you're done."

"Of course. I would expect nothing less."

Nya took a step back. "Oh, and by the way: this is for my knee."

She shoved Ronin's computer monitors to the floor in one sweep. Their screens cracked and their colors flashed erratically.

"Buy new ones with your blood money and we'll call it even."

The hospitals were always busy, so Nya's second appointment with a pain specialist was in June. Cole didn't attend so Kai filled him in later, explaining that Nya was starting high-dosage pain meds to help out with her knee. They would only come into effect four weeks later, long after the winter's cold had gone away and the summer sun had emerged to torment the city for another few months.

When the flower shop was empty, he returned to his office and read through Jay's documents to try to learn as much about his friend as he could. He knew that he would end up waiting on Kai and Nya, but doing something to no avail felt better than doing nothing so he continued to scan the documents until he had their words memorized and their accompanying images burned into his brain.

Nya visited his shop in late May. She didn't wince when she stepped into his shop and walked more confidently, crossing the shop to lean against the counter and tell him about the meeting she'd had
with the board of directors at NCU. She told him that they typically kicked out underperforming students in such a hard program, but after hearing her story, gave her the option to repeat the year starting next fall.

"You know what this means, right? That son of a bitch Jay is priority number one. Kai and I made a bet on who can find him fastest and I intend to win."

Nya took him for motorcycle rides often. Cole would hang on tight and she would drive away into the country, leaving the city and her troubles behind her. When martial arts competition season began, they would visit Kai as he coached his students through their tournaments, leading them to victory and gold medals and large trophies to celebrate their accomplishments.

If she wasn't driving or working, she was holed up in Cole's office to find patterns in Jay's documents. It was a slow process. She wrote down every similar occurrence, time, and prognoses. In July, she presented Cole with the completed list. Each occurrence had a paragraph of analysis written underneath.

"So, his trips to the doctor only seem to have begun two years ago. He goes around five times a year and always describes the same symptoms: nausea, lightheadedness, fatigue, and what have you. But it's hard for someone to be sick this many times a year, which has led me to one conclusion: the sickness isn't natural."

"Unnatural? What do you mean?" Cole asked.

"It's not the common cold. It's an external factor—something that can't be detected without internal examination, which Jay has refused each time. Something is going on. I'll figure it out, I promise."

In August, two weeks before Nya's fresh start, they drove out to a field outside of the city and spent the day eating snacks and talking about whatever came to mind. It was natural. It reminded him of his final few weeks with Nya but this time no pain accompanied it.

The sun had begun to set when she asked him about Ronin.

"You knew him, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"He's reincarnated too, isn't he?"

"He's not the only one that wasn't a ninja. Chen and Skylor were alive during my time. Your parents. Jay's adoptive parents. It's kind of scary."

Nya crossed her legs. "How so?"

"Chen was evil. Like, undeniably evil. Skylor was good. Ronin was kind of in the middle. He cooperated as long as it was in his best interest. Seeing people like Chen and Ronin come back begs a certain question: are other bad people coming back to life, too? Kai was the victim of Chen. You were the victim of Ronin. Then what about Jay? Lloyd? You think Jay is unnaturally sick—like he's poisoned. What if someone is doing this to him? What if he's not okay and there's nothing we can do about it?"

"I'm more worried about someone like the Overlord," Nya said. "I don't want to sound spiritual or anything, but the First Spinjitzu Master created the Elemental Masters for a reason. What if we're here for a reason? Why are we coming back? Why are our old enemies coming back? What if something bigger is on the horizon?"
"Zane's worried about that, too," Cole said. "He's afraid that you'll be forced to fight an enemy and
die trying. He doesn't want you to put yourself into danger."

"And how about you? Are you worried?"

"You're going to die anyway. I'm afraid of what's going to happen after."

"Oh. Makes sense."

In late August, Zane and Cole took Nya on a road trip. They travelled with the windows down until
they reached a decaying fossil hidden among a mountain range, off the main road and out of sight
from normal citizens. Together, they stepped into the mouth of the fossil and a hatch opened, creating
a door to walk into and explore inside. Cole and Zane stepped into the darkness. The cave had been
dark for years now because when Nya died so had the lights, and they'd never turned on again since.

Nya stepped into the cave. The echo of her footstep reverberated throughout the cave.

And the lights turned on. The walkway to the main platform illuminated one tile at a time, lighting
the way to the centre. Cole and Zane led Nya down the walkway, letting her take in the various
machines on display nearby. She asked where they were. They didn't answer.

On the main platform, the computer system came to life. "Welcome home, Nya," came the
computer's voice. "It has been three thousand and seventeen years, fifty-four days, twenty minutes,
and thirty-one seconds since you last returned. Would you like me to boot up Samurai X?"

"Uh, sure?"

"Please wait a moment."

Hanging from poles and chains was the Samurai X suit. It began to glow, slowly whirring to life.
Nya yelped and took a step back.

On the other end of the platform, a tube rose from the floor. A door in the tube opened, revealing
Nya's old pilot armor.

Nya walked towards it. She pulled out the helmet. "Is this mine?"

"All of it," Zane said.

Piece by piece, Nya put on the armor. Within minutes, she looked like a terrifying force of nature
again. It felt right. It felt normal.

Nya moved to walk towards them. She stopped after two steps. She lifted her right leg, putting her
weight on her left leg. She jumped. Landed. Jumped again.

"Uh, guys . . . I can't feel my leg."

"Is there a problem?" Zane asked.

"No, it's not," she said. "This armor takes the brunt of my weight. It supports my legs all the way to
the boot."

"What does that do?" Cole said.

"It means that my knee still hurts—that's how chronic pain works. But it doesn't hurt anymore when
I use it."
"So it's bearable enough that you don't have to give up on being a ninja?" Cole asked.

Nya looked up to him. She nodded.

The computer could only be controlled by Nya. She looked through her old files, laughing at some of the pictures she had of Kai and promptly e-mailing them to herself so she could use them as blackmail later. She opened her music library, but only one file was saved. She clicked on it. An audio player popped up on the screen and began to play.

"This is Nya. I've recorded these logs my whole life, but that's coming to an end soon. I deleted them. I don't want anyone to know my inner thoughts. At eighty-four years-old, I will now record my last log before I shut down the cave for good."

Nya began school in the fall. She spent her days and nights studying, working harder than ever and worrying Kai because it wasn't uncommon for him to find her passed out at the kitchen table, face buried in her books and laptop open a few feet away from her flashing a low battery warning to no avail. These efforts, however, let her conquer school once again and she found herself at the top of her new class.

"My life has been a capricious one. As a little girl, I'd never known it was possible to change identities so many times in a few simple years. First, I was Kai's sister. Second, Jay's girlfriend. Third, Samurai X. And lastly, the Water Ninja. I think defining ourselves as people is a little more difficult than most make it out to be. The labels we paint on our faces for all to see change as swiftly as the wind. What was once an identity becomes a past-self, and a past-self, a memory. A lesson for us to learn from."

Ronin got into touch with Nya in late September. He sent her a picture of what he claimed was The Second Rise's emblem. He said they used to brand their members, but under new leadership had switched to tattoos. The emblem was a white circle. A black circle was in the middle, and a black path curled around it like a snake. It was a drawing Cole was convinced Ronin had made in two minutes on an online photo editing program.
"I like to think back to my friends and family at times. Cole, Zane, and Lloyd are still around. But Lloyd is not immortal or ageless like the others. He is going to die. At this old age, I have witnessed the passing of both Kai and Jay. I often catch myself giggling at old memories or staring at old photographs until tears blur my vision and I can no longer see them. Call me nostalgic. It's better than thinking about the present."

Nya came to visit Cole often. Sometimes, they went on motorcycle rides, but now they mostly hung around the flower shop. She no longer needed to drive, no longer needed to run away from her fears. Freedom and control had been reached. Now, she could finally look ahead with no fear of being held back.

"I used to fear this time, this day when my friends and I grew old and had to say goodbye forever. But now I'm here, and . . . and I think I'm ready."

**RED | FIRE**

**MAGENTA | WATER**

**BLUE | LIGHTNING**

**GREEN | ENERGY**
Chapter End Notes

Thanks you for your comments and support! I'd just like to make sure that you know I read and cherish each comment/kudos/reblog, but do not reply to comments because I don't want to contribute to the comment count.

Thanks so much! I'm working on Jay's chapter as I write this out! <3
I haven't played Smash in a year but I'll forever be a Sonic and Robin main. Don't @ me.

Hey guys! I'm back with Jay's chapter. It's the longest by far (28k, ~101 pages) so I hope you enjoy!

Once again, thanks for all the positive feedback! And thank you for waiting! Your patience astounds me. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was autumn when Cole had his first nightmare in a decade. He awoke with a start, panting and pulling at his sweaty clothes to peel them away from his skin. He looked around the dark room, eyes landing on his bedside clock: 04:15.

Too early to be awake, but too late to fall back asleep. He shifted to sit on the side of his bed, taking in slower, deeper breaths to calm his beating heart. He ran his hand through his hair. Nightmares inspired conflicting feelings within him. There was the relief that it wasn't real, but as well as the fear that it had occurred nonetheless. His nightmares were so real; taking root in real events, and then twisting them so he was powerless and could do nothing but watch as his life was pulled away from him, be it in the form of his friends leaving him or becoming a non-feeling ghost or sometimes, in his worst dreams, just being himself as the world crumbled around him.

Waking up left him in limbo. Reality set in and the illusion faded, but for a few moments, they coalesced into a world wherein his greatest fears were reflected onto his current life. For now, he imagined his friends dying a second time, not to old age but to an ancient foe revived, one bent on killing them now that they had a second chance.

Ronin had pointed the gun at Nya's head. One wrong move would have killed her. A step out of line would have ruined so many lives at once. What if it hadn't been Ronin, but someone truly evil? He feared the day they encountered an enemy that wasn't afraid to pull the trigger.

flintcole
I just had a nightmare.

zjfalcon
It has been so long since your last. What do you think has inspired it?
Just recent events.

**zjfalcon**
I feared this would happen when we pursued reunification with Kai and Nya. Do you think you will be okay in the future?

**flintcole**
That doesn't matter. It's too late. I'm already close with Kai and Nya. We're close to finding Jay. And I don't think leaving Lloyd out there alone in the world will spare me from any bad dreams.

**flintcole**
I know you're worried about me. But I need to see Jay. I made too many mistakes with our friendship during my first lifetime. I'm not about to throw away a second chance to make things right for good.

**flintcole**
I'm going to become friends with Jay again. Even if it hurts me.

The nightmares were most common after missions. During his first lifetime, they were a weekly occurrence. But as his ninja activities waned, so did his nightmares, and he no longer feared his dreams before he fell asleep. They had all but stopped until now.

He had a feeling that as his friends returned from the dead, so would his nightmares. It was going to be an interesting few decades.

As the sun rose, Cole decided it was time to do something with his life. Kai was making a living doing what he loved. Nya was crushing her university courses. Zane was living his best life. Watching them from the sidelines, Cole felt like he was missing out on some sort of internal potential. He felt as though there was more he could achieve from life but he just hadn't made it there yet. It was as though he was being prohibited from moving forward. And Cole knew what was responsible.

It was fear. It always blocked him, didn't it? It prevented him from talking earnestly with his father and drove him to run away and land himself into homelessness. It forced him take on a position as leader he wasn't ready for because the idea of his friends dying terrified him. It kept him locked away in his room while Zane held funerals for their friends alone so he could pretend for just a little bit longer that he didn't just lose someone he loved.

But he'd lost them all—everyone but Zane had perished in the end. Now they were coming back from the dead. He was being given a new opportunity to live a life with them he felt was worth living for, one he could pretend for just a little bit longer that he didn't just lose someone he loved.

"What are you going to do, then?" Nya asked him, sitting on the flower shop counter as Cole paced around the closed store, explaining his feelings. "You can't decide that you're going to change your life with no plan."

"What do you think I should do?" replied Cole.

"Well, you never graduated high school. That could be a good place to start."

Cole spent his next week looking at adult schools, combing through all the options until he found one that would suit him best. There was a school not too far from him, one called Western
Continuing Education that avoided classroom-style learning in favour of private tutoring sessions. But there was one problem: they wanted government-issued ID before he could enrol.

Cole didn't know if he could trust the school's administration. Once they caught sight of his birthday, they would figure out who he was. He'd spent so long hiding that the thought of workplace gossip bringing him back into the spotlight terrified him. He had abandoned it for a reason.

He went into hiding at the end of his fifteenth lifetime. For the past few centuries, he'd volunteered at history museums and attended university lectures, talking about his experiences as a ninja and showing off some of his relics from the past. At times, Cole himself felt like a relic, travelling from exhibit to exhibit as the main attraction for crowds mesmerized by history but most often his elemental powers, almost always his elemental powers because in an age where the Elemental Masters were dying off, sometimes not having kids and sometimes dying before it was possible, the few Elemental Masters that remained were a wonder for the masses. Children would tell him that they wanted to be able to control fire or water or be as strong as him, and he would respond by sharing the bad sides of the powers, like Kai's inability to handle cold weather or how Nya could create storms when she was hurt.

It never really worked. People—children or not—still had that dream of flying, of becoming more than they were destined to be. Nobody wanted to be normal. Nobody but Cole.

He went into hiding because he hated feeling like a trophy. He hated visiting exhibits and feeling like he was part of it. Now that he was no longer on the public consciousness, he felt like a regular person. He could go to restaurants with Zane without fear of long stares or sudden interruptions from fans or even sometimes enemies. He was at peace with the world, and it was at peace with him, no longer trying to kill him or his friends and allowing him to do what he'd always wanted: live.

He couldn't risk his identity. So, he got into touch with a less-than-law-abiding ally.

-onyx has opened a new chatroom!-

secure_bot
Welcome to Secure, Ninjago's safest messaging service! Your messages will remain on our isolated, closed-circuit servers, keeping you safe from government surveillance and private tracking. Remember to donate to ensure that your communications remain private! Safe chatting!

ronin
I hate that thing

ronin
Anyways what do you want

onyx
I need a fake ID.

ronin
This better be for infiltrating the second rise

onyx
I'll be honest—it's not. It's so I can attend school without using my real ID.

ronin
Holy shit
I deal with gangs and the dark web, not this surface level garbage

Ask someone else or i'll block u

Okay. Ronin wasn't going to help. But he did know one last person with a more-than-lenient outlook towards the law.

Please tell me you know how to get a fake ID.

what kind of teen would i have been if i didnt have one

One that didn't break the law?

BOO

i can get you an id tho

tell me what info you want on it and ill get it made for you

theyre pricey af tho just warning ya

I'm sure I can afford it. Thanks, man. I owe you.

no prob my dude

One month later, Kai arrived at Cole's apartment with a thin card of plastic. It changed his birthdate to reflect his visible age, making him appear as though he were born twenty-one years ago. Kai stuck around to help him sign up, and within a few hours, he was accepted to start studying the following Monday. Kai shook his head and laughed. "I can't believe you used a fake ID to sign up for school. That's so undeniably lame."

Cole didn't care if it was lame, because he was one step closer to progressing in his life. All he had left to do was graduate high school, figure out what to do from there, and then fulfill his wildest dreams. His plan was a lot vaguer than he was comfortable with, but he was done being comfortable. It was time to cross all those lines he'd drawn in the sand and step into the ocean.

The tutoring room was small, with fading yellow walls and hardwood floors. In the middle of the room was a rectangular table with plastic chairs on either side. When Cole entered, he expected to
see his tutor, but they weren't there.

The receptionist behind him sighed. "He's always late, I'm sorry. Just take a seat and wait for a few minutes."

Cole did as he was told, sitting in the chair that faced the door. He pulled out his supplies, setting out his papers and pens and calculator on the desk. He wanted his tutor to have a good first impression. The last thing he wanted was for them to think he was disorganized and lazy.

The door opened. Cole sat up straighter. Then his tutor entered the room.

Freckles. Shaggy brown hair. A stupid, blue scarf.

Suddenly, Cole lost his ability to breathe.

Jay struggled to balance the various books in his arms. He dropped them on the table, then reached across to shake Cole's hand. Cole barely managed to bring himself to do it.

"Nice to meet you," said Jay. "My name is Jay, but you can call me Mr. Gordon." Jay paused. He looked Cole up and down. "On second thought, don't call me that. You look like you're older than me and that would be kind of weird. Just call me Jay. What's your name?"

He coughed before he spoke. "Cole. My name is Cole."

"Cool name. Or should I say, Cole name. No? No laugh? Okay. Let's just start doing math."

Sparing no time for small talk, Jay moved right into the lesson. As Cole began to relax, he tried to talk about unrelated subjects with Jay, such as movies in theatres or trying to get him to reveal personal details. Cole didn't know if Jay was ignoring him on purpose or failing to pick up on what Cole was doing, because their allotted two hours passed with no progress on Cole's part.

Before he left, Cole asked, "Are you going to keep being my tutor?"

Jay shrugged. "Unless you requested to have the same tutor, they switch us up. But I think I'm with you until Friday. Anyways, I have to go. See you tomorrow, Cole."

Cole clutched the underside of the table. Although he knew he would see Jay again tomorrow morning, nothing made his heart hurt more than watching him leave.

\textit{in: ninja squad 2.0}

\texttt{flintcole}

How's that pizza bet going?

\texttt{kai\_fire13}

ugh not good

\texttt{kai\_fire13}

when we find jay im going to kill him for being so sneaky

\texttt{nyarai}

When /we/ find Jay? I think you mean when /I/ find Jay.

\texttt{kai\_fire13}

dont act like youre going to win
kai_fire13
there's no way I'm spending my hard-earned money on buying you pizza for a whole year

nyarai
Likewise

flintcole
Well, then I've got some pretty good news for you guys. I just met someone pretty interesting. I think he'll be pretty helpful in helping us with our search.

kai_fire13
who is it

flintcole
You may not remember, but you've met him before. See, his name rhymes with slay, because that's what I just did to your plans to catch him first.

flintcole
To confirm: I have found Jay.

kai_fire13
FUCK

nyarai
I have never been so angry and so happy at the same time. What is this strange feeling?

kai_fire13
so what's the plan now

kai_fire13
you gonna tell he's a ninja and recruit him or?

flintcole
No.

kai_fire13
what why not

flintcole
I need to become friends with him first. If I just spring it on him, he won't believe me.

kai_fire13
but don't you have video evidence? wasn't Jay the vlogger?

flintcole
Trust me, Kai.

flintcole
This is something I need to do.

kai_fire13
intense but acceptable
Jay was late again the next morning. The annoyed receptionist for the tutoring centre explained that Jay had a bad habit of getting lost, no matter how often he made the commute there. Cole found it kind of funny. It was very . . . Jay-like.

A quarter past nine, Jay opened the door and made his way inside. He sat down, looked at Cole, and then groaned. "I'm sorry. What's your name again?"

He shifted in his seat. "Oh, it's Cole."

"Okay. Sorry, I'm bad with names. I'll remember next time, I promise."

But come Friday, Jay was still getting lost on his way to the school, and was nowhere close to remembering Cole's name. On more than one occasion, he complimented a doodle in Cole's notebook like it was the first time he'd seen it. Maybe he just couldn't be bothered to remember the details of their tutoring sessions. Cole was sure they weren't the highlight of his day.

They only had ten minutes left in their session before Cole potentially lost Jay for another handful of months. He had to get his information. His life didn't depend on it, but right now, it certainly felt like it did.

"When solving for 'x' in this case, you'd want to think about how to—" Jay began to say, but Cole interrupted him.

"Do you have Insta?" he asked.

"No, I don't. Why?"

"Because you seem like a cool person. I was thinking that we could text each other or even hang out when you're not teaching me."

His eyes widened. "What? Why?"

"I just told you: I think you're a cool person. Look, if you can't, that's fine. I just thought it would be neat to get to know each other a bit better."

"I want to, but I don't have a lot of time for friends. All my free time is spent studying or playing video games. It's hard to find time in my schedule to go out, you know?"

"I used to play a lot of video games when I was your age," replied Cole, feeling an immediate pang of shame at the realization of how old that sentence made him seem. "You could say I was pretty good. I can be pretty competitive if I want to be."

Jay's face lit up. He leaned forward on the desk. "Ever play Smash Bros.?"
It was a hard no. But upon revealing that he was willing to learn to play, Jay finally coughed up his username. However, it wasn't for Instagram: it was for Secure, the messaging app Ronin used to communicate with Cole and Nya.

Either Jay cared about his online privacy, or he had something to hide. It was intriguing, but Cole couldn't push. Not yet. He'd find out more about Jay's new life when the time came. For now, his only goal was friendship.

The following week, Nya asked him to begin training her, claiming that as long as they were careful, they could start her ninja training without causing more injury. After much persuasion, Kai lent them his keys to the dojo, and they started training that same night as soon as she had finished her homework. Given her schedule, they would only be able to train at night, but it didn't seem to bother Nya.

"If anything, it's more realistic this way," she said, strapping on her knee brace—not the regular one, Cole noticed, but the piece of armour from the Samurai X suit. "What kind of ninja doesn't do everything at night?"

"One that's well-adjusted to society," replied Cole with a sigh. Nya laughed, and once her brace was secured, they were ready to begin. Seeing that she still carried herself with a slight limp, he decided to try something different.

After Jay had injured his leg during the Tournament of Elements, he was suspended from duty shortly after the Tournament's conclusion to ensure he didn't make it worse than it already was. But he'd refused to sit back while his friends risked their lives, so he developed an adapted version of the ninja fighting style, one that permitted him to fight without a leg by shifting most of the action to the arms and hands. This is the style Cole would teach Nya. He just had to figure it out again first.

It was a good thing he was still a master fighter.

"This can be a bit tricky," Cole admitted. "You need to put more of the pressure on one leg while simultaneously keeping the injured one away from the action. This puts you at a disadvantage; smart fighters will spot your weak leg right away and target it."

"You want me to be more aggressive," Nya said. Cole was surprised—he wasn't that far in his explanation yet. "They're going to target my knee, so to keep them from doing that, they need to be busy defending themselves."

She didn't seem too happy. "Is that all right? I can try to figure out something else if it doesn't work for you."

"It's just different, that's all," she said. After a deep breath, she shifted into the stance Cole showed her. "I always fought in a mixed league, and no matter how hard I tried, the guys were always stronger. I used the same fighting style as Skylor. I wish I could have used Kai's tactic and just overpowered my opponents by beating them into submission, but I never could. Now you're asking me to do exactly what I used to think was impossible. I'm a little worried I won't be able to pull it off."

"Jay couldn't overpower anyone." Cole shifted into his own stance, ready to begin. "But he was quick. He always tried to take down his opponents before they had the chance to fight back. This is what you'll do."

"You're training me to be an assassin."
"I'm training you to be a ninja. Your success isn't measured by how many fights you win, but how many you avoid all together. I want you to be a strong ninja, Nya. I want you to be as good as you used to be. If we work on this together, you'll live up to all that potential you used to fear you lost. You just need to trust me."

She nodded. "Okay. I trust you."

"Perfect. Let's start."

Understanding her new style, Nya lunged forward. Cole moved to block.

Soon, she would become a ninja master again. It was just going to take time.

The next day, Cole messaged Jay. He wanted to speak with him, but felt like he needed an excuse to make the transition from teacher and student to friends less awkward.

-onyx has opened a new chatroom!-

secure_bot
Welcome to Secure, Ninjago's safest messaging service! Your messages will remain on our isolated, closed-circuit servers, keeping you safe from government surveillance and private tracking. Remember to donate to ensure that your communications remain private! Safe chatting!

onyx
Where can I buy a copy of Smash?

walker
online or in a store

walker
but wait do you have a console? you need one to play

walker
wait x2 was i supposed to send you a copy of my schedule/? i just remembered its a local game so we would need to be together anyways

walker
you can just come over to my place and play if you want

walker
or i could even lug the console over to yours

walker
your choice really

Cole knew the obvious choice. This was an open invitation to visit Jay's home; to peek into his private life, understand the conditions in which he now lived. But as he began to type his assent, a sudden memory prevented him from finishing. Jay overshared, but there were parts of him he kept secret from those he didn't trust. It took Cole years to earn it. And to earn it, he had to first sacrifice his own privacy, allowing Jay access to his hidden memories and deepest secrets.

He knew what he had to do.

onyx
Do you think you could come to my place?

Onyx
Not that I would hate going to yours.

Walker
lol sure

Walker
this is probs a good thing cuz i havent cleaned my place in ages lmao

Onyx
Okay, send me a copy of your schedule so I can figure out a good time.

Walker
sure thing bro

-walker has sent you an image!-

fall_shed.jpg

Cole looked it over. Jay had sent him his digital calendar for the month of November, full of notes for work schedule changes and class cancellations or adjustments. Among the chaos, there was one constant: Jay had no free time. He was no longer that free bird he used to be, the person he was before he became a ninja, with mounds of free time used for inventing and testing out his machines. On the schedule, Cole counted many university classes—for mechanical engineering—and three part-time jobs if he included their morning tutoring sessions. Cole combed through Jay's schedule, noting when he had his obligatory days off and the days when he had the longest breaks between his jobs and school. His days off were staggered between jobs and school, so he had something on everyday. It was just a matter of finding a time when Jay would be the least exhausted.

In two weeks, on a Wednesday, Jay was free from dinner until Tuesday morning. Cole and Jay made plans over text and for the first time in thousands of years, they were about to hang out as friends again.

By the next week, Cole discovered that Jay wasn't one to text first. But Cole was afraid of pushing it and losing him, so they continued without contact until the day of their get together, when Jay texted him in the morning to confirm that everything was still a go. After exchanging a few words, Jay stopped replying and only messaged him again to announce his arrival.

Jay walked into his apartment with a backpack strapped to his shoulders, the same blue scarf wrapped around his neck, and a rather heavy-looking brown jacket sagging off his arms. It seemed too big on him. Cole opened his mouth to bring Jay's attention to the coat rack and the mat where he could leave his shoes, but he didn't seem interested in basic etiquette and walked straight past him, making his way deeper into the room. Cole closed his front door and turned around.

Still wearing his dirty shoes, Jay had walked into his carpeted living room and was already in the process of setting up the game console. Cole shook his head, annoyed that his carpet may now need cleaning soon, but smiled a little nonetheless. When had Jay ever cared about personal space, or respected other people's preferences? What seemed like a character flaw now presented itself as hope that despite all the changes to Jay's life, with his busy schedule and seemingly different adolescence, he was still the same person in his core. His best friend would always be himself. Now, Cole just had to coax it out of him.
The game loaded on the screen. Jay scooched back and sat on the floor, crossing his legs and leaning his back against the couch. He patted the floor next to him, inviting Cole over.

Cole raised an eyebrow. "Why sit on the floor? I have a couch."

"I don't play games on furniture," replied Jay. "When I was a kid and played games for the first time, it was always on the floor. There was only one couch, and I'm a small person, so I always wound up on the floor when I fought the other kids for the controller. Playing like this reminds me of those days. It makes me feel more connected to the game."

This was a surprise. "You have siblings?" asked Cole. Jay was an isolated child, having grown up alone in a scrapyard with his parents. It was this background that made him socially unconscious and awkward in conversation. Would Jay be a different person if he'd had other children to bond with?

"No," said Jay, as though that was all the explanation required. Cole bit the inside of his cheek to keep himself from asking more questions.

The television changed to a character selection screen. Jay locked into a character as soon as he could. Cole could recognize some, but not all, and definitely not the one Jay had selected. Sheik wasn't in any of the video games he'd played when he was younger, or even ten years ago, when Jay would have been a child. Cole chose a character he'd played many games as: Sonic.


Cole was unaware of any kind of ranking system. "Are some characters better than others?"

"Yeah. See, you could choose Bayonetta, the best fighter, but that's kind of a cheap move. She's an S-Tier. We both chose A-Tier characters. They're really good, but not overpowered. Sheik is my main, but Sonic is my second go-to. Zero-Suit Samus is pretty good, too. I like fast characters."

"Blue characters too, apparently."

"Pfft. Of course. Blue is the best colour."

Cole couldn't argue with that.

Throughout the next few hours, Cole got a good scope of the game. He learned to block, shield, recover, and a number of other techniques to keep his characters from flying off the screen. But no matter how long he resisted, he quickly learned one thing: Jay was unstoppable.

Jay very rarely lost a life—or stock, as Cole learned to call them—and was quick to rob Cole of his own. After their play session was finished, Cole looked over to Jay, angry that he lost so many times but proud that his best friend had discovered something new he was good at. "How often do you play this? You're too good."

"When I'm not studying or working, this is what I do. Sorry that I never let you win. I get a little competitive."

"Do you ever do those gaming competitions?" asked Cole.

"Some of them," said Jay. "I like to go in the summer, when I don't have to worry about school."

"You ever win?"

Jay leaned forward. He turned off the console, then sat back. "I've only won once. And, to be
honest, it wasn't even because I was better. I won because I tricked him. He knocked me off the side, and I pretended I didn't have my recovery move. The guy jumped off to celebrate, and when he was passed the point of no return, I used my recovery move to jump a few feet in the air. He died and lost his last stock one second before me. No one really considers it to be a legitimate win. The next time I win, it'll be because of my skill, not a cheap trick. Then I can consider myself a real champion."

Jay stood up. Cole looked at the clock. It was midnight. They'd been playing for quite a few hours, now. Like Cole, Jay looked at the clock. Then, he looked to his video game console. "Can I leave this here?"

"Don't want it to get stolen?"

"Taking public transit at night with an expensive console in my backpack? If I got robbed, it would suck." Jay zipped up his back and put it on his shoulders. Cole led him to the door and opened it for him. Jay stepped into the hallway. "You can play it, if you want. Maybe, if you practice enough, you can beat me one day. I'll see you soon, Onyx."

Cole closed the door. He peeked through the peephole, watching Jay as he stepped into the elevator and then disappeared. He couldn't believe he'd just played video games with his best friend again. It felt surreal.

Cole laughed. And yet, despite all the time they'd just spent together, Jay still couldn't remember his name.

The next night, during his sparring session with Nya, he found himself often pausing his explanations to yawn. When she dared to ask why he was so tired, he lied and told her that he'd had a rough night sleeping. He didn't have the courage to look her in the eye and explain that rather than sleep, he'd elected to spend his hours playing Smash Bros. until the sun rose and it was time to attend his tutoring session. It didn't seem like she'd believed him, but to her credit, she chose not to push it further.

That was one thing he'd always liked about Nya. A keeper of secrets herself, she was never one to push. She respected boundaries and privacy. Although she had less to keep hidden in this life, this trait carried over. Cole was eternally grateful for this, because as more time passed with Jay's console sitting in Cole's living room, he went through his days with less and less sleep as he spent his nights cramming in game time. No matter how exhausted he appeared during their training sessions, she did nothing more than raise an eyebrow and ask if he'd had trouble sleeping again, never going further and demanding information he wasn't willing to volunteer.

Jay was a different story. The next time Jay came over to play, he noticed Cole's exhaustion immediately. He laughed. "Wow, you look awful. How many all-nighters have you been pulling lately?"

If it was anyone else, Cole would have been offended. But he knew Jay's bluntness came from a place of caring. "I've had a few. No big deal, I used to be up all night all the time. I'm just not used to it anymore. I'll be back to normal soon."

"Night owl like me, huh? I love being awake during the night. It feels more natural. It feels like the right time for me to be awake," said Jay, slinking lower into his spot on the floor, until only his head was supported by the front of the couch. "Man, before I came to the city for high school, I spent all my time awake at night. I grew up in one of those little Sands communities, and although it's been a thousand years since that climate scare, the storms have been pretty bad. So they always had someone awake at night, just to make sure that if the warning systems went off, at least one of us would be able to wake the others. That was my job. It was nice, just watching the stars and reading..."
"We would if we could. You can't see the stars in the city. Well, not most of them, anyway." Cole could remember watching the stars disappear as the city expanded, drowning them out with its destructive light pollution. The city did a lot more than that, too, spreading storm clouds across the country that destroyed ecosystems and wreaked havoc on rural communities that ultimately had little to do with it in the first place. He could remember the divide the shattered the nation, creating barriers that lasted for centuries and with it distinct dialects that became new languages. These languages emerged with new cultures, whose traditions varied from region-to-region.

It had been a long time since Cole visited the Sea of Sands. Thinking back, he could recall the way his feet sunk an inch into the sand with each step inside the floorless homes because sand was so pervasive they deemed it easier to embrace it rather than spend hours a day cleaning it out of every nook and cranny indoors. This was why Jay never took off his shoes when he entered Cole's apartment. He wondered what Jay's apartment looked like. Were the floors covered in shoe prints? Were his sheets dirty from sleeping with his shoes on, like most did in the Sands? Did he forget to lock his door at night after living in such a small, trusting community?

Jay looked past him. Cole followed his eyes to the window. It was nighttime. He was looking for stars. From the interior of his apartment, none could be seen. But the same couldn't be said for the roof.

"Do you want to go up?" asked Cole, gesturing to the ceiling. Jay seemed to understand. He thought for a moment, then shook his head and turned on the game console.

"It's too depressing," he said. "But if you ever come to the Sands, I'll show you the stars. You seem like the kind of guy that has his head up in the clouds. I'm sure you'd like them."

The mood lifted as soon as they started playing. Jay began to make jokes again, swearing at Cole whenever he landed a hit and nearly throwing his controller when Cole knocked him off the platform and eliminated one of his stocks for the first time. The practice was paying off.

But it wasn't enough, and aside from that small victory, Jay still crushed Cole no matter what character he chose. Even resorting to 'S-Tier' characters like Bayonetta wasn't enough to defeat Jay. Cole wondered how it was possible Jay didn't win the competitions he participated in. Were the others really that much better than him? How competitive could this game get?

For the next few months, Jay came over once a week to play games with Cole. If they ever wound up with tutoring sessions together, Jay would find ways to incorporate lessons about the game into what he was teaching Cole. It made Cole laugh. What a nerd.

Come spring, they were growing close. But Cole still knew nothing about him. He could piece together some things, like his general background, poor financial situation that required two jobs, and past-times, but there was more than that. Jay had always been an inventor. Where was this part of him now?

April brought sun showers. During a rainy day, Ronin messaged him and Nya for the first time in months.

-ronin has opened a new chatroom!-

secure_bot
Welcome to Secure, Ninjago's safest messaging service! Your messages will remain on our isolated, closed-circuit servers, keeping you safe from government surveillance and private tracking.
At midnight, Nya picked up Cole on her bike and they wove through the side-streets until they arrived at Ronin's building. Unsure of how to enter, they climbed up the balconies and entered through the sliding door. Ronin waved his hand out the door of the computer room, inviting them inside.

Since Nya's attack on his computers, Ronin had downgraded to one monitor. Cole smiled at the memory. Although Ronin was now his ally, it always felt good to see justice served.

"Welcome to the end of our alliance, Ninja," Ronin announced, spinning in his swivel chair and spreading his arms in gesture. "In the next period of unidentified time, the Second Rise will sever their ties with me. It was nice working with you."

Nya crossed her arms. "Wow," she deadpanned. "I'm so glad I made this deal with you. You have been an absolute well of information. Thanks, Ronin."

"Hey, give me some credit. A few hours ago, I hacked them. Just for you."

Nya's arms fell back to her sides. "You what?"

"Well, claiming I did it a few hours ago doesn't give me all the credit. We've been working together for nearly a year. I've had quite a few deals between then and now," Ronin said. He spun again and faced his computer. He pulled up a map of the city on his monitor. Every few moments, a few circles of light would blink somewhere in the streets. "The past few deals, I've put geolocation software in
the biotech. They didn't notice. For some kind of secret society, they're really bad at detecting malware."

Nya leaned forward. She looked at the screen with narrowed eyes. As though explaining to the less-than-technologically-capable Cole, she said, "So, anyone wearing your new biotech has a tracker. We can follow their movements."

Cole frowned. "If they didn't catch you, why are they kicking you out?"

"Change of leadership," replied Ronin. He turned back to face Cole. "There was a coup yesterday. My contacts are freaking out. Some of them are dead. This new guy is vicious. He calls himself Feng. I heard he went on this loyalty tirade, and if anyone refused to obey him, he shot them in the head or something. All the dealers are getting kicked out—something about not being able to trust third parties."

"Pretty smart," Cole admitted. "Sucks for us, but smart for them. It's a good thing we got in when we did."

"I'll send the tracking program to Nya. No offense, black ninja, but she's the real tech expert here."

"None taken."

That night, after Nya had dropped him off and he fell asleep, he had another nightmare. His arms were tied behind his back, connected to a wall by chains made of vengestone. It was a dark room. A single light hung from the ceiling, swaying back and forth in a breeze that made him shiver. It smelled of wet wood, like a forest after rainfall. Where was he? He looked to the left, then to the right. Crates were stacked against the walls. Portholes peeked out into the sea. Some kind of ship. Instinctively, he knew it was not Destiny's Bounty. He blinked and shook his head, willing his reality away. But he could still feel the chains pinching his skin, and upon opening his eyes, was met with a scene so different than his usual nightmares. Jay, hands bound behind him, faced a man Cole could not recognize. The only distinguishing feature a was a long, dark ponytail. Cole squinted but could not make out facial features. It seemed that his face warped, changing slightly with each passing second. Perhaps this was Feng. He shouted at Jay in a language Cole couldn't understand. Jay tried to reply but Feng ordered his silence. He stuck his arm out. It glowed a soft orange. As Feng spoke, it grew brighter. There was panic on Jay's face. He began to walk backwards out of fear, but did not notice a crate behind him and tripped on it. On the floor, he tried to move away, kicking wildly at his assailant.

And then, with one kick, lightning erupted from his foot.

Cole flinched when he woke, eyes snapping open in fear. He sat up, heart calming as reality kicked in. His clock beeped loudly. His alarm had been going off for half-an-hour now. It was 08:30. He was going to be late for tutoring.

Still half-paralyzed by fear, he dressed himself in the black clothes that gave him comfort and left his apartment with a travel mug filled with two cups of espresso to wake him up. The skytrain was unusually silent. He didn't know if it was remnant paranoia from the nightmare, but it seemed as though have the train car couldn't keep their eyes off him. It was suffocating. Once he reached his stop, he nearly stumbled out of the doors to get away from their looks. Rather than wait in a crowded elevator with suit-claden people scowling during their commute to work, he climbed the fence and jumped into the emergency stairwell. He ran the whole way down to try and burn energy, jumping some stairs and going as fast as he could.

He reached the bottom. The sight of people walking on the sidewalks made his heart pound in his
chest. What was wrong with him today?

The familiar walls of the tutoring centre only calmed him slightly. He made his way to the room, glancing at the clock on the way. He was ten minutes late. Hopefully his tutor wouldn't mind.

He opened the door. Inside, the back of Jay's auburn hair greeted him. Cole let out a sigh of relief. At least he was with someone he knew. He sat down in his chair, but Jay didn't smile upon seeing him. Tap tap tap! Cole looked down. Jay's foot, the same one he'd used to kick lightning in his dream, was tapping incessantly against the wooden floor.

Beneath the table, Cole pinched his own leg. It was a nightmare. The connection was arbitrary.

"Are you okay, Onyx?" asked Jay.

Cole's head snapped up. "My name isn't Onyx. It's Cole. We've been friends for months, Jay. Why can't you remember my name?"

Jay's foot began to tap faster. "I'm blanking," he said with a shrug. As though it were an answer.

"For months at a time? After we've known each other for this long?" Cole didn't know where the anger was coming from. Was it because he'd just witnessed his friend in a near-death scenario and he couldn't even remember his name? Was it because Cole had spent thousands of years missing him, falling into fits of depression at the thought of him only for him to return and then care so little his own name was negligible? Was it because he was afraid that if Jay didn't care, he would lose him again? He couldn't help what came out next. "You're my best friend, Jay. Why can't you remember?"

The chair scraped against the floor as Jay pushed back, eyes wide in a mix of fury and shock that pierced Cole's heart because this was how he remembered Jay looking at an enemy, not a friend. "You're not my best friend. I don't have friends. You're just a student I play video games with. Nothing more."

"How can you not have friends? You claimed you didn't have any time but now I know that's a straight-up lie. Weekly hangouts are enough to sustain friendship. What gives? Why are you pushing me away?" demanded Cole. The receptionist outside could probably hear him. He didn't care.

"Because of this, Cole," Jay spat. He gestured to the room—to them. "I can't remember anything. I couldn't remember you existed until our third tutoring session. I can't even remember the first six years of my life! My own life, my own childhood—gone. It's just weird, okay? I've never had anyone care enough to stick around before. I forget about plans, or I forget their names, or I don't text back for months at a time. Of course, no one cares. There's nothing appealing about hanging out with someone that can't remember yesterday."

He should have seen it. He knew Jay's memory wasn't perfect from the start. Why didn't he think it was beyond negligence?

"Because of this, Cole," Jay spat. He gestured to the room—to them. "I can't remember anything. I couldn't remember you existed until our third tutoring session. I can't even remember the first six years of my life! My own life, my own childhood—gone. It's just weird, okay? I've never had anyone care enough to stick around before. I forget about plans, or I forget their names, or I don't text back for months at a time. Of course, no one cares. There's nothing appealing about hanging out with someone that can't remember yesterday."

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"Oh." Jay seemed to deflate at Cole's apology. He breathed out, shoulders slouching. "It's okay. I get a little defensive. So, you don't hate me or anything? You want to keep being bros?"

Jay was giving him a chance. They didn't need to be friend or best friends right now. They just needed to be bros. The rest would come later.
"I'd love to be bros," Cole said. "Let's just make each other a promise, all right? No secrets. You can tell me if you have memory problems or anything like that. I'd rather know because the last thing I want to do is fight over another misunderstanding."

"Okay," said Jay. "I promise."

Despite his promise, Cole still did not believe him. The promise Cole made was not to assure Jay was honest, but to assure that Jay assumed Cole had no truths to hide. With this step forward, Jay would begin to trust him more. It was just a matter of time until he learned more.

On the train ride home, Cole pondered the implications of Jay's memory issues. His own memories of his childhood were patchy, but he could remember his first day of school, or the days when his father became exceptionally angry with him for various reasons. He couldn't imagine what it would be like to lose six whole years to some kind of memory black-hole bent on destroying his personal relationships. Above all, it was strange it existed in the first place. Jay didn't have memory problems before. But Jay wasn't alone in this. Nya, too, had problems unique to this lifetime. Her knee was fine in the past. Now, it was injured for what could be the rest of her life.

As the train pulled into his stop, a thought struck him: Nya's knee injury was caused by Ronin, another force from the past. Did this grant her an exception? Could life-changing events in their reincarnated forms only occur if done by another reincarnation? If this were the case, Jay's forgetfulness would have been caused not by a form of brain dysfunction, but external manipulation. All of this would imply that someone was actively harming Jay. But a gut feeling told Cole this was not the case. If someone was hurting him, he would have noticed. Jay would have arrived to tutoring with bruises, or if the wounds weren't physical, he would at the very least have acted even slightly different than he used to. Cole knew his best friend like the back of his hand. If something was wrong, he would know. Right?

Cole and Zane met up for breakfast the following morning, tucking themselves away in a corner booth of a café in one of the residential neighbourhoods of the city. Cole explained his observations, going over his past experiences with both Nya and Jay so Zane could help him figure it out.

Zane fell silent for a few moments, eyes looking around the room as he thought about what Cole had told him. Then, he spoke. "I have a strange theory to propose," he said. "What if we were wrong to assume they are the same people they were when they died? Nya and Jay both have new struggles, while Kai remains the only ninja still intact, so to speak. What if he is the exception in this case?"

"That's possible," Cole said. "I guess Kai was also fucked over by someone from our past. Chen ruined his martial arts career, right? Maybe this is a common occurrence in reincarnation."

"You told me Jay cannot remember the first six years of his life. His broken memory is not natural, Cole. It is not part of who he is supposed to be. I believe someone is doing this to him."

"I think I would have noticed if someone was messing with him," Cole replied. His bit his cheek again, annoyed at Zane's suggestion. He knew it was wrong to get defensive, but he couldn't help it. "No one is harming Jay. At least, not right now."

"Well, that is a theory, I suppose."

Cole frowned. "This isn't a time to be sarcastic." He picked up his mug and took a long sip of his coffee.

"I am not being sarcastic."
Cole paused. He put his mug on the table. "What's the theory, then?"

"I believe that you would have noticed if something is wrong with Jay. Best friends or not, it is hard to spend seventy years with someone and fail to realize if something is wrong. This means there is one reasonable explanation: Jay is not being hurt in the present."

Suddenly, it clicked. "Something happened in those first six years of his life," he murmured. Cole stood up. "Come on, let's go to the flower shop. I think we missed something in the files Nya gave us."

Back in Cole's office, they found the files in a cabinet and spread them across the table. They combed through them, looking for any sign of harm in his medical and other personal files. Cole searched for small details, things they would have missed during their first look-through when their biggest problem was finding out if Jay was even alive. He picked up the adoption papers, leaked by Nya despite their large CONFIDENTIAL warnings printed across the text as a watermark. She really was willing to commit crime to pursue her own goals, wasn't she? He supposed she'd always been a rule-breaker.

Some of the text was highlighted, containing key information like his parents' occupation and Jay's birthdate. Cole avoided this text. He looked at the top of the page, observing the generic information about the adoption. And then he found it.

"Zane, look at this," he said. Zane looked over. Cole ran his finger under the adoption date. "Jay was only adopted ten years-ago. He's sixteen."

"Does he know he's adopted?" Zane asked.

"Probably. His Secure username is his old last name, so he must have gotten it from his parents. Also, come on. There's no way he doesn't know. It's kind of hard to keep it a secret when your kid has a different last name than you."

"True," Zane said. "In this case, do you think it is some form of trauma caused by his biological parents? Memories can be affected by psychological trauma."

"We'll see. Right now, I'm going to keep being friends with him. His memories apparently do break through sometimes. There's a chance he'll tell me what happened if I can prompt him to remember."

"Okay. Let's see if you can do this."

Game plan in action, Cole contacted Jay to make sure they could continue to meet up and play *Smash Bros*. Jay promised they could, and soon enough, they were meeting up almost weekly to play for hours straight. But Cole wanted to take their friendship further.

Come summer, it was time to introduce him to his friends.

-onyx has opened a new chatroom!-

secure_bot
Welcome to Secure, Ninjago's safest messaging service! Your messages will remain on our isolated, closed-circuit servers, keeping you safe from government surveillance and private tracking. Remember to donate to ensure that your communications remain private! Safe chatting!

onyx
My friend Kai is hosting a movie night if you're down.
We usually just order pizza and chill.

are they cool?

also i talk during movies rip

They're pretty cool. One of them, Kai, likes to talk a lot during movies, too. You'll probably get along pretty well.

hmmmmmmmmmmmmmm okay ill try

don't ditch me though okay?

Shy around new people?

a little

how many people will be there?

Three that aren't me or you.

okay. that's doable.

Cole arrived at Kai and Nya's home a few hours early to help them set up. They cleaned the place from top to bottom, moving all of Kai's soda cans and empty bowls to the kitchen and forcing Nya to bring all of her devices and chargers up to her bedroom so it was no longer a struggle to walk around the house without stepping on a piece of expensive technology. They had planned to host the screening in the basement, but when Cole found out they still hadn't replaced the coffee table him and Kai had broken during a training session, he moved their plans to the living room and promptly held a small meeting with Kai and Nya.

"You need to take better care of your house," he said. Nya chuckled. Cole frowned. "I'm being serious. It's not like you don't have enough time to clean up or buy a new coffee table."

"Um, it's not the time, it's the money," Kai replied. He lifted up his leg and shoved a foot in Cole's face. His sneaker still had a price tag attached. "How am I supposed to afford a new coffee table if I also need to look pretty?"
Cole groaned when he saw the price. "You spent way too much money on those. And why is the tag still attached?"

"If the price tag isn't there, nobody knows. I spent an entire week's paycheck on this. I deserve to feel proud."

"You know, your parents are going to kick you out one day. You'll have to worry about rent, and food, and Internet. Then you won't want to waste money on shoes anymore."

Kai put his foot back down. He smiled. "I plan to marry rich, so I don't know what you're talking about."

"I will forever be confused by how you can have so much confidence and such little self-respect at the same time."

Zane arrived soon after they finished cleaning, ringing the doorbell on the exact minute the party was deemed to start. He helped them with some last minute set-up, putting out snacks and plating portions of what they knew to be Jay's favorite food. It was a simple rice dish, specific to Skylor's region of the island that had grown very expensive and hard to find after the climate divisions. But Zane knew how to make it from scratch, and had offered to make it for the party so Jay could rediscover something he used to love. Cole just hoped his taste hadn't changed since his sudden revival.

As expected, Jay arrived fifteen minutes late. He began to apologize profusely, but Cole made him stop and pulled him inside. He led him to the living room, where the others were arguing over what kind of movie they wanted to watch. They fell silent when Jay walked into the room.

Cole watched Zane's face light up at the sight of his old friend. He jumped out of his seat and hurried over to Jay, immediately enveloping him in a hug that only ended when Zane opened his eyes and saw Cole signalling for him to calm down. Zane took a step back and composed himself, still smiling as he introduced himself. "Hello, my name is Zane. It is nice to meet you."

"Uh, you too," said Jay. He looked back to Cole for a moment as though searching for reassurance, then faced the room again after Cole nodded for him to continue. He waved awkwardly to Kai and Nya. "Hey. I'm Jay. I don't know if Cole's told you anything about me, but we're video game buddies. Cool to meet you guys."

Nya laughed. "Oh, he's told us a lot about you. He thinks you're really cool." Cole shot her a glare, but it only made her laugh harder. "Anyways, I'm Nya. The guy on the other side of the couch is my brother, Kai. If you don't talk to him, this night will be absolutely perfect."

Jay leaned back to Cole. He whispered, "Why can't I talk to Kai?"

Cole, continuing to shoot glares at Nya, whispered back, "She's just messing with you."

"So, I hear you're into *Smash Bros.*" Kai leaned back in the sofa and pointed a finger at Jay. "You're a nerd and you should feel bad. Not because you're a nerd, though. You should feel bad because—"

"I was stuck in a tiny town for a month with no Internet and I played that stupid game for five hours a day, getting my ass kicked by a fourteen year-old daily until I learned to crush him. Now, I don't have a console and I just borrowed this controller from one of my students for effect, but I want you to know that next time we meet up, you better be ready to square up. I'll kill you. Instantly."

"Oh really?" Jay asked, his voice playful. "I'm one of the best players in the country. I know the
good players, and I've never heard your name before. Are you in the novice league?"

"Ouch, Jay has some fire in him," Nya commented.

"I'm the one with the fire, thank you very much," said Kai. "Whatever. Let's just watch a movie."

After much more bickering, they decided to watch a horror movie about ghosts invading a town that seemed to be vaguely based on the ninja's encounters with Morro and the Cursed Realm. The movie itself wasn't fantastic, but Cole learned something new as he watched: Kai and Jay were terrified of horror movies. Halfway through the movie, Kai convinced Jay to sit beside him on the couch and they clutched each other in their arms, screaming during the jumpscare and shouting at the main characters whenever they did something stupid. Cole became aware that Nya was discreetly filming them with their phone, and made a mental note to ask for the footage later. A little blackmail never hurt anyone.

After the movie, they ate the rice dish and Cole hid his smile behind his hand as he watched Jay devour it in one sitting, eyes wide as he ate what Cole could only assume to be the best meal of his life. Zane had made sure to make plenty, so after his third serving, Jay collapsed on his side, moaning as he complained about being "too full to function".

What was meant to be a movie party turned into a sleepover, although Jay forced himself to fall asleep early so he could wake up on time for work the next day. Cole spent his night hanging out with the others, all careful not to bring up anything ninja-related in case Jay awoke and heard them. In a way, the censorship was refreshing. Cole was able to focus on the present for once, not stressing about the future or being pulled down by his past. Kai told them about how his dojo was going, Nya talked about her plan to run for the student union, and Zane even spent some time considering taking everyone on a road trip during the fall long weekend. Nya proposed camping, and with no objections from anyone else, the plan was in motion. They just had to convince Jay to take the weekend off work and come along.

During his commute home the next morning, Cole decided to talk to Jay.

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secure_bot
Welcome to Secure, Ninjago's safest messaging service! Your messages will remain on our isolated, closed-circuit servers, keeping you safe from government surveillance and private tracking. Remember to donate to ensure that your communications remain private! Safe chatting!

onyx
I thought you said you were shy around new people?

walker
normally yeah. idk why but after a little bit i just felt super relaxed

walker
it was the same way with you actually

walker
i guess i feel like i can be myself around you guys

walker
most people dont make me feel that way congrats
anyways i have something i want to ask you, and maybe your friends in extension

What is it?

im competing in a smash tournament next weekend

i can afford to take time off work in the summer since im full time rather than part time

i got the whole weekend off

do you guys want to come? theyre really cool

Sure, sounds awesome. Anything we need to be aware of?

yeah. its one of the tournaments with a betting pool

which means its kind of illegal cause gambling is a big no no in the law

you dont need to bring a disguise or anything, the cops dont really care since the gaming part itself isnt illegal

I'm honoured that you trust me enough to tell me about your semi-illegal activities.

I'll let them know. I'm sure they'd love to tag along.

okay cool, i'll send you the deets later

Who wants to do something illegal next week?

The night before the tournament, Jay came over to pick up his controller so he could use it during the competition. But Kai had used his key to break into Cole's apartment, and when Jay arrived to grab his controller, Kai challenged him to a duel. A few years ago, when it seemed as though Kai had lost everything important in his life, Cole would have pulled Jay aside and asked him to go easy on him. But as Kai's students became more and more successful, a familiar arrogance had returned to his
personality. Cole did pull Jay aside, but he didn't encourage him to let Kai win—he told him to do the opposite.


Jay nodded and smiled. "Oh, it won't be difficult."

To Kai's credit, he was better than Cole had ever been. He could hold his own against Jay for quite some time, but in the end, Jay was an unstoppable machine and robbed Kai of his stock by using some tricky techniques Cole had never seen from him before. He probably wasn't a good enough opponent to warrant using them. He looked forward to watching Jay fight in the tournament. It was definitely going to be entertaining.

Kai elected to crash on Cole's couch for the night. "Dude, it's been too long since I've done this. You don't even have blankets sitting on one end of the couch for me anymore. How sad is that?"

That night, only a few hours before the sun was due to rise, Cole was shaken awake by Kai. His heart was beating, and he could vaguely remember dreaming about the time when Kai had been captured by an enemy and the Bounty was sent audio files of his screams and they were helpless to do anything about it—

"Cole, are you awake?" asked Kai, his voice soft and caring in a way that was normally reserved only for Lloyd and Nya. Cole didn't know Kai to be an intimate person. Seeing him now, kneeling beside Cole's bed with a hand on his shoulder, felt utterly foreign.

"Yeah. I am." Cole cleared his throat. "Why aren't you asleep?"

"Same reason as you," said Kai. "I had a bad dream. You screamed and woke me up. I wanted to make sure everything was okay."

"I'm sorry, it usually never happens this often and I—"

Kai cut him off. "Shush. It's been happening a lot with me lately. Ever since we met, I've had some nightmares here and there. But it's getting worse. They used to be a few times a year. Now it's a monthly basis. I guess you must get them pretty often, with your past and whatnot, so this probably sounds like nothing to you. But geez. I think I just had the worst one yet. Can I talk to you about it?"

"Uh, yeah. Sure. Go ahead."

"I was in a room. There were bright lights everywhere and my vision was swaying and I couldn't concentrate on anything. I felt drugged up, like when the nindroid shot me. It was really disorienting. Suddenly, and I'm sorry for this, someone was cutting into my arms, and my face, and I can remember yelling and struggling but it just kept coming. Then you woke me up. Like, what the fuck was that? Do you get these dreams? How am I supposed to fall back asleep after that?"

Cole shot up in bed. He was wide awake now. "We had the same dream."

"The exact same?" asked Kai.

Cole tapped his fingers on the bed sheets as his thoughts raced through him like lightning, connecting everything at once. "No. It was from my perspective. But we both dreamed of the same time in history, down to the minute. Your dream is real, Kai. It happened during your first lifetime. You just can't remember it."

"Holy shit."
Nya wouldn't answer her phone but Zane never slept, so a short call later and he was knocking on Cole's door at three in the morning, ready to listen and figure out exactly what was going on.

Zane had only one input. "Record your dreams."

"Cool idea, but I don't have biotech," said Kai. "Only Cole can do it."

"That will suffice," said Zane. "Our trust has continued into your new life. I am sure you will not lie to us."

"That's dumb. Now I know I can rob you and you'll never suspect it was me," said Kai. He was joking around, but Cole could hear the slight tremor in his voice. This was beyond anything he'd ever experienced before. Cole was used to the supernatural; he was part of it. But Kai was still grappling with the sudden changes in his life, with reincarnation, and he couldn't imagine digesting the newfound knowledge that all of his nightmares were real.

Cole only hoped nothing nightmare-worthy would ever happen in this lifetime. The Second Rise was always a threat, but if they played their cards right, it could be shutdown by only two ninja. Nya wasn't in physical danger by hacking. They could keep her safe. Nothing bad would happen to her, either. Cole wouldn't let anything happen to any of them.

They spent the rest of the morning weighing the possibilities of what was occurring. Together, they narrowed it down to one phenomenon:

The reincarnated ninja still possessed their old memories, but they could only come out in dreams.

Before they left for Jay's *Smash* tournament, they debriefed Nya on the situation. She admitted that she'd had a few odd dreams lately, but nightmares were sparse. Cole wondered if they'd ever shared dreams before and simply didn't realize it at the time. How often had this happened before with the others? Had he entered with dream space with Lloyd or Jay long ago and just assumed it was another memory?

The tournament was held in the basement of a card store. It was packed with people, some wearing face paint or other disguises, while others took their chances with the law and didn't bother to hide their identity. The lights were dimmed all around, save for colourul fluorescents that painted the room a myriad of colours.

To the left, Cole saw Kai put sunglasses over his eyes. He sighed. "Why are you wearing those?"

Kai continued to look straight ahead. "I can't be seen here."

After moving around the large space, they found Jay in front of a television, playing the game with a girl in all black clothing. He was smiling as they played, the way he did when he gained the upper hand, and Cole watched the screen just long enough to watch him send her character flying off the screen. They shook hands. Jay turned around to get up, then gave a small yelp when he saw them all standing behind him.

"Oh hi, guys. I'm glad you were able to find it," Jay said with a small wave. "Nice shades, Kai."

"Thanks. I think they really suit the room." Kai looked around. "Is there anything to do here other than watch people play video games?"

"If you brought cash you can bet on competitors, but it's a waste of money." Jay paused, then pointed to another room connected to the main area. "There's a secret bar in there. I think they only make Jägerbombs, though."
"What's a Jägerbomb?"

"Energy drink mixed with alcohol. It'll kill you. Don't bother. It's not worth it."

Kai glanced over to the room. He looked back to the group and started to walk backwards towards the room. "I'm going to the bathroom. See you in a bit." He turned on his heel and strode towards the entrance.

Nya groaned. "I'll go make sure he doesn't do anything stupid."

While she left, Jay called out to her, "I have another match in ten minutes!"

She shouted back a promise to be there, then disappeared into the adjoining room. Jay decided to go set up his account at the next station, bringing Cole and Zane along with him. At the console station, Jay signed into his home account and plugged in the controller he always used when he played with Cole. "I like it this way," Jay said. "It makes me feel more comfortable, like I'm just playing at home with a friend."

The opponent arrived a few minutes later. He looked a little younger than Jay, maybe around fifteen, and arrived on crutches to support a broken leg. Seeing the kid's face nearly gave him whiplash. He was familiar, yet he couldn't quite place a name to his face.

"Cole, do you recognize him?" asked Zane, whispering into Cole's ear. "That is Nelson, the honorary Purple Ninja we visited in the hospital. I wonder if his leg will ever stop being broken."

"Wow. Reincarnation can be cruel."

"Indeed."

Kai and Nya showed up a minute before the match was due to start. A large crowd had been forming, so Cole had to help them clear a path to the front. They stood just behind Jay, ready to cheer him on.

Jay turned around. "How was the Jägerbomb?"

"Stupid," Kai replied. "It tasted like gaming. That's not something I ever wanted to inflict upon my taste buds."

Jay laughed and then turned around, facing the screen. A timer buzzed. It was time to begin.

Nelson locked into Mario. Jay locked into Sheik. It was time to begin.

The stage was called Battlefield. Cole could remember that one. It was rather open, with only a few platforms to jump on. It would create heated combat. No running away or hiding to avoid an enemy. The match wouldn't take long.

Towards the end, they were both down to one stock. Nelson had 98%. Jay had 114%. Both were on the edge of their life, soon to be blasted off the platform and to their death. They were in a standoff, both standing on one end of the platform, unsure of how to proceed.

Then, Sheik began to move towards Mario. Jay called back, "Hey Cole, check out this up smash!"

Mario shielded. Sheik, rather than immediately smash, flipped over to Mario's backside. As Mario turned to attack, she smashed. Mario flew off the screen.

Jay won.
"That's cheating!" Nelson snapped. "You can't just do something like that."

The small audience burst into conversation, yelling and applauding and some booing. Rather than reply to Nelson, Jay unplugged his controller, stood up, and walked away. Cole and the others looked at each other, confused by his sudden departure. After a moment, Cole left the group to go chase after Jay, who has long since disappeared into the crowd.

He found him outside the venue, sitting on the curb with his head in his hands. Cole sat down next to him and put his hand on his back, the way he used to when Jay was upset all those years ago. "What just happened?"

"I cheated," Jay replied. "It's not against the rules, but it may as well be. I'm not supposed to talk during my matches. I just panicked."

"Hey, it's hard to judge when you're in a stressful situation like that. It's fine. It's not like it reflects you as a person."

Jay looked at him then, his eyes glassy and so guilt-stricken that Cole almost averted his gaze. "That's the problem. It does. I've cheated a lot in my life. I've lied to people, pretended to be something I'm not, and kept important secrets from the people that are supposed to trust me. It seems like it's all I can do."

"What else have you cheated on? Homework?" asked Cole. "I think most of us have once in a while. I wouldn't beat yourself up over it."

"It's more than that, though. I was a scholarship kid at a really rich private school. The standard tuition probably cost more than my family made in three years. I had to convince them to let me in, so they had some pretty strict standards for me. My grades couldn't dip below ninety. I had to compete in academic competitions under their name. I had to sign up for all these clubs, volunteer for thirty hours a year, and be part of at least one sports team." Jay looked back down to his feet. "It sucked. I did some things I'm not proud of to get through it."

"Like what?"

"This is secret shit, okay? My parents don't even know about this. I'm only telling you because I trust you."

"I'm good at keeping secrets. I promise."

"Okay. I'm just cautious. Everything I did could get my diploma revoked." Jay sighed. "I was the youngest person in my class by two years. It made a lot of people hate me. Nobody really likes it when someone younger than them is better at something. It makes you feel inferior. Anyways, I got a lot of shit from my classmates. They couldn't be open about it, 'cause my school had a zero-tolerance policy for any form of bullying, but it was all very subtle. I was criticized all the time whenever I raised my hand, they would laugh 'in good fun' if I didn't get the top mark on a test, and it always seemed like they were judging me. It did wonders for my self-esteem. But all those things weren't among the worst. See, my bad memory has been with me my whole life. In elementary school, I was allowed to bring little notes into tests that couldn't contain answers, but could have maybe a drawing or something to help me remember the course material. The private school—called LLC, by the way—didn't let me do that. I struggled a lot during my first year. Then, I found out about these pills on the Internet. They were illegal, but they were supposedly good at improving memory and concentration, so I went for it. And they worked. For the first time in my life, I felt like I could actually remember what I'd studied the night before or learned in class. They carried me until senior year. They made me pretty sick at times, to the point where I was afraid I was going to die, and I
went to the hospital more times than I'd like to admit. But in the end, I was always all right.

"Senior year came around. Just one more year until high school was over. My classmates broke into my dorm for one of their yearly pranks, the kind they did to every student living in residence. They found my pills in my desk. And then, the worst year of my life started. They had ammo against me. But instead of getting me kicked out, they decided to hold it over my head and force me to help them."

Cole scooted an inch closer to Jay. "What did they do?"

"They made me help them cheat. I sent them all my completed homework. They copied ideas from my essays and labs. It sucked, but at the same time, it made me feel safe. If they told on me, I could tell on them right back," Jay said. He placed his fingers on his knee, tapping them in a specific order that appeared like a code. First, he tapped his thumb and pinkie sequentially. "A." Thumb and ring finger. "B." Thumb and middle finger. "C." He tapped his index finger and thumb sequentially. "D."

"On exams, too?" Cole said. "I thought they checked answers for cheating. How'd you get away with it?"

"These students weren't stupid. They just wanted better grades," Jay replied. "They only copied when they didn't know the answer."

"Are they all in university now?" Cole asked. Jay nodded in response. "Cool. It's nice to know they may have gotten into programs they didn't deserve to. Really gives me hope for our society's future."

"They would have gotten in anyways. I don't think you understand just how far money gets you. These kids, they went through private school their whole lives. They had the best teachers, the best schools, and the best opportunities." There was an anger in Jay's voice now. "Universities eat that shit up. These kids get into the best programs without ever trying and not because they're smart or hardworking, but because their parents paid for them to be there. And you know what? When they graduate university, their parents will be ready to hire them into whatever company they work for, whether or not they're good enough to be there. But kids like me? My parents are scrap collectors in the Sands. They never expected me to get this far. Everything I'm doing now, even living in the city, has defied their expectations." Jay hugged his knees and his voice went quiet. "It scares me. It really does. One slip up, one mistake, and I'm gone. I can't complain to my parents, because although they're supportive, they always try to convince me to come home. I can't do that. That kind of life isn't for me. I came here because it felt like I had to. I don't believe in fate or destiny, but one of them brought me here somehow and I need to succeed. I can't fail. It would kill me."

"I don't think you will," said Cole. "You've been through a lot, but you're still here."

Jay turned his face towards him. Now, there was a small smile on his face.

"Yeah. I still am."

They didn't go back inside the venue. Cole texted the group chat to update them on what had happened and then took off with Jay, walking through the city with him. Cole didn't know where he was going, but neither did Jay, so it was okay. On their walk, Cole bought them slushies because the city's summer was hot even at night and they compared flavors and eventually their newly-coloured tongues that were blue and purple, bringing him back to the times they would break into Cole's candy stash on the bounty and eat until their mouths changed colours.

Jay began to text him every day. They would talk about their days, make plans for later, and sometimes, if Cole was lucky, Jay brought up previously-unknown stories from his past. Most of
them were unimportant, like times he fought with the other children in his community or built small inventions from the technology his parents would find buried in the desert sands. One day, as August approached its end, Jay confessed to something greater.

onyx
What's your earliest memory?

walker
wow cool question to ask the kid with memory issues bud

walker
weirdly enough though its a dream

walker
when i was a kid, i had a few dreams about being on a pirate ship

walker
everyone there (like the pirates) called me "walker" and obviously it has stuck with me

walker
but they weren't exactly happy dreams

walker
i was being held prisoner in a lot of them. you know how kids always have violent fucked up fantasies? maybe that was mine, idk. but all i can is that my earliest memory was this series of dreams i had about being a prisoner on a pirate ship :/

onyx
Do you want to visit a real pirate ship with me?

walker
are you talking about destiny's bounty? the ninja ship? i went there once with my history class. it was kind of boring.

-onyx has left the conversation!-

It was the last day of August. School was on the horizon. Jay had finally received his fall schedule, so he was running around his various jobs to make sure they could accommodate his new schedule. Once everything was sorted out, he called Cole to complain about a particular manager for ten minutes straight—Cole barely got a word in—before suddenly hanging up at the end of his rant.

Cole was really glad they had reached this stage in their relationship.

They decided to meet up to celebrate the end of summer. With no plan in mind, Cole promised to meet Jay at a skytrain station close to downtown and rode the elevator all the way up, earphones in to drown out the noise of the evening crowd.

He was ten stops away from the station when the group chat blew up.

in: ninja squad 2.0

nyarai
GUYS CHECK ANY SOCIAL MEDIA FEED /RIGHT NOW/
kai_fire13
k one sec im kinda busy

nyarai
NOW!

kai_fire13
okay holy shit. did a member of your favourite boy band die or something

nyarai
NO BUT YOUR GUESS IS CLOSE

kai_fire13
wait what the fuck

kai_fire13
HOLY SHIT?

kai_fire13
@flintcole WHERE ARE YOU PLEASE ANSWER

flintcole
I'm on the train, what's up?

kai_fire13 has started a group call . . .

accepting request . . .

pending . . .

connected!

"Cole, where's the safest place for you right now?" Kai demanded, his voice panicked and quick. "You need to answer me right now. Where is it?"

"Don't answer!" Nya blurted out. "It's too dangerous. They're probably listening in right now!"

His stomach sank. "Guys, what's going on?"

"It's Feng," Nya said. "He posted it everywhere. Your address, name, everything. It's not just a doxx. It's an open call for your assassination."

She sent him an image.
Cole looked around the train. The passengers were mostly middle-aged, on their way home from work after a long day. They were all absorbed in their phones. He was safe. For now.

"Noted. I'll figure it out. Nya, sign them up for Secure. We can talk there. Bye."

He closed the call. A new notification lit up at the bottom of his vision.

-nyarai has deleted the group chat "ninja squad 2.0"-

One stop passed. Cole watched the newcomers with scrutiny, judging out of the corner of his eye. As the train pulled away from the station, he reached into his backpack and pulled out his black face mask. Sliding it over his nose, he felt a little more protected. It would be harder to tell him apart from the rest of the crowd now.

-walker has opened a new chatroom!-

secure_bot
Welcome to Secure, Ninjago's safest messaging service! Your messages will remain on our isolated, closed-circuit servers, keeping you safe from government surveillance and private tracking. Remember to donate to ensure that your communications remain private! Safe chatting!

walker
i find it pretty interesting that the black ninja is your roommate? you have to introduce me to him one day

oh wait, you can't! CAUSE YOU'RE THE BLACK NINJA!

onyx
Look, I'm sorry for keeping it a secret from you, but I'm in some trouble right now. If you won't help me, stop messaging me. We'll deal with this later.

walker
the calculating leader makes a return i see

walker
ill help you. meet me at the same station. i know somewhere safe.

onyx
Thanks.

Eight stops away. New riders. No one dangerous.

walker
you trust me right

onyx
I trust you with my life right now.

walker
okay

Seven stops. A new passenger, a young girl that appeared to be around fifteen, stood across from him and stared. He met her eyes. They were bright, bright green. Under her hood, so was her hair.

She looked a little . . .

Oh, no.

The train left the station. Two minutes until the next stop. Without a second thought, he took off down the car, walking quickly until he reached the end. He waited next to the door. He kept an eye on Tox, who continued to stare at the place he used to be. He anxiously checked the time on the train's TV, counting the seconds until it was due to arrive at the next station.

Twenty seconds left. She reached into her pocket. One tense moment later, she whipped out a pistol and Cole realized he had to react. As she pulled the gun up to his eye-level, he saw a thick bracelet hanging from her wrist. A bracelet, he noticed, that was decorated with gemstones.

With a flick of his wrist, the bracelet snapped her hand towards her and she hit herself across the cheek with the butt of her gun. Before she could recover, he flicked his wrist again, throwing her down to the floor.

Ding! The trains doors opened. Cole jumped out, took a step to the right, and then hopped into the next car over. The doors closed. He built up the courage to look out the window. Tox was stalking around the station, looking quite angry. Then the train launched itself onto the elevated tracks and she disappeared from sight.

To his right, Cole saw a little boy riding alone, holding onto one of the poles near the door.

"Hey, you're not part of a secret society, right?" Cole asked him.

The kid shook his head. In the midst of his adrenaline, Cole chose to believe him.

The next six stops came and went without incident. Jay was waiting for him on the platform of the tenth station. He grabbed Cole's hand, and without a word, took off towards the emergency stairs. Cole boosted him up and Jay vaulted over, then hung on and offered Cole his hand. Cole took it, and together, they made their way down the stairs.

There was a car waiting at the bottom. Jay opened the door and the slid inside, piling into the back seat. The driver took off without a word.
"What is this?" Cole said.

"I booked it on one of those taxi apps," Jay replied. He put up his hand before Cole could protest. "Don't worry about the charge. I have money set aside for emergencies, and if this isn't one of them, I don't know what is."

His heart beat began to slow as the drive turned away from the crowded, downtown streets and into the relative safety of a residential area. "Thank you so much," he said. "You're literally saving my life right now. See? This is why you're my best friend."

Jay shook his head. "You're mine, too."

The cab pulled up in front of a small apartment building on the edge of the city. "Thanks," Jay told the driver, then opened the door and left. Cole thanked the driver and followed suit.

Jay led Cole up several flights of stairs, bringing him to a small studio apartment at the end of the seventh floor hallway. Inside, a bed was tucked into one corner, a low table was a few feet away from the kitchen counter, and several pieces of clothing were laid out on the radiator in the back of the room.

"Welcome to my home," Jay said. He spun in a circle with his arms out, as through showing it off to Cole. "This is where you'll be living until this whole thing blows over."

"I have a feeling Borg will want to protect me at some point, but this is fine for now. Thanks again."

"I keep forgetting that you're basically an ancient artifact. Are you like the Serpentine tunnels? Do they have nindroids protecting you?"

"Well, I have Zane."

"And he's the white ninja, isn't he? Fuck. You know, I got one hundred percent on my history final and I still didn't realize you two were the living ninja. I can't believe this."

"I mean, in your defense, the history curriculum says that we live in the countryside. We convinced the government to do it so we could live in the city without people bothering us all the time."

"You mean to tell me that history has been permanently altered just because you asked the ruling body to do it?"

"Yeah. Pretty much."

"I think I need to lie down for a bit."

-mer has opened a new chatroom!-

secure_bot
Welcome to Secure, Ninjago's safest messaging service! Your messages will remain on our isolated, closed-circuit servers, keeping you safe from government surveillance and private tracking. Remember to donate to ensure that your communications remain private! Safe chatting!

mer
Are you okay? Where are you?

nini
Please tell me you are okay.

onyx
Please tell me "nini" isn't your username.

nini
It is short for 'nindroid'. I thought we were using code names.

onyx
We are and that's a beautiful name. Never change.

mer
Okay guys, quick reminder to AVOID giving away personal details while we talk on messaging apps. We don't know if they can see this or not.

fifi
your name is nini?

fifi
well this is awkward

fifi
one of us has to change

mer
It's fine.

mer
Onyx, since you're joking around, can we assume you're somewhere safe?

onyx
Currently at a mystery friend's apartment. It's all good.

fifi
damn jay is so cool

mer
Holy shit.

mer
When you get home, I'm going to hit you.

fifi
wtf? whats your damage

-Mer has kicked fifi from the chatroom!-

mer
He'll do more harm than good right now.

nini
Kai has never been very subtle.
Wait.

-mer has kicked nini from the chatroom!

mer
I'm going to hit him at work tomorrow.

onyx
We should add Ronin to really get the party started.

mer
Lol :'D

mer
Okay, but seriously, I know we're only joking around to de-stress and avoid acknowledging the situation. What's the game plan moving forward?

onyx
I'm staying at you-know-who's for tonight. The rest of the time, I'm not sure. I don't want to put him in danger by staying here too long.

mer
Come to Borg tomorrow morning. I'll arrange for a secured car to pick you up. We'll keep you safe in the Tower.

onyx
That's probably safest.

mer
Okay. Just hang on tight tonight. I'm sure you can protect yourself.

mer
Message us if anything is wrong.

-mer has closed the chatroom!

Jay was laying on his stomach on the middle of the floor, staring at a wall. While Jay entered a thought coma, Cole took the time to look around Jay's apartment more. Next to his bed, there was a computer monitor that seemed to double as a TV. His kitchen was rather empty, although with Jay's schedule, it was unlikely that he was home often enough to justify keeping perishables.

"Are you creeping in my place?"

Cole stopped dead in his tracks. He turned around slowly, expecting to see Jay on his feet, but he was still on the floor, face turned away from him. Cole snorted. "Are you going to get up soon?"

"I only have one bed. I think this is where I'm going to crash for the night."

Cole looked at the bed, then back to Jay. "You have a double bed. It fits both of us."

"Oh, you're cool with it?" Jay rolled over and stood up. "Everyone at LLC freaked out when they had to touch each other. Sharing beds on school trips was an adventure every time. Kids in the Sands don't care, so maybe it's a city kid thing?"
"Dude, I don't know anything about today's youth. Don't ask me."

"Ha." Jay grinned. "You're so old."

"Whatever. Are we sleeping or not? I want to wake up tomorrow and forget this night ever happened."

Jay ran across the apartment, flipped off the light switch, and then grabbed Cole's arm and guided him to the bed. As they settled in, pulling the covers over themselves, Jay commented, "I wish sleeping it off worked. I used to have really bad social anxiety. It's still here, but you should have seen me when I was in high school. Ouch. I hurt remembering it. Anyways, whenever I did something embarrassing, I could never sleep. I just hated myself for hours on end, and when I finally fell asleep, I would just wake up and hate myself all over again. Life is rough."

They both faced opposite directions, but the conversation continued on the same. "Tell me about it. I used to get a lot of nightmares. When the other ninja died, they came every second night. It fucked me up. Eventually, I just stopped sleeping. I'd go days without it. It took intervention from Zane—and my very committed therapist at the time—to bring my sleep schedule back to normal. Avoiding things just doesn't work, does it?"

"Nah." A pause. "Got any cool stories?"

"About what?"

"I don't know. How'd you become a ninja? They don't go over that in history class."

"Oh. Well, my dad was a member of this theatre group called The Royal Blacksmiths. They were pretty popular at the time. He wanted me to follow in his footsteps. Like you, I moved to the city when I was a teenager to go to some snobby private school, but this one was for performing arts, not general studies. I hated every minute of it. I don't hate dancing, singing, or acting—I hate being forced to do things I don't want to do. My dad didn't make it much better. He yelled over every little thing. I have distinct memories of locking myself in the bathroom so I wouldn't have to deal with it after a long day of school. During my senior year, it came to a boiling point. I couldn't live there anymore or continue going to school for something I didn't care about. I ran away. I lived on the streets for a while, maybe around two years, before Sensei Wu recruited me. He found out about me when I started free climbing up the sides of mountains. I guess he thought I had some kind of ninja potential and took me under his wing."

"Geez. I'm sorry about your dad."

"It's okay. I kind of made peace with him later on. He wasn't the best, but he wasn't so bad that I couldn't bring myself to forgive him."

"I'm bad at forgiving people," Jay said. He chuckled. "I can hold a grudge forever."

Cole remembered being at the receiving end of one of Jay's grudges. It was rough. "Really? Anyone in particular you hate? I can beat them up for you."

Jay laughed again. "Do you want to beat up everyone that extorted me in high school? That would be a big bro move."

"Consider it done," Cole replied. "Once this whole assassination thing is over, they're my next targets. I'll teach them not to mess with you."

"What? I've barely done anything."

"You've listened. I like that about you. Everyone else just waits for their turn to speak."

That was a kick to the gut. His mind flashed back to a similar scene: laying in their bunk bed, talking the night away, only to be interrupted by Jay giving Cole thanks for something as simple as being a good listener.

This was becoming too much. It was time to sleep.

Cole yawned loudly. "It's no problem. I'm tired. Want to sleep?"

"Sure. Goodnight, Cole."

Jay rolled over. He wrapped his arms around Cole, bringing him closer. Cole smiled, and after a moment's hesitation, leaned in.

They fell asleep, secure from any threats in each other's arms. Cole trusted him. Jay finally trusted him back. With this thought, his dreams were sweet. He was on a ship with Jay, sailing across the waters, searching for new islands. The colours were bright. It was always warm. At night, they spoke honestly to one another, telling all the truths from their pasts in an effort to bridge any distance between them.

Cole awoke to Jay shifting suddenly. He felt himself drifting back into sleep, but a sudden weight on his stomach drew him from his semi-consciousness. Jay's knees were on either side of his torso. His eyes were wide open, wild and dead at the same time.

"Jay, what . . .?"

It was at this moment that Jay drove the knife into his stomach.

Self-defense instincts kicked in. He used one arm to shove Jay off of him, throwing him several feet away. The pain made his mind hazy. Was he supposed to keep the blade in or take it out? Without thinking, he yanked it out and threw the knife to the side. He blinked to activate his biotech.

Cole managed to throw Jay off of him again, this time with more force. Jay crashed onto the floor near the kitchen. Cole had a few seconds until he'd come back.

Zane picked up on the second ring.

"Cole? Are you okay? Why are you call—"

"Come here . . . now . . ." he croaked.

"I am on my way right now. Hold on."

Zane hung up. Using all of his strength, Cole stood up. His vision swayed and he nearly fell. He surveyed the room before him. Where was Jay?
He was tackled from the side. His body missed the mattress and his head smashed against the floor, sending black spots across his vision. He tried to push Jay off of him, but his strength was fading, and he was finally going to die, wasn't he?

Jay rolled him over onto his back. Cole felt so helpless, so vulnerable, that he did nothing to stop it. But he mustered the strength to speak.

"What . . . are you . . . doing?"

"The Sleep Walker has been activated." Jay slid his fingers into Cole's hair and yanked his head up. For a moment, the combined pain made his vision go white. "The Second Rise is no longer hiding in the shadows. Feng sends his regards."

Jay slammed Cole's head against the floor and he fell away from the world.

The room was white. As Cole came to, he lifted up his arm to shield his eyes from the harsh fluorescents above him. His skull felt as though it was cracked in two, each movement sending stabs of pain through his head. His stomach wasn't much better.

A nurse came in. Her footsteps were too loud. Cole winced.

"Shh, it's okay," she whispered. Cole followed her movements to a panel of monitors near him. She adjusted something. Within a few moments, unconsciousness began to tug at his mind. "You have a concussion. We have an advanced treatment all laid out for you. Go back to sleep. When you wake up, you'll be back to normal."

She smiled and his world died again.

The next time he awoke, he was in a different room. It was like a hotel room. One bed. A TV. At the other end, a door that led into a bathroom. The walls were a pale yellow. There was no window. The digital clock hung on the wall told him it was early afternoon.

His head felt better. They must have actually cured his concussion.

His hands trailed down and lifted the hem of his shirt. There was a nasty scar on his stomach, but the wound was closed. Zane must have gotten there quite soon after he'd passed out. He wondered what that would have looked like. Did Zane have to take Jay down? Had he already escaped?

There was a knock on his door. Nya poked her head inside. "Feeling better?"

"I'm awake."

She stepped inside. Cole noticed thick bags under her eyes. Her hair was greasy. How long had she been awake?

"We're having a meeting in a few minutes. There's something I want you to see."

His legs felt weak, so walking wasn't easy, but he made it to a large meeting room with Nya's support. As soon as Cole entered, Zane threw his arms around him and brought him into a tight hug.

"Do not scare me like that," he said sternly. "You are not allowed to die unless I say so."

"Thanks, mom." But he returned the hug, burying his face into the nindroid's shoulder. His face grew heavy. He rubbed it into Zane's shoulder to get rid of the tears in his eyes.
"I'm glad you're feeling better, black ninja."

Cole looked up. In his blurry vision, he saw a man with long, combed black hair in an expensive-looking suit. He smiled when he met eyes with Cole.

"Sorry, you must not know who I am. My name is Khan. I'm head of security here at Borg Industries."

Cole took a step back from Zane. The head of security was one of the most esteemed positions in all of Ninjago. This wasn't someone he wanted to see him cry.

"It's n-nice to meet you," Cole stammered out. "I'm a bit of a mess right now. I can leave if it's going to disrupt your meeting."

"Please, stay. Nya and Zane have been some of my best employees for years. If they want something, I give it to them." Khan gestured to one of the chairs at the long table. "They want you here. Sit down. You can't be in the best shape right now."

Cole was relieved to sit down. Zane and Nya took the seats at either side of him. A handful of Borg employees were also in the room, their faces sharp with focus as they watched Khan move to the whiteboard. At the far end of the room, blinds descended over the large windows that made up the whole wall.

"Cole, you have been asleep for two weeks," Khan began. "When Zane arrived on the scene, Jay was passed out next to your unconscious body. He assumed you had both been attacked. But after reviewing your biotech footage, we discovered that it was Jay who attacked you, not a random assailant from the Second Rise. Since Jay fell unconscious before Zane got to the apartment, the Second Rise has no way of knowing if you're alive or not. We know you're safe. They think otherwise."

Cole looked to Nya. She shrugged. "Wait," he said. "They think I'm dead?"

"All of Ninjago thinks you're dead. Thirteen days ago, we announced to the world that you had died of blood loss after a fatal stabbing in stranger's home." Pictures of news articles were projected on the whiteboard. Khan pressed a button on the table. More pictures, this time of funeral proceedings with candles, appeared on the board. "Your funeral was yesterday. I'm sorry that this was done without your input. It was the only way to convince the Second Rise that Jay had successfully carried out his mission."

His gut wrenched. There was a missing piece. "Then where's Jay?"

"There's a prison facility in Borg's basement for cases like this," Khan answered. "He's there right now."

Khan pressed another button. A live-feed of a prison cell jumped onto the board. Cole could recognize the top of Jay's head. He sat on the edge of the small bed, staring at his feet. The sight made him want to vomit.

"He thinks he murdered me," he breathed. His eyes narrowed. "You can't do that. He's innocent!"

"Your friends said the same thing, but they eventually changed their minds," Khan said. Cole looked to Nya again. She turned her head to avoid his eyes. "I know this seems wrong. I don't feel comfortable with the situation either. But after we arrested Jay, we discovered something new about him."
Another picture. This time, an x-ray of a brain with a chip and web-like nodes sprawling across the image.

"Jay had a neuroprosthetic implant in his hippocampus. It's not quite biotech; he has no control over it. We haven't had time to test it, but we believe its function is to prevent short-term memories from transferring to long-term storage. The Second Rise likely put it there to monitor his actions." Khan cut back to the live footage of Jay in his cell. "We believe this was implanted a long time ago. The Second Rise turned Jay into a sleeper agent many, many years ago. He's been a grenade ready to go off his whole life."

"Okay. He's blown up, now. Take out the implant and set him free."

"We will. Soon." A look of sympathy crossed Khan's face. "I know this is hard for you. But Jay is our only key to the Second Rise. We don't know if they're still communicating with him. If we're lucky, they want him to continue with a follow-up mission. With this in mind, Nya has designed a wonderful new piece of technology. Why don't you tell your friend about it?"

"It's like a keyboard logger," she explained. "Tomorrow, Jay will be brought into the medical ward for surgery. We'll attach the device to his implant. Once active, it will log all of the implant's activities so we can see what it really does. Then we can decide if Jay is safe for release or not."

"Fine," Cole said. "Figure out if he's safe or not. But if he is, I want him out of there."

"That's not how—" Nya began to say. Khan interrupted her.

"It's okay. I can tell him." On the footage behind Khan, Jay stood up. He walked around. From his arm gestures, Cold knew he was speaking to himself. He could only imagine what was going through his head. "Safe or not, Jay will remain here. And so will you."

"Me?" Cole demanded. "How long are we pretending that I'm dead?"

"Anywhere from a few months to a number of years. We need you as a surprise weapon. In the meantime, Zane, Nya, and her brother have promised to act as Ninjago's ninja if the need arises."

"I'm going to be locked in here for how long?"

"You'll help us," Khan said. "Zane speaks highly of your strategy in the field. As we speak, our nindroids are preparing to conduct invasions of known Second Rise incubators. We need someone like you in the war room, so to speak."

The suggestion angered him. He stood up quickly, throwing his weak body off balance. He gripped the table to keep himself upright while he spoke. "I want to help take down the Second Rise. But as long as Jay is in there, I'm not helping. Find another tactician."

It took all his strength to march out of the meeting room. As soon as he was down the hall, he allowed himself to collapse against the wall and catch his breath. His bones felt hollow. He needed to rest.

He found his room and promptly threw himself onto the bed. He shifted until he was comfortable, then blinked to activate his biotech. His home menu appeared before his vision. But it was different. Most of his apps had vanished. Typing their names into the search did nothing, and when he went to the app store to re-download them, found the app store was no longer installed. There was no way for him to access it. Among his apps, games and news apps were still accessible. Anything related to social media or communications was no longer there. The only app he could use to connect with the
outside world was Borg's own messaging service, rarely used by the public out of fears of surveillance. He opened the app. His only contacts were Zane, Kai, Nya, and Khan himself. There was no one else he could speak to.

He opened the web browser. All of his favourite forums were suddenly inaccessible, pages never getting past the loading screen or causing his browser app to crash after a few minutes of waiting.

It was official: he was cut off from the outside world until the Second Rise was dealt with.

Was this meant to be a bargaining chip, or were they censoring him for security? Cole couldn't imagine they trusted him enough to give him open access to websites where he could announce to the Internet that he was still alive.

He glanced around his room. It was so small, it was barely fit his bed. He was glad he wasn't claustrophobic.

With nothing to do, it didn't take long for him to fall back asleep. After two weeks in a medically-induced coma, he figured he would have had enough sleep to last him for quite a while. But he was still so tired and his body was happy to fall back into the calming realm of unconsciousness once again.

He awoke feeling rejuvenated. He stretched, sat up in the bed, and opened his eyes. His heart skipped a beat at the sight of Zane watching him from the other end of the room.

"Cole."

"Zane."

"How did you sleep?"

"Okay. What do you want?"

Zane didn't emote much, but he could tell the hostility in Cole's voice threw him off. Cole hated disagreeing with one of his best friends, but he couldn't believe that Zane had endorsed their experiment with Jay. It was uncharacteristic of him.

And yet, here they were.

"You are my best friend, Cole," Zane said. "I do not wish to argue with you."

"Then what did you come here to do?"

Zane sighed. "Jay is okay. He is not being mistreated for the sake of catching the Second Rise."

"He thinks he killed me. That's not mistreating him?"

"As I have told you, he is okay. I would not support this if I thought he could not handle it."

Jay wasn't one to handle anything. Zane knew that Jay's first instinct was to panic, not rationalize or remain calm. A situation like this wasn't one to be digested easily by anyone, let alone someone as anxiety-prone as Jay. Cole had seen him on the live-feed during the meeting, walking around in his cell and talking to himself. How did that strike Zane as the state of someone who was okay?

Cole scowled. "If this is an experiment, everything is recorded for the records, right?"

"Yes. Would you like the live-feed on your TV?"
"In a bit. First, I want you to show me a video." Cole leaned forward. "I want you to play the moment you told him he was a murderer."

Zane blinked. A few seconds later, the TV turned on and crystal-clear security camera footage was displayed on the screen. The scene reminded him of the tutoring centre. In the centre of a plain room, there was a metal desk. Jay sat on one end. His hands were attached to the table by handcuffs looped around a metal rod. He looked around the room anxiously, head darting back and forth. Beneath the table, his right foot tapped the floor. Cole realized that at this moment, Jay didn't know why he was there. He could only imagine the terror.

A nindroid entered the room. It was a security model, the same kind that had chased Cole and Kai through the tunnels and watched over the inmates at the Kryptarium. It didn't sit down at the desk. It stood a few feet away from the empty chair, unmoving.

Jay spoke first. "Why am I here? Is it because I was with Cole? We're friends. If anything, we're best friends. You won't see anyone closer than us. Well, maybe Zane and Cole, since they've been bros for thousands of years now. But Cole and I have something special, all right? He can vouch for me. Where is he, anyways?"

"What do you remember from last night?"

"Cole and I talked a bit, then slept. I woke up here covered in bruises. Do you know what happened? I'm really worried I somehow slept through an attack."

"Your account does not match our official records of the event. Are there any details you would like to add?"

"I—they don't? Look, I was asleep. I can't remember anything."

The nindroid gestured to a wall. "Please turn your attention to the wall to your right."

The room dimmed. A projector, barely visible in the corner of the screen, turned on. Cole couldn't see the video it played, but he could hear the audio. He recognized his conversation with Zane, Jay's final words before he slammed Cole's head into the ground. They were playing the footage saved in his biotech. Jay was seeing the assault through Cole's eyes.

The footage ended. Jay's eyes were wide, brimming with tears as he whipped his head around to face the nindroid again. "I didn't do that. I don't remember." His voice began to reach hysterics. "Please! I promise. I wouldn't attack Cole. He means a lot to me. I couldn't do that!"

"Then how do you suppose this footage exists?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's edited? What if they hacked his biotech to pin the blame on me?!"

"That is impossible." A pause. "Are you aware of the Second Rise?"

"They're the people that want to kill Cole and they're run by this evil guy named Feng and I swear I was trying to protect him from them!"

"How did you intend to do that if you're one of them?"

"What? I'm not!"

"Then why did you murder the black ninja?"
"What? No, no, no, no, no.." Jay jumped up, knocking the chair back. He pulled on the handcuffs. The chains wouldn't budge. It was hard for Cole to look at his face. Tears ran down his red and puffy cheeks, and he blinked furiously, but couldn't be rid of his tears. It was a look of horror, but also one of utmost disbelief. Jay continued to beg until—

The TV turned off. Cole rubbed his eyes, removing his own tears. He turned to look at Zane. "This looks like someone that's okay to you?"

"It has been two weeks. He is not like this anymore." Zane took a step forward. He put a hand on Cole's knee, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Please. Help us defeat the Second Rise."

"No."

"You are putting your emotions in the way of logic," Zane said. "Your talents as a tactician are wasted in this room."

"You guys don't seem to have a problem coming up with plans on your own. I'm sure you'll do fine."

"Cole—"

"I don't want to hear it. Just leave."

Cole slid back into his covers and flipped onto his side. He only looked back when he heard the door shut. He was alone.

For the next week, he saw no one. A nurse gave him plates of food three times a day, but aside from that wordless interaction, no one visited him and he was still too angry to go outside. He played games on his biotech to keep his mind occupied. In the background, he had the live-feed of Jay's cell playing on his TV. He wasn't sure why. He didn't agree with the security team's decision, but they weren't evil—they wouldn't hurt Jay more than they already had to get at the Second Rise.

On his ninth day alone, Kai messaged him.

Kai3284547
whats ur fave ice cream flavor

Cole
Cookies n' cream.

Cole
But don't buy any.

Kai3284547
is this about the whole jay thing

Kai3284547
cuz nya said youre FUCKING PISSED

Cole
" Fucking pissed" is a pretty good way to put it.

Kai3284547
if it makes you feel any better i dont like it either
Cole
Holy shit, thank you. I'm glad I'm not the only one.

Kai3284547
in their defense both of them protested it when it started

Kai3284547
but even tho zanes an og ninja he has like no control over anything

Kai3284547
i think theyre just convincing themselves that its not that bad when really it is just that bad

Kai3284547
classic case of denial ya feel

Cole
Oh. You think so?

Kai3284547
i mean it seems pretty weird that theyd just drop their moral standards overnight yeah

Kai3284547
its good to know youre getting mad over it tho

Kai3284547
and you dont even know all of it

Cole
Do you?

Kai3284547
this is a secret between you and me but ya

Kai3284547
during the first like, two days, while nya and zane were against it, they went whole hog

Kai3284547
is it whole hog or full hog

Cole
I think it's whole hog.

Kai3284547
NICE

Kai3284547
they wanted to convince the second rise that it was all real right

Kai3284547
they used some pretty wyld interrogation techniques

Cole
They did? That doesn't sound good.
Kai3284547
U RITE it sucked

Kai3284547
one of the methods was locking him in a little dark box for like 10 hours

Kai3284547
apparently it makes you ready to tell the popos more about your evil schemes

ERROR: LOST CONNECTION

WAITING . . . WAITING . . .

APP CRASHED. RELOAD?

OPENING APP . . .

RESUMING CONVERSATION . . .

Kai3284547
whats ur fave ice cream flavor

The rest of the conversation was missing. Reluctantly, Cole sent a reply.

Cole
Cookies n' cream. It's just the best flavor, you know?

Kai3284547
Yeah. It really is. I'll try to bring some to you if they let me.

Cole became acutely aware of how heavily he was being monitored. His communications were being read, and if they contained sensitive information, deleted. Okay. He would need to be more careful with how he spoke over the Borg messenger.

However, Cole wasn't one to be controlled. He was certain that he couldn't approach Khan about his surveillance, but that didn't mean he couldn't get the message across anyway.

Cole
Wow, this room is really small.

Nya7493875
Is it?

Cole
Yeah. It kind of feels like I've been trapped in a little box for ten hours.

She didn't reply. Kai never arrived with his ice cream. He wondered if the two incidents were related.

The fifteenth night arrived. Cole fell asleep and woke up in a familiar world. It felt hazy, and if he peered far away, noticed the details blur.

But there was one very clear thing standing before him.

"Jay?"
Jay turned around. His eyes widened at the sight of Cole. He took a step back. "No. Go away. I can't see you right now."

This felt too real. To cover distance, Cole took two steps forward. "You're dreaming."

"Of course, I'm dreaming. You're not alive in real life!" Jay exclaimed. "All you do is come in my dreams and haunt me. I keep having all these awful nightmares about us. I see us as kids chasing a dinosaur, or adults fighting in some kind of stone arena, but worst of all, I always see us as best friends facing the world together. Fuck. I'm so sorry, Cole. They keep telling me I killed you but I don't remember doing it. I have your blood on my hands and I can't even see it!"

Cole closed the space between them. He put his hands on Jay's shoulders and looked him in the eye. "These dreams; do you remember them when you wake up?"

"S-sometimes, yeah."

"I need you to remember this one. I need you to remember me saying this." He took a deep breath. "I'm not dead. I'm alive, living on one of the top floors of Borg Tower. You didn't kill me, Jay! They're lying to you."

Jay shoved him away. "Shut up! You're dead. They showed me the video."

"You knocked me out. You didn't kill me."

Jay put his head in his hands. "I hate this. I hate all of this. I hate my life. I worked so hard—so much harder than anyone I knew—and now I'm here. I'm in prison, dreaming about the person I killed because being awake isn't torture enough." He choked out a sob and continued. "Before you died, we talked about how you can't avoid your problems. But I don't want to face my reality in my dreams. I just want to sleep and get away from everything for a while."

Cole motioned to the scrapyard behind him. Slowly, Jay turned and faced it. "Where are we, Jay?"

"We're in the Sands, I think," he said. "It's not the same, but it reminds me of home."

Without looking back, Jay walked through the entrance. Cole followed behind him, keeping his distance as to not make Jay panic further. "This was your home. You grew up here."

"I... what?" Jay turned to the trailer car. He jogged towards it and opened the door. The car was cramped, but Cole managed to squeeze in behind him. Jay picked up a framed photo. It was the old Jay's favorite—a picture of himself as a young teenager with his parents. The camera was invented and advanced quickly, going from film to digital between Cole's early days and the time he finally ran away from home. It was the first picture of Jay that had ever existed. "This is me. But I don't remember this place."

"You haven't realized who you are, have you?"

Cole hoped this was the way the trailer had been at the end of Jay's lifetime. If it was, he could find the evidence he needed. He walked to the end of the trailer, where Jay's childhood bed was stuffed into the corner. He lifted the mattress and stuck his hand beneath it, feeling around for something Jay had hidden there not too long after he'd finished his ninja training.

His fingers slammed against it. He sucked up the pain and brought it out from the mattress. He turned and showed them to Jay.

"These are his—your—nunchucks." Cole placed them in Jay's hand. He turned one of them so the
inscription J.W. could be seen. "This is where you grew up in your first lifetime. I wish I could explain it under better circumstances, but things have kind of taken a turn lately, haven't they? I just want you to know that you're not just anyone. You're the blue ninja."

"But that's impossible."

"Why?"

Jay met his eyes. "Because you're dead."

And then the dream ended.

Cole awoke in his bed, dazed from the experience. His small room felt unreal. He'd never shared dreams like that before.

He felt the urge to tell his friends, but he couldn't. If Borg found out he could talk to Jay, they would find some way to make it stop. They'd force him to turn on his dream recorder so they could wake him up if he entered the dream space with Jay again. The last thing they wanted was for him to do what he had just done—reveal the truth.

Cole watched the live-feed of Jay's cell. Jay was awake, sitting up in his bed and staring at the wall. His eyes were glossed over, as though he'd seen something he couldn't believe. Cole hoped this meant that he'd remembered the dream.

It took another two days for Cole to find Jay in the dream space again. And for the next month, it happened every other day.

The second dream was at Chen's Noodle House. Meals rotated on the conveyor belt next to their table booth as they spoke.

"I can't believe this is happening again," Jay complained. He grabbed a bowl of his favourite rice dish off the belt and put it on the table. "But hey, dream-me has to eat, too. I'll take what I can get."

"You seem a lot calmer than the last time this happened," Cole commented.

"Well, if this is going to become a regular occurrence, I don't want to be all emo about it." Jay broke up a set of chopsticks and used them to stuff a piece of pork into his mouth. "Like I said last time, my life is miserable enough when I'm awake. I'm just going to relax while I dream. Even if the ghost of my best friend is here to haunt me while I do it."

Cole laughed, and for that dream, they didn't talk about the present. They ate heaps of food and talked about their previous adventures in this life, laughing and teasing each other and acting like they used to.

When Cole woke up, he checked the TV. Jay wasn't quite awake yet, but there was a smile on his face.

Steep Wisdom. Jay showed Cole how to make his favourite tea. Cole found the CD player and loaded up one of the CDs still stacked next to it, playing ancient music that he hadn't heard in ages but could still remember the lyrics all the same.
On that day, they didn't talk much. But it wasn't an uncomfortable silence. They sat on the service counter, only a few centimetres away, and watched out through the tea shop's front doors as the sun fell behind the mountains in the distance.

The Monastery. Cole found him in their old bedroom, staring at pictures of the old ninja on the wall. Cole grabbed his hand and took him around back, where the dragons were kept. In this dream, they were laying in their stables, sleepy. It was hard to ignore Rocky, but Cole walked past his stall and opened the door to Wisp's, the ancient Lightning Dragon.

Wisp's eyes opened at the sound of the door opening. When it saw Jay and Cole, it huffed and shifted a little before closing its eyes again to sleep. Cole led Jay closer, guiding his hand to the dragon until it rested on its nose. Wisp didn't move.

"I thought dragons were supposed to be aggressive," Jay said. "Shouldn't it be attacking me?"

"It knows you."

"The blue ninja's dragon?"

"Dude."

"I know, I know, you keep telling me that I'm the blue ninja," he said. A pause. "But I don't want to be someone else. I want to be me."

"It's okay," Cole said softly. "I don't think you'll ever be anyone else."


"I don't want to be here," Cole said.

"That's okay. Let's go somewhere else."

The dream wasn't meant to go much farther. They turned around and walked into nothingness together, holding on to each other until their surroundings disappeared and they could no longer feel or see or hear each other and they finally woke up.

The beach of Chen's island. They took off their shoes and sat close to the water, letting the waves splash over their feet as the sun beat down on them. There was the sound of fighting in the background. They ignored it.

"Do you think it will be like this for the rest of my life?" Jay asked.

"Like what?"

"When I'm awake, I do nothing. I lay on my bed and tell myself stories or come up with ideas for new inventions to pass the time. Here, while I sleep, I travel the world." He laid down on the sand, using his hands to cushion the back of his head. "I daydream a lot. As a kid, I imagined myself far away from the Sands, living out my dream as an engineer at Borg and maybe meeting someone to
fall in love with. Then, when I was old enough, we'd leave town and travel around the island, exploring the countryside and the mountains and the forests. I can't do that anymore. It's funny. When I'm awake, I'm dead. But here, in my dreams, I'm alive."

"This won't last for much longer," Cole said. "I promise."

"How can you say that? I killed one of the most important people alive. They won't let me off easy."

"They won't. But I won't let them get away with it for much longer."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't believe that I'm alive. That's fine. But sooner or later, you'll be free again. Even if I have to do something about it myself."

"You can't bust me out."

"I don't like to be controlled. Most people assume that the ninja have become passive after so many years of living. Maybe they're right. But if Borg has made any mistake, it was underestimating just how far I'll go for my friends. Way back then, we promised to do anything for each other. I don't think Khan realizes that my loyalty to you is far greater than my loyalty to a cause."

"How far will you go?"

"For you? For the others? I'd die."

"Really?"

"I would know. I've done it before."

It was October when they shared the dream space for the last time. It was on a ship, the same one he'd dreamed of so many months ago when he saw Jay defend himself from Feng.

This time, they weren't alone.

Cole was in the back again, against the wall. Across from him, Feng prowled along, his long hair tied back as he observed a wall lined with young children. He stopped in the middle and kneeled down. He inspected one child for a long time. Cole's arms were bound to the wall behind him, but he slid as far to the side as he could so Feng's back no longer obstructed his vision.

The child was a young boy. Auburn hair. Freckles. A cut above his right eye that spilled blood onto his face.

Cole yelled without thinking. "Jay!"

Feng looked over his shoulder. Except it wasn't Feng, like he'd always thought.

It was Khan.

---

I'm not safe. None of us are.
For the first time in their shared dreams, Cole had entered Jay's long-forgotten memories. It revealed something so important he found he could no longer close his eyes.

Khan was a member of the Second Rise. Not only was this whole situation cruel, it was useless. Khan would never let them catch the Second Rise while in power. Jay and Cole would be locked in the Tower for eternity.

Cole wanted to help Jay escape. But now, he knew that was too naive. He couldn't free Jay without first taking down the man that was responsible for his imprisonment.

He needed help. All Nindroids in the country responded to Khan, making him a threat Cole could not deal with on his own. He could trust Kai, but their communications were censored, and he didn't trust him to understand a secret code. Zane was smart, but integrated with Borg's main system. Cole couldn't work with him until Khan was removed from Borg.

This left him with one obvious choice.

**Cole**
Do you think you could grab my electronic keyboard from my apartment? I'm seriously dying of boredom in here.

**Nya7493875**
Feeling a little more friendly?

**Cole**
Yeah. I'm sorry about the way I acted. I think I just needed to get over my feelings and analyze the situation a little more.

**Nya7493875**
That's good. And don't feel too pressured to participate or anything. I don't think you were in the wrong to be angry.

**Cole**
Thanks. I appreciate it.

**Nya7493875**
No problem! I'll bring your keyboard around tomorrow.

Just as promised, she arrived at Cole's room the next evening, lugging his keyboard into his room by herself. They found a plug and Cole invited her to sit on his bed with him. He placed the keyboard on top of their laps and turned it on.

"Are you ready to continue our piano lessons?" he asked her.

A confused look crossed her face. Then, she smiled. "Of course. It's been so long. I think I'm starting to get rusty."

"I'm going to teach you one of my favourite songs. My dad composed it. And remember, we're working on training your ear. Memorize the notes and how many there are."

"I got you, chief," Nya replied. There was a knowing smile on her face. Cole hoped she understood what he was trying to do.

The song was based on one his father had written, but deviated from the original for the purpose of
the code. The song wasn't long, only two minutes. It was peaceful, serene. And within it, a secret message for Nya to decipher.

Every full break in the song represented a gap between words. Every one note break represented a new letter. The number of notes between a break represented a single letter. The message was straightforward.

11-8-1-14 9-19 20-19-18

KHAN. IS. TSR.

He played it many times, giving Nya the chance to record it with her phone. After the sixth time playing it, Cole turned off his piano and gave her permission to leave. "I know the piece is a little tricky. Once you figure it out, come back and play it for me."

"All right. I'll see you soon, black ninja."

It took one week for Nya to understand the code. She returned, and without saying a word, turned on Cole's piano and played a piece of her own.

He counted as she played.

14-15 26-1-14-5

NO. ZANE.

He assumed it was a question. He leaned over and played a new piece.

14-15-20 19-1-6-5

NOT. SAFE.

She played another song.

23-8-1-20 20-15 4-15

WHAT. TO. DO.

One last song.

16-18-9-14-20 19-8-5-5-20 13-21-19-9-3

PRINT. SHEET. MUSIC.

Nya left the room and came back a few minutes later with a stack of empty sheet music. She gave him the stack, a pen, and left him to start writing.


PRETEND RONIN WANTS TO LEAK KHANS SECRETS. LEAD HIM TO RONINS HOUSE. HE COMES ALONE. I WILL FACE HIM THERE. THEN WE IMPROVISE.

He handed her the fake composition. She read it over, looked up, and nodded. "I'll practice this at home. Expect to have it ready by Tuesday evening."
It was Friday. If Nya was telling the truth, he had three days to figure out how to escape from Borg Tower. He knew he couldn't just take the elevator down to the ground floor and walk out through the front doors. With how many cameras were in the building, there was no sneaking out, either. His escape route would require more creativity than he was used to.

On Saturday, he spent his day exercising his elemental powers. He curled his fingers into fists over and over again, feeling the power surge through his veins. He couldn't practice on rocks, but he allowed himself to feel more in touch with his powers again. As he thought of his escape plan, he knew he would need it.

It was Monday night when he began to enact his plan.

**Cole**
I'm not sure if Nya told you, but I've been thinking about what you said. I think you're right. I was putting my emotions before the mission. If it's not too late, do you think I could still sign on as a tactician?

**Zane**
It's never too late. Would you like to start tomorrow?

**Cole**
Sure.

His first meeting was in the early afternoon. Inside the meeting room, only Zane and a few other staff members were present. This was a good sign.

"Where's Khan and Nya?" he asked.

"In an emergency meeting," Zane replied. "They wanted to be here, but it is apparently too important."

He smiled. Nya was following through with the plan. Now, it was his turn.

Cole walked around the large meeting table, slowly making his way to the large windows that made up the far wall. They were thick, made of bulletproof glass that could resist even the strongest of external forces. But where earth could create mountains, an earthquake could destroy a village. He knew too well that anything could be broken. All it needed was the right amount of pressure.

"Do you think the Second Rise could have infiltrated Borg?" said Cole. In the window, he watched Zane's reflection speak.

"How could they?"

"I mean, the Second Rise has been around all these years and no one's noticed? How many kids do you think they kidnap a year? Why has this gone unnoticed?"

"I do not know, Cole."

"Don't you understand? Reports go through the police, who in turn go through Borg. Something has to be happening there."

"What are you saying? You think Borg is responsible?" Zane rose from his seat.

Cole wasn't about to give him a chance to get close.
"I'm saying that sometimes, the good guys do bad things. And more often than not, it's the bad guys pretending to be the good guys all along. It's just life."

"Is this about Jay? Are you saying that we are the bad guys? I thought you were done with this."

"I don't think you're the bad guy. I just don't think Jay's the only puppet pretending to be someone I can trust."

Cole pulled his arm back. Summoning his Earth strength, he punched the glass as hard as he could. It only left a tiny crack. He did it two more times. The crack only grew an inch.

"Cole, please stop!" Zane shouted. "You cannot break the glass. You will hurt yourself."

"Yeah, I don't think I can break the glass, either," he said. "But I know someone who can."

He put his palm flat on the glass. He summoned his Earth energy, feeling it travel through his veins. It built up in his hand, growing and growing until he could no longer contain it.

He pushed against the glass. His Elemental Dragon erupted from his hand, too large and powerful for the room to contain. It grew into the windows, and one by one, they shattered under the pressure.

Cole could hear Zane yelling behind him. He ignored him and jumped out of the window.

He fell through the air, using bursts of airjitzu to prevent himself from reaching terminal velocity and dying before he even reached the ground. As he approached the ground, he saw a huge blur fly around. When it was close, he grabbed it and swung himself on. His Elemental Dragon took off from the Tower, bringing him away from downtown and towards the area where he resided.

Once they were close enough, Cole cut off the flow of energy to his dragon and it disappeared, sending him into a free fall again until he landed on a nearby apartment building roof. Using airjitzu, he travelled by rooftop, jumping from building to building until his own building was in his sight. He ran the rest of the way, only slowing once he reached his street block and didn't want to bring attention to himself. His floor in the building had changed since his departure. Outside of his door, there were old candles and wilting flowers. He unlocked his door and carefully stepped over them to go inside.

As he peeked around the corner into the main room, he froze at the sight of a figure on his couch. He hadn't expected the nindroids to have already arrived. How quickly had Zane reported it?

He took another step closer. Upon closer inspection, he realized that this wasn't a nindroid. It was a human.

It was Kai, sitting on his couch and holding Cole's ninja clothes. He turned to face him at the sound of his footsteps.

"Cole! You got here faster than I expected," he said. He jumped out of his seat, and it was only then that Cole realized that Kai wore his fighter clothes, fit with knee pads, gloves, and the katana Cole had bought him for his birthday. "Nya told me to come here. Apparently, I'm supposed to help you with something."

"You are absolutely not coming with me," Cole responded. He walked forward and took his clothes from Kai's hand. He made his way to his room and closed the door to change. Well aware that his apartment was small enough for Kai to hear him, he continued to speak. "Khan is a one-man fight. If I'm lucky, he'll only bring along a few secret nindroid guards that I'll have to take down. I don't want you there."
"Why not? Do you not trust me?"

"I trust you. But now that I know you're on my side, I don't want you to come with me. I want you to do something else." Cole changed quickly, throwing his normal clothes all over the room in an effort to put on his gi faster. He would clean it up later, when it was all over. In the mirror, he adjusted the headpiece over his face until only his eyes could be seen. It was time.

"What is it?"

Confident in his apparel, Cole left his bedroom and nearly smacked Kai with the door. He strode past him, making his way to the front entrance. He threw open the door and checked to see if Kai had followed him. He had.

"Nya is lying to Khan, who we now know is a member of the Second Rise. Whether I succeed or not, she's going to be in danger. I want you to go to Borg Tower and help her," he said.

"They took away my clearance after our ice cream conversation," Kai said. "How do I get inside?"

A good question. Cole took a moment to think, mapping out potential routes, and then remembered that Borg now had a glaring hole in their security.

"You're not afraid of heights, right?"

On the rooftop of his building, Cole once again summoned his Elemental Dragon. He boosted Kai up on top and discussed the plan. Cole's dragon would fly him to the meeting room in the Tower. Once inside, it would be up to Kai to locate Nya and protect her from the potential waves of nindroids that Khan would likely sic on her. Kai nodded along, repeating the plan back to Cole several times until he understood it.

"Do me a favor," Cole said. "Don't die. I've been promising myself that I wouldn't let you guys hurt yourselves in this lifetime. Anything that happens after this is on me. Don't make me regret sending you out."

"Whatever happens, I won't blame you," Kai promised. "I've been looking forward to my first ninja mission for so long. Look at us! We're rebelling against the system and facing off against armies. This is awesome!"

"You're so young," Cole said with a laugh. "Now go. We both have somewhere to be."

Kai saluted. "Aye aye, captain."

After the dragon had taken off, Cole travelled across the rooftops. He paused at every edge, looking down to check for nindroids. It was the middle of the afternoon. Why hadn't they come after him yet? It wasn't like he was hard to spot in the skyline in the daylight.

Ronin's building came into view. Cole jumped down into an alleyway that connected with Ronin's street. He peeked out. No one was there yet. Or they were hiding. No matter what, every move was risky. But he couldn't wait for long, so he darted down the sidewalk and quickly scampered up to Ronin's balcony. He opened the door, stepped inside, and then closed it behind him.

Ronin was on his living room couch, watching TV. His hand was already grabbing for his gun on the coffee table when he finally got a good look at Cole. His jaw dropped.

"What the fuck? You're dead," he said. "Did you turn into a ghost again or what?"
"It's a long story. But I'm alive," Cole replied. He wasted no time getting to the point. "You need to leave."

Ronin stood up. "Leave? Why?"

"It won't be safe here soon. Go wait a few blocks away or find something to do downtown."

Ronin shoved the gun into his pants and began to mill around his apartment, picking up his wallet, phone, and laptop and shoving them into a ragged backpack rife with holes. "You know, if you were anyone else, I wouldn't be doing this."

"I figured."

Ronin was out of his apartment in a matter of minutes. Cole peeked out the balcony window, watching Ronin's departure in case Khan sprang up on him. Nothing. Ronin disappeared around the street corner and Cole let himself believe that he was safe.

The wait was terrible. Cole no longer seeked out battle, but nothing was worse than waiting. As more time passed, reaching an hour, he became too anxious to remain in Ronin's apartment. He stepped onto the balcony and sat on the bannister, his legs swinging off the edge.

The sun was setting when an armored truck turned onto the street. It stopped at the far end, a few buildings away. Cole waited for Khan or nindroids to climb out of the back.

But before he could see them, his reality slipped away.

Cole opened his eyes to his bathroom. It wasn't the washroom in his room at Borg, or the one in his apartment, but the one from the townhouse he'd shared with his father as a teenager. He checked the doorknob. It was locked. Downstairs, he could hear some kind of commotion. Banging noises. The sound of his father's loud voice carrying upstairs, robbing Cole of any real escape.

"So," said a voice to his left. Cole whipped his head to the side to see Khan leaning against the wall. It was starting to feel a little cramped. "This is a memory that carries weight in your mind. It must be pretty important if it's lasted more than thirty centuries."

"How are you doing this?" Cole demanded.

"Just a bit of magic," Khan said. He smiled. "Why not tell me about your memory?"

"It's the night I ran away. I hid in here for hours." Cole looked at Khan through the bathroom mirror. "Why are we here?"

"You'll see."

The bathroom melted away and Cole found himself once again on Ronin's balcony. He felt a hand grab the back of his head and keep it straight. Khan. "Do you hear that, Cole?"

He strained his hearing. There was a familiar voice wafting through the air, barely audible above the drone of cars in the distance. But the words brought crisp recognition. It didn't take long for Cole to realize what it was.

"My dad. You're making me hear his voice," Cole said.

"Observant. Now, let's go a bit deeper."

Cole blinked, and in front of him, on the street, was a bed. Sitting over its edge was Jay, small in the
distance. It was a familiar scene from his prison cell, when Cole had seen his condition for the first time. Cole called out to Jay. He didn't look up.

"Your worst memories and greatest fears are closer than you realize," Khan began. "Imagine your only remaining friend almost dies at the hands of someone you thought you could trust. Someone offers a solution, a way to prevent something like this from ever happening again. You don't like this idea because it strikes you as . . . unethical. You refuse to participate. But then, every so often, you think you see his body laying in front of you, bleeding out because you couldn't save him in time. Sometimes, it's your other friends, and on the worst of days, it's you. It makes it a little easier to follow the plan, doesn't it?"

"Zane," Cole beathed. "And you got Nya too, didn't you? This is why Kai was the only one that could see past it. You didn't have influence on him."

"You're catching on," Khan said. "But it's too late to help you. You turned one of my best against me. You made such a commotion escaping I'm sure half the city knows you're alive by now. I can't allow you to live much longer."

"But why?" Cole asked. He clenched hand into a fist, feeling the energy flow through it. He had to let Khan believe he had the advantage for just a little longer. "What does the Second Rise want with me?"

"There's a lot in motion. This has been in the works for a long time." Khan let go of Cole's head. "But I can't tell you too much. My superiors are already angry with me enough as it is. Goodbye, black ninja. You put up a good fight."

Cole panicked. Was Khan going to try to kill him from behind? Did he have an assassin on a nearby rooftop, ready to take the shot? In that moment, he decided it didn't matter. He had to do something.

It was a good thing Ronin's building was made of brick and concrete.

Cole jumped off the railing. He landed in a roll, where he allowed his body to feel connected to his surroundings. He located the balcony. As he came to a stop, he pushed on the sidewalk pavement and willed the balcony to collapse beneath Khan's feet.

The collapse brought down the two balconies beneath it, creating a chain reaction Cole narrowly jumped out of the way of as the rubble crashed into the sidewalk. He put a bit more distance between himself and the building. Paranoid of being hit from behind, he used the street's pavement to construct walls behind and to the side of him.

He lifted his arm and moved the rubble until he could see Khan. Khan coughed and slowly raised himself to his knees. One of his arms was bent in a strange way. His skin was caked in dust and blood. Cole was ready to take him down, but he was still wary of his surroundings. He tried feeling for distant footsteps, a shift in weight, anything. But it really seemed like they were alone.

Still on his knees, Khan looked up. He met Cole's eyes. He flicked his wrist. A wave of of black overtook Coles vision.

He'd been transported elsewhere again. This time, a large, dimly-lit chamber with a quiet but large crowd. Cole was stuck in the back. He stood on his toes to peek over the heads and get a view of the makeshift stage at the front.

The man on the stage had a thin, non-threatening appearance. His face was covered in paint, making it hard to note facial features. His hair cut off at his chin.
"Nadakhan has failed us!" the man shouted. The voice struck Cole as being bizarrely young. He sounded like a teenager. "The black ninja is alive. Nadakhan tricked us into thinking he was dead! We've been goofed, boys. And to top it all off, we were overthrown at borg. Let's watch the broadcast they released a few minutes ago."

It hit him all at once. This was a Second Rise facility. The man on the stage was Feng.

Khan—or was his name Nadakhan?—had brought him to the present. Cole had no doubt his body was still in the old quarter. They were here to observe.

Feng stepped to the side. A large, white curtain unfurled from the ceiling. A grainy image was projected onto the curtain.

It was Nya. She sat at a desk, her lip busted and left cheek swelling under a bruise. Hurt, but alive. Kai had done his job.

"My name is Nya. However, you may also know me as the water ninja," she said. Her eyes were straight on the camera as she spoke. "This is something of a PSA. One month ago, you were told the black ninja died. This is a lie. For several years, Borg Industries' security department has been headed by a man known as Khan. The ninja have uncovered that he is a member of a secret organization known as the Second Rise. We were meant to keep our knowledge of their existence as a secret, but much like the organization itself, we will no longer bide our time. Khan has been removed from power. His replacement is none other than myself. I am the water ninja returned to life. But I am not the only one; among me are the fire and lightning ninja. I guess I'm just trying to say that we're back. And as a message for groups like the Second Rise: we're coming for you. Water ninja out."

The broadcast ended. Feng walked back to the centre of the stage. "Are you happy, Nadakhan? You know we don't tolerate failure well. Why don't you stop hiding in the back and come up here with me?"

The crowd turned. They looked past Cole, and he followed their gaze to Nadakhan, a broken figure still on his knees. His head snapped up to face the crowd. "You can fix this, Feng. You still have one more chance."

Feng jumped off the stage. The crowd parted as he slowly approached Nadakhan. He raised a finger. "Wish number one: you go back in time and kidnap the blue ninja," he said. He raised two fingers. "Wish number two: you infiltrate Borg Industries. You're no longer of any use to me. What reason do I have to use my third wish?"

He was halfway through the crowd. Nadakhan snarled. "I wouldn't get much closer. You can't see him, but the black ninja is here with me. You wouldn't want him to recognize you so early on in the plan, would you?"

Feng stopped dead. "You brought the black ninja here?" he demanded.

"Just as protection."

"Fine. Then here is my final wish: I wish that this wish is your last. Go back to your teapot in the Stix ruins and never come out."

The last thing Cole saw was the look of horror on Khan's face.

He returned to the old quarter. He could no longer hear his father. Feeling safer than before, he peeked out from his stone shelter. There was no one there but Zane. He sat nearby, arms resting on
his knees. His shurikens were on the ground at his side.

He'd been guarding him.

"Khan disappeared," Zane said. "I almost didn't believe Nya when she told me he was evil. But not only was he evil, he was inhuman."

"What was he?"

"He was a Djinn. He is thousands of years old, older than you and me. As a Djinn, he can grant three wishes to anyone who desires it, provided they rescue him from his teapot. If he was used by the Second Rise, they must have found him on purpose."

Zane stood up. He looked over his shoulder and met eyes with Cole.

"He split us apart. Upon her seizure of Borg's security department, Nya discovered that my sensors had been modified to trick me into thinking Khan was human. He has made me unable to trust my senses, and in turn, you unable to trust me. That is unacceptable."

Cole moved forward to put a hand on Zane's shoulder, but he stepped away. Cole felt his heart sink. "Zane, it's okay. I'm sorry I had to lie to you. I still trust you."

"I believe you. However, I do not trust myself." Zane picked up his shuriken. "I think I need to step aside for some time. I do not wish to become a weapon to be used against you."

"What do you mean?"

White sparks erupted from Zane's hands. His Elemental Dragon came to life next to him. "Everything I do is to help my friends," Zane said. He climbed up the dragon and sat down. "If I cannot protect you from even myself, I must reevaluate my role in your lives. I will be back soon. I just need a break."

The dragon flapped its wings and took off into the sky, bringing Zane with it. He was gone.

During his journey back to Borg, the edges of his sleeves became soaked as he wiped his eyes to dry out the tears. His airjitzu faltered beneath him, and a few blocks away from the Tower, he missed the edge of a rooftop and crashed into the fire escape instead. He managed to hang on and heave himself over, winded and unable to think straight. He stood on the metal escape for a moment, catching up on his breath and telling himself to just calm down. But his mind kept going back to his father's bathroom and the Second Rise facility and the old quarter where Zane had just left him, making it impossible for him to think cohesive thoughts without distraction and even worse connect with his Elemental Dragon to make the journey less difficult.

He finally reached the Tower. A nindroid greeted him on the ground floor and brought him to an elevator. Cole expected to go up, where he would meet Nya and Kai. The nindroid hit the button for one of the basement levels and the elevator shot down into the underground.

The doors opened to a wide hallway illuminated by pale blue fluorescents. He followed the nindroid through the corridor, noting the way the rooms were aligned. Every few steps, there was a metal door with no window on both sides of the hallway. The nindroid stopped in front of one of these doors. It turned to Cole.

"Kai has requested that you be the one to do this. You may open the door whenever you are ready."

Cole reached forward and opened the door. He looked inside the room and froze.
Jay was on his bed, tying knots with a thin string. He didn't notice that Cole had opened the door.

Cole entered the room, standing a small distance from the bed. "Jay?"

Jay's head snapped up. His eyes widened. "Cole?" he asked. He jumped up and hurried over to Cole, where he put his hands on his shoulders and then his cheeks and then took a step back. "You're alive. You're actually alive. The dreams... they were real. I... didn't kill you." Jay sank to the floor, sitting down with a look so shocked it made Cole's heart hurt. On the floor, he covered his face with his hands and wept.

Cole kneeled down next to him. Leaning in, he pulled Jay into a hug. Jay wrapped his arms around his back and held on tight, burying his head into his shoulder to cry. His words slurred, but Cole made them out. "I thought you were dead. I thought I was a murderer."

"It's okay," Cole whispered. "You're okay now. This is all over. You're free."

It took half an hour for them to leave the cell. Cole kept his arm wrapped around Jay's shoulder all the way to the top floor, if not only for comfort but to remind him that it was real and Cole wasn't going to disappear again. Silently, he promised himself that he never would.

On the top floor, Nya sat behind a large, wooden desk in what used to be Khan's office. Kai sat on the desk, facing the door as they entered. Like Nya, he was covered in bruises and cuts, but he was alive. He was okay.

He greeted them as they entered. "We won!" he threw his arms in the air. "With our big brains and awesome moves, we've secured yet another victory for team ninja. Nothing can kill us! We're invincible!"

Nya laughed. "Yeah, I don't know about that one. But Kai is right—we've succeeded. The Second Rise just lost its greatest advantage because we rooted them out of Borg. I think that's cause to celebrate."

"We lost Zane," Cole said. "He left. I don't know where he's going or when he's going to come back. How is that a win?"

Kai's face turned solemn. "He told us he was going to leave before he went to go check up on you. Nya ran diagnostics. Since Zane is a part of Borg's system, Khan was using him to spy on us. He knew our every move. And so did the Second Rise."

"We're working on removing him from our system," said Nya. "In a few hours, he'll have no connections with anything Borg-related. Not even the Wi-fi network."

"What about Jay? Is he still connected?"

Jay looked back and forth between Nya and Cole. "I'm what?"

"It's a long story," Nya said. "Without going into too much detail, you have an implant in your hippocampus that's been used to block memories and temporarily take over your functions. So, yes, you did try to kill Cole. But it wasn't really you."

"They used me because I'm the blue ninja, didn't they?" Jay asked. "They figured out who I was when I was a kid and abducted me. If this implant is true, they made me forget my past and dumped me in the Sands to be adopted by my parents. My whole life led up to that night in my apartment with Cole. I was going to end up dead or in prison no matter what I did."
Cole squeezed his shoulder in comfort. Kai spoke up. "I mean, if it makes you feel any better, you're going to die anyways."

Nya leaned forward and shoved him off the desk. He fell to the floor didn't get up, groaning in pain. She leaned back in her chair. "Jay, I'm going to have a research team figure out if we can safely remove your implant. It may be dangerous since it's been in there throughout your brain development."

"And what if you can't?" Jay said.

"We'll figure something out."

It took one day for Nya to expunge Jay's record, have his implant checked out, and arrange for his university to give him the semester off with a full tuition refund. Nya and her team discovered that his implant couldn't be removed, but they could remotely access it and remove all of the spyware. Deciding this was good enough, Jay went into surgery the next Saturday and was cut off from the Second Rise for good.

The next month wasn't easy. Jay stayed out late each night, hanging out with Cole or going to video game cafés whenever he wasn't working. He often came over to Cole's to take naps while he was home, and at the beginning of November, Cole found out he'd gone a full week and a half without ever going home. He sat him down to talk about it, and through tears, Jay explained that he couldn't live alone anymore. "The isolation kills me now," he said. "When I close my eyes on my bed, I feel like I'm back in that cell. I can't live alone anymore. I just can't."

"Then let's change that."

By December, they found a two-bedroom apartment in the old quarter that was only a few blocks away from the closest skytrain. It took some time to move in, but after a couple of weeks of moving things around, they figured out how to accommodate for both of their possessions. Jay set up his nintendo in the living room and they played Smash every other night, having fun until they got bored and switched to any other game in Jay's collection. At night, on the worst days, Jay crawled into Cole's bed and slept beside him, hand on his arm or torso to remind himself that he wasn't alone.

Come February, two months after Jay started his new semester, he didn't need to share the bed with Cole anymore. But sometimes, after a long movie, they fell asleep on the couch together, laying on top of each other until one of them woke up in the morning and had to move. Whenever Jay awoke first, he would jokingly push Cole off the couch, but after a particularly bad incident that included skull temples and coffee table corners, he curbed the habit.

Zane still hadn't returned by spring. The other ninja assured Cole that it would be okay, but he was worried that his friend was out there somewhere in the country, letting guilt eat him alive. Did he go looking for him or respect his friend's autonomy? He didn't know what to do.

Walking in public became something of a problem for Cole again. He was recognized frequently in the street, sometimes asked for pictures and sometimes shouted at from somebody across the street. His flower shop had apparently boomed while he was gone, although his staff members were still a little freaked out because none of them knew who was supposed to step up and fill in Cole's shoes. At his return, everything seemed to return to normal, albeit busier than usual.

Despite the fanfare, he was acutely aware of the Second Rise's presence in the streets. He checked over his shoulder every few seconds, just as he'd used to. He didn't trust anyone that looked under eighteen, acutely aware that any minor now held the chance of being an assassin out to get him.
In the summer, Nya pulled some strings and got Jay an internship in Borg's engineering department. Concerned about bringing him back to the Tower, she arranged for it to take place in one of their research centres close to the old quarter. And so, for that summer, Jay got to do something he loved for eight hours a day. When he'd come home in the afternoon, he would ramble about his day for half an hour, and Cole would listen just like he always did, nodding along to the story. Jay talked a lot, but now that he got the chance to live with him again, Cole never wanted him to shut up again.

Cole took the long route home on a hot August day, choosing to relish in the sun instead of hiding from it as he usually did. It was close to dinner time, so the streets were packed with people, all trying to get home or go out somewhere with friends. In the midst of the chaos, he bumped shoulders with someone and heard them fall to the ground.

He turned around to help them up, then froze in place.

A green hoodie. Beneath it, blonde hair and bright red eyes that looked like contacts. A look of shock on his face.

"Lloyd?"

A beat passed.

"Cole?"

**RED | FIRE**
**MAGENTA | WATER**
**BLUE | LIGHTNING**
**GREEN | ENERGY**
**TOGETHER | UNITY**

Chapter End Notes

A quick note to all Zane fans who may be thinking: "Wow, Spacen, what the hell?"
Wait! Each character gets a story arc. Zane just doesn't get his own chapter! His big moment is on its way!

Edit: I probably sound like a broken record, but thank you again for all of your comments and kudos! I really appreciate it! Remember, although I don't reply, I read and cherish every comment! Thank you so much! <3
Chapter Notes

Without spoiling anything, there are references to suicidal ideation in this chapter. It isn't very heavy, but I will place asterisks ** before the scene just in case.

To quote many comments on the last chapter: Why yes, it's "green bean time".

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Lloyd?"

A beat passed.

"Cole?"

The world fell still. Cole broke his gaze away from Lloyd's red eyes and analyzed what little else he could see. The hair poking out of his hood was a shaggy, sandy blonde. His face was round, not quite filled in. His eyes were a bright, cherry red. He was young; younger than Jay, but older than he was before he consumed the Tomorrow's Tea. He was something he never had the chance to be before: an adolescent.

His scars revealed more than his age. A cut on his jaw. A bruised left eye. Cole looked down. His right knuckles were split and scabbing over. He was in a fight recently. Cole wondered if his hoodie hid other injuries.

A car honked, snapping Cole from his daze. He re-focused. "You know who I am."

Lloyd jumped up. He took a step back. "I need to go."

In a panic—he couldn't lose Lloyd like he'd lost Jay, couldn't spend another year searching for his friend—Cole snatched Lloyd's wrist and held him in place. Lloyd tried to pull his wrist away. Cole squeezed harder.

"What are you doing?" Lloyd demanded. His voice was quiet now—urgent, like he didn't want anybody to hear. "Let go of me!"

Cole didn't budge. "I'm going to go out on a limb and assume you know why I can't do that."

"I'm going to go out on a limb and assume you don't know how dangerous this is," Lloyd snapped. "You don't want to be seen with me. Not now."
"Then when?"

Lloyd looked over his shoulder and then back to Cole. "Friday night. Meet me at the place where we met for the first time."

The implication hit him like a punch to the gut. His grip on Lloyd's wrist weakened.

Lloyd sensed the weakness and twisted in towards Cole so his back was to his chest, and in a moment of unforeseen strength, grabbed the underside of Cole's bicep and threw him over his shoulder.

The impact of the hard sidewalk knocked the wind out of him. Wincing, Cole tried to ignore the pain and sat up slowly. He looked around for Lloyd. It had only been a moment—he had to be within sight, running down a street.

But the green ninja was gone.

It was a long walk home. Once he was back on his feet, his first reaction was to pull up Zane's contact and call him to tell him the good news. It was only on the ninth ring that Cole remembered the white ninja had flown out of his life ten months ago.

He thought of Zane as he approached his home, a two-bedroom condo on the outskirts of the Old Quarter. In a way, the buildings reminded him of his friend. Zane's exterior appeared thousands of years-old, a testimony to the durability of old technology. But his inside was new, fitted with every update and new software. He was an oxymoron; forever the same, yet permanently changing.

Cole pushed open the door to his apartment and was greeted with a familiar sight: Jay passed out on the couch, the TV playing the children's cartoon channel, and sun streaming in through the windows. On a normal day, Cole would turn off the TV, close the blinds to protect his sleeping friend from the bright sun, and then retire to his room until he grew too hungry to care about letting Jay sleep anymore and went to make dinner in the kitchen. Today wasn't one of those days.

He found the remote beneath the couch and turned off the TV. Then he turned around and shook Jay awake.

"What is it?" Jay mumbled into the couch pillow.

"I found Lloyd."

Jay's eyes snapped open. He pushed himself up with one hand and turned his head to face Cole. "You found him? How?"

"Ran into him on the street," Cole said. He spoke quickly as the excitement took over him. "But that's barely important. Lloyd isn't like you, Kai, or Nya. He isn't just a reincarnation."

"I don't get it." Jay rubbed his eyes and yawned. "Did he never die? What's going on?"

"He remembers me! He remembers where we first met," Cole replied. To burn energy, he began to walk in circles around the coffee table in front of the couch. On his second time around, he saw Jay close his eyes and fall back onto the couch. "I think he's come back fully. Memories and all. I mean, not to say you haven't. I think you do have memories. They're just locked somewhere deep inside your subconscious. But Lloyd, he—he just remembers. He knew my name. He knew how and where we first met. He must remember everything else, too."

"Oh, wait, I get it now," Jay said. "I'm an inferior reincarnation."
Cole stopped in his tracks. "That's not what I meant."

Jay rolled onto his side. He opened his eyes again and looked to Cole. "Dude. I don't blame you for being excited. But I do think it's a little unfair. Like, come on. Why does Lloyd get *everything*? In history class, we pretty much only learned about the green ninja. The rest of us were brushed under the rug. He got all the cool powers, the statues, the memorials . . . and now he gets to come back with his memories intact? I think the universe has some kind of bias."

The idea made Cole laugh. He didn't expect Lloyd to be anything less than extraordinary, being the grandson of the First Spinjitzu Master. Maybe it was a little unfair that the other ninja weren't as celebrated. But when Cole thought back to his past centuries alone, he couldn't imagine living with fame. Existing as nothing more than a normal person that didn't attract stares on the street was a blessing. Not something to feel angry about.

-onyx has opened a new chatroom!-

**secure_bot**
Welcome to Secure, Ninjago's safest messaging service! Your messages will remain on our isolated, closed-circuit servers, keeping you safe from government surveillance and private tracking. Remember to donate to ensure that your communications remain private! Safe chatting!

-walker has changed the chatroom's name to: the dk crew-

**kfire**
hes so fkn fast

**kfire**
like i swear he waits at his phone and stares at his screen all day

**kfire**
waiting for his next chance

**kfire**
he sees the notification pop up: someone has made a new chat

**kfire**
sweating, he taps the screen like a rabid animal and scours his brain for whatever stupid reference he can change the chat name to this time

**kfire**
not even for honor, or even the laughs

**kfire**
all just so he can disappoint his friends one last time

**mer**
Wow, Kai. You should become a writer.

**walker**
yeah maybe if youd applied to creative writing you wouldve gotten into university

**mer**
Holy shit.
kfire
HEY

walker
....e,fer,. ,

kfire
you good

walker
yeah cole just threw a soup ladle at me from the kitchen and i dropped my phone

mer
Cole, you've defended my brother's honor. What do I owe you?

onyx
You can come to the team meeting I wanted to have tonight.

mer
Consider it done. Kai, you going?

kfire
nya i want you to look at me and guess if i have plans tonight

walker
what does he look like?

mer
He's eating a microwave burrito while laying on the couch. A quick peek at his phone confirms that he's down to 3% battery life but has yet to do anything about it. He's using what precious battery he has left to message here and watch dash cam compilations.

walker
so hes not coming?

mer
He's too busy. Obviously not.

One hour later, however, Kai and Nya both knocked on the door to Cole's apartment. Kai strode to the nearest outlet, pulled his phone out of his pocket, and plugged it into the wall. Everyone sat around the the rarely-used dining table—Cole and Jay preferred to eat in front of the TV—and Cole broke the news.

"You really think he remembers?" Nya asked him. She didn't look like she believed him.

"Jamanakai Village has a population of less than two thousand people," Cole responded. "It's also pretty isolated. Last I checked, the village is the same it was three thousand years ago. I don't think a normal city kid would know it existed."

"And he wants to meet you on Friday night?" Kai said. At Cole's confirmation, Kai folded his arms across his chest and leaned back in his chair. "Okay. I'm coming with you."

This threw Cole for a loop. "No offense, but you don't really know him," Cole said. "Lloyd also seemed a little paranoid. I don't know if bringing someone else is a good idea. What if he only wants
"You're right. I don't really know him. And neither do you." Kai stuck a thumb in Jay's direction. "Last time you blindly trusted some kid you thought you knew, he almost killed you. Let's go over your description of this new Lloyd one last time. He's young. Has a ton of injuries. Knows how to fight and probably does it often. And, judging by how all of our histories were pretty much the same as the original versions of us, he's probably a parentless kid running around the streets wreaking havoc right now. Seems like the perfect candidate for a Second Rise recruit, don't you think?"

"If he tries to fight me, I'm sure I can take him. He's like, thirteen. I could probably punt him across the village if I had to."

"No offense to you, but Jay kicked your ass just because you weren't expecting it," Kai said. There was a pause before he spoke again. "Don't get me wrong. I want to trust Lloyd, and I want you to go. I just want to keep watch. Maybe from a safe distance, like a nearby rooftop. That way, if he tries to pull some shit, I can help out. Come on, dude. Let me come."

Cole didn't try to fight it. Kai was right. They began to draw up a plan, pulling up a picture of Jamanakai's map on Cole's laptop and figuring out the best place for Kai to hide. They settled on a house across the street from the candy store. The roof had a large tree leaning over it, providing cover for Kai behind its many branches and leaves. It was perfect.

They were ready to call the meeting to a close when Jay introduced another problem.

"I have a question. If Zane and his car are gone, how are you going to get there? I looked it up and I'm not seeing any way to get there without a vehicle." Jay squinted at his phone screen. "There are no train lines and It's about a . . . five day walk, give or take. What day is it again?"

Cole sighed. "Wednesday."

For a moment, they all fell into silence, trying to come up with an alternative route there. Cole could use his elemental dragon, but it took a lot of energy to fly for hours on end. He didn't know if he could make it all the way there and not faint as soon as they touched the ground.

Nya spoke up from across the table.

"I think we all need to come." She looked to Cole. "You don't care about the law, right?"

The plan was simple. But it made Cole nervous. If they went through with it, he feared he would be condemning his new friends to a way of life he never wanted them to experience. Involving Kai and Nya in his plot to save Jay was out of necessity, not desire. He didn't want them to become ninja again. Didn't want to see them hurt, killed, or imprisoned. Didn't want their blood to feel like a concoction of fear and adrenaline.

Nya's plan was the only choice. So, despite his best interests, Cole ceded. Nya was smug. Jay was unsure. Kai was excited.

Like Jay, Cole was also scared. But he couldn't deny that the idea of returning to his first lifetime—one surrounded by friends as they lived outside of the rules of society—brought back a long-lost bounce to his step.

He spent Thursday pouring over a map of the site. The site was seventy kilometres away from the city, located just off the side of the national highway the cut across the island. Cole himself didn't need a map—he had the area memorized. But the others didn't, so he drew over the map in thick markers, creating a master plan for what they would do that night. When it was perfected, he printed
off four more copies of the map and drew a detailed plan for each ninja. They each had their own role. Cole and Kai would clear out the guards outside. Nya and Jay would sneak into the interior, with Nya ready to help take out any guards they found inside. They had continued their training during the summer, so if all went well, she could take down some nindroids on her own.

That afternoon, Cole used his key to enter Zane's apartment. He hadn't gone inside for months. Even after all those months, the turbulent times as the two remaining ninja fought over Jay, it hadn't changed. It was the same as it had always been. Minimal furniture, tidy shoes, a spotless kitchen, and walls covered in pictures and paintings of his friends.

*Everything I do is to help my friends,* Zane had said.

If Cole ran away, would Zane look for him? Was Zane somewhere in rural Ninjago, waiting for Cole to find him?

Cole didn't know what to do. He wanted his friend back. He just didn't know whether to wait or send the invitation himself.

He found Kai's gi in Zane's closet. He stuffed it into his bag, took one last look around the apartment, and then left.

They convened at Kai and Nya's for dinner. They ate a small meal, drank a few cups of water, and cut themselves off for the night. Cole warned them about the dangers of eating too much before a mission. They couldn't risk being slow or sick. They had to be ready to fight or run at any given moment.

Jay stopped complaining when it was time to put on his gi. It fit him perfectly, but Jay kept pulling at fabric and stretching it, as though he didn't trust it yet. "I feel like this doesn't offer any protection," Jay said. "Aren't nindroids made of titanium? If they punch me, I'm done for."

Cole smiled. "Do you trust me?"

Cole was raising his leg for the kick before Jay could say yes. His foot directed with Jay's chest and sent him crashing to the floor. He rolled until he hit the wall and rattled the picture frames on impact.

Jay was up in a heartbeat. As though inspecting himself for injuries, he looked down on himself. Then he looked back to Cole. There was a wide smile on his face. "Holy shit. I barely felt anything."

"It's powerful stuff," Cole said. He turned to Kai and Nya, who were already dressed. "Don't do anything too risky. The suits can take some blows, but you aren't invincible. A bullet can get through your gi just fine. I wouldn't recommend throwing yourself into danger."

As the sun set, Cole went over the plan. He explained what they would do, how they would do it, and what to do if they got into a bind. Three thousand years ago, they had a rule to try to figure things out on their own before contacting the team. Now, he told them to contact him over the communicators in their gi if they felt even remotely unsafe. None of them were going to die on a mission with him. Not before the team had finally reunited, Zane, Lloyd, and all. Not ever.

Kai grabbed his katana, Nya fastened the samurai X armor to her left leg, and as the clock struck midnight, it was time.

It was time to steal from the government. From the Ministry of Culture.

It was time to steal back Destiny's Bounty.
They split into two groups; Kai and Cole as the fighters, Nya and Jay as tech ops. The Bounty had received many updates during his first lifetime, improving its security until Cole could no longer access its mainframe without a now long-forgotten password. It was up to Jay and Nya to hack into the ship and unlock its security systems. Only then would the Bounty fly once again.

Kai and Cole took to the air, riding Cole’s elemental dragon as Nya and Jay raced through the streets below on Nya's motorcycle. Cole kept an eye on the highway out of the city, flying near the clouds so his dragon's black scales would camouflage against the dark sky. It wasn’t busy this time at night, only a few cars driving in and out. He could feel Kai growing impatient behind him.

A black figure sped out onto the highway. Headlights flashed three times before it went dark again. That was Nya's signal—it was time to go.

Cole flew above the clouds and pushed his dragon to fly faster. Kai held onto his waist tightly as they built up speed. Their plan relied on the fighters arriving first to take out the first wave of guards and secure an entrance for Nya and Jay. Nya may have been the new head of security, but as she’d explained, these nindroids were owned by the government. They wouldn't hesitate to attack her—or any ninja—on sight. While she could deactivate them in theory, disabling Ninjago's police force for personal gain was a fireable—and prison-worthy—offence.

To make it worse, after the call for Cole's assassination and the announcement that the ninja were going after a secret society, security of ninja-related sites had increased dramatically.

A few months ago, there was only one nindroid guard at night. Now, there were twenty.

They were close to the Bounty when Nya called in.

"Just passed exit five. Be there in twenty."

Cole looked back to Kai. "You ready?"

He looked to the ground nervously. "You sure you can airjitzu us down there?"

"Just hold on and you'll be fine."

Cole flew below the clouds. Familiar masts poked up into the sky beneath him. He took a deep breath, feeling the air around him. A gust of wind blew through his hair. It was cooperating.

He clutched his fists and the dragon disappeared beneath him.

Kai readjusted his grip on Cole in the air, climbing up to hold onto his shoulders and wrap his legs around his torso. Cole summoned the air around him and controlled their descent, aiming for the main deck of the ship. They fell through the air quickly. Wind whipped around them, making Cole's eyes hurt if he looked down for too long.

As they approached the ship, he slowed down and tapped Kai’s hands, signalling for him to let go. Kai released his grip on Cole and fell that last few metres on his own, aiming for a nindroid about to pass below him. Cole heard Kai and the nindroid crash against the deck as he landed, ducking into a roll as soon as his feet hit the ground.

He jumped up, shouted a reminder to Kai to aim for their right eye, and then aimed his fist for the closest nindroid.

The fight didn't last long. Kai had become the fighter he used be when he was a ninja: aggressive, flashy, and skilled beyond words. They fought in sync, defending one another and offering cover
and taking down nindroids together. Fire was offensive and quick, Earth steady and slow. They worked together as sword and shield; Cole blocking attacks and Kai delivering them. It had been long since they fought as a pair, but even with Kai's new body and mind, it felt the same as ever.

The nindroids were defeated in ten minutes. Kai took out the last with his sword as Nya pulled into the lot, flashing her highbrems to announce her arrival. She parked her bike close to the ship and climbed up the side with Jay, helping him by holding his hand and giving him boosts up when he needed it.

Once he was on the ship, Jay rolled over onto his back and let out a long sigh. His eyes were wide open.

"That was so scary," he said. "I'm never doing that again."

Nya laughed. "Why not? It's only a motorcycle."

"Yeah. A motorcycle going at two hundred kilometres per hour," Jay snapped back.

Nya grabbed his arm and dragged him to his feet. "Come on," she said. "Let's go to the bridge. We need to figure out how to get this thing off the ground."

Cole and Kai waited on the deck as Nya and Jay went to the bridge, standing guard in anticipation of the swarm of nindroids to come. Cole could see flashing lights on the horizon. It wouldn't take them long to get there.

"Oh shit, there's more?" Kai asked. He ran his hands down his face. "I'm already so tired. I can't fight twenty more, man. I can't."

Cole looked to Kai, then to the highway. He couldn't let Kai be hurt or arrested. He had to do something. He had to stop them from reaching the ship in the first place.

"Guard the Bounty," Cole instructed, using his best leader voice. "I'm going to slow down the cops."

"How?"

Cole shrugged. "Obstruct traffic, I guess."

He jumped off the Bounty and landed on the ground below. He cut across the parking lot, running until his feet hit the pavement of the highway. He looked over his shoulder, checking for city-bound cars. Nothing. He was safe. All he had to do was block the highway before the police or any other cars passed him.

He placed his hand on the pavement. He felt the Earth several layers down, exercising his control over it until it was in his possession. Then he pushed against the ground and the highway split in two.

A chasm formed before him, twenty metres deep and five metres wide. The chasm was long, covering the highway and the land around it. It was impossible for the police to cross with their cars. If they wanted to catch the ninja, they would need something that could fly.

A bright light hovering in the distance told him that air support was on the way. He supposed it was a justified reaction. Taking out twenty nindroids was bound to raise an alarm back at the police station.

"You guys better hurry," Cole said into the comms.
"We're getting close," Nya responded. "This thing is tough to crack. Who coded it?"

"You and Jay," Cole said. "I don't know why we let you do it. I was bound to forget the password eventually."

"Yeah, way to go, moron. You're really making our lives easier. I bet Zane didn't forget his password." Jay groaned. "Wow. Old me was an asshole. Why is there no 'forgot my password' option?"

Cole turned around and began to jog back to the ship. "I don't know. Maybe you weren't smart enough to think of it."

Cole heard Kai laugh sharply into his mic and the subsequent click of Jay's comm unit turning off.

On his way back up, Cole grabbed Nya's motorbike from the ground and dumped it on the deck. On the ship, Kai sat with his legs hanging over the edge, watching the horizon. The lights were getting closer. They didn't have much time until air support arrived to take them out.

It was a long few minutes as they waited for Nya and Jay. Bugs hummed around them and Cole took the chance to breathe in the fresh, countryside air. It was a cool night. Being back on Destiny's Bounty had a strange calming effect on his body. Even as the police closed in, he felt more free than he ever had living in the city.

His earpiece crackled to life. "Kai, what's your Chirp password?" Nya asked.

"I don't know if I feel comfortable sharing that. I kind of use the same password for everything."

"Come on. It's important."

Kai sighed beside him. He flopped over on his back to hide his embarrassment. "Skylor0225."

Cole hid a grin behind his hand. "Is that her birthday?"

"Please shut up," Kai whined. "She was my best friend when we were kids. Of course, she was my password for everything."

In the earpiece, Nya gasped and started to laugh.

"Guys, it worked!" she exclaimed. "We got in!"

Cole and Kai jumped to their feet and raced to the control room. Down below, the large screens that covered the control room displayed a loading screen for Kai's account. The ship shuddered as it was brought back to life.

"What happened?" Kai asked. "What does my Chirp password have to do with this?"

"Well, after Cole called me dumb, Nya tried to make me feel better by joking about how bad you are with technology and it just kind of clicked," Jay explained. "Cole found you because you used the same username for everything, even after being reincarnated. We figured since that was the same, and since you don't care about cybersecurity and probably use the same password for everything, why would your password be any different from what it was way back then?"

"And boom! Kai's login is the same as it was three thousand years ago," Nya said with a smile. She held up her hand and Jay gave her a high-five.

Kai turned to Cole and frowned. "Where's my room? I need to go feel bad about myself in peace."
"Think you can fly this thing?" Cole asked Nya.

"I'm sure I can figure it out," she replied. "Take Kai and go sleep. You guys did all the physical stuff tonight. I'm sure you're tired."

As the Bounty lifted off, Cole removed the chains that were meant to block tourists from entering the bedrooms. Unsure of where to put them, he dumped them in the corner of Kai's bedroom and then brought him inside. It seemed so empty now, with all its decorations gone. Kai had once shared a room with Lloyd and Zane, and seeing it now made him feel lonely. There used to be trinkets everywhere, from Kai's hair products to Zane's stuffed falcon plushie to Lloyd's collection of art and letters sent by children from all over the island. When he was in his twenties, Lloyd uploaded weekly vlogs where he responded to letters and art and gifts his fans sent him. As he grew with his age, his fans declined, but he kept the vlog going until he died.

Cole could remember his last video. It went viral when it was released, playing on the skytrain and automated billboards and all over his social media feed. He couldn't escape it—especially not after Lloyd died and everyone realized what his video was meant to be.

It wasn't just a goodbye. It was a manifesto.

"Cole, which bed is mine?"

Kai's voice snapped him out of his daze. He turned to the beds, one a double bunk and the other a single on the floor. Zane had the single bed, too heavy after turning titanium to use the bunk bed without breaking it. Not that he slept, anyways. When Cole once asked about what he did in the bed all night, Zane had told him that he talked to PIXAL in his head. "It is our only alone time," Zane had explained. "Sometimes, I cannot stop myself from laughing and accidentally wake the others. I find it a little scary. Kai is not a pleasant person when awoken at two in the morning."

"Bottom bunk," Cole replied. "Lloyd had a thing about sleeping on the top bunk. Pretty sure it was easier to avoid bullies at night if they had to climb up to get him."

"He was bullied?" Kai asked. The surprise in his voice was so genuine that it made Cole stare.

"They didn't teach you that in school?" He couldn't figure out if Kai was ignorant because he barely paid attention in history class, or because Lloyd's childhood wasn't deemed important enough to teach. He'd always assumed they taught Lloyd's life from birth to death, what with the way the island of Ninjago seemed forever mesmerized by his existence.

"I didn't even know he went to school. I thought he grew up alone until you guys took him in," Kai said. "Am I wrong?"

"He went to a school for villains," Cole said. "His mom ditched him there as a baby and he stayed until he was eleven. The other kids brutalized him in there. He didn't like to tell us about it, though. He always tried to convince us that it wasn't too bad. I never believed him."

There was a sympathetic look on Kai's face. "And you think he has the same past, right?"

"If he has his memories, it won't be too bad," Cole said. "His knuckles were split when I ran into him on the street. Maybe he fights back now that he knows he's the all-powerful green ninja."

"Yeah, maybe." Kai climbed into his bed and yawned loudly. "Are you tired? I'm tired. We should go to bed."

Cole's eyes stung on his way to the control room. He rubbed them, as though the friction would get rid of the exhaustion building in his body. It was late. He'd fought twenty nindroids, created a chasm in the earth, and been awake for a few hours too many. Like Kai, it was likely time for him to sleep. But his inner leader wouldn't let him go to bed without first checking on the resident geniuses. So he stopped in the control room, where Nya and Jay were huddled around the main panel.

"You guys still hacking or what?" Cole called out from the doorframe.

They turned to him and Jay beckoned him to come closer. "Look," he said as Cole approached the panel, "we figured out how to reset our passwords!"

On the screen was a password reset prompt for Jay's account. Jay looked up to the screen and frowned. "I should probably change the name," he said. The account was under Jay Walker, not Jay Gordon. "Do you think I should change the name? Or would that be like desecrating his memory?"

"As far as I'm concerned, you're the same person," Cole said. "This is also the login for a computer system I haven't been able to access in years. I won't hold it against you if you change the username."

"Okay, nice. I'm still kind of new to this whole reincarnation thing, so I don't know what's cool with you and what's not," Jay said.

Nya put a hand on his shoulder. "If it's any consolation, I've known for years and I still have no idea."

"Are you two going to sleep tonight? At all?" Cole said. "I need you to be conscious tomorrow night."

"Maybe this thing has an autopilot. I mean, old me had to sleep somehow, right?" She leaned over the console keyboard and began to rummage through the programs available on the computer. "I don't think there's an existing program for it. If the ship has GPS I can probably write one."

"Or," Jay began, catching Nya's attention as he pointed to a button on a panel near the keyboard, "you could use your eyes and just hit the button that says 'autopilot' and call it a night."

Nya pouted and crossed her arms. "The real Jay wouldn't do this to me."

"Oh, is this the game we're playing now?" Jay said with a laugh. "I'm closer to my past-self than you could ever dream to be. I'm the real Jay minus the memories. You're just Nya lite."

"I'm not sticking around for this." Cole sighed. "Goodnight, kids. Don't kill each other."

"Goodnight, dad," they said in unison.

Cole changed into pyjamas and crawled into his old bed. He was exhausted, but as he thought of meeting Lloyd again, his heart beat faster and sank into his stomach. This was a Lloyd that grew up with heavy memories. A Lloyd that likely went through the horrors of his childhood again, filled with memories that weren't quite his own and too confusing for a kid to understand. Did he remember the good times, when they would eat dinner as a family and go to the movies to watch whatever dog-related movie Zane insisted they see this time?

Did he remember the bad? Did he remember the months after Morro's possession when he would wake up crying and screaming in the middle of the night because the dark, senseless sensation of sleep now terrified him? When his father died?
He opened Youtube, then scrolled through his subscriptions until he found it.

**therealgreenninja**

His last video was the most viewed on his channel. Cole hadn't seen it in years. It came to him during the worst period in his life, as Cole struggled to grieve for the life he had lost following the death of his last mortal friend. He had tried to block all reminders out of his life but this video still crept in, inescapable in a digitalized society.

He hadn't watched it since the time of Lloyd's death. But when he played it, he remembered every word.

"I've gotten so old so quickly, haven't I?" Lloyd asked the camera. He was in a hospital bed. The video was uploaded two days before his death. "I've aged sixty years in two months. This time last year, I was fighting off an evil wizard with the black and white ninja. Now I need their help to walk up the stairs!" He laughed hoarsely. "Ah. I got a really nice letter from someone named Monty yesterday. He wanted to know if I could go to his birthday party. I would love to, but . . . I don't think I'm going to make it. You don't want an old clown like me at your ninth birthday party. It would just be sad.

"I've been thinking about our world a lot. If I'm going to be honest, I used to think it was doomed. We're all alone, on an island in the middle of a planet of ocean, in a galaxy where no one else is around us, and every few years, someone tries to kill us. What kind of life are we meant to be living? We have titanium super-soldiers marching through our streets to protect us, but they've proven to fail time and time again. I used to think that no matter what happened, we couldn't get rid of whatever evil was bent on destroying everything we built. I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life fighting off whatever tried to come after us next. It felt a little tedious after a while, going through the motions with the other two ninja over and over again.

"After the water ninja died, I lost my will to fight. The black ninja had gone into isolation again. The white ninja was putting on a brave face but stayed at work well into the night. I tried to help, but I don't think they trusted me. They looked at me like I might disappear at any moment. I think they always knew I was a goner. Wu died. My father died. No amount of Garmadon blood would keep me alive forever. But nothing hurts more than watching your friends suffer with no way to help.

"It made me think of Ninjago. No matter how hard we fought, no matter how many enemies we defeated, there was always something waiting around the corner. I wondered if Ninjago was a lost cause. Life and society is supposed to be unfair, fine, but is it meant to be perpetually deadly? What kind of life do we lead if we must live in constant fear of our buildings burning down around us? Of our loved ones dying young at the hands of a man with a vendetta against the innocent?

"It took a year for my will to come back. I can remember the day it did. I was downtown, walking past an area of the city devastated by an attack a few months before the water ninja passed away. They were almost done rebuilding it. The streets were filled in, buildings were close to being finished, and there were 'for sale' signs on every street corner. The city planners had done something I found beautiful. Trees were planted alongside the buildings, along with flowers, gardens, and bushes. Everything was still growing. But it was so green, and fresh, and in a way, hopeful. That's what did it for me. I started crying on the sidewalk and had to sit down. I realized that we don't live to suffer from the evil around us. We live for the chance to be something better.

"Anything that dies can be reborn again. And I don't just mean city blocks. I'm talking about a message. An attitude. In times when this island is kicked down, we always get back up. We better ourselves. When I'm gone, I don't want the symbol I've become to die with me. I want you to keep moving forward. I want you to keep rebuilding. I want you to persist because despite our differences,
we all have one shared value:

A hope for tomorrow."

A nurse entered the room and the video ended.

Cole fell asleep with Lloyd's words ringing in his ears.

The next morning, Cole awoke to the steady hum of the engine as the ship flew through the skies. He took a shower, got dressed, and went to the kitchen to make breakfast.

Then he realized that the kitchen was empty and they'd brought no food. By the time the others all finished waking up, Jamanakai was only two hours away. They decided to wait it out and pick up food together in the village.

Dressed in civilian clothes, they parked the Bounty a few kilometres away from the village and walked the rest of the way there. Jamanakai was the same as ever; streets made of stone and dirt, traditional houses, and people that looked at visitors with a certain wariness but were kind to them all the same. Snow fell softly from the sky.

The existence of snow enthralled Jay. "This is so cool," he said. "We never got any snow in the Sands. I wish I'd grown up here instead."

"Everyone says that until they live somewhere with frequent snow," Cole said. "When I was a kid, I grew up in a village that got a lot of snow. It was awful. I never want to live somewhere cold ever again."

Jay stopped in his tracks. "Wait. You mean to tell me you're not a city kid?"

"Not until I was twelve. Kind of like you."

"See? We're practically connected. This is why we're best friends."

Kai groaned loudly from several metres ahead. "I've been starving for twelve hours. Can we please just get food?"

They finally stumbled across the only dining place in town, a small restaurant on the edge of the plateau the village was built on. The waitress greeted them in an unfamiliar language, and when no one was able to respond, went quiet. She led them to a table next to a window overlooking the mountains and gave them their menus and then briskly walked away.

Jay opened his menu. "Oh no. It's in snow people language."

"I think it's called Jamani," Kai said.

"I'm surprised you know what it's called," Jay said. "You impress me with your abundance of knowledge every day, Kai."

"Shut up. Besides, unlike you, I actually leave my house and learn about other cultures," Kai snapped. "Actually, let me take a guess: you speak that stupid sand language."

"What about you, huh? You know any languages other than city dialect?"

Kai gave him a cocky smile. "Monolingual and proud."

The life died in Jay's eyes.
"That's probably not something you should be proud of," said a voice from across the restaurant. Cole turned to the source.

Standing a few feet away, with his hands in the pockets of the same green hoodie he wore earlier that week, was Lloyd. The table fell into stunned silence.

Lloyd grabbed a chair from a nearby table and pulled it up to theirs. He sat at the end and looked back and forth between everyone. A smile adorned his face.

"So, you brought the whole squad, huh?" he said to Cole.

Cole froze when he noticed Lloyd's eyes were no longer red. They were now a light purple, unnatural-looking and almost uncanny. He was wearing contacts. Perhaps his eyes weren't red or purple, and they were still green under whatever disguise he was trying to wear.

Jay kicked Cole beneath the table. He snapped back from his shock. "They were going to wait in the Bounty during our meeting."

"Oh, I know. I was there." His smile grew wider. "You don't mind that I hitched a ride with you, right? I'm a little too young to drive and getting here any other way would've been a pain."

"You were on the ship?" Nya asked. "Why didn't we see you?"

"There's a training room in the basement. I snuck onto the ship before you raided it and hung out there. Way cheaper and more time efficient than taking the train to a town twenty kilometres away and then biking ten hours up a mountain," he said. The table was silent. "I guess you probably want the whole story. I've been following Cole around since I bumped into him a few days ago." He looked at Cole. "Not to sound like a stalker, but I snuck into Kai and Nya's house while you guys were eating dinner and listened in. When I heard you talking about taking back the Bounty, I biked my way there and hid inside. Great job clearing out the nindroids, by the way."

Kai buried his face in his hands. "I can't believe this," he muttered. "We were duped by a ten year-old."

"I'm fourteen, actually," Lloyd corrected. He shifted in his chair awkwardly. "It's a weird sensation. I've never felt so determined to seem cool in my life. Do all teenagers go through this or is it just me?"

"Oh yeah, you skipped it the first time around, didn't you?" Jay asked. "I wish I could've done that. Being a teenager sucks."

"Going from a kid to a young adult in a matter of minutes isn't exactly my definition of fortunate," Lloyd said. "Actually, not a lot that happened in my first go around was very fortunate. My life sucked. Even if this whole reincarnation thing is pretty confusing, I'm glad to get a second chance. How about you guys? How's it going for you?"

"We don't have our memories," Nya said. She shrugged. "Sometimes, we get flashbacks in our dreams. I don't know if that really counts, though."

Lloyd's face fell. "You don't remember anything? I thought you did for sure after the video you made about the Second Rise. I'm the only one?"

"You're the only one," Cole affirmed. "How long have you remembered?"

"Not my whole life. They started coming when I was eight. It was small things at first, like snapshots
from the past. I thought they were just my imagination. Then they became more frequent. The
snapshots formed full memories. By the time I was ten, I realized that I wasn’t just Lloyd—I was the
green ninja, too.” Lloyd paused. “Do you think I still have my powers?”

Jay leaned back in his chair. “First his memories and now this? If he still has his powers, I’m leaving.
Say goodbye to blue ninja number two forever.”

“Well, I don’t think I do,” Lloyd said. “I’ve tried a few times. I was hoping that Cole would have an
idea.”

“I’ve got nothing,” Cole admitted. “I don’t know what’s going on. Even Zane is confused.”

“Speaking of which, where is he?” Lloyd looked around the table again. “Our favorite nindroid
didn’t feel like coming to see his little bro? I’m hurt.”

Cole tried to speak but choked on his words. “He’s not—he—”

“We don’t know where he is,” Nya butted in. She shot Cole an apologetic look as she spoke. “He
left after we defeated Khan. He’s been missing ever since.”

“Oh. He’ll come back though, right?”

“We don’t know.”

“I’m sure he will. The Zane I know wouldn’t leave his friends for long if he knew they were in
danger.” Lloyd looked over his shoulder, where the waitress was peeking at them from the kitchen
entrance. “I’m hungry. What did you do to scare off the waiter?”

“Not speak Jamani,” Kai replied. “We can’t even read the menu.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I’m here,” Lloyd said with a smile. He beckoned the waitress over to the
table.

When she arrived, Lloyd broke into what Cole assumed was Jamani and spoke to her while pointing
to everyone sitting at the table. She nodded when he finished and then hurried over to the kitchen.
Lloyd turned back to them. The table had fallen silent yet again.

“I’m from here,” he explained. “I also just ordered for all of you.”

“You speak Jamani?” Cole said.

“I only moved to the city when I was ten. It’s been a few years, so my Jamani is a little rusty at times,
but I make do. Did you know all the northern languages in the mountain region are just slightly
different dialects from each other? Makes me pretty valuable. If you ever need someone to deal with
people up north, I’m your guy.”

Lloyd went on to talk about the other towns nearby and Cole stayed quiet, staring at his ancient
friend with an intensity he could feel down to his gut. This is Lloyd, he told himself. But everything
about him felt wrong, and the more he spoke, the more he questioned his friend’s stories. He wasn’t
just a cocky teenager, he was someone with something to prove—with something to hide.

Their meals came and Cole ate food he hadn't touched in centuries. As everyone became too busy
eating to talk, Cole found the quiet he needed to gather his thoughts and throw Lloyd off his game.

Lloyd was taking a sip of water when Cole finally asked the question.
"So, how's your mother doing?"

Lloyd choked on his water. He coughed and hid his mouth behind his hand. "Can we talk about this later?" he whispered urgently. "It's part of something I need to talk to you about later. Alone."

Cole let it go, but talk about it later, they did.

Back on the Bounty, they holed up in Cole's room alone. They sat on the bottom bunk together, at first a little awkwardly. Then whatever façade Lloyd had put on fell and he threw his arms around the older ninja, burying his face in Cole's shoulder and staining his sleeve with tears.

"I'm so glad you're here," Lloyd whispered. "I've been so alone."

Cole rubbed Lloyd's back in smooth, comforting circles. "Hey, it's all right. I'm here now. The others are here, too. I'm sure Zane will be so excited to see you."

Lloyd sniffled. "They don't recognize me. They look at me like they don't even know me."

"They'll get to know you again," Cole whispered. "They're the same people. You just have to do the whole bonding thing a second time."

Lloyd pulled back and rubbed his eyes, clearing away the tears. "You're right. Sorry, I know I'm being a bit of a baby right now. It's just been a long few years."

"You don't have to put on a face for them. If they liked you before, they'll like you now," Cole told him. "But that doesn't matter right now. Tell me about your life, Lloyd. What's going on?"

"You want the whole story, don't you?"

Cole nodded.

Lloyd took in a deep breath. "Okay. I grew up here, in Jamanakai. I never knew my dad. My mom was so kind, and sweet, but she was always tired. Looking back now, I think she was sick. Really sick. When I was eight, I started getting my memories back. I realized I was on some kind of borrowed time, living with a mom that was never supposed to be there for me. I made her promise to stay with me. She said she would, but when I was ten, we went on a trip to the city. She took me to Mega Monster Amusement Park. I think she wanted me to have the best day of my life before she left. I went on this one ride, a really tall roller coaster she said she was too scared to go on. She told me she would wait at the exit. When I got out, she was gone. She never came to pick me up from the missing child centre. She never picked me up from the police station. A few days later, when they realized she was never coming back and I had no family to take me in, they put me into foster care. It's kind of funny. At the age she originally came back into my life, she left. I couldn't even bring myself to be sad about it. I was just disappointed. I guess she was never my real mom, anyways. She was just a placeholder for the real Misako."

"It's weird, the way it works," Cole said. "Kai and Nya's parents pulled a disappearing act, too. I don't think they've seen them in years."

"But that's how it's supposed to be, right?" Lloyd looked to his feet. "They were never supposed to have parents. So why did I get one? Why did I get a mom just so she could be taken away from me? She looked just like my real mom, too. Just younger." Another sniffle. "Fuck. This is awful."

"How are your foster parents?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen them since the first day they took me in."
Cole stared at Lloyd's healing knuckles. "You ran away. Is that why you get into fights?"

"I don't live on the streets, if that's what you're thinking," Lloyd said. "But this is what I wanted to talk to you about. The thing I can only talk to you about alone."

Lloyd turned so his back was to Cole. Slowly, he lowered his hood and lifted the back of his messy, blond hair to reveal the nape of his neck.

There was a tattoo in his skin. The ink depicted a dot centred in a black swirl.

Cole had only seen this pattern in one other place—a drawing of an emblem Ronin sent him and Nya two years ago.


Lloyd pulled his hood back up and faced him again. "They kidnapped me off the street. I was going to fight back, but they started talking about giving me an opportunity to change the world. So, I stuck around to see what was going on. I planned on leaving after a few months and then coming to find you. But it got a little complicated when I met my Handler."

"Your what?" Cole demanded. "Do you have some kind of boss?"

"You may have heard of him after the incident with Jay," Lloyd said. "His name is Feng. He used to be a Handler for new recruits, but he organized a coup and made himself leader. He's training me to be an agent. I only have a year left until I graduate. And he knows who I am."

"He knows you're the green ninja," Cole said. "Lloyd, they tried to kill me. You're not safe there. He's going to target you, too."

"He's not going to kill me," Lloyd said sternly. "I'm too valuable."

"What do you mean?"

"He doesn't know I have my memories. He plans on using me to kill you because he thinks you'll trust me." He put his hands on Cole's shoulders. "I've been undercover for four years. No matter his plans for me, I know enough to take down the whole operation. I know all of their hiding places, their leaders, the people in power they have in their pocket—if we get the ninja back together, we can defeat them. The Second Rise would be history."

"Then who's Feng? What's his real name?"

"You know him, actually. I know him, too. A little too well." As though now afraid someone was listening in, Lloyd leaned to Cole's ear and whispered:

"It's Morro."

That night, Cole laid awake in bed, unable to close his eyes. Morro was the leader of the Second Rise. He had a plan to 'change the world'. And once again, Lloyd was under his control.

The sun was rising through the windows when Cole decided that this was not something he could do alone. He needed another ninja by his side.

He needed Zane.

But Zane was missing, hiding somewhere out in rural Ninjago. Cole didn't know how or where to start looking. Like a real ninja, Zane knew how to disappear. What was once Cole's greatest
advantage was now his greatest enemy.

They brought the Bounty back to the exhibit, where yellow police tape covered the area and the chasm had been filled in with cement. Nya and Kai took off on Nya's motorbike, Lloyd retrieved his bicycle from the bush he'd hidden it in, and Cole and Jay took off on the energy dragon. Lloyd rejected his offer for a lift, claiming that he couldn't be seen with any of the ninja in the city, let alone on a flying dragon.

Up in the clouds, Jay leaned into Cole as he held on. "He must be so athletic. I don't think I could bike for more than ten minutes before I got too tired."

Cole rolled his eyes. "Yeah, we might need to work on that. You can't be a ninja if you lounge around playing Smash all day."

"Hey, you're the one that told me to drop all my jobs for a part-time internship at Borg," Jay protested. "I'm not used to having free time. I don't know what to do with myself anymore."

"You could start training with Nya," Cole offered. "Private lessons with a ninja master, free of charge."

"Actually, that begs another question: where do you find all your free time? Don't you own a store? Shouldn't you be busy all the time?"

"I own a flower store, not a corporation," Cole said with a laugh. "I don't actually do that much. I mostly just struggle to do math."

"It's a wonder what a high-school diploma can get you."

Cole laughed harder. "You think I have a high school diploma?"

"Um, no, I don't. I tutored you for a whole year. You haven't even been back to Western since that whole thing with Khan!"

"After what happened to you, I think I'm going to wait until we deal with the Second Rise before I settle down again," Cole said. "Please forgive me, Mr. Gordon."

"Never call me that again. I'm giving you detention."

As summer turned to autumn, Lloyd and Cole kept in touch over Secure, chatting everyday about what was going on in their lives. Morro liked to check Lloyd's phone frequently, so he made Cole promise to never text first and wait for Lloyd to get in contact before they spoke over the messaging service.

Sometimes, they tried to figure out where to start searching for Zane, but it was hard to think of anywhere to go. Birchwood Forest was too dangerous for anyone to survive in, its average temperature dipping down below negative eighty (-112 fahrenheit) after the climate scare. They weren't sure if even Zane could survive in it. The rest of the island held no significance to him—if he was trying to find himself, where would he go?

On some days, Cole got a peek into Lloyd's life as a Second Rise recruit. His days were jam-packed with learning from dawn until sunset, coupled with weekly heists with the other recruits to practice their skills out in the field. His 'education' was something Cole found a little worrying, but the more he learned of it, the more it seemed to fit. It was the new Darkley's. It was the next piece in Lloyd's puzzle.
His education included fights everyday with the other trainees, although not controlled like normal sparring sessions, so they frequently resulted in scars, bruises, and other injuries all over Lloyd's body. There was no doctor on site so the recruits were left to tend to their injuries.

**matcha_gg**
only got punched once today!

**onyx**
That's definitely one too many.

**matcha_gg**
it was in the arm so does it really count?

**onyx**
Please tell me you didn't come back to life just to stress me out.

**matcha_gg**
im the least stressful one admit it

**onyx**
Really think you can compete with Nya on that one?

**matcha_gg**
nvm i retract my statement

Fighting wasn't all Lloyd learned. While fights were reserved for the afternoon, mornings were for theory. Lloyd learned several subject applicable to his 'field', such as political sciences, psychology, and history. On the eve of a history test, Cole helped him study by recounting the events from his own perspective. Apparently, their history classes were for studying the ninja, the Second Rise's next enemies.

**onyx**
Should I not be going to the flower shop anymore?

**matcha_gg**
i cant believe you still do after they doxxed you

**onyx**
I kind of have to.

**matcha_gg**
i know you need that drip but is it really worth your life

**onyx**
I need what?

**matcha_gg**
youre so old. wu is that you?

Those were the jokes that made him laugh the most. The casual jokes about their past, made by a friend that had gone through it with him. A friend that, despite everything, had come back to life with his memories intact.

In November, Jay and Cole were up late on a Thursday night, re-watching Jay's favourite animated
children's show for the third time. There were snacks and drinks on the coffee table, nearly finished as the season finale came to a close. Jay yawned, stuffed a few chips in his mouth, and then stood up.

"I'm so tired. Goodnight, dude."

"See you tomorrow."

Jay closed the door to his room. Cole began to clean up, bringing the various bowls and plates to the kitchen. He was rinsing them off in the sink when the balcony door opened.

A boy in a familiar green hoodie stumbled inside and collapsed on the floor.

Cole flipped Lloyd onto his back. He was unconscious. His face was slick with blood from a deep cut across his forehead. It caked his neck and the bust of his hoodie. Cole wiped his sleeve across the wound. Blood filled it and continued to spew out again in a matter of seconds.

"Holy shit!" Jay exclaimed. He ran over and knelt beside Cole. "What do we do? Should I call an ambulance?"

"No, we can't let authorities get involved," Cole said. In cases like these, medical issues were deferred to Zane. They didn't have that luxury this time. They would have to go with the next best thing. "Get a towel and put pressure on his wound. We need to do this ourselves."

Jay scrambled to do as he was told. Cole removed Lloyd's sweater and shirt so they could wash them and forced himself not to stare for too long at his sunken stomach and the plethora of scars that decorated his torso. Did he seriously get so many injuries from the daily fights? Was the cut on his forehead the result of a bad spar, or was it from something worse? Was it from Morro?

Cole gave Lloyd a new shirt to wear as they cleaned his wound. They washed it out, wrapped his head with bandages from the first-aid kit, and then moved Lloyd to Jay's bed. They sat on the edge of the bed, watching his bandages and replacing them when the white turned red. The cut stopped bleeding on the fourth replacement, but Cole stayed up anyways, sending Jay to Cole's room and telling him to at least get a few hours of sleep before his class the next morning.

He watched over him all night, and it was only then that Cole realized just how young he looked. Lloyd hadn't quite grown out of his baby fat, so his cheeks were filled in and when he slept, he looked innocent. He didn't look like an ancient ninja reborn. Didn't look like an undercover spy. Didn't look like the criminal Morro wanted him to be.

Jay was awake before Lloyd. Cole heard him shower and then rummage around in the kitchen before he came into the bedroom with a bowl of Cole's favorite cereal in hand.

"If he doesn't wake up by the end of my first class, you better take him to the hospital." Jay gave him the bowl and then stuck his finger in his face. "If this kid falls into a coma, I'm blaming you."

"He'll be fine," Cole assured him.

Jay made him promise to sleep as soon as he could and then left to go to school. As another hour passed, it became hard to keep his eyes open. He tried to play games on his biotech, but even those couldn't keep the exhaustion from turning his thoughts to mush.

He'd resigned himself to grabbing a cup of coffee when Lloyd shifted beside him. His eyes blinked
open, and he stared at the wall with an absent look in his eye that he'd often seen in Jay when he didn't want to wake up for a morning class.

It took a moment for everything to process. After a few moments, Lloyd blinked again, gasped, and then jumped up in bed. His eyes darted around the room until they landed on Cole. Today, they were a bright yellow.

He sighed in relief. "It's only you."

Cole's voice was soft. "Do you remember climbing up my balcony last night?"

"I remember climbing up a balcony and hoping it was yours." Lloyd's hand trailed up to his forehead, where he prodded the bandages with his fingertips. He winced. "Ow. It's pretty bad, huh?"

Cole pushed Lloyd's hand away from his face. "Yeah, and it will only get worse if you touch it. It bled for a really long time. I think you might need stitches."

"We don't really have doctors at the Rise. I'm not allowed to see one in the hospital either." Lloyd shrugged. "It's kind of a 'sink-or-swim' situation over there."

"How did you even get hurt so bad?" Cole asked. "Was it in a fight?"

Lloyd shook his head. "It was my fault. I stepped out of line."

It wasn't hard to figure it out. It made Cole's stomach hurt, thinking about how all the evils from their history had come back to hurt them again. "It was Morro, wasn't it?"

Lloyd stared at the wall with glassy eyes. "He made me a promise. He told me that if I could stay with the Second Rise until graduation, he would help me find him. I know I shouldn't trust him, I know he's just using me, but I can't let go of the possibility." He turned to him. His eyes were filled with tears, but there was hope in them, too. "What if he's out there? What if I can see him again?"

"What if who's out there? What are you talking about?"

He smiled sadly. "Isn't it obvious? He's going to help me find my dad."

Lloyd told him the story as Cole changed his bandages one last time. The previous night, he was on a mission alone with Morro, keeping lookout as the elder broke into an apartment to deal with someone that had been interfering in the Second Rise's business. On the walk back to the Rise's current compound, he asked Morro if they were going to start searching for his father soon. But Morro wasn't in a good mood, so he took a blade out of his belt and suddenly Lloyd couldn't see and when he wiped the blood away from his eyes, Morro was gone. Lloyd was abandoned in a neighbourhood he hadn't explored enough to navigate on his own, so when he got out onto a main road, he made his way to the only place he knew he would feel safe: Cole's apartment.

Cole tied the bandage to the back of Lloyd's head. Anger swelled in his heart. He was angry with Morro for hurting him, angry with Misako for failing her son a second time, but most of all, he was angry with the universe for putting the green ninja down the path of abuse once again.

The rest of the morning was spent trying to convince Lloyd to abandon his mission, but his mind was set. First, he would use the Second Rise to reconnect with his father. Then he would destroy them. He didn't seem too interested in listening to Cole's words when he told him nothing was ever that simple.

After Cole forced him to eat lunch—he was a little too skinny and he had a feeling the Second Rise
didn't treat their trainees as a priority—Lloyd went on his way, thanking Cole for the help before he disappeared through the front door. In his absence, Cole felt sleep tug on him, and he realized he hadn't slept for more than twenty-four hours.

He put on his pyjamas and crawled into his bed. As the jaws of sleep dragged him under, he made himself a promise that he hoped to remember when he woke up later in the day:

*I'm going to find Garmadon. And I'm going to do it with Zane.*

---

*onyx has opened a new chatroom!*

**secure_bot**
Welcome to Secure, Ninjago's safest messaging service! Your messages will remain on our isolated, closed-circuit servers, keeping you safe from government surveillance and private tracking. Remember to donate to ensure that your communications remain private! Safe chatting!

*onyx*
I have a question. Rhetorical. Not related to anything going on IRL at all.

*onyx*
Do you have any kind of suit or something made for really cold temperatures?

*mer*
You're going to Birchwood?

*onyx*
Maybe.

*mer*
Is this about Zane? We don't even know if he could survive there and I can't send you into -80 temperatures in good conscience. That's not "ow, my toes are freezing" cold. That's "ow, my body hurts because I'm dying" cold.

*onyx*
He couldn't have gone anywhere else. I need to go find him. He would do the same thing for any of us.

*mer*
Pull on my heartstrings a little more, why don't you? Geez.

*mer*
I'll see what I can do.

It was early December when Nya got something arranged. They met at the top of Borg Tower, in Nya's grand office with a view of the whole city. The last time Cole had seen it, he had just returned from facing off with Khan. The office had been a mess, likely used as a battleground where Kai, Nya, and Zane defended themselves from hordes of Nindroids.

Now, it was clean and proper. Against the right wall was a large, white suit that looked like it belonged to an astronaut. Nya brought him over to it and grinned.

"This, my good friend, is Ninjago's most powerful snowsuit," she began. She reached behind the suit and clicked something. The chest of the suit began to glow an ambient orange. "This is the power core. It heats the inside of the suit, keeping you warm and toasty. It also has a battery life of two
weeks, so unless you get lost, there's no need to worry about turning into a popsicle."

Cole grinned, too. He pulled her into a tight hug. "Thank you so much," he said. "This is perfect."

She squeezed back and pushed him away. "That's not all. A couple of nindroids will be transporting you to the barrier, where they'll wait until you get back. You'll have a comm link with them, so if there's any trouble, they'll issue an alert to us and we'll come get you."

"When do we leave?"

"How's tomorrow?"

Cole sat in silence in the back of an armoured truck as they turned off the highway and headed towards forbidden territory. Birchwood Forest had plummeted into uninhabitable temperatures after the climate crisis. It became colder towards its core, where even animals adapted for cold climates could no longer survive. Satellite footage revealed that the Treehorns may have persisted all these years, but they couldn't be sure. The trees were frozen in place, it never snowed, and mankind hadn't attempted an expedition there for decades. It was too dangerous.

The core was Cole's destination. Hidden away in a thick tree trunk in the core's centre was Zane's old home. He didn't even know if he would find Zane there, but if the ninja of ice had gone anywhere to hide, he would go back to the place he first begun. Even if it could kill him.

The barrier was even bigger up close. The walls were thirty metres high and made of solid steel that not even an expert climber like Cole could ascend. The only way in was through one entrance along the southern wall kept shut by a lock mechanism that only a nindroid could open.

There was a large compound connected to the entrance. The truck pulled inside and the door shut behind them. Cole moved to get out of the truck, but one of the nindroid sitting in the back with him told him to wait. Under official procedure, they had to wait an extra ten minutes after the door closed before they could enter the compound. Cole grumbled, eager to move on, but followed instructions and waited inside the truck until they told him he could leave.

Outside the truck, the nindroids warned him to keep in contact and gave him directions to the core. It wasn't a hard concept to grasp: all he had to do was keep going forward.

Cole stepped into a separate room made of glass. The nindroids shut the door behind him. He heard it hiss, trapping the air inside as it locked. He nodded to the nindroids once and looked forward, staring at the door. It wasn't very big, only a little larger than the one to his apartment.

An alarm rang out around him. Red lights flashed all over the room. The door opened.

The snow crunched beneath his feet as he stepped outside. Behind him, the door shut and locked. He took a deep breath and looked at the trees before him, each and every one identical in the frozen forest. He looked above him. The sky was clear. As long as he could see the sun, he could find north. But for now, he didn't need to worry about direction. He just had to keep going to straight.

A few steps in, he made the mistake of looking down. He clamped his mouth shut to keep himself from throwing up.

Bodies. Hundreds of them. Most of them kids and teenagers, frozen to the bone in their thin clothing. A girl was face-down close to him. Between her parted hair, in the nape of her neck, was a Second Rise tattoo.

*Sink or swim*, Lloyd had said. Is this what happened to the children that didn't make it?
With the nindroids under Khan's control, the Second Rise would've had unrestricted access to Birchwood Forest. Did Lloyd know about this? Were the trainees he defeated sent here? Had he received his forehead wound in a fight, would he have been sent here to die?

"Is there a problem?" a nindroid asked through the comm.

"Send Nya a log of all the times this door has been opened for the past ten years," Cole said. "I think Khan used this place as some kind of death chamber."

"Noted."

The comm unit went silent and Cole continued on his way.

The bodies disappeared a few kilometres in. The barrier was no longer visible through the trees. With no recent check-ins from the nindroids, Cole felt utterly, almost hopelessly alone. As he walked, he made sure to check the sun, watching it set to the west to keep himself oriented towards the north. The last thing he needed was to get lost.

At nightfall, he stumbled across footprints. They appeared human, but in this case, Cole was sure they belonged to a nindroid.

"Found Zane's footprints," Cole reported in. "Looks like he went home."

"Keep in touch."

He followed the footsteps through a clearing and into a dense patch of forest. The trees were close together, so much so that Cole had to climb his way through them. He stopped for a rest near a trunk, learning against it as he took a long-needed break. Maybe he could sleep here. The suit would keep him warm through the night, and in temperatures as cold as this, snow wouldn't fall to cover the tracks.

He was about lay down when the trunk moved.

He jumped to the side and looked back. The trunk was no longer there. Then he looked up.

The base of the trunk was coming straight towards his face from the sky.

He rolled out of the way. Looking up, he realized that the trunk wasn't moving on its own. It was connected to a body.

It was a Treehorn.

Another leg came down towards him. He jumped out of the way. More legs came towards him. He did his best to evade, but he nearly fell over when his back hit a tree and it was all the time the Treehorn needed to send a leg straight into his chest.

Cole flew until he hit a tree. He fell to the ground and groaned, his chest aching from the attack. He stayed still to catch his breath, watching the Treehorn out of the corner of his eye. It wasn't approaching him. It seemed to stand still, watching from a distance. Cole didn't budge. He wondered if it assumed he was dead.

A few minutes later, it turned around and went back into the trees. When he felt safe again, he slowly sat up and noticed something was missing.

The orange glow in his chest had disappeared.
"I have a problem with my power core," Cole said into his comm. "I think it died."

No response.

"Hello? Are you guys still there?"

Still, nothing.

He tried his biotech but there was no signal to be attained in the middle of a deadzone.

He was alone. Alone, in a forest where humans were sent to die, with nothing but a broken suit to protect him from the elements.

He took deep breaths, in and out every four seconds like Zane had taught him. Even with death around the corner, he forced himself to think. For the suit to work, it had to have some form of heat retention. Even with a dead core, the suit would keep him warm enough to keep going for a few hours. He just had to make it last. Dr. Julien's lab couldn't be too far away.

He stood up. Instead of walking, he broke into a jog. He located Zane's footprints and kept going, moving past where the Treehorn had attacked him and praying no others awaited him on his journey. He couldn't afford to slow down to avoid one—or, with his luck, be attacked by one again.

It was smooth sailing until the cold began to seep into his suit. First, it got to his hands, then to his feet, and then to his face. It was numbing in a way that was painful, like a million needles sticking into his skin at once. Moving around helped until it began to barely make a difference and he wasn't sure his legs were even working anymore.

In hindsight, sitting down to give his frozen feet a break was probably a bad idea. Leaning against a tree trunk, he struggled to find the will to get up again. He knew what giving up felt like. This was it.

Then it started to get hot. Very, very hot. It was suffocating. He knew what this was—the final symptom of hypothermia. But it didn't seem to matter. He fumbled in his suit as he tried to find the zipper, desperate to release some of the heat and cool himself down.

His uncooperative fingers finally found a zipper near his neck. Pulling it down, he felt a rush of cold air flow in, relieving yet painful at the same time. He went to pull it down farther when something sharp pricked his neck. He touched it with his finger and pulled his hand back to stare at it. A small dot of blood was on his glove.

The world blurred, turned black, and then disappeared as he fell onto his side.

***

Cole opened his eyes to a metal face looking down on him.

He yelped and tried to move, but a hand pushed down on his chest and forced him back into place.

"Do not move," Zane commanded him. Cole followed him with his eyes as he made his way around the lab. Inside the small kitchen, Zane poured a cup of hot water from a kettle and then brought it over. He put it on a small table a few inches from Cole's head. "Drink this when you are ready. But do it quickly. It must be warm."

Cole moved to wriggle his arm out of the blankets and winced. His skin felt raw, like it did when he caught a fever. He elected to sit still and leave the cup alone until he felt better.
He looked to Zane. "Did you tranq me?"

"I did what I had to do."

"Well, you saved me. Thanks."

If there was an emotion Cole expected to read on Zane's face, it wasn't anger. Zane took a spool of wire off a table and threw it against a shelf. A box of tools fell to the floor. It burst on impact and its contents scattered all over the floor.

"Sometimes, you make me fear that you've forgotten you're not immortal," Zane hissed. Standing in the middle of the abandoned workshop, he looked alone. Cole wondered how lonely it must have been, living here for a year on his own. "Why did you come for me? Why did you not wait until I had returned?"

Cole braced himself and then sat up in bed. Zane moved to him but Cole put his hand up, forcing him to stop. "No. Don't mother me right now. We need to talk."

"You suffered moderate hypothermia," Zane pleaded. "You need to stay warm."

In response, Cole pulled the blankets up so they draped over his shoulders. "See? Covered."

Zane crossed his arms. "This is the problem. You're supposed to be the rational one, the ninja I can trust to think things through, but it seems you have thrown this away. What is going on? Why are you keeping secrets from me? Why are you running around in Serpentine tombs, confronting biotech dealers, and fighting the puppets of nefarious organizations? I don't understand what has gotten into you."

"I'm doing it for my friends. It's the same reason I came for you," Cole said. "Is it wrong to want to protect the people I love?"

"No. But we made a pact. Do you not remember?"

He did. He remembered the time after Lloyd's death, when he finished isolating himself and had energy again. He rode the skytrain every morning with no destination in mind. He watched the stops go by, failing to muster the courage to get off as each one came and went. He would ride to the end of the line and back without ever leaving the train. It took three months for him to realize that it was never going to happen.

On the last ride, he got off at his stop and looked over the edge of the platform. The city streets were hundreds of feet below him, and he wondered why he ever thought he could do it in the first place. It would have seemed silly if he wasn't so scared.

That's when they made the pact. That night, Cole and Zane held hands and promised each other that they would never, ever die as long as they could help it. No matter what, they would never abandon each other. They were going to be brothers for life. Neither of them would ever need to fear being alone again.

As he thought back, he felt guilt build inside of him. He knew how much the idea of his death terrified Zane. And now, he has almost died again.

"I'm sorry. I'm not trying to die," Cole said quietly. "I just want you to come back. There's a lot going on. I don't want to do it alone."

Zane sat on the edge of the bed. He lifted the cup and put it to Cole's lips to make him drink it. He
felt his insides warm but he didn't know if it was the warm water or the embarrassment of his friend taking care of him like this. "I do not want you to die. Nothing scares me more than living without you."

Cole swallowed. "Come back to the city. We can do everything together. Protect each other."

"I do not want to be taken advantage of again. What if the Second Rise uses me against you?"

"Do you remember when Lloyd was a kid and working with the Hypnobrai?" Cole asked. Zane nodded. "Do you remember when they hypnotized me and tried to get me to kill everyone? Do you remember when PIXAL was corrupted but you saved her and trusted her anyways?"

Zane's put his hand to his own chest. "She is still with me."

"We've had long lives, Zane. You'll have to do a lot more than keep me prisoner for me to stop trusting you. I promise."

Zane looked away. His eyes glazed over as he stared at nothing in particular. "Is it mean of me to say that I wish none of this had ever happened? I'm happy they're back, but they have brought old enemies with them. Look at what it's done to us. Never in a million years did I think we would return to this place."

"It's a little depressing," Cole admitted. He winced and bit his tongue in pain as he removed his right arm from the blankets and placed his hand on Zane's. "But we've never been able to avoid trouble. It's just part of life."

He gave Cole's hand a squeeze. "It's unfair."

Cole squeezed back. "It is. But it doesn't have to be this way forever. Let's make another pact."

Zane looked back to him. "Like what?"

"This is our last bad guy. After the Second Rise, we'll retire. No more fighting evil. No more worrying about dying. No more being Ninja. Let's move out to the countryside and live the rest of our lives in peace."

Zane smiled. "I like this idea."

Then he leaned forward and crushed Cole with a tight hug. It sent waves of pain through his body, but Cole let the blanket fall off his shoulders and hugged him back anyways.

In each other's arms, he felt whatever tension had grown between them melt away. Soon, they would finally be able to live a life with no worries. They just had to defeat Morro a second time to get there.

Oh, right.

"Zane, I have something to tell you. It's about Lloyd."

And then he told him everything.

Cole stayed under the blanket for the rest of the day to let his body heal. Zane worked on his suit, playing around with it until he jump-started the power core and got it working again. He used it to make contact with the nindroids—who were freaking out on Nya's behalf—and promise them that Cole was safe. By the end of the day, Cole felt ready to go home, but Zane made him stay in bed for another three days to make sure he was fully healed.
On the fourth day, Cole put his suit back on and ventured out into the cold with Zane. They found the nearest clearing, summoned Zane's ice dragon, and then flew the rest of the way to the barrier. Inside the compound, Nya and a squad of nindroids awaited them. After they entered the barrier door and waited in the glass room for ten minutes, they were able to leave and enter the main area of the compound.

Nya walked over to Cole. She took off his helmet, put a hand on his cheek, and said softly, "I fucking hate you."

They broke into laughter, removed the rest of Cole's suit, and then boarded the armoured trucks to go back to the city.

Back at his apartment, Cole and Zane began what they knew was going to be a long, arduous process: locating Garmadon.

It began with questions. Was he evil? With the Devourer defeated, would Garmadon be good in this life? If so, where would they find him? Where would they find him if he was evil? Was he in the city? Somewhere in the countryside? How did they even start to figure out Lord, or perhaps Sensei, Garmadon?

The next day, they huddled around Nya's computer in her office, watching as the Borg archives failed to pull up anything related to the new Garmadon. She tried several times, but no matter what she did, nothing happened.

"I guess this will only work for Jay," she said, her voice apologetic. "Sorry."

"Perhaps we shouldn't start with Garmadon," Zane suggested. "What if we started with someone else? Someone who knows him."

"Like who?" Cole asked.

"Misako."

Nya looked over her shoulder to Zane. "That's Lloyd's mom, right?"

"If you can even call her that," Cole mumbled. Zane elbowed him and shot him a warning look.

Nya shrugged and typed into her laptop again. This time, they searched for Misako. Results popped up in a matter of minutes.

They weren't pretty.

Four years ago, Misako Garmadon was admitted to Ninjago City Hospital after tests revealed that she suffered from a terminal illness. From a hospital bed, she gave up custody of her son, paid to have him scrubbed from her records, and then planned on spending her last years alone in the hospital.

But she was still alive, so as Cole and Zane boarded the skytrain to go to the hospital, she would have to get used to not being alone for a few hours.

A familiar face smiled at them when they entered the emergency ward.

"Welcome back, Cole!" Naomi's hair was as well-kept as ever. Her perfectly manicured nails shone in the light. "Where's your wife?"
Zane stared blankly at her. "His what?"

Cole nudged Zane to get him to shut up. "She's not here. I need to see someone else. Can you help me?"


She took them through the hospital, guiding them through halls and wings as she tracked down the patient they were here to see. Cole forced himself to stare straight. Peeking into rooms and seeing people sick in beds did nothing but make his stomach hurt.

They stopped in front of a door. "Here she is," Naomi said. "Only close family is supposed to see her, so don't take too long. You'll get me in trouble if someone else finds you in there."

Cole and Zane thanked her. They opened the door and stepped inside.

If anything had stayed the same, it was Misako's beauty. Her greying, auburn hair fell in waves to her shoulders, and her grey eyes were soft and warm when she turned to look at them. But the rest of her was lifeless. Her skin was pale and sickly, arms that rested over the blankets skinny and frail. Cole had seen people like this before. She was at the end of her lifespan. She was dying.

"You're not doctors," Misako remarked. "Who are you?"

"Friends of your son," Cole replied.

"Aren't you a little old to be his friends?"

Zane stepped forward. "Lloyd is in danger."

Misako shut her eyes and rested her head against the pillow. "Of course, he is." She took in a deep breath. "I love him. I love him with my heart, with my head, with every bone in my body. But do not speak to me about him. I left him for a reason and I just want to forget."

"Then let's not talk about Lloyd," Cole said. "Can you tell me about his dad?"

She laughed airily. "He's not a good person. You don't want to know about him."

"Why?"

"He's inspirational. His words, they just... they suck you in. He makes you think you're walking into the light as he leads you into the void. When I met him, he always talked about wanting to change the world. He hated Borg, hated the government, hated society—he wanted to get rid of it all." She opened her eyes and looked out the window. "Don't get me wrong. That's not what made him bad. It was everything else about him."

"You're not answering my question," Cole said sternly. "Who is he?"

"A monster. What kind of man do you have to be to kill your own brother?"

Wu.

"Where can we find him?"

"If nothing has changed, Ninjago City. He runs a gang there."

This was all they needed. They thanked her and moved to leave, but she spoke to them, first.
"Does Lloyd know I'm here?"

"No," Zane said.

"Then do you think you could do me a favor? Please don't tell him I'm here. I don't want him to see me like this."

Cole wanted to refuse, but then he remembered seeing his friends in hospital beds and wondered if it was wrong to keep this a secret from Lloyd. This wasn't the real Misako. She was just a person put into his life to emulate the loss of someone meant to love him. What would her death do but cause unnecessary pain?

But even if she was just a pawn, she was still a person. She was someone that had lived a long life and was watching it come to an end.

Maybe keeping this a secret from Lloyd was wrong. But respecting someone's final wishes was right.

"You have my word," Cole said, and then they left Misako behind forever.

That night, Zane stayed over at Cole's for dinner to talk about their plan to track down Garmadon and made Jay's favorite meal again. Jay was hiding away in his room to study all night, but thanked Zane a dozen times when he got his bowl and then disappeared into his room again, never to be seen again until morning.

They talked as they ate their food. Cole wanted to ask Ronin to help them find Garmadon. Zane wanted to stop collaborating with criminals and instead do the hunting on their own. Their conversation was on the verge of turning into an ethical debate when there was a knock on their balcony door.

It was Lloyd. When he caught their attention, he opened the door and leaped inside. He carelessly knocked over a chair as he bound forward and threw his arms around Zane.

"I can't believe you're back," he said as he pulled back and rested his hands on Zane's shoulders. "I had no idea." He turned his head to send Cole an unimpressed look. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"We've been busy," Cole replied. Lloyd shrugged and then hugged Zane again.

A minute later, he let go and began to laugh. "You seriously haven't changed. Cole has new hair, but you're the same. Didn't think to change it up a little?"

"It's hard to change titanium. And you have not changed, either." Zane leaned forward and analyzed Lloyd's eyes. "Although, your eyes have changed color. They used to be green. Are they black because you no longer have powers?"

"I like to wear colored contacts." Lloyd ran a hand through his hair. "I used to dye my hair a lot too, but I damaged it pretty bad and had to chop it all off. I'm just letting it grow out again."

"I find it hard to imagine you without blond hair," Zane said.

"Now that I'm used to the blond again, me too. I don't think I'll dye it again anytime soon."

The happiness in Zane's smile was so infectious that Cole found himself smiling, too. With all three of them here, all three ninja with their memories, he felt like he was home again. There was no pain, no fear of losing them again. There was just warmth and comfort and Cole looked forward to
spending the rest of this lifetime with his friends.

Lloyd's stomach grumbled loudly and brought the moment to a close. He placed a hand to his stomach and winced.

Zane stopped smiling and looked down at Lloyd's stomach with concern. "Are you all right?"

"No, not really," Lloyd admitted. "I haven't been winning any fights lately. I'm on the brink of being kicked out and Morro is mad because I'm embarrassing him. He's keeping a close eye on me now and I'm only here because I snuck out and I know he's going to be so mad when he finds out, but he hasn't let me eat in three days and my stomach hurts and I almost passed out climbing up here but I have more fights tomorrow that I won't win and I don't know what to do."

Lloyd spoke quickly, and by the end, he was struggling to catch his breath. Zane was on his feet in an instant, moving to the kitchen to get Lloyd a bowl of Jay's favorite dish, but Cole was stuck in his chair. He couldn't move. He wondered if it was selfish to hear this story and think of himself, of his father that took his dance training too seriously and always told him no, you can't eat that and wouldn't let him eat breakfast if the number on the scale was too high.

Lloyd's stomach grumbled again and it was too much.

"You need to leave," Cole snapped. "You can't stay there."

"It's not that easy," Lloyd told him. "He'd come find me. He'd bring me back and punish me again, and then I'd really be in for it because if there's anything he hates more than weakness, it's disloyalty. He'd kill me. I know he would. He'd kill me, and then I would have wasted my life putting up with it all because I'd never get to defeat the Second Rise or become friends with everyone again or finally live with my dad."

"We'd protect you. We wouldn't let him get anywhere near you."

"I won't be there for much longer. I just need to graduate. Then Morro will help me find my dad and we can take down the Second Rise." Zane arrived with his bowl and Lloyd took a few bites before speaking again. "I know you're worried about me. But I can handle it. I'm the green ninja, right?"

"You haven't eaten in three days because Morro won't let you. You almost died climbing up to our balcony. Should I not be worried?"

Lloyd lifted up his bowl for Cole to see. "Yeah, but I'm eating now. Look, I know you don't want me in the Second Rise, but if you help me, I won't have to do it alone. I didn't come up here just to ask for food. I need you to do something else for me."

"What?"

Lloyd took another bite and spoke through the food in his mouth. "I need you to teach me to fight. I remember how to do all the ninja stuff in theory, but it's a little hard to replicate it when I've never actually done it before. If I can get good at fighting again, I can graduate early. You just need to teach me."

Cole was about to accept when he came up with a better idea. If Lloyd wanted to bond with his friends, now was the perfect opportunity to let him spend time with his adopted older brother again.

"I won't teach you. But I know someone as good as me that will gladly do it."

As expected, when Cole offered Kai the opportunity to train the green ninja reincarnate, he accepted
without hesitation. But before they could begin, Lloyd had to get back on Morro's good graces so he could start leaving the compound on his own time again.

It took a few days for him to get his strength back. Zane and Cole packed him a bag full of energy bars, crackers, and other easy-to-hide foods to help him keep up his energy during his fights. On his fourth day back, he took down one of his opponents and Morro allowed him to start eating at the compound again. By the end of the week, he was able to win more matches and Morro gave him permission to leave the compound in his free time.

Kai and Lloyd trained at night in Kai's dojo. Cole sat in on their first few lessons, watching Kai go through the basics of the ninja fighting style with Lloyd until he felt comfortable enough to start sparring with him. They spent a lot of time on warm ups and exercise, building up Lloyd's strength and stamina so he could fight for long periods of time without growing too tired.

Cole watched with fascination. He'd never done exercises when he'd taught Kai, only stretches so he wouldn't pull a muscle. Kai was a good teacher. It was no wonder why all of his students made it to nationals every year.

After their first week training, Cole stopped attending their practices so they could spend their time alone. Kai kept him updated over Secure, sometimes going over what they had done that night, and sometimes asking questions about something Lloyd had said because the green ninja found it hard to talk to a version of Kai with no memories and kept making references to things that had happened thousands of years ago.

-kfire has opened a new chatroom!-

**kfire**
hey quick question

**onyx**
Yeah?

**kfire**
who the fuck is dareth

-kfire has opened a new chatroom!-

**kfire**
borg was a real person?

-kfire has opened a new chatroom!-

**kfire**
wait you and jay once fought over nya?

**kfire**
(gun emoji)

**onyx**
I don't like to talk about it.

**onyx**
Also did you just type "gun emoji"?
kfire
secure doesn't do emojis okay

-kfire has opened a new chatroom!-

kfire
this kid is depressing

kfire
like all 14 yr olds are depressed weirdos i know this from working with them

kfire
but i ruffled his hair and he started crying

kfire
911 hello what do i do?

-kfire has opened a new chatroom!-

kfire
did he cry this much the first time around

kfire
he tried to apologize for crying yesterday but then he just started crying again

kfire
i'm pretty good at dealing with kids but idk what to do

onyx
i definitely remember him being upset, but crying all the time, not so much.

kfire
just saddle me with your emotional ex-teammate why don't you

kfire
smh

-kfire opened a new chatroom!-

kfire
k so i figured it out

kfire
this kid has the biggest sweet tooth ive ever fkn seen im not joking

kfire
i stocked up at the candy store

kfire
now whenever he gets sad we stop training and i let him eat candy and watch videos on my phone

kfire
he really likes watching videos of these lizards i forget what they're called
kfire
idk what kind of kid wants a lizard pet instead of a dog but thats not my business

kfire
when hes feeling better sometimes we train and sometimes we just hang out

kfire
he usually stays pretty late into the night

kfire
he never seems very excited to go home

-kfire has opened a new chatroom!-

kfire
i want a lizard now wtf

A month into their training, Lloyd was close to being top of his class. The extra help gave him an edge in the daily fights, even against opponents stronger than him that usually beat him without contest. But now, Lloyd could block their attacks and use their own weight against them. He could dodge blows and deliver them and keep fighting long after his opponents tired out.

It made Kai especially proud.

kfire
i think lloyd is the best student ive ever had

kfire
no joke hes scary

kfire
hes learning faster than i ever did

onyx
Well, he's the green ninja. He's always been a little overpowered. You get used to it.

kfire
oh okay

kfire
even if hes using hacks or whatever im still pretty proud

kfire
wow this is a weird feeling

kfire
should i have kids???

onyx
How old are you again?

kfire
24
Oh, wow. Sometimes I forget that you're not nineteen anymore.

lol me too its okay

idk tho i kinda want to adopt or something

lloyd keeps telling me about these others kids in the second rise and it makes me wonder what would have happened to me and nya if our parents weren't well off enough to support us when they disappeared all the time

i mean they obviously dont give us money anymore and nya and i pay all the bills for the house and stuff and we were thinking of claiming the house as abandoned and getting the bank to give it to us

but anyways every time lloyd talks to me about his life i always think about how that couldve been me you know. it couldve been nya too

maybe i just wanna help other kids like me

Do you think you're ready to raise a kid?

um ive already raised a kid

shes the chief of security at borg and top of her class at university maybe you've heard of her

Good point.

gottem

anyways ill keep you up to speed ttyl

Lloyd was ranked second in his class by the time February rolled around. He came over to Cole's for dinner every other night, but most of the time he was at Kai's house, spending his free time with the fire ninja. It made Cole happy, thinking of how they'd reconnected again. He'd almost forgotten how close they used to be.

Come mid-February, Lloyd was competing for the top spot in his class and Zane finally gave Cole permission to ask Ronin for help in their search for Garmadon.

-onyx has opened a new chatroom!-
Welcome to Secure, Ninjago's safest messaging service! Your messages will remain on our isolated, closed-circuit servers, keeping you safe from government surveillance and private tracking. Remember to donate to ensure that your communications remain private! Safe chatting!

**ronin**
Are you messaging me to apologize to my landlord

**onyx**
What?

**ronin**
I'm not pinning blame or anything but three balconies were destroyed after you kicked me out that one day

**ronin**
My rent increased by like 15% to pay for it I hate you

**onyx**
Oh. Sorry.

**ronin**
No you're not. Anyways what do you want

**onyx**
You've been in the underground for a long time, right? Would you be able to tell me about a guy that runs a gang?

**ronin**
Are you trying to get me shot? These aren't forgiving people. They will actually shoot me. My death will be on your conscience black ninja. Do you want that

**onyx**
How many more balconies do I need to destroy for you to help me?

**ronin**
I can always move

**onyx**
My balcony-destroying services are not exclusive to your current residence.

**ronin**
Oh no. Borg help me! I'm being extorted by the black ninja, your honorable hero

**ronin**
How would Nya feel if she saw these messages

**ronin**
Consider yourself screenshotted

**onyx**
You can't screenshot a Secure chat.

**ronin**
That's what they want you to think

onyx
Can you please just help me?

ronin
Fine who is it

onyx
Garmadon.

-ronin has left the chatroom!-

-ronin has opened a new chatroom!-

ronin
Memorial Way, lot #2302719485

-ronin has left the chatroom!-

Cole took the trip there by himself. He knew which road this was. He'd been here many times before.

Memorial Way was one of the oldest streets in Ninjago. Thousands of years ago, when the first humans began to die, they sought somewhere to bury their dead. They found a clearing outside of the first village and created the first cemetery, a place where most Ninjago citizens have been buried ever since.

It was no longer a clearing. Now, it was a forest where trees grew high and tombstones poked out from tall grass and wildflowers, a place of life among the dead. Cole walked among the tombstones, reading the names that identified the dead and the numbers that identified the lot in which they were buried. He was close to the outskirts, to the most recently-buried in Ninjago's history. He would find it soon. He was only a few lots away from lot 2302719485.

And then he found it.

There was a burial taking place nearby. A family dressed in black bowed their heads and said goodbye to a loved one for the last time. Their voices were muffled in his ears. The world didn't seem very real right now.

The gravestone of lot 2302719485 read:

A poet, activist, and leader
Your ideas rose to the skies
So whenever we look up to the stars
We believe there will always be a second rise

He walked through the forest, heading towards the city as he texted Lloyd over and over again, breaking their rule of letting him text first because this was so important he didn't care if Morro was looking over his shoulder.
onyx
Lloyd we need to talk PLEASE message me.

onyx
I was just at Memorial Way and there's something you REALLY need to know.

onyx
Where are you? Please get back to me.

A few kilometres away, Lloyd finally messaged back.

matcha_gg
thanks for not texting first i really appreciate it

matcha_gg
fortunately for u im alone rn

matcha_gg
whats so important

onyx
It's about your dad.

matcha_gg
oh

matcha_gg
meet at your place in an hour?

onyx
Okay.

-matcha_gg has left the chatroom!-

He took the skytrain back home. On the way, he stared out the window, stomach in knots as he thought of how he was going to break this news to Lloyd. Should he invite Kai? Would having him there make this easier on him?

No. It had to be Cole. It had to be a ninja who remembered the person Garmadon used to be.

In the elevator up to his floor, he was relieved to remember that Jay was in a class. He wanted them to be alone. He wanted to be able to sit Lloyd down on the couch, give him a hug, and explain the situation.

He opened the door to his apartment. He could feel a draft, like a window was open. It raised an instinct in him, one adopted by spending so many years as a ninja.

He knew he wasn't alone.

He wandered into the living room and froze in place.

Lloyd sat on the couch, hands resting firmly on his shaking knees. His eyes, finally green again, were wide in fear. Tears streamed down his cheeks.
Behind him, holding the barrel of a gun to Lloyd's head, was a man with straight black hair and blotches of black paint around his eyes.

Morro.

"Hello, black ninja," Morro said. His free hand stroked Lloyd's hair. A malicious grin stretched his face. "This is a nice place. Does the blue ninja live with you? Did you forgive him for trying to kill you?"

"You tried to kill me. The blue ninja had nothing to do with it." Cole kept his voice steady. Slowly, he raised his hands in the air in surrender. "Let's be calm here, Morro. You don't need to hurt Lloyd. Let's just talk this through."

Morro's free hand trailed down and cupped the side of Lloyd's face. "But he's like a son to me. You can't take him away."

His hand reached the underside of his chin and Lloyd flinched. He shut his eyes and he clenched his fists as Morro took his hand away. He rested it back on the top of Lloyd's head.

"Look at what you've done, black ninja," Morro said. "You're pulling little Lloyd away from me. I think he likes you better." He sighed dramatically. "You should have been more careful. If I hadn't caught you texting now, who knows what would have happened."

"What do you want with him?" Cole demanded. "He's powerless. He can't help you."

"He has his memories, doesn't he?"

Cole narrowed his eyes. "Those only go so far."

And then Morro laughed.

He leaned in close to where the barrel of the gun met Lloyd's temple. "Isn't this funny? You've convinced him so well. I'm almost proud."

"Convinced me?"

Morro stood up straight again. With a laugh, he said, "Oh, I thought it was obvious by now. Lloyd isn't the one that remembers."

He moved his gun to point at Cole.

"I am."

Lloyd was lying about his memories all this time. It was planned, orchestrated to make Cole and Zane believe he actually remembered his times as a ninja.

But all along he was just a normal boy with the green ninja's face.

"Don't look so down, black ninja. At least you succeeded at something." Morro tucked Lloyd's hair behind his ears. "He saw your messages. I have no choice but to tell him now. Would you like to do the honors?"

"The honors for what?"

"Why don't you tell him what you saw on Memorial Way?"
Lloyd opened his eyes. He looked at Cole with such terror that he couldn't open his mouth to begin uttering the words until Morro clicked his gun and gestured for Cole to continue.

"Lloyd, I—" he choked on his words and wiped the tears from his eyes "—I went to Memorial Way today. Do you know what that is?"

Lloyd only nodded.

"I found a tombstone. It—it had your father's name on it." Cole wiped tears from his eyes again and tried to force himself to breathe but he couldn't. He couldn't breathe. Not when he could see the realization dawning on Lloyd, his head dipping as his fists began to tremble and his sobs grew louder.

Morro smiled sickly and motioned once again for Cole to keep going.

Cole swallowed past a lump in his throat.

"Your dad, he's—he's dead."

Lloyd wailed but was silenced when Morro slapped a hand over his mouth and pulled his head back up. Lloyd's eyes met Cole's. There wasn't only sadness in them. Cole could see hate, and disbelief, and anger. He'd seen these eyes once before, thousands of years ago when Lloyd was still powerful and not just a kid and couldn't handle the idea that his father was going to sacrifice himself to save the world.

"I never gave you permission to speak," Morro hissed. Lloyd flinched again. "Stay quiet while the adults are talking."

"Are you going to kill me now?" Cole asked. His voice, shaky and filled with emotion, made him sound weak. But he didn't care. "Isn't that what you came here to do?"

"I planned to," Morro said. He shrugged. "But I don't really want to anymore."

"Why not?"

"The Second Rise isn't evil. You may not like our methods, but given time, I think you'll like our purpose."

Morro pulled Lloyd to his feet. He repositioned the barrel of the gun so it pushed against Lloyd's right temple again.

"You've got a whole lot of empathy in you, black ninja. I used to think you were just like everyone else. But watching you break all the rules to rescue Jay . . . it was inspiring. It made me pretty happy that Jay had failed, because now I know that one of the most powerful people in the world isn't my enemy."

Morro dragged Lloyd onto Cole's balcony.

"You're going to stay put for the next hour. If I even catch a glimpse of you moving through the window, the green ninja gets it."

"I'll stay. Just don't hurt him."

Morro smiled one last time. "Hurt Lloyd? I wouldn't dream of it."

Then he jumped off the balcony with Lloyd in his arms.
-onyx has opened a new chatroom!-

secure_bot
Welcome to Secure, Ninjago's safest messaging service! Your messages will remain on our isolated, closed-circuit servers, keeping you safe from government surveillance and private tracking. Remember to donate to ensure that your communications remain private! Safe chatting!

-walker has changed the chatroom's name to: that one group of girls in high school that never talks to anyone else-

kfire
this is way too specific

mer
Can we go back to being The DK Crew?

walker
no accept your fate

mer
:c

birchwood
@onyx Why did you make this?

onyx
I'm so sorry. This is all my fault.

onyx
I wasn't thinking straight. I thought I could help him. I just didn't want him to live like that anymore.

kfire
cole what did you do

onyx
Come to my apartment. I'm not doing this over messages.

-onyx has left the chatroom!-

kfire
what the hell?

walker
i have no idea whats going on

mer
Let's all go. Like, right now.

kfire
looks like im ending my lessons early today

Kai was the last one to arrive. An hour and a half later, he walked through Cole's unlocked front door and stumbled into a scene Cole was admittedly a little embarrassed about.
Cole hadn't been able to bring himself to just stop crying yet, but he couldn't explain what was going on until Kai arrived, so the other ninja were awkwardly trying to comfort him from where he laid on the couch.

"What's going on?" Kai asked the room.

Cole opened his eyes to see Nya stand up. "We don't know yet," she said softly. "Be patient."

He closed his eyes again when Kai put a hand on his arm. "Man, you know I'm not very good at this stuff. Feelings, right? Bleh. Get them away from me." Nya hit his arm and Kai pushed her away. "Geez, you're so violent. Let me finish. I was trying to say that yeah, I suck at emotions. But I think we all do. I mean, I'm the last one here and you're still crying, so clearly no one here really knows what they're doing. We can't all be you, I guess. How many times have you helped us get through our problems? Not to act like you're some kind of descended angel, but we'd all be in worse places if you hadn't entered our lives. If I'm going to be honest, we all kind of owe you big time. So even if we don't really know how to help, we'll be here for you, okay?"

"Don't say that," Cole mumbled. "Don't discredit yourself to make me feel better."

"I'm not discrediting myself, I'm just being honest." Kai pulled Cole up into a sitting position. "Come on, there you go. Misery isn't a good look on you."

His words made Cole laugh a little. "I think it is."

"You're right. You absolutely kill it in black, even if I don't understand how you can wear it in the summer," Kai said. He reached forward and gently tucked Cole's hair behind his ears. It reminded him of the way Morro handled Lloyd, but this time, the act provided a sense of comfort rather than unease. "I don't know what happened today. But no matter what, we'll stay with you. We wouldn't be your best friends otherwise."

Right. These were his friends. If anyone would help him, it was them.

Cole got up from the couch and locked himself in the bathroom. He blew his nose, wiped his face with a hot towel, and focused on his breathing until he stopped crying. Only when he felt like he could speak in full sentences again did he leave, opening the door to a crowd of concerned friends that engulfed him in a giant hug as soon as he stepped through the doorway.

It only lasted a few seconds, because Cole almost started crying again, so he pushed everyone back and made his way to the living room. His friends squeezed in on the couch together and Cole stood in front of the TV.

With all eyes on him, Cole explained what had happened. Discovering Garmadon's grave, getting Lloyd in trouble, the truth about Lloyd's memories, being forced to tell Lloyd about his father . . . Cole kept his voice steady and leader-like, but it became hard to maintain when he could see the disappointment and despair in Zane's eyes.

"He doesn't remember?" Zane asked, his voice quiet. "He was lying?"

"Not to rain on this already-depressing parade, but none of us remember, either," Jay said, gesturing to himself and the siblings. "If he's really your friend, his memories shouldn't matter. Our concern should be literally everything else going on in that kid's life. Like, I don't know him very well, but I feel a little concerned for his safety right now. Is this Morro dude going to kill him?"

"No. If history repeats itself, he will seek to use Lloyd against us," Zane replied. "I have no doubt that he would have used Lloyd to attack us had Cole not unveiled the truth about his father."
"That's a completely new problem," Nya said. "Lloyd isn't going to want to help the Second Rise if he isn't going to get anything out of it. Morro can't just trick him into sticking around anymore. He's probably going to keep him prisoner or as some kind of hostage to stop us from going after the Second Rise."

There was a familiar spark in Kai's eyes. "Then there's only one thing to do."

"What?" Cole asked. But he had a feeling he knew what Kai was about to say.

"We need to rescue Lloyd. We need to break into that Second Rise compound, and we need to get him back."

Cole surveyed the group. "Any objections?"

An air of determination filled the room as they concluded that Kai was right: the only option they had left to rescue Lloyd was to break him out of his prison.

All except for one.

Jay raised his hand. "I don't know how to fight."

Kai slapped his hand on Jay's back a little too hard. "I've got you, buddy."

Jay leaned forward and buried his face in his hands. "Oh no."

"May I ask a question?" Zane said. "How do we plan on locating this compound?"

Nya stood up.

"Everyone, get in Zane's car. We're going to my office."

In Nya's office, they stood around her desk as she ran a program on her laptop. At first, it seemed like nothing more than a map of Ninjago City, outlining its streets, buildings, and major landmarks. Nya stared at the screen expectantly, growing frustrated when nothing happened and Jay questioned why they were there in the first place.

The program began to work after a few minutes. Suddenly, yellow circles began to blink on the screen. Some were scattered around the city, but most of them were crowded in one location in the east end of the city. He narrowed his eyes as he tried to figure out what they were.

And then he remembered a meeting with Ronin, when they first learned of Feng's—Morro's—existence. It had been so long since he'd thought of it that he'd forgotten how vital this program could be when taking down the Second Rise.

"This map was created by our . . . friend, Ronin," Nya said. She pointed to the circles. "Those yellow dots are Second Rise members wearing biotech he sold them." She pointed to the cluster in the east end. "So, if we assume his GPS-trackers are accurate, we can expect to find the Second Rise home base right about here."

Kai crossed his arms. "We'll need a plan. We can't just walk in, right?"

As Cole watched the map, a plan was already formulating in his mind.

"Leave that to me."

They began preparing that very night.
The ninja met at Kai's dojo, where Cole and Zane worked with Nya, and Kai worked with Jay. Nya was getting good, but she still wasn't as aggressive as Cole wanted her to be. There was something reluctant about the way she fought, like she didn't quite believe in her abilities and stayed on the defensive. To try to bring it out of her, Cole never struck first when he sparred with her and made her get used to being on the offensive. By the end of the first week, she was more confident and surprised Kai when the two siblings were pitted against one another in a spar.

Kai won, but it wasn't his easiest victory.

Jay was a completely different story. Nya's background in martial arts made her strong, but Jay's only athletic history was found in high school sports teams, so his athletic prowess left much to be desired. As Nya trained, Cole occasionally caught glimpses of Jay doing laps, push-ups, or other exercises that made the blue ninja collapse in his bed at the end of the night and skip his morning classes so he could sleep off his exhaustion.

If he had time to complain about free time before, he no longer held such luxury. His hours outside of class were now divided between homework, his internship at Borg, and training with Kai. He improved slowly, capable of basic self-defense, but it would take some time to build his strength up. Kai assured Cole that Jay would be ready in a few months, but Cole didn't know if this was time they had. Every minute they trained, Lloyd was prisoner to a man that seemed to take delight in hurting him. He was a prisoner in a dark compound surrounded by people that didn't care about him and only saw him as a pawn and if Cole played his cards right, didn't realize that his friends on the outside were coming to save him.

He made a very tough call after the first month of training. Nya had improved dramatically, still not at her peak but capable of fighting the ninja with aggression and power that made it difficult to defeat her. If she could almost defeat the ninja, Cole was sure she could easily beat any of the goons in the Second Rise.

But Jay still struggled, and after consulting with Zane, they called a team meeting to discuss the blue ninja's role in their attack on the Second Rise.

It was late at night in the dojo. Cole, acting as leader, made the announcement to the team as they sat in a circle on the floor.

"We need to rescue Lloyd as soon as possible. When I say this, I don't mean in two months from now. I mean this weekend." He took in a deep breath. "We can't waste anymore time training. Jay isn't coming with us."

Cole had anticipated anger. He didn't expect Jay to clap his hands together and sigh in relief.

"This has definitely been a month of my life I'm never getting back, but this is pretty good news to me," Jay said. He stretched out his arms."I thought I was going to die. Like, I was pretty sure a Second Rise kid was going to murder me. Whew. Now that I'm done taking this glorified self-defense-for-women course, can I go home? Am I done?"

Nya punched Jay in the arm. "Hey, watch it."

Jay rubbed his arm. "Ow. Geez, sorry. I didn't realize I said that in your aggro range."

"Please shut up," Kai moaned. "I'm begging you. Just stop saying these things."

Jay hopped onto his feet. "No problem. Just don't put me in your cringe compilation on Youtube, okay?"
Kai groaned again as Jay left the dojo. Nya laughed, told Kai to get used to living with Jay for the rest of his life, and then dragged him to his feet so they could practice some more before they went home.

When Cole got home that night, he was surprised to see that Jay's bedroom light was still on. He thought of knocking on his door to ask why he was still awake, but he heard muffled music coming from the room and decided not to. Now that Jay no longer feared being alone like he was in prison, Cole noticed particular habits from the blue ninja that presented themselves as nonverbal signals. If his door was open, or he was in the living room, Jay didn't mind talking, or going out, or playing games together. If his door was closed, Cole had to knock and see how he was feeling. If his door was closed, and he could hear music, it meant three, absolute words: Leave me alone.

Knowing Jay was one to hide his emotions behind humour, Cole worried that his exclusion from the mission was less relieving and more upsetting than he let on. He wanted to check in on him, but he could hear the music, a weird, alternative melody whose genre he couldn't quite pin down. For a moment, Cole listened in, trying to make out the words of the song before realizing they were in another language and he had no hope of ever singing along.

When the song ended, he made his way to his own bedroom and changed into pyjamas. He turned off the lights, crawled into bed, and fell asleep with the distant sound of Jay's music as a lullaby.

Jay was already gone when Cole awoke the next morning. Cole shot off a text while he waited for the coffee maker to get going, a little worried that his friend wasn't feeling so good.

onyx
Hey, how's it going?

No response. Cole dumped an unreasonable amount of sugar in his coffee, took a sip, and chalked up Jay's uncanny silence to him being in class. Right now, he had important things to worry about. Not more important than his best friend's feelings, but important on another level.

In two days, the ninja would infiltrate the Second Rise compound, extract Lloyd, and then disappear into the night. He'd been coming up with ideas for thirty days, now, but he needed to finalize his plan. The last thing he wanted was to lose a friend at the hands of the enemy because he'd failed to plan well enough. It was time to pull out the maps, re-analyze his friends skills, and figure out what exactly each of them would be doing during the mission.

Nya sent him blueprints of the building they believed to be the Second Rise compound. It was an old apartment complex, abandoned after inspectors deemed its supports unsafe to live on. A few decades later, it had yet to be torn down, but in a new report she sent to him that morning, it came to light that the entire property was purchased twenty years ago by a name Cole knew too well.

Wu Garmadon.

There was a reference to the Second Rise on Garmadon's tombstone. And now, Wu was involved, too. But Misako claimed he was dead. She told the truth about Garmadon, so what reason would she have to lie about Wu?

He had a feeling these two brothers were intertwined with the Second Rise in a way he hadn't quite considered before.

If so, what happened twenty years ago?

Now wasn't the time for conspiracy. He printed off several copies of the building's floor plans, sat at
his dining room table with thick, colorful markers, and began to mark up the floor plans with arrows, circles, and directions for each of the ninja to follow. By sundown, he had a good rough draft that he would present to the others the following day for a final review. Together, they would analyze every small detail, make changes, and finally settle on something they knew would increase everyone’s chance of survival.

For dinner, Cole spent an hour and a half preparing one of Jay's favorite meals. It wasn't the pork dish, but it was one Cole knew how to make and made Jay excited every time he did. He checked the clock often, timing it out so it would be ready at around the time Jay normally returned home from his internship on Wednesdays. If he wasn't feeling well, food he loved after a tiring day was the best medicine Cole could offer.

But slowly, time moved on, the food grew cold, and three hours after his shift ended, Jay never returned home. It also occurred to Cole that he'd never received a response to his earlier message.

His worry grew with time, and by nighttime, he couldn’t just wait for his friend anymore. He had to make sure that he was okay.

-onyx has started a voice call!-

-pending!-

-declined!-

Cole frowned. Jay was usually quick to answer calls, and when he wasn't in class, quick to respond to messages. What was going on?

-onyx has started a voice call!-

-pending!-

-accepted!-

"Why are you calling so late?" Nya asked him. Her voice was groggy. "I'm trying to sleep."

"Jay never came home. Is he still at Borg?"

"One second, I'll check our employee logs." A few moments later, she spoke again. "Weird. He never clocked out."

This quelled some of Cole's anxiety. "At least he's somewhere safe. You kids are going to give me a heart attack one day."

He could hear the smile in Nya's voice. "Am I wrong, or is Kai physically older than you? When did you stop aging, again?"

"Twenty-one."

Nya laughed. "Cole, I have some bad news."

"What?"

"I'm twenty-two. You don't get to call me 'kid' anymore. How's it going, son?"

-onyx has ended the voice call!-
Cole stayed in the living room, laying on the couch as he waited for Jay to come home. He tried to call him every few minutes, desperate to find out what was going on with him. He never picked up his phone and Cole thought of going to Borg to check up on him, but he never did, because as he promised to wait another half hour before he set out, his eyes closed and he fell asleep without meaning to.

The sun shone through the windows when he awoke. A blanket was draped over his body. The TV played the children's animation channel.

And then Cole saw him. Jay sat on the floor in front of the couch, eating a bowl of cereal with no milk as he watched the cartoon. He looked back over his shoulder when Cole moved.

"Good morning. You slept in pretty late," Jay said. He help up the bowl. "Want some?"

He reached forward to grab some, then stopped when he noticed something a little odd. The hand that held up the bowl was covered in a thick, black glove. "What are you wearing?"

Jay put the bowl on the floor and turned to face Cole. He held up his hands. Both were covered in the gloves. "I made these last night. I wasn't ignoring you because I was mad, I was just concentrating. Aren't they cool?"

"I don't get it. You made gloves?"

"Oh, wait. Let me show you something."

Jay pulled out his cell phone. He turned it on and showed the battery percentage to Cole. 64%.

Jay rubbed his hands together. Cole thought he could see some kind of electricity flow through them, then Jay touched his phone again and the electricity disappeared. He showed his phone to Cole again. Battery: 100%.

"Being useless kind of sucks. Don't get me wrong, I was hyped about not dying, but I wasn't hyped about being the only ninja that can't fight. So, I made these," Jay explained. "They're shock gloves. I rub my hands together, and they generate enough electricity to emulate being tased. They can also charge my phone. So, I know I can't do martial arts, but how about some good, old fashioned lightning powers?"

Cole grinned. He reached forward and pulled Jay into a hug. "You're back on the team."

They met once again at Kai and Nya's house that afternoon. Cole put the plans on the coffee table in the living room and after a brief breakdown of what they'd do that night, everyone went to the dining room to eat dinner while Cole pulled aside each ninja one at a time to go over their roles in detail.

Although Kai and Nya were good, he still didn't feel comfortable sending them on their own just yet. They both had a little experience, but this was more than just a few, non-lethal nindroid guards. They were going to be taking on real people—people that weren't afraid to take lives if they so needed to. He couldn't send them into this situation alone. Not until they'd experienced it not once, but one hundred times. It took a long time to feel comfortable while surrounded by people trying to kill you.

But he didn't plan on letting them experience it much more. They were going to rescue Lloyd and then take down the Second Rise. Only two more times. Then, every ninja would retire, reincarnation or not.

Cole could see the light at the end of the tunnel. It was pretty. He couldn't wait to feel its warmth.
So, he divided the ninja into two teams. One team would locate and capture Lloyd. The other would pull attention away by wreaking havoc elsewhere in the building. Zane, Kai, and Nya were on the distraction team. It was up to Jay and Cole to rescue Lloyd.

"Why can't I be the one to find Lloyd?" Kai asked during his individual meeting. "Why are you bringing Jay? Shouldn't it be you and me? We're the ones that actually got to know the kid a little."

"We need the best fighters on that team. I'm not sending Jay into a brawl when he can barely throw a punch."

Kai scowled. "Fine. But we're bringing Lloyd here when we're done rescuing him."

"Don't worry. I wouldn't have it any other way."

They departed at midnight. They flew in on Elemental Dragons, staying above cloud level so no one from the Second Rise would see them coming. It was a cool night. Goosebumps pricked his skin. Behind him, he could feel Jay shiver. None of the Second Rise members would want to be out tonight. It was going to be a full house in the compound.

When they arrived, they floated in the sky and Cole watched Zane look over his shoulder to Kai and Nya, checking to see if they were okay. They both flashed him a thumbs-up. Zane turned to Cole and nodded. It was time to go.

The Ice Dragon vanished and the three ninja fell through the clouds.

Cole changed his sitting position so he could face Jay. "Are you ready?"

His blue eyes were wide with fear. "I don't know. The Bounty was different—it was easy. I don't know what to do here. I don't want to slow you down. I don't want to die. What if they kill me? What if they kill you? Any of the others? What if we get down there and Lloyd is already dead?"

The question hung heavy in the air. Below, he heard alarms ring out. The ninja had begun their assault. He needed to move.

He turned around again. Jay wrapped his arms and legs around his torso to prepare for the fall.

Before he de-summoned his dragon, he said, "That's the thing about being a ninja. You never know if everyone is going to make it out okay. All you can do is just go along with the plan and hope you'll see them tomorrow morning."

His elemental dragon disappeared beneath him and Jay held onto Cole as they descended from the sky, aiming for a balcony on the top floor. Zane and the others were fighting in the lobby. As they pulled the attention downwards, Cole and Jay would search through the upper floors and make their way down until they found Lloyd.

If they couldn't find him, they would have to try another day. But he didn't know if they would have another chance. He didn't trust Morro to keep the green ninja alive much longer if he knew it was going to put his operation in danger.

He used airjitzu to soften the landing. Beside him, Jay rubbed his hands together to charge his gloves. Cole watched blue electricity spark between them. When it faded, and Jay fell back into a basic fighting stance, Cole faced the door and took in a deep breath.

Then he kicked it down. He stepped inside, ready to fight... but the room was empty. What he'd expected to be a hub of people was devoid of all life.
He made his way through the rest of the apartment. Still, there was no one inside. But there were shoe prints on the floor and mattresses scattered all over, fit with sleeping bags and cheap pillows. Plastic shopping bags filled with clothes and other personal effects sat next to each mattress. Did the recruits live here? Were one of these beds Lloyd's? Did everything he own fit into a single bag?

Cole and Jay went apartment-to-apartment, kicking down doors and roving around in empty rooms until they determined that there wasn't a single living soul still on this floor. They continued floor by floor, growing frustrated and worried as they failed to encounter a single person in the first five floors of the apartment complex.

"We need to try something different," Jay said as they entered the stairwell to go to the sixth floor down. "No one's here. All the recruits are probably fighting the other ninja, or something. I don't know."

Cole paused at the stop of the stairs. "Where do you think Lloyd could be?"

"Well, if I was keeping a kid prisoner, I wouldn't want him anywhere near an exit. So, no balconies, and no staircase, either." Jay leaned over the railing, looking down the spiraling staircase and into the darkness below. "I think he's in the basement."

That made perfect sense. "Okay. Let's go."

They descended to the parking garage, a large expanse of concrete with no lights or visible exits. The sound of the door closing echoed, and Cole put his hand on Jay's chest to warn him to be slow. Quiet. The darkness was the perfect cover for a surprise attack from any Second Rise soldiers.

It was a good thing he had night vision in his biotech. The green, grainy vision came into view and Cole held into Jay's wrist to guide him through the darkness.

Much like the apartments above, the garage appeared to be empty, too. Cole took his steps carefully and moved forward, observing the empty parking spots and wide pillars that made up his surroundings. He kept his movements quiet and breathing steady, but a panic began to set in as he pondered the possibility that Lloyd wasn't even in the compound.

They reached the end of the parking garage. It was cold, empty, and Cole kicked a nearby wall out of frustration.

"Where is he?" Cole shouted, speaking to no one in particular. "Where is Morro hiding him?"

Jay grabbed him and shook his shoulders. "We don't have time to be mad! Let's go back upstairs."

"I don't think he's here. I think Morro is hiding him somewhere else in the city."

This time, Jay grabbed his wrist. He pulled Cole across the floor, his other hand in front to feel what was before him so he wouldn't walk into a wall. "I don't care if I can't see down here. We're going back to that staircase, we're going to walk up twenty stories, and then we're going to prove that Lloyd isn't here before we give up."

They argued all the way to the elevator, and while Cole wasn't one to give up so easily, he knew Lloyd wasn't anywhere in the building. Why did he ever assume that Lloyd would be here? Why would Morro keep him somewhere the ninja would obviously target first?

They reached the staircase. Jay looked up, saw the amount to stairs they would need to climb, and groaned. "I'm not looking forward to this. Is there an elevator?"
Cole looked around. He couldn't see one, wasn't sure where to start looking, until—

_Bang!_ The deep sound of metal clanging reverberated through the parking garage. And then it continued.

_Bang! Bang! Bang!_ Cole turned his head around, trying to figure out where it was coming from. It sounded like it came from everywhere at once.

"You hear that too, right?" Jay asked. Cole nodded and motioned for him to shut up. He needed to listen.

The banging continued, and if he listened closely, he could almost hear something else. A muffled voice cried out between the sound of the metal, its words sounding less faint as he listened but more as a cry for help.

"I think it's coming from over here," Jay said, and Cole followed him around a corner and into a small hallway behind the stairs. At the far end, a single light shone bright like a star and Cole turned off his night vision to see properly. The light was a hanging light bulb, illuminating the path to the elevator doors at the end of the hall. There was an 'out of order' sign was taped to the doors.

Here, the words became clear.

_Help._

_Is anyone there?_

_Please help me._

_I'm in here._

_Please._

They hurried to the door. Not wasting any time, Cole dug his fingers in and channeled his Earth strength to pull the doors open. Inside, light streamed into the elevator shaft and he distantly heard Jay gasp when he saw what was before them.

Lloyd sat in the middle of an abandoned elevator shaft. His right hand was cuffed to a metal bar in the wall. The sight of tears in his eyes was so familiar that Cole wondered if all those times he'd laughed or smiled or reassured Cole that _it was okay, he was fine_ were lies. His memories were lies. What else had been a cover up? What else did Morro tell him to say, tell him what to act?

Cole entered the elevator shaft and kneeled down next to Lloyd. He reached forward to tuck his blond hair behind his ears, the same Kai had done to him to calm him down, but stopped when Lloyd flinched away and averted his gaze. _Right,_ he told himself. _No hair touching._

They didn't have much time to be comfortable, anyways. They had to rescue Lloyd and leave before Morro realized what was going on.

He grabbed the chain connecting Lloyd to the metal bar. He summoned his Earth strength to snap the chain, but when he tried, Lloyd broke out into a frenzy, kicking and punching and doing whatever he could to throw Cole off his balance.

"Stop it!" Lloyd cried. "Let me go! You can't do this!"

Cole didn't have time to be gentle. He pushed Lloyd away, and in a quick burst of strength, ripped
the chain in two. Lloyd continued to shout at him.

"It can't be you! He's going to come after you. He's going to kill me. He's going to kill you! Do you want that? Do you want to die after three thousand years because you thought this was worth it?"

He remembered the threat Morro posed three thousand years ago. He'd possessed the green ninja, unleashed ghosts on Ninjago, and caused Sensei Garmadon's ultimate end. Now, he held nothing against them but an underground army of children they could track at anytime. If he wanted to steal Lloyd again, it would be quite the uphill battle for him.

Cole grabbed Lloyd and threw him over his shoulder. "Not to sound cheesy, but I think you're worth it."

A laugh.

"Wow. This is almost cute," said a familiar voice from behind him.

Cole whipped around. His grip on Lloyd's back tightened.

Morro was sneaky. Cole kept forgetting that he'd once been a ninja, too.

He was greeted with a familiar situation. Morro's left arm wrapped around Jay's neck, pulling him into his body. His right arm was free, but held a gun that he pointed to Jay's head.

"You're pretty stupid, black ninja. Did you really think I'd let you steal him from me that easily?" Morro asked him. "But I've gotta give you credit—I never expected you to find Lloyd's hiding spot. He's been there for a whole month and no one else found him. I'm impressed."

A month chained to the bottom of a dark elevator shaft. His stomach twisted at the thought.

"Let me just establish something before this gets out of hand," Cole said calmly. "If you kill Jay, I'll kill you. No hesitation."

"I don't doubt it," Morro replied. "Let's make a trade. Jay for Lloyd. How does that sound?"

Jay shook his head, so subtle Cole was sure that Morro didn't notice. Jay looked down, and Cole followed his eyes to his hands, where he was slowly rubbing his hands near his stomach, out of Morro's line of sight. Blue spark flew between his gloves.

Cole needed to buy a little time.

"You still haven't told me your plan," he said. "If you think I'll agree with you, why keep it a secret?"

Morro laughed again. "Why would I tell you? So you can stop me? You're actually such an idiot—"

Jay reached backward and shoved a sparking hand against Morro's face.

Morro screamed and crumpled to the ground. Jay jumped away and stepped back towards Cole, looking at Morro's convulsing body with worry. "Do you think I killed him?"

"He'll be fine," Cole told him. "Let's go."

They climbed up the stairs to the lobby, Lloyd banging his fists against Cole the whole way, and were met with a scene that made Jay burst out in laughter.
Kai and Nya were sitting on the reception desk, playing some kind of hand game. Zane stood in the middle. All around them, wall-to-wall, were Second Rise recruits frozen to the floor by their feet. They were all shouting, yelling vulgar things at the ninja, but it didn't matter. They couldn't move.

"Can we go now?" Kai asked when they entered the lobby. "I'm so bored. It's been like this for half-an-hour."

They left the lobby, boarded the elemental dragons, and took off towards Kai and Nya's house.

Lloyd continued to struggle even as they walked through the door, so Cole dumped him in the upstairs bathroom and locked the door from the outside by positioning the back of a chair beneath the door knob. Lloyd pulled against it hard, but no matter how many times the door shook, the chair wouldn't budge.

So, he resorted to hitting the door instead.

The banging on the door was incessant. Even downstairs, they could hear him slamming his fists against the bathroom door, yelling at them to let him go back.

There was a particularly loud bang and Kai winced. The ninja were in the living room, quiet as they tried to process what was going on. The first time they'd rescued Lloyd from Morro all those years ago, he was happy to be free. Cole never expected him to beg them to bring him back.

"I have neighbours," Kai began. "I have neighbours that are going to hear this and call the cops on us. They're going to call the cops, and they're going to bust down our door, and they're going to think we kidnapped Lloyd. I am not looking forward to explaining this situation."

"I mean, he's probably going to be like a baby, right?" Nya asked. "He'll get tired and cry himself out. Then we can sleep and he'll be fine in the morning."

Jay held up his phone to show the time to everyone. "It's three in the morning. I don't think we're going to sleep tonight."

Nya groaned and they all prepared for a sleepless night.

Well, it was supposed to be a sleepless night.

One by one, the ninja passed out in the living room. First, it was Jay, curled up in a ball and using Zane's lap as a pillow. Then it was Nya, who didn't curl up but spread out, throwing her arms and legs so wide that Kai had to get off the couch or threaten to wake her.

Cole didn't quite remember when he fell asleep. He switched positions with Zane so the nindroid wouldn't have to sit still for eight hours, and when he settled into the corner of the couch, Jay's head on his legs, he sunk into the cushions and Lloyd's banging faded into the background as the comforting darkness of sleep overtook him.

He awoke only a few hours later. Lloyd's banging upstairs had stopped. Jay and Nya were still passed out, but Zane and Kai were nowhere to be seen. He was still exhausted, but curiosity kept him awake so he carefully placed a pillow beneath Jay's head and made his way to the kitchen.

Zane stood in front of the fridge, its door wide open as he looked at its contents with intense concentration.

"Hey," Cole whispered. "What are you doing?"
He didn't look away from the fridge. "What do teenage boys eat for breakfast?"

"Something sugary that you can put in the microwave or toaster."

"I do not think Kai and Nya's kitchen will be helpful," Zane admitted. "So far, I have counted five bottles of protein powder. Why do they need so much? Do they eat it by the spoonful?"

"You know, we always talk about how responsible Nya is, but I think her responsibility cuts off as soon as she enters this house," Cole said. "She and Kai just feed of each other's bad energies. We need to separate them, or something."

"That may be feasible. Have you seen the front lawn?"

"No. Why?"

"An agent from a real estate company as put a 'for sale' sign in the lawn. I think their parents are gone for good."

"Well, I'm pretty sure chief of security is one of the highest paid positions in the world, so I'm not too worried about Nya," Cole said. "Maybe she'll buy us a mansion when this place sells."

"Borg's board members do not want her there for long. As competent as she may be, she is still quite young and inexperienced. I have a feeling that they will force her to step down once we have dealt with the Second Rise."

"Oh. She'll still be fine. Kai too."

"I am sure." Zane closed the fridge. "What time do the grocery stores open?"

Cole checked the time. It was nine in the morning. "They've been open for two hours."

"Thank you. I will be back soon. I am going to buy some sugary, toastable breakfast foods."

Zane left the kitchen. Cole heard the front door open and close as he moved to the counter to try to figure out the coffee maker. After playing around with the buttons for a few minutes, he found their mugs, placed one under the machine, and watched it out pour another dose of caffeine addiction into the cup.

A steaming cup of coffee in his hand, he made his way upstairs to find Kai. He expected him to be asleep in his room, but the fire ninja was still awake, sitting against the bathroom door. He jumped to his feet and hurried over to Cole when he saw him climb up the last few steps.

"Okay. Shh, be quiet, I think he's sleeping," Kai said quietly. "He finally fell asleep like, an hour ago. I checked to make sure he hadn't actually escaped, and he's asleep in the bathtub. When he stops trying to escape, we should move him to a bedroom. I don't want him to sleep in a tub forever."

"Unless you plan on buying this place, I wouldn't get too comfy," Cole warned him. "Did you see the sign?"

Kai ran his hands down his face. "Ugh. Zane told me about that. My parents are such assholes. I know Nya and I ghosted them first, but is it that hard to give us a warning that they're selling the house? I don't know what's wrong with them."

"What are you going to do?"

"I guess I have to move out. But there's some stuff I need to deal with first." He nodded to the
bathroom door. "You know, most of it pertaining to the problem in that room."

"Yeah. Let's wait until Zane gets back and wake him up."

Zane returned with several boxes of *Pop Tarts*, each box a different flavor because he couldn't
decide which one Lloyd would like the best. Cole and Kai couldn't decide each other, so they toasted
one of each, stacked them on a plate, and brought it upstairs to the bathroom with a glass of water.

Carefully, Cole removed the chair blocking the handle and opened the door. Inside the bathroom,
Lloyd was no longer asleep, but he hadn't moved from the bathtub. He looked at the single handcuff
still attached to his wrist with tired, green eyes.

"Why can't you just let me go back?" Lloyd asked them. "I don't want him to come here."

"Did you ever tell Morro about this place?" Cole said.

Lloyd shook his head. "He doesn't care about the new ninja. Only Cole and Zane."

"Is there any way he can track you?"

"No. But you don't understand." He rubbed his eyes as the tears came back. "I've tried to run away
before. He finds me everytime. He's going to figure out where I am, and he's going to kill you if you
try to stop him. He'll probably kill you just for taking me away. It's safer for all of us if you just let
me go back. I don't want any of you to die because of me."

"You understand why we can't do that, right?" Kai asked, kneeling down next to Lloyd. He offered
the plate of pop tarts. Lloyd grabbed one and took a bite. "It's safer for you here. If he tries to take
you away, let him come. I'm sure the three of us can handle one guy."

Lloyd sniffled. "I'm not getting my hopes up."

Cole and Zane shared a glance. That wasn't very reassuring.

Lloyd asked to be alone, so they left the glass and plate there and shuffled out of the bathroom. Just
to be careful, they put the chair back under the doorknob and then went down to the living room. Jay
and Nya were awake, looking at something on Nya's phone. They giggled quietly.

They stopped and Nya shut off her phone when they saw the others come downstairs.

"How is he?" she asked.

"He's definitely been better, but it's okay. I have a plan," Kai said. He ignored Cole's curious look
and kept talking. "I spent the whole night reading articles and advice blogs on how to help kids that
were abused. We just need to be calm, and let him have his own space, and just be there for him,
okey? I have a proposal for everyone except Nya."

"Excuse me?"

"Shut up, you already live here. I want everyone else to move here. If he thinks Morro is going to
come take him back, I want him to know that there's a bunch of people in the house that can protect
him. He should feel safe right now." He looked to Cole. "Right?"

Cole crossed his arms. "We trust you, Kai. Just tell us what to do."

For the next few hours, the ninja crowded around the coffee table, listening to Kai lay out the plan.
Lloyd would get Kai's room to himself, and if he was inside, everyone was to knock and receive
permission before entering. The other ninja would stay in the the other rooms, with Kai and Nya bunking together in Nya's room, and Cole and Jay in the master bedroom. They would invite Lloyd to every meal, every outing, and more, but if he refused to go, they weren't allowed to push.

Later that day, Cole and Nya took the skytrain to a nearby mall to buy Lloyd new clothing, chosen specifically for the task because Kai didn't trust anyone else's fashion sense. They bought him three new pairs of jeans, a few t-shirts, a new sweater, and splurged on a new pair of shoes that Nya thought would look good with all the clothes they bought. On the way home, Nya stopped by a Borg Mobile store and used her status as chief of security to get a new phone for free and install a decent plan on it.

By the time they got back, Lloyd was already in Kai's room. They laid out the clothes on the bed and Nya plugged in the wifi password and the other ninja's contact information before giving him the phone. He was mostly quiet throughout the exchange, but smiled a little when he unlocked the phone for the first time. He mumbled a thank-you and then sat on the bed to play around with the phone.

They left the room and closed the door. Outside, Nya gave Cole a high-five for their effort and then went downstairs to report back to Kai.

During the next few weeks, they fell into a pattern. Everyone continued their lives as usual, but they all came home for dinner and invited Lloyd each time. He never came, but Kai remained optimistic and made sure to have something prepared each evening. One day, Kai went into Lloyd's room with a handful of candy and didn't leave until he went to sleep.

Cole caught him in the hallway. "What did you do in there? He wanted you to stay?"

"We didn't do anything special. We just ate candy and watched lizard videos. The usual, you know?"

Some nights, if Cole listened carefully, he could hear the faint sound of crying from Lloyd's room. It was hard to listen to. It was even harder to hear footsteps in the hallway, wood creaking under Kai as he waited around outside the room for Lloyd to stop crying. It was a wonder he got any sleep at all, with how often he stayed up throughout the night to make sure the green ninja was okay.

In April, Lloyd began to leave the room on his own to grab food from the kitchen. It was a hopeful experience each time, and if they were lucky, he would hover around the living room for a few minutes and join in on the conversation. It wasn't easy to keep him around, but it was always nice to see him out of the room, so no one complained.

Halfway through the month, the ninja watched a movie in the living room after dinner. It was a silly movie, one Jay insisted they watched because it was so bad that it was funny. Lloyd came down to grab a snack while they were watching, and on his way back upstairs, he paused behind the couch and fell still as he became entranced by the movie on the screen. After a particularly bad acting moment, Lloyd burst out in laughter, and when he finished, there was a smile on his face so bright that it seemed to radiate sunshine.

Exams came for Jay and Nya in May, so they isolated themselves in the basement to study when they were at home. There was an atmosphere of stress in the house, brought by the stress of final tests and bad news Nya brought one Friday night.

She held the meeting in the living room.

"Borg Security knows what's going on with Lloyd. It was fine at first, but now the Child Protection Agency was to take him," she said. "They say that he belongs with parents, not a bunch of nighttime
warriors. They want to put him back into foster care."

"They can't do that," Kai said. "He's not ready."

"I've tried to explain, but they won't listen to me." Nya sighed. "They want him next week."

"They can fuck off."

"If you tell them to fuck off and refuse to give him back, they'll consider it kidnapping and get you thrown in prison." She leaned forward and put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry. I've done all I can."

Kai kicked a pillow out of anger.

Lloyd didn't take the news much better.

Zane and Kai also stood in the room as Cole explained the situation. "The government wants to put you back in foster care. They're coming next week."

"What? No, no, no . . ." Lloyd stood up and began to pace around the room. There was panic in his voice. "It'll be so much easier for him to find me if I'm in the system." He choked out a sob. "I'm fucked. He's going to get me again."

Cole was surprised at Kai's silence. There was a familiar, intense look in his eyes that made Cole wonder what kind of fire was burning inside his mind.

Lloyd started crying and breathing funny and Kai stormed out of the room.

The next morning, Kai left the house and didn't come back for hours. He returned with a thick folder full of papers, a ballpoint ink pen, and that same fire in his eyes that told Cole he was up to something. He followed him upstairs, waiting in the staircase so Kai wouldn't think he was listening in on whatever was about to go down.

He knocked on Lloyd's bedroom door. When Lloyd opened the door, poking his head out, Kai grabbed his hand and pulled him into the hallway.

"Do you trust me, Lloyd?"

A long moment passed.

Lloyd nodded slowly.

"I don't want them to take you away. You deserve more than whatever they'd give you. You deserve more than to be put in danger again."

A pause.

Kai took a deep breath.

"How would you feel about being adopted?"

Kai and Lloyd spent the weekend locked away in his room, filling out paperwork until every last page in the folder was filled to the brim with ink. On Monday, when government offices opened again, they made their way to the closest Child Protection Agency office and submitted the paperwork for review.
They got the approval letter the following morning.

Lloyd was officially under Kai's custody.

Lloyd came down for family dinner the first time that night. He was quiet, but it was okay, because he started to eat with them every night and by the time June rolled around, he finally seemed okay.

But the nighttime crying hadn't gone away. One day, Jay accidentally forgot about the no-hair-touching rule and ruffled Lloyd's hair at the end of a joke. Tears sprung into his eyes as he stopped breathing, and he escaped to his room and didn't come out for a week.

It came as a bit of a reality check. Cole sat Kai down and they had a talk.

"You should send him to therapy," Cole said. "As good as this arrangement has been for him, he needs professional help."

"Do you think so?"

"Do you think I was mentally okay after you all died the first time? After being a ninja non-stop for a hundred years?" Cole asked. Kai shook his head. "I went for a long time. A few lifetimes, probably. I am pretty much the god of cognitive-behavioral therapy. And, as this god, I think he should go. He's still young. Tackle the issues now so they're not as bad when he's older."

Kai ran a hand through his hair. "You're right. Yeah, you're right. I'll look into it."

The Child Protection Agency contacted Kai to let him know that if he wanted to keep Lloyd, he would need to enroll him in school the following September. So, on top of searching for a therapist, Kai began to search for a school he felt comfortable sending Lloyd to. Jay helped him look, telling Kai about the schools in the area that he could remember and which ones he thought would be a good fit for Lloyd.

There was a school Kai set his heart on. All the way in the west end of the city, the school was known for its kind students and overwhelmingly accepting environment.

Jay laughed at the suggestion. "You want to send him there? That's a one hour commute there and back. Do you really want to do that?"

Kai shrugged. "I have to move anyways, don't I?"

He eventually found a therapist in a woman with short hair and kind eyes. Lloyd was hesitant to go, but Kai was able to convince him to go by promising to sit outside the office every session, no matter how long or often they were. It became a weekly occurrence for two hours at a time, and Lloyd was given a workbook full of exercises and reminders that he had to fill in every day. At the end of each day, he sat in his room and filled out charts and wrote little journal entries so his therapist would know how he was doing on a day-to-day basis during their meetings.

Come June, Kai settled on somewhere to live. It was a small bungalow house for rent in the west side, just off a commercial street where there were breakfast restaurants and convenience stores and parks and was a only short bus ride away from the nearest skytrain stop. Lloyd's school wasn't far either, so he wouldn't need to worry about one-hour-long commutes and instead worry about twenty minute walks down the street to get there on time for his morning classes.

Nya moved out too, but instead of heading west, she found an apartment in a high-rise downtown that was close to Borg Tower and NCU's main campus. She and Kai split all the furniture and kitchen supplies in the house, playing some rather intense games of 'rock, paper, scissors' when it
came to expensive items like the TV set or the oven.

By the time they left, the house was empty. They were a little sad to see it go, but as one chapter in their lives ended, another began, and they were able to leave their childhood home behind in peace.

School began in the fall. Lloyd had some trouble in the beginning, avoiding students and teachers that tried to talk to him because he still wasn't quite used to being back at a normal school where the other students weren't trying to hurt him on a daily basis.

As the first month passed, he adapted a little better, and he found a group of other kids his age to sit with at lunch everyday. He struggled with maths and sciences, so Jay came by to the bungalow every other day to help him catch up on all he'd missed during his four years of absence so he could start to understand what was being taught in class.

But if the Second Rise did any good, it was teaching him humanities. Lloyd understood history and politics better than anyone else in his grade, scoring perfect grades on his assignments and impressing his teachers so much they convinced him to join the debating club, where he would learn to speak for himself again and become less afraid with disagreeing with those around him.

He excelled in gym class, his ninja training giving him an edge that made him run laps around his classmates. In October, they had a wrestling unit that Lloyd was a little too good at, causing his teacher to freak out when he was able to take down the professional wrestler they'd brought into class to teach the students.

The first time Lloyd hung out with his friends after school, Kai called Cole and told him about it with such pride in his voice that Cole could barely say anything before he hung up.

As it began to cool outside in November, Lloyd attended his first debating competition. He was nervous on stage, tripping over his words and going under time, but his team did well anyways and they each got a shiny medal at the end. Kai hung it up next to Lloyd's bed and made him promise to keep trying, because soon enough, medals turned into trophies and nothing felt better than holding that big, golden cup with your name on it.

Winter came, and Lloyd entered his end-of-semester exams. He studied hard with his friends and Jay, cramming as much information into his brain as he could before each exam. He went into each exam well-prepared, but his math exam was so hard that he cried when he got home from school and locked himself in his bedroom for the rest of the day.

His results came in the mail during his winter break. He passed his math exam with only 4%, and science wasn't much better, but he got 100% on his social studies exam, and at the back of the envelope was a congratulations letter because he was one of only ten students in the whole country to get a perfect score.

To celebrate, Kai took him to the pet store and Lloyd adopted the lizard he liked in those videos so much, a bearded dragon. Lloyd set up a huge habitat in his room, where the little dragon was free to roam around and play. Cole came over to see it and laughed at the sight, remembering the times when Lloyd's pet wasn't a lizard, but a real dragon. Lloyd got mad at him and kicked him out of his room, asserting that his lizard was as much a dragon as any out there.

Cole laughed all the way home.

There were times when his panic set in, when someone at school said the wrong thing or someone touched him in the wrong place and he suddenly lost the ability to breathe and he couldn't think straight and Morro's overbearing presence came back to oppress him. There were times when his
heart ached for no reason, or he needed to stay home from school for a few days, or he had an attack in class and had to be helped down to the counselor's office. There were times when it seemed like all his progress was thrown out the window and he was back in that elevator shaft at square one.

On these days, Cole would go over to the bungalow and sit down with Lloyd and they would talk about it, because if anyone understood what it was like to wake up after a trauma-induced nightmare, it was him. He taught him the breathing exercises, the ways he grounded himself in reality, how he eventually pushed the fear away and got out of bed to enjoy the rest of his day.

On a cold December day, Cole brought him down to Memorial Way. They walked through the forest and weaved through tombstones, quiet as they approached lot 2302719485.

Lloyd hugged him from the side and cried.

"I wanted to find him so bad," he whispered. "And now, he's just——"

Lloyd didn't finish the sentence. He didn't need to. Cole knew how it was going to end.

And now, he's just dead.

But despite the bad days, the good days kept him going. There were days when he felt good enough to play video games with his friends after school, days when he went to sleep without fearing how he would feel the next day.

Cole knew it wasn't easy to move on.

But he also knew that it was always possible.

-greenhoodie has opened a new chatroom!-

secure_bot
Welcome to Secure, Ninjago's safest messaging service! Your messages will remain on our isolated, closed-circuit servers, keeping you safe from government surveillance and private tracking. Remember to donate to ensure that your communications remain private! Safe chatting!

-walker has changed the chatroom's name to: ninja squad 2.0 [complete edition]-

greenhoodie
ive been thinking a lot

greenhoodie
come over whenever i guess

walker
hes having thoughts for the first time and inviting us over to celebrate

walker
im so proud

kfire
ill kill u

walker
try me
They all convened in Kai and Lloyd's living room. They squeezed in on the couch and Lloyd stood before them.

He sucked in a deep breath.

"I think I'm ready," he said. "I've been thinking it over for a long time. I've decided that I can't avoid the inevitable. I need to do it."

"Do what?" Cole asked.

"I only got better because I had people to take care of me. I got out. But somewhere out there, hundreds of kids like me are back in that hell I escaped from. I have a moral obligation to do this."

His green eyes narrowed. His thick eyebrows furrowed.

"I'm going to become the green ninja. And then I'm going to take down Morro."

**RED + FIRE**
**MAGENTA + WATER**
**BLUE + LIGHTNING**
**GREEN + ENERGY**
**TOGETHER | UNITY**

Chapter End Notes

Holy shit! Only one more chapter until this story is finished!

A huge thank you to everyone that has stuck through this. You're all the best. I mean it.

<3
wow, two years later and we're finished! thank you SO MUCH for reading!

i hope you like the final chapter!

edit: just for a bit of clarity, I would like to confirm that anything after DOTD (so, hands of time forward) is NOT canon to this fic. hence why PIXAL doesn't have a body again, and there are no mentions of Oni or Harumi other other big characters. This was simply to keep it consistent from the first chapter to the end!

The last time Cole went to a funeral, he went alone.

His friends didn't want him to go. They would tell him that it wasn't fair, that the years hadn't closed the gap between them, that it wouldn't give him the closure he hoped it would.

But he didn't care. He bought a suit. Fixed his hair. Picked up a bouquet of beautiful, yellow carnations.

And then he went to his father's funeral.

There were people he recognized. People he didn't. In the later years of Lou's life, he'd tried to make a connection with his son again. His attempts led to large social gatherings with Cole as a guest of The Royal Blacksmiths, watching theatre downtown from the box seats, and several awkward dinners where the silence hung heavy between them because although they were father and son, they now felt like strangers.

His father grew old and Cole didn't even know he was on his deathbed until he got the invitation for his funeral in the mail.

Funerals were meant to celebrate the dead, not condemn them. But still, it was hard to sit in a crowded room and listen to people he barely knew speak to the audience about what a good man his father was. How kind. How caring. How forgiving. What a perfect, perfect man he had been his whole life.

A perfect man that reduced his son to tears too many times to count and then scolded him for crying. A perfect man that wondered why his son began to lock himself in the bathroom when he started to yell. A perfect man that wondered why his son lied. A perfect man that wondered why his son hoarded food under his bed. A perfect man that chased his son away with his anger and strictness and even eighty years later couldn't understand why it was his fault.
A framed photo of his father was displayed on the stage. The picture made him seem young; his hair was still black, and there weren't so many wrinkles around his eyes. The youth in his face reminded Cole of how much he'd grown to resemble him.

It haunted him. When he looked at that picture and saw the same eyes that stared back at him in the mirror, his breath caught in his throat and he had to leave the room in the middle of a eulogy. He locked himself in the men's room, where he splashed cold water on his face and tried to calm down. He'd been trying to reconcile with his father for so many years. Why couldn't he just get over it? Why did seeing a photograph of him still inspire such anxiety? Was there something wrong with him?

The door opened and another man entered the bathroom. He was old and moved a little slow, but Cole recognized him nonetheless. It was Roy, one of his dad's group members before they retired. He'd known Cole since he was a baby.

"Wow," Roy said. "They weren't kidding when they said Lou's kid was immortal."

"I'm not immortal," Cole replied.

"But you should be fifty." Roy crossed his arms over his chest. "Immortal, ageless, whatever. You're gonna outlive us all. Must be weird."

"It's not weird. It's actually kind of scary."

"I can imagine." Roy gestured to the bathroom—to the whole building. "You're at your old man's funeral and you haven't aged a bit. To be perfectly honest, I'm surprised you even came. I thought you hated him."

"I used to."

"I remember when you ran away. That was the first time your dad ever missed practice. What made you change your mind?"

"About what?"

"About hating him."

"I don't know. I don't think I ever did. It's kind of confusing."

"Well, did coming here give you any closure?"

Cole took a moment to think.

After the ceremony, there was a cocktail party held at a nearby hotel. The lights were dim, waiters ran around with hors d'oeuvres on their trays, and Cole kept checking the time to see when it was late enough to leave without being rude.

The time wouldn't come soon enough. In the open ballroom, guests weren't afraid to approach him. They walked up to him, drinks in hand, to express their condolences for a man he still didn't know how to feel about. But he did his best to smile, to say thank you, to laugh at their shallow jokes, to act civil and polite and to be as fake as his father had taught him to be.

After his tenth awkward exchange, he couldn't do it anymore. He needed some help. It was time to break one of his rules.
When he'd realized death was no longer certain, he made a few rules on how he was going to live the rest of his life. He needed to take care of his body. He forced himself to eat well, stay in shape, and he worked with his therapist to put an end to his stress eating. Among these rules, there were some he took more seriously than others.

Alcohol and drugs were off-limits. He'd seen what they could do to people. He'd seen substances used for a fun night of partying turn into something to depend on, something to spend too much of a paycheck on. Cole didn't want to risk it—he didn't trust himself to have the mental fortitude required to get over an addiction. So, he banned himself from smoking and drinking and swore to stay clean for the rest of his long, long life.

But some rules had to be broken. He figured the death of his father was a good enough excuse to grant himself a little leniency with his alcohol ban.

As more guests came up to him, Cole made his way to the table with a pyramid of cocktails. He grabbed one, took a sip, and cringed. The orange, tropical flavour didn't do much to disguise the strong taste of rum. But people didn't drink alcohol because they liked the taste. They drank it for what it could do.

He finished his glass. Then he had another. By the time he finished his third drink, it became a lot easier to deal with guests when they spoke to him. He probably should have stopped. But he didn't.

When it was finally appropriate to leave, his face was fuzzy and it was hard to think for too long. He struggled to text Zane to ask for a lift, unable to type without suddenly dropping his phone or making a dozen errors. After he dropped his cell phone for the fifth time, he could feel the guests staring at him. He needed to leave.

He waited outside. Zane pulled up to the front of the hotel. Nya was in the front seat. She waved at Cole through the window.

Cole opened the car door and climbed into the back. It sat up straight for a moment, but as soon as the car started to move, he fell over on the seat and couldn't bring himself to move.

He would never forget the look of both disappointment and pity that crossed Nya and Zane's faces when they realized that the funeral had gone as well as they expected it to.

Cole stared at Roy through the bathroom mirror. He considered the question: Did coming here give you any closure?

He didn't need to consider it for long.

"No. No, it really didn't."

The candles were lit. The dining room lights were turned off. They took a breath to prepare themselves. And then they left the kitchen.

Lloyd sat at the head of the table as the other ninja sung happy birthday, sixteen candles aflame on the cake they carried over for his sixteenth birthday. The song finished and they placed the triple-layer chocolate cake in front of him. He closed his eyes, took a moment to think of his wish, and then blew out the candles.

They sliced up the cake and handed it out amongst themselves. When they finished eating, they opened gifts. Cole got Lloyd the newest handheld gaming console, and Jay got him his favourite game for it, an idea Cole came up with after he remembered how much the kid had liked video
games back in the day. He'd been good at them, too. Maybe he could challenge Jay for his title as the best *Smash* player among the ninja.

Jay took Lloyd to the couch at the other end of the living and dining space to help him set up the device and create his avatar. Meanwhile, the others sat at the dining table, where Zane and Nya took turns telling Cole about the drama at Borg Industries. There were quite a few people they mutually hated, and Cole wasn't used to seeing Zane get so worked up about *anything*, so it was funny to watch him complain about this one receptionist on their floor that couldn't keep her nose out of anything and enjoyed harassing him on a daily basis.

As Zane continued to complain about the receptionist, Nya kicked Cole's leg below the table. She nodded in Kai's direction. Her brother was a little quieter than usual. He stared at the birthday candles with a vacant expression.

When Zane finished his thought, Cole spoke up. "You good?" he asked Kai from across the table.

Kai remained still. "No."

"What's wrong?"

He let out a deep sigh. "I'm almost thirty."

Nya giggled. "That's what's wrong? You're only twenty-six. You have a whole four years until you're not young anymore."

Kai rested his chin on his palm. "Uh, yeah, but if you round up, it's thirty. I'm basically an old man."

On the couch, Jay looked up from the handheld console. He let out a sharp laugh. "Wait, Kai, you're thirty? Have they stopped IDing you at bars yet?"

"Shut up and go back to the kid's table!" Kai snapped back. "At least I'm old enough to have biotech now. How's that cracked phone screen coming along?"

Nya shot him a look. "His phone is only cracked because you thought it would be funny to play catch with it."

Kai put his head on the table. "Man, I don't care. I just don't want to get old. This sucks."

Zane stared at him with concern. "Are you having a midlife crisis?"

Kai groaned.

Later that night, when Cole was home, he crawled into bed and tried to fall asleep. But he couldn't even close his eyes. Thoughts raced through his head, relentless as a knot tied itself in his stomach and he gripped his pillow to try to keep himself grounded. His breathing became uneven and his face grew hot and he knew there was no point in fighting it anymore.

Alone in the dark, he let himself cry. He didn't want to think about the future. He didn't want to watch the minutes on the clock tick by—time moved too quickly, and Cole wanted nothing more than for the world to fall still. But the world continued on around him. No matter how much he wanted to make this fleeting moment of happiness with his friends last forever, he knew that was all it was: a moment, however brief, in the unlimited continuity of the universe.

Time moved on. Kai would turn thirty. Then forty. Fifty. Sixty. Seventy. Eighty. In the blink of an eye, he would be back in that hospital bed again. And the others would follow. Cole would blink
and they would all be—

He and Zane would be alone again.

At least, in the end, he would always have Zane.

onyx
I'm not ready for them to go again.

birchwood
I have dreaded this conversation for the past eight years.

onyx
Me too.

birchwood
Perhaps this seems shallow, but I do not want to think about the end right now.

birchwood
They have many years left. And us, infinity.

birchwood
If we spend this lifetime fearing the next, we will have wasted it. Please do not mourn people that have yet to die.

birchwood
We have the chance to live happy lives with our friends again, no matter how impermanent. I do not look forward to the end, either. But I look forward to the next seventy years.

birchwood
And after that, our retirement. :D

He hiccuped as he breathed. He couldn't stop crying—it felt hopeless to try—but as he read Zane's messages, he felt a little less scared of the passage of time. The minutes on the clock would tick by, his friends would get older, and if he could just sleep off this sudden wave of sadness, he could enjoy every last moment living with them.

Zane was right. He was already mourning their lives, fearing loneliness as though he didn't have decades left to spend with them. And even when they left, he would have Zane. He wouldn't be alone with thousands of years of memories to weigh him down. He could find happiness again, like he did long after his friends died the first time. And why, in a lifetime surrounded by friends, should he live in misery?

Like getting on a rollercoaster, he knew it would all end soon. But a rollercoaster was never about the end, it was about the ups and downs and loops and the happiness that came with it. The end would come when it did. For now, it was time to just enjoy the ride.

The next morning, the summer sun streamed in through his windows and there was a notification at the top of his vision.

*Reminder: "Lloyd final exam" at 14:00.*

He'd almost forgotten that Lloyd's birthday was smack in the middle of exam season. June was a busy month for him, and the moment he walked out of that exam room, it would become very busy
for everyone else, too.

A year and a half had passed since Lloyd announced his plan to become the green ninja. The months that followed were filled with hard work as Cole, Zane, and Kai spent their free time training the other ninja. Lloyd and Jay practiced every other night, fine-tuning their skills as fighters until Cole felt confident enough to leave them alone on missions. Nya finished early, so for the rest of their preparation time, she worked with Cole to draft up their final plan to take down the Second Rise for good.

In the end, it was a simple plan. Cole didn't want anything too complicated, knowing well that details could bog down a plan. But this wasn't going to be as simple as get in, get out as all their other plans had been. This was going to be get in, and stay until it's finished. There was only one objective: the complete elimination of the Second Rise organization.

Tonight, when Lloyd finished his last exam and was liberated from school for a few months, they would set their plan in motion. And then it would all be over.

Cole got out of bed. He made his way to the kitchen, where Jay sat on the counter with his shock gloves in his hands. He looked up when Cole entered the common area.

"I have a question," he said. He turned over the gloves in his hands. "What happens after this?"

Cole moved past him to get at the coffee machine. "After what?"

"Like, I don't know. After the Second Rise."

Cole put his mug in the machine and set it to work. He turned around and leaned against the counter. "What do you mean? I thought you wanted to be an engineer."

"Yeah, I guess, but it seems kind of pointless." Jay didn't look up from the gloves. "That's what I always thought I wanted to do. I had a set plan, you know? I was going to graduate high school with really good grades, get into university, do well there, and then just jump straight into my career. But I'm not so sure anymore."

Cole crossed his arms over his chest. "Why? Do you want to switch majors?"

"I can't think of anything I'd want to switch into," Jay said. He puts the gloves aside and gripped the edge of the countertop. "The idea of a career just seems stupid. It feels wrong. It feels like it's not for me."

And suddenly, he was back in the Serpentine tomb with Kai. He remembered the fire ninja, a long eight years ago, ranting about the hopelessness of the future. He spoke of how life was unfair, of his fear of living a meaningless life. But it was never because he feared a life of boredom. It was because like his past-self, he held an internal desire to help and protect other people.

Cole had never really held any long-term goals in his adolescence. In his early years, he was too busy trying to please his father to really think about what he wanted to do. He couldn't imagine what it would feel like to want something his whole life and then lose interest because he felt like it was pointless.

But it wasn't pointless for no reason. Jay's sudden apathy towards engineering wasn't borne of nihilism, but rather a change in destiny. Jay was experiencing the realization that there were greater things to be done than what society offered to the average person.

"Then what's for you?" Cole asked him.
Jay groaned. "I wish I knew."

For the first time, Cole found himself wondering if there would be happy endings after they defeated the Second Rise. Would it be easy for the others to settle back after working for something for so long? Or would they crave adventure, suffer a desire to help other people no matter the cost?

He supposed that they did manage to retire during their first lifetimes, after all the bad guys went away and they had a few decades of reprieve. If nothing came after the Second Rise, perhaps this was possible. He would just have to wait to find out.

They met at Borg Tower at around dinner time. Cole and Jay took the elevator up to Nya's office, where the others awaited them. It was time to set their plan in motion. It was time to defeat Morro for what Cole hoped would be the last time.

Nya booted up Ronin's program on her laptop. Lloyd stared at it with suspicion.

"This is how you found me, right?" he asked the room.

"Yeah, why?" Nya replied.

"It's not going to work."

Kai continued to stare at the program. "It won't work? It worked last time."

Lloyd didn't seem convinced. "I've never seen anything trick him twice. We've given him more than a year to figure out how you got me. I'm sure the Second Rise has looked into everything, and if the spyware is easy to find in the biotech, it might be gone."

Lloyd's words stuck in Cole's head as they waited for the program to load. It had taken forever last time, and Cole wondered if it was bad coding that made it slow, not some kind of connection issue. What if the program was so basic the Second Rise could find it? What if their only window into their location was now closed and locked forever?

They kept waiting. Cole was just about ready to call it quits when yellow dots began to appear on the screen.

But this time, there were only seven. They were spread out, mostly in the same area of the city, but seemed like they were scattered on purpose.

"Something's wrong. There were way more last time," Jay said. "What if they figured it out?"

Lloyd leaned forward. His fingers traced the locations of the dots on the laptop screen. "I know these places. These are their hideouts."

"All seven of them?" Cole asked. "Are they in all of them? If they don't have a central location we can hit again, this just got much harder."

"They cycle through them. It's annoying to uproot the entire organization, so they don't do it often, but I lived in a few different places," Lloyd explained. "I do know they only had seven hideouts, and by the looks of it, these yellow dots are right where I remember them being. Morro must have figured out that you used biotech to track them and scattered the chips on purpose."

"He is trying to split us up," Zane said. "He knows that some of us are better fighters than others. Only two of us still have elemental powers. We would need to stay together as a team to defeat him, like when we rescued Lloyd. But if we hit one hideout, and no one is there, he will know that we are
after him. We would lose the element of surprise."

"We could do what Morro wants us to. Split up, stay on the comms, and then regroup when we find
them. But there's still one more problem," Cole said. He pointed to the screen. "There's seven
locations and only six of us. One of us would need to hit two locations, or . . ." he trailed off.

"Or what?" Kai asked.

"We'd need to find someone we trust to look into the seventh location for us."

Kai smiled and took a step back, holding his arms out in front of him. They all turned to look at him.
"I have an idea. I think I know someone that would be willing to help us out."

"Who?"

"My old rival."

Zane and Cole met each other's eyes. Of course. It seemed stupidly obvious.

Kai wanted to bring in Skylor.

"Get in touch with her," Cole told him. "We'll work out the details when she's here."

Kai gave a salute. "On it, chief."

With their plans postponed and nothing else to do, Nya had Lloyd write down the addresses of the
hideouts and said she was going to look into the history of the buildings. After the building they
rescued Lloyd from had been revealed as being owned by Wu, she wanted to see if there was a
similar link with these other buildings. "Maybe," she said, "if we can figure out where this
organization begins, we can figure out where it ends, too. We can figure out what they really want."

Lloyd didn't know any more than they did. All they promised the trainees was the creation of a new
world, one where they would no longer be on the sidelines. To learn the true goals of the Second
Rise, the trainees had to graduate and prove themselves first. The ninja had rescued Lloyd just
months before he had the chance to do that.

So, they were all in the dark. But they wouldn't be in the dark for much longer.

Nya spent a day researching the buildings, looking at their histories and what they used to be in the
past. She kept everyone updated in the group chat, where Cole would save her messages and rewrite
his plans around the new information. Much like the first Second Rise compound they raided, the
buildings were all old apartment complexes once deemed too dangerous to live in. They were sold at
a low price to their new owner, who never refurbished them and ignored the various complaints and
fines from the city over the state of the buildings.

Twenty years later, nothing had changed. The buildings were still there, still owned by the same
person, and the city had yet to do anything substantial about it. According to a report she found, the
fines were never paid and it seemed like the owner had dropped off the face of the world.

Fifteen years ago, the owner's body washed up on the shore of a beach not too far from Ninjago
City. His brother had reported him missing a week before, claiming he'd fallen off the family yacht
and was pulled into the ocean by the current. At first glance, the reporters on the scene claimed it was
a tragic accident. The man wore baggy clothes that would weigh him down while underwater, and
according to his brother, he'd never been a very good swimmer. They wrote their articles and moved
on. The issue was dropped within hours.
Then, the police performed the autopsy. The idea of a tragic accident grew murky when seven knife wounds, previously hidden by his thick sweater, were discovered in his torso.

His brother came under suspicion of murder. But he would never be seen again and the case soon went cold.

Until now.

-mer has opened a new chatroom!

secure_bot
Welcome to Secure, Ninjago's safest messaging service! Your messages will remain on our isolated, closed-circuit servers, keeping you safe from government surveillance and private tracking. Remember to donate to ensure that your communications remain private! Safe chatting!

-walker has changed the chatroom's name to: funny group reference haha-

-kfire has changed the chatroom's name to: finally out of ideas aren't you-

-walker has changed the chatroom's name to: hating kai club-

-kfire has changed the chatroom's name to: hoping jay doesn't reincarnate again next time club-

-mer changed the chatroom's name to: hoping neither of you reincarnate again next time, you're both annoying as fuck club-

walker
oof

mer
I try to open this chat to talk about something serious, but no. You two won't even let me do that.

walker
well maybe if we had friends we wouldn't be on our phones so much and we wouldn't respond right away

onyx
???

onyx
Ouch.

kfire
is there a reason lloyd wasn't added to this chat

mer
Yes. Now everyone shut up! I've got some interesting news.

mer
The buildings are all owned by the same guy: Wu Garmadon. If you don't know who that is from your history books, it's Lloyd's uncle. He was like a mentor to the original versions of us.
Him and his brother (Lloyd's dad) were set to inherit a real estate tycoon from their father. This guy was no joke, alright? He owned a quarter of the city's residential properties. It seems like the company has fallen through in recent years due to a lack of leadership, but some of us probably live in buildings that he used to own.

**mer**
His kids were probably super rich. As in like, yacht-owning rich.

**kfire**
rich boy check

**mer**
Shut up! I'll kick you from the chat.

**mer**
It seems like Garmadon killed Wu, then disappeared. Cole, Garmadon's tombstone mentioned the Second Rise on it, right?

**onyx**
Yeah, in a poem. What are you getting at?

**mer**
I think Garmadon and Wu founded the Second Rise.

**onyx**
/And/ Wu?

**birchwood**
This is interesting. I assumed they would have been rivals in this life, too.

**birchwood**
But it certainly seems as though Garmadon has benefitted from his brother's property. Even if he was responsible for his death.

**onyx**
I have a question. Neither of them were ever really evil, so why would they be bad this time around and start the Second Rise?

**kfire**
well what if the second rise wasnt always evil

**kfire**
remember when jay was in jail and it seemed like borg was a little evil for a while even tho it wasnt always evil

**kfire**
what if it's like that

**kfire**
it just changed

**mer**
Garmadon was corrupted by that snake venom in his first life, right?
My parents are supposed to be dead. This time, they abandoned us.

What if the snake venom came back, but this time it was different?

So something goes wrong, and Garmadon becomes evil.

And then he murders his brother.

so he took the second rise in a different direction and then died? lloyd is only sixteen he couldn't have died too long ago

Misako stopped talking to Lloyd when he was ten and was under the impression that his father was still alive. She also thought he ran a gang in the city.

who tf is misako

Morro only became the leader a few years ago.

Kai, where are you right now?

man dont make me go home early again

If she has come to the same conclusion as I have, you may need to.

why?

Holy shit. Just go home!

someone pls explain

In order to secure his leadership of the Second Rise, Morro had to first kill the previous leader. If the Second Rise was truly founded and operated by Garmadon, this can only mean one thing.

Morro killed Lloyd's father.
Cole spent a long time thinking about what Nya had just told them. He could accept the chain of murders, he could accept that maybe Garmadon turned evil, but there was still something bothering him.

If the Second Rise held any kind of view of society, of what it should be, it wouldn't be easy to stamp out. So what was it?

And why did they think Cole would agree with them?

"He definitely did not take it well," Kai told him over their biotech. Cole was in his room, alone as he checked in on Kai. They needed Lloyd to be ready for the final battle, both emotionally and physically, and Cole had a feeling that the recent revelation regarding his father would cause him to feel something. It did. "He wasn't even sad. He was just . . . mad. He kicked a table and hasn't really left his room since. I can't really blame him. This guy holds the idea of meeting his dad over his head for years, and then it turns out that he'd killed him years ago? I don't even know how to begin putting myself in his shoes."

"You don't have to. I was with him the first time his father died. Just be there for him, like normal," Cole said. "Maybe buy him some candy. I'm sure you know what to do."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm trying my best."

"At least school is finished for the summer. Actually, is it more stressful when your kid is in school, or when your kid is out of school?"

"He's not my kid! I only adopted him so he would feel safe. How were some random parents supposed to understand the situation?"

"Wow, you wanted him to feel safe? How very not-fatherlike of you."

"I hate you. Talk to you later."

It took a few more days for Skylor to pull into the city by train. Zane picked her up from the train station and brought her to Kai's house, where the rest of the ninja awaited her in the living room, gi on and ready to go. She froze in place as soon as she stepped through the door and saw them.

"You were being serious?" she asked as Kai approached her. They hugged and then took a step back from each other. "You're actually a ninja?"

"Yeah, I've been a little busy since I kicked your ass at championships," he quipped. Skylor tried to kick him and he jumped out of the way to avoid it. "Hey, don't be mad that you're not a cool ninja like I am."

"Oh yeah? Then why am I here?" she said, gesturing to the room. She smiled. "Am I not good enough to be a ninja, too? Or do I need to bring all my gold medals to prove it?"

"Can you guys stop joking around? This is serious," Lloyd interrupted. The impatience was sharp in his voice. "I just want to finish this. Cole? Let's start."

Without hesitation, Cole pulled out the blueprints for the seven buildings. Each ninja had to follow a
simple, two-step plan: first, they would infiltrate the building they were assigned and determine if it was being used as the Second Rise home base. If not, they would move on to step two, where they would convene on the building where a ninja reported Second Rise activity. They would all group together, storm the place, and hope it went their way.

Strangely enough, Cole was almost looking forward to waking up tomorrow morning, after the Second Rise was defeated and this weight was removed from his shoulders. He didn't want time to move so cruelly forward, but if he could take Zane's advice to heart, he could bring himself to enjoy the next seventy years without fear of what came next. First, they just had to defeat the Second Rise to get there.

As Kai helped Skylor get ready, Zane pulled Cole into the kitchen. There was an excited gleam in his eye, the kind he got when he had a new idea he wanted to share with someone. He smiled widely as he spoke.

"I have a great idea," he began. "I have been thinking of our retirement for a while now. I know where we should go."

Cole couldn't hide his smile. "Where?"

"Jamanakai village. I know it is cold, but there is a reason for that," Zane said. "It is a snowy village in the mountains. Perfect for the two of us."

"A mix of our elements," Cole remarked. "I like it."

"Oh! And, if we move to the village, we can cross off something I have had on my so-called 'bucket list' for a long time."

Zane reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. He handed it to Cole. He unfolded it and there was a stock photo of a brown puppy printed on the paper. "I have never had enough time to own a dog. Would you like to do that with me?"

"I'm more of a cat guy myself, but I think I can handle a dog," Cole replied. He gave the photo back to Zane. "I get a stake in naming it too, okay? You can't name it *Falcon*, like you did with all your fish."

"We can discuss names later. For now, we must go," He turned to leave the kitchen. "Come on, Skylor should be finished by now."

There was a strange flutter in his heart and he grabbed Zane's wrist, keeping him in place. "Zane, wait."

Zane faced him. "What is it?"

"You know, I just—" he took a deep breath, trying to think of how he could say this. "I can be a bit of a pain sometimes, with my emotions, and all. I don't know what's going to happen after tonight. I hope I can be happy, and I think I can be. But I don't think I'll be that way forever. And before it gets bad again, I just want to—"

Zane put his hand over Cole's mouth, silencing him. "The day you came to me from the train platform, scared of what you had almost done, I worried that I had not done enough to help you." His voice was quiet. "It took me time to realize that I had done all that I could. I now understand that I may help all that I can, we may hire the best therapists in the world, but these battles are won by you. It makes me sad that you must fight them so often, so please, even if it gets so bad again that the skytrain is calling your name, do not see yourself as a burden to me. Should we both live forever, I want to do it by your side. Nothing you could do would put that in jeopardy."
Like the flutter in his heart, it was spontaneous. It was a burst of love, pure and hopeful as he reached forward and wrapped his arms tightly around his friend. Zane embraced him back, and for a moment they just held each other, comfortable and safe in each other's arms. Cole didn't want to let go, but when he could hear a commotion from the front hallway, he knew it was time to leave.

He released Zane and stepped back. "Come on, let's go. They're waiting for us."

Zane nodded and they began their mission.

In the dark of night, Cole rode his elemental dragon above the clouds. His building target was in the north side of the city, only a few blocks away from Kai's dojo. He stayed in the clouds above his building, waiting for everyone to report in. The hits had to be simultaneous—they couldn't risk Morro getting a security alert from another building and then realizing that his could be next. They didn't want him to have any preparation at all.

It was a surprise attack, as all ninja missions were meant to be.

Nya was the last ninja to report in over the comms. "Sorry guys, I'm here. Are we ready to go?"

"We should be," Cole answered. "Everyone, remember to report in and get out of there as soon as you're sure there's nothing in the building. Listen to your comms for updates from everyone else."

"Alright. Let's go," said Lloyd. A moment passed and no one else spoke, so Cole took it as a signal that everyone else had already started to enter their buildings.

Cole's elemental dragon disappeared beneath him and he used airjitzu to float down to the roof of the apartment complex. It was an old one, and if he was lucky, he would find the Second Rise in this one. Aside from a few metal patches on the outside holding the walls together, the building was made of brick and stone, playing right into his skillset. A flick of his wrist to crash the building down on Morro was all he would need to end the Second Rise forever.

"I have found nothing in mine," Zane said. "Anyone else?"

Cole explored the first few floors, but there was nothing to be found. He couldn't hear anything either, and if he tried to feel for movement in the earth, it seemed as though he was the only person in the building.

"Mine's empty," Cole reported in. "The rest of you should be finished by now. How are your buildings?"

"Nothing for me," Nya said. "This place is creepy. Can I leave yet?"

"Empty. Has anyone found anything?" Lloyd demanded. "What if this is what he wanted? What if he just moved them to a new building and put the trackers here to mess with us?"

"That's possible, because I have nothing. Skylor?" Kai asked.

"Sorry to disappoint, but I've got nothing either," she said. "So, that's none of us. Right?"

"Sorry to disappoint, but I've got nothing either," she said. "So, that's none of us. Right?"

"I know you're new to the team and all, but I exist, okay?" came Jay's voice. "I can't find anything in mine. I checked the elevator shaft and everything."

"This might seem bad, but it means he's gone into hiding. He's scared of us. We just need to figure out where he's gone next." The feat was easier said than done, but he didn't want anyone to feel hopeless. Failing a mission was always tough. "Regroup at Kai's. We can talk more there."
Cole flew to Kai’s house and waited in his living room. The other ninja slowly trickled in, a little defeated but this would be remedied with time. Like he’d told them, they just had to find them. With resources as great as theirs, this wouldn't take too much longer. He was sure of it.

When Lloyd got home, he didn't say anything and ran to his room. Kai followed him upstairs. Cole didn't want to think about what was going through the kid's head right now.

An hour later, only six ninja had returned. At first, he was calm, sure that he would come home soon. Another half hour passed. Cole was officially worried.

"Zane, where are you?" he asked into the comms. "We're meeting at Kai's place. Hurry up."

Now that he was made of titanium, Zane was practically indestructible. Cole used this fact to calm himself often, telling himself over and over again that there was nothing anyone could do to hurt his friend. He repeated this like a mantra to himself now, trying to convince himself that everything was okay.

But he knew it wasn't. He pulled his mask back over his face, ready to go out and search for him. If Morro had captured him, Cole would get him back. And then Morro would have to deal with having the two most powerful people on the planet trying to take him down.

He was about to leave through the front door when there was a crash! in Kai's backyard. Cole and the others still in the living room hurried to the back door, pulling it open and stepping onto the patio.

Zane's mangled body awaited them on the porch. He was all in one piece, but he was unmoving, and Cole's breath became uneven as he made his way to his body and turned him over onto his back.

There were no injuries, no holes from a bullet, nothing. Cole wanted to believe he was fine, but his eyes had no light in them and it didn't seem like he was functioning at all. He beckoned for Jay and Nya to come over. If anyone could figure out what was wrong, it was them.

"His panel is in his chest," Cole told them. Jay nodded and removed the upper part of Zane's gi, exposing his metal torso. He found the edge of the panel and pulled it open.

Where his core was once bright, it was now dark. His heart was dead.

"What's wrong with him?" Cole demanded. "Is he—"

"He's fine," Jay assured him. "If they destroyed his core, we can get a replacement at anytime. Zane isn't a rare model anymore."

"But his core isn't damaged," Nya observed. She kneeled down next to Jay to get a closer look. "He looks completely fine. Did they just turn him off?"

"Something is missing." Jay pointed to an empty slot in the back of Zane's chest. "I don't know what this is supposed to be. What if they took it from him?"

"Is Morro good enough with technology to know what to target?" Nya asked. "We should jumpstart his core again and see what happens. His vitals are all in place."

Jay shrugged. His fingers reached behind Zane's core and a moment later, his heart came back to life, whirring and glowing and giving a breath of life to Zane's entire body.

Zane's eyes blinked open. He gently pushed Jay and Nya away from his body and sat up.
"I am confused," he said. He looked around. "Where am I?"

"You're at Kai's house," Jay explained to him. "Morro shut down your core, but you're fine now. Are you good?"

"There is something foreign on my arm." Zane rolled back the sleeve on his left arm and held it up for everyone to see. "What is it?"

White bandages were wrapped around his forearm. On them, in thick black ink, were words that read:

**LEAVE US ALONE, OR SAY GOODBYE TO ZANE. FOREVER.**

"What does this mean?" Cole asked. His heart beat fast as he began to panic. "What does this mean?"

"May I ask a question, too?" Zane said. He looked at the group surrounding him. "It seems you know me, but I hold no recollection of you. Who are you?"

Cole's heart stopped. No, no, no . . .

"The empty slot in the back," Nya breathed.

Jay slapped a hand over his mouth. His voice was muffled as he spoke.

"They didn't just shut him down. They took his memories."

On that porch, everything evaporated. If Cole had any kind of hope left, any semblance of the idea that there was light at the end of this tunnel, it vanished.

Three thousand years ago, they had always thought that it was Zane who would be alone forever.

But now, the truth hurt like a knife to the heart. Zane was never going to be the one to live in misery for eternity.

It was Cole.

---

**WHITE | ICE**

He didn't go back to his apartment, where Jay and the others could find him. He went to a place no one else knew, a small apartment downtown with grey walls and tall windows. There was a bed in the bedroom, never used unless Cole slept over. It was covered in pillows and comfy blankets and he just sank into it, heavy heart bringing him deep until he could no longer move.

It felt like his chest was crushing him. There was something deep in his core, a familiar monster that came back to haunt him every so often, churning up dark feelings and guilt until his emotions were so heavy on top of him that the idea of pushing them away and getting out of bed made him cry.

He slept, and slept, and slept, until he was no longer tired and closing his eyes felt oppressive. His biotech was going haywire, friends spamming his social media in an effort to get a response from him. He'd left them quite suddenly, taking off on his dragon when Zane asked him to tell him his name. It was an impossible question. How was he supposed to introduce himself to someone he'd known for thousands of years without breaking?
He got another notification and bit his tongue.

**walker**
where are you?

**walker**
please come home

He shut off his biotech. It was strange to no longer see information like the time and weather displayed in his vision, and in a way, it was liberating. He didn't want to be reminded that he was wasting beautiful summer days in a room. He just wanted to be alone and think.

Thinking was hard. He tried to distract himself by reading books he found in the bedside table, but he could never get past the first few pages before his thoughts took him elsewhere. They were a burner on low in the back of his mind, a background of red that seemed to be hammering nails into everything he did. He couldn't avoid them for long. Eventually, they came flooding to the forefront of his brain, then pooled down into his body where they would feed the monster and he'd become paralyzed by a sinking feeling of guilt that enveloped him in a reality he knew was only true by his own actions:

*Zane is gone,* the monster told him. *Morro has his memories and he's never going to give them back. He's probably already destroyed them. Is it sad, that your oldest friend turned out to be temporary, but this will last forever? Loneliness is an eternal component of the human condition. It's about time that you came around to accept it again.*

He understood that if he didn't fight it, if he let himself stay like this, he would never get the chance to find out if Zane could be saved. But it all seemed like it was on the other side of a mountain he could not climb, one no amount of earth powers could move. He didn't know how he was meant to try. On the other side were answers, but in a hundred years, he would be alone again, anyways. His friends would die, Zane with memories or not.

The future was so uncertain, a devil he couldn't even begin to imagine. The monster within was a devil he knew, so he stayed in bed and let the crushing feeling consume him until he was tired enough to sleep again.

The next morning, he was hungry and sweaty and he knew he needed a shower. His gi was disgusting after wearing it for three days straight, so when he brought himself to get up an hour after he awoke, he stripped down and threw it in the laundry bin still filled with Zane's clothes. He found a clean towel and made his way to the bathroom, where he turned the shower to its hottest temperature and hoped the scalding water would just *do something* to help.

But it didn't—it just hurt. He tried to get through his normal routine, but he couldn't focus and he found himself standing still in the shower, feeling the water hit his skin. It turned from hot to warm to cold as it ran out of hot water, and he turned off the shower with shampoo suds still in his hair because dunking his head under cold water felt too daunting a task. He dried himself off and made his way back to the bedroom, rummaging through Zane's closet until he found the stash of clothes he'd put there for the days when he slept over.

He changed into a pair of shorts and a tank top and went to the kitchen now that he was up. Zane always kept snacks in case he had guests over, so Cole was able to find a box of crackers and a can of his favorite soda to help with a growing caffeine headache that rattled his brain whenever he moved.

Cole loved eating. He ate when he was stressed, when he was hanging out with friends, when he
was bored at home and had nothing to do. It was one of life's greatest joys. When he went through a depressive episode, Zane could always tell, even if he tried to hide it. If he was suspicious, he often deployed a cruel method that unveiled the truth without fail: he would call Cole on a day he knew he wasn't busy, and he would invite him to go out for dinner.

During an episode, his relationship with food changed. His stomach seemed small, and eating made him feel sick. The food would sit at the bottom of his belly, a cruel reminder that his body and all the chemicals in his brain were working against him.

He took a few bites of the crackers. His mouth became dry and he couldn't swallow them, so he cracked open the can of soda and drank some to wash it down, but the soda made his mouth feel sticky and gross and he realized that he hadn't brushed his teeth in three days. His stomach grew queasy and he put the food away. He felt too tired to chew anymore, anyways.

A few minutes later, the crackers weighed so heavy at the bottom of his stomach that it turned upside down. His stomach jumped and he raced to the toilet, where he threw up what little food he had in his body. He hated that it felt good to do it—hated it so much that he sat on the bathroom floor and sobbed. He sobbed, and sobbed, and sobbed, his tears big and ugly. It was embarrassing. He was supposed to be stronger than this. He was supposed to be Cole, the smart, athletic black ninja that could take on armies alone.

But this was him too, wasn't it? He was Cole, the black ninja with dried shampoo suds in his hair and an empty stomach and the rancid smell of vomit in his breath.

This was him, too. It had always been him. And it would be him for the rest of his life.

The monster purred and his stomach heaved. He opened his mouth and nothing came out but spit.

He spent three months in the apartment. At one point, he grew too hungry to subsist solely on crackers and the granola bars he found in Zane's cabinets, so he braved the outside world to walk to the grocery store a block away from Zane's apartment building. He stocked up on pre-made smoothies, rice, and the protein bars that Kai and Nya ate all the time. He needed easy things to cook and eat. The smoothies would go down easy, rice could be left alone until it was time to eat, and the protein bars tasted good enough that he could see himself choking a few down every once in a while. He would need easy things to cook when he got home—even a trip to a grocery store, once something so simple he would laugh at the idea that it was difficult during his good days, was exhausting and made his heart beat a little too fast and he wondered if people were staring at him, and all he wanted to do was go back to the apartment and crawl into bed.

By September, he was running out of food again. He woke up on a dark day. Clouds blocked the sun, and when he looked outside, the city around him seemed to be sad. The first signs of colder weather always did that, but Cole loved autumn. He loved the reprieve from summer, the excitement as Day of the Departed was just around the corner, and the shift into darker styles of fashion. It was a comforting time of year.

He left the bedroom and stopped dead.

"You know, I always thought I'd find you here," Nya said. She leaned against the wall, facing the doorway. "How have you been?"

He didn't really know how to explain it. "Not good."

"I don't think any of us have been good." She took a step toward him, but continued to keep her distance. "Did you know that Jay didn't register for any courses this semester? Can you just think
about that for a second? The perfect student, Jay Gordon, has basically dropped out of university."

He didn't want to think about it. He tried to speak, but his throat closed, and he knew it wasn't going
to happen. He was stuck.

"I'm sorry," she said. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "I know you've been here the whole
time and I haven't done anything. I found Zane's address in Borg's database, and I could have come,
but I wanted to give you some space. I didn't realize it was this . . . bad."

She looked over her shoulder to the living room, a quaint space with uncomfortable couches that
Cole had always hated.

"Do you want to sit down? We need to talk."

He shook his head. *The couches suck,* he wanted to say.

Nya smiled reassuringly. "Then let's just stand."

Cole swallowed. He could feel a wall between himself and Nya, the kind that made it hard to get his
words out. It was mental, but it was physical too, and he could never seem to figure out how to
surpass it.

Her gaze softened as the silence went on. "You don't need to say anything. Let me do the talking,
okay? I just need you to listen."

She took another step closer. "We know where he is. We took that picture—do you remember the
one Ronin sent us, the Second Rise logo?—and we figured out that it isn't just some kind of symbol,
it's a map. If we draw lines between the seven buildings, they seem to form a loop, and if we go by
what's in the symbol, Morro should be in the middle, on the dot. I think he wants us to go there. Like
some kind of final showdown."

Nya pulled out her phone and showed him the map.

"See what I mean? He has to be there." She was much closer now, close enough that she could reach
forward and rub his shoulder. "We're going to get Zane's memories back. He'll be okay."

He shook his head.

"What? Why not?"

He supposed that if anything could break down the wall, it was the monster. It was sudden. He
couldn't help it—all of his thoughts that once weighed him down came out of his mouth like vomit.

"He's probably already destroyed them. I want to hope he hasn't, but he has no reason to keep them,
and I just know that if we get even remotely close to him he'll put the drive under his boot and crush it. Zane is gone, Nya. He's not dead but he's gone." Tears were forming in his eyes. He wiped them away. "Don't you get it? I'm alone. You're all going to die some day, and Zane doesn't even know who I am anymore, and if I wanted to be happy again after all of this is over, it's now impossible. I bet it's going to happen in the same order, too. Kai, then Jay, then you, then Lloyd. And I'll be too depressed to go to your funerals just like last time, but Zane won't even be there to read my eulogies, so you'll get nothing. You'll get nothing from me because I'm too fucking stupid to get over myself and just go. I'm sorry, Nya. I'm sorry that our lives became intertwined like this. I'm sorry that Chen ruined Kai's fighting career, I'm sorry that Ronin hit you with his car, I'm sorry that Nadakhan turned Jay into a killer, I'm sorry that Morro manipulated Lloyd. I'm sorry that my problems came back to life and hurt you—I'm sorry they hurt all of you and won't seem to stop. I'm sorry that your lives are being ruined because I dragged you into this. You should have been living normal lives, but now you want to throw yourselves into danger to save the memories of someone you've only known for eight years. You shouldn't go. None of you should go. Just move on. Just forget about me and live the normal lives you always deserved."

Now, there were tears in Nya's eyes, too. She looked away from him and took a step back. "I'm—it's fine if you want to think that way. But you're the only one that does. If you decide to come with us, the mission is on October first. You're welcome to join."

"You shouldn't be doing this."

She met his eyes again. She stared at him not with sadness, but with the intense, inspired look in her eyes that he'd seen so often before.

"We're not doing this because we love danger. We're doing it because we want you to have a future when we're gone," she told him. Her voice wavered. "You've been fighting so hard for everyone to have a happy ending. You deserve one, too."

Before she rounded the corner to leave through the front door, she forced herself to smile.

"I love you, Cole. We all do. I hope you feel better soon."

She turned the corner and left.

That night, he returned to the bed and laid down with his eyes wide open. The crushing feeling came back, a bulldozer in a forest, tearing down everything in its path and pulling him deep, deep into the monster.

He closed his eyes and grimaced. The monster locked his heart in a cage and dragged it around by a chain. It tied a noose around his thoughts, tightening the knot more and more as each minute passed and he came to accept that he was never going to climb that mountain. He was never going to get to see the other side.

He turned on his side to look out the window. The view wasn't very nice, but he could see into the windows of the building across the street. People watched TV and laughed with friends and read books on their couches and cuddled with their cats and ate so many different kinds of foods and huddled over desks and cleaned dishes and danced to music he couldn't hear and talked on the phone and smoked and drank and someone was crying and by late night they all turned off their lights to go to sleep.

For a moment, he remembered what Nya said to him. He remembered the old and the new, the words she said to him before she passed away and the words she said to him before she walked out the front door that morning. Go take care of yourself for once, she'd told him in the hospital. And just
now, *You deserve one, too*. A happy ending. A life worth the eternity given him.

It didn't take him long to fall asleep. But as he thought of her words, the crushing became a little bit lighter.

He awoke with a spark behind his eyes. His episodes could last for days, sometimes years. Recovery could take even longer. But he didn't have that kind of time. Not right now.

The spark was a small bit of motivation as his body chemistry seemed to align for just a few moments, granting him the clarity of mind to come to terms with his situation:

He had a month to get better. Thirty days wasn't enough time to fully recover, but it was enough to get his head above the water. And that was all he needed.

That morning, he took a shower. It was slow, and it was difficult to keep his arms moving, but he went through his routine and came out with clean hair. Brushing it was too hard, so he let it dry and sat on the edge of the bed with a towel around his waist, breathing deeply. Showering felt good. He just needed to hold on to this feeling for a little bit longer.

The breathing helped keep the crushing at bay. Four seconds in, four seconds out. Just like Zane had taught him so many years ago.

He drank his last smoothie—the whole thing—and clenched his fists tight when it curdled in his stomach. It wanted to come out. He tensed every muscle in his body, shut his eyes, and willed it to stay there. He gagged once. It sounded like an ugly cough. He was fighting himself. He was losing. He always lost these battles with himself, the battles of control. His body hated it when he took control of himself. It hated *him*.

That was what these were, he realized. His episodes, the monster, the crushing—they were revenge designed to remind him that no matter how much he thought he controlled himself, no matter how internal his locus of control became, it would never last. He would lose control and the monster would always win.

He heaved and acid splashed his throat. He swallowed it back down. He put his head on the kitchen counter, his face becoming hot, as he begged aloud to no one.

"Please, please, please, please," he muttered. He couldn't lose. If he threw up, if he lost his progress, he didn't know how much longer it would take to climb out of the hole again.

He swallowed again. Slowly, the pain in his stomach alleviated, and he unclenched his muscles. He opened his eyes and breathed.

He won.

The next month was slow. He made progress bit by bit, showering and eating and brushing his teeth every day until taking care of himself was no longer an uphill battle. When he ran out of food, he went to the grocery store and forced himself to buy *ingredients* for meals, not easy things that he didn't have to think about. He got home that evening and he made himself a Cole-sized meal because he deserved it. He ate just as much food as he used to and he did it because he had faced the monster and won.

It became easier to go outside. As the weather cooled, it became easier to wear the clothes he felt comfortable in, the all-black attire that had caused Kai to think he was *grunge* the first time they'd met in person. He forced himself to go outside more often, where he would go on walks around the neighbourhood to get used to being around people again. This was often the hardest part, so he saved
it for last, when he felt secure enough that a bad experience outside wouldn't cause him to relapse.

The crushing came at night. Some nights, it was bad enough that he would toss and turn all night, the ghostly pain in his chest keeping him awake. But there were nights when it was barely there at all, and he could sleep without thinking of his lonely future.

On the last night of September, the crushing was deep, deep down inside of him, far enough that he wondered if it was really there at all. He felt like his head was finally above the water. For the first time in three months, he felt okay.

He told himself that he would be okay tomorrow, too. He would be okay a year from now. He would be okay for the next seventy years, because if he wasn't, he would waste his time with his friends, and he couldn't allow that to happen. And then whatever happened after their deaths didn't matter. Not for now.

But the end of all this didn't need to be so bleak. Zane didn't need his memories to still be Zane. They'd been friends for thousands of years, and they would continue to be for thousands more. They'd form new memories together. And what a better time to start off again than in a lifetime surrounded by the people they'd once been forced to leave behind together?

He wanted Zane to get his memories back. But maybe it wasn't the end of the world if that didn't happen.

He washed his gi in the morning. He showered and ate a big lunch. Come evening, he was ready. He put on his gi and got in the elevator. He rode up to the roof. It was a cloudy day outside, perfect for a ninja mission. He didn't know how tonight would end, if they would get Zane's memories back, or if they would even defeat Morro. He'd proven that he could learn from his mistakes, and if they weren't careful, they could risk losing more than just Zane's memories.

When he first met Kai, he'd promised himself that he wouldn't let the reincarnated ninja get anywhere close to real danger. He realized now that that was impossible—danger always found them, whether they wanted it or not. He couldn't keep them away from fights or the various evils of the world, couldn't keep them from getting injured or captured by enemies. They seemed destined to get into trouble no matter how much they tried to avoid it.

He could forgive himself for giving up on making sure they lived safe lives. But he could never forgive himself if their lives were cut down early.

As he summoned his dragon, he prepared himself for the end. He didn't expect his friends to die, but he felt like this was going to be the last fight for a long, long time.

He climbed onto the dragon's back and flew into the clouds.

It was easy to tell that the ninja were planning something inside. The blinds to Kai's house were all closed, the windows were shut, and when Cole knocked on the door, no one answered. He knew they were there—he could feel them walking around the house with his powers—and tried to knock again. There was no answer.

With a sigh, he activated his biotech. The familiar numbers for the time and weather appeared in his vision, as did hundreds of notifications from his friends. He ignored them and made a new group chat instead.
-onyx has opened a new chatroom!-

**secure_bot**
Welcome to Secure, Ninjago's safest messaging service! Your messages will remain on our isolated, closed-circuit servers, keeping you safe from government surveillance and private tracking. Remember to donate to ensure that your communications remain private! Safe chatting!

**onyx**
Please let me in.

**kfire**
WAIT WHAT

The door opened a moment later. Kai was dressed in his ninja gi, red from head to toe. His eyes widened and he reached forward, pulling Cole into a tight hug.

"We didn't think you would come," he told him, speaking into his shoulder. "I'm so glad you're here. We really need you."

Cole wrapped his arms around his friend. "I couldn't live with myself if anything bad happened to you."

A few moments passed before Kai let go and stepped back. "Come on, we need to go over the plan with you. There's a lot to catch up on."

Kai brought him inside, where the others waited for him. It was instantaneous—six arms enveloped him at once, their sleeves green, and blue, and grey, and their words a resonating chorus of *I miss yous and we love yous and don't do that again, we're always here for yous.*

But one person stood off to the side.

When the group hug was finished, Cole made his way over to him.

"We got off on the wrong foot earlier. Sorry about that. Let's start over." He stuck out his hand for a handshake. "My name is Cole."

Zane took his hand awkwardly. "I have been told my name is Zane."

Cole smiled sadly. "Yeah. Yeah, that's you, alright."

The mission briefing was short. The other ninja had been discussing what to do for months, and from the way they explained how they'd come up with the plan, he had a feeling that they'd spent more time arguing than just plotting.

He could understand why. He hated plans that hinged on one person, whether they were sure the plan was going to work or not. There was nothing reassuring about sending in a ninja alone with no backup. Undercover missions were hard, they were dangerous, and he tried to avoid them whenever possible.

Of course, this was exactly the kind of plan the other ninja had thrown together. Kai seemed particularly unhappy about it.

"We have Cole now. Do we seriously need to keep doing this?" he asked the group. They were crowded around the dining room table, where the blueprints for the building they believed Morro to be in were laid out across the wooden surface. "It's too risky."
"Lloyd's the one that thought of the plan," Nya replied. "If he's okay with it, and if it's really our only shot, we have to try."

They all turned to stare at the green ninja. Unlike the others, he wasn't wearing his gi, but normal clothes and his familiar green hoodie.

"I can do this," Lloyd assured them. "Just promise me that it won't take you long."

"Once you destroy the tracker, we'll be right behind you," she said. She tapped her ear. "If you're worried, just use your comms. We'll be listening the whole time."

A wave of worry washed over Cole's body. Kai was right: the plan was risky. In a few hours, Lloyd was going to hide a tracker in his suit, find Morro by himself, and feign surrender in exchange for Zane's memories. They didn't expect Morro to believe him, but since Morro seemed to value Lloyd's life, they didn't expect him to be killed, either. If all went well, Morro would bring Lloyd back to the current Second Rise compound, where he would destroy the tracker to communicate back to the team that he was at the compound.

When Cole questioned the reason for that step, Nya explained it to him. "If Morro figures out that he has a tracker, he'll use it to lure us into a trap again. We'll only know it's the real deal if it's broken. Besides, even if Morro destroys it, we'll know where he's been. Lloyd is going to find a way to lead a trail if that happens."

Cole nodded slowly. "When he destroys the tracker, we'll go to its last location and figure out what to do from there. So, this isn't just getting Zane's memories back, is it?"

"No, it's not." She adjusted the sleeves around her wrists. "The Second Rise has been messing with us for six years. Tonight, we're going to finish it. Morro, the recruits, all of it. They're done."

"So, this is really the end."

"It really is."

Lloyd departed at midnight. He was going to tell Morro that he'd chosen to surrender on his own, so he was going to take public transit and wear normal clothes to make it seem like the other ninja weren't involved. As soon as he walked out the front door, the rest of the ninja sat close on the couch to watch his GPS marker move through the map of Ninjago displayed on Nya's laptop.

They watched with anticipation as he approached the building. When he went inside, the marker fell still.

"What is this…" Lloyd mused out loud. Cole opened his mouth to speak to him, but Nya put her finger over his mouth and shook her head. Not now.

The silence hung heavy as Lloyd went silent for a moment. Jay grabbed Cole's arm and held it tight.

It happened too fast.

"Wait, Morro, wait, no—"

Click! Lloyd's comm unit turned off. His GPS marker disappeared from the screen mere seconds later.

Kai stood up. "Let's go."
To keep him safe in his confused state, they left Zane behind and took off towards the building. Nya and Kai rode by motorbike and Cole and Jay travelled through the clouds, keeping close to Nya as she wove through the downtown streets with skill. The final building was another rundown apartment building, one even Lloyd didn't know, so there was no telling what they would find inside. But they did know one thing: Lloyd was trapped in there with Morro and they had to make sure he was okay.

Cole used airjitzu to float down to the closest balcony. Nya and Kai climbed up to join them and they went inside together.

They explored the top floor until they entered what had once been the penthouse suite. Old, lavish furniture covered in stains and mould decorated the interior, but nothing was so impressive as the laptop on the living room coffee table.

It was old. It was hooked up to the wall by a plethora of cords and wires, all seemingly working overtime to keep the laptop alive. The ninja approached it carefully. Normally, they would have ignored it, but there was a familiar face on the screen that pulled Cole towards it.

Lloyd's face was in the preview monitor of a video editing software. It wasn't the young Lloyd they now knew, but the old Lloyd, the Lloyd on the brink of dying of old age after going from a young adult to an old man in the span of only two months. His death had been too quick for anyone to process, too sudden to prepare for. It was a national tragedy, not just because he died, but because it was so unfair. It didn't feel like a natural death. It felt like an assassination.

Jay reached forward and pressed the spacebar. The video began to play.

*Lloyd spoke from his hospital bed. Tears were in his eyes. He was panicking.*

"I tried so hard. I tried so, so hard to save them, but they wouldn't come back. No matter what I did, they wouldn't come back. I don't know what to do. I'm so fucked." He wiped his eyes but the tears didn't stop. His face was red. "I killed myself. I should have lived for hundreds of years, but I killed myself. I've aged sixty years in two months and no one else knows why and they're freaking out and I don't know what to do. How am I supposed to explain this to Cole and Zane? How can I tell them that I did it? How can I tell them that I've spent every night this past year on my knees on Memorial Way? I can't. It would make it so much worse.

"When I used my powers, I could feel their life forces. It was like hearing four heartbeats at once. My powers made their hearts beat faster—made their life forces stronger. I could feel them. It was like they were beside me. But the more I tried, the longer I stayed at Memorial Way, the more heartbeats I felt. My energy was being stolen by other people, people we were connected to that found a way to latch on to the deceased ninja. I should have quit then. I should have known the universe would never let them back without condition. But I couldn't stop. Not even when I felt Morro pulsing inside of me.

"I thought I was close. As I aged, as I gave my energy to the universe, I could feel my friends growing stronger. But it wasn't enough. The universe has taken my energy and given me nothing in return. I don't know what's going to happen. Will they come back? Did I do enough? Or will they only use my life force to feed their own and leave me to die?

"I can't feel them anymore. They're gone. Their life forces . . . they've disappeared and I don't know where they went. But I do know that it's my fault. I hope I didn't do anything too bad. I hope that if I somehow brought them back, if I've given them a chance to live again, they'll be happy. It's what they deserve. It's what we all deserve."
"I can hear the nurse down the hall. I should wrap this up before she gets close enough to hear. I want to say goodbye, but I know that isn't enough. Goodbye, Ninjago. Goodbye, Cole and Zane. Goodbye, me.

"I'm sorry."

The screen went black.

"What? What is he talking about?" Kai asked beside him.

Cole knew the answer. It hurt.

"This isn't just a cosmic coincidence," Cole replied. He brushed his fingers over the keys of the laptop. "He died trying to bring you back. He's the reason you're here."

He wondered if it was an exchange. Lloyd wanted to bring his friends back to life, so the universe took the rest of his natural lifespan as payment.

It was strange to think about. Lloyd had always moved on past the deaths of his friends with grace, crying and mourning and then learning to become happy again within only a few months. It took Cole years—it took him decades to learn to become even remotely happy again. He'd always thought that he was the only one that couldn't get a handle on his grief.

But now, it seemed like that wasn't true. Lloyd was a better actor than he'd ever given him credit for. Only a master could convince the world to be more optimistic as he crumbled apart from the inside.

In hindsight, he probably should have realized the video was part of a trap.

"Wait, guys, look out!" Jay called out from behind.

Cole whipped around just in time for someone dressed all in black to pull a thick bag over his head. A heavy object struck his head and something pricked his arm and he fell into a dreamless slumber.

When Cole came to, he was cold.

His eyes blinked open. A single fluorescent light hung above him, casting white light into every corner of the room. He shielded his eyes with his arm and sat up slowly.

His skull ached. He used his other hand to investigate, prodding around until a spark of pain shot through his head. He brought his hand before his eyes. Flakes of dried blood peppered his skin.

Suppressing a shudder, he looked around the room. The walls were made of a dark metal, and when he touched it, he recognized the smooth texture of the material well. Vengestone-infused metal. There would be no using his powers to help him escape.

Aside from his bed, the only thing that stood out to him in the room was a piece of string on the floor beside him. There was a small knot tied in the middle. He felt like there was something familiar about it, but he couldn't quite place it.

He didn't have much time to think about it before Kai interrupted him.

-kfire has opened a new chatroom!-
kfire  
pls tell me you still have your phones  

kfire  
hello?  

kfire  
come on guys talk to me here  

onyx  
I highly doubt they would let them keep their phones.  

kfire  
oh thank fuck for biotech  

kfire  
where are you? i feel like shit and my head hurts.  

onyx  
Aging does that to you.  

kfire  
you know what? fuck you 30 isnt old  

kfire  
who came up with such a bullshit arbitrary number anyways  

kfire  
i bet 30 was old back in your time but guess what we have MODERN MEDICINE now  

kfire  
im gonna live until im like 80 or 90 and THATS when im old  

kfire  
with my skincare routine do you think youll be able to tell apart 30 yr old me from 23 yr old me? i dont think so  

kfire  
my teenage years sucked and now im trying to make it up okay?  

kfire  
"30 is when youre old" get the fuck outta here this is horse shit  

kfire  
why must we conform to this unrealistic standard of youth and beauty anyways  

kfire  
its bullshit fuck  

onyx  
Are you okay?  

kfire
NO

kfire
last i checked we're in fucking pRISON!

kfire
i dont even know where lloyd is

kfire
the second rise fucking got us we are so fucked

kfire
what kind of evil organization keeps prisoners

kfire
they're gonna torture us or some shit like they did to jay and lloyd

kfire
and THEN they're gonna kill us

kfire
they'll probably live stream it too fuck i hate technology

kfire
im not about that okay

kfire
we gotta get out of here

onyx
We have to figure out where we are first.

kfire
yeah ur rite uhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

kfire
do you have any idea

kfire
like come on how many fully functional prisons does ninjago have

onyx
There's a few, but not many have cells made of vengestone.

kfire
i dont even know what vengestone is but which prisons use it

kfire
is it hard to get

onyx
I don't think so. But its only use is for detaining elemental masters, and there's only two of us left to begin with, so it doesn't seem very practical for widespread use.
kfire
but like what are the chances the second rise has it

onyx
Morro could figure out where to get it. I don't think this is a Second Rise prison, though. It's too
developed. It doesn't seem like something a gang of kids could throw together in an abandoned
apartment building.

kfire
so where are we

onyx
There's only two options. We're either in the Kryptarium, or we're in

He looked down at the string. He remembered where it came from, now.

When he'd finally rescued Jay from his cell, he'd been tying knots in a string. This was it.

He was in Jay's cell.

kfire
dont stop typing like that where are we

onyx
We're in Borg Tower.

kfire
what?

onyx
We're in the prison in the basement. They kept Jay here when Nadakhan was in charge.

kfire
yeah but nyas in charge now why would she put us here

kfire
fuck shes not in charge anymore is she

onyx
Kai, we have a very serious problem.

kfire
yeah obviously

onyx
No, I mean we have a VERY serious problem.

onyx
I think we lost.

kfire
like LOST lost?

onyx
Yeah. We lost.

**onyx**
When Nadakhan was in power, he was just the head. He had to convince all the administrators and everything to put Jay down here.

**onyx**
No offense to you, but they wouldn't put me in here. They think I'm too important.

**onyx**
I don't think those administrators are here anymore. I think it's just Morro and the Second Rise.

**onyx**
I think they've secured Borg Tower.

**kfire**
and if you secure borg tower you kinda secure the whole city right

**onyx**
Along with the entire nindroid army.

**kfire**
fuck

**onyx**
We lost. Morro won.

**onyx**
The Second Rise controls Ninjago City.

Cole ran a hand through his hair. His right foot tapped furiously on the floor. How were they supposed to fix this? They'd bested the Second Rise again and again, over and over. Why did they have to fail now?

Ronin was right. He was the worst ninja. It didn't matter how much experience he had, how long he'd lived, how many battles he'd fought—he was always destined to fail. He was always going to fuck up somehow.

He slammed his fist into the wall. It stung. He winced and barely noticed the new messages in the chat.

**birchwood**
Hello, who is this and why do I keep receiving notifications from you?

**kfire**
it's kai and cole

**kfire**
wait you're outside right?

**kfire**
what's going on out there

**birchwood**
I am not sure. I have stayed in the house as you asked me to.

birchwood
I will go outside now.

kfire
be careful

birchwood
Okay.

birchwood
This is strange. No one is here.

kfire
what do you mean

birchwood
I can hear birds singing. Two cats are sunbathing on the sidewalk. It is like nothing is here to disturb nature at all.

kfire
i dont live downtown this is kinda normal

birchwood
Yes and no.

birchwood
What I mean is that there are no humans or nindroids anywhere. I have not seen a single bus or car for all five minutes I have been out here. It is late afternoon. Should it not be busy at this time?

kfire
it should be wtf

kfire
where did they go?

onyx
Sorry for disappearing. They're probably just inside.

kfire
oh ok

onyx
Zane, how brave do you feel right now?

birchwood
I thought it was too dangerous for me to be a ninja while my memories are gone.

onyx
You don't need your memories to do this. All that ninja stuff, it's programmed inside of you. It's part of you. Your memories aren't important right now.

birchwood
Okay. What should I do?

onyx
Go downtown. Try to disguise yourself and see what's going on.

birchwood
Will I need a weapon?

onyx
No. You can't take on the Second Rise by yourself.

birchwood
That is an interesting perspective. I have been doing research on myself for three months, and I believe I very well could.

onyx
I don't care if you /can/. I don't want you to /try/.

birchwood
If the ninja are in prison, should I not attempt to rescue them?

onyx
I need you to promise me that you won't try.

birchwood
Why?

onyx
You don't remember it, but we made a pact. We promised each other that so long as we could help it, we wouldn't die. Don't do this to me. Don't make me live without you.

birchwood
….I understand.

birchwood
I am going downtown. I will report in soon.

It had been a long time since Cole was last captured by an enemy. When he wasn't sad or angry, he felt nothing. He felt bored.

His biotech was still active, so he could watch the time passing by, which kept him a little saner. Imprisonment was always so much worse when he wasn't aware of how much time was passing. Days and nights dragged on, never ending and slowly coalescing into one long, insufferable hell that flipped his sleep schedule upside down and made him want to tear his hair out.

At first, he passed his time by talking and playing games with Kai. They played what felt like a million games of online pool, wherein Kai beat him just about every time because he played it with Nya a lot. Apparently, they didn't need to talk to each other, and playing silly online games with each other was all the communication they needed to keep their sibling bond afloat.

onyx
So, you seriously just never talk to each other?

kfire
get with the times, grandpa

kfire
we see each other in person all the time

kfire
besides just wait until she finds out that you play

kfire
i get game requests at two in the morning

kfire
get ready she wont let u sleep

onyx
Oh no.

A few hours later, just as he was getting extra worried about Zane, he lost all Internet and cell reception. Morro must have figured out that they were old enough to have biotech to communicate with each other. Or, he cut off all mobile services for the whole city. Both options seemed viable.

He fell asleep that night hoping that Zane was okay.

When he awoke the next morning, he wasn't alone.

He saw the figure at the other end of his cell and jumped to attention. He threw off his covers and turned his body to face the person. His eyes were bleary from sleep, so he tried to bring his hands to his face to rub his eyes, but something pulled on his right wrist and kept it in place.

He looked down. A vengestone cuff attached to his wrist was linked to the metal bed frame. He couldn't move.

"Good morning, black ninja."

He snapped his head up. He could see the figure just fine now.

Morro.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

Morro reached in his back pocket. He pulled out what looked like a computer chip.

"I want to give you a chance," he said. The cruel smile was missing from his face. He was serious. "Lloyd told me that you came here to get your friend's memories back. I'm sure that's not all you sought to do, but he's such a good little actor, I couldn't help it: he convinced me. Now, it's your turn. Convince me, black ninja. Your life depends on it."

The computer chip was Zane's memory drive. A wave of relief and anger washed over him; happiness that his memories were within reach, and fury at the idea that they were in Morro's possession.

"Convince you to believe what?" he snapped.

"Convince me that you just want your friend's memories. That was our deal, remember? You leave me alone, and I give you the memory drive." He folded his fingers into a fist around the drive. "It's
so small—it would be so easy to break. One wrong word and *oops!* It's gone."

"Why should I bother? You'll know I'm lying."

"Sure. But if I remember correctly, you have a bit of a soft spot for your friends. Not many people would turn into a ghost to save someone they loved," Morro said. He put the chip back into his pocket and leaned against the metal wall. "I don't actually remember much. I can recall bits and pieces of my childhood, a few lessons with Wu, the moments before my death. But I remember my possession of Lloyd in full, like watching a movie through my own eyes. And then, when I died again, nothing. It's all blank. It feels like an incomplete story."

"That's because it is," Cole realized. "You helped us during that one Day of the Departed—the time I became human again. And you don't remember?"

Morro shook his head. "You know, when I possessed Lloyd, I shared some of my memories with him. Coming back like this, and knowing that Lloyd is the reason I'm here . . . I wonder if those memories stayed with him. And then I wonder if that's why I got them back, like they were some kind of extra memories the universe didn't know what to do with."

Cole tried to remember Lloyd's final video. He recalled one moment, wherein Lloyd spoke about feeling Morro *pulsing* inside him as he used his powers to bring his friends back to life. And then, like a jigsaw puzzle finally coming together, it all made sense.

"I don't think you were given those memories. I think you stole them."

Morro simply shrugged. "Maybe I did. But does that really matter?"

"I guess not."

"I'm not here to figure why we've come back. I'm here to help you make your choice," Morro said. "One week ago, the Second Rise secured Borg Tower. But we have a problem. When you and your friends ousted Nadakhan from Borg, you threw quite a large wrench in our plans. See, we may control the Tower, but all of Borg's security mechanisms are locked behind so many layers of encryption software that even our best hackers can't get in. So, as of now, we're a little stuck."

He almost laughed. "What do you want me to do about it? I can't unlock anything for you."

"You're right." Morro's eyes shifted to the door. "But the person who can is sleeping across the hall."

Of course. "Nya. She's the only one that can access the security systems."

"Now, let's discuss the deal." Morro took a few steps towards him, standing just out of arm's reach. "If Nya unlocks the security systems for us, you will all be allowed to live. I'll even give you Zane's memories. And then, when it's all sorted it out, you and the other ninja can take the Bounty to Jamanakai and live there in peace for the rest of your lives. We won't go anywhere near it. You'll be safe."

Just like Zane's proposed retirement plan. When he imagined life in that seemingly timeless village, it seemed perfect: happy, idyllic, and peaceful. He wanted it. He thought of his long-held dream to move to the countryside, where time seemed to move slowly and he could live far away from the hustle and bustle of the city. To him, there was nothing better than what Morro now offered him—a life of he'd always wanted, one with friends, all on a silver platter.

But obviously, he couldn't take up the offer. How could he, when he didn't know how many people Morro would hurt when he gained access to the nindroid army? How would he justify himself to his
friends after he'd taught them to never give up the fight? Especially while Morro did . . . whatever he planned to do.

Actually, that begged a different kind of question.

"What will you do with it? The software, I mean. What's the plan?" Cole tried to cross his arms in some form of defiance, but the handcuff jerked his arm back into place. He swallowed away the embarrassment and kept going. "I want to know before I make my decision."

Finally, Morro smiled.

"I want to jumpstart a new era," he told him. "I don't really care what it is. I just want change. I want the world to move on."

"Move on from what?"

"You. I want the world to move on from the era of the ninja."

"What? That era ended before the first ninja passed away. It's been years."

His smile dropped. "No one has moved on. If we had, we wouldn't even need Borg Security anymore. There are no more evil snakes or ghosts to terrorize Ninjago anymore. We don't need a nindroid army. The dark ages have been over for a long time. We need to start acting like it."

Cole opened his mouth to disagree, but as a memory came to his mind, he closed it. He found himself back in Ronin's apartment, during his confrontation with Nya, before she'd smashed his monitors onto the floor. He could recall a certain hatred for Borg, and as consequence, a dissatisfaction with the ninja. Coming from Ronin, it was easy to dismiss, but he now wondered if this was a more mainstream opinion. He'd never spent much time dwelling on society, but when he analyzed the advances in society since his first lifetime, he realized that Morro was right.

Everything was fundamentally the same. They had biotech and eco-friendly energy, but the nation was still piecing itself together after the climate issues and he couldn't help but think that nothing had ever gotten better. No, it had only gotten worse before returning to being the exact same.

They still had nindroid officers in the streets, guarding empty tombs turned into hideouts for teenagers. They had rows of unoccupied prison cells in the Borg Tower, ready to use at any moment despite not seeing a real threat in centuries. If Ninjago wasn't safe now, even with the Second Rise, was it ever?

"We don't live to suffer from the evil around us. We live for the chance to be something better."

If Lloyd hadn't lied, if he'd truly came back as himself with all of his memories, would he have been disappointed by the world he was born into?

He found himself staring into Morro's dark eyes.

"You're right. We haven't moved on," he said. "But there's a bit of a problem. You run a gang made up of children. You've kidnapped my friends, manipulated them, and stolen their memories. You even tried to kill me. To be honest, Morro, I don't trust you. You're going to have to do a lot more than just make promises if you want me to help you."

Morro stared back. His eyes narrowed.

"Don't let the violence of my actions neutralize their purpose. I'm not the bad guy. I didn't create the
Second Rise—I re-purposed it. Hell, I saved you from it." He took a step closer. He was in arm's reach, but Cole was smart enough to know that touching him was nothing more than a death wish. "There was something seriously wrong with Garmadon this time around. He wasn't turned evil by some kind of venom. He was born evil. So evil, that when he found out that his brother was planning on reporting him to the cops, he killed him. He took him out on their big family yacht and he stabbed him seven times in the chest, just like all big brothers are meant to do.

"He wanted to finally take over the world. He probably could have done it, too, if I hadn't come along. I gained his trust, convinced his own men to turn against him, and then I shot a bullet into the back of his head. He was going to rule Ninjago. I undid that. You didn't save Ninjago this time, black ninja. I did."

Misako had called Garmadon a monster. Perhaps she'd been right.

The idea saddened him. Even when given a chance to live a normal life with his wife and son again, the universe had to ruin it. But why would he come back evil when Chen was only mean? When Ronin was only a biotech dealer? And when compared to his older self, Morro was a little more... subtle.

Maybe he couldn't just blame the universe. Maybe, to understand why the reincarnations had resurrected as they did, he needed to blame Lloyd, too.

There was Kai, who had come back as a supportive older brother. Nya, who was once blocked from becoming a ninja and now held the key to Morro's defeat. Jay, who was smart but unlucky. And finally, Lloyd himself, who was the son of an 'evil' man with a disappearing mother and the misfortune of being targeting by Morro. The reincarnations were not only reincarnations. They were projections, too: projections of how Lloyd had grown to see his friends before he died.

So of course, Garmadon would come back evil. Being in control of his own morality simply wasn't a part of his character.

Cole refocused. Morro was still watching him, waiting for a response.

"You can tell yourself that you're better, but you've still taken over Ninjago City, and I can't imagine what you'll do when you control the nindroids, too," Cole said.

"I guess. But I have a feeling that Garmadon wasn't one to take prisoners."

Morro turned to his left and knocked on the door. It opened a moment later.

"I've been watching some of Zane's memories. You seem like great friends." He held up the memory drive again, a cruel reminder of what was at stake. "You have two weeks to convince me. Then you're free to go retire in the countryside and raise a dog and I'll never bother you again. Choose wisely, black ninja, or your other friends down here might just bite the bullet, too."

Morro leaned forward and unshackled his arm. He left the room and the heavy door closed behind him.

Cole didn't sleep that night. He wanted to, it made time in prison go by so much faster, but he couldn't stop thinking about Morro's ultimatum. He could retire and let Morro take control, or both him and all of his friends would die.

He supposed he could choose the former and lie, then wait just long enough for Morro to no longer consider him an enemy and attack him when he least expected it. They could try to take him down one last time.
But this was the second time in a row that Morro had outsmarted them. Cole was beginning to doubt the ninja's ability to take on the Second Rise and win.

The next day, he drifted in and out of sleep as he tried to figure out what to do. He couldn't waste an opportunity for his friends to live, but he didn't know what would happen when they were free. Could he bring himself to be complacent in a society ruled by Morro? Could the others? He had a feeling that none of them would be able to shake their ninja mindsets and simply do nothing. Asking these people to do nothing while innocent people suffered was an impossible demand.

But in the end, he supposed he had no choice. Memories or not, his pact with Zane hadn't ended, and he planned to see it through. I won't die if I have the chance to stay alive, Cole told himself. I won't let him live the rest of his life alone.

So, it was decided:

He would take Morro's offer.

Late at night, he finally tumbled into a deep sleep.

And when he opened his eyes, he was still unconscious.

The hot sun beat down on the deck of Destiny's Bounty. He couldn't see anything over the edge, only clouds for miles and miles. He felt isolated and alone until he turned around.

His friends were huddled in a circle on the floor a few feet away, speaking to each other in hushed voices. He sat up slowly and rubbed his eyes as the other ninja continued talking. They hadn't noticed him yet.

"Guys, I'm telling you: this dream is real. We're going to remember it in the morning," came Jay's voice. "It doesn't last very long, though. We need to come up with an escape plan now."

"We can't escape," Nya said. "The only way to open these cells is from the outside, and the walls are made of vengestone, so even Cole is useless. We're stuck."

Kai groaned. "You two are literally the smartest people I've ever met in my life and you're just going to give up? What's the point of going to university if you can't use your 'higher knowledge' to break out of prison?"

"We shouldn't need to break out," Lloyd said. "Morro said that if we left him alone, he would give us Zane's memory drive in exchange. He thinks that's all we were trying to do. If we can keep up that lie, he might let us out of here. Then we can figure out how to stop him."

Cole had to slap his hand over his mouth to stifle a laugh when Kai groaned again, this time flipping over onto his back in frustration. "I did not become a ninja so I could lie my way out of trouble. This is so lame."

Nya shushed him. "Shut up! Cole's not here yet, and I don't want to wake him up too . . ." she trailed off, and Cole realized that she'd finally looked up from the group and was staring straight at him. " . . . early."

Kai looked over and then jumped to his feet. "Cole! You're finally awake! Please tell me you have a plan."

Cole got up, too. He made his way to the group and joined their circle. "I have a plan. But we're not
"Good, because we've been trying for like half-an-hour and aside from Lloyd's plan, we've got nothing," Jay said. "What is it?"

He explained the ultimatum. Kai tried to protest at first, because it felt like admitting defeat, but even he could see that he was better off alive than dead at the bottom of a ditch somewhere. It felt like an easy choice to make—they couldn't come back to defeat Morro if they were dead—but there was a depressing atmosphere as they all acknowledged that no matter how long they had spent training for this, they had failed. Their loss had resulted not only in the theft of Zane's memories, but the capture of Ninjago City, too. And by conceding to Morro's demands, they would concede the rest of Ninjago. Every village and town would be under his control. To get it back, they would have a long road ahead of them.

But Nya had a better idea.

"We don't need to hand it over. I can ruin his plans myself," she said. "We just need to use the Overlord Protocol."

The name filled Cole with dread. "The what?"

"After the Overlord was defeated, Cyrus Borg implemented a failsafe that would protect the company from hostile takeovers. The protocol is basically the only reason why all of our nindroids aren't being hacked to use against the population every few years," she explained. "If Morro gives me access to Borg's main console, I can activate the protocol and shut down every single Borg operation currently in use. That means nindroids, security cameras, and even our cell towers. It takes a whole month for them to come back online. It'll fuck up his plans real good."

Jay glanced back and forth between Nya and Cole. "Okay, but I'm a little worried about what he's going to do with us after we sabotage his plans. I really don't think he'll have a problem with killing us if we break the deal."

"I can unlock the cells at the same time," Nya replied. "You guys will need to get out on your own. There are emergency stairs down the hall from the elevator. You can take those."

"What about you?" Kai asked. "He's going to go apeshit on you when he figures out what's going on. If this plan is literally going to kill you, I'm not doing it. It's not fair."

"I'll go with her," Cole said. "He knows I don't trust him. He won't suspect anything if I insist."

Kai pointed a finger in Cole's face. "You don't get to die, either. That would be some of the biggest bullshit I've ever heard in my life."

For some reason, Kai's words made him laugh. It really would be bullshit, wouldn't it?

He hadn't laughed in a really long time, he realized. He hoped that if they got out of there, if everyone turned out okay, they would all laugh a lot more. They deserved happy lives. And so did he.

"I won't die. I promise."

So, the plan was settled. They would use the Overlord Protocol to end Morro's plans and escape.

It grew darker, and darker, and darker, until he could no longer see his friends around him.
Then he woke up in his cell. It was sobering, but flowers of hope blossomed in his chest, and for the first time in a long time, he could tell himself that everything would be alright.

He knew it would be. Even in their dangerous first lifetime, everything had turned out okay. A gang of teenagers wouldn't take them down. His friends were going to live until they were old, and he would make sure they did.

It happened twice more during the next thirteen days.

A long-lost city in the Sea of Sand.

He came to in the middle of an abandoned slither pit. The old Samurai X suit was abandoned against the far wall and an empty cage hung from a pillar. The stands for viewers, once filled with cheering Serpentine, were now devoid of all life. It was eerily lifeless.

Gusts of wind brought flurries of sand and he covered his eyes. He hated it here. He held no good memories of this place.

Slowly, beside him, his friends awoke, too.

Lloyd covered his eyes as he sat up. "Ouroboros, right?"

This was a surprise. "You know Ouroboros?"

Lloyd shrugged. "Morro taught me everything I know about my past-self. He put a lot of emphasis on our first few years together. You know, to bring out some kind of nostalgia so you would trust me more."

Kai buried his face in his hands. "Is that why you know every grueling detail about old Jay's relationship with my sister?"

Jay and Nya exchanged a weird look before turning to face Lloyd.

Nya stuck a thumb in Jay's direction. "Him? I would never date him. He's like, thirteen."

"I'm twenty-one," Jay huffed. "You're only two years older than me!"

Nya crossed her arms. "Still wouldn't do it."

"You know what? This is a good thing," Cole said. "Relationship drama is stupid and puts the whole team at risk."

Lloyd smirked. "Yeah, you would know."

"Haha, wow, okay, let's change topics," Cole said. He coughed, hoping that it would make him seem less uncomfortable. "Have any of you guys—"

Kai cut him off. "No, let's not change topics. There's something I've actually always wanted to ask you."

Cole took a deep breath and prepared himself for the worst. "What?"

"Why have you never dated anyone before?" Kai asked him. "I kind of asked Zane about it, back
when we first met. He told me that aside from that weird thing that happened, you've never really been romantically involved with . . . anyone. Now, I know a thing or two about romance—I basically had panties thrown at me everytime I walked through the front doors of my highschool—but I can't figure out why you've never gotten together with anyone in your life. It's unnatural, dude. With looks like yours, you've gotta have people fawning over you everywhere. What's the deal?"

For a moment, he reflected. Love was something that, to him, was reserved for the people he cared most about, the people that actually knew him. Not many did. There was Zane, perhaps PIXAL, and his old friends. His new friends were a work in progress, but he knew they would come to know him as well as the others had, too. He loved them. He knew he did.

But romantic love was different. He knew that in many ways, it was similar to close friendship. At some moments, he felt as though Pixal and Zane acted more like friends than lovers, companions until the end of time whose relationship was so similar to Zane and Cole's that it was different only in subtle ways. There were times, too, when he would watch the old Jay and Nya interact with each other and feel like he could very well have been in Nya's place and it wouldn't have changed a thing.

He could understand it. Friendship, but different. He thought back on all his years, trying to recall a moment when he could have felt anything akin to romantic love. Did he ever encounter customers that made his confidence falter in a way only someone you wanted to impress could do?

But then, how did he explain his sudden silence when Jay walked into his store and they met again for the first time? It wasn't romantic. It wasn't even truly love that kept him in place—it was shock.

He sighed and accepted that he would never know the answer. Not until he allowed himself to become less scared of the people around him. How was he supposed to not fear love, when everyone he loved but Zane would always die in the end?

"I don't know what my deal is. I've thought about it before, and everytime I try, I can never get anything out of it. I've never been very good at navigating my feelings, love or not," Cole finally replied. "It's too hard to figure out. I don't really know if I have a type. I don't know if I have some kind of gender-related preference. I don't know if I could ever bring myself to meet someone and take it far enough to be romantic. It's scary."

"Scary?" Lloyd asked.

"I already avoid making friends because I hate watching people die. I'd have to be some kind of masochist to go through that with a romantic partner."

"Can I ask another question, then?" Kai said. The amusing tone in his voice was gone. "If losing people makes you so sad, why seek us out again?"

He didn't need to think about this one.

"I know I can make it seem like our first lives together were perfect. But they weren't." Cole sucked in a deep breath to calm his heart. There was heat building behind his eyes. He didn't want to cry—not now, when he needed to be strong around his friends. He needed to seem like the calm, collected leader he'd made himself out to be. "When I look back without the usual rose-tinted glasses, I know everything wasn't perfect. We had stressful lives. We fought a lot. We had falling outs. We almost killed each other every once in awhile. It wasn't perfect—not by a longshot. The idea of it, it used to keep me up at night, and I'd beat myself up over wasting even a second of my time with you over stupid arguments. I thought that this time around, we could just be friends and not have to worry about any of the bullshit that haunted our old friendships. I just wanted to live happy, normal lives with you from day one until you died again."
Nya stared at Cole. Her expression was soft. "What else?"

He shrugged. There was only one other thing he could say.

"I missed you."

A village for lowlives and thieves. It was just as sickly green as he remembered.

This dream was a little different. When Cole opened his eyes, he was in a bustling restaurant, likely the only one the village ever knew. His table was long and occupied by friends. Half-empty plates of food covered their table. They were midway through a meal.

His friends were in the middle of a laugh, and as it died down, Cole realized why this dream felt so different.

Kai wiped a tear from his eye, drawing Cole's attention to a scar that cut into his left eyelid. He'd received it a few years ago, after a bad run-in with some Serpentine. Cole had seen the scar enough to be able to know every millimeter of the jagged, pink line on his skin. He knew all of his friends' eyes a little too well; when in gi, it was the only part of them he could ever really see.

He knew the eyes around him well enough to know that they were different than the ones he had looked into when he dreamt of Ouroboros two nights ago. These were not the young, hopeful eyes that he'd become used to seeing on his new friends' faces.

These were the eyes of a team that had nearly lost their friend to a ghost's possession. The eyes of a team that had seen one of their teammates die. And when Cole looked down, he could see through his semi-transparent hands to see the dark wood of the table.

He was a ghost again.

This wasn't a shared dream. He was all alone.

"Does it suck, not being able to eat?" came a loud voice next to him. "I mean, come on, that's kind of your thing. You're the team's foodie. And now you can't even process food anymore." A pause as he put a piece of meat in his mouth. He pushed it into his cheek to keep talking. "Do you think you're going to go through an identity crisis?"

Nya's voice was sharp. "Jay, be a little sensitive!"

Jay swallowed and leaned back in his chair dramatically. "What? I'm just saying that it's gotta suck."

"Do you even have a remote concept of sympathy?"

"Whoa, whoa, okay guys, let's relax," Kai said, raising and then slowly lowering his hands in a way that said calm down. "This is our first time all hanging out since the whole Preeminent thing. We don't need to be having arguments."

Cole felt a spike of cold as a draft carried through the restaurant. He looked around for an open window or an air conditioner, but he couldn't see one. Weird. He wasn't used to feeling cold air when he was a ghost.

"Kai's right. Let's talk about something else, like how Zane ditched us just because Wu wanted to talk to him."
Lloyd piped up. "Isn't that a good excuse?"

"Um, no, it's a terrible excuse. Wu never makes any sense except for when he conveniently forgets to tell us very important things," Jay replied. "He's not going to tell Zane anything important. If it were, we'd be there, too."

The anger dropped from Nya's face. "Here me out: he's actually on a date with PIXAL."

Kai rubbed his hands together and leaned forward. "Ooh, I like those odds. What do you think, Lloyd?"

"How does that work? Isn't she in his head?"

"He goes on dates with her every night," Cole said. Another gust of chilly air passed through the room and he suppressed a shiver. "They talk while we sleep. We just can't hear them."

Nya rested her chin on her hands. "Aw, that's so cute. I had no idea."

"Wait, is that why he laughs and wakes me up at two in the morning? I've almost killed him like, five times," Kai said.

Jay laughed. "He just talks to her in his head? That's so weird."

"Yeah, I can't imagine ever—" Kai stopped. He looked to his left, where Lloyd blankly stared at the plate of mostly-untouched food in front of him. "Lloyd? Are you okay?"

He closed his eyes and hugged himself. "Can we change topics? It just reminds me of . . ."

He trailed off. No one at the table needed to hear the name left unspoken to know they needed to drop the conversation.

"Anyone notice it getting kind of cold?" Jay rubbed his arms with his hands. "I didn't think Stiix could even get cold."

Cole reached forward to touch his cutlery. He grounded himself just enough to feel it.

The spoon next to his plate was so cold that when his fingers grazed it, he could have sworn it bit him. He pulled his hand back. "It's not supposed to get this cold. Only Birchwood gets this cold."

The restaurant fell silent. Cole shivered. Why could he feel the cold so strongly?

He looked over his shoulder just in time for the restaurant door to burst open. A flurry of snowflakes entered the restaurant, a small blizzard, bringing icy air into the room with them. Through the windows, Cole could see a blizzard storming outside.

"What the fuck is going on?" Kai demanded behind him. "What is this?"

Cole stood up. He left the table and moved towards the door.

"Cole, what are you doing?" Jay shouted. "Stop!"

He kept moving. The restaurant goers all seemed to stare at him, like he was the strangest thing they'd ever seen. He got to the door.

He peeked outside. It was freezing, sending spikes of sharp pain to his toes, fingers, and cheeks. He was about to take another step forward and brave the cold when the trunk of a birch tree flew straight
past him.

He looked up. No, not a birch tree. The leg of a Treehorn.

Three more swung past the restaurant door. He stepped outside when he was sure that it was gone.

Stiix was gone. In his path now was only the wintry forest, filled with endless birch trees and dangerous creatures lurking within them. It was so, so cold. But he couldn't turn back to the restaurant. Not when his goal was in sight.

A thick, dead tree with a door in its trunk. The light at the end of the tunnel. The happiness even after the darkest of days.

Zane.

He didn't make it.

He raised his shivering hand forward and gripped the door handle. It was frozen shut.

Another gust of cold air passed through him and white became all he could see.

The voice was distant as he woke up.

"Cole, come on, wake up! We need to go!"

Hands connected with his shoulders. They jerked his body back and forth.

"Wake up! What are you doing?"

He recognized the voice now. Jay.

His eyes snapped open. Jay was standing over him, hands on his shoulders. He sighed when Cole sat up in his bed.

Out of his covers, he shivered. It was very, very cold.

"What's going on?" Cole asked. "How did you get in here?"

The voice came from the doorway.

"A lady in my head told me to come rescue you."

Cole looked past Jay to stare at the doorway. His heart stopped.

Zane was dressed in his ninja gi. He held a bow in his hand, a weapon he only used when he was certain they would be facing down too many opponents for his shuriken. But Cole knew that none of this was Zane's decision.

Cole jumped out of bed and marched straight to his friend. He stared into his glowing, blue eyes.

"PIXAL, what did you do?" he demanded. "We had a plan! You've just put us all in danger!"

A moment passed. "She has told me to tell you that the Overlord Protocol would have resulted in Nya's death. An extraction was the only way to get everyone out alive."

"She knew about that?"
"She figured Nya would suggest it."

He wanted to yell. To kick something. Zane didn't know what he was doing, he was in danger every second he was even close to Borg Tower, and now he was right in the thick of it. This violated every rule of their pact.

But despite his anger, he knew he could trust PIXAL. She knew Zane even better than he did—if anyone was going to be guiding him through this, he wanted it to be her.

"Fine. What's the plan?"

"She wants us to grab everyone else and get out. But I think we should aim a little higher," Jay said. He stood beside Cole and pointed towards the ceiling. "We've got all the ninja here. Let's go take down Morro once and for all."

"But Zane—"

"What's Morro gonna do? Shoot him? He's made of titanium!" Jay argued. "Zane's not the one we need to worry about. Let's get the others."

He paused to look at Jay up and down. He had never seen his new self be this confident in a fight before.

He'd dropped out of university. In a way, Cole supposed that he was finally free.

He was in his element. And he had a feeling the other ninja would be, too.

"You're right. Let's do it."

Before he left the room, he stopped in front of his nindroid friend again and wrapped his arms around him.

"Sorry if this is weird," he said as he hugged him. He took a step back and faced Zane once more. "Let's go get your memories back."

When Cole stepped out of his cell, he realized why it was so cold. The walls were covered in a thin layer of ice, and the guards were frozen in place to the floor.

It was almost pretty. But they didn't have time to marvel at the beauty of Zane's powers.

"Get the others!" he ordered. "We'll meet at the elevator. We have a long way up to Morro."

Cole ran down the hallway, opening every door he could. At the end of the hall, near the elevator, he kicked open a door and stumbled into a cell. Nya was awake, sitting on her bed. She perked up when she saw him.

"I heard a commotion outside. What's going on?"

"We're taking down Morro."

"There's a problem." She gestured to her left knee. "They took my armor. I can walk, but fighting is going to be a little hard."

He thought of what was waiting for them upstairs. No alarms were ringing, so Morro would have no idea they were coming, but would he be protected? There had been people outside Cole's cell when Morro had visited him—he had to have some kind of security, bodyguards to protect him before they
could control the nindroids.

But even then, if they took out his bodyguards and captured Morro, what would stop the impending wave of Second Rise members that would descend on them when they found out their leader was in danger? The ninja were as trained as they could be, and Zane and Cole had their powers, but it was risky. He didn't want to lose anyone in the aftermath of this six year-long fight.

It was a good thing the head of security sat before him.

"You're not fighting. I need you to do something else," Cole said. "Come on. I'll explain in the elevator."

They met the others outside. Jay and Zane had found the other ninja, and Kai had Lloyd's face in his hands, because there were a few healing bruises across his face and a swelling black eye and Cole didn't have to think to know that he'd gotten this injuries right after he'd found Morro and his comms shut off. But he was alive. He was okay. And for now, that's all that really mattered.

They got to the elevator. When they stepped inside, Nya pressed the button to take them to the top.

Cole pressed a button he knew well: the floor for Nya's office.

"You're getting off before us," Cole told her. He watched the floor numbers on the elevator's preview screen tick up and up, until they were above ground and rocketing towards the upper levels. "Kai and Jay are going with you. I have a feeling there's going to be a lot of people there."

"What? Why?" Kai demanded. "Morro would be at the top, in the control room. Why are we going to Nya's office?"

"When Morro's taken down, the rest of the Second Rise is going to come after us. I don't think you guys want to fight off an entire army today," Cole explained. "I need you to fight your way into Nya's office and call the nindroids here. They'll clean up the mess after we're gone."

"And what, Lloyd gets to go with you?" There was a tinge of anger in Kai's voice, but Cole knew it wasn't out of jealousy. He was worried.

"Morro's done bad things to all of us, but he has a long history with the green ninja. Lloyd needs to be there."

The elevator dinged! when they reached Nya's floor. The three ninja stepped out.

They didn't get to say goodbye before the distant sound of shouting rang from down the hall and the elevator doors closed on them.

Two stories up, the elevator doors opened again. Cole, Zane, and Lloyd stepped out and into Borg Tower's control room. Morro loomed over the control panel that faced the window, back to them.

There were three security guards.

The guards heard the doors close. They reached for the guns holstered to their hips, but Zane was quicker.

Three arrows, one after the other, lodged into their shoulders. The guards screamed and fell to the ground.

Morro turned around. He wore casual clothes, nothing more than a black zip-up hoodie and a pair of jeans. He raised his arms in a welcoming gesture.
"Ah, the white ninja! Good to know we didn't bang you up too badly," he said. He beckoned them to come closer. "I have no weapon. I just want to talk."

Zane narrowed his eyes. He knocked another arrow. "He is lying."

Cole grabbed Zane's bow and pulled it down before he could do anything. "Wait. He has something we need."

Morro continued to beckon them forward. "I have the bargaining chip right here, Cole! But I can't give it to you before we agree on a deal!"

Cole nodded. He motioned to the others, and carefully, they moved forward. They stopped a few metres away from him. Cole didn't want to get too close. Not when Zane thought he was lying about only wanting to talk.

Morro reached into his pocket and pulled out the memory chip. He held it up. "Do you know what this is, white ninja? This is your memory drive!" Morro pinched it between two fingers so they could see it clearly. "There's over three thousand years of memories on this thing. The black ninja doesn't want to lose it, and I'm sure you don't, either. So let's just talk."

Zane pulled his bowstring back just a little. "Talk about what?"

"Your retirement," Morro replied. "You and Cole planned on moving to a village in the mountains. You would raise a dog, make some new friends, and leave all the violence of life in the city behind you. But that doesn't seem like a lot of fun when you don't remember the person you're doing it with. Can you tell me, Zane, how much you actually care about the person standing next to you?"

Zane looked to Cole, then back to Morro. He drew back his bowstring farther. "It seems as though you are trying to make me laugh."

Morro's face fell. "What?"

"Since the loss of my memories, I have not spoken to Cole very much," Zane began. He drew his bow string until it reached its limit. "But his friends have told me about him. They told me about his patience, his kindness, and how greatly he treasures his friendships. They have also told me about my relationship with him, how we have remained friends for thousands of years, counting on each other to combat loneliness and to find support. He seems like someone I can envision spending the
rest of my life with. I have just one question for you, Morro."

He lifted his bow and took aim at Morro. "If this is a person I love enough to stay with after all these years, and will continue to be with for many more, why do my memories matter?"

Cole followed Zane's eyes and realized just what he was aiming at. But the realization came just a moment too late.

He jumped to the side to grab the bow just as Zane release his grip on the bow string.

The arrow flew through the air and missed Morro's head by only a few inches. But that was never Zane's target.

The arrow tore the memory chip from Morro's fingers and pinned it to the back wall. It sparked, glowed, and then went dark.

It was silent, in the aftermath.

Only a few moments after Zane destroyed his memory chip did nindroids flood the control room, commanded over by Nya, who instructed them to point their lasers at Morro and bring him down the elevator to the prison in the basement.

His friends celebrated their victory, swarming around him to give each other hugs and high fives and cheer because after such a long journey, they had finally succeeded.

But Cole couldn't take his eyes off the broken memory drive. He'd told himself that this might happen—that there was a chance he would lose the old Zane forever. He just didn't expect this reality to come by Zane's own hand.

He wiped his eyes when the tears came. He didn't try to stop them. He let himself cry, because if he didn't, he would never grieve. He would lock himself away for months again and this time, there would be no mission or threat to help pull him out of it.

Jay was the first of the new arrivals to notice the memory chip. He pulled it down from the wall and took it in his hands.

His eyes bright, he moved to Cole and put a hand on his shoulder.

"I have an idea," he told him.

The ninja found themselves at LLC, Jay's old high school. There was a large woodshop in the basement, filled with planks of wood and metal and expensive tools that lined the walls.

There was also an old man sitting at one of the tables. He smiled when he saw Jay, and when he learned of what had happened, asked the others to wait in the saw room. The saw room was separated from the main classroom by a door and a large glass window, through which Cole could watch the scene unfold before him.

Zane sat at the other end of the table. The old man smiled.
He reached across and shook Zane's hand. "A pleasure to meet you," he said. "I'm Jay's old robotics instructor. My name is Dr. Julien."

Zane nodded. "I am Zane Julien. It would appear that we have the same last name."

Dr. Julien's eyes crinkled behind his glasses.

"What a lovely coincidence."

Cole put a shaky hand over his mouth. He wanted to say something, wanted to point out their relationship, but he couldn't bring himself to make a sound.

They couldn't remember each other. What good would it do, anyways?

Dr. Julien placed the memory drive on the table between them.

"Now, let's see if we can fix this thing and bring you back."

They couldn't do it. Not even Dr. Julien could fix a drive that an arrow had split in two. It was impossible.

They spent three sessions trying to fix it. When they gave up, Nya left the saw room and approached Dr. Julien on her own.

"Can you make a new memory drive?" she asked him. "Borg is too out of sorts to build something new right now. I need someone on the outside to do it."

"I don't see why not." He picked up the remains of the last drive. "It should be this exact type, yes?"

"Yes. How fast can you make it?"

Dr. Julien considered it for a moment. He shrugged. "Two days."

"Come to Borg when it's ready. Meet me in the head of security office."

"Why?"

Nya looked back to Cole, now. She met his eyes.

"I was reading through my old history textbooks last night. I think there's something we can do."

Two days later, the ninja converged in Nya's office. She took the memory drive and plugged it into her laptop.

She opened Borg's server.

"I spent a long time finding this," she told them. She typed the name of a file into the search bar and pulled it open.

zane.mem
The file was loaded into the hard drive. She moved everything off her table and instructed Zane to lie down.

His panel was opened. Before she put the memory drive in, she looked around to finally explain.

"Before Zane died at the hands of the Overlord, he sent a file type no one had ever seen before to Borg's servers. It was used only once, one year after it arrived in our servers. It was opened on a remote island off the coast of Ninjago." Carefully, she pushed the memory drive into its compartment. "He won't remember everything. But he'll remember some of his life with us."

Not the new us, Cole realized. The old us.

Zane's eyes blinked a few times as he adjusted to the wave of information flooding inside of him. He looked around, chest rising and falling quickly in a panic.

"Where am I?" he asked. He locked eyes with Dr. Julien and froze in place. "Father?"

Cole hiccuped and rushed forward. He took Zane in his arms, and he held him as tightly as he could, breathing into his shoulder as he sobbed. "You're back. You're really here."

"I have come back to life?"

Cole barked out a single laugh. He kept crying, and he didn't stop until he felt secure enough that he could tell himself that everything was okay. Zane had lost most of his memories, but he was back, he could remember the people around him. He could remember Cole. He could remember some of the things they'd been through together.

He stepped back so Zane could see the rest of the team.

"No, Zane. We defeated the Overlord three thousand years ago."

"Three thousand?"

Jay slapped Zane's back a little too hard. "Welcome to the future, buddy!"

Zane put his hand to his forehead, like he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "I require further explanation."

Cole laughed again. The sadness, the monster, the crushing—it was all gone now. There were no threats on the horizon. There was nothing for him to fear anymore.

His shoulders and chest felt light. The light was no longer a distant hope at the end of a tunnel.

He was in the light, now. He'd finally made it.

And he had so much to look forward to.

It took a long time to explain. Their reality was hard to swallow, especially when Zane learned that he'd once been a part of it, but he eventually understood. He understood that their original friends were dead, and the ones around him now were brought back by Lloyd so they could all have the chance to live happy lives again.

For a month, it felt like the beginning. Zane amused himself by seeking out the differences in his
friends, pointing out to Cole even the most subtle of personality changes that even he had missed. He had a field day telling Kai of his old fear of water, something that made the red ninja's cheeks flush with embarrassment because the idea felt so silly when he'd been swimming his whole life.

He did more than this, too. He spent a lot of time with his father, working on a secret project in the robotics shop that no one was allowed to know anything about until it was finished. At the end of the three months they worked on it, they invited everyone over for the grand revelation.

They pulled back the sheet covering the project. Beneath it was a new titanium body, but not one for Zane. It had pretty green eyes and was decorated in an elegant, purple dress.

Cole recognized it immediately.

A body for PIXAL.

"She told me that she was comfortable living in my head, if I needed her too, but I believe that she deserves to live like we do, too," Zane told him. "I hope it is all right if she joins our retirement plans."

Cole found his hand in Zane's. A third person. Another person to keep in his life forever.

"Honestly," he replied, "we should have done it sooner."

Zane's new relationship with his father convinced Cole to do a little research.

It was because of this that he arrived at a bar late one night. It was of the elegant kind, with pricey cocktails and waiters that ran around in suits. Cole held a cocktail in his hand as he sat at the bar, stirring the ice cubes inside with the little straw they had given him. He'd taken only a small sip. The taste of rum was strong in the tropical fruit blend.

He'd planned his seating well. The music came to a stop, and the artists exited the stage. The lead singer sat next to him and ordered a drink for himself.

He looked at Cole through the corner of his eye. "You look a little too young to be at this kind of place."

Cole sighed. It had taken a lot of mental preparation to come here tonight. "You have no idea."

This intrigued the singer. He turned in his seat and offered his hand. "Who are you? I've never seen you here before."

"My name's Cole," he said, and shook his hand. The touch was electrifying. "And you?"

"Call me Lou," his father replied. He gestured to Cole's still-full cocktail. "I've been watching you all night, and it seems like you haven't drank that at all. Don't like it?"

"I'm not really supposed to drink, and rum reminds me of a bad night. I don't know why I got it," Cole said. He pushed the glass farther away from him. "You can have it, if you want."

Lou held up his hand in refusal. "No, thank you. I only drink wine."

Right. Cole had known that, back in the day. His father had had a cabinet full of bottles, mostly untouched, from various regions of the country. Cole had never really understood why he would
collect something he could never drink.

"Does rum remind you of a bad party?" Lou asked. "I went to a few of those, back in university. I swore off alcohol every time, but I couldn't really stay committed. What's the story?"

"It's uh, I drank a lot of it at my dad's funeral," Cole corrected. "But it's fine. I was young and stupid."

"I'm sorry for your loss. How old were you?"

He tapped his fingers on the counter. "It was just a few years ago."

"A fresh wound. I understand."

Cole studied his father closely. There was a familiar pain in his dark eyes now, a pain that had once taken over after the death of Cole's mother.

"Why?" he said, but he knew the answer.

"My wife, she . . . was in a car accident. It's been just a little over twenty years, now." Lou took a sip of his wine and put the glass back down. "She was pregnant. Only a few months in, so there was no saving the baby. And now it's just me."

"Wow, I'm sorry. That's awful."

"Do you plan on ever coming back here?"

A strange question. "I'm not sure. Jazz isn't really my thing."

"Then let me be honest with you. Sometimes, I get these dark thoughts, and I feel almost relieved that the baby hadn't survived too," he said. He ran a finger over the circular edge of his glass. "When she died, I retreated for a long time. I was snappy, angry, and an asshole to my bandmates. Just an absolute asshole. It was like there was this monster inside me, sucking away my happiness and any chance I had to be a good person. I think that if I had to raise a kid while I was like that, I would've had to spend the rest of my life trying to make up what I'd done to it during its childhood."

The monster.

"I hope you had a good father, Cole," Lou said. He got out of his seat and picked up his glass. "You deserve someone better than I would have been."

Lou walked away to join his bandmates.

Cole stared at his rum cocktail. He understood it, now.

He took a sip. The rum was strong, so strong the flavourful juice couldn't do much to prevent him from grimacing at the taste. He drank it until it was finished. It burned his throat.

He left the bar. The taste slowly faded from his mouth as he walked home.

An imperfect drink. He couldn't forgive it, because it didn't need forgiveness. It had never asked for it.

It was just a drink, a combination of the bad and good that brought it to fruition.

And his father, he supposed, was just a man. He didn't require forgiveness.
But that night, the part of him that wanted to hate his father shrivelled away and died.

He crawled into bed with the fading taste of rum on his tongue and said goodbye to his father for the last time.

Zane asked to speak to him during the winter.

They met at his apartment and sat on the uncomfortable couches, the ones Cole had always hated. There was a small chocolate cake on the coffee table. Cole took tiny bites as Zane spoke.

"I am not ready to retire," Zane confessed. He stared at his lap. "I have spoken to the others. They do not wish to quit yet, either. We should keep going."

"Go doing what?"

"Being ninja," Zane said. "We all have these urges to protect other people. It is becoming hard to ignore them."

"What do you think we should do?"

"We should live as we used to. On the Bounty, travelling the island, and fighting crime wherever we can."

"You want to be free again."

"You can put it like that."

Cole put his cake down. Excitement bubbled inside of him and manifested itself in a large grin on his face.

"I can't think of anything I'd rather do more."

TOGETHER | UNITY

The postponed retirement.

Nya stepped down from Borg, Kai trained his last batch of students, and Lloyd graduated high school. Jay made a new pair of shock gloves, packed all of his things into a suitcase, and waited for Cole in the main area of their apartment. It was empty, their furniture and appliances all donated to various organizations. It was a little lonely, living in an empty space like that.

Cole stepped out of his room. Dressed in black, he was ready to live his life as a ninja for the second time.

They didn't have to fight their way onto Destiny's Bounty. They did several grocery runs with Zane's car, transporting food until there was enough to feed all five of them and their varying diets and tastes. They claimed their bunk beds, emptied their suitcases into their drawers and closets, and spent the first day in the sky moving into the ship.

By evening, they were ready. Zane made a huge meal to celebrate their first night as free ninja again,
and it would forever be remembered as one of the most surreal nights of Cole's life. Experiencing this with his friends again, their personal journeys finished and bodies prepared to fight, reminded him of the best times in his old life. It reminded him of the times near the end, when they were mature and didn't fight as much and had finally learned to enjoy their time together.

Jay slept in the bunk below him, just like he always had, and Cole cried happy tears that night. And when he woke up that morning, he wasn't alone, and his friends were milling around in the kitchen as they ate breakfast and discussed what they were going to do that day.

In the afternoon, the Bounty's alarms went off. A nearby village needed help after a series of robberies the night before.

They suited up. On the deck of the ship, they watched the ground get closer as the ship descended upon the village.

Cole pulled his mask over his face.

"You guys ready?"

The other ninja put on their masks and nodded.

"Okay. Let's go."

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Kai's thirtieth birthday.

They celebrated in Skylor's hometown, at her favorite restaurant that she knew Kai would like. Cole made everyone promise to not make fun of his age in advance, so the evening went by smoothly, even when Kai seemed a little exasperated at the number of candles on his cake.

Kai and Skylor went off on their own that night, so the others retired to the ship, where many of them promptly fell into food comas and slept until late the next morning.

But not Cole and Zane.

They sat over the edge of the floating boat, watching the beautiful stars in the sky. After living in the city for so long, the sight of them each night never failed to take his breath away.

"For a long time, I thought I would be alone for the rest of my life," Zane said, breaking their silence. "Thank you, Cole, for being here. I am truly happy with my life, and I believe I will be until the very end of the world."

Cole put his hand over his.

"Yeah. Me too."

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**EPILOGUE**

The next time Cole went to a funeral, he wasn't alone.

He practiced his speech in the mirror, reading the lines until tears blurred his vision and he couldn't
go on. It took a week, a week of crying and heartache and comfort from his friends, but he eventually made it.

In the span of ten years, he presented four different speeches at four different podiums. He presented them with the support of six, then the support of five, the support of four, the support of three, and finally, in the end, the support of only two: Zane and PIXAL.

He cried every time. He cried for hours and hours, days and days. He went to their funerals, he grieved with an audience, and he missed them until he was numb. But this time, he didn't lock himself away in his room and eat ice cream until he was sick. He didn't give in to the temptation to crawl into bed and stay there for hours at a time.

And this time, it didn't take thousands of years to feel better again. In fact, it took only two.

At the end of those two years, he returned to the city for a few days. He met with the new head of security at Borg, and with Cole's guidance, they moved on. They got rid of the protections form the ninja era, allowing the nindroid army to choose what they wanted to do with their lives. They dismantled the very failsafes that had killed the Serpentine, and they put Secure out of business.

The city moved on. The world moved on.

As Cole moved to Jamanakai, setting up his bedroom and helping PIXAL and Zane with their own, he realized something:

It wasn't just the world that was going to move on.

He was going to move on, too.

He was going to enjoy his life.

He was going to spend his days with his friends.

He was going to laugh and smile and eat whatever he wanted and he was never going to feel that awful ache in his chest ever again.

He was going to live, and not out of an obligation to his friend, but because he wanted to.

He was going to live until the end of the world.

And he was going to love every last minute of it.

RED+FIRE
MAGENTA+WATER
BLUE+LIGHTNING
GREEN+ENERGY
TOGETHER+UNITY

the end.

Chapter End Notes

A huge thank you to EVERYONE that has taken the time to read this. It's not a short
story, so I appreciate it greatly!

The art of Morro featured in this chapter was made by the incredibly talented artist at lesbiannya.tumblr.com!

This has been a bit of a journey for me. If you couldn't tell, this kind of loose, never-ending type of writing is the exact opposite of what I like to write! So, the only thing really keeping me hooked on this story was all of the people reading, so thank you for inspiring me to finish my first fanfic since 2013!

And to think that this has been with me for so long! Two years, now! You know what has happened to me since then? I have moved across the country, graduated high school, gone to film school, dropped out of film school, and then moved back to where I came from! This fic is like my little travel buddy, haha.

Once again, thank you SO MUCH for your comments, kudos, bookmarks, and more! If you have made any art for me, another BIG THANK YOU, receiving fan art for a fic was a bit of a dream for me and getting it for this story was the biggest shock of my life. I was seriously losing my mind, omg.

I'm a little sad that it's over. But if you guys liked this story, I will be making more ninjago fanfic soon, with another multi-chapter in development and a one-shot! Hopefully, they won't take me six months to write like many of these chapters ;)

I cannot say thank you enough. But, there is not much else for me to say, here.

From the bottom of my heart,

you are all amazing.

<3

edit: i am saying "screw you" to my no-replying-to-comments rule for this chapter bc i wanna say thank you to everyone that has read this and commented!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!