Mirror Match

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/17303999.

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning: Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category: Gen, Multi
Fandom: Mortal Kombat - All Media Types, Mortal Kombat (Video Games)
Character: Shinnok (Mortal Kombat), Raiden (Mortal Kombat), Dark Raiden (Mortal Kombat), Cassandra "Cassie" Cage, Jacqui Briggs, Fujin (Mortal Kombat), Sonya Blade, Johnny Cage, Jackson "Jax" Briggs, Takahashi Takeda, Kung Jin, Tanya (Mortal Kombat), Mileena (Mortal Kombat), Kotal Kahn, Ermac (Mortal Kombat), Erron Black, Kuai Liang | Sub-Zero, Sub-Zero (Mortal Kombat), Frost (Mortal Kombat), Sareena (Mortal Kombat), Cyrax (Mortal Kombat), Liu Kang, Kitana (Mortal Kombat), Quan Chi, Quan Chi (Mortal Kombat), D'Vorah (Mortal Kombat), Kung Lao, Jade (Mortal Kombat), Kabal (Mortal Kombat), Kurtis Stryker, Sindel (Mortal Kombat), Nightwolf (Mortal Kombat), Smoke (Mortal Kombat), Kano (Mortal Kombat), Skarlet (Mortal Kombat), Noob Saibot, Reptile (Mortal Kombat), Tremor (Mortal Kombat), Rain (Mortal Kombat), Takahashi Kenshi, Bi Han (Mortal Kombat), Sektor (Mortal Kombat), Shang Tsung, Shao Kahn, Baraka (Mortal Kombat), Bo' Rai Cho, Li Mei, Havik (Mortal Kombat), Hotaru (Mortal Kombat), Onaga (Mortal Kombat), Nitara (Mortal Kombat), Khameleon (Mortal Kombat), Shujinko (Mortal Kombat), Darrius (Mortal Kombat), Motaro (Mortal Kombat), Triborg (Mortal Kombat), Sheeva (Mortal Kombat), Goro (Mortal Kombat), Ashrah (Mortal Kombat), Kai (Mortal Kombat)

Additional Tags: yes all those characters are in it this is basically a mortal kombat action-adventure novel with slice-of-life interludes, give it a try you won't regret it, WARNINGS:, Character Death, Canon-Typical Violence, brief and non-graphic mention of assault, note: assault does NOT happen on screen, homophobia from a non-human character towards the human version of themself

Stats:
Published: 2019-01-04 Completed: 2019-01-06 Chapters: 73/73 Words: 339498

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by judgmentfist

Summary

After provoking a bitter rivalry with Outworld, Raiden, trapped in his dark form, must urgently find a way to purify himself of the Netherrealm's corruption. However, he discovers that he cannot cure himself unless he also revives and de-corrupts his eternal foe, the one and only Shinnok. Alongside Cassie Cage and other helpful mortal allies, Raiden and his ex-enemy find themselves drawn into a complex series of events, culminating in a tournament three months away. Now they have to scramble to put together a team in time, recruiting unlikely allies and encountering treacherous villains. Which realm will prevail? Read and see, and meet the entire cast of kharacters, reimagined and reawakened.
Lightning cracks across the sky, splitting apart the clouds and punctuating the unrelenting rain soaking the god to his core. He shivers and bows his head, water spilling from the brim of his hat. This should be his element. Now, its power unnerves him. He is not who he once was.

He opens his palm to catch a spark of electricity that dances between his fingertips, studying it as it arcs and darts in tiny branches.

Abruptly, Raiden closes his fist, and the light shuts off.

Notes

Note: Mirror Match was written from November 2017 to December 2018. I'm posting it now as-is, for everyone to read, but I'll be releasing fully illustrated chapters for a long time!

Here's a guide to the chapters and sections.
Part 1 (Revivals and Rescues): 1-8
Part 2 (Gathering the Team): 9-18
Part 3 (Intersecting Stories): 19-29
Part 4 (The Krypt and Beyond): 30-41
Part 5 (Tournament Time): 42-55
Part 6 (Life Goes On): 56-73
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He gazes into the mist of the distant mountains, radiant blue eyes flickering with sinister orange flashes. It takes all his power to control the corruption with him and to tame the poison threatening to consume his soul. Even now, it surges in flares of rage and pain that strike him to his core. He has finally shed his armored garb for a simpler outfit, woven white and blue cloth embroidered in gold, rather than the dark coat and sharp spikes he’s been wearing these past months. But he knows that renouncing his new warlike persona will not cure the vengeful fever within him, gnawing away at his true self and building up a shell of selfishness.

Much greater measures are required.

This is the consequence of his sacrifice. He did willingly perform that necessary act, to cleanse the earth’s life force of the corruption after the Shinnok incident. The jinsei mists must be preserved at all costs. Raiden knows this all too well. For a god to renounce their duty would be the greatest sin of all. He’d believed that he was strong enough to contain that evil essence, making a martyr of himself.

He was not. He was wrong. The world has nearly paid for it.

It took the intervention of the Special Forces to keep Raiden from declaring war outright on Outworld. He had been only a few steps away from the emperor’s dwelling, burning dangerous and bright, with lightning in his fists and the sickly orange glow of the corruption surrounding him like a toxic mist. General Blade, may she be thanked, had stopped him - a spectacular showdown that humiliated Earthrealm even while proving the might of its greatest warriors. Dragged back to his Sky Temple at long last with futile apologies to Outworld, Raiden had been subjected to the healing attempts of his allies, with no luck. Bo’ Rai Cho contributed moral support but little else before
departing on his own journeys. Fujin’s healing capabilities were limited, despite his deep frustration. Thus, while Raiden struggles, his fellow god of wind has taken over the temple duties entirely, guarding him as he seeks a cure.

But he is elsewhere now, and Raiden is deeply, profoundly alone.

Hands folded behind his back, he paces back and forth at the edge of the courtyard. The weathered stone is slick with rain beneath his feet. He shuts his eyes for a moment of concentration, vanishes, and re-materializes in the air - arms outstretched, burning bright. Lightning courses through his body, silhouetting the god’s figure and arcing between his palms. His eyes flare sinister orange, then flicker back to blue, and back again to that cursed glow. Clenching his fists, he lets out his anger and pain in an ancient curse shouted to the vast empty sky. The wind carries away his scream. He may as well be silent.

He drops to the ground on hands and knees, wincing. The corruption has finally retreated again... for who knows how long. For a god, years mean nothing, but he feels as weary as an old mortal. He shakes the rain off and gets up, adjusting the brim of his hat. He can’t go on this way.

A petite shadowy figure watches from beneath the eaves. “Nice lightning show.”

Raiden greets her in a voice that cracks mid-sentence. “Cassandra Cage.”

“You sound bad.” The girl steps forward, hands in her pockets. She’s clad in sturdy pants and a leather jacket that says CAGE on the back in bold print - actually a vintage relic of her father’s past days of stardom, though she’d never, ever admit it. Twin holsters at her waist complete the stylish look. “Catch a cold out in the rain or something, Raiden?”

“What I have ‘caught’ cannot be reversed by time and rest, nor any normal means.” Raiden scoffs under his breath, shaking his head. “How I wish that it were so.”

“Yeah. About that… Mom wants a status report.” General Blade is known for her foresight, but not her patience. Usually, she sends Cassie as a military subordinate, but today, she is here to check on Raiden as a family friend above all. “Any idea what’s wrong?”

“Actually, yes.” Raiden approaches with measured steps, fixing her in his glowing gaze beneath the brim of his hat. He towers over her with godly stature, but her confident posture matches his own, hands on her hips, chin up to meet his eyes. Cassandra Cage has always been uniquely formidable. Raiden looks down at her kindly, stifling his own doubts and nerves. “Perhaps it is best if we discuss this inside the temple.”

Cassie gestures to the empty courtyard in disbelief. Caution is one thing, paranoia is another. “Really? Who’s gonna be out here eavesdropping?”

“That is not my concern. I would hate for you to catch cold.” Raiden rests a gentle hand on her shoulder, guiding her inside. “Go on, child. And... thank you for coming to see me.”

“Anytime. It’s nice to visit. Excuse for a vacation.” Cassie shakes the raindrops off her jacket upon stepping inside, but somehow there is still water pouring down on her, soaking her short hair with a heavy chill. She grimaces. “Temple roof spring a leak or something?”

Raiden pauses, with a moment of awareness, and closes his hand into a fist. The rain finally ceases. “My apologies.”

“Lots of gardeners would kill for that talent.” Cassie tosses her windbreaker onto an ornate but worn-down gilded hook inlaid into the wall. It’s probably thousands of years old. Well, her jacket
isn’t about to wreck anything that’s lasted that long. She brushes a hand through her hair, styling the undercut into messy wet spikes. “So, you were saying…?”

“Listen closely.” Raiden paces down the corridor, strong jaw clenched. This is as difficult to explain as it is to admit. Selfishness is at the core of the corruption, and to admit his own weakness is to contradict the urges of this horrible infection. “I bear the traces of the dark magic that poisoned Shinnok.”

“Well, I could have told you that. I didn’t think you were glowing orange and dressing like Dracula just to get into the Halloween spirit.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Pop culture reference. Skip it. I’m listening.”

“He was nearly completely consumed by that force, but it did not originate with him.”

“Well, that’s interesting. So he’s not the father of all evil after all? Bet he’d be real disappointed.”

Raiden sighs. “Now is not the time for cracking wise, Miss Cage.”

“You kidding? It’s always the time for that.”

There is no point in arguing about the matter. He continues, gripping his wrist with his other hand in an effort to steady himself as he speaks. “Shinnok… was not always what you know him to be. Deprived of worship, he came to Earth and spread heresy and chaos. For that, we chained him in the Netherrealm for several millennia. You know this.”

“Yeah, I heard about this one in my kindergarten history textbook.”

“I doubt that very highly.”

“Just keep talking.” Cassie shoves her hands in her pockets, glancing around. “Huh. Looks different in here. Did you redecorate?”

“No. Actually, the opposite. My temple is linked to my soul. As I… decay, so does it.”

“Okay. So you should redecorate. Gotcha.”

He ignores this with gritted teeth. “Miss Cage, these are serious matters.”

Cassie puts her hands on her hips and steps right in front of the god, chewing a wad of bubblegum to try to calm her nerves. They both come to a halt in a respectful face-off. Raiden’s stoic resolve falters as Cassie speaks. “Okay. Listen. The only way I know how to handle life-and-death situations is ‘cracking wise.’ You want me to be able to deal with the fact that my mentor, a literal god, is dying? This is how.”

A wistful look crosses Raiden’s weary face. “You are so much like your father that I’m sometimes astonished. I understand.”

“Yeah, genetics works like that. Good thing I didn’t get Mom’s sense of humor. Okay, so you’re falling apart, what do we do?”

“That is not all.” Raiden steps over to the wall and sags against it, catching his breath. The lines of his face are deeply shadowed, making him look aged and weary. It takes so much of his power to suppress the corruption, and he can spend only limited time to heal himself in the jinsei. “I must
cleanse this evil from within me. I believe that I know how. There is an ancient method… it has not been used in centuries.”

Cassie shifts her weight from one foot to the other, barely stifling a nervous twitch. She may be a Cage, but she’s not a General. If Raiden goes rogue again, she wouldn’t know what to do. Beating two Elder Gods is a lot to ask of anyone. “Well… now’s the time.”

“The corruption originates from the will of the One Being.”

She squints up at him, brow furrowed. “Ya lost me.”

“It is… too much to explain. In short, there is a force that seeks to unite all the realms, and in doing so, it would eliminate life as we know it. We have been aware of this threat since the beginning of time.”

“Huh. Wasn’t Shinnok spouting some stuff about ‘Death To All’?” Cassie adopts a dramatic tone. “Sounds sort of familiar.”

“Yes, and I have reason to believe the One Being fed on his soul while he was… in solitude, to implant those destructive desires into his heart. It would have offered him false hope, and a clear purpose, if he ever reached freedom… and made him a willing servant. Just as the revenants are now.”

Cassie fidgets with the strap on one of her holsters, ineffectively quieting her nervous energy. This is looking less like a fun afternoon visit to the Sky Temple, and more like an impromptu therapy session for Raiden. She’s not very good at this. “So - not to play devil’s advocate here, or anything - chaining him up in hell and not going to check in every once in a while might have been a bad idea?”

“Perhaps. At the time, the Elder Gods were concerned with the immediate threat, not the distant consequences.” Raiden pauses, clearing his thoughts. His face is impassive, but his mouth twitches with a barely stifled look of sorrow. Mistakes upon mistakes, accumulated over a god’s endless lifetime. It is an awful burden to live with.

“What does this have to do with me, or you? As far as I know, Shinnok’s a disembodied head down in the Netherrealm now.” Cassie scoffs, tossing her head. “That threat’s already neutralized. He’s not going to be doing much to help out this One Being anymore. Not if I have anything to do with it.”

“It is not that simple. In order to cleanse myself of this curse…” Raiden comes to a halt, standing statue-still. “First, you must know that when Shinnok was defeated, his soul was splintered. Furthermore, we are linked by the Jinsei. If he is not purified, I cannot be… and my efforts will be in vain.”

Cassie freezes. This one’s a pretty hard pill to swallow. “You’re shitting me, right?”

“No, Miss Cage. Would I joke about this? Do you truly think so little of me?” Raiden’s tone hardens, the faintest echo in his voice. For the briefest instant, his eyes burn with that sinister flame. He reaches out to grab her shoulder and Cassie raises a fist to knock his arm aside. “You dare to question me, child?”

Cassie leaps up and grabs him by the collar, shimmering fabric crumpling beneath one gloved fist. Her eyes are wide with shock. She’s swallowed her gum in panic, leaving a bad taste in her mouth. “Hey! *Raiden!*”
The god stops dead, shoulders slumping. Slowly, the corruption fades back into an invisible curse. The strength of his will is no longer enough to suppress this hellish impulse. If gods could dream, this would be a living nightmare. “You… see the urgency of this, now. This poison must be eradicated all the way to its core.”

“No kidding.” Cassie already has a pistol in hand behind her back, just in case, but she’s shaking with nerves, finger off the trigger. This is her mentor. She’s known him since she was a child, for fuck’s sake. In a crisis, she’s formidable, but kicking ass in special ops is nothing like this. This is as personal as it gets. “Talk fast. How does the purification work?”

“It involves the jinsei.”

“Of course it does.” Cassie manages to laugh under her breath with a tinge of bitterness. “Magic
mist is the staple of every good fantasy story. Let’s go fuck around with Earth’s life force again. That can’t go wrong!"

“Please, for once, try to be respectful.” Raiden’s tone softens. “Listen to me, Cassandra. To be cured, one must allow oneself to be weakened and then rebuilt by the jinsei’s force. The spiritual toxin is extracted and drawn into a vessel, which is then locked away for all eternity. This ritual cannot be done alone… and crucially, it cannot be done if the individual is not conscious. Thus, I am grateful to your mother for… restoring me to my senses.”

“She beat your ass in full view of Outworld when you went all evil overlord on us.”

“Must we relive that humiliation?”

“No.” Cassie sighs. “Go on. I’m listening.”

“Out of necessity, Shinnok must also be purified.”

“Uh, you ripped Shinnok’s head off. I don’t think you can do anything with him conscious. Or at all.”

“Therein lies the problem… which we will--” Raiden stops, and tries again, voice low as a whisper-- “which we will... repair.”

“No.” Cassie gulps and steps back, boots clicking on the stone floor. She’s already instinctively scanning the temple surroundings - exit door, platform for a jump attack, weapons to throw. Thinking fast, she points her pistol directly at Raiden’s chest. Her nerves are numb enough to barely feel the fear that’s swallowing her up. “You better not be telling me what I think you’re telling me.”

“I am indeed, young one.” Raiden doesn’t lift a hand to defend himself, but looks past her into the distance, overwhelmed by a torrent of regret. “I am so, so sorry. I should never have allowed myself to become corrupted so deeply. This drastic action is only to save myself. I do not want to force Earthrealm to fight its corrupted defender. It would be a travesty.”

Cassie swallows hard, resisting the desire to run, to yell at him, any way to let out her anguish at this situation. She needs to be reliable right now. She is the guardian, and Raiden is vulnerable. A true reversal of roles. “Not your fault.”

Raiden murmurs under his breath. “You are wrong, though I appreciate your thought.”

“So are you telling me I’m going to have to beat Shinnok’s ass again? Or yours?”

“Ideally, no.”

“But-- we have to…” She can’t make herself say it. “We have to bring that motherfucker back to life?”

Raiden frowns. “We do not discuss the lineage of the Elder Gods.”

“Uh, never mind. Not getting into it! Nope! Mythology’s weird enough already, I read those books too!”

“In reality, our origins are all uncertain. We were made before time; it does not matter. Just listen to me, very closely.” Raiden reaches up very carefully to adjust the brim of his hat, as Cassie lowers the pistol with trembling hands. “We simply need to…” The words are bitter on his tongue.
He speaks them slowly. “...to restore Shinnok to full form. This -- this will reunite his soul for the purification. The curse must be destroyed this way. What happens to him after that is irrelevant.”

Cassie’s actually starting to get pissed off. What else can she even do? “This is unreal. If I wanted a no-win situation, I’d go play a fucking slot machine.” She sends a glare in his direction. “Seriously, what are you gonna do? Toss him into the Netherrealm again? Because that worked out so well last time! Absolute genius right there.”

“Actually... in order to prevent this curse from recurring in myself, he needs to be kept as far from the Netherrealm as possible.” He pauses, giving Cassie a moment to absorb this new revelation. “Trust me, young one, I am more than dismayed to discover the link between us.” Raiden is as understated as ever. “Shinnok and I have a long history of crimes and sorrows. Nevertheless, this runs deeper than any rivalry. This is life and death… not for me, perhaps, but for the innocent dwellers of all the realms.” It pains Raiden to admit how far he has fallen, but the only way to cure a festering wound is to lance it. “I have contemplated this in solitude, discussed it with my fellow gods, and grieved over the choice with all my heart. I have searched high and low to find an alternative. There is nothing.”

“Right. So you bring Mr. Gloom and Doom back to life, you’re all cured, but he decides to go off on a murderous rampage. What then?”

“After months spent as… merely a head… it is likely that he is no longer of sound mind. He can do nothing.”

“Uh, good job on that, I guess.”

“It pains me to think of the brutality that I was willing to commit...”

“Never mind.”

“So-- he will be quarantined here.”

“What--” Cassie’s eyes go wide again. Her voice echoes through the vast hall, and she wishes for something, anything, to break the silence, but Raiden does not answer. “You-- you’re going to keep him near the jinsei? Uh, Raiden?”

“Yes?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Go ahead.”

“Are you listening?”

“Of course.”

“What the fuck are you thinking?!”

Raiden has no immediate answer to that. He purses his lips and sighs. “Just… cease, Cassandra, and heed my words.” He lifts a hand, electricity sparking along the length of his arm, but it fades just as quickly, diminishing into the folds of his sleeves. He clasps his hands behind his back, controlling himself carefully as his emotions surge. “If he crosses beyond the perimeters of this temple, others are free to take him and exact revenge upon him for his crimes. Remember what Mileena could do with his amulet… and think of what hostile forces could achieve with a demented god at their disposal.”
Cassie stutters. A quick retort is not immediately coming to mind. “Isn’t the point of this to… undemand him? Absolute fucking stupidest idea ever, by the way.”

“No. It is to cure me, child!” Raiden’s voice is suddenly unnerving, enhanced by an eerie hollow echo. His skin takes on a sickly hue, his eyes luminous with that wicked fire. “Shinnok is nothing more than collateral damage! Let him rot in the temple cellar if we must. Defending Earthrealm is my priority, and nothing else. Hardly the insignificant life of a traitor to the gods.”

*Here we go again.* Cassie clenches her jaw and aims the pistol lightning-quick, her fist clenched in a white-knuckled grip. This is a disaster in the making. “Raiden! Stand down or I’ll put you down worse than Mom did, I swear to god.” She pauses. “Gods. What-fucking-ever.”

Something manages to cut through the curse - either good sense or the threat of force. Raiden is uncertain. He freezes stock-still, aware of his loss of control, and does not speak until the influence has finally faded. That time, he barely even noticed the sinister aura seizing hold of him, driving a stir of sharp agonizing rage like a thorn in his side. This terrifies him unlike anything he has endured. “The corruption is recurring more often. It surges and fights within me, like an explosive force. I... fear for us all.”

“Yeah, you and me both.”

“We must work quickly.”

“You can say that again.”

“We m--” Raiden shakes his head. “You understand the difficulty of this situation, I am sure.”

“Yeah. I do. What now?”

“We go to the Netherrealm, immediately. The corruption will quicken in my veins when I am there, so we must work fast to find him.”

“Is a disembodied head an ‘it’ or a ‘him’?”

Raiden looks away. Best not to think about the question. “I need not mention that we should avoid capture by Liu Kang and Kitana.”

“Can’t say I’d be super thrilled about being revenant-ified by your former pals, nope.” Cassie slips her gun back into the holster. “You know, normally when I tell people to go to hell, it’s just a metaphor. You take it pretty literally.”

“If we are not careful, it will be hell for us all.”

“I’ve gathered. So, do I get to bring any friends, or is it just Sergeant Cassie and Uncle Raiden on a fun day trip?”

“If Jacqueline is willing to join us, I would suggest inviting her. If I... happen to lose my senses... her new gauntlets could stun me temporarily.” Raiden regards her solemnly, radiant blue eyes now dim with sorrow. Since the Outworld incident, several team members now carry technology capable of taking down a god. He paces across the room, collecting himself, and turns towards her again, regaining his composure. “I trust that she would not hesitate.”

“Well, that’s one hell of an idea. Sort of puts a new spin on self-control. Have somebody else do it for you. Kinda defeats the point, doesn’t it?” Cassie mutters under her breath, trailing off into a thoughtful silence as she leans against the wall. “Okay. Right. Let me just call Jacqui and tell her...”
we’re going on a road trip to Demonville.”

Raiden doesn’t miss a beat. “You might have better luck informing her over text message.”

“Yeah, that’ll work.” Cassie adopts an even more sarcastic tone, looking at Raiden with a raised eyebrow. “Hey Jacqui, you got any time this afternoon? I have some free tickets to a really hot vacation spot! Smiley face emoji.”

Raiden cracks a smile, the first in days, as if a ray of light has crossed his features. “All right. Tell her in whatever way you wish… but make haste. We have no time to lose.”

“Mind if I let Dad and Mom know where I’m going?”

“Go ahead and inform your father. His expertise in defeating Shinnok may be useful in a worst-case scenario.”

“What is that worst-case scenario?-- nope, never mind, not gonna ask. Same reason you don’t look down when you’re on a bridge.” Cassie grimaces, and swiftly types a message into her phone, keeping one eye on Raiden. “Can’t believe this one. Maybe I’ll get to take a couple selfies with a demon. Bet that’ll get me some likes.”

She laughs, a hollow short bark with no humor behind it.

“Actually, I don’t give a shit. I just wanna survive.”
“Not to be the killjoy of the team, but...” Jacqui flexes her wrist, examining her gauntlet, and fastens the weapon tighter around her forearm. She’s seated cross-legged on an outdoor bench at the temple, ready for the next mission. The weather has finally cleared up, perhaps a reflection of Raiden’s renewed hope. Jacqui managed to arrive within a few hours of Cassie’s message, after confirming via video chat that it was not an extremely well-planned but grim practical joke.

Raiden glances in Jacqui’s direction, interrupting his silent contemplation. “Yes?”

“... how are we going to do this?”

“I will handle that. All that we must do is retrieve the item. No more, no less.”

“‘The item.’ That’s... definitely one way to put it.” Cassie saunters towards them. “Do we need to bring a bag to put him in, or do you think they have a storage case?”

Raiden ignores her diligently. “Miss Briggs, I would simply ask that you have some faith in me, and in Miss Cage.”

“Oh, it’s not Cassie I’m worried about.” Jacqui fastens the straps on the other gauntlet, then crosses her forearms and taps the weapons together. A bolt of plasma power sears bright for a moment, and she blinks, shaking her head. “Raiden, you know I’d trust you, but you’re not yourself. How can we be sure you’re not being controlled by this One Being?”

“You cannot. I know that.” Raiden admits this readily, full of regret. “In fact, if we consider my corruption, that is precisely the problem at hand. Nonetheless, this plan comes from me, not my insidious alter ego.”

Cassie leans in closer. “Jacqui, it’s easy. Visual cheat code. If he’s glowing orange, he’s Bad Raiden. If he’s blue, he’s Good Raiden. Real simple.”

Jacqui regards her calmly. “C’mon. All these years, and you never knew I’m colorblind?”

Cassie is briefly dumbfounded.


“He glowed red, actually, but I wouldn’t expect your colorblind ass to have noticed.” Cassie puts a hand on her hip. “Maybe he thought it was a more fashionable color. Considering that, uh… outfit... I’m guessing he pays close attention to stuff like that.”

“Maybe so.” Raiden scans the horizon. Aside from Fujin, who is roaming around elsewhere in the temple, they are entirely alone. “It is paramount that we avoid detection. No arguing while in the Netherrealm.”

“Yes, sir.” Jacqui salutes him snappily, then steps back, scanning the god with a critical eye. “Speaking of outfits, where is Shinnok’s body? Don’t we need that?”

Raiden winces, brows knit in a deep frown. “It was destroyed. If we have his head, he can re-form, but... we do not have the body.”
“Oh, gross. I don’t even want to know. This is so wrong.” Cassie makes a face, looking anywhere but at Raiden. She really doesn’t want to think about the possibilities. “Think he’s gonna be pissed about that when you put him back together? I’d bet.”

Jacqui locks her fingers together, stretching her arms. “I thought the point of this is that Shinnok won’t be pissed about anything… or even know what’s happening, once Raiden’s cured. If his head came off once, it will again.”

Cassie raises a hand in hesitation. “Don’t think we’re doing that, actually.”

“Why not?” Jacqui’s brown eyes flare with sudden anger. Her gauntlets spark abruptly. “You’re not the one whose dad was a fucking revenant, Cassie. You know Shinnok’s to blame for that, and I don’t see any reason to let him live any longer than the exact time of the ritual!”

Raiden intervenes, moving between the girls. He is back to his old self for now, and radiates a quiet, soothing calmness. “My conscience will not allow it. Shinnok’s crimes cannot be forgotten, but… I cannot subject him to a… a fate worse than death, once more.”

Jacqui tilts her head and looks him dead in the eye. “Then I will.”

Raiden inhales deeply, letting out his breath slowly. Silence hangs in the air, suffocating.

He speaks softly. “Scorpion unleashed his revenge on Quan Chi to see him punished at any cost. Because of him, the other revenants cannot be cured. Beware the danger of blind vengeance, Jacqueline Briggs.”

“I know how it happened. I was there.” Nonetheless, Jacqui steps back, collecting her nerves. “So what are we going to do with him instead? Lock him in a closet?”

Cassie interjects. “Uh, I’m pretty sure he’s already in one.”

Jacqui gives her a look.

“Or he would be. If he still had a body. …what are we going to do with him, anyway?”

Raiden frowns. “That remains to be seen. I do not have all the answers.”

“Yeah, that’s why you’re a god, not a genie.” Cassie shrugs. She’s made peace with Raiden’s terrible idea, mostly out of necessity. “I gotta say, as long as we keep track of him, it’s not the absolute worst thing ever. Raiden gets cured, and— what’s Shinnok going to do anyway, if we keep him locked up? If you think about it, all he really managed to do was turn the sky red for about half an hour, then get his ass kicked. By me.” She offers a winning grin.

This earns her a glare from the thunder god. “Do not make light of the corruption of the Jinsei.”

“Sorry. So -- important question -- how are we going to get through the Netherrealm unnoticed?” She whips out a pair of sunglasses and puts them on Raiden before he can protest, then studies him closely for a moment, squinting. “Nope. Eyes are still glowing. Darn, I really thought that might work.”

Raiden silently removes the glasses and hands them back to Cassie.

She returns them to her pocket, unfazed. “Okay, plan A is down. Plan B: my Halloween costume from fifth grade. I went as a demon. Full light-up horns and everything. It was great. All the other girls were princesses. Dad got a kick out of it. The PTA didn’t.”
Raiden is still just staring at her.

“Okay! No costume. Um, do you have disguise spells or something in your godly arsenal?”

He sighs. “Yes.”

“Could have said so, you know.”

Jacqui laughs. “You didn’t let him!”

Cassie makes a face. “I’ve been here for several hours. He could’ve said something about it then.”

“Cassandra Cage, it took you several hours to accept the full necessity of this plan.”

“You kidding? I agreed to do it after like ten minutes! Not that I had a choice, you know. Mentor god’s turning evil and all that--”

Jacqui grabs them both by the collar, drawing a deep breath. “You two are starting to remind me of my high school babysitting job. Can we just go?”

“That’s a low blow. But, point taken.” Cassie frees herself and steps back, adjusting the holsters at her waist. “We’ll go in a minute. Need to make sure I have enough bullets for the hordes of demons that are totally going to attack us.”

“If all goes well, the demons will pay us no mind.” Raiden offers a half-smile. “Speaking of babysitting jobs…”

“Oh don’t remind me.” Cassie huffs under her breath. “Am I going to find out this mission’s some kind of karma payback for all those times Mom dropped me off at godly daycare? I’m still sorry about the antique rug, but I was three, so don’t you dare bring it up again.”

“This is hardly any petty vengeance. Although, now that you mention it, that is a perfectly valid point.”

Jacqui raises a hand with a sly grin. “I don’t remember the rug story. Anyone want to refresh my memory?”

“Fat chance.” Cassie straightens her back, arms folded, standing perfectly still beside Raiden. “Keep all arms and legs within the vehicle at all times.”

Raiden ignores her, placing a hand softly on her shoulder. He mutters a few ancient words in solemn tones to cast the spell, something which Cassie can’t decipher. Jacqui lines up on the other side of him and receives the same treatment. They wait. Nothing changes at all.

Cassie coughs. “You sure you did that right?”

“With this spell, we will be overlooked by our enemies. Brace yourselves!” With only a moment’s warning, Raiden grabs their shoulders tight and summons a bolt of lightning, striking him directly in a brilliant blinding flash that crackles through the courtyard. Cassie yelps, but is immediately silenced as they vanish, leaving behind only a few footprints that fade with a gust of wind.

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They land in Hell.

Unsurprising, considering that they were headed there in the first place, but it’s still a shock to get
used to the clammy heat of the Netherrealm. Cassie fumbles around in the darkness and unzips her jacket, fidgeting uncomfortably. “See, Jacqui? Just like a free visit to a sauna.”

“So somehow I don’t think they have any towels.” Jacqui peers around, squinting. They seem to have arrived in an enclosed chamber, ornately decorated with such lovely things as human skulls, metal claws, and blood-tipped spears. “Well, the decoration tells me they didn’t shop at Bed, Bath, and Beyond.”

“Guess not. Must’ve gone to Murder, Mayhem, and More.” Cassie snorts. “Really puts a new meaning on gothic architecture—**shit!**” She slips for a second on one of the strangely rounded floor stones, but catches herself quickly, biting her lip and balancing carefully. “What the hell did they use for floor tiles?”

“Let us find out.” Raiden raises his arms and surrounds himself with a faint lightning aura, casting a bluish light on the path ahead of him. He kneels down and peers at the bizarre floor. “This is… unconventional.”

Cassie pipes up. “Well, what is it?”

“Human skulls.”

“Oh.”

“Typical.” Raiden stands again, brushing off his sleeves with a rather distressed look. “‘What the hell’ indeed, Miss Cage. The Netherrealm’s most unique feature has always been its atmosphere.”

“My kidding.” Jacqui advances towards the door with cautious steps, glancing at the various chests and trunks littered around the sides of the room. “You know, I can’t help but wonder what’s in here.” She ventures towards one, but pauses, held back by her good judgment. “Better not.”

Cassie is not as wise. Impulsive as always, she’s already reached out to fiddle with the lock on the nearest chest, overcome by a burning curiosity. “Remember how Dad taught me lock-picking when I was ten? Got me kicked out of the Girl Scouts.”

“Oh yeah. Good times.” Jacqui laughs, but abruptly pauses in concern, noticing Cassie’s meddling. “Hey, wait I wouldn’t do that if I were you—**holy shit!**” She hurtles upwards, yanked up into the air by a sudden force that knocks the breath out of her for a minute. Cassie is beside her, floating similarly. Raiden hovers in front of them midair, arms open and eyes shut in concentration, surrounded by an arching halo of lightning. Beneath, there’s an ominous noise of grinding gears that she can’t identify. “What the hell?”

Raiden opens his eyes and glances towards the floor wordlessly. Between the skulls’ gaps, sharp knives shoot up from the floor, turning it into a pincushion of rusty blades.

Cassie gasps. Mistakes are deadly; she knows this already. How many times has Sonya warned her to stay on task and ignore all diversions? Now it almost cost her dearly. “Holy fuck. … ‘thanks’ doesn’t even begin to cover it, Raiden. What the **fuck** was I thinking?”

Jacqui taps a button on her gauntlet, activating its flashlight, and aims it at her. “Curiosity killed the Cassie.”

“Ha ha. Seriously— I’m sorry.” Cassie tries to squirm in the invisible grasp, but it’s strangely strong, squeezing the breath from her. “So, um, Raiden, what now?”

She’s met by peculiar silence.
Cassie tries again, a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. “Raiden?”

Raiden is equally frozen, perfectly concentrated. Slowly, inevitably, a faint flicker of orange light appears in his steady gaze.

As they watch in horror, it glows brighter and brighter, like the rise of a destructive sun.

Raiden gazes between them, reverted to his darkest, most corrupted self.

His voice is hollow, empty of the rich warm emotion that defines him. “I no longer need your help to accomplish this task. You are a burden to me, not an aid.”

The grasp around them tightens for an instant… and he lets go.

The girls fall with a sickening rush, hurtling through the air towards those sharp rusty spikes. Time slows down before their impending doom, nauseatingly sharp and clear… and Cassie thinks to herself, This is how I die.

“RAIDEN!” Jacqui screams in panic -- and in one last flash of brilliance -- boosts her gauntlets to full blinding power, blasting them towards the floor as Cassie grabs hold of her waist. The recoil sends her towards the ceiling, soaring up into the lofty rafters, and Cassie barely has time to grab hold of one of the beams and pull herself up before Jacqui falls again. This time Jacqui shoots towards Raiden, who is still ominously hovering midair, and uses the recoil to propel herself atop a high cabinet. “We’re so fucked! What do we do? You’re in the ceiling, Raiden’s gone evil, and we’re in hell!”

“Look on the bright side!” Cassie swings through the rafters like monkey bars, hurtling upwards to stand on a thin wood beam. Then in one smooth motion, she dives towards Raiden, landing squarely on his shoulders as he roars and lashes out with a lightning surge. The blow barely misses her, and she shakes it off. “Saves us the cost of a ticket to the afterlife! We’re already here!”

“CASSIE--” Jacqui grimaces, evaluating the situation. Cassie has already jumped off Raiden onto a high shelf, crouching and scanning the room. Jacqui’s pulse has skyrocketed, trembling with nerves, but she stays steadfast. She has no choice. Duty calls. “You got a plan?”

“You bet I do. Fry Raiden with the gauntlets, he’s about to chase m-- shit! Shit shit I don’t have enough swear words for this just DO IT!” Cassie gathers her weight, poises herself and leaps to the next shelf, whipping out her pistols with swift precision. And, just before Raiden crashes into her with a loud crunch and a crack of lightning, she aims at the floor skulls beneath each tall cabinet. In agonizing slow-motion, just before she blacks out, she sees the furniture crashing to the floor, creating platforms atop the lethal spikes.

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Minutes later, Cassie regains consciousness. At first, the world is a blur before her eyes, dimly lit from the glow of Jacqui’s gauntlets. She finds herself staring up at the rafters, caught in a stunned daze. Holy shit. With some effort, she staggers to her feet, and the old wooden cabinet shifts beneath her, weight, wobbling back and forth. She balances with arms extended. “Good job. But that… um… that really could’ve… gone better… you know?” She tries a tentative grin. “All’s well that ends well?”

“No shit, Sherlock Cage.” Jacqui glances up at her companion. She’s crouched beside Raiden, one finger on his neck to measure his pulse. He’s thoroughly knocked out, laying still atop one of the larger cabinets with his hat beside him. “That was pure genius, by the way. I was thinking I’d just
try to leap towards the door and get the hell out of here.”

Cassie chuckles at the pun. “Not bad, but if we used this room to get into the Netherrealm, we’ll probably need it again to escape.”

“Good point.” Jacqui stands up, hands on her hips, and breathes a heavy sigh. She’s taking some comfort from the power of teamwork. “Raiden isn’t going anywhere for right now. It’s not safe. He’s obviously vulnerable to the Netherrealm. By the way… where are we?”

“Oh, man, I don’t know. I misplaced my tourist’s map!” Cassie adopts a sarcastic tone. It’s a coping mechanism. Best she can do. “We’re probably in the castle. At least, that’s my guess. Liu Kang and Kitana have, uh… the head. As far as we know.”

“Assuming they didn’t just toss him into one of the lava pits.” Jacqui shrugs. “It’s all the same to me.”

“Really? You wanna deal with Dark Raiden again? If you have a better idea about how to purify him, I’d love to hear it. I don’t think a juice cleanse is going to do the trick.” Cassie carefully jumps from shelf to shelf towards the locked doorway, and finally lands on flat pavement, much to her relief. It’s good to feel solid ground under her boots after that complete disaster. “We gotta go--you’re gonna just leave him there?!”

“What’s your idea? Carry him along with us? He’s seven feet tall. I’m strong, but not that strong. Dad’s got the metal arms, not me. And I’m not about to wake him up.”

“…okay.” Cassie reluctantly accepts this, for lack of better options. What more could go wrong? Better not ask that, actually. “Let’s hope we can find our way back.”

“Done and done.” Jacqui blasts a tracker particle towards the door, firing directly from one gauntlet. It lodges in the wood, then fades, almost impossible to see. “Special feature. Endorsed by overprotective parents.”

Cassie laughs. “Nice. Very nice. Mom would probably want me to get lost for the learning experience. Not that she wants me to go to the Netherrealm, but I’ll just tell her it’s a Special Forces field trip. Raiden’s even here to supervise us! …sort of.”

Jacqui coughs. “Not to ruin the fun, but do you have any ideas about how to locate the head in the first place?”

Cassie stops short. “Actually, I was just trying to figure out how to open the door. I forgot my Girl Scout lockpicking lessons.” Not that they would even work on a Netherrealm door. “I’m… not actually sure how to find him, no. I thought Raiden would know.”

“Hmm. That’s a shame.” Jacqui kneels down, rummages around in Raiden’s pocket… and retrieves Shinnok’s amulet, holding it up triumphantly. It glints threateningly in the dim light. “‘Cause I do!”

“Hey, look. There’s the magic evil artifact, just when ya need it.” Cassie raises a hand to catch it. “Better be careful that thing doesn’t turn you evil, too.”

“Good point. Hate to have two generations of revenants.” Jacqui forces a smile, casually tossing it towards her friend. That happened long enough ago that she can joke about it, but the recent Raiden incident has struck new dread into her. “I could probably handle it, but you have the Cage blood. You have an extra bonus god-defeating power, obviously.”
“Right.” Cassie fiddles with the lock, sighs in frustration, then backs up and leaps towards the lock with a heavy kick. It swings open with a sharp crack under the force of her weight. She scrambles to land safely, dusting herself off. “That’s better. Works every time! It’s a Cassie special.”

“High style, low subtlety. At least we can close up the room again and make it look like nothing happened.” Jacqui follows her, stepping out into a dismal hallway with blood-stained stones, and carefully presses the door shut behind her. Flames flicker weakly from skeleton-themed torches set into the wall. “Where are we, the torture dungeon?”

“Maybe.” Cassie clenches the amulet tight, its green gem pressed into her palm hard enough to leave a mark. It has a strange sort of warmth to it, though that’s probably just from being in Raiden’s pocket. She tries not to think too much of it. “Somebody’s been through here recently. Torches are lit. Logically, where would Raiden take us? Probably not the torture dungeon.”

“Could be a former torture dungeon.” Jacqui volunteers, scanning the hallway. No signs of life. Or death. “Maybe it’s just a storage area now.”

“Yeah, storage for murder traps. That makes tons of sense.”

“Hey, if this was your castle, would you pay to have the murder room renovated, or just leave it alone? If it was up to me I wouldn’t bother.” Jacqui tiptoes along the hallway. “Not planning on buying any castles, anyway—aha. Look at that.” She stops short, eyeing an ornate wooden door, and gestures for Cassie to come closer. “You’re the door expert. Any thoughts?”

Cassie leans closer and sniffs the wood. “Seems like aged oak beams cut in three-quarter length. High-quality construction, but the nails are starting to rust.” She smirks briefly, and stands up again, shaking her head. “No. I don’t know anything. If Raiden was himself right now, he’d probably be telling me to take this seriously.”

“If he won’t, I will.” Jacqui gently taps her on the shoulder, reaching for the door handle. “We have to do this. On the count of three?”

“Yeah.”

They link arms and hold tight, frozen with dread. Wincing in anticipation, Jacqui fires a gauntlet blast into the handle, and staggers backward as the lock gives way.

Cassie recovers her balance first. Creeping forward, she slowly opens her eyes.

“Uh. Jacqui.”

Jacqui rises to her feet.

“Holy shit.”

“Treasure room?”

“Treasure room.”

Abruptly, Cassie bolts inside, yanking Jacqui alongside her and slamming the door shut. She clamps a hand over Jacqui’s mouth, then rolls up her own sleeve and taps a small display on her wrist. Infrared sensor. She and Jacqui, glowing dots over here. Raiden, close by. And -- at the edges all around them -- a pack of figures… slowly but surely closing in.

Jacqui’s voice is low. “How much time do we have?”
Cassie tries to catch her breath, studying the sensor. “About ten minutes.”

“Okay.” Jacqui lights up her gauntlet silently, breaking through the pitch darkness. Belatedly, she realizes that a green glow has filled the massive room with an otherworldly shimmer.

She whispers. “Cassie. Glad you can do that, but now’s not the time to use yourself as a flashlight.”

“I’m not-- what?”

Cassie opens her palm.

The amulet has lit up with a steady soft beam from the emerald gem.

“Whoa--” Jacqui raises her eyebrows at the amulet... but the the glint of gold captures her attention instead, out of the corner of her eye. Awestruck, she stops and stares, absorbing the sight. Then, slowly, she gestures around her, mouth agape. The room is filled with treasures. Kingdoms’ worth of pure riches. Precious metals, cups, chests, jewels, weapons -- it’s too much to count, almost too much to imagine. The wealth in here could solve all the world’s problems... or, she grimly reminds herself, it could cause even more of them.

Without warning, Cassie whips out her phone, pulls Jacqui into frame with her, and strikes a bold pose in front of a treasure chest. She snaps a picture with a self-assured smirk. “For nostalgia’s sake. We’re gonna put this in our picture albums when we’re little old ladies.” She adopts a creaky voice. “‘Those were the days!’”

“You’re assuming we make it to a comfortable old age at all. No guarantee.” Jacqui shakes her head, lifting up the amulet with careful fingertips. The glow wavers, fading as she brings it towards the door. She freezes with a sudden insight -- and, very cautiously, moves the amulet towards the other end of the room. The glow intensifies.

She points it towards the right of the room. The glow dims.

Towards the left. It brightens.

“Well, damn.” A wide grin crosses her cheerful face, and she tosses her hair proudly, reaching back to tap Cassie on the shoulder. “We’re going to play Hot or Cold with an amulet to find a god’s head. Go figure.” And she sets off towards the other side of the room, counting her steps, weaving between shelves of treasures with precise balance. “Let’s do this.”

Cassie is hot on her heels, trotting a few paces behind. “I’m not going to touch anything in here except... whenever we find him.” She clears her throat. “I’ve learned my lesson.”

“I’d sure hope so.” She pauses thoughtfully, getting her bearings. “I wish I could take some of the treasure, but I’m going to assume this is like the fairy kingdoms. You take something from them, you owe them a debt and can’t leave. That’s the rules.”

“Fairy kingdoms?”

“What, didn’t General Blade ever read you fairy tales?”

“Lots of natural science and history books.” Cassie leans to one side, dodging a tall and ominous statue that looks like it’s about to reach out and grab her. “Not so much the fairytales.”

“Darn. I’ll have to catch you up sometime. They’re a fun read. More murder than you’d think.” Jacqui stops short as the amulet’s glow flares up, too bright to view directly. She holds it high like
a torch, wincing and gazing away. Then she carefully, gracefully, kneels beside a dull, dilapidated-looking treasure chest, trying not to falter. “I... I think we got it...”

“Great. Nice work, Miss Briggs.” Cassie pauses. “Something wrong?”

Jacqui glances up at her friend with troubled eyes, struck by sudden doubts. “Cassie, I... really don’t want to do this. Really, really don’t.”

Cassie grabs her hand reassuringly. “Want me to take care of it? I can. Didn’t know you were squeamish.”

“You know I’m not. And I wish it was that simple.” Jacqui shudders. “Okay. You don’t have any fear of Shinnok, you beat his ass. But I do. And it’s not so much about what he can do. That’s not it.” She grips Cassie’s hand. “What would happen if people hear he’s back? Yeah, you’re right, he’s pretty disappointing for a supervillain god. But people have committed so many horrible acts in his name. Quan Chi, D’Vorah, all of them. He’s an excuse to do evil, and that-- that’s what scares me.”

Cassie nods.

“I get it.”

She leans in and gives her friend a tight hug.

“But right now, he’s a head in a bag. Can’t hurt us.”

“Good point.” Jacqui manages to crack a small smile. Carefully, with strong fingers, she pries open the lid of the chest, disrupting its careful seals.

The bag is there, tied shut and roughly crammed inside the small container.

And it’s still faintly squirming.

“Oh my god! Okay no nope that is NOT happening.” Jacqui scrambles backward in disgust and gets to her feet, glancing away in immediate revulsion. “No. Can’t do it. Not today. This is way above my pay grade.”

“‘Oh god’ is right, technically...” Cassie laughs hollowly, a failed effort to lighten the mood. Nothing can actually help here. “Hey, don’t worry. Like I said, I got this.” Cassie squeezes Jacqui’s hand tighter, reassuring despite the grim circumstances. She reaches into the chest, retrieving the bag by its fragile drawstring and trying her very best to ignore the movement within it. She is extremely careful not to touch the thing inside. This is, in every imaginable way, absolutely awful.

Forcefully, Cassie wills herself into thinking the bag contains literally anything other than an alive decapitated head... and, swallowing hard, safely tucks it under her arm.

Jacqui shudders with pure horror. Don’t think about it. Anything else. This’ll help Raiden. Focus on that. She lets go of Cassie’s other hand, rolling up her friend’s sleeve to check the infrared sensor at her wrist. Those approaching figures are dangerously close -- so many glowing threats on the tiny map. “We need to go. Right now. Ideally, two minutes ago.” She shoves the amulet into a utility pouch, then zips it shut, weaving her way back through the treasure room with Cassie in tow. Time’s limited. Make every second count.

“Uh---
She stops short. Cassie almost collides with her, bracing against her shoulder as Jacqui kneels and presses a finger to her lips.

Raging beyond the door, they hear the distinctive sound of crackling lightning mixed with demonic roars.

“Company’s here! Let’s help--” Cassie leaps up and charges towards the door, but Jacqui yanks her to a halt again, skidding on the stone floor. She whirls around to face her. “Are you crazy? We have to go!”

“Why not wait until it’s over? Raiden isn’t exactly going to help get us home!”

Cassie looks her dead in the eyes, surrounded in a faint green aura. “Then who the fuck will?!!”

“Good point. Taking our chances, huh?” Jacqui bites her lip. “By the way, you’re glowing. Use it wisely.” She promptly lets go of Cassie, freeing her to hold the… item. “Hey look, another suicide mission. I’m starting to lose track of these! Stay back. Keep safe, girlfriend.”

And at the sound of another thunder strike, Jacqui bolts forward and shatters the door -- gloved fists raised, gaze focused, her trademark gauntlets lit up in vivid fluorescent brilliance.

She hurls herself straight into the fight, landing directly on the back of a massive battle-worn demon steed. Its wings are tattered, one leg lame, its body already half fried by electricity. It staggers at the blow from Jacqui, but keeps its balance with an angry roar. Aggravated, she leaps forward towards its neck. Its veins glow orange like unholy lava, its eyes twin beacons of hellfire. It twists its head back and roars at her, unleashing a noxious cloud of putrid smoke. Gasping for breath, she presses a button - steadies herself -- raises her gauntlets -- and slams her electrified fists into the back of the demon’s skull.

A split-second later, a white-hot lightning bolt strikes the beast between its eyes, blinding it with a ghastly scream.

Astonished, Jacqui slowly raises her head, casting her gaze towards the shimmering air above her. She hardly dares to hope.

Raiden is luminous, more divine than ever with lightning held tight in his palms as a storm rages above him in the ceiling’s rafters. He gazes down at her, meeting her horrified stare, and softly smiles.

His eyes are pure electric blue.

“Jacqueline! Jump!” Raiden yells out to her, extending a hand as the lightning fades from his fingertips. She leaps towards him with all the power in her lean body, and he catches her by the shoulder effortlessly, holding her still and free from gravity. Cassie vaults up the beast’s flank, lands squarely on its sizzling neck, then propels herself towards Raiden and Jacqui with one last leap -- just as the demon bursts into flames, spraying blood everywhere in a white-hot searing inferno.

Raiden shuts his eyes. Despite his divinity, he sometimes envies those who can pray.

A massive bolt of lightning scorches down from the roof, hitting Raiden with full force and flowing through him like a current. It courses through Cassie and Jacqui, strikes the beast’s fiery remains, dances down to the walls of the horrible castle -- and they vanish in a flash.
Crisis Management

The Sky Temple greets them with the clamor of voices.

They re-form in the courtyard, plunging down from the clear air and alighting on the hard tiles. Cassie falls gracefully, twisting to land on her feet, and grips the bag tucked under her arm, which squirms with discomfort. She shivers and tosses it over to Raiden. “He’s all yours now.”

Raiden accepts it with a resigned thanks.

Jacqui is the first to scan the perimeter, rising to her feet with careful grace. Her gauntlets crackle and glow dimly, and she taps a button to deactivate them, shutting down the tremendous power. Beside the temple door, a blonde woman in military garb is arguing with a smirking sunglasses-clad man. Jacqui shoots a glance at Cassie, feeling a twinge of sympathy. “Hey. Heads up. It’s your folks.”

“Great! Can’t wait to explain this one.” Cassie dusts off her sleeves and trots towards them, putting on a cheerful look. Hopefully this won’t take long. “Mom. Dad. Might be best if you clear out of here. I’ve got this situation under control.”

Sonya draws herself up to her full height, inspecting her daughter with a stern gaze. “What ‘situation,’ Sergeant?”

Dad didn’t tell you? Cassie is at least smart enough not to blurt that out. She grits her teeth, thinking quick. Forgiveness is better than permission. “Raiden’s got a way to cure himself. I’m helping. Volunteer opportunity.”

“Well, that’s good news. Just what we needed to hear today.” Johnny whips off his sunglasses and tucks them in his pocket. As ever, he’s using humor to get through the horror. “Fraid we’ve got some bad news for you, daughter dearest.”

“Specifically for me? I’m touched.”

Sonya interjects. “This is no laughing matter right now. D’Vorah has escaped.”

“Should’ve bought more bug repell--” Cassie quips, and then freezes. “WHAT?”

“She broke out of her containment cell today. We found insects eating the faces of all the guards. There’s no trace of her path.” Sonya stays stone-faced. Emotion is the worst thing to interfere in a situation like this, but she’s just as terrified as the rest of them. “This is our number one priority right now. Raiden can wait.”

“No. No, he can’t. I promise you that one hundred percent. He’s losing control of the corruption.” Cassie clenches her fists. “You worry about D’Vorah. Jacqui and I can deal with Raiden.”

“I’m afraid it’s just you and Raiden right now. We need Jacqui for this -- urgently. Her gauntlet has the programming to track D’Vorah’s pheromones. You and I’ll talk later.” Sonya gives Cassie a brusque nod, then brushes past her, boots clicking on the stone. “Specialist Briggs!”

Johnny watches her go, thumbs hooked into his belt. “Business first. As always.”

“Can’t fault her for it this time. The last thing we need is Typhoid Ladybug buzzing around Earthrealm. Who knows what she’d do?” Cassie shudders, viscerally remembering the execution of
Mileena. “Let’s just say, the less you know, the better.”

“How much worse could it get? Remember when she glued me to the chair with bug spit and tried to have her grubs chew my face off?” Johnny brushes his hair back. “Good thing I’m too handsome to die as some kind of bug food.”

“Yeah, right. You probably just put on enough aftershave to poison them.” Cassie rolls her eyes. “I assume you got my message?”

“I sure did. By the way, I hope you’ve thought of a way to explain this to everyone. Can’t keep bluffing forever.”

Cassie inhales deeply. “Working on it!”

“For what it’s worth, I’ve got your back. We want Raiden to stop going crazy, so we gotta do this. Right?” Cassie’s father shares her lack of dread towards the infamous elder god. Fearlessness to the point of stupidity does run in the family. “But, not to be Johnny Raincloud here, but what if it doesn’t work and you get two crazy gods out of the deal?”

“You got a better plan, I’d love to hear it.”

Johnny frowns. It’s a shitty plan, sure, but most of them are. Somehow they work anyway -- more or less. He’s gotten used to this. “I don’t. But it’s not like you’re reviving him completely, right? Just… uh… re-attaching…?”

“Um.” Cassie shifts her weight from one foot to the other, hands shoved deep in her pockets. “Shinnok has to be conscious for this to work. Didn’t I mention that?”

Johnny grimaces as the news sinks in. This wasn’t part of the scheme. Not as far as he’d known until now. “That’s way worse. You want an extra helping hand to kick his ass when it’s over?”

“We’ll have Fujin to help us. No offense, Dad, but he’s a god. You’ll do more good on the outside.”

For once, he holds back a joke. “Got it. How’s this going to work?”

Cassie bites her lip, carefully recalling the exact ritual sequence. Raiden had made her memorize it while waiting for Jacqui’s arrival… just in case things went terribly wrong, as they tend to do. “Okay. So. Raiden preps a vessel to contain the corruption essence.”

“Jar of evil. Cool.”

“Yep. Then I place the jar of evil on the floor outside the jinsei, and hold onto it, because I’m the only one here who’s not a god. So I’m in charge of that—”

“Do you get to wear rubber gloves for this? Disinfectant? Anything?”

“Ha ha. Wouldn’t help. So, Raiden takes, um, the head-- and enters the jinsei with it-- him…”

“Wait.” Johnny holds up a hand. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but last time, wasn’t that incredibly, remarkably, catastrophically, bad?”

“Yep! Sure was. But he needs to be revived in order to fix up Raiden, and anyway, he can’t corrupt the jinsei unless he’s awake—”

“Hold on. Didn’t you just say he needs to be conscious for the ritual?”
“Oh yeah. So we have about five seconds to drag him out of it and start the process before he wakes up and the sky starts boiling red again.”

“This can’t go wrong. No potential problems here.” Johnny’s voice drips with sarcasm. It’s getting more difficult to process this impossible disaster, which actually seems more and more possible with every passing second. “What do you do next?”

“Raiden says the blessing cure, I hold the jar, and, if it goes right, he’ll be purified pretty quick and Shinnok will be…. not such a walking manifestation of evil, I guess. The corruption needs to be totally wiped out from Raiden, Shinnok, and the jinsei all at once, or it’ll keep coming back like an infection.”

“What about the revenants?”

“Wish I knew how to fix them. But they’re not gods. Not linked the same way.”

“And Fujin stands guard?”

“That’s the plan. He’s our backup in case of a crisis.”

“Not to ask an awkward question… but once Raiden’s cured, what are you planning to do with the failed world-conquering drama queen?”

“That’s what we’re pretending we won’t have to deal with! Far as I know, we keep him in confinement in the Sky Temple somewhere.”

“No more beheading? Aww.”

“I wish.” Cassie cracks her knuckles. “Raiden refuses to do it again. Conscience, or something. He won’t let Jacqui do it, either. And, trust me, she did ask.”

“You realize how many people want to get their hands on that guy?”

“Government. CIA. Special Forces. Netherrealm. Outworld. And probably D’Vorah, which is extra fun.” Cassie ticks them off on her fingers. “Yeah. I’ve thought about all that. Never thought I’d see a day when we’d have to protect an archenemy god, but you know how much harm he’d do outside our custody?”

Johnny raises an eyebrow. “Assuming he doesn’t instantly kill you all.”

“Yep. Big assumption. And if he doesn’t wake up at all, we’ll have to find a place to put him. Shelf wouldn’t work as well as when he was just a head.” Cassie glances around her, evaluating the scene. Sonya and Jacqui are discussing the situation in hushed tones, Raiden is consulting with Fujin at the edge of the courtyard, and she’s just standing here like a moron, ready to help out in the worst plan yet. “Raiden thinks he’s lost all his powers after being locked in a box in hell for a couple months. Oh, remind me to tell you about the treasure room.”

“Yeah, that’d do it. Treasure? I’d love to hear, but tell me later.” Johnny claps her on the shoulder, masking his concern with false bravado and a weak smile. “Stay safe, kid. Come get me as soon as it’s over. I’ll be right outside. Worst case scenario, we’ll team up and go three for three against Shinnok.”

“Sure. Easy peasy.” Cassie grins halfheartedly, and leans in and grabs her dad for a quick hug, gripping the fabric of his jacket. “Hey. I’m glad you came to help.”
He squeezes her reassuringly. “That’s what I’m here for.”

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The jinsei flares brighter than ever, filling the room with a comforting blue haze. Cassie scans the chamber, trying to calm her nerves. The walls are filled with elaborate stone reliefs, delicately carved murals that resemble old-style artwork. “Nice wallpaper.”

Raiden glances up from the jar he’s preparing, kneeling on the floor. He’s dressed in elegant garments of white and blue cloth. His hat and cowl are gone; instead, white hair cascades down his shoulders, framing his noble face. It’s a flattering look. “Do you like the walls? I carved those myself as a memorial to the past.”

“Wow. How long did that take?”

“Decades, perhaps. I don’t entirely remember.”

“Damn, and I thought I was committed to my projects.” Cassie strolls towards Fujin, who’s lingering near the edges of the chamber with his arms folded, seemingly unconcerned by current events. “You doing all right? Nervous or anything? C’mon, I can’t be the only one who’s feeling at least a little bit of dread about this.”

“I have faith in Lord Raiden.” Fujin inclines his head to study her, long silver braid falling over his shoulder. He’s clad in his typical gear, form-fitting and stylish leather armor. Like the other gods, he’s about two feet taller than Cassie. That always takes some getting used to. “But any mortal with good sense would worry.”

“Are you implying I have good sense?” Cassie laughs under her breath. “That’s a stretch.”

Raiden lifts his head, catching her in his glowing gaze with a comforting smile. “We are not perfect, not even the gods. Do not expect that of yourself. You have great talents.”

“Talents, yes. Self-preservation instinct? Not so much.” Cassie lifts her chin, following the path of the glowing mist up towards the open ceiling. This place really is beautiful. It’d be a shame to see it ruined again. “Do you have... uh—” She gestures vaguely rather than figure out how to refer to the head again. “Is it all ready?”

“Yes.” Raiden gestures to Fujin, who crosses the room with long strides, tactfully retreating beyond the edge of the doorway. Then, he stands, a brief charge of lightning traveling through him and crackling through his sleeves. The god inhales deeply, hoping to clear his mind. “Take the jar, Cassandra. I have finished my enchantments. I cannot touch it again.”

“Ever?”

“Ever. Nor can any god. It will be yours to protect.”

“Wait, what?” She freezes, breath caught in her throat. That’s a new level of responsibility. “ Didn’t mention that til now!”

“I trust you to manage that task.” Raiden stares at her sternly, then gestures to the item on the floor, inviting her to come closer. The Jar of Evil looks, for all intents and purposes, totally ordinary.

Cassie kneels, picks it up, turns it over in her palm. It is totally ordinary. For now. She sits down on the floor and places it back down on the rough stone, clasping her hands on either
side of the glass. “Like this?”

“Yes. Just so you know, the glass is not breakable. It will be sealed after the ritual. You have no reason to worry.”

“Smart move.” She closes her eyes, overwhelmed by a cold chill of sudden fear. When she reopens them, she finds that Raiden has knelt in front of her. “Oh. Hey.”

Raiden reaches out to her, resting a hand on her shoulder with gentle care. “Thank you for this, Cassandra Cage. If we are successful, I will owe you my eternal life. My gratitude is too deep for words.”

“Don’t mention it, Raiden. I’m just returning a favor. You’ve done a lot for me, too, y’know.” Cassie offers a smile, hands trembling with nerves. She grips the glass tighter, drawing on whatever inner strength she still has. She’s suddenly grateful for that morning’s espresso. “You ready?”

“Yes.” Raiden rises to his feet, stepping back, and draws another deep meditative breath. He lifts the bag with great care, just as Cassie had done… and loosens the drawstring.

Cassie looks away.

Even age-old gods can still learn life’s lessons.

Raiden ascends the steps, carefully balancing on each stone platform, and casts away the bag to reveal the severed head of Shinnok.

Sick to his stomach, Raiden reaches out and, with a fingertip, gently shuts the wounded god’s eyes. Shinnok’s sickly pale skin is cold to the touch, far different from the usual burning heat of the god’s dark magic coursing through his body. His eyelids twitch, but he does not move any further, settling into a deathly stillness.

Raiden unfastens the elaborate headdress, setting it aside, to reveal fine white hair, swept back and trimmed at the nape of the god’s neck. It is almost strange to see Shinnok without one of those ornamental headpieces. It strips him of his power even further. Cautiously, suppressing his rising dread and horror, Raiden grips the hair at the back of the other god’s head, cupping his other hand under Shinnok’s damaged jaw.

And, with one last invocation whispered through dry lips, Raiden ascends into the jinsei.

It happens immediately, as Cassie knew it might. At first she can’t look. Then, she can’t look away.

Beneath the torn injury of Shinnok’s neck, a body slowly forms, shaped by a blaze of pure blinding white light. His torso takes form gradually, the unbearable glow fading into pale skin and bony shoulders. Mist transforms into flesh, and his arms appear next, muscular but weakened by age, with patterned designs tracing the length of his skin. His delicate hands are just the same as before, strong but gaunt. His fingers twitch faintly while he continues to take shape, slender sides heaving as he struggles to draw breath.

Cassie shuts her eyes. She can only briefly stand to watch a god reborn.
In minutes, it is done. Two figures now float in the jinsei, facing each other as eternal parallels.

At last. Raiden hesitates, conflicting thoughts battling in his mind. Such strong emotions are nearly unbearable. Finally, he lets go, moves away, and gazes in a mixture of fascination and horror, studying the face of his fellow god. He never believed he might see Shinnok as anything other than a bitter foe.

There is something curious and unnerving about witnessing his enemy in a state of peace.

Raiden floats closer and gathers him up with an arm around Shinnok’s waist and another around his shoulders. He lifts him as he exits the jinsei, setting him down on one of the stone steps. Thoughtfully, he reaches for a nearby cloth, wrapping it hastily around the god’s newly formed body, and knots it at the back, between his shoulderblades.

Then he waits.

Minutes later, Shinnok finally stirs.

He opens his eyes slowly, trying to process his surroundings as best he can. The irises of his eyes glow pale white, with a hint of red flaring up behind them. It is a peculiar sight.

The god stares at Cassie abruptly. She freezes, mouth open. Shinnok does the same.

“Now, Cassandra!” Raiden swoops up behind Shinnok, catching him unaware, and grips his shoulders, turning him to look deep into his eyes. “Hold tight!”

Cassie grits her teeth and grips the jar with all her might. Focus. Raiden shouts the enchantment, mystical words echoing deeply through the chamber. The jar heats uncomfortably beneath her fingertips and rattles against the floor, but she holds it down with force. A deep and eerie hissing noise floods her ears, coming from all sides. She can’t place its origin, and she doesn’t want to.

And, as Shinnok furiously draws back a fist and Raiden catches hold of his wrist, the god speaks the spell’s final phrase.

Before Cassie’s eyes, a red mist begins to escape from both of them, seeping through the clothes and draining from their eyes and mouths. Shinnok trembles violently, but Raiden manages to hold still, muscles twitching as he grabs him tighter. Both their eyes have lit up now in bright sinister glares. Shinnok’s are a deep and ominous red, while Raiden’s are filled with that awful orange, a clear warning of his dark self. They have both turned to stare at her, fixing her in the crosshairs of those terrible gazes.

It is one of the worst things she has ever seen.

Shinnok wrenches one arm free from Raiden’s grip, reaching towards her with clawed fingers.

Cassie feels a bolt of icy terror down her spine, churning her stomach. She realizes -- for the second time that day -- this is how I die.

But the jar grows hotter, and she braces herself, and the red glowing mist moves towards the center of the chamber and concentrates into pure, menacing crimson -- then spirals with the strength of a tornado right towards the vessel, pouring itself into the glass until the air clears.

When she opens her eyes, she is met by concerned gazes of blue and green.

She peers closer. Raiden’s eyes are the usual electric blue, but Shinnok’s white eyes now have a
faint emerald glow behind them. Distantly, Cassie thinks to herself, they didn’t used to be green, did they?

Upside: Shinnok isn’t immediately trying to kill either of them.

Downside: he’s alive. And, based on the sneer on his face, he’s fully conscious.

In a feat of agility, he springs free from Raiden’s grasp and lands on one of the stepping stones around the jinsei, arms spread in a triumphant gesture as he beholds his surroundings. “And whom have I to thank for this magnificent honor? It was always my greatest dream to be seen in a flimsy towel in front of my archenemies.”

“Didn’t need to know that, Shinny.” Cassie discreetly slides the jar into her pocket. “Uh, welcome back. Not really sure what else to say. If you’re going to try to kill us right now, do your worst.”

Almost out of curiosity, Shinnok lifts his hand and tries to summon his magic.

Nothing. Absolutely, completely nothing.

He puts his hands on his hips. “Ah, delightful. I have a riddle for you. What is a god who is not a god?”

Cassie stares at him.

“Me, obviously.” Shinnok jumps down from the platform, landing nimbly, but winces as he gets up, joints cracking. “How… disappointing. If my companions for the foreseeable future are to be Raiden and yourself, I must say, that’s unfortunate.”

Cassie blurts out. “Fujin’s out there, too.”

Fujin steps in and offers a small wave.

Shinnok sighs. “Ah, wonderful. Here to help your brother? This is quite the family reunion... if it can even be called that, considering your divine status. Or, in my case, ex-divine.”

Fujin glares at him. “Do you want me to go get Bo’ Rai Cho, too?”

Shinnok looks down his nose at him. “Honestly, I would rather be reduced to my former headless state than speak one word to that man.”

“Your wish is my command.” A voice rings out from the doorway. A tall, imposing, heavily armed figure steps in, her brow furrowed in barely concealed anger.

Cassie winces.

“Hi, Mom.”

Sonya glances at her, weapons aimed directly at Shinnok. “Cassie! We need to talk. Later.”

Mortal drama is so delightful. Shinnok stifles a laugh. “Have you broken your curfew, Madam Cage?”

“No laughing matter.” A deep voice rings through the chamber. Jax steps in, jaw clenched firmly and anger written into his face. He taps his metal fists together as he stands beside Sonya, offering a wordless threat. Jacqui arrives at her father’s side right afterwards, gauntlets fully powered-up, and advances towards the edge of the chamber, circling the jinsei. Jax follows, stationing himself
beside one of the carvings.

Shinnok frowns. “Jackson Briggs. I don’t believe it was a pleasure last time.”

He looks at the god with pure contempt. “No. It wasn’t.”

“I don’t know about you guys, but I had fun. What’s not to love about throwing down with an ex-god?” Kung Jin crosses the threshold confidently, then stops short, taking note of Cassie’s look of muted horror. “Hi there. Thought I’d come help just in case you needed it. You look like you saw a ghost.”

“I sort of did. Nice to see you.” Cassie stares at her teammate. He’s armed with his usual carved bow and confident smirk, as she expects. She desperately hopes he has the sense to not piss off Shinnok with an irreverent remark. That’s her job.

Takeda, also armed to the teeth, follows close behind. He, at least, can be counted on to be slightly more sensible -- but only slightly. He greets Cassie with a wordless nod.

Cassie returns the nod in a daze. “Hi.”

Shinnok observes this smugly. “All four of you! How charming to see such teamwork. You... were expecting them, weren’t you, Miss Cage? Hmm?”

“You know, you’ve only been alive for two minutes and you’re already getting on my nerves.” Cassie grimaces and reaches for her pistol -- but is disrupted by a familiar whistle.

The figure standing in the doorway throws her a quick salute.

“Dad!” Cassie winces. This was not part of the plan. “Brought the whole gang? This isn’t Thanksgiving, for fuck’s sake. Thanks for the reinforcements, but I’d have appreciated some warning.”

Johnny shakes his head. “You really thought I’d let you go in there and revive an evil god, with just me for backup if it all went south? I’m good, but I’m not that good.”

Raiden, who has been quiet through all of this, approaches them at last. “I did foresee your aid. I offer my thanks to all of you.”

Cassie shoots him a glare. “Really?”

“I see many different timelines, Cassandra Cage. This--”

“Not the time for philosophizing! Might want to worry about our new pal instead!”

Shinnok, in the meantime, has decided to reach out towards the jinsei, tentatively waving a hand to disrupt the mists. It swirls around his fingers, but no evil red glow is seeping out into the mystical substance, much to the relief of all.

He draws himself up to his full height, hands clasped behind his back, and looks between them with as much condescension as a god wrapped in a tablecloth can manage, which isn’t really very much at all.

“Well, that was underwhelming.”

“You said it, Shinny, not me.” Cassie approaches Raiden, hands on her hips. Her nerves are starting to settle down, although the jar is still burning uncomfortably in her pocket. “Biggest
question: how are you feeling?

“I am well. The ritual worked, just as I had hoped.” Raiden pats her shoulder reassuringly. The inner turmoil that had chewed at the back of his mind for months is gone at last. He is, well and truly, himself. “Now, go home. Rest. I have this under control.”

“You need at least one Cage around in case of crisis. Mediterranean war cult, remember?”

Raiden smiles gently. “Perhaps. But he has no powers. All I must tolerate is his attitude, while I determine… some sort of arrangement. I still regret the grim necessity of this, but to restore my soul is the greatest relief of all. Thank you once again.”

“Okaaay.” Cassie rolls her eyes, then slips her pistol back into its holster and struts towards the door, shooting a glare at Shinnok as she leaves. “I’ll let the real adults handle this from here.”

Johnny moves towards her. “I better go then, too.”

Sonya responds from across the room, where she’s stationed herself with a large missile launcher pointed directly at Shinnok. Desperate times, desperate measures. “You stay right here, Mister Cage!”

“Never mind!” Johnny abruptly turns to face her. “See you later, kid.”

Sonya calls after Cassie. “Dismissed.”

Cassie hastily salutes her, then escapes beyond the doorway, leaving the rest of the team to deal with the divine personification of a bad attitude. Eight on one? She’d bet on those odds.

Fujin follows her as she leaves the chamber, footsteps echoing behind her in the cavernous hall.

Well, seven on one, then. Still reliable.

He quickens his strides and catches up with the girl easily. “I need not tell you to keep it safe, I am sure.”

“No worries.” Cassie digs into her pockets, pulling out a label and marker with one hand and the Evil Jar with the other. The glow has faded, and now the contents just look like a strange, viscous reddish liquid. She peels off the back, slaps the label haphazardly onto the side of the jar, and scrawls “Grandma’s Homemade Strawberry Jam. Souvenir. Do Not Eat!”

Fujin raises an eyebrow.

Cassie smirks at him, turns on her heel, and departs.
The situation simmers down in time, and the temple grows silent once more, out of necessity rather than choice. General Blade is needed urgently back at the Special Forces base -- not for an inter-realm crisis this time, or at least, so she hopes. Swiftly, she ushers her pack of accomplices back out through the entry portal. Fortunately, she won't witness whatever Raiden will do.

She trusts that he's been cleansed of the corruption by now... but he and Shinnok have much unfinished business to address, and the gods' matters are their own. They live by a scale of time that she could never begin to comprehend. Right now, it's not her place to interfere.

Or so she says. In reality, Jin, Jacqui, and Takeda are stationed beyond the temple’s perimeter, ready to spring into action if the temple erupts with divine battle. Just in case. They have the necessary clearance to deal with that -- and the hopeful arrogance to believe that they possibly could.

They're out of earshot, though, by direct order. To do otherwise would break Raiden’s trust, and Sonya refuses to take that risk.

Within the temple’s innermost chamber, the air is thick with unspoken mutual resentment, seething and flaring in visceral sparks. The wind god has stationed himself in a different corridor, leaving these peculiar forces of death and sky to solve matters between themselves however they may.

The door swings shut behind them with a clap of thunder. Raiden bars it physically as well, towering at his full height. His face is set in a ruthless stern frown, and the brim of the hat conceals his eyes as he silently crosses the rugged stone floor. Ghostly blue mist floats up from the cracks among the flattened boulders, circling around his sturdy body and pulling him closer to the jinsei, almost floating.

And there stands Shinnok, his lifetime foe.

He seems to be gloating, in his usual brave facade of scornful pride, but a closer look at his sharp, time-worn features reveals otherwise. There is fear written there, and a hint of malice, and above all, the profound and overwhelming despair of a man who knows his enemy has taken pity upon him.

For the first time in a long, long time, Raiden stands still and studies him, wordlessly.

Shinnok’s low raspy voice cuts through that uncomfortable silence. “Not once have you had the courage to look me in the eyes.”

Raiden raises his head, revealing his blazing stare. “You were never deserving of it.”

“Wasn’t I?” Shinnok recoils and steps back, spreading his arms as the mist of the jinsei swirls around his bare shoulders. “Was I deserving, then, of the three endless hells you inflicted upon me?”

Raiden gazes up at him. “That is not for me to say.”

“Ah! I see.” Shinnok leaps down from the platform, landing neatly upon the stone. The knotted cloth slips down his chest, and he pulls it up with an indignant huff. He is smaller and shorter than Raiden, but when they stand face to face, his bold posture is more than enough to match Raiden’s hesitant stance. “So you were willing to inflict these punishments upon your hated adversary” -- in
a voice that drips with venom -- “but you are still too much of a coward to defend your own actions? Raiden, Raiden…” He shakes his head. “Your uncertainty has always been your undoing.”

Shinnok glances past Raiden’s shoulder. A worried look flashes across his face, eyes widening.

Raiden’s focus wavers. He looks to the side, following the cue--

**WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME?!**

Shinnok’s scream rings through the chamber like a knife scraped on stone. There is a catch in his throat, almost a stifled sob. But he glares at his foe viciously, sending his words directly to the other’s mind.

He lashes out with a sudden bolt of magenta flame that hits Raiden square in the chest, sending a jolt of searing pain through his body. Raiden reels and staggers to catch his balance, balling his hands into lightning-laced fists.

Shinnok is not done.

*You will atone!*

He ascends before the thunder god’s eyes, glowing with power that crackles through the air and cloaks the roof in darkness. Flashes of ominous light dart out from his fingertips, arching up his bare arms and framing his slender silhouette in magical fire. He has transformed into his usual attire, wearing his ornate headdress and carved belt, his armored shoulder pieces accentuating a minimal chestpiece and elaborate boots. Frayed strands of rope dangle from the gauntlets on his forearms, an eternal reminder of his imprisonment.

His voice is hoarse with anger and thick with profound grief.

Raiden eyes the other god calmly, a hand pressed against his own chest as he catches his breath.

*I know.*

And as Shinnok hurtles towards him with a shriek of rage, fist outstretched and rage burning in his eyes, Raiden drops to one knee and lifts one hand, palm up, as if to offer peace.

They collide there between the hallowed walls, an unstoppable force battling an immovable object. Raiden catches Shinnok’s fist in his powerful hand, and loops an arcing strand of lightning around his arm, capturing him as he seethes with anger. Another bolt of electricity tugs him to the floor, encircling his waist and dragging him down to kneel before Raiden. Shinnok winces at the contact with the rough stone, grinding his teeth in pain.

Raiden kneels, too, facing him evenly and calmly. *Stop yourself.*

Shinnok growls and clenches his other hand, visibly seething. Skeletal fingers dart up from thin air and wrap around Raiden’s ankles, keeping him tethered to the earth.

Raiden nods knowingly, and says nothing, even as the grasp tightens to the point of pain.

Finally, after a brief eternity, Raiden releases Shinnok’s fist from his grip and lets the coils of lightning fall away.

Shinnok wrenches himself free, a look of horror crossing his face as Raiden easily rises to his feet and the summoned bones crumble away to dust.
When the thunder god speaks, his voice is a low, pleasant rumble. *Do you feel any better now?*

Shinnok does not bother to reply. Instead he grimaces, vaults off the ground, summons another surge of power, and hurtles towards Raiden again -- his forearms now encased in delicately woven gauntlets of sharp bone.

As *I thought*. Raiden counters the blow before it strikes, summoning a thin wall of lightning to separate himself and the enraged Shinnok, who claws at him ineffectively through the electrified shield. *This will not help you. I am sorry.*

*Sorry?! When has that word EVER before crossed your lips?* Shinnok raises his voice and shoots back a vicious retort as he ascends to the top of the chamber, propelled by the flame in his fists. He swoops down towards Raiden from another angle, but without even looking, Raiden lifts a hand and hurls a ball of lightning towards him. When Shinnok collides with it, it stops his momentum abruptly, dropping him to the floor in a tangle of gaunt limbs and sharp armor. He lands clumsily with a hiss and a curse, and gets up again, limping.

Raiden hasn’t moved from where he stands, just steadily tracking Shinnok’s path with a calm, sorrowful gaze. *Do not fight me in this state. You need rest.*

Shinnok seethes like a caged beast, steadying his weight tentatively between both feet. Any damage heals swiftly, even in this state. *I have no time for rest!*

Raiden shrugs gently. *You will have all the time in the world for it.*

With a hiss of outrage, Shinnok makes one last vengeful leap towards Raiden to land a hit, but the thunder god fights back at last, blasting off with a powerful surge of lightning, and blocks his blow easily with a look of mild disappointment. Then he grabs Shinnok’s forearms, gripping tight. The bone armor crumbles away, leaving only those gauntlets wrapped in fraying cords.

And as Shinnok freezes, briefly stunned, Raiden grabs hold of the ropes and tears them off.

Raiden drops the other god to the floor, and floats backwards into the air, his solemn figure framed by flashes of lightning. He casts the ropes into the jinsei, where they vanish in a flash, vaporized by the holy force. *Let that be a lesson.*

Shinnok sneers up at him, gathering himself up on hands and knees before he rises to his feet unsteadily. *A lesson in what, you fool?! What dare you teach me?*

*A lesson for myself.*

Raiden alights on the ground, then strides towards the stone structures that frame the jinsei, taking a seat on one of the sloped surfaces. *Join me. You will injure yourself if you continue to fight.*

*Nothing so grave as the injuries you’ve caused me before!*

*Very well.* Still, Raiden gestures towards the structure beside him. *You are free to sit.*

*Fine.* Hands clasped behind his back, Shinnok angrily stalks over, the fabric of his waist cloak swishing with every step. He climbs up to the top, and deliberately sits as far from Raiden as possible, knees drawn up to his chest and arms wrapped around his legs. *Are you happy now?*

Raiden adjusts his hat. *I wouldn’t call it that.*
That was humiliating. Shinnok huffs under his breath. Worse to be left with a small vestige of my power, than just to be stripped of my godhood entirely and be done with it.

If that were possible, I am sure the Elder Gods would have ordered it by now. Raiden regards him calmly, his glowing gaze unwavering. And now, after all I have learned, I would not have obeyed the order. The opposite of the corruption is mercy.

Shinnok’s face crinkles into a puzzled sneer. What in the name of the Realms do you mean by that?

It is too much to explain right now. Suffice it to say that I learned the true nature of the curse that was placed upon me from your actions. It is selfishness.

Upon YOU?

Ah. Raiden clears his throat primly. So you are not aware.

The most I have been aware of, ever since you last laid hands on me, was my own eternal agony. Shinnok arches a brow. Do tell.

I contracted the… curse, by cleansing the jinsei of your corruption, Shinnok. It consumed my every waking moment. I nearly declared war on Outworld.

Shinnok pauses, aghast, then laughs out loud, a hollow, grating noise. Oh, I wish I had seen that. You really did deprive me of all of life’s pleasures!

Raiden ignores this, and furrows his brows, mouth tugging into a small frown. I learned the nature of that selfishness, once I had been stopped. I had claimed my actions were for the defense of Earthrealm, but in reality, I was caught up in an indulgent vision of being Earthrealm’s divine champion. It was for myself, and only myself.

Shinnok scoffs, waving a hand in dismissal. Absentmindedly, he touches the bare surface of the gauntlets, getting used to the lighter weight without the ropes. He had always kept them as a symbolic reminder of his torment. Perhaps it’s best to be rid of them. And what else is new?

You were the same way, Shinnok. What did you ever speak of, these last times we’ve fought, if not your own power… your desire to be worshipped and to cast destruction upon all the realms? The moment you invaded Earthrealm so many millennia ago, you let envy and spite and hatred consume you. You allowed this curse to become a part of our world.

Shinnok tilts his head, looking down his nose at Raiden. Ah, yes, the king of subtlety and selflessness dares to educate me on proper behavior.

Raiden gazes upon him with stern disapproval to match. Do you feel you have any moral high ground to criticize me?

Hardly. Shinnok admits this with a roll of his eyes, focusing on anywhere except Raiden. So what do you intend to do with me now, O merciful Raiden? His voice drips with bitter spite. Why don’t you toss me to the wolves and deliver me unto the elder gods for another appropriate punishment? It would be swifter than… this.

You will stay here. Raiden adjusts his seat, taking a cross-legged position with his hands folded neatly in his lap. I needed to revive you to cure myself. This is not solely my own decision to pardon your crimes. You will be contained within the Sky Temple. Indefinitely.

Hmm. Let us hope it is a better ‘containment’ than the chains, amulet, or bag. These last few times
have been profoundly unpleasant.

You should be grateful. Miss Cage and Miss Briggs had other suggestions for what to do with you.

Oh, I’m quite I’m sure they did. Am I to waste away my days here with you, then? How absolutely absurd.

If you would rather be imprisoned again, Shinnok, I am certain that can be arranged.

I could say the same of you. Have you paid Kotal Kahn any other visits lately? I’m sure he’d love to hear from you.

Raiden grits his teeth. You do not even know what happened.

I know enough. Shinnok folds his arms, leaning back against the cold stone to gaze upside-down at the ceiling. Raiden, I loathe you with every bit of my terrible soul. Why are we pretending as if we can have a pleasant chat?

It is necessary.

Shinnok sits up to glare at him. It hardly is!

Fighting me did not work out well for you. Do not try it again.

If not for my previous pathetic state, I could defeat you in an instant. Fool.

I am not so sure of that. Raiden takes off his hat, setting it beside him, and looks directly at Shinnok, meeting his angry gaze. I want to be completely clear. I do not forgive the harm you have caused to Earth, nor the vile deeds you have enabled through your meddling. The reason we are at a truce right now is the pure necessity of co-existing in a situation that cannot be helped.

Shinnok’s body is tense, jaw clenched in discomfort. He grasps the edge of the stone surface with bony fingers. If not for the ‘necessity’ of this, Raiden, what would you do with me instead?

I am not certain. But the approach I took after your latest defeat… was wrong.

The ‘approach you took after my latest defeat’? Shinnok mocks Raiden’s tone, voice laced with anger. You inflicted the worst torture possible on me. At least while chained in the Netherrealm I was all in one piece!

Yes. What I did to you was not right. Raiden traces a finger along the brim of his hat, biting his lip in deep thought. It has cast many of my prior decisions into question.

So the mighty Thunder God has fallen prey to doubt?

Instead of responding, Raiden rises to his feet, setting his hat back on his head. Doubt is natural. Self-loathing is something else entirely. But what would you know of that?

EVERYTHING!

Shinnok responds with a forceful snarl. He conjures his magical flame in both palms, vaulting off the stone and landing in front of Raiden with surprising ease. He speaks through gritted teeth, catching the other god in a hateful stare.

Do you think it pleased me to dwell in indignity as the forgotten wayward god, while you and your friends reaped all the fame as Earthrealm’s defenders? And when I attempted to claim my stake in
that glory, I was condemned as a traitor! I am better than that, and I always was.

Raiden sighs softly. Your actions say otherwise, Shinnok. By trying to prove yourself worthy of worship, you instead demonstrated to all the realms that you are not.

I see. A neat and tidy paradox that leaves me with no solution. We are back where we began.

I should hope not. Raiden shakes his head, closing his eyes to collect his thoughts. Shinnok, what’s done is done. There is no rewriting history between us, nor between you and this world.

I’m perfectly aware. Thank you for informing me.

Raiden breathes in deeply, rediscovering his patience. But the path of the future stretches out before us, and it is just as vast and varied as the past. Even I do not know what it will hold.

I hope you don’t expect me to have a change of heart and become Earth’s savior, Raiden, you idealistic fool. I still hold just as much loathing towards this miserable place. I am simply less inclined to act on it.

So you have told me. Indeed, I do not expect any such thing.

Perhaps best to change the subject now.

Raiden gazes at a vacant stretch of the wall - a blank space for future carvings. Hmm. It may be time for me to undertake a new project.

Shinnok puts his hands on his hips, looking around at the elaborate murals. Did you do these?

Yes.

I suppose they’re all right. He scoffs dismissively, so as to not excessively flatter Raiden, but steals a closer glance at one of them when the other god isn’t looking. How long did this take?

Raiden smiles softly. Oh, only a few days.

A knock on the doorframe interrupts their conversation. Shinnok snaps to attention, looking inexplicably guilty, but Raiden is entirely unfazed. He foresaw this, too. “Ah. Jin.” He greets the young archer fondly. “Welcome back.”

Jin glances between them, eyebrows raised. “You’ve been awfully quiet. Heard a bunch of lightning, then nothing. Thought I’d come check.”

Shinnok eyes Raiden. I’m reassured to know that this form of conversation is still limited only to gods. I thought, in your infinite foolish generosity, you might have shared it with mortals already.

No, that is not possible. Although the young man Takeda possesses psychic abilities, he can read only Earthrealm mortals.

Oh.

Shinnok’s tone is filled with distaste. How nice for him.

Jin taps his fingers on the doorframe again. “Hey. Guys?”

Shinnok draws himself up to his full height, dignifiedly crossing his arms. “Have some respect for your elders. I am a god, not merely a ‘guy’.”

Jin makes a face, returning Shinnok’s annoyed stare with a carefree shrug. “Okay, Grandpa.”
Raiden shoots him a warning look.

“Just making sure you’re both still alive.” Jin ducks as Shinnok zaps a harmless bolt of magic energy past him, aiming above his head. “And, since I’d like to stay alive too, I’m getting out of here!”

Shinnok watches him hurriedly escape, feeling a twinge of vindictive delight.

Raiden frowns at his fellow god. “Don’t terrorize the youths.”

“I’ll terrorize the youths all I please, Raiden.”

“An unwise decision, considering the outcome of last—”

“Forget it.” Shinnok stalks off in a huff, taking a closer look at Raiden’s handiwork on the walls. “Why bother doing this, if no one is ever going to use the jinsei chamber but you and Fujin?” And me, he thinks to himself, almost out loud.

Raiden picks up on his stray thought, listening more closely than he should. It will be quite some time before you are allowed to use this chamber, Shinnok.

Shinnok whirs to face him, and stamps his foot. Don’t do that!

I apologize. Raiden clears his throat. “There is great joy to be found in the act of creation, even if the outcome will never be seen.”

Shinnok stops to ponder this. His first impulse is to contradict Raiden with a comment about the glory of destruction, but how much of that is true, and how much merely driven by his blind thirst for vengeance?

Grudgingly, and with great hesitation, he acknowledges that he and his adversary might, for once, possibly agree.

“Well… I suppose .”
The appeal of life on Earth has thoroughly worn off.

Shinnok wonders to himself, several times a day, why he even wanted to conquer this realm in the first place. Was that his own delusions of grandeur at work, or the will of this “One Being” asserting itself over him in his weakened state? Hard to tell, but whichever one it was, they were a fool.

For some time now, he’s been relegated to the guest quarters in the Sky Temple, a thoughtful room built a few years ago by Raiden for visiting mortals. It took him a little while to grow accustomed to these strange features -- particularly the heated rain chamber, which, he has to admit, is not entirely bad. Gods have no need to eat or bathe or sleep or any such concerns, so this is all at best a whimsical novelty. Nevertheless, it’s better than prison.

Besides, the visions are quieter here.

Chained in the Netherrealm for so many centuries, the god’s powerful mind became a magnet for whatever scraps of information he could desperately gather. He glimpsed bits and shreds of life on Earthrealm this way - the rise and fall of kings, bloody battles and brief times of peace. Disasters, triumphs, and even humanity transcending its own boundaries, reaching other realms and probing the vast borders of the universe.

And all he could do was uselessly strain against his chains, sending tormented psychic signals to anyone who possessed the power to listen.

Now he has a voice again, a physical presence in the world, and it takes him only a few moments to reach out and find someone to connect, engaging in conversation from nearby rooms rather than distant whispered echoes from worlds away.

Too bad that someone is Raiden. Well, nobody’s perfect, or even slightly close to it.

Shinnok is a nocturnal creature by habit, awake at all hours but most powerful at night when other creatures slumber. As the sun sets and a gloomy twilight falls over the Sky Temple’s walls, he stalks through the corridor, creeping with furtive steps. He is no coward, but he can’t shake the feeling that he is a trespasser here. One wrong move, and he might be banished back to the Netherrealm at a moment’s notice.

Perhaps that would be better. There, he could gain power, find allies… And, he ruefully realizes, that is precisely why he is trapped here, instead.

Raiden keeps a room full of mementos of the mortals he’s tutored. Of course he does, Shinnok mutters to himself. Sentimental fool. He kicks open the door in an act of sudden petty defiance, and steps inside.

The walls are lined with portraits of the students, most of them young and in good health - a far cry from their decaying revenant forms that Shinnok remembers so well. That was Quan Chi’s work, not his own; a comfortable moral distance which the god now appreciates, rather than regretting his rather small role in the sorcery. He looks up at them, studying their faces, then glances away, focusing on the fragrant candles that line the shelf below.

Curiously, he reaches out towards one and touches its wick, summoning his magenta fire. It flares to life, lighting the candle, and Shinnok picks it up, plucking it right out of its holder.
As he studies it, focused on the wavering flame, it swiftly melts in his palm, wax dripping onto the floor below. He hisses in annoyance and vaporizes the useless thing, wiping his hands on his cloak. *Never mind.*

The familiar crackle of lightning announces Raiden’s timely arrival.

Shinnok has a sharp retort on his tongue, and an excuse for the wasted candle, but Raiden approaches, laying a hand reassuringly upon his shoulder. *Your presence is needed.*

*You must be joking.* Shinnok swats him away and steps back, drawing himself up with tensed fists. *You dare touch me, after what you’ve done?*

Raiden says nothing, just waits until the other god is calm.

*We have a crisis at hand.*

*Another one? Is this an everyday occurrence?* Boldly, Shinnok reaches out and steps forward, grabbing Raiden by the collar of his shirt. Raiden scowls at him, but remains silent, and Shinnok lets go after a few moments, satisfied with his brief exercise of power. *Why am I needed? Do tell.*

*Outworld has sent an envoy. I cannot face him alone.*

Shinnok’s brow furrows in displeased recollection. *And you can’t bring Fujin for help?*

*It is not Fujin that they have requested.*

*I see.* Shinnok rubs his chin thoughtfully, head tilted as he inspects Raiden with a faintly smug expression. *Tell me more about your predicament.*

*My predicament? No, Shinnok. It is not just mine. Kotal would gladly settle for either of us. He claims we have both done irreversible damage to the safety of Outworld and the stability of his rule.*

Shinnok steeples his fingers, somehow managing to look down his nose at the taller god. *I have a few choice remarks about the stability of his rule.*

Raiden nods gravely. *Mileena has the right to govern.*

*Does she? I was under the impression that she was dead.*

*That is something to discuss later. Death, life -- it is all temporary. Regardless, listen to me, Shinnok. This is urgent.*

Shinnok gazes at him with barely concealed contempt, waiting for Raiden’s next words.

*The cowboy is here.*

Shinnok is startled enough to burst into laughter, breaking the mental connection. “I beg your pardon?”

“Erron Black.” Raiden repeats this, as if it might clarify the situation. “The immortal cowboy.”

Shinnok nods, processing this.

Raiden pauses. “Cowboys are mortal men from the Wild West bearing hats and handheld guns.”
“I know what they are, Raiden, you utter fool.” Shinnok levels a condescending look at the other god. “What puzzles me is why Kotal Kahn would send a cowboy to retrieve one of us.”

“Not once has that man governed wisely.” Raiden reaches out towards Shinnok again, hesitates, and withdraws his hand. “I do not expect that this… negotiation… will go well. If either of us chooses to attack Kotal’s envoy, we will have committed an act of aggression against Outworld, and thus may be forcibly taken into custody. And if we cross the perimeter of the Sky Temple, we give up our neutral ground, which is treated as a form of surrender. Act wisely.”

Jin pokes his head in the doorway and leans on his staff, doing his best imitation of a western drawl, and appropriately ruins the solemn moment. “‘Y’all willin’ to come help me deal with the Outworld Lone Ranger anytime soon?”

“The Lone Ranger?” Shinnok purses his lips as flashes of his visions float to the surface. “I recall that chapter in Earthrealm’s history. I always found it surprising that they would celebrate such a cowardly masked man as their champion.”

Jin looks between the two gods. “Earthrealm’s… history?”

Shinnok taps his foot impatiently. “It is a sad day when I have a greater recollection of your world’s past than you do.”

“But, uh--”

Raiden silences Jin with a stern look. “Let us go. We have no time to waste.”

Jin slings his staff over his back, trotting along the temple corridor as the gods follow behind. “Last time I was in here... the circumstances were pretty different.”

“I know.” Raiden smiles softly. “You have come far.”

“Far enough to deal with a situation like this, though? I’m not so sure.”

“Let me handle it.” Shinnok’s low raspy voice is especially grating right now, filled with self-righteous pride. “Between us, I am the one least despised by Outworld… which is a remarkable thing to consider.”

Jin looks back at him, shaking his head.

In the courtyard, they are greeted by a figure standing confidently atop the stone barrier. He cuts a striking figure, distinctive hat perched upon his head and belts of bullets wrapped around his waist. A tattered cloak hangs from his shoulders, a mask covering his lower face. Shinnok studies him scornfully. “Another cowardly ranger.”

Jin draws to a halt, and sets aside his bow on the ground beside him, standing with arms spread as a gesture of diplomacy. “Welcome, Erron Black, envoy of Outworld’s true emperor.” He is nothing but respectful, a calculated decision. “You’ve come to negotiate?”

“Not quite.” Erron twirls a pistol idly between his fingers, then slips it back into its holster. “Got some bullets here with ‘Elder God’ written on ‘em. And I’m not leaving til I’ve got one of you two to match.”

With a flare of anger in his eyes, Shinnok conjures his power and lets it flow out through his palms, lifting him off the ground. He towers before Erron Black menacingly, moonlight reflecting on his marble skin. “Rethink your options.”
Moments later, Erron’s pistol is pointed right between Shinnok’s eyes.

“Great. ‘Let me handle it!’, he says!” Jin mutters under his breath, imitating Shinnok’s smug voice. He strides forward, elbowing the unruly god aside, and adopts his dignified tone again. “I apologize for my… colleague. We wish Outworld no harm, but we cannot release either Raiden nor Shinnok into your custody, for the safety of the realms.”

Shinnok scowls, alighting on the ground again with a light clank of armored boots.

Erron is unyielding. His pistol doesn’t move an inch, finger wrapped around the trigger. “Kotal Kahn pays his debts. Can’t say the same of you. And when someone says no to Kotal Kahn, they’re invitin’ real trouble.”

Shinnok puts his hands on his hips, wearing an offended sneer. He is tired of this cowboy’s posturing. “I said no to Kotal Kahn when he solicited my aid, and the worst he did was send me empty threats, that feathered blue fool!”

Erron aims at the god again, ignoring Jin completely. “You insultin’ the emperor?”

“The emperor’s plea for my company is an insult in its own right! He really believes I would deign to cooperate and allow you to drag me off to some pathetic Outworld backwater town?”

“Kotal’s not paying me enough to deal with this.” Erron shushes him with a wave, and focuses his attention on Raiden, who has been standing there in appalled silence, watching the drama unfold at agonizing speed. “How about you, Raiden? We can do this real easy… or we can do it the hard way.”

Shinnok puts himself between Raiden and Erron with an air of superiority, leaving a trail of magic sparks behind him. “The ‘hard’ way? What meaningful threats could you possibly offer, ranger?”

Erron whips out another pistol, flipping and twirling it in a show of breathtaking dexterity before pointing it right at Shinnok, his other gun still trained on Raiden. “Gods’ skulls don’t stop bullets. I have orders not to harm your pal… but I don’t remember those rules applyin’ to you.”

Indignantly, Shinnok pulls a small magic gadget from its place at his belt, resembling the handle of a weapon, and tosses it a few times in the palm of his hand before aiming it at Erron like a gun of his own. “The insolence! How dare you?”

Erron raises a brow. “So you’re ready to throw down?”

Jin whispers under his breath. “Don’t do that.”

Erron narrows his eyes at the god. “You’ve got til the count of five.”

Raiden reaches out, helplessly, and conjures a bolt of lightning between his fingertips -- but remembers the Outworld non-aggression pact, and silences the sparks just as quickly, biting his lip in worry. He is powerless to act.

“Five…”

Shinnok ascends higher into the air, his forearms glowing with the heat of magic and the outline of a skeleton beneath.

“Four…”
“Shinnok, stop!” Raiden desperately lunges for Shinnok, trying to grab hold of the back of his belt -- at the same exact moment that Jin leaps towards him in a frantic effort to intervene. Instead, the two collide with each other and stagger backwards, leaving Shinnok untouched, and the defiant god stifles a laugh.

Erron is hardly amused. The countdown goes on.

“Thr--”

Pulled by a sudden force, Erron’s voice cuts off with a choked yelp. He hurtles towards the corner of the temple, yanked roughly along the stones by a sturdy rope. “WHAT in the name of--”

“Yeehaw.” Jacqui remarks in a completely dry tone, unfazed and unamused.

She bends down and cuts the rope free, careful not to touch Erron -- then, with the toe of her boot, pushes him off the edge, hurtling towards the path several feet below. He lands with a groan and a thud, rubbing his sides, and points his pistol towards Jacqui across the distance. “You’ll pay for that!”

“Didn’t touch you with a weapon!” Jacqui nimbly hops over the edge of the courtyard stones, approaching the three figures. “Mind telling me what that was all about?”

Jin greets her gratefully, picking up his bow. “Didn’t know you could do that.”

“Yeah, when we moved to the farm, Dad signed me up for cattle roping lessons. Didn’t last long.” She laughs to herself, remembering those days. “Hey, it was all I could think of in a crisis. Hit him with a weapon, and Kotal’s entitled to revenge. You--” and she glares at Shinnok with as much anger as she can muster -- “almost fucked it up.”

Jin mutters under his breath. “As usual.”

“Your commentary is not required, nor requested.” Shinnok floats dramatically towards the temple’s entrance, leaving the others behind.

Jacqui watches him go, mildly exasperated. “He got some of his magic back? Who thought that was a good idea?”

“He has barely enough to do harm.” Raiden’s tone is consoling. He feels terribly guilty for this entire turn of events. “Thank you for your intervention.”

“Yeah, it’s my job. But I’m supposed to be back at the Special Forces base to track D’Vorah by now.” Jacqui checks her wrist, noting the time. “Jin, let’s get going.”

“But--”

“No choice. They need my equipment, and the bug queen’s on the move.”

D’Vorah. Shinnok freezes, turning towards them. A chill shoots through his nerves.

All at once, a vision strikes him, rendering him speechless. His eyes open wide and glow green, and he falls to his knees, staring up at the heavens in silence.

When he finally blinks, and attempts to speak, there is pain and terror in his voice. None of the others have ever seen him so shaken, even at the point of his unceremonious defeat.

“D’Vorah… is free?”
“Shit.” Jacqui mumbles under her breath. “She’s not about to come steal you from your vacation getaway, if that’s what you’re worried about, Shinnok. And she won’t give you back your power.”

He gets to his feet, a bit unsteadily. “That is not what concerns me. I have great powers of perception…”

Jin interjects. “Really?!”

Shinnok continues, unwilling to acknowledge the sarcasm. “I... can perceive the thoughts of those who seek to find me. Such are the abilities of a god, which, might I remind you, I still am.”

“Just cut to the chase.”

“D’Vorah… desires a host. Make of that what you will.” And at that, Shinnok turns on his heel and stalks into the temple chamber, summoning a skeletal fist to slam the door behind him.

This revelation sinks in with slow, palpable horror.

Jin inhales sharply, a look of consternation on his face. “Well, this just got a million times worse. She wants someone to have her--?!” He can’t make himself say it.

“Jin. Stop. We’ll get her before she can do that.” Jacqui’s best answer is to leap into action. She’s already running towards the edge of the courtyard, vaulting off the railing to land safely on the path below. “Come on! The sooner the better. General’s orders.”

“Isn’t it always?” But Jin follows suit, waving Raiden a quick goodbye before chasing Jacqui along the path and vanishing into the fog. The god is, once more, alone.

---

Raiden finds Shinnok seated at the corner of the roof platform, warming his hands in one of the fires in a small metal bowl. He is unharmed by the flame, and seems to be captivated by it, taking a handful of it in his palm and turning it into bright green magic before releasing it into the thin air.

With a nod of greeting, Raiden sits on the opposite side of the burning brazier.

*D’Vorah seeks you?*

*Evidently.* Shinnok touches his fingertips together carefully, then slams his palms shut with a sudden clap. The fire sputters and dies, releasing a coil of searing smoke.

Raiden watches him, unsure how to proceed.

Shinnok lets go, hands parted again, and the fire springs to life between them - green and magenta flames this time, the trademark of his magic. One corner of his mouth twitches upward. *Not bad.*

Yes. Distract yourself if you must. This cannot be easy.

He leans towards Raiden, glaring fiercely. *What do you care? This would solve the problem of what to do with me. Let D’Vorah take me, then kill her and her offspring, and all is done. You would be the hero once more. What have you to lose?*

You are immortal, Shinnok. You would suffer for another eternity, torn apart and consumed.

*I’m aware. I don’t want such a thing to happen. I simply expect it.* Shinnok stares Raiden dead in the eyes. His arms are glowing translucent again to reveal the slender skeletal structure of his
delicate hands. I have no reason to trust you, nor your allies.

Shinnok, that would be another fate worse than death. I vowed to keep you from that. I would never allow this.

So there is a moral limit to the ways you will punish me?

YES! Raiden’s temper erupts in a surge of lightning that strikes the metal brazier, illuminating both their faces in a flash of searing white light. Will you never take me at my word?

NOT YET. Shinnok is seething, too, enraged at his captivity and at the multiple awful fates that await him whichever way he might turn. He gets up, dusting the magical ash off his palms, and begins to stalk the perimeter of the roof with angry brisk footsteps. Now more than ever, he has lost all hope. The cowboy will be back to take me. If he does, I will be vulnerable in Outworld, and the Kytinn insect will consume me there. If he takes you instead, I am no longer under your protection. I do not have a god’s full powers. I would be useless against her in this state. No matter what, I am lost.

He drops to his knees at the edge of the hole in the roof, peering down into the jinsei chamber as the mist rises up into the dark sky. Then he sits back, shoulders slumped, and sighs. He feels a gnawing twinge of despair and a sickness in the pit of his stomach. The god has grown increasingly aware of his powerless, pathetic state. What use is my physical form, if this is what awaits me?

Shinnok, listen. Raiden materializes beside him with an electric zap, taking a seat. Trust me that I will prevent this. I will kill her with my bare hands if need be. Or present her to Kotal Kahn as an alternative prize.

Any moment that she lives, she is a threat. Kill her if you come across her.

A better decision. Kotal will have to settle for nothing. Raiden draws a deep breath, feeling his pulse pounding in his throat. Gods’ bodies are not identical to mortals, but they contain the same life force as any other. We will find a way to proceed.

Defiantly, Shinnok glances towards the other god-- but his concentration is broken by the unmistakable crackle of magic and the light click of heeled boots upon the roof. Once more, he is frozen in panic, rendered useless by his own dread.

Finally, he twists to face the new arrival, but she has a blade pointed at his throat already, attached to a long staff that she grips loosely in one calloused palm.

Black hair frames her face in a short cut, glowing eyes accented by kohl eyeliner. Bright orange markings are inlaid in her dark skin, interrupted by teal and gold metallic cloth. She wears a jeweled necklace, elaborate bracelets, and a smug smirk.

She meets Shinnok’s eyes, and then Raiden’s, with an aura of absolute confidence.

“Hello, boys.”

Ugh. Not now. Despite the circumstances, Shinnok dismisses her with slight scorn. He summons a skeleton hand to push her staff aside, taking her by surprise, then stands up to face her squarely. He is aware of Raiden’s presence, close behind at his defense.

“Tanya.”

“So you’ve finally learned to play nice.” She lowers the staff, strutting towards them with
confident steps and trailing an aura of purple magic dust. This is already easier than she expected, though Raiden might pose a bit of a problem. “Mind if we chat?”

Shinnok scoffs in disgust at the interruption. The nerve. “Yes, actually, I do mind.”

“Hmm. That’s a pity.” Tanya looks between them, her smirk not wavering one bit. Then, to catch the gods’ attention, she taps the staff on the ground, hair falling into her face as she tosses her head. “I have a few solutions for your pressing problems.”

Raiden’s deep voice rings out through the still air. “And if we do not cooperate?”

“Then you’re about to have one more.”
Halfway to the Truth

Shinnok has had quite enough.

“Your insolence! --” His patience snaps in an instant. He reaches towards the intruder, venom dripping from his rusty voice, but she dodges him with an agile backflip and poses cockily at a safe distance, hand on her hip and flame burning in her palm. He snarls at her. “Begone, you-- you accursed woman!” He can’t think of a better insult right now.

“I think not.” Tanya stalks towards him with a swagger in her step. “I’ve got a deal to offer you, and if you know what’s good for you, you won’t refuse.”

Raiden finally steps in, catching Tanya in a coil of lightning before she can snap back and object--but with a shimmer of golden dust, she vanishes and reappears some feet away, looking even more pleased with herself than before. “So you think you can trap an Edenian?”

The thunder god sighs, his patience worn thin at long last. “I urge you to be direct, trespasser.”

“Hear me out.” Tanya holds up a hand, tapping her nose in theatrical thought. Honestly, she was expecting to have to fight both of the gods in some sort of epic battle. Instead, they’re sitting around bickering as if their deathly grudge is an old harmless rivalry. “Do you want the official story, the unofficial story, or the real story?”

Shinnok steps forward with a belligerent sneer. “The official story is always bound to be false. Tell me the lies first and foremost.”

“You would say that.” Tanya tosses a fireball casually over her shoulder at one of the braziers, summoning a roaring flame that casts her into backlit shadow. “Right now, the official story, in Outworld and Earthrealm, is that I escaped from Kotal Kahn’s custody and have gone rogue. Who could possibly know where I might have fled, or what my sinister goals might be?” She winks. “Certainly not the emperor.”

Shinnok is unamused. “Does that incompetent buffoon ever actually know anything?”

“No. That story’s all a fraud, by the way.” Tanya admits this freely, a self-assured smile on her sharp wily face. “Kotal, believing he’d secured my loyalty, sent me as a secret operative to retrieve you, just in case that unwashed gunslinger Erron Black failed his mission.”

“And you’re telling me this… why, precisely?” Shinnok looks almost offended at Tanya’s straightforward approach. “…Kotal believed that you were loyal to him? After all that happened with Mileena’s failed revolution?”

“Yes! Would you believe it?” Tanya laughs outright, arms spread. “Here’s a successful rule to governing: ask Kotal Kahn what he’d do, and then do the opposite!”

“I cannot disagree.” Raiden waits like a silent sentinel, arms folded across his broad chest. On principle, he is still opposed to Kotal’s rule, but there is nothing to be done about it at this time. “Unfortunately, Tanya, now that we have heard your story, I must ask you to leave.”

“Not quite. You’ve heard two of the stories, not three.” Unexpectedly, Tanya materializes right in front of Shinnok, prodding his chest with one finger. “You would benefit from listening closely.”

Exasperated, he smacks her away with a conjured skeletal hand that disintegrates in a puff of
smoke. “I can hardly wait.”

“The official story isn’t too far off.” Tanya lifts her chin. “Except my motives are perfectly clear. We need you at our side if we plan to triumph. Some time ago, you offered your aid to our cause. We intend to take you up on that offer, Shinnok, if you have any honor left.”

Shinnok hesitates. “We?”

Tanya responds with a threatening grin, readying herself into a battle stance with fists full of fire.

“Mileena lives!”

And, with a leap and a kick and a well-timed teleport, Tanya springs into action.

She shoves Raiden through the hole in the roof, sending him plunging into the jinsei chamber -- snatches Shinnok up in a frighteningly powerful grip -- and hurtles into the sky, trailing golden sparks.

She’s gone.

---

Cassie is enjoying the first few moments of peace she’s had all day. It’s been business as usual back at the Special Forces base, especially with the havoc caused by D’Vorah’s vanishing act, but she clocked out earlier this evening, sped home, and kicked off her army boots, sprawling out on the couch.

And, naturally, her phone rings, interrupting her accidental nap.

She groans. “Not happening.”

It goes quiet a few seconds later. And then rings again. And again. And again--

Cassie’s patience finally snaps. She bolts up, lunges for the phone, and taps the answer button with far more force than necessary. She doesn’t even recognize the number. It’s probably spam or telemarketers. “Cage speaking. This better be good.”

Distantly, she hears Raiden’s voice through the other end of the phone, crackling faintly. “Cassandra?”

“Raiden?!”

“I apologize for the unconventional means of contacting you, but I fear Outworld may be monitoring all transmissions. We have a problem.” He swallows hard, sagging against one of the temple pillars in exhaustion, and holds the tiny device to his ear. “Allow me to clarify. The recent problem who has joined our midst... is no longer here.”

“Holy shit.” Cassie falls back onto the couch, staring up at the ceiling as she makes sense of this cryptic remark.

Oh no.

“You lost Shinnok?”

“Not exac--”
“You LOST SHINNOK?!”

“He was stolen!”

“EVEN WORSE! What the fuck happened, Raiden?”

“Do you remember Tanya?”

“Who could forget? I thought Kotal Kahn had her in prison!”

“Not anymore. She managed to triple-cross all of us in one bold move. She told me she had been sent by Kotal to kidnap Shinnok, but the official story was that she’d escaped. Kotal was using her as an undercover operative in case Erron Black failed.”

Cassie moves into the kitchen, retrieving another stash of weaponry from atop the fridge. “Yeah, I heard about your little showdown at the temple. Jacqui told me as soon as she got back. Bad news. What about Tanya?”

Raiden winces, trying to figure out how to break the news. “She left with Shinnok, and teleported before I could stop her. It pains me to admit it, but she defeated me handily.”

“How in the name of—”

“She threw me through the hole in the roof.”

“That’d do it. But why? What’s she got to gain from stealing a bad-tempered, useless former god?”

“She said it was for her cause.”

“Her cause?”

“Mileena has returned.”

Cassie freezes. The phone clatters to the tile floor.

Seconds later, she’s chattering at Raiden in a frantic pace, voice rising in pitch as her nerves fray even further. “That’s not possible. I saw D’Vorah’s bugs eating her face, for fuck’s sake. How’s she alive?”

“That is easy. Since she is one of Shang Tsung’s experiments, it is likely that he made… copies.”

“Great! An army of teeth-girls with inferiority complexes who dress like they robbed a lingerie store. That’s what we need today!”

The phone crackles with the unmistakable sound of thunder. “Miss Cage!”

“Sorry, Raiden.” She quiets down, digging around in the fridge, and grabs an energy drink, chugging it hastily. “You’re gonna need me again, aren’t you.”

“We have no time to waste. We go to Outworld. Now.”

“Aren’t you… not supposed to go there? The treaty? Non-aggression pact? Severe consequences and all. I just got off work. I don’t want to go back to an Outworld prison.”

“Have you any better ideas? Besides, if what Tanya said is true, Kotal broke the pact first by sending a secret agent to enact his will.”
“Huh.” Cassie taps her fingers on the countertop, pondering this. “Mom’s not going to be happy. Did he really think Tanya was going to turn Shinnok over to him, or did she just make that up as an excuse?”

“I cannot tell. It would be a cunning lie, but Kotal is foolish enough to do such a thing. I can say with confidence, that her intentions to seek Shinnok’s help to depose the Kahn… are legitimate.”

Cassie groans. This is all at least a little bit her fault. “Think he’ll do it?”

“It is hard to tell. In his weakened state, he may have no choice but to cooperate.”

She rolls her eyes. “Oh, I feel soooo sorry for him.”

Raiden’s tone turns threatening. “Miss Cage…”

“Right.”

“Outside our custody, anyone could capture Shinnok. Tanya is talented, and I have no doubt Mileena is capable of fending off a great number of foes, but that may not be enough if disaster strikes.” Raiden grimaces, pacing the length of the hallway with a gloomy scowl. “Remember, it matters not if he is in full health or sound mind. The power and immortality of a god could be put to… many uses.”

Cassie shivers. “Don’t need to know.”

“Are you aware of the severity of this crisis, Cassandra?”

“More than aware! Let me see…” She ticks the points off on her fingers as she speaks. “Erron Black wants to haul him back to Outworld for Kotal. Tanya DID haul him back to Outworld to defeat Kotal. So our favorite death-god’s about to be a pawn in a war game. Great.”

“Do not forget the others.”

“Others?”

“D’Vorah and the Netherrealm.”

“NETHERREALM?!”

Raiden winces at the loud voice in his ear, holding the phone some distance away. “When they notice Shinnok’s absence, they will be… displeased. You should know this. You participated in--”

“Yeah, I remember that like it was last week!” Cassie slams her fist on the table with a frustrated yell, letting out some of the stress. “Fuck. Fine. Let’s get this over with. Where do you want to meet me, and what should I do before we go?”

“I will meet you where you are. It is better if fewer people are aware that Shinnok has been…” Raiden can barely admit it. “Kidnapped.”

Cassie rolls her eyes. “Godnapped.” A pause. “Wait-- what do you mean you’ll meet me where I-”

A crack of lightning in the kitchen announces Raiden’s arrival. The lights flicker, and the microwave beeps, flashing 12:00.

Ducking to avoid the low ceiling in Cassie’s apartment, he taps the tiny screen carefully, hanging
up the call. “Miss Cage.”

“Oh, no you don’t.” Cassie’s already aimed her pistol at him. “Private property. No trespassers. Not even you.”

“Forgive my intrusion. Cassandra, any official location is at risk of attack.” He’s dressed in a different outfit than usual, something casual that Cassie doesn’t recognize. His white flowing hair is falling free around his shoulders, the hat and cowl nowhere in sight. “The disguise charms will be necessary once again.”

“Yeah, I can tell.” She eyes Raiden in disbelief. He looks like an oddly majestic tourist. “That’s your idea of subtle camouflage?”

“As I said, Miss Cage, we will have disguise charms.”

“You’re gonna need ‘em.” Cassie rummages through her junk drawer, tossing useless crap onto the countertop. She’s gonna have to clear this all out someday. Not now, though. “Hang on.”

“What do you need?”

She brandishes a small document, shoving it into her pocket. “Passport.”

---

“I insist that you let me go!”

Shinnok is growing desperate. Pointing out his authority as an Elder God has accomplished exactly nothing. Threats of magical annihilation are useless, considering his weakened state. In a physical battle, Tanya could take him down easily; they both know this.

His only recourse is to annoy her.

Upon fleeing the temple, Tanya and Shinnok manifested back in Outworld in the spacious attic of a musty abandoned mansion. The place is decrepit but luxurious, filled with old books and tomes of knowledge that she’s enjoyed sorting through during quiet lonely nights. A few precious volumes on Edenian history are tucked beneath her piles of belongings, cherished above all others. She spends most of her days here, waiting for Mileena, wishing for action. But, as Mileena says, there are many of her, and only one Tanya, and so she must be kept safe for now. She is not quite as disposable as the extra copies of the former Empress herself.

She hasn’t bothered to explain any of this to Shinnok, just minded her own business while he sorts through the old shelves, griping all the while. “Your theft of me is entirely and completely unauthorized!”

She teleports beside him, smiling knowingly. “Unauthorized it may be, but when have either of us ever truly bowed to authority?”

He meets her confident gaze with a stubborn scowl. “I am authority!”

“Most would disagree.” Tanya speaks frankly. “But I can change that.” She leans against the shelf, taking hold of his wrist with no fear at all. “You’ve shed your bonds at last. Why not take your place at the side of Outworld’s true empress?”

Shinnok pauses. It’s a profoundly tempting idea, and he does support Mileena in theory, if not in practice. Her aggressive rejection of his offer did interfere with negotiations, but she may have
warmed up to the idea of an alliance by now. In fact, he is nearly certain of it... unless this scheme is entirely Tanya's idea. Which is alarmingly possible.

“Think of it.” Tanya purrs, then suddenly vanishes, reappearing atop the bookcase where she lies stretched out with her chin propped up in her hands. “As an Elder God, you could receive the veneration you deserve, at long, long last.”

Shinnok purses his lips, lifting himself off the ground with magic. He meets her eyes squarely. “I trust no flatterers.”

Tanya leaps down to the floor in a smooth motion. The attic’s flimsy boards tremble faintly. She faces him again, summoning her own purple magic to surround her. “All right. Let me be clear. I was _not_ impressed by your performances back on Earth.”

“It seems that no one is. What a pity.”

“Nevertheless, you’re a better option to help us than that fool Raiden. He may agree with Mileena’s right to rule, but his failure to act did us no favors. And when he _did_ act, he almost caused Kotal to rally his armies, which would have made our task a much greater challenge.”

“Raiden has a tendency to ruin his own plans with hapless mistakes.”

Tanya inspects him, a finger pressed to her lips in thought. “He who lives in a glass house should not throw stones, Shinnok.”

The god can’t disagree in clear conscience. Not, of course, that he has ever had one at all.

“Frankly, if it were up to me, I’d rather have the amulet than you. The amulet doesn’t talk back.” Tanya strides away, leaving Shinnok fuming between the bookcases.

Shinnok calls after her indignantly. “It’ll be a cold day in the Netherrealm before I lend my aid to you, you... you ungrateful wretch!”

Tanya replies, not even bothering to look. “I’ll wait.”

- - -

Tanya does wait. She sits atop a shelf, paging through a history book in serene silence, while Shinnok angrily sorts through the encyclopedias, looking up his own name. He finds the results displeasing.

In about two hours, he yields.

“What do you want from me?”

“Ah, you’ve seen reason at last. You’re brighter than they say.” Tanya materializes before him, gently plucking the book from his hands. “Listen closely.”

Shinnok makes an unsuccessful grab for the book, but she twirls away, leading him towards the open space in the attic. “It is rumored that Kotal Kahn will call a tournament.”

“A Mortal Kombat tournament?”

“Yes. Here, we will stage a coup.”

“Why--”
“His best warriors will be weakened after the battles. So will Earth’s. Who will stop us? We have an army of Empresses to tear our foes to shreds.”

He tries to search for any glaring flaws in the plan. “Ahem. Which Mileena will rule?”


“That sounds like a statement, not a question.”

“It is.”

“No one tells an elder god what to do.”

“I just did.”

“Unsuccessfully!”

“Oh, you’re going to help, whether you like it or not.” Tanya approaches him, a sinister gleam in her eyes. The pretense of reverence is entirely gone. “Listen to me, you old fool. Without me, you are useless. Do you want to spend the rest of your days rotting away in Raiden’s little temple, or would you prefer to claim some shred of the glory you’ve always desired, but never, ever reached?”

Shinnok seethes, clasping his hands behind his back. He is growing stronger, slowly but surely. With all the strength of will and spite and force stored up in his angry soul, he readies the spell--prepares it--

“I would prefer to TRIUMPH!”

He spreads his arms, ascending in a plume of magenta fire that leaves the books untouched, lapping harmlessly at his armored body and bare skin in a glorious magical blaze.

“I act on my own terms, Tanya of Edenia, not as the puppet of you, nor Mileena, nor Outworld, nor all the gods in heaven nor the demons in Hell!”

His voice rises, filled with power.

“And now, I bid you a very unhappy farewell.”

The god spreads his fingers as his magic blazes brighter, fingertips glowing translucent to reveal the skeleton beneath. Hands of bone shoot up from the attic floor, pushing Tanya away from him, chasing her and tugging her backwards as she teleports frantically around the room to escape him and try to land a blow.

He snarls, his eyes glowing radiant green.

“Until we meet again!”

And, in a brilliant flash, the renegade god disappears from sight.

- - -

Half an hour later, Tanya is still cleaning up the scattered books.

She shoves the last one onto the shelf in alphabetical order, careful to replace them where they
went. Then she storms around the attic with angry frustrated steps, fuming with disappointment. How could she be so foolish? Of course she should have bound him up, not trusted his lack of power. An incredibly stupid oversight. But she took him for granted, and that, of all things, is probably why she failed.

Well, she is sure she will have another opportunity.

The clatter of metallic footsteps on the attic ladder makes Tanya flinch-- but it is only Mileena, slithering through the trapdoor to meet her with wicked glee. Without warning, she gathers her comrade up in her strong arms, faces pressed together in greeting. Mileena’s mask is gone, revealing her formidable fangs that curve along both sides of her jaws. She grins up at the taller woman, revealing sharp incisors beneath pretty lips. “Did you find him, dearest Tanya?”

Tanya swallows hard, facing a brief moment of crisis.

“Not yet.”
“Any more great ideas?”

Cassie’s had enough of this nonsense for one day. Way more than enough. Voice turning sharp, she snaps at Raiden, who’s sitting above her contemplatively in the bough of a strange tree. Right now, they’re deep in the bowels of the humid, sticky, disgusting Kuatan jungle. Screeches of rainforest creatures echo loudly in her ears, oversized bugs buzzing uncomfortably close. She slaps her thigh to kill an insect before it can sink its pincers into her, wincing at the green ooze. This wasn’t in the plan -- as far as she’d been told.

Raiden looks down at her forlornly, wedged between two flimsy branches that don’t look like they can hold the weight of a seven-foot-tall god. He steadies himself, grabbing tighter, and sits down on a crudely constructed platform wrapped around the tree’s rough trunk. “I apologize for… all of this. It is my fault that Shinnok was taken. I should have been more diligent—”

“And I should’ve packed my safari suit.” Cassie groans, looking down at the ground below. It’s too far down for comfort. Definitely far enough for a fall to hurt. “Hope I don’t sprain an ankle getting down from the Magic Treehouse. Why’d we land here instead of, oh, I don’t know, the Outworld Inn?” She knows the question is totally futile. They’d be recognized, and Raiden really, really isn’t supposed to be here. “Scratch that. Can’t you just teleport to the ground?”

“By the divine laws, my abilities are… less effective in Outworld.” Raiden breaks this news as gently as he can to an increasingly distressed Cassie. “As Earth’s protector, I cannot wield my full power while in the lands of another realm.”

“Right, right. Can’t you just… get down from the tree?”

Raiden looks down at her guiltily. “Unfortunately, Miss Cage, I have never attempted it. And any commotion in the jungle could easily summon Kotal’s forces. We must be careful.”

“Okay! So they don’t have climbing lessons in the Heavens. Fantastic! Well, we’re gonna make do.” Cassie unslings a coil of rope and a carabiner from her utility belt, eyeing the network of branches. “One of us is going to have to get down first. That’ll probably be me, so you don’t break a godly rib.”

“Cassandra, you overestimate my weakness.”

“Not taking any chances.” Cassie grabs onto a particularly thick branch, shaking it to test its strength. It’ll be good enough in a pinch. Deftly, she rigs up the rope in a makeshift pulley, sturdy enough to let her down and counterbalance Raiden, rather than just drop the thunder god right out of the tree. “Stay here. I’ve got an idea.”

She wraps the rope around her waist and, with a deep breath, descends the tree in a flash, shimmying down to the ground with deft footwork and a strong grip.

Landing on her feet, she scuffs the moist dirt with the toe of her combat boot, wrinkling her nose at the smell of the jungle soil. “Made it down once, I can do it again. Huh… who do you think built the platform in the tree?”

“Most likely someone with the sense to avoid the creatures on the ground.” Raiden calls down to her, gripping the rope. Lightning crackles weakly between his fingertips, fizzling out in an instant. He’s relieved to know his powers haven’t entirely dispersed, but after the most recent incident, the
gods have placed an even stronger limit on what he can do while on Outworld soil. “Beware the flesh-eating--”

“Don’t need to tell me twice!” Panicked, Cassie scuffs around in the dirt to find some heavy stones to pack into her pockets, adding a bit of counterweight. Reaching up, she holds the end of the line in a white-knuckled grip. Logically, she should weigh enough to balance out Raiden in the makeshift rope pulley, slowing his descent to a reasonable pace. She tugs the rope again just to test it, gritting her teeth. “Can’t believe Earth’s protector can’t climb a fucking tree. You sure they didn’t have some kind of God Scout program and you just missed sign-up day?”

“Miss Cage, I am a god. Mundane concerns are not usually our area of interest.” He offers a helpless shrug. “I will admit, this is offering new perspectives.”

Cassie still can’t believe it. Of all the stupid fucking problems. “Okay, well, we are going to get your divine ass down here without alerting half of Outworld. I’ll balance you out, and climb down again once I’m back up. Grab the rope, ease off the platform, and--”

Obediently, Raiden grabs the rope. Freeing himself from the tangle of branches, he holds tight to the strained cord… and plummets to the earth like a sinking stone, sending Cassie flying upwards with a muffled shriek.

Her life flashes before her eyes again as momentum carries her into the air. She flails around to grab hold of a branch, fails, and starts falling again--

A fetid smell overpowers her, and she retches as something grabs her, surrounded by an eerie green mist and the whispering of a thousand voices.

Cassie stifles another scream, biting her tongue. She manages to turn her neck to look directly at the creature. They are a terrifying sight to behold. Sunken face wrapped in bandages to cover decaying flesh, they study her with vivid green eyes that seem to burn right through her soul. The creature throws back their hood, revealing stringy bandages and mottled flesh, as they float back to earth and set her squarely on her feet. Their forearms pulse with a swirling green essence, barely contained by the garments.

She grimaces. “Ermac! Nice to see ya. Let me guess, still working for Kotal?”

“We serve whom we choose… and we are here to arrest you.”

“Didn’t think you were gonna take me to a picnic!” In a flash, Cassie draws and cocks her gun, but finds it snatched from her hand by that ominous green mist, confiscated by Ermac. “You can look, but I’m going to need that back.”

“You ain’t the one callin’ the shots around here right now.” An unmistakable drawl rings through the rainforest, cutting through the infernal buzzing and the screeches. Erron Black steps out from behind a large leafy shrub, pistol aimed directly at Raiden, who Cassie notices belatedly, sitting forlornly atop a tree-trunk. He addresses the god next, mostly ignoring Cassie. “You and I have unfinished business… and I’m about to finish it real quick. Boss’ll have your head on a platter for this.”

Will an uppercut take down a glowing, talking mummy? Time to find out. Cassie swings at Ermac, but they manage to dodge the worst of the blow, staggering backwards and rising into the air as their many voices cry out in anger. Ignoring them, she pulls the ballast rocks from her pockets and starts flinging them at Erron in a last show of defiance. One of them knocks his hat off. She takes this as a small victory.
He scoffs, leaning down to retrieve his hat, and places it atop his head once more. Beneath the mask, his expression is difficult to read. “Playground tactics, girl.”

Cassie raises her fists, shifting into a fighting stance. “Do your worst.”

Erron and Ermac exchange a wordless look.

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About an hour later, the emperor is ready to see his new captives.

For lack of better options, Raiden and Cassie exchange whispers while the guards circle them, careful to stay out of earshot. They’re sitting on a bench in some big government hall, awaiting their appointed punishment. Their wrists are bound, and they’ve been thoroughly and embarrassingly searched. Fortunately, all Cassie had was the ballast rocks, her sunglasses, and a pack of bubblegum. Good thing she took Shinnok’s amulet out of her pocket back home. Not that she’s going to mention that… not even to Raiden.

He gazes at her apologetically, blue eyes flickering dimly. “That did not go well.”

“Yeah, I noticed. That plan didn’t work. What’d you do, eat a bag of bricks for lunch?”

Raiden shrugs as best he can, handcuffed uncomfortably tight. Trying to free himself would just lead to unfortunate self-electrocution. “My human form is little more than a corporeal illusion. Physically, the concentration of power within me means that my mass—”

“Yeah, Raiden, I don’t wanna hear it. We’re both about to get our masses kicked by Emperor Genie.”

“Buluc is no genie, nor any form of god. He has claimed this falsely for far too long.”

“Pop culture reference. Never mind.” Cassie chews on her lower lip nervously, stray strands of blonde hair falling in her face. She wishes she could reach up and fix it, but the magical handcuffs are unyielding. “Can’t get out. Dad’s the one with the Houdini act, not me.”

“Our best solution is to stay here and wait.”

“Wait for what? Our death? That’s one thing I don’t want to be around for.”

“Quiet. He’s coming.”

The emperor presents himself with invisible fanfare, approaching with an earth-shaking stride. Golden jewelry is fastened tight around his buff arms and thick neck. Patterned marks of yellow light decorate his arms, legs, and chest, emblazoned on his rough blue skin. His feathered leg ornaments swish with each mighty step, and his elaborate headdress frames a rugged square face, gazing down at his captives with stern superiority.

Cassie meets his eyes, foolishly fearless. “Kotal Kahn.” She offers a cheesy, hapless grin. Maybe there’s a heart in there somewhere. “What’s a nice guy like you doing in a place like this?”

Raiden shoots her a warning out of the corner of his eye, his desperation growing with every moment. Don’t.

Kotal towers above them both, silent condemnation written in his glowing gaze. He ignores Cassie entirely, focusing on the unfortunate thunder-god. “You have defied the will of the Kahn too often,
“With you in my custody at last, the safety of my realm is now assured.” Kotal reaches for the blood-stained sawblade mounted on his back, swinging the mighty sword in a slow arc. He slaps the flat side of the weapon against his palm with a hollow *smack*. Blood trickles from his strong fingers as he grips it tight. “Too long have you accused me of false godhood, Raiden. You threaten my authority, my status, and the safety of my rule. Now you have returned to Outworld, again, violating my direct decree.” His low voice booms through the chamber, grating on Cassie’s frayed nerves. “Only the trickery of General Blade’s Earthrealm regulations saved you last time, Raiden. This day marks your end.”

He raises his sawblade, a wordless threat.

Raiden hauls himself to his feet, balancing unsteadily. His hands are still tied behind his back with biting metal chains. Cloud-white hair falls into his face, damp with sweat, but his gaze is still fierce, cheeks flushed with rightful indignation. Defiantly, he addresses Kotal by another name, his forgotten Earthrealm identity. “A true god cannot be slain, much less by one who lies about his own godhood, Buluc!”

“I do not plan to slay you… but I will make an example of you. This time, you have gone too far.” Kotal nods to one of the guards, a hulking brute in a skull mask, who steps forward, smiling behind that sinister false face. Cassie notices his bloodstained gloves with a sinking feeling. “Unbind Raiden, and hold out his hands...”

“NO!”

Cassie springs up, hurling herself at Kotal in a sudden headbutt that hits him squarely in the stomach. Knocked off-balance, the emperor reels to catch himself, tip of his sword sinking into the scarred floor. Two guards materialize beside Cassie to haul her backwards, almost yanking her arms out of her sockets, and she spits at Kotal, all thoughts of diplomacy gone for good. “You’re not gonna *touch* him!”

“As I said, I do not intend to kill him. Nevertheless, even a god can be incapacitated for good. This is now necessary. As I eliminated Mileena, I will end you, too, Raiden.” Kotal inclines his head scornfully, observing his captives. “You yourself proved what can be done to destroy a god. Now, the tides have turned to wash you away from Outworld’s shores.”

Cassie feels a sudden clench of dread in her stomach, mixed with a curious twinge of hope. He doesn’t know about Shinnok. Yet.

“The Fire that Burns the Sun!”

A familiar voice rings through the emperor’s chamber.

Cassie twists her neck to stare, and blinks, jaw dropping. It *can’t* be. This has to be a hallucination. One of those visions before death, like what you get in the desert when you’ve run out of water and brains.

Her trio of teammates has blocked the wide doorway. The amber light of Outworld’s setting sun silhouettes them in a gauzy glare, weapons flashing bright.
Jin steps forward first, head bowed in a formal show of respect. Then he meets Kotal’s eyes, jaw clenched in desperation, and Cassie swears she can see a halo of ancestral spirits floating around him, protecting him in this moment of crisis.

So he wasn’t kidding about that.

Jin slams his staff onto the chamber’s floor, its carved dragon-head flaring with magical fire. “Cease.”

Kotal pauses. Infinitely slowly, he turns, and leaves Raiden behind, advancing towards the intruders with the measured pace of a man who has nothing to lose.

“You interrupt justice once again, Kung Jin.”

Jin is steadfast and unwavering, though behind the mask of bravery, he’s trembling with fear. Behind him, he hears the unmistakable clink of Jacqui’s gauntlets powering up. He lifts his chin boldly. “You will deliver no false justice on this day.”

“My justice is never false.”

“True emperors do not speak in absolutes.”

Jin steps forward. He’s backed by Jacqui, her armored fists raised, and Takeda, ready to launch his bladed whips. He silently thanks them for the support, a faint grateful whisper under his breath. Then his bold voice rings out again, rising up to the chamber’s high rafters.

Kotal shakes his head, feathers swishing. “Raiden is no longer yours to save. He has shattered the pact formed after his first attack.”

“That reminds me.” Jin reaches into the pocket of his tunic, withdrawing a tiny flask that sparkles with a strangely familiar purple dust. He holds it up to the light, clutching it firmly. “Raiden was not the first to break the treaty between the realms.”

Raiden catches sight of it, eyes widening. How can he…?

Kotal approaches with earth-shaking steps, trying to make sense of this strange new development. He stops before Jin, squinting at the small glass vial. “What is the meaning of--”

“YOU’LL PAY FOR YOUR CRIMES, FALSE GOD!”

With a glassy crunch and an ear-splitting shriek, a figure dressed in brown leather and pink cloth crashes through the skylight, twisting like a cat to land on all fours. Snarling, she pounces on Kotal, unhinging her fanged jaws. It’s a horrifying, captivating sight. But before she can strike, he swats her aside with an indignant roar, yellow markings shifting to blazing red as vicious anger consumes him. He slices his palm open, red liquid oozing to the ground, and the blood magic surges within him, burning bright as a second sun. “Twisted experiment! I slew you once before, Mileena! What is the meaning of this?!”

“THE IMPOSTOR MUST PERISH!” The same exact voice rings out from the opposite end of the chamber as a window shatters in a spray of crystal shards. Another Mileena soars through the gap, landing on Raiden’s shoulders and leaping off him like a vaulting platform to attack his nameless captor. She wraps her legs around the guard’s chest, tears his skeleton mask off, and throws it aside, breaking against the wall. Then she opens her sharp-toothed mouth wide, growls deep in her throat, and takes a bite out of his skull.
Cassie feels the sudden urge to throw up.

More Mileenas pour in through the windows, pushing aside Cassie’s bewildered team and hurling themselves towards the nearest opponents. Hearing the commotion, a pack of Kotal’s burly guards break down the door, swinging indiscriminately with claw-tipped clubs. Takeda springs into action first, unleashing his whips and cutting down a few guards in a spray of blood, while Jacqui zaps a few more into dust, pulverizing them with her gauntlets. Jin takes aim and pins Cassie’s guard to the wall with an arrow through the neck. A swirl of ancient spirits quickly follow the shot, vaporizing the flesh off the corpse until only a burnt skeleton remains. He shouts to her over the commotion, gesturing frantically with his flaming bow. “Get out of here!”

Cassie shouts back snappishly. “I’m a little tied up right now!”

“I can fix that, darling.” One of the Mileenas swoops down in front of her, eyeing her with a sinister grin beneath a mess of tangled black hair. She licks her lips with a pointed tongue, and reaches around behind Cassie, snapping her chains with bare hands. “Go on and run, little one.”

“You’re no taller than me! ...but thanks, Lady Dracula.” Irritated, Cassie rubs her wrists, then whips out her pistol and fires a couple shots into a guard’s skeleton-masked forehead. He staggers backwards, and she punches him down for good measure, snatching his club away and hitting another guard in the stomach. That one doubles over, and she lands a kick between his legs, sending him staggering backwards with a howl of pain. He bumps into a tangled crowd of Kotal’s lackeys, sending another one sprawling to the floor. She smiles grimly, aiming a bullet right through the next guard’s skull. “I got it from here.”

The emperor himself is busy fending off several furious Mileenas, ferociously swinging his sawblade and shouting curses in some ancient tongue. By now, Ermac and Erron Black have arrived to lend their aid, but one Mileena is viciously ripping the bandages off the unfortunate mummy, while another of them is blocking Erron’s rapid-fire bullets with her blades in a remarkable show of unholy reflexes. By now, there are too many Mileenas to count, crawling up the walls and dropping through the ceiling. They’re more than an equal match for the overpowering force of the brutish guards.

Cassie hunts for Raiden frantically, standing on her tiptoes to peer above the crowd. She catches sight of the god near the chamber’s massive door, mixed up in a fierce fight for his life. He’s surrounded by Jin, Jacqui, and Takeda, desperately trying to pull him away from the iron grasp of a few determined Outworld soldiers. At last he wrenches free with the distinct sound of a lightning blast and the smell of frying flesh. Cassie elbows a guard out of the way, shoving past the chaos. To speed her journey, two Mileenas unexpectedly grab her and hurl her through the air above the crowd, flying towards the door. She lands clumsily on the hard floor, and winces, grasping her sides. With a smart remark on the tip of her tongue, Cassie is shoved unceremoniously through the doorway by a firm push from Jacqui. “Get outta here!”

She isn’t ready for the Outworld heat. It beats down on her unrelentingly, even in the fading twilight, and she breathes in sharply, inhaling a mouthful of dry sand. “Ugh!”

“Take hold of me!” Takeda offers her a hand, which Cassie grabs desperately, squeezing hard enough to hurt. Jacqui seizes her other wrist, bursting through the door and skidding to a halt. In an overwhelmed daze, Cassie glances past Takeda, who’s holding onto Jin, who’s holding onto Raiden... who, with a thoroughly defeated look, is gripping the wrist of a smug black-haired girl with a golden necklace and fire in her palms.

Tanya flutters her eyelashes at Cassie. “Pleased to see you again.”
Cassie gasps. “YOU!”

Raiden grimaces, conjures a weak flash of lightning, and aims an extremely stern glare at Tanya. This fiendish woman has caused all of his recent troubles. Now he’s left with little choice but to cooperate with her. “You and I have much to discuss, Edenian!”

“In a minute, Raiden. You’ll have to be patient. Hold tight…” Tanya waves a hand in a dramatic flourish and vanishes in a flash, sizzling with golden dust. She leaves only a path of burning scorch marks in the desert sand.

Raiden disappears, too, fading in an instant. Then Jin joins him, then Takeda, and Cassie and Jacqui… until all that remains in the Outworld government hall are a hundred Mileenas, a hundred guards, and one very, very angry emperor.

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The smell of old books hits them first, the scent of musty fragile pages decaying from the ravages of time.

Then their vision clears, and on the floor sprawls a tangled group of hapless Earthrealmers and an even more hapless god. Tanya stands by, hands on her hips, dim candlelight casting shadows on her brown skin. She’s lit some small torches in the attic, careful not to let the flames touch the shelves. Her night vision is superb, but she’s trying to be considerate of the others and their pitifully weak senses.

Cassie is the first to pull herself free, latching onto Tanya’s leg and using the leverage to yank herself out from under Jacqui and Jin. Her voice has risen to an anxiously high pitch, all traces of sarcasm gone. She’s still processing it all, somewhat unsuccessfully. “Mind telling me what the hell happened back there?!”

“I was going to ask you the same thing!” Jin crawls out from the pile, taking a seat on one of the low bookcases with his bow cradled across his lap. “We got back to the temple, you weren’t there, Raiden wasn’t there, and all we found were scorch marks up the mountainside and this!”

He pulls out the miniature jar of Tanya’s purple magic dust. “Lucky that stuff stays in the air after it’s used, or we’d have no proof at all. We used it to track you here.”

Jacqui raises one arm, tapping her gauntlet with a knowing smirk.

“Hmmm.” Tanya bends down to look Jin in the eye, cupping his chin in one elegant hand. “Proof of what, Kung Jin?”

He pushes her away, scooting further down the bookcase. “Proof of your involvement! Last we heard, you were an agent of Kotal Kahn.”

“Do you believe everything you hear?”

“You shouldn’t.” Takeda is the next to speak, pushing his headband up his forehead and running a hand through his damp hair. He leans against an attic beam, thoroughly exhausted, and gathers his thoughts. Finally, he looks at Tanya with faint disappointment. This has gotten way out of hand. “It wasn’t hard to figure out. You’d been to the Sky Temple, Raiden and Shinnok were missing, we put two and two together.”

“If not for our timely rescue, your ‘two and two’ would equal zero.” Mileena boldly steps out from behind another bookcase. This one looks different from the countless others. Her hair is bound up in a high ponytail, a pointed crown perched atop her head. She wears no mask, revealing full lips
and a jaw full of fangs. Hands on her hips, she studies them all, looking from one to the next with a withering yellow stare. Then she struts forward. “You owe me your lives… and your loyalty, as Outworld’s true empress!”

Raiden looks up at her, sitting cross-legged on the floor. He is as surprised as the others by these strange twists and turns, though his growing despair has been replaced by a dim flicker of hope. “I supported your rule since the beginning, Mileena.”

“And I have come to appreciate that… Lord Raiden.” Mileena struts towards him, heels clicking on the floorboards. She kneels down to inspect the god, gazing deep into his eyes. He doesn’t flinch. “You risked everything to threaten Kotal, and proved where your loyalties lie. You gave me an opportunity. I owe you a debt.”

Raiden swallows hard. Best not to say anything for now.

Mileena approaches Jin next, but keeps her hands off him, respecting his space. Head tilted to the side, she studies the young man, sensing the ancestral power surrounding him. “You came close to reasoning with that… that foolish pretender to the throne.” She growls deep in her throat, teeth gnashing as her jaw shifts. “I appreciate your efforts… but only force can quell his will.”

A tense silence has fallen over the group, almost an air of reverence. By now, Mileena has risen to her role as empress, carrying herself with an imposing dignity despite her small stature. She commands respect. The teeth probably help.

She faces Cassie, brushing the girl’s hair off her forehead with a claw-tipped finger. Cassie rolls her eyes, leaning back to avoid her. “Thanks for the save, Mistress Munch.”

“I want answers… and I will have them.” Mileena ignores her now and puts on a haughty air, turning to Jacqui instead. “The younger Briggs. Your devotion to your friend is admirable.”

“Hey, I do what I gotta do.” Jacqui wipes a hand across her brow, reaching back to run her fingers through the ends of her cornrows. “Wasn’t hard to catch up. We landed in Outworld right after Cassie and Raiden, and followed them to Kotal’s hall. My tracker system’s set up to send a SOS if either of the gods disappears from Earth for any reason.”

Raiden sighs, chin resting in his hands. “A wise system of security.”

“Never thought I’d need to use it!” Jacqui huffs under her breath, then reaches out and taps Mileena on one bare shoulder, almost afraid to touch the ferocious empress. “Hate to ask the obvious question, but why, exactly, are there more than one of you?”

“Shang Tsung willed it. He made many of me. We awoke… and joined forces.” Mileena tosses her head, setting her hands on her hips again in a sultry pose. “I find it… efficient.”

“Guess so.” Cassie laughs under her breath. “Can you imagine if there were a hundred of our president? Two for every state!”

Takeda raises an eyebrow. “That’s a little creepy.”

“No kidding--” Cassie continues, but is interrupted by Mileena, whose attention has turned to Takeda, sitting on the floor beside Raiden. She kneels down to meet his eyes, studying him with eerie intensity. He fidgets, glancing away, but she continues to stare, seemingly captivated. Cassie clears her throat. “Um….”

“Indulge my curiosity. The young Takahashi possesses the power to sense minds, yes?” Mileena
stands up again, stalking towards Cassie. “I and my duplicates have something similar. I wonder if I will ever be able to read the thoughts of others…”

Cassie mutters to herself. “Let’s hope not.”

Mileena arches an eyebrow. “I beg your pardon?”

“--Sometimes it’s more of a curse than a blessing.” Takeda speaks up to distract the empress, hands folded in his lap. He’s spent the time in quiet contemplation, pondering where everything went wrong. “But that’s part of how we found you guys. What was Kotal going to do to you, anyway?”

“Well, someone told him it’s possible to dismember a god, so I’m pretty sure Raiden wasn’t about to walk out of there in one piece.” Cassie moves closer to Raiden, and hugs him impulsively, head resting on his broad shoulder. He sighs, holding her reassuringly, and she pats his back. She’s never been good at consoling people, but if there was ever a time to try, it’s right now. “Glad you’re safe, thunder dad.”

Jin chuckles under his breath, but his expression fades back to a frown, remembering their situation. “So what are we gonna do now, Empr--”

He pauses, and waits for Mileena to let go of Tanya, whom she’s seized in a passionate kiss. Fangs and all.

Cassie raises an eyebrow. “Glad to know the teeth don’t bother you, Cleopatra.”

Tanya gives her a strange look. “Who is Cleopatra?”

“Forget it.” Cassie leans against Raiden, arms crossed. “So when are we going to talk about the real problem?”

Mileena wipes her mouth, gazing down upon Cassie condescendingly. “What, Lady Cage, is the ‘real problem,’ in your view?”

She gestures vaguely. “Um. Missing god.”

Tanya winces.

Mileena turns towards Tanya, very, very slowly. Anger flares in her eyes as realization dawns. “You!”

“I didn’t lie to you!”

“I asked if you had him and you said NOT YET!”

“I hadn’t FOUND him yet!” Tanya teleports out of reach as Mileena lunges for her, landing on top of an especially tall bookcase. “I didn’t say I hadn’t had him! I just said I didn’t have him yet! …again!”

Mileena rakes her claws down the side of a shelf in pure exasperation. “TANYA!”

“I was GOING to find him again!” Tanya dodges nimbly as Mileena leaps to the top of the bookcase with ease, landing on the floor on the other side. “I could have done it if THESE two utter idiots--” and here she gestures to the astonished Raiden and Cassie-- “hadn’t fallen directly into Kotal’s hands in a master stroke of sheer stupidity!”
“Ladies!” Jin taps his bow on the hard floor with a loud cracking sound, calling them to attention. “Save the lover’s quarrel for later, okay? Cassie’s right. We’re here to get back what you took, Tanya.”

Tanya faces him boldly. “Are you accusing me of a crime?!”

Cassie’s had enough. She leaps up, pinning Tanya against a shelf with a hand pressed to the Edenian’s bare throat. “YOU STOLE SHINNOK!”

Tanya chokes out a gasp. “We need him to eliminate Kotal! With him on the throne, neither of your beloved gods will ever be safe!”

“They’ll be unsafe in Outworld! And now they’re both here! BECAUSE OF YOU!”

Jacqui slams her fists together with a metallic clink. “STOP!” She raises her voice, breaking through the clamor. “Tanya’s got a point! Erron came to get Shinnok within a week. I stopped him, but you really think he wouldn’t do it again?”

Cassie whirls around, raising a fist at her friend. “And the solution is dragging us all into total danger?! That’s fucking brilliant!”

“No!” Tanya wrestles herself free, knocking Cassie to the floor and sitting on her to keep her down. “The solution WAS to use Shinnok’s powers to destroy Kotal and his forces, place Mileena on the throne, and pardon Earthrealm, forgiving you of the debt of a god’s life! Had you allowed me enough time, this could have been accomplished in a matter of days!”

“He doesn’t even have any powers anymore!” Cassie fights against Tanya with weak blows. After today’s events, she’s totally worn out. “And, by the way, you didn’t TELL any of this to anyone!”

“If you knew, you might have interfered!”

“You can’t expect to kidnap a god-- godnap-- whatever-- without consequences!”

“Allow me to be honest. I thought you wouldn’t be competent enough to catch up with me so quickly.” Tanya sniffs, shaking her head. This has all gone terribly out of control. “Besides, Raiden’s presence on Outworld was not part of the plan. I fully expected him to abandon Shinnok to his fate. Instead, he chose to… retrieve him.”

All eyes turn to Raiden, who looks at the ceiling in a silent plea for patience.

He shakes his head softly, turning to Tanya. “I could not leave him in your hands.”

“My, my.” Mileena stalks forward with slinky steps, studying Raiden’s conflicted face. “Weakness towards your eternal foe? Such behavior does not befit a god.”

“Ruthlessness does not suit me, Mileena Kahnum. I have discovered this for myself. Perhaps things are different in Outworld… but I seek to emulate the Earthrealmers’ capacity to forgive.”

Cassie wrenches free from Tanya, bolting to her feet. Her temper is boiling over. “FORGIVE?!”

“It is a figure of speech, Cassandra Cage. Please, sit down.” Raiden stops her in her tracks with a faint but effective lightning zap, sending her reeling backwards into Tanya’s waiting arms. “Shinnok said -- and I remember it well -- ‘remove the shadow from the light, the shadow grows.’ So, this time, I have chosen to act differently, and make amends for my own poor choices.”
“Hmmmm.” Mileena purrs under her breath, pointy fingers steepled in a gesture of deep thought. “Mercy does not suit me… but, Raiden, I appreciate the effort to learn from your many failures.”

Raiden’s expression doesn’t change, his steadfast gaze boring holes through her. “I owe it to Earthrealm to learn.”

A familiar voice, low and sinister, echoes through the clamor in the attic. Silence falls.

“A commendable approach, Raiden. I must admit, I’m glad to learn your true intentions.”

Raiden swallows hard, gulping. He lifts a hand instinctively to adjust the brim of his missing hat, summoning a lightning charge that refuses to form.

No. It can’t be.

Shinnok himself flickers into view, facing the group.

Arms spread in a confident gesture, he towers before them, dressed in all his godly finery. He is standing atop a bookcase, surveying the library as if it were his kingdom. The candlelight reflects off his pale marble skin, highlighting his bare sides and strong arms and the hollow angles of his gaunt face. He is wearing an impossibly smug smirk.

“And I am so glad to know you all find me desirable, even if only as a mere source of power.”

The renegade god hops down off the bookcase with dramatic flair, approaching the group. Carefully, deliberately, he studies their shocked faces. Ever since the discussion with Tanya, he’s warmed up to the idea of his role in the war, and finally welcomed it. *This* is his moment of triumph. He is wanted -- *needed* -- for his true might as an Elder God.

He catches Mileena in the crosshairs of a knowing stare.

“Shall we negotiate?”
“Define ‘negotiate’, Shinnok.” Mileena summons her confidence and strides across the library floor, engaged in an intense stare-down with the defiant god. “Do you really feel that you are in a position to bargain?”

Shinnok’s gaze shifts between the crowd, eyes narrowed. The younger team members are all gazing at him intently, on edge and ready to attack if he makes one wrong move. Tanya is fascinated. Raiden just looks tired.

“I do, Empress.” Shinnok adjusts the shoulder-piece of his armor and lifts himself taller, preening a bit. Mileena is unimpressed. He pauses, considering his options, then tries a different tactic. “What have you to offer me in return for my cooperation?”

Mileena withdraws a gleaming narrow dagger from a sheath on her back. She runs her pointed tongue along the sharp blade, looking Shinnok right in the eye.

“Your life.”

Shinnok frowns. He reaches for the weapon at his hip, raises it, then thinks better of it, and puts it back. That wouldn’t work as well without a knife.

Raiden, surprisingly, is the first to interrupt. “Mileena Kahnum, you are in no position to threaten the life of a god.”

“What else am I supposed to threaten? His pretty corset lacing? His sense of dignity?” Mileena turns to face Raiden, and looks down at him as he sits captive in her attic. It occurs to her, belatedly, that she has both of the gods here. Her hair swishes as she tosses her ponytail, gathering her confidence. “I fear he has already lost the latter...”

Shinnok grumbles. “You will retract that remark at once.”

“I do not retract my statements.” Mileena gestures towards him, wiggling her fingers with a wry sharp-toothed grin. “Only my claws!”

Cassie leans closer to the weary Raiden, hand resting on the battered holster at her hip. “Catwoman over here is really gonna be Outworld’s new leader? Just making sure I’m not hallucinating.”

Raiden replies quietly. “Have you a better alternative in mind?”

Shinnok responds in a loud voice from across the room. “If you’re dissatisfied with Mileena, you are more than welcome to hand the throne over to me, personally. I wouldn’t say no.”

Jacqui’s fingers tighten around the edge of the bookshelf. “The rest of us sure would.”

“That was an attempt at humor, Miss Briggs. I am well aware that my current position does not lend itself to a coup d’état.”

She snaps back. “Took French lessons in the Netherrealm?”

“Actually, while Tanya was away, I took the liberty of absorbing the knowledge contained in this library into my own mind.” Shinnok puts a hand on his chest, looking quite proud of himself. “I feel... enlightened. Never before have I known so many useless Earthrealm facts at once.”
“I could’ve used that ability in college.” Jacqui makes a face. The last thing anyone needs is Shinnok as an insufferable walking encyclopedia. “Sure hope there was a book about making good decisions in there somewhere.”

Shinnok is more smug than before, if that’s even possible. “If there was, I would have shared it already with all of you... in light of your desperate need for it.”

Jacqui rolls her eyes, looking up at the ceiling. Her supply of patience ran dry half an hour ago. “So do we have a plan to get out of here yet, or...?”

Jin and Tanya have been quietly collaborating while the others were bickering, trying to come up with a strategy to get themselves out of the next mess. Fortunately, they’re both good enough at scheming that they might, maybe, have an idea that works.

Or maybe not.

Tanya is the first to speak. “This may sound… inadvisable, but I know what to do.”


Raiden claps a hand over her mouth. “Please continue.”

Tanya explains further. “You, as Earthrealmers, need proof that Kotal has violated the treaty. Correct?”

He nods. “Yes. What of it?”

“Currently, you have none. Jin’s little magic bottle, although it is a convincing piece of secondhand evidence, is insufficient proof.”

Cassie pushes Raiden’s hand away, interrupting again. “When’d you take law classes, Tanya?”

Tanya gestures magnanimously to a nearby bookshelf.

“Fine.” Unwillingly, Cassie concedes the point. She crosses her legs, gripping her knee-pads. “Okay. Hit me with it.”

“Beware, lest someone take that offer seriously.” Tanya arches a brow. “Here is what I propose. What would be more convincing proof than Special Forces’ own leaders witnessing Kotal’s act of deception?”

“Heate to break it to you, but I’m not the one in charge over there.”

“I didn’t say you were.”

Right on cue, Cassie’s infrared wristband lets out a jarring buzz.

She rolls up her sleeve, staring at the display, and notices two glowing dots. A faint sense of nausea rises. She slumps back against Raiden, who pats her shoulder consolingly. Grasping at straws, Cassie taps the device, frantically refreshing its signal. No luck. It was right the first time.

General Sonya Blade and Johnny Cage have arrived within Outworld’s borders.

“This can’t be happening!”
Tanya smirks, shadows hiding her face with a mysterious flair. “Time for a parent-emperor conference.”

“Did YOU call them?!” Cassie clenches a fist, open-mouthed and indignant. “You can’t-”

“No, no. I merely sensed their arrival. But did you really expect they wouldn’t follow their children into the jaws of death and danger?”

Jacqui interrupts, mind working quick. “If they’re here, so’s Dad. And if I send out a SOS with my gauntlet locator, it’ll reach him first.”

All eyes focus on her.

“You want to lead them here?!”

“Nope.”

Jacqui hops down from her seat, resting her hands on her hips. Once they’re all quiet, she speaks, illustrating her brilliantly simple plan.

“Guess who shot a tracker particle into the door at Outworld’s government hall?”

Cassie raises a hand. “Gonna guess it’s the girl carrying the tracker particles around.”

“Who else?” Jacqui grins, enjoying the moment. “I can re-rout the location signal, send the SOS to Dad and General Blade, and if we time it just right… they’ll break in and witness Tanya handing Shinnok over to Kotal Kahn.”

“Perfect!” Mileena crows in glee, grabbing Jacqui’s hands and gripping tight. Her palms are strangely damp, her polished fingernails digging into the girl’s skin. “Oh, such marvelous brilliance. I could kiss you right now!”

“Thanks, but it’s not the time.” Jacqui extricates herself carefully from the empress’s sharp grip. “Just so you know, I’d pay to see you debate our president.”

Shinnok, who has been listening silently to this heated exchange, now speaks up again, wearing a rather sour look on his sharp face. “Excuse me. What did you say, Jacqueline Briggs?”

“I said I’d pay to see--”

“Not that.” Shinnok purses his lips, the perfect picture of displeasure. “They’ll witness Tanya handing who over to whom?”


“You expect me to go willingly to this?!”

“Gonna go one way or another, Shinny.”

“Oh, come now, Cassandra. Let us not antagonize our valued guest!” Mileena swoops over to Shinnok, looking him over rather too closely. She stands on her tiptoes, but doesn’t even come close to matching his towering height. Intrigued by his looks, she reaches out and runs a hand over the bare skin of his ribs, exposed by his stylishly villainous outfit. “Hmm. You’re warm! I expected you to be cold and clammy, as a death-god.”

“What was that about antagonizing me? Leave your hands off me, you… you cursed vixen!”
Shinnok swats Mileena away, lifting into the air and floating some distance off. His cheeks have flushed a light purple with pure indignation. “My magic warms me, and I am a god of death in the abstract sense. I cannot die… as I have all proven to you, quite aggravatingly, I am sure.”

Cassie mutters to herself. “You got that right.”

Raiden nudges her. His patience is finally bending slightly, though still fortunately far away from snapping. “Miss Cage, you have your father’s flair for witty commentary, but at this moment, it is… unnecessary.”

“Thank you.” Shinnok heaves a dramatic sigh, and drops to the ground again, tentatively approaching. “Empress… continue.”

Mileena folds her hands pointedly behind her back, consciously respecting the god’s objection. Well, she supposes, not everyone shares the same tastes. Respect and cooperation do not come easily to her, but she owes it to Outworld to make an effort… unlike last time. “Lord Shinnok, you must briefly play the role of servitude that Kotal expects of you. Once Earthrealm has proof of his treason…” She grins widely, fangs gleaming. “Do whatever you please.”

Shinnok sighs sharply, breathing out through his nose. He must make the best of the situation, if nothing else. “Servitude does not suit me, even if we are play-acting.”

“Think of it as a mere role… a necessity to reclaim your glory!”

Raiden clears his throat.

Tanya tactfully amends the statement. “A necessity to reclaim your glory within the limits of reason, considering your current status and your past crimes.”

Mileena scoffs. “Technicalities and formalities! Personally, I would be glad to see Shinnok unleash his wrath upon those idiots. Maybe it will be good to… get it out of his system.” She winks at him with a sideways glance, smirking.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Shinnok draws himself up, arms folded across his slim chest. “Yes, I do plan to ‘unleash my wrath,’ as you put it, on your nemesis, the very instant I break free from the temporary chains. It would be my pleasure.”

Cassie pipes up once more. “I’m going to guess Mom isn’t going to be thrilled about that. Might ruin the grand plan.”

“Oh, she will be quite grateful for the aid. Kotal is enough of a fool to attack as soon as your Special Forces step into his presence. I’m certain of it.” Mileena gestures broadly, emphasizing her words with animated body language. It adds power and status, despite her diminutive height. She turns to Shinnok, tapping her toe on the time-worn floor. “And then you will not only savor the sheer delight of destroying your captors, but the eyes of Earthrealm will look positively upon you! What have you to lose?”

He regards her with a look that is very nearly a sullen pout. “I am forced to admit… you are not entirely wrong.”

Mileena leans in, staring him down. “Yes… or no?”

He brushes her off with an aggravated sigh, seeing no other choice. “Yes! Fine! I accept your plan, and will follow it… if you will follow me.”
Jin has remained quiet all the while, staying near to Tanya. Now he interrupts, adopting his diplomatic persona for safety’s sake. “Excuse me? ‘Follow you’ how?”

“Acknowledge my status... and my divinity!” Shinnok spreads his arms, rising into the air with a magnificent surge of power. His forearms glow with a translucent haze, revealing the skeletal structure beneath. Wisps of radiant magic curl around his body and rise to the rafters before vanishing with a clench of his fist. He drops to the floor, landing solidly, and poses with a confident stance. “Too many have failed to do so… and their disrespect became their last words!”


“That is not what I meant!”

“That’s all you’re gonna get.”

He turns away, looking back over his shoulder at her with a scornful glare. “I care nothing for your petty opinion. The Kahnum sees my value, even if you do not.”

Cassie doesn’t reply, just gives him a disgruntled look. Can it really be this easy to pacify Shinnok’s godly inferiority complex? She’s willing to let the rest of them suck up to him, if it’s what it takes to stop him from going on a world-destroying rampage. Not that he really could anymore, anyway. She’s not even sure he has the power to take down Kotal and all his minions in whatever grand showdown Tanya’s got planned.

Well, they’re all about to find out.

- - -

A low rasping voice rings out through the jungle’s humid damp underbrush, muffled by a thicket of leaves. “Let go of me!”

“You’re my prisoner!”

“I am pretending to be your prisoner, you... you infernal pyromancer!”

“To me, that’s a compliment, not an insult.” Tanya laughs to herself, hacking a path through the jungle’s thick undergrowth with a sturdy handheld blade. Shinnok is following along behind her, wrists bound behind his back with a thick coil of rope, scowling all the while. “You’ll just have to put up with this until we get there, all right? Do you think you can manage that extremely simple task?”

“This is not the way to treat a god!”

“This is how Kotal wanted me to treat you! I delivered you to safety.”

“Relative safety, at best!” Shinnok winces as the cord chafes against the bare scarred skin of his wrists. He falters and stops to catch his breath, quietly hoping that no ominous jungle creatures catch up to their trail in the meantime. “...Fine. I understand your predicament. I truly do. Nonetheless, I admit, this all brings back terrible memories.” To say the least.

“That’s understandable.” Tanya shrugs, and hooks her arm through his elbow, leading him forward across a slender tree-trunk bridge that crosses a deceptively deep stream. “Well, Lord Shinnok--” her tone is only half mocking-- “here goes nothing. We’re close. Be on your best behavior… or your worst. We have to make this convincing.”
“To me, that sounds like an excuse to be as perfectly insufferable as you all seem to think I am.”

“Watch yourself. I’d knock you unconscious and carry you in, but you weigh too much.” Tanya glances towards the heavens for reassurance, which doesn’t do much when the person causing your troubles is already a god. Fat chance that any of the other ones would choose to help, either.

“This is it. We’re here.”

Blade in hand, she emerges from the underbrush, pushing Shinnok forward with the tip of the knife digging into the small of his back and her strong fingers wrapped around the collar of his armor.

Erron greets her with a pistol to the temple. “Traitorous Tanya.”

“This isn’t the children’s rhyming hour.” Tanya sends him flying with a flick of the wrist and a blast of flame, landing in an undignified heap several feet away. “Do not bother me with your petty taunts. As I recall, you were unable to capture a god. Unlike me.”

Tanya follows the gravel pathway with quick decisive steps, crossing a patch of dry ground on her way towards the towering government hall. Shinnok has to be hauled along behind her, practically making himself dead-weight in a show of defiance. She pokes him in the ribs, hissing under her breath. “Cooperate.”

“Never!”

She ignores his protests, leading him forward and pushing him through the gaping doorway with a solid teleport-kick. Shinnok staggers, barely catching his balance, and falls to his knees a bit too dramatically. He growls under his breath, aiming harsh curses at her in a voice that drips with venom. “You will pay!”

“No. It is you who will pay, Fallen One.” Kotal’s distinctive menacing tone booms through the chamber, hitting Shinnok’s ears harshly. He glares towards the emperor, putting as much hate into his gaze as possible, just to make a point. “You have been brought to me instead of Raiden, as an… equivalent exchange.”

Kotal eases himself off the large ornate throne, walking with a slight limp. Shinnok hides a smirk. Those young fools must have done some damage. He leans against his massive saw-sword, surveying his captive with disappointment. “You have fallen far. Today, you will fall farther still, into the depths of oblivion.”

Shinnok snarls at him, firing back a retort. “My name will live forever in the hearts and minds of all the realms!”

“As a mere footnote! ” The Kahn raises his voice to a frightening pitch, slamming his blade against the floor in rage.

Tanya grimaces, glancing back out the door. Hopefully those children will make their move soon enough. She doesn’t want to be stuck here looking after a poorly repaired vintage god.

Kotal sinks the tip of his sword into the battered wood boards with every step, approaching slowly. “What I choose to do to you… will depend on my creativity.”

“You’ll have to outdo Raiden in order to impress me, and that would be quite a task.”

“Silence! I will not tolerate insolence from an elderly god!”
“ELDER god!”

“Nothing more than a relic!”

Shinnok clenches his jaw and flexes his wrists, trying to escape his bindings. “Why, you overfed blue buffoon, you—”

Tanya punches him in the shoulder, not hard enough to hurt but enough to shut him up for half a minute. “Kotal Kahn. Listen to me… Emperor. I have fulfilled your task. I brought you one of these puny gods, intact but disarmed, as requested. Grant my reward, and free me.”

Kotal folds his arms across his massive chest, surveying her.

“What task?”

Tanya gasps.

“You wouldn’t—”

“I have a god in my possession now. What happens to you, traitorous Edenian, is less than irrelevant. As the last Kahn crushed your realm, so, too, shall your spirit be crushed.”

“We made a deal!” Enraged, Tanya reaches into a hidden pocket in her sleeve and whips out a packet of papers, bearing the stamp of Kotal’s imperial seal. “In exchange for my services in retrieving your captive -- a task others tried and failed to accomplish, might I add -- you agreed to grant me a request. A favor owed fairly would be repaid by any honorable man. So I’m claiming my prize. Release me from your service! Now!”

Kotal snatches the papers from her with a mighty fist, crushing them in a burst of flame. They disintegrate into blackened ash, crumbling into bits as he opens his palm.

“Did you think I would be so foolish as to let you go?” He laughs, booming through the high ceilings and thin walls. “I have erred before. Not this time!”

Tanya hisses at him, white eyes burning in pure rage. “There is no honor among usurpers!”

“Nor among traitors!” He draws back a fist, gripping his sword tight in his other hand, and--

A light whistle pierces through the air from the other side of the room.

Johnny Cage has parked himself there, leaning against the empty doorframe. He holds up a smartphone in one hand, capturing the entire event. He’s beaming widely, hair ruffled and sunglasses perched atop his head.

“Hi there.”

Tanya has never been so happy to see a man in her entire life.

Johnny clucks his tongue. “That’s a no-no. Hitting a lady? Bad form. When our politicians do that, we vote ‘em out.”

Kotal roars, drawing his blade across his palm. Blood soaks the floor beneath, his fingers slippery with the red liquid.

Johnny winces. “No need for that --”
Kotal blasts him with a beam of magical sunlight, engulfing him in intolerable heat and blinding him for a few seconds. Johnny’s brand new phone explodes into shards in his hand.

“That is what I think of your puny Earthrealm technology!”

“Sorry, Kotes, it was a livestream!” Johnny leaps into action, hurling himself across the room and grabbing Tanya to knock her out of reach of Kotal’s blade. She shoves him away, and he ignores her displeased retort, focusing on the emperor. “Any day now, Sonya!”

“I am Tanya, not Sonya!”

“Not you! Talking to my wife! --Ex-wife! Doesn’t really matter right now!”

“Normally, it’d matter.” Sonya’s voice crackles through the communicator strapped to Johnny’s wrist, muffled through the fabric of his sports jacket. He breathes a sigh of relief. It’s about time.

“Incoming!”

General Sonya Blade leaps through the door with a flying kick, taking down the grungy cowboy who’s just joined the fray. Leaving him knocked on his ass, she whirls to face a guard and decks him with a determined uppercut. Other figures are pouring in to come to Kotal’s aid -- a handful of guards, a reptilian warrior, a tiny girl mounted on the shoulders of a hulking humanoid beast. All par for the course in Outworld’s weirdness. Relying on her wits, Sonya dodges through the growing violent crowd, finally coming face to face with Kotal Kahn.

And, with a flick of the wrist, she tazes the emperor.

He goes down like a chump, sprawling on the floor, and she whips out a pair of handcuffs, but tosses them aside, realizing they’re not about to fit an eight-foot-tall Osh-Tekk. Instead, she pulls off her belt, fashioning a makeshift zip-tie to bind his wrists. It’s not going to hold once he wakes up, but she should have this under control by then.

Her concentration is unpleasantly interrupted by a fetid smell and the hiss of a thousand voices.

“Outworld forbids you—”

“Nope. You are NOT touching my mother!” Making her dramatic entrance, Cassie launches herself halfway across the room with a boost from Jacqui. Her boot collides with the side of Ermac’s head with a satisfying crunch. Screeching in unholy rage, they topple over, but scramble to their feet a second later, floating off the ground. Cassie dodges as they make a grab for her throat, then distracts them with a snap of her fingers and lands a timely kick between their legs. “Done before ya even got started!”

“It is not so!” Ermac avoids her next blow, doubling back to grab hold of her collar and yank her up into the air. Wrenched with pain, Cassie pulls out her pistol and shoots blindly, and the mummy howls, dropping her. She looks around desperately in the split-second of peace.

Jax and Jacqui are fighting side by side, metal arms and gauntlets at full force, fending off the hulking brute and its knife-wielding child rider. Sonya is guarding the unconscious Kotal with a gun in hand, backed by Tanya, who looks altogether too proud of herself. Johnny is fending off that damned gunslinger. Jin and Takeda have positioned themselves at opposite sides of the chamber, and are following the invisible outline of the reptile warrior, carefully managing the range of their weapons as they try to land a hit between pools of poisonous spit.

And Shinnok…
Shinnok is sitting comfortably on the emperor’s throne at the far end of the room, luxuriously draped across its broad seat with a satisfied smirk on his face. Lazily, he studies the sparks of magic that dance between his slender fingers, ignoring the chaos unfolding before him.

He’s always wanted this.

“Shinnok!” Tanya appears before him in a puff of golden dust, thoroughly and completely exasperated. “This is not the time to try out the fucking imperial armchair. We need you!”

“Now, now. Is that any way to request the aid of a god?”

Tanya clenches her fists, but bows graciously, gesturing with feigned respect. She speaks through gritted teeth. “Please.”

“Oh, fine. Since you fools cannot manage anything yourselves…” Shinnok ascends into the air with a dramatic flick of the wrist, summoning his trademark magenta flame. He holds his arms out, shoulders back, chin up, adopting the proud look of the triumphant conqueror. “Face me, and fall!”

With a crackling hiss, a bolt of searing magic blasts down from the sky, forcing Kotal’s nearest insignificant lackey to the ground. More attacks follow in turn, the god’s enemies pinned down at his merciless whim. Shinnok lifts his hands, gazing upwards, and recites an ancient incantation, a chorus of eerie whispering voices repeating after his hushed tones.

As always, he saves the best for last.

The room grows dark, illuminated only by Shinnok’s own divine radiance. Like a graveyard come to life, a sea of bony limbs rises up from the floorboards, reaching and crawling and creeping until all the foes are bound hand and toe, held in the relentless grip of skeletal hands.

And then the hands clench shut, with the sounds of cracking bone.

All the enemies except Kotal vanish in a sudden fog of green mist, summoned to some other location. Shinnok isn’t sure exactly where. They will all have to figure that out for themselves.

The crowd below stares up at him, gaping blankly.

Shinnok descends to the floor, floating dramatically with his armor’s cloth panels billowing in the air. “Such punishment suits these fiends.”

Tanya meets his eyes, and smirks. “Was that fun?”

He waves her aside, and turns to Sonya, who’s now aiming one gun at Kotal and the other at him. “Such hostility, Miss Blade. As you have seen, the Kahn and his allies are no match for my power.”

Tanya coughs loudly. “That was not the point of this exercise!”

“Oh. Yes… of course.” Shinnok brushes off his bare forearms, summoning his armor gauntlets to cover them again. He’s more comfortable this way. “You may feel free to explain these events to our new arrivals, in case their puny minds are confused.”

Cassie rolls her eyes.

Tanya faces them all, standing beside Shinnok, and draws herself up to look as formidable as possible. “Thanks to the quick thinking of Mr. Cage, I believe you now have proof of Kotal Kahn’s
violation of the neutrality agreement between your realms. By sending me as his secret agent to 
steal Shinnok, Kotal disobeyed the agreements of fair and open communication, honorable 
dealings, and, most importantly, non-aggression.”

Sonya nods slowly, processing this. This is about to be a hell of a day. “Tanya, while I appreciate 
everything you’ve done here, you’ve committed a serious breach of inter-realm security. How, 
exactly, did you kidnap a god?”

A very familiar voice responds, laced with the crackle of lightning. “The fault is mine.”

Sonya whirls around to look at the intruder, wishing she had a third gun.

“The security of the Sky Temple has been compromised ever since the use of the jinsei to return 
Shinnok to his full physical condition.” Raiden materializes before the crowd, electricity flickering 
along the brim of his hat. He gazes at Sonya apologetically. “The energy required to restore an 
Elder God is… tremendous. I should have informed you of this beforehand.”

“What’s done is done. Having you cured is the priority. We’ll discuss it later.” Sonya turns back 
towards the emperor, who is now struggling to sit up, coming to his senses. “Care to explain 
yourself, Kotal Kahn?”

Kotal studies the crowd. Three adult Special Forces humans, the four dreadful children from the 
younger team, Raiden and Shinnok perplexingly side by side, and, among them all, the master 
betrayed, Tanya.

He’ll have her head for this.

But he is caught in his treason. He has broken the agreement in his desperate quest for repayment, 
making up for Raiden’s attempted crimes against his land. Much too late, he realizes he went too 
far.

There is only one option.

Kotal stands up, gathering his resolve. Even in his fall from grace, he carries the same imposing 
aura that first led to his claim to the throne. He has pondered this next option for some time, but at 
first thought it unwise. Now, it has become necessary. He must control relations between the 
realms and assert Outworld’s supreme rule once again. This time, for good.

“Since your Earthrealm warriors are so eager to test their abilities within Outworld…”

He pauses.

“I invoke my right to hold a Mortal Kombat tournament.”

Raiden’s jaw drops.

The room falls into silence.

Slowly, Raiden closes his eyes, giving only the faintest nod. Now it is he who has no choice. The 
Elder Gods would never come to his aid now. The terms have been set.

“I accept your challenge, Kotal Kahn.” His eyes are white with glowing power, emotion surging 
with him. He is to blame, once more. Always. “When is it to be held?”

“You have three months to prepare.” Kotal looks down at Sonya, matching her defiance with new
confidence. “By the laws of the realms, the tournament will resolve our differences, including the violation of our prior agreement.” He flexes his wrists, breaking the tied belt as if it were a fragile thread. “Raiden, as defender of Earthrealm, is naturally forbidden to participate. Choose among your best. You can expect to face only the finest warriors of Outworld.”

“Well, good. I’d hate to see your worst.” Cassie advances, chewing a wad of bubblegum. Jacqui, Jin, and Takeda are gathered protectively behind her, with Johnny and Jax guarding the group on either side. “What’s the prize?”


“I’ll take it.” Cassie steps back. “So… that’s it? I’ll mark my calendar.”

Tanya has quietly vanished. It’s probably better that way.

Shinnok glances around the group with his usual sneer of superiority, aiming a particularly vengeful look at Kotal Kahn. “Are we done here?”

The emperor’s brow furrows. He pounds his fist against his open palm, a wordless and unmistakable threat. “The second false god dares to address me? Your presence in my sight is an abomination. In time, you will bow to me!”

“No, I will most certainly not.” Shinnok retreats rapidly, grabbing a handful of Raiden’s tunic. “Get us out of here now, you fool!”

Raiden mentally counts the group, and frowns, brow furrowed deeply. “Have patience.”

“I have none left to give!”

Kotal is eyeing Sonya ominously, perhaps considering an alternate solution to his problems.

Shinnok elbows Raiden in the ribs sharply, his anxiety growing with each passing moment. “What at all are you good for, if not to rescue your beloved mortals?”

Raiden groans, and shoves his foe aside, spreading his arms and reaching up towards the heavens.

With a massive crack of thunder and a blinding explosion of power, nine bolts of electricity surge down from the ceiling and strike each god and Earthrealm in turn, engulfing them in light.

Finally, blessedly, the lightning carries them back to safer lands.
The next day dawns like any other. The sun rises over the horizon, staining the mountaintops with radiant gold. Shinnok sits and watches it from the rooftop, knees drawn up to his chest, shivering at the chill that bites at his bare skin. It refreshes him. Cold air fills his lungs as he inhales deeply. He far prefers this over the stifling heat of hell. In a surge of spiteful resolve, he clenches his fist, making a proclamation. Never will he go back, not even if they offered him the throne.

Instead, he needs to ground himself and step back into the flow of Earthrealm time. Too long has he been separated from this reality, unable to tell moments from eons. Now so much has happened in a week, and he is only beginning to grasp the scope of it all.

Through the night, Shinnok sat here in peace, quiet but awake, contemplating the wealth of his experiences. Now that the sun has begun to rise, the exhaustion finally hits him like a crushing blow. Gods do not sleep, but he urgently needs to rest. He really should find the ladder down from here and go back inside. Raiden is probably fretting with worry by now. Sentimental fool.

Shinnok gets to his feet, a bit shaky, and accidentally steps off the edge of the roof.

Raiden is there to catch him with open arms.

One lightning-flash later, Shinnok finds himself draped across a comfortable couch, large enough to fit the height of a god. He makes no effort to move, just presses his face wearily against the embroidered pillow and mutters an indecipherable snide remark.

“You are welcome.” Raiden slumps into a chair nearby, removing his hat and placing it on the floor beside him. They seem to be in a spacious but cozy library, somewhere among the Sky Temple’s secluded chambers. Shinnok weakly attempts to sit up and study his surroundings, but soon he gives up and flops back onto the couch, still dressed in full armor.

Raiden leans over and thoughtfully unstraps the spiked shoulderpads attached to Shinnok’s outfit, placing them on the ground near his own hat.

Shinnok gives him a grudging look out of one half-opened eye.

Raiden smiles to himself, glancing away. Thousands of years of rivalry and loathing, and here they are, on amicable speaking terms at last. Funny what a crisis will do.

Shinnok reads Raiden’s thoughts with ease. You think we are getting along?

We are not trying to gravely wound each other any longer. I consider that an improvement.

Indeed, I don’t plan to injure you. Just your sensitive feelings.

You will have to try harder than that.

Just wait and see.

It is an effort doomed to end in failure, like all the rest. Raiden tugs off his gauntlets and greaves, laying his elaborately carved armor on the rug, too. Your effort might be considered admirable by someone else.

Good. Meanwhile, if you considered it admirable, I’d be insulted.
What if I did? In that case, I invite you to be insulted.

Ha! You admitted that you admire me. I win.

Purely as a theoretical exercise. You do not win. You will never win.

Oh, yes, I do. Now you’ve sunk to my level.

That is impossible. Only you, my foe, could ever stoop so low.

I appreciate your respect for my unique skills. Shinnok looks over at him, and smirks. He idly takes note of a clipboard in Raiden’s lap, pen floating across the page and making notes on its own. What are you doing over there?

Planning for the tournament. Foresight has always served me well.

Has it, Raiden? Has it really?

You are becoming worse than Miss Cage with her insolent remarks.

You are her mentor, not I. As a matter of fact, I see why she developed that habit.

Raiden glances up from the clipboard. The pen halts, leaving a trail of ink. Shinnok, I never knew you even had a sense of humor.

You never attempted to find out.

At the time, I had no reason to try.

But now you do?

Raiden looks between the god and his page of notes.

It seems that is the case.

I’ll admit, it pleases me that you’ve warmed up to my company. Recognition by the gods was always what I sought.

Though I value the insight, I do not have the time for a thorough discussion of your past motives. We have a month to spend in planning, no more.

But Kotal Kahn gave us three months.

I know. We cannot waste more than a few weeks gathering our group before we begin to train.

We? You imply the participation of someone other than yourself, Raiden.

What are you going to do, Shinnok, if not to aid me? Cheer from the sidelines?

Perish the thought. ...What are your notes?

Raiden steeples his fingers, studying the scrawled marks on the page. Our primary four fighters are a clear choice. Cassandra Cage, Jacqueline Briggs, Takahashi Takeda, and Kung Jin.

I can’t argue with that. They did perform admirably throughout these recent events.

Indeed they did. You owe them a great debt of gratitude, Shinnok.
Yes. They rescued me from my untimely theft… which a certain other god was unable to prevent.

Tanya was no match for either of us. She caught me off guard. You should be glad that she wants your allegiance.

She was wise to choose my support, even if her methods leave something to be desired.

Raiden studies Shinnok, watching the unique wry quirks of his expressions. It has been so long since they saw each other so closely. Before Shinnok was locked up in the Netherrealm, he resembled the other gods, much like a mortal but taller and mightier. After millennia in hell deprived of light and nourishment, he faded, hair and skin turning pale as parchment. The change is permanent.

Once again, Raiden feels a painful twinge of guilt for the punishments he inflicted on his nemesis. Now that he has tasted the fever of corruption, he sees the past with a new perspective.

Shinnok meets his eyes demandingly, noting Raiden’s distracted frown. Is something the matter?

I was just... thinking.

Time well spent, in my opinion. So who else will fight for Earthrealm?

It is unlikely that Sonya Blade and Johnny Cage will participate. They have fought enough already, and performed bravely in the last tournament. Jackson Briggs could hardly be expected to do so, either. Nor Takahashi Kenshi. I would not put either of them through that.

I asked who will, not who won’t. Besides, we have their children as our fighters. It matters not.

I was just discussing our options. Sareena, though she hails from Netherrealm, may lend her aid.

I know of her. Is she qualified to fight for us?

Participation in the Tournament is based on allegiance, not origins. She would likely agree to it if I asked.

Very well...

Shinnok sighs, propping his chin in his hands, and lets his thoughts wander back to his own history in the Netherrealm.

A wave of disgust hits him all at once. He spits his next words, burning with sudden bitter rage. I cannot believe I am sitting around with YOU, on your accursed couch, discussing how to help Earthrealm. How shamefully far I have fallen! I am distracted entirely from my purpose.

Raiden’s tone grows stern. Your purpose? Listen closely, Shinnok. Quan Chi used you as a tool and a power source. The One Being twisted your mind to its advantage. You believed yourself a king, but you were treated as a pawn.

Shinnok falls silent, eyes wide as the horrible idea washes over him.

Liar!

Where have I lied? Think it over. Raiden sits back in the chair, resuming his contemplation. They valued your destructive capabilities and the limited scope of your intentions, not your free will and your godhood. Had you diverged from Quan Chi’s plans, he would not have hesitated to cast you back from whence you came.
Shinnok wants so badly to argue. The truth of Raiden’s words stings him unbearably. But he can’t force himself to utter an empty contradiction, and just sits there in despairing silence.

Shinnok. Raiden materializes closer with a zap of lightning, sitting cross-legged before him on the floor. Tentatively, gently, he places a hand on the other god’s shoulder. His skin has gone cold, like smooth stone. You did more to assert yourself as a true god yesterday than you have ever done in all your struggles against me and the Heavens.

He doesn’t even have the energy to push Raiden away, just closes his eyes and lays his face in his hands. If what you say is true, I am still a pawn.

You are not. Raiden is sorrowful. Part of him is revolted by his own sympathy for such a wretched enemy. The rest of him is appalled by that vengeful feeling, and seeks to learn to forgive. A battle rages within. He leaves his hand on Shinnok’s shoulder, establishing a silent truce. The only path is forward. Revisiting history is unwise, both metaphorically and literally.

No. There’s much to learn from it. Go on, dwell on my crimes.

Learning and reliving are not the same. Raiden gives his rival’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze, still torn with conflict. Then he stands up and returns to his chair, studying his writing-pad. If you do not care to discuss this any further, I understand.

Shinnok snaps out of his self-loathing trance, facing Raiden as he lays across the couch. Go on. I’ll lend an ear… for now.

Kotal can be counted on to put forth Erron Black, Ermac, Ferra and Torr, and Reptile. It is likely he will seek support from others, too. The Edenian prince Rain, and Shao Kahn’s experiment Skarlet, might appear. The whereabouts of the shade that became Noob Saibot are now unknown, but if he is not with us, he may be against us.

That makes… eight?

Ferra and Torr fight as a pair. Seven.

Very well. Do we have seven to match them?

Kuai Liang’s apprentice Frost may be willing to fight. She has a violent temper, but she is strongly talented. I will call upon her to inquire, as soon as possible.

Couldn’t we simply find other competent mortals, rather than raking through the depths of your contact list? Or are there too few of them these days?

The risks of introducing new mortals to the rules of the tournament, and preparing them to face Outworld opponents, do not match the potential rewards. I would prefer not to.

That’s understandable. Finally, some wisdom.

I have that, sometimes.

Shinnok smiles, a rare instance. So that’s six unlucky individuals. Who will be our seventh?

I have an idea. Unfortunately, it will involve some cooperation between you and I.

‘Unfortunately’? Excuse me?

Shinnok, please forgive my hesitation to collaborate with the god who tried to destroy all the
realms within the recent past.

You may as well be speaking of yourself. You brought Earthrealm and Outworld to the brink of war--

I know. I know. Raiden bows his head. It is not the same what you attempted, but I am not free of my own sins.

Humility suits you, Raiden. But keep talking. What is this dreaded idea?

Before he became a revenant, then restored to life, Sub-Zero was converted into an artificial cyborg form.

Shinnok is unimpressed by this news. And?

A fine young Lin Kuei warrior suffered a similar fate. He was fearless, pure of spirit, and fought nobly in the last tournament.

I’m sure he was a nice fellow. I appreciate your sentimental nostalgia, Raiden, but how is this relevant?

His soul may still be contained within the remnants of the cyborg data.

So what?

The combination of Quan Chi’s magic and my own was sufficient to restore Sub-Zero to his own true form as Kuai Liang. I believe the same feat could be accomplished once more.

Surely you’re not proposing--

Between the dark and the light, miracles can grow. And you are becoming stronger with each passing day, Shinnok.

This can’t be possible--

Can you call souls forth from the dead?

Well, yes--

And my lightning powers can restore true life, not just a warped shadow of it.

--are you suggesting reviving this warrior to fight for Earthrealm?!

It would right a wrong that has ached at my heart for some time.

Oh, for the love of the Netherrealm-- Shinnok sputters exasperatedly, turning over on the couch, and lands flat on the floor with a groan. He glares at Raiden upside-down. You are lucky I don’t have the energy to duel some sense into you. That is one of the most foolish plans I have ever heard, and I am a master of that craft.

It is easily within reach, and would be beneficial to Earthrealm. He has proven his worth before.

Couldn’t you just pluck some promising athlete from one of the mortal sports teams? Really, why are you like this?

Not with three months to spare. Raiden kneels down beside Shinnok, rubbing his palms together
and conjuring sparks of harmless lightning. *Hold still.*

*If you plan to zap me into unconsciousness to silence my objections, think again!* Why, I-- Shinnok falls silent as a cool rush of healing power flows through him, relaxing as the pain eases. *Oh.*

Raiden looks down at him, brow raised slightly.

Shinnok looks back, defiant as ever.

Raiden purses his lips and waits.

Shinnok glares at him, finally relenting. *Thank you.*

*It is my pleasure.* Raiden rests in his chair once again, rubbing his temples.

The click of hasty footsteps is all the warning they get. Cassie pushes open the door, letting herself in. She looks just as exhausted as the others, running on three cups of strong coffee. “Hi, Raiden.”

Shinnok purposefully stares at the girl, eyes glowing green.

“And you.” She greets him flippantly. “Hi, Shinnok.”

“You know, you owe me your thanks--”

“I’ll send you a card in the mail.” She pulls up an armchair, joining the conversation uninvited. She always seems to pick the wrong time to stop by. “How are things?”

“That depends on who you ask.” Shinnok has made no effort to get up off the floor. He simply does not care. “Your dear friend has come up with the brilliant, insightful plan to resurrect a dead soul to fight for us.”

“Huh? Thought that was *your* thing, Shinny.”

“Miss Cage, if you call me that *one more time* --”

Raiden interrupts them with a timely explanation. He steeple his fingertips, sparks flashing along his sleeves. “Our options are limited. The former Earthrealm kombatant Cyrax, a warrior of the Lin Kuei, was cyberized some time ago. I know he is capable in a tournament, and he can be returned to us, if great care is taken. His soul remains in fragments of his artificial body.”

“This sounds *super* destined to go wrong.” Cassie rests her chin in her hands, drawing her knees up to her chest and settling back into the chair. Doesn’t seem like Raiden’s gone crazy again, at least, but this is a pretty dumb plan. “Seriously, you can’t find someone else?”

Shinnok continues griping, taking full advantage of the opportunity. “That’s what *I* said!”

“Didn’t ask.”

Raiden interjects. “Suffice it to say, we are better off using proven warriors. Without question, Kotal will be looking for technicalities and weaknesses to exploit. We cannot trust a novice. He is also already familiar with our four main contestants.”

“Which are…?”

Shinnok’s tone is perfectly dry. “I believe that honor belongs to yourself and your little friends.”
“Oh. Sweet.” Cassie brandishes her sunglasses from her pocket, slipping them on with a winning grin. “I get all the fun jobs!”

“I’m glad you agree.” Raiden makes a note on the clipboard, unfazed by her attitude. He can’t even tell whether she’s sincere. It probably does not matter. “By the way, how did the Special Forces meeting go?”

“How’d you know I was--” Cassie glances down, finally remembering the military access badge pinned to her pocket. That’d do it. “Oh. Um, not great. They’re not happy about Shinnok being on the loose.” She turns her attention to the chronically defiant god, who seems surprisingly content laying there on the floor. She realizes it’s probably the first carpet he’s seen for, oh, a couple thousand years. “I convinced them you’re under control for now. Not all of them bought the explanation. They want you in their custody.”

“We will address that problem after our visit to the Lin Kuei.” Raiden observes Cassie with parental concern. She’s jittery with nerves despite her cool attitude, pulling her jacket tight around her shoulders. “Cassandra, you must rest. The battle in Outworld has depleted your health.”

“I know! You sound like Mom. Ugh. The meeting took forever. I just wanted to come see you guys before I went home.” Cassie shifts around in her chair, fidgeting idly. Even for her, this is a lot to deal with. Life and death in the balance, and all that. “Dad’s livestream went viral. Tabloids are all over it. Somebody on TV thinks Kotal’s the reincarnation of an ancient Aztec god.”

Raiden gives a conciliatory shrug and a nod. “Technically, he is the ancient Aztec god.”

“ What?! When were you gonna drop that one on me?”

Shinnok pushes himself up to rest on one bony elbow. He has particularly strong feelings about this subject. “He is no real ‘god,’ simply a long-lived user of magic. He could die like any other. Mortal fools choosing to worship him is no determination of godhood. Besides, mythologically--”

Cassie waves him off. “Thanks, Professor Shinnok. Not now!”

He sputters in indignation, but goes quiet. At least that’s a better nickname than the other one.

“Point is, Earthrealm media’s all over this. Tanya now has a massive fan club, which I’m sure she’d be thrilled about. But the public doesn’t know about the tournament. Yet.”

“Let us keep it that way until our combatants are gathered.” Raiden rises from his chair. With a wince, he bends down to retrieve his hat and Shinnok’s armor pieces, then graciously helps the other god to his feet. Shinnok grips his hand harder than necessary, strong enough to crush a mortal’s fingers. Raiden politely ignores this. “For a few days, we will rest, and gather our strength and our willpower. Then…”

Cassie waits.

“Then?”

Raiden flinches, briefly lost in thought, and snaps back to reality at the sound of Cassie’s voice. “Then… our plans resume.”

Exiting dramatically, he vanishes in a lightning flash, dragging Shinnok along with him.

Cassie tries to think this all over. Too much to deal with.
She curls up in the godly armchair and, without further ado, takes a nap.
Steam hisses underfoot, snow melting with every step as Shinnok trudges up the steep mountain path. Now and then he scuffs the toe of his boot against a stubborn patch of ice, a small show of defiance for the circumstances. He finds cool weather refreshing, but the dwelling of this clan of ice ninjas is a bit too chilly for his taste. Nevertheless, he’s been brought along on this journey to meet with the Lin Kuei and their twice-revived grandmaster. For some reason.

*Sub-Zero’s not going to be happy to see me, you know.*

Raiden follows along behind him with measured steps, unbothered by the cold. *He will have to accept the facts of our situation.*

*He was a revenant under Quan Chi’s control, which was blamed on ME.* Shinnok pulls his coat tighter around his slim body, grouchy as ever. Cassie found this thing for him, claiming it was the only thing in his size. It’s got a fluffy collar and it’s pastel green. He absolutely hates it.

He didn’t even have time to object before Raiden dragged him through the portal, so here they are, climbing up an icy slope on their way to visit somebody who’ll probably kick Shinnok right back off the mountain when he sees him. He’s not looking forward to that, either.

The coat is really just the final blow to his dignity. Earlier, he tried to take it off, and found himself unpleasantly freezing, so he is simply stuck. Admittedly, his current armor outfit does not make a statement of anything tactful, for example, ‘We would like your cooperation as honorable allies.’ If Shinnok is to be perfectly honest, it’s more along the lines of ‘I want you to bow to me and also admire me while you’re at it.’ Which, although true, is definitely not the message that the Lin Kuei want to hear.

He summons a blast of heat, melting a five-foot circle of snow around him, and smirks in satisfaction. It’s petty revenge, but it will suffice for now.

Raiden passes him on the path, leading the way. He’s exchanged his rain hat for a fur-lined hood and tailored woolen coat, a very flattering style. Golden embroidery runs the length of the blue sleeves, the coat’s style closely resembling his usual tunic. Shinnok admires the outfit briefly, with a trace of scorn.

*At least one of us is dressed respectably.*

The last thing that Kuai Liang will worry about is your coat, Shinnok. It makes no difference. Raiden realizes full well that the coat-related griping is probably just a proxy for Shinnok’s larger worries about the fate of himself and the realms, whether or not he’s aware of that. But he isn’t about to say so and invoke a tirade about how he should be minding his own business and not prying around in Shinnok’s thoughts. He’s not even doing so; he just finds Shinnok particularly easy to interpret. They have known each other long enough to predict each other’s every move. In past times, that was a curse. Now, it might, somehow, be helpful.

Without warning, a snowball hits Shinnok’s shoulder, knocking him off balance. He scrambles to right himself, hissing in indignation, and summons a magic projectile, hurling it back at the source of the snowball.

An avalanche hits him in the face.

Raiden catches him by the arm before he goes flying down the mountain steps, pulling Shinnok back to him and setting him on his feet. “Frost, your hospitality leaves something to be desired.”
A young woman lands in front of them, the ground turning to ice beneath her feet. Her pale blue hair is spiked up to resemble ice shards, padded armor encasing her lean body. “Want to explain why you’re here?”

Shinnok brushes the snow off his face and growls at her, doing his best to look imposing while dressed in a fluffy pastel coat. His headdress does not really complement the look. “One does not question an Elder God, you frigid heathen!”

“Remember the value of subtlety, Shinnok.” Raiden turns to him, his calm temperament restored but only barely. “We need their cooperation.”

“She hit me in the f--”

“I am aware.” Raiden leaves the other god to fume in a puddle of melting snow and a hiss of steam. He greets Frost with a slight respectful bow, pulling back his cloth hood to reveal loose silver hair. This is already off to a bad start, but he’ll make the most of it, if he can. “We are here on important business. We need to speak with the Grandmaster… and you.”

“What do you possibly want from me?” Defiant as ever, Frost taps her foot, arms folded across her chest in a guarded pose. Just to be on the safe side, she summons ice spikes around her chest and shoulders, coating her in a pointy armored layer. Nothing here is a good sign. Raiden doesn’t come here except on serious business, and the god who’s with him bears a striking resemblance to Shinnok, but that’s clearly impossible. Maybe he has a less evil cousin.

Raiden is only too glad to answer. The more swiftly they can get this over with, the better. “The new emperor of Outworld recently declared a Mortal Kombat tournament. We would like to nominate you as a kombatant.”

“Me!!” Frost wrinkles her brow, contemplating this. “Are you sure you haven’t mistaken me for Sub-Zero? We do dress similarly, even if I’m a little shorter.”

Shinnok looks down his nose at her. “Personally, I think Raiden’s scraping the bottom of the barrel if the best choice he can think of is some little ice witch who throws snowballs.”

Frost materializes another handful of snow and flings it right at him. Shinnok holds up a hand and vaporizes it with a satisfying zap, ice melting into hissing steam.

The two glare at each other for several tense seconds before Raiden clears his throat.

“Shall we negotiate?”

“I’ll do it. I love a good fight.” She’s only too quick to agree. Standing on the balls of her feet, she shifts her weight back and forth, ready for action just in case Raiden’s accomplice launches another hit. “Who am I going to be up against?”

“I am grateful for your cooperation.” Raiden breathes a sigh of relief. One down, one to go. This is never easy, especially with an ungrateful ex-elder god as his traveling companion, but he’s grown used to the recruitment process after many centuries of persuading difficult personalities. “You will be training against six others within the next three months.”

“Great. Who?”

“Cass--”

“No!”
“You know her?”

“We’ve met.” Frost adjusts the collar of her jacket, scowling. “Not a fan.”

“It matters not.” Shinnok sniffs, rubbing his palms together to conjure glowing magenta sparks. “You will fight, and you will triumph. That moronic usurper Kotal Kahn will see justice done against him and his pathetic, puny--”

“Got a grudge, old man?”

Shinnok seethes. “He tried to take me captive as a hostage! Why, he--"

Raiden gracefully slips an arm around the crook of Shinnok’s elbow and practically drags him towards the temple entrance. “Frost, there was some difficulty in diplomatic negotiations.”

“Yeah, I saw that news back then, too.” Frost leads the way, walking atop the snow with barely a trace. Raiden’s steps sink in with a satisfying crunch, and Shinnok continues melting the ice underfoot, leaving a watery path. “Raiden, I’d know you anywhere, but who’s your pal? I’m hoping it isn’t who I think it is.”

For lack of better options, Raiden gives a mystified shrug.

Frost stops, hands on her hips. “Answers, please.”

“He is…” Raiden clears his throat, and tries again. “A de-corrupted form of the individual known as Shinnok, who is now at least somewhat free of the influence that led him to--”

“Sometimes I hate being right. I assumed you’d fixed him somehow or else he wouldn’t be here, but I had to ask.” Frost resumes trotting along the path, hands shoved into her pockets. “What, did you think you’d shock me? Kuai Liang was turned from human to cyborg to revenant back to human again, and he’s as alive and well as if it’d never happened. We had tea this morning. I’ve learned to believe the unbelievable. So, if you’ve decided to bring the failed Napoleon in a demon hat along on your recruitments, I won’t tell you not to.”

Helplessly, Raiden shrugs again. She’s not wrong.

Frost bolts up the steps with a blast of ice and flings the door open, loudly announcing their arrival. “Two gods here to see you, Grandmaster.”

Soon, a handsome burly man in a loose blue leather vest arrives in the doorway, framed by a silhouette of freezing fog. A scar traces down one side of his face, his hair and beard deep black and neatly trimmed. His presence is formidable.

Shinnok studies him closely, intrigued. It occurs to him, as an afterthought, that this is probably Sub-Zero.

He calls out to greet them. “Lord Raiden! And--”

His voice trails off in visible dismay.

“You brought the devil-god onto hallowed Lin Kuei ground?”

Shinnok brushes bits of ice off his fluffy collar, not even bothering to assert his identity. He’ll let Raiden handle this one.

Raiden calls up the step in response, an apologetic note in his voice. “Shinnok was subject to the
same corruption that also led me to attack another realm. After purification, we are both now on better terms with the world.”

Frost sits on the banister of the stairs, balancing carefully. “Poetic. I like it.”

Sub-Zero catches both gods in a scathing gaze until they look away in shame.

Finally, understanding the necessity of the situation, he approaches, forging a path of ice to slide down the steps and arrive with a chilly flair. Hands clasped behind his back, he returns Raiden’s respectful bow. “For now, Raiden, I trust your judgment, though some say I no longer should. See that he does not do any harm while he is here.” He gestures in Shinnok’s direction, not even acknowledging the god by name. “Why have you come?”

“There are two reasons. The first, we have already resolved.”

Frost hops down from the banister, landing squarely on a patch of ice with perfect balance. “Grandmaster, I’ve been selected to represent Earthrealm in the upcoming tournament.”

Sub-Zero pauses, looking between her proud smirk and Raiden’s solemn gaze. The tournament is news to him entirely. He’s already seen and experienced the strangest things that life has to offer, so on some level, he’s not surprised by this development. Still, the last tournament was the cause of too much loss and misery. “Is there an explanation for this?”

Raiden claps a hand over Shinnok’s mouth before he can interrupt. “A disagreement with Emperor Kotal Kahn about the terms of our realms’ neutrality has led to--”

Shinnok pushes Raiden away. “That incompetent brute of an Outworld emperor decided that as punishment for Raiden’s earlier aggression, he would kidnap me as some sort of repayment, as a-- a prize. When… assorted individuals… retrieved me, after I destroyed our enemies, Kotal did not take the loss well. Like a spiteful child, he declared the realms’ agreement invalid, and demanded a tournament in a few months to resolve this mess.”

Raiden recovers as gracefully as he can. “It was his right to do so, even if we disagree with the decision. Nonetheless, this presents a great deal of difficulty for us. We need to assemble a team of known and capable fighters who are ready to handle this challenge. I do not wish for anyone who fought in the last tournament to return to such an ordeal, much less anyone who experienced Quan Chi’s curse. So I do not seek your help for that purpose.”

Sub-Zero nods, turning over a sphere of perfect ice in his fingertips. “Go on.”

“Thus I have recruited Frost to join Earthrealm’s team. Now, I need to find several more individuals who have the strength of character, the skill, and the sheer bravery to face down Outworld’s most formidable enemies.”

Sub-Zero and Frost exchange sympathetic glances.

“Good luck.”

“It is not that simple.” Raiden meets Sub-Zero’s thoughtful gaze, dreading the next conversation. “I have another matter to discuss with you.”

The grandmaster studies him, deep concern written in the lines of his craggy face. “Ask, and I will answer.”

“Do you remember Cyrax?”
Sub-Zero crushes the ice ball between his fingers with a nervous twitch.

“Come inside. We cannot discuss this publicly.” Spurred into action, he finally leads them indoors, taking the steps two at a time. Raiden and Shinnok follow quietly, respecting his need for privacy. With a powerful tug at the handle, he swings the temple’s mighty door shut behind him. “Frost, make yourself scarce. Pack your things.”

“Fine, Grandmaster.” Frost leaves in a huff, glaring at Shinnok one last time before she’s gone in a breezy puff of snow.

- - -

Deep in the Lin Kuei’s high-security storage chamber, Kuai Liang and Raiden sit across from each other in tense silence. Harsh fluorescent light casts their faces into deep shadow. Shinnok has joined Raiden in a nearby chair, keeping quiet for now. For once, he’s probably better off not saying anything. None of this was his idea.

“I would do anything in my power to restore the lives of those lost in Kombat… especially those forced to live warped half-lives at the hands of others who sought to control them.” Raiden rests his chin in his hands, a flash of despair crossing his time-worn face. He is to blame for so many of these horrible losses. “I see an opportunity to do so. You yourself were transformed from cyborg to revenant by Quan Chi’s dark magic, extracting your soul and giving it human form once again. And my magic restored you from the revenant corruption, bringing you back to the life that you should never have been forced to surrender.”

Kuai Liang nods. Raiden finds it better to address him by name, rather than title, when discussing a matter so emotionally fraught. The god and the grandmaster lock eyes. Raiden continues speaking, explaining the idea as delicately as he can.

“Quan Chi lost his life at the hands of Hanzo Hasashi, perhaps rightfully so. Nevertheless, his death removed the only known source of magic powerful enough to potentially combine with my own, and, in doing so, reverse corruption or even restore a soul entirely.”

Shinnok pays attention closely, eyes narrowed as he watches Kuai Liang’s expression shift from doubt to faint hope. The atmosphere is suffocatingly tense in the vast room.

Raiden sits up, straightening his back, and rests his hands on his knees, steadying himself. “Shinnok is far more powerful than any ascended Netherrealm demon could ever hope to be. I believe that he is fully capable of restoring the form of an individual’s soul… and rather than corrupting that person into servitude, I would then use my own powers to heal them and restore them to the light of humanity and freedom.”

“And you wish to do so with the remnants of Cyrax.”

“Yes. That is part of the problem. As far as I understand, his soul… has been digitized.” Raiden wrinkles his nose. He does not fully understand the technology behind cyberization, just that it is a vile process. “If we hope to restore him, this must be reversed. What remains of him, and where is it kept?”

“We still have the chip containing his mind.”

Raiden looks both perplexed and horrified.

Kuai Liang pauses, feeling increasingly unsure about this idea. Theoretically, it should be possible -- he experienced something similar -- but at what cost? It sounds like madness.
“We have backups of the data, as well.”

“You will need to destroy those. Multiple copies of a soul cannot exist.”

“Can he--” and here Kuai Liang points at Shinnok accusingly, who sits quietly and ominously beside Raiden-- “be trusted?”

Shinnok leans forward, looking him right in the eye. “Only a fool would trust me… which explains a great many things about Raiden’s plan, does it not?”

Kuai Liang finds him somewhat unimpressive. All that chaos and bloodshed to stop a renegade former Elder God, and this is him? Somehow, he was expecting a more demonic presence.

Shinnok senses his disrespect, and sheds the pastel coat.

The grandmaster is unflinching. “Only a fool would admit he is untrustworthy.”

“I would be wrong to deny it. I am, according to many, the source of tremendous evil, but I refuse to lie in the face of honest fact.”

“So are you being honest about being dishonest?”

Raiden feels suddenly vindicated. You see what I have to put up with?

Shinnok turns abruptly to shoot him a glare. I heard that!

Raiden glances at the ceiling, saying nothing.

Kuai Liang gives up. He sits back and gathers his thoughts wordlessly, resting against the hard metal chair. Far above, the spotlight relentlessly glares down on the small group, heightening the tension.

Finally, he stands up and paces the length of the room, collecting himself. He kneels and retrieves a wrapped parcel from a locked safe before delivering a solemn answer.

“I will give you the head of Cyrax’s cyborg form, which contains the chip. We will eliminate the rest of the copies.”

Raiden gazes at him in sudden wonder. He was fully expecting to have his plan soundly rejected, denied the opportunity to amend one of his many wrongs. Instead… there is hope.

“In exchange, I reserve the right to withdraw Frost from the tournament and exact a fitting vengeance if your plan should end in failure. Cyrax’s revival as a revenant would be worse than his death.”

“Oh, for the love of the Netherrealm. What do you think would go wrong, exactly?” Shinnok stands up, hands on his hips. In this light, he looks especially gaunt and aged. The shadows are stark beneath his cheekbones and jaw and the hollows of his ribs. “If I intended to turn against Raiden, I certainly would have done so already. Patience has never been my virtue.”

“A fair point, Shinnok, but you are not my concern. Throughout the last tournament, I saw Raiden try to repair the timeline, again and again. Events rapidly spiraled out of control, including my own forced transformation into a cyborg. Sometimes, efforts to fix a problem may leave even greater disasters in their wake.”

Raiden sorrowfully pulls his hood over his head, his glowing blue eyes deep with sadness. “Do you
think me unaware of this? For every good deed, a hundred things go wrong. What should I do? Give up entirely?"

Kuai Liang has no answer for that.

“Thank you, Grandmaster, and I bid you farewell.” Raiden reaches out and clasps the man’s cold hands gently, a gesture of respect. In exchange, Kuai Liang gives him the parcel, handling it with the utmost care. Raiden tucks it under his arm with a silent promise not to fail.

Shinnok does not bother with sentimental goodbyes, just gives Sub-Zero a brusque nod before he’s snatched away with a flash of lightning that steals him and Raiden from the room.

---

Cassie can’t believe it.

Here she is again, back at the damn Sky Temple, hanging out in one of the sacred chambers at the request of Raiden. She might as well just move in here and bring her toothbrush. Worse yet, he’s started notifying her by mobile phone in all capital letters. It’s like having her grandfather learning to text.

She rests her forehead in her hands and groans. “Any day now.”

Seconds later, the gods materialize in front of her in a glorious flash of divine power.

“Good timing.” Cassie looks up at the unlikely duo. They seem none the worse for wear. Shinnok has lost the pastel green coat. She figures he threw it off the mountain somewhere. Raiden is holding some sort of unidentified package, which he sets on a low table with great caution and reverence. “Whatcha got there?”

By way of response, Raiden opens the parcel, pulling out the golden metal face-plate of a cyborg.

Cassie’s eyebrows shoot up.

“You got a thing for heads in bags lately?”

Shinnok swoops over to judge her imperiously from several feet up in the air. “That, Miss Cage, is in poor taste.”

Raiden holds up the robotic head mournfully.

Cassie can’t help it. “Alas, poor Yorick.”

Shinnok smirks. “You are familiar with Shakespeare?”

“When’d you have time to catch up with medieval plays?”

“Actually, Shakespeare belongs to the Elizabethan era.” He floats to the ground, looking very pleased with himself. “I absorbed a library’s worth of classical literature. Have you forgotten?”

“No, but I didn’t need the reminder. Raiden, I’m going to guess that’s all that’s left of Cyrax?”

“It is indeed. We will commence as soon as you feel you are able, Shinnok.”

“I’d prefer some time to prepare. I’m no longer entirely confident in my abilities, and to be perfectly honest, I do not care to return to the Netherrealm.”
“We will not set foot inside Hell. Doing so would be a death sentence for both of us, since I stole you from their custody without the permission of the rulers. Instead, we will perform the ritual on the Bridge Between Worlds.”

“But that’s immensely dangerous. The amount of magic needed to even form the Bridge at all--” Shinnok instinctively reaches to where he once kept his amulet, wincing as he remembers the loss once more. A deserved and understandable decision, most would say, but it still stings. “All this for one Earthrealm warrior? How well did he do in this tournament, anyway?”

Raiden clears his throat. “Actually, he was invited, along with the rest of the Lin Kuei, to participate… by Shang Tsung, in the hopes that they would eliminate Earthrealm’s warriors from the tournament.”

Cassie gapes at him, suddenly full of dread. “He didn’t even fight for us?!”

“His conscience led him to oppose Shang Tsung’s motives as well as the cyber initiative. I am confident he will support us against Outworld. Besides, by reviving him, we are giving him a second chance… after his first was stolen from him.”

“And, let’s not forget, he’ll also owe you a debt of gratitude -- his life. How could he say no?” Shinnok purses his lips, frowning sternly upon the other god. “That’s manipulative, Raiden. I would know.”

“It is not manipulative! I am trying to do the right thing! For once, after a thousand failures, dozens of lives ruined at my hand, I may be able to reverse… ugh.” Raiden trails off, lapsing into silence. A bolt of lightning courses through him, his despair and frustration taking physical form. He sinks to his knees, face pressed into his hands.

Cassie and Shinnok freeze in awkward silence for a few moments. Then Cassie shuffles towards Raiden, bending down to hug him gently. “It’s going to work. I trust you.”

Raiden says nothing.

“I’m-- I’m gonna go.” Cassie stands up. She doesn’t know how to deal with a sad Raiden. Not this sad, at least. If he’s crying, she probably will too. She jabs a finger into Shinnok’s side, catching him in an accusatory glare. “You take good care of him or you’re gonna get your ass booted out of the Sky Temple.”

“I have no doubt.” Shinnok watches Cassie go, bolting out of the room and slamming the door behind her.

Then he, too, kneels beside Raiden, tentatively laying a bony hand on the soft cloth of the god’s sleeve. I...

He clears his throat, swallowing hard.

*I know the intention of your plan isn’t manipulation.*

*It may as well be.* Raiden wipes his face with the back of his hand, poorly hiding his grief. *There are so many foolish decisions in this entire idea. All this to make myself feel better about a death long past.*

*He really didn’t fight for Earthrealm?*

*No. He was not one of mine. I regret the events that led to his demise, nonetheless. It was all*
horribly unjust.

Shinnok rests against Raiden, just listening to the sound of his unsteady breathing. Weakly, he pats his back. How does one comfort an archenemy? He feels that any attempt would be too hollow, too pointless. It would sound insincere.

Still he tries. I am… sorry.

Raiden leans against him, too. He has nothing to say in return. He just can’t muster the words.

Eventually he gathers himself, and speaks.

I am also sorry.

Shinnok looks away, studying the floor.

Raiden blurts out his thoughts before he can help it, releasing a well of pent-up grief. You have known me longer than any other… not even Fujin, for he is a younger god. For us, time may as well be irrelevant. All the mortals I have ever known have come and gone in the briefest of instants. Fleeting moments, in comparison to our infinite lifetimes.

He meets Shinnok’s eyes, brimming with sorrow.

And yet… I never get over them.

Shinnok’s grip on his shoulder tightens faintly. I never had anyone to get over. Not in my entire lifetime.

Consider yourself blessed for that. The burden of loss builds up until it is unbearable.

Hardly a blessing. The pain of solitude is so much worse than loss.

Raiden shakes his head. How would you know to compare? If what you say is true, you have never had loss.

I have felt the loss of myself, over and over. Of hope.

But you have not lost another person.

No. Shinnok finds himself grasping Raiden’s wrist with his other hand. And you have never felt the solitude that I have.

No… I haven’t. But with each mortal death, I grow closer to such despair. Their lives slip through my fingers like grains of sand. I cannot save them.

Shinnok nods mutely.

Raiden eventually gazes back at him, the pain in his face almost unbearable to witness. There is no relief from it.

I longed for death during my millennia in hell. I clung to anyone and anything that would listen to the whisperings of my tormented mind. I wanted to destroy everything else in this world, to make them feel a fraction of the despair that I had felt.

Raiden takes a deep shuddering breath, trying to collect himself, and failing. Why are you telling me this as if I was not the one who did it to you?
I know you were. For my lifetime, I longed for the life that you had. Revered, respected, cherished by the mortals. Eventually, I settled for fear. And then nothing at all.

Shinnok stops short, choosing his words carefully.

If the death of one warrior, who you barely knew, caused you enough grief to drive you to this mad plan years later... I cannot imagine what you have gone through with the loss of each cherished mortal.

There are too many to count. I carry the memory of each with me.

How is such a burden even bearable?

It barely is. Maybe that is why the corruption claimed us both so easily. Raiden settles in, resting his head on Shinnok's shoulder. I am alone in my experiences... save for you.

What of Fujin and your precious Elder Gods?

He stands apart from the individual dealings of mortals, and guards Earthrealm on principle. He does not know or care for them the same way that I do. And my faith in the Elder Gods is... shaken beyond measure.

Raiden closes his eyes, finally content in the company of his long-hated archenemy.

You were the target of my loathing since we first fought... and yet, Shinnok, you are all I will ever have.

Shinnok grips his sleeve nervously. Raiden... you should rest.

I know, but I cannot. The visions overtake me and it is unbearable.

Is there any solution for that?

Not that I know of. I don't want to use the jinsei. I have depleted it enough already.

You need it. Use it. It's yours.

It belongs to Earth.

So do you, Raiden. You should value that fact. For eons, I burned with envy. Shinnok stands up, helping an unsteady Raiden to his feet. No longer.

Raiden looks at him curiously. What is it like, to live an immortal life without such obligations?

Lonely beyond compare. Excruciating. I am glad that I am no longer resigned to it. Shinnok gathers his strength and lifts Raiden, heading off towards the jinsei chamber. You're worn down and unstable. Not physically, but emotionally. You are going to go and heal, whether you like it or not.

Raiden doesn't have the will to protest, just closes his eyes as dark magic transports him into the chamber and strong lean arms lift him into the restoring life force.
Surely this can’t be impossible.

Shinnok gazes at his own reflection in the mirror, arms extended and head turned to inspect the full design of his new armor. Preening, he turns this way and that, judging its impact. The effect is pleasing. He’s replaced his leather and cloth gauntlets with sturdier metal ones, elaborately carved and pointy at the end to effectively elbow any enemies away from him. He considered adding cloth sleeves for the upper arms, but it seemed unnecessary. The chestpiece of his outfit is more complex now, and slightly more modest, with a detailed gold overlay that matches the pattern of the front and back waist cloak. Naturally, the sides are still open, cinched with a minimal extra layer around the waist.

Raiden observes him, faintly amused. What can’t be impossible?

The task before us.

I see you are dressed for the occasion.

It’s about time I upgraded this outfit. In case things go wrong, I can withstand more damage in properly plated armor. Shinnok turns to face Raiden, hands resting on his hips, thumbs hooked into his belt.

What of you? Wouldn’t it be better for you to wear something other than that cloth suit of yours? The last thing we need is for you to be grievously wounded some way or another.

Perhaps. A smile flickers across Raiden’s face for an instant, but vanishes quickly. You don’t expect this to go well, I see.

Precaution is better than regret.

A strange bit of wisdom to come from you.

I would know. I specialize in regret.

As do I, perhaps even more so than you. Raiden adjusts the brim of his hat, inspecting himself in the mirror. You are right. I should be cautious. Wait here. With a flash of lightning, he disappears in a rush.

Shinnok continues admiring his own outfit.

Not long afterwards, Raiden flickers into view again. This time he’s dressed in an ornate metal chestpiece layered over a tight-fitting blue cloth shirt, his strong upper arms bare for once. Protective gauntlets hide his forearms and end in half-gloves, leaving his fingers free to conduct electricity. The lower half of his outfit is thoroughly armored, with shiny plating running up the front and back of his thighs. Instead of the typical pure white cloth, his pants are a muted shade of grey. His boots are fully covered in reinforced metal. Raiden’s steps falter briefly as he gets used to the new weight on his body, pacing back and forth. This may help.

Shinnok studies him closely, eyebrows raised. That’s new.

As you said, we must take every precaution. Raiden clenches a fist, lightning flowing through his fingers. This feels strange. I am used to my ordinary clothes.

Aren’t we all. Shinnok’s gaze rakes over Raiden’s armor once more, approvingly. He returns his
attention to his own new garb, turning his forearm over and closely inspecting his gauntlets. Are you ready?

Yes. Raiden adjusts the cowl, leather closely fitted against his skin. Miss Cage will return your amulet to you shortly. Without it, you will not have the power to equal my own.

Is THAT where--

Indeed. Raiden raises his voice, calling out to summon the girl. “Cassandra?”

She bursts through a door and enters the long hallway, then comes to a halt, backpack slung over her shoulder. Lifting her sunglasses, she inspects the pair of gods. Shinnok just looks like he’s upgraded whatever that outfit is supposed to be, but Raiden’s got a new aesthetic entirely. It’s decent, but it’s also jarringly different. “Wow. Okay then. Found your tourist clothes?”

“No. This is necessary protection for the perils we are about to face.” Raiden inspects the dull surface of his armor, then conjures a bit of magic and shifts its appearance, replacing the gray and blue metal with an enameled surface and delicately crafted gold pattern that resembles his original gauntlets and greaves. “That is better.”

Cassie takes her backpack off, digging through the front pocket. “Well, that’s not conspicuous.”

Just to be contrary, Shinnok disagrees. “I find it flattering. Your opinion was not requested.”

“Complain one more time, and I’m chucking your amulet out the window.” Cassie pulls it out and inspects it closely, just to be sure. The gold’s a bit dull, but none the worse for wear. As she approaches Shinnok, the emerald gem glows, metal heating up uncomfortably in her hand. She tosses it to him and winces, rubbing her palm. “You’re welcome.”

He catches the amulet with agile reflexes, admiring it for a long moment, then presses it against a bare patch of fabric on the front of his outfit. It stays there, drawn to him like a magnet, and glows, burning with comforting heat. “Thank you. I’m glad to have it-- What?”

Cassie’s got a pistol drawn, dropped to one knee and aiming right at him. Better safe than sorry. “Don’t try anything now that you have that back.”

He spreads his arms, almost pitying her. “Would I? Would I really?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” Cassie hesitates for another tense moment, then slips the pistol back in its holster, approaching the gods with quick steps. “All right. I assume Raiden would tell us if he predicted anything.”

Raiden seems lost in thought. “I no longer trust in my visions. They are glimpses of possibilities, not the established facts of the future. Nonetheless, there is no likelihood of Shinnok misusing the amulet... at least, no longer.”

“Was there before?”

Raiden nods quietly. “The chances of failure at the beginning were… numerous.”

“And you didn’t mention that to anyone?!”

“Why should I burden all of you with fragments of mere potential? I have found that most prophecies are self-fulfilling. If they are shared, others act upon those assumptions, and they will inevitably come to pass.”
“I guess that makes sense.” Cassie shrugs. More than she’d know. “Where’s your amulet?”

Raiden withdraws it from a pocket, pressing it against his chest. His own talisman glows blue, the silhouette of a dragon carved into its central gem. “Mine was a gift from the Elder Gods.”

“Hrm. I had to make mine by myself. The gods bestowed no such thoughtful presents upon me.” Shinnok delicately places a hand on it, his fingers glowing green. “It matters not. I have it once more, and my power is restored...”

“Partly restored.” Raiden is quick to remind him. “Remember our purpose. You will return the amulet to Cassandra after the ritual is complete, for the safety of both it and yourself.”

“And what if I don’t?”

Cassie draws a finger across her throat. “Ugh. Fine. I accept the terms of this ridiculous agreement.” Shinnok straightens his back, arms folded over his chest in a dramatic flourish. As ever, he has no choice. “Shall we get this over with, Raiden?”

Raiden bows his head. “We shall.”

And, with flares of green and blue magic, they both vanish, transported by the amulets’ power.

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The border between Earthrealm and the Netherrealm resembles a gaping cavern with twin cliffs. Far beneath, a river of boiling lava rushes between the shores. Nearer to Earthrealm, at the base of its towering cliff, the lava hardens to form a cracked black surface, soothed and calmed by the other world’s influence. At the banks of the Netherrealm, it crackles and bubbles with hateful hisses of steam, the same hue of radiant orange as the corruption’s glow.

Shinnok and Raiden land at the top of the Earthrealm edge. The cliffs’s stone is gritty and solid beneath their feet, but the steep drop beyond the edge makes Shinnok’s stomach churn with dread and nerves. As a god, he has no fear of heights, but the boiling lava would be agonizing, even to an immortal. Perhaps even more so, because he would burn forever, conscious while roasted to a crisp.

He shudders, and steps back, distancing himself from that ominous edge. *I’m glad you didn’t throw me in there to rid the world of me.*

Raiden eyes him warily beneath the brim of his hat. *Even as my darkest self, I could not stoop to such barbarity.*

*No, instead you chose to--*

*Stop.* Raiden clamps a hand on his arm, accidentally zapping him with static, and he flinches. *Listen closely, Shinnok.*

*I’m listening.* He narrows his eyes, gazing at the rough spiky cliff across the abyss. *It’s strange to realize... for an eternity, I was the most powerful being in the Netherrealm. Now I have vowed never to return, not for anything in all the worlds.*

*Anything? Truly?*
There is nothing left here for me except the memory of my chains. Shinnok turns to face his fellow god, his amulet and his eyes blazing vivid green. What next?

We must form the bridge, combining our powers from between the worlds.

What?

Ahem. It is called the Bridge Between Worlds.

I understand that the title is literal, but I was under the impression we would stand at one edge -- our own -- and conjure the bridge to reach the other. Otherwise, what’s the point?

One of us at each edge, Shinnok. You or I will have to step foot in the Netherrealm, if only for an instant.

Shinnok swallows hard, seized by dread. We are both vulnerable to corruption. I would strongly prefer not to.

Our powers can only combine equally if they meet in the middle, entirely balanced. There is an alternate method, but it is far more dangerous.

Tell me.

If we both ascend to the midpoint between the cliffs, and cast the incantation from there, our strength will be equivalent. But if either of us falters, even for an instant, we will fall.

Shinnok’s gaze travels across the gaping cavern, lingering on the bubbling pit of lava far below. He recoils, stumbling backward, and drags Raiden with him. No. No.

Raiden looks into his eyes, his voice laced with a deathly serious tone. Are you strong enough?

I barely trust in my own power. I would not risk both our lives through my own weakness.

This is the only option. This, or setting foot in the Netherrealm...

Neither god needs to speak the possible consequences aloud. They both know.

Shinnok grabs Raiden and pulls him closer, sharp nails digging into his bare arm. I will not let you endanger yourself, you absolute and utter fool. If one of us must go, it will be me. I am likelier to withstand its influence.

Shinnok, you have come so far. You have freed yourself from so much. I cannot let you return to what you once were. Besides, I know that if I am corrupted, I can cure it.

You have suffered enough! How dare you risk subjecting yourself to that torment again! Shinnok fumes with righteous fury, floating off the ground a few inches. Never! I will conjure as much power as possible to keep you from that. We will summon the bridge from the midpoint between the cliffs. I have no choice but to trust in you and myself.

I… Raiden cannot argue. He goes silent, shoulders slumped. For the sake of Earthrealm, neither of us can take that risk. Yet if we fail--

Shinnok grabs the brim of Raiden’s hat, lifting it to look into his downcast eyes. I have a plan.

Raiden meets his determined gaze. I am listening.
We both can fly, yes? A rather simple power, really. We will ascend to the very top of the cavern and finish the ritual as swiftly as possible. If one of us falls, we can catch each other. If we both fall, the bridge should be complete by the time we reach it, rather than plunging into the lava. The impact would not be comfortable, but far from deadly.

Shinnok pauses, realizing something.

By the way, where is the cyborg head? Raiden, you had better not have forgotten it--

Raiden holds out a hand, and the yellow metal head materializes with a flash of lightning, landing in his palm. I placed it in a storage dimension. It vanishes again as he closes his hand. We will start the revival as soon as the bridge is complete. Be on your guard.

All right. Here goes nothing. Shinnok ascends at once, lifting himself up in a shower of magenta sparks. He aims one fist into the air, and shoots towards the top of the cavern at a rapid pace, slowing just before he strikes the rocky ceiling. Luckily, he escapes being impaled on a sharp sliver of cavern stone. Be careful, Raiden.

Raiden floats beside him in the thin air, sustained by the strength of his godly aura. Lightning sparks dance across the surface of his elegant armor, casting Shinnok’s face into blue light. Shinnok glows, too, green and magenta light flickering across Raiden. They are perfectly silent.

The gods face each other, refusing to look down.

Raiden reaches out towards him. Grasp my hands and link fingers.

Must I?

Just do it.

Grudgingly, Shinnok does. Raiden has cold hands. He’s annoyed. So what now?

I will utter the words of the ritual. Just contribute your power, as much as you can manage. Raiden grips his hands tight with crushing strength. Shinnok does the same, mentally preparing himself for this doomed task. On the count of three.

They count in unison. Shinnok’s nerves are frayed with dread.

Now!

A brilliant shock of lightning surges out from Raiden, concentrated through his strong body and flowing out from his talisman of power. Soon, a beam of energy leaps through the air to strike Shinnok’s own amulet. With a growl of frustration, he retaliates and conjures his own magical essence, as much tremendous dark sorcery as he can force himself to summon. Green flickering energy pours from him, reaching across and striking Raiden’s amulet.

A blast of unbearably bright light explodes between them, sending the gods flying backwards from the aftershock. Their painful grip on one another is all that keeps them from losing the spell and falling apart to face their doom.

As they both watch in fascinated terror, Raiden mouths the sacred words. The bolt of divine light surges downwards like a falling star, striking the precise midpoint between the borders of Earth and Hell.

The bridge forms from glowing fragments, lines and curves assembling to form a mighty structure
made of intricately carved wood and timeless metal. Towards the Netherrealm, the path grows ominous, with warped points and burnt planks. Towards Earthrealm, it is simpler, and far more welcoming, made with a craftsman’s touch.

Raiden grits his teeth and shuts his eyes, delivering the final line of the incantation. Then, he heaves a deep breath. *May the guardians of the realms protect us. We are nearly done*--

Unexpectedly, the beam of divine light surges and shocks them once again-- and, knocked back by the blast, the gods lose touch, fingers drifting apart as the powerful force pushes them away.

Raiden can’t even scream. There is nothing in his mind but dread. Lightning faintly crackles along his arms as he tries and fails and fails again to lift himself back into flight. The ceiling fades, cavern walls welcoming him as he plunges down.

And, using his last final push of magical force, Shinnok collides with him sideways, knocking Raiden off-course and sending him straight towards the hard pathway.

They land with a painful crunch. Raiden breaks the force of Shinnok’s fall, but it does nothing to lessen the agony of the impact. Struck mute by torment, they lay there and let themselves heal, sprawled out on the bridge between worlds.

Minutes later, Shinnok has recovered enough to rise to his feet, unsteadily balancing on the path. He clutches his amulet, drawing power and health from it, and a rush of blood courses through his battered body, bones and muscles mending. *Well done, Raiden.*

Raiden looks up at him weakly, gripping his damaged hat. Repairing the brim with a bit of magic, he replaces it on his head. *Was that sarcastic?*

*No. You were successful.* Shinnok bends down to help him to his feet. *This was quite a feat.*

Raiden leans against the railing shakily, coughing up blood. *One moment.* He presses his hand against his amulet, just as Shinnok had done, and summons a wave of healing force that jolts him like a refreshing shock. He stands up straight again, noticeably improved. *That is better. I will be all right.*

*I’m so glad to hear it.*

*Are you hurt?*

*It’s just a scratch.* Shinnok carefully repairs one of his gauntlets, damaged a bit from the fall. *This was preferable to re-entering that accursed realm.*

*Yes. And we are close enough to perform the revival ritual.* Raiden conjures the cyborg skull from his pocket dimension, cradling it carefully. *Have you recovered sufficiently?*

*I think so. Permit me a moment to gather my wits, as well.* Shinnok straightens one of his shoulder guards, knocked slightly askew, and allows himself a moment of pride, tossing his head proudly. It was his idea to perform the ritual this way, after all. And he did prevent Raiden from falling into the lava. Perish the thought that he might be glad to have saved his enemy… but that is all they seem to be doing, rescuing each other from certain doom.

*I’m fine. What next?*

*I will stand on the side of Earthrealm, you on the Netherrealm. First, you must draw his soul from the metal chip that holds his mind, and use your sinister magic to give him a new physical form.*
I don’t appreciate the ‘sinister magic’ comment. For once in my lifetime, I am offering my assistance to do something that is not entirely evil.

Necromancy has historically not been used for benevolent purposes. Hear me out. Raiden brushes past Shinnok and stands squarely to face him, moving nearer to the safe cliff of Earth. Once that has been done, I will cast my healing magic upon on him. I expect that his temporary reanimated form will look like a revenant.

Probably.

Alone, I cannot restore revenants. But you and I, caught up in this unlikely paradox of cooperation, could manage it.

That is why we are here, yes? Let’s find out. Shinnok positions himself opposite Raiden, reaching out to lay a hand on the robotic head as Raiden offers it with an outstretched hand. He grips his amulet tightly, too, feeling its power waxing and waning in time with his own pulse. It feels good to have it back, but it’s bittersweet. Once, it was his prison.

He watches Raiden closely, who touches his own amulet with great care, clasping its gilded edge. Shinnok knows the story of Raiden’s shattered amulet, too, and the visions of the future that misled him so thoroughly. So they both have tragic memories from their own items of power. Such is the nature of immortality.

Raiden meets the other god’s gaze, his sweet face full of wary hope. Let’s begin.

Shinnok offers a little smirk. Shall we?

You are first.

Aren’t I always? Shinnok grips the cyborg’s skull tighter, muttering an incantation under his breath. The words rise to the tip of his tongue, summoned from the buried depths of his memory. Never before had he a chance to truly use his magic in this way. It was Quan Chi who made the revenants, justifying his deeds in Shinnok’s name. But Shinnok was the source of much of that knowledge… and this comes easily to him, intoxicating power surging in his soul.

The god’s dark magic is radiant, veins glowing green as power courses beneath the skin of his bare sides and his strong arms and his severe, angular face. Raiden’s eyes widen, watching him with caution, but Shinnok is unbelievably focused, surrounded by a gauzy aura of sparkling purple flame. Slowly, that burning green and magenta glow sears through the cyborg’s head, engulfing it entirely… and when it touches Raiden’s fingertips, the skull explodes. Tiny chunks of metal scatter in every direction, thrown through the windless air til nothing remains.

Shinnok keeps his hand extended, fingers trembling as he focuses his ominous magic. Slowly, frighteningly, a skeleton begins to form from crumbling bits of bone, resembling the form of a human. Then, flesh begins to grow, nerves and veins and organs conjured into existence by the sheer power of a willful god. Muscles and skin build from thin air, and wrap around the bones and innards, layering carefully as the body comes to life.

And then the once-dead warrior is standing before them, lifeless and haggard, pulled back from the brink of the afterlife. His dark skin is grey, cheeks sunken, ragged hair falling over the back of his gaunt neck. The yellow garment of his ninja garb is tattered and worn, soaked with long-dried blood.

Shinnok blinks slowly, observing his creation, and gives Raiden a silent nod.
Raiden grips the revenant’s fragile hand. His eyes snap open, glowing a sickly yellow.

With a wince of pain, Raiden uses the last of his strength and conjures all the healing magic available to him. Hoping beyond hope, he infuses the man’s body with an overwhelming surge of purifying power.

The transformation washes over him like a ray of light. The gaunt angles of his body fill out with healthy muscle and fat, his skin warming to a rich sun-tanned brown. His hair turns thick and neatly bound in a ponytail of dreadlocks, the deathly glow fading to reveal pleasant dark eyes. He stands tall, his clothes restored with not a stitch out of place.

Shinnok gasps in awe.

Raiden lowers his head, offering a respectful bow. “Cyrax.”

Cyrax opens his eyes, breathes, and feels the comforting rhythm of his pulse for the first time in decades.

He blinks in confusion, holding out his hands and staring at his own body in shock. His consciousness had floated aimlessly among remnants of data until he gave up entirely, surrendering any last grasp at life. In truth, he considered himself dead for good when the Lin Kuei transformed him into a cyborg against his will.

Now…

He stares at Raiden bemusedly. He can’t possibly even start to understand how this has happened, or what has even happened at all. Was it all a bad dream? A hallucination? A punishment from Shang Tsung for his defiance? Was he ever a cyborg at all, or was it a delusion, a test of his loyalty to the Lin Kuei? The man before him resembles Raiden, the appointed protector of Earthrealm from the last tournament. He accepts this at face value, for lack of better options, while wrestling with the problem of his own mortality.

Even his clothes are the same. What happened? How much time has passed? He feels around at his waist, checking for his weapons, and finds his explosives strapped there. He reaches up, adjusting the headband wrapped around his forehead. Everything is just like it was at the moment of his mechanical death.

“I don’t know what to say.”

Raiden observes him in quiet respect. “I would not expect you to.”

So does Shinnok, who is reeling from the incident, both impressed and horrified by his own abilities. He never tried to put together an entire body before… but, while he is more than capable of that, he still cannot infuse the spark of life.

Only Raiden has that gift.

The wordless reverie is interrupted by a scream of rage from the Netherrealm cliff.

All three figures whirl to face the noise, caught in sudden panic.

A revenant emperor and empress stand before them, hands linked, eyes flaring with red rage. Both are dressed in dark threatening armor, full of burning corruption and hate in their hearts.

Raiden’s nerves falter entirely. He swallows hard and whispers, stepping away with shaky
footsteps. “Liu Kang and Kitana...”

“YOU!” With an inhuman shriek and the metallic swish of fans, Kitana jumps onto the bridge, planks trembling from the impact of her feet. She brandishes her weapons and bolts towards them, soaring through the air as she leaps across the railings from one side to the other. “You robbed us! Restore the prize!”

Raiden shakes his head, sick with sorrow. “I cannot!”

“Then we will take it back!” Exhilarated with power, she hurtles through the air straight at Shinnok, blade aimed right at his throat.

“NO!” Raiden blasts Kitana back with a thunderbolt, sending her sprawling back towards Netherrealm. Thinking quick, Shinnok darts forward and conjures skeletal hands to bind her wrists and ankles, taking her out of the fight for now. Raiden stumbles backwards, drawing from the depleted reserves of his amulet to keep himself going, and pulls Cyrax back with him towards the Earthrealm edge. But he barely has the energy to move, and Cyrax trips and catches himself on the railing, still unused to his reanimated human body.

Shinnok holds the line, fists raised and magic surging. “You will have to take me before you take either of them!”

“Get out of my way, old man.” Liu Kang strides past Kitana, moving with confident stiff steps. His arms are wrapped in spiked armor, an ornate skull emblazoned across his chest. Blasting a fireball from one fist, he forces Shinnok to retreat, conjuring an energy shield in a panic. He locks eyes with Raiden, who stands still, caught in the throes of grief. “It’s him I want!”

Shinnok ascends, blocking his path, and shoves him backwards.

Liu Kang barely even notices the hit. He keeps moving, brushing past Shinnok, who scrambles to catch up with him before he can touch the thunder-god. “I owe you my thanks, Raiden. You freed me from your service. Now, I rule an entire realm!”

Shinnok grabs the revenant by the collar, pulling him back towards Netherrealm with a violent yank. “Stop!”

“I was once your pet, your prized competitor. You saw me as nothing more than a piece in your grand plan!”

Anguish fills Raiden’s voice, a sob catching in his throat. “Liu Kang, you were like a son to me! I wanted so desperately to save you!”

“So desperately that you killed me!”

“It was the worst accident of my life! I wanted to stop you from dying at the hands of Shao Kahn! I could not foresee...”

Raiden trails off, giving up.

“I have no excuse. Liu Kang... I am so sorry. I loved you dearly.”

He collapses to his knees and bows his head, finally overcome by despair.

The corrupted emperor draws closer, raising his fist.
“No, you don’t!” Shinnok yells in the revenant’s ear, distracting him before he can land a blow. Sharp skeletal gauntlets form around his pale fingers, and he grabs him by the waist and digs deep enough to draw sickly dark blood. He lifts and physically hurls Liu Kang to the other side of the bridge, who lands with a crunch and a shout of pain.

But Kitana has wrenched herself free from his bonds, and is bolting towards the trio again with a sinister snarl, blind with greed for vengeance.

“You in the hat!” An unfamiliar voice captures Shinnok’s attention. He whirls around to look, just as Cyrax teleports through the air and lands in front of him, dragging Shinnok backwards into the comforting aura of lightning that Raiden has managed to summon.

As the revenant gathers herself to leap at them, Cyrax hurls a grenade towards the center of the path. It explodes, shattering the metal and wood. Broken pieces plunge into the lava far below. Glowing with searing light, the bridge slowly begins to crumble, separating the realms once again.

Raiden grips both his companions’ arms tight, his noble face wet with tears, and uses the last of his power to bring them home.
“Been a while since I took a road trip.” Jacqui leans against the window, face pressed against the cool glass as she watches the scenery rushing by. It’s miles and miles of nothing, just empty fields and plains and monotonous highway guardrails. Now and then, they pass a sign advertising an exit ahead, decorated with colorful fast-food logos.

Cassie just keeps driving.

Jacqui leans over and turns down the radio, quieting the music a bit. “Do we know exactly where we’re going?”

“It’s programmed into my phone’s GPS, yeah. Special Forces gave me the coordinates.” Cassie takes one hand off the steering wheel, tapping the small gadget mounted to the dashboard. She isn’t using it right now, though. They’re just traveling in a straight line, cutting a path through the middle of nowhere.

Earlier, Sonya gave the team a lift in a helicopter to drop them off near the state’s border, but it was tough to find a vehicle to comfortably fit eight people. When they located a dilapidated van at long last, they piled in like a troupe of acrobats. Jacqui called shotgun. Nobody objected.

Cassie’s driving, for lack of better options. She’s been doing it the longest, ever since Johnny let her take the car out for a spin in the suburbs when she was thirteen. Just in case of emergency, he’d said. Sonya had almost had a heart attack, and made sure to get Cassie a helmet for the next time.

Behind her, Raiden and Shinnok are sitting awkwardly in the small seats, folding themselves up to fit in the limited space. Raiden is wearing a seatbelt. Purely on principle, Shinnok is not. They’re still arguing under their breath, which they have been doing for hours. Cassie can’t even tell what they’re talking about. Probably better that way. She’d turned on the nearest radio station to drown them out, but they’re far enough from civilization that reception is fading, the sound crackling with static. It’s starting to annoy her even more than the bickering gods.

“Jacqui. You got any playlists saved on your phone?”

“Yeah. What genre? I’ve got pop, hip-hop, indie, classical, metal, opera…”

Cassie raises an eyebrow.

“Hey, I have diverse tastes, all right?” She taps her phone’s screen, scrolling through a list. “What do you want?”

“Whatever’s going to offend the least number of people.”

“So, pop, then. Got it.” Jacqui plugs the cord into the phone, redirecting the audio. Crisp sound flows through the speakers, a generic up-tempo melody. She holds her breath.

Nobody complains. Fortunately.

She’s disabled all the connectivity functions on her phone -- internet, location, even the signal itself. Going back on the grid is always dangerous. When they’re far enough away from any networks except the Special Forces satellite, Cassie’ll turn on her location and find this place. But they’re not there yet, so Jacqui can’t even pass the time with some mindless browsing. She and Cassie ran out of small talk a while ago, and it’d be awkward to discuss anything personal with six...
Another row back, Cyrax and Jin are sitting together, engaged in deep thoughtful conversation. Jin’s doing his best to explain everything that’s happened, particularly the assorted Shinnok incidents. Cyrax is a patient listener, but his head is spinning. This is a lot to take in, especially for somebody who’s barely used to even being alive again. Jin is considerate enough to be patient, but Cyrax needs to be debriefed on the situation by the time they arrive, and it’s tough to figure out how to summarize something like a godly invasion.

In the far back of the van, Frost and Takeda are doing their absolute best to ignore each other, positioned at the opposite edges of the seat. Takeda is doing a crossword puzzle, hood pulled over his head, pointedly paying no attention to the girl. Frost glares at him out of the corner of her eye every so often. She’s wearing two pairs of headphones, just to make a point.

Cassie takes note of an upcoming exit, tapping the brakes. “Fast food and rest stop ahead. Anybody need a bathroom break? Snacks? Fresh air?”

Shinnok clears his throat. “I would prefer not to be in this van at all.”

“For the last time, this is the only way we can get there. You and Raiden are way too burned out to teleport us, and we don’t have permission to land a chopper at the site. So it’s this or nothing.”

“Why was I obligated to go on this journey?”

“You think we’re gonna leave you at home? Not a chance.” Cassie nudges Jacqui in the shoulder. “Turn around and glare at him for me, will ya? I can’t take my eyes off the road.”

Jacqui cheerfully obliges.

Shinnok sighs, tossing his head, and leans back against his seat with a brooding scowl. “Forget the dire flames of the Netherrealm. This is how I will perish. Suffocated in the back of a van full of rowdy youths.”

Cassie rolls her eyes, and turns the music up a little louder.

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Deep in an underground lair, three stories beneath a nondescript seedy bar, a burly man springs from his seat, cursing at an unfortunate thug. His red eye glows in its metallic socket, seething as he finally takes control of his temper. His Australian drawl is loud enough to be heard from the next room.

“What d’ya mean you can’t find them?! Intel tells us they’re out in the open. Un-guarded.”

“I can’t! Sorry, Kano!” The thug gestures helplessly to a large screen, displaying a map of the United States with bright dots of light flickering all across the nation’s cell networks. “We’re not picking up on anything. No identifying data for any of them.”

“That shouldn’t be possible!” Kano slams his fist on the desk, leaving a dent. The thug backs away cautiously. Moving closer to the screen, he squints at it, glowering. “But if we find them and track their signal, we can grab ‘em. Then we’re really in business.”

“What’s the reward?”

Kano smiles, a wicked snarl. “If we can get one of the gods, that blue idiot’s going to hand me the
keys to his kingdom.”

“But how?”

He pauses, rubbing his chin, and spits on the ground. “Remember that voice tracker software we bought with the ransom funds? We’ve got video clips of Blade’s daughter. Pull the audio and set it to search.”

“But it’s not finish--”

“I don’t care. Run it!” Kano paces the room with heavy swaggering steps. “This could work.”

“The girl ain’t stupid enough to leave her phone on, or we’d have found ‘er.”

“No.” Kano cocks his head to the side, eyes narrowing, and clamps a hand over the glowing power battery in his chest. “But someone else might be.”

- - -

Elsewhere, six warriors and two gods are arguing in the middle of a fast-food drive-thru.

Cassie throws up her hands, yelling for silence. Slamming the mute button on her GPS, she leans towards the loudspeaker, her patience entirely depleted. “Give us one of everything!”

“Everything, ma’am?”

“One of everything you’ve got ready right this minute. I’ll pay for it all.” Without waiting for an answer, she slams the accelerator and rounds the corner, screeching to a halt behind another car in line. “Since none of you can make up your damn minds!”

A strange beeping noise echoes through the car.

Raiden rummages around in his pocket and withdraws a charmingly ancient flip-phone. He holds it up, peering at it in curiosity. “Why would someone call me?”

Cassie swivels in her seat to stare. “You have one of those?”

“I had one of the newer touch-screen ones, but I...electrocuted its circuits.” Raiden pries the phone open, pressing its buttons with a mystified look. “Oh. They hung up.”

“Get rid of that!” Cassie wrenches it from his hand, twisting it til it snaps in half, and tosses the pieces out the window. The cell-phone bits land in the fast-food restaurant’s bushes. “All connected tech needs to be off! I told you that before we got in this car!”

“I forgot that I had the cellular phone. I apologize.” Raiden sits back, looking quite forlorn. “May I ask the reason for this precaution?”

Cassie lets out a pent-up breath, resting her forehead against the steering wheel with a groan. “Mom thinks the Black Dragon mercs are going after us. Crocodile Dundee got out of custody.”

Jacqui grips the armrest of her chair. “Holy shit. Kano?”

Cassie nods grimly. “That bastard’s at it again, yeah. His thugs sprung him out of there.”

Shinnok clears his throat. “Is it just me, or is your government absolutely terrible at keeping its suspects imprisoned?”
“Excuse me?”

“D’Vorah is gone. So is Kano. Do you even have anyone of importance left in that little jail of yours?”

“That’s classified. They want to put you in there, too, by the way.”

“Hah! They would have as much luck with that as—” Shinnok’s sentence is cut off with a yelp as Cassie hits the gas again, zooming up to the drive-thru window and stopping abruptly. “Why, you-”

“Oh, just deal with it.” Cassie grabs a handful of bags from the panicked clerk, pushing a wad of cash at him in return. “Keep the change.”

“Ma’am, I can’t--”

“If anyone asks, you dropped it!” She aims the van out of the exit, driving at top speed without even bothering to roll up the window. Flying over a speed bump, she steers the vehicle deftly back onto the road, merging onto the freeway as fast as possible.

Everyone sits in uncomfortable silence.

Cyrax raises a hand tentatively. “Can anyone explain that?”

“I will.” Jacqui turns back to address the group. “A powerful mercenary’s got a grudge against all of us, but especially Cassie. He’s on the loose again. Bad news.”

“All right.” Cyrax nods thoughtfully, and turns towards Jin. “When you are ready, feel free to continue telling me about recent events.”

Jin hesitates. “You’re not worried about Kano?”

“After dying, one loses the ability to feel fear.” Cyrax rests his chin in his hands. “At least that’s the case for me. Everything else just seems so small in comparison.”

“I guess I can understand that. Anyway, so we were on the run from the emperor when...” With a deep breath, Jin launches into another detailed and colorful narrative of events. He’s no longer bothering to summarize, just telling Cyrax the whole thing start to finish instead. At least he’s a good listener.

Disregarding the idle chatter, Jacqui rummages through the bags. “Wow. They really did give us one of everything.”

Frost takes off her headphones, aiming a tiny snowball towards the front of the van. It hits the dashboard and melts instantly. “Any frozen drinks up there?”

Jacqui holds up the nearest one. “Yeah. Right here.”

“Pass it back.” She reaches out and leans over Jin’s seat to grab it from Raiden, who obligingly hands her the milkshake, cooperative as ever. Then, resuming her ill-tempered sulking, she puts both pairs of headphones right back on.

While Jacqui takes care of distributing the food, Cassie drums her fingers on the steering wheel, fretting quietly. It’s pretty obvious that Raiden’s phone ringing was no coincidence. Her intuition tells her it’s Kano’s fault. Though she already got rid of the device in a very low-tech way, she has
no way of knowing if they’ve used it to lock onto the van somehow. If so, the crew’s in for some trouble. If not, that fast food restaurant is going to have a very bad day.

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An hour later, all eight of them are trudging in a grim line across sandy soil, leaving heavy boot-prints in the fine gravel.

Cassie’s hanging back to chat with Jacqui, grateful for the chance to relax. Her nerves are fried from the driving and the stress of an impending merc attack. Raiden’s leading the way, dressed in an outdoorsy version of his usual gear. Shinnok is not far behind, shoulders hunched, clearly displeased about the whole experience. Frost, surprisingly, is walking next to him; they seem to be bonding through mutual spite. Takeda, Jin, and Cyrax have joined together in a small group, with Takeda taking the time to introduce himself politely. Cyrax seems mostly unbothered by the Shirai Ryu affiliation. It would take a lot to faze Cyrax at this point, anyway.

Raiden pauses, and addresses the group in a calm and authoritative tone, facing them. Slowly, they all stumble to a halt as the hot mid-afternoon sun beats down upon them. The desert horizon seems hazy, shimmering in the distance. “Sareena may not initially be willing to join us. Be thoughtful and polite. Let her make her own decisions.” Raiden raises an eyebrow. “In fact, please let me handle this. I am not certain you are all in a state of mind for proper negotiation.”

Frost rolls her eyes, jamming her hands into the pocket of her sweatshirt. She surrounds herself with a frigid aura, briefly relieving the heat. “Why do we need her, anyway?”

“So that we have a fairly matched number of competitors. She is talented and reliable. Beyond that, she is our best remaining choice at the moment.”

“Well, duh. If you were willing to drag some guy back from the dead to join the team, I’m gonna assume the selection’s pretty limited.” Frost turns to face Cyrax, sticking her hand out in an abrupt gesture of greeting. “Hi. I’m Frost. Didn’t introduce myself before.”

Cyrax shakes her hand politely, saying nothing.

Raiden surveys the group, pursing his lips. As always, the chance of success is slim, but he has found that knowing the odds of a plan’s failure never actually determines the outcome. So he ignores the sense of impending doom, and gazes at them all with a strange rush of pride, eyes bright with care and concern beneath the brim of his hat.

They may be a flawed team, but they are nonetheless his.

“For those of who you did not read the dossier--” and here he gives Frost a pointed look-- “Sareena was originally from Netherrealm. She assisted us during the most recent invasion of Shinnok, due to her familiarity with Quan Chi as a former servant. She freed herself and allied with us, by her own choice. After the rise of the revenants, she no longer wished to remain in Netherrealm, and has taken up residence on Earthrealm instead. She is currently safe in a Special Forces protection program. She’s chosen to work on a paleontology dig in the desert, quite close to here. Officially, she is helping the scientists excavate dinosaur bones. Unofficially, the bones belong to the Saurians, a reptilian race that lived in this world long, long ago.”

Cassie’s eyebrows shoot up. “I thought they were digging up velociraptors!”

“While they are similar, the velociraptors were not sentient to the same degree.”

“I can’t believe Mom didn’t tell me this!”
“I do have a higher clearance level.” A smile flashes across Raiden’s soft face. “Shinnok, she will likely not be pleased to see you.”

Shinnok waves a hand dismissively. “Is anyone ever?”

Just to be contrary, Frost interjects. “I am.”

Cassie looks between the two. “I thought you didn’t like him.”

“Not so bad once you get to know him.” Frost pulls the milkshake from her pocket, slurping quite annoyingly. “You were saying?”

“I believe I have said all I need.” Raiden leads the unruly pack forward again, walking with careful footsteps along the stony path. “Above all, be wise.”

Cassie laughs out loud. She can’t help it.

Minutes later, they find themselves at the edge of a vast shallow cavern dug into the ground, gaping like an excavated wound in the landscape. Between massive boulders and towering mounds of sandy dirt, piles of bones have been arranged carefully and wrapped with labels. Tarps are flung over some areas of the ground, pinned down with stakes. Paleontologists dressed in khaki overalls swarm over the scene, dusting off exposed bones with brushes, carefully shoveling handfuls of ancient gravel.

One figure stands out in particular. Bent down to one knee, she stands atop a mighty heap of dirt, photographing a half-buried skeleton from a slight distance. Her glossy black hair is marked with a white streak, dark stripes running over each eye from forehead to cheeks. Over a tight-fitting red and black outfit, she’s wearing the same overalls as everybody else, a utility belt strapped to her waist and safety goggles pushed up on her forehead.

She catches sight of Raiden, and straightens up and waves, tucking the camera into the front of her overalls. With inhuman speed and strength, she vaults off the top of the dirt mound, landing on the hard sandy ground, and dashes up to the edge of the cavern, climbing straight up. In seconds, she’s standing before Raiden, grasping his hand in a clumsy approximation of a human handshake. “Lord Raiden! Always a pleasure.”

“Sareena.” He greets her with a kindly smile, expression growing serious after a moment. “I will not waste time with trivialities. We need your aid.”

“In what way?”

“Your skills in kombat.”

“But surely--”

“There is to be a tournament with Outworld within months.” He cuts to the chase right away, figuring it best. “I would like you on the Earthrealm team.”

“I’m from--”

“That matters not. Affiliation, not origin, determines a competitor’s status.”

She gestures helplessly to the cavern. “But the--”

“The bones of the Saurians have lain there, entombed in the desert, for millennia. They will still be
“there when you return.”

“I can’t--”

“If you leave the excavation, the pace of progress might slow. If we lack sufficient members for the tournament, Earthrealm will fall. Think of the priorities.”

“What if--”

“I can assure you th--” But Raiden finds himself interrupted, a pale hand clamped over his mouth as Shinnok pushes him aside.

“Let the young lady speak, Raiden!” He draws himself up, attempting to summon some respect for the new acquaintance. On principle, this is a difficult task for him. “I am Shinn--”

“I know who you are.” Sareena glares at him, clenching a fist. “You and I have much to say each other, and none of it belongs in polite company.”

“Where is the polite company?” Shinnok gestures to the ragtag group pointedly, but retreats to stand behind Raiden, faced with immediate failure. “Such ingratitude!”

“Any affiliate of Quan Chi deserves no time of mine.” She taps a gardening trowel against the palm of her hand in an attempted threatening gesture. “Nevertheless, Raiden, I’ll consider your offer if--”

Yet again, she finds herself interrupted -- this time by the unmistakable whir of a helicopter coming into view, speeding low and quick across the horizon.

Cassie glances at the sky, feeling a chill of fear. “Hey, what the fuck?”

Jacqui studies it, desperately wishing she’d put her gauntlets on for this. At least they’re packed in her trusty backpack. Gotta be ready for a crisis, Dad always said. She slings the bag off her shoulder, dropping it to the ground and kneeling to rummage through it. “You have got to be shitting me. That does not look like Special Forces.”

Shinnok follows suit, squinting at the airborne vehicle. “Such obscenities, young ladies. Why--”

Cassie shoves him away to shut him up for a moment. “We got trouble. How far away is it?”

“Two minutes, tops. Minute and a half if they’ve got a full gas tank.” Jacqui slides her arms into the familiar weapons, feeling them come to life with the plasma pulsing in the palm of her hand. “Think it’s Kano?”

“Gotta be. I thought this might happen. My guess is he used the signal from Raiden’s phone to lock onto mine. All I had was the GPS active, no networks, but that’s enough to pull the destination coordinates and nearly beat us here. Ugh!” Cassie grimaces, loading her pistols. “Change of plans. Everybody ready to rumble?”

Takeda and Jin are staring helplessly at her. “We didn’t pack our weapons.”

“Goddamnit! Okay, go get all our stuff from the van. We’re taking that chopper.” Cassie barks orders like a proper general, checking in with each team member. “Frost, if you see Kano, freeze him. He’s pretty hard to miss. It won’t hold - he’s got cybernetics - but it’ll slow him down. Sareena, wrap up any unfinished business. Pick a second in command to handle the dig, and tell them all to call their bosses and get out as soon as they can. You’re coming with us. Raiden,
Shinnok--” She falters. Raiden’s way too wiped out to use his powers, but Shinnok might be able to help take down Kano’s crew of mercs, who are about a minute away from swarming out of the helicopter. “Raiden, go with the boys. Shinnok, you’re staying right here.”

“With such a polite request, how could I say no?”

Cassie rolls her eyes. “Just figure out something theatrical. You’re our wild card. Do your thing. Scare the Black Dragon thugs. I don’t give a damn what it is, we just need to tap into that primal fear. They’re only men, guns or not.”

Shinnok rubs his chin thoughtfully. “I’m beginning to like the way you think.”

“Should’ve said so a long time ago.” Cassie faces the newest team member, who’s got one hand on his belt of grenades, adjusting his headband. Clearly, this guy must be useful, if Raiden was willing to bring him back from the dead, and all that. “Cyrax, I don’t know what you can do, but whatever it is, do it. A lot.”

He cracks a smile. “Shall do.”

Shinnok catches Sareena by the arm before she can leap back down into the pit of bones. “How valuable are these Saurian skeletons?”

“Extremely. Why?”

“Are there any that are… expendable?”

“Yes. The bones you see in the piles are too broken to repair. The skeletons under the tarps are going to our research labs. Why?”

He smirks. “Oh, no reason at all.”

“If you say so.” Sareena shakes her head, then jumps down to the ground below, racing over to another paleontologist to exchange hurried words and hand him a badge. It seems she’s got no choice, and time is of the essence.

Cassie levels her pistol at the first figure out of the helicopter, a burly masked thug who drops in one shot. She doesn’t let herself celebrate, though; they’re still pouring out, more than a dozen of them dressed in full body armor. Kano must’ve picked a scapegoat to take the first bullet.

Sure enough, Kano descends from the helicopter last, leaving it running, its blades slapping the air in a noisy rhythm. Pushing his crowd of thugs aside, he makes a beeline straight towards Cassie, running like an Australian terminator.

She yelps in panic, nerves failing for a split second, and dodges as Kano somersaults through the air towards her, her boots skidding in the rough dirt. She fires off a couple more shots, but they bounce off his metal gauntlets, and he laughs in that brutish voice, calling out to her. “Hello, love! Glad to see Uncle Kano?”

Cassie gives him the middle finger and suggests something anatomically impossible.

From somewhere behind her, a spiky ice-filled snowball hits Kano squarely in the face, to his visible surprise. He winces and swears loudly, flicking bits of ice out of his beard. Cassie grins. Good. He didn’t know about the new part of the team.

Before he can respond, a half-empty milkshake also hits him in the face.
Cassie laughs. She’s sort of starting to like Frost.

Seconds later, cold hands clamp down on her neck and force her to her knees, and as Cassie reels from the impact, she feels boots landing on her shoulders. Frost uses her as a vaulting platform and hurtles through the air, forming a shell of ice armor around her arms and legs, and bodyslams Kano at full force. He screams in rage, stumbling backwards, and blasts a ray of power from his chest battery, sending Frost soaring away. She lands gracefully, stretching a hand out to freeze the ice beneath her opponent, and as he gathers his weight to launch a somersault attack, Kano slips and falls on his face.

Cassie cheers her on, readying her pistol. “You got this!”

“Don’t shoot! You’ll shatter my ice! And I can’t freeze him when he’s moving!”

“Okay! Lemme work on it.” She turns her attention to the van instead, and blows holes in the tires once Jin, Takeda, and Raiden are a safe distance away. Good thing she prepaid the rental fee. Now it’s the helicopter or nothing -- but failure’s not an option here. Last thing she wants is Kano in a van, chasing them across the desert. He’s more resilient than a cockroach.

Sareena’s climbing back out of the cavern again, all business taken care of. She’s ready for action. Felling one thug with a powerful punch, she summons a blast of purplish magic, raising the next one into the air and kicking him backwards into the cavern as he screams in horror.

“Hey!” Cassie waves to catch her attention. She’s got another brilliant plan. “Sareena Jones! You got some rope handy?”

Sareena wrinkles her nose at the nickname, puzzled, but withdraws a coil of rope from her utility belt. “Yes?”

“Throw it to Jacqui! The girl in the gauntlets. She’ll know what to do!”

Jacqui’s busy kicking ass, fending off a handful of thugs, but they’re closing in, gathering around her in an ominous crowd. With a determined yell, she powers up her weapons and points them at the ground, blasting off and sending them scattering. She lands in the rough dirt several feet away, just in time for a heads-up from the slightly puzzled Sareena, who hurls the rope at her. “The young blonde lady told me to give you this!”

Cassie raises her voice, calling out the next strategy. “Sareena! Run through the thugs, get them chasing you, then jump over the van as high as you can. Jacqui! Rodeo special! Hold him still for Frost!”

The plan unfolds beautifully. Time seems to slow to a standstill. Jacqui loops the rope into a lasso and sends it towards Kano, falling around his waist and yanking him to a halt. Once he’s prone on the ground, hurling slurs and curses, Frost leaps onto his back and conjures a solid block of ice, sticking him in an impromptu refrigerator. Nearby, Sareena shoves her way through a cluster of gathered thugs, leading them on a merry chase towards the large van. As she lands on the hood and takes off, flying several yards into the air, Cassie shoots the gas tank.

Three thugs perish in the fireball, while Sareena lands on the other side, safe but badly shaken. “By the Realms! That was brilliant, but I could have used some warning!”

“You did great! Go check on the boys and Raiden. If there’s anyone in the helicopter, throw them out. Get in there!” Cassie dodges another incoming thug. She’s been counting. The explosion killed three, Sareena got two, Jacqui took down one. And a partridge in a pear tree. Looks like eight
thugs left, though. That’s too many.

Cyrax has been circling the perimeter, keeping the fight contained and avoiding any harm to the civilian and military scientists. As she watches, he teleports a short distance, landing on top of a thug to punch him into the dirt, and tosses a grenade to blast another one into oblivion. It seems like he’s still getting used to his abilities, but it’s pretty damn impressive.

“Kano’s as frozen as I can get him!” Frost calls out to Cassie, standing proudly atop the block of ice and striking a pose. “Used up all the water vapor in the air. In this heat, he’ll melt in about… three hours.”

“That’s enough time!” Cassie whips out her phone, hits the SOS signal to call in a Special Forces rescue, and throws it far away from her, landing with a thud somewhere in the sand. Mom’s going to be thrilled. “Jacqui. You got those playlists saved?”

“On my computer, yeah.”

“Good. Dump your phone. Absolutely no tech going with us.”

“Aw, man--” Jacqui cringes, but pulls her phone out of her pocket and follows suit, tossing it away. “I know why, but it sucks. By the way, I stuck a tracker particle into Kano’s cyber eye socket. You can thank me later.”

“Holy shit. You’re brilliant. Gonna put you on the Nobel prize list. Seriously, I didn’t think of that--”

Jacqui points somewhere beyond Cassie’s shoulder. “Might want to keep an eye on Shinnok and his… what are those?!”

While the others fought, Shinnok has gathered an assortment of shattered bones from the cavern. Now, with a massive surge of dark magic, he’s assembling them into intact skeletons, conjuring reptilian flesh and veins that flow with green blood. Dry, leathery grey scaly skin wraps over them, revealing dull yellowish glowing eyes and mouths filled with sharp ghastly teeth.

“...zombie lizards.”

Cassie snaps her fingers. “Hey! Wildcard! Got your scare tactics ready?”

Shinnok looks over his shoulder at her disdainfully. “Of course I do.”

“Hit them with it!”

Shinnok clenches his fists and lifts his arms towards the sky, engulfing the lizards in magic sparks. Whispering a sinister spell, he fills them with unnatural life. They stumble towards the remaining thugs, claws extended, lashing out blindly.

The thugs shriek in terror and run for their lives, tripping and sprawling in the dirt as the reanimated Saurians grab hold of them. With a horrible chomping noise, it is over in moments.

“Shinnok! Kill those things, now!”

With a regretful sigh, Shinnok lowers his hands, releasing the spell. The lizards’ scaly skin melts away, then their flesh vanishes in peeling layers. All that remains is a group of skeletons, frozen midair by his immense power.
His arms drop to his sides, and the bones scatter across the wind-tossed desert, as lifeless as the moment they were dug up.

“That was repulsive and I never want to see it again in my entire life. But thanks.” Cassie squats beside one of the other intact fallen bodies, gathering an armful of Black Dragon tech. Fortunately, none of it seems to have a self-destruct mechanism. Special Forces will want it. “Get in the helicopter.”

“But--”

“Get in the helicopter, right this instant, or I am dragging your ass in there by the horns on your goddamned hat!”

“It can hardly be a ‘god-damned’ hat if I am the one wear--”

Cassie actually kicks him into the helicopter with a flying leap.

Shinnok staggers and catches his balance on the steps, scrambling into a seat, and glares down at her. “The ingratitude continues!”

“Don’t wanna hear it!” Cassie scans the scene below, climbing into the helicopter and sitting on the floor. Raiden and Shinnok are crammed together in the corner, Cyrax is guarding them, Jin and Takeda are strapped in safely, and Sareena and Frost are warily inspecting each other from nearby seats. “We got everybody? Who’s flying?”

Jacqui pipes up from the front seat. “Dad made me take lessons. I got this.”

“Okay. Get us out of here! ...where are we going?”

“There’s only one place I can absolutely guarantee we’re off the grid.”

Cassie hesitates. “Where?”

“Home!” Jacqui lifts the helicopter into the air, piloting expertly, and shouts above the engine’s roar. “Hope you all enjoy farm life!”
Carefully, with her pulse pounding in her throat, Jacqui grips the helicopter’s controls and lands in the middle of an empty field, flattening a huge patch of cornstalks. The steady whir of the blades slows and stops, giving way to deafening silence.

This particular cornfield is -- or at least it should be -- close to home. Jacqui has the area map around the Briggs farm pretty well memorized, just in case of crisis. Everything’s always in case of crisis. From here, if they travel in a northwest line for a couple miles, they should be able to find the place, tucked away in a nice patch of woods. She didn’t dare land any closer, just in case the Black Dragon chopper has any tracking tech. Dad would ground her for a year, and she doesn’t even live at home anymore.

Besides, the thought of Kano and his jackbooted thugs stumbling through a corn maze is almost funny. Almost.

Jacqui unstraps her safety harness, climbing out of the seat with shaky legs. She nearly trips over her own backpack, but catches herself on a railing. “Everybody okay? You’re all troopers. I can’t believe we got through that...”

Unbelievably, Raiden has fallen asleep on Shinnok’s shoulder, his hat tucked next to him in his seat. The other god looks far less than thrilled about this, but doesn’t dare disturb him. Brows furrowed, he’s scribbling something in Takeda’s crossword puzzle book, generously donated by the young man for the purposes of shutting Shinnok up. In the span of a few hours, he’s managed to do exactly seventeen and a half difficult crosswords. Godly omniscience probably helps with puzzle-solving.

Cyrax is asleep, too, seemingly in a meditative state. So is Sareena, although her eyes are still half open, a highly unnerving effect. Frost has conjured a pillow for herself out of snow and is sprawled out on the floor, snoring lightly. Cassie seems to be out cold as well, and it’s hard to tell with Takeda, but he’s unresponsive to a soft tap on the shoulder. Only Jin is still awake, and barely, at that. He’s staring out the window, lost in thought.

“Psst.” Jacqui catches the attention of Jin and Shinnok, waving to them. Shinnok shuts the puzzle-book irritably, and shoves it down the front of his outfit, freeing his hands. She meets his eyes, then looks away, feeling an eerie chill at the god’s judgmental gaze. “Guys. We’re home.”

Shinnok cranes his neck to look out the helicopter’s small window. “I would hope not.”

“Close to home. I don’t live in a cornfield.” She shakes her head. Sometimes she can’t tell if Shinnok actually is that dense, or if he’s just making a point, obnoxiously. Probably the latter. “One of you’ll stay with the sleeping beauties over here until we’re back. The other’s coming with me to get Dad.”

Jin tilts his head, studying her through an exhausted haze. “Mind if I stay? It’s been a long day.”

“You didn’t even have to fight! But, yeah, you should just keep an eye on them. Nobody’s going to attack us out here.”

“Hey, I had to figure out how to tell Cyrax about the Outworld drama. That’s pretty tiring.” Jin rests his face in his hands, elbows propped on his knees. By now, twilight has fallen, casting the cornfield into a gloomy haze. “How long do you think you’ll take? And how mad is your dad
“Not too long, and not too mad, if I handle this right. If I don’t, we’ll all be sleeping in the barn.” She shrugs, strapping her backpack across her chest. “Hey, Shinnok. Congrats, you drew the short straw. Can you still teleport, and do you know how Earth addresses work?”

He sniffs distastefully. “Yes. Of course.”

She rattles off the location of the Briggs farm from memory. “Take us there. It’s safe.”

Shinnok heaves a dramatic sigh, raising his chin in a gesture of defiance. Carefully, he eases out from under the weight of Raiden’s shoulder, letting the tall god rest across the seats. “Hmph. He can’t even handle an adventure anymore.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but didn’t you two summon an interrealm bridge? And raise someone from the dead? Like, a couple days ago?”

“Well, yes...”

“That’d drain me if I had to do it. Surprised you’re still up and running. Did you let Raiden do the heavy lifting, or what?” Jacqui doesn’t wait for an answer, just grips his wrist without warning. “C’mon. I’m not a fan of this, or you, but it’s easier than waiting for a cab.”

Shinnok gazes at her in utter distaste, but summons his magic anyhow, fulfilling the request.

They land in the woods outside the farm, falling into a large pile of hay with a satisfying crunch.

Jacqui climbs out first, picking bits of straw off her clothes. “ Couldn’t aim for higher ground?”

“When you have used your magic to re-animate the dead and destroy your foes, then you can judge my methods.”

“Forget I asked.” Jacqui grabs hold of Shinnok’s wrist again, but he yanks himself free, wiping off his gauntlet offendedly. She ignores him instead, which is usually a better approach in the first place. “Follow behind me, and don’t say anything.”

Carefully, they creep across the farm’s large yard, boots sinking into the soft well-tended grass--

“Shit!” They freeze as a large floodlight switches on, blinding them for a few moments. A security system beeps shrilly. Jacqui stops short and curses under her breath. “Forgot about that. Okay, stay where you are and be quiet. Dad’ll be here in a sec.”

Naturally, Shinnok does the exact opposite. As a large figure with gleaming metal biceps emerges from the shadows, the god offers a halfhearted smile, arms spread in a welcoming gesture. “The elder Briggs arrives. What a pleasure to make your acquaintance once more--”

“Dad!” Jacqui leaps through the air and grabs Jax in a hug, burying her face in his shoulder. He holds her tight, patting her back, and she breathes a sigh of relief. It’s good to be home.

“Hey, kiddo.” He sets her down on the ground, looking her in the eyes. Concern is written across his weathered face. “This is unusual. Y’know, you don’t need to sneak in after curfew anymore.”

“Haha. Damn, I missed you. We need your help. Code red. How’s Mom?”
“She’s doin’ okay. Hey, what’s--” Jax straightens up, clenching a metal fist. One of his arms glows briefly, weapons powering up. He storms towards Shinnok, and the god cringes and steps back. “You mind explaining this?”

Jacqui chases after him. “Sonya didn’t brief you?!”

“She sure did, but she didn’t mention bringing him onto private property!” Jax lifts Shinnok by his collar, dangling there helplessly. “You got five seconds to get the hell out of here!”

“Dad! Kano’s chasing us, Shinnok saved our lives again, and Raiden’s putting together a new tournament team and I’m on it!”

“What?!” Jax drops the god ungracefully, turning towards his daughter. “Since when?”

“Kano got out last night. We fought him this afternoon out in the desert.” He whistles under his breath. “I figured there’d be a new team, but the rest of this is news. I don’t want you participating, Jacqui. You’ve risked enough already.”

“I have to. I can go toe to toe with any Outworld warrior. Already proved it.” Jax raises his eyebrows. “Haven’t forgotten.”

“If I may interrupt the family dispute…” Shinnok clears his throat, gathering himself up to stand and boldly face the pair of Briggses. Briggses? He isn’t certain. “Jackson Briggs, your daughter admirably flew a helicopter to rescue the group. At the moment, it’s parked in a cornfield several miles away. The others are still inside, sound asleep. Have you any means of retrieving them?”

“Yeah. Let me get the pickup truck.” Jax rolls up his sleeves, heading towards the barn’s large garage. Jacqui trots along behind him, and Shinnok follows at a safe distance. “How many?”


“Cyrax? From the last tourn--”

“Yep. Long story. He’s human again.” Jax shakes his head, digging around in his pocket for the truck keys. “Miracles never cease, huh? You’re gonna need to explain that one… later.” He opens the garage, climbing into the driver’s seat of the large truck. “Shinnok, I don’t even want you near me. Get in the back.” He pauses. “The way-back.”

Not long afterwards, Jax expertly steers the pickup truck through the cornfield’s paths, making his way towards the grounded helicopter. A small-town police car is parked near it, blue and red lights flashing. Jin is negotiating with the officer, gesturing helplessly. For once, his ability to explain things isn’t doing any favors.

Jax jumps out of the car, brandishing his Special Forces badge from his wallet. Just in time. “I’ll take this from here, Officer. No need to worry.”

The man’s face lights up in recognition and relief. “Major Briggs!”

Jax nods, dog tags resting in the palm of his metal hand. “This is a classified situation. Now,
thanks for your service, and get outta here.”

The policeman doesn’t need to be told twice.

The hapless crew is gathered together in the helicopter, sitting obediently while they wait for Jin. Noticing the truck’s arrival, Cassie shepherds them all out, and greets Jax with a grin and a firm handshake. “Uncle Jax. Good to see ya.”

“You and I got a lotta catching up to do.” He squeezes her in a hug. “I heard about Kano. Jacqui told me when she got home.”

“That reminds me. I’m gonna need to borrow your phone.” Cassie holds out a hand, expectantly. “Mom needs to know something.”

Jax reluctantly hands it over.

She’s got Sonya on the phone within moments. Her stern voice echoes clearly through the receiver. “Jax? What’s the situation? Are the kids with you yet?”

Cassie chuckles. “Hi, Mom.”

“Cassie! I’ve been worried sick!” A rare admission for General Blade to make, but she means it sincerely, voice softening with emotion. “Good work. We have Kano in custody… with a severe case of hypothermia.”

“You can thank Frost for that. You’ll be seeing a lot of her; she’s on Raiden’s team now. So’s Sareena, by the way.”

“Good choice. She’s done wonderful work with us so far.” Sonya clears her throat, drumming her fingers on her desk. Though she tries to keep feelings out of her job, she’s beyond relieved to hear that Cassie’s safe. “What did you want to tell me?”

“Jacqui put a tracker particle into Kano’s cyber eye. If you let him escape, he’ll lead us to the Black Dragon base.”

“Let him escape?! After all that? Cass--”

“He did it once before. He’ll just think Special Forces is incompetent, rather than it being a trap. What’d you rather have, just Kano or the whole outfit?” Cassie shoves her free hand into her pocket, shivering as night slowly falls. “Think about it. That’s all.”

“I’ll consider it. Who’s with you, and what condition are they in?”

She rattles off the list of the names. “No one’s severely injured, but they’re all exhausted. We’re going to stay with Jax until we find alternate arrangements.”

“Would Raiden be willing to let the team prepare for the tournament in our underground HQ? We have a crop of new recruits going through high-level operative training. They’d fit right in.”

Cassie leaps at the offer. She, and the entire team, have apartments in the big city already. Far beneath, the Special Forces base is alive with activity at all hours, unknown to most civilians. “Good idea. We need to figure out where everyone’s going to live. I don’t want to just stick them in the SF barracks.”

“You have three new people on your team. Have the others host one apiece and buy some sleeping
“Well-- that works.” Cassie shrugs. “Any other loose ends to clear up?”

“Yes.” General Blade adjusts her cap, leaning back in her office chair with a deep sigh. “The top ranks of SF are insisting that both Elder Gods should be taken into custody. I want them here like I want a hole in the head.”

“What’s our alternative?”

“I made them agree to 24-hour supervision by a qualified Special Forces agent instead.”

“Who?”

“Remember how Raiden used to keep an eye on you when I had to go on missions? Just look at it as you returning the favor.”

“MOM--”

But Sonya’s already hung up.

Cassie tosses the phone back to Jax and rubs her temples. “Good chat.”

“Huh?” Jax has been busy loading the crew of warriors and gods into the pickup truck. Shinnok, Raiden, Frost, and Sareena are parked in the open flatbed, while Jin, Takeda, and Cyrax take up the back row of seats. Jacqui’s called shotgun, as usual.

He catches the phone, returning it to the pocket of his jeans. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah… just setting up arrangements after we leave the farm.” Cassie puts on a brave smile. “Mind if we crash for a few nights?”

“Well, I ain’t about to kick you out.” Jax opens the door for her, hoping there’s still room in the back. Good thing Cassie’s small enough to fit. “Hop in. We’re going home.”

“What about the chopper?”

“Leave it. Some lucky farmer’s about to have a hell of a morning.”

---

For most of them, it’ll be the first warm sit-down meal they’ve eaten in days. For a few others, it’s been decades.

They’re greeted at the farmhouse door by a cheerful older woman resembling Jacqui, dark hair pleated into long braids and a sturdy welding apron tied around the front of her sweater. She welcomes them in -- warriors, demons, gods, and all. “Nice to meet you all! I’m Vera. I would’ve cleaned up if I knew company was coming.” Self-consciously, she removes her apron and hangs it over a coathook by the door. “Jax won’t mind making a few more servings, I’m sure.”

Jax is stirring a pot on the stove, applying spices with a light touch. “If ya ask me, the nice thing about stew is there’s no way to make it wrong.” He approaches the gathered group, still holding the wooden spoon. “Nobody’s got any objections to home cooking?”

Shinnok raises a hand. “Gods don’t need to eat.”
“Well, you should. You and Raiden both look sick as dogs.” Jax gestures pointedly to the thunder god, curled up at the end of the sofa. “What’s he been through?”

“Altogether too much.” Shinnok lays a protective hand on Raiden’s shoulder. “He is an idealistic fool who insists on pursuing all sorts of grueling tasks barely worth the trouble.”

“‘Barely worth the trouble’?” Jin protests vehemently. “Cyrax was definitely worth the trouble! I’ve never met anyone who’s come back from the dead like that before, but he’s a good one.”

Cyrax smiles bashfully, still bewildered by all these unfolding events. It’s too much to keep up with. He’s just going along with it. “Thank you, Kung Jin. I appreciate that.”

Sareena is laying on the floor nearby with a delighted grin, letting a pack of tiny kittens swarm over her and paw at the loose strings on her overalls. The mother cat is draped across her body, purring contentedly and swishing her tail. “Jackson! I love these animals!”

“Oh, the kittens? Yeah, Milly had a litter a few months ago.” One of the kittens gleefully paws at Sareena’s fingers, and she lifts it up and reprimands it gently. Jax can’t help but smile at the sight. He’s always liked Sareena, and it’s good to see her happy and healthy out of the Netherrealm. “Cute little things, ain’t they?”

Cassie sneezes forlornly.

“C’mere. I have allergy meds in the bathroom.” Jacqui leads her off, letting the rest of the group sit around the living room in various states of exhaustion, except for Takeda, who springs into action to help Jax prepare dinner. “We don’t normally let the cats in the kitchen, but looks like Dad made an exception for the babies.”

Shinnok inspects the cats with slight curiosity, and eventually reaches down to scoop up a tiny black kitten, studying it up close. “What strange beasts…”

The kitten mews, and chomps down on his finger.

He winces, setting it down on his lap. “Even felines do not respect a god!”

Raiden opens one eye and chuckles.

“Oh, who asked you?” Shinnok glowers, and hands the kitten over to Cyrax, who studies it with an awestruck look, petting its soft fuzzy fur.

Frost stares at them all in disbelief. “Haven’t any of you ever seen a housecat?”

The rest of them shake their heads.

“ Weirdos.” Frost gets down on her hands and knees, crawling behind the couch, and retrieves a massive, powerful tabby cat with a thick long coat. She cradles him in her arms like an infant, snuggling him close. “Awww, who’s a cute little baby! Youuu aaaaare!”

Vera passes by, carrying a stack of plates. “That’s Norbert. He’s a Siberian cat. He loves the cold.”

“Norbert?”

She laughs, and retreats into the dining room. “He’s a rescue. We didn’t name him.”

Norbert swishes his fluffy tail, kneading Frost’s sweatshirt with mighty paws.
“Well, enough of this nonsense.” Shinnok tries to get up off the couch, but finds himself sinking down against the cushions again, felled by exhaustion. “Or, I suppose, I could stay and put up with this nonsense a while longer...”

“We’ll need to figure out arrangements for the next few nights.” Vera returns unexpectedly, her footsteps silent on the soft carpet. “We have lots of blankets and sleeping bags. Cassie can stay in Jacqui’s room. We’ve got a spare bedroom, and Jin, Takeda, and Cyrax can share it, if you’re all okay with that.”

Jin emerges from the other bathroom, wiping his hands on his pants. He’s gotten most of the blood and slime off himself from the fight, at least. “Sorry. Had to clean up. Yeah, that’s fine with me.”

“All right. Frost and Sareena, do you mind the basement? It’s cozy, I promise.” They both shrug agreeably, unbothered.

“Shinnok, there’s a room upstairs in the barn that’s heated. You’ll be in there.”

Shinnok draws himself up in outrage, towering over Vera. “The barn?!”

“No offense, but Jax doesn’t want you in the house, considering your...past history.” Vera sets her hands on her hips, showing off muscular arms. “And I’ve got his back. The decision stands.”

Raiden stirs and sits up. “I will join Shinnok there.”

“Raiden, it’s okay. We can find--”

“No. I have chosen. This is the best option. Solitude does not suit gods.” Raiden lays back down on the couch again, breathing deeply. “I think I am starting to recover.”

Shinnok mutters halfheartedly. “About time.”

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The dinner is satisfying, at least for those members of the group who normally eat. Raiden makes an effort, fully aware that his mortal appearance is just an illusion and the food will be vaporized. He supposes there’s something reassuring about sitting down for a meal with old and new friends, anyway. It is all for the sake of bonding.

Shinnok picks at his plate, stirring it with his fork. He hasn’t adjusted to mortal food yet, and finds the experience very disorienting. The younger team members have cleaned their plates already, while Frost is discreetly feeding scraps to Norbert the cat. Sareena is making a valiant attempt, too, picking out only the bits of beef. It’s a new experience to eat cooked meat.

Between bites, they chat across the table, an impromptu arrangement made from shoving several smaller tables together and throwing a cloth over it all. Slowly, one by one, as the meal concludes, the guests thank the Briggs family, put their plates in the sink, and file out, drifting off to various parts of the house.

Vera calls after them. “None of you are going anywhere without a shower and a change of clothes! Use the guest bathroom and take turns.”

Jin stops short in the doorway, and looks back at her, perplexed. “Ma’am, while I appreciate the hospitality, we don’t have anything to change into.”
“We’ve got some boxes of old clothes in the basement. Mine, Jax’s, and Jacqui’s. Borrow anything in there. We’re going to donate the rest.”

Jin thanks her politely, and departs, rushing off to claim the shower first.

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At midnight, despite the odds, they’re all still awake.

Frost and Sareena are safely tucked into sleeping bags in the basement, enthusiastically recounting their favorite strange tales of Netherrealm and the Lin Kuei. They’ve both invited the cats down to stay with them. Sareena has informally adopted a small rambunctious kitten with black stripes down its face resembling her own. Frost has nicknamed the little creature Sareena Junior, or Junior for short. Norbert the Siberian cat is stuffed into the front of her own sweatshirt, appreciating the cold.

Upon mutual agreement, Jin and Takeda have given Cyrax the bed in the guest room, figuring that he deserves it most. All three are sitting on it cross-legged now, though, engaged in deep conversation. In between funny quips and anecdotes, they’re asking and answering questions about the history of the past tournament and the current political situation. Cyrax hasn’t felt so welcomed among a team ever before.

Cassie and Jacqui are curled up at opposite sides of the bed, not really bothering with the sleeping bag in light of the day’s exhausting events. It’d seem unfair to put Cassie on the floor. They’re finally getting a chance to share their unfiltered opinions on the situation. Based on common consensus, Cyrax is definitely awesome, Sareena’s unexpectedly nice, Frost is a talented pain in the ass, Shinnok is still obnoxious and weird but getting more tolerable, and they’re very worried about Raiden.

And, up in the barn loft, Shinnok and Raiden are both sprawled out on the floor, making conversation in soothing silence.

_I don’t think I care for farms. I dislike that demonic creature in the stall below._

_Shinnok, that is only a horse._

_It is filled with malice. I see it in its eyes._

_Just avoid it, then._ Raiden chuckles to himself. Then he goes quiet for some time. When he speaks again, he is hesitant.

...May we talk about what recently happened?

Shinnok rolls over to face him. He’s taken off his armor and opened the back of his helmet, his swept-back silvery hair falling in loose wisps around his face. Dressed in an oversized green flannel shirt, he’s tied its ends tight around his waist, revealing pale bare skin, and rolled up its sleeves all the way to the shoulder, in a valiant attempt to make it wearable and stylish. Lying on a pile of folded blankets, he shifts his weight to get comfortable. None of the sleeping bags could fit the height of a god.

_Yes, Raiden. Tell me your thoughts._

_Seeing Liu Kang shook me to my core. He… he confirmed all my fears about myself and the consequences of my actions._
Shinnok grits his teeth. *That was not Liu Kang. It was a reanimated, corrupted copy of him.*

*It was still him, at least partly. What he said to me…* Raiden closes his eyes, unable to continue. He pulls his blue flannel shirt tighter around himself, fending off a sudden chill. *All you have ever said about me is true. My arrogance, my blindness. Are you happy now?*

Raiden, *shut up.* Shinnok sits up, gripping Raiden by the collar of his shirt, and pulls him up to face him. *Your faults are not what I thought they were. You are hardly free from them, but you are a selfless soul. Stupidly selfless.*

Raiden gazes deep into his eyes mournfully.

Shinnok drops him, laying back against the blankets. *Look at all you’ve done to help these children. Allow yourself credit for that, at least, rather than all this insufferable self-pity.*

*I did nothing. I endangered them on the journey, with the phone signal. Another of my unforeseen failures.*

*That damned mercenary would have found them one way or another. You’re bringing them all together to make this silly team of yours and fight for Earthrealm. Even after so many years, you’re devoted to that purpose. It’s a particularly absurd form of single-mindedness, but it’s…* He hesitates. Admirable.

*What?* Make no mistake. *I don’t want Outworld to win, any more than you do. So I am placed in the unfortunate and difficult position of being on the same side as you, Raiden. And, in light of that, I am forced to admit, occasionally, that you might have done something right.*

Raiden closes his eyes, letting Shinnok’s words wash over him. *I find it a challenge to believe that.*

Well, let us look at what you’ve done. *You went to the trouble to bring me back to life.* To cure myself from--

Oh, let’s not get into the technicalities of blame. You did that. *You also retrieved me from captivity in Outworld, brought together a group of diversely talented warriors, and successfully revived a soul from the dead. I suppose you deserve a little bit of credit there.*

*I… cannot disagree.*

Besides, it would reflect badly on me if I did not properly respect my enemy. *If you were not formidable, then it would be highly embarrassing for me, since you’ve defeated me in the past.*

Raiden tries to wrap his mind around this logical leap. *If you insist…* Shinnok pauses to collect his thoughts. *I truly wish Liu Kang had not spoken that way to you. It hurt you deeply. To fight Outworld, which is my priority, we need you in good health and sound mind, not consumed with worry and doubt.* He grabs Raiden’s wrist with strong fingers, feeling the weak rhythm of his pulse. *The path before us leads to victory. Don’t dwell on blaming yourself. Blame me instead; it’s healthier.*

Raiden manages a very faint smile. *I am already an expert at blaming you. I thought I would try an alternative for once.*
Stick with your strengths. It suits you. Shinnok turns over onto his back, pulling the crossword puzzle book out from inside his shirt. He contemplates it, then lays it aside. I don’t want to rest, but I’m aware that should.

Allow it to yourself. We both need to heal. Body and mind.

I’d be a hypocrite to disagree. Shinnok closes his eyes, steadying his breathing to a slower rhythm and slowly lulling his physical form into a state of slumber. Here’s hoping our fortunes improve.

Raiden curls up, blankets piled over him, and follows suit. And may the next day bring no sorrows. A peculiar wish.

All I want is peace.

Shinnok reaches out in the dark, gripping Raiden’s wrist again. I understand. Peace suits me more than I expected.

I agree. Good night, Shinnok.

Good night, Raiden, until we meet in the morning once more.

Tucked away in the comfortable solitude of a barn attic, the gods fall asleep at last.
The city is restless at all hours. It is a drastic change from the temple’s peace and solitude.

Cassie’s apartment is spacious and comfortable, a few floors above a generic coffeeshop. It’s close enough to the ground that, if ever necessary, she can vault out onto the fire-escape for a quick retreat. It’s also highly secure; she’s made sure of that. Besides, she’s made friends with all the coffeeshop employees, and gets free breakfast half the time. It helps that she’s a generous tipper. Might as well share that SF salary.

Unfortunately, her familiarity with the staff earns a few raised eyebrows when she comes in the next morning, disheveled and stressed, with two gods trailing behind her.

They look slightly more normal than usual, but the effect is very strange. Both have shed their armor, still dressed in the Briggs hand-me-downs. Cassie has forced Shinnok to untie his shirt and wear it like an actual human being, which is more or less impossible for him. They’re still distinctly taller than everyone else, and Shinnok is still inhumanly pale, and Raiden’s eyes are still glowing. There’s just nothing to be done about that.

She trots through the door, waiting for the conspicuous pair, and flashes an apologetic smile at the cashier. “Hi, Carla. Mornin’.”

“Hi, Miss Cage. You want the usua...” The lady’s voice trails off, surveying Raiden and Shinnok. A light of recognition flickers dimly in her eyes. “Are those...?”

“Uhhhh.” Cassie stalls, tapping her foot. Well, that didn’t last long. She prefers to leave the details of her job -- and life -- unclear to everyone outside SF. It seems her disguise attempt for these two hasn’t gotten very far. “...They’re… family, visiting from out of state. Uncle Ray and Uncle Shin.”

Shinnok sniffs distastefully. “Really? Is that the best you can do? How implausible. I don’t even look anything like you.”

With an exasperated sigh, Cassie pushes him towards the staircase. “Haven’t you ever learned to cooperate?”

“Cooperation, Miss Cage, is the opposite of what I excel at!”

Raiden has wandered over to the counter, and is politely ordering a cup of tea.

Cassie groans, and dashes over to drop a twenty in the tip jar before dragging Shinnok up the steps two at a time. She trusts Raiden to be able to handle minor social encounters with normal humans… mostly. Shinnok, not so much. He’s a walking liability, among other things.

- - -

Later, they’re all sitting around the living room, settled into a comfortable silence. Raiden lets himself through the door quietly, using the house key Cassie’s lent to him, rather than drawing any attention with a lightning teleport. Shinnok is dramatically draped across the couch, flannel shirt re-tied in his peculiar style. He’s busy reading a mystery novel he’s plucked off Cassie’s shelf. Despite himself, he’s enjoying it. Raiden seats himself in a chair across from him, warming his hands with the mug of tea, while Cassie taps away at her phone screen. Time to check in with the team.
[CC] How are u all?

[JB] Good :D Sareena’s settling in. Went to the pet shop and bought supplies for the kitten, and new clothes for her. I’m not sure she’s used to living indoors :( 

[CC] Ok good. Wait u let her keep that thing?

[JB] Couldn’t say no. Besides, I miss having a cat. But we’re fine. There’s room enough for two in here… if she doesn’t set off Dad’s custom security system. It’s all good :) 

[CC] How abt Cyrax?

[TT] not bad. spent some time talking about the tournament plans. he doesn’t seem to care that i’m with the shirai ryu. gave him my tablet, he hasn’t put it down in five hours. apparently he’s a history buff.

[JB] Lol. He’s got a lot of catching up to do ;|

[TT] you’re telling me… he’s been emailing frost asking questions about the modern lin kuei.

[JB] Emailing?

[KJ] haha yeah
[KK] Frost keeps complaining about it, I can hear her from out on the balcony
[KK] it’s okay though
[KK] I gave her my gym membership and library cards, I’m just gonna let her do her own thing and scope out the city

[CC] Prob for the best. Thx for doing this btw. I owe u all one.

[KJ] you might owe us more than one
[KJ] not sure though
[KJ] one and a half?

[JB] :P Don’t worry about it. It’s nice to have a roommate again, actually. And a cat :3

[TT] i’ll second that. i’m still glad to be on the team, but it was a big change to move away from the clan. cyrax is a good guy. but i’m not sure i want to know what shinnok did to bring him back…


[KJ] don’t remind me
[KJ] wait, don’t you have him and raiden at your apartment?
[KJ] make sure he doesn’t escape
[KJ] and you better childproof your cabinets

[CC] Not sure that’d help. Hes just sitting here reading n glaring at me.

[KJ] as long as he isn’t actively necromancing just leave him alone
[KJ] DON’T take him to any museums
[KJ] please
[KJ] that reminds me though… does anyone have an art museum membership card for Frost? she wanted to see some famous painting or something

[JB] Yeah :) I got one, I’ll give it to you this afternoon.
[KJ] cool thanks
[KJ] anyway just don’t let shinnok blow up half of downtown while he’s here

[TT] i’ll get him another crossword puzzle book, if you think it’d help keep him occupied. it seemed to do the trick yesterday.

[CC] Don’t sweat it, I got this under control. Thx tho.

She pauses as her phone buzzes in her hand, announcing a new message.

[SB] Where are you? Need a status report.

Cassie flips back to the group chat, firing off a hasty farewell.

[CC] See u all later. Take care n dont die.


[CC] Hey Mom. Don’t need to worry. Both gods r here w/ me. Situation under control.

She glances across the room. Shinnok is steadily building a pile of finished mystery novels beside the sofa, reading at inhuman speed. Raiden has found the untouched sketchbook Cassie’s grandmother gave her for her birthday, and is drawing silently, with a light touch of the pencil upon paper. She wonders if he’s any good. Probably. He’s a god.


[SB] Don’t give him anything with an internet connection. That’s the last problem we need.

[CC] No prob. Not planning on it. I think I can keep em safe n busy for the next week. Bookshop down the street if I run out.

[SB] Just so you know, Kano has been informally released from custody. Allowed to escape. We’ve already found the BD lair within this city. Unfortunately, it was empty when he arrived. All tech and associates gone. We’re tracking his path now.

[CC] Wheres he headed?

[SB] It appears to be the Sky Temple coordinates.

[CC] Thats bad. Whats the plan?

[SB] Intercept him. We’re working on it.

Cassie inhales sharply, struck by yet another of her wild schemes.

[CC] I got a better idea...

[SB] Am I going to be angry or proud?

[CC] Ur gonna see. If he gets into Sky Temple then the gods r free to punish him appropriately. Realm laws I guess. God rage beats a SF attack, sry.

[SB] Both of them are currently in your apartment, Cassie. They are not free to defend the Temple.
[CC] Not both. Ur forgetting one. Kano wont attack unless he thinks he can get S or R. He doesnt remember Fujin. No1 does. Poor dude.

[SB] What about him?

[CC] If we can get Kano to attack then Fujin is free 2 do the godly wrath thing. Might get rid of him better than SF can.

[SB] You want Fujin to defend the temple alone? Bad idea.

[CC] Nah. Leave it 2 me.

[SB] I’m checking back in half an hour.

[CC] By then Im gonna have it all set. U just watch. Bye Mom.

Cassie stretches her legs, unfolding them and crossing them again, and leans back against the couch with a heavy sigh, opening a different messenger app. Here goes the hard part.

Meanwhile, Shinnok and Raiden, sitting in seemingly peaceful silence, have been engaging in heated debate outside Cassie’s mental earshot, discussing the events of past days. By now, they’ve worked out a few disagreements from across the room, and are just bickering about trivialities.

This ‘mystery’ novel is hardly a mystery. Absurd. I foresaw the ending of the plot from the very first page!

Raiden eyes him quietly, building his sketch with careful crosshatched lines. Shinnok, the omniscience of a god does not lend itself to enjoying mystery novels.

I want to see if any of these are good enough to fool me. So far, none at all have passed the test.

How many have you read?

Twenty-three in the past two hours.

Hmm. Perhaps you would find it more pleasant if you stopped to enjoy the writing. Read the book at the pace it was meant to be consumed.

What a foolish idea.

It was merely a suggestion. Raiden tilts his head to the side, studying Shinnok’s face, the curved lines of his jaw and sharp angle of his nose. The wrinkles around his eyes stand out against his pale skin, his mouth set in a smug line. He captures these details with careful pencil marks, shading gently. I am not wrong, but you are, of course, free to ignore me.

I always try my best to do so. Shinnok shuts the book, folding a corner to mark his page. Drawing? One would hardly think you were an artistic type. I’ve never seen you do that.

I find it a worthwhile hobby. As if gods could have hobbies… but it is a way to make the endless hours more pleasant. He smiles softly. We have hardly had any leisure time to spend together. In fact, since your revival, we have had barely any rest at all.

That fact hasn’t been lost on me, Raiden. He returns to the novel, idly skimming through the chapters. What are you drawing?

Raiden hesitates, and looks away, suddenly very interested in Cassie’s bookshelf.
Shinnok rises from his seat, crossing the room in quick strides, and tries to peer over the edge of the paper, but Raiden snatches it away and holds the sketchbook out of reach. *That is impolite. I am not done.*

*Yes, but what is it?*

*I am attempting to draw YOU, you insolent creature.* Raiden stands up, thoroughly exasperated, and glares at Shinnok until he backs away. *For many centuries, I tried, and was unable. I could not quite remember the details of your face. It haunted me. Now I have resolved it.*

*Should I be flattered?*

*Unlikely. I’ve already drawn twelve different people, as well. Portraits of those I once knew...*

Shinnok looks down his nose at the other god. *Saved the best for last, then?*

*You are not going to be the last in the sketchbook.* Raiden furrows his brow, confused. *Why would you be? There are so many pages left.*

*Well, then never mind that. I fully expect to see the drawing when you’re done.* He huffs, and studies the book much more intently than necessary, a pointed show of ignoring Raiden.

Cassie belatedly notices this whole exchange, setting down her phone to pay attention to the gods. They haven’t said a word, but it looks like they just had some sort of argument...

Wait a minute.

“Are you two *talking* somehow?”

Shinnok runs a hand through his hair, sighing exasperatedly, as if he’s forced to explain the simplest facts to some sort of imbecile. “We are gods, Miss Cage!”

“Not what I asked!”

Raiden sips his tea. “We thought it would be more polite to argue in silence, since we are your houseguests.”

“You know what? Not even gonna question it. You two can argue all damn day, as long as you’re not bothering me with it.” Cassie’s attention switches back to her screen as an incoming message pops up. “*Finally! Plan’s all set. ...Hey, Raiden, can I ask you something?*”

“Yes, Cassandra?”

“Theoretically, if Kano and the Black Dragon were going to attack the Sky Temple on the belief that you and Shinnok were there and he wanted to kidnap you, would you be willing to have someone pretend to be you to trick Kano into attacking, so he’d have officially violated god territory and could get his ass booted off the side of the mountain? ...theoretically.”

Raiden blinks.

“Do whatever is necessary to defend the Temple.”

“Thanks. Perfect. Also, uh, do you have insurance against water and/or ice damage?”

Raiden hesitates. “You would have to ask Fujin. Though much of the temple’s physical structure is linked to my own life force, he oversees the maintenance of the external areas.”
“Good enough for me.” She fires off a message quickly. No time to waste.

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Far, far away, atop a tranquil mountain, Kuai Liang is waiting patiently to meet another god.

He politely wipes his feet on the doormat as Fujin welcomes him in, brushing snow particles from his pants. Self-conscious for once, he smooths back his hair with an impromptu ice comb, adjusting the padded armor over his broad shoulders. “I appreciate your invitation.”

“And I appreciate your assistance. This is a matter of utmost secrecy. I was informed of the plan a mere few hours ago by General Blade.” Fujin strides beside the shorter man with quiet footsteps, his long silver braid falling between his shoulderblades. He’s appreciating the peace and quiet since the recent absence of Shinnok and Raiden. While he is glad to be on Earthrealm, and has befriended a handful of its inhabitants, Fujin is a more solitary creature by nature, introverted and thoughtful. “Have you brought as many of your warriors as possible?”

“Nearly the entire clan. I understand how urgent this is, and I’m no friend of Kano.” Kuai Liang pauses, looking Fujin right in the eye. “We will eliminate the Black Dragon attackers, one and all, and decimate Kano’s forces. This, I guarantee. But, Fujin, you must deal with the man yourself once he sets foot within hallowed ground.”

Fujin nods solemnly, hands folded. “That corresponds with what General Blade told me. Who informed you?”

“Frost. She simply sent me a screen-capture of her conversation with Cassandra Cage requesting the Lin Kuei’s assistance. She didn’t even bother to retell the request to me personally.” Kuai Liang’s mouth twitches upward at one corner, a slight hint of amusement. “She is brusque, but efficient. I cannot fault her there.”

Fujin agrees with a quiet murmur and a nod, leading the way down the corridor once more. “We have maps of the woods and mountainside surrounding the Sky Temple. I suggest you study them closely, and prepare a strategy. Kano is unpredictable, but he will not rush in unprepared.”

“We are the Lin Kuei. We are always prepared.” Kuai Liang follows close behind Fujin, matching the pace of his steps. “In the past, we have erred severely, but we have re-earned the trust of Special Forces and Raiden himself. You need not worry.”

“I am not worried. I am just… cautious. There is a clear and important distinction.” Fujin withdraws a key from a hidden pocket, and unlocks a dark and heavy door, swinging it open with a gust of wind to reveal a storage room lined with shelves of yellowed papers. Obligingly, Kuai Liang removes a few useful maps as Fujin points them out, laying them carefully on an empty table and photographing each in turn. “Those should be sufficient. Many thanks, again.”

“We are the Lin Kuei. We are always prepared.” Kuai Liang follows close behind Fujin, matching the pace of his steps. “In the past, we have erred severely, but we have re-earned the trust of Special Forces and Raiden himself. You need not worry.”

They share a respectful bow. After Fujin leads his guest back through the Sky Temple’s exit, the cryomancer pulls his mask over his mouth and departs across a makeshift bridge of ice, becoming Sub-Zero once more.

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Not long afterwards, Fujin stands before a mirror, carefully un-braiding his hair with a frown of mild frustration. He’s worn it this way for so long that he simply can’t imagine anything else. He
tilts his head to the side to inspect himself. Headband gone, and long hair cascading over his shoulders, he feels quite strange. The white shirt and embroidered tunic of blue and gold feel even more foreign.

*How does Raiden fit into this?* Clumsily, he pulls the cowl over his head, wrapping it up tight and fastening it with an invisible seam. It’s not too uncomfortable, but he rubs the back of his neck, smoothing out some strands of hair. *I suppose it is not impossible. And the hat...*

Fujin puts it on tentatively, peering at his reflection from beneath the brim. Somehow, he looks both jarringly similar to Raiden, and strikingly different.

It’s certainly simpler to masquerade as Raiden, rather than Shinnok. Raiden is most identifiable by his trademark outfit and glowing eyes. As for Shinnok… well, if anybody could easily disguise themselves as him, Fujin would find that a bit worrisome. The fallen god’s looks are quite distinctive.

He takes a few tentative steps, softening his gait to resemble the steady pace of Raiden’s walk, rather than his own bold strides. Would Kano even be attentive enough to compare the body language of the genuine Raiden versus the temporary fraud? Fujin doubts it. Still, there’s no harm in being prepared.

Satisfied, he pushes the door open… and comes face to face with a very surprised Sonya Blade.

“Hi, Rai--Fujin.” She makes an attempt not to stare. He’s a dead ringer for him. “That is uncanny. Are you two actually related?”

“Gods are not made by the usual family structure. We simply… come into being, if it is willed. So the answer is both yes and no.” Fujin sets off towards the temple entrance, readying his nerves for the task ahead. It has been some time since he had to fight, and never while in disguise… it’s daunting. “How did you get in here unnoticed?”

“Sub-Zero let me in. We’re all on the same page with the plan, but I’m not participating. It’s better if the Black Dragon doesn’t know I’m here. Actually, I’m mostly just here to see Kano get his ass kicked.”

Fujin is as gracious as ever. “You are welcome to stay and watch, though I cannot guarantee that my abilities will be as spectacular as Raiden’s. I am only a wind god.”

“Good enough for me. Hey, you got me beat. I’m not exactly divine.” Sonya flashes him a smile. “If you need me, I’ll be up in the stands.” Wasting no time, she bolts off down the temple corridor, making her way to a higher balcony. She wasn’t entirely truthful; if Fujin goes down by some chance, she’s ready to leap in as backup. But it’s better not to tell him that. She doesn’t want to demoralize him before they’ve even begun.

---

Deep in the woods, Kano shivers.

He’s wearing three coats, two pairs of layered gloves, and long underwear. And he’s *still* cold.

Damn that Frost girl. If he ever sees a cryomancer again in his goddamn *life*, he’s going to shit a brick.

Escaping was stupid-easy. SF stuck the ice-encased Kano into one of their armored trucks and loaded him up, but they didn’t count on him melting the whole block with his chest laser when he
regained consciousness halfway through the trip. Clumsy gaps in security, as usual. He should start
keeping track of how many times he’s gotten away from those idiots.

Holding a pair of binoculars to his good eye, he squints, catching a glimpse through the fog. In the
Sky Temple courtyard, a tall figure in white clothes and a rain-hat is pacing back and forth, hands
folded behind his back.

“This is it, boys.” He slaps his knee, and stands up, shoving the binoculars into the front of his
coat. With a snarling grin, he surveys the vicious faces of his surviving Black Dragon comrades.
“Ready to bag us a god?”

They agree with eager shouts, reaching for their weapons and hurrying through the forest as Kano
launches himself down the trail at top speed, leading the bloodthirsty pack.

Coming up to the gap between the path’s edge and the Sky Temple balcony ledge, he shifts his
weight, vaults forward, hurtles across in a somersault….

And as his boots make contact with the solid stone, he hears a cacophony of screams and crushing
ice.

Sub-Zero pulls down his mask and waves at Kano from across the way, nodding in recognition.
Then, in his open hand, he conjures a blade and sweeps it across the group of frozen figures,
shattering them in a spray of crumbling ice and blood.

Kano roars in rage, firing off a blast from his chest laser, but Sub-Zero blocks the blow with an ice
shield and kicks the remaining fallen bodies off the cliff. As he and his clan retreat, Kano struggles
to leap across the gap in pursuit, but finds himself tossed down by a gust of wind, knocked onto his
back on the courtyard pavement.

The figure in the rain-hat bends down, lifting Kano with ease by the scruff of his neck. With
dawning recognition, the merc realizes that this man’s eyes are glowing white, not blue. His skin is
darker, his brows are more grey. The look on his face is not Raiden’s usual puzzled dismay, but
rather a detached, polite distaste.

“I’m going to need to ask you to leave.”

Kano shoves the god with a sudden punch to the chest, sending him reeling backwards. He’s filled
with a powerful, indescribable mixture of shock and rage. His cyber eye burns bright red like a
man possessed. “Who do you think you are? Why, you little-

Calmly, Fujin silences him with a well-timed slap. He removes the hat and cowl and sets them
aside, revealing a dragon-patterned tunic beneath. With a bit of magic, his hair whips into a braid
again, coiling up on its own, and a simple headband settles across his forehead. He folds his arms
across his chest, completely unfazed by Kano’s meltdown.

“If you're not willing to leave, I must remove you from the premises.”

Kano lunges for his throat, fingers twisted into claws. “I’m not leaving without a prize!”
“Ah. What a pity.” Fujin opens his arms, conjuring a swirl of wind that grows from a wisp to a full-fledged gale. Air currents whirling with mighty force, he catches Kano in the storm’s spiral, lifting him in rapid sickening circles as the tornado grows larger.

Without even a backwards glance, he raises his arms and makes a fist, gesturing towards the vast chasm beyond the Sky Temple. The tornado spits Kano out and flings him into the abyss, and he falls with a fading scream.

Fujin bends down to pick up Raiden’s hat and cowl, tucking them under his arm, and retreats inside, allowing himself a faint, satisfied smile. He did well today.

---

Cassie’s spent the day in the coffeeshop to escape her new roommates, typing away on her laptop and taking care of some SF paperwork she’s supposed to have done two weeks ago. Mom’s off at the Sky Temple, supervising the operation based on Cassie’s plan. Frankly, she’s not entirely expecting it to work -- but then again, she never does.

Her messenger pings with a familiar tone.


She fist-pumps, offering a silent thanks to one or other of the gods upstairs. Literally upstairs.

[CC] Lol did u take a pic?
[SB] Had to.

She peers at the blurry photo of a tornado with a red-glowing figure caught in it.

[CC] Bye! We shouln’t need 2 worry about him for a while.
[SB] Knock on wood.

Cassie smirks, and taps her knuckle on the table, just to be sure.

[CC] Goin home now?
[SB] On my way. You and your team have some serious training to do, you know.

[CC] Havent forgotten. Give us a couple days to settle in ok?
[SB] Extension granted.


She switches to a different program, forwarding the picture with a gleeful grin.

[Cass] Thought u might wanna see this.
[Frost] lol. bet kano still has freezer burn

[Cass] Haha. Seriously thx. Sounds like the LK saved the day.
[Frost] no prob. doubt he’s gonna be dumb enough for round 3
[Cass] Heres hoping. Stubborn bastard. Hey are u liking the city?

[Frost] yea it's pretty good. thanks i guess. nice to be here

[Cass] Glad to have another girl on the team tbh. And you can make free ice cream 4 us.

[Frost] when hell freezes over

A message pops up in another window.

[Jacqui] Cassie, Dad says Norbert's gone missing :( Do you know anything about this?

Cassie clenches her teeth, drumming her fingers on the table.

[Cass] DID U KIDNAP JAX’S CAT???

[Frost] even cats need a vacation. bye

[Frost is now offline]

Cassie groans and slams her laptop shut, trudging up the flights of stairs back to her apartment. Forget saving the world; missing cats and unruly teammates are the real problems.

She arrives to a perplexing scene. Somehow, Raiden has found the Beginner’s Recipe Book that Jacqui bought her as a joke when she moved in. Currently, he’s rummaging through the cabinets, stacking miscellaneous recipe ingredients on the table. So far he’s located pasta and spaghetti sauce, several cans of soup, and a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter. The intentions are unclear. Cassie dearly hopes he doesn’t plan to combine these.

He greets her with a gracious smile from across the kitchen. “Cassandra. Since you have extended your kind hospitality, I thought I would repay the favor by preparing meals to save you time.”

“Please don’t do that. Seriously, don’t. If you need a new hobby, just take up knitting.” A god trying to cook food is another headache she doesn’t need. She leans against the doorway, setting her laptop down on a table and ignoring the messenger beeps. “I can understand the pasta and soup, but peanut butter?”

“That seems to be a popular sandwich among mortals, if combined with fruit jam.” Raiden opens a high cabinet, standing on his tiptoes to reach all the way to the top. “This one says Strawberry. Would that be suffic-- agh!”

Repelled like a magnet, the jar leaps from his hands, flying towards the tile floor in agonizing slow motion.

Cassie drops to her knees and slides across the hallway, desperately trusting her reflexes. Right before it can hit the ground and shatter, she grabs it, cradling the glass vial close to her chest.

“...close one.”

Visibly shaken, she gets up, stumbles over to her room, and shoves it into a shoebox. Holy shit. Hopefully they won’t find it there.

When she gets back, Raiden is staring at her open-mouthed, absolutely perplexed.

Cassie feels she owes him a brief explanation. “Remember the ritual? Yeah, you almost dropped the fucking JAR OF EVIL. Leave the cabinets alone!”
Raiden staggers backwards, and sinks into a chair, head in his hands. The full possible consequences of the mistake hit him all at once. “Oh… no…”

Instantly, guilt gnaws at Cassie’s conscience. She approaches him and pats him on the shoulder comfortingly, leaning down for a hug. “You meant well. No harm, no foul. Just… leave it alone.”

Shinnok observes the scene from the doorway, holding one of Cassie’s grandmother’s antique encyclopedias. “He’s been like this all day.”

She eyes him. “Bit of light reading, huh? Careful. Those things are vintage.”

“I am well aware.” Shinnok scoffs, dropping the hefty volume onto a nearby bookshelf. “Perhaps you can dissuade him from further experiments. Earlier, he managed to stick bread into the toaster… and attempted to pry it out with a fork.”

Cassie’s eyes open wide. “Holy shit!”

Raiden shrugs weakly. “I was unhurt.”

“Raiden, people electrocute themselves that way! You didn’t die because you’re a fucking lightning god!” Cassie peers at the damaged appliance, cursing to herself. “How are you two so brilliant and so stupid at the same time?!!”

Shinnok places a hand on his chest proudly. “That is my specialty.”

“Not a compliment!”

“Criticism from my enemies is a compliment!”

“Doesn’t work that way, Shinnok.” Cassie carefully lifts the expired toaster and carries it over to the door, sticking it into a garbage bag. Another one bites the dust. “But you can keep trying, if it makes you feel better.”

He follows after her demandingly. “I beg your pardon?”

She faces him down, hands on her hips. “Hey, I beat your ass when you were in full rage-demon form. You’re not going to intimidate me when you’re sitting around my apartment wearing one of Jax’s shirts like a crop top and reading a fucking dictionary.”

Shinnok stares at her, lips pursed, eyes glowing in pure distaste.

“…I suppose I can accept that.” He retreats, grabbing Raiden by the arm and dragging him reluctantly out back to the living room. “Come along, mighty thunder-god, lest you manage to destroy something else in this wretched apartment before I can stop you.”

Cassie rests her forehead in her hands and sinks down into the kitchen chair, elbows propped on the hard countertop. Regretfully, she studies the pile of assorted ordinary mortal food. At least Raiden was trying to be helpful. That must count for something.

Jin might have had a point about child-proofing the apartment.

Oh well.

With a sigh, she fetches a knife from the drawer and begins to make a peanut-butter sandwich.
As always, the devil is in the details.

There’s a science fiction convention in the city this week, bringing enthusiastic devotees and casual fans pouring through the event halls. As luck would have it, it’s held a few blocks down from Cassie’s apartment, clogging traffic and filling the streets with visitors hauling bags of merch and talented fans in full costume.

She really should have paid attention to this. It’s going to make driving to the SF base downright impossible.

Raiden hasn’t yet regained the full energy to teleport, and Shinnok either can’t or won’t. Their only solution lies in physical travel, and it seems they’re out of options… other than the subway.

Ironically, one of the SF base entrances is through an underground train station, tucked away below several flights of stairs guarded by an inconspicuous door. There are a handful of different access points, for the sake of security and avoiding bottlenecks, but some are known only to the highest levels of clearance.

Raiden knew of this entrance. Cassie previously did not.

After some indignant sputtering, she agrees to the plan. It’s safer and less dangerous than going through another of the doors at street-level, where they might be intercepted by hostile forces. Besides, there’s a benefit to the chaos of the convention. Raiden and Shinnok will stand out in a crowd much, much less.

Cassie rummages through her closet, tossing items onto the ground in a careless pile. “I have an old Klassic Sub-Zero costume. Jacqui and I went as him and Scorpion one year. You think that might help get through the crowd?”

“That is highly doubtful.” Raiden ponders the issue, waiting patiently outside the door. I would suggest dressing in civilian clothing, as we have done.”

“You’re not dr--” She hesitates, backing out of the closet, and leans over to catch a glimpse of the godly duo. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

Raiden has used a bit of his magic to manifest a new outfit for himself, an elegant knitted blue turtleneck sweater with gold embroidery at the collar and sleeves. Perfectly normal pants and socks with sandals complete the look. Aside from the eyes, he would be quite passable as a civilian.

Even more astonishingly, Shinnok has followed suit. He’s chosen an emerald and golden waistcoat and button-down shirt for himself with patterned burgundy sleeves, resembling the designs on his upper arms. He’s still wearing ornate boots that look more akin to armor than normal clothing, but it’s a tremendous improvement.

Cassie raises her eyebrows. She hasn’t a clue what to say, really. She never had the slightest belief that these two would ever try to conform to normal society. But here, they’ve actually made an effort to make her life easier. “Good. That’s real good. You should be able to get through the subway just fine, assuming you don’t look directly at anyone.”

Shinnok adjusts the collar of his shirt with a dignified yet scornful air. “How far we have fallen, to resort to public transportation… First a van, then a helicopter, then a truck, and now this new
indignity.”

Raiden elbows him in the side, provoking a grumble of dismay from the other god. “Have you no gratitude for the efforts of Miss Cage? Without her, we might be trapped in the custody of the Black Dragon organization.”

“Wouldn’t call it custody. More like prison.” Cassie throws on a blazer over a long-sleeved shirt, buttoning it hastily. It doesn’t really match her jeans and combat boots, but it’s not like anyone is going to be paying particular attention. “That reminds me. Jacqui’s escorting you. If anyone’s tracking me, it’ll shake things up and keep you two out of trouble.”

Right on cue, the doorbell rings. It’s more a formality than anything else -- Jacqui already has a key, and slips through the entryway after alerting them that she’s arrived. She’s less surprised by the gods’ new appearances than Cassie had been, though that might be a side effect of her current jaded exhaustion. “Looking good. Honestly, I had the idea that we could just let them dress in their normal armor. Everybody would think they’re cosplayers.”

Cassie laughs. Now that would be a sight. “Too much of a risk, but it’s not a bad idea.”

Jacqui tightens her backpack’s straps across her chest and waist, fastening it securely. Her gauntlets are stowed away in there, as usual, plus a handful of other helpful items. It’s also locked shut and made of knife-resistant fabric, just in case. “Good point. I’m trying my best to avoid risks right now. You ready to go get the others?”

“Yes. I’m meeting Frost and Sareena at the art museum. Cyrax, Jin, and Takeda are leaving from the park. We’re all taking different paths to arrive at SF. Sonya’s orders.” Cassie pats the utility bag strapped to her hip, trusty pistol and ammo tucked safely inside. It’s best not to display her weapons publicly on subways and streets, but she wants to have it ready, just in case. Recent events have left her wary. “Just take it easy. If you see a group of con people, blend in with the crowd. It’ll be safer.”

“What if somebody recognizes them?”

“Who would possibly believe it?” Cassie retreats towards the door, holding it open for the motley crew behind her. “C’mon. Let’s get this over with.”

Single-file, they head down the stairs, careful not to trip on the steep steps. Shinnok is only too eager to escape. Raiden waves a polite goodbye to the cashier.

- - -

“Oh, for the love of--” Jacqui waits by the wall of the subway station, glaring at her two uncooperative companions. She’s fine with helping Raiden, but all things considered, she’s not too thrilled about working with Shinnok. Despite his occasional help, she isn’t even slightly convinced of his loyalty.

Grudges in the Briggs family run deep.

The station is unexpectedly busy, but that’s not necessarily bad. If anything, it might make it easier to avoid any pursuers. “It’s just a crowd. You’re not going to get swept away. Hold each other’s sleeve if you need to.”

Raiden and Shinnok glare at each other, disgruntled.

“Fine! We’re doing this the hard way.” She grabs Raiden’s wrist in one hand and Shinnok’s in the
other, wrinkling her nose in distaste. Roughly, Jacqui pulls them through the crowd, cutting across a swarming group of passengers scrambling to get on a departing train. Under her breath, she repeats the subway track number and scheduled times, reassuring herself. She grew up splitting her time between a farm and a military base, and even now, she still doesn’t have the same familiarity with city life as Cassie. Besides, she has the most important task of all. Playing bodyguard to two gods isn’t easy.

All three rush through the turnstile, scanning the tickets supplied by Cassie, and leap from the platform onto the second-to-last subway car, just before its doors slam shut. Unused to the motion, Raiden staggers and catches himself on one of the railings, gripping it tight and staying still throughout the journey. Jacqui takes the nearest seat, while Shinnok, looking aggravatingly smug, folds his arms and stands in the middle of the subway car, balancing seamlessly despite the train’s jarring movements as it starts and stops at each station.

“Okay, I get it, Shinnok. Great balance, godly powers, I’m impressed. You can sit down now.” Jacqui rolls her eyes, twisting in her seat and looking back through the window to check the name of this station. “Alright, we’re near Vogel University, we need to make it to Boon & Beran station. One more to go. Damn, there’s a lot of con people here. Look at those two.” She chuckles under her breath at a pair of cosplayers dressed in revenant makeup and elaborate spiky armor, wearing special contact lenses that add a vivid red glow. “Too soon. But I bet they’ll win the costume competition.”

Raiden freezes, turning slowly.

The dark emperor Liu Kang stares at him from the train platform, and slowly smiles.

Paralyzed with instant dread, Raiden grips Jacqui’s wrist, pulling her to her feet. There’s no time to let emotion cloud his judgment and endanger the others’ lives.

“We need to go to the front of the train.”

He locks eyes with Shinnok, whose face is a calm mask hiding pure fear. They both know.

“Jacqueline. Those are not costumes.”

Bolting towards the open doors of the last car, Liu Kang shoves his way through the crowd. Kitana follows close behind with her fan-blade in hand. They nearly miss, but land on the floor of the train, scrambling to their feet hastily. Kitana staggers backward, mesh cloak caught in the doors, but with a slash of her fan, she frees herself, clawing at the latch on the passage between the cars. Liu Kang moves her aside, and melts it outright with a fistful of flame. The door swings open.

Someone in the last car chokes out a compliment. “Great special effects! Good luck!”

But they’re already off and running, melting and slicing each latch as they find them stuck shut.

Near the middle of the train, the cars switch to a larger double-decker style, with multiple rows of seats above and below. Liu Kang and Kitana exchange glances, nod in unison, and Kitana vaults up to the top, while Liu Kang charges through the bottom, checking the faces of each passenger. They are all disappointingly normal humans, not the prey they seek. He pays them no mind.

Raiden, Jacqui, and Shinnok are dashing towards safety as fast as they can, scrambling through the train and shutting the locks behind them, but they’re not swift enough. Raiden senses Liu Kang’s sinister presence only a few cars behind, and the emperor and empress are gaining on him at a rapid pace.
With a deep breath, Raiden pulls his amulet from an inner pocket, activates it, and clasps it to the front of his sweater, an energy boost surging through him. It’s a minimal amount of reserve power, and still not enough to teleport, but it will do what he needs.

**Shinnok. No time to waste. Be ready, and conjure skeletal barriers between each door as we pass through. I do not care what kind. Slow them down.**

Then he takes hold of Jacqui and tucks her under one arm, grabs Shinnok with the other, pulls him closer, and, yelling a powerful incantation, blasts forward through the train doors, shattering a Raiden-shaped hole in the metal and glass. A bright shield of lightning advances before him, clearing a path as he shoots towards the front car at twice the speed of the train itself. Behind him, Shinnok frantically summons a barrier of giant skeletal hands between each subway car, building structures of bone that will, if nothing else, keep them safe for a few more minutes.

The train skids to an abrupt halt as it arrives at Boon & Beran station, the conductor frantically slamming his brakes amid the chaos of three intruders breaking a hole in the entire train. The instant the doors fly open, Raiden leaps through the exit and hits the ground running, still carrying Jacqui and Shinnok. Kicking open a small utility door and following the secret path, he leaps down a flight of steps and hurtles through the air, speeding to the end of a long empty maintenance tunnel. He barely feels their weight, powered by lightning and adrenaline. He won’t let the consequences of his mistakes haunt the people he’s meant to protect.

Raiden lands on the ground just long enough to catch his breath, then takes off down another hallway, weaving through a maze of bleak dimly-lit corridors and descending several floors of concrete staircases. Finally, he runs out of power, and skids to a halt, dropping Jacqui and Shinnok as gently as he can. Hands on his knees, he doubles over, sides heaving with deep labored breaths. “We should be near the Special Forces base entrance.”

Somewhere above them, they hear the clatter of armored footsteps.

“Raiden, you’re worn out. Let me take over from here. I think I can do this— I think—” Shinnok grimaces, clenching his jaw, and flexes his arms, trying his absolute best to summon the magic he needs. “I should have this power. I used to…”

Moments pass. Nothing happens. With a frustrated groan, he drops to his knees, throwing up his hands and shouting an ancient incantation.

In a shower of red sparks, a grisly clawed reptilian demon steed materializes from thin air in front of him, a leather riding-harness fastened across its back.

Jacqui scrambles backwards, gauntlets lighting up with plasma as she shoves her arms into the straps. “That’s going to help us?!”

“Grab the harness and, for the love of all the realms, do not let go!” Shinnok grasps one of the straps with both hands, heart pounding. He doesn’t know the path to the base, but they’ll make do. Raiden does the same on the other side, leaving room for Jacqui in the middle, and reluctantly she loops her fingers around the sturdy leather, holding as tight as she can.

Shinnok speaks to the sinister animal in an indecipherable tongue. With a roar and a sudden leap forward, it lunges into action and runs along the corridor, hurtling across the concrete nearly as fast as Raiden and his electric flight. Jacqui yells in surprise, gripping the strap with trembling hands, but Raiden has his teeth gritted in intense focus. So does Shinnok. They seem to be communicating.

**Take a right turn and descend the staircase. Go down two levels, then follow the path, take two left**
turns, and go up a level again.

Shinnok conveys the instructions to the demon creature, which obeys readily, nearly shaking off its passengers as it vaults over the railing of the stairs. Are you trying to make them lose our trail?

Yes. Did it occur to you that the rulers of the Netherrealm can probably track a Netherrealm creature?

Of course it did, you absolute fool. Take us to the door, and from there, I will send the beast on a different path to mislead them.

Ah. That is an intelligent strategy.

I have them sometimes. Where is the entryway from here?

At the end of this corridor, take either a right turn or left turn.

RAIDEN--

A-- right turn. He closes his eyes, recalling the pathway. Right turn, down the long corridor, left turn, another right turn, go straight and take the second door to the left.

The demonic beast obeys these orders like a well-trained racehorse, its broad shoulders surging with powerful muscles as it gallops down the corridor. The harness strap is still holding, thankfully, but it is starting to fray.

Not even bothering to slow its momentum, the scaly animal shakes off its hapless passengers, who land in a heap beside an unremarkable utility door. From there, it continues its romp through the corridors, leading the pursuers on a merry chase at its master’s orders.

Raiden fumbles with the latch, yanking open the door, and ushers his two companions inside. Once safe within the closet, they lock it from within, trembling in silence.

He feels his heart sink.

This is not the entryway door.

Jacqui is absolutely petrified with fear, beyond anything she’s ever felt. She wraps her arms around one of the two gods, face pressed against their chest as she tries desperately to gather her wits. She can’t actually tell which of them it is. At this point, she doesn’t care.

The other, slightly taller, gathers them both in his arms too, clinging tight. Both have their eyes closed, hiding the distinctive glow. Rivalry no longer matters at a time like this. They just need to stay calm and wait until the threat is gone, and then they can safely exit and find the correct door. Raiden isn’t going to tell them yet, but right now, the only way is out. Yet as long as Liu Kang and Kitana are still pursuing them through the murky depths of the subway, they cannot draw their attention and flee. Waiting is the only option.

Minutes pass, feeling like hours of silent agony. The captives can hear each other’s heartbeats, a visceral reminder of the fear that has not yet passed.

At last, heeled boots click along the concrete hall, moving closer with each threatening step. Softer padded footsteps follow close behind, barely audible.

Inescapably, they approach… and stop beside the utility closet, waiting.
There is nothing but silence. Jacqui clings to the gods, hoping desperately that they will all emerge safe and sound from this sudden hell.

Shinnok in particular is miserable. *Raiden, it’s me they want.*

*They want me just as badly. They will take us both if they wish.*

*If we meet our end today, I… I should tell you something.*

Raiden sighs softly. *What is it?*

*I never wanted to hate you.*

Shinnok swallows hard, imperceptibly quiet. The words have burned within him silently for days.

*I admired you, Raiden. My respect turned to envy, and then to loathing. I wish it never had. I… I wish I had understood that, Shinnok, and not done all that I did to you.*

*For ages, we have wronged each other grievously. I… no longer can.*

Raiden breathes out softly, a weight lifted off his shoulders at long last.

*Nor can I.*

The loud footsteps resume again, clicking away down the corridor at a determined pace. Finally, they turn the corner and vanish. All three feel their hearts surge with hope, daring to imagine they might be free from this torment.

Still, they don’t move for minutes.

Finally, Raiden reaches for the door, unlatches it, and, very slowly, pushes it open, letting in a crack of light and air.

The warped, grinning face of Liu Kang stares back at them, eyes blazing with hate.

Jacqui shrieks, and leaps backward, scrambling to activate her gauntlets, but they’re slow to switch on, flickering dimly. In the meantime, Liu Kang has grabbed Raiden by the throat and wrenched him out of the closet, sharp nails sinking into his skin as the god struggles weakly.

The dark emperor lifts his victim off the ground with unholy strength, flinging him onto the hard concrete floor. “*You dare flee me once more! Pay your penalty!*”

Jacqui finally presses the correct button on her gauntlet and hits Liu Kang square in the face with a plasma-enhanced punch, delivering a solid kick between his legs. He reels backward, stumbling, but his armor protects him, and he regains his footing in an instant. His fists light up with fire that smells of death.

She wrinkles her nose, scanning the scene. Kitana is nowhere to be found, but high-pitched shrieks combined with reptilian growls are echoing through one of the stairwells. Well, that solves *that.* She faces down Liu Kang, balancing herself in a fighting stance. “*Hey!*” Her voice shakes and cracks, but she keeps talking, summoning all her bravery. “*You’re not the one giving orders around here right now! You have no authority in Earthrealm.*”

Shinnok has rushed to Raiden’s side and is hauling him back onto his feet with unexpected strength. Raiden winces, holding one of his arms at an odd angle, but a surge of bright magic from
Shinnok slowly restores him to health. Jacqui watches them out of the corner of her eye, keeping Liu Kang’s attention focused on her.

The revenant growls in an eerie snarl, speaking with a hollow echo that fills the corridor. “You will return what was taken from Netherrealm’s treasures, or I will take it myself.”

Jacqui doesn’t quite have Cassie’s fearless bravery and talent for wisecracking. Not in this kind of crisis. But she speaks up again, grounding herself in the reality of the situation. They need to get out of here. Liu Kang needs to be appeased or else he’ll never go away. He’ll chase them as long as Shinnok lives. It’s inevitable.

A distant wisp of a fantasy tale floats through her memory, a story about a trickster thief who once robbed a fairy kingdom of a sack of gold pieces. When confronted by the high court, he made amends… by returning the bag. The gold pieces no longer existed, having been melted into a statue. Bound by convention, they were forced to accept the bag as repayment, and release him.

She grits her teeth, a grim smile crossing her face. Who knew those stories would ever have any practical value?

Now’s the time.

“What was taken, Emperor?”

Liu Kang catches her in the sights of that horrible red glare, fire flaring in his ghastly hands. His voice is raspy when he speaks again. “A bag was taken, containing the decapitated head of Shinnok.”

Jacqui runs a hand over her hair, straightening her cornrows. She squares her shoulders, comforted by the backpack’s familiar weight, and clasps her hands in front of her, adopting a respectful stance.

“I will return all that I can to you. I have the bag, and will gladly give it back. Unfortunately, the decapitated head of Shinnok no longer exists, so I am unable to present it to you.”

Liu Kang hisses in a surge of seething anger, pointing at Shinnok. “He is right there!”

“Shinnok himself is there, in completely intact form. You’re correct about that. However, he has been re-created, and the original item, consisting only of his head, is no more.” She chooses her words with great care, speaking boldly. “Should you attempt to remove his head again, it would still not be the same. That particular prize is lost. I apologize.”

As Liu Kang flings a searing fireball at Jacqui, she falls to one knee to dodge it. Working quickly, she slings her backpack off, drops it on the ground, and rummages around in it to withdraw a ziploc bag, carefully preserved. Wincing, she unzips it and pulls out its contents, brandishing the very same cloth sack they’d taken from Netherrealm, which once held the infamous head.

Liu Kang tries to snatch it from her hands, but she grabs it and holds it tight, meeting his wicked stare despite her paralyzing fear. “By the laws of the Realms, I have repaid the debt of my theft.”

She lets go of the bag, her brown eyes bright with new confidence.

“Now get out of Earthrealm! Your excuse is gone.”

Liu Kang stands still, then slowly moves towards her, silent and dreadful.
“I’m counting!” Jacqui stands her ground, hand extended. Her gauntlet is aimed right between his eyes. “Five…”

He advances another step, unyielding.

“Four…”

Raiden is prying at one of the utility closet’s walls. Shinnok is intensely focused, fingertips pressed together. She keeps her eyes locked on Liu Kang, who hasn’t yet noticed them. She’s not going to let him touch the gods again. Not today.

“Three…”

He raises a fist, his forearm engulfed in flames.

“Two…”

Jacqui leans back, balancing her weight.

“One!”

Just as Liu Kang ascends into the air to kick her across the corridor, Jacqui matches him with a flying leap, pummeling his ribs with armored knuckles. Knocked backwards, he lets out a vicious screech, fetid breath escaping him as he opens his mouth.

And right before he hits the floor, Shinnok’s trusty demon beast materializes in a shower of red sparks, snatching the dark emperor up in its strong jaws.

It rears onto its hind legs and whirls around, galloping down to the corridor. It disappears with the sound of a revenant’s screams.

Shinnok waves a hand dismissively, but is shaking with fear, nerves frayed to their limit. “Begone with you! Back to the Netherrealm… at once…”

In the closet, Raiden has finally managed a miracle.

He pries open a small door that’s hidden as part of a wall panel, filling the closet with a welcome surge of bright light. He did get the directions right. The Special Forces base, and the comfort of certain safety, awaits below.

Wordlessly, he ushers them closer, pushing Shinnok through the small gap without much caution. Jacqui scrambles through on her own, and Raiden follows, wincing when he lands. Immediately, walls shoot up around them, forming a square barrier. The floor drops without warning.

Seconds later, the hidden elevator lands safely a few stories below. The walls descend slowly, releasing them from the unexpected transport cage.

Jacqui gets to her feet again with shaky steps. The gods stand behind her, flanking her at each side.

The rest of the team is gathered there already, none the worse for wear. They’ve picked up lunch along the way, and have been waiting patiently for the inexplicably delayed third group. They can’t start training until everyone’s arrived. By now they’re restless, and Jacqui hasn’t even been answering her texts.

Cassie greets them with raised eyebrows, hand on her hip.
“Hi. What took you so long?”

Jacqui sags against Raiden’s shoulder, who stumbles off-balance, caught by Shinnok with a timely grab.

She meets Cassie’s eyes. “Traffic was hell.”
It’s still unclear to Shinnok exactly where Raiden stands in the public eye.

As far as he knows, the thunder god is perceived as a well-meaning but mysterious creature of dubious motivations. He occasionally makes the actual news, he frequently appears in blurry tabloid photographs, and his supernatural status is doubted by at least one society of skeptics. Overall, he is somewhere between a minor celebrity and beloved cryptid.

As for himself… well, Shinnok’s disappointed. The amount of people who actually believe in his existence, for starters, is a minor percentage. The consensus seems to be that his short-lived attempts to conquer Earth were either a government conspiracy or a publicity stunt from the film industry.

Speaking of publicity stunts, it seems the sci-fi convention has been blamed -- or credited -- with the subway disaster. Nobody is taking ownership for the incident, but it’s widely believed that it was for promotional purposes for some sort of show or game. All resemblances to actual individuals, living or dead, are entirely coincidental.

Furthermore, it has come to Shinnok’s attention that -- following the assorted inter-realm clashes that drew the media’s attention over the past several decades -- there is some sort of worthless game about it. Fatal Konflict, or some such. He can’t say he’s thrilled to find this out. One of the old installments has a character suspiciously similar to him, or at least some cheap mockery of him dressed in a harlequin’s outfit. There’s also some sort of fictionalized Raiden in it, naturally, although the resemblance is vague at best.

If he absolutely must engage with mortal culture, he will tolerate film, literature, and art. Secretly, he actually enjoys a great deal of it, though he’d never, ever admit it.

Much to Cassie’s dismay, he got his hands on an internet-equipped tablet from the Special Forces base on the very first day. She had tried to confiscate it, but he was in a state of tremendous distress from that nightmarish subway chase, and rather than argue with a god on the verge of a panic attack, she just let him keep it. So, now, while the others duel and train in the SF base, Shinnok has been resting at the sidelines and letting his energy recover, informing himself on current events at the press of a button. In between his scathing observations on mortal culture, he has also gotten himself addicted to impossible puzzle games. It keeps him occupied, if nothing else.

Raiden has taken it the worst, following that whole disastrous encounter with Liu Kang and Kitana. Jacqui was shaken, but managed to get through it all intact, and spent several days just pouring her energy into hard training until she reached the top of the duel win/loss list. She coped by keeping busy, Shinnok distracted himself with media, but Raiden…

Well, everyone has been trying to look after him and lift his spirits, but he is oddly quiet now, a note of grief in his voice that’s far worse than ever before. His eyes seem more dim.

He is getting stronger, though. He has recovered enough energy to teleport safely across the city, bringing Shinnok with him on each journey. It’s a relief to them all that his powers have returned, following the exhausting ordeals that seem to come fresh with each day.

Tomorrow, they’ll return to the sky temple, and let Raiden heal at last, as a god should.

But today, the youths all seem to have something planned. Shinnok looks irritably over the top of
his tablet, turning off the device and studying his reflection in the glossy screen for a moment. Really, he doesn’t look half bad disguised as a mortal. He switches his attention to Frost, who meets his eye and slides across the room towards him on a path of ice, landing smoothly. Shinnok nods in approval. He can respect her attitude.

“We’re going to the art museum.” Frost offers Shinnok a hand to get up from the bench, but he ignores it and springs to his feet without aid, lifting off the ground with his sparkly magic. She shoves her hands back into her pockets, rolling her eyes. “Suit yourself. Want to come?”

“What is there worth seeing?”

“An exhibit on world mythologies. We all thought it’d be fun to bring you two.” Frost gestures to Raiden, who’s engrossed in thought, working away at his sketchbook. “Especially him. He might even have made it into a couple of the old myths. Not so sure about you.”

Shinnok huffs, his ego slightly wounded. “The impertinence--!”

“Just telling it like it is. Sorry, dude. I think you’re more interesting than all those stuffy justice-and-goodness gods, but a bunch of people three thousand years ago didn’t agree.” Frost waves at Raiden to try to catch his attention, but he seems not to notice. “It’ll be neat, though. There’s all kinds of myth. European, African, Asian, American... Cyrax wants to see the exhibit too. He’s from Botswana. Sareena I’m not sure about, but I guess they might have some art with demons in it.” Frost whips out a museum ticket from her sleeve, shoving it at Shinnok and tucking it in the pocket of his waistcoat before he can object. “Give it a chance. We’ll be by the door. Leaving in ten minutes.”

She slides away with the grace and poise of a skater, leaving a trail of ice behind her that melts into a puddle in seconds.

Shinnok withdraws the ticket and turns it over, studying it. Upon closer inspection, she’s given him two of them. *How considerate.*

Raiden tunes into his thought, loud enough to hear. Finally, he glances up from his sketchbook. Hm?

*Frost offered us museum tickets. We should go, I suppose. It’s our last day here in the city for now.*

*Ah. Yes, I keep forgetting.* Raiden closes the sketchbook, rising from the seat, and zaps the paper and pencil into his storage dimension with a flick of his wrist. *It would be courteous to join them. Besides, we may learn something.*

*Apparently, there’s some sort of mythology exhibit. Shinnok sniffs with a dismissive air, shoving the tickets back in his pocket. You may be featured here and there in it, if Frost is to be believed.*

*There are many representations of thunder gods across the mortal cultures. Not all of them are me.* Raiden offers a faint smile, eyes crinkling. *Still, it could not hurt to check.*

*It’s good to see you smile. You haven’t seemed like yourself, ever since the disaster at the train station.*

Raiden is self-conscious for a moment, faltering. *That was the worst in a long line of disasters, as of late.*

*You’re not to blame for that one. Besides, Miss Briggs handled it more than competently. And you did bring us to safety.*
Perhaps. But I would have been unable to do that without your aid.

We seem to be constantly rescuing each other from our failures. So it shall be. I’ve accepted it. Shinnok turns on his heel and strides towards the doorway, ushering Raiden along with him, who trails slowly. What were you drawing?

Raiden catches up with him, producing the sketchbook from thin air, and flips it open to the latest page. On the page, he’s drawn a half-finished portrait of the revenant Liu Kang, exactly as eerie in pencil as in person.

Shinnok shivers instinctively. Don’t remind me.

I believed that if I drew him, he would leave my mind’s eye, but so far I have not been able.

Try not to think of it. Shinnok catches the forlorn Raiden by the elbow and roughly leads him to the exit. He needs a distraction of some sort. Maybe the museum will help. “We are ready to depart whenever you are.”

Cassie greets them with a salute. “Hi, boys. Glad you’re coming. Raiden, how are you feeling?”

Raiden shrugs halfheartedly. “While I truly appreciate your courtesy and hospitality, I will be glad to return to my temple. I am in need of healing and peace.”

“I know. One more day, then we’re sending you two back.” She smiles broadly, showing a flash of genuine affection. “And we have the day off. So let’s make it count.”

This subway ride is much, much more peaceful than the other.

Hopping through the doors one by one, the kombatants and gods all grab hold of rails and settle in along the subway car, appreciating its empty space. Once again, Shinnok stands in the middle with his arms folded, rather enjoying the adrenaline rush as the train speeds through the tunnels. Frost and Sareena are making conversation from nearby seats; Sareena seems to have her new kitten tucked safely into her coat, which none of the others have noticed. Cyrax is reading a hefty history volume with a well-worn library label. The four other teammates are having a lively chat across the aisle, laughing occasionally. They needed this chance to relax.

But Raiden is sitting apart from them, brow furrowed with a troubled gaze as he puts pencil to page once more, drawing his dark visions.

When the train halts at an intermediate stop, Shinnok joins him, dropping into a nearby seat and leaning towards the other god. What’s the matter?

Raiden shows him the page, hesitantly. In spare but vivid pencil strokes, he’s brought Quan Chi to life, rendered in simple greyscale but still blazing with that demonic power that they both remember so well. He won’t leave my visions.

Visions?

Yes. They keep returning. I am unsettled. I do not wish for this.

Try to rest, Raiden.

I cannot. They filter through my mind whether I want it or not. It has all been growing worse since
the encounter with the emperor and empress. Raiden can’t even say their names. Not anymore. I am hoping the return to the Sky Temple will ease this torment.

Shinnok twists in his seat. Face me.

Raiden does, sketchbook resting in his lap.

He places his fingers on either side of Raiden’s temples.

Raiden winces instinctively.

Shinnok lowers his gaze, looking away. Trust me.

I do. Raiden takes a deep breath. Go ahead.

Shinnok lets a pain-easing spell flow through his fingertips, an inversion of the dark magic he normally practices. This does not come as easily to him, but it was still worth learning. After a few seconds, he lets go, folding his hands in his lap and turning away from Raiden. Maybe that will help.

...It does. Raiden lifts his head, seeing a bit more clearly, with the haze of the headache now reduced. Thank you.

It is the least I can do. Show me your drawings.

He opens his sketchbook once more, lightly leafing through the thin sheets. They are all visions. Drawing them has helped resolve these troubles, but some, I cannot shake.

Shinnok studies the pages. They are all the revenants, in their cured forms. The noble face of the former Queen Sindel gazes out from the paper, eyes bright with magic. Beside her is the princess Kitana, once an elegant assassin, with dark braided hair and a confident smirk. Then Jade, the lively and sensible Edenian bodyguard, and a few others Shinnok recognizes, too. Kung Lao, the bold and daring young fighter, with his trademark hat and a hopeful smile. Nightwolf, the Native American shaman, one of Raiden’s closest friends. Others take him a bit longer to identify. Smoke, once of the Lin Kuei, a dignified masked man with a shock of silver hair. Stryker and Kabal, two police officers known only briefly by Raiden, but who remain in his memory nonetheless.

And there is a portrait of the human Liu Kang - unfinished, with lines trailing off into nothing.

Raiden sighs, and shuts the book, holding it tight to his chest. At least their faces are still with me... most of them.

Your work is excellent. It resembles them all strongly. Or at least, it must have. With a pang of guilt, Shinnok realizes he’s never met them face to face, not before they became revenants. He does know what they once looked like, but not in the way that Raiden did. I am glad you have them in your memory. Now you have them on the page.

I suppose so. It is better than nothing.

Raiden settles back in his seat as the subway car comes to a shuddering halt, swaying on the tracks. Shinnok doesn’t bother to get up again. They simply sit and think, pondering their circumstances in silence. For immortals, the burdens of the past only ever grow worse.

“Are you ready to go? It’s our stop.” Frost arrives in front of them, tugging Raiden by the sleeve of his sweater to encourage him off the train. He flinches, leaving his state of meditation with an
accidental zap of static electricity. She winces and withdraws her hand, rubbing her fingers. “Hey. No need to do that. I get the message. Just c’mon.”

Shinnok wants to smirk, but just can’t quite.

Raiden pushes himself up from his seat, almost colliding with the roof of the subway car at his full height. Stooping a bit, he steps out onto the platform, shakes his head to clear his thoughts, and rejoins the group with Shinnok close behind. Now he seems fine, with his usual quiet friendly attitude back in place. He doesn’t want the others to worry about him any more. “Let us go, then. The museum awaits.”

“This way!” Frost takes off running, chased by a giggling Sareena. Testing his powers, Cyrax follows in teleporting leaps and bounds, with the four other teammates bolting along in hot pursuit. They clear a path along the sidewalk, dodging passerby, who seem unfazed. After all the events of the past months, particularly the recent subway debacle, nobody bats an eye at minor incidents of magic in public.

Shinnok and Raiden look at each other, and shrug. Shall we?

May as well. Shinnok takes off first, conjuring a shower of purplish sparks in his hands, and clenches his fist, aiming towards the group and soaring along at rapid speed. Raiden follows suit, arms extended in front of him, flying parallel to the sidewalk in an arcing stream of lightning. They outpace the youths easily, hurtling past them midair, and land on the steps of the art museum a few blocks later, identifying it by its massive pillars. The crowd is sparse; the youths were smart to schedule the break for a weekday. The building is quite majestic. Shinnok thoroughly approves.

Raiden lands on one of the large empty front steps, taking a seat as his lightning flickers out of view. Shinnok follows suit, laying across the concrete, and gazes up at the bright cloudless sky. Both are out of breath and exhilarated by the chase. Well, that was fun.

Yes. Raiden smiles in a moment of genuine joy. They will catch up to us any minute.

Sure enough, Frost comes flying into view, dashing up a set of frozen steps she conjures from ice in midair, and leaps from the top platform onto the stairs, landing with a hard thump on the pavement beside Raiden. Sareena follows suit, executing a perfect backflip and vaulting through the air like a gymnast. Jacqui wins third place with a boost from her gauntlets, leveraging the power against the pavement to send her hurtling towards the group with a safe landing. Cyrax teleports up to the museum door, catching his balance carefully each time, and Jin and Takeda tie for fifth, touching the top step at the exact same moment.

Cassie is nowhere to be found.

A minute later, she saunters up to the others, eating an ice cream cone. “I love the street food around here. You all missed out.”

Jacqui laughs, leaning against one of the stone pillars. “Seriously? You know you can’t bring snacks inside!”

“I know.” Cassie polishes it off at an unbelievably fast pace, tossing the wrapper into the nearby trash. “Just needed to power up before we go in. I’m betting one of you is gonna get lost in the museum, and we’ll have to explain why you accidentally fell into some ancient tomb.”

All eyes turn to Shinnok.

He raises his hands, looking offended. “Why me? What have I ever done wrong?”
Cassie is quick to reply, a wide grin crossing her face. “You want a full itemized list, or just the ‘Best Of Shinnok’s Stupid Mistakes’ highlight reel?”

“Oh, forget I mentioned anything!” Shinnok mutters something highly impolite under his breath and brandishes the tickets from his pocket, handing one to Raiden, who’s stifling a chuckle under his breath. “You stop laughing.”

Raiden lifts an eyebrow. “It is funny.”

“No, it’s not.”

“It is a little bit funny.”

“Come on, nerds.” Frost impatiently ushers them all towards the entrance. Sareena has already made it past security, deftly disguising the kitten, who is currently tucked in the front of her cozy shirt. Cyrax goes next, politely surrendering his book for inspection, while Jacqui shoves her gauntlets into her backpack and goes to check it at the front desk, explaining it’s for a costume. Cassie, Jin, and Takeda have all had the sense to ditch their weapons, and breeze through the line, with Cassie flashing her access badge in case anyone starts asking any questions.

The museum clerk glances up from her desk, studying the large group and checking their tickets. It seems to be a college trip. Everyone is dressed in exercise wear. One of the girls seems to have stage makeup on, or maybe it’s a new goth trend. Another has spiky blue hair. She supposes that’s just the style among the youths these days.

Nearby, the strangely tall man in the sweater is making polite conversation with one of the security guards about the weather, and the one in the green waistcoat is pestering another one with questions about the mythological art exhibit, specifically if there is anything to do with a certain god named Shinnok.

There is not. He looks tremendously disappointed.

Frost goes back to retrieve the two of them, guiding them along with an exasperated sigh. She runs a hand through her hair, and a shower of snowflakes falls out. Hopefully nobody notices. “You guys are impossible.”

The gods both protest at once, saying something about wanting to be polite to the humans, and defending the idea of asking questions about one’s own presence in a world mythology exhibit. She ignores them, putting on her headphones without even turning on any music.

As soon as they get through the doors, they all take off in different directions, rushing towards their areas of interest. Jin opts to go with Cyrax, curious to learn about the ancient African legends. Takeda heads towards the central highlights of the exhibit, wanting to see the best of everything. Sareena makes her way towards the section related to underworld mythologies, while Frost hunts down the Norse myth gallery. With much teasing from Jacqui about the famous Mediterranean war cult, Cassie sets out in search of the ancient Greek art.

This leaves Shinnok and Raiden standing around, debating their options. They exchange glances and migrate towards the nearest hallway, intrigued by some sort of ancient object that neither can quite identify.

To be quite honest, I’m enjoying myself already. I wonder if there are any artifacts of true power here, accidentally mislabeled as art items...

Shinnok, no. Absolutely not.
I wouldn’t steal from a museum!

Yes, you would.

...yes, I would, theoretically, but I won’t. He crosses his arms, looking sternly at Raiden. I suppose if you were to be anywhere, it would be in the Japanese mythological section, would it not?

Most likely. As for you, I am uncertain. I saw some interesting scholarship comparing you to the Norse figure Loki.

Oh? I’d like to see those.

There are also some articles suggesting that you are the devil, but the logic seems lacking.

Shinnok snorts out loud. The idea of Raiden researching mortal theories about him is both bizarre and oddly sweet. What a thought.

Anything related to you might be in the underworld section, where Sareena went.

Perhaps. Let’s look for you first.

Yes. Lead the way. Raiden follows Shinnok as he sets out towards the East Asian corner of the gallery, brushing past museum patrons and moving through corridors almost too swiftly to keep up. He comes to a halt in the center of a large room, illuminated by dim spotlights high in the ceiling. Old paintings and prints are mounted on the walls, protected by shatter-proof glass, with informational plaques and inscriptions available nearby.

Shinnok peers at one of them. There’s something here about Fujin and Raijin...

Raiden comes closer, looking over his shoulder. The paper seems to depict a pair of demonic creatures with pointed ears and vivid grimaces. Hmm. While I appreciate the artistic intent, those do not particularly resemble us.

Shinnok takes a step back, and squints at Raiden, pursing his lips. Oh, I don’t know. An unflattering depiction, surely, but maybe, at a distance… if the artist had poor eyesight.

Raiden cracks a smile and turns away.

Shinnok’s attention has already shifted to another plaque, something newer and more brightly colored, with a bold inscription. He raises his eyebrows in surprise, bending down to inspect it. Well, well. Would you look at this.

Raiden approaches his companion once more. What?

Shinnok reads it out loud, silently. ‘For those interested in the connection between current legends and past mythology, please see the gallery in the next room.’ He straightens up, and makes a beeline for the door, elbowing his way past a few disgruntled attendees. Oh, my. This is promising.

Raiden follows him through the door, and comes to an abrupt halt, eyes widening.

Amid colorful display panels devoted to cryptids, urban myths, and heroes of folklore, there is a corner of the room dedicated to Raiden himself, complete with a few carefully framed scraps of old parchment and stone engravings that resemble a figure wielding a lightning bolt and wearing a rain hat.

Shinnok can’t help but grin. Raiden, you’re famous. Now, truly, you have ascended to the next tier
of glory. Look at that.

Raiden approaches slowly and cautiously, hardly believing his eyes. He mouths the words on the inscription: ‘Raiden, Lord of Thunder: Modern Hero, or Immortal Legend?’

Shinnok eyes the artworks, still unable to hide a smile. Those aren’t half bad. I am not sure they depicted your face quite right, but one can appreciate the effort.

Raiden ignores him, reading the passage. ‘Raiden, as we know him, is a controversial and mysterious public figure whose adventures have often captured our collective imagination. Whenever we hear of Raiden -- who, if reports are to believed, wields the power of lightning -- he is frequently battling Earth’s enemies, inevitably making headlines. Is he a descendant of the ancient Raiden who appears in several mythological texts and art, or is the identity simply a role handed down over time to worthy successors? Or, as some theories suggest, has the very same Raiden been protecting Earth for many centuries, defying the limits of mortality? As with all fragments of old stories, the answer is unclear. For now, our own Raiden remains a cherished figure of modern myth.’

He steps back and ponders this, his hand pressed to his heart.

Shinnok watches him from some distance away. Despite himself, he is happy to see Raiden happy. What an odd and jarring thought, to feel positively towards his fellow god, after fighting in endless bitter strife for so, so long. Yet, on some level, it’s a relief. Resentment is a heavy load to carry. Raiden… deserves this.

Raiden can’t quite tear himself away from the exhibit. He just stands there quietly with his hands folded behind his back, studying the art and absorbing the moment. His responsibility is a thankless one, but somehow, it helps to know that even one person cared. Somewhere, there is a museum employee who wrote this little plaque, collected these art items, and placed them together for the world to see, calling attention to Raiden and his lonely world-saving efforts.

A group of children rush into the exhibit room, scrambling to see the artwork and read the stories, followed closely by a weary teacher. A young girl lugging a heavy mythology encyclopedia approaches the corner and stands on her tiptoes to take a look, paying special attention to Raiden’s information plaque. Clearing his throat, he moves out of the way, standing aside.

A minute later, with a flash of realization, the little girl looks at Raiden, eyes widening. Her jaw drops.

Raiden offers a gentle smile.

The little girl nods knowingly, sharing a conspiratorial look and a delighted grin. Then she goes back to reading, her little face lit up with complete joy.

Heart filled with warm hope, Raiden exits the room once the sentimental moment has passed, moving down the corridor towards the rest of the gallery. Shinnok follows close behind.

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After a long journey around the various world myth exhibits, they find Sareena in the underworld section, delightedly studying an old painting on the wall. Stretching floor to ceiling, it vividly depicts demons scurrying around various levels of a flaming inferno. She greets them with a friendly wave. “Look, this artist was quite accurate! I wonder if he ever lived in Hell?”

Shinnok mutters under his breath. “Haven’t we all?”
A laugh echoes from somewhere behind them.

Shinnok doesn’t even turn around. “Hello, Frost.”

“Hi. Look, I found you.” Dryly, she points to a crude representation of a horned man holding a pitchfork. “Exact resemblance.”

Shinnok is completely deadpan. “Why, it could be a self-portrait.”

Raiden is still glowing with happiness. He’s wandered off to inspect another wall, and is now studying a frieze of ancient carved murals, a Greek marble creation. “Hmm. This scholar believes that Hades, god of the dead, had a helmet with two horns. Perhaps he was based upon you, Shinnok.”

Shinnok approaches to investigate. “Doubtful.”

“It is possible. He ruled the Underworld, after all.” Raiden continues reading the plaque, wrinkling his brow. “Although he was not put in chains... that we know of.”

“A far luckier man than myself, then.” Shinnok strolls along the corridor, inspecting the art leisurely. It’s nice, for once, to be in no rush. As they go, Frost points out a few more highly inaccurate demonic counterparts, laughing under her breath each time. He rolls his eyes, secretly amused, despite his better instincts. “I wonder where the others have gone.”

“We will find them again in due time.” Raiden looks quite serene, pleasantly lost in thought as he drifts along the passageway. “Shall we depart? It’s nearly the late afternoon.”

“Is it?” Frost quickly checks her watch. She’s the only one of them that actually keeps track of time. “Guess so. Hope we didn’t lose the others somewhere in here.” After a moment of thought, she shrugs. “Their problem. Yeah, let’s go. Seems like you all had fun. I’m glad we went.”

With a faint satisfied smirk, Shinnok leads the way towards the exit. He did, truly, have fun. Perhaps for the first time in forever.

- - -

Nothing ever goes smoothly.

Raiden gets stopped at the exit by security as the metal detector beeps, a shrill jarring noise. Embarrassedly, he rummages around in his pockets, producing Cassie’s house key, several museum information brochures, and his amulet.

The guard looks disapprovingly at the amulet, then at Raiden, then back again, scrutinizing the gleaming gold item.

“Were you trying to steal that from the gift shop?”

Raiden blinks at him. This is unexpected. “I beg your pardon?”

The guard jerks a thumb in the direction of the gift shop, somewhere over his shoulder. “You gotta pay for the replicas.”

Raiden hesitates, utterly bemused. “This belongs to me. It is my property. It has been for thou-”

“He forgot to ask the cashier for the receipt.” Shinnok swoops in and saves the day, hauling the unfortunate Raiden off towards a display stand of museum replicas, including daggers, small
figures, and a few amulets. He plucks one off the shelf resembling Raiden’s own, cutting in line to get to the cashier. “I will take exactly one of these, please.”

The cashier barely even reacts to the two imposing figures standing before him. “That’ll be $22.50 with tax.”

Shinnok rummages around in his pocket, brandishing a handful of strangely engraved Netherrealm coins. “Will this suffice?”

The cashier stares at him.

“I’m sorry, my uncle’s visiting from out of town and he hasn’t gotten his currency converted yet. I’ll pay.” Cassie comes to the rescue of both gods, slapping two $20 bills on the counter and ushering the unfortunate pair away from the register once she’s grabbed the receipt. “Keep the change.”

The second time, they navigate successfully through security, trailed by the misfit pack of kombatants. Cyrax bought some particularly interesting art history books from the museum shop, while Jacqui picked up a few gifts to send back to her mom and dad. Jin is holding a bag of ancient warrior action figures. Takeda and Sareena were content just to look at the art. Frost is wearing a new sweatshirt with a parody of a famous painting, transforming the subject of the portrait into a well-dressed cat.

The trip home is a fairly uneventful subway ride. After buying several bags of food from assorted street vendors, the mortals are now eating as quickly as they can, preparing to arrive back at their home bases. Sareena is petting the tiny striped kitten, drawing the attention of a few random bystanders, and Raiden has his sketchbook out again. Shinnok, sitting across the aisle by himself, takes the time to rest and collect his thoughts in a rare moment of tranquility, closing his eyes.

When he looks up again, Raiden has his head in his hands.

Shinnok rapidly crosses the subway car and takes a seat beside him, gripping his shoulder. *Raiden?*

*It seems I was doomed to be free only briefly.* Raiden brushes back his hair, cloudy wisps falling free from the ponytail at his nape of his neck. *I am sorry. I… hoped that your magic would help keep away the headaches, and the visions, for more time. Please, do it again.*

*I am powerless to help.* Shinnok suddenly feels terribly desperate, guilt gnawing at the pit of his stomach. *I cannot cast that again for hours.*

*Oh…* He squeezes his eyes shut. *I understand.*

*I’m sorry, Raiden.*

*It is not your fault. And do not contradict me about that.* Raiden grips the edge of his sketchbook tightly, fingers trembling. *It is something about the subway. I am uncertain why. Once we emerge above ground, and return to Cassandra’s apartment, I should be all right.*

Shinnok sets his jaw, teeth clenching tight. *If you say so. What were you drawing?*

Raiden opens the sketchbook, silently revealing a hasty sketch of D’Vorah. Drawn in bold lines, she rises from the ground, lifted by her sharp stingers and savage pincers. Wriggling larvae and grubs are clutched in her clawed hands. Her wicked compound eyes are wide with glee as insects swarm around her, surging towards the edge of the page.
Shinnok recoils and shudders. Fear courses through his veins like burning poison. His own past visions flash through his mind, recalling the horrors that would await any victim of D’Vorah’s parasitic grasp.

No. No. Not this. It cannot be.

Raiden rips out the paper and crumples it in his fist. Memories of the past.

Yes. That is all. Shinnok steadies him with a hand on his shoulder, squeezing tight enough that Raiden’s focus can’t drift away. I promise you that.

Raiden offers a halfhearted smile. Never fear. According to the museum, I am a cherished figure of modern myth. I will be all right.

Shinnok can’t help but share the smile. Who am I to disagree with scholarship?

As the subway empties and the group races up the stairs, Raiden drops to his knees on the sidewalk and gulps in lungfuls of fresh air, his mind finally clearing as if a noxious fog has lifted. The others double back in alarm, bending down to check on him, but he reassures them quietly, not wanting to cause needless fear. “I am fine. I was simply… weary. All is well, now.”

“It’s okay.” Cassie paces along beside him, trotting quickly to match the gods’ long strides. Darn their heights. She can barely keep up. “Let’s get back to my place. You two can sit around and rest a while, if you need it.”

“I am sure we’ll be entirely all right.” Shinnok’s voice is dry with sarcasm. He reaches into his pocket, producing the clearly fake replica amulet with a dramatic flourish and a wry smirk. “Who knew it could be so easy to find another source of divine power?”

Cassie snatches it from him, laughing. “Hey, I paid for that!”

Raiden follows them along the broad sidewalk, absorbing the ambient noises of the city, and gazes deep into the sky, studying the comforting blanket of clouds. At last, he finds his peace of mind, safe in the company of old foes and friends alike.

This too shall pass.
“You guys ready to go?” Cassie’s joking tone hides a note of sadness. Though the gods haven’t exactly been the ideal houseguests, it’s been nice having company for a week -- especially since once of them is Raiden.

The other one… well, he’s still nobody’s favorite person, but he’s grown on her a bit.

In preparation for the journey back to the Sky Temple, both have returned to their usual gear. Raiden looks dashing in his tunic, gauntlets, and greaves, his cowl fastened tightly and trademark hat perched on his head. Shinnok has returned to a simpler outfit, a pointy-shouldered contraption held together by laced straps and an elaborate belt. Though he’s grown accustomed to daily life without his headdress, it’s comforting to have it back on. Besides, it looks good, in his opinion, framing his high cheekbones and slender neck. He admires himself in the hall mirror before returning his attention to the other two, mentally preparing himself for the journey.

“Yes. We are ready.” Raiden squares his shoulders, clasping his hands behind his back. Shinnok folds his arms across his chest, resting his weight on one hip in a graceful pose. “Once more, we offer our thanks for your hospitality and kindness.” Though Shinnok is less likely to admit it, they are both tremendously grateful. They’ll still see the team now and then, planning to return to the city every week, but after all the recent ordeals, a break is necessary for the health and sanity of all involved. Fujin has guaranteed the safety of the Sky Temple, and they will be back in a flash.

Gathering Cassie in a quick hug, Raiden offers a final farewell, steps out onto the balcony, and lifts a fist to the sky, conjuring a lightning surge that blinds her for a moment. At once, he vanishes, materializing away to the distant temple.

Shinnok inspects the girl, silently weighing the value of his dignity and aloof reputation. Then, very reluctantly, he attempts a half-hug, putting an arm around her shoulder and squeezing lightly. He pulls away just as quickly, establishing a safe distance immediately. “Farewell for now… I suppose.”

Cassie laughs softly. “Never hugged anyone? Can’t say I’m surprised. Try it with Raiden sometime. He’s good at hugs.”

“I would rather not, thank you very much.” Shinnok raises his arms and gathers a glowing magenta mist around himself, full of sparkly light. It’s impossible to truly put his feelings into words. He isn’t used to real gratitude. “But, sincerely, thank you. And now, farewell.”

He, too, is gone in an instant.

Cassie stays out on the balcony for a couple minutes, idly staring at the vacant space where the gods once stood. There’s already a strange feeling of dread that she can’t shake.
Deep in the bowels of the bustling city, two shadowed figures reach out and clasp hands, sealing a sinister pact.

The smaller one tosses her head, neck craning strangely. Walking with hunched steps, the pointed hem of her cloak swishes with each stride. There is a peculiar rasp in her voice when she speaks, flittering off the ground to hover above her companion. “This One shall claim the prize... with your aid.”

“And, with the trap set and the bait in place, I shall fulfill my purpose, to slay he who has gone astray.” The other’s voice is strangely mellow and fluid, his movements laced with a vibrant green magic that simmers around him. “It is my command. The Elder Gods have foretold it.”

“This One cares not for your motives, but wishes to see your goals succeed.” Face hidden beneath a hood, she bares her teeth, revealing sharp pointy rows in a simulation of a smile. “Our collaboration will be fruitful.”

“I feel the same, my lady.” The sorcerer bows his head, chalky skin marred with ornate red patterns. His outfit is emblazoned with skulls and blades. Turning away from the cloaked woman, he paces in a circle, metal armored plates rasping unpleasantly with each stride. “He whom I served... he betrayed me, and failed to save me even as I allowed him to return to the world of the living. I will be glad to see him... repurposed.”

“A sentiment that This One shares.” Lifting herself onto sharp pincers that drip with venom, she rises to match the height of the taller figure. “The one whom you pursue, would not serve my needs nearly as well. When you capture him, he is yours.”

“He will be taken before the court of the Elders and put to death for his crimes.” His tone is emotionless and measured, the voice of a man driven only by single-minded devotion to a task. “I will be joined by my servants. If I am unable to defeat him, they will, without question, succeed. He is weakened by the most useless quality of emotion.”

The small cloaked figure drops to the ground again, offering a hoarse buzzing laugh. “All such concerns are a shared fallacy. Ahead of These Ones, there is only destruction, and triumph.”

“I could hardly agree more.” The sorcerer extends an arm and flexes his shoulders, the interlocked leather straps across his torso shifting with the motion. “The snare is set. When I sense him, I will draw him here. What do you plan to do with... your prize... once he is in your possession?

By way of answering, she extends a long stinger limb, curving out from her back and reaching towards the taller man in a sudden jab. He recoils, flinching instinctively. She smiles that awful sharp smile again, her black eyes glittering in the dim light.

She touches the stinger’s slender tip to her open hand, tracing it across her palm. It drips with a viscous green substance, trickling between her fingers and landing in thick drops on the damp stone floor.

“This One’s intentions are clear.”

The sorcerer swallows hard, stricken by understanding.

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Raiden lands directly in the temple’s sacred chamber, shedding his hat and armor beside one of the wall carvings. For many days now, he has been in need of rest and healing. As he floats weightlessly in the jinsei mist, he lets his thoughts wander, his mind finally cleared of visions and
grief. Shinnok isn’t with him, but Raiden presumes he’s in a different part of the temple, avoiding his fellow gods for a short while. He’s earned some well-deserved solitude.

Hours pass with the blink of an eye.

Shinnok has still not arrived.

At last, his patience snaps, and the strain of anxiety gnaws at Raiden’s mind. Shinnok can be temperamental and reluctant to share the company of others, but such a long absence is unusual. An unshakable sense of unease rises within him, and he sinks to the floor of the jinsei, burdened by sick worry.

Climbing out, he paces the circular chamber, head bent in thought. Raiden can’t sense him, either. If Shinnok were in the temple, Raiden surely would have made contact with him by now, drawing upon that psychic connection that is both a blessing and a bother. Shinnok mentioned no plans of leaving… but would he?

No. He wouldn’t. He couldn’t.

Raiden is convinced of that. By now, Shinnok, for all his prior talk of destruction and hatred for his fellow beings, is firmly entrenched in the misfit group of kombatants, and particularly inseparable from the thunder-god himself. Their burning conflict has boiled over at last and simmered down, resulting in an almost friendly rivalry full of unlikely cooperation.

For Shinnok to betray them now, to turn against them, to flee... hardly seems possible.

He cannot believe it. He will not believe it.

Raiden leans against the wall, struck by sudden exhaustion despite the chamber’s restoration. All at once, sick dismay settles over him, with a rising surge of disoriented panic. Shinnok is not here, he is supposed to be here, he is gone, gone, where? Please... This cannot be happening again. Please... no...

Until right now, Raiden seemed to have at last escaped his curse of failure. The pair had worked together, saved the youths, revived a lost soul. They finally transcended the roles they in which they had trapped each other.

Now, he has even failed the former enemy he vowed to protect. That was all he had left.

Raiden falls to his knees, leaning against a figure on the mural wall. Unthinkingly, he runs his fingers over the cold surface, feeling its rough texture and grounding himself in reality.

Sitting back, he looks more clearly through a sudden haze of distress.

The figure is Shinnok, part of the elaborate artwork Raiden himself crafted so long ago of his own triumph and the god’s defeat.

Trembling with dread, he reaches out and gently touches the carving.

A rush of sensation floods his brain, horrible excruciating pain that surges through the core of his body. With a muffled scream, he yanks his hand back, overwhelmed by a psychic surge.

Shinnok?

Raiden... The other god’s voice is reduced to a hoarse whisper, echoing in the recesses of Raiden’s
mind. Indistinctly, he catches glimpses of a dismal scene -- a high ceiling dripping with stale water, a damp chamber blocked up with bricks, a crumbling hole smashed through the wall, and a small cloaked figure flitting around the room in jerky sudden movements.

Raiden presses his forehead against the stone figure, clutching tight to its lifeless form. Shinnok.

Where are you? What has happened?

I-- I am underground in the city. A... trap was set for me. When I used my magic, I-- was taken.

Shinnok draws a shaky breath, his body going limp as aching pain stabs and surges through him. No matter how desperately he wishes for an end to this, it happens again, filling him with unthinkable agony.

Please, come for me... I--I am-- I have been--

And with a gruesome buzzing sound and a snap of her pincers, D’Vorah drops from the ceiling, sweeping off her hood to reveal sparkling black compound eyes bright with pure, gleeful evil.

Shinnok screams. His vision goes dark.

NO-- Shinnok!-- Raiden stumbles backwards, frantically overwhelmed by dread. Instinctively, he shifts into his armor, layering it over his clothes and fastening tight. There’s no time to think, just to act. He can follow Shinnok’s plea for help, use his power to land in that awful lair, and slay D’Vorah. Whatever has happened...

It doesn’t bear thinking about. Not yet. The first priority is to free him.

He is all that Shinnok has.

Minutes later, Raiden lands in the depths of the subway, its dim corridors illuminated by his own electric flare. They are down past the levels where Liu Kang pursued them, perhaps further than the base itself, deep into the twisting tunnels that connect to the city sewers.

Shinnok’s tormented soul calls to him like a glowing light, guiding him through the tangled dark path.

He arrives at the chamber with a massive punch of lightning, sending shards of bricks flying through the air.

There, he is greeted by utter horror.

Far on the opposite wall, D’Vorah has fastened Shinnok there, wrists and ankles bound tight against the wall by insect resin. He cannot free himself from the disgusting glue, despite several hours of desperate struggling, and now hangs there limply, giving himself over to a living death.

His armor has been stripped from him, except for the cloak hanging around his waist, and, cruelly, his divine headpiece. It comes as a horrible shock to Raiden to see him like this, his dignity so thoroughly destroyed. His pale marble skin has taken on a sickly greenish tone.

Raiden stifles a gasp, biting his tongue. Of all the awful visions, this was not among them. How could he have been so blind, unable to prevent his companion from falling into the hands of the torturer? He feels sick to his stomach, bile rising in his throat.

Shinnok is awakened by a crack of lighting and a roar of outrage. Eyes fluttering open weakly, he meets his counterpart’s glowing gaze, and whispers his name softly, a bitter taste in his mouth.
Raiden vaults up into the sky, blazing with pure power. His entire body is lit up with incandescent electric fury. “D’VORAH! YOU WILL ANSWER FOR THIS CRIME!”

“This One finds the concept of ‘crime’ outdated, and knows only the importance of propagation of the Kytinn!”

D’Vorah, crouched atop a high brick ledge, extends her stingers, laughing gleefully. She will not let this piteous wretch steal her moment of triumph. She leaps down in front of Raiden, and attacks him with a horde of tiny buzzing insects, opening a slit in her abdomen to unleash the swarm in a gruesome display.

Raiden hurls a ball of lightning at her, frying the insects in a sizzling hiss. The bricks of the floor beneath him are disintegrating under the force of his power. “HE IS NOT YOURS!”

Unclasping her cloak and throwing it off, she lets all her limbs extend from the back of her humanoid shell, four lethal sharp pointed pincers tipped in green venom and a pair of iridescent wings that glitter in the light. “This One has already taken him!”

“No! No, no, NO--” Raiden howls in utter grief and agony, and lunges at D’Vorah, seizing her before she can escape his grasp. Lighting up with fury, he plunges a fist into her abdomen, blasting her with electricity, and then punches through the other side, tearing a hole in her tough exterior shell. With one last forceful blast, he hurtles towards the ceiling, aiming for a broken pipe, and shoves her onto it, impaling her through the hole. She hangs there lifelessly, her knifelike pincers twisting in death-throes.

Raiden drops to the floor and rushes towards Shinnok, whose eyes have shut again, groaning softly in pain.

He places a hand on the resin, blasting it with lightning, but it only gives way slightly, releasing Shinnok’s wrist a tiny bit. He is still stuck firmly, no matter how hard Raiden tries, fighting against the bonds in useless desperation.

Shinnok. Weeping, Raiden gives up for a second, and just holds him, letting the broken god lay his head on his shoulder. Shinnok’s body is trembling unnaturally, his skin cold and grey, nausea rising in his throat and blazing pain shooting through his torso. Raiden tries desperately to calm him, strong arms offering a safe-haven from this living hell. How did she do this to you? How can I free you?

I don’t know. I don’t know. The moment we left, I was here. She took me, and flung me at the wall and had me stuck before I could fight my way out. I think the resin is alive, somehow. Then she-- she--

Shinnok trails off, voice catching with grief.

Shinnok… oh, Shinnok, dearest rival, my eternal counterpart... I am sorry. I am so sorry. Raiden grips Shinnok’s wrist and struggles viciously against the resin again, burning away a small portion of it with his lightning, but it grows back moments later, defying his best efforts. I-- never wanted anything like this to happen to you. Ever, ever. I should have listened to my visions and kept you safe. He thinks of the crumpled sketch of D’Vorah, consumed by a pang of self-loathing. I need to free you.

It is already too late. His voice cracks. What’s done is done.
Raiden has never heard him like this. Even at the worst of times, Shinnok’s tone is laced with a trace of smug confidence, certain of his own ability to endure even the worst defeats. That is gone now. There is only hollow despair.

What did she--?

Shinnok quietly begins to weep.

Shinnok, no, oh, no… Instinctively, Raiden’s hand moves to touch the god’s bare stomach. He shudders violently, and Raiden lets go, clutching him close again.

She will NOT prevail!

She already has. I am… gone. He takes a deep shuddering breath, heaving with sobs. Leave me, and flee, before she takes you, too.

I will not do that. Not as long as I breathe.

Raiden inhales sharply, absorbing the sickly smell of the room, and a wave of nausea surges through him, wavering on his feet. He pulls his amulet from his pocket, lighting it up in the palm of his hand. I am going to give this to you for now. I have the power of the jinsei. Between us, we may be able to free you.

I can’t use your amulet…

You can, if I allow it. Raiden gently presses it against Shinnok’s slender bare chest. It stays there, drawn to him as if a magnet. What hand do you prefer?

My left.

Focus on destroying the resin around it. I will do the same. On the count of three.

Raiden presses both his hands over Shinnok’s, silently gathering his power.

The patch of resin on the wall explodes with a gory yellowish surge as a massive blast of magic strikes it, disintegrating and dropping to the ground in sizzling chunks.

Shinnok moves his fingers tentatively, almost in awe, and Raiden clasps his hand in his own and burns away the rest of the resin, squeezing tight. It is not over yet.

Shinnok looks over the thunder-god’s shoulder, heart sinking.

It may be.

Raiden whirls around to look, equally stricken by distress. He freezes stone-still, uttering a name he never thought he would be forced to speak again.

“Quan Chi.”

“Oh, the servant, I am now the captor.” The demonic sorcerer strides through the hole in the wall, talking in that same unnervingly detached, calm tone. The blades attached to his outfit are glowing like heated metal, eyes blazing red to match. Sinister energy warps the air around him. “Shinnok was nothing more than my power source. Now, he belongs to D’Vorah, to forge a new generation of Kytinn. She has promised me one of her offspring to fuel my magic, in exchange for my assistance.”
Raiden feels sick like never before. He manages a choked whisper, still gripping Shinnok’s hand, and feels the god’s pulse slowly fading.

“Assistance with what?”

“Bringing you to justice before the Elder Gods.”

Raiden’s heart stops.

“That CANNOT be!” Blazing with power once again, Raiden clenches a fist, conjuring a staff from midair. Lightning arcs along its metal length, surging with electricity, and he slams it into the ground hard enough to crack the pavement. “You lie!”

“My purpose has been allotted to me by the gods, in exchange for my life. Your power must be eliminated, to restore the universe’s balance.” Quan Chi approaches slowly, utterly unfazed by Raiden’s vulnerable rage and despair. Behind him, nine shadowy silhouettes appear in the shattered doorway. Nine sets of eyes glow orange like coals, unblinking as they await their master’s command. “I have brought your former friends to witness your destruction.”

Raiden staggers backward, colliding with the wall behind Shinnok. “No…”

The revenants file in slowly, taking their place at the sorcerer’s side.

First among them is the once-majestic Sindel, long hair coiling down her back, corrupted glowing veins etched across her face, arms, and chest. Clad in mesh and purple leather, she walks with stiff steps, joining Quan Chi and eyeing Raiden with undisguised contempt. She opens her mouth and utters an unholy shriek, deafening both gods, and Raiden winces, leaning on his staff. “Once, you sacrificed yourself nobly to protect Earthrealm. Now you blindly follow an ascended demon…”

By means of response, she shrieks again, like nails on a chalkboard.

The others assemble beside her. Nightwolf locks eyes with the god, his once-kindly gaze filled with radiant evil. He clutches a tomahawk in one twisted hand, made of unsettling red light rather than the familiar green spiritual energy. The horror of the sight shatters Raiden to the core, memories of his lost friend flashing through his mind. He wishes he had never seen him this way.

Kung Lao’s face is worn and weathered, eyes glowing beneath the serrated brim of his hat. He has fallen so far from when Raiden knew him as a young warrior, full of enthusiasm and bravado. His future was stolen first by Shao Kahn, ending his life, then Quan Chi, reclaiming it. There seems to be nothing left of that bright soul in him, just an empty shell.

Jade, Smoke, Kabal, and Stryker, equally destroyed and distorted by the sorcerer’s magic, join ranks beside the rest. Raiden processes them numbly, looking between them and seeing nothing but unrelenting blind hate. Then, worst of all, the Netherrealm’s emperor and empress, Liu Kang and Kitana, stand at Quan Chi’s shoulder, taking a horrible, perverted joy from their new status.

The mindless revenants are awful, but those who take pride in their corruption are far worse.


He has been so swept up in the sight of the revenants that he’s ignored a faint crumbling sound from all corners of the room. Piles of bones begin to appear there, scattered along the walls.

*Raiden.* Shinnok’s voice fades as pain enthralls his mind, but he breaks free and continues faintly. *I need you to-- to help.*
What are you doing?

Conjuring a creature. It is enough to drive out the revenants. I'll send it against them in moments. Infuse your power into it. Bring it to life, and make it breathe lightning... He trails off. D’Vorah is not dead. She can return from that. You will need to fight Quan Chi as well.

Raiden’s heart sinks even further. He stands still, locked in a frozen stare-down with the revenants and their master, while exchanging silent whispers with the captive god.

When should I conjure my lightning?

Ten seconds. You'll see.

What else can I do?

Grip my hand. It is a foolish request, but... Shinnok closes his eyes. It would help.

Raiden does as asked, reaching to clasp his slender hand very slowly.

Moments pass in agonizing silence.

Now!

Raiden lifts his staff towards the sky, lighting up with a brilliant flash that sends a shower of bricks crumbling from the ceiling.

Somewhere far above, he hears a distant trickle of water.

A surge of magic floods through the floor with a crackling roar, infusing into the scattered bone piles and assembling them midair to resemble a massive skeletal dragon.

As the reptilian beast opens its mouth, revealing wicked teeth, Raiden shoves his staff between its jaws. It bites down, and lightning surges through its body, connecting its bones and surrounding it with an outline of its living shape. Satisfied, it shakes its head and lets go of his staff, sending Raiden sprawling to the ground, and roars, scattering the revenants with a sweep of its clawed foot. Scrambling to rush out through the broken hole in the wall, they flee with loud screams, and the dragon chases them, flowing through the gap and reassembling its shape outside. The shrieks fade amid the patter of footsteps and the clatter of gnashing bones.

“FOOLS!” Quan Chi tries desperately to recall them, but the revenants are gone, all nine pursued through the corridors in different directions as the huge dragon splits up into smaller incarnations of itself. Outraged at the loss, he lifts his arms, summoning a barrage of ghostly green skulls, and flings them towards Raiden like grisly missiles. Raiden leaps into action and smashes each with his staff, blocking them in quick succession as the magic shapes shatter like fragile glass.

Feeling a rare trickle of fear down his spine, Quan Chi backs away as the enraged thunder-god advances like an oncoming storm. He summons all his tricks and trademarks -- flinging skulls, conjuring portals, activating magical auras -- but Raiden is unstoppable, dodging and shattering his way through every obstacle as he crosses the length of the cavern. Desperately, Quan Chi decides to stand his ground against the god, surrounding himself with barriers of dark energy and drawing upon all his sorcery learned from years in the Netherrealm.

With a glorious surge of lightning, Raiden swings his staff, smacking directly into the side of Quan Chi’s skull.
The sorcerer collapses in an unconscious heap. Raiden kicks him away with a solid crunch to his ribs. He’s uncertain if he’s dead, but there’s no time to waste. Shinnok is most important. Shinnok is more important than anything else.

Rushing back across the chamber with a quick teleport, Raiden turns his attention to freeing the poor god, still bound to the wall by that odious pulsing resin, eyes hollow with despair. He gently cups his jaw in one hand. Stay with me. I will deal with D’Vorah. Just stay. Do not give up.

I may need to. I did that trick to save you, Raiden. Shinnok is consumed by a cold fever, trembling violently. Just flee…

Never. Absolutely never. I spent too many years at odds with you just to give up now that we are finally reunited. Raiden places his hands on Shinnok’s sides, trying to focus his healing, but the god cries out in pain and he immediately lets go, infusing him with restorative lightning from a close distance. Does that help?

No… nothing can. My body is ruined. Don’t you understand that? Shinnok grabs at him desperately, seizing a handful of his tunic. She-- And he trails off again, unable to put it into words. His face is contorted with grief again. I did not want this. All my life, my freedom and joy has been destined to last only briefly. I thought that would prove false this time. He gulps in air, chest heaving desperately. I have nothing left.

You have me. I will do everything I can.

Nothing can undo what was done.

You were remade once. It can be done again. I will find a way.

Not within days. Oh, no-- Shinnok shudders, violently repulsed by the sight of D’Vorah dropping from the rafters. The hole in her abdomen has been filled by a pulsing mass of bugs, restored to life even despite Raiden’s efforts. Please… I can’t do this again.

The creature stalks towards them both fearlessly, one stinger raised high and glistening. “Prepare yourself, Lord Shinnok.” She uses his title as a mockery, laughing out loud with a horrible buzz, feet clicking on the wet clammy floor. “This One is ready once more to use your corpse for the good of the Kytinn!”

“YOU WILL NOT!” Raiden tosses his staff aside and leaps at D’Vorah with a roar of fury, grabbing her and hurtling into the ceiling. He hits her against the hard brick repeatedly until she goes limp, body shattered with blue blood leaking from all limbs, then down to the floor, grasping her by the ankles and smashing her against the pavement. She lies there in a heap, broken and still, her breathing stopped...

Until, tossing her head with a defiant toothy grimace, she lifts herself up by her stingers and lunges for Shinnok.

Shinnok’s body goes limp, surrendering. It’s easier if he does.

Raiden grabs her by one stinger and tears it off. D’Vorah screams, feeling a rare shock of pain, and watches as Raiden shreds the pincer and incinerates it with lightning, leaving only a heap of charred ashes that he scatters across the floor with a clench of his fist.

It will grow back in minutes. Take off her head.

I want to destroy her body with my bare hands first. Then I will.
Don’t waste your time.

Time avenging the harm done to you is not wasted.

D’Vorah pushes off from the floor and hovers there, already beginning to regrow the lost stinger. Throwing furious blows at each other, she and Raiden duel through the chamber as the god steadily destroys her body, unleashing swarms of tiny insects with each limb he rips off. The fight is taking a toll, and she hits him occasionally with pincer stabs and blasts of acid, steadily draining his health. Shinnok watches helplessly, his own power nearly depleted. What a horrible thing, to spend the short remainder of his time alive watching his captor and violator slowly try to destroy the only god who ever cared for him… whom he spent his whole life fighting against.

What a waste. What an awful, awful waste.

Raiden. A gruesome realization washes through him. When you kill her, you will have to-- to-- do the same to me.

No! Raiden falters, and D’Vorah lands a blow, sending him reeling. He strikes back and seizes her arm, tearing it from its socket and crushing it in a spurt of thick blue blood.

Shinnok, no. No. Why?

I don’t think you understand what was done to me.

I...

Look at me.

Raiden does, meeting Shinnok’s pitiful gaze. Silently, they exchange a few choked words.

The full, horrible reality hits him.

He shrieks with a fury unknown to him before, grips D’Vorah by the throat, and rips her head from her body, crushing it between his hands. Venomous resin sprays across the floor, sizzling like acid on the brick. A swarm of gnats pours out from her neck, and Raiden crushes them with a lightning strike, too blinded by rage to acknowledge the horror. He lifts her torso and tears off the legs, unleashing a sea of wriggling grubs that scatter across the floor, and, destroying them with searing electric force, he burns the remainder of her body into ashes and oblivion.

Shinnok… please. Stay with me.

Raiden stumbles towards the other god, his balance faltering as his vision swims. The injected poison is slowing him down, but it is nothing like the torture Shinnok has endured.

He wraps his arms around Shinnok, careful not to squeeze him too tightly, but he whimpers in pain nonetheless. Raiden rubs his back soothingly, just trying to steady his frantic breathing. I will undo what she did. There must be a way. If we do it quickly enough, they will not grow.

I would not endanger the rest of you just for the sake of preserving me.

Shinnok… Raiden inhales deeply, pressing his ear against the god’s neck and listening to the sound of his heartbeat. Steadily, he gathers the magic to try to break him free. How did we go so quickly from loathing each other, to caring, instead? I would not give that up for the world. I cannot lose you now.

I would not endanger the rest of you just for the sake of preserving me.

Shinnok… Raiden inhales deeply, pressing his ear against the god’s neck and listening to the sound of his heartbeat. Steadily, he gathers the magic to try to break him free. How did we go so quickly from loathing each other, to caring, instead? I would not give that up for the world. I cannot lose you now.

A necessity forged from crisis… but you are now both my oldest enemy and my oldest friend. Shinnok tries to smile, but just manages to gaze at him sorrowfully. Raiden…
He listens closely. Yes?

*These are surely the words of a man driven mad by pain and desperation, but I do care for you, too, deeply.*

He takes a shuddering breath, and closes his eyes, fearing it is for the last time.

*I don’t want to go.*

*You will not. Hold me tightly.*

*If you insist...*

Raiden transforms himself into a beacon of healing energy, flowing through the god’s damaged form and weakening the resin keeping him adhered to the wall. Shinnok tugs hard at the restraints, feeling the glue soften, and, newly encouraged, keeps trying.

*We are almost th--*

With a yelp of surprise, an invisible force wrenches Raiden through a portal in the floor.

Quan Chi stands in the middle of the room, bitterly triumphant. As Raiden falls from the matching portal in the ceiling, flailing unsuccessfully to catch himself, Quan Chi ascends into the air and lets Raiden’s battered body snap over his knee.

The god falls to the ground in a crumpled heap, lying unnaturally still.

Shinnok blazes with rage, spitting a curse in an ancient language, but the sorcerer just laughs, advancing towards him. “He is all mine now. The gods will be pleased. D’Vorah failed, but her mission did not. In time, you, too, will be mine… or, at least, what comes from--”

“Fuck you!” Shinnok cuts him off with a sharp swear and a magic blast, gathering all his wits and power and renewing his will to survive. He has more left in his life than this. All the kombatants flash through his mind -- clever Cassie and her sharp retorts, Jacqui’s unfailing courage, Takeda’s thoughtfulness, Jin’s bright bold attitude -- and the new ones, icy but warm-hearted Frost, sweet-natured demon Sareena, patient and brave Cyrax -- and the Outworld duo still depending on his aid, the eccentric rebel empress Mileena, and Tanya with her infinite persistence -- and above all, Raiden, Raiden…

*“Those who touch a god… will pay the price!”*

Shinnok wrenches himself free from the wall. He lands on his feet, ignoring the sharp pain arching through his body and the chills running down his spine.

Quan Chi stumbles back, clearly startled.

Skeletal hands manifest from the air, clutching Quan Chi’s shoulders and dragging him before Shinnok. He is strong, but the god is still stronger.

Shinnok grips his throat and forces him to his knees.

*“You have risen above this world’s laws for too long! None who exploit me will ever thrive!”* Shinnok’s fingers begin to burn with energy, eyes searing unbearably bright. Quan Chi looks away, blinking and wincing, and Shinnok squeezes his neck tighter, choking his life away. A mist of sickly green energy begins to seep from the sorcerer’s eyes and mouth.
With his voice echoing in an ominous deep tone, Shinnok speaks an incantation in an ancient
tongue, draining Quan Chi’s power from his body and setting it free.

Quan Chi screams and struggles as his limbs disintegrate, his familiar armored human illusion
reshaping into the form of a true demon. His chalky white skin turns to tough purplish hide, bone
protrusions growing from his torso and hands twisting into an animal’s claws. His face is the last to
vanish, his warped shriek of rage disappearing into an eyeless skull of solid bone with a gaping
toothed maw.

With a twist, Shinnok snaps his neck.

The demon’s corpse erupts in a bright flare of green mist, shooting towards Shinnok in one last
attempt to claim him, but Shinnok snatches Raiden’s amulet from his chest and holds it out like a
protective beacon, dispersing the sinister magic with a bright surge of electricity. The amulet feels
soothingly cool to the touch, like Raiden’s own hand.

At last, the sorcerer’s soul fades and vanishes, swept away like dust in a strong wind.

A clamor of hollow voices outside the cavern door announces the revenants’ return. Shinnok’s
conjured dragon has fallen; he can feel it. D’Vorah and Quan Chi did not take him, but he has no
hope of escape now.

I’m sorry, Raiden. I’m sorry. May my soul find yours again, someday.

Shinnok staggers over to him, heart sinking, and drops to his knees beside the fallen god, laying
across his broken body. He cannot even feel Raiden’s pulse.

Hopelessly, he stares up at the ceiling, and faintly hears a trickle of water far above, drowned out
by the rush of blood in his ears. He thinks he can feel something squirming inside him. The
thought makes him want to rip out his guts, destroying himself once and forever.

His vision swims, and then goes black.
Nine revenants enter the room with shaky steps, colliding with each other as they halt.

Quan Chi… is gone. They were drawn here like moths to a flame, but instead of their master, there is a cleansing aura here, the lingering energy of a broken curse.

The girl in green is the first to drop to her knees, corruption flowing out of her and vanishing, orange glow giving way to vivid emerald eyes. Dressed in an ornamented bodysuit, she pulls the mask down from her mouth and gasps for air as she kneels on the cold wet brick floor. Her fingers twitch as she flexes her hand, reclaiming control of her own body as the glow of the veins fades away to reveal warm brown skin. She never dared to even dream of this day.

The man in shirt and slacks collapses as the luminous corruption fades. His police badge dangles around his neck, battered and worn, and, trembling, he lifts it with one hand, turning it over and remembering his true identity. As he breathes in the fresh clean air, his face changes and ages, transforming from a young man to a rugged officer with silver hair and a time-worn face. His best years are gone, but the rest of his life may still unfold before him.

Beside him, his partner, badly scarred from burns and covered with a metal face mask, convulses as his body expels the toxic essence. The patches of glowing light between his burns finally vanish. He touches his face, still feeling the mask, and bows his head in sorrow, but runs a hand down his bare arms, disbelieving his own joy. Only scarred skin meets his touch, not the holes that once held the corruption. Now he only carries one curse, not two.

The ninja tears off his mask as well, briefly revealing a young face to the world before the two decades of lost life catch up all at once. Lines and wrinkles quickly form, his shock of thick silver hair thinning and fading. But the ghastly veins are gone, and he is free from both the plague of corruption and the threat of cyberization. He raises his head, gazing skyward in search of impossible answers.

Taking off his headband, the Native American man lets his dark hair fall loose around his shoulders, aged by time within seconds. He holds his breath, and opens his palm to summon his tomahawk, dreading that flicker of red energy. Instead, it is miraculously green once more, as it always was before the demon’s sorcery claimed him. He clasps a hand to his neck to feel his own heartbeat. It has returned. He, and only he, owns his free will.

A scream dies in the former queen’s throat, fading instead to a sharp gulp of air as her heart stops and restarts, reviving her as her own true self. Though immortal, she, too, has been changed by the experience. There are more creases in her brow and lines beside her nose, and the black streak running through the center of her long white hair has faded to deep grey. Instead of mesh and leather, she is clad in elegant purple armor with a cloak resembling a gown. She dares open her mouth, and coughs, emitting a gentle sound rather than a harsh sonic blast.

Her daughter finds herself equally reborn, her outfit changed from the armor of the dark empress to elaborate yet delicate assassin’s gear with satin fabric and a samurai’s flair. Her hair is braided in a traditional style, her lean arms clad in leather gloves. Her face displays an earnest pout rather than a sinister snarl. Her skin is clear and bright instead of the unnerving grey of the undead. She whips out a fan, studying her reflection in the polished blade, and her eyes widen in shock.

The martial artist with the hat is sitting quietly in a meditative state, holding it in his lap. He has aged most visibly, transformed from a young warrior to a distinguished man with silver hair, beard,
and mustache. Disbelievingly, he traces a hand over the silver dragon emblazoned on his tunic, inspecting and buttoning the intricate clasps. The last sight that met his own eyes was the bloody sand of Shao Kahn’s arena. Since then, he has lived in a traumatized, controlled trance. At least he was not alone in it. His companions in this horror are all beside him.

And the last of them, the former dark emperor, his hair once falling wild and his face a decayed mask, is his true self once more. His face is mature and noble, his silver hair tied back with a red band. He hesitantly touches the leather gauntlets on his arms, finding them a stark contrast to the armor he wore in the role of Netherrealm’s ruler. This is… *him*. No longer must he play a false role, jerked this way and that as the puppet of capricious demons.

He is the first to stand, gathering his balance. Rubbing his palms together, he conjures a tiny wisp of flame.

He speaks his name out loud, asserting himself.

“*I am Liu Kang.*”

He has finally, after twenty-five years, reclaimed his soul.

His nearby companion follows suit, placing his hat on his head. It feels familiar now, his trusty weapon in his hand and a trademark of his identity.

“And I am Kung Lao.”

The assassin rises with the swish of a fan. She is only too glad to discard her past perspective. Why be an empress, when she can be a princess?

“I’m Kitana.”

Her mother lays a hand on her arm gently, wracked by guilt. She knows she caused much of this horror, but now is not the time to be weak. She was controlled, too.

“*Queen Sindel.*”

The shaman replaces his headband, letting his weapon vanish into thin air. His skill and support will be needed here, both for physical injuries and for the emotional hell they have all endured.

“*Nightwolf.*”

The ninja, a mystery to most of them, speaks at last in a soft voice. He has almost forgotten what it was like to live as a distinct soul of his own, rather than a shadow.

“Call me Smoke… or Tomas.”

The scarred warrior unfastens the mask, bravely revealing a damaged face marred by burns. After the healing, he can breathe without it, and he is tired of hiding.

“I’m Kabal.”

His fellow officer reassures him with a nod and a shoulder pat. He was always committed to duty above all, but he’s spent so long enforcing someone else’s will. Never again.

“Officer Kurtis Stryker.”

The girl in green leaps to her feet, visibly overcome with joy, and rushes to hug Kitana, picking her
up off her feet.

“And I’m Jade!”

They all share a slight smile at Jade’s enthusiasm, gazing between each other. After so long working together as little more than a pack of mindless beasts, to meet their true selves is more than a revelation.

Nightwolf has slipped away from the group already, kneeling beside the two damaged gods. “We must hurry. They are both grievously injured. Haokah has fallen--” He glances up at their confused faces. “--Raiden.”

Kitana kneels, poking and prodding at Shinnok, who looks on the verge of death, skin cold and clammy. A dawning realization of horror washes over her. “What… what happened?”

“It is wiser not to ask that.” Nightwolf closes his eyes, summoning a healing wave of green magic to wash over Raiden, but it does nearly nothing. “Liu Kang, Kung Lao, help me bring them to safety. We need to take them outdoors before the transformation.”

Jade bends down to join Kitana in inspecting the unfortunate god, her nose wrinkled in confusion. “Transformation?”

“When gods cannot sustain their bodies, they will reincarnate into a temporary mortal form. It is likely this will happen soon.” Nightwolf steadies Raiden’s head as the two warriors easily lift him, guiding them towards the exit together. “Bring Shinnok, as well. I have never met him until now… but we owe him our freedom.”

Jade grunts as she lifts Shinnok, unsteadily wobbling with his full weight in her arms. Kitana gracefully glides towards the exit, steering her around broken patches in the floor. “He’s heavy, and looks extremely sick. What’d he do?”

“As far as I am able to tell, he killed Quan Chi by neutralizing his magic completely.” Nightwolf summons his tomahawk, using it like a green flashlight to illuminate the path before them. “This not only destroyed him, but obliterated the corruption spell he placed upon us.”

Far above, the trickle of water grows louder.

“Run, now!” Stryker leads a charge up the stairs, bolting past them in a rush. Sindel follows close behind, hiking up the edge of her cloak to keep from tripping on the steep steps. “We’re deep in the sewer system. Get out, get onto flat ground, and then let’s handle the reincarnation.”

They don’t need to be told twice. All nine ex-revenants, hauling the the two fallen gods along with them, ascend through the deep stairwells and climb towering ladders until they’ve hit the surface, bursting out through a sewer grate and piling onto an empty sidewalk.

They are in the middle of the city park. A sea of beautiful green grass shines in the moonlight, stars glittering like pinpricks of light in the night far above. A brisk breeze ruffles their hair, and the city skyline unfolds like a twinkling diorama, lifting their hearts.

Liu Kang gasps. “I always wanted to come here!”

Raiden is stirring, brought back to life under the open sky. Shinnok does the same, eyes opening, but only barely. He does not even have the strength to move.

Following instructions, Nightwolf lays the wounded gods on the soft grass next to one another,
stepping back and kneeling at Raiden’s side.

Raiden gives him a silent nod, then turns to Shinnok, reaching for his hand and clasping it weakly. He receives a faint squeeze in return.

*I need to be rid of this body. It is the only way.*

*I will do it with you. I will join you.*

*In mortal form, we’re both vulnerable.*

*No. There are those who will protect us… as you have saved them.*

Raiden gazes at the group once more through a god’s eyes… Liu Kang and Kung Lao, his lost sons.

Then it begins.

Raiden’s entire body lights up, but not with electricity, instead with the powerful glow of the healing aura generated as he shifts from divine to mortal form. He will lose his highest powers, but it will be a relief from his visions. Before their eyes, he disappears in a blaze of light, but only for the briefest moment, reassembling to give him new life.

Shinnok is next. He erupts with searing power, revealing the silhouette of his broken, damaged body. As the purifying light consumes him, the toxic essence injected within him is slowly vaporized, burning away all that ever remained of the Kytinn.

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When Shinnok comes to, he is laying on the grass, politely covered by a green shirt. The girl that was presumably once wearing it seems much more concerned about his dignity than her own. Unfortunately, due to their difference in size, it is less than useful.

Raiden is sitting beside him wrapped in a majestic purple cloak, chin propped in his hands, gazing at the city’s tall buildings and vivid lights. Beside him, Liu Kang is leaning against his shoulder, with Kung Lao sitting close by and Nightwolf standing over him protectively. The others are talking idly, almost reveling in the ability to make simple useless conversation. Everything now is a miracle.

Jade squats down to inspect Shinnok, and offers a hand. “Hi.”

He shakes it politely. “I assume you want your shirt back?”

“No, keep it, I’m fine.”

“Take it, anyway.” Shinnok tosses it back to her, conjuring a green cloak to wrap himself in instead, with more effort than usual. Nothing is going to be quite as easy in mortal form. His head is swimming, but the pain surging in him is gone. He’s trying not to think about it all, so, so hard. It’s… easier, now, than it was ever before, to control his thoughts. He doesn’t have endless visions swimming through his mind.

“I appreciate the color coordination.”

“I didn’t know you liked green. I was just being nice.”

“It is nonetheless appreciated.”
He reaches for Raiden’s hand, then thinks better of it and withdraws it immediately.

Raiden notices anyway, and grasps it comfortably. You endured. I am... in awe of you, Shinnok. You have been through such torment and you are still here, with me.

Don’t worry about me. You have your friends back.

They survived their own torments, too, together. And I am the only one who truly knows what happened to you. I intend to keep it that way.

Please. I couldn’t endure that shame.

There is no shame in being a survivor. Raiden gathers him closer, letting Shinnok rest his head on his shoulder. Even so recently, this would have been unthinkable, but surviving so many living hells has broken down their barriers, beyond even the pretense of genuine rivalry. That has all become a waste of time. You defeated Quan Chi. You freed them.

I was enraged about what he did to you. I wanted to unmake him, to destroy him to his essence.

And that is how I felt about D’Vorah. I have never experienced such rage.

Shinnok shudders, feeling nauseous. Please don’t say her name.

She is gone. Dead. I made sure of it.

I know you did. I saw it.

Raiden squeezes Shinnok’s hand, then lets go, laying back to gaze at the stars. There are so many realms, and yet I am fortunate enough to be in this one.

Shinnok finds himself echoing the thought, despite himself. I am grateful for it, too.

Look up at the sky. I find it soothing. What if every star is a realm? There is no end to what we might discover.

A faint smile plays across Shinnok’s face. Raiden, you sentimental, quixotic creature...

Those are qualities worth having. Raiden’s gaze travels across the sky, watching the path of a shooting star. Mortals make wishes upon those.

Can gods do it, too?

I suppose. We usually grant our own wishes.

Shinnok manages a real smile. You would say that.

The group of nine have settled amongst themselves on the grass. Most have fallen asleep, while a few keep watch, standing guard to preserve their new freedom.

We should go...

Not yet. Raiden’s tone is firm, but kind. Let them rest. We should, as well.

Shinnok protests weakly, but sleep soon claims him, too, tucked safely in the crook of Raiden’s strong arm. Former enemies or not, the thunder-god simply refuses to allow him to suffer.
An urgent knock on Jacqui’s door wakes her in the middle of the night.

Stumbling sleepily through her dim bedroom, she turns on her phone as a flashlight, making her way over a pile of clothes, mumbling to herself. “Dammit, gotta do my laundry… who on earth is here at this hour? What the hell…” She’s gotten weird calls in the middle of the night before, but not usually in person. She sort of hopes she doesn’t get murdered.

Just to be safe, she straps on one of her gauntlets before opening the door just a crack.

An unfamiliar figure gazes back at her, a distinguished older Asian man with kind dark eyes and a concerned frown written on his handsome face. His silver hair is tied back in a headband, and he’s dressed in a red and black leather tunic, which is kind of unusual for the middle of the night, but, Jacqui supposes, everything about this is unusual.

He greets her by name, clearing his throat politely. “Jacqueline Briggs? I owe you an apology?”

Something about his voice is familiar, bringing back a chill of deja vu. Something about his face… and the way he looked through that crack in the door...

It hits her like a bucket of cold water.

It can’t be.

She gasps. “Liu Kang?”

The dignified man nods silently, closing his eyes. “We need your help.”

Jacqui’s head is spinning. She’s half certain she’s hallucinating. “We?!”

The door opens a crack further, revealing an elegant girl with fancy braids who gazes at her rather imperiously. “I’m sorry, too, but shall we work out the details of the apology later? Now let us in.”

Numbly, Jacqui unlatches the safety lock and opens it all the way.

She finds herself staring at a crowd of nine ex-revenants and two unconscious gods wrapped in towels, carried between them all.

Jacqui blinks, frozen in shock.

Then, reeling backward, she faints.

Awakening from the noise, Sareena comes to the door right away, kitten perched in her hair, She gently pulls Jacqui aside, lifting her over her shoulder. Her eyes light up in recognition of the crowd at the door, suddenly comprehending the miracle.

“You fled the Netherrealm, too!”

She gestures towards the hallway, letting the group file in one by one and locking the front door behind them. “Make yourself comfortable. We have a spare bedroom. Jacqui won’t mind if I let you stay, too.”

And, seemingly unconcerned about the idea of eleven guests in one room, Sareena carries Jacqui back to bed, removing her gauntlet and politely tucking her in.
They’ll sort it out in the morning. For now, they’re all safe and sound.
Jacqui is the first to awaken in the early dawn. The clamor of songbirds outside her window catches her attention, rousing her from troubled dreams.

One of her gauntlets has been set on the nightstand beside her bed, her phone plugged in and charging. The welcoming light of the morning sun filters through her window, blinding her briefly. In a flash, she remembers last night’s events, and flings her covers off, leaping from the bed and stumbling to the closet to throw on a jacket and jeans over her pajamas.

Jacqui gulps down her morning vitamins, chugging a cup of tap water, and inspects herself in the mirror. She looks worn out, dark circles under her eyes and a dazed expression on her face. Shaking her head, she exits her bedroom, ready to face the next crisis.

Unless she had some kind of bizarre nightmare last night, nine cured revenants and two gods are all sitting around in her apartment right now, putting her in charge of the safety of eleven fugitives from the Netherrealm’s clutches.

She advances cautiously into her living room, an airy open space full of comfortable furniture Jax brought from the farm. Half of them are scattered there, soundly slumbering. The girl she recognizes as Kitana is curled up in an armchair, a blanket gently draped over her. Her friend Jade is sleeping in the cozy window-seat, sprawled out across the cushions. Liu Kang, the group’s de facto leader, has taken a corner of the couch, softly snoring.

Jacqui’s gaze lingers on the man, wondering. When she knew him as a revenant, it was almost impossible to imagine him in human form. Now she looks upon him with curiosity and respect, not the fear and dread she felt in the fight.

What would it be like to endure this? She thinks of her father, and closes her eyes, remembering it all. He was lucky to escape the corruption curse. It could all have been so much worse.

Queen Sindel has changed most dramatically from her revenant self. Sound asleep, she is levitating in the corner of the room, legs folded in a meditative pose and hands clasped in her lap. Her long hair coils in a pile at the floor, her cloak wrapped around her shoulders. Jacqui knows some of her story, told to her by Raiden in the early days, of the long-dead queen returned to life from her desert grave by Quan Chi, sent as a weapon against all the other revenants. Another gambit by Shao Kahn, that ruthless, bloodthirsty conqueror. Jacqui can’t help but compare him to Shinnok.

What marks the difference between them?

Shao Kahn was driven by greed. Shinnok was driven by envy.

Sindel will have it the worst, out of all the revenants. Jacqui can guess that much. While under Shang Tsung’s control, she was responsible for the deaths of most of the others, so she will carry the burden of guilt and blame for the horrors that they all endured.

But she will persevere. They all will. Jacqui will do everything she can to make sure of that.

She knows much too well what it’s like to live with the burden of former corruption. Jax suffered
just like they did, controlled by Quan Chi. Now, his daughter is filled with sympathy towards the other ex-revenants. It would be impossible for her to feel anything else.

Stryker and Kabal are sleeping on the floor, seemingly unconcerned by the lack of blankets. As officers, they are probably used to crisis situations… or at least they were, once. She wonders what they’ll do now. How does one cope with the circumstances they’ve endured?

Jacqui rests her chin in her hands, thinking of another fairytale. Once upon a time, a young woman entered the fae realm, and completed a task to cure the queen, retrieving a piece of her soul stolen by goblins. That piece could only be touched by the hand of a human. Weeks, months, and years passed, and she achieved her task at long last, receiving the respect and honor of the revived queen. When the young woman returned to the mortal world, though, all that time elapsed in the fae realm counted for nothing. She was the same age, as if only a day had passed.

Is that what it will be like for the revenants, to step back into a lost life?

The Edenians will experience it differently. They are already unthinkably old, immortals free from the curse of aging, so two decades, to them, is merely a blink of the eye. But the humans…

She lists off the revenants -- ex-revenants -- in her head, ticking off the numbers on her fingers. Kitana, Jade, Liu Kang, Sindel, Stryker, Kabal. Six out of nine. Smoke, Nightwolf, and… who is the last? Kung Lao. They must be in the spare bedroom.

She makes her way down the hall, checking. Sure enough, Sareena has made room for them all. Smoke is curled up in a corner of the room, solitary by nature, while Nightwolf is contentedly sleeping in a chair and Kung Lao has taken half the bed, leaving the other half for Sareena.

And what of Raiden and Shinnok?

Very faintly, she hears a noise from the kitchen. It sounds like a toaster.

Tiredly, she stumbles in, and finds herself face to face with both the gods. They look indescribably different, but only slightly. The glow in their eyes is a bit fainter. They are both wearing simple clothing; it would take more energy to recreate something complicated, considering the recent drain of their power.

Their attention is solely focused on one another, gazing at each other in near-complete silence except for Raiden absentmindedly eating a piece of toast.

Jacqui waits in the doorway, observing them for a few minutes. They seem not to notice her at all. Their expressions shift occasionally, as if they were having a discussion, but--

She clears her throat awkwardly. “Mornin’. You guys have a psychic connection, huh?”

Shinnok jumps and flinches, summoning fistfuls of purple magic flames in self-defense, but Raiden just greets her with an exhausted nod.

It takes a minute before he speaks.

“We owe you an explanation.”

“I figured out what’s happened, but I want to know how.”

Shinnok gazes at her, a terrible deep-seated look of pain in his eyes. Jacqui feels a pang of sympathy. “I believe I was responsible. I destroyed Quan Chi.”
“Where? When? What?”

He doesn’t even have the energy to add any sharp sarcasm to his remarks. “Let me summarize. Yesterday, D’Vorah kidnapped me with his help. She took me to a… an underground cavern in the subway, and…”

He trails off, looking very intently at the refrigerator rather than meeting Jacqui’s eyes.

Raiden clasps Shinnok’s wrist, choosing his words with great care. “She attempted to use his body in the hopes of creating more Kytinn like herself.”

“Oh! Oh my god…” Jacqui’s eyes widen with horror. She backs up, instinctively scrambling away from Shinnok, appalled by the mere idea. “Holy fucking shit. You can’t— no …”

Shinnok’s heart sinks. Quietly, he rises from the chair to leave the room.

Raiden gently pulls him back down. “Stay. She does not know all that happened yet.” He continues his explanation, catching Jacqui’s gaze with a disappointed frown. “We both sustained so much damage that we reincarnated into mortal form. Quan Chi used a portal to snap my spine, and Shinnok…” Raiden shivers, remembering. “We are both intact now. Theoretically, we are not fully invulnerable, and certainly less powerful than before, but right now, we are the curious paradox of mortal gods.”

Jacqui approaches cautiously again. What can she even say? Words are pretty much useless against a trauma like this. “Shinnok. I’m sorry. You... didn’t deserve that. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“I am the furthest thing from ‘okay.’” He takes over the explanation again, pulling his heavy jacket tighter around himself. Quickly, as best he can, he relates the events to her — Raiden’s spectacular fight against Quan Chi and dismemberment of D’Vorah, their skeletal lightning dragon sent against the revenants, and Shinnok’s final escape and destruction of the sorcerer, freeing his magic and breaking the curse.

Then he trails off. “After Quan Chi was unmade, I could not sustain myself any further. I don’t know what happened after that.”

“I can tell you.”


Their eyes meet. Both freeze, gazing at each other in awe. After all this time...

Raiden rises from his chair and approaches the man. They are both still silent, unable to look away from one another.

Then, at long last, they embrace each other, hugging tight and whispering apologies.

Jacqui watches them, and wipes her eyes. They deserved this. She never thought this could be possible, ever, and… here they are. Liu Kang is himself again. Raiden’s heart is no longer broken.

She needs to tell Jax.

Letting herself out onto the fire escape, she takes a seat on the metal grate, dialing his familiar number. “Dad. Dad, it’s me. You there?”
“Well, if it ain’t my dearest daughter!” Jax’s voice rises above the sputtering sound of a tractor engine. “You haven’t called in a week. I was starting to think you’d run away on a safari expedition.”

Jacqui laughs for the first time that day. “No, but I’ve had some adventures. Okay. Let’s say I had some unbelievable news. Would you want me to break it to you easy, or just tell you all at once?”

“All at once, like rippin’ off a bandage. Hit me with it.”

“The revenants are cured.”

She hears the clattering of a wrench dropping to the ground.

Jax is silent for a solid minute, pacing the garage as he tries to process this news.

Finally, he returns to the phone. His voice booms through the other end, filled with panic. “WHAT?!”

“It’s a really, really long story. D’Vorah captured Shinnok with Quan Chi’s help, but Raiden came and freed him, and Shinnok killed Quan Chi-- except he didn’t just take off his head like Scorpion did. He destroyed him. I don’t exactly know how. It…it broke the curse.” Jacqui explains hastily, speaking in a frantic tone. “So -- it finally happened. They’re all back.”

Jax whistles under his breath. “Call Sonya. She’s gonna need to take ’em to the SF base. I was only a revenant for a little while, compared to those guys, and life was still hell, to live with those memories. Twenty-five years? They’re going to be a wreck.”

“I don’t know if putting them in military containment is the right way to handle this. Might make it worse.”

Jax goes quiet for a moment, drumming his fingers against the tabletop as he thinks.

“Let me ask Vera if she’s okay with havin’ guests.”

“Wait, seriously?”

“Everybody’s gonna want to get their hands on those revenants. I was one. So were Sub-Zero and Scorpion. Get in touch with them.”

“We’ve already called in too many favors from Kuai Liang. I don’t think we can get the Lin Kuei to help out here. But we do have Smoke…”

“Just tell him what’s happened. You haven’t dragged the Shirai Ryu into this yet, have ya?”

“Nope.”

“All right. Get your boyfriend to talk to Hanzo, if you ain’t got the guts.”

Jacqui sputters in sudden embarrassment. “He’s not my boyfriend! We just went out a few times!”

“If ya say so.” Jax chuckles. “You take care, now. Give your dad a call a little more often, huh?”

“Been a little busy! But okay. Love ya. Bye!” Jacqui hangs up, shoving her phone back in her pocket. Well, this sure is a big goddamn problem.

Out of the corner of her eye, she notices Shinnok on the other side of the fire escape platform,
sitting against the wall with his knees drawn up to his chest, seemingly lost in thought.

“When’d you get here?”

“Oh, about the time Raiden started reuniting with all his long-lost friends. What do you plan to do with them, by the way? I assume that is undecided.”

“Don’t know. There’s a lot of options. Dad offered to let them stay at the farm, but I’m not sure that’s gonna work. There’s always the Sky Temple, but it’s pretty lonely. And the Lin Kuei temple, but it’s pretty cold. Dad thinks I should contact the Shirai Ryu.”

Shinnok raises an eyebrow. “You should act quickly before your government gets hold of these unfortunate specimens.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m kind of worried about.” Jacqui takes a deep breath, head swimming with the chaos of it all. “Are, uh, are you doing all right? Because--” She trails off. She doesn’t need to say it. It’s way too much to even try to process right now.

Shinnok looks her in the eyes. He has an air of grief and pain about him that’s entirely replaced his confident attitude. “No, and I expect I will not be. Frankly, Miss Briggs, the fact that others need me is the only thing preventing me from taking advantage of my newfound ability to die.”

A cold chill runs through Jacqui, and her heart skips a beat. “Please-- don’t do that.”

“I won’t.” He gives a bitter, hollow laugh. “If not for me, who else would save Raiden from accidentally killing himself with kitchen appliances?” His voice goes quiet, a note of raw anguish deep within it. “Raiden has all his friends returned to him now. What is stopping him from discarding me as a useless temporary ally, an enemy turned helper out of pure necessity?”

“He wouldn’t do that. That’s not him.”

“I no longer have an intrinsic purpose. The two individuals who I had believed to be my supporters… completely betrayed and used me.” Shinnok closes his eyes, resting his chin in his hands. “I do not have the power to destroy Earthrealm, nor the desire for it. If I may be honest, the only thing sustaining me has been the busy schedule of daily life. Now, I am about to lose that, as well.”

Jacqui listens to him patiently, mind whirling with thoughts.

“Dammit. That’s it. If we let the ex-revenants go sit around the farm or the temple or the clan or anything alone, they’re going to be alone with their memories, and probably turn suicidal. Dad was like that for a while. Mom got him through it.” Jacqui hits the re-dial button on her phone, holding it to her ear. “Hang on, Shinnok. I’ll keep talking to you in a minute. I’m here.”

Shinnok withdraws into a state of inconsolable silence.

Jax’s familiar voice echoes through the phone again. “Jacqui? What’s up?”

“Being isolated would kill the ex-revenants. You-- you remember back then? You always said Mom saved you. They need company. They’re going to stay with us.”

“What?!”

“They have to stay around here, help them get used to life again. They lost the last two and a half goddamn decades. Johnny’s got a place in the city. Huge house, lots of room. I’ll text him.” She
hangs up without waiting for a reply.

“Hey.” She approaches Shinnok again, and offers a hand, helping him to his feet. Very reluctantly, he takes it, unfolding himself and rising to his full height. He’s still well over six feet tall, but seems a little shorter, smaller, less… godly. She guesses that’s probably the point of the mortal form.

“Look. We’ve had our differences, and I know you used to be a world-conquering death god, but… uh… you haven’t been that anymore, for a little while now. And you’re trying. I can respect that.” Jacqui inhales deeply, attempting to figure out how to express her muddled thoughts. Everything is so overwhelming right now. “You… saved us. A lot. I’m not going to let D’Vorah have you. Even if you reincarnated out of the body, you’re still living that memory. I know.”

Shinnok nods silently, clenching his jaw. He doesn’t even have the willpower to respond.

“I’ve had people I know go through things like this. Support’s the best thing to help. You and Frost are friends now, yeah?”

He shrugs slightly, with one shoulder. “As much as that girl is willing to have a ‘friend,’ yes, I suppose we are.”

“Oh. Do you and Sareena get along?”

“Well, yes. I find her to be pleasant company.”

“How ‘bout Cyrax?”

“He and I have not spoken much.”

“That’s fair. Who’s the ex-rev who helped get you here?”

“As I recall, her name is Jade.”

“Alright.” She calls out into the apartment, summoning the two out onto the balcony to join them. “Sareena! Jade! C’mere.”

Shinnok frowns at the flimsy metal structure, tapping his foot on it. He’s trying to get his mind off the horror by focusing on trivialities. It isn’t really working. “I am not sure this little staircase can hold a human, a god, a demon, and an Edenian. Perhaps we should retreat inside?”

“Yeah. Good idea.” Jacqui slips back through the door, coming face to face with the two girls. “Hi. Shinnok’s in bad shape. D’Vorah did something to him. Not telling the details without his consent. Anyway, I’m gonna assume you guys have nothing on the schedule today.” She doesn’t wait for an answer. “I’m handing you two and Shinnok over to Frost to go hang out. I don’t care what you do, just keep him company. Frost’s the only modern human on the new team, and I am not letting any of you try to call a taxi.”

“Ah, so I am to be placed in the custody of these young ladies?” Shinnok arches a brow, shoving his hands into his jacket pockets. “A less objectionable punishment than imprisonment, I’ll admit. Very well.” He’s concealing it all with his usual attitude, slipping back into place like a mask. It will be good to do something to escape this. All he can see when he closes his eyes is D’Vorah’s snarling face, pincers raised.

Jacqui taps his shoulder, snapping him out of a sudden daze. “Hey--”
She finds herself tossed backwards through the air with a surge of purple magic, Shinnok instinctively slipping into a battle stance. Realizing what’s happened, he lowers his arms, apologizing quietly as Jacqui approaches again.

“It’s okay. You’re probably gonna be like that for a while.” She looks closely at the other girls in a stern staredown. “Don’t touch him.”

“Just what I was about to say.” Shinnok draws himself up to his full height. “My personal boundaries have already been violated enough. I would prefer no further attempts.”

They’re all quiet for a moment, unsure what to say.

Jacqui pulls out her phone again, retreating onto the balcony and loading her messenger app. “I need a minute.”

[Jacqui] Frost. You here?

[Frost] yeah what’s up

[Jacqui] Need your help. :( 

[Frost] oh no, frowny face already. tell me what’s going on

[Jacqui] I haven’t told the others yet, but…

She pauses, rubbing her temples, trying to figure out how to tell her.

[Frost] that’s cryptic

[Jacqui] Shinnok got caught by D’Vorah and stuff happened and he’s not doing so good :<

[Frost] stuff happened? d’vorah is… the bug girl, yeah?


[Frost] …

[Frost] JADE?

[Frost] THAT jade?

[Jacqui] Yeah, that Jade. That’s the other part of it. The revenants are ex-revenants now :)

[Frost] THAT DESERVES A LOT MORE THAN A SMILEY FACE

[Frost] oh my god

[Frost] wait, are all of them cured??? how?

[Jacqui] Shinnok did it. Destroyed Quan Chi… FINALLY. Not sure how though :

[Frost] holy shit. he deserves a medal

[Jacqui] He deserves to, uh, not want to die because of what happened. Which he does right now.

[Frost] …that bad, huh?
[Jacqui] Yeah, seems like it :(

[Frost] he may be a stubborn old asshole but i like having him around

[Frost] wait, he’s immortal. wtf

[Jacqui] Both he and Raiden got so hurt they turned into mortal forms. ;_;

[Frost] ...bad. real, real bad. extremely bad

[Frost] ok, i’m supposed to be volunteering at the animal shelter about this time, hope everybody likes cats. i’ll just bring them all along. idk. best thing i can think of

[Jacqui] Sounds good to me. Thanks Frost. I owe you one <3

[Frost] miss me with that sappy heart emoji stuff

[Frost] glad to help tho. bye

One problem solved. She flips to a different messenger, firing off a fast message.

[JB] Hey Mr. Cage :) 

[JC] Hi, kiddo. You never call me ‘Mr. Cage’ unless you want a favor. I’m listening.

[JB] How many spare bedrooms do you have in the city house?

[JC] Don’t tell me you picked up a traveling circus troupe.


[JC] ...This is a great practical joke, but you can stop now.

[JB] I’m dead serious. Ugh I hate explaining this over and over. -_- 

[JC] I’m willing to hear you out, Jacq, but if you’re joking, I’ll kick your ass.

[JB] Okay here goes. Shinnok got caught by D’Vorah and Quan Chi, Raiden rescued him, Quan Chi brought the revenants, Shinnok wrecked Quan Chi and freed the revenants. I think. Ugh it’s a huge mess. Shinnok’s in terrible shape so I’m sending him to hang out with the team. Don’t know what else to do. :|

[JC] “Turned into a big glowy demon” terrible shape, or “stuck in an amulet” terrible shape, or… what are we talking about here?

[JB] I’m… pretty sure you remember what D’Vorah did to you… yeah? Basically. That. -_. But, apparently, she got way farther.

[JC] Oh, holy shit. She wanted some godly bug babies?

[JB] Real tactful, Mr. Cage. Yeah, seems like it. But that’s not the point. I have nine ex-revenants sleeping in my apartment right now who are about to get hit pretty badly with 25 years worth of memories of being a magic slave. Would you mind having a couple houseguests?

[JC] …I’ll come pick them up. Does Sonya know about this? What about Cassie?

[JB] No and no. I’m kind of dealing with this totally on my own right now. :/
“Hey, this one looks like you!”

Frost’s sarcastic voice cuts above the clamor and clatter of the animal shelter, reaching Shinnok’s ears. He doesn’t even bother to look up, lost in a haze of overpowering nightmarish memories.

She drops a cat in his lap, a strange-looking slender white creature with prominent ears and a bony face. It’s kind of cute, in a really weird way. “Totally you.”

Shinnok just sighs, and pets the cat’s sleek fur. “Any distraction is welcome right now.”

“...if you wanna talk about it, I, uh. I can listen. I’ve been there.”

“No one has experienced what I have, and I consider that a blessing… for everyone else.”

“No, I just mean--” She gestures vaguely. “Stuff like that, happening, in general. Someone taking you like that and--” Frost reaches for a nearby cat rather than finish the sentence, lifting the fluffy beast into her lap and settling in against the wall near the forlorn ex-god.

At the other end of the cat playpen, Sareena and Jade are making lively conversation, kittens swarming over both of them. Jade seems to be recovering the quickest from her revenant status, which probably has something to do with her very long lifespan. Sareena just likes the kittens and is more than glad to listen to Jade venting about… well, everything, although she’s courteous enough to listen to Sareena’s tales of misadventure, too, in return.

Shinnok watches them, familiar despair settling over him.

Frost’s voice breaks his reverie again. “Hey. On the subway, you did that thing for Raiden, to ease the visions’ pain. Do that to yourself.”

Shinnok glances at her, surprised. “It would achieve nothing.”

“It’s worth doing. Anything that’ll help is worth a try.”

With a sigh, he presses his fingers against the sides of his head, summoning the enchantment. Immediately, a wave of soothing calm washes over him, clearing the horrible memories from his mind’s eye. It is a tremendous relief, even if briefly.

“...that is better.”

She reaches for his arm, then thinks better of it. “Hey. May I touch you?”

“Thank you for the warning. Yes.”

Frost’s chilly hand settles on his wrist, testing his pulse. “Huh. What’s the difference between mortal and god form?”

“This way, we are far less powerful, and have the potential to die, though it is strongly unlikely.” Shinnok gazes up at the harsh fluorescent lights. “It was… strange. After the fight with Quan Chi, I thought that I was going to die, even as an immortal… but I awoke in the city park, still myself, and yet not quite myself, with nine unfamiliar faces standing over me. It took me some time to
Frost nods, listening closely. “Have you talked about what happened yet with anyone?”

“No, not at length. You are the first.”

“I’m listening.”

Shinnok lifts the strange cat, holding it a little closer as he speaks. “I cannot even describe what it was like to be betrayed, so thoroughly and so horribly, by the two who proclaimed themselves my allies in the past. It has shaken my faith in everything. Everything.”

Frost pats his arm, a helpless attempt at reassurance. “You still got us.”

They paint a strange picture there, the two of them, a fallen god and an ice ninja, sitting on the floor of an animal shelter and making conversation as if they were no different from any other mortals in this vast, endless world.

“Keep talking. It’ll help. Talk it out.”

He goes on, voice strengthening a little. “Liu Kang was the only one of the group who knew anyone in the city. He found his way to Jacqueline’s place, somehow, and brought us all there… but we were too weary to go any further. Sareena welcomed us in. I don’t know what happened after that. I fell asleep somewhere in there. I woke up to Raiden keeping watch over me, to be sure I was safe.”

Frost raises an inquisitive eyebrow.

Shinnok closes his eyes. “Do not make assumptions.”

“Why’d Raiden need to reincarnate?”

“Quan Chi gravely injured him.” Shinnok fidgets with the sleeves on his jacket, chewing his lip. It is a disgrace to realize he has been reduced to this state, barely able to think without being overcome by the incident’s horror. “I can still feel it all. I have shed that body, but the memory remains.”

“Yeah, you probably have PTSD.” Frost steeples her fingers, a shell of ice growing around her hands. “I got some of it, too. It’s just… like that, sometimes. After a trauma, your body and mind don’t let go. You keep reliving it. The ex-revenants are going to have it bad, too.”

“This is wretched. At a time when we should be able to rejoice, with the death of Quan Chi and D’Vorah and the return of these nine heroes, there is instead nothing but pain.”

“That’s life. It sucks and then you die. Or, it just keeps sucking and you don’t die.” Frost glances at him. “Immortality probably isn’t so great, either.”

Shinnok wrinkles his nose, thinking it over. “It has its advantages and disadvantages.”

“It’s so damn weird to think that I’m just sitting here talking to somebody who’s existed since the dawn of time.” Frost bursts into a new train of thought, interrupting herself. “I can’t even process that, I’m a dumb mortal. I’m not like you guys. As far as I’m concerned you’re just my weird new friend who has a really comprehensive knowledge of everything that has ever happened.”

“That is fine by me.” Shinnok lets the cat go, and it scampers off. Instinctively, he tightens the belt
of his jacket again, folding his arms across his chest. “I can’t even bring myself to wear my usual armor. I… do not want to be seen. I don’t even wish to be trapped within myself, and yet I am.”

Frost raises her eyebrows. “You’re a god, you got any alternate appearances?”

“Once, I adopted a demonic corrupted form, but… I would prefer not to return to that.”

“Okay. So you’re stuck as you. Sorry. I know that’s awful right now, and I’m sounding kind of cynical, but that’s the reality. You have to figure out how to move forward from here. Find your reasons. They’re there. Just look for them.”

“I have none! The revenants have returned. They are Raiden’s companions, one and all. The need for me is… no longer present.”

“Do you actually know that, or are you just projecting your worst fears onto the situation?”

Shinnok admits his error eventually, pondering the matter with a clearer mind. “No. It is entirely speculation.”

“You’re a god. Please tell me you’re smart enough not to do that.” Frost makes a face. “You think Raiden’s got any other immortal pals who’ve known him for… as long as you guys have? Not even going to guess the actual timespan.”

“We were enemies for ninety-nine percent of the time we knew each other!”

“Yeah, and it took Einstein like nine thousand tries to make a lightbulb, but that doesn’t mean he didn’t eventually succeed!”

“What is a lightbulb?”

“Never mind. Bad analogy, but you get the idea. ‘The past doesn’t define the future.’” Frost delivers this in air quotes. “Kuai Liang likes saying that. Anyway, you’re not going to grow any bug spawn, nobody is going to try to do that to you ever again, and you broke the revenant curse. That’s a big deal.”

“Fine. Since you are so well-informed, Frost -- what is my purpose?”

“You don’t need some big ‘purpose’ to keep on living, running around on Earth and Outworld and doing whatever you like. I mean, what’s my purpose? It’s whatever the situation needs. I’m the world’s first combination martial artist and ice sculptor.”

Shinnok actually cracks a smile.

“No, really, your purpose is to… be Shinnok. Isn’t that obvious? You’re just-- you. Your weird, sarcastic, slightly unnerving, totally fascinating self. Every time I see you, you’ve gone on some new wild adventure. I know this one was horrible, but it’s not the end. There’s no way it’s the end.” Frost gestures broadly, voice rising as she tries to get her point across. “And the same’s true for the revenants. They’re not gonna be able to step right back into their lives. It’s like-- like the Odyssey. I read that once. The king was gone for twenty years and when he finally got home, he pretended to be someone else before taking his throne back…”

Frost trails off, thinking to herself.

Shinnok glances sideways. “Are you suggesting I adopt a false identity?”
“Not even a little. Wouldn’t want you to. You’re good at being yourself. I’m just thinking of the revenants. People need to not know they’re back.”

“That goes without saying. I am sure Jacqueline can be relied upon for discretion. Plus, there is the entire Outworld matter…”

“The what now?”

“Ah.” He clears his throat. “I was under the impression you had all been debriefed on that.”

“I’m not about to let anybody debrief me!”

“That is not what I meant. But you have not been informed about the struggle for power?”

“No, but I wanna hear it.”

“The current emperor, Kotal Kahn, deposed the prior empress, Mileena. Many would argue that it was an unjust coup. I happen to agree. Recently, I lent my aid to Mileena and her consort Tanya, to trap Kotal Kahn in a lie… It was a very long story. That is what led to the tournament.”

“Oh, was that that viral news thing with the Aztec guy and the ancient Egyptian girl?” Frost ponders this. “I cannot believe how weird that sentence sounds. Do you ever just stop and think about this incredibly strange world we live in?”

“More often than I would like to.” Shinnok welcomes another cat into his arms, a large orange creature. “Yes, it was ‘that viral news thing.'”

“Okay. So…” Frost counts on her fingers. “You gotta help the rebel ladies overthrow the Aztec guy. That’s a big thing. You need to help get us all through the tournament, too. That’s another. Raiden obviously needs somebody to help keep him from doing incredibly stupid plans, and you’re pretty good at that. There’s some purposes for you, if you’re still stuck on that idea.”

“…I find myself unable to disagree.” The cloud of despair over Shinnok is slowly lifting. He scratches the cat under the chin, and it purrs in contentment, kneading the thick cloth of his jacket. “Humanity is so peculiarly charming, in a foolhardy way. You welcome these creatures and beasts into your homes, to live alongside you. Remarkable.”

“Cats are great. They sort of just started living with us way back when, because humans have grain, and grain means mice, and cats love to eat mice. At least, that’s as far as I heard.” Frost shrugs.

Shinnok gives her a disapproving glance out of the corner of his eye. “I would know. I was alive to see it.”

“Oh. Yeah. I guess you were, weren’t you?” Frost’s eyes widen slowly. “You could help confirm so much historical knowledge. Holy shit.”

“It is better to leave the past unclear, and let humans find their own path. Raiden says as much. I am not sure if he’s right… but he avoids meddling in the world, more or less, except for issues to do with protecting the realms. Which is still a great amount of meddling.”

“Huh. Okay, never mind.” Frost reaches over and pets the fat fluffy orange beast. “Are you feeling better?”

“Me, or the cat?”
“You, you dumbass.”

“Yes. As a matter of fact, I am.” Shinnok huffs in indignation, his dignity briefly damaged. “I do feel… slightly renewed. Not very much, but it is enough to make my existence bearable, for now, and remind me that my life is filled with things other than... yesterday.”

“Good. That’s what I like to hear.” Frost raises her eyebrows. “You wanna duel?”

“You wish to test your skills against me?”

“What, you think you can take me, old man? Guess again.”

“I can hardly resist answering such a disrespectful challenge. Yes, I would be more than glad to duel, and teach you the superiority of an Elder God.” Shinnok ushers the cat out of his lap, trotting away with its fluffy tail waving. Then, he stands, straightening his shoulders, and goes to retrieve Jade and Sareena. “Young ladies, I suggest that we go. There is work to be done.”
Cassie and Johnny meet in a little French bakery halfway between the Cage mansion and the Cage apartment, a quiet neutral ground that they both enjoy. It specializes in croissants and sugary delicacies with unpronounceable names, a tiny slice of nostalgia in a city filled with light, noise, and modern ambition.

Johnny is there first, spreading butter onto a pastry and watching the crowd, searching for his daughter’s familiar face. He’s seated outdoors on a weather-worn chair, a small bag of desserts resting on the patio table beside him. It’s only been a few hours since Jacqui broke the news, and he’s spent the time frantically rushing to clean up the house, making room for his unexpected guests. Luckily, he has a reliable housekeeper on speed-dial, who swoops in with a staff of assistants, tidying the place and making it hospitable for nine new lost souls.

Cassie hops over the patio railing with an agile vault, landing on the little porch, and slides into the seat besides Johnny. She rummages around in the bag, retrieving a frosted pastry, and bites into it, appreciating the rush of sweetness. After a few seconds of loud chewing, she glances over at her father. “Hi, Dad. You know those things have butter inside them already? You don’t need to add more. Just sayin’.”

“Says the girl who eats a pound of sugar a day.” Johnny finishes off the croissant, tossing the wrapper in the trash and leaning towards Cassie to grab her in a hug. “Hey. Thanks for coming at such short notice. Did Jacqui tell you yet?”

Cassie drops the pastry. As far as she knew, Johnny invited her to the bakery for some dad-daughter bonding time on a free afternoon. A twinge of sickening worry courses through her. “Did Jacqui tell me what?”

Johnny swallows hard, sitting back. The ornate metal design of the chair digs into his back, and he winces, leaning forward again and propping his elbows on the table. “That makes this a lot harder. Call her. Put it on speakerphone. Before we talk about this, I want you to know I agreed to help. Sonya doesn’t know yet.”

Cassie winces. “Is somebody pregnant?”

“No! It’s not that! Just-- call Jacqui. Or I will.” Johnny pulls out his phone, hitting Jacqui’s call button a bit too forcefully. This is a new level of responsibility that he’s not quite ready for. “Hey. I have Cassie on the other end. Did Jacqui tell you yet?”

Johnny swallows hard, sitting back. The ornate metal design of the chair digs into his back, and he winces, leaning forward again and propping his elbows on the table. “That makes this a lot harder. Call her. Put it on speakerphone. Before we talk about this, I want you to know I agreed to help. Sonya doesn’t know yet.”

“Yeah… I was getting ready to call her. Hi, Cassie.” Jacqui’s stressed voice resounds through the tinny speaker. “Want me to tell it again?”

Johnny leans towards the receiver. “Start to finish.”

“Nope. This time, you’re getting the highlights.” Jacqui grits her teeth, cracking her knuckles. “Cassie. The revenants are cured. Nine of them.”

A wave of unexpected relief washes over Cassie. She sags back against the chair, clutching her pastry. “Thank fucking god. I thought it was something bad. I’ll ask about how and why later. What do you need?”

“Um.” Johnny chimes in between bites of another croissant. Actually, better not tell her right now. Not after a painfully optimistic comment like that. “I’m letting them stay at the mansion. Cassie,
you’re going to need to take care of Shinnok and Raiden again.”

“...Take care of them?” Cassie gulps down a cup of water, dread growing once again in the pit of her stomach. “There’s something you guys aren’t telling me, isn’t there?”

On the other end, Jacqui sighs in frustration, wiping a hand across her brow, and grips the phone tight. “Come to my apartment as soon as you can. Mr. Cage, just-- get here. And tell Cassie. I can’t do it again.”

Without further comments, Jacqui hangs up, shoving her phone into her jeans. Her guests are finally starting to wake up, and they’re going to have a lot of questions.

Back at the cafe, Cassie is left staring at Johnny’s phone with a barely concealed look of horror. She sits in the chair, stupefied. She can’t even think of any wisecracks to meet this kind of situation. The full weight of this realization is hitting her pretty hard.

“I’m gonna ask about ‘how’ and ‘why’ right now.”

Johnny stuffs another bite of croissant into his mouth, and mumbles something unintelligible.

“Dad. What?”

“It was your favorite pair of roommates. Jacqui told me the Bondage Sorcerer showed up with the revenants.”

“Gonna assume that’s Quan Chi.”

“Yep. Shinnok killed him and broke his magic.”

“Good for him. Can’t say I’m surprised it eventually happened. Long overdue, honestly. Where and when was this?”

Johnny prods the croissant with the butter-knife, looking away. “A couple stories underground in the subway system. Last night.”

Fear grips Cassie’s heart. “What? Why?”

“Remember how Sonya told us D’Vorah escaped? And… what she put me through?”

“Oh my god.” Cassie slumps forward over the table, face pressed against the worn surface, and grips the edge with trembling fingers. “Oh, no. Holy fuck. Not those two... no. No. Please tell me I’m assuming the wrong thing. I should NEVER have let them go—”

Johnny reaches out to pull Cassie into a hug, letting her lay her head on his chest. “I’m really sorry. It’s not your fault. It’s not.”

“Was it Shinnok or Raiden?”

“It was Shinnok. Raiden made it to the Sky Temple, powered up again, and came back to get him. I guess Shinnok summoned him with godly ESP or something. But it’d been several hours.”

“D’Vorah only had you for half an hour and she was already trying to stick grubs in your face.”

“Jacqui says Shinnok got it a lot worse. Raiden annihilated D’Vorah, but Quan Chi took him down and Shinnok wrecked him as punishment. Then the revenants got fixed. I don’t know. I’m fuzzy on
the details.”

Cassie holds onto Johnny tightly, numb with shock. “How are they even alive?”

“They did a reincarnation thing. They’re not as strong right now, but they’re doing fine.”

“You gotta have them stay with someone else. I failed them.”

“No way. They need you. Raiden is everybody’s best friend, but Shinnok… isn’t. But you’ve done real good so far, dealing with them. They’re like an immortal salt and pepper shaker set.”

Cassie manages a tearful smile. “Weirdos. Seriously… I don’t think they’re gonna want to see me. I fucked up. I thought they were good to go home. I should’ve just gotten Sonya to fly them back to the Sky Temple.”

“Kiddo, this is not your fault.” Johnny looks into his daughter’s eyes, brushing her hair off her forehead. “Listen to me. You are a smart, capable, awesome young lady who has done an amazing job dealing with two actual gods. But they’ve just been through hell, for reasons that aren’t your fault, and the rest of us are going to be busy handling the revenants. They need you.” He pats her shoulder. “So clean out your spare room again.”

“It’s still clean. They haven’t exactly been gone long.”

“Okay. We still have to worry about that tournament, so we’re gonna need Raiden to recover. And Shinnok. You know, he’s all right, when he’s not trying to murder us all.”

Cassie nods. “I think Quan Chi is the first person he actually managed to kill.”

Johnny runs a hand through his hair. “Huh. You’re right. Good place to start, but that’s a hard act to follow. And he might’ve made up for the past shenanigans with this one. Anyway… I’m going to Jacqui’s place to pick up the revenants. You coming?”

“Sure. But I got here on my motorcycle.”

“C’mon. You think the French bakers are going to steal it?” Johnny chuckles, picking up the bag of pastries and stuffing it into his jacket pocket. “Put it in the back of the truck.”

“The truck? Where’d you get one of those?”

“I paid my housekeeper to borrow her cleaning van to pick up our guests. Nobody’s going to think twice about it.”

“Hey, that’s pretty smart.”

“You can thank Jacqui for that one. I would’ve brought the limo.”

“Good job, Dad. Real subtlety right there.” Cassie tries to laugh, weakly. “Welcoming them in style.”

“Yep, that’s what the Cages are known for.” Johnny returns the grin. At least he’s starting to feel a little bit like his old self again, after the shock’s worn off. “Meet you in the parking lot in the back. The truck’s pretty hard to miss.”

Cassie throws him a salute. “Will do.”

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Slipping her key into the lock, Cassie barges into Jacqui’s apartment with barely a knock to warn them all. Johnny is close behind, and kicks the door shut behind them, in case of nosy neighbors wondering about their impromptu house party.

Jacqui meets them in the hallway, looking even more distressed than usual. “Okay. We’re doing fine for now. Everybody’s a little confused, but they’re not evil and decaying anymore, which is a huge improvement.”

“I’ll say.” Johnny scoops her up in a quick hug. “Good to see you. What’s the… alive status on these guys? Do they need to eat? Normal human functions?”

Jacqui makes a face. “Yeah, of course they need to eat. Seems like they’re all normal people again, with the exception of about three of them that don’t age. I ordered pizza. Didn’t know what else to do. I’m not sure anyone’s ever had it before.”

“Got it. Okay, I’ll stock the fridge at home… and buy five more fridges.” Johnny steps into the living room, grinning broadly. “Hi! Long time no see.”

Cassie smacks her forehead. “Good one.”

Liu Kang and Kung Lao recognize him first with welcoming smiles. Liu Kang speaks up first, carefully crossing the room to meet him. “Raiden’s tournament star. Johnny Cage. It is… good to see you again.”


Kung Lao greets him with a friendly nod, tipping the sharp brim of his hat.

His gaze sweeps around the group, taking a mental headcount. The three Edenians have congregated in the corner, distinctly recognizable by their peculiar outfits. Nightwolf, Smoke, Stryker, and Kabal are gathered on the couch, having a friendly chat and getting used to the novelty of free will.

Johnny catches Kitana’s eye next. From what he’s heard, she was the other half of the Netherrealm power couple. “Hi there.”

Kitana is intently focused on her plate of food, cutting it into tiny pieces with a knife and fork. After a pause, she glances up at him, deigning to offer a greeting. “Oh. It’s you. Johnny Cage.”

“That’s me. Glad you’ve heard of me.”

“It would be impossible not to.” Sindel rises from her seat next to Kitana, and Johnny realizes, belatedly, that she’s been levitating midair. Extending a hand in the Earthrealm greeting custom, she offers an accidentally bone-crushing grip, stopping short and towering over him. “I am Sindel, former queen of Edenia. You are Lord Cage?”

He tries to smile, wincing a bit and rubbing his hand. “Not quite, but thanks.”

The queen tilts her head to the side, trying to recall the proper etiquette. “Sir Cage?”

“I’m flattered, but nah. Just Mr. Cage is fine.”

“Mister Cage, then. It is a pleasure to meet you.” Sindel clasps her hands behind her back, bending down to match his height. “I apologize for my daughter’s manners. She is unaccustomed to the life
we now all share.”

“It’s okay. I can deal with princesses. Already did, in a couple movies.” Johnny stands on his tiptoes. “You don’t have to bend down to talk to me. I promise. Actually, please don’t do that.”

“Oh.” Sindel straightens her back, gazing down at Johnny politely. “To be truthful, life and freedom are novelties for me, as well. I had never met any of this group before, except for my daughter and her bodyguard, until I slew them... I should explain. I sacrificed myself centuries ago to stop the emperor Shao Kahn from invading your realm. Quan Chi became powerful enough to revive me, reversed my protective wards, and made me into a living weapon.” It is clearly hard for the queen to discuss this. She closes her bright eyes, head bowed in sorrow. “I was responsible for the deaths of nearly all whom you see here. I am grateful beyond measure for their forgiveness.”

Kitana chimes in from the corner, between bites of strange Earthrealm food. It cannot compare to Edenian cuisine, but, for now, it’ll suffice. “Mother, you said it yourself. You were controlled. You are as responsible for their deaths as a sword is responsible for its wielder’s blows.”

Sindel pauses, looking over her shoulder at her daughter. “I will try to convince myself of that.”

After a long moment of quiet thought, she returns her attention to Johnny, offering her hand again. “I am grateful for your help and support. I hope that I and my companions do not impose too much on your home.”

“It’s fine. Kind of lonely all by myself, anyway. Jacqui told you the plan? Okay, good.” Johnny grips her hand carefully by the fingertips, avoiding another deathly squeeze. “Nice to meet you, too. Whenever you’re ready to go, I got a van downstairs.”

“If I may ask, what is a van?”

“It’s... like a big car.”

Sindel looks equally puzzled.

“A... transport vehicle with wheels.”

“In the manner of a chariot?”

“No horses, but yeah, that’s the idea.”

“But how can it function without beasts of burden to pull it?”


Smoke chimes in with a quiet voice, closing the magazine and stuffing it into his jacket. “Of course I have. I’ll take care of coordinating the group and informing them on modern developments.”

“Thanks, buddy. We’ll do a full round of introductions later.” Johnny trots out the door, hunting for his daughter. “Hey, Cass. Where’d you go?”

Jacqui looks up from her phone. “She’s on the roof with the gods.”

“You know, a couple months ago, I might’ve thought that sentence was a little weird.” Johnny hides a smile. “You got everything under control?”
“I think so.” Jacqui puts on a brave smile, too, forcing herself to stay calm. The stress is starting to wear on her pretty badly. “Sareena’s been helping. She’s amazing.”

“Sareena? Remind me which one—” Johnny finds himself interrupted by a gentle poke in the shoulder, coming face to face with a tall girl who looks sort of like a goth harlequin, but cuter. “Hi. That’s you?”

“Mr. Cage!” She offers a hand, too, but it’s the wrong one, and she grips his wrist when he returns the handshake clumsily. “I’ve seen your films. Jacqui lent me her television. I enjoyed them.”

Johnny blurs out before he can help it. “Is that why you look like a Ninja Mime extra?”

Jacqui smacks him in the shoulder. “Excuse you!”

Sareena seems unbothered. “Is that a good thing?”

“Yeah, if you want it to be.” Johnny tries again, clearing his throat. “Thanks for… helping with all this. Not really what I expected to be dealing with today, but I’m glad to do whatever I can. I still can’t believe it.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble at all. I’m just glad to see others freed from the Netherrealm’s clutches.” Sareena smiles brightly. “Of course, the task is not complete. Based on my studies, any powerful sorcerer would have built in a fail-safe system to retrieve their souls in case a curse is broken. But don’t worry! I am working on a plan to deal with that.”

Jacqui and Johnny chorus in unison.

“What?!”

Sareena shrugs, explaining as simply as she can. “Sorcerers are very thorough.”

“But Quan Chi’s dead!”

“Yes, and I couldn’t be happier about that! Still, there’s always the chance that someone else might try to recapture our new friends. But don’t worry about that for now. I think we will be all right.”

“Don’t worry?” Jacqui throws up her hands helplessly, feeling those familiar clutches of panic in her heart once again. “What the hell? When were you going to tell me this?!”

“The biggest problem might be Shang Tsung.” Sareena whips out a notebook, flipping through the pages and inspecting her untidy scrawls in a foreign script. “Kabal told me that Shao Kahn used Shang Tsung’s stored souls to empower Sindel with the energy to kill everyone else, which killed Shang Tsung… but, well, Sindel is freed now, and so is all that soul power.”

“Last time I heard ‘soul power’ it was about 70s music, and I liked that a lot better.” Johnny hooks his thumbs into his belt loops. “So what’s the conclusion?”

“There is a very slim possibility that Shang Tsung may return to life and take advantage of Quan Chi’s failsafe mechanism to steal the revenants.”

“And by ‘very slim possibility,’ you mean it’s gonna happen.” Jacqui grits her teeth. “That’s how this always works. Okay, what do we do about this? You’re teaching us all about Hell, I’d expect you to have an idea.”

“Quan Chi’s laboratory would have held vials that, if shattered, release an essence capable of
"reclaiming that individual soul." Sareena winces, recalling this. "I am… familiar with his methods. I was once his servant."

"Oooh." Johnny whistles under his breath. "That’s nasty. So we go steal the vials, or what?"

"Not yet. We have to worry about the tournament…" Sareena’s voice trails off. "I was just offering a bit of information about what might happen, but probably won’t."

"Never mind that. The tournament’s two months away. What’s the maximum time span for Shang Tsung to revive and steal back our new pals?"

Sareena wrinkles her brow, calculating. "About two or three weeks. At minimum, one."

"Fantastic. That’s actually a pretty good lead-up time. Better than the recent disaster-a-day stuff." Johnny cracks his knuckles, shifting his weight from foot to foot. "How are we gonna know when this happens? When, not if."

Sareena falters. "That, I don’t know."

"Okay, well, we’ll talk it out later. Mind translating those notes into English? I’d love to take a look." Johnny retreats towards the door. "Well, I’m gonna go drop Cassie’s motorcycle at the back, head home, and, uh, open up the Cage Bed & Breakfast. If she asks, tell her that’s where I went. I don’t really want to interrupt her reunion with the divine dynamic duo."

Jacqui’s starting to recover her nerve. "It’s pretty easy to judge how you’re feeling based on how many terrible jokes you make."


"You better. Bye, Mr. Cage."

"Catch you later, Jacq." And he’s gone in the blink of an eye.

- - -

On top of the apartment building, Cassie and the two gods are having a quiet chat, enjoying the clear weather. Now and then, they fall into a comfortable silence, conversation lapsing as they all retreat into their thoughts. It’s exactly what they all need among this stress and chaos.

She’s perched in one of the normal chairs that Shinnok has thoughtfully conjured from midair. For himself, he’s constructed an elaborate skeletal throne instead. She can’t even bring herself to criticize him. Shockingly enough, she’s glad to see him back to his normal self… more or less.

Raiden is resting in a comfortable upholstered armchair that hovers slightly off the ground. Hat and cowl removed, he lets the wind toss his hair, appreciating the refreshing cool breeze. He still remembers so clearly the stifling damp atmosphere of the subway chamber. He stares off into space with a wistful look on his face, lightning-laced fingers idly tapping the chair’s fabric.

Cassie looks over at him, rising from her daydreams of punching D’Vorah and Quan Chi right in their faces. "What are you thinking about?"

"The new constraints of mortal life. Our bodies will still vaporize food, but we must eat to sustain our energy, and to sleep. These are… strange customs."
“Have you ever done the mortal-form thing before?”

“A very long while ago.” Raiden goes quiet again, musing to himself. “Nothing noticeable has changed, and yet, it feels… different. Time is passing more slowly, I think.”

“Damn.” Cassie tips her chair back, balancing elegantly. “How ’bout you, Shinnok? I’m loving the bone throne.”

Raiden laughs quietly to himself.

Shinnok aims a glare at him. “Why is that funny?”

“Mortal humor.” Raiden looks elsewhere.

Shinnok huffs, mildly offended, and sits up, folding his arms. “I am doing as well as I can in this current weakened state. I am not speaking of mortal form, but rather, my… punishment.” He sighs. “That is the only way I can view it. If I tell myself that it is justice for my past actions, I can cope with the harsh reality, and begin to accept it. But if I say that I did not deserve this, and yet, it happened, somehow, to me…”

He grips the arm of the throne so hard it shatters.

Cassie is quiet for a moment. “That’s… that’s not good.”

“You don’t understand.” Shinnok tries to sit up from his chair, but sinks into it again despondently, the complex structure crumbling slightly under his weight. “I have to find whatever ways I can, to accept it and proceed through this life. To endure something like that… I cannot cope with the weight of this reality, the memory of it all. Even the mind of a god can only bear so much.”

Raiden rises from his chair, drops to one knee before Shinnok, and places his fingers on his temples, glowing softly with healing magic.

Shinnok inhales deeply. The throne rebuilds itself with skeletal bits and pieces. “Thank you.”

Cassie rests her chin in her hands, watching the two. “Shinnok. If you want to talk to me about it, you can.”

“Perhaps later.” He lets the chill of the fresh air wash over him, gazing into the open sky as the sun slowly sets over the horizon. The healing magic is helping him settle down, his mind and emotions clearing once more. “I spoke with Frost, early this afternoon. A few of us went to help her at the animal shelter. It was a strangely mundane activity, but it was… good to talk about it, to share the horror with another. It is easier not to bear it alone.”

His voice trails off.

“Regardless…” Shinnok clears his throat, urgently wanting to move on from the subject. “Afterwards, we dueled in the city park. Naturally, I was victorious. Then, she returned me here, to Jacqui’s company, and Raiden and I have been up on the roof ever since.”

“Got it.” Cassie looks over at Raiden, who’s still resting in contemplative silence, seemingly satisfied not to speak. “How are you doing? I heard you saved the day.”

He gazes at her sadly, an awful piercing stare of grief. “Not well enough.”

Cassie winces. “I’m sorry. But you did save Shinnok.”
“Not in time--”

“Far as I know, you got him out of there, you killed D’Vorah, you helped take down Quan Chi, and then you two successfully rebuilt yourselves. So, you know, you’re doing all right.”

Shinnok and Raiden share a pained glance.

“Am I missing something?”

“The reincarnation was necessary for me.” Shinnok rises from his skeletal chair, pacing back and forth across the rooftop. Cassie finally notices his heavy jacket, an unusual change from the revealing armor. “What she did to me was more… direct and thorough, than her torment of your father. Had I not reincarnated, the consequences would have been gruesome.”

Cassie nods slowly, biting her lip. “Okay. I got it. You don’t need to tell me the details. But you should probably talk to a therapist about this, or something.”

“What good would that do?” Shinnok sinks into the chair again. “Compared to that, my prior decapitation was… enviable. Oh, why do these things keep happening to me? This one was not deserved, and I know it, and that knowledge burns me like poison. Why? ”

Very hesitantly, Cassie crosses the distance on the roof between them, leans down, then pauses. “Okay. Boundaries. Can I hug you?”

“...yes, fine, if it would make you feel better.”

“Might help you, too.” Cassie wraps her arms around him, careful not to move him or pull him out of the chair. “It’s absolutely fucking unfair. Completely and totally. You’ve… really been trying, and you know, we all like you. Whether you want that or not.”

“To be well-liked is the opposite of my goals.” Shinnok sniffs, leaning against her. “But for the first time in the history of humanity, I had been trying to make the most of my miserable existence, for some purpose other than wanton destruction. And now, here, this is the consequence of it. There is a horrible rage deep within me once more, but driven by pain, not selfish envy. I do not know what to do with it.”

He closes his eyes.

“...Raiden, did you hear what Quan Chi said, when stating his purpose?”

Raiden flashes back suddenly to the scene, freezing as it plays out from the depths of his memory.

“To bring you to justice before the Elder Gods.”

His eyes widen. For once, he has nothing to say.

Raiden struggles for justification, his voice weak. “He… he must have lied. Quan Chi is manipulative and deceptive at his core...”

“No. He intended to capture and kill you. He had no reason to lie about your fate; what would it matter? He wanted you to know the reason for your torment.” Shinnok sits forward in his chair, eyes lighting up with a zealous glow as a profound realization hits him. “Once again, the Elder Gods have betrayed one of their own! I will see them brought to justice for it.”

“No! Not happening!” Cassie raises a hand, suddenly panicking. “We are NOT going back to the
whole ‘destroy the Elder Gods’ stuff! Not this shit again!”

“For the sake of my own torment and their new mistreatment of Raiden, I will tear them down from their mighty thrones in the sky with my bare hands, if I must!” Shinnok rises from his throne, summoning a skeletal staff, and slams it against the ground, toppling Cassie’s chair. She scrambles to catch her balance, leaping to her feet, and stares at him in horror as the sky darkens around him. “We must hold them accountable for this personal hell on Earth!”

“Shinnok...” Raiden stops him with a gentle zap of lightning, a bolt leaping across the distance between them. “This is not the way. Not now. Not yet.”

Unbelievably, Shinnok pauses, listening to him.

“Then what?”

“First, we must win the tournament. Then we will resolve this treason against us.”

“At last, you see things my way!” Shinnok has never looked so triumphant, his face blazing with renewed passion that quickly changes to sadness. “You, too, have faced the betrayal of the gods! and, oh, how dearly I wish you had not.”

Raiden bows his head, reaching out to grasp Shinnok’s sleeve. “As do I. I do not understand their reasons...”

“The trickery of the gods enabled this. Without Quan Chi, D’Vorah would never have had the power to take and trap me. They are responsible for what we both endured!” Shinnok raises his fists, silhouetted by burning magenta flame. “But... surely they would not punish you, just for the sake of torturing and eliminating me. Perhaps they thought they could destroy us both in one master-stroke.”

“Quan Chi did not seem to care about your fate, Shinnok... although he did say that when D’Vorah had her way, she would give him one of your--”

“STOP!” Shinnok lunges at Raiden, grabbing his collar, and shoves him away with a hysterical note of grief in his voice. “Don’t say it! Don’t!”

“I am so sorry. Shinnok. Please listen. I’m sorry...” Raiden gently grasps him by the shoulders, trying to soothe the panicked god. “I am just trying to determine the motivation of the Elder Gods’ betrayal, and how far their punishment went.”

“Don’t speak of what she did to me! Please--” Shinnok backs up, stumbling, and drops into his chair again, face in his hands. “Please...”

“Shinnok.” Cassie’s gentle voice cuts across the thick air, rising above the others. “Hey. Shinnok. Talk to me. What do we know about Quan Chi and the Elder Gods?”

He steadies himself with a few shaky breaths. “He did not say why or how he was alive again, but I have no reason to doubt that he did want to take Raiden to them. The reasons for this, however, escape me.”

“So the Elder Gods are exactly as awful as you always said? Let’s take it at face value and go from there. Raiden, tell me what you know. What’s the recent history here?”

Raiden swallows hard, looking over at Cassie guiltily. “I never wanted to doubt them... but when Earthrealm was threatened by Shao Kahn, they refused to intervene until he had set foot in this
world, actively violating their rules. They cared nothing for our fate otherwise.”

“Okay. Lawful Evil. Got it.” Cassie rubs the bridge of her nose, feeling raindrops falling on her jacket and the back of her neck. She’s starting to get a headache, too. “Can we talk about this indoors? Weather’s turned bad. I want to go home.”

Raiden clears his throat apologetically. The rain stops.

Cassie doesn’t even know how to feel. It’s sort of charming that it rains when Raiden’s sad. It’s also extremely depressing. She approaches him and gathers him into a hug, too, pressing her face into his shoulder. “Yeah. We’re going home. You guys are staying with me for now. Any objections?”

Shinnok stands up, letting the skeleton throne crumble into dust. “No… none at all. I will be glad for the company, if I may be honest. How are we traveling there?”

“I have a motorcycle…” Cassie trails off. “…that’s not gonna work for you two, is it.”

Raiden tests his lightning, letting the sparks flicker along one arm. “I can still fly. I could do that. Shinnok, you should not. Save your energy.”

Shinnok rolls his eyes, scuffing the toe of one boot on the rooftop surface. “If you absolutely insist…”

Without further ado, Raiden raises one fist and leaps off the edge of the roof, hurtling off towards Cassie’s apartment with a blast of electric power.

The god and the girl face each other, both laughing under their breath. “Raiden…”

Cassie strides towards the rooftop exit with quick steps, gesturing for Shinnok to join her. “Has he always been like that?”

“Absolutely. Ever since the first day that our paths crossed, he was… like that.” Shinnok descends the narrow staircase, landing squarely at the bottom. “How does a motorcycle work?”

“Are you looking for a technical explanation, or just how you’re gonna fit on it?”

“The latter.”

“Sit behind me and hold on tight. Sorry, I don’t have two helmets.”

“No matter.” Shinnok lifts his chin and materializes his headpiece from thin air, fastening tight around his neck and framing his pale face. “I hardly need one.”

Cassie smiles approvingly. The more Shinnok seems like his old annoying smug self, the more relieved she is. “Good. Can’t look like a proper god without a fancy crown. Or a hat. Either one.”

“Precisely.” Shinnok leads the way down the stairs, clinging desperately to the slightest shred of normalcy. Well, normalcy is entirely subjective, but his meaning is still clear. “I have never been on a motorcycle. I seem to keep discovering new modes of mortal transit. How fascinating.”

“It’s real fun.” Cassie lets herself out the building’s back door, crossing the parking lot with her key clasped tight in her hand. Johnny thoughtfully removed the motorcycle from the van, placing it across two empty slots. She groans. “Thanks, Dad.”

“I won’t even ask.” Shinnok tentatively climbs onto the vehicle behind her, filled with
indescribable dread. “So should I… hold onto you?”

“Yeah, wrap your arms around my waist. Go ahead. I’m pretty sure neither of us is each other’s type, so I’m not exactly threatened. And I’d rather be really awkward for a little while than explain how one of the gods fell off my motorcycle.”

Shinnok does as instructed, locking his hands firmly together with a slight grimace. “I am highly unaccustomed to this sort of thing.”

“Probably better for everybody else that way. Seriously, hold on tight. I go fast.” And without further warning, Cassie kicks the motorcycle into action, speeding out of the parking lot as a muffled shriek from Shinnok is lost to the wind.

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Raiden is waiting for them in the apartment, poking through Cassie’s shelves of books. Thoughtfully, she seems to have stocked up on new art supplies and mystery novels. When they arrive, he greets them both pleasantly. “I am glad you have returned safely.”

Cassie seems fine. Shinnok is staggering along with a seasick look on his face.

“Go take care of your pal.” Cassie gestures towards Shinnok, deftly catching him by the arm before he faints into a nearby chair. “Any news?”

“Actually, yes.” Raiden retrieves a new flip phone from his pocket, poking at it with a tiny stylus. “Sonya has informed me that the Outworld tournament roster has arrived.”

“How do you get texts on that?” Cassie’s eyebrows shoot up. “And what is it?!”

“I am not sure. She wants us to come to the base and find out.”

“Tell her we’ll be there later. Gotta refuel first. What food do you guys like best?”

“None of it.” Shinnok chimes in. “I hate it all.”

“Okay, you can drink water or something. Raiden?”

“Hmm. I am not certain. Choose something that you enjoy.”

“Spicy food’s off the menu. Okay. I’ll get takeout.” She pokes around her phone’s contact list, finding a few delivery numbers. “By the way, welcome home, I guess. I mean, I know home’s technically the Sky Temple, but—”

Raiden smiles softly. “Home is wherever we wish it to be.”
Bright and early next week, the team arrives at the SF base one by one, drawn like magnets from all points in the city to reunite at an inconspicuous alley doorway.

The ex-revenants are tactfully excluded from the latest events. Instead, they’re now appreciating the comfort of the multi-story Cage mansion, and Johnny’s starting to enjoy having them around. Some of them, the Outworld natives in particular, are not exactly acclimated to human life. But they’re all good company, and they’re starting to work through the system shock of their transformation and their dire history, day by day, one step at a time.

It turned out that Sonya’s report of the tournament roster was a false alarm. Kotal refused to divulge the full list long-distance, just informed them that he was assembling his fighters and details would be forthcoming. They only discovered this once the Cage family had reassembled in the SF situation room… which left Cassie and her godly companions in the awkward position of having to explain, in person, to General Sonya Blade, exactly what had happened last night, and why the dust-covered and exhausted Johnny looked like he’d been conducting a one-man excavation project.

Sonya almost had a heart attack on the spot… then traveled back to the mansion with Johnny, reintroduced herself to the team of nine, and officially appointed her ex-husband the Special Forces-approved overseer of these refugees from the Netherrealm. She preferred not to disrupt their lives any further. Re-acclimating to life is easiest in a comfortable environment instead of government custody, and while Johnny isn’t the most responsible person in the world… well, he did successfully raise Cassie. He must be capable of doing something right.

Days after the incident, newspapers were filled with reports of a mysterious collapse in the underground sewer system, a long-forgotten area of the city infrastructure now swept away by a sudden flood. Everyone was silently grateful for this, Shinnok most of all. There would be no physical evidence left of his ordeal. None whatsoever.

Now, the team’s been tasked with a new level of responsibility: making their way on their own from their living-spaces to the SF base. All nine, from the city-dwellers to the newcomers, must be able to fulfill the same expectations.

Cassie is the first to arrive, motorcycle parked nearby in the alley. Distracted by daydreams, she checks her watch. She fully expects she’ll be doing a rescue mission for at least one of them. She has a nagging suspicion which one it’ll be -- and she’s never going to let him down again.

Her expectations are shattered when Shinnok steps out of thin air in front of her.

He dusts off his hands on his jacket, looking quite pleased with himself. The others have granted him a fair bit of self-sufficiency, which has been helping him cope with his recent trauma, much more than smothering him in protective caution.

Lifting an eyebrow, he meets Cassie’s gaze through her sunglasses. “That was hardly a challenge.”

She smirks. Of course he’d be smug. It’s better than the alternative. “Impressive. How’d you do it?”

“A simple trick, really. I turned myself invisible and followed you.”

“Hey, if it works, it works.” She presses a button on her watch. “You’re second place.”
Raiden manifests in front of them in a shower of lightning sparks.

She doesn’t even look up. “Third place. Sorry, thunder dad. Shinnok beat you here.”

“I suppose I cannot be victorious every time.” Raiden leans against the wall at the other side of the alley, poking away at his tiny flip phone with the even smaller stylus. “Have you heard from the others?”

“Still waiting.”

“I’m here!” Sareena waves from the end of the alley, city map clutched in one hand. Leaping through the air, she lands nimbly between the group, stowing away the folded document in a hidden pocket. “Fourth place, then? That isn’t so bad. I am glad to see you all.”

“Yeah, you did good, especially for somebody who hasn’t lived in the city before.” Cassie welcomes her with a smile. “Okay, we’re almost at half. This is progress. What’s your method?”

“I memorized the route, then I used cars traveling in those paths to navigate here.”

“You ‘used cars’?” Cassie questions her with a stern glance. “Uh, what?”

“I sat on the roofs of different vehicles, and leapt across them to reach new ones when the direction changed.”

“Mmkay. Breaking some traffic laws. Nice. Hope you didn’t scare them into a car accident.” Cassie greets Cyrax as he rounds the corner, striding towards them with a messenger bag slung over his shoulder. “Hey there. You’re fifth.”

“That’s about what I expected.” He takes his place beside the others, wearing a blazer over his athletic garb, and adjusts a pair of reading glasses perched on his nose. “Taxis haven’t changed much in the past few decades. Fortunately, it wasn’t too difficult to come here, even if so much else is different. It’s no longer the same city I once visited, but echoes of the past are everywhere.”

Shinnok answers him out of the blue. “It’s a strange phenomenon, isn’t it, that idea of constant transformation? For us, it passes in the blink of an eye.”

“It’s jarring, I’ll admit.” Cyrax slides his hands into the pockets of his blazer. “The feeling of displacement is unshakable, but it’s also fascinating. We should discuss it sometime.”

Shinnok nods silently, drifting back into thought.

The others join them in quick succession -- Frost swoops in on a pathway of ice, Jin arrives in civilian clothes on a longboard, Takeda follows soon after with an apology for his bike’s flat tire. Last is Jacqui, who arrives out of breath, chugging a cup of coffee. “Sorry, guys. I had to meet Aunt Sonya last-minute. She wanted a statement on what happened with the ex-revenants.”

Cassie shoots her a questioning glance. “Mom’s not at the base yet?”

“Nah. She caught me on the way here so we’d be prepared before we go into SF territory. Sounds like there’s some higher-ups who want to bring them in.” Jacqui shakes her head, rolling up loose sleeves to reveal her gauntlets. “Like hell they will. I’d like to see them try.”

“It’s ok. For once, Dad’s actually got things under control. Besides, the movie star always wins. That’s how all the cheesy plots go.” Cassie is prying around at the bricks in the wall, counting under her breath. With a mighty shove, she pushes in one specific brick, opening a latch that
activates a hidden entrance. A panel in the wall slowly sinks into the ground, revealing a concrete staircase illuminated by clean white light. Wasting no time, she darts through the doorway, boots thudding on the steps. “Hurry up. You’ve got sixty seconds.”

The unruly group piles through the doorway, jostling to be first to follow.

The elevator ride to the base’s main level is uneventful and swift. Somehow, all nine manage to cram onto the platform together, uncomfortably cramped. Shinnok is grumbling about personal space, Jin is trying to avoid accidentally hitting anyone with his longboard, and Cassie’s given up trying to corral them all into cooperation. They proved they can get here on their own -- that’s good enough.

She’s still wary of letting Shinnok out of her sight, but he’s a god. The last thing he needs is to feel like he’s being humored, pitied, or babysat. Not only would it probably piss him off, but on principle, Cassie’s just not going to do it. The only one entitled to look after him is Raiden, anyway.

Maybe those two can predict and prevent each other’s mistakes.

Shinnok greets the assembled group of generals with a scornful stare and a huff under his breath. “Foolish mortals.”

Then again, maybe not.

Altogether too late, Raiden steps forward, smiling bravely. “I apologize for my colleague. He is… still acclimating to these circumstances.”

“I’ve heard it before. Just keep him under control.” One of the generals doesn’t even look slightly bothered. He reaches out with a firm handshake, which Raiden politely returns. “You’ve arrived right on time. We have a slight problem. You may be capable of helping.”

A look of dread flashes across Raiden’s face. “In my experience, General, there is no such thing as a ‘slight problem.’”

“We have it mostly handled. Do you know the individual Ermac?”

Cassie chimes in. “Not so sure Ermac counts as an individual, but yes. Up close and personal.”

“He arrived in the city this morning as Kotal Kahn’s Outworld representative. For diplomatic reasons, we can’t touch him. We took him into the base for him to deliver his message. Surprisingly, he’s not hostile. We plan to let him go within the hour.” The general recounts this at a rapid-fire pace, leading the way through the base’s winding halls. “He also has the tournament roster.”

“Finally!” Cassie exhales sharply. “Guess Kotal finally got his shit together and figured out the lineup.”

“Ermac says that by the tournament’s rules, Earthrealm has a week to determine its-- Ah.” The general rounds a corner and steps back suddenly, thrown off by the sudden presence of Ermac. He nods brusquely at the ominous figure, floating slightly off the ground and filled with green energy that casts a subtle glow on the glossy walls. Though still wrapped in bandages, Ermac looks a bit younger, stronger, renewed by some form of magic. Raiden can’t help but silently wonder why and how.

Ermac faces Raiden directly, ignoring the rest. When they deign to speak, it is in the same hissing
echo as always, a multi-layered and eerie tone that sends chills down Cassie’s spine. “I come as the 
envoy of Kotal Kahn. We have determined our kombatants. You have a week to answer with your 
own roster of fighters for the tournament.”

Cassie cocks her head, pushing her sunglasses up on her forehead. “You don’t scare me, corpse-
breath.”

Ermac ignores her.

Raiden handles the situation as carefully as he can. “One week? That is insufficient time.”

“The Kahn expects that you have already begun your preparations. A week will be enough. Listen 
closely.” Ermac floats nearer, sunken eyes blazing beneath the wrapped bandages. “Our emperor 
has reason to believe that a tournament would be an opportunity for hostile forces to challenge him. 
Therefore, there will be nine battles. Each kombatant will fight once, and only once. This will 
avoid weakening Outworld’s best warriors and depleting the Kahn’s ability to defend his throne.”

“Very well. I agree.” Raiden rubs his chin thoughtfully. “Go on--”

Something occurs to him. He hesitates.

“Nine?”

“Yes.” Ermac proceeds unflinchingly. “Two new kombatants have joined Emperor Kotal’s forces. 
You will accept these terms.”

“And if we do not?”

“You forfeit.”

“Very well. It seems you leave me no choice.” Raiden adjusts the brim of his hat, feeling a sudden 
cold sweat.

He assembled a team of seven.

Each kombatant will fight once.

Kotal has nine.

These do not add up to a pleasant conclusion.

“...Who are your fighters?”

Ermac ticks them off on their fingers. “Ferra and Torr, the bonded pair of warriors. Rain, the half-
Edenian prince and son of Argus. Skarlet, the creation of Shao Kahn. Reptile, the last Zaterran. 
Ourselves, the being of a thousand souls...”

Sareena whips out a notebook, jotting this all down in a rapid-fire scrawl.

Ermac continues. “Erron Black, the Kahn’s deadly First Minister. Noob Saibot, formerly known as 
Bi-Han, the resurrected shade--

Sareena gasps, and drops her pen.

Ermac is unbothered. Their voice carries on, barely interrupted. “Tremor, Earth’s most powerful 
elemental warrior. And Kano, renowned leader of the Black Dragon.”
Cassie yelps, but Jacqui claps a hand over her mouth.

A distressing silence settles in.

Shinnok’s sharp voice breaks through Raiden’s frozen mind. That bastard still lives? Ah, what a pity. So, have you any ideas for how to deal with this? We can’t exactly forfeit.

Raiden struggles to maintain a neutral expression, overwhelmed by absolute dread. No. I see no way forward. Do you?

Yes. I’m sure you recall that gods, due to our power and immortality, are forbidden from competing in tournaments.

I am familiar with that rule.

We are in mortal forms. The rule no longer applies. Besides, Kotal has two god-level kombatants. Rain and Tremor would easily win against any of the rest.

I know. Tremor was Kano’s lackey, responsible for the theft of Shinnok’s amulet from Special Forces custody. He set the snare. I fought him, and nearly lost. Raiden’s voice turns desperate as the silence drags on. Have we any other options? We could take two losses, and still win a majority of the battles...

That is not a risk I want to take. And who else would we recruit? The retirees? The revenants? I think not. Grow a spine and volunteer us, Raiden.

This is inadvisable.

So is everything else you do. Shinnok grits his teeth. Blame me if this goes wrong. I’m an easy target.

How are we going to convince Ermac that we are mortal? Should we allow them to try and prove it?

No, you self-sacrificing idiot. They have a thousand souls, they can certainly perceive ours.

Fine. I have no other option. Shinnok, are you even in a state to fight, after your--

Yes. The rage I carry within me could level all of Outworld. Do it. Don’t be a coward.

Raiden steps up, clearing his throat. “We accept.”

Half the team gasps.

“Our roster is as follows.” He recites the list in a calm tone, citing from memory, careful not to reveal any of the team’s talents. “Cassandra Cage, Special Forces team leader. Jacqueline Briggs, technology specialist. Kung Jin, of the Shaolin. Takahashi Takeda, of the Shirai Ryu. Cyrax, formerly of the Lin Kuei. Frost, currently of the Lin Kuei. Sareena, Special Forces paleontologist.”

He clears his throat.

“Shinnok, former Elder God, currently taking mortal form. And myself, also an ex-god, also in a mortal incarnation.”

Ermac’s jaw drops in astonishment. They open their mouth, about to offer a protest, but draw back, managing the situation carefully. “Our souls verify yours. You are, indeed, mortal… which grants
you permission to participate.”

Shinnok looks deliciously smug. “I thought as much.”

“Kotal Kahn was not aware of your intent to become kombatants.”

“Well, we weren’t aware of Kotal’s intent to try to force us to forfeit by adding two extra fighters, but, Ermac, I’m afraid that’s just sometimes how it goes.” He spreads his arms, floating off the ground as well and towering above Ermac’s height. “Send him my least sincere apologies.”

Raiden stifles a chuckle.

“I accept your terms. I will inform Emperor Kotal of these developments. Within a week, I expect your proposed schedule of kombatant duels.”

Raiden lifts a hand, clarifying an important detail. “Might I remind you, as the challenger of the tournament, Emperor Kotal is obligated to accept our choices for individual opponents.”

With no further comment, Ermac nods. Then, with a dismissive gesture, they sweep away down the SF corridor, sending the good-natured general chasing after them in a hurry.

Raiden holds his breath until Ermac is nearly out of sight. Then he sags against the wall, taking off his hat and cowl and running his hand through his hair with a deep breath. “That did not go especially well.”

“Raiden, now is no time to become a pessimist. I would consider that a success.” Shinnok pats him on the shoulder, looking entirely self-assured. “Kotal will soon learn that his trick to force us to forfeit completely failed. Oh, what I’d give to see the look on his face…”

The group erupts in a clamor, all arguing amongst themselves. Cassie’s voice rises above them, highly distressed about Kano’s reappearance, while Sareena is in a panic about Noob Saibot. They’re all hastily debating who will fight who, trying to sort out the details without any sort of thorough discussion.

Sonya steps into view, and silences them with a whistle.

Cassie’s head snaps up instantly. “Hi, Mom. Did you catch any of that?”

“We have hallway cameras. Yeah, I got it. Well played, Raiden. I thought Kotal would do something sneaky, but not that.”

Raiden silently gestures to Shinnok. “The idea was his.”

“I suppose I am good for something, once in a while.” Shinnok meanders down the corridor, peering through the windows. “This place is so unsettlingly soulless, all sterile and metal and dreary. How do you stand it?”

“Let’s talk business before you start bitching about the decoration.” Sonya sets her hands on her hips. Shinnok is exactly as insufferable as always, but after everything, she’s a little more inclined to cut him some slack. But only a little. “I can’t believe Kano made it through the Sky Temple incident. I’m disappointed.”

Jacqui makes a face. “For all we know, he’s been resurrected. Doesn’t matter. Someone’s got to fight him.”
Sonya gestures down the corridor, beckoning them all to follow her into a meeting room. “The sooner we figure out the match-ups, the better. We’re not choosing them today, but I want your ideas. You should know each other’s strengths by now.”

Cassie mumbles under her breath. “More like each other’s weaknesses.”

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Less than an hour later, they’ve got a tentative roster jotted down on the whiteboard in Sonya’s neat bold print. It’s not perfect, but it’ll do for now. Reaching a consensus among these nine uncooperative personalities is a miracle in its own right.

“Let’s go over it again. I want your reasons.” She addresses them crisply. “Cassie?”

“Kano. He wants a rematch? I’ll give it to him.” She pounds her fist into her palm, sunglasses perched on her nose again. “This time, it’s even more personal than the last time. ‘Uncle Kano,’ my ass. He’s going to eat dirt.”

“Let’s assume something goes wrong and we need to reshuffle the team. Who do you not want to fight, at all costs?”

“Skarlet.” She shudders. “She’s the blood girl, right? Yeah, I’m just a human. I can’t do anything against her. And what you’ve shown me from our files is really creeping me out.”

“Okay. Sareena? Best and worst?”

“The best would be Reptile. By now, I’m an expert on Saurians -- their movement, their abilities, their bone structure. Not only would I be able to fight him, I could learn a great deal for my research.” Sareena looks up from her notepad. “The worst would be Bi-H-- Noob Saibot. I knew him, back in the Netherrealm… then Quan Chi took him and remade him as a shade. I could never fight him.” She swallows hard, scribbling something in her notebook. “I hope this is acceptable.”

“It’s fine. We understand the circumstances. Jin? What about you?”

“I wanna take on Ermac.” He beams. “I can summon my ancestors’ souls, yeah? So it’d be like a soul showdown!”

Sonya shakes her head. “Ermac is nearly impossible to defeat, now that he’s been empowered again. We’re looking into finding out why. We may have to take a loss on Ermac’s fight, since we’re aiming for a majority win, not a flawless victory. Are you ready for that?”

Jin winces. “…yeah. I guess I am. Cousin Lao would say it’d be good for me. Learning experience.” He fidgets with his sleeve, rolling up the cuff. “Don’t want to fight Erron Black. Arrows versus bullets? No thanks. Don’t see that going well for me, unless I want a career as human Swiss cheese.”

“C’mon, Jin, that joke was way too cheesy.” Takeda volunteers next as Jin groans. “I’ll fight Noob. He’s originally from Earthrealm, so I can read him. I’ll do all right, or at least I think I will. I’d rather not go against Reptile, since he hurt me pretty badly in the Dead Woods last time. Couldn’t see for half an hour, and I’m no good as a blind Shirai Ryu. Dad’d be disappointed.”

“Your dad wouldn’t be disappointed in you no matter what, Takeda. Go easy on yourself.” Jacqui idly flicks her gauntlet’s plasma setting on and off with an annoying power-up noise. “I’ll fight Ferra and Torr. I know how to deal with weird horse girls. I was one. I mean, ‘horse’ is a little different from ‘lumbering flesh mountain,’ but, you know, same concept.” She shrugs. “I don’t
want to fight Kano. That’s Cassie’s job.”

“Seems like a lot of stuff is Cassie’s job.” Frost conjures a tiny snowstorm between her fingers, sitting back in her chair with her feet propped on the table. “I’ll fight the cowboy. I can probably learn how to make ice shields to block bullets. We’ve got a little while to practice, so if I master that trick, I’m good to go. Don’t make me fight Ermac. He freaks me out.”

“I’ll fight Skarlet. I don’t fear her, and my powers of chi may help repel her. Besides, I once was dead. Maybe that will limit her ability to use my blood.” Cyrax sits still, speaking in a measured tone. He pushes his glasses up on his nose. “I’d prefer not to fight Ferra and Torr. I suspect I wouldn’t be effective against them.”

“Who’s left?” Sonya looks across the table at Shinnok and Raiden, who are both staring at each other deep in thought, completely silent. “Is there something you two want to share with the class?”

“You dare think you could teach me anything? Hardly.” Shinnok looks up, sitting tall in his chair. “Yes, in fact. I will fight Tremor. What use would an earth elemental have, in trying to stop a god who can fight without ever touching the ground?”

“Don’t get cocky. Who’s your last choice?”

“Rain. He could extinguish my fire, which is a major part of my strategy.” Shinnok opens his hand and conjures a spark of flickering magic, by way of demonstration. There’s never a bad time to prove his power. “Tremor, however, will not know what to expect from me.”

“Don’t do that in here. Our fire alarms are sensitive.” Sonya looks directly at Raiden. The things she puts up with for the sake of this job… “How about you?”

“I’ll fight Rain.” He actually looks happy at the prospect, recovering from the system shock of the Ermac encounter. “A demigod with storm powers, against the lord of thunder? I believe I am likely to win.”

Shinnok rolls his eyes. “The ‘Lord of Thunder’? Is that what you’re calling yourself now?”

Raiden looks at him, wounded. He wrinkles his nose, glancing away. “Just keep talking. You’re not actually incorrect.”

Raiden does as requested, sitting forward across the table to address the team. He looks earnestly hopeful, hat perched on his head over his loose silver hair. “I would be ill-served fighting Tremor. He was sent by Kano to place and activate the snare surrounding Shinnok’s amulet, and in my efforts to disable the traps, I confronted him. It was not an easy victory… and if Kotal is willing to hire him, he is surely more powerful than before. Shinnok, however, stands a solid chance against Tremor.”

“Thank you for your overwhelming confidence in me, Raiden.”

Raiden ignores him.

Sonya’s tone is brusque. She wipes the whiteboard clean. “I appreciate your contributions, all of you. Barring unforeseen circumstances, this will be the final roster. If we discover some weaknesses during training in the next week that would limit your chance of victory, you’ll switch roles. Otherwise, prepare yourselves.” She pauses. “That reminds me. Your mentors will be arriving tomorrow. They’ve agreed to help for at least a month, which gives us extra time to
prepare after the intensive training is over. There are five of us. The first is Scorpion.”

Takeda’s face lights up. “Hanzo! I’ve missed him.”

Sonya looks directly at Frost. “You’re going to train with him. Fight against someone whose abilities counter yours, and you’ll get much stronger.”

She widens her eyes, and slams her hands on the table, creating a sheen of ice on the surface. “No way! He’s an enemy of--”

“Your worst trait is your stubbornness, Frost. If you can learn to cooperate with Scorpion, you’ll be ready for anything.” Sonya does not listen to any complaints. “Cassie, you’re training with Kenshi. He’ll help teach you patience, and how to predict and control fight pacing.”

Cassie pops a wad of bubblegum into her mouth. “Can’t complain. He’s a good guy… but I’m not sure I need sword training.”

“That’s not the point. Trust me on this.” Moving on, Sonya meets Jacqui’s gaze reassuringly. “You’re going to be training with me. You’re good, but you’ll need to learn better tactics and agility to fight Ferra and Torr.”

“Yeah.” She powers off her gauntlet with a flick of the wrist, looking a little disappointed. “I guess you’re right. Got some room to improve.”

“Takeda, you’re going to be training with Sub-Zero, on the same principle as Frost.”

He offers a hesitant smile. “I should be able to manage that.”

“Sareena, Cyrax, you’ll be training with Johnny. I’m pretty sure he can deal with you two. In fact, he volunteered.” She looks directly at Jin, staring him down. “And you’re also working with me. If you’re brave enough to go up against Ermac, I’m going to make sure you can handle it.”

Jin salutes her. “Aye, aye, ma’am.”

Sonya purses her lips. “That’s all. You’re dismissed.”

Shinnok rises to his feet first, pushing his chair back. “Once again, you’re all quite welcome for my solution to Kotal’s trap. I absolutely cannot wait for this tournament!”

He vanishes without waiting for a response. Raiden just sighs and follows him.

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They reconvene above-ground… somewhere. Shinnok has developed a form of teleportation safety net for himself, instantly traveling between several random locations before arriving at his destination, in order to thwart any pursuers. Dutifully, Raiden struggles to follow him, and by the time he catches up, Shinnok has already seated himself on a park bench… right across the street from the SF entrance alleyway.

Raiden groans, flickering into view beside him and sitting back with a heavy sigh. “Was that actually necessary?”

“Nothing I do is necessary, in the conventional view, but that has never bothered me.” After a few moments of consideration, Shinnok finally removes his jacket, letting the garment vanish into thin air. Beneath, he’s wearing the same elaborate waistcoat from his mortal garb, layered with armor
pieces over it. His slender forearms are adorned with elegant gauntlets. It’s far more sensible and concealing than his usual attire, but it’s a step up from the heavy jacket, which was more suited to chilly weather than the pleasant seasonal temperatures.

Raiden observes with an approving nod. “Are you feeling any better?”

“Not yet. Would you mind helping with the spell? It is more powerful if someone else does it.”

“Gladly.” Raiden gently rests his fingertips against Shinnok’s forehead, infusing him with the healing magic. “As immortals, we recover faster than most, but you have still been through something entirely terrible. Do not pressure yourself to immediately heal.”

“I understand.” Shinnok closes his eyes, letting the sun’s warmth wash over him. “You handled Ermac well.”

“I thought you believed I had not.”

“No. Despite my needling, I will acknowledge that you did a decent job. Of course, you wouldn’t have managed the crisis at all without my timely suggestion, but I will admit, it was a collaborative effort.” Shinnok slides down in his seat a bit, stretching out his long legs and draping his arms over the back of the bench. “Is it even allowed for Kotal to have nine fighters?”

“Considering the tournament’s unconventional structure, yes, as long as it is an odd number. That is the custom.”

“I suppose. Kotal must be paranoid about a coup, in order to arrange the fight structure this way. You did correctly guess all seven of his original choices, back when we were recruiting. Raiden, I’m a little bit impressed.”

“I have done my research. I know which beings hold the most power.” Raiden pauses. “Why are we talking out loud?”

Shinnok blinks, realizing this. “Oh. I’m not certain. Probably because we’re used to dealing with the mortals, but there’s hardly anyone to overhear us here…”


“What in all the Realms—” Shinnok yelps, conjuring a skeletal staff from midair, and bolts to his feet, aggressively lunging at the source of the voice. But she poofs out of view with a flash of bubbling pink energy, materializing right beside him instead, and shatters his weapon with a quick stab of a small dagger. He surrounds himself with a magic shield, throwing the unseen opponent into the air. “You stop that!”

“Must I? I was having so much fun.” Mileena lands on all fours, picking herself up, and tosses her head, brushing thick tangled dark hair out of her face. She pulls down her mask to reveal intimidating fangs, grinning at the shocked pair of gods. “And hello to you as well, Raiden. It’s been some time since we saw each other, but it feels like it was only yesterday.” She strides towards him with swaggering steps and a model’s poise. “You look simply lovely with your hair down. You should wear it that way more often!”

“Raiden’s hairstyle is none of your concern. Nor mine, might I add.” Shinnok is too confused to react in any way other than pure exasperation. This is almost the least strange thing that has happened all day. “Haven’t you some sort of business to attend to in Outworld? What are you doing here? How did you find us?”
“My empress self is dealing with those matters.” She waves a clawed hand in an airy gesture, smirking at the annoyed god. “I, as my diplomatic self, have come for a visit and a friendly chat… and to protect you until the time of the tournament. I followed Ermac’s magic. He made it all too easy.”

“I see.” Shinnok grumbles, sinking down into his seat with folded arms. “What do you want from me this time? At least you didn’t bring Tanya.”

“Dearest Tanya is currently occupied, assisting my empress self as we make our plans. Do tell, how did the meeting with Ermac go? Did he reveal any valuable information?”

“Yes, he told us the tournament roster. Raiden and I will be fighting Kotal’s new pets.”

“So that’s how you chose to deal with that trap!” Mileena’s mouth opens, lips curling in a slow grin. “Very, very clever… but how did you subvert the rules?”

“We have both reincarnated into mortal form.” Raiden answers flatly. “I trust you are not aware of the circumstances.”

Mileena backs up a step, faltering. She respectfully stows her knives in their sheaths across her back, hands dropping to her sides. “Why?”

Shinnok meets her eyes. “D’Vorah.”

Mileena gasps, jaw dropping. “That treasonous wretch! Filthy wriggling scum! She ought to be crushed under the heel of her enemies-- what… could she do to a god?!”

“Quan Chi was involved, as well.” Raiden’s tone is quiet. “Shinnok, I am going to return to Cassandra’s apartment. Take as long as you need to talk with Mileena. When you are done, bring her home, as well.”

“You’re living with Cassie Cage?” Mileena’s gleaming yellow eyes are wide with astonishment. “What unearthly circumstances could possibly necessitate that? Such an insufferable girl…”

Raiden gently touches Shinnok’s shoulder, and disappears.

Shinnok pats the empty seat on the bench beside him. “Come, sit a while, have a chat. I’m sure you’ll be thrilled to hear the latest developments.”

“Your tone suggests I will be anything but thrilled.” Mileena slithers into the seat, leaping over the back of the bench and landing squarely beside him before getting comfortable, draping an arm over his shoulders. Shinnok flinches violently, and she withdraws the arm at once, moving away a respectful distance. “First of all, what did D’Vorah do? Before you tell me, I want you to know that she murdered me by kissing me and filling my mouth with bugs that devoured my face and body. So, whatever horrors she inflicted on you, I very well know the feeling.”

Shinnok breathes deeply, his voice a bit shaky. “You have the confidence to speak of it…?”

“Enough time has passed that I finally can. It takes time to come to terms with horrible deeds.” Mileena licks her lips, mouth dry. “I woke up in a new body after it happened, too, although I’m not sure if it’s quite a reincarnation…”

“You are most likely the only person in the world with experiences comparable to my own.” Shinnok’s voice is dull, almost too quiet to hear. “She… used me as a host.”
“Ohhhh my gods--” Mileena’s voice rises to a shriek. “She will die!”

“She did.” Shinnok responds numbly, eyes squeezed shut. “Raiden ripped her apart limb by limb, then burnt her into ash. She is gone. It will never even begin to repair what she did, but it was satisfying to witness.”

“Oh, tell me more, I want to hear all about her gruesome death! It’s the only consolation I’ll ever have for what was done to me.”

“Hmm…” Shinnok tries to recall, wincing at the memory. “First, he punched a hole through her stomach and hung her from a broken pipe in the ceiling. Then, she revived herself, and he destroyed her again by tearing off her stingers, arms, and legs. When he finally found out what she’d done to me, he decapitated her and burned her gnats, crushed her grubs, and vaporized the remaining shell of her body.”

“Delicious. She should suffer beyond measure, as her victims have, for all that horrible violence and violation. I wish I could kill her a thousand times over!” Mileena rubs her palms together, gnashing her sharp teeth in a forceful grimace. “Oh, Shinnok, dear Shinnok, you should never have had to endure that. Truthfully, I never thought that she could do such a vile act to another person. I’m so sincerely sorry.”

“Nor did I. Thank you…” Shinnok hangs his head, resting his chin in his hands. Somehow, there is a new weight off his shoulders, though the subject is still nearly unbearable to discuss. “Quan Chi aided her. The Elder Gods sent him to kill Raiden. For the life of me, I have not the slightest clue why.”

“Ugh.” Mileena snarls, spitting onto the ground. “I never liked that wretch. What do you plan to do about it? And-- before we continue, by the way, do I still have your promised aid in an attempt to depose Kotal Kahn?”

Shinnok blinks at the sudden question. “Yes, of course. I have no reason not to.”

“Lovely, wonderful, excellent. I just had to check.” Mileena runs her pointy fingers through her hair, gazing up at the pretty Earthrealm sky. It’s so picturesque here, but she wouldn’t want to rule it. Outworld is more than enough. “Really, though, what do you plan to do about those accursed useless so-called gods?”

“I am unsure. I somehow doubt I could kill them all…”

“Well -- and this is just an idea, there’s hardly any need to take it at face value, may I add -- there could be some way to prevent them from accessing Earthrealm. And If they try to come through Outworld…” Mileena whips out her knife and licks the blade. “I would be quite capable of thwarting their plans, for your sake and mine.”

Shinnok breathes deeply, steadying his wits. “While I appreciate your moral support, Mileena, you are not yet Empress. Let’s worry about the tournament first and foremost.”

“Of course, of course. Have you figured out which one of you is fighting which among Kotal’s little collection?”

“We’ve made progress in determining that, yes. At present, I am all set to fight Tremor. Raiden is fighting Rain..."

Mileena pauses, then just starts laughing in a hysterical howl.
"...is something the matter?!

She slaps her knee, trying to collect herself. “Kotal thinks that Raiden is going to fight Tremor and you are going to fight Rain! He believed Raiden wouldn’t dare fight another kombatant with the power of lightning. Oh, gods, this is absolutely priceless—” She puts a hand over her mouth, stifling laughter. “I saw him discussing it. One of the benefits of being me is that I am my own spies. I know Kotal’s going to be infuriated.”

Shinnok chuckles to himself, wearing a triumphant smirk. “Yes. That arrangement was my idea. Why would Kotal be foolish enough to assume Rain would win against Raiden?”

“Wishful thinking, perhaps... I can’t imagine any other explanation. ‘Why would Kotal be foolish enough’ is the eternal question, isn’t it, dear Shinnok?” Mileena turns to face him, resting her chin in her hands with a wicked smile. “So, tell me more about your new arrangements. What necessitates living under the same roof as that incredibly exasperating Cage girl?”

“Raiden and I were planning to resume living at the Sky Temple, but our mortal forms make that a far greater challenge. We will return weekly for healing in the jinsei and to visit Fujin, who is, for now, Earthrealm’s appointed defender. But otherwise, we are more or less stuck here… especially now that we are on the team, and the rev—”

He stops himself before the rest of it escapes him.

Mileena puts her hands on her hips demandingly, leaning towards him with teeth bared. “The rev-what?”

Shinnok draws away, flinching, and responds in a stifled whisper. “The revenants are cured.”

“HOW?!” Mileena gazes at him in pure awe, a mixture of emotions shifting across her face -- distress, confusion, dread, but joy as well. “Sister…”

“It happened when I killed Quan Chi.” Shinnok stares off into the horizon, inspecting a distant tree far down the city street. “Please… we have all come so far. Don’t do anything to harm the revenants.”

“I wouldn’t.” Mileena swallows hard. “I have spent a great deal of time thinking the issue over… if this were to ever come to pass, which I had always doubted, but it has! And-- if it did-- I resolved that I would…”

She coughs, trying to parse the words more clearly.

“Tanya wants a free Edenia— but I haven’t the slightest idea how to un-merge the realms; that is far beyond my abilities, despite my power. It is possible that a devoted god or two could eventually determine a method to achieve it…” She glances at him knowingly out of the corner of her eye. “Nevertheless-- I will, as Empress, proclaim Edenia’s freedom, in spirit if not in fact… which would necessitate it having a leader-- which I would be willing to grant to Queen Sindel, or my dear sister.”

Shinnok’s eyebrows shoot up. For a minute, he has nothing to say.

Eventually, he speaks, his voice cracking slightly. “Sindel lives again, and while she was falsely resurrected for an evil purpose, I would hate to return her true self to the world of the dead.” He adjusts his crown and his collar, an outlet for his nervous energy. “That means she would resume her status as queen, and Kitana is still the princess. But I am not sure she would be interested in meeting you again at this point… and it is also worth mentioning that she and Liu Kang, as
“revenants, became emperor and empress of Netherrealm. After that ordeal, her taste for leadership is probably somewhat diminished.”

“Oh.” Mileena ponders this, fingers locked around her knees, leaning forward in deep thought. “This is quite the revelation. I agree it’s best if I avoid them… for now.”

“What do you plan to do now?”

“My diplomat self, or all of me?”

“Just you.” He gives a half-shrug, not sure how to specify, and points at her. “This you.”

“I’m not going anywhere until the tournament. In fact, considering recent catastrophes, I would suggest that I should protect you until then, dear Shinnok.”

“Mileena, you are perhaps the only individual than me who is less capable of blending into daily Earthrealm life.”

“Oh, nonsense. Goro or Kotal would be far worse.”

“I suppose you have a point with that.” Shinnok follows Mileena’s awed gaze as she inspects a passing car. “I imagine those are new to you. It will take some time for you to accommodate to Earthrealm.”

“But it’s fascinating! I’m quite willing to learn… if you will have me.”

“I enjoy your company, but I can hardly vouch for the others.”

“What do they matter? You’re a god! You overrule them!” Mileena leaps from her seat, landing in front of Shinnok, and offers her hands to help him up, gripping strongly. Then she pulls her mask back over her face, concealing the fangs in order to be less of a public menace. “Come. Let’s talk as we walk, and you can tell me all that’s happened since the Kotal incident…”

“I am not sure we will have enough time on the walk for a thorough explanation. It has been, in a word, eventful.” Shinnok can hardly sum it up. He pauses in thoughtful silence, doing his best to recall the route home. His sense of direction is lacking at times. “I might as well try, for your sake. You should know it all. Come, let’s go. There’s no time to waste.”

The petite pink-clad figure falls into step beside the towering god, a conspicuously strange pair who go entirely unnoticed as they make their way along the city’s busy streets.
Shinnok has to figure out how to break the unwelcome news.

This requires him to be tactful. And, for a god as old as the dawn of time, one would think he’d have picked up that ability by now. Regrettably, he has not.

Well, it’s never too late to learn.

Standing at the bottom of the flight of stairs in Cassie’s apartment building, he’s desperately trying to improvise a scheme to handle this sticky situation. The ex-empress is equally skeptical of his abilities. He can feel her questioning gaze all the way across the hallway.

Leaning against a wall, Mileena idly fidgets with her skull belt, waiting for the great and powerful Shinnok to bother saying something.

The god clears his throat awkwardly, hands clasped behind his back. “Despite evidence otherwise, I think that I can manage this.”

“You don’t really have a choice, dear Shinnok. What else would you do, invite me into her apartment unannounced? I suspect Earthrealm has rules about that sort of behavior.” Mileena shakes her head disapprovingly, clucking her tongue. “Just get it over with. I’ll wait further down on the stairs, and come join you once you’ve made your valiant attempt at diplomacy.”

Newly invigorated by spite, Shinnok ascends the stairs, eager to disprove Mileena’s doubt.

He taps on the door lightly, enough to catch Cassie’s attention. He has not yet been allowed a house-key, on the simple principle that a god doesn’t need one.

Cassie opens it, half-changed into her workout clothes. “What? Can’t you just come in here?” Shinnok coughs politely, stalling for time. “What would you say if I told you that a powerful leader of a foreign land had arrived, and needed a place to stay for the upcoming month?”

Cassie is unimpressed. “Tell ‘em to book a hotel.”

Shinnok feels a sudden surge of panic. He hadn’t actually prepared for Cassie to say no.

“That may be difficult. She isn’t from around here.” He breaks the news in the vaguest terms possible, scanning the room behind Cassie with a desperate glance. “...Raiden? Are you in there?”

Raiden materializes beside her, an expression of grave concern on his face. “What is the matter? Shinnok, has something gone wrong?”

He coughs again, fidgeting with one of his gauntlets. “Not precisely. We simply have unexpected company. Important company. She will need somewhere to stay. Ideally, here, since I cannot possibly imagine any other options. Trust me, I have thought about it at length.” He delivers this all in a rushed tone, trying to just get it over with. “I did not expect her arrival. Apparently, she followed Ermac. She is here for my protection.”

Cassie and Raiden lock eyes, then stare back at Shinnok, unimpressed. “Mileena or Tanya?”

“Indeed, it is Mileena.” Shinnok blurts it out, gesturing for the girl to join him at the door. She bolts up the stairs two at a time, pulling down her mask to grin at them broadly, but before she can
interrupt, he shushes her with a quiet glance. “She has important information about our opponents, or so she says.”

Cassie smacks her forehead and groans, gritting her teeth. As if she didn’t have enough problems already. The gods aren’t ideal roommates, but the carnivorous empress is on a whole new level. “Really? Seriously? What is this, the Cage Motel?”

Raiden pats her shoulder consolingly. “I am sure everything will be perfectly all right, Cassandra.” He isn’t at all sure of this, but Cassie might benefit from the false confidence.

“My landlord is gonna kill me. Just get in here.” Cassie flings the door open, stalking off towards the bedroom to finish changing for the afternoon’s training. “Should’ve set some ground rules about guests. I need this like a hole in the head. Couldn’t she just stay in Outworld and not invade my apartment?”

“Ah, I already am in Outworld! The version of me that you see is merely one of my many forms.” Mileena sweeps through the doorway gracefully, hair swishing, and Shinnok steps through behind her, politely latching it shut. Mileena has already started inspecting the living room shelves with extreme curiosity, rifling through the books. “I do sincerely appreciate the hospitality! Why, I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Cassie calls from another room. “That better not be sarcasm.”

“It wasn’t! What would I do otherwise? I could hardly hope to impose on Jacqueline Briggs, nor your other teammates, and joining the former revenants is out of the question.” Mileena stresses this with a snarl under her breath, and plops down onto the couch, sprawling out across the cushions. “They are not at all ready to see me, nor I them.”

“Guess that’s fair. So you’re imposing on me instead? Amazing.” Cassie is already starting to cope with this new development, mind racing as she makes plans. “Hope you like that couch. You’re going to be sleeping on it.”

“I promise you, these are far finer accommodations than what I’ve endured in the past.” Mileena inspects one of the pillows with great curiosity. “Such lovely workmanship…”

“We have sewing machines on Earth.” Cassie crosses into the kitchen, rummaging around in her fridge. Feeding two newly mortal gods is bad enough, feeding Mileena is going to be worse. “What do you eat?”

“Raw meat.” Mileena answers promptly, a gleam in her golden eyes. “The fresher, the better.”

“Okay, I don’t have any of that sitting around, but I can pick up some rare steaks or something. That’s as close as you’re gonna get.” Cassie pours herself a glass of water, chugging it rapidly. “If you want, I can move the couch into the other room, where Shinnok and Raiden are staying. There’s probably room near the bed.”

Mileena arches a brow. “One bed?”

Shinnok answers dryly. “We cut it in half.”

Cassie shakes her head, slamming a drawer shut. “I don’t even want to know if you’re kidding.”

Raiden materializes into the living room again, and takes a seat cross-legged on the floor besides Mileena, addressing her politely. He’s almost relieved to know all is well with her. “It is good to see you again. How have you fared in Outworld since our last meeting?”
“Not altogether badly, my dear Raiden. I’ve been collecting information on Kotal Kahn’s plans and actions. I’d be only too glad to share.”

Raiden pulls his sketchbook and a pencil out of his storage dimension, turning to a blank page and offering it to the empress readily. “Transcribe all that you know. We will need the information.”

Mileena snatches it from him and flips the pencil over in her hand with a look of wonder. “Is this what writing utensils look like in Earthrealm?”

“Yes. They are erasable.”

Her eyes widen. “Marvelous.”

Raiden smiles a bit. Mileena has evolved a great deal since her earliest years. “Just tell us all that you know. It will aid us greatly.”

“Speak for yourself.” Cassie calls from the kitchen, still in a bad mood about the unexpected intrusion. Four occupants is the limit, but she would’ve appreciated some warning. “Does she really have to stay? Seriously? Last chance to tell me this is a bad joke.”

Shinnok swoops over to stand across from Cassie, arms folded with a stern frown. “As I said, she is in need of a safe haven on Earthrealm during her time here. What I told you at the start isn’t wrong.”

“Oh yeah. You were smooth. Real smooth.” She rolls her eyes, unwrapping a granola bar and devouring it in a few hasty bites. “What do we do with her? Just drag her along everywhere? You and Raiden already stand out enough, now we have to deal with somebody with a face full of fangs.”

“Surely there is a way around the problem.” Actually, Shinnok has no such confidence at all, but it’s easier if he pretends he does. “She is here to protect and guard me, and, considering recent events, I sincerely appreciate her aid. We have endured similar torments.”

Cassie hesitates mid-chew. Visions of D’Vorah’s gruesome execution of the previous Mileena flash through her mind.

“Oh.” After a long pause, she zips her jacket and shoves her hands into her pockets, walking back into the living room. “Now I feel like an asshole. Yeah… I think I can understand why you want her to stay.”

He catches her gaze for a long moment. “Thank you.”

Cassie approaches Mileena, privately grateful that she seems to have calmed down a little since they last met. “You know what? Fine. Let’s do this. It’s not like I’m not already used to living with weirdos.” She hesitates. “Sorry, Raiden. Not you. You’re like, good-weird.”

Shinnok’s tone is quite demanding. “And I am not?”

“Recently, maybe. Historically, no.” Cassie pushes Mileena out of the way on the couch, making room for herself. “Still planning on kicking Kotal out of office?”

“Yes, that is my intention… after the tournament. I would hate to disrupt such an exciting event.” Mileena pushes herself up on one elbow, adopting a sultry pose and lying across the couch. “Shinnok has told me about your team of fighters. You’ve impressed me. Well done.” She aims a respectful glance at Raiden, who smiles graciously. “Your realm may not be doomed after all. If
you win the tournament, I suspect Kotal will pull some sort of treacherous stunt to deny your victory. And if, by some chance, you lose... well, then I will make my move.”

Cassie blurs out. “You refer to yourself as ‘I’ but there’s a hundred of you. How does that work?”

“All forms of me share a mind. I operate as one, but can be in many places all at once.”

“Is Tanya dating just one of you, or do you share, or...?”

“Cassandra!” Raiden raises his voice with a warning note. “Do not be impolite!”

“I think I’ve earned the right to be impolite, considering Empress Dracula is testing her invasion skills on my own damn home.” Cassie stares up at the ceiling as if it might hold some sort of answers. “Does anyone else know you’re here?”

“No, and I would strongly suggest you keep it that way... at least for now.” Mileena licks her lips nervously. “I suspect some individuals would not be quite so glad to see me.”

Cassie’s phone buzzes with an incoming notification. She whips it out as Raiden fumbles around in his pocket, wondering if the message might be for him. It isn’t.

[Frost] mind if i come over?

[Cass] No actually now isn't ideal sry

[Frost] ooh why? got a date?

[Frost] is she cute?

[Cass] That isn't it!!!

[Frost] dammit i just lost a bet

[Frost] seriously why though

She grimaces at her screen, much to the infuriating amusement of Shinnok, who is hovering about and observing.

[Cass] Can't tell you right now!!!

[Frost] ok im coming over, see u soon

Cassie shoves her phone into her pocket, cursing under her breath. “Crisis not averted. Better get ready, you’re about to meet one-third of the new team.”

“Am I really?” Mileena lays back on the couch, resting the pillow under her head. “This promises to be quite a treat. Tell me about this new team, dearest Cassandra.”

“I am not your dearest!”

“Then just tell me. There’s no need to be rude.”

“Frost has ice powers, Cyrax has magical teleport energy, and Sareena is a demon with super-speed and strength.”

“I asked about them, not their abilities. An important distinction, if you ask me.”
“Oh. Huh.” Cassie wrinkles her nose, briefly lost in thought. “Frost’s personality is about as icy as her magic, but she’s all right if you get to know her. She’s cynical, but funny. Cyrax is a little quieter, more thoughtful type. He’s really interested in history. He was dead for twenty-five years but he got revived.”

“By us.” Shinnok chimes in, unable to resist making his minor claim to fame.

“How fascinating. Go on…”

“Sareena’s a sweetheart, she’s got a good attitude and she looks out for the team. So, pretty much the opposite of what you’d expect from a demon.” Cassie shrugs, stretching her arms. “She’s a little eccentric, but we all are.”

“Then I have no doubt I’ll fit right in.”

“You’re not ‘fitting in’ anywhere. You’re not on the team, Mileena. You’re here as a diplomat.”

“Oh yes, precisely, which means you are all obligated to graciously put up with me.”

“I have to put up with you. Doesn’t mean I have to be gracious.”

Raiden attempts to look reassuring. “You will find yourself as welcome as possible.”

“Don’t hold yourself accountable for the actions of others... but I do appreciate the effort, my lovely Raiden.”

He coughs under his breath. “Just ‘Raiden’ is enough. Nonetheless, spoken like a true empress. You’ve come far.”

“This time, I desire to lead, rather than to rule… it decreases my chances of being overthrown. Granted, it would not take much to improve on the job Kotal Kahn has done while in power, but I’ll endeavor to do my best.”

Cassie listens to this conversation with great interest. Maybe Mileena won’t be all bad.

Raiden folds his hands in his lap, gazing out the window in solemn contemplation. “Might it not be easier, then, to find a legal way to remove Kotal Kahn from office, rather than a direct revolution? And what are your plans to deal with him, if you are successful?”

“I don’t know enough about Outworld laws to possibly discover such a solution, although Tanya has tried her best. And, in my humble opinion, Kotal is likelier to obey the threat of force, than any words you or I could offer… Raiden.” Mileena rolls over on the couch to face the thunder-god, one arm trailing on the carpeted floor. “I have been trying very hard to devise a strategy for dealing with Kotal afterwards. I have none. If I imprison him, he may gain sympathy and support and destroy my government from within. If I exile him, he could gather an army and march on Outworld. Despite my instincts, I don’t actually wish to kill him.”

Shinnok volunteers a helpful suggestion. “You could always try chaining him up in the Netherrealm for several thousand years.”

Raiden winces, and hangs his head.

“Ahem. I didn’t entirely mean that.” The god carefully approaches, looking slightly guilty. That was an unnecessary low blow, and there’s some part of him now that regrets making Raiden feel bad. “Might he have any viable future on Earth? The man is a fool, and entirely unfit to rule, but I
recall there’s an entire section in that mythology exhibit dedicated to him. Execution does seem like a bad choice.”

Cassie pipes up. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Mileena gazes at her with bright golden eyes, brow furrowed in confusion. “Pardon me?”

“It’s an Earthrealm saying. It means, if we have a problem in the future, we’ll deal with it when it happens, rather than making plans.”

“Is that your philosophy? That explains quite a lot.”

Cassie glares fiercely. “What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“Young ladies, calm yourselves.” Shinnok takes a seat on a bookshelf, for lack of other options. Though he’s grateful to have Mileena here, this may be more trouble than it’s worth. “What are we going to tell the newcomers? Do any of them know of Mileena already?”

She brushes her hair back with a carefree gesture. “If they don’t yet, they certainly will soon…”

“That isn’t what I meant. Cyrax is unlikely to know you, Frost may be familiar with your reputation, and Sareena was involved in… various events. I would suggest being as diplomatic as possible, since that is your stated purpose.”

A knock on the door interrupts the tense conversation. Cassie leaps to her feet, hurrying out of the room, and wrenches it open, unfastening the latch clumsily. “ Couldn’t give me a little more warning?”

“Nah. Why would I do that? I love surprises.” Frost brushes past her, strolling into the living room, and stops short, a patch of ice freezing underneath her feet on the carpet. “Hi there. Who the hell are you?”

Mileena yawns, unhinging her entire jaw.

“Holy fuck.”

The ex-empress rises from the couch, confidently striding towards this strange new girl. “I apologize… I’m quite weary from my travels. I am Mileena Kahnum, former and future Empress of Outworld.”

“Nice.” Frost grabs her hand and shakes it firmly, painfully cold to the touch. “I was pretty sure the emperor was someone else, but you know what, I’m willing to go with it.”

“I was empress after the demise of Shao Kahn, but I was deposed by that wretch Kotal… but I will reclaim my throne, soon. It is inevitable.”

“I like a girl with confidence.” Frost studies her closely. “What’s with the teeth?”

“I am of Tarkatan origin, made by the sorcerer Shang Tsung. My sister by blood is Princess Kitana of Edenia.” Mileena straightens her back, drawing herself up to her full height, still noticeably shorter than Frost. “Unusual as I may seem, I assure you this does not affect my ability to competently rule.”

“Wasn’t gonna question it. Do you have the knife arms?” Frost enthusiastically mimics a stabbing motion.
Cassie presses her forehead into her hands, clenching her jaw. She can already feel the headache coming on. Ice-Woman vs. Teeth-Girl is not a showdown she wants in the middle of her living room. “You can’t just ask people that kind of thing!”

Mileena actually laughs, not at all offended. “No. My Tarkatan traits are mostly limited to my face, among other things.”

“Ooh, other things? What other things...?”

“Excuse me!” Shinnok hops off the bookshelf, promptly coming to greet Frost. He is trying very hard to hide his amusement at this entire awkward encounter. “Set aside your curiosity for now. You should know that Empress Mileena plans to remove Kotal from power, following the tournament. It would be wise to acquaint yourself with her.”

“Revolution, huh? That’ll be a blast. Are we talking impeachment style, or French Revolution style?”

Mileena stares at her completely blankly.

“Are you planning to kick him out legally, or is he gonna go on the chopping block?”

“That is what we were just trying to resolve.” Shinnok answers for her, while Mileena ponders the question, hair falling into her face as she tilts her head. “At present, it’s uncertain. Kotal won’t part with his power willingly, we can be sure of that.” He sniffs. “Insolent fool, to think he could take me into custody as a captive! And Raiden, too! The audacity!”

“Fill me in on what happened there sometime. I don’t think I ever got the full story.” Frost makes a beeline for the fridge, pulling out a yogurt carton and eating it with one of Cassie’s spoons. “You should meet Cyrax and Sareena. They may be complete nerds, but they’re a lot of fun.”

Cassie helpfully translates for the puzzled Mileena, glaring at Frost along the way. She’s almost mad at herself for getting used to Mileena’s company so quickly. “Nerds are people who are weird in a good way. So… all of us.”

“That seems universal among you and your accomplices… but I can hardly claim myself to be otherwise, or I’d become a hypocrite.” Mileena perches on the couch again, folding herself into a gymnastic sitting pose. “So, when shall I get to know the others?”

“I’m sure it’ll happen eventually. We all cross paths pretty much daily.” Cassie taps at her watch irritatedly as it beeps with a blaring alarm, breaking her focus. “Which reminds me, we’re due for training.”

Mileena squints at the little time-piece strapped to the girl’s wrist. “What is that?”

“A watch. Miniature clock, keeps track of the hours. What do you guys use in Outworld?”

“Water-clocks and sundials, or we track the passage of the sun. You have such small portable devices for it? Incredible…” Mileena rests her chin in her hands, pondering this revelation. “Imagine if I introduced proper timekeeping to Outworld! I see tremendous possibilities here. I want a watch.”

“We should go shopping later.” Frost volunteers readily. “I’d pay to see you try to deal with Earth citizens.”

“Frost, do whatever you want. Mileena wants to stay and be the world’s tiniest, toothiest
bodyguard for Shinnok. I’m letting her crash here, but other than, it’s all up to her. So yeah, girls’ bonding time is fine by me, but not right now. File that in the list of ‘problems for later,’ and let me know when, so I can come bail you out for public disturbance. ” Cassie grabs a backpack, throwing it over her shoulder. “See you all at training. I know it’s rich coming from me, but don’t be late.”
Dream Team

Training has not started out very smoothly.

Frost bristles at the man who stands before her, a bearded muscular figure dressed in the yellow garb of the Shirai Ryu.

“I am not working with you!”

Hanzo Hasashi sighs, and bows his head. He accepted this challenge at the request of the General, but it is going to test his patience greatly, and it has only just begun. “Frost. Listen closely. Your mentor and I have long since made peace after the revelation of the true Lin Kuei history. If you wish to live up to the newly restored reputation of your clan, I suggest you consider a different approach.”

Frost grimaces, gritting her teeth. She’s aware that the rivalry is technically over, but she still has no trust at all for Scorpion, nor any who bear the title and loyalty of the Shirai Ryu. It is simply not her style to forgive and forget. It’d damage her reputation.

Hanzo approaches a few paces, moving closer across the training room. “Are you friends with Takeda?”

“I wouldn’t call it that, but we can put up with each other.”

“He is working with your mentor, and he has been very gracious about it. It is an equivalent exchange.”

“That means nothing. He’s him, and I’m me!”

By means of response, Hanzo whips out his kunai and flings it towards Frost, gripping its chain. “Prepare yourself!”

She blocks it with a tightly packed ball of snow, shielding herself before the knife hits. “Way too easy!”

He tosses a fireball under-handed, melting the snow in an instant. “Is it truly, young Frost?”

She scoffs, sliding out of range on a sheet of glassy ice. “It’s a breeze!”

Hanzo shakes his head. Frost is headstrong, but she might not be entirely impossible. The ordeals that he’s survived as Scorpion have taught him much, including the value of patience. He opens his hand, beckoning a flame, and a flicker beneath Frost’s sturdy boots melts the ice. “Think quickly!”

She leaps out of reach, conjuring a flat brick of snow beneath her feet, and nimbly lands on the frozen platform in midair. “Can do!”

Scorpion hurls another fireball, but Frost’s already jumped away, darting across a series of flimsy ice blocks to successfully evade his attacks. Nonetheless, without warning, he vanishes in a raging roar of fire and materializes beneath her final ice platform, rising up and shattering the delicate structure below her feet with a fistful of flame.

Frost lands on the floor, scrambling to her feet with a frustrated noise, and clenches her icy fists. She’s fine, but her pride’s been wounded. “Not fair!”
“Kombat is inherently unfair.” Hanzo folds his sturdy arms across his chest, facing her once again. “And yet, you’ve already passed your first challenge. We may be rivals, but we can work together to prepare for the tournament. This is fully possible. Learn to fight without your ice, and you will be unstoppable once you regain it.”

“... fine.” Frost really doesn’t care enough to keep protesting. Kuai Liang is around here somewhere; she’ll go chat with him later. For now, she sulks with her hands on her hips, conjuring a little snowstorm above Hanzo’s head.

He laughs, and melts the flakes before they fall. “You will be a brave kombatant. I can see it already.”

---

Elsewhere, Takeda is locked in a battle against Kuai Liang, giving him quite a challenge despite his bladed whips and weaponized foresight. Sub-Zero’s strength lies in defense, blocking his blows with summoned shields or freezing him before he can think quick enough to prevent it. Takeda loses the first match against his new mentor, but only barely. He’s winded afterwards, and sinks to the floor near the wall, catching his breath with difficulty.

Looking up at Kuai Liang, he unfastens his armor and gauntlets for a quick break, laying them aside. “You know, I might learn a lot from this.”

“Those are my thoughts exactly, Takeda.”

Takeda winks. “I know.”

“I simply ask that you don’t reveal all my secrets.” Kuai Liang takes a seat near him. “I’m looking forward to speaking with Frost and Cyrax. For the latter, it has been quite some time... it will be bittersweet.”

“I’ll say. You didn’t see them yet?”

“No. General Blade wanted us to begin training directly.”

“I guess I can see the logic behind that.” Takeda removes his headband, wiping his brow, and stares up at the training room’s tall ceiling, appreciating the peace and quiet. “I can’t read anybody else. Sonya probably didn’t put any of us in the same place.”

“Likely not. She seems intent on ensuring that you all train with unfamiliar mentors.”

“Which makes sense, considering what a big deal this tournament is gonna be.” Takeda pauses. “You know, it’s nice to meet you. This is going better than I thought it would.”

Sub-Zero smiles. “I agree entirely.”

---

Cassie still doesn’t see the value of training against a swordsman. Still, Kenshi’s good enough to block her bullets with that magic blade of his, so she figures there’s some value in learning how to deal with that. The sword stops her from getting close enough to use her fists... which necessitates some pretty creative solutions.

Shielding herself with a burst of green energy, she leaps towards Kenshi with a flying kick, catching him off guard and using her power to shield against the cut of the blade. Kenshi backs up
and blocks, absorbing the blow with surprising ease, and nods in approval. “A well-timed attack. But it is not yet enough.”

“Guess not.” Cassie wipes her hands on the pants of her armor suit, chewing her lip in thought. “I’ve been at it for an hour and I haven’t actually landed a successful hit on you. I can’t believe this.”

“It helps that I can perceive your planned actions before you strike.”

“Why do I keep forgetting about that? Dammit.” She brushes her hair back, suddenly exasperated. “But it’s not like Kano’s psychic. Why’s it matter?”

“Cassandra, I assure you that, considering his rivalry with your mother, Kano has spent a large amount of time studying both your fighting styles. You should assume that he, too, will be able to predict your moves when you duel him.”

Cassie freezes. “Oh. Didn’t think of that. Well that explains a lot about Mom’s choices.”

“Did she not mention the reason?”

“Just said that I needed to learn better patience and fight timing.”

“That’s part of the problem, yes, but not entirely. You attack very aggressively, but don’t yet have a good sense for how to avoid blows and punish mistakes. A better knowledge of this could give you a great advantage against Kano.” Kenshi stows his sword back in his holster, approaching her solemnly. “You did well for your first day. You will only improve from here. Do not forget that.”

“I dunno. I’m pretty sure it’s possible for me to get worse.”

“Possible, but unlikely. Remember to have confidence in yourself.”

“Usually do. Actually, I’m pretty sure Mom thinks I have too much.”

“An accurate perception of oneself is necessary before attempting to predict the actions of others.”

“Guess you got a point there.” Cassie unhitches her holster, dropping it near the wall. “Want to go get coffee after we’re done? You’re my mentor, may as well hang out.”

Kenshi offers a gracious smile. “Certainly.”

---

Johnny is having a great time.

Surprisingly, with two mentees, he doesn’t really have to do all that much. He spent some time dueling them one-on-one, to get a feel for their abilities. Now Cyrax and Sareena are practicing evasion maneuvers, resulting in the world’s least violent fight.

Sareena’s strength lies in her agility, leaping to impossible heights and dashing at improbable speeds. Cyrax can teleport, although only short distances, but swiftly and unpredictably enough to escape most blows. Neither one of them has managed to land a hit on each other in ten minutes.

Johnny calls it to a halt, gesturing for them both to come closer. “Okay. Let’s talk about the tournament. Sareena, you’re going to be fighting someone who can throw acid spitballs. Cyrax, you’re fighting someone who can throw blood balls.” He makes a face. “So you’re both going to need those evasion skills, and maybe some waterproof suits.”
Sareena laughs gently. “Would those do us any good? I could try…”

“Nah. Just a joke. But you’re going to need to focus on endurance in the fight. Getting up-close is only going to end up with a faceful of body fluids. Outlast them, stay out of range, and let them use up those abilities before you take ‘em down.”

Cyrax nods dutifully, hanging onto every word. “Mr. Cage, you are a surprisingly good mentor.”

“Started with low expectations, huh?”

“I started with no expectations at all, so I am pleasantly surprised.”

“Hey, I’ll take it as a compliment.” Johnny rubs his chin, focusing on Sareena next. “Tell me what you know about Reptile’s abilities.”

“He can hide himself from view to make attacking difficult. To be truthful, I am not sure how to counteract this.”

“We’ll come up with something. What weapons do you use?”

“At present, just my bare hands, and some occasional magic.”

“Can you do magic snares? Throw a cloud or a sheet to slow down the enemy?”

“It’s possible. I could try to learn.”

“That’d help. Work on it.” Johnny’s attention returns to Cyrax. “You’re up against one of the weird ones. Sorry, man. We don’t know as much about Skarlet’s powers as we’d like to, but it’s got something to do with being strengthened by blood, so don’t take any iron supplements.”

Cyrax laughs a little, ignoring the chill of fear from this daunting task. “Understood. Do you have any strategy suggestions?”

“Your grenades could be useful to keep her out of range. How good are you at vertical teleporting?”

“Good, but not quite as good, compared to my horizontal range. Should I practice?”

“Yes. Laws of gravity. Get yourself above the path of the blood ball, instead of left or right, and you should be able to avoid it much better.”

“The skill doesn’t come quite as easily, but I’ll see what I can do.”

“Atta boy.” Johnny grins broadly. “You’re both doing good. Okay, class dismissed. Get outta here, and start brainstorming. I expect your essays on my desk by noon tomorrow.”

Sareena beams, immediately excited about the task. On the fossil dig, she got used to that kind of work. “What citation format would you like those in?”

“I’m kidding! But if you did it, I’d be impressed.”

---

In yet another training room, Jacqui and Jin are duking it out, trying to land hits while blocking each other’s blows. Sonya watches from the sidelines, occasionally calling out advice. She’s not quite impressed, but she’s not disappointed, either. Yet.
“Enough!” She calls it a halt when they’ve both run out of energy. Jacqui bends over with her hands on her knees to catch her breath, while Jin lays flat on the cold floor with his bow beside him. “Let’s talk about what just happened.”

Jin groans. “You mean how I got my ass kicked?”

Jacqui scoffs at him, helping him up to his feet. “You were kicking my ass, too. Don’t deny it.”

“Quit flattering each other.” Sonya tosses her braid over her shoulder, striding closer. “What did you take away from that fight?”

“A bunch of bruises and a wounded ego?”

“Come on, Jin. Be serious for once.”

“Okay.” He exhales sharply, leaning on his bow. “The gauntlet blasts are tough. Jacqui’s got range. I could neutralize the plasma bursts at close range with fire from my staff, but the missiles and bullets were pretty bad. I’m not quick enough yet to block those. Just have to jump out of the way and hope not to die.” He pauses. “But Ermac isn’t exactly gonna have bullets, is he? ‘Mummy with a Gun’ sounds like one of Johnny’s movies, not my tournament fight.”

“No, he’ll be trying to grab and push you around on the ground and midair… which is why Jacqui’s about to get a gauntlet upgrade. Low-level tractor beams.”

Her jaw drops. “What?!”

“See me in the armory afterwards. Both of you. Jin, we’re working on a feature for your staff to more effectively knock back enemies. We’ll let you know when it’s done.” Sonya’s tone is crisp and clipped. “Jacqui, what did you think?”

“Same thing. Not gonna lie, this was tough.” She wipes the sweat from her brow, loosening her gauntlets and setting them on a wire shelf, then flexes her wrists, easing the tension. “But, ma’am, I don’t think Ferra and Torr are going to be firing arrows.

“You still need to be able to get out of the way of a weapon path, and fast. Use your gauntlet leap ability, firing the plasma blasts at the ground. Don’t be afraid to overuse that. Part of their gimmick is projectile attacks. If you can dodge flaming arrows, you can dodge a little girl with knives flying at you and a somersaulting giant.”

“I guess.” Jacqui sheds her camo jacket, tying it around her waist. “Thanks, Aunt Sonya.”

“Anytime. It’s my job.”

---

A majority of the training sessions have been productive. Then there is Raiden and Shinnok.

For lack of other options, Sonya’s relegated them to a vacant training room and instructed them just to duel each other indefinitely. It’s not worth the trouble to find a trainer capable of dealing with a god. They are mentors themselves -- or at least Raiden is supposed to be.

After some enthusiastic battling, they both grew tired of the activity and are now floating in midair having a minor argument, occasionally tossing handfuls of magic at each other. Raiden has doubts whether to trust Mileena, while Shinnok is arguing on her behalf. Eventually Raiden admits he is playing devil’s advocate, which Shinnok finds completely, hilariously ironic.
Johnny steps into the room, door slamming shut behind him with a hollow echo. He’s been tasked to retrieve the dreadful duo, which isn’t the worst job, but he’s still not quite used to dealing with Shinnok and probably never will be. “Guys? Uh, gods? You around?”

“Up here.” Shinnok’s dry sharp voice resounds from somewhere near the ceiling. In a grandiose show of power, he floats down to the ground trailed by magic sparks, landing gracefully before Johnny. Raiden teleports beside him in the blink of an eye. “You wanted something…?”

“Yeah, just a status report for Sonya, I think.”

“What is there to report? We have battled for millennia. We are hardly in need of any practice.”

“Oh, I dunno. There’s still lots of things for you guys to learn, like how to get along.” Johnny pulls his sunglasses from his pocket, sliding them on in the indoor fluorescent-lit room. “But it’s not like we have anyone with water or earth powers sitting around for you to train against, so frankly, we can’t help. You’ll probably end up dueling the kombat kids for mutual practice.”

Shinnok looks down his nose at him snidely. “What a joy.”

Raiden nods, his expression filled with earnest sincerity. “I agree. I am looking forward to it.”

Johnny tries not to laugh.

The door clicks open behind him. He doesn’t even turn to look. “Hi, Sonya. I’m dealing with them. Situation under control.”

“No, it’s me, Sareena.” The girl trots up to join them with quick footsteps, battered notebook clutched tightly in her hands. “I came as quick as I could. You asked for an English version of my notes on the Netherrealm soul traps! I tried.” She passes over a small folder stuffed with crumpled papers. “English script is not my strength, but it should all be readable.”

“Wow. Thanks, for real. Wanna tell me more about it?” Johnny tucks it under his arm, holding it out of reach as Shinnok makes a sudden grab for it. “Hey! Grandpa! Play nice!”

“Never! ’Netherrealm soul traps’?” Shinnok mimics Sareena’s cheerful tone, then scowls, tapping his foot impatiently to hide his growing dread. He had hoped to avoid the Netherrealm in the near and far future. It seems he’s not that fortunate. “That is no laughing matter. Tell me more.”

Maintaining a calm attitude, Sareena briefly relates all she already told Johnny, from the likelihood of Quan Chi’s failsafes to the inevitable mission to retrieve these accursed vials. By now, she nearly has it all memorized.

Shinnok looks less than amused.

He scoffs dismissively as soon as she’s finished speaking. “So, then, what of it? Presuming you are at all able to retrieve these items before they are used, would you all just go to the Netherrealm and traipse around like hapless tourists until you find Quan Chi’s lair?”

Raiden shakes his head, brow creased in solemn thought. “Locating the laboratory will not be too large a problem. Shinnok, you know things about the Netherrealm, do you not?”

“Yes, Raiden, just like you know things about thunderstorms. I am perhaps the greatest living expert on that accursed world, and, to be clear, I wish I was not. So, tell me, what must we do to deal with this... new inconvenience?”
“Gaining access is the largest obstacle. You and I are now in mortal form, and could not spontaneously travel to the Netherrealm even if we were willing to take the risk. Sareena, could you do it?”

She shakes her head. “No. I have been away too long, and would be unable to transport others with me. Liu Kang and Kitana, since they’re no longer revenants, are equally unable. All known paths to the Netherrealm are locked.”

“Well, isn’t this fantastic. Guess we’re not going to hell today.” Johnny fidgets with the wraps on his wrists. “Keep brainstorming. I’m getting nervous.”

Raiden and Sareena lock eyes, and whisper something to each other.

Johnny cups a hand to his ear. “Speak up.”

Raiden’s tone is more solemn than ever, laced with dread. “Our only hope is the Netherrealm Kamidogu.”

“The kama-what-now?”

“A sacred artifact, of sorts…” Raiden is highly reluctant to even admit this, let alone to explain any further. On principle, it just seems like a bad idea, but he can see no other options. Conjuring another bridge would be downright impossible in this state. “It has been sealed away for many years. Only I know the location.”

Johnny gapes at him. “When were you gonna drop this one on us?”

“Ideally, never, but it seems otherwise we are doomed.”

Shinnok falters, fresh panic clutching at his heart. He backs up a few steps, involuntarily surrounding himself with a protective glowing aura, and shudders. “Could that be used by hostile forces to send me back to the realm, or to capture me? I want nothing to do with Quan Chi, nor to enable his soul’s return…”

“No. Never.” Raiden consoles him in quiet tones, laying a calm hand on his slender arm. “Listen. We will make a plan to send Sareena and others to the Netherrealm and recapture these foul vials. First, we need to make a plan to successfully conquer the Krypt. It is... a labyrinth, devised to protect items that should not be found.”

“I have never heard of it.”

“That is the point.” Raiden smiles softly, with warmth in his eyes. “Come back with me to the Sky Temple. We need to locate the maps.”

“Aren’t you afraid that revealing such sensitive information to me might lead to some world-ending disaster? That seems to be a common opinion.”

“Shinnok. We have been through too much for you to still hold such beliefs about my views.”

Shinnok inhales deeply, his voice shaking despite his best efforts. “Anything that could risk interaction with Quan Chi... and particularly now that he and D’Vorah have allied, considering the strength of his abilities to revive--”

“Just come with me. I need your aid for this.”
“...all right.” Shinnok agrees reluctantly, head bowed and shoulders slumped. Raiden has asked, and he can hardly decline due to his own fears, justified or not. “Mister Cage, please be sure to tell your daughter to inform Mileena about my whereabouts.”

“Hold up. Inform WHO?!”

But before Johnny gets an answer, they’re gone in a flash.

- - -

The Sky Temple is a bittersweet but welcome sight. Shinnok’s gaze travels up its towering structure, pausing to take it all in as Raiden strides across the broad courtyard. In a way, it is his home, and yet it can never truly be. It was the place of both his greatest defeat and his eventual revival.

As with everything, he has perpetual mixed feelings that bother his soul.

Raiden. He calls after him, dashing to catch up before the other god reaches the entryway. How long will we be here?

As long as it takes. I will find the Krypt maps, and you will heal in the jinsei.

You would let me...?

You are in need of it. Raiden’s tone is soft. He opens the mighty door with the gentlest tug, holding it as Shinnok crosses the threshold. In many ways it astonishes and appalls me that we spent our entire lives trying to destroy each other, knowing, now, that... it could have been otherwise.

You’ve put into words what I’ve pondered for days. Shinnok clasps his hands behind his back, advancing down the hall and striding beside his fellow god. So much of my life’s course feels like a series of brutal mistakes.

I am not saying that it was not. I cannot do anything other than condemn your past actions. Nevertheless, we have both erred, time and time again. Raiden leads him down a dimly lit corridor, ducking to get through a smaller doorway. The Krypt maps are sealed in a small room in the temple’s cellar. They are protected from damage, or else might deteriorate. I made sure of that.

You’re as thorough as ever, Raiden. Shinnok descends a narrow spiral staircase, conjuring a purplish light to illuminate his path. My soul is more at peace since we ceased outright fighting. There is great relief in letting go of painful history.

I have too many troubles weighing on my conscience to worry about maintaining a past grudge with someone with whom I have now forged a companionship. Raiden lights a sconce in the musty damp cellar with a zap of lightning, filling it with a bluish glow. And you have new pains. I would not want to add to them by dredging up a past that you regret.

I do regret it. I gained nothing from all my efforts except endless suffering, and for what? All for the sake of my envy of you, Raiden, and your role and your gifts. Misplaced yearning, corrupted jealousy, all such petty sins. It led me to ruin.

Let yourself focus on the future.

My future is tainted.

Raiden draws to a halt, turning to look back at Shinnok. His blue eyes are radiant in the gloomy
darkness. *Your future is bright.*

*Not after my ordeal.*

*Let me convince you otherwise.*

Gently, Raiden presses his fingers to Shinnok’s temples, and shares with him a flash of past visions, conjuring his memories of the future.

Before his mind’s eye, Shinnok sees it all play out -- their tournament triumph, the fall of Kotal, Mileena upon the throne, forgiveness for the revenants, and more remarkable scenes that Shinnok cannot identify. Throughout it all, he stands boldly beside the others, leading the charge to set right so many endless wrongs. It captivates him til he is standing in awed silence.

*This could be where our paths lead.*

‘Could be’ is no guarantee.

*A glimpse of mere possibility is still a blessing. My visions no longer actively plague me since my transformation, but these I remember clearly.*

*How can they guide you, if you’re uncertain which are true?*

*They tell me what to avoid, and what to aspire towards.*

*I understand.*

Shinnok stands still in the dim corridor, watching the flickering electric light dance across the rough-hewn walls.

Then he approaches Raiden, and silently gathers him into a hug, willingly embracing his former foe.

*Thank you.*

Shinnok... Raiden hesitates, voice trembling. *I have as committed as many wrongs as any other. I do not doubt my choice to stop your invasion efforts, but I wish I had never done what I did to you the last time.*

*So you have said. I know. I promise that I don’t doubt you. And I am grateful for all you have done for me ever since. Let us set aside the flawed past. Shinnok rests his chin on Raiden’s shoulder, still holding him close. Well, here we are. I suppose this is what the mortals would call a friendship.*

*I imagine that is true.* Raiden pats his back, uncertain what exactly to do, and closes his eyes. *What if it could have always been this way? I cannot let go of that thought.*

*What does it matter? Time passes, and there is no reclaiming it, but we have an eternity ahead, and so many ways to spend it.* Shinnok lets go of him, leading through the passageway with a firm grip on his wrist. *Onward, Raiden. We have much work to do.*

---

Later, Shinnok floats in the jinsei, comfortably suspended in the weightless mist, and absorbs its healing energy in a state of silent peace. Raiden sits by the wall and inspects an ancient pile of fragile maps, paging through the leaves of yellowed paper. Nearby, his pencil moves on its own
across a blank page, carefully obeying his mind’s orders as it sketches the passageways of the Krypt while Raiden closely studies each line and corner. He’s nearly done with the task, at long last, and finds this a much wiser option than bringing priceless antique documents on yet another wild adventure.

Minutes, or maybe hours, pass in comfortable silence.

Eventually, Shinnok’s eyes snap open, blazing radiant green that fades to a gentle pure glow. His voice cracks when he speaks at first, but he sounds stronger, more invigorated. Letting himself float lightly to the ground, he lands at last, stepping out onto the chilly stone floor.

*Thank you. This will help.*

*You hardly need to thank me.*

*I’m doing it anyway, whether you like it or not.*

Raiden does not dignify this with a response.

Bending down, Shinnok retrieves the pieces of his outfit, sliding them on one by one and fastening them tightly around his lean body. Since the healing, there is a renewed aura to him. His pale form is luminous with barely contained power. Even in mortal form, he still has the essence of a god.

Before Raiden knows it, Shinnok has swept over to sit on the floor beside him, peering over his shoulder. *Hmm. So that is the mysterious catacomb we’re about to invade?*

*Something like that.* Raiden offers him the old parchment for a closer look. Shinnok turns it over in his hands, inspecting it closely, halfway afraid it might crumble at the slightest touch. *There are several different areas of it. The Kamidogu itself is within the tomb of Shao Kahn.*

Shinnok pauses, processing this. *You cannot possibly be serious.*

*I placed it there myself soon after his death. Any seekers of the item attempting to find it by its malevolent aura would be unable. Shao Kahn’s essence drowns it out.*

*Well, that’s clever.*

*I thought so at the time, yes. If it has somehow gone missing, then I invite you to disagree, but, from what I know, the tomb has remained untouched.*

*I certainly hope no one’s robbed it. That would add a bit of difficulty to our lives.*

*Indeed. We can figure out further plans when we return to the city. For now, make haste.* Raiden rises to his feet gracefully, holding the maps with great care, and exits the jinsei chamber with Shinnok close behind.

Fujin is lingering around outside, offering a courteous smile towards his fellow gods. Raiden greets him with a warm hug, and hands over the maps, stopping for a moment to chat. “I have not seen you for some time, brother. You did well against Kano.”

“Not well enough, from what I’ve heard since then, but I have confidence in young Cassandra’s abilities.” Fujin tilts his head, long silvery braid falling over his shoulder. “But we last met only a short while ago...”

“You forget that in mortal form, my perception of time’s passage has shifted.” Raiden shrugs this
off. “It is only temporary. Do not worry. Would you be kind enough to return these maps to the storage cellar?”

“Certainly.” Fujin tucks them under his arm, and vanishes with a puff of wind, but not before acknowledging Raiden’s companion with a gracious wave. “Farewell, Shinnok. Be wise.”

Shinnok shoves his hands into the pockets of his armored waistcoat, shivering as he steps outdoors and the cold wind of the courtyard bites against his skin. *What is THAT supposed to mean?*

*Precisely what it sounds like. Maybe he thinks you are lacking in that area.*

*Hrm. You’re one to talk.*

*Did I say that I was wise? No. None of us truly are.* Raiden stands at the edge of the courtyard, stepping up onto the railing. *Do you have the energy to fly back to the city, or would it be easier to teleport?*

*How far is it?*

*Half a world away.*

*Hmm. Are you challenging me?*

*If you wish it.*

*Then by all means… let’s go.*

Smirking devilishly, Shinnok leaps off the balcony’s edge, hurtling towards the horizon in a streak of bright magic flame. Raiden follows, fast as the lightning that darts between clouds, and together, locked in eternal competition, they soar towards home.
It takes a lot to faze Cassie these days. She’s seen it all. Gods, monsters, about three different entire worlds… by now, it’s all routine.

Still, she’s a bit surprised at the sight of Mileena waltzing through her door wearing a spiked leather jacket, sequined evening gown, and five wristwatches all at once.

Frost follows close behind, toting a bag from a resale store, and aims a wry glance in Cassie’s direction, dropping the parcel on the floor with an undignified thump. “Yeah, that’s Mileena’s mortal fashion sense. I don’t know if it’s better or worse than the pink catsuit.”

“So much better.” Mileena sweeps dramatically over to join Cassie at the kitchen counter, pulling up a stool and gazing at the girl a little too intently. She’s also wearing a particularly ostentatious tiara headband, and she’s somehow braided her hair. Maybe Frost did it. Cassie isn’t about to ask. She grins with an exceptionally toothy smile. “The civilians here are quite a bit more orderly than Outworld! I’ll admit, I was impressed.”

“Don’t get any ideas about being empress of the big city.” Cassie sips her smoothie, then points to a minifridge parked in one corner of the kitchen. “Turns out the appliance store was buy-one get-one, so Dad dropped this off. I got you some rare steaks. Sorry you’ve had to put up with pizza for a week. You owe me, you know. I expect full distinguished guest privileges when I go visit Outworld.”

“By my authority as former and future Empress, the privileges are gladly granted! And thank you for the raw meat. It’s so much better.” Mileena scampers over to the fridge, pulling out a packaged wrapped in paper, and rips it open with her bare hands. “Delicious!”

Cassie winces. Mileena notices, thoughtfully moving over to the sink to manage the feast a little more neatly. Apparently, miracles do happen. If Johnny Cage can be taught table manners, Mileena isn’t out of the question either.

The carnivorous empress turns over the slab of steak in her small hands, wrinkling her nose in distaste. “It’s cold.”

Cassie doesn’t even give her a second look, busily typing away on her phone. “Microwave it. Raiden can probably help.”

At once, Raiden appears, as if summoned. It’s the least he can do to help with the situation. “Lady Mileena. I would be glad to assist.”

“Hey there. Glad to see you.” Cassie finally glances in his direction, then taps at her phone again, sending a hasty confirmation message to Sonya. “Between you and Shinnok, I was starting to wonder.”

He looks faintly alarmed. “Wonder what?”

“You’ve both been working on those notebooks for a week. You’ve got a huge pile of them. I had to dump them off the couch to let Mileena sleep. So what’ve you figured out?”

“Those are our plans to deal with the Netherrealm difficulties. Specifically, those cursed soul vials that might be retrieved by a sinister opponent of ours. Shinnok and I have been plotting a path through the Krypt, which is an amalgamation of merged realms’ sacred places, and we’re planning
“on dividing up teams to manage the obstacles most effectively.”

“I’m not even going to pretend I understood what you just said.”

Raiden wastes no time with further details. “You will be working in six teams of three, made up in
total of your tournament team, myself, Shinnok, and the nine ex-revenants. I suggest we meet
today, at your father’s mansion. Please, inform him, and bring anyone who is willing.”

“You think the ex-revs are ready to go for this kind of mission? It hasn’t been long since… all
that…” Cassie would rather not say it outright, all things considered.

“They need to be. We cannot do it without them. The Krypt’s obstacles may require up to three
individuals to disarm the traps.” Raiden produces a notebook from thin air, flipping it to a page full
of indistinct tiny handwriting. “In fact, if you observe here--”

Cassie shakes her head, shoulders slumped. “Sorry, Raiden. I’m not focused enough right now.
Mom and I are confirming the fight roster to be sent back to Outworld.”

“Already?” Frost meanders across the apartment towards Cassie, idly opening and closing her hand
to practice summoning spiked ice gloves around her fists. It’s a handy trick. “So the tournament’s
all set?”

“Looks like it, yeah. No changes from our original plan. If you ask me, training’s been going pretty
well. I’m still only landing one in five hits on Kenshi, but it’s better than one in a hundred. Makes
me feel a little bit psychic when I win.” Cassie slips her phone into her pocket, observing the other
girl. “How’s Kung Jin dealing with it all? Haven’t seen him around lately.”

“Not bad. But Jacqui can pull and push him with beams on her gauntlets now.” Frost pulls a face,
folding her arms tightly. “Man, I’d hate to fight against that. Jin’s doing okay, though. He’s figured
out how to anchor his staff in the ground and grab it so he doesn’t get thrown against the ceiling.”

“Against the ceiling?”

“Jacqui’s a little overzealous and hasn’t got enough practice yet, so she sends him flying across the
room about half the time. But, not gonna lie, I can respect her attitude.” Frost flicks a handful of
powdery snow into thin air, watching the crystal flakes melt in the warmth of the kitchen. “So, my
strategy against the Lone Ranger is a little different than what I thought it was gonna be.”

“Since you’re not charbroiled and you still have your spine attached, I’m gonna guess you figured
out how to get along with Scorpion.”

Frost laughs under her breath. “He likes being called Hanzo better. I guess I can understand that,
considering the reason for it… Anyway. Enough sentimental stuff. I’m practicing throwing
knives.”

“Wait, really?”

“Yep. Check it out.” Frost reaches into her jacket, withdrawing a small symmetrical metal knife,
and rests it flat across her palm. Opening her other hand, she summons an identical knife made of
sharp clear ice, and grins sharply, brandishing them both. “Infinite ammo. I’ll start with the real
knives, knock down Black’s health and use up his bullets, then take it hand-to-hand where I know
I’ll win.”

“Huh.” Cassie pinches the bridge of her nose, thinking this through. “That’s a pretty solid plan,
actually.”
“Yeah. There’s the major risk that I won’t be able to block his bullets forever, depending on how worn down I get during the fight. He’s got sand grenades, too. If he gets one of those into my ice blocks, he could explode them pretty easy. Can’t rely on just my power. I’ll lead with the knives, bring in as many as I can in my armor, then when I run out, hit him with the ice and catch him off-guard. I don’t have to knock him out. Just depends on which of us is doing better by the time the clock stops.”

Cassie nods, trying to ignore Mileena gnawing on a raw steak at the kitchen sink. “Sounds like you got this figured out.”

“Precision isn’t my strong suit, but it’s fun trying to figure everything out. Frankly, I’d rather just fling a knife at his face so he can’t shoot straight. Even the best marksman in the world’s still gonna flinch.” Frost observes the empress, head tilted to the side. “Mileena’s a lot of fun. You’d be surprised.”

“I’m not sure anything’s really gonna surprise me anymore. How’d you get her out in public with the teeth?”

“Surgical masks.” Frost grabs Cassie’s smoothie and takes a sip. “My best friend in the Lin Kuei is Muslim. She’s from Tunisia, but moved to England before she joined us. When civilians gave her shit about her niqab, she’d just wear one of those to stay observant. Course, the ninja masks do the job just fine, but America hasn’t really caught up with the trend.”

Cassie nods thoughtfully, grabbing her smoothie back out of Frost’s hand, but the cup’s already frozen solid. She scowls and sets it aside, ignoring the ruined beverage. She can just get another one at the downstairs cafe. “Hey. I never asked. What’s your real name?”

“Ingrid.”

“Really?”

“Yep. I think it sounds like some kind of dumb storybook character. I like Frost better.”

“I figured. Where are you from, anyway?”

“You’re gonna laugh.”

“No, tell me.”

“Nope. It’s stupidly ironic.”

“I gotta know.”

Frost groans. “Iceland.”

Cassie stifles a laugh, but only barely. “No way.”

“Yep. I was born in Norway, but my parents moved when I was three. I should’ve just said I’m from Norway… but I have to admit, the Iceland thing is pretty funny.” Frost rolls her eyes. “The Lin Kuei’s very focused on multinational recruitment. We sort of have our own mini-Olympics every year, except it’s more about who can beat each other up with flashy superpowers. One year, I got in. Lucky me. Helps that I have the same powers as the guy in charge, right? It’s not nepotism, but it’s kinda close…” She trails off. “Actually, I wrote to Kuai Liang on the off-chance he wanted me to join. Figured it was worth a shot. He sent me the airfare to get to the tournament. I was living with my aunt in the Netherlands, for lack of other options, and tending tulip fields
wasn’t really my style.” A soft sigh. “I was an orphan. It was kind of my only option to find a family again. I guess it worked.”

Cassie is silent for a minute, processing this. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know that.”

“It’s okay. I’m over it now. I got people who care about me, even if they’re all freaks.” Frost looks over Cassie’s shoulder at Mileena. “Hey! Use soap and water. Don’t forget. And wrap the bones for the trash.”

Mileena replies positively through a mouthful of half-chewed meat.

Cassie can’t help but grin. “You’re house-training the empress?”

“I mean, you keep making me babysit her every day, so yeah.”

“I thought you liked spending time with her! It hasn’t been every day.”

“Every other day! But you’re right, I don’t mind. Sareena gets along with Mileena pretty well, too. Their names even rhyme. We’ve got this under control.” Frost shoots a glance at Raiden, who’s intensely focused on the notebooks again. “What’s Professor Thunder been up to lately?”

“According to him, we’re going to go raid a creepy tomb to unlock a secret chamber in an underground vault and retrieve an artifact that will let us go to the Netherrealm and destroy a sorcerer’s evil traps.”

“Are you shitting me?”

“Nope. This is pretty normal for us.”

“...I guess it is.” Frost perches on the countertop, trying to look over the edge of Cassie’s phone, which she’s retrieved promptly, firing off a reply to a new message. “Whatcha doing?”

Cassie snatches the phone away. “None of your business.”

“You know, that only makes me more suspicious.”

“I’m texting Dad to make sure he’s got the place ready for our meeting.”

Frost ponders this, distantly remembering an email she ignored. “Who’s meeting where?”

“Me, Shinnok, Raiden, and the revenants. We’re going to line up the groups before we bring the main team into the planning.”

“You’re the boss in charge now?”

“I am the team leader. And Raiden told me all this about ten minutes ago. I’m just going with the flow.”

“Okay, fair. Am I invited?”

“If you want to be. It’s semi-optional. The odds are about ninety percent that you’re going to be working with Cyrax and Smoke. Team Lin Kuei, and all.”

“Sounds pretty decent to me. What’s the rest of the team breakdown?”

“I haven’t the slightest goddamn idea. Raiden’s got it figured out, unless he’s just pretending to be
brave and has no clue what’s going on.”

Raiden replies in a rather distressed tone. “I can assure you of my competence, Cassandra!”

“Just making sure you’re paying attention.” Cassie offers an apologetic smile. “What time are we meeting?”

“In the middle of the night. We can risk no interference.”

Frost wiggles her fingers. “Ooh, spooky secret society meeting.”

“Can’t be that secret if you’re invited.” Cassie hops off her stool, wandering towards Raiden. “Any set time, or is it just a ‘get there whenever and wait around’ kind of situation?”

“The latter. Truth be told, I have no sense of mortal time.”


“That’s not how time works!” Cassie grits her teeth, checking her own watch. “It’s 4:44. You have five watches and you didn’t even get it right.”

Raiden glances up from his sketchbook, laying down his pencil. “Allow her a few errors, Cassandra. No one is perfect on the first try.”

“Is that your godly wisdom of the day?”

Shinnok finally poofs into view in a burst of bright purple magic, out of breath and burdened with two large stacks of books tucked under his arms. “What did he say this time?”

Frost waves at him. “Hi there. Too much to explain. Wait around and he’ll say something else that Cassie’ll make fun of.”

“I would know. I live with these two absolute fools.” Shinnok sweeps over to the bookcase in a grandiose fashion, cloak trailing behind him, and drops off the stacks, arranging them in alphabetical order. “I found as many mythology books as I could. I intend to familiarize myself with these other purported ‘gods,’ and determine why they succeeded where I failed.”

Frost just stares at him. “Shinnok. Oh my god. Are you serious?”

“I’m hardly your god, though in an ideal world, I would have been the god of all.”

Cassie raises her hand. “Can I make fun of that, or am I officially limited to just Raiden’s stupid remarks?”

Frost bites her lip and stifles a grin, trying not to look at Shinnok and his indignant scowl. “Yeah, go ahead.”

“Actually, there’s nothing I can say to improve on that. It just speaks for itself.” Cassie squints at the row of volumes on the shelf. “Are those self-help books?”

“Nothing of the sort. I am trying to learn more about the psychology of mortals.”

“Too good to be true. You improving yourself would be a better godly miracle than anything you’ve done so far.”
Shinnok actually pouts, floating off the ground a bit in frustration. “Miss Cage, that was completely unnecessary! I have more than proven my divinity already.”

“Not the point.” Cassie approaches with a half-smile, though, and pats him on the shoulder consolingly. “What are you trying to do, anyway? I suppose it’s better than summoning minions of the dead.”

“I intend to write a holy text. Lately, I have committed some of my thoughts to writing each day, and I’d like to know how to format it in a fashion that mortals will read and obey.”

“...you want people to worship your diary?”

Shinnok scoffs, eyes glowing, and sets his hands on his hips. “No! It’s not like that!”

“I really hate to side with Cassie on this one, but she’s right. You’re gonna need to work on the sales pitch for that.” Frost strolls over, poking at the shelves. “Ooh, the Odyssey. This is a different translation. Can I borrow this?”

Cassie takes a seat on the coffee table. “I still can’t believe you’re into ancient literature.”

“I’m not. I never read the rest of the stuff.” Feeling suddenly compelled to explain, Frost continues, tucking the book into her jacket. “I told you about my aunt. She was a retired professor. She had an old copy of the Odyssey with some really cool illustrations. As a kid I liked to read it. Sort of made me feel like I’d always find my way back home, too. Wherever home was.”

Cassie nods understandingly, but can’t help but crack a joke. “Was it an autographed copy?”

Raiden looks up from his papers eagerly. “I had one of those, once.”

Cassie buries her face in her hands. “I don’t even have a response for that, either. Where’d it go?”

“I suspect I lent it to Fujin and he never gave it back. My memory of it is distant.” Raiden shrugs, then tucks his well-worn pencil into his pocket and gathers up his notebooks, getting ready for the next trip. “Surely it cannot have gone too far.”

Shinnok, meanwhile, has strolled over to chat with Mileena. She’s hard to miss in the spiky leather and glittery sequins. It’s not a look he’s seen before, on anyone, but it’s oddly compelling. “I see you’ve discovered mortal clothing. I respect your desire to be eye-catching.”

“Well, dearest Shinnok, I do always want to be the topic of conversation...” Mileena pauses, trying to remember Frost’s attempts at etiquette lessons. She eyes Shinnok, and then the mini-fridge, and then calls out a question. “I know it’s considered polite to share, but--”

“Nope! He’s lived here longer than you, and he definitely doesn’t eat what you do.”

“So I should offer refreshments only to visitors who don’t live here? I understand. Thank you!” Mileena doesn’t wait for a further response, just folds her hands behind her back and immediately engages Shinnok in conversation again, standing on her tiptoes to look closer. She’s in a far better mood than when she first arrived. Socializing with a group rather than constantly hiding in Outworld has done wonders for her attitude. “What are our afternoon plans?”

Shinnok shrugs expansively. He isn’t planning to devour all twenty mythology books in an afternoon, although he very easily could. “Anything you want.”

“Shall we duel on the rooftop?”
Shinnok hesitates. Perhaps it’s best to ask permission. “Cassie?”

She doesn’t even look at the other god. Instead, she’s busy paging through one of Raiden’s intricate notebooks, handling the sheets of paper with great care. It’s oddly fascinating, and he’s got a great sense for drawing. “Yeah, go for it. You two have fun up there. Kick each other’s asses. Whatever.”

Frost heads towards the door, seeing a chance at a quick escape. She’s enjoyed the chat, but she’s hit her limit. “I’m gonna play referee. Just in case.”

“Sounds good to me.” Cassie flops over on the couch next to Raiden, gratefully hearing the door slam and appreciating the newfound silence. “Okay. We can do this. I just need to catch my breath. Dad’s good to go for tonight, he’ll wait at the back door for us. Seriously, should we try for any particular time?”

“Midnight, I suppose. It seems to have special significance for mortals.” Raiden puts an arm around Cassie’s shoulders consolingly. “You’re doing well, even with all these new burdens.”

“More like I’m getting used to it. I’m managing. I’m always just managing. It’s all I can do.”

“Doing the most that you can do is still a success, no matter what.”

“Thanks.” She inhales deeply, then lets it out in a long sigh. “This is crazy. This is just crazy. The tournament’s like a month away. We have to go do this Krypt thing. And then we go to hell. And then we have to train some more. And then who knows what else is gonna go wrong in between? Some other accidental nightmare? Things just-- happen, and they don’t stop.” She gestures vaguely, trying to articulate the stress of it all, but gives up and buries her face in Raiden’s shoulder.

Raiden hugs her close, soothingly. “Tell me your troubles, if you would like. I am listening.”

“I… I really miss when all I had to worry about was keeping my team safe. I love Jacqui and Takeda and Jin, they’re so amazing. But three people is still a lot. And-- and now I’ve got you and Shinnok, and Frost and Cyrax and Sareena, and Mileena too on top of everything else, and nine people who were zombies for two decades who are now living with my dad! I’m falling apart.”

“Cassandra. Just breathe.” He quietly listens to her heartbeat. It’s pounding much faster than an average human, and it concerns him. “May I heal you?”

“Yeah, go for it.”

“Very well.” Raiden places a hand on Cassie’s forehead and gently infuses a faint wave of healing magic into her, helping to alleviate the stress. “Listen to me. This too shall pass. I tell myself that often, and it is always true.”

“But-- I don’t want it to pass. I love everyone, all these people I’ve gotten to know… even Shinnok.” She sighs, closing her eyes and following the pattern of Raiden’s slow breathing. “You know, when I was a little kid, I always dreamed about what it’d be like to have you around all the time. Uncle Raiden could come scare away the bullies with lightning, wouldn’t that be cool? But I knew you had stuff to do, and you were a god, even if you’re friends with Mom and Dad. Now… you’re in mortal form and it’s me that’s gotta help keep you safe. It’s so weird.” Cassie blurts it all out in quick succession, pausing to collect her thoughts. “I mean, it was kinda tough having to help you right when this all started, with the ritual. It was scary. It was like my last chance to save you. I knew I had to do it. But this, the way things are now… it’s both a dream come true and a bit of a
nightmare. Not because of you, I’d be totally fine with having you around all the time, you’re like family. But it’s everyone and everything else piled on top of all that, too.” She groans, falling silent for a few long moments. “It’s like one of us pulled the thread on a tapestry and then the whole thing just started coming apart.”

“It was a tapestry that needed to unravel. Look how many things are being set right, at long last.”

“I know. I know this is what’s gotta happen, and should happen, and this is how it needs to be…”

Raiden goes quiet for a while.

“I have something to confess.”

Cassie’s blood runs cold.

“What is it?”

Raiden sighs, barely knowing where to begin. “There are reasons that Shinnok and I cannot return to the Netherrealm, beyond the risk of our own corruption… and, above all, a reason that I did the purification when I did.”

Cassie’s heart skips a beat. “Keep talking.”

“I could have been cured without Shinnok. I retrieved him to save him, not for my ritual.”

A tense silence hangs over the room.

“WHAT?!”

“Hear me out, Cassandra. Please.” Raiden closes his eyes, bowing his head. This won’t be easy. “My visions, as always, were numerous, both true and false at once... but above all, I saw the consequences of my inaction as well as my action. Tell me, are you familiar with the Brotherhood of Shadow?”

“I think so...” Despite it all, Cassie still cracks a joke. “Quan Chi’s boy-band?”

Raiden actually attempts a smile. “Something like that. The group dismantled after his death… but not entirely.” He rests his face in his hands, fingers pressed against his cheekbones. He hopes this isn’t a headache developing. “On the day you came to visit me, I was struck by a vision that told me they, too, would try to retrieve Shinnok’s head. I knew very few details, only the time of the theft from the treasure chamber. Without my intervention, the Brotherhood would have succeeded. It was, in essence, now or never. I chose to act.”

Cassie is reeling from this revelation, staring off into space as her mind races through the memories. “What... what would’ve happened if they got him?”

“He would have become a reanimated puppet infused with the power of a god. He might have become a weapon against us, or he might have sat in a Brotherhood dungeon for eternity… but I could not consign him to that fate. The risks were too great, and my conscience too powerful. Either I would give Shinnok a second chance, or he would be lost, without question, forever. Their form of revival would have finally broken his consciousness. I couldn’t.”

“Holy shit. Why didn’t you tell us any of this?”

“Explaining the depth of the threat at the time would have been unwise. It was easier to tell you
that I needed it entirely for my own sake, than to clarify the secondary reason, or, worse, explain
the consequences if you did not succeed.”

Cassie pulls away, sitting back to stare at him in undisguised horror. “You sent Jacqui and me in
there knowing that somebody else was going to steal his head at the same time!!”

“We were earlier… but yes. I am sorry.” Raiden shakes his head, looking more sorrowful than
ever. “Yet you did not encounter the Brotherhood.”

“Not that we know of! But-- imagine what could’ve gone wrong…”

“I see every worst-case scenario, Cassandra. My purpose is to prevent them all. I would not have
brought you if I believed that you would fail.” Raiden chews on his lip, remembering the entire
sequence of possibilities. “I thought it all through very thoroughly. If we landed anywhere other
than the former torture room, we would be within range of the Brotherhood’s sorcerers potentially
sensing us. In case I reverted to my dark self, I wanted to ensure the fight would take place in that
room - which it did - and Jacqueline would have the necessary equipment and be ready to deal with
any crises - which she did. Bringing Takeda or Jin would have ended in failure. Arriving earlier or
later would have doomed us, and I included the possibility of a delay due to my own corruption. If
I had been unaffected, I would have simply instructed you to wait. I placed Shinnok’s amulet in my
pocket, so you would find it for the treasure room search, but I would not have it available to
wield, in case of crisis. And so forth…”

Cassie whistles under her breath. “Wow. You weren’t kidding. Is everything like that for you?
Figuring out what to do, like a minefield?”

“Yes. Since I am a god, I can manage all these simultaneous thoughts, but it is still, at times, a
great burden. Nonetheless, it is my responsibility to Earthrealm, especially for the sake of those
who are dear to me. As a god, I have no true relatives, but I always find myself cherishing the most
unique and wonderful mortals as family.” Raiden holds Cassie closer again, reassuringly. “Since
my reincarnation, my visions are more muted, thankfully. It is not a state in which I should exist for
long -- it will likely be only a few months before I revert to divine form -- but it is a relief… and I
do need to thank you again, sincerely, for choosing to help me.”

“You don’t have to thank me. I couldn’t have not helped you. You’re you, you know? You’re
Raiden. Thunder dad, and all that. Of course I’ll always be there for you.”

“I do need to thank you, because it was a choice. The free will of mortals is a stunningly powerful
thing. Even your smallest decisions can have mighty consequences, for evil or, more often, for
good.”

Cassie impulsively leans over to hug Raiden, reassuring both of them. “Was there any timeline in
which we didn’t make it through that whole adventure?”

“Many… but above all, I knew I could rely on you, no matter what.”

“Wait. Did I actually help you in every timeline?”

Raiden nods.

“Cassandra, there is a curious factor that makes you special. Your heroism is not restricted to grand
acts, but the simplest things. Offering shelter to those who need it, and coming to the aid of friends
and teammates just for its own sake, rather than the glory. No matter what, you are ready. You are
an accidental hero by virtue of your circumstances and your parents, not one who sought it
intentionally. That is, perhaps, the best way to be.”

Cassie is silent for a long time, just listening to the sound of Raiden’s breathing.

“I never thought about it that way...”

“It is time that you heard it.” Raiden squeezes her gently once more in a welcoming hug. “You have endured these circumstances with incredible bravery. Allow yourself credit for that. Our troubles are not over, but we are past the worst of it, thanks to you.”

Cassie stops short, just trying to figure out what to say. There’s really nothing that can top that. Raiden is amazing. Plain and simple.

She returns the squeeze. “You give the best hugs.”

Raiden smiles softly. “I have practiced quite a bit.”

“Good. You deserve a lot of hugs.” Cassie sits back, letting idle thoughts float through her mind after the intense conversation. “...Did you know Dad wanted to make you my godparent? Seriously. For the pun value. He was going to do it until Mom changed the paperwork to make it Jax instead.”

Raiden actually chuckles out loud. “I never knew that. That sounds very much like something your father would do.”

“I know, right? It’s pretty great.” With a renewed surge of energy, Cassie gets up off the couch at last, pulling Raiden to his feet. “Hey. Let’s go check up on the roof and make sure nobody threw anyone off in the duel.”

“Never fear. If they had, I imagine we would have heard by now.” Raiden gets up slowly, stretching tiredly. The world is slowly becoming less focused, and swims before his eyes as he tilts his head. “I am not used at all to this mortal body. It needs rest, and I am highly unaccustomed to that.”

“You’re sleeping, right?”

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“According to Shinnok, two hours per night, over the past week.”

“Raiden--” Suddenly horrified, Cassie pushes him back down onto the couch abruptly. “Nope. Normal sleep for humans is eight hours! I’ll go check on them and you are going to take a nap before you pass out.”

Raiden hasn’t the energy to protest, just nods obediently and curls up, trying to convince himself to rest. “Very well. Be careful, Cassandra. Those sorts of duels can be dangerous, I hear.”

Cassie returns his smile, then dashes out the door, distantly hearing the sounds of cracking ice.
Night falls all too quickly, signaling the hour of the meeting.

Cassie’s the first to arrive, skillfully letting herself in through the porch on the second floor with a spare key, and sneaks down the stairs to the back door with silent footsteps.

She taps her dad on the shoulder with a playful grin, startling him sharply. “You’re up late. Staying for the meeting? I thought you old people went to bed at ten in the evening.”

“That would explain why your mother isn’t here.” Recovering from the shock, Johnny chuckles under his breath, moving away from the door to face his daughter. She looks a little less stressed than usual, but only barely. “How are you holding up? I’ve been worried about you.”

“I’m doing okay, thanks for asking. I think it’s you we should be worrying about. How’s life as a landlord?”

“It’s been better, but it’s also been way worse. Can’t complain.” Johnny leans against the doorframe, idly tossing his keys and catching them in the palm of his hand. His reflexes are exactly as good as they always were; he’s just more tired these days. He stuffs the keys back into his pocket after a minute. “Why don’t you go say hi to them all? There’s probably a lot to talk about.”

“Not a bad idea.” Cassie’s actually looking forward to seeing the ex-revenants again. It’ll be a nice change from her weird pack of roommates. “Okay, I’ll see you in the living room at midnight. That’s when Raiden said we’re all supposed to be here.”

“We? Who’s coming, anyway?”

She shrugs, making an indifferent noise under her breath. “Technically, the whole team, but I doubt they’ll all haul their asses out of bed just to sit around while Raiden tells us about the creepy ancient tomb.”

“Hey, creepy ancient tombs. That’s kind of my specialty. They even made action figures of me from those movies, back in the day.”

“Dad.” Cassie can’t help but laugh. “There aren’t any stunt wires and safety doors in this tomb. Sorry. You’re not invited.”

“I didn’t need special effects!” But by the time he protests, Cassie’s already headed out through the back hall, making her way through the spacious house to round up the pack of ex-zombie warriors. Sometimes reality is stranger than fiction.

The sound of pattering paws on the hard floor announces the arrival of Johnny’s trusty companion. He squats down and pets the dog, an amiable golden retriever with kind eyes and too much drool. “Hi, Goldie.”

Goldie happily barks in response, then leaps up to paw at the door, hearing a knock from outside. *Danger! Intruder!*

“Settle down, girl. It’s our guests.” Johnny unfastens the latch and invites them in, opening his arms in a welcoming gesture. “Finally! I was just about to send out a search party.”

Cyrax lets himself in politely, dropping to one knee to greet the enthusiastic dog, while Sareena
hesitantly tiptoes through the door and shuts it behind her, almost afraid to touch anything. She glances at Johnny with great concern, carrying a sturdy briefcase. “Are we late?”

“You’re early. I’m just messing with you.” Johnny inspects the briefcase, eyebrows lifted. “That’s professional.”

“Sonya gave it to me after I dropped a pile of papers in the hallway.”

“Nice of her. What’s in it?”

“My newest research on threats from the Netherrealm. Don’t worry, it’s a light read.” She beams brightly, struggling to unlatch the case. Finally, her encyclopedic knowledge of hellbeasts is serving some good purpose. “Would you like to see it, Mr. Cage?”

“Hold off on it until Raiden gets here. He’d probably want to take a look.” Johnny notices Cyrax, who’s engaged in an enthusiastic tug of war with Goldie, playfully fighting for control of a toy she’s retrieved for her new friend. “Hey, she likes you.”

Cyrax lets go, and Goldie trots off with the well-gnawed toy between her jaws, her silky tail waving proudly. “She’s lovely. I assume she’s your home’s guard? What’s her name?”

“Goldie IV.”

Cyrax looks a bit surprised. “The fourth?”

“Long story. Cassie got a golden retriever puppy for her birthday when she was little, and she named it Goldie. Creative, right?” He chuckles, recalling the old memories. “Nah, she was a great kid. Goldie - the original one - was a gift from Jax, to help teach her responsibility. But, you know, dogs, lifespans, all that stuff… we got another one, we started calling her Goldie II as a joke, and it stuck. Then when Sonya and I divorced, she kept Goldie II, Cassie and I both got new puppies, but Cassie moved to an apartment with a no-dogs rule. So I raised both Goldie III and IV. For what it’s worth, they respond to Three and Four. They’re smart.”

Sareena has been listening intently to the tale of four canines, and applauds politely at the end of the story. “I am impressed by your dedication to these creatures. ...Ahem, Mr. Cage?”

“Yes?”

“Can I tell you about my research now?”

“Just hang on. Raiden’ll get here any minute.” At least, Johnny hopes so. If he doesn’t, they’re all in trouble. “Hey, why don’t you go check out my awards cabinet? It’s down the hall, third room on the right.”

“I shall!” With just as much enthusiasm, Sareena heads towards the cabinet full of prizes, eager to see these souvenirs. They must be valuable, for them to be safeguarded so carefully. She’s looking forward to learning more about these Earth customs.

Cyrax has been leaning against the wall comfortably, watching the exchange between them, but now gets to his feet again, tucking his hands in his pockets. “Hey, Mr. Cage--”

“Call me Johnny. It’s okay.”

“Johnny, then.”
“Hey, by the way, what’s your name? You never told me.”

“Huh. I guess I didn’t. It’s Kenosi Onthatile, but I haven’t gone by that for years, not since I left Botswana. Cyrax is my warrior moniker.”

“I guessed it was. It’s a pretty cool ninja name.” Johnny pauses, thinking to himself. “You know, this is an awesome bonding moment. Mentor and mentee, all that stuff. It’s good.” Johnny’s tendency to talk nonstop is seriously interfering again. “So what’s ‘Cyrax’ mean?”

“Short answer: it sounded interesting. The long answer is kind of complicated.”

“Hit me with it.”

“It’s a combination of ‘cyrus’, which means ‘sun’ in ancient Persian, and ‘rex,’ which means ‘king’ in Latin. As I said… it’s kind of cool, and it does mean something. But I changed it up a little. ‘Cyrex’ sounded like something you’d buy at the pharmacy.” Cyrax shrugs, adjusting his messenger bag over his shoulder. “I studied history and politics before I joined the Lin Kuei, but being a ninja is more or less a full-time job. So it’s just a hobby.”

Johnny nods slowly, processing this random snippet of language knowledge. “I’m impressed. My real name was Johnny Carlton, but I changed it to Johnny Cage because it was catchy. That’s the only reason.”

“No hidden connection to the language of the Mediterranean war cult?”

Johnny groans. “Cassie told you about that?”

“You bet she did. Hey, I think it’s impressive. Supposedly I have some sort of warrior ancestry, too.” Cyrax fondly recalls all those folklore tales. It would be interesting to investigate any connections between the two… sometime else. “Anyway… I just wanted to say thank you for the training. I’m starting to develop my skills beyond my Lin Kuei background, believe it or not.” He sheepishly runs a hand through his braids, collecting his thoughts for the impromptu discussion. “Ever since my revival, I’ve been thinking about the last tournament. I’m sure you know this already, but I was hired to compete on the side of Shang Tsung. It’s… a welcome opportunity to be able to fight for Earth this time. I promise I won’t let you down.”

“Hey. No need to worry about disappointing me.” Johnny returns the smile, doing his best to seem reassuring. He’s not the greatest at serious conversations, but he’s trying with all his heart. “Just doing this, being willing to help us, is more than enough. I know it’s got to be difficult, but…” He trails off. Being turned into a robot, dying, and being revived by two gods isn’t exactly a relatable experience. Johnny doesn’t quite feel qualified to comment on it. “You’re really doing great. I think you have a good chance to win. And if you don’t, there’s nine fights. Between us all, we’ve got you covered.”

“Which I do sincerely appreciate. The Lin Kuei is far better than it once was. Everything seems… renewed.”

Johnny takes a minute to contemplate this. “Yeah. I guess it does. Everything’s changing, but none of it’s bad. Knock on wood.” He taps his knuckles on the nearest countertop, just in case. “No, I’ve noticed that, though. I mean… our former friends no longer look like Night of the Living Dead extras, we’re ready to kick ass in the biggest tournament of two decades, and one of our most dangerous supervillains is now my daughter’s weird roommate. I can deal with this. Things are going our way.”
Sareena’s voice echoes through the long hallway. “Mr. Cage! I really need to tell you my research on the evil Brotherhood of Shadow sorcerer trying to steal the soul vials!”

“...scratch that.” Johnny locks eyes with Cyrax, wincing. “I jinxed it.”

Cyrax offers a halfhearted smile. “Never a dull moment.”

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Improbably, Raiden makes his way to Johnny’s home at the stroke of midnight. Much to the distress of all, he arrives precisely in the center of his dining room, shattering the table as he lands on it with Shinnok close behind.

Johnny bolts in, and stares at the ruined table, mildly astonished. “Dammit. That was an antique. How much do you weigh? That table can hold up at least one human. Or... it used to.”

Raiden distances himself from the wreckage, zapping it into oblivion with lightning. “I sincerely apologize. My control of my teleportation is reduced while in mortal form.”

“So you can’t even tell where you’re going to end up?!”

“My location is approximate, not precise.” Raiden produces a substantial stack of papers from thin air, brandishing them proudly. “Where is the group?”

“Living room. Sareena’s dying to tell you about something. Don’t know what, but it’s an evil sorcerer.”

“Evil sorcerer?” Shinnok looks up from the skeletal table he’s been skillfully reconstructing from thin air. “Another one of those? Must we?”

“Looks like it.” Johnny peers at the handicrafted item, halfway impressed at its level of detail. “Are you like the Da Vinci of bones, or something?”

“I assume that is a flattering comparison.”

“For once, it actually is. Now c’mon.” Johnny follows close behind Raiden, sliding into an empty seat on the couch as the god pulls a large and comfortable chair towards the front of the room. Shinnok prefers to construct an impromptu skeletal throne for himself nearby. All nine ex-revenants are seated across various couches, and Cassie’s perched on a table cross-legged. Cyrax joins her in a nearby chair, flanked by two happy golden retrievers. Sareena’s sitting on the windowsill, for some reason, poring through her briefcase.

Johnny greets them all with as much enthusiasm as he can muster at this hour. “What’s going on?”

Raiden pulls out another stack of papers, stapled in tidy packets. Counting under his breath, he distributes them to each team member as they wait in respectful silence. “Cassandra assisted me in reproducing my maps and sketches. I’ve prepared multiple copies of the information you will all need to know to navigate the Krypt.”

Johnny raises his hand. “Do I get one? Just in case...”

Raiden produces another packet, handing it over. “As the gracious host of the occasion, please feel free to follow along, Mr. Cage.”

“Dunno about ‘gracious.’” Cassie comments under her breath, smirking. “Don’t worry, Dad. I’ll
take lots of pictures in the tomb to show you later.”

“Thanks, dearest daughter. You know I always appreciate that.” Johnny flops back on the couch, idly paging through the packet. Next to him, Kitana is studying the printed maps with a haughty air. She finally glances his way, acknowledging him with a nod, which he returns politely. “Okay. Raiden. What’s the situation?”

Raiden shuffles through his stack of papers. “Please turn your attention to the first map.”

They all do so, dutifully studying the neatly drawn outlines.

“The Krypt is a combination of several sacred grounds for various groups across the realms. Shao Kahn merged them into one location to desecrate them more thoroughly, and his followers repurposed one of the ancient catacombs as his own tomb. The Netherrealm Kamidogu is in here somewhere.”

Kitana coughs, eyebrows lifted dramatically. “Somewhere?”

“Daughter.” Sindel sets a gentle hand on her arm. “Have patience. Raiden knows how to manage this.”

Kitana rolls her eyes, but sits back, grudgingly studying the map in closer detail. “That wretch of an emperor! So his filthy corpse is in here?”

“Yes. It was reclaimed and brought to the Krypt, mummified, and placed in a sarcophagus. The tomb that contains him was originally the site of sacred Lin Kuei, Shirai Ryu, and Edenian Knight catacombs. Though Shao Kahn did not successfully merge Earthrealm, he was able to steal some of its holy sites nonetheless, including a White Lotus temple on the surface. We must take the utmost caution when exploring this area, and only follow the existing key retrieval mechanisms. We cannot force our way through, at any cost.”

Raiden scans the faces of the group, waiting for their reactions. Smoke is motionless, sitting back in a chair with his fingers steepled as he, too, studies the rest of his companions. Kabal is resting patiently on a couch and idly adjusting the straps on his utility belt. Stryker is near him, diligently taking notes on a clipboard. Meanwhile, Nightwolf is already aware of all this information, as disclosed to him by Raiden beforehand, and is now sitting on the floor near Cyrax, petting the dogs.

The Edenians are all quiet and attentive. Jade looks dutiful, Sindel looks sorrowful, and Kitana looks vengeful.

Liu Kang and Kung Lao are whispering something under their breath to each other, so Raiden turns his attention to his pupils first, clearing his throat. “Both of you, as well as Kung Jin, will constitute one group. You will retrieve the key—”

A knock on the door interrupts him. Jin guiltily creeps in, Jacqui and Takeda close behind. Frost follows them a few moments later, sipping a milkshake. Jin glances apologetically in Raiden’s direction. “Sorry we’re late. What’s that about me and a group and a key?”

Shinnok swoops over to them, crossing the room behind the couches, and delivers four packets of maps. He looks down his nose at the youths, hands clasped behind his back. “Try to be more timely, won’t you?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Jin waves him off and goes to sit by his cousin. The rest of them disperse, filling the room. Jacqui perches on the table with Cassie, Frost sits on the floor near Shinnok’s skeletal
throne, and Takeda takes the open space on Sareena’s windowsill. Once the newcomers have settled in, Jin addresses Raiden again, wilting under the god’s disappointed gaze. “Well… we’re here and we’re listening. Can someone catch me up?”

Kung Lao leans over, summarizing the Krypt’s history. Jin whispers a quiet thanks.

Raiden coughs, resuming the discussion as promptly as he can. “Liu Kang, Kung Lao, Kung Jin. You will navigate the path to the White Lotus Temple. One of the six keys is hidden within. The temple is obscured by a cemetery ground, and can only be approached from the front. However, there is a safe path through the graveyard.”

Jin brightens up. “Great! We got this under control.” He places an arm around the other two’s shoulders. “Raiden? What’s the path?”

“I... am uncertain.”

Jin hesitates.

Raiden continues, faltering. “My maps of the Krypt are marked with phrases that, if correctly interpreted, will reveal the safe paths to retrieve the key.”

Jacqui interjects, raising her hand. “So, riddle traps?”

“Yes. Riddle traps.”

“Great! I love those.” She isn’t even being sarcastic. “Really. I think we can figure this out. So who wrote these?”

“Who wrote what?”

“The riddles. Was it the person who made the Krypt, or...?”

Raiden winces a little. “According to the handwriting on the maps, it was me.”

“Wait, you wrote these puzzle things and you don’t remember the answers?!”

“This was a very long time ago! Besides, they needed to be difficult to interpret in case the maps were captured...”

“Raiden--” Jacqui grinds her teeth. She’s very fond of the god, but he’s far from omniscient. “Okay. Just tell us what they all are. We’re going to figure them out.”

“Turn to page four of your packets, and you will find them all there.” Raiden quotes the first phrase from memory. “The strength of the past supports the burden of the present.”

Jacqui’s face falls. “That’s so vague! Why can’t we get something like “The number three unlocks the key” and we only have to find the ‘3’ written somewhere?”

“Actually, there is a phrase along those lines...” Raiden hesitates. “Please allow me to explain each area in turn. That way, it will be more clear.”

“Okay. Go for it.”

“Each area has a trap, intended to prevent intruders from forcing their way in.” Raiden listens to the group’s collective groan, and is almost tempted to join in himself. He’s no happier about this than they are. “The White Lotus’s cemetery is filled with graves containing hollow pitfalls, laced...”
with spikes. I have determined that there are certain gravestones that are safe to step on, and to leap between, unlocking an invisible path. The exact method to find out which stones are safe, however, is unknown.”

Jin chews on his lower lip, suddenly overcome by nerves. “So… we’re screwed?”

“No. The location will reveal the answer. I know this.”

“We have to figure it out when we get there?”

“Essentially.” Raiden sighs, pacing back and forth across the room. “I have faith in all three of you. You will find the path.”

Jacqui interrupts again. “Can you give us a quick breakdown on the rest of the sites?”

“Yes. The next location is the Nesting Caverns, merged from Arnyek. Sareena and Takeda will handle this area—”

Shinnok clears his throat. “You would send two innocent youths into some sort of gruesome cavern without a third accomplice? Really, Raiden?”

Raiden whirls to face him, anguish written on his face. “The other groups cannot spare a member. Teams of three are needed for all the traps, except the caverns, and they have all been distributed into groups based on their knowledge and skill.”

“Well, then, who is the spare?”

“You.” Raiden steps back, shaking his head. “I would not send you into any area the Kytinn have touched. Not on my life, either mortal or immortal...”

Shinnok scowls. “Don’t be so dramatic. That is my job, you usurper.” He rises from his skeletal throne, throwing off the blanket he’d draped around his shoulders like a cloak. “I’ll do it. Sareena and Takeda will need support, and who is better than a god?”

Takeda pipes up weakly from the windowsill. “Hey, thanks.”

“...very well.” Raiden’s taken aback, but accepts this in stride. “Then that is settled. The three of you will pass through the nesting caverns, and navigate the paths until you locate a bottomless pit. Beyond the gap, the key is stored.”

“Hrm. All too simple. A bottomless pit is no match for us. So, what is this second riddle clue?”

“Defeat your fear by accepting your fate.”

Sareena swallows hard. The entire room has fallen into uncomfortable silence.

“Well, that’s absurd. I’ll just use my magic to toss one of you across.” Shinnok waves a hand dismisively, settling back into his chair and gathering the blanket around him again. “Go on, Raiden. We’ll have no trouble. Tell us about the next trap.”

Raiden is a bit bemused, but does as requested. Shinnok never ceases to surprise him. “The underground city of Araknia, merged from the realm of Vaeternus, contains a longer unlocking sequence to retrieve the key. Fortunately, I think it is possible to pass through without any danger.”

“Who have you assigned to this lovely task?”
“Cyrax, Smoke, and Frost.”

Frost sees this as an opportunity to jump into the conversation, plunging in feet-first. “Great. This is going to be a hell of a bonding activity for Team Lin Kuei.”

Raiden addresses her sternly. “Levity is not required.” Then again, perhaps he had better be more patient. “It you would like to refer to yourselves as teams, you may.”

“Okay, you know what, why not? Let’s break this down. We’re team Lin Kuei. You guys—” and here she points to Liu, Jin, and Lao -- “can be Team White Lotus. Wait, are you all Shaolin? I can’t remember. White Lotus, for now.” She directs her attention to Sareena, Shinnok, and Takeda, sitting nearby. “You three… what do you even all have in common? Gimme a sec.” She furrows her brow in deep focus. “Okay. Team Hellfire. I like it.”

Takeda smiles a bit. “It’s Hanzo that has the fire, not me.”

“Whatever.” Frost rolls her eyes, sitting back against the wall. “Okay. What’re the details on Spiderland?”

“Araknia. It was originally a system of secret tunnels beneath the treasure room of Vaeternus, the realm of vampires, merged by Shao Kahn. Legend holds that there are many bodies buried in its walls.”

“Course there are.”

“The first unlocking sequence corresponds to the phrase ‘Tread carefully, for your days are numbered.’”

“Uplifting!”

“My research tells me it is guarded by a series of four platforms with weighing scales built into them, which, when properly unlocked by appropriate weights, will open a secret chamber.”

“How do we get in?”

“There are items hidden throughout Araknia that correspond to each of the four scales, and are correctly weighted to trigger the latches. You will have to find them.”

Jacqui coughs. “Can I just throw out a guess? ‘Numbered’ is probably a riddle reference. I’d bet you anything those scales have some kind of number on them, and if you find items with matching numbers in Araknia, those might be it.”

“That is likely, yes. The thought had occurred to me, but I was uncertain. Your suggestions are wise.” Raiden gazes at her with an approving smile. Jacqui is well-suited for these adventures. “Within the secret chamber is the mechanism to open the door to the Shadow Cave.”

“You lost me. What’s the Shadow Cave?”

“It is a tree of stone. Its roots are surrounded by the last surviving wisps of the jinsei of Vaeternus.”

Frost’s eyes are glazing over. “Tell us how to get past it and get that key.”

“I am uncertain. I am relying on your sharp wits to unlock this.”

“Me? Bad idea. Try Smoke instead. Or Cyrax. He studies history.”
“You are just as knowledgeable as your peers, Frost. Do not discredit yourself. The answer will become apparent at the right time.” Raiden turns the page of the packet, studying closely. “Cassandra, Kabal, and Stryker, are you opposed to working together?”

Stryker looks up from his notes. “Not in the least.”

Cassie and Kabal echo his opinion readily.

Frost grins. “Team Humanity. I like it.”

“That is settled. You will handle the Hanging Bridge and the Chamber of Bones.” Raiden indicates it on the map. “This area was merged from Zaterra. I have more information on its construction than most other traps. The Hanging Bridge is kept in place by a system of pulleys. In order to be lowered, and allow passage across, two individuals need to operate it simultaneously, standing at the left and right of the path. The third crosses into the chamber.”

All three share a glance. Cassie volunteers at once, shoving a wad of bubblegum into her mouth to cope with the stress. “I’ll cross.”

“I would suggest that. Regardless, listen closely. Six Saurian eggs -- or something resembling them -- surround the perimeter of the chamber’s circular platform. There is a tiny trapdoor at the center of that area. I know not how it opens. Beneath it is an ominous mist, with which I highly suggest you do not interact.”

“Noted. What’s the clue?”

“A lack of caution can shatter the highest hopes.”

Jacqui pipes up again. “Shatter. That’s a clue. Do NOT break the eggs.”

“Got it.” Cassie fidgets with the zipper on her jacket, thoughts racing through her mind. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get there. Literally.”

Only Johnny laughs.

“Thanks for the moral support, Dad. The rest of you suck. Raiden, where are you gonna be in all this?”

“I, Nightwolf, and Jacqui will handle the Hollow Grounds, merged from Outworld itself. That key is suspended in the air, and can only be reached by climbing the interlocked branches of two trees. Unfortunately, these are sentient trees, of the Outworld forest variety.”

Jade shivers. “I hate those.”

Jacqui’s life is flashing before her eyes. “Talking trees. Let me guess, I’m going to climb that thing.”

“Yes. As Nightwolf and I answer the trees, they will form a ladder with their branches. However, if we fail, they will let you fall, or worse, strangle you. You have your gauntlets in case of emergency, and are likeliest to be able to help with the riddles--”

“Wait. Strangle me?!”

“That will not happen. I will hardly allow it.”

“Why can’t you just uproot those things with your lightning?”
“Remember that these are sacred grounds, young one! We cannot desecrate anything here.” Raiden pinches the bridge of his nose, well aware that the group’s impulsive nature may pose difficulties. “The clue for this one is less relevant. It is ‘knowledge is the root of triumph,’ which is not so hard to decipher. ‘Root’ as a reference to the trees, and so forth…” Raiden sighs. “No matter. We will persevere.”

Frost rubs her hands together, forming tiny icicles. “Okay, you guys are Team Guardians. I think that fits. Who’s left? The Edenians? I’m guessing you stuck them together for a reason.”

“Yes. The Garden of Despair was originally from their world. The clue is ‘a keen eye and ear may reveal a grave flaw.’ I have the least information about this area, but our friends may be able to determine the answer.”

Frost eyes the Edenian trio. “Got enough royal blood in here, I’d sure hope they could figure out something about their own world.”

Sindel responds quietly, long hair coiled around her shoulders. “Our realm has not been intact for many mortal lifetimes. Still, we hold memories that may unlock the key. We will not fail.”

“That’s that, then?” Cassie’s been listening quietly, observing the small groups as they chat under their breath. Nobody seems too displeased with their assignments, and while it’s clear that Raiden’s out of practice at leading a team, he’s still doing a pretty good job. “What happens when we get the six keys?”

“Those, together, unlock the tomb. Inside, as I mentioned earlier, are the Shirai Ryu, Lin Kuei, and Edenian Knight catacombs. Within those are levers, which, when activated, open the main chamber. From there…” Raiden sighs sadly, holding up his hands. Faint lightning flickers across his fingertips, eyes bright with power. “We will have to improvise. That is all I have to share. Read the packets closely, I have included all my notes on each area. Prepare wisely.”
Sareena very quietly clears her throat. “May I--”

Johnny doesn’t even wait for her to finish. “Yes. Go ahead. I want to hear your research now. The floor is yours.”

“No, it’s yours… isn’t it?”

“Figure of speech. Tell us about the sorcerer guy.”

Shinnok rises from his skeletal seat, graciously offering it to his new teammate. “The chair of honor. You may address the group from there.”

Johnny rolls his eyes. Sareena seems delighted.

Perched atop the temporary throne, she whips out a page of typed notes, thanks to a tech upgrade from Jacqui. “Do you all recall the Brotherhood of Shadow?”

The room erupts in a clash of voices. She silences them with a gentle motion, continuing to explain. “After the… temporary demise of Shinnok--” she hesitates, feeling his glare-- “the Brotherhood disbanded, for the most part. However, it was suspected that a leader rose again among their ranks. The popular opinion among Netherrealm’s rebel forces, myself included, held that it was Quan Chi… but recent events proved this untrue.”

Her voice grows stronger as she talks, gaining confidence. “From my informant -- another rebel and a close friend of mine who has yet to free herself from Netherrealm -- the leader is another demon, this one a shapeshifter, by the name of Keryon. Much like Quan Chi, he is a reanimator, though his method is even more grisly.” She shudders, flipping through the pages quickly. “He prefers to take severed heads and reattach them to… new bodies, constructed from many different parts.”

Cassie and Raiden’s eyes lock in horror.

“He goes by the title Keryon the Tri-Formed… beast, swarm, and man. The direct appearance of the two other forms are unknown, but his swarm form resembles Netherrealm bats. They are small reptilian creatures with red eyes, sharp fangs, and an extra pair of winged limbs.” She brandishes an illustration, passing it around. “My friend, Ashrah, is attempting to discover his other forms, but she hasn’t yet been successful. I will keep you updated. It is likely that, within a week, he will be able to pass into Quan Chi’s lair, so we must act before then.”

The room is dead silent.

Comments and opinions fill the air all at once, aimed right at Raiden and Sareena. The pair answer their companions’ rapid-fire questions as fast as they can, taking turns.

“What do we do with the jars when we get them?”

“Each former revenant will shatter the jar that corresponds to them, thereby reclaiming their own soul. This is the surest way to neutralize the threat.”

“How’d you find out about this Keryon guy?”
“It’s not too hard to keep our forces coordinated and gain information here and there. It’s like any resistance effort. I couldn’t do it anymore, but it’s a worthy cause.”

“How does the Kamidogu work, and where is it?”

“It works simply by bringing it near the portal, activating the mechanism. As I said, I am uncertain of any information beyond the opening of the tomb. However, between all eighteen of us, I have no doubt we will find it and fulfill our task. We have very little choice in the matter.”

One by one, with their questions answered, the group eventually files out, all in dim spirits. Johnny’s offered some of the upstairs bedrooms to the new team, in case they want to stay over. Most of them opt to do so, rather than worry about venturing back to their apartments in the night. After wishing Cassie goodnight, Johnny also departs, leaving his daughter and the two gods behind in the empty quiet living room.

Cassie stretches out on the newly vacated couch, then inhales sharply as realization strikes, leaping off the couch just as quick. “Mileena’s alone in my apartment!”

“No matter. I am sure the girl can endure one night on her own, in comfortable conditions, no less.” Shinnok is stealing cushions from another couch, piling them up in his skeleton throne. “I am certainly not planning on going anywhere at this hour to check on her.”

“Fine. Hey. Raiden.” Cassie flops down on the sofa again, calling over to the other god. “How are we going to get to the Krypt and back?”

He’s already thought this through, too. “Fujin will help. He’s agreed to construct a portal between the Sky Temple and the Krypt courtyard, at the start of our journey and at the end.”

“Good. Just trying to think of any loose ends. Are there any more?”

“More than I can count… but this is a massive plan, and I am placing all my faith in our group.” Raiden finally takes off his hat, forlornly curling up on the cushion-free couch. “If you see any glaring flaws, please inform me.”

Shinnok is almost too tired to comment. Unsteadily, he hauls himself to his feet, wrapped in the stolen blanket, and wanders towards the kitchen. “I suppose I should go and find something to eat that I can tolerate.”

“Okay.” Cassie watches him go, then turns her attention to her phone, checking through her messages. As usual, the group’s busily firing off messages to each other, communicating silently through the house’s walls.

[KJ] we’re all on different teams now
[KJ] kind of weird to think about
[KJ] really hope I don’t die

[IS] [Image received: Screenshot10784.jpg. The image shows a Google search results page for “how to write a will.”]

[KJ] haha frost that’s funny
[KJ] you’re lucky, you get the ice powers to protect yourself. I have to figure out how to not fall into a spiky grave pit

[IS] have your cousin do it instead or something
[KJ] unfair, he died once already
[KJ] so did Liu Kang
[KJ] I gotta do it

[IS] seven other people did too. they’re not special

[KO] Eight other people.

[IS] ok fair sorry cyrax. you count too. you’re special if you want to be

[TT] you’ll all do fine. i’m pretty sure about that. it’s me i’m worried about. actually, it’s shinnok. not sure how he’s going to do in the kytinn nest area.

[JB] :( Why did he volunteer?

[CC] I think hes worried about saving face after everything. Proving himself or smth.

[IS] maybe he just thinks you’re all incompetent

[SD] No, that can’t be it! I think he wanted to help.

[IS] SD?

[SD] It stands for Sareena Demon.

[IS] ...

[SD] It was all I could think of! But I like this chat program, it’s so useful.

[JB] I helped her set it up. :)

[TT] good job, guys. but can we focus?

[IS] no

[KJ] nah

[JB] I want to, but I’m tired \n
[TT] ...ok fair. i’m going to sleep, then. goodnight everybody.

[IS] i’m literally sitting across from you. you are still on your phone

[TT] give me five seconds to finish sending this!!

[SD] LOL

Cassie chuckles, then flips over to her phone’s camera app, paging through her photos. She really ought to find something new to post on Friendships. It’s been a week since she even touched the site.

Page by page, she goes back a month or two, idly flipping past random selfies and impromptu photos of the team and blurry shots of Goldie III and/or IV chasing a tennis ball. Something makes her keep looking, back, back further, until, finally, she finds the selfie she took in the Netherrealm treasure room with Jacqui.

She zooms to full-screen and studies the image. There she is, holding up the camera with a cocky
smirk, while Jacqui playfully frowns with her arms crossed. Their faces are lit by the amulet’s green glow and the brightness of the phone screen, casting their faces in sharp relief against a shadowy background. Behind them, there’s an old rusty treasure chest, and beyond that, a sea of glittering jewels. Vivid blue sapphires, purple amethyst chunks, emerald green stones, and, at the edge of the bowl, there’s two red rubies, glowing brighter than the rest.

Cassie’s blood runs cold.

She zooms in, very slowly, presses edit, boosts contrast, increases brightness...

Staring out from the background of the photo is a ghastly Netherrealm bat.

Cassie stares at it as long as she can, then squeezes her eyes shut, overwhelmed by dawning horror and a chill crawling up her spine. “…Raiden?”

“Yes?”

“Raiden, I have something to show you.”

“Come here, Cassandra.” Raiden shifts to the side and makes room on the couch, welcoming his friend. There’s an unusual note of distress in her voice that he notices easily. “What is the matter?”

Wordlessly, she offers him the phone.

As he slowly processes the image, he feels a surge of dread, eyes flickering and dimming.

“That is the bat that Sareena showed us. The swarm shape of Keryon, the tri-formed sorceror…”

“That-- that can’t be coincidence. What if-- he was IN there--” Cassie’s voice rises sharply, but she catches hold of herself and breathes deeply, shakily. “Earlier you told me-- everything, why we went and raided the Netherrealm treasure room, to get Shinnok and save him-- and you said-- the Brotherhood…”

She can’t finish the sentence. She doesn’t want to.

Raiden lays a hand on her shoulder, his voice deadly serious. “The beast I fought…”

“What if--” Cassie clenches a fist, trying to collect her frantic thoughts. “It looked like one of those nightmare creatures. I was wondering when its rider would show up. I thought it was the steed of the Brotherhood leader…”

Their eyes meet again, sharing a dreadful realization.

“…that WAS him.”

She closes her eyes, gasping in horror as the full weight of the revelation strikes her. “He was there fighting you, and we had no idea. And before, he-- he made it into the room with us… he was there!”

Raiden swallows hard, unable to summon any words.

“But-- but didn’t you kill Keryon when you fought him, then?” She’s clutching at any thread of hope.

“Shapeshifters are notoriously difficult to destroy.” Shinnok comments drily from the living room doorway, holding a cup of water. “What? Did you think I was deaf? Go on, spill whatever grand
realization you've just had.”

Raiden looks across the room at Shinnok, sorrow written in his weary face, and says nothing.

“I’ll take care of it.” Cassie reassures him gently, as Shinnok takes a seat on the other side of Raiden, quietly returning the couch cushions to him. She tries not to let her voice tremble. “Let me clear this up as simply as I can. When we took you back from the Netherrealm, the rest of us didn’t know it at the time, but Raiden had a vision that the Brotherhood of Shadow was going to try to steal you. He knew when it would happen, but nothing else. Needless to say -- we got you, revived you, you know the rest. But--” She falters. “You were about ten minutes away from being taken by the sorcerer that’s trying to get the soul vials. If what Sareena says is true, he would have turned you into an abomination. And-- he was there! We had no idea! He was watching us the whole time…” She shivers, tossing her phone onto the table.

Raiden glances between them, cautiously. “May I share the visions with you?”

They both nod, moving closer.

He places a hand on Shinnok’s shoulder, conjuring forth the images from the unwanted prophecy, and lets the others glimpse the same sights.

The worst path plays out first. Keryon, shown only as a cloud of red mist, enters the treasure room, retrieves Shinnok’s head, and, from his remains and others, builds a horrible unholy creation, a mockery of a god. This vision flashes by quickly; Raiden can’t bear it for long. Then, the grisly alternatives for themselves -- capture by Liu Kang and Kitana, death by drowning in Netherrealm lava, impalement on the torture room spikes -- and then the various chances of Raiden’s reversal to his dark self, at different points in the event -- and at last, the ideal path; Cassie and Jacqui safely retrieving the item, rejoining Raiden, and reviving Shinnok. The vision ends with that scene Cassie remembers so well, the terrifying red mist seeping out of the gods’ bodies to purify them and, finally, their eyes opening to reveal familiar blue and unfamiliar green.

Shinnok pulls away as soon as it’s finished, face buried in his hands. “I… I never knew.”

“Nor did I.” Raiden’s tone is a faint echo of his normal powerful voice. The revelation has shaken him to his core. “We now know his beast form...”

“Ugh!” Cassie shudders again with a visceral surge of disgust. This throws it all into horrifying new perspective. “I don’t want to know what his human form looks like.”

“It’s probably horrendous.” Shinnok’s tone is gloomy. The situation speaks for itself. The bats have come home to roost.

“Yes. Probably.” Cassie leans against Raiden’s shoulder, curling up on the couch. “I’ll tell the team tomorrow. I can’t do this right now. I just cannot think about this.”

“A wise decision... You should rest. You are nearly out of energy.”

“I’m gonna. So should you. You’re still tired.”

Shinnok sniffs in distaste. “What, no invitation for me?”

Raiden smiles halfheartedly, despite himself. “You deserve rest, as well. Come and sit here.”

Shinnok grudgingly inches closer, propping one of the cushions against Raiden’s shoulder. He supposes there’s no harm in having some company while he attempts to sleep. A strange and
unsettling phenomenon, in the first place, to be unconscious so long. “...all right. If you insist.” He shuts off the lights with a snap of his fingers. “There. You’re welcome.”

“Thanks.” Cassie replies drowsily through the darkness. “Try to relax, if you can.”

“Yes, ‘if’…” But within moments, even Shinnok’s dry sarcastic voice is quiet, his breathing slowed as sleep finally overtakes him.

Cassie lays awake for long after the gods have drifted off, unwanted images running through her head. The revelation of that gruesome sorcerer flitting around the treasure room above them in bat form, listening, observing, gazing at them… and then Raiden’s opponent, the beast of burden, as that same sorcerer in disguise. It’s all quite appalling to consider.

Finally, she lets herself close her eyes, and focuses on the quiet reassuring solid presence of the gods beside her, and the safety of her father’s house, and her friends on the team, probably still chattering away on the app. Even with this newfound threat, as Raiden said, they will persevere. Somehow.
New Perspectives

A world away, eight lost souls are preparing for the tournament, following this one chance to bring meaning to their scattered lives.

The ninth doesn’t qualify. He’s in it for the money, nothing more.

Kano sits around on a dilapidated bench, idly trimming his beard with a large wicked knife. The Outworld training room is airy and scenic, time-worn with a sort of vintage charm to it. Kano doesn’t particularly care, nor will he bother to train against any of his “teammates”. He’s spent a long, long time getting ready to take down his opponent. It’s all up to him now.

The emperor is across the room, glowering at him from the corner of his eye. Kano offers a wolfish grin in response. “Let’s let bygones be bygones, why don’t we?”

Kotal Kahn dismisses the remark, striding over with mighty footsteps to address two of the others in the motley pack. Well, three, if the flesh-beast counts as a person, but Kano doubts it. The vintage cowboy and the little feral girl -- is Kotal really going to send those two out together on an important mission?

Looks like it.

Kano scoffs, and stands up, stretching leisurely. He has no friends here, nor allies. It’s all up to him, but he’s more than ready to walk away with the prize. Kotal’s brought in some sort of trainer for the others, an overweight former martial artist carrying around a big stick and a bigger flask. Bo’ Rai Cho, former ally of Raiden, trainer of his pets Liu Kang and Kung Lao. He’s an Outworld native, Kano knows that much, and he defected back to home after Raiden’s little diplomatic incident.

Kano laughs darkly. Looks like Kotal hired Raiden’s ex-friend to train the group of fighters that’ll take Earth down. He can admire that level of balls, or stupidity.

The cowboy and the girl and her beast are gone now, sent to follow the emperor’s orders. Kano wasn’t listening closely enough and didn’t care enough to find out where they’re going.

The rest of the fighters are no more impressive. Noob Saibot, a wraith wearing black who doesn’t talk if he can help it. Reptile, the acid-spitting lizard with abandonment issues. Ermac, the floating atrocity; Tremor, the failed Black Dragon; Rain, the forgotten prince. At least there’s Skarlet, a suitable piece of eye-candy in a skimpy red bikini. Shao Kahn did something right with that one.

Kano shakes his head, descending the stairs of the training room and stepping out into the sweltering heat of the marketplace. He wants to see what kind of goods Outworld’s shadiest dealers have to offer. If he’s here, he may as well have a little fun.

---

“Big bossie no listen.”

The dull drone of the jungle’s insects and screeching apes is broken by Ferra’s insistent shrill voice, tugging on the edge of Erron’s hat to catch his attention. Torr is plodding through the pathway with heavy ground-shaking steps, while Erron walks ahead, hacking his way through the underbrush with his Tarkatan blade. Called to a halt by the annoying little girl, he slows his steps, backing up as Torr pounds the ground with heavy fists.
He squints at her beneath the brim of his hat. “What?”

Ferra stares down at him impatiently. For this mission, she’s dressed in a small spiked helmet with long blades attached to her arms, extending past her elbows. Her outfit is a mishmash of leather and metal, blending right in among Outworld’s ragged citizens. Torr is dressed in sharp-edged armor, laboriously strapped around his hulking body. Erron can’t make heads nor tails of the pair.

She waves her hands, trying to articulate more clearly. “Big bossie no ‘spect us an-more.”

Erron purses his lips. Hearing a rustle of motion behind him, he whips out his pistol and fires backwards without even looking. The dying screech of a lethal jungle creature marks a successful shot. He slips it into its holster after reloading, plucking a bullet from his belt.

Ferra’s eyes widen. “Quick Shoot no need to see?”

“What, I could win a duel blindfolded.” Erron isn’t bragging; it’s a fact. He’s the only gunslinger in Outworld, that he knows of. “What’s the problem with ‘big bossie’? Spill the beans.”

Ferra struggles to find the right words, biting her lip, and pounds her fists on one of Torr’s armor pieces in utter frustration.

Silently, her and Torr’s thoughts are merged, flowing together in a nonstop stream of interaction that’s completely unseen to the outside world. The common tongue is foreign to them, and thus, Ferra is limited in what she can express to others, either friend or foe.

*Trust him? Emperor gives gold, he obeys. What to share? What to say? Have we choice? Help, we need help, or just to tell. Yes. Tell. Talk. Let him know our pain. Lost people, lost world, no better than the last kahn. Claims he be kind, offers pretend hope, takes us to great hall for honor, for gifts, for glory, but then we serve. Make-believe freedom.*

Ferra stutters awkwardly for a minute, then settles on a summary. “We no paid.”

“What a rip-off. Want me to help negotiate?” Erron hacks his way through the jungle path again, clearing away a large swath of sticky vines. A ripe fruit above him dangles tantalizingly from a tree branch, and he raises his gun and shoots its stem, dropping it into his palm.

The fruit is mere inches away from his mouth when Ferra swats it away from him in a panic, drawing a finger across her throat and miming a choking noise.

“Oh. Good save, kid.” It’s not hard to figure out what she’s implying. “Thanks.”

“Well-come.” She enunciates the word carefully, sitting sideways on Torr’s shoulders to look closer at her new friend. “You help me?”

“Yes, sure. I got Kotal to hand me a gold brick every month for my service, I’d be glad to help ya too. S’ no trouble.” The emperor’s pockets are deep without limits, and Erron may be a soulless mercenary, but he’s not evil. The idea of ripping off a little girl and her mute monster strikes him as kind of rotten.

He shrugs, kicking at a clump of weeds in his path. “Don’t know why he picked us for this mission, but it’ll be easy as pie. Grab a treasure box from some smugglers, bring it back safe n’ sound. You can carry it.”

Ferra’s eyes light up. “Treasure!”
“On second thought, maybe I’ll carry it, n’ you can guard--”

The sound of crunching footsteps and sinister shrieks is their only warning. A swarm of Tarkatans emerges from all sides, dropping from branches above and flanking them on both sides. They flail and slash with their arm blades, trying to intercept the trio, but all three have leapt into action. Erron is pumping them full of lead with twin pistols, aiming right through the center of their miserable skulls. Ferra’s taken a few down with her knives and the sheer force of her fury, while Torr scatters them all with a swing of his arm, crushing his opponents against a sturdy tree-trunk with a scream and a squelch.

They’re all down within minutes, but at a cost. Erron drops to his knees, breathing heavily and gathering his wits. “Well. Damn. They saw us comin’.”

Ferra winces, holding her side, and limps closer. “Trap?”

“Could be. Kotal’s not the type to send us into somethin’ as a trick. He wanted us dead, he’d do it outright.” Erron looks past the little girl, towards Torr, who is grunting in pain, holding his shoulder and leaning against a rock. “He alright?”

Torr tries to move it, but it’s stuck at a funny angle, and he winces, clawing at the ground with his good arm. He can’t fix this on his own.

_**Hurt. Out of place. Need to put back-- force, push into socket. Get help. Be strong.**_

Ferra tugs at Erron’s sleeve. “Need you, Quick-Shoot. You bigger than Ferra!”

“Dislocated shoulder, huh?” Erron collects himself, striding closer and kicking aside the mangled body of a Tarkatan. “Brace yourself. I can pop it back into place.”

A minute later, with Erron’s expertise, the problem is solved. Torr’s roar of pain echoes through the entire jungle, sending Erron flying backward as he shoves him away. He moves his arm hesitantly, feeling the bone fit properly within its socket.

“We say thanks.” Ferra springs up onto Torr’s back, but leaps back down in an instant, realizing he can’t carry her weight until he’s fully healed. And she’s limping, damaged by a still-bleeding gash on her thigh. “...We got trouble.”

Erron sizes up Ferra’s injury quickly, too. He’s used to managing emergencies with a cool head, but it annoys him that a horde of nameless Tarkatans did so much damage by surprise. He reaches into the pouch strapped to his leg, pulling out a wad of clean gauze and some grimy bandage wraps. “Hold still.”

Ferra raises her blades, pointing them at his face in a surge of panic. “You no touch!”

“Okay. That’s alright. Let me show ya how to do it.” He mimes placing the gauze onto his arm and wrapping the bandage around the limb, tying the ends in a tidy knot. “Like that. You can handle this.”

Ferra does as instructed, inspecting Erron with new respect once her bandage is secured. “What you name?”

“Erron Black. You can call me Erron.” As he recalls, Ferra doesn’t normally call _anybody_ by their name. He’s sort of flattered.

“Err-in.” She pronounces the word with great care, enunciating the syllables, then leaps to her feet.
Rhymes with Ferra!

“Yeah, guess it does. Hey, can you walk?”

Ferra tries, trotting ahead boldly, but falters and limps after a few paces. She looks back with pleading eyes. “Ferra try...”

“Hey. No. Kid-- Ferra. If you’re okay with it, I think I can carry you.” Erron grumbles under his breath. “I don’t want to fail this assignment. My paycheck depends on it.”

“Mm-kay. We say thanks!” Using the last of her strength, Ferra leaps onto a boulder, vaulting from there and landing squarely on Erron’s shoulders. He staggers under the weight, grimacing, but balances himself well enough. Crossing her arms on top of Erron’s hat and leaning forward, she surveys the jungle from the new perspective. “You no tall as Torr...”

“I’m guessin’ very few people are.” Erron leads the way once more, slowed down by the new burden, mentally calculating the path through the jungle. The smuggler storehouse should be close to here, if he’s measured the distance right, and he always does. “Long as we’re here, can I ask you some questions?”

“Ferra try answer.”

“Why does Torr wear the mask?”

“He scary. People no want to see. So he hide.” Ferra fires back with a question of her own. “Why you wear mask, Err-in?”

“Sand grenades. I don’t want that stuff in my nose and mouth.” He produces one of them from the back of his belt, tossing it in the palm of his hand. Unexpectedly, Ferra snatches it, plucking out the pin and hurling it somewhere in the forest, and he yelps in surprise.

...good job, kid.

“As it detonates, a shower of Tarkatan guts explodes into the air nearby.

“...good job, kid.”

“Ferra pay attention, too!” She feels very proud of herself. “Where treasure?”

“Unless I’m wrong, it’s over here.” Erron takes a detour, cutting a path into the jungle, and passes a grove of unmarked trees, carefully stepping over a tangle of roots. Buried deep within the forest is a small cabin, barely large enough to fit a man. Covered in vines, it could easily go unnoticed. “Yeah, this looks like the place Kotal described. Storehouse for smugglers. You could probably fit in there easier ‘n me.”

“Ferra can get treasure!”

Erron kneels down, shortening the distance to the ground. “Go to it, kid.”

She trots up the rickety steps, slipping through the door into a pitch-black room, and stumbles back out, faltering. “All dark!”

Erron pulls out a book of matches from his belt, lighting one and holding it safely between his fingertips. With great care, he offers it to the girl. “See if there’s a torch inside.”

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Ferra crawls back in, clumsily pawing at the wall, and drops the match into a metal thing stuck there. The room fills with a bright blaze of torchlight, and she grins, pushing her helmet back on
her head. “Did it!”

“Good job.” Erron’s voice is muffled. He looks over at Torr. He’s not very good for conversation. “Make it quick.”

She roots around among the boxes, ignoring the ones with old bottles and bullets and blades. “What find?”

“Antique jewels. Should say “Edenia” on it. Somebody grabbed it from the palace treasury.”

She rummages through the stacks a little while longer, leaving a disastrous mess. “How spell that?” “E-D-E-N-I-A.”

“We find!” Ferra gleefully notices a box with hastily scrawled text. She’s gotten better at telling the letters apart. The boy in purple has been trying very patiently to teach her. So far, she’s got A, B, C, D, E, and, of course, F. The rest of the alphabet still escapes her. But E-D-E-A is enough to find the box, and she seizes it in grimy hands, lifting it high. She doesn’t even notice as a small item slips out through an opening in the bottom. “Here!”

Erron is waiting at the door to take it from her, and hands her his water flask in return. “Put out the torch.”

Ferra follows directions, standing on her tiptoes to extinguish the blaze, then chugs the rest of the water for good measure. On the way out, she steps on a strange cold thing with hard edges, and winces with a yelp of pain, hopping on the other foot.

“You okay in there?”

“We fine!” Ferra kneels down to investigate her finding, turning over it in the palm of her hand and gazing at it through the crack of light in the doorway. It’s an old key, intricately constructed, delicately inlaid with tiny gems. Maybe its metal was precious once, but it’s now aged beyond recognition. Yet, as she rubs it with a piece of cloth from another box, a shine reappears, revealing bright gold.

She doesn’t want to give it back. It’s beautiful.

Feeling a slight pang of selfishness, she tucks it into a tiny pocket within the front of her leather shirt, close to her heart. *We keep.*

Putting on a bright mood again, Ferra darts down the stairs again, trying not to limp, and lands on Erron’s shoulders before he even knows it. “Let’s go! We give jewels, big bossie pays.”

Erron smiles faintly. “And he’ll pay you, too. I’ll see to it.”

---

The journey back is a long and boring trek through the jungle, going back along the path from which they first came. Torr is carrying the box of jewels on his shoulders, resting where Ferra normally would. Along the way, Ferra points out a tree with edible berries, standing up on Erron’s shoulders to grab a handful. “You want?”

“Sure. Grab me some.” He unstraps one of his pouches, handing it up to her to hold the berries. “You sure these aren’t poisonous?”
“We sure! If not, we die!”

“Yeah, fair.” Reluctantly, Erron unstraps his mask, tucking it away in his belt. “Thanks, kid.”

Ferra takes notice. “You show face now!” Sitting back down on his shoulders, she leans over to inspect him. “You old.”

He grumbles. “I’m not *that* old. I’m thirty-nine, or I was when I left.” A wave of unwanted memories hits him, and he shakes his head, eating one of the berries to distract himself. “How old are you?”

“We no know.” Ferra offers an incomplete explanation. “When we older, we turn, slowly. Then we make new. Change, not clone. We guard new one, carry and protect.”

Erron thinks it’s best if he doesn’t ask any more questions.

Eventually, the silence starts to annoy Ferra. She pokes at Erron’s hat again, catching his attention. “What you story? Why you here? Why big bossie want you?”

“One question at a time, kid. Easiest first, Kotal hired me because I’m the best, and I’m here because there’s nowhere else I wanna be. Or, to put it a little more bluntly, I don’t wanna be anywhere else.”

She cocks her head to the side, cramming a handful of berries into her mouth and speaking in mumbled tones. “Why?”

“What?”

“Why, any. All. Tell we. We curious.”

It takes a couple minute for Erron to finally relent.

He dusts off his hands before speaking, balancing carefully as he steps over uneven ground with Ferra aboard. “I was the best. Still am the best. But I’m from the 1800s.”

She blinks, puzzled. “If eighteen hundreds then, what now?”

“On Earth, it’s the 2000s.”

“Two thousands… two hundred different?”

“Yeah. Good job. I’m not 39. I’m almost two hundred years old.”

Ferra processes this. “How?”

“An Outworld sorcerer hired me to assassinate someone for him. Heard me boastin’ about being the best in the West, decided he’d let me handle his killin’. ‘Cept when I was done, he didn’t let me go back.” Erron grits his teeth at the memory. “I had a wife. A daughter, ‘bout your age. He blocked me from ever returnin’ to Earth, long as he lived, so I wouldn’t tell what he’d paid me to do. He’s dead now, but I can’t go back. I can’t. Don’t want to see how much everything’s changed.”

He’s quiet for a long while after this realization. So is Ferra.

Eventually, she awkwardly hugs him as best she can from atop his shoulders, leaning down to talk to him more closely. “We sorry.”
“Yeah. It’s in the past. Nothin’ to be done.” He pulls out a gun, twirling it in the palm of his hand.
“I do my job, I get paid, I keep on livin’. He slowed my aging, as a ‘gift,’ in exchange for not lettin’
me go home. Not a gift I ever asked for.”

“We know same feeling. False gift.” Ferra watches the tricks in fascination. “You teach Ferra
shoot?”

“What?”

“So Ferra stop meanies who want hurt Torr!” She’s quite convinced of the idea by now. “You and
we, we help each other?”

Erron’s poised to answer with a ‘What’ve you got to offer me?’ but a shred of better wisdom stops
him. That’s not really the point.

“Yeah.” He fumbles around in his jacket, searching for an item he’s carried around with him since
he left Earth. A tiny pistol, meant for his daughter when she got old enough to learn marksmanship.
No point in keeping it. “I got a gun your size. Got a different name engraved on it. Susanna. Did it
myself.”

“We no mind. We sorry she dead…” Ferra’s face falls in sorrow. “You lose family, we lose
family.”

“You had a family?”

“Others like us… once. No more. Long gone.”

“Well, I’m sorry too.” Erron lapses into silence, digging around in the pouch for the last of the
berries, and offers them to Ferra. “All yours, kid.”

She grins brightly, savoring them. “We there yet?”

“But yet. Little bit of a ways left to go. You’re a trooper.”

“You carry me. You strong. We glad for help.”

“Thank me later. Let’s get paid first.”

---

The emperor’s garden, an expansive patch behind the palace armory, is a pleasant place to spend
an afternoon. It’s full of strange beautiful birds fluttering here and there, feeding from floral vines
that climb the armory wall in intricate woven patterns. Stunning flowers spring from flourishing
plants, lighting up the landscape in a rainbow of color.

The emperor’s gardener is crouched down at the corner, tending a small patch of completely
ordinary weeds.

He’s quite focused on the task, holding a bowl of water in his hands and concentrating on it
intently. A damp mist swirls around him. If he can use his powers to modify this water into the
correct form, these might transform into Edenian wildflowers. It’s worth a try.

Subconsciously, he’s aware of footsteps behind him, but when a gravelly voice rings out and
breaks his concentration, Rain flinches, almost dropping the bowl. Obediently, he rises to his feet,
wiping the dirt and soil off his royal purple garments. Since being promoted from captive to
gardener, he’s taken to wearing a simpler long-sleeved outfit to hide the fading burns from the emperor’s torture. As the son of a water-god, he was able to quell the worst of the damage, but he could only do so much.

He sizes up the man standing before him, a hulking man whose skin resembles grey cracked stone. “Tremor.”

Tremor greets him with a friendly nod. “Rain.”

“What brings you here?” Secretly, Rain is glad for the companionship. Since the training began, Tremor’s been one of the few willing to extend a friendly hand to him. Kotal still holds deep resentment for Rain’s role in the doomed rebellion, and while he’s willing to offer a shred of grudging respect, it is clear there is no love lost. Tremor, on the other hand, holds no such concerns, and treats him fairly, as an equal.

Tremor takes a seat on a nearby bench, wincing as the wood cracks under his weight. He summons a mound of stony earth to sit on instead. “I thought I would come say hello. Nothing more, nothing less. I have no sinister motive. How are you doing?”

“Ever since the fight assignments?”

“Yes. I understand you, too, are to face a god.”

Rain scowls, setting the bowl of water on the now-damaged bench and folding his arms. “That fool Kotal thought Raiden would opt to fight you! As if. What use is a demigod against a full god? He knows he will win, and with great ease, at that.”

“Do you have so little faith in your own abilities, Rain?”

Rain rolls up his sleeves, demonstrating. “I wasn’t even strong enough to protect myself from torture at the stake. Do you really think it likely that I’ll be able to hold off the might of Raiden, renowned thunder-god?”

“But you are a demigod, correct?”

“Son of a god. A dead god, as far as I’ve ever been aware, despite the impossibility of the idea.” It’s all a massive mystery to Rain. He doesn’t remember as much of his Edenian heritage as he would wish to, but he recalls enough to still miss it badly. “Argus, guardian of water. Hence my abilities. He watched over my realm, while it was still intact, and supposedly was struck down by Shao Kahn during the invasion. I never saw his body. As a young prince, I was kept away from the fighting, which baffles me, because Kitana was allowed--” He trails off with an exasperated huff. “I’m bothering you with tales of history beyond human memory. Do not mind me.”

“I find it interesting. Go on.”

Rain cups the bowl of water in his hands again, focusing on the spell as he speaks. “What more is there to say? I’ve drifted from place to place as a fugitive in this foreign world, always longing for my own land and my people. My fellow Edenian, Tanya, betrayed me without a second thought, which hurt more deeply than nearly anything else. Admittedly, I had hoped to use Mileena’s rebellion to gain power for myself and rule, as I ought to… but, clearly, that was not to be my fate. I only freed myself from captivity by agreeing to be Kotal’s tournament champion, and now I’m trapped in a fight that ensures my defeat. I’ll lose yet again, as the world seems to think I deserve. I grew weary of all this several centuries ago.”

Tremor is quiet for a little while. “There is no shame in defeat. There’s great shame in cowardice,
or trickery, but to fight boldly and lose is better than not to have fought at all.”

Rain ponders this. “I… suppose.”

He studies the bowl, holding it up to the light. “Enough of all that. Before you ask, I’m attempting to transform Outworld water into Edenian water. Purer, sweeter, more nourishing. These plants should bloom, but they refuse. They seem to respect me as much as everything else.”

Tremor observes, leaning forward for a closer look. The weeds do look very ordinary, but he’s willing to take Rain’s word for it about their importance. “It could be an issue with the soil composition.”

“…I hadn’t thought of that.” He shrugs, pouring the bowl of water on the plants. It does nothing. “What should I do about that? Beg Kotal for some proper fertilizer?”

“I can possibly fix it. Describe Edenian soil to me.”

“Almost entirely loam, rich with nutrients. Very little silt or sand, no gravel…”

Tremor closes his fist, and lifts it upward, drawing out a pile of accumulated sandy and rocky debris from the patch of soil. He deposits it in a heap beyond the garden bed, sitting back and wiping his hands together. “There. Now, try your trick with the water again.”

Rain refills the bowl again, drawing the moisture from the air to create a pool of cool clear water. He’s becoming more proficient with his magic, and it doesn’t take him long to adjust the mineral composition, invisibly transforming the element. “Should I just pour it on?”

“Why not?”

He empties the bowl onto the little patch of plants, watching as the fresh dark soil absorbs the water.

Slowly, implausibly, tiny flower-buds grow before his eyes, opening and unfolding to reveal beautiful purple blossoms.

Tremor rests his hands on his knees. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

“…Thank you.” Rain kneels down to study the flowers, impressed and slightly awed. He hasn’t had a reason to say thanks to anyone in months. “They’re not much, but they have a bit of sentimental value.” He takes a seat atop the broken bench, facing Tremor. “I know you didn’t come here just to be nice to me. …or did you?”

“The others are gone. The choice was between you or Kano, which made it a very easy decision.”

“Oh. Indeed. What happened with all that? I don’t believe I ever heard the full story.”

“It isn’t all that complicated, just simple betrayal. I used to work for his mercenary organization, the Black Dragon. He paid me to set up a trap to aid in the theft of Shinnok’s amulet from the Special Forces vault. It was a snare designed to send Raiden to another realm, the Dream Realm, and take him out of the action for long enough to give Kano an edge.” Tremor shrugs, a noise that sounds like crumbling stone. “Kano did not provide me with a way to leave the realm. He intentionally abandoned me to delay Raiden, with no thought at all for my survival.”

Rain crosses his legs nervously, all too familiar with tales of planned betrayal. “What happened? Clearly, you’re here today, so…”
“I fought Raiden, and although he defeated me, he allowed me to exit the realm, setting up a portal that remained even after he had left. I used it to escape, left the Black Dragon, and have been forging my own path ever since.”

“I see why you hate Kano. Raiden has some honor, then. Hmm.”

“An all too rare gift, in this day and age. I am certain he respects you, as well.”

“I’m not so certain, but I suppose we’ll see.” Rain gets up from his seat and leans down to inspect the wildflowers more closely, feeling an excruciating pang of nostalgia that briefly shakes him to the core. “So we’ve both had unfortunate experiences with Shinnok’s amulet. And now, even more unfortunately, he’ll be competing in the tournament himself.”

“Yes.” Tremor rests his stony chin in his hands, gazing at a sculptural bush all the way across the garden. “I doubt my abilities will have much effect against him, but I will ensure it is a fair fight. The Dream Realm increased my power tremendously, so I at least have a chance.”

“Your odds are better than mine.” Rain’s gloomy mood seems inescapable, but he’s trying to shake it, with little luck. “Why did that idiot Kotal insist on having nine fights? Did he really think Raiden would forfeit?”

“I can’t tell what he thought. I hear he is selling tickets to wealthy Outworlders. Maybe he thought nine fights would bring more revenue than seven.”

“Ugh. Possibly.” Rain conjures a handful of water and flicks his wrist, sending it flying in gleaming droplets towards a nearby bush. “Maybe we should train against each other. It would keep us both from having to deal with the others.”

“That is a decent idea.” Tremor ponders this. It might be worthwhile. “Master Bo’ Rai Cho knows the weaknesses of all of our enemies. I assume we will follow his instructions.”

“If he has any ideas for how I can defeat Raiden, I’d love to hear this.”

“I already do, if he doesn’t.”

“What?”

“Use a weapon.” Tremor looks at him with a measured gaze. “Think of it this way. He is resistant to your storm powers - but you are resistant to his, as well. If you bring an ordinary weapon and attack him with it, what is he going to do? Use his abilities to stop you? You are unaffected.”

Rain furrows his brow. The idea isn’t half bad, and might save some of his dignity if he finds a way to fight back. “I hate to admit it, because that’s a stupidly simple plan, but, Tremor, you might actually be onto something. Well done. Now do I have to think of ways for you to defeat Shinnok?”

“If you tried, it would certainly help.”

“Well, the first thing coming to mind is that I know he’s an aerial fighter, so ground-based powers shouldn’t seem to affect him much.”

“I have thought about that at length already, Rain.”

Rain shrugs, holding out his arms. “So, throw rocks at him. Knock him out of the sky and fight him there.”
“Also a good idea… but neither of these ideas sound particularly honorable.”

“Who cares? Life hasn't ever been fair to either of us. Why not write our own rules to level the field of play?” Rain gets to his feet and paces back and forth agitatedly, leaving faint boot-prints in a soft patch of soil. “If you see Kano, don’t talk to him. Do not acknowledge him. He’ll want to get a reaction out of you. That seems to be the sort of person he is, from my observations. Little more than an overgrown schoolyard bully.”

Tremor cracks a smile. “You are not wrong. I’ll keep your advice in mind.”

“If you do, it’d be a first.” Rain offers a hand, recalling traditional polite Earthrealm gestures. “And thank you, again. The plants meant a lot to me. You can take a flower, if you’d like.”

Tremor grasps his hand cautiously, trying not to crush his fingers, and returns the handshake with a sincere smile. “No. Let them bloom.”
Back on Earth, the process continues, the group’s endless preparation and thoughtful work adding up day by day as they get ready for the doomed Krypt. Johnny’s house has become the new base of operations, replacing the SF training headquarters. Sonya can’t even complain. At least she knows where they all are.

Jacqui bursts into the room, her backpack stuffed full of purchases from the local bookshop and a half-eaten hot dog clutched in one hand. She kicks the door shut behind her, dropping everything on the table in the studio office, and whips out her laptop, emptying the backpack upside-down. A pile of riddle and brain-teaser books spills out onto the floor.

Shinnok is busy tinkering with something with a very tiny screwdriver and pliers, pulling tools from what seems to be a jewelry-making kit. He has an assortment of miniature mechanical pieces strewn across a small tray in his lap. Annoyed at the clatter, he glares up at Jacqui, wondering about her intrusion. “What brings you here?”

“Prepping for our next problem.” She brandishes one of the fresh new books, something about a hundred-and-one lateral thinking problems. “Do you have a knife?”

“A knife?”

“Yeah. Sharp pointy thing-- skip it. I’ll grab one from the kitchen.” She dashes off, returning with a large and intimidating gleaming blade. “What does Mr. Cage do with this, cut steaks or actually butcher the cows? Hah. It’ll work.” And without further commentary, Jacqui grabs the book, slices off its covers, and shaves off the spine, leaving a stack of perfect separated pages.

Shinnok’s eyebrows shoot up. “And you are now butchering helpless novels?”

“Need to scan ‘em.” Jacqui pops the stack into some sort of nearby device, sliding the papers into a tray and slamming it shut. It whirs to life, chugging through the stack page by page. “I’m making a database of riddles and logic problems so I don’t die.”

“Speaking of which, I fail to see the logical connection there.”

“I gotta climb that tree ladder to get our key, right? And if Raiden or Nightwolf fail a riddle, then my ass is toast and I’m going to die a very leafy death. So I’m gathering everything I can and making a document to load into my phone. I already got all the relevant info I could off the internet, so I’m adding in some extra stuff from the bookstore. The library won’t let me do this…” She repeats the slicing process on another book, sawing through the tough cover. “The computer can process the scan into searchable text. I punch in a few keywords, it spits out an answer if I’ve got it stored in here. And, seeing that I’ve got about five thousand riddles by now, my odds are pretty good.”

“Well, that is a clever method of forcing your way past a trap designed to test your intelligence.”

“Who says my plan isn’t smarter than playing by the rules?” Jacqui laughs, removing the first scanned stack and inserting the next one as the machine obediently kicks into action. “Says the guy who’s planning to skip the riddle entirely and throw someone across the Ominous Bottomless Pit Of Doom with his bare hands.”

“It’s not quite like that. I’m going to train them to use my magic blasts as platforms to jump across. I couldn’t throw anyone that far.”
“If you’re going to do it that way, have Sareena make the trip. She’s got better reflexes than us measly humans. Takeda should… I don’t know, figure out how to save both of you if the pit drags you in, or something.” Jacqui contemplates this. “Actually, yeah. He’s got his whips, right? Have him practice grabbing onto something solid, just in case.”

“I doubt he is strong enough to hold my weight if I fall in.”

“No harm in trying. Don’t be a pessimist.”

“I am the god of doom!”

“Only heard that one a million times.” Jacqui punches a series of keys on the computer, swiftly switching between windows to load the new scanned text into her database. “Just try changing it up this once, alright? And what are you making over there?”

Shinnok holds up the item, a modified watch with a glowing pink gem in place of the clock. “It is a disguise charm for Mileena, so she can pass among humans unnoticed.”

“Oh, yeah. ‘Cause that won’t backfire.”

“Why are you concerned? She has become a fine and responsible young lady.”

“How?”

“Actually, Raiden has a theory about that.” Shinnok squints at the glittery magic item, swiveling the screwdriver in a tiny socket to fix a small error. “Her consciousness is not just one being, but many. However, the new learning and maturity that she gains from each individual experience, applies to all forms of Mileena equally, resulting in much swifter character development.”

“So… she’s leveling up really fast?”

He tilts his head to the side. “I beg your pardon?”

“Human analogy.” Jacqui waves a hand to dismiss the thought, not wanting to explain. “Didn’t know you were good with crafty stuff.”

“I am a magical artificer. I created my own amulet, the most powerful in all the Real--”

“Most powerful in all the Realms, yeah, I heard that one before too. Didn’t know you made it yourself, though.”

“I did indeed. Many have tried, and failed, to replicate the enchantment it carries.”

Jacqui whistles under her breath, dropping the last book-cover into the pile. “I won’t lie, that’s pretty impressive. Think you could make me something sometime?”

“What would you wish to have?”

“I don’t know, how about a bracelet to ward off any creeps who try to hit on me?”

“Do your gauntlets do an insufficient job of that?”

“Not so good in a public setting, though I’d sure use ‘em if I could.” Jacqui takes a seat in front of her computer, typing in a few phrases to check the database’s search function. “Up and running! Nah, I’m kidding, don’t worry about the bracelet idea. I carry Mace.”
“Where do you fit it?”

“I--” She laughs. “Not a mace like the spiky thing. Pepper spray. You spray it at someone who’s attacking you, they back off.”

“A wise invention. But it seems excessive, when a punch would suffice.”

“‘Excessive’? I thought that was your middle name.” Jacqui shoots him a look. “It’s for women who can’t punch their way out of a situation. Unfortunately, that’s most of us. Society is like that.”

“Hrm. On principle, society would be well-served by ensuring all its citizens are ready for kombat.”

“Yeah, that ain’t how it works here on Earth.”

“As I have noticed.”

Jacqui wraps each stack of pages in a few rubber bands, piling them onto the nearest shelf. “Okay, I’m outta here. Got a lot to do before we go tomb-raiding.”

“Farewell, young Briggs.” Shinnok holds his invention up to the light, studying it even more closely, and nods in Jacqui’s direction as she departs. “I suppose I’ll take your advice and instruct Takeda to prepare for emergencies. Surely, something shall inevitably go wrong...”

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“You want me to what?” Takeda stares up at Shinnok, perplexed. “I don’t think my whips do that.”

Somewhere nearby, Sareena giggles.

Shinnok glares at her. “What?”

“Oh, that could be taken out of context-- Never mind.” She looks away quickly. “Go on. Don’t listen to me.”

Shinnok puts his hands on his hips. “Tell me all your abilities.”

“Uhh--” Takeda falters. “I have the whips built into my bodysuit, those can grab onto things or wrap around them, but not a cave wall…”

“Just tell me.”

“I can briefly phase and teleport, but not too many times in a row. I can summon plasma swords…” He looks increasingly helpless. “These aren’t going to save anybody from falling into a pit.”

“Hmm.” Shinnok steeples his fingers. “Could your whips wrap around a pole or column and stay secured?”

“Yeah, I could do that.”

“Very well.” Shinnok lifts a hand, summoning a large spiked stone pillar that rises from the floor, shattering the smooth surface of Johnny’s indoor gym. “Would that suffice?”

“...yeah.” Takeda’s eyes widen. Experimentally, he shoots a whip towards the structure, flicking his wrist to make it coil around the pillar. It latches tight, and he yanks on it to test it, releasing it in a moment. “That could work!”
“That’s one problem solved.”

“Great, we got a plan for a crisis.” Takeda’s a bit encouraged by this. Maybe they’re not so screwed after all. “But how do we get across in the first place?”

Sareena approaches. “I would like to know that, too…”

“Just leave it to me.” Shinnok dramatically sweeps towards the pillar, floating up to stand on the top of it, and builds a platform beneath his feet, wide enough for two. “Sareena, come here.”

She crouches, then leaps right to the top, scrambling onto the platform. “Right here.”

“Good.” He conjures a similar pillar and platform on the other side of the gym, further destroying Johnny’s laminated flooring. “Let us suppose this is the approximate distance of the gap. How far do you jump, normally?”

“What do you mean?”

“How far-- Takeda, can you help?” He calls down to the boy. “Sareena, go back down. Takeda, I want you to measure the distance of her average jumps.” He conjures a tape measure, handing it to Sareena. “Make haste.”

After a loud thump, Takeda calls out an answer. “Looks like about three yards.”

Sareena vaults back up to join Shinnok. “And that’s without even trying!”

“Good. I’m going to-- let me see…” He closes one eye, measuring the distance between the pillars. Every nine feet, he summons a bright ball of glowing pink magic, marking the path across the long empty room. “Assuming that the pit will, in fact, drag in anyone and anything who attempts to cross -- and really, we have no reason not to assume that -- the safest idea is to counteract its power by using my explosive magic to create jumping platforms.”

“Oooh. That’s an interesting idea.” Sareena clasps her hands behind her back, surveying the distance with a twinge of dread. “Are you certain about this?”

“Not at all, but we will try anyway. On the count of three -- jump to the first, and keep jumping, as if there were actual structures there.”

“Okay. Three, two, one…”

Sareena readies herself, then leaps off.

Shinnok catches her with the first surge of magic, propelling her up again, and she lands easily on the next one, ricocheting off it and gaining momentum. The force tosses her far enough to skip the one after that, landing on every other magic blast until she arrives safely on the other side.

“Good! Now come back the same way…”

Sareena does as asked, cheerfully bouncing across the distance in perfect timing with the magic. Out of breath, she lands next to him, bending over with her hands on her knees to rest briefly. “This is easy!”

“Perhaps to you, or perhaps you’re just talented. It helps that you have better reflexes than most.” Shinnok allows himself a smirk. A successful plan, once again. He floats down from the pillar, landing beside Takeda. “Now, you shall practice grabbing me with your whips. Wrapping one
around my waist seems like the safest option.”

Takeda stares at him, noticing the significant amount of bare skin at the sides of Shinnok’s outfit. “Are you sure you wanna do that?”

“Oh. Hmm. One moment.” He summons a layer of leather and metal armor, tightly fitting it around his chest and waist like a corset. “This should be better.”

“Yeah. Wow, that’s a look. Still, I don’t really want to hurt you… this time.” Takeda offers a halfhearted grin. “How are we gonna do this?”

“Come to the top of the pillar. We need to test your strength.”

Takeda teleports up into the air, but only makes it about halfway, dropping to the ground again with a dissatisfied sigh. “I need to get stronger.”

Sareena volunteers a helpful suggestion. “You could climb it.”

“Or I could do this!” Takeda shoots one of his whips at a spike at the top of the tower, shooting upwards rapidly and scrambling over the edge of the platform. “See, I can be cool, too.”

Shinnok chuckles, soaring up to join him. “There is no need to prove yourself at this point, young Takahashi.”

“You say that like I’m gonna have to do it later.”

“Time will tell whether we even live long enough to test your abilities…”

“Shinnok, I’m the only mortal here!”

“Technically, I could die in this state, as could Sareena. It would, however, be extremely unlikely.”

“Yeah, and I’m just a squishy human.” Takeda takes off his headband, wiping his brow. He’s starting to get a bad feeling about this. “So you want me to grab you with that thing, or what?”

“Certainly.” Shinnok soars away to float a few feet in the air away from the edge. “Try it. Then, I will see if you are capable of pulling my weight.”

“Highly doubt it…” Takeda mutters to himself, aiming his whip towards the god, and deftly winds it around his waist. “Okay. Gotcha, now go ahead-- AAGH!”

He goes flying off the platform in agonizing slow-motion, tethered to Shinnok as he falls like a sinking stone.

They both crash onto the floor in an undignified pile.

“Are you okay?!” Sareena tries to pry them apart, unwinding Takeda’s whip, and helps the boy to his feet unsteadily. “Did you break anything?”

“Nah. Never do.” Takeda brushes it off, trying to pull Shinnok up by his wrist, but finds himself completely unsuccessful. Shinnok grumbles and gets up on his own, and Takeda stares at him in disbelief. “How much do you weigh?!”

“Evidently, more than you. No matter. The rest of the plan was successful--”

Hearing the noise, Johnny bursts through the door, scrambling to the rescue.
He sees the pillars. His jaw drops.

“WHAT did you do to my GYM?!”

---

Johnny briefly considered exiling them all back to the SF training grounds. Then again, he figured would be far more trouble than it was worth. So, with permission granted to Shinnok, they’ve turned the whole damned thing into an obstacle course, filling the length of the indoor space. There’s more than enough room. When the gym was built, Johnny dedicated an entire floor of the house to it.

Now, Kung Jin is deftly leaping between an assortment of gravestone-style platforms embedded into the gym floor. He’s dressed in a simple athletic outfit and boots with sturdy soles, his trusty bow slung over his back. So far, he hasn’t missed a step.

Kung Lao isn’t far behind, though he’s out of practice, compared to his lively younger cousin. He’s carefully following the same path across the field of stones, navigating with precise balance. “You’re more sure-footed than me, Jin. Consider me impressed.”

“It’s all that thievery. It honed my reflexes.” Jin cracks a grin, doing a backflip off the last gravestone to land squarely on his feet outside the field of obstacles. “You’re not doing too badly yourself, for a guy who just crawled out of a grave.”

“To be more accurate, I was never in one, though some say I ought to have been.” Lao joins him at his side, following Jin as he crosses the length of the gym to reach the others. “Cousin, your companionship has done me good. I feel… stronger. Not in body, but in mind, and in spirit.”

“Well, of course you do.” Sareena greets him with a friendly wave, responding as though he’s said the most obvious thing in the world. “Positive emotion breaks Netherrealm curses. I’ve put a lot of time into studying this, and everything’s proved it true!”

Shinnok scoffs, looking up from his careful study of the Krypt information packet. “Yes, yes, and then they all lived happily ever after.”

Jin chuckles. “Hey, don’t be such a downer. She’s right, as far as I can tell.” He puts his hand on his hip, watching Shinnok’s annoyed reactions. It’s kind of entertaining. “Then again, you broke the revenant curse. So she could be right. Since when have you ever been positive?”

“Positive does not mean happy.” Sareena’s eager to clarify. “Positive means… the emotion is directed in a good way, even if it is rage, vengeance, or anger. A justified desire to strike down someone who has harmed a loved one.”

“Oh.” Jin takes a minute to think about this, turning over the thought in his mind. “Does that mean-”

“Enough questions!” Shinnok ushers him away with a light shove of magic. “Haven’t you any better ways to spend your time? Go and have some family bonding.”

“Okay, okay. I get it.” Jin shrugs amiably and leaves the god alone, heading over to greet another familiar face. “Cassie, what’s up? Been an exciting few days.”

“Sure has.” Cage Junior is sitting cross-legged on the floor, strapping on some strange-looking footgear. It looks like a pair of boots with a hinged spring mechanism and an extra platform built in on the bottom, suspending her a few inches off the ground when she stands up. “Check these
suckers out. Lets me run twice as fast, or that’s what Mom tells me. SF prototype.”

“No way.” Jin admires the boots with undisguised envy. “Lucky you. How’d you get those?”

“She really wants me to beat Kano. I’m pretty sure she’d hand me some nuclear codes if I said I was gonna use ‘em on him.”

Lao interjects. “That might not be wise.”

“Thanks, hat boy. Okay, you gotta admit, those codes would be safer in my hands than our moron of a commander-in-chief.”

Jin answers before his cousin can even ask. “I’ll catch you up on everything later. Old president was pretty good. America fucked up its election and swung way to the other side. New one’s pretty bad.”

Another voice interrupts them. “I’ve been reading up on what happened. It’s made me feel differently about being a part of the police force, I have to admit.”

Jin studies the new face more closely. He’s a tall man, muscular and covered with burn scars, though one of his eyes and some of his face is still intact, suggesting he was once handsome. Now, he seems unbothered by his injuries. Based on the extensive mask he normally wears, though, it’s not hard to assume it took him quite some time to grow comfortable with it. Jin offers him a friendly smile. “You’re Kabal, right?”

“Jack Kabal.” The man greets him with a firm handshake, returning the smile. “Kung Jin?”

“You got it. Nice to meet you.”

Kabal reaches for the mask, then thinks better of it, hesitating. “I don’t bother you this way, do I?”

“You? No. No way. I’d be a real dick if I was bothered.”

“Yeah, and I’d beat your ass for it.” Cassie springs to her feet, bouncing slightly on the hinged platforms attached to the boots. “These are cool. Hey, Kabal, you know Mom wants you to join SF, right? You and Stryker both. She’ll probably invite you soon.”

“It would be preferable to civilian life.” He’s still slightly startled at how readily the group has accepted him. But it’s a pleasant surprise, and he no longer finds himself filled with dread on the prospect of meeting new teammates face-to-face. As Jin leaves with Lao in tow, Kabal bids him farewell politely. “Good luck with your training!”

The cousins both reply with a cheery thanks.

“I wonder what it’s like for them both now, to be family again.” Kabal muses quietly, watching the pair depart. “Is Jin old enough to have met Lao before?”

“Don’t think so… but he heard a lot about him from his family, I know that. So I guess it’s not even a reunion, really. More like a new friendship.” Cassie balances herself and jumps into the air, testing the boots. Soaring much further than she expects, she lands clumsily, and Kabal catches her by the arm to steady her. “Hey, thanks, good save. Hate to ask, but what’s it like for you and Stryker? To go through... all that, together?”

“We’ve gone through everything together.” Kabal adjusts his spiked gauntlets, fastening them around his muscular forearms. “I was a member of the Black Dragon. Smuggling arms, drugs, you
name it. When my conscience finally caught up with me, I ended up joining the city police and helping take down the guys I’d once worked for. Let me tell you, Kano wasn’t having that.” He sighs, fastening his helmet and mask back around his face. “When Shao Kahn invaded, me and Kurtis got caught off guard by a couple fights.”

“Kurtis?”

“Stryker.” Kabal glances towards the ceiling, recalling the memories. “Long story short, I got roasted by a four-armed fire-breathing tiger… that’s why I look how I do. I thought I’d hallucinated it all until I woke up with Kano looming over me, saying he’d took me to Outworld to save me. You know the rest. Fought ‘em off, came home, lost my soul, got back my soul…”

“Fire-breathing tiger? It was one of the Shokans, I’d bet.”

“Those the four-armed guys?”

“Yeah. Didn’t know they came in housecat variety.” With a surge of rightful rage, Cassie pounds her gloved fist against her palm. “Kano. That motherfucker. I’ll rub his face in the dirt extra-hard for you.”

“That reminds me, Cassandra.” Unannounced, Raiden flickers into view, looking quite casual with his hair tied back in a ponytail and wearing a comfortable sweater. Kabal barely recognizes him. “Kotal Kahn is selling tickets, and has also given me authorization to do so. We may bring our friends, as well as any Earthrealm citizens with an interest in the tournament.”

She lifts her eyebrows in surprise. “They haven’t sold out yet?”

“Not as much as you would think. Many do not want to bother with the travel fees.”

“Great. So, we gotta get ‘em fake passports, right?” Cassie screws up her face in deep thought. “Okay. I got this. Sindel… how about Cindy? Cindy Eden. That’s a totally convincing fake name.”

Kabal chuckles. “No, it’s not.”

“Kitana can be Kitty.”

“I don’t think that’s gonna happen.”

Raiden hides a grin. “There is no need for it. Outworld does not require passports.”

“Darn, and all this time I thought they did.” Cassie rolls her eyes, shifting her weight from foot to foot and getting used to the feeling of the springs beneath her feet. “Hey. Kabal. Wanna fight? I need to test these.”

“Anytime. Let’s make sure you’re ready to teach Kano the real meaning of pain.”

Raiden watches them approvingly, meandering across the gym towards the wall. Elsewhere, on an open patch of the floor, Sindel and Kitana are artfully dodging each other’s blows. Jade is playing referee, sitting atop one of the pillars and eating a bag of popcorn stolen from Johnny’s kitchen.

He comes to rest near the wall, announcing himself to Liu Kang with a gentle cough. His former student is deep in thought, palms pressed together as fire dances between his fingertips. Noticing Raiden’s arrival, he draws himself into a respectful stance, addressing the god. “Welcome.”

Raiden greets him fondly, following his gaze as the two both study the field of kombatants. “They
are doing well, are they not?”

“It seems so.” Liu fidgets with his headband, brushing his hair back off his face. “I… have so many things to say to you, and so few ways to say them.”

“Sometimes, what goes unspoken is most powerfully understood.”

“Wise words.” The warrior manages a smile, time-worn face lighting up with a flicker of happiness. “Nonetheless, I shall try to state my thoughts as clearly as I can. When the corruption took me, as it did you, I succeeded at my conquest, which I should not have. My defeat, and my salvation, at the hands of the Netherrealm’s former master… it’s all a level of irony beyond imagination. I owe him my thanks, as well. But to you, Raiden, most of all. You welcomed me back into your company when you could have cast me out for good.”

Raiden places a gentle hand on his shoulder. “I never wished to lose you. You are as dear as family to me.”

“And you, to me. You are the closest thing to a father that I have ever had.” Liu Kang glances hesitantly at Raiden, then looks away, studying the ground. “I heard about Bo’ Rai Cho.”

“You did?” Raiden’s heart sinks. He had hoped that neither of the Shaolin would find out about their former master’s defection to Outworld. He’s still shaken from the news. “I can understand his actions.”

“I cannot.” Liu Kang’s hands grow warm with a flame of anger. “He shouldn’t turn against you as he did. You are truly repentant, Raiden. You acted beyond your own will when you attacked Outworld. All of us, who’ve been overcome by this terrible disease of the heart… we can understand one another, and forgive what we were forced to do. It is only those blessed enough to never suffer from this, who can find no mercy.”

“You are wiser than ever, my son.” Raiden meets Liu’s gaze, and finally gathers him into a tentative hug, letting go a few moments later. “I apologize for all I have done to harm you.”

“As do I. Let’s take a lesson from it, and never allow it to happen again.” Liu wipes his eyes, bowing slightly. “Don't praise me. I have learned from the wisest of all.”

“And who would that be?” Kitana saunters over, twirling a bladed fan between her fingertips. “Oh. Hello, Raiden. How are you today?”

“Quite well, my lady.” One corner of the god’s mouth twitches with a smile. “You are faring well against the queen in your duels, I see.”

“My mother’s skill has not faded… but neither has mine.” The princess strikes a pose, admiring the bright glint of the fluorescent light on the blade of her fan. “I must thank Mr. Cage for his hospitality. This is a far better training ground than any Outworld shack.”

“No need to thank me, it’s included in the hotel bill.” Johnny steps through a nearby door, holding both identical dogs by their leashes, and aims a sheepish grin at Raiden. “Hey, guys. Anybody want to help me take the Goldies for a walk?”

“These creatures intrigue me.” Kitana pockets the fan, stepping closer. “May I greet them?”

Liu Kang follows her, laughing quietly. “They’re just dogs, Kitana…”

Raiden watches them chat amiably with Johnny until the group finally vanishes down the corridor.
He can’t help but feel a swell of happiness within his melancholy heart.

Perhaps the world truly is changing for good.
Kotal surveys the vast arena with his hands on his hips, squinting in distaste. The repairs to Shao Kahn’s Koliseum are taking too long, and the planned renovation project has been scrapped entirely, leaving time only for a simple upgrade. He’s delegated Syzoth to manage the building task, but the contractors he hired are strangely unwilling to work with a talking man-sized reptile.

The Kahn shakes his head, and with a sigh of anger, summons a beam of sunlight that strikes the ground before him. “What are we to do about it?”

Syzoth stands before him, wringing his scaly hands as acid drips from his jaws. “It’s all the same to me. Do whatever you like. They must heed the will of the Emperor.”

Kotal strides over to the scattered group with pounding footsteps that leave scorch-marks in the sand. Standing tall before them, he slams the tip of his sword into the ground. “You will obey, and complete the Arena in time for the tournament!” At least, he’s hoping this strategy works. He hasn’t the time to go and find a new batch of workers. The rebellion heavily depleted Outworld’s military and labor forces. Damn that accursed Mileena.

Defiantly, the group’s leader gets to his feet, smacking a hammer against his open palm. “We don’t take orders from overgrown lizards.”

Before their eyes, Syzoth shapeshifts into a man clad in green armor, casting a very convincing illusion of an ordinary Outworlder. “Is this better?”

“...fine.” The contractor gestures towards the other men, calling them to action. “Get goin’, boys. The arena’s got to get done one way or another.”

Kotal does not deign to thank them.

Fleeing the encounter, Syzoth leaps onto a stone column near the edge of the arena, hunching over to survey the scene. He lets the illusion slip away, revealing his true Saurian self again. “It shall be completed in time. I am sure of it.”

Kotal joins him, head tilted to the side as he ponders the entire situation and the mess he’s found himself in. It’s gradually dawning on him that much of his troubles are of his own making. At least Mileena has not been glimpsed in some time. “I am glad that you approve of the construction plan.”

Syzoth peers a little closer at it. The half-built structure is a broad and wide platform spanning much of the arena’s length, suspended ten feet above the sand to give the audience a better show of the battle action. “It’s a clever concept. Will it alter the structure of the matches?”

“Yes. In addition to the normal timed aspect of the tournament, a contestant may win by pushing their opponent over the edge.” Kotal leans on his mighty sword, armor shifting as he shrugs his shoulders. “It should put on a better show for the wealthy Outworlders.”

“You put too much effort into impressing your guests. They will be happy to see the matches without adding further spectacle.”

“If I am to call a tournament, I must do my best to make it worth the while of the participants and audience.”
“That iss, I ssuppose, very ressponsibliss of you…” Syzoth leaps down from the column, landing on all fours in the sand, and gets up, brushing the grit off his armor. “Will it impede Tremor’ss abiliesss, to hold the fight off the ground?”

“No. I already verified that. He is powerful enough to summon stone and earth, and in all likelihood, he can use the sand as part of his powers, as well.”

“Clever.” Syzoth licks his scaly lips, if they can even be called lips at all. Straightening up a bit, he looks up at Kotal, mustering a bit more nerve. “Why are you ssso intent upon appeassing the ‘wealthy Outworlderss’?”

“I may have made unwise decisions in the past, but I am not entirely a fool. I recognize threats to my rule when I see them… and the fortified cities and their overlords could easily declare sovereignty, or worse, overthrow me.”

Syzoth nods, listening closely. “Remember, Ko’atal… I aided and orchestrated your rise to power. Do not ssquander it.”

Kotal’s eyes and markings of power flare brightly for a moment, glowing red with anger, but he calms himself with a strengthened will. “You revealed the truth about Mileena. For that, I am grateful, in eternity.”

“In truth, I am ssstil ssurprissed it wass not already known.” Syzoth paces across the arena, feet digging into the ground beneath. The sand gets between his toes and annoys him to no end. Lifting a foot, he stretches his claws, shaking out the grit. “Shao Kahn kept his ssecrets well.”

“If I may be honest, I still have many unanswered questions about my predecessor. His rise to power is not well-documented, and some facts about him are still unknown.”

“For thosse, I can provide no ansswerss.”

“How do you know? You have not yet heard my queries.”

“Then, sspeak.”

“Who, or what, was he? He was no ordinary Outworlder.”

“Thesse are questionss for another time.” Syzoth retreats towards the exit of the Koliseum, observing the constructors’ slow progress with a glance over his shoulder. “Emperor, do not make inquiryss that you will regret.”

“I understand.” In truth, Kotal doesn’t understand, but he is willing to preserve the tense peace with his Saurian underling. “Sometimes I feel as if I am constantly swept away by my circumstances, burdened with many responsibilities too great for one being.”

“I have often known the ssame feeling.” Syzoth holds the gate for the emperor, latching it shut behind him. “Sso I am to fight Ssareena. Have you any knowledge of her?”

“Only that she is a former servant of Quan Chi, and aided Earthrealm and Special Forces in their assault on the Netherrealm. I am unfamiliar with her abilities and powers.”

“That’ss a pity.” Syzoth abruptly extends his long tongue to snatch a large insect from midair, loudly chomping on its crunchy body. Kotal winces. Syzoth just keeps talking through the mouthful of bug legs. “I wass able to gain information from Kano… I intimidated him into cooperation. Even the mosst fearlesss man will ssstill cower when faced with the true power of a
Saurian.”

“I am no more fond of the man than you. He is only in my presence because he may grant us a victory against Earthrealm.”

“I’m glad to hear that you agree with my assessment. Pitiful man.” Syzoth briefly rests against one of the pillars beneath the Koliseum’s seating structure, a complex network of metal scaffolding holding it all up. Once he’s finished his snack, he resumes his place at the emperor’s side. “She has great powers of agility, so my best approach will be to try to slow her with my acid spit.”

“Use whatever strategies you feel are best…” And as the emperor and the reptile keep walking, the conversation trails off into indistinct mumbling, pushing open the stadium’s exit door and briefly letting in a blast of blinding sun.

Hidden deep within the shadows, the wraith cringes, waiting for blessed darkness to settle in once more.

Finally, he reveals himself from behind another metal pillar, conjuring a copy of himself from inky shadow to walk beside him.

Noob Saibot is not a happy individual, but his present situation has worsened his attitude considerably, leaving nothing but distaste and despair.

He stops short, addressing his murky shadow-clone. Why am I doing this? What loyalty do I owe to the new emperor?

Shao Kahn is dead and gone. His alternate self sensibly reminds him. This is your only chance at revenge. Think of the importance of this fight, of what it could mean to you.

Yes. Young Takeda is Scorpion’s pupil. I could harm him as Scorpion harmed me.

Let me question you instead. Would it bring you inner peace?

Nothing could do that.

What will you do about Sareena?

I would not know how to confront her, or what to do. She is a despised remnant of my past self, my weak self. When I was Sub-Zero I was a mere mortal, cryomancer or not. Now I have transcended. Sareena plays no further part in my plans.

What else do you hope to gain from this entire exercise?

Very little. With a victory, I could secure my place at the emperor’s side. Quan Chi is gone, as well. I can feel it. That dark energy is dispersed… by a force even darker.

What is that dark force?

Shinnok, former master of the Netherrealm.

A threat no longer. He holds no designs on the Outworld throne. Or does he?

Not to my knowledge. If the Kahn brought him into his possession, he would serve little purpose other than as a source of power. The malevolence in him is weakened, diminished.

And what of his successor, Liu Kang?
Pitifully cleansed. The other revenants as well. I find it pathetic.

Noob’s shadow form finally asks him the question he’s been trying to avoid. *Will Kuai attend this tournament?*

*Almost certainly. His pupil, Frost, is kombatting Erron Black. He himself is mentoring young Takeda. So he is now an enemy of mine, as well. Little brother Tundra... I do not wish to confront him.*


*Wait for what? Whatever opportunities await.*

Noob dismisses his shadow-self with a wave of his hand. The conversation was not as rewarding as he’d hoped. Sometimes, he finds he can gain insights by allowing his splintered soul to take an alternate voice. Not this time. Instead, he’s only uncovered answers that he already knew.

Squatting on the ground, he reaches back behind his head and unclasps his mask, letting himself breathe freely, unseen in complete darkness.

From years of corruption and neglect, his skin is a withered gray, rotting off along his lowered jaw. He opens his mouth and gulps in fresh air, breathing as far as his damaged lungs will allow, and then when he can stand it no longer, he shoves his mask back on.

In another time, he might have resembled Kuai Liang. His once-dear little brother, now a sworn enemy.

There is nothing but rivalry and hate buried within his damaged soul.

Noob flickers out of view, disintegrating into a wisp of shadow. He’s lingered here too long.

"...and then I said to him, ‘Why do they call you Reptile?’” And, I swear, Ermac, he looked at me as if I’d grown a third head. How was *I* supposed to know that that’s the word for scaly creatures? Father barely bothered to teach me to speak!"

Submerged in a large porcelain tub full of bright red blood, Skarlet leans her head back against the chilly edge, gazing up at the armory’s dismal moldy ceiling. The only light in the room comes from a strange cylindrical structure resembling a large warped open mouth, containing a column of greenish glow. Within it, Ermac is quietly meditating, floating in silence as the energy slowly restores their worn-down form.

"Are you paying attention?"

They respond with a whisper of disinterested voices. “We are listening.”

“Told him I’d call him by his real name. Syzoth. It’s not such a bad name. I sort of wish I had a better one.” Skarlet’s still wearing her red silken mask, tied tight to conceal her lower face. Her hair is loose, the ends dripping with blood. “Father just named me ‘Skarlet’, as if it were a proper actual name. How’d you like to be called ‘Green’ or something ridiculous like that?”
“We suppose ‘Emerald’ would not be such a bad name.” Ermac ponders this. “There is also Jade…”

“I heard that wasn’t her real name, but I hardly know what to believe.”

“Shao Kahn’s files of information on each ally and enemy were destroyed in his defeat… or so they say.”

“That’s such a pity. I’d love to have a look at those and see what he said about me.” Skarlet climbs out of the bath, wearing a layer of blood around herself like a bodysuit. She pads over towards Ermac’s soul chamber, leaving dark footprints on the damp stone floor. “What is that? Can I touch it?”

Ermac stirs at last, and swats her hand away from the green glowing substance. “We would prefer if you did not.”

“Oh, fine.” She pouts, brow furrowed. “But what is it?”

“We do not know. Shao Kahn created it for our rejuvenation. The new Kahn brought it here.”

“Thoughtful of him. He’s at least trying, poor thing.” Skarlet walks back across the room, dropping herself back into the blood bath. “I think he barely knows what to do with us. Strange little mutant creations of the past emperor on a power trip. We’re made from the leftover bits of his enemies. How incredibly petty is that?” She trails off, grumbling to herself.

“In Kotal Kahn’s defense, he has not had positive experiences with the other one…”

“The other?-- Oh! Mileena. Yes, her. Out of all of us, I suppose she’s succeeded the most… and failed the most, too. There’s not many people who can come back from an execution.” Skarlet briefly disappears, melting into the reddish pool, then re-forms again at the opposite end of the tub. Summoning a tentacle of blood, she retrieves a comb from a nearby shelf with it, working through her long tangled hair. “Ahh, that’s better. I need to learn how to alter my appearance. Shao Kahn made me look like his sexy little slave. Filthy swine. His own daughter!”

“We doubt he viewed you as a daughter.”

“I wish I could say that helps, but it doesn’t.”

Ermac can’t help but be intrigued by something Skarlet already mentioned. “You are unable to shift your shape?”

“Actually, I can change into a very different form, but you wouldn’t like it. Much as I loathe the skimpy bikini girl form, it’s arguably better.”

“What is it? We wonder.”

“You want to see? Come here and take off my mask.” She hops out of the bath, spraying blood everywhere, and lands deftly in the center of the room, halfway towards Ermac. “I dare you.”

Ermac unfolds themself from the meditative pose, floating through the air towards their companion. “Must we?”

“You asked!”

“Very well.” With tentative glowing fingertips, they reach out and untie the string holding
Skarlet’s veil across her face, letting it fall.

Beneath red lips, sharp teeth gleam in the light, twin scars stretching across her cheeks from her lip corners to her ears.

She grins widely, and begins to shift, transforming into an eerie creature with blood tendril limbs extending from her back and shoulders.

Ermac cowers, immediately dreading this awful figure. “Please go back…”

“Pfft. Hypocrite! You’re a mummy, you have no right to talk.” Skarlet shifts back instantly, standing before Ermac with her hands on her hips. Putting her mask back on, she tosses her head defiantly, wet hair spraying drops of blood through the air. “Actually, I’ve achieved one type of shapeshifting success. I can put myself into actual clothing, rather than the… outfit intended for me.” She demonstrates this, summoning a fashionable vintage outfit in red and black. “It’s better than it was. Curse that foul Emperor!”

“We recognize and respect your discontent.” Ermac bows their head understandingly. “We are still fighting Shao Kahn, as well.”

“What? How?!”

“Within us…” Ermac’s chorus of voices suddenly falls apart, scattering into arguing whispers. Several agonizing seconds later, they collect themselves, clenching their hands into fists, and resume speaking, unified into one mind again. “Within us, the Kahn stored a portion of his soul, lest he ever die.”

“What keeps him from escaping?”

“Our amulet.” Ermac floats over to the table, retrieving their cloak held shut with a clasp containing a large glowing green gem that resembles a cat’s eye. “So long as we wear it, we retain control. Yet the Kahn lives among us still.”

“What’s the--”

Skarlet is interrupted as a new, different voice takes over Ermac briefly, speaking in rushed tones. This one sounds strong and distinct, like an individual rather than a collective. “Listen closely. What we say together is true. Each of us is the soul of an enemy of Shao Kahn’s. Together, we suppress the remnants of his vile self. The former Edenian king Jerrod lives within us, as well as the chief diplomat, father of Tany--”

And it slips away, trailing into silence.

“Father of who?” Skarlet cocks her head to the side, utterly puzzled, but Ermac yields no answers. Wordlessly, they float back to the soul chamber, seeking restoration and renewal, if nothing else.

Inner peace is out of the question.

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Later, Skarlet is poking around in a palace storeroom, ripping open boxes with her bare hands and gleefully extracting the contents. She’s stumbled upon a stockpile of royal ladies’ clothing from years past. Many are pink, which she carelessly tosses aside. Some are blue, skimpy little garments much like her own, and she wrinkles her nose at the thought of Shao Kahn forcing his actual daughter to wear these sorts of clothes. “What a pig! Despicable wretch!”
“Spicable?” A sharp little voice interrupts from the open doorway. “What that?”

“Despicable? Oh, it means… bad, evil. Worth hating.”

“Ferra good at hating!” She leaps through the doorway with surprising strength, landing on a stack of precarious boxes, and digs in with her arm-knives to keep from falling over. “What you doing?”

“Finding some new clothes for myself.”

Ferra hops down from the boxes, sitting on the floor by Skarlet. “You no have clothes?”

“Just this.” Skarlet lifts an arm, demonstrating the simple sleeve of her shirt. "I need more. If I’m going to be named after a color, I may as well live up to it.”

Ferra readies her knives. “We find red?”

“Oh, yes. But don’t cut through the fabric!” She grabs Ferra’s little arm before she can jab her knives into a nearby box. “Open them with your hands.”

Ferra frowns deeply, but obeys, tearing open the box instead. She holds up something purple and fancy. “Plum!”

“What are plums?”

“Fruit. Good, plump, juicy. Hard stone inside.”

“Is that food?”

“Yes!”

“I don’t eat.”

“How you survive?”

Skarlet shrugs. “I exist. It’s what I do.” She reaches for a green garment, turning it over in her hands. “This one must have belonged to Jade…”

“Who Jade?”

“You wouldn’t know her. She was the princess’s bodyguard.” Skarlet sits back on her heels, recollecting the memories. “Kahn kept me chained in his arena like a pet, day and night! Jade convinced him to free me… and taught me to talk.”

“Kahn? Our Kahn? Big bossie!!”

“Not our Kahn. The one before. Shao Kahn.”

Ferra nods wisely. “Skeleton face!”

“Yes. Him.”

“You no talk before?”

“I couldn’t. I was… made without a mouth, to keep me shut up.”

Ferra’s eyes open wide as saucers, staring at Skarlet. “How you talk now?”
“Magic.” Skarlet figures this explanation is better. She isn’t sure how old Ferra truly is, but she
seems like a child at most, and she’d rather not traumatize the girl any more than she already is.
Allowing Skarlet to talk involved slicing open a mouth for her. Of all the stories to retell, that’s the
least fun. “Jade was a sweet girl. I wonder what became of her.”

“We no know. Sorry she gone.” Ferra pries through the boxes, pulling out a crown. “Oooh!
Shiny…”

Skarlet studies her. “How long has it been since you had a proper bath?”

“We no bathe.”

“It’s fun. You should try it. I have to bathe, to keep fresh.”

“…fresh?”

“I’m made of blood.” Skarlet shrugs her shoulders apologetically. “It was magic.”

Ferra accepts this unquestioningly.

It takes a few more boxes until she digs up something red, but when she finds it, she lets out an
enthusiastic whoop and nearly knocks over the whole stack. Pulling it out excitedly, she hands it to
Skarlet. “This fit?”

Skarlet looks at the garment. It’s some sort of fancy ornamented jacket, red with silver trim,
complete with coattails and a cinched waist. It probably wasn’t meant for a girl, but she’s
intrigued.

She puts it on, slipping her slender arms through it, and rolls up the sleeves to make it fit. “I’ll need
to pin these…” She tightens the cinched belt, leaving enough room to fit around her upper body,
and stands up, turning this way and that. “Thank you! This is marvelous. So very much better than
that wretched heap of strings.”

“You welcome!” Ferra is wearing the crown proudly, perched atop her grungy braids. “How
bathe?”

“Oh, you just find a bathtub, and put some bl-- water in it. And soap.” At least, that’s what Skarlet
remembers, from her scattered observations of Outworlder life. “You could ask Kotal where to find
one. It’s probably better if you don’t use mine.”

“Err-in maybe know…”

“The gunman?” Skarlet hesitates. “Does he bathe?!”

Ferra spreads her arms in an uncertain gesture. “Okay. We ask big bossie.”

“I’ll redo your braids for you once you’ve washed your hair.” Skarlet is trying her best to extend a
hand in friendship, though she’s pretty new at all this. “Let’s be honest, I need better company than
Ermac, and you’re lots of fun.”

The little girl is already digging around in another box, retrieving a few more sparkly headbands
and stacking them on top of each other. “Why you wear mask, Skarly?”

“Oh-- I’m scary without it.”

“Just like Torr! We com-pre-hend.” Ferra pronounces the word carefully, syllables rolling off her
tongue. She bounces on the balls of her feet, looking up at Skarlet. “You carry us?”

“I don’t think I’m strong enough. Sorry, Ferra.”

Ferra’s face falls. “But you do kombat?”

“My abilities aren’t strength. I can do a lot of things, but not that.” Skarlet bends down, rummaging through a box she’d found earlier. “What’s your favorite color?”

Ferra ponders this for a few seconds. “Orange! Like sun. And oranges!”

Skarlet can’t help but smile under the mask. The girl’s infectious enthusiasm is cheering her up. “Here, I think I saw something that was orange earlier. Wait just a little while…”

Moments later, she’s managed to find a bright scarf interwoven with sparkling thread in a brilliant sunlight shade. “Here. You can have it, if you want it.”

Ferra yells in delight, grabbing the silky cloth and winding it tightly around her tiny waist. She ties it in a clumsy knot, fumbling with it. “We no have pretty things. Thank you!”

“Do you know how to tie a bow-knot?”

“What’s a bow-knot?”

“Like this…” Skarlet picks up a different scarf, something in royal blue. She sits down on the ground, wraps it around her leg, and carefully demonstrates how to tie the knot with loops, forming a perfect bow. Then she pulls it off, setting it back in the box again. “That’ll let you take it on and off more easily.”

“Jade teach you?”

Skarlet’s surprised that Ferra remembered. “Yes.” She observes the girl’s progress with the knot, offering helpful suggestions here and there. A few minutes later, she’s got it, the orange strip of cloth fastened with a lopsided bow around her waist. Skarlet congratulates her dutifully. “Good job!”

“We say thanks! But now we go.” Ferra trots out the door at a surprisingly quick pace, making Skarlet dash to keep up. “You and Ferra only girls on team. Gets lonely.”

“I guess so. I really can’t stand Kano. He looks at me like a dog looks at a steak.”

Ferra whips out her knife-blades, crossing them together with a grinding sound. “Red Eye! He touch you, we slice him.”

“Yeah, just wish he’d keep his eyes off me.”

“We get rid of eyes! Ferra and Torr collect!”

“Maybe not that far just yet. Scare some sense into him.” Skarlet strides down the hallway, appreciating the swishing of the coattails behind her. “Rain isn’t so bad.”

“Water boy!” Ferra’s face lights up with a grin. “He teach Ferra letters.”

“Aw, that’s sweet of him. I didn’t know he was such a softie.”

“And Err-in -- Quick Shoot, he help us. Big bossie pay now.”
“What are you going to do with the money?”

Ferra shrugs. “We no know. But shiny!”

“That’s true. What do you think of the others?”

Ferra makes her fingers into claws, sticking out her tongue. “Scaly-Mouth no friend of ours!”

“I don’t think he’s anyone’s friend. Personally, I don’t mind Tremor. He’s all right, and he’s never been unkind to me.”

“Quake Fist big like mountain. Quiet, too.” An idea occurs to her suddenly. “He carry us?”

“If by ‘us’ you mean you, then yes, probably. I don’t think he’s going to be able to lift Torr.”

“No one lift Torr! Too mighty!”

“Yes, so I’ve heard.” Skarlet muses, rounding the bend of the corridor with quick footsteps. “What about Noob?”

Ferra shudders. “Shadow Man scare me.”

“Me, too. He just pops up without warning. I don’t like that!” Skarlet shakes her head, hair flying around her shoulders. “So you’re going to fight… Jacqui Briggs?”

“We meet Pretty Girl before! She have braids, like us. Metal arms. Blast, shoot, hit. Lots of power! But we still win next.”

“I like your confidence.” Skarlet pats her on the shoulder affectionately. “I’m fighting Cyrax. I don’t know anything about him, but I’m sure I’ll do fine.”

“You win, too!”

“We’ll see. I’m kind of out of practice. I spent quite a while floating in a tank of blood, doing nothing. The past twenty-five years or so, actually.”

Ferra draws herself up in shock and horror, staring at Skarlet. “You drown??”

“No. It was a storage chamber for me. I’m made of magic blood, remember? I’m doing all right now, but it wasn’t so good at the start.” She shoves open the door of the emperor’s office, coming face to face with Kotal. “Hi, Emperor. Just on principle, I want to remind you that you’re so much better than Shao Kahn.”

Kotal is confused, but flattered. “I appreciate your endorsement.”

“Do you have a--” Skarlet mimes a snipping motion with her fingers. “The slice gadget thing?”

“A scissors?”

“Yes! That.”

“I suppose…” He gestures to a table at the corner of the room, containing a pile of books, papers, and Outworld-style office supplies. “You might look there.”

“Also, do you know where there’s a bathtub?”
“Yes, three doors down this hall, to the left. Is yours insufficient? I ensured that the blood was fresh…”

Ferra pipes up. “You kill for blood?!”

“No, I had the city slaughterhouse donate their recent blood.” Kotal shakes his head, ruffling the feathers in his headdress. “I would not murder innocents just for that.”

“Good.” Ferra’s satisfied with that answer, and darts out of the room, bright scarf trailing behind her. “We go take bath. Bye, Skarly!”

Kotal observes this with some surprise. “The girl has been taught hygiene?”

“I’m trying. She wants to be friends with me. I’m not exactly sure why.” Skarlet brandishes a scissors with a look of triumph. “Kahn, can you do me a favor?”

“Though you are a valued kombatant, my ability to help you depends very strongly upon what you need.”

“Just hold my hair.” She gathers up the messy strands with one hand, holding it like a low ponytail to demonstrate. “Like that.”

Kotal hesitantly follows instructions, grasping the handful of hair in one blue fist. “If I may ask, what is this for?”

“This.” And with a quick snip, Skarlet shears off her long mane, trimming the ends in a short bob. Freed from the weight of the hair, she shakes her head, grinning beneath the mask. “That’s so much better! Thank you. I needed that. It’s liberating.”

Kotal studies her, still a bit bemused. “You are welcome. Allow me to say, you are beautiful with or without long hair.”

“Don’t get too hasty. I’m actually a blood monster.”

“Yes. There is no need for concern. I have not forgotten that fact.”

“Better not.” Skarlet plucks the handful of snipped hair from his hand, tossing it into a trash bin at the corner of the room. “While you’re at it, can you just quarantine Kano so I never have to see him again?”

“He is under constant supervision by Bo’ Rai Cho.”

“Oh, I bet they’re both loving that!” She giggles. “Please tell me you’re going to send him back to Earthrealm after he’s done fighting.”

“I have arranged an agreement with General Sonya Blade that he will return to Special Forces custody, regardless of whether he wins or loses.”

“Yes!” Skarlet clenches her fists, immediately overjoyed. “Thanks again! I’ll see you later.” And she’s off, whooshing through the door in a liquid red trail.

Kotal watches her go, silently pondering the mysteries of the universe. Somehow, he managed to gather the most impossibly strange group of kombatants imaginable.

Deep in his heart, he’s glad to hear that Skarlet holds him in high regard. He’s aware that Shao Kahn’s terrible behavior won the ex-emperor no favors with any other Outworlder, and it would be
difficult to stoop to that level, even intentionally. Nevertheless, Kotal dreads following in the footsteps of the past Kahn.

He’s made tremendous missteps, both in the past and recently, but now is not the time to atone for them. Right now, he is just intent on surviving the tournament with Outworld intact.
Buried Memories

Arriving at the Sky Temple is an ordeal and a half.

Ultimately, they solve it by having Raiden go fetch Fujin, establish a portal between the temple’s courtyard and Johnny’s living room, send everyone through -- all eighteen! -- and gather them in a group before putting up another portal, this one to the Krypt, that dark and ominous lair that nobody is particularly excited to visit.

Cassie takes one for the team and hops through first.

Her boots crunch in a pile of snow, faced with ominous gravestones and biting wind, and she recoils, yelps, and leaps back out, deftly caught by Jacqui’s swift reflexes. “That’s cold as hell!”

Raiden tilts his head, gazing at her, faintly mystified. “Hell is-- oh. A mortal expression.” He nods knowingly. “Did I not tell you that the Krypt is trapped in eternal winter?”

“No! You did not tell us that! Not even once!”

Now he has a look of faint panic. “Well, then….”

“Just leave it to me.” Cassie backs up a few steps, then takes a running leap through the other portal, shimmering faintly on the opposite side of the courtyard. Landing on in her father’s living room, she takes a deep breath, shaking snow off her shoulders. “Dad. You got any spare coats?”

“Yeah. A bunch of them.”

“Do you have eighteen of them?”

“Uhhh. I don’t think so…”

“Well, we’re gonna need--”

She’s interrupted by a dry sardonic voice behind her. “Miss Cage, might we not be better served by purchasing some coats?”

She doesn’t even need to turn to look. “Shinnok, you’re a god. Come on. Manifest some from thin air, or something.”

“Magically constructed clothing is at risk of being disintegrated by the Krypt’s protections.” He spreads his arms, demonstrating the armored outfit he’s chosen to wear. It’s nearly as fancy as his original, but has a handcrafted look to it. “Unlike Raiden, I took precautions.”

“Did you make that?”

“Yes. It took me two days. I made one for Raiden, as well, just in case.”

“That’s nice of you. Surprising.”

“Yes, well, I didn’t want to deal with the consequences of his outfit being destroyed by accidentally activating one of those wretched Krypt traps.”

“But no coats?”
“I didn’t know it was cold, either! In all truth, I had assumed it would be hot.”

“Great.” She makes a move for the door. “Come on. We’re going to the secondhand store.”

“Where is it?”

“What’s it matter to you?”

“I could teleport, and save us all a great deal of time.”

“You don’t know city addresses, do you?”

Their argument’s interrupted by Johnny, bringing an armful of warm jackets with “CAGE” emblazoned on the back. “Here’s three. All I could find.”

“Dad… Couldn’t find any without your name on it?”

“I have a normal one, but it’s at the dry cleaners. Take ‘em or leave ‘em.”

Shinnok laughs to himself, endlessly entertained by mortal arguing.

“Keep them, it’s okay. Shinnok, listen up—” Cassie rattles off the thrift shop address, then grabs hold of his arm expectantly. “Let’s go.”

With a discontented grumble, he obeys.

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“We are not getting them in matching colors for everyone!”

“Yes, we are!”

“Says who?”

“Say I, the god present at this occasion.” Shinnok draws himself up to stand as tall as he can. “This store has a plethora of items, and they’re all sorted by color. I see no reason not to find suitable coats for each individual.”

“Okay, well, that’s gonna depend on how much this is gonna cost us. If your fashion-conscious ass puts us over budget, I’m screwed—”

Cassie feels around for her wallet.

“Shit.”

“What is the matter?”

“I forgot my money.”

“Oh.” Shinnok furrows his brow, contemplating the ethical consequences of a possible option. Seconds later, he shrugs, and manifests a pile of perfect counterfeit money in the palm of his hand.

Cassie groans. “Shinnok. I can’t take you anywhere. Don’t do that!”

With a sigh, he makes it vanish again, dismissing the spell. “Then what shall we do?”

“Just drop me back at my apartment and come back in five minutes. I’ll probably have it by then.”
“That is sufficient. I should be able to find satisfactory garments in that time.”

“Why do you talk like you ate a thesaurus?”

“Metaphorically speaking, I did.” He sweeps over to her, looking quite smug. “Shall we go, then?”

“Just get it over with.”

In quick sequence, he drops her at her apartment, whooshes back to the store, and begins combing through each aisle of winter coats, looking for something suitable for each of his strangely fashionable teammates.

Dutifully, five minutes later, he goes to pick up Cassie, who’s got her own money in hand by now. She greets him with a brusque nod. “What’d ya find?”

“Enough.” He gestures to a pile of durable winter coats, carefully chosen according to size and color. “Purple for Sindel, blue for Kitana, green for Jade. Those are easy enough.”

“Okay, off to a good start.” She’s already found her own coat and thrown it on over her uniform. “What else?”

“Let me see…” He sifts through them thoughtfully. “Black with yellow trim for Takeda, camouflage for Jacqueline, dark green with brown accents for Kung Jin... I found two with black and red trim, which should suit the other Shaolin. Red and black for Sareena, yellow for Cyrax, and light blue for Frost.”

“Does Frost even need a coat?”

“Likely not, but she wouldn’t want to be left out.”

“Good point.” Cassie raises her eyebrows. “Seriously, though, since when do you care about this?”

Shinnok digs a tiny handful of technology pieces out of his pocket. “Bright colors will stand out against the dull landscape, enabling the teams to find each other. Additionally, I created trackers, so if emergency strikes, I will be able to come to their aid. Inserting them into the coats should save some time and trouble.”

“...You’re a sneaky bastard. I say that with a lot of respect.” Cassie puts her hands on her hips, looking between Shinnok and the growing pile of jackets. “What else you got over there?”

“Hmmmm. Light grey for Smoke, brown for Nightwolf, blue and gold for Raiden, maroon and gold for myself, dark blue for Stryker and dark green for Kabal. I think that is enough.”

“I’d sure hope so.” Cassie grabs the pile, heading towards the register, and winces as the cashier announces the total. Without questioning it, she slaps down several bills on the counter. “Keep the change.”

---

The whole ordeal takes less than half an hour, incredibly enough. Shinnok and Cassie pop back through the portal and land on the cold hard pavement of the courtyard, burdened with an armful of plastic bags.

Cassie starts ripping open the bags, tossing the coats to their intended recipients. “We’re back. You’re welcome.”
Raiden greets her with a relieved half-smile. He’s been fretting this entire time about his own failure to plan correctly. If he forgot this element of the Krypt, what else might he have overlooked? “Thank you, Cassandra. My apologies for the oversight.”

“It’s no big deal. We got it taken care of.” She bends down and straps her enhanced boots back on, standing a couple inches taller. “Everybody armored up?”

Raiden holds up a hand to intervene. “Do not bring your weapons. We must not disturb the Krypt.”

“Raiden, we’re going tomb-raiding. Just because we’re not supposed to destroy the place doesn’t mean we’re not going to be in danger. Let us have some weapons.”

“I suppose I can see your sense.” He backs down, listening to Cassie’s logic. “I should have more faith in all of you.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” She steps towards the portal, balancing her weight, then hurls herself through again, propelled by the springs in the boots. “C’mon! Follow me.”

This time, she hurtles much further, soaring over the first tombstone and smacking directly into the locked iron gate.

With a groan of pain, Cassie lands facedown in the snow, picking herself up clumsily after a few seconds. “Still not used to that.”

Jacqui rushes to her side, helping her up. “You okay?”

“Yeah…” She leans against the gate, shaking her head as her vision swims. “Gimme a minute. I’ll be back to normal in no time.”

The Krypt’s entryway fills quickly with brightly clothed yet solemn figures. One by one, each teammate passes through the portal in turn, breaking off into their designated groups.

Frost is last, counting off their names and verifying everyone’s where they ought to be. “Team Hellfire?”

“Right here!” Takeda offers a cheery grin, putting an arm around Sareena’s shoulders. He tries to do the same for Shinnok, but he’s too short, so just stands on his tiptoes and sets a hand on the uncooperative god’s arm instead. “Present and accounted for.”

“Team Guardians?”


“You’re thorough. I like it. Team Shaolin?”

Kung Jin pipes up. “I thought we were Team White Lotus.”

“Too clunky. Besides, that’s where you’re going, anyway. The White Lotus place. Wouldn’t make sense to have the same name. Whatever. Are you three all here?”

Liu Kang raises a hand in greeting, and Kung Lao tips his hat courteously.

“Okay, good.” She makes a quick check for Cyrax and Smoke, hovering at the edges of the group. “Lin Kuei’s all here. Edenians?”
Jade is sitting atop a gravestone, while Kitana leans against it. Sindel is floating in the air nearby, lost in thought.

“Great, got you. I’m missing someone. Who am I missing? Hellfire, Guardians, Shaolin, Lin Kuei, Edenians…” She racks her brain. “Did we really need eighteen people for this?”

“Yeah, we did. It’s a tomb-raiding party.” Cassie’s finally feeling better, standing boldly in front of the gate. “You forgot Team Humanity.”

Kabal and Stryker, standing together at the opposite end of the group, give Frost a quick nod to confirm their presence.

“Okay, that’s everyone. Wow. I feel responsible. I think that’s only ever happened about twice in my life.” Frost raises her hands, turning glistening white with a layer of snow. “Everybody out of the way. I’m going to take care of the gate.”

Cassie steps aside. “Be my guest.”

She grabs the chain between her frozen palms, and the metal shatters.

Cassie nods in approval. “Nice one.”

And, with a showy jump-kick just for good measure, Frost shoves the gate open with a loud clatter of metal, revealing a gloomy graveyard. Torches burn bright in the distance, eternally preserving the memory of the sordid and tragic spirits who still haunt the Krypt.

She charges forward, leaving only faint footprints in the deep snow. “Let’s go!”

---

At the border of the White Lotus cemetery, Kung Jin crouches in the knee-deep snow with his bow planted in the frozen soil, the flickering red glow of his bow ornament casting vivid shadows on the tombstones.

His cousin flanks him on the right, hat in hand, carefully studying the solemn graveyard. “I see no clues.”

Liu Kang tosses a ball of fire from one hand to another, getting to his feet and standing up straight. “May I try something?”

Jin turns to look back at him, concern written on his face. “What is it?”

Liu gestures to one of the gravestones, the nearest one. “What if I toss a fireball at it and see if I can activate the traps, and allow us to walk through safely?”

“No dice. If you think every square inch of this graveyard isn’t rigged, you’re crazy.”

Liu’s face falls, and he steps back. Raiden always did say he was too impulsive. It’s better to overcome his instincts than to pay the price for a poor decision. He’s learned that lesson over and over by now. “All right. I’ll leave it in your hands.”

“Wait. Speaking of hands--” Jin hesitates, looking over at his Shaolin companion and the fireball with which he’s warming his frozen palms. An idea is coming to him. It’s crazy, but it’s the best hope he’s got. “You can summon that fire dragon, can’t you?”

Liu shivers, and strengthens the fireball, casting golden light onto his face. “Yes, it’s my signature
move. What about it?"

Jin pulls his hood over his head, blocking out the chill of the bitter air as it ruffles his thick ponytail. “Can you use it to see? Like, if you conjured it and sent it into the graveyard, would you be able to look through its eyes?”

“I could try it.”

“Let’s find out.”

“But why?”

Kung Lao’s been thinking quietly to himself this whole time. “Jin, do you plan to read the gravestones?”

“Yes. I can’t make them out from here, my eyes aren’t that good. No one’s are. But if we can send Liu’s floaty fire-dragon out into the cemetery, we have a shot at checking each one without disturbing everything.”

“Brilliant.” He claps him on the shoulder, beaming. “I’m proud of you, little cousin.”

“Thanks. I’m proud of me, too.” Jin turns back to Liu, who’s summoned a wisp of a fire-dragon, breathing hot air between its tiny jaws. Before his eyes, it grows and strengthens, curling around his arm and perching on his hand like a falconer’s pet.

“You good to go?”

“Yes.” Liu releases it into the graveyard, watching as it snakes through the air and comes up towards the first memorial marker. “What should I look for?”

“Read the names and tell me what’s on ‘em.”

Liu studies the script engraved into the stone, making out the worn symbols and translating instantly from Chinese. “Fang Lu-Hao...”

Kung Jin gasps. “The founder of the Shaolin!”

“You’ve been studying.” Kung Lao regards him fondly. “Yes. The very first lesson we learned in our academy’s history. I still remember it.”

“As do I.” Liu Kang’s voice echoes through the chill of the silent corridor. “What do you make of it?”

“I think I have to jump onto that gravestone. I’d bet my life that there’s other ones with famous Shaolin names, and those are the safe ones!” Jin’s voice is growing stronger, increasingly excited about the possibility of solving this mysterious maze. “What was Raiden’s passcode phrase?”

Liu remembers it readily. “The strength of the past shall support the burden of the present!”

“That’s it! That’s gotta be!” Jin grabs Lao in an excited hug, clasping his shoulders. “Strength of the past, that’s the grave markers that won’t cave in, with the Shaolin names-- burden of the present, that’s whoever’s trying to cross it!”

“Then go to it, cousin.” Lao returns the hug. “May our ancestors be with you.”

“You know they’re gonna be.” Jin lifts his bow, uttering an incantation. Wisps of spirit essence
swirl around the ornate staff. “Who knows, maybe the Great Kung Lao’s in there somewhere.” And, wasting no time, he slings it over his shoulders. “I’m sure glad I practiced for this. Gymnastics lessons in the city aren’t gonna cut it.”

“How will you gain enough leverage to cross the distance?”

“Like this.” Jin scrambles up the side of the stone barrier that marks the edge of the narrow corridor, using a carved skull to gain a foothold. Then he climbs to the top of the lantern, careful not to let the flame touch his feet, and makes a mighty leap for the branch of an overhanging tree.

Pulling himself up, he inches along the branch, hooks his bow over the edge, grabs its other end, and drops down, suspended above the untouched snow a few feet away from the gravestone.

“Core strength, c’mon…” He mutters to himself, maneuvering to get some momentum, and swings backwards, then hurls himself towards the target, unhooking his bow from the tree along the way. A loose arrow tumbles out of his quiver, touching the snow just as he lands safely atop the monument’s weathered stone.

As the arrow hits the ground, a grave-sized pit opens up in the patch of bare earth behind him, snow tumbling into the cavernous spiky hole.

“Well, shit! But I made it!” Steadying himself, Jin turns back and calls out to his companions. Incredibly, a glowing path over the snow has formed between the edge of the cemetery and the first grave marker. Lao steps onto it tentatively, and Jin encourages him as his confidence grows. “I think this is it. Liu, c’mon! I need your dragon eyes again. Next one’s going to be harder.”

“Let’s think this through.” Lao tucks his hat under his arm, crouching down to try to take a closer look at the upcoming stones. They’re badly damaged by years of caustic snow and rain, but still legible at short range. “There’s no more than a few options for the next one, right? It has to be a distance a human could leap.”

Jin corrects him. “It has to be a distance a Shaolin could leap.”

All eyes turn to Liu Kang.

“Why me?”

“Dragon kick.” Jin raises his eyebrows. “Don’t be a scaredy-cat.”

“I am not that.”

“Scaredy-dragon?”

“Jin, you are even more insufferable than your cousin.” But Liu smiles anyway, conjuring his flame-creature again, and unleashes it towards the nearest gravestone. “No… it’s not that one. The inscription is nonsense.”

“To an untrained eye, it’d look like Chinese characters.”

“I suspect that is the point of the trap.” Liu checks the next stone, then another, and another, growing increasingly impatient. At last he pauses, clenching his fist in delighted victory. “I found it! This one says ‘Batuo,’ the first--”

“First abbot of the Shaolin monastery.” Jin is quick to answer him. “That’s it. Okay, you found it, you go get it.”
Liu sighs, and grimaces. “You might have too much faith in me.”

“Come on, you’re the tournament champion!”

“I was, once... Jin, you may be the next of them.”

“Unlikely. I signed up for a fight I’ll probably lose. Ask me later.” Jin gives him a gentle shove to the shoulder. “Go!”

Liu Kang backs up, standing on the glowing pathway, then takes a running leap and soars through the air, landing unsteadily on the next marker several rows away. Bits of stone crumble in a small shower beneath his feet, but it stays intact, supporting his weight, and the pathway continues onwards, snaking across the cemetery to reach the next grave.

Jin lets out a yell of victory. “You did it!”

“Shh, little cousin. There might be--”

The soft crunch of snow behind them interrupts Lao’s thoughts. A spectral wolf rises up with a roar, lunging to attack them with dripping sharp-toothed jaws, and he grabs his bladed hat and hurls it at the creature, operating on pure reflex alone.

It dissolves into shadow, falling apart right before it can take a bite from the astonished Jin.

“...good save.” Jin shivers, clutching his bow a little tighter. “Way, way too close for comfort.”

“Let’s just go.” Lao leads the way across the cemetery, following along behind Liu Kang as he boldly leaps to another grave, checking each name inscription with his fiery dragon-pet. “It looks like he’s going to reach the temple first. He always was too eager.”

“Says you. I hear you’ve got a reputation for that, too.”


“I dunno, I’ll ask them sometime.” He laughs softly. “No, I really do think we’re doing pretty well. I’m glad to have you back. I only ever knew you by what our family said about you. They had a statue of you made to give to Raiden, to remember you... I was so angry about your death when I found out how it happened, that I went to the Sky Temple and took it back.” Jin sighs softly. “That’s where he told me to go to the Shaolin Academy. I think I told you this.”

“In bits and pieces, yes, but I don’t mind listening again.”

“I still have the statue.” Jin shuffles awkwardly, advancing down the pathway. “It’s on my desk back at home. I was always so sad about what happened, and then finding out what you’d become... it was awful. I still just can’t believe you’re back.”

“Nor can I. Cousin, your support has helped more than you can imagine.”

“Well-- thanks. Oh hey, Liu made it. Look at that. Let’s go.” Jin hurriedly crosses the distance, not quite ready to handle deep sentimental conversations while the threat of ghostly wolves is on his mind. They’ve still got a lot to talk about later. “How do we get in?”

The trio climbs the steps together, all pondering the question. Above the doorway, the White Lotus emblem is embedded in the stone, glowing as bright as moonlight. The entry to the majestic stone
temple is secured shut by a mess of cobwebs, obscuring it completely.

Liu Kang shrugs, and raises his hand. “I don’t mean to sound like every problem can be solved by fire, but…”

Jin encourages him. “Give it a shot.”

Liu tosses a fireball underhand at the cobweb structure, disintegrating it in a sudden blaze.

Inside the building, tattered but intact banners woven with the Lotus emblem are suspended from the ceiling, decorating the small chapel. Beneath their feet, there’s a larger version of the symbol, inscribed into the floor with metal plates. A few dilapidated coffins and chests are scattered along the room’s edges, along with a pile of bones, which makes Jin shudder. “I wonder what happened here.”

A flash of motion and a bright glow catches Liu’s eye. “What was that?”

“What was what?”

“That.” And he points to a tiny treasure-chest, newly manifested from thin air in the corner of the room.

All three freeze, then scramble to grab it at once. Lao makes it there first, gently prying open the unlocked latch, and reaches inside…

In the palm of his hand, there rests a rusty iron key, stamped with the symbol of the White Lotus.

“That’s gotta be it! That’s the tomb key!” Jin stares, wide-eyed. “I thought it’d be fancier. Gold, or something.”

“Maybe the simplicity is the point.” Lao glances between them. “Should I safeguard it?”

“Well, yeah. Don’t toss it out the window.” Jin cracks a grin. “Yeah, you can hold onto it. Finders keepers. So what do we do now that we’re done for now?”

“When Raiden sent us our separate ways, he told us to reconvene at the Krypt’s entrance.” Liu reminds them, wearing a faint smile of pride. “I would suggest that we do so. You both did wonderfully.”

“You weren’t half bad yourself.” Jin reaches over and gives him a hug, too, beaming with delight. “I guess we’re all special elite Shaolin now. C’mon. Let’s get going before that graveyard path disappears and we’ve gotta play the world’s worst game of parkour twice.”

- - -

“Mother, are you all right?”

Sindel collects herself. She’s fallen to her knees in the Garden of Despair, scooping up handfuls of snow and studying them as the soft flakes melt into icy water between her hands.

She turns to follow the source of the voice, and gazes up at her daughter, who’s dressed in a blue puffy coat, worriedly clutching her fan-blades. “Kitana, there is no need to worry. I am unaccustomed to snow. It has been some time... It is so beautiful, and so cold.”

“I remember it from the Edenian mountaintops.” Kitana kneels beside the former queen, running a finger through the snow and pressing it to her lips. “This is unlike ours. It’s not as fine and soft,
more full of bits of ice. But I’m glad to see it. I spent too long in the heat.”

All three understand what she means.

Jade flops down on the ground, laying on her back, and wiggles around a bit. “Look, a snow angel.”

“Jade, don’t be silly.” Kitana smiles sadly. “No, go ahead. I lost my sense of fun, I know. You’ve told me already.”

“I don’t blame you for it. You went through a lot.” Jade gathers a handful of icy powder, forming it into a snowball. “What are we supposed to be doing?”

Sindel remembers the discussion of the mission, thinking of Raiden’s guidance. “He said, ‘A keen eye and ear may sometimes reveal a grave flaw.’”

Jade hops to her feet, dusting snow off her fluffy green coat. “Grave… So something’s wrong with the gravestones? Who here’s got the best vision?”

“It must be metaphorical. These puzzles are never straightforward.” Kitana pats the ground, scooping away snow to reveal the frozen soil beneath. “Once a garden, now a graveyard. I wonder why.”

Sindel shakes her head. “The war dead. If my suspicions are correct, these tombs are memorials, not true graves… Do you remember this, daughter?”

“I-- I think I tried not to.”

“When Shao Kahn conquered Edenia, he slaughtered and took the bodies of those most prominent among us. We made monuments for them, with their names. Shao Kahn stole those monuments, and destroyed them. Scratched out the names. Damnation of the memory.”

“Yes…”

“Yet these resemble the memorials that were stolen…” Sindel muses to herself. “It could not be. Could it?”

“Maybe. They’re all covered in snow.” Jade steps closer, leaving dainty footprints. “Should I look?”

“Yes, go ahead.” Sindel stands up shakily, briefly overcome by the weight of the past. “Shao Kahn ruined the name inscriptions, but there is more to these… He forbade the Edenian anthem to ever again be sung or heard, to deny our sovereignty. But I had the sculptor inscribe parts of its melody, in musical notation, along the edge of each gravestone.”

Kitana is inspecting one of the scattered monuments, running her fingers along the delicate pattern carved into the glistening stone. “That is remarkable. I applaud your foresight.”

“Shao Kahn stifled us to a great extent, but he could not suppress the Edenian spirit forever.” Sindel slowly paces around the edge of the graveyard, counting the stones, and feels a clutch of pain at her heart. “It is possible that the trick to recover the key lies with the musical inscription.”

Jade has a more pressing question. “What happens if we mess it up? All the other places have some sort of lethal trap.”
“We will discover the path across that chasm when we come to it.” Sindel floats up in the air, taking an aerial view of the graveyard. “This is built symmetrically…”

“I wonder if that has some significance.”

“Course it does.” Jade leans on her staff. “Let’s clean off the monuments and see what happens.”

“At once.” Kitana pulls out a cloth scarf, brushing away the layers of snow from each monument in turn. With a sweep of her long majestic hair, Sindel does the same, sending a flurry of flakes into the air. Jade does her part, prying off icicles with her bare hands, and within minutes the stones are restored, revealing gleaming marble caked in bits of ice.

“Ohh… look at that.” Jade’s eyes widen. It’s strange to be reminded so suddenly and so viscerally of her lost home. “How many are here, anyway?”

Kitana quickly takes stock. “Eight. Four on each side. That’s not too bad.”

“There were four verses in the anthem.” Sindel muses to herself. “I did not have the full melody inscribed on each stone… just one verse for each.”

“Was there any logic to which stone was given which verse?”

“No, not in particular.”

Jade sits down in the snow again, poking around at the base of one of the monuments. “Every verse had a different melody, right?”

“Indeed. Each was slightly different. It was beautiful… Kitana, can you read music?”

“Mother, you made me take lessons for centuries. I haven’t forgotten.”

Jade interjects. “I can read it, too! If we need it.”

“Very well. I will sing the melody. Follow along. I am sure the first verse will be at either the closest or farthest stone.”

The girls take their positions at the front and back of the graveyard, kneeling beside their chosen monuments.

Sindel closes her eyes, draws a deep breath, and begins.

A hauntingly beautiful chorus of voices issues forth, an intricate layered melody that no human could sing.

The notes rise and fall, sending chills down Kitana’s spine, and in an instant she’s brought back to Edenia, thousands of years of stifled memories flooding through her mind.

“Mother!” Kitana leaps to her feet the instant Sindel is finished, scrambling towards her through the deep snow. “That was incredible… Mother-- I know how to solve this. May the Elder Gods smite me if I am wrong.” She takes a shaky breath. “As a revenant, I lost my memories. Many of them. But-- I remember this place. I came here, once.”

Jade lays a hand on Kitana’s arm. “Was I with you?”

“I believe not.” She shivers. “Shao Kahn had thrown the gravestones in a warehouse. They were taken from there, and placed in a garden sanctuary. There was-- there was a hidden chest, locked
away with layers of magic, and it held the name of each of the honored dead, engraved onto a tablet of stone. Though their names were banned, they would not be gone forever...”

“How could it be accessed?”

Kitana closes her eyes, deep in thought.

“Here. Look.” She steps towards the first gravestone, trembling with nerves. “Jade, go to the other side… the symmetrical garden may truly be important.”

Jade does as asked.

“Look at the carving of the melody.”

She does so, peering closely. “This-- this doesn’t seem right…”

Kitana’s voice rises in strength, growing bolder. “I think… this was set up so that it required two people with knowledge of the Edenian anthem.” Her finger hovers over a tiny area of the carving. “Find the wrong note in the verse.”

“I can’t find it. Queen Sindel, can you sing it again?”

She does as asked, voice lifting and carrying through the chill of the air.

“Okay-- I think I got it. Is it here?” And Jade hums the stanza under her breath, pointing to a particular spot on the engraved notation, nearly invisible to the naked eye. “I’m pretty sure that one’s written wrong.”

Kitana checks it quickly. “Yes. Now press it at the same exact time as me.”

“What happens if I don’t?”

“The creator of this trap included a failsafe. Not a self-destruct mechanism, but rather the opposite, to destroy anyone who tried to do this alone.”

Jade nods, understanding the consequences. “Three, two, one…”

They press the individually carved notes at the same moment, activating levers hidden inside the tombstones. With a rumbling noise, a latch unlocks, hidden from view.

Sindel’s jaw drops.

“Daughter, how do you know to do this?”

“It is buried deep within my mind. I cannot say how or why.”

“Next verse!” Jade leaps to her feet, scrambling to the next tombstone. “Let’s get it done.”

The girls follow along closely as Sindel shares the next verse, absorbing the lilting melody.

They look at each other, glance at one another’s tombstones, and nod together, pressing the next set of matched buttons hidden among the carved ornamental notes.

Another invisible latch clicks open.

The third and fourth go just as smoothly, the Edenians working in unison and listening in
satisfaction as the trap mechanisms activate in turn.

Sindel finally sings the last note, and bows her head, hands tucked into her pockets. “What should we do next?”

“I-- I’m not sure…” Kitana coughs, gathering her breath. “Sing the melody all the way through again, but this time, we’ll do it with you. I think it takes at least two people…”

The queen lifts her voice and begins the anthem once more, the soaring layered notes rising through the clear air of the forgotten garden. Slowly but surely, the princess and her guardian join in, following along with strong pure voices.

Gradually, laying atop the snow, a small treasure-box slowly forms from fragile wisps of magic.

Kitana grabs her mother’s hand and squeezes it, then Jade’s, too. They complete the final verse boldly, singing in perfect harmony.

As the last note fades, there is dead silence.

Hardly believing her eyes, Kitana slowly approaches. She bends down and lifts the box off the snow, holding it up to the moonlight to study it. Her voice is choked with emotion. “This is it. This is it. We did it…”

“Daughter, I am so proud of you.”

Kitana drops to her knees, tears running down her face, and cradles the box close to her chest, unable to speak.

Jade sits close beside her, putting an arm around her sorrowful friend’s shoulders. “What’s the matter?”

Kitana sniffs softly. “I’m all right. Don’t worry.”

“Can I see the box?”

She unlatches it carefully, extracting its contents. Within, there is an old heavy iron key, which she turns over in her palm, wondering quietly. “This was not originally here… It must have been added by whoever secured the tomb. I cannot imagine how.”

“Powerful magic, I would suspect.” Sindel reaches for the key. “I will keep it safe with me.”

Kitana nods, pulling out the other small item in the box. It is a thin carved tablet of fine marble, with eight names arranged in four dual rows.

As she reads it, she begins to weep once more.

Jade gently takes it from her. “These are the names on the graves… aren’t they?”

Kitana nods silently.

Jade stands up, slowly making her way from monument to monument.

“Delia, sorceress of flame, the first love of Edenia’s protector Argus....”

She pulls out a powerful knife from her pocket with an emerald hilt, and kneels before the stone, carefully and laboriously etching the name into a clean patch on the marble.
Next, she crosses the pathway, following the guide. “Titus, champion of justice, chief diplomat among Edenia’s court…”

Jade writes each name into the stones in turn, one by one, before coming to the very last marker, holding the first verse of the Edenian anthem. Despite her great courage, she hesitates here, respecting the power of the past.

Once the inscription is carved, she drops to one knee respectfully, touching her forehead against the monument’s marble.

“King Jerrod.”

Wordlessly, Sindel moves towards her, and kneels, gently laying her hands on the damaged gravestone that once held her beloved husband’s name.

Kitana follows, voice choked with tears. “Father.”

When the weight of the silence is too much to bear, the princess rises again, still clutching the empty treasure-box, and sits down in the trampled snow some distance away.

Jade joins her, reliable and dutiful as ever. She’s still reeling from all these revelations, too, but she’s just trying to keep a clear head. “Kitana, can I help?”

“You’ve helped more than you could imagine. I can’t believe this was ever gone from my memory. I mourn all that I’ve lost, and beyond that, everything that I did not know that I lost…”

Tentatively, after Kitana falls silent, Jade voices the question she’s waited all this time to ask.

“Who put this together and saved the memorials?”

Kitana gazes at her, eyes sparkling with dewy tears.

“It was me.”
Looking for Trouble

No one else is having a good time.

Unsuccessfully trying to hide behind each other in the shadowy darkness, a trio in blue, yellow, and grey tentatively advance towards a circular doorway guarded by obsidian pillars.

“Anybody need a pep talk?” Frost summons an icicle and hesitantly pokes it through the doorway, waving it around to check for any hidden mechanisms. Nothing happens, but she still wouldn’t trust it with her life.

Smoke, the oldest of the three, shakes his head silently. Unmasked, he’s a distinguished-looking man with a weary face, silver hair flowing free down his shoulders. He doesn’t say much, but the other two Lin Kuei more than make up for it. It’s almost jarring for him to work again with Cyrax, now separated by two decades. When the gods revived his former colleague, he returned to the age at which he died, still a young man barely past thirty. Luckily, despite his own experiences as a revenant and the harsh passing of time, Smoke’s own powers have not waned.

“Save your breath. This is an underground tomb. Our air supply may be limited.”

“Thanks for the cheerful reminder.” Frost looks over at him, only slightly annoyed by his pessimism. He’s not actually wrong. “Should we draw straws, or does anyone want to step up to go through the creepy hole in the wall?”

“I suggest we all pass through at once.” Cyrax studies the doorway, hands clasped behind his back. “If there is a hidden mechanism, we’d be best served by making sure we reach the other side together, to avoid losing anyone.”

“Okay. How are we gonna do that? Just count together and lunge through?”

“I can teleport. So can Smoke. Right?”

“Correct.” He transforms into a mist of wispy fog, then back again. “Frost?”

“Yeah, I’m the lucky one who can’t do that. Ready?”

They both respond in affirmation.

“Follow me!” And with the other Lin Kuei by her side, Frost leaps through, careful not to set foot in the doorway.

Too little, too late. As the three land on the slippery pathway leading to the Araknian tunnels, a hidden lever activates, responding to the motion and weight. A wedge of solid stone falls from a slot in the ceiling, barring the door with a heavy thud.

Frost surveys it gloomily. “Knew it.”

“But we’re all here. We’ll deal with the exit once we’ve finished the mission.” Cyrax helps her to her feet, studying the area around him. “Let’s take stock. The torches in here are still lit, so there must be an oxygen supply.”

“I am glad to be wrong, then.” Smoke bends down, touching the floor that’s covered in a thin layer of fog. “This is strange.”
“No kidding, Tom.”

“Tomas.”

Frost ignores him. “I gotta say, I’m really loving all the bloodstains in here. They look fresh.”

Cyrax is hopeful. “Maybe it’s red paint.”

“You know it isn’t.”

“Yes. I know.” Cyrax cautiously approaches one of the walls, not particularly encouraged by their progress so far. “It could be something other than human blood.”

“Right. Yeah. Sure. Okay, let’s assume this is a maze. No reason to think otherwise. I’m going to leave an ice path wherever I go, and we are not splitting up.” Frost walks a few steps, creating a crystalized trail on the ground. “Follow me.”

“Where are we going?”

“Good question.” She turns to face Smoke, who looks lost in thought. “Depends what we’re looking for. Raiden said… something about a path, and steps.”

Cyrax has it written down. “Tread carefully, for your days are numbered.” He folds up the paper again, slipping it back into his pocket. “Raiden said there were four scales that have numbers on them, locking off the secret chamber.”

“So there must be corresponding pieces, bearing those same numbers.” Testing something, Smoke bends down to touch the floor. With a quick surge of his powers, he banishes the layer of fog from the floor, revealing damp shiny bricks beneath their feet. “‘Tread carefully.’ That can’t be a coincidence. The pieces have to be in the floor.”

“You’re pretty damn certain about that.”

“I see no other alternate solution. Do you?”

“Nope. So, okay, let’s hunt down this corridor looking for bricks with numbers, until a vampire pops out of a hidden passage and kills us.”

“There are no living beings left in here, only bodies buried in the walls.”

“Correction, let’s look until a zombie pops out and kills us.”

Cyrax shrugs, and kneels down to study the floor. “I have nothing better to do.”

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After a few hours, they’ve managed to unearth several bricks from the floor, carefully pried out from the crumbling mortar with Frost’s ice knives.

Inconveniently, they bear the numbers 1, 2, 3, and 5.

“Could Raiden have been wrong?” Cyrax looks desperately between the bricks. “Were there five?”

“That must be the case. Should we keep looking?”

“No.” Frost interrupts Smoke, raising her hand. “I think this is just how it is. You’re supposed to
keep looking, and then you never solve the puzzle.”

“What?”

“Okay, hear me out. Jacqui told me this story.” Frost clears her throat. “So she went to this rural high school, right? Out in the country. For their senior prank, they got three pigs from one of the kids’ farms, and they labeled them 1, 3, and 4. The administration spent the whole weekend looking for pig #2.”

The other two look at her, faintly puzzled.

“It’s to trick people into wasting their time looking for something that’s not there. In that case, the fourth pig. Here, it’s another brick-- You know what, just come on.” Frost throws up her hands, retracing her icy steps down the path. “If there’s a fifth one, you can sue me, but I’d rather go find out than get lost in one of these damn tunnels.”

“I see no fault in your logic.” Smoke joins her at her side, carrying the bricks tucked under his arm. “I just have no faith that the existing known facts about this maze are actually accurate at all.”

“A little skepticism’s not a bad idea, but it’s all we have to work with.” Right before a shadowy spider drops from the ceiling, Frost summons an ice dagger and hurls it at the beast, reacting to the flash of motion. It dissolves in a wisp of shadow. “Safeguard tricks, huh. At least the spider’s not real.”

“There could be real spiders in here.”

“Thanks for that, Cyrax.”

“Where are we headed now?”

“How about that huge hall with all the bones scattered on the floor?”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Then come on.” Frost follows her mental map of the place, leading the group into the gloomy chamber within a few minutes of careful navigation. “Right or left?”

Cyrax glances from one side to the other. “Go to the right. It’s got a longer passage. We can come back and check the left room later.”

“Well, all right.” Frost smirks at her pun, but her face falls again as she notices a dead-end coming up with identical passageways on either side. “What now?”

“There’s a lit torch on the left. That might be worth a try.”

“Let’s go.” Leaving snowy footprints, she trots off boldly, winding through the dim passageway with an ice-dagger in hand. Yet it is nothing more than a closed circuit, leading them back to the blocked entryway. “Dammit.”

“May I try?” Smoke speaks again in a quiet voice.

“Yeah. Go ahead.”

“Thank you.” He moves through the passage silently, floating a few steps off the ground, and Frost slides along on a trail of ice, following close behind. Cyrax teleports along in intermittent leaps, doing his best to stay off the floor as well. Better safe than sorry.
They reach the large room again in no time, careful not to crunch any of the scattered bones underfoot. Smoke spots the problem immediately. “We were turned ninety degrees in the wrong direction. The small room is forward, the rectangular passage is backwards. Not left and right.”

“Dammit. How’d I fuck that one up?”

“Do not worry. I should be able to find the path.” Smoke tries the remaining doorway, leading to a new section of the bloody labyrinth. “This looks promising.”

Frost shudders, glancing around her, and tightens the belt on her coat. “This is way too many cobwebs. I don’t like this.”

“At least there’s fresh air from up above. We can’t be too far underground.” Cyrax points towards the stony ceiling, noting cracks in it where beams of cold light pour down onto the murky floor. “May I use my chi to illuminate the room?”

“Literally, or is this like a philosophical thing?”

“Literally.” Cyrax summons a blaze of yellow light around himself, creating a pleasantly radiant aura that dispels some of the buried tomb’s darkness. “That should help.”

“Good. Come this way.” Smoke gestures for the pair to follow, bending down as the ceiling grows lower and the walls close in. Blood-soaked stalactites hang from the chamber’s raw stone, poking uncomfortably at Frost’s shoulders, and she shudders, crouching to avoid them. As the passage narrows too far to safely pass, Smoke disintegrates into wisps again, re-forming at the other side. “This is it. There are four platforms here.”

“I’ll come next. One moment.” Cyrax blinks and vanishes, appearing beyond the tiny gap in the cavern wall. “Frost, can you get through?”

“I should be able to. Gimme a minute.” Grumbling in frustration, she wriggles through the opening, landing in an undignified heap. “Ugh. Not fun. Where are we?”

Cyrax takes stock of the surroundings. “This is it. Four weighing platforms in a row. Torches on the other wall.” He studies the inscriptions with increasing horror. “I have no idea what those symbols are.”

Frost clenches her fists in frustration. “Shit. Didn’t Raiden say this was… Vaeternus, right? Vampire world.”

“Yes.”

“I bet it’s the numbers in their language.”

“Which I don’t speak.”

“Course not. Smoke, any chances you took a foreign language elective in high school…?”

“I know several languages, but not whatever that is.” He’s off at the other end of the passage, studying the mighty door. “This has some kind of locking mechanism on it. And some inscribed text.”

“Okay. Raiden said there were two parts to the trap. Is the writing readable?”

“It’s in English. It looks like someone else added it later.”
“Damn, really? What’s it say?”

“Mind the weight of responsibility.”

“...which of these things are heaviest?”

Smoke offers a brick. “This one.”

“Hold onto it for now. Which is lightest?”

He hands another one to her. “What are you doing?”

“Brute-forcing the puzzle.” Frost takes the lightest brick, dropping it onto the first platform.

Above them, a grinding noise signals the opening of a latch.

“Fuck yeah! Second brick, please?” She catches it as Smoke tosses it over to her. “Thank you, let’s see...”

She sets it down.

Nothing happens.

“The other second brick?”

Smoke shrugs embarrassedly, and floats over to her, handing her a different one. “Try that.”

The second latch clicks, and she grins.

“Better.” She drops the remaining two bricks into place, guided by the worried Smoke who hovers at her side. “That should do it.”

With a loud clamor, the lock on the mighty door snaps open, falling away in a shower of sparks.

“Damn! That’s more like it. Let’s go, and don’t touch anything.” Frost points towards the door, encouraged by their new success. “Cyrax, can you do it?”

Cyrax tugs at the handle, testing it, then, with a mighty pull, yanks it open.

Beyond the door, a cavern looms ominously, lit by dual torches at its entryway. Its floor and walls shimmer with some sort of dark liquid in the faint light.

“Who wants to go into the creepy cave and find the next death trap?”

“I’ll do it.” Cyrax steps through without hesitation, still glowing with his own magic.

A massive column of cobwebs towers before them, concealing something with a deep red glow hidden within its wrapped layers.

Frost feels true dread for the first time. Her skin crawls, and she surrounds herself in a case of ice armor, shedding snowflakes with every step.

“...anyone want to find out what that is?”

Cyrax studies it. “It resembles a sarcophagus in its dimensions and shape.”

“That’s comforting.”
“I suggest we open it.”

“WHAT?! ”

“What else are we going to do?”

Smoke nods, coming to the same conclusion. He’s not looking forward to it, but it is what must be done. “Listen. This is what we were meant to find.”

“Am I being outvoted?!”

“Yeah. Sorry.” Cyrax looks genuinely apologetic. “Can I borrow your ice blade?”

“No! You’re crazy!”

“Ah, well.” Cyrax retrieves a sharp key from his pocket, poking a hole in the corner of the sturdy structure. “I can’t believe I forgot my Swiss army knife.”

Laboriously, he hacks away at the first layer of spiderwebs, prying open the sarcophagus.

As clean air reaches its contents, a sharp shriek issues from within. Something trapped inside stirs, and the structure trembles, shaken by blows as the prisoner tries to break free.

“Oh, fuck!” Frost leaps into action, shooting a bolt of frozen energy at the layered spiderwebs. But it has the opposite effect, and the cobwebs dissolve into snow crystals, falling away to reveal a figure.

Leathery wings wrapped around their body, a vampire emerges from the tomb, clutching something between withered hands.

“FINALLY!” The strange figure growls in a low sinister voice, and spreads her wings, revealing blazing eyes, gleaming fangs, and layers of black leather. She’s gripping an orb, bright with an insidious crimson glow. Her face and body are decayed from endless captivity.

Before the eyes of the horrified trio, she raises the orb high, and flings it onto the hard ground, shattering it in a spray of glass.

As it breaks, a rejuvenating essence fills the room, wiping the old bloodstains from the walls. She grows younger in an instant, absorbing the powerful energy, and tosses her head, red eyes burning bright. Fangs protrude over the edge of her lip, and she opens her mouth, unhinging her jaw ominously.

Frost raises one ice-cloaked fist. “Don’t you dare eat us.”

“I have no quarrel with you, unless you are agents of Shao Kahn.” The vampire spreads her arms, wings extended to their full length, and flexes her fingers. Bending to the floor, she picks up a glowing ruby from within the orb, still unbroken. “Does anyone have any blood to spare?”

“NO!”

“Settle down. It is merely as if you were to ask me if I had water to offer. I will survive without it, for now.” She stomps one heeled boot on the shards, grinding them into bits of glass. “Shao Kahn trapped me when I tried to retrieve the orb of Vaeternus’s captivity, and had a traitorous colleague of mine bind me in these cobwebs. Here, I have lingered… until now.”

Cyrax approaches her respectfully. “Hello, ma’am. Would you mind telling me what’s going on?”
“Ah. Greetings. I am Nitara, agent of Vaeternus.” She reaches for his hand, lifting it to her mouth and kissing it in a courtly gesture. He shivers as her fangs brush against his skin, but she doesn’t harm him. Meeting his fearful gaze, she draws herself up taller, approaching him. “You are an individual of great power.”

“How can you tell?”

“You are glowing.”

Frost laughs, despite herself.

“Really, though, I want to know what’s going on, too.” She struts closer to the strange vampire, tossing and catching one of her ice knives. The shock is starting to wear off. “What’s with the evil paperweight?”

“Shao Kahn bound our realm with it when Outworld conquered Vaeternus. It should now be freed.”

“Wait, what? Did that just happen?!”

“It will take some time for the transformation to complete, but yes.” Nitara pushes her aside with a flick of her wing, and struts past her, making her way to the room’s exit. “I need to check on the arborvita.”

“The what now?”

“The manifestation of our realm’s life force… or at least a branch of it.”

Frost inches closer to Smoke, tapping his arm. “Are you seeing this, or am I having a really weird hallucination?”

“No, this appears to be happening.” He muses thoughtfully, watching the vampire as she strides through the doorway. “Should we follow her?”

“Yeah. I guess…” Frost walks along, trailing closely as her mind reels. “I don’t actually know how to react to this. We’re here for a key. Not-- whatever the fuck’s going on here right now.”

“Perhaps she will lead us to the key.”

“Aha, the Shadow Cave. Just as I left it…” Nitara flings open the door with a strong punch, shattering it into oblivion, and stalks through the chamber, approaching a stone pillar resembling a tree that stretches from floor to ceiling. At its roots, a strange light faintly flickers, manifesting as tiny darting blue flames fenced in by a low stone barrier. She shakes her head, dark hair falling loose around her shoulders. “It’s grown so weak!”

And, just like that, she tosses the ruby into the blue glow.

Like a fire drenched with oil, the blue flames leap to life, transforming into a shimmering mist that swirls around the tree trunk until it fills the room with a glow too bright to behold.

“That’s better.” Nitara puts her hands on her hips proudly, and turns back to glance at her three new acquaintances with profound appreciation. “This branch of the arborvita is restored, the life-force of my realm. Its source will feel the effects soon, strengthening our ability to separate from our Outworld captors. Incidentally, who are you?”
“I’m Frost.” She responds automatically, gesturing to the other two. “Smoke and Cyrax.”

“Cyrax? The Cyrax? Of the Lin Kuei?”

“...Yes?”

“I’d hoped to contact you to help me steal the orb, before Shao Kahn intervened!” She beams at him, revealing menacing teeth. “My plans failed due to the Kahn’s meddling, but I found other ways to retrieve the item. Nevertheless, I always admired your work. Yet I do not remember you being human…”

“Ask me later for an explanation.” He smiles in return, quite politely. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“And the same to you. It’s been over two decades since I last breathed… What was it you wanted, a key?”

Smoke responds. “Yes, that’s correct.”

“Here, try this.” Nitara kneels, and plucks an old iron key from a gap among the roots of the tree, feeling around to check for it. “Would this be the one?”

“Yep.” Frost sticks out a hand. “Thanks a whole lot.”

“Anytime. My pleasure, truly.” She folds her wings, bowing to these strangers who freed her from her unfortunate captivity. Maybe their paths will cross again. Maybe not. “I owe you my gratitude. And now I’ll be off.”

Wasting no time, she steps into the glowing mist, vanishing in an instant.

As silence falls again, the Lin Kuei trio stare at each other, trying and failing to process this bizarre turn of events.

Finally, Cyrax manages a brave smile. “We have the key. Let’s go.”

“Are we not going to talk about the spider coffin lady?”

“Nope.”

“How are we going to get out? The door’s barred.”

Cyrax shrugs, and steps into the mist. “Let’s all concentrate very hard on going back to the entryway. Wishful thinking hasn’t failed me yet.”

Seconds later, they miraculously fall from midair into the soft snow, landing in a pile together yet again. Luck is on their side.

Frost doesn’t bother extricating herself from the snowbank, just raises a hand, holding the key in one frozen fist. “Got it. Mission success.”

Kung Jin enthusiastically comes to her side, helping her up. “Our trap was really cool, we had to leap across these gravestones with the names of famous Shaolin. And the Edenians had something complicated, with musical notes. What was yours?”

Frost stares at him exhaustedly. “Vampires.”
Elsewhere in the Krypt, three normal humans are standing at the edge of a broken bridge, unhappily measuring the gap.

“Okay, I trust my boots, but not *that* much. There’s got to be another way. I don’t want to jump that.” Cassie shifts her weight from foot to foot, springing into the air and landing again with careful steps. “Raiden said there’s a way for two people to keep the bridge in place. Which means there *is* a bridge here… somewhere.”

Her gaze travels upwards, studying the large cavernous chamber. She can’t tell if it’s a strange sky far above or just a towering rocky roof. Raiden brought them here, and he’ll be back to pick them up once they make it back to the entrance. Or at least someone will. Truth be told, she’s not sure on the details. Stryker is handling the logistics - she’ll deal with the stunts.

Kabal is kneeling at the corner of the path, studying a stone platform set into the worn earth. “I think someone has to stand on this. There’s another one at the other side.”

Stryker moves into place at the other edge, the opposite platform sinking under his feet. “Got it. Let’s get in position.”

Kabal matches his placement on the bridge while Cassie waits between them.

Twin ropes drop from the ceiling with metal handles attached, landing several inches from their faces.

Her eyebrows shoot up. “Close call. That’s gotta be it. Pull on those.”

“You’re taking this in stride, Sergeant. This could be a trap.”

“If you’ve got a better idea, Officer, I’d love to hear it.” She responds to Stryker snappily. Staring across the gap, she counts the eggs scattered around the edge. Six, just like Raiden said. “So far, it’s all going according to plan. It’s gonna go wrong later, I promise you that, so be ready and follow my lead.”

After a moment of thought, Stryker nods, and grasps the rope, putting all his weight on it. Kabal does the same, working in unison to summon the bridge.

A large platform, buried beneath the greenish mist, slowly rises from deep below, activated by the weight on the pulleys.

“Holy shit!” Cassie stands back, hands on her hips, as the bridge slides into place. She crosses in leaps and bounds, wasting no time, and slides to a halt at the center of the circular area on the other side. “Good job, guys. Now don’t drop it.”

Cassie’s prepared for this. From within her jacket, she whips out a pair of thick gloves with reinforced palms, and a stethoscope, just to confirm her own curiosity.

“Six eggs, move them out of place, figure it out from there.” She mutters to herself, pulling on the gloves, and lays the stethoscope aside for now. Reaching for the first egg, she grasps it gently. It’s cold to the touch. Still better not break it. “Could make a family-sized omelet with these.”

One of her companions chuckles from across the bridge.

Hoisting it with all her might, she lifts it up and sets it aside, revealing a tiny niche in the ground beneath. Inside, there’s a lizard’s tooth, yellowed with age. “Hey, check this out!”
Stryker calls back to her. “Get it done!”

“Yes, sir!” She grabs the tooth, sliding it into a nearby triangular slot in the ground next to the egg. It fits perfectly. “This is pretty straightforward. There’s a little place to stick the thing.”

“Do it for all of them.”

“I’m gonna.” She’s honestly surprised that this isn’t more trouble. One by one, she lifts each egg, careful not to disrupt the contents, even if they’re long-dead. “Two… three… four… five…”

The sixth one gives her pause. Beneath it, the earth has a strange warm glow.

When she touches it, she swears she feels a stir of motion.

But that’s impossible.

Nope. Nothing’s impossible in this world. She grabs her stethoscope, putting it on, and listens to the shell of the egg, hearing a faint fluttering beneath.

“I’m too genre-savvy for this.” She mutters to herself, sliding the sixth ancient tooth into its designated slot. “Of course one of the eggs was gonna still be alive. In a couple minutes, right when I figure this out, the bridge’ll break. Why do you think I wore the propulsion boots?”

Kabal calls out a response. “You okay?”

“Yeah, just get ready for the rope to fray. And now that I told you it’s gonna happen, it won’t, at least not when I think it will. Bought myself a minute of time.” Cassie shoves the stethoscope into a pocket, shedding the coat and tying it around her waist to reveal a backpack strapped to her uniform. She takes it off, pulls out a thick towel, wraps the sixth egg in it, and tucks it into the backpack in quick succession, making sure each closure is securely shut. She fastens the straps across the front of her body with a couple zip-ties, pulling them tight, then rises to her feet with the egg in her backpack, bending down to poke impatiently at the little trapdoor at the center of the platform. “C’mon. Any day now. Key.”

The door flips open, and the eerie green mist tosses the key up from the depths before it slams shut again. She snatches it neatly and slides it into her pocket. “Got it! Let’s go--”

The noise of snapping rope and a startled yell disrupts her comment.

“Knew it!” She hurls herself forward to reach the edge of the platform, but the bridge is already hanging precariously. The rope on Kabal’s side has frayed straight through, leaving only one side of the bridge intact, and less than a foot of room to land on.

She gathers her weight, swears under her breath, and jumps, landing squarely on the edge of the bridge. Boosted by the spring-loaded boots, she hurtles across the remainder of the distance, just as the other rope frays and the bridge crumbles to oblivion.

A surge of panic washes over her. She’s going to fall short.

Thinking quick, Kabal whips out his hook-sword with the blade wrapped in thick tape, leaning over the edge as Stryker holds him back to keep them both from falling. “Grab this! You got it!”

Cassie stretches out a hand, fingers closing tightly around the dull edge, and follows the momentum as Kabal yanks the sword back, zooming away onto safe ground with a burst of super-speed. She lands smoothly, bouncing on the balls of her feet, and retreats to the edge of the cavern.
before she kneels down and saws through the zip-ties to check her backpack.

The massive egg is safe and sound wrapped in the towel, without the slightest scratch.

“Okay. Saurian egg. Where’s Sareena when you need her?” Cassie grumbles to herself, sliding the backpack back on. “I’ll catch up with her later. Good job, guys. We got it. No casualties. Not to jinx it or anything. But I’m pretty sure none of us are gonna die here. Not if we move quick!” She jumps to the side as a large rock crumbles from the roof of the cavern, falling right where she stood. “Let’s get out of the karma cave right now.”

Stryker leads the way back to the entrance, smacking a few spectral spiders out of the way with his flashlight as they proceed through the dark tunnels. “Nice teamwork.”

“Thanks.” Cassie turns back to smile at the other two officers. “Couldn’t have done it alone.”

Kabal is deep in thought. “Do we need to hatch the egg?”

“Yeah, of course. I wasn’t serious about the omelet. That’s why we need Sareena… but not yet.” Cassie stops short, noticing Raiden’s staff planted in the dirt near the center of a dimly lit cavern. There’s a handwritten note pinned to it: Slam the staff against the ground, it will take you to the entryway.

Shrugging, she does as asked.

It transports the group right back to the start, Saurian egg and all.

Kneeling, Cassie drops the staff and slips the backpack off, cradling the precious parcel in her arms. “Who has fire powers here? Hey, Liu Kang. Keep this warm.” She hands it over to him impatiently. “There’s an ancient giant lizard egg inside.”

He accepts this without comment, sitting down and holding it in his lap.

She whips the key out of another pocket, beaming at the grimy object. “Got it, and nobody’s hurt. Who are we still missing?”

Frost does another quick headcount. “Guardians and Hellfire. Raiden, Nightwolf, Jacqui, Sareena, Takeda, Shinnok.”

“Great, so we don’t have the gods. Fantastic.” Cassie sits down in the snow, sighing deeply. “Still, it’s progress. How’d your spider adventure go?”

Frost grins slowly. “Oh, you are not gonna believe what happened.”

“Try me.”

“Let’s just say a Saurian egg isn’t the weirdest thing anybody’s found.”
**Soul-Searching**

“The Magic Treehouse, it ain’t.”

Standing atop a half-collapsed stone ledge, Jacqui flexes the fingers of her powered-up gloves, checking that the plasma blasters are working as they should. Across the snowy courtyard, two trees tower at the edges of the far wall, roots stretching across the frozen earth. Their trunks rise like pillars, ascending into the dim snowy sky, and as the wind rustles their branches, the tips touch like fingers brushing together, shivering with an icy chill.

Nightwolf hoists himself up onto the ledge, too, removing his headband to brush back his hair. Quickly braiding it, he slips his hands into his pockets to avoid the cold air, pulling the fur collar up around his neck. “You could say that. What do you suggest for our strategy?”

Jacqui pulls out her phone, bringing up the offline dictionary, and hands it over to him, cords and all. “I’m gonna put you in charge of this. Raiden’s not exactly high-tech.”

“I suppose he doesn’t need to be.” Nightwolf gazes up at the sky. Somewhere above, Raiden’s flying around and investigating the other side of the wall, trying to figure out what lies beyond. “Are you ready for this?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be. So how do you think this works? Who talks to the trees?”

“I suspect Raiden and I have to stand in the opposite corners, before each tree. While they link their branches together, you climb.”

She squints at the misty fog above the far wall. “I don’t even see the key.”

“It might be invisible until you reach the top, to prevent anyone from just soaring up to grab it.”

“They’re awfully worried about flying people coming to steal from them, huh?”

“I mean, we are here. Are they wrong to worry?”

“They shouldn’t be worrying about anything. They’re supposed to be in a forest.” Jacqui calls over to one of the silent oaks. “Hey. Make like a tree and leave.”

A pair of malevolent red eyes opens in the trunk, glaring at her.

“...stay right where you are, buddy, I’m not complaining.” Jacqui backs up a little, balancing carefully on the low wall. She’s shaken, but trying hard to hide it. “Raiden, get back here, dammit.”

Raiden poofs into view, surrounded by a lightning aura, and drops to the ground lightly. “On the opposite side of the wall, there is a steep ravine. A fall would be lethal.”

“As I thought.” Nightwolf gets up, nearly matching the god’s height. “Thank you for checking.”

Jacqui hops down off the wall, too, feeling very small and mortal among the company of these powerful beings. Trees included.

“Should we get this over with?”

“Yes.” Raiden leads the way, gently gripping Jacqui’s shoulder to reassure her. “I have faith in you.
“You will not fall or fail.”

“Yeah, well, if I do, you’re gonna be the one to tell Dad. Good luck with the broken jaw.” She scuffs the toe of her boot in the snow, gritting her teeth, and tucks her scarf into her camo jacket. It’s a pretty cute coat. Here’s hoping it doesn’t get wrecked with tree-related bloodstains.

“That will hardly be necessary.” Raiden gives her a quick hug before stepping towards one corner of the courtyard, bowing his head to the mysterious oak. “Guardians of the sacred path, we come in search of the key that you hold.”

The sinister trees speak together, their booming voices overlapping and melding alternating verses in different tones.

“Among our roots you dare intrude, to find the item oft pursued… bold travelers shall take our test, or else they must forsake their quest.”

Jacqui chuckles. “It’s a poet-tree!”

Nightwolf looks back at her in alarm. “I’m not sure your dictionary is going to help.”

She bites her lip. “Let’s give it a shot anyway.”

The first tree looks at Raiden squarely with bright eyes, its mouth a knotted snarl of worn bark. “O thunder-god, our speech is terse, yet you shall closely heed our verse.”

Raiden waits with his hands folded obediently behind his back, listening to the tree. “Go on.”

“Past failures haunt you still like ghosts. The sharpest memories sting the most. Yet even gods can still forget. Tell me, which more do you regret?”

Raiden stands there in shock, taken aback by the question.

He answers in a low voice, murmuring under his breath. “Though my errors are infinite, I prefer to learn from the past. Forgetting is the worst curse of all.”

The tree seems satisfied. It extends a row of branches like a ladder, allowing Jacqui to climb several feet off the ground, her heart pounding in her throat as she grips the firm twigs.

Nightwolf’s tree speaks next. “The endless weight of thoughtful sorrow, shall plague you til your last tomorrow. Did yesterday’s good deed gone wrong seal others’ fates for far too long?”

This catches him by surprise, too, though he knows in an instant what the tree speaks of. The tree knows.

“Striking down the corrupted Sindel did not cause the curse of the revenants.” He speaks evenly, managing his emotions carefully. “It was all I could do to help, and I understand that it was not enough. Doing the best that we can, at the time that we can, is the nature of the human condition.”

Without even deigning to answer his comment, the second tree lifts its branches, too, and Jacqui scrambles up.

A tiny glint of something shiny, far above her in the air, catches her eye. Jacqui feels a swift shiver of hope in her heart.

“Raiden.” The first tree speaks again, shaking its branches as a shower of dead leaves falls down
upon the god’s shoulders. “**The realm that brings you endless joy, your counterpart sought to destroy. If caught between your world and muse, then which, among them, would you choose?**”

Raiden answers without hesitation. “The lives of those on Earthrealm take priority. Regardless of his importance to me, if Shinnok strayed from the path of goodness once more, I would intervene, no matter what.”

The tree looks almost irritated that Raiden isn’t bothered by the question.

He is, of course, but he’s good at hiding it. *His muse* … It is an odd way of describing it, but it is true. A muse is the source of one’s motivation. Yet that motivation was always to *stop* Shinnok, to put an end to his evil plans. Can it be redefined, now that the status quo has changed?

Jacqui ascends further up the ladder of woven branches, rising high in the air now. Raiden and Nightwolf are growing smaller and smaller, dark figures against the glittering snow, and on the other side of the wall, the ravine drops ominously in a pit of blackness.

“**Nightwolf.**” The second oak’s voice rumbles deep within its trunk, eyes closed as it contemplates each rhyming word. “*The path of history has changed. Now of sound mind yet once deranged, the revenants reclaim their souls. Will you support them in their goals?***

“Yes.” Nightwolf answers absolutely immediately, folding his arms across his chest. Faint green lightning flickers around his shoulders, hair blowing in the breeze as he tosses his head. “They have been my companions through years of evil and merciless misery. I would be foul-hearted not to stand by them no matter what.”

The tree bends its branches towards him, as if to nod in agreement.

Jacqui scrambles up even higher, tensing up as she balances between slender twigs. “Almost there!”

“**One more riddle.**” The trees speak in unison at last-- and as they do, with a swift snatching motion, powerful branches seize both Nightwolf and Raiden, lifting them high off the ground.

Her heart stops, blood like ice in her veins.

“**Young Jacqueline, obey our call. To gain the prize, one soul must fall.**” Lifting Jacqui up so her fingertips touch the tiny metal key, the trees drag her hapless companions towards the ravine with terrifying strength, silencing them with smothering leaves. “**The sacred key is yours to take. Which sacrifice will you now make?**”

Jacqui stands on her tiptoes, flexing her fingers, and checks her gauntlets, once, twice, one last time.

“**Mine!**”

Jacqui leaps off the edge of the branch, vaulting upwards through the thin air. Moving in precise slow-motion, she grasps the key tightly in her fist, spreads her arms, and shoots a powerful plasma blast at each of her companions, knocking them from the branches and sending them tumbling backwards to land on the soft snow.

Darkness engulfs her as she falls towards the ravine without a sound.
Thinking quick, Raiden soars up in a surge of lightning, hurtling down again on the other side of
the branches, and hauls Jacqui back to safety before she crashes against the rocky ground.

Seconds later, the trio lays flat on the snow, breathing heavily, as the trees’ branches unlock,
wordlessly settling back into place and concealing the ladder through the sky.

“\textit{You are worthy.}”

And with that, the oaks close their eyes silently, growing quiet once more.

Jacqui opens her hand to reveal the key, cradling it close to her heart. “There it is.”

Raiden smiles at her affectionately, gathering her into a hug. Nightwolf does the same, holding
them both tight with a sigh of relief.

“...Now let’s go home.”

“Not yet.” Raiden buttons up his coat as a chilly breeze ruffles his hair. “This is only one step
down a long and treacherous path. But the first challenge is past, thanks to you.”

Jacqui gets up, tapping her armored fists together. “Okay. Then, onward?”

“Onward.”

- - -

“If anybody’s got a fear of the dark, small spaces, depths, spiders, spiderwebs, creepy dead bodies,
or anything else we might find in this tomb down here… speak now, or forever hold your peace.”

Sareena impatiently tries to push past the boy blocking the pathway down to the Kytinn tunnels.
“Takeda, can we go?”

“Hey, I’m just covering all the bases! Liability, you know?”

“Raiden isn’t paying me enough to supervise you insufferable youths.” Shinnok shoves them both
aside, floating down the steep passageway to avoid crunching any scattered skulls under his feet.
“In fact, I am not getting paid at all for this entire misadventure.”

“Don’t complain, neither are we.” Takeda lights up a pair of flashlight-beams built into the wrists
of his bodysuit, guiding them down the tunnels. “Sareena, you’re the expert. What’s everything
down here supposed to mean?”

Sareena pauses in the middle of a clear open area, and turns around, checking all the hollows in the
cavern walls. Kneeling down, she pulls back a swath of cobwebs, shivering, and lets the shadowy
curtain fall into place again. “This isn’t clear. From what I know of the Kytinn, they commonly
raised their y--” She slowly glances at Shinnok, mindful of his feelings. “We don’t need to talk
about this.”

He conjures a skeletal staff from midair, leaning on it, and urges her to continue. “It is better to
speak of it than to act as if it never happened.”

“Ah… if you insist. Well--” She draws a deep breath, carefully picking her words. “The Kytinn
weren’t all like D’Vorah. To reproduce, it was more usual to find a dead body - one that had died
of natural causes - and let the eggs grow within. A chrysalis would form as the infant Kytinn
absorbed the nutrients, naturally and quickly biodegrading the original body. From an
environmental perspective, the Kytinn are a decomposer species.” She speaks quickly, trying to simplify the explanation as much as she can. “Murdering the host would corrupt the offspring, so most Kytinn avoided this. While a living host would theoretically produce stronger offspring, the morally objectionable nature of the act made it...unpopular. It is from D’Vorah and her actions, as well as others like her, that the species gained its bad reputation.”

Sareena rattles this all off in rapid succession, focusing her magic to pull a large knife from thin air. Clutching it in the palm of her hand, she cuts away at the wall of cobwebs again, tearing it back to reveal the musty alcove hidden behind it.

One of the chrysalises, a child-sized shell with pointy limbs protruding from its back, lays there on the ground, withered and shriveled with the passage of time. Vicious puncture wounds ripped it open long ago, and it still lies in a stain of dried blue blood, delicate wings half-crumbled to dust.

Shinnok shudders, clutching his staff in both hands, and gathers his courage to stride onward.
“Thank you for the explanation. Let us not mourn the dead for now. There’s work yet to be done.”

Takeda walks at the god’s side silently, ready to fulfill the mission, fetch the key, and get the hell out of here. It’s giving him the creeps already.

Soon, though, curiosity overtakes him. He coughs, prompting Sareena for further answers, despite knowing he shouldn’t. “So how did this happen? Who killed the baby Kytinn?”

“When Shao Kahn conquered Arnyek, D’Vorah sold out her race, with the intentions of rising to power at his side. Though she was mostly unsuccessful at gaining any sort of notoriety, Mileena and Kotal both foolishly trusted her. She used the poor reputation of the Kytinn to set herself apart intentionally, claiming that she was loyal unlike the rest of her kind. Needless to say, this is very ironic.” Sareena pauses to slice away a particularly nasty cobweb along the way, obscuring the path. “She is an opportunist of the worst kind.”

Shinnok’s voice rises above the crackle of the torches on the walls. “She was.”

“Yes. Was, and will never be again.” Sareena catches him by the arm before he can walk into a net of spiderwebs, clearing it out with a quick blast of shimmering magic. “You shouldn’t have any fear of her. She’s gone for good.”

“I know. Who said I had any fear? I have none.” Shinnok floats a little higher off the ground, advancing through the cavern and projecting a luminous glow to lead them through the treacherous path. “From my close study of Raiden’s maps, it should be somewhere over here…”

Sareena tugs gently at his gauntlet. “This way.”

“Did I say over here? I clearly meant the other direction.” Shinnok huffs under his breath, settling back down to the ground again and facing his pair of accomplices. “It is just beyond this corridor. ...correct, Sareena?”

She makes her knife vanish again with a snap of her fingers. “Yes! Are you ready?”

“Not even slightly, but this needs to be done.” Shivering with nerves, Shinnok peers around the edge of the stone wall. “Ah, yes. There it is. The giant hole in the ground, exactly as predicted. I’m glad we took the time to prepare a strategy.”

Sareena joins him, stepping into the narrow space between the wall and the gaping pit. “How far is it?”
“Nearly as far as the length of the Cage gymnasium.” Shinnok folds his arms, surveying the treacherous gap. The walls are far too wide for any strategic maneuvers. Between the platform and the opposite ledge, a strange murky mist swirls like a demented fog, reaching up over the edge of the pit to grab at his ankles.

He dispels the mist with a slam of his staff, lifting his hand to summon a spiked pillar from midair that connects the floor and ceiling of the cavern with a mighty crunch of stone.

“Takeda, attach your whip around that, and the other around me.” Shinnok conjures his armor over the outside of his jacket, fastening it tightly, and promptly finds himself stuck in place by a lash wrapped around his waist, holding him back from the gloomy pit. “Ah. Perfect. Thank you. Sareena, are you ready?”

She shifts her weight from one foot to the other, crouched and waiting to leap. “Yes!”

“Three, two, one -- go!”

The maneuver works perfectly. Matching her timing to Shinnok’s magic blasts, Sareena bounds across the gap and jumps off each invisible platform, trusting his power to get her across. Seconds later, she scrambles into the niche in the wall at the other side, plucking the key from its spot atop a small stone altar, and calls out to him. “I’m ready to come back!”

“Three, two, one-- agh!”

He’s yanked forward by a pull from the pit, grabbing at him with tendrils of wicked energy. “Wait!”

Sareena waits, skidding to a halt at the edge.

He grits his teeth, withstanding the eerie force as it tugs aggravatingly at his boots, and tries again. “Thr--” And he trails off, unable to focus as it creeps up along his body.

Takeda yelps in pain, trying to hold back the god’s weight and keep Shinnok from being dragged into this awful strange pit of despair. They’re all already in there metaphorically, they don’t need a literal one. “Hurry up!”

Shinnok grimaces, and pulls his amulet from his pocket. Time to try a desperate last-ditch strategy, as he always does.

“Sareena, do you trust me?”

She wipes the sweat from her brow, clenching her hands into white-knuckled fists. “Yes!”

“How much?”

“That doesn’t matter, just save me! Please!”

“That’s good enough for me! Hold still!”

Lifting up the amulet, he points it at Sareena, sending out a blast of a powerful forcefield that shimmers with a bright pinkish hue. It flows across the cavern like an airy liquid, wrapping around her body, and she feels herself drawn to him like a magnet, dragged towards the edge.

“Now!”

And, yanking his arm back with all the force he can muster, Shinnok hauls her across the gap at
top speed, hurtling across the sinister pit to land safe on the cavern floor.

Far above them, they hear an unnerving crumbling sound, the crack of stone.

“We have to get out of here!” Takeda’s voice rises, flailing around frantically to detach his suit’s whips. He unwraps his weapon from Shinnok’s armor easily enough, letting the god breathe freely, but it’s tangled at the other side, knotted around the stone pillar. As he yanks on it, it tightens, and the cracking noise grows louder.

“Enough of that!” Shinnok scoops Takeda up under his arm and disintegrates the pillar with a firm punch against the stone, letting loose a shower of magic sparks. Still dragging Sareena in the forcefield, he bolts out of the cavern at top speed, not stopping for air until they’ve dashed down a winding succession of increasingly small tunnels.

They land at the end of a tiny corridor, illuminated only by the amulet’s faint glow.

Releasing his companions, Shinnok sits down on the cold ground despairingly. “That could have gone more smoothly.”

“I got the key. Thank you! You both did wonderfully.” Sareena pulls it out, proving her point, and takes a seat beside him. She slides her arms out of her coat, tying it around her waist, and stretches, shivering a bit. That was scary, but she’s not about to say so. “Do you know where we are?”

“...No.”

“At least we’re safe from a cave-in. We’ll find our way back out.”

“There’s no need to.” Shinnok rubs his hands together, gathering his magic between his palms. He only has a bit of power left. Using the amulet depleted him, as it always does in mortal form. He’d forgotten that. “I have enough energy to teleport…”

To teleport two people.

He swallows hard, and places a hand on Takeda’s shoulder, and the other on Sareena’s. “Look at me.”

Takeda steps up. “Yes?”

“Get to safety. I’ll find my way back out.”

And before either can voice a word of protest, Shinnok engulfs them in bright energy, sending them back to the entryway in a flash of sparks. Ensuring their survival is the most important thing. He’ll worry about himself later. He’s a god.

As the reality of the circumstances strike him, he sits down on the floor again, gathering his senses.

_How long will it take for me to find my way out? Certainly not all that long. I can retrace my steps._

..._Can I, really? In total darkness, and with my power drained?_  

_Hrm. Shinnok, you are a fool. You’ve done it again. Good work._

He grumbles quietly, waiting for his energy to return, but the process is agonizingly slow. At last, his amulet lights up again, its trademark green glow shining on the walls of the dead-end corridor.
Finally, he gets a closer look at where he’s sitting.

As he processes the sight, Shinnok yelps in horror and scrambles back against the edge of the cavern, skeletal staff clutched tight. His weapon shatters in his grip, vanishing into shards.

The shriveled body of a dead Kytinn is curled up on the floor, an adult dressed in a simple blue cloak with a scarf tied around her bare head. Unlike D’Vorah, her outer shell is orange and grey, her pincers and wings wrapped tight around a shrouded object that she clings to with her decayed arms wrapped tight. Though dead for decades, her corpse is still intact, preserved by the cavern’s climate and the obscurity of her hiding-place.

Overcoming his fear with great agony, Shinnok approaches, step by step, as his heart pounds in his chest. Remember what Sareena said. They were not all like D’Vorah.

The parcel in the dead woman’s grasp seems to be the chrysalis of a young Kytinn, much like the one they glimpsed earlier with its guts spilled on the floor in a reminder of the tragedy of the invasion. But this one is still intact, wrapped in a feathery paper substance almost like the surface of a dried leaf. It’s no more than a few feet in size.

Illuminated by the faint glow of the amulet, something stirs beneath the surface of the cocoon.

No! Shinnok shrieks silently within his mind, petrified and unable to move. He wants to flee, to get out of this new living hell, no matter the cost, but he doesn’t know his way through the tunnels and he’s bound to be located by the Kytinn beast once it hatches. He’d rather stand and fight, or better yet, kill it before it can awaken and do irreparable harm.

Conjuring his skeletal spear, he approaches, raising the sharp-tipped blade. The noise and the warmth must have revived this long-dormant creature. No matter. This is the end of them all.

Yet his conscience cuts through his thoughts, repeating Sareena’s words. It is from D’Vorah and her actions that the species gained its bad reputation.

If he were to kill this thing merely for being a Kytinn, what would that make him? No better than his own past bloodthirsty conquering self, willing to wipe out entire races for opposing him. No better than Shao Kahn, selfish brute, or D’Vorah, putting her desires above his own autonomy.

Still, he suspects that to touch the chrysalis will be to welcome his own doom.

If he slew the creature here, now, no one would ever find out.

But as he studies the Kytinn mother’s withered face, compound eyes frozen wide in fear, he can’t help but feel a strange pang of sympathy and grief. She was trying to protect her child from the invading forces, brought on by a traitor among her own kind. She had done nothing wrong.

Shinnok lets the spear go, disappearing into traces of dust, and drops to one knee. Reaching out gently, he closes the corpse’s eyes.

The chrysalis stirs again, trembling with fluttering movement.

Dread surges within him, nausea rising in an instant, but Shinnok gently lifts the mother’s arm away from the precious parcel, gathering the cocoon up and laying it flat on the floor. If nothing else, he will guard it and see what happens.

A tiny weak pincer stabs through the dry surface, shattering it to crumbling bits.
Within, a small Kytinn child lays curled up on the cold ground, iridescent wings wrapped around her fragile exoskeleton body.

Shinnok’s blood turns to ice. He backs up, pressed against the wall of the cave with his amulet clutched in his pale trembling hands.

Black eyes snapping open, she unfurls her limbs for the first time, shakily getting to her feet. She’s barely half the height of a human, with tiny clawed hands and huge eyes. She stumbles around for a few seconds, and falls flat on her face, wailing in pain.

Shinnok feels the urge to help her, yet stays back and does nothing, blending into the shadows.

The small Kytinn stands up again, weakly flailing her pincers. She looks around the cave for a few moments—ignores Shinnok—and finally glimpses the corpse, shriveled and long-gone.

“**MAMA!**” With a cry of agony, she rushes to her mother’s side, falling to her knees, and desperately clings to the long-dead cold body, burying her face in the worn fabric of the cloak. She pulls the cloth over herself, mourning her loss in a fit of agony. Though still nameless and only just born, the little creature weeps like a heartbroken soul for what seems like an eternity.

Shinnok wipes a tear from his eye, too. He can’t bear it anymore.

Clearing his throat, he presses his amulet to his chest and steps out from the shadows, bending down to approach the small Kytinn’s height. “I’m-- I’m sorry.”

Flailing in panic, the child stabs the air with her stingers, an uncoordinated attempt that leaves her in further tears. “Attacker!”

“No-- No, I’m not… I’m not one of them.” Shinnok racks his brains, trying desperately to think up anything he can say. How do Kytinn minds work? Sareena mentioned once that they inherit the memories of their parent. Maybe that might provide some clues. “Who are you?”

By means of response, the girl turns over the hem of the cloak, revealing a hand-sewn label in a foreign script. She laboriously reads it out loud, sounding out each syllable. “For N’Malah.” She is N’Malah. This must be so. The memories left to her as her legacy are only fragmented, but she remembers a rampage through the tunnels, skull-faced warriors slaughtering her people in sprays of blue blood, and the traitor of their own, in a hood and yellow stripes.

She shakes her head, overwhelmed by the weight of the memories, new to her and yet so old.

“This one is N’Malah.”

Abruptly, she rushes towards Shinnok, clinging to him and burying her little face against the fabric of his soft jacket. He flinches badly, but doesn’t push her away, instead laying a gentle hand on her tiny shoulder. Her skin, or shell, is oddly cool to the touch.

N’Malah looks up at the scary stranger through large tearful eyes, unable to reconcile with such grief at the start of her existence.

“This one mourns…”

“I’m sorry.” Shinnok repeats this again, unsure what else to do. Fighting back his rising dread, he gently holds the girl and lets her cry against his jacket, pincers wrapping around him to hold tighter rather than to harm him. Her wings flutter against his grip, and he lets go, allowing her to unfurl them. They glitter in the amulet’s dim light.
She notices the glowing gem pinned to his jacket, feeling at it tentatively with small pointy fingers. “What is this?”

“It is an amulet.” It’s hard to tell how much she knows, but she seems to have the awareness of a school-aged child. He speaks to her gently, but firmly, keeping his voice intentionally neutral and steady. “It is an item that safeguards me.”

“Okay. It’s pretty.” N’Malah lets go of it, and steps back, stumbling away. Her voice is buzzing and raspy, but with a childish simplicity to it. “Who is that one?”

“Me?”

She nods wordlessly.

“I’m Shinnok.” He coughs awkwardly. “I…” How can he describe himself? “I am an adventurer.”

“Not Sh--” She sounds out the word carefully, but in a rush. “Shaokan?”

“Shao Kahn? No. I am not him.”

She looks relieved by this, gazing at the floor. “This one knows Shaokan murdered Mama.”

“Who was your mother?”

The child shrugs helplessly, pointing at the fallen figure. “That one.” With tentative footsteps, she approaches again, prying at the fastenings on the blue cloak. The top is sewn like a jacket, fitting around the torso of the insect body with holes in the back for the stingers and wings, and there’s a belt of lighter blue fabric around the midsection, matching the headscarf.

She uselessly fumbles with the clasps, trying harder, and whimpers with desperation as her attempts fail. Instead, she falls to her knees again and clings to the dead body tearfully, still processing this new reality.

Shinnok moves closer, careful not to upset the girl. “I could retrieve the cloak for you, if you want.”

N’Malah gazes up at him with deep sorrow. “Don’t hurt Mama.”

“I will not.” He gently detaches N’Malah from the other Kytinn and lifts her to set her aside, unfastening the jacket and sliding it off the shriveled limbs. Untying the headscarf, he offers the items to her instead. “Do you know how to put these on?”

She shakes her head, looking even more mournful. “Please help? Like--” She gestures towards her mother’s body. “Like that one had.”

Doing his best to remember, Shinnok ties the scarf around N’Malah’s head, looping the ends in a careful knot. The cloak is much too large for her, and trails on the ground as he gently fastens the jacket across the front of her exoskeleton. He finds some straps and buttons on the sleeves to keep them at a manageable length, and wraps the belt around twice, tying it with a small knot.

“Thank you…” The little girl leaps into his arms, clutching close, and wraps her pincers around his shoulders to cling tighter, absorbing his warmth. Unsure what else to do, Shinnok sits down unsteadily, and holds her, sitting together in peaceful silence.
“You left him there?”

“He left us!” Takeda is quick to defend himself to Raiden, holding out his hands and offering him the key as Sareena drops the prized item into his palm. “He’s still in the tunnels somewhere. Teleported us right back here before we could stop him…”

“I’ll be taking that.” Frost leans down from where she’s sitting atop the dilapidated gravestone in the entryway, plucking the key from Takeda before he can object. “Six out of six. Perfect. Well, someone go get Shinnok, already.”

Takeda looks up at her, annoyed. “I don’t even know how to get back in there!”

“It does not matter.” Moving past the arguing pair, Raiden retrieves his staff from where Cassie’s left it, propped against the gate. “I have the situation under control. I can travel to Shinnok’s immediate location and bring him back.”

Frost raises her eyebrows, studying the god. “You have some kind of built-in Shinnok retrieval mechanism?”

“More or less. May I have the keys?”

“Yeah, here you go.” She hands them over promptly, and Raiden places them into a small pouch, tucking it deep within his pocket. She watches him with a degree of skepticism. “Maybe we should make some copies of those things.”

“That is exactly what I intend to do, once Shinnok is located.” In fact, Raiden is planning to have Shinnok create the duplicates. His skills as an artificer far outmatch Raiden’s own. “In the meantime, Nightwolf will lead all of you to the next destination: the tomb entryway. Take the time to eat, drink, reload your weapons, and any other necessities you can think of.”

A voice pipes up from among the crowd. “Is there a bathroom around here?”

Frost groans, providing the instructions. “Just use the Sky Temple portal and go there. One at a time, no more. If anybody tries to run off, I’m catching you and booting you back into Graveyard City.”

Jin meekly approaches the portal and steps through, vanishing immediately. “I’ll be right back!”

Nightwolf opens the Krypt gate, holding it as the rest of the adventurers flood through in an organized charge. Frost waits for Jin to finally step back through the portal, then herds him along the path, bringing up the back of the group to make sure no one’s wandered astray.

This leaves just Raiden, staff held tight as he ponders the problem of the mysteriously absent Shinnok.

The god conjures his energy and slams the staff on the icy ground, disappearing in a blink of lightning to begin his search. The sooner, the better. He can’t afford for anything more to go wrong.
Raiden lands somewhere in the shadowy tunnels, facing a dead end.

*Well, that can’t be right.*

Backing up, he transforms his staff into a glowing beam of light and paces down the dismal corridor, brushing off cobwebs that cling to his hat and tunic.

A very familiar voice interrupts his thoughts.

*What can’t be right?*

*Shinnok! Are you here?*

*No, I’m speaking to you from the hidden astral dimension. Yes, Raiden, I’m here.*

*Where?*

*How would I know?*

Raiden calls out loud, hoping he’s within earshot. “Shinnok! Can you hear me?”

Shinnok responds silently, wincing as the noise awakens N’Malah for a moment. She’s asleep peacefully in his arms. *Stop that.*

*Why?*

*There is a reason. I assure you.*

*What is the reason? This is strange.*

*Nothing could be as strange as what I have encountered.*

...*Shinnok, is there something you are not telling me?*

*Obviously.* Sighing deeply, Shinnok gets to his feet, trying to follow the beacon of Raiden’s energy. *Just stay where you are.*

*I intend to find and rescue you.*

*I can do perfectly fine for myself, now that you’re here. Your presence is helping me orient myself in the darkness, so I can find my way back to the main path. Without you, I had no frame of reference.* He pauses. *That’s awfully metaphorical.*

*I suppose it is.* Raiden manages a soft smile, leaning on his staff. By now, he’s in the middle of a tunnel crossroads, patiently waiting for Shinnok to arrive and join him.

Within minutes, the other god emerges from the darkness, holding something in his arms.

*Shinnok?* Raiden’s eyes widen as his companion steps closer. The full weight of the realization hits him as he recognizes the burden Shinnok’s carrying. He’s barely equipped to process this, after the system shock of the tree ordeal. *Is that a--*

*Don’t speak. There was an infant Kytinn in the tunnels, protected by her dead mother. Her cocoon was dormant. She hatched, and she means us no harm.*

Raiden hesitantly studies Shinnok’s face, full of earnest determination. His eyes are blazing with a
protective instinct that Raiden’s surprised to see.

Right now, she’s asleep. I don’t want to awaken her. Her name is N’Malah.

Raiden approaches further, looking at the small creature. Her head is nestled against Shinnok’s chest, small pincers clutching his shoulders, and her oversized cloak trails down the front of his jacket as he holds her carefully.

I have absolutely no idea what to do about this.

Raiden thinks quickly. She will be in danger if we bring her along on the remainder of the mission. Would you object to leaving her with Fujin until we return?

No, not at all. He would be a wise choice to look after her.

Good. Then come with me, back to the entryway and through to the temple. Raiden gently rests a hand on Shinnok’s arm. Are you ready?

Yes. Let’s go. I’d prefer to waste no time.

Shinnok closes his eyes as Raiden’s magic transports them back to the icy outdoors path, snowflakes falling and melting into water as he heats the air around him.

He’s hardly prepared to make the decision about what to do about the child afterwards, once they’ve all returned from this hellish adventure. He supposes N’Malah is his responsibility now. Finders keepers, as the youths say. Maybe Mileena can help.

Come this way. Raiden leads him through the portal at the corner of the courtyard, stepping out into the crisp afternoon breeze at the Sky Temple. Shinnok gulps in a sharp breath of clean air, filling his lungs to refresh himself after the musty underground ordeal.

Just wait here.

“Fujin.” Raiden seeks out the third god immediately, and finds him seated atop the roof, reading a book about rare birds. Fujin’s dutifully studying its pages and illustrations, but slams it shut and sets it aside, getting to his feet to greet Raiden cordially. Raiden gestures for him to follow, ignoring his attempt at courtesy. “We need your help.”

“I’m always glad to offer whatever assistance I can. Tell me more.”

“Shinnok found a child Kytinn in the Krypt tunnels. She needs to be looked after. That is all I know. Can you do that?”

Fujin hesitates. That is a horrible and frightening amount of responsibility. He knows nothing about children, and even less about Kytinn.

But who else will do it, if he won’t?

“Of course I can.”

- - -

“What’s that one’s name?”

Fujin glances around in confusion, studying the small creature as she sits on a rooftop bench nearby and jabbers at him in a light buzzing voice. “Which one?”
N’Malah points at him, trying ineffectively to make her meaning clear. “That one!”

Realization slowly dawning, Fujin puts a hand on his chest. “Me?”

She nods emphatically.

“I am Fujin, current defender of Earthrealm.” He smiles at her reassuringly, bending down a bit to meet her large unnerving eyes. “Tell me about yourself?”

“This one is N’Malah.” To prove the point, she fumbles with the cloak to find the tag sewn inside, showing it to him. “That--”

A piece of crumpled yellow parchment tumbles out of a hidden pocket inside.

Eyes widening, she hops down off the bench to grab it, carefully trying to unfold the precious item. “A letter!”

“May I see?”

“No!” She snatches it away, holding it at a safe distance from her new acquaintance. “This one doesn’t trust you yet!”

Fujin takes this in stride, accepting it. “Who do you trust?”

She sounds out the name carefully. “Shin-nok. The adventurer.”

“So he’s calling himself an adventurer now?”

“Yes! He is one!” N’Malah seems very insistent about this. “Can you read?”

“Of course. Can you?”

“Not much.” N’Malah’s face falls as she unfolds the paper, trying to make sense of the text. It’s written in elegant cursive, hard to decipher for someone so young, even with the benefit of inherited memories. She pulls her cloak tighter around her tiny body, wings fluttering in distress. “This one… needs help.”

“May I try to read it?”

Reluctantly, she hands it over to Fujin, pointing one of her small pincers at him. “Don’t hurt it!”

“I promise I will not.” Studying the text and putting his godly skills to use, Fujin slowly translates each word, reading it aloud.

Dear N’Malah,

Daughter, this one leaves you this note, with the hope that you will find a better life.

The emperor’s soldiers are closing in. They have already destroyed the rest of the young. This one has hidden you here, in this cavern. You will be safe until someone finds you. This one prays that you do not awaken on your own. You should not witness this.

Fujin pauses. A portion of the text has been scratched out, overwritten by scribbled black lines.

If you are reading this message, you have been found. This one hopes that the one who awakens you will hold only good intentions. Stay safe, daughter, and defend yourself, if need be. If they are
cruel, attack them. If they are kind, follow them. Your freedom is the most important goal of all. You can survive. You will survive.

This one is watching over you, always, from the Beyond. A mother’s love cannot die. Wear this one’s cloak, and this one’s spirit will be with you.

With love,

Zir’ah

Fujin trails off to a quiet whisper, folding the letter again and handing it back to the small girl. N’Malah clutches the letter to her heart, solemnly tucking it into the pocket of her jacket and buttoning it up with trembling fingers.

“This one thanks you...”

With a surge of bravery, she spreads her wings and tries to fly over to him, but lifts only a few inches off the bench, fluttering weakly. Giving up, she hops the rest of the distance instead, flailing her stingers to try to balance herself as she lands in Fujin’s lap and clings tight.

Fujin returns the hug patiently. “It is the least I can do. Your mother was a good person.”

“She was. She must have been.” N’Malah wipes her face with the soft fabric of Fujin’s cloak. “This one remembers what she did, but not everything. Life is new to this one.”

“I understand.”

A hawk soaring far above in the sky catches Fujin’s eye, silhouetted against the clouds. He greets it with a polite nod, and sends up a spiral of wind to aid its flight.

Looking back to N’Malah, an idea occurs to him. “Have you ever seen a bird?”

“What’s a bird?”

He points up to the hawk, and N’Malah’s gaze follows, eyes wide open in wonder.

“Here. Look at this.” Fujin retrieves the book of birds, placing it on the bench and opening it to a sheet of bright illustrations. “You might like it. You don’t need to be able to read.”

She eagerly flips through the pages, delighted by the colorful pictures. “This one hasn’t seen these—nor mama, nor mama’s mother... No one has any memories of these birds!”

Fujin watches the girl patiently with his chin in his hands, smiling softly. “It’s never too late to discover something new. Welcome to Earthrealm, N’Malah. I hope it’s to your liking.”

---

“Here you go. Six copies, and six more copies in case you somehow manage to lose them all.” Shinnok delivers the duplicates of the Krypt keys to Raiden, saving a set for himself that he’s tucked away in one of his pockets. He’s speaking out loud to take advantage of the fresh air, strong voice resounding in the silence. “I can’t believe everyone survived. What were the traps? Did it all unfold as you thought it would?”

“The tree’s riddles were unexpected.” Raiden ponders this, leaning against the railing of the Sky Temple courtyard and savoring the peace and quiet. He needs to rest before he returns to the Krypt, even if only for a few minutes. “There were two. My tree asked me first what I regretted more,
making all my bad decisions or forgetting the past.”

“What did you say?”

“I believe forgetting is worse.”

“Interesting. I can agree with that. Personally, I find that I regret things I haven’t done far more than things I have done. But that’s neither here nor there.” Shinnok studies the distant mountains that fade into a haze through the thick mists. “What was the second question?”

“It asked me to choose between Earthrealm and you, if I absolutely had to.”

“Hardly a contest I would ever win.”

“At least you know that. But if I could choose both, I would. Only the most dire circumstances would make that impossible.”

“Hm. I see.” Shinnok lapses into silence, thoughts whirling in his mind. “And then, that was all?”

“Then, it asked Jacqui to choose between throwing me or Nightwolf over the side of the cliff in exchange for the key. Instead, she pushed us both back to safety and took the fall herself.”

“Tragic.”

“I caught her.”

“Oh. That’s a relief.”

“Did you think I would not save her??”

“One can never be certain.” Shinnok waves a hand airily, concealing faint regret at his rude comment. “...No, I know you would. I have enough faith in you to assume that much. What were the other groups’ experiences?”

“The Lin Kuei encountered a vampire entombed in cobwebs, who supposedly shattered an orb keeping her realm trapped as part of Outworld, then disappeared.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s much more interesting than the riddle trees. What?”

“Her name was Nitara. That is all they told me.” Raiden shrugs, not particularly interested in figuring it out at this moment. “Frost says she was pretty. The others did not offer any subjective commentary. I doubt we have seen the end of her. Paths that have crossed once do tend to cross again.”

“I’ve noticed that. What about Cassie’s team?”

“They found a living Saurian egg. Sareena is in charge of it. She refuses to let it out of her sight, so it will stay with the group until we return.”

“That’s intriguing. So three separate groups found some sort of living creatures in this strange labyrinth? Four, counting your trees.”

“Yes. The Krypt is much more than a tomb. There is a reason I planned our path so closely.”

“Aside from the coats...”
“Of course.” Raiden smiles ruefully. “As for the Edenians, they discovered something about their past history. I did not inquire what. The Shaolin had the least eventful experience, from what Liu and Lao told me.”

“And now what?”

“Now, we unlock Shao Kahn’s tomb. We have lingered here long enough.” Raiden approaches the portal with Shinnok beside him, and pauses. “May I say something?”

“Naturally. What insights have you to offer now?”

Raiden brushes off the needling with a gentle smile, then grows solemn once more. “Allow me to be serious for a moment. I am proud of you, Shinnok. You did the right thing. You protected the others on your team, and saved N’Malah. You could easily have slain her before she hatched. I know this.”

Shinnok is honest. “I considered it.”

“And yet you did not. You spared an innocent life, knowing full well she was a Kytinn, the same race whose villain harmed you so greatly. That was an act of mercy.”

He’s quiet for a moment. “I couldn’t bring myself to do otherwise.”

“I know. You have come so far.”

Raiden takes off his hat, tucking it under his arm, and gently leans towards the other god, foreheads pressed together in a gesture of mutual understanding and care.

_The tree referred to you as my muse. They were correct._ Raiden gazes deep into Shinnok’s glowing eyes, unable to look away. _I am so infinitely relieved to see you as you are now, your true self. There is a good soul in you after all._

_Some time ago you would not have thought so._

_I allowed life to harden my heart. We needed to begin anew, and rebuild from the start, as a forest grows fresh after a wildfire._

_Poetic, and true. Well said, Raiden. I, too, am glad for the current situation._ Shinnok blinks softly, and offers a smile. _We have undergone a rebirth both metaphorical and literal. It is fitting that this should be a new opportunity._

_I agree._ Raiden finally breaks the contact, and steps towards the portal, leading Shinnok by the arm. _Shall we go?_

Shinnok follows readily, close at his side. _We shall._

---

Johnny rings the doorbell at Cassie’s apartment out of habit. He’s got a key to let himself in, but it’s more polite to announce himself first.

Then he remembers she’s not even home. She’s several worlds away by now, traipsing through some sort of evil graveyard.

Sighing, he slips his key into the lock, dropping a bag of Cassie’s clothes on the floor as soon as he steps through. “Man, this place is a--”
He yelps, interrupted with shock as he feels the sharp tip of a blade pressed against his ribs. A low sultry female voice snarls in his ear. “You dare enter without permission?!”

“Mileena!” Astonished, Johnny holds his hands up, making a gesture of surrender. As the girl lets him go, he slowly turns to face her, careful not to make any sudden movements. “I’m Cassie’s dad. I can visit once in a while. It’s allowed.”

Mileena sheathes her knife at her hip, dressed in some sort of pink outfit with black leather and spikes. Grumbling, she steps back, leaving Johnny at a safe distance. “I can hardly argue with that logic.”

She looks completely human.

“...where’d your teeth go?!”

She taps a gadget on her wrist, deactivating the disguise, and reveals her jaws full of fangs again. “I have Shinnok to thank for this particular innovation. His inventions are greatly helpful.”

“Yes, well, tell him to call me when he gets a gadget that can turn back time.”

“I wouldn’t suggest mentioning it to him. He would probably try... and destroy reality as we know it, entirely by accident!” Mileena laughs to herself, imagining the consequences. “As opposed to his many failed attempts to destroy it intentionally…”

“Love him or hate him, I admit you’ve gotta respect the effort.” Johnny hooks his thumbs in the belt loops of his jeans, looking around at the apartment. It’s not as much of a mess as he first thought, but he’s still not used to it. Shinnok has repurposed Cassie’s desk as some sort of artifact-making workplace, along with several stacks of mythology books filling up the shelves. Raiden appears not to have disturbed anything, although Johnny notices some knitting supplies that probably belong to him. At least, he’s having a very hard time imagining anyone else other than Raiden knitting.

He hears a faint meow from beyond the wall.

“...is there a cat in here?”

Mileena grins very toothily. “I’m taking care of Junior and Norbert while the team is gone.”

“You know Cassie’s allergic to cats, right?”

“I know. They’re in the empty apartment next door.”

“They-- what?!”

Mileena teleports out of sight in a puff of pink energy, then reappears, holding a very large cat in her arms and a very small kitten on her shoulder. “It’s unoccupied! The felines have the place to themselves, and it’s not as if anyone’s going to move in within the next few days.”

She disappears again, and replaces the cats in their cozy new temporary home.

Johnny is somewhat dumbstruck.

He scrambles for words, trying to keep the conversation alive. “So, uh, how’s it been going lately on your side of things?”

“Not bad, not bad at all!” Mileena sweeps towards the kitchen, neon pink shawl trailing behind her.
“Since you’re visiting, would you care for some appetizers?”

“Yeah, sure. What is it?”

“Steak tartare!”

“...no thanks. I’ll pass.” Johnny clears his throat. “Um. So-- the tournament…”

“Only a few weeks away! I’m excited. All versions of myself will be very prepared for the event.”

“I’m kind of frightened to imagine what you mean by that.”

Mileena shrugs. “Kotal has never played fair. Inevitably, he’s going to change the terms of the agreement in some way or another, before, during, or after the tournament. If things get too messy, I’ll depose him right then and there. Otherwise, Tanya is trying to think up some clever strategies to remove him from office.”

“That Tanya of yours is a real smart girl, huh?”

“Oh, she’s marvelous!” Mileena sinks into a chair, grinning broadly. “Her family was among the Edenian diplomats, so as a young lady, she absorbed quite a lot of information about the workings of the realm’s government. It’s funny to think she’s so much older than me, isn’t it?”

“Man, and I thought I was unlucky that Sonya’s got a couple years on me. You’ve got, what, several centuries of age difference over there?”

“More than that, I’m sure. I don’t usually ask.” Mileena licks her lips, laying across the arms of the comfortable chair. “So your daughter is going to fight in the tournament! How do you feel about it?”

“Really proud, and really, really afraid.” Johnny answers honestly. “Do you know Kano?”

“I believe I saw him once or twice in Outworld, when he was licking Father’s boots and readying his knife to stab him in the back.”

“Guy with the red eye, yeah?”

“That’s him! Loathsome, despicable fellow.”

“No one likes him. For good reason. Frankly, I think Cassie’s going to pulverize him. She’s got the skills, the brains, and the grudge. Plus the new tech, thanks to Sonya.”

“I can’t wait to watch.” Mileena smirks, but her confident expression slips away slowly. “Are the former revenants going to be at the tournament? And return to Outworld?”

“I’ve been talking about it with them. They all want to come. Some of them would like to stay there afterwards.”

Mileena falters, voice cracking. “Which?”

“Sindel, Kitana, and Jade all insist they belong there. Can’t disagree with them.”

“From my best guess, Kotal’s very unlikely to respect Queen Sindel’s position of authority… let alone my dear sister, the princess.”

“I-- I guess that’ll work itself out in one way or another. We’ll find out.” Johnny doesn’t really
know what to say. Earthrealm politics is bad enough. Other realms are a whole different story. “Liu Kang wants to go with them, and stay with Kitana. Can’t blame him for that either. He feels too different from the Shaolin after being Netherrealm’s ruler-- should I even be telling you this?” He stops short, thinking it over. “But who else am I gonna tell?”

“Good point. For my part, I’ll keep it confidential.”

“Thanks, Mileena.” Johnny gets to his feet, trudging over to Cassie’s fridge to pour himself some soda. “Have you seen any of the ex-revenants since it all happened?”

“No.” Mileena chews her lip with fanged teeth. “I want to see Sindel and Kitana, but-- to be entirely honest with you, Mr. Cage, I couldn’t bear it if they refused my company. They are all I have in the way of family. I don’t want that hope to be crushed, so I’d rather postpone it.”

“Didn’t Shao Kahn make a bunch of other--” Johnny shuts himself up immediately. “Never mind.”

“Ermac is hardly the same, and I’ve never met Skarlet. Shao Kahn never allowed it. Jade was brave enough to approach her and free her, but not me… I was barely acknowledged as an independent creature with my own mind and soul.”

“Yeah, that’ll fuck you up. Explains a lot.” Johnny takes a seat, sipping his drink. “As for the rest of ‘em, Kabal and Stryker are headed to SF, Nightwolf might travel a while, Smoke’s off to the Lin Kuei again, and Lao’s going to stay here too and train with Jin. Kung squared.”

Mileena cocks her head. “Excuse me?”

“It’s a joke. In Earthrealm math, whenever you multiply something by itself, it’s called squaring it. Two times two, that’s two squared. And they’re both named Kung.” Johnny explains quickly but patiently. “Anyway. Am I missing anyone?”

Mileena counts on her fingers. “Three Edenians, two Shaolin, four other humans, that’s nine. That’s all of them.”

“Thanks.” Johnny is distracted by an insistent muffled meow, instinctively glancing across the room. “If your kitty pals keep it up, they’re going to need to start paying rent. You’d better go check on them. Nice of you to cat-sit, though.”

“I like being trusted with responsibility.” Mileena is unexpectedly candid. There’s something about Mr. Cage that makes him strangely easy to talk to, a sort of careless charm, and she readily shares her thoughts. “It makes me feel so much more worthwhile.”

“Yeah… I know what you mean. I ended up raising Cassie mostly by myself, y’know. Sonya was too busy. I was so sure I was gonna fuck everything up, but Cassie turned out okay somehow. But I never really believed I was up to the job of being a parent, until, before I knew it, I was at her graduation and, you know, taking pictures, trying not to cry, the whole nine yards…” He chuckles quietly, still remembering that day. “Life’s just like that sometimes.”

“I suppose it is.” Mileena beams at him with genuine warmth. “It was nice of you to visit. I appreciate it, I really do.”

“Uh… thanks, and you’re welcome. Anytime.” Johnny hops to his feet, shaking Mileena’s hand as she politely offers it. “I’d better get going. But, hey, you know, my door’s always open to you as long as you’re in Earthrealm.”

“Thank you.” She grins even wider, an ear-to-toe smile. “Farewell for now, Mr. Cage. Say hello to
everyone for me! Or don’t, if they wouldn’t want to hear from me. I’ll leave the decision to you.”

“Will do!”

With that, Johnny retreats out the door, leaving the apartment in Mileena’s surprisingly capable hands. Wonders never cease.
The entrance to the tomb is down a rocky stairway set deep into the ground, guarded by a gauzy spirit barrier that stretches and warps as Raiden tentatively pokes at it. Stabbing it yields no better results, and he steps back, staff in hand. “The stronghold is secure. Give me the keys.”

“What do you mean, give you the keys?” Shinnok puts his hands on his hips, supervising from a safe distance. “I gave them to you already, or have you gotten some sort of godly amnesia?”

“Oh. Indeed you did.” Raiden retrieves them a bit ashamedly from his pocket, counting them and feeling the engraved symbol on each. “Thank you.”

“By the way, I would hope the barrier was secure. If you’d made us go through all that trouble and the tomb wasn’t even locked, I think I might throw you over the side of the cliff myself.”

Raiden doesn’t bother answering Shinnok that time. Cross-matching the symbols, he slides the first key into the lock and turns it this way and that until it clicks, activating an old unused mechanism. “I think that’s the right way.”

“Well, go on, then. Try the rest of them.”

Raiden does as asked -- the second, third, fourth, and fifth keys work exactly as they should. The sixth catches in the lock and refuses to work, much to his sudden dismay, but with a light shove, it slips into its designated slot, relieving his anxiety.

Slowly but surely, the barrier dispels, revealing another eerie stairwell full of musty air that rises from the tomb’s depths in an unwelcome gust. Raiden coughs, stepping out of the way, and summons a light rainy breeze to clear out the stale drafts. “That should be enough… Is everyone prepared?”

A light chorus of ‘yes’ rises from the gathered group.

“Just to be certain—” He clears his throat, repeating the mission details. “You have all endured quite a lot today already. I want to make it clear that the Shao Kahn tomb mechanisms are not riddle traps or logical problems. They are designed to kill you, plain and simple.”

Raiden’s not looking forward to this. Nor is anyone else.

“The Lin Kuei catacombs, and the lever behind them, are guarded with vials of caustic liquid. The Edenian Knight tomb is protected by with enchanted suits of armor that respond to motion. The Shirai Ryu catacombs are filled with spring-loaded spikes and chains intended to impale intruders. Do you all consider yourself capable of handling this?”

Only a handful of people respond affirmatively. Most shuffle their feet and look away.

Cassie speaks up. “Hey Raiden. Why didn’t you tell us the details of this earlier?”

“It would have interfered with your focus for the outer traps, which required careful thought. Underground, our task is arguably easier.”

Shinnok coughs loudly.

Raiden turns to him. “Yes?”
“If I might be so bold, I have a plan.”

“Indeed, you may be so bold.” Raiden leans on his staff patiently. “Tell us.”

“Let’s consider first who can’t help with the death-traps. Frost, I suggest you stay outside and guard the door with a wall of ice. If something breaks through and shatters it, we will hear it.”

She scoffs. “Throwing me to the wolves, huh? That’s fine. I can handle that.”

“Sareena has the egg to guard, so she should stay away from danger. My energy is depleted, so I will hardly be of much use, other than strategic advice. That leaves fifteen. Pair off into new teams.” Shinnok keeps talking, encouraged by the others’ attentive looks. “You all have different specialties. Attack, defense, evasion, and so forth. That should influence our strategy.”

Cassie takes a seat on the stairwell ledge. “Seems sensible enough. Who’s where?”

“From my observations, those who can teleport have superior evasion abilities. Kung Lao, Takeda, and Nightwolf should handle the Shirai Ryu area.”

“What, all at once?”

“No, of course not. One or two people can try for the lever while the other guards against the undead beings wandering this tomb. I guarantee there are some of those in here.”

“Well, isn’t that wonderful.”

“Very much so.” Shinnok scoffs under his breath at the thought. The undead are no match for him. “Smoke, Cyrax, and Sindel can deal with the Lin Kuei catacomb.”

Frost interrupts him. “Why not me? I’m from the Lin Kuei, and I could just freeze the traps solid.”

“There is a high possibility that that would activate the traps, since liquid expands when frozen. I presume you would rather not destroy the graves of your clansmen.”

“Okay, good point.” Frost retreats up the stairs again, pushing past the group to lift herself up onto a low-hanging tree branch. “Nice view. I don’t mind guarding. I’ll freeze the door when you all get inside.”

“Jade, Kitana, and Jacqui can manage the Edenian Knights’ tomb. That leaves Raiden, Liu Kang, and Kung Jin to search through the tomb, clear out the undead, and light the torches. Fire is most effective against reanimated corpses, so I am sure you are up to this task.”

Jin taps the end of his bow on the ground, summoning a puff of fire from the carved ornament. “You know it.”

Raiden nods slowly, memorizing the plan. “A valid strategy. Thank you, Shinnok. What of you?”

“I’ll stay with Sareena and help her guard the egg, and track each group as they return.”

“Very well.” Raiden lights up his staff like a beacon, draws a deep breath, and takes the plunge, stepping down into the tomb’s darkness. “Follow my lead, and stay with your group no matter what. I need not repeat myself again… but we cannot risk failure.”

Sareena tilts her head to the side. “What was that?”
Shinnok pays closer attention to the strange noise. It sounds like a series of high-pitched yells, followed by the crackle of roasting flame and a grunting scream.

“If I had to guess, I’d say that was Liu Kang killing a zombie.” He folds his arms, sitting back against the wall of the tomb’s main hall. “But one can hardly be certain.”

“Probably.” She clutches the huge egg closer, nestled firmly in her lap. “What happened in the tunnels after you sent us back to the Krypt gate?”

Shinnok is evasive. “What do you mean, what happened?”

“Please, don’t be dishonest, I know something happened.”

He hesitates, then briefly relates the story of N’Malah to her.

Sareena’s eyes widen, clutching the backpack. “You saved her!”

“I suppose I did. Fujin is keeping watch over her now.” Shinnok taps his fingers on the floor, fidgeting with nerves. “How long has it been since they went in there? Half an hour? An hour?”

Sareena checks her watch dutifully. “Seven minutes.”

“Oh.” His face falls. “I suppose they will be back sooner or later.”

“Inevitably. In the meantime, try to keep your spirits up.”

As a zombie lunges from the shadows at them, Shinnok summons a skeletal construct in the blink of an eye, a ghostly apparition that stabs the undead corpse to bits. Then, the phantom bows, and disintegrates into dust once more.

“Like that?”


- - -

Frost is still perched in the tree, terribly bored. She’d love to text her friends, but all of them are currently trapped underground with no reception.

Except for one.

[Frost] mileena are you there?

[Mileena] Hello how are you

[Frost] doing ok. i’m on guard duty for the mission. how’s it going?

[Mileena] Much better ever since I turned on speech recognition

[Mileena] The touchscreen doesn’t like my nails

[Frost] lol. how’s norbert

[Mileena] Doing very well I’ve been feeding him and he likes to chase string but he makes a very strange vibrating noise and I’m concerned

[Frost] yeah that’s kind of just a cat thing, they purr when they’re happy
[Frost] how’s life in the big city all alone?

[Mileena] Not so bad Mr. Cage came to visit earlier and we had a nice talk

[Frost] huh, didn’t know he did things like ‘nice talks’

[Frost] just kidding, he’s okay once you get to know him

An insistent tapping on the ice wall interrupts her focus. Moments later, Jin breaks down the barrier with a blast of flame from his staff, not even waiting for Frost to open it. He zips up the steps, landing on the ground, and calls up to the tree’s high branches. “Just thought I’d let you know we got the Lin Kuei one unlocked. Cyrax and Smoke teleported through, the lever got stuck so we had to send two people in, but it went fine.”

She responds with her usual attitude, but she’s secretly relieved. “Thanks. Glad to know everything’s going good down in paradise.”

“Ha ha.” He rolls his eyes, trotting back down the steps. “Seal it up behind me, will ya?”

“No problem.” She summons a sheet of ice to block the door again, tossing a snowball at Jin for good measure.

- - -

“The Shirai Ryu tomb’s all set.” Takeda takes a seat on the ground between the other two members of Team Hellfire, glancing between them. “Did I interrupt a conversation or something? Sorry if I did.”

“No, we were just musing about the strange realities of life.” Shinnok greets him with a hint of a smile. “Where are Nightwolf and Kung Lao?”

“They joined Raiden’s group to clear out the hallways.” Takeda’s quick to reply, pulling out a snack bar from his pocket and biting into it enthusiastically. “It wasn’t so hard to get to the lever, though I needed to hang from the ceiling a couple times to dodge the spikes, which was pretty wild. So that’s two down.”

“Very well done.” Shinnok absentmindedly tosses his amulet from one hand to the other, catching it deftly. “I should tell you what happened…” And, as simply as he can, he relates the tale again, including the trip back to the Sky Temple to safeguard N’Malah. “I suppose she is my responsibility now.”

Takeda’s eyebrows shoot up. “You don’t hear that kind of story every day. You think Fujin could just keep her?”

“I doubt that’s a good idea. He likes solitude, and I don’t think he’s prepared to raise a child, let alone this sort.”

“And you’re ready?”

“Not in the least, but I have enough allies and… friends…” The word is almost anathema to him. He scowls and continues talking, folding his arms across his chest. “We will figure something out, eventually, somehow.”

“Okay. Not gonna worry about it while we’re still in the middle of Shao Kahn’s tomb.” Takeda finishes off the snack bar, shoving the wrapper into his pocket to avoid littering. “You think the
others are doing all right?”

“They’d certainly better be.”

- - -

Hours later, Frost is still hunched over her phone, typing away to ease the boredom. Jacqui was nice enough to give her the cords and battery packs, so she’s all set for a while now.

[Mileena] It’s been lovely talking with you I’m surprised at how much I’m adapting to Earthrealm even if the people are all a bit strange
[Mileena] Strange in a good way of course

[Frost] thanks for that ringing endorsement

[Mileena] So I don’t think you ever actually told me what you’re doing at the Krypt

Frost almost drops her phone out of the tree.

[Frost] um. we have to... get something...

[Mileena] That was obvious I just mean what are you trying to retrieve and where

[Frost] not sure i’m supposed to share that info

[Mileena] Who else would I possibly tell

[Frost] not the issue. we need an item to open a portal to netherrealm

[Mileena] Ooh how exciting but I certainly hope it isn’t in Father’s tomb

[Frost] why would it be a problem if it is? just curious!!!

[Mileena] I was forbidden from helping with his burial D’Vorah handled it instead she was never kind to me
[Mileena] When I went to pay my respects it was strange she wouldn’t even allow me to put the coin in his mouth to guarantee passage to the afterlife I should have done that as his daughter
[Mileena] I have reason to suspect she tampered with it in some fashion but the tomb has been sealed shut so whatever she did could hardly matter
[Mileena] Until now

[Frost] … well shit

[Mileena] It’s in his tomb isn’t it you may need to stop them before they open it

[Frost] yeah of fucking course it’s in his tomb. do you know what this place is like? can you get here?

[Mileena] How would I know how to get here but yes I’ve seen the inside of the tomb
[Mileena] Very briefly the guards dragged me away before I could get a closer look

[Frost] good enough. there’s a portal to the sky temple in johnny cage’s house. go there. from there, you can get to the krypt entry and i’ll meet you there
[Frost] call him, have him come get you
[Frost] i’ll delay them from opening it up
[Frost] and for gods sake FUCKING HURRY
Mileena pokes around at her phone haplessly, guiding the voice commands to pull up Johnny Cage’s number. Hesitating for a moment, she dials him, speaking in rapid-fire nervous chatter.

“Mr. Cage. I need you to help me. Can you come get me so I can take the portal to get to the Krypt and stop all your friends and family from possibly unleashing a horror on the world?”

Johnny blinks stupidly, awoken from a nap on the couch. “Uhhh what?”

“Mr. Cage--” Briefly, Mileena thinks about explaining it all over the phone, but realizes that might not be very productive. “Can you come get me? I need to get to the Krypt. Very soon. Immediately. Even more than immediately. Is there a word for that?”

“Instantly?”

“Yes, instantly!”

“Actually, yeah. On my way.” Coming to his senses, Johnny fumbles around for his sunglasses, zips his jacket, and steps through the living room portal, entering the Sky Temple itself.

Fortunately, Fujin isn’t far off. With him is--

“...who is that?”

N’Malah turns around and waves tentatively with one tiny, pointy hand. “This one is N’Malah, saved by Shin-nok and--” She looks up at her tall companion. “Fujin?”

Fujin nods. “Hello, Mr. Cage. I’ll explain later.”

“Is that a Kytinn?!?”

“Yes, and a harmless one.”

“She’s adorable. What is this, the Disney Channel version of the Kytinn?” Johnny strides towards the pair. “I’ll watch her for a minute if you go get Mileena from Cassie’s apartment. You know where that is?”

“I can find it. What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know. She needs to get there and stop them from opening the tomb.” Johnny wipes his brow. “I got this, okay? You just go get her and send her through to the Krypt. Hi, N’Malah.” He bends down to her height, smiling politely. “How old are you?”

She speaks in a cute childish voice, passingly similar to the shrill buzzing of D’Vorah, yet very different. “This one was asleep for twenty-five years, and awakened earlier this day.”

“...okay.” Johnny’s learned not to question the laws of this weird world. “Just get going, Fujin! Please!”

“Very well.” Fujin nods, tossing his braid over his shoulder, and vanishes in a gust of wind. “Off to find Mileena...”

He locates her in Cassie’s living room, strutting back and forth with her hands clenched into fists as she worries and frets. “Lady Mileena?”

“Who are you? Raiden’s cousin?” She sizes up the intruder, hands on her hips. “You look like him,
but not quite…”

“We’re not related directly, but I’m like his brother. I'm also a god. My name is Fujin. There’s no time for pleasantries. Take my hand, I’ll bring you back to the Sky Temple.”

She does as asked, gripping Fujin’s hand tightly, and reappears in the temple’s courtyard in seconds, hair ruffled by the power of the wind.

“Hello, Mr. Cage-- and what is tha--”

Johnny interrupts her before she can finish the sentence. “As ked the same question myself a minute ago. She’s not D’Vorah, not related to her, just a cute little kiddie Kytinn who got stuck in the tunnels in a cocoon or whatever. Right?”

N’Malah waves politely with one stinger. Mileena shudders.

Fujin herds Mileena towards the portal to the Krypt, not bothering to ask about the trivialities of the situation. He’s learned to keep a cool head in a crisis. “Just go!”

---

“STOP!”

Frost comes running down the flight of steps, darting through the tunnel passages to try to find the heart of the tomb where they’ve all gathered, but as she rounds a corridor into a dark passage she skids to a halt, realizing she’s lost track of her location. “Dammit, dammit--”

“Frost! Calm yourself.” She collides with Raiden, who illuminates the corridor in a burst of surprised lightning, and grabs her, steadying himself and landing on his feet. “What is the matter?”

“I was texting Mileena and she told me that we need not to open Shao Kahn’s tomb because D’Vorah messed with it and she doesn’t know how but it’s bad.” Frost explains hastily, and gasps for breath, bending over. “She’s been here before so I told her to come here--”

“You were text--” Raiden pauses, trying to process the idea of Mileena adapting to Earthrealm life. It’s still quite strange. “All right. What is the status of the situation?”

“I had her call Mr. Cage, who by now should’ve had Fujin send her to the Krypt entry, so we need to go get her!”

“Very well, then let’s--”

A noise like the grinding of gears interrupts them. The ground shakes beneath their feet.

“...we may be too late.” Raiden grabs her around the waist, raising one fist and zooming through the corridor at top speed to reach the center of the tomb. “I dearly hope not! Did she clarify the nature of the threat?”

“No--”

They arrive to a massive half-open tomb door, slowly lifting and shuddering to a halt. It inches up slowly, pulled by an old rusty mechanism, as the group gathers around.

Raiden scatters them out of the way with a slam of his staff to the ground. “Can the opening of the vault be stopped? It is urgent.”
Kitana puts her hands on her hips. “Why? All that trouble we had with the Edenian Knights tomb, and now you’re going to interfere? I think not!”

“Daughter! Please.” Sindel approaches cautiously, ill at ease with the tension in the room. “What is the matter, Raiden?”

“The tomb of Shao Kahn may contain a greater threat than we know.” Raiden shudders, imagination briefly running wild. Frost probably hasn’t made the connection yet, but the survival of N’Malah, combined with the intervention of D’Vorah in Shao Kahn’s burial, holds ominous possibilities.

He peers through the yawning doorway, but it is impossible to see anything except for a faint glint in the darkness.

Raiden bows his head, steadying his nerves, and summons as much lightning as he can, hurling it into the room’s depths and sparking each torch in a searing blaze.

It illuminates a massive roomful of weapons… and no grave.

Frost sighs deeply, sinking to her knees. “All that and it’s just Shao Kahn’s goddamn man-cave.”

“That does not help us.” Raiden rubs his temples. “Come, Frost. We need to go to the entryway.” And he grabs her and zooms off in a blast of lightning before she can protest, leaving the others to deal with the huge pile of treasure.

Cassie’s already sifting through the arsenal. “Why does Shao Kahn have rocket launchers?”

Jacqui shrugs, grabbing one. “Why not? I’m going to take one. Hottest accessory of the season. No girl should be without it.”

Cassie chuckles, running her fingers over a strange glittering weapon with a wavy blade. “Wonder what this is for.”

“Oh! That’s like the one that belongs to Ashrah!” Sareena leaps to her feet, spotting the unusual weapon from a distance. “Or maybe it is the same one… she mentioned that it was taken from her some time back, and she was none too pleased about it.” She grabs the knife, tucking it into a holster at her hip. “I’ll return it to her when I see her.”

“Be my guest.” Cassie is admiring a larger, shinier rocket launcher. “This thing’s calling my name.”

Raiden sets Frost down at the top of the stairs, letting her catch her balance and breathe. “Are you all right? Tell me the details.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m okay. I just know Mileena’s pretty damn sure that we shouldn’t open Shao Kahn’s tomb. And we need to, right?”

“Yes. The way to unlock the Kamidogu is almost certainly in there.”

“Almost certainly?”

Raiden shrugs helplessly. “That is the extent of all possible research! Now hold still—” And without further warning he grabs her again and goes hurtling into the air, propelled by a blast of
lightning. Flying over the expanse of the Krypt’s winding maze, they land in the entryway courtyard.

A figure dressed in pink greets them, shivering.

Frost takes off her coat, tossing it over. “Sorry, wrong color, but you need this and I don’t. Also, hi.”

Mileena wraps the coat around herself gratefully. “Did they open the tomb?”

“We thought they were gonna, but it was just his big weapon room.”

“Oh, the armory! Yes, it was constructed that way on purpose, so that those without firsthand knowledge of the tomb would be led astray.”

“It sure got us.”

“Fortunately, I know the way to find the true mausoleum of Shao Kahn. I glimpsed it briefly.” Mileena treads through the snow, shaking her feet with each step like a dissatisfied cat. “Pitiful weather. Raiden, can you fly us there?”

“Gladly.” Raiden holds both girls carefully and soars back along the distance of the Krypt, depositing them on the steps and descending once more. “Let us hope this goes as well as possible.”

“MILEENA!” An angry shriek and a blur of green stops Mileena in her tracks, dragging her into the tomb and pinning her to the wall with a triple-bladed knife pointed against her throat. “Why? Why are you here? After everything you did in the name of Shao Kahn?! You DARE?”

“Jade, let me go!” Mileena frees herself with a powerful teleport-kick that sends the other girl reeling backwards. She lands on a low-hanging lantern and glares down like cornered prey. “I’m here to help, and I just so happen to know the way through this miserable rotten labyrinth…” She trails off into silence, catching sight of a noble figure clad in dark blue.

“Sister…”

Kitana meets her eyes from across the corridor, a painfully intense piercing gaze.

Mileena looks away, clambering down from the lantern and cowering behind a pillar.

Kitana approaches with steady quick footsteps, heels slamming on the hard floor. “Mileena, face me.”

With great reluctance and her teeth bared, Mileena steps out, body language tense. She’s ready to fight or flee. She wasn’t ready for this confrontation just yet.

Kitana grabs her by the chin, cupping a hand under her jaw, and studies her face. It’s been so long, but it’s just like yesterday, that horrid memory of finding her warped clone.

“You are not me!”

Mileena inches towards her, standing up taller. “I-- don’t want to be you. I have an identity of my own!”

Kitana lifts an eyebrow, heart pounding in her chest. “Do you now?”
“I do!” Mileena’s confidence grows, and she shoves Kitana away with a wave of her hand and a snarl. “I am Mileena Kahnum. You are Princess Kitana. We are hardly alike. Sisters need not be identical.”

“You’re not my--”

The words die in Kitana’s throat.

“You came to aid us in raiding the tomb of Shao Kahn? Truly?”

“For what other purpose would I be here? I have no love left for that man, not after all I now know. I only loved him because no one else would treat me as a thing of value.” Mileena spits on the ground, wiping her mouth, and bares her teeth again. “Never again! I have learned the difference between being respected and humored.”

“Do you respect me as Princess of Edenia… false sister?” Kitana growls the word in a low tone, holding her bladed fans behind her back.

“Yes, and when I reclaim my throne, I intend to help free your world!” Mileena blurs this out before she can help it, desperate to redeem herself in the eyes of a family that will never be hers. “I mean that with all my honor!”

“Preposterous!”

Shinnok steps forward, intervening at last. “What she says is true.”

“And why should I trust you? You’re a traitor, to allow her here!”

“Does that make me a traitor, as well? Watch your words, Kitana!” Raiden joins the conversation, standing faithfully at Shinnok’s side. “Mileena’s character has grown tremendously since you last encountered one another. I suggest that we allow her the benefit of the doubt.”

Jade speaks flatly, hovering close behind Kitana. “Why should I?”

Mileena opens her mouth and a torrent of bad news pours out. “It’s possible D’Vorah intended to use the emperor’s corpse as an incubator! At the time I thought that her fanatical devotion was genuine, and stood by to allow her to mourn, but it was all false!”

Kitana is disgusted, but unconvinced. She knows enough about the whole story by now to offer an opinion. “How would a Kytinn, no matter how resilient, endure almost three decades of confinement in such a shell?”

Shinnok clears his throat.

“It’s possible. I found one.”

A collective gasp rises from the entire room, bordering on a shriek.

“Not D’Vorah!” Shinnok’s very quick to clarify. “A small innocent one named N’Malah. She was hidden deep in the Kytinn tunnels and I stumbled upon her. Her mother died protecting her when D’Vorah sold out her race to Shao Kahn in exchange for power.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Kitana wrinkles her nose, appalled at the notion. “Well, where is this horrifying child-creature now?”

“With Fujin, back at the Sky Temple. She is hardly horrifying. I suggest you watch your tone.”
Shinnok steps forward a few paces more, standing up for Mileena. “The empress’s motives are genuine. She is here on Earthrealm to protect me after what D’Vorah did to me. She has no interest in damaging this mission.”

“Why would I?!” Mileena exclaims, offended at the thought. “I don’t want you all turning back to revenants, either. How utterly illogical do you believe me to be?”

Finally, after a long and uncomfortable silence, Kitana backs down.

“Proceed.”

They all fall back into their respective groups. Sareena and Takeda gather around Shinnok, reassuring him. “You okay?”

“I will be all right.” He sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Actually, I won’t. I do not care to enter that tomb. I cannot confront… that, if the possibility is true.”

“I’m not going in.” Sareena volunteers some moral support immediately. “I need to watch the egg. Stay here with me and help.”

“I’m staying, too.” Takeda joins encouragingly. “Just… just in case.”

“Hey. Team Humanity, c’mere. Let’s go help.” Cassie strolls over, greeting Shinnok. “Hi. You did good back there.” She squeezes him in a quick unexpected hug, then pulls away. “Stryker, Kabal, Jacqui, let’s make an inventory of those weapons, huh?”

Frost trudges past the group, ascending the staircase with dull thudding steps.

“Where you going?”

She groans. “Someone’s got to guard the door. Now I’ve got no one left to talk to.”

Cassie laughs. “Just text Dad. He’ll annoy you so much you won’t notice time passing.”
“The entry is here.” Leading the group, Mileena gestures to a large towering statue of Shao Kahn in one of the distant corridors, a monument that’s brutish and crude in its construction. “There’s a hidden latch in the horn of his helmet. May I?”

Kitana waves boredly. “Yes, yes, go on. Get this over with.”

She scrambles up the side of the statue, tugging on the horn and fixing it to its correct angle. “The idea was that only someone familiar with Shao Kahn would notice anything amiss.”

Kitana puts her hands on her hips, squinting and staring upward. “But you can’t even see the helmet from down here!”

Raiden clears his throat. “Shao Kahn was a strong man, but not a smart one.”

Sindel nods. She’s been staying quiet this whole time, processing Mileena’s surprising arrival and pondering how to treat the girl. It’s hard to detach her entirely from the legacy of Shao Kahn, still so fresh in Sindel’s memory, but Mileena is clearly desperate for family, and her intentions are no longer harmful. Everyone in their group has been allowed a second chance. Why not her, too?

Brandishing her staff with a flourish, Jade forcefully pokes at a panel of the wall where a lever just clicked. It moves, but only barely, budging out of place a mere inch.

With a mighty shove, she breaks it down with her bare hands, opening the door wide as the stone barrier crumbles into dust. “Let’s go!”

The Edenian mother and daughter are next, then the Shaolin trio, following hot on their heels. Cyrax, Smoke, and Nightwolf have opted to stay outside and guard the opening, just in case of a worst-case scenario. Hopefully they will have nothing to do.

Mileena moves to enter the passageway, but Raiden stops her with a gentle hand on the shoulder. “Thank you for coming.”

Mileena nods. “It’s the least I can do. We’re all very lucky Frost was bored enough to message me.”

“I would agree.” Raiden half-smiles, but turns serious again in an instant. “I have not told the others yet, because I was not certain and did not want them distracted, but I have reason to believe the item required to unlock the Kamidogu is a coin.”

“A coin?”

“Yes. The clue, loosely translated, instructed the reader to face both sides when confronted with change, in order to find the path to the interrealm portal. That suggests a coin, I think…”

“Hmm. I’d believe it.” Mileena ponders this, rubbing her chin, and gnaws on her lip in frustration. “The good news is, I definitely know where there’s one of those in here.”

“And the bad news?”

“We have to open Shao Kahn’s sarcophagus to find it. We’ll probably awaken whatever’s within.”

Raiden lays a hand on her shoulder, mustering as much courage he can in the face of today’s
“We will face it boldly.”

Mileena grins, fluttering her eyelashes. “As you always do.”

He clears his throat, glancing away. “Shall we go?”

Mileena lights the path ahead of her with a flash of bright pink energy. “Be my guest.”

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The mausoleum is far, far underground, through a few long corridors connected to a tiny singular staircase. They file downward in absolute silence, finding their way by torchlight.

When they finally arrive, Jin puts his hands on his hips skeptically. “I’m going to guess the huge stone box held off the ground by the pillars is the one that has the dead guy in it.”

“A wise observation, little cousin.” Lao laughs to himself, adjusting his hat. It’s a nervous habit, but he’s glad for the comforting halo of light in this gloomy dismal chamber. “The treasure chests aren’t worth worrying about until later.”

Jin’s eyes widen, glancing around. “Did someone say treasure?”

“Stay on task!” Liu Kang nudges him, drawing his attention back to the mausoleum. Kitana’s already climbed to the top of it, sitting on its stone lid and studying its construction. “She may know what to do.”

Kitana stands up, and nimbly leaps back to the ground, landing with a twirl of her fans. “I don’t know what to do.”

Liu grins sheepishly. “At least you tried.”

Mileena interrupts without hesitation. “Raiden could take off the lid with his lightning abilities. Correct?”

Jin’s hesitant. “I don’t think that’s how lightning works.”

“Between us, we could lift it.” Sindel’s voice echoes from high up in the room, floating midair at the other side. “If we focus our power strongly enough, it is possible.”

Raiden nods. “That will allow enough time for someone to slice open the mummy and remove the coin.”

Jade cocks her head, puzzled. “Coin? What coin?”

“I believe the item we need is a coin… of the type placed in the mouth of the deceased, to aid their passage to the afterlife.” He explains it clearly, encouraged by Mileena. “One of you will need to reach into the skull and retrieve it.”

They all shudder in unison.

Kitana leaps up again, though, summoning all the bravery left in her soul after this ordeal. “I will do it. Gladly.”

Mileena bites her lip, full of conflicted feelings. It’s still hard to accept the necessity of destroying Shao Kahn’s body, as his creation and heir, but in all likelihood, it’s already ruined. Besides, would it not be better to kill whatever’s been feeding off him, and preserve his legacy? She can rationalize
this to herself that way. She’s gotten very good at rationalization.

“Jade, Mileena, Jin, Lao, Liu -- be ready to fight no matter what happens.” Raiden doesn’t want to address it in anything other than vague terms. Best not to confront the horror until they truly need to. “Are we ready?”

Kitana’s the first to speak. “Yes. Let’s get it done.”

Raiden locks eyes with Sindel, coordinating their powers. Together they lift the top of the coffin, grimacing in pain at the sheer weight of the stone. Once it’s off, they can’t hold it much longer and Jade leaps out of the way as the slab falls to the ground, cracking into pieces.

Raiden sighs. “At least it is done.”

Kitana hops up on a ledge, ready to get the job done. “What’s inside?”

Raiden peers in with a frown. “An exceptionally large mummified corpse.”

Kitana soars up and lands on the edge of the sarcophagus, balancing herself carefully on the stone rim of the coffin. Leading over, she and slashes across the mummy’s face, ripping open the bandage wraps, and slams her gloved fist against Shao Kahn’s long-dead jaw. Knocking the teeth out of place, she reaches in and plucks out a large golden coin, gripping it tight. She descends to the ground with a triumphant clench of her fist. “Here it is!”

“YES!” Mileena beams broadly, teeth glinting in the light. “Marvelously done, dear sister!”

And then they wait, prepared for the next horror.

Nothing happens.

Absolutely nothing.

Not even the slightest stir from the mummy, despite all the noise and chaos and the clatter from the tomb invasion.

Time elapses, feeling like an endless tense struggle of waiting. Eventually, Raiden floats over and pokes and prods at the ex-emperor’s body with his lightning-staff, hardly believing it.

“...can we go?” Jin taps his bow on the ground, shoulders slumping. “Please.”

Raiden shakes his head. “We must stay vigilant.”

Eventually, finally, Raiden floats down to the ground, giving up. “It appears there is nothing except a withered corpse.”

Sindel descends to the floor as well, coming up beside the other Edenians. Mileena stands across from them, staring at the floor disconsolately.

Sindel catches her eye, and extends a hand to her, gesturing for her to come closer.

Dragging her feet, Mileena approaches, second-guessing herself.

Jin’s the first to bolt up the stairs of the exit, followed closely by Liu and Lao, and together, the Shaolin, Edenians, and thunder-god leave the doomed tomb behind.

Silence reigns again.
And, behind them in the sarcophagus, far out of reach and out of sight, the mummy finally stirs.

This One will wait as long as she needs.

Stirring in the darkness, the reborn offspring of D’Vorah bursts out of the mummified body in a spray of bandage shreds and shriveled organs. The others have left, good, good… Does This One have a name? No, hardly. This One is D’Vorah as well. Not a child, but a reincarnation.

As is this one. A second, similar creature clambers over the edge of the lid of the coffin, falling to the ground and landing with surprising poise. Both of these Kytinn are almost full adult size, nourished by the emperor’s strength and power as he lay rotting. Their compound eyes glow a horrible red.

A third version of D’Vorah’s spawn claws her way out, immediately unfurling her wings and soaring up towards the ceiling of the chamber, and smacks into it and goes spiraling downward before her eyes adjust and she catches herself with a powerful grab of her pincers.

All three pairs of those awful eyes lock in the dark, finding each other like a beacon.

They join hands and grip tight, echoing as a chorus of voices. Find. Destroy. Devour.

But where next?

Follow them!

Fist clenched and teeth visible in a horrid grin, the first D’Vorah scampers towards the exit, pincers already dripping with venom.

They’re close by. So close. We can taste them.

Their sacrifice will honor Empress D’Vorah.

Mileena just can’t settle her nerves. Although Sindel has been generous enough to walk beside her arm in arm on the way back up, magical eyes glowing bright to illuminate the path ahead, she’s still consumed by a sense of worried horror that she can’t justify.

Sindel looks at her with a concerned gaze. “Mileena?”

She flinches. “What?”

“I sense unrest in you.”

Mileena’s silent for a long while.

Eventually she speaks again, quietly. “How close are we to the surface?”

“We are not far from the staircase, if my memory serves.”

“How-- how was this built? Do you remember the floorplan at all?”

Sindel furrows her brow, recalling their journey. “We went straight forward, then, after some time, to the left-- and then to the right-- and after two more right turns we were within the tomb. I
believe it was built symmetrically.”

“Symmetrically?” Mileena’s voice rises a little, full of anxiety. “So there’s another path from the tomb to the staircase?”

“I think so. To prevent emergencies due to cave-ins, underground tunnels are built with two paths.”

Mileena rips off her borrowed coat, flinging it aside, then takes off running, bolting forward at superhuman speed to catch up with the rest of the group before they turn the corner. “STOP!”

- - -

“Something’s amiss downstairs.”

Shinnok rises from his seat on the cold stone floor, wincing and stretching out his sore limbs. Sitting in this dreary dismal tomb isn’t doing wonders for his health.

Realizing the others are awaiting an explanation, he offers one as briefly as he can. “The jackets have safety trackers, Mileena borrowed Frost’s, and its signal just went silent.”

“The jackets have what?!”

“There’s no time to explain.” Shinnok rubs his hands together, preparing his magic. “I’m going to teleport to Raiden’s location. If I do not return within fifteen minutes, please write a very nice obituary for all of us.”

“Wait, you guys can both teleport to each other?!”

“Approximately. What’s the matter?”

Cassie snickers to herself. “Nothing. See you soon, I hope.”

Shinnok rolls his eyes, then vanishes in a shower of magenta sparks.

He materializes at the stairway entrance next to a very surprised Smoke, Cyrax, and Nightwolf. “Hello there. I presume the group has gone down to the tomb within that door?”

Cyrax answers helpfully. “Nearly an hour ago.”

“Much too long. Hrm. What has Raiden gotten himself into now?” Shinnok shakes his head, conjuring a skeletal weapon just in case. Leaving the guard trio behind, he descends down the stairs, following the signal of Raiden’s own magical glow. He’s not too far-- but there’s some interference… more sinister energy that he’s never sensed before.

Shinnok stops short, hearing a skittering noise from the tunnel beyond him. Drawing back into the shadows, he goes silent, engulfing himself in a vanishing spell that drowns his body heat with magic to avoid any form of detection.

His night-vision is superb. At times, he wishes it wasn’t.

Before his eyes, he sees a sinister silhouette with pincers extending from its back, a large hulking figure bigger than D’Vorah with glowing eyes like hot coals.

He’s frozen in place, barely able to draw breath, but this new hellish figure ignores him and stalks past him, passing through the corridor in search of its prey.
Quickly, Shinnok surveys the place’s structure, drawing on his perception powers. The tomb is at
the opposite end, then two symmetrical corridors, connecting to the stairway entrance…

Heart pounding hard, he follows the beast through the darkness, floating behind like a shadow.

- - -

“RAIDEN!” Mileena’s suddenly hysterical, grabbing the god by the shoulder and yanking him to a
halt. “Listen to me! I can sense Father’s energy, but it’s not the same! Something-- *something* is in
here, and getting closer--”

“Mileena, breathe!” Raiden conjures his usual calming spell, infusing it into her, and a few
moments later she inhales sharply and gazes at him steadily. “Now tell me.”

“There’s-- there’s not enough room for a fight in here… ugh. I think the creature did hatch from the
mummy, it just waited for us!” She clenches her fists, claws digging into her palms. “I can feel
it…”

Kitana pushes towards the exit, moving quickly. “Then let’s *leave*, for the love of the Realms!”

“No! The corridor’s a rectangle--” Mileena gestures quickly, trying to explain as panic surges
again. “D’Vorah always talked about her young in the plural. Multiple. Several. I don’t think
there’s just one!”

“What?”

“I can feel Shao Kahn’s presence *on both sides!* Forward and backward through this passage!”
Mileena runs a hand through her hair, gnashing her teeth. She can taste blood in her mouth from
biting her tongue. “What do we do?!”

Raiden silently moves past her, guarding the back of the group. “If this is true, I will strike down
the one behind us. The rest of you, go forward and attack the one that lurks ahead.”

Kitana looks at him demandingly. She doesn’t want to seem as rude as she is right now, but she’s
historically had a bad experience trying to trust Mileena. “You believe in her judgment?”

“I do.” Raiden gazes at her evenly. “Go forward and *get out.*”

Sindel coughs quietly. “My power is drained. Since breaking the revenant curse, my strength is
significantly diminished.”

“The same is true for us as well.” Lao and Liu speak up together, reluctantly confessing the
problem. “We have enough left to help, but--”

“Just get behind *me!***” Mileena shoves them to the side of the corridor, forging a path ahead with
her gleaming sais in hand. “Kung Jin, rally to me!”

He hops into action, bow lighting up and arrows ready to launch. “Yes ma’am!”

Mileena gazes defiantly into the darkness, calling out through the long pathway. “D’Vorah!
Traitor, usurper, destroyer, scum of the realms! Face me!”

A hollow laugh echoes from the gloom. “This One appreciates your flattery!”

“*Never again!*” Mileena crosses her arms, clashing the edges of her blades together, and flings
herself down the passage in a spectacular somersault, blazing with pink energy. “You devour and
devour with no mind for the consequences! You’ll be crushed like a gnat!”

Right on cue, a hail of glowing arrows soar past her, thudding like pinpricks and piercing through the hidden adversary’s outer shell, and the target shrieks in pain. Jin whoops with delight as his shots find their mark.

At last, Mileena gets a glimpse of her enemy’s new reborn form. Towering above her with the height of a god, the new D’Vorah lifts herself off the ground with her lower pincers, the other pair ready to seize and stab Mileena without mercy. A toxic venomous substance drips down her body, eating away at the stone.

“Not this time!”

Teleporting behind the new D’Vorah, Mileena kicks her down the corridor with more power than her small body should be able to hold, following it up with a flurry of blows to her spine, severing one pincer.

“NO!” She gets up, lunging for Mileena, but a long tendril of silver hair wrapping around the Kytinn’s leg yanks her back, a last-minute save by Sindel. Sprawled on the floor, D’Vorah rises and launches herself towards the empress, snarling. “You will call this one D’Vorah Kahnum!”

“No, I won’t!”

On cue with Mileena’s shriek, a well-timed throw of Kung Lao’s hat slices off another pincer, while Jade’s glaive mangles her wings and Liu Kang’s fireball incinerates part of the new D’Vorah’s arm, burning it to a disintegrating crisp.

Stumbling backwards, D’Vorah steadies herself against the wall, blazing eyes turning to look at the gathered group. Turning slowly, her gaze locks on Kitana, face lighting up with malevolent glee. “If This One cannot have the empress, why not the princess?”

“NO, YOU DON’T!”

Mileena tackles her opponent bodily, forcing her to the ground, and delivers a solid punch to her sternum, shattering her ribs. Taken aback, D’Vorah gasps for air, howling at the top of her lungs in a muffled shriek. “False empress! I am a greater successor to Shao Kahn than you EVER were!”

In the shocked silence that follows, Mileena glimpses a bright flash of lightning at the other end of the tunnel. The second fight has begun.

She raises her blade and drives it straight through D’Vorah’s throat. Blue blood spurts out, soaking Mileena’s shirt. She doesn’t care one bit.

As D’Vorah desperately scrambles to get free, lunging and clawing at Kitana, Mileena grabs the reborn Kytinn’s face and aggressively slams her head against the ground.

“That is for trying to hurt my sister!”

She does it again, hitting harder this time against the unrelenting stone.

“THAT is for what you did to Shinnok!”

Mileena grips D’Vorah’s jaw in one clawed hand, forcing her to meet her eyes.

“And THIS... is for me!”
With wicked precision, she leans in and takes a bite out of the front of D’Vorah’s skull.

Mileena leaps off and stands up, spitting out the grisly mess of bone shards, and watches her sworn enemy writhe in screeching death-throes. To seal the deal, she stomps on her throat, pulverizing it til she no longer breathes.

She points at Liu Kang. “Shaolin. Help me, and burn this.”

Liu Kang doesn’t need to be asked twice. Summoning the mightiest blaze he can manage, he forcefully incinerates the remains of the first new D’Vorah.

Mileena watches in satisfaction as they vanish into ash.

Raiden joins them soon after, holding the electrocuted corpse of the second D’Vorah by the throat. Throwing it aside, he burns that one into oblivion, too, leaving only a pile of shattered bones.

In traumatized silence, the group shuffles towards the exit at long last, afraid to breathe a word.

It seems like an eternity til they finally reach the corner of the corridor, lit faintly by the glow of Jin’s bow and Lao’s hat. They’ve never been so glad to see a hallway before in their lives.

Drawing to a halt, Mileena catches her breath, speaking in a weak muted tone. “Thank you for the help.”

“You saved us…” Kitana’s voice is even quieter. “We have much to discuss when we escape.”

“Yes.” Mileena breathes a sigh of relief, stepping forward. “We do--”

The ghastly silhouette of the third D’Vorah rises up before her, laughing horribly.

This Kytinn flings Mileena aside with a pincer, stabbing deep into her chest, and stalks forward, even more warped and monstrous than the other two of her kind. The powerful influence of Shao Kahn gave her an extra pair of stinger limbs, and she clashes them all together as she walks with confident steps, terrorizing the group.

She uses her toxins to great effect, spitting out a spray of venom. As her prey scrambles and dodges, she catches them in a flurry of poisoned pincer-stabs, felling the other two Edenians and the Shaolin in quick succession. They collapse to the floor, screaming and clutching their chests, rendered powerless in a horrifying instant.

Only Raiden remains, and as he raises his staff and gathers his lightning to try desperately to strike down D’Vorah once more, he can’t help but mouth a quick prayer, hoping against hope.

May the Elder Gods be with me.

Those fools? Hardly. But I’m here instead.

A very familiar voice echoes through Raiden’s mind at the exact moment a skeletal scepter punctures D’Vorah’s chest in a spray of blood, stabbed straight through by a vengeful, delighted Shinnok.

Rising up behind her, he shoves D’Vorah against the wall with a forceful kick, conjuring bone hands to wrap around her neck, wrists, and ankles.

Shinnok is fueled by the power of rightful revenge, refusing to let his fear show. Flexing his fingers, he lets magic surge through his whole body, invigorating him once again.
“You’ll pay, D’Vorah. Oh, you’ll pay.”

She tries to spit venom at him, but it vaporizes harmlessly in the force field he’s built up around himself. He smirks.

“Those who try to harm me only bring pain and suffering upon themselves multiplied tenfold!”

For a moment, he glances sideways. *Raiden, heal them. Don’t just stand there and listen to my dramatic revenge speech.*

*Yes, of course.* Raiden kneels and begins tending to the others, neutralizing the effects of the poison with his healing magic. *Kill her already.*

*No. I need her to know this.*

Shinnok continues, still wearing that profound, relieved smirk.

“You are not the last of the Kytinn, D’Vorah. In fact, you are the least of them.”

“…How can that be?” She screams in his face, struggling against the binds of the skeletal hands, but he is unyielding. “You lie!”

“Others still live, despite your efforts… and they will achieve through honor what you never could through cruelty!”

“What would YOU know of honor, Shinnok?!”

“Very little, I will admit… but I have more now than ever before.” He sets his hands on his hips, watching the monstrous creature as her useless rage grows. “I have the capacity to learn, and to join the company of others, and seek a better life. You, D’Vorah, do not, and that is why you will always be doomed.”

He silences the rest of her remarks by tightening the grip around her throat.

“And now, I’ll not waste any more time….”

With a horrible wrenching noise, he yanks the skeleton hands apart, ripping the last new D’Vorah to pieces. Limb by limb, she falls apart, her arms and legs and pincers all collapsing into a grisly heap. Her lifeless head tops off the mess, landing face-down in the gore.

Shinnok leans down and picks her head up, holding it up dramatically.

“Et tu, D’Vorah?”

He drops it again, letting it fall at his feet.

Raiden watches him open-mouthed.

*I’m… I’m glad you are coping. What now?*

*Hmm. I have to dispose of her somehow, don’t I?*

With a snap of his fingers, Shinnok summons his reliable lizard-demon companion, arriving in a shower of red sparks and waddling down the corridor towards him.

It gleefully starts munching on the pile of limbs, unconcerned by the crispy outer shell.
Raiden looks at him pleadingly. *Can we go now?*

*Yes, Raiden. The demon will leave when he chooses. I’d hardly wish to bring any of this up to the surface. Let’s just go.*

*What do we tell the others?*

*We should tell them the truth.*

*Very well. That is wise.*

*Are the wounded ones well enough to walk yet? I’d hate to have to carry them.*

*Yes. Raiden bends down and awakens them, gently tapping their shoulders. “Come. It is over.”*

Mileena gets up first, staggering in the blood-slick corridor, and bends down and grabs Kitana’s hand, pulling her up before she can protest. She does the same for Sindel, helping the queen to her feet, while the Shaolin and Jade get up of their own, checking on each other’s health.

Jin is the first to realize, suddenly overwhelmed by all that’s happened. He looks between the gods exhaustedly. “Raiden. You saved us.”

“I only healed you.” Raiden gestures to Shinnok, who’s standing very matter-of-factly, blocking the line of sight to his pet demon and his afternoon snack. “He saved you.”

Shinnok nods silently. “D’Vorah is dead, no matter if once reborn.”

Kitana speaks up. “There were three of them in total.”

“What?!”

“Raiden killed one, Mileena destroyed the other. It was satisfying.” Kitana slips her arm through Mileena’s, leading her towards the stairs back up to the surface. “I regret to admit that I owe you my life.”

Mileena giggles softly, suddenly overjoyed. “It was nothing.”

“It was certainly something! My life is significant, is it not?” Kitana huffs under her breath, carefully climbing the steps. “Allow me to say, Mileena, I’m pleased to find out you have a mind of your own rather than being Shao Kahn or Shang Tsung’s puppet. You’re not so bad.”

“Thank you! I think.”

“Maybe we can get to know each other after all.”

Mileena’s heart soars.

She dashes up the rest of the steps two at a time, bolting towards freedom with her newfound family close behind.
“This can’t be all.”

Hands on her hips, Cassie surveys the bizarre statue. It’s in the middle of a tiny alcove tucked in the center of the Krypt up a flight of winding stairs. It’d be easy to miss. But somehow, Raiden remembers where it is, and so, at last, the troupe of adventurers follows him out of the tomb, weary feet dragging in the snow.

Fortunately, he spares most of them the responsibility of dealing with the Kamidogu retrieval. After all they’ve endured, it would just be unfair. So, following careful directions, Jacqui and Nightwolf lead the pack of ex-revenants and kombatants all the way back to the portal, assuring their safety.

Only Cassie remains with Raiden, acting as his trusted assistant once again.

She’s glad for the responsibility. She really is. But she’d appreciate an explanation.

Beyond the alcove’s wrought-iron doors, the statue towers like an ugly metal lawn ornament, depicting a fearsomed winged demon sinking its fangs into some unfortunate human with crudely sculpted abs. Its thick tail is wrapped around the man’s body, encasing him in choking coils.

She raises an eyebrow. “Who designed this?”

Raiden shrugs helplessly. “Perhaps we would all rather not know.”

“They had bad taste.” Cassie paces back and forth, feeling light snowflakes falling into the collar of her jacket, and shivers at the chill. “So we have the coin now? Great. You’re going to need to tell me where it goes.”

Raiden places the coin in her palm, very reverent and solemn. “This item cannot be touched by a god. The responsibility is yours.”

“Aw, there goes my theory that Shinnok was the one who made that statue.” Cassie laughs under her breath. It was a plausible idea, all things considered. “There’s this… this little bowl thing at the bottom. What’s up with that?”

Raiden ponders it. “Come to think of it, this was modeled after a sacrifice basin from an ancient cult. I believe I saw similar sketches in my old notes.”

Cassie jumps back. “Sacrifice basin? Don’t tell me this has a knife that’s going to shoot out and kill me.”

“No, the killing would have been done on a separate altar.”

“Because that’s so much better.” She rolls her eyes, stepping forward again. “There’s a slot in the bottom of the bowl. Could that be it?”

Raiden leans over, studying it. “Use it.”

With deep suspicion, Cassie does as asked. The coin from Shao Kahn’s corpse drops perfectly into the slot, tumbling down and activating an inner mechanism with a creaky mechanical whir.

With a metal clang, the demon rises up and spreads its wings, its frozen metal grimace snarling up
at the sky. Seconds later, the statue deposits a strange glowing red item in the bowl, falling from a chute hidden in the serpent’s tail.

Cassie gapes at it.

“We came all this way for a vending machine?”

“A magical vending machine, if we are to be specific.” Raiden retrieves the item from the bowl, turning it over in the palm of his hand. It glitters ominously in the dim light, a pointy carved angular emblem with rubies embedded in its surface. “Behold, the Netherrealm Kamidogu.”

“Ooh, shiny. Now store that thing in your pocket dimension before someone tries to steal it.”

Raiden does so immediately, vanishing it in a flash of lightning to keep the Kamidogu safe and hidden. Folding his hands back, he bows solemnly to the statue, then turns to leave the alcove, floating above the snow.

Cassie awkwardly bows to it, too, before following after Raiden. Just in case.

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What now?

They’re all asking themselves that, gathered up in the Sky Temple’s cozy library. Cordially welcomed back by Fujin, the group has made themselves comfortable with snacks and cups of tea, thoughtfully delivered from some visiting monks from an Earthrealm temple. Altogether, they’re shaken by the experience, but not too badly. They will surely survive.

Distracted by the thought, Shinnok looks up from where he’s been poking around the bookcase, snapping to attention. What?

Raiden meets the other god’s eyes from across the room. Have you any ideas?

I presume we should now return home. Wherever we may all consider home.

A wise suggestion, but I spoke with Johnny Cage earlier. He still needs to break the bad news. Raiden turns to the door attentively, hearing a firm knock. This may be him.

Johnny stands in the doorway, rain-soaked and distressed, with his grey hair ruffled into messy spikes. “Hey, so, you guys aren’t gonna be able to come back to the mansion. We left open the portal from the Sky Temple to my living room, and there was a storm here while you were away. Which means there was a storm in my living room.”

Cassie winces at the news. “Shit.”

Johnny can’t even figure out what kind of joke to crack about this. “Good thing I’ve got my cleaning crew on speed dial, but it’s going to take at least a couple days to dry everything out. It soaked all the way down to the floor below.”

“Don’t we have anybody with heat powers to dry it out?” Cassie laughs under her breath. “C’mon, you’ve all got to be good for something.”

Liu Kang replies to her from the corner of the room. “Fire powers are not equivalent. I would rather not set Johnny Cage’s house aflame.”

“I don’t think it could even catch fire right now.” Johnny runs a hand through his hair, trying and
failing to brush it back in an orderly fashion. “How do you all feel about farms?”

Liu muses to himself. “Generally positive, I suppose.”

A muffled chorus of other voices offer their agreement.

“How do you all feel about farms?” Johnny directs this comment at the group of ex-revenants, gathered around a comfortable couch. “Catching up on old times, that kind of thing…” He’d rather not elaborate. It’s not his issue to discuss.”

Jacqui interrupts, still hauling a large rocket launcher with her. “Does he know we’re coming, or is this a patented Mr. Cage Surprise?”

“He knows. Don’t worry.” Johnny musters a grin, briefly forgetting about his ruined living room for a split second. “I haven’t patented that, but I should.”

“Okay. Good.” Leaving the others behind, Cassie hops up from her chair to give her dad a hug, offering him one of the extra pastries. “Did you get one of these?”

Johnny grabs it, eating half the thing in one bite. “Thanks. I’m starving.”

“Sorry I don’t have any extra butter.” She smiles halfheartedly. “So if the portals are closed now, how are you going to get home?”

“Your mom’s giving me a ride.”

“What?”

Right on cue, the deafening rhythm of helicopter blades grows louder, slowing and coming to a halt as Sonya deftly lands in the Sky Temple courtyard.

“We’re all going home that way. Raiden can’t do any more portals, and it’s a military chopper. It’ll fit us all, if we don’t mind getting a little bit up close and personal.”

“I’m surprised, Dad. This is the most thorough plan you’ve ever made.”

“You can thank General Blade for that.” As Sonya sweeps through the doorway, Johnny instinctively salutes her, only half-joking. “All present and accounted for, ma’am.”

“They better be.” Sonya smiles at him fondly, while doing an extra headcount, just to be sure. Better safe than sorry.

“No. Not all are present.” Shinnok rises to his feet, stalking towards the front of the room. “Where is the child?”

Kitana makes a face. “What child?”

“Ah--”

With a chill of dread, he remembers that they don’t yet know.

Wincing as he waits for the reaction, Shinnok tells the tale as quickly as he can. “While retrieving the key, when I was alone in the tomb, I stumbled upon the cocoon of a child Kytinn. She is harmless and innocent. I retrieved her and left her with Fujin at the temple. Her name is N’Malah.”
“What?!”

A chorus of shocked voices answers him, but Shinnok silences them with a wave of his hand. “Ask Raiden, Mileena, or Mr. Cage, if you doubt my authority.”

Johnny nods hesitantly. “He’s for real.”

Kitana draws herself up to look taller, staring down Shinnok with a fierce glare. “If you believe I would ever allow a Kytinn to exist anywhere near me, now or in the future, you are sorely mistaken! She must die!”

“Well, what a pity, that is not your decision to make.” Shinnok brushes her aside, passing through the doorway with a courteous nod to Sonya. “I will retrieve her from Fujin.”

Kitana turns to her mother, looking for moral support, but Sindel shakes her head slightly, majestic silver hair falling loose around her shoulders. “I cannot endorse killing an innocent youngling, no matter the race.”

Mileena clears her throat, very softly. “The small Kytinn is fine. If anything, she’s charming.”

“What would you know of ch--” But Kitana catches herself, a bit of good sense and caution taking over, as well as that strange twinge of a guilty conscience that’s been plaguing her ever since Mileena saved her at the tomb.

“...of children? How is this your area of expertise?”

Mileena shrugs. “I saw N’Malah only briefly, but I trust the judgment of Mr. Cage. He is clearly successful at the raising of a child.”

Cassie lifts an eyebrow. “Is that a backhanded compliment to me?”

Mileena ignores the girl. “Besides, the child isn’t your problem, Kitana. I doubt Shinnok would turn to you for help. He will deal with this with the aid of the others. You are needed now as the defender of Edenia’s heritage.”

“Thank you for your confidence in my abilities.” Kitana pouts, but sticks her hands into her pockets, grudgingly accepting this state of affairs. Mileena isn’t exactly an expert at pouring on the charm, but she’s become more tolerable very quickly.

Jade grabs them both by the wrist, tugging them towards the doorway. “Let’s go, the helicopter’s ready. You know, you two don’t look that much alike.”

Kitana sighs with relief, and rolls her eyes pointedly. "I am not exactly familiar with helicopters.”

“You don’t need to be, it’s just a ride. Through the air.” Johnny follows up the back of the pack, making sure everyone’s safely stowed away to travel to the farm. “Doesn’t Outworld have anything like that?”

She wrinkles her brow. “Like the Dragonfly?”

“I don’t know what that is, but yeah. Let’s go with it.” Johnny hangs back, catching up with Cassie again once the room is empty. “Hey. You okay?”

“Yeah. I’m doing all right. We found a huge stash of weapons in Shao Kahn’s armory, so we made a list.” Cassie bites her lip. “Some stuff went horribly wrong in the tomb. Half the group still
doesn’t know. But it ended up okay. Raiden told me about it.”

Johnny sets a comforting hand on her shoulder. “What is it? If you don’t mind telling me.”

“Nah, it’s okay. Uh… D’Vorah laid her eggs in Shao Kahn’s mummy. They hatched when they opened the tomb, and attacked.”

Johnny drops his pastry on the floor. “Holy shit.”

“They’re all extremely dead now, from what I heard. Mileena apparently slaughtered one of them and chomped through her skull.”

“Mileena the Munch strikes again.” Johnny tries to salvage the rest of the pastry, shoving it into his mouth. “Five second rule, though I’ve almost lost my appetite. What about the other two D’Vorah kids?”

“Raiden fried the second one with lightning, and Shinnok ripped up the third one with his bare hands and let his demon lizard eat it.”

“Good. Not gonna lie, he deserves the chance for revenge on D’Vorah. Hope he got in a few extra hits for me.” Johnny wipes his hands on his pants. “It’s sort of a sore subject for him, isn’t it? How’s he holding up? Close encounters of the Kytinn kind, and all that.”

“He seems to be okay. He’s doing well with responsibility of N’Malah, from what I’ve heard.”

“I’m glad. The kid’s all right. She talks in the third person, and she has like three sets of extra limbs, but she’s not that weird.”

“Well, that’s a relief. But I’m guessing we can’t go enroll her in public school.”

“Probably not. Might need to homeschool that one. Shinnok’s going to have his hands full. Unless Kytinn just grow up on their own. I don’t know. We’re all going to find out.”

Cassie shakes her head. “Why am I just accepting it unquestioningly that my strange ex-god former villain roommate is now adopting an insect child?”

“Because life’s just like that sometimes. When Raiden invited me to participate in the tournament, I didn’t even ask any questions about it until about round five.”

“Didn’t he forget to tell you it was real?”

“Yeah.” Johnny hides a smirk. “He did.”

“You know, I’m sort of glad Raiden’s got a team of people to see every day. Immortality’s probably kind of lonely.”

“You know you’ve reached adulthood when you start worrying about the grown-ups in your life.” Johnny smiles ruefully, pulling Cassie into a hug. “Let’s get going before Sonya comes and hauls us into the chopper herself.”

---

General Blade assigns Jacqui to fly the helicopter, much to her surprise. She’s doing a good job at keeping the thing in the air, though it’s a bit of a bumpy ride as she figures out the controls. Finally, the flight path evens out and she sets it to autopilot, relaxing at last and letting go of the stress that’s fueled her so far. “I think I got this.”
“I knew you would.” Sonya gives Jacqui a reassuring nod from the copilot’s seat. She unstraps her seatbelt, climbing out and stretching her legs, and crosses over into the helicopter cabin, addressing the group with an authoritative tone. “Everyone paying attention?”

“Sure am now.” Jin is the first to come to attention, saluting her from a cross-legged position on one of the tiny seats. “What’s the news?”

“I’ve spoken with SF, and in light of the security risk of opening a Netherrealm portal, they’re giving us a high-security bunker in which to conduct the experiment. Ten stories underground, sealed off with concrete on every side. Nothing’s getting in -- or out -- beyond that room.”

Raiden breathes a sigh of relief. “Good. Time is of the essence, but I had hoped I would not be forced to conduct the procedure on civilian grounds--”

Jacqui turns to look at him, astonished. “Were you thinking of doing it on Dad’s farm?!”

“...no.”

“Better not. I don’t want to have to tell Dad all the cows got eaten by a bunch of hellhounds.” Jacqui groans, turning her attention to the chopper’s controls again. Sometimes she wonders if Raiden has any critical thinking skills at all. Do immortals even have to develop a survival instinct?

Takeda chuckles softly, beaming a message to Jacqui. He’s crammed into the corner of the cabin, right behind the pilot’s seat. I wonder about that too.

Her eyebrows shoot up. Eavesdropping on my thoughts?

No! I don’t do that. You were just thinking very loudly.

Yeah, I’ll bet. Jacqui scoffs under her breath. Can you read everyone?

It’s easier for people in close proximity to me. Thoughts are like radio channels. They fade at a distance, and I can only read one person or channel at a time.

Person OR channel?

It’d be possible for multiple people to talk telepathically, if they all had the ability. But the power’s pretty rare.

Out of the corner of his eye, Takeda notices Raiden sitting patiently with his chin in his hands, seemingly lost in thought.

In sudden curiosity, he tunes into his thoughts, just as an experiment. He’s never been able to because Raiden’s a god.

But now he can.

Takeda barely hides his reaction of shock. It must have been the mortal form transformation. Listening intently, he closes his eyes, focusing all his psychic energy.

Raiden’s familiar voice echoes faintly through his mind. When shall we inform the others about the incident in the tomb?

Another voice answers.
It’s Shinnok.

After we land. I don’t want to have to deal with the chaos of telling them all what happened while we’re in the helicopter.

Takeda is instantly burning with curiosity, but he keeps his mouth and his mind quiet, still tuning in.

I can understand that. It might become disastrous, with far too many questions.

Precisely. I’m glad you understand me, Raiden, for once. How did the final task go?

There were no problems or incidents. We arrived at a small enclosed area with an automated statue of a man and a demon. Placing the coin into it yielded the Kamidogu.

An ‘automated statue of a man and a demon’? I can’t even imagine that.

It was quite large and strange. Raiden beams a memory-picture of it over to Shinnok. Cassandra suggested that it might have been your creation.

What? No, that’s far too hideous for my taste. I would at least ensure that the man was accurately sculpted. That’s not how abs are supposed to look.

Takeda stifles a giggle.

So does Raiden.

In a moment of realization, their eyes lock in immediate horror.

Raiden grits his teeth, eyes blazing as he tries to control his expression, but his mental voice is filled with anger and distress. YOU CAN HEAR US?

NOT USUALLY! I’m sorry! Takeda looks away, studying the corrugated metal wall of the helicopter. It was an accident. This is the first time I’ve actually been able to hear you. ’Cause, you know, you guys are gods. Except… not anymore.

Shinnok chimes in. Oh, lovely. Wonderful. Who is the intruder? Takeda, is that you?

Takeda searches the group to find Shinnok, seated at the opposite edge of the cabin with N’Malah tightly clinging to his coat. Briefly, he meets his eyes, then glances away, embarrassed.

I suppose we will have to encrypt our thoughts to a greater degree. Shinnok scowls at him as intently as he can without being noticed. Your disobedience is not appreciated.

I wasn’t trying to do it! Trust me, I don’t want to overhear what you’re saying! Takeda pauses, calculating the risks. …but what was the incident in the tomb?

Shinnok looks like he might murder him with a glare from all the way across the helicopter.

Takeda cringes, and averts his gaze. Never mind.

I will tell the group when we have arrived at the Briggs farm. Raiden is quick with an answer, adopting a soothing tone. For now, try to rest. All the mortals are weary.

Takeda looks around the group, studying their exhausted faces. Raiden’s not wrong. Some of them have dozed off already, leaning on each other’s shoulders. Smoke is watching over the other two
Lin Kuei as they rest peacefully. The Edenians and the Shaolin have gathered together, and Johnny and Cassie are chatting in the corner under their breath, sitting alongside the rest of the humans. Even Sareena is curled up comfortably with her precious Saurian egg.

Takeda feels all at once terribly alone.

*I miss Dad. And Hanzo.* His thoughts wander, staring out the window. *I’m the only Shirai Ryu here. It’s a weird feeling. And so much happened in the Krypt... everything all at once.*

Raiden sets a hand gently on his shoulder, trying to console him. *Don’t ponder the past or the future. We will soon be safe.*

Shinnok catches his eye, too, looking considerably less exasperated. *You are not entirely alone, Takeda. Did we not work together? You did an excellent job. You arguably saved my life.*

Takeda manages a very faint smile. *Arguably? You’re doubting my skills?*

Shinnok rests a hand on his hips. *Very well. You did save my life.*

*It’s just kind of what I do.* Takeda shuts his eyes again, leaning against the sturdy wall of the helicopter. Maybe Raiden has a point.

*See you on the other side.*

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Far at the outskirts of a small rural town, an ordinary farmer is plowing his field.

He barely notices the massive helicopter until its shadow is right above him, settling down with a sputter of exhaust and leaving deep marks in the freshly turned soil.

Appalled, he stares at the foreign object in his field for a long minute, then picks up his phone and dials the police. Nothing else to do.

This isn’t even the first time.

The sheriff and Jax arrive at the same time, practically crashing into each other as they screech to a halt in the farmer’s driveway. Jax hops out of his pickup truck, striding confidently towards the police car, while the sheriff hauls himself out, sipping from a lukewarm cup of coffee.

“Mr. Briggs.” The sheriff looks deeply tired. “Again?”

Jax doesn’t have a good answer for that.

The unfortunate farmer interrupts. “One helicopter landing in my field is more’n enough, but a second one?! I was gonna start planting tomorrow!” He sets his cap backwards on his head, caught between frustration and a strange sense of existential despair. “Briggs, this can’t keep happening!”

“I’ll make up for it. Got my old tractor up n’ running. Tomorrow, I’ll come by and hook up the plow, get it done in half the time.” Jax sets his metal fists on his hips, offering a welcoming smile. “Would that help?”

“...yeah, if you’re offerin’, I’ll take it.” Resolving the dispute, the farmer dejectedly thanks the sheriff and walks back to his tractor, surveying the ruined field.
Jacqui shows up a little too late to offer any apologies. “Hey, Dad.”

“Hey, hon. You did good.” Jax scoops her up in a tight hug, dropping her back on the ground, and she laughs, lightly punching him in the arm. He returns the grin. “Gonna break your hand doin’ that!”

“Hi, Jax.” Sonya steps forward, and, without further comment, offers him a hug, too. “Thanks for doing this.”

“It’s no trouble. Vera and I just redid our basement, so there’s enough room for everyone.”

“How are you going to get them all back to the farm?”

Jax points in the direction of his pickup truck. “Anyone we can’t fit, Vera’ll take in her station wagon.” This time, his smile is weary and wistful. “Never thought I’d be hosting all the revenants in my house, turned right back to the way they were.”

“I know you’ll want some time to talk to them. There’s no rush to return.” Sonya’s tone softens. “Johnny’s house will take some time to dry out. Might be a week.”

“I can handle that.” Jax claps her on the shoulder, squeezing affectionately. “S’ good to see you, Sonya. I’ve missed you, you hear that?”

Sonya smiles, a bit misty-eyed. “You too, Jax.”

“You headed out, now?”

“Yes. I have to take Johnny back to the city. And I’m needed back at the base. Duty calls.”

Jax eyes the large helicopter. “Where ya gonna park that thing?”

“Rooftop. SF rents a couple spaces throughout the city.” Sonya hugs him again, but only briefly, pulling away and directing her gaze towards the chopper as she adopts her military attitude once more. “Everybody, out! Johnny, do a headcount!”

Jax counts them all, too, as they stand scattered through the field. It’s almost mind-boggling.

Near Cassie, there’s Sindel, the reanimated queen who killed him way back when. Now she’s fine. There’s a girl in green with her, too. Must be Jade. And who could mistake Kitana? Near them, that’s got to be Kabal and Stryker, and then Nightwolf. Jax remembers them all fondly.

Smoke he doesn’t recall quite as well, but Jax trusts the judgment of the two Lin Kuei he’s already met. Cyrax and Sareena he recognizes immediately, and Frost, the notorious cat thief. The Shaolin team’s all hanging out together, plus Takeda, who they’re making an effort to include. Nice of them to try. Takeda’s a good kid.

The misfits have banded together, as well. There’s Mileena, Raiden, Shinnok, and a small figure he doesn’t recognize. Must be the little Kytinn that Sonya told him about, clinging tightly to Shinnok’s coat. She’s sort of cute, at least from a distance.

Wrinkling his brow, Jax counts them again, just to be sure he hasn’t forgotten anyone. He doesn’t think so. Sonya took the time to tell him all the details beforehand -- at least, everything she knew.

He has a sneaking suspicion there’s more to the story. There always is.

Cupping a hand to his mouth, Jax steps out into the field and calls to the group, pointing them in
the direction of his pickup truck. “Let’s get goin’ before we wear out our welcome!”

The look of joy and recognition on the ex-revenants’ faces lightens his heart in an instant.
Calm Before the Storm

Close to Jax’s farm, there’s a 24-hour diner. It’s a cozy little place, serving country meals with a welcoming atmosphere. No pretensions, just good food.

Still, they’re not going to be prepared for a table of twenty-one.

Overnight, the group’s been surviving on Jax’s cooking and an assortment of reheated freezer meals. Most of the guests were crammed into the basement together, sharing as many blankets as the Briggs family could conjure up. Cassie, Sareena, and Frost camped out in Jacqui’s room, while the guest room hosted Jin, Takeda, and Cyrax. Everybody else was given a chance to pick and choose where they’d like to stay.

Almost everybody. This time, Jax set another ground rule, though it was for N’Malah, not Shinnok himself, who has risen in overall status from “loathed ex-villain” to “mostly inoffensive yet deeply strange ally.” Shinnok’s own feelings about this change are mixed.

Understandably, though, Jax didn’t want the little insect child in the house, just in case something went wrong, so once more, Shinnok and Raiden parked themselves in the heated barn attic, this time with a third guest. While Raiden and N’Malah slept, Shinnok worked intensely overnight to craft a disguise amulet, presenting the appearance of a normal human child. When he tests it in the morning, it does an awfully good job - enough so that they can invite N’Malah along to the diner, bringing the total number to twenty-two.

Jax can see the waitress’s face fall slowly as she counts the group, putting on a cheery attitude nonetheless. “Hi, Jax. Hi, Vera. And Jacqui! Nice to see ya again! Who are all y’all’s friends…?”

“Hi there. Mornin’. They’re just some old pals I’m catchin’ up with.” He quietly slips her the credit card. “Put it on my tab.”

“I think I can get ya the group discount.” She does another quick headcount, doing some mental math. “Our all-you-can-eat buffet opens in half an hour. You’re a little early.”

“Dammit. Forgot the hours are different on the weekend.” In his haste to get the group fed, Jax hadn’t factored in the diner’s recent change. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry. I can bring y’all some coffee. On the house.”

“That’d be great.” He offers a relieved smile. “Maybe better ask everyone what they want.”

“Should I get my notepad, or a survey form?” The waitress chuckles. “It’s okay. Nice to see so many friendly new faces.”

Sure enough, not long afterwards, they’re all scattered outside on an assortment of picnic tables, chatting amongst themselves. The Edenians opt for juice rather than coffee, while someone thankfully intercepts Mileena before she can ask for something carnivorous.

Raiden requests tea, while Shinnok only wants water. Turning to N’Malah, he asks carefully. “What would you like to drink?”

She smiles brightly. “Plant nectar!”

The waitress hesitates.
“Juice. She means juice. Make that four, not three.” Shinnok adds this hastily, for clarification. At least the disguise amulet hasn’t failed. If it did, it would be a spectacular disaster.

“Aww, ain’t she cute!” The waitress beams at her. “Comin’ right up.”

When the breakfast buffet opens, the group attacks it like a horde of pillaging conquerors, barely mustering the manners to stay in line. The waitress stares at them all, astonished, and studies the strange assortment more closely. “Y’all shootin’ a movie or something?”

“...Yeah, sort of!” Vera approves of the excuse, endorsing it readily. “It’s a community theater project.”

“Oh, will y’all be performin’ it round here?”

“Uh-- no, we’re-- adapting it to film, and they’re shooting some of the scenes here, on the farm.”

The waitress seems content with this explanation.

Silence falls over the group as they devour plate after plate, rebuilding their energy after the tiring adventure of the tomb. Soon, exchanging murmurs under their breath, they all hear about the tale of the three D’Vorahs and the heroism of Mileena and Shinnok, newly enlightened about the horrors lying in wait in the mausoleum of Shao Kahn.

“Good thing we don’t have to go back there.” Cassie attacks her breakfast, chopping up a pancake into syrup-drenched chunks. “Not yet, anyway. We might need to get our hands on those weapons eventually.”

“Leave them be.” Nightwolf’s plate is filled with something vaguely resembling a healthy vegetarian meal, or at least as close as he can get at the country diner. “Nothing is worth the risk of returning to that place now.”

“You can say that again!” Jade shudders, chugging her glass of apple juice in one gulp. “It was so much worse than you could imagine.”

“I’m imagining, and it’s not pretty. At least D’Vorah didn’t do any lasting damage.” Cassie folds up a strip of bacon and shoves the whole thing into her mouth, displaying efficient eating habits that would make Johnny proud and Sonya horrified. “So, as much fun as we’re all having, I don’t think we can stay together in a group this size. Have you guys figured out what you’re doing after we get rid of those soul jars?”

“Actually, yes.” Nightwolf’s kept track of all the plans carefully. “Kung Lao is considering returning to the Wu Shi academy to work with the Shaolin. Smoke will rejoin the Lin Kuei. You already know that Stryker and Kabal will be with Special Forces.”

Cassie nods. “All sounds good so far.”

“As for myself, I’m planning to move to the Sky Temple and document all of our experiences as thoroughly as I can. Fujin may appreciate the company.”

“Aw.” Cassie can’t help but smile. “I worry about Fujin. He might be getting kind of lonely without Raiden.”

“I share your concern. Besides, the Temple is a place of peace, and I’ll hopefully be well-suited to it.”
“I think so.” Cassie’s attention turns back to Jade. “What about you?”

Jade’s disrupted from deep thought. Snapping her head up, she replies quickly. “Kitana, Sindel, and I will move back to Outworld. We’ve discussed this with Mileena. Liu Kang wants to come along, too, after everything he’s been through.”

“I get that.” A faint strain of happiness mixed with sorrow tugs at Cassie’s heart. “Raiden’s gonna miss him.”

“I know.” Jade looks her deep in the eyes, very sincerely. “But Raiden has you now, and everybody else. He’s got so much more than he ever had.”

Nightwolf nods solemnly. “Despite his mortal form, he is thriving more than I have seen for centuries.”

“...Really? Well-- not gonna lie, that’s a huge relief.” Cassie talks through a mouthful of pancakes. “I worry about him, you know? But I worry about everybody. I’m turning into my mom.”

“Happens to everyone.” Jade smiles reassuringly. “Liu Kang’s still technically got his slowed aging from the last tournament. We think there’s a way for him to keep it. If one of the gods fights last, probably Shinnok, the automatic victory blessing should logically just skip him, and stay with Liu instead.”

“Now that’s the kind of rule-breaking I like to hear. I really hope it works. You know, I’ve gotten kinda attached to all you guys. You’ll have to send me letters from Outworld.”

“If Mileena’s grab for the throne is successful, it should be no problem. Personally, I don’t know if she stands a chance, but I’d say the odds are pretty good.” Jade steals Kitana’s juice from another table and takes a sip, putting it back before she can notice. “Hey. Jax has horses, right? I used to ride. Edenian cavalry, and all. I’d love to try again. It’s been a while, but they say you never forget.”

“Yeah, you should ask Jacqui later this afternoon if she’ll take you on a trail ride or something.” Cassie polishes off the rest of the food on her plate. “I’m going back for thirds. Anybody want anything?”

“More juice, if you wouldn’t mind. Thanks.”

Cassie grins, grabbing the empty glass. “Coming right up.”

Nearby, Shinnok, Raiden, Mileena, and N’Malah are gathered together into a strange little family unit. Mileena has been devouring platefuls of breakfast sausage nonstop, while N’Malah has been daintily sipping spoonfuls from a bowl of syrup, and nothing else. Raiden’s eating toast. Shinnok isn’t even eating at all.

Mileena and the girl are making conversation, a bit awkwardly but with much warmth and effort. N’Malah has altogether too many questions, which Mileena’s doing her best to answer, practicing the fine art of small talk. Fortunately, they’re both in mortal disguise, so as not to raise too many eyebrows from the occasional farmers passing by on their way into the diner.

Raiden and Shinnok watch in apparent silence, leaning against each other.

_We’ve endured too much, don’t you ever think? Is there ever such a thing as ‘too much’, for gods?_
Good question. I’d say there is, but somehow, we’re still going. Shinnok takes off his coat, tying the sleeves around his waist as the sun rises higher in the sky. Beneath, he’s still wearing the handmade version of his outfit, but abruptly transforms into a normal-looking plaid shirt that blends in with the country crowd. Luckily, nobody pays him any mind.

It is peculiar to think that after we deal with the Netherrealm portal, it will all be over.

That’s very ominous, Raiden. You mean this part of our adventure will be over, and none too soon, at that.

Yes, that is what I meant. Personally, I have no objections to enjoying the peace and quiet of the farm for a few days. It is wise to lie low after retrieving an artifact of such value, in case anyone is tracking it.

Nobody’s tracking that thing. Or else, they had better not be, or I suspect Jax would separate them in half with a single punch.

Not to worry. I have assured its safety.

Raiden, every time you say ‘not to worry,’ I worry more.

Raiden smiles gently. There is no need for such dread. The laws of the world dictate that the next week will be uneventful.

What’s that supposed to mean?

Just trust me.

I’m worrying again.

After the catastrophe at the Krypt, fate would not force us to confront another equally severe obstacle immediately afterwards.

What about a minor obstacle?

Raiden shrugs, leaning back and steadying himself with his hands pressed onto the picnic table bench. We will see what happens. Try to enjoy yourself, Shinnok.

I’m trying. Shinnok scans the group. The young ones are eating at two tables pushed together. Jacqui and Takeda are talking happily, as are Sareena and Frost. He spots the lizard egg that Sareena’s now permanently babysitting. At the other side, Cyrax and Jin are chatting and holding hands.

Shinnok raises his eyebrows at the pair, hiding a smile. That’s a new development.

It surprised me as well when I found out, but not in retrospect. I am glad that Jin is happy. He is a fine young man.

A peculiar bittersweet feeling tugs at the pit of Shinnok’s stomach. Yes. He deserves such happiness. They all do.

Surprisingly optimistic words from you, Shinnok.

Well, I’ve grown fond of the youths, aggravating as they can be. Shinnok rests his chin in his hands, elbows propped on the table. The rest of the human ex-revenants are eating together, engaged in enthusiastic conversation with Jax and Vera. Are you going to miss them?
Yes… I would lie if I said otherwise. Kung Lao will be in a leadership role among the White Lotus, but Liu Kang will be a world away. Still, he will have the protection of the Edenians.

I know. I’m glad you arranged everything for them.

As best I could. I worry about the ones who wish to return to Outworld. I cannot guarantee their safety.

They’re all very capable. It will be fine. In a worst case scenario, they do have Mileena to look after them. Her and her many clones.

I suppose that is a good point. Raiden smiles halfheartedly. I have been meaning to induct our young team into the White Lotus officially. I suppose, now is as good a time as any.

What, right here in the diner?

No, no, at the Briggs farm whenever I have a chance to talk with them. It is quite simple. They will swear an oath of loyalty, and I will grant them the emblem of the White Lotus to wear or display wherever they choose. Raiden looks at him sideways. I suppose, as a competitor on our team, you would also be included.

Shinnok sniffs. How preposterous.

I am tempted to agree, but the fact remains.

Raiden, I’m not going to wear the symbol of your little club.

Raiden’s face falls. You do not need to wear it, strictly speaking.

Shinnok observes him closely. So you wish me to swear an oath of loyalty to you, do you? That’s very intriguing.

Raiden sips his tea, suddenly flustered. No. That is not necessary either. Consider it an honorary title, if you wish.

I know. I’m just toying with you. You are very gullible to being teased. Has anyone ever told you that?

Yes. Fujin always said so.

He wasn’t wrong. Incidentally, I should thank him for looking after N’Malah. And… thank you as well, Raiden. I truly owe you a debt of gratitude.

Raiden glances at him with new interest. Do you, now? What do you plan to do about it?

I haven’t the slightest idea. You speak as if you have some suggestion in mind…

Perhaps.

Then tell me.

Raiden smiles. It would be quite nice for you to join the White Lotus in some official capacity. It is the least you could do.

Oh, you-- Shinnok rolls his eyes, then grabs Raiden’s mug of tea and takes a sip just to spite him. Loathing the taste, he grits his teeth, but swallows anyway. How do you drink this?
It is an acquired taste.

I can tell. Obviously.

I am good at acquiring tastes.

I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean, Raiden, and I don’t think I want to know.

It is better that way. Raiden watches the others as they gather up their plates, returning them inside the diner. It was very thoughtful of Jax to bring us here.

Yes. I’ll admit, I appreciate his hospitality, and the barn isn’t too uncomfortable.

Shinnok… do you truly intend to eat nothing at all? In mortal form, we need to eat to refuel our bodies.

I can’t find anything that I like the taste of. It’s all so dreadfully bad. Overpowering.

Raiden offers him a piece of toast.

Grudgingly, Shinnok takes a bite. Fine. It’s at least less offensive than the rest of all the flavors.

Raiden doesn’t object. He’ll take whatever progress he can get in the ongoing effort to convince Shinnok to maintain this mortal form properly. He supposes he shouldn’t judge. Shinnok has had an equally wretched time convincing Raiden to sleep at normal hours.

One by one, the group scatters until it’s just the gods, lost in silence with their thoughts entangled.

Mileena picks up N’Malah, lifting her onto her shoulders, and the little girl squeals with delight, looking for all the world like a perfectly normal child. Mileena taps Raiden on the arm with one pointy fingernail. “I believe they’re leaving. Unless you two intend to fly home, it might be wise to join them.”

Shinnok grumbles. “I’d prefer to fly, rather than to try to stuff myself into the back of Mrs. Briggs’s station wagon again.”

Mileena laughs. “There’s always the bed of Jax’s pickup truck, if you’re not satisfied.”

“Ugh. That is worse.” He gathers himself up and stalks away from the table, vaporizing the dishes with a poof of magic. “Come along, Raiden. There’s much to be done.”

Drinking the last of his tea, Raiden joins him, politely leaving the mug indoors with the remainder of the dishes before returning to the group. “Is everyone here?”

Jax greets him with a friendly grin. “All present n’ accounted for.”

“Excellent.” Raiden folds his hands behind his back, drawing himself up a little taller, and conjures his hat from thin air to place it on his head, a familiar symbol of authority. “Those of you fighting in the tournament, I’d like to meet sometime soon and discuss our progress. All others… you are free to do whatever you wish until we return to the city and deal with the soul jars.”

“Oh-- about that--” Sareena clears her throat in the familiar way whenever she’s about to deliver some Netherrealm-related bad news.

Raiden hesitates.
Jax taps one fist against his palm. “Out with it.”

Pulling out a clipboard, she gestures to some illegible notes. “The Brotherhood is closing in. We need to open the portal and destroy the jars as soon as possible.”

The group’s expressions turn deathly serious in an instant, consumed by silence.

Shinnok is the first to speak up. “Raiden, what was that you were saying about the universe’s laws ensuring peace and quiet?”

Raiden ignores him, addressing Sareena instead. “How should we deal with this new revelation?”

“Traveling to the city wouldn’t be ideal.” Sareena quickly reads from her clipboard, already tense with stress. “Any significant movement risks discovery of our location.”

“Oh, wonderful. Lovely.” Shinnok interjects again, voice dripping with sarcasm. “So what do you plan to do about this troublesome fact? It’s not as if we have some sort of underground safety chamber on the Briggs family farm!”

Jax clears his throat.

“Got some good news and bad news. Good news is, we do. Bad news is, you’re wrong.”

Shinnok stares at him in utter astonishment.

Jax shrugs, metal arms clanking. “First couple years at the farm, I put some work into buildin’ us a nuclear bunker in case things went south. Guess it was just the paranoia actin’ up from the whole revenant thing, but it’s still here, and it’s still secure.”

Shinnok continues to stare. “How large is it?”

“’Bout the size of our pasture.”

Raiden is equally shocked. “You never mentioned this!”

Shinnok clears his throat. “At what point would the presence or absence of an underground lair have come up naturally in conversation?”

“Shinnok, hush.” Raiden gently pushes him aside. “We will deal with the soul jars tonight. Sareena, I need to see your information. For all others, today, I want you to rest. Explore the farm. Stay safe. Do nothing that would threaten your lives. Those of you who were not revenants, I am assigning you to protect those who were.”

Cassie salutes him. “Gotcha. We’re on it.”

The group disperses, wandering away towards the pickup truck and the station wagon. Only Jax, Sareena, and the two gods remain, standing in the gravel parking lot.

“I thought you needed to know sooner rather than later.” Sareena shrugs apologetically, handing Raiden her clipboard. “I’m glad you have the bunker, Mr. Briggs. We’ll be better off if we’re secure and safe when we do this.”

“You can say that again.” Jax studies the dirt gloomily. “Gonna call Sonya.” And he steps aside, pulling out his phone. It’s a patented SF model, programmed to work with special sensors in his metal fingertips. He really does owe Sonya a lot, ever since his retirement. But he’s got a good crew to back him up, too. He couldn’t ask for more than Vera and Jacqui.
His wife calls out to him from across the parking lot, and he holds the phone up, pointing at it as it dials the unlisted number. “Be right there, honey!”

Sonya picks up within two rings. “Jax. Hey. What’s going on?”

“Change of plans. Sareena’s told us we need to get this done, asap. I’m going to let Raiden use that bunker I built, for the portal.”

Sonya breathes in sharply, clenching her teeth. “Is it safe?”

“Safe as anythin’ can get. I’d wager it’s as good as the one in the SF base.”

“Okay. The change is authorized. I’ll inform the staff. Thanks for telling me.” Sonya presses the phone to her ear more closely. “I want you to know, I wouldn’t trust anyone else with this.”

“I know. Means the world to me.” Jax smiles widely. He’s a sentimental sap at moments like this, even when it’s supposed to be serious and grim. “You take care of yourself, ya hear? Don’t let Johnny drown in his own living room.”

Sonya actually laughs. “I won’t. General Blade, over and out.”

She hangs up with a click.

Jax stows the phone in his pocket, turning back to Shinnok and Raiden, who have that same odd meditative look on their faces as usual. “You two comin’?”

“Yes, of course.” Raiden responds graciously, tugging Shinnok along by the sleeve towards the back of the pickup truck. “We would not decline your kind invitation.”

Shinnok grumbles to himself, resistant til the end. “We could fly!”

Raiden elbows his companion in the side rather ungraciously. “We have the rest of our lives to fly. This is an important bonding experience with our group.”

As a gesture of defiance, Shinnok floats up into the bed of the pickup truck, then makes himself as comfortable as he can in the corner, crammed in next to Raiden. He locks eyes with Takeda, who smiles cheerfully, pushing his yellow headband up on his forehead.

Hi. How’d you like the diner? It was good, but I can feel my arteries stopping already.

Shinnok grits his teeth. You’re eavesdropping.

That wasn’t eavesdropping, that was a direct message!

Oh, shush.

What? This is useful. All we need is to get Sareena in on it and we’ll have full Team Hellfire communication abilities. Wouldn’t it be handy if we could all read each other?

Shinnok glares daggers at him.

That was a joke. J-o-k--

I know how to spell!

Also a joke. Takeda holds his hands up, still grinning. Take it easy. I’ll stop now. Just try to have
some fun when you get back to the farm, Shinnok. You need it.

My idea of ‘fun’ is wreaking chaos!

Better include wreaking chaos on whatever enemy we’re about to face in Jax’s nuclear basement.

For once, Shinnok offers a faint smile. I can guarantee that.

They ride back to Jax’s farm in peaceful telepathic silence, deafened by the roar of the open air whooshing past them. Raiden carefully holds his hat in his lap.
Thunderous hoofbeats shake the earth as Jacqui gallops through a field, clinging tight to the saddle of a sturdy cattle-roping horse with Jade following close behind. It’s been quite a while since Jacqui did any serious training, but she’s got a steady hand on the reins, guiding the horse in sharp turns with her feet firmly planted in the stirrups. Jade’s a little more unsteady, still getting used to the structure of the Western saddle and the horse’s bouncy gait instead of the smooth strides of Edenian steeds. But she’s doing well, hair ruffled by the wind as she soars down the well-trodden pasture.

Jax is leaning on the fence watching the girls and the horses, smoking a cigar. Turning to the figure next to him who’s carefully perched on the gate, he gives an approving nod. “Your friend’s good.”

Kitana peers down at him, settling back into a sitting pose at Jax’s eye level. “Thank you. So is your daughter. She exhibits remarkable skill at the sport.”

“She won the county rodeo roping competition three years runnin’ in high school. We’ve still got a trophy on the mantelpiece.” Jax offers a crooked grin. “Almost as good as an Edenian royal bodyguard, I’d say.”

“Hmm.” Kitana studies them for a moment longer. “She does come close.”

“Thanks for sayin’ so.” Jax is silent for a moment, and exhales the smoke, breathing the crisp clean air of the peaceful pasture. “Ya scared, Princess?”

Kitana twitches. “Scared of what? Why would I be scared?”

“We’re ‘bout out to open up a portal to the Netherrealm. Everybody in their right mind should be scared. Least, that’s the way I see it, and I’ve been ‘round the block a few times.”

“I have been around it many more times than you, Jackson Briggs.”

“Ain’t no question of that.” Jax is unbothered. “You’re, what, a couple thousand years old?”

“Much longer than that, let it suffice to say.” Kitana pulls one of her hairpins out, twirling it in her fingertips as a nervous habit. “Yes. I am not terrified, but I hold some fear about the upcoming encounter. As you said, who wouldn’t?”

“Anybody who ain’t dreadin’ this at least a little bit is either a fool or a liar.”

“Mm-hmm.” Kitana agrees quietly, studying a hawk as it circles over the pasture. “It’s no Edenia, but this place is idyllic enough to impress even me.”

“Well, thanks for that, Princess.” Jax puts out his cigar in his metal palm, tossing it aside. “Y’know, I’m glad you’re you again. You might be a bit prickly, but you ain’t all bad.”

Kitana laughs under her breath. “I’ll take that as high praise. I’m glad for it, too, and my counterparts as well. They deserve freedom even more than I.”

“What makes ya say that?”

“In the Netherrealm, I did not rule with mercy.” Kitana sticks the hairpin back in, adjusting her seat on the gate and resting her chin in her hands. “In many ways, I was a mastermind, but at what cost?
And where does this leave me? I’m no longer an Outworld assassin, my home realm was extinguished long ago, and my identity as Princess Kitana is forever tainted by my time as Empress.”

Jax listens to her patiently, and shrugs. “Ya got your family back. And one extra.”

“Oh, don’t remind me.” Kitana curls her lip. “Mileena is more than just a mindless construct of Shang Tsung, I will admit that. She’s not much like me at all. But I question her ability to competently rule Outworld. If she follows in the footsteps of Shao Kahn once again, we’ll all suffer.”

“Would Shao Kahn have saved y’all from D’Vorah?”

“Hardly. He would’ve fled to save himself. For all his posturing, the man was a coward at heart.”

“Well, there ya go. Mileena ain’t him, and you ain’t her.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You’re both nice girls, but ya got different strengths.” Jax phrases this as diplomatically as he can. “From what I hear, Mileena’s plannin’ to offer Sindel her title back if she gets the Outworld throne.”

“She did say that to me. At the time, I thought it a helpless and empty promise, but she seems committed to the idea.”

“If she gets the throne.” Jax drums his fingers on the gate, listening to the hollow metal clang. “S’ a nice thought, but there’s no guarantees. Kotal’s pretty powerful.”

“Didn’t you and the others handily defeat him when he stole Shinnok and Raiden?” Kitana has been updating herself on current events. “Surely it can be done again.”

“Yeah, we did.” Jax smiles at the memory. “But that was just him against us. This time, he’ll have a crew of warriors ready to take us down if we try anything.”

“What is Mileena planning to do? Pull out some archaic rule saying Osh-Tekk can’t hold office? Bite through his neck? I haven’t the slightest clue.”

“Why don’tcha ask her?”

“I doubt even she has the answer.”

“The method will depend on the outcome of the tournament, dearest sister.” Right on time, Mileena strides up to the pair, holding a handwritten note which she shoves at Jax. “Your wife wants you in the house, I believe. She said you forgot your phone.”

Jax pats his pockets, suddenly aware of its absence. “Shit. Tell her I’ll be right there. Gotta look after Jacqui n’ Jade.”

“No matter. I’ll take care of the steeds.” Kitana hops off the fence, landing on her feet. “Go on. Answer your wife’s call.”

“If ya say so.” Jax saunters back towards the house, note in hand. His voice fades as he moves further away, muffled by the trees. “Don’t forget to air out the saddle blankets on the fence, ya hear?”
“Understood.” Kitana inspects Mileena from head to toe, restraining herself from any unkind comments. She must make an effort to cooperate. It seems they’ll be stuck working together for a while, like it or not. “So, since we were discussing it, how do you plan to get rid of Kotal Kahn and replace him with yourself?”

“That’s easy.” Mileena smirks confidently. “I’m going to try a strategic approach.”

“You can’t even begin to imagine how pleased I am to hear that, Mileena.”

Mileena looks at her through narrowed yellow eyes. “Was that sarcasm?”

“I am actually pleased. Just tell me.”

“Mm. Well, there are multiple factors to consider.” Mileena ticks the elements off on clawed fingers. “Kotal wants to remain in Outworld. I don’t know his level of current public support, but my alternate selves have been conducting research in the larger towns and cities. While he’s not a tyrant of the Shao Kahn variety…” She winces, saying this about her father, but she’s forced to admit it. “His policies of harsh punishment for small crimes are not popular. I need to prove myself as a merciful alternative.”

“How in the Realms you plan to do that?”

“Well… presuming Earthrealm wins the tournament -- and if they do not, we have many larger problems -- Kotal will not be pleased with his fighters who were defeated. From his past behavior, it’s logical to assume he would imprison them for their failure.”

“So what?”

“So…” Mileena licks her lips. “I discussed this earlier, with Jin. The boy’s very good at strategy. Dearest Tanya informed me of that, and she wasn’t wrong.”

Kitana’s eyes widen, recalling unpleasant memories. “Dearest Tanya? THAT Tanya?!”

Mileena hastily continues the conversation in a different direction. “At that point, I make an appearance in the arena, and challenge Kotal to a duel, myself… for the right to free the imprisoned fighters, in the name of Outworld’s reputation, or some such thing.”

“What makes you assume Kotal wouldn’t kill you that very instant?”

Mileena shrugs nonchalantly. “I have duplicates of myself, if he does.”

Kitana shudders. “That’s still so unbearably strange.”

“But convenient. Anyway… Jin pointed out, quite rightly, that Kotal has a tendency to foolishly agree to duels. If I can duel him for the right to his throne, and I win, then part of my strategy has succeeded.”

“And then what would you do about Kotal? Execute him, and destroy the reputation of mercy that you held for approximately thirty seconds?”

“No. Jacqui has an answer for that part of the plan.” Mileena waves at her cheerily as she approaches, leading the two horses with Jade walking alongside her. “Jacqui, darling, please do be so kind as to tell Kitana about the Kotal scheme.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” Jacqui hands Jade the horses’ reins, striding over to the other Edenians.
“Thanks, Jade, that was lots of fun. You’re pretty darn good. Take them inside and untack them. I’ll deal with the rest.”

Mileena chimes in. “And don’t forget to air out the saddle blankets on the fence.”

“Can do.” Jade skillfully guides the horses through the gate one after the other, handling the creatures with patience and experience. “See you inside!”

Kitana watches Jade go, a wistful look on her face. “I’m glad to have her back.”

Jacqui takes off her helmet, wiping the sweat from her brow. “We all are. What’d you want me to tell you? Kotal?”

Kitana replies drily. “Yes, please do. I’d love to know what could convince an emperor to surrender his throne.”

“Okay. Listen close, ‘cause this is a wild ride. You know how Sareena was working on digging up Saurian bones with the SF project, out in the desert? Well, SF’s been doing some research into Aztec artifacts, too, down in Central America. There’s this crystal skull in a pyramid somewhere, and they think it’s got a lot of cultural and magical importance. Long story short, our intel tells us Kotal wants it. He’s been hunting for it in Outworld for months now.”

Mileena places a hand on her chest proudly. “I found this out myself.”

“Yes, and good job with that. Anyway, connecting the dots, if we get Kotal maneuvered off the throne, SF’s going to invite him to help with the Aztec dig, for his expertise. There’s no way he’ll say no.”

Kitana sniffs. “And what if he goes rogue at that point and murders all of you to get his hands on the skull?”

Jacqui bends down to pick up her gauntlets from the base of the fence, strapping them on with practiced ease. “Tasers work on gods, too. Found that out a few times.”

“I can’t imagine you plan to handle this personally.”

“Nah, I’m just one of the coordinators, for now. We’re going to ask Reptile to come to Earth, too, to help with the Saurian stuff.”

Kitana looks down her nose at the girl. “Yes, because inviting your enemies to join you has historically worked out so well.”

“I mean… it has.” Jacqui puts her hands on her hips. “You heard of a guy named Shinnok? Really tall, fancy clothes, kinda pale--”

Kitana is unconvinced. “He’s an exception, I’d presume.”

“You got any better ideas for what to do about Kotal?”

“No.” Mileena snarls, brushing her hair back out of her face, but it falls in the way again, annoying her. “Yes, I know it is a gamble, but aside from banishing him -- in which case he might build an army and return to retake his throne -- our options are limited!”

“Here.” Kitana pulls out her hairpin, gathering Mileena’s hair up off her forehead and pinning it in place before she can object. Satisfied with the result, she turns to Jacqui again. “Go on. I’m
Jacqui continues her explanation, doing her best to summarize the complicated scheme. “We’re not going to tell him we know about the skull immediately, for the exact reason you mentioned. Just going to put the option out there for him to come to Earth at SF’s invite, versus dying once Mileena wins.”

“If Mileena wins.”

“Yeah, well, let’s assume she does and we’re all still alive at that point.”

“Fine. I suppose I must admit it’s the best possible option. Tell me more after we’ve all saved our souls.” Kitana hops down from the fence, hearing Jade’s familiar voice calling for help from the barn. “If you won’t go assist her with the horses, I will.”

Mileena is intrigued, following close behind. “I’ve never touched a horse.”

“I took equestrian lessons quite some time ago, so I still know something, at least. Do you… do you not have my life experiences and memories?”

Mileena shakes her head.

“Well, that’s a relief.” Kitana grabs her by the wrist, leading her along. “Come with me, I’ll show you the horses.”

“I’m gonna go find Dad.” Jacqui leaves the pair of hot-tempered Edenians behind, but she can’t quite hide a smile. Hard to believe they’d ever be able to stand the sight of each other, let alone cooperating, but it’s a real relief to see. It gives her hope about life after the tournament.

*If* there’s life after the tournament.

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The underground shelter is dark and dreary, all full of musty air that makes Jacqui cough once she first steps in. Holding her nose, she advances a little further, her eyes slowly adjusting to the dim light.

She flicks on the beam of a heavy-duty flashlight, directing it around the room. Dusty cabinets and shelves line the walls, full of canned goods old enough to be vintage. “You never told me about this, Dad.”

“When I said emergency bunker, I meant *emergency*. So far, we haven’t needed it, and I’m countin’ my blessings for that.”

“It’s big enough to house hundreds of people in here. Goddamn.”

“I’d have to make sure the neighbors got someplace to stay, too. Good ol’ country hospitality.”

“I can’t even tell if you’re joking.” Jacqui chuckles, but it turns into a cough. “This air is terrible. Where’s Fujin when you need him?”

“I am no wind god, but my powers might suffice.” Stepping into the bunker behind them, Raiden illuminates the room with a surge of bright magic, then summons a draft of damp air that cleanses the musty odor. Conjuring all his strength, he places a field of crackling lightning across the ceiling that sends his face into sharp blue-lit relief. He tosses a few spheres of electricity towards the
corners of the room, which connect along the seams of the walls, forming a network of glowing lines that encloses the room like a cage.

Satisfied, Raiden lowers his hands, his godly aura fading until only his eyes shine in the dim light. “That will help protect us if anything comes out of the portal. Shinnok? Where are you?”

Shinnok materializes behind him in a shower of pink sparks. “Why do you ask?”

Raiden hides a smile. “Ever the optimist, I see. Have you gathered the others?”

“They’re waiting at the top of the stairs. At this point, it’s all up to you.”

“I would not say that. The participation of all involved is equally crucial.” Raiden conjures the Kamidogu from his storage dimension, holding it close to his chest as Shinnok eyes it greedily. “Do not even think about it.”

“Think about what? What was I thinking about, Raiden?”

“Do not touch the Kamidogu.” Raiden takes a few steps back. “Its corrupting influence is powerful.”

“Then why are you holding it?”

“Because I have no other choice. Bring them down here.”

Grumbling discontentedly, Shinnok does as asked. One by one, the participants in the eerie ritual file down the steps. The ex-revenants gather near Raiden, all consumed by nerves, while the others take their places along the walls, weapons close at hand just in case of crisis.

Raiden’s voice strengthens, adopting an authoritative tone. “Jackson, go and close the door, please.”

“Can do.” Jax takes the steps two at a time, locking the bunker tight. “Nothing in or out. Here goes.”

Raiden thanks him with a polite nod, then addresses the gathered group, heart pounding as lightning surges around his body in the dark. “Do you all feel prepared to commence the ritual?”

Shinnok sniffs. “I don’t.”

“I did not ask you.”

Kitana steps up, acting as the leader of the revenant group for now. “We’re ready. Let’s waste no time.”

“Very well. You speak with wisdom.” Calling a long-buried enchantment to mind, Raiden places the Kamidogu at the exact center of the room, trying to summon all his confidence.

*Be brave, Raiden. Now, more than ever.*

Shinnok overhears his thoughts. *Please do so. If needed... you can depend on me.*

*Thank you for that.*

In a deep echoing voice, Raiden kneels and places his hands on the Kamidogu, reciting the words of power. At his command, the artifact rises in the air, casting an eerie red glow onto his noble
All at once, the Netherrealm portal erupts in a blaze of magic, shadowed by an ominous red spiked gate that forms from sinister sparks. It towers before the assembled group like a gaping hole in the air, leading straight to hell.

Raiden scrambles backwards, lightning-laced weapon tightly clutched in his hand as the center of the portal shimmers.

But it settles down within a moment, and nothing escapes.

There is a collective sigh of relief.

“Sareena, step forward. Are you ready to do this?”

Sareena darts to the center of the room, ready and willing. It’ll be a good chance to put her Netherrealm knowledge to use once more. “Just like old times.”

“Good. I am proud of you. Cassie?”

She beams suddenly, taken aback. “You called me Cassie! Not Cassandra!”

Raiden coughs. “Come forth and help Sareena.”

Cassie brings the rocket launcher along, setting it next to the sinister gate just in case.

“You will take the soul jars as Sareena hands them to you. Then, you will hand them through the portal to each ex-revenant in turn. They must be shattered outside the Netherrealm.”

“Got it. Any particular order?”

“No. Merely proceed based on which jar is first to be found. Do not allow these jars to be broken by anyone other than their owner.”

“I know. You gave me the soul-jar safety speech earlier.” But Cassie smiles at him anyway, understanding Raiden’s caution completely. “I get it. Dangerous mission. But we’re not gonna fuck this up.”

Shinnok glowers from close by. “You had better not.”

“Shinnok, don’t you even start. This is all your fault.”

“How is it my fault? There are so many faults to be shared. Arguably, it is--”

Kitana elbows Shinnok in the ribs sharply to shut him up. “Go on, Cassandra.”

“Okay. In position.” Heart pounding, Cassie glances at Sareena. This is definitely a higher-risk mission than anything in the Krypt itself. It’s pretty goddamn scary, but that’s never stopped her. “You ready to do this?”

“Hang on.” Jacqui steps forward too, joining Raiden close behind. “Hey. I’ll take the jars from Cassie and give them to the right person. That way, there’s no risk of mix-up.”

Jax smiles proudly, observing from the corner. “That’s my girl.”

“Very well.” Raiden’s secretly relieved for the offer of help. “That is a wise suggestion. Sareena,
go on. Find the jars, with haste.”

“Where in the Netherrealm does this portal lead?”

“If this ritual was completed correctly, you should find yourself in Quan Chi’s own laboratory.”

Shinnok mutters to himself. “Which means you should prepare to land somewhere else.”

Raiden gazes at him, hurt. “I have improved my abilities.”

“What? I am merely suggesting that Sareena should be ready for a worst-case scenario, as we all should be.”

“Got it.” Never one to hesitate, Sareena leaps right through the portal’s shimmering air, followed by Cassie. She lands squarely in a large and ominous chamber, illuminated by glowing red lanterns and framed by bookshelves, pillars, and an elaborate carved staircase. Boots clicking on the hard floor, she takes a few steps, shuddering at the sight of a few tanks containing body parts and organs. “Those can’t be the jars.”

“Nope.” Cassie scans the room, feeling an increasing panic. There’s everything except jars. Basins, bowls, a table full of gruesome implements. Typical Quan Chi accessories. “You sure they’re supposed to be here?”

“Pretty darn certain.” Sareena sighs in frustration. All this way, and they can’t even get it right the first time, ever. She hops up onto a table to get a closer look at the bookshelf as the bright glint of glass catches her eye. “Wait. Hold on.”

“What?”

She points at a series of small vials on the top shelf with increasing excitement. “Look at these!”

Cassie is busy studying a pool of ominous liquid in the center of the room, squatting down and wrinkling her nose at the deadly goo. “I’m gonna guess this isn’t Quan Chi’s hot tub.”

“Ha ha. Probably not. Come here!”

“Coming!” Cassie approaches quickly, standing beside Sareena as she leans up to try to grab the first vial. “You got it? Be careful!”

“I know!” Sareena hands it to Cassie, who clutches it tight with trembling hands, suddenly struck by the intensity of the situation. “Don’t break it! Get it through the portal!”

Running for her life, Cassie dashes back to safety, leaping through and dropping the vial in Jacqui’s waiting hands. “One down!”

Jacqui studies it, seeing the faint engraved name of Stryker on it in a strange script. “Stryker?”

“Here!” He moves to the front of the group, accepting the small jar. “Is that all?”

“Yep! Break it!”

Obligingly, he opens his hand and drops it, smashing it on the concrete vault floor.

A faint mist rises from the jar’s shards, like the hissing of steam, and flows towards him, encasing him in a comforting warmth. In the blink of an eye, it is gone.
“Okay, I’m gonna guess that was good. Just gotta do that eight more times!” Jacqui leans through the portal, feet planted firmly on the ground. “Cassie? Next?”

“Here!” Cassie delivers the second vial, out of breath already as she sprints across the room from shelf to portal. “I think this one is Sindel.”

Graciously, Sindel shatters the jar, stepping away from its remnants. The same mist envelops her, too, as the last shred of her soul is returned. “Thank you.”

“Sareena!” Cassie calls out to her, trudging back across the laboratory as she pauses to catch her breath. Even with the day off at Jax’s farm, she’s still exhausted already. “Where’s Ashrah?”

“Should be here any minute!”

“Okay! Next one?”

Sareena bends down from the table, handing it to Cassie with great caution. “The rest of the shelf is farther away from the table, and I can’t lean all that way. It’ll take a lot of effort to get the next ones.”

“Just do the best you can.” Cassie hastily returns to the portal with the next jar, delivering it without even checking the label. There’s no time for that. She has faith in Jacqui to get it done right.

In fact, she’s got no other options.

A flash of motion catches her attention out of the corner of her eye. Cassie freezes, reaching for her pistol in a heartbeat, but a majestic woman in white and gold attire shimmers into view, looking nothing like a demon whatsoever.

“Hi, Ashrah. I’m assuming that’s you. If it’s not you, whoever you are, you’re gonna get pushed right into Quan Chi’s pit of evil goo.”

She laughs, a sound like tinkling bells. “I am Ashrah. Hello.”

“Hi. Let’s save the meet and greet for later.” Cassie takes the next jar from Sareena as she lands on the ground after leaping up to grab it. “Good move, but try not to do that again. Way too risky.”

“What other options do I even have?!”

“Here. Allow me.” Ashrah raises her arms and ascends from the ground, reaching towards the shelf and gathering the next vial to cradle closely in her hands. “I presume these are the items?”

“You know it. Nice work. Sareena, take that one over to the portal. I need to breathe.” Cassie falls to one knee, inhaling sharply. “Don’t get the wrong impression, I’m not out of shape, but this is the second underground lair I’ve been running around in lately. I’m just tired.”

Ashrah’s voice is comforting. “Do not be harsh on yourself. You have endured much.”

Cassie chuckles to herself. “Lady, you have no idea.”

Out of view of the women, something gurgles faintly.

“...what was that?”

“Don’t know, don’t care, let’s keep it moving.” Cassie accepts the next jar from Ashrah’s gentle
hands, transferring it to Sareena, who bolts back to the portal immediately. “How many are we up to?”

Sareena counts quickly. “Four done, five to go.”

The gurgling happens again, sunken deep into the floor.

Cassie steels her nerves. *Don’t panic. Don’t panic.*

She turns to look at the revenant pool.

It’s glowing.

*Panic!*

“Give me those!” Cassie tries to leap up to snatch the jars in a hurry, outracing whatever’s in that revenant pool, but Ashrah knocks her back with a blast of light, sending her sprawling. “*Dammit!*”

“Have a care! You risk doing damage in your haste.” Ashrah offers the next vial directly to Sareena, who’s showing no signs of slowing down, making record time across the length of the laboratory and practically diving through the exit. Ashrah watches her fondly. “It is good to see Sareena again. We are old friends.”

Cassie whirls and points at the portal. “Save the feel-good stuff for later! There’s something in there!”

As the next sight strikes her, fear crawls up her spine.

A glowing figure, hot and red like molten lava, is ascending from the pool, its head and shoulders visible and dripping with sinister power.

“*Holy fuck!*”

“Sareena!” Ashrah drops to the floor, advancing towards her in a hurry. “You said you found the Kriss! I need it back!”

“Yes! Here. Take it. Please.” Sareena brandishes the distinctive blade, handing it over to her friend at once. “Just keep going! Don’t think about the pool.”

“*Don’t think about it? Are you insane?!*” Cassie’s voice rises in fright. Whipping out her pistols, she unloads a round of bullets into the glowing figure, but it absorbs them with a deep laugh, untouched by the damage. “God fucking *dammit.* What’s gonna work against this thing?”

“*This!*”

Ashrah sweeps high into the air, raising her sacred knife. With great poise and grace, she does a diving somersault towards the ominous creature as it rises higher, slicing through its neck with the holy blade. The head tumbles off, sinking back into the pool, and the half-formed beast roars and flails its arms, descending into the depths.

“Good…”

Cassie’s comment dies in her throat. It’s back again, its head regrowing at a shocking pace. By now, it’s starting to look like a large man, features indistinct through the glowing substance.

She grits her teeth and darts back towards Ashrah again, snatching the next jar. “Sareena, is this
“five or six?”
“Six!”

“Got it. So, uh, what is that thing?”

“I have no idea!” Sareena grimaces, hurling a bolt of magic at it, but the creature is still undamaged, much to her distress. It just keeps advancing, ascending out of the center of Quan Chi’s lair, filling the room with a demonic presence that makes them all shiver.

“Just hurry.” Cassie pokes her head out of the portal as she gives Jacqui the next jar. “Who’s left?”

“Liu Kang, Nightwolf, and Kitana. Get going!”

“Raiden!” She catches his attention desperately. “There’s something coming out of the revenant pool!”

Shinnok lunges towards the portal. “I’ll destroy it myself!”

“No, you will not! It probably wants you.” Raiden yanks him back, fingers closing tight around his arm. “Cassie, make haste and do not stay in there for any reason as soon as the last jar is out!”

“You got it!” Cassie leaps back into the laboratory, steadying herself. “I think we have to let it form, then beat its ass. We can’t kill it while it’s in progress!”

Sareena calls to her from across the room, clutching the seventh precious jar. “What if we tried harder?”

“Trying will never achieve anything for you, little demon.”

With a cackle, the glowing figure grabs the edge of the pool, clambering out and shaking itself, sending drops of lava spraying everywhere. Its voice echoes and hisses, and it stretches languidly, flexing its muscles as it transforms into a human shape.

Finally complete, the creature laughs. It’s a man, a grey-skinned sorcerer with a shock of untidy red hair and wicked orange-glowing eyes. An aura of dark magic crackles around him, surrounding him like an evil halo. He eyes the women, seemingly unconcerned, and adjusts the straps that hold his spiked armor around his sturdy body, a sinister motif of metal claws and ragged wings.

“What a pleasure to see you all again.”

Cassie lunges at him, slamming him in the jaw with a solid punch. “I don’t think so.”

He catches himself from tumbling back into the pool, sending Cassie flying backwards with a kick. She collides with one of the disgusting tanks, and shatters it, sending smelly magical fluid and tangled intestines flying everywhere. She gags in disgust, picking herself up and trying to wipe off the repulsive liquid. “Fuck you!”

“Alas, that isn’t an option.” The man strides towards Cassie, raising a hand and sending a paralyzing blast towards Sareena as she bolts towards the portal. The ex-demon freezes mid-stride, slowed to a halt-- and, in a slow agonizing moment, the jar flies from her hands, tumbling towards the floor.

Cassie throws herself at it, sliding across the room on her knees to make a heroic catch. Right in the nick of time, she snatches it from the air, holding it close to her chest, and leaps through the
portal, barely able to stop her momentum. “Jacqui! Eighth one!”

Jacqui grabs it from her, steadying her. “Ew! What happened to you?”

“The thing in the revenant pool came out and it took down Sareena!”

Jacqui grimaces. “Get me that ninth jar and get out of there!”

“What about Sareena?!”

Raiden hesitates, thinking quick. He should’ve foreseen this. “Retrieve the jar first, then we will rescue them. I cannot go into the Netherrealm, nor can the others. Jacqui, you will have to do it.”

She pounds her gauntlets together, lighting them up already. “You know I can!”

With a shriek, Cassie vanishes, dragged back through the portal by an invisible force.

“Oh hell no!” Jacqui leans over and snatches the rocket launcher from the Kahn’s tomb, leaping through to follow Cassie, and almost falls on her ass on the slippery floor. Catching herself, she aims the launcher right at the unfamiliar figure. “You let her go now!”

The strange man holds Cassie around her neck, dangling limply, and tosses her aside like a sack of potatoes. “I feel unwelcomed. You could try harder.”

“You bitch! No one touches Cassie!” Thoroughly enraged, Jacqui fumbles for the trigger, but her unknown enemy floats up into the air, placing himself between her and the last jar. “You are so gonna pay for this!”

“Would you really shoot me, and destroy the last of the soul vials?” The sorcerer laughs, fully aware of his upper hand in the situation. “Don’t you recognize me? Keryon the Tri-Formed? No? I really must work on my public image.”

She grimaces. “Oh, great, another edgy sorcerer. Dime a dozen of those.”

“Ah, but you and I, we’ve met before.”

“What?”

“All through the treasure room, I followed you and Cassandra… you struck me down when Raiden fought me, but let me tell you, that did not last long.” Keryon licks his lips, eyes glowing bright as he surveys Jacqui with a greedy grin. “I was oh so close. I nearly took Shinnok’s head from you imbeciles. I could have had it all! But, allow me to say, Shinnok himself eventually gave me quite the consolation prize…”

Cassie mutters weakly. “This guy was the hellbeast.”

“Yeah, I figured that one out.” Jacqui narrows her eyes, pacing to the left to try to get a clear shot at Keryon, but he places himself in front of the jar again, grinning at her. “You motherfucker. Fight me!”

“Why would I? I want to make you work for the privilege.” Keryon adjusts the straps on his chestplate, pointy spikes lighting up at his touch. He’s stalling for time, certainly, but he’s having such fun. “Besides, I’m waiting for a friend.”

“A friend?” Jacqui scoffs at him, taking a step forward with the launcher leveled right at his head. “Since when do you have friends?!”
Keryon laughs hollowly. “Fine, fine, you’ve got me there. Not so much a friend, as a subordinate… a creation… a masterpiece.”

The pool gurgles again, stirring as a new horror begins to emerge from its depths.

Struck down and laying in a heap by the bookcase, Ashrah finally opens her eyes. Clutching her blade with weak fingers, she is unable to do anything else, forced to watch the grisly scene as this master of hell torments this poor girl.

Jacqui clenches her fist, raising her gauntlet and firing a volley of bullets and missiles at the second glowing monstrosity, but the ammunition does nothing, harmlessly disintegrating as soon as it touches the creature.

“Just get it the fuck over with!” Jacqui grits her teeth desperately. She’s stuck in a hopeless standoff. If she moves, Keryon’s bound to shatter the jar and take down all her friends. Probably gonna toss them into the revenant pit, too. Where’s the rest of her team? They should be sending someone else in by now, but--

She’s shocked to her senses by the second figure.

It bears the reanimated head of Quan Chi, lips sewn shut with grisly stitches, but the rest is nothing alike. It has the body of a Netherrealm creature, like rocky stone shot through with lava veins, but grossly disproportionate beast’s arms, scarred and stitched together with heavy knuckles dragging on the floor. The legs are mismatched. One is a skeletal construct with ropy flesh hanging off it in dangling strips. The other is the only remaining part of Quan Chi’s original demon form, a leathery limb with reptilian claws.

“WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT?!?”

Jacqui’s voice rises to a shriek. Barely thinking straight, she drops the missile launcher and hurls herself right at Keryon, grabbing him and stopping short before they collide with the bookcase. Instead, she launches him into the air with a series of gauntlet strikes, tossing him around ruthlessly before impaling him on a spiky part of the staircase.

That does very little damage. He simply reverts to his bat swarm form, flittering around as he works up the energy to resume the humanoid illusion. But it’s enough time for Jacqui to grab the last jar from the shelf and run back to the portal, desperately hoping against hope that she’ll make it in time.

Success.

Raiden takes the jar from Jacqui, and hands it to Kitana, his face full of deep worry and concern. “What is happening?”

Jacqui breathes in panting gasps, clutching the portal gate. “Help!”

“Jacqui!” Jax rushes over to her from the corner, coming to his daughter’s rescue. His arms are already lighting up with full power, ready to beat the shit out of whatever’s on the other side of that portal. “Hang on. I’m goin’ in!”

Gratefully, she grasps Jax’s hand as they leap back into the Netherrealm together.

Kitana takes the jar and raises it high over her head, then smashes it on the hard floor with obvious glee, stomping on the shards. As the soul mist settles back over her, she crosses her arms and stands confidently, head thrown back. “Finally!”
Jax lands squarely on the tile floor, ignoring the mess, and storms towards the grisly reanimated Quan Chi, shivering at the sight. It’s unclear if he’s even sentient. Jax almost hopes not. “Jacqui! I’ll take these goons. Get the girls out!”

Keryon resumes human form, dropping out of the air in front of Jax. “Oh, welcome. Another visi--”

Jax seizes him by the waist, grips him hard enough to shatter his ribs, and slams him against the floor until he goes quiet. “You ain’t touchin’ my daughter!”

Jacqui grabs Cassie in a fireman’s carry, scrambling back towards the portal, and hands her through into Raiden’s waiting arms. “Don’t know what they did to her, but I think she’s paralyzed.”

“It will wear off. Netherrealm enchantments can be reversed.”

Shinnok interjects. “By me. Hand her over.”

Raiden does as asked, turning back to Jacqui. “Rescue Sareena!”

Jacqui doesn’t need to be asked twice. Near the revenant pool, Jax is gladly beating the shit out of either Quan Chi, or whatever used to be Quan Chi, depending on perspective. She smiles grimly at the sight, then dives under the table, retrieving Sareena from where she fell.

She struggles to lift Sareena, surprised by the contrast between her human illusion and her actual weight. For lack of better options, Jacqui drags her across the slimy floor, barely managing to hoist her up high enough to toss her through the portal.

Raiden catches her deftly. “Is Ashrah there?”

“The lady in white?”

“Yes, that is the one. She needs to kill Keryon. Her weapon is powerful enough to destroy evil!”

“She’s knocked out!”

Shinnok yanks the amulet off the chain attaching it to his outfit, quickly handing it to Jacqui. “Fire a blast from this, and it will reverse the enchantment!”

“How? I’m not a god!”

He grabs it back, summoning a spell quickly and loading it into it. “Hold it in your right hand. When you have it correctly aimed, touch it with your left hand. Go!”

“Got it!” And once more, Jacqui rushes to the rescue, following instructions perfectly.

Jax is winning handily against the remnants of Quan Chi, unleashing the full force of his rage for his once-lost friends. “Just ‘cause they’re fine now, don’t mean you ain’t gonna suffer for what you did!” He snatches him by the neck, pounding his head against the tile floor. “You took them all from us! You took me!”

“Dad! There’s no point. It isn’t him! He’s controlled by Keryon!”

Sure enough, Keryon has regained consciousness and is gripping a crude effigy tightly in one hand, resembling the ghastly monster bearing the reconstructed head. Even Shinnok’s spectacular destruction of Quan Chi can be reversed… but only barely.
Jacqui kneels down by Ashrah, using Shinnok’s amulet to blast her with the curse-reversal spell. Ashrah shudders, regaining control of her limbs, and scrambles for her weapon, holding the sacred kriss tight in both hands. “Thank you. Who are you? Jacqui?”

“Yep. That’s me, the one and only.”

“Sareena told me about you.” Ashrah surveys the situation quickly. Keryon hasn’t yet noticed that she’s revived. He’s focused instead on puppeting the Quan Chi monstrosity, eyes blazing with evil delight. “Can you distract Keryon long enough for me to kill him with my blade? It will banish him for quite some time if I succeed!”

“You got it.” Jacqui grabs her rocket launcher and heads towards Keryon with determined steps, drawing his attention towards her in the opposite direction of Ashrah. “Hey, asshole, ready for round two?”

“Of course!” Smirking, Keryon rises up, standing confidently. All the metal claw-spikes on his armor are glowing with power now. Much to Jacqui’s horror, he unfurls a pair of tattered wings, resembling the beast she once fought. “Step right this way, and let your father witness your defeat!”

“I don’t think so.” Jacqui eyes the scene, eyebrows raised. Jax has managed to detach most of the monstrosity’s sewn-on limbs, pulverizing them one by one and throwing them out of the laboratory entirely. “Looks like Dad’s doing pretty good against you and your little craft project.”

Keryon hisses. “Your disrespect is not appreciated.”

“That’s kinda the point, pal.” Jacqui fiddles with the trigger on the rocket launcher, keeping her expression neutral as Ashrah rises into the air behind Keryon with her blade raised high. “Let me ask you something. How can you be the leader of a death cult if you’ve never even died? Sounds like a fraud to me.”

Keryon arches a brow, tossing the effigy aside, and raises his fists. “Must I do all these hard tasks myself?”

“Real leaders don’t delegate!” Jacqui offers a lopsided grin, but her expression is laced with grim determination. “Hey, look at this way. I’m doing you a favor! How about saying thanks?”

Keryon lunges towards her, burning with rage.

Jacqui pulls the trigger… and aims it at his feet.

The rocket strikes the floor and sends him ricocheting back upwards, impaled right onto Ashrah’s blade.

Keryon screams as the knife pierces through his body, flailing in agony as a glowing white holy light consumes him and eats him from the inside out. Ashrah stays strong and determined, holding him in place in midair as the sacred kriss does its job.

Finally, the powerful energy consumes him in a blast of searing light that blinds them all for a moment, sending a shower of ash to the floor.

The light descends, and obliterates the remnants of Quan Chi -- all except his unconscious head, which Jax unceremoniously drop-kicks off the edge of the laboratory. As it soars away, a beam of light strikes it, disintegrating it too.
The orb of light takes a human shape, floating up towards Ashrah again and mirroring her pose like an inverse shadow. It envelops her with a surge of power, then fuses with her, illuminating her eyes and fingertips as she beams triumphantly.

“I am freed!”

Dropping to the floor with her knife stashed in her belt, she grabs Jax with one hand and Jacqui with the other, bolting towards the portal and tossing them both through with alarming strength. In a flash, she scrambles through as well, afraid that at any moment the Netherrealm will drag her back.

“Not so fast!” Jacqui jumps back into the laboratory again, grabbing her launcher. Closing one eye, she aims a volley of missiles at the revenant pool.

It explodes in a shower of disgusting tarry liquid, seething with veins of glowing fire as the evil substance scatters across the floor.

“Jacqui!” Raiden fearfully pokes his head through the portal. “Do not do that!”

“Too late! This needs to end!”

“Come here! It will destroy the laboratory!” Raiden leans towards her desperately, but he can’t yet enter the Netherrealm safely. Not enough time has passed. “Please!”

A pale hand reaches through the portal, grabs him by the cowl, and yanks him back unceremoniously.

Jacqui chuckles, and drops the launcher, not even looking back as she steps through the portal. Behind her, in a spectacular show of corrupted magic, the wicked laboratory erupts into a volcanic blaze, shattering the tanks and consuming everything in its path.

Falling to his knees, Raiden breathes a sigh of relief, feeling the shockwaves of the explosion on the other side of the portal as it closes up for good.

He retrieves the Kamidogu carefully, vanishing the gate, and shuts it off with a solemn spell, tucking it back into the storage dimension before the others can even process it.

Silence reigns in the gloomy chamber.

Slowly, one by one, they gather together in a collective hug, and sit on the floor around Raiden, ex-revenants and heroes alike.

Raiden pulls Jacqui close, heart overflowing with fondness. “You saved them.”

Jacqui points to Cassie and Sareena, now revived and fully conscious thanks to Shinnok. “They did the hard work. And he helped-- here.” She tosses the amulet back to the god. “Thank you.”

Shinnok smirks. “I am always glad to assist with Netherrealm matters.”

Sareena coughs, rediscovering her voice. She gestures in the direction of Ashrah. “Thank her instead.”

Ashrah shrugs, laying back on the floor and breathing the fresh Earthrealm air. Everything is a revelation now that she’s free. “It was the tall man with the metal arms. He did it. He defeated Quan Chi.”
Shinnok’s jaw drops. “He defeated WHO?!”

Jacqui reassures him quickly. “More like a Frankenstein monster with something that looked like Quan Chi’s head. It ain’t him. Actually, past tense. It wasn’t him. Dad ripped him apart like tissue paper.”

Raiden shakes his head solemnly, studying the floor, and finally closes his eyes, feeling the burden weighing upon his sturdy shoulders. “This was much too close.”

“Who cares about too close? We did it.” Cassie leans against him, coughing weakly. “We all did it. Even everybody who didn’t do anything. The moral support helped.”

Jin, Takeda, Frost, and Cyrax exchange glances, shuffling around guiltily.

“It’s okay. You guys saved our asses before. Cyrax, don’t feel bad, you can’t go back in there. But we all shouldn’t have to, for a while.” Jacqui waves a hand, dismissing any concerns. “Keryon’s wrecked, Ashrah killed him. Franken-Chi’s destroyed, Dad did that. And I hit the revenant pool with a couple rockets, which blew up the entire damn fortress. I’d say this is a big success.”

Shinnok leans against Raiden’s other shoulder, smirking boldly. “If I didn’t know better, I would suggest that you have all acquired my taste for death and destruction.”

“Hey, death and destruction ain’t all bad if it’s aimed at the right folks.” Jax breathes deeply, wiping dirt and grime off his metal arms. “Well. That’s all. Y’all ready to get outta here?”

The entire group choruses practically in unison. “Yes.”

- - -

Up at the farmhouse, Vera is getting to know the newest member of the group.

N’Malah sits on a high stool at the kitchen counter, taller than her own height, and pokes inquisitively at a sandwich. “What’s this?”

“Peanut butter and jelly. Sorry, I’m not the chef of the household, but it should tide you over for now til Jax and everyone gets back.” Vera smiles at her fondly, sitting beside her and tinkering with a small piece of tractor equipment that needs delicate repairs. “So where are you from?”

N’Malah shrugs vaguely. “This one was found in a tunnel.”

Vera studies her with some concern. “What kind of tunnel? What do you mean, this one?”

“Peanut butter and jelly. Sorry, I’m not the chef of the household, but it should tide you over for now til Jax and everyone gets back.” Vera smiles at her fondly, sitting beside her and tinkering with a small piece of tractor equipment that needs delicate repairs. “So where are you from?”

N’Malah shrugs vaguely. “This one was found in a tunnel.”

Vera studies her with some concern. “What kind of tunnel? What do you mean, this one?”

“This one… is--” N’Malah pauses, thinking back to how the others all refer to themselves. “Me.” Her face brightens up. “Me was found in the tunnel.”

Vera corrects her gently. “I was found in the tunnel.”

Her eyes widen. “You were, too?!?”

“No--” Vera thinks of trying to offer a quick grammar lesson, but decides against it. “So, I’m guessing you’re not human.”

“This one is a Kytinn!” N’Malah declares this happily, not even noticing the slight flinch of panic in Vera’s eyes. She knows enough to know what a Kytinn is, and nobody told her any details about the child before they all arrived. “Is something wrong?”
“No.” Vera turns her attention back to the damaged tractor piece, steadying her nerves. D’Vorah wasn’t the only Kytinn. There must be good ones. “Tell me about yourself.”

“This one hasn’t got much to tell. Shinnok rescued this one… then we’ve all gone here and there, done lots of exciting things! This one liked the food place.”

“The diner? Yeah, it’s nice. We’re regulars.” Vera smiles softly. “You know, you sort of look like someone I used to know.”

“Huh?” N’Malah ponders this. “Oh! This is an il-lusion!” She sounds out the word carefully. “Shinnok made it. It’s so normal people don’t notice this one.”

“Well, I notice you. That must mean I’m not normal.”

N’Malah giggles. “That’s not what this one-- me. That’s not what me meant.” She leans over, looking closely at Vera’s work. “Shinnok makes all kinds of things.”

“So do I, but I doubt he does welding, or farm equipment. What do you look like without the illusion? If you don’t mind showing me.”

N’Malah abruptly shuts off the tiny device strapped to her wrist, revealing her Kytinn form -- a strangely adorable child with a body made of exoskeleton pieces, with a pair of small fragile wings and two sets of pointy limbs.

Vera almost falls off her stool.

“THAT’S what you--” She bites her lip. Better not hurt N’Malah’s feelings. “You… look very different from us humans.”

“Yes! Mileena does, too. She says it’s okay to be different.” N’Malah impales the sandwich on one pincer, dropping it into her hands, and pries apart the two pieces, licking off the fruit jelly. “This is good. Do you have any more?”

“Yeah, just one minute.” Bewildered, Vera hops off the stool and goes to the cupboard, getting the jar and a spoon. “So Mileena’s looking after you?”

“She helps.” N’Malah takes a spoonful of jelly, eating it straight from the jar. “This one prefers fruit. Some Kytinn like meat. This one--Me.” She struggles to correct herself again. “Me doesn’t like meat.”

Vera no longer even notices the child’s unusual syntax. “I was a vegetarian in college. Jax knows how to cook that way, too. He’s good at all kinds of cuisine.”

She hears a familiar knock at the kitchen door.

“Speak of the devil. C’mon in, dear.”

Jax appears in the doorway, horribly grimy and coated in some sort of bloody gunk, reeking of formaldehyde. “Hey, hon. We’re back.”

Vera takes a second to process the sight, unable to hide her horror. “Jax! You are not coming in the kitchen like that. You go shower right now!”

“Ain’t even gonna ask me how it happened?”

“I don’t want to overwhelm you with questions until you look human again.” She points in the
direction of the bathroom. “Go.”

“Hate to break it to ya, but about five of us look like this right now.”

“Go get the garden hose and some soap, I don’t care. Just take care of it. How’s Jacqui?”

Jacqui leans in through the doorway, looking even more filthy than Jax. “Mission success!”

Vera beams at her, full of maternal pride. “I knew it would be, honey.”
Cassie leans against the kitchen counter, watching the spectacle with a smirk of amusement.

“What’s a man to a king… what’s a king to a god… what’s a god to a tightly shut jar?”

Shinnok scoffs at her, teeth gritted in exasperation as he attempts to get the lid off a jar of grape jelly. “Miss Cage, your commentary is neither required nor entertaining. Silence thyself.”

“Breaking out the formalities on me, huh?” Cassie arches a brow, shifting her weight from one foot to another as she ponders the situation. Frost’s somewhere downstairs, hauling up heavy boxes with apparent ease. Mileena is lingering around in a halfhearted attempt to help, and N’Malah is sitting patiently at the countertop, waiting for Shinnok to open the jar.

He seems unable to do this.

Frost breezes in on a trail of ice, unbothered by the damp carpet she leaves behind, and drops a massive box right in the center of the living room, landing on the floor with a thud. “Did I miss anything?”

“Nah.” Cassie laughs under her breath. Show-off. “Shinnok’s demonstrating his godly might and power.”

“Gimme that.” Frost lunges for the jar, popping it open in one quick twist of the wrist, and hands it directly to N’Malah, who obediently takes a tiny spoonful. Frost pats her on the shoulder, retreating to the couch. “That kid has better manners than anyone on the team."

“You can say that again.” Shinnok sniffs, brushing off his sleeves, and draws himself up to his full height, floating a few inches off the ground. “I trust that the moving arrangements have been made already?”

“Yep. Lease is signed, you guys are good to go next door.” Cassie’s secretly pleased with herself for working out the deal. Shinnok, Raiden, and their two nonhuman guests are relocating to the vacant apartment next to hers, much to Cassie’s deep relief. Meanwhile, Frost is moving in with her, Cyrax is rooming with Jin instead, and Takeda finally gets some much-needed peace and quiet, staying by himself once more.

Must be tough to be psychic.

Raiden pops his head in the door, tapping gently against the frame to avoid disturbing the occupants. “Cassandra, may we talk?”

“Sure.” Cassie trots over to him, gladly ignoring the others. Frost is raiding her freezer, and Norbert the cat has taken up residence in the largest armchair. Cassie’s allergy meds work as well as they can, but her nose is still infuriatingly itchy. She makes a face, breathing in the fresh air deeply as she follows Raiden out to the hallway. “What’s up?”

“I need to lose my tournament fight.”

She stares at him dumbly.

“I had a vision. If I defeat Rain, he will sever all ties of loyalty due to the humiliation, and attempt to take the throne of Outworld for himself. This is a future we cannot allow.” Raiden is
frighteningly serious, eyes burning blue under the shadow of his hat. He meets Cassie’s eyes, catching her in his stern gaze. “Where is your mother?”

Sudden panic grips Cassie’s heart. “She’s-- uh--” She racks her brains. “I think she’s out having coffee with Sindel. They’re working out the travel arrangements for the tournament…”

“Notify her immediately.”

“YOU tell her!” Cassie explodes with frustration suddenly, hands clenched into fists. As a lock of hair falls into her face, she brushes it back angrily, jaw set firmly in indignation. “Look. I handled the move, I got you and Shinnok arranged to stay here as long as you’re fugitives from your own damn temple. Now I’ve gotta break the news that we might lose the tournament?”

“We are not fugitives… it is simply not safe for us to permanently return, yet.” Raiden inclines his head with a soft sigh. “I understand your burden.”

“You sure about that?”

His eyes spark with lightning. “Miss Cage, whether or not I occupy a mortal form, I still face the task of determining which actions will endanger Earthrealm’s fate. I understand all burdens. And I would rather gracefully lose the fight, and accept the slight damage to my reputation, than make an enemy of a demigod!”

“...that’s fair.” Cassie bites her lip. Somehow, she’d failed to remember the type of responsibility Raiden must constantly carry. “Okay, so you’re a guaranteed defeat, Jin’s probably going to take a loss against Ermac. That gives us seven possible wins, at best. That’s not the kind of odds I want to have in an inter-realm battle.”

“I have enough confidence in you and your colleagues that I can -- I must -- accept the risk of endangering our victory.” It’s not an easy decision for Raiden to make. It never is. “Shinnok will fight last. I am certain that he will win. That should secure a safe margin for Earthrealm, no matter the outcome of the prior fights.”

“Raiden, he couldn’t even open a jar five minutes ago.”

“His physical strength is limited, but his magic is tremendous.”

“Then why not open it that way?”

“The force would have destroyed your kitchen.”

“Okay, I guess I’ll cut him a break for that one. It could always be worse, right?” Cassie opens up the apartment door, ushering Raiden back inside. Worries race through her head at a rapid-fire pace. She reaches for her phone in the pouch at her hip -- only to find it mysteriously absent.

She glares at the first immediate suspect. “What did you do with my phone?!”

Shinnok produces it from a pocket in the eccentric outfit he’s wearing today, handing the device back to its rightful owner. “Its battery life will expire in a century. You’re welcome.”

“What-- I see how you know the magic amulet stuff, but how do you have any clue how to fix Earthrealm tech?!!”

“I am a god! Nothing is out of the question for me!”
“Okay, okay.” Cassie backs off, heading over to sprawl out on the couch. She’s suddenly exhausted, and the day’s only just begun. “Did you guys get everything moved out? All seventeen boxes of books?”

“Yeah, I got it dealt with.” Frost glances at her new roommate from the well-worn armchair. The cat is draped around her shoulders like an elegant accessory, tail swishing in satisfaction. “The gods are all set. Mileena and N’Malah went out to go to the park, I think. They’ll be gone for the day.”

“Okay. Wouldn’t have taken Mileena for the maternal type, honestly.”

“I think it’s more like a big sister thing. You know she’s got issues about that.”

“Boy, do I ever.” Cassie taps at her phone, firing off a quick message to Sonya. “Better let Mom know the bad news.”

Frost leans forward. “Bad news? I’m listening.”

“You’re always listening for bad news.” Cassie laughs under her breath, but her tone quickly grows serious again. “Raiden, tell her.”

Seated on the small table opposite Frost’s chair, Raiden solemnly relates the prophecy, including the worst consequences of Rain’s hostile takeover. Visions flash before his eyes of a prince turned tyrant, indulging his thirst for power, grown far stronger after years of suffering in the land he considers his birthright.

Frost takes a minute to process this.

“Not the ideal option. You gotta just lose like a champ.”

“That is my plan. A victory over me will improve his confidence and open his mind. The bitterness of the loss would make him revert to his own selfish schemes.”

Frost observes him, impressed. “Put some effort into reading people, huh?”

“It is not just from my visions. I am taking the time to learn the behaviors and ways of mortals, to comprehend their motives. A lack of this type of understanding may have been the cause for… previous events.” Raiden clears his throat, owning up to his own mistakes. “It is not enough just to be aware that Rain may turn on us. It is also worthwhile to know why the possibility exists.”

Frost’s quiet for a minute, chin propped in her hands.

“You’re not bad, for a god.”

“Shall we fight, Master?”

“So we must, Grandmaster!”

The two eternal opponents bow respectfully, then draw their elemental weapons and lunge at each other, slashing and hurling with ferocious power.

Comfortably seated at the training room’s sidelines, Kuai and Hanzo observe with satisfaction as their ice clone and demonic projection grapple with each other in an evenly matched fight.
Hanzo can’t help but needle him gently, elbowing his former enemy in the side. “Your technique leaves something to be desired.”

“As does yours.” Kuai’s expression is impassive, watching the battle peacefully as he controls the ice clone from a distance. Hanzo’s fiery projection slashes through the clone’s waist, slicing it in half, but it slides away and re-forms on the other side with a new set of ice legs. Raising a frozen knife, it stabs the flaming figure in the neck, sending it crumpling to the ground in a fireball.

Hanzo has to admit it. “Well played.”

“Would you like to try for best eight out of fifteen?”

“No, I think I’m satisfied.” Fully aware of their evenly matched abilities, they’ve taken turns with wins and losses, each allowing the other to try out new strategies. Distance fighting with projected forms is a new technique, but they’ve both grown tired of spontaneously leaping into fights themselves. They have clans to protect, young apprentices to guide, and many responsibilities far more important than the risks of kombat.

Kuai sits back in the old folded chair, creaking slightly under his weight. “The last tournament feels like a lifetime ago.”

“For us, it was.”

“You have a point.” Kuai rubs his bearded chin thoughtfully, self-consciously touching the scar on his face that will never quite vanish. Struck by a sudden burst of confidence, he addresses the topic most difficult for both of them. “It has taken me decades to come to this conclusion, but I suppose I am glad Quan Chi restored some physical form to me so long ago. Being transformed into a cyborg was nightmarish.”

“Quan Chi can rot in the deepest pits of the Netherrealm, as far as I’m concerned. However, I am forced to admit I like you better in human form, rather than robotic.” Hanzo glances to the side, carefully inspecting him out of the corner of his eye. “You don’t often speak of the cyberization.”

“I try not to. Nonetheless, the recent trials and tribulations of the revenants did bring to mind our old struggles.” Kuai steeples his fingers, resting his chin on his fingertips and leaning forward again. He can’t quite sit still. “For a long time, I’ve wondered… can you still return to your own demonic appearance, or has that ability left you?”

Hanzo leans in unexpectedly. “Would you like to find out for yourself?”

“Not necessarily, thank you.” Kuai maintains a safe distance, a faint smile playing across his lips. “How far we’ve come.”

Hanzo straightens up again in his chair, arms folded leisurely. Running his fingers through his ponytail, he removes the band holding it in place, letting his long black hair fall at the nape of his neck. “Farther than I ever expected, and for that I’m grateful.”

“As am I—”

A sharp voice catches their attention from the training room’s doorway. “Sorry to interrupt the reminiscing hour, but we’re having a ninja tea party. Do you want to come?”

Kuai doesn’t even need to turn to look. “Frost, it is considered polite to knock.”

“You left the door open.”
“Ah.” Kuai clears his throat. “In that case, disregard my comment. Where are you going?”

“There’s a nice little rooftop cafe a couple blocks down.” Takeda cracks a smile, stepping into the room uninvited. “We’re having official Shirai Ryu and Lin Kuei peace talks.”

“Like hell you are.” Hanzo springs up from his seat, folding the chair and setting it against the wall, but hides a smile, returning to his usual sharp-tongued attitude. “Your invitation honors me, Takeda. I can only dream to be some day entrusted with the responsibility of leading the Shirai Ryu.”

Takeda turns red, scuttling back out through the doorway. “Sorry. Bad joke.”

“Don’t feel self-conscious. I will eventually need a successor, and I admire your initiative.”

Frost blurts out another classic tactful remark. “I thought you were immortal.”

Hanzo’s unfazed. “I have yet to find out one way or another.” He ties up his hair again, replacing his headband and tightening the straps of his tunic. “Raiden has some idea of attaching my life force to the jinsei, so that I may be Earthrealm’s eternal protector. I foresee many ways for this to go wrong.”

Kuai follows close behind, sighing. “Do not allow him to do that.”

“I intend not to. In truth, immortality would hardly suit me. I have lost enough friends and family already. To see them perish while I continue… would be miserable.”

Kuai pats him on the shoulder awkwardly, unsure what else to do. “I understand.”

“There’s no need to express your sympathies, Grandmaster. My troubles are my own. Don’t concern yourself with them.”

“Enemies or friends, I must admit I still feel some responsibility towards you.”

Hanzo scoffs. “You should not worry about my welfare. You’ve got enough problems of your own to look after.”

Kuai nods gravely as Cyrax and Smoke appear in the doorway. “Here are more of them now.”

Frost bites back a laugh.

“That’s everyone!” Takeda cheerfully ushers the older ninjas towards the exit, trotting along beside Hanzo and matching his quick footsteps. “I’ve made progress in my training, Master.”

“I am pleased to hear it. You have always been a diligent student.” Hanzo glances over at Kuai. “However, I should verify. Has he actually?”

Kuai offers a half-smile. “Yes, of course.” It’s still bittersweet for him to be training an apprentice to defeat his own demonic former brother, but situations are what they are. All he can do is make the most of it.

“This way.” Frost leads them into the elevator, piling in the cramped space together to fit in one trip. Holding their breath, everyone shuffles around awkwardly until they reach the ground floor, bursting out into the main corridor and making a beeline for the exit.

The leaders follow last of all, matching each other’s leisurely strides as the others surge ahead onto the open sidewalk. Kuai adjusts the bands wrapped around his sleeve, and brushes his hair back,
appreciating the rush of cool air outdoors. “I’m pleased to see them all showing such enthusiasm about the tournament to come. I distinctly remember a sense of constant dread throughout my own.”

“I remember very few emotions at all. It is likely for the best that way.” Hanzo tucks his hands into his pockets, appreciating that none of the city-dwellers give them even the slightest passing glance. “I see that Smoke has accepted the task of being chaperone to our young apprentices.”

“Something like that. I am more grateful for Tomas’s responsible nature than ever.” As for Cyrax, Kuai isn’t exactly sure where he falls among the age groups. He’s still as young as he was when he died, but his memories and experiences belong to the same set as the former revenants. He considers the question as they stroll in silence.

Hanzo finally notices. “Is something on your mind?”

“I am only pondering the mysteries of life.”

“You would say that.” Hanzo squints off into the distance, no longer able to see the retreating figures of the others. “Hrm. We have fallen behind, and we don’t even know the way to the cafe.”

Kuai is completely unfazed. “I expect Frost will be back to retrieve us at any moment.”

“Does anything bother you anymore?”

“I have found that I achieve more by maintaining calm, no matter the circumstances.”

“I cannot say that I have ever had success with the same method.”

Kuai chuckles. “I’ve noticed. For what it is worth, your fiery disposition seems equally effective.”

“I appreciate the compliment.” Hanzo studies the scenery around him, particularly the solid pavement. “If it were up to me, I would have already sped ahead to catch them, but you and your indifference prompted me to stay behind and wait.”

“Indifference and calmness are hardly the same.” Kuai raises an eyebrow. “I was waiting for you.”

“Ah. How considerate of you.” Hanzo smirks. “In that case--” And he launches himself forward in a sudden burst of flame, hurtling down the empty sidewalk. “Catch me if you can, Grandmaster.”

“At once!” Kuai follows close behind on a trail of ice, sliding at top speed and leaving a path of snowflakes behind him.

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From across the street, Sonya raises an eyebrow, watching the ninjas. “Those idiots are at it again.”

“Be gracious, General.” Sindel reprimands her gently, sipping her drink at a slow thoughtful pace. She’s dressed in a vintage style, not quite civilian clothes but sufficient to pass among the mortals. Her hair is bound up in a long braid, kept in control as much as possible while traveling within the city. “I, for one, am glad to see them cooperating. A cohesive team is likelier to achieve success.”

“Don’t have to say that twice.” Sonya takes a gulp of her black coffee, setting the mug down firmly, and taps her fingers nervously on the table. “Just got some seriously bad news. Raiden’s had a vision that Rain needs to win, so there’s more responsibility on everyone else right now.”
“And you find yourself increasingly stressed about the danger and risks. I understand.” Sindel studies her with a pleasant peaceful gaze, glasses perched on the bridge of her nose to hide the pure white glow of her eyes. “Calm yourself. Excessive coffee will not help your nerves.”

“No, but it’ll keep me awake long enough to fix the problems that keep showing up. It’s a goddamn miracle my hair isn’t completely grey yet.”

Sindel laughs softly. “Your hair is beautiful as it is.”

“Thanks, but that wasn’t the point--” Sonya clears her throat. “Yours is good too. I like the magic, it’s probably useful. Sure wish I could use mine to get things down from high shelves.”

Sindel’s smile widens. She takes another sip of her drink, observing Sonya’s awkward fidgeting. “Shall we discuss the tournament?”

“Yes please.” Sonya whips out a stack of file folders from the briefcase beside her, sliding them across the table towards Sindel, but the other woman is not interested. She lays a hand on the folders and pushes them back, and Sonya raises an eyebrow. “Did you already get that intel?”

“I already know all there is to know.” Sindel suddenly feels the need to explain. “The infusion of power into me upon my revival left a lingering effect, not dissimilar to Raiden or Shinnok’s ability to perceive the world around them.”

“Those two couldn’t perceive their way out of a paper bag.”

Sindel looks away to hide her smirk. “Regardless, do you understand my meaning?”

“Yeah. Slight omniscience?”

“Something along those lines.” Sindel glances across the table again, folding her hands and sitting primly in her chair. “I understand you have mentored Jacqueline Briggs and Kung Jin?”

“Those two are mine for the tournament, yep.”

“You did an excellent job. They have both strength in kombat, and strength of character.”

“Thanks, but I can’t take credit for that. Didn’t raise them.”

“Your own daughter is even more remarkable.” Sindel tilts her head to the side, studying Sonya closely. She is a strong woman, perhaps too stubborn to allow herself to indulge in sentimental thoughts. “Hers is a particular brand of selfless heroism, though she would be reluctant to admit it.”

“Can’t take credit for that, either. Johnny raised her.”

“She is still your daughter.” Sindel’s expression is a peculiar mix of bittersweet emotions. “And it appears that now, I have two of my own.”

“Mileena isn’t your real daughter, though.”

“That is irrelevant. She needs a family. She was unjustly created, against her own wishes and those of her sister. This makes her no less of an individual with her own hopes, thoughts, and dreams.”

“You’re good at looking past the teeth.”

“Not many are. This contributes to her troubles. In a desperate search for attention and validation, Mileena has caused great chaos in the past. This time, she is intent to do better, and I intend to
support and advise her.” Sindel pauses after the concise analysis, unafraid to speak in such certain terms. “Additionally, I am in a good position to lend my aid. I am no longer a revenant, and I will never be again. In my present form, it is… difficult to die.”

“Are you trying to tell me you’ve turned into a goddess or something?”

“I would not quite describe it that way, but if you wish to do so, I will not disagree.”

“If you say so.” Sonya chugs her coffee. She’s really starting to need it. “What’s gonna happen when you go back to Outworld?”

“Ideally, Kotal Kahn will have the grace and sense to accept me as the queen of Edenia. The land still exists, even if it has been merged for now. Thus, my authority remains, as long as I live.” Sindel speaks with the measured confidence of a leader, stepping back into a role long vacant, but adapting well and quickly. “If he refuses to accept me, I will have to convince him. There is no other option. I have no wish to fracture the Outworld government further, but nor do I intend to lead my own land from exile.”

“Hold up.” Sonya stops her, lifting a hand. “Merged for now?”

“That brings me to my next point. There is a path to free Edenia, and I plan to pursue it, should Earthrealm emerge victorious in the tournament.”

“How?!”

“You know a lot about this.”

“This was part of my sacrifice to protect Earthrealm. Shao Kahn created these orbs upon each conquest, to stabilize the merging. They were kept in scattered places under unbreakable security seals. I was never able to find Edenia’s orb. I am unsure if it will ever be possible, considering the breadth and scope of Outworld…”

Sonya is dumbstruck. “But it exists. It has to exist.”

“Precisely. This is my ultimate goal of returning to Outworld, whether or not I have Kotal Kahn’s cooperation. I doubt that he would wish to surrender a portion of the realm that he now rules. However, that scenario rests on the assumption that Kotal retains power… which is not a safe assumption to make.”

“I’m not sure where you stand on the whole deposing-Kotal scheme.”

“I am in favor, provided that it is achieved in a way befitting of a realm’s rightful rulers. Using unjust tactics would invalidate the entire point of the effort.”

“You and I are gonna have to talk more about this later.” Sonya’s head is spinning, trying to keep up with all these new revelations. “Tell me about the orbs.”

“Long ago, I was able to locate Earthrealm’s orb, not yet infused with the necessary magic, but prepared and ready for an eventual conquest. The power of these orbs fades with time and distance, which is why Nitara, the vampiress located in the Krypt, was able to free her realm immediately upon awakening.”
“You heard about that?!”

“As I mentioned, I have heard about everything.” Sindel smiles politely. She’s appreciating the conversation with Sonya, even if the woman’s eyes are starting to glaze over with confusion. “Regardless, I knew Earthrealm’s orb needed to be immediately destroyed. The magic necessary to do so was far beyond my capabilities at the time. To conjure that much power would deplete my own life force.”

“But you did?”

“I did.” Sindel sighs, running a hand across her forehead as the pain of the memory surges back. “Shao Kahn was able to eventually manufacture another orb, which he had prepared for his more recent expected conquest of Earthrealm. I do not know the location of that orb, but it is now completely useless. Shao Kahn’s power was a unique type that cannot be replicated. With his demise, the method is also lost -- thankfully.”

“I remember him. Still can’t shake the memory.” Sonya shudders. “Didn’t he make you marry him?”

“Yes. That contributed to my reasons for suicide.” Sindel seems unbothered by the topic, continuing to sip her drink. “Fortunately, this incarnation of my life is far, far better. By the way, I’m enjoying this beverage. What is it made of?”

“The smoothies? I think that’s just fruit in a blender, and yogurt.” Sonya retrieves the folder from across the table, tucking it into her suitcase. She’s finally getting used to the strange whiplash of this conversation, though it’s taking a while. She suddenly has even more respect for Cassie for dealing with the two immortals every day. “So, what were you gonna say about the tournament?”

“Ah. Yes -- I wanted to alert you I have made travel accommodations to Outworld on the behalf of Special Forces.”

“When was this?!’”

“Yesterday. I traveled there, disguised myself as a commoner, and located a fine hotel in the capital city, near the arena. You have nothing to worry about.”

Sonya mentally checks over her responsibilities, crossing one off the incredibly and painfully long list. “Damn. That’s one problem taken care of. Could’ve told me beforehand, but thanks. How many people per room? How are we handling this?”

“Two in each room. I assume you have the budget for it.”

“Not in Outworld currency, but yeah. We’ll figure it out.” Sonya rests her head in her hands, taking a deep breath. She’s honestly not used to someone else taking charge and handling the planning behind the scenes. This is a total novelty. “Anything else you want to tell me, while we’re at it?”

“Hmm…” Sindel absent-mindedly swirls her straw in her drink, pondering a variety of issues. There’s much to discuss, but this is not the time. “Later, I should tell you all I know about the competitors on Outworld’s behalf. However, that will have to wait. You seem weary.”

“I am.” Sonya finishes off the rest of her coffee, swallowing it in one gulp. She meets Sindel’s eyes gratefully. “Thanks for the help. I can’t say that enough. This is so classified that I’m handling it mostly myself. Kenshi’s lending a hand, but he can’t really do paperwork, so it’s all me.”

“I’m glad to offer my aid. It is the very least I can do, considering the hospitality you and your
family have offered me,” Sindel offers a soft smile. “Ah, that reminds me. Frost bought opera
tickets for me. I’d discussed Edenian theater with her, and she mentioned that opera was a similar
art form. Thus, I have a spare ticket, as Kitana is busy in Outworld at the moment. Would you like
to attend?”

“Frost bought opera tickets?”

“The girl is surprisingly fluent in the arts.” Sindel reaches around in her pocket for the tickets,
withdrawing them as proof. “Yes or no?”

Sonya is taken aback once again, fumbling for an answer. “Yeah-- yes. What should I wear? I’ve
never been to an opera in my life.”

“I am sure you can find something elegant that will suit you perfectly.” Sindel smiles at the
general, rising from the table with her drink in hand. “Shall we depart, General Blade? There is
much to do.”

“At once.” Sonya collects herself and fetches her briefcase, returning the mug before heading out
the door to graciously hold it for Sindel. “Let’s go save the world.”

“Yours or mine?”

“Both.”
Making Amends

For once in his life, Johnny Cage is at a desk.

More accurately, he’s using his dining room table to collect all the piles of paperwork representing his current responsibilities. It’s a hefty stack, divided into “Urgent” and “Not Now.” Most of it is in the latter pile. He hasn’t yet bothered to replace the actual furniture, and instead chose to leave the complex skeletal table added by Shinnok, which he now explains to visitors as an avant-garde art piece.

Not that he’s had many guests lately -- and he’s starting to miss it. Now, however, Johnny has a chance to do something right. He’s offered to let young SF recruits stay in the mansion during their training, rather than renting a room in the city’s costly residential areas. The decision is mostly driven by generosity, partly spurred by his own loneliness, and also because it’ll help to have someone to walk the dogs while Johnny’s away.

“Cage.” Right on time, Stryker strides into the room, dressed formally in SF officer attire. He still looks self-conscious in the freshly pressed uniform, clean-shaven with his hair smoothed back, presenting himself as possible on the first day on the job. It’s been a long time since he’s been on duty… in real life, at least, not in some twisted Netherrealm fever dream.

Johnny greets him cheerfully. “How’d it go?”

“Pretty well. General Blade streamlined the process.” Stryker’s unsure how to handle the complex dynamic between Sonya and Johnny. He fidgets and adjusts his sleeve, glancing across the table. “Why’d you invite me here? I’m afraid I have too much paperwork of my own to help with yours right now.”

“Nah, that’s not it.” Getting up from his seat, Johnny shakes Stryker’s hand with a firm grip. “I have something I wanted to give you. Stumbled across it while cleaning out some old boxes.”

Stryker is intrigued. “I don’t get many gifts.”

“I don’t even know if you’ll like it, but-- nah, you will. It’s funny. Here.” Johnny rummages around the folders strewn out across the table, quietly grateful that Stryker hasn’t bothered to ask why he still has the strange skeleton table. Then again, he’s probably used to it by now. Retrieving a stack of yellowing pages held together with paperclips, he drops it into Stryker’s waiting hands. “Before everything happened, the studio was working on a script for an action movie about you. I was supposed to play you. Thought you’d get a kick out of it.”

“You were going to play me?” Stryker pages through the script in bewildered amusement, eyebrows rising. “I don’t believe this.”

“It was a good script! But when the city got invaded, we shelved it, for obvious reasons…” Johnny shuffles his feet as his mind races for any sort of tactful way to describe Stryker’s time as a revenant, coming up with nothing at all. He deftly sidesteps the topic. “As far as the public is concerned, you died a hero.”

Stryker is touched, although he’d never admit it. Stoic expression cracking at last, he closes the script, tucking it into his briefcase with a slight smile. “Looks like I already had a good reputation, when I bit the dust.”

“You were a hero. All those times you saved a bunch of civilians… people like that stuff.” Johnny
fumbles for a further explanation, aware of his own sentimental awkwardness. “I wanted you to have the script. Just a keepsake. For what it’s worth, I wouldn’t have been the right person to play you. I’m not tall enough.”

“I think you would’ve done fine. Maybe you still would, now that I’m mysteriously alive again.” Stryker smiles again, warming up. “Your wife came up with the explanation that I was kidnapped by hostile forces and kept in prison. Now, they could make a movie about my glorious fictional escape. You might even be cast.”

Johnny returns the grin. “Naw, I’m too old to play you now. No way.”

“Your daughter, then.” Stryker sizes him up. “With some shoulder pads, she’d be identical.”

Chuckling, Johnny shakes his head, leaning against the table. “I don’t think she’s old enough.”

“Details.” Stryker returns the smirk. He and Johnny hadn’t spent much time together while the ex-revenants were staying at the Cage mansion, and Stryker’s brusque personality contrasts sharply with Johnny’s comic attitude. Nonetheless, they’re glad to get to know each other better. “I just wanted to say thanks once more. I don’t know what I’d have done without you to help after we…” Stryker hesitates. “After we turned back.”

“Hey, listen. It’s no problem. Me and Sonya were the only ones who weren’t zombified in that whole nightmare. I had to help you guys, ‘cause I got off lucky.” Johnny shoves his hands in his pockets, shifting his weight from foot to foot. “How’s Kabal?”

“He’s doing well.” A genuine smile spreads across Stryker’s face for a brief moment. “SF has some kind of new medical technology for healing scars, so that’s actually improving. It’s been a long time since he was willing to go without the mask.”

“You two were pretty close, huh?”

“You could say that.” After the moment of warmth, Stryker’s stern disposition settles into place. “Thanks for the invitation, but I have to go. My agenda’s pretty packed now.” He checks his watch out of habit, pushing up his sleeve. “Hey, did they tell you about the kids yet who’ll be staying with you?”

“I’ve gotten to learn a little about them, but I have to sign all the confidentiality and liability forms before SF’ll tell me more.” Johnny gestures to the piles of folders on the table. “Either that, or a bunch of office clerks are putting way too much effort into getting my autograph.”

Stryker stifles a chuckle. “It could be either one.”

“You know it.” Remembering Stryker’s time constraints, Johnny offers a hand politely. He’s good at small talk, and he’s been enjoying the chat. Still, he’d better not keep the officer around too long. “Good to see you again.”

“You too.” Stryker shakes it firmly with a grip strong enough to match Johnny’s own, exchanging a glance of understanding. “Hope you made a copy of that script. It’s a real winner.”

- - -

“Checkmate!”

Jade’s voice rings out across the empty hollow room, triumphantly placing a game-piece on the board and knocking another out of place. “Got you.”
Tanya groans, plucking the token off the board, and drops it in the growing pile on her side of the table. Elbows resting at the edge, she cups her chin in her hands, glaring at the other Edenian through half-closed glowing eyes. “That’s not how that works!”

“Prove it!” Jade laughs, sitting back in her chair and tipping it back on two legs. She’s been having a grand time ever since her return. Tanya still prefers to stay in the spacious attic with Mileena, but the rest of the vacant Outworld mansion now belongs to the Edenian family, and Jade’s been delighted to find the fanciful treasures left behind by whoever owned the place. She unearthed this particular game from a closet, brushed off the dust, and challenged Tanya to a duel. “I only remember half the rules of the game, but that’s more than you do.”

Tanya rests her forehead in her hands, regretting her last strategy. Jade pulled an unexpected move, and it caught her off guard. But she has to admit, Jade’s no longer as insufferable as she once was... or else Tanya’s grown soft in her very, very old age. “I’m a tactician. I shouldn’t lose!”

“That’s your problem. You don’t know how to improvise!” Jade smirks cheekily, leaning over to gather up Tanya’s game-pieces, and sets them out on the board, pointing at each one in turn. “Here’s what you did wrong--”

“I don’t need to be told what I did wrong.”

“I’m not gonna comment on that.” Jade shrugs, loose green cloth cascading over her shoulders. She’s dug up several new scarves out of the old closet, and this one suits her well. “It’s just a game. C’mon.”

“Oh, fine.” Tanya rolls her eyes theatrically, finally paying attention to the other girl’s quick-witted comments. “Go on, then. Maybe this’ll yield some brilliant insight for the tournament.”

“Aw, don’t give me that much credit.” Jade grins. “Let’s try again...”

In the mansion’s antique kitchen, Mileena is enthusiastically preparing a pile of fruit, chomping open the hard rinds and scooping the contents into a bowl with a sharp-edged spoon. Kitana is sitting on a high stool beside her, observing with a mixture of respect and horror.

“Are you sure this is the right way to do it?”

“No, but it’s faster, isn’t it?” Mileena glances up, ragged hair falling around her shoulders. She shakes her head to push the loose strands back, but yelps in surprise when Kitana grabs a handful of her hair, quickly gathering it into a tidy braid. “What are y--”

Kitana grumbles, weaving her thick hair with nimble fingers. “Just hold still. I don’t want your hair falling in the food.”

“How sweet!” Mileena tosses her head and feels the long braid cascading down her back, grinning broadly. She appreciates all the bonding moments, even if they’re just little things. Nothing is ever truly trivial. “Thank you, sister!”

“No problem.” Kitana surveys her critically. “Mileena, you need to learn to smile with your mouth closed.”

She enthusiastically shuts her jaw full of fangs, still revealing the sharp front teeth. Waiting for Kitana’s approval, she raises an eyebrow. “Like this?”

“That’ll do for now.” Kitana sits back on the stool. Unlike Jade, who’s been constantly wearing a selection of fancy armors she found in the mansion’s basement, Kitana’s enjoying the privacy and
lack of pressure to constantly dress as royalty. Currently, she’s wearing a loose jumpsuit and a pair of casual boots, her own elegant samurai armor set aside elsewhere. “Do we have anything to eat that’s not just fruit?”

“Yes. I have a full storeroom. I went out in disguise and purchased some blocks of ice from the market.” Mileena scampers off to the room, pulling out a slab of meat and carrying it triumphantly back to the outdated stove. “I had to learn how to live normally. Tanya says I’m doing quite well at it.”

“I thought you ate meat raw.”

“I do. Tanya doesn’t. Speaking of which--” Mileena calls out to her girlfriend, leaning over the kitchen counter. “TANYA!”

Kitana winces. “You could just go get her.”

“This is more convenient.” Mileena tosses the steak over to Tanya as she materializes in the doorway, then reaches for a well-worn pink apron, tying it around her waist. “If you cook the meat, I’ll deal with the rest.”

“That’s a fair deal.” Tanya fetches a pan from the cupboard, resting the slab of meat in it, then, with the practiced ease of a gourmet chef, places her hands underneath the pan and sets it on fire. Contained by the metal, the fire roasts the steak immediately. As Kitana stares in surprise, Tanya focuses her flame, searing it evenly as the other girl rushes around the kitchen. “Mileena, the seasoning?”

“Right here.” Mileena prepares the food with quick precision as Tanya continues to heat it, putting careful attention into the balance of spices. “Kitana, how do you like your steak?”

Kitana raises her eyebrows, still processing this highly unorthodox method of cooking. “I like it medium rare. Jade likes medium well.”

“Figures.” Tanya carefully adjusts the balance of fire between her hands, focusing on one half of the pan more strongly. “This won’t take long. Just be patient.”

“I wouldn’t dream of rushing you.” Kitana crosses her legs, balancing carefully on the stool. She has to admit, she’s impressed. “Do you cook all the time, or is this just a special occasion?”

“As often as possible. It’s simply more efficient to be able to prepare my own food, since there are so many of me.” Mileena whisks the pan out of Tanya’s hands once the meat is seared to satisfaction, placing it on the burnt countertop. “I’m the only one of me that’s here right now, though. You don’t need to worry.”

“Who said I was worrying?” Kitana still considers the idea of the clones rather strange, and keeps forgetting that this Mileena isn’t technically the same person that she met on Earthrealm -- and yet she is, somehow. She has the same memories and personality. How odd. “Do you need my help?”

“No, we’re quite fine.” Tanya brushes off the offer, though she graces the princess with a slightly smug smile, tucking her short black hair behind her ear once her hands finally cool down. “You are our guests. We’d never dream of imposing on you.”

“How nice of you.” Kitana hops off the stool, striding around the kitchen and stretching her legs. “How long have you lived here?”

“Several months now. I assume Jade is off exploring the basement again. She seems to be having
quite the adventure. Not that I mind.” Tanya’s secretly glad to have reconciled with the other Edenians, particularly Kitana. Though they are not yet friends, Tanya’s more willing to tolerate her, and Kitana no longer objects to her presence. Her experience as a revenant seems to have taken away some of the rude royal attitude.

Minutes later, Jade bolts up from the basement, lugging a heavy box stacked to the brim with books. Landing in the kitchen doorway, she rests against the creaky wood frame, flustered and out of breath. “Sorry. I got sidetracked. Tanya, you might want these--” She drops the box on the table, pushing it to the corner. “These are mostly novels, but a couple look like textbooks. Some kind of history something or other. That’s your specialty, right? Way more than mine.”

“Oh, I was looking for those! They’re part of a set. I have the rest upstairs. I’ve been trying to make sense of them for months.” Tanya sweeps over to inspect the box, rummaging through it and plucking out the relevant books. “Those books have vexed me ever since I found them. They’re so familiar. There’s little notes in the margins, signed by someone named “T”, all about the juicy secrets behind Edenia’s history… there’s so much to learn. I wish could remember why the handwriting seems familiar. But--” she grits her teeth-- “I can’t.”

Jade volunteers helpfully. “None of us remember everything, but we could put together what we’ve got. Do you want me to take a look?”

“Maybe later. Eat while the food’s warm.” Tanya hands her a fork, knife, and plate filled with fresh fruit and well-cooked steak, which Jade devours enthusiastically, downing it in several bites. Kitana takes her time instead, cutting it up primly into small pieces. Tanya watches her sophisticated manners with a raised eyebrow. She supposes old habits never die.

Tanya’s curiosity overcomes her tact. “Did you have to eat as revenants?”

“Nope.” Jade answers through mouthfuls. “I gotta say, I like being able to taste food again. It’s nice to remember I’m not dead. It’s all the little things, like breathing, and eating, and--”

“I know what you mean!” Mileena answers enthusiastically from across the kitchen, gnawing on a freshly warmed but uncooked steak of her own. “You’re completely right.”

Kitana inspects her fingernails. “Generally speaking, we all prefer to be alive.”

Tanya’s gaze shifts between the other girls. She still hasn’t shaken the odd feeling of nostalgia, the reunion with others from her lost homeland after so, so long. She wonders how much time has passed since so many Edenians were in one place. “Am I the only one of us that didn’t die at some point?”

“It would appear so.” Another voice interrupts the conversation. Sindel floats in from midair in a silhouette of glowing light, materializing into her usual form as she lands on the floor. She smiles cordially at Tanya, gracious as ever despite their past differences. “How are you this afternoon?”

“I’m perfectly fine.” Tanya answers politely, lifting her chin to look at Sindel. She’s tall, but the other woman is even taller, almost matching the height of the gods. “How did the meeting go?”

“Very well, thank you for asking. I informed General Blade of the hotel arrangements.”

Tanya taps her foot on the floor. “I still think you should’ve just let me go and deal with it. I’m as good a negotiator as you are.”

“Perhaps, but the hotel was more than willing to give an elderly Outworlder a discount rate for her family reunion.” Sindel morphs into the disguise of a little old woman, then back again to her real
self with practiced ease. “It was not, technically, a lie.”

“I like the way you think.” Tanya hides a smirk. “Did you want something to eat?”

“No, I’m fine for now.” Sindel produces a large bag of groceries, placing it into Tanya’s waiting hands. “I brought sustenance.”

“I appreciate that.” Tanya hands it off to Mileena, the official keeper of the cupboard in the new Edenian household. “What did you get?”

“Just some sweets that reminded me of Edenian confections, the sort of thing that can’t be found in Outworld.”

“That’s nice of you.” Tanya reaches into the bag and grabs a little box from Mileena’s grasp, prying it open to find small sugary morsels inside. Raising an eyebrow, she plucks one from the box and pops into her mouth, chews to savor the taste, and--

Memories strike her like an avalanche, blinding her for several long moments.

“Come along, now.” Tanya’s father gently leads his young daughter by the hand, guiding her through the halls of Edenia’s palace towards the negotiating room. “The emperor from Outworld sent an emissary, and we don’t want to be late.”

“But why?” The little Tanya complains under her breath, clutching a box of candy her father bought for her on the way through the market. Munching on the sweets, her eyes grow wide as she watches a group of intimidating guards pass by, heavily armored and carrying sharp glinting weapons. “Who’s that?”

“They came with the emissary. Don’t worry, Tanya.” As they reach the doorway, her father pulls an old book with a gilded cover out of the bag slung over his shoulder, bending down to hand it to his daughter. A warm smile lights up his dark worn face, with friendly eyes and a shock of short-cropped black hair. “While I negotiate, I need you to sit and study your lessons.”

“But Daaad--” Tanya whines, accepting the book grudgingly. “These are so boring.”

“I know. I wrote some notes in the margins to make it more exciting. Our history isn’t dull, not when it’s retold properly.”

“Okay. I’ll read it. Thank you.” Tanya hugs her father tight, trotting off to sit in the corner with the heavy volume under her arm, and takes a seat on the chair, quickly engrossed in the book and chuckling at her father’s humorous notes...

Eyes open wide, Tanya lunges for the box on the kitchen table, frantically digging through the pile until she finds a leather-bound history book with gilded edges, pages yellowed by age.

She flips it open, taking note of the handwriting in the margins.

There’s much more to this incident than they’ll tell you. The diplomatic failure involved a gift of a priceless gown for the governor’s wife that was three sizes too small. -T

Tanya freezes, clutching the book to her heart. “The notes were from my father!”
Blinking tiredly, Jacqui stumbles into her living room with a mug of coffee in hand, ignoring the faint buzzing of her phone shoved into the pocket of her pajamas.

“Am I going insane, or is there an ex-demon on my sofa?”

Sareena joins her, close behind in the doorway. “How about both?”

Jacqui glares over her shoulder. “Rude!”

“I’m sorry! I couldn’t resist. Yes, I invited Ashrah to stay here for a little while. I thought you wouldn’t mind.”

“I don’t mind, but you didn’t even ask me first.” Jacqui takes a gulp of the coffee, wincing at the taste. “Forgot to put in any sugar. Goddamn, I’m tired.”

“How unpleasant.” Sareena looks her roommate up and down inquisitively, dressed in exactly the same red and black bodysuit she wore to training last week. “Why do humans drink coffee?”

“It wakes us up in the morning after we’ve been asleep.”

“Why do humans need to sleep?”

“Don’t you sleep?”

“Well, yes, but no one explained why!”

“Ask me later.” Jacqui finishes off her coffee, gritting her teeth as she swallows the bitter drink, and sets the mug aside on a countertop, striding into the living room and putting on as much confidence as she can manage at six AM. “Ashrah?”

The former demon meets Jacqui’s eyes with a gentle smile, rising from the sofa in a floating motion and approaching the girl unblinkingly. “Yes?”

Jacqui swallows hard. “You-- uh-- I feel bad for asking, but you can’t stay here, so what are you going to do now? Now that you’re free from the Netherrealm, and all-- and, wait, where were you until now?”

“Here and there.” Ashrah gestures vaguely, offering a reassuring nod. “Sareena offered your hospitality. I presumed it wouldn’t be an inconvenience.”

“No, it’s fine. I’ve just had so many people crashing in my apartment that it’s starting to piss off my landlord… and Dad.” Jacqui rubs her eyes, adjusting the collar of her pajamas and scratching the back of her neck. She’s still a disheveled mess, and has made no effort otherwise. “Seriously, what are you going to do? I don’t want you to have to go back to the Netherrealm.”

“I refuse to.” Ashrah’s voice rises through the room, eyes glowing bright from beneath the brim of her hat. “To maintain my freedom, I must distance myself as far from demonhood as possible. I need to help as many innocents as I can.”

“So you’re becoming a guardian angel.”

Ashrah’s hand rests at her side, touching the dagger strapped into the belt encircling her hips. “Perhaps.”

Jacqui raises a brow. “A guardian angel with a knife.”
She chuckles. “That is a way to describe it, surely. Never fear, Jacqueline. You will be free of me soon. I must be off.”

Jacqui feels an instant twinge of guilt, reaching out to reassure Ashrah. “I didn’t mean to sound like that—”

“Hush. I understand.” Ashrah brushes past her, moving out into the hallway to bid farewell to Sareena with a gentle clasp of her hand. “Thank you for your aid in my final escape. Shall we see each other again sometime?”

Sareena grips her friend’s hand firmly. “We shall.”

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In the heart of the city, in a silent peaceful chamber with elegant windows, a solemn woman dressed in white sits at the far end of a low bench.

Outside the hectic life-or-death chaos of the emergency ward, the hospital offers a sanctuary for the patients’ loved ones, when all they can do is wait and seek solace in the chapel’s silence. Ashrah has brought herself here in search of non-denominational holy places that will allow her to enter. Now, she sits and waits, an ethereal figure in the shadows, ready to offer comfort to those who need it.

With the heavy creak of the door, a mortal enters and sits in the back row, head clutched in their hands as despair overtakes them.

Ashrah rises from her seat, reappearing near them. She stays silent, not wishing to interrupt their reverie, and instead rests quietly beside them as a comforting presence. *You are not alone.*

Eventually the mortal raises their head, meeting Ashrah’s eyes. “You have someone in the ER, too?”

She shakes her head slightly. “No, but I am here to aid those who do.”

“Who are you?”

“A helper.”

The mortal sighs, staring despairingly at the worn-down wooden floor. “I should be in there with them. I didn’t do enough.”

“Do not blame yourself for the impossible. No matter what you have done, that is enough. Too many walk this earth unwilling to offer the slightest bit of kindness to their fellow man.” Ashrah’s voice is soft. “Rest here before you return. Your strength will help others, as well.”

They nod miserably, exhausted and distressed. “I guess I’m no use right now.”

“That is not true. Just stay here until your spirit is strengthened, and then find your way back to them.” Ashrah lays a hand on the mortal’s shoulder gently, consoling them. “Peace be with you and yours.”

“Thank you… and same to you.”

Ashrah smiles graciously and sadly. “For me, it matters not. Stay strong in this difficult time, no matter what. It is the right thing to do.”
And by the time the mortal blinks again, she’s gone, vanishing back into the shadows to haunt the hospital sanctuary like a benevolent guardian.
“Feels good to be here again.”

Jin sets his bow and quiver on the ground, then climbs up onto the low wall that borders the outdoor courtyard at the Shaolin monastery. Hands resting on his hips and head held high, he studies the scenic horizon that stretches out before him, memories rushing back all at once. It’s been a while since he had a chance to return to the academy, between the chaos of the tournament and his duties on Cassie’s team. So his delight is laced with a bittersweet nostalgia, remembering what life was like before all the chaos and catastrophe of the past few years.

“Hey, don’t start feeling like the king of the world just yet. We’ve got work to do.” A familiar voice interrupts him as soft footsteps approach. “Have you seen Liu Kang around?”

“Lao. I was wondering where you went.” Jin hops down off the wall to come face to face with his cousin, smiling. “No, I think he’s trying to find the newest recruits. I have to say, I’m surprised he volunteered to help. Netherrealm emperor and martial arts trainer are pretty different jobs.”

“Maybe that’s the point. I think he wants to distance himself from all that. It’ll be good for him.” Lao takes off his hat, tucking it under his arm, and the bladed edge glints in the sunlight, catching Jin’s eye. “I’m going to stay here afterwards and mentor some students, but I’ve been told Liu’s going to live in Outworld after the tournament.”

“That’s not too far from now, you know.” Jin runs a hand through his ponytail nervously, looking past Lao to study the scenic academy landscape. Talking about the upcoming crisis helps with the stress, at least a little. “We’ll head out there out in a couple days. Sonya’s sending us there a week early to get used to the climate. The seasons are different from ours. It’s winter there, which is about the same as spring here. Not exactly Arctika weather, but it’s not very hot, either. We’ll need some sturdy clothes.”

“Who’s taking care of the designs? We had someone helping with it all during my tournament. If they were more thoughtful, they’d have given me some armor.” Lao manages a halfhearted laugh. “It’s water under the bridge now. I’m just curious.”

“Who do you think? Shinnok basically appointed himself the wardrobe consultant. As long as he sews some protective spells into the stuff, I don’t really mind.” Jin leans against the low wall, twirling his bow from hand to hand. “Hey. Want to duel before I go?”

Lao breaks out into a sudden grin. “I just sharpened my hat. Are you sure?”

“Never mind. I’d like to have my head attached for the tournament.” Jin returns the grin. “When are you and the other guests coming over to Outworld?”

“A few days after you. I think we’ll be staying wherever you are.”

“At this point, SF might as well rent the entire hotel.”

“I’d be surprised if they didn’t.”

“Good point… Hey. I have something for you.” Suddenly remembering, Jin slings his backpack off his shoulder, reaching inside to retrieve a polished jade statuette. He awkwardly presents it to Lao, glancing aside and clearing his throat. “I… got this from Raiden, right before I joined the Shaolin. Our family gave it to him as a memento of, uh, of you. He let me keep it. I thought it
should be yours.”

Lao gently takes the statuette… and hands it right back to Jin. “I appreciate the thought, but it’s yours.”

“Aw, c’mon.” Jin pushes it back towards his cousin. “I didn’t come all this way just to get this thing through security twice.”

Lao reluctantly accepts it once again. “This is very thoughtful. Where did you get it, anyway?”

“From Raiden’s memorabilia room.”

“With or without Raiden’s permission?”

“Both. Long story.”

“I thought so.” Lao grins slowly. “Let me guess, this is the thing you stole that made him send you to the Shaolin. This is the infamous treasure from the Sky Temple.”

“Yep.” Jin hooks his thumbs in his belt, hiding a self-conscious laugh. “It’s not completely treasure. I might have exaggerated.”

“To me, it is.” Lao gently places it in the messenger bag resting over his shoulder. “I’ll keep it for now, but when you win in the tournament, I’m giving it back.”

“If, not when.” Jin studies the ground beneath his feet, shaking his head. “It’s not a guaranteed win at all, and nobody’s letting me forget it.”

“Just stay safe…” Lao places a hand on his cousin’s arm, suddenly stricken with a surge of worry that clutches at his heart in cold slithering fear. “I don’t need to tell you why.”

“No, you don’t, and I’m not going to let you down. Not you, not anyone.” Jin pounds his fist into his palm, adopting a determined frown in a show of bravado that’s more for Lao’s sake than his own. “Ermac’s going to eat sand by the time I’m done with him.”

“That’s the spirit.” Lao starts off towards the academy’s main hall, striding across the grass with his cousin close behind. “Let’s go retrieve Liu, wherever he’s wandered off to.”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“He could be in the library. Believe it or not, when we were students, he was even more of a bookish scholar than you are. Might I add, that’s a high standard to surpass.”

“Hey, take that back!”

Lao chuckles. “I never said it was a bad thing.”

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“I’ll have you know, I am breaking the Sky Temple’s no-pets policy for you.”

With a wolf puppy slumbering peacefully in his arms, Nightwolf glances across the room at his companion, lifting an eyebrow. “I can’t tell if you’re serious.”

“You’re not supposed to be able to tell.” Fujin responds completely deadpan, then finally breaks the facade, allowing himself a grin. “No. There is no official rule of that sort.”
“That’s a relief. I would be disappointed to find out that the Sky Temple is not welcoming to creatures from all walks of life.” Nightwolf kneels down, freeing the puppy to scamper around the floor with its siblings. “Thank you for clarifying.”

“Of course. Although, I have to say, I’d prefer it if you did not keep all the orphaned wildlife in Raiden’s personal meditation room. I imagine he will not be pleased.”

Nightwolf pauses, slightly horrified by this revelation. “I… was not aware that that was the purpose of this particular room.”

Fujin gazes at him calmly for a few long moments, then grins again. “It is not. You’re much too willing to believe me.”

“You keep saying things that ought to be taken seriously!”

“Well, you should have asked beforehand what room this was.”

“I assumed it was a guest room.”

Fujin leans against the doorframe, observing. He has to admit, he’s charmed by the animals frolicking around the floor, all sorts of creatures carefully separated from one another by rearranged shelves. “It is, but if you wish to be a protector of Earthrealm, you will have to pay much closer to attention to a great many things. You didn’t even ask me for a map of the temple.”

Nightwolf straightens up, folding his arms. “I only arrived here quite recently. Forgive my failure to ask you about the building’s layout, furniture, heating and cooling systems, plumbing, insurance policies—”

“There’s no need to worry about those in such detail.”

“What a relief.”

“Yes. Guests to the Sky Temple only learn about the interior workings of the building once they’ve stayed here for exactly three weeks and four days.”

“Really—” Nightwolf shakes his head. “You are quickly teaching me to believe absolutely nothing you say.”

“As it should be. A healthy sense of doubt is crucial.” Fujin steps into the room, squatting down for a closer look at a litter of baby wild rabbits. “And yet, somehow, Raiden never managed to acquire one.”

“Is that why you’re like this? To teach Raiden skepticism?”

“Maybe.”

“I appreciate the efforts, but it is quite possible he is beyond help in that regard.”

Fujin shrugs. “To be fair to everyone, no immortals have any sort of survival instinct. Not even me.”

Nightwolf sighs ruefully. “It is debatable whether I do, for that matter.”

“You are still here, which indicates that you’ve done adequately at surviving.”

“Two decades spent as a revenant would suggest otherwise.”
“Yes, but you’re past that now.” Fujin waves it away dismissively. “Two decades barely matters.”

“Maybe to you. My frame of reference is several millennia shorter than yours.”

“And centuries longer than normal mortals.”

“It’s all relative.” Nightwolf wanders over. “Do you like the rabbits? I found them freezing in the woods last afternoon. Their mother abandoned them.”

Fujin inspects the little creatures more closely. “Just out of curiosity, do you plan to save every possible orphaned or wounded animal in the woods around the Sky Temple?”

“As many as I can.”

“Very well. I’ll help. I’ve always had an affinity for birds.”

“I am delighted to hear that.”

“I’ve collected quite a selection of vintage nature books. It’s a pity I’ve not had the chance to see any of the creatures up close.”

Nightwolf glances at him in surprise. “You don’t leave the Sky Temple?”

“As infrequently as possible, yes.”

“That seems… limiting.”

“Someone has to stay close to the jinsei.” Fujin leaves the rabbits alone, retreating towards the door. “That someone happens to be me.”

Nightwolf furrows his brow. “Why not appoint another?”

Fujin sighs, then reaches back, gathering his hair up, and braids it neatly without looking. “Technically, that is you, but you seem dedicated to spending your time outdoors.”

“Not all of my time. I could guard the jinsei now and then, if you’d like.”

“Never mind.” Fujin rubs the back of his neck, thinking deeply. “It would be nice to leave, perhaps, but the last time I did, Shinnok managed to arrive and corrupt the jinsei immediately. That was a mistake.”

“Why did you leave?”

Fujin winces. “I was trying to intercept Shinnok.”

Nightwolf responds evenly. “At least that whole situation has resolved itself now.”

“Yes, my brother and his former archenemy are now determined to get themselves murdered in Outworld instead of by each other. I am unsure what happens if a god dies in mortal form, but I don’t want to find out.”

“Nor do any of us. I must admit, I have some questions about the history between Raiden and Shinnok.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing that can’t be answered by the fact that my brother spent centuries lovingly hand-carving that damned mural upstairs.”
“That raises more questions than it answers.”

Fujin relents, with another sigh. “Shinnok and Raiden were allies, long before Shinnok went rogue and made a power grab for Earthrealm. He was one of very few gods not assigned to protect any realm. He was bitterly, deeply envious of Raiden and how the mortals loved him, without a true understanding of the miserable responsibilities of protectorship.”

“I knew none of this except for Shinnok’s attempt to take over.”

“Raiden prefers not to speak of it… or he did, the last time you knew him. I suppose everything is completely different now.”

“Different and better, I’d argue.” Nightwolf unzips his vest halfway, revealing a small wildcat sleeping inside. “Tell me more. Do the Elder Gods all protect realms, then?”

“No longer. They gave that up a long time ago, and now serve as a council in their own right, trying to monitor and manage the protectors themselves. There were many more gods in the past than there are now.”

“What happened to them all? That surprises me.”

“Even immortals can be eliminated. Broken to pieces, trapped for eternity, entombed, locked away… there are all sorts of options, depending on one’s morbid creativity.”

Nightwolf inspects Fujin with renewed curiosity. “You seem to know a great deal about this.”

“Only secondhand. I was one of the gods who arrived later. To put it as grimly as possible, I am the back-up for Raiden in case he catastrophically fails. So far, nothing has gone so severely wrong that I’ve needed to formally take over his duties, although it’s worth mentioning I am technically Earthrealm’s main protector right now.”

“Ah.” Nightwolf processes this. “Did you ever meet the Elder Gods directly?”

“No, negotiations were never my specialty. I tried to stay out of politics, and still do.” Fujin adjusts the tie on his braid, idly fidgeting with it. “Gods aren’t made in the same sense as mortals. They simply… come into existence. Raiden found me in the Heavens, and brought me back to Earthrealm with him. It’s likely I would have ended up as a lowly assistant to the Elder Gods otherwise, at least for a while.”

“Did you know Shinnok before his fall?”

“I knew of him, but no.”

“I imagine only Raiden remembers, then.” Nightwolf removes the kitten from his vest, gently placing it back into its pen in the corner of the room to rest atop a pile of well-clawed pillows. “Forgive my curiosity. It’s impossible not to wonder.”

“Indeed. I do know that Shinnok was once very different. At least, he more closely resembled the mural version than his current self.”

“I was wondering about that discrepancy. I assumed there was a valid reason other than Raiden’s imagination.” Nightwolf gestures for Fujin to come closer. “Here, look.”

“It could easily be both.” Fujin approaches obediently. “What?”
Nightwolf points to a small cage resting atop a bookshelf, containing a little nest of baby birds. “I’d never seen any of these in the wild.”

“Nor had I.” Fujin peers at the nest, deeply fascinated. “They’re charming. I thought these were endangered.”

“They are. Hence the reason for my determined efforts to save them all. Would you like to help feed the chicks?”

“I’d be glad to.”

Nightwolf hands him a tweezers and a cup full of wriggling insects.

Fujin raises an eyebrow. “Perhaps you’d better do it.”

“I just thought I’d ask.” Stifling a laugh, Nightwolf plucks one of the grubs out of the cup with the tweezers and offers it to one of the small feathery chicks, who gulps it down hungrily. “Still, some assistance would be nice.”

Fujin ponders it for a moment. “There are some monks who come visit quite frequently to check on myself and Raiden, and make sure we haven’t managed to accidentally explode Earth’s life force. Maybe you could give them wilderness training lessons.”

“I can’t tell if that suggestion is serious.”

Fujin cracks a smile. “Only somewhat.”

“I suppose it couldn’t hurt to try. We’ll have the place to ourselves while the others are at the tournament.”

“Well, not entirely. Some of the Lin Kuei are assigned to come help guard the temple as soon as the group leaves for Outworld.”

“That’s thoughtful of them. Maybe they’d be willing to help.”

“Feel free to ask.” Taking a seat on the windowsill, Fujin rests his chin in his hands thoughtfully. “Do you regret not going to this tournament?”

“No. I wouldn’t want to.” Nightwolf responds swiftly, his mind made up. “The last one was disastrous enough, and my duties are here now.”

“Ah. I was just curious. It seems that everyone else is going.”

“Which is understandable. From what I hear, Outworld wanted to claim one of the gods for their own, as repayment for whatever Raiden did.”

“Yes. I consider it best not to remind them that there’s a third god at all.”

“Do they forget that so easily?”

Fujin grimaces. “Yes.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being unobserved. Sometimes, it’s better that way.”

“I have to agree.” Fujin gazes out the window, admiring the mountainous landscape. “As much as I sometimes criticize my duty of staying here, I wouldn’t feel at home anywhere else. I did go on
adventures, once… but those days are over, ever since all the recent crises. Protecting this place
suits me well.”

“You’ll have to tell me some of your stories.”

“I’d be glad to. I suppose it would not exactly be abandoning my duties if we discussed it during a
walk in the woods, provided that I stay close to the place.”

“That’s a wonderful idea. I’ll bring you along the next time I go out and look for orphaned
creatures.”

“That’s not at all what I meant.”

Nightwolf grins suddenly. “I know.”

Fujin rolls his eyes, suddenly feeling terribly self-conscious. “Some other time, then?”

“Whenever you would like.”

He musters a bit of boldness. “What about now?”

“Certainly. After I finish feeding the birds.”

Fujin manages a smile. “That sounds fine by me.”

Nightwolf immediately offers him the cup of wriggling insects again. “It would go faster if you
helped.”

Fujin scoots away, eyebrows raised, and shoots a mild glare at his companion. “Do that one more
time, and I might revoke my offer to tell you about all the exciting adventures.”

Nightwolf prudently sets the cup aside. “That would be a shame.”

Fujin hides a smirk. He hasn’t had this much fun with a conversation in quite a while, and he’s
starting to feel the weight of loneliness lifting off his shoulders. “Perhaps.”

“I wouldn’t want to miss those exciting adventures.”

His response is as deadpan as usual. “Actually, I only have a few of those to retell. The rest of them
are dreadfully dull.”

Nightwolf meets Fujin’s eyes. “Let me be the judge of that.”

- - -

“What are you making?”

Mileena glances up from her project, carefully pulling needle and thread through velvet cloth with

Hanzo sits down at the other side of the bench, keeping a polite distance. “Call me Hanzo. I’m
surprised to find you here.”

“I’m surprised you found me at all, but I don’t mind if you’d like to talk. Last time we met, I recall
it wasn’t under such good terms. I wasn’t as mature, and you weren’t as good-looking.” Mileena
glances at him out of the corner of her eye, then gestures to the playground in the city park, where
N’Malah is running around in human disguise, having a grand time with the other children. “I’m supervising N’Malah, the insect child. It seems to do her good to be outdoors. I don’t have the faintest clue what Kytinn culture was like, but I’m trying my best, and she seems happy.”

“The unexpected duties of parenthood.” Ignoring the remark about the insect child, Hanzo smiles faintly, leaning back on the bench and studying the city skyline beyond the trees. “I remember those days.”

“You what?”

“Takeda.” Hanzo clarifies, clearing his throat. He keeps forgetting Mileena doesn’t know everything that the others do, at least not yet. “I raised him until Kenshi returned.”

“Oh.” Mileena takes a moment to absorb this, head tilted to the side. “It seems you did a good job. He’s a very fine young man, from what I hear. I haven’t actually talked with him much, of course, but I’m willing to trust Shinnok’s observations.”

“You’re here to protect Shinnok, correct?” Hanzo’s still unclear on the whole situation, but thought he’d make an attempt to find out. “By the way, I asked Frost about your whereabouts. I apologize for arriving without notice.”

“I don’t mind it, but I’m curious why you decided to come find me, of all people.”

“You’re the only person right now without something urgent to do.” Hanzo shrugs, stretching his legs, and settles in on the uncomfortable bench as best he can. “Kuai is having lunch with the other Lin Kuei, Takeda and Kenshi are taking the day off for bonding time, Sonya and Johnny are in meetings, Cassie and Frost are packing for the trip to Outworld… You understand, I’m sure.”

“Ah, so you decided to come find me rather than sit around angrily and brood about revenge, or whatever it was that you did as Scorpion.” Mileena glances at him sideways. “I apologize. That was harsh.”

“Harsh, but true. I try not to be Scorpion any longer, though I’ll never fully shed the title. I know that much.” Hanzo grits his teeth. “At least Quan Chi is dead. I’m infuriated that he was revived at all, but I couldn’t be more glad that his fate is sealed.”

“That’s another part of the reason I’m here.” Mileena explains quickly, keeping an eye on the playground. “Do you know what happened to Raiden and Shinnok?”

“I was told, yes.”

“I’m glad I don’t have to explain it. Regardless, that is why. I couldn’t bear the thought of anything more happening to them. And somehow, instead, I’m the guardian for a child instead. An insect child.”

Hanzo can’t help but ask. “Did you mean that literally?”

“Yes.”

He peers more closely at the playground. “I don’t see anyone unusual.”

“You’re not supposed to. Both she and I are in disguise.”

“That explains the lack of teeth.”
“I’m surprised you were tactful enough not to mention it.”

Hanzo laughs a little. “Even I am not rude enough for that. What does the child normally look like, if I won’t regret asking?”

“Did you ever see D’Vorah?”

“Only once, briefly.”

“Consider yourself fortunate.” Mileena holds up the small plush animal she’d been sewing, a velveteen Kytinn patterned similarly to N’Malah with large glossy insect eyes and a blue jacket. “Something like that.”

Hanzo’s eyebrows shoot up. “Unexpected.”

“They normally have wings, too, but I’m not done sewing those.” Mileena finishes a few more stitches, deftly tying a knot in the fine thread. “I thought she might like to have something like herself. Human children have dolls, so it’s only fair.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you.” Hanzo checks his watch discreetly. “I suppose I had better be going. Kuai ought to be done with the Lin Kuei luncheon by now, and I need to pack.”

“Is that somehow dependent on his presence?”

“No, not at all, of course.”

“Yes. There’s no reason to assume something like that.” Mileena grins cheekily, reaching across the bench to shake her newfound acquaintance’s hand. “It’s good to see you, Hanzo…?”

“Hasashi.”

“Hanzo Hasashi.” She grasps his hand with a bone-crushing grip, ignoring his slight wince. “You may call me Mileena Kahunum. Or just Mileena.”

“Very well, Mileena.” Hanzo manages a smile, and returns the powerful hand squeeze, to which she barely reacts. “I’m sure I’ll see you again sometime.”

“You certainly shall.” As he rises from the bench, she bids him a polite farewell, fluttering her eyelashes a bit. “Say hello to Kuai from me.”

Hanzo looks at her sternly. “I beg your pardon?”

“Don’t worry about it.” Mileena turns her attention back to the playground as N’Malah comes running towards her, laughing cheerfully. “It seems I’m needed. But I’m glad you stopped by.”

After a proper goodbye, Hanzo makes a quick exit, heading back out through the city park’s gate. Though they last met long ago, when Mileena was a new and monstrous creation and Hanzo was still a vengeful specter, it’s a relief to make peace so much later, now that they’ve become their true selves.

Pausing at the edge of the sidewalk, he pulls out his phone, sending a quick message.

[HH] Frost, thank you for helping me find Mileena. She was very polite.

[IS] no prob. glad it went well. she’s pretty devoted to taking care of that kid
[HH] So I noticed. Responsibility can do a world of good.

[IS] for someone else maybe
[IS] btw cassie says you guys need to get ready for the trip.
[IS] is the polar bear back yet?

[HH] What??

[IS] you know who i mean. i KNOW you know

[HH] If I could glare at you through text message, I would.

[IS] haha. you wish

[HH] Worry about yourself and the team for now.

[IS] ok fine, thanks dad #2
[IS] i gotta pack too. talk to you later

Shoving his phone back into his pocket, Hanzo sighs, and sets off down the sidewalk again, finding his way back towards his home away from home.
“Is this it, then?”

Cassie perches on the roof cross-legged, curled up in a dilapidated plastic chair, and gazes out on the city at dusk, lit up by a million tiny points of light. Raiden is close beside, chin resting contemplatively in his hands as the wind tangles his silver hair, his noble profile silhouetted by the setting sun.

“We have come a long way, have we not?” Raiden answers the question with a question, a smile flickering across his face as he glances towards Cassie with vivid blue eyes. Since his mortal transformation, there is something about him that is no longer untouchable. His eyes may glow less brightly, but it is easier to glimpse his soul through his gaze.

She nods, unable to stop a faint grin. “A damn long way. I can’t believe it’s finally here.”

“Not quite yet. We will have a few days to spare in Outworld before the tournament.” Raiden leans back in the chair, nearly tipping it over, but catches himself and scrambles to reassert his balance, stretching out his long legs instead. “Shinnok is still crafting the tournament armors. I believe he should be finished shortly.”

“So that explains where he’s been.”

“Yes, he has devoted himself to the job. It seems to suit him well. He has been using Mileena as his seamstress when he needs help. It is an efficient arrangement.” Raiden’s mind drifts through an assortment of thoughts, making sure he’s taken care of various last-minute tasks. “Have you packed everything you need?”

“Yeah. Checked and double checked. You?”

“Triple-checked.” Raiden allows himself a smile. “Everything is in order at the Sky Temple. I verified that with Fujin. He seems to be doing well, although thanks to Nightwolf, there is wildlife running amok through two floors of the temple.”

“Guess it makes the place more lively.”

“So I have been told.” Raiden folds his hands behind his head, mentally scanning the glimpses and flashes of visions that have been guiding him for these last few months. “You will fight first of all. Are you prepared?”

“Hey, Raiden? Stop asking me stuff like that.” Cassie chews loudly on a wad of bubblegum. “You’ll break through my false courage if you keep that up.”

“False courage? That is an untrue notion. If you have the composure to present yourself that way, you have as much bravery as you need.”

“Interesting way to look at it.” Cassie winces at a clattering noise from downstairs, complete with loud cursing in a language she doesn’t recognize. “Not even going to ask about that.”

“I suggest ignoring it until Shinnok emerges from the apartment with nine sets of armor.” Raiden looks over at her, sharing a patient glance. “It is new for me not only to participate in a tournament, but to no longer hold the responsibility of coordinating it.”
“It’s about time you caught a break, I’d say.”
“I would not describe it as a break.”
“Sorry.”
“It is neither more nor less work. It is simply a different role.” Raiden’s voice grows quiet, watching the sun fall beyond the crowded skyline. “Cassandra, there are things about this tournament I cannot disclose to you.”
“What?”
“I cannot mention this to anyone, lest I interrupt the path of events. The necessity of fate will not allow me to breathe a word of it. Nevertheless, I can at least make you aware…”
“Of what?”
“You should expect the unexpected.”
“*That* helps.” Cassie rolls her eyes, concealing a sudden flash of dread. Raiden’s ominous comments are never, ever a good sign. “Do we have to keep doing this cryptic stuff? Haven’t we been through enough together by now?”
“What will happen *must* happen. Just pack extra ammunition.”
Cassie draws a deep breath, letting it out through clenched teeth. “I’ll shove bullets into every empty pocket in my outfit if I have to. I’m not letting anyone die.”
“No one will die.”
“What a relief.”
“In fact, the opposite may happen.”
“The opposite of dying is… surviving. So? That’s good.”
Raiden steeples his fingers. “That is not what I mean.”
“Are you suggesting even more people are going to come back from the dead than they already have?”
“That is not what I said, either.”
“Raiden!”
“I am warning you as best I can!” Raiden moves to get up from his chair in a sudden motion, but sinks back into it tiredly, head resting in his hands. “Be patient with me, and with your teammates. The stakes are high.”
“I’m trying.” Cassie leans over and rests a hand on his shoulder, feeling Raiden’s anguish all at once and doing her best to soothe it. “We’re going to be just fine. I know we are.”
The god offers her a tentative smile, exhaustion written on his worn face. “Your confidence will see us through.”
“Did I ever tell you what it was like in the Netherrealm?”

Mileena glances up thoughtfully, lounging across the bed while she draws a sharp needle through blade-proof fabric in rows of neat invisible stitches. “No.”

Shinnok barely glances up, deeply focused on crafting a fitted suit of armor onto a sturdy mannequin. “It was hardly a… how do you mortals say it, anyway? Not a picnic.”

Frost snorts, haphazardly shoving Raiden’s clothes into a suitcase and sitting heavily on it to zip it shut. She volunteered for packing duty, and far prefers it to whatever Mileena’s stuck doing for Shinnok’s last-minute DIY project. At least her own armor is already done, and it’s amazing. “You were king of the place, weren’t you? Can’t have been that bad.”

"Empire, and yes, it was that bad.” Shinnok grits his teeth, hauls back his fist, and punches a piece of durable metal plating into place. Satisfied with the result, he secures it firmly, bending the sheet of reinforced armor back and forth to test its flexibility. “Remember that my physical body was chained in the deepest pits of the Netherrealm with restraints too powerful to break.”

Frost nods knowingly. “Like Tartarus.”

“I suppose.” Shinnok sniffs dismissively. “Regardless, the only way to escape was to project my spirit elsewhere in the realm in a ghostly form. Although I appeared as myself, I could not interact with the world around me. Hence, I developed the skeletal hands.”

“Ohh, that’s why!” Mileena gasps in a sudden flash of insight, dropping her needle. “It was out of necessity, then!”

“Everything I do is out of necessity.”

Frost arches a brow with another cutting remark. “Including the corset lacing on that outfit?”

“Yes.” Shinnok snaps back. “By the way, this is my outfit. Excuse me.”

She rolls her eyes, leaning back against the wall with one foot on the lopsided suitcase. “Wouldn’t have expected any less.”

“I tried to be thoughtful, and completed the other armors first.” Shinnok sneers at her, taking slight pride in his apparent generosity. “I need a suit of armor least of all, and I will fight last. You do approve of your own armor, yes? Or are you too critical to grant me any praise?”

“I told you I liked it already.” Frost laughs, eyeing the outfit in progress. “Don’t worry, I’ll be there on opening day when you launch your own fashion line in Outworld.”

“As if I would grant them access to my creations.” Shinnok turns the armor around, inspecting the other side with a critical eye. “Hmm. Not perfect, but nearly complete. I suppose I can tolerate wearing it. I’ll finish the rest on the way.”

“That’s probably a good idea. It’s at least a couple hours to get to the transit site.” Frost shoves her hands into her pockets, pacing back and forth across the carpeted floor. “All else failing, you can distract Tremor by looking fabulous, and punch him in the face when he’s not looking.”

“That was part of my strategy already.” Shinnok responds dryly, accepting the bundled fabric from Mileena and securing it into place with a series of delicate stitches and unbreakable adhesive. “Apparently Sindel and the other Edenians will bring us to the capital when we arrive in Outworld. If they can be relied upon.”
“Z’unkarah. That’s the capital.” Mileena corrects him, interrupting in annoyance. “Do you really expect that my mother would let you down? Besides, I’ll be there to help.”

“That reassures me way less, not more.” Frost hauls the suitcase over to the door, joining the pile. “Where’s N’Malah?”

“In the living room. She’s drawing.”

“I’ll go say goodbye.” Frost crosses through the threshold, checking the other room, then stops in surprise, retreating back towards the doorway at once. As strange as her life is, she’s still not yet used to some of the weirdest elements. “Oh. Uh. That’s… efficient… I guess…”

N’Malah glances up from the paper, enthusiastically working on a rainbow-hued picture with a crayon clutched in each hand and four more crayons impaled on her tiny stingers. “Hello!”

“Hey.” Frost joins her on the couch, sitting down nearby. “Whatcha makin’?”

N’Malah holds up a surprisingly well-drawn picture of a strange underground landscape, looking like some sort of tropical garden with a roof above it and a maze of tunnels on all sides. “Look!”

Frost tilts her head to the side. “What’s that?”

N’Malah shrugs. “Dunno. I remembers it.”

Frost raises an eyebrow. “You’re getting better at your first-person pronouns.”

“My what?”

“Don’t worry about it. Hey, I got you something.” She produces a bag from the library, containing some kiddie picture-books about prehistoric art and ancient history. “Closest I could get to Outworld stuff. You might like it.”

N’Malah’s compound eyes light up, dropping the crayons and enthusiastically accepting the bag from Frost with obvious glee. “Thank you!” She grabs her in a hug with her stingers, barely noticing as Frost flinches instinctively. “You’ll be back when?”

“Should be about a week and a half, if everything goes okay.”

N’Malah gives her one more squeeze, then lets go and returns to the drawing, pulling out a new sheet of paper and eagerly scribbling on it with several crayons at once. “You can keep the picture! Take it. From me.”

“Hey, thanks.” Frost folds it up and tucks it into her vest, awkwardly patting N’Malah on the shoulder. “See you later, okay?”

“Okay!”

Leaving the cheerful insect child behind, Frost returns to the bedroom to find Shinnok clad in full tournament regalia, looking exactly as fabulous as promised. As he preens, Mileena diligently stitches up a few seams in the back, surprisingly skillful despite her pointy nails. Shinnok’s clearly proud of himself, wearing his usual annoying smirk with his hands on his hips. The outfit is luxuriously sewn and thoroughly gilded, crafted in the usual gold and burgundy colors, with enough armor plating to protect him in a fight and enough iridescent cloth to be eye-catching.

Frost whistles under her breath. “Lookin’ good, Liberace.”
Shinnok’s tone turns demanding. “What?”

“Don’t worry about it.” Frost laughs under her breath, then whips out her phone as it buzzes with urgent notifications, checking the unread messages. She has a bad feeling about this.

[SB] We are running late. Be at the base, NOW.


She shuts off her phone, wincing. “We gotta get going. Raiden and Cassie should be all set by now.”

Raiden clears his throat and steps through the doorway, inviting himself into the makeshift outfit studio. “Indeed we are.”

Frost whirls to face him, hands on her hips. “How long were you waiting out there?”

“Only a minute.” Raiden shrugs helplessly. He was doing his best to be polite. “Shinnok, you look very nice.”

“I’d hope so.” Shinnok floats off the ground a bit, looking down his nose at the other god in an unsuccessful attempted show of authority. “I designed your outfit, too, remember?”

“I do remember.” Raiden glances aside, stifling a smile. “You told me already today. I have yet to see it, and although I trust in your abilities, I would like to take a look eventually.”

Shinnok waves a hand dismissively. “Have some patience! The artistic process is not easy.”

Frost can’t help but smirk. “I’ll get the suitcases while you two have your daily pointless argument.”

Shinnok objects. “Pointless?”

Raiden clears his throat. “Daily?”

Frost hides a laugh, and escapes through the doorway, dragging the suitcase behind her.

---

Sonya checks and re-checks her clipboard, her hairstyle coming undone as loose strands fall around her eyes. She hasn’t slept in a day and a half, and it shows. She brushes her hair back off her forehead and puts her hat on backwards, then sinks into the nearest chair and groans, clipboard dropped in her lap. “They’re not paying me enough for this.”

Johnny saunters over. “I’m pretty sure they’d cut you a hefty paycheck if you asked.”

“Maybe after it’s all over, sure. If we don’t win, there’s not gonna be a SF to pay me anymore.”

“You sure about that?” Johnny’s brow furrows, suddenly confused about the details. “I thought if Outworld wins, they get to claim one of the gods. Not the whole planet.”

“That’s the problem. If they take one, the other’s gonna go berserk to get him back. Then we’re all fucked.”

“...didn’t think of that.”
“Yeah, I’ve been thinking about it. If we don’t win, it’s, uh…” Her voice trails off. “No-win.”

“Sonya, you need to get some sleep.”

“I’ll sleep on the way to the transit site.”

“You need to rest now. Otherwise you’re gonna pass out, and I don’t want to have to carry my unconscious ex-wife all the way to the plane.”

“I guess.” Sonya laughs hollowly. “I could always drink some more coffee.”

“I don’t think it’s possible to have that much caffeine in your bloodstream without spontaneously exploding.”

“Yeah, I guess you would know.”

“Hey, saving the world is exhausting!”

“You’re telling me.” Sonya glances over at him, trying to keep her spirits up. “Is this like when you chaperoned that eight grade trip? I was hearing about that for weeks.”

“This is so much worse than that.” Johnny fidgets with the zipper on his jacket, idly staring at the blank wall in the dull SF base corridor. “Hey. If it’ll make you feel better, go through the checklist. Who’s staying where, who’s bringing what? Gimme the details.”


“Yup.” Johnny cross-checks with his mental list, which he only has half-memorized, but he trusts Sonya’s judgment more than his own. “Items? What’s our inventory?”

“Sareena’s got the reptile egg to give to Lizard after the tournament.” Sonya shakes her head, rubbing her eyes. “Lizard egg to give to Reptile.”

Johnny bites his lip to keep from laughing. “Reasonable mistake to make. Shinnok’s got the armor, right?”

“Yep. Jax has the weapons. All the competitors, plus our spectator team.”

“We’re sending them into the arena armed? They’re not fighting--”

“This is Outworld. We’d be insane not to.”

“You think Fujin and Nightwolf can keep Earth safe while we’re gone?”

“Pretty sure it’s safer while we’re not here.”

“Can’t argue with that.” Johnny knows Sonya’s got a point. “What about the actual spectators?”

“Beats me. There’s some ticket agency handling it all. I don’t know how many Earthrealmers are going to show up. It’s not exactly Olympics-scale.”

“Yeah, but it’s still cool. There’ll be enough people on the Earth side. Don’t worry.”

“It’s not like we need a cheerleader squad to win a tournament, Johnny.”
“If we need one, I could try to fit into a uniform—”

Sonya can’t help but laugh. “Please don’t.”

“Made you smile. See, I’m doing my job.” Johnny rests back against the wall, feeling a little better already. Sonya’s capable enough to pull this off, even despite the inevitable chaos. “So what do we do when we’re there? Drop everything in the hotel and go explore?”

“Different time zones. It’ll be night there when we arrive. I wouldn’t go wandering around outside if I were you.”

“Aw, but it could be fun!”

“If you want to punch your way out of a Tarkatan security squad when you accidentally stumble into the black market, that’s on you.”

“I bet I could, though…”

“Let’s not find out.”

“Aw, okaaay.” Johnny feigns disappointment, but catches Sonya’s eye and winks. “Our daughter’s all grown up now! Are you excited to see her beat up Kano?”

“I wish she didn’t have to, but if she doesn’t manage to get rid of him, I’ll jump into the arena and do it myself.”

“That might be breaking the rules. Dunno about that.” Johnny squints at her. “You two are pretty alike. Hey, if you go get an undercut before we go and put on a little eyeliner, you could be her stunt double.”

“No way. I wouldn’t pull off the look as well as she does, and I know she can win on her own.”

“So what security clearance did you have to go through to get Cassie those super-human boots?”

“I had to threaten to tell a general’s wife about his fling with the secretary.”

“I can’t tell if you’re joking, and that scares me.”

Sonya’s resolve cracks, and she offers the tiniest hint of a smile. “No. I just cashed in a few favors at the tech department. As if I’d have to blackmail anyone to get what I want.”

“Fair enough.” Johnny rests his sunglasses back on the bridge of his nose, drumming his fingers on the arm of the chair. “What are we waiting for, anyway?”

“Jax is packing up the weapons. I figured it’d be better not to rush him.”

“That man does know his way around an armory.” Johnny suddenly remembers something he’d heard in passing when the whole incident was unfolding. Somehow, it feels like both yesterday and last year. “Hey, did Jacqui ever get that stockpile of weapons out of the Krypt?”

“Nope. For some reason, nobody wanted to go back.”

“Can’t imagine why.” Johnny shudders at the memory of what he’d been told. “Any chance of strangers messing with us in the hotel?”

“We rented the entire thing. No chance at all.”
“Nice. Very thorough. I like it.”

“You can thank Sindel for that, not me. She handled it all.”

“She’s doing pretty well for herself, what with having been dead… a thousand years, or something, right?”

“I guess being alive is like riding a bike. You never really forget how to do it.” Sonya quips dryly, lifting her phone from her pocket and checking it with a quick glance. “Jax’s done. Let’s go.”

“So this is it?”

“This is it.”

“Hey. C’mere.” Johnny awkwardly exchanges a hug with Sonya that soon turns sincere. She rests her chin on his shoulder, glad for the support, if only for a moment. “You’re doing great. We’re gonna win this. I know we are.”

“Just like you knew—” But Sonya’s voice trails off, the sharp remark fading into thin air, and she sighs, closing her eyes. “Thanks. Seriously. Thank you. The optimism helps.”

“Anytime.” Johnny squeezes her lightly, then lets go, stepping back to give her space. “You know what?”

“What?”

“After this tournament, I’m taking you out… for dinner. Again.”

Sonya grins. “It’s a deal.”

---

Shinnok stands on the balcony, sniffing the air with a faint hint of annoyance. “It’s much too humid here. I don’t care for it.”

Cassie gazes out into the Outworld darkness. “We’re right next to a rainforest, genius. You don’t like it, you can go terraform it or something.” She corrects herself quickly. “That’s a joke. Don’t do that.”

“I’d rather preserve my energy for actual projects, thank you.”

“Good call.” She squints her eyes, straining to make out the shape of foreign buildings in the darkness. Beyond the luxurious hotel, perched on a tall hill near the outskirts of Z’unkarah, the city unfolds like a scattered landscape of living ruins. “Everything looks so… different. Like the old worlds you hear about in history books.”

Raiden’s voice echoes from somewhere behind her. “In times long past, the boundaries between the realms were far less secure. Outworld and Earthrealm’s ancient civilizations drew inspiration from each other… but while Earthrealm moved forward, Outworld did not.”

“Explains why it looks like someone threw together about ten different ancient-city diorama kits.” Cassie can’t help but smile, though. “It’s all dark out here. I’m not used to it.”

“While they lack electricity, they make up for it in other ways.” Raiden joins the two of them, standing patiently with his hands clasped behind his back. In the chilly night air, he’s wearing a warm tunic over light loose clothing, dressed in a traditional Outworld style. “You can see the stars
far more clearly here.”

Shinnok inspects him from across the balcony, brow furrowed under his headdress. “I suppose.”

“Here.” Raiden gently lifts the helmet off Shinnok’s head, setting it aside, and Shinnok irritately smoothes back his silver hair, shooting him a stern glare. In response, Raiden glances towards the sky. “Just look up and see.”

Shinnok folds his arms with a bothered frown, tapping his foot on the balcony. “It is a sky.”

“Look at it.”

Shinnok grudgingly obeys. He finds the sight immediately breathtaking, but refuses to admit it.

“I suppose that is... somewhat scenic.”

“Yes, it is.” Raiden’s face lights up with a smile. He enjoys convincing others to see the beauty of the world around them, no matter how difficult it might be. “By the way, I have something for both of you.”

“Well, that’s ominous. Allow me to guess, another grim prophecy?”

“No.” Raiden looks slightly wounded at the comment, expression clouded with a solemn frown. “It is a gift.”

“Oh, in that case, please do go ahead.”

“Here.” Raiden withdraws two small tokens with the White Lotus symbol carved on them, attached to elastic straps just the right size for bracelets. “I gave them to the others already. As Earthrealm’s defenders, you are now officially members of the White Lotus Society.”

Shinnok stares at him in disbelief. “Really, Raiden?”

Raiden looks down at the floor, his efforts in vain. “It was meant as a polite gesture.”

Shinnok feels the faintest twinge of a guilty conscience. “...it’s very thoughtful of you. Thank you.”

Raiden quietly hands him one.

Shinnok hands it back promptly, holding out his wrist. “You’re the official White Lotus Society leader, aren’t you? Put it on me. It’s just not the same otherwise.”

A faint smile reappears on Raiden’s face. He fastens the engraved emblem around Shinnok’s thin wrist, pushing up his sleeve to secure it tightly. “Is that more to your liking?”

“Very much, yes.”

“By the way, those have a slight luck enchantment.”

Shinnok’s eyebrows shoot up. “They do? You should have mentioned that before.”

“Such a gift must be accepted in the spirit with which it was given. Fortunately, you passed the test.”

“And if I hadn’t?”
“It might have been awkward.” Raiden turns to Cassie. “Do you want me to put on yours?”

“Nah, I’ll just wear it myself.” Cassie cracks a grin, secretly entertained by Raiden’s sentimental nature. God or not, he’s just as much of a disaster as the rest of them, but he’s more charming than most team leaders. “Gimme. And thank you, seriously. It’s very sweet of you.”

“My pleasure.” Raiden politely hands over the bracelet to Cassie. “I know it is inspired by foolish sentimentality, but I like to think there is some actual value in the gift, as well.”

Shinnok turns his wrist this way and that, inspecting the small item with a critical gaze. “That depends. What is it made of?”

“That is hardly relevant. It is a simple item.”

“And how did you enchant it?!”

Raiden offers a patient, mysterious smile. “You are not the only artificer, Shinnok.”

Shinnok goes quiet, staring at him.

“Come. Let us go inside.” Raiden rests a hand on each of their shoulders, guiding his fellow kombatants back inside the hotel corridor, and shuts the balcony door securely behind him, carefully locking the antique latch. “We all need our rest.”

Shinnok mutters under his breath. “Says you.”

“I recall you were the one diligently reminding me to get enough sleep, Shinnok.”

“Yes, but you’re you, and I’m me.”

“A fact that has not escaped my notice.” Raiden glances aside, trying to hide his grin. “I will see you tomorrow, Miss Cage. I look forward to our next adventure.”

“Same to you. Thanks for the bracelet. I’ll keep it as a memento if I survive.” Cassie throws them both a snappy salute. “It’ll be weird not having you two next door anymore. What’s your room number?”

Raiden digs around in his pocket, pulling out the room key. “311.”

Cassie groans, shoving hers back into her utility belt pouch. “Amazing. I’m 312.”

Shinnok smirks. “You spoke too soon.”

“Nah. I bet Mom did it on purpose. She knows you two need supervision, or else you’d blow up the realms by accident.” Cassie herds the two gods down the corridor towards their room, already engaged in a theatrical argument about something random and pointless. “Get in there before you wake up the whole team.”

“That would be highly unlikely. Still, your point is valid.” Raiden turns back to bid her a proper farewell. “Good night, Cassie.”

She’s almost caught off guard. Raiden called her Cassie again, not Cassandra... She’s still delighted by that. “Night, thunder god.”

Shinnok pokes his head out the door. “And me?”
“Night, death god.” Cassie purses her lips. “Doesn’t have the same ring to it.”

“I suppose not.” Shinnok ponders this, reluctantly agreeing with her point. “I’ll think of a better title, now that I’m no longer forever trapped in the Netherrealm herding demons.”

“You’re still doing that, it’s just a different set of demons. Good news, we’re way nicer than the other ones.” Cassie can’t resist the quip, expression softening in a slight grin. She can’t resist any opportunity to tease Shinnok about his newfound responsibilities. “See you tomorrow.”

“Until then, farewell.” Shinnok retreats out of view, then slams the door with a conjured skeletal hand in an appropriate show of dramatic emphasis.

Cassie laughs to herself, withdrawing to her own room and closing the door far more quietly. “Classic. Hey, Jacq, you here?”

Jacqui mumbles from one of the beds, half-asleep. “Yeah. Helped Dad haul the crates of stuff. Tryin’ to rest. Let’s catch up tomorrow. Night, Cass.”

“Night. Get some sleep, you deserve it.” Giving up on any thoughts of conversation, Cassie curls up in her own bed, pulling out her phone out of habit. Sonya was thoughtful enough to provide them all with charging batteries, guaranteed for a month solid. And while Outworld doesn’t have great reception, the signal’s strong enough to keep in touch with each other.

[CC] Hey mom just wanted to say thx

[SB] You’re still up? What’s going on?

[CC] This whole tournament thing didn’t really feel real til now tbh. But we r here. We made it. You did a great job w everything.

[SB] It’s my job. But you’re welcome.

[CC] You do way more than ur job just thought I should remind u. We r gonna be fine

[SB] Thank you… now go to bed!

[CC] I’m gonna. Nite mom love u


Cassie finally lets herself close her eyes… and she’s out like a light before her phone screen goes dark.

Tomorrow will be a new day.
“I don’t think you’ve got enough security in here.” Hands on her hips, Cassie glances around the airy and expansive hotel lobby, built in classic Outworld architecture. With her sunglasses perched atop her ruffled blonde hair, she’s dressed in a casual, non-threatening t-shirt and jeans… and double pistol holsters strapped around her waist, plus the tech-enhanced boots with which she plans to kick Kano’s ass in two days.

No harm in letting him have a preview.

Sonya comes up behind her, adopting a critical tone. “Really? You can tell?”

The lobby, to any civilian, would look unoccupied. But Cassie’s learned to notice the telltale signs of agents in hiding, including her own father crouched behind a particularly large houseplant.

“Tell Dad to hide a little better.”

Johnny sheepishly emerges. “Give me a break, will ya? They haven’t arrived yet, so I was practicing. Besides, I’m not the only one in here.”

“I know.” Cassie points around the room, picking out each secret location with ease. “Jacqui’s behind the reception desk, isn’t she?”

Jacqui’s muffled voice echoes over to her. “Hey, Cass. Good guess.”

The receptionist ignores her, reading a newspaper in a language Cassie doesn’t recognize. She’s clearly seen far stranger guests.

“Not a guess. I grew up with you, I still remember your hide and seek techniques.” Cassie laughs to herself, ignoring Sonya’s questioning look, then keeps searching. “Takeda’s in the armor closet.”

“Hey.” Takeda coughs awkwardly. “It’s kind of funny that they have armor closets here instead of coat closets, isn’t it?”

“Nah. You’d have to be crazy to wear a coat in Outworld... and you’d have to be even crazier not to wear armor. This isn’t a t-shirt, it’s a bulletproof vest.” Cassie rests her hands on her hips. “I think that’s all of them. Right?”

Sonya doesn’t bother answering. “Go get Sareena. The Outworlders will be here in a minute.”

She turns on her heel. “Will do.”

“Cassie!” Her mother’s sharp voice stops her. “Detail check, first. Tell me the plan.”

Cassie sighs. “I know this.”

“Then this should be easy.”

“Okay. I go get Sareena, who has the Saurian egg. Reptile arrives here at the lobby in five minutes, with Kano as his guard.” Cassie makes a disgusted noise under her breath. “Then Sareena hands off the egg to Reptile and that’s that. Anything goes wrong, we’ve got ‘em surrounded.”

“Right.” Sonya calls out to the next room. “Sareena, are you here yet?”
“I sure am!” Sareena trots into the room with a sturdy crate carefully cradled in her arms. She’s upgraded the Saurian egg’s protection, keeping it nestled warmly in a bundle of blankets to protect it from the cold and damage. In Outworld, she no longer has to worry about temperatures, but she’d rather be safe than sorry. “It’s right here.”

Sonya nods. “Hold onto it. This is going to be tense, and it’s our bargaining chip.”

Jacqui muses to herself from behind the desk. “I wonder why they’re sending Kano and not Erron.”

“No chance to shoot the egg if the deal goes bad. I figured that out already.” Sonya answers brusquely. “Besides, depending on how smart Kotal is, he might figure it’s an intimidation technique—”

She stops short as a burly figure kicks open the door.

“Kano.” General Blade’s voice drips with barely concealed contempt. “You’re early.”

“Surprised?” Kano saunters in, half-eaten sandwich in hand, as Reptile trails along behind him, leaving slimy footprints. “You know I couldn’t resist seein’ ya, love.”

Sonya grimaces.

The houseplant moves slightly.

Kano’s harsh gaze shifts to Cassie. “Look, it’s the whole family! How sweet. So, ya got the item?”

Cassie jerks a thumb in Sareena’s direction with a dismissive noise under her breath. “I don’t know what you think she’s got in that crate over there, but we didn’t make any omelettes with it, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“You must not!” Reptile snarls with sudden anger. Pushing Kano aside, he sweeps into the room, dressed in light armor that fits his streamlined body. His scales shimmer with iridescent color under the Outworld light. Claws clasped behind his back, he approaches Sareena, his voice suddenly choked with emotion. “Thank you for presserving thiss.”

Sareena steps forward boldly. Her eyes light up, holding the crate closer to her body, but her hands still shake slightly with overpowering nerves. “A real Saurian! Hello… I’m Sareena. I’m glad to meet you!”

“I understand you sstudied my disstant ancesstorss’ remainss.” Keeping his composure, Reptile studies her through eerie green eyes with slits for pupils, looking down his nose as best he can. Despite the hostility of Outworld city-dwellers, he chose to remain in his true form, rather than shapeshifting to an acceptable human alternative. He felt it would be best this way. “What did you disscover?”

Sareena admits with a soft shrug. “I don’t know… My job was making sure the bones were safely unearthed, not figuring out what they all mean. That’s for people smarter than me.”

“You were ssmart enough to ssave the egg.”

“Cassie did that…”

“But you kept it ssafe.” Reptile gently accepts the crate from her, gripping it with desperate intensity. “Sareena. Thank you, truly…” His voice trails off. “Call me Ssyzoth.”
“Syzoth? That’s your name?”

“It wass.” Reptile gingerly peels off the blankets with one claw, running a hand over the egg’s smooth shell. “Thiss… is our lasst chance, and I never knew of it. Not for an eternity.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“Raisse it as my own child. When there iss another Ssaurian, then together we can sseek other long-buried eggss in the depths of cavernss. If there iss one, there could be more…”

“That’s-- that’s a good plan.” Sareena’s oddly touched by the idea of this reptilian creature as a loving father. It seems hard to imagine, but it’s even stranger to picture anyone else trying to raise a baby Saurian. “How soon do you think it’ll hatch?”

“In the heat, it could be mere dayss. We sshall ssee.”

“Hate to ruin the cute family moment, but the Emperor’s expectin’ us back.” Tactless as ever, Kano strides towards them, fetching his knife from the holster at his hip. “Now, if ya don’t mind, I’ll be takin’--”

Reptile retreats behind Sareena, hissing and clutching the crate. “You will take nothing, falsse warrior!”

“Ooh, that hurts.” Kano pretends to wince. “Don’t play around. Let’s get goin’.”

A moment later, he notices Sonya has a gun drawn.

Her voice is cold steel. “No weapons.”

Kano studies her from his one good eye. “Little hypocritical, don’t ya think?”

She cocks the gun.

“Okay, okay!” Kano lowers his hands, putting away the knife. “Just thought I’d be the one to take the crate. Emperor’s orders.”

Reptile snarls over Sareena’s shoulder, sharp teeth bared at Kano. A bit of acid drool drips onto her armor, but she ignores it. “Kotal ssaid nothing of thiss to me. I would not trust you with thiss crate with my life!”

“Ouch.” Jacqui vaults over the reception desk, landing squarely near Cassie. Gauntlets activated, she points a fist at the mercenary, clucking her tongue in mock disapproval. “Tension on the Outworld team. That’s not good for morale.”

“I’ll second that.” Takeda emerges clumsily from the armor closet with a loud clattering noise, cursing under his breath. He doesn’t even know why Sonya put him here, except for a distraction, but maybe that’s the point. He summons all his willpower and glares sharply, letting his whip fall from his sleeve. “Kano, don’t try anything. Just get going.”

Cassie laughs to herself, balancing her weight from foot to foot. “It’s not showtime just yet, Kano, unless you want to try to fit the whole Koliseum crowd into the hotel lobby.”

“Not that you kids really need me, but…” Johnny steps out from behind the houseplant, barely avoiding knocking it over in a pile of dirt and leaves. “Backup, y’know? Anyway, get away from my family before I make you eat your own knife instead of that sandwich.”
Kano glances around the room leisurely.

“Is that all?”

“Nope!” Jin drops from a beam in the tall lofty ceiling, somersaulting down and deftly landing on his feet. “Hi there. How’s it goin’?” Before Kano can protest, Jin snatches the sandwich from his hand, taking a bite from the other side. “Mm, Outworld street food. Can’t identify the meat. I’m guessing that’s a good thing.”

“Why, you little--!” Kano sputters in true indignation this time, his composure finally broken. He grabs for his knife abruptly, only to be elbowed in the side sharply by Johnny, knocking his breath out for a second. He grudgingly settles for a string of colorful Australian slang muttered under his breath. Gesturing to Reptile, he points to the door, his grizzled jaw set in a scowl and his cyber eye blazing brighter than ever. “Let’s get outta here. Need plenty of rest before we beat their asses.”

Just to show off, Cassie balances her weight, crouches, and launches through the air with the help of her boots, doing an agile backflip and landing in front of the doorway to block Kano’s path. “You sure about that?”

Kano lunges towards Cassie in sudden rage, seeing red. But she nimbly vaults back again, using her momentum to ricochet off a nearby column in the entryway, and squarely kicks him out. As the mercenary stumbles in the dust, Reptile slips through the door with agile grace, closing it quickly before Kano can try any foolish revenge.

Cassie dusts off her sleeves, grinning back at Sonya. The general glares from across the room, her face a mixture of disappointment and relief.

The junior Cage retreats towards the exit, stealing a bite from Jin’s newfound sandwich along the way. “That went well.”

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Under the blazing Outworld sun, a pair of traveling companions wanders through the packed aisles of the city marketplace. One is distinctive in a simple golden tunic and a ponytail of dreads. The other’s long silver hair is braided and wrapped in a purple shawl, hiding it from sight. Wearing a plain dress and ordinary commoners’ shoes, she does not seem out of place among the citizens, though her elegant necklace distinguishes her from the crowd, lending an air of nobility to the otherwise simple outfit.

Cyrax has been listening eagerly to Sindel’s tales of Edenian history for the past several hours, connecting the pieces and parts of the stories and memorizing it all as best he can. Although there are gaps from archived memories that might be impossible to retrieve, she still holds enough knowledge of her former homeland to paint a clear picture of the idyllic place. Edenia was not without its struggles, but it seems infinitely better than Outworld’s chaos.

“I do like this place, even with its awful political system.” Cyrax stops at a stand of replica historical merchandise, wonderingly turning over an ornate amulet. Obviously fake, it glitters more brightly than the original, but might be mistaken for the real thing, at a distance. “Is this Shinnok’s amulet?”

The shopkeeper beams at him. “As close as you’re gonna get!”

Cyrax glances questioningly at Sindel. “It could be useful…”

Sindel laughs, and hands her companion a pocketful of Outworld currency. “You might be
expecting more trouble than we will encounter. Who would try to steal--” She stops herself, shaking her head as she remembers common sense. “No. There is always more trouble than we expect. Go ahead.”

“You get used to it, eventually.” Cyrax exchanges the money for the replica amulet, tucking it in the messenger bag slung over his shoulder. “Took me a while. Hey, you and me, we both, uh-- came back.”

“I suppose we did. We should discuss that sometime.” Sindel ponders this thoughtfully. She lifts off the ground and floats midair, scanning the aisles from above. “It seems the farmers’ market is at the center. We could--”

Cyrax tugs her back down to the ground abruptly. “Don’t do that around civilians!”

“Oh.” Sindel shakes herself, setting her necklace back in place, and glances at him sideways with a look of apology. “I am still growing accustomed to ordinary life. I simply forget, upon occasion, that the norms of Edanian life do not apply to Outworld.”

“You can all float?” Cyrax inclines his head in disbelief, studying her across the narrow aisle. “I guess that makes sense. Come on, let’s go get something to eat.”

They find themselves in the center of the farmers’ market soon enough, elbowing through several gossiping crowds. From what Cyrax can overhear, the chatter is all about the impending tournament and the incredible demand for tickets. His heart sinks a little. The Outworld side is going to be packed with supporters, and the Earthrealm side will only have their friends, family, and a handful of people willing to buy tickets to a martial arts show on another planet.

“Take heart. Your performance in the fight will be marvelous, no matter the crowds.” Sindel gently ushers him towards a tent, taking shelter in the shade. Though the Outworld sun is relentless, the temperature itself is moderate, cool enough for full clothing and light armor. Sunscreen helps, but not always enough. “Would you like something to eat?”

“Here!” Nearby, a grimy little girl with short-cropped hair hops off a barrel where she’s been sitting, offering them a bowl of fresh-sliced fruits. “Try it. Good!”

Cyrax tentatively reaches out, accepting a piece of luscious fruit. No sooner has he taken a bite than the little girl holds out a hand demandingly. “Gotta pay. Not free sample.”

“You could have mentioned that.” Cyrax sighs, then stuffs the rest of the fruit into his mouth, digging around in his pocket regretfully. At least it was good. “How much?”

“Three koins.”

“I suppose that’s not so bad.” He offers the necessary amount, dropping it in the little girl’s palm. “There you go.”

She grins widely, bouncing on the balls of her feet, and pockets it. “Want the whole bowl?”

Cyrax hesitates for a half-second. “Sure. What’s the price of that?”

“Fifty-three koins!”

He raises an eyebrow. “There’s not enough fruit in there to justify that.”

“Sure. Five slices, fifteen koins. Bowl, thirty-eight koins.”
“I don’t want the actual bowl! Just the fruit--” Cyrax is beginning to feel like he’s gotten into a bargain with a twelve-year-old used-car salesman. He pulls out all the spare change from his pocket, giving it to the girl with a defeated sigh. “Thanks. I’ll just eat it here. Are you the owner’s daughter?”

“Just helper. Work here sometimes, get extra money. Torr guards big bossie. He and we, no always together now. Is okay.”

Cyrax’s eyes narrow. “Torr? Big guy, knives on his arms, bag over his head?”

“Yeah!”

“You’re Ferra?!”

She grins excitedly. “We Ferra! Hi. You’re Cyrax.”

He’s actually stunned, nearly dropping the bowl of fruit. “How did you know that?!?”

“Big bossie has files in the desk. We pick locks.” Ferra digs around in her shirt collar and pulls out a key around her neck, brandishing it proudly. “This opens anything! Purple boy taught we to read.”

“Purple boy?” Cyrax is increasingly lost, trying to determine how on earth— or how on Outworld— Ferra knows him. “Does Kotal have files about the competitors?”

“Mm-hmm. Purple boy’s Rain. He grows plants.” Ferra keeps going without even stopping for breath. “We look at pictures in big bossie’s files. Can’t read it all, just names. That’s enough.”

“You don’t have photography yet, do you?”

“Pho-- what?”

“What kind of pictures are they?”

Ferra gestures frustratingly. “You know-- pictures!”

“Oh, drawings. Like sketch artists do. That must be it.” Cyrax can’t even begin to imagine where they found the likenesses of all the competitors. “Were they done in pencil? With lines?”

“No, looked just like you! Color, too. Yellow clothes.”

“It’s got to be phot--oh. Kano probably brought the info.” Cyrax gripes silently to himself. Nobody is a fan of Kano, but Cyrax finds him especially annoying for his traitorous behavior. “Anyway-- we’re getting off topic. Rain taught you to read?”

Sindel finally pays attention, turning on her heel to stare at the chatting pair. “Rain?”


Sindel falters, drawing a sharp breath as the revelation hits her. “He… no. It can’t be. The herb…?”

Cyrax looks between them in absolute confusion.

Sindel recovers quickly. “I knew Rain, once. He was the son of Edenia’s protector god. A bright and brave young man, but too arrogant.”
“Gods seem to be like that.” Cyrax observes cynically, offering the bowl of fruit to her. “I paid fifteen koins for this. You should try some.”

“Oh, I remember this fruit...” Sindel reaches for a piece, somehow hoping that it’ll trigger a rush of memory like the candy did for Tanya, but no such luck. It tastes good, and nothing else.

She shrugs, shoulders slumped a bit. “Who is the girl?”

“Ferra.”

“That Ferra?”

Cyrax sighs, downing the rest of the fruit in two bites. “Yes, that one. This is a strange day.”

“Aren’t they all?” Sindel kneels down to Ferra’s level, offering a hand. “It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Sindel.”

Ferra sticks out her hand in return, but seems unsure what to do, blinking in confusion. She flinches as Sindel clasps her hand, but adjusts immediately to the gesture of greeting, returning the handshake with surprising strength. “We’s Ferra!”

Sindel resists the urge to correct the girl’s grammar, instead offering a soft genuine smile. “I understand you will fight in the tournament with your companion. Although I support Earthrealm, I wish you luck in your kombat.”

“Thank ya.” Ferra somehow remembers her manners, thanks to a few clumsy attempts by Erron to instruct her in etiquette that he himself barely knows. “We’s gonna fight... Jac-kie.” She stumbles on the name. “Pretty girl with metal arms.” She pounds her fists together, imitating the gesture.

“I know who you mean. She is a bold fighter, too. The kombat will be a good match.” Sindel squints at Ferra’s necklace as it glitters in the sunlight, feeling a strange sense of familiarity about that key. “May I ask where you obtained that?”

“What, this?” Ferra’s hand moves protectively to her neck, clasping the precious key. “Found it. On a mission. Secret house in the jungle, old stuff from E-den-ey-ah.” She sounds out the name very carefully, so as to not offend Sindel. Despite her apparent ignorance, Ferra does know who the queen is, or was, or maybe still is. “Mine! You can’t have it!”

“I know it is, dear. I would not take it from you. But it-- it reminds me of my lost home. That is all.”

“Oh.” Ferra’s face falls. She avoids the queen’s gaze, staring down at the well-worn dirt of the marketplace path. “Still can’t have it. It opens things.”

Cyrax digs around in his bag, sensing an opportunity. “What if I gave you a lockpicking kit instead? Then, you can open anything. Not just drawers that need keys.”

Ferra’s interest is piqued. She accepts the little bag from Cyrax, snatching it out of his hand, and peers curiously at the small tools inside. “Don’t know how.”

“I’ll teach you, in between the tournament fights, if you’ll give Sindel the necklace.” Cyrax manages the bargain carefully, hovering close enough to take back the lockpick kit if Ferra declines the offer. “Would that be fair?”

“Maybe.” Ferra stares at him suspiciously, then glances back to the queen, inspecting Sindel’s
necklace with deep interest. She has a strange sense that she ought to trade for the key, even though she wants to keep it. She doesn’t need to give it to Sindel at all. She could run away right now if she wanted to, lockpick kit and all. It’s a weird feeling, that she ought to do something because… because she should. Ferra’s not sure what to think.

She settles for studying the jewels, leaning in closely. “That’s pretty.”

“Thank you. It is also very, very old.”

Ferra’s eyes light up in benevolent understanding. “Just like you!”

Cyrax winces, again.

Ferra tugs at his sleeve worriedly, noticing the shift in his expression. “What’s the matter?”

He shakes his head. “You don’t say things like that to ladies. It’s just not nice.”

Sindel is amused, though. “Ferra is hardly wrong, is she?” Reaching around to the back of her neck, she unclasps the glittering strand of gems, carefully arranging it in the palm of her hand and offering it to Ferra. “Shall we trade?”

“Yeah.” Ferra unceremoniously rips the key off her neck, breaking the leather strand that kept it there, and drops it into Sindel’s outstretched hand. “You can have it.”

“Thank you very much, dear.” Sindel slips the key into a secure pocket in her dress, clutched firmly in her hand. She still has that strange sense of buried memories brimming right near the surface, connected to the symbol on the key and the brief bits of information Ferra had casually mentioned. “Would you like me to help put the new necklace on you?”

“Nah.” Ferra holds it up to the light, entranced by the bright glimmering of the colorful jewels. She’s starting to feel like she got the better end of the bargain. “Skarly can help!”

Cyrax chimes in again. “Skarlet?”

“Yeah! That’s her. Hey. What time is it?”

Cyrax checks his watch uselessly. “I don’t know.”

“Why you look at your hand? That’s dumb. Look at the sky.” Ferra squints up at the bright sun, suddenly grinning and snatching the bowl back from Cyrax to drop it abruptly on the fruit stall counter. “It’s time! We get to go home!”

“Are you done with work, then?”

“Yep!” Ferra hops up onto the barrel, vaulting over the counter to consult with the shopkeeper in the back. Satisfied by a small bag of coins in her hand, she hurtles back over and lands squarely in the dirt, scrambling up to her feet and dashing away. “Bye!”

Sindel watches her go. “A charming young woman.”

“Not sure I’d put it that way, but sure.” Cyrax only now realizes he’s holding one more piece of fruit. He offers it to Sindel automatically, still trying to process the events that just unfolded. “Want the last slice?”

“Thank you.” She accepts it, appreciating the fresh flavor as her mind whirls with ideas and half-buried recollections. She shakes her head, dislodging her shawl, and pulls it back over her hair
quickly. “I’m going to take the key back home after we’re done at the market. Maybe Kitana, Tanya, or Jade will be able to make something of it.”

“That’s a good idea.” Cyrax lays a hand on her shoulder reassuringly, contemplating the strange incident. “Hey. You handled that really well.”

“So did you. The lockpicking kit was brilliant.”

“I don’t know what I would’ve done if that failed. She’s just a little girl. I wouldn’t take it from her.”

“Nor would I. I suppose there would be time to bargain later, instead. But we did acquire the key without trouble.” Sindel lifts her head and glances around her, noticing shopkeepers taking down signs and moving their wares inside the stalls. “Oh, I think the market is closing. Should we go back?”

“Unless you want to help them pack up, yeah, let’s get out of here.” Cyrax pats his messenger bag, full of assorted marketplace finds, replica merchandise, and little secondhand antique items. He may as well bring back some Outworld memorabilia. “This was fun. But you didn’t even buy anything, did you?”

“Of course not. What would I need? I came with you for the conversation and the company. I, too, miss having friends.”

“Well-- thanks.” Cyrax swallows hard, folding his hands. “It’s been weird adjusting to it all. It feels like I’m put back into somebody else’s life, a pre-made life, instead of creating my own, if that makes any sense…”

“It does.” Sindel pats his shoulder with maternal affection. “I know the feeling precisely. After the tournament, you are free to live life as you choose.”

“Maybe I’ll go back home. But I don’t know where home even is… and I’d have to bring Jin. I don’t want to lose him.”

“I see.” Sindel nods knowingly. “Where did you consider home, before it all?”

“For years, I lived in the Lin Kuei headquarters, but that’s in Arctika.” Cyrax shivers instinctively at the memory. “I liked my colleagues, but it was so miserably cold. I never quite adjusted. Home, I guess, is Botswana. My relatives are probably all still there, but-- they wouldn’t expect me to be this age…”

“Why do you concern yourself with what they expect? They are your family. They were already used to your magical abilities, yes?”

“Well, yes--”

“Then it matters even less. Come along. I’ll walk with you back to the hotel.” Sindel takes off along the path with long graceful strides, and Cyrax rushes to catch up. After a long silence, she resumes the conversation once they’ve left the marketplace, speaking in a quiet, contemplative tone. “Go back to see your family, if you can. There is nothing I desire more than to be with mine, although some of my loved ones will never return to me.”

Cyrax’s heart hurts a little. “I’m sorry.”

“Fate wills the paths of our lives, they say.” Sindel draws a deep breath, shuddering slightly. “I’m
not so sure. Perhaps that is heresy, but it is true. It is difficult for me to know that his soul is still
within reach, stored like so many tormented others.”

Cyrax doesn’t understand for a moment until realization finally hits. Then, he falters, almost
tripping on the path. “Ermac?”

“Indeed. The problem vexes me, but it is not something to resolve at this time. If the construct has
a life of their own, I would not take it from them.” Sindel finally takes off her shawl, unbinding her
hair and letting it flow freely down her back as they weave through a maze of back streets in
Outworld’s residential district. “It is a relief to finally speak of it. I could not discuss the matter
with any of the other Edenians. If they knew that Jerrod’s soul still lives, they would not hesitate to
take it, and potentially release thousands of others.”

Cyrax ponders the consequences. “That could be a disaster.”

“That is putting it lightly.” Sindel raises her head, studying the city’s low skyline. “Do not concern
yourself with it for now. Just worry about your fight. You are scheduled to kombat Skarlet?”

“Yes. I don’t have a clue what to expect.” He admits it openly. “We know basically nothing about
her. I’m-- I’m going in blind. All I know is I have to win.”

Sindel takes hold of Cyrax’s sleeve and saves him from a wrong turn, guiding him down the
correct street. “I have an idea. Ferra mentioned Skarlet. It seems that they are friends. I could speak
to her, and learn what I can.”

“That… would help. Would you actually be able to do that?”

“Certainly. All I would need is, perhaps, more gifts. Shiny gifts, since those seem to be to the girl’s
tastes.”

“Nothing like a little bribery to make kids cooperate. My younger brothers were like that...” Cyrax
laughs, but his face abruptly falls, as the difficult reality strikes him once again. “They’re probably
all grown up now. Older than me. I can barely even think about it. ”

Sindel steadies him again. “Try not to. Focus on your responsibilities and the tournament. I’ll do
what I can to assist you and the rest of Earthrealm.” Without warning, she stops him, and gathers
him into a warm hug. “Your hotel is up ahead. Get some rest, and be sure to eat enough. Take care,
Cyrax… What is your real name?”

He sighs deeply, resting on her shoulder. “Kenosi.”

“Very well. Take care, Kenosi, and we will meet again tomorrow.”

Cyrax eventually detaches himself, stepping back reluctantly. “This is stupid, but your hugs are
kind of like my mom’s. At least, I think. I don’t really remember all that well, but… I don’t know
where I was going with this. Never mind.”

Sindel smiles suddenly, a rare, authentic look of happiness. “I appreciate it. Thank you…” She
wipes her face, pushing a few strands of long hair back into place. “Farewell.” And she disappears
down the street, returning to her home in a teleport flash.

Cyrax stands in the middle of the path for a few long moments, studying the city as it unfolds
down the slope of the hill, then turns and trudges back towards the hotel, ready to return to the
strange, perplexing life that still doesn’t quite feel like his own.
From a high palace balcony, the emperor stands and watches the sunset, his heavy feathered headdress set aside as he basks in the last glow before the light vanishes.

“Kotal Kahn.” Bo’ Rai Cho’s familiar voice greets him from a distance, joined by the sound of loud footsteps on the balcony planks. “I thought I might find you here. How goes it?”

“All is well. Syzoth and Kano recovered the egg. Syzoth will care for it. That is the only news I have to offer.” Kotal slowly turns to face him, picking up the imperial headdress once more, but a shake of Bo’ Rai Cho’s head stops him, and he leaves it alone. “My apologies. The burden of the emperor’s role is both literal and metaphorical.”

“I understand that. It’s good of you to preserve your culture’s traditions, even after all this time. I can’t even imagine how long it’s been.”

“All too long. My heart sometimes yearns for a place that no longer exists.” Kotal draws a breath slowly, holding it and listening to the pounding of his pulse in his ears. “The tournament looms before me, yet I cannot shake the feeling that I have made a mistake by causing it to happen.”

Bo’ Rai Cho joins him at the edge of the balcony, brow furrowed in worry. His long dark hair is tied lower at the nape of his neck, rather than the usual high ponytail. Although the years have aged him, he looks healthier than before, studying Kotal with a critical gaze. “What does it matter, Emperor? The tournament will happen. You made your decision months ago. That cannot be changed. Proceed with an eye to the future, not the past.”

“Wise words as ever.” Kotal sinks down to the bench, resting his chin in his hands wearily. Bo’ Rai Cho’s words ring true. He should not allow himself to be consumed by idle wondering and worrying about what could have happened during that Earthrealm confrontation. Kotal needs to concentrate on what will happen, for better or for worse.

He glances approvingly at the warrior. “You look well.”

“I have been drinking less.” Bo’ Rai Cho pats the bottle at his hip. “It is the source of some of my abilities, but those that matter most are connected to my soul, not my flask.”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Kotal allows himself a soft smile. “My powers originate from the sun, as you know. To be cooped up indoors, filling out imperial paperwork, is against my nature.”

“Then do not let yourself be forced into lesser tasks.”

“I know. I have assigned it to Rain. He seems to appreciate the leadership opportunity. Tremor was willing to assist, but his powers give him difficulty in holding a pen.”

“That makes plenty of sense. I’m pleased to hear you have some help.” Bo’ Rai Cho leans back against the balcony railing, the old bench creaking under his weight. “I would never want to be emperor. It seems to be far more trouble than it’s worth.”

“It is.” Kotal laughs darkly. “And yet those around me seem to crave it. I can trust no one.”

Bo’ Rai Cho looks almost hurt. “Even me?”

The emperor shrugs weakly. The sun has set, shrouding the balcony in darkness, and his divine energy is beginning to fade. “You are the tournament trainer. You do not attend to the throne in the same way as others who have more opportunities to betray me.”
“Wouldn’t you fear that Rain might stage a coup?”

“No. My guards would kill him to defend me.”

“Ferra wouldn’t.” Bo’ Rai Cho steeps his fingers in quiet contemplation. “He’s teaching her to read.”

Kotal falters. “He… what?”

“You hadn’t heard? She is apparently doing well at the task.”

“But why would he do that? It does not serve his own purposes for any reason that I can see.”

“Maybe he is doing it for its own sake, to help her.”

“That would suggest a side to his personality that I have not otherwise witnessed.”

“That’s possible. People are full of surprises. You never know what to expect.”

Kotal nods in silent agreement. “You speak more truly than any royal advisor.”

“That’s because I’m authentic. It’s the only way to live.” Bo’ Rai Cho offers the bottle at his hip in a friendly and familiar gesture. “Want a drink?”

Kotal declines as politely as he can. “I do not care for alcohol.”

“I told you I was cutting back. It’s just Kuatan mango nectar.”

Finally caving to the pressure of politeness, Kotal accepts it with deep hesitation, then takes a sip. Bo’ Rai Cho had not lied. It is good, and tastes just like the fresh juice sold at the morning marketplace.

He takes a long swig, then hands it back. “Thank you.”

“I said a drink, not the entire bottle.” But Bo’ Rai Cho laughs, unbothered, and replaces the flask. “I should go inside. It is past my bedtime. Goodnight, Emperor.”

Kotal does not move, just sits, lost in thought, until he notices his friend’s departure. “Goodnight, Bo’ Rai Cho. Thank you for the talk.”

His distant voice echoes from the corridor. “My pleasure.”

Shaking his head, the Kahn lifts his helmet, retreating to the vast and lonely imperial quarters. Training is complete, and the event organization is all in order. Nonetheless, Kotal cannot shed the growing dread that he will never be ready for this tournament.
Unstoppable and Immovable

“Is that everyone?...”

Liu Kang stands back, hands on his hips in astonishment, as the entire Kung family piles into the hotel lobby, burdened by suitcases and cheerfully chattering about the upcoming tournament. Unknown to him, the rest of the hotel has been rented by Earthrealm tournament guests—
including seemingly all the relatives of his rival and brother-in-arms, Lao. They arrived last night, but their suitcases unfortunately only arrived this morning.

In the absence of other leadership, Liu’s been assigned to oversee the guests, particularly his own group of ex-revenants, mentors, and others with a stake in the fight. He’s directed all of the important ones towards their rooms and given them a copy of the neatly printed tournament schedules, offering more help than the jaded hotel clerk is willing to give. He didn’t recognize most of the other Earthrealmers - nor did they recognize him, much to his relief - but he’s already confirmed that nearly everyone is where they should be.

He glimpses a shifting shadow out of the corner of his eye, only for a split-second, but long enough to suggest the presence of someone else in the corner of the room, attempting to maintain a guise of invisibility.

Striding over to the empty spot in the lobby, he lightly shoves the patch of empty air. “Tomas?”

Smoke staggers and catches himself against the wall, already flustered at the failure of his disguise. He brushes his messy silver hair back, tucking it behind his ears with a nervous twitch. “Liu. Good morning.”

“I wondered where you’d gone.” Liu eyes him critically. Last night, he’d moved rooms to avoid Lao’s family. Instead, he’s opted to stay with Smoke, which has worked just fine so far. “I take it you’ve also been helping the horde of guests?”

“As much as I can.” Tomas’s Eastern European accent stands out distinctly over the low chatter of other voices. “The Special Forces leaders are in a meeting. General Blade, Johnny Cage, Kenshi, Jax, Stryker, and Kabal. I am not certain where they went.”

Liu shrugs. “It’ll sort itself out. I doubt they have any chance to get lost.” Truthfully, he doesn’t have the energy to help look after the tournament leaders right now, especially those who are supposed to be in charge. He’s much too drained from all the recent events. “Who’s left?”

“Hanzo and Kuai are helping the team prepare, I think. Vera Briggs is around here somewhere, as well. Lao is with his family.” Tomas leans against the wall, surveying the group with a weary stare. He’s not yet used to Outworld’s lack of good coffee. “The Edenians will arrive later.”

Liu instinctively winces. “Later is better.”

Tomas studies him out of the corner of his eye. “Is something the matter?”

Liu swallows hard, rubbing his nose thoughtfully. “We can discuss it later. I’m not accustomed to telling others my problems. Nor do I intend to start doing so.”

Tomas almost looks hurt. He pulls up the collar of his uniform a little tighter, adjusting the metal plating strapped tightly to his body. Though Liu’s in casual clothing, Tomas is dressed in full ninja gear, just in case. “If something is the matter, I will listen.”
“Not here, while we’re around…” Liu gestures vaguely, looking almost scornful at the newest horde of strangers. “Around everyone.”

“I understand. I have trouble with crowds, and groups… Solitude suits me better.” For once, Tomas is unexpectedly candid, speaking quietly enough that Liu has to lean in to listen closer. “Right now, I feel I am the only former revenant without a place.”

“You aren’t.” Liu sniffs, and settles into the nearest chair. Unsatisfied, he gets up again, pacing the length of the small alcove in the lobby. “Nightwolf has the Sky Temple duties now. Stryker and Kabal are with Special Forces, Lao is a mentor for the Shaolin, and the Edenians…” His voice trails off defeatedly, resting his forehead in his palm. “Being in Outworld is worse than I imagined.”

“You… are not staying here at all, then, after the tournament?” Tomas tentatively confirms what he already knew. Liu answers only with a weary stare, shaking his head, and Tomas keeps talking, trying to fill the awkward silence. “Perhaps that is for the better. There is more for us to do in Earthrealm—”

“You’re not telling me anything new.” But there is a note of sorrow in Liu’s voice, and he glances back at Tomas apologetically. “The life I had envisioned for myself after the revenant curse was lifted, has crumbled completely.”

“Come with me.” Tomas reaches for his wrist, trying to tug Liu to his feet, but he resists, getting up on his own after a few moments. Dodging the crowds, they both head towards the exit, emerging into the peculiar Outworld weather that mixes the heat of the sun with a chilly wind.

Liu squints, shading his eyes with one hand as he studies the path. Uphill, it leads to an area near the city walls, while the Outworld capital unfolds before his eyes downhill. “At least it’s scenic.”

“I cannot disagree.” Lightly nudging his companion in the shoulder, Tomas makes a sweeping gesture towards the sprawling network of archaic buildings. “It would be nice to see the city for a short while, I think.”

“I suppose.” Liu humors him halfheartedly, but knows deep down that it won’t do him any good to dwell in the hotel and stew about his troubles. He’s been keeping it bottled up for too long now, ever since the stay at Jax’s farm. His sense of time is long lost, so he can’t pinpoint it - days? weeks? - but it plagued him through his stay at the Shaolin monastery, and follows him to Outworld, worsening here in this the foreign world in which he’d once longed to live.

They walk in silence for quite a ways, eventually coming to a stop before a flight of outdoor stairs leading to a rooftop balcony. Surprisingly, Tomas makes the initiative to be bold, gracefully darting up the steps. “Follow me.”

Liu follows, too weary to decline the offer. Besides, on some level, he’s truly appreciating Tomas’s efforts to help him with these unknown burdens. “Did you find this yourself?”

“Yes. Today. I needed the solitude, and I like the cool air of the early morning.” The ninja sits cross-legged on the flat roof, resting his chin in his hands and studying the landscape. Patting the ground beside him, he makes eye contact with Liu for a fleeting moment, glancing away awkwardly. “Come here.”

He obeys, already feeling more at ease once he’s gained a safe distance from the chaos of the hotel. Brushing back a few stray strands of his grey hair, Liu settles down nearby. “Fine. Thank you.”
“You do not need to thank me.” Tomas clears his throat, fumbling to find the right way to express his thoughts. He wants so badly to try to offer some comfort to Liu, even if the most he can do is to try to listen. “What is the matter?”

Liu’s resolve snaps. Opening the floodgates of emotion, he finally talks, the truth pouring out in a sudden rush of misery. “Kitana… ended things, painfully, right before we left the Briggs farm.”

“I’m sorry.” Tomas touches Liu’s shoulder very gently, then withdraws his hand, uncertain of his reaction. “I had assumed that was the case, but-- I do not know anything else.”

“Well, I did tell you that it happened, but not exactly how.” So far, Liu had only mentioned once, in casual conversation, that he would have to forge his own path through the world from now on. The rest, he’d determinedly avoided addressing. “She told me in no uncertain terms that her future lies in Outworld, trying to restore her own land and dealing with the duties of leadership.”

“That… makes sense.” Tomas breathes deeply, choosing his words with great care. “At least the issue was not you, then.”

“She also told me she wished she had never fallen for me, and that her former decision to stay with me is what kept us in the Netherrealm and under the curse for so long.”

Tomas is quiet.

“That is not true.”

“I know, but it felt true.” Liu shakes his head, staring up blankly at the sky. “Her future does not include me. Nor should it, I now see. She is practically immortal. My life can never compare to hers, slowed aging or not. I knew all this, but-- confronting it is a different issue completely.”

Tomas lays a hand on his shoulder again, expecting Liu to shrug it off, but he doesn’t, instead quietly accepting the consolation. Encouraged, he tries to offer his thoughts. “You did the best that you could. As revenants, we were not ourselves. You know this, as does she. She is… coping differently, but she should not have lashed out in that way.”

“In that time, Kitana often said that the Netherrealm curse freed her, but after she was cured, she realized the opposite was true. Somewhere along the way, she chose to blame me. I-- I can’t fault her for it.” Liu runs his fingers through his hair, untangling the long silver strands. “Had I not sought the title of Netherrealm emperor, we might not have remained trapped for so long.”

Tomas’s curiosity overtakes him, blurring out a question. “What do you mean?”

“We held those roles for much, much longer than any of you know. We kept the Netherrealm in control until Quan Chi freed Shinnok again, and the other realms… accepted this.” Liu bites his lip, forcing out the words. It’s agony to try to talk about his life’s mistakes on this scale, but he has to. Keeping it bottled up any longer would be impossible. “Raiden, too, left it alone for the sake of Earthrealm, no matter how much he desired to save us. As Dark Raiden, he chose to try to ally with us, but that all has ended. Before that, he knew, with Kitana and I in charge, Netherrealm was not powerful enough to offer any true threat. Better the devil you know…”

Smoke exhales sharply. “What?”

“Nightwolf told me that, and insisted I should not tell the others. I didn’t tell Kitana. I can’t. She should blame me, not Raiden.”

“Why not? Do not let that burden of guilt rest on your shoulders if it does not belong there.”
Liu looks him in the eye directly, catching his gaze strongly enough that Tomas can’t tear himself away. “If all goes as planned, after this tournament, Kitana will become one of the most influential leaders in all the realms. I would prefer the power of her rage to be directed at me, a relatively unimportant person, rather than Raiden, the guardian of our entire world.”

“I understand.” A certain shapeless dread is settling over Tomas, chilling him to the core. “You fear she might retaliate?”

“I do. Kitana is as sharp and merciless as the blades of her fans.” Liu rests his face in his hands, a tired shell of his old self. “Raiden did what was necessary for the sake of his realm. I understand this. I’ve seen and felt the depths of his grief, and I still love him as a father. But Kitana would not forgive him as I’ve done.”

Tomas scoots closer, wrapping an arm around Liu to hold him tighter, and feels his nervous pulse racing through his strong body, his breath shaky in his chest. “That is perfectly sensible. It is a wise decision, but you should not blame yourself, even if she does.”

“It’s hard not to.” Liu leans into the hug, resting his head on Tomas’s muscular shoulder. “With every day that passes, my memories of that warped half-life grow fainter. I can’t wait for them to be gone.”

“Mine, as well. I’m grateful for the distance. And you… you know, you saved us.”

“How do you mean?”

“When our curse was broken, you brought us to Jacqui. You knew what to do.”

“Only because, while I was emperor, I hated Raiden so much that I hunted him down in the depths of the city’s tunnels. Cornered him like a dog…” Liu shakes his head, full of conflicted agony. “He deserved none of that. He did what he had to do, and tried to minimize the damage, even knowing the consequences. I can’t imagine how awful it would be, to know everything that could and will happen-- and what must happen.”

Tomas closes his eyes, basking in the comforting sunlight as the cool breeze ruffles his hair. “He is doing his best. I am glad that you don’t hate him. I cannot, and I never have. But you would have far stronger reasons to, so… for your own peace, I am grateful.”

“My own peace is a long way off, but yes, it hurt much less once I forgave him. My own death truly was an accident, too. I confirmed that. He did not foresee nor intend it. It helps, at least, to know that…” Liu’s voice trails off again. “I’m rambling. I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing? I am usually the one apologizing too much. Stop that.” Tomas gently squeezes his shoulder. “Is there anything that can be done to help you find peace?”

“Some things. It would help to know what my life will be after the tournament. I won’t stay in Outworld. That much is certain. Right now, it’s an open-ended question.” Liu closes his eyes. “Maybe I’ll go back to the Shaolin library, and revisit all those poetry books I read in secret when I was young. The others would’ve mocked me quite mercilessly for it, you know.”

Tomas recalls his few memories of the academy. “Kung Jin seems very fond of the Shaolin book archives, as well.”

“I know.” Another note of pain enters Liu’s voice. “I owe him an apology.”

“What for?”
“Earlier, I was impolite towards him about his-- orientation.” Liu’s voice catches unexpectedly. “I did not mean to be, but I hurt him nonetheless. I’ve always been the type of person to say things that shouldn’t be said.”

“I am the type to never say the things that should be said… I suppose, between us, there is a healthy average.” Tomas absentmindedly feels Liu’s wrist, noting his pulse has calmed down from his earlier grief and panic. “Yes. Apologize to him. You will feel better.”

“I will. I need to check in with Raiden, first.” Liu springs to his feet unexpectedly, pulling Tomas up with him. “I have no other duties today. I ought to help however I can. Cassie is fighting Kano first, I know that.”

“I expect she will make short work of him. I barely know the man, but every encounter with him seems to be unpleasant.”

“It is. There is nothing likeable about him. He can perish, as far as I’m concerned.” Liu sniffs dismissively, heading down the stairs several at a time with agile leaps. “The format of the tournament still requires some adjustment, at least for me. One fight for each kombatant, and only one… and different elimination rules.”

“Is that so?” Tomas catches up with him on the pathway, trotting ahead to match his long, quick strides. “What are the rules? I can’t recall.”

“There’s an elevated platform, with ropes bordering it. Knocking the other fighter off results in an instant win. Otherwise, the fights continue until one defeats the other, or the time expires. I believe it’s a longer time limit, too.” Liu reaches up to the back of his neck to secure his long hair with an elastic tie, a convenient modern invention. “It has something to do with Earthrealm fight rules. Rumor has it, Kotal, or some other organizer, thought it would sell more tickets.” He shrugs. “I really don’t care. I don’t have to fight in this tournament, and you can’t imagine what a relief that is. I never want to endure that again.”

Tomas raises an eyebrow, genuinely surprised. “Really?”

“Yes. I spent my entire life training for it, and now it’s the last thing I would ever want to do. I still enjoy kombat - there’s no purpose in abandoning my skills - but after the last tournament… never.” Liu cracks his knuckles, teeth gritted. “And I hope to the gods I never, ever see another Shohan. I’ve put up with enough of them for one lifetime.”

“I have not encountered any so far. Cyrax told me they went into seclusion in another part of Outworld, planning to free themselves from the emperor’s rule and govern their own land.”

“Go figure. Just like those people in Texas who want to break away and make Texas-opolis.” A cheery female voice rings out from behind them, and Cassie trots up to join the duo, fully dressed in her stylish and durable tournament outfit. “What are you two doing out here?”

Taken aback, they both freeze and turn to face her. Liu is the first to address the girl, eyebrows raised. “Cassandra Cage.”

“That’s me.” Cassie strikes a dramatic pose, whipping out her pistol from the holster strapped to her back, then puts it away with a quiet laugh. “Right now, I’m dodging autograph requests. Just got out of last-minute training, and I think I’m all set. Not too long til I’ve got to be there, and the arena’s not far to walk. Want to join me?”

“Certainly. But why walk? It is a very short drive.” Tomas politely points out. Outworld has its
own rudimentary transport vehicles, powered by some technology he doesn’t quite understand. “That could be more efficient.”

“If you can get your hands on one of the vehicles, I’d love to. But good fuckin’ luck.” Cassie spits out a wad of bubblegum, clearly more nervous than she’s letting on. “All of them are either rented out already, or promised to someone else.”

Liu furrows his brows. “Surely SF has one or more reserved?”

“Yeah, and everybody else is using them.”

An idea occurs to Tomas. “Can the gods teleport in Outworld?”

“...kind of.” Cassie makes a face. “I don’t know which one would be a worse choice to ask.”

“Only one of them would even be willing to try.” Liu knows he’s right. Even without their past rivalry at stake, Shinnok is unlikely to be persuaded into cooperating, ever. “Should we go find Raiden?”

“Can’t hurt.” Cassie takes off towards the hotel, dashing ahead in leaps and bounds with her enhanced boots. Tomas and Liu match her pace as best they can, only barely. Fortunately, the distance isn’t far, although they’re winded by the time they arrive, immediately regretting the mad dash to keep up with Cassie as they both pant for air.

She shifts her weight from foot to foot, barely hiding a laugh. “Go get a drink of water or something. I’ll get Raiden.”

Liu nods wordlessly, looking rather embarrassed at any sign of weakness. “There’s a reason you are competing in this tournament, not us.”

“It’s okay. You guys both put up with way too much already. Take a break.” She turns and darts down the corridor, escaping the lobby crowd with a few quick well-timed dodges. Raiden’s room isn’t far, just up a few flights of stairs, which she makes short work of, arriving on the third floor with a confident leap.

He’s at the other end of the corridor, talking into a communication device cupped in his hands as he faces the holographic figure. Cassie’s too far away to make out what he’s saying, though it seems urgent, talking to a blurry figure with long white hair tied up in a high ponytail.

She squints at him, eyes narrowed. “Raiden?”

He doesn’t react, so she paces closer, boots thudding heavily on the wooden paneling. “Hey. Raiden. Thunder dad. We gotta go.”

Finally, Raiden notices, head snapping up. Switching off the device, he slips it into an elegant embroidered pocket, dressed in a classic vintage outfit resembling ancient Asian formal wear. His face lights up, eyes glowing fondly. “Cassie! Good. I was just searching for you.”

“Wasn’t searching very hard.” Cassie grins affectionately, hands on her hips as she strides towards the god. “You look fancy. Did Shinnok make that?”

Raiden glances down at the sleeves of his outfit, seemingly surprised by the compliment. “No, I brought it along. It was in the Sky Temple closet.”

“Can’t wait to see what he put you in for the tournament fight.” Cassie gently tugs him by the
sleeve, leading him back towards the stairwell. “I’m surprised those comm devices still work. Never thought I’d see Fujin in anything other than the braid.”

“Mhmhm.” Raiden answers absentmindedly, following along as he sorts out an assortment of urgent thoughts. “You should be at the arena already, should you not?”

“That’s what we need you for. Teleport us there. Just try not to land us in Kotal’s quarters, or the dungeons.” Cassie smiles gently. “Nah, you can do it. Liu and Smoke need the transport, too. Bring ‘em along.”

“Hey! Wait!” Lao finally arrives, dashing up to them with his hat perched lopsidedly on his head. As fun as it’ll be to have his family in the stands alongside him, he’s starting to get stressed, mostly because Jin has managed to disappear for the entire morning. “I thought the fight starts in an hour!”

“It does. I’m the one fighting.” Cassie cocks her head, lifting an eyebrow. “Unless you wanna make a cameo appearance in the tournament, I’m pretty sure you can chill for the next hour. Make sure your family gets there in time, and don’t lose anyone along the way, okay?”

“I can manage that. Hi, Liu. Bye, Liu.” Lao grins, then teleports away, reappearing at the other end of the room. “See you later.”

Liu mutters to himself. “Show-off.”

“Be polite.” Raiden reprimands him gently, summoning his energy as the others grip his arms tightly, hoping to avoid being left behind on the uncertain teleport attempt. “Hold onto me. I will try this, and I apologize if I make any errors…”

They arrive behind the scenes at the Koliseum on the first try, landing perfectly in Earthrealm’s prep area in a sudden bolt of lightning. The others scatter, scrambling away from them, and Raiden lifts his head proudly as the lightning fades.

Cassie lets go of Raiden and applauds, secretly grateful they haven’t landed in more trouble than they’d be able to handle. She has enough problems on her plate already. “Good job.”

“Thank you.” The god summons his hat from thin air, perching it atop his head, and greets Sonya with a friendly nod. “I brought Cassie.”

“I see that.” General Blade is unimpressed. “You were almost late.”

“Almost late?!” Johnny protests from the corner. “They’re five minutes early!”

“As I said…” Sonya gives up, sighing. The debate isn’t worth it. “I’m glad you made it on time.”

Cassie taps her watch, staring at her mother. “With an hour and five minutes to spare.”

“I told you, they’re letting the crowds in an hour before it starts. I didn’t want any delays from spectators.”

“No reason to worry. We’ve got Raiden Transport, Inc.” Johnny rises from his chair, cracking his knuckles, and strides towards Cassie. “You ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

He produces a bag of trail mix from his pocket. “Want a snack?”

“You’re such a dad.” Cassie grabs it eagerly. “Thanks. I’ll need this.”
Liu wanders over. “Mind if I have one of those?”

Johnny raises an eyebrow at him. “Your dad is over there.”

“He doesn’t keep snacks in his pockets.”

“Fair.” Johnny tosses a bag at him. “You got any helpful tournament advice for my daughter?”

Liu ponders this. “Don’t die.”

“I said helpful tournament advice.”

“How is that not helpful?”

“I already know I’m not supposed to die.” Cassie retorts. “Any suggestions on how to prevent it?”

“If you want me to try to teach you the flying dragon kick within the next hour, I could try.”

“Wait, are you serious?”

Liu shrugs. He’d been half joking, but it’s a reasonable idea. “I’ve got nothing better to do.”

“Sure, then.” Cassie munches on the trail mix, heading towards the door. A little extra advice beforehand couldn’t hurt. “Where’s the training room in here?”

“Down the hall and to the left.” Sonya calls out, trying to suppress her nerves. “Don’t get hurt!”

“Mom!”

“Oh, all right.” Sonya turns her attention to Tomas. “I think they’re having a Lin Kuei meeting in the next room. You should go find them.”

Taking the hint, Tomas nods and vanishes, leaving behind two very nervous parents and one godparent.

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By now, Cassie’s nerves are dull to the roar of the crowds. She spent enough time with Johnny on his Hollywood sets to get used to that. But as she steps out onto the hot sand of the Koliseum, the noise is overwhelming.

Both sides are packed. She wasn’t expecting that. Outworld’s stands are predictably full, ranging all the way from the well-dressed nobles up front to the ordinary citizens all the way back. But Earthrealm’s ticket agent did a good job, too, because the seats are crammed with friends, family, guests, supporters, and martial arts fans who just want to have a good time.

Cassie picks out her parents easily, and the rest of her team, down at the front, and flashes them a grin and a salute, her steady steps carrying her forward one by one. Her battle suit is durable enough to keep her safe from Kano’s blows and blades, but light enough not to stifle her in the warmth of the sun. She’s grateful for it, and for the guns strapped along her legs and back, filled with enough ammo to keep her powered up all the way to the end of the showdown.

The Outworld crowd suddenly surges with a loud cheer, and Kano makes his entrance. Striding forward with a devil-may-care swagger, he’s dressed in military gear and a long coat, open at the front to leave room for his chest laser. He has knives in full display, attached to his arms, and more hidden through the coat and outfit, enough to slice Blade’s daughter to little bits if she crosses him.
He’s going for the knockdown strategy, though. A few somersaults, and a quick slice through those ropes, and he’ll have her down on the sand in minutes as the crowd goes wild.

They don’t come face to face until they’ve both climbed the stairs up to the fight platform, locked in a bold staredown of mutual loathing. Kano narrows his eyes and sneers at Cassie, and she laughs in his face, blowing a bubble. Just for good measure, she flashes him the middle finger, then leaps over the barrier, doing a backflip in exactly the same way she’d knocked him out of the hotel lobby.

Not to be outdone, Kano jumps up and vaults over the ropes, landing on the mat with a mock bow and a vicious grin. Outworld’s crowd cheers obediently, but he knows in his heart they’re rooting for their realm, not for him. He reminds himself it doesn’t matter. He’ll teach them all a lesson.

Looking back over his shoulder, he makes eye contact with Kotal, smirking at the tired emperor. Bo’ Rai Cho is seated next to him, who Kano’s always dismissed as a well-meaning fool, but there’s a competitive gleam in his eye that surprises him. The rest of the team is lined up nearby, all looking forward to the fight with a mixture of delight and dread.

Cassie does the same, flashing a beaming grin back towards the Earthrealm team. She gives them a thumbs-up, gazing back at Sonya and Johnny, the proud mom and dad. Then she smiles sincerely at her team, old and new members alike, deeply appreciating them more than ever. Her gaze rakes over the others, heart swelling with pride, and then finally, she locks eyes with Raiden.

He gives her a confident nod, mouthing the words Defeat him.

She whispers back. You know I will.

Cassie turns back to face Kano, and whips out her pistols, striking a confident pose. His sneer fades at the sight of her carefree grin, unfazed by any of his attempts to taunt or discourage her.

He narrows his eyes, laser glowing brighter. She really is her mother’s daughter.

Three... two... one... fight!

The announcer’s voice rings out, and at the sound of the bell, they lunge at each other, blades and guns drawn.

Cassie’s first shots leave their mark in the thick fabric of Kano’s coat, striking him in the shoulder hard enough to make him stagger, though they don’t pierce the sturdy material. Caught off-guard, he snarls and crouches, throwing himself forward hard enough to send her flying back towards the ropes. She catches herself, bouncing off them with the resilience of a young athlete, but she, too, is shaken.

Three minutes. She reminds herself. Knock him out before the three-minute mark, or throw him overboard. Just beat his ass.

She’s going to need to play defense. Kano is stronger and larger than Cassie, but she’s more agile, with the advantage of her enhanced boots. She needs to be careful - a mis-timed jump could send her soaring over the ropes, with nothing to use for momentum and leverage to get back into the arena. The second she touches the sand, it’s over.

Kano’s already testing those ropes. A few quick slashes of his armblade barely leave a mark in the sturdy woven lines, and he curses, turning his knives towards Cassie instead. Taking a hit to the arm, one of her pistols flies out of her hand, the blow leaving a bruise through the blade-proof fabric. She swears in a very unladylike manner, and as Kano lunges for the gun, she launches
herself up in a backflip to kick it out of his hand. Out of reach, the pistol soars over their heads and lands with a soft thump on the Koliseum’s dirt.

She’s down a gun. So what? She has five more. Cassie is very thorough.

She draws another from her holster, confidently firing a few rounds right at Kano’s chest, but his laser vaporizes the bullets right before they strike. The red glowing blast hits her with enough force to send her staggering towards the arena’s edge. Leveraging her weight, she crouches and pushes herself backwards, ricocheting off the sturdy ropes as the slight elastic tension catches her and sends back towards Kano in a flying leap. She nails him in the jaw with the toe of her boot this time, and he yells and ducks, slashing upwards. His blade misses, but Cassie lands heavily that time, feeling a stab of pain through one leg.

Damn it. Just knock him down! As the timer draws closer to zero, she leaps at him in a frenzy, firing her rounds towards the mechanism surrounding the chest laser. Much to her satisfaction, it flickers, the red glow weakening as one bullet finds its mark. Going after the eye laser with her pistol would be a bad idea - killing is forbidden in this tournament - but she catches him in the face with a surprise punch, sending him stumbling away.

Now’s her chance. He’s off balance. With ten seconds left, Cassie dives towards his legs, knocking Kano’s feet out from under him. He lands heavily on top of her, and sneers with sinister delight, but a knee to the groin makes him yell in pain, struggling to get away. Using her advantage for a last-second victory, Cassie leaps up and firmly plants her foot on Kano’s glowing chest, forcing him down as the clock runs out.

Time!

The Earthrealm crowd roars in approval, and a few scattered Outworlders join in. Cassie nimbly backflips out of reach as Kano scrambles up again, still clutching his crotch in pain, and hurls a string of swear words at her that she largely ignores.

Just to make a point, she casually tosses her empty pistol over the side of the arena ropes and draws another, pretending to blow smoke away from the tip. Kano is visibly surprised, and Cassie winks and smiles sweetly and politely, catching him more off guard than any show of aggression ever would.

They’ve caught their breath, finally, and the announcer starts the clock again.

Three… two… one...

Cassie bounces on the balls of her feet, filled with nervous energy. She doesn’t want to do this three times, and she knows Kano won’t let her knock him down again. Close the deal and push him out of the arena, and the rest is history.

Fight!

Kano’s on her at lightning speed, somersaulting hard enough to send her flying to the ground, and plants a boot on her chest, just as she’d done to him for the first win. Thinking quick, Cassie manages to hit him in the back of the knee, weakening his stance enough to dodge and roll out from under him as he leaps to his feet. They’re on even ground again, grimy and sweaty from the battle, but with enough stamina and mutual hatred to fuel the fight for a long time.

She’s already trying to predict his next moves, but he’s doing the same. Dodging and feinting each other’s blows, neither is able to gain the advantage. Kano leaps up a few times, as if to prepare for
a somersault, but when Cassie instinctively ducks, he lands normally, slicing in the direction she’d
dodged. She’s able to predict his blows, though, and wrestles one of his knives out of his hands,
grabbing his fingers and bending them back sharply when he drops it. It does no lasting damage,
but he roars in rage and lashes out, nearly hitting Cassie as she abruptly jumps out of range. She’s
no knife expert, and tosses it over the side of the arena just to spite him, but it only makes him
angrier.

This whole time, Cassie’s been studying Kano’s laser. She knows it can detach from its slot in his
chest, to recharge or swap for another power core. There must be a way to get it out of him, aside
from punching his lights out and prying it out with her bare hands - though she’ll do that, too, if she
needs to.

That’s more for damage control than to win the fight. Sonya’s going to take him back to SF
custody if-- when-- he loses, and Cassie knows enough about Kano to realize he’ll try to run.

For now, he hasn’t done his trademark somersault attack in a while, and the timer is counting
down. Kano may be cybernetic-enhanced, but he’s only human, and he has to be getting tired.
Cassie is, too, though she’s trying not to show it. Thanks to Johnny’s trail mix, she’s got enough
energy to last through the battle, but there’s an ache in her muscles that she can’t shake. Plus, she’s
taken damage from Kano’s attacks, and that’s going to leave a few marks.

Kano’s about to try to knock her out. Cassie knows this, she sees it coming, but when it happens,
she’s still caught off guard. Launching her into the air with a solid shove, Kano follows it up with a
somersault, sending Cassie flying towards one of the arena corners. She’s thrown too high to grab
the ropes and stop herself, hurled like a rag-doll.

Just before it’s too late, an idea hits her.

Flashing back to her most recent training, Cassie drops into the dragon-kick pose, extending one
leg and drawing the other back, and aims for the solid post at the corner of the arena.

Her boot strikes the top of the post with only a few inches to spare. Launched backwards by the
ricocheting momentum, Cassie reverses course and soars through the air into the arena,
backflipping to land with her boots planted right on Kano’s shoulders. She leaps straight up, and
then down again, forcing Kano to collapse as her full weight hits him and sends him crumpling to
his knees.

Infused with the superhuman strength of adrenaline, Cassie flips Kano over with a kick, one foot
planted on his crotch to pin him in place. She bends down and rips his knife-blade off his arm,
wedging it into the small space between his laser and the slot embedded in his chest. Gleefully
ripping it out, she flings the power core over the arena ropes with a throw powerful enough to
qualify for major league baseball.

Stripped of his arm knife, chest laser, and composure, Kano isn’t quick enough to land a vengeful
blow. He’s already defeated. Cassie drags him bodily to the edge of the arena, lugging him by one
ankle. Before finishing him off, she squats down to look Kano right in the eye.

“This is from Mom.”

A solid punch connects with his jaw, knocking loose a few gold teeth.

“And this is from both of us!”

Triumphanty, Cassie kicks him through the slot below the lowest rope, just wide enough to fit.
Kano flops over the edge undignifiedly, landing facedown on the ground. Cursing at the arena above him, he spits out a mouthful of sand.

*Game over.*

Planting her hands on her hips as the Earthrealm crowd goes wild, Cassie struts to the center of the ring.

“Time!”

The announcer echoes her in a low booming voice through the Koliseum speaker system. “Time. Cassie Cage *wins!*”

“You did it, Punkin!” Johnny’s voice is loud enough to rise above the rest of the crowd. Cassie winces at the nickname, and then grins at her dad despite herself, hopping over the ropes to land on the stairs and stride down to the ground. She’s so glad that fight’s over. She’s walking with a slight limp, though, and Johnny rushes over to her, supporting her. “You okay? You did great out there!”

“I’m okay. Thanks, Dad. Couldn’t have done it without you-- *Get Kano!*” Cassie glances over her shoulder just quick enough to notice Kano grabbing his laser out of the sand, wiping the dirt off it, and trying to shove it into his chest. One final shot knocks it out of his hand, a bullet ripping through the laser’s innards to render it useless.

“Nice job, Cassie. Hold on a sec.” Sonya’s already leaping over the edge of the arena, running onto the sand in hot pursuit, clutching her badge and handcuffs. “Special Forces! You’re under arrest, Kano!”

“Nice try, love!” The indestructible Kano is already up on his feet again, bolting away and heading back towards the Outworld side in search of diplomatic immunity. Kotal catches his eye, though, and gives him the thumbs-down sign and an ominous shake of his head.

Kano hesitates. This might not be a good idea.

Changing course, he heads towards one of the arena’s far ends, hoping for an exit gate. If all else fails, he’ll just jump into the stands and make a run for it. Sonya’s barely catching up with him, still far enough behind that he might make a clean getaway. From there, well… he’s got agents on the inside. The Black Dragon is everywhere.

Another voice joins the mix, an unfamiliar one from far behind. “Kano!”

He’s curious enough to glance back, then stops and stares. Another Special Forces officer has joined the chase, speeding past Sonya at a superhuman pace. Kano can’t even see him clearly, but there’s something oddly familiar about him.

The agent catches up with Kano in an instant. He stands no chance. As Kano’s knocked down with a punch to the stomach, sending him doubling over in pain on the dirt, he gets a closer look at the officer, studying his scarred face. Though he was clearly badly injured once, he’s still recognizably handsome, with a high hairline and light, piercing eyes.

Kano draws a sharp breath, and the agent whips out a hooked sword.

“Kabal!”

“Hello, Kano. Nice to see an old friend.” Kabal watches in satisfaction as Sonya snaps a pair of handcuffs on Kano, crouching down to yank his arms behind his back and lock them in place. “I
was almost thinking you’d forgotten me. After all that trouble you went through to get me back, that’d be a shame.”

Kano hisses through gritted teeth, struggling uselessly. “It’s been twenty-five years! Wait-- how are you-- alive without your respirator…?”

“Imagine that.” Kabal nonchalantly checks his watch, as if to confirm the passage of time. “Fortunately, thanks to some SF healing technology, I’ve recovered well enough for you to recognize me… right before General Blade pounds your sorry ass into the dirt.”

Sonya does as promised, punching his lights out in one last fit of vengeful maternal fury.

“Thank you.” Kabal replies calmly. Tucking his sword into its holster on his back again, he helps haul Kano back towards the Earthrealm stands, cleaning up after that small spectacle. The crowd is going crazy on both sides, but he largely ignores it. “Cassie was smart to take out his laser.”

“Don’t even need to finish that sentence. Cassie is smart.” Sonya grunts, dragging her unconscious captive by the ankle, much like Cassie had done to knock him out of the tournament. She’s tired already, and the day’s only just begun, but her job is done. “I bet that revenge felt good.”

“So good.” Kabal nods in mutual understanding. “Thanks for the opportunity.”

“Thanks for catching him.” Sonya makes a disgusted noise under her breath, tossing her head. “Mind getting some help? He’s heavy. Guess that’s how it is if you’re carrying that much bullshit around.”

Kabal tries not to laugh, instead dashing forward at top speed back to the stands. “Dear? We need a hand.”

Stryker joins them immediately, dusting off the sleeves of his uniform as he strides towards the other officers. He bends down, lifting Kano, and hauls him back towards the group, dropping him over the edge of the arena like a sack of potatoes. “There. He’s officially in custody. Kotal had better not give us any trouble about it.”

Kabal squeezes his shoulder affectionately, returning to his seat. “He won’t.”

Johnny watches all this with a raised eyebrow. “You two are--?”

Stryker replies dryly. “Married.”

“Married?!”

“If you didn’t notice the wedding rings, that’s on you, not me.”

Cassie elbows Johnny in the side. “I noticed.”

He’s still staring at Stryker. “When-- when did you guys get married?!”

Stryker shrugs. “We were engaged before, uh-- the events.” He still tries to tactfully avoid talking about the revenant issue. “Went to the courthouse and got it formalized pretty recently.”

“You should’ve told me! I would’ve had a party!”

“That’s why I didn’t tell you, Cage.” But Stryker offers a friendly smile. “Thanks for the thought. Now help us look after our favorite fugitive. And increase your daughter’s allowance.”
“I have a salary now, not an allowance!” Cassie objects, laughing. “But thanks a lot.”

Sonya is gathering up the pistols and knives from the arena sand, trotting towards the Earthrealm stands and vaulting over the edge to land beside Cassie. She gathers her into a hug, dropping the weapons, and finally lets go, wiping her eyes. “Twenty years later, I’m still cleaning up your toys.”

Cassie grins exhaustedly. “Don’t ever change, Mom.”

Sonya returns the smile gratefully, giving her daughter one more hug. “Not planning on it.”
Outworld’s heat is different than Netherrealm. Instead of the choking, stifling hellfire that burned both outside and within, the sun in this foreign land beams down like a blessing.

It’s still not as good as Edenia’s climate, or at least what it used to be. Kitana muses to herself, sitting on the roof of the old mansion, and lets her thoughts wander. She’s still burdened by an indescribable mass of troubles and sorrows, but she’s so much happier than she’s felt for an eternity. This benevolent Outworld weather is melting the ice in her heart.

Kitana lays back on the sloped roof, reaching upwards over her head and hooking her palms over the top line of shingles to keep herself from sliding down. Aided by a pair of gauntlet-gloves with spikes in the palms, she’s safe and sound for now. The box where she found these labeled it as tree-climbing gear, but it made her ascent to the roof far easier, safely scrambling up the shingles, even though she knocked a few loose along the way. As they fell to the ground with an ominous thump, she did feel a twinge of dread, but now, she’s enjoying her perch up here. She’s free from the company of others, and the burden of royal social constraints. She is so sick of it.

She shakes her head, letting her long black hair fall freely down her back. She’s let it down from its usual styled braids and set her tiara aside. Now, she’s dressed like any ordinary adventurer, lacking her trademark royal blue. She’s wearing a plain shirt, some trousers stolen from one of the old closets, a weathered belt cinched tight around her waist, and a pair of sturdy hiking boots more suited for a forest than a palace.

It’s liberating to set aside her identity for once, but she knows it isn’t permanent. It never will be - especially with the impending burdens of leadership. Mileena may be part of herself, and thus, in some warped way, her sister... but they’ll never be the same. Deep in her heart, Kitana cannot bring herself to let go of her doubts about the girl’s leadership ability. Kitana is thousands of years old, and still remembers centuries of history. Mileena is twenty-five.

That, most likely, will leave Kitana with the responsibilities of handling all of Outworld’s affairs with the diplomatic yet shrewd approach of a seasoned ruler. She won’t handle the throne on her own, and will not even officially sit upon it. But Sindel and Tanya will inevitably clash, ruining their attempt at constructing a trio of advisors surrounding the unfortunate Mileena. Kitana will have to step in. She always does.

Pondering this to herself, Kitana groans, and letting herself be crude and undiplomatic, hurls a curse out into the humid air. “Fuck that.”

It feels oddly good. Liberating. She does it again. “ Fucking hell.”

“Huh?” A familiar voice calls out from below. “Kitana?”

Kitana grits her teeth. She normally loves Jade’s company, but her solitude upon the roof was a brief blessing that’s now slipped through her fingers. “What do you want?”

She sounds wounded. “I can come back later…”

“...No. Come here.” It might help to have someone to listen, to talk this through. Kitana is trying to keep a balanced perspective on the whole situation, and Jade is the only person she truly considers an equal counterpart. “I want to talk.”

“I thought so. You always want to talk whenever you run away.” Jade laughs gently, clambering up
to join her, and carefully avoids the gaps in the tiles. She perches nimbly, carefully sitting at the top of the roof-line, and grabs the shingles just to be safe. Gazing down at Kitana upside-down, she raises her eyebrows. “What’s up?”

Kitana grins suddenly. “Us.”

“Okay, you’re fine. If you can crack a joke, you’re all right.”

“I’m not entirely all right. I just realized that I’ll need to go back to the princess life.” Kitana mutters under her breath. “I sound spoiled. Fuck that. I don’t know how to explain. It’s stifling. The crown weighs me down, and always will. And yet I’m the best choice to handle the situation, pulling strings behind the scenes.”

Jade listens peacefully, running a hand through Kitana’s sleek hair. “What do you want to do about it?”

“I don’t know! I don’t know a thing!” Kitana lets out her frustration, gripping the metal bar across the palm of her climbing gloves. “Before all this, I jumped at the chance to be an assassin. Something, anything, to get me out of the palace and into the world, even if it was an filthy task. I don’t actually like constantly murdering everyone in my path, but it was better than trying to play nice with Shao Kahn.” She spits the words, unleashing her fury. “I wish I could kill him again myself!”

“Hey. It’s okay.” Jade leans down to look at Kitana more closely, meeting her dark brown eyes. “I know how you feel. I was there. You don’t have to justify your opinions to me. You put up with so much more than you ever should’ve had to.”

She grumbles to herself, teeth gritted. “At least Mother was able to escape it, for a while.”

“By committing suicide…”

“I wasn’t brave enough to do that. It was enough of a shame that one Edenian had died.”

“I would’ve stopped you if you’d tried.”

“I know.” Kitana sighs. “This is horrible, but some part of me was grateful that I didn’t need to obey Sindel anymore. There’s something intensely humiliating about taking second place to your own mother, forever, with no chance of a change. But-- she was my mother, after all, so my grief at her death was always more powerful than that awful selfishness. There is, at least, that…”

“Don’t apologize for being a person with normal thoughts and feelings that aren’t all good and harmless. We’re all wicked deep inside somewhere. We just learn to suppress that part of us, to be as good as we can.” Jade lays down beside her friend, slipping an arm around her shoulders and somehow managing to balance on the sloped roof tiles. “I’m listening, if you want.”

Kitana lets out another sigh, closing her eyes as she’s comforted by the hug. “I haven’t done very well in this new chance at life, either. I thought that being a revenant would allow me a chance at true leadership, boldly claiming my freedom, defying the will of those who always suppressed me. All that nonsense. It didn’t. I was a puppet for a gruesome old bald sorceror!” She spits the words viciously. “Then I started to blame Shinnok, too, but I realized Quan Chi had him under his thumb. Or the One Being did… Wherever that awful thing is, I’m glad it’s slithered back to oblivion, where it belongs!”

Jade nods in total agreement. “You no longer need to be a revenant, and you never will again. I’m not Shinnok’s friend -- I don’t think he’d want that -- but I appreciate what he did for us.”
“I don’t know if it was intentional, freeing us. I think he just wanted to completely destroy Quan Chi.”

“Still. It happened. We’re back… you’re you.” Jade rests her forehead against Kitana’s, her eyes tightly shut. “It’s my turn to be selfish. Revenant or not, I always carried around some bitterness that Liu Kang ruled beside you, not… me.”

“Jade, honey-- I regret that, too. I have, ever since we awoke from the curse.” Kitana strokes Jade’s cheek with one hand, a solemn look on her face. “I… talked with Liu Kang, back at the Briggs farm. He is now aware of my current feelings towards him.”

“Which are…?”

“I don’t hate him, but I hate his decisions, and I told him that. I blamed him for our fate over the past decades, and his stupid ambition to conquer the entire damned realm, and my own stupidity at following him in that awful fucking goal!” Kitana’s voice rises again, not quite a screech, but laced with the power of bitter regret. “I could have sought our freedom, if I wasn’t tied to him! For that time, I wanted a future with him, revenants or not. He was-- different. Charming, refreshing, a welcome change from the dull ritual routines of my usual life. But that was all he was. I didn’t really want a change for good. It wouldn’t have lasted. It couldn’t.”

Jade pats Kitana’s shoulder affectionately. She isn’t surprised by any of this -- by now, she’s gotten very good at reading Kitana’s thoughts and opinions without even discussing it openly. But Kitana needs to vent, and she’s more than willing to listen. “What did you tell him?”

“I told him it was his fault and I never should have fallen for him. Among other things.”

“Oh. Oh, no.” Jade exhales sharply. “It might be true, but you shouldn’t have said it.”

“I told him it was his fault and I never should have fallen for him. Among other things.”

“Not like that!” Jade clenches her jaw momentarily, overcome by mixed emotions. She cares for Kitana dearly, and always has, but she is not free of mistakes. The princess particularly lacks a sense of mercy towards others’ feelings. “You-- you just shouldn’t have said it like that. I’m not close to him, but he’s endured enough already. You ought to have at least ended it peacefully. You and I will have our entire future together, assuming we don’t die, again. He won’t, with or without you, and he’s going to have to carry that around now.”

“I don’t care what happens to him!”

“**I do!”** Jade isn’t friends with Liu, either, but she has a strong conscience and more forgiveness than Kitana. “Apologize to him when you see him again! I know it’s true, but that’s the kind of thing you should tell **me**, not him…” She breathes out, shutting her eyes again. "You can tell me anything. You know you can. But not everyone has an eternity to get over the wounds in their heart. For mortals-- everything in their lives matters so much more. They don’t always just forgive and forget and stop caring, like we do. That’s necessary for immortal life. But they’re not like that, and it’s so easy to hurt them… for good.”

Kitana is silent for a while.

Eventually she concedes. “Fine. You win. He… didn’t deserve what I said. When I see him at the tournament, I’ll apologize.” She groans, suddenly thinking back to all her unkind words towards the Earthrealmers. She hasn’t exactly tried to see things from their perspective. “I’ve been a bit of an asshole, haven’t I?”

“That’s the intention. And I’m trying not to talk like a snobby noble any longer. I guess Mother overpaid for those etiquette lessons eight centuries ago.”

Jade grins, biting her lip, and scoots over to Kitana again. “Hey. Why don’t you and I go run around in the Kuatan jungle for a while, later? That would really scandalize the nobles.”

“If only there were any left to scandalize at all! I suppose there’s always the Outworld elites and their bratty little spawn. Thank the gods I don’t have to deal with them yet.” Kitana is feeling very satisfied by letting loose her real opinions. “You know-- I was using Liu as a target to blame. I needed that. It has to be someone’s fault, someone I can curse out and unleash my rage on so I’ll feel better. But it shouldn’t have been him.”

“Yeah.” Jade squeezes her in another hug. “Hey. I think there’s some old Shao Kahn sculptures around in the city. Why don’t we go destroy one of them?”

“I’d rather not be arrested for damaging official property. I don’t think I have diplomatic immunity anymore.”

“Are you kidding? Kotal’d probably pay us to get rid of those.” Jade’s eyes light up with an idea. “He should! I’ll ask him to do that when I see him. If I see him.”

“You’d better work quickly then. I don’t think he’s going to stay as emperor much longer, and Mileena probably won’t want the statues taken down.”

“I doubt she’d care. I think she’s starting to hate Shao Kahn, too.”

“As she fucking should. He’s not her father, he’s a tyrant who wanted an heir that he could control! Which certainly wasn’t going to be me.” Kitana finally sits up, letting go of the top of the roof and carefully balancing beside Jade with her arms wrapped around her waist. “She has every right to hate him. He ordered her to be created, he didn’t raise her!”

“Well, Mileena’s desperate for a family. I’m not surprised she convinced herself that he was her dad.” Jade is as insightful as ever. “She’s doing better now, with you and me and Sindel around. And Tanya, but Tanya is, uh, a different kind of family.”

“I’m glad she’s with Tanya. She’s mellowed out. Tanya used to be so insufferable that I always had the urge to hit her in the face with my fan-blades.” Kitana admits this freely. “At least now I can have a conversation with her. And I’m glad she recalled all that about information about her family… It’s so strange, to recover memories. You remember in the Krypt?”

“Yeah, how could I forget? That was amazing.”

“Rediscovering the actions of my past self was like… glimpsing the life of someone else. It didn’t even feel like me.” Kitana shakes her head, hair falling around her neck. “It was so strange. But I hope I can remember more of the past. I’d rather know, than not know, no matter how awful the memories turn out to be.”

“Let’s send Sindel out for grocery shopping again. Maybe she’ll pick up some other snacks that’ll trigger a memory recall.” Jade grins broadly, returning Kitana’s comfortable embrace. “Hey. This is nice. Just like it used to be… you know?”

“Oh yes, I remember how it used to be.” Kitana comments wryly. “Sorry about that.”
“It’s okay. We’ve been together, one way or another, since the dawn of mankind. I’m not surprised we got sick of each other at some point.”

“It was me that got sick of you, so… I’ll take the blame for that one.”

“I let you go without even trying, so I deserve the blame, too.”

“Okay, we can blame ourselves half and half. Fair?”

“How about no blame at all?” Jade prefers that option. It’s much more comfortable to forgive and forget, as Edenians are inevitably bound to do -- but sometimes it needs to be a conscious decision, for the sake of moving forward.

“Okay. It’s a deal.” Kitana ruffles Jade’s hair fondly, reaching up with one arm. “Well. Anyhow. How it used to be… and all that sort of thing. That was quite nice, you know.”

Jade raises an eyebrow. “Are you trying to resume the official royal Edenian partnership? Just to be clear…”

“The emphasis is on trying.” Kitana isn’t good at this, and she knows it. “I… uh… you’re my bodyguard. So I want you to, uh-- guard… my body… or something.”

“Oh no.” Jade is trying not to laugh, but can’t quite manage to hold it in. “Did you practice that pickup line? Please tell me you didn’t.”

“No, that was improvised. Ugh, I’m terrible. Why don’t you try?”

“I can, if you really want me to…”

“I do really want you to.”

“Okay. Princess Kitana, heir to the throne, leader of the realms…” Jade delivers her full title with a teasing tone, still grinning. “Would you like to -- as they say -- resume the official royal Edenian partnership?”

“Maybe.” Kitana lifts her chin. “What kind of partnership?”

“You know what kind of partnership!”

“Hey. Come here.” There’s only one way to solve their mutual uncertainty. Carefully avoiding an accidental stabbing with her climbing gloves, Kitana guides Jade closer and gives her a firm, determined kiss.

“Exactly.” Jade laughs in delight, returning the kiss enthusiastically. “You know, it’s been so long since we did this that I lost the memories, I think.”

Kitana tosses her head boldly, smirking. She feels more invigorated than she’s been in a long, long time. “Let’s make some new ones.”

“…later.” Jade inhales sharply, eyes widening as she takes note of the time. “Tournament’s in two hours. Shit, I gotta go.”

“You’re swearing, too?” Kitana arches a brow. “I’m so proud of us.”

“Why not? We’re alone up here. Alone together. I like that.” Jade pulls a hair-tie from her pocket, gathering up her dark locks up into a small ponytail. She’d always straightened it meticulously, but
it’s starting to lose its smooth shine, returning to a curl pattern as it grows out. “Are you coming?”

“Hrm. I suppose.” Kitana tilts her head, thinking it over. “I really should attend, just for the sake of representing Edenia. Do you think I should dress nicely, or just wear this?”

“Depends on what style you want. Nobody would ever recognize you in that outfit.”

“Thank the gods. What I’d give for a little anonymity… But I do need to put on the Princess Kitana tiara again, don’t I? And the outfit, and the armor, and the hairstyle, and the makeup…”

Jade volunteers instantly. “I can help, if you need it.”

“No, I’ll be fine. Get going, and save me a seat. I’ll meet you there.” Kitana leans over and gives Jade one more farewell kiss before she climbs down the roof, watching her silhouette disappear against the blazing sun.

Jade descends with quick steady footsteps, keeping her weight balanced against the old tiles, and from there it’s not hard to grab the gutter at the edge of the roof and swing back through the open window through which she’d climbed. She’s glad the room’s empty - there’s no one to stop or question her. She wants to see an old friend before the start of the tournament. Hopefully, by now, she’s still in the market, meandering through the charming maze of shops and stalls and street performers. Outworld seems to have a lot of those, much more than the reserved dignity of Edenia’s capital. Jade secretly likes it. Edenia may have been her home… but she needs time away from home, in the lively Outworld rather than the living hell. It’s renewing her.

It’s not long until Jade arrives, hopping across rooftops as a blur of muted green cloth and vaulting over streets with the help of her staff. Standing triumphantly at the top of a small tower and narrowing her eyes for a closer look, she scans the market crowd until she sees a distinctive figure dressed in red. Skarlet has lost her ponytail and cut it short, and dressed in a battle suit instead of a bikini, still bright crimson but without the blatant sex appeal. Jade nods in approval. She and Kitana aren’t the only ones who have finally escaped the former Kahn’s clothing standards.

Jade leaps down, and crosses the last few rooftops to land nimbly in an open patch of the marketplace street, right beside Skarlet. Gathering herself up and panting heavily for breath, she rises to her feet, only to find herself pulled up by a strong yet gentle grip. The figure has red painted nails, almost resembling claws. Jade follows the path of the arm up to its owner, gazing at a sharp and clever face with bright red eyes. Her skin is still marred by scars tracing from the corners of her mouth to her jaw, but careful medical attention seems to have healed them for good… far different than when Jade had to cut open her mouth to let her speak after Shao Kahn sealed it shut.

“Skarlet!” Jade drops her staff in delight, leaping up, and grabs the shorter girl in a hug, lifting her off her feet. She’s strong, but lean, barely matching the weight of the sturdy Jade. Finally, she puts Skarlet down, clasping her shoulders to stare at her more closely. “You’re here!”

“Jade…” Skarlet’s grinning, too, but it’s a softer look, full of gratitude even after the passage of so many years. “I never forgot you. Hi. Welcome back!”

Jade’s enthusiastic gaze shifts to her outfit. “You’ve changed your look. I love it.”

“So do I! I want to be me, rather than a thing.” Skarlet gestures emphatically, ready to launch into a vigorous discussion about magic creations and free will, but stops herself with a bit of good sense. Jade’s only just arrived, and she probably wants to chat, not hear about Skarlet’s political views. “You look amazing. I heard what you went through, but you’re back. You look…” She raises an eyebrow. “Perfect.”
“Hey, now. I’m afraid I’m spoken for. But thanks.” Jade bites her lip, trying to stop smiling. “I can’t believe it. It is so good to see you. I don’t even care if you’re on the other side of the tournament. I just wanted to say hi.”

“I don’t care, either! We’re only fighting each other for a few days. Then we all have to learn how to get along.” Skarlet’s shaken off the formal speech patterns that come more naturally to the artificial creations as she adjusts to her new freedom. She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, brushing back her short bob, and smiles. “You missed the first fight! It was a riot. Literally.”


“Cassie. I wasn’t surprised. She has that fire in her eyes, you know? She wasn’t going to lose. Personally, I’m glad. I didn’t want Kano to win, Outworld team or not. He always looked at me like a slab of meat.” Skarlet shudders emphatically. “Which I technically am, but not the way he imagined. Ugh, I wish I’d been brave enough to turn into my other form in front of him. Anyway -- he tried to run from Special Forces, but they took him down. Kotal wasn’t about to give him safe haven, either. I think they’re going to take him back this afternoon.”

“Before or after the next fight?”

“After. Next up is Jacqui and Ferra. Actually, Ferra should be around here somewhere. She got a job at one of the fruit sellers’ shops, if you’d believe it.” Skarlet beams with sisterly affection. “She’s a nice little kid, when she can be convinced to leave the creature behind.”

Jade raises an eyebrow. “To leave the what now?”

“Oh-- Ferra’s companion. Torr. He’s… sort of a beast creature. She sits on his shoulders.”

“Jacqui’s fighting that? I was picturing a battle team of humans!”

“Yeah, not quite.” Skarlet makes a face. “Anyway. Kotal scheduled the tournament fights to have some free time in between, not all in a row. It gets people to stay in the city and look around, and buy things. Economy boost, or something.”

“What do they have in between?”

“I think there’s actually some kind of inter-Outworld tournament competition. City rivalries, that kind of thing. I wasn’t paying attention to those fights.” Skarlet shrugs dismissively. “I’ve been spending time with Ferra while she helps at the fruit stall. She’s got some confidence issues.”

Jade’s heart softens. “That’s so sweet of you. What do you think her chances are in the fight?”

“I’d say it’s an even match.” Skarlet ponders it. “They’re both talented, and their abilities can neutralize each other. It’s anybody’s guess.”

“Jade! There you are!” A well-dressed woman carrying a tote bag bolts down the aisle towards them, clearly out of breath. She resembles Jacqui, but older, and seems calmer and more thoughtful, rather than Jacqui’s steadfast bravery. She stops in front of Jade, panting for air with her hands on her knees, then straightens up, speaking quickly. “Jade! Jacqui forgot something at the hotel. Johnny told me she went to the market, but you’re the first person I’ve recognized in half an hour, and our tech doesn’t work here. I didn’t get Shinnok to enchant it yet. Ran out of time--hello!” She introduces herself to Skarlet with an outstretched hand and a friendly smile. “You must be Skarlet. I’m Vera Briggs.”
“Jacqui’s mother?” Skarlet offers hesitantly, just to check, but when Vera nods, she grips her hand firmly, returning the handshake with proper manners. “It’s nice to meet you! I’m glad I’m not fighting your daughter. She’s formidable.”

Vera nods solemnly. “She certainly is.”

“Thanks, Mom.” A familiar voice responds from the end of the aisle, just around the corner. “You made it! Thanks so much, oh my god. Did you get the power pack?”

“Jacqui!” Vera’s head snaps up, finally recognizing her daughter. A relieved smile spreads across her face. She jogs down the aisle towards her, gathering her up in a hug. “There you are! I was worried sick about you!”

“Mom…” Jacqui groans affectionately, gripping her mother tightly in return. As usual, one of her parents saved her ass. Jax would, too, if he wasn’t running security for the Earthrealm team. “I figured you’d try to find me. I activated my gauntlet tracker so I’d know when you were nearby. Worked like a charm.”

“Wait--” Vera backs up, studying her daughter in surprise. “You have a tracker on me?”

“Yeah, for Outworld. It’s in your purse. Considering the Briggs family bad luck, I figured I’d better--”

A small, shrill voice rings out from beside Jacqui. “You her mom?”

Vera looks down, surprised to see a grimy school-age girl dressed in battle gear. “Hi there. Yes, I’m Jacqui’s mom. Vera Briggs, at your service.” She offers a tired, friendly smile. “Who are you?”

“We’s Ferra!” Ferra hops up and down, ineffectively trying to match Jacqui’s height. Spying a fruit crate nearby, she leaps up onto it, standing taller to look her new acquaintance in the eye. “We been talking to Jacqui. Nice girl. We’d hope she wins, but we fightin’ her.” Ferra grins suddenly, a sincere and oddly charming look. “No matter who wins, we friends now.”

Vera isn’t bothered by Ferra’s unusual dialect. “Well, that’s very sweet of you two. I like that idea.” She lightly punches Jacqui in the arm, full of maternal pride. “Leave it to you to make friends with your opponent.”

“Gotta know ‘em to beat ‘em.” But Jacqui’s tone is only teasing. As Ferra puts her hands on her hips, Jacqui retorts before she can comment. “You’ve got an advantage too, now, y’know.”

“Guess so.” Ferra can’t argue with that logic. “You teach me hair braidin’ after?”

“Yeah, if you want!” Jacqui studies Ferra’s hair a little more closely. It’s braided in rows close to her scalp, but messily done, perhaps by someone who didn’t quite know what they were doing. “After the fight, you and I can hang out. Y’know, I like it better if the teams don’t hate each other’s guts.”

“Me, too.” Vera is profoundly relieved, her lingering anxiety slowly starting to settle. She’s always worried about her daughter’s safety, especially considering the dangerous jobs and assignments. Competing in an inter-realm tournament is far more intense than anything Jacqui’s done so far back on Earth. She’s glad to know that she’ll be fighting a friend, though, rather than the bitter, seething rivalry between Cassie and Kano. Cassie’s fearless all the way, totally immune to intimidation, but Jacqui still has a soft, sweet core beneath all that bravery and attitude.
“Hey. Jacq, hon. You wanna go find Dad?” Vera lays a hand on Jacqui’s arm, noting her gauntlets are tucked away safely in the backpack strapped across her chest. Friends or not, it’s wise not to wear the full weaponry that she’ll be using in the fight, just to make sure Ferra doesn’t get an advantage. She’s still dressed in casual clothes, planning to change into the stylish body armor right before the duel, and can’t quite tell whether or not Ferra intends to fight in this outfit. As Jacqui continues to chatter with Ferra, Vera clears her throat loudly. “C’mon. We gotta go."

“Aww, Moooommm--” Jacqui feigns indignation, then grins. “It’s okay. I was planning to head back to Earthrealm HQ in a few minutes anyway. Did you get lunch?”

“Yeah, Dad and I went out to a restaurant. Nice little place down the road from the hotel. Oh, forgot to tell you -- Johnny and Kensi are in charge right now. Sonya, Stryker, and Kabal are getting ready to take Kano back. They’ll stay through this fight, but they won’t risk waiting any longer.”

“Mr. Cage took over?” Jacqui’s slightly surprised. “I thought he’d want to be having fun, seeing Outworld with the team.”

“He does, but they’re all taking turns. After Jacqui’s fight, the gods are going to supervise. Then it’s up to Liu and Smoke. They volunteered, would you believe it? But I’m glad. We need all the help we can get.”

Jacqui’s even more surprised. “Any chance Lao’s going to pitch in, too? It’d be nice to have another set of hands that can teleport, just in case.”

“I think he has to supervise his entire family. Otherwise, I know he would.”

Jacqui runs through the list again, checking off the ex-revenants in her mind. “What about the Edenians?”

“They’re helping on the third day, but they’ll be guests for the first two. Which reminds me-- Jade!” Vera leans around the corner, calling out to the girl. “Wanna come back with us? You’ll get a look backstage.”

“One moment!” Jade replies quickly, hugging Skarlet goodbye and wishing her well. “See you later, okay?”

“Yeah! I can’t wait.” Skarlet returns the hug, lifting Jade up off the ground this time, just for good measure. “Good luck to, uh, everyone!”

“Same to you. Goodbye!” Jade turns away at last, running to catch up with the group. “Hey. Ferra. I don’t think we met, did we?”

“Green girl.” Ferra pronounces this thoughtfully, walking backwards to study the newest girl, following the sound of Jacqui’s gauntlets clinking in her backpack. “You friends with Skarlet? You good.”

“It’s been a while since we saw each other, but yes. She’s great.”

“She help we out lots.” Ferra nods emphatically, lifting her head boldly, and comes to a halt near the corner of an aisle. “You help her. She tell me once.”

“Aw, she did? I’m glad.” Jade’s quietly delighted to hear this. It’s nice to be remembered. “Yeah. Hey-- wait!” She rushes to catch up with the others as they turn the corner, almost accidentally leaving Jade behind. “Bye, Ferra!”
“Bye!” Ferra waves farewell, slicing the air with her arm-blades.

It’s not far back to the tournament headquarters beneath the arena stands, but the Briggs mother and daughter nearly get lost in the complex maze of the marketplace, despite their best efforts to follow the street signs. Jade helps out by leaping up to the nearest rooftop, studying the path from above, and guides them by yelling directions down at them. Sooner or later, they make it back, none the worse for wear, and with a few souvenir trinkets in their pockets that they couldn’t quite resist.

Jade joins them, landing seamlessly on the ground. “Mind if I leave you two here? I’m not sure I’m allowed inside.”

“Hey, we promised we’d let you in. C’mon.” Vera waves her in past the row of stoic SF security guards, striding down the hallway confidently and letting herself back into the main room with her daughter and the Edenian in tow. “Got her.”

“Jacq! I was hopin’ you’d make it back by now.” Jax’s voice booms out from across the room, noticing Jacqui instantly. He leaves behind a few guards he’d been chatting with, and scoops his daughter up in a tight hug, carefully holding her with the metal arms in a reassuring embrace. “You’re gonna do good out there. I know you are.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Jacqui presses her head into the familiar rough fabric of his sturdy vest, taking a few deep breaths to try to settle her nerves. This is a massive responsibility. She doesn’t want to let Earthrealm down. More than that, she doesn’t want to let her parents down. They came so far to support her. “You promise you’re not gonna be mad at me if things go wrong, okay? Just in case. And I’m sorry if they do.”

“I’d never be mad at ya, sweetheart. I’m always gonna be proud of ya.” Jax puts her down, giving her some space as she digs around in a storage box for her battle suit. “You go out there with your chin held high and tell ‘em, this is what Earthrealm can do!”

“Okay.” Jacqui clenches her fist, encouraged by the quick pep talk. Holding her armor proudly, she grabs the bag holding her gauntlets, heading into the next room to suit up. “Let’s go!”
“Erron? We’s scared.”

A little voice distracts Erron from his wandering thoughts. Ferra picked him out of the crowd by his cowboy hat, and is now trying to lead him back to the Outworld sidelines with her, tugging determinedly on his pants.

“Please?” It’s rare for Ferra to say ‘please’ or ‘I’m sorry’ or any such polite words, but this time, she really means it. She stares up at him, wide-eyed, and stands on her tiptoes to pull at his jacket sleeve. “Erron!”

Erron ponders this, trying to shake off his melancholy mood. “Sure.” He bends down and scoops Ferra up, letting her ride on his shoulders. He doesn’t trust her not to slice up his jacket with those arm blades, but if anything happens to the hat, he’s gotten a few replacements from Outworld’s finest leathersmiths. “What’s goin’ on?”

“We’s--” Ferra chews on her lip, remembering Rain’s lessons. “I’m scared.”

“Aww. Hey… listen, kid. You go out there and fight your best. Tell Torr he oughta do the same. Just face ‘er down and win those battles. If you can push Briggs out of the arena, you win early. But play it safe. She’s got those gauntlets. Might knock you off Torr’s shoulders.” Erron’s spent some time thinking this through for Ferra’s sake. It’d be a shame her to lose her big tournament battle. She hasn’t had many wins in life so far. “Hang on real tight, okay? Don’t do those throwin’ moves. Just stay close. Ya might fall out of the arena yerself.” His distinctive Old West dialect is showing through again, despite occasional efforts to lose it. “An’ if worse comes to worst… ya still got what I gave ya?”

Ferra pats a leather bag strapped to her leg. “Yeah. We’s got it.”

“Use that, if ya got a chance and ya might win. Don’t kill ‘er though. Then we’d have real trouble.” Erron sighs softly, feeling a weight on his head as Ferra props her elbows on his hat, settling her chin in her hands as she studies the arena. He can’t bring himself to object. “How’s Torr feelin’?”

“We’s-- he’s okay.” Ferra recalls the earlier conversation. “He thinks Jacqui’s gauntlets might be upgraded by now. He’s not sure what they gonna have, but maybe somethin’ to grab us-- grab me, cause I’s small, an’ Tor’s not. I gotta stay close, or jump off his shoulders if she gonna try to grab me, an’ use him as a big shield. But that way we can’t attack much, ‘cause if I get close, she gonna blast me right through the ropes. Energy punch.” While explaining the fight strategy to Erron, Ferra’s slowly adjusting to describing herself and Torr as individual people, after years of life being treated as only one unit. It’s weird, and interesting. She speaks rapid-fire, continuing to tell him the plan. “So I gotta stay outta punch range, an’ maybe get behind her to knock her through. Stabbin’ won’t hurt her, she gonna have the armor, but Torr might hit ‘er through the ropes, if he got good timing.”

“Well, color me impressed.” Erron certainly wasn’t expecting such a complex set of ideas. He wonders sometimes about what’s goin’ on in Torr’s mind. Torr obviously isn’t the mindless brute that he seems, but his silent thoughts filtered through Ferra’s limited communication skills don’t lend themselves to a lot of conversation. “You’ve sure got this figured out. Why not just have Torr grab her and toss her out of the arena?”

“She got gauntlet powers to stun n’ freeze him. Can’t grab her, don’t want that. Better fightin’
“Solid plan, kid.” Erron carefully kneels down, letting Ferra hop off and trot away towards her hulking mute companion. “Good luck out there, okay?”

“Thanks, Erron! Thanks for… everythin’.” Right by the sidelines, Ferra puts on a set of sturdier armor, checking the buckles and straps on Torr’s protective gear after she’s all suited up. “You an’ Skarly an’ water boy… thanks. Can’t do it without ya.”

Erron silently gives her a thumbs up.

Kotal, several rows away, does the same.

Grinning, Ferra leaps up onto Torr’s shoulders from a standstill, bouncing off the bench and launching herself up. She’s practically indestructible, despite her small size and young age, and she’s pretty sure she can get through this fight none the worse for wear. As for Torr, he heals quick, and he knows what he’s doing. He always does.

She barely hears the announcer as he pronounces their names clearly in a deep booming voice echoing through the arena. *Ferra and Torr.* It’s not until Erron hastily catches her eye and points towards the stage that she takes off, following the direct path from gate to arena. Perched on Torr’s back, she carefully stands up with the skill and balance of a circus performer, giving the crowd an emphatic thumbs up. Outworld cheers enthusiastically, and there’s even a few scattered claps from the front row of Earthrealm, just for moral support.

Jacqui walks with solid confidence and determination, hands on her hips as her gauntlets light up. She doesn’t have quite as much audacity as Cassie’s cheeky introduction, but she leaves no doubts about her courage. Hopping over the ropes into the ring, she pounds her fists together as she faces Ferra and Torr, the gauntlets’ solid metal *clink* emphasizing the weapons’ power. “Hey. This is gonna be good.”

Ferra tries to mimic the gesture, but accidentally locks her arm blades together, struggling free in a moment. She shrugs it off, and grins, spreading her arms in an attempted recovery from the mistake. If Jacqui can be as brave as she seems, Ferra can too. “We fight? C’mon!”

The announcer carefully and loudly reads off the countdown.

*Three.*

*Two.*

*One.*

*Fight!*

They both forget entirely about their planned strategies. Fueled by a friendly rivalry and foolish bravery, Ferra and Jacqui leap into the air, hurtling towards each other with their fists outstretched.

Panicking at the sight of the knives, Jacqui fires her gauntlet blasts for protection. The energy surge hits Ferra’s armor and reflects back on Jacqui halfway, hitting her right back in the chest -- and, thrown backwards by the power blast, they both go soaring through the air.

They hit the sand outside the arena at the exact same moment, collapsing flat on their backs with the wind knocked out of them.
The crowd is silent.

The announcer waits three seconds. Neither is getting up.

He clears his throat. *The first match is a draw. Jacqui Briggs, and Ferra and Torr, are tied one-to-one.*

He pauses, letting the unexpected news sink in.

*If the third match is two-to-two, a fourth match will be played.*

“Holy shit!” Jacqui finally stirs, scrambling to her feet, and wipes sand off her battle-suit. She’s not badly injured, just startled by the force of the impact. She races back up the steps and leaps into the arena, taking her place on the Earthrealm side again. Ferra has struggled back in, too, shaking herself off and spitting out a mouthful of sand. Jacqui hesitantly offers a smile. “Oops.”

Ferra waits a second, then returns the smile wearily. “S’ ok.”

They’ve barely recovered when the announcer starts the next countdown, a little more hastily this time.

*Three, two, one-- fight!*  

They’re far smarter this time, playing mutual defense. Torr takes a few ineffective swings at Jacqui from across the arena, and Jacqui fires back with a few gauntlet blasts, fending him off to keep safe from any further attacks. Considering Torr’s size, the announcer had decided beforehand that the fight will end when Ferra is down, rather than Jacqui attempting to knock the gigantic Torr off his feet. She may as well take a sledgehammer to a mountain.

All things considered, it’s almost an uneventful fight. They’re slowly but steadily running out of time, and if the clock stops with both fighters on their feet, they’ll need to quicken the pace for an overtime win. Jacqui thinks back desperately, trying to imagine something, *anything*, that would give her an advantage here. Her gauntlets’ traction beams are nearly useless on a creature of Torr’s size, and Ferra is hiding behind him far too effectively to make a grab at her. Horizontally, the fight is simply impossible to win.

But vertically…

Jacqui’s hesitant to try. An air attack seems like her only option, if she can fire it off and launch herself up without falling out of the arena last time… but the odds aren’t too good.

The memory of the Netherrealm misadventure with the once-corrupted Raiden suddenly floods through her mind. They’d battled in the room with the floor pit of spikes, and she fired her gauntlets downwards at the ground to reverse the blast and fly upwards, grabbing him so Cassie could make her move…

*This could do it.*

Jacqui tentatively creeps towards Ferra and Torr, keeping her pace slow, then, without giving them a chance to react, whirls backwards, points her fists at the floor, and fires the strongest gauntlet blast she can manage. Jacqui stifles a yelp as she goes soaring backwards, a disorienting feeling--but somehow, against all odds, she grabs Ferra’s shoulders as she hurtles past, stopping her momentum as Ferra screeches and clutches Torr. Dislodging the girl from her perch atop her companion, Jacqui leaps back off, tossing Ferra towards the floor of the arena and landing nearby as she strikes the ground facedown with a light *thud*. Ferra angrily claws the mat with her blades,
trying to push herself up, but as the announcer calls time, Jacqui’s securely wrestled her down, securing one victory.

She lets Ferra go instantly, patting her shoulder lightly as the girl scrambles away. Jacqui won’t apologize for a win, but she’s sort of sorry that she has to even do this. All in all, she is fighting a little kid. Who’s to blame, anyway? Herself, for choosing this fight? Sonya, for putting together the tournament roster? Kotal, for calling the tournament? Cassie, for making the plan that caused Kotal to call the tournament? Tanya, for stealing Shinnok and starting the whole chain of events? Raiden, for reviving Shinnok which prompted Kotal to steal him and cause the diplomatic incident? Shinnok himself, for--

Jacqui stops herself. This is stupid.

“Hey. Let’s go!” She dodges and ducks and rolls under Torr as he roars and charges at her, both silently agreeing to play an offense fight despite the risks. They really both do want to get this over with, win or lose -- and they truly don’t want to fight a fourth match, even though the first one was over in only five seconds. They’re running out of energy, anyway. Jacqui’s punches are just a little slower, Ferra’s stabs a bit less forceful. They manage not to land a single harmful blow, intentionally hitting each other’s strongest armor points to put on a show for the audience as Outworld and Earthrealm cheer each time their chosen fighter gains the advantage.

Jacqui can’t help but feel a bit of sympathy. For Ferra to be defeated with no wins at all would be humiliating for her, and she knows Kotal’s volatile mood and poor decision-making skills. She’s trying her best to win for Earthrealm, and it’s a hard and grueling battle. Still, some part of her is secretly glad that Ferra’s putting up a good fight, just for the sake of her reputation and her post-tournament life.

Jacqui’s train of thought is interrupted by a solid punch from a meaty hand that sends her hurtling against the ropes, bouncing against them and landing facedown. She uses her gauntlet force to push back upwards, sending her stumbling to her feet and trying to regain her balance, but she catches herself in a backwards somersault and bolts to the other side of the arena quick enough to barely dodge another attack from Torr. Though Ferra has agreed to take it easy, Jacqui realizes that Torr clearly hasn’t.

She loses. Somehow, she loses. Ferra outsmarts her. Just before the announcer calls time, the girl jumps onto Jacqui’s back, knocking her forward to fall heavily on her face with her arms outstretched. Thinking quickly, she uses the parallel blades strapped to her arms to pin down Jacqui’s own arms at the elbow, just above the gauntlets. Jacqui’s trapped. Her gauntlets are pointing away, and any motion would drive Ferra’s blades into her own battle-suit, piercing through the fabric and maybe her own flesh. She’s not sure how blade-proof it is, and she doesn’t want to find out.

Time.

Ferra pulls the blades out of the mat as quickly as she can, offering a tiny apologetic shrug, and Jacqui nods silently. The mutual respect is still intact, despite the current tie -- which forces them into a fourth round…

Jacqui’s blood rushes in her ears as she feints and punches upward, knocking Torr off balance for a few moments. Newfound of courage floods through her at the small hint of a possible victory. Maybe she’s been fighting wrong this whole time. Torr can’t be invulnerable - not after this much time spent in battle, and the exhaustion settling over all of them. She hits him with a flurry of punches in the chest before he can react, kicking back his arms as he reaches towards her to strike out. The soles of her boots are strong enough to resist the blades on his own arms. Taking
advantage of the momentum and Torr’s disadvantage, Jacqui fires another gauntlet blast to push him back against the ropes, but notices the bright light flickering, hitting a little more weakly -- a signal of an upcoming problem they hadn’t yet had time to fix.

The power pack…

Desperately, she scrambles to pull it out of her pocket and slide it into the extra slot on her forearm, managing to get it shoved into place just in time. The plasma glow returns at full strength, burning bright as ever. As Ferra leaps at her, sensing an opportunity, Jacqui hits her with an uppercut blast that knocks her right back against Torr, bouncing off his broad chest to land on her feet. Gathering her courage, Ferra faces down Jacqui on the arena floor.

It’s not long til she’s up on Torr’s shoulders again, and, once more, time is running out. An indescribable terror settles over Ferra -- she could do this, she really could, but what if she doesn’t! She fears the consequences with deep, unshakable dread. She remembers Kotal’s comments about sending her out to the wastelands if she fails as his bodyguard. She couldn’t tell if he was joking. Erron and Skarlet might try to protect her, but there’s no hope for Torr.

In one last aggressive push, eyes wild with desperation and her face caught in a mask of fear, Ferra urges Torr to run towards Jacqui in a powerful charge. He strikes her in an instant, finally managing to land a real blow, and tosses her upwards, hurtling all the way across the arena and out onto the sand--

Or not. Jacqui outstretches her arms and manages to cling to the top rope of the barrier, desperately struggling to get herself back in. She points her fist at her enemy and hits Torr with a stun blast fueled by her new power pack, freezing him in place, but Ferra dodges it and runs across the arena towards Jacqui at top speed. One of the arm blades is coming loose as the leather strap frays, and Ferra struggles to fix it -- but her blades catch together again, locking her arms in place! She has no time to fix it. She furiously yanks her arm out of the contraption, freeing one hand and letting the other arm dangle with both blades stuck there.

Ferra frantically reaches into the holster strapped to her leg…

She draws the tiny pistol, a gift from Erron.

Her hand shakes unsteadily as she aims the gun right at Jacqui, stopping short at the edge of the arena and not daring to make another move.

Jacqui stares down the barrel. The gun has Susanna engraved on the metal in elegant script and Ferra scratched in clumsy letters right below. She can’t help but wonder why.

She gazes at Ferra’s desperate, terrified face -- and notices her finger trembling on the flimsy trigger. The girl may not plan to shoot, but she’s scared enough to unleash a bullet by accident. The consequences of killing an Earthrealmer would be severe, and Jacqui’s own life is at stake.

Jacqui closes her eyes.

Then she lets go of the rope.

Moments later, a bullet shot rings out.

Jacqui abruptly lands on the sand, falling on her back. She made the right call, but at what cost? Gasping for air, she stares up blankly at the sky, blinded by the relentless Outworld sun.

She shuts her eyes as the announcer speaks.
Ferra drops the gun, yanks her other arm out of the broken gauntlets, and leaps down from the edge of the arena, completely ignoring the noise of the crowd. She kneels down by her fallen rival, frantically poking and prodding at her. “Jacqui!”

Jacqui opens her eyes, sorrowful and pained, yet slightly relieved. It’s a tie now. Earthrealm can still win. She did the right thing for both of them. But it still sucks.

“...I’ll be okay.”

“You fought amazing.” Ferra tries to help her to her feet, pulling uselessly at her arm, but Jacqui gets up on her own, dusting the gritty sand off her uniform. She gently pats Ferra’s shoulder, then gazes upwards, where Torr is studying her from the edge of the arena.

He pounds his fists together like Jacqui had done with her gauntlets, then nods in approval.

Ferra translates. “He thinks your strategies were impressive. We thinks.” She corrects herself in the other direction this time, trying to clumsily comfort Jacqui. “You honor Earthrealm. Good fight. You tried real hard.”

“Yeah. I really, really tried.” Jacqui groans, rubbing her forehead. She’s still processing the whole sequence of events. The loss stings, but a bullet would’ve stung worse. “Damn pistol. Don’t leave it there, okay? I’m guessing that thing’s a souvenir.”

“Yeah! From Erron. Meant for his daughter, long time ago. Gave it to me, to keep safe. Torr gonna get it. No worries.” Ferra walks with her former opponent to the center of the arena, then turns back to return to the Outworld side. Before she goes, though, she catches Jacqui’s eye and gives her a comforting nod and a thumbs-up. “You be proud, okay? You fought so good.”

Jacqui tiredly returns the gesture, and somehow, despite it all, manages a smile.

She trudges back to Earthrealm’s side of the Koliseum, studying the sand beneath her feet. She can’t quite even manage to look up at the crowd, no matter how loud they cheer for her. And they truly are cheering - they don’t seem bothered by the loss. If anything, they’re trying even harder to reassure her. Outworld, of course, is going wild at their first victory, but that’s to be expected.

Jacqui falls into her parents’ arms at the sidelines. “I tried.”

“I know ya did, hon.” Jax squeezes her with that familiar metal embrace, unwilling to let go as she slumps against his chest, exhausted. Vera joins the hug, too, helping to hold up Jacqui. She nods silently, biting her lip, but keeps looking down, suddenly overwhelmed by disappointment.

She can’t help but curse herself out. “If I hadn’t been stupid enough to fire that gauntlet blast in the first round, there wouldn’t have been a fourth round, and we wouldn’t have--” She shuts off her own train of thought. “Fight’s over. I lost.”

“Ya know, I can deal with ya losin’ to Ferra. Nice little kid. Glad she helped ya. If Kano beat Cassie, though? Woulda been another story. One of us mighta jumped in and started a fourth round ourselves.” Jax smiles, trying to cheer Ferra up. “Just sayin’, if one of you kids had to lose to somebody, that ain’t so bad. And ya fought honorably. Good kombat.”

“It truly was.” Jade, leaning against the wall, offers a comforting glance and a few kind words. “That was incredible. Your strategy with the gauntlet blast off the floor to grab Ferra was superb.”
“Thanks… done it before.” Jacqui groans, settling into the nearest chair with her face in her hands. Unstrapping her gauntlets, she drops them, flexing her wrists, and stares at the ground. “And thanks for the power pack, Mom. Saved my ass from getting hurt worse, at least.”

“You’re welcome, honey.” Vera joins her in the next chair, leaning over to hug her once again. “Don’t beat yourself up about this. There’s seven more fights. We’re only getting started.”

“I know. Frost is up next, isn’t she? She’ll be fine.” Jacqui shakes her head, still thinking over the loss, studying and pondering everything she did wrong. “I really wasn’t expecting a goddamn gun.”

“I know. It doesn’t matter. Without that… mighta won, mighta lost. You put up the best fight you could.” Jax’s familiar voice answers from the chair on the other side, staying with his daughter until she starts to cheer up, no matter how long it takes. Jacqui will be all right in a little while, but it’s still a bad feeling to lose so unexpectedly in an overtime round. He’s been there. “Want something to eat? We ordered pizza.”

“Outworld has pizza?”

“Yep. Seems like they picked up on a few of our Earthrealm foods. Not sure why.”

Jacqui ponders this, grateful for something to talk about. She needs the distraction, even if it’s just a stupid conversation. “It’s probably to sell food to the Earthrealm tournament guests. That’s pretty clever, actually.”

“It’s good for us, too, though I don’t think they were expectin’ such a big order.” Jax helps his daughter up to her feet, leaving the gauntlets behind as Vera discreetly picks them up off the floor. “You’ve got to be exhausted. Eat something. We got all kinds.”

“Please tell me there’s no ham and pineapple…”

“Sorry. Cassie insisted.”

“Some people have no taste. Or tastebuds.” Jacqui wrinkles her nose. “You got one of those stuffed-crust pizzas?”

“Nah, but we got something called ‘supreme.’ That one’s gotta be good. Marketing wouldn’t lie to us, would they?”

“Haha. Good enough…” Jacqui’s voice fades as they disappear down the hallway. She’s finally starting to feel a little better about the outcome of this fight. It’s just a tie, after all. The tournament will go on, and she’s confident her teammates can do even better.

There’s one more fight left today. But for now, they’ve all earned a break.
“Are we there yet?”

Kabal’s joking, of course, but it’s been a long journey. Feet braced against the sturdy chair on the opposite wall, he relaxes as best he can in the uncomfortably small containment van, transporting a handcuffed Kano, heavily armed Sonya, and very tired Stryker. They’ve done enough portal-hopping for one day, traveling from Outworld to Earthrealm and then bouncing between a series of teleportation landing sites to throw off any trackers. It wasn’t bad enough to make him nauseous, unlike the first time, but Kabal’s definitely tired of it.

They’re on their way to a SF site now, one of those secret locations out in the desert that the tabloids love to speculate about. Once in a while, SF will send up some sort of mysterious UFO-style creation at a safe distance from the base, just to act as a decoy. The media eats it up. SF goes unnoticed. Everybody wins. No one suspects that the entrance to the base is actually through the back room of a perfectly ordinary gas station.

But they are, regretfully, not there yet. Not even close.

Stryker sighs, leaning against Kabal, and lays his head on his husband’s scarred shoulder, exhaling deeply. He’s just as tired, perhaps more so, for having had to supervise the rowdy group of kombatants. He pulls his hat over his eyes, and interlaces his fingers with Kabal’s gloved ones, hoping to catch a few moments of rest.

Unfortunately, Kano’s awake.

He leers at them, one eye glowing bright and the other filled with cruelty. His voice is thick and groggy, but he’s still his usual self. “Kabal? Hah, look at that, you and your little boyfriend. Always knew you were a f--”

Stryker doesn’t let him finish. He stares at him calmly. “Actually, he’s not.”

Kano’s gaze turns to him. “Huh?”

“But I am.”

That’s as much warning as Stryker gives before a flashlight collides with Kano’s skull.

He flops over on the mat at the floor of the van, knocked out cold. Again.

Stryker returns to his seat, dropping the flashlight back into the duffel bag he’s been hauling around. “If I have to hit him one more time, his laser eye’s going to fall out of its socket.”

“Can’t say I’d miss it, but he might.” Kabal laughs under his breath. Secretly, he’s glad Stryker intervened, taking care of the problem before it got worse. Kano’s comment infuriated him much more than he’s willing to admit. “I don’t think he really cares whether or not I like women too. Well played, though.”

“Least I could do.” Stryker calls up to Sonya in the front, who’s been dutifully ignoring the chaos in the back as the van rattles down the dusty highway. “We’re fine.”

“Just stay out of trouble, will you? Don’t make more than we’ve already got.” Her voice rises above the indistinct chatter of the radio laced with static. “We’re a half hour away. Won’t be long
now."

“Okay.” He’s glad for that, but the time’s been passing far more slowly than he’d hoped. Guarding an international criminal is both nerve-wracking and dull, especially when he’s unconscious. Stryker’s just hoping Kano will keep quiet until they reach their destination. It’d save them all a lot of problems.

Of course, he doesn’t. Kano is practically indestructible. Still handcuffed, he manages to return to life and stagger back to his seat before the half-hour is up, staring at the pair of officers with a pained yet arrogant sneer. “Good one, mate. That one hurt.”

Stryker studies him with a cool stare beneath the brim of his hat. “Pleased to hear it.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet you are.” Kano laughs, and settles back into his chair, trying to act like the circumstances don’t matter. He can’t get out of the cuffs yet - he tried for quite a while - but he’s willing to use his secret weapon, if he absolutely has to.

More accurately, he’s going to use his secret weapon to detonate theirs.

They weren’t smart enough to strap him to the chair, so it’ll be a piece of cake. Stryker’s bag has grenades in it; Kano noticed that earlier. If his aim is good enough, he can use his laser eye to cut through the cloth, fry the pin, and open the lock on the van’s back doors. There’s no way he can do it at seventy miles per hour - it’d be suicide, which would be tough to survive, even for him. But there’s got to be a stop sign around here somewhere. The desert can’t last forever.

The van doesn’t have a window in the back, but Kano cranes his neck to peer through the windshield, catching a glimpse. It’s barely even a town, more like a little collection of scattered buildings. There’s some kind of industry out here - Kano doesn’t know or care to figure out what - but it’s nothing noteworthy. It figures that SF would put their base out in the middle of nowhere. Clever, actually. It’ll be harder to get help here.

Not that he’s ever needed it.

Kabal’s been studying him too, observing Kano as he thinks. He’s turned away, but watches him through the edge of his vision, escaping his notice.

An eye for an eye. It’s fitting.

The van lurches to a stop as Sonya hits the brakes.

It unfolds in a split second. Kano lights up his laser, piercing through the duffel bag with a hot red glow. Snarling triumphantly, he springs from his chair and headbutts Stryker against the wall of the van, tossing him aside with a swift kick. He dodges a hit from Kabal, knocking him to the floor easily, but they’re both thrown against the back doors of the van as Sonya drives forward, hurtling through the intersection with a string of creative curses. The bag’s contents spill all over the floor, scattering before either Kabal or Kano can keep track.

Too late. Kano’s had his chance. Fending off Kabal’s desperate blows, he cranes his neck to catch one of the grenades in the crosshairs of the laser, destroying the pin in a flash of metal. Then, he knocks it away quickly, aiming it towards the front of the van. It lodges firmly between the seats, much to his delight. The others won’t make it out of this one.

Ten seconds to go. Kano snaps his head around and aims right at the lock of the back door, tumbling out in a sudden somersault as the van speeds onward without him. Scuffed and lightly damaged, but alive, he crawls to the curb of the road. No oncoming traffic, just vacant buildings
and a silent stoplight. Of course there’s nothing going on in this pathetic little town.

Six seconds to go.

“Keep driving!” Kabal shouts to Sonya, frantically digging the grenade out from between the seats. He clutches it carefully, cradling it in his hands, and leaps from the back of the van, hitting the ground running. For once, he’s the man with the plan this time.

Stryker’s out cold, and if Kano hurt him, he’s never going to see another day.

Three seconds to go.

Kabal accelerates to full speed, desperately backtracking. He saw an empty dirt lot just a minute ago, somewhere down this lonely road. The grenade will detonate safely there. No casualties, no damage, just a mysterious underground gas leak that caught fire.

Stryker insisted, a long time ago, that Kabal should learn how to throw a baseball properly. It was Stryker’s favorite sport when he was younger, and he still returned to it sometimes, helping out with the local Little League. One time he dragged Kabal along, who demonstrated his complete inability to throw pitches. Then Stryker taught him, and it turned out, he wasn’t half bad.

That must have been twenty-five years ago -- no, twenty-seven. Nearly three decades.

But muscle memory never fades.

Skidding to a halt at the edge of the vacant lot, Kabal winds up for a pitch, clenches his jaw, and flings the grenade as far as he possibly can.

It bounces once, and then explodes in a massive shower of dirt, leaving a scarred crater in the soft earth.

Hearing the explosion from afar, Kano flexes his wrists and grins, boasting to himself. The impact snapped his handcuffs, so he’s free. He really did it this time. “Under an hour. That’s a new record-”

A firm hand clamps down on his shoulder, forcibly yanking him backwards. Kabal looks angry enough to breathe fire, glistening with sweat and his dark hair streaming behind him.

Kano gets a better look at Kabal’s face this time as he’s shoved to the ground. He’s not even hideously scarred anymore. Pity. It’s what a traitor deserves. But, somehow, Kabal keeps escaping the fate that Kano planned for him.

Kabal lets Kano realize his defeat for a long moment, gazing at him with burning hatred from his one good eye.

“You wish.”

This time, it’s no special weaponry that knocks Kano out, just a good old-fashioned punch.

Sonya’s always been talented at repairs. Pulling out a mechanic’s kit, she fashions a makeshift lock for the van’s back door, then cuffs Kano hand and foot this time, hog-tying him just for good measure. Stryker’s recovered by now, and he’s horrified by the disaster he couldn’t prevent - but, as Kabal’s quick to assure him, there was no damage done, except for the duffel bag, one grenade, and a few of Kano’s teeth.
Once she’s satisfied, off they go as if nothing had happened, ignoring the assorted laser holes puncturing the van. Nothing to be done about that now. Sonya slows down near a drive-thru, calling to the quiet and gloomy back seat. “You guys want anything?”

“Yeah, can you get me a soda?” Stryker mutters, rubbing his temples. Getting knocked out so quickly gave him a headache in multiple senses, both humiliating and painful. “You don’t have to. But it’d be nice.”

“No problem. Kabal, anything?”

He shrugs apathetically. “Burger? I dunno. Whatever they have out here.”

“Gotcha. Won’t take long.” Sonya maneuvers into the drive-thru and quickly places the order, along with one black coffee for herself. The transport van bears the logo of a nonexistent construction company, so they attract no particular attention. Renewed by the refreshments, they pull into a local gas station for a minute to eat and refill. Everybody needs a break.

It occurs to Kabal about a minute later, mid-mouthful. “Is this the SF base gas station?”


“I’ll do it.” Stryker climbs out of the van, wincing, and rubs his knee. He doesn’t heal up as fast as he used to. Making his way across the desolate parking lot, he drags open the heavy door, poking his head inside. He locks eyes with the bored teenage clerk. “Do you sell diesel fuel here?”

The clerk responds in a monotone. “Yes, three cents off per gallon if you use your discount card.”

Stryker pulls out a small keychain, including a few reward cards, and offers it. “I think you’re supposed to scan this.”

The clerk points the barcode scanner at the card. With the click of a button, Stryker’s information pops up on the cash register screen. Officer Kurtis W. Stryker. Rank, birthdate, credentials, personal history, blood type. He cranes his neck to see, catching a quick glance. It’s all exactly the same as his SF file.

“Looks like I’m verified.” He gestures hesitantly towards the back of the gas station. “Through there?”

She hits a button to reset the register, picking up the magazine. “Yeah. Go ahead.”

“Okay. Let me just go get my husband. And my commanding officer, and our prisoner...” Stryker hastily excuses himself, returning to the van, and finds Kabal leaning against the battered door, typing away on his phone. “You got reception out here?”

“Barely.” Kabal presses a few buttons frustratedly, sending the text before the phone decides not to cooperate at all. He shoves it into his pocket, turning his attention back to Stryker. “The Earth-Outworld data connection is better than I thought, but not by much. Just checking in with Cassie. She’s helping Frost get ready for the fight.”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot we’re gonna miss that.” Stryker groans, running his hand through his hair. “Hope it goes a little better than our afternoon.”

“It seems like they’re gonna be fine. Hey. Are you all right?” Kabal lays a hand on his husband’s arm, deeply worried, but trying his best to conceal it. “You took a few pretty hard hits.”
“Nothing compared to you. I can’t believe you got us out of the way of a grenade. God…” Stryker slumps against the side of the van, exhaustion settling into his bones. “Good save. As always. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“I dunno either. I’d be lost without you. Stranded. Y’know, way back when I escaped him the first time, you gave me something to hold onto that wasn’t the Black Dragon. Still thankful for that.” Kabal sighs softly, tying his hair back up into a ponytail. “Maybe this’ll be the end of it. Kano’s luck must have run out by now.”

“I’m gonna guess we won’t have to worry about him for awhile. He pissed Sonya off one too many times.” Stryker’s pretty certain of it, at least. Kano’s difficult to defeat, but Sonya’s willpower is absolutely legendary. “Tell Cassie to tell Frost good luck for me, will you?”

“Can do.” Kabal exchanges a quick smile with him, then does as asked, waiting for the phone to send the message over the painfully slow signal. He’s glad to have Cassie as a friend. He hasn’t had too many of those.

[JK] Kurtis told me to tell you to tell Frost good luck from him.

[CC] I feel like “good luck Frost” would be enough here lol

[JK] Just trying to be accurate.

[CC] She says thx. how did it go w Kano??

[JK] Could be better but we’re ok.

[CC] What happened??

Cassie grits her teeth, waiting for a response. She’s been typing with one hand while the other hand holds a part of Frost’s intricate icicle-spiked outfit in place. Distracted from the conversation, she glares at the others. “What is taking so long?”

Shinnok stares at her through glowing green eyes. “This is not fitting exactly as well as I had planned. I would very much appreciate your patience.”

“Her patience? What about MY fuckin’ patience?” Frost complains loudly, hands on her hips as Shinnok laboriously sews an extra piece of elastic into one of the seams of her outfit. “I TOLD you my shoulders were broader than Mileena’s!”

“Yes, but YOU refused to stand still long enough for me to accurately fit the outfit onto you!” Shinnok’s voice rises as he threads the needle through the sturdy cloth, somehow managing to avoid stabbing Frost. Not that he isn’t tempted.

Cassie’s phone buzzes.

[JK] Kano pulled some stunt with his eye laser. Knocked out Kurtis, activated a grenade, opened the doors of the van and jumped out. I got the grenade away in time and caught him. We’re at the base, he’s probably in a jail cell already. Although tbh I don’t care what the hell happens to him now as long as he’s not around me.

[CC] Holy shit yikes but nice save. any injuries? how’s mom???

Miraculously, the repairs are finished. Frost is neatly outfitted in a fitted long-sleeved bodysuit with sharp icy pieces at the shoulders, a mix of durable blue fabric and glittering silvery cloth enhanced with spiked elbow and knee pads. It looks excellent. In fact, it’s hardly possible to tell that the kombatant and designer had been loudly swearing at each other two minutes ago about the lack of pockets. Shinnok insists that the outfit’s attached pouches are more than enough. Frost just supports pockets on principle.

With the dispute finally resolved, Frost inspects herself in a mirror, grudgingly appreciating the results. “Sweet. You… you did good. I like this. I really wish this was an everyday look.”

Shinnok sniffs, trying to avoid being too self-congratulatory. It takes significant restraint. “Anything is an ‘everyday look’ if you are sufficiently brave.”

“Spoken by a true master of weird fashion.” Cassie can’t help but laugh. Relieved, she finally puts her phone away. Kabal’s doing all right, Stryker will be fine, and Sonya is apparently none the worse for wear. But, as amazing as her mom is, Cassie still worries. Maybe that’s just part of growing up. Dad said so once or twice, after all.

Lapsing into memories, she shakes her head and focuses on the moment. “Frost. You got the jacket?”

“Yeah.” Frost is slipping her arms into an oversized and unremarkable blue coat, zipping it up the front. “Got all my throwing knives in the fanny packs strapped to my thighs.”

“Those are utility pouches!” Shinnok grimaces. His patience has been tested beyond measure. “If you don’t want them, they are removable!”

“No, I actually like them, I just wanted to see your reaction to that.” Frost tests the zippers, valiantly attempting not to laugh. Shinnok is a diva. There’s just no other way to describe it. “I’m actually impressed by how many kunai I can fit in here.”

“Hmm. It’s all about technique.” Shinnok smirks, accepting the praise. “I am a master of making things fit—” He trails off, immediately noticing Frost’s expression. “Excuse me. Anything I say will be instantly taken out of context, won’t it?”

“You know it will.” Frost grins. Shinnok is so entertainingly easy to irritate, and she has a feeling he plays it up for comic effect. She can relate to that. “I wonder what Erron’s going to be wearing. Whoever’s doing the costuming for Outworld isn’t too bad, actually.”

“Not as good as me, naturally.”

“Of course not. Nobody ever has been, currently is, or will be.” Frost rolls her eyes. “Can we get going?”

“Yeah, c’mon!” Cassie is already holding the door.

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Over at Team Outworld, Skarlet is also demonstrating her skill at costume design. She’s added no less than ten extra bullet pouches and belts to Erron’s outfit, enhancing the stylish effect - or at least she thinks. Erron seems to disagree.

He makes a face of mild disapproval, inspecting the jacket draped over a mannequin. “This has
“Yeah. So? Frost’s got ice powers. If you want to freeze because you absolutely insist on showing off your muscles or whatever it is, I can’t help you. Here. Do it yourself. Cut off the sleeves.”

Skarlet offers a scissors promptly. “It’s all yours.”

He gives her a weary look. “It’s fine.”

“You’re lucky I was the one making this. Ferra wanted to wrap all the bullet belts around your hat. All of them.”

“I can’t even imagine what that’d look like.”

“I’m sure she’d be glad to help you find out. They’re detachable.”

“No thanks.” Erron lifts the leather jacket off the mannequin, slipping it on over a light woven shirt, and buttons up the front with worn fingers. The outfit is surprisingly comfortable, and he doesn’t look like a dandy in it, which he’d dreaded. He grunts in approval, attempting to muster up some necessary politeness. “...appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome. The pants have six hidden pockets on either side. You can put more bullets in there.”

“There might be a limit on how fast I can shoot to use ‘em all up.”

“Better safe than sorry.”

“You ain’t wrong.” Erron hooks his thumbs in his belt, staring into the mirror. He’s still annoyed by the faint tan line from his mask, which he’s not wearing today, but he does at least look presentable. Not bad for a guy who’s seen a couple centuries.

He’s got his guns and his bravado, which is really all he needs, but there’s still a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. The walk from the backstage changing room out into the Koliseum is short, but somehow, he dreads it.

No matter. He’ll get it over with soon enough.

The rest of the team wishes him well, especially Ferra, who he scoops up for a reluctant but sentimental hug. Then it’s showtime.

The announcer’s words ring hollow in his ears. After the long trudge across the sand, he and Frost face each other on the platform, dressed to the nines, he in his upgraded cowboy gear and she in some sort of shiny pants and an oversized jacket.

She catches his eye and smirks. He answers with a nod. They have no strong feelings towards each other. Just a worthy adversary for a fun mid-afternoon fight.

The announcer calls Erron’s name first. Outworld’s spectator gallery responds with a chorus of cheers, but he can feel that the crowd is out of energy. After two full tournament battles and a long day of inter-Outworld competitions, they’ve seen more than enough. When Erron and Frost have dueled to the finish, everybody gets to go home.

Frost is just as aware of the cloud of dreary dullness that’s settled over the stands, but she’s still trying for style points. When her name echoes through the Koliseum, she dramatically sheds her oversized jacket to reveal an elaborate top made of eye-catching glittery cloth with icicle spikes at
the shoulder. Somehow, the outfit still manages to look intimidating. Erron shrugs in approval. It won’t make a difference in the fight, but she looks nice. He can respect the effort.

He wasn’t expecting knives.

He can’t even let loose the first bullet before a small throwing-knife goes whizzing past his head, calculated to make him flinch in the right direction for her to lob another one into the top of his hat, where it sticks, embarrassingly. They’re ordinary kunai, too, much to his surprise. She’s not using ice. She’s not freezing him. She’s just trying to skewer him like a target practice dummy.

Two can play this game. He takes aim and lands a couple shots, slowed to a halt by the magical fabric of her bodysuit but still hitting strong enough to do some damage. Catching her breath and ducking out of range, Frost swears loudly, rattling off a string of twenty-first-century verbal inventions Erron hadn’t previously heard. He raises an eyebrow. He’ll have to remember those.

They’re still sniping at each other, exchanging knives and bullets, when the countdown starts. They’re about to be out of time.

Frost’s tired, but not out of tricks. Erron’s gotten complacent.

There’s not a lot of moisture in the air for her to use, but there’s enough.

She tosses one more knife in his direction, right as she forms a patch of slick ice beneath his feet.

It’s an easy round-win from there. He goes flying, hitting the mat hard, and barely catches his hat before it can go tumbling over the side of the arena, but Frost’s already victorious. She timed it right - big reward, small effort. She grins cheekily, and bends down to offer him a hand.

Dammit. He forgot about the ice. Erron ignores her offer of help and gets back up, grimacing. He has two chances left, but he’s not thrilled with the outcome so far.

The second round goes the other way, much to his satisfaction. He cracks open a couple sand grenades, smashing them against the floor of the mat - no more slippery tricks to catch him off guard. When Frost runs out of knives, she starts making them from ice, but it slows her down. Erron’s used up a couple of his bullet stashes by the end of those few minutes, but he catches her fair and square with an elbow to the ribs as she lunges at him, knocking her back and keeping her down with a gun pointed at her head til the timer runs out. He’s too much of a gentleman to actually step on her, unlike Kano, but Frost knows she’s beaten this time. So she cooperates, rather than risk a bullet to the face.

Frost’s trying hard to maintain some composure, so she clenches her hands into fists rather than flip him the middle finger. Erron could be doing a lot worse to her, all things considered. She’s not a fan of how long this is taking, but he’s made no move to push her out of the arena yet, so she’s refraining from doing the same. Better to just use up the timer. Then everyone’s gotten their money’s worth.

Besides, she doesn’t want to engage Erron up-close to try to kick him through the ropes. It’s way more fun to just stand at the other side of the arena and throw snowballs.

That’s how it ends, with the pair of elite battle-hardened fighters just casting aside the serious dignity of the fight and flinging sand and snow. They can’t touch each other up close in melee kombat, and this is so much more fun anyway. For those last few minutes, it’s just as much of a theatrical performance as Jacqui and Ferra’s duel, but in the opposite way. The two girls were trying to feign an intensive and bloodthirsty battle. Erron and Frost have both just stopped giving a
shit, but they’re good at making it seem like a real fight.

The crowd seems pretty convinced - they’re no less supportive than at the start of the match - but, for the most part, their lively passion has turned to comfortable apathy. As the announcer ticks down the time, Frost makes her move.

Erron’s gotten used to her staying far away. She calculates her odds, takes a flying leap, and tackles him. Plain and simple.

Success. She’s able to grab his pistol and toss it away, and he doesn’t have the reaction time to grab it back. He has no way to use Frost’s weapons against her, so he’s stuck there, flat on his back and glaring at her in great consternation, as she breaks into a broad grin.

Frost wins!

Again, she offers Erron a hand up, and he takes it with deep and grudging weariness. He’s almost annoyed to find out she’s strong enough to pull him back to his feet. They remain there, studying each other with reluctant respect, bullet casings and ice-knives scattered all around beneath their feet.

When the cheers fade, he mumbles a few words under his breath, turning away as the crowd finally makes a break for the exits. “That’s all. Good fight, kid.”

“You too. Take care. Have a nice day.” She doesn’t know what else to say, and etiquette’s never been Frost’s strong suit. She can’t even muster the energy to feel too strongly about her win. She did it, it’s over, now let’s all go home.

Cassie fetches her from the edge of the arena, escorting her back to the Earthrealm headquarters. Once there, Frost peels off the icicle suit, tossing it in the corner of the room. It was useful, but ironically, she’s overheated.

Shinnok observes from a short distance, eyeing her with disapproval. “The time it took to make that--”

“Cool your jets. I thanked you already, didn’t I? But if you didn’t hear, I won.” Frost laughs tiredly. Pretty wild to think she won a tournament battle, but she’s oddly numb to it. “By the way, your suit prevented me from getting fatally shot. Guess the warranty’s void now, huh?”

Shinnok just sighs. All this effort, and this is what he has to put up with.

Feeling a bit guilty, Frost retrieves the glittering garment from where she threw it, straightening it out. “Can I keep this thing?”

“Who else would wear it? Feel free. It is yours, after all. Don’t mind me; I’ll be over here, constructing armor for you heathens until the end of eternity.”

Cassie intervenes. “Shinnok, I feel like you need a break.”

“I have to finish this!”

“Doesn’t make a difference if you do it now or later. Come with us, we’re going out to eat. You gotta get some Outworld pizza.”

“Outworld p-- I beg your pardon?”
“Yeah, it’s all the rage. Give it a try.” Linking one arm through Frost’s, Cassie grabs Shinnok by the elbow, leading him towards the exit as he reluctantly shoves his sewing supplies into a bag. “Is it you or Raiden that pretends to eat just to humor the rest of us? I never remember.”

“That would be Raiden. Have I ever done anything to humor anyone in my life?”

“Good point.” Cassie nods knowingly, pulling him through the door. At least he’s honest about it. “Now let’s go home.”

Shinnok arches a brow. “Oh? Have we been set free at last?”

She groans. “The hotel. You know what I mean.”

“None of us are free…” Frost does a surprisingly good impression of Shinnok’s dramatic voice. “Woe to us, for we shall all wander the realms alone forever, constrained to our humble duty of sewing projects.”

He glares at her. “Shut up.”

Cassie bites her lip to keep from laughing. “Just come on. Let’s have some fun for once.”

“As opposed to…?”

“Real fun. Normal fun. Not beating people up or saving realms.”

Shinnok manages a wry smile. “I suppose we could take a break from that for a mere few hours.”

“We better.” Frost cuts in again. “Cause I’m the victor, and I said so.”

“How nice for you. Would you like me to make you a crown?”

“Wait, are you serious? I want a crown!”

“I was joking. I’m not making you a crown--”

“Come on!” Chuckling under her breath, Cassie drags her companions both out of the stadium, emerging into the bright daylight once again. There’s still a whole realm to see.
“Are you sure you know where you’re going?”

“I’ve never been less sure of anything in my life. Do you actually care, though?”

“No.” A deep sigh echoes through the darkness with a light clatter of steel. “I can’t believe I let you talk me into this, Johnny.”

“C’mon. That’s what best friends are for.”

“Then what am I doing here?” Kenshi pauses, then chuckles, lightly shoving Johnny in the shoulder. “Just keep going. I assume you have a flashlight?”

“No, I ran out of batteries. We’re completely lost.”

Kenshi responds, deadpan. “Is that why you brought me?”

“Nah. I’m just messing with you.” Johnny grins, catching Kenshi by the elbow and leading him forward through the low cavern tunnel. “The difference between you and Sonya is that she would’ve believed me.”

“I would’ve believed you, if I didn’t sense the light up ahead.”

“How does that work, anyway? Is it like echolocation?”

“No.” Kenshi politely puts his sword away as Johnny navigates the path ahead. He still doesn’t completely trust his friend’s ability to get them through the maze, but between the pair of them, they hopefully won’t be doomed. So far, they haven’t run into any cave monsters. Yet.

He responds to Johnny a moment later, after a quick pause to measure the cave wall distance. “Echolocation is making repeated noises to get a better idea of your surroundings. You would be good at it.”

“Ooh, burn.” Johnny whistles under his breath. “No, really, I’m curious. I don’t think you ever explained how you, uh, see. Is it through Sento?”

“Yes, as I have told you a million times. Johnny, if you’re trying to avoid talking about our children fighting in the tournament, you need to pick a better topic.”

Johnny groans. “What about it? Do you want to talk about it?”

“No particularly. There’s nothing to be done except wait and hope for the best. I have faith in Takeda’s abilities, and in the support of his team.”

“But you’re still dying of nerves.”

After a long pause, Kenshi admits it. “Mostly.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Other than dragging me off on your hilariously ill-contrived quest through the Outworld palace tunnels, no.” Kenshi hides a smile. Johnny’s good company, and it is helping to focus on a task, rather than sit around and fret about his son’s upcoming life-or-death battle. “I still wish we hadn’t
done this in the early morning. I didn’t get enough sleep.”

“Do you want to take a nap? I can carry you.”

“There is no way that’s happening.”

“Good. I don’t know where I’d put the sword.”

“Shh--” Kenshi’s sharp ears catch a faint noise up ahead, a scuffling sound. He can’t make it out, but at least it’s probably not coming closer. “Shut off the light. Now!”

Johnny flicks off the flashlight, dropping to his knees and crouching by the cave wall. Wincing at his poor judgment, he bites his lip, hoping the potential threat will pass. He drops to a stage whisper. “We need to be quiet.”

Kenshi responds with a thought. *We could just talk this way.*

*Hey, what the hell! Don’t poke around in my brain!*

*I can’t read your thoughts, Johnny. I promise.*

*Are you sure?*

*Yes. And I wouldn’t want to. Who knows what might be in there?*

*Very funny. Do you hear anything else?*

*Just your nervous hyperventilating. Take a deep breath.*

*Hey, I’m not used to this kind of thing. It’s been a while.*

*As it has for me, which is part of the reason I agreed to this terrible decision. It’s exciting.*

Johnny turns to ineffectively glare at Kenshi through the darkness. *You know you want to find that place just as bad as I do!*

*Maybe. It would be interesting. Where did you hear about this, anyway?*

*Uh, Raiden told me some stuff about the dark secrets of the Outworld palace.*

*You brought us here because of that?!!*

*He’s trustworthy!*

*I suppose. Kenshi sighs, leaning against Johnny’s shoulder as they wait in the dismal cavern. I still seriously doubt we’re going to find Shang Tsung’s lab, and I don’t think we would actually want to.*

*Yes, we will. C’mon. Now or never!* Johnny gets to his feet again, cracks his knuckles, and winces. Reaching down again, he helps Kenshi up. *There’s nothing down there anymore except his old books, and I wanna see those.*

*You wouldn’t even be able to read them, would you?*

*It’s a souvenir!*

*Couldn’t you just go buy something in the marketplace?*
That’s boring. Johnny grips Kenshi’s wrist and leads him forward, following the beam of the flashlight ahead in a steady winding path through the tunnels. *I borrowed Cassie’s navigation watch device. Yes, I asked first.*

*Does she know what you’re using it for?*

*She didn’t really seem to care.*

*Yes, because you have the benefit of that green energy in case something terrible happens. Which I don’t, by the way.*

*I’ll just jump in front of you. It’s fine.*

Kenshi’s tone is teasing, lightly reaching out to poke Johnny in the ribs. *Your reflexes aren’t that good anymore.*

*And yours are?*

*I didn’t say that either. Between us, we’re almost as good as one kombatant.*

*Thanks for the ringing endorsement right there, Kenshi.* Johnny rolls his eyes, coming to a halt before a massive stone door. It doesn’t appear to have a latch, just crude rectangular gashes in the stone. He backs up a few paces, surveying it with the bright beam gripped tightly in one sweaty palm. *Hey, found something! Look at th-- check it out.*

Kenshi stops, running his fingers lightly over the seam in the wall. *I can’t tell how it opens. Yet.*

*We’re gonna figure it out. Go hard or go home, as the youths say.*

*You’re not wrong. Hmm.* Kenshi’s silent for a long moment, working over the problem. *You have your energy projection form, don’t you?*

*Yeah. You got one of those, too, right?*

*Yes, though I can’t sustain it for too long. But we wouldn’t need to. How strong is it?*

*At least as strong as me.*

*We’re going to knock the door down that way.* Kenshi steps back confidently, hands resting on his hips. He’s proud of the plan. Usually, he lets Johnny take charge, but this time, it’s his turn.

*He continues. Unless you have a better idea. Perhaps you could charm it into opening with the Cage wit and humor.*

*I don’t think this is one of those magic doors. If it was, you bet I’d try it.*

*Maybe it’s for the best that way. I have a few doubts about the technique’s effectiveness.*

*Hey, it doesn’t work so bad on you.*

*Yes, but I’m not a magic door.*

*Yeah, but you op--* Johnny abruptly cuts the thought short. *Nope. No way. You didn’t hear that, did you?*

*Hear what?*
Good. That’s better. Johnny clears his throat quietly, tucking his flashlight into his belt and rubbing his hands together. What are we gonna do, kick the door down? Shoulder-slam it?

Whatever is strongest. Kenshi draws his sword and summons the projection form with ease, a blue ghostly version of himself. Johnny does the same, glimmering with yellow energy that occasionally flickers green. Kenshi nods in approval, and prepares himself, facing the door squarely. On the count of three?

Yeah. Johnny inhales sharply, focusing his power as much as he can. He’s used to beating things up himself, not sending some kind of magic clone to do it, but it’s a far better idea this time. He doesn’t want to have to explain to Cassie how he smashed her watch and dislocated his shoulder. That would just be embarrassing.

Three, two, one….

All at once, both of the valiant explorers send their magic duplicates crashing towards the wall. The stone door gives way under the force, and the rough-cut slab tumbles forward to land with a mighty thud on the floor of the cavernous room ahead.

“Hell yeah!” Johnny whoops and goes in for a high-five, which Kenshi returns at the last second, reflexes coming to the rescue once again. “We did it!”

“Get in there! Fast!” Kenshi shoves Johnny through the gap, dragging him by the shirt collar as an ominous crumbling noise echoes overhead. At the last second, they both land safely on the cold stone floor, laying there out of breath as the tunnel collapses behind them.

Johnny opens his eyes, staring upwards as he catches his breath. It’s a large domed ceiling with ornate chandeliers draped in cobwebs, glowing dimly with some magical spell. The walls are lined with bookshelves, much to his delight. Elsewhere, the room contains several magical storage tanks full of thick opaque liquid, which, fortunately, all seem to be empty… and if they aren’t, he really doesn’t want to know.

“Hey, Ken. We did it.” Johnny can’t stop grinning. Sitting up and gathering his breath once again, he reaches down and pulls Kenshi up to his knees, dusting some grit off his coat from the pile of crumbled stone. “Wanna check out the creepy underground magic room?”

“In a moment.” Kenshi fumbles around, searching for his sword, knocked out of the straps holding it on his back. It’s laying a few feet away, and Johnny grabs it and returns it to his grasp, for which Kenshi bows his head in thanks, sheathing the blade once again. “I appreciate it.”

“No prob. You know I’m always glad to help you put your sword where it belongs.” Johnny smirks, guiding Kenshi over to one of the grimy bookshelves. The tomes are ancient leather-bound volumes, coated in a thick layer of dust, and he leans in to blow off the grit and reveal the titles on the books’ spines.

Predictably, he can’t read them.

“Hey. You know this language, by any chance?”

Through the blindfold, Kenshi gives him a look.

“...Yeah, I’ll ask Raiden later.” Johnny reaches into his pocket and unfolds the cloth backpack he had the foresight to pack, then gathers the armful of books and dumps them in as carefully as he can, slinging the bag jauntily over his shoulder. “Do you sense anything we should know about?”
“Not yet, but I’d avoid the storage tanks.”


“I can’t tell. Just stay away. Far away.” Kenshi adjusts his stance, reaching back to grasp the hilt of his sword and measure the surroundings more closely. He’s almost disappointed to find nothing exciting. “Is there anything else left in here? It seems mostly vacant.”

“Nah. Just a creepy table full of, uh, medieval torture devices, I think.” Johnny’s eyes widen slowly, inspecting the sharp-bladed items, now rotted with rust. “There is no use for this stuff that’s even slightly good.”

“Spare me the description.” Kenshi grimaces. He’d rather not know. “Are there any more books?”

Johnny paces around the circular room, aiming his flashlight at each of the shelves. “Let’s see. Big pile of bones… some more nasty gadgets… ooh, here’s a really big book.” He whistles quietly. “It doesn’t have any dust on it! Holy shit, this is weird.”

“Magic.” Kenshi can sense it up close, following a few paces behind Johnny with one hand gripping his sleeve. In an unfamiliar environment, they could be ambushed, and as much as he likes to needle Johnny, he truly does trust him. “I feel it from here. Take a look, but be cautious.”

“Haha.” Johnny leans in to peer at the book, tilting his head in thought. “Cautious is my middle name.”

“Maybe once you changed it. Not before that.” Kenshi retorts jokingly. “Do you have gloves, or anything similar?”

“Fingerless ones. That won’t help.”

“Not a chance.” Kenshi breathes in through gritted teeth, measuring the odds. “Pick it up. If it was malevolent, I think I’d feel it.”

“Oh. Here goes.” Johnny’s too focused and curious to think up a witty comeback. Reaching out, he grabs the heavy tome with both hands, lifting it off the shelf. A light shower of dust fills the air, but the book itself is still clean, bound in glistening leather with an elaborate pattern engraved onto the front.

He squats down and rests the book across his knees, holding the edge of the cover. “I got it, and I’m not dead. Should I open it?”

“Go ahead.” Kenshi kneels down next to him, paying diligent attention to their surroundings. His hearing is keen enough to catch any warning signs, and just to be safe, he switches back to telepathy. Be as quiet as you can. If anyone or anything heard the door, it’s on the way by now.

Gotcha. Johnny hunches down, scooting beneath a table and pulling Kenshi along with him into the illusion of safety. Just in case. Let’s open it up under here.

Can you see it?

Yeah, there’s a little light in here. Johnny flips open the cover, laying his hand on the first page. It’s in that language I don’t kn--oh my god. His eyes widen as the illegible writing transforms before his eyes, morphing from an archaic script into plain letters. Yeah, this is magic. Super magic. It just turned into English.
Impressive. Kenshi nods in approval. Nothing quite surprises him anymore. What does it say?

I don’t know. I forgot how to read.

Johnny, please.

Haha. Okay. Are you ready for this?

You know I am.


Probably not. Put it in your backpack. Don’t read any more of it right now.

Good call. Johnny obeys as quickly and quietly as he can, tying the bag’s drawstring and strapping it across his chest for safety’s sake. Let’s take a look later. What next?

We need to get out of here. There’s no way a place like this doesn’t have two exits.

That means… right into the palace. Johnny makes a face, thinking of all the worst possibilities. At least we’ll get more of a view than the tourists. You wanna take a bet on who’s gonna find us? Better not be a Tarkatan.

I don’t think Kotal likes Tarkatans. It could be one of his Osh-Tekk guards, though.

That’s not much better. At least one of us is armed.

What, aren’t you armed with your wits and charm?

Haha. That’s not going to take down a seven-foot-tall Aztec.

It might. You distract, I slice.

Okay, that’s a pretty good strategy-- Shhh. Johnny drops off into silence, picking up on the sound of echoing footsteps from a distance. Oh, shit.

Kenshi doesn’t respond, just shakes his head slightly. Their chances at a smooth exit are now officially ruined. Stay here. Don’t move.

What do we do? Fight our way out?

No. We have no valid excuse for being here.

Raiden told me how to get here!

What did you do, bribe him?

Yeah. I held his hat hostage. Johnny grins. I bet you can’t tell if I’m kidding.

I can’t, and, it’s more entertaining to wonder about it. So, will Raiden rescue us if we’re in trouble?

Depends if he’s awake right now.

Gods don’t rest, do they?
No, not normally, but he’s in mortal form. Let’s hope he didn’t oversleep. Johnny promptly pushes a button on the borrowed wristwatch, sending a signal back to Raiden’s device. Play it cool. Stay in here, unless they find us, in which case we bluff our way through until Raiden arrives.

If Raiden arrives at all.

Shh, you’re crushing my hopes and dreams.

One of us has to take things seriously. But Kenshi smiles, inclining his head slightly in Johnny’s direction. You’re better at improvisation than I am. I’ll follow whatever story you make up.

Good plan. I’ll try to make it believable. ...any suggestions?

I haven’t the slightest clue. Maybe we couldn’t sleep and went for a walk?

Through the underground cavern network of Z’Unkarah?

Well, there’s more peace and quiet down here.

Not wrong, I guess. Johnny rests his chin in his hands. Do we know where the door is in here? Maybe we could try to block it, to stall for time.

The door’s over there. Kenshi gestures to a few near-invisible seams in the wall, concealing a hidden latch. I can sense it. Do you have enough energy left for another projection?

I can try. Do you think the power of friendship would help?

I’ve heard far stranger ideas. Kenshi stifles a laugh. Here, take hold of my hand. If we combine our power, we could merge our projections into one.

Johnny grasps his hand readily. That’s kind of smart.

I have a good idea once in a while. Leaning out from under the table, Kenshi sends out his projection, followed closely by Johnny’s. With a bit of concentration, they overlap, fusing into an enhanced glowing form that strolls casually over to the door and leans against it. Kenshi watches in satisfaction. Just stay focused and we’ll be fine.

Johnny furrows his brow, trying his hardest to concentrate. It’s never been easy for him, but he’s doing his best. How long do we have to keep this up?

Don’t use any strength. Just rest there. Draw on your inner peace.

What inner peace?

Kenshi sighs very softly. Whatever works for you, then.

The door rattles slightly.

The projection figure tenses up, shoving back against the door with equal force to keep it in place seamlessly. Under the table, Johnny and Kenshi grit their teeth, gripping each other’s hands with near-crushing strength.

Hey, ease up. Johnny lets out a breath slowly, starting to regain some true focus. We got this. They’re not that str--

Another faint shove is the only warning.
Holy shit!

A bolt of greenish power knocks the door off its hinges, hurtling halfway into the room and landing in a heap of rubble. Whatever magic mechanism opened and closed that latch is now definitely gone for good, blasted into oblivion alongside the door itself.

Johnny leans backwards and lets go of Kenshi as the projection fades, vanishing into a wisp. Kenshi slumps against his friend’s shoulder, leaning back with his eyes shut, and dearly hopes the new intruder is someone generous enough not to kill on sight.

Hey. I don’t hear footsteps. Johnny dares to beam a thought over to Kenshi, communicating wordlessly. Maybe they left.

Unlikely. Stay silent.

The ominous figure floats into the room, lifting a few inches off the ground with their arms spread gracefully. Revealed by the eerie light of the dim chandeliers, they are more recognizable now, but only barely. Their rich brown skin has a warm tone in the magic light, bright eyes radiant with an emerald glow. They’re dressed in a light bodysuit and tunic, with red armored padding and a spidery pattern of green lines tracing up the black cloth.

Johnny inches forward slightly. Goddamn.

Who is it?

I have absolutely no idea.

Johnny grimaces, trying to get a closer look. The figure’s face has the carved aquiline features of an old Egyptian sculpture, long black locks of hair bound up in a ponytail. In the darkness, that’s all he can see.

If I was crazier than I am, I’d say somebody made a--

A third voice cuts into the mental conversation, an echoing, layered, hissing voice with rich undertones.

Who speaks?

Johnny goes silent, frozen with dread.

The figure floats closer.

Without warning, they lift up the table and vaporize it in another blast of green telekinetic energy. So much for hiding.

Time for some action. Steeling his nerves, Johnny springs to his feet, pulling Kenshi up with him. He immediately starts talking, trying to fill the ominous silence as the intruder hovers nearby. “Hi, whoever you are. We misplaced something under here. Hope you could help us look for it.”

The figure inclines their head, studying him evenly. “Was it your sense of dignity?”

Johnny’s eyebrows shoot up. “Good one. No, really. Uhhh...” He stammers for a long few moments as the figure surveys him silently, arms folded across their chest. “Who are you?”

“Who are we?” The figure rubs their chin thoughtfully, eyes narrowed. “We bear many names. Which would you like? We can list them alphabetically, or in order of importance...”
“Hey! What’s going on?” A deep voice rings out from the doorway amid the clattering of armored footsteps as someone else bursts into the room, chasing the first one. “Where the hell are you going-- oh.” The other man, a dark-skinned handsome princely type dressed in vivid purple, draws to a halt sharply, staring at Johnny and Kenshi. “Do I know you?”

“Hi.” Johnny waves weakly at the newcomer. “We’re the new private investigators Kotal hired. He wanted us to figure out what’s going on down here.”

He squints at the pair doubtfully. “Dressed like that?”

“What? You don’t like my fashion? Got an anti-Earthrealm bias or something? That’s where all the hot styles are from.”

The armored man shakes his head, stepping forward and leaving wet footprints on the cold stone floor. “Learn to be a better liar. It may save you someday.”

“I’m great at lying--” Johnny has the sense to shut up as the floating guy grabs him by the arm, pulling him forward into clearer light. “Do you know who I am?”

“No.” The purple guy sniffs, eyeing him scornfully, and adjusts the clasps across his bare chest, holding some sort of bag strapped to his back. “Should I?”

Johnny puts his hands on his hips. “Absolutely not.”

The floating figure chimes in, reading their minds with ease. “He is Johnny Cage. The other is Kenshi Takahashi. They are intruders from the Earthrealm delegation, parents of the kombatants.”

Letting go of Johnny, they step backwards, shuddering as their feet make contact with the floor. “Normally, we would be entitled to take you into custody. Nonetheless... as we were not previously aware of the existence of this chamber... we cannot.”

“What a relief.” Johnny lets out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding.

“However, if you set foot beyond this room into the palace, we are fully entitled to arrest you.”

Johnny studies the floating figure, raising an eyebrow. “You know, I wouldn’t mind if you arrested me.”

They study him through half-closed eyes with immense scorn.

“Sorry, sorry.” Johnny raises his hands in mock surrender, then stops immediately, lest he be taken seriously. “So who are you?”

“We are Ermac.”

“Haha. No, I mean, for real.” Johnny’s expression doesn’t even change. “You’re not... dead. Like, not even close. I mean, you could definitely get some bandages and dress up as ‘hot mummy’ for Halloween, but--”

“Not now. No longer are we in need of physical restoration.” Ermac sets their hands on their hips and looks down their nose, appearing quite annoyed with Johnny’s insolence. “The Kahn was generous enough to allow us access to the Soul Chamber. We are now revitalized.”

Johnny’s gaze switches between the two of them, trying to process this. “Great. Who are you?”
“I am Rain, son of Argus, demigod and heir of Edenia--” A nudge from Ermac cuts short the string of titles. He tries again, tossing his head defiantly. “You can simply call me Rain.”

“You two deserve each other.” Johnny shakes his head, trying not to laugh. “There’s so much ego in this room, Freud wouldn’t believe it.”

Ermac wrinkles their nose thoughtfully, puzzling over the problem. “Who is this ‘Freud’?”

“Forget it. Earthrealm reference.” Johnny shifts his weight from foot to foot. Where the hell is Raiden, anyway? He should be here by now. Raiden’s a great guy, but he’s not always good at being a god.

He fills the silence as quickly as he can. “So… how you guys doing?”

“I could be better, actually.” Rain crosses his arms, actually answering the question. People don’t often ask about his day. “For some reason, I’ve been placed in custody of the reptilian infant.”

“The what?!” Johnny eyes him with complete skepticism. This day is getting weirder and weirder, and it’s not even noon yet. “Gonna need an explanation on that one.”

Rain rolls his eyes, and turns around, revealing a backpack contraption containing an oddly adorable newly hatched Saurian. It looks just like a baby version of Reptile, but a million times cuter and less deadly. “I’m in charge of keeping this thing warm, for now. We all agreed to take turns.” He glances sharply at Ermac out of the corner of his eye. “In half an hour, he’s your problem.”

“We are quite used to your problems becoming ours, as well.” Ermac answers, hiding the faintest hint of a teasing smile. “We hardly object, but the point stands.”

“Hey, come on. That’s unfair. You have as many problems as I do--” Rain cuts himself short, staring back at the pair of adventurers. “So, how are you going to get out of here? I’d hate to have to arrest you, because I don’t want to waste my time on you.”

Johnny eyes Rain with thinly concealed annoyance. “They say honesty is a virtue, but I’m not really feeling it right now.”

Kenshi finally speaks, nudging Johnny lightly in the shoulder. “Our transportation is here.”

“Where? Wh--” A split second later, Johnny goes quiet as a blinding lightning-bolt cracks down from the ceiling. It fades away to reveal Raiden dressed in a magnificent suit of armor, silver hair flowing behind him and trademark hat perched atop his head.

Drawing himself up to his full height, Raiden surveys the scene, speaking in measured tones. “It seems something has gone wrong.”

All four stare at Raiden with mild disbelief.


“So I gathered.” Raiden approaches, striding confidently towards the others as his electricity aura lights up the surroundings. He is filled with grace and poise, unlike everyone else in the room. “Are you or Kenshi harmed?”

“Nah, we’re good. Aside from being insulted by these two clowns.” Johnny glares pointedly in the
direction of the Edenians -- or, rather, Edenian, and one combination of them. “Mind taking us home? Please. If you can. Sorry about this.” Johnny Cage rarely apologizes, but Raiden definitely deserves one. He’s about to save his ass... again.

“Of course I can. Do not worry. You did well.” Raiden smiles softly, placing one hand on Johnny’s shoulder and the other on Kenshi’s. His touch is soothing, despite the slight static electricity. He glances in Rain’s direction, bowing his head slightly. “My opponent.”

Rain makes a faint noise under his breath, then stares him in the eye. “....greetings, Lord Raiden.” Despite everything, he knows he ought to address Raiden politely. A god outranks a demigod, as much as that fact annoys him.

Raiden studies Ermac, too, acknowledging them with a thoughtful nod. “You look well, Ermac.”

Ermac lifts their head to meet Raiden’s gaze, eyes glowing, and responds pleasantly. “We are glad you approve.”

“Farewell, for now.”

And just like that, Raiden is gone, taking the hapless humans along with him.
“Hrm.” Rain grits his teeth, shaking his head, and mutters something impolite in ancient Edenian. “We wasted all this time down here. I can’t believe it.”

“The encounter lasted only ten minutes.”

“Yes, well, I could have been doing something else that wasn’t dealing with that insufferable Cage. By the way, was that the father of the girl I fought in the jungle?”

“Yes. Do not concern yourself with either of them.” Ermac follows Rain’s heavy footsteps as he trudges out of the room, floating gracefully nearby. “Raiden will be a worthy opponent. You need not concern yourself with that. He is honorable.”

“What do I care if he’s honorable? I just care if I can beat him.” Rain clenches his hands into fists, summoning a faint rain-shower that follows him down the underground hallway. “Can you light the way?”

Ermac fills the corridor with a vivid green glow, pressing one hand against the amulet clasped to their chest beneath the black cloth. “Is that better, our prince?”

Rain falters. “You don’t have to call me that. With anyone else, yes, I’d insist upon it, but you’re technically also an Edenian… the same as me, somewhat.”

“Hardly. There is no equivalent comparison to be drawn. We are only a recent construct.” Ermac shakes their head, dark locks falling over their shoulders. With so many shared souls, it’s often difficult to stay in touch with their core identity, but with time and restoration, it has grown easier. “You are an immortal, are you not?”

“If I’m somehow not, I haven’t had the opportunity to find out.” Halfway down the corridor, Rain comes to a sudden halt, turning to stare at Ermac abruptly with a look of deep concern in his dark eyes. “Do you think I can win? Truly?”

“Not with your powers alone, if you fight as gods. If you wield weapons, as a warrior, your chances are viable.” Ermac clasps their hands behind their back, brow furrowed thoughtfully. “What did Skarlet create for your armor?”

“Something made of sturdy carved wood, actually. No metal.”

“That was wise.”

“Yeah. She’s good at this. I’m honestly impressed, and that’s hard to do.” Rain shrugs his shoulders, trying to balance the weight, and winces. He’s starting to get tired of hauling the tiny dinosaur around like an unpaid babysitter. “Do you want to take the Saurian now?”

“Has it been half an hour?”

“Nearly.”

“Yes. Give us the child.”

“I like how you say ‘child’ as though it isn’t a lizard.” Rain grumbles, but very carefully un-straps the backpack, settling it around Ermac’s shoulders instead. He lightly secures the clasps across the
front, drawing them tight, but not too tight. “I hope the kid likes floating.”

“We are sure it will have no objections. To our knowledge, it cannot yet speak.”

“Good point, I suppose. Let’s go.” Rain clenches his fists, finally shutting off the indoor storm, and lifts his chin, striding confidently as he climbs the staircase back up to the palace’s main chamber. Ermac is only a few paces behind, sharing the burden of responsibility.

Skarlet is there to meet them, face lit up with nervous excitement as she chews on her lower lip with sharp gleaming teeth. She clutches Ermac’s arm, practically dragging them through the air. “Hurry, or you’ll miss it!”

“We are here. Do not concern yourself with the time.”

Skarlet shakes her head, short hair flying loosely around her face. Dressed in her elaborate tournament armor, she bounces from foot to foot, standing on her tiptoes to match the others’ height. “No, you’re late! It’s about to start!”

“Oh, no.” Rain groans, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I told you!”

Ermac bites back a retort, trying to preserve their aura of detached dignity. “Come. I know the fastest path.” Taking hold of Rain’s damp wrist, they suddenly bolt forward, making Rain dash at full speed to keep up as they wind through the palace corridors and emerge into the blinding daylight.

They slide into the stands just in time, settling into their seats with the baby Saurian clutched tightly in Ermac’s lap. The creature is rapidly growing in size, half of Ferra’s height already. It chomps its little jaws in satisfaction as Ermac unstraps it from the child backpack, settling against Ermac’s chest to try to absorb their faint warmth. Rain finds the sight oddly charming.

Reptile has stepped out already, morphed into full Saurian form rather than the human illusion he adopts when dealing with Outworlders. His suit of armor glints brightly in the light, shining with the iridescence of his scales and patterned with a fossil motif. Armor plates cover his back and chest, strong enough to absorb any blows but not bulky enough to hinder his movement. As usual, Skarlet did an excellent job on the outfit. Ermac feels a faint twinge of pride. They may not exactly be conventional siblings, but Skarlet is, in some sense, family.

Sareena looks equally stylish, dressed in sharp-edged armor pieces in a black and red gothic scheme. She is a lively and enthusiastic personality, not grim and sour as might be expected of a demon, but she still embraces the underworld aesthetic. From a distance, Rain makes out a pair of serrated blades strapped to her back, small enough for handheld use in up-close kombat. Interesting. He expected a ranged approach to counter Reptile’s abilities.

Rain rests his chin in his hands, studying the fight more closely from a tactical perspective. This is simply one more battle among the countless wars he’s witnessed, but here, the outcome matters more than most. In truth, he’s uncertain what will happen if Earthrealm wins… and they very well might. Outworld’s victory would also mean changing the status quo in some equally unpredictable way. For once, he has no idea what to expect.

Ermac’s quiet voice interrupts his thoughts. What would you expect for the outcome?

I don’t know. I can’t get a read on it. There’s nothing that seems too clear one way or another.

Rain shakes his head, reaching up to adjust the bow keeping his ponytail in place. What about you?

We are uncertain. Even with the gift of prediction, we cannot tell.
Nothing at all. Ermac leans back, folding their arms behind their head and stretching their legs as the baby Saurian curls up and falls asleep. They gaze unblinkingly at the battle stage, watching as Reptile and Sareena leap, dodge, and land blows, fighting at equivalent speed. Ermac was aware of Sareena’s agility powers, but nevertheless, they are impressed.

The first round goes to Reptile after a well-fought duel. Both kombatants stand face-to-face after the announcer calls time, regarding each other with profound respect. Sareena’s pulse is pounding, palms wet with sweat. This is a harder task than she thought. Studying the bones of Saurians was a remarkable experience, but confronting the last living one face-to-face in battle is far beyond her expectations.

--Not the last living one.

Her heart catches in her throat, gazing past Reptile’s shoulder over to the Outworld seats.

There is the infant Saurian, alive and well.

She breathes out, filled with emotion. “The egg hatched.”

Reptile answers with a silent nod, glancing aside. His voice is nearly too quiet to hear. “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me.” The words tumble out before Sareena can stop herself. “It was the right thing to do. I had to.”

“You did not have to do it. Many would not have. I know that.”

“Yes, but--” Sareena cuts herself off as the announcer raises his voice, booming across the stands to signal the start of the match. She draws a breath, gasping for air, and raises her fists with an encouraging smile. “It’s time. Let’s fight!”

The second round is just as lively, bouncing across the arena and against the guard-rope poles to land hits at improbable angles. Reptile speeds back and forth, swiping quickly at Sareena to catch her off guard, and in response she somersaults out of danger and lands on all fours, kicking his legs out from under him. He lands with a thump, but scrambles back up seconds later, claws digging into the soft mat.

They’re down to a minute to go. For now, Reptile has the advantage. If Sareena overturns the momentum, she’ll score a third round, leveling the field to bring home another win for Earthrealm. If not… well, she’s trying not to think about it. Focus on the fight. Earth depends on it. She mutters to herself, teeth clenched and breathing heavy. Do what you have to.

She doesn’t want to do it, but she knows the weak points of the Saurian skeleton. There’s a spot between the shoulderblades that can bring them down, but it’s heavily armored. That’s no good. Nothing in the torso or hips, either. The armorer was very thorough.

But there’s a gap between the chestplate and the shoulder protection... If Sareena lands a hit right there, it could knock Reptile out of the fight for now.

She narrows her eyes, measures the trajectory, and leaps with full force, hurtling forward in an agile flip. One boot heel connects with the vulnerable point near Reptile’s collarbone -- striking with an audible crack as the joint snaps out of place.
Reptile staggers backwards, caught by the arena barrier and collapses to his knees, clutching his shoulder as he hisses in excruciating pain and grips the rope with tight claws. He’s in far more agony than Sareena expected, unable to move his arm.

She drops to her knees beside him in shock, forgetting the fight altogether. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry!”

“Just-- get away from me!” Furious and wounded, Reptile tries to lash out at her, but his effort is useless, his arm dangling limply. He hisses with a shower of acid instead, sharp teeth bared and green eyes wild with pain. “Curse you!”

Back in the stands, the little Saurian awakens. Leaping to its feet, it scrambles out of Ermac’s lap and jumps towards the barrier ineffectively, clawing up to the top and clinging there weakly as it reaches out, trying to save Reptile.

It cries out in a thin shrill little hiss, the voice of a child. “Papa!”

Unable to hold onto the barrier any longer, the baby Saurian lets go and falls to the ground, still calling for its father.

A stab of conscience hits Sareena right between the ribs. She gasps, flooded with regret. Injuring Reptile was bad enough, but hurting both of them… She can’t do this.

“I forfeit!” With seconds to spare, Sareena scrambles to her feet, hurling herself over the edge and landing squarely on the Koliseum floor in a shower of sand. She yells to the announcer, raising her voice loud enough to rise above the murmuring crowd. “I’m sorry! I hurt him too badly. He needs help! Please, he can’t fight a third round!”

Mystified, the announcer obeys in a solemn tone. “Reptile wins.”

With her fight officially lost, Sareena leaps back up into the arena, kneeling beside Reptile once again with tears streaking down her face. “I’m so sorry. Can I help you? It’s-- it might be dislocated.”

Reptile bares his sharp teeth, face drawn with pain, but nods.

Miraculously, she pops the arm back into its socket, drawing on her knowledge of the Saurian skeleton. The abrupt force and pain makes Reptile hiss and spit again in agony, acid melting through one of the ropes. Still, when he moves his arm, it works, carefully bending at the shoulder and elbow.

They sit in silence for a minute. By now, Ermac has gathered up the distraught baby Saurian and floated across the sand, delivering it into Reptile’s custody. Distracted from the pain, he clutches the little creature tightly with his good arm, cooing to it in some unknown Zaterran language.

“Come.” Ermac gestures to Sareena, who’s uselessly wiping her eyes with her sleeve. “Return to the Earthrealm group. You acted more honorably than we have witnessed in kombat.”

Sareena nods wordlessly, and slithers through the gap in the ropes to land clumsily on the sand, picking herself up and dusting off her armor with a dismayed shake of her head. She trudges across the rest of the distance, disappearing into the stands as the Earthrealm team lets her through the door. Ermac returns to Reptile, hovering protectively until Reptile is strong enough to crawl down to the Koliseum floor and return to his group, too.

Raiden is there waiting for Sareena, and gathers her into a lightning-enhanced hug. “You chose wisely. Do not concern yourself with the loss.”
Sareena shivers, chest heaving with deep breaths. “I thought I’d paralyzed him.”

“You are fortunate that you did not.” Raiden rubs her shoulder comfortingly. “Breathe, young one. In the circumstances, you chose wisely. There are many fights remaining. Your teammates will do what they must.”

“Ugh. I let you all down so badly.” Sareena lets go of Raiden, finally, and slumps into the nearest chair, face clutched in her hands. “I should’ve never tried that! I could have won fair and square!”

“Hey. Things happen how they’re gonna happen.” It’s Johnny again, filling in as the team dad. Sitting beside her, he pats her shoulder, offering a tissue. “You did what you had to. I dunno if anybody else would’ve forfeited. You’re a good person, you know that?”

Sareena sniffs sadly, pushing her hair back behind her ear. “Hey, don’t forget I’m a demon. But I’m trying.”

“You did better than the rest of us would have. I promise.” Johnny pats her shoulder comfortingly, racking his brain for ideas. “Hey. Hey, I got a question for you. How many weird languages do you know?”

Sareena looks up, confused. “Plenty. Why?”

“I got these books, and I have no clue what they say.” Johnny pulls out the backpack he’d fetched from the laboratory, brandishing one of the grimy old tomes in the unrecognizable script. By now, he’s stowed the magic book away in safety, but he’s still got the others. “Can you read this?”

Sareena’s eyes light up in an instant, the sting of the loss slightly forgotten. She snatches the book from Johnny’s grasp, brushing off the dust on the cover. “Yes! I know this!”

“What’s it say?”

She squints at it. “It’s… that’s got to be the numeric script. Five tens-- fifty…”

Johnny leans closer, waiting with bated breath.

“That’s-- is that the dative case? ‘For.’ It could be ‘to’, but it’s probably ‘for’. This is one of those languages that doesn’t use pronouns, and just modifies words-- that’s an adjective! Okay, we’re getting somewhere. New? Young? No, not like that. Fresh-- no… Novice! Amateur. It’s amateur.”

“This is so cool.” Johnny grins, feeling rather proud of himself. “Anything else?”

“The first noun is… guidelines? lists? No, it’s ‘instructions’ or ‘projects’, I think. Or maybe ‘recipes’, depending on context. And then the second one…” Sareena’s voice trails off. “Well, this word has a lot of meanings. It’s derived from ‘to cut’, which also means ‘to chop’ or ‘to modify’ in a looser sense, so it could be translated a bunch of ways… it’s usually dictated by context, like the first word.” She raises her eyebrows. “Well. Uh. Okay then. Where did you find this?”

“Um. Just, a bunch of abandoned shelves.” Technically, Johnny’s not lying. “What’s it mean?”

“This says either ‘50 Recipes for the Amateur Chef,’ or ‘50 Projects for the Amateur Surgeon.”

Johnny winces slightly. “Any way to find out which?”

“I could look inside…” Sareena flips open to the first page. “Um. That’s definitely the word for ‘human’…”
“Ahem. Perhaps we should all go and get a nice lunch.” Raiden intervenes and taps them both on the shoulder, gently extracting the book from Sareena’s grasp and discreetly setting it aside. “I believe that would be wise. We can discuss our plans for the afternoon.”

“Yeah! Let’s go.” Grateful for the exit opportunity, Johnny springs to his feet, rubbing his hands together. He’s going to try to forget all about the human recipes. “Sareena, where do you want to go? Your call.”

“Hmm. Well, I did see a few nice places along the way.” Sareena falls silent as she follows Johnny towards the exit, mulling over the options. “What about that one cafe near the hotel?”

“Could be good…” Johnny’s voice grows fainter with distance as the pack of Earthrealmers assembles outside, talking over each other in a muffled clamor as they offer their input on the lunch debate.

Before he leaves, Raiden lets himself back into the stands and strides back to the edge of the arena, leaning against the barrier. Gazing across the length of the Koliseum sands, he meets Ermac’s eyes, exchanging a respectful nod with the fusion of so many ancient souls.

And then, in another flash of lightning, he’s gone.
“Do you want to talk strategy?”

“Not particularly.” Cyrax idly pushes the food around the plate with his fork, resting his chin in one hand with his elbow planted on the edge of the table. In Outworld, manners seem not to apply - in this restaurant alone, he’s seen everything from cutlery to chopsticks to enthusiastic diners gnawing on a plate of food like a pie-eating competition. Still, the excitement and noise of the surroundings is nothing more than a dull roar on top of a headache.

Jin reaches across the table and places his hand lightly on Cyrax’s arm, brows furrowed in concern. The tournament’s at a tie, and he’s more than aware of the pressure on Cyrax to bring the next victory home to Earthrealm. Right now, rather than tournament statistics, he’s just concerned about the burden of stress resting on his boyfriend’s shoulders. “What do you want to talk about?”

“Anything but the fight, actually. Hey, keep your voice down, your family might overhear.” Cyrax takes a mouthful of food, chewing pensively. He’s not familiar with the unique Outworld spices, but it’s tasty. It reminds him of home, just a little. “I thought we were hiding from them.”

“We are. My cousins all want my autograph. Do you know how many cousins I have?” Jin sits back in his chair, hands folded behind his head. “Eight. And that’s just counting the first cousins. I don’t know why they think I’m so great, I haven’t even done anything yet.” It’s a rare moment of honesty from the usually bold and confident Jin. He shrugs, wearing a wry expression. “You’ve got better odds to win than I do. Wait -- sorry. You don’t want to talk about it. Subject change. Who’s that woman Sonya’s talking with?”

Cyrax cranes his neck, looking around. “Where?”

“That table over there.” Jin gestures in the right direction, a small table at the corner of the restaurant’s rooftop patio. Sonya’s ditched the uniform to look like an ordinary Outworlder instead, but she still doesn’t blend with the colorful crowds. Her lunch companion, a good-looking middle aged Asian woman, is dressed in an elegant outfit, a step above the casual style they’re all used to seeing. “She looks important.”

“Only somewhat.” The woman turns and gives them a quick smile. “Lower your voices if you’re trying to hide.”

Jin’s jaw drops in surprise. “Sorry. Were we that loud?”

“I just have good hearing. Hello, it’s a pleasure to see you again. I’m Li Mei.”

“I know you! You brought the refugees to Earthrealm!”

“I thought you might remember. I’m here to represent my village in the tournament, and had the luck to cross paths with an old friend.” She smiles at Sonya briefly. “Before you ask, I’m not competing - I’m just the ambassador. Somehow, everyone seems to think I’m going to fight this afternoon.”

“You and me both.” Sonya snorts, taking a bite of her sandwich. “I’ve had three people wish me luck in the fight. As if.”

“You may need to step in and replace me, if this headache doesn’t go away.” Cyrax rubs his temples. “I don’t know if it’s stress or the weather, but--”
“Here.” Sonya retrieves a bottle of pain reliever and a flask of water from the worn leather bag slung over her shoulder. “You’ve got an hour to spare. Try to get some rest. How are you going to handle the battle? What’s your strategy? You’ve got a plan, right?”

Cyrax winces.

Li Mei interjects, diplomatic as ever. “Let’s leave the competitors to their business. I’m sure they have many important tasks to worry about.”

“Oh. Of course.” Sonya takes the cue, grudgingly nodding at Jin before returning to her own lunch meeting. She didn’t mean to intrude, but there’s only a small handful of restaurants with food that’s palatable to Earthrealmers, so she was bound to run into someone else this afternoon. Stealth and subtlety are not her responsibility.

Jin cranes his neck over the edge of the balcony railing, scanning the crowds below. “Uh-oh. Is that one of my cousins?”

The figure spots him and waves eagerly.

“Aw, hell. I gotta get out of here.” Jin rummages around in his pockets, dumps the right amount of money plus a tip onto the table, and gulps down the rest of his drink before scrambling for the fire escape staircase. Cyrax grabs him by the sleeve to stop him, and he whirls around to look. “Hey. Why don’t you teleport us out?”

Sonya calls over to them. “No magic in public!”

“Right.” Jin changes course, heading for the normal staircase instead with Cyrax close behind. “You think they’d let us use the back entrance through the kitchen? It’s an emergency.”

“Jin, your family following you is not an emergency. I… I honestly wish some of mine were here.”

“Oh.” Jin stops dead, hit by a nagging sense of guilt. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve met all of yours. I understand your panic.” Cyrax laughs softly. “But do you really want to see what the inside of an Outworld kitchen looks like?”

“Hell no. I’d like not to regret that lunch.” Jin jumps out a low window, landing among a crowd of strangers outdoors. None of them pay him any mind; they’re far more focused on an arm wrestling duel between a pair of intimidating Tarkatans. Cyrax stops for a moment to stare, but Jin pulls him onward, taking hold of his hand. “We got places to go, things to see. Let’s get outta here.”

“You got it.” And off they go, racing down the streets of the Outworld capital.

In the crowd, a small hooded figure watches through narrow golden eyes, flicking a handful of coins onto the pile. She grins beneath the scarf wrapped around her face as the larger Tarkatan finally wins, clanking his blades together in triumph before bending down to gather the scattered money. Disappointed, the loser slinks away as the crowd scatters, and the pair of figures disappear down a back alley, the Tarkatan’s pocket rattling with newfound change.

The shorter person throws off the hood, revealing thick tangled black hair and neatly trimmed eyebrows. “Well done. I see you haven’t lost your strength.”

“Did you expect me to?” The taller one laughs hollowly, gnashing his teeth together. He has a face that only a Tarkatan mother could love, but he cuts an imposing figure as he stalks down the dirt-paved lane, leaving heavy footprints. “I have both you and your father to thank for my revival. I
should have known he’d make a backup copy of me.”

Mileena smiles, arching an eyebrow. “He is thorough, isn’t he? Such luck that those two Earthrealm fools-- I mean, honored allies… stumbled across the vacant laboratory. I was able to send in my clones within the hour and retrieve you.”

“Is that so? Hmm. Why was he not able to locate it himself?”

“He’s under constant scrutiny, Baraka. You should know that. A plan of such importance can’t be jeopardized by silly side-missions.”

“Retrieving me is a silly side-mission now?”

“To him? Yes. Don’t flatter yourself.” Mileena crosses her arms firmly, pulling the hood back over her head and hunching over as they pass by a dusty storefront. “As for you, naturally, I can’t bring you back home. I have several guests now, and they wouldn’t approve. I’m so sorry.” She shrugs dismissively. “However, I have plenty of safe-houses for my clones scattered through the city. I’ll give you the coordinates of one or two of them. That should suffice.”

“Does anyone else know that you’ve revived me?”

“Father does, yes. The others, no.”

“How did you make contact with him so quickly?”

“One of my clones is living inside the palace ventilation system.”

“Convenient.”

“Very, although she needs to be careful.”

Baraka has a moment of self-awareness. “I suppose I’m a clone too, aren’t I?”

“Not the same as me. There’s only one of you running around at a time, at least for now.” Mileena pats his arm. “Try not to think about it.”

“I’ll think about it as much as I want. What else can I do right now?”

“Stay out of the way. You already know what needs to happen, unless you managed to forget.”

Baraka huffs under his breath, immediately irritated. “I remember.”

“Good.” Mileena runs a hand through her hair, brushing it up off her forehead with a toss of her head. “After that happens, I’ll need you by my side.”

“As what?”

“Bodyguard. Have you met Tanya?”

“At least once. I don’t think she liked me.”

“Don’t take it personally. She doesn’t like anyone but me.” Mileena rolls her eyes, hiding a smile. “She’s wonderful. You’ll get to know her again, I’m sure. For now, just stay undercover and keep out of sight. You probably shouldn’t even be walking around the street unmasked.”

“Who would care? You know how humans are. Every Tarkatan looks the same to them.”
“Good point.” Mileena nods, then freezes as she spots a familiar figure some distance away, loitering around the street. Tensing her muscles, she springs up to the nearest low roof in a mighty leap, calling down to Baraka in a stage whisper. “I have to go. That’s Erron Black.”

“That Erron Black? The emperor’s—” But she’s already gone, leaving Baraka stranded in the middle of the road, abandoned among random citizens and the occasional enemy.

He tucks his hands in his pockets, retracting his arm blades, and strides forward with determined steps, fixing his gaze somewhere in the distance. If he can get to the street corner, he’ll be fine, but if he acknowledges Black, he’s in trouble. Tarkatans aren’t well-liked in the capitol, considering their reputation as bloodthirsty and witless mercenaries, but legally, there’s nothing Black can do…unless he recognizes him.

The odds aren’t in his favor. They pass each other in the street and lock eyes at the same moment, and Erron freezes, staring at Baraka under the brim of his hat. “Huh. Don’t you look familiar…”

“No. I don’t.”

“Wasn’t a question.” Erron tilts his head to the side, studying the tall and intimidating figure. “Ya definitely remind me of someone. Might be wrong…”

Baraka swallows hard, trying to resist the urge to bolt and flee. Tarkatans are quick, but he’s not faster than a bullet, and he’d hate to squander his second chance at life. “Who?”

“Somebody I used to know. Couple decades ago, maybe. We traveled together for awhile.” Erron thoughtfully lifts his Tarkatan arm blade sword out of the sheath strapped to his back. “Been carryin’ this with me ever since. He got cut down too soon.”

“Ah.” Baraka nods as politely as he can. “...And?”

“Nothin’. Just gave me a fright there. Woulda sworn it was him again.” Erron shakes his head, as if to rid himself of the thought, and stows the blade back in place before leaving without another word. He’s wanted back at the palace.

Erron’s weapons weigh heavier on his shoulders as he retraces his steps back to the emperor’s dwelling, rattling in their holsters and sheaths. He has half a mind to take off all the gear and sit to catch his breath, but it’d be a shame to be robbed, and more of a shame to be late. He’s left his mask at home today - right now, he’s more identifiable with it than without. Besides, he has no clue who that arm blade might have belonged to, but he’s glad he didn’t remind Erron of the unfortunate Tarkatan who got skewered by D’Vorah that fateful afternoon.

Somewhere along the way, a cheerful portly figure falls into step beside him. “You fought well. Don’t fret about it.”

“Master Bo’ Rai Cho…” Erron mutters his name, identifying him out of the corner of his eye, but doesn’t even turn to look. “I fought adequately. Nothin’ more.”

“I should have prepared you more thoroughly for that battle. I apologize.”

“Not yer fault. With all due respect, you ain’t got a clue how to train somebody in guns. And
there’s nothin’ wrong with that.”

Bo’ Rai Cho chuckles to himself. “You might be surprised.”

“’Scuse me?”

“I know how to operate Earthrealm weaponry, if nothing else. At one point, I was obligated to learn. Still, you’re correct; I’m no expert.” Bo takes a drink from his ever-present flask, somehow managing not to belch. “You are going back to see the emperor?”

“Someone needs to check in on ‘im. He seems stressed lately, with the tournament n’ all.” Erron glances at Bo suspiciously. “You gettin’ drunk at noon? Really?”

“This isn’t alcohol. I’m cutting back.” Bo explains yet again, shaking his head slightly. No one ever seems to remember, let alone give him credit for the effort. “Tell Kotal I’m going to look for Rain. I cannot seem to locate him.”

“You lost ‘im? Right before the fight?”

“I didn’t lose him. No one has lost him. He has simply made himself scarce.” Bo’ Rai Cho fumbles to explain. Technically, Rain did win permission to leave the palace on the day of the tournament, but no one expected him to flee rather than taking advantage of the chance to embarrass Raiden with a defeat. This might be a problem.

Clucking his tongue, Bo exhales sharply, stopping his train of thought to talk to Erron. “I have some ideas of where the prince might be. I will see you later. Hopefully, so will he.”

“Yeah, good luck.” Erron doesn’t even wish him a proper goodbye. Keeping his head down, he trudges onward through the alley until he reaches the palace gates at last.

The guards, dressed in formal Osh-Tekk regalia, look down their noses at him as he passes through the back entrance, but he pays them no mind. The moment he steps foot within the building, he shucks off his holsters and guns and rifle and sword, scattering the leather straps across the floor and dropping his bullet belts on top of the whole pile. He has neither the energy nor inclination to fix the mess. It’s not as if he has any important role to play other than Kotal’s guard, and at this point, he’s half convinced that Kotal can guard himself more effectively than Erron even can.

The palace is oddly empty, echoing with the sound of Erron’s footsteps through the halls, but he finds Kotal up at his usual spot on the balcony, basking in the sunlight. He’s spent so much time indoors fretting about the tournament that his skin has half faded to brown, resembling a mortal Aztec, though he’s still blue across his face, arms, and back. With some time spent outdoors, he’ll return to normal, rather than looking like a seven-foot-tall ancient Central American human who happens to sunburn blue.

Erron raises an eyebrow. “Yer not doin’ great, ain’t you.”

Kotal flinches, startled out of a worried daydream. “May I speak candidly?”

“Course.”

“No, I am not.”

Erron nods understandingly, encouraging Kotal to keep talking. Might help.

“The tournament is not proceeding as planned. I fear some great threat on the horizon.” The city
swims before Kotal’s eyes, shimmering in a rare heat wave, or maybe it’s just him. The temperature is still the light brisk chill of an Outworld winter. He shudders, calling down a beam of sunlight to surround him like a halo, and Erron moves closer to stand near it, warming his hands. Kotal turns his head to make eye contact, his face more worn and lined than usual. The stress is weighing on him unavoidably. “I am unsure if I should attend, but I am obligated. Whatever is in the future, I cannot avoid it.”

“Do we know any shape-shifters? Maybe they could go instead of you.” It’s a stupid idea, and Erron knows it, but he’s grasping at straws. Kotal is introspective and thoughtful sometimes, but this solemn and gloomy attitude is unfamiliar to him. Erron isn’t sure how to respond; he’s used to taking guidance, not giving it. “Never mind. What if we painted somebody else blue? Ya got some pretty tall guards…”

“It would bring dishonor to the throne if I showed any cowardice.” Kotal shakes his head, heavy dreadlocks of black hair falling down his back. He leans on the handle of the heavy sword planted in the soft wood beneath him, contemplating his options. “I assume I can depend on you in a crisis.”

“Always. I got yer back.”

“They may attack from the front.”

Erron’s face falls. “Ya know what I mean.”

“Yes. I do.” Kotal sighs heavily, rising to his feet and pulling the sword out of the boards with a heavy creaking noise. He strides towards the balcony, taking the steps downward two at a time while Erron trots behind him, eager to keep up. “Prepare yourself for anything. That is all I can say. Have you seen Skarlet recently?”

“Nah.” Erron hooks his thumbs in his belt, scanning the wide palace corridor. Other than a noticeable bloodstain in the carpet, it’s empty. “Huh. Wonder what happened there. Somebody get murdered in yer hallway?”

“No, it’s just me!” The bloodstain spreads and rises up in a fountain of showering drops, and reforms into Skarlet herself, grinning widely. She’s dressed in an elegant outfit of her own construction, with an ornate decorative skirt piece resembling the tendrils of blood she uses in battle. “Hi. Rain was helping me put this on. We’re fine. I’m good to go.”

Erron breathes a sigh of relief. So the prince did not escape after all.

“He went to run some errands after that, though, so I don’t know where he’s gone.”

Never mind.

“It is of no matter. Let us prepare.” Kotal takes the lead, striding down the hallway with his usual confident posture and aura of authority, and Skarlet scurries along behind him, practically running to keep pace with her short strides. Although she’s the smallest of all the kompetitors, her powers have nothing to do with strength, so she’s not afraid for her battle. Worried, maybe. Concerned, perhaps. But not afraid, never.

Erron tries to make friendly conversation. “How you feelin’ about the fight? Scared?”

Skarlet drops the pretense. “Actually, yeah.”

“You got nothing to worry about.”
“How would you know? You lost.”

Erron winces, gritting his teeth. “Thanks for that.”

“No, I mean-- I’m just saying--” Skarlet backtracks quickly. “My opponent has very different
powers than you.”

“Yeah? Why don’t you do to him what Frost did to me?”

She brightens up immediately. “You’re right! I could throw my kunai at him!”

“No. Not that. Make ‘im slip and fall on his face in a blood puddle, or somethin’. I’m just tossin’
out ideas.” Erron pauses briefly, realizing something. “Had you really not thought of using your
kunai?”

“No, I already did, actually. I was just trying to make you feel better.”

“It’s the thought that counts, I s’pose.” Erron grabs his weapons and follows Kotal out the
doorway, hopping into the chariot beside him and gesturing for Skarlet to join him. “Get in. We’re
startin’ to run short on time.”

Skarlet clings to the seat the whole time, wide-eyed with her jaw clenched in fear as the vehicle
speeds through the streets. Erron just takes it in stride; he’s spent enough time riding horses
through rough terrain that he can handle anything, although it did take some time for him to get
used to the Outworld transport. Sometimes he forgets that Skarlet’s been out of action for twenty-five
years. He has to pity her for that. Time is meaningless to Erron now. He’s noticed that change
never lasts. Everything always reaches a balance again, eventually, until someone upsets the cart
again and it all starts fresh.

Erron hops out of the chariot and stays a few steps behind Kotal, finishing up with all the buckles
and straps on his gear until he’s ready to go again. Skarlet is already making small talk with a few
of the Outworld inter-city champions that wandered back behind the scenes, but Erron does his job
and ushers them out of the area, locking down security as best he can. Reptile is sitting in the
corner, nursing his dislocated shoulder and looking after the baby Saurian he’s now acquired. Bo
has arrived with Rain in tow, looking a bit ruffled and bothered with his hair falling out of its usual
neat ponytail and his purple outfit covered in grime.

Erron decides he’d better not ask.

The rest of the team is scattered here and there, minding their own business, except for the
noticeably absent Kano, who Erron does not miss. Sliding into his seat near the emperor, he gives a
friendly nod to Ferra, who waves back. So does Torr, lifting one meaty claw.

The announcer has already begun, and Skarlet takes a deep breath. If she had a real heart, it’d be
pounding with nerves. She pats her thighs, checking for the kunai strapped there, and reaches
around to check that the swords are in their sheaths. Cyrax might be formidable, but he’s only
human. She’s not. In Outworld, that might be an advantage.

Just to be showy, she turns herself into the puddle of blood and slithers across the sand, crawling
up the post of the raised arena and re-forming into her human illusion right in front of the crowd.
The Outworld audience roars in approval, along with a few gasps.

Cyrax simply strides across the sand, as casual as he can be. His outfit isn’t even an elaborate
contraption like the others, just a simple ninja uniform with traditional Botswanan patterns. It suits
him best this way, and Shinnok was more than willing to follow Cyrax’s design idea, just for the
sake of doing something unique. Coming to a halt in front of the square arena, he smiles politely at
Skarlet, then phases out and back in with a flicker of golden energy, teleporting right past the
barriers into the ring.

Earthrealm cheers just as loudly. Skarlet feels a stab of worry, shivering as she tries to stand
confidently in front of the eyes of the whole crowd. The last time she was here, she was chained up
by Shao Kahn in a humiliating display, stripped down and robbed of her independence. This is her
chance to prove herself and erase that memory, but it’s still difficult for her.

Then again, no one who was in the Koliseum at that time is even still alive.

She finds some comfort in that.

Whipping out her swords, she bows politely to Cyrax, who returns the gesture. The announcer calls
time - and then it’s on! She launches herself at him, landing on his shoulders and slicing at him
with a flurry of blows, but he’s already phased out again, blinking past her and out of range. She
lands with a somersault and jumps back into action, but he’s nothing more than a flickering
translucent form, keeping himself phased out so long that Skarlet can’t even land a hit.

Grimacing in frustration, she whips out the blood tendrils and lashes at him, grabbing his shoulders
and pulling him in - but before he’s even close, he flings a net of magic energy at her, trapping
Skarlet in place for a precious few seconds. The blood tendrils fall away, pooling on the arena floor
in a shower of bright red, and Skarlet stumbles back, catching herself with a hand on the rope.
Numbly, she hears the announcer give the thirty-second warning in a loud booming voice - and it
sounds so much like Shao Kahn she has to pinch herself. The dismay is followed by a surge of rage
and, in one last desperate play, she flings herself at Cyrax one more time, fueled by righteous
anger. At the last moment, she teleports in the other direction, landing on his shoulders and kicking
him in the stomach.

Astonished, Cyrax lands facedown on the arena, unable to catch himself in time. Skarlet seizes the
opportunity and puts her full weight on his back, triumphantly pinning him down long enough for
the announcer to call the match. Even he sounds surprised.

Skarlet wins!

If nothing else, she got one. She proved her power.

Cyrax recovers quickly, phasing out from under her. He materializes around the arena in leaps and
bounds like a living ghost, and Skarlet gnashes her sharp teeth in frustration, spreading her blood
tendrils as wide as she can to ensnare him. It only lasts for a few seconds before Cyrax vanishes out
of her grip, slippery as quicksilver, but she’s starting to take pride in even the most minor victories
- a successful hit, a stab that rips the cloth of his uniform. He looks more hurt by the damage to his
traditional outfit than the actual blows that Skarlet’s landed on him.

Cyrax takes the second round, to the surprise of neither. It’s a war of attrition, waiting for the clock
to expire as Skarlet wears his health down too slowly. He hasn’t even used his weapons on her, as
he knows they wouldn’t help. An explosive would scatter her in a shower of blood that re-forms in
an instant. Instead, he sends her flying across the arena a few times with some martial arts moves
that she didn’t expect. It’s impossible to push her out of the arena - she can cling to the ropes with
her tendrils - so he doesn’t even try. Instead, he’s relying on his chi to carry him through, the
ancestral magic that runs in his veins. It lets him slip in and out of the physical plane just long
enough to dodge Skarlet, and that’s all he needs.

Against any other opponent, the trick of the slippery blood puddle might have worked, but that,
too, is ineffective against Cyrax. He side-steps it and catches himself against the ropes, bouncing back to move Skarlet out of range with a well-timed high kick. She takes it in the ribs, recoiling backwards and using the blood tendrils to steady herself, and in desperation she flings her kunai rapid-fire, but it’s too little too late. Cyrax simply phases out one more time, and lets the blades pass right through, knocking her down with a powerful blast of magic.

He bows his head respectfully as Skarlet stares up at him from the floor, defeated.

“You fought bravely and honorably. Come, let me help you up.” He kneels down, gripping her hand, and grudgingly Skarlet’s rises to her feet, ignoring the announcer’s voice and the noise of the crowd. Cyrax shrugs helplessly, looking out at the sea of faces. “Haven’t they ever seen anyone teleport before?”

“Probably not. At least, not from your realm.” Skarlet casually leans against the ropes, collecting her kunai off the sand with the blood tendrils that snake downward to the floor of the arena. “What were those powers? I’ve never encountered such a thing, aside from Mileena’s teleporting.”

Cyrax shrugs. “I don’t know. I just do it. By the way, it’s nice to finally meet you. You did very well in that first round.”

“You, too.” Skarlet lets her defenses slip, sighing loudly and gripping the ropes with white knuckles as the memories flood back. “Shao Kahn used to chain me up in here. I needed to win at least once… just for my own sake. I wish I’d done better, but I’ll take what I can get.”

“I’m particularly glad you won that one, then. Of course, I don’t like to be defeated, but you earned that.”

The announcer clears his throat, tapping his fingers on the desk of the booth. “All contestants are encouraged to leave the arena.”

“Oh. Yes, of course.” Cyrax has nothing to lose by being polite. He offers his hand in a friendly gesture, and Skarlet tentatively grabs his fingers, shaking firmly. “I’ll see you again sometime.”

“I’m sure.” Skarlet grins, revealing a mouthful of sharp teeth, and drops back into her liquid form, flowing out the arena to escape back into the stands. Cyrax simply teleports out and strolls back, ignoring the crowd with as much focus as he can manage. There’ll be time to deal with the fans after the tournament is done.

Crossing through the threshold of the backstage area, Cyrax finds himself face to face with a pack of youngsters who look suspiciously like Jin, as well as a handful of weary adults. Immediately, they start clamoring for an autograph, holding up pens and notebooks and surrounding him as he tries to retreat to the back of the room.

His gaze locks with Jin, who’s leaning against the wall, smirking at Cyrax. “Are these the cousins?”

“You know it. Hey, you’re the hero now. Enjoy it. Revel in it.”

“I– I’ll try.” He signs the nearest notebook hastily with his real name, handing it back promptly, but is interrupted by one of the cousins tugging on his sleeve, demanding an explanation.

He clarifies, much to their disappointment. “Cyrax isn’t actually my real name.”

One of them fearlessly speaks up. “Can you sign it Cyrax anyway? I can sell that for more on eBay.”
Cyrax stifles a laugh and signs each paper in turn. “If you make photocopies, you can sell those, too.”

“That’s a great idea!” The pack of cousins scampers away, immediately distracted by other Outworld attractions, and Cyrax is free at last. He crosses the room to stand by Jin, exchanging a warm and meaningful smile. For a little while, they just stand in silence as Cyrax catches his breath, finally cooling down from the fight.

Jin faces him, casually interlacing their fingers. “You did great out there, you know.”

“Well, I did the best I could.” Cyrax smiles gently, glancing aside. “Sorry I wasn’t more talkative at lunch. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to do that strategy.”

“Yeah, but you did! I knew you could.”

“You didn’t even know what I was planning.”

“I was sure it’d be amazing.”

“Your confidence might be undeserved, but it’s very appreciated.” Cyrax leads him towards the stadium exit, sensing a chance to escape before more of Jin’s relatives arrive. “You want to go finish lunch somewhere else?”

“I’d love to.”
Rain is angry.

More than that, he’s furious. Time and time again, he’s been denied his chance at godhood, at proving his worth and showing his might and verifying to those around him that he is, truly, the son of Edenia’s fallen divine protector.

No one on his own team even has the confidence to believe that he’ll win the upcoming fight. Logically, they’re right. Raiden is a more powerful deity, in all accounts, and a real one, at at that. The Edenian blood that runs in Rain’s veins sets him apart from all the petty mortals scattering this realm, but it’s nothing compared to a member of the real pantheon.

But Rain has one element in his favor: pure rage.

Hefting a wooden spear as he glistens with raindrops, hair flying behind him, he hurls himself across the room and skewers a training dummy wearing Raiden’s hat, impaling it right through the heart.

He tugs it out again, knocking the hat to the floor, and angrily places it back on top of the dummy’s stump of a neck. It’s starting to leak sawdust from an assortment of spear-holes, but Rain doesn’t want to go find another replacement. After he’s done demolishing this one, he’ll rest before his fight. He doesn’t want to use up all his energy right before the battle - he needs to defeat Raiden at full power.

Earlier, he’d tried to escape beyond the city walls, just to test whether it could be done. Bo’ Rai Cho caught him and wrestled him into cooperation, and Rain accepted it, with great exasperation. He wouldn’t actually sacrifice his chance at humiliating his so-called superior in front of all of Outworld and Earthrealm’s most important guests.

Casting the spear aside, he tenses his muscles, springs, and kicks the entire training dummy right off its post, sending it flying to the floor in a spray of sawdust.

“Well done.” An uncomfortably familiar voice reaches his ears. “You’re looking better than I’ve seen in quite some time. Did Kotal find a way to reverse the effects of trying to burn you alive?”

“Not exactly.” Rain’s suddenly too defensive to be angry. Spear in hand, he whirls to face the intruder, but she’s already materialized up in the rafters, looking down at him with her chin in her hands. He glares up at her, already infuriated. “Tanya, how did you reach this place?”

“What, like it’s hard?” Tanya drops to the floor again, does an elegant cartwheel, and kicks the training dummy to the corner of the room effortlessly. “Technically, we’re enemies, but I thought I’d stop by. I owe you an apology.”

“How many times have you apologized in the last few centuries?”

“Twice.”

“What an honor.” Rain’s voice drips with sarcasm. Leaning on his staff, he brushes his hair back behind his ears, head tilted to the side as he studies Tanya with blatant scorn. “What is the apology for? Starting this entire tournament? You are the cause of it. I do my research.”

“Actually, our favorite emperor is the real cause. I was merely doing the job he told me to do.”
“By kidnapping Shinnok and running away with him?”

“I saw the job through! I gave him to Kotal!”

“As a trap to further your own ends!”

“I thought Kotal would surrender his claim to one of the gods. I didn’t realize he would call the tournament!” Tanya grits her teeth, eyes flaring bright as a flicker of flame runs up her arms and vaporizes into the air. “That’s not the point. I actually think you have a good chance.”

“Oh, I’m so flattered.” But Rain is curious, after all. Shedding the purple garment from his muscular shoulders, he drops onto a bench, stretching out his legs and scuffing his toes on the worn floorboards. “Why do you say that?”

Tanya joins him on the bench, a safe distance away. “Raiden is weak.”

“That comes as no surprise to me. I’m amazed he’s still functional.” Rain is secretly relieved to hear it. He was half expecting Tanya to bring news that Raiden had reverted to divine form and Rain would lose his chance to fight him. However, that would be expecting too much from Raiden, considering his tendency to disappoint all his precious Earthrealmers.

Rain grunts, a noise of approval. “Go on.”

“I’ve been observing from a distance.”

“Considering Raiden’s stellar powers of observation, you could walk right past him in full Edenian costume and he’d think nothing of it.”

Tanya laughs with a sharp grin. “I almost have.”

“Good. How is he weak, specifically?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Fine. Which brings me to my next point…” Rain snatches his spear and holds it to Tanya’s throat before she can even react, grabbing her arm roughly to keep her confined. “Why are you telling me this? What do you gain from it?”

Tanya shrugs him off with a backhanded slap, shoving Rain back to the other end of the bench. “I want you to win. I have no more love for the current empire than you do. I know how you feel.”

“Correct. I’m fighting as a formality, and out of obligation.”

“And also because you want to kick Raiden’s ass into oblivion.”

“That too.”

“I thought so.” Tanya steeples her fingers, gazing at Rain out of bright glowing eyes that burn beneath the long black hair falling over her forehead. “You ought to be confident. That’s all.”

“What have you to gain from Outworld winning?”

She laughs. “Who said I think they will? I want you to win. That’s a difference.”

“But why?”
“I’m willing to put Earthrealm’s protector gods in their place. So should you. If Raiden has a healthy respect for you -- if he knows that Edenians can match him in power -- I’ll have an advantage as well. Plain and simple.”

“I’m a demigod. Not an ordinary Edenian.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Tanya scoffs at the thought. “Do you think anyone else cares about the difference between types of Edenians? Argus is long-gone, our realm is scattered into a thousand pieces across awful little Outworld villages, and we are what is left.”

“Telling the truth, for once, I see.” Rain feels that familiar bitterness rising up again. “Thank you for the information. Now get out of here before I throw you out. I never want to see you again, not after what you did to me!”

“That reminds me. How are you healed?”

“It’s simple. Ermac put me in the soul chamber long enough to restore me.”

“So that’s how…” Tanya scrunches her nose in confusion. “It works on Edenians?”

“Apparently.”

“Why would Ermac even do that?”

“I suppose they developed a mind of their own, finally. At least someone respects and values me.” Rain shrugs, retrieving his purple cloak and draping it over his shoulders again in a princely fashion. “You’re taking away valuable time that I need to train. Get out of here!” It’s a useless plea, but his tone is sharp, as commanding as he can manage to be.

Tanya finally takes mercy on him, rising up and striding away. “Good luck, Hyetos.”

Rain hisses. “Did I give you a right to--” But she’s already disappeared, and he clenches his fists in frustration and goes to gather up the training dummy off the floor. Maybe there’s still time to practice, and to forget about his unfortunate situation, if only briefly.

Tanya flicks a handful of magic dust at the guards as she slips through a back corridor, making them collapse as if intoxicated. Delicately, she steps over their unconscious bodies, winding her way through the network of secret tunnels beneath the palace until she’s emerged from a moldy cellar up through a trapdoor into the daylight. The hot Outworld sun is still bright enough to shake off the chill of the breeze, a strange mix of weather elements that she resentfully compares to Edenia’s perfect climates.

What a waste of a realm.

The route across the rooftops is faster, so Tanya heads back to the Earthrealm home base in leaps and bounds, nimbly dodging chimneys and towers until she’s arrived at the front door of the hotel. Cautiously eyeing the receptionist at the desk, she backs off slowly and slinks around the side of the building instead, climbing the balconies and landing up on the high floor where Raiden is hopefully still waiting.

Pushing open the door, she steps inside, coming face to face with a very irritated Shinnok.

“You’re late.”

“Be nice. She was timely enough.” From the armchair in the corner, Raiden is the voice of reason.
“Were you successful?”

“Yes. He believed it.”

“Are you sure?”

“I know Rain. If he was smart enough to realize I’m playing him, he’s too stupid to hide it.”

“Fair enough.” Shinnok tries not to smirk. “Playing him in his own favor, of course.”

“Amazingly, for once, yes.” Tanya settles into the other armchair, displacing Shinnok from the spot before he can reach it. “He has no love lost for me, clearly, and I don’t even slightly blame him. With that said, I did do him a favor.”

“Yes. He now believes he can defeat me.” Raiden chimes in. “Previously, he lacked the confidence.”

“Remind me why it’s so necessary for you to lose?” Tanya still doesn’t quite get the point, regardless of her commitment to the plan. “What would happen otherwise?”

“If I defeat Rain in this fight, he will take it as a lethal blow to his ego. He would go rogue, outside our control, and would wreak massive damage in his attempted path to the throne.”

“The humiliation of it. I see.” Tanya observes closely, resting her chin in her hands. “And what will happen if -- when -- he wins?”

“The future proceeds as it must.”

“That’s it? No hints?”

“Absolutely not.”

She turns to Shinnok for help, but he shakes his head, green eyes narrowed at her. “Not a chance.”

“What a shame.” Tanya sprawls out on the chair, peeling off her arm wraps and tossing them in a pile on the floor. “Shinnok, I still don’t understand why you wouldn’t make me a costume. Haven’t I earned one by now?”

“You kidnapped me! I think not.”

“Why does everyone keep bringing that up?!”

“What, do you expect everyone to forget?”

“I was assigned to do it!”

“Settle down. Please.” Raiden’s voice is soothing, his blue eyes warm with reassuring kindness. By now, he’s good at hiding his frustration with all the quarreling nuisances around him. “Tanya, perhaps you should go report the progress to Mileena.”

“She’s already furious that we have to let him win. She holds a grudge.”

“I suppose that’s fair.” Shinnok sighs and leans against a nearby mannequin -- only to flinch and recoil in surprise as it topples to the floor, the disguise falling away to reveal a formerly invisible Mileena. “Excuse me?!?”
Shocked, Mileena picks herself up off the floor, tapping the now-broken illusion device attached to her wrist. “Curses! I was so close.”

“Close to WHAT?” Shinnok grabs her by the collar, eyes wide with outrage, but she easily teleports out of his grasp, landing across the room. “Explain yourself!”

“Oh, she was the backup plan.” Tanya is unfazed, eating a handful of roasted nuts from a bag that she grabbed along the way from a street vendor. “She’s always the backup plan.”

“How many Mileenas are there?!”

“Many.” Mileena takes a seat at the edge of the bed, winking suggestively at Tanya as she zips up the petite pink vest she’d been wearing. “Don’t worry. If Tanya didn’t return to check in with you and Raiden in time, I’d have to go retrieve her.”

“Why not allow us to do it?”

“I seem to recall something about you two being official tournament competitors.”

“So what? Raiden’s already trespassed in the palace.” Shinnok stares at him pointedly. “This morning, I believe.”

“Technically, that was not part of the palace until it was discovered--”

“Quiet down.” Now it’s Tanya’s turn to take charge. She finally gets up from the seat, returning Shinnok’s chair to his possession, and takes hold of Mileena’s hand, leading her towards the balcony. “I did my job, you two. Now do yours.”

Raiden smiles softly. “I will.”

The pair vanishes promptly in a shower of pink and purple magic sparks.

Shinnok collapses onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling. “All this, and now I discover my mannequins are Mileenas in disguise?”

“Just that one.”

“You knew?!” He props himself up on one elbow, staring at Raiden with an accusatory glare.

He nods, dutifully brushing his long silver hair. “It would have interrupted the natural flow of events if I mentioned it.”

“Raiden, how many things do you know that you don’t tell us?”

“Fewer than I used to.”

“How lovely.” Shinnok checks the time, sighing loudly. This took up a few more precious minutes than he’d hoped. “Are you done grooming yourself so I can fit the tournament outfit?”

“I thought we already did that.”

“I reinforced the seams in some areas. It should still be the correct size. I just need you to put it on, unless you’ve decided to walk out there in the arena wearing that pajama outfit instead.”

“They’re casual clothes.” Raiden looks hurt. “Where is it?”
Shinnok gestures to the corner of the room, not even looking. “Go get it.”

“I shall.” Raiden gathers up the armful of cloth and armor, disappearing into the bathroom. Some clattering and ungodly swearing interrupts the peace and quiet. Shinnok calmly ignores it.

Several minutes later, he emerges, newly dressed in an elegant ornamental outfit perfectly suited to an ancient Japanese god. He’s quite delighted with it, although from all the complaints from Shinnok about hand-crafting the thing, he was expecting something complex and unwearable. He is pleasantly surprised. “Is this correct?”

Shinnok eyes him coolly. “It’s on backwards.”

Raiden stares in horror.

“I’m joking. Yes, Raiden, that is correct. Congratulations. You know how to dress yourself. I was unsure.”

“Hrm.” Raiden grumbles under his breath, putting on the matching hat. “This is enchanted to stay on, I assume?”

“What do you think, Raiden?”

“I never know with you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Did I not create that extremely complicated, difficult, never-before-seen historically influenced armor for you?”

“You may have stolen it from a museum.”

“In your size? I think not.” Shinnok gets up, rummaging around his bag of sewing supplies. “Damn it. Mileena stole my thread.”

“I am sure you can purchase some more in the marketplace.”

“Not of that quality!”

“She helped you with the costumes. Perhaps you owe her a debt.”

Unwillingly, Shinnok concedes the point.

Raiden picks up his staff, resting near the door, and hefts it into place on his back. “Now are you ready to go?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be, I suppose. Should I bring the supplies? Knowing you, you might manage to break the armor along the way.”

“If that happens, then you did not craft it as skillfully as I would expect from you, Shinnok.”

“...True.” Even more grudgingly, Shinnok glances at the other god out of the corner of his eye. “Was that a compliment?”

“Hmm. Did you interpret it that way?”

“Oh, forget it.” Shinnok shoves him out of the door, slinging the bag of supplies over his shoulder just in case. “Hurry. We’ll be late if you don’t--”
“Hush. We will not be late.” Raiden grips his upper arm firmly, summoning a surge of lightning to teleport them both to the Koliseum...

...and lands directly in the center of the arena, nearly interrupting a hand-to-hand battle between two enthusiastic young Outworld martial artists.

“Excuse me!” Raiden dodges quickly, dragging Shinnok out of range, and tries again, disappearing in a lightning flash. This time, he lands backstage, right in the middle of a meeting between the SF leaders.

At least it’s better than the arena.

Raiden gathers up his damaged dignity, retreating to sit in one of the chairs lining the walls. Johnny, Sonya, Jax, Kabal, Stryker, and even Kenshi are glaring at him.

“Don’t worry about him. It’s been a long day.” Shinnok waves off the incident and kicks his sewing supply bag underneath one of the chairs, out of reach of any of the Earthrealmers who might be curious. “No damage was done. Mostly.”

Across the arena, Rain stares in disbelief.

“**That**’s him?! She was right.”

Tremor leans on the railing at the edge of the stadium, looking thoughtful. His rock arms are glittering with a metallic tint, adorned with embedded crystals, but he shrugs his shoulders and shakes it all off, stone crumbling away to dust. “Who was right, Rain?”

“Never mind!”

“All right.” Tremor notices Rain is in a particularly bad temper today. He doesn’t care one way or another - it’s very difficult to faze Tremor by this point, considering all he’s put up with. Admittedly, he’s curious about the reasons, but decides not to pry. “How are you feeling?”

“Victorious.” He hastily adds a disclaimer. “I hope.”

“Hey, don’t be too humble.” Skarlet laughs from somewhere behind him, standing on her tiptoes and straining to place Rain’s crown on his head. “I finished it!”

“Just in time.” He bends down briefly to make it easier, adjusting the headpiece behind his ears. His hair is tied up in the usual ponytail, glossy and sleek to match his outfit. Skarlet crafted a suit of armor for him from ornate purple cloth and fine wood, with not a single piece of metal anywhere. That should prevent Raiden electrocuting him. It’s unlikely that it would happen, but Rain is sometimes unlucky.

“Did you carve the crown?”

“By hand.” Skarlet nods enthusiastically. It’s a wooden replica of the crown Rain used to wear as an Edenian prince, referenced from old sketches dug up from the palace archives. Everything is stored somewhere if you know where to look, but she always has to wear gloves to prevent bloodstains on the pages. “Do you like it?”

“I love it.” Rain holds his head high, squaring his shoulders with renewed confidence. “And I don’t frequently say that about anything.”

“So we have noticed.” A newcomer arrives, responding in a monotone voice layered with hissing
“Thank you, Ermac!” Skarlet retreats to the back, taking her seat up a few rows near Ferra to see over the others’ shoulders. From there, she squints, trying to make out the figures in the stands on the distant Earthrealm side. Her vision isn’t the best, though, so she sighs and settles back in her chair. She’ll have to wait and see. Finally, she glimpses a figure in mustard yellow, and tries to get his attention, receiving a friendly wave in response.

Ermac circles Rain slowly, floating a few inches off the ground, and finally settles back down, nodding in approval. “You are prepared...”

“Was that a statement or a question?”

“The former. Your powers are formidable.” Ermac has changed into a better outfit after the morning’s incident in the palace tunnels, cleaning off all the dust and grime and lizard spit from babysitting Reptile’s new Saurian child. Now, they’re dressed in an Edenian-styled outfit, not fancy enough to truly be a tournament costume, but nonetheless elegant. Rain approves.

“I’m glad someone else thinks so.” Rain slides his spear into the holster on his back, reaching around to make sure the fastenings are properly tightened. “Raiden won’t know what hit him.”

Ermac looks at him in confusion. “What else would hit him, other than you?”

“It’s a figure of speech.”

“Ah. We understand.”

No, you don’t, Rain thinks to himself, but stifles the remark. He at least makes a slight effort to be nice to Ermac, as one of the few individuals -- or collective beings -- who still actually respects him.

After this fight, they will all respect him.

When the announcer calls him, he’s more than ready. Vaulting over the edge of the stands without even opening the door, Rain strides towards the arena, leaving a trail of wet sandy footsteps straight to the edge of the platform. With a powerful leap, he clears the top ropes and lands square in the center, lifting his fists in triumph before stepping back to make room for Raiden.

Raiden skips the introduction entirely and arrives with a mighty thunderclap, materializing from a lightning strike. He’s glowing with electricity, lit up at full power, and his antique styled outfit and hat are patterned with symbols that Rain doesn’t recognize. He lifts an eyebrow at the sight, and Raiden answers the glance with a respectful slight bow.

Rain returns the bow. He has to. He almost resents it.

Whipping out his spear and planting it tip-down in the surface of the arena mat, Rain strikes a confident pose, calling down his own lightning. Unlike Raiden, his glows with a purple tint, surrounded by a light rain-shower that hits them both with scattered droplets.

Raiden nods, almost hiding a smile, as the raindrops slide off the edge of his hat.

The crowd is already going wild; they appreciate a good show, and are certainly getting their money’s worth. Neither Raiden nor Rain has any attention to spare for the spectators, though, and as the announcer counts down the time, they circle each other cautiously, keeping a safe distance from the center of the mat.
Rain springs into action like a flash, faster than Raiden can react. He leaps across the arena with his spear held high, aiming right for the center of his chest-plate... and it strikes and slides off to the side, leaving a light dent in the metal, nothing more. Caught off balance, Rain staggers and catches himself on the arena ropes, gripping the spear white-knuckled.

Raiden mouths to himself, *My turn.*

Raising his staff, he charges it with lightning and aims for Rain’s own armor, intending to strike a mostly harmless blow. To his surprise, Rain flinches back and drops to a crouching stance, then leaps again -- grabs the end of the staff, wearing special gloves Raiden hadn’t noticed -- and, grimacing, hits Raiden with a punch to the stomach.

The lightning charge recoils back into Raiden, reflected by the special material in Rain’s gloves. Doubled over in pain and overloaded with electric charge, he drops to the ground on his hands and knees and gasps for breath, recovering quickly but not quite quick enough.

Rain has a hand on his throat before Raiden can think clearly, yanking him back up to his feet and shoving him against the arena ropes with enough effort to try to force him through. Raiden resists easily, relying on the power of his nearly invincible armor, but Rain’s raw anger and determination wins out over Raiden’s restraint, driven by the knowledge that he must lose.

They struggle for a long time, a hush falling over the spectators as the Koliseum turns silent. Rain has one foot planted on the lower rope, knee pressed against the middle rope, and one hand around Raiden’s throat, but the material of the cowl is strong enough to resist the squeezing force. His other hand is gripping the top rope tightly, frying it steadily with an electric current. It won’t hold forever.

The announcer calls the thirty-second mark.

Raiden struggles limply, enough to indicate that he’s putting up a fight but not too strong to defeat Rain outright. His hands are locked around Rain’s shoulders, trying to force him backwards, but the effort of shoving Rain away is pushing Raiden backwards against the arena rope...

With five seconds to spare, it snaps.

All three ropes destroyed, the arena barrier collapses, and Raiden falls backwards onto the sand with a heavy thud as Rain stares down at him from the edge of the mat far above. His brown eyes are glittering with triumph, but there’s a tension in the lines of his face that can only mean fear. Fear of his defeat, perhaps; not of Raiden, but of his own weakness.

*Rain wins!*

Raiden struggles back to his feet. Rain makes no move to help him up.

*Do not resume the fight yet until the repairs are completed.* The announcer gives the order, and Raiden obediently stays on the sand, biding his time. A crew of repairmen scurries out from a gate in the stands, installing new ropes in a flash, and Rain doesn’t even move out of their way.

Raiden finally teleports back up when they’re gone, brushing sand off the brim of his hat and out of the indented carvings in his elegant armor. Shinnok will be bothered by the need to fix the damage.

Right now, Shinnok’s projects are the last thing on his mind. He’s anxiously leaning over the stadium barrier, practically falling over the edge. Sonya has a hand on his collar, keeping him held
back, just in case. Shinnok is not known for sensible behavior, especially not in crisis situations.

He exhales sharply, rubbing the bridge of his nose. *Raiden, don’t get yourself hurt.*

*I will not.* Only the slightest glance towards the Earthrealm side suggests that Raiden is distracted, but he responds to the telepathic message in an instant. *You know he cannot hurt me.*

*That was more power than I expected from him.*

*More strategy, as well. He is determined. Still, Shinnok, cease your worries.* Raiden grips his staff tightly. He’s thought about setting it aside, but any hint of weakness or surrender would do him no good. Rain needs to believe, fully and confidently, in his victory and his power.

It’s better than the alternative.

Rain skips the spear this time, and tackles Raiden to the ground and knocks his hat off, landing a few solid punches before Raiden kicks him away and body-slams him into one of the arena posts. Staggering, Rain shakes his head and dodges behind Raiden, hooking a hand into one of his shoulder-plates to try to pull off the armor’s loose parts. Instead, he receives an electric shock he wasn’t expecting, and winces and yanks his hand back, rubbing his fingers in pain. Even he isn’t invulnerable to Raiden’s lightning.

Maybe he’d better stick with the spear.

But he has another factor on his side: his true powers.

Conjuring up a storm above the arena, Rain lets the heavens pour down on them both, drenching Raiden in a torrent that catches him off guard. Bathed by glittering water drops, the painted trim on Rain’s wooden armor glints in glorious purple and gold. He takes a moment to let the crowd admire him before kicking Raiden halfway across the arena, landing heavily against the ropes. Raiden can absorb a lot of damage, but he’s starting to slow down.

Rain looms over him, taunting him in his deep voice. “Is it possible I am superior?”

“Prove it!” Raiden growls at him, levitating off the ground in a lightning flash before flinging Rain back an equal distance. Conjuring his powers, he sends a bolt of electricity from his fingertips and aims it at Rain, who raises a hand to resist it.

Rain catches the lightning, turning it to his own advantage, and absorbs it as long as he can.

When he’s had enough, he clenches his hands, slams his gloved fists together, and redirects the lightning right back at Raiden, electrocuting him with as much force as a true god.

Raiden sinks to his knees, shocked to the core. Rain is presenting a harsh challenge, not just a fair fight that Raiden is obligated to lose.

Rain stalks towards him, hair flying loose and whipped by the brisk winds of the storm. His Edenian crown still rests victoriously on his head, untouched by the battle. “Had enough?”

*Thirty seconds remaining.*

“Never!”

“You will!”

Raiden summons all his strength - as much as he can, without annihilating Rain - but it does nearly
nothing, weakly pushing back against the water shield that the demigod has conjured. He’s untouchable now, standing triumphant in the rain-soaked arena. Daringly, he lifts himself off the ground to match Raiden’s height, standing on a sheet of water, and looks him in the eye.

“Today, I am the god!”

And, unstoppably, he shoves Raiden towards the ropes again, forcing him backwards until he topples over the edge in an undignified shower of sparks.

Rain wins!

The prince bends over and stands with his hands on his knees, sides heaving with sudden panic as the storm fades to a sunny day. He did it. He did it. He defeated Earthrealm’s protector, the all-powerful Raiden…

…but Raiden was in mortal form this time.

Still, it’s enough.

Moving as if in a trance, Rain finally steps down from the arena and returns to the Outworld side, dragging his feet in the wet sand. He’s welcomed back eagerly by his fellow fighters, who shower him with amazed praise. Skarlet throws a towel over his shoulders, anxiously worrying about a chill, and Ermac carefully guides him backstage, responsible for his safety. The Outworld guards scatter before him, moving out of his path in awe and reverence as they bow their heads.

This is everything Rain ever wanted. He is more than royalty - he is divinity.

Shinnok breaks several rules and climbs over the barrier of the arena to retrieve Raiden from the pile of sand, dusting him off with a scrap of cloth from his sewing bag. Grabbing him by the arm, he hauls him back to safety, muttering commentary along the way that Raiden barely hears. His ears are still ringing from the electrocution by Rain, an unexpected attack that literally turned Raiden’s power against himself. Metaphorically, his efforts backfiring is hardly new to him, but he’s not used to it in battle.

“Hrm.” Shinnok peers at the dent in the center of the breastplate, poking at it a few times. “It could be worse. I would rather have damaged armor than a damaged Raiden.”

“Thank you.” Raiden mumbles distantly, staring off into space.

Shinnok stands on his tiptoes and grabs Raiden’s chin, making him look into his eyes. “Are you harmed?”

Raiden blinks at him, and says nothing.

“Hrm.” Shinnok grumbles to himself once again, rubbing his hands together and conjuring a bit of healing magic. He presses his fingers to Raiden’s temples, zapping him with the restorative spell, and the cloudy look in Raiden’s eyes clears slightly.

Still worried, Shinnok steps away, giving the other god his space. “You need rest, urgently. I do not know what will happen when we’re damaged too heavily in mortal form, and I’d prefer not to find out. Do you have the power to return to the hotel on your own?”

Raiden is unmoved. “What?”

Shinnok steps closer and repeats himself telepathically, feeling a flash of deep concern.
Raiden nods slowly. *I think so. Mileena will probably still be there, raiding your sewing materials. I can trace her for the location...*

Sonya suddenly overhears, distracted from her conversation with Li Mei. “No, don’t --” But it’s too late, and they’ve already vanished.

*I can do this...* Raiden whispers to himself, re-appearing from the lightning flash with Shinnok close beside him, but when he opens his eyes, they’ve landed in the middle of the marketplace, nearly knocking over a vegetable cart. Wide-eyed, a masked and hooded Mileena stares at him, holding an armful of tomatoes.

Hastily, he teleports away again.

This time, he finds himself in a dismal warehouse, face to face with another Mileena -- playing cards with an oddly familiar Tarkatan, no less.

Shinnok grabs his sleeve. *Raiden, no! Wrong one--*

On the third try, Raiden manages it. No sooner has he landed on the drab carpet of the Outworld hotel room than he collapses onto the bed, creaking under the weight of the heavily armored god.

Predictably, Mileena is there, admiring a variety of Shinnok’s sewing needles.

Shinnok glares at her as she yelps in surprise. “Help me get this armor off!”

Mileena springs into action, undoing the latches and buckles on the ornamental plating. “Did he lose?”

“Yes. Badly.”

“Good! I mean, uh...” She wilts under a harsh glare from Shinnok, looking down his nose with disapproval. “He needed to lose, right? I like Raiden, I didn’t want him to lose, but he had to--”

“Just shut up and help.” Shinnok yanks off the gauntlets and shoulder plates, stacking the whole pile in the nearest armchair. “He got electrocuted so much he won’t hear anything for a week, but he’ll survive.”

“What happened?!?”

Shinnok groans, settling into the other chair, and puts his head in his hands. “Rain was strong enough to fight a god.”

Mileena forces a smile. “Good for him. I’m... happy for him.”

“No, you’re not.”

“No, I’m not.” She answers a little too quickly, admitting in complete honesty. She still doesn’t like Rain one bit. “Do you want me to stay and help you look after Raiden.”

“That might help. ...thank you.” Those are still foreign words for Shinnok, but in this situation, it’s necessary. He stares at Raiden forlornly, glancing between him and the pile of damaged armor. All things considered, he did his best. They both did. Nevertheless, Shinnok wishes he could have done more to protect him.

Months ago, he would have said the opposite. He thinks to himself silently. *It’s remarkable how things can change.*
Raiden opens one eye, a slight smile flickering across his face. Yes, it is. I am certain that it is for the better. It is how things ought to be.

Shinnok breathes out deeply, relieved, and lays back in the chair, slowed down by exhaustion. At least Raiden is still Raiden, injured or not.

Mileena settles down on the floor cross-legged, stealthily reaching for the pouch of sewing supplies she’d dropped earlier. “Can I work on something while I wait here?”

Shinnok sighs, finally giving in.

“It’s all yours.”
Sonya’s decisions, for the most part, are reliable. Certainly, she’s made a few bad calls in her day, but nothing on the magnitude of the others in authority; the White Lotus’s track record is particularly bad, or at least it was until Fujin took over.

Still, inviting the other side of an inter-realm tournament to a casual party is not the wisest move. The others wouldn’t call it wisdom, at least, but she believes in the chance. The gamble pays off.

For all intents and purposes, it’s just a temporary truce, a chance for the contestants to get to know each other on equal ground. In reality, it’s damage control. Tomorrow, one realm or the other will emerge victorious, and Sonya would like to minimize the fallout, no matter the outcome. It would be harder to condemn the other side to a war if they’ve looked each other in the eyes as friends.

Li Mei agrees with the plan, and together they extend the invitation to the imperial palace, slipping a note in fine penmanship into the hands of the very grudging Erron Black. From there, all they can do is wait and fret until, hours later, a motley crew of Outworlders finally shows up in the hotel lobby.

They’re short a few, of course - Rain skipped this party, Ermac has no interest in attending any parties at all, and Reptile is dedicated to looking after the young Saurian. Tremor and Bo’ Rai Cho both politely declined the invitation, and there was no chance that Noob would ever come.

Win some, lose some.

The hotel is overrun with pleasant chaos, the basement now occupied by a crowd of Lin Kuei and Shaolin happily engaged in a board game tournament. No one knows the rules, and it doesn’t matter one bit. Someone in the hotel kitchen has figured out how to make grilled cheese with Outworld foodstuffs, to the delight of all. Li Mei is down with the Shaolin as the nominal responsible authority figure, although she’s let Liu talk her into a game of poker.

She bites her lip, studying her hand of cards. “What do I do now?”

“I don’t know.” Liu shrugs. He’s oblivious to the game, but has been successfully faking it until now. “I didn’t think I’d get this far. Jin dared me to ask you to play.”

She laughs, and shrugs, dropping the cards on the table. “It doesn’t matter, then. But why?”

“I don’t know. You could go ask him. I think he’s grilling cheese.”

“A peculiar pastime.”

“With a group this large, it’s smart to provide food to entertain them.” Liu observes, reshuffling the deck of cards. He’s managed not to burn the edges of the deck, mostly. “I’ve never been any good at food preparation. You’d think I’d be able, but the Shaolin monastery always provided meals, and then I spent the next twenty-five years not needing to eat.”

Li Mei cracks a smile; she can’t help it. “Sorry. I shouldn’t laugh.”

“Why? It’s easier to laugh about it. It keeps me from actually thinking about what happened.” Liu shakes his head, tipping his chair back on two legs and hooking his foot around the leg of the table. “So, tell me about yourself. You seem to know a lot about the Shaolin.”
“Ah, you finally noticed. Yes, I actually studied there in disguise for several years, but it probably wasn’t at the same time you attended. It was a wonderful learning experience.”

“I’ll say. Why in disguise?”

“I didn’t think they’d want an Outworlder student.”

“But you look exactly the same as any normal Earthrealmer.”

“I do?” Li Mei is suddenly self-conscious, brushing a wisp of dark hair off her forehead. “Yes, I suppose I do, now. I was young and in search of adventure, and I had plenty of fun while it lasted, but eventually, I went back to my village. It was inevitable - they needed me. I’ve been there ever since.”

“What for?”

“I was the mayor’s daughter. Now, I’m the mayor. So it goes.”


“The job has ups and downs. So does everything else. But let’s not get too philosophical.” She chuckles, leaning forward across the table. “It’s a charming little place. You ought to visit sometime.”

“If I survive the tournament, I will. Tomas has been thinking of traveling Outworld, and I may as well come along. I don’t have anything better to do.”

“Who’s he? Have we met?”

“So far, he’s my only actual friend. You’re the second, I think.”

“I’m honored.” She smiles, a genuine gesture. “Is he the Lin Kuei agent?”

“The one from Prague whose hair looks like mine.” Liu gestures towards the other side of the room, where the ninjas are intently focused on a game. “It seems he’s busy. Introduce yourself later.”

“I’ve been meaning to. It’s nice to finally meet all the Earthrealmers in person.”

“Finally?”

“Sonya’s told me about all of you in preparation for the tournament.”

“I thought you two just met.”

“Did you really think--” Li Mei clears her throat, trying again. “She and I corresponded in secret to prepare for the tournament. Sindel helped with the accommodations, but I’ve handled everything else. I may as well. It’s my duty to restore amicable relations between Outworld and Earthrealm.”

“Why you?”

“Someone has to.”

Liu can’t argue with that.

“Grilled cheese!” A shout rings out from the kitchen, and immediately the crowd of board gamers
drops the pieces, leaps from their chairs, and heads for the door in an eager pack.

“Maybe I’ll have one.” Liu gets up, pushing his chair back in politely, and bids farewell to Li Mei. “It was nice to meet you. I’ll probably see you again sometime.”

“Thank you, and the same to you.” She returns the comment with a gracious smile as Liu retreats to the kitchen.

He is expecting grilled cheese. He is not expecting a seven-foot-tall Osh-Tekk making hot chocolate.

He blinks. “What?”

“You.” Kotal grunts at him in acknowledgement, stirring a pot of something that Liu at least assumes is hot chocolate, although it has ingredients he can’t identify. Indoors, he looks slightly less blue, and he’s not wearing his royal headpiece, but he’s still dressed jarringly differently than the rest, in what seems to be Aztec-style casual wear.

Liu stares, processing this. “Emperor.”

“Most call me that.”

“Why-- what-- why…?”

“I invited him. My idea. Didn’t think he’d come, but I’m glad he did.” Jin appears with a tray of grilled cheeses, offering one to Liu, who practically inhales it and grabs another. “We’re all going to go back to trying to kill each other tomorrow. No harm in taking advantage of the moment.”

Liu sizes him up, finishing off the grilled cheese and wiping his hands on his pants, and finally notices Erron lingering in the corner of the kitchen, sipping a mug of whatever Kotal is making. “You, too?”

“Oh.” He doesn’t even bother with a full response. For once, Erron’s left his hat at home, messy brown hair falling down one side of his face instead. He’s also lacking the dark shadow around his eyes, resulting in a surprisingly normal appearance.

He inspects Liu with disdain. “What are you lookin’ at?”

“Nothing. I’m just surprised you attended. Hello.” Liu fumbles with a proper greeting, feeling that he left all his social graces at home in Earthrealm. “Are you liking the party?”

Erron sets the mug aside and crosses his arms, leaning against the countertop. “If I was likin’ it, I wouldn’t be in the kitchen, would I?”

Liu has no response to that. He nods dumbly and turns to Kotal, summoning his best respectful smile. “Is that hot chocolate?”

Another one-word grunted response. “Yes.”

“May I have some?”

Erron raises one eyebrow, just a bit. Jin looks like he’s trying not to laugh.

Kotal weighs the options for a long moment, then nods silently, pouring it into a mug and handing it to Liu without a word.
Liu sips it… and immediately gasps for air, swallowing with difficulty and nearly dropping the cup in alarm. His mouth is on fire. “This is spicy!”

“That’s Aztec hot chocolate.” Erron hides a smile, and polishes off the rest of his drink, crossing the kitchen to approach the obviously suffering Liu. “Mind if I finish that, if you ain’t gonna?”

Liu hands him the mug with a look of despair.

“Drink some water.” He pats Liu on the shoulder, feeling a sudden pang of sympathy, and exits the room as Jin springs into action to fill a cup at the faucet.

The path upstairs isn’t hard to find, a well-worn wooden stairwell that leads up to the hotel’s back yard. Beyond the grassy space, a luxury in the dry Outworld climate, there’s an outdoor swimming pool. Takeda, Jacqui, and Ferra - and, amazingly, Torr - are splashing around, obviously having a good time. Erron has absolutely no inclination whatsoever to go swimming, but he can’t help but be curious about the rest of the party. In time, he wanders over, settling into a metal chair on the lawn and gazing up at the twilight sky.

“You.” The voice from nearby is accusatory and a bit smug. “I’m surprised you attended.”

“Shinnok.” Erron doesn’t even look. “It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“Not long enough.” Shinnok is sitting cross-legged at the back of a lounge chair, right behind Raiden, who’s staring off into the distance. Raiden looks un-focused and exhausted, and although Shinnok is patiently rubbing his shoulders, it doesn’t seem to be doing much.

“What’s wrong with ‘im?”

“Rain injured him. He can’t currently hear anything.”

“Really? A god can get hurt that bad? Guess he ain’t much of a god after all.”

Shinnok hisses and grimaces, wrinkling his nose in sudden anger. “You work for a god who barely even qualifies as a god!”

“He ain’t a god. Some people just think he is.” Erron sips the hot chocolate, well-accustomed to the spicy taste. “Doesn’t mean you two are, either.”

“Kotal could be injured just as severely as Raiden was!”

“Unlikely.”

“Do you want me to go hit him and prove it?”

“You!” Sonya’s voice rings out all the way across the yard. “Don’t you dare!”

Erron bites back an insulting remark, studying Sonya at a distance instead. “Miss Blade’s doin’ a good job lookin’ after y’all. Must be a tough task.”

“I can imagine it is, yes.” Shinnok resentfully agrees. “I trust there are no hard feelings between you and Frost?”

“Ain’t seen her all evenin’. Cassie neither.”

“I suppose they have things to do.”
“Probably.” Erron scans the edge of the pool. Most of the other SF adults are there, although a few have gone back indoors, getting tired of the constant water splashing. “So, you and yer gods… who else ya got?”

“I beg your pardon?”

Erron scoffs. “Then beg.”

“It is you who should be begging!”

“You asked first, partner!”

From a distance, they hear Johnny laugh.

He tries again. “If you and Raiden are so high n’ mighty, what other gods ya got?”

“There’s Fujin, his brother. The wind god.”

Erron keeps prying. “I know him. Other than that?”

Shinnok hesitates. “Well, most of them have disappeared.”

“You lost the gods? Aw, that’s great.” He laughs outright. Classic. “Were there ever any others to start with?”

“Yes! I just… don’t know what happened to them.” Shinnok sniffs in utter indignation. He does not care one bit for the cowboy’s attitude. “In case you didn’t notice, I was not informed of Earthrealm or Outworld events for quite a while.”

“You mean to tell me Quan Chi didn’t bring ya the newspaper n’ read it to you every day down there in hell?”

“Oh, you-- just be quiet!” Shinnok digs his fingers into Raiden’s shoulders in sudden frustration, gritting his teeth. Surprised, Raiden breaks out of his silent reverie to glance around in confusion, nodding politely at Erron Black.

Erron returns the nod. At least one of the gods is civil.

“I-- I should go indoors.” Raiden rises from his chair. His voice sounds a little different, halting as he chooses his words carefully, unsure how they sound to other ears. “It is a pleasure to see everyone. I hope you enjoyed the party.”

“Come on, you.” Shinnok follows Raiden close behind, shooting one last glare at Erron Black over his shoulder as he departs. Erron just smiles and sips his chocolate.

I hate that cowboy!

He is not so bad. Raiden glances back at Shinnok as they cross the yard. What did you speak about?

Nothing of importance. He asked me if there were other gods. I reminded him about Fujin, but… Shinnok’s train of thought comes crashing to a halt. Are there actually other gods, Raiden? Where are they? You never told me.

It is of no consequence. Raiden waves it off. Ask me later.
Later? How much later? Tomorrow? Centuries?

Perhaps… Raiden bites his lip. A week and a half from now in the morning?

That’s oddly specific. What aren’t you telling me?

Nothing that I can tell you now.

Exasperated, Shinnok holds open the screen door for Raiden, slamming it behind him as they cross the threshold. Insufferable.

I try my best. Raiden smiles. That sounds like something you would say.

On the porch, Hanzo and Kuai are engaged in a deep conversation, barely noticing Shinnok and Raiden as they pass by. Shinnok taps his fingers on the table to catch their attention, and they both greet the gods respectfully, biding them hello and goodbye in the same sentence.

Shinnok takes the hint and departs.

Hanzo watches him go, head tilted to the side thoughtfully. “I wonder what’s the matter with him.”

“If we knew what was the matter with him, we would be wiser than the greatest philosophers.”

Kuai observes critically, head swimming with stressful thoughts. “Don’t worry about it.”

“What were you going to tell me?”

“--Oh. The Cyber Initiative, yes.” Kuai settles back in the uncomfortable metal patio chair, folding his muscular arms as he gathers his words carefully. “I finally made the decision to wipe the database. Their souls must be set free.”

Hanzo inhales sharply. “After all this time?”

“After all this time. It is the only way.” Kuai closes his eyes. “It is a miracle Cyrax’s mind was intact when the gods revived him, but the others will never return. There is no chance. It is time to close that chapter of the Lin Kuei’s history.”

“A brave decision.”

“A necessary one, nothing more.”

“What you call necessary, others call brave. Trust me.” Hanzo runs his fingers through his ponytail, studying Kuai from a close distance. Once again, he’s impressed with the strength of character of his one-time bitter enemy. “What will happen now?”

“I contacted the Lin Kuei headquarters. The order has been given. Now, I’ll just sit and fret about Takeda’s fight tomorrow.”

“You and I both. I’m sure Kenshi isn’t doing well, either.”

“Naturally. But Takeda seems fine.” Kuai glances over at the far side of the yard, where Takeda is practicing his technique on the diving board, narrowly avoiding colliding with Torr in the deep end of the pool. “The best thing for him to do is relax. Nerves won’t help.”

“True, but with his telepathy, it’s more of a challenge.”

“What was that like, raising a psychic child?”
“Difficult. I quickly learned the value of honesty.” Hanzo laughs slightly, recalling the memories. “He did well. He was a bright student, and has good character. If anyone could fight Noob Saibot and emerge unscathed, it would be him--”

A feminine voice interrupts him. “Unless he reads his mind.”

“Pardon?”

Sareena, dressed in an astonishingly normal shirt and shorts, plops down in the remaining chair. She glances between the two grandmasters, nervously drumming her fingers on the armrests. “Hi. Sorry to interrupt. I already told Takeda, but I should tell you, too. If he reads Noob’s mind, there’s a chance to disrupt Quan Chi’s enchantments.”

Hanzo’s mind floods with sudden dread. “What would be the consequences?”

“Unknown, but probably bad. Notice that I said disrupt, not remove.” Sareena breathes deeply, twirling the end of her hair around her finger. She hates to be the bearer of bad news and grim warnings, but somehow, this keeps happening. “It’s just a precaution to take. Hanzo-- Mr. Hasashi, how much do you remember of being a wraith?”

“Not all that much. When my human form was restored, the memories of my past life returned to me, but the remnants of my wraith identity quickly faded.”

“Indeed. It’s a tricky problem.” Sareena gets philosophical for a moment. “There is space in the mind for only one full identity, not two. Coexistence is a challenge, and to tip the balance can lead to madness.”

“Well-said.” Kuai rests his bearded chin in his hands, eyes half-closed as he dwells on thoughts of his revenant past. Quickly breaking himself out of that dismal mental state, he turns to Hanzo, resting a hand on his forearm. “Takeda will be safe and do well. I have no doubts.”

“He’ll be all right.” Sareena nods, and smiles brightly, springing up from her chair and trotting away across the lawn. She’d better check in with the others, just in case.

Jacqui and Ferra are sitting at the edge of the pool, chattering away about all sorts of subjects, as Jax carefully reads a book that he’s wrapped in a clear plastic bag to avoid the water. He’s sitting as far away as he can, chair pushed up against the back fence, and is only half focused on the novel, keeping a close eye on his daughter and her friends.

“Hi.” Sareena leans in and taps him on one metal shoulder. “Why don’t you join the fun?”

“Can’t. My arms would rust.” He laughs at Sareena’s look of clear dismay. “Nah. They’re waterproof, but I’m too old for this. It ain’t my tournament, and thank god for that.”

“I’ll say.” Sareena sits down in a nearby seat, lounging back and just watching the group. “You think tomorrow is gonna be okay?”

“Nothin’ we can do except wait and see.” Jax muses cryptically, fumbling to turn the page on his novel through the plastic bag. “Hey, why don’t you go swimmin’? You gonna melt or something?”

“No… I think I wouldn’t, at least...” Sareena’s brow wrinkles in sudden concern. “I’ve been in the rain, and showered and bathed, and nothing happened. I don’t think a swimming pool would be a problem.”

“Then go have fun!”
“Hm… all right!” Acting on the spur of the moment, Sareena leaps into the pool, still wearing her shirt and shorts. “Takeda! Teach me how to dive!”

“Do you know how to swim?”

“Not yet! Teach me anyway!”

“Let’s just start there…” Takeda catches her by the arm, keeping her afloat, as Jacqui slips into the water to help out and Ferra eagerly follows close behind.

“At least she can go swimming. I’d just turn the pool red.”

“Hey, Skarlet.” Jax can make a pretty good guess at who’s standing next to him now. “Good to see ya.”

“You aren’t even looking at me!”

“Now I am.” He cranes his neck to make eye contact. “What’s up?”

“Jin told me to come here and ask you if you wanted some grilled cheese.”

“Hey, that’s nice. Tell him I said yeah.”

“How about hot chocolate? Kotal made some.”

“Naw. Don’t wanna be poisoned by the enemy emperor.”

“It’s not poisonous! I promise! But all right.” Skarlet slips off, chuckling to herself, and slides down the stairwell to bring the news back to Jin. “He said yes! So that’s...how many? I forgot already.”

Liu, still lingering around in the kitchen with the others, has been keeping track. “Eight. I’ll bring them out.”

“Thanks.” Jin hands him a platter, which Liu carries up the stairs and unceremoniously sets down on the porch table, calling out all the way across the yard. “COME GET IT!”

Frost laughs from the doorway. “I don’t think that’s how being a waiter works.”

“Who am I waiting for?”

She rolls her eyes. “Never mind.”

“If you say so.” Liu retreats into the building, actively avoiding any further responsibilities. “Where were you? I haven’t seen you all evening.”

“I accidentally froze the water in my shower and had to wait for it to thaw.”

He looks dismayed. Hopefully it won’t increase the cost of the hotel bill. “You didn’t ruin the plumbing, did you? I can go get Stryker. He fixes things, or so I’m told.”

“No, it’s fine now, and Stryker would probably make it worse.” Frost’s faith in her fellow man is limited, even more so for those inclined to do DIY home repair projects. “Just don’t worry about it. Where are you going, anyway?”

“Have you seen Smoke lately?”
“Isn’t the entire point of him that he can’t be seen?”
Liu huffs in frustration. “I mean… yes, but--”
Frost laughs, pointing down the hallway. “Try that way. He’ll turn up.”
“Thanks.” Liu leaves quickly, heading down the corridor with measured steps. Frost watches him depart, wearing a slightly evil smirk.
Cassie leans against the stairwell railing behind her. “Is Smoke actually that way?”
“How should I know?” She shrugs. “I haven’t seen him. I just told him to try it. It’s as good a guess as any other.”
“Liu’s going to accidentally walk into some important person’s room and it’ll be your fault.”
“I thought your mom rented out the entire hotel.”
“Good point. Then he’s going to spend the rest of the night looking in all the empty rooms, just in case.”
“Excuse me--” A light tap on Frost’s shoulder interrupts her, and she turns to face Smoke, who’s looking puzzled. “Have you seen Liu Kang?”
“Yeah. He went that way.” Frost points in the opposite direction. Before Cassie can correct her, Smoke’s already vanished again.
Cassie laughs out loud. “You’re evil.”
“Me? No way. It’s a free game of hide and seek.”
“That’s still not nice.”
“Admit it, it’s hilarious.”
“Can’t argue with that.” Cassie sneaks down to steal the remaining grilled cheese off the table. “Want to split one?”
“No thanks, I’m lactose intolerant.”
Cassie ponders this for half a minute, eyebrows raised. “No, you’re not! We’ve gone out for ice cream!”
“Haha. Yes, I know. I just wanted to see how long it’d take for you to remember.”
“Right. Are you done being evil now?”
“Never.” Frost sweeps upstairs on a trail of ice, leaving the stairs slippery and unusable for the next several minutes. “Catch me if you can.”
“Oh, you--” Cassie shakes her head, gathers her nerve, and carefully climbs up the edge of the stairwell, parkour-style, until she’s reached the top. It’s barely worth it. If only this place had an elevator.
At the landing, she runs into Shinnok, dressed in an outfit that looks suspiciously like pajamas. “Hi, Grandpa.”
Shinnok glares at her with all the spite he can muster, which isn’t much at this hour. “You… you exasperating child.”

“Exactly.” Cassie bites her lip, stifling a laugh. “You’re going to bed at ten PM?”

“Excuse me for trying to be responsible!”

“Hey, there’s a first for everything.” She shrugs, spreading her arms. “Now, if you’ll pardon me, I need to reload my weapons.”

“You’re not even fighting tomorrow. ...Are you?”

“No, but you are, and you might need a replacement.”

“The nerve of you--” But Cassie’s already gone, so Shinnok directs another fierce glare down the now-empty hallway.

Grudgingly, he has to admit he’d benefit from some backup. Although he thinks he’ll win tomorrow’s fight, it won’t be an easy task -- and they can’t afford to lose two gods. Raiden won’t be any use until his hearing returns; the only way to communicate with him right now is telepathically, which, at least, Raiden has plenty of practice with.

Shinnok shoves open the door, greeting him. *Raiden, what are you--* But Raiden’s already asleep.

Shinnok hesitates, then puts on his armor chestpiece and boots over the pajamas, getting ready to go back downstairs. The sight of the Outworld and Earthrealm team cooperating at a party is still somewhat unbelievable, and Shinnok always appreciates a spectacle.

He collides with Liu Kang on the way out the door, who apologizes and picks himself up off the carpet, looking rather disheveled. “Have you seen Smoke?”

“Why, did you lose him?”

Liu sighs. It’s just one of those days.

“Never mind.”
On a mountain in hell, a pallid figure crawls up the narrow pathway, falling to his knees and gripping at loose rocks as he falters. A shower of gravel scatters down the mountaintop, and he turns to watches the cascade of stones, glaring with baleful red eyes.

“I should never have…” He mumbles to himself, repeating a pattern of regrets. He’s been cursing himself ever since he crawled out of the pit into which he’d been flung by Jax, with just enough mind left to reconstitute a ghostly body. This is all he has left, nothing more. No strength, no magic, and just enough memory to recall the route to his fortress.

It’s been left in ruins ever since the last incident with Keryon’s invasion and the rocket launcher. No one has been bold enough to trespass on Quan Chi’s infamous territory, so when he collapses through the doorway, he sees the revenant pool replaced by a pile of ruined marble tile and glass shards, glued together by a hardened mound of lava.

Like any good sorcerer, he’s left a failsafe for himself, a revival potion hidden deep in one of the library’s secret cabinets. Greedily, he breaks the seal and desperately drinks it to restore his mana, but it does nothing except to slightly strengthen his translucent ghostly form. He still lacks his powers, and no cunning plans from his past self can possibly compensate for the fate he’s suffered.

At least he’s himself again. In essence, he’s traded his physical form for his mind.

Settling onto a broken bench, he lets his gaze drift over the ruined laboratory, stretching out his lanky frame and laying back against the worktable. He’s acquired a faint glow, the green tint of his previous magic, but he cannot even conjure a portal, much less a revenant.

Or can he?

“Is it still here?” He mutters to himself in his strange deep voice, stumbling across the broken tile floor, and uses a nearby chunk of marble to smash through the glass case containing the demonic armor he’s kept for so long. He slides on the chest-piece first, crossed leather straps adorned with a skull carved from bone. Then the shoulder and hip plates, rich enameled crimson decorated with sinister spikes, and the belt that latches in the front, with another skull for a clasp.

Satisfied, he studies himself in the remains of the nearest mirror. It will do.

Speaking an enchantment from memory, he touches his fingertips together, watching as a green glow with flares of purple flame spreads all the way up his arms and engulfs his body. Then, finally, it vanishes, leaving him far stronger than before.

Quan Chi clenches a fist in victory. All is not lost.

First things first: he will need some souls.

It seems all the soul-jars, except one, are long gone. So his efforts were ultimately overturned by those meddling mortals and gods. How dare they! He grumbles to himself, aggravated, and begins the hunt through his cabinets, rummaging through piles of books and weapon stands until he locates the precious item.

The markings on this jar’s label have nearly faded, but he can still identify it. Bi-Han.

Good. This will do. Sweeping across the room, Quan Chi sets the jar on the table and begins the
careful process of decoding his own enchantments. It comes back in bits and pieces, the arcane knowledge slowly returning to his muddled mind. He’s managed to find an informational guide he’d once written on the process, scrawled in a tattered book bound in a strange sort of leather, and as he learns from his past self, he tentatively begins to cast those very same enchantments on a brand new jar.

Hours pass, lost to his determined focus. Once it’s complete, Quan Chi steps away, leaving it on the table, and tries to think through the next steps. On his own, he’s far too weak to take on even a single enemy, but with a new pack of revenants, he could come back to plague the Earthrealmers like a poisoned thorn in their side.

Such a situation calls for unusual measures. Quan Chi has not set up a spirit trap in quite some time, as he’s had no shortage of freshly dead souls nearby, but in his abandoned mountaintop fortress, he’s not about to find any unwilling victims.

He has all the ingredients, elements, and devices - the mortals weren’t clever enough to destroy his resources, just the physical structure of his laboratory. It takes a night of tireless work, but soon enough, he’s managed to summon a small flickering pillar of green energy that swirls like an evil tornado. Filled with unholy magnetism, it will certainly be powerful enough to lure in any fresh souls that were unlucky enough to land in the Netherrealm.

Naturally, it is not as intimidating as a full-powered spirit trap. Instead of reaching from the ground to the heavens, it is about as tall as Quan Chi himself. But it will do.

It doesn’t take long until the bait lures in the first and only victim. Carefully, for hours, he waits and watches, hoping that new prey might stumble into the trap, but it seems to be only one, an amorphous soul that glows green and radiates anger.

Whoever it is, they’ll need a body…”

“…Sektor?”

Quan Chi blurts out in amazement, putting the finishing touches on a hand-crafted reanimated form. It’s all ready for the revenant enchantment, but is otherwise human, more or less. He’s found that sticking to the default blueprint is the easiest way to go.

This soul is awfully familiar. It was he with whom Quan Chi struck the bargain with the Lin Kuei, profiting off the corrupt exchange. As he carefully transfers the remnants of the soul from the spirit trap to the body, it begins to morph back into Sektor’s familiar form, a muscular Chinese ninja dressed in faded red. He glares at Quan Chi from dark eyes filled with contempt, set in an angular haughty face with sharp eyebrows and a permanent condescending frown.

As his sight returns and he begins to recognize Quan Chi, Sektor tosses his head defiantly, struggling to escape from the magical restraints. “You! Curse you, you worthless son of a demon! How dare you--” And here he lapses into angry Chinese.

Quan Chi panics. The revenants aren’t supposed to talk back.

“Just-- stop!” Quan Chi reprimands him uselessly, crossing the room to retrieve the soul jar and inscribe the proper name on the label to finish off the enchantment. The revenant curse is already half-complete, with Sektor’s skin faded to a sickly grey and a yellow glow in his hollow eyes. Quan Chi carefully etches his name on the thick glass, lifting the sharpened tool to inscribe the last letters--
And a fierce blow sends him reeling across the room as Sektor breaks free.

Sektor catches the jar in one hand, studies it for a moment, then kicks Quan Chi’s limp body aside and, with all his force, flings the glass against the wall. It shatters in a spray of shards. In an instant, the wicked glow fades from his eyes and his veins, returning him to his pre-cyber self.

He lifts his hands, studying himself, and bitterly laments the situation. “Excellent. I’ll spend the rest of my days rotting in Quan Chi’s little tower.” He gives the unconscious sorcerer another kick in the ribs for good measure before striding across the room to the workbench, spying another jar. “I should see about this.”

He takes note of the label - Bi-Han - and carefully nestles the jar in an inner pocket of his tunic. He doubts the Grandmaster still lives, or any of the other Lin Kuei. He’s also quite aware of the first Sub-Zero’s unfortunate fate. But if Quan Chi’s control somehow depends on these little jars, he’d better bring it along.

It’s time to find a way out.

Leaving behind the rest of the laboratory, he wanders back towards the spirit trap, running a hand through the green glow as his skin tingles with power. “Could this be a portal?”

It doesn’t really help to talk out loud, but at least it distracts him from the crushing loneliness.

Without his cyber form, he has nothing. He traded everything for that, and Quan Chi didn’t even give him his flamethrowers.

“Ugh!” He kicks away a chunk of stone on the floor, wincing, and strides back and forth anxiously, trying to make up his mind. He hasn’t the slightest clue what this green glowing energy might do to him. At worst, he’d return to death, or to the numb oblivion of file storage.

“Fine by me.”

He moves closer to the glow, and finally, working up his nerve, steps in.

The portal spits him out in the middle of a row of seats, tripping and falling face-first as the rest of the crowd stares at him in concern. The overcast sky has a purple tint he recognizes as Outworld, and he lays still, upside-down between rows of seats, and stares at nothing.

Coming to his senses, he gulps in air like a drowning man and sits bolt upright, scrambling for the nearest empty seat. He taps a random visitor on the shoulder, asking an urgent question. “Where is this?”

“The Koliseum. Where else?”

“Where else, indeed?” Sektor settles back, rubbing his temples and groaning in pain. His head hurts. Everything hurts. He’s not used to living.

As his vision clears, he scans the seats around him and, with a jolt of horror, realizes he’s rejoined the Lin Kuei.

Kuai, noticeably older and weathered by the years, is sitting up at the top of the stands, alongside… Scorpion, he thinks. How strange. He narrows his eyes, trying to make out his face, but it’s blurry. Several rows away, he spots Tomas Vrbada, inevitably returned to human form. And there’s--
Unlike the rest, Cyrax is the same age he was when he--

When he died. You killed him, Sektor.

He promptly argues against the voice of his conscience. The Cyber Initiative was for a good cause--

He buries his face in his hands, unable to even continue the train of thought. He’s not alive enough to sort this out quite yet.

Leaning over for a closer look Sektor squints and tries to identify the fighters in the arena. One of them, dressed all in black, looks uncannily similar to Noob Saibot. The other seems to wear Shirai Ryu colors, but it’s only a guess.

He turns to ask someone else, tapping the shoulder of the spectator in front of him. “Who’s fighting?”

The person, a muscular girl with short blue hair, turns and stares back at him in disdain. “You don’t know?”

“No. I-- I just arrived.”

“I thought they didn’t let in anyone late.”

“They made an exception.” Sektor invents an answer on the spot, sweating nervously. “So. Who are the competitors?”

“Takeda and Noob.” Frost studies the newcomer’s distinctive looks, suspicion slowly crossing her face. “You look familiar.”

“We haven’t met.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Sektor has a bad feeling about this.

He scoots away in his seat. “You don’t know me.”

“Really? Where are you from?”

“That’s… classified.” He quickly fumbles for an answer, scowling deeply and folding his arms.

“Leave me alone.”

Frost decides not to push the issue any further, but it’s strange. Very strange.

Turning back to watch the fight, she pays close attention to Takeda. He’s doing fine so far, dodging and flipping out of Noob’s attempts to grab him and slam him down against the ground. The whips are good for keeping Noob at bay, hoping to outlast the wraith in the fight, but every time Takeda lands a blow, Noob bleeds blue and re-forms right behind him, full of renewed rage.

The match is one-to-one. Noob had the edge in the first round, taking advantage of Takeda’s fear and nerves, and was able to grab him and toss him across the arena before he caught hold of the barriers with his whips. So far, he’s saved himself several times from immediate disqualification, hanging on a few inches above the sand as he hauls himself back up to the mat. Takeda got smarter
quickly, though, and outwitted Noob in the second round, teleporting out of the way of him and his shadow double. It’s a reliable trick.

Kenshi chews on his lower lip nervously, watching from the edge of the arena. It feels like a mile away. “What’s happening now?”

“Noob’s backing up into the corner of the arena. He’s sending the shadow to grab Takeda -- Takeda dodges, hits him with a laser sword. Shadow’s vanished. Pops up again right behind Noob, it’s merging back into him…” Johnny narrates it like a play-by-play, keeping Kenshi updated on the events of the fight. It’s the only thing keeping Kenshi from going insane with worry as his son participates in what could easily be a death match.

Stay safe…

I will. I am. Hang in there. Takeda eavesdrops on his father’s silent thoughts, sends back some reassurance, and does an agile backflip across the mat -- kicking Noob’s mask off as his boot collides with the wraith’s face.

Takeda drops to the ground, slowly turns, and stares back in horror.

Noob’s face is missing. Behind the mask, the grey skin has rotted away to reveal a skeletal jaw, the decayed flesh and raw bone visible underneath.

Takeda freezes, wide-eyed, and tries not to be sick.

Noob stalks towards him slowly, followed by his shadow clone that matches him step by step.

Against his better judgment, Takeda locks eyes with Noob. I’m-- I’m so sorry.

Are you?

With a silent shriek, the hellish prison of Noob’s mind pulls Takeda in, compelling him to look. In an instant, he peels away the layers of corruption and captivity and evil instincts, making contact with the victim trapped within.

For an instant, Takeda’s mind touches Bi-Han’s, and the wraith’s true soul whispers in his own voice.

“Help me…”

The glimpse of light is extinguished by a wave of shadow, like a heavy door slamming shut. Enraged, Saibot forcefully expels the foreign presence from his mind, filling to the brim with blind fury. A haze of dark magic rises from his body, steaming with power, and Noob charges across the arena and grabs Takeda by the throat, choking him and flinging him over the side of the arena like a pitiful rag-doll.

Takeda hits the ground and doesn’t move.

The announcer’s voice is laced with panic. Noob Saibot wins.

It isn’t over. It’s only just begun.

Ripping apart the ropes of the arena into frayed strands with his bare hands, Noob leaps down through the gap, landing on the sand. He vaults across the Koliseum floor towards the Earthrealm stands, moving with the speed and fury of a dark storm. He smashes through the barrier, destroying
the first row of seats, and slows to a halt as he finally glimpses the one he craves to kill.

Little brother Tundra. You die today.

A blur of green leaps in front of him, slicing at him with a triangular blade and kicking him sharply, but Saibot grabs Jade by her hair and throws her aside, colliding heavily with the barrier as her leg crumples unnaturally. Next is Stryker, useless mortal, who doesn’t even manage to fire a bullet before Noob’s ripped his gun from his hands, broken his jaw, and hurled him into the crowd, where he falls unconscious among the seats. Kabal is almost quick enough to catch him, slashing Saibot around the neck with the hooksword, but Noob comes to his shadow’s rescue and grabs Kabal’s arm, breaking it in two places with as much ease as a twig.

Kicking the injured Kabal out of reach, Noob comes face to face with Kung Lao, whose hat slices draw sickly blue blood from Noob’s veins before the wraith swiftly defeats him. Slamming him against the ground hard enough to crack his ribs, Noob hands him off to Saibot, who drops the Shaolin among the trail of fallen bodies. Liu Kang springs up to take his chance, intercepting Noob with the eager desperation of a would-be hero. But the shadow puts out the fire with ease, and Saibot and Noob grab Liu by the arms and yank hard enough to dislocate his shoulders, leaving him wailing in pain with no one to rescue him.

The other Earthrealmers aren’t close enough to help. All that’s standing between Noob and his doomed ex-brother is the rest of the Lin Kuei.

Cyrax springs up first, bravely volunteering, and escapes Jin’s grasp as his boyfriend tries to stop him from a useless effort. Instantly, Saibot knocks him back into Jin’s arms with a punch to the stomach, leaving Cyrax gasping in pain and clutching his side in agony. Frost fares no better at the hands of Noob, who destroys her ice, mocks her inferior powers, and sends her flying down into the stands, landing among the pile of other fallen Earthrealmers.

Smoke tries his best, springing up and blocking the path with a shield of fog. “Bi-Han!”

“Bi-Han is no more!” Noob grasps Smoke by the collar, lifting him off his feet to hiss into his face with putrid breath. “I will have my vengeance!”

Smoke struggles in his grip, gasping for air and trying to break free. “I’m-- sorry this-- happened!”

“Stop saying that!” Voice rising with hatred and contempt, Noob tosses Smoke over to Saibot, who punishes him with a flurry of blows before dropping his unconscious body. Rejoined by his shadow, and merging together once more, Noob storms onward and upward, focused on destroying the name of Sub-Zero once and for all.

Up at the top, Hanzo pulls desperately on Kuai’s collar, pleading with him to escape. “He is going to murder you! You must leave. Come with me. You are the grandmaster. You owe it to your clan to survive.”

“He is my brother.” Jaw set in a grim line, Kuai refuses Hanzo’s offer of help, standing tall and strong in the face of a living nightmare. “I need to speak to him.”

“There is no speaking to him! He is not there!”

“Yes, he is! I heard him!”

“It can’t be!” Hanzo groans, redoubling his efforts, but Kuai will not budge. “Please. For the sake of the others, come with me and leave.”
“You are free to go, Hanzo. You do not need to face this. He will kill you next. An eye for an eye, a life for a life.”

“That is not my concern. I will defend myself. You are making no effort.”

“There is none to be made.” Kuai seems to have accepted his fate, resigned to this confrontation, which cannot possibly end in anything other than misery. There is a deep sadness in his eyes as he watches his former brother, once an honorable ninja, now nothing more than a wraith from hell.

A figure in red and black flashes up the stairs behind him, chasing him as fast as she can.

Hanzo’s eyes widen. “Sareena?”

Just for a split-second, Sareena morphs into her demon form, reaching out with a long claw-tipped arm to snatch hold of Noob’s leg. Amazingly, she manages to yank him back, slowing him down for a long moment, and when he turns with a snarl of rage, she dodges his blows at incredible speed, staying unhurt.

She calls up to Hanzo. “I’m going to try to break his enchantments!”

Kuai is first to respond, calm as ever. “How?”

“Bi-Han is awakened. That’s why Noob is furious. If his mind can be reclaimed, the rest will return in time!”

“What needs to be done?”

“Give Bi-Han a reason to fight!” Sareena morphs into full terrifying demon form again, body-slamming Noob back down into the stands, and he escapes her grip in an inky shadow and pounces on her back, digging in his nails. She shakes him off, morphing back to human and somersaulting out from under the wraith’s heavy weight, and kicks Saibot backwards as the shadow makes a lunge for her throat.

Her voice is laced with panic. “I can’t hold him off forever! He’s not weakening quickly enough!”

Rows away, Sektor watches the fight in grim determination. He places a hand over the soul-jar nestled next to his ribs, tucked into the pocket of his tunic.

He knows what he must do.

Shoving the other horrified spectators aside, Sektor leaps to his feet and runs at full speed across the aisle, landing squarely on wooden boards that shake beneath his feet. He has no powers, no weapons, nothing but the soul jar and a good guess that this will be worth the pain.

“Bi-Han!” He takes his place atop the row of seats, hands on his hips, voice ringing out through the chaos of the rioting stadium. “I’m to blame. Come and fight me!”

“I am not Bi-Han!” The wraith snarls, chased by his shadow as they merge together into one ominous form. Behind him, Sareena frantically reads an incantation from a shred of paper, mispronouncing a few of the words. He pays her no mind.

“I am Noob Saibot!”

As Noob leaps towards him, Sektor stands tall, bracing himself, and spreads his arms.

“No, you’re not!”
Noob’s fist collides with Sektor’s body, and the jar shatters, driving shards of glass deep into his ribs.

He falls backwards in a spray of blood, landing heavily and hitting his head on one of the seat railings. As his vision swims, he sees Sareena pounce on Noob Saibot and speak the last words of the incantation. Noob finally collapses, and Kuai Liang springs into action, leaning over the broken shell of his fallen brother.

The last thing Sektor sees is the evil light fading from Bi-Han’s eyes.

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“Takeda!”

“Slow down!” Johnny chases after Kenshi, charging across the sand to kneel beside the fallen Takeda. The boy is crumpled and unconscious, whips strewn out across the ground and curled up in pain. Kenshi leans over, half-hugging him, but Johnny pulls him back. “You don’t know how he’s hurt! Don’t move him. We need to get medical help!”

“Dad…” Takeda blinks weakly, eyes fluttering open. “Whas’ happenin?”

“Noob knocked you out.” Johnny’s face slowly comes into focus, looking more worried than Takeda’s ever seen him. “Just stay still. Don’t go anywhere. I’m going to go get Sonya.”

“She gonna heal me?”

“No. But she can get someone who will.” Johnny gets up, dusting the sand off his knees, and heads back to the Earthrealm stands, frantically searching among the faces. “Where’s Sonya?”

“I’m here!” She pops up from the crowd, waving to find him. “I need medical help! We’ve got some men down. And women. Get help!”

“I was going to ask you for help!”

“I don’t care who does it! Just get it!”

“I don’t know where to find a doctor!”

“Neither do I!”

“Stop it! I’ll do it!” Jin has a sudden idea. He leaps down several rows at a time, jumping over the stadium barrier, and bolts across the arena at full speed, clearing the short wall on the other side with a well-timed leap. “Kotal Kahn! We require your assistance!”

Kotal looks at him in a mixture of confusion and alarm. “Earthrealm is at a disadvantage in the tournament. What do I owe you?”

“One of your fighters hurt ALL of ours!”

“All?”

“Most!”

He is silent for a long moment.

“Fine. Get up.” Kotal gestures for his guards to move out of the way, pushing past the others, and
strides across the sand before Jin can even stop him. “This time, I will assist.”

“Just get some doctors! Please!”

Kotal relays this order to the crowd at the other side. A number of messengers scurry off at top speed, going to fetch medical help, but Kotal continues, determined to reach the group in time. As he walks closer with Jin trotting alongside, he summons a healing sunbeam, striking down from the sky to the lowest row of the Earthrealm stands. “This will suffice until the Outworld alchemists arrive.”

“...Alchemists?”

“Not to worry. They also heal wounds and bandage bones.”

“Tell them to bring extra bandages.”

“Who is hurt?”

“Cyrax, Frost, Smoke, Liu Kang, Kung Lao, Stryker, Kabal, and Jade.”

“Oh.” Kotal had not been counting. “And the others?”

“Takeda is also hurt, but he’s conscious. Kenshi is with him. Johnny, Sonya, and Jax are helping the others.” Jin counts on his fingers, trying to make sure he hasn’t missed anyone. “Cassie and Jacqui are on the way. Shinnok’s helping. Raiden is trying. Sareena’s up with Kuai and Hanzo. They’ve got Bi-Han.”

“Bi-Han?”

Jin realizes the Outworld side has no idea what happened.

“Noob is gone.”

Kotal rubs his chin thoughtfully. “That makes two of my competitors that you Earthrealmers have taken. You owe me two in return. How about Shinnok and Raiden?”

Jin’s jaw drops.

“I am not serious. Forget the debt until the crisis has passed.” Kotal shakes his head, feathers trembling on his headdress. “If nothing else, the tournament has humbled me. I understand your perspective. Besides, Outworld now leads the score. It would be unfair to incapacitate your forces even further.”

“Kotal…” A faint voice greets him from somewhere in the stands, slowly dragging himself over to the healing sun-beam. Liu sits forlornly, unable to even move his arms. “Thank you for the hot chocolate last night. I actually liked it.”

The emperor looks down at him. “No, you did not.”

“I... well...uh.” Liu glances away. “Take care of the others first. I’m conscious and I can move.”

“Nonsense. Your shoulders are dislocated. Come here.” Jin winces as Kotal kneels down to tend to Liu’s injuries. He smoothly snaps the joints back into place, with some shrieking from Liu, who suddenly goes silent as he realizes he can move his arms again. “That was not so bad, was it?”

“Just-- go find the others. Thank you. Please... Where is Smoke?”
“Here.” Wrapped in several bandages, Smoke limps down the steps to join him beneath the sunbeam. His outfit is a tattered wreck, soaked with blue and red blood. A handful of his hair is ripped out. He rests his chin in his hands, groaning with pain. “Go talk to Bi-Han. I can’t do it right now.”

“No. Give him space.” Jin barely knows how to feel about the return of the two most infamous Lin Kuei. Right now, he’s just focused on crisis control. As a number of medics arrive and scatter through the stands, gathering up the damaged Earthrealmers and tending to their wounds, Jin gestures towards the Outworld side of the arena. “Emperor. May I escort you back?”

“No need, but you may if you wish.” They fall into step silently, trudging through the bloody sand, and halfway through, Kotal pauses to address Takeda, now laid on a stretcher on the ground while the Outworld doctors examine him. “You fought with bravery. I respect you greatly, young Takahashi.”

“Thanks.” Takeda whispers weakly, keeping his eyes shut. “I’m too tired to look. That’s Kotal, right?”

“Yes.”

“Thanks, Kotal.”

“You are welcome.”

“Where’s Jacqui?”

“I’m right here!” Jacqui hurries across the arena sand, kneeling beside Takeda to check in with him. He smiles faintly and grips her hand, steadying and calming each other as the doctors carefully check his injuries. “Kotal Kahn, we’ll take care of it. We have the situation under control. May I ask one favor?”

“Yes.”

“Can we postpone Jin and Ermac’s fight until tonight?”

“A battle in the evening? Yes. The recovery time is needed.” Kotal nods slowly. “That is a reasonable request. Is that all?”

“Hey. Takeda, what’s your favorite food?”

He mumbles quietly. “Sushi.”

“Kotal, do you have sushi in Outworld?”

“We have raw fish.”

“Not the same thing.” Jacqui swallows hard, imagining it, then gently asks Takeda again. “Second favorite?”

“Just gimme some chicken soup.”

“That can be arranged.”

“Thanks...” And Takeda quietly drifts off to sleep as the healing medicine does its work.

“We’ll take it from here.” Jacqui politely shakes Kotal’s massive hand, feeling very small and
fragile and human. She was lucky not to be hurt, but a majority of the Earthrealmers, plus Jade, are now out of commission for at least several days, if not weeks. This is a nightmare.

She gazes morosely at the sand, dragging her toes in it as she walks alongside the doctors carrying Takeda on the stretcher. She thinks about asking one of the others a question, just for the sake of hearing someone else’s reassuring voice in the grim silence of the now-empty stadium. But everyone else is lingering in the same depressed silence, so she shuts her mouth and walks onward.

Even in the back of the stadium, no one is speaking. The survivors of Noob’s rampage are all appropriately bandaged and medicated and stitched up. Now, most of them are slumped in the chairs along the walls, carefully looked after by the rest of the team. Cassie is sitting near Stryker and Kabal, while Jin has an eye on Liu and Lao. Li Mei is making conversation with Jade, who looks slightly less injured than the rest, but not by much. Hanzo and Sareena, now partly in charge by default, are anxiously chattering about what to do now. And the Lin Kuei - all of them, including the new arrivals - are huddled in the corner of the room.

More accurately, Frost, Cyrax, Smoke, and Kuai are closely guarding Sektor and Bi-Han.

The newly revived duo are eyeing each other with caution and grim appreciation, daring to talk when the others will not. Bi-Han is still consumed by a greyish pallor, resembling an older and more emaciated version of Kuai, but his face is no longer a mask of decaying terror. Sektor is still Sektor, but with many more bandages around the ribs.

Bi-Han breaks the silence eventually, muttering under his breath. “How did you know what to do?” Sektor glances over. “Who, me?”

“Yes. The jar. What was that?”

“I took it from Quan Chi’s laboratory.”

Bi-Han tenses in instinctive fear. “Quan Chi? What were you doing there?” There’s so much he doesn’t know, and couldn’t even begin to ask. Right now, he’s just trying to keep safe from immediate threats as his worn-down mind sorts out its scattered memories.

“Don’t worry. I beat him up and left. He was just a ghost. He tried to revive me.”

“Hmm.” Bi-Han clasps his hands together, settling back against the wall as he manages to suppress the power of the shadow still lurking within. “Then I suppose we are in the same situation.”

“You have twenty-five more years of experience.”

“You could say that. When did this all happen?”

Sektor just starts laughing.

“What?”

“You could say I’ve had a hell of a day.”

Though it fades in a flash, Bi-Han can’t help but smile.

“Damn you.”
“So this is goodbye, then?”

“Yes.” The man gently clasps the girl’s hands, looking her in the eye, and then gathers her into an awkward and stilted hug. Genuine affection is uncharacteristic for him. Even now, bracing himself for the task he’s awaited for months, he isn’t ready to say farewell to the only family he ever had.

She is not family by the technical definition of the word, more like the handiwork of a clever inventor. Nonetheless, eventually, she has come to view him as more of a father than the emperor who ordered her creation.

She’s choked up, wiping away tears from her scarred cheeks, and lets her long messy hair hide her expression, casting shadows across her face. “I’ll miss you.”

“And I, you.” He gently lets go, breathing out a soft sigh. He is not one to cry, but his eyes glint wet in the dim torchlight, blinking hard as he glances away.

He warns her, turning back again, with a note of urgent alarm in his tone. “Do not falter.”

“I won’t.”

“Everything depends on this.”

“I know, Father.”

“This is for you. I have made peace with it.”

“But what will you do? Where will you go?”

“How should I know?” He spreads his arms wide, shrugging carelessly. “It will be another adventure for me, and there is no harm in that. I’ve escaped fate time and time again.”

“I suppose.” A third voice joins the conversation, chuckling softly, and bright eyes gleam from the shadows. She steps closer with graceful, languid strides, folding her arms behind her back, and stands tall as she studies the pair of figures. “I have the law for proof.”

“A copy, I presume?”

“Yes. Do you take me for a fool?”

“Never. You have been a good companion to my… my daughter.” The words feel strange to say out loud, after all this time. “Where will you wait?”

“Close enough.”

“How cryptic.”

“I reveal my plans to no one.” She tilts her head to the side, smirking. “You do your part, sorcerer. I will do mine.”

“Father--” But the words die on the girl’s tongue, and she shakes her head, as if clearing out a harmful thought. “I’m sorry.”
“Don’t be. There is nothing to grieve. This is not the end.”

“Do you promise?”

“I promise.”

And, with one last lingering look of remorse, they go their separate ways, slipping out the door at the back of the warehouse. Night has fallen over the capitol, and it blazes with lights and lanterns, illuminating the main streets but not the back alleys. This is the best time to act in secret, the best way to escape detection.

For the other women striding down the Outworld street, it is strange to not fear the guards.

Feeling bold, the oldest one pushes back the hood of her cloak, letting a coiled braid of silver hair cascade down her back and fall free. “It’s odd to see Kotal’s men now. I was always so used to Shao Kahn’s followers patrolling the streets.”

“Ugh.” The girl in blue grimaces, wrinkling her nose. “Bastards! How blindly they followed that brute of an emperor!”

“Kitana, honey, don’t worry about it.” Jade is limping slightly, but otherwise recovered from the afternoon’s disaster. She reaches for Kitana’s hand, lacing their fingers together to distract the princess from her sudden fit of spite. Centuries of tightly repressed anger and distress are piled up in Kitana’s psyche, and she’s finally beginning to let go. “It’s not all that bad. I like the Osh-Tekk look, actually. It’s...dashing, in a-- a primitive sort of way.”

“I like Edenian style better.” Kitana mutters to herself, starting to cheer up a little as her steps carry her further into the brightly lit marketplace. “Do you think we’ll have time to shop tonight before the fight starts?”

“Probably not. The sun is nearly down already, and they’ll start closing the stands. We should try to arrive early.” Sindel is the voice of wisdom and reason, as usual. She also didn’t bring enough money for a proper shopping trip. “Why, what do you want to buy? We have everything we need at home.”

“I saw a nice selection of scarves yesterday. I could use some new ones...” Kitana raises an eyebrow, recognizing the familiar figure that’s just crossed their path. “Kung Jin? What are you doing out here?”

“Powering up.” The young Shaolin greets them with a friendly smile, and tries to take a bite out of an Outworld fruit, making a face as he realizes the rind isn’t edible. Embarrassed, he peels it quickly, stuffing the pieces into his mouth. “You ladies came to watch me fight? I’m honored. I hope you won’t be too disappointed.”

Jade shakes her head slightly, not understanding. “But you have to win.”

“I know.” Jin nervously taps the toe of his boot on the ground, already dressed up in his tournament armor. It’s asymmetrically designed and well-suited for an archer, with plenty of space to sling his quiver across his back, though he’s left his weapons in the Earthrealm headquarters behind the scenes. “I know. If I win this, I tie the tournament score, and then it’s up to Shinnok to bring home the win. If not...”

He lets his sentence trail off into silence. Nobody wants to finish it.

Kitana wrings her hands anxiously, letting go of Jade. “Is Takeda all right? What about the other
Earthrealmers? Were they too badly hurt?"

“Well, they don’t heal as fast as all of you do, but they’ll get better. Let’s just hope nothing else goes wrong.” Jin bravely smiles, putting on a show of false confidence to reassure himself and the Edenians. No one is actually convinced. “Takeda’s ribs are in several more pieces than they’re supposed to be, but he didn’t break his spine, so he’ll live. Cyrax is pretty much just bruised up, and Frost’s not too hurt either. Everybody else has stitches or a cast. Half of Team Earthrealm looks like they just escaped the hospital.”

Sindel comments thoughtfully. “They should probably be in one.”

“And miss the biggest fight? No chance at all.” Jin does feel a swell of pride at that, leading the way back towards the Earthrealm stands. “I got you some great seats right down in front. It’ll be a good view. Hey, just have some faith, okay? I can do this.”

“I know you can, Jin.” A familiar voice interrupts him, and Jin notices his cousin Lao standing near the doorway, hat in hand. Though wrapped in bandages around the midsection, he’s alive and well, avoiding the worst consequences of Noob’s wrath. “Mind if I talk with you for a minute?”

“No problem. Hey, go on in.” He hands the Edenians off to the guard at the door, and stands beside Lao, folding his arms to keep from nervously fidgeting. “What’s up?”

“I just wanted to say congratulations for making it this far.” Lao takes a deep breath, staring off at the vanishing sunset. “Last time I was in this stadium, I had my neck snapped. It’s a miracle I’m even here to watch you fight. You’ll do even better, I know you will. Just don’t turn your back on him.”

Jin smiles sadly. “Part of my motivation for getting here is knowing that you did it once before. What happened that day wasn’t really your fault.”

“I know it wasn’t, but it’s impossible not to think of the what-ifs.” Lao finally rests his hat back on his head, looking at Jin from under the sharp brim. “Ermac is powerful. Maybe even as powerful as Shao Kahn.”

“You don’t have to tell me. I’ve been told again and again.” Jin bites back the bitterness in his voice, apologizing. “I’m sorry. I’m nervous. It’s all up to me now. Everything. And I wasn’t even supposed to win this! I was expecting that this match would be a lost cause, and everybody else would win theirs instead. Kind of a training mission…” He studies the sand beneath his feet. “Plans sure change, don’t they? God, I should’ve picked someone else to fight. I was too cocky about it.”

“You are just as capable as any other fighter on this team. Remember, the spirits of our ancestors are with you.” Lao gives him a reassuring pat on the shoulder, stepping back into the backstage area. “That reminds me. Raiden wanted to speak with you. I should find him… Oh.”

He finds himself face to face with the lightning god, seemingly materializing out of thin air. Raiden greets them both with a friendly nod, otherwise silent.

“I’ll leave you two to talk, then. Good luck, Jin.” And they exchange a brief but heartfelt hug before Kung Lao slips away again, taking his place among the other ex-revenants who he now calls his friends.

Raiden’s voice enters Jin’s mind, beaming his thoughts in directly. Can you hear me?

Hey, what the hell! Jin flinches, taken aback, and stares at him wide-eyed. What’s going on?
I cannot hear anything since Rain electrocuted me. This is how I will communicate for now. I apologize for the intrusion. Raiden retrieves an exquisitely carved quiver from a nearby table, elaborate enough to look like a piece of artwork. I took the liberty of strengthening the enchantments and adding some decorative elements. I promise you will find your ancestors close at hand when you call upon them.

You did this?

Yes. Raiden’s face lights up with a warm, soft smile. I, too, am an artificer. I just prioritize my responsibilities over my craft. I hope that this helps.

It really, really does. Jin grins with delight and slings the quiver over his shoulder, feeling it instantly fill with the heavy weight of a batch of fresh arrows. And it’s magic?! Even better.

Yes. Ammunition should not be a concern. Fight bravely, and fight with all your heart. Raiden sets his hands on Jin’s shoulders gently, infusing him with deep and silent confidence. Then he steps back, vanishing again in a lightning flash.

It’s time.

The dull roar of the crowds outside is muted by the rush of blood in Jin’s ears, his fragile pulse pounding in his chest. Numbly, he gives Cyrax a goodbye kiss before he steps out, clutching his carved bow-staff and lighting it up with its signature flame. He is skilled at concealing his fear, and has plenty of practice, but there’s a certain look in his eyes that betrays his dread of the coming fight.

Ermac awaits at the opposite side. At an equal pace, matching their steps, the two kompetitors approach the arena. Jin leaves a straight line of neat footprints in the sand, and Ermac just floats above it, towering over their opponent once they both reach the barriers. Jin catapults himself over the rope with a well-balanced somersault, dropping to one knee when he lands, and Ermac floats languidly over the top, refusing to touch the arena mat.

Jin studies his enemy in the moments of silence while the announcer prepares to start the match. The crowd is tense and uneasy before this unpredictable fight, but Ermac looks unconcerned, green eyes glowing dimly beneath heavy lids. Their expression is almost apathetic. Unusually, they’re wearing their amulet fastened directly to their chest, as well as a belt with the same green glow. Jin can’t help but wonder why. Perhaps Ermac is more powerful than ever, and needs to contain their souls even more carefully before they unleash their full force.

Jin hopes not.

He stands tall when the announcer calls his name, ponytail flying in the sudden breeze that washes over the stadium and sets the lantern flames flickering in the darkness. Planting the base of his staff against the arena mat and gripping it with white knuckles, he is unflinching, refusing to let his worries interfere with the job that needs to be done.

He made countless mistakes the last time he was in Outworld. Since then, he’s grown up.

He notices, a bit late, that none of his arrows fell out when he leaped over the arena rope. He silently thanks Raiden for the extra enchantment - and suddenly realizes the fight is in close quarters. This will be hand-to-hand. He won’t even need arrows at all.

Well, thanks anyway. Jin springs into action, smirking at the irony, and that loosens up his nerves enough that he’s back to top form, canceling out all of Ermac’s hits and grabs with quick-thinking
defensive moves. Summoning the ancestral spirits, he sends a wave of them towards Ermac just as the construct unleashes a pulse of soul energy against him. The forces cancel out, disintegrating into nothing.

He can handle this.

Oddly, Ermac is coming closer and closer, seemingly feeling no fear even as Jin pummels them with blows from his staff. They are absorbing damage with ease, not even flinching. They must be protected by some kind of barrier from the extra amulets, which Jin needs to break down if he’s hoping to outlast the fight. Ermac’s attacks may be weaker than usual, but if Jin can’t throw them out or pin them down, he’ll lose by default. An indestructible enemy is worse than a powerful one.

Jin calculates his strategy, backed into the corner as Ermac keeps coming. Lashing out with his bow at full force, he strikes the belt amulet first, managing to loosen the clasp. Another hit sends it flying out the edge of the arena, dropping out of reach.

One down, one to go…

No! We cannot have this! Ermac’s eerie hissing voice cuts into Jin’s mind, making him flinch. They sound not only enraged, but desperate. Cease!

No way! I’m in it to win it! Jin feels like a cheesy idiot saying it, but it still gives him a burst of confidence, enough to stand tall and grip his bow with both hands as he smacks the weapon right against the glowing amulet on Ermac’s chest.

It cracks, the clear green gem turning cloudy and dark, and Ermac collapses to the ground.

Jin gasps.

Recovering, Ermac struggles to their hands and knees with difficulty, hoisting themself back up and floating an inch off the ground. Still, Jin has the upper hand now, and pins them easily on the mat, letting the time clock run out. He’s starting to feel guilty about damaging the amulet - it’s a bit of a dirty trick, but he needs this win. Not for himself, but for Earthrealm.

He can’t imagine the consequences of another loss. Kotal has been playing nice lately, but the emperor’s mood is as unpredictable as a cloudy sky.

Kung Jin wins!

Allowing himself one backwards glance, he grins at Lao, beaming from ear to ear. Lao nods at him, tipping the brim of his hat, and answers with a soft smile of pride.

When he looks back, Ermac has started glowing.

Not the usual green glow concentrated in their fingertips as they use their magic, but an angry red silhouette framing Ermac’s lean body, towering over them and growing stronger with every moment.

Holy shit!

Ermac glances upward with fear, noticing the rising silhouette, and clutches a hand to the amulet on their chest as another crack slices through the gem. Their voice rings out again, and this time, it is a true plea, laced with desperation.

“We are damaged. We will not stay together without help. If you must defeat us, do so quickly, so
that you may win. Throw us over the side.”

“I DON’T THINK SO!”

The crimson silhouette wrenches free, rising up to point and laugh at Kung Jin. It is a tall man in a horned skull helmet, dressed in barbarian armor. He wears a cruel, snarling smile on his half-hidden face.

Kung Lao gasps audibly, all the way from the stands.

“Shao Kahn?”

“I’ve been waiting for this! Thank you, little boy, for the freedom.” Shao Kahn sneers at Jin, then bends down to grab Ermac by the wrist, lifting them off the ground as they dangle limply by one arm. “I wasn’t able to free myself as long as that accursed amulet stayed intact. You were enough of a fool to break it! Now that the souls are released, I’ll have my revenge. Starting with you!”

“Revenge for what? We haven’t even met before!” Jin’s voice has risen to a desperate pitch, grabbing an arrow and releasing it in a flash before Shao Kahn can react, but the fiend sidesteps it easily as it whistles through the air and lands with a thud in the arena post. He stands taller, yelling in the ex-emperor’s face. “You can’t do anything!”

“Oh, yes, I can! As soon as the tournament is officially over and I’ve annihilated you, I’ll take back my throne and restore myself with Ermac’s other souls. Unfortunately, I have to keep this useless creature in the arena in order to win. Curse Kotal Kahn and his foolish elimination rules!” Shao Kahn is already summoning his spectral weapons, glowing red instead of the vivid green from when he still lived. Though he’s translucent and ghostly, he still packs a punch, sending Jin reeling back against the ropes after the first blow. “Should I snap your neck, too? It seems to be a family tradition!”

Jin scans the faces of the crowd with horror. Team Earthrealm already has their weapons at hand, but they’re forbidden to act, lest they interrupt the fight and ruin Jin’s chance to tie the score. Team Outworld looks equally mortified - Kotal is trying to stand up and intervene, but Bo’ Rai Cho, beside him, is tugging him back into his seat, reminding him of the rules.

“No!” Jin makes up his mind, rising up to his full height and leaping towards Shao Kahn. In a particularly gutsy move, he grabs one of Shao Kahn’s horns and yanks his head to the side, damaging his neck. It does nearly nothing to an incredibly powerful spectral soul, of course, but his head is now attached at a slightly unnatural angle, tilted to the side.

It’s a start.

Shao Kahn laughs again, but a flash of doubt has entered his voice. By now, the other souls were supposed to be escaping Ermac to make him more powerful, but they are somehow holding on, refusing to fall apart as planned. He shakes the nearly lifeless construct, squeezing them tighter around the ribs, but the amulet is still intact, even if broken. He reaches for it -- grips the amulet -- and…

“I don’t think so!” Jin smacks him with the bow again, hard enough to break bones, if Shao Kahn’s ghost had any. Dropping Ermac, he reels backward, only to find an arrow thrust directly through his throat by a furious Jin. It lodges there, and the ex-emperor’s heavy breaths rattle unnaturally. He’s running out of time.

But Ermac’s willpower is failing. Lying facedown on the mat, they start to leak green energy,
flowing out of their crumpled body and up into Shao Kahn, empowering him. He grows stronger, more solid, with each and every stolen soul.

“ERMAC!” Skarlet yells from the sidelines, frantic with fear. Her fellow construct is dying, and there’s not a thing she can do. Bo’ Rai Cho makes eye contact with her, shushing her, but she is inconsolable, running back and forth behind the barrier and digging her nails into the worn-down wood.

Jin has an idea. The fight won’t be over until Shao Kahn is down, or Ermac is pushed out of the arena -- but letting Ermac take any more damage would almost certainly destroy the amulet, returning Shao Kahn to full power and possibly ending Ermac’s own existence. Not an option.

Kicking Shao backwards with particularly forceful spite, he makes eye contact with Lao in the stands and shouts at him, gesturing with a frisbee-throwing motion. “GIVE ME YOUR HAT!”

“What?!”

“I don’t have a knife with me! I wasn’t expecting to need to kill someone!” Jin’s voice shakes, his nerves on edge. “Throw me your hat!”

“Can you catch it?!”

“I have gloves on! Do it, Lao!”

Lao grips his hat, steadies himself, and lets it loose, soaring across the stands with perfect aim. Jin grabs it, dodges a furious blow from the former Kahn -- and leaps up, driving the blade clean through Shao’s spectral throat.

Shao Kahn’s body falls in one direction. His head falls in another. And he disappears, vanishing in a puff of red energy that gets sucked up into the sky and dissipated in a gust of wind.

Jin’s troubles have only just begun.

Kneeling down beside Ermac, he speaks loudly and clearly. “Are you alive?”

Ermac answers with a grunt.

“The time clock’s running out. Do you think you can last? I can’t push you out. I’m not going to do that to you...”

Ermac is silent.

Jin grinds his teeth, counting down the seconds. Five, four, three, two...

Kung Jin wins!

“SHINNOOK!” Ignoring the announcer, Jin immediately calls out towards the Earthrealm stands, choosing the best plan of action. He’s brought the tournament score to the necessary tie, but that’s not the most important issue in the moment. “Get over here and fix the amulet!”

“What makes you think I can fix the-- oh, fine!” Producing his kit of artificer’s supplies from somewhere in his vest, Shinnok quits complaining and clears the barrier with a surprisingly powerful jump. He runs across the sand and hauls himself up into the arena, breathing heavily. Then he kneels beside Ermac, turning them over to lay on their back. “Jin! Get the belt!”

“I’ve got it already!” Skarlet pops up, crawling through the ropes and laying the precious belt into
Shinnok’s waiting hands. “What are you going to do?”

“The gems are interchangeable. The crack can’t be sealed, but I can replace it. The amulet is more powerful than the belt, so it’s possible…” Shinnok is already prying it apart with a set of small tools, but it refuses to budge. It’s fastened together with nearly indestructible materials, except for the weak point of the gem itself. As he swears and struggles with the device, souls finally begin to escape.

They take shape in silhouettes like Shao Kahn, glowing green and floating away to mingle among the Earthrealm and Outworld mortals as mass panic ensues. Some of them are familiar faces; Kitana gasps as she notices the visage of King Jerrod among the pack of loose souls. But most are too weak and faded to easily identify, featureless faces whose identities are long since lost. It pains her to remember that these are what’s left of the Edenians slain so long ago.

Slowly, as Shinnok repairs the amulet and successfully replaces the gem, the souls return single-file and merge back into Ermac, surrendering their single chance at freedom. It has been too long. They cannot survive alone. The construct is restored, although Ermac is unconscious now, incapacitated by pain and their strength sapped from the fight.

On the Outworld side of the tournament, Kotal is trying to stay calm. Erron is seated on one side of him, Bo’ Rai Cho on the other, and they’re both tongue-tied in morbid silence as the emperor watches the disaster unfold. He steeples his fingers, bowing his head as he leans forward in his seat, trying to make sense of the chaos. He was not expecting to ever see the former Kahn, much less witness his ghost slain in three minutes by a youngster from Earthrealm. And yet, despite all evidence, he cannot shake the feeling that the danger has not yet passed.

Bo’ Rai Cho places a hand on Kotal’s arm, drawing his attention. “Do you remember when I first allied myself with Outworld for the tournament?”

“Yes, of course.” He finds it a strange question to ask. “Why?”

“What did I say to you at the time?”

The emperor’s memory is sharp. “You said you chose the side that had earned your allegiance.”

“Yes.” And suddenly, he smiles wickedly, a sharp, cunning smile very unsuited to his soft features. “That side is no longer yours.”

Before his eyes, Bo’ Rai Cho morphs into another man, a sorcerer dressed in red and gold finery, with a narrow sly face and a low ponytail and dark eyes that gleam with malice.

Shang Tsung leaps up to stand on the barrier, leaning down to look Kotal in the eye as the emperor rises to his feet in shock. He revels in the moment, absorbing the awe of the crowd, and slides a knife from his sleeve, wiping the blade with a cloth dipped in poison.

He lifts the knife and, smoothly, in one venomous blow, strikes the emperor in the heart.

Kotal collapses backwards, the poison already seeping into his veins. He stares at Shang with shock and horror and betrayal, the face of a man who understands nothing. “How could you? Bo’ Rai Cho? How could…” His voice trails off, breaking. “What have you done to my friend?”

“He was never there. I’m sorry, Kotal Kahn, but that is the art of deception. You were a good friend, you really were…” Shang laughs wickedly. “To me.”

Kotal’s face is frozen in a mask of shock, blood seeping out of his chest to stain his Osh-Tekk
regalia. Erron drops to his knees, cradling the emperor in his arms and pulling out a clean bandage from his supply pack to press against the wound, but it is useless.

“If you wish to live, Kotal Kahn, you have no choice but to return to Earthrealm. There is a herb somewhere in your American forests that can reverse the effects of the poison.” Shang tosses away this information carelessly, glancing back over his shoulder as he stands tall in triumph. “I am afraid you will have to forfeit your ill-gotten throne. For now, if the emperorship is in question, I believe it belongs to--”

“NO!” With a yell of rage, a pink-clad blur leaps from the top of the Outworld stands down to the emperor’s seat, jumping from an impossible height and landing so hard her boots crack the wooden boards. “Don’t!”

“Mileena!” Shang inhales sharply, turning towards her, and she flies from her perch and knocks him off the barrier into the arena sand, teleporting to land beside him with her sais pressed to his throat. He gasps, choking for air, and stares up at her, his eyes gleaming bright. “You dare?”

Mileena speaks loud enough that the crowd can hear, her raspy voice rising in pitch. “The throne of Outworld will not be yours, Shang Tsung, you foul sorcerer! You’ll regret the day you ever crawled back from the depths of the Netherrealm!”

“Good. Shang bites back any change in his expression, keeping up the mask of anger instead. “Only if you manage to kill me, Mileena! I created you! How dare you turn on me?”

“It’s for the good of Outworld!” Mileena struggles against Shang’s attempts to push her away, the words flowing naturally. “Any wretched villain who would slay the prior emperor would not deserve the title of Kahn! It is a cheap trick, and you’ll pay for it! Why, I would rule better than you!”

“You believe yourself more suited to the throne than me? Hah! You are nothing more than a child!”

“No longer! I learned from my mistakes. I’ve studied Outworld law, taught myself how to govern. I understand the people more than ever before. I was granted a second chance, and I intend to use it!” Mileena delivers her speech precisely, fighting back against Shang as he makes an attempt to wrestle her weapons away from her. “Little do you know, you’ve given ME a chance at the throne! Your greed has consequences!”

Shang snarls in rage, not quite ready to accept his defeat. “And why is that, Mileena?”

“Outworld law states that the person who avenges the emperor may claim the throne!” She revels in the moment, the stadium falling into silence as they strain their ears for every word. “I know the rules of my realm, Shang Tsung! Can you say the same?”

“Prove it, then, and strike me down!” Shang summons his magic, his fingertips lighting up with the familiar green glow. A few shouts of “Just kill him!” ring out from across the arena as Mileena lifts her sai, ready to strike down Shang as he did to Kotal.

“You’re not bold enough, are you, little girl?”

Mileena bares her teeth in a snarl. “I am, and I always will be...”

“Now, Mileena, now!” Shang’s eyes offer a silent plea as he drops to a whisper, too quiet to hear from afar. “Remember our plan!”
“I can’t do it, Father.” Mileena freezes in revulsion at the thought, her weapon held high. “I can’t do it! Not to you!”

“Now!” Shang reaches up -- grips her arm, as if to push her away -- and yanks her wrist down, driving the blade into his own heart.

As he bleeds out on the sand, despite the agony, he is at peace. Mileena will rule again. For once, among thousands of years of misdeeds and crimes, Shang has done something right.

Mileena bends over his body, pretending to grip his neck and strangle him. Instead, she leans down to whisper in his ear, tears streaming down her face. “I’m so sorry.”

“It was worth it… my daughter.”

And just like that, he’s gone. Three months of preparation for a five-minute plan ending in his own death, and Mileena’s left with a lifeless body in her arms, her sai still impaled deep in Shang’s chest.

Tanya leaps over the barrier, pulling Mileena to her feet. “Kotal’s actually dying!”

“Why should I care?”

“Come on!” Leaving Shang’s body behind, and ignoring Ermac and the rescuers in the arena, Tanya drags Mileena back through the barrier gate to speak to Kotal face-to-face.

She bends down to address the fallen emperor, who’s prone on the ground as Erron frantically applies poison remedies to the stitched-up stab wound. “What next?”

Amazingly, he is civil, though the vivid tone of his skin is rapidly fading to gray. “It is as you said. The throne belongs to he or she who avenges the emperor. Although that…” He swallows hard, the light in his eyes growing dim. “That is contingent on my death.”

“Actually, it’s not.” Tanya stands tall beside her, one hand on Mileena’s shoulder. “I am an Edenian diplomat, or… I was. I know these laws. Revenge need not be for death. It can be for grave or bodily injury.”

Erron mutters under his breath. “Think this counts as pretty grave… but I don’t want that girl rulin’.”

“Have you a better idea, Mr. Black? Would you prefer we place you on the throne?”

“ Wouldn’t fit me anyway, and I ain’t leavin’ his side.” Erron gets to his feet, pointing a gun in Tanya’s direction. His accent is thicker under stress. “Go get them Earthrealmers.”

“Already here.” Sonya runs up to the barrier, winded from the sprint and her cap knocked off along the way. “What’s the status? This is a crisis.”

“Ya don’t say, ma’am.”

Kotal chokes out a few words. “Bo… Shang said... the cure was in the American forests.” His mind is reeling, thoughts clouded by the effects of the poison, and he stares up into the sky, barely seeing Sonya through a fog. “Take me there. Make haste.”

Sonya salutes him, and backs off, trying to stifle her rising panic. “Yes, Emperor. We can get you back to Mexico in an hour.”
“An hour will not do. I am dying.” He’s not even strong enough to raise his voice, laying in a pool of dark blood that Erron’s trying to mop up with a handkerchief. “Now it is my turn to ask for medical aid from you, but... you cannot supply it. You have nothing that will heal me, pitiful Earthrealmers.”

“We’ll just get you where you need to be.” Sonya hastily calls Johnny and Jax to her side, gathering a group of the Outworld guards to carry the wounded emperor out of sight. They are a solemn procession, striding with grim footsteps and faltering under the weight of the mighty injured god.

Shang’s body is still lying in a pathetic heap of red and gold cloth on the bloody sand. Skarlet stares at it in horror and sorrow, torn between her allegiance to Kotal Kahn and her lingering fondness for Shang, one of the few to ever protect her during Shao Kahn’s rule. The ghostly return of her captor and tormentor filled her with dread, but she still kept enough of a cool head to help Ermac, the closest thing she has ever had to family. Now, she collapses to her knees in the sand, hit by the full emotional weight of this horror.

Rain is already fretting over Ermac by the time Jin and Shinnok reach the barrier to drop them off, gathering the construct easily into his arms with no effort. Trusting that Ermac will be left in good hands, the two Earthrealm competitors turn back and silently help Skarlet up to her feet, gesturing for her to return to her group. Numbly, she walks away with wobbly steps, and Tremor, the only Outworlder remaining, gently leads her back. Ferra is distraught, following Kotal and Erron alongside Torr, and Reptile and his baby Saurian are not far behind.

The stadium is in a state of collective shock.

Mileena makes her way back out across the Koliseum sand towards Shang’s body, despite Tanya trying to pull her back, tugging on her wrist. “Stay here! You’re all we have for an emperor right now!”

“No...” She kneels down beside him, gently closing his eyes. “No matter what he did, he was still more of a father than Shao Kahn was! You know that...”

“I know. But get up. You need to pay attention to your citizens.”

“Just-- just go talk to Mother and Sister and Jade. Please.” Mileena slides her arms underneath Shang’s and struggles to lift him, staggering under his weight. “I want to bury him. I want to bury him...”

“We will. But,” and here Tanya leans into hiss in Mileena’s ear, “you’re supposed to hate him! Don’t break character!”

“I know! Ugh...” She drops him in the sand again, unable to carry his limp blood-soaked body any longer, and wipes her eyes angrily with one grimy sleeve. “Where’s Baraka? I’m going to send one of my clones to get Baraka. He can carry Father. I could myself, if I had a clone here...”

“The citizens can’t find out about the clones! Stop that.” Tanya leads her by the hand across the arena, meeting Sindel, Jade, and Kitana halfway. “I hope you’re feeling ready for responsibility this evening, because you three are now the members of the imperial court, starting right now.”

Jade nods slowly, feeling the burden of authority settle on her shoulders again. “I understand. We’ll prepare for it.”

Kitana is not so easily convinced. “Wouldn’t Erron Black still have a claim to rule, as the First Minister?”
“Not a chance. He’s not leaving Kotal behind. All his important followers are coming with him. I guarantee it” Tanya is calm and confident. She turns to face Kung Jin as he approaches, still clutching his cousin’s signature weaponized hat. “Go tend to your other Earthrealmers. We have this under control.”

“O...okay.” Jin doesn’t have anything to add. He stumbles away, mind whirling with thoughts. He doesn’t even have any energy to celebrate his well-earned victory. At least the score is at a tie. Kotal is lethally poisoned, Bo’ Rai Cho is presumably dead at the hands of Shang Tsung, Shang himself was killed by Mileena, Ermac nearly died thanks to Jin’s own mistake, but…

He killed Shao Kahn.

As his exhausted legs carry him back to the Earthrealm gate, Jin collapses against Cyrax, who holds him up as Lao carefully retrieves the hat. The rest of the Kung family swarms over him in delight and pride, supporting him and carrying him to the back and helping him remove his armor. And as Jin slumps against a seat, barely able to keep his eyes open, one happy thought finally flickers through his mind.

Lao is avenged.
“They have to let me fight!”

Shinnok stands on the hotel balcony in a fit of outrage, hands on his hips as he complains under his breath. He’s dressed head to toe in the elaborate tournament outfit he designed and constructed for himself. It’s a masterpiece of handicraft, built from the finest materials and truly befitting of a god.

Nearby, Raiden is standing around in a casual shirt and pants, studying the sunrise.

He glances at Shinnok curiously. Hm? Did you say something?

Yes. I-- He huffs out loud, frustrated enough to feel confined by the telepathic communication. I can’t believe it. He wants to forfeit? Really? And deny my opportunity to fight?

Shinnok, this is a victory for Earthrealm. We will win the tournament.

Do you know how long it took to design this?!

Raiden musters up some inner well of patience that he didn’t know he had. Shinnok, please listen to me. If Tremor forfeits the fight, we will win outright. Five to four. That ends the tournament for good.

I wanted to fight him. He sighs, reaching up to rub one of the crested horns on his helmet. I suppose I shouldn’t be so petty about this, should I?

Raiden declines to comment.

It would have been my opportunity to battle in front of both Earthrealm and Outworld, as an equal to the rest of the kompetitors.

Hm. You bring up a valid point. Raiden hesitates, fidgeting with his loose sleeve as he shifts his weight from foot to foot. The sun is bright today, beaming down on them as it rises on the horizon. The sky is clear, but Raiden prefers clouds.

He turns to Shinnok, eyes lighting up. I have an idea.

And what would that be?

Tremor can forfeit behind the scenes, but the battle still proceeds as planned. You, of course, will have to win.

You think that I possibly wouldn’t?

Shinnok, my confidence in you is complete. I am sure you know that by now.

Really?

Yes, mostly.

Raiden, you’re an awful liar. Shinnok heaves a deep sigh, brushing off his sleeves and turning on his heel to step back indoors. He leaves the door open for Raiden behind him, who shuts it politely, blocking off the sunlight from the balcony. It’s a better plan than anything I had in mind.
Are you sure you didn’t think of it yourself already?

I was debating it, but the idea needed to come from you. Besides, the rest of the Earthrealm team will listen to you. I do not command nearly as much obedience, for obvious reasons. Even with his helmet, Shinnok doesn’t quite match Raiden’s imposing height as he strides beside him towards the stairwell. You, however, cannot hear at the moment. How will you tell them? Mass telepathic group-messaging?

I will have to choose one of the others to tell them.

How about General Blade?

She is currently in Earthrealm with Kotal Kahn and his assistants.

‘Assistants,’ that’s very polite of you.

What would you call them?

He sniffs haughtily. Minions.

Raiden stifles a sigh of disappointment, leading the way down the stairwell. Shinnok, you have never learned the nuances of diplomatic discretion.

He snaps back. And YOU have?

I am no master of it, but I at least make an effort. Jackson and Jacqui Briggs and Johnny Cage are also in Earthrealm with Kotal and company. Raiden deftly changes the subject. Agents Kabal and Stryker are currently in charge. Kenshi is also still here, but he is supervising Takeda’s recovery.

Do we have anyone left who isn’t injured, exhausted, or traumatized?

That would be convenient, but no. Fortunately, Kabal and Stryker did not sustain excessively severe damage.

Unexpectedly, Frost drops down from a railing to land squarely on the stairwell in front of them. “Whatcha talking about?”

Raiden glances in her direction. What did you say?

“Don’t give me that look.” She suddenly remembers exactly how much Raiden outranks her. “Ahem. Please don’t.”

Shinnok intervenes. “He can’t hear anything right now. What do you want me to tell him?

Do not worry. I can still communicate. Raiden beams his thoughts directly into Frost’s mind. What is the matter?

There’s someone here who wants to talk to you. She makes an effort to think her response, rather than saying it out loud. She’s not sure if Shinnok can psychically eavesdrop, but it doesn’t really matter. It’s the announcer from the tournament.

Raiden reacts in surprise, glowing eyes widening. Oh? Who is it?

I don’t know, actually. Looks like an ordinary Outworlder guy. Dressed pretty nicely, so I’d guess he’s from one of the big cities. Frost leads the way down the staircase, both gods trailing behind her. Does anybody have any information about who Kotal hired to manage the tournament?
If there was anyone who knew, they’ve probably left for Earthrealm along with him. Shinnok’s tone is gloomy, shoulders slumped as he clasps his hands behind his back. He’s still not sure he’ll even get a chance to fight, but a few words with the announcer couldn’t hurt. Perhaps this man would understand the importance of finishing the tournament - it’d be unsportsmanlike to send the audience home empty-handed without the final fight. That seems like a reasonable argument.

He narrows his eyes at the man, who’s waiting at the base of the stairs. It’s nobody he recognizes, although he doesn’t quite know what he would have expected. The hotel is suspiciously empty - everyone else is either still asleep, or has already left, and Shinnok’s not about to go knock on the doors to find out.

Besides, he can’t shake the sense that he doesn’t have the full picture quite yet.

“It’s good to see you. Raiden, you fought valiantly.” The man sounds quite normal when he’s not announcing. He’s a stocky Outworlder with dark tan skin and glossy hair bound up in a loose ponytail, wearing a slight mysterious smile as he scans the group. He’s dressed in neutral colors to avoid any city affiliation in the hotly contested local tournament. Nonetheless, the materials of his outfit are fine enough that Shinnok guesses he must come from wealth.

Raiden inclines his head at the man, remarkably calm and at ease in the presence of this stranger. Could you repeat that?

Of course. The announcer nods politely. It’s good to see you. Raiden, you fought valiantly.

Thank you for saying so. Raiden smiles, a soft genuine expression that Shinnok hasn’t seen for days. The loss is nothing. The fight needed to unfold as it did. I wish I had not suffered any damage, but so be it. I did not foresee that particular detail.

Nor I. Take care, and recover soon.

Shinnok blinks, narrowing his eyes at the stranger as he notices something strange. Why would you foresee it?

Ah.

The man tries to repress a wry grin, but it escapes and spreads across his face. I suppose it is time to tell him, isn’t it?

Raiden nods, ever so slightly.

Before the astonished eyes of Frost and Shinnok, the announcer morphs into a tall dignified man with glowing white eyes, his ponytail transforming into a long silvery braid that cascades down his back.

That’s more like it.

Welcome back! In a rare show of strong emotion, Raiden exclaims in delight, gathering up the slightly shorter god into an enthusiastic hug.

Shinnok’s jaw drops. He makes eye contact with Frost, who’s practically in shock.

Fujin?!

Insurance, if you will. Raiden lets go and steps back, leaning against a pillar. He’s much more at ease, some of the stress and worry dissolving at last. The tournament events needed to unfold as they did. Just in case there was any force powerful enough to push fate off-track, we’d have assistance close at hand.
But there wasn’t, thank the realms. Fujin sounds nothing like the announcer, but the cadence of his speech patterns are similar. Shinnok kicks himself in retrospect for not noticing. He stares wide-eyed with his arms folded angrily, and Fujin glances at him in amusement. Settle down. Raiden couldn’t have told you, even if he’d wanted to, which I’m sure he did.

And why would that be? I’m a god, too!

We have worked together for quite a while longer. Raiden pats Shinnok’s shoulder. Do not take it personally.

Frost shakes her head. “I’ll be damned. Talk about a plot twist. But I’m sick of talking inside my head. Let’s go get the others and see about getting Emperor Fashion over here back to the stadium.”

Shinnok rolls his eyes. “Would that be me, Frost?”

“Yes, of course. What time did they schedule the fight for?”

“I don’t believe it was formally announced.” Fujin chuckles at his own pun, resuming the illusion and morphing back into the stranger’s face and voice for safety’s sake. “Sometime this morning, within an hour of sunrise. The fans will be arriving already. Shinnok, you need to come with me and negotiate with Tremor. He, Rain, Ermac, and Skarlet are the only remaining members of Team Outworld.”

Raiden chimes in. Should I come?

No. Stay out of it. Fujin glances at him out of the corner of his eye. Gather up the Earthrealmers. You’ll need to present a united, organized force.

Frost manages to interrupt a silent conversation. “I’m going to go get Stryker and Kabal. I think, by seniority, they’re in charge now, unless anyone else had any other ideas?”

“Yes. If it’s based on seniority, what about me?”

“Knock it off, Shinnok.” She hides a smirk. “You have to fight, anyway. Lao’s got his family to deal with, and you don’t want Liu or Smoke in charge. You just don’t.”

Fujin nods imperceptibly.

“How badly are Kabal and Stryker injured?” Shinnok raises an eyebrow. “I wasn’t paying attention. I was too busy preventing Ermac from certain death.”

“Good job on that, by the way. Stryker’s jaw is broken, Kabal’s arm is broken, but they’re both alive and mostly functional. Kabal can’t fight, but he can outrun anyone, so he’s as good as new, really.”

“Good enough. Is Stryker’s jaw wired shut?”

“No, he just has to wait for it to heal. He can still talk.”

“Fine, then. Let them handle the other children.”

“Children!? I’m twenty-four!”

“An infant, by my standards. Go fetch the other humans.” Shinnok dismisses her with a wave of his hand, and Frost makes a rude gesture before departing.
Fujin, now fully transformed back into the announcer, makes eye contact with Raiden as they approach the door of the hotel lobby. Is he always like this?

Yes. It’s much better than he was before.

Before when?

Raiden waves a hand vaguely. Before.

Right. Fujin holds the door open for Shinnok, escorting him forward. Goodbye, Raiden. Keep an eye on them all, won’t you?

I can, and I will. I’m glad there were no fatal injuries during Noob’s rampage.

As am I. Sitting still and watching while I did nothing was agony.

I agree. Raiden had stayed out of that fight, mostly to ensure that the timeline unfolded as necessary. Guiding the course of events to save Bi-Han was more important than preventing a few broken limbs. You didn’t break the illusion one single time. Well done.

Shinnok taps his wrist, his patience already wearing thin. “Are you quite done?”

“Yes. Let’s go.” Fujin ushers him out the door, already leading the way.

He fills Shinnok in on the latest details as they walk along the well-worn path. Mileena took charge of the palace quickly last night, occupying the emperor’s quarters within a few hours of the catastrophic fight. After that, she kept one of her clones in place while she and Tanya left to bury Shang Tsung. I don’t know where. I didn’t ask.

I see. Shinnok feels a strange stab of emotion that he can’t quite identify. Is she in charge today?

Yes, and handling everything competently, although I suspect she’s just doing what Tanya tells her.

That’s good enough for me. How about the other Edenians?

Sindel, Kitana, and Jade have all moved into a wing of the palace. It was a surprisingly seamless transition of power.

I gather that this was how it all needed to happen?

Yes. Raiden figured that out.

He did well, I have to say.

He grew tired of making mistakes.

Don’t we all. Shinnok folds his arms, keeping his eyes focused on the palace in the distance. He’s starting to get annoyed by the heat of his helmet, but he’s committed to the design of his tournament outfit and refuses to take it off. So how long have you been here? Was there ever any Outworlder announcer?

Since the beginning. And no, of course not.

When were you planning to tell the rest of us?

Fujin shrugs. You found out this morning. The others won’t.
Shinnok purses his lips, considering another factor. *Frost now knows.*

*She will have the sense not to mention it.*

*Are you sure?*

*Mostly.*

Shinnok grumbles. *You’re worse than Raiden.*

*No, I’m not, and you know it.*

Shinnok does not care to respond.

Fujin provides a few more details along the way, sharing more bits of vital information, and by the time they arrive at the palace gates, Shinnok has a complete picture of exactly how carefully the gods planned the tournament events - and, in many cases, allowed things to happen. Despite his infinite age, there are quite a few things that Shinnok does not know.

Tremor greets them at the wide doorway, nicely dressed in his own tournament outfit, with Skarlet following alongside behind him as she frantically stitches up a seam in the shoulder. She meets Shinnok’s eyes in panic, knowing he’ll understand. “I was an idiot to put sleeves on him! I have to do a few last-minute alterations. It won’t take long.”

Shinnok nods solemnly, remembering the many adjustments that were required for his own tournament outfits. “How did you manage to make a costume that Rain would actually wear?”

“I let him sketch out his own idea for it, then worked from that concept.”

“Was it any good?”

“It was a stick figure.”

Tremor chuckles, like the rumbling of stone. “You did well with the design.”

“He just needed to feel like he had some input. It’s all about the psychology.” Skarlet neatly ties off the thread, snipping it with her teeth, and tucks the sewing supplies back in a pouch strapped to her hip. “You’re good to go! Try not to worry about it if the shirt falls off.”

“It would barely matter, at this point.” Tremor exchanges a friendly smile with the announcer.

“Were you able to negotiate the forfeit with the Earthrealm faction?”

“Yes, thank you.” His tone is full of respect. “You have saved both sides a great deal of trouble. Unfortunately, you will now have to lose the fight.”

“It doesn’t particularly matter to me. I’m more than content with the current situation.”

“Good. Because I’m going to win.”

The announcer nudges Shinnok in the side, very carefully. “That is indeed the plan. Do not forget that both the Earthrealm and Outworld crowds are expecting this match to conclude the tournament. The official score is at a tie.”

Tremor shifts his weight from foot to foot, waiting for a chance to leave for the stadium. No time to waste. “So what you’re saying is, make itcount?”
“That is exactly what I’m saying.” The announcer turns away, bidding farewell, only to be interrupted by an out-of-breath Mileena, messy hair flying behind her as she darts out the door holding her crown onto her head. “It seems our new leader is in a hurry.”

Tanya races past them both at high speed, too, wielding a hairbrush. “You’re the empress now! You have to let me style it!”

Shinnok suppresses a fit of laughter. “I see Outworld is in good hands.”

“It doesn’t make much difference to me, as long as there’s no public uproar about it. Here, let’s use another exit so we’re not interrupted by civilians.” Tremor leads the way through the palace corridor, shaking the wooden boards with heavy footsteps, then ducks out a small door with surprising grace. “Follow me. I’ve spent enough time here to learn all the back paths and alleys.”

Shinnok eyes him critically. “Yes, but can you fit through them?”

Tremor already feels his patience decreasing. “Yes. Are you sure you’re not too old and fragile to make it all the way to the Koliseum?”

“The nerve!” The god’s green eyes widen in sudden infuriated outrage, manifesting one of his skeletal weapons from midair. “Why, you--”

“There, now you’re mad at me. That’ll make it a good fight.” Paying him no further attention, Tremor departs, carefully winding through the maze of narrow streets until he makes it all the way to the Outworld sidelines. There, he finds Mileena slumped in the comically oversized emperor’s seat with her chin in her hands, sulking as Tanya runs a comb through the tangled knots in her hair. “Good morning, Empress.”

She digs her claws into the wooden carved arm of the chair, gritting her teeth as Tanya yanks the comb through a particularly difficult snarl. “Morning.”

“How are you settling in?”

“It’s been fine. Everything is too large for me. I keep falling out of the chairs.”

Kitana, lurking nearby, jots a note down on a notepad. “I’ll have them replaced. Edenian decorative style. Jade, take care of it.” She rips off the note, handing it to Jade, who tucks it in her pocket and immediately forgets about it.

Sindel is supervising Rain and Ermac, who both seem mostly catatonic, resting in their seats as they wait for the fight to begin. Ermac is even quieter than usual, recovering from the temporary loss of their souls, and Rain is trying to give Sindel the silent treatment, though he keeps interrupting himself to comment snidely on the rest of the team. She ignores him.

Over on the far side of the arena, a scarred man with his arm in a sling and a very tired-looking man in a uniform are trying to herd the others into their proper places in the seats. It doesn’t seem to be going well.

Rain squints at them, trying to make out their faces. “I suppose the ones I don’t recognize are Earthrealm’s latest undead arrivals?”

“So it would seem.” Sindel is quietly working on a knitting project, weaving the strands of fiber into a beautiful cloth. “They are very fortunate.”

“Hrm. Just looks like more people to supervise. More of a pain than it’s worth.”
“What are they supposed to do with them, Rain? Send them to the local orphanage?” Skarlet drops into the seat next to Ermac, leaning over to give him a look. “I thought you were all about being in charge and leading the team. Wouldn’t you leap at the chance to get some long-lost people back? C’mon.”

Rain crosses his arms, leaning back and sulking, and considers summoning a cloud over Skarlet’s head, but notices the very sharp sewing scissors strapped to her pants and rethinks the idea.

“Oh, there he goes.” She watches Tremor crossing over to the central arena as the announcer introduces him, carefully stepping over the barrier ropes. “Think he’ll have a bit of an advantage with all that sand around?”

“Maybe.” Sindel checks the Earthrealm crowd for Shinnok, failing to see him anywhere. “I don’t suppose the fallen Elder God is there, too?”

“Yeah, I saw him earlier. Just give it a minute.” Skarlet props her feet up on the arena barrier, relaxing in her chair. “Looks like Tremor’s outfit is holding up. Thank goodness.”

Rain glances over. “Were you worried?”

“I had to take off the sleeves.”

“Why would you give him sleeves?”

“That’s what I’m asking myself.” She sighs, biting her lip in frustration. “Just start it already. Where is he?”

Summoning two oversized skeletal hands to surround him, Shinnok materializes from thin air, spreading his arms wide in a dramatic gesture as the bone pieces fall away to dust. Earthrealm erupts with cheers, and he turns to face them and bows grandly, appreciating the applause.

“Of course he would do that.” Rain isn’t impressed. “Who does he think he is?”

Skarlet has a quick retort. “A god, maybe. Unlike certain other half-gods I could mention?”

“Shut up. I beat Raiden.”

She nods. “Touché.”

“Since when do you speak French?”

“How did you even know that was French?”

“In advance of fighting Earthrealm, I felt obligated to prepare for it and inform myself of their cultures.” Rain places a hand on his chest, giving her a pointed look. “And you?”

“I saw it in a dictionary.” She pauses. “Rain, no one on Team Earthrealm is from France. Why would you study that?”

“I like to be thorough!” He scowls, staring at the Earthrealm crowd as if to intimidate them from a distance. “And also I thought Jacqui Briggs was from France. Jacqueline is a French name, after all.”

“You thought who was from where?”

“Shush. It’s starting.” Sindel gently silences both of them, sitting forward in her seat to watch the
fight. Tremor lands the first hit, intercepting Shinnok’s strike with a bone scythe and sending him stumbling backwards instead. And right on cue, Team Outworld, as an unlikely unified force, raises a cheer together in support of their kombatant.

Shinnok recovers quickly, summoning a new weapon to balance himself and lifting up off the arena floor to float a few inches above. Just in time, he dodges one of Tremor’s earthquakes, soaring higher. Tremor manages to grab one of the coattails on his outfit, trying to pull him back down, but it just detaches in his hand, falling away to let Shinnok escape.

Shinnok laughs, staying out of reach, and rips off the other coattail to make the outfit symmetrical, tossing it over the side of the arena. “I try to be thorough.”

“Clever.” Tremor admits this grudgingly. “But you worked so hard on that outfit.”

“Yes, but that feature was built in on purpose.” Shinnok materializes his scepter from thin air, canceling out a sudden hit from Tremor with a timely counter-attack. “Try a little harder. The fight isn’t spectacular enough yet.”

“You mean like this?” Tremor clenches his fists, raising his arms and flexing his muscles, and a gold metallic coating appears over his rocky arms, studded with glowing teal crystals. The Outworld crowd cheers excitedly, engaged by the display of his powers.

“Yes, exactly. They love magic.” Shinnok touches down on the ground again, just in time for Tremor to land an earthquake hit that sends him flying up into the sky again undignifiedly. He catches himself, grabbing his amulet, and blasts Tremor with a blazing beam of power, knocking him off his feet. “Like that!”

“Good job. Keep it going.” Tremor pounds his fists together, raising a field of sharp stone chunks from the arena floor to give Shinnok no place to land. Undeterred, Shinnok keeps floating and circles around to the other side of the arena, luring Tremor closer and closer until he snatches him with a massive skeletal hand, squeezing tight with his arms at his sides.

Tremor escapes easily, the bones crumbling as soon as he spreads his arms, and ducks one more magic blast from Shinnok. “Let’s not fight hand to hand. The crowd likes this better, anyway.”

“Not to mention it would look ridiculous, even if I float. How tall are you?”

“Don’t worry about it.” Tremor uses his powers to coat the arena mat in sand, pulling it up like a sandstorm off the Koliseum surface with sheer effort. He smiles faintly as the Outworld audience goes wild. “Your turn. Go ahead and do something impressive.”

“Is that a request, a command, or a dare?”

“I’m not stupid enough to command a god.” Tremor, despite his god-like powers, is still a sensible man. “So, whatever you want.”

“All of the above, then!” Clenching his fists, Shinnok moves to the center of the arena, his arms starting to glow bright with magenta energy. “Wait, we’re almost at time. I should knock you down.”

Tremor eyes him critically. “Can you?”

“Of course I can!” Unexpectedly, he summons a magic blast from the floor, tossing Tremor upwards before landing on his back. The sharp stones crumble beneath him like tissue, leaving him unhurt, but Shinnok grabs a bone scythe from midair, pointing the blade at his chest until the
announcer calls time.

“Now let’s do that again…” Shinnok backs up, conserving his power and floating only a few inches off the ground once more. “I don’t think you’re ready for this.”

“Would anyone possibly be?”

“Not a chance!”

“Then do it!” Tremor braces himself, arms glowing and glittering again as he shows off his elemental abilities. “Impress me.”

“That should be easy…”

And, with all his concentration, Shinnok summons his deepest and most sinister powers.

The air grows dark around him as he glows bright, silhouetted by blazing energy, floating off the ground with his amulet gripped tight.

Slowly but surely, all the long-dead bones of the Koliseum’s buried skeletons rise up.

The reanimated warriors drag themselves out of the ground like an awakened horde, shaking off the sand and crawling on all fours towards the arena platform. Some leave behind a trail of bone fragments as they shamble forward, reaching upwards and grasping with clumsy hands to pull themselves up into the arena by the ropes. At the center of it all, Shinnok fuels their half-lives with his dark magic, floating high off the ground as the ancient skeletons obey his summons. His power spreads from the air into the skeletal skulls, lighting up their eyes with frightening sorcery.

It is quite a sight for eight o’clock in the morning.

Tremor freezes, staring at Shinnok wide-eyed as some skeletons tug determinedly at the hem of his pants. “I’m impressed.”

“Just wait…”

Pressing his amulet to the center of his chest, Shinnok spreads his arms, infusing the remains of the warriors with a surge of fresh power.

They converge on Tremor, grabbing him and dragging him backwards to the edge of the arena platform. With all their might, they yank him through the ropes, dropping him onto the sand. He’s too shocked to fight them off, and just lays on his back surrounded by piles of scattered bones, staring up at Shinnok and his skeletal army as the announcer calls the victory.

Shinnok wins!

 Abruptly, Shinnok snaps his fingers. The dark aura surrounding him vanishes in a flash, giving way to broad daylight as his power shuts off. The skeletons fall back into pieces, sinking deep into the Koliseum sand again, and Shinnok kicks a few stray bones off the arena mat with the toe of his boot.

He rests his hands on his hips, surveying the crowd on both sides, and bows once again… then, in a rare show of graciousness, floats down to the Koliseum sand and helps Tremor back up to his feet. “Well-fought. I admire your effort.”

“Same to you. That was quite a spectacle.”
Shinnok smiles, a mix of smug and reassuring. “I promised my best, and I always deliver.”

The announcer calls the crowd to order for one more brief moment, bringing the tournament to a long-awaited conclusion.

*Earthrealm wins with a score of five to four, settling the dispute. We hope you enjoyed the show.*

Shinnok would swear he can hear Fujin’s true voice in those solemn tones.

He exchanges farewell compliments with Tremor before making his way back to Earthrealm’s stands, greeting a few enthusiastic mortals and then slipping behind the scenes to catch Raiden by the sleeve. *Shall we go home?*

*Not quite yet. There’s much work to be done.*

For a rare moment, Shinnok tunes out the praise of the group. *How much, Raiden?*

The thunder god smiles, a patient and enigmatic smile that suggest he knows much more than he’s telling.

*We’ve only just begun.*
“So, tell me. Whose idea was this?”

“Raiden’s.” Liu answers in an exasperated voice, not even bothering to look back as he and his crew of three miserable accomplices move forward in their long, wretched slog through the Kuatan jungle. They were originally intending to follow a path of winding back roads in a slow and steady journey, but some genius with a handy Outworld map figured out that a direct route would cut a few days off the travel time.

That genius was Liu himself, who very much regrets it.

The voice behind him sniffs dismissively. Liu can practically feel the eye-roll. “And who was it that you -- we, rather -- are supposed to meet?”

Liu winces. “He didn’t say.”

“Excellent. So we’re here trudging through an overheated swamp because Raiden told you so, and you decided that we needed to pass directly through every insect colony in Outworld?”

“I don’t want to hear it.” Liu grits his teeth, clenching his fists, and tries very hard not to summon a fireball and lob it somewhere behind him without looking. Not that it would do any good - one of his two unwilling companions is lucky enough to have ice powers, and his frigid aura is the only thing preventing the two others from passing out with heatstroke.

Bi-Han grumbles to himself, deciding not to share his next comment with Liu Kang. He would’ve vastly preferred to return directly to Earthrealm, rather than spending one more moment in this godforsaken jungle, but here he is. Both of the unexpected Lin Kuei arrivals - or rather, revivals - were hastily assigned to follow along with Liu Kang and Smoke in their mysterious journey. He really ought to have put up more of a fight. Maybe they’d have assigned him to watch over Shinnok and Raiden back in the capitol instead. It couldn’t possibly be any worse than this, could it?

He thinks it over a little more.

No, this is fine. He’ll tolerate it.

Sektor is not quite as accepting of his fate. He’s been muttering to himself in Chinese the whole way, lamenting the loss of his cyber tech, particularly the flamethrowers. He was very, very attached to those flamethrowers. Liu generously offered to contribute his own fire if it’s needed, which did not help Sektor’s mood at all. Not everyone is quite so lucky to be born with magic powers, and he deeply resents being stuck as a normal human.

‘Normal,’ of course, is highly relative among the current group.

During the few days between the end of the tournament and their current hiking trip, Sektor was able to assemble something loosely resembling a cyber suit from various bits of cast-off Earthrealm tech, but it’s heavy, inconvenient, and nothing like the real thing. At the moment, he’s stowed most of the gear away in a backpack, though he still has his new prototype ‘flamethrower’ tubes strapped to his arms - they’re more akin to a handheld lighter, but it’s better than nothing.

However, fully aware of the risk of burning the jungle down, Bi-Han froze the ends of the flamethrower tubes shut. Which leaves Sektor with no weapons at all.
Smoke is just keeping his mouth shut and trudging onward. His long silver hair is tied up in an untidy bun, damp from sweat and grimy from several days without a chance to wash it. Despite the Outworld winter, they’ve been having an unseasonably warm spell, which just happened to overlap with this trip. If this realm still has a protector god anywhere, they’re doing a terrible job regulating the weather.

Furthermore, thanks to Liu’s earlier shoulder dislocation (Noob’s fault, for which Bi-Han staunchly refuses to take any responsibility), Smoke has to carry all the baggage. He’ll do it, and he’ll tolerate it, but it’s hardly any fun. Out of the four, he’s struggling with the heat most of all. He keeps waiting for Bi-Han or Sektor to volunteer to carry something, but so far, it hasn’t happened, and it’s much too late to ask.

Smoke clears his throat, desperately trying to lighten the mood with some pleasant conversation. “We’re supposed to meet Li Mei at her village, right? She seems like a very nice woman. I didn’t have much of a chance to talk with her, but--”

Bi-Han interrupts. “Stop. I don’t want to hear it.”

“Oh.” His face falls. “All right.”

Sektor elbows Bi-Han in the ribs. “Don’t listen to him. Keep talking.”

Bi-Han stares at Sektor contemptuously. “You know, I always used to think you were an asshole.”

“And now?”

He scoffs. “Who said my opinion had changed?”

Smoke glances at Liu for guidance, who shakes his head urgently and draws a finger across his throat. Smoke takes the warning sign and keeps ignoring the other two ninjas, who are technically still his co-workers, but only technically.

Disaster strikes before they even see it coming.

Liu feels it first, sinking in the soft earth up to his ankles, and desperately stumbles to catch his balance. “Careful!” But it’s too late, and he’s immersed up to his knees by the time he remembers how to escape, moving horizontally and staring up at the jungle canopy as he slowly pulls himself out. Thank goodness he actually paid attention to Fujin’s survival tips, once.

The others aren’t so lucky.

Smoke panicked as soon as he felt himself sinking, throwing the baggage aside into a patch of prickly bushes, and is now clinging to a tree branch a few feet off the ground, desperately trying not to let go as he watches the others try to escape nature’s death-trap. Bi-Han instantly freezes the earth around him, preventing himself from sinking deeper, but, unfortunately, is now stuck. Sektor is the least fortunate of all - his backpack is embedded deep in the treacherous mud, and he absolutely refuses to let go.

Scrambling onto solid ground, Liu rubs his hands together, summoning a warm flash of fire. “Bi-Han. Can you escape?”

Bi-Han cranes his neck to glare back at him. “Do I look like I can?”
“I don’t know! That’s why I asked.”

“The short answer is no. The long answer is still no, and you’d better get me out.”

“I will.” *I don’t want to*, Liu thinks to himself, but his conscience gets the better of him. Carefully controlling his fire, he kneels down and melts the ice around Bi-Han’s arms and hands, freeing him to squirm out of the loose muck. He summons icicles to anchor himself as he crawls out, gripping the frozen spikes tightly. He’s encased in a layer of gritty mud with snow and ice particles embedded in it, which he tries to ignore.

Sektor is still floundering, and much too proud to call for help. Sinking up to his chest, he ineffectively tries to light his miniature flamethrowers, softening the mud around his hands. “I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not, you idiot.” With a wave of his hand, Bi-Han freezes the entire patch of quicksand between him and Sektor, and stalks across the path to kneel down beside him. Thinking quickly, he also freezes the ground beneath Smoke and the branch that’s about to give way under his weight. “You. Come over here, now.”

Smoke grips the branch tighter. “Me?”

“Yes, you. Let go before you fall off the tree.”

“All right…” Reluctantly, Smoke lets himself tumble to the earth, landing on his back in a patch of melting dirt. He pries himself loose, reaching back and feeling his hair tangled up in thick mud.

His face falls. “Oh, no.”


“I can see that.” Temporarily irritated, Smoke’s mild anger flares up. “I have eyes.”

“Really? I wasn’t sure. Do you have any ropes in those bags?”

Smoke eyes the dangerous thorn-bush the bags landed in. “How would I know?”

“Could you *be* any more useless? Get those bags!”

Reluctantly, he shifts into vapor form and carefully drags the first piece of luggage back onto solid earth, struggling to grip it. “Try to keep him from sinking any further while I look.”

Sektor mutters. “Just leave me to drown. It’s easier for everyone that way.”

“Absolutely not, you utter moron.” Bi-Han grips him by the collar, yanking him an inch out of the mud. “Take off your backpack. It’s dragging you down.”

“Not a chance. It’s all I have left.”

“You think *I* have anything left? Take it off, asshole.”

Crouching on the ground near Smoke, Liu rubs his chin thoughtfully. “I think Bi-Han has anger issues.”

“I can *HEAR* you! Get a rope!”

“No, here, I have a better idea.” Liu pries the hair-tie loose from Smoke’s bun, throwing the small
strip of cloth over to Bi-Han. “Will this work?”

“NO!”

“I know what to do!” Liu summons his fire again, pressing his fingertips together as he eyes the massive thornbush. “I’ll burn the plant down, and then you can pull the luggage loose.”

“You’ll set the bags on fire!” Smoke grabs desperately at Liu’s pants, pulling him back. “Stop that! I’ll get them!”

Bi-Han is still uselessly trying to reason with Sektor. “I can get you some new cyber equipment. I’m sure I could convince Kuai to pay for it.”

Sektor stares off into the distance, motionless as the quicksand slowly engulfs him. “Why do you even care? Just leave me.”

“You’re the only person who possibly has any idea what I’m going through at the moment, and I refuse to let you die. I need someone to talk to.” Bi-Han freezes himself to the earth, encasing his feet in solid ice, and uses the leverage to yank Sektor out of the mud, gaining a few inches of ground. “You may be an useless fool, but it’s better than nothing. I’m not about to leave you in here. Now take off the backpack.”

Sektor grits his teeth, glaring at Bi-Han out of dark eyes. “No.”

Bi-Han creates an ice knife from thin air, deftly slicing through the straps of the backpack and freeing Sektor’s arms from the flamethrower tubes. “How about now?”

Sektor swears at him.

“I don’t care.” Gripping the armored shoulder of Sektor’s jacket, Bi-Han pulls with all his strength, yanking him free from the quicksand at a glacially slow pace. But the dangerous soil keeps dragging him down relentlessly, and every bit of progress he makes seems useless.

Pounding footsteps shake the ground behind him.

Liu’s startled voice cuts through Bi-Han’s focused thoughts. “We’ve got company.”

He huffs under his breath. “I don’t care.”

An unfamiliar deep female voice rings out in his ear, making him flinch. “Yes, you do.”

Bi-Han whirls around to look, as Sektor’s eyes widen in surprise.

A powerful, intimidating woman is standing there and surveying him with scorn, one pair of hands on her hips and the other folded across her chest. She has a pattern of dragon scales on her skin and a crown perched on her head, attached to a mohawk of shiny black hair.

Liu drops to one knee, bowing his head. “Queen Sheeva!”

Smoke coughs nervously. “That’s not the Shokan greeting.”

Liu whispers back to him. “I’m just trying to be polite. What is the greeting?”

“Crossing both pairs of arms and pounding your upper and lower fists together.”

“I don’t have two pairs of arms to do that! What am I supposed to do?”
“Maybe we could do it together--”

“Shut up!” Bi-Han yells at both of them, losing his patience for the twentieth time. He turns back to Sheeva, raising his eyebrows in a show of defiance. “Are you going to help or not?”

“Just get out of my way.” Sheeva grabs him by the shoulders, lifting him up like a small child and placing him beside the nearest tree, and yanks Sektor out of the mud in one powerful motion, stomping back to the others and setting the unfortunate ninja down on solid ground.

“That’s better.” She laughs deeply, a note of grim amusement in her voice, as Sektor tries to scrape the mud off his clothes. “Mileena said I might find you here.”

Bi-Han wrinkles his nose, craning his neck upward to look the Shokan queen in the eye. “What does she have to do with any of this?”

“If you hadn’t arrived at Li Mei’s village within three days, I was instructed to search for you.” Sheeva wipes the dirt off her outfit, a vivid red patterned battle-suit with silver trim. “By doing so, I am technically neglecting my duties as queen, but my lieutenant is at the palace in my stead. Do you know how to reach the path to the village from here?”

Liu nods boldly. “Yes, we do.”

Smoke shakes his head. “No. No, we do not. Please help.”

“As I thought. Just follow me.” Sheeva is not inclined to make conversation. Gripping each man by the shoulder and slinging their bags across her back, she guides all four of them through the jungle, finally leading them to a dirt pathway that seems to stretch on for miles onto the horizon. Far away, in between patches of trees and rolling fields, they spot a small village, made up of scattered clusters of quaint buildings.

Liu gestures in the direction of the village. “Is that it?”

Sheeva nods grimly.

“That shouldn’t be so difficult!” He tries to adopt a cheery tone, and gets four stern, disappointed glares in his direction as a response.

Recovering from the awkward moment, he clears his throat, adjusting the collar of his tunic. “Thank you for the assistance, Queen Sheeva.” He manages something resembling the Shokan salute. “I wish you safe travels in your return.”

“Save the well-wishes for yourself. You need it more than I do.” And, with one last cutting mark, Sheeva is gone, retreating back into the jungle and disappearing within moments.

Liu rubs his nose. “I don’t think she actually liked us.”

“You think?” Bi-Han raises his eyebrows, sneering at him, as the ice slowly melts off his clothes. “Let’s go. Here’s hoping you can lead us down a road without getting lost.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure.” Sektor has recovered his composure, trying to pretend that nothing happened. Although he still half-wishes that the accidental brush with death had claimed him, he’s oddly reassured by Bi-Han’s rescue, despite his sour attitude. Shouldering the bags that Sheeva dropped, he confidently leads the way down the narrow path, leaving muddy footprints on the dirt road.
Smoke trails exhaustedly at the end of the pack, mournfully reaching up to feel the matted clump of once-silver hair that used to be his neatly tied bun. There’s not much chance of disentangling it by himself at this point. He hopes Li Mei has either good shampoo or a good pair of scissors.

As a matter of fact, he’ll just be glad to see civilization again.

Halfway to the village, they stop for a lunch break, just in time to prevent Liu from eating a dangerous wild plant he’s managed to mistake for a popular food. Bi-Han whips out a packaged sandwich from one of the tattered bags, shoving it in Liu’s direction. “Here. Eat this instead before you poison yourself.”

“Okay.” Embarrassed into silence, Liu devours it quickly, and accepts Smoke’s donation of half his own sandwich as well. Bi-Han is finished within minutes, wolfing down the food like he hasn’t seen any in years, but Sektor takes longer. He resents having to eat at all. Plugging into a cyber station was so much easier.

By the end of the trip, they’re too tired to be hostile, exchanging meaningless small talk as their weary footsteps finally carry them past the threshold of the village.

Li Mei is there to meet them, standing patiently near a street vendor’s stall. They’re days late, but she expected it - rather than spend the entire time waiting, she instructed a messenger to tell her when they saw four figures coming over the horizon, vividly dressed. Unfortunately, by now, they’re too caked in mud and grime to even see the colors of their outfits.

Liu Kang meets her eyes with a look of pure gratitude and relief. “You’re here!”

“Yes, I am.” Standing back at a safe distance, she takes in the sight. She was there to witness Noob’s rampage through the Earthrealm team, and his transformation into the unmistakable Bi-Han, but they haven’t yet spoken face to face. Sektor is also a surprise - she was expecting someone enhanced with technology, thanks to his reputation, but he seems completely ordinary, except for the thick layer of dirt and leaves stuck to him like a camouflaged hunter. They’re all mostly uninjured, at least, but Smoke and Liu are also a mess, looking more like the losers of a melee battle than brave Earthrealm adventurers.

“Dare I ask what happened?”

“No. You don’t.” Bi-Han answers brusquely, stepping up to talk face-to-face. If he’s trapped on this mission, he may as well take charge. “Where is your house? And where is the man we are supposed to meet?”

“Just up the hill.” She gestures in the correct direction, already feeling a little overwhelmed. “He wasn’t actually able to be here today.”

“Why not? We were told to meet him. Not just you.” Bi-Han looks absolutely appalled. “What?”

Smoke interrupts hastily. “No offense, ma’am.”

“None taken.” Li Mei nods politely at him, but not at Bi-Han. “He was planning to travel from his village to mine, in order to meet you here. Unfortunately, the Shokan forces have built a temporary encampment there. He is, for lack of a better word, stuck. Or so he told me.”

“How recently was this?”

“A day ago. He may have managed to escape since then. I suggest waiting patiently.”
“Patience isn’t my strong suit.”

“I’ve noticed that, Bi-Han.” Sektor cuts in, even less politely. “I’m not up to date on Outworld politics. What happened?”

Li Mei rubs her chin thoughtfully, deciding how to sum up the situation. “With the return of Mileena to the throne, Sheeva and her faction traveled to the capitol to forge an alliance, sometime within the past few days.”

Liu’s eyes widen suddenly. “So that’s what all those Shokans were doing there!”

Bi-Han looks at him in both scorn and pity.

“As I was saying…” Li Mei coughs politely, leading the way towards her house. “This provoked the anger of Goro and his faction, and he decided to bring his forces to the village in which our mutual friend is residing.”

Bi-Han curls his lip in distaste. “Friend? I’ve never met this man.”

“It’s a figure of speech.” Liu shakes his head. “And then what?”

“Nothing. Goro hasn’t yet made his move. It’s believed that Sheeva is gathering her forces to defend the capitol if Goro strikes.”

“Why would Goro be stupid enough to do that?”

“Don’t ask me. I don’t know.” Li Mei throws up her hands in a gesture of despair. “Welcome to Outworld.”

“So why do we need to meet this man, anyway?”

“For the last few months, he’s been conducting research on something extremely important in that village.”

Bi-Han quickens his pace to walk beside her. “‘Extremely important’? Who decided this was extremely important?”

“Every single person involved.”

“Fine.” Satisfied with the answer, he steps back and lets her take the lead again, waiting on the front steps as she unlocks the door of her house. It’s a spacious but cozy place -- much better than the Outworld hotel, in his opinion, and the furniture is nicer. “So what do we do? Wait for Goro to leave?”

“Or we wait for Mileena and Sheeva to devise a plan to get rid of him. The Shokans have had a civil war brewing for quite some time - the elites against the lower factions. That’s how it always seems to be.” Li Mei locks the door behind them as the last of them passes through, appreciating Liu’s sincere thanks. “There’s not much I can do from here, other than coordinate with the mayors of the rest of the local villages. But we don’t exactly have armed forces that can counter a group of Shokan.”

“Yes, I see the issue. That’s very unfortunate.” Smoke begins to hunt around the house uselessly. “Do you have any shampoo?”

“Yes, of course.” She peers at the mess that was once his long hair, trying not to wince. “Jungle
mud is like glue. That happened to me once. I had to cut it all off. I looked like I’d joined the military.”

Smoke grimaces.

“But maybe you won’t have to.” She smiles reassuringly, retreating to the bathroom to fetch all the hair products she can find. “Try this. Feel free to use the kitchen sink.”

An hour later, they’ve made no progress.

Bi-Han and Sektor are outside arguing about something trivial, while Liu is trying to assist Smoke with the useless attempt to rescue his hair. Li Mei is busy answering some of her huge pile of letters to the mayor, using something that looks like Outworld’s equivalent of a typewriter. Truth be told, she’s disappointed that her contact from the other village hasn’t showed up yet. Keeping these four Earthrealmers happy as guests seems like an absolute nightmare - not that she doesn’t trust them, but their mix of personalities is not the ideal composition of a working team.

Focusing intently, Liu runs the comb through one of the thick tangled knots in the hair, trying to minimize the pain, but as he holds the clump with one hand and yanks with the other, he manages to break off the handle, leaving it stuck in Smoke’s hair.

He finally gives up. “I think I have to cut it off.”

Smoke slumps over the table, his face buried in his hands as despair sets in. “Fine. Just get it over with.”

“Let me take care of it.” Li Mei sets aside the pile of letters, retrieving her sharpest scissors from a drawer in her desk. “I’ve done this before.”

“Thank you.” Smoke mumbles quietly. As much as he likes Liu, he doesn’t trust him to give a decent haircut. “Just make it fast.”

“I’ll try.” Wielding the scissors, Li Mei deftly cuts around the mess, trying to preserve as much as she can. Trimming it in feathered layers with the help of the broken comb, she manages to keep it longer than a buzz cut, if nothing else. She gathers up the remains of his hair and discards it all in the trash, stepping back. “You look very nice. It’ll grow back.”

Smoke finds the nearest mirror, and stares at himself mournfully. “I’ll live.”

“It’s better than dying in the quicksand! I’d rather have you than your hair.” Liu helpfully points out, going to take a seat across from Li Mei. “I appreciate your hospitality, ma’am. Do you have any pets?”

“Yes, a cat. She’s around here somewhere. Try looking under the furniture in the other rooms.” Li Mei answers politely. In truth, the cat is probably close by, but that should keep Liu occupied while she tries to finish answering her mail.

Hours later, with no trace of the cat, his search is interrupted by a knock on the door.

Liu rushes to greet the visitor before Li Mei even gets there, answering through the doorframe. “Yes?”

A distinctive voice answers him, so familiar that it sends a shiver down his spine. “Is that you, Liu Kang?”
“Yes! How did you know?!”

“One moment, please. This might be our contact. I need to verify his identity.” Li Mei ushers Liu away from the door. “Have you looked in the kitchen cabinets for my cat?”

“Not yet. I will.” Easily distracted, and also taking the obvious hint, Liu strolls off towards the kitchen, comforting Smoke with a pat on the shoulder as he passes by.

Li Mei opens the door a little ways, inspecting the visitor. Sure enough, it’s him - a cheerful and well-dressed man, a bit overweight but still obviously a formidable fighter. His silver hair is tied back in a ponytail, and his white-streaked beard is in need of a trim, neglected during his treacherous journey past the Shokan forces.

She invites him in, shaking hands with him in the Outworld manner as she grips his wrist. It’s a relief to see another Outworld resident after dealing with these peculiar Earthrealmers for several hours. “Welcome! I’m glad you could come.”

“Me, too.” He beams widely, setting aside his staff at the weapon rack by the door and unstrapping the flask from his hip. “Did you get my letter?”

“Not since yesterday. It’s probably buried in the pile I’ve been trying to answer.” She shrugs, shaking her head. Correspondence is one of her duties, but it can be tiring, and she has yet to find a competent secretary. “What did it say?”

“The Shokan haven’t yet discovered the tunnel entrance, so we’re safe on that front.”

“Good. The last thing we need is Goro stumbling into--” She notices Liu Kang out of the corner of her eye, holding the cat. “Oh, hello.”

Liu drops the cat in shock. It scampers off.

He stares wide-eyed at his former martial arts master, alive and well a week after his apparent murder.

“Bo’ Rai Cho?!”

Bo beams at him with a cheery wave from across the room. “Liu Kang! It’s so good to see you again! You always were one of my favorite pupils.”

“Yeah, I know you told them all that.” Liu manages a weak laugh. “You look different. Excuse me for saying-- how are you alive? I saw you turn into Shang Tsung and then die. In front of everyone.” He’s too much in shock to remember his manners, if he ever had any.

Bo taps a finger against his nose knowingly. “I was never dead.”

“Excuse me?”

“I really should explain, shouldn’t I?” He shrugs casually, laying out the facts. “I allowed Shang Tsung to impersonate me for the past few months while I conducted research undercover. It was the simplest way to achieve the result we needed.”

“We? Who’s we?”

“Raiden and I.”

“Yes-- of course.” Liu swallows hard, processing this. “Result? What result?”
“Everything that happened in the tournament. Surely you saw it with your own two eyes.”

“Yes, of course. Including you dying. Fake-you…” Liu trails off, at a loss for words. “I’m sorry, what’s happening?”

“No need to be sorry, my friend.” Bo’ Rai Cho strides over to him, smiling warmly, and claps him on the shoulder. “How you’ve grown since we last saw each other!”

“’You-- you could say that.’ He stutters, clearing his throat awkwardly. “Can you please explain? I assumed you were gone for good.”

“Quite the opposite, in fact. It’s impossible to get rid of me. I may as well tell you.” Bo glances at Li Mei for reassurance, and she nods silently. “I believe Raiden has finally given me permission, now that we have nothing left to lose.”

“Permission for what? Since when have you ever needed permission?”

“Ah, you overestimate me. Flattery will get you nowhere.” Bo grins, taking a seat in one of Li Mei’s armchairs. “You may have noticed that I look slightly different.”

“I assumed it was the stress.” Liu answers honestly. “My hair is gray now, too. I wasn’t expecting it--”

“No. Not that.”

Bo snaps his fingers, and the lights in the room turn off.

His eyes are glowing.

Another snap of his fingers, and the lights are back on as if nothing happened. “You really didn’t notice?”

“It’s very subtle.” Liu tilts his head to the side, processing this new development. Something uncanny is definitely happening, but he can’t exactly figure it out. It’s been a long and tiring day.

“So what are you trying to tell me?”

Bo leans forward and props his elbows on his knees, pressing his fingers together, waiting for Liu to figure it out. It doesn’t seem likely. He’ll have to drop a few more hints.

“Bo’ Rai Cho isn’t my real name.”

Liu’s eyes widen in alarm. “What is it, then?”

“Ugajin.”

He hesitates, taken aback. “I-- didn’t know that.”

“How could you? I never told you.”

He bites his lip in concentration, brows furrowing deeply. “Ugajin… That sounds a bit like Fujin.”

Bo -- or rather, Ugajin -- nods encouragingly.

Liu’s eyes light up. “You were named after one of the Japanese protector gods!”
Ugajin rests a hand on his forehead. “You’re very lucky you’re so talented at kombat.”

“Ohhh!”

And finally, realization strikes.

“You’re--” Liu stops, and tries again. “No, it can’t be!”

“Mm-hmm.” Ugajin leans back in the chair, resting his feet on the table as Li Mei tries not to wince. “There’s a reason I talked about the first battle with Shinnok as if I was there.”

“My-- my martial arts tutor is a god?”

“One who managed to piss off the elder gods quite some time ago.” Ugajin chuckles, remembering the incident. “To escape them, Raiden had the brilliant idea for me to disguise myself as a normal Outworlder, complete with a new identity. I liked it. By the time I noticed he’d just turned a human word for ‘drunk’ into a false name, it was much too late to do anything.”

“I always wondered about that.” Liu is both astonished and delighted by this new revelation. He wasn’t expecting to ever see his former master again, let alone in his unknown true form. Cautiously, he turns towards Li Mei, who’s just watching the whole conversation unfold. “Are-- are you a god, too?”

“No. I wish, but no.”

“Oh. All right.” Liu collects his thoughts after a long moment of silence. “So what were you looking for in that other village?”

He answers nonchalantly. “The tomb of Argus.”

“What?!”

Ugajin chuckles to himself, meeting Liu’s eyes from across the room. “Want to help?”
Mileena trots up the steps to the oversized throne, sitting in it politely with her hands in her lap and her ankles crossed - the picture of queenly dignity. Seconds later, though, she gets tired of the act and throws one leg over the arm of the chair, draping herself over it upside-down like a cat. “I need a new throne.”

Tanya shakes her head, following her up the steps. “We don’t have the budget for it right now.”

“The budget? Can’t we just drag one out of storage somewhere? I know we’ve got a few spare thrones sitting around. We must.” Mileena pouts, disappointed, and slithers off the side of the throne to sit on top of the back-rest instead, balancing delicately on all fours. “Mother wants to give me etiquette lessons. I don’t need those, do I?”

Tanya jots something down on the clipboard tucked under her arm, biting back a laugh. “If Sindel has suggestions for you, I’d advise you to listen. Her tenure as queen is remarkably long-lasting. She must be doing something right.”

“I suppose.” Mileena heaves an over-dramatic sigh, landing on the ground again and staring up at Tanya from the floor. “How about carpeting? Or a rug? It’s so sparse and bare in here. It’s just not welcoming. If I have a second chance at being empress, I want to keep it this time, and that involves making people like me. Right?”

“Not to put too fine a point on it, but yes.” Tanya reaches down and helps her to her feet, grabbing Mileena’s hand and tugging her up, then slips a hand into her waistband, smiling down at the shorter woman. “I believe that your popularity will increase sharply when we get the budget sorted out, and spend less on executioners.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? Then we’ll have a lot of unpaid out-of-work professional murderers around the palace.”

“So what? That describes all of us, too. Besides, they can find work at the butcher shops instead. Same concept, less loss of human life.” Tanya flips through the pages on her clipboard, a thick stack of hand-typed notes transcribed from her father’s journal. “I’m working out plans for the next month, year, and decade. If we follow these steps, we should be able to justify your authority, both legally and in the popular opinion. I’d hate to go through all this again.”

“I’ll try not to get deposed. I like not wasting your time.” Mileena laughs, then pauses, catching sight of a tall, formidable figure lingering in the doorway. She lets go of Tanya and hastily dashes across the room to greet the Shokan, her pink heeled boots clicking on the echoing floor. “Queen Sheeva! You’ve returned! What is the status of the mission? Anything to report?”

“Allow me to speak, and I will.” Sheeva answers dryly. “I located the four of them, and set them on the correct path towards Li Mei’s village. They were about to drown in quicksand.”

Mileena scowls. “Those Earthrealm idiots. You should’ve let them.”

Tanya elbows her in the ribs. “Dear!”

“Ahem...” Mileena stands up straight, adopting a polite posture with her hands clasped behind her back. “I’m very grateful for your intervention. Do you have any news on the current Shokan situation?”
Sheeva looks faintly amused. “Mine, or theirs?”

“Goro’s, of course. We’ll never reach that village if we don’t clear out the encampment.” Mileena has spent the past forty-eight hours studying and memorizing the details of the reports sent back by scouts, enthralled by her first crisis as empress. “This is so exciting. What do you suggest we do?”

Tanya taps her foot on the tiled floor, glancing around the large empty chamber. “Must we discuss it out in the open, for all to hear? If you want to surrender the element of surprise, feel free, but--”

“No.” Sheeva grabs them both by the shoulder, gently but firmly leading them out of the room and shutting the throne room doors with her other two arms. “Come. Meet with my lieutenant in the strategy chamber. We can formulate a plan.”

Mileena bites her lip with sharp fangs, feeling the stress already. “It needs to be a good one.”

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“We didn’t pack enough mosquito repellent.” Melting with sweat in the heat, Johnny summons his flickering green aura for a moment, zapping the blood-sucking insects landing on him, but it only deters them for a couple seconds. Swatting a particularly large bug on his arm, he dives for the backpack, rummaging around to find the can of bug spray, and promptly douses himself in it. “That’s better. Anybody else want some?”

“Yeah. Gimme that.” Jax gestures for him to toss it over, and catches it deftly with a gloved hand, lightly spritzing the stuff but skipping his metal arms. Nearby, Erron Black coughs, and scowls, pulling his bandana over his face. He can’t stand the weather, but he can’t stand the bug spray, either. The stuff smells toxic.

Sonya already remembered to pack enough, and seems unbothered by the weather, dressed in a light shirt and cargo pants stuffed with medical supplies. Tonight, she’s been put in charge of distributing food rations - they have enough for two weeks, which should be more than sufficient for Kotal to find the necessary healing herb in the jungle. As a matter of fact, if he doesn’t locate it within the next day, they have a bigger problem on their hands than a few insect bites.

“Wanna see!” Ferra lunges for the bug repellent, trying to snatch the can and spray some in her mouth to find out what it tastes like. Luckily, Kotal pulls her back at the last minute, lifting her gently by the collar of her shirt and placing her at a safe distance. She scowls, and rolls her eyes, balling her hands into fists. “Awww.”

“That would taste terrible. Do not think of trying.” Kotal resumes changing the bandages wrapped around his broad chest, wrapping up the blood-soaked gauze in a bag and setting it aside.

Something in the poison is refusing to let the wound heal, and unless he finds the cure shortly, he might bleed out. His skin has already faded from vivid teal to a dull tan, and his glowing eyes are dimming with each passing day.

Jacqui is the only one among them who hasn’t yet panicked about it. She has confidence that they’ll find the cure in time - they have to. They’ll just keep searching until they do.

Sitting cross-legged by the campfire, she tries to collect her thoughts. There’s no internet access out here - it’s a whole lot different than the camping trips with her dad that she’s used to. Reptile and the young Saurian have vanished into the rainforest to go hunting for fresh meat. Their diet is more carnivorous than the packed food rations can accommodate. Personally, Jacqui has no problem with them eating rats on a skewer like a kebab, but she really, really doesn’t want to see it.
Torr, the designated camp guard, seems lost in his own thoughts, staying near Ferra as he stares out into the pitch blackness. He’s in charge of fending off any wild things that come out of the forest, and carrying most of the luggage, although everyone is contributing to the effort. It’s only fair.

A rustling noise approaches from the darkness, and Torr raises his huge gauntlet-clad fists, ready to attack - but it’s just the two Saurians stumbling into the clearing, with a bag of freshly caught rodents slung over Reptile’s shoulder. Jacqui wrinkles her nose and looks away as they gulp down their dinner, not even bothering to fry it over the campfire first. “Eww.”

Kotal is more tactful. Nodding politely at the duo, he greets them by name. “Syzoth. Koetzal.”

“Hello!” The baby Saurian, named after the emperor, waves at him with one tiny clawed hand, trotting over to sit beside Kotal. He’s a strange combination of living relic and small child.

Ferra wanders over to talk with the little creature - finally, she’s not the youngest one in the group, and she’s kind of grateful for it. In the meantime, Johnny, Sonya, and Jax have been planning their next move. They’ve almost run out of ideas.

“Hey.” Jacqui gets up, moving to sit beside her dad. “How much do we know about this plant we’re trying to find?”

“Not much, other than that the toxin and antidote come from the same thing.”

A lightbulb goes off in Jacqui’s head.

Leaping to her feet, she crosses the camp to talk to the former emperor, keeping a respectful distance. “Kotal Kahn? Excuse me. I think I know what to do.”

Kotal inclines his head, patiently listening. He’s desperate for a cure, but he refuses to show it. Although he’s formally stripped of his title as Kahn, he appreciates the polite gesture. “What do you suggest?”

“Dad-- Jax told me you said the poison and the cure are made from the same plant.”

“That is true.”

“How did Shang Tsung know how to get his hands on it in the first place?”

“That one, I can tell ya.” Erron saunters over wearily, joining the conversation. Sitting down beside Kotal, he leans against the emperor’s shoulder, careful not to put any weight on his injury. “Back when I was on Earthrealm, Tsung had me gather some toxic plants for ‘im. Nothin’ from here in particular, but I’d wager he knows where everything poisonous is on Earth. Wouldn’t be hard to slip through a portal and get some of it.”

“Especially in disguise as Bo’ Rai Cho.” Kotal rubs his forehead, groaning. “How could I have been such a fool? I had no idea...”

“Don’t beat yerself up over it.” Erron closes his eyes, pulling the brim of his hat down over his forehead. “Miss Briggs. What’s the idea?”

“If it’s the same plant… the poison is still in your bloodstream, so I can program my gauntlet to search for it, and if the chemical is nearby, it’ll tell me.”

Kotal approves, nodding slowly and offering a thumbs-up. “It is worth a try.”
"I’m gonna need some of your blood. Just a little.”

He raises an eyebrow, stone-faced.

She glances at the discarded bandages. “Or that... that’ll work.”

“Go ahead. The blood is of no use to me outside my body.”

Jacqui starts the task as fast as she can, carefully placing a tiny piece of the gauze in the gauntlet’s chemical compartment with a tweezers borrowed from Sonya. Soon enough, she’s programmed it to start the search, scanning everywhere she goes. It’ll probably work.

Probably.

Kotal studies her solemnly while she works, finally clearing his throat.

She looks back at him. “Yeah?”

He speaks in the somber tones of a man finally aware of his own mortality.

“Thank you.”

Jacqui smiles. “Don’t thank me yet.”

“You are not obligated to hold loyalty to me, and yet you offer your aid.”

She shrugs. “It’d be better if you didn’t die.”

“Yer tellin’ me.” Erron chimes in, lifting the brim of his hat just enough to glance at her. “If he dies, nobody gets paid.”

Jacqui laughs, despite herself. “Let’s just survive til tomorrow. Soon as the sun’s up, we’ll start the search.”

Koetzal, their scaly little companion, looks up from his meal. He’s been eating a freshly caught snake like corn on the cob. “Do I get to help?”

Jacqui tries not to grimace at the sight. It’s definitely not the time to tell the baby Saurian about manners. “Why don’t you stay with Ferra and Torr instead?”

“Aww.” He scowls, showing a row of tiny pointy teeth. “Why can’t I come?”

“Kotal is silent for a long moment, thinking to himself. It’s a tempting offer, to resume the quest. He spoke to Syzoth of it long ago, but has not yet shared the details with the Earthrealmers. The mysterious skull, buried deep in a pyramid somewhere in this archaic rainforest, is rumored to be the artifact that keeps the ruined realm of the Osh-Tekk trapped and merged.

But if he destroys it, on the chance that it could free his realm, he would shatter the one remaining treasure from the world that used to be his.
“No. The risk is too great. We shall not.” He bows his head, studying the campfire as the flames dance in the darkness. “Some possibilities must remain buried.”

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“Ma’am, do you have a dry erase board?”

Mileena blinks at her guest, confused by his request. “A what?”

“A writing board, or-- I dunno, a chalkboard, like the kind used in classrooms.” Kabal shifts his weight from foot to foot, leaning against the wall of the strategy room as the group slowly gathers. He’s been requested to help with the anti-Shokan war plan, on the logic that an Earthrealmer’s perspective might be useful. At this point, it wouldn’t take much to outdo the group’s collective strategy insights. “It’s just easier if I draw a diagram.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Mileena passes the request to Tanya, who keeps passing it down the table from Jade to Kitana to Sheeva, waiting at the door for the others to arrive. Sheeva promptly forwards it to her lieutenant, who heads off down the hallway, checking all the rooms in vain.

“Forget it. I’ll just draw on the wall.” Kabal pulls a marker out of his pocket. “Anybody mind that?”

“YES!” Kitana practically leaps across the room to rip the marker from his hand, standing protectively between him and the wall. “This interior decor is thousands of years old! I chose it myself!”

Kabal retreats to the corner. “Yes, ma’am.”

Checking his watch discreetly, Kabal tries to ignore Kitana’s sharp glare. Stryker is running late, unfortunately, as are all the other Earthrealmers. Kabal’s honestly surprised - he’s not used to being the punctual one. Then again, Outworld’s passage of time is a little different. Maybe he’s the only person who’s not affected. Super-speed will do that.

Finally, familiar footsteps echo down the hallway, catching Kabal’s attention before his husband even enters the room. He smiles at Stryker, gesturing for him to come closer. “There you are. Hey, hon.”

“Hey, you.” Stryker gives him a quick kiss on the cheek before setting his briefcase down on the table. It’s anybody’s guess where he even found a briefcase, but he’s prepared for the meeting as best he can. “Any news?”

“Nothing yet. I’m waiting for somebody to find me a board to write on.”

“How come?”

“It’s just easier than explaining. Oh, here we go--” Sheeva catches his eye, motioning for him to come to the door. Kabal immediately does as asked. She’s a queen, after all. “What’s up?”

She towers over his height, both pairs of arms folded sternly. “We have found a room with a writing board in it. It can’t be removed, so we will need to meet there instead. Shall we go?”

“Yes. This, I want to hear.” Kitana grumbles under her breath, gathering up the other Edenians and herding them all out the door. “It’s a mistake to waste the mortals’ time on this, anyway. They have their own business to attend to. What can they offer to the plan that we cannot?”
“Humility, maybe.” Kabal mutters under his breath, moving past her.

“I heard that!” She scowls, but lets it go. He might have a point.

Kabal waits at the door politely, gesturing for Stryker to pass him as he turns out the light. “Gentlemen first.”

Kitana glances over her shoulder. She can’t resist. “Oh? Then you both need to stay inside.”

“Ha ha. Very funny.” Kabal barely reacts, but he’s trying very hard not to smile. It’s been oddly fascinating for him to see how the friendships and rivalries develop between himself and the other former revenants. None of them are anything like what they once were. “I would’ve said ladies first, but you were already outside.”

She smirks, sweeping past him down the hallway.

“Hold it!” A flash of uniformed blue and tiger-stripes is all Kabal sees as two figures go crashing to the floor, a large orange Shokan tackled to the ground by a furious Stryker. Reaching for his gun on instinct, Stryker curses at the guards who made him ditch his firepower in the weapon room, and puts his opponent in a headlock instead, fueled by his fury at the Tigrar who injured Kabal so badly.

“Kintaro!”

The Tigrar snarls at him, trying to claw free, and Stryker loosens his grip a tiny bit, keeping them in place with surprising strength. It’s taking all his self-control not to curse Kintaro out in front of all the Edenians. He’ll never, ever forgive him for how Kabal suffered.

“Why? Why did you do it?!”

A powerful three-fingered hand grabs Stryker by the scruff of his neck, lifting him several feet off the ground by the collar of his shirt. As he coughs for breath, Sheeva glares at the human, her feline eyes ablaze with fury.

“That’s not Kintaro!”

He choking out a response. “...what?”

“Not all Tigrars are identical. Now apologize.” Sheeva drops Stryker without dignity in a pile on the floor, and he winces, rubbing his still-injured jaw. “That is Shaka. My lieutenant, and one of my wives. You will ask her forgiveness.”

Stryker looks up at her meekly, swallowing hard. The Tigrar - fortunately uninjured by the incident - is two feet taller than him, and almost as strong as Sheeva herself. “I’m very sorry, ma’am. I thought you were the Tigrar who burned my husband alive.”

Shaka’s gaze shifts between Stryker and Kabal, and back again.

“I see.” She rests a clawed hand on Stryker’s shoulder, only for a moment. “In the circumstances, I would have done the same. We Shokan do not easily forget wrongs against our loved ones.”

Sheeva glares at him again, just to make a point.

Stryker retreats to the back of the group, retrieving his briefcase. “I am sincerely, extremely sorry.”

“You didn’t have to do that for me. But...” Kabal clears his throat. “Let’s just get going. We’ve got
work to do that *doesn't* involve tackling anyone."

Ten minutes later, they’re all crammed into a very tiny kitchen, listening intently to Kabal as he jots his notes and diagrams down on a chalkboard. It was probably once used for recipes of the day, but it doesn’t seem to have been touched in years.

He brushes some dust off the chalk, drawing a loose outline of the palace, the distant village, and the paths between them. “They’ve basically got the village surrounded.”

Stryker raises his hand cautiously. “Does the village actually have a name?”

“Yes. Astodan.” Kabal scrawls it in illegible handwriting. “Li Mei’s village is Sun Do. Any other suggestions?”

“Yes. You forgot the geographical features.” Kitana is sitting on top of an old shelf used for pastries, trying to maintain some impression of dignity. “Are you going to draw in the hills?”

He tosses her the chalk. “Why don’t you do it?”

“Maybe I will.” Landing on the ground, she moves over to take his place at the chalkboard, diligently filling in the map with every detail she can remember. “Do we have any other possible solutions other than getting rid of Goro and the other Shokan?”

“No.” Mileena answers flatly, perched on top of a cabinet. “Any attempt to move past them and circle around to the back of Astodan would be intercepted. Their forces move too quickly. They have many beasts of burden. Z’Unkarah has few, despite our importance.”

Kabal tilts his head to the side, looking up at her. “Why?”

“Most of them were slaughtered and eaten during the famine.” She sighs, frowning deeply, and rests her chin in her hands. Being empress is more than just a formal title of authority. More responsibility weighs on her shoulders now than she could have ever imagined. “Tanya’s spent some time figuring out the problem. Unreliable pathways and routes between the capitol and the villages led to insufficient trade and, therefore, insufficient food. The usual cause for the failure to trade was - oh, can you guess?”

“I know this one.” Jade raises her hand. “Centaur and Shokan rivalries?”

“Correct. Also Tarkatans.”

“I didn’t think that was as much of an issue.”

“Yes, well, it is. They want full rights of citizenship. Can you imagine?” Mileena spreads her arms dramatically, making a sarcastic point. “Anyway. If I don’t resolve this conflict right now, as soon as possible, it’ll establish a precedent for armies blocking the roads to force us to compromise, and just… getting away with it!” Her voice rises in pitch. “They won’t. That is absolutely not happening. Not as long as I’m in charge.”

“So, not to ask a completely obvious question, but…” Kabal adjusts his ponytail, full of nervous energy. “How do we get rid of them?”

“That’s the problem, isn’t it?”

“Well, what do they want?”
“Entry to the capitol for an audience with me… where Goro almost certainly try to stage a coup, and eliminate me and Sheeva all in one blow. He claims it’s unfair that she was granted an audience and he wasn’t.”

“Not true.” Tanya mutters quietly. “You’re doing great, sweetie. Keep going.”

Mileena grins, encouraged for a moment. “So, anyway -- Sheeva has a third of the Shokan armies, and we’ve got… well, the Outworld guards, and all my clones, and you people -- and not much else. Some of the guards died when Raiden invaded, and others were killed during unrest in the city, so we’re already down to half the usual numbers on *those.* All the citizens in the local villages have been too busy as farmers and haven’t had time for military training, so they’ll be completely useless.”

Kabal’s heart sinks. “So we’re screwed?”

“Yeah.”

“I mean, you’re all screwed. I don’t live in Outworld, I’m just volunteering. But, I’m still here right now…” He exhaled. “Yeah. It’s all of us.”

Kitana scans the room. “Does anyone other than Kabal have any brilliant ideas?”

“What if we tried to extract some of the souls from Ermac and gave them weapons?”

“Who said *that*?!”

She’s answered by silence.

“We’re not doing that! No chance. Absolutely not.” Kitana scowls, looking even more offended than before. “There’s no way it would work, and we’d probably kill Ermac. We need living warriors.”

Jade chimes in with a idea. “Do we really need living warriors? Shinnok was able to summon all those skeletons--”

“That was for the aesthetics. They’d break at the first hit from a Shokan.” Kitana shakes her head. “Not enough.”

“So, what about the Tarkatans?”

“Finally, someone’s paying attention!” Mileena turns to Shaka, who’s just had the first smart idea in this entire conversation. “That’s what I’ve been thinking. If they could unite under a leader, I may be able to convince them to follow me.”

“Where’s Baraka?”

“Out fishing, I think.”

Shaka blinks. “What?”

“Tarkatan fishing. They dive into the water and try to spear the fish. It’s quite a sport.”

Stryker muses to himself. “That sounds fun.”

“Please!” Kitana slams her fist on the table. “All right. Mileena, discuss the matter with Baraka, and see if he is willing to help. I’d suggest finding a title for him. General of the Tarkatan armies,
or some such.”

Jade furrows her brow, thinking through the consequences of the plan. “Do we really want a full standing army? Given too much authority, that could be extremely dangerous.”

“I wasn’t planning on doing that, but… yes, it’s a possibility, even if we limit them with laws.” Tanya has to admit Jade’s right. It happens on occasion. “Fine. He can be the envoy between the Tarkatans and the government. Diplomat, or something.”

“Wait. Is he polite enough to be called a diplomat?”

Tanya shrugs. “If I am, he can be, too.”

“Fair point.” Kabal jots the idea down on the chalkboard, trying to make himself useful as he contemplates a crazy idea. “Okay. You can get the Tarkatans on your side. What else?”

“I doubt there are enough of them to fight the Shokans directly, if an armed conflict happens.”


“Be quiet, hon.” Kabal glances at his husband. “So we need some kind of nuclear option, right? Something we wouldn’t actually dare use, but they’ll respect it enough to back off?”

“Yeah, of course that’d help.” Stryker knows Kabal’s got a plan in mind, but he can’t quite figure out what. He’s known for his off-the-wall ideas in a crisis, which can be very hit or miss. “Where are we going to find one of those?”

“Just hear me out here.” Kabal looks suddenly proud of himself, choosing his words carefully. “What’s worse than Raiden?”

“Shinnok?”

“Yes, but, uh, not what I was going for.”

Jade raises her hand again. “May I?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

“Define ‘worse’.”

“More of a threat.”

“Got it.” She nods solemnly, curly hair glittering in the dim kitchen light. “Corrupted Raiden.”

“Exactly!” Kabal nods grimly. “Corrupted Raiden -- Dark Raiden -- nearly wiped out Outworld’s forces the first time. The Shokan have to know they wouldn’t stand a chance against him.”

“But Raiden’s back to his normal self now.”

“Yes, but does Goro know that?”

“I’m not sure.” Jade glances at Sheeva questioningly. “Does he?”

“Goro probably hasn’t even noticed Raiden’s in Outworld at all. He’s as clever as a rock. The elites follow him for his bloodline, not his strategy skills.” Sheeva scoffs disparagingly, looking up from the kitchen drawers she’s been organizing with her spare arms. “He spent the days of the
tournament giving propaganda speeches to his armies, rather than bothering to attend. Foolish, but useful for me.”

“Great. So let’s dress Raiden up as Dark Raiden and scare off the Shokan.”

Tanya studies Kabal closely. “I’ve never heard an idea so smart and so stupid at the same time.” He offers a winning grin. “That’s what I’m here for.”

Stryker nods, as if to prove it.

“We have Shinnok here, too. Let’s include him.” Kabal keeps going, strategizing in real-time as the plan unfolds. “As a matter of fact, he should make the costumes. If anyone could do it, I’m sure it’d be him.”

Mileena pouts. “Skarlet could, too.”

“I’m sure she could, but Shinnok actually knows what they looked like as Dark Raiden and… Corrupted Shinnok, was it? I think so.” Kabal wasn’t actually there to see it. His memories of his time as a revenant are unclear at best, like a jumbled fog in the past. “Did anyone take pictures?”

“Yes, they hired a photographer for the event when he invaded Earthrealm.” Tanya responds sarcastically. “No.”

“Fine. It’ll be up to him to figure out. We just have to convince Goro and his goons. This…” Kabal pauses, processing the weight of this latest development. “This could actually work!”

The door creaks open slowly, and Cassie peeks through.

“Hi, guys.” She pushes the door open, followed in single-file by Frost and two very familiar gods dressed in surprisingly casual outfits. “Finally found you! What are you doing in the kitchen? And what’d we miss?”

Mileena peers down from the cabinet, greeting them enthusiastically. “Welcome! Yes, you missed everything.”

“Figures. These two were running late.” Cassie glances over at her shoulder at Shinnok and Raiden, then back to the gathered group. “You got any ideas to share?”

Kabal looks past her, closely studying the two gods, who look completely confused. Exactly what he expects.

“Boy, do we ever.”
Liu looks up, startled by the other man, who arrived in total silence. “I thought it would help.”

Smoke reaches up to run his fingers through his hair in frustration, still adjusting to the short cut. Sighing with exasperation, he clasps his hands behind his back again, observing Liu from across the room. Unknown to him, until right now, Liu took matters into his own hands and cut his own hair, in some sort of solidarity with Smoke. Perhaps it would be better if he hadn’t.

Or, at least, someone else ought to have cut it. It’s a tragedy.

Smoke sighs, approaching him. “I appreciate the gesture, but it would have been better for you to ask Li Mei to help.”

“I considered it, but she was so busy. I suppose I could ask her to… fix it.” Liu does have to admit that something went wrong. Lopsided is not the look he was aiming for. Observing himself in the mirror, he sighs and slumps forward across the table, resting his chin in his hands. “At least it’s not entirely ruined, unlike most other things.”

Smoke settles in at the table across from him, intrigued by Liu’s sudden pessimism. It’s a contrast to the norm, at least recently. “What’s the matter?”

“Tomas…” He uses Smoke’s real name, not bothering with formalities. “Remember how I told you I never wanted to see any Shokans again?”

“Yes.” Smoke doesn’t recall the details, but he feels the need to be polite, and he hasn’t forgotten the conversation. “And?”

“Li Mei informed me of our travel plans. We’re needed back at the palace, and we will need to pass directly by the entire Shokan encampment.” Liu’s already dreading it. What if Goro recognizes him? He can’t possibly imagine any positive end to that, particularly since he is no longer the well-known champion. Not after what he endured.

Smoke shrugs, hastily cleaning up the tabletop before Li Mei arrives. He doesn’t want to cause any extra work or stress for her, in gratitude for her hospitality. It’s rare to find nice Outworlders. “Will we have to travel alone?”

“No, Bi-Han and Sektor are returning with us, as is Bo’ R-- Ugajin.” Liu’s still shaken by that revelation, but he doesn’t mind finding out. It’s reassuring to know that someone as powerful as a god willingly took him under their wing as a mentor. Two, counting Raiden.

Smoke reaches down to pet Li Mei’s cat as it saunters past, winding around his legs and nearly tripping him. “Is Li Mei coming with us?”

“She’s needed here instead, I’m told. Which I understand.” Liu sadly reports the facts. “Outworld’s system of government seems to be held in place by the very, very small handful of people actually willing to do their jobs.”

“Isn’t that the truth everywhere? Not that I have any experience in it.” Bi-Han snorts, stepping into the room, and pauses to stare at Liu with faint horror. “What happened? Did you do that to yourself, or did a nest of magpies attack you?”
Liu tilts his head to the side. “What?”

“Your hair.”

“Oh.” Liu clears his throat politely, unsure how to respond. Bi-Han is a menacing presence, and Liu sometimes still struggles to meet his icy gaze. “Yes, it’s, uh, incomplete.”

“I’ll take care of that.” Bi-Han moves across the room swiftly, picking up the scissors. He may as well attempt to rescue it. “Freeze, or I’ll freeze you. You can’t return to the palace looking like that.”

Liu holds still obediently, squeezing his eyes tightly shut and not daring to breathe. Despite Bi-Han’s relative tolerance for him, he’s still an angry cryomancer with a sharp bladed item five inches away from Liu’s face.

“Done.” Bi-Han drops the scissors on the table a few minutes later, dusting the wisps of silver hair off Liu’s shoulders, and strides away. He did his good deed for the week. That’s enough. “It’s less of a wreck now. I’m not sure if there’s enough to tie with a ponytail, but you could try.”

“I’ll just leave it.” Liu shrugs, managing a weak smile. Sometimes he wonders how he still lacks so many basic life skills, then remembers he spent twenty-five years undead. Then again, so did Bi-Han, so Liu really has no excuse.

Sektor doesn’t even bother entering the room, choosing instead to lean against the doorframe with a look of barely contained mockery. His hair is neatly trimmed as well, at the ends of the flowing ponytail. He’s also found a pair of glasses somewhere. For Sektor to admit any flaw, particularly in his vision, is both ironic and a good sign of newfound humility.

He bites back any smug remarks. Liu’s probably heard it already.

“Are you ready to go?” Li Mei gathers them all up, herding them like schoolchildren in the direction of the luggage she’s put together for them. She took the trouble to find new watertight bags, filling them with travel necessities and labeling them properly. It’s her responsibility to make sure that these four will all survive the journey back.

Hopefully they won’t take any side trips through the jungle.

The three trained killers and one martial arts champion all follow obediently behind Li Mei as she leads the way to the door, ushering them through into the capable hands of Ugajin. She desperately needs the peace and quiet, although at least she’s been able to use the time productively. If she wants to have a brainstorming session for new plans, Liu is the perfect choice to invite. Anything he suggests should be immediately cancelled.

Liu beams at Li Mei as he passes through the threshold, bowing his head politely. “Thank you. We are all deeply grateful for your kindness. The others don’t all look like it, but I know they are.”

Sektor mutters under his breath. “Thanks for that, great ambassador.”

Liu’s smile wavers slightly. “Just don’t worry. I promise we’ll be fine.”

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Sektor is useless in a fight right now, and he knows it.

His glasses have already fallen off his face twice, now attached with a wire strung between the
ends across the back of his head. Although his depth perception has mildly improved, he doesn’t have his flamethrowers, and his fighting skills are rusty. Pathetic.

Bi-Han, sensing an impending disaster, yells out to him as Sektor steps too far forward in the narrow path. “Look behind you!”

A Tarkatan guard towers over him, arm blades glinting in the blazing sunlight.

Bi-Han forges an ice knife out of thin air, tossing it over to Sektor, who grabs it and flails, lashing out to catch the guard off-balance. They stumble backwards in surprise, and he retreats quickly, pulled backwards by a strong cold hand on his collar.

Ugajin steps forward with no apparent fear, and stares down the Tarkatan, unarmed. “We are allies of the empress. Let us pass.”

The Tarkatan glowers, disbelieving him. “On whose authority?”

“The White Lotus.”

A glimmer of recognition sparks in the Tarkatan’s dark eyes. They glare at Ugajin for several more long moments, then retreat, leading the way across the well-trodden pathway. “Lord Baraka has authorized us to allow allies to proceed, but there have been some attempts to deceive us. Tarkatans do not appreciate such duplicitous actions.”

“I gather that.” Sektor is unhurt, but his pride is wounded. Now trailing at the back of the pack of ninjas, he grabs his luggage from Bi-Han, who’s slung the strap over his shoulder, barely noticing the weight of the extra bag. “Don’t we have enough problems with the Shokan already? What are the Tarkatans doing here?”

“Oh, hello!” Mileena pops out of the shadows, dressed in camouflage tactical gear and equipped with a shiny new bladed battle-suit. She waves at the group, arm knife slicing in the air, then realizes her lack of safety and quickly hits a button to retract the blade, golden eyes shooting open wide. “I’m glad to see you all! I want you back at the palace, now. We’re almost done with the plans.”

Sektor doesn’t even try to hide his confusion. “Why aren’t you at the palace?”

“I am. What do you mean?”

Smoke elbows him in the side, whispering to Sektor, barely out of earshot. “She has clones.”

“She has what?!”

“Be polite!” Smoke hisses under his breath. “Clones. Like the cyber-- no, let’s not mention that.”

Sektor is still holding the ice knife, and raises it threateningly. “Don’t go there.”

Bi-Han snaps his fingers, shattering the knife before Sektor can make another bad decision. “No inter-group stabbing. Enemies only.”

Sektor glares at him, his attitude worsening. “So the empress has clones? Are you serious? That seems like a monopoly on power.”

Smoke takes a moment to contemplate the issue, his train of thought derailing. “I suppose, from an ethical perspective, it--”
“I’m here, you know!” Mileena taps her toe on the ground, leading the way through the Tarkatan encampment without waiting for the others to follow. A small but well-armed unit of soldiers is unpacking their rations and sharpening their blades, preparing for a battle with the Shokans that they hope won’t happen.

Baraka falls into step beside the empress on one side, joined by Tremor on the other side, who’s appreciating his new assignment. Tarkatans may be difficult to get along with, but they’re better than anyone in the Black Dragon. He speaks to Mileena in a low rumbling voice, crystals in his shoulders glinting green as he folds his arms across his broad chest. “Can they be trusted? I was on the team with Noob Saibot, and--”

Bi-Han raises his voice unexpectedly sharply, rushing to catch up with the Outworld leaders. “I am not Noob. Saibot is the shadow that haunts me.”

Tremor turns slowly, carefully, trying to keep the peace. “This is still the case? Even after your soul was cleansed?”

“Yes, but I can fight it off. I haven’t failed yet. I’ll get rid of the accursed thing eventually.” Bi-Han is unexpectedly candid. He has no interest in deceiving the others about his current condition, and as long as he himself is no longer corrupted, he can deal with the inky voice whispering at the back of his mind. It’s only a summary of his worst impulses.

“Now drop the issue.”

“Very well.” Tremor leads them forward, navigating through the network of tents and crates until they reach the other side of the camp. Grunting with the effort, but impervious to pain, he opens a hole in a thick wall of thorned hedges with his bare rock-clad arms. Mileena is still animatedly discussing battle plans with Baraka, having a relatively friendly argument about something. On some level, Bi-Han is relieved that she seems unbothered by him, despite everything she witnessed Noob do in the arena. It’s good to have a leader who’s willing to tolerate unusual circumstances.

He steals a look at Sektor out of the corner of his eye. There’s no chance for him to be grandmaster now, but Bi-Han wonders often if Sektor ever truly wanted the role. Their recent conversations have suggested otherwise.

That’s something to discuss later.

Bi-Han raises an eyebrow as Baraka trims the hole in the hedge with his arm blades, widening it enough for everyone in the group to get through. When he’s done, the Tarkatan leader locks eyes with Bi-Han, vivid blue meeting strange catlike yellow, and offers something vaguely resembling a smile.

The ninja answers with a polite nod, tossing the bags through the gap in the underbrush before climbing through, landing on the ground. So far, so good.

Slowly, he notices a pair of thick two-toed legs standing on the path before him, gaze rising up to take in a hulking four-armed figure with blazing red eyes. Unmistakably a Shokan, and a very angry one, waiting outside the Tarkatan threshold for an excuse to fight.

So far, not so good.

He mutters under his breath to Sektor, while Smoke is trying to remember the Shokan salute in sudden panic. “Is that Goro?”

Sektor scoffs, crouching down beneath the underbrush. He’s trying not to make any sudden moves.
He doesn’t know Shokan etiquette. “How would I know? Do you think I’ve ever seen him up close?”

“Fine.” Bi-Han glances across the path to Liu, who’s frozen with dread, staring at the Shokan as a small flame flickers at his fingertips. He seems to be accidentally burning a hole in his pants. “Liu Kang. Is that Goro?”

“I can’t tell. It’s been quite some time.” Liu extinguishes the fire just in time, and rubs his nose, squinting up at him. “Sir, are you--”

The Shokan glares, and lunges at him.

“Don’t talk to him! Don’t engage. Anything is an excuse to break the peace!” With surprising speed, Ugajin dashes past the Shokan, grabbing Liu’s shirt sleeve with the hooked end of his wooden staff and dragging him to his feet. Distracted, the Shokan whirls around, and the ninjas dart past him, moving out of reach as the forgotten god saves the day.

When they’re at a safe distance, they all slow to a halt, catching their breath. Bi-Han is the first to speak, pulling out a bottle of water from the bag and drinking the entire thing in one gulp. He can’t believe the close call, and his nerves may never recover. “Liu Kang, how did you survive to this day?”


“Wrong time, wrong place. Keep it to yourselves.” Ugajin tries to settle them all down, consulting the well-worn folded map he’s stashed in his pocket. This is a much more difficult task than he was anticipating. “It’s not far back to the palace. Do you think you can all just stay quiet and follow me?”

Sektor fixes his glasses, perching them on the bridge of his nose, and grabs the bags before anyone else can protest. It’s his turn to be responsible.

“We’d better.”

---

Back in the palace courtroom, Mileena strides back and forth, hands on her hips, crown perched askew on her wild mess of black hair. “You both look great. I don’t know what the matter is.”

“I’m shorter.” Shinnok grits his teeth, obviously infuriated. He’s dressed in a remarkably similar replica of Dark Raiden’s gothic outfit, built in his own size with extra shoulder padding and lift heels built into the boots. Still, it’s not enough to make up the height difference. Giving up on a solution, he floats off the floor, glaring from under the brim of the gold-enameled rain hat.

“Raiden, I don’t know why you wear this.”

“It suits me.” Raiden laughs with a slight crooked smile, adjusting the horned headpiece that glows with corruption veins. It’s all special effects, of course, and Shinnok is very proud of it. “It looks good on you, too. Adequate, at least.”

“It suits me.” Raiden laughs with a slight crooked smile, adjusting the horned headpiece that glows with corruption veins. It’s all special effects, of course, and Shinnok is very proud of it. “It looks good on you, too. Adequate, at least.”

“Did you hear that?” Shinnok grumbles under his breath, making eye contact with Cassie at the sidelines and hoping for some sympathy. “Raiden thinks I’m adequate. After all the hours I spent trying to--”

“Is he wrong? You’re trying to impersonate him, and doing an adequate job at it. You look nothing like each other. Good thing Goro’s stupid.” Cassie chuckles to herself, tucking her phone away in
her pocket. “Dad hasn’t responded to my texts in a whole day. I’m starting to get a little worried about him.”

“Heavens forbid the Cage family should be apart for more than twenty-four hours at a time.”

“Yeah, I bet you’re glad both the people who beat you aren’t in the same place.” Cassie winks, launching the insult in a teasing tone. Shinnok fortunately isn’t too offended. He ignores her, and turns and floats away, attempting to levitate to match Raiden’s height. She watches him carefully, trying to pick out any flaws in the outfit that could ruin the negotiation with Goro. “That hat’s going to fall off. Attach it to the cowl.”

Kitana has a few more important questions, eyebrows shooting up in astonishment as she sweeps into the room dressed in regal blue finery. Her gaze shifts between one god and the other, briefly wondering if she’s hallucinating.

“So why, exactly, are you two dressing up as each other?”

“Risk of re-corruption.” Cassie gives her the quick explanation. “Raiden’ll be Corrupted Shinnok. Shinnok’s going to be Dark Raiden. Goro’s not going to be able to tell the difference. Raiden thinks if they try to turn back into their corrupted forms, they actually might invite the curse back on them. That’d be a bad time, so we’re skipping that.”

“It’s a sound idea, and I’m going along with it.” Mileena waves a hand cheerily, rushing over to greet the visitor. “Pleasure to see you, Sister. You look beautiful today!”

“Thank you.” Kitana smiles sincerely, trying to think of a way to return the compliment. Mileena has been helping with the costumes all morning, and is wearing a pair of oversized overalls drenched with various colors of paint and glow-in-the-dark glue. An empress’s outfit it is not. “You look… like you have been working hard. And I like the crown!”

“Thanks. I’m trying.” Self-consciously, Mileena reaches up and straightens the crown on her head, sticking it more firmly to the clips in her hair. “We meet with Goro at noon in two days. We’d better make sure these costumes work before then.”

Kitana nods solemnly. She has to respect the audacity of the scheme, even if she’s not yet convinced that it’ll work. Shinnok dressing up as Raiden, and vice versa, will push the odds from unlikely to implausible. Then again, what in her life so far has been plausible?

“Well, Kabal, I certainly hope - for your sake - that your idea pays off.”

“You and me both.” Kabal materializes in front of her, zooming over from one of the sideline seats. “How’d you know I was here?”

“If I were you, I wouldn’t be missing this.” He smiles amiably, long dark hair falling loose over his scarred shoulders. “Stryker’s over there somewhere, talking with Shaka. He’s trying to learn more about Shokan culture while he’s here.”

“After that little incident of mistaken identity, I’d say that’s a smart move on his part.” Kitana puts her hands on her hips, dutifully ignoring Shinnok trying to zip up Raiden into a corrupted demon form costume. Trying, and failing. “If everything goes wrong, perhaps we can call upon your husband to negotiate with the Shokan for us. I’m sure he’d be happy to try.”

Stryker overhears, and answers with slight embarrassment, voice echoing in the large room.
“Ouch.”

“That was mean.” Kabal stifles a laugh, leaving Kitana behind to go rescue Raiden from the hopelessly stuck costume zipper. “You need a hand over here?”

“I’m fine.” Shinnok huffs in exasperation, grimacing as the Dark Raiden hat slips off his head. Kabal catches it just in time and sets it down on the nearest bench, and Shinnok glances at him in silent thanks. “Someone measured Raiden wrong. Skarlet sewed this part, I think. Can you go find her?”

“I haven’t seen her.” Kabal is pretty sure he would remember it, too. Skarlet has an eye-catching habit of melting into pools of blood to cross under doors, rather than using the handle like any normal person. “You want me to go look?”

“If you feel inclined, please do.” Shinnok wrenches the zipper, managing to pull it up past Raiden’s shoulderblades. “Finally! Yes, go find her. We don’t need the costume breaking in front of the entire Shokan elite. I’ll sew in some elastic.”

“Can do.” Kabal takes the excuse to escape, speeding in a blur across the large empty room and slipping through the doors on the other side. He would’ve sworn he heard voices out here.

The corridor is dark, but a pair of eerie green glowing eyes stares back at him. The other two silhouettes freeze instantly when the door creaks. One of them drops a stack of papers that flutters to the floor in a cascade of sheets.

“Damn it!” The person bends down, hastily gathering up all the pieces before Kabal can kneel down to help. “I was rehearsing a speech. Can’t I have some privacy?”

“Well, okay.” Kabal finds the nearest switch, and flicks it, activating some kind of mechanism in the wall torch. The hallway fills with flickering golden light, illuminating the three figures - Rain holding the scattered stack of paper, and Skarlet and Ermac somewhere behind him, boredly playing rock-paper-scissors to pass the time.

Kabal glances between the three of them. “What, did I interrupt a conspiracy or something?”

Rain coughs. “My plans are none of your concern, Stryker.”

“I’m Kabal.”

“Oh, right.” Rain’s expression is somewhere between contempt and panic. “Why are you here?”

“I’m supposed to find Skarlet. Shinnok needs help with the Raiden costume. Or is it Raiden’s costume of him, which Shinnok made? I’m not sure.”

“Can do!” Skarlet darts for the door, but Rain tries to grab her arm, pleading for help. “You can’t go yet. I need you to back me up on this. It’s not as effective if it’s just Ermac.”

Ermac looks less than pleased by this comment. They fold their arms, floating off the floor to look taller than Rain. “We are more than enough to support your endeavors.”

“Can do!” Kabal darts past the three, pasting the papers into his pocket, and flings the doors wide, kicking one side and shoving the other to send them both flying open. Ermac and Skarlet follow him obediently, filing past Kabal, who’s trying to figure out how the torch light-switch works. Skarlet shoots him a sympathetic look on her way out, melting into a puddle of blood and reappearing whole inside the
chamber as the doors swing shut.

Kabal sneaks into the room behind them, waiting near the wall. Whatever this is about to be, he doesn’t want to miss it.

Rain clears his throat, raising a fist and summoning a crack of lightning to catch the group’s attention. He strikes the ceiling, and narrowly avoids searing through the chain holding up one of the light-fixtures, swinging dangerously in the air above him.

He scurries out of the way of the chandelier, just in case. “I have a proclamation!”

Mileena trots over to her throne, perching in it and staring down at him. The nice thing about the face full of teeth is that nobody can tell when she’s trying not to grin. “Yes, Prince Rain?”

“Finally, some respect!” A dramatic sigh. “Lady Mileena, and everyone else here...” The demigod glares at Tanya in particular, raising his voice to be heard in the whole chamber. “As the heir to Edenia’s protector god, I am here to claim my birthright as prince! Mileena, you may serve well as empress of Outworld, but Edenia still exists, and I will rule it. Somewhere, somehow, our realm will be freed. And when I find a way to un-merge the realms, I will--”

Tanya interrupts him mid-speech. “Oh, good, you want to help? I’m glad to have you join our efforts. It’s about time.”

Rain whirls to face her, summoning a small thunderstorm indoors. “I beg your pardon?”

“Yes, beg, why don’t you? And turn that storm off before I turn it off for you.”

“The disrespect!”

Tanya readies a fireball in the palm of her hand. “I’d love to test my aim. You have three seconds to move.”

Rain grimaces, and clenches a fist, returning the interior of the chamber to pleasant weather. “As I was saying--”

“As I was saying, we’ve been working on that for half a year. Un-merging Edenia is the entire point of my research. And now that my fellow Edenians have returned, they’re assisting me. So will you.”

Rain’s mouth opens, his plans shattering in the blink of an eye. “What?”

“Don’t stare. It’s rude.” Tanya finally gets up from her chair, strutting over to him. Everyone else is watching with the intensity of fight spectators. “If you want to help me, I’m all for it. I can’t guarantee you’ll rule, of course. That wouldn’t be fair. But I could use someone to help sort through these old documents. Assuming you can still read.”

“Of course I can read!”

“Good. I’ll have a box of documents dropped off at your door tomorrow morning. Are you still staying in Ermac’s room?”

“NO! I have my own quarters in the palace. It just so happens to be that all the Outworld competitors shared that particular area of the--”

She shuts him off, again, with a wave of her hand. Problem solved. “Thank you for your
cooperation, Prince Rain.”

Somewhere behind Rain, out of his peripheral vision, Skarlet and Ermac are still playing rock-paper-scissors.

- - -

Sufficiently humbled by the experience, Rain has decided to stay on the sidelines for now.

By now, the costumes are finished, and Shinnok and Raiden are ineptly practicing each other’s magic outdoors. Shinnok’s powers allow him to steal the lightning effects, which manifest red rather than blue, but Raiden has no clue whatsoever how to do any of Shinnok’s specialties.

“She is tragic.” Dressed in his own normal clothing again, Shinnok retreats to the courtroom, poking his head in the door to check on the group. Rain is sulking at the other side of the room, while Tanya is gloating more than is perhaps strictly necessary - not that Shinnok can fault her. Jade, Mileena, and Kitana are discussing something with Stryker and Kabal in the corner, and Skarlet’s stitching several pieces of elastic into all the different parts of Raiden’s costume. A correct fit is better than exact accuracy.

Ermac is floating near the ceiling, trying to fix the chandelier by poking at it with a screwdriver. They have made exactly zero progress.

Cassie calls up to them, still playing babysitter to a room full of immortals. “Hey, Ermac. Get down here before you kill us all, okay?”

Ermac reluctantly obeys, descending to the ground and handing the screwdriver back to her with a sorrowful expression. “An attempt was made. If we intended to kill anyone, it would not be in that manner.”

“Reassuring! Thanks for that.” She tucks the gadget in her pocket. She’s not sure where Ermac even got a screwdriver, and she’s not about to ask. “Anybody seen the ninjas lately?”

“Of course. We, ourselves, are a ninja.” Ermac pauses, struggling to figure out how to express the concept. “Ninjas? No, we are only one individual entity, yet--”

“There you are!” Cassie waves to Liu and Smoke as they tiredly push the door open, limping into the chamber and collapsing into the nearest available seats. Liu drops his bag on the floor, and Smoke politely sets it under the table beside his own. Cassie studies them, brow furrowed, trying to figure out exactly what went wrong. Neither of them is in good condition.

“May I suggest a shower? Glad you’re back, by the way.” Tucking her hands in her pockets, Cassie strolls over, eyeing them both. “Your hair…?”

Smoke self-consciously runs his fingers through the short hair at the base of his scalp, looking at her through troubled grey eyes. “What about it?”

“Is Li Mei opening a wig shop? What happened to both of you?”

“I got stuck in a swamp. Quicksand, or mud, or both… I didn’t look close. In my defense, we all wandered into the same swamp, and I wasn’t actually trapped for very long.”

Cassie grimaces. “Bad. Real bad. What happened to taking the quiet roads? What about Liu’s hair?”
“He, uh, cut it to make me feel better.”

Liu nods tiredly, laying facedown across the table. “That was the intention.”

“Great. Well, you two both look fine, except for the obvious exhaustion, cuts and scrapes, and serious need for a bath or some air freshener. Did you go on a camping trip along the way?”

“No quite.” Smoke gestures to Bi-Han as he shoves the door open, cueing him to join the conversation. “You were there. You wanna explain?”

Bi-Han looks at him squarely. “No.”

Sektor follows a few steps behind. “Me neither.”

Smoke responds. “Sektor, I didn’t ask you.”

“I know. I’m trying to make sure you don’t.”

“You have no need to worry about that.”

Ugajin brushes past him, shutting the door beside Sektor as he continues to argue. If he didn’t already have white hair, it would’ve turned white right now from the ordeal. “Boys, please. This is bad for my blood pressure.”

Sektor glances over, looking at him sternly over the rims of his glasses. “Alcohol consumption is bad for your blood pressure, and yet I see you doing nothing about it. I think you can tolerate us for several hours without suffering excessively.”

“Have you ever heard the phrase ‘straw that broke the camel’s back?’”

“Yes, well, that certainly would make you the camel, wouldn’t it?”

From a distance, Liu laughs.

Sektor glares at him over his shoulder. “You’re not helping.”

“I apologize. I wasn’t trying to.”

“As usual.” Sektor drops his bag by the wall, striding across the chamber to greet the scattered group of people. Some of them are unfamiliar faces, though he knows he’s once met them. His memories from his prior life are not entirely intact. “Miss Cage, Stryker, Kabal. You three, I already know...”

Kabal smiles at him. “Good to see you, too.”

Sektor’s sharp demeanor softens slightly. “I didn’t say that, but thank you.”

Kabal offers a winning grin. “Yes, but you were thinking it.”

“Possibly.” Sektor hides a smirk, and turns towards the assorted women. “The one in green is Jade.”

Jade answers dryly. “Yes, she is.”

He points at Mileena. “You are unmistakable.”
She giggles, revealing rows of sharp fangs. “Thank you!”

Sektor shudders.

Rain interrupts from the sidelines. “I’m Prince Rain.”

Sektor glances sideways. “The royalty of weather reports?”

“*No!*”

“Too bad.” He turns back to the girls. “Blue is Kitana. Correct?”

She is less than impressed by this human. “Mm-hmm.”

He sizes up Tanya. “And you are…”

She smirks. “Sindel.”

Mileena chuckles. “No. She’s lying to you. That’s not Sindel. That’s actually Skarlet.”

Sektor folds his arms, waiting.

“I’m Tanya.” She gives in after a few moments. “Congratulations, you’re not gullible.”

“You needed to test me to find that out?”

“Maybe. Some people think it’s written on the ceiling.”

Instinctively, Sektor glances upward -- just in time to see a chandelier plummeting towards him.

“*Holy shit!*” Tanya yanks him out of the way, teleporting away to the side of the room as the chandelier smashes on the floor, landing in a pile of tangled metal, broken glass, and flickering flames. “Rain, you’re paying for that. And cleaning it up.”

Sektor brushes off his shoulders, unhurt, and grudgingly thanks her. “Was it a bad time for me to arrive?”

“No worse than any other time. That was Rain’s fault.”

“So I gather. Is life in Outworld always like this?”

“Like what?”

“A continuous series of crises?”

Tanya shakes her head confidently. “No, sometimes it’s even worse.”

“Thank you for informing me. I find that very reassuring.” Dripping with sarcasm, Sektor strides over to greet Mileena in person, reaching up to grip her small clawed hand. “Empress. I appreciate that, somehow, you have prevented this palace from burning down so far.”

“It wasn’t easy.” Mileena laughs, hopping down to greet him at eye level. “Oh, you look like Shang Tsung! I didn’t even notice!”

Sektor draws back, offended. “I look like *whom*?”

Mileena hastily realizes her mistake. “The young version!”
“Oh. Thank you for clarifying.” Sektor breathes a sigh of relief. He looks mostly unchanged from his old self, but he dreads suddenly aging up to his true form as the revenants and Bi-Han did. Being human is bad enough already. “I met Shang Tsung before, in my old life, when he hired the Lin Kuei. He looked like he’d just arisen from a coffin.”

“It’d be very possible that he had, considering his powers.” Ugajin strides over to interrupt the conversation just in time, thumbs hooked into his belt loops. “Good to see you again, Mileena!”

Mileena does a double-take, and then another. So does the rest of the room.

“ I saw you die!”

“They all keep saying that.” Ugajin can’t help but laugh. “Yes, I’ll shorten the story for you. I’m the actual Bo’ Rai Cho… sort of. You, unlike the rest, already knew Shang Tsung was impersonating me, but you didn’t know about my true form. My name is Ugajin.”

“Hmmm.” Mileena’s eyebrows raise sharply, lifting her chin to peer down at her nose at him. He’s surprisingly astute. “And…?”

He shrugs, smiling. “It’s not the most important thing in the world right now, but I am actually a god.”

“Pardon?”

“Sorry for waiting so long to tell you. I had to.”

“You what?!” Rain leaps from his seat and knocks over his chair, rushing over and sidestepping the pile of chandelier debris. “You! You’re Bo’ Rai Cho! Our trainer! You-- you said you were-- who?!”

“Pleasure to see you again, Rain.” Ugajin manages a cordial smile, somehow. Rain has always tested his patience, and some things will never change. “Yes, that’s me. I knew your father Argus, a very, very long time ago. He was a nice man. Someday, maybe you’ll be like him.”

“I--I--” Rain sputters, at a loss for words.

Most of the other Edenians prefer him that way.

“Come on. I’ll find a better place for you all to stay.” Tanya saves the day, leading the way towards the exit as the pack of grimy ninjas trails along behind her. “There’s plenty of palace attractions to see.”

Sektor follows, dragging his bag along behind him until Bi-Han snatches it from his hands. “Do you have any sort of technology?”

“That depends on how you define technology.”

“That’s not the answer I was looking for.”

“Some engineers are working on deconstructing the workings of various Earthrealm devices, though.”

“Like what?”

“Smartphones.”
“What are *those*?”

Somewhere behind him, Cassie laughs.
“I GOT IT!” Jacqui’s triumphant voice rings through the rainforest, cutting through the screeches of wild animals and the droning buzz of a horde of insects. Crashing though the underbrush, she bolts through the trees to reach the campsite, cradling a small plant in the palms of her gloved hands. She’s taken off her gauntlets, stashed in the backpack alongside the rest of her supplies, to avoid damaging the precious plant. She hopes against hope - desperately - that she’s still in time.

Kotal is hunched over, sitting on a stone with his knees drawn up and his head in his hands. He’s shivering, despite the hot weather, and his light blue eyes are glazed over, dimming with each passing moment. Now and then, he reaches up to rub his shoulderblades, feeling the pain of phantom limbs that he knows he has never had.

He glimpses Jacqui from the corner of his eye, addressing her in between labored breaths. “You… you found it?”

“Yeah.” She kneels down, and drops the plant into a bowl resting on the ground, plucking off a few leaves to place them into a beaker. Sonya brought a set of SF-approved chemistry supplies, and while Jacqui’s experience with homegrown remedies is more limited than she’d like, Erron’s knowledge can fill in the gaps.

She sets her jaw in determination, wiping the sweat off her brow.

“We’re gonna help you get well.”

Erron hears the commotion, and rushes over, trailed by the pack of other Outworlders. Wasting no time, he squats down to inspect the plant and the set of supplies, trying to determine the steps necessary. He’s taking a bet that the potion needs to be consumed, rather than applied on the surface to the deep injury. It’ll be necessary to flush the poison out of the emperor’s system. He won’t feel well for a week, but it’s better than an untimely demise in the place the Osh-Tekk once called home.

Working quick, Erron assembles the ingredients, following centuries of intuition. His bet pays off. The extract seeps out of the leaves, staining the harmless liquid a light green. The poison must be in the roots, which are tinged with bright red, still caked in dirt. This is dangerous, and it’ll need be thrown out when he’s done making the cure, but for now, he’s just glad to have the plant at all.

“Kotal.” He bends down, offering the small glass vial to the emperor. “Drink this. Quick.”

Kotal does, gratefully, tipping his head back to let the liquid flow down his throat. He can barely swallow, feeling like he’s moving in slow motion. He has a splitting headache, bursting through his temples, and his spine feels heavy, with an invisible weight resting on his shoulders.

He shudders, trying not to throw it back up. “Thank you.”

“I’m staying here.” Erron says nothing more, digging through his scattered backpack to pass the time. The group isn’t short on rations yet, thankfully. They’d hate to have to resort to eating the creatures of the rainforest, like Reptile and Koetzal have done. At least they throw out the remains-

Erron squints, peering across the clearing at a pile of chewed bodies and scattered bones.

“Mighty rude of ‘em.” He gets up, then thinks better of it and takes a seat beside the emperor
“Ewww.” Approaching the pile, she wrinkles her nose, staring at a heap of torn flesh. She can’t even recognize what animal it used to be. Not far away, though, there’s a pile of clean bones, and an intact animal corpse, something resembling a pig, with deep puncture marks in its neck, drained of all its blood.

A chill of unease runs through her.

“Our Saurians don’t usually eat like that. Better learn some manners.”

“What’s this?” Reptile rises to his feet, uncurling his clawed fingers and stretching. He’s been basking in the sunlight, trying to regulate his body temperature, and is feeling far more energetic than he had before. Koetzal is still asleep across a broad rock.

Jacqui gestures to the pile. “You forgot to take out the trash.”

“What?” He stares at Jacqui from a distance, shaking his head sharply. “That is not ours.”

“Well, nobody else here is eating raw animal meat, unless one of you went on a high-protein diet without telling me.” She manages a laugh, trying to shake off the odd sense of fear. There must be an explanation. “Maybe it was just some wild animal that did it.”

“And stacked up the bones like that? I think not.” Reptile crouches, taking a closer look at the fresh remains. “This is the work of a thinking creature. It resembles a trail marker.”

“That’s creepy. That would mean there’s someone else in here, running around the jungle with us…”

“Perhaps. There may be colonies of unknown beings, deep in the wild.” Reptile doesn’t even dare wonder if it could be another Saurian. That’s far too much to hope for.

“Should I get rid of it?”

“No.” He rubs his scaly chin. “Leave it. It isn’t our business.”

“All right. Come on. Let’s try to catch up with the humans, huh?” Jacqui leads the way back across the clearing, where Sonya, Jax, and Johnny are packing up the supplies and supervising Kotal from afar. “Hey. Something weird over there--”

“Yeah, I saw.” Johnny studies the gruesome sight critically. “Looks like a vampire ate that pig.”

Jacqui’s eyes shoot open. “You kidding me?”

“Actually, no. Sorry, kiddo. Get the emperor. We need to move, now.” Johnny’s calm demeanor is still intact, mostly for the sake of the others, but he’s starting to feel a twinge of fear, too.

The middle of an unknown rainforest is not the best place to meet new friends.

“I need to try for it.”

Kotal stands at the entrance of the dilapidated pyramid, addressing the group in a quiet, dignified plea. The ruins are little more than a massive pile of weather-worn rubble, soil, and plants
sprouting from the dirt. It was a magnificent structure once, buried deep in the rainforest. Now it’s out of sight of men and gods, half-buried and covered over by the earth.

“It is an opportunity that will not recur.” He reasons with them as calmly as he can. His wound is beginning to heal, the infection slowly draining out, but the strange sense of the phantom limbs has not yet ceased. He supposes it is a hallucination from the poison taking hold in his system, affecting his nerves and his mind. He’ll be glad when it’s gone, leaving him in peace.

No one responds, waiting to hear him out.

Except Ferra, who feels the need to offer her support, tugging on the feathers on Kotal’s leg ornaments. “We’s on your side. Want to help big bossie get his home back.”

He gazes down at her patiently. “There is little guarantee that the artifact would do that. In fact, I am unsure of its function. I just… wish to see it.” There’s a strange note in his voice, haunted by longing and homesickness. “I know it is here. I have every reason to believe.”

Sonya brings up a more practical concern. “The structure looks unstable. What if it caves in and traps us?”

“I will take that risk myself.” Kotal bows his head, feathered headdress glinting in the sunlight that filters through the canopy leaves. Now that his healing has begun, he’s starting to look more like himself again, the teal-blue color seeping back into his ashen skin. “I do not expect you all to accompany me.”

Ferra pipes up again. “We’s coming. With Torr.”

Erron places his hat on his head, tilting the brim. “Me too.”

“And I.” Reptile steps forward, joining Kotal at his side, but leaves Koetzal with the group of humans, placing a reassuring hand on the young Saurian’s shoulder. “Little one, sstay ssafe. I will be back as ssoon as I have helped the emperor. It iss my duty, to aid him as he has aided me.”

“I understand, Papa.” Koetzal gazes at his father sorrowfully, but stands beside Sonya, who’s seated atop the pile of bags. “Earthrealm lady, you will sstay outsside?”

“Yes. Someone has to, in case there’s a-- a crisis.” Sonya clenches her jaw, trying not to imagine the worst possibilities. She doesn’t want to lose them all just because of Kotal’s stupid quest for an artifact that might not even be there. But she feels she owes it to him, so she’ll allow him the chance to try.

“I’m coming, too.” Jax steps up, along with Jacqui, joining Kotal’s group bravely. Johnny stays behind, silently backing up Sonya, who very much does not want to stay in the rainforest alone.

Kotal takes a step closer to the pyramid entrance, surrounded by vines and cobwebs, and burns the debris out of the way with a blinding beam of sunlight. “Then it is done. We will return.”

Reptile turns back, and kneels down, gesturing for Koetzal to come closer, and the little lizard leaps into his arms, grabbing him in a hug.

They linger there until Reptile lets go, and Koetzal scampers back to his chaperones, taking a seat obediently beside Sonya with his short legs dangling in the air.

Kotal is peering at the entryway. “This shall be easier than I expected. These stones are loose.”
Erron points a flashlight at the inside of the passage. “That’s a good sign, ain’t it?”

“I am uncertain. No matter. We will go forward.” Kotal’s demeanor is unchanged, but a thread of nagging self-doubt gnaws at him. Nonetheless, he ignores it. He’s come too far to fail.

Bending down, he lights the way with another sunbeam and disappears into the tunnel, followed closely by his posse. It’s now or never.

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“Do you think we’ll be able to stop them?” A hissed whisper echoes down the dismal corridor, a greyish figure barely visible in the flickering torchlight. She has hair like silver snake-tails cascading down her back, dressed in faded green adventuring gear, and moves a pile of stones out of the way one by one, gripping them with sharp claws.

Another figure, somewhere behind her, crouches down and moves forward step by step, careful not to hit her folded wings on the roof of the passage. Tying her long wild hair back with a red ribbon, she leans forward, opening her mouth as she inhales through her nose to sense the scents of the new pyramid visitors.

“Possibly. We’ll just have to reach the group in time. When he escapes, that’ll be the chance to slay him before he’s fully formed.”

“Can we do this without killing the host?”

“That’d be our last resort. Perish the thought.” Nitara shakes her head, trying to track the scents, but it’s too far to tell their exact path through the ruins. “No one I recognize, but there’s three humans, one I think is Osh-Tekk, one Saurian, two of… something else. I don’t know.”

The vampire’s companion glances back at her, reptilian eyes reflecting bright in the torchlight. “Saurian… that must be the one known as Reptile.”

“Most likely. That isn’t his real name, is it?”

“Of course not. Nor is mine. Aliasses are easier.”

“I knew Khameleon wasn’t your actual name, but what is it?”

“I’ll tell you sometime else.” Khameleon smiles slightly, revealing a mouth full of small sharp teeth beneath thin scaly lips. “Reptile’s name is Ssyzoth. It has been quite some time since he went by that moniker.”

“So I gather.” Nitara crawls through the gap in the row of bricks, dragging her bag of supplies along with her, as Khameleon follows close behind. “We’d better be close to the treasure room.”

“We are. While you were mapping the entrance, I opened up all the passageways to the interior chamber. They will have no trouble finding it.”

Nitara is admittedly impressed. “Where are we in proximity to it?”

“Right above it, in the ceiling. The construction is solid, so removing some bricks to let ourselves through will not collapse the entire chamber. Fortunately.”

“Good. How am I going to get through?” Nitara gestures vaguely, starting to get worried. They thought the plan through in great detail, but there’s still plenty of room for error. “With the wings,
“I’ll start opening up the hole in the ceiling. Here.” With inhuman strength, Khameleon digs her claws into a nearby brick in the floor, displacing it and gripping it tight enough to yank it out. “It will not take long.”

“Good.” Nitara folds herself into a cross-legged sitting position, biding her time and managing her patience. The return of a long-dead enemy may be inevitable, but she might at least try to do some damage control on it. “I’m glad to have met you, by the way. Funny to think we’d end up collaborating on this.”

“My colony may be hidden in plain sight, but I am willing to return to the ruins from time to time, as well. It’s nostalgic.” Khameleon offers another slightly unsettling yet charming smile, steadily opening up the gap brick by brick. “How did you find out about Kotal’s plans?”

“I know people who know people.” The vampire shrugs, unwilling to divulge her secrets just yet. “It’s a good thing the skull stayed buried this long, but if it makes it out of the pyramid, we’re all doomed. I don’t know why Kotal thinks it’s a realm orb. Skulls aren’t orbs, unless there’s something very wrong with the person’s head.”

Khameleon chuckles, a low hissing laugh. “He has been… deceived.”

“Yes. How long, do you think?”

“Hiss willpower is strong. It could be decades. Years. Or perhaps less than that, a matter of months… there is no way to know. All we need to do is free the emperor from it, and avoid killing the humans who have accompanied him. That would defeat the entire point of the mission.”

“Mm-hmm.” Nitara agrees absent-mindedly, sniffing again to track the scents. “They’re getting closer.”

“Yes. Good, we haven’t much time to waste.” Khameleon works faster on the bricks, revealing an empty cavern of darkness far beneath. A musty odor floats up, and she crinkles her flat nose, her lip curling in disgust. “I haven’t asked yet, but… why did you choose me?”

“Simple. I needed to work with somebody with no ulterior motives. Someone where I can be sure there’s no chance that you’d want the outcome of this plan to go the other way, you know?”

“You fear betrayal?”

“It’s happened.”

“Understandable.”

“Anyway, that made you the perfect choice. We haven’t worked together before, but you seemed trustworthy based on my sources, so I took the chance.” Nitara smiles, too, revealing pearly white fangs. “It paid off. You have no actual reason to try to betray me - unless you want to move back to Outworld, but I don’t think so.”

“Hardly.” Khameleon shakes her head emphatically, snake-tail hair flying. “Earthrealm has plumbing. My colony is happy here.”

“How do you get by in everyday human life? I mean--” Nitara raises her hand, tapping her mouth to point out Khameleon’s rows of glistening sharp teeth. “That’s a little conspicuous.”
Khameleon laughs, and seamlessly shapeshifts into a human appearance, a relatively normal-looking woman with pale skin and silver hair. Then, she shifts back, assuming her true reptilian form once again. “I am called Khameleon for a reason.”

“That makes a lot of sense. Hey, for what it’s worth, I like both versions.” Nitara flashes a winning grin. “You know, we should spend some more time together sometime. Just an idea.”

“It’s a plan. If we both make it out of the pyramid.”

Returning to reality, Nitara groans. “If.”

“The odds are in our favor, but not completely.” Khameleon is as cautious as ever, bending down to look through the hole in the ceiling as she hears approaching footsteps. A faint glow flickers far below, revealing the tiled floor of the chamber - a twenty-foot drop, far more than she’d expected.

She whispers in Nitara’s ear, frozen in place. “Don’t move until we need to. You’ll have to fly down. Take the first strike. I’ll follow.”

“All right.” Nitara withdraws a dagger from her bag, a magical blade forged from silver, with an elaborate ornamental hilt. Then, she produces another matching weapon, and hands it to Khameleon. “This should be enough. Magically enhanced, and guaranteed to make the kill. We’ll have very, very limited time. He’ll choose a new host shortly after he escapes, and I have a bad feeling about it.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“He may start flying, so if it’s an air battle, I’ll handle it while you get the others to safety. If not, keep him cornered.”

“Understood.” Khameleon crouches on her hands and knees, balancing herself as she prepares for the steep drop. “Here they come…”

Far below, a torch lights up as Ferra stands on her tiptoes, jumping up to touch the flame to the wall sconce. It flickers ablaze, filling the vacant chamber with a warm, welcoming glow.

Aside from elaborate wall carvings, the room is totally empty.
Kotal scans the scene in dismay, his heart sinking. The pains have worsened along the journey, and he would hate to think that all this effort was for nothing. “Was it looted?”

“Nah. Looters leave traces.” Erron aims the flashlight at the walls, looking for secret latches and hidden levers, and notices some particularly deep shadows in the carvings. “Hey, Ferra. You see those pieces in the wall that look like they could be switches? Go press those.”

“No, don’t!” Reptile snatches her by the shoulder, careful not to sink his claws into her skin. “Any number of those could be traps.”

“Awww, no fun.” Ferra backtracks, retreating to stand beside Jacqui. Torr is staying at the door, ready to evacuate the others and hold open the entryway in case of a crisis. Jax is stationed just inside the room. Ferra tilts her head, looking this way and that, and stares up at the ceiling, noticing a dark hole in the corner. “Room’s broken.”

“Broken?”

“Yeah.” She points upwards, directing his attention to the gap in the bricks. “Up there.”

Kotal squints at the sight, lighting up the room with beams of sunlight along the walls. His energy is running low, and he won’t last for long, but if ever his powers were needed, this is the time. “There’s no pile of stones on the ground. Strange.”

“It’s got to be a ventilation shaft.” Jax folds his arms, cautiously leaning against a stone pillar. “Builders put it in so there’s air flow in case of a cave-in.”

Erron’s willing to accept the explanation, but he still has doubts. “Awfully big for a ventilation shaft. Somebody could get in and steal from the place.”

“With a ceiling two stories up? No way.”

“Guess you’re right.” Erron ambles over to join Kotal near the wall carving. Illuminated by the artificial sunbeam, the emperor is running his fingers carefully over a particular section of the bas-relief sculpture, searching for a latch hidden in the stone. “Find somethin’?”

“Almost. The carving illustrates a story from my legends. The solution should be within this area.” Kotal stops as he feels a sharp edge, tucked beneath the raised helmet of the warrior in the scene. Hooking his fingers under the piece, he tugs it outward, activating the latch.

Immediately, a tile in the floor crumbles, opening up an empty hole beneath.

“There it is.” Kotal’s sunbeams flicker ominously as his heart skips a beat, but he tries to think nothing of it. Crossing the room with slow and steady paces, he drops to his knees beside the box, carefully prying at the incredibly heavy lid. “It would take the strength of a god to lift this off.”

Erron, as usual, is close behind, ready to back him up. “Maybe that’s the point.”
“I suspect you are right.” With a grunt of effort, Kotal grips the lid and heaves the stone slab off, dropping it on the ground nearby. The massive weight cracks another tile, spidery seams tracing across the floor.

He bends down to gaze into the box. Empty eye sockets stare back at him hollowly, captivating him with the unmistakable gaze of the golden skull.

“How. Weird! Lookit that!” In awed tones, Ferra points to Kotal’s shadow on the wall.

The shadow has wings and horns, towering over the emperor.

Jax’s stomach drops out. He should’ve known something would go wrong. He’s not ready to deal with evil magic again. He’s faced way too many of these situations, and barely made it out alive each time, escaping by the skin of his teeth. Now he’s got his daughter with him.

No way.

Jax steps up, cracking his metal knuckles. “Kotal. Step back. You’re in danger.”

Kotal glances up, meeting his eyes in confusion. He’s so close to finding the prize, and Jax seems to think something’s wrong. “What?”

Something’s different. The familiar reassuring blue glow of Kotal’s gaze has faded to a nasty greenish-yellow, with slits for pupils.

Kotal is unaware of the change. “I feel better. Jackson Briggs, I need to finish this task. I have come so far.” He insists, almost pleading, pressing his hand against the bandages on his chest. “For the Osh-Tekk. I owe it to them all to find the truth.”

“Something’s controlling you.” Jax points to the wall, where the shadow’s growing stronger, silhouetting a large figure dressed in imposing armor with a distinctive helmet. It’s not Kotal’s crown.

Jax’s voice is deep and patient, but it cracks slightly in fear. “You see that?”

Kotal blinks, peering at it. “Is something wrong with it? I see only myself, with my armor and my-

…”

He lifts a hand to his head… and feels twin horns sprouting from the temples of his headdress.

“Help me!” Kotal’s voice is a strangled plea as realization hits all at once, dropping to his knees as searing pain overwhelms him and wracks his damaged body. His words are echoed by a deeper, more sinister voice, with an ominous hiss in its smooth words.

“Emperor!” Erron rushes to his aid, trying to pull the headdress off Kotal’s head, but it’s stuck like glue. He can’t do a thing. Letting go of the emperor as he collapses to the floor, he rushes to grab the stone lid and put it back on the skull box. Unsurprisingly, it’s too heavy to lift.

As he leans over the box to check inside, the skull meets his gaze, and Erron stares deep into its sockets, entranced…

Ferra tackles him with a flying leap, knocking him out of the eye contact. “Err-in! Don’t lookit it!” She raises the knife blades on her forearms, stabbing frantically at the skull inside the box while averting her eyes, but it does nothing, not even leaving a scratch on the enchanted object.
Jax has pulled Kotal to his knees, gripping him tight with his hands clasped firmly on the emperor’s shoulders. He watches closely as Kotal’s gaze flickers between the possessed eerie yellow and his own normal eyes, trying to convince the emperor to win the internal fight, but it’s a lost cause. Spectral wings are already appearing above his shoulders, growing more and more visible with each moment. “Emperor. Stay with me. Stay with me--”

“No.” The being that was once Kotal answers in a smug tone, knocking Jax aside with a casual swat of one mighty arm. Kotal’s own hands are still visible, but they’re encased in three-fingered spectral claws. The possessor has become visible now, a ghostly silhouette surrounding Kotal and mirroring his every action.

Reptile realizes.

“Onaga.” His voice comes out as a hoarse croak. “The Dragon King.”

“Correct.” Onaga is slowly emerging from his unwitting host, and answers with a grim, warped smile, unfolding his wings. Kotal is incapacitated now, frozen on his knees as the Dragon King rises up and absorbs all his energy and essence. Onaga stands at a massive height, freed and alive at last, and shakes off Kotal, leaving him a lifeless ragdoll on the floor.

“I knew it would be here. I knew.”

He slowly turns his head towards the stone box, where Erron and Ferra are crouched nearby, frantically trying to lift the lid.

“Get out of the way.”

“Don’t think so!” Ferra jumps into the box, standing on top of the skull to prevent Onaga from looking at it. “Gotta get past me first!”

“Not a problem.” Onaga plucks her out of the box with one claw hooked in the back of her shirt, dropping Ferra unceremoniously on the floor, as if tossing aside a weightless scrap of paper. Pausing above the skull, he turns to address the rest of the group, his face shadowed by the mighty helmet. “To the rest of you, I do owe you a debt of thanks. If not for your willingness and cooperation with Kotal, I would never have reached the skull. He took my suggestion so willingly.”

Jacqui steps up, hands on her hips and gauntlets at full power. She’s keeping her cool, but she barely knows how. “It’s not a realm orb?”

Onaga actually laughs, throwing his head back as he cackles with an awful creaking noise. “Of course not! When is a skull an orb? Did he really, truly think he could recover his realm with this?” Onaga delves into the box and plucks out the golden skull, lifting it high as its eye sockets begin to glow. “I am very convincing. I ought to give myself more credit for persuading him in such an obvious lie.”

“He thought it was his own brain tellin’ him that!” Erron is pissed. Very pissed. He’s also been around the block a few times, and knows how to handle magical foes. Taking perfect aim, he fires a shot from his revolver right through one of the skull’s eye sockets, whizzing right past Onaga’s face.

The glow shuts off. One down, one to go.

Annoyed, Onaga snaps his fingers, shattering the bullets in Erron’s gun. “Modern weaponry! I should have figured--”
He whips out another hidden pistol, knocking off the tip of one of Onaga’s horns with a quick shot. He’s not going to kill him until he knows how to get Kotal back, but he might as well give him a good scare. “Got more of these with your name on it! Kinda. Would’ve scratched it on, if I’d known.”

To his surprise, Onaga winces and grabs his horn, shaking his head as he reacts in obvious pain. “Pitiful Earthrealmer!”

“Everybody! The horns are his weakness! Try to get his wings while I take out that cursed gotdamned skull!” Erron calls them to action, firing and reloading his gun at superhuman speeds and putting a few dents in the golden skull as Onaga does his best to vaporize the bullets. “Don’t look in its eyes! Don’t do it! He’ll make ya look, if he can...”

Reptile rushes across the chamber to Kotal’s aid, checking for a pulse desperately, and finds it, weak and fluttering. He breathes a sigh of relief, his own heart pounding in distress. He can’t let the emperor die. It’s been so long since any leader treated him with respect. He owes Kotal so much.

Out of the corner of his eye, he notices two figures dropping from the hole in the ceiling, a blur of grayish-green and vivid red.

The first one darts towards him, bending down and trying to lift Kotal with shocking strength. “Syzoth! Aid me! Bring the emperor out of the chamber, now!”

Reptile’s heart almost stops. He stares at the newcomer in astonishment, looking into the eyes of a fellow Saurian.

“How about--?!?”

“We’ll talk about it later. Get him out!” Khameleon stagers towards the doorway, hauling the unconscious Kotal over her shoulder, and deposits him into the waiting arms of the massive creature Torr, who cradles the seven-foot god like a baby. “We’ve been tracking you since you arrived. It was Nitara’s idea. Thank her later.”

“Nitara?!”

Khameleon silently points towards the second figure, who’s launching an air strike on Onaga, screeching as she hurtles towards him at high speed with the silver dagger outstretched.

Reptile nods dumbly. “Nitara.”

“Don’t just stand there. Get back and help!” Khameleon leaps into the battle again, trying to pry the artifact free from Onaga’s mighty claws, but he’s already grabbed Jackson Briggs by the throat, nearly choking him and forcing him to stare into the cursed skull’s singular glowing eye.

Jacqui attacks from the side, kicking Onaga in the ribs and discharging a burst of plasma energy into the side of his neck. He stagger as she strikes, dropping the skull as his grip weakens, and Jacqui forces the Dragon King to stumble backwards, coming to her father’s aid. With Onaga dispatched for now - and two strangers attacking him in a miraculous rescue - Jacqui’s first priority is getting her dad out of harm’s way. She grabs his metal arm and drags him towards the doorway, but he’s frozen in place, muttering to himself numbly in an unknown language.

“Ferra!” Jacqui’s voice reaches a new pitch of fear. Erron, Khameleon, Reptile, and Nitara are all trying to take Onaga down, but the imposing dragon brushes them off like gnats, stomping across the chamber to retrieve the lost skull.
Jacqui calls again, desperate for help. “Ferra! Help me get Dad out of here! Something’s wrong!”

“We know what ta do! Hit ‘im! Shock breaks the curse!” Ferra takes a flying leap, smacking Jax in the face with the palm of her small hand, and he blinks and staggers back, shaking his head as he comes to his senses. “There ya go. Mister Jax! You got shiny arms. Break ‘is horns!”

“Will do.” Setting his jaw in a grim line, Jax’s eyes blaze with cold anger as he strides across the chamber to face down Onaga. When Khamelion leaps onto his back, forcing the Dragon King to drop to his knees, Jax takes the opportunity.

He grips one of Onaga’s horns, encased by the helmet, and wrenches it off, breaking at the hilt.

Onaga howls in berserk agony, lashing out and catching Jax in the chest with a sharp blow. He reels backwards, leaving a trail of blood, and Nitara instantly swoops in, catching the blood in the palms of her hands and lapping it up.

Jax cringes. “What the fuck, lady?”

“Sorry!” Nitara steadies him with a hand on one of his arms, pressing her fingers against the wound on his chest through the ripped cloth. It quickly heals up, forming a scar as Jax looks down in shock. “Get back to the fight! It’s not over. We’ve got to kill him in this form before he picks another host!”

But it’s too late.

Onaga has Reptile pinned against the wall in the corner, lifting him off his feet with a hand on his throat and holding the skull against his forehead.

Reptile’s eyes go dark, glazing over.

“No!” Kotal cries out in dismay, reaching consciousness again, and tries to struggle free from Torr’s reassuring grasp, but he can’t move. His limbs feel as heavy as lead, refusing to respond to the desperate signals of his brain.

Khamelion curses, whipping out the dagger as she prepares to enter the next stage of the fight. Then the silver knife falls from her fingers, clattering against the hard cold floor. Her face falls in dismay, horror written on her expression. “I can’t do it. I can’t kill the other Saurian. I can’t--”

“Then I will.” Nitara pushes her companion aside, leaping across the room with her wings outstretched as she shouts an explanation to the rest of the team. “It might be too late. If we can’t kill Onaga in transitional form, we have to kill the host. If he gets out of the chamber, it’s over!”

Ferra has come to Reptile’s defense, tugging on the leg of his pants to try to pull him back to consciousness. “Please! Sye-zoth!” She thinks that’s his name, at least. It might help. She’ll try anything. “Please! Fight ‘im! We can’t lose you!”

Reptile blindly lashes out, catching Onaga in the jaw with one clawed fist as his vision blurs.

Encouraged, Ferra digs her arm blades into Onaga’s leg and starts climbing him. He roars in pain, trying to shake her off, but she lands on his shoulders right between his wings. “Sye-zoth, get out! Get out!”

Reptile lets himself fall from Onaga’s grasp, and slithers out from under him, fleeing to another corner. He’s stumbling in confusion, his mind and body weakened from the possession attempt, but he’s still fighting.
Onaga finally shakes off Ferra, rearing up and throwing her backwards against the unyielding stone wall. She hits with a hard thump, knocked unconscious, and Erron rushes to scoop her up, trying to carry her to safety. Onaga laughs at the sight, shoving them both out of his way, and storms across the chamber, cutting a path through his enemies with ease.

He grabs Kotal out of Torr’s arms, lifting him by the neck. “Maybe I will use you as my full host after all! The metamorphosis didn’t take long, and you have more life force to offer me, don’t you? Come back to me!”

Torr will not have it. Red eye blazing through the mask over his head, he roars in outrage, angered by the injury to Ferra and the harm done to his emperor. He raises one foot, gathers all his courage, and stomps heavily on Onaga’s toes.

“How dare you!” Onaga drops Kotal back into Torr’s grasp, and hops on one leg, clutching his injured foot. “I am the rightful king of Outworld, and I will take my place once again, starting with this realm!”

Reptile appears behind him, holding the golden skull in one hand, and flings it forcefully against a wall.

“No, you won’t!”

With the combined force of Reptile, Kameleon, and Nitara, the three fighters drag Onaga back into the chamber, throwing him down onto the floor as the women raise their silver knives.

But Onaga still has some fight left in him. He springs to his feet, struggling free, and reaches up and grabs Reptile, gripping him by the throat in a final blow.

“Enough!”

He fades into silhouette form again, and engulfs Reptile, fusing with him in a slow and gruesome process. His wings connect to Reptile’s shoulders, and the Saurian gradually grows to the dragon’s height, terror and pain written on his face as Onaga’s broken horns attach to his temples.

Kotal struggles to move, lifting one arm as he reaches out to try to save him. It’s not enough. “Syzoth, no!”

Reptile fights off the essence of Onaga as best he can, eyes returning to their normal green as he speaks in his own voice for a few more moments. “Ko’atal…” He heaves for breath, gripping his temples with his scaly hands as the three-fingered claws form around them. At this stage, the transformation is irreversible. “Ko’atal, it iss too late. I’m ssorry. I would rather lose mysself, than ssee ssuch harm come to you. After all this time…”

Kotal takes a few shaky breaths, tears running down his face. He knows what’s happening. “You were-- you are-- more than I could have asked for, as an ally and a friend.”

“Thank you, Emperor…” Reptile gasps for breath, clutching his chest as the evil essence gradually overtakes him. His long, long life flashes before his eyes, all the triumphs and losses, and then, at the end of his life, the great blessing of another Saurian child… taken away from him, forever, in a few instants.

He meets Kotal’s eyes, one last time.

“See that Koetzal is cared for.”
“Please… there must be a way to stop this! *Please!*” Kotal uselessly begs, trying to summon a sunbeam of healing light to help Reptile, but it flickers out in an instant, extinguished by his weakness and his grief.

Jacqui wipes her eyes, and steps in front of Kotal to block his view, as Onaga completes the transformation, wearing Reptile like a second skin. Their faces are fused now, and Onaga is dressed in the shreds of the Saurian’s clothing, hopelessly ripped from the fight.

Khameleon and Nitara make their move, daggers in hand, and it’s over.

He falls, and the knives sink deep and drain the evil life force out of him, absorbing the essence of Onaga as the warriors keep the blades buried in his chest. Slowly, in an equally gruesome process, the fusion of Onaga and his host gradually transforms back into Syzoth’s own lifeless body, pathetically small in comparison to the monstrous dragon king.

Kotal struggles free, falling to the floor, and stumbles to his feet, approaching Reptile’s broken body. He is numb with shock and grief. The light has faded from his eyes, the vivid glow entirely gone. “I am sorry. I am so sorry—”

“Emperor.” Jacqui catches him by the arm, pulling him back. “Please! Please don’t do this. Remember him as he was.”

Kotal falters, and stops, briefly obeying her request. “Please-- let me do something. A gesture of honor.”

“All right.” She walks forward with him carefully, step by step, as the former emperor leans on her for her support. Distantly, Kotal watches the others, as if in paralyzed slow motion. Erron retrieves the skull and shoots out both its eye sockets, then drops it back in the stone box. Jax and Khameleon lift the lid and place it back in the floor, sealing away the horrible object. Nitara carries the still-unconscious Ferra back to Torr. They are all doing what needs to be done.

Kotal falls to his knees next to Reptile, placing a hand on his wounded chest, as if he could somehow offer some kind of healing and bring him back.

“He is gone.” Kotal’s voice is hollow, echoing in his own mind. It’s as if he’s listening to someone else speak. He is free from the blinding headache and the sense of phantom limbs, surely the consequence of his possession. But how long did Onaga own his soul? Why here? Why now, and with such great cost?

“If not for me, he would still live. And Koetzal--” Kotal’s voice breaks, remembering the baby Saurian, now left without his only parent. He will have to be told. “I bear the responsibility for Syzoth’s death.”

“Onaga told you to do this.” Jacqui tries to reassure him, fruitlessly. “It wasn’t you--”

Kotal looks at her, as if to say, *Don’t.*

Carefully, with shaking hands, Kotal takes off his own headdress, placing it on the ground beside Reptile. Reaching out, he closes Reptile’s eyes gently and lifts the heavy crown, placing it over his fallen friend’s face like a burial mask of honor.

“I have no water to cleanse him, nor a coin to give him passage…” Kotal distantly recalls the Aztec funerary customs, his head bowed as he kneels beside the lifeless body. “Do you have anything at all?”
Jacqui digs around in her pockets and her backpack, retrieving a bottle of water and her lucky dollar coin. “Here. Have this.” She can live without it.

Kotal whispers a thanks, performing the burial rites in silence.

When he’s finished, he steps back, turning away and exiting the chamber. He can’t look back.

Khameleon bends both daggers out of shape with her bare hands and places them in opposite corners of the room, keeping the evil essence trapped. Then, solemnly, she steps outside and consults with Kotal, making him aware of the necessities of the plan. “We need to cave in the roof, so none of this can ever be found. With your friend’s help—” and here she gestures at Torr—“it should be easy.”

Kotal nods in sorrowful silence as the group surrounds him, offering their quiet support.

“Come with me. We’ll take out some pieces. Gravity will do the rest.” Khameleon steps back in, executing the last stage of the plan. With Torr’s assistance, she uses her strength to claw out the stones at the base of the walls’ foundations, damaging some of the pillars along the way. Finally, there’s an ominous rumbling up above, suggesting a collapse, and she gathers her wits and flees, leaving the chamber empty at last.

A massive pile of stones, bricks, and rubble descends on the room, burying the site of the tragedy forever beneath countless layers of immovable debris.

By the time the cascade spills out into the passage, they’re all on their way to safety, hobbling through the narrow corridors of the pyramid ruins.

All but one.
“Don’t you ever knock?”

“I’m sorry!” The palace visitor dashes through the doors, rushing into the courtroom trailed by a pack of angry skull-helmeted guards. Rain, stuck holding the door, stares at this mystery guest with a look of confusion before making a quick exit.

For once, he had nothing to do with the current problem.

The fleeing guest narrowly dodges a ladder set up on the floor, where Tanya is perched at the top, trying to install a new chandelier. The guards aren’t so careful, though, and the ladder wobbles ominously, making her curse at the pack of fools far below. “Watch yourselves!”

“Sorry, Lady Tanya!” The only guard with any sense turns around to quickly apologize to her, and the others grudgingly follow suit. Meanwhile, the visitor - a friendly and athletic black man dressed in a battered long coat and a pair of stylish sunglasses - stops to catch his breath and bends down as the guards are distracted, heaving for air after of the long, desperate race through the palace corridors.

Slowly, as he glances at the other visitor beside him, he realizes he’s about to meet a centaur.

Looking around, he quickly takes stock of the situation. Mileena, fulfilling her duty as Outworld ruler, is trapped for now, listening to the demands of a group of gaudily dressed high-status nobles from a nearby city. The current leader of the centaur faction is only here on a simple mission - to request subsidies for hay, a necessary staple food in his community. Meanwhile, the nobles are arguing about the price of jewels.

He has the feeling he’ll be here for hours.

Mileena’s patience has run out. She dismisses them with a wave of her hand, crossing her legs and leaning against the arm of her throne. “Gentlemen, these guards will see you out. I’ve heard your case, and I have no advice to offer you. Settle it amongst yourselves.”

Much to the visitor’s relief, the pack of guards falls into step beside each of the nobles, politely staying at a distance, but making it clear that they are no longer welcome guests.

“Those nobles and their petty little problems.” Mileena sighs, exasperated by the entire incident. She turns her attention to the last two individuals in line, welcoming them forward. “A centaur? We haven’t heard from your group in some time.”

“We thought it best not to burden you with more problems.” He steps towards the empress, respectfully clasping a folder full of documents in his human hands. He’s dressed nicely in a tunic fitted to his human half, with his hooves polished and his tail braided. He passes the documents to Mileena at the top of the throne, leaning forward to close the distance - stairs are unfortunately off-limits to him. Hooves aren’t particularly effective on steps.

The empress takes a peek at the documents inside the folder, completed in surprisingly neat handwriting. “What’s this for?”

“Hay subsidies.” The centaur explains, pushing back a lock of thick hair behind one of his shiny horns. “With the livestock shortage, many farmers are raising the price of hay based on demand, claiming that we centaurs are capable of eating human staple foods. However, without a diet of
sufficient hay to aid our digestion in our equine half, the result is bad for our health. Unlike livestock, we, obviously, cannot graze on fields.” He shrugs apologetically. “I’m sorry to bother you with relatively trivial concerns, in the face of… whatever was happening with those nobles.”

“Don’t worry one bit about it.” Mileena chuckles, pulling down her veil to reveal the fangs, then hesitates. “This doesn’t bother you, does it?”

“Ma’am, I am a centaur.”

“Of course.” She peers closer at him, eyes narrowing. “You look peculiarly familiar.”

“I believe you met me once. I used up my first life in the battle of Shao Kahn’s invasion. Ever since, I have kept a low profile, trying to lead the other centaurs in a path towards peace.”

“And your name is?”

“Motaro.”

“Ah. It is you, then!” Mileena beams widely, sitting up in her chair. She’s pleased to have remembered him. That’s a good thing to do, as empress. “Tanya, dearest, can you take care of the hay issue?”

“Of course.” She calls back from the top of the ladder without looking. “Later.”

“I can find someone else, if it’s too much trouble--”

“Hardly. I’ll just need to twist some farmers’ arms.” Tanya pauses, smirking. “Metaphorically. For now.”

Motaro bows slightly, and backs away carefully. “Thank you for your time, Empress.”

“Don’t go just yet. Tanya will need more details. Wait here, at the side, while I talk to--” She stares at the other man, taking a long look. “I’ve never seen you before, have I?”

“I hope not.” He flashes a winning smile, pushing his sunglasses to the top of his bald head. “I’m Darrius. Leader of the Orderrealm Resistance. I require your help, if you’re willing.”

“The-- oh, no!” Tanya groans. “Don’t listen to him! We don’t need an interrealm war.”

Mileena pouts. “It sounds like it’s for a good cause, love. Surely there can’t be any harm in taking sides, can it?”

“Yes! We don’t need a rivalry with the government of Seido, not this early in your leadership!”

“With all due respect, a rivalry would be inevitable, considering the tyrannical nature of the Seidan government.” Darrius clasps his hands behind his back, laying out the facts clearly. “The rule of law does not merely preserve order, it imposes it unfairly on all of society. Freedom and liberty are unknown. Creative expression is stifled. Suffering is inevitable.”

Mileena furrows her brow sympathetically. “That’s awful.”

“Yes. Fortunately, I’m not the only one who is tired of it.” Darrius brightens up a little, appreciating Mileena’s earnest demeanor. If nothing else, he’s certain she won’t try to deceive him, despite her amateurish approach to political maneuvering. “My Resistance has led an effort to overthrow the worst members of the Seidan government for years, with some success. Our battle is not just an ideological one - it directly affects the lives of all citizens.”
“I understand.” The empress leans in closer, captivated by the story. He’s a compelling speaker, and she agrees with everything he’s said so far. This could be another exciting opportunity. “What do you need from me? Resources? Support?”

“That’s where it gets complicated.” He shoves his hands in his pockets, shifting his weight from one foot to another. “I already have resources, but in order to obtain what I needed for the Resistance... I may or may not have made a deal with someone who I should not have. I’m sure you know how that is.”

Tanya mutters under her breath. “Don’t I.”

Darrius continues, mildly encouraged. “Have you ever heard of Havik?”

Mileena tilts her head, ponytail falling to the side. “Not yet.”

“I appreciate the ‘yet.’ You’re about to.” Darrius checks his watch hastily. “Ten minutes, at most.”

Mileena’s jaw drops.

“Who, or what, is Havik?”

“The Cleric of Chaos. At least, that’s what he calls himself. I’m unsure if he’s actually certified by any religious institution.”

“Maybe you could ask him.”

“When he’s speaking to me again on peaceful terms, yes. Not before. And that will take some work.” Darrius clears his throat. “I... I promised him a powerful magical artifact in exchange for his help, on the belief that, with my connections, I’d be able to obtain whatever he wished. Unfortunately, that’s not possible, and he’s now accusing me of backing out on the deal.”

“That looks bad.”

He nods. “It really, truly does.”

“Why not get him what he wants? What is it?”

“A Kamidogu.”

“Oh.” Mileena swallows hard, folding her hands in her lap. She knows the weight of that kind of demand. “So what is he like? Can he be reasoned with? Persuaded to accept some other item, maybe?”

“He does most things just to see what will happen, I think. He supports the principle of chaos. Obviously.”

“Where is he from?”

“Konton. Better known as Chaosrealm.”

“Ahm, that place.” Mileena licks her lips nervously. She’s heard legends of it, though she’s not sure how many are true. Some say it’s a cursed realm. Others are certain that it’s as normal as Outworld, just disrupted from centuries of nonstop anarchy. She figures she’d better not ask. “Why did he help you?”

Darrius checks his watch again, twitching with anxiety. “He supports anyone who wants to
overthrow order. Which makes sense… Anyway, although he won’t kill me, I’m told he has, uh, means of getting the information he wants.”

Mileena scrunches her nose. “Unpleasant means?”

“He didn’t specify.”

“Ah. Well, let’s assume the worst. What can I do?”

“Please grant me diplomatic immunity.”

“Done!” Mileena reaches into her pocket excitedly, hunting around to pull out a small bag of tiny gilded badges. She hands one to Darrius, helping him pin it to his lapel. “There you go! I was waiting to use one of these!”

Tanya mutters under her breath again. “My idea.”

“All right. Let’s set down some ground rules. You have, uh…” Mileena makes a snap decision. “Three days to resolve this. After that, I have to kick you out, and you should probably make peace with Havik before then.”

“I have to come up with a Kamidogu in three days?”

“Or an acceptable substitute.”

“Hmm.” An idea occurs to Darrius all of a sudden -- no, that’s ridiculous. He shakes his head, sunglasses slipping back down onto his face. He’ll find the solution later.

“I’ll manage.”

“Good.” Mileena grins widely. “Is there anything else I should know?”

“Actually, yes.” He raises his hand, trying to summarize his thoughts. “I’m also being chased by one of the Seidan guards. Hotaru. He’s, uh, desperate to capture me, and Havik. He hates both of us. Havik is already rivals with him.”

“Aww, it’s like a love triangle, but with hate.”

Darrius stifles a laugh. “Sort of.”

Mileena taps her foot on the throne, suddenly full of nervous energy. “What does he look like? Who is he? And how can I prevent him from doing anything while he’s here?”

Tanya calls out from the ladder, paying closer attention to the conversation. “Search warrants. Tie him up in red tape. He won’t be able to make a move within three days.”

“Good solution. We’ll do that.” Mileena shifts her weight, sitting backwards in the massive chair. “So, uh, what should I do when they get here--”

Darrius checks his watch once more. “That’s up to you.”

And, without further warning, he bolts from the courtroom, making an escape through the back door.

Out of curiosity, Motaro follows him, bending down to get through the low doorway. Maybe this Darrius has some ideas about the hay situation. He seems well-informed.
Darrius urgently gestures for him to shush, crouching behind the door. “I’m going to eavesdrop out here. I need to find out how much Hotaru and Havik both know right now.”

Motaro nods silently, standing very still to avoid the clip-clopping of hooves on the palace hallway.

At the same moment, the carved doors on opposite sides of the courtroom fly open. Two individuals charge in, making their dramatic entrance.

One is an unusual and alarming sight, with his lower face reduced to the remnants of a skull. His eerie light blue eyes blaze bright with excitement, and his scruffy hair is tied up in a short ponytail, headband flying behind him as he bolts in. He’s wearing an assembled collection of straps, leather, and skull decorations, plus some sort of headdress resembling a helmet face-plate, without the back of a helmet to match it.

Mileena thinks to herself, Havik.

The other is no less distinctive. He’s a handsome but exasperated-looking older man with flowing silver hair and vivid yellow eyes, dressed head to toe in elegant dark gold-trimmed armor. For some reason, he has two flags on tall poles attached to the back of his outfit, which catch on the doorframe, stopping his momentum as he skids to a halt. He forces his way forward, snapping off one of the flags, and it falls to the ground behind him, leaving a trail of debris in his wake.

Unmistakably, this is Hotaru.

He catches sight of Havik, and sees red.

“YOU!” Hotaru makes a flying tackle at the cleric, crashing to the ground in a pile of armor and pinning him down with a hand on his neck. “You disobedient wretch! You-- you-- stealing artifacts, aiding rebellions, how dare--!” He’s too angry to form a cohesive sentence, having chased Havik halfway across the Outworld capital by now. “Curse you!”

Havik grins up at him, revealing perfectly normal teeth beneath the skull face, now visible as a convincing illusion. “You can swear. It’s okay.”

“I’m not legally allowed.” Hotaru grimaces, keeping Havik stuck to the floor. “If you or I were in our native realms, I could, and would, take you into custody right now. However, the circumstances of your capture prohibit me from--”

“--From arresting me.” Havik beams, looking completely unbothered by this little adventure. It’s a cat and mouse game, and he enjoys it in an odd way. “What are you gonna do instead? Break my neck?”

Hotaru fumes, eyes lighting up gold as his elemental power surges to his fingertips. The hot lava sears Havik’s skin, but it heals on contact, leaving no trace of injury, just a melted hole in his shirt and a damaged patch in the floor.

Tanya leaps down from the ladder, approaching ominously. “You’re going to pay for that. In cash.”

Hotaru rises to his feet, outraged by his own carelessness. He let his anger get the best of him… again. The lava cools around his hands, and he flexes his fingers, shattered pieces of volcanic rock falling to the floor.

“I have no Outworld currency.”
She is unmoved. “We have an exchange bureau.”

Hotaru glares.

“Alternatively, I’ll just take this.” She grabs one of his shoulder pads, trying to pull it right off his armor. “I could use a souvenir from whatever is happening here.”

Hotaru shoves her away, looking deeply offended. His normally pristine hair is a tangled silver mess flying around his face, damp with sweat from the chase. This is not the way he wanted to appear before the Outworld authorities.

He digs around in his pocket, and finds a handful of bills, shoving them at her. “Exchange it yourself, and keep the change.”

Tanya smirks. “Now that’s better. Do you have something you want to tell the Empress?”

Hotaru eyes her from across the courtroom. “Hand Darrius over into my custody. Now.”

Mileena is unbothered, twirling the loose ends of her hair around her finger. “I don’t think so.”

“You are legally obligated to cooperate on interrealm matters of disciplinary--”

Havik pokes him in the shoulder, whispering much too close to Hotaru’s ear. “No, she’s not. Not yet.”

Hotaru whirls around, shoving him away. If he could, he would wipe that insufferable smirk right off that chaotic little gremlin’s skeletal face. Unfortunately, in his experience, it is impossible. Any actions taken to counter Havik’s schemes somehow manage to backfire. Infuriating.

“What do you mean, she’s not yet?”

“As the new leader of Outworld, she hasn’t been in office for enough time to verify the inter-realm negotiation contracts.” Havik’s completely making it up, but he knows Hotaru believes it. Or, at least he’s about to. He makes eye contact with Tanya, raising an eyebrow. “Isn’t that right?”

Tanya plays along seamlessly. “Yes. That is completely correct. Mr. Hotaru, your claim is not supported under the current legal code of Outworld. Unless you’d like to help me fill out the necessary paperwork, which will be processed in five to seven business days.”

Hotaru stares at her with a keen gaze. “How do you know my name?”

She shrugs it off. “Psychic.”

“All right. If you say so, how old am I in Earthrealm years?”

She takes a guess. “Forty-eight?”

“Forty.” He looks deeply wounded in an instant. “Do I look forty-eight?”

Havik steps back and studies Hotaru, hands on his hips and a smirk on his face. “No. Forty-three at most.”

“How reassuring.” Hotaru pulls a comb from his pocket, trying to straighten up his hair while the inter-realm dispute plays out. Havik may have the upper hand at the moment, but it won’t last long.
“So, shall we try this again? Dishonesty is frowned upon. How do you know my name?”

“Yes, how did you?” Havik approaches, slowly stalking his prey. He knows the man’s in this courtroom somewhere. He just knows. “Did Darrius tell you?”

Tanya answers dismissively. “What if he did?”

Hotaru and Havik lock eyes with each other.

“He’s my fugitive!” Hotaru snarls. “Mine!”

“He owes me the debt, which takes priority! Do what you want with him afterwards. Whatever it is, you know I’ll be there to stop you.”

“You’re just asking to be thrown out a window again.”

“Do you think that actually does anything to me?”

“It should!”

“Not with a healing factor! Which you, I recall, don’t have.” Havik winks at his nemesis, gloating. “You’ll never be able to touch me.”

Hotaru reaches out and grabs his arm. “Yes, I can.”

Havik laughs out loud, pulling his arm free and shoving his enemy backwards. Hotaru is such an easy target for his taunting, it’s almost an unfair fight. He attended the battle of wits unarmed. “You’re too literal-minded. No wonder you have a stick up your ass all the time.”

“I do not--”

Mileena pounds a fist on the arm of her throne, growing tired of the nonsense. “Are you both children?”

They fall silent, and glare at her in unison.

“All right, go ahead, shout at each other until you wear out your lungs. It’s not as if it matters to me.”

That infuriates them both, far more than if she’d actually told them to stop. Hotaru lunges towards the end of the courtroom, but his common sense holds him back, fuming silently. He looks as if smoke might start coming out his ears. “You are obligated to take this matter seriously!”

“By who?” Mileena’s voice has a mocking note in it. “The laws of the universe?”

“That’s not the point I was trying to make! Order is a necessity, and--” With a jolt of alarm, Hotaru realizes he hasn’t even attempted to state his purpose clearly. Instead, he’s been sidetracked nonstop by Havik, that infernal little man. Taking a deep breath and counting to ten, he paces forward slowly, addressing the throne in a more normal tone of voice. “I failed to introduce myself. I am, in fact, Hotaru, and my purpose is to restore order. I come here both in search of the fugitive Darrius and the-- the--”

Havik chimes in from behind him. “Cleric of chaos.”

“The day I acknowledge you as a genuine cleric is the day they put me in my grave!”
“That can be arranged!”

“STOP!” Mileena yells again, ripping the mask off her face to reveal her rows of teeth. That’s enough to catch Hotaru’s attention, and he stares there, dumbfounded, waiting for her to explain.

She doesn’t.

Instead, Mileena just leans her elbow on the arm of the throne, waving a hand to signal for Hotaru to continue his makeshift explanation. “From what I’ve heard, your obsession with order is to the, uh, the detriment of your realm.”

“How is that?”

Mileena enunciates clearly, voice ringing out across the chamber. “You’re stifling the population with artificial laws and legislations that contradict basic human nature.”

Tanya grins. “Good girl. Those law lessons are paying off.”

“What a falsehood. Order is our nature!” Hotaru clenches a fist, loose wispy silver hair flying around his face as he storms across the room. Technically, he’s forbidden to fight Havik in here, but if not for the laws of the land, by gods, he would. He can’t stand that man.

Coming to a halt again in front of the throne, he coughs miserably. He’s starting to get a sore throat from all the yelling. “Empress, listen closely. We are creatures of order. The laws of the universe ordain it. Sowing the seeds of chaos, as Darrius and Havik do, will only lead to a violation of the established systems, setting back social progress by years! Decades! Centuries!”

Havik, as usual, has something to say. He stands back, hands on his hips, head cocked to the side as he studies Hotaru through faintly glowing eyes. “It’s your nature. That doesn’t make it true for everyone else.”

Hotaru answers with silence, thinking up a retort. He’s not having much luck.

He glares at Havik out of the corner of his eye. Now he’s is in his normal human-like form, dropping the skeletal lower jaw illusion. It’s sharply reduced by Mileena’s presence. If the Empress can have a lower face full of teeth, his own appearance isn’t a startling novelty anymore.

What a shame.

Hotaru looks like he’s about to explode with anger, so Havik naturally has to make it worse. “Even you don’t actually adhere to the laws of order. You have lava powers, as we saw, do you not?”

“Yes.” Hotaru turns and glares at him over his shoulder, teeth gritted. He has the feeling he’s not going to like this conversation. “What about it?”

“What could be more chaotic than lava? Nothing controls it. It flows as it pleases down the side of a volcano, formless and random as it boils over.”

Hotaru grimaces. “That is not --”

Havik isn’t done. “And even you. If you’re so devoted to order, tie up your hair. It’s falling apart. You’re starting to look chaotic.” He smirks, shifting back to the skull face just to see Hotaru’s expression of alarm. “What kind of example is that setting for our captive audience?”

“Irrelevant!”
“Look at your flags. One broke off. The other is ripped. If the universe naturally sought order, instead of descending towards entropy as it always will, then wouldn’t they stay intact because you said so, great esteemed general?”

Hotaru hisses, and whirls around to try to look at the flag attached to his back, like a cat chasing his tail.

Mileena mutters under her breath to Tanya. “I should have sold tickets to this.”

“We’d certainly turn a profit.” Tanya takes a seat at the sidelines, sitting cross-legged on a chair. She’s far more amused by this whole thing than she’s willing to let on. No wonder the other worlds are nicknamed Orderrealm and Chaosrealm, with these types in charge. “Anyway, I’ll cut this short. Darrius is somewhere through there--” and here, surprisingly, she gestures at the back door, where he’s still eavesdropping. “Good luck.”

Hotaru and Havik both sprint towards the door urgently, forgetting all their other quarrels. The second flag on Hotaru’s armor catches on the ladder as he passes under it, and breaks off completely, sending it crashing down behind him as he flees.

Mileena’s jaw drops, and she looks at Tanya in shock, mouthing a question. “Why?”

Tanya shrugs, whispering a response. “Only way to get rid of them.”

“They’ll be back! And what about Darrius?”

“If he had any sense, he’d be out of here!”

Unfortunately, Darrius didn’t have that much sense. With only a few seconds of warning, he turns and flees down the corridor, followed by Motaro, patiently trotting along to match the human’s pace.

“Motaro!” He pleads urgently, coming up with a novel idea. “I don’t know if it’s rude to ask, but-- I need a ride. You can run faster than I can.”

“Go ahead. It’s only rude if you treat me like an actual horse.”

“I don’t want to do that. I’m very sorry if I gave the wrong impression.”

“No, you didn’t. Here, climb on. They’re almost here!”

Darrius leaps up onto a nearby chair, and from there onto Motaro’s back, carefully clinging tight to his shoulders. “Like-- like this? I’m sorry if this is awkward.”

“Yes. Don’t worry. Have you ever ridden a horse before?”

“No. Equines are restricted for the guards in Orderrealm.”

“Unsurprising.” Motaro has also been listening to the catastrophic debate inside the chamber, and has a fairly good idea of what Orderrealm is like. “Hang onto the belt of my tunic, around my waist. I don’t want you to fall off.”

“I can do that.” Darrius stashes his sunglasses in his pocket, getting ready for the next high-speed adventure. Just as the doors fly open, letting in a very angry duo, Motaro takes off, leaving hoofprints in the floor from his iron horseshoes as he gallops off to safety.

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Elsewhere, Shinnok and Raiden are enjoying lunch.

Or else they were, until a centaur raced past, leaping over a gate and overturning half the tables at the sidewalk cafe.

As hoofbeats thunder down the narrow road, all three - Shinnok, Raiden, and Cassie - turn around to stare at the sight, eyebrows raised. Raiden, in particular, is alarmed. He has a very strange feeling about that centaur.

“Was that Motaro?”

Shinnok stares at him. “How would I know?”

Cassie also shrugs. “No clue.”

“Just-- follow me later!” Raiden leaves the rest of his lunch untouched, and takes off in flight, pursuing the centaur at top speed down the sidewalk as pedestrians scatter in alarm. Leaving a lightning trail behind him, he catches up easily, shouting to make himself heard. “Stop!”

The centaur -- along with a passenger, a very frightened-looking man -- skids to a stop. When a god commands him, he might as well listen. Particularly this one.

“Are you--” Raiden settles down on the ground, staring up at the centaur in total astonishment. It’s like seeing a ghost, except very much alive. This seems to keep happening. “Excuse me if this is impolite, but I thought I killed you.”

Motaro snorts. “Yes, that could be considered impolite. Nonetheless, centaurs have two lives. You might have. What is your question?”

“Oh-- I--” Raiden trails to a halt. He probably shouldn’t have interrupted his lunch for this, but it’s too late now. “I was merely curious. I suppose I have no further quarrel with you, nor a reason to kill you again. Whatever you were fleeing from, I hope it does not catch you. Good day.”

“I think we’re fine. We lost them a ways back. I appreciate your kind comments.” The man, seemingly a normal human, slides down from the centaur’s back and almost falls over, staggering to catch his balance. He feels a little sick from the motion, but manages to preserve his dignity, standing up tall to meet Raiden’s eyes.

“Wait.” A glimmer of recognition shines in his eyes. “Are you… Raiden?”

“Yes.” Raiden brightens up, surprised and flattered that he’s recognized, even in disguise as a normal Outworlder. This man seems to have a pleasant personality, unlike most. “How did you know?”

“I’ve heard tales of the battles between Earthrealm and Outworld.” Darrius sticks out a hand, imitating the Earthrealm greeting, and decides to make a bold move. This is a stroke of good fortune if there ever was one. “I am Darrius. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m wondering if you could offer me some assistance, for the sake of peace between the realms.”

Raiden arches a brow. “It would help if you could be more specific. What do you need?”

“Only two very basic things. Housing for a few days, and a replica of a magical artifact.”

Raiden puzzles over this for a moment. “Basic?”
“You are a god. To you, surely that is a simple request, and it could prevent conflict between the realms—”

“The magical artifact will be no trouble. But where am I going to find housing for a centaur?”

“We’re not traveling together—well, not until right now.” He clears his throat. “I suppose we could figure something out for Motaro, too. I’ll pay.” Darrius tries to be generous whenever he can, especially since Motaro just saved him from certain doom at the hands of bitter enemies. Thanks to Havik, he does have the funds to spare. “Is it possible to find a room on the first floor somewhere? That could work.”

Motaro nods solemnly. Darrius is quick to grasp the issue—no stairs, because of the hooves. Also, Outworld innkeepers don’t like renting to centaurs. “That would be enough.”

“Hmm…” Raiden adjusts the hem of his sleeve, stalling for time as he weighs the possibilities. “We do have the entire hotel that we rented out for the Earthrealm team, which is now mostly vacant.”

“In that case—” Darrius falters. “Please?”

“I suppose the security risks are not too disastrous. I’ll speak with Miss Cage about it.”

Darrius’s eyes widen. “Miss… Cage? As in, the daughter of Johnny Cage?”

“Yes. What is the matter?”

“Johnny Cage is a renowned folk hero among the Orderrealm resistance! The documentaries of his adventures are an inspiration to us all.” Darrius whips out his sunglasses, putting them on. “Many of us wear these in tribute to him.”

“The-- the documentaries?”

“Yes, of course. Havik supplied them to us.” Darrius looks deeply concerned all of a sudden. “Is something the matter?”

He's struggling to keep a straight face. “No-- no, of course not.”

“I understand that you knew Mr. Cage personally. If you see him again at some point, would you be kind enough to ask for an autograph?”

Raiden suppresses a chuckle. Sometimes the truth is best left untold, especially if Johnny’s awful movies actually inspired a group of revolutionaries.

“I will, gladly.”

“Hey! Rai-dude!” Cassie yells from down the street, chasing after Raiden at top speed. Shinnok is close behind, floating above the ground with a sour look on his face. “You can’t just run off like that! The restaurant thought we were trying to stiff them on the bill!”

Shinnok mutters under his breath. “Actually, he flew off.”

“Never would I take such an unjust action.” Raiden looks injured by the mere thought of it. He gestures to his new acquaintances, introducing them to Cassie and Shinnok, and dearly hopes both of them have the sense not to say too much. “This is Motaro. And Darrius.” Quickly, he clarifies. “Motaro is the centaur.”
“Miss Cage!” Darrius beams widely, bowing deeply to her. Despite the earlier incidents, this really is a fortunate day. “You have my utmost respect. Your father is renowned in my realm. I am the leader of the Orderrealm Resistance.”

“Cool.” Cassie studies him closely, hands on her hips, trying not to be distracted by Motaro eating handfuls of fresh grass from a nearby pot of ornamental plants. “You’ve seen Dad’s movies?”

“Of course. All of his documentaries.” Darrius nods solemnly. “The variety of his adventures and brave deeds never ceases to amaze. He is a very courageous man.”

Raiden makes eye contact with Cassie, carefully.

“...Right.” Cassie pulls out a stick of bubblegum from her pocket, chewing on it to keep herself from laughing. Whoever was responsible for telling Darrius the movies were real will definitely get a good ass-kicking, but it’s the funniest thing she can imagine. Johnny would never let it go if anyone ever told him.

Focusing on Darrius again, she returns the nod, answering politely. “Hey, that’s pretty cool. You guys just keep doing your thing. You overthrow the government yet?”

“Parts of it. We’re working on it.”

“More power to you.” She smiles brightly. “We should probably get going back to the hotel sometime soon, so--”

Raiden interrupts her with a light cough. “Darrius and Motaro will accompany us. They are both in need of a place to stay.”

“Excuse me?”

“We do have the hotel rented for the next week, do we not? There are plenty of spare rooms.”

“Yeah. But we’re not authorized to--”

“Now we are.” Raiden looks rather proud of himself. “It is for a good cause. Darrius needs housing.”

Cassie is a little irritated, but she can’t really override Raiden’s decision, not without the rest of SF to back her up. He’s not known for his consistent good judgment. Nonetheless, she isn’t getting any creepy vibes from either Darrius or Motaro. It’ll probably be fine.

“Anything else, as long as we’re handing out favors like candy?”

“Yes. There was one other thing, what was it-- Ah.” It occurs to Raiden all of a sudden. “A replica of some kind of magical artifact.”

Shinnok steps forward, intrigued, with a rare sly smile. “Those are my specialty. What sort of artifact?”

“A… uh…” Darrius rests his hand on his forehead, already regretting the entire ordeal. Even if he’s just been saved by a pair of gods, he’ll still have to see Havik again in the near future. “I-- I can’t say it. I made an incredibly stupid promise.”

Shinnok is already exasperated. “How am I supposed to know if you don’t tell me?”

He blurts it out. “A Kamidogu.”
Shinnok is silent.

Raiden is not. He opens his palm, flexing his fingers to summon the infamous item from his pocket dimension. He’s certain he still has it here somewhere.

The Netherrealm Kamidogu drops into his palm, glowing sinister red as it manifests from thin air.

“Like this?”

“PUT THAT AWAY!” Shinnok lunges for it, but Raiden’s already stowed it again in the invisible dimension. He’s serene and unbothered, gently pushing away Shinnok with one arm as he restores the peace.

“Not to worry, Shinnok. It is safe in my possession.”

Darrius is nearly having a heart attack.

“W--was that--”

“Maybe.” Shinnok cuts him short, refusing to give a direct answer. “I can replicate the item very convincingly. What do you need it to do?”

“The person who wants it-- well...” Darrius carefully avoids any further explanation. “He believes it can grant wishes.”

“Ah, excellent.” Shinnok’s vivid green eyes light up with sudden mischief, a wicked grin spreading across his thin face. “The replica will grant wishes in the most disappointing way possible. Technically, it would still function as expected.”

Raiden protests uselessly. “Shinnok, no--”

But it’s already too late. The scheme has begun.

Shinnok sets off along the path towards the hotel, wasting no time as he thinks through the list of necessary components. He has almost everything he needs in his armor construction kit, and he’s certain that Tanya would help him acquire any rare materials. “Darrius, come with me.”

Cassie calls out to him, following close behind. “What about us?”

“Come along, if you like.” Shinnok doesn’t even look back.

Raiden sighs, exhaling deeply. By solving one problem, they might have created another.
Salvation (1/2)

Skarlet answers the door cheerfully, unlatching it to welcome the newest visitor. She’s thrilled to meet someone who’s managed to knock politely, waiting to be invited, rather than crashing into the palace like a battering ram.

Running her fingers through her short hair, she clears her throat and straightens the collar of her top, adopting her best manners. She has no idea who it is, but she’s already glad to see them.

“Welcome to the Outworld palace!” Skarlet pulls the door open, and smiles wide, revealing sharp pointed teeth. “What do you want?”

Inwardly, she kicks herself. That’s not what she meant to say.

The visitor is unbothered. She studies Skarlet through dark eyes, framed by elegant eyelashes and a pretty face. She’s dressed in flowing white silk with gold trim, a broad-brimmed hat perched atop her head and secured with ribbons.

Among the grimy denizens of Outworld, she sticks out in the crowd.

She has a clipboard tucked under her arm, mostly to seem official, and patiently waits to be invited in. Skarlet takes the opportunity to try again, coughing under her breath, and fumbles for words, flustered already. “What I mean is, what is your purpose for visiting?” As an afterthought, she remembers something important to ask. “And your name?”

“Ashrah.” The woman’s voice is melodic and lovely, contributing to the angelic impression. “I will be honest with you. I am a former demon.”

Skarlet blinks. “Interesting. I don’t care.” A second later, she smacks her forehead. “I mean, I don’t mind!”

Ashrah arches one eyebrow in faint amusement.

Skarlet backs up a few paces, mortified. “I’m sorry. I keep saying things I don’t mean to say, and not saying the things I should…”

“Not to worry. May I come in?”

“Oh! Of course!” Skarlet yanks the door wide, holding it politely as she steps through. “Why are you here?”

She smiles faintly. “Your candor is appreciated. I sensed the dispersal of demonic energy here recently, and came as soon as I could. I trust that I am not too late to prevent a crisis?”

Skarlet scratches her head, recalling recent events. “Not really, unless you know anything about Orderrealm and Chaosrealm.”

“Ashrah muses thoughtfully, proceeding down the hall with silent footsteps. “I have no expertise in that area. Allow me to explain myself, instead. I assisted the Earthrealm delegates on a mission to destroy several sinister magical items. We succeeded, but it seems one of these items was left behind without our notice. It was recently shattered, which means a soul was freed. Who was it?”
“I actually know the answer to this.” Skarlet stops short, gesturing for Ashrah to take a seat beside her on a nearby windowsill. They may as well sit down for a complex conversation like this, and she’s not even sure if she’s supposed to allow this woman in to visit. Too late. “I saw the whole thing happen! I was across the arena at the time, but I have good eyesight.”

“I am pleased to hear it.” Ashrah takes off her hat, resting it across her lap, and places the clipboard on top, writing in another language with an elegant quill pen that supplies its own ink. “Shall you tell me?”

Skarlet’s eyes widen. “That pen is great. I’d like one.”

“I will see about obtaining another, once you have told me what I need to know.”

“Right!” Skarlet bites her lip, collecting her thoughts. “It was Noob Saibot. He’s Bi-Han now.”

Ashrah drops her pen and clipboard, clattering to the ground. “What?”

Skarlet lunges to pick up the items, handing them back to her urgently. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No…” Ashrah takes a deep breath, wiping her forehead. This is an unexpected revelation. “Noob Saibot was believed to be beyond help. For a time, I myself hunted him in search of purification. It was necessary for me to slay a being of great evil, to free myself from the Netherrealm.”

“Oh, interesting! Who’d you murder?”

“A Brotherhood of Shadow sorcerer named Keryon. I will tell you the details later, or you could ask… nearly anybody else.” Ashrah quickly recalls the list. Nine ex-revenants and all the Earthrealmers, plus a few gods. “It was a wide-ranging adventure.”

“I will.” Skarlet sits on her hands, trying to stop her nervous fidgeting. “Anyway-- if you want to try to find Bi-Han, I can get him and he can talk to you. Would that help?”

“Probably not. If he remembers me, it would be in a negative context. There are very few beings of evil who have escaped my capture, but he was one of them.” Ashrah gazes out the window, briefly distracted by what looks like a play rehearsal in the courtyard. “How was he freed?”

“That, I don’t know. I’d have to find Sektor and ask. He had something to do with it.”

“Sektor? Who is Sektor?” Ashrah jots a note on her clipboard. “I have not heard his name within recent memory.”

“Another of the Lin Kuei ninja clan. He came back at the same time as Bi-Han.”

Ashrah furrows her brow. “A sinister plot by the Brotherhood?”

“I think that was the idea, but it didn’t work. I don’t know any more than that. Come with me. I’ll try to find him.” Skarlet leaps from her seat, grabbing Ashrah’s hand and leading her forward. She may as well just search the palace and let Sektor tell his own story when he’s found. “Actually, I’ll give you a tour. I’m sure we’ll run into him along the way.”

“That would be fine by me.” Ashrah is amused by the girl’s antics. She seems like good company, although the sharp teeth suggest otherwise. “Since you are giving me a tour… what is happening
in the courtyard?”

“Oh, that’s just Shinnok and Raiden again. And Sheeva.”

“The gods and a Shokan, cooperating?” Ashrah glances at the shorter girl in surprise. “Whatever for?”

“Do you want the short story or the long story?”

“Allow me to hear the details. I’m curious.”

“The Shokan split into two factions, the elites and... well, everybody else. Sheeva is in charge of the everybody else faction. She became queen - and she earned it! - but Goro didn’t like that very much. He convinced plenty of the other Shokans to follow him instead, and there was-- is??-- a civil war. Or something like that.” Skarlet speaks at high speed, trying to summarize the entire complicated incident. “Now he’s trying to get Mileena to confirm HIM as the real ruler of the Shokan, by blocking an important trade route with his part of the army. It’s a dirty trick, if you ask me.”

“Hmm.” Ashrah is not closely involved in politics, and does not plan to be. “...You say Mileena rules again?”

“Yes. Also a long story. It’s fine, Kotal is in Earthrealm. I hope he’s okay.”

“You... hope he’s okay?”

“Ask me later.”

“Certainly.” Ashrah doesn’t feel like probing for more information quite yet. “What does Mileena plan to do?”

“Shinnok and Raiden are going out there in costume as the corrupted versions of each other, to scare off the Shokan.”

“They... what? They believe this will work?”

“It should. I helped with the costumes!” Skarlet does an abrupt U-turn at the end of a dead-end corridor, leading Ashrah back out. “Sorry about that. Forgot my way around-- oh!” She stumbles, running headfirst into a man who’s rushing down the main hallway with a box of mechanical parts. “Very sorry!”

The man stumbles, catching himself before the box falls, and glares at Skarlet over the rims of his glasses. He’s in a bad mood already, and this isn’t helping. “Watch where you’re going.”

“I really am sorry!”

“You should be.” He scoffs dismissively. “Are you Skarlet?”

“Yes. Who are you?”

“Does it matter?”

Skarlet looks instantly apologetic. “I’m just trying to be polite.”

“Fine.” His attitude softens slightly. “I’m Sektor.”
“I was looking for you!” Skarlet lets go of Ashrah’s hand and immediately rushes to help him with the box, attempting to pry it from his arms. “Let me carry that for you.”

“No!” He wrenches it away, backing up against the wall, and seethes at her. The last thing he needs is people trying to ‘help’. “Mind your own business. What do you want from me?”

“Ashrah wanted me to ask you to tell her about what happened with Bi-Han.”

“Be specific.”

“How he started being Bi-Han again.”

“I can spare a minute for that.” Sektor starts off down the corridor again, not even waiting for the others. If they want to hear, they’ll have to keep up. “Quan Chi attempted to revive me and transform me into a revenant. It was unsuccessful, because I defeated him with my bare hands.”

“Quan Chi?” Ashrah’s almost shocked, but Quan Chi is notoriously persistent. “The last time I saw him, he was… ah, part of a-- construction, by another sorcerer. What was he like this time?”

“A ghost, and a weak one, too.”

“Unsurprising. I’m listening.”

“He resurrected me, and it looked like he’d done some ritual to a jar or a vial to keep me bound to his will. During the fight, I smashed the jar, and correctly guessed that my freedom was due to destroying that thing. Then, I looted his laboratory and found a similar jar that said Bi-Han. When I exited through Quan Chi’s portal, I brought it along. And there I was, in the damned Outworld tournament. Skarlet can tell you the rest.”

Ashrah is impressed. “And you knew enough not to break it?”

“I’m impulsive, but I am not stupid. Others will testify to this, if you feel like asking them.”

Skarlet hurries down the corridor, catching up with quick footsteps. “You seem a little defensive about that.”

Sektor refuses to answer.

Ashrah clears her throat. “Out of curiosity, do you know what would have happened if you broke it?”

“No. Demonic lore isn’t my specialty. But I imagine it’s nothing good.” Sektor exhales sharply in disgust. “Quan Chi has never brought anything positive into my life, except for my second chance at life, and that was accidental.”

“The jar acts as a failsafe on the enchantment. Had Bi-Han been freed previously, it would have returned him to wraith form. As Noob Saibot, it would have trapped him permanently. Forever.”

Sektor ponders this grim possibility for a moment, rounding the corner of the corridor and heading out towards the courtyard. “Good thing I didn’t break it, then, isn’t it?”

“I would say so.” Ashrah ignores Sektor’s sharp-edged attitude. “How did you know that he needed to break it?”

“A correct guess.”
“How did you cause it to happen?”

“I threw myself in the way of one of his punches. When he hit me, it smashed the jar. And me.”

“Clever.” Ashrah nods in approval. It’s rare to find a mortal who comprehends the logic behind demonic enchantments. At worst, she’d feared the sinister influence of another Netherrealm in Outworld, but that seems to be far from true. “Why?”

“What else was I going to do?” Sektor shrugs, backing up to shove a door open. “Either way, I suspected I’d die. Ripped apart at Noob’s hands, or bleeding out from the glass in my ribs. And if I lived, I’d be considered a Lin Kuei war criminal, unless I did something to make up for it. The opportunity was there. I took it.”

Skarlet’s eyes widen. “War criminal? What did you do?”

“Don’t you know about the Cyber Initiative?”

“I’ve heard a little bit-- wait. Wait.” Skarlet’s jaw drops, suddenly realizing. “You’re that Sektor?!”

Sektor stares at her in mild disgust. “You thought there were two?”

“Maybe. There are two Sub-Zeros.”

“...that’s fair.” He grumbles, holding open the door for both women. “Yes, I am that Sektor. And that’s as many details as you get. If you’re wondering, they took the glass out of my ribs, Bi-Han recovered, and we’ve been more or less fine ever since. Not that you have a reason to care.”

“I see.” Ashrah slips out the door, appreciating the decorations in the Outworld courtyard. Sektor’s pessimism does not surprise her, considering everything he endured. “So what are you doing here now?”

“Overall, or right this instant?”

She shrugs. “How about right now?”

“I’m setting up some pyrotechnics for the gods in their stupid costumes.” Sektor is less than thrilled to be involved in the whole thing, but he does have the necessary skill set. “Shinnok is dressing up as Dark Raiden, Raiden is dressing up as Corrupted Shinnok. Ask them why, not me. Unfortunately, Raiden can’t come anywhere close to summoning Shinnok’s magic.”

Ashrah is perplexed. “So what are they going to do about it?”

“I’m setting up a cord through Raiden’s sleeves like my flamethrower. Shinnok can adjust it and put it on him, and make it look like it belongs on the outfit. From there, it’s up to them.”

“Shinnok has fire powers?”

“Purplish-pink fire, and according to Shinnok, it’s not hard to make that kind of illusion. Actual fire is much more of a challenge. I would know...” Sektor is suddenly absorbed by technical talk, explaining the system to Ashrah. “It’s much like my own flamethrowers, but smaller and hidden, with the outlets on the insides of Raiden’s wrists. With any luck, it’ll be sufficient.”

Shinnok, already dressed in full Dark Raiden apparel, confronts Sektor the instant he comes close. He’s still floating off the ground, trying to adjust his height to Raiden’s. “Do you know what time
“No.” Sektor answers dryly. “Let me just pull my sundial out of my pocket.”

Shinnok grits his teeth. “It’s almost noon, which means it’s almost time to confront the Shokan. Did you bring the supplies?”

“Yes. All you have to do is put it on Raiden.” Sektor practically throws the box at him. “Get it done. It’s your project.”

“Thank you.” Shinnok’s voice drips with sarcasm. “It will function correctly, won’t it?”

“Do you think I would sabotage my own work just to prove a point? I have more pride than that.”

Shinnok gives him one last stern look, and floats away, followed by Skarlet, who’s already pulling out a needle and thread from a sewing kit attached to her belt. At a distance, Raiden now looks like a convincing imitation of Corrupted Shinnok - somehow, they’ve managed to make his eyes glow red, though his skin tone is still the same, although it's greyish now. Shinnok, meanwhile, is as pale as always, but he’s set up some kind of illusion that makes it less noticeable.

It’s sufficient.

Ashrah clasps her arms behind her back, keeping a safe distance, and side-eyes Sektor. “May I attend the festivities? If I’ll be spending my time in Outworld now, I may as well.”

“I’m not going to stop you.” He shrugs, starting to relax now that his part of the elaborate scheme is over and done. “Why? Are you trapped in Outworld?”

“More or less. For demons, traveling between realms is limited. Only Quan Chi and Sareena are powerful enough to circumvent this.”

“That makes me glad not to be a demon. I would, at some point, like to go home.” Sektor studies her, stepping back a few paces. “You don’t look anything like a demon, I have to say.”

Ashrah nods, refusing to offer any explanation. “Sometimes that is how it is.”

“Bi-Han doesn’t look like Noob at all anymore, either. Though he’s stuck with Saibot forever, or so I’m told.”

The blood in Ashrah’s veins runs cold. “Saibot is still attached to his soul?”

“Yes.” Sektor’s tone turns slightly rude. “What about it?”

“He must have an incredibly strong will, to hold back such a force.”

“Yes. He does.” Sektor’s words are brief and clipped. “If he ever needs help fighting Saibot, I would provide it.”

“You are close to each other?”

“It’s not like anyone else is going to be.”

Ashrah doesn’t know what to say to that.

Fortunately, the conversation is cut short by the arrival of a tall, imposing Shokan woman in regal armor and elaborate finery, bending down to step through the palace door. She brushes past Ashrah
and Sektor, not noticing either of them, and is trailed by an equally tall and imposing Shokan woman with fur and tiger stripes.

Sektor raises an eyebrow, lip curled. “I really have seen everything.”

Ashrah meets his eyes. “No, you haven’t.”

“Maybe not compared to you, no.” He concedes the point. Folding his arms, he turns sharply and starts off towards the courtyard gates. If he’s early, he can get a seat somewhere on the city wall. “I may as well watch this disaster. Let’s go.”

“You seem peculiarly convinced it is all going to fail.”

“If it does, I won’t be disappointed. If it works, I’ll be pleasantly surprised.”

“That is an interesting mindset.”

“It suits me. I’ll see you later, whatever your name is.” Sektor hurries forward, blending in with a crowd of assorted Earthrealmers, and seeks out a tall and burly man dressed in blue, with a no-nonsense look on his face. That must be Bi-Han, Ashrah thinks to herself, and so it is.

She stands back in the shade, watching the crowd pass. One group seems to be sticking together, and among them, she recognizes Sareena. She’ll have to greet her later. Nearby, two bearded men, in blue and yellow, stand alongside a group of young people, chattering excitedly. These must be the Earthrealmers. She recognizes Cassie, from the incident with the soul jars, and a few other faces seem familiar. Jax and Jacqui, though, are missing. Ashrah can’t help but wonder why.

Yet another bearded man, with a red blindfold tied at the back of his head, is close to the group of ninjas. Someone - evidently his son - is leaning on him for support, looking cheerful despite being on crutches for now. Near them, Ashrah spots a group of royally dressed Edenians, in blue, green, purple, yellow, pink, red, and another purple.

Some of these are -- were -- the revenants she helped save.

Two responsible-looking humans in SF uniforms are herding the pack towards the city gates, one covered with healed burn scars, the other with short hair and a farmer’s tan. With a shock, Ashrah realizes these, too, were the revenants. Kabal and Stryker, who else?

It’s astonishing to see them alive again, fulfilling the rest of their future. She almost doesn’t recognize the last two, dressed differently in an Outworld style. Liu Kang and Tomas Vrbada. The ninth is missing, though Ashrah has a guess where Nightwolf could be. Among the Earthrealmers, he is the only one with enough power to defend the Sky Temple while two of the gods are away.

Despite everything she went through to help free the revenants, Ashrah has never been more certain of her decision.

It was worth it.

Skarlet catches up to her and interrupts her thoughts, slipping her arm through the crook of Ashrah’s elbow. “Hi! It’s me again.”

“So I presumed.” Ashrah glances at her sideways. “Are you going to watch?”
“Wouldn’t miss it for the world!”
“Do you have any stage fright?”

“Naturally, I do not. I have no reason to fear this, at all, whatsoever. Do you?”

“Of course I don’t. Why would I? What a preposterous idea! Why would you even ask?”

“You were the one who raised the question. I thought it fair to return it. Do you disagree?”

“Not again.” Mileena rests her forehead in her hands, careful not to disrupt her hairstyle. “Shinnok. Raiden. Please. I can’t exactly tell immortals to grow up, but--”

Shinnok stares down at her imperiously, floating a foot off the ground. He’s surrounded in an aura of crackling red lightning, presenting himself as a convincing substitute for the actual Dark Raiden. If not for Mileena’s knowledge of the truth - and helping with the costumes - she’d find it terrifying.

He puts his hands on his hips, waiting for her to continue. “What were you going to say? That we should grow up?”

“Something like that.”

“What are you? Twenty-five? Barely an adult, even.” Shinnok sniffs dismissively, pulling the brim of his hat further down over his eyes. Mileena had the bright idea to fasten it to the cowl, so it’s not coming off anytime soon. “You have no right to criticize us.”

“Point taken.” Mileena has neither the time nor energy to argue. “Sheeva! Are you ready?”

Sheeva towers behind her. “A queen is always ready.”

“Great!” She brightens up, tilting her head back to grin at the much taller woman, and fastens her mask over her face, then thinks better of it and tosses it away. “If I’m going to scare them, there’s no point in not being me.”

“Well-spoken.” Baraka nods in approval, leaning against a wall with a box of costume props. Just in case disaster strikes, they’ve prepared a Mileena body-double outfit for him too, complete with a wig. It’s unlikely Goro would ever notice a difference, and all the Mileena clones are away in other cities. For now, though, he’s wearing a complex armored outfit, which will look impressive from a distance.

He’s hoping Goro won’t get close enough for a better look.

“Let’s go!” Mileena rubs her hands together enthusiastically. With no other warning, she opens up the city gate door and charges through, trotting forward eagerly before she remembers Sindel’s advice. Walk like a queen. Shoulders back, chin lifted, placing one foot in front of the other with determined precision.

She sees Goro now, standing there with both pairs of arms folded, flanked by his lieutenants and lackeys. For now, he’s stayed at the agreed distance from the city walls, but he’s ready to push the barrier at any moment, should the negotiation go wrong.

Shinnok and Raiden step out, following a few paces behind Mileena. Both have shut off their
magic and special effects for now, reserving their power for up-close intimidation. They are frightening enough on their own. Raiden looms above everyone else, encased in a partial suit of demonic armor with sinister magic flickering through his arms and chest, a ripped cloak of red fabric wrapped around his waist. Shinnok floats above the ground, his head-to-toe armor glittering in the sunlight, while the black fabric stands out starkly against the colorful desert backdrop.

Behind them both, Sheeva walks with measured footsteps, the ground trembling beneath her feet. She looks entirely self-assured, showing no signs of fear. Her thick mohawk of hair is neatly plaited, the dragon-scales on her skin standing out vividly between the gaps in the armor. Baraka is beside her, smiling as much as his mouthful of teeth will allow. This is an important day for not just the Shokans, but the Tarkatans as well.

Action leads to change. He knows this, and he’s ready.

Mileena comes to a halt ten feet from Goro, refusing to break the silence. Shinnok and Raiden hover on both sides of her, with a hungry gleam in their eyes, ready to pounce at the first false move.

Goro falters, and feels a twinge of fear, cracking both sets of knuckles in a visible show of attempted intimidation. He hadn’t known the gods both still carried the corruption. And now the empress has weaponized it in her favor? After all the harm that came to Outworld at the hands of Dark Raiden?

The situation is not what he thought.

“I am Drathon, the Destroyer Prince, known to the commoners as Goro. You will heed me. “He ignores the queen and the empress, turning his beady red gaze directly towards the smaller god. For some reason, he thought Raiden was taller. Maybe the corruption changed Shinnok more than he’d expected. “You dare set foot here? To talk with me?”

“Yes, I intend to talk with you.” The one known as Dark Raiden sets his hands on his hips, wearing a baleful smirk. He’s looking forward to this. “Unless you would prefer pantomime?”

Goro says nothing.

“With four arms, you’d be at an advantage there.”

Goro still says nothing.

“That, however, is the only advantage you’ll have in this negotiation.”

Goro continues to say nothing.

Sheeva elbows Dark Raiden in the side. “Words are useless. He knows only force.”

Dark Raiden cocks his head, lifting his chin as he glances back at her. They’re at eye level now that he’s floating. “Noted.”

That gets Goro’s attention. Enraged by Sheeva’s attitude, he leans forward across the invisible line, trying to intimidate her. “I know more than force. I have strategy.”

Mileena presses a sharp finger into Goro’s chest, standing on her tiptoes and digging in. “Back up.”

He snarls, his meaty hands balling into fists. “Who are you to tell me to back up?”
"I rule this land. Back up, or I’ll back you up."

"Your rule does not extend to my domain. And this--" here Goro gestures to the entire encampment-- "is my domain!"

Dark Raiden arches a brow. "Saying things doesn’t make them true."

Corrupted Shinnok nods slowly. "You speak the truth in that, Raiden."

Goro looks between them, unsure which to address. This is a paradox he hadn’t considered. Attacking either of the gods will bring far worse consequences than either Sheeva or Mileena, but if he stands down, he’ll lose his hard-earned right to bargain. It took a great deal of time, money, and effort to set this all up.

He settles for talking to both of them, pointing in opposite directions. "You!"

Dark Raiden, as usual, has a retort. "Which one?"

Goro decides to focus on him first. "You will pay for the invasion you led in Outworld!"

"I see. You really are out of touch, aren’t you? Outworld’s news industry is behind the curve, I know, but this is just inexcusable." Dark Raiden spreads his arms, gesturing to the entire group of Shokans behind Goro. "He doesn’t know I have atoned. I’ve also learned how to weaponize the corruption and increase our powers tenfold! I welcome this dark magic, and the efficient mindset it brings. Gone are the concepts of mercy, weakness, second chances. We are here to conquer, and to crush those who attempt to conquer us!"

Mileena nods, grimly smiling.

Goro glances from one to the other, staring at Corrupted Shinnok now. "Is that true?"

Corrupted Shinnok nods, gesturing in Dark Raiden’s direction. "Listen to what he said."

Unwisely, the Shokan decides to taunt him. "Do you have something to say by yourself?"

"Indeed I do." Corrupted Shinnok straightens his shoulders, cracking his neck and rubbing the back of his skull. His horns glow brighter, eyes blazing. The special effects are flawless. He’ll thank them all later for it. "You have the audacity to question not one god, but two? You place your people in undue danger. All of you--" and here he picks up on Dark Raiden’s tactic, addressing the group of displeased Shokans behind Goro-- "did your leader inform you that you would be facing down two gods?"

One of them is bold enough to speak. "No."

"Ah! I see. That is your failure, then." Dark Raiden takes over, and points at Goro, lifting his chin to look down his nose at the giant Shokan. "If your leadership was sufficient, you would already know of our presence and our tactics."

"I have no reason to expect you. Kotal Kahn banned Dark Raiden from Outworld."

Mileena taps her toe on the paved path. "Do you see Kotal Kahn here?"

Goro glances around.

"The question was rhetorical." Sheeva chimes in, deep voice resounding through the still air. So far, this hasn’t broken out into violence, for which she’s grateful. "Goro, you have two options.
Retreat, and we will resolve our differences honorably, as Shokans, on our own territory.”

“If I do not?”

“As I said…” Mileena grins nastily. “Back up, or else.”

Goro has the sense to take a half-step back.

He glances around at his surroundings. He and his supporters are camped out across a wide road that leads to a large vacant trading ground outside the palace walls. It’s now full of makeshift Shokan-size tents and the scattered bones of leftover roasted meat. Traffic, in the meantime, has been forced to re-route around the obstacle, passing through the narrow side-streets and weaving through the network of scattered small buildings. Goro has the tactical advantage, and he won’t surrender it without making the empress - and her new ally, the traitorous queen - reach a compromise.

He cracks his knuckles again. His options are limited, if he wants to save face. “You cannot attack me here, Sheeva.”

She spreads her arms wide, shrugging. “Would I?”

“Attacking would be foolish.”

“I’m aware.”

“Then what threat do you possibly pose to me? Your hands are tied, the Tarkatan is useless, and these gods are cowardly.”

Mileena carefully delivers the cue, seizing the opportunity. “Be wise, and avoid conflict. The gods in their corrupted forms are... volatile.”

A dark shadow passes over Goro’s face. “What does that mean?”

“The slightest provocation can spark their anger. Beware.”

Both Shinnok and Raiden turn towards Goro, lighting up their powers at once with a surge of excitement. Raiden’s hands flicker brightly with magic fire, working perfectly as intended. He owes Sektor many thanks, since the system is flawless. Shinnok, meanwhile, has already loaded up his amulet with a magic charge from Raiden’s lightning, keeping him powered up through the whole elaborate show.

Slipping back into their roles, they enter the next phase of the negotiation.

Dark Raiden raises his fist, encased in red lightning. He’ll enjoy this. “You suggest that I am a coward, ‘Prince Drathon’?”

Goro’s expression shifts with unease. “You cannot attack me. The Shokans enjoy special status in the eyes of the Kahn!”

“Actually, Raiden and Shinnok can now overrule that law. I appointed them both to be Outworld protector gods.” Mileena spreads her arms, shrugging with one shoulder. “Sorry.”

Goro glares down at her. “You are not sorry.”

“No. I’m really not.”
Dark Raiden and Corrupted Shinnok slip into their telepathy for a quick moment, laying out the plan.

*We shouldn’t attack the Shokans first, Raiden. It’d end badly.*

*I know. So we fight each other, close enough to Goro that he will inevitably try to hit one of us.*

*Yes. Then, leave it up to the others.*

*Good. How about the bone scepter? I cannot manifest that.*

*Pull it out. I’ll form it. On the count of three…*

Corrupted Shinnok reaches for his belt, brandishing the surprise weapon - Shinnok’s own scepter, now in convenient handheld form. He grips the handle of the small object tightly, and the whole staff forms from thin air, brittle bone shards coming together to form a polearm blade on one end and a scythe on the other.

Dark Raiden smirks imperceptibly.

*Now!*

Dark Raiden floats closer to Corrupted Shinnok, pointing at him ominously as red lightning crackles and arcs up his arm. “*I am the new protector god of Outworld. The Kahnum’s proclamation listed my name first. You are nothing more than an impostor!*”

“*I claim the title rightfully, unlike you, who laid waste to the capitol when you first crossed into this realm!*” Corrupted Shinnok snarls back at him, glaring with a deep frown, and points the scepter at Dark Raiden. “How dare you call yourself the protector of this world? You have brought it nothing but continual misery and harm!”

Dark Raiden hisses under his breath, disgusted by his rival’s words and actions. “I should have let Kotal Kahn take you as reparations! It would have spared us all the difficulty of the tournament!”

Corrupted Shinnok’s eyes widen, mouth opening. “*That was uncalled for! How dare you, you ungrateful fiend!*”

Dark Raiden sends a telepathic apology. *I’m sorry. Was that too harsh? I’m only being mean to myself, if you think about it.*

Corrupted Shinnok answers quickly. *No, that was excellent. Continue. We need to make him believe it.*

The argument rages on.

“Uncalled-for, perhaps, but I speak only the truth!” Dark Raiden’s voice rings out as he floats higher in the air as a show of power. Now the red lightning is surrounding him like an ominous aura, and he’s dangerously close to Goro, who’s beginning to show real fear.

Corrupted Shinnok grips his scepter tighter, magic fire flaring bright as his emotions rise. They’re close to the tipping point. The other three had better be ready. “Do you wish to test your skills against mine?”

“You would *willingly* demonstrate your inferiority?” Dark Raiden lets out a cackling laugh, playing the role to the hilt. “I accept!”
Are we actually going to fight? How hard should I hit you?

Hard enough to be convincing. He hasn’t fled yet. We’ll keep doing this until it works, Raiden. You know we have to.

All right. Watch out! And there’s no other warning as Corrupted Shinnok swings the scepter towards Dark Raiden, the bone-enhanced blade landing against his armored ribs with a loud crack of clashing metal. Dark Raiden curses in outrage, and hurls a bolt of crimson lightning across the distance to strike Corrupted Shinnok in the shoulder, making him wince and draw back. Corrupted Shinnok launches himself at Dark Raiden in anger, knocking him sideways in the air, and Dark Raiden retaliates with a slap in the face and a lightning-enhanced fist to the temple.

Mileena, Sheeva, and Baraka are frozen solid, staring up at the sight. Some of the Shokans are already cowering, slinking away from the back of the group.

Corrupted Shinnok gets the upper hand, throwing Dark Raiden back with a magic blast from the infamous amulet that sends him hurtling towards the ground, right past Goro’s face. The Shakan prince raises a fist in outrage, but doesn’t strike either of them just yet.

So close. How’s the replica amulet working for you?

Very well, thank you. It does not actually hurt when I hit you with it, does it?

Only a bit. I’ll live. Keep at it.

Dark Raiden recovers, brushing off the dust on the shoulders of his armor, and surrounds himself with a crackling aura of blood-tinged lightning, forcibly slamming into Corrupted Shinnok with a solid punch. The glowing revenant veins across Corrupted Shinnok’s body flicker on impact as he reels backward, but the effect stays intact, thank the realms.

We have to get this over with. I don’t know how long your costume will hold up.

You built it yourself, Shinnok. What about that guarantee of quality?

Oh, shut up.

I am going to knock you downwards towards Goro. His instincts will take over. It will work this time.

Are you sure, Raiden?

Am I ever not?

Yes! Plenty of times!

Just be quiet and brace yourself.

Corrupted Shinnok reaches out with one clawed hand, grabbing Dark Raiden’s collar, and lifts him, yanking him upwards, Then, in one smooth motion, he circles around, measures the distance, and kicks Dark Raiden down towards the earth, sailing towards Goro.

The Shakan prince roars, and lashes out with both fists, connecting perfectly.

Dark Raiden soars through the air, launched like a missile across the length of the empty ground. He lands in a heap of pointy armor near the city gate, dusting himself off and yelling curses loud enough to be heard from the top of the walls.
“THAT’S NOT ALLOWED, GORO!” Mileena scampers towards Sheeva, climbing up like a tree and perching on her shoulders to make herself heard. “YOU CAN’T HIT OUR PROTECTOR GOD!”

Goro shouts in outrage, already stepping over the invisible line with his arms raised and his spiked gauntlets strapped on. “He was going to hit me!”

“HE DIDN’T! YOU DID!” Mileena is absolutely delighted, but trying not to show it. “Baraka! Do the thing! Now!”

Baraka raises his arm blades, crosses them, and hits them together twice. The clash of metal rings out across the courtyard.

Instantly, a united force of Tarkatans emerge from the nearby outbuildings, vaulting through windows and leaping over fences. They dash across the ground to confront the Shokan forces, swarming around them and gnashing their teeth. Their blades are sharp and their armor is polished, wearing clothing with the insignia of the Outworld authority.

“THEY’RE CITIZENS NOW!” Mileena shouts at the top of her lungs. “IT’S AUTHORIZED! Get them, boys!”

Goro measures the odds as Corrupted Shinnok floats ominously above him. His closest allies are about to be skewered by a pack of Tarkatans, he’s just accidentally punched a god, and the other god is about to kick him into another dimension.

Without a word, he turns tail and flees, giving the signal to evacuate.

The ground shakes with the force of the impact as the Shokan horde departs, leaving their encampment littered with debris. It’s a high-speed chase, and the Outworld defenders nearly catch up to the Shokans, frightening them as much as the warring gods did. Finally, their strength carries them to safety and the Tarkatans halt the pursuit, turning back at last.

“Look at that!” Mileena clings as Sheeva hugs her tight, spinning her around in the air. The empress beams with pure joy, hair flying free as her crown falls off. “We did it! It worked! I can not believe it! They fell for it!”

“Yes. Celebrate later! I have to go. I’ll follow them with my forces as far as I can.” The queen puts her down, striding confidently back towards the palace gates as Mileena grabs her crown and runs beside her to keep up. “I owe you a great debt. The tactic was effective. Reason and logic would not have removed Goro from your back yard.”

“Probably true, but it doesn’t matter now. Off he goes!” Mileena waves a hand dismissively, laughing to herself. “Come back sometime and visit again, won’t you?”

“I will.” Sheeva gives Mileena one last goodbye hug, bending down, and then she’s gone, sweeping through the mighty gates as the path clears. She collects Shaka from the group, and proceeds arm in arm, preparing to claim her rightful place as queen of the united Shokan.

Outside the palace walls, someone in a SF uniform speeds across the distance to reach Dark Raiden, helping him to his feet.

“I have to commend you, Kabal. The plan was brilliant.” Dark Raiden pulls off his hat and helmet, revealing Shinnok’s ordinary face beneath as the illusion fades away. He rubs the bridge of his nose, groaning in pain, and stumbles towards the gates. “My ears are ringing. I’ll feel that blow for days. Damn that Shokan.”
“You’re a god. You’ll recover.” Kabal answers with an amiable smile, helping him back into the city with a steady hand on his shoulder. “You did great. That’s going to go down in history as one of the greatest scams in Outworld.”

“Take some credit. The idea was yours.”

“Yeah, but you and Raiden actually did it.” Kabal takes the hat and cowl from him, tucking it under his arm. “Here. I’ll bring that in.”

“Thank you. Oh-- there you are!” Shinnok glances over his shoulder, coming face to face with a disheveled, sweaty, demon-armor-clad Raiden. He looks exhausted, but he’s beaming like never before.

Shinnok floats up to meet his counterpart’s formidable height, and gathers him up in a tight hug, his chin resting on Raiden’s shoulder. *We did it. That was phenomenal.*

*Yes. You were admirable.* Raiden pats his shoulder gently, fluffing up Shinnok’s hair at the back of his neck. *You have earned the highest honors for that.*

Shinnok smiles sincerely. *So have you.*

Kabal clears his throat. “I don’t know about you two, but I’m going inside. I need a nap.”

Shinnok glances at him, arching a brow. “But you didn’t even do anything.”

“No that was stressful to watch. Take a nap if you need it, too.”

“Gods don’t do that.”

“Who cares? You’ve earned it.” Kabal strolls off towards the gates, walking at a normal pace for once, and hands over the costume hat to Skarlet and the mysterious lady in white nearby. Better not ask.

Glancing over his shoulder, Kabal hides a smile. The plan might have sounded stupid, but it worked like a charm. He actually did something meaningful for once. How ‘bout that.

Despite his success in Outworld, though, he’s still looking forward to going home.
“Let me see it.”

“No.” Shinnok yanks it away, holding it arm’s length. “Ask politely.”

Rain lets out an exaggerated sigh, and leans across the table, trying to get a closer glimpse of the mysterious item. “I would like to see it.”

“Better. Keep trying.”

“...May I see it?”

“That’s sufficient.” Shinnok drops the fake Kamidogu into Rain’s open palm, smirking as the prince inspects his creation with impressed awe. “I trust that you’re not planning to steal it?”

“No.” Rain tosses it back to him, and sits across the table with his chin propped in his hands, idly studying Shinnok’s assortment of crafting materials and tools. “How did you make such a convincing replica?”

“Let’s just say I had a good reference image.” Shinnok isn’t about to mention that Raiden is still carrying around the real Kamidogu close at hand. Rain isn’t the most conniving of the Edenians, but at his worst he’s unpredictable and selfish, and Shinnok knows what that’s like. He himself has often been guilty of the same sins. “It’ll be good enough to fool Havik, I think.”

“It had better be.” Rain grumbles, glancing over at Ermac, who’s been sitting on a tall stool with their arms folded, absolutely transfixed by the creation process. They haven’t uttered a single word through the whole conversation. “Are you still alive over there?”

“We are.”

“What a relief.” Shinnok retorts, pulling out a small tool to carve a few extra weathered details into one of the Kamidogu’s edges. “I’ll admit I prefer working with slightly more notice ahead of time, rather than emergency on-the-spot amulet creation.”

“That reminds me.” Rain forces the words out. “Thank you.”

Shinnok doesn’t even look up. “You’re welcome.”

Ermac’s voice echoes through the small room. “We also thank you.”

“You’re also welcome.”

They’re silent for a little while after that, before Rain’s curiosity gets the better of him once again. He turns to Ermac to prod them in the shoulder instead. He may as well leave Shinnok alone for now. “Have you been feeling all right, after… all that?”

“We are adequate.” Ermac shifts their weight on the stool, frowning and gazing off into the corner of the room. “The new amulet keeps our souls secure. That is enough.”

Shinnok clears his throat. “That’s not all it does.”

Both voices sound at once. “What?!”
“I didn’t have time to mention it in the spur of the moment, but I built in another feature.” Shinnok glances up, gesturing towards the amulet pressed tightly against Ermac’s chest, bound beneath their tunic. “With some self-control, you should be able to temporarily project whichever of the souls you would like to set free. Possibly even more than once at once, if you are capable.”

Rain sputters, at a sudden loss for words. “What?! When were you going to mention this?”

“Sometime when Ermac was not occupied by other concerns.” Shinnok tosses the Kamidogu up in the air, catching it in the palm of his hand. “The weight is correct. Good. Havik will be attentive to that.”

Rain isn’t done. “Ermac can just-- let the souls loose now?”

“Yes, that’s the general idea.” Shinnok sniffs, holding the Kamidogu up to the desk lamp. Light bounces off the onyx wood and dark ruby, polished to a sheen. “Do you think the gem glitters enough?”

“It looks fine to me. --How many souls at once?!”

“I have no idea. I wasn’t given any time to test the feature in the middle of the tournament fight.” Shinnok’s mildly irritated with all the questions, but he understands the reasons. “The soul containment mechanism is secure, if that’s what you’re going to ask. I can verify that. I wouldn’t do an insufficient job.”

“You’re a god. I’m sure you wouldn’t.” Rain takes a moment to process all this, his brown eyes narrowing as he thinks through the consequences. “Interesting. By the way, how do you feel about another god turning up?”

“Who, Ugajin? I was never fond of him at all, but I suppose it’s fine that Raiden has a friend.” Shinnok is trying to be as diplomatic as he can manage. “Did you know about him?”

“Not a clue. If I knew once, it’s definitely left my memory.”

“I understand that feeling. I was aware that Ugajin was Bo’ Rai Cho, by the way. I knew him from times long past, ever since he... assisted in defeating me the first time.” Shinnok’s lip curls bitterly, poking at the Kamidogu with a small craft blade. “Raiden said not to mention it, so, for once, I listened.”

“He knows so much more than he lets on, doesn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“That’s unknown to me. He tells me that if he shared the knowledge, the path of the future would change. So he has to just... stand by, and watch, and wait.” Shinnok finally looks up from his project, meeting Rain’s eyes. “I imagine it’s frustrating. You shouldn’t wish to be a god. It’s more trouble than it’s worth.”

“I don’t want to be a god. I’m fine as I am.” Rain’s immediately defensive, tossing his head and moving his chair an inch back from the table. “I defeated a god, or-- did he know about that beforehand, too?”

“Sort of.”
“What do you mean, sort of?”

“There’s no harm in telling you now. Raiden knew he had to lose, or else you, feeling the sting of defeat, would take inadvisable actions.” Shinnok phrases it as delicately as he can. “However, he wasn’t expecting you to defeat him as completely and thoroughly as you did, so I have to say, well done.”

Rain never knows when to leave a topic alone. “What kind of ‘inadvisable actions’? Would--would I have turned into some kind of megalomaniac conqueror?”

“Something like that.”

“Really?”

“You would have found yourself at odds with the rest of the Outworld leadership. I don’t see it ending well.” Finally satisfied with his work, Shinnok slips the Kamidogu into a small velvet drawstring bag. “Your attempted coup was an admirable effort… from certain perspectives. Not mine, but I can see why someone would say so.”

“Oh, thanks.”

Shinnok smirks. “Nevertheless, I’m glad to know your priorities are in the right place. If it comforts you to know, your father’s tomb will be found.”

Rain gasps. “When?!”

“I can’t say.”

He leans across the table. “How?!”

“I also can’t say.”

“You can’t say, or you won’t say?”

“I don’t know. Even if I did know, I wouldn’t tell you, but it’s an educated guess. Raiden seems remarkably certain of the events of the future, and he’s not taking any actions to change the timeline.” Shinnok finds it peculiarly comforting to be able to discuss such things openly, for once. Rain isn’t a friend, but he’s starting to be something like it.

Shinnok sits back in his chair. “Can you do me a favor?”

“I can. But will I?”

He glares. “Could you?”

“I could. Possibly.”

“What if I ordered you to do it?”

“I’d find a way to do it in the worst possible manner.”

“Yes, you certainly are the son of a god. No question of it.” Shinnok sighs, picking up the velvet bag with the Kamidogu inside, and hands it over to Rain. “Give this to Darrius. He’s elsewhere in the palace. I told Ermac where to find him in advance.”

Rain glances to Ermac questioningly, for confirmation, and receives a single nod in response.
“Fine.” He resists the urge to sulk about another god exerting his authority, and accepts the bag quietly instead, tucking it into a pocket in his regal purple tunic. “Thank you for entrusting me with this.”

Shinnok eyes him, fingers steepled and one eyebrow raised. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

“When have I--” Rain corrects himself, exiting the room swiftly with Ermac close behind.

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**Darrius is this way.** Ermac floats down the corridor serenely, leading the way. They’re comforted by the powerful energy sensation of the new amulet, concentrating all the magic and keeping it contained within them. There’s no more risk of falling apart, and more importantly, no more Shao Kahn. They’d given up hope on ever being free of the emperor.

So, in many ways, the catastrophe was a blessing.

Rain follows, urged onward by the silent telepathic cue. *Are you sure?*

*I doubt Shinnok would have intentionally misinformed us.*

**Does Darrius know we’re coming?**

*Probably.* Ermac pushes open a door with a blast of green energy, holding it long enough to let Rain in. Then they slip through and take their place at the corner of the room. Inside, it seems to be some kind of meeting chamber, with a group gathered around a table collaborating on a written plan.

Ermac picks out Darrius by sight, and nods in his direction. Rain crosses the room to hand over the Kamidogu--

A very familiar hand grabs his wrist. “I’ll take that.”

Rain glares at Tanya, snatching the Kamidogu away from her with a disapproving frown. “Meddling in everything again, I see.”

“I’m coordinating this plan. Hand it over.”

“Shinnok told me to deliver it, how dare y--”

“Ladies and gentlemen, just don’t.” Darrius gets to his feet and intervenes, prying the bag with the Kamidogu away from both of them. He slips it into a deep pocket in his familiar trench coat, keeping it safe and sound for now. “Thank you for your assistance. I’ve already set up the meeting with Havik, with Mileena’s intervention. It’s practically a miracle I survived.” He groans, remembering the encounter with the chaos cleric. He’s almost more trouble than it’s worth. “Tanya, it’s your duty to deliver the information to Hotaru.”

Rain looks between them, puzzled. Nobody filled him on the details of the plan, or any part of the plan at all, actually. “What information?”

“I’m meeting Havik back in Orderrealm to hand over the Kamidogu.” Darrius is only too glad to explain. “Tanya’s going to give Hotaru the information about the meeting… an hour and ten minutes late.”

Rain cocks his head, looking baffled. “What for?”
Tanya mumbles under her breath, grimly amused by his antics. “And you say you have a strategic mind.”

Rain tactically ignores her.

“Hotaru’s guaranteed to be an hour early, so if I can get the kamidogu to Havik and leave within ten minutes, they’ll be distracted fighting each other. The timing’s tricky, but it’s enough.” Darrius folds his arms, leaning against the carved wall. “It should work, and save me plenty of trouble.”

“It should work. But will it?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out!”

---

“And what reason do I have to trust you?”

Tanya shrugs, reminding herself to play it cool, and flutters her eyelashes enticingly.

Hotaru reacts with a disapproving glare, completely unimpressed. His temper is the opposite of cool, which is particularly ironic for a supposed defender of order and peace. “Your flirtation will achieve nothing.”

“Fine.” Tanya tries a more straightforward approach. “Has anyone else helped you here other than me?”

Hotaru sighs, and shrugs sadly, admitting defeat. “No.”

“There you have it. The point proves itself.” She tosses her head, bangs flying. “Did you catch Darrius the other day, by the way?”

“No.” Hotaru doesn’t care to be reminded of it. He glares at her from beneath dark eyebrows, still seething about the incident. “He ran off with a centaur.”

Tanya bites her lip, stifling a laugh. “Fancy that. Did you catch Havik, at least?”

“No. I almost did, though, just like always. I suppose that counts for something.”

She snorts. “‘Almost’ doesn’t count in war and love.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it.” Hotaru offers a slight, barely visible smile. He’s not used to wearing his armor without the flags, and stands a little taller and straighter without the weight on his shoulders. “Back to business. Is this information true?”

“I’m a good eavesdropper.”

“That means you were listening to him talk with someone.” He’s suddenly surly again, his stern temperament settling back in. “Who?”

“The centaur, obviously.”

“Hrm.” Hotaru hadn’t thought of that possibility. Gathering up his small bag of belongings, he hefts it over his shoulder, striding down the hallway without so much as a goodbye. “I’m due back at Orderrealm any minute now. I appreciate your assistance.”

“Nice to see you, too!”
Hotaru ignores her.

With any luck, he won’t run into either of his foes along the way.

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“It’s beautiful!” Havik crows in delight, turning the Kamidogu over and over in his hands, and holds it up to study it in detail in the bright sunlight. It’s a magnificently crafted artifact, weathered over millennia but still intact. It seethes and pulses with arcane power, glowing with a magnetic pull. “You did it! I can’t believe you did it! Darrius, my faith in you is restored. There’s no way this is a duplicate. Just look at it. A god made this!”

Darrius nods, hands clasped behind his back. “I believe you. I’m pleased to hear you like it.”

“This renders the debt null and void. Here.” Havik pulls out a scrap of paper and a pen from his sleeve, signs it, wads it up, and tosses it at Darrius. “I am a man of my word, some of the time. Oh, look at this, I love it! Get out of here, I want to try it.” He shoos him away with a wave of the hand, holding up the Kamidogu to the sky in preparation for its first test.

Darrius needs no further invitation to leave Havik’s company, though he makes an effort to be polite. “Nice doing business with you as always. I’ll contact you if I need anything else.” And he’s gone, vanishing into a doorway in the back street, deliberately timing his movements to avoid the Seidan guard patrol. He has it all memorized like clockwork now, knowing exactly when to dodge and weave through alleyways. The authorities aren’t creative enough to change their schedules.

Havik’s personally hoping he runs into some of them. He’d love to cause some dismay and disorder. Armed with this, it’ll be easier than ever.

He grips the Netherrealm Kamidogu tight, concentrating all his magic energy on the item. “All right! Make it rain money. Seidan money!”

Nothing happens.

He shakes it a little, tapping it against the palm of his hand. “Come on!”

That does it. Before Havik’s eyes, the sinister artifact lights up with a blazing red glow, calling out to the magical force in the realm and absorbing it to grant his wish.

He hears a faint rustling noise from somewhere up above.

Turning his face upwards to gaze at the sky, he sees the heavens open up…

Suddenly, he’s showered by a torrent of Orderrealm pennies, bouncing off his outfit and scattering in the street. Within moments, the ground is covered by them, glinting uselessly in the afternoon sun.

Havik stares at the Kamidogu in horror. The downpour continues, showering pennies onto the nearby rooftops, alleys, and balconies. There’s no end in sight.

Moments later, he hears the distinctive clattering of a certain set of armor.

He doesn’t even look up. “Hi.”

A sharp blade on a long stick pokes him directly in the ribs.

He swats it away without a second thought. “Rude.”
“How dare you!” Hotaru strides closer, naginata gripped in one fist and a deep scowl on his face. He’s trying to ignore the shower of pennies, but they’re all falling into the cracks in his outfit. He’ll deal with that later. He nearly has Havik in custody, and he’ll be a hero for it. “What do you have there?”

Havik waves the Kamidogu casually, grinning widely with his skull face. “You like it? Got it at a thrift shop. It’s pretty, so I thought I’d take it home.”

“You did not get that at a--” Hotaru smacks his forehead. He’s letting Havik distract him with falsehoods again. “Darrius was here.”

“You sure?”

“I will catch him!”

“How? That’s not what you’re doing right now.” Havik is, as always, quick to point out the facts.

Hotaru ignores that. “Why are coins falling from the sky?”

Havik shrugs broadly. “Made a wish.”

Hotaru glances between Havik’s smug face and the glowing artifact in his hand, and instantly deduces the answer.

Tossing his naginata to one side as a distraction, Hotaru lunges at Havik and tackles him once again, crashing to the ground in a pile of pennies. On the slippery surface, he can’t get a good grip, and using his lava powers would create a puddle of molten metal. He locks his arms around Havik’s waist, gritting his teeth, and ignores Havik’s strange expression. “I--am--taking--you--into--”

“Is this your way of asking me out?”

“NO!” Hotaru’s eyes burn bright yellow. He pulls the headdress off Havik, tossing it aside in a fit of anger. It smacks against a hard wall, but there’s not even a scratch on it. “I’m taking you into custody!”

Havik’s unfazed. “On whose authority?”

“My own! I am a general of the realm Seido!”

“Really? I’ve heard that. You don’t get a lot of respect for it, do you?”

Hotaru’s eyes open wide, and then narrow in furious rage.

He has an idea.

Moving swiftly, he grabs the Kamidogu out of Havik’s grasp, making a wish of his own before Havik can think quick enough to stop him. “I would like to receive the treatment that I deserve!”

Havik’s jaw drops. He leaps to his feet, knocking Hotaru off of him “No! No, don’t do that! It’s cursed, you idiot!”

“It’s what?!”

“I told it to make money rain from the sky and it sent a rainstorm of pennies, not cash!” Havik snatches the Kamidogu back, grabs his headdress, and stuffs the magical item into a hidden pocket
in his pants. “You just cursed yourself. Good job, Hotaru. Whatever it is, don’t come to me crying about it.”

“I have absolutely no intentions to do any such thing!” But Hotaru isn’t familiar with the use of magical artifacts the same way as Havik, and he’s starting to feel a nagging twinge of dread. He might have just made a big mistake. If he did curse himself, he has no idea what to expect, other than the worst.

Then again, this is Havik. Nothing this man says can be trusted.

While Hotaru is pondering his sudden doom, Havik’s busy opening a portal back to Chaosrealm, ready to deposit him back where he belongs. Though he has no fixed residence, he recently managed to obtain a luxury RV from Earthrealm, and he’s outfitted it to run on Outworld scrap materials as fuel, thanks to some practical and literal wizardry. Right now, as much as he’d love to see the disaster about to befall Hotaru, he needs to go home.

Hotaru is a disheveled mess, completely at a loss. He’s still picking pennies out of the joints in his armor and scrambling to retrieve his naginata when Havik makes a move towards the portal. Lashing out quickly, he grabs the back cloth on his belt, trying to drag him backwards towards captivity. “You can’t flee!”

Havik pulls a thread on the back cloth, seamlessly separating it from his belt, and it falls away in Hotaru’s hand. He laughs. “Yes, I can.”

The clanking of armor from beyond the alleyway announces the incoming patrol, more than the typical number of guardsmen. Somehow, Hotaru has the feeling they won’t be impressed by his work.

He panics, realizing the dire situation. “How quickly does the-- ah--- the wish-curse work?”

Havik glances up at the sky. The downpour of pennies is only just starting to slow down. “Immediately, I think. You’d better move quick.” For once, his tone is serious. “Hotaru, the rivalry’s no fun anymore if you die. Get out of here.”

In one last desperate measure, Hotaru dashes for the portal to Chaosrealm, trying to fling himself through behind Havik -- but it’s already closed by the time he reaches it, sending him crashing against the wall instead. He staggers backwards, knocked off-balance with a dent in his armor, and lands in the pile of pennies, losing his captive and his dignity.

He finds himself staring up at the unsmiling faces of his subordinate guards and fellow generals, all gathered as a group. Slowly, as he clambers to his feet, he realizes they’re forming a circle around him.

And they’re all armed, their blades glinting in the filtered light.

Hotaru glances between their faces, seeing no trace of mercy or understanding in their eyes. For once, he understands. Is this how his prisoners feel? “I can explain. I was outwitted. He is not a being of this realm.” His voice shakes, losing his composure. “I nearly had him.”

“I know.” The first of them speaks in a low, stern voice. “Hotaru, you have permitted Havik to commit yet another act of chaos in our city. This was in broad daylight, no less. Your failures bring dishonor to the Seidan guard. This is the final offense. If the authorities will not eliminate your inefficiency, we are left with no choice.”

“I did not permit him!” Hotaru steps back, but feels himself pushed forward again by the guard
behind him. “I was unaware of the exact circumstances of--”

He gives up, abruptly cutting himself short. Pleas for mercy never work in Seido.

Moments of awkward silence pass. Finally, Hotaru starts again, lamely. “I’ve been meaning to check your promotion papers, you know--”

The guard cuts him short with a shake of his head. “We need to talk.”

“It doesn’t seem like you want me to.”

The first of Hotaru’s fellow guards lifts his blade.

“We are talking, not you.”
“You’re looking forward to going home, aren’t you? So would I.” The girl pushes a long strand of black and white hair out of her face, leaning over a balcony to appreciate the Outworld vista before it’s gone. “How do the others feel about it?”

“I think they’re all looking forward to it.” Kuai leans against the balcony the opposite way, facing the building, conversing idly with Sareena as he flips through a stack of papers. “Where will you be?”

“I’m not sure yet.” Sareena admits honestly. She’s unsure of her plans, and although she doesn’t mind a little mystery about the future, she wishes she had a place to go. “There’s always SF… I’d been thinking of staying with Ashrah back in Earthrealm, but she’s here now. I got to see her the other day. That was nice.”

“I’m glad.” Kuai responds patiently. “Most of the others have plans to travel when they return to Earthrealm. As for me, I have duties as grandmaster. I’ve already been away too long.”

Sareena offers a slight smile. “You’ve gained a couple Lin Kuei members along the way here. What are you going to do about that?”

“They’re coming home.”

“Where’s home?”

“That’s up to each of them to decide.”

---

“This is stunning.” Kung Jin watches the Botswanan sunset, lodged between the branches of a spacious tree, with Cyrax’s head resting on his shoulder as they hold hands. He’s at peace at last, far away from Outworld and all the disasters. It’s time to rest. “I can’t believe you knew where to find your family.”

“Me neither. And they’re still here.” Cyrax grins, interlacing his fingers with Jin’s. They’re quiet for a while, just listening patiently to the chatter of conversations from nearby homes and the buzzes, hisses, and chirps of the wildlife. Finally, Cyrax’s voice breaks through the ambient noise again. “It’s practically a miracle. At least they really believe it’s me.”

“I’m guessing they all expected you to look your age, but they’re damn happy to see you. I thought your mother was going to faint.” Jin chuckles at the memory, prodding him in the side. “You have even more cousins than me. How old are you actually, anyway?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Cyrax blushes. He prefers not to think about the actual math of it. His soul was stored at a certain age, after all, and that’s how he was brought back. “I skipped two and a half decades, and you know it.”

“I’m guessing they all expected you to look your age, but they’re damn happy to see you. I thought your mother was going to faint.” Jin chuckles at the memory, prodding him in the side. “You have even more cousins than me. How old are you actually, anyway?”

“Whatever you actually are, I’m glad you don’t look like it.” Jin gazes idly at the landscape as it stretches out below him, unraveling like a lush green carpet. “This place is gorgeous. Almost justifies the cost of the plane tickets.”

“SF paid for us, didn’t they?”
“Yes. But I try to be responsible. Old habits die hard.”

“I understand that.” Cyrax muses quietly, leaning over to give Jin a gentle kiss.

Jin stifles an infectious grin. “This entire thing is a series of miracles. I’m still not sure what to think about it sometimes. No way I could be this lucky.”

“Don’t think. Just appreciate it. Chances aren’t meant to be wasted.”

“That’s true. You always know what to say.” Jin stretches his legs, shifting his position in the treetop. “Are you going back to the Lin Kuei?”

“In time. Not until I’ve had my fill of sunlight and home cooking.”

He laughs. “That might take a while.”

Cyrax flashes him a warm grin. “That’s the idea.”

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Elsewhere across the globe, Kung Lao is poring through the Shaolin library archives, wandering through the old shelves. They’ve implemented many technical upgrades since he studied here as a young monk, but the place still has the same atmosphere of comforting, solemn peace.

Eventually, after hours have passed in silent introspection, he remembers to leave.

Rising from his meditation, he bids farewell to the librarian and crosses the doorway into the outer hall, picking up his belongings from the shelf where he’d left them.

A hand on his shoulder catches his attention. “I thought I’d find you here.”

“Kai!” Lao’s eyes light up with recognition. He pulls his friend into a tight hug. “I wondered if that was you I noticed, following me through the hallways.”

“I couldn’t help but check up on you. We didn’t have enough time to talk earlier. Come on, let’s get a meal.” Kai still resembles the young man that Lao once knew, but the years have aged him with dignity. He looks at home in the traditional Shaolin attire. The rich plum color of his tunic complements his dark skin, marked with patches of vitiligo along his back and arms, and his cornrows are tinged with grey.

Lao studies him respectfully. Kai gently prods him to move on, setting the pace. “Go now, or there’ll only be leftovers.”

“I’m coming, I’m coming.” Lao smiles, and lifts his bag over his shoulder, falling into step beside his old friend. “How have things been without me?”

“Less exciting than you’d expect. New faces have come and gone. I remember your little cousin, by the way. He’s just like you, except different.”

Lao can’t help but laugh. “I appreciate your analysis.”

“It’s the least I can do.” Kai returns the smile, retracing the path together through the once-familiar halls. “As for me, I spent some years traveling in Outworld to keep myself occupied. I’ll tell you about my adventures whenever you’d like. And you? Many have said you were among the ranks of
the undead, and I believed the reports, but I see no trace of it.”

Lao reaches up and touches his hair self-consciously. “It is too much to summarize or explain without some forethought. For now, I’m just glad to be back.”

“I’m glad you’re back, too.”

“I wouldn’t be here without Kung Jin’s support. The curse polluted and corrupted us all, but for now, we’re free.”

“I was meaning to ask. Where is Jin? From what I’ve heard, he deserves praise for everything he did in the tournament.”

Lao answers carefully. “Visiting his partner’s family.”

Kai nods. “I see.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Hey, I already know he’s gay. It’s okay. He talked about it with me.”

“Oh. Good.” Lao lets out a sigh of relief. “His boyfriend is from the Lin Kuei, originally from Botswana. So he’s decided to go there, for now. I’m sure he’ll be back in time.”

“Is he having fun?”

“I hope so.”

“More importantly, are you having fun? Is this where you want to be?” Kai turns abruptly, stopping short in the hallway with a look of concern on his rugged face. “Liu Kang didn’t return. Why did you? I’m happy about it, but I want to make sure you aren’t back at the Shaolin just because you feel you ought to be.”

“This was my choice.” Lao shrugs gently. “I have plenty of family, but you are one of the few who knew me for who I am.”

“That’s a good answer.” Kai smiles softly. “I guess we can just pick up where we left off, can’t we?”

Lao starts off along the corridor again, matching his friend’s pace. “Why not try?”

---

Liu groans. “It’s cold.”

Bi-Han brushes past him, lifting several sets of bags without any visible effort as he pushes the door open. “It’s a mountain temple. What were you expecting, a sauna?”

Sektor follows close behind, carrying one single bag of his own. “You have your fire powers to warm you. Don’t complain.”

Smoke consoles him with a light touch to the shoulder. “Ignore them. You’ll get used to the temperature.”

“Or I’ll stay indoors.” Liu grumbles, retrieving his bag from the large pile where Bi-Han threw them all. “What am I going to do here?”
Kuai has an answer already. “I need help cleaning out the cyber server storage. We obviously don’t have any use for those any longer. Do you object to lifting heavy objects?”

“No, of course not. Why would I?” Liu pauses, thinking. “How heavy?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sure you can manage.” Kuai accepts yet another stack of papers from an eager Lin Kuei apprentice, briefing him on everything that’s happened in his absence. He flips through them, frowning deeply as he speed-reads all the information. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to figure out how to inform our entire clan that we gained two ninjas during the Outworld trip.”

The apprentice stands alert, ready for instructions. “Should I tell them, Grandmaster Sub-Zero?”

“No. I am Tundra again.” Kuai gestures respectfully towards his brother. “This is Sub-Zero.”

“I understand, Grandmaster Tundra.” The apprentice glances between them in wonder. “So it is true!”

“Don’t forget to explain exactly how you got two more ninjas.” Sektor’s already strapping on his latest set of makeshift flamethrowers, just for the sake of insurance if any wayward ice ninjas decide to challenge him. “Do you think any of them will remember me?”

Kuai thinks it over. “They’ll remember who Sektor is, but they won’t recognize you. You might want to consider resuming the use of your original name.”

Sektor snarls, responding too quickly. The topic has touched a sore spot. “Not a chance.”

“That’s your choice. I understand.” Kuai finds it best to move on. “Oh, look at that.” He stops to study the portraits of previous Grandmasters, hanging in a row on an elegantly decorated wall. One more very familiar face has joined the set. “I’m up here now. I think they did a good job with the resemblance.”

The apprentice follows close behind him, their face falling in dismay. “We were going to surprise you with that!”

“I’m surprised, and flattered.” Kuai smiles tactfully. He’s genuinely touched, though he’s not prone to bold displays of emotion. “The artist did a wonderful job. Send them my praise.”

“Thank you. I will.” The apprentice bows slightly, and hurries off, racing down the corridor with quick footsteps.

Sektor is still at the portraits, head tilted up to study the paintings’ features closely, with a scowl on his face. “They might recognize me if they’ve spent enough time looking at-- at the prior Grandmaster’s portrait.”

“No.” Bi-Han answers shortly, following behind his brother. “You don’t look like him.”

“What?” Sektor runs a hand over his face self-consciously. “I always thought--”

“You don’t.” He offers no more comments, striding down the hall confidently and disappearing with the other Sub-Zero around the corner.

Smoke follows in silence, and Liu is last in line, stopping to get a closer look at Sektor and compare him to the portrait. “I suppose I can sort of see it--”
“Sektor glares.

“--but only if I pay attention very closely. You look like someone else.” Liu recovers and finishes quickly, changing the subject. It didn’t seem like Sektor wanted to hear that. “What kind of food do they have here?”

“How would I know? Probably nothing you’ll like.” Sektor answers bitterly. He’s letting his bad attitude get the best of him again, and he knows he shouldn’t. He softens his tone a little, “Don’t worry. You’ll get used to it.”

“I’ll try.” Liu attempts to be optimistic. “You know, if you can set up your flamethrowers to shoot fireballs, I could teach you some techniques.”

“Easy for you to say. You can summon them.”

“I thought you were good at technology. Can’t you make the flamethrowers do that?”

“...I suppose I could try.” Sektor does his best to humor him, but he secretly likes the idea, the more he thinks about it. From a technical standpoint, it’s very possible, and he has enough hubris to try. He’s only slightly annoyed that Liu was the one to suggest it. “So, when do you plan to offer me these lessons?”

“Whenever I’m done cleaning out the cyber storage units. Hey, do you want to help me with that?”

“No.”

- - -

“It’s almost time to set the pups free. You’ll have to be ready in a few days.” Nightwolf carefully steps through the doorway to check in on a group of monks, who are sitting in a circle on the floor, feeding several tiny baby birds with eyedroppers. “How are the little ones?”

“They’re doing wonderfully.” One of them glances up at him with a shy smile, holding up the bird for inspection. “You can look, if you want. I don’t think we’ve done anything wrong.”

“No, you haven’t. Keep doing what you’re doing, and don’t doubt your skills. A nurturing attitude is the key to success.” Nightwolf nods approvingly, and promptly leaves them alone. By now, he’s been able to train most of the Sky Temple monks to help with his wildlife rescue efforts. Although Dark Raiden had placed orders to banish all mortal residents during the time of his corruption, the monks have now returned, and are incredibly helpful with the upkeep of the ancient temple. It looks better than ever, thriving and overflowing with life.

“You’re stealing my job, you know.” Fujin leans against the corridor’s opposite wall, resting casually with his hands in his pockets. “I’d bet that under your guidance, we’d never have had an invasion in the first place.”

“I was one of the invaders, remember?” Nightwolf’s negative memories of the incident are mostly faded, as if it happened to someone else in another life. “Still, I appreciate your trust in me. Is your brother coming home anytime soon?”

“I’m not sure. We’re due to have a batch of Earthrealmers back here any day now, and we have to send back the ones who are currently here, including Kotal Kahn, of all people.” Fujin checks off a mental tally. “I’ll need to go gather them up. I’d ask if you want to come along, but you seem to have plenty to do here.”
“If I had anybody else to watch the temple in the meantime, I would. It doesn’t matter either way.” Nightwolf strides leisurely towards the stairwell, waiting for Fujin to follow, as he always does.
“How was the announcing job? I haven’t had time to ask.”

“It was excellent. They didn’t suspect a thing. I kept a journal of the events. I’ll let you take a look if you have time for some light reading.”

“I might take you up on that. Is it written in a language I can read?”

“It should be.” Fujin’s mouth twitches in a half-smile. “My journals are the only reason Raiden has any idea what happened before a few centuries ago. I love him, but even gods aren’t perfect. As for me, I forget half of what I write once it’s left my mind.”

“I don’t imagine you’ve let Shinnok get his hands on the journal archives?”

“Not at all, though at this point, I don’t think he’d harm them. He’d probably just try to mock me for whatever I wrote.”

“I would be unsurprised.”

“I dislike him less than I used to.” Fujin shakes his head, and the tie on the end of his braid comes loose, unwrapping. “Believe it or not, he did more to save Outworld than anyone else, from everything I witnessed.”

Nightwolf absorbs this information, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “That’s news.”

“It surprised me more than anyone, but Raiden didn’t seem to consider it out of the ordinary.”

“He knows things the rest of us don’t. I try to keep that in mind.” Nightwolf takes hold of the hair-tie, lifting the end of Fujin’s braid. “Here, let me fix this for you.”

“No, I’ll just let it down for once.” Impulsively, Fujin reaches back to start unraveling the layers, and Nightwolf helps, worn fingers weaving deftly through the white strands. “It’ll be a nice change.”

“I like it this way.” Nightwolf steps back to evaluate his friend when it’s done, wrapping the hair-tie around his wrist instead. “Your hair is even longer than I expected. I’m impressed.”

“I’ve had an entire immortal lifetime to grow it out. Don’t be too impressed.” Fujin starts up along the stairs again, taking them two at a time with lengthy strides. “I’m going to the jinsei chamber. I need to recharge before everyone arrives. You should, too.”

“I don’t think it works on me. I was originally a mortal.”

“Give it a try anyway. You officially have my permission.” Fujin shrugs, his long hair falling in waves over his back. He’s definitely already seen worse, but he doesn’t know what to expect. “Prepare yourself. Get plenty of rest. It’ll probably be a spectacle.”

Nightwolf smiles amiably, trailing after him and occasionally stopping to study the artwork on the stairwell walls. “Let’s hope it’s a good one.”
“Am I supposed to be here?” Earthrealm Mileena, now suntanned from her brief vacation, is pacing around the edge of the Sky Temple’s stone-paved balcony. Every so often, she scuffs her toe on the worn-down stones, shifting her weight as she sighs with impatience. Fujin and Nightwolf are already here, caught up in enthusiastic conversation with N’Malah. The little Kytinn is as lively as ever, dark compound eyes glittering in the light, blue cloak fluttering behind her as she runs across the stones.

“I think so.” From the shimmering portal in the middle of the balcony courtyard, Sareena steps out - dressed in a new set of red and black clothes, and with a recent haircut, but otherwise exactly the same as ever. As a demon, her persona is not likely to change, but she’s happy with who she is. She flashes a smile at Mileena, who returns it clumsily, with too many teeth. “How are you?”

“I’m doing well.” Mileena points across the distance, gesturing to the two temple guardians and their young insect acquaintance, who’s enthusiastically trying to pet a small, fluffy wild animal. “I’ve been looking after N’Malah, but I’m ready to bring her back to Outworld. She belongs there, not here among the humans, pretending she’s someone else.”

Sareena nods understandingly, feeling silent solidarity. “Tired of the human illusions?”

“Very.” Mileena tosses the magical watch in the palm of her hand, carefully crafted by Shinnok before the tournament. She’s grateful for the disguise, but sick of it, too. “I’m still getting used to responsibility again… and I’ll need, uh, this particular copy of myself, to help with matters in Outworld. I can’t spare any.”

Sareena tilts her head to the side, bangs falling in her eyes. “I won’t ask you how that works.”

“Don’t.” Mileena whirls around, catching a flash of light out of the corner of her eye -- and freezes. In a ray of sunlight, Kotal and his group materialize from thin air.

The emperor stands very still, keeping his distance as he counts the heads in the courtyard. Mileena is here. He had considered that risk, but did not quite believe he would be forced to confront it. Nevertheless, his foe is present before him… and despite his temporary loss of leadership, he should still act like an emperor would.

But he’s no longer certain what that means.

Tanya slithers out of the portal at just the right moment, vanishing again in a shower of purple sparks and materializing next to Mileena with an arm around her shoulder. She smirks at the group of humans and Outworlders, arching an eyebrow. “Ready to get the party started?”

Sonya Blade glares at her with silent fury in her eyes.

“...I’ll stop.” Tanya backs up to the edge of the courtyard, perching precariously on the barrier of neatly arranged stones at the edge. Something has clearly happened. She hasn't been informed. She hates that.

Kotal advances towards them, measuring his paces carefully, and the gathered group scatters in various directions. Johnny Cage is here, too, looking uncommonly solemn. Jax and Jacqui are both ready for duty and armored up. Erron Black, Ferra, and Torr, the stalwart companions of the former emperor, are present, of course. And behind them all...
Koetzal, the small Zaterran hatchling, steps forward uncertainly. Another Saurian is holding his hand. But instead of Reptile, an unfamiliar pair of yellow eyes stares back at Sareena, unblinking.

This one is a woman, dressed differently in light armor and durable worn cloth. Long snake-like tendrils of hair cascade around her shoulders, and her face is lighter and more delicate, with the same scaly skin as Syzoth. She manages a faint smile towards Sareena, but it’s not truly happy, just an attempt to appease the woman’s visible dismay.

“Reptile.” Sareena chokes out a few words. “Where is he?”

The Saurian lady answers flatly. “He died in a heroic sacrifice, to save Kotal Kahn.”

Mileena’s lip twitches at the title of ‘Kahn,’ but she does her best to avoid worsening the situation. “That… that was honorable of him.” She nods, advancing a few steps. “What happened?”

Kotal speaks up. “Khameleon, you need not tell the tale for me. I will explain to Mileena.” He moves forward, closing the distance between himself and his long-time opponent. Neither is wearing their royal regalia, bare-headed without their crowns and dressed in simple clothing. Somehow, it makes the confrontation easier.

They pace in circles around the spacious courtyard, maintaining a safe distance from one another. Kotal slowly describes the incident, telling the tale with carefully-chosen words. “Onaga, the ancient Dragon King, was… possessing me. After the healing herb was found, thanks to the brave efforts of the humans--” here he glances over his shoulder with an appreciative nod-- “we entered a pyramid, in which an ancient artifact was kept. I was deceived into believing that it would free my realm.”

Mileena’s jaw drops. “Then what?”

“The artifact, a cursed skull, was meant to restore Onaga’s power instead, I am told… The memories are faint.” The Osh-Tekk rubs his forehead, and shakes his head vehemently, long black dreadlocks falling down his sunburned blue back. “Nitara was there, as well. She and Khameleon were ready to fight the threat. I know not how or why.”

Khameleon is stone-faced, saying nothing.

“They slew Onaga boldly, but not before Syzoth had voluntarily allowed Onaga to possess him, stopping him from stealing my own soul and body instead.”

Mileena is hit by a wave of actual pity. Her feelings on Syzoth are mixed, due to his betrayal in the past, but he didn’t deserve that kind of fate. Not at all, not for anybody’s sake.

She has the sense not to say that.

“Ko’atal.” She speaks clearly, enunciating through the mouthful of teeth. “I… am glad for your return. We can resolve our differences.” She’s not actually glad, but she has to express the sentiment. Otherwise she looks childish and uncivil. “Allow me to suggest--”

She doesn’t get to finish the sentence. A handful of other guests fall out of the portal, led by Cassie, who dashes up to both her parents, grabbing them in an eager hug before she notices the solemn mood. “Mom? Dad? What’s going on?”

Johnny points towards the tense confrontation between the two Outworld leaders, now both frozen in place as they stare at the portal.
“Oh.” Cassie shrinks back towards the wall, approaching Fujin and N’Malah. “Hey, kid. How you doing?”

“Good!” N’Malah beams at her, and pulls a crumpled crayon drawing out of her pocket. It looks like an oddly detailed map of an underground labyrinth. “Hi! This one made this. Look at it!”

Cassie turns the drawing upside down, studying it.

“No, not that way!” N’Malah insistently corrects her, flipping over the paper. She gestures with one small pointed finger at a pathway weaving across the drawing. “This one-- I remembers this. Don’t know why. It’s pretty. You want it?”

Cassie nods quietly, and folds it neatly to tuck it into her jacket, alongside a pocketful of assorted useful supplies. This probably has some significance that she’s too stupid to figure out right now. She’ll ask the gods later. “Thanks, N’Malah.”

She bounces on the balls of her feet, her tiny iridescent wings fluttering in the air. “Welcome!”

The other arrivals - Frost, Stryker, and Kabal - are all sitting on an outdoor bench by the door, using their collective common sense to decide they shouldn’t interrupt whatever’s going on. They exchange a few polite nods with the rest of the humans across the courtyard, respecting the seriousness of the occasion. Hopefully everything will all work out. And if it doesn’t… well, everybody’s armed.

Fujin is the first to break the uncomfortable silence. “Kotal, you spoke of Onaga?”

“Yes.” He retells the tale, recounting all the details for the benefit of the group. Sareena looks more and more heartbroken with every word, especially when Kotal describes the funeral rites for Reptile. She’d always wanted to meet a live Saurian, and be friends with one… and now he’s gone. She feels worse for Koetzal, though, a small child deprived of his new parent.

But Khameleon glances across the distance and meets Sareena’s eyes, offering a faint reassuring smile, and she regains a sliver of hope. The Saurians aren’t lost after all.

Fujin shakes his head, stepping back again, and studies the intricate bricklaying pattern of the courtyard’s surface. For once, he lacks words to describe his emotions. “Onaga… the threat was there, all along? He was…”

“Possessing me, it seems--”

The portal lights up once more… and Shinnok and Raiden tumble through, landing face-first on the pavement.

Shinnok picks himself up quickly, scoffing in distaste and brushing the dirt off his elaborate armor. Raiden is a little dazed, but Shinnok bends down and pulls him to his feet, smoothing out the pristine fabric of his sleeves. He figured, rightly, that dirt-proof cloth might help Raiden’s inexplicable commitment to wearing all white.

But now’s clearly not the time to discuss fashion. Shinnok was expecting conflict, as he always does… but not this.

His green eyes shoot open as he processes the situation, gasping audibly. Raiden settles him down with a hand on his shoulder, beaming his thoughts directly into his companion’s mind. *Don’t overreact.*
I wasn’t going to. Shinnok breathes deeply, the world swimming around him. Kotal and Mileena are here, several feet apart. So, apparently, is everyone else. And he has the distinctive feeling he’s missed something important.

Raiden, what happened?

With a calm look on his face, and his head held high, Raiden summarizes the entire chain of events exactly as it happened.

Shinnok is doubly shocked, overwhelmed by the onslaught of new information. Onaga… YOU KNEW ALL THAT ALREADY?!

It needed to transpire as it did. You will see why. Raiden seems free of worries. His cloudy hair falls free around his face without his hat or cowl, presenting an appearance of harmless confidence. Shinnok lacks a helmet, too, and his swept-back hair is tangled by the wind. He runs his fingers through it, desperately smoothing it back into place as he processes this new revelation.

Raiden glances at him with a slight nod. Now focus. Be silent. Wait and watch.

Kotal and Mileena lock eyes again, faint glowing teal meeting bright feline yellow. There’s no longer a sense of hostility, only doubt and uncertainty. Self-consciously, the empress tucks her hair behind her ears, shooting a sideways glance at Tanya as she seeks reassurance. Right now, this feels more like an arena than a courtyard.

That is dangerous territory. She knows everything that she’s done in Outworld - she woke up with the memories. She needs to proceed with caution.

And so she does. “Kotal, shall we discuss?”

“We shall.” The emperor draws himself up to his full height, coming to a halt near the corner with the ever-loyal Erron and Ferra close behind him. “Speak, then.”

“My title is legally earned, and I have no intention to surrender it…” Mileena takes a deep, shaky breath. “…but nor do I intend to govern carelessly.”

Kotal lifts his chin. “Go on.”

“The opportunity presented to me carries a profound burden of responsibility.” Mileena coughs, tongue-tied as she stumbles through the words. She’d rehearsed it in front of the mirror, but this is different. Very different. Tanya wrote the script anyway, since Mileena isn’t used to speaking quite so eloquently. She drops into a simpler dialect, in her natural element. “I don’t want to ruin Outworld.”

Kotal inclines his head. “As you should not.”

“With that in mind… your contributions to Outworld won’t, uh– won’t go unnoticed. There might be a way for us to compromise.”

“I have thought of this as well.” Kotal inches forward, collecting his own confidence. Though he’s sure Mileena must be more anxious, it isn’t exactly an easy ordeal for him, either. “I have had enough of war.”

Mileena nods, biting her lip with gleaming fangs.

Kotal speaks a little louder this time, his deep voice ringing across the quiet courtyard. “The role of
first minister was intended to belong to an ally of the emperor. Considering D’Vorah’s betrayal, though… it may as well belong to an enemy.”

Mileena arches her eyebrows. “I had thought of granting you a role, but… first minister? That’s bold.”

“The power is mostly symbolic.”

Tanya coughs from the sidelines. “I resent that.”

“You don’t need to, dear. We’ll sort this out.” Mileena waves a hand. “All right. I’m not going to make you first minister. There’s too much bad blood and risk of conflict. That’s not happening. However…”

Kotal waits.

“…Earthrealm humans have a ‘prime minister’ title. That might work. In Earthrealm countries, the royalty mostly exists for the sake of the public, as I’ve found out. The prime ministers make the policies.” Mileena swallows hard, trying not to bite her tongue as the words rush out. “I’d prefer the opposite in Outworld. I, as Kahnum, will manage the difficult task of governing, with the assistance of the court of advisors. They are knowledgeable Edenians, one and all. You, possibly, as prime minister, could occupy a more public role and speak with the people.”

Kotal furrows his brow deeply. It’s not what he was hoping for, but it’s better than he was expecting. “Why do you say this?”

“We don’t have the budget to tear down that colossal statue of you, let alone make one of me.”

Tanya chuckles under her breath. “I like honesty in a leader.”

Kotal can’t argue that point. “…Fine. What else?”

“The people don’t like being executed for stealing bread. Historically, that’s just not popular. We’re doing better now.” Tanya gets up, resting her hands on her hips, and struts over to the center of the courtyard, standing near Mileena. “I’ve already drafted some legislation to replace the first minister position with prime minister, if both parties agree to it, and only if. If not, I can just tear it up and throw it over the edge here—”

“No, do not.” Kotal stops her abruptly, raising a hand. The time has come to make a decision, and he’d best keep his own self-interest in mind, as well as his handful of remaining supporters. “Allow me to pass judgement…”

He pauses.

“I find this agreement acceptable.”

The entire group breathes a collective sigh of relief.

“But you, Tanya…” He’s harmlessly curious. “As first minister, what else will you now be?”

“Wouldn’t you know, I already have an answer to that, too?” Tanya grins widely, a warm, genuine smile. It’s the first time most of them have ever seen such a sincere look. “I think of everything.”

“Of course you do.” Mileena’s deeply intrigued, beckoning her closer. Somehow, this part of the plan had escaped her attention. “You didn’t tell me this yet. What are you going to be?”
Tanya saunters closer, hands on her hips, then suddenly whips out a small parcel from her pocket and drops to one knee, flipping open a tiny box and presenting it to Mileena. “How about... wife?”

Mileena screeches in delight and leaps into Tanya’s arms, knocking her onto the pavement before picking her up and shouting an enthusiastic “YES!”

“How about... wife?” Tanya can’t help but gloat, slipping the ring onto Mileena’s slender finger. “Are you happy, sweetheart?”

“OF COURSE!” Mileena drops her voice self-consciously, licking her lips as she tries to stifle a toothy grin. “Yes. Very much yes. I do! Don’t I have to say that?”

“You’re doing great.” Tanya grips her hand tight, leading her back towards the other side of the courtyard. “I have one more thing for you, actually.”

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“Something else?!”

“Yep.” Tanya reaches into a pocket inside her jacket, retrieving a larger wrapped package, and unfolds the cloth covering an elegant and simple crown. Gleefully, she sets it on Mileena’s head, stepping back to admire her fiancee. “It still fits! I knew it would. Welcome back, darling.” She steps back, gesturing towards Mileena and formally presenting her to the group. “This is the real one.”

Kotal stares in total shock, utterly taken aback. “THIS is the original Mileena?!”

“You didn’t think I’d let her run around Outworld in danger while everything was happening, did you?” Tanya winks, taking hold of Mileena’s hand again and interlacing their fingers. She leads her over towards the gathered group of humans and gods, keeping their distance at the sidelines. “Class dismissed. How are you all doing?”

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“We are fine.” Raiden is the only one who doesn’t look shellshocked. He smiles pleasantly at her, and pulls out a wrapped gift from his pocket, with a neatly tied pink and yellow bow. He glances between them, then hands it to Mileena. “For the occasion.”

Shinnok elbows him in the side, astonished once again. “That’s why? You could have said something!”

“No, I could not have.” Raiden almost grins. “This is the optimal outcome. See? I told you.”

“...So you did.” Shinnok grumbles, looking past them all to admire the mountainous landscape around the Sky Temple. “What now? Does everyone just... go home?”

“Depends. I asked around already.” Kabal answers his question, speeding over in the blink of an eye to join the group. “Sareena’s going to go spend some time at Jax and Jacqui’s farm. The girl needs a vacation.”

Shinnok glances over and seeks Sareena out in the crowd. She’s already found Kameleon and Koetzal, offering her condolences and having a nice chat with the new Saurian. “I can imagine so. The break will be good for her. She’s done well.”

“Kurt and I are coming home. Cassie’s staying in Outworld to supervise-- I mean help you two.”

Shinnok shoots him a hostile look.

Kabal ignores it. “Frost’s headed to the Lin Kuei. I’m not sure about Johnny. I think General
Blade’s going back to Outworld to manage the operation.” Kabal describes it in very vague terms, just in case. Tomb-raiding sounds both exciting and illegal - and apparently, it didn’t work out so well for Kotal and company. He makes a note to ask for details later about what went wrong. “So who’s Onaga? I’m imagining a talking dragon.”

“It’s a long story. Hey, come have tea in here. I’ll explain it.” Fujin saunters over, seeing an opportunity to break the ice again. “You’re all invited.”

Shinnok can’t resist a jab. “Even me?”

“You don’t even like tea. Don’t worry.” Fujin answers with an even-tempered smile. He’s made a habit of ignoring the other god’s sharp-tongued comments, for everyone’s benefit. “And you and Raiden are needed back in Outworld, I hear.”

“Are we? Says who?”

“Now you’re just being contrary.” Raiden reprimands him, but his tone is pleasant. “Why don’t you go find Miss Cage?”

“I suppose I might as well.” Shinnok shoves his hands into his pockets, striding away. He’s extremely curious to hear Cassie’s opinion on all the recent events. She’s standing near Frost as the Lin Kuei makes conversation with the tiny Kytinn, saying goodbye. Shinnok vanishes and teleports the rest of the distance, just to be dramatic, and taps Cassie on the shoulder by surprise.

She doesn’t even react. “Hi, Shinnok.”

“Hello.” He grumbles, folding his arms, and scowls at no one in particular. “So… what about all of that?”

She’s deliberately vague. “What about it?”

“Did you know that was going to happen?”

Cassie shrugs. “I mean, if I thought it was going to devolve into mass murder, I’ve had brought more guns.”

“Raiden apparently knew all of it!”

“Yeah, he does that. Of all the people, I’d think you’d be used to it by now.” Cassie teases him gently. “Or are you just jealous that he can do that?”

“That’s not why!”

“That’s definitely why. You know what they say about people who deny things.” Cassie hooks her thumbs into her belt loops, admiring the picturesque landscape. “The temple looks nice. A whole lot nicer than when I first came here.”

Shinnok answers dryly. “The Sky Temple improves with the health of its occupants.”

“I thought it was tied to Raiden’s life force.”

“That too. But Fujin’s guidance does have some benefits.” He purses his lips, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. “…you are correct, though.”

“So it looks better because Raiden’s happy?”
“You could, in theory, maybe put it that way.”

“I see. Good job on that, then. He’s doing great.” Cassie grins, checking the gathered group for Raiden. “There he is. He even had a gift for Mileena and Tanya! I’m impressed. What was that?”

“Wedding rings. And he didn’t tell me why!” Shinnok grumbles to himself, highly annoyed that he hadn’t figured it out first. “Raiden gave me the design and told me that it would be nice if I did it. I assume Tanya had the idea. I guessed that there was some reason for it…”

“That’s adorable.” Cassie’s grinning from ear to ear. “So this was a pretty good day, huh?”

“It pains me to admit it… but yes, I’d say so.”

“Wow, I actually got you to say something positive. I can’t believe it.” Cassie laughs, studying Shinnok’s face a little closer. He looks less old, less worn-out, somehow. It’s a subtle difference, but she can still tell. “So what do you think Kotal’s going to do?”

Shinnok gestures over Cassie’s shoulder. “Why don’t you ask him yourself?”

Cassie jumps in surprise, and turns quickly as she notices the emperor, folding her hands behind her back. “Oh! Hi there.”

Kotal greets her with a respectful nod. “Miss Cage, I owe you a thanks. Your participation in… everything, these past several months, has been important to the final result.”

“You’re welcome. I think.”

He offers something resembling a smile. “It was a compliment.”

“Then you’re definitely welcome.” She returns the nod. She’s not sure about Osh-Tekk greetings and farewells, but it probably doesn’t matter. She’d just better be polite to Kotal - they made good progress today. Maybe the near-death experience gave him some humility. “Good luck with everything. I’ll probably see you again soon.”

“Until then…” Kotal ends the sentence mysteriously, striding away before Cassie can ask. After exchanging goodbyes with the humans and Fujin, he vanishes through the portal with his ragtag band of supporters - Ferra, Torr, Erron, Koetzal, and last of all Khameleon, accepting her new duty as Outworld’s only known Saurian.

Moments later, the gateway between the worlds flickers once again. Three more figures step out - Hanzo, apparently none the worse for wear; Kenshi, with a warm smile and Sento strapped to his back; and Takeda, still on crutches but making a quick recovery.

“Hi!” Takeda waves to Jacqui, who rushes over and grabs him in a hug. She lets go and apologizes as he winces a little, resting her hands on his shoulders instead. “Ow, my ribs. Don’t worry, I’ll live.”

“I’m so sorry! But I’m so glad to see you again. Wait until you hear what happened--” She chatters excitedly, walking slowly to match his pace on the crutches. “How are you holding up? Broke anything?”

“Is there anything I didn’t break?” But Takeda grins, keeping a cheerful attitude despite it all. “So, fill me in…”

As Kenshi makes his way towards the SF crew, Hanzo stands at the center of the courtyard,
studying the gathered group in puzzled confusion. He would’ve sworn he saw Kotal and his associates passing through the portal, going the opposite direction as they came through. And something important has clearly happened, judging from the excited buzz of conversations.

He clears his throat. “What’d we miss?”
Special Delivery

*Time is of the essence.* The man whispers the reminder to himself as he crouches behind a stack of impeccable, spotless trash cans. He’s prepared for stealth in the nighttime, dressed in a black trenchcoat and stylish sunglasses. His sleeves are rolled up, a watch strapped to his wrist. He taps it anxiously, fidgeting with nerves.

He may already be too late.

Muffled hoofbeats arrive down the alleyway behind him, and he doesn’t even glance up. His companion in this particular adventure is an unusual choice, but very useful for high-speed escapes, as he’s already learned. “Motaro. There you are.”

The centaur greets his friend simply. “Where is he?”

“Law enforcement headquarters, I’m told. My spies’ reports are always accurate.”

“Always?”

“Usually. That’s good enough, I think.” Darrius is not inclined to follow the strict, obedient precision that Orderrealm is known for. Spontaneity is his greatest ability, and Seido’s biggest weakness. “Shall we?”

Motaro nods. “We might as well.”

“I still can’t believe I’m doing this, but Hotaru will be a valuable ally — if I can get him to remember I saved his ass.” Darrius rises to his feet, careful to stay out of view around the corner. “The guards aren’t patrolling in this particular area right now. I assume they were too busy stabbing him.”

“So I’ve heard.” Motaro tosses his head, wearing a look of deep confusion. “Is there any particular reason they did that? I’m not familiar with this type of betrayal in politics.”

“Hell if I know. Maybe they just got tired of him. Maybe someone else wanted his job. It could be anything. It’s ironic, but the Seidan authorities aren’t actually very logical.”

“Hmm. Thank you for the explanation.” Motaro pretends to understand. “So where are we taking him after we retrieve him, if he’s still alive?”

“To the only person who’ll be able and willing to heal him.”

---

Havik awakens with a start, rolling over and tumbling off his couch with a resounding *thud*. Like almost everything else he currently owns, the sofa is a stolen luxury item from Earthrealm, now coated in a layer of cat hair but otherwise still comfortable. A night owl by habit, he’s accustomed to falling asleep on the couch - just not prepared for a knock on the door at 3 AM, or whatever damned time it is.

He hears one more knock, a rapid, anxious pattern, and then a *thump* outside the door, the distinctive noise of an unconscious person falling down. After that, silence -- and… no, he must be imagining it.
He would swear he heard the sound of hoofbeats.

Scratching his head, he gathers up his messy hair into an off-center ponytail, and shoves scattered boxes out of the short pathway between the couch and the door. Havik’s never expecting company, so his living quarters are disastrous at best, but he might as well be ready for whatever’s about to happen next.

He’s even less prepared to see Hotaru there, passed out on the ground. He’s swathed in makeshift bandages like an unfortunate mummy. All the pieces of his glittering armor are gathered up and shoved into a bag beside him, with a note pinned to it thoughtfully.

Havik rips off the note and reads it.

_You might be able to heal him. Other guards stabbed him. Get in touch with me when he’s fine again, if he doesn’t die._

- _D_

He crumples it up and stuffs it into his pocket. “Thanks, Darrius.”

As an afterthought, Havik grabs a wrinkled shirt from his laundry pile and pulls it on hastily, bending down to pick up Hotaru as carefully as he can. He staggers across the threshold with the heavy burden over his shoulder, still bleeding through the bandages. He has the sense to lay out a few towels on the couch before dropping Hotaru there, still unconscious and miserable.

He goes back out to fetch the armor, and tosses the heavy bag onto the floor, scaring a cat out from under the nearest chair. It hisses at the sight of the rescued guest, hair standing on end, and Havik reassures it with a friendly pat to its head. “Get out of here. We have company.”

Obediently, the cat leaves, retreating towards the miniature kitchen.

Havik gets to work.

“So Darrius thinks I can heal him…” Havik ponders this for a moment, then remembers a very useful feature of his own powers. Gathering a mouthful of saliva, he spits into his palm, then smears it over an open injury on Hotaru’s shoulder.

The skin magically heals up, leaving only the slightest trace of a scar.

“Okay, I guess I’m doing this.” Havik grumbles to no one in particular, steadily unwrapping the bandages and prying shredded blood-soaked bits of cloth off of Hotaru. His bodysuit has held up fairly well against the injuries, still intact for the most part. Nonetheless, in many places, the knives passed through the sturdy fabric, driving deep enough to do some serious damage. Havik routinely seals up each injury, wetting a washcloth at the portable sink and wiping the wounds clean before applying his strange but useful healing spit.

Hotaru awakens at some point in the process, and says nothing, glaring at Havik. His normally-bright golden eyes are cloudy with pain and distress, and he shudders at the next healing touch, trying to shake off Havik and drive him away. “Why… why you…”

“I’m saving you.” Havik delivers this news matter-of-factly. “Not by my own choice. Someone dropped you at my door.”

“Then… why?” Hotaru’s dark brows furrow in suspicion as a thought crosses his mind. “What—you did this to me?”
“I had nothing to do with it at all. Relying on others just isn’t my style.” Havik dumps a mouthful of spit onto the washcloth instead of his hand, dabbing it onto Hotaru’s various minor injuries. He’s starting to look more and more alive with each passing moment, the sickly pallor of his skin returning to the usual tanned gold. “I feel kind of sorry for you. And you’re entertaining. I’ll keep you here until you’re healed enough to run off. The alternative’s dying, and I’d rather you didn’t.”

Hotaru scoffs at the idea, running out of words, and shuts his eyes again. So this is his life now. Pathetic. “…Hrmph.”

Havik offers a faint smile. “Apparently, your guards stabbed you. Sorry to hear that. Do you know why?”

“Inefficiency.” Hotaru mumbles, drifting into a half-conscious state again. “Failed to catch you.”

“You’ve definitely caught me now, so that’s not a very good reason.” Havik lifts an eyebrow skeptically. “I mean, you could catch me right now, if you felt like it.”

Hotaru outstretches a hand, grabbing the collar of Havik’s shirt. “Got you.”

“Yes, just like that. There you go.” Havik runs the washcloth along Hotaru’s arm, healing up a particularly deep gash. “I can fix you up, but I can’t fix your suit. Sorry. Hope you know how to sew.”

“I can manage.” Hotaru rolls his eyes. He’s only been here with his usual enemy for five minutes, and he’s already annoyed beyond belief. “Why did you take me in? Could’ve left me.”

“This is gonna shock you, but I have a conscience in here somewhere.” Havik places a hand on his chest, exchanging a conspiratorial wink with Hotaru, who looks even more annoyed with the gesture. “Also, you have a lot of information about Seido that I’d really love to have.”

“What--” Hotaru gasps for breath, feeling a powerful surge of pain through his chest, and collapses back against the sofa again. “…why-- you think I’ll tell you?”

“What else are you gonna do? You’ll be extremely bored in here if you refuse to talk to me. And I’m not giving you any of my books until you stop bleeding.”

Hotaru sniffs. “Reasonable.”

“Glad we can agree on something. See, we’re always making progress.” Havik offers a slight smile. So far, everything’s better than expected. “Wow, you really are out of it. You haven’t even commented on what I’d expect.”

Hotaru blinks, trying to fix his blurry vision on the very annoying man beside him. “What?”

“I’ll just wait.”

Hotaru eventually focuses his attention on Havik, studying him closely. To his astonishment, he notices the skull illusion is gone, revealing a perfectly normal face beneath.

He looks almost appalled. “That’s the actual you?”

“Yes.” Havik grins, much less ominous than usual. “The skull is the illusion.”

Hotaru shakes his head, shutting his eyes. Havik is, if nothing else, annoying enough to distract from the pain. “I… thought that your real appearance was the skull, and the face was only magic.”
“How would I eat? Talk? Do… other things?” Havik raises an eyebrow sharply at the suggestion, trying to hold back a laugh. “All right, assuming you’ll be here for a while--”

“Why?”

“You sure as hell can’t go back to Seido, can you?”

“No.” Hotaru groans, pressing a hand to his forehead. “I have nothing there to return to, anyway. All my work, my effort… for naught. A glorious career, wasted!”

Havik tilts his head to the side. “Whose?”

Hotaru glares daggers at him.

Havik stifles an impolite grin. “Anyway. What kind of books do you like?”

“Non-fiction.”

“Of course you do.” Havik wrings out the washcloth at the sink, soaking it in cold water, and folds it up, laying it across Hotaru’s forehead. “Just in case you picked up an infection before I started healing you. Fevers are no fun.”

Hotaru grunts in displeasure. “I don’t like being cared for.”

“Get used to it. Stay there and close your eyes for a while. You need to rest.”

“What are you going to do?”

Havik retreats to his own bed, displacing an assortment of cats that have been nesting comfortably among the blankets. “I’m going back to sleep.”

Hotaru stares at the cats, and lets out a miserable sneeze.

---

Ashrah digs through her travel bag once again with increasing desperation, looking for her signature dagger. It’s not here. There’s not even any sign that it was ever here. She’s starting to lose her mind about it, but she’d rather keep searching, fruitlessly, than admit that she somehow misplaced the weapon that freed her from the Netherrealm.

Skarlet pops into the room, peeking around the doorway with an inquisitive expression. “Lost something?”

Ashrah groans, shaking her head in dismay. “My kriss.”

“What’s that?”

“A-- a knife. It has a curved blade, like that--” Ashrah gestures in the air to demonstrate. “Have you seen it? It’s very important.”

“Oh, that!” Skarlet feigns surprise. “Yes, I borrowed it to cut vegetables. I couldn’t find anything else. Sorry! I’ll give it back!”

Ashrah rests her head in her hands. “You what?”

“It was a mistake. Honestly.”
“All right.” Ashrah stares dully at the wall. She really needs to work on her security. “Can you get it back?”

“Just give me an hour, I went and had it sharpened when I realized the mistake.”

“By whom?”

“Shinnok.”

“Oh, that’s fine, then.” Ashrah has had enough dealings with Shinnok by now to trust him implicitly. Everyone else seems to find him a valuable ally, and astonishingly, it appears that he’s earned it. “Go get it, please.”

“Of course!” And Skarlet vanishes again, leaving behind a faint trail of blood.

She finds Shinnok in his borrowed room in the palace, a secluded little chamber in one of the highest towers. He has an assortment of artificer’s tools scattered across the desk, as well as neatly organized small boxes containing magical materials. He’s absorbed in his work, and doesn’t notice at all when she knocks on the door, nor the second time.

She tries again, standing on her tiptoes. “Shinnok! It’s me!”

“Oh. My apologies.” Shinnok nearly knocks over his chair in haste, opening up the door and letting his friend in. “She noticed the kriss is missing, I presume?”

“Yeah, she wants it back.” Skarlet folds her hands behind her back, leaning over the table to study the assorted tools. “She believed the explanation.”

“Good.” Shinnok produces the blade from somewhere else on the table, hidden in thin air. “It’s been de-enchanted. No longer will it compel its wielder to seek out and kill vampires. Thank you for bringing that to my attention. That could have caused diplomatic difficulties with Vaeternus.”

“Great!” Skarlet accepts the item from him, and holds it up to the nearest lamp, admiring the blade as it glintens with reflective light. “No problem. I figured I should let you know.” She wraps it up in the clean cloth Shinnok provided, tucking it carefully under her arm. “Thanks for doing this.”

“I was glad to. It’s a welcome distraction from current events… though, I must admit, I’m relieved by the outcome of the negotiations.”

“I heard!” Skarlet stands up a little taller, eager to discuss the latest news. “What part of the palace is Kotal going to get?”

“I don’t know.” Shinnok waves a hand dismissively. “They can cut it down the middle with a knife, for all I care. Let them sort it out. I have bigger priorities.”

“Like what?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know…” Shinnok’s inclined to accept the chance to talk about his plans, at least with someone he trusts. “I may as well tell you. There’s some sort of mysterious underground exploration planned.”

“Oh, is it that thing with Rain and the other Edenians looking for the tomb of Argus?”

Shinnok does a double-take. “How do you know?”

“Rain told me all about it, don’t worry. You don’t have to. He wanted someone to talk to.” Skarlet
giggles, holding a hand up to her mouth. “I think he’d give away all the secrets of the realm if he was bored enough!”

“Probably. Please, try to prevent him from doing that.” A slight smile flashes across Shinnok’s face. “I’m not staying here for long, but we may as well minimize the chance of disaster. Anyway, you should return Ashrah’s weapon. Go on, then.”

“Agreed.” Skarlet nods confidently, retreating back out the door. “Thanks again!”

“My pleasure, really. Magical items are my specialty.”

As Skarlet disappears around the doorway, Raiden flickers into view, arriving in a flash of lightning. “There you are. I’ve been looking everywhere for you…”

“Raiden, you’re a bad liar.”

“I suppose I am.” Raiden shoves the door shut, settling into an armchair with a thoughtful sigh. “That reminds me. Did you enchant those rings that we gave as a gift?”

“I did indeed. I’ve been waiting for you to ask.” Shinnok smirks. “I wanted to try a new experimental spell.”

“What is it?”

“A muting charm. If anyone is being particularly aggravating near the wearer, a wave of their hand will silence that individual for thirty minutes.”

Raiden ponders this. “I want one of those.”

“Don’t we all.” Shinnok answers dryly. “If I made one for myself, I suspect the entire world would be forced to shut up.”

“Then why haven’t you?”

“Discretion. Shocking, I know, Raiden, but I do have it.”

“Will wonders never cease?” Raiden smiles pleasantly, leaning back in the chair. “Have you heard from General Blade?”

“The expedition starts within a week. That’s the only thing I know.”

“Ah. That is all the information I have, too.”

Shinnok narrows his eyes, turning around in his chair to gaze at Raiden with penetrating curiosity. “Are you sure? Absolutely, completely sure?”

Raiden smiles slightly. “As sure as I can be.”

“Which isn’t much, is it?”

“That depends on your opinion of me.”

Shinnok throws his hands up. “Why are you like this?”

“It is simply how I am.” Raiden silently enjoys Shinnok’s reactions. It’s endlessly amusing. “That reminds me. We are due to meet with Ugajin soon. He has information about the expedition that
we will need.”

Shinnok scowls deeply. “I can’t believe I didn’t realize his true identity before you told me.”

“Most likely, you forgot it, then forgot that you knew it altogether. I do that frequently.”

Shinnok mumbles under his breath. “That explains a lot.”

“Hmm? What did you say?”

“Nothing.” Shinnok raises his voice to respond, looking back at Raiden once more. “I did always think Bo’ Rai Cho was a ridiculous name.”

Raiden looks wounded for a moment. “I thought of it.”

Shinnok purses his lips. “Well, that-- ahem. I, uh, respect your effort.”

“I do agree with you, though. It was not the best possible choice.” Raiden hides a laugh. “The mistake is mine, but we were in a hurry to create a false identity. The Elder Gods were in pursuit.”

Shinnok stiffens, snarling under his breath. “For what purpose?”

“Violating a divine law of some kind. I hardly remember. Meddling in inter-realm affairs, maybe. Regardless, we did escape safely. Although they are easily angered, they are also easily fooled.”

Shinnok grits his teeth. “I do remember that about them, at least. What a bunch of brainless nuisances. Absolutely pathetic, despicable--”

Raiden raises an eyebrow. “Perhaps you have some pent-up anger?”

“Perhaps I do!” Shinnok folds his arms, glowering at nobody in particular. “So when is the meeting with this harvest-god friend of yours?”

They arrive a few minutes late, but not by much. Ugajin, Cassie, and N’Malah are gathered around the edge of a long table, set up in a cozy and well-decorated chamber with various writing-boards on the walls. Tanya already began a few renovations around the palace, including an assortment of meeting chambers. The group seems to always need them.

N’Malah is perched on the table cross-legged, very proud of her own contributions. She’s assembled all of her various detailed drawings with colorful crayon scribblings, hand-made mazes with landmarks scattered here and there. Nobody can decipher what they mean, but they’ve at least managed to put together a coherent map of whatever the hell this is.

“Hi, guys.” Cassie greets the pair of gods, ushering them into the room. “Our favorite baby Kytinn apparently has some stored memories about something underground. Whether or not it’s the tomb, I’ve got no clue.”

“It could be.” Ugajin is copying the pathways and landmarks onto a larger sheet of paper with an ink-brush pen, writing in surprisingly precise script and confident lines. “If not, I have no alternative theories.”

“It’s not the tomb. There’s no chance it’s the tomb. That’s far too easy.” Rain is sulking in the
corner, arms folded across the table. His dismal mood is clear; Shinnok’s surprised there’s not a miniature raincloud over his head. He glances up at the new arrivals, then looks down again, studying the worn wood-grain of the tabletop. “I’m sure you disagree.”

“Thanks for that, Eeyore.” Cassie slides a notepad and pen across the table to Rain, hitting him in the arm. “Take these.”

“Eeyore? Who is that?”

She rolls her eyes. “Earthrealm cultural reference.”

“Ah.” He wrinkles his nose in distaste. “Hardly worth knowing, then.”

“Sure.” Cassie ignores him, addressing Ugajin instead. “Who else is supposed to be here? Honestly, I’ve had enough of group events for one week. Pretending to be polite is hard.”

“It’s just us. Rain insisted he should attend, so, here he is.”

Rain mumbles in a disappointed tone. “Everyone else is having fun elsewhere in the palace, I’m told.”

Cassie stares at him. “Then go have fun, damn it!”

“No.”

She glances at Raiden. “What’s the matter with him?”

Raiden steeples his fingers, leaning over the table and studying the Edenian like a well-practiced psychologist. “It is self-doubt due to his perceived lack of a leadership role, prompted by Kotal’s recent return to power, and the good fortune that’s befallen Mileena and Tanya. Rain feels that he has languished in the shadows for far too long, and he lacks confidence about our planned expedition. He has no faith that his father will be found, nor that he will receive the honor that he feels he deserves.”

In a fit of irritation, Rain throws the pen at the other god. “You stop that!”

Raiden holds up a hand and zaps the pen with a flash of lightning, exploding it in a shower of electric sparks. “Rain, calm yourself.”

Cassie tosses Rain another pen. “Knock it off, kids.”

Shinnok raises his voice. “Ironic, coming from you! After all, you--”

“Yeah, yeah, younger than the rest of you by thousands of years, I already heard that. For once, Shinnok, I wasn’t making fun of you.”

“Millions of years.”

“Rain isn’t millions of years old.”

Rain sighs dramatically, leaning over the table and resting his chin on his crossed arms. “I feel like I might as well be.”

Shinnok turns his attention to him. “You have the sheer audacity to compare your own brief existence to the lifespan of a god?!”
Rain challenges him boldly. “Why not? It’s not like you did much with yours!”

Thinking quickly, Raiden grabs Shinnok’s collar before he can lunge over the table to commit murder. “Now is not the time.”

Shinnok retreats back to his seat, seething with anger. “At least let me throw him out of here! Out the window, if necessary.”

“There is no window in this room.”

“I’ll make one!”

“Please don’t. We have a few things to discuss, that we--” Ugajin scans the faces of the crowd, noticing their reactions. Cassie and N’Malah are losing their minds with laughter at the drama between the petty, high-tempered immortals. “--we could deal with later, I think. Why don’t you all get something to eat?”

“Thank you!” Cassie dashes out the door, flinging it open behind her as she bolts down the hallway. She’d prefer not to be fried by lightning, soaked by rain, or crushed by skeletons, and one of those was definitely about to happen.

As the gods and Rain trudge guiltily out of the meeting-room, N’Malah stays behind to gather up the scattered papers for Ugajin, who she’s now adopted as her newest helpful adult. “We go adventuring?”

“Well--” He hesitates, a look of concern flashing across his benevolent face. “I don’t think you should go.”

“This one has got to come, too!” N’Malah presents him with the stack of papers, standing on her tiptoes on the table to match his height. “I knows the way!”

“But you’re just a child... I think.” Ugajin doesn’t know too much about Kytinn, but he’s fairly certain about this. “Who’s your guardian?”

“Shinnok found me! He’s coming, right?”

“Yes, of course he is. We just-- I’d be concerned about the danger--” Ugajin thinks for a moment longer, and shrugs. If she survived this long, it couldn’t hurt to bring her along, especially if they get lost in the unknown tunnels. That would be less than pleasant. “All right. When the time comes, we’ll let you lead the way.”

“Yay!” N’Malah jumps off the table, wings fluttering uselessly, and lands on all fours, straightening up and throwing the blue cloak over her shoulders. She trots out of the room to chase after Shinnok, her buzzing high-pitched voice echoing through the corridor. “We’ll have an adventure!”
“How do you get reception out here?” Ignoring the picturesque sunrise, Kung Jin stares at Cyrax. The cellphone in his pocket is buzzing at full volume, and it shouldn’t be. “Who the hell would be calling you right now?”

“How should I know?” Cyrax retrieves the phone from his pocket, and checks the caller ID, wrinkling his brow in confusion. He’s only just gotten used to the peace and quiet. “It’s Frost.”

“Pick it up, then! C’mon.”

Cyrax hits the Answer button, holding it up to his ear. “What’s up?”

He immediately hears an awful clattering noise in the background. Frost’s voice crackles through the speakerphone on the other end. She’s tense with alarm and out of breath. “Get back to the Lin Kuei! Vacation’s over!”

Cyrax’s face falls in dismay. Just when he thought he’d caught a break. “Why?!”

“Code red!”

“Code what?”

“Cyborgs!”

---

“If there’s a real god out there, he’s laughing at me.”

“Probably. But why?”

“That’s the problem with having a pessimist for a friend. You agree with everything I say.”

Bi-Han shrugs. “Can you blame me?”

“Yes.” Sektor grimaces, strapping his flamethrowers to his arms and clenching his fists to test the control mechanism. A plume of searing flame shoots out of the nozzles in both wrists, safely angled away from his hands. Satisfied with the test, he shuts off the fire to save fuel. He’ll need it. “I can’t believe this is HAPPENING!”

“Hey.” Bi-Han catches his attention from the opposite side of the training hall. He meets Sektor’s dark eyes with a sincere, piercing gaze. “You know, this isn’t actually your fault.”

The clatter outside is getting louder. The hallway echoes with cyberized voices in unison, shouting about the inevitable victory of Triborg and the Tekunin. The horde is rampaging through the hallways, held back by the capable Lin Kuei ninjas, but for every human, there’s two cyborgs. Evacuation has already begun.
“What do you mean, it’s not my fault?” Sektor gestures in the direction of the reinforced doorway, staring at Bi-Han like he’s a complete moron. “That’s me out there.”

Bi-Han dismisses the idea. “That’s not you. You’re standing right here.”

“It’s still a copy of me. How could I have been such a complete idiot?” Sektor curses himself out in a string of colorful Chinese, cutting himself off when Frost pops out of an underground tunnel, covered in dust and cobwebs. “Oh. You again. How’s the evacuation progress?”

Frost freezes the cobwebs, and shakes her shoulders to dislodge them, letting the slivers of ice shatter and melt on the ground. “It’s getting there. The Grandmaster’s made sure the apprentices are safe, so that’s a start. We’re lucky some of the SF crew are still here. Their flight out of here got delayed.”

“I doubt they think they’re very lucky.” Sektor grinds his teeth, clenching his jaw in exasperation. “Which ones?”

“Johnny Cage, Stryker, and Kabal. It’s better than nobody. By the way, Sektor, fire isn’t going to do a goddamn thing against the terminators out there. They’re flame-proof. Get another plan.”

“Fire is all I have!”

“No, it’s not. You’re some kind of tech genius, aren’t you? Code a program to shut them down!” Frost suggests it like the most obvious thing in the world. “Come on.”

Sektor finally forces himself to look at the nearby surveillance screens. The horde of red and silver cyborgs has already ripped down all the portraits from the hall of grandmasters, even the image of his own father. He cringes, but he can’t look away from the path of destruction.

Abruptly, he raises his voice, yelling at the others in the room. “How the fuck did the Tekunin know that now was the right time? We’ve only been back a week and a half! After everything that all of us went through in Outworld, I thought, I really thought, we could--”

“Looks like Triborg had your systems hacked.” Johnny Cage interrupts him as he crawls out of the tunnel, not even bothering to clean off the layer of robot grease that he’s now coated with. “Good news, Tundra’s got a plan.” He raises an eyebrow at Bi-Han. “He asked me to bring Sub-Zero back. I think that means you, unless he’s got a case of split personality.”

“Yes, that’d be me.” Bi-Han finishes lacing his boots, zipping up the sturdy vest. He’s surprisingly calm in the heart of the crisis, letting his cool nerves take over and guide his actions. “What’s his idea?”

“Water ruins the cyborgs. They’re fireproof, but not ice-proof. If the other ninjas throw water bottles, and you and Frost explode and freeze them, it’ll work like grenades to take out the metal minions out there.”

“All right.” Bi-Han crosses the room with surprising speed. The plan’s simple, but effective. “Sektor, how fast can you program an override for these things?”

“You think I can?!”

Bi-Han turns on his heel, and strides back towards the other man, gently cupping Sektor’s bearded chin in his hand. His light blue eyes are blazing with focused intensity. “If anyone can, it’s you. Now’s not the time for self-doubt. Get rid of it.”
“Fine.” Sektor leans into the touch, comforted, but only barely. “I need a cyber head to reverse-engineer the code. They’re all probably following one central brain.” Sektor grimaces, remembering his familiarity with the LK units before his own transformation. The cyberization did his personality no favors, and now he’s apparently come back to take revenge on himself. “If, and I say if, I could reprogram it, I’d still need to get to the central cyber unit and plug it in. A flash drive would work. I can’t do the rest of it alone.”

“You heard the man. Get him what he needs.” Johnny delivers the instructions to an apprentice that’s appeared beside him, who promptly scurries off to search the room for tech supplies. They’re all lucky that the underground storage room has held up against the assault on the temple so far, but Sektor can’t even begin to imagine the damage done on the outside and the interior.

Frost’s disappeared somewhere. Surprisingly, she returns a few minutes later with the mangled remains of a cyber head, which she throws at Sektor. “This one went down like a chump. All yours.”

He snatches it midair with reflexes honed to a fine edge, and drops it on the desk. His lip curls in disgust as he studies the metallic skull. “It looks just like my old one. Appalling.”

“Save the monologue until later, wise guy. Cyrax and Jin are on the way, but they’re in another continent, so it’ll take a while. Until reinforcements get here, we’re up shit creek without a paddle. Now, if you don’t mind me, I’m gonna go kill some more of them.”

Sektor ignores her, and takes a seat at the desk, engrossing himself in the task. The code is a heavily upgraded version of the original, and -- unsurprisingly -- the personality core is his.

It still stings to know for sure.

He works some digital magic on it, prying apart wires and connecting it to an isolated computer. He has enough sense not to plug it into the larger system, not that it’d matter; from what he knows, Triborg’s had access to the Lin Kuei’s entire tech setup for months now. Why? He mutters it out loud to himself, too. “Why?”

“I don’t ask why. Neither should you. You face it and you move on.” Bi-Han leans over the desk, watching him as he works. “I have no idea how you do all that. Remarkable. How fast can you finish it up?”

“I don’t know!” Sektor snaps, glaring up at Bi-Han with a defiant snarl, but his expression softens in a moment, looking down at his work again. “Go out and fight them. Don’t wait for me. They need you.”

“I’m not leaving you here alone.”

“The apprentice is over there.”

“Doesn’t count.”

“Fine.” Sektor seethes, but accepts it. He’s nowhere near used to Bi-Han’s protective instincts, or, for that matter, anybody’s. Part of him would like to insist that he doesn’t need it. The rest of him knows that he does.

Minutes pass in near-silence, as Bi-Han occasionally reads updates out loud from the broken phone screen. “They’re down to about half the Tekuin left, so it’s a one-to-one fight ratio now. Cyrax and Jin won’t get here until tomorrow for sure, but we’ll need help then, too. Stryker’s at the sidelines, Kabal’s still fighting. Kuai’s plan works. Tomas and Liu are helping.”
“How? Frost said the cyborgs are fireproof.”

“How?” Bi-Han mumbles under his breath, shoving the damaged phone back into his pocket. “As much as I resent it, and I told Kuai not to ask that damned man, Scorpion is bringing reinforcements.”

“Good. We need reinforcements.”

“Not from him!”

Sektor jumps to his feet, grabbing Bi-Han by the collar, and leaning closer. “This is my fault, I’ll decide how to handle it. We’ll accept the Shirai Ryu’s help, or we’ll be torn to pieces like the rest of the temple!”

Bi-Han shoves him away, reeling with confusion and dismay. “Get back to the programming. We don’t have time to waste arguing. Just keep Scorpion away from me.”

Sektor’s done with it in minutes, fueled by an added surge of anger. Yanking the cyber head away from the wires and throwing it against the wall, he holds up a small flash drive, then shoves it into a zipped pocket in his sleeve. “Done. Now we have to find the original Triborg. You freeze him when he catch him, I’ll de-program him. That should shut down the rest.”

“That works. Where is he?”

“I was hoping you had the answer.” Sektor thinks it over for a split second. “Ask Kabal. He can check through the different areas of the temple faster than we can.”

Bi-Han types a brief message into the phone. He receives an answer more quickly than expected, and he doesn’t like it one bit. “Triborg was out there, above us on the basement level. Now he’s on his way back out of the temple to find the evacuation area. Sounds like he’s got a point to prove.”

“Of course he does. I did.” Sektor bolts towards the door, dragging Bi-Han along by the hand. “We have to catch up with him, now. He’ll murder the apprentices.”

“How do you know?”

Sektor stares at him with a hard, merciless gaze. “It’s what I’d have done at the time. I’m reverse-engineering myself, Bi-Han! Now shut up and let me out the door!”

Bi-Han wordlessly hits a switch on the wall.

Sektor makes his way down the dark, dismal corridor and climbs the stairwell as quickly as he can manage, noting the strewn trail of metal parts along the way. Bi-Han locks the secure room behind them, and follows close behind, trying to balance his mental state and regain his focus. He’ll accomplish what needs to be done, no matter what.

The future is much too important to allow the past’s demons to manifest and ruin it.

They emerge into bright sunlight beaming down from a hole in the roof. Sektor blinks, and covers his eyes with his hand, staring up. “That didn’t used to be there.”

“Indeed it didn’t.” Smoke greets them quietly, flickering into visible form out of thin air. “Here, follow me. I’ll take you to the top of the building. You have good timing. We’re starting to run out of everything. Time, energy, water to freeze… the cryomancers have already used most of what we
“That’s bad.” Sektor’s blood runs cold. “Bi-Han needs the water. That’s part of our plan when we catch Triborg. He’ll freeze him, I’ll upload the code to de-program the hivemind.”

“You-- you have that code?”

“I just wrote it. Get out of my way.” Sektor shoves past Smoke, following the noise of clattering metal and angry voices. “How many Tekunin are left?”

Smoke trails behind, surrounded by a cloud of mist. “About a third of them. So far, they haven’t reached the evacuation area, but they’re getting close. They don’t get tired like we do.”

“Yes, that was one of the selling points of the entire project!” Sektor snaps at him, his emotions boiling over once again. “Bi-Han. Come with me.”

Bi-Han obeys the command, aware that it’s a sincere request. Finally, he notices they’re ascending another set of stairs, heading up to the roof. “Why are we going up here?”

“So you can see the whole picture. I’ll teleport you down.” Smoke answers simply. “I’m managing strategy. You’re a better fighter than me in this situation… in most situations, in fact.”

Sektor replies brusquely. “Now’s not the time for humility. If you don’t believe you’re the best, the enemy won’t, either.”

“That’s good advice.”

“Yes, I’m worth listening to, sometimes. Not that version of me, though!” Sektor moves to the top of the roof, standing at the edge, and points at the chaos below. Rising above them all, there’s one central cyborg in bright glossy red, laced with glowing wires. Now and then, his colors shift to yellow, and then to blue, silver, and back to red, using the different abilities of the cyber Lin Kuei. Sektor watches it in fascinated horror. “That doesn’t look like it’s just me, but it is. I examined the personality coding. I know it for sure.”

Bi-Han insists again. “That is not you, Sektor. It’s a copy of you, but a flawed copy. Much more psychotic and genocidal.”

Sektor seethes. “Thanks for that!”

“I’m making the point that you aren’t that way. Not when you’re real self, at least.” Bi-Han strides to the edge of the roof, not even caring about the steep distance from the ground. Far off, he sees a helicopter approaching, filled with armed fighters in yellow uniforms. He grimaces, and can’t look straight at it. “That’s them, isn’t it?”

Sektor glances at the sky. “It’s the Shirai Ryu. They’ll help take back the evacuees.”

Bi-Han watches in silence as the helicopter drops to the ground, landing perfectly on a flat area. The doors slide open, and the ninjas pour out in a sea of yellow, moving past the line of Lin Kuei defenders and overtaking the next wave of cyborgs. The oncoming Tekunin tumble off the side of the mountain in dismembered sliced pieces, reduced to inanimate heaps of metal. A few more ninjas stay behind to help the crowd of terrified youngsters and new recruits, but there’s only room for half of the evacuees. They’ll have to make another trip.

Down below, Smoke catches sight of Liu Kang coming out of the building with a heavy sack filled with clinking glass. He seems unconcerned that he’s stuck on the wrong side of the fight,
dangerously near to Triborg. “What is he doing?”

Sektor wordlessly gestures to the side of the mountain. Another wave of cyborgs is crawling up the cliff-face, metal fingers gripping the frigid stone and easily overcoming the obstacles.

“We have to get down there!” Bi-Han makes a move, but Sektor grabs his arm to hold him back, yanking him away from the edge. He whirls around, responding to the other ninja sharply. “What are you doing? Come on!”

“We can’t take on all of those singlehandedly. Are you insane?” Sektor grits his teeth, feeling a wave of headache pain shoot through his skull. “We have to deactivate Triborg. That’s enough of them to destroy the entire building.”

Smoke points downward, beyond the building’s edge. “Liu might have a good idea.”

Liu Kang has apparently raided the Lin Kuei alcohol stash. He’s throwing bottles at the far-off horde on the cliff, then shooting a fireball right after them, exploding them like grenades in showers of flaming glass. With each hit, he picks off a few of them, slowly but surely. The unlucky cyborgs fall off into the valley, screaming in uncanny metallic voices.

Bi-Han offers a grudging nod. He has to award Liu a few points for creativity, if nothing else. “It’ll help, but it’s still not enough to take them down. They’ll arrive before the helicopter gets back. We have to do this, or it’s a no-win scenario. Sektor, are you ready?”

Sektor braces himself for the task, trying to summon all the meager courage he’s got left. Most of it is replaced by now with spite, which is an efficient substitute.

He breathes deeply, collecting his thoughts and steadying his nerves. He might as well not waste his second life.

“I am.”

“All right. Come here.” Bi-Han reaches for his hand, pulling him close into a tight hug. “It might not count for much, but I’m glad you’re you. Now I’m not the only asshole around.”

Sektor scoffs, his voice muffled by Bi-Han’s heavy vest. “You’re enough of an asshole that it counts double. I’m not contributing much.”

“Yes, you are.” Smoke gently interrupts the conversation. “You know, the invasion probably would’ve happened whether or not you were here, but there’s no one else who could find a way to shut them down. We’d just turn into the Lin Kuei scrap heap.”

“Good point.” Sektor nods, still not letting go of Bi-Han. “All right. I appreciate that, both of you. I think I’m ready.”

“Okay.” Bi-Han steps back, gripping both of Sektor’s hands, and leans down, pressing their foreheads together. There’s a hint of a sinister echo in his voice, but only barely. “Do you trust me?”

Sektor doesn’t hesitate for a moment. “Yes.”

“We’re going to need more than I can offer, if I’m going to stop Triborg from ripping you up on sight.”

Sektor has a feeling he knows where this is going.
“Can you survive it?”

“Yes, even if I have to throw him off the mountain afterwards.”

Sektor nods slightly. “All right. You know best.”

“No, I don’t, but I have to try.” Bi-Han leans in a little, raising an eyebrow. “Hey. Before we go, and possibly die… you mind if I do one more thing?”

Sektor smiles a tiny bit, the first time that day. “Yes. I’d like that—"

“NOW! Get down there!” Smoke’s voice is filled with hysterical urgency. Vanishing in a plume of steaming fog again, he surrounds the two of them in a hazy cloud and teleports them down the ground, landing beside Liu Kang, who’s still going strong with the fireball explosives. Beyond that, he sees a pack of cyborgs swarming like ants, blasting their missiles and nets and blades towards the valiant defenders. The humans are still holding their enemies off, assisted by a sturdy ice wall from the cryomancers, but it won’t last forever.

Leaving Smoke behind, Sektor strides forward with a hand on his pocket, just to make sure he’s got the flash drive. It’s now or never. “Bi-Han. If you’re going to do it, get it over with.”

“All right.” Bi-Han squeezes his hand one more time, then lets go, steps forward -- and unleashes the remnants of the infamous wraith. Another familiar shape slides into place beside him, the sinister clone of himself that stains the air with inky shadow.

Saibot is back, and Bi-Han can’t control him for long.

“Triborg! Face me, coward!” Bi-Han coats his fists in icy spikes and charges towards the Tekunin, hitting them like a force of nature. When the cyborgs turn and fight back, Saibot takes over, ripping them limb by limb and slamming them against the ground like metal ragdolls. He leaves a trail of scattered, mangled pieces, assisting Bi-Han in kill after kill as he cuts a path through the swarming pack.

Sektor follows in his footsteps, blasting them all with quick bursts from his flamethrowers. It stuns them for a few valuable moments, and Smoke appears right beside him, ready to pull off his own distinctive battle tactic. He grabs the cyborgs one at a time, then teleports into the thin air beyond the mountainside, dropping them into the steep ravine before landing on solid ground again. They hit the rocks far below with a satisfying metallic crunch.

By the time Sektor reaches the center of the pack, right in front of the famous Lin Kuei temple statue with its twin flaming braziers, Bi-Han has done as promised. He has Triborg pinned against the ground with one boot on his neck, both his metal hands ripped off and Saibot grabbing his ankles to hold him down.

Sektor steps forward, finally feeling a surge of confidence, and crosses his arms in front of him, flamethrowers at the ready. The other Tekunin have scattered as the Lin Kuei and Shirai Ryu steadily decimate their numbers. He leans over the trapped metallic husk, addressing the failed copy of his own soul. “Triborg. You bastard!”

Triborg just laughs in response, an awful mechanical sound. “You! Or should I say, me?”

“I am not you!” Sektor practically spits at him, jabbing one fist against the cyborg’s shiny red chest. “Though I’ve set it all aside, I was meant to lead the Lin Kuei. You want to come here and destroy them? Why?”
“Conquer, not destroy! You are short-sighted. But cyborgs do not need…” Triborg gestures uselessly with the stump of one wrist, indicating the wreckage of the formerly beautiful Lin Kuei temple exterior. “This. Sentimental garbage!”

Bi-Han hisses through his teeth, straining from the effort of controlling Saibot. “Sektor! NOW!”

Sektor lifts his gaze, meeting Bi-Han’s eyes. They’re oddly dark, glazed over with a hollow look. “I have to know why he did this!”

Bi-Han’s voice raises sharply. “Please!”

Sektor reaches for his sleeve to pull out the flash drive, planning to blast Triborg with his flamethrower to stun him -- but the tank is out of fuel. The device clicks uselessly.

At that moment, Saibot springs free.

With a roar of anger, the shadow wraith turns against his former master and companion, matching Bi-Han’s hits with synchronized motions and dodging his attempts to block the blows. Step by step, he forces him to the edge of the cliff, laughing in gruesome delight. “I always knew I would triumph over you!”

Bi-Han is absolutely furious. He kicks Saibot with all his force, sending him stumbling backwards across the icy surface, skidding to catch a grip. “You will not!”

Saibot vanishes and appears again, materializing behind Bi-Han, and grabs him in a chokehold, forcing him to his knees. “I will. I AM you!”

Triborg sees an opportunity. Throwing off Sektor with ease, he lifts his human counterpart up and slams him against the Lin Kuei statue, cracking it. Then he tackles him to the ground, pinning Sektor down mercilessly, just as Bi-Han had done to him before. “Let’s talk, weakling!”

Sektor desperately tries to reactivate his flamethrowers, searching for one last bit of fuel in the tank. Maybe if he tries again -- but there’s nothing at all, no chance to fight his way out. He and Bi-Han are both rendered powerless by their evil selves.

Ironic, that.

Triborg looks up, surveying his captive audience of humans. “One move against me, and they both die. What do you say, Tundra?”

Kuai raises his voice in response, clearly taken aback by the title. “How do you know my name?”

“We’ve had your surveillance hacked for months, just watching and waiting. You were idiots not to notice!” Triborg’s speech patterns have an odd similarity to Sektor’s, and the ninja cringes as he realizes it. Triborg keeps going, digging his boot into Sektor’s chest. “How do you feel about that? You’re not even the true Sektor. Why not share your real name with all the rest of them?”

“No!” Sektor kicks upwards, hitting Triborg squarely between the legs, but it does nothing. He barely even notices, and laughs at the effort. Sektor’s undeterred, and keeps yelling at him, trying to keep Triborg’s attention on him. “I won’t let you take my name from me, you ungrateful bastard! I made you!”

“You made me? I AM you! You’re nothing more than an inferior out-of-date copy!” Triborg is enraged. He bends over his captive, getting face-to-face with his human predecessor. He’s disgusted by every aspect of him, and is deeply looking forward to the chance to humiliate the
older Sektor. At this point, he doesn’t care if Bi-Han lives or dies, but it would enthrall him to see
Sub-Zero killed by his own evil shadow.

Before Sektor can gather the words to respond, Triborg keeps talking, raising his voice to make
sure everyone hears. The rest of the Lin Kuei, the gathered Shirai Ryu, all the apprentices, all the
supposed rescuers... they’re all trapped here, and it won’t be long til the next Tekunin
reinforcements arrive. He just needs to keep the humans focused, and then it’s game over.

“You are depraved, weak, susceptible to human instincts!” Triborg spits out the words through his
speech processor, his mechanical voice grating in Sektor’s ears. “You’re no better than a beast.
You succumb to disgusting human emotions. You let yourself be defiled. It’ll be our pleasure to
kill you!”

Bi-Han struggles against the grasp that binds him. Everything has gone wrong. He’s filled with a
torrent of panic, but he still has enough presence of mind to respond. “That’s not true. He’s better
than you, you-- you useless piece of scrap metal!”

Triborg laughs again, a grisly noise. “You would say that. You’re the one that’s defiling him!”

The mountaintop is totally silent.

Bi-Han tries to wrench himself free once again, escaping the clutches of Saibot for a few moments.
“How DARE you!”

“Come on, then! Do it to him, right here. Right in front of everyone, if you’re not ashamed of it!”

Bi-Han lashes out with a punch, and manages to smash Triborg directly in the face with a fist
covered with ice spikes. It falls away, revealing the wiring beneath -- a gruesome metal imitation
of the inner workings of a human skull.

Triborg looks oddly delighted by this development. “The consequences of emotion! Look at this.
No wonder I craved to escape my human form! You--” And here he bends down to grab Sektor
again, driving the metal stump of his arm through his shirt-collar to lift him up by the neck. “You
desire the wrong things, the wrong people. You could never be the perfect heir or carry on the title
of grandmaster -- never have a wife, a child, everything you were meant to. You’d rather let Sub-
Zero use you, now, wouldn’t you? But before you became me... you still had ambition, drive,
focus. You strived to eliminate your disgusting human weaknesses. You had all the skills I have,
without the weaknesses that bind you now! Look how far you’ve fallen!”

Sektor chokes out an unintelligible response.

Triborg keeps talking, growling at his captive up close as Sektor stares at him numbly. “Back then,
the only way out of the trap was to shed that part of your soul completely… or should I say, my
soul! I’m the true soul of Sektor. You’re nothing more than Quan Chi’s pathetic replica.”

Kuai’s voice rises above it all, strikingly calm. “That is untrue. Sektor’s actual soul remained in the
storage databases. This is the original. You, Triborg, are a poorly coded duplicate. You lack the
necessary conscience programming.”

“False!” Infuriated, Triborg drops Sektor long enough to shoot a missile in Kuai’s direction,
which he catches in an ice ball, containing it harmlessly as it explodes. “What do you know of
programming, Tundra? You’re a failed copy, too, no better than him. You cast aside the benefits of
cyberization in favor of… what? This?”

“I didn’t choose to change that. That was also Quan Chi’s work, when he remade me. But I prefer
this.” Kuai speaks reasonably and clearly, keeping Triborg’s focus away from Sektor. “Humanity cannot be replaced, altered, or surpassed.”

“Ridiculous!” Triborg shuts the conversation off, and turns back towards his loathed human version, snarling through a wire-filled mouth. “You must be exterminated, but first you’ll feel the shame for your filthy--”

Sektor is absent.

“-- where are you, coward?”

Sektor pops out of thin air again at the edge of the pathway, alongside Smoke. Both are surrounded by a faint haze of fog. Although Sektor’s clearly injured, he’s still standing, and the angry fire in his eyes burns brighter than ever.

In a silvery cloud, Smoke teleports to the other side of the pathway, drawing Triborg’s attention…

Sektor hurls himself sideways at Saibot and Bi-Han, knocking them away from the edge. As Saibot springs up, hovering over his duplicate, Sektor gets between them and kicks the wraith aside, buying enough time for Bi-Han to get some distance and gather his energy.

Sektor gestures at him, and whispers under his breath. “Now! Do you have it?”

Bi-Han digs into his tunic, and pulls out a small enchanted blade - a parting gift from Shinnok, who insisted he would need it eventually. He leaps at his shadowy duplicate, and plunges the blade through his inky chest. It sinks in, as if absorbed by a gooey material, and… bit by bit, Saibot melts away.

“Good.” Bi-Han grunts in approval, and, without even looking, fires a powerful blast of ice backwards -- just in time to catch and freeze Triborg, who was a moment away from lunging and snapping his neck.

Sektor has the presence of mind to whip out the flash drive and plug it into the back of Triborg’s neck, looking for the connecting port and shoving it in. He rips out a few of the wire tendrils at the back of his head, too, for good measure, and flings them over the side of the mountain.

As the code uploads and activates, the remaining Tekunin drop like flies. They fall off the cliff-face, piling up at the bottom in a massive heap of metal bodies. The clamor of fighting inside and outside the temple ends abruptly as the opponents fall dead. The silence is deafening.

Sektor collapses into the snow, overcome by physical and emotional exhaustion. Before he passes out, he has the presence of mind to push himself up on one elbow and make eye contact with Kuai, mouthing a few final words.

“You’re welcome.”

---

Clean-up is easier than expected. The Shirai Ryu helicopter hauls away the pieces and parts of cyborg metal, load by load, destined for an actual scrap heap once they’ve been thoroughly hacked up and dismantled. Everyone is glad to assist with that.

Everyone except Sektor, who cannot be moved from his outpost on the roof.

He’s insisted on keeping Triborg’s damaged mechanical corpse, ripping it apart to add the pieces
of armor to his own cyber suit. The metal is fireproof and high quality, and he likes the idea of accessorizing his gear with the bits and pieces of his defeated evil clone. The work is helping him keep his mind off what happened.

Night’s fallen by the time Bi-Han visits him, bringing a wrapped-up parcel of leftovers from dinner. He’s slightly disappointed, but unsurprised, to find him in the same spot, working on the same task. Sektor can barely focus by now, forgetting which pieces he’s already dismantled, and keeps going over and over the same areas, ripping the tattered wires to shreds.

Bi-Han sits cross-legged beside his companion, reaching out to place a gentle hand on his arm. “You should come in.”

Sektor’s voice is monotone. “I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Triborg told everyone.”

Bi-Han feels the reminder strike him like a knife through the heart.

“I’m sorry.” He squeezes his arm softly. “I’m so sorry.”

Sektor stares at the sky. The stars are unusually clear tonight, reflecting brightly in his tear-filled eyes.

Bi-Han gathers him in a tight crushing hug. “You’re not the only one who’s gay. Some of them told me that.”

“They-- they did? Which ones?”

“Frost. Tomas. A few others. And…” Bi-Han hesitates. “Not all secrets are mine to tell.”

“Okay.” Sektor nods slightly, barely capable of processing this news. Everything is shut down within his soul. He feels as empty as one of the dead cyborgs.

“...Thank you.”

Bi-Han doesn’t let go. “I’m not leaving you until you’re okay.”

“That might take a very long time.”

“I’ve got nowhere else to be.”

Sektor blinks back the tears, and tries to smile. “Okay. Can you help me dismantle Triborg?”

“I’m not sure this is what you need to be doing right now. It might make it worse.”

Sektor mumbles quietly. “It’s helping.”

“All right.” Bi-Han makes himself comfortable beside him, occasionally encouraging him to eat some of the meal he brought, but Sektor is focused. Bi-Han settles for rubbing his shoulders to soothe him. It helps with the physical pain, even if the emotional injury is beyond healing right now.

Eventually Bi-Han breaks the silence. “None of that’s true. What he said-- it’s all wrong. Every damn word.”
Sektor repeats the taunts like a dull echo. “Disgusting human emotions.”

“It’s not disgusting!” Bi-Han feels himself raising his voice, and consciously settles himself down, for Sektor’s sake. He needs the support right now. “And it’s not defiling you. It’s not any different from--”

“I know.” Sektor slumps back in his arms, laying his head on Bi-Han’s shoulder. Some kind of dam has broken inside him, letting out all the emotions that he’s kept stifled since the incident happened. It feels like an eternity ago, not half a day. “How dare he! How dare I--”

“That wasn’t you.” Bi-Han holds him close, running a hand through Sektor’s short dark hair. “It’s just like what Kuai said. It-- I’m not calling Triborg ‘he’ anymore. It was a copy, and a bad one.”

“Who cares? It thought it was me, and it said… everything I told myself back then.” Sektor shuts his eyes, suddenly unable to even bear the burden of awareness. “There is a reason I was so desperate to escape humanity. That was the reason.”

“Mm-hm.” Bi-Han reassures him quietly. “I’m listening.”

“I’d never heard those words spoken out loud. I did try to-- force myself to suppress everything. It did damage, clearly. More than I ever realized.” Sektor shrugs helplessly. “That was who I was back then. Nothing but rage at my own existence, and then everyone else, too.’

“It’s not who you are now. None of us are the same. Just… think about it.” Bi-Han offers a tentative smile. “I was remade, too. Still don’t know how the hell it happened, but here I am. Kuai came back the same way you did, Cyrax was put back together by Shinnok and Raiden, Tomas was a revenant… I think Frost is the only one who didn’t die.”

Sektor mumbles quietly. “Yet, if she keeps it up.”

“I know you did, too. You’re talented.” Bi-Han’s tone is confident and calm. “You realize you saved everyone, right?”

Sektor blinks, and shakes his head, as if he’s hearing new information. “What?”

“There was no way out of that unless we shut down Triborg. That was it. We were running out of fighters.”

He takes a deep breath, absorbing Bi-Han’s words. “I… I did know that, I just didn’t think about it. I did what had to be done.”

“You’re good at that.” Bi-Han hugs him a little tighter. “Nobody died, by the way. The SF guys are a little beat up, but they’ll survive. No casualties in the Shirai Ryu, either, but our apprentices are all scared shitless.”

“It’s a learning experience.” Sektor is slowly returning to his old self. “Are you all right? Everything with Saibot--”

“Yes. I’m glad to be rid of him-- it.” Bi-Han consciously corrects himself. “I was holding it back
this entire time. It was a nuclear option, as the kids say. I wish I hadn’t needed it, but it did the job.”

“It really did. I don’t know how else we’d have caught Triborg.”

“No need to speculate about it. It happened. We got through. It’s over.” Bi-Han pats Sektor on the shoulder, leaning in to kiss his cheek carefully. “Hey. Are you still okay with-- with us--”

Sektor turns around, and grips his shoulders firmly, pinning him down against the surface of the roof to kiss Bi-Han passionately. When he’s done, he pulls away, focusing on his project as if nothing happened.

Bi-Han lays a hand on his shoulder. “So, uh-- that’s a yes?”

Sektor stabs Triborg with a screwdriver more times than necessary. “Yes.”
“Ya think she’d like one a’ these?”

“Maybe.” The man in the hat leans closer, peering at the case of small vintage figurines. “Who are they?”

“Dunno.” The little girl beside him hops up onto an antique chair to take a look. The colorful patterned fabric masks the grime left by her boots. She’s wearing too many knives strapped to her arms, and jabs at the case with an excited gesture. It clinks loudly as the metal hits the glass. “We’s not sure. Somebody important?”

The shop’s proprietor clears his throat politely. The two visitors have spent quite some time here, and he’s still not sure if they’re actually planning to buy anything. They also both look oddly familiar. He could swear he’s seen them around somewhere. “Excuse me. May I help you?”

“Yeah.” The man pushes his stringy hair out of his face, tucking it behind his ear. He looks stressed and tired, as if he’s been through too many adventures. The jingling in his pockets suggests he’s here to make a large purchase. He tips the brim of his hat, remembering his manners. “‘Scuse me. Who are these figurines s’posed to be?”

The shopkeeper, a friendly older man with messy white hair in a ponytail and a trimmed beard, emerges from behind the counter with a small set of keys, ready to unlock the glass case if necessary. “These are a limited-edition set of White Lotus warriors. Would you like to see one?”

“Naw.” The girl shakes her head sharply, sighing in frustration. “Leena’s got nothin’ to do with them. She won’t like it.”

“I guess so.” Erron adjusts his hat on his head again, stalling for time as he thinks it over. He doesn’t want to be rude to the shopkeeper, but he’s not sure what would be polite as a wedding gift for Mileena and Tanya. He’s still a little astonished by the timing of the news, but he has to admit, he’s also not surprised that it happened. “Do you have anything pink?”

“Probably. There’s a selection of accessories in the other room. Scarves, and that sort of thing.” The shopkeeper gestures in the direction of a neatly arranged cabinet and coat-rack, some distance off. “Feel free to take a look. But--” He hesitates. Both the visitors look like they’ve walked through a swamp on the way here. “Please don’t handle more of the goods than you’re intending to buy.”

“Mm-kay.” Ferra stands on her tiptoes, looking over the counter at the cash register. “What’s that?” She reaches over, hitting buttons wildly. “Wanna see!”

He grabs the register and slides it out of reach just in time, keeping her grubby hands away from it. “It’s an Earthrealm invention. That’s where I’m from. Or, at least, I once was.” He doesn’t want to discourage either of them from buying something -- and he’s starting to remember where he’s seen them. The tournament! But he can’t quite remember their names... “Ahem. Uh... Please don’t do that.”

“Awww.” Ferra frowns, but obeys Erron’s silent shake of his head, and leaves the cash register alone. She trots off towards the other room as something sparkly catches her eye, distracting her all of a sudden. “Oooh. Lookit this one!”

Erron offers a polite half-smile. “I apologize. She’s still learnin’.”
“It’s fine.” The shopkeeper returns the smile enthusiastically, his usual optimistic mood returning immediately. “You look familiar. May I ask your name?”

“Erron Black.”

“Ooh!” He smacks his forehead, embarrassed that it’d slipped his mind. “Kotal Kahn’s first minister!”

“Formerly.” Erron raises an eyebrow. “Unless you haven’t kept up with recent politics?”

He pauses. “Sort of?”

Erron decides to drop the subject. “And your name?”

“Shujinko.” The man leans over the counter, offering a colorful printed business card with his name and a neatly lettered font that reads ‘Kamidogus, Inc.’ He hands it to Erron, who stares at him, briefly dumbfounded. “I spent some time as an adventurer all over the realms, then came back here and decided to open up a shop, to sell replicas of everything I’d found. I figured it’d let me meet all the tourists from other realms. It’s been nice.” He smiles benevolently. “Now we have antiques and other merchandise, too, but we still sell artifacts -- harmless duplicates of them. Would you be interested in one?”

Erron catches a glimpse of a stack of Shinnok’s amulets, neatly arranged on a low table. “...Nah.”

“Hmm. That’s all right.” Shujinko is undeterred. “How about kamidogus?”

Erron scratches his head. “Can’t say I’ve ever needed one. What do you do with ‘em?”

“Well, you take it home and put it on your shelf, usually. You can’t actually use them for anything.” Shujinko shrugs, the loose fabric of his simple tunic shifting around his shoulders. “I make the replicas. It’s a nice way to spend my time these days. They’re also very convincing, if you need a fake for any reason--”

“Err-in! C’mere n’ lookit this!” Ferra’s shrill voice rings out from the other room. “She’s gonna love it! Come see!”

“I guess I better go see ‘bout that...” Erron ambles away, leaving Shujinko alone. In the absence of his visitors, Shujinko leans over the glass countertop, resting his chin in his hands as his thoughts wander off sideways. Business was excellent during the time of the tournament, but over the last several weeks, it’s been much quieter. He’s just glad to have somebody to talk to at all, but they won’t be here for long, either.

Erron and Ferra return with an armful of pretty accessories in pink and gold, plus a bag of glossy multi-colored marbles that Ferra insists on purchasing. Shujinko concludes the transaction cheerfully, punching the buttons of a small calculator to check the exact change, and ignores Ferra’s not-so-stealthy plan to steal it. He moves it out of reach and slips the calculator back into a drawer before she can shove it into her jacket and run out the door. “Would you like that gift-wrapped?”

“Nah, we’ll do it ourselves.” Erron accepts the bag from him politely, reaching in and digging out a tiny scrap of paper he hadn’t noticed. “What's this?”

“The receipt. Just in case you need to return it, or if you need an alibi for where you were at this specific time.” Shujinko chuckles nervously.
“Oh. Alrighty then.” Erron stuffs it into the bag again, heading towards the door. “Thanks. See ya around sometime.”

“Have a good day!” He bids them a polite farewell, watching them leave as the door slams behind them with a pleasant chiming sound.

Another chiming noise rouses Shujinko from his thoughts, some time later. It could be anywhere from minutes to hours; he’s never quite sure. He hops up from his chair, emerging from behind the counter to greet the newcomers. “Hello, and welcome to Kamidogus, Inc--”

“Shujinko!” A familiar voice rings out through the store, deep and commanding and distinctive, and then he’s swept off his feet in a tight hug by someone familiar. “I never thought I’d see you again!”

Shujinko looks up, eyes widening as he recognizes the man’s face. “Hotaru?”

“Yes.” Hotaru smiles -- actually smiles, the first time in years -- and sets Shujinko back down on his feet again carefully, full of sudden joy. “It’s been so long since I saw you! You’ve aged.”

“Earthrealmers do that.” He tries not to grin. “And you-- Hotaru… you’re still who you were! I’m glad.”

“Not to interrupt the reunion party, but who is this?” A third voice enters the conversation, a sharp and irreverent tone that comes close to grating, but not quite. “Hotaru, do you have-- a friend? An actual friend?!”

“I did. Once.” Hotaru steps back, folding his arms, and leans against a precariously balanced antique clock. Somehow, he manages not to knock it over. “Havik, meet Shujinko. Shujinko, this is Havik.” He’s still smiling, against all odds. “I can’t believe you’re here. I didn’t imagine it was possible. I’m glad I was wrong.”

“Havik, hmm?” Shujinko scratches his chin, rubbing his soft white beard. The other person looks younger than Hotaru, and very mischievous. He’s almost intimidating, but the sly smirk on his face somehow makes him less fearsome. Shujinko likes him already. “That sounds like ‘havoc.’ Are you from Chaosrealm?”

“I am.” Havik nods. “Good guess. So, uh--” He looks between Havik and Shujinko, pointing at one and then the other. He hates to admit it, but he’s confused. “How do you two know each other?”

Hotaru explains promptly. “At one point, I was assisting a city in Outworld with their defenses, as part of a cooperation initiative between the realms. Ultimately, it didn’t go well…” Hotaru restrains himself from sharing too many details. “Shujinko was there at the time, and received some Seidan guard training. He ended up in trouble for violating a curfew.”

“Hmm.” Havik lifts an eyebrow, with a knowing glance. “Naughty.”

Shujinko blushes. “No. Definitely not. It was a mistake! An unintentional mistake.”

Hotaru eyes him skeptically. “As opposed to intentional mistakes?”

Havik grins. “I make those all the time.”

“Anyway…” Hotaru ignores him, continuing the explanation. “I was in the process of helping Shujinko get out of trouble, when he escaped. I never saw him again until now.” He glances back at Shujinko with unexpected warmth. “I’m so glad you’re safe. And you’re here! How have you
been? Dare I ask?"

Havik is still doubtful. “He must have left an impression on you, for you to still remember him so much later.”

Hotaru snaps back. “I don’t have many friends.”

Havik bites back a laugh. “Yeah, I’ve noticed that.”

“Havik, we’ve barely spent more than two weeks together. You are in no place to comment on my social life!”

“Other than your lack of one?”

“Please. Don’t.” Shujinko nervously places a hand on each of their arms. “Are you-- are you here to buy something, or…? If you’re not, that’s fine. It’d be nice just to talk with you.”

“Actually, I saw the shop name and thought I’d stop by…” Havik reaches into his pocket and dramatically whips out the glowing Netherrealm Kamidogu. “Are you any good at appraising artifacts?”

“Oh, one of those!” Shujinko beams merrily, and points across the room at an overflowing bin full of identical replica Netherrealm Kamidogus. “Did you purchase it here?”

Havik is dumbfounded.

Hotaru puts a hand over his mouth, trying not to laugh hysterically. “You-- you think Darrius might’ve-- somehow--”

“*No! Mine is enchanted!*” Havik holds it out of reach, glaring fiercely. “You know it works!”

“*Cursed, more like!*” Hotaru bristles at the recollection, rubbing a sore area on his arm that’s still healing after the excessive stabbing. Outwardly, he’s fine, but the muscles and insides will take some time to heal. “…Shujinko, there’s no way you could actually make a functioning magical artifact, is there?”

“No, definitely not.” Shujinko shakes his head vehemently, and blinks in confusion. “Havik-- is that the… the actual…?” He can’t bring himself to say it. “One of those items?”

“I thought it was! It’s supposed to be!” Havik grimaces, storming across the room to the basket of Netherream Kamidogus. He snatches one out of the pile, holding it up to the light and comparing it with the real Kamidogu -- or whatever this actually is. “Shujinko, are these replicas to scale?”

“No, not quite. Most of them are larger or smaller, so they can’t be mistaken for the original.”

“*Hrm.*” Havik grumbles. “Are you absolutely, completely, totally sure about that?”

“Well-- yes, of course I am.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I made them.”

“That’s good enough.” Havik turns and stomps back across the room, holding up the duplicate Kamidogus a few inches from Hotaru’s nose. “*These are the same size!*”
Shujinko gasps. “That means yours is fake!”

“It’s NOT fake, it’s actually magical! It’s just-- it--” Havik stews wordlessly for a moment. “I’m going to kill Darrius. I’m going to murder him in cold blood the next time I see that man.”

Shujinko frowns. “That’s not very nice.”

Havik whips around to glare at him, turning his neck further than should be possible. “I’m not very nice.”

“But you seem nice, at least to me.”

“Then you’re not very observant.” Havik grits his teeth. He’s beginning to see why Hotaru was friends with Shujinko. He’s oblivious and optimistic enough to tolerate Hotaru’s personality. Maybe he even enjoys it. “Can you take a look at this Kamidogu, or whatever it actually is, and analyze it?”

“Of course!” Shujinko accepts it gratefully from him, moving a small lamp and magnifying glass over to the countertop. He evaluates it closely, scanning it using several different unfamiliar tools, and eventually gives it back, answering with a helpless shrug. “It seems authentic. The enchantments on it are some of the most powerful I’ve ever seen! This has to be legitimate. Maybe I didn’t make the Netherrealm Kamidogu replicas in a different scale after all…”

“No, that’s not it.” Havik grimaces, stuffing it back into his coat-pocket and striding back and forth across the room. He’s full of nervous energy, and he can’t do a damn thing about this current conundrum. Technically, Darrius did fulfill the deal -- it’s an artifact, it’s magical, and it looks like the right thing. Havik couldn’t be more furious. “Can you test to see how old it is?”

“Well-- that’s the only issue…” Shujinko hesitates. He hadn’t wanted to mention it. “This seems like it was recently made. I assumed my equipment was inaccurate--”

“No, it’s not. You’re right.” Havik seems to be going through all the stages of grief at once. He collapses into the nearest chair, putting his head in his hands. “I didn’t ask Darrius where he got it!”

Hotaru comments wisely. “Maybe you should have.”

“No shit!”

“Gentlemen--” Shujinko tries uselessly to settle them both down. “…Now would be a bad time to ask if you want to buy anything, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, it would.” Hotaru ignores the distraught Havik, and turns his attention back to Shujinko. “I want to know more about what’s happened with you. How has your life been, ever since we parted ways?”

“Not so bad. I almost went on an adventure seeking out the Kamidogus, if you’d believe it… but I lost my map, and I decided not to. I’m glad for that. It might have been too much excitement.” Shujinko smiles slightly at the memory. “Instead, I’m here, and I’ve been running this shop for several years now. It suits me well, but it’s a bit lonely. How about you?”

“Not so bad. I almost went on an adventure seeking out the Kamidogus, if you’d believe it… but I lost my map, and I decided not to. I’m glad for that. It might have been too much excitement.” Shujinko smiles slightly at the memory. “Instead, I’m here, and I’ve been running this shop for several years now. It suits me well, but it’s a bit lonely. How about you?”

“Not much, except I got stabbed two weeks ago.” Hotaru skips past the details. “I’m fine now.”

“Oh, no!” Shujinko puts a hand over his mouth. “Did you survive?”

Havik almost collapses to the floor in laughter.
Hotaru shoots him a glare. “You. Stop being dramatic about the Kamidogu and get back here. I’d like to stay and talk with Shujinko for a while.”

“I’ll be dramatic for as long as I damn well please.” Havik’s already accepted he’s never going to figure out how Kamidogu fraud was possible, but he’s looking forward to trying, anyway. “You need to catch up on gossip, or something?”

“There’s not much to gossip about.” Shujinko answers honestly. “I don’t hear anything worth talking about. This is the most interesting thing that’s happened to me in quite some time.”


Havik blinks in confusion. “Last I saw, they were enemies.”

“I don’t know, really. I always forget to keep up with the news.” Shujinko settles back into his chair, inviting Hotaru behind the counter to sit with him. “Here, we may as well talk, as long as you’re visiting.”

“You trust him that much?” Havik catches his attention. “Hey, what about me?”

Shujinko attempts to be polite. “You can sit on the counter if you want.”

Havik hops up onto the countertop, sitting cross-legged and balancing on the glass surface. “Okay.”

Shujinko blinks at him. “You actually want to?”

“I’ll take any opportunity I’m given.”

“He does.” Hotaru comments under his breath. “I’ve learned that the hard way.”

Shujinko looks on the bright side, as always. “Havik, you seem like a fun person.”

“That’s a matter of taste.” Hotaru rolls his eyes. “I’ve gotten used to him. He saved my life after I was stabbed. I’ve stuck around ever since, mostly because I can’t return to Orderrealm, so it’s this or nothing.”

Shujinko offers a sweet, genuine smile. “You can stay here with me if you like. Both of you.”

“Really??”

“Yes. It gets lonely sometimes… most of the time, if I’m being honest.” Shujinko brushes a few wispy strands of white hair out of his face. “Hotaru, I did always want to thank you for trying to free me. I know it didn’t actually happen that way, but… I appreciate that you wanted to.”

“Thank you.” Hotaru glances aside, not used to sentimental displays of emotion. “And thank you for being my friend back then.”

“I can be your friend now, too. I think I’d like that.” Shujinko sets a hand gently on his arm. “I’ve been thinking about going on adventures again, but I’m too old now, and I have the shop to take care of. It’s just me now.”
Hotaru raises an eyebrow. “No wife and kids?”

“No… none of that.” Shujinko glances aside. “I have too many other things to keep busy with. I just never had time for romance at all.”

Havik is intrigued. “You didn’t? How?”

Hotaru interrupts sharply. “Havik, everyone’s priorities are different.”

“That’s true. I just wish I’d made more effort to keep in touch with people, but I always lost track.” Shujinko blinks sadly, suddenly not able to look right at either of them. “Hotaru, getting to see you again… it’s like a gift. And Havik, I’m happy to meet you.”

“I feel the same.” Hotaru offers a soft smile. “May we stay for the afternoon?”

Shujinko actually grins. “Gladly.”

- - -

“Mooooom!” Cassie complains loudly, offloading half the accessories from the overstuffed bag Sonya’s insisted she take along during the underground exploration. “I don’t need sunscreen! We’re going into a tomb!”

“What if something very bright is down there?”

“Please.” Cassie tosses it into a basket on the table, a convenient gathering-place for all the items that everybody’s decided they don’t need. “Dad’s usually the one who’s worrying about me. C’mon. You’re supposed to be the cool one.”

“I’ve got a lot of catching up to do on worrying.” Sonya smiles, though. “I’ll admit I might have over-packed just a little. Don’t get rid of any of the snacks. You might actually need those.”

Another voice joins the conversation. “Yes, we can use them to bribe the rescue party you’ll inevitably have to send for us.”

Cassie tosses the bottle of sunscreen at him. “Shinnok, shut up! You’re worse than Rain!”

He swats it back at her at high speed. “I am not!”

Raiden catches the item calmly, appearing out of thin air yet again, and sets the controversial item out of sight. “Settle yourselves. For this journey, we will need patience, endurance, and, most of all—”

Cassie holds up yet another unwanted parcel. “Breath mints?”

Sonya calls back to her on the way out the door. “You never know!”

Cassie flings it into the bin of items. “I swear to god…”

“Oh, you do, hmmm? Which one of us?”

“Shinnok, shut up.”

For once, he does.

Li Mei comes to check in on them, hurrying between the assorted palace rooms with a bundle of
freshly laundered coats tossed over her shoulder. “Do you want one? It might be chilly in the tomb!”

Cassie declines, raising a hand. “No, thanks. I’m having Krypt flashbacks.”

“You what?”

“Don’t even ask.”

Ugajin stops by, just in the nick of time. “I’ll take one, if you have one in my size.”

“I do.” Li Mei hands it over to him. “What’s the headcount?”

“One per person.”

She looks at him sharply. “I know that!”

“That’s the usual number, at least.”

She rolls her eyes. “You know what I’m asking.”

Ugajin nods. “All the Edenians are coming. Mileena -- well, one of the Mileenas… Sindel, Jade, Kitana, Tanya, Rain, Ermac--”

“Ermac? Why?”

“They’re more than one Edenian, technically, but we might need backup. Shinnok’s amulet lets them project different souls individually.”

“So they’re a walking ghost container now? I like it.” Cassie straps her backpack across her shoulders, stuffed full of first-aid supplies, ammunition, and energy bars. “Who else?”

“N’Malah, you, Raiden, Shinnok, and me.”

“Wait. That’s all the gods we’ve got here right now. Why not leave Raiden outside?”

“Cassie, that is not very polite of you to say.” Raiden reprimands her in a pleasant tone. He’s dressed head to toe in his usual divine garb, some kind of gleaming ceremonial armor with intricate carvings and gold details. Upon closer inspection, it’s an improved version of his tournament outfit, with all the damage repaired, thanks to Shinnok. “I have come so far on the journey, I may as well see it through. Besides, if, by some chance, we unleash an ancient evil locked deep underground, I will be able to help fight it back.”

“Oh, that’s reassuring!”

Raiden reminds her. “It has happened before.”

“...You got me there.”

“Hi, everyone!” Mileena breezes into the room, dressed in some kind of bright pink outfit with plenty of leather and lace details. It contrasts sharply with the usual Outworld look, and Cassie has a feeling she must’ve gotten it at an Earthrealm store. “How are you on this lovely day?”

“Doing real good.” Cassie unwraps an energy bar, biting down, and makes a face. It’s one of those all-natural organic ones, without the sugar to make it palatable. “How’s the wife?”
Mileena grins widely, revealing the entire set of fangs. “Wife-to-be. She’s good! She’ll be here soon!”

“You figured out when you two are getting married yet?”

“Probably sometime next spring. There’s lots of preparations to be made.”

“Mm-hmm.” Cassie chokes down the whole energy bar, chugging a bottle of water afterwards. It has way too many unidentifiable seeds. “You sure you shouldn’t leave her up here, just in case?”

“And miss this?” Tanya, appearing in the doorway, gestures grandly to the assembled group. She looks exactly the same as always, dressed nicely for the occasion, with her weapons strapped to her back. “Oh, Rain isn’t even here yet. I wonder if he’ll be late to his own party.”

“Have patience.” Sindel brushes past her politely, floating off the ground, and gently reminds Tanya to remember her manners. She’s the most old-fashioned of the Edenians, and the oldest of all. Her thick silver mane is bound in a ponytail, still usable in a fight but more convenient than the loose, flowing hairstyle she usually wears. Like Kitana and Jade close beside her, she’s dressed simply and elegantly in her chosen color, wearing a set of adventuring gear provided by Li Mei and Sonya. In an expedition of this type, function matters more than fashion.

Rain clearly doesn’t follow the same principle. When he finally arrives, he’s dressed in his own regal purple and gold tournament armor, patched up by Skarlet and polished to a brilliant gleam. He greets the group with a scornful look, glancing behind him to make sure Ermac’s still silently floating there. “There you all are. Are we missing anyone?”

N’Malah crawls out of a nearby cupboard, scooping the remains of a jar of berry jam into her mouth, and politely drops the glass jar and the spoon into the trash. Sindel winces, noticing the antique silverware, and retrieves the spoon without a word.

Ugajin clears his throat, clapping his hands to gather their collective attention. “I think this is everyone! Li Mei and Sonya have agreed to stay outside the tomb’s entrance and monitor our progress by keeping in touch with Miss Cage.”

The group nods dumbly, accepting this information. Most of them are tired from a sleepless night of worries beforehand. Only Kitana has the presence of mind to respond at once, meeting Ugajin’s eyes directly as she projects an image of confidence. “Shall we go?”

Ugajin answers in the affirmative. “Raiden, the portal?”

Raiden lifts his lightning-staff in the air and slams it on the ground, sending a bolt cracking through the air and opening up a rift that connects to the entrance of the cave. “Go ahead. It is safe.”

Shinnok lingers beside him, waiting for the end of the group as they pass through single-file. “You are so dramatic. You didn’t need to do that.”

“You are always dramatic. I am merely taking cues from you.”

“Fine. We’re both dramatic.” Shinnok waves a hand dismissively. “So what? We just follow N’Malah around the tomb until we stumble into something important?”

“I suppose.” Raiden shrugs without hesitation. He seems unbothered by any of the worries and concerns that plague the rest of the group. Instead, he lets his thoughts distract him as he ponders the future. “You found her in a tomb originally. It is fitting, I think.”
Shinnok hesitates. “You’re right, now that you mention it. I did rescue her.”

Raiden’s tone is gentle. “That was the right thing to do, Shinnok.”

“I know.” He studies the hazy outline of the portal, hands clasped behind his back. “For once.”

“That was only one of many right things you have done.”

“They don’t outweigh the wrong things.”

“Let me be the judge of that.” Raiden urges Shinnok onward gently. “Go on. The outcome of this effort will be positive. I promise you that.”

“Will it?” Shinnok glances back over his shoulder. “I’m trusting you on that, you know.”

“I understand.” Raiden nods slightly, resting a hand on his shoulder as they approach the portal. “You have not failed my trust, Shinnok. Nor will I fail yours. I owe you that.”

“You don’t owe me anything.”

“Yes, you do.” Raiden smiles softly. “Come along, now. The greatest adventure is still before us.”
“Do you think we know where we’re going?” Cassie mutters under her breath to Shinnok, who’s dragging his feet at the back of the adventuring pack, burdened by a sturdy bag that he’d originally insisted he didn’t need. She prompts him again, poking his arm. “Do you even care?”

“No, and no.” Shinnok grumbles a response under his breath, ineffectively trying to catch up by walking at a quicker pace for several feet before he gives up. Raiden is somewhere far ahead, ushering the other adventurers forward in a loosely organized group. How he’s managed to make them all cooperate is still a mystery. “N’Malah will find something, sooner or later. Of that, I have no doubt.”

Cassie’s not satisfied with this response. “And?”

“And I haven’t a clue whether it’ll be the actual tomb. Look around. Does this seem like a tomb?” Shinnok stops short, gesturing to the cavernous walls around them. They’ve all descended deep into the earth by now, but far above, bright sunlight filters through spidery cracks in the stony ceiling. A few pools of water have collected in the lowest points of the tunnel’s earthy floor, and moss is growing on a network of tree roots that weave through the walls. “It looks like an ecosystem.”

“Maybe it is.” Cassie tries to keep the mood up, with very little luck. “Seems interesting, though. It’s kind of pretty down here.”

“I suppose.” Shinnok scoffs impolitely, and steps far away from Cassie as she pulls out a spray-bottle from her backpack and douses herself in some kind of foul-smelling spray. “What is THAT?!”

“Bug repellent. I know you can just zap mosquitoes, or whatever they’re called in Outworld, but I can’t. So deal with it.” Cassie stuffs it back into the pocket, waving her hand to clear the air. “I wouldn’t mind being buried down here. Seems like there’s lots of living things, so you’d decay fast. It’s like recycling…”

Raiden appears from thin air between them yet again, making Cassie jump in surprise, almost hitting her head on a spiky protrusion from the cave roof. “Miss Cage, while I appreciate your efforts to make small talk, silence would be preferable.”

Shinnok grumbles under his breath. “Thank you.”

“You too, Shinnok.”

Shinnok glares sharply at him. “Why?”

“We are approaching our destination, according to our guide. Perhaps you would like to come up to the front with me, to catch up?”

Shinnok ignores the cue. “I can catch up by myself.”

Raiden keeps pace with him for a few more strides. “How about now?”

“Oh, fine--” Shinnok grabs his sleeve, and Cassie follows suit, holding the white fabric loosely. Much to their shock, Raiden grips both their arms firmly and takes off down the tunnel in rapid flight, leaving a crackling trail of lightning behind him. They zoom past the assorted Edenians and
land next to Ugajin and N’Malah, who stare at them both with astonishment.

Raiden sets them down and steps away proudly, dusting off his hands. Luckily, he managed not to collide with anything this time. “I found them!”

Cassie puts her hands on her hips. “You found us?”

Rain feels the need to answer. “You were so far back, we’d lost you.”

“That’s your problem, not mine.”

N’Malah interrupts them both by waving her wings and tiny pincers, pointing at a solid slab of stone that’s blocking the path in front of them. “Through!” She stands on her tiptoes, pressing against the wall. “We’ll find it!”

“Let’s see…” Ugajin carefully consults the hand-drawn map he’d made from N’Malah’s assembled drawings. Satisfied with the answer, he slips the parchment back into his pocket. “It seems like she’s right. Let’s figure out how to get this open.”

Tanya points a finger at Rain. “Okay. Before we start, if there’s treasure in there, you’re not allowed to run off with the whole thing.”

He snaps back in response, summoning an orb of water in the palm of his hand. He’s ready to fling it at her. “‘Allowed’?! Do you hear her? The nerve--”

Sindel steps in to save the day. “You both have a valid point. While Rain is correct that he should not be obligated to take orders, Tanya is also right in suggesting discretion. If -- and I repeat, if -- there is a storehouse of treasure within the grave, we will divide it evenly, and--”

N’Malah tugs politely on Sindel’s coattails. “Grave?”

Sindel kneels down, looking her in the eye. “Yes. That is what we’re looking for…” She has a sudden bad feeling about this whole thing. “What are you looking for?”

“Tomb! Like we said!”

She’s reassured. “Good. A grave and tomb are the same thing.”

N’Malah shakes her head vehemently. “No. They aren’t.”

They’re all silent for a moment, pondering what this means. A feeling of collective unease settles over the group like a wet blanket.

It’s Tanya who figures out the solution. “In the Kytinn dialect of the common tongue, some words have different meanings. ‘Tomb’ can also have the colloquial meaning of ‘resting-place’ and ‘origin.’”

“You’re so smart, sweetheart.” Mileena beams toothily. “Why does it mean that?”

“The way Kytinns are born, eggs are placed in a body that has been peacefully laid to rest underground. Violent, forceful killing will corrupt the offspring.” Tanya scratches her nose as she thinks it over, reaching back into the deepest recesses of her memorized research. “Therefore, a tomb, to a Kytinn, would be their place of origin… their home. N’Malah might think the word means something else.”

Ugajin sums it up. “This isn’t good.”
Raiden tries to shed some positive light. “It could be the correct tomb.”

Shinnok brings him back to reality. “You know it’s not.”

Cassie shrugs. “Finding the wrong tomb is better than not finding a tomb, isn’t it?”

They both grudgingly agree.

“So let’s get through that door.” She jerks a thumb in the general direction of the solid stone wall. “Any volunteers?”

Raiden steps up. “Do you want me to crack it open with lightning?”

“Not a chance.” Shinnok grabs Raiden by the belt and pulls him backwards. “It’s probably cursed. You know how tombs are.”

Raiden shakes his head. “Statistically, only a small percentage of tombs are seriously cursed. Most are—”

“Quit it, you two.” Ugajin distracts them with a warning look. The last thing he needs is the mission derailed even further by a pair of bickering gods. “Maybe there’s a magic incantation that could open the door?”

Kitana and Sindel step forward. “We know some spells that might be of use. We could try.”

Rain is unimpressed. “If you want to stand in front of the door and recite poetry, be my guest.”

Tanya glares. “Do you have a better idea? Of course you don’t.”

Rain keeps quiet.

Mileena listens eagerly as her sister and mother take turns attempting a variety of magic spells, but it’s no use. The door is unimpressed. It will not budge.

She strides towards the edge of the chamber, running her fingernails over the smooth stone to look for a seam or crack in it. “We could figure out how to pry it open, maybe.”

“Even with all of us, no one is strong enough to do that, especially with the risk of ruining the structural integrity of the chamber.” Tanya gestures at the ceiling, noting the tiny beams of light filtering down. They can’t be that far from the surface after all. There could be life down here. “Come back, dear. You’ll ruin your manicure.”

Mileena wanders back, defeatedly. “All right.”

They’re quiet for a few minutes before N’Malah speaks up again, trying to get Ugajin’s attention and whispering something to him.

He bends down to listen closer. “What’s that?”

She tries again, louder this time. “We could knock on the door!”

Ugajin stops short. “How did nobody think of that?”

Shinnok has the answer. “If there’s something alive on the other side of the door, we’re in trouble.”

“Fair point.” Ugajin shrugs. This isn’t exactly the ideal situation, but so far, it’s been uneventful.
He’s also out of options. He may as well take a chance. “Okay. We don’t have any other ideas, and we’ve gone too far to backtrack. N’Malah, try it.”

N’Malah steps forward tentatively, stands on her tiptoes, and knocks on the door - once softly, and then again, louder, in a distinctive pattern that she seems to know from memory.

A glistening portal appears in front of her, spreading through the stone at the height of a doorway. It’s translucent like frosted glass. There seems to be light and movement beyond it - an uncertain future, but a promising one.

“Okay!” She backs up, takes a running start, and hops through.

Ugajin follows hastily, disappearing through the portal -- vanishes for a few seconds -- and sticks his head back out, urgently gesturing the others forward. “Come on!”

Shinnok, despite his apparent lack of enthusiasm, is next in line. “What is it?”

Ugajin sputters, searching for the right words, but Shinnok’s already impatiently shoved him aside and stepped through the portal. Whatever it is, he wants to look for himself.

He’s not prepared.

A luxurious underground jungle is blooming before him in the cavern, with a flourishing pool of crisp water at the center. Fruit-bearing vines are intertwined with the tree-roots woven into the cave walls, full of green leaves and lush vegetation. Far up above, sunbeams illuminate the room through a natural skylight set into the earth. It’s like an unearthly paradise.

He is silent in awe.

A figure dressed in a gauzy floating gown drops down from the sky above him. Her voice is a pleasant melodic buzz, and her wings are iridescent and vividly colored, resembling an enormous butterfly. The skin of her exoskeleton body is green and intricately patterned, and long tendrils of antennae extend from her brow. She is undeniably another Kytinn, most likely the leader of this place.

She welcomes them warmly, settling onto the ground and resting on the tips of her elegant pincers. “You come to the Colony. This one, T’Ziporet, welcomes you.”

Shinnok freezes, and scrambles out of reach, struck by horror at the sight of another unknown Kytinn. His blood runs cold in his veins, rendering him speechless until he finally chokes out a desperate plea. “No. No! Not again!”

The butterfly woman is troubled by his reaction. She fails to understand. “You come in peace. This One reads your intentions.” She reaches out a hand to him, but pauses, noticing his fear. “What plagues you?”

Shinnok pants for breath, trying to focus his vision, and brushes up against Raiden’s tunic behind him. In his desperate search for reassurance, he clings to Raiden, gathering his nerves. Slowly, after long, agonizing moments, he lets go and steps forward, extending a hand as a polite gesture. “I apologize. I have had terrible experiences with Kytinn in the past. You, madam, have nothing to do with it.”

“Ah. One of our number has harmed you…” T’Ziporet’s face falls, antennae drooping. “There are those among the Kytinn who destroy as they please. We fled them. Long have we lived in this place, buried beneath the jungle. Few find us. Even fewer return.” She reaches out to touch his
hand, fingertips brushing together. “Those who stay, stay out of choice. You need not.”

Shinnok withdraws his hand. “That’s very good to know.”

“Once in a eternity, we are found by a lost Kytinn. This one sees. We will speak to her after the foreigners.” T’Ziporet meets the gaze of each member of the group in turn, judging and evaluating them. She has large, dark compound eyes that glitter in the filtered sunlight. Satisfied with her impression of the Edenians and the other mysterious immortals beside them, she finally comes to the end, eyeing Cassie with astonishment. “You… you smell of poison, and yet you live?”

Cassie coughs, feeling embarrassed. “Bug repellent.”

T’Ziporet nods slowly, trying to understand. Her high forehead is furrowed deeply in thought, antennae twitching in confusion. “You feared us?”

“Uh-- no. I wasn’t expecting to meet any Kytinn at all, actually. It’s just to keep mosquitoes off me.” Cassie summarizes as best she can, without explaining the entire mission. “We were trying to find a place where a dead guy is buried.”

“The graves…” T’Ziporet inclines her head slightly, wings fluttering as she lifts off the ground to perch on a large boulder before them. “Those are far beyond the catacombs! This one wishes you good fortune in your journey.”

Shinnok raises a hand, finally ready to ask more questions. This is strange beyond words, but at least he knows he’s not in danger. “Catacombs?”

She explains graciously. “Long ago, beneath the jungle, rebels fled the authority and built a structure of tunnels and mazes out of sight. We, the Kytinn, are refugees from own kind and the world itself, and so we occupy this structure. We cultivated this cavern to become a world of its own.” She reaches up to pluck a flower from a blossoming vine, then kneels down to offer it to N’Malah, who has been standing awestruck and silent this entire time. “Welcome, young one. Your pilgrimage has ended, if you wish it.”

“Thank you!” N’Malah tucks the flower into her headband, smiling broadly with tiny sharp teeth. Then she hops up and launches herself into T’Ziporet’s arms, clinging to the woman tightly. “The tomb. Home!”

Tanya sums it up. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

Ugajin tries to get the mission back on track. “Ma’am, you did say the graves are down here?”

“Yes, indeed. The Edenian graves.” T’Ziporet nods confidently, still holding N’Malah reassuringly. “Excuse the silence from the others, please. They are in the tunnels. We naturally fear visitors and the harm that they may bring, so I am the ambassador. All others stay out of sight.”

“Understood.” Ugajin is polite as he can be. A few of the others, mostly Rain, are astonished at the sight of a new Kytinn and still staring open-mouthed, but he doesn’t feel like correcting their manners at the moment. “We need to keep moving, then.”

Cassie and Shinnok both turn towards their guide, but she speaks first. Her presence of mind is, somehow, still intact. “I get the feeling N’Malah wants to stay here. Can we say goodbye?”

Mileena steps closer. “Me, too.”

Ugajin nods understandingly. “Of course.” He’s not familiar at all with Kytinn social customs, but
whatever is happening here, he might as well be respectful.

N’Malah wriggles free from T’Ziporet’s grasp, dropping to the ground and then leaping into Mileena’s arms for one more hug. “Thank you! This one’s gonna miss you!”

“I’ll miss you, too.” Mileena squeezes her tight, reassuringly. She’s full of a mix of bittersweet emotions. Saying goodbye is never easy. “I had a good time looking after you, N’Malah. Don’t forget me, okay?”

“I’ll never forget.” N’Malah grins enthusiastically, then hops right into Shinnok’s arms, surprised as he staggers backwards off-balance. Raiden catches Shinnok quickly and pushes him back upright again, and relying on him for balance, Shinnok steadies himself. He grips N’Malah’s shoulders nervously, studying her unusual, inquisitive face. She looks right back at him curiously. “Shinnok, are you okay?”

Shinnok nods, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. “To think, we’ve come all this way…”

“You saved me. This one’s never gonna forget you, either.” N’Malah switches freely between the Kytinn and human grammar, not caring at all about mixing the forms of speech. She unbuckles the little bracelet from her wrist with the disguise charm, handing it back to Shinnok. “Thank you, but I’s never going to need it. You keep it.”

“Are you sure? Don’t you want something to remember us all by?”

“No.” N’Malah shakes her head vehemently, pushing it into his hand. “Yours. You remember me. I’s going to remember you with this.” She puts a hand over her heart. “Forever.”

“That’s-- that’s very sweet. Thank you.” Shinnok blinks quickly, looking past her, and hands her over to Cassie. “Here, you say goodbye.”

Cassie rests N’Malah on her hip, holding up her weight easily. “I guess you found Disneyland for insects, huh? Have fun here, okay?”

“I will! Thank you for everything, Miss Casisie.” N’Malah’s wings flutter excitedly, full of joyful energy. “I’s going to meet all the Kytinn, but first…” She points at a vine full of berries, some distance above. “Tasty!”

“You can have that later.” T’Ziporet retrieves her, gently setting her down on the ground. A crowd of other Kytinn is already forming at the edges of the cavern -- all kinds of insect varieties, with vivid bright wings and multi-layered pincers and compound eyes. They all look peaceful, dressed in colorful accessories, with pleasant, curious expressions.

N’Malah catches sight of them, and her eyes widen, mouth falling open. “More of us!” Without waiting for permission, she takes off, darting across the cavern and taking a flying leap across the pool. She doesn’t quite make it, splashing into the water, but she flails with her wings and lifts herself out, shaking herself off. She’s undeterred, charging onward enthusiastically to cross the distance. “Hello!”

They greet her hesitantly but politely, welcoming her into the group.

Shinnok’s heart is warmed at the sight.

“This is goodbye. I suppose I will miss the child. You should know-- I was the one who found her, in the Krypt caverns from the remains of that Kytinn island. I forget the name.” He sighs deeply, turning away to face the portal, and touches the shimmering barrier, reaching through and then
drawing back his hand again. “Thank you, T’Ziporet. Queen T’Ziporet? I don’t know how Kytinn authority works.”

“Just T’Ziporet.” She bows her head politely in a respectful gesture, lowering her wings, and points in the direction of the door. “I apologize for the harm you endured from another Kytinn. I cannot make it right, and I am sorry for that. But, should you find yourself in this area again, you are always welcome in our home.”

“That’s fine. You don’t have to try to make it right. Just the thought counts for something.” Shinnok’s oddly touched by the comment. Some sort of soft emotion stirs deep inside him, suggesting forgiveness and peace. “I appreciate the invitation, but we really ought to go. Where are those graves you mentioned?”

“Hmm.” T’Ziporet takes a few steps closer. “Do any of you have a map?”

Ugajin brandishes it from his pocket, as well as a pencil. “I have what N’Malah wrote down. She kept making drawings of maps…”

“Ah, latent memories, passed down between generations and bloodlines. We have dwelled here for a long, long while.” T’Ziporet nods wisely. She accepts the pencil, holding the unfamiliar object carefully, and jabs at a point on the paper. “Take that path. It will be dull and dreary, and you will see nothing at all, until you find what you seek. Then, you will be challenged. Accept it. Vanquish it.”

“Thank you very much.” Ugajin makes note of this, stashing the pencil and map back in his pocket. “We’ll find it, ma’am. Much appreciated.”

“Do not let boredom, fear, or doubt deter you from your goal.”

“Don’t worry. We’re all very stubborn.”

“That will be more than enough, then.” T’Ziporet smiles gently, lifting her wings. “This one is glad to see new faces. Nevertheless, you must leave. Go on. Be brave. The reward will be yours.”

Shinnok waits until the rest of the group has filed out through the portal, nearly all awestruck and obedient for once. Then he turns back, glancing at the group of Kytinn, and sees N’Malah sitting cross-legged in a circle, animatedly telling them all about her adventures. His gaze shifts to T’Ziporet. “N’Malah will be happy, won’t she?”

“Very much, I hope. Thank you for saving her, and looking after her as you did. It cannot have been easy.”

“She spent some time on Earthrealm, in disguise as a human. I think she’ll like it better here.” Shinnok rubs his temples, checking to be sure that all the others have left, before he speaks again. “One of the Kytinn-- D’Vorah--”

T’Ziporet’s antennae shoot up in alarm. “The traitor?!”

“Yes, her. She… laid eggs in me.” Shinnok wipes his eyes with his sleeve, shaking his head as if to expel the unpleasant thoughts. “I’m-- I just-- I don’t like to talk about it.”

“This one is … sorry.” Her voice is deeply solemn. “That was cruel and undeserved. You are beyond brave, to survive and endure, and to speak freely with Kytinn now.” T’Ziporet takes a few steps closer, resting a hand on his shoulder with a light touch, then pulls it back cautiously, respecting his fear from before. “No fault was yours. None at all, in any way. Since she chose to do
that, may she rot in the depths of the Netherrealm for all time.”

Shinnok can’t help but offer a weak half-smile. “I used to be in charge there. I left because of bad working conditions.”

She nods very seriously, with no apparent idea who he is. “This one is glad for your freedom, and our gratitude to you knows no bounds. The Kytinn are few in number… But go on. Your group needs you.”

“They really don’t, actually. I’ll just get lost again and slow them down.” Shinnok is not usually quite so self-deprecating, but he feels no need to keep up the pretense of smug authority. Reluctantly, he turns and faces the portal, preparing to leave the Kytinn behind for good. “Farewell, T’Ziporet. I wish you good fortune.”

“The same to you.” She lowers her wings again in a respectful gesture. “Goodbye, Lord Shinnok.”

“Wait, you know--?!” But as Shinnok exclaims in shock, he’s already vanishing through the portal, dragged back into the tunnel by a very worried Raiden. He cuts off the rest of his sentence, shaking his head silently, and trudges onward, shouldering the burden of his supply bag again as if nothing at all had happened.

Reality is sometimes the strangest fiction.
“Is now a good time to mention I’m afraid of heights?”

“It’s not a good time, Rain!”

After a long and uneventful journey through a series of winding tunnels, staircases, and passages, they’ve finally found the next step. Or so they think.

It’s a narrow, precarious bridge stretching across a gaping expanse of empty air, pitch-black and seemingly extending forever into the earth. Rather than just one bridge, it’s two parallel lines of stone, barely wide enough to walk on.

Rain backs up against the wall, shivering in dread. “I don’t like that.”

“None of us like it. Get over it. Aren’t you supposed to be the fearless prince?”

Sindel jabs Tanya with her elbow. “Please do not make fun of his deficiencies.”

Rain retorts. “What do you mean, deficiencies?”

Cassie mutters under her breath. “If I have to hear one more word of this, I’m jumping into the cavern myself.”

“That will not be necessary.” Raiden reassures her calmly. He’s lit himself up with a lightning aura to illuminate the dark chamber, crackling around the brim of his hat and down his sleeves. It’s apparently an illusion, as he doesn’t seem to have static-shocked anyone yet. “Do you all have any ideas?”

“I wish Jacqui was here. She always knew the way past all the magic traps the last time we had to do this bullshit.” Cassie sighs, crossing her arms across her chest. It’s chilly in here, unlike the underground bug greenhouse. She wishes she’d been smart enough to pack a jacket like Ugajin. Then again, she might have one.

She drops to one knee, slinging her backpack off, and digs around in the deep pockets until she finds a light folded jacket. She pulls her arms through the sleeves gratefully, appreciating the tight warm fit. “Thanks, Mom.”

“A wise decision, considering the temperature.” Shinnok regards her from a safe distance. He rubs his hands together, and summons another item of clothing, a cozy vest that settles over his elegant outfit. “I’ll do the same.”

“You have an advantage with your magic.” Cassie unhelpfully points out. “So, as Raiden was trying to say--” she raises her voice, interrupting the next useless argument between the Edenians--“anybody got any ideas?”

Ermac is the only one with any kind of suggestion. “We could float across ourselves, and carry those who need to come along.”

Cassie shakes her head. “One at a time? There are ten people here.”

“We have souls.”

“Ah, yes. The soul-projecting device, thanks to me.” Shinnok is trying his best to recall his
memory of magical structures. “I think this bridge is enchanted.”

Raiden raises an eyebrow, deadpan. “Really?”

“Yes. It strengthens as two people walk across it, hand in hand. I believe it’s a sort of metaphorical bonding exercise, or some such nonsense. Unfortunately, several pairs need to pass across before the bridge is complete and the stone in the middle is filled in.” Shinnok rests his hands on his hips, surveying the dangerous-looking structure. “May I suggest sending one of Ermac’s souls across with each person? That way, if the bridge fails, they won’t immediately die.”

Raiden is doubtful. “Can the souls perform telekinesis?”

Ermac answers. “Not as strongly as us ourselves, but individually, they are able.”

“Good. That means my amulet’s doing its job.” Shinnok allows himself a proud smirk for just a moment. “If my knowledge serves me correctly, the bond between the two individuals crossing the bridge needs to be sincere, which means that Rain should be last in line.”

“Why, you dare--”

Shinnok ignores him. “Ermac, which of your souls are strongest?”

“King Jerrod, whom you may know, and Titus, the diplomat, the leader of Tanya’s family.”

Tanya gasps. “Father... I’d like to see him again. Just once.”

“Then so be it.” Ermac rests their hand against the amulet at the center of their chest, closing their eyes and concentrating deeply. Slowly, an amorphous mass of glowing green energy manifests in front of them, taking shape into a tall man with distinctive features and black hair. He closely resembles Tanya, with short-cropped hair and a noble bearing.

Tanya rushes forward, and grabs him in a tight wordless hug, refusing to let go.

“You’ve always been brave. My daughter, I never thought we’d get to talk again...” Titus smiles crookedly, trying to keep a brave face despite his overwhelming emotion. He needs to stay collected. He’s used to being part of the group within Ermac, but it’s a relief to be free, if only briefly. “Still fighting for Edenia, after all this time?”

“Always.” Tanya smiles at him, sniffing a little and wiping her eyes. “It’s what I do.”

“That’s my girl.” Titus lets go of her, and grips her hand instead, lining up in front of one side of the narrow bridge. Tanya takes her place as well, ready to step onto the narrow strip of stone. Her heart is pounding in her chest, blood rushing loudly in her ears, but her confidence carries her forward, supported by the soul of her father. Slowly but surely, the gap between the two paths fills in with a mass of crumbling stone, appearing from nothing and forming a solid surface that supports their footsteps.

They pass across in peaceful silence, arriving at the opposite edge safe and sound. Before Titus vanishes again, Tanya hugs him one last time, burying her face in his shoulder. This moment is already embedded deep in her memory. “I remembered your journals, Father.”

“I knew you would.” He returns the embrace, squeezing her gently. “Tanya, I’m happy for you. For everything.”

She meets his eyes, gasping softly. “You are?”
But he’s already faded, vanishing into thin air.

Tanya staggers against the far wall, sitting down with her back pressed up to the stone. She wishes she had the time to think about this with the deep consideration it deserves. Just like everything else, when something meaningful happens, they’re in the midst of an adventure that’s liable to go wrong at any moment.

On the other side, Ermac needs some moments to recover, leaning on Rain for support. King Jerrod is already forming from the amulet projection, a shimmering regal outline, and Sindel silently takes his hand, exchanging quiet words with her long-gone husband. Kitana greets her father as well, embracing him in a sudden surge of emotion, but she reins in her joy and respectfully steps back, letting her mother cross the bridge with Jerrod instead.

Sindel wishes the past had been different -- a constant, enduring wish. This is a particularly important instance. What could have happened if Jerrod lived? What if fate had been more merciful, and her husband had survived to stand beside her, instead of Shao Kahn vanquishing Edenia and standing over her? These questions are pointless, though, and she knows it. She dismisses them with a deep breath, gripping Jerrod’s hand tighter as her footsteps echo on the fragile stone.

When he’s finally gone, she sinks to her knees, too, sitting beside Tanya in quiet solidarity.

“I think this isn’t enough. One more should suffice.” Shinnok reaches out and taps his foot on the newly formed stone between the bridge path, testing it to determine if it’s solid. “Who’s next?”

“I might as well. I’ve come this far.” Ugajin shrugs with one shoulder. He’s ready to take the risk, as always. “Ermac, do you have any friends of mine in there?”

Ermac nods without a word, and manifests another glowing soul, a pleasant chubby middle-aged lady wearing the garb of the Edenian court. Kitana raises an eyebrow, recognizing her. “Can it be?”

“Indeed. A pleasure to see you again, Lady Kitana.” The woman nods politely, greeting the princess. Though she’d only been one of the less significant governing Edenians, she’d made an effort to reach out between the realms and befriend many Outworlders -- including one who turned out to be their protector god. “Ugajin? How have you been?”

“I’ve been fine, Esther. And you?” He exchanges a gentle smile with the woman, chatting politely as they cross the bridge, and though he’s sorrowful when she vanishes, his heart is still filled with warmth at the encounter.

“All right. I’m next.” Rain pushes his crown up on his head, tying his ponytail firmly in place, and pretends to gather his nerve. In reality, he barely has any nerve left -- his fear of heights isn’t doing him any favors -- but he has a reputation to maintain. If he wants to call himself a prince, he’d better act like one. “Ermac? Shall we?”

“Certainly.” Ermac floats over aimlessly, accepting Rain’s hand with a pleasant, vacant expression. The effort of summoning the souls has drained them deeply, but they’re more than glad to cooperate. “This will leave... whom?”

Rain glances back to do a headcount. “Jade, Kitana, Shinnok, Mileena, Cassie, and Raiden. That’s more than enough to cross by themselves. They’ll be fine. No more soul-summoning. Don’t drain yourself out.”

“We will not.” Ermac nods understandingly, and drops to the ground to actually walk. Encouraged
by the progress so far, Rain lifts his chin and strides confidently across the bridge. He makes it across without looking down, then shudders as he gets to the other side and leaves the shaky structure far behind.

Tanya glances over at him, feeling a charitable mood for once. “You did great, Rain.”

“...Thank you, I think.” Rain grimaces, settling down to sit a safe distance from the edge. “I do not want to do that again! Ever!”

“It’s likely that, when we reach our destination, there’ll be another path back to the surface.” Ugajin has a few encouraging words to offer. At this point, he’d say anything to keep Rain in a good mood. “There usually is.”

By the time they both glance back towards the other side, Kitana and Jade are already across, passing the obstacle with unshakable confidence. They let go of each other’s hands and step off the bridge, exchanging a smile and a wink, unless Rain is imagining things.

Maybe he is.

Then again, maybe not.

Shinnok, Cassie, Raiden, and Mileena are having a minor dispute about who will cross with whom. Raiden, as always, is the voice of reason. “I will bring Miss Cage across. If the bridge fails, I can float and catch her. Shinnok, the same is true for you and Mileena.”

“I suppose.” Shinnok sighs. “So be it, then. Let’s not leave the helpless mortals to their own demise. You first.”

Cassie grips Raiden’s much larger hand, wincing with a static shock, and grabs it with surprising strength. “Okay. This better work.”

“It has worked for everyone so far. Quick, let’s cross.” Raiden leads the way with confident steps, with Cassie trotting along at him at high speed to match his long strides. Once they’re past the bridge, she stops and grabs an energy bar from her backpack, offering one to Raiden. He declines it politely.

She remembers, halfway through the third bite, that it’s another one of those disgusting health-food bars, but she’s hungry enough not to notice.

Back on the other side, Shinnok awkwardly takes hold of Mileena’s hand, trying to figure out how to interlace their fingers. “Like this?”

“You’re bad at it. Don’t even try. It’s fine.” Mileena laughs warmly. She tucks her hair behind her ears and offers a reassuring smile to Shinnok, which he seems to very much need. “Let’s just go. By the way, good job figuring out how the bridge works.”

“Not a problem. Someone around here has to know things.” Shinnok arches an eyebrow, appreciating the moment of praise. “Now, go.”

Mileena takes off running, dashing across the bridge, and as Shinnok hastily keeps pace beside her, he feels it crumbling beneath his feet behind him. He lifts off the ground, flying the rest of the distance as Mileena leaps across, and only lets go of her once they’re both safe.

Mileena coughs pointedly. “Forgot to mention that last part?”
Shinnok lays on the ground, staring up at the high ceiling. He remembers the last piece of information now, with a sinking feeling. “The enchantment dissolves once all the adventurers have begun to cross. Yes, I did forget. But we all survived, did we not?”

Mileena glances around her, and pretends to be alarmed. “Quick, wait, where’s Raiden?”

Shinnok seethes instantly. “If you lost Raiden, I swear—” But as he pushes himself up on one elbow, he catches sight of Raiden, sitting right beside him. “Oh. Don’t do that.”

Mileena stifles a laugh. “Serves you right. You almost dropped me into the void back there.”

“But I didn’t, and you know it, because you’re here, talking to me. ”

“Good point!” Mileena springs to her feet again, snapping her fingers to gather the group’s attention. “Almost there. Let’s go! Who’s ready?”

The group groans in response.

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“Oh, look, it’s another bullshit magic challenge.” Cassie leans through the doorway, observing an ominous glowing ball of energy that’s floating at the center of the long passageway. This one doesn’t seem to have any trapdoor floors, fortunately -- yet. Whatever it is, though, she’s not looking forward to it. She’s had enough of this for a whole year, let alone one day.

Ugajin reassures her. “Miss Cage, I doubt mortals can pass through this challenge. We are very close to our destination. You can stay behind.”

“Gee, thanks.” Cassie grumbles, chewing on a candy bar she managed to find in her backpack. At least it’s washing away the taste of the weird seeds. “You’re just gonna leave me here, all alone, in the middle of the creepy tomb, right before you go dig up the dead guy?”

“Not alone.” Raiden approaches. “I will stay with you. It would be irresponsible to abandon you at this point.”

“Thanks, thunder dad.” Cassie sighs in relief, making herself comfortable in the corner of the small room before the passageway. She can still see what’s going on, but she’s glad she just gets to be a spectator this time. “So what is that?”

Kitana paces around the chamber, extending a hand to touch the walls. She seems awestruck, gazing into the distance with a yearning expression. “I remember this.”

Jade answers her from across the room. “How?”

“Kitana turns and meets her eyes in a moment of deep, surprising sincerity. “Truly?”

“Yes. That always has been the case, but you have distinguished yourself in an extraordinary way, my dearest daughter.” Sindel moves closer, and exchanges a gentle, thoughtful hug with the princess. Her glowing purple eyes have a look of unusual softness. “Now, lead us on.”
Kitana brandishes her fans, crossing and uncrossing the blades, and steps forward to the doorway. “It’s an enchanted spirit. You can’t cross unless you fight it first as your worst enemy, and then as yourself.”

Jade is close behind. “Do we have to speak to it?”

“Not unless you want to.”

“I’d rather not. Do you want me to go first?”

“If you wish.”

“I do, I can, and I will.” Jade whips out her staff and her glaive, glowing bright with magical energy, and enters the passageway. It’s always been her role to be brave. Why stop now?

The spirit greets her first as a formless whisper, murmuring her name over and over, and then it morphs into the form of her worst enemy… Revenant Kitana.

Jade doesn’t hesitate. Aware of the crowd waiting behind her, she pounces and strikes down the spirit in her friend’s corrupted form, slicing through its neck with the blade of her glaive. It doesn’t even have the chance to put up a fight. Glowing energy pours out of its veins like blood, and it springs back up again, morphing into an identical copy of Jade herself. But she fights this, too, without fear, jabbing her staff through its heart and forcing it down to the ground with one knee on its chest. She barely cares that it looks like her. It’s a foe, and it needs to be eliminated. “Begone.”

It vanishes, melting into a puddle of magical fluid, and re-forms in the center of the room as the glowing burst of energy. Jade ignores it, and passes to the furthest end of the corridor, leaning on her staff. “Next, please.”

“I might as well.” Kitana is ready for it, and she’s already guessed what form it’ll take. An imitation of Shao Kahn rises up before her, formidable and ruthless, and she slices it down with a flurry of blades before kicking it in the face. Defeated, it collapses to the ground as a twitching corpse, and leaps back up to confront her as an identical mirror-image of Kitana herself. She’s taken aback, more so than Jade, but only briefly -- the copy falls with only a brief fight, and disappears before her eyes. Satisfied, she turns on her heel and stalks to the end of the hall, stowing the blades away. That’s that.

Sindel accepts the responsibility to be next in line, appreciating the respectful nods from the rest of the group. She approaches the figure doubtfully, measuring her footsteps and maintaining a dignified manner. Although she hesitates when she’s confronted with her own self in revenant form, she handles the fight with ease, catching the spirit mid-attack with a well-timed hair whip. She breaks its limbs with more force than necessary, screaming in its face until it melts to the floor and re-forms as the regular Sindel. She’s gentler in the second fight, putting the copy of herself out of its misery with dignity and respect. As the spirit vanishes once more, she barely gives it a second look, joining the other Edenians on the far side of the challenge.

The next fights are unique in their own way. The spirit seems unable to decide which of Ugajin’s enemies is the most important or fearsome, and keeps morphing between different forms of Elder Gods, resembling the massive carvings of the faces in the jinsei chamber. Surprisingly, he has a difficult time defeating it in the first form, and grumbles to himself discontentedly, pausing to catch his breath after he’s pummeled the life out of it with his walking-stick. “I’m out of practice.”
None of them respond, not wanting to break his concentration, and he’s better the second time, though it’s peculiarly unnerving to fight oneself. He isn’t used to it at all. As Ugajin strolls down the corridor past the obstacle, he glances back over his shoulder to watch the mysterious spirit re-form into its usual unclear glowing form. How unusual. He has to wonder who put *that* together.

Tanya doesn’t expect her own appointed enemy. It’s Kotal Kahn, looking just the same as always. But, as she astutely notices, in the copy, his body language is slightly different; the copy is obviously a poor imitation. So, despite her own efforts to train herself towards peace rather than war, she has no moral qualms at all about brutally slicing the fake Kotal to bits with her tonfas. She’s less pleased about having to dismember an alternate version of herself, but at least the fight doesn’t last long. She’s almost disappointed by the ease of it all. This should be set at a higher difficulty level.

Mileena plunges into the fight with a flying leap. She’s already predicted who her foe will be, and she’s ripped the spirit as D’Vorah from limb to limb with ferocious bites before it can even have a chance to re-form. The scattered pieces of wings and pincers disappear, melting back into formless energy, and then Mileena’s up against her own clone again, though this time she’s fighting to kill, not to train. She dispatches it with a bite to the neck, flinging her own body forcefully against the wall, and finds it strangely satisfying. She didn’t even have to use her blades.

Ermac has no reaction to the fight at all. They are confronted with their own mummy form, on the verge of decaying and collapsing beneath the bandages, but it is clearly a false illusion. They have recovered from that state. When they’ve eliminated that enemy, it reappears before them as their usual restored form, and so Ermac does as all others have done, fighting back until it lets them pass. They float the rest of the distance to the exit, reluctant to touch the floor. This tomb ordeal has been riddled with traps; they would hate to discover another.

“I suppose this is my turn.” Shinnok hesitates, gripping Raiden’s hand, and leans a little closer to exchange a few words before they part ways for now. “If by some chance I don’t come back from this…”

Raiden blinks sadly. “After all this… I do not know how I would go on without you.”

“What? No, that’s not what I meant. I was going to tell you to go rescue me.” Shinnok bites back a laugh. Raiden is charmingly predictable, and he’s grown fond of it. “Keep Cassie safe. I’ll return as soon as I can.”

“Of course. Fight well, Shinnok.”

“Don’t I always?” He approaches the spirit with confidence, but falters when it turns into his enemy…

Raiden.

Or rather, Raiden as he used to be - before it all, with that self-righteous ethical aura untainted by corruption. Shinnok used to hate him so bitterly, everything that he thought and believed and tried to be. Then, somehow, they came to an understanding…

Shinnok rests his hands on his hips, looking the artificial Raiden right in the eye. “You’re *not* Raiden.”

The spirit speaks in a creaky, gravelly tone, with a voice unused for eons. “I represent Raiden.”

Shinnok hesitates. “So, fight me, and let’s finish this feud once and for all.”
The spirit obliges.

Shinnok counters the first hit with a quick strike from his bone-scythe, swifter and more agile than Raiden but less able to resist direct blows. It’s a surprisingly even match, mostly due to Shinnok’s hesitation at fighting Raiden, even a false one. Nonetheless, at the end, he triumphs -- pressing his spear into the tip of Raiden’s chest, right on the verge of landing a lethal blow.

Raiden calls out from the end of the corridor. “It is not me! Strike it down!”

“Right.” Shinnok lets the spear sink in, watching in gruesome fascination as the magical energy leaks out like thick blood. It’s only gone for a few seconds, and then it pops right back up again as Shinnok himself, looking even more infuriatingly smug, uptight, and insufferable than the real thing.

Shinnok glares at himself. “You, I can handle.”

The false Shinnok raises an eyebrow in an irritatingly familiar manner. “Prove it.”

Shinnok skewers it right in the chest with the bone-spear, plunging the blade through to the other side. This is an excellent opportunity to let out his self-loathing. “Done.”

The spirit looks indignant for a few seconds, and then collapses to the floor, already disappearing. “Proceed.”

“That leaves me, then…” For once, Rain doesn’t mind being last in line. This entire time, he’s been speculating about who his assigned opponent will be. Kotal? Tanya? Someone he hasn’t thought of? He’ll have to find out up close. He approaches without fear, gathering a fistful of purple lightning before his enemy has even formed. “Fight me!”

The spirit hesitates for just a split second, then turns into Rain himself.

“No, not like that!” He sighs, throwing his hands up. “The enemy first, then me, just like everyone else!”

Tanya calls out helpfully. “I think it thinks you’re your own worst enemy.”

“Fine, then, if it’s going to be like that!” Rain takes out his anger on the spirit, even more infuriated that this magical creature is pretending to be him. The first version of himself he zaps to death with a furious blast of purple lightning, and the second he drowns in a torrential rainstorm that clears up with a snap of his fingers once the corpse has vanished. Satisfied, he struts to the end of the corridor. “That’s more like it.”

“You’re all through!” Cassie cheers them on from the other side, encouraging them onward. She’s appreciating the chance just to sit and talk with Raiden, but she’s also looking forward to the end of the adventure. It’s gone on so long already, and it’s not even over… yet.

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Sindel muses to herself, kneeling down to peer at the keyhole set into the massive cold stone door. It’s only a few minutes past the enchanted passageway. This must be the right answer, the right path forward. “Could it truly be that simple?”

“Yes, it could.” Tanya scratches her head. “But would it?”

Rain pushes his way past the others. “I haven’t a clue what you two are talking about.”
Tanya mutters to herself. “Status quo.”

“Tell me, then!”

“Look.” Sindel points to the door. “It’s a keyhole.”

Jade brightens up, trying to get a closer look. She sees an opportunity to be helpful. “I know how to pick locks. Let me help!”

Rain glares back at her. “I don’t think you’re supposed to do that.”

“No, that’s not it. That’s-- not quite what I mean…” Sindel reaches into the front of her shirt, pulling out an antique ornamental key, warm from resting next to her heart. She turns it over in her hand, marveling at the beauty of it. “This… I acquired it from Ferra in the market before the tournament. It seemed familiar. I traded my necklace for it. I have no clue where she found it.”

Kitana gasps sharply. “That is familiar! I don’t know how, but it is.”

Rain’s face falls. “Do you even realize how staggeringly low the odds are, that that’s the actual--”

Sindel slides it into the lock. It clicks.

“--the actual key…” Rain’s voice trails off into a whisper. At the click of the lock, a series of Edenian engravings have appeared in the stone, written in the ancient script. “How?”


Ugajin is hastily jotting down the inscriptions on the back of his map. “Not to be disturbed unless in times of emergency, contains the item capable of freeing the realm-- the what?!” He drops his pen in shock, hastily bending down to pick it up off the cold stone floor. “The realm orb! I’d thought there was only the slightest chance that it was here. If it is, that means we-- we--”

Tanya finishes the sentence. “We could free Edenia. I never had any doubt at all.”

“Good for you. You, uh, you do seem to be right, though.” Rain runs his hand over the door, looking for a handle. “How do we open it?”

“You push, genius.” Tanya chuckles, but takes her place at the door beside him, putting her weight against it. “Here. You can’t do this alone.”

“What, I can actually count on others to support me?”

“Can’t hurt to try.” Tanya offers a faint smile. “Everyone! Push!”

Ermac, following instructions perfectly, pushes Mileena.

She pushes them back, smacking them away. “Stop that!”

Tanya groans. “Push the door!”

The collective group gathers in front of it, shoving with all their force -- and, slowly, with the crumbling and cracking of ancient long-buried stone, it moves.

They slide it forward inch by inch, forcing the doorway open until they’re exhausted from the effort. The air within is musty and pitch-black, and Tanya leads the way through, lighting her hand up with flame like a makeshift torch. “Come on, then…”
It’s disappointing.

None of the markers of a royal gravesite are here. There is no finery, no gold or jewelry, not even any decorations on the walls or precious offerings left in respect. There’s no sign that it’s been robbed, no signs of a struggle or forced entry. There is only a cold stone slab in the center of the room, resting on the floor, in the size and shape of a coffin.

Rain stumbles forward, dropping to his knees in front of it. He can barely believe his eyes. This is not the tomb of a king, not even a prince, let alone a god. “This can’t be right. My-- my father--”

“Sorry, Rain. Looks like it’s not here after all.” Tanya’s cold, cutting voice rings through the chilly room. “What a shame to come all this way and find absolutely nothing. Too bad!”

“But it-- he-- must be here!” Rain’s voice has a tone of clear desperation, on the edge of a sob. His crown has fallen off, resting on the ground beside him as he clutches the solid block. “It has to be!”

Tanya is unmoved. She crosses the room to stand across from him, looking down at him and the pathetic stone block. “I guess this expedition was a disappointment, after all. Just like you.”

“How dare you! I won’t tolerate this! Not anymore--” Rain’s face is wet with tears, and he lashes out in fury, striking Tanya squarely with a bolt of lightning. She staggers backwards against the wall, catching her balance. As he clutches the coffin, a tear falls from his face onto the worn-down stone…

Before his eyes, the plain block transforms into an intricately carved marble sarcophagus. It ia a thing of beauty, made from exquisite materials and enhanced with gold details. Across the sides, battle scenes are delicately carved in the panels, and on the top, a name is inscribed in Edenian calligraphy.

*Argus.*

Rain exclaims in shock. “It-- how-- I--”

“Sorry, Rain. I had to make you cry.” Tanya picks herself up, brushing the dust off her sleeves. “The grave is enchanted. I read up on it. The idea is that the grief from the disappointment would only affect his true heir, and I don’t think you can cry on command. So…” She gestures towards the elaborate coffin. “Looks like we actually did it.”

Rain is speechless.

They all stand back, giving him the time and space he needs. Slowly, Rain collects himself and rises to his feet. He places his crown back on his his head, brushing back a few loose strands of his hair. Despite his tear-streaked, dusty, grimy appearance, he still has the look of a prince. He gathers them around, gesturing to bring them closer. “Help me open it. Please.”

Tanya is the first to volunteer. “I’ll take the other end.” She braces herself, tightly gripping the bottom of the lid. “On three, we move--”

“There is no need.” Ermac summons a surge of magical green energy, and surrounds the lid with telekinetic power, gently lifting it off and setting it aside on the ground behind the coffin. “Will that do?”

“It will.” Rain flashes them a thankful smile. Then, hesitantly, barely even daring, he looks into the grave.
A figure is entombed within the sarcophagus, covered from head to toe with an elegant Edenian purple and gold cloth. When it makes contact with the air, the fabric crumbles and vanishes into dust before Rain’s eyes, revealing the figure beneath.

It is an old, old man, wizened with age, dressed in an elegant robe, with his arms crossed over his chest and his eyes shut tightly. He’s gripping an object between his wrinkled hands, wrapped in another regal cloth. As Rain leans closer in horror and fascination, he notices a very faint flutter of the man’s chest, the rising and falling of breath.

He waits, and waits, and waits.

Nothing happens.

“...I-- I suppose that must be him. That’s Argus...” Rain blinks back a few more tears, stepping back. “He does look like me, I think.” He’s overpowered by emotions, resorting to an inept stream of consciousness to convey his thoughts. “I don’t know. I sort of expected him to just come back to life and jump out of the coffin.”

“Well, that’s highly unlikely to happen.” Shinnok finally joins the conversation, lurking by the door. He’s been watching in fascination, unwilling to interrupt the important moment. “Gods cannot die, but if locked away for millennia... don’t get me started.” He shakes his head.

“Regardless, that does appear to be your father. He is alive, but barely. He will need rehabilitation in... ahem. Does Outworld have an equivalent to the jinsei?”

Ugajin nods, taking a few steps closer. “Yes, but I haven’t found it. Theoretically, it must be around somewhere.” He raises a cautious hand as Rain reaches into the coffin, trying to grab hold of his father and carry him out. “Be very careful. You don’t know if he’s--”

Instead of the stiff corpse-like body that Rain had expected, Argus is limp, as loose-limbed as a living being. When Rain lifts him, the object between his hands falls free, tumbling out of the cloth. It bounces on the edge of the coffin, hovers in the air for an agonizingly slow moment, and shatters on the floor -- a beautiful glass sphere split into a million pieces.

Rain freezes, still holding Argus. “Was-- that the realm orb?”

Tanya is shocked, but trying not to show it. “I think so.”

“Was... was I supposed to do that?”

She nods. “Technically, yes. It did need to be broken.”

“So I did do something right?”

“Probably. It’s possible that it needed to be broken intentionally, but, most likely--”

All at once, they feel a warm pleasant gust of air whooshing through the tomb, uplifting their spirits and cleansing the musty stench of the underground chamber. They feel it together, the trembling of the earth as the realm splits free. All across Outworld, on the surface and through the whole land, magnificent portals open up between the realm and its once-merged conquest. Distinctive landmarks disappear and vanish, restoring the natural beauty of the original Outworld as the scenic sites return to their permanent home in Edenia. Some curious villagers step through the new portals, finding themselves in a beautiful world full of bright colors, flourishing nature, and exquisite ruins.

Down beneath the earth, the pack of explorers is panicking. Rain is carrying his father out of the
tomb, slinging the fragile old man haphazardly over his shoulders. Argus is still unconscious, and surprisingly heavy, but Rain is managing. This is his duty. He follows the group as they dash back out the tunnels, trailing at the back of the pack with Ermac supporting and leading him along.

“Thank you for the help.”

“It is our pleasure.” Ermac guides him forward, keeping their eyes focused on the rest of the group. “You did well. You truly are the son of a god. We never doubted.”

“Yes, now we just have to figure out how to wake him up.” Rain staggers to a halt, almost colliding with Tanya. The spirit let them all pass back with no trouble, but the small chamber seems to be empty. “What’s happening? Where are Raiden and Cassie?”

“Up here!” Cassie pops her head out of a small opening near the top of the wall, leaning down to offer a hand. “There’s a staircase!”

“Wonderful!” Mileena grabs her hand and springs up, following close behind. The rest of the Edenians rush after her. Rain hesitates, unable to lift both Argus and himself, but Ermac accepts the burden from him, carrying Argus with deep care and respect.

“Thank you.” Rain mouths under his breath as Ermac floats up to the staircase, levitating up the narrow, steep spiral steps. Once again, he’s at the back of the pack, but he doesn’t mind. A prince should be responsible for all those under his guidance. It’s his duty to see that they all leave the tomb safe and sound.

A shout of gleeful joy resounds from the top of the staircase. “We’re out! We’re here!”

Rain rushes up the rest of the way, dizzy from exhaustion, and crawls out the last few steps, dragging himself onto solid ground as Tanya closes up a trapdoor behind him. He wants nothing more than to stop, regain his strength, and rest. After all this adventuring, he needs peace.

“Where’s ‘here’?”

Tanya lights up the room again with a handful of fire. Her expression shifts to visible shock, studying her surroundings in alarm and awe. She recognizes all these stacks of boxes, remembers digging through them to find the packed-up journals. It feels like an eternity ago.

“This is the basement of the house where Mileena and I used to live.”

Rain stares at her stupidly. “It can’t be!”

“It is. I swear.” Tanya sits down on the floor heavily, shutting off her flames. She wasn’t at all ready for this revelation. She knew there was some reason she was drawn to this place, but never in a million years, not in a hundred Edenian lifetimes, could she ever guess why. “The tomb was right under our noses. This whole time. This whole entire time. It was right here! HERE!”

“Just breathe, dear.” Mileena settles down beside her, laying on the damp, grimy floor. She’s trying not to preoccupy herself with concerns other than the present moment. She’s got enough to worry about. “We all made it out?”

Raiden lights up the top of the room with a few convenient floating bolts of lightning, counting on his fingers to verify that all the members of the expedition are safe and sound. “Yes, we did. I made sure.”

Shinnok’s voice echoes through the darkness. “Did you count me?”

Raiden laughs. “Yes, I did. Twice.”
“Well, *that* won’t help very much, will it?”

“I counted you all twice. You’ve contributed so much more to this than I could have ever imagined.” Raiden’s voice is raw with emotion. “Do you realize what you did? You *freed* Edenia. I felt it. I know you all felt it.”

There’s a chorus of murmurs across the room, all quietly agreeing.

“What was it like? I wish I could have seen it…”

Tanya chuckles to himself. “Rain dropped the orb by accident.”

Rain answers defensively. “I broke it! It needed to be broken!”

Raiden can’t help but grin. “You did it, and that’s what counts.”

“Yes. That’s right. I did it… this whole thing.” Rain’s voice is fading, already taken over by exhaustion. “You did. We *all* did.”

Tanya raises an eyebrow. “Now that’s what I call character development.”

Rain mumbles under his breath. “I *heard* that…”

No one answers him. Most are half-asleep by now, consumed by the exhaustion of adventure and the satisfaction of a job well done.
Shattering (1/2)

“It can’t have been easy, can it?” Sektor surveys the remains of the Lin Kuei temple from his perch on the rooftop, a vigilant figure in gleaming red and silver. He’s augmented his cyber suit with the remains of Triborg, stapled and welded onto the arm and leg plates. In a way, he’s wearing the corpse of his own evil clone. It’s very satisfying.

Cyrax settles into the folding chair beside him, wearing a heavy yellow snowsuit zipped up from head to toe. “Maybe not.” He ponders it all, crossing his hands behind his head and leaning backwards as he appreciates the icy mountain vista. “But I had to come back. I couldn’t stay away forever. The Lin Kuei is my home.”

The air between them is still tense with distant memories of cyberization and betrayal, but they are on the verge of making peace.

Sektor reaches out first. “I just wanted to tell you--” He stops, and starts again. Though Cyrax has been here for several days now, it’s taken some time to summon the bravery to talk directly. “I’m sorry for the past. should never have forced the other Lin Kuei to be cyberized. I faced the consequences of it myself, finally, when Triborg arrived. I suppose that’s karma.” He waves an arm in the direction of the construction crews, busily patching up the hole in the temple roof. “None of it was good. As for you, I’m glad you’re restored to yourself. You were my friend. I mean that.” There’s a remarkably sincere look in Sektor’s dark eyes. “I’ll have to thank Shinnok and Raiden for that, if I ever see them again. I understand why you’ve gone your own way now.”

Cyrax nods, a measured, patient response. “Yes, you were my friend, and you still are, if you want to be. I do forgive you.” He’s doing his best to set aside the whole ordeal. “Besides, the memories are so far back that I don’t feel them anymore.”

“Hm.” Sektor wasn’t expecting such a calm response, considering the weight of all that happened. “Thank you… and I wish I could say the same. I remember too much.” He scratches his head, adjusting his ponytail. Though he’s thoroughly armored, his fingertips are still bare, maintaining human contact with the outside world through the layers of metal. He feels the sudden need to change the subject, not wanting to linger on profound emotions. “How does Kung Jin feel about the visit?”

“I think Jin’s happy to see everybody again.” Cyrax smiles a little at the mention of his boyfriend. “You remembered about him?”

“I could hardly forget. He’s a good man, and I’m glad he’s treated you well.” There’s a catch in Sektor’s voice, drawing Cyrax’s attention. He falls silent, noticing his friend’s glance.

“On that subject…” Sektor clears his throat, looking away. He’s quiet for a few moments before he speaks again. “As it turns out, I’m not the only-- uh--” He inhales deeply, searching for a way to phrase it. “Not the only person with different inclinations among the Lin Kuei, after all.”

Cyrax grasps his meaning immediately. “You’re telling me--”

“Yes.” Sektor snaps back defiantly. “You never knew?”

“I wondered, but it wasn’t my place to ask.” Cyrax offers a soft smile. “Do the others know?”

“Triborg told them all!” A dark shadow of anger passes across Sektor’s sharp face. “I immediately killed him, of course. Anyway-- according to Bi-Han, there are others like us among the Lin Kuei,
so I’m not as alone as I thought.”

Cyrax nods patiently. “You’re never truly alone.”

“Literally.” Sektor raises an eyebrow. “...Don’t you know?”

“Know what?”

“Bi-Han…” He forces out the words, trying to find a way to say it that doesn’t sting. “We’re, ah, seeing each other.”

“Oh!” Cyrax grins suddenly. He’s genuinely happy for him. Though Sektor’s the same person as always, he’s transformed into a better version of himself, returning to the sharp-witted and steely personality that Cyrax knew so long ago. “I thought so! I didn’t want to mention it. It seemed like a better idea to let you both figure it out for yourselves.”

“What do you mean, you thought so? We’ve only been together since we came home from Outworld!”

Cyrax nods sagely, rubbing his chin. “The possibility was there. I did notice.”

Sektor is exasperated at this revelation. He hadn’t even realized at the time. “You could have said something!”

“No, I couldn’t. It’s clearly difficult for you to discuss it, and you hadn’t told me then. It wasn’t my place to talk about it, unless you wanted to.” Cyrax shrugs. “Boundaries are important. And I’m happy for you. He seems like a good man now.”

“He is.” Sektor sits up, his attention captured by something down on the ground, and leans over the edge of the roof. “Look there.”

Near the ruined entrance to the temple, three figures are talking, two in blue, one in yellow. The air around them is tense and thick with dread, but with Kuai as the mediator close at hand, they keep the peace. Looking each other in the eye, Bi-Han and Hanzo exchange a few civil words, then part ways again, leaving footprints in the deep snow.

Sektor lays back on the roof, staring up at the clouds. “Good for them.” His tone is sincere, not sarcastic. “And now what?”

Cyrax grins, his spirits lifted by the sight. “Now, we wait here for our boyfriends to come back, and talk about... whatever ninjas are supposed to talk about. Any ideas?”

“I got one.” Frost darts up the stairs in search of Sektor, and drops a pile of robot parts on the ground next to him, emptying out a canvas bag. “Found you some stuff! Kuai told me to send this up to you.”

Sektor sifts through it, making a face. Most of it is broken handfuls of wire and twisted metal, fried or frozen beyond recognition. “It’s absolutely useless. Thanks!”

Cyrax leans closer. “Hm. Are you sure?”

Sektor takes a second look at the wreckage. At the bottom of the pile, there’s a charred but intact Lin Kuei medallion. It looks awfully familiar. He wipes it off on his tunic, pressing it against his chest self-consciously, and slips it into his pocket. He’ll find a way to attach it to his outfit later. He twists around to look back at Frost, demanding answers. “Where did you find this?!”
She shrugs carelessly. “Beats me. Kuai found it, actually. Ask him when he’s not busy. I think he’s sorting out insurance paperwork now. Hey, if you feel like helping—”

“I’ll stay here, thanks.” Sektor is suddenly very interested in the dismembered robot parts. “Is there anything I’m actually supposed to be doing right now?”

Another familiar female voice joins the conversation. “Nope. Keep your ass parked on the roof. If we dig up a live robot, we’ll call you.”

Sektor doesn’t even look. “Miss Cage, welcome to the Lin Kuei temple. Again.”

“Hah. I should be welcoming you. I’ve spent more time around here over the past few months than you have.” Cassie offers an irrepressible grin. “Then again, you grew up here, so I guess you’ve got me beat. How’s it feel to be back?”

“It’s good, most of the time.” Sektor growls under his breath, suddenly tired of conversations. “I especially appreciate the peace and quiet.”

“Point taken! Ouch.” Cassie backs off, retreating down the steps with Frost, and strikes up a chat with her friend instead. “What’s the matter with him?”

“Long story. Didn’t you get my texts?”

“Oh yeah, I’m sorry, I was underground in Outworld, I forgot to check—” Cassie pulls out her phone, and reads the entire set of messages, eyes widening in shock. “Holy. Shit.”

“Yeah. Sucks for him, but he’s doing fine.” Frost hooks her thumbs in the belt-loops of her jeans, a casual outfit that barely resembles the Lin Kuei uniform. After all the recent disasters, Kuai has relaxed the dress code somewhat. Passing by a group of chatting young ninjas, Frost exchanges a wave and a smile with a tall girl in a headscarf. “Text me!”

“I will!” The girl calls after her, but Frost’s already gone, sliding away on a trail of ice. Cassie tries to keep up, digging her boots into the frozen surface of the path, and jogs as quick as she can, already out of breath.

Frost looks over her shoulder, beckoning her forward with a smirk. “Try to keep up!”

“Just wait for me!” Cassie calls out to her, stopping to lean on a railing and catch her breath. “So, uh, you heard about the latest tomb adventure? I know I just got back, but maybe somebody sent a letter in the mail from Outworld.”

“Yeah, I heard. That shit was crazy. I guess they’ve got a new realm to take care of, huh? That’ll keep Rain busy, at least while he waits for dear old dad to come out of hibernation.” Frost pauses, and retraces her steps, standing beside Cassie. “I kind of wish you’d been able to fight that weird shapeshifting spirit. I want to know who your worst enemy would’ve been.”

“Beats me. I thought about it. Can’t figure it out.”

Raiden answers from somewhere behind her. “That is intentional. Mortals cannot participate in that challenge. You should not have one true enemy. You are much more unpredictable than us. You grow, change, evolve, learn… in ways that immortals do not.” He’s almost sorrowful as he explains. “That is the nature of life.”

“I dunno about that, Raiden.” Cassie turns on her heel, leaning against the barrier to look him in the eye. By now, she’s used to Raiden joining conversations out of thin air. It doesn’t even surprise
her. “You and Shinnok both -- you’ve grown, evolved, learned, all of that. I’ve seen it myself.”

“That is not true growth. It is merely returning to who we once were.”

“Looks the same to me.” Cassie retorts snappily. “So, you here for a reason?”

“Yes, in fact.” Raiden adjusts the brim of his hat, eyes glowing bright in the shadow beneath it. “Miss Cage, please accompany me to the Sky Temple. I am in need of assistance.”

Cassie blinks, remembering that stormy day so long ago. “I’m having flashbacks here.”

“No.” He smiles, trying to soothe her, but it’s a sad look. “This time, the problem is a different one.”

“Problem? What problem?”

Raiden answers shortly. “We have come under scrutiny from the Elder Gods, due to-- ahem-- meddling extensively between the realms. They plan to launch an inquiry, which would be unpleasant. We need to block the path between the Heavens and Earthrealm. With your assistance, it is a simple matter.”

Cassie staggers backwards, and almost falls off the edge. Frost catches her by the arm, setting her upright again, and she stares at Raiden open-mouthed, pulse pounding in her ears at this new revelation.

“What?!”

“It will not take long.” Raiden is as calm as if he’d asked her to help move books in the Sky Temple library. He is reluctant to acknowledge the seriousness of the task, partly for Cassie’s sake, partly his own. “Do you still have the jar?”

“Which jar?”

“The Jar.” Raiden prompts her subtly. “You recall the one, I am sure.”

“Oh, that!” Cassie has an instant flashback to the Jar of Evil with the hand-written label, tumbling out of Raiden’s hands and almost smashing on the kitchen floor. “Where’d I put it--?” She racks her brain, searching through her closet mentally. A shoebox, of course. “Yeah. I haven’t lost it or anything. Why?”

“Can you retrieve it? It is an element in the ritual. Time is of the essence.”

“Raiden, I live halfway around the world from here.”

“Then I will teleport you there. This will not take more than a day, and I will return you here afterwards, if you would like.” Raiden’s look is deeply serious. He’s clearly not joking about a single word of this. “I would encourage you to say your goodbyes to your friends and family.”

“What, should I write a will, too?!?”

“Not like that!” Raiden corrects himself hastily. “You will be back soon. I just mean, we need to leave immediately. Please.” There’s a note of desperation in his solemn voice. “At once.”

“Okay.” Cassie thinks it over. She’s been through worse than… whatever this is about to be. Way worse. Raiden needs her help, so what, she’ll do it. “Dad, Mom, Stryker, and Kabal already left, and nobody else is gonna miss me too much, so I guess this is it.” Cassie grabs Frost in a hug,
resting her head on her shoulder for a brief moment. “Keep in touch. Text me sometime, just in case the Elder Gods kidnap me.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Frost pats her back reassuringly, meeting Cassie’s eyes with a genuine smile. “You get back here soon, okay?”

“I will. I promise.” Cassie lets go, following along behind Raiden as he leads the way to yet another crackling midair portal. She’s sick and tired of portals, but she has to admit, they’re convenient. She mumbles to herself. “Here we go again.”

Right before she passes through to the Sky Temple, Cassie turns and looks back and waves at the yellow and red figures on the Lin Kuei roof. They both return the wave, bidding her a silent farewell.

A gust of bracing chilly air hits Cassie as she reappears in the temple’s balcony courtyard, striding across that familiar stone. It’s not raining this time, thank goodness, but it’s cold enough to sting. She passes through the ornate carved doors, tossing her jacket onto the coat-hook. It’s in good condition now, unlike the damaged decorations from that first visit so long ago.

Raiden stops her in the hallway. “Can you retrieve the jar if I send you to your apartment? Will you return?”

“Yes. I’ll come right back.”

“You swear?”

Cassie looks up, meeting his eyes honestly. “Yes. You need help, so I’m here. That’s what I do.”

“Very well. I appreciate your bravery and persistence. This will not take long, I promise.” Raiden claps a hand on her shoulder, zapping her with a painless bolt that sends her back to her city apartment. Everything’s just as she left it. Frost and Sareena’s cats are gone, back at the Briggs farm; Jacqui picked them up as soon as they all returned to Earthrealm. The extra coats from the Krypt expedition are still strewn across a chair, and there’s a set of Shinnok’s artificer tools scattered on the kitchen table.

She feels a curious twinge of pain deep in her heart. It feels like nostalgia for the recent past.

The jar is buried deep in her closet, stuck in a nondescript shoebox. Cassie digs it out and slips it into her pocket, still glowing sinister red and labeled as Grandma’s Homemade Strawberry Jam. Retracing her footsteps to the center of the apartment, Cassie waits for Raiden to zap her back to the Sky Temple, and lo and behold, he does. A bright burst of lightning flashes around her for an instant, and then she’s back.

“Right on time.” He greets her once again, leading the way down the hall towards the library. “This is for not only my own safety, but the other gods as well -- Shinnok, Fujin, Ugajin, and now Argus. You recall that Ugajin has many foes among the Elder Gods.”

Cassie nods. She does remember, based on the strange shapeshifting spirit Ugajin fought in the passageway. “And Shinnok hates everyone, right?”

Raiden tries not to laugh at the sudden quip. “Yes. It is he who has devised our plan. I’ll let him explain.” He gestures towards Shinnok, waiting for them anxiously at the library door. “Here, I found her.”

“I had no doubt you would.” Shinnok answers smugly, smirking a bit. He’s glad to see Raiden back
so quickly, and deeply relieved to see Cassie. He would hate to have to explain the elaborate nuances of the plan to someone less acquainted with divine magic.

He sums it up succinctly. “We need to block the Elder Gods from ever entering Earthrealm. Fortunately, I’ve anticipated this for quite some time. I have prepared for it.” He points to a tiny magical artifact on the table, an abstract design vaguely resembling a Kamidogu, but not quite. “The spell to establish a barrier between the realms is bound to this item.”

“Where’d you get that?” Cassie glances across the room, noticing Fujin, Ugajin, and Nightwolf gathered around. She nods at them politely, and promptly turns her attention back to Shinnok. “Let me guess, you made it?”

“Correct.” Shinnok lifts it carefully and cups it in the palm of his hand. It pulses with enough energy to cause untold destruction. “If it is attached to the Jar-- you do have it, right?”

Cassie pulls it out of her pocket. “Right here.”

“Good. I… I’m proud of you.” Shinnok’s actually impressed. “If the barrier is attached to the Jar, no god will be able to touch it, so the Elder Gods themselves cannot disarm the trap. However, it must be established at the center-point between the Heavens and Earthrealm… which means Raiden and I must form the Bridge Between Worlds.”

Cassie stares up at the ceiling, groaning. “Haven’t we have enough goddamn bridges?”

“It is only a magical ritual to summon a physical path between those two particular realms.” Raiden explains hastily, not wanting to scare her off with the complexity of the plan. “You are still willing to assist, are you not?”

“You couldn’t get rid of me if you tried.”

“Excellent.” Raiden smiles, appreciating Cassie’s irreverent wit. It’s badly needed in a situation with such serious consequences. “The creation of the the barrier charm is already complete, as you see. However, Shinnok and I will need to perform a ritual to activate it. At this point, when it the ritual is complete, you will attach the charm to the Jar, so it can never be dismantled.”

Cassie furrows her brow. “How are we going to do that?”

Shinnok reaches into his pocket and pulls out a roll of duct tape.

“Okay.” She grins. “I’m on board. Just tell me exactly what I need to do, where, when, and how.”

Shinnok sniffs. “We just did.”

“I mean when we’re actually doing the ritual. I’m good at thinking on my feet, but I’d prefer not to fuck this up.”

“You have done well so far, aiding the gods as you have.” Raiden reassures her politely. “Ancient poets would have thought your adventures worthy of an epic tale.”

“That’s a nice idea. Maybe somebody’s gonna write one someday.” Cassie chuckles to herself, and sticks the jar, bag, and duct tape into her pocket. “So, what are we waiting for? Let’s get this done!”

Raiden is as thoughtful as ever. “Cassie, do you want your jacket first?”
“Nah.” She pushes up her sleeves, rolling them up to her shoulders. “If Heaven doesn’t have nice weather, I’ll eat my hat.”

Raiden is puzzled. “You have no hat to eat.”

Shinnok snorts. “Don’t worry about it, Raiden. Just get us there and back. You can do that, can’t you?”

Raiden is spurred into action by Shinnok’s taunting, and glares at the other god over his shoulder. “Of course I can, you-- you infuriating scoundrel!”

Cassie tries very, very hard not to laugh.

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Shinnok strides across an elaborate ivory bridge suspended in the sky of the Heavens, resting his hands on his hips with superior pride. The Earthrealm side, where Raiden now stands, is constructed from carved wood and stone, a simple hand-crafted design. Shinnok has to admit, from a distance, he appreciates the style of the glossy, elaborate Heavens bridge. But up close, it’s actually gaudy and useless, just like the Elder Gods themselves.

He sniffs, tapping his foot on the shiny surface. “See, that wasn’t so bad, was it?”

Cassie’s not convinced. For the past fifteen minutes, she’s waited at the Earthrealm edge of the cliff, while Shinnok and Raiden floated around in the sky and did some sort of architectural summoning ritual. Now, Raiden’s politely teleported her to the middle. “How do I know this thing’s not gonna break while I’m standing right here?”

Shinnok scoffs. “You have the audacity to doubt the strength of our magic?”

“I have the audacity to do anything.” Cassie chews on a wad of bubblegum, almost swallowing it in nervousness. She’s glad to have normal Earthrealm items back again, even something as simple as gum. It’s the little things everybody takes for granted. “So what next?”

Raiden freezes, standing bolt upright, and leans towards the Heavens side. “Work fast.”

A sense of cold unease washes over Shinnok. “Why?”

Raiden answers cryptically. “They are coming.”

Shinnok shivers. “What, now? Already?!?”

Raiden is insistent. “Work fast!”

Cassie brandishes all three items, unsure what the hell they’re talking about. “What do I do?”

“Just follow my instructions.” Shinnok takes his place on the Heavens side of the bridge, flexing his fingers and gathering all his energy. His amulet is pinned to his chest, charged up to full power, and his eyes blaze brighter green than Cassie has ever seen him. Even his arms are glowing translucent, revealing the outline of the skeletal structure beneath. It’s an eerie and fascinating sight.

He fastens the collar of his outfit, manifesting his helmet from thin air. A few wisps of hair get stuck in the zipper in the back, and he sighs in irritation, waving his hand and transforming the helmet into a headdress instead. He doesn’t have time to fix his hair in such dire circumstances.
“Cassie, duct-tape the barrier charm to the jar.”

Cassie obeys the instruction, winding several layers of sticky grey tape around the jar and the magical charm. Both items are searing hot with pure power, almost painful to touch. She wraps it up tight, ripping the end of the duct tape, and shoves the roll back into her pocket, holding the parcel out to Shinnok. “What now?”

“I can’t touch it.” He frowns, almost disappointed to see his beautiful handiwork hidden beneath the tape. It’s for a good reason, though. “Hold it up in the air. Once I start the ritual, it will be suspended there.”

Cassie holds out her palm, lifting it up like an offering to the sky. The Heavens side of the barrier is thick with clouds, obscuring her view, but there’s the silhouette of a city far beyond. She ignores it. “Here you go.”

Shinnok stretches out his fingertips, hovering close to the jar. Even through the layers of tape, it recoils away from his touch, and Cassie grips it tight, holding it up. “This thing’s got a mind of his own.”

“Not quite. The safety enchantments do. You have Raiden to thank for that.” Satisfied with the first phase of the magical ritual, Shinnok steps back. “Now, let go.”

The nondescript wrapped parcel hangs in the air, radiant with unimaginable power.

“Raiden, come on.” Shinnok takes note of the anxious look on Raiden’s face. “Do you know something I don’t?”

The lightning-god hesitates. “There’s something missing. A blank point ahead of us... an action I can’t predict.” Raiden is deeply troubled. He relies on his visions to discover the truth of the future, then keeps them secret to let fate unfold as it should. “All I know, is that I do not know something I should.”

“Don’t pay it any mind.” Shinnok reassures him confidently. He’s starting to hear a strange oncoming sound, too, like the storming noise of charging footsteps. For Cassie’s sake, he acts calm, barely even reacting. “Stay here, with me, and finish the ritual. This is essential. The Elder Gods will not have mercy for violation of the rules. Trust me, I would know.” He coughs under his breath. “Preserving Earthrealm’s safety is more important than anything.” Shinnok can’t even believe he’s saying this, but it’s true. He finally left the Netherrealm far behind, and achieved the role he always hoped for -- a god of the Earth. But he assists them, rather than rules over them... and he’s come to understand that that is the true role of an honorable god.

Reluctantly, Raiden reaches out to close the distance between them, trying to ignore the impending ache in his heart. It feels like a foreshadowing of doom, but neither of the others seem to feel the same dread. Cassie backs him up, standing close and chewing her lip anxiously. “Just do it. I got you.”

Raiden presses his fingertips against Shinnok’s, joining together in the empty air above the jar -- and the barrier begins to form.

It’s only a thin layer at first, like the wavy air of a desert mirage, but it thickens and grows solid as Cassie watches in awe. Slowly and surely, the clouds shift in their usual patterns, and the silhouette of the city disappears from view, obscured by the sky. She can’t even see the cliff where the bridge connects, far away in a paradise she wouldn’t want to visit.
The ominous noise is growing louder, thundering deep in the distance. Shinnok’s heart sticks in his throat.

Still, he persists. He knows this needed to be done. He’d known for longer than he’d dare admit. Actions have consequences, and it’s his involvement that’s brought down the impending punishment of the Heavens. Ugajin and Argus are mere side-notes. Shinnok is the only one that once belonged among the council of Elder Gods themselves, and willingly cast aside that role to seek his own goals, envying the life of a lesser god instead.

The Elders do not forgive an insult.

This was always a matter of when, not if.

“The barrier is almost complete.” Shinnok keeps his fingertips pressed against Raiden’s. “There is only a small window of time in which I can return across the barrier. After that, it must be sealed. I will do that. You have spent enough energy already. Take Cassie back, now, and be safe.”

Raiden gestures towards the Earthrealm cliff. His anxious eyes are flickering with fear, lightning darting along his sleeves in unpredictable paths. “Cassandra, go.”

Cassie stands her ground. “No. You need me!”

“I cannot endanger you!” Raiden bows his head, a silent apology, and rests a hand on Cassie’s shoulder. Teleported away in a heartbeat, she lands on the Earthrealm cliff, far from the center of the bridge.

“RAIDEN!” Cassie clenches her hands into fists, yelling at the top of her lungs, but there’s already a line of lightning stretching across the entrance of the bridge, forbidding her from coming back to help. She has an awful feeling about the plan and Shinnok’s true intentions. She doesn’t want to be right. “DON’T DO THIS! Shinnok, come back!”

Shinnok calls back to her, his voice faint through the barrier. “Cassie, stay strong. You’re a better mortal than any I’ve ever known.”

“Get back here!” She backs up, trying to take a flying leap over the blocked bridge entrance, but another bolt of lightning knocks her down to the ground. “I didn’t go all the way to the Netherrealm to get you for nothing--”

Cassie stops short, and stares in shock, witnessing the attack of the Elder Gods.

They surge forward as a unified force, visible a mile away, flickering with cold blue energy. Their weapons are extended and pointed at Shinnok, focusing on their bitter enemy. Some of them are hidden behind masks and helmets, but some match the faces of those ancient carvings in the jinsei chamber, sculpted by Raiden with deep respect for those who no longer deserve it.

Raiden’s voice breaks, raw with terror. He tries to reach between the worlds and grab Shinnok and pull him out, but his fist strikes the barrier instead. He winces, gripping his hand in pain. This is the worst future he can envision. This is the unclear part of his visions, the mystery that he doesn’t want solved. He shouts uselessly, slamming his hand against the barrier again, as if the enchantment could somehow break. “Please! Shinnok, you cannot do this! Come here.”

“There’s not enough time. I can’t weaken the barrier enough to get through without letting the Elders into Earthrealm. And that, I simply won’t allow.” Shinnok turns back to face Raiden, leaning against the barrier, as solid as unbreakable glass. They can still see and hear each other, but no longer touch. They’re sealed off between the worlds.
Raiden struggles to reconcile himself to this sudden truth. Tears well up in his bright eyes, and he blinks fiercely to clear his vision, speaking the awful words out loud. "You have no escape plan?"

"Yes. Call it a sacrifice play, if you will. I always knew this might be necessary. I made peace with it some time ago." Shinnok smiles sadly, meeting Raiden’s eyes with that familiar glowing green gaze. "You won’t miss me. You’ve only just gotten to know me again. Life goes on."

"No! I refuse to accept that!" Raiden’s voice is hoarse as cries out with rage and grief. He backs up, throws himself forward, and body-slams the barrier, trying to dislodge the charm and let Shinnok back through. It absorbs the impact, and he drops to the ground, curling up in a surge of pain. Forcing himself back up to his feet, he frantically strikes the barrier with a furious surge of lightning, but it is beyond useless. The enchantment is permanent, just as they’d planned.

When he looks back up, Shinnok is already radiant with power, lighting up like a supernova. He smiles at Raiden, actually smiles, with that clever smirk Raiden’s come to know so well. "This entire plan was a trap for the Elder Gods. I’ll do enough damage to them to set them back for centuries. In mortal form, I can unleash all my power. All of it!"

"You will burn yourself out!"

"As I intend to." Shinnok flexes his fingers, clenching his glowing hands into fists. "I want this fate. I have plenty of things to atone for, and you can’t possibly know how long I’ve wanted to disappear into oblivion. To be free. To find peace."

"No. No, no! Please-- The loss would be a crushing blow, considering our journey. You know this as well as I do." Raiden’s voice cracks again, whispering weakly. He’s already burning with unimaginable grief, exchanging his last words with the enemy he never believed he’d call a friend. "Why did you hide this from me? How could you?"

"You’d have tried to stop me.” Shinnok rightly points out, and presses his hand against the barrier one last time, meeting Raiden’s eyes. "Without the Elder Gods, you’ll have an easier time protecting Earthrealm. All the others… they matter more than I do now, in the grand scheme of fate, and I know that you know it. Keep Cassie safe, won’t you?"

Raiden glances back at Cassie. She’s hysterical, trying and failing to claw her way past the safety net of lightning at the cliff’s edge. "You owe it to her not to do this!"

"It needs to happen. Raiden, look at me...” Shinnok gazes deep into his eyes. He mouths a few silent words, pausing and exhaling deeply, and nods, confirming it.

Raiden responds the same way, and shuts his eyes, pressing himself desperately against the barrier. He’s already trying to make peace with this, but to no avail. The Elder Gods are coming now, pouring onto the bridge and thundering onward with their sharp weapons raised. Raiden can’t even make himself look. "I cannot bear this. Never, in an eternity, could you escape my thoughts. Please-- I do not want this to be my final memory of you."

"Breathe, Raiden. Think clearly. You’ll endure the sorrow, and then you'll thrive again. You managed several millennia without me.” Shinnok smiles despite the circumstances. "This kind of ending suits me, don’t you think? One last act of destructive defiance... By the way, you might want to step back."

Raiden staggers backwards, obeying the instructions, and lifts off to float midair as the bridge begins to crumble beneath his feet. It shatters on both sides, sending the Elder Gods tumbling through the air, but they leap back up in flight and soar towards Shinnok, aiming their weapons at
his head and his heart. The first of them shouts in fury, calling his name. “Shinnok! YOU!”

“Yes, it’s me.” He gestures broadly, spreading his arms with a triumphant grin. “You’re probably wondering why I’ve gathered you all here today…”

They hesitate as a group, drawing back before they strike.

“That’s the problem with you all. You’re not creative! You can’t innovate!” Shinnok lifts his head proudly, preparing to release the spite he’s kept pent up for so long. “Come and fight me, if you dare!”

They obey his command, driven by indignant fury at the disobedient former Elder God. When the group is within striking distance, Shinnok lets go.

He lights up like an exploding star, glowing with pure magical energy. The force of the shockwave blast sends the Elder Gods plummeting down through the sky, dropping like flies. Some of them leap at the barrier, smacking against the hard surface, and it flings them backwards into the clouds, refusing to let them through to Earthrealm. Those that still persist, hurling curses at Shinnok, are forced backwards until they surrender, their powers completely burned out by the force of his sorcery. He does unthinkable damage in a matter of moments, annihilating all the Elders who dared challenge him. They’ve deserved this for a long, long time.

Yes, they’ll be back in time, but not before the world has flourished without them. Shinnok is their worst and best enemy, and he’s not afraid to prove it.

At the far edge of the Earthrealm cliff, Raiden clutches Cassie. Both are shivering with pain and misery. She finds herself reassuring the god, squeezing his arm, but her own eyes are filled with tears as she watches the glowing silhouette diminish into nothing.

She choke out a few words. “What happens now?”

Raiden bows his head, dropping to his knees from the force of the grief. Lightning pours from the brim of his hat like water, dripping onto the ground. “I-- I don’t know. I don’t understand. How could I have not seen this? How, Cassandra? I failed. He concealed this from me until I could do nothing to stop him.”

Cassie doesn’t know what to say. “What would have happened if the Elder Gods got through?”

Raiden whispers a response, stumbling over his words. “They rarely take action, but when they do, it is never in Earthrealm’s favor. They may have taken us into captivity… I hardly know. Whatever the threat was, Shinnok saw fit to prevent it.”

“Just take us home.” Cassie begs him, gripping Raiden’s sleeve to try to focus his attention and comfort him. The picturesque clouds on the other side of the barrier are gray and stormy now, reflecting the tension and battle in that world. The fallen Elder God struck a catastrophic blow, eliminating the threat of condemnation that always loomed large above the protectors of the realms. Shinnok’s work is done.

Raiden responds, his voice thick with barely stifled despair. “Whose home?”

“The Sky Temple. Yours. You need to heal.” Cassie urges him onward, clinging to a shred of hope. Once again, she finds herself being the responsible one, reassuring a grieving god who is all too human. “Go to the jinsei and rest right now. This isn’t over. Not for you, and not for him, either.”

Raiden meets her eyes in deep confusion. “It is over. No one could return from that. You saw...”
Cassie smiles through her sadness. “Don’t be so sure.”
EPILOGUE

Months and seasons have brought growth, change, and healing.

The newborn realm of Edenia is flourishing under the capable guidance of its ancient rulers, resuming the burdens of responsibility they carried so long ago. Kitana and Sindel govern that world now, welcoming refugees from Outworld and other realms torn by war. Though Edenians may be few in number, Edenia accepts one and all. There is no place for elitism now, not in a realm rebuilt from the ashes.

Tanya remains at Mileena’s side, guiding Outworld as her wife and advisor. Tensions remain uneasy between the empress and the prime minister, but Kotal is seemingly satisfied with his role in the governing hierarchy, at least for now. Ugajin assists as its protector god, and although Argus hasn’t yet awakened, Rain still has high hopes. In the meantime, he’s doing his best to learn the duties of a protector god himself.

Among the humans, on the other hand, it’s business as usual. Life moves forward, fate returns to its natural balance, and the mortals step right back into the roles that suit them best.

Raiden is the only one who hasn’t healed.

He lingers in the jinsei chamber as often as he can, working on the murals with intense concentration. Over the the past months, he’s taken a hammer and chisel to the faces of the Elder Gods to wipe the slate clean. The surfaces are smooth now, marked by guideline sketches for bas-relief statues, but Raiden’s only begun one of them. The silhouette is crudely etched in the stone, a familiar figure in unique armor, but unlike the carving of their bitter fight so many eons ago, Shinnok is not wearing a helmet.

Raiden labors over it, lingering on that carving to the exclusion of all else. Enough time has passed since the loss of Shinnok that Raiden should be healing, growing, and moving past it all to focus on the future… but he is not. The memories grow fainter with each day, which he hates. He has sketchbooks filled with drawings of everything that he remembers, but paper will decay and fade with time, just like everything precious in this world. Only stone endures.

Fujin carries on his duties as Earthrealm’s protector, looking after his brother, but Raiden seems consumed by grief, fixated on his own inability to predict Shinnok’s actions. No amount of reassurance from any human or immortal can possibly convince him that he didn’t fail.

He just… endures, for lack of other options. He spends all his time on his carvings, feeling that he is living the same day over and over.

Raiden has lost track of night and day. Slowly but surely, the sculpture takes shape, depicting Shinnok in his tournament armor. Raiden could not possibly forget it. That is the outfit he died in.

One evening, after a long period of restless unproductive hours, Raiden falls asleep in front of the sculpture, curled up on a blanket helpfully provided by Cassie. She keeps visiting every few days, trying to check in on him, make sure he’s eating and sleeping. He hasn’t yet reincarnated from mortal form back into divine, however that’s supposed to work, so he’s still fragile. His grief makes him more vulnerable than ever.

Right now, he’s consumed by tormenting nightmares, reliving the sight of Shinnok’s last fight
against the Elder Gods. He stirs himself awake with a jolt, only to drift off moments later into something more peaceful. He doesn’t ever remember his dreams, and he’s grateful for it.

In the center of the room, in total silence, the jinsei flares with a surge of energy.

Responding to the silent call, the amulet in Raiden’s pocket begins to glow, too.

After the ordeal, Raiden had inexplicably found the item there in his tunic, tucked in among a handful of useless Outworld trinkets. He assumed at the time that Shinnok had forgotten it and left it behind, or made a duplicate, or any number of reasonable explanations... but he would’ve sworn he saw Shinnok wearing it during the ritual, and Raiden knows it wasn’t in his own pocket at the time. Disregarding his confusion, he’s kept the amulet safe ever since, treasuring it as one last reminder of his lost companion.

The jinsei glows a tiny bit brighter.

Raiden stirs in his sleep, and the amulet tumbles out of his pocket, landing face-up on the stone chamber floor.

Slowly, agonizingly, a magical essence flows from the amulet’s central green gem, re-forming bit by bit in the restorative force of the jinsei. It’s a grueling process, reconstituting from such a form, but Shinnok isn’t above using dirty tricks to escape permanent oblivion.

The magic essence gathers in the center of the mist, re-forming itself into the bright silhouette of a scrawny, slender person with a high forehead and short hair swept back, messy at the base of his neck. He has long, elegant fingers and a lean form, the physique of a sorcerer rather than a warrior.

He awakens, blinks, and stretches, returning to the land of the living. As his vision slowly returns, he scans the room, confused by his own powerlessness. He’s unable to perform even the slightest magic spell, such as summoning his garments from thin air. There are no clothes nearby, except for a pile of laundry that Raiden left at the edge of the jinsei for some reason. Typical Raiden.

He shakes himself, stretching out to test that his body still functions. He steps out of the jinsei, tries to lift off the edge -- and clumsily collapses to the floor, constrained by gravity. He can no longer float.

Raiden sleeps on, hearing nothing.

“Damn it!” Shinnok hastily grabs an oversized white shirt and pants from the laundry, fastening the blue fabric strips at the wrists and ankles. “I should have known. I should have known!”

Raiden mumbles in his sleep, instinctively responding to the familiar voice. “Known what?”

“I lost my magic!” Shinnok clenches his fists, trying to summon his flame. Nothing. Nothing. He can’t activate the skeletal arms illusion. He’s unsure whether his eyes even still glow.

He pulls on a pair of Raiden’s socks, and storms across the room angrily, hunting around for a mirror as he monologues to himself. “I ought to have guessed. I’m an absolute idiot. Burning out my power like that, of course there’d be consequences, other than spending a very boring several months trapped in--”

“What?” From across the room, Raiden interrupts the other man, gasping in shock as he stumbles to his feet and shakes off his exhaustion. He can’t believe his eyes. Surely this must be a dream, but it feels so real. At worst, it’s a cruel prank. “Shinnok?”
Shinnok turns on his heel, and spreads his arms, welcoming Raiden. “Hello there.”

Raiden hurls himself across the room with a surge of lightning. He tackles Shinnok and lifts him off his feet in a crushing hug, floating together off the jinsei floor. “Shinnok. Shinnok!…”

“Yes.” Shinnok squeezes his eyes shut, hugging Raiden just as tight. The thunder-god feels thinner than before. He’s probably neglected his health out of unhappiness, like the sentimental fool that he is. Shinnok holds him more gently. “That is still my name.”

“Shinnok…” Raiden repeats it dumbly again, and smiles in a sudden daze. If it’s a dream, he doesn’t wish it to end. “This-- this is real, is it not?”

“Very real.” Shinnok pinches Raiden’s arm sharply. “See?”

Raiden exclaims in pain, wincing, but his stupid smile returns immediately, spreading across his face and lighting up his eyes with joy. “You are alive. You are not dead. How, Shinnok? How?”

“I was never dead. That was an elaborate ruse, to trick the Elder Gods into believing I’d sacrificed myself by striking a blow against them. I’m sure you remember that time you trapped me in my own amulet, don’t you?” He sniffs, glancing over Raiden’s shoulder at the carving off himself. It brings a smile to his angular face. “Oh, that’s lovely. You got my nose just right.”

“Thank you. I have been working hard on it.” Raiden appreciates the compliment, beaming with pride. He’s reluctant to put Shinnok down, and carries him back across the chamber to take a closer look at the mural. “What were you saying about the amulet?”

“Oh, yes. Let me explain.” Shinnok folds his arms, choosing his words carefully. “I trapped myself in the amulet with that same enchantment, then set up a time-delay spell to teleport it into your pocket. The Elder Gods now think I’m dead, which is precisely how I want it. We’ll have ages of peace and quiet, as long as I avoid other realms.” Shinnok nods sagely, explaining his plan to the completely dumbstruck Raiden. “It’s a simple scheme, at least to me, but I needed it to be believable, which meant I couldn’t warn you. I’m sorry you were so upset about it. Honestly, I wasn’t expecting that much grief.”

“I thought you were gone forever. How could I not grieve?” Raiden answers plainly, his deep voice overflowing with raw emotion. “You meant so much to me. My redeemed enemy, my eternal counterpart-- my deeply cherished--” Raiden hesitates. “Shinnok, why are you wearing my laundry?”

“This?” Shinnok looks down at himself, remembering all of a sudden. The ill-fitting clothing is almost comical on him. “Yes, that’s one problem. I can’t summon my clothes. I can’t summon anything. I have no magic. I am, effectively, no longer a god.”

Raiden can’t even imagine it. “You what?”

“I assume I’m still immortal, but the consequence of dying -- or, rather, ‘dying’ -- in mortal form, is to lose one’s magic. I thought I’d be able to avoid that by disappearing into the amulet at the last moment.” Shinnok grits his teeth. “Apparently, fate had other plans.”

“What will you do?”

“I suppose I’ll just start having to make magical items to help myself instead of everyone else, won’t I?” Shinnok smirks, leaning against the half-formed stone artwork, and makes the same pose, comparing himself to the carving. “This is very good. I’m flattered, Raiden. Your skills have improved.”
“I-- I would hope so. I have spent a great deal of time on it.” Raiden glances between them, questioning his own perception of reality once again. “You are here. You’re back, you’re alive. Can I be certain this is truly happening?”

Shinnok taps his foot on the floor, amused by Raiden’s doubt. He understands the reasons for it, but Raiden’s confusion is always so charming. “Why don’t we go ask someone and find out?”

“They all heard what happened. They thought you died, as well.”

“Were they sad about it?”

“Yes, very. ...Most of them.”

“Well, that’s good to know.” Shinnok allows himself a slight prideful smile. “So who should we tell first?”

“How about me?” Cassie’s voice rings out from the doorway, echoing in the spacious stone chamber. She’s standing there, perfectly still, staring at Shinnok in shock. She’s brought a portable container of chicken soup intended for Raiden, and it takes all her effort not to drop it.

Shinnok greets her with a grin. “Miss Cage. You guessed correctly that you’d be back, didn’t I?”

“Yes, I actually did.” Cassie’s mildly annoyed that he guessed about her guess. “Not this soon, though.” She blinks slowly, taking in the sight. She’s not even going to ask why he’s wearing Raiden’s clothes. She probably doesn’t want to know. “I was kind of expecting you to show up a couple years from now, or something.”

“Unfortunately for everyone else, I’m not that patient.” Shinnok smirks, entirely proud of himself. “For the record, I didn’t actually know how much time would pass before I could return. I was prepared to wait a very, very long time. This is just a stroke of good fortune.”

“Gotcha.” Cassie nods. She’s playing it cool, but she’s overflowing with curiosity, trying to restrain herself for a proper question-and-answer session later. “So… how’d you do it?”

Shinnok lifts his head, a silhouette against the jinsei. “I feigned my death by enchanting my life force into my amulet and teleporting it into Raiden’s pocket. The Elder Gods now think I’m dead. Convenient, isn’t it?”

Cassie moves a little closer. “I gotta admit, I’m impressed. I knew something was up, I just didn’t know what.”

“Perceptive. Indeed, you were right, as you sometimes tend to be.” He swoops over, plucking the container of chicken soup and plastic spoon from her hands. “May I?”

Cassie hesitates. “That’s for Raiden.”

“No, let him have it.” Raiden generously donates the soup to Shinnok. “He probably needs it much more.” He yawns, rubbing his eyes, and retrieves the blanket from the floor, draping it over Shinnok’s shoulders. “He no longer has his magic, I am sorry to report.”

Shinnok glares up at Raiden out of blazing green eyes. “I’m right here, you know. I can tell her myself!”

Raiden nods wisely, ignoring him. “He does, however, still have his attitude.”
“No kidding.” Cassie covers her mouth with her hand to hide a grin. She probably shouldn’t laugh at such an important occasion, but between the sight of the medium-size god in the extra-large god clothes, and the constant bickering between them, it’s hard not to.

They both seem happy. *Genuinely* happy.

Cassie’s not even going to ask how Shinnok came back. The answer can probably be summed up with “magical bullshit,” and for now, she’s fine with that.

She turns to leave, letting them have some badly needed peace. Before she reaches the door, she glances back over her shoulder again, catching the gods’ attention once more. “Hey, Raiden?”

“Yes, Cassie?”

She grins brightly. “Told ya so.”

“So you did.” Raiden answers with a knowing nod and a gentle smile. “I will remember to have faith in you, Cassandra. You have never let us down.”

Shinnok interjects, full of nosy curiosity. “You told him *what*?”

Cassie vanishes out the door, leaving them to their business. “Ask me later!”

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