



A KINETICS SHORT STORY PREQUEL

KINETIC TRAGEDY

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Kinetic Tragedy
a *Kinetics* prequel story
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“I can’t wait!”

Raiden Theron’s mouth twitched at his son Kiran’s expression. The wild, rebellious teenager tried to pretend he was big man on campus, but it was obvious to everyone he had the spirit of a toddler trapped in a fifteen-year old’s body.

But he wouldn’t be fifteen much longer.

Jessica, Kiran’s twin sister and Raiden’s daughter, mirrored her father’s small, humored smile. “Kiran, calm down. You’re close to bouncing off the walls and there aren’t any.”

Crossing his arms, Kiran blew a raspberry at her. “There’s no reason why I shouldn’t be. We turn sixteen tomorrow, remember? Why aren’t you more excited?”

With a heavy sigh, Jessica replied, “Because I know there’s a time and place to act like you are. And it’s not while walking through the courtyard of a military base.”

Raiden gazed at their surroundings, every soldier’s attention firmly on the twins. Brow furrowed, he called out commandingly, “As you were!” Instantly, every soldier returned to their activities.

Jessica looped her arm through her brother’s and guided him down their path to the gates of the compound. Raiden trailed a few yards behind, skimming the structures and people he could both visibly see and even those he couldn’t. He’d been raised militarily, and always kept a firm eye on his surroundings, even in friendly company. Why? Because you’ll never know who is actually your ally and who is a traitor.

“You want to be excited?” Jessica’s voice directed his attention back to his kids. “Wait until we’re home, dummy.”

“Gladly!” Kiran stuck out his tongue, an annoyed gesture if anything. “Your nagging reminds me of Mama. You’re a teenager. Act like one.”

After another heavy sigh, Jessica replied, “I wish I could. But, I can’t.”

Kiran arched an eyebrow. “Why?”

“Because someone has to watch your immature tushy.”

Kiran scowled and shoved her. Their locked arms remained connected, accurately showing their almost indestructible relationship that all siblings should have. “My immature tushy exists solely because it gives your life purpose.”

She eyed him with a knowing smile. “So, if I didn’t actually need it, you could switch off your immature front like a light switch?”

“Yup.”

“Let’s see then.”

Kiran's confident expression dropped, obviously nervous at having to prove one of his tough-guy lies. After a few more moments, he shook his head, his shaggy blond hair, that he inherited from his father, flying this way and that. Clearing his throat, he released a slow breath. Smiling at his sister, he told her, "See? I can be calm, and rational, and – Oh look, Jess! Ice Cream!"

Raiden lifted his gaze to find an ice cream cart just to the side of their exit. He smiled and waved at the soldier scooping for other kids that ran to it. Kiran, apparently, was just like those kids, as he lunged forward. However, his sister kept their arms fully linked, jolting him to a stop after only one excited leap. He pouted, lip quivering as he stared at her. And there it was: Kiran's infamous puppy-dog eyes, that made both his sister and mother melt at the sight.

Sighing again, Jessica un-looped her arm. "Go on. Go get some stupid ice cream."

"Thanks!" He'd only gone five steps before screeching to a halt and turning back to his sister. "Want anything?"

Jessica called back, "Surprise me!" With a nod, Kiran spun back around and bolted at breakneck pace to get the frozen delight that was ice cream.

Raiden approached his daughter from behind, resting a hand on her shoulder. "He's quite the handful, isn't he?"

Turning to face him, Jessica replied, "I've lived with him every hour of every day for almost sixteen years. 'Handful' is an understatement."

With a small smile, her father told her, "I'm sure he'll mellow out eventually."

"You can hope for that," Jessica responded, "But something tells me that will take a long time and a lot of effort."

"Not sure he's worth it?"

Jessica locked a firm gaze with him. Raiden could see the serious, overprotective emotions swirling in her blue eyes. "He's totally worth it. Every second of every day, through thick and thin. No matter what Hell he puts me through, life would be worse than Hell without him in it."

Raiden ruffled her hair, making her giggle and grin. "That's my girl. Now, let's collect your brother and head home."

Nodding, Jessica replied, "On it!" She dashed to the cart, leaving Raiden to stand alone. He watched his kids enjoying life, his son with a mouth stuffed full of multiple flavors of the cold confection, while his daughter apologized to the cart owner for her brother's rudeness and stealing too much of the aforementioned confections. A small smile appeared on his face. They may be almost sixteen, but there was so much they had yet to understand. They were green and innocent. While he'd had to grow up quick at a young age, he didn't desire the same type of life for his children. These two were his pride and joy. As long as he had a say in this life, they would enjoy their childhood at the same pace as the other kids their age.

A sharp pain shot through his chest. Raiden clutched it tight until the stinging pain subsided. That was... odd, to say the least. Usually he'd only get that in events that Thorne got excited with, such as when he was in life-threatening danger. He waited a few more seconds, to ensure the shocks were gone, and then straightened.

With a soft sigh, Raiden rolled his shoulders and headed for the cart his children were bickering at. As he walked, he reached into his back pants pocket and pulled out his wallet. Upon reaching the cart, he held out a few bills. "That should cover it, right?"

The cart owner looked quite shocked. "Your Majesty, you do not need to worry about that."

Raiden smiled, one that had been labelled as quite charismatic and charming by his citizens. "Take it, Sir. It is only proper that I reimburse you for the trouble my son has caused."

"But, You Majesty-" Raiden arched an eyebrow and shook the hand with the money in it, silencing the vendor. Finally, the older man cracked a smile, gratefully taking the paper currency. "Thank you, King Raiden. Your generosity is greatly appreciated."

"My pleasure." He wrapped an arm around each of his kids' shoulders and guided them to the gate.

King of the Second Kingdom, and I still have to clean up my teenage son's messes. He smiled to himself. I wouldn't want it any other way.

The steam from Raiden's hot shower had filled the bathroom, fogging up the mirror. Once he'd dried off and slid on a pair of gym shorts, he used a dry part of his towel to wipe the condensation from obscuring his reflection. He instantly regretted that, because blood red eyes stared back at him.

Rolling his eyes, he growled, "Show yourself, Thorne!"

A soft, menacing chuckle reached his ears. "You request my presence, your Majesty?"

"Yes, I do, because obviously you have something of importance to tell me. Otherwise this stupid color wouldn't be marring my prestigious appearance."

A black form split out of Raiden's shadow. It molded into a more human shape, and soon after became colored. A man stood to his side, with spiky black hair and matching garnet irises. He leaned in toward the wiped mirror, staring at his own reflection. "Doesn't look like I'm any worse for the wear. Though..." He pulled down skin from underneath his right eye. "I think I look a tad exhausted. The bags under my eyes are tremendously dark."

Raiden's fingers curled into tight, biting fists at his frustration. "Stop messing around, Thorne."

Thorne's eyes darted to Raiden's reflection, then to Raiden's real body. His mouth formed a wide grin, the sharp canines glinting. "But I love messing with you. It's the best part of my job."

"You're not a comedian, Thorne," Raiden snapped, "You're a demon."

"Who says I can't be both?" When Raiden only glared at him in return, Thorne sighed and straightened up again. "Alright, fine, killjoy. I'll lay off."

"Why did you summon my demonic eyes, Thorne?" Raiden pointed at his sockets for emphasis.

Thorne's lip twitched, obviously holding back a humored smile. The fact that Raiden got annoyed really easily served as perfect fodder for the playful and twisted demon that resided inside him. "I wanted to give you a heads-up on something."

Raiden felt veins in his head twitch in frustration. "About what?"

"Your wife has some special news that she is going to tell you tonight, and the two of you will be telling the twins tomorrow."

"That's it? That's your heads-up?"

Thorne rolled his head on his shoulders, staring up at the ceiling. "Well, it's kinda important, as it will throw both of us out-of-whack. And I'm not referring to our tense relationship. It has to do with our mutual agreement."

Eyes narrowing, Raiden growled, "You are not to hurt anyone unless my life is in danger. That was our agreement. It's binding, and you know it."

"It's binding if I am of free will. However... This news might tip the scales against us, friend. We could come closer to The Break sooner than we first assumed."

His fingers dug into his palms, close to breaking skin and spilling blood. "You said you had that under control. You said you found a loophole, a way for me to never Break."

Jerking his head toward the door behind Raiden, Thorne replied, "Then go ask your wife why she may have shortened your life."

Raiden looked back at the door for a few brief moments. When he went to look back at Thorne, the demon had vanished, gone back inside of his host's body. Turning to his reflection once more, he thanked life that the red had vanished, his rich brown once again coloring his irises. Sighing, he slid on a white wife-beater tank and walked into the bedroom. His wife apparently was panicked, pacing while ranting on a cell phone. It appeared she hadn't yet noticed his entrance.

"Sil, look, I just don't know... Yes, I'm sure he will be thrilled, but you know how he is... We've already got Jessica and Kiran's mentoring to deal with, and any other distraction will be unnecessary and not... Basila, you don't seem to grasp the gravity of this situation!"

“Basila?” Raiden asked.

His wife, Estelle, snapped still, keeping wide, terrified eyes at the wall. She swallowed nervously before saying, “I’ll call you back,” and ending the call.

“Why did you call Basila, Stell?”

With a shaky sigh, Estelle turned to face him, plastering an obviously faked smile across her visage. “You know, just girl-talk.”

“Girl-talk?” Raiden arched an eyebrow. “Stell, she’s planning for the Bright Lights Festival right now. How could she find time to spare to chat about ‘girl-talk’ with Majora’s government breathing down her neck?”

Estelle’s gaze darted to her hands, currently fiddling in a nervous twitch. “When the girl-talk has to do with our family.”

“What are you talking about, Stell?” When Estelle bit her lip, Raiden crossed the distance. He placed a hand on each of her shoulders. “Stell, just tell me what’s going on. You’re worrying me too much. What about our family?”

With a soft huff, Estelle walked over to the bed and picked up a piece of paper off the sheets. As she approached her husband, she handed it to him. “It’s about to get bigger.”

Raiden’s eyes widened slightly as he flipped the paper over. It wasn’t just a piece of paper. It was a photograph. And, more than just any photograph.

An ultrasound picture.

“Stell, I...” His mouth had gone dry, but his heart pumped faster from the adrenaline rush he currently felt. His eyes quickly darted up to her. She smiled weakly at him. “Is this... Does this mean...”

Estelle nodded. “Yes, dear.”

“You’re pregnant?”

The sharp pitch of his happy, ecstatic voice apparently told Estelle plenty, because her muscles finally relaxed. “You’re not upset?”

“Upset?” Raiden’s mouth stretched into such a wide smile it slightly hurt. “I couldn’t be more thrilled!” He grabbed her in a tight hug, which she mirrored. Softer, he repeated, “Couldn’t be more thrilled...”

Thorne’s words buzz-killed the mood temporarily. He said that Estelle’s news could make any progress they’d made on his life span vanish like it was never there. He could connect the dots well enough, but didn’t share his concern with his wife. He would tell her only at the moment it became important.

Because, based on Thorne's warning, this new child could be his own undoing.

Raiden's head killed him the next morning. Waking up was the easy part, because he'd barely slept all night. His muscles ached something fierce. However, it wasn't until those shocks jolted him that he got out of bed. He sat on the edge, clutching his chest tightly. His breathing shook with each inhale and exhale, more of a sharp hissing than anything.

Finally, the pain in his chest stopped. Replacing it, however, was a tingling sensation in his left hand. When he directed his attention to it, his eyes widened. Jagged purple lines crisscrossed his hand, reaching as far as halfway up his lower arm. Twisting it in terrified wonder, his mind started panicking.

"I gave you fair warning." Raiden's head snapped up, eyes locking on Thorne's figure. The demon reclined in Raiden's office chair with one leg crossed over the other, throwing a stress ball up and down. "Were you not prepared for that answer?"

"Would you have?" Raiden spat.

Thorne's lip twitched, but the small smile remained miniscule. "I sense a bit of hostility there. But, to annoyingly answer your rhetorical question, no, I probably wouldn't have either. But, I told you to brace yourself."

Raiden leapt to his feet, holding out his hand with the palm facing the demon. "Explain this. Now."

With a shrug, Thorne returned his attention to tossing that soft ball of foam. "I believe I've already told you enough. What, do you need me to dumb it down for you?"

Grinding his teeth, Raiden hissed, "If you do not connect the dots in laymen's terms within the next five seconds--"

Thorne's body turned to black smoke, flew up to Raiden, and rematerialized less than a foot from him. The sudden appearance cut off Raiden's hostile words. So soft it verged on murderous, Thorne asked, "Was that a threat, Raiden? You know very well what I can do to you, yet you still think you're the captain of this train wreck. I will remind you who is the alpha, if that is what you want." When Raiden swallowed past a horrid, nervous lump in his throat, Thorne's smile widened slightly. "That isn't what you want, correct?"

Raiden shook his head, gaze locked firmly on his demon's. "No, of course not. I did not mean to aggravate you."

Taking two steps backward, Thorne replied, "Alright then." Then, he flicked his arm to the right, and Raiden's body went flying in that same direction. Upon landing on the carpet, he rolled a good distance before slamming into the far wall. His exposed skin burned something fierce, while the aching of his muscles and nerves doubled what they'd been at before.

"What the hell, Thorne?" he spat, rolling onto his back and regulating his breathing.

“What can I say? I just love pain.”

“Then do it to yourself.”

A dark chuckle reached his ears. “But that takes all the fun out of it.” Thorne came into view, standing next to Raiden’s resting body. He gazed almost hungrily at him, a psychotic, sadistic gleam in his eyes. The same traits mirrored in his crooked smile and lazy movements. “Do I need to make my point again?”

Raiden held a hand toward him, signaling ‘Stop’. “It’s alright. I’ve learned my lesson.”

Smile turning smug, Thorne replied, “Good boy. I’ve taught you well.”

As the demon walked away, Raiden slowly got to his feet. The pain from the rug burns and wall-bashing hurt and throbbed, making standing a struggle. He stared at Thorne’s back, barking, “I want to know the truth.”

“Do you, now?”

Thorne’s nonchalant reply made Raiden’s blood boil, but he swallowed it back, knowing he did not desire a repeat of a few moments ago. His body had already been through enough, and he’d only been functioning for a few minutes. “Yes,” he choked out, holding back both bile and fury, “I deserve to know the connection.”

“Connection?” Thorne asked innocently, tossing the ball where he stood, “What connection?”

Eyes narrowing, Raiden responded bitterly, “You are baiting me again, Thorne. It’s not going to work. Stop playing games with me.”

As he tilted back his head, Thorne gazed at Raiden out of the corners of his eyes, a teasing grin stretching across his face. “Really now? Looks like it’s working to me.”

Glaring at him murderously, Raiden growled, “*Thorne.*”

With a soft, mocking chuckle, Thorne finally turned to face him. “Very well. I’ve had my fun.” The demon walked over to the bed, plopped down, and crossed his legs again. “The connection is the inclusion of a third child. Keep in mind you were one of two, as were your father and uncle before you. The addition of a third child could mess with me, and, in turn, mess with your ability to keep control.”

Raiden’s heart pounded, not wanting to believe it. “Are you saying that I could Break because I’m having another child?”

Thorne held up a single finger. “Close. If your future child is a girl, it could be many years before you go crazy, as female Therons are more stable, both magically and demonically. If the child turns out to be a boy, then you could Break before the child is even born, given the right circumstances, tension, and the number of poked buttons. Since she is already with child, I

could sense the gender and power of the child long before birth, even before medical professionals could figure it out.”

“So, what you’re trying to tell me,” Raiden asked slowly, “Is that my window of Breaking has now been narrowed down to between a few weeks to a few decades?”

Nodding, Thorne replied, “That is correct.”

With a scoff, Raiden headed for the dresser. “That’s preposterous. Why would gender matter? Besides, it’s not like each of my children impacts you at all. They have their own quirks, but that shouldn’t shorten my life.”

As Raiden pulled out a black dress shirt, Thorne responded, “Do I have to explain everything to you? Honestly, it’s like talking to a toddler. Males in your family have active demonic tendencies, while females are more passive. Each boy you have poses a threat to your own demonic patriarchy. Namely, me.”

“Meaning that you are threatened by an infant boy because he might have the ability to become the demonic Alpha? And you will willingly kill a member of the bloodline your lineage haunts?”

“It’s my conditioning and instincts, Raiden,” Thorne told him, this time with a serious, pressing tone, “Whether I want to kill the child or not is not my decision. If my instincts sense either of us being threatened or targeted, they take me over and then take you over as well. If that happens, it is not a matter of desire; it is a matter of willpower of the host. That’s why I told you there are varying factors. If you are in a weakened state, both physically and mentally, we’ll succumb that much quicker. I’m only as strong as my host.”

Raiden froze in the middle of pulling on his second sleeve, mind racing. This child, his child... He might not even be able to meet them. Not only that, but he might not live to see his twins turn legal. In that moment, a regret-filled lump grew in his throat, making swallowing painful. There would be so much at stake. Estelle would have to be a single mother of either two or three, and a single ruler of his kingdom, his family’s legacy, until the twins took over. His eyes stung, picturing all the precious moments that lay ahead for those he cared about, precious moments he might not be alive to witness himself. As he squeezed his eyes shut, salty tears rolled down his cheeks. Sniffing, he pulled the sleeve fully up and started buttoning the shirt up. “I’m not worried. I’ve been told I have a rather stubborn, resilient personality.”

“I’d be careful, Raiden,” Thorne warned, “That very indifference could be what ultimately makes you Break.”

As he opened his mouth to retort, he looked to him to find his demon had vanished inside him again. Letting his head loll back to look at the ceiling, he groaned, “He will really be the death of me. Or, at least the one who will compel me to hang a noose.”

“Raiden, sweetheart?”

His head snapped back down to find Estelle peeking from the door of their bedroom. Her soft, caring gaze always calmed him. However, it didn’t today. He was wired tighter than a spring, and who knew when he would blow? He flung both hands behind his back, hoping she

hadn't seen the cursed lines etched into his skin. As he grabbed a single black glove and slid it over the only bit of exposed, tainted skin, he asked, "Yes, Stell?"

Estelle asked gently, "Is everything alright? One of the guards said they heard a loud slam from in here."

"I'm fine."

His curt response triggered worry in her eyes. His wife glanced back into the hallway before entering the room and shutting the door quietly behind her. "Are you upset about the news I had last night?"

Eyes widening, he quickly bridged the difference between them. "Of course not! I'm ecstatic! Why would you think otherwise?"

Estelle shrugged, averting her eyes to the carpet. "... I just don't know how we'll handle an infant. It's been sixteen years since we had the twins. Can we handle it? Two teenagers and a baby, on top of a kingdom to run?"

Raiden used two fingers to lift Estelle's hanging head. When their eyes locked, he could see the hesitance and worry that had always characterized her. "Together, Stell. Together, we can handle it. We've gotten through so much adversity together. This will just be another challenge that will ultimately make our lives even more unique and special. This child will only make us better, both as parents and as husband and wife."

A soft, small smile finally cracked his wife's face. "I suppose you're right. I can't help but worry though."

After a gentle kiss on her lips, Raiden smiled lovingly at her. "I know. Part of the reason I fell for you was that you worried about me when nobody else would. It's nice to have someone who cares about me like that."

Estelle's cheek blushed slightly. "And your recklessness gave me a purpose: to protect you from yourself. That's why I fell for you. You needed someone to stand by your side and hold you back."

"No. I needed someone who saw the good in me," Raiden corrected, "And you fit into my twisted life perfectly, like a missing piece to an otherwise damaged puzzle." Kissing her again, he pulled back and told her, "Together. Together, we can do anything."

As he sat in his intricately carved throne, Raiden fidgeted. His nerves were wired, his increasingly-painful headache spreading and covering more ground all over his skull. The tension in the air practically suffocated him. The knowledge and unknowns of what was to come would make anyone nervous, had they been in his position. He had a family and a kingdom to think about. Leaving his family to take up his mantle and soldier on was an idea he found horrible and torturous, and wasn't one he wanted to happen. Unfortunately for him, he lacked the ability to prevent it. Because, in the end, his demon would consume him.

“Daddy!” Jessica squealed as she tore around a corner into the throne room and leapt onto him in a tight, hyper-active hug.

Raiden’s face finally cracked a smile at some sense of normalcy. “Happy birthday, baby girl.”

Releasing him, Jessica plopped down onto the left armrest, grinning from ear-to-ear. “Thank you, Daddy.” She tucked a few strands of hair back behind her ear. “Did you sleep well?”

His smile only faltered for a moment, but failed to go unnoticed by his intuitive, instinctive daughter. “Daddy, is everything okay?”

He nodded, not wanting to worry her. “Yes, princess, I’m fine.”

Frowning, she averted her gaze. “Don’t lie to me. I saw it.”

Puzzled, he asked, “Saw what, sweetie?”

After taking a slow, shaky breath, Jessica tucked her fingers under the edge of the glove he still wore. His other hand slapped over hers, stopping her from removing it. “What are you doing, Jessica?”

With a huff, she yanked her hand back, tearing the glove completely off. The cursed lines now exposed brought back the poking, tingling, and throbbing. The status now reflected a spreading, as those sensations now could be felt as far up as his elbow. *Great, it’s already spreading...*

“I saw you and Thorne this morning.”

Sighing, Raiden muttered, “A motherly daughter with Second Sight *never* works in my favor.”

“Damn right!” Jessica snapped, a steeliness to her tone, “Because you prefer to keep your own flesh and blood in the dark all the time, right?”

As she turned on the armrest to face away from her father, Raiden replied, “I just don’t want to worry anybody. You know that better than anyone, Jessica, because you do the same for your brother. Hiding the truth to spare those closest to us from pain and worry... That’s better than divulging that same truth and watching those you care about suffer over it.” When his daughter didn’t even flinch, he became worried. “Jessica, did you see something else I should know about?”

Jessica shrugged and hopped off the arm of the throne. “It’s like you said. Why let anyone suffer over my problems?”

Brow furrowing, he asked gently, “It has to do with me, doesn’t it?” A small whimper reached his ears. “Sweetie, you can tell me. I can take it.”

Sniffing, she murmured, "You're going to kill us."

Arching an eyebrow, he told her as comfortingly as possible, "Sweetheart, anything you or your brother did can be remedied and fixed quite-"

"I didn't mean figuratively."

He went silent for a moment, piecing the puzzle together. "Then what did you mean?"

After another sniffle, she answered with a quiver in her tone, "You're going to kill us. Violently. I saw it. First Kiran, then me."

Shaking his head, he quickly walked around her and got down on a single knee to catch her eyes, a beautiful blue currently marred by the pink shading in the whites. "Jessica, believe me on this. That isn't going to happen. You two are my whole world, and Thorne knows that."

As she wiped her eyes with one hand, she pointed the other at the gloveless, rigid lines crisscrossing his damaged hand. "That's a warning, isn't it? It means you're deteriorating. I've done my research. So..." Her lip quivered, tears welling up in her eyes again. "So, what I saw could become a reality."

Raiden stood up and wrapped his arms tight around his daughter, holding her head close to his chest. "Shhhh, sweetheart, it's okay. Nothing's going to happen, I promise. We'll all be okay."

"So you say," Jessica whimpered, "But you can't guarantee it, can you?"

Intertwining his fingers in her hair, he replied gently, "I wish I could, sweetheart. But I will do whatever it takes to keep you two safe and alive, understand? You're not going anywhere."

After she nodded and buried her face deeper into his torso, he thought to himself what he would never voice to her, *But if things pan out like they appear to... I will be.*

The Bright Lights Festival held a warm place in the hearts of the citizens of the Five Kingdoms. It lasted a full week in Majora, dedicated to those who had passed on before. It took meaning from a widely-accepted myth that if a lightning bug ever flew near you, it was a loved one, checking in from beyond. A good long time ago, scientists noticed an oddly large amount of firefly activity for a single week every year. The week was at a different time every year, but science had ways of predicting the activity accurately, all for the sake of the Festival.

Distinguished individuals travelled from all over the Five Kingdoms to join in the festivities, with their families and friends in tow. And, this year, Raiden took his kids and wife along. Kiran and Jessica hadn't attended the Bright Lights Festival in a good number of years, and the first of seven days of celebration just so happened to coincide with their sixteenth birthdays. So, perfect present, in his opinion.

“Kiran, slow down!” Jessica ordered, chasing her hyperactive brother as he flitted from vendor to vendor with eyes wide in wonder.

Raiden’s mouth twitched into a small, humored smile. “Jessica, let him have some fun.”

With a strong huff, she turned to him and snapped, “He’s too hyper. I can’t get a good look at anything when he runs from one to the other so quickly. Besides, he’ll get lost if I can’t keep up with him.”

Placing a hand on his daughter’s shoulder, he responded gently, “You don’t need to be so overprotective of him. He’s the same age as you, remember?”

Jessica sighed, “I know, but that’s my job. I’m supposed to be overbearing and protective.”

“And why’s that?” Raiden expected her to rant about how immature and reckless Kiran was. Imagine his shock when Jessica said instead:

“Because he’s my brother. If we don’t protect each other, how can we expect anyone else to?”

In that moment, Raiden couldn’t have been prouder of her. Ruffling her hair, he smiled. “That’s my girl.”

Jessica smiled and hummed to herself as she wandered over to a cart, staring at the handcrafted stuffed animals with wide, hyper eyes. Yep, they definitely were siblings. Kiran ran across Raiden’s path, stopping at a stand just to his right.

Shocks shot through Raiden’s body, gripping his torso with paralyzing pain. He bent over, clutching his chest. He heard his daughter call to him, but her voice sounded as if in another room: muffled and distant. When he opened his eyes, his vision had tinted red, shadows replacing people. He saw the one nearest him with its back turned. All sounds muddled together, leaving him lost in his own thoughts. The tingling spread instantly, shocking his heart. The thump-thump of another’s heartbeat rang in his ears. The last human thought he had he muttered weakly, “It’s a boy.”

As he pulled his dagger from its sheath, eyes fixated on that nearby figure, Thorne’s voice filled every fiber of his being:

“Welcome to your Breakdown.”

<THE END?>