



# Mortal Kombat Playground

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## Chapter 1: The New Kid

*Years ago, Outworld Elementary School and Earth Realm Elementary school merged into one. Raiden and Shao Kahn, the principals of the schools, couldn't decide who should be in charge. So they held a playground tournament among the students twice a year. The principal of the winning side rules the entire school however they see fit.*

It was Liu Kang's first day of fifth grade at Outworld-Earth Elementary school. His parents had transferred him to the special school after discovering his peculiar talents. Liu adjusted his red headband and walked towards the main entrance.

"Ah, you must be Liu Kang," said a low whispery voice. Liu looked up to see a man in white robes and a straw conical hat. "My name is Assistant Principal Raiden, and I represent the students of Earth Realm Elementary School. I'm happy to meet you."

Liu was taken aback by the sparkle of electricity in the man's eyes. "Um, hello. I was told to look for the principal. Are you taking me to him?"

Raiden offered a tight lipped smile. "I don't think so. Principal Shao Kahn leaves most of the day to day duties to me. It's better that way. I've actually arranged for a student to show you around and help get you acclimated to our school."

Raiden stepped aside to reveal a short brown haired kid standing behind him. He was wearing black pants and aviator sunglasses. "Hey dude, my name's Johnny Cage, but the ladies just call me JC. Come on, I've got lots of stuff to show you. Later Mister R." Johnny grabbed Liu by the arm and dragged him away from the school.

"Aren't we headed in the wrong direction?" asked Liu.

"Nah, even Raiden knows the most important part of the school is the playground. Come on, we've got a couple minutes to walk around before class starts. Just enough time to meet everyone."

Liu Kang gaped in awe at the site of the playground. It was a gigantic wooden maze. You could run, climb, slide, duck, and hide all over the place! On one side of the maze was a bridge made out of huge tires. The tires ended at a ladder that went up to a castle tower. The castle was definitely the place to be. It was high up enough to spy on the rest of the playground, and even had a slide and a pole to scoot down. On the other side of the playground were a set of swings (including a tire swing), a sandbox, a soccer field and a blacktop court that had lines on it

for four-square and basketball. At the moment, all sorts of strange looking kids were milling around the playground.

“Pretty cool, huh?” said Johnny. “The playground is where all the action happens. The adults pretend to teach us stuff, but after lunch when we come out here for recess is the most important part of the day.”

“Why is that?” asked Liu.

“Because this is where we practice for the tournament,” said Johnny. “Twice a year us Earth Realm kids battle with the Outworlders to decide who runs the place. Last year they won it, and we could use all the help we can get to take it back.”

Liu had a number of questions about this ‘tournament’ but Johnny cut him off. “Okay, let me show you who else goes to school here.” He pointed at three girls hanging out on the swings. “The girl in the purple leotard is Mileena and her sister Kitana is in blue. The girl with the super long hair is Sindel. You don’t wanna mess with her. She screams so loud it’ll make you pee your pants. He waved at the girls. “Hey Mileena, looking good!”

“Drop dead!” said Mileena.

“She’s totally into me,” bragged Johnny. Liu noticed Kitana looking in his direction. He gave her a timid wave and she looked away.

“Okay, not too bad so far,” said Liu. “Who else goes here?”

Johnny pointed to four boys crouched in the shadows under the tire bridge. “Those are the ninjas. They all dress the same, except for different colors. The blue one is Sub Zero, the green one is Reptile, Smoke is all black, and the one in yellow is their leader, Scorpion. He’s a real butthole. They think they’ve got the best fighting moves, but none of them can top my finisher. Check this out!”

Johnny went down into a split and lashed out with his right hand. “Yah!”

“Um, what’s that supposed to do?”

“Dude, it’s the perfect way to punch someone in the nuts. Works everytime. Someone giving me trouble? Nut punch. Someone picking on my friends? Nut punch. Teacher tries to give me detention? Nut punch. I’ve never had a problem that couldn’t be solved by punching someone in the nuts.”

“Oookay,” said Liu Kang. “Do you have any other moves?”

“Why would I need anything else?” asked Johnny. “Anyways, follow me over to the other side of the playground.” They walked past the sandbox, where two kids were quietly

making sand castles. “The kid in the huge gas mask is Kabal, he doesn’t talk much. The kid in the blue vest and feather in his headband is Night Wolf, I think. He’s homeschooled, but his mom lets him come to the playground every day. All he does is sit in the sandbox though. Kinda weird.” Liu Kang waved to them. They both nodded in his direction, and went back to their sand castles.

Next they walked over to the slide where three kids stood watching everyone else. There was a girl with blond hair wearing a green and white leotard, a big kid with shiny metal arms, and a blonde haired boy wearing a backwards blue hat that matched his uniform. Each of them wore an orange belt that was connected to an orange strap going over their left shoulders. On the strap was a shiny badge that said “Safety Patrol”.

“Hey guys, meet the new kid, Liu Kang,” said Johnny. “Liu, this is Sonya Blade, Jax and Stryker. They’re the Safety Patrollers.”

Liu shook each of their hands, although Jax’s metal hand almost crushed his. “What’s a Safety Patroller do?”

“Hmm, I’m surprised you don’t know,” said Sonya. “Safety Patrollers are tasked with enforcing the rules of the playground. If we see someone getting out of line, we are fully authorized to put them in timeout while everyone else gets to keep playing.”

“And if they really mess up,” added Jax, “We take them to the Principal’s office for punishment.”

“What kind of rules are there?” asked Liu Kang.

“There are typical rules like no stealing, cheating or calling names,” said Stryker. “But the most important is no Kombat, except for during the tournament. We can’t have people fighting all the time.”

Johnny whispered to Liu. “That rule gets broken EVERY day. Just don’t do it in front of them. They’re super strict.”

“I heard that Johnny,” said Sonya. “You better watch yourself.” Then she pointed at Liu. “You too, new kid.”

“She’s totally into me too,” added Johnny as they walked away.

Liu Kang pointed at the wooden castle. “Do we have time to go up there? It looks cool.”

“Sorry Liu, but us Earth Realm kids aren’t allowed,” said Johnny. “The Outworlders won the last tournament, and one of the rules they passed was to make the castle off limits to us. But this year we’re gonna kick their butts, especially with you on our team. I bet you have all sorts of cool powers.”

Liu started to disagree with him, but was interrupted by evil laughter. A bald kid with pointy teeth appeared at the castle entrance. He jumped down to the ground and walked up to Liu Kang.

“New kid, huh? Doesn’t look like much to me.”

“What would you know, Baraka?” said Johnny. “You’re the weakest kid on the playground.”

Baraka snarled and spun to face Johnny. To Liu’s shock, two long pieces of metal emerged from each of his arms. “Stuff it Cage. Once I become a true Tarkatan warrior, I’ll be allowed to sharpen my blades. You’ll be the first person I cut with them.”

“Good thing you’re too young to be a warrior,” taunted Johnny. “Cause those ski poles sticking out of your arms couldn’t cut through butter right now.”

“Johnny sounds hungry,” said another voice from the castle. “Maybe four knuckle sandwiches will fill him up.” A muscular monster stepped out of the castle. He was a foot taller than the rest of the kids. His long black hair was in a top knot. But most importantly, he had four arms.

“Oh great,” muttered Johnny. “Goro.” He glanced at Liu Kang. “He’s gonna want to fight us. You keep him busy while I take on Baraka, okay?”

“Are you crazy?!?” said Liu Kang. But then he was scrambling out of the way as Goro leapt off the castle and tried to stomp him. “Whoa, big guy, I don’t want to fight you.”

“Good,” grumbled Goro. “It will be easier if you just stand there while I do all the punching.” He swung his top right fist straight at Liu Kang’s head. Liu managed to duck out of the way. Goro followed it up with punches from both his top and bottom left fists. This time Liu wasn’t as fortunate. The bottom fist hit him in the side of the face, stunning him. Goro used his bottom two arms to pick up Liu Kang and hold him in the air. “I will give you a warrior’s death!”

“Nobody’s giving anything!” said Sonya Blade. She ran around the corner with Jax and Stryker close behind. “Put him down, right now, or I’ll report you for fighting.”

Goro paused, uncertain what to do.

“You heard her. Put him down.” A boy with dark hair floated down from the castle. He had black and yellow pants and suspenders, and his eyes were white with no pupils. Goro immediately let go of Liu. “Sorry, Shang. I was just messing around.”

The boy patted Goro on the shoulder and then introduced himself to Liu. “I’m Shang Tsung, master of the playground.”

Liu gave him a skeptical look. "I didn't know someone could be master of a playground."

"Now you do." Shang smiled at Sonya. "Sorry for the misunderstanding. It won't happen again. You and your boyfriends may leave now."

"They're not my boyfriends!" yelled Sonya. (Stryker looked bummed upon hearing that.) "The tournament's only a month away, Shang. If you guys get out of line, you'll be disqualified." Sonya stomped off, with the other two Safety Patrollers close behind.

Shang turned his attention once again to Liu. "My advice to you would be to stay away from the tournament. Otherwise you'll get hurt and have to run home crying for your mommy." Shang Tsung laughed at his own joke and started floating back up to the castle. Goro climbed up the tire bridge to join him. When they were out of sight, Liu let out a sigh of relief.

"Dude, you can't let him scare you like that," said Johnny.

"Easy for you to say," said Liu. "Goro was gonna kill me! Where were you?"

"Takin' care of Baraka."

"How'd you beat him?"

"Nut punch, duhhh. It always works." Liu glanced over Johnny's shoulder to see Baraka rolling on the ground, clutching his crotch in pain.

Suddenly a deep voice called out from the school. "**LEARN.**"

Johnny started walking towards the school. "Come on, Liu, time for class. If we're lucky we can get seats in the back of the room."

Liu adjusted his headband and followed Johnny. "I just hope I survive."

## Chapter 2: Safety Patrol

“All right team, let’s go over assignments,” said Sonya. Jax and Stryker gathered around. The Safety Patrol unit was on the second level of the wooden playground maze. From their viewpoint, they could see the entire playground. The only better vantage point was the castle, but they were barred from using it this year by the Outworlders.

“Jackson, I want you next to the swings,” said Sonya.

“Sonya, I told you only my Mom calls me Jackson,” whined Jax. “And you’re not my Mom.”

“Fine. JAX, please go to the swings. There’s a rumor that Sindel isn’t letting anyone else use them. Stryker, you’re with me.”

“Yes!” said Stryker, underneath his breath.

“Did you say something?” asked Sonya.

“Um, nothing.”

Sonya continued. “We’re gonna do a stakeout in the maze. Someone’s been carving funny faces on the wood, and I suspect it’s Kano.”

“You always suspect Kano for everything,” said Jax.

“That’s because it always IS Kano,” said Sonya. “But every time he manages to escape before we can catch him in the act. This time, we’re finally going to nail him.”

Over on the swings, Sindel laughed as Liu Kang walked away. “I can’t believe the new kid thought he could use the swings!” said Sindel.

“Yeah, what a dork,” said Mileena.

“I don’t know, he seemed nice,” said Kitana.

“Geez Kitana, why don’t you just marry him,” said Mileena. Sindel laughed. Her laughter stopped, however, when she saw Jax approaching.

“What do you want?”

“Did you just stop Liu Kang from using the swings?” asked Jax.

“Maybe, what are you going to do about it?” challenged Sindel.

“That’s against the rules. I’m giving you a five minute timeout. Follow me to the picnic table to start your penalty.”

“I have a better idea,” said Sindel. Her grey hair suddenly grew longer and lashed out, grabbing Jax around the legs. Then she retracted her hair and dragged him to her. Jax struggled to break free, but Sindel used her hair to lift him in the air. “Hey Jax, did you remember to use the bathroom before recess?”

“NO! No Sindel, don’t do it!”

“Don’t do what?”

“Don’t scream at me!”

“Wait, did you just ask me to scream at you? I’m pretty sure that’s what I heard you say.”

“No!”

“No, you don’t want me NOT to scream? Okay, I guess I better scream, since you asked for it.” Sindel took a huge breath and then let it out in a scream. The high pitched ringing noise hit Jax, rocking him back and forth in the air. Jax’s face turned red, and he grabbed his pants.

Sindel stopped screaming and pointed at a wet spot in the front of Jax’s pants. “Uh-oh, looks like somebody had an accident. Maybe you should wear a diaper.” She released Jax from her hair, dropping him to the ground. Jax started crying and ran awkwardly back to the school. Mileena and Sindel laughed as he ran away. Kitana sighed and started reading a book.

Deep in the maze, Sonya and Stryker hid behind some steps and waited for any signs of the mystery graffiti artist. The two Safety Patrollers had almost given up hope when they saw a boy wearing a red and black outfit slowly approach. Half of his face was covered by a metal plate, with a red orb instead of an eye. Kano looked around, and smiled. He walked over to a wooden fence. A laser shot out of the red orb and started scorching the wood. In a matter of seconds, the laser carved a picture of Raiden sticking his tongue out.

“Gotcha now!” yelled Sonya as she jumped out from behind the steps.

Kano smiled and crouched low. “Hello baby, did you miss me?”

“Don’t call me a baby. You’re in big trouble this time.”

“I have something for you and your partner,” said Kano. “It’s a...Kanoball!” Kano grabbed his legs with his arms and jumped into the air. He spun around a few times before plowing into Sonya and Stryker, knocking them down. Kano stood up and waved. “Gotta go. Recess is almost over.” He ran into the maze and disappeared.

Sonya leapt to her feet. “Oh no you don’t.” She took off after him.

Stryker was slower to get up. “Sonya, wait for backup.” But she didn’t listen.

Kano chuckled as he made his way through the maze. As long as he didn’t get caught by the end of recess, he wouldn’t get in trouble. That was one of the rules made when Shao Kahn took over. Catch them in the act or it never happened. And if you run out of time before winning, it doesn’t count.

He wasn’t paying attention when Sonya came crashing down on top of him. The two of them grappled a bit and then stood up. Kano wiped some dirt off his tunic and smiled. “Give it up baby. I’ve studied all your moves.”

Sonya stomped her feet. “Stop. Calling. Me. BABY!” She launched into a handstand and grabbed Kano’s head between her feet. Then she slammed him to the ground.

“Ow ow ow owwww!” cried Kano.

“Does it hurt, baby?”

A minute later, Kano was sitting on the picnic table in timeout. Sonya was telling Stryker for the fifth time how she took him down when Jax walked up.

“Hey Jax, you missed it. We caught Kano! Maybe this will get us in the Special Forces junior division.”

“Um, great.”

“Jax... why are you wearing a different pair of pants? Did you have an accident?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

In the sandbox, Night Wolf and Kabal observed the Safety Patrollers.

“It appears Jax is now a member of the Safety Pee-trol,” said Night Wolf.

“Good one,” said Kabal. Then they went back to building sandcastles.

### Chapter 3: Tag

The ninjas all gathered together underneath the tire bridge.

“We rule at the game of tag,” said Scorpion. “We’ve never lost a match, and that will not change today. Are you prepared?” Sub Zero, Reptile and Smoke nodded. “And if you get the chance, beat the snot out of those punks to remind them that we’re totally bad-asses.”

“Okay,” said Liu Kang to Johnny Cage as they headed towards the playground. “Let me see if I understand. The ninjas are hiding in the playground. All we have to do is avoid them during recess. If they tag us, we’re eliminated and have to spend the rest of the time sitting out.”

“Yup,” said Johnny. “No one’s ever made it to the end of recess. Those ninjas are super tricky, so be careful.”

The two boys lined up at the edge of the playground. Shang Tsung, Goro, Baraka, Kano, Sonya Blade, Jax, Stryker, Sindel, Mileena and Kitana were already waiting. Kabal and Night Wolf declined to play. They just sat in the sandbox and watched.

“Hey look, the buttwads finally showed up,” said Baraka. “I thought they were too scared to play.” Goro laughed so hard he snorted.

“Hope you can last longer this time, Baraka,” said Johnny. “Eight seconds was pretty pathetic last year.”

“Your FACE was pretty pathetic last year,” said Baraka.

Before they could continue arguing, a deep voice called out from the school. “**TAG.**”

Everyone scattered into the playground. Before Baraka had even found a place to hide, Reptile appeared out of nowhere and tagged him. “Aw man!” said Baraka, and trudged off to sit on the picnic table.

Johnny called out to Liu. “Oh yeah, I forgot to mention that Reptile can turn invisible and Scorpion can teleport. Good luck, dude.”

“Great,” muttered Liu, and started looking over his shoulders for any invisible ninjas.

Scorpion quietly stalked his prey. Stryker had gotten separated from his fellow Safety Patrollers, and now wandered through the lower levels of the maze. Too easy. Scorpion slid across the ground and tripped Stryker with a leg scissor takedown. Then for good measure, he punched him in the nose.

Sub Zero chased Kano and Mileena through the maze. “You’ll never catch us!” yelled Mileena.

“I don’t have to,” said Sub Zero. He used his powers to create a sheet of ice beneath Kano and Mileena’s feet. They lost control and slid across the ground. Sub Zero extended the ice straight to the curly slide. Both of them couldn’t stop themselves and went headfirst down the slide. Smoke was waiting for them at the bottom. Two more kids were eliminated from the game.

Sonya and Jax dove under the tire bridge. “Are you sure about this, Sonya?” asked Jax. “This is where the ninjas always hang out. Why are we hiding here?”

“Because they’d never expect us to do that,” said Sonya. “Now get down and shut up. We’re going to win.”

“Johnny?” whispered Liu. “Johnny, where are you?” The two had gotten separated running away from Reptile near the swings. Now Liu was lost in the maze.

“Over here,” said a girl wearing a blue leotard.

“Whoa, you’re not Johnny,” said Liu. “Kitana, right?” She nodded yes. “So, um, do you want to work together?”

“We might have a better chance that way,” agreed Kitana. “Follow me, I know a good hiding place.”

From under the tire bridge, Jax and Sonya kept a lookout. They didn’t notice any ninjas, but they did see Sindel creeping along the edge of the maze.

“There’s something I gotta do,” said Jax, and ran out from underneath the tires.

“Get back here!” hissed Sonya.

But Jax didn’t listen. He snuck up behind Sindel and kicked her square in the butt.

“OWW!” screamed Sindel. Her voice carried across the entire playground.

“Yeah, gonna be hard to hide now,” said Jax. “Hey ninjas, Sindel is over here! Come and get her!”

“Stop it!” said Sindel.

But it was too late. Scorpion teleported next to Sindel and tagged her. Then he pointed at Jax. “Come here!”

Jax smiled at Sindel. Escape was not his plan. He walked over to Scorpion and let himself be tagged. “That’s for making me pee my pants.”

Shang Tsung and Goro watched from up in the castle. “Half the people are caught already,” said Goro. “And no one’s spotted us yet.”

“Don’t jinx us, idiot,” said Shang. But it was too late. Smoke ran up the ladder and did a somersault into the castle.

“Oh crap, what do we do now?” said Goro.

“You...are going to let Smoke tag you so I can get away,” said Shang.

“But I’ll get eliminated!”

“It’s your own fault for jinxing us. Do it.”

“Aww, man.” Goro trudged over to Smoke, who was more than happy to tag him. But Goro grabbed onto Smoke’s arm and wouldn’t let him go. While Smoke struggled to get free, Shang Tsung slid down a pole and ran away from the castle.

Liu and Kitana slowly made their way through the maze, staying alert for any ninja attacks. “Soooo, why do you hang out with Mileena and Sindel?” asked Liu. “They seem kinda mean.”

“Mileena is my twin sister,” said Kitana.

“Doh! Sorry, I didn’t mean, um...”

“It’s okay,” said Kitana, “She can be a jerk sometimes. But she’s my sister, so I put up with it. Sindel’s always getting her to do bad stuff. I tried asking Mileena to ditch her, but they’re best friends. Sometimes I --” Kitana stiffened, and pointed in front of them. Reptile was heading their way. They turned around to run, but Sub Zero was creeping up from behind. “We’re trapped.”

Liu looked for a way out as the ninjas closed in from both sides. Then he had an idea. He locked both hands together and held them out for Kitana. “Quick, I’ll give you a boost up to the top level of the maze.”

Kitana was puzzled. "But, they'll catch you."

"It's okay. Come on, hurry before they attack!" Kitana put one foot on Liu's hands and jumped up. Liu used all his strength to boost Kitana high into the air. She managed to grab a wooden beam and haul herself over the edge. She landed on the top level of the maze and looked back down to Liu.

"Thanks!"

"No problem. Hey, if Sindel ever gets too annoying, you can always hang out with me," offered Liu. But before she could answer, Reptile and Sub Zero pounced. Sub Zero hit him in the face with a snowball, while Reptile swept his legs out from under him. Liu hit the ground hard.

"You're out," said Sub Zero.

Liu brushed the snow out of his face and smiled. "Totally worth it."

Sonya was crawling on her hands and knees, staying low and out of sight. She stopped in her tracks when she saw Johnny on the tire swing. He was swinging round and round in circles, and cheering.

"Wheeeeeeee!"

"What are you doing?" whispered Sonya.

"I have the perfect plan," said Johnny. "The tire swing is out in the open. As long as I hang out here, there's no way the ninjas can sneak up on me. I'll see them coming from a mile away."

"Yeah, but they'll see you too. They're probably on their way right now."

"True, but they still have to tag me, and that's gonna be hard."

"Why?"

"Cause I'm Johnny Cage."

He didn't have long to wait. Smoke and Scorpion arrived. Sonya quietly crawled underneath a wooden platform and hoped they didn't notice her. The two ninjas circled the tire swing. Scorpion motioned to Smoke and pointed at the tire swing. "Get him." Smoke got a running start and jumped, trying to land on the swing as it soared in the air. But Johnny kicked him before he could get on. Smoke landed in the dirt.

Scorpion grew agitated. “What are you waiting for, get him!” Smoke hesitated until the tire swing was on the way down and jumped. But Johnny was ready and kicked him again.

“Who knew kicking ninjas could be so much fun!”

That made Sonya giggle. She quickly realized her mistake and covered her mouth, but it was too late. A moment later, Scorpion dragged her out from under the platform. “Oh poop!” Sonya dusted herself off and stomped over to the picnic table.

Scorpion grabbed Smoke by his tunic. “Make yourself useful and find the others. I’ll handle Cage.” As Smoke departed, Johnny called down to Scorpion.

“Hey Scorps, you ready to try your luck?”

Scorpion pulled out a grappling hook that was concealed under his left gauntlet and whipped at it Johnny. The grappling hook latched onto the belt of his pants. “GET OVER HERE!” Scorpion pulled on the rope and yanked Johnny off the tire swing. He landed hard on his butt. Scorpion strolled over and smacked him on the back of his head.

“No fair! I didn’t know he had one of those!” Johnny looked around for anyone to take his side. Seeing no one, he got up and walked to the picnic table.

There was only two minutes left before recess ended. Kitana ran across the tire bridge, hoping to get to the castle before anyone noticed. If she could just last two more minutes, she would win! Maybe then Mileena would show her some respect.

Suddenly, a cloud of smoke appeared in front of her. Kitana knew what that meant. Smoke stepped out and blocked her from entering the castle.

“I can defeat one ninja,” said Kitana. “Get out of my way or I’ll punch you.” Smoke pointed behind her. Reptile jumped on the tire bridge. “Beating two ninjas is going to be tough.” Then the ground froze beneath her, trapping her feet in a block of ice. Kitana raised her hands in surrender.

Shang Tsung was about to win the game. For the first time ever, the ninjas would lose. But instead of remaining hidden, Shang stepped out in the open. “Scorpion, let’s talk.”

A few seconds later, Scorpion teleported next to him and tagged him on the shoulder. “You were about to win, why give yourself up?”

“So you can keep your undefeated streak. I know how much it means to you.”

“Don’t lie to me Shang. What’s in it for you?”

“Well...I helped you win the game. Now maybe you and your clan will help me teach the Earth Realm kids a lesson.”

“What did you have in mind?”

## Chapter 4: Lost & Found

Liu Kang was on the swings, soaring higher and higher. Last week, Sindel wouldn't let him anywhere near the swings. But after the game of tag, she had been silent on the subject, just walking away when he came near. He decided to take advantage before she changed her mind.

As Liu pumped his legs, trying to go even higher, Johnny Cage walked up. "Hey dude, how's it going?"

"Pretty good," said Liu. "How 'bout you?"

"Actually, I can't find my sunglasses. I've looked everywhere. Have you seen them?"

"Um...I don't think so. Where was the last place you had them?"

"On my stunningly handsome face."

"Hold on a sec, I'll help you look for them." Instead of dragging his feet on the ground to slow down, Liu waited until the swing was high in the air and jumped off. He did two flips before landing on the ground.

"Awesome!" said Johnny. "You gotta teach me how to do that after we find my glasses."

"No problem." Liu tried to adjust his headband to get the hair out of his eyes. He stopped and frowned. "Hey, where's my headband?"

Johnny looked at him. "Oh yeah, I thought you looked different. Maybe it fell off when you were swinging?" The two fifth graders searched the ground next to the swings, but there was no trace of the red headband.

"First your glasses and now my headband," said Liu. "This is getting weird."

Just then Sonya walked by.

"Hey Sonya," said Johnny. "You're looking mad as usual."

"Stuff it, Cage," said Sonya. "I don't have time for games. Have either of you seen my black headband? It's missing. I checked the lost & found box in the office, but it's empty."

"Whoa, you lost something too?" said Liu. He explained to her about their missing items.

Sonya was immediately suspicious. “In the Junior Special Forces training manual, it says there are no such things as coincidences. We didn’t lose our stuff, someone stole it.”

“What should we do?” asked Liu.

“The thief has to be one of our classmates. Fan out on the playground and see if anyone is acting out of the ordinary.”

“What, like the mysterious ninjas who hide out under the tire bridge?” said Johnny, sarcastically. “Or the monster with four arms who’s always trying to pound us? Everyone around here is out of the ordinary. Even the home-schooled kid.” He pointed at Night Wolf, who was sitting in the sandbox with Kabal.

“Johnny, that’s brilliant!” said Sonya. “Night Wolf is always in the sandbox. Most people don’t even notice he’s there. He might have seen something.”

The three of them walked up to Night Wolf and Kabal. “Hey Wolfie,” said Johnny. “Did you see someone other than me rocking the coolest sunglasses in the world?”

“Or mine and Sonya’s headbands?” added Liu.

Night Wolf put down his pail and shovel before talking. “Sometimes it’s not what is missing that is the answer, but what is still there.”

“Seriously dude?” said Johnny. “Well, talking to you was a huge waste of time.” He pointed at Night Wolf and whispered to Liu and Sonya. “Do you think he eats the sand?”

“Thanks anyways,” said Liu as they walked away. Sonya led them over to the picnic table to meet up with Jax and Stryker.

“Has anyone seen my blue hat?” asked Stryker. “I swear I was just wearing it when I went down the slide, but now I can’t find it.”

“Hey Safety Patrollers!” said a loud voice. “Shouldn’t you be patrolling?” Mileena stormed up to them, with Kitana walking meekly behind her. “Someone stole my sister’s fan, and I want it back. No one picks on her except ME!”

Suddenly, Scorpion teleported on top of the picnic table. “Who took my grappling hook? I will swear vengeance upon them!”

Everyone began talking at once, coming up with wild ideas on who stole the items or where they might be.

“Wait a minute!” yelled Liu, silencing them. “Night Wolf said not to look for the missing items, but to notice what was still here. Think about it, who’s NOT missing anything?”

Sonya jumped up. “The Outworlders in the castle! Shang, Goro, Kano and Baraka must have done it!”

“Let’s get ‘em!” said Mileena.

“No, we don’t know for sure they did it,” said Jax. “This is a job for the Safety Patrol. Everyone else stay here, we’ll go check on Shang’s gang.”

Everyone reluctantly agreed to let them handle it. “You have five minutes,” said Scorpion. “After that, I’ll beat up everyone on the playground. It’s the only way to be sure I catch the thief.”

Liu looked at Sonya. “Please hurry.”

The three Safety Patrollers crossed the tire bridge and climbed up into the castle.

Baraka jumped out at them, the metal extended from his arms, ready to strike. “You’re not allowed up here.”

Jax put Baraka in a headlock and gave him a noogie. “Official Safety Patrol business. Where’s Shang?”

“He’s out looking for his suspenders,” said Kano. “Somebody stole them when he wasn’t looking.”

“Yeah,” said Goro. “And when we find out who did it, I’m gonna pound him!” He looked at Sonya. “Or her.”

“I’ve never stolen anything in my life,” said Sonya.

“Hey!” said Stryker. “Look over next to the maze. Is that Liu with all our stuff?”

The kids all looked to where Stryker was pointing. Sure enough, they saw Liu creeping around near the maze. In his arms were a black headband, a pair of sunglasses, a blue hat, a fan, a pair of suspenders and a grappling hook.

“Wow, I can’t believe it,” said Sonya.

Kano laughed. “The new kid is even worse than me. Maybe I should start hanging out with him.”

But Sonya didn’t hear him. She was already out of the castle and sprinting across the tire bridge. “Liu, stop!”

Liu Kang noticed her and smiled. He dropped the items on the ground and put his hands in the air. “I guess you got me. I took everyone’s stuff.”

“Why did you do it?” asked Sonya.

“Because it was fun. You guys are so stupid, you didn’t even suspect me.”

“You’re in big trouble for this.”

“Only if you catch me. Hey, watch out behind you!” He pointed behind Sonya. She turned to see if someone was about to attack her, but all she saw was Jax and Stryker hurrying to catch up. When she turned back around, Liu had vanished.

Back at the picnic table, Scorpion was getting restless. He grabbed Johnny by the feet and held him upside down. “What body part should I punch first?”

Johnny gulped. “Um, Baraka’s face?”

“Nice try.” Scorpion cocked back his fist, but Liu grabbed it and held on.

“You’re not punching my friend.”

“Friend?” said Sonya. “That’s funny. I didn’t think friends stole from each other.”

“Huh?”

Sonya, Jax and Stryker walked up to the picnic table carrying all the missing items. Scorpion dropped Johnny, grabbed his grappling hook from Stryker and teleported away.

“Where did you find all the stuff?” asked Liu.

“Don’t try and lie to us,” said Sonya. “You’re the thief. I saw you with everyone’s things at the maze a minute ago.”

“What are you talking about, I’ve been here at the picnic table.”

“I know what I saw.”

Johnny stepped in. “I will totally pinky swear that Liu was with us the whole time.”

“How can you be sure?” asked Jax. “Wasn’t Scorpion holding you upside down part of the time?”

“Mileena and Kitana were here too. Ask them.”

Mileena snatched Kitana’s fan out of Jax’s hand and gave it back to her sister. “Whatever. You probably all plotted this together. Let’s go, Kitana.” Mileena grabbed Kitana by the hand and stormed off.

Sonya stared long and hard at Liu. “Since we got all the items back and Johnny is vouching for you, I’m not reporting to this to Principal Shao Kahn. But I’m keeping my eye on you from now on. Step out of line, and I’ll totally bust you.” The Safety Patrollers resumed their playground monitor duties, leaving Liu and Johnny alone at the picnic table.

Liu picked up his headband and put it on. “I don’t understand. I didn’t steal anything. This makes no sense.”

Johnny put on his sunglasses. “Dude, one of the ninjas can shoot ice out of his hands. Another one can turn invisible. A LOT of things don’t make sense here. Now let’s go play.”

Liu sighed and sat down on the picnic table. “I don’t feel like it.”

“Hey, I know what’ll cheer you up. You wanna watch me punch Baraka in the nuts?”

“No, thanks.”

“Oh, okay. Your loss. I’m gonna go do it anyways.”

Scorpion, Reptile, Sub Zero and Smoke were all hanging out under the tire bridge, eating a bag full of cookies when a visitor arrived.

“May I enter?” asked Liu Kang. Scorpion waved him in. Liu sat down next to them. “Where did you get the cookies?”

“I stole them from the cafeteria,” said Reptile. “Lunch lady Sheeva didn’t even notice.”

“Being able to turn invisible has its benefits,” said Liu. “You did a great job stealing everyone’s things. And taking Scorpion’s grappling hook was a nice touch. That way they never suspected the four of you.”

“Being able to shapeshift also has its benefits,” said Scorpion.

“Very true,” said Liu. Then he shimmered and transformed back into his true form, Shang Tsung.

“We kept up our end of the bargain,” said Scorpion. “Now where’s our payment?”

“Ah yes,” said Shang. He reached into his pockets. “Ten dollars and a pack of Outworld Murderball cards, just like I promised.”

“Why go to all this trouble to frame the new kid?” asked Smoke. “If you want to get someone kicked out, get rid of Jax. He’s their strongest guy.”

“You don’t get it,” said Shang. “We won the tournament last year against those kids. There’s no reason to think we won’t crush them again. The only difference is Liu Kang. He wasn’t here last year. Maybe he’s a wimp, or maybe he’ll help them win this time. I don’t want to risk it. So I’m going to get him expelled before the tournament.”

In the sandbox, Night Wolf pinched his nose in horror. “Oh gross! Did you fart?”

Kabal shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t smell anything.”

“That’s because you have a respirator,” said Night Wolf, pointing at the mask over Kabal’s face.

“Seriously, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Kabal. “But...I did hear something.”

“What?”

“This.” Kabal farted, and then started laughing uncontrollably.

## Chapter 5: The Arena of Sport

“Gooooooooooooooooo!” yelled Johnny Cage as he and Liu Kang walked to the playground for recess.

“What the heck are you talking about?” asked Liu.

“Dude, I’m practicing for when I score in the big soccer game today. It’s gonna be epic. All the girls will want to go out with me.”

“I didn’t realize there was a game today.”

“Every semester some of the middle school kids come over for a week to help out around our school,” explained Johnny. “And they always organize a soccer game. They pick teams and coach us.”

“That sounds cool,” said Liu.

“And I didn’t even tell you the best part,” said Johnny. “The losing team has to all stand in the goal and bend over. Then the winning team gets to shoot soccer balls at their butts!”

Liu laughed. “That sounds great if you’re the winning team. But I bet it hurts if you lose.”

“We never lose!” said Johnny. “Kung Lao was an amazing soccer player, and he would always score a ton of goals for our team. This year he’s one of the middle school volunteers, so I know he’ll be our coach. With him leading us, we’ll definitely win.”

When they arrived at the playground, three middle schoolers were there waiting. Johnny pointed them out to Liu. “The bald, pasty white guy with red eyes wearing spiky armor is Quan Chi. He’s a total jerk. Earth Realm won three tournaments in a row thanks to Kung Lao. But last year Quan Chi used an amulet that took away some of Kung Lao’s power. He was weakened just enough for Goro to beat him.”

He pointed to the next guy. “I’m pretty sure the dude in the red and black armor and the weird helmet is Sektor. He was the leader of the ninjas last year in Elementary school. He was super mean, even to the other ninjas. Not sure why he has all that armor now. Kinda looks like a robot or something.”

“Is the guy in the black circle hat Kung Lao?” asked Liu Kang.

“Yup,” said Johnny. “That hat is actually a weapon. He throws it at people and it always comes back to him, like a boomerang. One time he threw the hat and knocked three people off the tire bridge.”

“That’s cool,” said Liu. “I wonder if he’ll teach us some fighting moves?”

“Nah, I’m all set with my nut punch technique.”

The ninjas gathered around Sektor, who was telling them stories about beating up kids in middle school. “So, who’s the best soccer players for my team?” he asked.

Sub Zero raised his hand, but Scorpion quickly batted it down. “Me and Smoke are the best,” said Scorpion.

“But I really want to play,” said Sub Zero. “I’ve even been practicing a new move to help us win.”

“I left Scorpion in charge this year,” said Sektor. “And if he says you’re not good enough, then stop crying about it and sit down.” Sub Zero, shoulders slumped, slowly walked away.

Sindel, Mileena and Kitana were talking about the game. “Soccer is for dweebs,” said Sindel. “Let those losers play. I’ve got better things to do.” Mileena agreed, but Kitana was not so quick to fall in line.

“I think it might be fun,” she said. “Besides, it’s only one game.”

Sindel’s eyes widened. “Did you just disagree with me?”

Mileena crossed her arms. “What’s your problem Kitana?”

Kitana mumbled “Nothing” and dropped the subject.

It was time to choose up teams. Quan Chi and Sektor decided to coach one side, and Kung Lao would be in charge of the other. The Elementary schoolers milled around, waiting to be picked.

The first picks were fairly predictable. Quan Chi and Sektor chose Goro, Kano, Scorpion and Smoke. Kung Lao went with Jax, Sonya, Stryker and Johnny. Each team needed two more players. “Who else wants to play?” asked Kung Lao. Liu and Baraka each raised their hands. “I’ll go with the new kid and see what he’s got,” said Kung Lao.

Quan Chi looked at Baraka. “If I pick you, do you promise not to accidentally score on us again?”

“Oh yes I promise! May I fall in a fire pit and die if I do.”

That left one spot open for each team. “Who else wants to play?” asked Kung Lao. Kitana raised her hand. “Okay, you’re on my team.” Kitana jumped for joy and joined her teammates.

“What?!? How dare you?” said Sindel.

“I’ll teach her a lesson,” said Mileena. She raised her hand to join Quan Chi’s team.

Kung Lao offered to shake the other coach’s hands. “Good luck in the match.”

Sektor walked away without a word. Quan Chi laughed. “You’ll need more luck than you can imagine, Lao.”

Kung Lao didn’t mind the insult. He gathered his team and assigned them positions. “Let’s put Stryker, Johnny and Kitana at forward, Sonya and Liu on defense. Jax, you’re the goalie. Does everyone remember the most important part of soccer?”

“The victory dance after scoring a goal?” suggested Johnny.

“Communicating,” said Kung Lao. “Talk to each other. If you work together, you can pass it right around those thugs.”

On the other side of the field, Quan Chi and Sektor had a different message for their team. “Kick the ball right in their faces,” said Sektor. “Then the next time you have the ball they’ll move out of your way.”

“Goro, you’re in the net,” said Quan Chi. “Scorpion, Smoke and Kano are on offense, Baraka and Mileena on defense. Do NOT fail me.”

The game started with the Outworld team taking the kickoff. Kano passed the ball to Smoke, who darted down the left side of the field. Liu moved over to stop him, but Smoke passed the ball to the center of the field to Scorpion. He was about to shoot when Sonya stepped in and kicked the ball away.

“Too easy,” bragged Sonya.

Stryker collected the ball and sprinted up the field. He passed the ball to Kitana, who deftly touched it back to Johnny. He ran up to the ball, getting ready to shoot it.

“Good luck getting it by me,” said Goro. “I have hands to cover all directions.”

Johnny blasted a shot, but Goro was able to reach it with his top left hand. He punted the ball to midfield. Liu was about to trap it until Scorpion teleported in front of him and stole it. He passed it through the air to Smoke, who headed it into the Earth team’s goal.

“All day!” yelled Baraka.

“Dude, you didn’t even touch the ball,” said Johnny.

The Earth team kicked off. Kitana passed back to Liu, who crossed the ball to Johnny. He had an opening on the right side of the field, but purposely dribbled straight at Baraka. Johnny waited until Baraka charged him, then faked right and spun left. Baraka’s legs went in different directions, and he fell to the ground.

“Sucker,” said Johnny, and fired a shot on goal. But Goro easily caught the ball and heaved it down the field to Kano. Sonya ran as fast as she could to catch him. Kano remembered Sektor’s advice. Instead of trying to get away from Sonya, he kicked it as hard as he could at her. Sonya was caught off guard and didn’t dodge in time. The ball hit her in the stomach, knocking the wind out of her.

Liu ran over to check on Sonya. “Are you okay?”

“G..get...back...” wheezed Sonya, but it was too late. Jax had no help on defense. Scorpion, Smoke and Kano swarmed the goal. Jax managed to block the first shot, but Scorpion blasted the rebound into the net.

The Earth team kicked off. Johnny passed to Kitana. She dribbled past Baraka, but Mileena was waiting for her. She ran by and elbowed her sister in the back, knocking her down. Mileena kicked the ball to Smoke. Liu tried stopping the ninja, but he disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Liu coughed and tried to see through the haze. Smoke passed it to Scorpion. Sonya ran to stop him, but Mileena stuck her foot out and tripped her. Jax squared himself to the ball, ready to block Scorpion’s shot. But Kano blasted a laser at him from his red orb. Jax saw it and brought up his arms at the last second, deflecting the laser. Scorpion took advantage of the distraction and easily shot the ball into the corner of the net.

“This is embarrassing,” muttered Johnny. He kicked off to Stryker. The Safety Patroller dribbled the ball past Smoke and looked for an opening. Scorpion threw his grappling hook, latching on to Stryker’s arm. When Stryker turned around to free himself, Kano and Smoke both plowed into him. Stryker crashed to the ground, holding his ankle and crying. The first half ended with the Outworlders up 3-0, and Stryker out with an ankle sprain and unable to keep playing.

“We’re getting killed out there!” said Sonya. “We have to play better.”

“Then stop letting them get past you,” said Johnny.

“You’re one to talk,” spat Sonya. “How many goals have you scored?”

“If you had nuts I’d punch them,” said Johnny.

“Settle down, please,” said Kung Lao. “Arguing will only help the Outworld team win. First we need a player to fill in for Stryker.”

“I think I can find someone,” said Liu.

Kung Lao nodded. “Next, the reason the Outworlders are winning is teamwork and unpredictability. You keep trying to play the game by the regular rules, but they use their powers to succeed. If you want to win, you’ll need to do the same.”

“It won’t matter if we can’t score,” said Sonya.

“Yeah, Goro’s got arms everywhere,” said Johnny. “We can’t get it by him.”

“You need to aim where his arms are not,” said Kung Lao. “Shoot the ball at his feet.”

While the others continued to strategize, Liu ran off the field and through the playground. He stopped underneath the tire bridge. “Hey, Sub Zero.”

“What do you want?” asked the ninja.

“Stryker got hurt and we’re short a player. Do you want to be on our team?”

“You’re joking, right?”

“I heard you wanted to play, but Scorpion wouldn’t let you,” said Liu. “Well, I want you on our team.”

Sub Zero considered it. “Can I play defense?”

“Sure.”

“Well...okay. But just this once.”

The second half was about to start. Kung Lao made some changes, putting Liu Kang on offense with Kitana and Johnny. The Outworlders were shocked to see Sub Zero lining up on defense with Sonya.

“What do you think you’re doing?” asked Scorpion.

“Playing soccer,” said Sub Zero.

“So...you’re joining their team in order to betray them?”

“No. I’m on their team to help them. May the best ninja win.”

Scorpion had more to say, but the second half began. Kitana kicked the ball to Johnny, who passed it to Liu. He sped down the field, avoiding slide tackles from Smoke and Kano. Just before Mileena could reach him, he crossed the ball low into the air in front of the goal. Johnny

ran past Baraka and got open for the pass. But when the ball reached him, he didn't kick it. He went down into a split and headed the ball right at Goro's feet. The big monster wasn't able to react in time and the ball went between his legs and into the net. The Earth team was finally on the board.

Smoke kicked off to Scorpion. He shoved Johnny out of the way and passed it over Liu's head to Kano. Sonya moved to cut him off but Kano sent an overlap pass to Smoke, who one-touched it to Scorpion. Sub Zero was the only one left to stop him. He used his power to freeze the bottoms of his own feet. Now wearing ice shoes, he was able to quickly slide across the field and kick the ball away from Scorpion.

Johnny kicked the ball up to Liu. He sent a through pass behind Baraka to Kitana. Mileena tried slide tackling her, but Kitana tapped the ball back to Johnny and jumped over Mileena's legs. Johnny passed it back to Kitana, who broke in all alone on Goro. But before she shot it, Sub Zero caught up to her. He used his power to create a sheet of ice on the ground under Goro's feet. Kitana shot the ball at the left corner. Goro tried to save it, but he slipped on the ice and fell down. The ball went in the net to make the score 3-2.

The Earth team cheered and high-fived each other. The Outworlders started bickering with one another. At the kickoff, Scorpion teleported away and didn't reappear. Smoke passed it to Mileena, who sprinted past Johnny and Liu. She kicked it behind Sonya to Kano, who had a breakaway on Jax. Rather than let him shoot it, Jax ran out to stop him. Kano passed the ball to the right of Jax, and Scorpion reappeared to shoot it at the open net. But at the last second Sub Zero used his powers to create an ice wall in front of the goal. The ball bounced off the ice.

Sonya kicked the ball over to Kitana, who redirected it up the field. Johnny caught up to it first and stopped the ball. "Who wants it?" he yelled. Baraka, Mileena and Kano all raced to steal the ball from him. While the Outworlders converged on Johnny, Liu snuck down the other side of the field until he was in front of Goro's net.

"Johnny, now!" yelled Liu. Johnny kicked the ball high into the air towards Liu before the Outworlders could steal it.

"You're not getting it past me!" said Goro. Scorpion teleported in front of the net to help. Smoke also got in the way.

"As soon as the ball hits the ground, clobber Liu Kang!" yelled Quan Chi from the sidelines.

But Liu had a different idea. He gathered the power inside him and leapt into the air. He kicked the ball rapidly, over and over while launching at Goro. "Woo-woo-woo-woo-woo-woo!" The power of Liu's bicycle kick crushed the ball into Goro and slammed him through the back of the net.

“Whoa, what the heck was that?” asked Johnny.

“Something I’ve been working on,” said Liu.

“Dude, that might be cooler than my nut punch split.”

The score was now tied, 3-3. Kung Lao let them know recess was almost over. The next goal would win the game. Sektor quietly talked to Scorpion. The ninja nodded and teleported, reappearing in front of Sub Zero.

“You better decide right now who your friends are,” said Scorpion. “Sektor says if you help the Earth team win, you’re out of the clan for good.”

Sub Zero said nothing. He just trudged back to his position.

Kano took the kickoff and passed it to Smoke. Liu tried stealing the ball but Smoke kicked it back to Mileena, who nailed it as hard as she could. The ball headed right for Jax, who was getting ready to easily catch the ball. However, Scorpion teleported next to Jax and wrapped him up with his grappling hook. Scorpion yanked on the rope, pulling Jax out of the goal.

The ball hit the ground and started bouncing towards the net for the winning score. Sonya and Sub Zero were the only ones close enough to stop it. Sonya sprinted as fast as she could. Sub Zero sighed, and created an ice patch underneath her feet. She slipped on the ice and fell. The ball bounced into the net for the final goal.

The Outworld team celebrated. “I didn’t score on us this time!” cheered Baraka.

“It’s a miracle,” agreed Goro.

“I can’t believe I fell,” said Sonya. “I should have been able to reach the ball in time. It’s all my fault.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Liu. “It’s just a game. Besides, that was a pretty fun match.”

“I think I like soccer,” said Kitana. “Count me in next time you play.”

“I hate to break it to everyone,” said Johnny. “But the game’s not over. The winners still get to nail us.”

The Outworlders had already lined up near the goal with a bunch of soccer balls. The Earth team formed a line in front of the net, turned around and bent over.

“Hey Johnny!” yelled Baraka. “I’m kicking my ball straight at your butt.”

“Good,” said Johnny. “That way I know you’ll miss.”

The Outworlders each kicked a ball as hard as they could. Liu, Jax, Johnny and Kitana each got hit. The impact knocked Johnny to the ground. Goro couldn't resist, and shot another ball at him, hitting him in the head. He quickly jumped up and out of the way before any more balls were kicked. "No face shots!" yelled Johnny. "I need my good looks so I can be a movie star."

"Oh man that stings!" said Liu, rubbing his aching butt where the soccer ball struck it. He saw Sub Zero walking away and stopped him. "Hey thanks for playing on our team. That was a pretty cool move you did, putting an ice wall in front of the goal."

"Um, thanks," said Sub Zero. "Sorry we lost." Then before Liu could say anything else, he rejoined the ninja clan, who were all smirking at him.

"Well done," said Sektor. "Sub Zero proved himself today. He joined the Earth kids and destroyed their team from within."

Kung Lao shook the hands of everyone on his team. He saved Liu for last. "I was very impressed with that goal you scored. You tapped in to some of your power. I think you'll do great in the tournament."

"Thanks!" said Liu. "I hope I help the Earth realm win this year."

"Just watch out for Shang Tsung," said Kung Lao. "The others will test your might, but he's the real threat. If you can beat him, Earth realm has a chance to win."

## Chapter 6: King of the Castle

Johnny Cage was still stewing a few days later about the results of the soccer game. “If I had known Goro’s weakness in the first half, it would’ve been a flawless victory. I’m gonna beat the crap out of Baraka the next time he brags about winning.”

“Let it go,” said Liu Kang. “Maybe you can figure out another way to get them back. What if you tied his shoelaces together?”

“Ugh, that is so lame,” said Johnny. “Just being near you when you said that hurt my coolness. Good thing I have my sunglasses. They’re total babe magnets. See?” He pointed at Kitana, who was heading towards them.

Kitana smiled and raised her hand briefly for a shy wave. “Hi Liu.”

Liu’s face turned a little red. “Um, hi Kitana, what’s up?”

“I was wondering if you could help me study for the geometry test. I can’t remember what world the living trees are found on.”

“Aren’t all trees living?” asked Johnny.

“Yes, but these ones will eat you if you get too close.”

“That’s why I stay in my house and play ‘Road Brawler’ videogames. Nature sucks.”

A voice called down from the playground castle. “Hey look, it’s the LOSING soccer team. What’s up, loooooosers?”

Johnny glared up at the castle. “Shut up, Baraka. Your face looks like my dog’s butt.”

“Why don’t you come up here, Cage?” yelled Goro. “And I’ll pound your face in.”

“Because I’m not allowed,” answered Johnny. “If it wasn’t for the Outworld rules, I’d come up right now and beat all you fart sniffers.”

Kano’s half metal face appeared in one of the castle windows. “We challenge you to a game of ‘King of the Castle’ to see if you can back up all your tough threats.”

“What’s that?” asked Liu.

“If you can knock us all out of the castle,” explained Kano, “You Earth Realm morons can keep it for yourself.”

Johnny grew silent as he considered the challenge, but Liu intervened. “Forget it. Four on two doesn’t sound very fair to me.”

“It’s just the three of us,” said Kano. “Shang Tsung is in detention today.”

“Hmmm, three against two’s not bad,” said Johnny.

“I’ll play,” volunteered Kitana. “That will make it three against three.”

“Are you sure?” said Liu. “Those guys are tough.”

Kitana shrugged. “My sister is Mileena. I’m used to fighting bullies.”

“So what’s it gonna be?” said Goro.

Cage looked at his friends and nodded. “Let’s dance.”

Liu and Kitana climbed onto the tire bridge and ran for the main castle entrance, but Johnny had a more direct route in mind. He charged straight up the castle slide. Baraka was waiting. Two metal rods slid out of his forearms. When Johnny reached the top, Baraka swung the rods at Johnny’s face. But the cocky fifth grader tucked into a somersault and dodged the attack. He sprang up and grabbed Baraka by the back of his underwear and yanked upwards. Baraka squealed as Johnny pulled the underwear over his head, giving him an atomic wedgie.

A satisfied Johnny turned around and found himself face to face with Goro. Actually, more like face to chest due to Goro’s size. The four armed Shokan grabbed the shades off of Johnny’s face and crumpled them into pieces.

“Hey, those were five dollar sunglasses, butthole.”

“I’ll crush you with one blow!” yelled Goro. He swung his top right fist at Johnny. The Earth Realm student went down into a split. Goro’s punch missed Johnny, but accidentally connected with Baraka behind him. Baraka went flying down the slide and landed on the ground.

Still in his split, Johnny punched Goro straight in the nuts. Goro grabbed his crotch and bellowed in pain. He slowly stumbled around the castle, walking dangerously close to the slide.

Johnny looked at him and smirked. “This is where you fall down.” He kicked Goro in the chest. The bully tumbled backwards down the slide and landed on top of Baraka.

“I...can’t breathe...” said Baraka’s muffled voice from underneath Goro.

Meanwhile, Kano was firing eye lasers at Liu and Katana. Liu was struck on the knee, burning a hole in his pants. Kitana pulled out a metal fan and deflected a laser blast back at Kano. When he ducked out of the way, Kitana dove into the castle and kicked his legs out. Kano slammed face first into the ground.

Kano got up, holding his mouth in pain. "Yuu shipped ma tewth."

"What?" said Kitana.

"Ma tewth. Tewwth."

"I think he said you chipped his tooth," said Liu.

Kitana made a fist and held it up to Kano. "Better leave now before I chip the rest of them."

Kano, blinking back tears, slid down a pole to the ground and ran away from the castle.

Johnny walked over and high-fived both of them. "Well, that was easy."

Kitana nodded. "Maybe a little too easy."

Johnny rolled his eyes. "Puh-leaze. Too easy? Maybe cause I beat two of them and you and Liu teamed up to take down one. I made it look easy."

"What are you guys doing up there?" Sonya Blade walked up to the castle ladder with an agitated look on her face. Standing next to her was Shang Tsung.

"I told you," said Shang. "They broke the rules and went in the castle. And they were fighting too."

"I thought you were in detention?" said Liu.

"I'm sick of you Earth Realm students breaking the rules," said Shang. "I don't care about the other two, but Liu has got to be reported. First he steals from everyone. Then he goes into the castle and engages in Kombat, beating up my friends who were just minding their own business."

"They challenged us to 'King of the Castle'!" yelled Johnny.

"There's no such thing," sneered Shang.

"I've never heard of it," agreed Sonya.

"You're a Safety Patroller," said Shang. "Do your job and report Liu."

Sonya looked at Shang, then Liu. “He’s right. You’ve broken the rules three times now. I have to report you to Principal Shao Kahn. Let’s go.”

Sonya led the way towards the Principal’s office, with a stunned Liu following behind. He passed Goro, Baraka and Kano.

“Ooooooh, Liu’s in trouble,” said Baraka.

“Principal Kahn is going to ban you from competing in the tournament,” said Goro.

“Try not to cry, ya baby,” added Baraka.

Liu kept his eyes pointed at the ground and ignored their taunts. He followed Sonya up the steps to the main entrance of the school. Once inside, they went into the administration office. Sonya led him past the reception desk and knocked on a large wooden door with black iron hinges.

The door creaked open, and Sonya entered first, leaving Liu to wait in the hallway. A minute later, she came back out. “Principal Kahn wants to talk to you. You better tell the truth. I heard once that a kid lied to him, so he turned into a Hydra and ate him.”

Liu gulped. He slowly opened the door and walked inside the dimly lit room. There was a large man sitting behind a desk. He was wearing a half skull helmet and spiked shoulder pads. The chair he was sitting on was more like a throne, full of large spikes.

Liu was very intimidated. It was all he could do to stop from shaking in fear. “Um, you-you wanted to see me sir?”

**“BOW TO ME.”**

Liu quickly bent over at the waist for a quick bow.

**“YOU ARE PATHETIC.”**

“I don’t know what you mean, Principal Kahn,” said Liu. “Please, just hear me out. I know Shang said that I broke the rules, but I didn’t. They invited us into the castle to fight and--”

**“IS THAT YOUR BEST?”** interrupted Shao Kahn.

“I swear I’m not making this up, honest,” said Liu. “Shang tricked me into getting into trouble. Please, don’t ban me from the tournament. That wouldn’t be fair to me or the other Earth Realm students.”

**“YOU WILL NEVER WIN.”**

“But, but I won’t know that for sure unless you let me compete.”

**“YOU ARE NOTHING.”**

Liu felt himself tearing up in frustration. How could he convince Shao Kahn to change his mind? Before he could say anything, the door opened and Raiden entered the room. “Pardon me, Principal Kahn, but I have two children with me that claim that Liu Kang is speaking the truth.” Raiden stepped aside to let Kitana and Sub Zero enter.

“It’s true sir,” said Kitana. “I was with Liu the entire time. The Outworlders invited us into the castle and challenged us to a fight.”

**“DON’T MAKE ME LAUGH.”**

Sub Zero stepped up. “You might not believe Kitana because she is Liu’s friend, but I can vouch for him. I was under the tire bridge and overheard Shang tell the others to trick Liu into the castle. Also, last month it wasn’t Liu that stole everyone’s things. Shang used his shape-shifting power to impersonate Liu. Scorpion was the one who took everything.”

Shao Kahn said nothing. His red eyes glared at Sub Zero. Finally, Raiden spoke up. “Thank you Principal Kahn for your patience and understanding. I will consider the matter resolved. Let’s go children.” He ushered the three of them back into the hallway.

Liu let out a sigh of relief. “Whew. I thought he was going to kick me out of school. Thanks guys, for sticking up for me.” Kitana smiled. Sub Zero shifted uncomfortably.

“I was taught in the Lin Kuei ninja clan to have honor,” said Sub Zero. “It didn’t seem right having you get in trouble for stuff you didn’t do.”

Raiden told Kitana and Sub Zero to head back to the playground, but asked Liu to stay behind. “I sense great power within you. Use it to your advantage the way some of the other students do. It will help you win the tournament.”

“It’s not like I can turn invisible or freeze people,” said Liu.

“Maybe not, but I think you’ll be surprised with what you can do. The others as well. And tell Johnny Cage to start working on a move other than that ridiculous split.”

## Chapter 7: Balance Battle

Reptile and Smoke held Sub Zero's arms while Scorpion punched him in the stomach.

"I can't believe you betrayed us!" yelled Scorpion. "Helping an Earth Realm kid, you truly have gone soft."

"It's...not...r-right," said Sub Zero, wheezing for breath.

"Who cares?" said Scorpion. "Being bad is awesome. No rules, no worries. You take what you want, eat dessert for dinner and stay up late. And if you don't like someone, you fight them." He looked at Reptile and Smoke. "Hold him down."

The two ninjas pushed Sub Zero to the ground and pinned him there. "You're officially out of our ninja club," said Scorpion. "If I see you anywhere near the tire bridge again, I'm going to kick your butt. But first...it's purple nurple time."

"Noooooooooooooooooooo!"

Near the swings, Kitana was being chewed out by Sindel and Mileena.

"You're going to get us all in trouble," said Sindel. "What if Principal Kahn punishes us for your dumb mistake?"

"I can't believe you're my sister," said Mileena.

"That makes two of us," said Kitana.

"That's it!" yelled Mileena. "Sindel, it's time to teach her a lesson."

Sindel lashed out with her hair, snagging Kitana. Mileena reached into Kitana's backpack and pulled out her fan.

"No, don't touch my fan, it's my favorite!" pleaded Kitana.

"What, this?" remarked Mileena. She snapped the fan over her knee. "Oops. You should take better care of your things." Mileena and Sindel laughed as they walked away. Kitana fell to her knees and held her broken fan, crying.

A day later Sub Zero was wandering around the maze by himself. He saw Kitana sitting in a corner, quietly reading a book. "Hey."

She put down her book. "Are you an outcast now too?"

"Yup. Totally stinks."

"It's not that bad," said Kitana. "I was getting sick of hanging out with those two anyway."

"I wish there was something we could do to get even," said Sub Zero.

"What if there was?" said a mysterious voice.

Sub Zero and Kitana turned around to see a girl with short black hair dressed in a green tunic.

"My name is Jade," said the girl.

"Do you go to school here?" asked Sub Zero. Jade nodded yes.

"How come I've never seen you around?" asked Kitana.

"I'm in an advanced class," said Jade. "And during recess I like to keep hidden and observe everyone else."

"Well you do a pretty good job," said Kitana.

"I'm not so sure," said Jade. "That Night Wolf kid always seems to spot me. Anyways, I think I can help you."

"How?"

"After the trouble in the castle, the Safety Patrol was told to strictly enforce the rules, yes?"

"Yeah, if anyone gets caught fighting they're banned from the tournament," said Sub Zero.

"I have a way you can beat up everyone in plain sight without getting in trouble," said Jade. "Listen up."

Kitana and Sub Zero spent the next few days hanging out in the maze with Jade and practicing some new moves. At the end of the week, she told them they were ready.

“Are you coming with us?” asked Kitana.

“No,” said Jade. “But don’t worry, I’ll be watching.”

Kitana and Sub Zero made their way to the middle of the playground. Liu and Johnny noticed them and headed over, as did Mileena and Sindel. The ninjas didn’t come out, but Sub Zero saw them watching from underneath the tire bridge. Eventually the Outworlders in the castle realized something was about to happen and came down to check it out. Sensing trouble, Sonya, Jax and Stryker walked over to make sure there wasn’t any fighting.

Shang Tsung tapped a foot impatiently and smirked. “Well...”

Sub Zero spoke up. “We challenge everyone on the playground to a battle.”

“No way!” said Sonya. “There is no fighting allowed. Anyone that does is in big trouble.”

“Sonya,” said Kitana, “Would you say fighting consists of punching, kicking and special powers?”

Sonya’s eyes narrowed. “Yeah...basically. What’s your point?”

“Our game will have none of those things,” explained Kitana. “We challenge everyone to a battle of balance. The rules are simple. You must fold your arms against your chest and not use them. Then you have to hop on one foot. If you lose your balance and fall down, or both feet touch the ground, you are eliminated.”

“That sounds boring!” said Baraka. “I’m not playing.”

“Wait,” said Sub Zero. “You can bump into other people and knock them down. The last person left standing is the winner.”

“Hold up, so you’re saying we can all shove each other to the ground while hopping on one foot?” asked Sindel.

“No shoving,” said Kitana. “You can’t use your hands.”

“Ohhh, so you kind of have to body check people with your shoulders,” said Liu.

“Exactly. It will take strength and smarts to win.”

“Well that means Baraka is already eliminated,” said Johnny.

“Shut up Cage!”

Shang considered the challenge. He turned to Sonya. “Does this count as fighting?”

Sonya thought it over. “Nope, as long as you follow the rules and don’t use your hands or any special powers. But I’m going to watch the whole time just to make sure.”

“Then we’ll do it,” said Shang. “It will be fun to embarrass the rest of you.”

“I’m in,” said Johnny. Liu also agreed to play.

“I’ll do it just to prove how dumb it is,” said Mileena. “And that I’m better than Kitana at everything.” Sindel agreed.

Sub Zero called out to the tire bridge. “And what of the ninjas? Are they brave enough to accept our challenge?”

Scorpion teleported in front of them. “It will be our pleasure to destroy you.”

The kids gathered at the basketball court, which would serve as the boundary for the game. If a kid hopped off of the court, they were out of bounds and eliminated. Sonya, Jax and Stryker circled the court, agreeing to serve as referees.

“Ready,” said Sonya. “Set, go!”

Everyone on the court crossed their arms and started hopping on one foot. Some of them quickly realized that hopping on one foot was more difficult than expected.

Sindel’s hair got in her eyes, but she couldn’t use her hands to fix it. “Ah, I can’t see!” That was all Kitana needed to hear. She hopped over and bumped into Sindel from behind, sending her to the ground.

Goro was hopping slowly, but with power. He barreled towards Smoke, who tried standing up to him. Goro smashed into Smoke and sent him flying.

Reptile disappeared, but Sonya called him out. “Reptile, no using your powers! If you’re invisible, I won’t know if you’re hopping on one foot.” Reptile reluctantly reappeared.

Johnny went straight at Baraka. As he got closer, Baraka backed up. “Oh no you don’t Cage, I’m not letting you touch me.”

“I’m coming for you Baraka, and there’s nothing you can do to stop it,” said Johnny. Baraka started hopping backwards even faster, which was what Johnny was hoping for. Baraka hopped right out of bounds and onto the grass.

“Ah mannnn!” said Baraka. He sat down to watch the rest of his friends compete, and when no one was looking, started picking his nose.

Kano was busy hopping in circles around Liu, trying to get an opening. But he forgot to watch his own back. Sub Zero nailed him from behind and sent him to the ground.

Goro hopped towards Johnny, eager to get some payback for the castle fight. “Let’s see you do the splits now, Cage!” Johnny was too proud to retreat, and met Goro head on. The two kids smashed into each other, but Goro’s body mass easily triumphed. Johnny landed hard on his butt.

“That’s what I thought!” crowed Goro. “Now get off my court.”

Liu and Shang slowly hopped in circles around each other.

“Think you have what it takes to beat me?” asked Shang.

“Let’s find out!” The two of them banged into each other, neither falling. But Shang had an advantage. He was able to jump a little higher than Liu, and stay in the air longer. The next time they came together, Shang hopped higher and came down on Liu. Shang’s momentum was too much, causing Liu to trip and fall.

“Get used to losing, Liu-ser,” laughed Shang.

“Wait just a second,” said Sonya. “Shang used his flying power to levitate in the air instead of hopping. He’s disqualified.”

Shang’s white eyes briefly flashed with rage, but in the next second he accepted his punishment and walked off the court.

“Sweet, so does that mean I’m back in?” asked Liu.

“Nope. You fell, so you’re out,” said Sonya.

The other kids realized that the only way to defeat Goro was to gang up on him. So Scorpion, Reptile, Kitana, Sub Zero and Mileena formed a temporary truce. They came at Goro from all sides and crashed into him. Goro toppled over like a giant tree, but he took Reptile with him.

With Goro out of the picture, the final four contestants split into pairs to face off against one another. “Time to lose, Kitana,” taunted Mileena. She hopped straight for Kitana and leapt high in the air. Rather than back up, Kitana braced her body and simply lowered her head. Mileena’s momentum carried her straight into Kitana, and she hit her nose on the top of her sister’s head.

“OW!” Mileena had a bloody nose from the impact. She temporarily forgot about the contest and put both legs down.

“Mileena’s out for not hopping,” said Jax.

Kitana hopped a short distance away and waited to see Mileena's reaction. She was prepared for the worst. But her sister wiped the blood away from her nose and smiled. "I knew you had it in you, sis. Fighting dirty is second nature to us."

"It wasn't dirty, it was smart," countered Kitana. "I let you do all the work. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a contest to win."

Scorpion and Sub Zero were hopping in slow circles around each other, looking for the perfect chance to strike. "I know what this is," said Scorpion. "You knew you couldn't beat me in a real fight, so you looked for a way to even the odds."

"I just wanted you to know what losing feels like," said Sub Zero. "Now when I beat you in the tournament, you'll already be used to disappointment."

"No chance." Scorpion lunged forward, trying to plow into him. Sub Zero jumped in the air and did a double spin. Scorpion missed his target and landed awkwardly. He wobbled for a second, trying to regain his balance. Kitana came from the side and bumped him. Scorpion lurched backwards, right into Sub Zero. The outcast ninja lowered his shoulder and crushed Scorpion with a major body check. He landed face first on the court, arms and legs sprawled in every direction.

Sub Zero and Kitana were the final players left. "That felt great," said Kitana.

"Definitely," agreed Sub Zero. They both stopped hopping and walked off the court.

"Wait, so did they both just win or get disqualified?" asked Stryker.

"Who cares?" said Johnny. "They proved their point and stuck it in the Outworlder's faces."

As they walked back to the playground, Sub Zero and Kitana looked up at the top of the maze. They saw a fleeting glance of a girl in a green tunic disappear around a corner.

"Thanks Jade," whispered Kitana.

## Chapter 8: FIGHT!

The day of the tournament had finally arrived. In honor of the competition, classes were dismissed for the participants. They would be on the playground all day, battling to decide which school would be in charge for the rest of the school year.

Johnny came running up to Liu. “Did you hear? This year it’s going to be a dodgeball tournament! I’m so pumped!”

“Oh, I thought the tournament was going to be a martial arts match,” said Liu.

“Are you crazy? Yeah, a bunch of fifth graders are going to kill each other while the teachers cheer us on. Dude, we’re playing dodgeball. Raiden told me that we’re splitting into teams of four. There will be dodgeballs all over the playground. All you have to do is hit somebody or catch their ball, and they’re out. And the best part is you can use your powers.”

“But you don’t have any powers,” said Liu.

“Not any that you know of,” said Johnny, looking around to make sure no one else was listening. “But I’ve been saving something special just for the tournament.”

They made their way to the playground. Sub Zero and Kitana were waiting for them. “I already found our teammates,” said Johnny. “I figured they were perfect for our team, especially since they got booted from their usual groups.”

Sub Zero nodded briskly, and Kitana smiled. “If that’s okay with you,” she said.

“Of course, that’s awesome!” said Liu.

“Good thing I got to them first,” said Johnny. “The Safety Patrollers had to beg Kabal to fill out their group. We got a huge lucky break because Shang is out sick today. So Goro, Baraka and Kano asked Sindel to join them. Mileena teamed up with Scorpion, Reptile and Smoke.”

Liu let out a sigh of relief when he heard Shang wouldn’t be involved. “So when do we start?”

“The Outworlders are against the Safety Patrollers first,” said Sub Zero. “We can watch their match and take notes. Oh and remember all balls count, even if you accidentally get hit by a teammate. So be careful where you throw it.”

Goro's group was already taking their place in the playground. The Safety Patrollers huddled up.

"Okay, this is the big day," said Sonya. "If we want to become junior members of the Special Forces, it has to start with winning the tournament. Kabal, just follow our lead. Jax, mark up on Goro. Don't let him out of your sight. Stryker, if Sindel tries to scream, stuff a dodgeball down her throat. Got it?" Her team nodded yes. "Okay, break!" She clapped her hands and walked into the playground.

There were dodgeballs scattered around on the playground. Everyone grabbed one or two and waited for the match to start. Finally, a voice was heard over the school's loud speakers.

**"Round one. FIGHT!"**

The match started with both teams hurling dodgeballs at one another. Everyone was able to easily dodge, until Sindel grabbed a ball with her hair. She threw it with incredible speed, hitting Kabal right in his face mask.

"See ya!" she cackled. She picked up another ball with her hair and selected Jax as her next target. She launched the ball right at his face, but Jax was ready. His bionic arms were able to absorb the impact of the ball and easily catch it.

"NOOOO!" Her angry scream was so loud even her own team clutched their ears in pain. As Sindel stomped away, both teams picked up some dodgeballs and commenced lobbing them at each other.

Sonya stepped out from behind a fence and found Baraka twelve feet away. "Rings of justice!" She clanged her wrists together and yellow ring-like energy projectiles shot out of her hands and nailed Baraka. The young Tarkatan went flying into a fence. Stunned, he couldn't react in time as Sonya finished him off with a dodgeball. She sarcastically blew him a kiss and walked away looking for her next target.

Meanwhile, Goro picked up four balls, one in each hand and advanced on Stryker.

"Uhh, I think I'm in trouble," said Stryker, in a panic tinged voice.

Too late. Goro hurled all four balls at once. Stryker managed to evade one, but was pelted by the other three. Goro pounded his chest in triumph and stomped off, reloading with four more balls.

"Sonya, I need your help with Goro," said Jax, who was trying to fend off the monster by firing down at him from the top level of the maze.

But Sonya had finally caught a glimpse of Kano and wasn't about to let her enemy get away. She chased him down to the swings, where Kano slowly turned around and waited for her to make the first move.

"I've got you now," said Sonya, and whipped a ball at Kano's waist. Stunningly, Kano jumped high to avoid the ball, and then remained floating in the air.

"What the..." said Sonya, not able to comprehend her opponent's newfound ability.

Kano took advantage and whipped a ball at her. Sonya recovered her senses and leapt for cover, but not in time. The ball glanced off her leg, eliminating her.

"Gotcha baby," snickered Kano.

"Darn it, Sonya, we're supposed to be a team," muttered Jax as he backed up in the maze. Goro had jumped up to his level and was slowly stalking him. Jax had one ball to Goro's four, and held it in front of him as a shield. It wasn't good enough. With a roar, Goro fired all four balls at once and crushed Jax.

The Outworlders celebrated their victory as the Safety Patrollers hung their heads.

Next up were the ninjas versus Johnny's team. The ninjas quickly disappeared into the playground, including Mileena. Johnny, Liu, Kitana and Sub Zero went to the top level of the maze and looked out over the playground.

"What's the plan?" asked Liu.

"You won't see them until the last second," said Sub Zero. "Be ready to throw the ball at any time. I know how to get Reptile."

"The invisible one?" said Johnny. "I have the opposite power. People can see my good looks from miles away. Better stay away from me or you'll be spotted."

The others looked at him, puzzled.

Johnny's smile fell away. "Seriously, get lost. I plan on bringing a lot of attention to myself."

A voice called out over the school's loud speakers. "**Round two. FIGHT!**"

As the others moved through the maze, Johnny jumped down to the tire bridge. "Hey you bunch of ugly trolls, I'm about to cross your bridge. Who's got the guts to stop me?"

Smoke was up to the challenge. The ninja grabbed a ball and vanished into a dark cloud. Johnny waded into the cloud.

“There’s two things you need to know about me,” said Johnny. “One, my sunglasses are keeping the smoke out of my eyes, so I can see you. And two, I have a new move I’m about to introduce. I call it the shadow kick.” With super fast speed, Johnny leapt through the cloud, leaving a confusing trail of green afterimages. He kicked Smoke hard in the stomach, knocking him off the bridge. Johnny followed it up with a dodgeball to Smoke’s face. “Thanks for playing.”

Sub Zero stalked around the swing set. He knew Reptile was invisible and would be coming for him. Sub Zero used his ice powers to create a soft covering of snow all around him. Then he waited. Not long after, he noticed footprints appearing in the snow behind him. Sub Zero spun around and rifled the ball in that direction. Thinking he was still undetected, Reptile didn’t move in time and was hit in the chest with the ball. He reappeared on the ground, covered in snow. “If I was as ugly as you I’d turn invisible all the time too,” said Sub Zero.

Liu was near the castle looking for the ninjas. Unfortunately, one found him first. A grappling hook snagged him from behind and yanked him off his feet.

“Get over here!” Liu flew through the air towards Scorpion. The ninja simply held out a dodgeball and let Liu’s momentum carry him right into it.

Embarrassed, Liu slowly got up and walked off the playground. “Thought I’d last longer,” he muttered.

Kitana was searching the castle when her sister stepped out from behind the ladder. “Ready to lose, sis?” asked Mileena. “I’ll even let you take the first throw.”

Kitana accepted and hurled the ball at Mileena’s head. She managed to duck in time and the ball missed. “Ha! I knew you coul--” BAM! The ball bounced off the wooden plank behind Mileena and ricocheted, hitting her in the back of the head. Caught off guard, Mileena fell to her hands and knees.

“Ungh...the ball hit the castle first, so it doesn’t count,” said Mileena.

“No. But this one does,” said Kitana, and nailed her sister with another ball. “Today you were outsmarted, outclassed and now you’re just plain out.”

But Kitana’s moment of triumph was short lived. A grappling hook came flying up the slide and snagged her leg. Scorpion pulled on the rope, yanking Kitana down the slide where the ninja was waiting with a ball.

Johnny and Sub Zero were near the tire bridge when they saw Kitana and Mileena leave the playground. “Guess it’s us two left against Scorpion,” said Johnny.

“No, his fight is with me,” said Sub Zero. “Stay out of it.”

“Well...okay, but if you get out I’ll handle it,” said Johnny, before taking a sniping position up in the maze.

Scorpion teleported in front of Sub Zero. “Now you will pay for betraying us,” he snarled.

“You betrayed our group by doing whatever Shang tells you,” said Sub Zero.

“Unh-uh, did not!” said Scorpion.

“Shang and Scorpion sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G.”

“Shut up!!!” Instead of throwing a dodgeball, Scorpion launched his grappling hook. Sub Zero ducked, but not quickly enough. The grappling hook hit him in the face, leaving a long scratch above and below his right eye. Sub Zero countered with an ice blast, freezing Scorpion in place.

“Your rage is a weakness,” said Sub Zero. He picked up a dodgeball. But instead of throwing it, he gripped it tightly and walked over to Scorpion. He bent low and sprang up, delivering a giant uppercut with the ball to the defenseless Scorpion. The ice shattered and Scorpion fell to the ground, stunned.

“Nice dude!” yelled Johnny as he rushed to join him. “We’re in the finals!” The two of them walked over to the picnic table and joined Liu and Kitana.

“Sorry about getting out so quickly,” said Liu. “I’m not very good at this game.”

“Nonsense,” said Assistant Principal Raiden, who was observing the tournament. “Channel your inner power and you’ll be unstoppable.”

“Stop acting like I’m some kind of chosen one!” yelled Liu. “I’m not that great. Everybody saw it.”

“Believe in yourself,” said Raiden, before walking away. As he passed the Outworld team, Baraka laughed at him.

“Hope you told those wusses to quit before we destroy them.”

Raiden’s eyes crackled with electricity. “I don’t think so.” A small lightning bolt flashed from his pointer finger and zapped Baraka in the butt.

“Ow, my fanny!”

“He called his butt a fanny!” said Johnny. “What a dork.”

The Earth Realm team had one minute to strategize before the final match began. “Goro and Sindel are the main problems,” said Johnny. “The others will be easy.”

“I know how to beat Sindel,” said Kitana, and looked at Sub Zero. “But I need your help.”

“No problem,” said Sub Zero.

The team made their way into the playground. The Outworlders decided to start in their castle.

A voice announced the final match over the school’s loud speakers. **“Round three. FIGHT!”**

The Outworlders poured out of the castle and spread out. Sindel went straight for Kitana. “You got lucky against your sister, but that won’t happen again,” said Sindel. She whipped her hair at Kitana, trying to grab her. Kitana ducked just in time and grabbed a handful of gray hair. She pulled it through the fence posts and held on so Sindel couldn’t retract it.

“Sub Zero, now!” said Kitana.

Sub Zero jumped out of the maze and used his ice powers to freeze Sindel’s hair in a giant block of ice. Sindel tried pulling her hair back, but the ice kept it trapped in the fence.

“What? No fair!” said Sindel. She took a deep breath, planning on using her scream powers to shatter the fence. But as soon as she opened her mouth, Kitana hit her in the face with a dodgeball.

“Guess I got lucky again,” said Kitana. Jax cheered loudly on the sidelines as Sindel walked off.

Johnny was in the maze searching for Kano when Sub Zero joined him. “Hey, have you seen Kano? I can’t find him anywhere.”

“Don’t worry about Kano,” said Sub Zero. “You have bigger problems.” Before Johnny could react, Sub Zero hit him in the back with a dodgeball, eliminating him.

“What the heck? Why’d you do that?”

Sub Zero laughed as he walked away.

Kitana was slowly luring Goro towards an ambush in the maze. Liu was perched on a turret near the swings, waiting for Goro to walk below him. He noticed movement coming from

the other direction, but breathed a sigh of relief when he saw it was Sub Zero. The ninja joined Kitana as Goro advanced on them, menacingly.

“Let me help,” said Sub Zero.

“What did you have in mind?” asked Kitana.

“I was thinking it would be easier for Goro to catch you if you couldn’t move.” Sub Zero used his powers to freeze Kitana’s feet in a block of ice.

“Hey, what are you doing?!?”

Goro smiled as he closed in on his prey. “Dumb girl.” He threw four balls at once, pelting Kitana while she was helpless to run away.

Liu jumped down from the turret, but was too late to save his friend. “Why did you do that?”

Sub Zero looked at him. “It was an accident, honest. My ice powers backfired or something.” While he talked, he slowly crept closer to Liu.

“It’s a trap!” said a voice from behind them. Liu and Sub Zero turned to see...another Sub Zero. The second ninja gestured angrily. “He’s an imposter. He eliminated Johnny and Kitana.”

“No way,” said the first Sub Zero. “He’s the imposter. Get him Liu!”

Liu wasn’t sure who to trust. Goro was busy picking up more dodgeballs, but any second now he’d be ready to attack.

“Wait, I can prove it,” said the second Sub Zero. “Look at my face.” He pulled his mask off. “When Scorpion hit me with his grappling hook in the last round, it gave me a long cut down my face. Nurse Tanya thinks it might leave a scar.”

Liu turned to the first Sub Zero. His face didn’t have a mark on it. Liu aimed his ball at him.

The first Sub Zero laughed and shimmered, changing back into his original form.

“Shang!”

“Stupid Liu. Did you really think I would be out sick on the day of the tournament? I told Kano to stay home so I could impersonate him and trick everyone. Goro, take them out.”

Goro had dodgeballs in all four his hands. “There’s about to be a fatality!” he roared. Goro launched all the balls at Liu and the real Sub Zero. Liu knew they wouldn’t be able to get

out of the way fast enough. But at the last second, Sub Zero used his powers to create an ice clone of himself in front of them. All four balls struck the clone, shattering it into a thousand pieces.

Sub Zero did a somersault and came up on one knee. He aimed both arms at Goro and unleashed the biggest ice blast of his life. Goro thrashed about trying to break free, but slowly began to freeze. Sub Zero used all his power and concentration, pouring on more and more layers of ice until finally Goro resembled a giant ice monster statue.

Liu didn't hesitate, launching a ball at Goro and easily eliminating him. But Sub Zero was exhausted from using his power. When Shang threw a ball at him, he was too tired to dodge it.

"It's just the two of us now," said Shang. Liu didn't acknowledge him. He was too busy trying to pick up a ball. He had almost gotten to one when Scorpion's grappling hook snagged it and yanked the ball away. Scorpion laughed and changed back into Shang.

"In the beginning of the match, I wandered around the playground destroying any balls I could find," said Shang. "Now there are only a handful left." He popped the one in his hand. "Oops. One less ball."

Liu glanced around. There were only five balls left. Then Shang turned into Sub Zero and froze two of them.

"Won't be using those. Try again."

Liu dove for a ball that was under a swing. This time Shang turned into Kano and shot the ball with an eye laser. Only two balls left, and unfortunately for Liu, Shang turned into Scorpion again and teleported next to one of them. He picked it up and smiled.

"I have you now."

There was one other ball, slowly rolling towards the tire bridge. Liu ran for it. Shang turned into Sindel and used her long hair to snare the ball before Liu could grab it. Sindel opened her mouth and screamed at the ball until it popped. Smiling, she turned back into Shang. He hefted the last remaining ball, but then set it on the ground.

"Let's have some fun," said Shang. "Why don't you come over here and try and take the ball away from me?"

Liu didn't hesitate. He jumped into the air and launched into a bicycle kick. "Woo-woo-woo-woo-woo-woo!" But Shang turned into Goro and folded all four arms across his chest, blocking Liu's attack. Then he used his two lower arms to seize Liu, while the top two arms punched him repeatedly. Liu tried to squirm free, but Goro was too strong. So he changed tactics and head-butted Goro. The giant fifth grader yelled in pain and released Liu, who stumbled

away. Goro shimmered and changed back into Shang. He used his sleeve to wipe some blood that had trickled from his nose.

“Is that the best you’ve got?” asked Shang. “Quit now. This tournament is mine!”

Liu gritted his teeth and summoned all of his inner power. He visualized exactly what he wanted to do, and locked eyes with Shang. He leaned back and raised one knee into the air, and brought his hands together. Everyone watching gasped as a fireball shot out of Liu’s hands and slammed into Shang.

Sitting in the sandbox, Night Wolf and Kabal looked at each other. “Toasty!”

Shang was rocked by the blast and visibly stunned. He slowly swayed back and forth, barely able to stand. Johnny called out from the sidelines. “Finish him!”

Liu picked up the last dodgeball and walked over to Shang. With one finger, he pushed Shang to the ground. Then while standing over him, he held out the ball and dropped it on his Outworld opponent, ending the tournament.

Johnny ran over and high-fived Liu. Kitana gave him a big hug, and then immediately blushed. The other Earth Realm students also gathered around to congratulate him.

“That was awesome!” said Jax. “You whipped him good.”

Raiden walked over to the group. “Well done Liu Kang. Maybe you truly ARE the chosen one.”

“Uh, thanks, Assistant Principal Raiden,” said Liu. “I probably just got lucky.”

“That’s PRINCIPAL Raiden now,” corrected the thunder god. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m looking forward to breaking the news to Shao Kahn.” He disappeared in a flash of lightning.

Johnny was already up in the castle. “Now that Earth Realm makes the rules, we’re taking the castle back. No Barakas allowed.” He waved at Sonya until she looked up at him. “Hey babe, how about a victory kiss?”

Sonya snorted. “Oh, gross! I’d even kiss Stryker before you, Cage.”

Stryker, eavesdropping next to the swings, did a quick fist pump and whispered “Yes!”

Meanwhile, Sub Zero stood at the edge of the tire bridge. Scorpion teleported next to him. “From this day forward, you are exiled from our clan, no take backs,” said Scorpion.

“Whatever,” said Sub Zero. “You better leave me alone, or I’ll have my older brother beat the snot out of you.”

The Earth Realm students spent the rest of the day celebrating, while the Outworlders were sent to detention, as punishment for losing. At the end of the day, the door to detention opened. The students looked up to see a new kid enter. He was dressed in red robes with a large golden collar, with green sleeves and pants. On his head was a large red and black hat.

“Who’s this clown?” muttered Baraka.

“My name is Shinnok,” said the new kid. “I’m a foreign exchange student from Netherrealm public school.”

“Why should we care?” asked Kano.

“Because,” said Shinnok with an evil smile, “I’m going to help you destroy the Earth Realm kids once and for all....”

## **MORTAL KOMBAT!!!!!!** (playground)

*“Mortal Kombat Playground” was written by Eric Williams and illustrated by Dexter Morrill. It is not affiliated with Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, and is created for the sole purpose of entertainment. To see more of Dexter’s awesome illustrations, go to [www.dextermorrill.wordpress.com](http://www.dextermorrill.wordpress.com). Eric and his brother Chad host a free weekly podcast about videogames and movies. Check it out at [www.jumpmenpodcast.com](http://www.jumpmenpodcast.com). Eric wrote a superhero book called “Shark Knights”. For more info go to [www.sharkknights.wordpress.com](http://www.sharkknights.wordpress.com)*