

1 – DON KUAN, PRESS F TO PAY RESPECTS

DK never liked starting slow.

But God knew he needed the Gold right now. So he grit his teeth and tightened his fingers around the shaft of his axe.

Any moment now, he chided himself. *Just wait a little longer.*

Despite the jitters eating at his stomach, he stood knee-deep in the tall grass with a battle-axe in hand and fought the incessant urge to run out and secure another kill.

He could wait, but could his team afford to do the same for him? They were very quiet after the last teamfight.

“Where’s the enemy team?” DK asked aloud.

“Mid lane, dude,” a rather annoyed response came back to him. One of his teammates on the voice call sighed for everyone to notice. “Why are you up there?”

A little information about the game may have been what he wanted, but that snappy comeback broke DK’s immersion entirely.

His fingers wrapped around his mouse, not the handle of his battle-axe. His eyes drifted away from his screen and back to reality. DK was not on the Rift or knee-deep in tall grass anymore, but back in his trepid body with fingers aching to push some buttons.

He had a game to win. The sooner DK could get back in immersion, the better.

“Need to put pressure up in the top lane,” DK called back. “Can you stall for a minute?”

“We can try,” a second voice called back. Trevor, his Support role player, was thoroughly demoralized. “Thanks for throwing the game, idiot.”

DK took a moment to steel himself. Back-talk was fine. Casual insults were tolerable. The real problem was not that these teammates were mean, but it was that he wanted to *win*.

That certainly would not happen now that DK’s team was this terribly behind. Winning this game was now a pipe dream.

Their enemies had the tempo going in their favor. Every other player on the enemy team was sieging all three lanes to push against his team's base. Waves of red Minions plowed through the destroyed defenses of the blue team. DK's team was on their last legs. Defeat was imminent.

The last two team fights ended poorly for him, and DK's five-man team felt like four guys and him scrambling to make anything work.

What was the old proverb about teamwork again? "Your team is five fingers, and ours is a hand?"

Just another day playing this game.

League: the most played MOBA in the world if the metrics it boasted were anything to go by. DK played it, and so did a large percentage of all kids attending the University of Richmond.

And it was addictive as hell.

If he did the math right, (DK hated the fact that he picked Political Science over Calculus) then they needed one decisive edge to get some Gold and make their comeback. Any Gold helped to buy better gear, and he needed a sharper axe right now.

DK could get that edge by securing one kill in his lane. Easier said than done.

This was what he needed, a surprise attack to get the metaphorical ball rolling. If his lane opponent died, that gave DK ample room to push his team's Minions before the other guy respawned.

"So, uh, are you gonna wait up there all day?" Trevor probed again.

"No," DK curtly spat back. "I'm in position."

"Well hurry up. I think they're gonna do Baron."

As much as he loved this game, DK would admit League was a hyper-competitive culture. Everyone wanted to win, to get an edge, and to improve. It was an instinct that permeated every facet of every game, including this one.

DK was no exception to wanting to win badly. But why else would he tolerate the back-talk from his teammates like this?

Well, to win.

Duh.

He was waiting to join the tourney for the longest time: the UR Collegiate Team. Getting in the league was hard. Winning your games was harder. Endless hours of practicing, fighting, and squeezing in every last game into his schedule to get good enough for his next fight.

DK could hardly wait for the last bell to chime so he could log in and start playing. Christmas was coming in a week, and coincidentally, he had at least two days before the weekend rush of tourists coming into New York and residents trying to escape the cold.

Also, if it meant fewer people in his area, DK was more than excited to get that precious public WiFi to himself.

And extra internet bandwidth at my apartment, DK bemused. His family would not need it. Unless Uncle Ken decided to stream Women's Tennis from Italy again.

His senses drifted away from his laptop screen to scan the room he set himself up in. A wave of freshly brewed espresso wafted to his face. The air in the Plug and Play Café was chipper than usual. It was one of many internet cafes that dotted the Brooklyn suburbs, where WiFi was good and the coffee was better.

DK could only assume that one of the baristas started using peppermint-flavored air freshener to make the place more festive for the season. Good idea for the tourist season.

Or maybe it was actually peppermint mixed into the espresso for somebody to pick up?

DK shook the thought out of his mind. More caffeine would shoot his senses into overdrive, and dull his decision-making on the fly. Ironic, considering he was physically sitting at his favorite nook at the Plug and Play cafe. Any lapse in concentration could mean—

Wait. Where is my lane opponent?

He glued his eyes to the monitor this whole time. There it was: that moment of losing focus. DK needed to reorient himself.

Not one red pixel showed up out of the edge of DK's screen. No enemy players in sight.

Where was this guy?

No matter. Waiting a bit more was fine. DK could handle waiting another ten seconds because three good things were going to happen today:

- a) Today was the day of the League Tourney.
- b) DK was going to make it to the second bracket.
- c) This was his professor's last day before he quit.

Alright, that last one was a bit mean. Nevertheless, DK could hardly wait to run out the lecture hall at the first chime of the bells. Mr. Morocco just could not sell him the joy of learning "Current Events in the 1980's" mixed with MTV jokes.

DK dug into his chair, but his knee would not stop thumping up and down. His mop of raven black hair always was in a permanent bedhead, like the Chinese version of an afro.

The difference was he could not flaunt the look. At least his demoralized teammates could not see him now.

Back in reality, DK had to wait. It always paid to stay calm. It helped when he needed to stay cool during the Kuan family drama, or when Uncle Ken found some Irish courage during Thanksgiving.

This year's episode was... something.

DK had to have the most level head when everything else pushed him to freak out. Even now, he tried for the thousandth time to stop twitching his knees and fingers. He clenched two fists until the nails bit into his calloused palms.

It's almost over. Suck it up, DK.

Just like that, his trepid body calmed down for another ten precious seconds. He was going to need every second to think as clearly as he could.

"You know they're gonna get a free Baron, right? We all died in the last team fight."

DK blinked. "Oh."

League was a weird place; most of these terms would not make sense to anyone who did not play it for a while. There was basic terminology related to moving around, controlling your avatar, and learning gaming lingo to know what was happening.

Map objectives, like boss monsters across the map, could offer some very valuable buffs to whoever landed the killing blow.

“Baron” was just one of many game-deciding monsters that, when slain, would bolster the slayer’s team for one final siege of the game. You always wanted to secure Baron for you and your teammates.

Speaking of which, DK remembered that the rest of his team was dead. Their respawn timers, displayed to the right, blared grayed-out portraits and ticking clocks.

In other words, it was bad. This game was over in less than a minute, so there was no chance that they would be ready for the next fight.

Stay cool, DK. Look at the bright side. I can turn the game around.

Stay positive, that was what he had to do. DK also had to concentrate and get that clutch win in the next fight. He just hoped nobody started streaming *Star Wars* in the café and killed his ping.

“Great,” said Trevor with plenty of salt mixed with the word. “Just 1v5 them and we can make a comeback!”

That was a tall order, but it was the “best” play DK could do. Did he hear some sarcasm out of Trevor too?

No matter. He nodded, even though none of his teammates were in the room to see him.

DK tapped the push-to-talk button on the side of his mouse. “Yeah, I’m recalling back to the base. Lemme buy.”

“Hurry up!” his captain blared back at him. “They’re doing the Baron! Trevor, get ready to back him up!”

No witty retort from Trevor this time. At least there was hope for victory yet.

As DK drove his avatar back to his home base, he took a moment to wrestle his gaze away from his laptop screen. One moment to breathe could be the difference between victory and defeat.

He dug into his seat. He scanned the shop and picked the gear he needed.

Black Cleaver’s finished, and I’ll need extra health and armor with Warmog’s and Dead Man’s Plate. Now I needed to finish the set with—

“What’cha doin’?”

The voice broke his concentration entirely.

DK nearly flipped his laptop over in surprise. But DK glanced back up and plucked one earbud out of his canal. Did someone just try to get his attention? He finally realized who he was looking at, and DK's jaw nearly fell to the floor.

It was as if someone ripped a model right from Instagram's Top Trending page and stuck her in Antarctica. She stood tall, a pink tracksuit to keep the December air off her frigid skin. Black, tussled hair clung to her nose and ungraciously to her face.

But despite her humbling first impression, there was no doubt that she was talking to DK.

DK finally regained his usual charm. "Um, 'scuse me?"

"I asked what'cha—ah—aaaah choooo!"

Instagram's coldest top model sneezed into her elbow, which was the least gracious thing to do when making a first impression.

DK bashfully looked back to his laptop out of respect. How was the game going? After buying his last item, and then checking the mini-map in the bottom right corner of his User Interface, DK was sure: the enemy team wasn't in his base yet. He could spare a few more seconds.

"Looks like fun," asked the girl. "What is it?"

She wiped her nose with the back of her sleeve. But DK wasn't going to give her a second thought. Not that she was mean or anything, but he *did* have to try to win a fight all by—

"Dude, where are you?"

DK's finger found the push-to-talk button. "Sorry, Trevor. I'm at full build. Did they do the Baron?"

"Yeah. They did the Baron."

A curse nearly escaped his clenched lips, but then DK remembered a lady was watching him.

She was still here, in fact. No coffee in hand either. Instagram's Coldest Model was not even looking at the pickup counter for an espresso or anything.

She was DK's audience, and he had to at least pretend he wasn't about to cry from shame. Speaking of which, DK remembered to mind his manners.

He put on his best smile, glanced over and asked, "Sorry, would you like a seat? We're about to end the game."

That came out wrong.

DK knew this League Tourney was over. His randomly assembled team of players knew it too, that was why they nearly stopped talking at the end of the match.

Defeat was inevitable. But he had to at least look good for someone *actually* in the room with him.

And she took the bait.

"Sure, why not?" asked the girl in a pink tracksuit.

It was silly to say it aloud, but DK felt something flutter in his chest and all over his stomach. He kept that to himself and both his hands on the keyboard and mouse.

Insta's coldest model (DK made a mental note to ask for her name) smiled and grabbed a vacant seat from an unassuming salaryman stuck to his iPhone and earbuds. She wasted no time to get seated.

"So how's the fight going?" she inquired. True curiosity, and a good game sense, fueled her words. "What's your win condition?"

He checked his fingers to make sure they were in the right position: left hand on Q, W, E, R, and right hand on the mouse. None of his fingers tapped the push-to-talk button, so at least he would not bother his team.

"We're playing League," DK explained with a smile, as smooth as he could make it. "Is this your first time seeing it?"

She nodded, which baffled DK even more. Who *hadn't* heard of the "most played game in the world?"

"It's a war game," she deduced, though Instagram's coldest model scratched the top of her head. "I think? Your team doesn't look so good."

DK rolled his eyes. Of course DK's team didn't look so good, because all of them were dead! Their portraits were still displaying respawn timers.

"But I'm familiar with war games."

The girl in a pink tracksuit brushed a lock of hair back over her shoulder. One of the biggest smiles stretched across her face, like a balloon for a birthday party.

"You might have heard of my last anointed one," she continued. "Sun Tsu? The guy loved playing those with his friends. Great with party games too. Is he still alive?"

DK pried his eyes back from his monitor just to stare at her with disbelief. "Him?"

"Yeah," she replied without missing a beat.

"Um, no. He's dead."

And like that, Instagram's coldest model deflated her happy face balloon. "Oh, that's a shame."

"Yeah, something like that. Hold on." DK then pushed the button to speak to his team. "I'm going in!"

The words went unheard. DK knew that in the back of his brain, despite every trigger-pull of his fingers on the mouse and clacking of his fingers on the Q button. He watched in terror as the enemy team flanked him from every side with weapons in hand.

But he ran in like one big, brave fool. The fact was clear, and DK almost wished he did not have an audience for this part:

His team was going to lose right now.

DK watched the enemy march into his base, and he was surrounded. All five hostile players stormed the gates, which were burst wide open in the last siege five minutes ago, and DK was the last man standing.

But one cute girl sitting right next to him was still watching the show.

Despite his bravado going into this absolute muck storm of a match, he had to say it. "Wish me luck, miss!"

She paused for a beat, smiled, and then cleared her throat. "A blessing? You know, mortal, my name is—"

DK readied his battle-ax, ready for one last stand. DK stood between the five hostiles and his team's Nexus, the precious crystal they had to protect, which was battered half to death by the other team's assault.

This was DK's final stand. The final skirmish.

It may all have been digital hitboxes and players locked behind the LCD screen, but League felt real. It *was* real. That was the only way to visualize victory: by making every skirmish a fight for—

You have been slain.

“Oops.”

DK stared at his monitor in stupor. His avatar, a hulk of a man in spiked armor, gave a dying gasp and fell with the tenth arrow sprouting out of his breastplate.

The entire computer screen sapped of all the color at the declaration of his death. He was surprised that he expected anything different.

DK stole one final glance at his sweating palms. One truth rose from the swarm of restless thoughts plaguing his brain: DK didn’t even make it past the first bracket of the Tourney.

His index fingers twitched as if he could input just a few more tactical attacks, or another swipe of the wrist to prolong his life for just another second.

But it really was over.

The screen re-colored as the enemy team marched to victory. Five players marked with red to show their team colors wasted no time to raise their blades, staves, and fists to strike down his team’s Nexus.

They swung in unison, and in one tremendous, pixelated explosion, the crystal was gone.

“Nice try, DK,” said Trevor dejectedly. “But it’s over. Thanks for nothing.”

And like that, his team left. Four simultaneous clicks proclaimed them leaving the game lobby.

No sense in staying in an empty digital lobby either, though this defeat left DK’s heart in a ditch to die too. As League’s client window closed out, reality caught back up to DK.

He was still in a coffee shop, infected by the smell of peppermint, and beside a frigid window overlooking a winter scene right outside. The game might have been over, but at least DK was not actually dead.

“Good try,” she said back.

He almost forgot that someone was watching the tail end of his game this whole time. DK remembered to paste a smile over his façade of bravado and look back at her.

“Coffee shop WiFi, am I right?” he asked. “You think your ping is fine one second, then boom! Laggy as hell.”

Instagram’s coldest model stared back at him, her head cocked to the side like a curious eagle finding a better angle to dive at a mouse for its food.

“Bad joke, I guess.”

She shook her head, which threw her twin tails around like a helicopter’s blades.

“No, it makes sense,” she continued. “You wanted to win, but lost due to factors outside of your control. It happens to the best of us.”

DK paused. That was perhaps the nicest thing anyone had said to him about losing a League game. It was usually a storm of bad insults and direct criticisms about him, to which DK learned to expect it.

But positive thinking *from someone else?* That was new.

“I, uh, thank you.”

“Don’t sweat it,” she said back. “A good warrior always finds a way to keep on fighting. Someone’s got to pick up that ax, right?”

DK curled his lips down, and then he glanced away out of shyness. His best angle to look at was straight out the window. “I guess. Um, were you going to say something earlier or...”

The end of that sentence never left his lips. It may have been peaceful in the shop, but a different thing caught DK’s attention out on the streets.

Light snowfall covered the sidewalks and ended where tires ground up the sleet on the road. No guardrails stopped passers-by from jaywalking about the street, and the roads were barely big enough for one lane.

The setting did not bother DK nearly as much as who he spotted. A wayward toddler squatting on the side, toy truck in hand, eerily close to the road. His attention was not even close to

his mother, who had seemingly stood idly by with no hands-on her child.

DK finally rose from his seat. "I, uh, need to get outside. 'Scuse me."

It was a feeling, the pull of a 50 lb weight tugging at his stomach and intestines. DK always hated that feeling. It precluded one of Uncle Ken's drunken episodes. He felt it when someone was about to barge into his room and yell about "dishonor" and the usual depressing stuff his elders dumped on him.

His gut was never wrong. Something bad was going to happen here, right on the side of the road, and DK knew it.

Insta's coldest model stared at him with curiosity. "What's happening?"

He smiled back at his new friend. "I'll explain later! Just watch my stuff, would you?"

DK could have been wrong. Maybe he was being paranoid. But he didn't want to stay on his butt and find out.

He lumbered to his shaky feet, stuffed his twitching hands in his navy blue parka's pockets, and left the café without another glance back.

The girl he left behind stared back startled, as if this were the first time someone served her raw vinegar instead of a latte.

DK could always find a way to explain himself, right? But the toddler needed someone *now*. Chilled air prickled his skin. Hot blood shot through his veins. Even now, he had to ask himself the big question:

Why did DK not look the other way?

The child waddled out to the open road. His teetering feet barely supported his weight, and the clueless look in his eyes showed no fear. They only had doe-eyed wonder at the world.

And a van was about to run the kid over.

DK's heart sank, and his eyes widened with horror. The child's mother had mere seconds to scream. She was not at all prepared to catch her child. DK was closer.

Ten seconds.

Don Kuan was never a patient kid. He even insisted that everyone call him by DK because it rolled off the tongue quickly.

Nine.

DK was entirely aware that he did not help strangers. But he could still see the horrified stare of the child's mother and hear her horrified scream about to leave her throat. DK almost felt like screaming too.

Seven.

"Screw it." The words barely escaped his lips as he leapt over the curb.

Five.

He rushed in one stride and threw out his arms in the second. Both hands wrapped around the toddler's shirt and overalls.

Four.

Don clenched his jaw and looked away from the headlights. The van was mere inches away from running him over.

Two.

He had to try. DK always hated quitting.

One.

Tires screeched. Horns blared. Rubber ground against the asphalt as the steel and iron of the truck screamed in horror. His body froze to brace for impact.

But the feel of something soft and warm pressed against his forehead.

A hand.

A human hand?

DK opened his eyes. Five fingers poked out of the sleeve of a bright pink tracksuit.

"Mortals," Insta's coldest model bemused. "Always finding a way to surprise me."

Her other hand, fingers stretched and fanned out, thrust out towards the van. None of her fingers touched the pocked and frosted bumper.

Yet the large, white van had stopped dead in its tracks. It was as if someone had made an invisible airbag big enough to catch a moving car.

Wait a minute...

And it dawned on DK what just happened.

“Who are you?” he finally asked.

Instagram’s secret superhero put her hands down, brushed an invisible speck of dirt on her jacket, and offered her hand as if DK were supposed to kiss it.

“Ishtar, Goddess of Venus, Love, Fertility, and War,” she declared as-a-matter-of-a-factly as if this were another day in Brooklyn. “You may approach me, mortal.”

DK leaned back, fingers finally releasing the boy to collapse on his rear end. The beginnings of a primal wail escape the toddler’s throat, but DK hardly noticed in the aftermath of his own survival. The mother finally gathered her wits and grabbed her child from DK’s hands.

“Thank you,” she choked, though the words were not meant for him. The mother’s attention was entirely on Ishtar.

Speaking of which, the goddess in pink sweats smiled and made a power-pose fit for Wonder Woman. Fists balled, legs planted at shoulder-width, and hands at her hips. Big bright smile to boot.

She glanced down at DK. “Be proud, mortal. For your courage, I have anointed you as my avatar on—”

DK finally sprung to his feet. “Maybe we should get out of the road first.”

Ishtar stared back. “Excuse me, I was introducing myself for—”

“Get out of the road!” a deeper, saltier man yelled from the driver’s seat of the van.

A loud horn blared after the driver’s curse. Evidently, he hadn’t cared that some girl in pink caught his van. But he was absolutely livid about someone stopping him.

That was the mother’s cue to rush to the driver’s window and turn her panic into her own rage.

DK nearly whistled. He had never heard a lady swear like a salty sailor, well, ever. Ishtar nearly spat an actual curse at the guy, but DK grabbed her hand.

“Hey!”

Almost immediately, Ishtar’s face flushed with rage and her eyes threatened to shoot lasers at his face. Could Ishtar do that?

She was either a real goddess or a superhero with more than one power.

DK wished he had asked before wrapping four fingers around her wrist. He cleared his throat, this time with his voice calmer for a mere mortal.

“Ish, uh, your highness? Look, we should get off the road. I’ll say more when we’re out of here, alright?”

Ishtar stared back at him, to her wrist, and back at the kid holding it. The Goddess pouted, obviously offended that a mere mortal was telling her what to do.

But the situation was dicey enough to make her wipe that scowl off her divine face. Plus, the other mother was still swearing her head off with a child in tow.

“Fine, fine,” Ishtar lamented with her bottom lip putting out. “Where to?”



2 – GOD IS A WOMAN

Brooklyn weather always sucked this time of year.

DK at least had the sense to dress for the weather. He tugged at the parka and jeans wrapped around his dangly arms and legs. He secretly hoped that today would not end in more bizarre affairs, but there was an actual goddess walking right next to him.

Anything could happen now. It was entirely likely for a Winter-pocalypse to happen, as if Thanos decided to snap his fingers to spite Earth for its many sins.

I wonder if Ishtar watches superhero movies too?

The thought crossed DK's mind, but he had not said much since the two of them left Plug and Play. The air was quite dead actually. Entirely reasonable seeing as how he narrowly escaped dying and stuff.

Ishtar walked beside the “mere mortal” she just met fifteen minutes ago. She held her head high, though her red nose threatened to sneeze for the umpteenth time today.

Maybe she did not want to embarrass herself after that grand show earlier. She was being awfully quiet too. Ishtar stole a glance back, and then turned as if she was not just peeking at him.

Wait.

She was *waiting* for him to start the conversation. Right?

DK cleared his throat and began with, “You sure you don’t want anything from a bodega? Like coffee or a bagel?”

“I’m fine.”

Oops. DK read the atmosphere wrong.

Ishtar opened her mouth to sneeze, but she sucked in a burst of air through her bright red nose. Silence. No sneezing this time, so that seemed to quell the itch in her sinuses. Ishtar stood tall as she walked, perhaps as regal as someone frigid cold could be.

DK shrugged and looked over his shoulder. Whatever worked for a god, he supposed.

“Ok, I think we’re in the clear,” he continued. “Wanna talk indoors or out here?”

The goddess in a pink tracksuit folded her arms, but he suspected that it was more to keep herself warm than to look tough. She reminded him of a strawberry-flavored Popsicle.

"Indoors, of course," she replied. "Your home will have to do. I'm not staying out here for another second if we can be anywhere else!"

DK curved his mouth upward and rubbed his chin. "How about a Starbucks?"

"Well, do they have heated blankets?"

"I sure don't."

"Watch your tone mort—oah—*aahhh choo!*"

The thought caught in her throat as Ishtar sneezed. She hid the lower half of her face. No doubt she needed to wipe her nose out of his sight.

DK secretly wished he kept a pack of tissues in his pockets, if only for a bizarre situation like the one he was stuck in right now.

As his gaze slipped down, he spotted something small pointing out of the cuff of Ishtar's pants. Specifically, five small appendages stuck out and dug into the frigid snow. They were pink, red from chills and—

Oh. She's barefoot.

DK had to force himself to look away. How could anyone stand, well, *standing* in snow with no shoes? Ishtar's feet were just trotting through the white frostiness as if this were another uncomfortable day in the park.

But was he surprised? Probably not, considering Ishtar was sniffing and shivering this whole time. This looked awful for her too. She stifled another sneeze.

A familiar tug in DK's gut found a new hold on his heartstrings. "My place then," he relented. "Your highness, if you would follow me."

Ishtar, the goddess of war, wiped her running nose with her sleeve again, and went back to folding her arms together. On top of finding a warm blanket, she definitely needed a trip to the laundromat after this.

"V-very well mortal," she declared. "Take me to your house. You *do* have a house, right?"

DK shrugged. "It's got a radiator. Will that work?"

The goddess nodded. "It will do. Lead the way."

She would not admit it aloud, but the signs were clear. Ishtar was definitely unprepared for winter. A polyester tracksuit did nothing to help with the 30-degree wind whipping at their heads. She was walking around snowy Brooklyn dressed for sunny California weather. There was no way she was fine in a polyester jacket and drawstring trousers.

DK secretly suspected that Thanos' cold snap would come any second now.

He carried his backpack, laden with his laptop, mouse, and charging cable, which he had tossed in to get out as quickly as possible. The other customers at the Plug and Play definitely saw the scene out there.

Too much attention was bad in DK's experience. To top it off, Ishtar looked like she needed a hot shower, not the press or the cops pushing her for a statement.

"We're here," DK announced for his divine new friend.

DK stopped and glanced at Ishtar's shivering, annoyed form. He followed her skyward gaze up to his apartment complex. As she grew a scowl across her dry and cracked lips, DK was almost tempted to do the same.

Ishtar finally declared, "You live in a dump."

"I know."

They stood at the entrance of Sunnyland Apartments, one of many thrifty complexes for housing Brooklyn's Chinatown residents. The cold, beige walls towered twenty stories over their heads, sand-colored concrete stacked like the bastion of a derelict castle from England, and not the exciting kind of tourist trap either.

But since this was Brooklyn housing, plenty of filth stood in plain sight. Dirt caked the ground level walls. Acid rain melted the paint into dead pastel shades. No shortage of grime and moss stained every air conditioning unit, which stuck out as boxes wedged feebly in adjacent apartment windows.

Not the best place to take a girl, or a divine one, on their first visit to Brooklyn. But it was home.

"You know what?" Ishtar added, fighting the urge to clatter her teeth from the chills shaking her skull. "Your trash pile of a house is fine. Just get this door open, would you?"

"Yes, your highness," DK muttered as he fished for his ring of keys. "And I don't own the whole thing. Just one room in it."

"I figured," Ishtar fumed. "Do you think I'm a simpleton? And I'm not a princess, you know."

The lock clicked below DK's frigid fingers as he twisted the key in the threshold. As soon as the front door unlocked, Ishtar wasted no time to push herself right in.

"Coming through!"

Sunnyland may have been far from perfect, but the entrance lobby at least had the presentation of a Hallmark postcard and tolerable air. The tiled floor at their feet had a pseudo-marble texture to the surface to make their complex grand. Not fancy, but not bad either. It was home for DK and his other friends when they needed to hang out.

Wonder if Mira is home?

DK imagined she was busy with tomorrow's preparations for her annual Christmas party, but he would find out after seeing Ishtar to his apartment.

Sunnyland's lobby displayed scented candles wafting the aroma of pine trees to compliment the homely air heating unit flushing throughout the first floor. Lukewarm wind washed over the two of them, and that was enough to make Ishtar bite down on her curt commentary of the apartment complex.

"Much better," Ishtar sighed with relief. "Much, much better."

Clearly, a 60-degree climate was closer to her element. As soon as she entered the lobby, her expression loosened and curved to a slight smile. Her cheeks flushed with rosy color as soon as the cold left her frozen face.

Ishtar rubbed her hands together to get more heat in her fingertips. "You were saying, mortal?" she asked.

DK had not realized he forgot to breathe for five seconds. All his attention fixed on her. He stood entirely idle with one hand holding the front door wide open and with the cold wind whipping at his back.

Did his heart stop for a second too?

Goddess of Love. Right. Doesn't surprise me that she's cute.

And like that, DK bit his lower lip at that last treacherous thought. Mira would not let him hear the end of his crush if she ever found out about Ishtar.

He wiped away his concern as soon as Ishtar turned to check his expression. "Didn't mean to stare," said DK. "No offense."

Instagram's coldest model smirked back. "None taken, mortal. You may bask in my splendor."

As if an imaginary photographer were on the spot, Ishtar stood with one hand on her hip and red nose held high. She would have struck a great pose for a cover girl model.

But DK just did not care.

"Uh, right," he finally said. "Let's get to my place."

DK finally sealed the door behind him. The automated lock churned its inner mechanisms and sealed the door behind him. Thanks to that, the cold air was no longer a hindrance to their belated, if not strange, explanation for the last hour.

A beat passed, and Ishtar dropped her arms in defeat. "Fine, fine. I need some hot water anyway. You at least have that, don't you?"

"Sure. For drinking or for a shower?"

That warm smile came back to her complexion again, if not for a serious reason. "*Drinking* water, silly," Ishtar replied. "I never get dirty."

He wasted no time to point to an elevator at the end of the lobby. DK pushed a button to call the car down.

Silence greeted the two of them. No one else could bother them inside Sunnyland's lobby. Most of DK's neighbors either were at work elsewhere or locked behind the warm, padlocked doors of their apartments. In that soundless space, a different thought passed through DK's mind.

“Earlier, you were saying something about anointing me?” he inquired. “What was that about?”

To that, Ishtar bitterly smiled back. “I did say that. And I was about to explain before someone rudely interrupted me.”

“The van driver?”

“Sure. Him. I thought it would be a waste to let someone as selfless like you to become, well, a smear on the road. So I anointed you as my avatar on Earth.”

The a-word still stuck out in DK’s mind. “What do you mean, ‘anointed?’” he pushed more for his own clarity. “Like you’re saying I’m the chosen one or something?”

Ishtar paused, perhaps stunned by the blunt and stupid question. When she saw the dumbfounded expression on DK’s face, a bubble of laughter escaped her lungs and she bent over to try to hide the smirk on her face.

“Chosen one?” she sputtered out. “Seriously? No no no. I *anointed* you. There’s a difference.”

Again, the definition of “anointed” escaped DK’s memory. Confusion must have plagued his face some more, because Ishtar definitely noticed.

“A god can choose, ah, *select* mortal men and women to represent them on Earth. But the tasks we ask from anointed mortals are harmless. If I were to actually ‘choose you,’ it would be for a terrible task I expect you to succeed in. Like a quest to steal an apple from a monster or something.”

“So I’m not chosen?” asked DK.

“Anointed. That’s the difference. But now, you are under my protection as long as I can find use for you.”

Ishtar’s words may have been clear, but that only led to more questions popping up in DK’s mind.

Was she telling the truth about anointing him?

Did Ishtar mean to anoint him when they met at the coffee shop?

Were there other gods?

A much simpler question finally came to light in DK’s mind. At least he knew when to mind his manners.

“So may I call you by your first name?” DK asked earnestly. “If we’re in a working relationship, I mean. And you can

do the same for me. 'Cause it's weird being called 'mortal' all the time, you know?"

"Perhaps." Ishtar raised an eyebrow at the thought. "But you are a mortal, are you not?"

"I also have a name," he insisted. "You know. The thing that makes it easier to ID people you just met? And it's gonna get weird if I keep up the princess act."

The thought mulled around Ishtar's brain, as her gaze changed from surprise to contemplation. Her expression grew dour by the end of his request.

Was DK wrong to say the word "princess?" It was only a couple seconds, but a different thought passed through DK's brain too late.

She could kill me if she felt like it. Oops.

DK did not know the politics of speaking with a god. Were you supposed to be super polite all the time? Or if you were anointed, could you risk being lippy and hope that the god didn't smite you where you stood?

He held his breath and awaited Ishtar's answer. She finally cleared her throat.

"Very well, mor— uh, what was your name again?"

Ishtar knotted her eyebrows, as if *this* was the hardest question she heard today. She shrugged it off and went on.

"In any case, I will allow you to call me by my name. I don't appreciate being called 'your highness' when the title hardly suits me."

DK blinked. "'Your highness' doesn't suit a god?"

"No, silly mortal. What could be higher than me?"

Ishtar beamed with a smile, which flipped to a forlorn scowl as a different idea came to her mind. "A lot of things, actually. But never mind that. What is your name?"

"DK," he introduced himself, giving a slight bow with a hand to his heart. "At your service. Pleasure to meet you, Ishtar."

Ishtar found her smile again, and a bit more rosiness came back to her cheeks. "Dee-Kay. Why does your name sound familiar?"

DK wondered if he should tell the full story of his self-titled nickname, or that it was the exact name of a licensed video game character. That was *always* the first question regular people asked him about his chosen name.

And that was the moment the elevator arrived. Its pair of rickety metal doors wrestled themselves open to reveal the wood-tiled car inside.

“Let’s talk more in my apartment.”



3 – I, DK, HAVE A DREAM

By the time DK set up his laptop again, Ishtar already marked her territory in the living room.

She spread her entire body out on his couch when DK last left her. The air hummed with the sound of his rickety radiator injecting freshly warmed air into his home. It would have made a great sauna if there were not cloth cushions for the moist heat to ruin.

Most of the heated current washed over Ishtar's sprawled body, and she was delighted to soak it all up. The old radiator may have been a relic from the early 2000's, but at least it kept her and DK's apartment at a comfortable temperature.

Ishtar's fingers and toes flushed from red to room temperature pink. As she got comfortable, the room got warmer as well.

"Much better, Dee-Kay," she said, then sat up, crossed her legs, and laid back in her cushioned seat. "Grapes, please."

"I don't have those," DK already turned on his heels and left the living room.

The goddess fumed silently, but at least she was busy heating herself up instead of berating her human host for being inhospitable.

"Anointed," she muttered below her breath. "What am I going to do with you?"

DK paid that last whisper no mind. He had some water to boil.

It took a minute for the entire space to heat to 70 degrees Fahrenheit, and he had half a mind to ask if Ishtar wanted it to be warmer.

DK called out as he searched his meager pantry. "How about instant ramen?"

"No need, Dee-Kay," Ishtar replied as she sprawled out on her new bed. "This pleases me. You may fetch me some grapes and wine."

"I said I don't have either of those," he replied as he scavenged the cupboards for more emergency food. There was

hardly anything fit for a god in these dusty cupboards. "You want Hot Pockets and hot water instead?"

He poked his head back to the living room.

Ishtar pouted back at him.

DK would not have imagined a picky child wrapped in pink to hold back her scowl with the most "elegant" façade she could make. But that was who he was looking at: Ishtar the Goddess of Venus, Love, and War.

Was she joking about that earlier?

DK had to wonder that in silence, or else Ishtar would smite him for asking an ego-bruising question.

The goddess in question relented and leaned further into her cushions. "Fine. Just make it quick."

Approximately three minutes later, DK marked his own territory in the apartment. The kitchen, the bathroom, and his own bedroom would do. The three places he definitely needed to call himself home.

If Ishtar was taking the living room, he needed to mark his designated spot. There was also no guest room to spare, so DK figured a couch was a good substitute for his semi-permanent guest.

A water boiler sizzled on the kitchen counter. The decimated remains of a Hot Pocket lay on a ceramic plate, and DK made sure to get the thing prepped for a few minutes in the microwave. Ishtar's snack was getting a trip in the microwave oven.

What is the polite way to present fast food to a goddess?

This was almost like offering an animal sacrifice. DK had to hold that thought in before he let a scoff escape his clenched lips.

As the meal was basically ready to go, DK set up his laptop again. The device was charging again, and he had already fired it up for another session of League whenever he could start. Preferably after tending to his guest.

No sense letting his senses dull. He had to practice any and every minute he could.

If Ishtar would have the living room, which was the largest space in his place, then DK would have the microwave, fridge,

sink, and stove to himself. He certainly felt like he got the better deal out of this non-verbal arrangement.

“Dee-Kay?” Ishtar called from her seat on the couch. “I hope you actually have something warm to eat in your home.”

“Relax, I’m boiling the water now. Do you still want those Hot Pockets? I’ve got pizza burritos heating up now.”

“That would be lovely.”

DK silently wondered when the last time someone had called a Hot Pocket “lovely.” But he put the thought aside as he slipped the frozen food into his microwave.

“Do you take tea? I have some packs from the store, but I don’t think they’re too fresh.”

A few distinct clicking noises came from the living room. Something dense scraped across the floorboards quickly followed those.

What was Ishtar doing in the other room?

“Ridiculous,” she said over the suspicious sounds. “Tea is a preserved good. The only way to ruin it is to expose the leaves to moisture.”

DK held the electric water boiler in his hands. Frothing hot fluid sloshed inside. His other hand touted an empty mug for his divine guest. He turned about and re-entered the same room as the goddess.

As he stepped out to see what she was doing, DK stopped frozen in his tracks. He fought the newfound urge to yell incoherently at the pink splattered across his living room.

“What?” his guest asked innocently.

Ishtar had wasted no time to redecorate her space with a few *noticeable* changes.

Who was DK kidding? The new living room was horrendous to his eyes.

The entire couch turned bright pink. Gaudy strawberry ice cream pink canvas retouched the cushions, and DK suspected they got stuffed with more cotton. The coffee table at the center was cleansed of all its nicks and scratches atop the surface from years of parties and zero polish. It almost looked like cheap plastic. The air even smelled of fruity perfume as well.

“How did you repaint everything?”

Ishtar laughed. “Paint? No no, I *transmuted* your couch. I’m afraid my power is not so paltry as that. You’re in the presence of a girl who can turn anything and everything into whatever I want!”

“Like a bright pink couch?”

She clapped. “Now you’re getting it! And check out my new shrine!”

Ishtar directed his attention to the other side of the living room. DK did just that, and he immediately regretted that decision.

The biggest offense was the TV on the wall. Well, it *used* to be on the wall. It hardly existed now. DK hung his slack jaw open and he nearly dropped his water pitcher on the floor.

“Did... did you blow up my TV?”

“No worries.” Ishtar beamed back and held up her hands like a showgirl at a car show. “It’s a shrine dedicated to me!”

A shrine.

Of course it was a shrine for a god.

The old Sony TV was a boxy old thing from the ancient year of 2004, and the glass screen burst wide open. Now it was a black, plastic husk housing something reeking of incense.

DK knew the smell from anywhere; a weird cocktail smelling like legal marijuana and jasmine perfume. His grandparents always lit the stuff whenever he and his family came to visit.

That pungent smell definitely leaked out of the husk that used to be his television set. Ishtar’s new shrine stuffed itself with that strange new fragrance. Six different lit sticks, like the world’s smelliest firecracker sparklers, radiated long smoke trails into the cramped air.

The incensed lights surrounded the cavity that *used* to have a working TV, and that space was stocked with printed, polaroid pictures.

All of those little photos were of a specific goddess, who mugged for the camera with kisses and smiles. There were at least a dozen of them sitting upright. Ishtar proudly beamed from every picture, and the real goddess grinned from ear to ear at the sight of her own face.

It was official. DK had a new shrine to a foreign god in his living room. Courtesy of Ishtar, of course.

Speaking of which, she asked, "Do you like it?"

He could only grimace. "I'm missing a TV now."

"No, I repurposed it," she declared nonchalantly. Ishtar kicked up her dainty feet on the refurbished coffee table and sat back in her new pink cushions. "As your resident goddess, I like seeing my followers being taken care of. I think the old thing couldn't play a DVD."

There was a rather different thought at the tip of DK's tongue, but he swallowed it down. Not that he was scared, but he was too annoyed to feel anything else.

"Your hot water is here, Ishtar." He sullenly declared like the world's saddest waiter. "I'll get your Hot Pockets too."

Water was served, and that was that. He did not want to show Ishtar his pout.

Now was a good time for League.

Once DK served the baked treats on a plate, he slipped that at Ishtar's new coffee table and retreated back to the kitchen. Ishtar said nothing, though he could feel her gaze lingering on his back as he turned and retreated to the kitchen. DK's laptop was still there, on the table and ready to go.

One game then. Time to get my mind off the fact that my TV smells like weed forever.

DK logged in without a second thought and found his way to the in-game lobby. He made sure to keep one Hot Pocket to himself as a snack. These last few months, DK painfully learned two things about playing his favorite MOBA video game:

1. It took a lot of playtime to get good at League
2. It still took plenty of practice to stay good at League

He found his groove as soon as the game loaded in. His avatar picked up his battle-ax and ran for his designated lane.

"GLHF," he typed in the team chat. It helped to be polite to start on a good note.

No reply.

The other people in the lobby were not in the mood to talk either.

The next thirty minutes was the typical blur. Micro managing yourself in League took a lot of concentration, and he already knew that alone was hard. Muscle memory kicked in when his brain laid back.

What happened in the next half hour? Apparently, a lot. Before he knew it, DK was dead for the umpteenth time and watching his team's Nexus get beaten to death again.

At least this isn't for the Tourney.

That last thought still put a bad taste to the Hot Pocket in mouth. He had to forget that his last big game ended abysmally earlier today.

"Playing again?"

DK nearly flipped his laptop over again. He shot his gaze behind his shoulder. Ishtar, with a trail of cheese and pepperoni trailing from her teeth, was still gorging herself in a Hot Pocket.

"Yeah, I felt like it." DK defiantly declared. He closed out the League client to turn his whole attention to the goddess. "Were you watching me the whole time?"

Ishtar nodded, and then slurped up the rest of her melted, cheesy meal. "I'm not going to pretend I understand this war game—"

"League," he piped up.

The goddess waved her hand to dismiss his snippy remark. "Whatever. But it seems like this game has you obsessed over it."

DK shook his head. "I'm not obsessed."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Really! I'm not!"

Ishtar did not budge. Eerie quietness blanketed the claustrophobic kitchen as she stared him down.

"Okay, maybe a little obsessed," DK confessed.

To his relief, Ishtar eased up on the doubtful leering. "So why do you play it? Is it fun?"

He nodded, but that did not diminish the look Ishtar gave right him.

Doubt.

Interest.

Ishtar's expression was not malicious, but the face Ishtar gave him was one that he could not ignore. She was a god older than him, after all, not a simpleton. How else would she know which questions would push his buttons?

Now was a good time as any to say what was really on DK's mind.

"I want to get into the collegiate League," he said. "For the University, I mean. The really good players do it for a degree, like football players and stuff. But to become that good, I need to prove I can use the keyboard and mouse and stand toe-to-toe with the best players out there."

To that, Ishtar raised an eyebrow higher than before. "You want to play video games for your college?"

"Uh huh, for a college degree. There's a scholarship for students who make it into the group and prove they can dedicate themselves to this game. And if I'm lucky, I can drop my current major to graduate with that program."

The word spilled out before he knew it. DK always had that dream, as silly as it sounded. No one in his family would have taken him seriously. They would laugh and never let him hear the end of his dumb dream.

Was this the first time he ever confessed it to someone else? DK doubted anyone else would take him up on his word if he said his dream was to play video games to pass college.

As luck would have it, Ishtar was still listening. No snide remarks yet, and she leaned in patiently to hear what else DK had to say to his guest.

"Maybe I just like working with my fingers," DK explained some more. "And aiming with the mouse helps. Those things take skill. Mechanical practice to push buttons at the right time, and tactical thinking to fight correctly. When I do that right, I feel good."

Ishtar mulled that thought around with a few specks of pepperoni bits between her teeth. She swallowed that and faced DK.

"This war game, League, doesn't seem like the kind of thing to ease your mind."

Her tone was solid, consistent, and without judgment. Ishtar might have been patronizing, but that made sense about a god who was definitely older and wiser than DK was. Ishtar set down her plate and continued.

"I've been watching you, and you haven't smiled once since you played."

"Because someone blew up my TV."

Ishtar pouted. A retort bubbled behind her eyes, but a different thought engulfed that one. Ishtar's glance became more pensive as she stared him down, and then focused on the laptop running League, and back to him.

DK already anticipated her next order: quit the game. He had heard it too many times from mom and dad, and he was not in the mood to hear it again from a goddess.

"You feel good when you do things right, huh?" Ishtar smiled mischievously. "Dee-Kay, I hate to be *that* kind of angel on your shoulder, but would you like to win?"

"I'm not gonna quit..." DK felt the sentence get stuck in his throat. "Wait, did you say win?"

Ishtar made her power pose again, like Wonder Woman earlier today when she stopped the van. "Yes, my anointed one. It is only fair after you aided me in my time of need. And it *was* a bit mean to repurpose your TV without asking you first."

It was not an apology, but DK was happy to hear Ishtar offer her help, which begged a few more questions in his brain.

"But you've never played League before. What are you gonna do?"

Ishtar held her hands aloft and along an invisible weapon. Based on the way she held her arms, she was wielding her own battle-axe with two hands.

"A warrior always must be aware of his effective range," Ishtar explained as she swung about to demonstrate. "For you, your battle-axe's effective range is the length of your weapon. That would be, what, one inch on your screen? I suggest you always stay one step out of your own reach. Bait your opponent to engage, outmaneuver him, and hit him back before he can blink!"

DK blinked. That explanation sounded very educated for someone who never played a MOBA before. But it sounded crazy enough to work.

“So you have played a video game before?”

The goddess laughed. “Yes, Mario Kart!” Ishtar beamed with pride. “Items on, Rainbow Road only. It’s harder than it sounds!”

The goddess smiled wide as if that was the best testament she could bestow to planet Earth.

DK held his smirk behind a clenched fist. Rainbow Road was easily the *worst* place to race in a Mario Kart game, but whatever. Ishtar’s advice sounded solid. He opened his laptop and glanced at the League client once more.

“OK, your highness.”

“Ishtar!” she chided her host. “We’re on a first name basis. Hurry up and show me what you can do, Dee-Kay!”