Breaking Space-Time

by RebelPaisley

Summary

A renegade criminal is making alterations to the time stream, and it is Alex's mission to rectify the time alterations while maintaining a low profile. He manages pretty well, up until the moment he accidentally recruits Hunter Bradley into his mission. Neither one of them are particularly happy about this. Or each other.

Hunter thinks this is somewhat justified, but Alex just wants to do his job. This may or may not take longer than they expected it to. They also may or may not grow to find some redeeming qualities in each other. It's unfortunate, really.
Doing it Wrong

Chapter Notes

It is less crazy than it sounds, I swear. This fic is to mark my seventh anniversary as a writer, which is still kind of mind boggling. Thanks to all of you who’ve read my past stories, for any who have reviewed or messaged me – and to you hopping onboard the crazy train for the first time, welcome! Thanks for stopping by :)

For those of you wondering, Alex is the original red Time Force ranger who brought in Ransik in the future during Power Rangers Time Force. Ransik kills him right before his escape into the past, prompting Jen and company to follow him, but he does get a few more appearances in the season due to alternations of the time stream. This story takes place after the events of Power Rangers Time Force.

As always, I owe a great deal of thanks and appreciation towards the incomparable the_real_vampire for being an attentive beta and sounding board throughout this entire process, and also to Kei_LS for additional beta-ing and constant enthusiasm. You two are peaches, and this story would not be anything close to what it is today without them. If you are looking for additional power rangers stories, check out My Brother’s Keeper by The Real Vampire, or The Art of Cohesion by Kei_LS. Both are good reads : )

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“In case you were wondering-”

“I wasn’t.”

“Oh, I know,” the voice replied, unperturbed. Almost civil, even. “But in case you were-”

“Because I don’t care-”

“-wondering, in a hypothetical world where you are not an asshole-”

“Because you are irritating-”

“Difficult to conceive, I know, but bear with me here-”

“If life had a mute button I would use it, repeatedly-”

“Then I would say-”

“Solely on you-”

“-and you would hear-”

“You are that obnoxious-”

“-that you’re doing it wrong.”

At that Alex paused, hands posed above his head, one gripping his makeshift lock pick, the other
firmly holding his datapad, which was doing its very best to explain the basics of breaking and entering. Trying, and falling woefully short; as it would seem the theory was much different than the actual practice.

Instead of asking the obvious question, because that would only goad the teen and Alex rather valued his sanity, the brunette deflected, rocking back on his heels as he risked a glance in the other ranger’s direction, the familiar feeling of regret a steady and constant companion.

Unsurprising, considering the company he now kept.

“And you would know this how?” Alex asked, allowing an eyebrow to raise suggestively, the slight inference that one should not possess such criminal skill sets as loud and brazen as the blond’s usual sarcastic bite.

For the most part, the blond looked unimpressed.

With a weary sigh, Hunter pointed to himself. “Ninja.”

He let the one word speak for itself.

At that point, Alex didn’t bother trying to argue (he wouldn’t have; it would have just been perceived as arguing, and then it would be fifteen minutes later and nothing would be done). Instead he moved on, changing the course of the conversation slightly while still continuing his assigned task.

“It’s a window lock,” Alex said, frowning at the worn down object that dared to hamper their mission. “Hardly the most complicated of mechanisms.”

“And yet,” Hunter began, making impatient grabby hands at Alex’s tool. “Still one of the first things they taught us to break into.”

Begrudgingly, Alex allowed himself to be relieved of his equipment and moved, taking over Hunter’s old position of lookout.

The fact that Hunter hadn’t ended the sentence with “And yet, you seem remarkably incompetent” would indicate a certain amount of tolerance that Alex should attempt to emulate. As the more mature one.

“Just give me a few seconds,” Hunter said, tongue peaking out the side of his mouth, the picture of utter concentration. “And we can go back to screwing with people’s lives.”

“Mending the time stream.” The correction was habitual more than it was effective; Alex having long given up on actually conveying this concept to the crimson ranger.

“Whatever,” Hunter replied, flippant and uncaring. “You do what you need to cope.”

“Can I-?”

“Except for murder me.”

Damn it.

Alex said nothing after that, ignoring Hunter’s gleeful smile at his (totally veiled annoyance), keeping quiet even when the blond began a jaunty whistle.

Because that was just…the best thing to do when trying to be stealthy.
Alex didn’t rise to the bait. He didn’t rise to it and he didn’t indulge in the useless exercise of wondering how his life had come to be this way, knowing too well from previous perusals that he was completely aware of the moment things had gone downhill.

Alex was unfairly honest with himself that way.

There could have been, at one point, a time where Alex appreciated Hunter Bradley. For his skills, if not the company he provided. The blond was a strong fighter who adapted to his surroundings with the fluidity and grace of an accustomed professional, and bore a strong potential for future works.

Their initial meeting had not been under the best circumstances, so Alex had not been foolish enough to assume that their… arrangement would be smoothly transitioned to, but he had hopes that both their maturity and their duty as rangers would outweigh any petty squabbles they might have.

He had been wrong.

Very wrong.

Alex didn’t like his tagalong.

He didn’t like the fact he was there; he didn’t like the company, and he certainly didn’t like the lack of dedication to subtle stealth tactics, despite his tagalong repeatedly claiming his training had specialized in them. Alex had been doubtful of the existence of ninjas – despite Time Force’s insistence – so when he had been given his mission he’d simply nodded and accepted any run-ins with said quasi-suppositional stealth forces as a distant possibility. Alex had never expected it to go beyond the hypothetical. Mostly because Alex’s mission emphasized quick and efficient problem solving, rendering any interactions with the locals not only unnecessary, but undesired.

Not that this differed from how Alex normally approached things; on top of minimizing his effect on the time stream, he could easily admit he wasn’t the biggest fan of people.

Until this point that had always worked to his advantage, considering his occupation.

He hadn’t expected he would have to entertain company.

Captain Logan was going to kill him. Alex wasn’t sure how his current predicament could have been avoided - even in retrospect he couldn’t find a way - but the simple fact remained that it had been his responsibility to carry out mission plans undetected, and he had failed. That was all it came down to.

It was supposed to be a basic mission. The circumstances were new, but the goal was the same as any of his other assignments. There were small discrepancies in the time stream; fluctuations, actual events differing from their historical logs. It was little things, only small alterations, but they were snowballing. Normally Time Force wouldn’t feel the need to intervene, but all of these events seemed to be focusing on Ranger teams, especially those in the few years prior to and after Jen and the others fought Ransik back in 2001. Eventually they figured out a pattern, and decided a criminal specializing in time manipulation was the most probable culprit. Maybe a new mutant had stolen some of Time Force’s equipment, but whatever the cause, Captain Logan had immediately ordered their team into action, issuing Jen and the others the task of locating and neutralizing the threat, and Alex the job of correcting whatever alterations it had made.
The unfortunate fact of the matter - and the other primary cause to his current predicament - was that
time travel took time. Extensively long periods of preparing a time ship, setting course, and actually
traveling to said destination took time they simply didn’t have. The alterations the criminal had made
were already starting to affect the future, and if they didn’t act soon there might not be a time ship to
use. It wasn’t just the one change; it was the buildup, and Alex didn’t have the time to wait for the
ship to be prepared between each and every stop.

The solution to this problem came from Trip. The green ranger had fastened a device that worked
with Alex’s morpher, designed to take him to the designated periods requiring his adjustments. Once
there, Alex would be on a timer, given only a brief period to make whatever corrections were
necessary before the device automatically transported him to the next spot, and so on. Without the
burden of a ship, Alex’s trips would be much faster (if more dangerous). The program was designed
to go to the period most affected by the criminal, so Alex wouldn’t need to check in with Time Force
after every stop. Before the mission had started, he had considered this feature resourceful and
practical.

Unfortunately, he had become intimately acquainted with the downsides of this almost immediately.

It hadn’t helped that he had acquired his tagalong on his first stop.

There was a certain degree of shame he should probably be feeling because of this fact, but in the
end, Alex could only process the overwhelming feelings of anxiety.

Even he had his limits.

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Aside from the mild stinging – which was to be expected; Trip had pulled off quite a remarkable feat
so some side effects were bound to arise – Alex’s first trip hadn’t been too disorienting. Once he had
activated the device, there was merely a flash and the pain, and then a soft landing; the sterile white
floors of Time Force replaced with smooth wooden ones, a common mark of the twentieth to early
twenty-first century building design. According to Time Force’s databases, he was in an
underground stronghold known as ‘Ninja Ops’, utilized by the Ninja Storm team during their brief
period of activity. Based on the information Trip had given him, the base should be empty of its
usual occupants, giving Alex enough time to…

Alex tilted his head, realizing with a slight start he couldn’t actually remember what his first task had
been. Another side effect, perhaps?

No matter, despite the fact he was dressed to blend in with the locals, Alex still possessed some of his
more basic Time Force equipment, designed to fit in with the technological aesthetics of last
millennium. The data pad was small, framed to look like a PDA (more likely to fit into the earlier
ranger years of the late nineteen-nineties), and pulled up his assignment for this period easily.

There was a…console, somewhere, in the wall he had to tamper with. Some experiment he had to
make go awry. The fine text beneath the main objective elaborated the necessity for this, the phrases
“switching bodies” and “energy transfer” possibly floating to the surface, but Alex paid it little
attention. It would be better, ultimately, if he knew less. It was likely he would have to have his
mind erased anyway, but it never hurt to exercise caution. Such tactics had proven valuable to Alex
in the past.

Pun unintended, though Lucas – had he heard – would probably assume it was.

With the help of his datapad, the brunette located the designated panel and got down to business,
disconnecting a few key wires and putting everything back in complete order just as he was intended to. Odd, that the villain in this case would correct a malfunctioning experiment for the rangers, but perhaps there was more to this than it seemed. It was just as likely that the experiment going wrong greatly assisted the rangers, as opposed to hindering them.

It was irrelevant, at the end of it. Alex’s job was done, his device counting down the seconds until his next teleportation, and everything was as it should be.

Assuming it was intentional for one of the Ninja Storm Rangers to make an appearance.

Alex didn’t have much time to process it; he had been too busy staring at his timer, mentally preparing himself for the flare of pain just three seconds in the future, when another body charged into view with inhuman speed, on the offensive. Long, slender limbs made the trip all that quicker, the person tall and narrow, though obviously well-conditioned. His – and it was definitely a ‘him’ despite the shaggy, unkempt hair falling about him in mad disarray – movements were determined, threatening and somehow fluid and smooth all at once. Dangerous was the most prominent feature Alex’s mind digested, and then he was right before Alex, hands grabbing at his battered jacket, expression twisted in a snarl, body poised to shove the Time Force Ranger back against the wall for daring to intrude upon his lair.

He had moved with such agility that it took Alex a moment to process there was, in fact, a person in front of him, clearly as displeased with his presence as Alex was, and worse still, that was not a moment Alex actually had to waste.

Time waited for no man; timers existed for a reason – parameters – limitations existed because seconds could not be spared.

The blond opened his mouth, movements prolonged and muscles contracted as he began his push, began his interrogation, neither of which he would ever get to finish because the place where Alex stood was about to be filled with a whole lot of nothingness.

The lights flashed, just as the ranger’s expression took a furious turn, and the world was alight with pure brightness, the time warp painfully dazzling against Alex’s eyelids. It was enough to almost distract the Time Force agent from the jolt of pain flooding through his being, but neither were unbearable, and in a second, it had all passed.

Alex was at his next location.

That was the good news, Trip’s device worked as planned.

The bad news slightly outweighed the effectiveness of the good news.

Because as it just so happened, the other ranger – who was still gripping onto Alex’s jacket – had been transported too.

And he did not look pleased about it.

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“Where the hell-?” the scraggly blond began to ask, lips curled back in a snarl, giving no indication that the sudden teleportation had affected him in any way save for a slight shifting of his weight, rocking from one foot to another as though unable to find his center.

Were he a ninja - and the situation previously demonstrated was enough to suggest he was - things like grounding yourself and balance were probably important. A constant awareness of your
surroundings was vital to properly hide away from the world. At the moment, the blond before Alex was lacking both of these things and his patience, had it ever existed, was in short supply.

Though he could understand, it was ultimately irrelevant; Alex had a job to do.

With this in mind, Alex took no guilt from interrupting the teen.

“Quiet,” Alex murmured, spinning them so that the blond’s back was pressed against what appeared to be the side of a weathered building, the old bricks and metal trashcans hovering off in the peripheral of his vision confirming they were in an alley.

The red ranger’s actions earned a glare and an actual snarl. “Don’t you-”

“Quiet,” Alex repeated, eyes darting to the mouth of the alley to see if they had drawn the attention of any pedestrians. To this point, they remained unnoticed. “My name’s Alex Collins,” the brunette continued, knowing the ranger before him wouldn’t be satisfied unless he got some information, and quickly.

He didn’t like it, but allowing the ranger classified details was an excusable tradeoff to ensure they remained unseen.

“I’m a Red Time Force Ranger from the year 3001. I was tasked with correcting time permutations that were committed by a villain the rest of my team is currently hunting down.” Alex held up his morpher to the other man’s face, knowing the blond would pick up the similarities between their morphing devices. “I’m on a timer,” Alex continued, voice low and controlled.

Exposing this much of the future to someone one thousand years his junior fought against every instinct Time Force had ingrained into him, but it was necessary. Alex just had to keep reminding himself of that. “It seems like you were picked up as well. I suspect it has something to do with the nearness of our morphers at the time of transportation.”

Alex gave it a moment to sink in, watched the dirty blond process his words for a few seconds, still studying the Time Force Ranger through narrowed eyes, before allowing the teen some space. He backed away, making sure to keep a hold of the teen’s shoulder, and tried to assess his next move. Calling in to Headquarters seemed like the obvious choice.

“So let me get this straight.” The tone was drenched in sarcasm strong enough to break Alex from his thoughts, almost enough to cover up a mild disbelief. “You were helping us by breaking Cam’s computer setup?”

“Yes.” Alex was sure to keep his face stern and unreadable. “There’s supposed to be a malfunction.”

“Oh really,” the blond drawled, a statement more than a question, and he lounged back against the dirty bricks behind him, slow and languid even under Alex’s hold. “And what exactly was your next task, breaking someone’s morpher?”

Unlikely, but Alex doubted such a vague answer would satisfy his new charge.

Without taking his eyes from the blond, Alex pulled up his datapad, holding it up to eyelevel so that both it and the kid were in his view. “I need to relocate some items.”

“You have got to be the most helpful person in the world,” the teen deadpanned, eyes half-lidded.

Alex did not rise to the obvious bait.
“I don’t dictate the missions,” Alex replied, tone even. “Nor do I dictate history; I’m just trying to preserve it.”

“And what about me then?” the kid asked, head tilting forward, eyes flashing an obvious challenge. “If your little device is jumping you through history, haven’t you just displaced me?” He batted his eyes, almost playful to the untrained eye. Fortunately, Alex was familiar with the concept of mockery, and would not be so mistaken. “Looks like you might be breaking time more than fixing it.”

“A minor setback,” Alex deflected, smooth, calm. “I went to your time once; you can be returned.”

Trip, Captain Logan, and the rest of Time Force be willing, that was.

There was no need for Alex to elaborate on that particular front, fortunately.

The fact that the teen snorted in response was no comment on Alex’s neutral expression, or actual ability to discern something was wrong. He was merely grumpy, upset…hormonal, whatever teenagers usually were.

He had been one, at one point. Not that long ago. He understood the trepidation of-

Those were times Alex was generally better off not thinking about.

“Whatever,” the kid snorted, tiny smirk playing on his lips. “Call your boss, send me home. Just-make it so I don’t have to talk to you anymore.”

Alex would have been offended, if he didn’t entirely agree with this sentiment.

This kid was too…erratic, to maintain civil conversation with. The faster Alex could return him to his time, the better it would be for the mission.

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One less-than-successful call in to Time Force later, Alex was gifted with a new set of mission parameters.

The general gist of them were, as far as he could discern, ‘Take care of your mistake because we don’t have time to fix it for you’. Were Alex prone to dramatics, he would feel mildly wounded, maybe even embarrassed by how little support he was receiving, but ultimately such feelings were irrelevant to the job at hand. In essence, his superiors did have a point. He was a seasoned agent who knew what needed to be done to manage his missions. Suffering the consequences of his own miscalculations seemed a just enough fate, if not ideal.

The newest challenge then, would be the task of informing his recruit on the new information.

“That,” the teen began after the red ranger had returned from his short walk around the corner. “Is not the face of a conversation that has gone well.”

“New orders,” Alex confirmed, keeping on task. “You’re to remain with me until I’ve rectified the more pressing time alterations.”

“Are you serious?” the other ranger said, as if questioning the completeness of Alex’s mental facilities. “Or do you have a shitty sense of humor?”

They both knew the answer; the teen’s eyes, despite his tone, were serious and hard. It prompted
Alex to continue, ignoring the expletive. “Once I have made enough corrections, we can take you back home. Until then, we’re on a schedule.”

“So that’s it then?” It was a challenge, slightly bitter, resentment clear as anything. “I’m just supposed to follow you around?”

‘Yes’ seemed like the obvious answer. It also seemed like the one least likely to satisfy the blond, so Alex cut off the teen’s frustration with a simple delivery of facts.

“We’re in the year 1999,” he explained, watching as this dawned on the other ranger, his fists curling tight against his sides. Alex offered up his datapad for inspection. “You don’t have to believe me. You could ask around, get questioning looks for wondering what year it is.”

“Perhaps I will,” the kid countered, jaw tight, defiant.

Alex shrugged. “Perhaps. But when it’s ultimately confirmed, you’ll have a choice. You can stay here- out of time, unable to go to your old life because technically, you, the past version of yourself, is already here. Already living your life.”

Alex allowed that to sink in, knowing from the way the teen’s jaw set in a frown that he knew what his best options were.

Feeling generous, or at least, empathizing the feeling of displacement, Alex finished laying out the ranger’s options.

“Or, alternatively, you can come with me, a fellow ranger, who’s just trying to save people, like you do. I can get you home in a couple of days, maximum, instead of a couple of years.”

He took a breath, willing himself to stay patient, to fight away the nerves eating at his stomach, playing the cruel game of ‘what-ifs’ in his mind.

They were always present, but sometimes he was more successful in sequestering them to silence than others.

“Those are your choices,” he said quietly, not as a command. Not with derision. He wanted the other ranger to have some power, have the chance to make his own choice, so he wouldn’t feel trapped.

There was no point in obtaining cooperation if it was begrudging and laden with resentment. Not for this, not with this mission and this-

It wasn’t ideal. It wasn’t. But it was necessary.

“If you would,” Alex began slowly, feeling the words out with care. “Could we take the second option?”

He didn’t have time to waste for further persuasion. He knew it wasn’t his best sell, but the brunette wasn’t really known for being the type that inspired sentimental relationships. He was…a bit out of practice. And that had been forced upon him.

Except for Jen, but as in many aspects of his life, Jen defied previous expectations.

Eventually – to Alex’s relief – the blond sighed, head tilting back with a quiet thunk against the wall and eyes rolling to the sky in an example of pure exasperation.
“Fine,” the teen huffed begrudgingly, like he was doing Alex some kind of favor.

Which, he sort of was, but seeing as Alex was returning the sentiment—

Irrelevant. He had agreed, he would stick close to Alex, help him finish the mission and, so long as Alex kept a close watch on his timer, all would be well.

They just had to keep an eye on the time.

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“So, what needs to be broken?”

“This time? Nothing,” Alex said, taking the steady volume of the kid’s voice as a measure of his proximity, knowing that he was trailing just a few steps behind. “We need to relocate some papers.”

Travel documents, by the look of them. Along with the papers, the list scrolling across Alex’s datapad included a passport and few other odds and ends, small things that would build on top of one another if missing— toothbrush, keys – objects that possessed natural tendencies of being misplaced.

“By ‘relocate’ you mean steal, don’t you?” the blond noted quietly under his breath, displeasure mixed with enough annoyance to give the allusion of a collected mind. The sarcasm must be a coping mechanism then; despite his experience as a ranger there was no way the teen should be able to pick up things so quickly, to settle into a routine and follow Alex’s lead. There should have been more argument, Alex had expected at least a smidgeon more bitterness, some resistance but, to his credit, the teen was not so shaken. Either he had dealt with these kinds of fluid situations before, or he was building himself up for denial and the breakdown would happen later.

Either way, at least this newest task should be accomplished with relative ease.

“I mean nothing more than what the word infers,” Alex replied, motioning the other ranger to a halt as he glanced around the edge of the building. Another quick look to his datapad confirmed it; that was the right one.

“But you don’t want—” the kid made a vague motion with his hand. “-whoever to find them.”

“That’s correct,” Alex replied, waiting for the foot traffic to die down so that they could cross the street. “The details are...less important,” he began, sensing rather than seeing the displeased frown on the kid’s face. “But,” Alex continued. “The basic gist of it is that we need to make a ranger sneak aboard...a plane.”

And by that Alex meant ‘A shuttle to an exploratory space colony’, but in the interest of revealing as little as possible, Alex opted for the more easily assimilated alteration.

Behind him, the blond made another displeased noise, but didn’t argue, so Alex figured he was satisfied. At least for now.

Begrudging acceptance would have to be enough because these papers, as apathetically as Alex described them, were vital to the formation of the Lost Galaxy team. If Leo wasn’t forced to sneak aboard a shuttle he would never be marked as a stowaway which, in turn, would never have him accidentally pushed into that last-minute training run on the moon.

Beyond that it was basic history; all of which led to Leo Corbett taking up the mantel of the Red Lost Galaxy ranger, and that was the important part. Mr. Corbett making his shuttle would lead to an unpleasant cascading effect, which Alex would rectify here and now, before it could ever fall apart.
Unfortunately, that also required sleuthing into Mr. Corbett’s apartment and effectively “misplacing” his travel documents, all the while remaining undetected, which was going to prove slightly more difficult with the added baggage of a shadow.

It was opportune then, that this particular shadow specialized in stealth tactics.

Perhaps Alex could work this to his advantage.

Getting access to the apartment building was as easy as walking in, strides purposeful, just as though they belonged there. If you had enough confidence you could buy yourself anonymity. It was a lesson Alex would have drilled into the teen more soundly if he hadn’t caught on without the Time Force Ranger ever having to suggest it, posture casual with a bored expression plastered across his face, the epitome of inconspicuous. Either he was well-practiced or simply didn’t care, but either way his composure was kept, so Alex was satisfied. It was a moot effort, perhaps, considering the lobby attendant was passed out on his desk, soft snores echoing quietly in the early morning, but still, the practice was useful.

Getting into the apartment was a different matter.

It was an early enough time period that mounted hallway cameras remained uncommon in most apartment buildings, which left one less thing for Alex to worry about, but there was still the resounding issue of the elusive door lock.

Alex only had time for Trip to run him through a brief crash course in lock picking, introducing him to the different models of door, window, and car lock Alex might encounter on his mission. Any electronic devices could have been easily dealt with by his datapad - the future tech equipped with any of the historical data he could need - but manual things still required a delicate touch. One Alex could openly admit he did not exactly have.

Like everything else, he made do, focusing on completing his task to the best of his ability, ignoring the quiet grumbles Hunter murmured underneath his breath, arms crossed as he slouched against the wall, keeping his eyes peeled for civilians. It was still the early hours of the morning- early enough that Leo would be sleeping- so they should be in the clear, but it never hurt to be cautious.

A few painfully prolonged minutes later and they were in, footsteps light against the carpet as they took in their surroundings, door shutting silently behind them. The sight that greeted them was about what Alex had expected for someone preparing to make a big move. The place was mostly empty; the furniture and knick knacks that indicated a “lived in” space had most likely been packed up or donated. Whatever wasn’t vital, whatever wasn’t necessary was gone or in storage, leaving behind a modest duffle bag as Leo’s only luggage.

That also meant that the only other thing occupying the apartment’s space was Leo himself, and whereas most people would have selected the bedroom as their resting place, out of habit if not for any other reason, Leo had opted to make his last stand where Alex suspected his living room used to be, curled up in a ragged sleeping bag that would most likely meet the same fate as the rest of its donated brethren.

It was nothing worth panicking about. It didn’t matter if the red ranger-to-be was located five feet from them as opposed to a room over; the plan was malleable, they could adapt. Stealth had always been a key factor anyway; if anything this would be a strong, solid motivator for them to take expert care.

Divide and conquer, Alex thought, sliding his finger along the front of his datapad until he accessed the part of the list he was looking for. Target acquired.
He beckoned the blond over to his side quietly and gestured towards his intended targets. The small things- toiletry items, Leo’s keys- were all located in the small bathroom attached to the bedroom, and with an irritated huff the teen stalked off. Somehow he managed to convey his aggravation without emanating a sound, which was all Alex could ask for anyway, choosing for his patience’s sake to ignore the obvious body language and focus on his own task. The papers. They would be in the kitchen.

Considering how barren the place was now, it should have taken Alex less than a second to track down his wayward papers. When he actually breached the kitchen area and noted how equally empty it was he immediately reconsidered this thought, and consulted his datapad. Perhaps he had read wrong. Maybe the papers were in Leo’s duffle bag after all.

His (minor) fears were confirmed. Alex had read correctly. They were in the kitchen, according to Trip’s intel. Beyond that the green ranger hadn’t bothered to specify, but so far all of his data had been reliable, so there was no reason for Alex to start doubting him now. The papers were there, they were simply tucked away. In a drawer perhaps, for safe keeping. It was a reasonable conclusion.

The good news was that Alex’s assumption had been correct, and the papers, complete with passport, were found in record time, only slightly past Alex’s original projected timeline.

The bad news was the particular drawer the papers had resided in hadn’t been the most structurally sound. Alex pulled on the handle, expecting the drawer to halt its movement when he halted his hand, and was immediately reeducated. The drawer stubbornly continued its journey without any heed to Alex, crashing onto the scuffed linoleum floor with enough racket that even Leo, firmly unconscious, would have heard it.

There wasn’t much to do but react after that. Alex emptied the drawer, shoving the papers into his coat pocket carelessly with one hand while he jabbed the drawer back into place with as much care he could manage one-handedly, ducking quickly behind the kitchen counter as he heard Leo awake with a start in the living room.

Not the most ideal of circumstances, and Alex couldn’t even place the fault on his newly-acquired partner for making them as such.

“Hello?” a voice Alex decidedly placed as Leo’s called, soft but clear, and with more awareness than a man who had been unceremoniously jostled from his sleep should have.

Instant alertness would be something Alex expected from a veteran ranger with enough battle under their belt to be conditioned that way, but Leo was still a civilian. He had no military training; no contact with other rangers. The part of town he was in wasn’t the most developed, perhaps that had something to do with it. A break-in could be more of a common occurrence than an extraordinary circumstance.

“Hello,” Leo echoed, inquisitive tone replaced with something more firm, more confident. Establishing a fearless rapport with the intruder, offering them one last chance to escape without harm. A warning, that this was a person who would not shy away from a fight.

Or maybe Alex was reading too much into it, he wasn’t the best in social situations.

Priorities, Alex thought, recognizing he was allowing his analysis to waste his precious time. He needed a strategy to escape Leo’s notice that wasn’t direct confrontation. Time Force had made it clear enough to Alex after his initial encounter that he was to remain unseen, undetected. Simply rattling off his mission would not be acceptable anymore.
What other options did he have?

“Hello?” Leo’s voice was drawing closer to the kitchen, but thankfully distant enough that Alex remained hidden. Were the red ranger to describe it, he would say Leo’s approach was cautious. “Sammy, is that you? I told you man, breaking into someone’s apartment is not polite.” The words sounded almost fond when he said them, mirthful in the quiet room, but the tone was gone in a second, replaced with his earlier confidence. “Sammy, I told you I’m leaving. I’m sorry, I can’t—”

Crashing from the bedroom interrupted the apology, sounding deceptively like a brick breaking through a window. The tell-tale sound of heavy footsteps echoed against the wall as Leo made a beeline for the room with a quiet curse.

“Stay there Sammy,” Leo threw over his shoulder, distracted. “We’re not finished yet.”

They were, they always had been, but Alex hadn’t the time to spare thinking about it. His mind was already on his tagalong, knowing the blond had to have been responsible for the opportune distraction. Quick thinking on his feet, unquestionably, which leant to Alex’s previous hypothesis of how easily the ninja took to adapting, but it still left the nagging query of what exactly the kid’s next move would have been. He was as blocked in as Alex, so what did he—

“Ducked out the window,” the blond said by way of greeting, dropping into Alex’s sight with no kind of warning, making the red ranger jolt back against the counter. He recovered quickly, but by that confounding smirk he knew the teen had caught it. “Scaled the fire escape,” the other ranger continued in a low whisper, grabbing Alex’s wrist tightly. “And ducked back in the other window; now let’s get the hell out of dodge before—”

The world lit up in the growingly familiar lights of teleportation and Alex noted, with no small amount of irony, on how appropriately timely Time Force could be.

Alex scrolled through the new information streaming across his datapad while the blond cursed, still becoming acquainted with the unpleasant tinges of individual time travel. It certainly supported the reason why they had specified ships to carry out such tasks.

“Alright, one down,” the teen managed, coming back to Alex’s side when his temper was back in check, mitigated to a tight frown Alex could see wouldn’t be leaving anytime soon. “How many more to go?”

“A dozen, at least.” He knew the answer wouldn’t be well-received, but the teen seemed like the type that appreciated open honesty more than sugar-coating, so Alex kept to his best guess.

“Awesome,” the blond huffed; bumping his shoulder against Alex’s to…properly express his sarcasm? Alex wasn’t sure. Or maybe it was simply because he was the only person the teen had a chance at properly conversing with, his only chance at solidarity in the world, so he made the best of it.

Good, that meant he was coping. That was one less thing for Alex to worry about.

Alex was halfway through reading up on their next assignment when a hand poked at his shoulder. Looking up, he found the other ranger studying him with an annoyed expression, exasperation clear through his narrowed eyes.

“Hey,” the blond began, as though he hadn’t already appropriately caught Alex’s attention. “Is there any chance you’re going to ask me what my name is anytime soon?”

In natural conversation, the answer was ‘no’, as the teen had rendered that possibility impossible by
bringing it up himself, but Alex got the point.

“Okay,” Alex said, swallowing around the conflicting feelings of frustration and unease. “What is your name?”

“Hunter Bradley,” his companion said, hand thrusting out in an offered handshake. A challenge, really. The grin was cocky, all teeth and annoyance. “Crimson Thunder Ranger.”

“A pleasure,” Alex murmured, taking the proffered hand easily, returning the rough handshake with less care than he should. “Truly.”

There was nothing pleasant about it, which was why when the teen-Hunter- threw his head back and laughed, Alex couldn’t help but feel there was a chance this would be less agonizing than he had previously assumed, because at least they were both aware of it.

After all, the more determinedly two people worked towards a goal, the more efficiently it should, hypothetically, be achieved.

Even if the goal was to be rid of each other, that concept should still hold true.

Alex had learned not to allow himself to hope for many things in his life, but in this instance, he decided that placing his faith in science wouldn’t be the most horrible thing in the world.

Chapter End Notes

The character filter says his name’s ‘Alex Drake’ whereas the ranger wiki has settled on ‘Alex with-no-last-name’, so I went with Alex Collins as a compromise, as he is Wes’ descendant. And for those young-ins out there, a ‘PDA’ is a ‘personal data assistant’ – the precursor before tablets became popular.

Next chapter will be Hunter’s POV, and will be uploaded next Sunday.

For previous anniversary pieces, see below:

1. Any Moment – Chapter 32: The Rainbow Connection
2. Songs About Rainbows
3. Beyond that Bright World Lies Despair
4. All Things Great and True
5. Happiness is a Firefly
6. The Time Love Takes

Until next time :)
SO MUCH THANKS to the real vampire and Kei Luna Shoryu for their beta reading efforts! This story would not be what it is without either of them ^_^.

If you’re looking for more power ranger stories, check out ‘My Brother’s Keeper’ by The Real Vampire, or ‘The Art of Cohesion’ by Kei Luna Shoryu.

Warnings: Adult language

Were anyone to ever ask Hunter’s opinion – not that they ever did, so this was purely an intellectual exercise – he would say that the most prominent feeling he had for this particular situation, the situation of mild-kidnapping, was… disdain.

He had considered his other options carefully. Mostly because he had plenty of time and not much to fill it with, so he could say with complete confidence that disdain most appropriately described his emotional state. There was a good chance this was because it was the only emotion Hunter seemed to provoke from his new ‘buddy’ Alex, when the red ranger felt like giving the blond any attention at all.

To say this was the vacation from hell was a lie in so many ways. The first of which being that this could in no way be classified as a “vacation”, the second being that hell would assuredly have much better company.

So… Hunter didn’t like Alex.

Which didn’t seem to be that much of a problem, as Alex didn’t seem to be all that fond of the Thunder ninja either. It was a hostage situation neither one of them wanted to be a part of, but Alex obviously had his orders and Power Rangers to save, and Hunter had touched Alex at the wrong moment, so here they were, trying to fix the broken fabric of time… or something.

Or, to be more specific, Alex was fixing the “time irregularities” while Hunter sat back on his ass and did nothing, because that was pretty much the extent of what Alex trusted him to do. Even breathing at this point seemed to be perplexing to the Time Force Agent, who kept murmuring things about “the added effects of another displaced person” and blah-de-bler-de-blah-blah-blah-blah.

Alex didn’t like Hunter. That much was clear. It wasn’t a situation the blond was unfamiliar with, of course. He wasn’t that much of a people person - that was Blake’s job - so it wasn’t all that surprising yet another individual had been warded off by his usual disposition. Of course, it wasn’t until Hunter met Alex that he realized just how socially incapable a person could be.

Communication, that was something Alex could do. In fact, he was very good at that, giving out information in an even and calm tone, concise and to the point, using no more words than necessary. Communicating was not one of Alex’s faults. But beyond that the guy was sort of a robot, so detached from his emotions and the feelings of others that some of the dumb shit he spouted off didn’t even register as offensive, or if it did, he did not give a damn.
Which was just charming, don’t you think?

Perhaps the reason for Alex’s obvious distaste was because Hunter had jeopardized his mission. Or maybe the man just wasn’t a fan of blonds, or maybe he was super prejudiced against stupid people from the past; but whatever the reason, he didn’t try to befriend Hunter. Which wasn’t a problem. It wasn’t like Hunter exactly needed more friends (especially not douchebags like Alex), but would some professionalism be too much to ask for?

If Hunter was being generous, he would say it wasn’t that Alex hadn’t tried for that, because he was all about the job, and he dealt with Hunter the best way he knew how. He probably thought he was being professional, but his…disdain could not be controlled by duty. It was simply too powerful. It was clear he saw Hunter as an annoyance, added weight, a distraction, too young, too sarcastic, too…not Alex. So he was disliked without being offered a chance at redemption.

Hunter adapted to this as best he could, and by that he meant he didn’t bother putting forth the effort of making nice with Alex. There was a good chance he went out of his way to do just the opposite, in a sad attempt to keep his sanity. It was petty, but with Alex relegating him to the role of silent bystander, Hunter needed to do something to occupy his time.

The older Bradley realized, vaguely, that this would not help to improve Alex’s image of him. And then he realized he didn’t care, because with each terse frown thrown in his direction, each barely-subdued sigh, each quiet but distinctly present glare that got thrown his way, Hunter wanted to do a little hurting back. Because he was human like that.

He didn’t intend to do anything but justify Alex’s obvious contempt for him.

He didn’t think it would turn out to be fun.

But he probably should have.

“:-:-:-:--:

“What the hell are you doing?”

The look Alex gave him visibly communicated that the Time Force ranger did not see the reasonableness of Hunter’s question, but the blond let the look slide off of him, countering it with an unimpressed expression of his own.

Seriously, they’d been going from one ocean-side town to another, most of them blurring together in a haze of ill-chosen fashion statements, so when the civilized organization of bricks and cement gave way to a hot and humid jungle, clearly uninhabited by humans, Hunter was allowed a few questions. Especially if they kept skulking around through plants with leaves bigger than his face, freezing at the sounds of any other life forms. They continued this behavior until Alex, who had been periodically checking that futuristic tablet-thing of his, had finally found…whatever they had been looking for. Hunter didn’t care.

Maybe there were…jungle rangers, or something? Someone was lost, or maybe-

And then Hunter felt it; the ground literally shuddering beneath their feet. No exaggeration was necessary.

At that point, Hunter decided that just maybe he should care about exactly what Alex was looking for.

It was then he discovered that the job for this particular dimension had something to do with
A real life Tyrannosaurus Rex, to be specific, just...tramping around in the distance. A huge, monstrous - Hunter was willing to go so far as to say frightening - mammoth of a beast, sinews rippling beneath its scales, shifting, movements slow and lumbering and Alex was waving at it.

So suffice it to say, Hunter had some concerns.

Which he had decided to address by asking what the hell was Alex’s problem.

Aside from being a dick. Because that was a given.

Were it anyone else, Hunter would have said the expression on Alex’s face was exasperation, but being that such irritating notions could only be felt by common human beings, the brunette probably perceived it as one degree away from absolute professionalism.

There also might have been a tired sigh to accompany it, but Hunter had gotten past calling Alex out on his automatic reflexes. It provided him with too much material.

“We need to lure that T-Rex-”

“Yeah,” Hunter interrupted, fears confirmed. “See, I saw that happening, but I really just hoped I had gone temporarily insane, because clearly you would be smart enough to not do that.”

As much as Alex hated him, Hunter really couldn’t have pushed him that close to suicide yet, right?

Right?

The Time Force Ranger spared Hunter a brief look (which was his personally inept way of being generous to the silly past-human who needed things like eye contact in order to effectively communicate) before he returned his focus to the far distance, never deterring from his arm-waving task.

“It needs to chase Eric and Wes.”

At this point, Hunter could constructively mention they were neither the Wes nor Eric of which Alex spoke, so why would getting that damn monstrosity running their way be to any benefit, but wisely declined doing so. It wasn’t worth it.

Any other day, yes; but not on the day Alex decided to indulge in some suicidal tendencies.

As if perfectly attuned to the whims of the universe, a blinding light exploded up above them, not far off into the distance revealing...Hunter almost didn’t see it. It was the whole light-blinding-business going into play, but once his vision furiously clawed back into existence Hunter thought he could maybe make out the outline of a ship or something, and there was a dude on it, who fell, and then another dude and...

The blond put two and two together (or dinosaurs plus shiny portal of pain plus those guys) and figured out the reasoning behind their dabble into the Jurassic period - or wherever the hell it was they were - was to help out with Power Rangers.

It was a mystic portal from whenever-to-prehistoric-times. Awesome; more time travelers. Honestly, Hunter wasn’t even registering half this shit anymore. Thanks to Alex’s hands-on training, there was very little that managed to faze Hunter now. He supposed that was one upside to this entire affair.
Behind him, Alex gave a quiet exhale of what could only be an expression of triumphant satisfaction that everything was falling in line.

Learning the subtleties of body language- another benefit.

Okay, so the crimson ranger’s side-trip wasn’t a total loss. Maybe Hunter could start applying the stuff he was learning on Cam; get into the head of the team’s tech-guy. That could come in handy. That was, if Hunter could ever manage to get the bespectacled teen alone for more than five minutes without Cam wanting to strangle him.

Back in the now-world, the workaholic was narrating the mission plan.

Alex liked to do that. A lot.

“There they are,” Alex murmured, supposedly for Hunter’s benefit (he could connect the dots easily enough thanks; he wasn’t brain damaged). “Right on time.”

“Perfect,” Hunter said, trying to earn himself some brownie points to sweeten up his strictly opposed-stance on all T-Rex related issues. Butter Alex up by agreeing that everything was, indeed, going as it should be.

It would most likely be a futile effort, but with the possibility of death-by-trample-maiming on the line, Hunter would at least like to give a token effort to preserve his life. On principle.

The two that had exited the portal- Wes and Eric, presumably- had separated in the fall. To get a better view (and firmly escape the sight of the towering behemoth that seemed to be stubbornly ignoring Alex) Hunter scaled the closest tree, finding a comfortable perch in the upper branches, concealed enough to keep him hidden but high enough that he could get an eye on his target. At least on one of them.

And he was glad he did, seeing as there were certain…qualities about that ranger that safely occupied the entirety of Hunter’s attention.

See, his eyes were sharp enough to recognize a doppelganger, even at this distance.

The damn morpher even looked the same.

Gravity made the trip down faster than the blond’s original ascent, and if Alex noticed the Thunder Ranger’s new perplexity, he was doing an awful fine job of not giving a damn.

Hunter didn’t bother with the pleasantries, opting for the direct approach they both seemed to prefer. “You didn’t tell me you had a brother.”

“How old is he?” Hunter corrected, corner of his mouth quirked down to express his displeasure with the T-Rex’s decided loftiness. If there was a way for a prehistoric beast to manage an expression of bored aloofness, this was it.

If Hunter wasn’t so relieved, he would have found it hysterical.

But back to the matter at hand.

“He looks like your twin,” Hunter continued, noting a real, true frown grace Alex’s ‘professional’ features. “Except, you know-”

“Yes,” Alex replied, beginning to sound irritated. “I know.”
Ah, lookey there.

Seemed like Hunter had found a sore spot.

“You wearing his morpher then?” Hunter asked, partly curious, and partly in hopes of creating an aggravating distraction, shifting Alex’s attention towards a less-suicidal task.

“He’s wearing mine,” Alex replied, teeth gritted and oh- was it a sight to behold, the mighty and all-collected Alex Collins finally exhibiting those things called emotions.

It was a touching moment for all of them.

“What about the other guy then?” He had to force himself to keep from smiling; knowing the amusement in his voice would be enough of a provocation on its own. “He some long-distance uncle?”

“Quantum Ranger,” Alex said, shoulders tense. “Only one. Worked with the rest of my team to-”

“Why didn’t you work with them?” Hunter asked, lifting his eyebrows. He wasn’t stupid; he knew a reluctantly-shared story when he heard it, and he also knew just the buttons to push to make Alex regret it.

“Because Wes did.” It wasn’t a real answer, and they both knew it, but it was the best Hunter was going to get for now. Alex apparently had decided he was done playing his game and retook control of the conversation. “Be quiet,” he murmured, not quite as stoic as he probably wanted to be. “I need to think of a way to get the T-Rex’s attention.”

“Are you still trying to do that?”

“It needs to chase them. That’s why we’re here.”

“Oh,” Hunter began, taking the metaphorical gloves off and allowing himself an exaggerated roll of the eyes to bring his sarcasm home. “So we’re helping by shepherding a blood-thirsty murder machine in the direction of your teammates. How thoughtless of me.”

Now that the initial crack had been made in his impassive mask Alex felt free to shoot Hunter an annoyed look, with narrowed eyes everything. “It helps them bond.”

Sure it does.

“Because nothing says friendship like scrambling for your life,” Hunter drawled, eyebrows rising in what he hoped would be an expression laden with just enough incredulous boredom that it would stab at Alex’s stupid sense of propriety.

Judging by the way Alex’s jaw tightened, Hunter would say it hit the mark.

“I could do without your commentary,” the brunette murmured. He shifted his gaze back to the looming threat in the distance after that, exaggerating the movement so Hunter’s puny brain could understand that their pleasant “chat” was over, and Alex had big-boy things to do now, thanks.

Fortunately, Hunter had been around enough stubbornly-dedicated people to recognize when resistance was futile and that his arguments, while sound, had fallen on deaf ears. This was going to happen, whether he liked it or not, so he might as well make the best of it.

That was sort of his new life motto.
Hunter sighed, head rolling back against his shoulders as he squinted at the sun, wondering when this mess would be over. “Just, don’t ever consider me a teammate, okay?”

Alex opted to respond with silence, shockingly ignoring Hunter’s comment in favor of focusing on the job, causing Hunter to sigh again.

“I don’t think I could survive being ‘helped’ by you,” Hunter muttered, pressing the heels of his palms against his eyes.

Maybe if he did it hard enough, he could pretend he was somewhere else. Somewhere with better company.

Instead of continued silence, Alex decided to break up the routine with…what Hunter sincerely hoped weren’t laser blasts, because even Alex wasn’t that-

But he was. He so very was, and then the T-Rex was roaring and Alex had latched onto his wrist, yanking them safely to the side, out of sight as the raging giant-prehistoric-lizard trampled by, ground shuddering in its wake.

Hunter would have taken the opportunity to make a smart comment about the man’s freakish reflexes, or maybe an innuendo about the way they had landed, Alex looming over the blond, destroying the concept of personal space, or maybe he would have wished Wes and Eric good luck on their murders or something, but then the light was flashing again.

They disappeared, just like they always did, in a blaze of pain and skullbashing blindness, the humid, jungle brush replaced with dirty cement and rain puddles, soaking through the back of Hunter’s clothes with vindictive ferocity.

Maybe they were on Alex’s side, or something.

Honestly, it wouldn’t surprise Hunter.

-:-:-:-:-:-

“So…what’s your favorite color?”

A brief look of annoyance was flashed Hunter’s way before Alex’s attention returned to the street down below them, fast enough that Hunter wouldn’t have caught it were it not for years of ninja training. Alex was good at those kinds of things, Hunter would give him that; he might have made a good shinobi in another lifetime.

Hell, maybe he had. That was one of the perks of working at Time Force right? Gave you all the time you needed.

“Come on, bro,” Hunter continued, unable to keep the slightly mocking tone out of the misused nickname, combining all the things Alex hated. “Don’t give me the silent treatment.”

It was bad enough Hunter was forced to play shadow to the world’s biggest tightass; the least the guy could do was humor him through a little small talk. Hunter’s ability to recognize patterns was enough to indicate that stakeout number three was but the beginning of a huge string of wasted time. And, based on first impressions alone, Alex should realize the immense amount of desperation that was necessary for Hunter to even resort to conversation. Because he could only keep himself entertained for so long.

The entire “no impact on the time stream” rule made it difficult to do just about anything that wasn’t
stand absolutely still and don’t touch anything. Don’t mess with anything. Don’t talk to any people. Don’t mess with any wildlife. Don’t pick up any stray, abandoned magazines, even if it was in the past, because that could quite possibly be meant for some random hobo’s entertainment, and if there was anything homeless people enjoyed, it was the latest editorial on the newest model of cars GM had released. Or maybe they just used it as fire fuel or insulation or something. Whatever.

End point was that there was a very lengthy list of things Hunter could not touch. Or do. Or interact with.

Which pretty much just left Alex as his sole source of socialization, which had to be some form of cosmic punishment for Hunter not being good enough of a decent human being or something because nobody, nobody should be pushed into that corner.

But Hunter was.

The lucky duck.

“Favorite color,” Hunter tried again, talking to the side of Alex’s face as he readjusted his crouch, shifting his weight against the rough cement on their rooftop. “Wait, don’t tell me. It’s red.”

Alex continued his favorite pastime of ignoring Hunter flawlessly, surpassing Tori on even her meanest day.

Appropriately, this goaded Hunter to continue.

“Nah,” Hunter sighed, head flopping back, eyes squinting up at the waning sun, far off in the distance. “Too obvious. I bet it’s something different. Something more professional, but boring, of majority consensus.”

In his peripherals there was what could have been the squinting of ones eye, which meant he had definitely hit a nerve. Nice.

“Blue then,” Hunter settled on with a nod. “That’s predictable and bland.”

And there was that tightening of the jaw; Alex clearly working to contain some remark that was too much exertion to be wasted on Hunter.

Well then.

“How about favorite food?” Hunter continued, stretching his arms up to pop a crick out of his back. “Do you guys even have the same kinds of food or do you survive on like, flavored paste? Astronaut food? Or do you go by way of Star Trek, where you can have whatever you want at the push of a button?”

“Y’know,” Hunter said, grinning at the tense profile beside him. “Real magical stuff.”

He made a show of studying Alex because that meant his eyes weren’t on the door across the street which meant he wasn’t on task which meant he was horrible and rubbed his chin in thought, just for good measure.

“Crackers,” Hunter exclaimed with a snap of his fingers. “I bet you eat three meals of crackers a day. You seem like the kind of guy that would do that. Punishing yourself, like you can’t have any real flavor in your life-”

“No.”
“Or something- What?” Hunter ground to a halt, eyes fixed back to Alex’s face where, unsurprisingly, the red ranger continued to look just as serious and unsociable as always.

And yet, Hunter’s ears had not deceived him.

“So that’s a no on the crackers?” he offered, partially as a peace treaty, but mostly to see if he could continue eliciting a response.

He could. For future reference.

“No,” Alex said, and this time Hunter could watch as his jaw moved ever so slightly, efficient, never exerting more movement than necessary. “We are not doing this.”

“Doing what?” the blond prompted, as was required of any individual when given a blatantly obvious reply. “Because, for the life of me, it looked like you weren’t doing anything, which meant that I—”

“The small talk.”

“Was doing all the work and will you stop that?” Hunter growled, beginning to feel the annoyance he had placated in the back of his mind start to rekindle anew.

“I’m working,” Alex said by way of explanation. “This is how I talk.”

“When you’re working?”

“Clearly,” Alex replied, and it was sad that Hunter celebrated in not being interrupted, because Alex’s meager social civility should not matter to him in the slightest.

That was something he should keep an eye on.

Or not, if he was meant to be ignoring it. But that would indicate a series of problems Hunter refused to allow Alex to cause, so he would stick to the eye-looking thing and be done with it.

“And when you’re not working?”

“No,” Alex repeated, quietly, calmly, but with no room for argument.

Which, of course indicated that Hunter had to argue. Obviously.

“No, what?” Hunter snapped, keeping his voice down so they wouldn’t have to go into the “Excess noise is a time traveler’s enemy” speech again and humor Alex’s subtle threats of duct tape. Because that shit was difficult to keep a straight face through, and Hunter really needed Alex to at least tolerate him until he got home.

“No,” Alex said, eyes still forward. “We are not having this conversation.”

“Well, clearly—”

“Any small talk,” Alex continued, rambling right over Hunter’s more than predictable response, unperturbed. “Anything of a social nature, we are not doing. You can’t know about the future.”

“I didn’t ask about the future,” Hunter countered, allowing himself to glare at the other ranger.

“I’m from the future,” Alex replied, tone light. “Therefore—”
“You’re kidding me right?” Hunter exclaimed, sliding a hand across the front of his face, suddenly (even more) tired. “Are you for real?”

“The rule stays.”

“Well it’s a stupid rule.” It had to be, with what it implied. “You mean I can’t talk to you at all? How am I supposed to know what kind of person you are?”

For the first time since the conversation started, Alex turned to look at Hunter, eyes hard and serious, unwilling to compromise whatever hiccups threatened his overall goal.

“I’m a ranger.” Alex turned towards his favorite standby phrase, the one he had been feeding Hunter for the past two weeks, as though it instantly rectified everything. “That’s all you need to know.”

With that addressed, Alex turned back towards his self-assigned duty, now done with Hunter. Unless the blond mentioned some horrible catastrophe about to befall them or innocent civilians, or noted something about their latest task, he wasn’t going to be heard. Alex had made sure of that.

It was why Hunter hadn’t felt guilty about indulging his latest bad habit of grumbling to himself, allowing the vocalization to console whatever forms of socialization he required.

“Well, it’s not enough for me.”

Predictably, Alex didn’t reply. Didn’t give any outward indication that he had heard Hunter at all.

Which was fine.

It would just make the inevitable homicide that much more justified.

Chapter End Notes

…It’s Sunday, somewhere.

Do things get worse? Sure do! Kind of.

The first section of the chapter references Power Rangers Time Force episode 15, ‘Clash for Control, Part II’.

Until next time :)
Showering and Shit

Chapter Notes

Just a basketful of love and appreciation towards the real vampire for beta-ing this monster of a story! I am forever in dept to you, my dear, and similar thanks go to Kei_LS for additional editing! If you’re looking for some more ninja storm stories, check out the_real_vampire's 'My Brother's Keeper', or Kei_LS's 'The Art of Cohesion'.

Warning: F-bombs by Hunter, mentions of the homosexuality

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“We need a break.”

“I told you,” Alex began, holding back a sigh between his teeth and counting to ten in his head, knowing that anything that could even remotely resemble aggravation would only goad Hunter further. “We don’t have time.”

“For hygiene?” The blond stepped around Alex impatiently, arms folded across his chest and posed for battle, prepared for any and all confrontation. Welcoming it, even.

The blond was still talking, naturally, despite the fact that Alex’s attention was still being distributed between his timer and the specs for their next mission, with none to be spared for things like trivial complaints.

Initially, Alex had attempted to apply some lenience to his unwilling companion, but Hunter’s personality held a certain kind of perseverance when it came to bemoaning the current status of his life. Alex had long lost any sympathies he had for the ninja because of this.

There was a chance some of his vexation had slipped through his normal countenance of professionalism, but with constant exposure to such a negative companion when previous interactions with individuals had been limited to ten minute windows, at most, Alex was losing some of his patience.

He had retired into the welcoming hands of apathy as often as he could, but even he had limits.

“I mean it, Collins,” Hunter continued dryly, looking impressively unperturbed for someone who was nearing the end of their metaphorical rope. “We’re rank. By the looks of it, your ‘Couple of days, max’ hypothesis is going to be just the slightest bit overshot. If we keep doing this, we need to prepare ourselves for the long haul, which means adapting the plan to accommodate for stuff like showering and shit.”

He presented…some fairly valid points, Alex surmised. Stubbornness and sense of duty were what had kept him sticking to his work so far, but Hunter had some sound logic. The longer they went without taking care of their physical health, the more they would stick out.

As though reading his thoughts, a wicked smile crossed Hunter’s lips, sensing victory was near.

“Let’s face it Sunshine,” the blond drawled, resorting to one of Alex’s less favored and even less-desired nicknames. “We’re starting to look more like hobos than time-savers.”
In a professional relationship, that would have been the moment for Alex to admit Hunter had a good point, or a novel idea worth investigating, and then quickly move on, implementing a new plan.

But Alex prided himself on his efficiency, and as there was simply no way to quickly, or politely, or even... realistically give Hunter any sort of positive attention and easily move forward. It would be nothing short of an impossibility, so Alex kept his mouth shut and went to contact Time Force, knowing that if he could get Trip on the line there was at least a chance they could get an opportunity to groom themselves.

Hunter made no comment on this action, but his ever-present smirk was enough of an aggravation in its own right.

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Unlike all the other places Alex and Hunter had stealthily infiltrated (not “broken into”, as the blond was so fond of recounting), the newest destination Trip managed to work in for them was actually one Alex was familiar with due to prior reconnaissance (if shared with Hunter, the blond would probably mislabel this as “stalking”, which was why this fact would remain unmentioned to him) rather than actual interaction. It was one of the few structures in this time period that allowed Alex the indulgence of complete neutrality, having no strong feelings related to it other than the basic task of gathering knowledge. Which, in its own way, was a bit of a gift. It wasn’t like the Clock Tower or even Bio Labs, where memories rekindled unpleasant and erratic feelings in Alex, as they tended to. It was simply a home, not unlike the thirty or so that surrounded it in that quiet neighborhood in the Silver Hills suburbs.

True, this house belonged to Eric Myers, but other than that it was nothing particularly special. Were it not for this necessary rest stop, Alex never would have been required to recall the information he had dutifully memorized on his previous mission. It wasn’t all that far away, in the literal and figurative sense, and to continue indulging his noncompliant feelings, it wasn’t far enough away either.

But that was all irrelevant.

Hunter, feeling generous, was kind enough to select a subtle conversation starter, clearing his throat casually as they inspected the modest two story house in front of them.

“Do you know-?”

“Ranger’s house,” Alex explained, breaking from his reverie with a quick shake of his head and pushing himself into a brisk walk towards the house’s side gate, not waiting for Hunter to follow. “A teammate of mine, from the past.”

It was a liberal use of the word, but technically appropriate, as Eric’s morpher was a part of Alex’s set. Just because it had been lost to time didn’t make it any less Time Force. If anything, the reverse was true.

Still, he was aware this implied a greater intimacy between himself and Commander Myers than what truly existed, as opposed to the nothing that it actually was. Alex had never had to deal with the Quantum Ranger; that had been Jen and Wes’ job.

Fortunately, that shouldn’t prove to be too much of a problem.

“Is this one of the teammates we stuck a T-Rex on? Because I don’t think he’ll be too happy to see us.”
“They never saw us.” The correction was automatic, but unnecessary, though Hunter already knew that. “And yes.”

“Oohhh,” Hunter began, drawing out the vowel in a smug show of triumph. “Is this the brother-”

“Ancestor.”

“-or the distant-”

“Teammate.”

“-uncle?”

A few seconds passed as Alex retrieved the back up key for Eric’s rear door; Hunter’s smugness an aura in itself, hovering just over Alex’s shoulder, the blond knowing too well this was one of the weaker spots in Alex’s professionalism. Like most things in this time period were.

“To meet your descriptions,” Alex began slowly, taking in a steady breath as he dealt with the offending lock. “It would be the ‘uncle’.”

Hunter released a low whistle, hands patting out a sporadic rhythm on his thighs as he waited impatiently. “That’s a shame,” he said, sounding slightly put off. “I would have liked to meet blond-Alex.”

“Wes,” Alex corrected, because if he stopped now he would ruin the routine, and Hunter, who had nothing better to occupy his time, would gladly proclaim that suspect and jump into an investigation. So Alex rose to the bait, because he had to. There was a system.

“Whatever,” was the only reply he received - bored, perhaps disappointed - but Alex didn’t look further into it. He hid the relief and tension away as they moved through the door into a simple, well-maintained kitchen.

“The spare bedroom has an on-suite bathroom you can use upstairs,” Alex said, glancing at the floor plan reflected off his data pad. “If you give me your clothes, I’ll locate the washing machine and-”

“Woah there, Slugger,” Hunter drawled, propping a hip against the kitchen counter and appearing to revel in the newest nickname. “It’s going to take a little more than that to get me naked.”

Alex had not, and would not, feel the uncomfortable flush of embarrassment grace his features as he frowned at his misconstrued instructions. “I was not proposing-”

“Thank fuck for that.” Hunter cut the brunette off with a relieved murmur, lathered on with enough exaggeration that Alex almost rose to the challenge, before a t-shirt was unceremoniously hurled in his direction, Hunter done with it.

The sweatshirt and worn tennis shoes had already been abandoned on the scuffed kitchen laminate without a care, and the blond, whether to spite Alex’s orders by carrying them out to the pettiest of his ability or to poke fun at Alex’s more formal social decorum, had already disappeared up the stairs. Seconds later, the rest of his garments were delivered with spiteful ease, and Alex, resolutely unembarrassed, bundled the pile together and stubbornly did not think of the blond casually walking about in the nude just a stairway away.

He had intended for the clothes acquiring to happen after they had retrieved suitable temporary-wear, but Hunter preferred to twist Alex’s plans to make them the most awkward, as though to infer the
brunette’s strategies were nothing but misplaced for polite company.

Though truthfully, it was more likely that Hunter simply celebrated in being contrary, and any sort of strike he could use against Alex was a welcomed one.

It was the more realistic alternative, but ultimately, not one worth dwelling on.

With a quick reference to his data pad, Alex located the laundry room. With Hunter’s clothes delivered, Alex set to the task of finding some of Eric’s garments he could borrow, if only until his own were clean. He knew to some, this would be seen as a kind of violation, but there was a purpose to this mission, and this transgression, while undesired, was necessary.

It was unlikely that Commander Myers would see it this way, but regardless, the point remained.

When Alex’s clothes were deposited safely beside Hunter’s, the brunette began the cleaning cycle (which may have, theoretically, taken longer to start up than was strictly necessary due to some… confusion on Alex’s part), the red ranger went out in search of the guest bathroom to rectify his own lack of hygiene.

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Like most things Alex did, his shower was quick and to the point, minimalist to some, but covering all the basic areas of cleanliness. Years of Time Force community showers had made Alex efficient in the ways of personal grooming, and it had not been a skill set he had abandoned when promotion finally allowed him his own private facilities. Showers, he had come to understand, were considered by some an activity of personal indulgence, the water soothing, almost therapeutic, in the confines of a space that society had dictated as definitely private. There was some freedom in that.

For Alex, it was simply a necessary action among many necessary actions, and not a feat that should have more time dedicated to it than was strictly necessary. It was wasteful.

Alex used the…toothpaste, he believed it was called (there were things like it in the future, but it was almost humorous to inspect the little brushes that past-humans had used on their teeth), with his finger, cataloguing the minty-cool taste thoughtfully and moving on, combing his hair into a semi-presentable state before heading back to the kitchen. Hopefully, Commander Myers would have some sustenance he wouldn’t notice missing. Alex and Hunter had made do with what they could, and an active morpher could get you very far by way of energy, but there was only so much they could manage from vending machines and Alex’s dwindling provisions. A more substantial meal would be a rarity they could both make good use of.

He had been scouring Commander Myers’ upper cabinets, contemplating their contents, when he heard the back door open up behind him.

The most logical solution, and clearly the one Alex should wrap his mind around accepting (because his anxieties should not be this high), was that Hunter had chosen this moment to try and rile Alex, again. The blond had probably snuck out one of the upper windows and was waiting so he could attempt to give the brunette a heart attack whenever he entered the kitchen.

Alex felt no despair that this was the most probable course of action, because he was not one who was so easily crippled. Not when he was on duty, and certainly not-

“Wes, what the hell are you-?”

The voice - distinctly belonging to Eric Myers, Alex realized with delayed horror - dropped off with an air of uncertainty, the moment he must have realized that Alex was not the teammate he worked
The Quantum ranger recovered quickly enough, bags of groceries crumpling beneath his hands as he stared down the brunette, eyes hardening.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Time Force,” Alex explained calmly, keeping his stance relaxed and easy so as not to communicate any potential ill-will. “I’m a descendent of your teammate, Wes Collins.”

“Yeah, I gathered as much,” the other man growled, shoving his bags onto the counter beside him so he could tackle the problem of an unfamiliar home intruder without being burdened. “Why the hell are you here?”

“Time alterations,” Alex continued, holding his hands up cautiously, offering his palms out, fingers spread, keeping them easily in the other man’s sight. “There are discrepancies in the time stream. I’ve been sent back to rectify them. Because I needed to minimize my effects on the time stream—”

“You decided to come here and…” The other man’s eyes narrowed as he finally caught sight of Alex’s clothes. “Is that my shirt?”

“I’m just borrowing it until our clothes are clean,” Alex offered, though he could admit, it was somewhat pitifully.

This was not going nearly so well as he had hoped it would.

The Silver Guardian narrowed his eyes at Alex, jaw tightening in a look of annoyance so pure and unguarded Alex almost wanted to study its ways. “You’re just helping yourself to everything aren’t you?” He turned off to the side irritably, hands fidgeting against the counter as he stared down at his groceries. “Time Force pricks,” he grumbled.

“Ideally,” Alex began, keeping his tone level. “We would never be here.”

“Yeah,” Eric snorted, rolling his eyes back toward Alex. “Ideally, you would be hitting up Wes’ mansion right now, right?”

“Ideally,” and Alex did not, would never have, bit out the repeated term, forcing himself past any of the strained feeling he had in regards to his ancestor. “We wouldn’t have bothered anyone at all, but this was necessary.”

“Sure it is,” the other man scoffed, incredulity easy in his expression. “It’s not like you don’t have a whole base full of people devoted to helping you out.”

“Look,” Alex started, vaguely registering how near he was to the end of his patience. “I have neither the time nor the authority to completely explain the situation to you. Just- take comfort in the idea of helping to maintain the integrity of time—”

“Because that is always so rewarding,” Eric interrupted, looking unimpressed.

It reminded Alex a little of someone else.

“-And we will try to get out of your home as quickly as possible.”

“Fantastic.” The way in which the other man exclaimed this suggested that it was not nearly as ‘fantastic’ as he had made it seem. “That’s just great, I love having brownie points with an
organization that doesn’t even exist yet. How about…” he trailed off with a frown, looking as though he were reviewing the past few minutes, then levelled a curious look at Alex. “Wait, that’s the second time you’ve said, ‘our’. Who’s part of this ‘our’? Is it Trip?” the Quantum ranger continued while Alex attempted to decide whether or not to chide himself on the slip up, no matter how truthful it had been. “Because honestly, my furniture does not need the threat of his clumsiness-”

“He’s not that bad,” Alex felt the need to defend, if somewhat untruthfully. There was a reason he had been nicknamed ‘Trip’, after all.

The incredulous expression on Commander Myers’ face was enough of an indicator that he was very much aware of this fact.

Of course, this moment of thoughtful silence, an instance where Alex and Commander Myers might have had a shot at the beginnings of a professional…ambivalence, perhaps, or at least for the Quantum Ranger’s rage to subside into apathy, was when Hunter decided to waltz down the stairs, as easy as you could please.

“Is there something we need to know about this guy?” Hunter’s voice carried down the stairwell, only to be followed by the blond himself a few seconds later.

The casual inquiry was instantly overwhelmed by the ninja’s choice of clothing, a monstrosity of pink and fluff in the form of an oversized bathrobe.

Alex, for the life of him, could not gather the mental capacity to wonder how it had come to be; only that it was completely appropriate for Hunter to have chosen it.

“Because as good as I make this look,” the blond continued, rubbing a towel against his head, making his flyaway hair look even more disorganized than normal. “I’m thinking that there’s no chance in hell your uncle could-”

At that point, Hunter caught sight of Commander Myers, who, for all intents and purposes, looked like he was putting up a valiant effort not to start strangling somebody.

“Sup?” Hunter offered, propping against the stair rail; a half-lidded, bored look on his face. Alex could have taken the moment that followed to fight off the overpowering urge to give into his annoyance; his hard work, all forgotten, for nothing, and then convinced himself to move onto the next attainable point in conversation. Maybe achieving some civility, or something.

Unfortunately, unlike Commander Myers, who had frustration at this rather forward intrusion to distract him, Alex was still slightly…taken aback, by Hunter’s…wardrobe.

Color was irrelevant. The cloth, its ratio of dry-to-wet material was irrelevant, the fact that Hunter seemed utterly content to drip all over the Commander’s floors was irrelevant…What was relevant, to Alex at least, in a very prominent way, was the size of the damn robe.

It was too big. It was obvious that however it had come into the Commander’s possession, it had been intended for him, and while the blond and the Quantum ranger were perhaps similar in ways of height, their statures varied greatly, with Commander Myers large, broad chested, and Hunter a slim stick of a person, all lank and no mass, thin as a rail.

It caused the robe to hang off his right shoulder in a vindictively taunting way, revealing a slick collar bone, water dripping down his neck and-
Sexuality was not a topic much discussed in the future.

Possibly, if entirely, because there was nothing to discuss. It would be like talking about breathing, or sleeping, or the beating of one’s heart. It was simply a thing that happened. It was a natural part of any human or alien’s reproductive system and sure, while not all couplings were traditional heterosexual relationships, enough time had passed that nearly any relationship, so long as it was between consenting adults, was welcome in society. Homosexuality, polygamy, asexuality, demisexuality – these were all scandals of the past. At one time, sure, researched and gossip-worthy phenomenas, but in the present- or future, where Alex lived- it was simply one option of many.

Sex was sex; love was love; there were more pressing matters to attend to than attempting to conform the masses to some outdated romantic ideals.

Alex could admit, with Jen he had been…hesitant when considering the more intimate aspects of their relationship and had, on quite a few occasions, actively shied away from it. He had- they had- ultimately assumed it was just an unfortunate side effect of growing up alone, of learning that dependence - any kind of emotional need - was counterintuitive to his long term survival.

It was not that Alex hadn’t found Jen attractive - he had, in almost every aspect (though his favorite features had always been the intangible things; her disposition, her determination, her mental strength) - it was he who was lacking. There had been arousal earned through long-term familiarity and that, Alex had thought, was to be expected.

Those five inches of exposed skin on Hunter’s chest was enough to make Alex realize his assumption had been totally unfounded.

It could be self-sabotaging; a subtle ploy from a mind that desperately hated itself, but like all other nuisances, Alex pushed it away.

It wasn’t relevant; therefore it could not be processed. It would not be processed.

The mantra might be one Alex would have to keep repeating, but it was effective and he had other things to worry about, so he allowed the matter to slide for now.

“And who,” Eric began through clenched teeth, clearly not registering the sensuality Hunter offered. “Exactly, are you?”

“Time Force,” Hunter replied flippantly, seemingly deciding his own answer. Clearly, he had no concern for making up a cover story, Alex noted, which was either a strike at Alex’s attempts at damage control, or he had already perceived that any such attempts had already been abandoned. Neither were particularly relevant now, but seeing as one indicated pettiness while the other perception, Alex should put some effort in discerning Hunter’s disposition.

Later, of course.

“Bullshit,” the Quantum ranger scoffed. “You’re too young.”

“They can recruit young,” Hunter argued, an almost-frown tugging at his lips.

If Alex didn’t know better, he would say the blond was offended.

“You’re also not enough of an asshole,” Eric continued. And that, at least in Hunter’s case, was not a thing the blond could really argue, so the crimson ranger responded with a shrug, conceding the other man’s point.
“It’s irrelevant,” Alex continued, frowning at the almost instant familiarity falling between the two other rangers, an ease and acceptance of social decorum where Alex was finding nothing but struggles. “We’ll be out of the way soon.”

“Nope.” Commander Myers shook his head decisively, cutting off further explanation with a displeased look. “I’m pretty sure that’s completely relevant.”

“Thank you,” Hunter chirped. “I appreciate the back up.”

The Commander levelled a look in the blond’s direction that would be best described as ‘disdain’. “Shut up kid, this isn’t for you.”

The gruffness only earned him a tiny smirk, nothing particularly outstanding, but there was a certain impishness to it that made Alex feel wary, recognizing that nothing ideal could result from this.

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It wasn’t that Alex didn’t necessarily approve of the fast-growing bond between Hunter and Commander Myers per se – simply based on their current rate of corrections it was clear that they would have need of the Quantum ranger’s hospitality for longer than Alex would care for – but there was a line, he thought, when it came to familiarity.

True, solely basing one’s friendship, or at least allowing one to be kindled, over the joint distaste of an individual or group of individuals was not a foreign concept by any means; it was just that Alex couldn’t help but feel the fervor by which the other two rangers readily attacked Time Force’s (and subsequently his own) inadequacies, may not be entirely necessary.

In Hunter’s case, perhaps, but as a member of the same ranger team, Alex had been expecting a little more solidarity from Eric. At the very least on principle.

It would seem that in this regard, as with so many others, Commander Myers and Alex were of differing opinions.

Ultimately, it was irrelevant to the outcome of Alex’s mission, even if it somewhat hindered the morale (specifically Hunter’s), proving that peaceful coexistence was once again an elusive fever dream.

At that point, Alex had stopped bemoaning the cards fate had dealt him and bore through his situation with the appropriate amount of apathetic professionalism that was required to endure.

Later, he would note that this may have hindered more than helped.

“So, what you’re saying here is that he essentially kidnapped you.”

It was less of a question on Commander Myers’ end and more of a displeased statement, frown setting on his features in a permanent fixture of distaste. He spared Alex a glance before setting his attention back on Hunter, hand curling tight against the handle of his coffee mug. “In that case, I’d say you’re holding up pretty well.”

“Thank you.” Hunter, for the most part, was looking positively mirthful, as pleased as Alex had ever seen the blond now that he had someone to sympathize with his plight. “It’s been a struggle.”

“He wasn’t supposed to be there,” Alex reminded quietly, keeping his voice steady.

As the other two had immediately disregarded him as a participant in this conversation when it
started ten minutes ago, Eric promptly ignored him. “I can imagine,” the Quantum ranger replied without any hint of sarcasm.

“We’re on the same team.” Despite his better sensibilities, Alex couldn’t help but mention it.

“It was a little touch and go there,” Hunter continued blithely, his grin all mirth with a sharp kind of edge to his eyes. “Back at the beginning, I mean,” he continued, conspiring, addressing the Commander as though they had been friends for a lifetime, as opposed to acquaintances of a few minutes. “Somehow though, I managed to pull through.”

Commander Myers took a slow sip of his coffee. “An inspiring story.”

“Truly.” Hunter’s grin widened, a seemingly impossible task. Perhaps it was appropriate then, due to Hunter’s predisposition of effectively destroying logic.

Alex opened his mouth. He had prepared at least four proper objections during the recant of Hunter’s epic (which stood to bear a great deal more exaggerations than strictly necessary, a comedic effect the Quantum ranger had only appreciated), but seeing as his current progress was nonexistent, Alex abandoned them, choosing to stick with silence. He kept his gaze fixed on Hunter’s face, steadily ignoring the allure calling from just five inches lower; exposed skin neither the thunder ninja nor the Silver Guardian felt bothered to address.

For the first time in- It had been a long time, since Alex had felt this decidedly out of place. He did not dwell on his prior experiences. This time period bore too many things- too many distractions, made him weak-

“So, what’s your plan then?” the Commander’s question was polite, but sincere. His fingers tapped a lazy rhythm against the rim of his coffee mug. “You just gonna weather this out until he’s done with you?”

Hunter shrugged, a languid, almost careless movement. His bathrobe did not waver, not that Alex considered the possibility. “It’s the only thing I can do.” It was said with a sigh, aimed more to rattle Alex than to express actual weariness. Hunter was not tired. No, he was merely getting started. “This was probably for the best anyway,” he continued, waving vaguely. He made a not-so-subtle gesture in Alex’s direction. “Guy’s kind of lost without me,” he mock-whispered.

His voice filled the room, raspy, exaggerated, wrapping around the curled smirk of Commander Myers lips.

It reminded Alex uncomfortably of his early years at the Academy, the whispers. Defect. Reject.

As he had then, Alex blocked out the sour feeling blooming in his stomach, the nausea and unease, and focused on keeping his breathing steady. Composed.

They laughed, Eric rolling his eyes, and the moment was broken, the joke dissipating over their instant companionship.

“Yeah,” Eric drawled, chuckling into his drink. “I can see that.”

His gaze shifted, a broad inspection of Alex narrowing in on his left wrist, the morpher - Wes’ morpher, for all that he was concerned- the center of his focus.

Alex fought back a shudder, but said nothing.

They were on the same team, but that did not make them teammates.
It was a concept he was only too familiar with.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so… got a little dark there at the end. Happens sometimes, when I’m focusing on Alex.

I know Eric’s house is a one story in the series, but I thought he could do with a bit more room :)

I like to think the fluffy pink bathrobe was a gag-gift from Wes that Eric can’t make disappear. Every time he tries to throw it away it reappears in his house somewhere, so he just gave up at some point and shoved it in the spare bathroom where he wouldn’t see it. You know Hunter would be all over this. What the hell, right?

Taking a page from Tsukino Akume’s book and going along with the whole ‘Trip’ as just a nickname thing because, come on, it’s Trip. There is no alien language where that could possibly equivocate to ‘name’.

Until next time :)
So here was the thing.

Every once in a while, the stars and all the planets would align perfectly with the sun, or Jupiter would be in orbit, or there would be a total eclipse of the heart, or the dawning of the age of Aquarius or something would happen that would allow Alex, for five seconds of his life, to not be the most gigantic douchenozzle this side of the Pacific. At first Hunter had suspected it was an illusion, some kind of fever dream his mind had worked up in a poor attempt to convince himself that things were not as bad as they seemed (they were though; they so very were). But then it had happened again. And again. And three points were all you needed to triangulate a signal or find the angle of a line and by god, Hunter could use his three little instances to develop himself a pattern, because it wasn’t like there was a whole hell of a lot else to do in his downtime. Of which there was much, and so little to occupy it with.

So he had plenty of time – in between the grumbling and the annoying and the general harassment – to appreciate the very few moments when Alex put aside the pomp and circumstance and demonstrated that there actually was a reasonable and semi-decent human being underneath all the formal decorum; and he wasn’t all that bad to hang out with.

And then he would be gone, and Hunter would be stuck back with Mr. Stick-up-his-ass, and the story from there was fairly predictable.

It made the brunette like, eighteen times more hate-able, easily. Easily. Because Hunter knew there was a person under there, a person who was trapped within this other person who was awful, and Hunter wanted to save that person, but it was especially difficult because they were a part of the other person, who was aware of the good-person deprivation but just didn’t really give a damn.

Ultimately, the fifteen seconds of good person Hunter had gotten so far were just a few measly drops in an ocean of infuriating, so at the end of the day Hunter stuck to hating Alex, because it was the only strong emotion he could properly articulate around the son-of-a-bitch.

It made for some stunning conversations.

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“Look, as fun as it is-”

“You’re lying,” Alex murmured quietly, eyes pinned on some random spot in the distance with the same creepy focus he approached everything. “So I assume this lie is to demonstrate the exact opposite of your following statement.”
“Whatever,” Hunter replied, waving his hand in a lazy assent. “My point is, we’re going about this wrong.”

“As the professional in this situation—”

“Jackass,” Hunter grumbled under his breath; loud enough, of course, for the brunette to hear him.

Alex studiously ignored this. “-It is not only my opinion, but an undisputed fact that I would be better acquainted with what would be the best approach to these types of missions.”

“That’s great and all,” Hunter began, making a show of taking deep, calming breaths to demonstrate how thoroughly stupid Alex was. “But you know, sometimes a fresh set of eyes—”

“You want a more direct approach,” Alex stated, interrupting Hunter’s play nice with others speech he was about to flagrantly steal from Shane’s first (ill-advised) team building exercise. “While it may seem like the most expeditious tactic for meeting our goals, it has an inherent flaw of lacking subtlety which, if you cannot tell—” The brunette bequeathed him with a bored, sidelong glance. “-is very pressing for this operation.”

“I’m a ninja,” Hunter grumbled, leering at the side of the agent’s face as he turned to survey their target. “I live stealth.”

“Subtle interactions are not equivocal to non-interactions,” Alex replied dryly. “Aside from instigating corrections, our most pressing objective is to minimize our effects on the time stream. Sometimes, this involves patience.”

“Or stupidity,” Hunter stated, glancing up at the sky. “I live stealth.”

Maybe he should take up bird watching or something. That seemed like a more worthwhile exercise at this point. Even if he didn’t give a shit about birds.

“But mostly patience,” Alex quipped, not missing a beat. “Think of it as building character.”

“If this makes me anything like you, I’m going to pass.”

“Discipline is not a crime.”

“Neither is having a personality.”

“Is that what they call it now?” Alex quirked a curious eyebrow at him. “Interesting.”

“You’re just pissed because your uncle doesn’t like you,” Hunter sneered.

The temporary rest stop had been, to this point, the best part of the entire ordeal. Hunter wasn’t stupid; he remembered the Time Force rangers. They had only been a couple years before Lothor had reemerged from the depths of spacehell.

It was nice, actually getting to talk to one of the people he and Agent Ass-face had been obnoxiously stalking for the past few weeks (even better that the guy totally sided with Hunter, because Hunter was right).

But that was neither here nor there.

(It was at the table of champions, where victory and justice and astoundingly good hair presided, if we’re keeping a record)
There was a chance – and Hunter was just going out on a limb here, as he only had one person in the world to entertain him and they were less than two feet away – that the other ranger had stiffened (more, as though it were possible) under the accusation, though he kept his eyes forward.

Oh yeah, nothing to see here. Don’t mind my stiff shoulders or slight frown or the meager narrowing of my eyes, all the small things that should be nothing that were most definitely something in the world of Alex.

Hunter might as well have just stabbed Alex in the soft and gushy parts, because man, he hit the nail on the head. The painful, painful head.

Now, Hunter could take a moment to feel bad about this, or…

“Not that I blame him,” Hunter said lightly, shrugging up into the mid-afternoon sunlight. “If I discovered my personality-less nephew helping himself to my-”

“He’s not my uncle,” Alex muttered, because that was the important part of the conversation.

“Right,” Hunter said. “Because that was the important part of the conversation.”

Sometimes it needed to be pointed out.

“Your speculation brings you entertainment,” Alex replied off-handedly, still focused on the… whatever. Point was, he wasn’t looking at Hunter. “In that, I did find it satisfying. Though I must mourn the gross inaccuracy.”

“What, do you think he secretly likes you?” Hunter asked, smiling at the thought. At the gall that such a thought could exist, specifically. Like it offended his sensibilities with its very existence.

“You think this is some kind of tough-love thing?”

“I think he is entirely apathetic either way,” Alex noted. He was beginning to have a slight edge to his voice, a tenseness that preluded snippy annoyance, and also the sad puppy eyes of despair (Alex regularly denied their existence, but Hunter swore, they were there). “Commander Myers is a professional; he treated the situation as such.”

“Does being a professional involve chewing out your colleagues for stealing your clothes?” Hunter asked. He had really liked that part. A lot. Especially the fact that Alex had little choice but to stand under Eric’s belligerence and take it with quiet acceptance, lest he discover more of the angry face. Hunter himself was a fan of the angry face, but that was getting off topic.

“Admit it,” he grinned, prodding at Alex’s shoulder with an insistent finger. “You’re upset he doesn’t like you.”

“There is nothing to admit to,” Alex insisted stubbornly. “Aside from his initial annoyances of receiving unexpected house guests, Commander Myers does not feel strongly about us one way or the other.”

“You keep telling yourself that,” Hunter said, brushing off the mild insanity the same way any other individual with mildly problematic thought processes would, by latching onto the outside crazy. “In the meantime, I’m going to try and comprehend the idea of you caring about someone else’s opinion. Someone you haven’t really met. Whom you also siced a dinosaur on.” Hunter paused, a tiny smile fighting its way onto his face. “On that note, I’m totally bringing that up next time I see him.”

Alex sent him a glare that was not in any way kind. “Our operations are not to be shared in light
Because that was the- okay, Hunter was getting a little sick of his own repetition. He wasn’t usually this repetitive. It must be something about the constant Alex-exposure that drained all things nifty and interesting- damn, yes, he had just used the word ‘nifty’. He needed to spend time with Shane. Rehabilitate his language into something more respectful. Or polite grunting. That seemed like something Shane would do (perhaps? Hunter wasn’t really sure, he tried not to listen to Shane all that much).

“Why do you care so much anyway?” It wasn’t exactly like Alex was giving him a lot of signals here, but Hunter had learned during their brief (and very straining) time together that you had to be able to make a mountain out of the tiny molehills the brunette tried very hard to conceal with his visage of apathetic professionalism. For Alex, that slight frown was an exaggerated declaration of his woes, and Hunter wanted the deets (damn you Dustin) on that so he could renew, reuse, recycle (no reducing, not this time) as many times as possible.

“It is really about the same-team thing?” Hunter continued idly, moving on when Alex’s glaring had reached optimum levels of ‘I am not ignoring this no matter how much I want you to believe I’m ignoring this’. “Because that seems a little naïve, even for you. Like, expecting brotherhood over matching morphers. That doesn’t seem like a very you activity.”

His comment was met with silence, and then Hunter bothered to glance Alex’s way.

Holy shit, how was that even possible?

“Holy shit, how is that even-?” Apparently Hunter was broken today (you know, more than usual), because his usual brain-to-mouth filter of witty repartee was taking a vacation or something. “Is that actually why you’re upset?”

“I’m not upset,” Alex insisted. But his shoulders were tense, and his eyebrows were slightly furrowed, and it could have been mistaken for his usual expression of you-are-annoying-me-you-stupid-small-person but Hunter knew that look and what he was wearing now, as in, right now, was not that. This was despair. He had discovered Alex’s despair that hadn’t evolved from annoyance.

“I don’t believe you,” Hunter marveled, shaking his head. “I don’t even like all the people on my team, and none of them have ever tried to raid my closet for handouts.”

“I was borrowing them.” Alex repeated the technicality like the anchor in the storm that, for him, they all knew it was. “And secondly, I am not bothered.”

“Majorly bothered,” Hunter deduced. He added in a thoughtful chin-rub to bring the scholarly vibe home, then remembered at the last second that was something Dustin would do, and settled for a wicked smirk instead.

Alex flashed him a look that some would politely refer to as irritation, which Hunter aptly recognized as deep, deep loathing. “If you are not going to contribute anything useful to the matter at hand, kindly refrain from speaking.”

It was fairly obvious that the ‘kindly’ had been thrown in at the last second, that dedication to polite indifference rearing its ugly head no matter the amounts of anger being brewed in that oppressive brain of his. Hunter smiled and wiggled his fingers in return, miming a zipper across his lips, but Alex was already looking away.

Okay, so that was definitely a sore spot.
Distinctly noted, Hunter thought.

He could pretend that he might not abuse this knowledge in the future, but if there was one part of Alex’s anger that was justified, it was that Hunter was kind of an awful person. An awful person with needs.

-Annnnd, we’re back,” Hunter announced, pushing the back door open with an exaggerated flourish that was sure to tickle Alex’s control-freak nature in an especially unpleasant way.

“What the-?” This time Eric was home, and halfway through dinner preparations, by the looks of things. “No. You don’t get to come back.”

“Missed you too, snookums,” Hunter said with a grin. He glanced over the counter with a lazy eye, taking in Eric’s ingredients with easy familiarity. “Chili dogs, awesome. I’ll get the other buns.”

Looked like a bachelor menu was about the same as the recently-orphaned-child menu by way of skill and pallet.

“Why don’t you just get out of my house instead?” Eric grumbled. He frowned but did not, however, make any move to throw Hunter out on his face. So there was something.

“Mission,” Hunter replied with a dismissive wave. “You know how it is.”

“Doesn’t mean I have to help.”

“But he’s on your team,” Hunter sighed, giving Eric the same exasperated kicked-puppy eyes Alex had all but been unloading onto the Quantum Ranger the last time they’d shown up. “You can’t just leave us alone in the harsh wilderness, we’ll die.”

“Go to a homeless shelter or something,” Eric grumbled, and then completely undermined his protests for their removal from his house by tossing Hunter the desired hot dog buns and nodding towards a stack of paper plates.

Ah, the good china.

No seriously, they were the reinforced kind. The ones that didn’t wilt in the microwave after two minutes. Hunter may or may not be an expert on such things. Older brother status automatically nominated him for house chef.

It hadn’t been a grand lifestyle, but they had lived.

“We would-” Hunter allowed with a shrug, fighting off a wave of discomfort at the lack of Blake’s presence. “But then we would miss out on your company, and that would be a true tragedy.”

Eric scoffed, but otherwise didn’t make any derogatory comments in the wake of Hunter’s wide smile. He was trying, oh, was he trying to hate Hunter, but he couldn’t. Because Hunter was freakin’ charming, that was why. The only reason Alex couldn’t figure that out was because he was too busy lodging his head firmly up his ass, and even if he wasn’t occupied in that particular pastime, Hunter was two-thirds convinced the guy had some minor brain damage. Or a traumatic childhood that instilled an unyielding fear of positive relationships, or something. It was a tossup.

Though when Hunter, of all people, was the one putting more effort in the ‘amicable relationship’ department, it was a good bet that Alex’s ineptitude derived from a combination of both theories.
People couldn’t have changed that much in the future for Alex’s behavior to be considered normal.

“Shut up and microwave some more hotdogs before I change my mind,” Eric declared with a tired sigh. He pointedly kept his attention to the pot on the stove, giving the brown sludge an occasional stir as it bubbled complacently. “Hell, I should be making you do this.”

“You could,” Hunter offered. It seemed fair enough. “It’s not like I haven’t mastered the art of chilidog-making by this point.”

“What about your buddy?” Eric asked, head angled at an incredulous tilt. “He still hanging around?”

The blond took a moment to appreciate how his stupid kidnapper was lumped into his own company, despite the fact that he was seriously on Eric’s team. If anything, Alex was his buddy.

Not that Hunter could blame him from wanting distance from that mess of issues.

Hunter shrugged. “Unfortunately. He’s outside, you know…” He tossed some hotdogs onto a plate and started looking around for toothpicks. A fork would work too. “Reporting and stuff.”

The blond looked up in time to stop a small plastic container from colliding with his face. When he looked to give Commander Sassypants the proper glare he deserved, Eric looked unapologetic, gesturing towards the toothpick-filled projectile that had been exactly what he wanted.

Too damn snarky for his own good.

Hunter could appreciate that.

Appreciate, and pointedly not think about Blake.

He was multi-talented that way.

“How much longer do you think this will take you?” Eric continued, turning back towards the stove.

Hunter shrugged, regardless of the other ranger’s inability to see him, and started poking random holes into the sides of the hotdogs. “No idea, but my best guess is that it won’t be anytime soon. Every time we fix something it seems like three more things get added to the list.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Eric noted.

He didn’t sound entirely sympathetic in his response, but he wasn’t condescending either. It was more like a neutral note of support, that he could acknowledge the stupidity for what it was and empathize, albeit mildly.

Hunter was spending too much freaking time with Alex. He should not be reading this much into body language.

Except he had to, or else he would never know what the dumbass was thinking.

Eric broke the silence with a slow nod. “I have ice cream, for dessert.”

Hunter smiled, and continued impaling his tiny meat links. “I think Alex would have something disapproving to say about ‘maintaining a balanced diet for preserving healthy functioning’ or something equally obnoxious like that.”

Eric paused, and there was something, the beginnings of a tiny smile playing across his lips.
He looked at Hunter. “I have hot fudge too.”

They were still grinning when Alex entered the kitchen. The smile grew wider upon viewing the immediate look of distaste Alex gave the pot on Eric’s stove, and shared a knowing wink with the Quantum Ranger.

Oh, this was going to be the beginning of a lovely friendship.

-:-:-:-:-:--

“Hey.”

Hunter wasn’t even going to pretend he had been acting stealthily, because even if he and deception were on fairly familiar terms — enough for Shane to regularly despair at the blond’s poker face — even Hunter wasn’t so obnoxious to pretend he had been attempting anything less than ambivalent conspicuousness.

If he were feeling particularly dick-ish, he could claim it was from a need for rebellion (and, well, it would always be partially because of that; it went without saying), but if he were being honest, Hunter had been spending too much time discovering ways to spite Alex, and had kind of dropped his guard a bit. A tad. A trifle, nothing major.

The tiny blonde child continued to stare at him expectantly with wide, open eyes, half of its face obscured by the metal fencing separating their backyard from Eric’s.

After a panic that was obligatory at best, Hunter settled for a shrug, and replied, “Hey.”

Stunning conversation thus far.

And then, because the little thing — it was a girl, he determined; the fluffy hair and big pink bow were kind of a clue — continued staring at him, Hunter added, “You didn’t see me.”

Look at him being all Time-Force-subtle.

Apparently the kid was at an age where statements like these could still confuse her. “I don’t?” she asked, head cocking to the side. Were Hunter one to note such things, he would classify the action as adorable. Kid could probably give Blake a run for his money if she wanted to.

“Nope.” Hunter nodded, then tilted his head back towards the sun, stretching to catch a few more of its rays. The last ‘mission’ had taken place somewhere with temperatures in the rough area of ‘too damn cold’. There had been no sun then, only clouds and misty rains that turned to slush and hail, and at no point were Alex and Hunter’s Fall-appropriate light jackets qualified to handle such chills.

When Alex had retreated to Eric’s office to plan out their next move/mission/paperwork (there was always paperwork, always), Hunter had turned on the television in Eric’s living room to suitably annoying soap operas and slinked out the backdoor, into the forbidden area of sunshine and open sky.

He supposed, if he thought about it, Alex’s backyard-restrictions were put in place for instances such as these, but Hunter had only just gotten the feeling back into the entirety of his hands and feet, so he didn’t particularly care that much.

“Why?”

“Why what?” Hunter craned his neck to the other side. It wasn’t like he expected the little kid to
drop the subject, but if she wanted something, she was going to have to work for it.

Hunter didn’t discriminate who he released his jackass nature onto; he was thoughtful like that.

The kid was undeterred and pouted, as though she knew Hunter’s game. “Why don’t I see you?”

Hunter considered this. He shrugged. “I’m a ninja.”

If the crimson ranger had to make a comparison, he would say the kid’s thinking face was a lot like Dustin’s thinking face, which was not at all endearing, or a subtly painful reminder of a home he might not ever see again.

Pff, how painfully dramatic. Dustin would approve.

The fluffball, unsatisfied with only half a view, clambered onto the fence until her feet were firmly planted on the bottom rung and her chin peeked over the top, small hands clinging to dirty metal with steadfast ferocity.

“You’re not a very good one,” she declared, staring down at Hunter, her nose furrowed. “Ninjas are supposed to be stealthy.”

“Maybe you’re a ninja too,” Hunter proposed. “Everyone knows ninjas can see other ninjas. Their stealth gets like, canceled out.”

The contemplative face returned. The blonde chewed on her bottom lip, because apparently that was a thing seven-year-olds did. “Okay,” she decided eventually. And then, “Is Mr. Eric home?”

Hunter winced. “Sorry kid, he’s not here.”

“Oh.” Strangely enough, the kid sounded disappointed by this.

Hunter had to fight not to find the idea of Big Bad Eric bonding with the bright pink fluffball ninja perched on a metal fence amusing. It was a losing battle. He bet they did tea time together, or something.

“Can I still pet the birdies?” she asked.

The birds in question, as though recognizing the words, perked up with a few cheerful chirps when they were mentioned over in their cage on the porch.

That was still something that threw Hunter off, that Eric was a bird-guy. If the blond ever had to guess, he would have pictured the Quantum Ranger with a bulldog, or maybe a German Shepherd; some kind of hardy service animal. He would not have guessed birds.

But hell, it wasn’t like he was one to judge.

“Well?”

The face that greeted Hunter this time was somewhere in the area of ‘I will not have any of your funny business, you know what I meant’ that should not be so easily conveyed by a seven-year-old. If she teamed up with Tori, they would probably manage to take over the world through sheer power of no-nonsense facial expressions.

It should be a terrifying thought, but Hunter kind of wanted to see the type of world Tori and Fluffball McGee molded for the rest of them.
The kid’s eyebrows lifted.


“I won’t.” Underneath the excitement was an expression of ‘I’m not stupid, thanks’ and Hunter had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. This kid had clearly spent too much time with Eric. He was willing to bet anything the Quantum Ranger spoiled her rotten any chance he got.

Hunter was about to settle back into his lazy slump across the porch steps, angling back into his sunbeam in a slow recline, when the kid spoke up again.

“Hey.”

He looked up; his half-lidded gaze meeting the small blonde’s determined one. It was a mighty, surprisingly fierce look for such a small thing as she stared down at him from her perch on a milk crate, which Hunter suspected Eric left nearby specifically for her usage.

“It’s ninja petting time,” she explained once she had his attention. She motioned towards the birds. “Come pet.”

Really, if Hunter had any amount of decency, he would have probably talked this kid through the whole concept of stranger-danger, on exercising an appropriate amount of suspicion to keep her safe. If he was a good *Time Force* agent, he would have never bothered to talk to her, and if he had been a good ninja he would have stuck to Eric’s roof if he had really needed to bask in the warmth of the sun that badly.

But Hunter never tried to be anything other than himself, and he was far from decent, so instead the blond found himself shrugging and following the little girl’s orders easily enough, shoving his fingers through the bars of the cage to pet himself some birds.

He knew from intimate experience that there were worse ways to spend an afternoon.

Chapter End Notes

The ball-o-fluff at the end of the chapter is Alice. She makes a brief appearance in *Time Force* to help Eric out with some character development. I believe the grand summation of her achievements involved Eric leaving his birds to her (a very young child) when he was going to leave Silver Hills in whatever fit of diva-dom had struck him that episode.

Like, I loves me some Eric, but in the actual series, he could be a bit of a dick. For reals.

Until next time :)
The day their arrangement met its inevitable point of collapse was not particularly different to any of their other admittedly trying days. They had managed a rest period at Commander Myers’ abode just a few days previously, and were due for another as soon as their latest objective had been completed.

Their newest goal didn’t even require the trial of patience; there was no laying in wait for individuals to make certain moves, nor did it depend on active concealment. Of everything they had done so far, this task would probably be the most easily accomplished of any of their determined objectives.

It stood to reason then, that Hunter would choose that exact moment, as insult to injury, to lose any grasp of professionalism he had. He was a spiteful child, and though Alex actively avoided dwelling on the subject - as it would do nothing but create further feelings of negativity that could in no way aid him on this mission - after this debacle, Alex could do nothing but evaluate his infuriating tagalong.

It started rather surreptitiously.

“Indoor basketball hoop,” Hunter noted dryly once the light had dissolved from around them, the ninja taking in their surroundings with a practiced eye. “Nice.”

“Focus,” Alex muttered.

He paused, mentally reviewing the last two seconds, and steadily did not throw a glare over his shoulder at the impertinent child who had mimicked his words at the same time.

If Hunter was attempting to demonstrate Alex’s predictability, the very least he could do was actually listen to his admonishments.

“I know, I know,” Hunter waved him off, turning in a slow circle to get a good look at the room. “I’m focusing. What’re we due for?”

“You’ll like this one.” Alex mounted a set of stairs that took him to an upper balcony area, scanning the immediate vicinity in search of a particular door. “We need to attract someone’s attention.”

“Do my ears deceive me?” Hunter began, overdramatic, sarcastic, and crude, hand pressed against his chest in mock surprise.

“No,” Alex interrupted the blond before he could blather more nonsense. “They do not. We need to draw an individual into this room and over to…” He consulted his time pad quickly and scanned the area. “Over there.”
It looked to be a recliner. A plaid monstrosity surrounded by television monitors. On the screens were multiple angles of what appeared to be a ranger fight, live footage from different news programs broadcasting the battle. For the most part.

It appeared that some of the screens presented private camera footage with active uplinks to the rangers’ communications. This must be where their mentor monitored their progress. They needed an employee – Fran, his file said her name was – to stumble upon this footage and initiate the steps that would make her a team support.

As a team with private identities, having an adequate support structure was vital to their continued efforts. They would not know it were they left deprived, but had they a taste of an outside opinion that understood their work conditions, they would greatly mourn the loss. Fran would provide moral support, a perspective of the people this team – Jungle Fury – was protecting.

Moral supports were every bit as important to a team as tech or command supports. Though they were not active members of a ranger team, their contributions could drastically affect team performance.

The villain must have found a way to keep her attention downstairs at this point. They would simply need to make a commotion up here more pressing and therefore, more worthy of Fran’s attention.

“So what’re your thoughts on this?” Hunter asked, releasing a slow whistle as he examined an area of the lower floor set aside for sparring. “We stage a fake break-in? Attempt a cry of distress? Pretend to be confused victims of a monster attack, hopelessly lost and screaming ‘Oh god, oh god, we’re all going to die’?”

“I was thinking we could turn on a stereo,” Alex replied, zeroing in on a workbench generously covered in random scrap parts and wiring. It must be the team tech’s area.

“A stereo?” Hunter did not sound so much incredulous as he did exasperated. “That’s your big idea? That’s going to be about as effective as a car alarm, you know. Lots of noise, but no attention. Super effective plan.”

Alex shook off the blond’s criticisms and scanned the work area. There had to be a stereo somewhere; that was technical. It seemed like the kind of thing Trip would have around, at least, and he was a team tech. “It will be out of the ordinary enough. If she knows this place should be empty, she will come to investigate a sudden noise.” He glanced over at the thunder ninja, catching the teen as he eyed a selection of practice weapons appreciatively. “Assuming burglary, of course.”

“Because when I’m burglarizing, my first move is to turn on some tunes,” Hunter agreed, his tone dry, with every suggestion he was not nearly as supportive as his statement. “Unless she’s been forbidden. Because that seems like the kind of thing you would want to do. Forbid the employees from discovering the super-secret base upstairs. In which case,” he looked to Alex, his eyes half-lidded and annoyed. “Sudden stereo music won’t be enough to draw her attention.”

Alex paused in his (admittedly fruitless) search, resting a hip against the workbench. “I suppose you have a solution you would like to propose then?”

The smile this earned in response was all teeth, deprived of any mirth that wasn’t kindled by bitterness. “Is that a legitimate question?”

“Do you have a legitimate answer?” Alex countered, folding his arms across his chest.

It felt like they had reached the pinnacle of the rather precarious balancing game they had been
attempting to master, the equilibrium between tension and civility coming to a head with inevitable misfortune.

Though the odds were unlikely to be in his favor, Alex hoped he was imagining the sudden strain that had fallen over them.

They did not have time for this.

Hunter narrowed his eyes, body rigid with a stillness some would mistake as composure, but Alex recognized as a deliberate calm before the storm, masking potential fury. “I suppose that would depend on your definition of ‘legitimate’. If you are referring to a working alternative that is both efficient and effective then yeah, I’ve got you covered.”

It was not common sense that dictated what Alex said next, he could admit that. It was nothing but his own frustrations at Hunter, at himself for Hunter’s involvement, at Time Force, at the criminal who had instigated the changes.

“Somehow,” Alex began, words traveling from his mouth in slow motion, before he had a chance to filter them. “I doubt that.”

It would be downhill from there.

There was a tick in Hunter’s cheek, a small twitch only noticeable through the complete lack of any other movement. “You would, wouldn’t you.”

It wasn’t a question. It was a statement. A challenge.

“Hunter-“

“You can’t even listen?” Hunter asked. “You can’t even pretend to humor me because you just assume-“

“To this point-” Alex began to object, but Hunter cut him off with a ruthless shake of his head.

“To this point, I’ve been pressing for the direct approach. Want to know why?” Hunter bounded up to the balcony in a single leap, landing in a crimson blur. “Because the direct approach,” Hunter spat the words out as though they were his bane. “Worked on me. It worked on Eric. It would probably work on any of the rangers and the ‘ranger supports’, as you call them-“

“The civilians-“ Alex began, attempting to rally a defense.

“We can go super-stalker-sneaky on them!” Hunter snarled, and now Alex realized the blond was angry that he would infer anything less, as though Hunter lacked the mental capacity to figure that out. “But for the rangers-“

“We minimize our effects,” Alex repeated for the tenth, hundredth, thousandth time. “I acknowledge that is not a strategy you’re particularly fond of, but it is important-“

“To not listen?” Hunter snapped. It was odd, seeing him so still, yet so strangely expressive. “Don’t you know how to work with a team? Couldn’t I possibly, just maybe have a suggestion that could fit your stupid standards-?”

“Necessary standards,” Alex corrected.

Hunter talked over him in a furious rant. “-that is worth listening to? But you won’t even give me
“Keep it down,” Alex hissed. He glanced down at his modifier; checking the time, then back towards the monitoring area. On the screens, the rangers’ battle continued. “We don’t want—”

“That is exactly what we want!” Hunter bellowed. “I was led to believe that was the precise aspiration we were aiming for! Are you saying that we’re changing mid-stream? Can we even do that? Are you even capable?”

“Of course I’m capable,” Alex murmured, his fists flexing rigidly against his sides. “What I would like to know, for all your assurances and declarations towards your supposed intelligence, is what about the situation renders you incapable of understanding the importance of what we are doing?”

Alex shouldn’t be fueling this fire, but it was too tempting, too easy to give into these desires that had been building up ever since they had started working together, intensified by their sporadic stops at Commander Myers’ abode. The humiliation, the uncomfortable truth of it, that they were stuck in this situation for the greater good, why couldn’t Hunter see that?

“The part where you kidnapped me,” Hunter snarled, lunging into Alex’s personal space. Alex didn’t waver, didn’t back down from the advance, as he knew the blond desired him to. “The part where you don’t trust me or listen to me—”

“Listen to you?” Alex snapped, despite knowing better. “You hardly listen to me. In fact, our performance increases drastically whenever there is an absence of communication.”

“That’s because we each do our own thing.” Hunter shoved an angry finger into the battered material of Alex’s jacket. “We compliment the other’s skills by working as – brace yourself for this now – a team.”

“Teams have leaders,” Alex replied. He forced himself through the uneasy feelings of inadequacies that this thought presented, the facts that Hunter could only remain unaware of for so long.

That Alex had not, in fact, ever been a part of a team. Not in any capacity really. When he had been the given the responsibility of his morpher he had been tasked with collecting criminals on his own, and the one time he had traveled to the past to reclaim that very same morpher-

It had not ended well.

There was a reason Alex had been put back on solo duties after that particular debrief. A reason he had been selected as the most fitting candidate for this mission specifically.

With every turn, with every point he made, Hunter was valid. He was right.

And Alex hated him for it.

“Lead by example,” Hunter snapped into his face, reading between the words Alex hadn’t said, about Hunter’s inability to follow. “You can’t expect me to listen if you won’t return the favor.”

“I’m the expert.”

How Alex longed for the days where Hunter submitted to complacency, where bitter silence had been his go-to form of conduct. Too much time had passed for that to be feasible; now Hunter felt the need to contribute what he could to bring an end to his unwanted recruitment.

The crimson ranger rolled his eyes, turning away in the beginnings of what looked to be a movement
to throw his hands in the air. It was a gesture that was steadily increasing in appearance, a non-verbal cue to indicate he was fully displeased with Alex. When words failed him, when he felt there was no audible way of communicating, he resorted to this.

“Why don’t you just-”

He stopped suddenly, gaze pointed towards the doorway Alex had made note of earlier. It was the one that, by process of elimination, had to lead down to the pizza parlor at the front of the building, where Fran worked.

Of course, that was when she wasn’t investigating the mysterious raised voices emanating from her employer’s secret training facility.

The girl – young woman – poised in the doorway was entirely bewildered, her expression such a perfect combination of lost and confused that it was almost artistic. Mousy, would be an appropriate adjective for her. Average. Perfectly capable of blending into a crowd.

*She would make a good Time Force agent,* Alex noted through the haze of shock.

Her mouth was hanging open, not enough for it to be intentional, and she clutched onto the doorknob with both hands as though it were her only lifeline, looking panicked and slightly abandoned in her colorful work clothes.

“Time Force,” Alex began, swallowing the sigh that threatened expulsion. “We’re here-”

“Oh my god.” It was uttered in a breathless exhale, eyes wide as they darted back and forth between the two males frantically. “It’s you- You guys are Power Rangers.”

“From Time Force.” Alex gainfully tried to salvage this while he could, ignoring the immediate flare of concern that she had deduced their identities so quickly.

Definitely Time Force material.

*Focus.*

“I know!” Fran clamped both hands over her mouth after the exclamation, eyes going impossibly wide in the wake of her outburst. “I mean,” she began again, quieter, but no more composed. “I recognize you, from the- but I thought you had blond hair?”

From the corner of his eye, Alex could see Hunter snort and turn away, shaking his head with a rueful grin. Ever so helpful.

“It’s complicated,” Alex went with the flow easily enough. “Now, if you could just look at those monitors over there-” he pointed towards the recliner.

Fran remained steadily focused on him and Hunter instead. “Why are you- why are there power rangers in RJ’s…” she trailed off, then slowly moved in to the room, glancing around, her eyebrows furrowed in concentration. “What is this place anyway?”


“Oh my god,” Fran repeated again, smiling wide at the expensive ceiling in wonder. “That is so cool.”
“Truly fascinating,” Alex agreed. “Now if you could-”

“Wait.” Fran seemed to regain a bit of her bearings, at least enough to shake off her awe and settle back into befuddlement. “Why are you guys here? And arguing?”

“That’s not important now,” Alex assured her. Keeping his steps light and steady, the brunette made his way over to her side, not wanting to startle her with any sudden movements. “What matters-”

“I think it matters a hell of a lot,” Hunter murmured. He was posed against the brick wall with a posture of disdain exemplified, eyeing the proceedings with slight amusement.

His teeth ground together in an uncomfortable pinch, but Alex kept his grip light as he turned Fran – gently – towards the monitoring area.

“Not now,” he muttered.

“Don’t you mean, ‘Not now, Hunter’? What, you won’t even say my name now, Alex?”

He wouldn’t have, because the less Fran knew, the better, and Hunter was perfectly aware of that.

Fran startled at this. “I thought your name was Wes.”

“It’s complicated,” Alex said. His gentle guide became more of an insistent push as he all but dragged the occupied female to the monitoring station.

Hunter laughed. “That’s his brother.”

“Ancestor,” Alex corrected, throat catching at nothing – it was nothing, just like this annoyance was nothing and unhelpful. “He’s my ancestor. And I’m here to fix some time alterations.”

“Really?” Despite being directly in front of the monitors, Fran’s full attention was on Alex, her head stubbornly glancing over her shoulder and locked on his face. “That’s awesome.”

“Very much so,” Alex agreed with a distracted nod. He could feel Hunter’s contempt through his half-lidded glare, but like so many other things, Alex ignored it. “And now I need you to just-”

“It seems cool,” Hunter interrupted with a snide growl. “But it turns out he’s more awful than awesome.”

“Hunter,” Alex warned. His patience was unraveling from him in a taunting wave, disappearing from his fingertips without apology, and there was very little Alex could do about it.

Under his hands, Fran’s shoulder went suddenly stiff.

“Not now?” Hunter asked, sarcasm dripping from every syllable as he attempted to mimic Alex’s tone. “It’s never now, is it?”

“He seems upset,” Fran noted.

Were Alex feeling more sympathetic, there would be some guilt at the hints of hysteria that entered her voice.

Unfortunately, his attention was on Hunter. “Look at the monitors, Fran.”

“Yeah Fran,” Hunter addressed the employee with a sneer, his eyes never leaving Alex’s. “Sit in the chair. Heat up some popcorn, watch the monitors, and forget we were ever here, Fran.”
“Exactly,” Alex agreed.

He could both hear and see Fran gulp, a response most likely derived from the slightly dangerous edge to his agreement, but Alex couldn’t find it in himself to care.

He should be professional, he should be composed, but he just couldn’t be. Not with Hunter.

“That’s all that it comes down to, doesn’t it?” Hunter asked, lumbering forward with narrowed eyes. “Just shut up and obey?”

“Hunter-”

“No,” the blond snapped. And that seemed to be it, the gate to his threshold obliterated in one single resonating syllable, loud and graceless and painful, and in that one second, the floodgates opened.

“Six weeks,” Hunter said, a tense exhale that barely captured sound. “Six frickin’ weeks I have spent with…” He made a gesture unbefitting of polite company in Alex’s general direction. “-that and you’d think that at some point we’d level with each other.”

The blond began pacing; stalking back and forth as he occasionally glanced at Fran, illustrating that this conversation was no longer for Alex’s benefit, but for her’s. Alex was not an acceptable participant.

“At some point,” Hunter continued, throwing his hands into the air with a harsh snarl. “You’d think he’d be like, ‘Hey, you’re a ranger, and I’m a ranger, and we’re both trying to achieve the same things and lets maybe not try to keep ripping each other’s throats out.’ But nope. That hasn’t happened.”

“Not for lack of trying,” Alex interjected, quelling his own fury at such blatant unprofessionalism in favor of defending his intentions.

He had tried. Hunter just made things very difficult.

Hunter acknowledged this with the same care he reserved for maturity. In that, he did not.

The blond spoke over Alex as though he could not hear him (which was entirely possible, considering his obvious dullness). “Instead, we keep doing this.” He turned on Alex, as though the Time Force ranger had magically just appeared in the middle of his one-sided rant. “You know what, fine, I give up. You win. No friendship. No teamwork. You hate me, I hate you.”

“No friendship?” Fran echoed in a hushed whisper.

There was a sorrowful note to her tone that Alex could not help but identify with; a vague disappointment that he hadn’t even acknowledged the possibility-

Because it was foolish. He didn’t need to be Hunter’s friend, he needed a working relationship. He needed trust and respect. Or at the very least, tolerance.

But despite the layered deviations Hunter had been unapologetically willing to burden Alex with, there was still a lingering impulse to insist he did not hate Hunter.

True, he did not particularly like the blond, but hatred in itself seemed like far too much of an effort to exert on the teen.

Hunter continued raving, back to working up a rant in fine form, eyes wild and daring. “I’m a
nuisance who should sit in a perpetual time out while you and your ‘professionalism’ and ‘procedure’ and whatever the hell you want to call it, save the freakin day!” He waved his hands in exasperation, almost clipping Fran with a stray arm. “Watch out everyone, it’s Alex Collins; if you so much as think of having an original thought, personal awareness, or creativity, he will suck out your soul!”

Alex glowered, acknowledging they had passed the point where Hunter’s ideas held any validity, and were straight into impassioned nonsense. How fun.

“You’re overreacting,” Alex indicated with a sigh, attempting to keep his tone neutral.

There was probably more calming alternatives Alex could have employed, especially for Fran’s benefit (it wouldn’t do if she believed her supposed saviors derived from a lot of emotionally imbalanced individuals), but the constant presence of Hunter and his- his other facets had frankly worn his patience past the point of reason. There was nothing Hunter would take from him now that would be received with an appropriate response, so why even bother with the effort?

“Hear that everyone?!” Hunter continued, overdramatic and complete in his efforts to prove Alex’s point. “I’m overreacting.” He turned towards Fran, and Alex reflexively pulled the young woman back as Hunter leaned into her space. “You wanna know how long I’ve been overreacting? Six weeks.”

He shuddered, chest heaving with exertion, and beneath that worn fabric Alex could remember that gleaming collar, dripping wet-

He sucked in a quick breath and shook his head, focusing on Hunter’s annoyance. It was real; there was no time for useless fantasies.

Hunter narrowed his eyes, his body controlled in a sudden stillness, his jaw clenched. “Because being any more lively than super-robot man automatically makes me an over-reactor!”

There was something about that, the barest wisps of a memory jarred into rude awakening. Jen’s urges for compassion, to listen; ‘Please, Alex’. Lucas, back in the academy days when Alex was training him for tactical recon, telling him that he needed to ‘loosen up a bit’ before the others would mistake him for an android (actually, he had said even Androids were more expressive. He knew a guy). Even Trip and Katie, the most accepting individuals he knew, had their own comments about his behavior, both before and after-

Administrators, fellow orphans, cadet squad members, commanders, doctors… For the entirety of his life there had been comments, ranging from critical to humorous to disturbed, regarding Alex’s conduct. His tendency to emote, or lack thereof. These words, like the many that had come before them, were not an original revelation.

But they were the ones that broke the dam.

Alex hands tightened around Fran’s shoulders as he narrowed his eyes at Hunter and hissed, “You are immature, irrational, and impossible to deal with.”

“And you’re a dick,” Hunter snarled, head tilting at a taunting incline.

“That’s it. We’re done,” Alex decided. It was past time he had made this ultimatum, far past the point of no return. “I don’t care how long it will take, you are going home.”

“Thank you.” The only question to his tone would be whether the sarcasm or the disdain was stronger, but even through the anger and the obvious contempt, the tension in Hunter’s shoulders
eased ever so minutely, enough to indicate a slight relief.

Glad to be rid of Alex.

*Stop it,* Alex chided himself. The desire to return home from unfamiliar surroundings was a natural response; it did not in any way reflect on the possible escape from Alex’s company in specific. Even if that were a contributing factor.

“It’s nothing,” Alex assured. He fought back a swallow, his tone level, controlled, neutral, just as it should be. “Watch the monitors, Fran.”

Upon hearing her name, the young woman seemed to snap to life, coming back into existence with a startled jolt.

“What-? Are you guys okay?” She worried on her lower lip, hands wringing in an unsettled fashion even after Alex managed to coax her into the recliner.

In a silent prompt or to illustrate his own parting shot, Hunter nudged a bowl of popcorn into her hands. It appeared he had not been joking about its suggestion earlier; it really had been nearby.

“We’re fine,” Hunter said, his voice apathetic. “We’re just working through some relationship issues.”

“Oh.” Fran blinked, eyes wide as she did a mental reboot, considering this with a blank expression. “That actually makes a lot of sense.”

“Please act as naturally as possible whenever your friends return,” Alex instructed, waving off the implications of the conclusion the girl had arrived at. Without looking away from the young woman, Alex levered a finger in Hunter’s direction, calling him to *hold off* for once. “I apologize for any distress we have caused you.”

“Distress?” Fran echoed, disbelief edging into her tone, gradually making her more alive. “That was better than all of my soap operas, and they-” She whipped towards the screens, as though seeing them for the first time. “RJ!!” she exclaimed with a startled yelp.

“Your friends,” Hunter repeated. “Power Rangers. Try not to think about it too much.”

“Or remember us,” Alex added.

Hunter smirked, though there was nothing satisfied about it, no joy even for his own benefit. “You heard the man. Forget we were ever here.”

“Will I see you again?” Fran asked. She was still staring at the screen, eyebrows knitted in an expression of unadulterated confusion.

Hunter scoffed, though this one had more mirth. To Alex’s understanding, this revealed more humor at the girl’s choice of phrasing rather than the content of her words. It was probably a twenty first century thing.

“If you’re lucky,” Hunter drawled, making his way over to Alex’s side, eyes on the bold numbers displayed across the modifier, counting down the seconds to their next teleportation. “You won’t. Be grateful for that.”

The seconds counted down – five, four, three – and Alex grabbed onto the teen’s shoulder, grip firm as he gave Fran one final look of composure. In the pitiful hopes that it, through some means, might
be reflected onto her.

Fran aimed a timid wave in their direction when the familiar lights enveloped the two rangers, and that completely innocuous, perfectly unnoticeable female disappeared just as steadily as the rest of the world, leaving Alex with no one but Hunter.

Hunter, the dumbass.

Chapter End Notes

In answer to your question, why yes, that is a Firefly reference. Because we all need a little more Firefly in our lives ;D

And in conclusion, HAPPY NEW YEAR – hope you guys find many good fics to read in the future :)

Thanks to Lee_Onew for the comment!

Until next time
Performance Review

Chapter Notes

Thanks to the real vampire and Kei Luna Shoryu for their combined efforts in beta-ing this monstrosity! If you’re looking for some other team Ninja Storm fanfictions, check out 'My Brother's Keeper' by the real vampire, or 'The Art of Cohesion' by Kei Luna Shoryu.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hunter would be lying if he said this hadn’t been the plan all along.

Okay, he would only be partially lying, because even he wasn’t obsessive enough to plan their encounters that thoroughly (that was an Alex-job; unfit for Hunters and their creativity and freewill and shit), but he knew an opportunity when he saw one, and he took it.

Alex had been on edge for- nope, always, he was always on edge, so really, when they entered the secret basketball lair (Hunter needed to talk to Cyber Cam about this; circumvent the hurdle of regular Cam for some real recreational excuse to throw balls at things), Hunter just kind of went for it. He pushed, he needled, he complained, he did everything Alex hated.

To be fair (he wasn’t sure why he bothered at this point, but he would like to think his parents would have wanted him to have a conscience or something), he hadn’t expected Alex to rise to the bait. The other ranger was an impervious wall of repression most days, with only occasional dabbles into rolled eyes and sarcastic bickering. Usually Alex would block Hunter out of existence long enough to get the job done before dragging the blond onto another jaunty romp through space-time, regardless of the kicking and screaming and general displeasure emanating from behind him.

Alex was a challenge. Alex was a statue. Alex didn’t like Hunter.

And Hunter, bless him and his sharp tongue, had finally managed to break the bastard enough that he was done with the blond. It was a glorious, terrible thing.

Look, it wasn’t like Hunter had gone into this ordeal intending to be a dick. Sure, that had been plan A, in that anyone who had been accidentally kidnapped by a guy whose profession strictly involved avoiding accidentally-kidnapping people was entitled to be a dick. He figured Alex would let him have his pissy parade, endure the sarcasm, and do whatever it was rangers did when it was just the two of them. Hunter assumed it was something other than trying to destroy other rangers, even if that was his and Blake’s only experience as a duo of badass ninjas.

He was digressing.

He was also pissed, but that was his perpetual state of being, so Hunter was almost cool with that.

Just- Alex had this way of summoning every ounce of annoyance Hunter had in the most painful way possible. Like he was slowly ripping the blond’s fingernails off through power of haughty glances and pretentious frowns and- Hunter would show him pretentious. The guy was worse than Cam, and Hunter hated Cam, so the fact that there was a human being that he could detest enough to actually put forth the effort of hating him as opposed to letting it slide off his back in disdainful
Okay, the bottom line here was that Hunter was very happy to not have to be here anymore. He didn’t care if they blew their cover doing it; Hunter was out, he was done, he was-

Sitting on Eric’s couch with a untouched cup of coffee clutched in his hands, glaring a hole through the television while Alex fucked right off outside; the declaration of ‘Calling his superiors’ lingering like a triumphant birdcall. If Hunter stopped glaring and actually took a sip of his drink, it would taste like victory, because he had finally won. He was free; he was out.

Unfortunately, Hunter remained unfamiliar with the sweet taste of grand achievement, because he was – for reasons unknown to him – too freaking pissed to even think about it.

Hell, what was wrong with him? This was what he wanted. Exactly what he wanted. This had never been his mission; this had never been his fight. Hunter was an innocent bystander involved purely because he was too damn good at his job and Alex was too incompetent at his, and the fact that he got to go home- back to his brother, back to finishing off the guy who murdered his parents- that was worth celebrating. Hunter had responsibilities he needed to see to, bikes to fix, a world to save, a brother to torment; he should be doing enthusiastic heel clicks and dancing the jig of in-your-face-bitch like there was no tomorrow, not moping on the couch.

It wasn’t even a nice couch. He should be perched on the window ledge, basking in the sunshine and watching Eric’s little neighbor ride around on her pink bicycle, being all adorable and charming and sickeningly suburban, but no, if he was in the window the mailman could possibly catch a two second glimpse of Hunter though the corner of his eye, and then they would be screwed.

Throwing Alex’s meticulous rules for time-preservation to the wind, Hunter crossed over to the forbidden bay window and planted himself among Eric’s second-hand pillows, nestling in under the warm sunlight streaming through the blinds. He might as well, right? Wasn’t like it would matter soon anyway.

Damn, he was being a morose little pansy. What the hell was his problem anyway?

Hunter pondered it for a second, staring down at his creamy brown beverage with more focus than was strictly necessary for what was essentially boiled beans, and sighed. He knew what his problem was.

Pride. Damn it, he had thought he had quelled that urge after being taken in by Sensei Omino. It wasn’t like Hunter had a lot of it to begin with. Pride was something for people who hadn’t had to be taken in by social services because their birth family couldn’t be bothered to take care of them; pride was for people who had the luxury of simple lives, who didn’t have to fight for their survival. Pride was an indulgence that Hunter rarely partook of, because it was so astonishingly easy for it be taken away, or worse- used as a tool for your own demise.

There was some - pools and patches - Hunter saved for rare occasions. He was proud of his fighting prowess, but not enough to underestimate his enemies, and certainly not enough to stop training to get better. He was proud of his ability to survive, and he used that ego to back up his skills, to keep him going, and he was proud of that single-mindedness.

And at this exact moment, apparently he was proud of his mindset for attacking time alterations, because the idea of leaving Alex alone in his incompetence was bothering the hell out of Hunter.

The pride was one strike, but the fact that Hunter had actually come to care about this stuff was another, and the third was the remaining bitterness at the fact that it was all about to be taken away.
He was good at this, he was a ninja, stealth was what he did - if anyone should get sent back home with a ‘better luck next time ribbon’ it was Alex, not Hunter. At least Hunter was personable. Compared to Alex, Hunter was freaking charming. That should say something about this situation. Something bad. Something frightened.

“Well, aren’t you a real rebel today?”

Hunter didn’t bother to turn and meet Eric’s drawled sarcasm head on. He considered it for a moment, pondering whether it added more fuel to the flame than it inspired fondness, and ultimately shaking if off because all in all, the exercise was stupid. He had coffee, he had a window - he was fine.

“You know me,” Hunter grumbled, shaking his cup to allow gravity to stir its contents, glaring at the creamy swirls. “You can’t contain this revolutionary. Rules to break, archaic systems of outdated leadership to overthrow, and all that.”

The Quantum ranger’s footsteps were quiet against the carpet, soft thumps as he made his way over towards the other side of the bay seat, metal coffee cup clutched in one big hand. The Silver Guardians symbol was etched onto the side. Some remnant of a company togetherness initiative, possibly. It was an odd picture, Eric drinking coffee at a meeting or something. Reviewing numbers and regulations or whatever business people did. Nice.

“Sure,” Eric scoffed. “One window at a time.”

Hunter shrugged, finger tapping against the edge of his coffee mug. “You’ve got to start somewhere.”

“Sure,” Eric repeated.

Despite the relatively short period of time they had known each other, Hunter was familiar with the exchange, and what it prefaced.

“So,” Eric began when he felt an appropriate amount of thoughtful silence had passed. “Is there any particular reason your pal’s spitting fire on my back porch, or is this just another Tuesday?”

“Special occasion, I’m afraid.” Hunter considered his cup briefly, then sighed, dropping it down to rest on his thigh. He couldn’t drink it now. Stupid Alex. “I seem to have finally broken him.”

There was a laugh—something of a chuckle that still managed to be cool and imposing – skill, and Eric’s own lack of social grace coming into play – before the other man took a healthy sip of his drink. “Took you long enough.”

“He’s sending me back,” Hunter continued. He tried to keep his tone neutral – nothing, because this was nothing – but he could tell from Eric’s sudden look of interest that he had failed spectacularly. Still, he carried on, “Guess you’ll be down to one houseguest from now on.”

“Try not to sound too happy about it,” Eric murmured. He froze, cup posed in front of his lips as he studied Hunter. “You actually gonna miss this?”

“Oh course not.” Hunter’s response was immediate and snide, a rare throwaway that was as irrelevant as this conversation. “At least, not Mr. Sunshine out there. I could probably spare some concern for you though.”

“You’re welcome.”

Look at that, a nice exchange of pleasantries. Wasn’t it funny how far a little courtesy went? Wasn’t it weird to picture a team that operated from respect and trust, that encouraged communication and alternative solutions? Wasn’t it keen?

“Jesus, kid.” Eric’s voice brought him back from the one-sided glaring contest he had with his coffee, reclaiming his focus with furrowed eyebrows that split the line between confused and concerned. “I’m not one to talk about repressed anger, but hell.”

“I knew you were the strong, silent type,” Hunter deflected, taking the road of levity while he could and frowning out the window. The little blond had finished her first lap down the sidewalk and made a daring cross to the other side, the pink streamers that dangled from her handlebars fluttering in the wind.

Eric took his attempts at avoidance with about as much grace as could be expected from an impatient, culturally-graceless human being. “Kid.” The Quantum ranger nudged a work boot into Hunter’s thigh, one eyebrow raised in underwhelmed impression. “Just spit it out already.”

Turned out, Hunter didn’t need all that much encouragement before the dam broke.

“It’s stupid,” Hunter snarled, fingers tightening around the handle of his cup. Eric shot him a quick look of warning- to mind his strength, right- and Hunter immediately loosened his hold. “I’m better at this than he is and he does this crap for a living.”

Hunter did not add, ‘And also, he and everything about him is inherently flawed due to a stupidity that could only be achieved by those emphatically devoted to such pastimes, and I am better in any and every way because he is dumb and I am amazing’, but it was very much implied.

Not that Commander Sassypants appeared to agree with that point. “When I first met you, it took- I can’t even quantify it in seconds, it was less than that-”

“A moment?” Hunter offered coyly, mind going back to some musical Dustin had harangued the team into watching under penalty of his you-will-make-me-sad face. It had been some lead-up into a love song.

Eck, Hunter shuddered thinking back on it now. Eric was great and all- guy had biceps, was what Hunter was saying- but no. It would be like dating an older, crotchety version of himself. With less tact. It would be an explosion.

Eric took Hunter’s mental detour and following expression of disgust in stride, having come to terms with the blond’s daydreaming weeks ago. “Less than a second,” the older ranger continued. “Before you gave up your super-secret mission. At least your buddy-”

“Would you stop calling him that?” Hunter groused. “You’re implying an intimacy that doesn’t exist, let alone is wanted.”

“-had the decency to stay committed to the stealth aspect of his mission before realizing the jig was up,” Eric continued, talking over Hunter’s objections with practiced grace. “You didn’t even try.”

“Because it’s stupid,” Hunter snapped. “I mean, you’re on his freakin’ team; if there was anyone we should be able to talk about this time-business with, it’s you.” Hunter slumped back with a frown, glaring at the splash of coffee that dared to follow the laws of physics and cascade over the rim, into his lap. It was warm now, halfway to undrinkable.
With a sigh, Hunter abandoned it to a nearby end table, wiping off the excess coffee with the unstained parts of his shirt.

Eric considered this, and Hunter could tell, he knew the other man didn’t disagree, but he was doing that small frowny thing that Hunter couldn’t stand, because it usually led to a point he didn’t want to hear that was painfully accurate.

The Quantum ranger sighed. “Look kid, I’m not going to say he’s not an asshole-”

“Takes one to know one,” Hunter countered with a smirk. “Right?”

Eric lifted one eyebrow. “Pot,” he drawled, turning his hand to jab a thumb at himself. “Kettle.”

Hunter contemplated this, then shrugged. “Fair enough.”

There was a reason the only friends he had accumulated over the years were 1) his brother and 2) people who had to interact with him for fear of the world/time’s destruction (i.e. Eric, his team).

“All I’m saying is that this stuff- it’s important to them, okay?” Eric continued. “I mean, it’s important to all of us, if you enjoy living in a stable timeline- but for them, this was what they were born to do. This is what has been drilled into their minds as the most important for fear of catastrophic consequences.”

“I get that,” Hunter said, staring the other man down. “I’m not stupid, I understand the necessity-”

“Then why don’t you act like it?” Eric challenged. His face was set in what Hunter assumed was his teaching expression, a combination of seriousness with a tinge of regret they had to go the route of tough-love. “Alex might not be the most sociable human being in the world-” Coming from a fellow unsociable human being, that was really saying something. “But he knows his job and how to do it. You should be the one following his lead, kid. Not the other way around.” Eric turned to look out the window, just as the little blonde neighbor rode by the front of his house, pigtails wild in the breeze. “Gonna be honest, if there was anyone who preferred the ‘talk it out’ plan of attack, I wouldn’t have guessed you.”

And that was the painful thing, because it was true. Dustin or Shane- that would be their way to go about it. Blake and Tori would understand the need for secrecy, and Cam would probably find a way to build a robot to do all the work for him or something. Shane would have gone the direct route by way of friendship, and Dustin would have dutifully followed, because that guy and stealth were not always the best of friends. The missions where the red and yellow wind rangers were required to do secret recon were always the most entertaining debriefs to sit in on, because they almost always ended with Dustin saying, “I don’t know how it exploded, it just did” and Shane cradling his head in both hands, wondering why.

Hunter had pictures. Many, many pictures. He might have made a collage with Tori at some point for his and Blake’s shared living room at the Ops, but that was the most secretest of secrets.

The truth was – and he had known this for a while, though he refused to acknowledge it – the only reason he had really opted for the talk-it-out plan was because that had been the last thing Alex wanted to do, and Hunter was a petty little five-year-old at heart.

By the smug look on Eric’s face as he took another generous sip of coffee, the Quantum ranger already knew this.

“You’re an asshole,” Hunter muttered, turning to reach for the remainder of his coffee. Even if it was cold, there was no point in letting it go to waste. He could reheat it in the microwave.
“Pot,” Eric repeated. “Kettle.”

“Awesome,” the blond huffed. With a lazy roll of his eyes, Hunter clambered to his feet, making his way into the modest kitchen to reheat his coffee. “Any other wisdom you’d like to impart, oh wise one?”

“Nope.” Eric sidled up into the doorway, leaning against the frame leisurely. “I’m afraid I’m fresh out.” He took a sip of his drink, eyes closing as he savored the flavor. “Though there is only one thing that confuses me,” the other man confessed, looking suddenly serious. “If you two had time to stop here to rest, why the hell couldn’t Time Force arrange for you to be sent back home weeks ago? It would take about five minutes.”

“Performance review.”

Hunter didn’t jump, because he was above such things, but he wouldn’t lie and say he hadn’t been surprised by Alex’s sudden intrusion. He hadn’t heard the Time Force ranger enter.

Alex’s expression, while one of his usual flavors of seriousness; did not provoke victorious bells of freedom.

“Unfortunately,” Alex continued, shutting the back door behind him quietly. “Due to the nature of this…hiccups, Time Force has decided, in order to properly rate my skills as a field operative, that I am to continue the mission with the assistance of Mr. Bradley.”

Hunter reacted before Eric did. “That’s kidnapping,” the blond snapped. “How could Time Force have the authority to do that? Aren’t there jurisdictions or something that I don’t fall under?”

“They’re the ones with the technology, kid,” Eric said quietly, staring Alex down with hard eyes. “As far as they’re concerned, you’re part of their team now.”

“Seriously?” Hunter spat. He had no words, none, to provide for this.

“It’s a punishment,” Eric continued. To his credit, Alex didn’t completely freeze up at the words, but he did the repressed equivalent that might as well have sung Jackpot-Jackpot-JACKPOT. “You screwed up, and they want to know if you can still do your job.” He nodded to Hunter. “If you can succeed with Hunter acting as your figurative ball-and-chain, you’re in the clear. But if you mess up…”

“There is a lot more at stake than my career Commander Myers,” Alex noted sharply. He was tense, Hunter noticed, coiled up and angry, and this comment, he felt, was one Alex had already brought up to Time Force. “This is beyond a measurement of my abilities, if this fails-”

He cut himself off with a stiff jerk of his head.

“It cannot fail,” he said simply.

With that, the brunette turned on his heel and walked away, back out the door from whence he came. If Hunter knew him as well as he – unfortunately – did, the brunette would be camping out in Eric’s tool shed and meditating, or whatever that Time Force Zen meditating equivalent thing was that Alex had explained was ‘much more complicated’ than that.

“He doesn’t understand why they’re risking it.” Eric’s voice broke the silence thoughtfully, making Hunter realize he had been staring out the window after Alex. Eric continued when the blond turned. “I think he’s more angry at himself than he is with you. He isn’t happy you know, about the risk.”
And that was really all it boiled down to, wasn’t it?

“Yeah,” Hunter drawled, abandoning his coffee altogether and dumping the pitiful remains carelessly down the sink. “Wouldn’t want to risk my dumbass, bumbling around and messing shit up.”

Eric fixed him with a hard stare – one of his no-nonsense, hard assessments of one’s soul kind of things – that stopped Hunter in his place. “Kid,” the other ranger said. “You’re missing the whole goddamned point.”

“I’m a champion like that,” Hunter returned snidely. He left his mug in the sink and breezed past Eric, taking the stairs two at a time, blocking out Mr. Knowledge-face’s words with practiced ease.

Like that guy knew anything about teammates, Hunter didn’t know why he had even bothered to listen.

It wasn’t like Alex was worried about risking Hunter.

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“Are you two going to talk about this, or what?” Eric snapped, frowning down at the other two rangers, his arms folded across his chest, giving the impression that he was supremely underwhelmed by their antics. “Because I am not spending my free time dealing with your drama.”

“Well, feelings again,” Hunter sighed melodramatically, rolling his eyes up towards the ceiling so he could continue looking anywhere and everywhere that wasn’t Alex.

Seeing as the Quantum ranger had pretty much bullied them from their separate hidey-holes into the house with threats of no food/time disruptions (okay, Hunter didn’t know what he had said to Alex, but that was the only thing that got the brunette to move, so it was probably right) should they not comply, there wasn’t really a choice here.

Eric, having clearly reached his limit for Hunter-bitching for the evening, turned towards Alex. His mistake. He probably figured the brunette would be the easier party to deal with, and Hunter would be a liar when he said he wasn’t looking forward to the Commander being proven wrong.

It would teach him a lesson for threatening to withhold dinner (that he provided in the house he let them hide out in rent-free with minimal complaint, the scrooge).

“You,” Eric began, loudly, in order to break Alex out of his distracted staring into the great beyond. “Talk.”

Alex snapped back to reality with a start, his gazing lingering on the Quantum ranger before they found a much more interesting target with the hands in his lap. “There is nothing to talk about,” the brunette concluded. “What’s done is done, we can only move forward.”

“And here I thought you were all over post-mission debriefs and shit,” Hunter snarked quietly, with a touch of hypocritical-jerk to bring it on home.

“There is- I…” The guy was conflicted, his mouth wavering between open and closed as he struggled to find the words for whatever condescending remark he had prepped up for Hunter.

Maybe he would comment on the blond’s maturity, he hadn’t done that in awhile.

“I’m sorry,” Alex said at last, his voice soft within the room. “You are right.”
“Yeah,” Hunter drawled. “Why don’t you just-”

Wait a minute, let’s back up here.

“Wait a minute,” Hunter began. “Let’s-” he shook his head, cutting off the words and shouldering through the new serving of confusion Alex had inspired. “Wait, you’re sorry?”

He searched the brunette for signs of insincerity, to see if this was a show for the sake of damage control or if it was…an exercise in humanity, or something. Empathy.

Weird. That went without saying, but still.

Hunter knew from experience that a few seemingly-heartfelt words every now and then could go a long way when it came to placating relationship wounds. He had gotten away with it for a good couple of months before Blake had called him out on it with the Ninja Storm team, his brother having decided the winds were actually worth trusting, and Hunter had to grow up and have big people emotions- he knew it would be scary, deal with it.

The blond had only yielded because he could admit, regrettably, that the ragtag trio of bumbling dolts they had once known had been replaced with three individuals he kind-of, sort-of cared about, and maybe sharing some real things with them every now and then wouldn’t be so bad.

Unless it was Cam, but Blake hadn’t been expecting a miracle.

He and Alex hadn’t quite been working with each other for two months yet (yes, months), and considering the fact that the guy tended to be more closed off than Hunter on a regular basis, the idea of a legitimate expression of regret or perceived weakness must be…terrifying.

So okay, that wasn’t going to make Hunter less of an ass in the next five minutes, but he found he was willing to soften the blow when he saw that Alex was being totally honest.

And he was. He very much was.

“I am sorry,” Alex repeated. He nodded slowly, as though he was still digesting this fact, but with care. A definite movement. “We cannot proceed as we have been.”

“Well that’s…good?” Hunter tried.

He looked to Eric for guidance, or maybe a little brotherhood. It probably would have been more successful if that guy wasn’t as helpless as the rest of them when it came to making nice. The Commander shrugged his admittedly broad shoulders.

“Great,” Eric drawled.

Yeah, great.

So…bonding?

Hunter weekly battled monsters whose only desire was to aid in the enslavement of Earth. The concept of bonding should be miniscule in comparison.

It wasn’t.

Like he said, he was a five-year-old at heart.
The musical referenced is “Hello, Dolly” and the song in question ‘It only takes a moment’. Because I like musicals, and shall never feel guilty for this fact :)

Thanks for the kudos!

Until next time :D
Other Brilliant Plans

Chapter Summary

Thanks and love to the real vampire and Kei Luna Shoryu for their hands in beta-ing this beast! If you are looking for some other power ranger fiction, check out the real vampire’s 'My Brother's Keeper' or Kei Luna Shoryu’s 'The Art of Cohesion'.

So…whoops? Sorry about that. Here is the much-belated chapter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The wake of the apology did not inspire any bonding, as Alex had appropriately dreaded. It did not do much of anything, were he being honest, though it did bring what he supposed could be considered a mild relief.

The apology was well-due to Hunter. The blond, loathed as Alex was to admit, was right. Alex couldn’t continue to treat the other ranger as a burden; they had to be, for all intents and purposes, a team. They were a team. All that remained was to act as one.

It proved to be a greater challenge than he’d anticipated, but Alex was no stranger to enduring hardships.

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Upon first waking, Alex was greeted with, “Ugggh, my back hurts.”

In itself, it was not an unprecedented occurrence (though it had as of yet become a desired one). The sleeping bags that Commander Myers lent them suited their purpose admirably, but were not complete deterrents from the hard floors of the Commander’s spare room.

Hunter, for the sake of hearing his own voice, Alex was sure, took great joy in perfectly bemoaning these faults. At first, Alex had assumed this was merely another ploy to attack Alex’s patience, but in the end he realized that Hunter simply liked to provide a constant backtrack to his life, perhaps as a way of coping with their circumstances. Alex could not entirely blame him, though he would have preferred for Hunter’s coping methods to be slightly quieter.

There was some more groaning - Hunter’s usual theatrics - before the blond continued. “Did we have sex?”

“No,” Alex replied automatically. Though honestly, he couldn’t remember enough to be certain if that answer was true. It felt like the appropriate answer. “We did not.”

Why couldn’t he remember? The ground was- not wood. Rougher than the Commander’s floors. Concrete, perhaps?

Despite himself, the brunette fought down visions of engaging in such pastimes- quelling the initial arousal that had – unbidden, unprofessional, crude – and moved on, trying to orient himself with the dust and the…rubble?
“What does one have to do with the other?” Alex asked, honestly curious. He determined they were outside – the street clothes were one indication – but struggled to open his eyes; his head ringing with a pain whose origin he couldn’t remember.

“Yeah.” Hunter’s grumbles came from off to the side, mirroring Alex’s reluctance to be awake at that exact moment. “That was kind of a long shot, but still, ow.”

Ow, indeed. Alex couldn’t really argue with the agree.

“What happened?” he wondered. Hunter could take satisfaction in Alex seeking his opinion, or perhaps he would simply revel in his discomfort, but either way, Alex had put up a token effort. He could do this; he could be polite.

Change was difficult, but not impossible.

Still, it would be much easier to focus on his tactics for a better working relationship if his head didn’t feel like it was stuffed with cotton. In a way, Alex felt detached, lost and wandering as he tried to get his feet under himself. As such, it took him a few moments to realize these were classic symptoms of a mild concussion.

“Are you alright?”

Alex tried out the question, keeping his tone a neutral kind of inquisitive. The tell-tale aches of new bruises detracted from his focus, causing Alex to wince as he got himself standing, but he managed. His hands were bloody – scraped, was more accurate – bruised and dirty. Why?

It was then Alex registered their surroundings, and the unfortunate events leading to the current predicament swamped him with ruthless abandon.

An explosion. There had been an explosion.

It was Hunter’s doing, of course. Not the explosion, but their position to being in the immediate blast area. Naturally.

Some days, Hunter made it very difficult for Alex to…endure him.

“We should…” Alex swallowed, his mouth tasting of dust and ash. “…Leave.”

Grumbling, the lanky blond lumbered to his feet with significantly less grace than usual. “Sure thing, genius,” he drawled, casually popping his back, as though this were not entirely his doing. “Any other brilliant plans?”

Alex could snap that there was nothing requiring brilliance about simple logic, but that would be counterintuitive to the…toleration, they had to build. It was not Hunter’s fault he was here, it was not Hunter’s fault he was bitter (entirely), it was not Hunter’s fault that their current relationship was only somewhat better than a relationship that didn’t exist at all.

It was Hunter’s fault they were caught in an explosion, but one couldn’t dwell on such things. Especially when suffering from minor head injuries.

Alex thought all this, then replied, “No,” and settled on taking a hold of Hunter’s sleeve and dragging him away from the wreckage. They were just two civilians in a sea of confusion, nothing to see here.

No snide, petulant frowns to remember, no shoulders roughly pulled from teammate’s grasps.
Nothing to see there at all.

Alex made an effort, after that. An effort to build something greater than their partially-muted hostility.

It was not an effort that was noticed by his temporary teammate.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Alex paused – taking a moment to evaluate which of his exact actions Hunter was referring to, and concluding on the most obvious choice. As it was one he had never attempted to engage in previously, it stood to reason that would be the cause of the blond’s distress.

Still, it seemed like an odd thing to complain about.

“You’re cold,” Alex said. Explanation delivered, the red ranger finished draping his jacket across the teen’s shoulders before turning his attention back towards stake-out duty. It wasn’t a glorious job, but there was little to be done for it.

Alex had a high tolerance for colder climates, but it seemed that Hunter did not. Though the thunder ninja had yet to vocalize his complaints (a rare occurrence, and one Alex would covet, were he not attempting to form a better relationship), even Alex could catch the other man’s shoulders quaking from the corner of his eye. Every few minutes, Hunter’s frame would start to tremble, before the blond managed to still himself through sheer obstinacy. If Alex had to guess, he would assume that the blond was attempting to will himself to a warmer mindset to deal with his ineffective wardrobe for the cold, but despite his efforts, it was not working.

It seemed like a logical move for Alex to offer Hunter his coat, as A) he actually had one to lend and B) with his sweater, he wouldn’t have too much use for it anyway.

It appeared that there was something to this reasoning that Hunter was fundamentally predisposed against.

“What, you think I can’t take a little cold?” Hunter snapped, his fingers tightening around the leather of Alex’s coat (leather, actual leather; it still amazed him that Time Force could get a hold of such things) as though it offended the very depths of his soul. “I don’t need your stupid charity Alex, I’m fine.”

With that, the coat was thrust back into Alex’s arms with rough abandon, the blond fixing his gaze to the distance to inform him that the conversation was over.

Alex, unsure of what had transpired but unwilling to worsen the situation, slipped the coat back on without objection, trying to act as though his offering had never occurred.

Boundaries - right, he was jumping ahead of himself. He should have asked first.

He spent the rest of the afternoon ignoring the way Hunter tried to restrain his shivers from the cold, and fighting down the nauseous feeling of restlessness that he was unable to help with it.

Being the wrong tool for his teammates was not an unknown feeling for Alex, but this wasn’t about him.

It was unprofessional to even think it possibly was.
Alex had grown up an orphan.

He didn’t mourn this fact as some might. He didn’t hold it against all his future interactions. It was merely something that had been, and could not be undone. What was the point of worrying over it?

Yet in the moments where Commander Myers and Hunter seemed to get along in perfect harmony, marked with matching sarcasm and revelling in gruff - if inefficient - dispositions, Alex could not help but muse over his past. Not because it fostered resentment, but merely because it called an aching sort of familiarity to the present. His current present.

Being an orphan wasn’t a bad life, just sort of lonely. Compared to the systems in place during Hunter’s time, the orphanages that existed while Alex was growing up were nothing short of miraculous, operated with as much care and efficiency as could be afforded. The workers were kind, but they weren’t parents, couldn’t be with so many charges in their care. They had to keep a watchful eye on all of them, had to make sure the basics were done: food, education, clothing, shelter. Things like that. Let the morals build from there.

They didn’t have time to be family too.

He had never been adopted. Alex wasn’t sure why. He didn’t seem all that lacking compared to the other kids. He was quieter, maybe, but that never registered as a bad thing to him. More of a plus.

But he wasn’t picked, despite that. Or because of that, perhaps. And then he had grown into that awkward age where he wasn’t as appealing anymore, where he wasn’t what was wanted, and eventually he was lumped into a group home with all the other kids that hadn’t made the cut. They weren’t bad either, some had tales a little more sorrowful than others, but all in all, they were not a bad bunch.

Alex had enlisted in Time Force the first moment he was able, in one of the early registration programs that was offered to teens that already had their basic education under their belt. He had never looked back. Time Force gave him something, gave him indisputable proof he had value. That he wasn’t worth ignoring.

He had trained long and hard and learned all he could, gave as much as he had to offer and then some, and it had paid off. Alex had made something of himself, on his own. No family required.

He wasn’t bitter about it. You could be, he learned, but he wasn’t. Sometimes life just…it dealt out bad hands. Alex had fallen victim to a sporadic process he had no control over, so there was no point in being angry about it.

Moving on had been simple, made easier the more he succeeded in Time Force, eventually becoming a ranger. A red, just like he had always dreamed. The history logs said they were the leaders, the ones that fought until the bitter end.

Something that had seemed so preposterously unattainable had fallen right into his hands, his, earned and justified.

There were no words to describe how ridiculously happy it had made Alex. A feeling that somehow managed to expand when he’d met Jen, the first person he had really connected with, who dealt with his shyness with clear headed determination and a knowing smile. Jen, who was his best friend.

Jen, who he had lost.
Alex could admit, as painful as it was to do so, that he had never really recovered from their…from it ending. He hadn’t.

He wasn’t sure why though, because he had acted so horribly, so angry and rash at seeing how he had been replaced, how Jen had just moved on with his look-alike, but-

She moved on, because that was what she had needed.

Alex hadn’t. All he got was a nice shiny promotion from Time Force and the authority to operate on his own for all future missions. Best not to mix him in with the rest of the Time Force team - they were their own little machine. They were something Alex wasn’t a part of.

And that…that had taken him longer to overcome, but eventually, like everything else, he had moved past it.

At least, as best as he could.

He knew that wasn’t a lot, but it was something right? A token effort? That had to count.

It was a trivial thought, but sometimes Alex considered that the universe as a whole had somehow determined he would be better off alone. Or, reversely, that the rest of society – those he interacted with – were simply better off without him.

Lazy, that’s all such considerations were, lazy and irresponsible, pushing his faults off on others, though still, they remained. For the most part, Alex didn’t consider himself all that terrible. Perhaps a bit more formal, more withdrawn than others, but professionalism shouldn’t be detracted from. Shouldn’t be penalized.

Yet as he stood in that kitchen, watching Hunter and the Commander bicker good naturedly, talking over him as though Alex did not even exist, he realized that was not the case.

He truly was alone, even in the company of others.

Maybe they knew it was better that way too.

Never one to stay stagnant in his own woes, Alex sought to rectify the problem of the Myers/Bradley coalition immediately upon his first given opportunity. It was becoming quite clear to him that he would never be able to gain Hunter’s…friendly tolerance, or acceptance (if Alex really dared to dream) if he did not gain the favor of Commander Myers as well. He had been proceeding about this entirely the wrong way, and Alex cursed himself for his thoughtlessness. What was one without the other?

“What are you doing?”

That seemed like the only question they asked nowadays. Aside from questioning his general socialness (an amusing if somewhat pained experience, coming from them), it was the question of the hour.

Alex had come to learn that it was rhetorical. Had learned to recognize it as an indication that any genuine curiosity was overwhelmed with the implication that whatever he was doing, he was not doing it right. Or, on the other end of the spectrum, he should not be doing it at all.

Sighing, Alex paused in his self-appointed task and turned to face Hunter, pondering which of the
two options he had fallen into.

It need not bothered to be said, as Alex’s activity was very clear, but who was the brunette to break tradition?

“The dishes, Hunter,” Alex said quietly. He used the blond’s name to be companionable, but from the way the other ranger’s frown tensed, he supposed he had missed that mark and landed somewhere in the area of patronizing. It had not been his intent, but there he was.

“The dishes,” Hunter deadpanned, using the repetition to...confirm. Or demonstrate a low intellect, it was difficult to tell.

Alex nodded, realizing that further words from him would only feed into Hunter’s ornery mood. Cleaning the dishes had seemed like a practical option at the time, something useful he could contribute to demonstrate his gratitude that subsequently took the chore from the Commander or Hunter’s shoulders. It was useful and generous, effectively tackling two issues in one easy move.

Besides, Alex preferred pulling his own weight when it came to these sorts of things, it made him feel...less entitled. More a part of the whole, pulling his own weight.

“What are you using?”

“To-?”

“To clean,” Hunter interrupted with the same annoyed frown he had worn before. “Any particular reason you’re using dishwashing detergent?”

There was a pause where Alex considered the most polite way to inform the blond he had answered his own question. It seemed pretty self-explanatory for him.

While Alex contemplated this, Hunter continued. “See, because dishwashing detergent is used in dishwashers, whereas dish soap—” A bottle was plopped down next to Alex on the counter, clear plastic containing an electric blue mixture Alex recognized as soap. “Is used for hand-washing dishes.”

Alex considered the bottle. It was a very nice blue, if you were into that kind of thing.

“I don’t understand the need for differentiation,” Alex confessed at last. He looked to Hunter, suds liberally coating his hands and the rest of the sink. “Isn’t the same thing achieved either way?”

It had been a genuine question; there was a good chance this was merely a practice of the past Alex had not been made privy too, a custom that had escaped (in the thousands upon thousands of practices it would not be surprising for some to elude his knowledge). Though it did not put him in the best light, Alex was eager for the crimson ranger’s response. They could bond over this, the thunder ninja could educate him, build a rapport, and they could-

“You’re a dumbass,” Hunter announced.

With that, he sharply turned on his heel and walked out of the room, never once glancing behind him.

“Hey Eric!” the teen called. “Guess what Pointdexter’s doing in the kitchen!”

“He better not be trying to make coffee again!” The Commander responded from somewhere else in the house, his office, most likely.
“Even better!” Hunter replied.

Alex blocked out the details after that, fingering the plastic bottle Hunter had left behind contemplatively.

He had brought some merriment to them, at least.

Not the goal, but better than anger, he supposed.

Though comparatively-speaking, Alex wasn’t sure on what scale emotions could be weighed in regards to each other.

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“What the hell’s wrong with your morpher?”

The comment – innocuous or not – was enough to bring Alex to a halt, pausing mid-butter application against a piece of toast that was only mildly burnt.

Procuring edible breakfast foods had been a trial and error process that had brought great entertainment to Hunter and the Commander. Of course, this was after Alex’s initial trial run, the result of which was a squealing smoke alarm and an unsavory burnt smell plaguing the house for the rest of the day. Before then, there had only been annoyance on the part of the Commander, with renewed exasperation from Hunter as though Alex had discovered new and unthinkable lows to descend to.

Alex took a moment to dally in those memories, using them as a mild reprieve from assessing the Commander’s question, and swallowed.

Alex didn’t think about his morpher often, as it was generally an exercise that led to no pleasurable results.

The morpher, the one he was wearing, had always been his. It had been given to him by Captain Logan, new and gleaming, the first of its kind, specifically locked onto Alex’s DNA. It hadn’t been an award exactly, but more like an acknowledgement of his dedication to going above and beyond the call of duty. To help him continue his excellent service with a tool appropriate for the quality of that service.

At the time it had been given to him, Alex hadn’t been able to properly formulate his thanks, his genuine gratitude for being bestowed such an honor. He had accepted the morpher in silence, his throat tight and stomach whirling in a cataclysm of nerves and anticipation. He knew to some he had appeared apathetic, unappreciative even, but Alex simply hadn’t had the words. How could he? Everything he imagined seemed too inefficient, too laughably understated to even be considered.

For that, he thought, words hadn’t been necessary. Doing his job – doing it well – that would be more of an explanation for himself than anything else.

Not for the first time, Alex wondered if that had been his folly for the ultimate decision on the red Time Force morpher arrangement.

The morpher Alex had on, the almost weightless burden strapped to his wrist, it was the original, but it wasn’t new or shining anymore. It was…old, worn. Still functioning, still as effective as ever but–

It showed its age.
Once Wes had obtained the Red Time morpher in 2001, he had kept it. There had been arguments, deliberations as to whether the morpher should stay in the past as it was future technology, but much like Alex’s dedication to duty was acknowledged, so was Wes’.

And maybe for Wes it had been a little more definite, because he hadn’t been a member of Time Force. He didn’t have any training, he hadn’t faced mutants, he had never pledged his life to protect civilians from complications that were, by all rights, none of his concern.

But he had. It was Wes, not Alex, who had captured Ransik for good. It was Wes, not Alex, who had rallied his team for the betterment of not only his town, but for time itself. Wes’ actions had not only been admirable, but commendable of excellence in almost every way, and he had demonstrated an immense capacity for understanding the red Time Force morpher, and used it effectively to what could only be considered everyone’s benefit.

It had been a short deliberation process. Wes could keep his morpher, could fight alongside Commander Myers, and keep the peace in his time period.

Alex, in the meantime, would get his morpher returned with patience, after it had weathered a thousand years to get back to him.

In this way they could both be wearing the same morpher; Wes the new, Alex the old.

Functional, useful, but still leaving a bitter aftertaste on the back of his tongue that Alex could never talk about.

It was a logical arrangement, but Alex hated it.

With a start, Alex realized in his hesitation to answer that the Commander and Hunter had carried on the conversation without him, their voices an oppressive weight in the otherwise homely kitchen.

“-now you look at Wes’,” the Commander was saying, pausing to take a hefty swig of his coffee. “And it’s as shiny and gleaming as the rest of the future squad’s morphers. Like the damn thing gets polished every day.”

“Maybe they just stuck him with version 2.0,” Hunter offered, distracted, but amused. The blond had been attempting to persuade the Commander’s blender into concocting a smoothie for him, and had yet to succeed. “You know, leave Wes with the good one.”

“But it works, right?” The Commander asked. The question was clearly aimed at Hunter – Alex, in his silence, was clearly no longer a suitable candidate for retrieving answers about his own effects.

Alex could practically hear Hunter’s shrug. “Sure.”

Sure.

Alex’s toast crumbled under the pressure of his knife, but neither of the other rangers bore it any attention which – for once – Alex was grateful.

What was the point, Alex wondered, of obtaining the approval of two people who were, unquestionably, not worth the esteem he so desired?

But the greater cause for trepidation in that slippery slope of reflection was not that it shouldn’t be necessary, but that this was merely an excuse. A justification based on the fact that Alex couldn’t gain their approval if he wanted it.
Why he had the thought at all, the brunette didn’t know. It seemed ultimately useless.

He had already proven that he could not.

Chapter End Notes

I swear it gets better. Like, you will see. Next chapter my friends, you will see.

Until next time :)
Hunter could admit he had been surprised to see that Eric had company. It was something that said horrible things about his assumptions on the Quantum ranger’s social life, which part of him wanted to defend, while the other part simultaneously did not give a damn.

You could guess which side won this exchange.

In his defense - if there was a defense to be had - it had been a particularly trying day. Hunter’s patience, while legendary when it came to all things regarding avenging parental murders, was not the most forgiving when it came to the likes of Alex’s particular brand of douchebaggery. As a result of this, there might have been a chance that the blond didn’t actually recognize the man sitting at Eric’s kitchen table as someone other than the Quantum ranger until it was safely past the point of ‘too late’.

Maybe it was because of how comfortably at home the man seemed, or because the coffee had already been brewed and there wasn’t another person in sight and all of these were perfectly understandable reasons why Hunter didn’t immediately recognize not-Eric and evacuate the premises post-haste.

But as things went, he hadn’t, and it was with a moping Alex somewhere behind him that the thunder ninja made a beeline for the coffee pot, towards the marvelous beverage that Eric deigned worthy of splurging on. And that Hunter subsequently felt no guilt for hoarding, because it was delicious.

Usually, Eric made Hunter brew it himself, if the blond was going to ‘eat him out of house and home’ he might as well ‘frickin’ work for it’, so either the Silver Guardian was struck by one of his rare moods of sympathy after experiencing his own crappy day, or he had been misguidedly optimistic about the odds of his house guests not returning.

His loss, was what Hunter was getting at here.

“As much as I would love to hear about your day,” Hunter began without concerning himself with pleasantries, digging through Eric’s upper cabinets in search of that one dark red mug the Quantum ranger refused to admit owning. “And as much as I’m sure you’d like to hear about mine-” He wouldn’t, as he had expressed many a time. “Such frivolities are going to have to wait until after I have steeled my will. By way of, you know, coffee, so if you could just save the lecture on how coffee’s not good for growing boys-”

“It really isn’t.”
The voice had a touch of humor with no outright criticism. It was a delicate balance, an indication of clear skill since it didn’t immediately put Hunter on edge right then and also- hey, look at that- distinctly not a voice that Hunter was familiar with.

The blond reevaluated the situation with the finesse of someone who had been raised by ninjas all their life. Or most of it.

And by that, he meant that the instinctive reaction to hurl the nearest object was quelled just enough that it soared over the mystery man’s head before crashing into Eric’s vintage wallpaper-of-doom. Hunter managed to transition the follow up shift to a fighting stance into a bashful neck rub. While it was more Dustin’s forte, Hunter found that he could manage clumsy adorableness if he tried hard enough.

Except the guy didn’t even flinch, or show any kind of indication that the faintly amused expression on his face was going to change anytime soon, which sort of put a damper on things. It was like he already knew everything Hunter was going to do before he even did it.

On that principle alone, Hunter should not like him. Yet for some odd reason, it didn’t automatically fill the Bradley with any amount of suspicion or loathing, which was…unsettling, to say the least.

Everything was screaming for Hunter to hate this guy.

It took the blond a second to realize that this was where a normal person would offer up an explanation for their home intrusion.

Or maybe not, but he figured it wouldn’t hurt to try.

“Uh…loveable neighbor kid,” he explained, gesturing vaguely towards the window. “You know how we are.”

*Cripes*, Dustin was rubbing off on him. Used to be a cold day in hell before Hunter would rely on the universal recognition of television tropes to communicate with people. That was…He needed to spend more time with Tori or something. Or, you know, Blake.

Now there was a person who could sell a lie to you with the sincerest smile on their face.

He would apologize to Tori for cutting down on potential date time later, but Hunter really needed a firm grasp of his sanity again, to collect himself. For those purposes, he needed to either spend time with Blake or Cam, and if Dustin didn’t get his date time in he sure as hell was going to tag along to whatever was occupying his boyfriend, which sort of diminished everything Hunter would have been trying to accomplish.

He was digressing. By god, was he digressing.

The stranger, the pleasant stranger who Hunter-really-wanted-to-hate-but-didn’t-quite-hate was nodding thoughtfully, sipping on his own cup of coffee as he allowed Hunter’s explanation to sink in. There was no judgment in his eyes; no suspicion or concern.

Which made it all the more irritating when he finished his sip with a nod towards Hunter’s wrist, and said, “Nice morpher.”

Before Hunter could spit out the automatic (stupid) response of “My uncle made me this watch- her-de-hur”, the man reached down and deftly plucked something off of his belt, offering it up for the thunder ninja’s inspection with quiet efficiency.
“Got one too,” he replied with an apologetic shrug.

Hunter, being the uncouth barbarian that he was, made grabby-hands at the device almost immediately; his instinctual curiosity overcoming whatever survival mechanisms he had developed. Distantly, Hunter recognized the thing as one of the older models of morpher he had seen on his stupid adventure through time, more prominent in the early nineties.

It was in this position of most coveted reverence that Alex found him, finally entering the kitchen after one of his stupidly long check-ins to base (for guys called Time Force, you would think there would be some sense of efficiency, but nope, they gave no damns).

In his peripherals, Hunter could see the brunette survey the scene with his usual blank look that some would perceive as persistent boredom, but what Hunter had come to recognize as his game face for dealing with shit he wasn’t entirely sure how to handle. Alex was better than most when it came to masking his feelings - probably came from growing up like a robot - but Hunter and Blake had spent enough time surviving on their own for the blond to recognize cracks in a façade.

Eventually, the Time Force agent sighed, shutting the door behind him with a quiet yet distinctly put-upon air. “Five minutes.”

That was all he said. It was all he really needed to say, to be fair. Even if Time Force wasn’t efficient, that didn’t mean Alex wasn’t.

“It was more like three,” the mystery man offered helpfully, eyes warm, like he supported both of their sides.

Clearly, the poor bastard had yet to recognize the true depths of their antagonism.

Before Hunter could properly thank the stranger-ranger (heh), his eyebrows furrowed, quiet cheer replaced with confusion as he got a closer look at Alex’s face.

Ah, Hunter knew where this was going.

“Wes?” the man (the poor, poor man) tried, sounding unsure.

Hunter, being the helpful person that he was, responded for his associate. “Alex. Don’t get them confused, it makes him angry.”

The stranger looked immediately apologetic. “I’m sorry-”

“I’m not angry,” Alex interrupted lightly, the slight curl of his fists doing everything to convey the exact opposite of his statement. “And it’s okay, you were simply misinformed.”

“Still-” the other man tried again.

“Just drop it,” Hunter suggested. “You’re only going to dig yourself deeper, man.”

“He isn’t,” Alex insisted with that tight, slightly-constipated look on his face that said it very much bothered him, but he was aware enough to realize that it was because of his own issues.

The fact that Hunter knew the brunette well enough to realize that only made him wish he had a crossword puzzle or something on him when he had discovered Alex in Ninja Ops all the more, because it really would have been nice to have something to occupy his time that wasn’t getting uncomfortably familiar with other assholes.
It was just…unfortunate.

While Hunter took a moment to mourn this small despair, Alex kept his attention on the veteran ranger, dutifully handing out information.

They were having to do this too many times to count. Okay, so in all fairness it was like, a grand total of two times – but that was two times beyond the range of Hunter’s concern. That was an Alex-problem, and he would be more than happy to complain about it later with that particularly constipated look on his face Hunter had come to know as ‘strained annoyance’.

Crossword puzzles. Lots and lots of crossword puzzles. He needed them.

Hunter drowned the voices out, the stranger’s steady probing mixing with Alex’s terse, simplified explanations, revealing the necessities and nothing more, like the good little time-kidnapper he was. Hunter would have given up with the ultimate professionalism thing a long time ago from exhaustion, but Alex was either the epitome of stubbornness, or actually possessed no off-switch. Both were annoying and somewhat distressing options, but Hunter opted not to dwell on them as, you know, that involved thinking about Alex, which was a pastime he was really trying to avoid.

So instead of emotionally-underdeveloped brunettes, Hunter turned his attention to the much more interesting tech resting in his hand, a metallic kind of belt buckle posing as a morpher. He didn’t doubt its legitimacy. All the stalking of early-nineties teenagers left Hunter without a doubt that this was A) legit and B) successfully camouflaged, considering the era it was in use. It was goofy enough to blend into the forest of equally goofy and horrific fashion decisions.

Hunter hoped to hell the guy just kept it in his pocket now, because this – morpher or not – was a tragedy in the making. There was a frog in the middle. A big ole’ frog marked out in black and gold, unashamedly huge.

Ninjetti morpher, then. Hunter scoured his brain, trying to distinguish one teenager decked in horrible clown clothes from another, and realized he might actually remember this guy. Not well, because he had been a quiet son of a bitch, but there was a distinct impression of a scrawny Asian kid in black, shuffling behind a herd of brightly-dressed teenagers. Hunter’s retinas might never fully recover from the clashing colors and terrible patterns, but it had made them memorable enough. He supposed that counted for something.

“So this is just a rest stop for you?” the stranger – Hunter vaguely remembered hearing the name ‘Adam’ – said, now standing beside Alex, his coffee cup forgotten on the table.

“Essentially,” Hunter replied absently, raising the morpher – still carefully cupped between his hands – to eye-level, tilting it to watch the way light reflected off the different angles.

Even from the corner of his eye, he could see Alex get that stiff posture that usually indicated he was upset by something, usually himself. “The mission is taking longer than previously expected,” he explained, voice steady.

There were undertones though, undertones Hunter recognized as dissatisfaction.

Yeah, the guy might commit to being unreadable all the time, but he had his tells. They were subtle, but compared to his usual apathy, they tended to stand out more. He was upset this was taking so long and, in a way that must be a requirement for all red rangers (because Shane pulled this shit too), was unfairly berating himself for things that were, ultimately, out of his control.

‘Adam’, who, to this point, appeared to be reasonable and a moderately-decent human being,
continued that trend with a sympathetic smile. “It happens to the best of us,” he said, and then to top things off, he actually reached out towards Alex’s shoulder, committing the comforting grasp Hunter had only briefly considered.

Alex, to his credit, didn’t react, which was about as much of a thank you as anyone would ever get from him.

The other ranger recognized this with a shrug, turning his warm smile to Hunter. “At the very least, that explains all the shopping bags.” He gestured towards the broad opening that led into the living room, about double the size of a regular door opening, and…

Hunter moved quietly, strides smooth and gentle (“A leaf on the wind”, his mother would say). He stopped at the entryway, swallowing down the sudden memory, grip tightening around the odd-morpher until the metal edges dug into his palms, anchoring himself in the tactile realness of that. Of now. Not then.

Maybe he should ask Alex if they could make another stop-

Hunter froze, thoughts forgotten as he stared at what was once, he believed, Eric’s couch. Well, it could very well still be Eric’s couch, but it was kind of difficult to determine, what with it being ground zero to an explosion of shopping bags. They varied in size and color, some huge, plastic monstrosities reserved for things like oversized pillows and bedspreads, others paper and chic, eggshell blue with flowery lettering. There were rough brown bags that had seen better days, indicative of a cheap market chain, plastic bags from the grocery store tied in small bundles. There were boxes too, not many, but a few different colors, the familiar swoosh adorning the side of one, burnt orange and cringe-inducing. Another few were clearly shirt boxes, plain and white and unembellished.

There was a hell of a lot of stuff there, and all of it looked packed.

“Looks like he was preparing for you.” ‘Adam’ meandered over to his side. During the trip he had reclaimed his coffee mug, a black chipped thing with a faded logo on it, almost completely washed away from usage. Hunter wondered where he had found it.

“See, clearly you don’t know him, because that guy? Hates us. So much.” Hunter turned his best, most bashful love-me eyes he had learned from Blake in his direction. “I have no idea why.”

It earned him a soft laugh, ‘Adam’’s eyes warm and inviting, sharing in the joke, not belittling him for it.

And hey, while he was at it… “Adam, right?” The other man nodded. “Hunter.” He offered a hand, making sure the morpher was properly secure before doing so. The man shook it, still smiling.

It was weird that Hunter didn’t hate him yet, but a good-weird.

Perpetual cheer was impossible. Despite that, there was an easiness to Adam’s, and Hunter found himself nonetheless receptive.

“Well, he was always a practical sort of guy,” Adam continued, eyes turning towards the overladen couch with a look that Hunter would describe as fondness. “While I doubt his supposed-hate, practicality has always been exclusive to emotional responses.”

“True.” Alex, who had made his way quietly over during the course of the conversation, nodded, taking up position on Adam’s other side, hands folded behind his back. “It is not unreasonable to assume Commander Myers has surrendered to the inevitable.” He frowned, eyebrows quirking ever
so minutely in a picture of concern. “Though I doubt such preparations were needed to this extent.”

“Yeah, well I try to be realistic.”

Thankfully, Hunter’s knee-jerk response to undetected intrusions did not extend to Adam’s morpher (just barely). The blond managed to stop himself, morpher clutched in a tight fist, posed above his head. *Not* because he was about to throw it or anything, but just because…

“I guess I know who broke my coffee mug then,” Eric deadpanned, eyes focused on the shattered mug that Hunter totally-hadn’t destroyed earlier.

The blond lowered his arm slowly, ignoring the amused smirk Adam had adopted. He covered his surprise with a practiced look of boredom, waving a tired hand at Eric.

“‘Sup, asshole.”

“Ungrateful leach,” Eric grumbled, studying him through annoyed slits before turning away with a tired sigh, arms loaded with paper grocery sacks. “If you’re going to continue eating away my hard-earned money, the least you could do is help me unload.” He nodded towards the door before unceremoniously dumping his burdens onto the counter.

Alex, who always perked up at the idea of doing something useful, eyed the door. “Is it clear out-?”

“Just go,” Eric said. “If anything, they’ll mistake you for-”

“Going.” The interruption followed by a hasty retreat was just sad and, by the look on Eric’s face, expected.

He shared an exasperated look with Hunter. “Works every time.”

Before Hunter could reply with a rather *witty* repartee of his own, Adam said, “That was unkind.”

“No one invited you.” Eric turned his eyes upon his original guest with an annoyed look. “How the hell did you get in, anyway?”

Adam shrugged, one part innocent, two parts playful. “Key’s in the same place.”

Oh, oh hey- *there* was some major history right there, in their gazes; Hunter knew enough to recognize that. They shared the kind of look that’s foundation was based upon layers and layers of nuance, years and years of experience and *wow* – yeah, Hunter did not want to be a part of that. Especially that minor note of unresolved sexual tension, because as happy as he was that his kind-of friend had a person in the universe willing to get it on with him, *ewwwwww.*

Hunter copied Alex’s sudden retreat, shutting out the conversation and making a beeline for Eric’s SUV. Alex was, predictably, separating the grocery bags into manageable loads, a symptom of anal precision, or perhaps, desperate distraction.

There was a thought, coping by way of OCD, using structure and minor ticks as a way to deal with unnecessary things like feelings and inadequacies.

Hunter shook it off, realizing he was doing that thing again, and purposefully grabbed two sacks from different pre-determined groups. He offered a sweet smile when Alex shot him a look of muted frustration. Had he a free hand, the blond would have blown a kiss, if only to see how red Alex’s face would get before the brunette exploded and started strangling him.
Hunter did not have a healthy way of approaching working relationships. He embraced this as one of his quirks.

By the time he got back to the kitchen, the dynamically-destined duo were half-way through unloading the first batch of bags. Adam sorted perishables from canned goods while Eric made grumbling noises from the general direction of his fridge, probably lamenting whatever abomination of food items that were growing into sentient lifeforms in there. Guy had a tendency to live off takeout and horribly cheap food whenever Hunter and Alex weren’t around to cook for him. It was their one redeeming factor, he had informed them, the time or two he had been visibly considering throwing them out on their asses.

“Just throw it away, man.” Hunter dumped his bags onto a free space on the island. “There’s trying to not be wasteful, and then there’s purposefully poisoning yourself and you, big guy, are very stubbornly trying to attempt the second option.”

“It’s still good,” Eric grumbled, though by the tentative grip he had on his Tupperware, lid barely cracked as though he dared not to risk more, he didn’t entirely believe this.

“Disposal.” Hunter pointed towards the sink. “Now.”

The square container was lobbed with a careless toss, the Quantum ranger not even looking to see it successfully make its mark. “Just who the hell is running this show anyway?” he asked no one in particular.

Hunter answered, because clearly, that was for him. “As it is obviously not you, I’m going to go ahead and say Adam, because he seems the least likely to abuse this power.”

“Thank you,” the frog ranger said, not a touch of sarcasm in sight.

Alex, who had spared them his attention as soon as leadership was brought up, furrowed his eyebrows and deposited his load. “It could be said that I-”

“No,” Hunter and Eric said at the same time, with varying degrees of disdain.

Alex frowned. “You didn’t even-”

“Not you,” Hunter said, just as Eric added, “Definitely not you.”

Alex stilled for a second, restraining a look of almost…hurt, before abruptly turning on his heel, walking back to the SUV.

As soon as he was out the door, Adam turned on them. “You two need to be nicer to him,” the black ranger chastised, giving them a stern look. “He’s trying.”

“And failing,” Hunter murmured, without the aforementioned spit. “Me?” he asked, thumping his chest when his throat decided to choke on nothing. “He’s the one who-”

“From what I’ve seen, however roughly you two might have started off, you’re the only one carrying a grudge now.” Adam stared him down with hard eyes, not backing down an inch. He turned a pointed look at Eric. “Both of you.”
Alex breezed back in before Hunter could properly defend his honor – he had a right to be snappy, *damn it*–the brunette’s doing his very best impersonation of a person who was completely alone in the universe, his movements slightly frigid. In a demonstration of perfect efficiency, he didn’t bother to make so much as eye contact with any of them before he was out the door again, retrieving another load.

But he wasn’t *hurt*, exactly. Alex was always like that.

Sure, he was talkative some times more than others, but that was only when he felt like he needed to rectify Hunter’s state of perpetual ‘ignorance’, in his book. It wasn’t like he was trying to be friendly, and he sure as hell didn’t actually give a damn about their *opinions*.

It should be creepy that throughout the course of that mental tirade, Adam had not stopped staring him down like a creepy McCreeperson with an expression that said he was very much aware of Hunter’s thoughts and very unimpressed by them. Also, Hunter was wrong.

Hunter had seen that look on Blake enough to recognize it.

“*You’re* wrong,” Hunter declared, trying to force as much righteous incredulity into the words as possible. He liked the guy, but there was no way Hunter was about to establish a precedent for allowing Adam to think he was right about things he was woefully misinformed about. He had to establish a line of future defense, if you will.

Alex caught the tail end of this declaration when he marched back into the room and paused, hesitating by the counter before he unloaded his newest batch of groceries. Hunter knew the question of ‘*Who’s wrong?*’ would follow seconds after, and honestly, he was very excited by this prospect because he had at least three very witty comments that would turn it around on the brunette in an artfully glorious way, and he really wanted to use them.

Except Alex – the killjoy – seemed to realize this possibility the same time Hunter did. He met the blond’s gaze, considering for a moment, and then, without saying a word, deposited his sacks and left, not rising to the bait.

Hunter did not seethe over this. That would be childish.

And, by Adam’s stupid smug, knowing expression, this was just another indicator that the Ninjetti ranger was, in fact, right.

*Damn it.*

Hunter did some very subdued glaring. “I still say you’re wrong.”

“Just as long as you *know* I’m right,” Adam shrugged, a small imprint of a smile gracing his features. “I don’t care.”

“Friendship, kindness, whatever,” Eric grumbled, dumping the remains of some molded over spaghetti that had seen better days into the sink. “We get it.”

Adam was kind enough not to vocalize the doubt that he so very clearly felt in relation to this statement. Which probably would have been kinder if he didn’t radiate ‘CHANGE YOUR BEHAVIOR NOW, GOOD SIR OR I SHALL BE MIFFED’ so strongly that even Eric, stubbornly facing his sink, could feel the disappointment.

When he felt that his silent – and not entirely appropriate, for the record – lecture had been thoroughly explained, Adam gave Hunter a critical look, then nodded towards outside.
“You should help finish unloading.”

‘And also you should start making flower tiaras and running through fields of daisies and other improbable acts of gushiness’ was what he didn’t say. Hunter liked to think he was good at interpreting the subtleties of human behavior (even if he wasn’t a big fan of interacting with humans in general), so he picked it up anyway.

“Don’t push your luck,” the blond snorted. He added a very exaggerated roll of his eyes for extra emphasis, and disappeared out the door before Adam could go back to dredging up feelings of guilt Hunter didn’t even know he still had access to. That stuff was usually reserved for Blake. And his parents. And then Blake some more. Sometimes, on rare occasions, Dustin - but it was mostly Blake.

Apparently he had some to waste on Alex.

Fine. He could make this work. He could be the better, bigger person. Especially if it meant being better than Alex, which was something Hunter should be able to do as easily as breathing.

They made short work of unloading and sorting the groceries into appropriate piles (Adam and Alex had a system of organization based on size, color, and containment device that bordered on somewhat frightening in its execution) and they were back to awkward small talk in no time, Hunter hesitating near the counter while Alex fiddled with a box of mac ‘n cheese. For the sake of distraction, the brunette kept bouncing it between ‘perfectly aligned’ and ‘even more perfectly aligned’ in a way that defied the natural laws of physics. Maybe even the laws of sanity.

Hunter would have applauded the other ranger’s efforts were he not so clearly just dragging out his assigned duty because he had no idea what to do next.

The distraction-by-way-of-instilling-order angle was starting to look more and more accurate.

“The provisions in the living room,” Alex began suddenly, eyes focused on the bright blue box resting between his hands. “They weren’t-”

“If you’re gonna finish that up with ‘necessary’,” Eric drawled, flushing the last remains of disgusting foods down his sink. “Then I’m going to go ahead and cut you off by saying that yes, they were. And before you get all…” Eric trailed off with a vague gesture, as though saying ‘guilty’ or ‘bitchy’ or Hunter’s personal favorite, ‘stupid’ without actually saying it. “-about it, you should know that I wanted to do it.”

At this, he earned Alex’s (and similarly Hunter’s) complete attention.

Hunter got it, somewhat. They weren’t the worst human beings you could have around, but their continued visits to Eric’s house couldn’t be anywhere in the area of ‘convenient’. They were burdens Eric had learned to tolerate through bickering and sarcastic insults, they were mooches that paid their dues in home-cooked meals and minor cleaning (they didn’t really have the energy for anything else). The only thing Eric should want from them was to be rid of them.

Alex seemed to have traveled a similar train of thought. “I don’t understand.”

The Quantum ranger rolled his shoulders with a sigh, looking up towards the ceiling as though begging for patience. Hunter kept his focus on Eric, but from the corner of his eye he could see Adam frown in uncertainty.

Huh, it seemed that there was actually something here he didn’t know. How shocking.
“Alright children,” Eric turned to face them, arms folding across his chest defensively as he stared them down. “I’m only going to say this once, so you better remember it.”

“We’re hanging on your every word,” Hunter said, unable to help himself from breaking the sudden tension that was falling over the kitchen.

Eric shot him an exasperated look, fully aware of his tactics. “I’ve had worse company,” he said finally. “And while I’ve never exactly been that big of a team player, you guys are rangers, and you’re rangers in a particularly trying situation, doing the best you can. Way I figure it,” he shrugged, looking off to the side. “The least I can do for rangers, and for friends, is to help them out when they need it.”

“But we didn’t need—” Alex protested, eyebrows furrowed and frowning.

Hunter wondered if it was the ‘friend’ thing or the ‘help’ thing that had him conflicted.

“Kid,” Eric said, rubbing a hand across his face. “Remember what you said the first time we met? We’re on the same team - and the least I can do, as your teammate, is get you some damn clothes and an actual bed to sleep in.”

Eric paused, gaze zeroing in on Alex, holding the brunette’s attention with extreme focus. There was something heavy in that silent communication, full of meaning and feelings.

When Eric had decided enough awkward silence had passed, he nodded. “Now stop complaining and accept my presents.”

“I don’t think you’re supposed to threaten people into receiving your gifts,” Hunter noted, because Hunter kind of needed an immediate escape from the ‘real talk’ that had settled over them.

Eric snorted. “Suck it up you whiner, and take your crap upstairs.”

He dismissed them with a wave of his hand, and started pulling random pots from the cupboard, tossing them carelessly in the direction of the stove.

Hunter didn’t need to be told twice.

-=:-:-:-:-:

The bedroom Eric had set aside for them was a reject of a guest quarters if Hunter had ever seen one. It was a lot better than nothing though, and hell, they had about a million and a half bags just downstairs to improve it with, which was both a convenience and a generosity Hunter still was working his mind around handling. He should be grateful, he supposed – and he was – but the rarely used part of himself that experienced warm fluffies was kindling to life at the action. Shit, it was like he was touched or something, and after his parents’ murders, Hunter had never appropriately learned how to handle feelings like that.

Thankfully, it looked like Eric was just as experienced at giving them, so they settled for a few jerked nods of epic manliness before Alex and Hunter had started carding bags upstairs, inspecting their temporary quarters.

Thoughts of uncomfortable gratitude were immediately replaced with Hunter’s usual sarcasm because, haha, looked like they had a joker in their mist.

There was only one bed. It was a queen, a small queen, but it took up a majority of the already-crammed room. If they tried, they could probably both fit, but Hunter would rather take the floor than
have to play snuggle bunny with Mr. Stick-up-his-ass.

As though reading his mind, Alex declared, “I’ll take the floor.”

With that, the brunette set about methodically sorting through his bags, disregarding any further input from Hunter on that matter.

Which, in a really stupid way, made Hunter annoyed.

Which led to his mouth doing that stupid talking-thing before he could actually think why he needed to do that.

“We can share, dummass,” he grumbled, taking up a contrary position purely out of spite, without really knowing why. Despite this being exactly what he wanted five seconds ago, the more he thought on it, the more ridiculous it seemed. They already spent the majority of the time running around playing creepy-stalker; the least they deserved was a comfy bed at the end of the day.

Alex got that unsettled look on his face that was equal parts suspicious and concerned, like Hunter was making fun of him but he didn’t exactly know how. It was, and it had to be the ‘time-lag’ talking (Hunter still hadn’t gotten his majestic cup of coffee), almost kind of endearing. Like a puppy. A confused, socially-awkward puppy.

It made Hunter wonder, yet again, what Alex’s past was. Because sometimes he looked so lost in social situations it was like there had been no one to show him the way when he was younger, and that was both heartbreaking and something Hunter could relate to. Both considerations were unpleasant, because they related to Alex, so Hunter immediately took that train of thought anywhere else and took comfort in the fact they were only exhaustion-driven suspicions.

And then, when that seemed close to failing, he started talking.

“What floor is there to sleep on, anyway?” He made a vague gesture with his arms before dumping his bags onto the bare mattress. Jeez, the guy hadn’t even bothered to put sheets on the damn bed, what kind of guest room-

There was a chance, Hunter realized, that it had not always been a guest room. Which meant Eric had procured a bed from somewhere-

“Move that stuff to the dresser,” Alex ordered quietly, eye twitching in that distinct way that meant he desperately wanted to roll his eyes but couldn’t violate his uptight decorum. “I think I’ve got the sheets.”

“Outstanding,” Hunter drawled, layering on as much sarcasm as he could to cover up his gratitude for the distraction. It was probably a second-hand bed from Goodwill or something; no need to freak out.

“Anytime you’re ready.” The tone was consciously without emotion, so void it was perfect and oh-oh, this had to be sarcasm. Hunter had found Alex’s sarcasm spot. Maybe.

“But of course,” Hunter leered, grabbing his assortment of toothbrushes and bathroom products in an unorganized mob and tossing them on a nearby dresser.

In perfect Leave-it-to-Beaver fashion, they managed to get the sheets sorted out until the bed was decently covered. It wasn’t anything particularly pretty, and Hunter knew there were more pillows and blankets and stuff downstairs, but even just as is, it was kind of nice.
The fact that Eric’s color of choice happened to be red, well…that had nothing to do with it.

They made more trips, ignoring the understated reunion going on in the kitchen as Eric and Adam worked on dinner. Hunter was half-through getting the shower curtain to cooperate in their attached bathroom when Alex opted to speak again.

The brunette appeared torn between finishing up the bed and putting away the clothes Eric had bought them, piles of socks, underwear, t-shirts, sweaters, and even hats in various stages of stored in the drawers of the dresser. He was frowning at the jacket in his hands, battered and nondescript, and didn’t bother looking up when he addressed Hunter.

“This wasn’t necessary,” he insisted, his fingers traveling across the rough texture of the coat. “We’re going to be done soon.”

Despite not having his attention (the guy was probably just thinking out loud; it wasn’t like he willingly involved Hunter in things), the blond shrugged. “Hey man, whatever helps you sleep at night.”

Probably should have figured his efforts to be a snarky ass would doom his fate too.

-:-:-:-:-:-

It was night. They had a bed. They had a place to sleep that was comfortable and the remains of a pretty decent meal they didn’t even have to cook in their stomachs and permission from Time Force to take an extended break at the good Commander’s house to catch some sleep. They had showered; they had their clothes set out for tomorrow for when they had to move out, ‘bright and early’. They had everything they could possibly need. It was, by any means, the most they could make of this disaster of a situation.

And here they were, two completely rational (okay, one rational, one robot) people, staring at the bed as though it were threatening their lives. Which, given their track record, could be a distinct possibility, it was just an unlikely one at this exact moment.

Adam was downstairs crashing on the couch. Eric was finishing up paperwork in his office. Alex and Hunter were standing side-by-side and pretending to not both be awkwardly staring at the bed, waiting for the other ranger to make the first move. As though this would doom them.

Alex shifted, a minute twitch of his pinky. “I’ll take the-”

“Get in the damn bed,” Hunter ordered, giving the brunette a light push. Without waiting to see if he would follow, Hunter bounded towards what he decided would be his side and yanked the blankets up, diving in before he could change his goddamn mind.

They were goddamn Power Rangers; it was not going to kill them to cozy up a little.

He felt the bed dip lightly on Alex’s side and busied himself with arranging the blankets. They didn’t have to make a big deal of this, and hey- it wasn’t a big deal, so Hunter could make all the eye contact he wanted; it wasn’t like it mattered anyway.

The blond turned to make a snippy remark to the other ranger, figuring he could goad Alex into compliance, when he realized the brunette had yet to move beyond perching on his side of the bed. The Time Force agent was clearly contemplating the bed’s dimensions with a doubtful look on his face, gnawing on his lip (subconsciously, because there was no way Mr. Composure would do that on purpose), generating this overall feeling of discomfort and epic baby-ness.
Like the social thing from earlier, Hunter ignored this. And then he ignored the follow up thought that this might be the first time Alex had ever shared a bed with anyone (and it might be the first time Hunter had either, with non-family, but it wasn’t like that was important anyway).

Hunter ignored all of it, because he was really freaking tired, and sat up with a dramatic sigh.

“Collins,” he said, because physical closeness demanded mental distance. “Stop thinking so goddamn loud and lie down, I want to sleep.”

Alex, who tended to focus on the least important parts of a conversation, shot Hunter an annoyed glare. “You can’t hear someone-”

Before he could finish speaking, Hunter grabbed at the brunette’s shoulder and pulled, yanking him down until his back connected with the pillows. He couldn’t force the stupid lug to finish getting completely on the bed, and really, it had been nice enough (for him) to have gone this far, so he didn’t. Hunter turned away with an exaggerated sigh, his side facing the opposite wall, as he buried into their mish-mash of blankets, leaving enough room for Alex to sleep how he would. Hunter was a skinny guy; he didn’t take up a lot of room.

That said, he didn’t react when he heard Alex settling in behind him, finally, or even when he heard a probable involuntary sigh of contentment. Hunter honestly didn’t care, he just wanted sleep.

“Hunter-”

“Sleeeeep,” the blonde hissed, pulling a blanket over his head. It cut off most of his ventilation, but at the moment he was trying to get a point across. No more talking.

“I sometimes get nightmares,” Alex continued.

Hunter waited a few minutes, but Alex didn’t say anything else. Didn’t feel any obligation to elaborate. For all intents and purposes, it looked like he really was just going to sleep.

When he was fairly certain the brunette was unconscious, the blond burrowed deeper, and whispered, “Me too.”

That was three similarities in about fifteen minutes.

Balls.

Chapter End Notes

WHY YES, THAT WAS A FIREFLY REFERENCE.

Because sometimes you need another ranger veteran to come along and show you the path towards friendship.

Until next time :)
Things changed.

Not subtly - as Alex was sure Hunter would have preferred it - but they did change. It was clumsy and tentative, drastic enough that Alex couldn’t help but notice, and perhaps that was the very last thing Hunter wanted. In return, Alex opted to never address the blond’s new actions, even if he didn’t necessarily understand them.

Were Alex a superstitious man, he would not pay attention to it, for fear of the universe somehow undoing the…fortune, he supposed, that was delivered his way. But as such pursuits were illogical, Alex had no qualm with noting that Hunter had, in all appearances become…

Friendly.

For Hunter.

At this point, Alex was well-versed enough in the teen’s sullen disposition, his adaptability and constantly guarded feelings that the difficulty of reading the other ranger had somewhat lessened, leaving him with only one conclusion. Hunter wasn’t being intentionally antagonistic anymore.

That had to be it. Of course, that did not infer an escape from sarcasm, or that he was outwardly and proactively congenial (as he was with the Commander, in his own way), but he didn’t, as Alex hadn’t, go searching for battles to engage in. He seemed more open-minded to Alex’s lack of total understanding of his time period, had traded his derision with more patience than he had ever expended on any of their previous interactions.

It was unnerving.

But as stilted and pained as it could be, it was also, Alex thought, decidedly better.

They could do this. For however much longer it lasted, they could do this well.

Alex could have a team that wouldn’t fall apart with his participation, and the mission could be completed. Everyone won.

-:-:-:-:-:

“You’re saying they train you to wrangle animals?”

This whisper was laden with disbelief, despite its low volume, but in a strange turn of events, Alex
found it did not bother him. He understood now that the incredulous tinge had less to do with the validity of his statements, and related more to Hunter’s ability to properly process them. He had seen the blond exercise similar techniques when exchanging ‘ranger stories’ with Commander Myers, and all of them seemed to be in good spirits. There was no reason for now to be different.

Alex had also learned that slight admissions about his training in the future – so long as they were non-specific – would not be ultimately harmful to share with Hunter.

That was a suggestion made by Mr. Park before they had transported out for their next set of mission objectives, but Alex had to admit, it definitely had merit.

“We briefly cover it, yes,” Alex nodded, despite knowing Hunter couldn’t see him through the cave’s darkness, and continued moving forward. “While our mission is entirely unique with the necessary animal interactions-”

“The interactions that require us to lure animals towards unsuspecting victims,” Hunter noted dryly. But not – Alex noted – with criticism. There was a fine line between that and dry humor, but it was there. Hunter was making an effort, treating him the same as Commander Myers.

Or, if he wasn’t, Alex should at least pretend to give him the benefit of the doubt.

“Yes.” Alex shifted into a crouch, peeking around one of the winding curves of the cave before continuing, “Contact with animals exists as a definite possibility, and as such, we are trained-”

“To diminish your effect on the time stream,” Hunter finished. Were Alex looking at him, he was sure the teen would be rolling his eyes. “I know,” the blond griped. “I know.”

A complaint hidden in banter? Alex did not know, but he suspected.

It was a lot like how Hunter communicated with Eric; surely it was the same.

“Yes,” Alex settled on. It seemed safest. “In answer to your initial question, we are trained to ‘wrangle animals’, essentially.”

Behind him, Hunter snorted – a different, non-disdainful sound that took Alex momentarily by surprise.

He never thought the day would come where he would welcome that from Hunter, but even in the lingering awkwardness of tentative peace, Alex could admit it was…nice. Pleasant, even.

Nothing worth getting attached to, but agreeable enough for the current situation.

“Do you guys have a TV show?” Hunter asked, voice brimming with wicked mirth at his proposal. “Like, Crocodile Hunter, future-style?”

“I’m sure there’s educational programming specific to it, yes.” Alex focused on the part of the conversation he understood. He had never partaken of those particular offerings; television had
never really interested him, but he vaguely remembered Katie mentioning something about it once.

Alex didn’t bother asking what a crocodile was. Probably some creature that had been long-since extinct. Alex didn’t need to know what hunting them entailed.

Though he was, admittedly, curious.

“This could be a TV show,” Hunter noted lightly. Not a serious proposal, Alex realized, merely something to pass the time as they traversed the winding cave system. “If it weren’t for all the classified stuff, I mean. Or hell, that might make it better. Two heroic rangers traveling on the down-low through space and time, righting wrongs and looking obnoxiously studly. It’s a recipe for success, if you think about it. Two polar-opposites forced to work together, bonding over stealing shit and shooting at dinosaurs.”

“I didn’t think the latter option offered us very much by way of bonding.” Not the way Alex remembered it, at least. Hunter had spent the several days following that incident alternating between silently giving Alex the stink-eye and confirming that the brunette wouldn’t ever consider him a friend.

At the time, Alex had viewed this with annoyance, though in retrospect, it could have been considered hurtful, had he been more invested in Hunter.

“Artistic license.” Hunter’s blithe reply brought Alex out of that useless train of thought. “They would play it off as a hilarious misunderstanding, or something. But then something else would happen – or a side character would be introduced from out of nowhere – and then they’d be cool. Not best friends or anything, but cool.”

“Cool,” Alex repeated, swallowing. It was hitting a little too close to home, which was probably Hunter’s intention. An apology – an explanation – without being an apology or an explanation. These were Hunter’s walls.

Alex could respect that.

“Yeah.” Maybe there was a hint of relief when the blond said it, and maybe there wasn’t, but he continued on before Alex could really analyze it. “I would watch the hell out of that show. If I watched TV. Okay, what I’m saying here is that I have a teammate who would watch the hell out of that show in my place, and happily use it as his guiding light through social interactions – which would probably be the worst use of that programming, but it is what it is.”

Alex considered asking – would it be polite, or too much of an invasion? – about Hunter’s teammate, but then the crimson ranger kept talking.

“I’m pretty sure it would be the best show about time shenanigans ever.”

“I’m sure fans of the Doctor would disagree.”

“What,” Hunter’s voice was friendly-incredulous again. “You mean Doctor Who?”

“That’s the one, I believe.” As much as a television non-savant as he was, even Alex was familiar with the supposedly longest-running television show of all time. Trip always got worked up over the scientific inaccuracies and praised the show whenever it traipsed into an area that resembled something feasible, but Alex had never paid much attention to it. There were scarves involved, or something. He didn’t know.
Hunter let out a soft whistle behind him. Prolonged, demonstrating disbelief. “Damn,” he huffed. “Dustin’s never going to let me hear the end of this.”

“As he shouldn’t.” Alex didn’t know who ‘Dustin’ was, but he had gathered enough rhythm to their conversations to decide the most appropriate response.

“Thanks man.” He could practically hear Hunter rolling his eyes. “I’ll be sure to get you a scarf for your birthday.”

Alex knew it. A childish victory, but still…

With Hunter’s lingering chuckles, it felt satisfying. Fulfilling, even.

He should try doing this more often.

“I hate to sound cliché,” Hunter drawled, switching from levity into something more serious. “But are we close to wherever we’re going?”

Alex consulted his datapad, the screen a muted green, filtered to give off the least amount of light. “Close,” he said. “A few more turns, and then…”


“Sabretooth Tiger.” Alex wasn’t sure what they were drawing it towards; all he knew was that they had to get it moving. “We just need to coerce it down a certain path. After that, time will take care of the rest.”

“I like how you refer to it as a tool.” Hunter’s voice wasn’t exactly critical when he said it, but there was something…some kind of judgement there. “Like time’s yours to be used.”

Alex shrugged. Though he wouldn’t see it, Hunter would feel the movement from the grip he had on the brunette’s shoulder, and that would be enough. “It is what it is. Time is…time, definite. In the end, it will be however it wants to be.”

“And now it’s sentient,” Hunter murmured, sarcasm clear. “That’s not creepy or anything.” There was a pause. “Is this like a religion to you guys? Do you have funny time-worshiping hats you wear and-”

“Shhh,” Alex hissed, eyes locked on his scanner.

“No, I’m serious,” Hunter insisted. “I actually want to know-”

“Hunter,” Alex interrupted the other ranger with a frown. “We’re here.”

Or, more accurately – it was there – but such technicalities really didn’t need to be observed when coming face-to-face with prehistoric carnivores.

“Oh,” Hunter replied, articulately. “Okay, we can put a pin in it.”

“What?” Despite himself, Alex turned to face the blond, eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “Put a pin in-?”

“Focus, Daniel-san,” Hunter hushed, spouting more nonsense as he leaned over Alex’s shoulder,
trying to get a view of the animal. "Target’s in sight."

Ignoring the heat and pressure of Hunter against his back, Alex turned around to face the tiger, keeping his breath slow and even. It would not do to alert it of their presence.

"Whoa," Hunter whispered, his breath hot against Alex’s ear. "That thing is much meaner-looking in person."

"As it was evolved to be, I’m sure." Alex kept his gaze focused on the animal, replying to Hunter’s comment with half his attention as he attempted to ascertain their next move.

It probably would not be as simple as shooting at it and then outrunning it, in as tight quarters as they were.

"This is some true caveman shit, right here," Hunter noted unhelpfully. Levity, he was trying to cut the tension with levity, his own walls-

Alex fought down the annoyance; this was Hunter. He was still focused; he just needed to babble to find his center. Or, in his mind, assist Alex in finding his. That was generosity, and should not be dismissed.

But that was something Alex could revisit later, when they had less volatile creatures to deal with.

"So," Hunter whispered, his tone shifting out of the light comments and into something more serious, heavy and focused. "What’s the plan?"

"Subtle distraction."

It would be the only way, considering their nearness. The tiger-in-question resided on the far end of the cavern they had worked their way into. It was, as far as Alex could tell, on the prowl, occasionally stopping to consider the pools of water dripping from the overhanging stalactites. Hunter and Alex were crouched behind a boulder near one of the smaller off-shooting paths of the cavern. Their goal was to usher the tiger toward a tunnel directly across from them, big and unobscured.

It was also directly opposite of their prey, which offered some amount of difficulties.

"Oh good." Hunter abandoned his position behind Alex and settled in beside him, taking a quick peak over the top of the boulder before ducking back down. "I’m glad we’re not going for the laser-beam distraction route on this one."

"Confined quarters, smaller prey," Alex listed off, unable to fully contain the defensiveness of his response. "It would not be the most appropriate tactic."

If Hunter read any adversity in his tone, the blond did not show it. "As happy as that makes me," he began, turning his head towards Alex. "I’m kind of at a loss for what plan B is here."

Instead of offering a response, Alex grabbed for Hunter’s hand and settled a few of the pebbles he had been gathering into his palm.

The teen’s skin was warm, soft and dry, and even with the briefness of the contact, Alex could discern rough calluses.

"Ooooh," Hunter practically cooed, a quiet sound of joy. "Yeah, this is going to be fun."
“Just aim for the tunnel.” Alex tried to sound annoyed, tried to sound like what would be expected of him and not on the surprising feel of Hunter’s palm. “We don’t have that much time left to draw it over there.”

In the dim light, he saw Hunter shrug. “Works for me.”

And with that, the thunder ninja was throwing.

It only took a couple of tosses for Alex to decide that the throwing would be best left up to Hunter. The blond clearly had a skill for it, landing the stones with meticulous precision behind the beast. Alex supported the idea of delegating duties to those best suited for it – seemed foolish to do otherwise – and being tasked to gather more stones distracted him enough from the tense seconds of hand-off between him and Hunter.

He really needed more sleep. Unfortunately, that thought brought him back to the sleeping arrangements at the Commander’s, and-

“It’s working.” Hunter’s whisper was ninety percent triumph with ten percent added ego, for good measure.

The other ranger was right. The tiger, once on the far side of the cavern, had taken the bait. It had followed the echoes of the rocks, tracing their origin with teeth bared, in preparation for an attack. Beside him, Hunter’s giggles were practically gleeful, a quiet huff of success as the tiger drew closer and closer to the other tunnel entrance.

“What are we aiming this thing towards, anyway?” Hunter asked between throws, waiting for the tiger to catch up. It was almost towards the other passageway. “Is there a prehistoric ranger down that hall, or something? Are we ushering him away from a secret zord that needs to remain secretly-secret for another thousand years?”

“I’m not sure.” Alex frowned, staring down at his datapad. “Time Force did not specify.”

“That’s weird.” Now Hunter was frowning. “I thought they were usually all over the details.”

“Generally.” Something uneasy settled in Alex’s stomach. “I suppose with the increased frequency of the necessary corrections, they are minimizing the information they provide.”

“Yeah,” Hunter agreed, though he didn’t sound like he entirely believed it. “Makes sense. Don’t need to bog us down with the details.”

“Right.” Alex nodded.

It made perfect sense, why worry about it? Why dwell on it at all?

It was not the most efficient use of time, providing excessive details when so many disturbances were coming up, so why bother? Before, it had been a common courtesy, for Alex’s benefit. For his understanding.

Ultimately though, Alex was a soldier, and his job didn’t require understanding, only fulfilling the assigned mission objectives. That was all.

He wished that would bring him some measure of comfort.

“Okay,” Hunter said, narrating for Alex’s benefit. “Last one.”
The blond whipped his hand forward and the stone flew, whistling through the air until it landed with a clatter ten feet in front of the tiger. The beast, whose agitation had grown the longer the echoes had continued, took off after the sound with a lunge, charging into the passageway with a snarl.

Hunter gave a quiet laugh. “Glad that thing’s not after me,” he said, slumping back against the boulder. “That would be a surefire way to ruin your afternoon, right? Come face first with—”

The other ranger cut off abruptly, pausing his sentence with a twist of his head, his gaze going back towards the hallway. Blindly, he grabbed for Alex’s shoulder, turning his attention to the hallway.

It did not take long for Alex to determine what had caught Hunter’s eye.

“Light,” the blond hissed. “There’s someone over there holding a light, and we just led the damn thing towards them.”

It was only Alex’s own decision to take action that had him moving in time with Hunter; the crimson ranger being easily lighter on his feet. They moved in tandem, Alex a half-step behind, abandoning all sense of stealth as they charged after the animal.

With the head start, the tiger appeared to have already reached the end of the tunnel, entering what seemed to be another cavern.

Hunter jarred to a halt, searching for the source of the light, trying to decide the best next move.

Alex saw it as soon as he did, the thunder ninja’s breath catching as they caught site of the small hand fearfully holding up a torchlight.

“A kid,” Hunter hissed, his body flooded with tension. “Your buddies wanted us to set that thing on a kid.”

“It has to—” The venomous look Hunter threw him stopped Alex from finishing, ‘happen’ an uncomfortable lump in his throat he had to swallow around. “There’s a reason for this,” he settled on. “There has to be. We did everything right, there has to—”

“Screw your reasons,” Hunter snapped, body pivoting forward again, a deft turn of his heel.

He lunged and Alex grabbed, blindly throwing his body forward until he had a good enough grip on the other ranger. Surprise was the only thing that allowed him that advantage, and it would not last him long, based on the ferocity of Hunter’s struggles.

“Let go asshole,” the blond hissed. “I’m not sitting back and watching a kid die for time.”

“There’s a reason,” Alex insisted, throwing it out like a lifeline. “There has to be, just—”

“Shut up.” Hunter’s elbow dug into his side, but Alex refused to let go. “Don’t you dare do this, don’t you—”

“We can’t be seen,” Alex replied, and whatever spiteful comment Hunter had next died as soon as Alex brought his blaster up.

They couldn’t be seen, but that did not mean they had to sit by and do nothing.

Everything about the situation screamed of wrongness to Alex. This was his duty, it wasn’t his job to question it, or analyze his orders, he needed to follow them, be a good soldier but-
But what kind of protector was he, if he simply watched as a child, previously safe from all harm, fall under the wrath of their alterations? How could he idly sit by and allow that to occur?

“Shoot it,” Hunter hissed. “What the hell are you waiting for? Shoot-”

Something leaped across the mouth of the tunnel. The tiger pounced, Alex’s hand shook, and something barreled into the tiger’s path, catching the beast in the side and carrying it out of the way.

The child was screaming, Alex realized. Had been screaming, was still screaming, the same thing, the same-

The world around them disappeared, the bright heat of teleportation consuming them.

Just like that, the cave was gone.

Even with that truth, it took them a few minutes before they gained enough awareness to separate. They stood still, Alex wrapped around Hunter, one hand thrust ahead of them, blaster at the ready, trembling in his grip.

Hunter’s hand was wrapped around the butt of the blaster, over Alex’s hand as though to steady it, just as warm and soft and calloused as it had been before.

They jerked apart without comment, Alex hastily stowing his weapon away before looking at the next objective.

They didn’t talk about it, but Hunter didn’t berate him over it either. Whatever had happened, whatever that thing that had tackled the tiger had been, it was – had been – needed.

He thought he may have caught Hunter reassessing him when the blond thought he wasn’t looking, but that could have just as easily been chalked up to close-calls and adrenaline altering his perception. There was nothing more than there had been.

But there was less anger, and that-

That was something. That was good.

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“You were actually going to shoot the tiger, right?” Hunter asked, leaning against the metal pathway railing as they scoped out their next target. “Like, for-real, actually shoot it? Against orders and all?”

“Yes.” Alex didn’t think about his answer as he gave it, though he knew it to be true. He would have.

Hunter paused for a second, his gaze still fixed in the distance, and then nodded. “Okay.”

They didn’t talk about it again after that, but Alex preferred it that way.

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“As concerned as you jackwads are with preserving time, you leave a lot of crap in my house,” the Commander grumbled, nudging aside the pile of travel documents that had been left on his coffee table.

Alex couldn’t quite remember how they had come to be there, how they had migrated from their
now-furnished guestroom, but he suspected it had something to do with Hunter.

Said blond was perched on the back of the sofa in a crouch, giving the Commander less than half his attention while he stared at something playing on the television. Alex wasn’t sure what it was, something about being fast and angry that involved a lot of car chases, and he furrowed his brows as yet another vehicle exploded on screen.

The brunette was about to reply, about to explain the tradeoff of minimal displacement, when Hunter shot the Quantum ranger an amused look.

“Lesser of two evils,” Hunter explained with a shrug.

“I like the evil that doesn’t clutter up my coffee table.”

“For the sake of the hundreds of civilians who are not dying because of that missing paperwork,” Alex nodded towards the clutter scattered across the table. “I would disagree.”

Hunter whistled. “You hearing bells son, because I believe you just got schooled—”

“Just keep it in your room,” the Commander interrupted with a roll of his eyes. “And the next person who lectures me on time preservation is doing the dishes.”

“Should we go ahead and give Alex a dishrag now?” Hunter’s smirk was playful, Alex realized, softer around the edges than the expression he’d worn in their initial weeks together. “I feel like that would save us time.”

Alex shrugged. “It might be prudent.”

With that he settled back in to finish up his report, exiting the conversation. He would never cease to vocalize the importance of their mission. If not out of duty, then from habit. It mattered, far more than Alex could express, it mattered, and if it took a few lectures posed as gentle reminders to keep the others aware of this fact, then Alex would do it.

It took the brunette a few moments to realize the silence, and when he looked up to find its cause he found the other two staring at him. The Commander was frowning, as was his default expression, but his eyebrows were furrowed in consideration, and Hunter…

His eyes were wide with shock, mouth slack, before he threw his head back and burst into laughter.

It startled the Commander out of his reverie with a shake of his head. “You two…” he grumbled, trailing off ambiguously. “Do what you need, whatever. But could you stop it with all the toothbrushes already? I don’t want to know where those’ve been.”

“It’s only the one,” Hunter replied between chuckles, rubbing a palm against one eye. “It’s not even in your bathroom, stop bitching.”

The Commander settled both hands at his hips in a defensive position. “This is my house, so technically, all of the bathrooms are mine.”

“He has a point,” Alex offered tentatively.

While his relationship with Hunter had been faring better, he hadn’t much… ‘bonded’ with the Commander.

Hunter turned a wild expression on him. “Traitor,” he snipped. Before Alex could protest, the blond
was on his feet, striking a pose that he possibly considered heroic. “I formally claim the upstairs bedroom and guest bath as a territory of the thunder-time team, and grant sanctuary to any stray toothbrushes that have fallen in the line of time-saving duty.”

“You didn’t really need to keep it,” Alex began to say, on seeing the Commander’s newest and most impressive frown. “Just misplace-”

“Quiet,” Hunter waved him off, but there was almost something…friendly about it. Something inclusive. “Daddy’s negotiating.”

“Daddy’s about to get his face punched,” Eric muttered, crossing his arms.

“Why are we talking about daddies?” Adam appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, a bag of takeout in one hand.

“ Toothbrush liberation,” Hunter answered, causing the Commander to groan. “But that’s just in the details.”

He was over the back of the couch and in the kitchen before Alex could even get up, the Commander following at a more sedate pace, mumbling about ‘ungrateful rangers’ and something about mothers? Alex wasn’t sure.

He helped Mr. Park unload the takeout bags, Hunter smiling appreciatively at the bowls of pho, taking in the aroma with an exaggerated sniff.

“Thank goodness you’re here to temper Mr. Gruff-and-Stuff,” Hunter said, breaking out the chopsticks he was incapable of using. “I don’t know how he got around without you.”

“Reminds me of someone else,” the Commander muttered, pulling glasses from the cupboard for drinks.

Hunter sniffed, but this one was all for show, disdainful. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Alex added, because in truth, he didn’t.

Adam- Mr. Park, smiled at him. “Past-thing,” he explained.

Then he was moving to intervene in a utensil fight-in-the-making, Hunter bouncing a spoon off the Commander’s head with the same skilled accuracy he had shown with the rocks, and Alex settled into his confusion.

It wasn’t such a bad thing, if it got him this.

“Seriously, it’s always animals. We should keep a pouch of meat or something on hand for animal emergencies.”

“At least it’s just a dog,” Alex offered. “A well-trained one, by the looks of it. Should not be prone to attacking civilians.”

“In this forest, I don’t think we have to worry about random minors wandering around.” Hunter was poised in the tree above Alex, whispering down his observations as they looked over the old wooden building in the field below them.

Hunter had called it a farmhouse, which accurately correlated with the information on Alex’s
The blond was very insistent that it had to be a barn, before he launched into a complicated
diatribe about red paint and white trim, and Alex had nodded along and kept his eye on the time.

He respected Hunter now, but half of the time he knew the crimson ranger spoke to settle any
lingering nerves he perceived or felt. It did not necessarily imply he was looking for a response,
unless he directly asked a question.

Before, Alex had found it annoying, but now that he understood he supposed the other ranger’s heart
was in the right place. It wasn’t for purely selfish reasons.

“So where do we need to lead it?” Hunter asked, frowning. “There’s some rock or something…?”

“A monster by a boulder,” Alex replied. They had been quite lucky to avoid the monster themselves
by this point. They had escaped its notice thus far by appearing before it had entered the woods and
hiding out, but their good fortune would not last them forever.

Fortunately, it only needed to last long enough.

“Right,” Hunter whispered, his voice conspiring. “Ranger origin story; a very magical moment for
all. So glad we get to be a part of that.”

“It is a more humbling moment,” Alex agreed. “An honor and privilege.”

“The cool thing is, you actually mean that.” Hunter was hanging upside down now, his naturally
disheveled hair flopping down in a dirty blond halo. “Like, sincerely mean that. You’ve got the
noble Samurai attitude down – which is something I should probably hate on the transitive property
of people with Samurai features being complete dicks, but for you, I’ll make an exception.”

Alex took his eyes off the barn for a moment, sparing Hunter a quick glance that allowed his
amusement to shine through. “I’ll consider that an honor as well.”

The wry smirk changed into a grin. “As well you should.”

It was an utterly ridiculous picture, but that, in itself, was probably what made it so appropriately
Hunter.

For once, Alex found that it wasn’t something he would ever want to change.

But that was nothing worth considering.

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Hunter was moping.

For once, the blond was not saying as much, wasn’t projecting his unhappiness for the entire house’s
awareness, wasn’t attempting to share the load of his personal misery as his spitefully-cheerful
tendencies usually lent him towards. No, tonight his morose attitude had a personal weight, one he
apparently did not feel inclined to share.

Illogically, this was the moment Alex could not shake off an immense interest, as opposed to
thanking his fortune and spending a quiet evening playing chess with Adam.

It was a different game – the version they played in this time period – but Alex found he enjoyed it
without the complications of extra levels or added players. Stripping the game down to its basics
allowed for more interesting strategy, and exploring the way an opponent thought was an intriguing
and invigorating exercise. Perhaps when he returned, he would teach Trip the ways of ‘archaic’
chess.

But that had little to do with Hunter.

The blond-in-question was holed up on the seat of Commander Myers’ bay window, his knees
drawn up towards his chest in a rare display of defensiveness. In his hands he clutched a dark red
coffee cup. His fingers drummed against it restlessly, just as distracted as his gaze, unfocused as he
stared out into the warm night.

From his position on the couch, Commander Myers scoffed quietly, rolling his eyes at the display
before turning back to the mountain of files splayed across the coffee table. Adam said nothing, but
after sharing an unreadable look with Alex, the black ranger relocated himself to the couch without a
word, ending any possible chances of chess for that evening.

Unoccupied – and for that reason alone – Alex made his way to the other end of the window seat,
taking a brief estimation of Hunter’s expression before focusing on the darkness outside.

“I’m not mad.”

Alex startled at the words, but kept his outward appearance schooled, his attention remaining on the
dark bushes outside. “I didn’t think you were mad.”

“You didn’t?” If the dripping sarcasm wasn’t enough of an indication, the balefully quirked
eyebrow Alex caught from the corner of his eye was enough to prove Hunter’s disbelief.

Alex took that as his cue to give the blond his full attention, turning to face the inquisitive stare.
“You wouldn’t hesitate to let us know if you were angry.”

For a moment, the blond held his gaze, eyes unblinking and serious, and then he laughed, a startled
snort, and attempted to save face by hiding behind his coffee cup. Alex was kind enough to pretend
he hadn’t seen it.

“Yeah,” Hunter said, a few chuckles and sips of cocoa later. “I suppose I would.”

They fell into silence after this, not an uncomfortable one (Alex was well-versed with awkward
pauses, being an unfortunately frequent participant in such occurrences), intermittently interrupted by
quiet bickering and the occasional rustle of paper on the coffee table.

If Alex had to guess Hunter’s expression – not a judgment he would completely trust, not yet, as he
was still becoming accustomed to the blond’s temperament – he would say the other ranger
appeared…pensive, perhaps. There was something clearly bothering him, but it was a something
that appeared to be difficult to share. Due to pride? Or concern, that there would be no point in
sharing if there was no possibility of the others’ comprehension.

Alex was intimately familiar with the last one, but he pushed the thought aside and focused on
Hunter.

“It’s not stupid.”

Hunter snapped his head up, his drink forgotten, hovering in front of his chest, and Alex could swear
all movement from the couch had paused, but he pressed forward, “Whatever you’re worrying about,
it isn’t stupid.”

For a moment, Hunter was surprised, his eyes wide with confusion. It was a brief thing though,
gone in one instant when Hunter schooled himself back into his usual air of sarcastic cockiness, his mug of coca resting against his bottom lip.

“Oh?” Hunter challenged, both eyebrows raised. “I thought all things considered ‘unnecessary’ automatically qualified as stupid for you.”

“When working…” From the corner of his eye, he could see Adam’s back tense. “Perhaps. But we’re off the clock, and among friends…”

Alex trailed off uncomfortably, staring out the window. Even in the reflection of the smudged glass he could see Adam relax. He tried not to dwell much on it, these social cues, these – condolences he couldn’t offer. Alex dared not imply that they themselves were friends, but with Adam and Eric, surely the blond considered them friendly, at the very least.

“Off the clock,” Hunter echoed. He sounded the words out carefully, but this time it did not seem overtly mocking. It was a marvel, sure, a profound thought, but not one that inspired humor. “We have an off-the-clock now? Swell.”

“Off the clock, you can mope as much as you want, judgment-free,” Alex offered.

He tried to say it kindly, but it still earned him a frown. “I’m not moping.”

“And you’re not angry either,” Alex noted. “So if you’re not angry and you’re not moping, you’re…sad?”

Alex had tried, dutifully, to not sound horribly apprehensive about the prospect of that last option– Alex was little good for comfort, he knew that from Jen after the-

Well, he wasn’t made to hand out condolences. If Hunter was actually feeling low about something then Alex would have to redirect the thunder ninja to someone better equipped for such matters. Perhaps Adam.

Thankfully, Hunter laughed at Alex’s suggestion – though whether it was his tone or the thought, the brunette could not tell. “Geez, try not to sound too despairing at my possible depression, oh friend of mine,” Hunter chirped, extending one leg and nudging Alex’s knee playfully. “It might send me into a deeper fit of desolation.”

Alex swallowed, trying to push past the sudden lump in his throat– it had nothing to do with the mention of friendship – and shrugged. “Something is bothering you. You can share, you know; if you would…find it preferable.”

Even by Alex’s standards, the words were especially painful to hear. He didn’t fight back the wince that begged to follow and settled his attention back out the window.

In the glass’s reflection, he could see Commander Myers’ shoulders shaking in amusement. It only worsened after Adam elbowed him, but Alex appreciated the sentiment.

A sock-clad foot dug insistently into his thigh, bringing Alex’s attention back to Hunter, the blond’s expression amused. “Sharing is caring.”

“I believe sharing and caring are two completely separate undertakings with little correlation in regards from one action to the other,” Alex replied immediately, his brows furrowing at the unfamiliar expression. It must be a past thing. Based on Hunter’s growing amusement, Alex assumed that was the case. “Though the attitude is a noble one.”
“Truly?” Hunter asked, his head cocked to the side. It was one of the moments where Alex could not determine whether Hunter was mocking his more formal language, or simply replying in kind out of respect (this was a discussion Alex and Adam had on a few occasions, though that didn’t lead to easier comprehension on the subject).

For the sake of continued goodwill, Alex decided to take the crimson ranger at his word. He nodded. “Yes. Now if you feel that you have appropriately stalled long enough.”

“Gaaah.” Hunter flopped his head back with a dramatic sigh, all appearances of professionalism abandoned for his usual good humor.

“Then perhaps you could-”

“Fine.” Hunter scowled, his cocoa leveraged up before him like a kind of armor, hovering in front of his lips as he stared Alex down. “But I don’t want to hear any of your…” He gestured vaguely to Alex’s entirety. “…criticisms,” Hunter settled on.

“No judgments,” Alex confirmed. He attempted not to sound eager when he said it, pleased to be making headway with his Hunter-communications, and determined by the sarcastic roll of the teen’s eyes that he was not entirely successful. He did not allow this to deter him.

With a huff, Hunter turned his attention back towards the window. His foot bounced lightly against Alex’s thigh, an almost-nervous tick that Alex tried dutifully to ignore. Even though it had been a long time since anyone had felt comfortable enough to-

“I’ve been keeping track of the days, you know,” Hunter said quietly, taking a sip of his cocoa. He licked away the excess from his lips when the mug was lowered, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand to remove the saliva with what should be a disgusting manner. Alex ignored it. “I wanted to know how much time had passed since I had been picked up, how many days – or weeks, I guess now – older I would be than the calendar actually said.”

“Logical,” Alex noted.

Hunter scoffed. “You would say that.” There wasn’t any heat to it, so Alex didn’t interrupt, listening intently as Hunter continued his explanation. “Anyway, more time has gone by than I thought and, by my count, today’s my birthday.”

He said it off-handedly, as though it were nothing, and left it at that. As nothing.

Alex himself was not well-versed in the way of birthdays. At the orphanage there had been one celebration per month to celebrate that month’s birthdays, and even in the group home, Alex hadn’t stayed around long enough to truly indulge in them, but he did know one thing.

“You need a cake,” Alex said solemnly.

That was the one constant, even when he participated in the joint SPD/Time Force training sessions, or living with Jen, or hanging out with Trip, there was always cake. Granted, it was a protein cake that was closer to emulating a biscuit than the delicate indulgences of the past, but cake was still present. Alex had always assumed it was a tradition entertained purely for the benefit of candles, making light of a moment as though any possible wish could actually be granted. Though Alex had never understood the practice, he had respected it, and the comfort and collectiveness it could bring.

Hunter needed cake.

“Come on,” Alex said, ushering the blond away from the window seat and towards the kitchen. “I
saw a few boxes with cake on them in the Commander’s pantry, there are at least two flavors to choose from.”

That was how they did it now, right? Alex understood the theory of it, storing all the dry ingredients together and allowing the consumer to provide the rest of the necessary items. It was truly clever marketing.

Hunter, blinking out of his confusion, frowned at Alex. “You want me to bake my own cake?”

“You can heckle,” Alex assured, then turned towards the pantry.

He would miss the fleeting look of surprise and pleasure that crossed Hunter’s face, and even a little bit of contentment, but Alex was a man on a mission, and he carried out his missions with the dedication and attention they deserved.

Eventually, Mr. Park would intervene to educate Alex on the art of ‘preheating’ the oven while Hunter sat consumed in a fit of laughter over by the kitchen table. Commander Myers, in the meantime, would liberally glare at all of them, muttering about ‘special occasions’ and ‘wasted icing’, but he was the one who located the candles without prompting, who sang the loudest when they serenaded Hunter in that century’s birthday song.

When the others sat later, icing slightly melting over the warm pieces of cake, Alex would catch just the tiniest smile of joy cross Hunter’s lips as he dug into his cake (cake that Alex abstained from in favor of cleaning dishes – ‘You make it dirty, you clean it up’ was one of the Commander’s more favored mottos), and the red ranger would think, however inappropriately, that it was one of the best birthday’s he had ever celebrated.

Chapter End Notes

Time corrections-wise, this was a very PR Dino Charge heavy chapter :). The first change was leading the sabretooth tiger towards Koda’s brother to force Koda’s intervention, and the second involved leading Rubix (Riley’s dog) towards the location of the green energem.

The movie Hunter is watching perched on the back of Eric’s couch is ‘The Fast and the Furious’. I have never personally watched Dr. Who, but based on the fandom it is my firm belief that it could probably last forever if it wanted to.

Until next time!
So…any anger Hunter might have had left for Alex pretty much disappeared after the birthday cake thing.

Yeah, it turned out, when Hunter wasn’t actively hating Alex in his entirety, the brunette wasn’t that bad a guy.

That didn’t make him a social savant or anything; the red ranger was still awkward as hell. He still didn’t understand all of their ‘past behaviors’ and remained all about efficiency and the love of the job and that stuff, but he wasn’t terrible. Hunter hadn’t been expecting it, but with his figurative claws finally put away, he finally noticed that the brunette had been – in his very special, private way – attempting to make this uniquely unfortunate situation as easy on Hunter as he could.

Which, in turn, made Hunter feel like a gigantic dick when he realized it, because he couldn’t even go around boasting to himself about how much of the bigger person he was. How much *better*. How much…not-Alex.

Like, with the cake thing? That was when Hunter realized how much of an effort Alex was truly putting forth for him, to make this work, and even if they had started off on the wrong foot, Hunter could admit he appreciated someone putting themselves out there on his behalf. Especially someone like Alex, who he could tell didn’t dabble in these ‘feel good’ moments very often.

Hunter wasn’t going soft; there was just something kind of heartwarming about Alex’s excitement (Hunter ignored the way his chest warmed up in a literal since, because it was nothing but sentimentality). There was something fun (adorable) about the way the brunette had timidly ordered the necessity of cake, the consternated look of intense focus as he studied the back of the box of cake mix, still mildly baffled by the food preparation of yesteryear. There was a difference between theory and execution, Alex had reasoned aloud. Yeah, turns out they actually had past-living *theory* classes at Time Force, but it was obvious from the way Alex considered Eric’s oven with slight trepidation that the brunette had never gotten a chance to act on any of them.

In that way, Hunter took it as his privilege to witness Alex’s trials, almost as a payment for his participation on a mission…well, it wasn’t as awful as it could be, he guessed.

Also, there was cake, and that was nice.

Look, Hunter wasn’t proud of his past behavior, but Alex seemed more than willing to let bygones
be bygones with a desperation that should probably be less painful for everyone involved, that very much wasn’t. Eric and Hunter had simultaneously decided to apologize by not-apologizing, which seemed to be the way Alex preferred it. Instead of meaningless words, Hunter tried to move forward in the friendliest way he knew how and it turned out…

Alex was an okay guy. He was funny, in his own way, and clearly not used to being around people for very long periods of time. He was overly serious and tackled just about every task they had with too much focus and too much organization even when it wasn’t really called for (Eric had vetoed the idea of a chore chart once Alex had accidentally discovered them through Hunter), but he was…he was himself.

And above all that, he wasn’t bad. Hunter kept thinking this because it was hard to believe that the former Mr. Stick-up-his-ass could ever possibly be considered something other than bad, but they had shifted into the new status quo with a quiet sort of comfort. Bonding through sarcasm and trying, honestly trying to understand where the other person was coming from.

Since this wasn’t a privilege that was even extended by some of his teammates – the people he fought to save the world with – Hunter could appreciate it.

Appreciate it and know, however slightly, that Alex Collins was kind of, sort of, very minutely, his friend.

His acquaintance-friend.

It was a start.

-:-:-:-:-:-:

Despite most of the shit Hunter pretended to do (and let’s say this was a lot of things, a terrible habit to project stuff so people wouldn’t look at the soft and tender underbelly of his feelings), he was actually very perceptive. The others – Adam, Eric, Alex – might argue this because they were ignorant ingrates who could not withstand his glory, but that was their problem. Their misconceptions didn’t stop Hunter from being what he was, and what he was on that particularly sunny afternoon (in what he quickly discovered was February), was bamboozled.

Dustin-word, guy had like, a retro-word-of-the-day calendar in the Ops kitchen, but in the privacy of his own mind, Hunter could admit it was appropriate.

Their return to Eric’s backyard had been the standard pain-with-location-gain, fading away after a few seconds before Alex – who always recovered faster (or at least pretended to) – was striding forward, towards the back porch. Not unusual. Not noteworthy. Not something that should outweigh Hunter’s immediate needs for coffee, shower, and food in that order. Or maybe he would skip all three of those and just pass out on the couch.

The only problem with that last option was that he always magically awoke in the new guestroom bed, which meant someone had carried his unconscious ass up the stairs, and none of them ever felt like sharing who. Hunter had the distinct feeling it was Eric –as the biggest and most macho of them all (though with their morphers, physique affected actual strength jack shit), but part of him – the part that saw Alex willfully avoid his gaze when he woke up from these sleep transportations, knew it was the Time Force ranger.

And as that led to a conflicting basket of things Hunter was better off avoiding, he made like his brother on his best day and shut the hell down when approached with anything that didn’t include ignoring what had obviously transpired. Blake should give masterclasses on this stuff; he could
make a killing with this crowd.

…sidetracked. Right. There were things to perceive. And these things- these very minute things, happened to be a chain of red and pink hearts hanging in the kitchen window of Alice’s house. Nothing special. Nothing out-of-the-ordinary as belonging to a (what was she, eight? Seven?) young child who was hopped up on the spirit of arts and crafts with a will no one else could challenge.

So the hearts, he took them in, but subsequently ignored them.

It was the newspaper Eric had carelessly (and by that, Hunter was pretty sure he had purposely planted it there) tossed onto his back porch that had Hunter pulling Alex away from the door and back down onto the grass.

That, combined with the bouquet of lilies wrapped in rough brown paper he saw through the window that rested on the kitchen table.

Three small things, but they were enough for Hunter to manhandle Alex down off the porch (with minimal squabbling from the brunette, as he had not expected Hunter’s latest spaz-attack).

He called it. He called it. Eric totally had the not-communicated hots for Adam.

Adam, who seemed to be in Eric’s house just about every time Alex and Hunter were there making a ‘pit stop’. Adam, who seemed to fit into Eric’s life as though he had always been there, even if Hunter knew from the bountiful-lack of Adam-related pictures that he hadn’t, Adam-

“Hunter-” Alex’s confused face was not adorable – or, it was, but in a universal way, where anyone would think it was adorable. Like, a fact or something.

Just because Hunter wasn’t actively hating the guy anymore didn’t mean that he was completely aboard the train to crazy-town. Hunter was excessive in all things he did, but even he had limits.

Therefore, Alex’s particular expressions were clearly attractive based on facts.

Clearly.

“Look.” Hunter shoved the newspaper (which he had also grabbed) into Alex’s chest, ignoring the uncomfortable feelings that led to rationalizing stupid things.

Alex’s face got more confused. And subsequently more (universally) adorable. “What-?”

“The date.” Hunter jabbed a finger at the top right corner of the newspaper.

He couldn’t even roll his eyes, that one had been on him. It was a well-known fact in the Myers household that Alex’s understanding of newspapers and their foreign, papery ways served as a point of perpetual confusion. ‘You have the internet though, correct?’ the ranger had asked multiple times, confused over the waste of natural resources for what could be obtained electronically.

Hunter had tried to win him over to the concept by showing him how to make the bi-corner pirate hats every second grader worth their crafting skills had learned to make, but all it had really earned him was a peek at Alex’s polite-but-confused-toleration face as the brunette tried desperately hard to not look at the paper contraption on his head.

Hunter’s mom had taught him and Blake how to make them, and while that still hurt to think about, he knew she would have approved of him using this old skill to bond with a person who previously
seemed un-bondable.

He was really on a roll with good feelings today, wasn’t he?

“February 14th.”

Alex’s business-like recitation brought Hunter back to the present with a blink, just in time to see the red ranger turn his gaze towards Hunter. He was doing that thing - the thing where he tried to look like he knew what they were talking about because he felt like he should know, but he honestly had no idea, because sometimes a thousand years worth of displacement did that to you.

Before he would be forced to ask why it mattered, Hunter moved on. For the sake of efficiency. “It’s Valentine’s Day.”

Alex blinked and consciously did not move. It took Hunter a second to realize he was waiting for more of an explanation.

Really?

“You guys don’t have this?” Hunter frowned down at the paper, scanning articles boasting the ‘Best non-traditional couple activities, see E5’, ‘The Perfect Flowers for Her, see E7’, and ‘Last-minute plans? Look no further; E2’, splayed across the front with generous amounts of hearts, chocolate, and couple-y pictures.

“The name seems... vaguely familiar,” Alex admitted, and Hunter wanted to groan, or at the very east check out page E2 for whatever pitiful last-minute suggestions Eric’s paper had for lowlifes who forgot about Valentine’s Day.

Seriously, if they couldn’t be bothered to remember, they might as well dump their partner. It would be beneficial to both of them in the long run.

Not like Hunter was bitter or anything. As he had no logical reason to be, aside from his general dislike of love and commercialization and-

So he was a (semi-) bitter lonely guy on a mission; there was no crime in this. No crime in being the only single person on his team. It wasn’t like he was around them right now to have his face rubbed in it, as it happened so frequently back at home, with Blake and Tori, and then the others and their-

“What is the significance?”

In the time Hunter had taken to peruse his useless grievances, Alex had claimed the newspaper and was frowning down at the explosion of pinks and reds across the paper, eyeing it with the same trepidation he had when trying to coax little neighborhood girls into patience. The same look he had when explaining that while they couldn’t play tea party now, there would be plenty of time for ‘such activities’ later.

Watching Alice pull the red Time Force ranger into a pinky swear about it had probably been one of the greatest moments of Hunter’s life. That he had also taken pictures of, because he was a human being with a soul, and that business needed to be preserved for the millennia to come.

The little blonde had gotten her tea party too, and Hunter may have also taken pictures of that. When he wasn’t pretending to sip tea with Mr. Flufferwollems, and all that.

While Alex hadn’t been especially pleased for the excessive interactions with Eric’s tiny neighbor, he seemed to concede on the grounds of trying to bond, and that-
Hey, look at that, Alex was staring at him. Hunter should probably do something about that.

“It’s a couples’ holiday,” Hunter explained. “You know, celebrate your relationship with chocolates and cards and fancy dinner and… couple stuff.” Hunter didn’t spit out the last two words with derision, because he was a mature human being who didn’t entertain such pursuits – but even he could admit it was close.

Luckily, Alex was too busy turning his confused gaze to the back porch to bear him any mind. “And this prevents us from going inside, why?”

Hunter skipped the part of the conversation where he pointed out that this should be obvious – because it clearly wasn’t to natives from Year 3001 – and pulled Alex back around to face him. As though just looking at Eric’s house would violate its sanctity.

Maybe it would. Better play it safe, lest the Commander know.

“Eric? Adam?” Hunter tried giving Alex the benefit of the doubt with some slight(ly incredulous) reminders of the sexual-tension-riddled couple that also took up residence in the house without addressing anything. Like their sexual tension.

Alex blinked at him dumbly. His version of dumbly.

It was actually pretty smart.

Hunter closed his eyes to escape the dumb/smart look that was alluring in the same way any oxymoron was alluring (to literary aficionados, and Cam probably), and exhaled. “Look, just- they need alone time today, alright? We can’t go in there.”

“We can’t stay outside.” Hunter could hear the frown in Alex’s voice as he said it, which he took as an indication that it was safe to open his eyes. Yep, Alex was indeed, frowning. “Hunter, the only reason these breaks are allowed is because Time Force was assured our utmost discretion.”

“And we will continue that,” Hunter replied immediately. “We will, we just can’t do it here.”

Alex’s frown deepened.

“They’ve done a lot for us,” Hunter was saying before he realized he had decided to talk. “They’ve put up with us when they didn’t have to. Can’t we just, I don’t know, take a walk or something?”

Upon Alex’s (now blank) expression, Hunter continued, “We don’t have to disrupt anything. And hell, your friends were here for like, a year and it didn’t cause any real damage to the future, right? We can just do that now, for just one evening.”

Sure, that evening was Valentine’s Day and sure, it would just be them – two guys, walking around, on Valentine’s Day – but Hunter ignored those obviously stupid implications (stupid because the two guys in question were Alex and Hunter, which made that entire mental trek irrelevant) in favor of something that really needed to be done.

And also, if Eric was going to go through the trouble of planting the newspaper on the back porch, right in their way, then maybe they could take a hint for once and stay out of the guy’s hair. It would only be for a couple of hours.

Alex was frowning again when Hunter looked back to him, but it was more his discomforted, thinking frown, the one he reserved for situations he didn’t know how to handle.

They didn’t fight so much now.

When he looked back at Hunter, the frown was gone. “Just one walk?”

It shouldn’t feel like a victory, except the part where it actually *was* one, so Hunter’s victory dance was, if you thought about it, very reasonable. This may or may not have been what prompted Alex into grabbing the younger ranger’s wrist and bodily dragging him out of the backyard, onto the sidewalk, but Hunter allowed himself to believe it was because he was feeling extra leader-ly that moment, and just really appreciated the blond’s ideas.

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The problem with being two non-romantically-involved guys taking a casual stroll on Valentine’s Day was that there *was* no such thing as two non-romantically-involved guys taking a casually platonic stroll on Valentine’s Day. They hit the park (newspaper still in hand, as Hunter hadn’t had a chance to drop it), figuring it would give them the best odds of blending in, only to be greeted by the perfect camouflage: a sea of dating, self-involved couples.

It was an ocean of romance everywhere, couples riding in horse-drawn carriages (no idea Silver Hills could rank that much fanciness), couples picnicking by the pond, couples strolling candle-lit paths side-by-side, arms wrapped around each other, gazes locked and completely submerged in their own little world. It couldn’t get any more freakin’ *sickening* if it tried, but Hunter’s moment to contemplate that had passed by the time he acknowledged Alex’s uncomfortable fidgeting beside him.

“Well…” Hunter said. Not awkwardly, because this wasn’t awkward. Weird maybe, but not awkward.

Alex didn’t say anything. He was probably too busy being worried about being outside the safety zone of Eric’s house despite the baseball cap and sunglasses that made him look like the creeper keeper. Like, the grand king of all creepers that ever did contemplate creeping.

Hunter himself had settled for the cap and refused to compromise with anything else, and Alex had resigned from that battle with the knowledge that Hunter would raise less hell if his quirk was tolerated for a few measly hours. Look, they might be legitimate stalkers, but Hunter refused to look the part, alright? Especially not on Valentine’s Day, people would notice.

That was, if they could manage to take their *eyes* off their romantic partner for more than two seconds to notice it. Holy hell, people were self-absorbed assholes. The marketing system was working well in this time, judging by all the checkered blankets and red and pink ensembles assaulting Hunter’s eyeballs. Hooray capitalism. Maybe he and Alex could celebrate *that* while everyone else cuddled up to their special someone all sickeningly sweet-

Yeah, no hard feelings there.

“Is this standard procedure for Valentine’s Day?” Alex pronounced the holiday tentatively, feeling around the words to recite them correctly. It was because he cared, because he wanted to do it right.

That initiative was enough to pull Hunter out of his self-imposed anger party to answer him.

“Yeah, this is pretty much standard procedure for all couples.” Hunter waved a dismissive hand at the picnicking couples around them. Off in the distance, a string quartet was playing. Probably in a gazebo or something else disgustingly *cute.* “You have a person, you celebrate your togetherness
with flowers and chocolates and cards and a fancy dinner, and then you proceed to make strong enough goo-goo eyes at each other until you are thrown from whatever establishment you’d decided to terrorize with your presence.”

Hunter couldn’t see it, but even with sunglasses and hat, he could tell Alex wore a look of confusion. “And this is to…”

Ah, so he had decided to skip the obvious clarification for ‘goo-goo’ eyes and move onto the more pressing questions. Smart.

“Celebrate your love.” Hunter rolled his eyes, angling his face towards Alex so the brunette could properly see his disdain. “The whole world needs to know how in love you are, so you make these dumb huge gestures the same time everyone else makes these dumb huge gestures to see who can dumb-huge gesture the most out of this stupid holiday.”

From the corner of his eye, Hunter caught Alex’s frown. “If it is to celebrate your love, wouldn’t it be more prudent to…” he trailed off, trying to settle on a word. “…to do something you and your partner find agreeable? Special to you, I mean.”

“Yep.” Hunter nodded, consciously directing his gaze away from a particularly nauseating couple making out on a bench. “And society has decided you have to do that through chocolate and flowers and-”


“Thank you.” And this was just further proof that Hunter should have treated Alex like a human being sooner, because he shared wisdom like this. “That’s what I’ve been saying, but my team won’t listen to me.”

“I’m glad we don’t have this holiday.” The confession was delivered casually; with so much ease Hunter almost missed it, celebrating his anti-Valentine’s ally.

Hunter was suddenly thrown by the idea of Alex trying to navigate Valentine’s Day. He pictured the brunette wandering lost in the grocery store, an expression of absolute befuddlement as he considered the chasm of red and gold heart-shaped chocolate boxes. He thought about Alex working a modern telephone and an actual telephone book to make dinner reservations, or Alex haggling with one of those horse-drawn carriage drivers (because he seemed like one of those guys, all romantic and shit), or maybe he would pack a picnic like this horde of conformists. What the hell would Alex pack in a picnic basket anyway? Probably vegetables. Like, something super well-balanced. All your basic food groups. Maybe he would do heart-shaped sandwiches like Dustin did sometimes, when he went through one of his cookie-cutter phases, or maybe-

Wow, a little too much consideration for hypotheticals- Hunter should return to the real world now.

He came back to earth in time to hear Alex say, “It is a nice idea, conceptually. Though I would like to think if you were romantically-involved with someone, you would celebrate that…connection every day. Not just when it was socially dictated.”

Yeah, just like he thought. Real softy on the inside.

“Maybe that’s why it didn’t last,” Hunter offered. “People didn’t need it anymore.”

“Perhaps,” Alex agreed.
His tone said something along the lines of ‘I hope so’, or maybe Hunter just thought it was so he would have more support, but even through his desperation he was pretty sure Alex was just… hopeful. A romantic at heart.

They fell into an uneasy silence, walking past an ice cream cart with a hot pink umbrella overtop. The vendor was handing off two cones to a teenage couple, the girl giggling and leaning into her boyfriend while the boy smiled, his nose crinkled with laughter as he tucked some napkins into the front pocket of her coat.

Hunter hadn’t realized he was still watching them until the vendor spoke up, a middle-aged woman with a warm voice. “Got a Valentine’s Day special,” the woman explained, her smile big and genuine. “Two double-scoop specialty cones for six dollars. Homemade ice cream,” she added, waggling her eyebrows. “Extra sinful. Perfect dessert for you and your boyfriend.”

Alex – and Hunter decided that focusing on Alex at this moment would probably be for the best – thankfully did his super-helpful robot-shutdown thing where he exited out of any and all emotions (as far as Hunter could tell), which left the crimson ranger in charge of communicating. Which was-great, Hunter could do that. He spouted off some nonsense about a diet and lactose intolerance and pulled his silent creeper away from the cart with a wave, hoping if he just kept putting one foot in front of the other Alex could do that thing where he took comfort in the predictable.

They hadn’t had this talk, exactly; the ‘hey, what’s your stance on gay people?’ talk because it had literally in no instance come up in normal conversation. Hunter didn’t think Alex cared all that much, maybe, because detesting someone’s sexual preference on a set of archaic principals was a certain flavor of illogical and inefficient in which Alex didn’t dabble, but even with Hunter’s assumptions, there was no way he could be sure unless he asked the guy and—nope, he sure as hell wasn’t going to ask the guy. Not- not today. They did not need that.

Better to play it safe and walk away, and not delve too deeply into his concerns about Alex’s view of gay people. This was him being a good and respectful teammate. Go team. Yay him.

It wasn’t even anything worth thinking about. In fact, Hunter should be more concerned with taking pictures of Alex’s shocked expression in commemoration of this fine moment, but he couldn’t.

Instead, he found himself wondering how old that teenage couple had been with the ice cream, and decided that a distraction was definitely in order.

He still had the newspaper.

“Well, that was bound to happen at some point,” he babbled, opening up the folded paper and quickly scanning through the pages.

“I suppose it was,” Alex agreed, sounding…way too collected in Hunter’s opinion.

It occurred to the blond that maybe Alex hadn’t shut down at all; maybe he had thought the vendor was just talking to Hunter, but that conclusion couldn’t add up in Hunter’s brain. Mostly because that meant that the other ranger was being the more mature and reasonable human being in this instance, and that never sat well with Hunter. Because that indicated that he was the one overreacting, which inferred there was something to overreact to, and there wasn’t.

It had been a while since his last teenage angst-fest. He was probably due.

Yeah, that had to be it.

“-better for blending anyway,” Alex was saying, continuing to lay out his perfect logic.
Hunter nodded as though he had been hanging on every word despite giving a good no damns about it, smiling as he found the article he had been searching for.

“In that case, I believe some celebrating’s in order.” Hunter smirked, refolding the paper so the article was prominently displayed and shoving it in Alex’s face. “To blend.”

There was dumb blinking, Hunter could tell even with the sunglasses, and the corners of Alex’s lips began to quirk downwards.

“We shouldn’t even be out here,” Alex protested – and then mitigated that protest by taking the offered newspaper anyway. “While partaking in these activities would help us blend in, it wouldn’t be necessary-”

“Isn’t this what you do?” Hunter asked. “I thought you enjoyed studying culture? This is your chance to get in the thick of things, experience a real holiday.”

“Valentine’s Day.” Alex said it in a deadpan, but his nose was scrunched, kind of uncertain.

Hunter got it; he wouldn’t have been the other ranger’s first, second, or even fifteenth choice to celebrate with, but he was here and if they kept wandering around aimlessly, eventually someone was going to talk to them again and Hunter didn’t feel like dusting off his gag reflex. Because it was sickening.

Not for other things.

Whatever.

“Come on.” Hunter grabbed Alex’s wrist before he could over-think it. “We’re going.”

Easiest way to get someone to make a decision was to make it for them.

How was that for democracy?

-:--:--:--:

How they ended up in the community center, armed with paint brushes and the combined artistic talents of maybe an eight-year-old (if they were being generous) was anyone’s guess. Thirty bucks cash had gotten them two coffee mugs and access to about thirty different colors of paint, most of which Alex and Hunter had silently decided to bypass in favor of the comforts of red, black, white, and crimson.

Hunter insisted they each paint a mug for the other under the guise of ‘keeping in the spirit’ of things, but it was mostly because he wanted to see what Alex would imagine as a Hunter-appropriate coffee cup.

It turned out to be fairly predictable, but interesting. Like everything else he did, Alex approached his painting with great diligence and care, his focus unwavering despite the non-life-threatening action. Part of Hunter – the soft part that was kind-of, sort-of growing to like Alex – thought it was a little sweet. Touching, that he would put forth so much effort. The other part of him thought it was funny.

The end result was a coffee mug with a black base, covered in horizontal stripes of various widths and colors (Hunter counted two different reds, some white, and a little silver), all evenly spaced apart. In the end, Hunter could admit it was a really nice cup.
To this, Hunter appropriately retaliated with disorder and chaos, going all Starry Night on his cup for Alex. He swirled the colors together – keeping with the red, black, and white theme- trying to keep the madness artistic in careful gradients as they made their way around the outside.

Hunter topped it all off with a giant golden heart and twin golden stripes going down the edges of the handle – and even with his protests, the blond caught sight of a fleeting smile before Alex completely smothered it.

They drank cocoa (okay, he drank cocoa; Alex was confused by cocoa) and feasted on complimentary Teddy Grahams (or Hunter did, while Alex monopolized the strawberries with a bashful expression – something about the fruit being rare in the future). They had given the volunteers Eric’s address (the cups would be delivered after the pottery fairies had worked their magic) and maybe, just maybe, it was one of Hunter’s better Valentine’s Days.

Just maybe.

They stumbled home after being pulled into a line-dancing class that had taken place just down the hall, Hunter poking fun at Alex’s tendency to overcomplicate the steps and the brunette responding in kind about Hunter’s absence of agility where twisting hips and cowboy hats were concerned. They had crossed a park lit up by lanterns, couples swaying in a dance area near the gazebo (knew it), and suffered through the smell of roses and chocolates and half-deflated balloons.

“What the hell happened to you guys?” was the first thing Eric asked when they came in, riding the last wave of very manly chuckles.

The flowers Hunter had seen earlier were in a vase on the table, along with the remainders of a meal of baked ziti and unromantic broccoli.

“We saw the lights go off earlier,” Eric continued, grumbling. “But no you. What the hell?”

“You’re welcome,” Hunter replied brightly before Alex had a chance to give a reasonable explanation. He would do it too, since he was trying to be Eric’s pal now.

“For what? The heart attack? Yeah, that I could have done without,” Eric groused, rolling his eyes with enough exaggeration that Hunter almost bought that this hadn’t been his plan all along. “Do me a favor next time, leave a note.”

“Sure…” Hunter trailed off mid-serve of baked ziti, spooning generous portions of the delicious pasta into two bowls for him and Alex. “Got it. Total inconvenience, us not being here.”

In the corner of his vision, Hunter could see Alex linger uncertainly. “It is not unreasonable-”

“You’re welcome,” Hunter replied brightly before Alex had a chance to give a reasonable explanation. He would do it too, since he was trying to be Eric’s pal now.

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In the corner of his vision, Hunter could see Alex linger uncertainly. “It is not unreasonable-”

“Course not.” Hunter waved him off. “Could you grab some water bottles?”

Distracting Alex with simple requests may-or-may-not have been one of the certain cures for dealing with his social anxiety. Hunter might abuse this discovery, but it was ultimately for the greater good.

It worked, despite some obvious reluctance; Alex was too pleased by obtaining a task that could be easily accomplished without any kind of conflict to put up a fight.

“Seriously, kid.” Eric’s eyes were narrowed, judging. “Warn a guy.”

“You did.” Okay, the act of ignorance was cute, but Hunter was done with it. “Or are we pretending
that your paperboy delivers the entertainment section of your newspaper directly onto your back porch?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Eric’s frown was a mighty one, but this- Hunter knew this. This was a Commander Myers who had been left out of something and was not pleased with this fact.

This was an Eric that did not know.

Water bottles successfully obtained, Alex’s eyes darted between the two arguing rangers. “Is he not aware...?”

The brunette didn’t finish the sentence, the confidence bolster of successful task completion only doing so much, so Hunter took pity on the guy and picked up where he had left off.

“Do you know what day it is?”

Seemed obvious, with the decorations and the activities and the massive amount of romance permeating the air, but there was only one conclusion left to draw here, and Hunter doubted it had to do with alternate-dimension Eric’s inhabiting their world for a day.

Eric’s eyebrows furrowed, sealing the deal. “Thursday?”

Well...okay then.

Before Alex could stumble into the conversation in his tentative, confused bumbling way (which was kind of endearing, now that Hunter knew to look for it), Adam breezed into the room, cakebox in his hand.

Without pausing to look at them, he asked, “You guys have a good time going out?”

“Delightful,” Hunter replied.

The puzzle pieces settled into place pretty easily after that. This here, this was a game he knew how to play along with, and far be it from him to ruin Adam’s carefully constructed stealth-date plans. From one ninja to another, Hunter could give him this.

“But-” Alex began to say.

“You guys start without us.” Hunter nodded to the cake box and shoved one of the bowls of ziti into the Alex’s hands. “We’ll be back later.”

After you’ve had a creepy moment of romance or whatever else I’m definitely not thinking about.

Alex’s frown deepened. “It’s-”

“I know you love chocolate man, but balanced meals first,” Hunter ordered, despite the fact that he had never actually witnessed Alex eat a dessert of any kind, and nudged the brunette towards the stairs. “Ziti-broccoli fusion, then cake.”

“But the flowers,” Alex protested, because in all of this, that was what stuck with him.

Eric, who had somehow maintained his position as a completely oblivious dumbass, rolled his eyes. “Adam’s idea,” he grumbled. “Said they would brighten up the room.”

“And they certainly do,” Hunter called over his shoulder. At that point, he was more focused on
shoving a hesitant Alex up the first few stairs to the second floor, but eventually, Alex gave in and followed his prompting.

It would take Hunter awhile to realize that the brunette had consciously decided to trust Hunter’s lead in a situation where he was floundering, and that it probably meant something about their existing relationship and the way they communicated.

But in the moment, Hunter was too busy laughing around mouthfuls of pasta and catching Alex up on what he had missed, because he was a generous guy like that – and it would take him a little longer to figure out that his desire for Alex to be up-to-date meant something too.

But those were things for other days.

For the immediate future, there was cake.

Maybe he could get Alex to actually *eat* some.

Chapter End Notes

Eric is the most oblivious bulldog that ever did live, yessir ;P

Awkward Valentine's day chapter! The idea of having one of these really early in their relationship really appealed to me. I liked the thought of them bumbling their way through this while their friendship was still fresh and new, so here we are! Hope you guys liked it :)”

Until next time :D
What Time-Preservation Demands

Chapter Notes

Thanks to the real vampire for lending her expansive expertise in the beta-ing of this chapter! Additional thanks to Kei Luna Shoryu, for her beta-ing and all around awesome disposition. If you guys are looking for some other Ninja Storm stories and haven’t checked them out yet, I highly suggest looking into 'My Brother's Keeper' by the real vampire and 'The Art of Cohesion' by Kei Luna Shoryu. Mix things up a little :)

Warnings: The beginnings of male/male attraction. Shocking, RIGHT?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ow!” Hunter sucked in a quick breath of air, straining to bend away from Alex’s proffered hand. “Jesus, that stings.”

“We work with what we have,” Alex explained stubbornly, repeating the same mantra they had lived by for the past few weeks. “Medical supplies in this time period leave much to be desired.”

“You know what,” Hunter said, dodging Alex’s cotton swab with stubborn wiliness. “I’ll just let my morpher do the work. Keep the alcohol to yourself, man.”

“We can’t depend on our morphers for everything.”

They needed to conserve energy while they could. There was no point in stressing their equipment if they had other means of dealing with minor scrapes and damages. It was this reason and this reason alone that had Alex annoyed. Hunter’s repeated attempts to escape his administrations were worthy of irritation; the fact that he had managed to get himself wounded yet again on Alex’s watch was but a secondary and unaddressed detail.

Alex certainly wasn’t worried. Hunter was a hardy individual, and expressing any concerns over a wound so insignificant would be illogical. It certainly wouldn’t be anything the crimson ranger welcomed.

Alex swallowed, frowning at the vivid scrape across the blond’s eyebrow. “Stop moving Hunter.”

“I don’t need it,” the blond insisted. “I don’t see what your deal with cleaning away germs is anyway; we’re going to be fine.”

“Better safe than sorry.”

“Worry wart,” Hunter grumbled. He eyed the offered cotton swab with steely suspicion, as though it threatened more harm to him than good.

“This is happening,” Alex declared. The only way they would stop dancing around the issue was if they drew a line somewhere, and Hunter got to do it last time. It was Alex’s turn. “We still have a while until our next transport, we have supplies, and you’re bleeding. Now I am going to disinfect you, and you are going to stop being a child about it.”

“Oh, disinfect me baby,” Hunter murmured, a lazy smirk gracing his features. “Disinfect me all
“I assure you, it won’t take that long.” Alex muttered, choosing to focus on reapplying the alcohol rather than Hunter’s pitifully concealed innuendos. The blond had discovered Alex’s susceptibility to such phrases a few days after their new living situation had been solidified, and had since then been insufferable in his campaign to make Alex uncomfortable.

It was not ill-intended, he believed. The mild teasing was probably just another effort the blond was making to strengthen their bonds as teammates, as counter-intuitive as it seemed. Alex understood it and despised it in equal parts, but to this point, had said nothing on the subject. Though he preferred Hunter’s other gestures towards friendship, he would never be one to mitigate the other ranger’s attempts, no matter his distaste for them. The fact that he was trying at all was something Alex appreciated.

True, he enjoyed the moments where they compared cultural changes over the years much more. He appreciated when the blond would take on an educational air to illustrate facets of that century to which Alex was unfamiliar. If for the patience that was required to do so, if not for the additional commentary the crimson ranger provided on certain subjects. Not entirely necessary in the long run but, for some reason, Alex found himself welcoming the dialogue. Perhaps because it was, in essence, frivolous. For the blond to risk criticism for Alex’s benefit was something the brunette could not, and would not, dismiss.

Alex remembered that, whenever Hunter dallied in the cruder side of their interactions. He supposed he should value the fact that the blond was not willing to ‘baby’ him, treating the red ranger in the same regard he would Commander Myers. That was respect, of some sort.

Still, for the most part when it came to these things, the brunette ignored him. There were only a few moments where his attention was diverted when he found himself actively imagining Hunter’s innuendos.

The ninja found those times delightful, and if Alex himself was snippier afterwards, that was no one’s business but his own.

Eventually, the entertainment would pass.

“Seriously though.” Hunter dodged his advances with a scowl. “I’m fine.”

“Stop moving.” In a last ditch effort to keep the blond in place, Alex grasped his chin with his free hand. He kept his grip loose, non-threatening (he had learned the hard way never to initiate contact when Hunter didn’t expect it), but with purpose. It stood to reason that Hunter would simply pull away from his hold with a shake of his head, but the wound could become infected without any medical attention (it was a long shot, but Alex couldn’t risk it), so the brunette went through with the action anyway.

It was a pleasant surprise when the blond did not pull back.

“Isn’t this going to break your ‘leave no biological evidence behind’ rule?” Hunter whined, wincing, but Alex was sure that was just a show Hunter was putting on for his benefit.

Perhaps he sensed the tension Alex carried and was attempting to relieve it, but the more likely alternative was that he was bored, and slightly put-off by the focus on what he considered to be an insubstantial cut.

“We’ll take it back with us.” Alex dabbed the wound carefully, eyes narrowing in concentration as
he focused on his work. “The displaced goods’ effect will be immaterial in comparison to-”

“My boo-boo?” Hunter offered with a grin. He hissed when Alex increased the pressure, and threw the brunette a glare. “Spoil sport.”

“Would you rather I let the blood freely run down your face?” Alex asked. He kept his voice light, even if the proposed image left an uncomfortable feeling in his stomach. “If anyone were to stumble upon us, there would be alarm.”

Hunter snorted. “At least we have these spiffy new clothes from Eric. Instead of looking like homeless bums pilfering abandoned office buildings, we’re upstanding, well-groomed bums pilfering abandoned office buildings.”

“You could have stayed back from the explosion.”

“I could have,” Hunter agreed. “Didn’t. No point in arguing about it now.”

Alex wished they were at a point in their relationship where he could express his desire for Hunter to exercise more caution. It wasn’t that he doubted the other ranger’s abilities; it just seemed impractical to risk injury so frequently when there were other, less harmful, alternatives.

The red Time Force ranger recognized this as concern for the blond himself, rather than his usual behavior for a teammate, but quelled the thought process. As congenial as Hunter seemed now, his statements on the other man’s actions would not be well received.

Perhaps one day, but not now. For the moment, Alex stuck to playing the calm medic and continued his treatment of Hunter’s wound, making a noncommittal noise as he wiped away the last of the blood.

“You’re job’s weird,” Hunter grumbled after a length.

“It requires adaption, sure.”

Their tasks had been…odd, as of late. Saving civilians that the offender had displaced into the line of fire, retrieving goods that needed to be hidden, taking things from rangers and replanting them when they were required. It all felt small, inconsequential even, but it was necessary.

Hunter rolled his eyes, countering the reaction with a small grin. “That’s one way of putting it.”

Alex swallowed, inspecting the scrape – it wasn’t much of a thing, honestly – with exaggerated care to ensure it was sufficiently clean. Perhaps this was a ploy merely to extend his– no, he was not that foolish. Even if the movement of Hunter’s jaw under his fingers was distracting in its warmth, there was no point in prolonging the contact.

Satisfied with his work, Alex released the blond with a quick nod to himself, tucking the swab into his pocket for future disposal. Commander Myers’ abode had become somewhat of a dumping ground for ranger effects; what was one more for the garbage bin?

“You do this much?”

Hunter was prodding at the scrape with narrowed eyes when Alex turned back towards him, the blond’s tongue peeking out from the corner of his mouth as he put on an air of someone in deep concentration. It was an almost childlike picture, but on Hunter, it was more…free. Loose, without fear of prosecution.
In a way, it was an appealing vision, but one that most people would consider welcoming. Enjoyable. Not out of the ordinary.

“Remedial first aid, I mean,” Hunter continued. He stopped his poking with a slow smile. “Gonna kiss it better?”

“You’re still bleeding,” Alex noted. He focused on the annoyance, using it to combat images of such intimate contact. “The alcohol should be sufficient enough for you.”

“Not into the kinky stuff then,” Hunter muttered to himself. “I’ll make a note of that.”

Refusing to rise to the bait, Alex turned his attentions to returning the first aid kit back to its original hiding place. He took care to wipe away Hunter’s fingerprints. As a member of Time Force, Alex did not have to deal with such concerns, having had his fingerprints removed once he had become an approved field agent, but with Hunter he still needed to exercise caution.

“Do you have much practice?” Alex asked.

“With the kinky stuff?” Hunter asked, both eyebrows raised. His lips quirked, enjoying his joke. “Sorry, I’m a gentleman. I don’t kiss and tell.”

“That’s rather courteous of you,” Alex said mildly, paying no heed to the deflection. He didn’t flush, but he found himself turning away regardless, should his efforts to school his features not be entirely successful. “But I was referring to your first aid skills. Your academy must have taught you the basics?”

“Yeah, it did,” Hunter agreed. His posture was languid; relaxed to the untrained eye, but there was a fierceness to his expression that betrayed his entire focus. “Had to practice a lot on Blake too, so no worries.” His gaze flicked to the first aid kit. “You know, if you get a boo-boo.”

“Blake?” Alex asked. “Who’s Blake?”

The blond didn’t move, didn’t so much as shift from his semi-reclined position against the dirty wall. He was too busy studying Alex, for what he assumed was insincerity, and trying not to make a show of it.

Perhaps it hurt a little, to see such speculation after their moderate period of peace, but something about this ‘Blake’ must have warranted it.


“They only gave me the basics,” Alex replied with a shrug. “Color. Team. Skills. If you were or were not a confirmed psychopath.”

Hunter laughed, bright and familiar, a welcome distraction from Alex’s thoughts. “Yeah?” he said, grin wide. “What’s the final score on that one?”

“Jury’s still out,” Alex said.

It earned him another bout of laughter, resonating through the deserted room, bouncing off the scattered debris of hasty abandonment. Alex took a moment to appreciate the sound and the situation, reveling in the strange comfort of it for as long as he was able. In themselves, they were not particularly unpleasant minutes.
“So Blake is…?” Alex prompted, head quirked to the side as he took in the Hunter’s fading laughter, the blond’s cheeks mildly flushed from the exertion.

“My brother.” Hunter took up the conversation in stride, no longer finding amusement from evasion. “Navy thunder ranger. My other half.”

“And your brother was injured often?” Alex did not have experience with siblings, but he could ascertain from his coworkers that did that the mischievousness nature of youth sometimes led to injuries, especially for immediate relatives.

There was a graceless snort behind him, loud enough that the blond could have choked on it. Alex found himself whirling back around in time to see the thunder ninja’s lips spread into an amused grin, quietly laughing to himself.

It was a good look on him.

The chuckles died down with a few slow shakes of Hunter’s head, the blond – in his overdramatic fashion – finished up the show by wiping away a few invisible tears.

“Oh come on, Alex,” Hunter laughed. “We were ninja kids. Think of us as boo-boo magnets.”

It was without a lot of thought that Alex replied, “Your parents must be thrilled.”

It wasn’t– it was a phrase he had heard, in casual conversation. A playful expression exchanged between friends. Alex himself had never found a use for it, being one who abhorred small-talk, but it had always seemed – in the few instances he had observed it – to be welcomed easily enough.

Those individuals had never spoken to Hunter though.

The grin froze with exact suddenness, the joy draining from its presence with painful adamancy.

Unintentionally, he had hit a sore spot. He had gotten careless, comforted by the fact that Hunter had seemed so reciprocal, but there was a line-

Alex resigned himself to the end of the conversation at Hunter’s silence. He moved toward the lone window of the room, a small thing generously coated with layers of grime and dirt, making it impossible to see through. A few determined rays of moonlight wormed their way through the more translucent cracks, spilling onto the floor in a spidery web of wisped light.

“They used to be,” Hunter said suddenly, breaking Alex from his reverie. When he glanced back at the blond, Hunter had his eyes stubbornly turned towards a large mystery stain marring the carpet, set off to the side. “Might seem weird, but as long as we didn’t get too beat up, they were happy that we were fighting the good fight. You know-” he flicked an imaginary piece of lint off of the knee of his pants, and allowed a moment to follow its pretend fall towards the floor. “-That we were doing our best.”

“That is…” Alex pretended not to see the way Hunter’s shoulders tensed at his voice. He pretended that this, and this conversation, were unimportant, tracing the layers of filth on the window, making a game of determining their origins. “That is a good way to look at it.”

‘Practical’ had been his first choice, and while – in Alex’s opinion – it was the more accurate description, he knew without saying so that Hunter would not have received it with grace. It would have sounded like a criticism, a diminishment of his parents’ efforts, and Alex could never do that. Even if he lacked parents of his own, he understood – in a theoretical way – the sacredness of those bonds.
Behind him, there was another laugh, quieter than its predecessors. It was more for deflection than need, and the oddly casual tone of Hunter’s voice when he answered was enough to confirm it as such. “Just ‘good’?”

“Yes,” Alex confirmed, swallowing. “Just because it is simple does not make it untrue.” It wasn’t really worth the argument, but something about Hunter’s usual indifference, on this subject, made him...

They could actually talk right now, if they wanted to. He was willing to listen.

“They died when we were twelve,” Hunter declared suddenly. He said it about as mildly as one would discuss the weather. Alex didn’t turn around. “They were our adopted parents, but they were the only family we knew, you know?”

Alex turned, enough for the blond to get a proper view of his profile, and nodded. He could imagine as much.

“What about you?” Hunter continued on with renewed lightness. “You have any family? You can be vague, if that’s what time-preservation demands.”

“There’s no need, I-” Alex shook his head, then turned, facing Hunter’s schooled expression of careful consideration. “I’m an orphan,” he explained. Hunter’s expression didn’t change. Something about that prompted Alex to continue. “I was moved to a group home when I was thirteen. Stayed there until I was old enough to qualify for Time Force’s early-enrollment program.”

“They still have orphanages in the future?” Hunter asked.

Alex could not explain the relief that the other ranger did not use this as the easy opportunity that it was, declaring how it ‘explained so much’, as many a colleague had.

Lucas had been well-meaning, attempting to establish a kind of comradery, but there were some wounds that could never be made light of, even for the purposes of bonding.

Alex struggled to find a way back into the present, pushing aside resentment and the usual feelings of unease he had learned to keep steadily locked away.

“We have a much better system in place than what is present in your time,” Alex explained, taking comfort in the facts, in educating and distancing himself from those emotions. “With proper funding, enough resources have been allocated to properly facilitate the demand. Social Service positions have become very prestigious and respected careers over the last millennia.”

“That’s…good,” Hunter decided. The word selection was purposeful, and if Alex had to evaluate it, chosen with fondness, sincerity. “It’s kind of sad though.”

Alex could tell by the distractedly thoughtful look on Hunter’s face that this was something he legitimately mourned. It was…He was familiar with this. Hunter had been one of the success stories of the childcare systems, no matter how unfortunately the experience had ended.

For Alex, there had never been a definite conclusion. Nothing to shield him from the long-repressed memories of not being good enough. Of trying to determine what needed to be fixed so he could have a home.

“Either way,” Hunter said, levering himself up to his feet and making his way over to Alex, one languid step at a time. “It does kind of explain a few things.”
He laughed. Alex smiled.

It was progress. Sure, they laughed and watched movies and went for walks together, but this was the first time they had spoken of their pasts in great detail. Or, more specifically, of the sorrowful subjects that had greatly altered the courses of their lives. It was progress. That they were comfortable enough to indulge in such conversations.

In this one instance, Alex wound himself just a little bit tighter. It was a useless endeavor; no matter how much he withdrew there would always be pieces of him sticking out begging for assault, and Alex-

It was all he could do to collect the pieces of himself afterwards, and mash them back together.

That was how he had learned about Blake.

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The introduction of Adam into their routine, along with Commander Myers’ recent desire for an amicable relationship, led to an eventual easement of the routine Alex and Hunter had settled themselves into. In a way, the new arrangement was its own, as the colloquialism went, “nine to five” career. With an established base of operations away from Time Force, Alex and Hunter could afford more rest periods in their mission. As Eric’s time was located closer to the mass of time alterations, it required less energy to transport from his time to the periods in need of corrections. Much less energy than it would take from Alex’s own time of 3001.

It was both aggravating and a relief in different regards, but for the most part Alex minimized whatever emotional reactions he had regarding their new living arrangements and took them as they were, unavoidable. There was no point in reacting strongly, if it was beyond his control. It was after all, simply part of the mission and as such, vital. A small part of a much larger, vastly important, whole.

Living with company did take some adjustment.

Again. Living with company – again – took some adjustment. Most of the alterations that derived from his company were different than his previous dual-person living situation, but that did not render the entire ordeal completely unique from how he had lived before.

Most was new, and that was good. Refreshing. Awful, in that half the time Alex could not be entirely sure how to respond, what the boundaries were, and without any previous experience to draw upon it was frustrating. But the new things, as uncomfortable as they could be, were safe at least.

The moments when Alex remembered living with Jen were the least pleasant.

Alex had lived with impersonal masses all his life. In the orphanage, group home, barracks. There were people, yes, but the places he had stayed were never his, nor the company he kept. That lack of control in the transient part of his life eradicated the opportunity to develop feelings of a home.

For the longest time, Alex had no home. He had places where he stayed. Places he slept and groomed and kept his belongings, places he called a home, but never a place that actually was a home.

When Alex got his first promotion into an officer position, he was allowed the opportunity to live off-base. As he had advanced over the years his roommates had dwindled from seven, to three, to one. And while it was nice, in a way, having company, Alex took the chance for off-base quarters
as soon as he was able. Wanting, for the first time, to decide where he would live. What he would put in it. Designing his own space to fill his own needs.

It was… Jen had called it “bare”, but for Alex, it had been economical. That was how he had sold it.

It was easier to pretend he was being efficient than to openly admit he had no idea what to do with the open areas of what was undoubtably a small space.

That changed with Jen.

There had never been any judgment. Even when it was sparse to an almost painful degree, so much so that she had delicately asked if he was punishing himself – not in so many words, but it was Jen, and the point had gotten across – she had no opinions either way. She offered suggestions without expecting compliance, when they were friends and then, when he had finally worked up the courage to try, with her, her suggestions were a joy. They became a team through building a joined space together, and with that, their new routine. Hobbies, habits, superstitions were shared and created in turn, all in that one joined space they had built together.

Living alone after that had been a dull, lifeless experience. There were no more movie nights – there was no point, there was no gain – no more Pasta Tuesdays or early morning runs or crossword puzzles at the kitchen table, Jen glaring stubborn holes into the paper while Alex called out answers over her shoulder. She would swat at his arm, annoyed but determined, her eyes still on the tablet –

She’d taken her things, and with them, part of Alex’s life.

Sharing a room with Hunter was nothing like sharing a room with Jen. For which Alex was exceedingly glad, because if it were that would imply a greater familiarity between the two of them than he could ever desire (Hunter was good, he was a… friend, but he wasn’t Jen).

Even with that fact, that tiny peace of mind, it was still awkward, to say the least.

The only person Alex had ever shared a bed with was Jen, and while they had never truly been intimate, there had been, after much conditioning and opportunities to become accustomed – cuddling.

It was the closest Alex had ever been to another person, and once he had allowed the experience with welcoming arms (both literal and figurative) it had been incredibly enjoyable.

It had also become, much to his horror, a habit.

His only saving grace upon the discovery of this was the fact that Alex consistently woke up before Hunter. How he out-stealthed the blond by removing himself from the situation without the other ranger knowing was beyond him, but after a certain point Alex wasn’t going to look too closely at fortune’s favors.

It would have been more manageable, more easily ignored, were it not for the very unfortunate, very real attraction he seemed to be growing for Hunter.

Physical. *Physical* attraction.

(The mental attraction derived from the uniqueness of their friendship – Alex was not accustomed to bonds not rooted from work, kept on professional terms.)

It was not something of which Alex was particularly proud.
It had always been there, Alex had known that. He had also disregarded it immediately, as physical appreciation had not been (and still was not) constructive to their situation, but it had been there.

But now it seemed, with Hunter’s new resolve to be congenial – sarcasm and wit aimed not at Alex, but including him – it was enough. Without the barrier of hostility serving as a constant reminder of where Alex stood, he could see it. Or, he felt free to partake of it – as awkward and fumbling as he was when it came to these sorts of things.

It was mortifying and unethical, in a sense. While they were only a few years apart in age (were it greater, there would be another concern), Hunter was Alex’s responsibility. His part in the mission was purely a result of Alex’s neglect and as such, it was up to Alex to return him in not only one piece, but as physically and mentally healthy as possible.

These feelings, as base as they were, edged on a violation of power that was not only inappropriate, but borderline deplorable. Alex needed to get himself in check.

Unfortunately, Hunter - despite the carefree air he attempted to exude - was not a constant chatterbox. Even with his efforts, he could not speak every moment of the day, could not provide Alex with the distraction needed to stave off this… these feelings.

It helped then, to have the diversion of Mr. Park and Commander Myers.

The Black Ninjetti ranger, much to Hunter and Alex’s surprise, seemed to be a new fixture in the Commander’s abode. While neither of them spoke of it, it seemed like an arrangement that both the Commander and Mr. Park had unanimously agreed to. The ‘why’ of which Hunter had attempted to badger out of Commander Myers a grand total of one time, before immediately rethinking his strategy under the threat of withheld… something or other. Oleos, or something, Alex wasn’t sure. As the Ninjetti ranger was aware of their situation anyway, Alex had no qualms to his continued presence.

And there were moments, when Hunter didn’t go out of his way to put on a show, that he couldn’t help but simply be himself.

There was still things about the other ranger Alex found grating – his carefree (or seemingly carefree) approach to their missions, his dismissiveness, his dry comments that bore no sensitivity to the conditions of their surroundings or the people they were protecting - Alex found those things mildly annoying.

But there were moments of stillness, when Hunter would throw off his façade of whimsy and trade it for a focus with killer deadliness, moments where he was the perfect soldier. It could never be said that Hunter ever actively hindered the mission. Especially now that he was willing to work with Alex, he always did what was needed, when it was needed to be done.

If there was an excessive amount of complaining for some of their mission objectives well… Alex would never vocalize the fact that his irritation for such diatribes had been traded in long ago for amusement. Found himself even welcoming them, when they needed to pass the time.

It was worrying.

A physical attraction was worrying enough; Alex couldn’t afford to get emotionally invested in a person who should by all rights not even be there. Hunter was an unsanctioned individual who would probably require a memory erasing when this was all said and done, or at the very least, a vow of secrecy. Even if they managed some kind of friendship – the very idea was childish (but appealing, stupidly appealing) – there would be nothing for it. When the mission was over, Hunter
was due back to his time and Alex back to his, and there was no room for negotiation in this matter, especially not for things as trivial as wants and feelings.

With this irrefutable truth lingering in their future, Alex shut down the majority of his conversational urges. That was not to say he did not respond to Hunter (he found himself unable to deny the blond something as simple as conversation now, should he request it), but he had to keep a lid on pursuing his own queries.

There was no room for attachments in his line of work; it was one of the reasons Time Force supported isolationism. Some agents went undercover in the past for months, years even, to correct altered events. It was one of the reasons they had developed the memory wiping technology in the first place, to free agents from hindering associations they couldn’t have further contact with.

When this mission was over, there was a good chance Alex’s mind would be erased as well.

It was probably for the better, he supposed.

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“You’re such a fuddy-duddy,” Hunter grumbled, sprawling across the kitchen table with a dramatic whine, twisting to stare up at Alex with sarcastically disconsolate eyes. “Why can’t you cut loose every once and a while? Throw dietary caution to the wind? Live a little?”

By the island, Commander Myers scoffed, rolling his eyes at Hunter’s display as he focused on scooping up another uniform blob of cookie dough. “‘Fuddy-duddy’,” he murmured. “Didn’t know that was in your vocabulary.”

“I’m opening up my word selection to be more generationally-accepting.” Hunter countered snidely without looking away from Alex. “I’m trying to prepare Alex for slang of all decades.”

“And what decade, exactly, features power rangers who use the term ‘fuddy-duddy’?” Commander Myers propped a flour-dusted hand against his hip, one eyebrow cocked in challenge. “Just admit it, you’re square.”

“Square,” Hunter snorted, rolling his eyes.

The Commander glared. “Fuddy-duddy.”

“Boys.” Adam’s smile, if Alex had to describe it, was amused. The black ranger had taken up a neutral position at the other end of the table, a mug of tea clasped between his hands as he watched the proceedings. He made no attempts at hiding the entertainment derived from Hunter and the Commander’s actions.

“And to answer your question,” Hunter continued, taking Adam’s warning with a cheeky grin. “Dustin is all over ‘fuddy-duddy’ usage.”

“Do I want to know who Dustin is?” Commander Myers asked. He held his dough-covered melon baller (seldom used for balling melons, Alex had discovered) aloft as he considered the cookie sheet before him with a critical eye. “Or is this something I’m better off not knowing?”

“Yes and no,” Hunter replied vaguely. His eyes returned to Alex. “But onto the more pressing issue here; come on Alex, it’s just some cookies.”

“Which you are free to partake in,” Alex reminded him gently. It had taken awhile to find the balance between informatory and condescending, but with Hunter’s new endeavor of not taking
everything Alex said in a negative light, things seemed to be going more smoothly.

“Of course.” Hunter made a vague gesture that suggested this didn’t matter so much. “But what good are cookies if you cannot share their wondrously gooey glory among friends?”

“Didn’t take you for a friendship guy,” Eric muttered.

Hunter pointed to the Commander. “Pot,” he began, then pointed to himself. “Kettle.”

Trying to hide his bewilderment, Alex turned to Adam, who could be counted on as an emotional and educational anchor in this storm. He hoped his blank expression somehow conveyed the concern of Hunter’s statement not making logical sense, or perhaps his brain was deteriorating.

There were known to be odd side effects of Time Travel, though they were few and far between.

Adam smiled, bringing his mug to his lips. “Past thing,” he explained.

*Good,* Alex thought. It would be distressing otherwise.

In that Hunter was his responsibility, of course.

And perhaps there was a little fondness there, but that was reasonable to feel towards a teammate. Even a temporary one.

“Seriously, though.” Hunter’s eyes were curious when he recaptured Alex’s attention, an odd counter to his exaggerated slouch across the table. “What’s the deal with the healthy eating? Is this a Time Force thing?”

Alex considered this, then nodded. “Partially,” he admitted. While he wasn’t technically supposed to expand on the future’s technicalities, Alex determined that this tidbit in itself would not be harmful to share. “Despite our thorough training, there are not actually many missions that require us to travel though time.”

Jen and the others’ mission had been a rare exception, not the rule.

“Generally,” Alex continued, taking a sip of his tea. “Our focus is centered on the regulation of equipment necessary for Time Travel, with the occasional mission to contain a threat that has managed to actually use it.”

“Oh,” Hunter blinked, nodding to indicate he understood Alex’s explanation. “I assumed that was some phenomenal lead up to explain the whole veggies-only mindset.”

“And you would be correct,” Alex replied – though he deplored rewarding assumptions. They could be costly. “Before now, I have never had an extended undercover mission in the past,” Alex explained. “So it was not necessary for me to partake in the…local delicacies.”

“What?” Hunter sat up with a start, his head cocked in confusion. “We don’t have cookies in the future?”

“Sugar,” Alex corrected. “At least, not beyond the natural amounts present in fruits. There were restrictions in 2531, mandatory restraints on the harvest of sugar cane, vanilla and cocoa beans.”

It had been a combination of legislature intended for the benefit of society’s health and deadly fungus that wiped out a majority of the crops, leaving very few of the original sugar farms up in operation.

There was still sugar of course (along with honey and other natural sweeteners), but with such
scarcity it quickly became a luxury good, reserved only for the wealthiest of the elite.

Alex, working a government job, was definitely not one of those.

“This is why I have not indulged this period’s high-sugar treats – your birthday cake, for example. It seemed prudent to adhere as closely to my normal diet as I am able to.”

And, in truth, ignoring these delicacies was one small, but effective, thing he could control at this point in this mission. When he returned to 3001, it would be one less thing to miss.

The full explanation was met with blank stares and then, in what Alex was becoming to recognize as typical Hunter-fashion, overdone horror.

“Holy hell, you’ve never had chocolate?” He shifted, turning his attention to Commander Myers before Alex could reply. “All of them,” Hunter demanded, answering the original question that had led them to Alex’s initial refusal. “Bake all of them.”

It was a testament to the seriousness of this perceived slight when Commander Myers simply nodded, not even extending the smallest objection at being ordered around by a man ten years his junior.

“This isn’t necessary,” Alex tried protesting when the first tray was removed from the oven, a dozen clumps of cookies warm and browned under the cheap halogen light. “Perhaps it’s better if I don’t-”

You couldn’t know what you were missing if you’d never had it. You wouldn’t know what there was to miss.

Though the explanation remained unspoken, the other three rangers turned to him as one, the Commander and Hunter wearing unimpressed looks, while Adam gifted him with sympathetic eyes.

“Just try it,” the black ranger urged softly. “You’re here, you might as well enjoy it while you can.”

Even if that could make things so much harder.

Alex wasn’t sure exactly how much of this had to do with baked goods, or other less gratifying trains of thought, and in an effort to distract himself he reached for one of the cookies.

Armed with a glass of milk supplied by Adam, Alex considered his cookie, tracing the rough shape with one finger delicately. They were chocolate chip, Eric had explained. A mixture of brown and white sugars, vanilla extract, and finally chocolate, culminating in a four strike indulgence created in a modest kitchen with a scuffed linoleum floor, in a neighborhood that wasn’t gated or overwrought with aesthetically ridiculous attempts at luxury art.

It was- Alex had chocolate, in his hands.

Alex hadn’t spoken much with the others after they had returned with Ransik, but on occasion he had managed a lunch with Trip and Katie, the least likely to hold grudges for his admittedly less-than-stellar behavior. During these meetings, Trip had waxed poetic about the foods of the past, pouting down at his fruit salad morosely as he and Katie traded off sharing stories of greater and greater past foods. Pizza, Trip had said, was truly a treasure lost to time. Katie had campaigned for ice cream (a treat that made greater sense once explained there was no actual ice present) and cake.

At the time, Alex had still been off-balance by his sudden upheaval at Time Force, no longer the highly aspired-to lead agent, and not part of the team either. He stood in limbo, envious of their stories, bitter about his loss with Ransik.
He could have beaten him; Alex wasn’t sure *what* had happened the day he had died-

Not that he could remember it now. Alternate time lines, and all that.

Alex swallowed, then frowned, staring down at the elbow Hunter had unceremoniously jabbed into his side.


He gestured with his own cookie, taking a giant bite out of the treat as though it were nothing. Alex supposed it was true enough, with a tray resting on the stove to cool and another safely tucked away in the oven, with the Commander dolloping balls of dough onto yet another for future baking. It was an odd disconnection for everything he had known.

Hunter held his elbow up, eyebrows lifted in the threat of another jab, and Alex took a bite of his cookie.

He didn’t have the words to sufficiently describe the taste.

It was sweet – *of course* – sweeter than strawberries easily, but a different kind of sweetness. There was a small bite of- cinnamon? Alex knew the smell, but had never- It was soft and warm and melted, the chocolate delicate and bitter and melting, perfectly enveloped in the warm dough – soft inside with a crisp-

For a moment Alex stood there, completely overwhelmed by this…thing he had no words for. He hadn’t known what he was missing.

When he opened his eyes, the Commander and Adam were busy by the stove, talking quietly over their own cookies. Only Hunter watched on expectantly though, for once, he didn’t bother with words.

He held up his glass of milk, and Alex mimicked the movement with a silent toast, for things new and glorious.

Alex wasn’t sure how he could go back.

But moreover, he didn’t think he’d *want* to.

Looking at the expression of pleased satisfaction gracing Hunter’s face, Alex was beginning to think that concept applied to more than just cookies.

Chapter End Notes

An introduction for physical attraction – how fancy. Gotta build up the foundation of a real love story, ya know?

It is mentioned at some point during Time Force that they don’t do junk food? I think? Jen makes some awful cookies, if I remember correctly. That stuck with me, which led to this, and very careful navigation around Alex eating sweets in the previous chapters :)

Until next time :D
Write It Off As Meaningless

Chapter Notes

Three cheers (and a couple of beers) to the always wonderful the real vampire for her efforts in beta-ing this monstrosity! Added thanks to Kei Luna Shoryu for additional beta-ing efforts and all around enthusiasm towards this project ^_^.
If you guys are looking for more Ninja Storm reads, check out 'My Brother's Keeper' by the real vampire, or 'The Art of Cohesion' by Kei Luna Shoryu. Expand your horizons :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If there was one thing Hunter had held onto with the death of his parents - one defining mantra that had conditioned him into the person he was today - it was that there was absolutely no shame in developing eccentric coping mechanisms in particularly stressful situations. Hunter acknowledged that he, as a person, had not developed into the most mentally sound of people. He did not grasp onto normal societal practices or average mental outlooks and frankly, he didn’t feel like he lost much because of it. With the exception that normal development would have resulted from the continued lives of his parents, of course. But aside from that, life as he lived it, without useless hopes and wishes, was just fine by him.

He was, what you would call, damaged. He had abandonment issues, mild insecurities, a certain lack of social warmth, empathy, and trust. He wasn’t the biggest bucket of sunshine and he sure as hell wasn’t the smoothest or even the least offensive in a conversation. Hunter was, and always would be, the product of unfortunate circumstances. He was okay with that though. He felt like his other qualities - the ones that the weak-willed, soft-hearted, hardship-oblivious populous could never fathom to acquire - compensated for this lack. Or, at least, made him valuable in his own way.

He was stronger (emotionally, physically, whatever) than most people, could adapt to situations on the fly and had a high tolerance for pain (physically, emotionally, whatever). He was observant, careful with what he said (mostly), when he said it, and constantly prepared for opportunities when someone could easily stab him in the back, in either the literal or figurative sense. He also thought he was a great deal more interesting than most people, at least in a conversation, and there were few others you would want in a fight before him because even Shane (or Alex, at this point) could admit that the older Bradley was a spit-firing, lethal ninja machine.

Maybe it wasn’t an adequate trade off but it was what Hunter had, and alongside these benefits came a…unique approach to problem solving.

The problem, in this instance, was the continued presence of his sanity throughout the duration of his current mission.

Fortunately for him, the blond had managed to find a new way to keep himself occupied.

Unfortunately for him, he was not entirely sure it guaranteed his sanity as his actions, in their own special way, screamed of a person who was definitely unbalanced.

So… Hunter had started flirting with Alex.

Look, they had friendship-happy-good times, and Hunter supported that, he did. It was fine. They
were good. But even ‘fine’ led to a new status quo that ended with Hunter under strict time-rules, and as much as he enjoyed conversing with Alex (free of snippy-attitude), Hunter still got bored. They had, ironically, a lot of downtime to fill. He hadn’t intended to fill that void with flirting, it just kind of… happened.

At some point, after they had worked through the bitter mockery into manageable pleasantries, Hunter had somehow thrown metaphoric pig-tail pulling into the mix. Hunter blamed this on Adam. There was no particular reason as to why; it just seemed like something that know-it-all was responsible for.

It wasn’t legitimate. It was completely harmless; a pastime for amusement to occupy the more trying hours of nothing when they carried out mission objectives. It wasn’t even really anything worth worrying about. Hunter sure as shit didn’t care about it.

With one distinct exception.

To Hunter’s horror, Alex had actually realized it was going on before the thunder ninja had. Which was an embarrassment in so many ways; the main one being that Hunter hadn’t been able to appropriately appreciate the confused looks the brunette had been sending his way until they had changed into ones of pure discomfort, awkwardness incarnate, unsure of how to respond.

It wasn’t good playing-nice behavior but if Hunter was going to inadvertently be an asshole, then he would at least like to reap the benefits of such.

Not the best outlook, but it was the only positive he had in this situation.

The secondary downside, other than allowing those perfect Kodak moments to pass him by, was that his lack of attention had allowed Alex time to adapt. Once the brunette realized Hunter’s flirtations were not legitimate, he brushed them off as Hunter had intended them to be – mild entertainment – and moved on with his life, weathering the storm of Hunter with as much ease as he did about every other social exchange.

It wasn’t until Hunter realized that his mock leering was almost exactly like that one disastrous time he had attempted to hit on one of the ninjas back at the Thunder Academy where his behavior finally dawned on him and while he was surprised, he also sort of… wasn’t.

Because Hunter, despite his protests, wasn’t much better socially-adjusted than Alex. And he might adore challenges just a bit. And flirting with your teammate (wrong response) combined with that teammate being Alex (challenge), really only led to one inevitability.

It wasn’t an issue. Any day now, Adam would bust out his disapproval face and Hunter would back down, and all would be well. Besides, life was short. And Hunter’s was threatening to grow shorter through mind-numbing boredom with each new instalment of past-ranger-stalking.

Really, what harm could a little flirting do? Hunter was rusty anyway; might as well get some practice.

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So.

Alex was a cuddle monkey.

Which, in itself, was adorable because he would be. Cuddling was a horrifying subconscious action for someone so obsessed with proper etiquette, it only stood to reason that cruel lady fate would
crack her knuckles and get down to the business of traumatizing the poor sucker.

It was adorable. Hunter had mentioned its adorableness, but he could never really press exactly how adorable it was, except with a flagrantly abusive repetition of the word and by using a few adaptations of said word that Dustin had invented, like ‘adorks’ and ‘abdoo-doo’ (which Hunter was pretty sure existed on the sole basis that it was fun to say, and Dustin needed a definition for his obviously made-up word).

Hunter should be mocking this, really, he should be. Even if they were cool now, the material practically fell into his lap with helpless abandon, begging ‘mock me, I’m right here,’ except in this particular instance it was both figurative and literal because when Alex sleep-cuddled he did it like a champ, leaving no body part unattended.

Okay, that sounded weird and implied certain activities committed in bedrooms that easily surpassed cuddling levels, so Hunter was just going to drag his mind out of the gutter where it had derailed into and think about how effing cute it was.

Like, Alex’s contented-time sleepy face was the best. He even beat Blake – insane, yes, but true. Even more startling, Hunter was pretty sure if he showed a picture of it to Tori, the aqua ranger would agree with him, and she was all about Blake’s sleepy face. It was a thing.

Hunter could mock him for it, but the thing was, he kind of couldn’t. Even if they were back in the days of ultimate-Alex-hating, the blond couldn’t have done it. He got it, you know? He understood – bitterly, but still understood – that sometimes the loneliness of your consciousness effected your sleepy time, leading you to seek out what you could because it was there, and you needed it. Needed something.

Hunter was just an unfortunate target. Christ knew he wasn’t an intentional goal (if he was, there had been a hell of a lot of nonverbal communication going down that he hadn’t been let in on), and Alex…

Well, he still had moments of obtuseness, but that derived more from unfamiliarity to conversation proceedings than anything else. He lacked, as Tori would say, ‘Total social grace’. Of course, at the time the aqua ranger had been referring to a snippy Cam, but Hunter figured the analysis could be applied to Alex just as easily. Tactful communication was not his greatest strength.

Alex. Cuddling. Oh, the cuddling; it was too much.

At first Hunter had accepted the attention with annoyed ambivalence, assuming it to be the fluke it should have been. After his ninja instincts of stab – this – thing had been quelled and he had determined it was friendly contact (if a little too friendly- not that much, stupid gutter), Hunter had rolled his eyes and accepted the warm stranglehold for what it was and decided, then and there, to use it as an excuse to sleep in. That way, Alex could duck out of the situation with his ego intact, and Hunter got a few more minutes of bedtime, which was a marvelous thing indeed. Despite the walls lined with secondhand furniture, Eric had splurged on their (too small) mattress, getting one of those cushiony sleep-number ordeals that had memory foam or some other kind of magic involved. Hunter suspected it was created from dewdrops plucked from children’s brightest dreams, or something equally poetic. Maybe a few rainbows and a dash of happiness. Something.

When the cuddling became a regular thing, it took a moment for Hunter to reevaluate his decision of ignore-ignore-ignore. He knew it wasn’t on purpose; Alex’s awkward fumbling attempts to sneak away was enough indication, and sometimes Hunter would peek through the narrowed slits of his eyelids to catch the brunette’s expression in the mirror, which was always embarrassed with mild hints of subdued panic. That too, was cute.
But it also left Hunter with the unfortunate conundrum of determining what to do next.

He couldn’t really call Alex out on it, especially if there wasn’t anything the other ranger could exactly do about it. Hunter could always go down and sleep on the couch, but then there would be suspicions (if he was trying to follow Adam’s marching orders of ‘don’t be an overt asshole’, then the blond couldn’t exactly slight Alex for no apparent reason).

In the end, Hunter let exhaustion make the decision. It wasn’t uncomfortable and, were Hunter honest, he would say there was actually something kind of nice about being held close to someone, like he was wanted and needed right there.

Of course, Hunter would rather stab himself in the face than ever admit this to anyone ever, so he decided to take the high road and just pretend it was never happening.

Sometimes, feigning ignorance was the easiest way to survive.

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Hunter had started it off on a random whim, when creepy-stakeout time had translated into bored-wait-around time as they ‘patiently’ waited for some chick in hot pink shorts to show up so they could put something back into her backpack or whatever, blah-blah-blah.

They had actually been to this same park several times before because apparently the first team had been special enough to rank several years of service, as opposed to the following teams, making this place the hot spot for early-nineties power ranger debacles.

“You know who doesn’t like human contact?”

“I would make an estimate, but based on past experience I know your tone is rhetorical.”

“Germaphobes,” Hunter continued, talking over Alex’s response with the delicate civility they had managed to figure out. “Are you a germaphobe?” It wasn’t taunting; this was genuinely something Hunter wondered about. “Or is that like a future-thing? More boundaries and such, wait-” Hunter shook his head, did a mental retreat, and tried again. “Sorry, that edges on stuff I can’t know, right? Forget I said anything.”

“I believe you would categorize it as a ‘me-thing’.”

It took Hunter a few seconds to realize Alex had actually said something. His gaze was still trained to the horizon, in that same unblinking stare that had to have been genetically engineered into him or something, because Hunter swore the man never blinked. Ever. Not on a stakeout.

Hunter might have spent their first few nights together surreptitiously looking him over for eye drops, because the guy had to have some kind of medical help – dried out eye hazards and all that – but all it had earned him was a very uncomfortable silence after Alex had woken up when he’d tried to give him a pat down that one time.

In a stroke of brilliance, Hunter had very intelligently passed it off as a ninja thing to ward off bad spirits. Alex had raised one doubtful eyebrow and started sleeping further away. As though that would do anything. Seriously, what kind of countermeasure was-?

Anyway.

Words. From Alex.
“Personal preference?” Hunter asked. In the distance, a young version of Adam was throwing a Frisbee with a guy sporting one of the most epic pairs of fluorescent sweatpants Hunter had ever seen. “Bad past experience?”

“I suppose,” Alex began, earning Hunter’s undivided attention easily. “I’m just not used to it.”

Hunter considered this with a tilt of his head, watching as teenage-Adam beamed bad-pants-kid in the head with their fluorescent green disk.

“So it became a personal preference,” he concluded. He kept his tone as non-judgmental as possible, because Hunter liked to think he wasn’t a candidate for the biggest dick in the universe. A hug-less childhood – it wasn’t like Hunter was unfamiliar with the concept, at least in his life before the Bradleys-

The tiniest hint of movement from the corner of his eye indicated a tight bob of Alex’s head - agreement.

“I suppose you could say that,” the man concluded.

Across the park, bad-pants-kid teamed up with yellow-shorts-girl to tackle young-Adam to the ground, collapsing into a pile of giggles while some other bespectacled kid decked out in overalls watched on with a fond smile.

Hunter was willing to bet anything that was their team’s Cam. Anything-and-a-half, if you were feeling especially risky.

It was sad, if he dwelled on it. That they could exchange this conversation just as easily as though they were conversing about the weather. It was a strange kind of epiphany to reveal that for once, Alex sort of got it. Or more accurately, Hunter got Alex. There was an understanding to lessen these… things in their lives with easy ambivalence and quiet conversation, creating a more manageable burden.

Or maybe for Alex, a hug-less childhood didn’t seem like that big of a deal. Hunter hadn’t been sure when’d had talked about orphanages before, but maybe the concept was something to which Alex was so accustomed that it didn’t even phase him anymore.

Which, in itself, kind of made the rest of this even sadder.

Hunter made his decision in about half of a second, because any more consideration would have allowed for common sense to swoop in and properly dissuade him, and Hunter couldn’t actually stand the idea of it now. Not when there was this thing- this stupid incessant notion in the back of his head that brought him back to the unremarkable age of six, a time when no human being should have to play the game of what do I need to do to be good because obviously, he had been bad. Nothing made sense otherwise.

It wasn’t something he spoke of, and it wasn’t something he was going to speak of now, but in that half-second Hunter really, really wanted to go back in time to his past self and just shake him until he realized there was jack shit he could have done to make his caregivers less neglectful assholes.

Naturally, Hunter did the only thing he could to curb this impulse.

He held Alex’s hand.

Come on, the guy was practically asking for it, keeping it all loose and abandoned at his side, all lonely and isolated in the world. Hell, he was practically shouting for Hunter to make a move with
that kind of (consistent) behavior, so it wasn’t like Hunter could just let the opportunity pass him by. Alex’s hand was remarkably warm, considering his… behavioral restraint. Aside from that small note, the experience wasn’t anything special. It was just a hand. One among many, that was warm and pleasantly not-sweaty, about the right size to fit comfortably against Hunter’s lanky fingers, and was nice even in the reflexive curl to return the grip-

It was pretty obvious it had taken a few moments for Alex to realize what was going on, so intent was he on watching the majestic Frisbee battle further down the park. There was that familiar brown-haired girl in a hot pink sweater again, tackling the dogpile with rampant abandon. Another kid, sporting a wicked ponytail, hovered a few steps behind her, grinning at overalls-Cam. It was a pretty content picture, if you looked at it.

By the time Alex acknowledged his hand’s newest occupation, Hunter had already draped himself against the brunette’s shoulder, his head coming to a lazy stop against one of the spiffy brown jackets Eric had procured for them.

There were a lot of things Alex could have said or done, a lot of things Hunter expected him to say or do. Such as shaking Hunter off and rolling his eyes (Hunter had seen him do it once- he had thought it was impossible, but it totally happened). At most, Hunter expected this to be something they could playfully mock each other with later, accompanied by Alex’s annoyed but mostly empty complaints about Hunter’s immaturity and lack of focus.

At best, he expected a flick to the head, because – it was honestly really sad and he could admit this, okay – that would prove that Alex trusted him enough to… mildly hurt him, or whatever.

The last thing Hunter expected was for Alex to huff one very put-upon sigh, and then do nothing. Nothing. As in, nothing-nothing.

As in- ‘Your turn, Mr. Bradley, I can outlast your foolishness any day’ - which was, if you thought about it, an awful lot like a challenge.

And Hunter not only adored a proper challenge, he trampled all over their sorry asses until his ownership of such pitiful competitions was not only unquestioned, but revered.

Hunter, in short, loved himself a competition.

And it all sort of devolved from there.

-:-:-:-:-:-

The task of discovering new sets of Alex-boundaries for his recently-acquired endeavor was enough to keep Hunter occupied for the next few days. He made his next move in the evening, a-la-Batman, and struck with what he assumed would be met with unamused sputters.

To play it safe, he waited for Alex’s attention to be mostly occupied before making his move, choosing to swoop in when the brunette had the majority of his focus narrowed on the pan of sautéing onions before him. One of the systems Alex and Adam had created in their double-A team of freakish efficiency was the establishment of a dinner chart. As in, who cooked it and when, and yes, vegetables were mandatory, so you’d better account for them.

By this point, Hunter assumed Adam lived there. He couldn’t find any proof to the contrary and Eric got a little psycho-eyed the one time Hunter considered asking the Quantum ranger, so yeah, that
was a thing now. The blond was willing to bet anything Adam was the one who had made that decision, not that Eric would have put up much of a fight. Or, at least, a heartfelt one. Hunter was sure there was a great one Mr. Myers put on for a show, and maybe it had entertained Adam, but it sure as hell had not deterred him in any way, which seemed to make both of them happier.

Yeah, that romance was not one Hunter ever wanted to understand. If he was around for more of the time, sure, the constant tension of hanging around two people who really wanted to bone each other who consistently refused to bone each other would get to him. Fortunately, as it was, he could just pop into a different point in time and be done with the mess, so he wisely stayed out of it.

But back to Alex.

Alex, who had donned Eric’s red apron with the efficiency and dedication of a soldier, the straps wrapped around his back and tied in a neat knot in the front, a checkered hand towel dangling from his waist as he stared down at the stove with unmatched intensity. Alex was pretty much the grand champion of following the recipe. It was great for getting a finished product out, but it left little room for creativity or experimentation, much to Hunter’s ire. He had tried cooking with the brunette a grand total of one time. Hunter was proud to say that he had lasted about two minutes before being ordered to their room by Alex, Adam, and Eric, so… yeah, that wasn’t for them.

The only reason the crimson ranger was allowed in now was because he had promised on his morpher that he wouldn’t try to help in the cooking process whatsoever. Alex had taken him on his word which was, frankly, the other man’s mistake. He should have realized Hunter would have alternate forms of entertainment prepared for himself. Perhaps he had forgotten the challenge, but hey, that just made it easier for Hunter to win.

And Hunter did so love winning.

With that in mind, Hunter took a deep breath and moved forward, going in for his second plan of attack.

Before he could over-think it, Hunter draped himself across Alex’s back, folding his forearms across the Time Force agent’s shoulders and resting his chin against them, gazing over Alex to peer at the dish he was working on below.

“Whatcha working on?” Hunter asked. His hair was still slightly damp from the shower. Alex could probably feel it brushing against the side of his head, his own strands pristine and gleaming.

There was a pause, and then, “Sauce.”

“Spaghetti?” Hunter hoped it was spaghetti, Alex had a real knack for Italian.

He felt Alex’s head bob. “Yes.”

“Smells good.”

Beneath his hold, he could feel Alex tense, but there was no objection. No question, no move to shake him off.

They were in private now, there was no one to judge them, no one to think this was odd or out of the ordinary. No one’s attention to worry about drawing if Alex flinched away. No one who would care.

“Thank you,” Alex said. Quiet. Conversational.
He didn’t say anything else.

Hunter left when Alex had to dig through the pantry for tomato paste, and tried not to think about... anything.

Solid plan there.

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So.

Alex was a crafty bastard.

He was also far more patient than Hunter had been led to believe. Maybe he just hadn’t bothered activating the full range of his composure when they first met but- okay, that wasn’t relevant. What was relevant was that Hunter was pretty sure either he or Alex had been broken somewhere along the line, and no one else (**cough** Eric-and-Adam **cough**) was saying anything but that didn’t make it untrue.

Either Hunter had completely lost his skill for being an amusing little shit, or he had broken Alex’s propriety so much that the Time Force ranger didn’t know how to speak up against his assaults, or something. It was an ordeal. A debacle. It was stupid.

Part of Hunter was annoyed that the brunette wouldn’t speak up for himself. Like that was the offensive thing here.

He didn’t worry about it.

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It wasn’t like Hunter set off to do these things with the intention of pissing people off, because he didn’t. That was rarely the goal. Anger was a strong reaction; strong reactions made for memorable interactions and ultimately, if Hunter could help it, he didn’t want to be remembered. It was kind of a ninja thing, to be one of many in the crowd. Unnoticed, not warranting a second glance, to be deemed harmless and unworthy of further inspection. That was really all Hunter wanted in life. Just- to do his own thing without the judgment or consideration of others because hey, he got it, he was weird. Hunter, of all people, would never make the mistake of considering himself average.

The ship on that possibility had sailed a long time ago; now it was all about getting by. Getting by, without anger, or super-hilarity (because that was another strong emotion people correlated experiences to) or, dare he think it, love.

Hunter had always excluded the third possibility on the very clear basis that it wasn’t going to happen- not for him. He could dream, maybe; he could hope and feel the phantom weight of his dead parents’ guilt, as though they were shaking their ghost heads at his reluctance to try, or his inability to consider it, but Hunter was a realistic person. He had issues. Piles of issues. Pie-fuls of issues, with paranoia ice cream a la mode and emotionally-stunted sprinkles piled on top.

His best shot – in his hypothetical world where he entertained best shots and not the ultimate demise of the guy who had murdered his parents – was another ranger. Hunter knew that. He also knew that, hell no was he ever dating anyone on his team. After the Cam/Dustin fiasco of too many months ago, Hunter had stopped considering the idea of an inner-team relationship. They were too close; he was too...not their type, apparently. He didn’t begrudge it, there wasn’t anything to begrudge, and this was all hypothetical, stupid.
So maybe a later team, if he met them. Or a veteran who had already been around the block. There had to be ranger reunions of some kind, right? Their job clearly warranted a social event that featured excessive booze and at least one, if not several, massive platters bearing an assortment of cheeses. The kind of place where one could figuratively let their hair down, where they could compare battle scares and stupid monster attack stories and – for the red rangers, a special section of the evening where they could brightly babble on about the morals they had learned and the way their teams had bonded and everyone else would roll their eyes together in a movement so put up with the reds’ sunshine that it would be dazzling.

And in the midst of all that sarcasm, Hunter might – just might – find an individual of equal levels of snark and damage, whose aspirations were as similarly modest as his own – surviving – who… got him.

His best case scenario was grounded on an event that would probably never occur, so being here, with these people – person, if Hunter cut the shit and was honest with himself – was really throwing off his life-groove.

Because Adam and Eric? Yeah, that was a pending romance he was not going to touch with a ten-foot pole (not that Hunter would have considered it; Eric was a real bro, but there were too many similarities for Hunter to contemplate anything more).

That left Alex, who wasn’t a problem, nope, not in anyway. They weren’t even friends, really, so it wasn’t like there could be the slightest possibility of temptation because their entire existence was based on gargantuan efforts of compromise, and it wasn’t like anything could grow from- Who the hell was Hunter kidding; even the sourest of personalities did not detract from the fact that somewhere along the line Alex’s stupidly rigid demeanor had gone from ‘overbearing’ to ‘sexy’.

But just, mildly sexy. Hunter had eyes, okay, and no matter how awful Alex had once been, the blond couldn’t deny that the guy was built, right? And that beneath that neatly put together attire were biceps that could rival Shane’s, and-

So he was attractive. There were plenty of awful people in the world who were attractive.

…Alex wasn’t one of them, but Hunter wasn’t going to completely abolish all of his defense mechanisms in one day, so the complaint would stay for appearance’s sake.

The point – and Hunter actually did have a point in all of this; future romance and all that crap aside – was that he did not continue his self-determined task of Alex-flirtation from an actual desire for reciprocation. This was for science. For… stamina, a test of the other ranger’s patience, and besides, if Hunter stopped now it would just make Alex think he had won, and even if they were doing the friendly thing now Hunter couldn’t let that happen. It was the principle of the thing, he had pride at stake.

Alex would never take it seriously, and Hunter didn’t really want him to, so it wasn’t really hurting anyone.

It was all for the sake of entertainment. And science.

Yes, it was totally for science. Cam would be so proud.

Alex was contemplating something, which Hunter was used to. Alex contemplated lots of things. A plethora of possibilities that ranged from boring and mundane to stupid to involved to needlessly
complicated (which made them stupid). It had to be really hard when your conscience demanded you be responsible for everything in the world that immediately pertained to you, because that was what Alex did on a regular basis, and it looked exhausting. Hair pulling. Aggravating. No wonder he had been so… ass-holeish, in the beginning, he hadn’t had the energy to spare for being nice.

So Alex and thinking, or contemplating, or whatever, Hunter was used to it. Used to being pushed out of Alex’s world while the brunette retreated into his own private headspace, stewing over life’s great mysteries while Hunter just sort of hung out on the other side, waiting for the Time Force agent to return to land again.

He was used to it, and therefore should not feel threatened by it, except for this time Alex had become all pensive and quiet after Hunter had been particularly obnoxious with his physical interactions, and that was something that was worth being worried about. Maybe Hunter had finally crossed the line – go figure, after one too many hand-holds and shoulder leans, Hunter hooking his hand through the crook of Alex’s arm – because it was freezing, and Hunter had been using the broader ranger as a wind shield. And for body heat… and because it was kind of nice – seemed to be the deal-breaker.

Alex was frowning down at their linked arms, not protesting, not upset, just… thinking. They were trying to kill time before they had to follow some kid out of a café and towards what would be a monster-battle, so it wasn’t like Hunter had anything he could readily distract Alex with. Even if he wanted to. The kid was very clearly still hanging out inside the shop, in the delicious looking warmth. Asshole.

Hunter tried to pretend he wasn’t paying very much attention to Alex’s focus, because it wasn’t worth paying attention to or whatever, but he couldn’t stop fidgeting as the other ranger titled his head to the other side, as though to get a better angle.

“Good idea,” Alex said eventually. And then he turned his attention back to the store.

He didn’t say anything else.

Hunter sucked in a breath and held it, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

As though to mock him, Alex seemed pleased to stick with the companionable silence thing and say nothing, which was, you know, great and all that, but-

“What?” Hunter asked, taking the bait.

He didn’t care if it was a trap, he wanted to know- Oh, Alex probably meant the body-heat thing. Yeah, that was a great idea. Go him.

It was a stupid thing to get worked up about. The cold must be getting to him, throwing off his calm-

“The gesture,” Alex said lightly. “Posing as a couple allows us better camouflage. Two individuals standing around without anything obviously occupying their attention could be noted as suspicious. However, if those two individuals are dating, most of the populous will write it off as meaningless, and continue on their way.”

Alex released a small humming noise – of approval, Hunter guessed – then nodded. “It is a good tactic. Very…practical.”

Hunter could tell, easily, that Alex had been struggling for a word selection that wouldn’t be perceived negatively. That the brunette had been legitimately attempting to compliment Hunter, had been trying to move forward and grow, to make things easier, and the blond should really appreciate
that.

He would have, but his stupid brain was still stuck on the whole ‘how did my trolling become a tactic?’ thing to give it the gratitude it was due, because hell, now they could do this all the time. Now, Alex wanted them to do it all the time, because it was camouflage.

It was like Valentine’s Day all over again, and the fact that Hunter possessed that particular thought at all was something he should probably be upset about. Yet somehow a stupid part of him, the one he had stifled into silence, felt a flare of excitement.

Great well, no one needed to pay heed to that, so…

He decided to be upset instead, and urged himself to get his shit together. He was a ranger, damn it, he could freakin’ act like one instead of thinking about how nice and comfortable Alex felt next to him, his arm at his elbow, his hand fitting easily with Hunter’s-

Yeah, he could be upset about that.

“Practical?” Hunter echoed, the word rolling off his tongue with a dangerous tinge, only the barest hint of questioning kept it from being deadpan.

He could see Alex nod in his peripherals, and there was relief. The brunette was probably congratulating himself for getting through to Hunter without upsetting him. He was probably pleased that the balance had been maintained.

Overwhelmed with the desire to gain distance, Hunter was about to wash that freakin’ pipedream away. In spite of the cold, Hunter extracted his arm from its place against Alex’s side, pulling away until he had enough distance to appear physically intimidating. Or, more realistically, until Alex looked like a slightly less appealing prospect to protect himself from the icy winds because owwww.

“So you’re impressed that I managed to think this up?” Hunter offered – not in a kind way, not in a peaceful way, but as a challenge.

At this point though, Alex was still in a logical headspace, thinking good feelings were lingering about, and he nodded again.

On another day, Hunter might have felt something akin to mild satisfaction from this.

But at the moment he was kind of freakin- irritated, so-

“Like I should be too dumb for this?” Hunter continued.

He caught the exact moment Alex abandoned his focus on their surveillance in order to review the last few seconds, probably to see if he had heard what he had thought he heard, but it was enough.

“That’s just rich.” There may have been some growl to the words when he said them, catching the attention of some random passers-bys before they immediately diverted their attention in an effort to get away from the fighting ‘couple’.

But not really. The fighting part, that was true, that was-

Alex was frowning, but it was aimed less at Hunter than it was with his general position in life, like this actually was somehow his fault, and that only served to make Hunter’s initial faux-anger into something much more substantial.


“That’s not what I meant,” Alex offered, still frowning, his eyebrows furrowed. “Even if-”

“Even if what?” Hunter spat.

He was in the twilight zone. By choice, he had entered into the world where he was a spastic, unreasonable human being, desperate for this space he couldn’t really claim because Alex was still looking at him with this— not hurt, but- 

“When we started-” Alex began to say, and Hunter, thankfully, caught some movement from the corner of his eye.

The kid they were stalking now, decked in white, backpack in hand, had ducked his way out of the shop.

“Just save it,” Hunter spat, turning on his heel to follow the kid, shadowing him from the other side of the street. He could practically feel Alex’s confusion pouring off of him in waves, though it quickly changed into satisfaction whenever they completed whatever they had been sent for.

With that accomplished, Hunter actually welcomed the pain of Time-Force’s no-morpher transportation through time.

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When the icy cocoon was replaced with the comfortable warmth of Eric’s backyard, the tension in Hunter’s stomach didn’t settle any better. It remained, churning, even as he shrugged out of his coat. Cripes, what was wrong with him? He needed to apologize, but more than that, he needed an explanation that he didn’t really know how to give, because he didn’t even know why-

“That was a smart move.”

Hunter jolted, turning in time to watch Alex fold his winter scarf carefully, tucking it into a small enough package to be stored away back into his pocket. He didn’t seem outwardly bothered. If Hunter had to describe it, he would say the brunette was proceeding with business as usual. Just, friendly. In that awkward complementary way of his.

By the time Hunter determined the first word of his I-don’t-know-what-to-say sentence, Alex had already continued, his scarf carefully tucked away and jacket free from his shoulders. “As unassuming as a couple would be,” the brunette began. “A fighting couple, while more memorable, is also more actively avoided. Creating an uncomfortable social atmosphere was a clever way to prompt us into moving without anyone paying notice.”

There were protests clustered on Hunter’s throat, half-babbled nonsense that didn’t make much sense beyond the need to exist, and then Alex looked up at him.

And then, Alex smiled.

It wasn’t anything Hunter hadn’t seen. Alex had smiled before, plenty of times. After the cookies and from the few history jokes Adam shared with him and when they did a truly good job- Alex smiled.

The one Alex gifted him now was small, but devoid of his usual barrier, lacking the active guard of propriety and professionalism and-

It was a celebration in success. Hunter’s success.
The protests died on Hunter’s tongue.

“Good job,” Alex concluded.

In a show of what was true bravery, the brunette reached out to pat Hunter on the shoulder. It was a brief touch but it was one, Hunter noted, that he did not fear would be denied.

Hunter shrugged when the hand withdrew, still feeling the lingering heat through the material of his sweater.

“I try,” he offered casually, returning Alex’s cheer with a grin of his own.

The tiny smile might have grown then, might have prompted the courage for Alex to companionably bump shoulders with Hunter, might have fed into the red ranger retrieving Hunter’s coffee mug for him without prompting.

It was then Hunter realized it.

They were friends.

Only Hunter could go out of his way to be an obnoxious flirting asshole and come back with a friend. This had to say something about one of them, about both of them. The way neither respond to a normal social situation with any kind of reasonable-

Nope, stop that train of thought there.

They were friends.

Okay, there were worse things to be.

Chapter End Notes

The ‘Cam/Dustin fiasco’ mentioned in this chapter is a reference to one of my previous stories, ‘Any Moment B’ (posted on ff.net). Short version, Hunter used good old words to help Dustin discover his sexuality and followed that up by asking him out, and Cam was less-than-pleased (because of his own secret Dustin-love and wow, that reads as dumb, but I like writing was is essentially soap operas, sue me). Essentially, the whole thing ends with Cam and Dustin dating and eventually Shane joins in - making a happy loving triangle that Hunter is not a part of. That is the short version. I know, not so short after all :)

The last stakeout scene takes place during Dino Thunder, and they’re waiting on Trent.

Until next time :)
Love Hopeless Causes

Chapter Notes

Love and thanks to the real vampire for lending her beta-ing might for the benefit of this story! You're a real gem, vamps :). Added thanks to Kei Luna Shoryu for additional beta-ing efforts and all around support – there seems to be no end to your enthusiasm and for that, I am grateful.

If you're looking for something else to read, try out the real vampire’s 'My Brother's Keeper' or Kei Luna Shoryu’s 'The Art of Cohesion'. Go on, you know you want to :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alex was not a great supporter of the newest development, but he had swallowed down his feelings on the matter and allotted them the respect they were due. Hunter’s actions, while… uncomfortably close - too close to Alex’s personal preferences - were actually incredibly helpful in their plight. It added a hint of sincerity and harmlessness to what would otherwise be two questionable individuals. Doing this, as little as Alex wanted to fuel that particular flame, was nothing but helpful.

And if they spiked the flickering warmth of arousal, a distant warning that continued to take Alex off-guard, that had little to do with the merit of Hunter’s plan.

Because of this logic, Alex could not reject Hunter’s idea. Initially, he had suspected the younger ranger was simply trying to rile him up, trying to poke and prod at whatever annoyances Alex might have left. He thought that Hunter, perhaps, was simply bored and had sought a new way to alleviate his boredom using the only outlet available. It was a reasonable conclusion, and yet-

There never seemed to be anything mocking to the blond’s actions, and as they had ascended to better grounds - not exactly friendship, but at least an open-mindedness in regards to each other - Alex realized this could not be the case. Hunter respected him, or at least what they were doing, enough not to jeopardize it meaninglessly. And as the crimson ranger could not honestly be undertaking these pushes for intimacy from a desire to actually be close to Alex, that left only one option.

Unfortunately, the blond’s logic only served to make Alex all the more fond of him.

Attracted. Alex was physically attracted to him- as would be reasonably expected, from such acts. But that wasn’t why they were instigated, correct? Not for the warmth and comfort, trust that the hold would be returned, not for the feeling of welcome when it was accepted, but for practicality.

Not that – not that Alex wanted the motivation to be actual desire, or –

Alex was fooling no one, though he aimed, pleaded with his mind to try.

That attraction, that initial appreciation for Hunter’s physique, was beginning to transcend into something different, something deeper and warm. It was like all the harsh edges of his perception of the blond were being cut away, dulled into something that almost seemed familiar, and in that familiarity, appropriately horrifying.
They were not truly friends, and while that was true, that fact could not fight the one time Alex had felt the beginnings of such emotions before.

It had been with Jen.

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“You’re pretty good at this. Done it before?”

Hunter, his eyes still fixed to the distance, cocked his head to the side in question, his fingers squeezing Alex’s lightly. It was a subconscious effort, the brunette was sure, but it was hard to tell with Hunter.

Alex swallowed. “Once,” he said. “With one person before, I mean.”

Hunter nodded to indicate he understood the clarification. “You still together?”

“No,” Alex said. Swallowed. He didn’t have much of an explanation beyond that; not one he wanted to share, or even could share considering the limitations of maintaining a professional appearance. Treading the path of Jen-reminiscence would only end in folly. It was a trap Alex had fallen into far too many times in the past year, and one he could not—would not—spring again.

The idea of contemplating past failures only kindled a slight ache of shame now, and it wasn’t something that seemed appropriate in Hunter’s company. It didn’t feel… right.

For once, the other ranger respected Alex’s simple answer for what it was, refraining from demanding more details. The slender fingers tightened around his own, a brief squeeze, causing Alex to feel the rough calluses shift against his own battered skin. From repair work, maybe. Or perhaps it was a result of some kind of ninja training. Alex would have to ask later.

He would want— he wanted to ask later. There was no need for it.

It was a desire, a curious urge devolving from his interest in history.

That was normal. This was normal.

People did this all the time.

“May I ask how?”

It was said quietly, with no real kind of need. It was as casually presented as one would ask after the weather, and that was… kind. Hunter wanted to know, was interested, which was nice, but wanted to allow Alex a chance to retreat, should he require it, which was also courteous; he didn’t want Alex to feel obligated—

It was a wealth of kindness.

Hunter would protest the description. He said he was realistic, no-nonsense.

He was these things too, but he was mostly generous and patient.

Odd, that Alex could not see these things before. Then again, he had a nasty habit of not recognizing what was in front of him until it had already past him by, unforgivably real and concrete against his own self-imposed conceptions.

Alex’s breath stuttered, catching in his throat, but he didn’t tense. He focused on the warmth and the
calluses and the field in front of him and did not shake.

“It’s-” he swallowed, shaking his head. He kept his eyes away from Hunter because he had to, he was doing his job – observing – but part of him was relieved for that excuse.

“It’s complicated,” he said at last. “I don’t know if I can explain it.”

Not here. Not justly.

It wasn’t even a question if he should. At this point, Hunter had earned his answers, had earned the right to glean truths from the intimate aspects of Alex’s life. It was the least the red Time Force ranger could offer him, really, after essentially kidnapping him. The least he could do.

Alex took a breath, trying to find the words to force this, to explain, when Hunter cut him off.

“Then don’t,” the blond said lightly.

Alex turned, but the crimson ranger wasn’t looking at him – not in a way that was stubborn or annoyed – but simply as he had been before, carrying out his - their - duty.

He must have felt Alex’s gaze, as Hunter turned to look at him, shrugging lightly. “Don’t explain it.”

Of all the things Alex had ever been offered – genuinely and truly offered – the prospect of not speaking was rarely awarded him. To keep to himself without penalty. People thought it encouraged a reclusiveness that his childhood had conditioned into him – Jen had always fought against it, not wanting Alex to shut her out.

Hunter gave him this olive branch with a twist of his lips, and then his gaze was gone, back on their job, back to the distance.

Alex desperately needed to stop drawing comparisons, but it was a rule he would have to enforce another day. For the moment, he accepted the silence, and tried not to tear up about it.

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“Her name is Jen.”

Alex was supposed to be writing a report – a compromise of clerical duties that had been instigated to grant them their rest periods at the Commander’s abode, and while they had the one forgiving note of bringing Hunter some entertainment (the word ‘bureaucracy’ snorted with a roll of his eyes) – Alex still loathed to do them. Mostly due to the conflict of taking him out of his mission-focused mindset even though he understood the need. It was better to give updates while the events were fresh in his mind.

Repetition and familiarity had made the work second-nature, incapable of holding his entire attention, which gave the declarations that had been dancing on the tip of his tongue, twisting in his gut, easier access to freedom.

It wasn’t relevant; Hunter didn’t need to know it, but part of Alex felt inclined to share regardless. Not as compensation for the blond’s patience, but…trust, maybe.

Yes, it was trust. Trust strengthened bonds, and strong teams worked more efficiently.

It was the mantra Alex tried to sell himself on, even if the mild twist of Hunter’s lips into a frown
wanted to coerce him otherwise.

Perched on the far side of the bed, Hunter was the picture of domestic bliss - instilling a semblance of order in the crumbled pile of clean clothes heaped inside the laundry hamper at his feet. There was a stack of t-shirts folded into conservative rectangles across the foot of the bed – as much of a concession to organization as the ninja was willing to give. In turn for his efforts, he made no attempt to separate Alex’s clothes from his own. That duty was left to the brunette – though there was a slight possibility that Alex happened to misplace some of his shirts in the blond’s drawers on occasion. If Hunter stubbornly refused to return the offending garment until it had been used – as his own, of course, being in *his* drawer – then that was simply a quirk for Alex to endure.

Such occurrences may have been more frequent than Alex’s usual attention-to-detail should allow, but Hunter seemed to find it more amusing than aggravating. Rather, Hunter seemed to interpret the situation as aggravating for Alex, but took no preventative measures.

It was a blessing, a relief Alex should acknowledge, and yet he found himself continuing to push the boundaries of respectable behavior. The picture of Hunter in oversized shirts, collars hanging crookedly on his narrow frame-

This should tell the brunette something, a kind of foreboding for the future, but he-

It was irrelevant.

“It was- we both agreed,” Alex found himself stumbling over the words. His vision began to blur the harder he stared at his mission report, willing some kind of calm, centering focus to return. “It didn’t work anymore.”

There was so much more to it than that; how Jen had found Wes, how Wes had- he had *risen* into this person that was so much more than Jen had expected, who met what she deserved and more. They functioned in a tragic way, displaced by time, but even with that thousand year barrier, their affection – their *love* – had never wavered.

Jen didn’t settle just because regulations had forced her to stay in one time period and Wes another, and she didn’t disregard what had happened for Alex’s sake.

It- how would Hunter put it? It ‘was what it was’.

Part of the reason Alex had shut down so much when he had returned, when he had reclaimed his morpher, was because he had known. He’d recognized it on the monitors when Jen herself could not see the fondness she held. Alex had something to prove, he wasn’t Wes, Wes wasn’t *him* – and that had been the entire breaking point.

At the end of the day, Wes was who Jen wanted and Alex wasn’t.

He had been loved, Alex knew that. Jen hadn’t faked it, but it wasn’t the same kind of love. It wasn’t the kind of relationship Jen needed to thrive.

Jen didn’t need someone she had to coax through life; she didn’t need to lead on the battlefield and then back at home, guiding someone through the personal hurdles of living that everyone else seemed to naturally adapt to. That was Alex’s failing, not hers.

Jen had been patient beyond reason. She had been his first real friend and, despite the course of their relations, she always would be.

How someone could put that into words, Alex didn’t know.
It made him wonder why he had even brought it up. Surely, if he could not offer Hunter a satisfactory explanation the blond would be irritable. As though Alex were taunting the ninja-

“It was good though, right?”

Alex blinked, his gaze pulled from the fists clenched in his lap to the other side of the room. He was still angled away from Hunter, the blond safe out of sight behind his back, but he could feel the crimson ranger’s attention like a laser beam, hot and deadly accurate against his neck.

“While you had it,” Hunter continued, his voice light. “It was good?”

There wasn’t anything naturally antagonistic about the question, no hidden meanings. It was, as far as Alex could tell, Hunter’s version of consolation. Comfort by being casual, by maintaining the status quo.

Alex swallowed around the lump in his throat, torn between the listless feelings inspired in him by Jen and the other ranger’s surprising generosity.

“The best,” Alex replied.

That he had known, and that – he must admit – he would ever know.

There wasn’t much more to say about it than that.

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It changed without really changing, and Alex suspected that was part of the problem.

Routine was a comfort, but complacency was a danger – and while Alex knew that better than any person his age had a right to, the concept still managed to take him by surprise. Later, he would justify it, that as two veteran rangers it was reasonable to expect them to be more aware of their surroundings, but in the moment-

The moment had been terrifying, a fear so raw and overpowering that it had rendered Alex incapable of breathing as the possible ramifications washed over him.

There were many rules- etiquette, to be followed. There was procedure, there were tactics, there was stealth to be enforced and blending to be done and the constant reminder of no touching, no talking, no excessive interacting, that hung over their every action as they traversed through time. Those were inherent, those were clear.

For Hunter and Alex specifically though, there had been one rule that was held above all others, one rule that they had never been required to address, that they never needed to speak of. They didn’t have to because it was just simply known.

And in one second – a length in which the world could change – they had both simply forgotten it.

Alex couldn’t even remember what they had been doing at the time – waiting, most likely. It seemed like they were always waiting. It was one aspect of the job Time Force didn’t advertise, even though it proved to be nearly integral to just about every mission they ran. Time travel wasn’t an exact science, it was difficult to determine the correct trajectories just to get you in a safe landing area – ascertaining the most appropriate time for transport required a mastery of entirely different skills altogether, and an agent could often be expected to be teleported to his assigned period some time in advance. Safety came first for such a delicate process, and it was better to wait than to risk missing the periods that needed immediate intervention.
This mission had more than demonstrated an exercise for patience – the waiting game even more particular in the wake of their untraditional method of time transportation. They could have hours to wait after finishing a mission objective, or they could have spare seconds. Despite Hunter’s grumbling that seemed to beg to the contrary, it was not something that could be helped, and they had learned to keep themselves primarily entertained in the intermittent areas of downtime.

During that day’s session, Hunter was demonstrating some of his fighting forms in a languid, graceful flow. It reminded Alex of this era’s fighting style ‘Tai Chi’, though he had learned not to mention the similarity to Hunter. It would only lead to more lectures, and for once, Alex was eager to listen to Hunter’s current tirade.

“Lightning’s fast,” he was saying, his eyes shuttered with focus. “But you’ve got to keep your movements smooth to control it. It’s kind of the opposite of what you’d be expecting, but to transfer it you have to be sure, not tentative.” He turned, dragging his leg around in a slow arc on the ground before him, gradually turning his torso to match that direction, his arms up. “This is one of the first things Thunder students are taught at the Academy. If they have the patience for it, they get to advance to elemental training.”

“And if they don’t?” Alex prompted from his position at the edge of the clearing, leaning against a tree.

Hunter snorted. “Then we shuck them off to the Wind Academy; they love hopeless causes.”

Alex cocked his head to the side. “Weren’t your teammates considered…?”

“Yes.” Hunter smiled, but it was genuine and friendly. “Good thing they’ve got me and Blake; they would be tragically lost without us.”

“Truly.” Alex returned the smile. It was nice, this. Having these moments without worrying about potential offense was pleasant.

Alex may even come to admit that they could be one of his favorite parts of these missions, but as Time Force didn’t require opinions on reports that would be a secret he kept to himself.

“Maybe you’ll get to meet them one day. From a distance, I mean.” Hunter curled his hands until they formed small cups. Alex followed the movements of his slender fingers, illuminated in random splashes of sun that filtered through the trees around them. “As far as teammates go, they’re pretty great. Except Cam, but hey, can’t have everything right?”

Alex nodded his head, considering, though he didn’t actually know. He had never gotten to work with a team beyond the support units that operated under him for capturing time criminals. It didn’t seem to count in the same way as Hunter’s team did, based on his stories, so Alex could only imagine what their interactions would be like. He supposed distaste between two members could only be an eventuality – it would be difficult to expect perfect cohesion with such a high stress occupation.

“He’s kind of like you,” Hunter continued, turning away from Alex. “But like, worse in every way. Alright, so he isn’t a lot like you, but he likes organization and being an asshole, so he’s kind of like first-impression you.”

“That was what you took away from our first meeting?” Alex raised both eyebrows, considering this. It wasn’t surprising, in retrospect, though the thought did sting a little. Were Alex to indulge in such useless-
As though reading his mind, Hunter waved him off. “Don’t sweat it. Now I’ve come to understand the soft and squishy inside of one Alex Collins.”

“I hope you mean in a figurative sense.”

Hunter flashed him a smirk. “The literal sense had to wait until you were sleeping.”

“I feel better off not knowing what that entails,” Alex deadpanned, and Hunter had to pause his exercise to throw his head back and laugh.

“See,” the blond said once the laughs petered out into chuckles. “This is what I meant. Now, we’re cool – but unlike you and I, Cam never got the memo that maybe not-being-terrible was good for friendship, so here we are.”

“Maybe he’s just not certain how to proceed?” Alex offered. He had faced similar problems.

In truth, the only reason he succeeded in winning Hunter’s approval to this point was because of Mr. Park’s intervention. Alone, Alex hadn’t stood a chance.

“Or maybe he just sucks,” Hunter countered with a flick of his head. “Don’t worry about it, we still work together fine. You just won’t see us sitting down for any movie nights anytime soon.”

“A true tragedy,” Alex tried to offer this with sincerity, but based on the shameless grin Hunter flashed his way, he knew he had not succeeded. Were it up to the blond, every one of the Commander’s impromptu ‘Movie Nights’ would feature a Star Wars movie of some kind, and Alex could only take so many impersonations of the green Yoda goblin before resigning himself to the peaceful silence of the guest room.

Apparently in Hunter’s opinion, it was hysterical – but thankfully Mr. Park had insisted on taking turns for movie selection, to the relief of Alex and the Commander.

Despite the Commander’s many protests, however, Alex noted that a small figurine – modeled after one of those… storm troopers? – showed up on Hunter’s designated side table upon their next return trip. Alex may have subtly taken a picture of the thunder ninja’s ecstatic reaction upon its discovery, saving it away in one of the personal, hidden files on his datapad, but he would deny it if ever questioned. It was research, clearly. Documentation for his mission records.

“Just for that, we’re watching the Phantom Menace again when it’s my turn,” Hunter taunted, his voice a satisfied song. “Jar Jar Binks for everyone.”

“Surely a beast so ineffectual would have succumbed to natural selection,” Alex bemoaned. Even now, the very concept of Jar Jar Binks baffled him. “How could he continue to survive?”

Hunter paused again to laugh, this time bent in half, hands resting on his knees in an effort to collect himself. “See, the funny thing is that you’re not joking.”

“Why would I be joking?”

Hunter swiveled his head towards him, his face flushed with exertion. “Because it’s fiction. But you know what, never change Alex. You’re perfect just the way you are.”

Alex found himself floundering, lost under the casual praise. In an effort to restore normality, he sputtered the first thing he could think of, “First-impression Hunter would disagree with you.”

“Yeah, well.” Hunter stood up with a gradual pull, bending backwards to stretch out his spine, hands
propped on his hips. “First-impression Hunter was kind of a douchebag, so what does he know? Rhetorical question,” Hunter added before Alex could throw together a response. “But speaking of real questions, how much time do we have left before we’re teleporting out of here? I’ve got—”

The words phased out as Alex glanced down at his modifier, his heart shuddering to a stop when he made sense of the timer. He looked up, Hunter angled away now, still talking, babbling – and ran.

It was ten feet, only ten feet. That was nothing in the grand scheme of things. With Hunter’s agility, the distance may as well be non-existent. Alex was certain Hunter could clear more than ten feet in a single leap, could do that ‘ninja dashing’ thing he had spoken of before. He could perform a shadow battle and cross the distance in less than a second – flitting from one place to another before you could finish blinking.

Hunter was speed incarnate, but Hunter wasn’t looking at Alex.

The brunette didn’t have time to weigh calling out to the blond versus running, didn’t have time to convey that they were done, he didn’t have time-

“—and I’m calling first dibs on the shower now. I don’t care how—oomf.” Hunter’s surprise gave way to a series of curses when Alex tackled him, knocking the blond clean off his feet mid-rant.

He was twisting even before they had hit the ground, instinctively curling to lessen the impact. His lips were set in a frown, displeased in almost every way.

The world disappeared around them in a flash of brilliant light. They landed unceremoniously on the green lawn of the Commander’s backyard, a clumsy tangle of limbs and groans.

For a moment they paused, riding the after-effects of the transport. Alex’s chest was heaving – unreasonably so; it had been a short run, though quickly instigated. He made a mental note to work on his cardio and pledged to be more aware of the modifier’s count-down timer. He had barely reached Hunter in time.

Said crimson ranger extracted himself from Alex’s uncoordinated sprawl before the brunette had managed to reorient himself – before Hunter was reoriented too, based on the way he stumbled, clutching his head.

Alex had missed it, couldn’t remember the feeling of landing on top of Hunter, though he somehow noted the loss between the headache of time transport and berating himself.

“So,” Hunter muttered, making his way towards the back porch on unsteady feet. “That—” The blond vaguely gestured towards the patch of dirt they had landed on. “—didn’t happen.”

Alex stared at his retreating back the entire walk to the door, but Hunter never looked behind him.

It was an uncomfortably familiar gesture.

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“Have you ever thought that maybe we’re the saboteur?”

Alex paused but consciously did not tense. Their relationship was steady enough nowadays that Alex could tell the question was a legitimately thoughtful one, as opposed to an instigator, as it would have been at the beginning of the mission.

“Think about it,” Hunter continued, his voice low and deceptively casual as he leaned against the
brick wall, the hood of his sweatshirt pulled over his messy hair, shadowing his eyes. “We haven’t seen any suspicious future-like people lurking around in any of these places.”

“We’re behind them,” Alex replied automatically. This he knew by heart. “We’re playing catch-up.”

“Yeah.” Hunter nodded, but there wasn’t anything challenging about it. His eyes, from what Alex could see, were staring blankly into the distance, his mind occupied with tackling this newest inquiry. “But all the stuff we’ve been doing…or, the stuff they’ve been ‘breaking’, it seems to me…” He trailed off with a frown. His jaw moved, teeth catching his bottom lip in a poor habit of annoyed consideration. Alex tried to keep his gaze from lingering, tried to-

“It seems to me like all this stuff was fine.” Alex’s attention snapped back to Hunter’s face as the blond continued, and something like guilt and relief flooded him – immediately dismissed on the merits of existing at all when they shouldn’t. In the meantime, Hunter kept talking, “Like, who goes out of their way to fix all this stuff? Are they really that good with machines of the past? Your saboteur is some kind of technical prodigy? Or was the stuff never really broken at all?”

“I believe you have to be a minor to be considered a proper prodigy.”

When Hunter’s gaze flicked over to him, there was a flash of amusement in his gaze – maybe fond – no, before he was back to business. “I’ll keep in mind your engrained predilection towards a minor’s incapability to perform time-crimes. That’s some kind of discrimination, right?”

“Of a sort,” Alex nodded, conceding the point with a flush. He didn’t really possess the faculties to argue lightly. Not with– it wasn’t necessarily that Hunter had a point, it was just difficult not to come around to it, now that Hunter had called attention to it.

It was a great deal more difficult to fix things than it was to break them. Most of the things they had done– now that he thought back on them – seemed more like the options of the original manipulator, instead of the secondary correctors that they were supposed to be acting as.

Hunter allowed the bantering distraction with a wry twist of his lips, then moved on. “Look, I’m not ragging on your employers or anything, but what if this was something different, right? What if it got to the point where they realized a whole bunch of weird stuff was supposed to go down that didn’t. Like that guy having all of his travel documents together, or that girl not finding out her coworkers are power rangers, or all this stuff actually working the first time around instead of giving up in a fit of despair because Time Force ordered you to go at it with a screwdriver and unskilled enthusiasm?”

Alex flushed; the screwdriver in question tucked into his back pocket from their latest expedition – sneaking into some garage-hideout to break a wheel-contraption made by this era’s blue ranger. Neither of them had been able to determine what exactly it was supposed to do, but a few well-placed blows from a utility tool–

It had been sparking by the end of it, and that was all that mattered, Alex supposed.

“Just, think about all this stuff that history has said happens that for some reason, you know, hasn’t – and maybe they go all defcon seven up there, because their current reality depends on what’s-his-face missing his space-plane.”

“Shuttle,” Alex automatically corrected.

Hunter rolled his eyes. “My point is, if that actually happened, their hands would be tied, right?
Because they’re not supposed to mess with things unless someone else tries to fuck with them first. So maybe in their super-panicked, must-maintain-the-time-integrity state, they come up with a plan. They decide that maybe there’s this person/monster/bad guy who is just on the slightest side of fictional running around and making all these ‘manipulations’ to the time stream, and clearly they have to send out their best and brightest with limited information and a whole bucket list of broken stuff to fix, because that’s how they deal with bad guys.”

There was a lot of that statement on which Alex should have focused, but for some reason his mind was stuck on- “You think I’m the best?”

“And the brightest,” Hunter replied without hesitation. “It just makes more sense, with what we’ve been doing. With why they don’t care that I’m tagging along too. Two for the price of one, right? Two guys doing the work they need for a bad guy they don’t have, and history is double-fixed.

“That’s not how it works.”

The blond tilted his head back, eyes searching the holographic sky displayed on the city’s protective dome high above them, a smile tugging at his lips. “I know, they’ve probably got fancier terminology for it–”

“I meant, that’s not how our procedure works.” Alex tried not to sound panicked as he said it, tried not to – tried to keep calm and level and casual, as Hunter had; this wasn’t a conversation with stakes – but there was a tightness in his chest and throat, a sudden weight in his stomach, that threatened otherwise. “We can’t, they can’t do that. Make up a mission. There’s too much-”

Regulations, rules, laws, they couldn’t–

And he couldn’t take this out on Hunter for posing a question, an intellectual pondering that had, as far as Alex could tell, plenty of merit.

He swallowed around the uncomfortable feeling in his throat, hating the sudden tension that plagued Hunter’s shoulders, and tried to gather his thoughts.

“We had an agent once.” Hunter’s expression of surprise was almost humorous with its sudden appearance; clearly he had been expecting a lecture, as opposed to an anecdote. “He– they had stayed in the field too long,” he explained. “Initially, we didn’t have limits for how long someone could be out, but this – this changed that. There was an event; I don’t know all the details, it was before me, but he – they had tried to save someone or something or–”

Alex swallowed, but his mouth tasted like sandpaper, dry and unyielding. “They altered something without permission,” Alex continued quietly. “Something that couldn’t be undone. No one will go into details, but he–”

Alex breathed in slowly, eyes closed to block out the intensely inquisitive gaze of Hunter Bradley.

“The damage was unforgivable.” His eyes were turned towards his shoes when he opened them; a safe, comforting picture. “Their actions had eradicated at least a dozen different bloodlines. The agent was recalled immediately but–” Alex shook his head. It didn’t help; didn’t lessen the feeling of Hunter’s eyes pinned on him, only him. “The agent was tried and convicted for serial murder. The first – and only – member of Time Force to be locked in our own-”

He cut off with a shake of his head, too loaded down with thoughts of secret missions and betrayal and subterfuge.

“We cannot proactively make alterations,” Alex said, nodding, confirming. “We can only correct.
It’s like being a ranger; we defend, not initiate.”

“That makes sense.” There was no criticism in Hunter’s eyes when the brunette looked over, but the crimson ranger could hold the best of his concerns to his chest with an ease that almost hurt. It didn’t really promise much of anything.

A second later, Alex’s fear was confirmed with a generous roll of the blond’s eyes.

“Can’t help thinking they made up a boogeyman though.” Hunter leaned back against the wall in a boneless slump, showing a weariness Alex wasn’t sure he truly felt. “Like, ‘Don’t end up like him, don’t be a murderer you well-intending time-people’.”

“They wouldn’t do that.”

“You don’t know the details though.” Hunter had both eyebrows raised and this, Alex knew, was a challenge. “You, Mr. On-top-of-it-all.”

“It was classified,” Alex argued. “We only knew enough—”

“To be aware of the consequences?” Hunter returned, face blank. “To know not to do that?”

Alex was caught between ‘yes’ and ‘never’, because they wouldn’t – As much as Time Force did, they wouldn’t –

But companies, militaries, and organizational groups throughout all of time had been doing that. Implementing scare tactics on their own to avoid unnecessary grievances. Why would Time Force be different? Sarge had seemed so certain, so deadly serious when he had dispensed these secrets too, and maybe he had believed them– maybe he had–

Mutiny and disobedience. What was he thinking?

“They wouldn’t do that,” Alex said simply. It was all he had.

Even if Hunter allowed him silence this time – begrudgingly; the way he had read the line of Alex’s patience should probably be something worth more attention from the brunette. Still, it didn’t stop the churning feeling in Alex’s gut.

For once, they had exited an argument in which the blond’s points were based merely on logic, and Alex’s could only stand on loyalty and dedication to a mission, reason be damned.

Maybe he had been traveling for too long.

Or maybe Hunter was right.

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The place Alex had chosen for them to rest wasn’t ideal; at least, not in the comfortable sense, but it was off the beaten path in a long abandoned area, so for his given necessities it was pretty much perfect. Of course, when choosing a place to hole up that affected the time stream the least, you were bound to miss out on a few basic luxuries like… heating. It wasn’t unbearable; the place was dry, if dusty, and provided a solid roof over their heads. There were even a stockpile of blankets Hunter had discovered in the midst of his scathing critique of Alex’s chosen sleeping quarters.

The other ranger complained a lot, sure, but he hadn’t tried to convince Alex to shift his target elsewhere, so his grievances were probably out of a desperate need to fill the silence as opposed to
actually protesting. If Alex truly considered it, he thought that the thunder ninja was putting on a front to mask the fact that he missed the Commander’s abode. Alex did not fault him for this; the guestroom was a preferable resting area to a warehouse any day, but unfortunately it was not a transport that Trip could manage for them at this time.

Hunter had taken the news with more grace than Alex had expected, but he countered this maturity with a running commentary of the warehouse’s facilities. It wasn’t that bad, but when night had fallen, leaving them in total darkness, the temperature had dropped rather drastically.

It was, in Hunter’s words, “Dick-freezing cold”.

To this point, Alex has found himself unable to disagree with this assessment.

It was frigid; even with the two of them huddling together (an action they had silently agreed not to draw attention to), and keeping to the less drafty areas, it was cold. Hunter’s pile of blankets was doing its very best to maintain a base level of warmth, a commendable effort, but it did little to fight off the dropping temperatures. Sleep, something they both desperately needed, was becoming an elusive prey. It was difficult to lull off into dreamland when your teeth kept chattering and your face had surrendered to being a numb, biting mess.

As a member of Time Force, Alex had been trained with at least a basic understanding for surviving in extreme temperatures, both hot and cold. While a majority of his work tended to occur more in an urban environment, Time Force felt it was important for its agents to be prepared for even the most unlikely situations. On the offhand chance their backs were ever forced against the metaphoric wall, at least they would have the small comfort that the organization employing them had provided a three hour seminar.

There was always the minuscule probability they would have to recall that knowledge, which was what Alex was doing now, trying to review the details for conserving warmth.

Layers were important, Alex remembered that much. They had that much, with their long abandoned blankets. Keeping dry was important too, but that had more to do with situations involving snow, which was not something they had to worry about in the abandoned warehouse with seemingly no insulation. A majority of body heat escaped from the head, the reasoning for their muffled breathing, blankets covering their entire bodies, and from the feet as well, which was why neither of them had opted to remove their shoes. It might have been mildly uncomfortable, but at this point, all discomfort was becoming relative to the relentless pinpricks of cold.

The last thing Alex remembered, only applicable if you had two or more people, was sharing body heat.

In extreme cases, such as hypothermia, direct skin-to-skin contact was required to properly share body heat.

Right now, Alex would just settle for sharing side-of-arm heat.

It was the best they could do, given the size of the blankets. Ideally, being curled up would have been the best position to conserve heat, but the blankets didn’t provide enough coverage to allow the both of them, Hunter tall and gangly and Alex…well, Alex, so they settled for laying side by side, squeezed as close as propriety would let them on the only section of the floor that still had carpeting left. Sure, it didn’t do much by way of comfort, but it outshone the rest of the hard, concrete flooring by a landslide. An easy choice.

An easy choice among other easy choices they hadn’t gotten around to addressing just yet.
Alex knew Hunter wasn’t asleep because he had been listening for the teen’s breathing, straining to hear if it had evened out into a slow, prolonged lull that depicted unconsciousness. He had been hoping, vainly, that the blond had some other ninja technique that aided him with sleeping or maybe a quiet meditation, Alex didn’t care which, that would allow the Time Force Ranger to make his move. Alas, it seemed Hunter’s pride did not extend to rest techniques, and the blond was awake beside him, body tense in a stubborn attempt to stop the tremors from running through him.

Phenomenal.

He would just have to wait the blond out then, because there was no way in hell Hunter was going to see reason on his own. They were close, but they would never truly be that close. There was no need for it now, and Hunter didn’t have to practice to get Alex accustomed to the intimacy (as he did when the brunette was cooking sometimes), and he-

Alex had been in the middle of convincing his mind to fade away to a place that was – if not happy, at least bearable, when Hunter began shifting beside him. Not, in itself, a surprising occurrence. Movement created friction and heat, it stirred circulation, it gave your mind something to think of that wasn’t so-cold-so-cold-so-coldcoldcoldcoooooooold-

So Alex could admit, quite easily, that he was surprised when the blond’s movements stopped abruptly with a turn instead of an irritated sigh, and then the left side of Alex’s body felt a reprieve from the onslaught of cold.

Inside, Alex celebrated. Hurray warmth.

The party ended when he felt the warmth continue spreading and the reasoning behind this being Hunter, finally having enough of this business, taking matters into his own hands. The blond curled into Alex’s side and rested an arm across his waist, head shoved underneath Alex’s chin and deftly hooking a leg around Alex’s left, pulling him flush to the older ranger’s body.

For a second, just one, Alex tensed up, unused to having someone so near to him (not when Hunter was awake at least, the other times had been accidents, habits-), a boundary that hadn’t been crossed since he and Jen had-

Since… her, and even after her there hadn’t been many others, nothing he could stomach the fear of rejection for. That fact alone should have made this experience that much more painful and humiliating.

And then the second passed and the warmth radiated outwards, coaxing life into his abused limbs, and Alex, as easily as Hunter had, went with it.

He wrapped his arms around the teen instead of commenting on the mess of hair jutting below his chin, disregarding any feel of it that didn’t have to do with temperature.

“We say nothing of this,” Hunter warned, voice low and threatening retribution.

Alex nodded instead of answering, feeling like it was the appropriate response. If it wasn’t, Hunter had no complaints.

Sleep came much easier after that.

But it had been a necessity, not a pleasure.
The referenced wheel sabotaged by Alex’s screwdriver is from Power Rangers RPM episode 21, ‘Not So Simple’.

Until next time :)}
Nothing ‘Gives’

Chapter Notes

A heap of love and thanks to the real vampire for lending her skills to beta this chapter! And of course, thanks to Kei Luna Shoryu for additional beta-ing and support. You two are the best cheerleaders a writer could ask for ^_^.

If you’re looking for something else to read, check out 'My Brother's Keeper' by the real vampire, or 'The Art of Cohesion' by Kei Luna Shoryu. Diversify your reading schedule :)
badly shit went down–”

He imagined Alex was frowning. “To prevent–”

“I get it,” Hunter snarled. “I’ll keep a better eye on our targets so they don’t get–”

“It wouldn’t have been a problem if you had just–”

“I didn’t have *time* to listen, we had to *move.*”

“Do guys ever let each other finish a sentence?”

The voice, low as it was, managed to be heard over the obnoxious wall of water encapsulating their entire beings, bringing both rangers to a halt.

It was weak and confused, and also, slightly concerned. “Or,” Sanders – Landers? Hunter didn’t know – continued. “Do you not-do that?”

Instead of answering, Hunter elected for the very appropriate decision of knocking that dickhead unconscious and carrying on with their stupid journey to return unconscious rangers back to their secret hideouts.

They didn’t speak for the rest of the night.

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Of course, by the time they were transported back to Eric’s, it wasn’t midnight anymore. The early -evening sky taunted them with slightly humid heat, no clouds, not even a hint of possible rain, which made the reality of being drenched to the point of drowning all the more insulting. Figured.

“Boots,” Alex said, because if the red ranger didn’t say something redundant that insulted Hunter’s intelligence, he was probably going to die. At least, that was Hunter’s impression, seeing as that was the running theme of the past few hours, and he was very much sick of it.

“Sure,” Hunter chirped with mock cheer, fingers sliding on the slick grime that coated his supposedly weather-proof laces. “Anything you say, boss.”

“Hunter.” There was a sigh, maybe; a *tiny* sigh leading into a tiny look of maybe-guilt, but Hunter was done with maybes and done with all the freakin’ *effort* it took to discern Alex’s wide variety of subtle lip quirks just because the jackass never learned to properly communicate. Hunter had been an orphan too. He knew it was shitty; he knew it sucked and affected you way more than anyone would hope, but he just– he was *tired*, okay?

“Just *stop,*” Hunter snapped, finally managing a good enough grip on his shoe to rip the damn thing off, then moving to the other. “I thought we were past this, but *you,* mister–” He levered a dirt-covered finger at the dripping brunette, glaring at him through soaked eyelashes. “-Have gone all the way back to stupid levels again. What gives?”

Hunter was not hallucinating this; Alex was reverting back to his old ways. And not reverting in a good way, or a fun way, or a way that led to solid working relationships or indicated great internal strength, but in a way that was panicky and *stupid*, and frankly, Hunter was done tolerating it.

Alex’s gaze stayed stubbornly on the laces of his shoes, making quick work of his perfectly uniformed knots. “I apologize,” he murmured. “I acted out of line.”
“That wasn’t the question,” Hunter pointed out. Because that question, that was what he wanted. That was all he needed. Just answers.

“Nothing ‘gives’,” Alex said quietly.

Hunter could practically hear the air quotes, but there was no mocking in this repetition. If anything, it was Alex’s adorable little way of mimicking Hunter’s lingo in an attempt to bond. No shit, the blond had actually heard Alex discussing this with Adam at one point, and the methodical strategy to which he was dissecting possible approaches to relationship-building should have been creepy. Or pathetic. At the very least, it was mock-able, but for the life of him, Hunter just couldn’t because it was too cute. It was horribly, horribly cute.

The fact that even in his state of imminent face-punchings, Hunter managed to admit that (in his own stupidly masculine way, thanks) indicated that stupid-Alex was stupidly-likeable with his stupid socially-awkward stupidity, so why was his stupidity attacking in such an un-entertaining, horrific and displeasing way? Why? Hunter hadn’t actually done anything, he swore.

Probably. Hunter probably hadn’t done anything. He couldn’t really speak for possible wandering hands during the great freeze of holy-hell (yeah, he knew, phenomenal name), but between his last visit of cool-Alex and the Alex-of-now (who was the opposite of anything remotely cool), Hunter had been acting like a perfect gentleman.

Hunter paused to gift Alex with an appropriately dubious look that the brunette missed due to his absorption with ringing water out of the bottom of his shirt, and looked up to the insultingly clear sky with a wary exhale. Not a sigh. Hunter was not going to become a rhyme master anytime soon. Even in his mind.

“Everything gives,” Hunter groused. He frowned at his shirt, plastered against his torso in sodden glory, and pondered the effort of pulling it off verses just ripping the damn thing. “With you, everything gives. Now what’s the issue?”

Alex, because organization was not a pastime so much as it was a way of living, arranged his mud-caked boots neatly beside Eric’s back porch stoop, peeling off his socks and delicately laying their pitiful carcasses across the tops of his shoes to dry.

“Nothing-”

“Don’t insult my intelligence, man,” Hunter protested, grabbing the bottom of his sweater with a small shrug. The least he could do was try to save it; seemed kind of rude not to give an effort when he was literally feet away from the house of the guy who had given it to him. “Something’s a problem. Is Time Force giving you flack? The future changing in bad ways? Is it classified?”

Because that was not a battle Hunter really felt like having today. The, ‘we’re-two-halves-of-a-whole-right-now-so-share-your-super-secret-bits (not that, gutter) – if-you-actually-want-us-to-work-together’ thing that transcended into an ordeal and then into two days of not-talking followed by one day of Alex awkwardly trying to make small talk (it was bad, he couldn’t do it, it was just bad) before he eventually caved because Hunter was awesome.

Or because they were legitimately friends that actually respected one another, but hey, that wasn’t something they addressed, alright?

“It’s not classified,” Alex said, shrugging off his jacket; draping it across the porch railing with care before contemplating his own shirt. “Because there isn’t a problem.”
“So it’s me then.” After a few quick tugs and some generous cursing, Hunter yanked the sweater-trap off his head and chucked it to the side in a lumped up bundle. “Please, just do us both a favor and tell me what I did. I think we have one more mandatory therapy session left with Adam before he’s going to end up strangling the both of us.”

Because two perfectly mature individuals should be capable of working out their own problems without resorting to their neighborhood Dr. Phil, but what could Hunter say, they were overachievers.

Geez, this was like some crappy soap opera. Like he was the overreacting boyfriend who always brought things back around to himself so they could fight. Hunter hated those people. He didn’t want to be one of those people, except with Alex he had to be one of those people, because avoidance was the only tactic the brunette knew when dealing with interpersonal conflict.

Which, if you thought about it, explained a lot about his failed relationship with Jen, but even Hunter wasn’t a big enough asshole to point that out. Regardless of how frustrated he felt.

“It’s not you,” Alex insisted. It would have been a lot more effective were it not for the fact he was continuing to avoid eye contact, and Hunter refused to believe Eric’s stupid floor boards required that level of interest. “There’s nothing wrong.”

Hunter followed the brunette inside like a wrathful shadow, refusing to allow more than a foot between them because then Alex would be off-balance, and Hunter would have a shot of getting some answers.

“I’ll listen better, if that’s the issue.” It wasn’t one of his strengths (ask Shane, or hell, ask Sensei) but Hunter was willing to try. Look at him being all mature and stuff. “I think, all things considered, it didn’t go as bad as-”

“I know,” Alex said. Now he was staring at the coffee maker, as though he ever used it. Come to think of it, Hunter wasn’t exactly sure what the Time Force agent drank as a pick-me-up, but it wasn’t coffee. “I already apologized for snapping at you. I was just frustrated.”

“And now we are back to why are you frustrated-?”

“What the hell happened to you guys?” Eric stalked into the room (that was what he did, there was no lackluster walking, only the steady march-march-march that Adam must find attractive as hell), frowning at their clothes. “You get attacked by a mud monster?”

“I’d mock you for that suggestion, except it’s perfectly plausible,” Hunter grumbled, narrowing his eyes. “You get attacked by a mud monster?”

“Go for it, Sport.” Eric raised one unimpressed eyebrow and motioned towards the stairs. “Go get cleaned up, dinner’s in ten.”

“Great,” Alex said, just as Hunter replied, “Oh, hell no”, and look at that, Alex finally glanced his way.

The blond struck while the iron was hot. “There will be no cleanliness until you tell me what’s wrong.”

“Are you guys fighting again?” Eric asked. There was a look on his face that was akin to the look one got when smelling something particularly awful, which was pretty much his expression for ‘not this shit again’.
“No,” Alex lied while Hunter simultaneously said, “Yes” and got a sideways glare for his troubles.

So much for the coffee maker being the most interesting thing in the world.

It should probably be said that their varying tones of annoyed insistence was enough for Adam - who had just innocently walked in on the scene, still looking over his shoulder at the abandoned clothes outside - to determine it was indeed time for another intervention.

As a man in possession of great reserves of patience, Adam sighed.

“If I ask what’s wrong now, will I get a straight answer?”

“You would be the first,” Hunter grumbled. With Eric by the stairs and Adam blocking the back door, the blond felt the threat of Alex’s attempted retreat could be swayed long enough for him to reach for some paper towels. “He’s certainly not talking to me.”

Alex, for the first time since they had entered the kitchen, began to look annoyed. With his wild hair, and soaking clothes, it was easily more endearing than threatening. “There is nothing wrong.”

“He won’t talk to me,” Hunter complained, motioning to Eric. If anyone would understand, it was Eric. People didn’t talk to Eric all the time (which was mean, but also accurate).

“When did he start acting screwy?” Eric asked, wordlessly handing over the roll of paper towels.

“I’m not-”

“Hell if I know,” Hunter muttered. He ripped a handful of sheets off the roll and thrust them at Alex, tearing off another handful for himself. “One day, we were fine, the next day – bam – it’s all stupid again.”

“I’m not--”

“Did something happen at night?” Adam asked. He paused from unloading his small white cartons from the beaten brown takeout bag, considering.

“No,” Hunter said. Come on, they were just sleeping. Even he couldn’t screw that shit up. “All we did was- Oh.”

Oh yeah, now he got it.

Alex, familiar with his epiphany face, coughed awkwardly. “If you’re not going to shower first, I’m just going to-”

“Dude, are you upset about the cuddling?” Hunter asked. Because that was stupid; they did that all the time. “Or did it just remind you of some dark and stormy night with Jen or something?”

“Cuddling?” Adam asked just as Alex’s face turned a delightful shade of red with embarrassment, reminding Hunter exactly why it had been so wonderful to mess with the guy’s boundaries early on. It was a very charming color.

“There was nothing wrong with the… cuddling.” The last word was said under his Alex’s, his eyes darting to the side in a desperate attempt to focus on anything other than Hunter. “Just like there isn’t anything wrong now and I would appreciate it if you believed me.”

“How can there be something wrong with the cuddling?” Hunter asked, pondering the question aloud. “We do that all the time, it’s not exactly like it’s something new-"
“You wanna repeat that last part?” Eric asked, doing that stupid incredulous one eyebrow raise that he thought made him look like a snarky-mc-smartpants but only made him look like an asshole. “With the cuddling?”

“Don’t act so damn surprised; it’s not like the bed you gave us was exactly big.”

“I figured you’d take turns–”

“Alex?”

Adam’s question being asked in that soft, tentative kind of tone snapped Eric and Hunter out of their argument with frightening effectiveness. It was the vocal equivalent of approaching a wild animal, extending every kind of indication that things were safe, and that nothing was there that intended harm. Even if it was possibly a fruitless endeavor, it was utilized because you wanted any advantage you could get when calming a feral creature.

The look on Alex’s face was nothing short of shocked.

The brunette was still, his eyes frozen wide as he stared at Hunter. It should have been ridiculous, him, still dripping wet with this startled expression– it should have been cute like everything else, but for some reason the only emotion Hunter seemed capable of processing was dread.

He realized about the same time as Alex did that he hadn’t ever shared that little bit of information with the brunette. You know, to save his ego.

Load of good that did Hunter now.

“You knew?” Alex asked.

It should have been stupid; an over-used cliché of shocked victims everywhere, but Alex delivered it with utter seriousness, his voice careful and soft, and at the very end of it, tucked away to protect himself, hurt.

Hunter swallowed. Despite water drenching his being, his throat was dry and chalky. “Ninja, you know,” he explained, trying to keep the levity in it. “Of course I knew.”

That probably wouldn’t help him any.

Alex blinked, taking a moment to process this information. Eventually, he nodded, like that would do it, would assuage any possible concerns the rest of them possessed.

“So of course,” he murmured. The shuttered look on his face was – well, you know, awful – Hunter broke him, he had actually broken Alex – “Well, then,” the brunette continued, finally looking back at them. His eyes were blank. “If that’s been settled, I’m going to go shower.”

He left in silence with Hunter feeling like an absolute tool behind him.

Seriously me, you suck. So much.

He should have taken a page from Adam’s last therapy session and thought before he spoke. If he remembered correctly, that was still something they were trying to work on. Damned if it didn’t show now.

“I really want to ask more about this cuddle-business,” Eric began, with the solemnity and seriousness one should never maintain while uttering the words ‘cuddle’ and ‘business’. “But I feel
“Now’s not the time,” Adam interrupted. Like Alex, he stacked the takeout boxes neatly, two-by-two, rice, low mien, dumplings, his lips set in a grim frown. A disappointed frown. A disappointed frown made much more effective by its lack of direction at Hunter, because then it was worse. Then Hunter couldn’t even be looked at and that stung in a way only Adam and Cam had ever been able to manage. If there was anything Hunter hated, it was to be ignored by people he legitimately cared about.


The paper towels were still clenged in Hunter’s fist, partly muddy and soaked from the mess on his hands. He wiped down his chest distractedly and toweled of his hair with whatever dry spots were left before chucking the now-sodden mess into the trashcan by the island.

Eric chose the moment the blond started eyeing the staircase to interrupt Hunter’s planning time. “Don’t, kid. Just give him some time to cool off.”

Hunter, who was kind of getting a little pissed at how predictable these guys found him, threw Eric a glare. “He’s just going to shut down if I let this go.”

“Then don’t,” Adam said. His attention was still fixed on to the leftovers, separating the packets of soy sauce from the spicy mustard, but his expression was cooler, more considering. “But he’s not going to listen now, so you might as well give him a little time to get his head back together.”

“Use my bathroom and get cleaned off,” Eric ordered when Hunter was about to protest. It was going to be an amazing protest that may or may not have involved suggesting if Adam loved the damn soy sauce so much why didn’t he marry it, because at times like these he reverted to a fifth grader. “You can corner him after dinner, alright?”

“Be sure to explain why you lied,” Adam instructed. He moved to retrieve forks for the chopstick-challenged Alex and Hunter, securing napkins from the holder as he passed by. “I’m sure you had a good reason; he just needs to know what it is.”

“I didn’t lie.”

“Lies of omission,” Adam said. He glanced up, one hand paused on the drawer handle, and looked at Hunter for the first time since the conversation of disappointment had been rekindled. Hunter wished it wasn’t so stupidly effective, especially when he had known it was coming but honestly, he couldn’t get past that special feeling of shame that only Adam and his mother could have managed.

He probably shouldn’t bring up that little tidbit to the black ranger; most people would consider it creepy.

“Right,” Hunter agreed. Agreeing, while not always truthful or honest, was the easiest way to end an argument. There wasn’t any point in continuing a fight if both parties were seemingly on the same side, right?

Adam saw through this with narrowed eyes, because he was a wizard, but Hunter escaped the newest look of disappointment by whisking out of the room, ignoring Eric’s protests of dripping water all over his carpet.

He would steal some clothes from the Quantum ranger in retaliation; that would cheer Alex up. Damned if Hunter knew why, it just did.
Hell, he probably just liked having baggy-clothes buddies or something.

Future people were so weird.

Yeah, Hunter; that was the important part of the conversation.

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Despite the horrible monster movie Eric had insisted they watch while eating, dinner was strained. It didn’t help that Alex’s mind was obviously elsewhere, his eyes darting between the floor and his food with equal disinterest, and that Hunter countered this behavior by only looking at the brunette.

Adam had, wisely and subtly – as was his way – separated them onto different couches, so it wasn’t like Hunter could have scooted up next to the Time Force agent to stare imploringly into the windows of Alex’s soul or whatever the older ranger seemed to be afraid of, so there was that. Whatever that was.

Eric didn’t bother to put up the pretense of small talk, choosing instead to occasionally bump shoulders with Adam, who spent his meal casting worried glances between Hunter and Alex before frowning at the television. If his thinking was any louder, Hunter would have had to become a subterranean mole person just to deal with the anxieties, it was just– unpleasant.

The real kicker came afterwards though, when the leftovers had been put away and the washed dishes were resting in the drainer, when they had all gone their separate ways pretending everything was just their usual definition of adjusted-normal as it could ever be.

Hunter paused at the bottom of the stairs, watching Alex putter about the living room through the opening to the kitchen. “You coming?”

Alex froze, again. It wasn’t getting any more pleasant to watch the way the Time Force ranger obviously snapped his walls back into place, but there it was.

“I think I’m going to take the couch,” he said at long last.

Though he had been expecting it, something twisted in Hunter’s stomach. A bad dumpling, probably. “Look, I’m sorry I didn’t say anything about it sooner; I just didn’t want you to feel, you know, awkward.”

Kind of like how the awkwardness was so heavy now it could crush them with little to no effort. Hunter really wasn’t a fan of death-by- awkwardness-crush; that was just stupid.

Okay, so maybe Hunter dealt with situations by avoiding them a little bit too, but he wasn’t bad as Alex. Regularly.

The other man had one hand resting on the blanket thrown across the couch’s back. It was almost a dramatic pose, but Hunter knew that Alex never thought about that kind of thing off-duty. That stuff was all Hunter. Alex tried to be honest, when he could talk about it.

“I appreciate the thought,” Alex broke the silence suddenly; his voice was cool and professional. Old-Alex again. “But it is unnecessary. I can just as easily rest here without the inconvenience.”

“It wasn’t an inconvenience,” Hunter said.

It wasn’t; that he knew.
It had been weird at first, and maybe a little bit annoying, but even back at the very beginning of it Hunter couldn’t honestly say he outright hated it. If it had really bothered him, he would have put an end to it. If it had really driven him crazy he would have volunteered to sleep on the couch himself.

The fact of the matter was, he hadn’t, because with all the other shit they had to deal with, it didn’t seem worth the battle. And then, after a while, it had sort of been a comfort.

Hunter and Blake had stopped sharing a bed when they were seven, being too old for such nonsense. The year after their parent’s murders, however, they had broken that rule, until Blake had called an end to it, saying it was time to ‘grow up’.

Hunter wasn’t sure if he had brought any of that baggage into this stupid situation but he did know back then, even though he knew Blake was right, even though he knew they couldn’t do it forever and he had to be the strong one, Blake’s declaration had felt like a betrayal and this, this wasn’t that.

He hadn’t meant to make this a redemption for actions committed by a person Alex had never met, but it had always kind of felt that way. Having someone at his back, who felt comfortable enough to- well, to just sleep, that meant a lot to Hunter. After all the mind controls and bad decisions and general douchebaggery, there was someone who trusted him enough to be unconscious next to him, and that had meant more to Hunter than he was ever willing to admit.

“Perhaps not for you,” Alex said, breaking Hunter from his thoughts. “But it was for me.”

“Don’t do this shit,” Hunter muttered. It wasn’t until Alex’s head snapped in his direction that he realized he had actually said it aloud. Well, if he had already gone this far… “Just come to bed,” he continued. “This doesn’t have to be a….” He made a vague hand gesture that could have meant ‘ordeal’ and shrugged. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you, that wasn’t – I wasn’t making fun of you, or anything. I just want to go to bed.”

And I don’t want to say it, but I would really like it if you came with me.

It was a thought that took Hunter by surprise, but he didn’t question it, he didn’t read into it any more than what it was.

It had been nice, having someone hold him. He could admit that. He was secure enough in his masculinity to confirm that. And he didn’t mind that the person doing the holding was Alex.

“Please,” Hunter murmured, realizing that was the one thing he hadn’t said yet. “Please just- come to bed Alex.”

If the brunette the left him hanging there, it would be a humiliation Hunter deserved. But he was pretty sure, almost certain…

Alex put down the blanket with a sigh and crossed over towards the stairs.

He paused beside Hunter, and gave him a small look of amusement, a little strained around the edges. “If you insist.”

“Damn right I do.” Hunter grinned, clapping him on the shoulder, and dutifully led the other man upstairs.

Right. Nothing to look into here.
The ‘green wizard guy’ in question is Xander, the green Mystic Force ranger.

Until next time :)
When Alex woke up, it was with Hunter burrowed into his chest with relaxed abandon – cuddling, for lack of a better word – against his torso, as though it could possibly provide better comfort than the empty pillow lying just half a foot away.

Apparently acknowledging the rather mortifying aspect of their sleeping conditions had broken a personal boundary as far as decorum was concerned for Hunter. Now that the truth was out, Alex was as fair game to be embraced as Hunter was for embracing.

It was an odd turn of events.

Instead of executing his usual retreat and delicately removing himself from the blond’s side, Alex wrapped an arm around the younger man’s back and opted for a few more minutes of sleep, deciding that it would be cruel to disrupt Hunter’s rest when he was looking so at peace.

That was the only reason, of course.

It had nothing to do with the scent of fruity shampoo or comforting warmth or dirty blond hair shoved beneath his chin.

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Things went smoothly after that. By their definition, at least.

It would never be perfect, but that was – in an odd sort of way – part of the appeal. They had perfection where it was needed. Seamless coordination when approaching an objective, companionable silences in the stretches of time they laid in wait for their targets, and ready cooperation in the kitchen, when preparing meals.

That was not to say that any of this was achieved sans-bickering. Alex would never be so foolish as to assume such a prospect were even possible, and were he truly honest, he was glad this was the case. The banter had lost its initial edge of hostility and with it, the negativity and inlaid resentment that had made their earlier interactions toxic.

Now that Alex had a better understanding of past individuals, he could discern Hunter’s natural tendency to throw out quips as his own specified way of exchanging – not affection, but goodwill. There could not be a Hunter without sarcasm, and there could not be a Hunter-and-Alex without arguing. It was the good-natured intent of their exchanges that made what they had work now, and
Alex, for the few weeks he had them, savored the moments.

Alex was not a fool; it couldn’t last forever, but that did not keep him from wishing that it would.

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“I’m sorry.”

Alex cocked his head to the side, the deep red pillow shifting under him as he considered the seemingly spontaneous statement. Seemingly. It was from Hunter though, and if there was one thing Alex had been properly educated on during their time together, it was that the blond did not do things without purpose. Even if the purpose was to distract in order to gain ground, or to retreat, or to hide. There were no wasted interactions. Hunter wouldn’t bother with the effort if there was not some end to his means.

So while the apology was, in all appearances, from out of nowhere (that Alex knew of), that was not to say it was insincere, or without reason.

Hunter had opted for the full-body pillow method of sleeping that evening. When pressed (by Eric, the one time the Quantum ranger had wandered in on their sleeping arrangements uninformed, only to laugh for the following three minutes), Hunter would explain it was to properly utilize the provided bed area, to share warmth, and for comfort. The Commander had responded to this answer with a crude snort and an exaggerated roll of his eyes, but said nothing.

Alex too, had said nothing, but that had little to do with his own wisdom. He had been trying, in utter futility, to will his blush out of existence.

Though Hunter had never bothered to lift his head from its designated position on Alex’s chest, he had a feeling the ninja knew this. And promptly did not care, probably assuming it was some relation to Alex’s ‘delicate sensibilities’ that he and the Commander took great joy in mocking.

Though Alex knew he was unlikely he’d get a straight answer, the brunette asked for clarification. “For what?”

Hunter – despite expecting this (he must have, as Alex, for all his strengths, was not a mind reader) – grumbled, wrapping around Alex’s side without shame. Alex wondered how it would feel to thread his fingers through that messy hair, pondered the texture and softness of the strands. If he would be allowed to map small circles in a tiny massage, could be trusted to cup the back of the blond’s head and hold it close, for protection, for comfort.

If Hunter could feel Alex’s hand curl into a fist at the small of his back, he made no comment on it. Even there he had the urge to splay his palm flat, to stretch his fingers towards the hem of Hunter’s shirt-

“I was out of line,” Hunter said, uncharacteristically quiet. It was not a description Alex could often associate with the younger ranger, and it caused his attention to refocus. “With the orphan-thing.”

“I’m sorry,” Alex said, sincerely, but the words were thick in his throat, difficult to get out. “I’m not sure what-”

“I said it made sense,” Hunter continued, talking over Alex. “But that wasn’t fair. And it was, honestly, a dick move.”

“I am no worse for the wear,” Alex replied. He felt distant, detached maybe, as though he were an outside observer, looking on a scene that couldn’t possibly be happening.
“It hurt you, so yeah, that’s not true,” Hunter countered stubbornly. His chin brushed against the soft material of Alex’s shirt, and the brunette focused on that. “I knew it would hurt you,” Hunter added. It was softer, the bare wisps of an addition, but despite the pressing calmness, Alex could detect guilt. “I knew it would hurt, however offhand it was, and I didn’t care. You were trying, we were trying, but I needed space so I… I did it anyway.” His arm curled around Alex’s waist, subconsciously, Alex was sure, pressing him closer against the Time Force agent’s side. “And that is worth an apology.”

“It couldn’t be said that I did not deserve it,” Alex replied after a short time. He felt Hunter tense—couldn’t do anything not to with this proximity – and continued before the younger ranger could object. “I was discourteous to you in the beginning; I behaved in a way unbecoming of a fellow ranger, and offered little apologies to atone for my actions.”

“That doesn’t excuse it.” There was something dangerous about Hunter’s tone as he said it, low and quiet, but strung taunt, daring Alex to disagree.

He did not. “Nor does it redeem my own choice. The point, ultimately, is that we were both at fault.”

There was a moment of stillness – prolonged by Alex’s own anticipation – and then Hunter snorted, his grip loosening against Alex’s side. “Then accept my apology, asshole.”

Alex’s response was immediate. “Only if you accept mine.”

He couldn’t see the blond, but his tone suggested Hunter was rolling his eyes. “Has anyone ever told you—?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Alex replied. He couldn’t keep the fondness out of his voice when he said it, even though it was true in a manner that was painful, it was also light. When shared with Hunter, the burden was more manageable. “I accept your apology.”

I do not believe it is necessary, but I accept it nonetheless.

There was a soft drumming near his hip, Hunter’s restless patter he had stopped attempting to restrain about a month-and-a-half into their mission. “Yeah. I accept yours too, jackass.”

It was said snidely, and with the clear intent that further discussion was now prohibited.

Those facts did little to restrain Alex’s smile. For Hunter, negatives were positives, making ‘jackass’ closer to ‘I care about you’ than a true insult.

Alex was still smiling when he surrendered to unconsciousness.

Eventually, there came a night when Alex could not escape his demons. It had been a pleasant novelty, the extended absence of nightmares over the course of his mission, but even with the gradual adjustment to a life without unknown anxieties and fears claiming his subconscious, Alex had known it had been a temporary pause at best.

Even with Jen’s company, there had been long nights spent tossing in a restless sleep, Alex’s mind too overwhelmed with worries – things she tried desperately not to put a name to, for fear of acknowledging their very real hold over him – to settle down as he once would. There was no easy sleep, no graceful yield into dreaming. There were only the thoughts, half-coherent plagues of emotion. Had he the ability to retain his proper functions, Alex would have quelled the fears with logic.
But when it got like that – dark and restless and lonesome – Alex found it impossible to stay in his right mind.

Tonight, he willed himself to remain still, not wanting to disrupt Hunter’s steady rest, his chest rising and falling slowly. The blond looked tranquil, a rare moment when he was completely at peace with the world. Normally, Alex would use this as a kind of grounding point, an object of levity to distract himself from the thoughts he could not control. Normally, there was something humorous about how Hunter could only manage true peace when he wasn’t conscious, but tonight it only served as a point of sorrow and discourse. Hunter should be peaceful all the time; Hunter should be safe and happy all the time.

These were not things Alex could provide him, which proved to be the central point of his own private discord, spurring the brunette to refuse his usual easy sleep.

Alex cared for Hunter a great deal; more than he was comfortable admitting. He had nightmares all his life, vague images of someone suffering wounds, trapped in the distance, beyond his reach. No matter how hard he tried, no matter what tactics he employed, he could not save that person. Over the years the individuals in his nightmares had changed. At first they had been formless, the nightmare culmination of Alex’s concerns for his insufficiency, but as time drew on, the focus changed. Soon, the face belonged to Jen. Sometimes it was Trip, or Katie, but it was mostly Jen.

After– when they had separated, the only piece of the pink ranger he had left remained in his nightmares.

When the mission started, the tormented person had still been Jen.

Alex wasn’t sure when it had changed to Hunter, only that his heart ached with a kind of weariness he hadn’t known possible at the thought of it ever coming to fruition.

It worried him for different reasons. True, he was responsible for Hunter’s health and safety, but Alex would be a fool to deny there wasn’t more to it than that. He truly cared about the younger man’s wellbeing, as a friend, as –

He cared for Hunter. Too much. Too much for their relationship and too much for how this mission would end.

This limbo they had settled into, this halfway place between their periods of existence, it couldn’t last forever. Eventually, the mission would end, Hunter would go back to his time, and Alex would go back to the future, and that would be the end of that. There would be no more cooking experimentations in the kitchen, or good-natured arguing on what qualified as ‘classic cinema’ or terrible knock-knock jokes on stake outs in dirty abandoned buildings.

Eventually there would come a time where Alex would no longer share a too-small bed with Hunter. At one point he may have cherished that day, laid in wait for it with an eagerness unbecoming of any ounce of maturity; the same could not be said for now.

The truth was, Alex didn’t want to think of the future without Hunter resting in his arms, and he had only felt that way about one other person.

That person had thrown the ring he had spent months picking out back in his face with a rueful frown and determined eyes. Even just the barest brush of thought about the subject filled him with muted despair, thinking of Hunter-

Thinking of Hunter doing the same was a foolhardy endeavor, but he wanted – Alex wanted – to
give the blond a ring. He wanted to hunt for months for the perfect-

He was a fool. Alex was as broken as Jen and the others suspected him to be.

And now, he was at a loss.

“You’re thinking too loud.”

Hunter’s eyes were half-lidded and dazed when he spoke, still fighting through a haze of dormancy with a determined look that was – Alex could say – adorable. Dirty blond hair skyrocketed in every direction, matted by the pillows and Alex’s shoulder, a mess of ‘bedhead’ and Bradley rebellion that was, in short, perfect. For Hunter.

Alex remembered the days where he had hated Hunter. At the moment, he profoundly mourned their loss.

Hunter, clearly displeased with Alex’s lack of response, brought one hand up to rub at his eyes, as though shaking off his slumber was but a matter of clear vision. “If I ask what it is this time, will you tell me?”

Alex frowned. “This time?”

That implied other times, times of which he was not aware.

“I’ll take that as a ‘no’ then.” Hunter sighed heavily, taking no pains to hide his annoyance.

Alex swallowed, throat suddenly dry at the concern, then automatically berating himself for humoring such absurdities. It was an act, this was what Hunter did, he acted.

And observed, but Alex wouldn’t berate himself over that until later, after the thunder ninja had noticed his sudden tension.

“Okaaaay then.” Hunter felt out the words carefully, peeking between his fingers as he moved to sit up, staring down at Alex. “I’m not actually mad here, and you’re kind of…”

Worrying him? Maybe? Alex couldn’t tell; he was more concerned with hiding his immediate relief. This was too small, it didn’t matter, it didn’t–

“Okay,” Hunter said again. He was beginning to sound more awake now, coherency slipping back to him in a steady trickle. “Get up.”

Torn between studying the other ranger’s jaw– a strong, defined line – and his profile in the shadows, lithe and lax, Alex almost missed the order. He flushed, feeling caught, though Hunter hadn’t bothered to so much as to look at him, and hurried to comply.

“What-?”

“Blanket,” Hunter instructed. He gestured to their small pile, a random collection of what Hunter had dubbed as ‘Goodwill’s greatest hits’ despite the fact that every one of them had come newly-packaged, the best of sales racks from the department stores favored in this time. On instinct, Alex selected Hunter’s favorite, a crimson number with a velvety-cotton texture, baring slight fluff, and all of Hunter’s appreciation. Though the blond had not said as much, he managed to wrap himself into a ranger cocoon every night with the cloth, so Alex knew better.

He had also taken pictures, but that was beside the point.
“Where are we going?”

Hunter paused from his position by the window, still fidgeting with the latches when he threw a glance in Alex’s direction.

“You need to relax,” Hunter said. “And you can’t do it here.”

“We can’t just-”

“Relax,” Hunter drawled, waving him off. “We’re not going far.”

He slipped out of the window before Alex could raise another objection, and the brunette found himself rushing across the room in order to determine exactly where Hunter had slunk off to.

The location really wasn’t far.

“Come on,” Hunter huffed, exasperation seeping into his voice as he stared down at Alex from the rooftop. “This section of the roof’s only visible from the backyard.”

“Why are we sleeping on the roof?” Despite his confusion, Alex found himself trailing after the blond obediently, climbing up the rough surface until he found the slight indent Hunter had selected for them.

The blond was right, of course. The only true line of sight on the place was from Eric’s backyard, though that did little to settle the remainder of Alex’s confusion.

Hunter took his time answering, choosing to fuss over Alex with an air of annoyance until the brunette eventually complied, laying out beside the blond as they stared up at the sky; the red blanket draped over them an appropriate amount of protection from the evening’s chill.

The answer came a few minutes later, after they had adjusted to the ambience of outside; the natural white noise of suburban living washing over them.

“Blake and I used to sneak onto the roof of the academy whenever we had trouble sleeping,” Hunter said suddenly. His voice was strong but quiet, a kind of subdued seriousness he reserved for mission planning. “When we lost our parents, it wasn’t really a matter of who couldn’t sleep. It wasn’t even really about the nightmares. It was just the thoughts, you know? The worries that kept us awake. It was stifling in our room. Kind of hard to breathe enough to just… you know, relax.”

Hunter turned, shifting until he was pressed against Alex’s side. The brunette obediently took the cue and lifted his arm, allowing the crimson ranger to duck under it and tuck it to his chest.

“Out here,” he said, voice soft. “It wasn’t easier to sleep. Not really. But it was easier to breathe. Easier to think there was going to be more to our lives at some point than just getting through the day. That was all we could do back then. Just get through the day, one step at a time.”

“Did you find it? Something more?” Alex asked. He shouldn’t have, Hunter could be evasive when asking the easiest of questions, but things like this–

Hunter chuckled, a true sound lacking any bitterness. “I’m a ranger, aren’t I?”

“Debatable,” Alex argued.

There was a laugh, followed by a light jab to his side, but nothing further. Hunter didn’t press him for details, didn’t demand more than his body warmth– and perhaps a bit more blankets, if it wasn’t
too much trouble?
He never asked after what had been plaguing Alex’s thoughts, and Alex never told him.
And, more importantly, he never asked how Hunter knew he needed to breathe.
He was too afraid of the answer.

Chapter End Notes

Check it out, emotions and stuff! Dreams do come true when you believe :)

Until next time :D
An unending stream of thanks to the real vampire for lending critical editing skills in a time of need! You’re the top, vamps, and I shall never forget it :). Also thanks to Kei Luna Shoryu for additional beta-ing skills and all around enthusiasm and support. All of which are a treasure.

If you’re looking for something else to read, try out ‘My Brother’s Keeper’ by the real vampire, or ‘The Art of Cohesion’ by Kei Luna Shoryu. They are both Ninja Storm delights :)

Warnings: SPOILERS – for Power Rangers Operation Overdrive. If you do not want anything spoiled, skip to the bottom for a brief summary.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘Hanging at the club’

‘Getting drunk on love’

‘Gee I really wish I had a washing-tub’

And if those weren’t the damn lyrics, then somebody needed to learn to enunciate better, because this was all kinds of ridiculous. Hunter was beginning to feel like an old person, crotchety and stubbornly insisting that the ‘hottest tunes’ were nothing but a bunch of incomprehensible noise. A fate he would have previously scoffed at, but the junk being blasted into his ears was very safely labeled as noise, and Alex– were he not two seconds from having a conniption fit – would have totally backed Hunter on this.

Sadly, Alex was two seconds from having a conniption fit, so Hunter was kind of stuck with doing all the thinking at the moment. Lucky him.

Time Force – for the upstanding beacon of propriety it claimed to be – seemed to have a very cruel sense of humor when it came to sending particular agents out on particular missions.

Like seriously, they couldn’t have waited maybe half-an-hour for their target to not be in a super-crowded club? Couldn’t have waited for their cyborg prey (yeah, it was a cyborg; no Hunter did not make that up) to be isolated before sending Alex in to trigger some jamming signal that would make the cyborg malfunction and– whatever; the explanation had been too boring and too high level for Hunter to bother remembering. Point was, Time Force had opted for a different route when it came to approaching their target.

Instead of sneaking up behind the guy/robot (red ranger of some team after Hunter; the blond must never share this with Cam) when he was strolling through the park or something, Alex and Hunter were stuck traversing the crowded and chaotic dancefloors of Club Unmemorable-Name, trying not to seem woefully out of place in the mass of grinding bodies.

Because of course it was that kind of club. Apparently during the time Hunter had outgrown school
dances (middle school? It felt like that was middle school) and whenever they were now, ‘dancing at
the club’ became street lingo for ‘attempted fornication with most of your clothes on; what, what’.

It was…something all right.

Hunter wasn’t a prude; if this was what the kiddoes were doing nowadays (if he was going old man
on this time period, he was going to go whole hog), then more power to them, but the other member
of his two-person time-team did not happen to share this mindset.

Which was the fanciest and most polite way of saying that Alex had frozen up at the door to the
club’s central dance area in what the blond assumed was horror, and it had been up to Hunter’s
spirited and determined ass to maneuver both of them in a way that would be forgettable, but
agreeable enough to look like they willingly wanted to be there.

It would help if Alex would do something with his expression other than shut the hell down, but hey,
who was Hunter to deny a challenge? He could get on the other man’s adaptability skills later, when
his mockery would actually be perceived (so Time Force could prepare its agents for T-Rex’s and
Sabretooth tigers and general thievery, but the mere sight of a dance club rendered them useless?),
but for now, it was Hunter and his meat sack of unresponsive feelings moving towards the far corner
of the room. The current team, Over-something, had staked their claim to a booth in the back.
Based on their very conveniently morpher-color-coordinated outfits, Hunter could see their target, the
red ranger, and what he guessed was a silver/black ranger, hanging out at the booth. A sane choice,
considering the crowds. Hunter respected it.

He also hated it, as the damn booth was essentially as far away from Hunter and Alex as it could
possibly get while still being in the same cavernous room.

“Well.” Hunter sighed, his eyes scanning the bodies packed onto the dancefloor. “This is going to
be–”

Ninja reflexes dictated imminent contact from behind, so Hunter sidestepped. A second later a
gaggle of tittering sorority sisters (he guessed, there was a lot of pink) bustled by and made their way
into the crowd. The crowd that had no discernible edges, the crowd that had no concept of being
confined merely to the dancefloor, the crowd that had exploded pretty much everywhere, leaving the
only sanctity to be the booths and tables that skirted the perimeter of the room.

“…fun,” Hunter finished with a drawl.

His sarcasm was lost to the volume of the masses, but he felt better having said it, even if the results
were ultimately useless.

“Hunter…”

The blond turned, intending to do a quick once-over of Alex’s mental state, and found that the other
ranger was much closer than he had been previously.

It took a few very long seconds of painful blinking before Hunter remembered the sidestep. The one
that had taken him into Alex’s personal bubble without thinking. The one that ended with the agent
pressed against the wall (where he had been huddled away from the ominous sea of dancers), with
Hunter pressed against him, in the heat and the noise and the flashing lights–

“Right.” Hunter pulled away. Propriety. Alex needed propriety, and Hunter wanted to give him
like, two seconds of that before it all went downhill in a monstrous way (there was no option for
getting to the cyborg ranger that allowed for personal space).
Just-- two seconds, it didn’t seem like a lot.

Ninja reflexes failed to keep Hunter from stepping into someone who very helpfully knocked him back the direction from which he came, into Alex.

Alex, who was doing his very best to keep breathing. Who only paused in this endeavor to catch Hunter, and then blink in absolute befuddlement that the blond was right there again.

Right. So…

Hunter’s cheeks were flushed because of the heat, and he rode that lie until he spun back towards the dancefloor, one hand gripping Alex’s arm like salvation. For the Time Force agent, not for him. Hunter was fine.

Fine, fine, and not-missing–

He made it about two steps before his grip was almost ripped completely away by the enthusiastic pulse of people. From habit, he was pretty sure Alex yanked him back towards him, and they met somewhere in the middle. Somewhere, in their very uncomfortable collision that left very little room for-

Well, anything.

“Umm…” Alex – might have – said. Hunter felt the rumble in his chest more than he heard it. From the corner of his eye, he could see the other ranger’s ears flush red. “We–”

“Suck it up, Collins,” Hunter murmured quietly, turning to face the brunette and moving in so he could mutter directly into Alex’s ear. “We’re going to have to dance this one out.”

Such a statement should not precede what could be considered an apocalyptic fate for either of them, and yet, here they were. This was what being a ranger had gotten Hunter, not a fancy suit and the opportunity to save the world, but ridiculous situations like this.

Blake would be laughing his ass off right now. Blake and Cam. They would probably be eating popcorn too, the betrayers.

He could feel Alex still, knowing it was so the other ranger could hear him better. Alex was a pro, they had posed as a couple, or fighting couple, or cuddled in bed or– they had done this enough that it wouldn’t affect him. He was good like that.

It was just all the people. They were, if Hunter was being perfectly honest, starting to get to him too.

“Let’s ride,” he said, smiling with a rueful grin he knew the other man couldn’t see.

Probably should have re-thought his choice of words, trying to reference western-movie night at Eric’s had seemed like a much better idea before he took a good look at the couples dancing around them.

Seriously, clothed, vertical sex. That was what dancing had become.

And he was pretending to do it with–

“Yes,” Alex exhaled, his head dipping into the crook of Hunter’s neck. “Let’s… ride.”

Very, very bad choice of wording.
Hunter shivered, and very masterfully wrote it off by shuffling backwards – minutely, pulling Alex back with him through the crowd. Stupid, that they moved better together as one unit – but it worked. It worked, and that was all he needed to think about.

Not other things. Not– things? What things? There was nothing to perceive here except the– oh, hello elbow to the side, nice to see you there.

Alex was already gathering Hunter away from the offending limb by the time Hunter registered enough snark to scowl at it. As if on instinct, he curled one arm around the crimson ranger’s waist, serving as a buffer from the hoard of gyrating (Dustin would be so proud Hunter got to use that word) masses around them. It didn’t really help with their space problem, and the other not-problems Hunter definitely wasn’t having, but of the two presented evils, Hunter was electing for the lesser one.

There were worse things than cozying up to Alex. Even if, by the brunette’s rigid posture, that was not a reciprocated mindset. It was, by the horribly stilted movements of the red ranger, quite the opposite of reciprocated.

And, if any of the euphorically uncoordinated dancers around them caught sight of it, it was also going to be a problem. They weren’t so much as blending as they were getting incredibly lucky, and as Hunter knew from one too many lectures presented by Agent Collins himself, that really wasn’t the goal here.

It was with this newfound sense of duty (and a desperate need to protect his toes) that Hunter curled into Alex again, angling himself down to whisper into the other man’s ear.

“You need to loosen up.” Or hell, consistent breathing would be a good step up at this point.

“You’re going to stick out like a sore thumb.”

Alex froze – because that was his go-to dance move– and jerked his head down, tilting towards Hunter. “Is that-?”

“Past expression.” Hunter didn’t roll his eyes – all it would give him was a view of Alex’s hair, and he was quite content to stare at the other man’s shoulder like it would share the meaning of life if he just kept at it long enough. “Point is, you need to blend.”

“I’m…” Alex trailed off in what Hunter knew was defeat. Defeat without protest, which was…bad, in this case. Very bad. It meant that he had no suggested alternatives, nothing to assist, which was the kindest way of saying he was lost at sea without a hope of finding a life raft, flare gun, or even a friendly-neighborhood dolphin to give him a ride to awkward-dancing-liberation.

It was up to Hunter. It was always up to Hunter. Why couldn’t Alex have done this on their earlier stealth-missions? Back when they could have had a respectable two-feet between them, and Hunter detested the agent from his personality down to his anally-styled hair and stupid shut-off expression, back before he knew there was someone quietly funny and loyal and nice behind those subtly debonair looks and-

Hunter was not helping himself. To be fair: noise. Noise blasting into his eardrums. He was off-balance, clearly. Because of the noise.

Not because of the negative-distance between him and–

“Just-” Hunter huffed, going for annoyed, as he stalled for time. Alex shivered for whatever reason, Hunter’s breath wasn’t that bad, and with annoyance from that inconsistency, Hunter moved
forward. “Here.”

Before he thought about it— because that was how you faked it when they pulled out the phrase ‘Fake it ‘til you make it’, you didn’t think – Hunter grabbed the brunette’s arms and placed them on his hips. Hunter’s hips.

No thinking.

It lost him his safety barrier, so he had to pull himself closer (impossible? Clearly not, somehow) to avoid flailing arms from unaware pedestrians riddled with ‘the tune’, but it – hopefully – would work.

Alex’s grip was shaking, Hunter could actually feel the minute tremble of his fingers with his amazing ninja skills, but he was faking it, so he brushed it off.

“And I’ll-” Before the other man could protest – not that he was much for talking, but who knew, maybe this would be the straw that broke the camel’s back – Hunter draped his arms around Alex’s neck, completing their pose of just-another-careless-couple-boogying-on-the-dance-floor.

Apparently faking it also required Hunter to channel Dustin. That probably said something kind of depressing about the yellow ranger, but Hunter couldn’t focus on that because suddenly he was face-to-very-much-face with Alex Collins.

Okay, so…

Maybe Hunter shouldn’t be allowed to do the planning anymore.

Alex wasn’t petrified – oh good, what a low bar to jump there, not petrified – but he wasn’t really moving either. Digesting it, would probably be a good phrase for it, trying to comprehend how Hunter, the barely-tolerable-on-a-good-day, had come into his life in such a way, but with less rhyming.

Hunter didn’t have an answer for him, so he did the next best thing.

He swayed.

Slightly, at first, as to not spook Alex. Just enough to wake the brunette up to yes, this was happening and yes, he should probably get with the picture and – lookey there, they had swaying.

Under Hunter’s guiding movements, Alex followed his leans, gradually shifting from his awkward, rigid movements into something with a little more grace.

Alex, from what Hunter assumed was shame, had his head firmly tilted down, tucked in towards Hunter, away from the crowds. “I…”

“Just follow their movements,” Hunter instructed. Firmly, because if he said it like he hadn’t maybe pictured them doing this in a place like hell very much frozen over, maybe the disbelief wouldn’t shine through. “Do what they do, and you’ll be fine.”

“I don’t want to-” Hunter could picture the petulant frown, the way Alex’s eyebrows would furrow in displeasure and– there was a lot of things Hunter was discovering at this exact moment that he really, really didn’t need to, and the sudden attractiveness of that expression was definitely one of them.

“Not like that,” Alex finished.
“Suck it up.” Hunter rolled his eyes, pretending to subconsciously tighten his hold around Alex’s neck. “Just pretend.”

Alex shook his head. “I don’t-”

“Sore thumbs are bad,” Hunter elaborated, latching onto their earlier conversation as a lifeline for distraction. “Definitely not a thing you want to be.”

“But I can’t-” Alex inhaled quickly when someone bumped into his back, pushing him into Hunter. It propelled them forward, closer to their goal, so it safely ranked as a victory. Go them.

When Alex had collected himself, he swallowed. Hunter saw it more than heard, but it would be difficult not to read Alex’s discomfort. “I can’t do that.”

“So what? You’re doing-”

_FINE_, was how Hunter had planned to finish that sentence. You’re doing _fine_.

Except he had caught Alex’s gaze, noted the direction it was aiming, and realized what the hang-up was.

Hunter was going to call it grinding. And not the kind of grinding that Shane got a kick out of (though once informed, the blond was sure the other ranger would be very supportive of the concept). _There_ was the problem, _there_ was the-

“Just-” Hunter had a hand threaded through Alex’s hair before he could register it- and could he be blamed for this? It was like, the one moment he could get away with it before Alex caught wise and his propriety deftly asskicked Hunter’s _bold_ movements entirely. “Do your best,” he finished lamely.

In this instance, ‘your best’ included continuing to do what he was currently doing without having a mental breakdown.

Hunter hadn’t – despite the conflicting feelings of hormones and its-been-too-long – actually intended that to be encouragement of any kind for Alex to proceed in a way he was not comfortable with.

Apparently, Hunter’s pep-talks were way better than he thought they were.

It was kind of difficult to process the few seconds that followed. Hunter was trying very hard to keep breathing and _not_ freak out. And if there was the added benefit of not-freaking Alex out too, then that would be swell, but it wasn’t the target because Hunter kind of needed to be a self-centered individual right now and _not_ choke and _not_ punch things and not-

“Sorry,” Alex breathed – he fumbled to a halt before he transitioned back into swaying – safe swaying, the dancing-equivalent of 1800s respectability that didn’t involve giving people heart attacks. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have- sorry.”

The guilt mixed with shame mixed with other things Hunter didn’t have the mental capacity to label were enough to pull Hunter from his shock, enough to urge him onto the pressingly important task of calming Alex _down_ before people – i.e. the rangers they were steadily drawing closer too – noticed.

Hunter steadied a palm against the side of the brunette’s face, turning Alex to face _him_ instead of the ground, his shoulder, or anywhere the press of shame-guilt-awkwardness had forced Alex to look.

“Hey,” he said, doing his very best _you-will-look-at-me_ stare down while only three inches were
between them. It was a bit hampered, but that was all on Hunter. “You’re fine, you’re great – *stop freaking out*.”

“I’m not-” Alex shook his head, but Hunter kept his hand steady. He knew an avoidance tactic when he saw one, and nope, they did not get this far under the misconception that Alex was in any way alright with this, so the very least the other ranger could do was give him the benefit of a few ounces of brainpower.

“It’s *okay,*” Hunter repeated, channeling his inner-Shane for sincerity and the power of *BELIEF.* “It’s okay to not be okay, remember? It’s okay; just do what we did before, alright? It will be fine if you just *look* like you want to be here.”

Even if he didn’t, even if the last place on Earth (or any of the other space-moons Time Force had them visit) he wanted to be was here, with Hunter Bradley, a plastered façade of pleasantness would be a great improvement from the potential pile of despair Hunter had to deal with right now.

He got it– he knew it wasn’t great for Alex, in any way. He wouldn’t mock the other man for it, wouldn’t even fault him for not wanting to be this close to him (sleeping was different, that was a necessity for warmth, for comfort, and could be played off). Still, it was a bit of a blow to his ego, no matter how much Hunter wanted to protest otherwise. He had been trying to keep his mind on the mission, trying to keep focused in a way the original-version of Alex would have been proud of, it was just *hard.*

In an emotional – and to Hunter’s growing horror – a potentially literal *sense.* If the literal was an innuendo based on friction and proximity, and if the victim probably had this coming at him in an ironically-karmic way. Careful what you wish for, and all that.

Their targets – who Hunter was beginning to hate just a little bit more with every passing second – were closer (Hunter and Alex had made it about two-thirds of the way across the floor), but were still unfortunately out of device-zappy range, which was something Hunter was beginning to dread.

Beginning to? He meant completely. Completely dreaded and despised and simultaneously could not remember any of his mystic-ninja-calming techniques because *that* would be just too damn convenient-

“It’s okay.” Hunter – on reflex – almost jerked away when Alex ducked down, but he caught himself. Or, Alex caught him with an arm around his waist, causing the blond to hate any and everything in existence. “It’s a natural physical reaction to repeated stimulus. Considering the heightened sensitivity in your body’s hormonal-”

“Please don’t give me the birds and the bees talk.” That was it, Hunter was dead. He had officially died and gone to the place that Cam had always wanted him to go. “Please, let’s not- *let’s not* do that.”

Because of this, Hunter felt, more than heard, Alex’s next statement. “It’s okay,” his chest rumbled, somehow over the throbbing base and cheering spaz-attacks that surrounded him. “I mean to say– I have heard, from a trusted source, that it is okay to *not be okay.*”

For a few seconds they slowed down – Hunter processing this, and Alex very generously allowing him that time.

It didn’t suddenly make the situation less humiliating, because it couldn’t be, but it was…

It was as nice as a painful thing could be, which was about the best he could hope for.
Hunter knew that from intimate experience.

He snorted, trying to recollect some of the snark he had before.

“I bet you say that to all the fellas that get turned on by your awkward dancing.”

Hunter said it with a smile that quickly morphed into a laugh when Alex jolted, not expecting the comment. The blond moved with him, having expected it, and through the shimmy of other people – the sweat maze he started to hate slightly less – Alex regained his smile.

He knew this because he had risked it – just one look – as the brunette edged them forward.

“I suppose,” Alex muttered, angling towards Hunter’s ear. “In that case, you are correct.”

Because-

Oh.

Yes.

Well, that shouldn’t be sexy. Which figured as to why Hunter’s possessive side found it not only appealing, but a sufficient excuse to negate any distance they had between their bodies – past ‘hormonal’ troubles be damned, and laugh.

Hunter wasn’t so good at quelling his immediate responses around Alex anymore. One day, that would get him in trouble.

Just fortunately, not today.

Or maybe it would be today, because-

Damn it – no, hormonal problems could not be damned right now; there were certain parts of Hunter that couldn’t help registering an interest at this exact moment, and lunging and friction and proximity and Alex-

Hunter shuddered, trying to back up with nowhere to go, but Alex didn’t notice it.

The freehand – the one that wasn’t still wrapped around Hunter’s waist, a warm weight against the small of his back (not that he had memorized the size and feel of it or anything) – was fiddling with something at Alex’s side. It dipped, palm running along the length of his belt, sneaking under the edge of the very-complimentary fitting jacket Eric had gotten the red ranger just to torture Hunter, and… oh right, they had a mission. Right. That was a thing here.

“Perfectly reasonable,” Alex breathed, the words coming out in warm huffs against Hunter’s neck. Oh, how the tide had turned. “We’re in range now; give it a few more minutes and we’ll be done.”

“That doesn’t really make me feel better.” Hunter fought the urge to curl into Alex, the call to hide himself from the rest of the world almost overwhelming in its appeal. “Just point and click and let’s get this show on the road.”

“It’s a little more complicated than that.” It was a kindness- they both already knew that, but Alex was clinging to their usual banter and with the heat and noise and everything else that subtle hint almost completely overloaded Hunter. “And I assure you, there is no need for embarrassment, I won’t-”

“Could we not talk about it?” It wasn’t a plea, it wasn’t firm- sure as hell couldn’t be when Hunter
cutoff with a quick exhale, Alex’s thigh rubbing against- god damnit tingles, now is not the time.

“Of course.” Alex’s voice was steady, steadier than it had any right to be and it wasn’t fair, the tables turning like this. It wasn’t fair that Hunter’s body and imagination and Time Force (he was going to include those guys too, on the fundamental basis that they were Time dicks) had betrayed him – not that he was one to argue for equality from the universe (he wasn’t delusional, or, at least not in that way), but coming out of this with a little grace would have been awesome.

As the taunting cherry on top of what was inarguably a pretty horrible sundae, Alex slowed their movements down to a gradual sway, closing whatever few inches of distance remained between them and parking his chin on Hunter’s shoulder. It was to get his shot, to get a view of their target with the ruse of focusing on Hunter, on his neck or back or whatever, but it- Hunter’s hands shook, and he could feel it, too much, too many sensations. Ninjas worked in shadows, they were trained to deal with distractions, to block out noise, but there was very little in his studies that involved zoning out this multitude of inputs.

Alex’s hand – the device one, snuck around his back, the hard shell of it digging into Hunter’s spine. He felt it move, Alex warm against its harshness, the pounding bass reverberating into his skull.

He hadn’t realized he had his eyes closed, surrendering to the bright flashing lights of their surroundings, until he felt Alex’s hand shift, activating the cyborg-programming-error-whatever device. And it- all of it, was just Alex. His nearness, his heat, his-

Reciprocation of certain stimuli and why the hell hadn’t Hunter noticed that be-

They were moving before Hunter could finish that thought – and he had to note that while there was nothing as effective as a cold shower when it came to certain body grievances, running face first into a sweaty, flailing undergrad decked out in fairy wings and neon green hair was a close runner-up.

Alex had them moving again before Hunter could get caught up in that horror, and it wasn’t until after he heard the catcalls and carefree congratulations that he realized the brunette was making his way through the crowd like a freight train, one arm stubbornly wrapped around Hunter’s waist as they trekked their way to freedom.

The cries of “Get some!” were a colloquialism Hunter had no intention of clarifying for Alex – besides, he was too busy with willing his full-body blush into something more heat-and-crowd related instead of imagining that scenario.

Alex had them outside the club – past the bouncer with a stamp pad (stamps, it had been so cute) – in record time. Probably not as incognito as it could have been, but Hunter couldn’t argue with his effectiveness. Wouldn’t have, but Alex felt like demonstrating his speed anyway, not so much as pausing on the sidewalk before he was barreling on, Hunter stumbling in tow as they rounded the corner into an alley.

“Oh, I don’t know what you heard-” Hunter felt the beginnings of a panicked ramble but had no idea how to stop it, or why it – and the very mild note of hysteria – existed in the first place. “But we don’t actually have to take suggestions from boozed-up strangers-”

Not that they couldn’t, exactly - Hunter was undeniably all for it (yes he was screwed; very, very screwed) – but Alex’s complacency would be way too questionable for him to consider-

“What?” Alex was breathless, flushed cheeks and mussed hair such a deviation from his standard appearance of collection and order that Hunter wanted to test out his club dancing again, despite the
hell he knew it would give him. “What are you talking about? The timer-”

“Space timer,” Hunter’s mouth said before Hunter could think of a reply. He really needed to work on it. “Right, we had to evacuate. That’s cool. That’s great, even.”

“Great.” Alex nodded distractedly, his eyes flicking to the entrance of the alley. Still deserted. “What did you mean-?”

“How much time do we have left?” Hunter plastered on a grin that had no recollection of the last phrase Alex spoke, because it didn’t exist, couldn’t exist; he had already promised he wasn’t going to explain it. Eric could do it, because then it would be hilarious instead of humiliating. “Before the next transport?”

“It’s-” Alex pulled away, the distance of a few feet once seemingly so miniscule now feeling like miles. In comparison to where they had been, it was a void of distance, unending in its isolation. The heat was gone, the lingering feeling of Alex against him a distant sense memory, but Hunter—that was baggage he would carry forever. Something he needed to evaluate later. Something that needed to be addressed before it got out of control, because he had seen how that had ended for Cam and Shane and Dustin—and he wasn’t going to do that.

Alex turned his wrist, angling the device towards him for a better look. “It’s-”

Hunter had been so focused on the distance and breathing and not looking at Alex that he almost missed the familiar flash of time-transport light. Hell, at this point, he would even welcome the pain (‘mild stinging’, his ass) if that meant not having to be in this time period for anymore seconds.

The light faded, his retinas not burning quite as much as they usually did, and hey– it didn’t hurt so much this time.

…or, at all.

It hadn’t hurt at all.

Hunter opened his eyes, and found himself standing in the same slightly-damp alley. The key difference this time being that he was quite notably alone.

As in, alone-alone. As in, sans-his time captor-turned-friend-turned-something-else. It was just him, a solo individual, riding the last dredges of arousal in a place and time he hadn’t bothered remembering.

So… awesome.

They hadn’t actually come up with a plan for what to do in this situation, not even after their last close call and Alex’s leap of faith (seriously, that had been some of the most impressive maneuvering Hunter had seen from a non-ninja that didn’t involve Shane and his skateboarding voodoo). The moral they had taken from that little encounter was ‘never let it happen again’, and Alex had overcompensated for like, the next fifteen transports by holding his hand five minutes before any promised action, until Hunter had snapped at him for not letting him tie his shoes.

It hadn’t been either of their most shining moments, and the trail of awkward silence followed them all the way to Eric’s kitchen until Hunter made up for it with apology tacos; Adam coaxing Alex through apology guacamole and Eric berating all of them for adding unnecessary adjectives to dinner courses.

In short, they hadn’t really learned the right lesson from that one. Whoops.
Hunter was in the middle of pondering his next course of action – to stay where Alex had left him or move, and if move was the choice, *where* – when the mad echo of feet scrambling for purchase against the pavement brought his attention to the mouth of the alley.

They rounded the corner with about as much coordination as the cacophonous noise had indicated; the blue-clad Asian guy nearly bowling over a no-nonsense chick decked out in yellow. The others followed up behind them with slightly more reservation, but Hunter recognized the faces at the back of the crowd – the red ranger cyborg and the silver/black ranger (as one of their team members’ ensemble was dedicated to *only* black, Hunter guessed he was silver. Or orange, now that he got a closer look).

It was definitely safe to say that this was the ranger team Hunter had been mentally disparaging just a few minutes before.

*Peachy.*

“Hey, are you-? Did you-? Are-?” Several endings to that sentence were considered and immediately aborted by the Asian man, and the obvious conflict would have been funny in itself if it weren’t for Miss Yellow shoving the blue ranger out of her personal space. In which case, it was hilarious.

Black ranger – an African American man with the smoothest swagger Hunter had ever witnessed – glided in front of his babbling teammate with a collectiveness slightly hindered by said teammate’s confused and minimally dejected expression.

“What my friend-” *Idiot teammate,* his tone said. “-means is, did you see anything weird come this way?”

“ Weird?” Hunter echoed.

The bewilderment couldn’t be anything less than sincere, considering he still had no reason why the team had shown up, or why, if they knew about the robot-meddling, they weren’t *beating* him up – or the general, but less-considered note of *why* they would think it would be good to approach a possible-civilian with *all of them* in an alley. That was just stupid.

The pink ranger – Hunter was going off the coordinating skirt-and-vibrant sneakers combo – looked like she was attempting to mitigate *that* problem (meaning they could have come in peace), but her teammates were too busy being concerned/confused/intense to pay attention to her insistent tugs on various shoulders/collars/ears (in the case of the emotionally-wounded blue ranger).

Before the black ranger could respond, silver-orange cut in. “We registered an intense energy signature-”

A few flailed arms later, silver-orange had his mouth safely covered and had been sufficiently *shushed* by his teammates. All of which, excluding the black ranger, who was too cool for school, and the yellow one, who’s default seemed to be perpetual annoyance, were desperately throwing Hunter the “please-pay-no-mind-to-our-crazy-friend-here; doesn’t-he-say-the-damndest-things?” look.

Seriously, they had just left a *club.* They could have played him off as drunk.

*Amateurs.*

“We thought we heard a commotion,” Black ranger lied, once his eye roll had been completed with max style, “was what my friend means.”
“It seems like your friends mean a lot of things they can’t express properly,” Hunter shot back, his default of rough banter slipping in before he could evaluate. “You the team translator?”

The black ranger took it in stride, shrugging. “Sure,” he said, and it would have been so much cooler if a few of his teammates behind him hadn’t flinched.

Seriously, *amateurs*.

“Well…” Hunter swallowed, scrambling for the right words to get out of here. They hadn’t noticed the manipulation, that was good; as far as they knew he was just a very calm civilian who was good at going with the flow. “If that’s all you needed, I’m just gonna…”

He waved vaguely towards the mouth of the alley, behind the team’s backs. The red ranger now had silver/orange trapped in a conversation of hushed whispers, probably lecturing his oblivious teammate about the importance of discretion (Hunter didn’t have to hear at this point to recognize one when he saw it). The rest of them (Yellow and Pink, at least) still wore minor hints of disbelief, but they weren’t strong enough that they would deny Hunter right out.

Cool, looked like this evening wasn’t a total bust after all.

It was still a shitstorm, of course, on multiple levels, but Hunter didn’t have to add explaining the time-mission to yet another ranger team onto the list, so hey, at least he won some bonus points with Time Force. Even if they did accidentally strand him here.

“You sure you didn’t see anything?” Yellow was not backing down from something so lightly, even as the smooth-talking black ranger started to guide Blue away, past the still-whispering red and orange/silver. “Nothing at all?”

“Are you guys high?” Hunter allowed some of the annoyance a normal human being would have at this point to seep through. “I told you, there wasn’t anything. So unless you’re planning some elaborate club-heist that depends on your energy whatever happening – in which case, props to you for depending on a random pedestrian to catch sight of that for you, and then including them in a very memorable conversation – totally don’t feel like I’m about to die or anything–”

“We get it,” Yellow snapped, her scowl managing to somehow trump Tori’s on her worst day. “Nothing happened. *Thanks.*”

“You’re welcome,” Hunter shot back in a way that suggested she wasn’t very welcome at all.

It was that kind of evening.

Great, them leaving took care of at least one problem (they still saw his face but whatever, that couldn’t be helped), now all he needed to do was…what? He was back to square one. There was no plan for this.

“Come on, guys.” Red exited his conversation with the team’s special (had to be, with the two colors) in time to do damage control, casting an apologetic look in Hunter’s direction before herding his friends back in the direction of the street. “Sorry to bother you, it’s been a crazy night.”

*Ain’t that the goddamn truth.*


Yellow ranger narrowed her eyes, catching his put-off tone with what was probably righteous
indignation, and looked away. That’s right, be the bigger person, don’t stoop down to this level where nothing out-of-the-ordinary occurred, no sir, it was as perfectly innocuous as could be-

Lights flashed, and it was only Hunter’s ninja reflexes that had his hand up in time to block the worst of the unapologetic explosion of white. There were startled cries from the ranger team, something that sounded like a triumphant “There!” from the silver/orange ranger, and when the haze dissipated…

Alex stood exactly where he had been transported from not even six minutes before, hands clutching onto his morpher modifier in a grip that in no way could be considered gentle. His hair was still a wild mess of unattended adrenaline, but his face was flushed in a different way, his eyes wide and–

And, if Hunter had to guess it, some chaotic combination of concern/terror/need/duty (there was always duty) and–

“Who are you?” Black ranger accosted just as Hunter said “Really?” – because that timing, yeah, it couldn’t have been worse.

“What do you want?” Red ranger stepped up to the plate, squaring his stance in preparation for a showdown of legends, and Yellow ranger – behind him, was exchanging a one-sided high five with Blue ranger that caught him squarely in the side of his face as she muttered, “Knew it.”

Hunter, for all the good it did him, rolled his eyes.

“Fine. Look, it’s nothing too-”

Alex had him caught around the waist before he could make it into the baby steps of an explanation, and when Hunter moved to berate, to express his annoyance (to avoid his body’s newfound pleasure of Alex’s immediate proximity again, thanks for that), the world disappeared from around them again.

When the pain faded, they were back in Eric’s backyard.

That was something Hunter noticed as a secondary feature, which was followed by noting the presence of Eric and Adam on the back porch, both of whom had donned their best expressions of reserved-worry.

These were things Hunter would notice in time.

But first, he was kind of wrapped up in the fact that Alex was still clinging to him like a limpet, past the bounds of propriety and care and moving straight onto please-still-be-there-and-hi.

In an effort to compose a proper response – something sarcastic that would allow him to pull away (even if he didn’t want to– no, especially because he didn’t want to) – Hunter took a habitual once-over of Alex’s condition. With this he noticed, belatedly, that the brunette was wearing different clothes than he had been five minutes ago.

He felt like that meant something. Something important.

Of course, that also meant it should be something that Hunter ignored.

Hunter shoved Alex off of him as soon as he had his bearings again. “Jesus, asshole.” He pretended to dust himself off, rolling his eyes for good measure. Rolling his eyes was safe. Rolling his eyes was not dirty dancing with Alex; it didn’t make him see things he didn’t need to see. “I was gone like five minutes, chill.”
He didn’t wait for a response before moving – because he knew but couldn’t address, couldn’t ask how long it had been on their end – just picked up his feet and started walking, scuffing off alley gravel from his shoes on the bottom step of Eric’s porch.

He could feel it all, Eric’s annoyance almost palpable, Adam more unreadable, and the hesitation behind him from Alex as the brunette quietly picked up the pieces of himself. The panic, the worry.

Having a permanently displaced-ranger probably scored him negative points on his Time Agent report card, couldn’t have that now, could we? Nothing wrong with it, Alex was his job, Hunter knew that, it just–

For a moment there, he wanted to believe that was something more than it had been.

Eventually, Alex made his way to the back porch just as Hunter passed Eric on the steps. He received a flick to the forehead for his time-trauma (thanks, pal) and an incomprehensible look from Adam that registered concern and maybe constipation and not much else.

They didn’t talk about it (what was there to talk about?), but later, Alex would stand next to him as the blond brushed his teeth before hitting the sack. His eyes avoided Hunter’s in the mirror, gaze lingering on the various bath products that littered the counter (that always provided a constant source of amazement for Alex), hands fidgeting against the edge of the smooth tile.

“I’m glad you’re here.”

He said it quietly, as though it pained him – probably did, with him and feelings – and that was all Hunter got before the red ranger was out of sight again, back in the bedroom before Hunter could so much as spit.

Later, Hunter pretended to be asleep when Alex snuck out of bed to go to the roof. He didn’t at all ponder cause and effect, or clothing changes, or flustered hands.

For once, the loneliness was probably better for both of them.

Chapter End Notes

Spoiler-free summary – Alex and Hunter get up close and personal and are forced to dance close to each other at a club. It is awkward for everyone involved. Once their mission is accomplished, there is a slight chance that Hunter accidentally gets stranded in the past for like, five minutes. Alex comes back for him, though maybe perhaps it has been longer than five minutes for him.

Would the Overdrive team be able to register a nearby energy signature? I didn’t really watch that season, save for the ‘Once a Ranger’ episodes, so I don’t know for sure, but for the purpose of this story yes, yes they can.

All kinds of thanks to WickedBlue for the lovely and detailed comment. I said it before, but your feedback is greatly appreciated, and I’m glad to have you onboard for the ride :D

Until next time :)
When Hunter was lost… when he had been, but hadn’t–

When he wasn’t there.

It meant something.

It wasn’t the something Alex wanted it to be. He didn’t talk about it, though he suspected the Commander and Mr. Park knew; he didn’t confront Hunter, who was kind enough to never-

They shared no words.

And for this act, Alex would remain continually grateful.

-:-:-:-:-:-

Hunter’s temporary absence wasn’t what drove them into their next outing, but Alex could admit – distantly – that it had been a contributing factor. A slight one. They had both been plagued by restlessness, something Alex would have normally been able to ignore, been able to quell under the knowledge it was a childish impulse, but the recent events had made him more prone to giving into Hunter’s requests. The thunder ninja had grown what the Commander called ’stir crazy’, failing to move through his usual training forms in the living room with any kind of concentration. His cagey attitude had infected Alex and, in a weaker moment of desperation to appease the blond (because he had been lost, he–), Alex suggested they get some fresh air beyond the boundaries of the backyard, and go for a walk.

It wasn’t a pastime they frequently employed (as they were still supposed to retain a low-profile, and Alex’s uncannily-similar appearance to Wes could draw more attention than they needed), but ever since Alex’s first ‘Valentine’s Day’, he and Hunter had, on occasion, gone for walks through Silver Hills.

They were always discreet; Alex in sunglasses and a hat, Hunter in his compromised hood, but it was…nice. Nice to be out on the street without worrying about mission objectives. Nice to escape the sanctity of the Commander’s house and wander aimlessly, without a goal. It was a novel experience for Alex, to walk without a destination, without a drive – it seemed inefficient, useless. But with Hunter… with Hunter, that was the point. The walk – the company – was the exciting part;
the destination couldn’t matter less.

It should be a frightening prospect, but the idea had come over Alex so gradually that he welcomed it with quiet acceptance, another stealthy part of Hunter that had snuck into his life.

“So what’s your take on it?” Hunter had his hands shoved into the front pocket of his sweater – a ‘hoody’, by his explanation – using the cloth to ward off the minor fall chill that was gradually descending over Silver Hills.

Alex tilted his head, prompting the other ranger with a flick of his eyes the unvoiced question the non-sequitur so obviously deserved.

Although he had clearly been expecting it, had known that would be Alex’s response, the blond did not seem deterred. An inefficient way of speaking, though the brunette had come to recognize it was Hunter’s way of easing him into a conversation.


Alex frowned. It was a broad topic, which in itself was unsettling, and with Hunter’s lack of specification–

The blond snorted a laugh, a mischievous grin gracing his features. “Chill man, I didn’t mean it. Don’t have a heart attack.” The smile grew, and Alex had to consciously direct his gaze elsewhere to avoid staring. “I meant, what’s your take on the good Commander and his unofficial boyfriend?”

“What’s there to take?” Alex asked. Stray leaves crunched under their feet as they made the turn into the park, starting along one of their more favored walking paths. “The status of the Commander’s and Mr. Park’s relationship is none of our concern.”

“Yeah, I get the privacy thing. But you’ve got to admit, there’s a lot of unresolved…” Hunter gestured with his hand, broad and vague, with no specific explanation. Regardless, it seemed to be enough to convey his meaning. At least, to him.

Struck by a strange desire to call him out on it, Alex lowered his sunglasses enough for Hunter to see his quirked eyebrows.

The blond retaliated with a roll of his eyes. “The sexual tension,” he sighed, exasperation almost humorous. “For two guys who are so obviously into each other, why haven’t they, you know…”

“Relieved the tension?” Alex offered. He kept his gaze resolutely ahead, his cheeks flushing – from the cold, not the – the thoughts of what that would require.

Thankfully, Hunter did not notice this development. “Exactly!” the crimson ranger exclaimed. “They both so clearly want it, so why not just take the leap? Save the rest of us from stewing in their pathetic game of romantic cat-and-mouse.”

“Perhaps you misunderstood the nature of their relationship.” Alex could not necessarily decry Hunter as instantly false, but he also couldn’t say he was well-versed in interpersonal relationships either, so his opinion wasn’t really qualified. “It could be more platonic. Perhaps they are comfortable acting as each other’s emotional supports.”

Which, while not entirely unappealing (it would be nice, wouldn’t it? To have someone there for you, without judgement–), did not necessarily hold the same weight as an entirely-romantic relationship. Something where you belonged to someone: mind, body, and soul.
They had been subjected to too many romantic-comedies by the ire of Commander Myers – Alex really needed to stop basing his theories off of media created solely for the purposes of entertainment–

Hunter snorted again, somehow with even less dignity. “With the way those two look at each other? No way man, they want it.” From the corner of his eye, Alex could see Hunter’s smile settle into something more contemplative. “The question is, why won’t they just go for it?”

The blond’s eyebrows were furrowed, not in anger, but extreme focus. An expression reserved for their more trying objectives, a solution dancing at the tip of his tongue, just beyond reach. It was a frustration born from knowledge, knowledge that the answer was there, just out of bounds, and it – while disheartening, considering what instigated it, was almost endearing. Almost.

It was then Alex realized that this was something that actually bothered the blond.

The brunette swallowed. “They could be taking things slowly.”

“Any slower and they’d be going backwards, chum.”

“Or…” He didn’t know why, when the thought hit him, that it seemed so difficult to share, but for a moment, Alex hesitated. He paused, considering Hunter’s reaction, all the while being incredibly aware of the blue gaze locked on him, with no need to feel like it had to be subdued, its interest to be hidden.

“They could be scared,” Alex said. “Scared that it is not reciprocated.”

“That’s stupid,” Hunter declared immediately. “How could they not know? How could they ever-?”

“It’s a terrifying thing, being rejected,” Alex admitted, so softly that he wasn’t even sure Hunter had heard it. Hadn’t expected him to care if he had.

Somehow, it was enough.

“Yeah, I…” Hunter floundered. It was a novel experience; one Alex would have taken the time to appreciate, had he not known so well what had brought Hunter to this point.

Alex had only, in a technical sense, been rejected one time. Before that Jen had always welcomed him. Had, in a way, nurtured their relationship from the very beginning. She had been the one brave enough to instigate it. She had been the one who was patient through Alex’s follies. The biggest risk he had ever taken was asking her to marry him, and that had been bolstered by two solid years of “I love you’s” he didn’t doubt, not including the years of friendship and teamwork that had preceded it.

Asking Jen, at that point, had never felt like a risk, because it had never occurred to Alex that she might say no. After all the work she had put into… them, after everything she had been so willing to do, how could she say no?

“So they’re dumb.”

Hunter’s statement brought Alex out of his thoughts. Though the blond wasn’t looking at him, the way he kicked at some leaves that had fallen down onto the path felt like a peace offering. A reprieve.

“Fine.” Hunter shrugged, like this was an inevitability. “As the reasonable people in that house, I
“Guess we’ll just have to put up with it.”

“Right,” Alex agreed.

“Never thought you would consider me reasonable,” Hunter said. He was smiling.

It was enough to make Alex smile too. “It was my folly,” Alex said quietly. “Your logic can be unique, but it is always well-founded. I apologize for not seeing that sooner.”

The breeze was nice today, comfortable. It would be winter soon, and Alex reveled in the idea of it. Even through the cold, the idea of snow seemed like an appealing one.

It took him a few steps to realize that Hunter had stopped walking, and when Alex turned to see the reason for this, the blond’s expression was, for lack of better explanation, dumbfounded.

Hunter blinked, as though working through a haze of shock.

Alex tried not to fidget under his scrutiny.

“Dude,” the thunder ninja said eventually. “Did you just… You know I was joking, right? That had been a joke?”

Alex nodded, agreeing to this point, but kept his gaze steady. “Still, the point was valid. I did not treat you kindly.”

“I wasn’t complaining about that,” Hunter protested, his eyes still wide. Not angry, not offended, just wide.

“I know.” Alex crossed the few steps of distance to the blond’s side. “But that does not mean it wasn’t due.”

He had never really mentioned that before, Alex realized. While he had become more accepting, tried to be more welcoming, more malleable to the social conditions, he had never truly apologized for his initial treatment of Hunter. He had spent hours worrying about the subject, carefully considering his approaches, his tactics, how it needed to be done in a way that Hunter most deserved. With the reverence it should have so Hunter would know just how much Alex thought it mattered.

He had acted without honor, without… without empathy, or care. He shouldn’t have.

Strange, now, how a quiet stroll through the park seemed like the most appropriate way to deliver that message.

“I…” Hunter floundered. Visibly, floundered. Alex hadn’t seen him this out-of-sorts since- “You’re ridiculous, you know?” He gathered himself, piece by piece, but the smile he put on was real, not a show, and that was what mattered. “I was just trying to make a joke, not have a heart-to-heart.”

“I know.” They resumed walking, but it seemed easier now, lighter.

“Course you do,” Hunter grumbled. “Smartass. But, I uh… I mean, you’re not the only one that needs to hand out apologies.”

“Your reactions were perfectly understandable.” Alex didn’t want to hear whatever Hunter had to offer, because the blond’s responses had seemed reasonable, in retrospect. He had been coping with a lot, some outlash should be necessary. “You don’t need-”
“Yeah, I do.” Hunter’s voice was forceful, quiet but deadly in its intent. “And that’s not the only thing I need to apologize for.”

That was what caused Alex to stop. To pause.

Hunter, in a rare show of bashfulness, kept his gaze off to the side, towards the mostly-abandoned playground off in the distance. “I uh…at the club, I mean…”

Were there ever a time for a monster attack, this would be it.

It wouldn’t happen, of course, not when Alex needed it, not when he desired it with a desperation unbeknownst to him until that precise second. Life could never be that convenient, and as that same fact had molded Alex into the agent that he was, he would have to be an adult in this conversation he greatly did not want to be a part of.

“Don’t concern yourself with it,” Alex said, training his gaze to Hunter’s playground – using it to provide the same shelter of distraction. “As I explained before, it is a natural body response. It would be unreasonable for me to hold you accountable for something that was clearly unintentional.”

Especially considering that Alex had fallen prey to similar stimuli himself – and he had much less of an excuse for doing so. He was older; he should have been more in control, but with Hunter there, so close-

“And now you’re weird,” Hunter complained. “Look, we can never talk about it again past this point, but if you could just accept my apology for not being able to keep it together, I’d appreciate it.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for.” Alex stressed this even under the edge of Hunter’s annoyance, he knew it was a warning, that this wouldn’t be a point from which Hunter would back down, but he couldn’t, in good conscience, leave the blond thinking that some kind of fault had occurred.

It had been a twist in the path – neither of their faults – and even if it meant not reaching an immediate pact of silence by refusing to accept Hunter’s apology, Alex was willing to do it still. Because it was right.

Beside him, Hunter let off an unintelligible garble of frustration. “You are the most frustrating human being sometimes, you know? Can you stop being so sickeningly noble for ten seconds and let me assuage my wounded pride?”

“Since the long-term effect of this apology would be more detrimental than-”

“Detrimental? It was my fault.” In less than a second, Hunter had cut in front of him, effectively forcing Alex into a stumbled halt to avoid running into the blond. Somehow, he managed – the desperation to maintain his distance unquantifiable but insistent – and his response only served to fuel Hunter’s rage.

“See? This is the shit I’m talking about; you’re all weird!” Hunter shook his head, exasperated, his face twisted with displeasure. “You’re talking about long-term effects, but you’re the one making this stupid. We’re adults, let’s act like them.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Alex insisted. If Hunter called for maturity, then he would get it. This was not a point on which Alex would budge.

“So I can’t apologize?” Hunter challenged. He swayed forward, almost like he was tempting to take a step closer. Alex fought back a flinch, then a sigh of relief when the blond chose not to.
He took the reprieve as a moment to collect himself, then spoke. “There would be no logic for it. What do you gain by carrying the blame for a blameless.”

“I was humping your leg,” Hunter hissed, and Alex’s face wasn’t the only one flushing at that statement – though Hunter’s was surely more from embarrassment than whatever unethical considerations Alex was–

“And like *adults*,” Alex emphasized the word, swallowing his discomfort to focus on Hunter’s instead. “We do not need to assign guilt. The world is not black and white; sometimes things just… happen.”

It would be insufficient, he knew. It could never be enough once Hunter had made up his mind, but it would have to do. Alex wished he could tell the blond he hadn’t minded, wouldn’t mind if it happened again – but there were boundaries that had to be respected. The damage such admissions would cause would far outweigh the intended good, and Alex had grown weary of collateral damage a long time ago.

“Oh?”

Alex was once more grateful for the sunglasses that shielded his eyes, because the uneasiness, the sudden fear could remain hidden in response to Hunter’s newest challenge. The word had been light, deceptively careful, but it was in those moments that Alex knew Hunter was the most dangerous.

The blond cocked his head to the side, eyes wide, almost innocent. A redirection of tactics.

“So you wouldn’t mind now if I just…”

When he stepped forward, Alex forced himself to hold his ground. The move was slow, languid, carefully projected so the brunette would be perfectly aware of Hunter’s destination and have ample time to relocate himself if needed.

Though it would probably be considered less ethical to hold his ground, Alex had a few points to prove too. If Hunter wanted to change tactics now, Alex would simply have to remain firm.

Hunter paused when there were about six inches between them, toe-to-toe with Alex. He leaned forward carefully, no sense of urgency, and with exaggerated care wrapped his arms around Alex’s waist in a gradual hug. He finished the move by tugging himself forward and canceling the distance between them.

And then, he waited.

Waiting, of course, for Alex’s expected response of displeasure.

Alex, who had taken on Ransik by himself without flinching, who had carefully negotiated hostage situations and had risen through the ranks of Time Force with unparalleled precision and speed because of his dedication and worth ethic. Alex, who did not scare easily.

And he would not scare easily *now*.

He had done many wrongs to people he had claimed to care about greatly. He would like, for one instance, to end that trend.

He returned the hug.
There wasn’t anything risqué about it—just a hold.

On first impression, it wasn’t much different than what they had encountered a few nights ago—but with prolonged exposure, Alex quickly learned and appreciated the distinct differences between now and then.

_Then_ had been plagued by noise and people and heat, awkward dancing that Alex hated even more for its incoherency than the required nearness of his dance partner. _Then_ they had been on a mission and Hunter hadn’t had a choice. _Then_, they had been moving, and _now_—

Now it was quiet, and in the open air of outside, a gentle breeze carrying only the noise of distant bystanders, animals, and crinkled leaves—_now_ was better. It helped that they weren’t moving. It helped that Hunter had initiated it.

Alex… the last time he had been hugged had been by an overenthusiastic Trip who had been riding on two hours of sleep after two days of straight lab work. Some kind of breakthrough had been made, and the green ranger’s euphoria couldn’t bear mind to Alex’s firmly established boundaries. It had been an awkward interaction, with twisting and words delivered a mile a minute that weren’t entirely English (Alex was fairly certain some of them had been equations) and then the Xybrian was off in search of Lucas and Katie, waving his datapad of findings with a complete lack of coordination. It was a wonder the teen hadn’t run headfirst into the wall, with how little attention he had spared.

Before that, it had been from Jen—Alex shut that thought down in an immediate effort of self-preservation.

Instinctively, Alex returned the hold. He didn’t lean into it, didn’t press it more than Hunter assumed his sensibilities would allow, but he was there.

_Now_, unlike _then_, was comfortable. It wasn’t… plagued with carnal urges inspired by hormones long put to rest; it was nice. Friendly. Almost like an exchange between family.

They stood like that for a few minutes. It took less than that for Hunter to ease into the hold, to release the tension he carried from anger and simply be. Alex didn’t think about it, didn’t think about how he should end it, didn’t think about how it felt, he didn’t memorize anything because this, as rare as it was, wasn’t something for him to cherish. It wasn’t _about_ him, it was for Hunter.

The blond pulled away before he did, shifting out of the hold with a cough—pretend even to Alex’s ears—and actively avoided Alex’s gaze.

“Alright, so… fine, you’re not weird about this.”

“Because it isn’t.”

“Let’s just agree to disagree,” Hunter said with a sigh, regaining some of his usual countenance with a few swaggering steps. “We’re adults, right?”

“Right.” Alex swallowed, but moved to keep in step with Hunter, ignoring the creeping cold that stole in to replace the warmth left by the other ranger.

“An adult who’s a dick about things,” Hunter grumbled, kicking his feet.

“_Hunter._” It was more of an effort to restore normality than a chastisement, Alex suspected, but his throat constricted nonetheless at the prospect of a continued argument.
“Nah, it’s fine.” Hunter confirmed. “Agreeing to disagree. Whatever. Let’s move on to other things like- ah hell, is that your doppelganger?”

If it was a mindless distraction, then it was one made in poor taste. Alex flinched regardless, following the direction of Hunter’s finger in the fleeting hope that in his desperation to change the topic, the blond had opted for a terrible and very unlikely-

Alex stilled, as if eliminating all excess movement would somehow better help him to perceive his surroundings, would allow him to properly confirm Hunter’s lunacy, but like most things in his life, the plan fell through. There, halfway across the park, on the far end of the walking trail, was Wes, his shoulders hunched up against the wind. In itself it was unpleasant, but understandable. This was Wes’ time, he lived here; it was only a matter of time that Alex would encounter him at some point, based on his frequent interactions with Commander Myers. Alex hadn’t been looking forward to the meeting, but he had easily suffered through worse things. In the grand scheme of all his trials, interacting with Wes would not have been unbearable.

“Did he have the girlfriend before we set a T-Rex on him? Because that’s probably kind of rude. I mean, ruder-”

The rest of Hunter’s words melted into an incomprehensible haze that Alex didn’t bother deciphering, not when his brain was struggling to accept that input, striving to conceive the pieces placed before him into a coherent concept.

It was Jen. Alex knew that profile better than he knew his own, knew that fond smile even at this distance, knew it, and understood he would never again be the recipient. But that– that theory, that truth seemed almost worse in action, when she was aiming it at Wes in a time period that wasn’t, it wasn’t–

“Woah. Hey, earth to Alex. Are you okay?”

The view of Jen and Wes was obscured by Hunter, his expression of concern and other indiscernible things almost palpable with its nearness. Alex blinked, trying to turn his gaze away, trying to understand–

“I need you to breathe, okay bud?” Hunter was saying. “I need you to– oh, fuck this.”

There was a grip on his arm that pulled him away from it – Wes and Jen too caught up in their own world, and Alex too caught up in theirs – to notice two figures in the distance moving away.

When the shock faded, Alex recognized the feeling of the brick restroom walls behind him, and Hunter was there, right there, coaxing him quietly.

“That’s it,” Hunter was saying. “In and out. Easiest thing in the world. In and out. Work through it… whatever it is, just-”

“Okay.” It was breathless (weak, pathetic), but enough for Hunter. Something like relief immediately flooded into the other ranger’s eyes. Alex would feel guilty for this if he hadn’t been riding the after waves of shock.

“Okay?” Hunter repeated, not entirely believing it. “Okay is good. Okay is great. If we can get past ‘okay’, maybe you can explain why the hell seeing your great-grandpa walking around the park threw you into a panic attack.”

“It wasn’t him,” Alex said. “It was–” He stumbled over his explanation, avoiding the look of displeasure that would be sure to grace Hunter’s features. “It was him, but I didn’t–”
Alex had never had a panic attack before. Not even when Captain Logan had explained that his team – that Jen – was under the belief that he was dead. That he had, in an alternate timeline, died.

It hadn’t been real for him, Alex knew. There was no point in expounding over something that hadn’t actually happened – or wouldn’t happen, so it had seemed illogical to worry about it. The counsellors had commended him for his mindset, had given him positive evaluations for ‘working through’ this unique and trying circumstance in such a healthy way.

“It was Jen.” Alex gasped out the words before Hunter could demand more, before the Thunder ninja could tear apart the fragile foundation of his composure. “He was with Jen.”

“Who’s–?” Hunter’s head was cocked to the side, confusion blatant before recognition dawned on him with wide eyes. “Wait, Jen? Like, your ex-girlfriend Jen?”

Alex nodded, but Hunter was still going, already sure in the conclusion he had drawn. “Like, your girlfriend in the future–?”

“Yes.” Alex closed his eyes, willing to make the admittance feel like less of a defeat than it was. He had no right to feel like this, it had been over for more than a year, he had known of Jen’s fondness for-

“But why is she here?” Hunter pressed. “I thought you couldn’t just waltz back in time unless you had a mission. Is something going on? Wouldn’t Time Force tell you–?”

“They would,” Alex confirmed. “But they didn’t.”

He swallowed, letting the statement hang, letting it settle with Hunter, before adding. “Or, they haven’t.”

Hunter looked at him, his gaze careful, considering, and uncharacteristically soft. “So, it’s classified?”

It was an out. It was a generous offering of an out, but–

With Hunter’s absence and Jen’s appearance and the prolonged bouts of loneliness, it wasn’t an out Alex felt inclined to take.

“Or it’s not a mission,” Alex countered, whispering the words around the catch in his throat.

“Like a leisure call?” Hunter didn’t say it with ill-intention, but Alex flinched anyway. “I thought you weren’t supposed to be able to do that.”

“We’re not.”

“Then why?” Hunter paused, and Alex could see the pieces slowly fit together, could see it the moment Hunter looked towards the far corner of the building, where halfway across a park, Wes and Jen were walking.

“Did she dump you for your ancestor?”

“It was mutual,” Alex replied automatically. “We both agreed–”

“Yeah, your body language screams of mutuality,” Hunter scoffed. “Did she actually break it off with you to go after your look-alike?”

“It was,” Alex insisted on the first point. “She didn’t, and while we might look alike–”
“That’s a bitch-move.” Hunter was on a tirade now. “I don’t even know her and I can say that’s a bitch-move.”

“She isn’t a bitch,” Alex said the last word in a whisper, the term unfamiliar in his mouth. He had heard it, but never opted to use it, had never felt the need. There were better ways to communicate, and it was easier to focus on those than it was to deal with this conversation, to deal with Hunter rallying for his support, apparently, instead of mocking Alex like he may have at one time. Hunter’s eyes were fiery when they turned to Alex. “I judge by actions pal, not words. If she acts like a dick, she’s a-”

“It was mutual,” Alex insisted, repeating his only saving grace. “We changed; it didn’t work anymore, and while Commander Collins and I may look alike, I can assure you that is where the similarities end.”

His chest was heaving by the time he finished his explanation, his eyes – much to his horror – were heated and wet, threatening a kind of emoting he did not partake in, did not have time for.

“She made her choice,” Alex whispered, feeling as though every ounce of his energy had bent spent. “She made it, and I respected it, but none of that adds up as to how she could be here.”

Hunter allowed him a moment to collect himself, though even with his eyes fixed to the ground he could feel the blond’s gaze on him. It would be considering, probably, and the idea of that from Hunter wasn’t something Alex could handle at that exact moment. It was already too much.

“It sounds like she just broke the rules,” Hunter eventually offered. His tone didn’t sound accusing, but Hunter was the master of hiding emotions in inconspicuous bindings, so Alex wasn’t keen to rely on his perception for that one.

Still, the thought broke something in him.

“Yes.” Alex shuddered, closing his eyes. “Yes, it would seem she has.”

It had been selfish – Alex knew. Selfish to think that while he had suffered after the separation, that in a small way Jen would suffer too. Her burden was different from his – her love still alive, but trapped by boundaries, but it would still be there. They wouldn’t both be entirely happy.

It wasn’t a mature thing, but it had been the only consolation he had found and, in his loneliness, Alex had taken advantage of the idea as much as he could.

He guessed that hadn’t entirely been the case then.

Hunter guided them home with one hand wrapped around Alex’s bicep, and without the bother of exchanging apologies or pleasantries or any kind of offering other than the refuge of silence. Alex took from it what he could, and tried to prepare himself for the future. One small step at a time.

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“I could see how it could screw you up, you know.”

Alex paused, one finger marking his place in the book he had been unsuccessfully trying to read for the past ten minutes, and slowly released a breath. He should have known not to assume Hunter would let this go. It wasn’t the blond’s way. He had hoped though, regardless, but that was his own shortcoming.
“I mean, it has to be weird, right?” Hunter continued, his attention consciously focused on folding the small pile of t-shirts in front of him. “Seeing someone you used to sleep with on a regular basis hooking up with your look-alike?”

For a moment, the small guest room didn’t feel big enough. Alex felt the urge to leave, to wander, crawling beneath his skin, but as he had many times before that, he ignored it.

“Yes.” Alex voice was craggily from disuse when he replied, the silence from dinner and cleanup afterwards reluctantly shattered. “It is.”

“Don’t be like that.” Hunter abandoned his kindness of not looking at Alex to frown at the brunette. “I mean, I– shit, be however the hell you want to be, okay? Just- I’m here for you, alright? Whatever you need, I’m here for you.”

It was a drastic change from the version of Hunter Alex had met initially, and that, in itself, wasn’t staggering. The thoughts that triggered - the want for Hunter to just stay there, to not leave, to just– be himself with Alex, like this, continuing on into comfortable infinity, as though this could be theirs - was.

Hunter’s eyes were earnest and no-nonsense, rendering Alex incapable of playing it off, of trivializing the blond’s offer with a distraction. He owed the other ranger something, payment in kind – not an obligation of duty, but of friendship.

Despite everything else, they were friends.

Instead of voicing his gratitude (it was too terrifying), Alex found himself taking the conversation in a different direction.

He spoke before he could think about it; eager to fill the silence in front of Hunter’s judging eyes. “We didn’t sleep together.”

Hunter blinked, slowly processing Alex’s statement. The brunette himself was trying to will away the flush that followed, embarrassed at his offering – both the truth of it and the statement – and struggled not to fidget under the weight of Hunter’s consideration.

“Umm…” Hunter blinked at the non sequitur. “You didn’t…”

Alex fumbled for words. “We were never… physical in that sense. We did–” A lot – some – but Hunter didn’t need to know the details. “– but we never…”

Alex trailed off with a swallow, turning his eyes to the sight to escape the sight of Hunter sputtering, at a loss for words.

“We didn’t…”

It wasn’t that he hadn’t wanted to have sex with Jen – Alex had, as much as could be expected as two mature adults in an active relationship – it just hadn’t… it had never felt like the right time. Jen had never rushed it, had respected that Alex had boundaries he needed to slowly overcome before they could reach that particular milestone in their relationship, and Alex had never loved her more for it.

He had decided to wait until the engagement – to properly celebrate them in a way that was special, when… when he knew there wasn’t any backing out. When he knew that Jen was his, and he was Jen’s, and there was no fear in surrendering his last line of defense.
It was an event that had never been destined to be.

“There’s no shame in that.”

Alex head jerked up in surprise, but Hunter wasn’t looking at him. He was sorting through the laundry with a half-focused gaze, mind too preoccupied to properly match the socks in his hands.

“Not that you need me to tell you,” the blond babbled. “Cuz you don’t, I get that. But in case you were looking for extra, unnecessary backup confirmation then – yeah, there’s totally nothing wrong with the slow-and-steady route. Screw anyone that tries to tell you differently.”

“I’d rather not,” Alex offered, feeling a small but genuine smile take his place.

Hunter paused, obviously startled by his input, and blinked at him owlishly. “No,” he said, a tiny smile taking over his features. “I suppose you wouldn’t.”

It was a half-hearted joke at best, barely worth consideration.

It pulled Alex into laughter anyway, Hunter falling behind him in a similar suit until the Commander stormed up the stairs and demanded ‘what the hell was so damn funny?’

Somehow, Alex managed to reply, “Carnal relations,” but it was all worth it when Hunter burst into a new round of guffaws.

He missed the Commander’s grumbling exit, too wrapped up in Hunter’s joy. It was a dangerous thing, but in that moment, it was home.

It was an experience Alex tucked away for later, claiming it as a meager possession for future storms.

Chapter End Notes

Emotions! Because they happen sometimes :)

Until next time :D
A Weight on Your Shoulders

Chapter Notes

Hearts, stars, and horseshoes to the endlessly talented and ever-generous the real vampire for lending her beta-ing might for this chapter! Additionally, thanks to Kei Luna Shoryu for her added beta-ing efforts, and for her continued enthusiasm for this project :D

If you guys are looking for something else to read and for some reason haven’t followed my recommendations yet, check out 'My Brother's Keeper' by the real vampire or 'The Art of Cohesion' by Kei Luna Shoryu. Alternatively, if you have read those stories (good on you!) you should check out some of their other works, because they are all delightful.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This whole thing with Alex – the fact that there was even a thing to be had gave Hunter the hives – was kind of progressing at a rate Hunter was not comfortable with. He could admit that. As a mature human being, he could own up to that.

Now the rest of it, he wasn’t going to bother contemplating because it was a mess, and it was, more importantly, a temporary mess. If there was anything Hunter was good at, it was secluding unnecessary burdens to the unaddressed areas of his brain and moving on with his happy life, so that was what he did. For his moderately happy life. His life. Whatever.

Alex was, in the words of Dustin, his ‘bro’. His friend. There was nothing wrong with that. There was nothing wrong with finding your friends attractive. Hunter wasn’t blind, and human beings were aesthetically-oriented little shits; it was only natural for him to perceive other people and for perhaps those other people to invoke certain things because he had eyes and damned if he didn’t know how to use them.

But that wasn’t really an issue either. Hunter had plenty of hot friends. Okay, he had seven. He wasn’t going to include Blake in that list on the grounds that it was kind of creepy, and the little shit would never let Hunter hear the end of it if he figured it out.

But still, friends with looks, Hunter had those. Alex was just another one of those.

So the overwhelming feelings of anger and defensiveness in response to Alex’s devastation about his ex-girlfriend showing up out of the blue (literally, literally out of the blue) – that was kind of concerning.

At the time it wasn’t, because at the time Hunter had just been pissed – he didn’t like things that could do that to Alex. Mostly because he didn’t know anything could and he was mad that it existed, and partly because Alex was his friend, and a little like him, and neither Hunter nor Alex warranted the crap that got paraded on them by people who had, at one time, pretended to give a shit about them.

There was a chance Hunter was projecting – and he really didn’t need to relive any of his Cam-anger flashbacks – but damn, damn, was that a dick move. She sucked. Even if she hadn’t known Alex
was there, she sucked, because there were rules and she had sworn to follow them, and even worse, she made Hunter care about the broken rules for an organization he shouldn’t even know existed, and that was some messed up crap.

At the end of the day, Alex was his friend. Sure, they now had a hilarious story about the one time at a club Hunter had taken the idea of dirty-dancing too seriously, but that aside, they were friends. Hunter cared about Alex. Alex cared about Hunter (or justice, since he wouldn’t accept Hunter’s apology, but with the amount of patience he demonstrated for the unending games of Uno whenever Hunter had a nightmare, the ninja was leaning more towards the former). That was all there was to it.

So Hunter felt good about that. And he didn’t feel bad about being angry at a person he hadn’t met, and he didn’t feel weird about Alex’s refusal to accept his apology, and he didn’t feel like having a personal reevaluation, so he didn’t.

Just as simple as that.

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Hunter mashed the buttons on his x-box controller like a man obsessed, consciously blocking out the snickers of the oversized jackwagon sitting beside him. Normally, he would not reserve such disrespectful language for friends, but Eric’s derision necessitated it at this point.

“Holy hell Alex, we cannot let them win another round; I have a reputation to uphold.”

“I don’t believe this game is historically accurate,” Alex noted unhelpfully in the same bewildered tone he had adapted when Eric had (evilly) brought the suggestion of a team death match tournament into the hallowed halls of his living room.

“Could you please just shoot them anyway?”

It wasn’t that Alex was bad; it was more like whatever the gaming equivalent was in the future, it was so stupidly advanced in comparison to what they did now that he couldn’t comprehend their caveman technology.

“Sorry,” Alex apologized for the fiftieth time that evening, and Eric, in his generosity, only cheered half as loud in victory when he landed another successful headshot.

“You’re a gentleman, Myers,” Hunter groused, glaring at the screen.

“And you’re dead,” Eric drawled.

On his other side, Adam watched the exchange with disgustingly blatant adoration. It was terrible. Because of its blatancy, of course.

“Sorry,” Alex repeated from his end of the couch. It was all the warning Hunter got before his screen was filled with a series of explosions.

Well, at least he’d figured out how the mortars worked.

“It’s fine,” Hunter assured, elbowing Eric mid-cackle. It wasn’t nice to make fun of the new-to-video-games guy. “You’ll get better.”

He didn’t. But when the brunette conceded to gaming lessons in their downtime, Hunter decided it was better that way.
“You know who likes orange soda?”

Hunter had been expecting the blank expression from Alex, which may or may not have been half the reason for his prompting in the first place. The other half was from boredom, and that was the half he fixated on for the time being.

“What’s orange soda?”

“The correct response here is supposed to be ‘Who?’” Hunter informed the brunette good-naturedly. Look at him being a chum. The best chum, a great chum.

Better to enjoy the moment than dwell on that.

Conceding that comprehension was not on the list of things immediately in his future, Alex nodded his head in a silent apology and took the bait. “Who?”

“Kel,” Hunter deadpanned. “Kel loves orange soda.”

“Who’s Kel?” Alex asked. His brows furrowed a second later, like he thought, much like his initial response, that it was a question he should not ask.

He didn’t want to spoil the game.

Tori would find that sweet. Hunter didn’t, but Tori and Shane would probably be gushing all over this shit. Shane especially. He was a sucker for team bonding.

“You, my friend, have been deprived,” Hunter informed the Time Force agent solemnly. “I’ll see if we can fix that the next time we get back to Eric’s.”

“Is Kel important?” Alex asked. Hunter’s response had eased the anxiety caused by so many social unknowns. It created a warmth in the pit of Hunter’s stomach – something that felt a lot like ease and comfort.

Shane was rubbing off on him.

“I guess it would depend on your values.”

For two ten year old boys riding high on life, falling into TV shows for bonding when they had so many other things, it hadn’t seemed that important. Sitting with their parents and watching some dumb kids’ TV show… that was just one of the many gifts they had been given, that they hadn’t known was on a limited time schedule.

Hunter had never expected that he would have gotten to the point where he didn’t treasure every damn moment that he’d had with the most generous, brave, and just people he had ever known, and had ever had the honor of calling family, but he had. He had fallen into the belief that his parents had fought so hard to instill; that it wasn’t temporary, that it wouldn’t be taken away if he was bad, if he needed things.

It wasn’t their fault it ended, but sometimes Hunter wished they could have spared more than a ten second ghost pep-talk to confirm that, as unreasonable at that seemed.

“Let’s fix it then.”

You can’t fix-
Alex gaze was steady, unyielding but kind, an exposition of control and expression that begged for further inspection.

“If you value it,” Alex added.

It was stupid. Hunter was bored, and this was stupid.

“Okay,” Hunter said.

Watching Alex gag on orange soda was the second greatest highlight of the evening, only topped by his extreme befuddlement at the antics of one Kenan and Kel.

“Why do they not seek employment the honest way?” he had bemoaned. “It would be much more effective.”

“Yeah, that’s the show all kids want to see, ‘Gainful employment 101’. Get them started on the trials of the job search early. The season finale could cover the wonders of filing their tax returns.”

Alex was unamused at this. “It would be a better standard to show the nation’s youth.”

“Your lack of understanding towards sarcasm is but one of the many things I love about you.” Hunter had prodded the words out against the lip of his orange soda can, his mouth twisted in a smirk that was both salty and sweet from the kettle corn that Eric had whipped up. “Welcome to the uncivilized twenty first century.”

“You should not revel in this,” Alex murmured. His soda can had been abandoned on the coffee table, quarantined out of his sight, but he managed to look put out and just the tiniest bit petulant anyway with empty hands.

“Tough snot, my friend,” Hunter goaded, tossing a few kernels of popcorn his way. “I’m an uncultured heathen.”

“You’re goddamn something alright,” Eric muttered from the recliner.

He was just bitter because Adam was still out. Boo-freakin’-hoo.

Hunter tossed popcorn at him too.

Eric glared at him, the kernels bouncing off his chest and into his lap. “Any mess you make, you’re cleaning up, brat.”

Hunter cocked an eyebrow at him. That sounded like a challenge. “Any mess?”

“Hunter…” Alex knew the warning signs when he saw them, but Eric was choosing to ignore them.

“Seemed pretty straight forward,” Eric drawled.

“Which would imply, by your standard, that I am free to make a mess, so long as I clean up afterwards.” Hunter finished up this declaration with a waggle of his eyebrows, and waited approximately two seconds for the implications to settle over Eric, and the resounded dread to creep onto his face.

Eric narrowed his eyes. “Kid…”
The rest of the statement was drowned out in a few choice expletives as his face met a fistful of popcorn, Alex too slow to intercede, and then the game was on.

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“All of you will be cleaning this up,” Adam declared, staring down the three full-grown rangers in the wreckage of a soda-and-popcorn covered living room.

“It’s my house.” Eric made this protest as though he actually expected Adam to listen, which Hunter could give props to. He appreciated hope in his friends, even if it was horribly misplaced. Whatever got them through the night.

“I tried to stop it,” Alex offered tentatively.

Being the most stain-spattered of the three of them, Hunter could see how some would find that difficult to believe. The soda-slicked hair and popcorn grease blotches were a testament of his attempted interference though, and even if it had cost Hunter a handful of popcorn down the back of his shirt when the brunette tried to pull him back, he could, in hindsight, commend Alex for it.

Adam, in all his wisdom, recognized this. “You may shower,” he allowed. “You two, clean.”

Eric frowned. “It’s my-”

“Clean.” And with that, Adam turned on his heel in a retreat that was so militaristic and precise that old-Alex would have probably wept.

New-Alex was still too popcorn shell-shocked to appreciate the maneuver, but Eric was more than willing to take up his slack when regarding some of Adam’s… assets.

“Someone’s in the dog-house,” Hunter sang.

Eric didn’t even bother looking away from Adam until he disappeared completely out of sight. That was devotion. “Shut up,” he murmured.

“I suppose he doesn’t like orange soda either,” Alex offered, tentatively.

Whatever ornery need Hunter had to fight, to distract, evaporated with the statement. He found himself laughing, head thrown back, guffawing without grace or care, much to Eric’s ire.

“Yeah, bud.” Hunter patted Alex’s arm. It was firm beneath his fingers. “Now go shower.”

Go while Hunter could distract himself with bothering Eric, with cleaning, and never spare any thought to what was going on upstairs. Hormones be damned.

Alex considered him a moment, head tilted to the side, his non-soda-soaked hair flopping down in hectic disarray, before nodding. He left quietly, and unlike Eric, Hunter didn’t feel the need to stare.

He was a gentleman that way.

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“…you are well?”

Alex asked this as though there were ever a time when Hunter wasn’t well – which, granted, those times did exist within the sizable amount of moments they shared together, but it hadn’t been recent, and it hadn’t been anything Alex had ever felt the need to ask about. Usually the brunette could
figure it out on his own, like a weird kind of cause and effect game of ‘if I wake Hunter up at 6 am, yes, there will be anger’ and so on and so forth.

The cautiousness of the question was enough for Hunter to reevaluate whatever his expression might be, because he had been certain it had been at least passable for apathetic. Stoic disinterest. Maybe, still-trying-to-wake-up.

The longer Hunter didn’t respond, the clearer it became that none of those emotional shields were working in his favor today. Alex’s brows furrowed to that subtle angle that suggested he was concerned but didn’t want to imply Hunter projected anything worth being concerned about to avoid offending him. It was a very particular expression; Hunter had grown to recognize it quickly.

He might also like it, but not in a malicious way. It was just kind of nice to think that someone would put that much effort into little ‘ole him.

“Yep,” Hunter replied eventually, swirling the contents of his coffee mug, trying (and most likely failing) at disinterest. “I’m good.”

It was just the two of them in the house this morning – Eric occupied with his day job (‘paying the damn bills for you freeloaders’) and Adam off doing whatever he did when he wasn’t there. Hunter didn’t know if the guy had gotten a new dojo to teach at, or if ‘dojo’ was a code word for ‘secret ranger missions’ (which he strongly suspected it was, based on the amount of injuries the Ninjetti ranger seemed to accumulate), but he had learned not to ask after the second time.

Alex considered him for a moment – caught between calling Hunter out on the obvious lie and leaving him be.

Hunter wasn’t sure what it was; the fact that the brunette had asked in the first place, or the length of his deliberation, but something found the blond conceding to his fake answer with a sigh.

“Alright, maybe I’m not good.”

There. See, no big deal.

He watched Alex’s shadow as he moved across the kitchen, his steps quiet on the worn laminant floor. Hunter hoped that his admission would be enough for him, that they could leave this one be and go for the ‘give it space’ route, but that didn’t seem to be working so well for them nowadays. Guess they had passed that point in their friendship, right? Now it was all about sharing. Now, they didn’t get their own private sectors to worry about because they weren’t Hunter and Alex anymore, they were Hunter-and-Alex, the team, and teams had to address shit when they were dealing with super important, time-stream changing events.

For a moment, the bitterness of that overwhelmed whatever gratitude Hunter had for his ability to depend on in Alex without fear, but he pushed it aside as unwarranted.

“I won’t ask if you don’t want me to.”

“No.” Hunter shook his head, dismissing Alex’s usual concern for what he perceived as a delicate situation. “It’s fine-”

“I mean it.”

The sincerity (Alex was always sincere, though sometimes Hunter could block it out, pretend he was just as fake as everyone else) was what brought his eyes back to Alex.
The brunette waited, as though giving Hunter the time to digest his intentions. ‘Intense’ was an easy word to choose when describing Alex. Because he was intense, he was dedicated, in everything he did. No matter how small, no matter how unimportant, he threw himself completely into it with the stubborn determination that it must be done right.

It was his own perception of justice, of rights and wrongs being distributed. Alex was a practical guy, a realist, so it wasn’t like he believed in some kind of unattainable utopia – it was more like… like there was no reason why he shouldn’t work to make the world that way. That there wasn’t a reason why he shouldn’t do what was right with as muchrightness as he deemed necessary just because everyone else wasn’t. He wouldn’t contribute to the perceived problem.

Normally, Hunter would laugh in the face of that idealism, but there was something about it that made it just kind of sexy now.

“We don’t have to talk,” Alex continued, and Hunter eagerly latched onto that distraction. “But if you should choose to, if you would like to, I am here.”

“You’re always here,” Hunter noted, taking a sip of his coffee.

“Yes,” Alex conceded. “I am.”

Except when he wouldn’t be.

That was a terrible thought- abort, abort, abort.

At this point, it was all about catering to the lesser of two evils. Hunter chose his immediately, without giving it much thought.

“It’s an… unpleasant anniversary, today.”

The way Alex cocked his head to the side would normally be something Hunter found endearing, but at the moment it only added to the list of conflicting emotions waging war in Hunter – and the lesser of two evils, while more familiar, still proved to be as adamantly unpleasant as it always was.

But if Alex was anything, it was perceptive (when it felt appropriate), and he connected the dots before Hunter was forced to elaborate.

“Your parents,” he said quietly.

Hunter appreciated the understatement, he appreciated how Alex didn’t press for more, he appreciated that in his silence, Alex could somehow radiate this feeling of empathy at an unquantifiable loss.

And then Hunter systematically hated him for it, because he was an unreasonable human being like that.

They had touched on the subject before, when they were bonding, but Hunter hadn’t gone into details. He had hated Alex then too, but in a different way. He hated that the brunette had changed before he had, that Alex had tried to morph into a workable relationship while Hunter thought they were still playing petty, and he detested the lack of balance it had caused. As though opting to be the bigger person had somehow given Alex more power, when in the end it wasn’t about power at all.

Alex had been right, in a way. How they felt was immaterial in the grand scheme of things. But Hunter had let it get to him anyway, and in an effort to make up for a score that no one was keeping, he had shed light on the tragic story of Marcus and Veera Bradley.
“They’re dead,” Hunter muttered, flicking away some invisible crumbs off the top of the table. “It happens.”

“That does not forbid you from mourning their loss.”

There was a flare of agitation, and Hunter felt his grip tighten around the mug of his painted mug. “Mourning is good for jack shit. What’s the point?”

Alex remained unmoved by the outburst, maybe he had expected it, maybe he had known. “The point is, they mattered.”

Whatever comment Hunter had ready next died on his tongue. His mouth snapped shut, swallowing down anger, frustration, longing. It never really went away. As much as he wanted it to, as much as he wanted to scream at the ghosts of his parents to come back, it would never leave. Probably wouldn’t even if they did deign him worthy of their afterlife affections.

“If they did not matter, it wouldn’t hurt.”

“No shit—”

“But because it does, you carry some of them. Always. You carry their meaning and their impact, you carry…” Alex struggled for the words. “You have a weight on your shoulders. And it isn’t pleasant…it isn’t fair, but I think it is better that… at least it exists at all. At least you have that.”

It was pitiful. How in hell could those words possible make up for the void of losing the only people who had ever given a real damn about him and Blake? How could something so… insubstantial ever measure up to the loss of his parents? Of support freely given without fear, without a price, of love and guidance and stories before bedtime, of midnight movie premiers, of rainy day grilled cheese and pet negotiations and being nursed back to good health during flu season, how could it possibly matter?

Alex didn’t know what he was talking about. Why the hell had Hunter bothered speaking in the first place?

Maybe it was for the same reason anyone did difficult things for people, because they cared, or-

It was really not Hunter’s day.

“But there’s… more to it, isn’t there?” The tentativeness, the fear in Alex’s eyes when he pressed forward, caused something to tighten in Hunter’s throat. This was bravery, he realized; Alex was in completely unfamiliar waters and he could be wrong, the brunette knew he could be wrong, but he pressed forward anyway.

For justice though, not for Hunter. Or, only a little for Hunter.

The blond would cling to that small piece until the end of time, because illogical choices were kind of his jam. Blake would get a kick out of it.

“Something else happened?” Alex offered tentatively.

Yeah, something else happened.

Hunter hadn’t touched on it before, as he had still unknowingly been trying to obtain Alex’s approval and revealing his and Blake’s initial conflict with the Winds didn’t seem like a way to inspire confidence, but that didn’t stop it from sticking with him.
They had gotten this far, he may as well reward Alex for trying to be nice.

“I should probably tell you how I met the rest of my team,” Hunter began conversationally.

Yeah, Alex was going to love this story.

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“It’s not your fault,” Alex insisted for the second time, and, for the second time, Hunter scoffed at him.

He threw in an exaggerated eye roll too just to bring the point home, but Alex was too focused to bother paying it the (glorious) attention it deserved.

“It isn’t,” he pressed. “Lothor played on your emotions. In high intensity situations, your decision-making skills are compromised.”

“Would you have done it?” Hunter glared, but more on principal than anger. He knew Alex, and the brunette was controlled to a fault. He would have made up a ten page diagram that thoroughly plotted out the motivations behind Lothor’s seemingly generous offers and dismissed it as the obvious falseness it had been before he agreed to murdering innocent people.

Alex held his gaze with the same creepy intense focus that he reserved for stalking people. Hunter didn’t fidget in the wake of that look, although he wanted to. Wanted to look away.

“I have done it,” Alex admitted softly.

Hunter waited. He didn’t take it in, he didn’t react, he didn’t think; he waited.

A few moments later, Alex shared his story.

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“I was… thrown,” Alex said – and even though Hunter knew there were giant holes in this story probably filled with confidential information he couldn’t know, Alex had said enough for Hunter to understand his separation from his team had not been willing. “But I wanted to help. Instead of adapting, instead of listening, I had-”

“It’s not your fault,” Hunter assured.

Alex was too civilized to roll his eyes, but his substitute got the point across with a refinement that should be expected from a Time Force Agent.

“If it’s not my fault, it’s not your fault,” Hunter pressed.

“I suppose that’s only fair.” The corner of Alex’s mouth kicked up in the beginnings of a grin, slight and bitter.

There was nothing fair about it. Nothing fair about it at all.

Hunter laughed. After a few seconds, Alex joined him.

It wasn’t healthy - conditional forgiveness of your sins for the purpose of someone else’s peace of mind - but there was something comforting about the exchange. Almost like they were sharing the burden instead of going it alone. And even if they didn’t, it was nice having someone else there who knew.
As though sensing his thoughts, Alex’s expression took a serious turn. “You should forgive yourself.”

“Only if you do it too.” Hunter saluted the man with his coffee mug.

There was a slow, but thoughtful nod, Alex’s eyes never leaving Hunter’s. “I shall try to.”

“Then we have ourselves a deal.”

As lightly as he said it, Hunter found himself meaning the words. The guilt would probably always be there, and he may never be able to look upon his past actions without any kind of shame, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t try.

His brother knew it better than anyone else, that if you faked something long enough, eventually you could adopt it as your own.

Maybe Hunter could do that too.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Easter everyone! I hope you celebrate in the manner you see most fit – for me, that include barbeque and a lot of chocolate, but to each there own :)

Thanks to FlipCarson for the comment! It meant a lot, and your feedback is greatly appreciated :D

The TV in reference here is ‘Kenan and Kel’, which had been a popular Nickelodeon show in the 90s.

For clarification, between the scene beaks, Hunter covers his and Blake’s little stint being evil rangers, and Alex talks about that time he unsuccessfully took control of the Time Force team in 2001, and was kind of a huge dick about it. At least, in the show.

Until next time :(
“Alright, that does it,” Hunter declared in a dramatic whisper, one hand pressed against Alex’s chest to hold him back as the blond peeked down the staircase. “I’m sick of this.”

“Of the staircase?” Alex knew this probably wasn’t the case, but his usual thought processes had ground to a halt at the feel of Hunter’s warm palm pressed against his abs, causing a slight distraction.

Hunter’s head shook frantically to convey a negative, but he kept his eyes aimed at the first floor of Commander Myers’ house. “What? No, not that. This.”

He pointed down the stairs emphatically with his free hand, his lips twisting with displeasure at whatever scene had initially brought them to a shuddering standstill.

Alex strained to look around the blond, somewhat hindered due to the fact that said-blond was still holding him back. Hunter conceded to his movement eventually, but kept his hand in place even as Alex moved to get his own look, as though he may need to shove the brunette back at any moment.

Perhaps he would Hunter had good instincts when it came to surprise monster attacks.

While Alex had expected some minions lying in wait, or perhaps the remains of another one of the Commander’s culinary monstrosities (the Commander was the only person in the house worse at cooking than Alex), what he saw instead did not appear out of the ordinary. The Commander and Mr. Park were huddled together by the stove – not an unusual display for the morning. Mr. Park was armed with an apron and spatula as he tended to the pancakes (a practical title that Alex greatly appreciated) on the stove with the Commander adding his own color commentary to the process, grinning around the lip of his coffee mug when Mr. Park waved him away in vain.

“What’s wrong with that?” Alex tried to lean to get a better view, but Hunter was shoving him back around the corner again, probably deciding he lacked subtlety. “You don’t like pancakes anymore?”

Was it due to the carbohydrates? There had been a period when Jen had declared all baked goods, potatoes, and the like total enemies of their abode due to the ‘delicious curse of carbohydrates’. Not conducive to maintaining a healthy weight.

Personally, Alex found them quite helpful for keeping up with his ranger metabolism (something Jen had frequently cursed until she had gotten a morpher of her own), but if Hunter wanted to take a
different approach-


Alex frowned. “I thought you and the Commander-”

“No,” Hunter cut him off, but it wasn’t with malice. The blond was finally opting for efficiency in what was, undoubtedly, a confusing conversation. “Not them, individually. I mean them, collectively. As a unit.”

Hunter was still gazing towards the opening of the stairs, despite the fact that they had both backed away from it to continue their discussion. This time, Alex waited. Hunter would elaborate when he was ready, and until then, Alex needed to be patient. It was clear that his probing would not get him anywhere near the correct reasoning for Hunter’s displeasure.

With a sigh, the crimson ranger turned on his heel and stalked back towards the guest room, snatching Alex’s arm in the process and leaving the brunette with no choice but to follow behind him in bewilderment.

The door shut behind them with quiet care – a limited maneuver from Hunter, exercised only when calling for private conversations. With anticipation rolling in his stomach, Alex settled down on his side of the bed and waited, knowing the blond would speak when the moment was right, and not a second before.

“I’m sick of this,” Hunter repeated as he began to pace, quick paths up and down the short length of the room. “The ‘will-they?’, ‘won’t-they?’ wishy-washy crap. I don’t want to deal with it anymore.”

“Will they’ what?”

“Fuck,” Hunter declared, causing Alex to blanch at the drastic change in conversation. Before he could recover, Hunter continued, flopping himself down on the other side of the bed with a dramatic sigh. “Date. Sex. Get married, raise babies, whatever. They just need to stop dancing and start getting their business together because we are going to drown in sexual tension if they don’t do something soon.”

“The dancing is figurative, correct?” That was the question Alex held on to; in the storm of Hunter’s speech, it was the only one he could truly perceive.

Hunter wasn’t annoyed when he nodded in confirmation. “Yep. Totally dancing around each other, pretending they both don’t want what they both want.”

“How are they sure they both want it?” Alex cocked his head to the side, considering. They’d had this conversation before, truly, but Hunter’s emphatic insistence made Alex reassess the subject. “If they both know the other knows–”

“Okay.” Hunter waved him off. “So they don’t one-hundred percent know, but they do– They have to, abstractly be aware of some kind of attraction from the other party, and if they don’t act on it soon, I am doing it for them.”

“How?” Alex was past the point of asking Hunter to expound on his perception of the Commander’s relationship with Mr. Park. “Would you…?”

Act on it himself? Act on what himself? Would Hunter actually consider making an advance towards either the Commander or Mr. Park to demonstrate the availability of one to the other? It
seemed like a plan that could be moderately successful, but without any sincerity on Hunter’s part, it seemed a bit cruel, and if there was sincerity—

“Relax, Red.” Hunter reached up a hand to squeeze Alex’s knee, bringing the brunette back to their conversation. “We won’t do anything drastic. They just need a… push.”

“A push?” Alex echoed. After a few seconds he added, “We?”

“Yeah.” Hunter dismissed this detail as unimportant, his gaze directed toward the ceiling as he moved on with creating his plan. “You. Me. We. The dynamic duo back in action, adding ‘relationship gurus’ to our growing list of problem-solving capabilities.”

“I never pictured us as particularly dynamic.” Alex wasn’t even sure what that implied. He would have to ask Adam later. “And is it necessarily wise to interfere in the affairs of our host? It is his business to maintain his personal life however he sees fit. If he had wanted to… evolve his relationship with Mr. Park—”

“Adam,” Hunter corrected.

“–then he would do so, would he not?”

Hunter frowned, considering this, then sat up with a heaving sigh, as though it were some great effort. “Sometimes, my friend,” he began, wagging a knowing finger at Alex. “Two people can know something and want something – nay, need something – but be too chickenshit to do anything about it. They can’t take the risk.”

“If they can’t take the risk, then do they really deserve the reward?” Alex pondered. In his life, he had learned the difficult lesson passed through whispers of ancient literature. In essence, it came down to ‘you keep what you kill’.

Your fate was something dependent on your own actions. Your own activity or inactivity would ultimately determine what was yours – if you needed something, if you wanted it, you had to fight for it.

Alex had struggled for every little piece that he had; there was never the luxury of ignoring something that could potentially offer joy when it was there for the taking.

His offering was met with a flick to the head and a dismissive snort from Hunter, who settled his disagreement with a roll of his eyes.

“If you have friends that aren’t assholes then yes, you deserve it. Hell, you deserve it if you do, but let’s look at the part that applies to us.”

“And that is…?” Alex raised his eyebrows in anticipation.

“They need a push.” Hunter declared, brought it back around to the beginning of his rant. “And we’re gonna do the pushing.”

“The figurative pushing.”

“Towards each other. Figuratively and literally, as necessary,” Hunter decided with a nod of his head. “We’re here anyway, might as well do our good – non-work related – deed of the century and help those schmucks out.”

“And how do we uh…” Alex struggled for the right word. “Push them?”
Hunter smiled, something deadly wicked that caused Alex’s stomach to somersault, churning with anticipation and some other unidentifiable feeling that he consciously chose to ignore.

This was too similar to something he knew wasn’t real.

“That,” Hunter began. “Is actually the easy part.”

Alex was destined to deal with the Commander under Hunter’s declaration that opposing attitudes would be more effective in this endeavor. Not that Alex necessarily disagreed (okay, he did, a great deal), but it seemed a bit like an unnecessarily arduous approach to their plan.

In the end, Alex surmised that Hunter didn’t want to handle a discussion of feelings with the Commander and had left the more difficult of their two quarries up to Alex, which seemed greatly unfair, considering the blond’s own knowledge of Alex’s social abilities.

Still, Alex was a supportive teammate, and he did not want it to be said he hadn’t tried.

He had no hope for his success, because even Alex had limitations.

On the bright side, he at least had something moderately calming to occupy his hands while he attempted to broach the subject of the Commander’s love life with an admittedly formidable human being, so there was that.

“Is there any particular reason why we had to do this now, or is sorting paperwork first thing in the morning a popular pastime in the future?” the Commander grumbled, glaring at the piles of reports that were littered across the desk of his study.

Alex tensed, then disregarded the mild hints of suspicion. He was overreacting. “You would put it off otherwise.”

“It is Saturday,” the Commander protested, eyeing a particularly unorganized pile of folders. “I’m allowed to slack off on the weekends.”

“You won’t have to worry about it if you take care of it now.” Alex shrugged, but kept his eyes consciously on his own piles of documents as he sorted them into the wooden filing cabinet.

“True.” Eric slowly reached towards his latest cup of coffee, and it wasn’t Alex’s imagination that his eyes flickered to the closed door of the study. “But I think your new insistence in doing paperwork has a little more to do with Hunter’s mandatory ‘dish-bonding time’ with Adam than with any real concern with my efficiency.”

Alex froze, mind racing for a possible response to the Commander’s accusation. As though hyperaware of his guilt, Alex could almost hear the soft laughter of Hunter and Adam as they congregated around the sink to clean the breakfast dishes, even though he knew the kitchen was too far away for the sound to carry properly.

“So…” the Commander drawled, placing his cup down with a calculated ‘thud’. “Anything you wanted to talk to me about?”

There were many responses to the question, many paths for the conversation to traverse based on Alex’s reply, and for a second the possibilities overwhelmed him. It had been difficult enough attempting to find the appropriate way to broach the subject with the Commander when he wasn’t aware of Alex’s intentions, but without the guise of organization working as a barrier from his true
goals, Alex had no idea what to say.

So he ended up with, “Yes.”

The look it prompted from the Commander was a very unimpressed one. It caused Alex to stumble on, his tongue tripping up as he tried to elaborate more eloquently. “Relationships….”

“Oh, God.” The Commander’s head thudded down against his desk in a sudden defeat. Alex was not mature enough to say he hadn’t been relieved that he was no longer alone in his desire to not be in this conversation.

Still, Alex supported Hunter, so he would try. “They are… um, difficult.”

“Please stop,” the Commander croaked, holding up a beseeching hand. “Just. Stop okay. I knew this was going to happen sooner or later–”

Oh good, that would actually make this easier.

“–but I figured you would talk to Adam.”

“Me too,” Alex offered consolingly. “But fate had other plans.”

While he didn’t believe in the concept, he was aware the romantic idea of it could sometimes be used as a figure of speech to assuage Commander Myer’s frustrations. He and Hunter had joked about it a couple of times; Alex determined it would not be out of place to try it now.

Instead of replying, the Commander groaned, one hand pressing against his face in a picture of exasperation. “You couldn’t wait a few– You know what, whatever. Let’s do this.” Eric looked up, his expression schooled into something like determination. “Fire away.”

“Umm…” Alex had not expected Commander Myers to be so amendable to propositions in his relationship status with Mr. Park, but if he was willing to go this far, it seemed unfair for Alex to back out. As much as he would have preferred it.

Out of respect for the… delicateness of the situation, Alex elected for a vague approach that would allow them enough detachment to avoid embarrassing either of them more than was necessary.

“So… here’s a situation,” Alex began, the proposal slowly taking shape in his mind. “When there are two people who… quite clearly bear a strong fondness for each other–”

“Cripes,” the Commander muttered, rubbing a hand over his face.

“–then… it would be an obvious choice for them to… evolve this relationship, correct?”

The Commander paused, his body restrained from any excessive movement. It was almost like he hadn’t been expecting the observation, and the gaze he turned on Alex was equal parts considering and something unreadable. That lack of definition in his look would normally be enough for Alex to call for a verbal retreat – too many unknown variables, too easy for him to commit a social faux pas – but Alex pushed past his concern and continued, knowing Hunter was counting on him.

For whatever reason, the blond was depending on him.

“But if they… weren’t. Or, they chose not to,” Alex added, hoping to not sound too hasty. “Then why– what do you think the… why would they do that?”

The end of it made him feel small – an irrational thing, this had no reflection on his own standing in
any way – and Alex had to fight to not shrink against the Commander’s scrutiny. He kept his eyes on the files, papers that offered a kind of intangible protection of their own, and resumed his organizing. The Commander would answer in due time.

It was quiet for what Alex guessed was five minutes. He could hear the occasional creak from the office chair to confirm the Commander was still present, but otherwise the room was silent. Not sounds of coffee mugs or paperwork emanated from the desk, but Alex refused to feel any kind of awkwardness for the comparatively conspicuous sounds of his own efforts.

Eventually, there was a sigh.

“Kid…” It had been Hunter’s nickname from the Commander, not Alex’s, and that alone was enough to urge the brunette to face him. “There’s a balance, okay? Let’s say that, that there’s a balance.”

Alex nodded, and with that, the Commander continued. “And that balance is… it’s a terrifying thing, frankly. It starts in friendship and- damnit, why couldn’t you have asked–?” Eric cut off his ranting with a mean twist of his head, and refocused. “So, you have friendship first and then, if you’re incredibly lucky, it becomes… not family–” ‘Because that would be weird’ was what he didn’t say, but Alex caught it nonetheless. “–but something greater. Something better. There’s this…claim. You don’t talk about it, you don’t address it, but it’s there. And they’re part of yours, and you’re part of theirs and that’s great. It is great. And you can keep that for as long as you want, no one will begrudge it.”

“Because it’s great,” Alex echoed, tentatively.

Eric nodded. “Yeah…because it’s great.” He looked up towards the ceiling – an action indicative of a silent call for strength (usually, the Commander exercised it when searching for the patience to deal with Hunter in one of his more hyperactive moods). “And the thing about greatness is you don’t want to lose it.”

“Right.” For whatever reason, something in Alex’s chest tightened, an invisible vice twisting without reason or purpose.

He knew a lot about catching glimpses of wonder with the edges of his fingertips, fighting to hold onto a glory so reverent he could barely form words. It was a perilous feeling, teetering between joy and sorrow, revelling at the golden pedestal while being unfairly conscious of the void that hung below, waiting to consume it, should it ever fall.

This, Alex was familiar with.

But this was not about him.

“Then what… what would it take to make it worth it?” Alex asked, sorting through the words with as much detachment as he could muster. “To act upon…”

Hope. Want. Need. Alex didn’t know the right words. Didn’t know if Eric would understand his meaning, even though he desperately hoped he would.

“That’s up to them.” The Commander sighed, slowly slumping back in his chair as though straining under an invisible weight. “If you– if they want to keep things where they are, then that’s fine. That’s their right. Sometimes there are things beyond our control and that’s nobody’s fault. No one should be pressured to do something, or not do something, if they don’t want to do it.”

Alex nodded slowly, as though he understood this. In a small way, he did.
Mr. Park and the Commander already knew where their cards lay. They would move forward when they were ready, and only then.

“Ah, hell,” the Commander groaned, burying his face in his hands. His elbows were braced against the desk in support, and for a second he looked almost like an ancient statue, all smooth edges and incredible strength, unmoving to the times. “This is coming across terribly.”

“It’s fine,” Alex assured, as much as he knew how. Coming from him, it would offer the Commander little comfort, but it was better than nothing. “I understand.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t think that’s true.” His head was still buried in his hands, and when he turned, the wear of the ages was clear in his eyes. “Look, here’s the short version. You want something; you get it—no questions asked. Don’t let other stuff get in your way. You think you should want something because of whatever self-imposed crap you’re not sure of, then don’t. Be sure. End of story. Got it?”

“Got it.” Alex nodded.

It was, ultimately, exactly as he had assumed before.

The Commander would move when he was ready, and it was none of their business otherwise.

“I really hope you do.” The Commander shook his head, reaching for his coffee cup. “For all our sakes.”

He needn’t have worried; Alex knew a warning when he heard one.

Even if it had been a roundabout way of getting there.

-:-:-:-:-:-

“Yeah, that’s pretty much what I got.” Hunter was glowering out the window, arms folded across his chest in a stance that he insisted was not defensive, merely ‘contemplative of the universe’.

Alex hadn’t gone into details about his and the Commander’s conversation, which had worked out well, considering Hunter had only allowed him to get to the word ‘business’ before the blond was off on a tangent about ‘passive-aggressive, all-knowing pricks’ who didn’t appreciate when someone was trying to do them a favor.

Alex hadn’t asked, but he assumed Mr. Park’s methods of communication had been similar to the Commander’s.

“They are adults,” Alex offered, feeling an unnamable want to ease some of the tension in Hunter’s shoulders. “They will move when they are ready.”

“I really need you to not be reasonable right now,” Hunter muttered. His lower lip was jutting out, almost in his equivalent expression of a pout, and Alex dutifully forced his gaze out the window.

“What do you need?” he said, swallowing.

“Scrabble,” Hunter decided. The transfer in mood shifted without warning, much like it always did. Hunter was digging through the closet by the time Alex recovered. “Kicking your ass at Scrabble is what I need.”

“It isn’t my fault the words don’t exist yet,” Alex offered tentatively.
It was an old argument, and not even a good one, but it created the desired result. Hunter smiled – one of his genuine ones – carefree and just the tiniest bit wicked, and the tension that Alex had been hating left his posture with an assurance of ‘ninja victory’.

The conversation he’d had with the Commander felt too close and too far away all at once – so Alex forced it to the back of his mind, under the worries of his mission and the enjoyment of now. There were some words of wisdom he could respect, were he brave enough to do it, but Alex was familiar enough with his own inner workings to understand he would never possess that kind of bravery.

For now, he would stay a coward. Safe, and through some fortunate stroke of fate – happy.

Chapter End Notes

Because two people thinking they’re talking about the same subject when they’re really talking about two different subjects is something I find hilarious.

‘Will-they’, ‘won’t-they’- the vaguest of references to the tv show, Community.

Thanks to Celebrusc and FlipCarson for the lovely comments! As always, any and all feedback is greatly appreciated, and I’m very glad you guys are enjoying the story thus far :)

Until next time!
“Let the record show that this is – in Dustin terms – the ‘bee’s knees’. Are those flying space cars?”

“Emergency transports,” Alex replied distractedly, frowning at their surroundings. Hunter took in his unsettled expression with a grain of salt, then went back to tracking the flying-space-emergency-transport-vehicles (see, compromise) with the unrestrained enthusiasm of a toddler. Hey, maybe they would get to ride one.

Hunter wasn’t so insecure with his baddassness to admit that would be awesome. Sure, the Winds had their stupid hang-gliders, but Hunter got space cars. For a limited time only, but that was more than their sorry asses could say.

Blake would be so jealous.

Alex was still wearing that distinct ‘This very much concerns me but my professionalism hinders my ability to express this’ face when Hunter had finished his immediate inspection, which meant either their mission, or their setting, was a stupid one.

Hunter set about determining which in the most direct way possible. He jabbed Alex’s cheek with a firm finger, startling the brunette out of his maelstrom of brooding thoughts. “Just spill it,” he advised sagely. “What’s the problem?”

When the brunette opened his mouth to make a predictable objection, Hunter narrowed his eyes. “We gonna do the same song and dance as the last few times, or are you just going to tell me?”

It turned out that having a direct conversation was actually a feat that proved difficult for Hunter and Alex sometimes. For an individual who loved efficiency (Alex) and an individual that hated bullshit (Hunter), they had a horrible tendency of falling into predictable routines as a way of deflection and self-defense. Except at the end of the day, they were both very stubborn, so whatever the other person had wanted to hide/pretend-wasn’t-there/gloss-over was dragged into the light anyway, more often than not with the other person looking just a bit smug about it.

Alex’s smugness consisted of the tiniest quirk of his lips. Hunter should despise its very existence, but the subtlety inspired more fondness than aggravation. It was disconcerting as hell, but as per most of his survival mechanisms, he ignored it.
You would think acknowledging your ignorance of something would diminish the effectiveness of a tactic, but nope, Hunter was a determined SOB if he (and many others) did say so himself.

Alex’s eyes focused on the distance, settling on a cluster of gleaming factory buildings that protruded over the storage warehouses below. It looked like they were in a manufacturing district of some kind, really industrial, but without the grime and neglect of the factory buildings from Hunter’s time period. In short, they were a huge step up from the abandoned warehouses team Ninja Storm (and every other team ever, apparently) found themselves fighting in.

“This is my time,” Alex said suddenly. He was still looking into the distance, but his expression was colder, eyes wary. The brunette swallowed. “It’s about a year before I left though.”

“Is there an alternate-you running around here?” One night, when Adam had taken the time to properly educate them on the makings of ‘the perfect s’more’, they had discussed the possibility of time paradoxes on their little adventure. What the ramifications would be of entering a time period where a past version of yourself already existed. Alex has assured them that time would remain intact, so long as they remained distant, but Hunter had been campaigning for ‘the end of the world, oh God’. Two unsuccessful s’mores in, and the remains of about eight exploded marshmallows covering his arms (Hunter had tried the direct approach with his applied lightning strikes and had impressed no one with his endeavors, least of all Eric and Eric’s counters), Hunter remained alone in his position. Though not for lack of trying.

Alex, who had ended up with speckles of marshmallow goo coating his hair, spent the rest of the night throwing the occasional look of annoyance at the sticky offenders. There was a chance Hunter had covertly taken a picture at the epic pouty face and shared it with Adam, but that was neither here, nor there.

This time, Alex spared a moment to look at Hunter, his eyes troubled and wavering in an effort to conceal as much. “Possibly,” he replied, looking down towards his datapad. “Our orders are to ‘distract the ranger’.”

“Just ‘the ranger’?” Hunter furrowed his brows, considering the request. “That’s it? No specifics?”

Alex shook his head. “It just provides coordinates.”

“Then, by all means.” Hunter injected as much of a cocky air into his words as he swaggered towards the building Alex had been staring at, knowing without confirmation that was the end goal. “Let’s distract away.”

A pity laugh would have been appreciated – had been the goal (Alex may protest otherwise, but he liked it, Hunter had this on authority) – but the other ranger didn’t even spare him another glance.

Alex kept his attention split between his datapad and the buildings in the distance, using discrete hand signals to guide them through the least-trodden paths.

The red ranger grew more and more rigid as they neared their designated position, his shoulders practically cement as they quickly climbed a set of metal stairs up towards some kind of observation deck. The thing, as far as Hunter could tell, would overlook some kind of helicopter pad, or future equivalent, but still allowed enough distance that two past-dudes wouldn’t be immediately visible.

Hunter wondered what they were distracting the ranger from. And who the ranger was, that was a big question, one that Hunter was beginning to suspect Alex knew the answer to. He hadn’t been this closed off in a long time, and Hunter wasn’t really in a position to criticize healthy mission approaches, but if Alex got anymore wound up he was going to throw himself into premature cardiac arrest, despite the morpher’s happy healing energies pumping through his veins. It was a problem.
Once Hunter had a chance to actually assess the situation, it took him all of two seconds to find the source of Alex’s inner discourse.

“Shit, is that–?”

“Get down,” Alex ordered, his voice painfully stiff as he yanked Hunter behind a nearby crate of some kind – future crate – and repositioned them for a better view.

“But that’s you.” Yeah, newsflash, as though Alex didn’t know that, but the paradox-thought-trail wasn’t supposed to be foreshadowing and discovering that it had been wasn’t doing too many favors for Hunter’s disposition. Especially when Alex had jacked up his posture rigidity to nine without looking like he was ever going to come down anytime soon.

In the distance, past-Alex was duking it out with some dude in a cape and mask, showing off that agility and minimalistic approach to combat still favored today. Hunter had no idea how long the battle had been going on, or what distracting Past-Alex was actually supposed to gain them, and he didn’t question it. Based on the impressive statue-impersonation current-Alex was pulling off, Hunter knew he would have better luck talking to a brick wall.

The red Time Force ranger – his Time Force ranger, not the past guy – had his blaster out and posed at the ready. He was waiting for an opportunity to release some distraction fire, Hunter guessed. Waiting for a moment when it wouldn’t be clear to either past-Alex or the Phantom-of-the-Opera-wannabe where the shots had come from.

“Keep it together,” Hunter said, trying to break Alex out of his self-imposed stillness. Nothing brought Alex back to reality faster than Hunter’s uncultivated ass patronizing him on battle strategy. “Aim for his– your feet, off to the side. That will pull his focus away for at least a few seconds.”

With Alex’s gun posed in front of him, Hunter had clear view of the modifier’s timer, and was surprised – and disturbed and displeased and, hell, why not be disappointed too – to see they had about fifteen seconds left to distract past-Alex. Talk about a speedy schedule. What the hell had Time Force been thinking?

“Alex,” Hunter tried again. The brunette still wasn’t answering him, and not in his usual ‘I’m-focusing-so-I’m-just-going-to-pretend-you-don’t-even-exist-right-now’ kind of way, but with dazed eyes succumbed to inattention. He wasn’t planning, he wasn’t prepping… he was just staring.

“Ten seconds,” Hunter said. He moved a hand to Alex’s shoulder, trying to shake him out of his funk, but the other ranger remained unresponsive. His shoulders were about as tense as they had ever been, his whole body drawn tight with apprehension.

In the distance, Hunter caught a blur of movement, a small group of people charging up the metal staircase leading up to the landing pad, all decked in the same white uniforms as past-Alex. Good guys then?

“Seven seconds,” Hunter said, losing moments to his stupid observation. Even then, Alex’s fingers were slack against the trigger. His breathing, Hunter finally noticed, wasn’t steady. His hands were shaking, ever so slightly, and his breaths were quick and ragged, pulled through his mouth as he stared–

“Four seconds.”

The people on the staircase were drawing closer, frantic maybe, but Hunter shut them out. He grabbed the gun – still clutched in Alex’s hands – and aimed as best he could, hoping his Thunder
Staff had a similar trajectory as a Time Force Blaster.

It made its mark well enough; past-Alex’s head whipped to the side, eyebrows furrowed in confusion at an attack he had not perceived, and then–

And then he was falling, Hunter noted numbly, his hand still clutched on Alex’s hand and the blaster. Past-Alex fell in painful convulsions, his body twitchy and shuddering unnaturally as it suffered under the attack of manic-cape-man.

Past-Alex fell, his neck twisted at an unusual angle, one that would make it hard to breathe–

The people racing up the stairs finally made it to the top with an agonized scream, watching the show with less detachment than Hunter and his emotionally-stunted friend. It wasn’t until then that he realized, despite the warm hand under his palm, the trembling body crouched against his side–

Alex had died.

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They landed in one of their least graceful stumbles yet, but Hunter couldn’t spare the energy to give a damn, because that wasn’t– That couldn’t have happened. When they recovered– from the transport, not the– Hunter didn’t bother moving away from Alex. There was this baseline terror that if he let the brunette go he would disappear forever, because he had died, he was dead, and there was nothing that could quell it.

Oh, hey, and Hunter had been the one who killed him, so that was probably going to be really good for their relationship.

“What just-?” Hunter cut off with a swallow, leaning into the catatonic Time Force ranger’s chest. “Did you just-?”

“Yes.” It wasn’t a croak. It wasn’t accusatory or angry or delivered with any level of energy. It was a soft confirmation, devoid of emotion and, in itself, very broken.

“But how-?” Hunter asked. That didn’t make sense, how could he be here-?

“They fix it.”

That was all Alex said. He was shaking, very minutely – his legs, Hunter thought – but aside from that there was no exertion. The brunette didn’t return the hold. He didn’t push Hunter off either. Alex stood shell-shocked, totally shut down from processing emotions.

He had known. He had known as soon as they had landed – between the vague instructions and the coordinates – Alex had known they had marched off to watch him die.

Hunter clutched him tighter, throwing every damn he had to the wind. Why not? Alex wouldn’t have noticed on a good day; he sure as hell wasn’t going to figure out Hunter gave a damn about him in the next few minutes.

“Did he lose someone?”

There was a lot to be said about the fact that he hadn’t even heard someone approach (hell, that he didn’t bother determining their surroundings). Hunter managed not to jump at the new voice; he kept it cool, turning his head to lie against Alex’s shoulder as he looked toward the stranger- surprised to see it was actually someone he recognized.
Who was it—the guy from the apartment, the first guy. Luke, Luis? It was some kind of L-name; Hunter couldn’t remember. He had stolen the guy’s toothbrush. Still had it, actually.

It was obvious that the guy had seen better days. There was a generous coating of dirt and sweat staining his clothes, and his denim over-shirt had been ripped in a few places. The morpher decorating his wrist explained both of those, but not the exact reasoning behind the question.

It looked like they were in some kind of metal hallway, a big change from their last encounter and that, as far as L-man was concerned, this was a normal happenstance.

“In the fight?” L-man pressed on. He looked tired, worn with a bone-deep weariness that evolved from the shittier monster battles, and Hunter would have been all over extending his sympathies if A) that didn’t make him look like a crazy person and B) holy shit Alex just died.

Hunter, realizing that Alex was still very much down for the count (not that he blamed the guy) swallowed down the lump in his throat and nodded, then paused, and frantically shook his head. Space station, there had been something about a space station and the metal hallways were kind of backing that up. It would be difficult to play off an unaccounted dead person in a finite number of people, right? They probably had all kinds of rosters and lists and stuff that Hunter and Alex were screwing right to hell merely by being present.

“Not here,” Hunter elaborated at the guy’s confused stare. “But uh…yeah, he lost someone.”

“News from home?”

Hunter nodded in response and the guy’s shoulders sagged, but there was, and Hunter could see this even through his thoroughly freaking out mind, a certain relief to it.

Yeah, Hunter knew those thoughts. The ‘Thank Jesus it wasn’t us this time’ relief. Because even if it was technically the psychopath who let loose his swarm of evil robots/zombies/ninjas/fish people/whatever that was dealing out the damage, they were the ones who hadn’t been good enough to save lives, and that kind of thing stuck with you.

He remembered Alex’s body falling lifeless to the ground, shuddering under a barrage of explosions, and held the brunette tighter.

“I’m sorry for your loss.” L-man looked sincere when he said it, even through the obvious exhaustion. It was refreshing, and pathetic in that refreshment, but Hunter latched onto it like the desperate madman he was, clinging to it as tightly as he unashamedly held onto Alex.

He was beginning to feel a little bad for stealing the guy’s toothbrush.

“Thank you,” he replied. “Are you okay?”

It seemed a little selfish to be monopolizing the conversation, even if he was part of the duo of very pathetic individuals in this hallway.

The guy was clearly thrown for a second, not expecting the inquiry (what, a guy couldn’t be polite while clutching onto a friend five seconds from a breakdown? Hunter could multitask, thanks). He paused, blinking as though he hadn’t considered his state after the battle, then shrugged.

“I’m no worse for the wear,” he said diplomatically. He also said it as a man whose pants reveled in being the most on fire, but Hunter wasn’t really in a state to call him out on it.

Shit, he had no idea if the public knew this guy was a ranger. Screw it, he would just play it as
normally as he could while holding onto a catatonic person and go from there.

“Great,” Hunter said. Politely. Utterly politely. Alex would be proud.

The other guy nodded, his smile tight.

And then they entered the silence that indicated nobody in the hallway knew exactly what to do next. Leave? Hunter could do that, right? Just pick a random hall until they had some privacy so he could check Alex’s datapad, find out what the next task was, destroy said task and send a few mean-spirited message back to Time Force Command for making Alex witness his own death. That was—and Hunter was only vaguely familiar with command structures (the Thunder Academy was more educational than militaristic), but that didn’t seem like the kind of thing that inspired positive moral. More accurately, it was a dick move. Alex hadn’t deserved that.

“You should come in.”

Hunter blinked, realizing he had gone off into his personal dream world, and looked back to the battered ranger. The awkward anxiety had been exchanged for hope and, if Hunter read his body language right, the same kind of can-do-ness Shane possessed whenever he was looking for a light at the end of his ‘got kicked in the face one too many times’ tunnel. It was a distraction wrapped in good intentions, and Hunter – being Hunter – usually went out of his way to avoid being the air ninja’s target.

He supposed then at this point, he was due.

The brunette continued, “My roommates will… Well, it will be some time before they show up.” Translation: my-teammates-are-holed-up-in-the-infirmary/mad-at-me/mad-at-me-because-they’re-holed-up-in-the-infirmary. “I’ve got tea,” L-man added hopefully, the slightest tinge of desperation a painful undertone to his words.

Hunter sighed and leaned into Alex, trying to sort through the shoulds and should-nots and coming down to Alex died and deciding to hell with it, tea sounded amazing.

And besides, the guy had made it this far into the conversation without even slightly freaking out over Alex being essentially shut down and Hunter being a pathetic human being with needs, so the blond probably owed him this much.

“Okay,” Hunter said after a moment, nodding against Alex’s shoulder. “Tea sounds good.”

He reached down, squeezing the Time Force agent’s hand. He wasn’t expecting anything, so he wasn’t going to bother describing the immense relief that flooded through him when Alex squeezed back, however weakly. It wasn’t worth mentioning.

“It’s not much further,” L-man said softly, trying – Hunter could tell – to not disrupt Alex and whatever mental catastrophe was going on in there. He motioned for them to follow him down the hallway, towards one of many identical metal doors. “Hard to get used to, right? Everything looking the same?” the ranger joked with a smile. It was forced, but only Hunter’s years of experience with Blake let him in on that fact.

For that alone, Hunter allowed him a laugh and didn’t press for more, tugging Alex through the door behind him with a tight grip. Hunter still wasn’t trusting Alex’s probability of vanishing into thin air, and as long as the brunette wasn’t going to object, he was going to keep his death grip on him if it killed–

Hunter forced his brain out of the messy storm that was brewing and focused on the room L-man had led them to. It appeared to be an open-concept apartment, complete with kitchen, living room, and—how adorable—three built-in bunk beds lining the wall between two spaces. They were color-coordinated: red, green, and blue. They were *such* power rangers.

There was another door leading to what Hunter guessed was a bathroom, and L-man gestured for them to settle down on the couch while he headed towards the kitchen, beginning to prepare the tea.

Hunter had thought—hoped—maybe by the time he had Alex sitting down the other ranger would be calm enough to check the datapad, or, you know, *speak*, but the blond had no sooner gotten the red ranger sitting than Alex had latched onto him, grabbing at him—his shirt, his hip—desperately, pressing his face against Hunter’s torso with a few shudders.

Okay, change of plan, Hunter went with the flow, effortlessly shifting onto the couch until he straddled Alex’s lap on bent knees, arms coming around the other man to press his head against the thunder ninja’s shoulder. Alex wasn’t crying, thank Christ, but the shaking had gotten worse, and it was all Hunter could do to start spouting incomprehensible (and useless) words of comfort while Alex quaked into his shoulder, his arms wrapping tight around Hunter’s back.

“Hey, hey,” Hunter whispered, painfully aware of the other ranger standing just a dozen feet away, watching them in what was at best confusion and at worst concern. “*Shhh*, it’s okay.”

“It’s stupid,” Alex muttered darkly. He sounded barely composed, but hurt, and in a particularly Alex way, shocked by that hurt.

“It’s fine,” Hunter countered, stroking Alex’s hair. What? He wouldn’t notice, and it was calming. “You’re *fine*.”

“Exactly,” Alex replied. “I’m fine, I shouldn’t—”

He sucked in a breath, one hand fisting the back of Hunter’s shirt, and the blond took that as a cue to increase the calming noises.

“You’re not fine,” Hunter amended, cursing his stupidly frantic mind. “And *that’s* fine.”

“You make no sense.” Alex didn’t sound angry when he said it. If anything there was a kind of levity, and Hunter latched onto it.

“That’s me,” Hunter said. “So crazy.”

“Mind boggling.”

“Insanity inspiring.”

“Perpetually bewildering.”

“Hey now,” Hunter said, pulling back to stare down at Alex. “Careful, you could hurt my crazy feelings.”

“That’s…” Alex laughed, a quiet but real chuckle, and shook his head. “I suppose, appropriate. My apologies.”

“I guess I can accept them this time around,” Hunter said, speaking down his nose in an obnoxious, Dustin-approved fashion. “But watch yourself in the future.”
“I…” Alex seemed to freeze up at the mention of ‘future’ and Hunter cursed again, even as the brunette seemed to curl into Hunter’s shoulder. Instinctively, Hunter went back to petting Alex’s head, fighting the urge to bend down and kiss it, like his mother had done for him, for Blake, his father–

“Not fine,” Hunter repeated. He turned, looking over his shoulder towards L-man to get an assessment on his feelings. It was– what? The early nineties? Was homosexuality a big deal then? Hunter couldn’t remember, but he knew he and Alex were way too close to play it off as comforting, even if that was all it strictly was.

He really needn’t have worried. If there was one expression that registered on the stranger-ranger’s face, it was a fierce combination of jealousy and longing, supplemented by some brotherly support. They were in the clear– and envied, even if the guy didn’t really know how un-enviable Hunter’s position was (not literally of course, literally he was doing just fine).

Beside him, on the counter, rested three mugs, the white tails of tea bags hanging down onto the pale countertop. He seemed to snap back to reality when Hunter glanced at them. He moved swiftly, pulling out sweetener and honey and cream, and busied himself by locating spoons. It was an impressive show, but even his averted eyes couldn’t cover his embarrassment at being caught staring.

Yeah, Hunter knew that behavior. That was the ‘why can’t I do that with my guy/why can’t my guy know I exist’ despair that was unfortunate for every one of its victims. It wasn’t the first person Hunter had seen it on. Hell, he wasn’t even the first ranger, but still, it was… nice, kind of. That he was the aspired-to party. That was kind of cool.

Hunter finally pulled himself away when Alex began to settle down, shifting so that he was curled into the brunette’s side, the other ranger’s arm draped across his shoulders in a rare show of vulnerable dependency. If it hadn’t taken such shitty circumstances to get it, Hunter would have celebrated. He was an unrepentant loser that way.

“How do you guys take it?”

For a second, Hunter almost thought the ranger meant this in a philosophical sense, and there was no part of him that was prepared for that kind of emotional discussion, but then the blond realized he was motioning towards the tea mugs. Oh, right. Yeah, that made more sense.

“One sugar,” Hunter replied, casually resting a hand on Alex’s thigh. The brunette said nothing.

“Lots of honey.”

L-man nodded, then flicked his gaze towards Alex, who remained silent.

Hunter shrugged helplessly. “Same for him.”

For the most part, Hunter and Alex stuck to cocoa (after the sugar-is-my-life mindfreak many moons ago), and though Alex was probably used to taking his tea plain, honey was soothing. Even if that rule only applied to sore throats, why the hell not extend it to wounded souls (so romantic today, golly) as well.

“Okay.” The ranger nodded distractedly, staring down at the cups. “I can do that.”

He could, and if there were several glances that lacked any kind of subtlety towards the huddled individuals on the couch, none of them bothered to mention it. It was weird, really weird, but Hunter didn’t dwell on it. He was still breathing. Still moving and thinking and not trapped in shock, but it would hit him later, probably.
The process of becoming Alex’s friend – of Alex becoming his friend – had been a gradual one, understated and painstaking, but now that they were there Hunter could feel his potential loss just as strongly as he would for any of his teammates, Cam included. Alex was a voice of reason, a contrast to know when to play it straight and when he could let loose, and the idea of just not having that someday-

Stupid. Hunter wouldn’t have that someday; there’s just something about Alex actually dying that made the dread of separation that much stronger.

“Here.”

Hunter was broken from his thoughts by two mugs being set on the coffee table before them. He gave L-man a tight smile and realized, with a start, at some point his hand had shifted to Alex’s far leg, leaning across his lap for… whatever purposes his subconscious deemed necessary. (Hunter wouldn’t know; he really hadn’t been paying attention.)

Though Alex said nothing – still – Hunter used retrieving the tea as an excuse to reposition himself, handing Alex his mug carefully before clutching his own cup in two hands. That would keep his grabby paws in check. Now was not the time to do stupid crap, Alex was actually hurting.

For himself, the ranger chose the leather-ish looking chair to settle into, his elbows resting against his knees as he held his red tea mug up in front of him, staring at the wisps of steam curling up from the metal rim.

It was at this point he realized they had missed one vital step over the course of their conversation.

“Oh,” the brunette said, blinking almost sheepishly. “I’m Leo, by the way.”

Leo, Hunter thought, nailed it.

“Hunter,” the blond offered. To hell with it, he didn’t have the energy to think of a fake name. “He’s Alex.”

At the mention of his name, Alex perked up, as though remembering they were supposed to be super-stealth encapsulated. His shoulders tensed, like he was about to object, and then he went back to staring at his untouched tea. Priorities, and all that.

Cue more awkward silence.

“So,” Hunter said suddenly, breaking the pause after a healthy sip of his drink. It wasn’t bad. “You look like hell.”

Leo, clearly not expecting the deduction (though he should have, having safely bypassed ‘slightly ragged’ straight into ‘hot mess’ territory with little effort), froze, doing a rather swell imitation of a deer caught in the headlights. And then he laughed. A lot. One startled guffaw turned into two, and soon he was shaking, his head bent over his steaming tea while not-quite hysterical chortles filled the room.

Some people would be deterred by this. Hunter was not one of these people.

“Bad day?” Hunter continued, lifting a playful eyebrow. He could do this. Even though at this point, he wasn’t exactly sure what they should be doing. Could small talk be their task? Or maybe it was more distraction; who knew?

Leo paused, wiping tears from his eyes with a rueful grin, then shook his head. “Not my best,” he
offered quietly. “The attacks, you know…”

“Yeah.” Hunter nodded, the mug warm in his hands. Alex’s arm tightened across his shoulders to pull him closer, and Hunter didn’t fight it. “They’re kind of crazy.”

“Kind of,” Leo echoed with a small smile. Like the one from before, it was for their benefit only. “I try to help out, you know? With the emergency responses, evacuating and stuff.”

It was a very understated way of saying ‘I sometimes morph into a skintight suit and battle space creatures to save your life, but whatevs’, and Hunter silently applauded him for it. Secret identity it was then; duly noted.

“I’ve done martial arts since I was a kid,” Leo continued, gesturing with his cup. “So I can keep Stingwingers at bay long enough for people to get to the emergency shelters.”

“No gonna lie,” Hunter said after a particularly large gulp of tea. “That’s pretty awesome. Thanks, dude.”

“It’s nothing,” Leo dismissed quietly. His cheeks flushed, embarrassed by the praise or from feeling undeserving of such, but then he was moving on with a small shrug. “My friends – my roommates, I mean – they can fight too—” Because we’re secretly power rangers. “But…” he trailed off, staring down at his drink. “Anyway, it was a tough day.”

Oh. Okay, Hunter actually had this one.

Leo was having team issues, and like the dedicated red ranger he was, the brunette was appropriately tearing himself up about it.

It was times like this, Hunter missed Dustin. And Tori. They were good at this team stuff. And feelings.

Hunter was usually the guy that sat in the back and heckled during their moments of attempted bonding, at least up until the point where Dustin laid on the sad puppy eyes and Tori’s glare turned to just this side of murderous, in which case, Hunter immediately found a pair of shoes (usually his) that needed an intense inspection that could only be pulled off by him, damn it.

“Leo.” The brunette’s head snapped back towards Hunter, eyes widening at the no-bullshit tone. “Come on dude, you already know our issues—” Super understatement of death-mourning, but that was fine. “What’s your beef, man?”

Speak, so that I may comfort you with the awkward wisdom of a preferential loner.

Hunter couldn’t do that much worse than… say, Cam, or something. It would probably be better to have him talk than for Leo to just fester in his own angst. Even his clumsy attempts at being a ‘decent human’ would be better than nothing, right?

“Speak,” Hunter ordered, when it looked like Leo was about to object.

He got it; the other guy felt bad about Alex and his situation (because he was decent, and that was weird, in a sad way), but they were here and they might as well, so…

Leo sighed, and frowned down at his mug. “I’m having trouble with my, uh…”

“Roommate?” Hunter offered. The brunette seemed to be sticking with that word over any other, which meant his team had to be a newer one, where they were still working through the bonding
“Friend,” Leo corrected. He was determined in this declaration, but it seemed more like a ‘we will be friends’ kind of tone rather than a ‘we are friends’. If there was one thing that was clear, it was that Leo wanted to make this work, even if he didn’t exactly know how.

If Alex could be bothered with speaking at the moment, he was sure the Time Force ranger would say the same thing.

“My friend…” Leo continued. “He doesn’t really trust me.” He looked away, his expression rueful. “I guess I can’t really blame him.”

“Stop.” The brunette’s head snapped in his direction, but Hunter waved his confusion off with a frown, leaning into Alex. “No one’s going to trust you if you don’t trust yourself. You make a call, you commit to it, end of story. Odds are, your instincts are steering you the right way.” He would be dead if they weren’t, but Hunter didn’t bother saying that. “You want to help people, then help them. But you gotta go all out or else you’re only going to end up getting yourself hurt, or worse.”

You could just watch your friends die.

Alex, as though sensing his thought, squeezed Hunter’s hand. He turned, ever so slightly, and fixed a look on the blond. It was conflicted, Hunter guessed – he wasn’t good at this stuff – but if he really had to put a label on it, he would say Alex was proud.

It took Hunter a few seconds to remember how to talk again.

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting to help people,” Hunter muttered, his throat dry. “And your friend’s an ass if he can’t see that.”

Instead of looking startled, the other man laughed, low and bitter, frowning into his tea. “My friend says that intentions are worthless if you cannot follow through with an effective solution.”

“Well, you’re not going to get there by moping,” Hunter countered, the words spilling out before he could stop himself. “Your jackass-friend has a point, but you’re kind of missing it completely.”

“Oh?” Leo countered, both eyebrows raised. It was meant to be a light jab, but Hunter could see he held the other man’s interest, even if he didn’t want to project as much.

“You can’t get better without making a few mistakes,” Hunter said. “We learn through experiences right? And now that you’ve messed up… whatever you messed up, that mistake – and mistakes like that mistake – are something you know to look out for.” He sat back, taking a slow sip of his drink and leaning into Alex. “You might not be as awesome as Mr. Holier-than-thou yet, but that doesn’t mean you can’t be.” Hunter frowned, wondering who the hell he was to give out life advice, then shrugged, resting his chin against Alex’s shoulder. “Get knocked down, you get up again. That’s the only thing you can do.”

Now if life could only be as easy as quoting song lyrics, everything would be peachy keen.

Leo laughed, and this time there was some relief in there, a dose of legitimate mirth startled from his cesspools of angst. “Is that so?”

Hunter nodded, opening his mouth for some (undoubtedly) witty reply.

Alex beat him to the punch. “Yes,” the red ranger said quietly. “It is.”
Damned if it didn’t mean more coming from the party supposedly in mourning.

No, no— Alex was mourning, and he had every right to be. Even if Hunter didn’t know the full story behind that attack, Alex’s drastic change in behavior was enough for him to see that was a day that had greatly changed the brunette’s life. And maybe not for the better.

“Okay,” Leo said. It was the barest exhale, the tension dissipating from his body as the adrenaline and fear and guilt wore off with sudden exhaustion. Yeah, Hunter was familiar with that too.
“Okay,” the brunette repeated, nodding. He looked down at his mug, his throat working around what Hunter sincerely hoped was a ball of feelings. He liked Leo, he did— hey, Hunter didn’t hand out pep-talks to just anyone— but he honestly couldn’t deal with two crying rangers right now. Sure, Alex might be keeping the tears on the inside, but he could be crying the Nile easily for all the sorrow he was feeling.

Hunter wasn’t sure if any of that made sense, probably had something to do with the sudden elation that Alex was feeling collected enough to talk. Because then, you know, he didn’t have to do it all by himself now. That was why.

Leo opened his mouth, eyebrows furrowed as though he were about to break into a particularly uncomfortable question. “How did you two, you know—?”

There was nothing quite like being saved by the familiar beeps of a communicator going off. The other ranger shook, startled enough to spill tea over his hands, then cursed, rushing over towards the kitchen. “Sorry,” Leo called over his shoulder. “It’s just my pad, you know— a.k.a. my morpher you don’t know about. –I have some friends in the medbay I need to—” He cut off with a stare, torn between what should happen next.

Hunter knew an out when he saw one.

“Go,” the blond urged, waving the other ranger towards the door. “We can let ourselves out.”

It cut through the distraction enough to make the brunette smile – a half-cocky, half-timid thing that reminded Hunter of the son of a bitch Eric constantly complained about, the confident jokester team leader.

“Try not to wreck the place,” Leo said, grinning. He moved towards the door, stopping just at its threshold. Hunter assumed he had just forgotten some thing, but instead of rushing around for missing items, Leo looked over his shoulder, his expression unfamiliar with its intensity, a seriousness that honestly freaked Hunter out a bit.

“Thank you,” Leo said. “And I’m very sorry for your loss.”

He exchanged a slight nod with Alex, and then was gone, out the door in a flare of denim and dust.

“Comfort Leo Corbett.”

“What?” Hunter’s question was asked with a turn of his head, when he saw that Alex once more had his datapad in hand.

The brunette, upon his prompting, angled the screen so the ninja had a better view.

Whereupon Hunter discovered that the mission objective was, indeed, to ‘Comfort Leo Corbett’.

Sometimes, Hunter noted, Time Force just really liked to fuck with them.
Now if only he replaced ‘sometimes’ with ‘every second of every day ever’, that statement would be one hundred percent painfully accurate.

Comforting a guy after dying, what a load of crock.

Chapter End Notes

A bit of Time Force trivia:

So if you’re not familiar, at the very beginning of Time Force Alex captures Ransik all on his lonesome. While Ransik is in transport to be imprisoned, he gets loose, and then Alex goes after him to recapture him, being the dedicated time-dude he is. Of course, this time is much less successful, as Alex dies, Ransik escapes to the past, and Jen and her team travel after him with Alex’s morpher. Wes has to use it because the morpher is locked to certain genetics, and Wes is part of Alex’s family tree. They change enough things in the past that somehow the timestream shifts so that Alex never died (no idea how that worked), but it doesn’t change the fact that it happened.

Liberties have definitely been taken in this particular chapter by way of the logistics of time travel. I’m not going to pretend to understand the science, if it would even be possible to travel back to a timeline that didn’t end up being the ultimate timeline – it gives me a headache just thinking about it, so please take this as the creative liberty that it was. I’m biased, but ultimately I feel this chapter was vital to progressing the story.

End of trivia :D

Thanks to FlipCarson for the comment!!! Your feedback, as always, is greatly appreciated :)

Until next time
“So, we’re going to talk about that, right?”

“Hunter.” Alex felt tired. No, he felt exhausted, like every ounce of energy had been drained from any reserves he might have formulated in his years of training; like he had run every marathon and worked every test until his body and mind were depleted of anything that could be considered useful.

“Because that,” the blond continued, tugging Alex forward restlessly as they made their way up Commander Myers’ back deck. “That needs to be talked about.”

“Hunter,” Alex tried again. He didn’t know what else to say.

The crimson ranger gave him a knowing look, his eyebrows raising just a fraction, a challenge and inspection all in one. “Alex,” he replied calmly.

“Hunter.” Alex struggled with the words, trying to fight down the feeling of shock and despair. “Hunter, please.”

The blond judged him quietly, still against the back door as he considered Alex’s request. He still had one hand wrapped around Alex’s wrist, and the contact was nice- unnecessary, but nice– yet it reminded Alex too much of what he had taken without thought to Hunter’s boundaries not half an hour before. He had been so lost in his grief that he had allowed them to be seen by Mr. Corbett, and then he had latched onto Hunter… It was humiliating what he had– what he had needed, but Hunter hadn’t said anything then, much like he wasn’t saying anything now. Part of that made Alex want to yell at him. Hunter shouldn’t be indulging his– this, none of it. Alex didn’t have any right to ask for it.

A betraying spark of hope noted though, insistently, that Hunter hadn’t pushed him away. Remembered the feeling of Hunter’s fingers carding through his hair. The warmth, the feel of his muscles underneath Alex’s palm, allowing him that close, sitting stacked as though it were a regular occurrence–
Humiliating. Weak and humiliating.

At this point in their relationship, Hunter might be kind enough to ignore it, but Alex would never forget. The burden was his.

“Okay,” the blond huffed, rolling his eyes. Before, Alex would assume this as the sign of exasperation Hunter wanted it to look like, but now he knew better. Underneath the show was a hint of relief, of concern and worry laying in the tension of his neck, long and lean and–

“But we’re talking about this later,” Hunter warned. He was glancing over his shoulder, almost coy, one hand poised on the doorknob.

Alex swallowed. Nodded. “Okay.”

Perhaps later the feeling of comfortable nearness would fade into a dull memory, into something less distracting while Alex attempted to wrap his mind around the guilt. No, not guilt, but… failure, maybe.

His fate was not a shocking one. Alex had come to terms with his death– it had been required for him to receive grief counseling before he could be cleared for active duty. While his case was entirely unique, the administration of Time Force were not ones to shy from a challenge, however problematically singular it presented. They tackled his therapy with the same seriousness and determination as they would for that of any other agent, and Alex had gone through the hoops willingly, eager for the distraction.

When it had started, he had foolishly hoped for true improvement, but it hadn’t taken long to see that no amount of counseling would ever make up for his wound, would ever compensate for what he had lost. In the end, Alex had learned to cope, had taken what he could and moved on, albeit slightly less of a person than he had been previously.

He wondered if he could tell this to Hunter. About how he had already tried, and failed. About how there was not much to be done for it.

But Hunter had given an order, one built from concern for his wellbeing, and for reasons he would prefer not to articulate, Alex could not deny him. Not when– not when there were alternatives.

-:-:-:-:-:

There wasn’t much to it, in the end.

Hunter chose a moment where they were secluded, when their duties were not pressing, to address the topic again. It hadn’t been long enough for Alex to find his bearing in the haze of confusion and detachment, but he had been given his reprieve. The fact that he had not used the moments given to him effectively was his own failure, not Hunter’s. The misuse of time felt ironic, or at least artistically appropriate in his case. He didn’t know why. Alex had been given more time than he deserved, that much was clear. Odd, to be contemplating his own morality. Alex had never considered himself a particularly philosophical individual, but something about what had transpired gave him pause.

Behind him, Hunter shifted on the bed, doing his best to break the silence as obnoxiously as possible. Before, Alex would have found it annoying, but now he appreciated the levity and subtle gesture for what it was. Hunter was giving him an opportunity to start this on his own terms; it was not a generosity Alex would squander.

He began the only way he knew how, keeping his gaze fixed out the window.
“I died,” he said quietly.

Even now, it caused his throat to catch, feeling thick with discomfort and dread.

“Yeah, I got that.” Hunter’s reply was light, its appearance dismissive. The lack of fidgeting though, the stillness, confirmed that this was anything but.

It was a remarkable kindness. Were Alex stronger… better, the immensity of the gesture would have rendered him speechless.

As it was, he could only steel himself for what was to come.

“I was always going to die,” he explained. His words were barely a whisper, but he knew Hunter heard them, knew the other ranger was holding too still to miss them. “There were time alterations—allowable ones, due to my team’s initial stay in the past. Ransik—” Alex swallowed. He didn’t remember the specifics of that day because of the time changes, but he could picture it. The frustration of Ransik’s escape, the anxiety stifled under duty. He would have acted as best he could with what he had been given, and it had ended… It had ended in a blast intended by his own mission. His death was predestined. He was never supposed to be the one to bring Ransik back into custody.

That, in and of itself, was probably what hurt the most. While the procedures behind determining what would ultimately be the flow of time were beyond Alex – known only to the council and the analysts; a dozen or so people who examined the course of history and managed it as best they could, implementing procedures to maintain the integrity of what had been— he did understand one thing. That, in the grand scheme of it all, his death had been a necessity.

And that, in turn, his life had not been.

“Ransik killed me,” Alex finished, even though all he could feel was betrayal; betrayal and frustration that the organization he had pledged himself to had so easily cast him aside. He understood the need, wanted to take solace in the logic, but he could not. “When the team went back, my death was undone. I suppose the manipulator went back and prevented it from happening, which could have…”

Would he have captured Ransik? Would Ransik have still escaped? Would Alex be charged with leading the others back to the past, or would there have been other candidates? Jen’s team had always been near the top of the roster, but her decision to abscond with the morphers and hijack a time ship had always been against orders. Maybe Time Force would have ordered her back anyway; maybe they would have picked a different team, maybe–?

“We had to preserve it.” Alex’s fist clenched against the windowsill, his fingers rigid against the chipped wood. “We have to keep things as they were.”

“So we had to kill you?”

Alex didn’t have time to analyze Hunter’s tone, could only be grateful that his back was to the blond, that Hunter could not see the instinctive flinch against his words. He had died, but he hadn’t been able to remember it. Had only been told it had happened. Had only known that because of Jen’s logs.

Watching it transpire, even from afar, had made it so horribly real. It was not a sight he could clear from his mind, no matter how much he desired it. He had seen what Jen had seen, and for a moment he understood with unkind severity just exactly how devastating it must have been. To go from that definite lack to Alex’s gruff and brutal reintroduction into their team. For him, he had never died. He
had been off-balance and angry and at a loss, on the outs as Time Force’s number one ranger, suddenly stuck playing in the background while Jen–

For Jen, he had died. And then he was there, carrying on with a rigid structure he couldn’t help but enforce, and he had broken her.

It seemed only reasonable then, that she would turn to Wes.

Despite what many may assume, Alex didn’t actually hate the other red ranger.

The true reality of their relationship, however small it may be, was less impactful to both of their lives, morpher aside. On a personal level, Alex was apathetic to Wes. There were things he hated, but those were situational, not personal, and not anything to do with them. They were related, and Wes had… hadn’t stolen Jen from Alex. He hadn’t, as long as it had taken Alex to see that. Jen was her own person, determined and headstrong to a brilliant extent, and she would never subject herself to a concept such as love, she would not yield, simply over matching faces. She hadn’t transferred her affection for Alex onto Wes. Wes had stood on his own as an individual and Jen– beautiful, independent Jen– surrendered her affections willingly.

Jen had never been stolen away. Jen wasn’t a helpless damsel. Jen wasn’t from a fairytale. Jen was real, a person, an adult capable of making her own decisions.

She wasn’t stolen.

Jen had left. Her choice.

Alex would never fault her for it. It was her life, she should be happy.

It didn’t matter if it had left him at odds with his own attempts for happiness – transformed him into a helpless wanderer when his future had been so clear before him. Jen wasn’t responsible for Alex’s contentment; that was Alex’s job.

He wasn’t very good at it, but it was his job.

“Hey.” A finger was prodding insistently into the side of Alex’s arm, and it took the brunette a few seconds to realize Hunter was beside him, frown firm on his face as he looked down at Alex. “That’s fucked up.”

The non sequitur threw the Time Force agent, though he supposed upon review that the comment wasn’t as out of the blue as he had perceived it to be.

“They shouldn’t have done that to you,” Hunter continued. His eyes were blue. It wasn’t something Alex hadn’t noticed before, but at this distance it was evident and, for some reason, very notable.

They weren’t a bright blue, not piercing, but something more subtle. It felt appropriate.

Alex felt comfortable under that gaze.

Hunter must have realized the Time Force Agent was only half-listening and pressed on. “Alex,” he said, insistent, unyielding (stupidly stubborn and stupidly loyal-) “They shouldn’t have made you do that.”

Alex found himself defending their decisions before he could think about it.

“They did their jobs,” he replied automatically. “It is not their fault I died, nor is it their fault that the
situation was… rectified,” Alex struggled around the word, and Hunter’s eyebrows shot up, his mouth tensing as though he were about to say something horribly sarcastic. Alex couldn’t bear it. “I was the agent available,” he continued, repeating the same reasoning he had been trying to console himself with all evening. “I have a duty to preserve the time stream; it was my job to–”

“Kill yourself?” Hunter hissed.

The blond had always been dramatic. It had irritated Alex when they had first met, but now, seeing it aimed not at him, but in his defense–

“Ransik killed me,” Alex murmured. He felt stiff and tired, wrecked through and through. “Ransik killed me. Time changed; I lived. I am here, I am fine.”

And that was all there really was to it, wasn’t it? It was a fact that Alex couldn’t find fault with, shouldn’t find anything but comfort in. No matter what had happened, he was still here, still doing his job. He still had his morpher, he still had a purpose.

Time Force hadn’t taken that from him. Not yet, at least.

Alex would not be obtuse enough to say he didn’t fear for the moment they decided they were done with him. Wasn’t sure that would be the same moment his purpose came to an end, his life–

He was being overdramatic. Taking notes from Hunter’s books again. The blond would be irritated. Said blond was looking at Alex with an expression the red ranger could not place. It was eerily still, boarding between intense anger and defensiveness, mixing into something he could not place. “See, you keep saying ‘Ransik killed me.’” Hunter murmured in a low voice that was almost a growl. “But what I’m hearing is ‘I let him kill me, so clearly, I deserve this traumatic experience’ and frankly, it pisses me off.”

“That’s not–” Alex had never said as much, but Hunter, ever perceptive, had caught onto exactly what Alex had been thinking. Because in truth, how could he be angry over a fate he had earned? Alex had been the one who had lost the battle; it would be unreasonable for him to mourn that which was always meant to be. It would be–

It wasn’t until Alex was blinking down at the scuffed floorboards of their shared bedroom, one hand pressed against his face, that he realized Hunter had slapped him. Not punched, slapped.

He was at a loss for determining what, exactly, that was supposed to mean.

“You asshole,” Hunter was grumbling, his hands tugging at his messy hair, the rebellious strands in a perpetual state of dishevelment despite the ninja’s efforts. “You stupid, you–” Hunter’s eyes – those pale blue, comforting things – were back on Alex with renewed intensity, one finger pointing in the brunette’s direction preluding the crimson ranger grabbing a hold of his shoulders.

“Asshole,” Hunter repeated. “You caught a guy– no, you caught the guy single-handedly. He escaped, you went after him again, with the balls of a freakin’ giant, you took on that motherfucker again, because that was what you swore to do. Because you’re the guy who fights for the guys that can’t and not-having backup wasn’t going to stop you from–”

Hunter cut off with a shake of his head, and Alex watched the teen’s Adam apple bob as he swallowed, composing himself amidst the rant that left Alex floundering.

“You,” Hunter began again. This time when his gaze returned, his stare determined, there was a glistening that Alex must have imagined, but it was a nice thought, albeit a stupid one– “Are a fighter,” Hunter said. “Who went up against stupid odds and you got dealt a bad hand. But the stuff I saw, that fight? That wasn’t the work of an amateur. That wasn’t a guy who let himself die, that
Hunter frowned, breathing harshly. He was close.
“If you can’t see that asshole had to cheat to win– had to resort to surprise and deceit because he
couldn’t beat you in battle, and hell, he couldn’t even keep you dead, then… then you’re stupid.”

“I’m stupid?” Alex echoed. He wasn’t sure why he focused on that part.

It was enough to break the intensity that Hunter had built over himself, and if he imagined it right, the

They stood like that for a moment, held in an awkward limbo. Eventually, Hunter broke the hold,
seemingly satisfied with the silent transaction. “Stupid,” Hunter muttered. “Now, come to bed.”

Alex swallowed, allowing himself a second to get lost in the implications of such a statement, before
he followed after the blond, agreeing with his deduction. It was stupid, the whole thing was
preposterous, he knew that.

It didn’t fix anything, but the passionate vehemence in which Hunter had more or less fought for
him, for his peace of mind, for his credit as a ranger…

That warmed something in Alex he thought had long sense been rendered dormant.

It was in that moment Alex realized he was totally, and invariably, screwed.

He’d fallen in love with Hunter Bradley.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter’s short and sweet but I feel like it covers a lot of very emotional ground, so
to speak. Which is good, because next chapter we have angst.

Love and just- every thanks to FlipCarson for the comment! I greatly enjoy reading your
feedback, and I hope you continue to enjoy the story :)

Until next time :D
We Can't Stay

Chapter Notes

Thank you to the lovely real vampire for beta-reading this chapter and all of its predecessors. The generosity of your critical eye and even better attention-to-detail will always be appreciated, and never forgotten. Additional thanks to Kei Luna Shoryu, for additional beta efforts and all around cheerleader status. Thank you, Kei, for you never-ending wells of support, they too, will always be appreciated.

If you’re looking for something else to read, try 'My Brother's Keeper' (now complete!) by the real vampire or 'The Art of Cohesion' by Kei Luna Shoryu. Regrets – you will have none :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It took Hunter a moment to remember how to breathe.

In that time, Alex was already moving, already shifting them into a more concealed location until they had their bearings. Hunter only managed to follow suit on auto-pilot, his mind blank and body numb as he took in their surroundings.

It was modest, by anyone’s standards. Nothing special. It ranked as park number twelve on their tour of rangers’ hang-outs, and it fell on the smaller scale in comparison to the others they had stalked/walked/sprinted around. In the grand scheme of things, it would have been quite unremarkable, if it weren’t for the painful familiarity of a place he had long abandoned persistently hanging over him, calling back memories he had worked hard to repress.

“malfunction of some kind,” Trip was saying. Later, Hunter would register his tone as urgent, a sense of panic pervading the usual enthusiasm. “Hold tight. Do not engage. There is a Delta class criminal nearby; you can’t interfere–”

“Hunter?”

He didn’t want to look, didn’t want to turn away from the playground with the broken seesaw or the old oak tree with the three splitting trunk for fear that it would disappear without his vigil. Or maybe it would be worse if they stayed, if they were really there–

“Hunter.” A hand gripped his forearm; the hold light, tentative. Hunter didn’t shake it off.

“I know this place.” He swallowed, refusing to look at Alex. Trip’s voice was still ringing from the communicator, a spitfire of information, but Alex wasn’t paying attention. That, Hunter could tell, even without looking.

The grip tightened. “This park… it was near our house, before my parents–”

He cut off with a scowl, his jaw snapped shut so tight he could hear the grinding, welcomed the pain. He exhaled the air trapped in his chest through his nose, wanting it to help, wanting to be wrong.

He had to. He had– this was a coincidence. There was no way they could go to the exact wrong
There was one way to find out.

He was running before it was a thought, down the worn gravel path he knew so well – the same one he and Blake had traversed a dozen times on their way to and from the Thunder Academy. He had never gone back. His excuse had been Blake, Blake’s peace of mind, Blake’s temperament, Blake’s healing process, but in truth he could never stomach the thought of the place. It held too many things he would never get back, and damnit, if he knew he had never deserved them in the first place, but Hunter was a greedy SOB laden with unrepentant want anyway.

Thoughts like that had landed him in the hands of counselors that would be shaking their heads in disappointment, but damned if they mattered, and damned if he would stop running.

He made it to the crest of the hill sooner than expected. He hadn’t been streaking, he realized. Too much attention, and there was no way Alex would have been able to keep up with him at that rate, which somehow mattered. Details.

Hunter made it to that hill, that rise behind his parent’s subdivision, the one that flanked the backyards of several neighbors before falling into the disarray of wild, unclaimed woods.

In the distance he saw it, just as welcoming and comforting as it had been six years ago. Like nothing had even goddamned changed.

The hill provided a clear line-of-site through his old backyard. Light spilled through the glass doors on the back porch, the blinds open, revealing the living room he had broken his nose in after sneaking in some not-so-approved ninja practice with Blake when they were ten. The stupid couch was the same, even though it sported an awful blotch down the side where Blake had spilled spaghetti on it. He had hidden in the woods for about two hours until mom had coaxed him out; a tale of tragedy ending with ice cream and a blanket fort, Disney movies a constant stream across the television. Hunter had tried recreating those results a grand total of one time, and even if he had to pick up a paper route of all things to pay off the cost of dry cleaning the rug, dad still snuck him an ice cream sandwich when mom wasn’t looking, and it had been their secret for years.

It was there. Every Christmas and every birthday, every lost tooth and well-intended prank. Every failed round of Monopoly (the board always ended up flipped onto the ground by someone, and their name might rhyme with ‘snake’), every tournament of Mario Kart, every breakdown and tantrum and feeling of belonging and family and love, that was where it started.

“We have to go back.” The voice came before the grip on his arm – smart on Alex’s move, Hunter might have punched him otherwise. “Hunter, you heard Trip. We can’t stay–”

“What’s the date?” Hunter refused to turn his gaze away from the scene in front of him. His parents had to be home if the lights were on, someone had to be, but he hadn’t seen any movement yet.

“Hunter–”

“What is the date?” He ground it out through clenched teeth, his shoulders wound with tension. He could feel it, feel the hesitancy, the anxiety of Alex with his countering, gentle hold. Either his fingers were shaking or Hunter was, and the blond could not find it in himself to set aside the processing time to determine which was which.

When the brunette continued not to answer him, Hunter finally turned, head wrenching to the side in such a furious motion he was surprised he didn’t get whiplash.
“Alex, this is goddamn important. What is the date?”

“How do you know this place?” Damn him and his perception; Alex had already caught on, had already moved a hand to Hunter’s other arm until he was bracing against the crimson ranger, staring at him head on, concern and something else unreadable in his eyes. “Hunter, how–?”

“It’s our house,” Hunter spat. The words were strangled, forced, causing Alex’s eyes to tense, a minute flinch subdued through years of training. “You know that right? You and your friends had to know that.”

“There was a malfunction,” Alex explained. His voice was level, he looked calm, but Hunter could feel the quakes in his palms, his hands tight against Hunter’s forearms. “A mistake. Trip’s working on it, but we can’t stay, something dangerous is going to happen.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Hunter hissed. It wasn’t until he was inches from Alex that he realized he was leering in the other man’s face, and at that point, he was past caring. “You think I don’t know exactly what is going to happen–”

Had it happened? Was this the aftermath? Jesus, was he too late again? He and Blake had ended up around the front, right? Sensei had said they were running training drills in the park that couldn’t be disturbed, so they had taken the long route home but hell, was this it? Was the universe mocking him?

He saw it, like a dream, and Hunter could have sobbed from relief for such a small thing.

His mother passed by the window, as graceful and collected as she had always been, a brief image as she crossed the living room but she– she was there. She was real.

He had to stop it. If they were here and something bad was going to happen, he had to stop it. He knew that outfit. Knew it covered in blood, knew it even when he was throwing himself back out the door, shoving Blake outside before he could see it too. Protecting, even through the shock.

“Hunter,” Alex was saying, maybe repeating his name for the tenth time, the twentieth. “Hunter, we cannot engage. Do you understand? We cannot engage–”

“Fuck your orders,” Hunter hissed, his eyes locked on the window. “Lock me up forever if you want to; I’m stopping this.”

He made the declaration out of courtesy, kind of. But mostly, it was because Alex was his teammate, despite their different morphers. Alex deserved to know and a tiny, stupidly hopeful part of Hunter, was waiting to see if Alex would help. If he would understand.

It was like the sabretooth tiger again, right? Alex wouldn’t let them kill a kid; this was just– just a mistake. They had missed it the first time around. The last six years of Hunter’s life had been a small lapse in Time Force’s bucket before they realized a correction needed to be made. It was a devastating oversight, sure, but Hunter would be willing not to rain hell upon them and their loved ones if they could bring back his parents. If Alex could bring back his parents.

There was something stupidly wonderful about the concept, and it struck Hunter off-balance long enough for him to fumble. It would be an epic story, he and Alex would trade off telling it, Alex with the more technical details, Hunter would– It wouldn’t matter, it would be everything. Hunter would have everything and more, and Blake would have a family and he and Tori’s blonde, blue-eyed kids would get grandparents and Hunter wouldn’t have to leave a legacy of failure in his ranger career. He wouldn’t be born of it. He could… he could have something.
The grip on his arm changed; Alex was letting go– to plan, right? They were going to do this right, do it well–

Hunter had a face full of dirt before he understood what was happening to him, his arms twisted behind his back in some kind of complicated hold he couldn’t fathom, because Alex had just freakin’ tackled him, was bracing him against the ground. Down, not moving.

They weren’t moving.

“Timer’s almost out,” Alex whispered. Maybe it was apologetic, maybe it was his version of apologetic which just turned out to be the exact opposite of anything Hunter needed at this exact moment, and maybe Hunter just needed to kill some people right now, because this couldn’t be happening. “We can’t engage.”

“Stop fucking around,” Hunter hissed. “We have to warn them. They have to know.”

He didn’t know how Lothor had gotten into the house, how he had managed to get close enough to two master shinobi to land the fatal blows, to catch them off balance, but even the smallest warning had to help. If they just knew it was going to happen, they could be on guard. He could save them. Hunter could do this.

“We cannot engage,” Alex repeated. Hunter got it; he had to put on a show while Trip was on the line, but could he let go? “Hunter, this has to–”

“Don’t you dare,” Hunter snarled, thrashing against the hold for the first time. He had been willing to humor Alex before but he couldn’t actually– they weren’t actually going to do nothing. “Let go. That’s my parents, I have to go.”

“Trip,” Alex’s voice was urgent, uncertain in a way his grapple wasn’t. That damn thing was impenetrable, and Hunter would know, because he couldn’t get out of it. “How long–?”

“Fifteen seconds.” Trip’s voice was wild and Alex’s voice was shaking and Hunter’s breath was coming out in rough gasps, but it was all wrong, it was wrong. He couldn’t be here– He couldn’t be the asshole loser who was given this opportunity, this impossible chance and then screw it up completely. Hypothetically yes, he could be that guy, but he didn’t want to be– He couldn’t, it would kill him.

“Let go.” His eyes were warm, but he refused to look at Alex, refused to look away from those glass doors. Hard, when Alex kept shoving his damn face into the ground, but not impossible. “Let go, you son of a bitch.”

“I’m sorry.” Alex’s hands were shaking, but his hold stayed tight, his body pressed against Hunter’s – minimizing every thrash with physics and logic and foresight and his perfect-robot-tactics. “I’m sorry, we can’t–”

“Fuck you,” Hunter spat. “Fuck you, we can’t. We can. The only thing we can’t do is let them die and–”

He had been struggling, half turned, twisted under Alex, not pleading – never stopping to beg– but accessing as much reasonable communication as he could manage because if Alex didn’t understand that, didn’t understand emotion and family bonds and needs and all the other shit he had pretended to understand over the past few months, then maybe he would understand this.

Hunter didn’t get to see if that would work, because a flurry of movement had turned his attention back to the windows, freezing him dead in his place.
Lothor.

He even looked the same, stupid wrestling mask and all, but his movements indicated the years of training and mastery of the shadow arts so many forgot he possessed. He moved— a blur across the living room, and Hunter could see, now in his sight, his father—

There was… there was knowing a thing had happened, there was seeing the results and living in the aftermath, and then there was seeing it happen, that laid a different kind of burden on your shoulders. Hunter had never desired to see his parents’ death, had satisfied his quota for personal tragedy a long time ago, but like many things in life, his wants meant nothing.

He saw his father’s body fall, a knife in his throat.

And then the world was disappearing from view, lost in the transport between times. For once, Hunter welcomed the pain, knowing it would never compare to the injuries he had suffered trapped under the duties of someone he had considered a friend.

A friend, of all things. But he had known better, through experience, he had learned

Friends were for children.

Hunter had not been one of those for a very long time.

Their story had gone like this:

Hunter hadn’t been wanted. It happens, he guessed.

Blake hadn’t been wanted. His birth family had expressed this standpoint in a different way, and that happened too, though the tragedy was none the less poignant, nor the justice less violated.

The Bradleys, for whatever reason, had wanted them.

Hunter had never questioned it. He had never really understood it either, but he hadn’t questioned it. He had welcomed this change, this new, wonderful mutation, with welcome arms. He had hoped it had been his due, some kind of comforting prize to ease the effects of neglect and loneliness.

After his parents had died, Hunter had reevaluated his mindset with as much efficiency and pragmatism as a traumatized twelve year old could muster.

Because he and Blake? They had never started off as close. They had been two broken cogs thrown together, wounded in their own ways, and coerced into a family experience. Hunter hadn’t understood the concept of a brother, but he had gotten it in an abstract way. It was a person he could be responsible for. It was a person he could love, and take care of, and make feel safe and wanted. He had liked that.

Blake understood family but detested it, held a fierce aversion from his own experiences, and had fought them all tooth and nail. Where Hunter had been needy, Blake had just been scared. Scared that if they were his, and if he were theirs, they would hurt him. That he would fail at whatever impossible standards you could apply to a toddler and be punished for it, or leave them upset.

They both needed their own reassurances, and where Hunter would take it easily, Blake wouldn’t. It made him grateful, in retrospect, that he’d somehow ended up the older brother. It was only by a couple of weeks, but that was enough to proclaim him the defender, enough to give him the excuse
to always look after Blake, to be allowed to take care of him.

If Blake’d had his way, back then, he wouldn’t have spoken to Hunter at all. He would have retreated deep into his shell where it was safe, and Hunter would have been all alone again.

Maybe he wouldn’t have, but Hunter was familiar enough with engrained survival mechanisms to understand that you didn’t abandon a good strategy if it worked for you.

In the end, they clung together because they were, in essence, all they had left of their family, and Hunter was older, and Hunter decided they were sticking together. In grief, Blake had gone along with this, and new survival techniques had been established, ones that better suited the team than the individual. It wasn’t glorious, it wasn’t great, but it had been all they had, and the universe generally didn’t give grief to two traumatized orphans.

Or when it did, it at least had the decency to wait a bit.

Ultimately, it came down to this:

There was no balance. There was no guaranteed good to counteract the evil; there was no invisible force assuring the just distribution of rights and wrongs in the world. Life was chaos. You had to cherish the good while you had it and accept the bad when it dragged its sorry hide up to your front door and nothing or no one could make you less than you made yourself for it. Prepare yourself accordingly; embrace what you had while you had it.

That was all it really came down to, at the end of it.

He had been fooled once, by his childish mindset, but Hunter hadn’t been bitter about it. That was part of the learning process, right? That was how maturity worked.

Hunter wouldn’t say he had been fooled, but there had been, without question, a severe lapse in judgement where one Alex Collins was concerned.

That was on him. He had gotten too comfortable with his team, too complacent with the end game.

His duty as a ranger had only ever been about one thing.

Now he paid the price for forgetting that.

---

Hunter turned on the other ranger as soon as the world reappeared beneath their feet, shoving and snarling and remorseless for stupid concerns of keeping a low profile when what the hell was that, what the hell was that?

“You son of a bitch!”

He threw a punch, wild and furious and knowing, very distantly, that Alex would be able to block it. He used that inevitability to justify his continued rage, not that he needed, or even wanted, justification at this point, but the anger and the loathing and the betrayal were so much easier to hold onto if he could build a wall to stand behind, something that held the sorrow and emptiness at bay.

He had only seen the results of Lothor’s activities the first time. He remembered it, all but bouncing into the house on a high with the kind of adrenaline that resulted from enthusiastic training and ignorant youth, Blake hot on his heels, not knowing they were walking into a nightmare that would be the rest of their lives.
The first time had been bearable only through the haze of shock, of not understanding. Blake had figured it out before he did, a veteran of violence already in his brief life. Blake had seen death before, murder even; had been born of it. Hunter had only been neglected, knew the two bodies bleeding out on the floor as his only guiding lights in this world, and they couldn’t be gone, they couldn’t be. He hadn’t gotten enough.

Even though he had more than earned this punishment from his idiotically committed past follies, Hunter had hoped, for the worthlessness that it was, that he would never be faced with such feelings of overwhelming helplessness again.

But he had seen it, this time. Had fought for it, for his mom– his dad– he had fought so that history could take its rightful course and burn a hole through his chest, right where he was most lacking. To bury inside and bleed him hollow, until there was nothing left to offer, their deaths just as raw as that day five years ago, just as shocking and unfair.

And all he had done was laid there and fucking watched.

“Go to hell!” Hunter snarled, disregarding strategy and structure for mindless blow after mindless blow, Alex easily blocking with his elbows. “Go to hell; go to hell!”

“Hunter,” Alex said, his voice quiet but firm. Reasonable.

If Hunter took the time to really look, he would see the strain around the brunette’s eyes, the tight set in his shoulders; notice the minute rigidity of his movements, the mechanical behavior he defaulted to when he was having difficulty coming to terms with something. Hunter would see this, and know.

And maybe part of the blond did see it. But most of him – the dying part – couldn’t handle perceiving Alex as being capable of humanity at that exact moment, couldn’t empathize with the monster that had allowed his parent’s deaths, couldn’t comfort the man who was– who had been – his friend, because there were a lot of things Hunter could do right now, but forgiveness was not one of them.

“Inside, Hunter,” Alex continued, holding his hands up, palms out in a show of calm surrender. “We can talk about this inside–”

“Fuck you!” God, it was loud, but Hunter didn’t care, didn’t care about the tears blurring his vision, distorting that tense look on Alex’s face. “Fuck you and your stupid protocol! Fuck your damn rules and your stupid–!”

“What the hell is going on out here?” Eric – or, Eric’s basic outline – was dressed in comfortable night clothes, sweatpants and a red sweater, and Adam spilled out of the house behind him, concern, stupid compassion oozing off his features.

“Get him inside,” Alex ordered. Hunter took some satisfaction in the slight waver to his voice, seeing the crack in the façade and going for it, claws and daggers waiting.

“That’s all you’ll be, you know. Your job. I hope that’s enough for you,” he spat, shaking off Adam’s hand as the black ranger made a reach for his shoulder. “My mistake though; Don’t feel bad. I’m the one who thought there was a person under there; I’m the one that thought you were worth something, that wasn’t you. You never pretended to be anything more than what you are.”

“Kid–” Eric tried, not backing off when Hunter attempted to shake him away. “You’re gonna say something you regret.”

“What the hell does it matter anyway?!?” Hunter struggled in their hold, all but leering at Alex. “It’s
not like he cares. He’s never—” The blond whipped his head towards Adam, because he had argued, had plead on Alex’s behalf so many times. “You were wrong,” he hissed, voice pure venom. “You were so fucking wrong and I should have hated you at the start, should have—” He flicked his eyes back towards Alex, uncaring of the mess and the noise and the scene. “I should have never stopped hating you,” he whispered. “Stockholm Syndrome, get it?” He laughed, leaning against Eric’s shoulder, who was, at the moment, the least of his offered evils, despite the hand on his shoulder. “We were – are not – friends.”

“I know that, Hunter,” Alex whispered, no inflection to it, no added emotion that Hunter could read into.

It was as it had always been, the bastard.

“Good.” He didn’t sob. He was not sobbing. Sobbing was a luxury for those who had earned it, a privilege of emoting that Hunter couldn’t, by a long shot, label himself as fit in partaking. He had earned this. Like everything else, he had earned this.

“I hate you,” he said.

Whether he was talking to Alex or himself, he did not know. He shook off the others’ hands and marched inside before he could think about it, hiding away in a home of false promises, counting down the minutes of his imprisonment, and steadily not thinking of anything else.

He was the one who built this cage.

He should have known better.

Chapter End Notes

It didn’t seem realistic to have a time travel fic that involved Hunter that didn’t address the deaths of his parents in some way. This is the way I decided to handle it.

Until next time
Adam ushered Alex inside while Eric stayed behind to pacify the neighbors, pleas of a stressful family situation or something of the like; Alex wasn’t entirely sure and he didn’t, in truth, actually care enough to find out. He followed the veteran ranger’s lead, taking the indicated seat on the couch when he was prompted, and watched as the other man whisked himself into the depths of the kitchen.

With the adrenaline fading, Hunter’s expression - a twisted hatred of startling pureness - was Alex’s only occupation. The fact of that matter was that he hadn’t known, he hadn’t; Time Force had not deemed him fit to be fully briefed on the situation and, in light of Hunter’s reaction; it wasn’t entirely difficult to determine why.

Alex had never considered himself a master of human interaction, but he could imagine – very pitifully, but still imagine – the havoc wreaking through Hunter at this very moment. The indescribable loss.

Alex had never met his parents, he could not imagine the concept of having people in the world whose express purpose was to care and nurture, protect and prepare you, individually. He had dreamed of it when he was younger, had hoped and planned. He didn’t need much. He hadn’t wanted perfection; he just wanted to be claimed. To be a part of something, something intangible and permanent that couldn’t be broken or taken from him, not like the few friendships he’d tried to maintain or whatever meager possessions he had stockpiled over the years. Family was something greater than one’s self, and he had wanted one. So very badly.

He did not know much of Hunter’s past before the Bradleys. Honestly, he didn’t think the blond knew much either, and was happier that way. For what little it mattered, this had made Alex glad. He liked it when Hunter was happy.

To be the cause of such agony, however unintentional, stirred a feeling within Alex he had long since abandoned. Guilt.

It usually came hand-in-hand with insufficiency and self-loathing, and rarely devolved from his failures with others. There simply weren’t many who Alex’s actions could have personal sway over. Who he, in turn, cared for deeply enough to be affected by their disposition.
There were a few adults in his youth, faces he couldn’t even remember, and Jen.

And now, Hunter.

He ached with it.

“Here.”

A mug was placed into his line of sight; the red, black, and white one Hunter had painted for him in a fit of childish spitefulness, steam rising from a golden brown liquid within.

“Drink this,” Adam said quietly, less of a demand and more along the lines of... guidance, maybe, in these troubled waters.

Alex ignored the cup. The heat would feel good, would feel like something, but he didn’t want it. He was lacking in many ways at the moment.

He didn’t need to see Adam to know he was getting that certain expression, his eyebrows furrowed in an unpleasant knot. “Alex–”

“I’m not thirsty.”

He knew what needed to be done. What should have been done long ago, before selfishness had kicked in and he had folded to regulation despite the knowledge not to, just as he had had before. It was like Jen all over again, when Alex had returned in a triumphant blaze of glory to reclaim his morpher, his team, to shout out demands and disregard feelings when he knew, plain as day, that they functioned better without him.

He’d held on then, kicking and screaming and wanting until he had forced Jen to fight back. In retrospect, maybe that had been his aim all along, to prove his own doubts right. To show his worst fears were exactly as he had expected them.

Alex had never wasted a moment to think of how jarring his reappearance would be, or consider Jen’s own attempts to move on with her life, or if alternative command strategies would have been required. He hadn’t borne a single thought beyond his own desperate need to be there, and look where that had gotten him.

Hunter had been his tagalong. An unwanted complication. Alex wanted to believe, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that any affection that may have been kindled was merely a result of mental conditioning, of altering his perception until it was to his greatest benefit. Getting along with Hunter was easier than fighting him, than hating him. Having a friend even, was a gift so preciously rare in Alex’s life that he had savored it, honored it in private, promising whatever he could offer in the silence of his own mind.

He knew it wouldn’t have been much. The fact that Hunter had seemed receptive to it (only under Adam’s persuasion, only after someone else had interfered because Alex’s best efforts could not when on his own) had kindled a flare of hope so strong it seemed injust. Alex hadn’t known that he still had the potential for desiring such an amiable relationship; it had taken him by surprise, and Hunter–

They had shared. Had comforted. Had offered their own coping mechanisms, had worked together, and had grown to take satisfaction in each other’s company even during their down-time. Had actively looked forward to it, even.

But it hadn’t been real. Alex was familiar with Stockholm Syndrome, understood it as a method for
coping, adapting to survive. Hunter had done what he needed to in a helpless situation, had made the best of what little Alex had to offer, and the moment Alex had stepped out of line he abandoned what courtesy they had emboldened in each other. There was no longer any point. What was Alex but the low-life that had sealed the fates of his parents’ deaths? What could Alex possibly offer to somehow justify his actions?

Surely he couldn’t explain the horror, the fear for Hunter, for themselves. Couldn’t explain reverting to regulation out of panic, couldn’t articulate the desperate need for Hunter to stay safe and whole and vibrantly alive. That he couldn’t– didn’t want to live in a world deprived of Hunter. Couldn’t be the cause of the thunder ranger’s departure from this lifetime. What would his concerns matter to Hunter, who had only, truly been tolerating him?

In an almost-poetic way, something in Alex’s chest tightened, a dully-throbbing constriction that ached at the thought. It wasn’t a betrayal, it wasn’t– Alex had known better.

They were not friends. They never had been.

He loved something that had never been his to keep.

This family they had built had never been real. It was a necessity of circumstance, all of them adapting so that it was easiest, but in the end it was never truly wanted, and convincing himself otherwise had been Alex’s greatest downfall.

It had felt right. It fit– they fit; even for all their quirks, there had been cohesion in the madness. Their defects had balanced each other, had birthed tolerance, acceptance, comfort–

But it wasn’t real.

Alex had never thought he would be so foolish as to delude himself into needing something that had always been a temporary fixture in his life, into building emotions – hope of reciprocation – into something that didn’t exist, but he had. He wasn’t learning from experience, as desperately as he needed to.

“I need to make some calls,” Alex muttered, pulling his gaze away from the inviting cup resting on the coffee table, false offerings of home and comfort echoing in its wake.

He stood abruptly, ignoring the way Adam followed in suit. “I need you to talk to me Alex,” the other man pleaded, voice soft. “I think it would be wise if you took a moment to explain what–”

“I know what I need to do.” Alex felt numb when he said the words, the world expanding around him, drawing Adam’s voice farther away. “And I need to make some calls.”

A hand reached for his arm. “Alex–”

“Oh, now that damage control has been taken care of, will someone tell me what the hell–?” Eric stopped in the doorway, evaluating, but Alex didn’t particularly care. He was too busy shaking Adam’s hand off and formulating his strategy, snapping every alternative into place into a neat little diagram in his mind, allowing for slight deviations.

Comfort in planning… Hunter had ‘hit that nail on the head’, as he would say.

Alex had no need for such colloquialisms; they were inefficient anyway, lacking in directness for those unfamiliar with the turn-of-phrase. They allowed the opportunity for misapprehension of literal translation and were ultimately a burden, another thing Alex did not need. Had not needed.
There were attempts at further speaking, but Alex no longer bothered to differentiate the words, allowing their tones to wash over him in a steady accompaniment to his melancholy.

“I need to make some calls,” he repeated one final time. He turned away from their faces, wanting of him things he could never offer (as much as he had fooled himself into wanting to), and made his way towards Eric’s office, knowing that the backyard would be worthless in terms of privacy at the moment. He hoped they hadn’t awoken Alice.

There may have been more speaking, but Alex’s reception to them ended with the click of the door behind him. He rested against it – oak, Hunter had said it was, a real wooden door; ‘how quaint’.

He didn’t register his transition to the floor, his knees giving out from under him in deft surrender. Alex paid little mind to the change, but allotted himself some time to pull together. He needed to be professional, direct, efficient. He needed to focus. He needed to be detached. He needed to be the model example to all Time Force cadets.

If rising up to such impossible standards required tears on his part, a steady silent torrent he could not address, then Alex thought in this one instance, he could be allowed this.

He wouldn’t have done it had he known. He knew that. He wouldn’t have hurt Hunter that way; Alex didn’t care what it would have thrown off. Didn’t care if it had destroyed his existence entirely, he wouldn’t have done that to Hunter.

He wouldn’t have done that to the man he loved.

“Wouldn’t have’. Past-tense. A luxury for those who rambled about useless yesterdays.

Alex was a man of 3001. Future-tense.

He had no friends.

There was no family.

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The following morning was subdued. Eric had managed to coax Hunter into the kitchen, but the closest the blond was going to get to consuming breakfast was to glare steely holes into his toast through the sheer power of his displeasure, and Alex couldn’t make himself settle anywhere near the general vicinity of the breakfast table. It was too presumptuous, too much for him to laze so closely to the others as though they did not blatantly humor his presence. He couldn’t bear the thought of it, so he opted to lean against the counter near the back door, off to Hunter’s side so to be partially in the blond’s vision, but not enough to be mocking and cruel.

Adam allowed them about five minutes of tense silence before he shut off the stove with a sigh, eggs and bacon half-cooked on the burner.

“We need to talk about this,” he said quietly, arms folded across his chest as he awaited their opposition. Or, more precisely, Hunter’s. “As neither one of you particularly felt like talking yesterday—”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Hunter snapped, eyeing the veteran with subdued indifference. And then, because he knew, just as Alex knew, that this would come nowhere close to satisfying Eric, who was less patient in regards to these matters, he added, somewhat snidely, “He killed my parents.”
They froze, whatever irritated remark Commander Myers was about to make held on his tongue. As one, they turned to Alex for confirmation.

The brunette nodded stiffly, meeting neither of their eyes. “I killed his parents.”

At the time he hadn’t known, hadn’t understood, had been too terrified of losing Hunter, of the blond suffering a fell blow while under his protection, that he hadn’t listened.

He held firm, Time Force’s warning ringing in his mind– *extremely dangerous, do not approach, avoid contact at all costs*–

He hadn’t known it was Lothor. He hadn’t known he had broken Hunter’s heart.

Alex may as well have stabbed them himself, for all the good he had done.

“Did you now?” Adam asked, head tilted to the side, as though considering.

He was not through; his voice was no more contemplative than it was honest, and the question, Alex could tell, had never been sincere.

It was a jibe to demonstrate Adam’s disbelief.

Alex did not rise to it, held to his well-worn patience (the trials Hunter had subjected him to were enough to last a lifetime, what was a few more minutes?)

“How’d you do it?” Adam continued. Here, his voice was steady. Serious. “Stabbing? Slicing?” He advanced upon the kitchen table slowly. “Did you use your Chrono Sabers?” Adam tipped his head to the other side, his unforgiving gaze fixed on Alex. “No, you would have shot them, wouldn’t you?”

Provocation, that was all it was. Adam was attempting to goad Alex into claiming his innocence, but the brunette wouldn’t do that here, not with Hunter five feet away, not ever in good conscience when he knew the Bradley’s blood was just as much on his hands at it was any others.

“No?” Adam asked, eyes wide, inquisitive. “No shooting?”

Behind him, Eric shifted from his position against the opposite wall, glower firm and unquestionable. At the table, Hunter held perfectly still, as though his void of movement would subtract him from the conversation altogether.

When Alex realized his gaze had drifted, he turned his attention back to Adam, who was still curious for answers.

“I killed them,” he repeated.

“I heard you,” Adam replied, sounding understanding. Like he was trying to work with Alex towards the optimal outcome, as though they were all friends here. “I just want to know how—”

“He held me back,” Hunter murmured, his voice a gravely strain, threat and anger and bare restraint so evident on the surface. “Did he actually shove the knife in? No. Okay, you made your stupid point. Good for you.”

Adam’s attitude made a complete turnaround from goading to deadly serious, and it was then Alex realized the show had never been for him, but for Hunter. As the other man turned on the blond, his expression reverted to his usual air of composed calm, a constant voice of reason.
“It’s an important point,” Adam said, patient and serious. “One that is easy to forget—”

“Don’t you dare defend him!” Hunter snapped, rising to his feet in a sudden jolt, sending his chair toppling over in a useless heap behind him. “He knew—”

“I didn’t,” Alex said quietly, but Hunter couldn’t hear him, couldn’t be bothered to accept Alex’s input.

“He knew,” the blond spat. “He knew and he made me watch, again. Held me down, kept me from moving, from helping – trapped me while we had a first row seat to my parents’ murders—”

“The instructions.” Alex began – extremely dangerous, do not approach, avoid, avoid, avoid–

“I don’t giving a flying shit about your instructions!”

For the first time since the conversation had begun, Hunter looked at Alex, his eyes shining with total fury. “You followed your orders. That’s great Alex. Really, I’m happy for you. I hope that can keep you contented for the rest of your life.”

“I didn’t know it was them.”

Hunter needed to know this, needed to know it like Alex needed to breathe; it was vital to his continued existence.

“And if it was someone else?” Hunter asked, a challenge, shaking, hands clenching and unclenching against his sides. “You would have been fine if it had been some nameless family dying for the sake of Time Force?”

“Not Time Force,” Alex said. He felt raw on the inside, scraped and pulled taut until he was a thin layer that barely registered existence. “Time itself.”

That was Alex’s job, his life. He knew the answer would never satisfy but it was the truth that what had been done was a necessity to preserve something sacred, something whose sanctity warranted an organization eight hundred strong devoted to its protection.

When time travel capabilities had first been realized, a great controversy arose over the regulation permitting its use. The availability of certain technologies did not necessarily okay their usage; it was greater than that.

The world was balanced. Perhaps not perfectly, but with good came evil. With every altruistic and truly heroic deed came one of pure selfishness and evil. For every Winston Churchill there was an Adolf Hitler; for every Gandhi a Genghis Khan.

For every Wes Collins, a Ransik.

By correcting the horrors that fell behind us, you could only displace the unforgivable we attempted to prevent. In some way or another, evil would shine through. It had been Time Force’s belated discovery, and a day of tragedy for them all.

That was why Alex did what he did.

It wasn’t heroic or particularly spectacular. His job was to maintain what had already been built, to preserve the random happenstance of the billions that came before him, to keep them as they were to save what would follow.
The world had forged its own destiny; who were they to play god and try to rectify what they deemed incorrect? How could they raise themselves above as hopelessly flawed human beings to judge the acts of other hopelessly flawed human beings?

For those unfamiliar with the concept, his actions seemed like those of a coward. And perhaps, in a small way, they were.

But he had done his sworn duty, correcting the alternatives made by an unstable individual.

The rest was irrelevant.

“Time,” Hunter spat, a quivering mess of fury and wrong doings, his entire life an accumulation of unfortunate accidents. “Of course, how foolish of me. You were just correcting time–”

“It was supposed to happen.” Alex wasn’t sure how he kept his voice steady, but somehow he managed it, his words never wavering despite the sudden tightness of his throat. “I know it doesn’t seem like that–”

“Fuck you!” Hunter snarled. His eyes were red again, glassy and vicious. He would have gone for Alex’s throat had Eric not been hovering behind him, a fearsome watchdog.

“Hunter–” Adam tried, but it was too late.

For Alex, for Hunter, for any of them.

Hunter turned on him, arms moving into a rigid jerk until they were above his torso, a defensive stance. “Fuck you!” he yelled. “Fuck all of you!”

“Kid–” Eric reached forward, the warning Alex had stuck in his throat, even as the blond flinched away from contact, shifting so that they were all in his line of sight.

Before things could unravel further, Alex stepped in, delivering the news he had carried well into the morning. “I contacted Time Force.” Adam’s eyes jerked to him from Hunter, and there was something in them, a beseeching warning, that Alex did not heed. “They’ve agreed to reschedule your drop off.”

“Really?” Hunter asked with a laugh, bitter and mocking. “They can spare the time now–?”

“Get your original clothes on,” Alex continued. If he focused on the instructions he could blind himself from the emotions that begged for his attention, on clambering atop the other in a hopeless mess to be the most recognized, leaving him groundless. “We’ll be leaving in ten minutes.”

“Alex–” Adam tried again, but Hunter was already backing out of the room, laughing, shaking his head.

If Alex really strained his ears, he would hear, underneath the desperate gasps, the watery choked undertone of sorrow; more tears by Alex’s hand dripping down Hunter’s face.

Luckily, Alex did not listen. Not to Hunter, not to Adam, not to Eric standing square in front of him, feet planted and arms folded across his chest in a level of authority, delivering his own ‘tough love’. Alex caught the phrases ‘fool’ and ‘coward’ being thrown around.

Aware of this in a painful, unfair way, Alex shut him out, and then there was silence.

When Hunter reappeared in Alex’s world, his face was an impenetrable mask. He didn’t look at
Alex when he delivered his goodbyes, didn’t offer his usual sarcasm or wit, didn’t joke that he’d see them in the future one day.

When they left, Adam and Eric were still arguing, though why, Alex did not know.

They landed in Ninja Ops, back where they had started.

Alex had just enough time to let the blond go before the light consumed him once more, taking him to his next location. Without Hunter.

He took a few seconds to ground himself, becoming accustomed to the wind carried through the trees, stirring a faint memory of training katas, a near-miss with the transporter—

He had killed him.

He’d stolen Hunter’s soul and left an empty husk in its place, stealing away the vibrancy and courage and wit that was Hunter Bradley, because Alex, like he had somehow always known, had unparalleled brilliance when it came to breaking the things he most coveted.

This he could admit, now.

He moved forward, no footsteps echoing in his wake, and got to work; a dedicated Time Force Agent.

Alone.

It shouldn’t feel odd or lacking; he was used to this. Would be again, in time. He had adapted, but it could be undone.

In the end, time would heal all wounds.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, this is still a love story. We now enter the angst-portion of said love story, but by golly, will there be romance.

Eventually.

Until next time :)
The sincerest thanks to the real vampire for being the most attentive and effective beta-reader a gal could ask for! Your hard work and words of encouragement are always appreciated, vamps, and I am very lucky to have you as a beta-reader. Additional thanks go to the lovely Kei Luna Shoryu for her supplementary beta-ing and all around support! You are the cheer leader supreme, and I am grateful for this fact :)

If you guys are looking for something else to read and for some reason haven’t checked out the two stories I keep recommending, please look into 'My Brother’s Keeper' by the real vampire (I beta’d that one!) or 'The Art of Cohesion' by Kei Luna Shoryu. Go forth and expand your power rangers literary repertoire, you will have no regrets :) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A night wasn’t enough for Hunter to stop being angry. A year wouldn’t have been enough – he was rather dedicated in his ability to hold grudges for transgressions he couldn’t even properly remember the defense behind, but this– this would never fade with time. This would never leave. His mind was more than happy to plague him with night after night of nightmares littered with his parent’s dead corpses, while he was held down by the seemingly immovable weight of Alex, pressed into the ground until it hurt, being slowly crushed while the brunette cackled above him.

Some nights would be less complete than others, figments and sensations rather than a full narrative. Those nights would feature the despair, the coppery smell of blood slick against his fingertips, the betrayal, and the worst of it: helpless rage. He should have done something; he could have done something, but Alex–

Hunter hated him. He had known, hadn’t he? All along, he had known and he hated him so much. He hated him every day; and would continue hating him every day. That was all Alex deserved, right?

Though Hunter wasn’t one to believe in the universe delivering a blow for blow, a grace for grace – that train of thought was for fools and idiots, and Hunter was neither – this hate that he conserved, that he grew and nurtured in silence – he figured it was Alex’s due, for whatever good it did him. It was ultimately a useless expense of energy, Hunter knew that. Logically, he knew that, but he couldn’t stop. It wouldn’t stop.

A part of Hunter that he would never acknowledge knew that if he let go of the anger, he wouldn’t have anything left of Alex.

And damn him, Hunter just couldn’t do that yet.

He knew it was bad for him, but Hunter was no stranger to self-inflicted injuries.

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The way Hunter saw it, he could be excused for forgetting the circumstances that had started his detour into the ‘mission made for screwing up the already screwed up ranger’, as he was still kind of
reeling from the circumstances that had gotten him out of the mission from hell, and the clutches of Asshat McEvilsworth and his posse of stupid conformist professionals. That they would even bother to listen to Alex’s side –

Whatever. It was in the past (hah) anyway; no point in worrying about it now.

Given his current state of mind Hunter couldn’t really appreciate the hilarity of Shane and Sensei switching bodies, or the stupid panel-in-question that Alex had sabotaged earlier, because he was still formulating new mantras of hate, hate, hate that weren’t doing him any fucking good at all.

That didn’t stop him, of course, but he was willing to acknowledge the uselessness of his actions.

He was getting pretty good at that, nowadays.

It had taken Hunter an embarrassingly long time (a couple of hours, give or take) to pick up his life where it had ended (where the carefree days of simply despising Cam and Lothor had been traded in for the crowd-stomping his heart had taken, because if Hunter was going to be dramatic, he was going for Oscar worthy exaggerations, damn it).

He was pretty sure the only one who had actually noticed his confusion was Blake – as he was Blake – but his brother seemed to write it off as the after effects of some argument Hunter honestly couldn’t remember having had with Cam just before this whole kit and caboodle had kicked off. Shane had waved off his behavior with a roll of his eyes; Tori had shaken her head in exasperation. Hunter was pretty sure Dustin was creating a freakin’ ‘Feel better Hunter’ poster comprised entirely of glitter and rhinestones that Blake had managed to intercept, and Cam was Cam, and spent the majority of his time on the opposite side of the room from Hunter, just as he always had.

As a common consensus, they labeled Hunter as ‘in a mood’ and let things be, figuring he would get better eventually.

Honestly, Hunter had taken that opportunity and tried – really, he had – to get his sh*t together. To go back to being the sarcastic wiseass who stood in the back, trading quips with Tori, playing pranks on Cam. He tried.

But those attempts, like many others, ended up being but another addition to Hunter’s string of recent failures.

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“Hey Hunter, I’m gonna make some cookies. Do you wanna help, man?”

“Nope.”

Hunter didn’t look up from the textbook in his hands, the equations melding together into one indecipherable blur he knew, for a fact, had not been a problem to him before. He hadn’t suddenly become stupid, he knew the material; he just couldn’t manage to care anymore.

“No?” Dustin echoed.

He was confused. Hunter knew he was confused, and he should be, if the rules of un-time-damaged Hunter were still in play. Before his… incident, he would have been all over cookie-time. He would have lorded it over Blake who was stuck closing up at Storm Chargers; he would have demanded they exceed the recommended dosage of chocolate chips until Dustin, of all people, had to call for restraint (with a laugh and a smile). He would have rejoiced in the fruits of their labors and hidden some away for Tori for a rainy day, because even if she was doing the whole ‘sugar is my
greatest enemy’ phase, he knew a sweet treat made a shitty day a hell of a lot more endurable, and
Blake could be a little thick sometimes when it came to recognizing that.

Before Alex, Hunter would already be halfway to the kitchen by now.

He glared down at the equations, stubbornly willing comprehension as he had for the past thirty
minutes.

“No,” he repeated.

Now cookie-time was tainted with companionable bickering and Alex’s eyes lighting up in
confusion in wonder, in awe almost, and a warm feeling that Hunter had – through some small form
of measure – contributed to creating.

“Oh.” Dustin stood in the doorway, clearly at a loss for what to do next. It had been a long time
since Hunter had turned him down. “Okay then. Good luck. Studying, I mean.”

Hunter nodded and waved him out, never daring to look up from the textbook. The words might
have been boring and unfamiliar, but they were safe from the memories, and that was something.

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“Where’d you learn that takedown?”

They were walking back to Ops from the beach, finishing up a round of sparring that Hunter had
probably been overly-attentive in. This was different. This was something with need and function,
to keep up their skills to improve, and Alex didn’t get to take that away. He could keep the
meditating practices and focus techniques or whatever, but Hunter got to keep his barbarian fighting
ways.

Maybe Hunter had been going at it a little too enthusiastically though, because it took him a few
moments to understand Shane’s question.

“What?” He cocked his head to the side, ruffling a hand through his hair to remove the excess sand.

“The takedown?” Shane repeated. “I haven’t seen you use it before. Have you been practicing on
your own?”

It was an innocent question. A question between friends. Between people who respected each
other.

“Yes,” Hunter answered tersely. And then, for no particularly reason, he decided to take advantage
of the pleasant weather and run back to base.

He had actually learned it from Adam. One of their quiet nights inside where they cleared Eric’s
furniture off to the side of the room and educated themselves – something Alex approved of – but
mostly it had been about laughing at each other’s failure to get out of specialty holds, even if Alex
seemed to be able to slip out of most of them, the ass.

Hunter sucked in a deep breath, and ran faster.

So yeah, he had pretty much learned it on his own.

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Hunter thought – he wasn’t sure why he had thought it – but he had thought going back to the track
would have helped, a bit. His bike was something that hadn’t been tainted. There hadn’t been any
time-shenanigans involving two-wheeled vehicular chases or bi-tired sabotages, there hadn’t really
been any access to motorcycles at all, so this, at least, should have been safe.

Of course, with that mindset it obviously wasn’t safe, because while Hunter had never physically
approached a bike at any time during their journey, there may have been a period where Hunter
kind-of, sort-of mentioned his love for the mud, sky, and speed, and Alex had politely listened. Had
asked questions. Had, in his own awkward way, supported and simultaneously mocked Hunter for
such habits. He didn’t understand them, but he got that they made Hunter happy, and that had
seemed to be enough for him.

Hunter pulled off the track after two pitiful laps and three failed turns, ripping off his helmet with a
snarl so he wouldn’t have to look behind him, wouldn’t have to see how badly Blake was beginning
to lap him.

Tori, from her perch by her van, watched the display with furrowed eyebrows. “Everything okay
Hunter?”

“Peachy,” Hunter snapped.

He didn’t stay to see the shock or face of judgment; he didn’t want to see Tori weigh her options and
decide what his deal was.

Some things, Hunter could decide for himself.

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After Hunter’s second week of avoiding ‘movie night’, Cam confronted the blond in Ops’ garage,
cornering him just as Hunter was half-way through a repair on Shane’s Tsunami cycle.

“You’re worrying them,” the green ranger noted dryly. Not that he cared, but they did, so Hunter
should buck up real quick, was what his tone inferred. “Just speak your piece and be done with it.”

Like it was as easy as simply saying what was on his mind. Like that would make his parents any
less dead, and Hunter any less responsible for it.

“You know what Cam,” Hunter growled, his fingers clenching around the socket wrench, knuckles
white with tension. “Fuck off.”

The tech startled, blinking slowly at the lack of creativity of Hunter’s insult and stood there,
swamped with confusion.

Hunter snarled, a low and incomprehensible thing of rage and stormed out of the room. He would
finish the repair later, when Cam was gone. When all of them, and all of their stupid expressions of
bewilderment and concern and worry were shoved somewhere where Hunter wasn’t privileged to
see them.

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“Hunter,” Blake began, in his eerie-calm Blake-way. “We’re worried about you.”

“Don’t be,” Hunter replied, his voice weighted with tension, wounded instead of light. He
swallowed, tried again. “It’ll pass soon.”

Blake began to protest, “But what–?”
“Just–” Hunter cut off the word viciously, snapping his mouth shut hard enough that his teeth rattled. “Just give me some time.”

It was too much like mom, in her reserved calculation when stuff was on the line. It was like Alex, treading carefully to approach a situation that mattered with the respect it was due.

Hell, it was like Hunter couldn’t even stay in the same room as these people anymore. As anyone, anymore.

Perhaps that was the most fitting punishment.

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Dustin was officially afraid to talk to him. It wasn’t something Hunter reveled in. He liked Dustin; had – at one time – wanted to date him. If Hunter had to choose a person who was less judgmental, more kind, and more honest than Dustin or else the world would be destroyed, the people of Earth would have to become accustomed to living on a charred husk of a destroyed planet, because it simply could not be done.

It had been one of the reasons Hunter had hated Dustin in the beginning. Someone like that couldn’t be real – they still shouldn’t be – but there Dustin was. The blond had assumed Dustin was mocking them in the beginning– playing at this fake persona as a joke on the new guys. It was one of the reasons Hunter hadn’t had much of an issue betraying the brunette. Guy had it coming, easy.

Now though, this was not the case. Now Hunter could honestly say it was a privilege to be called one of Dustin’s friends.

And now Hunter was repaying that privilege by scaring the poor guy so badly he was afraid to come closer than ten feet to Hunter, because that was the radius of his disdain.

“Hey, Hunter?”

“What?” the blond snapped. He kept his attention on the bike in front of him, trying to find some calming effect from the familiar mechanics of repair and restoration, of oil and grime and metal gears.

From the corner of his eyes, he saw Dustin flinch. “Nothing,” the other teen mumbled.

It wasn’t that Hunter was mad at Dustin, he wasn’t, and knew he shouldn’t be, because Dustin was Dustin. If there was ever a less–appropriate party to take your anger out on, Hunter would love to see it, because then the world was ripe for other impossibilities. Pigs flying, for example (Cam would like that, hah- because Cam’s a pig).

He wasn’t mad at Dustin. He was just mad that sometimes the other teen asked simple questions that were a lot like the stuff Alex should have known about their time period but didn’t, and then would blink in confusion but honestly want to know more. Dustin was honest in the same way Alex was straightforward, and determined like–

“Damn it,” Hunter hissed. He reached for another wrench.

On the other side of the room, Dustin flinched again. Perfect.

Tori was going to kill him if he kept this up.

“Listen, it’s not–” Hunter cut himself off, knowing he needed to at least try to not act like an ass but not sure how to phrase it. Not sure if there was anything he could offer that wouldn’t bring up more
of the bile and hatred and hurt he had accumulated in bitter, excess abundance.

On his side of the shop, Dustin was still poised on the razor edge of Hunter’s judgment.

Hunter took in a quick breath, held it in until he felt the ache, and released it, slowly. It was a distorted version of the technique he had taught Alex—

“It’s not you,” Hunter ground out. It was all he had to offer, and he could only put forth that effort with the determination of a madman who didn’t understand his own boundaries. “It’s not you,” he repeated.

Hunter swallowed, frowning at his hands. They were grimy, coated with grease and oil, the black stains not so dissimilar from earth and sweat and mud, breathing heavily against the ground, his parents—

“Then who is it?”

Dustin was braver than Hunter in many ways, but perhaps the most prominent was his ability to completely accept his feelings as they were. They could confuse him, true, but he acknowledged them and worked around them, through them, with a determination and courage that Hunter easily admired. The yellow ranger had his own demons to hide from, had a family that was barely around to acknowledge him, his accomplishments, his presence, his wellbeing, but he didn’t hide from it. He didn’t mask it and put on a show to make everyone to look the other way. Dustin hadn’t built up a wall from his emotions; he didn’t have to constantly be in control for fear of letting the terror take over.

*Who is it then?*

It was him. It was Hunter.

It was always Hunter.

Thank hell Tori was made of tougher stuff than the rest of them. It didn’t make her any less confused, but it did mean she could more readily handle Hunter’s drastic change in behavior in stride, calling him on his crap whenever it was needed, ignoring him when the need for space grew into an almost corporeal thing he wanted to bludgeon them unconscious with.

Hunter wouldn’t go as far as to say that Tori was on ‘his side’, exactly, but she was the closest out of any of them to being there, in that particular endeavor.

It was also why she was one of the few individuals who was allowed to brutally cut to the heart of the matter, who Hunter wouldn’t protest or try to distract, or hide, or snark.

“It’s you, right?” she asked when it was just the two of them in the Ops’ kitchen, Hunter taking comfort in the routine of emptying the dishwasher, because apparently at some point in his efforts to despise all things related to Alex he had *become* Alex.

Damn, he was pathetic.

Hunter didn’t startle, didn’t bother looking up from the plate in his hands, but he didn’t deny it either. He wanted to hear what she had to say.

“At least, it’s partially about you,” she continued. “But there’s something else to it, right? Is it a
Lothor thing? A ranger thing?"

Her hands were empty, curled against the edge of the counter and free of distraction as she stared Hunter down. She didn’t blink, didn’t allow a hint of a smile, didn’t temper the seriousness of his conversation with a grin or a smirk. This was the Tori who meant business, who would not be deterred by his shenanigans.

Belatedly, Hunter had a flashback of a small girl in pigtails, perched on top of a milk crate, impatiently waiting for Hunter to get with the program. There were birds to pet.

Hunter swallowed the memory down like acid, shrugging off a displaced feeling of home, of belonging. He glared down at the plate, eye-blindingly red, a gift of Cyber Cam and Dustin’s shopping shenanigans, and frowned.

“Ranger thing,” he said eventually. He needed to, at some point, and at least Tori would spread the word to the rest of the team. Hunter sure as shit wasn’t going to– and it should be embarrassing how much of a relief it was to be relieved of that burden, but Hunter let go of his pride a long time ago. Probably around the same point he had willingly shared a bed with someone he had perceived as mostly harmless.

Sometimes Hunter wondered who he hated more; Alex, or himself.

“And if it’s any consolation,” Hunter continued, knowing, even before he saw the blonde bite her bottom lip, her nails worrying at the edge of the counter, that she would not be satisfied. “It’s classified, so…”

So I couldn’t tell you if I wanted to.

There was a wry twist of her lips and, without prompting, Tori moved to help Hunter with his task, sorting through dishes in silence.

Yeah, it wasn’t like Hunter would ever really want to anyway.

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“Who’s Alex?”

Hunter – for all the determined pledges to not-think about Alex (which safely kept the train of thinking about Alex alive, as was his obnoxious way) - couldn’t fight a small flinch at Blake’s question. It hadn’t been difficult, exactly, to keep his ultra-secret mission an ultra-secret (the humiliation and shame were excellent motivations), which made the overwhelming question of how the fuck Blake knew about Alex all the more aggravating.

Blake, who had been raised on the same ‘keep your reactions close, and your emotions even closer’ school of communications chose to keep his face expressionless save for one raised eyebrow, a challenge without the benefit of life support. It seemed that Hunter was not due for any ropes to save his sorry hide.

On one hand, Hunter could hardly blame him – he was only glad he wasn’t one of the people who had to deal with his behavior without knowing why (it was a mystery to him still, why Cam hadn’t decked him yet) – but on the other hand, Hunter wanted to do a little face-punching of his own, because damn it Blake, it wasn’t any of his business.

Hunter chose to ignore the fact that were the tables turned, it would very much be Hunter’s business as to why Blake was freaking out, because that was a minor detail. Detail. Hunter was the older
brother; he got to suffer in silence.

Because Hunter was feeling snippity, and incredibly thrown by the mention of Alex’s name, the blond opted for route ‘play it dumb and inspire annoyance, post-haste’ and furrowed his brows. Hopefully, he could spit out the Time Force ranger’s name without inflection. “Who’s-?”

Blake was having none of it. “You call out that name when you’re sleeping,” he explained quietly. The younger Bradley folded his arms across his chest, a clear show of defensiveness that should bother Hunter more than it did. “I heard it, from the living room. You asking Alex to stop.”

It was supposed to be delivered impassively, but Hunter knew his brother too well, had studied the fissures in his mask too much to not be able to see the sore spots. He was barely holding it back, whatever he was feeling. Shaken, that was one emotion for sure.

When he continued speaking, Hunter realized why that was the case.

“You begging Alex.” Blake’s eyes were shining, but he kept his jaw firm. It reminded Hunter a lot of Sensei Omino when he informed them their parents hadn’t made it. Like that had been a shocker.

Blake took a step forward. “‘Please Alex’,?” Blake quoted, his hands curled into tight fists. “‘Please. I can save them. Stop. Please Alex. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I lov-’”

“Shut up,” Hunter hissed. The paper he had been working on crinkled in his hands, crumpled tight and ruined, but Hunter couldn’t have given any less of a damn for it. He took a deep breath, trying to calm his frantically beating heart. “Shut up, Blake.”

Stupid nightmares. Maybe if Hunter could get one full night of sleep he wouldn’t be talking while he was unconscious, gleefully sharing the gaping wound with his brother, as though he deserved Hunter’s damage.

He had considered it, really. He had thought about telling Blake what had happened, all of it, what he hadn’t done.

But damn, his brother was happy. He was moving on and healing, as much as anyone could in their place. Blake, for once, was very content with his life.

Hunter wasn’t going to do him the injustice of sharing his burden, even on the off-hand chance that it made things easier to cope with.

He didn’t have to say anything for Blake to understand what he was thinking, what he had decided. His brother’s face twisted from concerned and strong to frustrated in a heartbeat, furious that Hunter was blocking him out. Still though, he did not press as to why.

The navy ranger turned away, his fingers curled tight around his forearms. “Who’s Alex?” he repeated quietly.

Hunter didn’t even pretend he would consider answering.

“::: :::::

“You’re making Dustin sad,” Cam noted. He didn’t put any inflection into it, which Hunter normally hated, but today he just… he couldn’t.

He didn’t have it in him to make the effort for their usual tete-a-tetes of barely-concealed malice and a passive aggression that was only ‘passive’ in the sense of being ironically mislabeled.
Not that Hunter actually liked Cam now; it just seemed so very trivial, looking at the origin of his distaste. In comparison to what it could be, what a true wrong was, Cam’s slight of being emotionally incompetent wasn’t nearly so base.

The fact that Cam felt secure enough to approach Hunter about any of this was enough to indicate the tech had recognized this as well. That, or maybe he was hoping to goad old-Hunter back into action.

“I know,” Hunter said eventually, unsure of what else he could say. He knew, and he hated it, because Dustin was hurt because Hunter was angry, but Hunter was angry at Alex–

Hunter left the room before he had to say anything else.

Cam didn’t follow him.

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Shane only gave him a few more days of quietly simmering in his own rage before he approached Hunter, shoulders set in that same can-do leader pose that every red ranger seemed to have. Hunter wondered how Shane would feel if he mentioned how much the Air ninja walked like Tommy, if he noted how similar his quiet humor was to Leo’s, if the general kindness turning to unshakable stubbornness mimicked Wes and Eric’s – the Commander’s – to a T. He wondered if Shane would care, if he would find it interesting, or if he would shake it off with a derisive snort, because he knew better.

In this instance, Hunter wasn’t exactly sure what it was that would be known better, but Shane would know it. He had to.

“Enough of this,” Shane declared, slamming a palm against the rocky walls of the Ops’ main room. “What’s your problem Hunter? And don’t give me that ‘It’s classified’ crap you fed Tori.”

“Tough shit, Shane,” Hunter spat back, pulling his eyes away from the panel– the stupid panel– to level a glare at the other ranger. “Because it is. Deal with it.”

“What does that even mean?” Shane asked, as though it wasn’t rhetorical, as though there would be some answer that satisfied. “Hunter, we’re worried about you–”

“I’m fine.” Adam had been worried, right? He had looked– no, he had been concerned, not worried– Adam was a practical guy; he was concerned about the practical side of things, he wasn’t worried about Hunter. Eric – Alex – they weren’t worried about Hunter.

Shane’s look of ’Ah, hell no’ was stronger than Tori’s and Eric’s Fluffball neighbor combined and twice as potent. “Hunter, you’re bleeding out man.” Somehow the teen managed to say it without sounding monumentally stupid, illustrating this metaphor with a sincerity that was painful, that was foreign and cruel. “You’re hurting and in turn, you’re hurting the rest of us. Why won’t you just let us help you?” Shane’s eyes were wide, imploring, leader-ly. “We’re a team. Team’s fight–”

“I’m not on your team!” Hunter snapped. His chest was heaving, the breaths pulled in burned and his jaw ached from how tightly it was clenched but he couldn’t– he couldn’t do this.

“I’m not on your team!” Hunter snapped. His chest was heaving, the breaths pulled in burned and his jaw ached from how tightly it was clenched but he couldn’t– he couldn’t do this.

“We,” Hunter continued, plowing through the words, even if a distant part of him thought they were wrong. “Are not a team. We are not a family. We are not–” Hunter swallowed, his throat dry, thick and tired all at once. “This,” he said, motioning around him. “Is a joke. So don’t come to me and try to sell your… your bullshit, because I’m not buying– I’m not–”
The effort it took to cut himself off was nothing short of monumental, and even in the wake of Shane’s dumbfounded expression, Hunter still wasn’t sure how he had managed it. Part of him wanted to keep screaming, but he didn’t know what words to say. Everything else he had would only demonstrate how much of a freaking basket case he had become.

Would Shane take away his morpher if he thought Hunter wasn’t balanced? Would Sensei Watanabe? Would they tell Blake?

*Heh*, as if Blake wasn’t hiding away with the rest of them, watching the confrontation on a monitor Cam had set up for them somewhere.

Shane was lost, his mouth slack as he visibly tried to pull himself back together, tried to determine what he should say. “Hunter…”

“No,” the blond muttered. He had been stupid, thinking that he could earn something— that he *had* earned something like this.

He knew, logically, that if they didn’t care none of them would have bothered approaching him in the first place, but really, how much of that was because they liked him and how much of it was because he was the guy using the Crimson Thunder morpher? How much of it was because they *had* to get along with him?

It was impossible now, for Hunter to look back on those times without Alex-tinted glasses, without seeing the connections he had made then, he had made now, he had made in the future, and none of it falling into place without making Hunter out as the joke.

Or maybe that wasn’t it at all, but it was the only explanation Hunter had. The only thing that could explain away the gaping hole in his chest. Used to be that he only felt the loss of his parents there, but now it was greater, the hurt more poignant, and Hunter wasn’t sure what he had lost.

His dignity, sure, but what use had Hunter ever had for that in the first place?

He left without saying goodbye, and ran out of Ops, towards the beach, towards the cliffs. Hunter ran.

He ran, and ran, and ran until he couldn’t feel his legs anymore.

They had a powwow, a freakin’ *powwow*, and they didn’t even have the decency to think up a legitimate excuse to get Hunter out of Ops. There was Dustin, with his wide, bashful eyes asking for a milk run (for cookies, of course), but as Hunter had, in fact, been in charge of grocery pickup earlier that week, he determined that even with their metabolisms as vicious as they were, there was no way they had gone through three gallons of milk in two days. Sure, Shane loved his dairy, but even that guy had limits.

Hunter was torn between taking the escape for what it was and eavesdropping to maintain some kind of control of the situation, curious to see what their ideas would be. Of course, he managed to psyche himself out enough with the desire to *not* know what they speculated to miss the first half of the meeting, but eventually Hunter picked an air vent nearby and stayed there, threatening Cyber Cam with many, many exploded servers if the program squealed on him.

Later, he would decide that the better course of action would have been to stay away, but intricacies such as that were details that didn’t need attention after-the-fact.
“We need to determine a timeframe for the change,” Cam was saying, merciless in his cool precision, keeping the team focused. “Once we narrow down the window for Hunter’s altered behavior, we can ascertain possible occurrences that could take place in the window of opportunity.”

“But that’s just it.” Blake was pacing, Hunter could hear that; even without his voice traveling from one end of the room to the other, the restlessness was clear in his tone. “He was fine, and then—”

He cut off with an unintelligible growl, and Hunter could picture him perfectly, his face resting in his hands, safe enough to display how lost he felt, Tori hovering over his shoulder, one grounding hand settled against his back.

“Maybe it was an alternate dimension?” Dustin offered. The blatant uncertainty he projected should hurt— Hunter hadn’t heard the yellow ranger sound this hesitant in a long time, hell, probably since back before Cam was friends with the brunette, and it was an undeniable fact that Hunter had been the one to revive the ‘glory’ days.

“I mean,” Dustin continued. “Time doesn’t work the same there, right? He could’ve gotten trapped in one for a while, that would have… well, you know.”

*Changed him into an asshole.* Yeah, it would have.

Cam made a small hum of agreement. “It is the most probable outcome,” the tech acceded. “Any instance that would allow for Hunter’s sense of time to distort, lengthening in comparison to our own—”

“But how does Alex fit into this?” Tori asked. It was quiet, a gentle interruption to keep Cam from getting lost in the technical mumbo jumbo.

“Maybe Alex is a civilian that got left behind?” Shane offered. “Residual guilt—”

“Would not explain Hunter’s silence,” Cam interrupted brutally, impatient with tangents that would ultimately be of no help to them. Hunter should feel flattered, that the tech was actually focusing his efforts on *Hunter*, but that behavior probably had more to do with Dustin’s depression than Hunter himself.

“Yeah,” Blake agreed. “Hunter would take on the world by himself if he could, but he’d come to us if someone innocent got trapped by Lothor. He’d do anything to protect someone who couldn’t fight for themselves.”

Except punch Alex, but that was a detail they didn’t need to know, right?

“And that doesn’t explain the whole ‘classified’ business,” Tori pointed out.

“You think that’s for real?” Shane asked. Not as a challenge; there was legitimate curiosity behind the words, a kindness of tact that Hunter… Forget it, he hated everything right now, pretty much. “That’s not just some excuse Hunter made up?”

“It sounded real.” Tori was sure when she said it, firm in her belief. Hunter wasn’t sure if he should be happy about that, if he should be grateful that his team was composed of people freakishly good at dissecting behavior, especially when it counted.

“That would imply some kind of entity is behind this,” Cam declared. “A governing body of some sort that has both the power to impose silence over Hunter and distort time.”

“Like another Academy?” Dustin asked. It was confused, but there was also hope, like they were
cutting close to the root of the issue.

They might be, they could be, who knew.

“Do you think Alex works for them?” Shane added, and it, it was–

Hunter left. He had fully intended to chew them out, to snarl and spit obscenities that they should mind their own business, that they should just give him time, but he had too much hate for Alex and himself without adding a hatred for the team’s perceptiveness; he needed to get out, he needed to breathe.

He felt like he was going to throw up, but when he made it out, back towards the cliffs, all Hunter felt was hollow.

It seemed so impressively stupid now, when he considered it.

Alex worked for Time Force.

Time Force had always come first.

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Hunter had stopped sleeping in his and Blake’s shared quarters ever since Blake had confronted him about the sleep-talking/yelling/groveling. He wanted to pass out– because that’s what it was now; there was no more waiting for sleep, just running until exhaustion took over – somewhere he could be safe from his unconscious responses, safe from worrying about who could hear.

Sleeping outside was too much like sleeping on the roof, now, too empty without the familiar presence by his side. Sleeping in the Ops meant finding a new hidey hole every night, meant evading the others and negotiating with Cyber Cam for his secrecy, and it was rarely comfortable, rarely safe.

Hunter’s sleep was restless, plagued with nightmares and regrets, but he had come to recognize those as the more preferable nights.

Some evenings his dreams would take a different turn, vague and foggy, difficult to decipher, but even with that stubborn ignorance in place, Hunter understood the feel of them. The warm hand gripping his palm, welcoming, confident, gladly returning the gesture. He remembered the arms around his waist, the head buried into his shoulder. He could feel the heat of Alex’s breath against his neck, a warm mass that didn’t shy away from embrace. He could hear the gentle laughter and long for it, for the small smiles, for the feeling of comfort and companionship and equality. Hunter felt the gratitude and easy friendship change, the heat, the warmth, taking on something more sinister and cruel– from familiar, from safe and family-friendly in his chest to lower, in his–

There were shy kisses that Hunter knew, knew damn it, were and would have been entirely impossible, but now were tauntingly real; there were hands grabbing at his hips like they belonged there, lips trailing down the length of his throat–

Those dreams ended with cold showers and more miles below his belt than Hunter ever cared to count. At this rate, he was going to destroy his running shoes, but the blond could easily attest to how very little he cared about that fact.

No amount of running, or snapping at the others, or projecting his misery was ever going to make him feel less stupid, less betrayed, less broken. Less of a failure, as a ranger, as a son, as a friend, a person, a partner.
At a certain point, undeniable facts had to be acknowledged.

No matter how little they made Hunter feel.

The payphone was– Hunter was going to be honest, he had been surprised to find one at all, let alone one that was actually still functioning– but it was there and off the beaten track, and he dialed the appropriate number before he could back out like the coward he was and run for the hills again. He knew by now that they weren’t safe, but it didn’t make the option any less appealing.

He hadn’t been expecting Alex to answer– he wouldn’t – and he had known it had to be either Eric or Adam picking up the phone (if, for some reason, the original Mighty Morphin’ decided to stick around), but when the line picked up with Adam’s firm but quiet, “Hello?”, logic may as well have flown right the hell out the window, because Hunter was having a mini panic attack.

What the hell, what the hell; it wasn’t like Adam had– Well, there was actually a lot of stuff Adam hadn’t done too– but he was, he had–

He had treated Hunter decently. He had made them treat Alex decently, he had made them into a family unit, that had been– That was his doing.

Hunter wondered how much of a joke Adam thought it was, wondered if he felt proud, or if it had simply been the most constructive thing to do. He wondered if Adam actually liked him, and why the hell he even cared if the other ranger did in the first place, because it wasn’t like Hunter had needed Adam’s approval before.

“Hello?” Adam said again.

The phone was shaking in Hunter’s hand, his breath coming in staccato bursts as he realized – holy hell – he actually was having a panic attack. Go figure. Such a diva, he was, right? Alex had hated that about him, hated it.

“Hunter?” The blond’s heart jolted at the question; at how Adam’s concern became a bit more pointed, more… whatever? “Hunter, is that–?”

He slammed the phone against the receiver, eyes clenched shut as he collapsed against the side of the payphone stand. Somehow, he made his way to a bench, his head cradled delicately between his hands as he sucked in ugly gasps of air, ignoring the world around him, blocking out that voice.

Stupid idea. Stupid, stupid idea.

Hunter wasn’t sure what he had been thinking, but it was probably the same thought process that got him to consider Alex a friend.

Nonexistent and foolhardy.

Perhaps, just maybe perhaps, Hunter had expected there to be some possible consequences of his aborted phone call. He didn’t expect a lot though. Maybe Adam would try to call him back. Maybe he would have a private meltdown. Maybe Eric would go on TV and make an ambiguously vague demand for a cease fire of all telephone communication harassments to his private abode, or something; just another passive-aggressive barb to make Hunter feel miniscule and small.
Point was, he hadn’t really been expecting company, though in hindsight, he probably should have.

To be fair, if he had been preparing himself for a reunion, it probably would have been with one of the people he had actually called.

Long story short, it was safe to say that Hunter was just as surprised by Leo’s presence as Leo had been by his.

He had been stocking the racks at Storm Chargers, replenishing hoodies and sweatshirts and consciously avoiding all the red and black ones, taking his time on the women’s pinks, on men’s blues. He either had his gaze fixed on the metal hooks of the hangers or the floor, so his attention had been firmly elsewhere when yet another person entered the shop.

“…Hunter?”

The voice was distantly familiar but he didn’t immediately recognize it. Hunter looked up, each hand loaded down with overpriced sweatshirts, and was greeted with the dumbstruck expression of one Leo Corbett.

Through sheer power of shock, Hunter kept his expression neutral. Leo reciprocated in kind, but his restraint derived from a bamboozlement unlike any other. Hell, you would think the guy just discovered the key to life or something, with the way he held himself so stiffly, eyes wide, startled—

It was a good thing Blake was at the track, that Dustin was in the back rushing to finish a last-minute repair. That Cam and Shane were having their weekly strategy session, and that Tori had decided to hit the beach instead of doing her homework in Storm Chargers’ study nook. That last one was probably courtesy of Hunter’s lovely behavior, but there wasn’t time to spare for it, not to feel the guilt and comprehend—

“Shouldn’t you be in, you know…” Hunter trailed off helplessly. Wasn’t sure if he should articulate the whole space station thing. It was kind of hard to be on Earth when you were supposed to be in space.

Leo looked about as dazed as Hunter felt. “We uh…” He blinked, his gaze flickering to Hunter’s wrist (it hadn’t before; why now?), and something akin to recognition graced his features. “We have transport now,” he said finally.

“Oh.”

Yeah, that was all Hunter had. Quite the conversationalist, he was.

Leo swallowed. “I didn’t think—” He stopped, clearly gathering himself, and looked to the side. “When Eric told me to come here, I didn’t think this…” He trailed off with a chuckle. “Go figure.”

For reasons he couldn’t properly express, the thought that Eric was the one to lead Leo here broke some dam within Hunter he didn’t know he had left. Fury, a quiet anger that had been burning deep and steadily, made a new appearance, snarling to be heard.

Shoving the clothes onto the racks haphazardly, Hunter motioned for Kelly’s attention. “Hey, I’m going to take my break now.”

He waited for her nod – even if it came with the same concerned eyebrows everyone else was giving him – and then stalked out of the store, knowing without having to look that Leo was trailing quietly behind him. Hunter led them to a nearby park and promptly collapsed on the first bench he found that was secluded enough for them to get this stupid heart-to-heart over with. That had been Eric’s
master plan, right? He knew Hunter had kind-of liked Leo – as a far as human beings went, he wasn’t so bad – so of course the Quantum ranger would send him Hunter’s way. It wasn’t like he could be bothered to—

“I’m a ranger,” he said without any prompting. He owed Leo that much, if his absence had actually worried the Lost Galaxy ranger. “That’s why we were there, and why you couldn’t find us afterwards.”

Leo nodded slowly, taking his time to digest the information. “You worked with Time Force.”

“It’s classified,” Hunter ground out. He had flinched, just as he had every other time someone got too close to what had happened, but Leo didn’t comment on it. He was kind, that way.

“Of course.”

They fell into a silence that Hunter couldn’t classify as uncomfortable. He wanted to. He wanted to hate everything about his stupid kidnapping disguised as a mission, but despite himself, he did not. He had liked Leo. He had liked Adam and Eric. He had liked being one of the omnipotent elves that snuck around fixing everything. There had been a kind of adventure to it that had felt satisfying.

But that was just the coping speaking. Hunter had to remind himself of that; he had just been making the best of things.

“Did he really lose someone?”

“What?” Hunter blinked, almost abandoning himself to the quiet of the moment. It took him a few seconds to find the appropriate references for what Leo had asked, who ‘he’ was.

“Oh,” Hunter said at long last. “No. No, he didn’t.”

“He didn’t?” Leo asked. He had been trying to make it off-handed, but Hunter could tell he was invested, deeply so, but didn’t want to say it. He wasn’t sure how he felt about it, why Leo cared that much at all; they hadn’t met for very long. It shouldn’t have been very memorable at all.

It was because of this confusion, and for no other reason he could determine, that Hunter replied. “I mean, yes, he did. But it wasn’t- It was him, I mean. He died.”

Hunter remembered that. He had almost forgotten; with what had followed- well, it led him to here, but he had almost lost those moments of panic, those moments of pain and sorry and heartache, seeing Alex fall to the ground, lifeless.

“He died,” Hunter repeated. “And I helped make that happen.”

Shit, it was no wonder Alex hadn’t let him save his parents. How could Hunter be entitled to a right he hadn’t even given himself?

“Oh, God.”

‘Distressed’ was the only word Hunter could think of– Leo’s words were distressed enough to make him turn, to make him really look at the other ranger. He wished he hadn’t.

Leo looked almost broken, his eyes wet, jaw working slowly, trying to digest what Hunter had said.

“I’m so sorry,” Leo said it in a quiet exhale, like he could barely manage to air to get the words out. “I’m so sorry for your loss—”
“Don’t,” Hunter snapped. Leo pulled back visibly, his lip quivering, and Hunter turned away, looking anywhere but at him. His throat felt tight. “He didn’t— alternate timelines or something, okay. Technically, he’s fine. He’s not dead, he— He didn’t die.”

He did but he didn’t, but Hunter didn’t really have the mental capacity to explain that right now, not when his neck was feeling like it was a really good idea at the most inopportune moment to layer on additional heat of shame, for his cheeks to flush. Hunter clenched his fists against his sides.

“He’s not-not here because he’s dead,” Hunter spat. “He left me here because—”

There was a sound, this choking, coughing mewl of a thing that came from somewhere, and belatedly Hunter realized that it was from him. He cut himself off, trying to stifle the horrifying cry, shoving a hand against his lips and quaking. His shoulders shook with— He wasn’t crying, he wasn’t, it wasn’t like he had just realized that Alex had left him, Hunter was very much aware, thanks—

But Alex had left him here, just as he was always going to, and Hunter was alone.

And as much as he hated him – wanted to hate him until the end of time, until the sun went all red giant and engulfed them all – as much as Alex had betrayed him, had played Hunter for the best possible outcome- Hunter still, for some reason, wanted him around. Wanted him there for Hunter to yell at, even if his arguments were predictably logical, even if he was the ultimate asshat, even if— Hunter wanted Alex. Beyond a physical need, beyond a fleeting fancy, he wanted the brunette there.

“He left me,” Hunter choked brokenly, burying his head in his hands. “He left.”

And that desire was something he would never have.

That had been why Hunter had held onto his anger, had strayed to the ways of frustration and moping and sorrow, because if he acknowledged the fact that anything beyond anger existed for Alex, then he would be finished, he would be done.

A hand moved to the center of his back, grounding and warm. Hunter soaked in the contact, as much as he could and he—

Well, he cried. Cried until his heart felt less broken.

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Hunter didn’t have enough pride to shake off Leo’s hand. There was a list of things he needed in that exact moment, but most were incomprehensible in his current state of mind, so he focused on that one point of contact like it was his only lifeline in the world. It wasn’t; he was a lucky guy, he still had a team, a brother, a purpose – but he—

Jesus, he made bad decisions. Hell. He should have never stopped hating Alex; it was just asking for trouble.

Hunter wasn’t sure how long he spent hunched over himself, tears leaking into his hands, drying salty tracks across his palms. It was probably longer than the fifteen minutes his break allowed, but Hunter couldn’t find it in him to care. The fact that there was someone here, someone who kind of knew what had happened… it relieved enough of a burden Hunter hadn’t been aware of carrying, lessened the vice around his heart.
He didn’t feel great, but he felt better. Like he could manage.

Leo remained silent during the transaction, not bothering to offer useless condolences. When Hunter looked up, slowly pulling himself into an upright position, the red ranger’s expression had nothing but understanding, sorrow, and support. Normally, Hunter detested the pity, but this was Leo and… he kind of understood. Broken teams led to difficult relationships; if you could get through that—Well, Hunter knew from experience that it made the bond all the more worth having.

Hunter wondered if Leo had an Alex of his own on his team.

The blond thought about asking, but was sidetracked when he registered a new presence. A few feet past the edge of the bench, wavering off to the side, stood Dustin. He had his hands tucked into the pockets of his filthy sweatshirt, covered in grease and oil stains, and his curls were frazzled and sticking in odd directions—He had probably spilled something and forgotten, running a hand through his hair without realizing (he got in the zone, that one). Shane and Cam would happily clean him up later.

“Are you—?” Dustin gnawed at his bottom lip, glancing down at his beaten sneakers. He was gathering his strength, renewing his determination or whatever, but right now, it just made him look horribly uncertain. “Are you Alex?”

“No.” Leo kept up with the conversation easily, answering the proffered question and putting the pieces together slowly. It was classified; it really was classified, even to Hunter’s teammates. The brunette glanced at Dustin’s morpher, then back to his face. “I’m Leo.”

“Dustin,” the yellow ranger responded automatically. He was disappointed, but not rude, and very, very unhappy.

If Hunter had to guess, it probably had something to do with the fact that he looked like he had just spent the past fifteen minutes watching Hunter ball his eyes out on a park bench, but one could never really tell with Dustin.

_Hell_, a distraction was in order.

Hunter cleared his throat, and looked around for any straying ears. When he didn’t find any, he continued, “Dustin.” he motioned to Leo. “This is Leo Corbett, the red Lost Galaxy ranger. Leo—” He looked at the brunette. “This is Dustin. Yellow Wind ranger; my teammate.”

Dustin offered a shy wave. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Leo nodded politely.

The silence that consumed them next had none of the comfort from before. It was ruined, overrun with concern and tension, and if Hunter weren’t so tired of it all, he would have started laughing from the sheer amount of _feeling_ the other two rangers were doing. _Over him._

“Is it-?” Dustin cut himself off, unsure, but quickly gathering his courage, like he had already come this far so, why not. “Is it classified for you too?”

In his posture, in his – Dustin-ness, for lack of better word, was that old spark Hunter had seen before. The will to fight to hell and back for what he thought was right. It was an awful waste, being used on Hunter, but he wasn’t going to criticize Dustin for it. Not if he was getting his ‘ole moxy back.

The smile Leo gave him in return could only be described as bittersweet and apologetic. “It is, I’m
afraid.”

The way Dustin deflated, his shoulders slumping with a dejected sigh, was too painful for Hunter to look at. The blond turned away, focusing on some kids’ soccer practice going on far across the park.

“Oh.” He heard Dustin say.

Just, oh.

For once, Hunter found that he was legitimately disappointed with that face. Somehow, through all his mourning, his silence began to stop feeling like a shield for his inadequacies.

Now, here, among people who cared about— who he cared about, at least, Hunter found that the cover up felt more like a prison than anything else. The idea of it was so staggering it almost brought him to tears again.

He would never be able to talk about Alex. What he hated, what he liked, what he missed, what they had done. Hunter would never be able to speak those words, to articulate his feelings.

Hunter gave into the urge, hiding his face in the safety of his hands.

This time, there were two hands on his back, and Hunter shook off neither.

Chapter End Notes

Plot twist – he will totally be able to talk about Alex. Someday.

I know, that chapter was allll the angst and more, but things will look up! After Alex has his share of angst next chapter :)

Thanks to Zy_lar, Celebrusc, and FlipCarson for the comments! Your feedback is deeply appreciated, and I know the story is at its low point now, but it will rally into a wonderful finale (in my very biased opinion ;P).

The mention of Hunter wanting to date Dustin is a reference to one of my past stories, ‘Any Moment’ – technically the ‘B’ version (on my fanfiction.net profile), which ends with the Shane/Cam/Dustin coupling. This story is technically in the same universe, but you don’t need to read Any Moment to understand this one :)

Until next time
Hunter hated him.

Alex could not fault the blond, it was reasonable.

This was why he didn’t— why they weren’t supposed to become attached to past-natives. Even if his own experience was entirely unique, Alex had known, had understood — better than most — what he had been getting into. Fondness only laid seed for failure; an upsetting balance of emptiness an inevitable doom for those who succumbed to the lesser wiles of emotional partiality.

A part of him had hoped — he knew this now — that Hunter could be an exception. Much like the Commander and Wes — Adam as well, Hunter could… perhaps, have his own communication equipment for future conferences. Could be allowed to know, to stay and give updates as needed and, as Alex had been the one who interacted with him, who nurtured that connection, Alex would be his point of contact.

And if those business calls sometimes diverged into something more friendly, that could be an allowable transgression, if only for a few minutes.

It seemed like such a pitiful thing, now, but it had been Alex’s only hope through this storm. He was a realist, a pragmatist. Much like Jen had to return to duty in the future and abandon her love—

But that world could not exist for Alex.

It hurt, when he dwelled on it. Hurt and burned in new ways every time he remembered Hunter’s rage, his righteous fury. How quickly he had turned; how quickly he had abandoned their pleasantries, this façade of comradery when something that was truly important hung in a precarious balance that Alex— that time — destroyed.

It was a temporary burden, however. His memory was due to be erased in his time period by a different operative, one who hadn’t become too invested in their assigned partner. And that was— it was for the best, no matter how much the prospect stung.

He should never have expected Hunter to understand his position, his duties, no matter his insistence. Hunter would never truly comprehend the sacrifices necessary to preserve something bigger than himself.
The irony was not lost on Alex that with this incident, he would never forget.

Luckily, that burden would be taken from him at the end of the mission.

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“Stockholm Syndrome, right?” Hunter had spat, along with all the other words whose potential was unrecognized. Alex pondered them on his own, when he hid in the shadows waiting, considering all the possibilities.

How deep had it gone? For how long? Had Alex warped him? Had he broken Hunter’s fiery personality into complacency until the shinobi could get home? Where he was supposed to be?

Hunter hated him.

More than anything else, that was Alex’s biggest regret.

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He didn’t go back to the Commander’s. It hadn’t been essential in the first place – more of a luxury than anything else – and with the rate of needed corrections increasing at such a rapid pace, it didn’t take much for Alex to call Trip and request the next rest stop be canceled.

A few days after that, he had managed to get himself and his clothes cleaned at a shelter, making the next stop unnecessary as well.

Alex procured sustenance as Time Force had trained him to, salvaging scraps, junk that wouldn’t be missed but held enough nutrients to keep his ranger-metabolism satisfied. It was slightly more difficult than it should have been – inexperience had left him uncertain, but that was his own failing. He had grown too accustomed to the comforts offered by the Commander.

Just another reason not to return. Alex had only been there because of Hunter.

He canceled the next scheduled rest stop.

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He was in a time – Fran’s team was active, he thought, but there were too many similarities for Alex to really focus. The team wore uniforms (Hunter’s team had ‘ninja suits’ they could switch into as a default, the blond had showed him once–), color-coordinated, and there was a blond. He was tall, his hair lighter than Hunter’s, shorter, but his eyes were just a blue and smirk just as wicked–

Alex assumed he had completed the necessary task before the teleportation, because he couldn’t remember doing it.

He wished he could stop seeing Hunter in every direction he looked, wished he could stop looking over his shoulder, as though the crimson ranger would somehow be there.

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He had never considered disobeying orders. That wasn’t Alex’s prerogative. It wasn’t his place to decide what should and should not be – he knew this. He honored it, had taken it on as his mission with the respect it deserved. The best, and only the very best, were selected to be a part of Time Force for that very reason. There couldn’t be the temptation, there couldn’t be the ego to play god, to be judge and executioner. There had to be an understanding, a humble acceptance that with this
power, with these abilities, they did what was needed and no more. They couldn’t alter what had been, even if they perceived it to be for the better. They couldn’t.

Alex never had to remind himself of this, but with every passing day he woke alone, without that presence of warmth wrapped around him, a quiet part of him – needed to.

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As an academic exercise, Alex would sometimes contemplate the steps needed to change the death of Hunter’s parents. Scratching a hand through his gradually cultured stubble, he would – as a small mental workout – consider what he could have done. What he would need to do now, if he so chose to go rogue.

He wouldn’t, but if– well, if he could. In a world where regulations did not exist, he would go through the front. He would keep out of sight of the bay windows. He would coerce them to be on guard, to be the ninja masters Hunter vehemently swore they were, and with that, maybe they would have a chance.

A chance didn’t seem unreasonable. It wasn’t something Alex could promise, but a chance– it was just an exercise.

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He saw Hunter again.

Alex wasn’t expecting it, had grown accustomed to the auto-pilot haze of completing mission objectives, so coming to between a few well-kept shops in a city square shouldn’t have been anything out of the ordinary.

He heard him before he saw him.

Hunter – and that must be the famous Blake – were huddled towards each other, exchanging whispers that weren’t quite soft enough not to carry on the wind.

He looked… angry, but not in a way Alex was familiar with. This was– it was almost engrained in him. Derisive. Condescending and mad. They were talking about someone, and they–

“We’ll get him,” Blake was whispering. “Don’t worry about that.”

“I’m not.” It was a promise, and there was something hard in Hunter’s eyes, something twisted and mean and not Hunter. Not the Hunter Alex knew. “He’ll pay for what he did to them.”

Blake was grinning, wicked, more teeth than smile. “And nothing’s gonna get in the way.”

Hunter rolled his eyes, hair tossed with the exaggerated move of his head – that was familiar, but the rest of it wasn’t. “Nothing that won’t regret it,” Hunter added with a laugh, and Alex was too caught up in the horror, the dismissive promise of violence, to catch Blake’s reply.

That wasn’t Hunter; that wasn’t– had they met yet? Did he know him, did he–?

The world disappeared before Alex had the chance to figure it out.

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It wasn’t a hard choice, after that.
Alex had been selfless for the majority of his life – or he had tried to be. He had dedicated himself to doing the right thing, to keep himself a useful tool to Time Force, to never let his own self-importance supersede the will of the company he served.

But in this one moment–

However that Hunter had come to be– before Alex, after Alex; it didn’t matter – Alex couldn’t stand by and do nothing while that warped version of his friend, his family, came into being. He couldn’t let the blond become that; he couldn’t– he didn’t want him to live without his family.

Alex had gone his whole life untethered from any kind of familial bond, but Hunter shouldn’t have to. Hunter shouldn’t be left striving for perfection just to get a small note of commendation from his peers, he shouldn’t be desperate for praise, he shouldn’t be lost or angry or hurting and he shouldn’t have met Alex.

But he had.

Alex had met him, and they were both forever changed from that encounter.

The very least Alex could do for him was provide the blond the benefits of that relationship. The very least he could do, after all the toleration, all the–

Hunter may never have considered Alex a true friend, but Alex did.

And for once, Alex would like to take care of his friends.

Alex’s first action into his unsanctioned side-trip was to relieve himself of Time Force’s morpher modifier. He needed to eliminate the possibility of being recalled, and this was the only way that could be guaranteed.

His hack had been rudimentary at best; Trip would see through the programmed façade almost immediately (if he hadn’t already), but Alex needed confirmation that he would be free to move to do what was needed. There was always the possibility they could recall the device without him, effectively leaving him stranded, but Alex found the importance of his mission outweighed that distinct possibility.

Instead of fear, he opted for Hunter’s reckless mindset of living in the moment, in life, instead of ruminating in plans and possibilities and counter measures.

He hid the modifier, shoved it into a random mailbox and took off running, mentally replaying the debrief they had merely three days ago, reviewing where they had been positioned, where the fight had taken place, where it had ended. Alex shoved away the unpleasant memory of Hunter struggling beneath him, screaming and cursing and biting, ignored the remnants of his own fear, his own uncertainty, and focused on the facts. They were resolute, unaffected by passions and vital to this operation.

Originally, they had been focused on the back entrance of the Bradley house. Alex couldn’t say for certain how Lothor had entered the dwelling, but he knew, with the surety that came from any strategist, that the shinobi had been aware of their presence. He had to have; the ruckus was unavoidable.

That left the front as his only option, and however Lothor had gained his access, he had done it unobtrusively. Hunter had said there were no signs of breaking and entering. Either Lothor had
managed to find a key, teleported, or the Bradleys had let him in. Alex didn’t intend to stay around long enough to deduce which of these options the villain had employed; he was going to get the Bradleys out of there. Future pondering could wait.

Alex ran, disregarding years of training that stressed blending in, subtlety, camouflage. He ran full out, a lone lunatic in the dark, sleepy suburbs, eyes frantically searching each house until he found the familiar roofing.

Rusty red, worn but solid. Hunter’s house. It had seemed appropriate at the time.

Now Alex made for it as though it were his only lifeline, sprinting up the steps and reaching for the doorknob before he could properly formulate a plan, too high on adrenaline and need to bother with such things.

He expected the door to be locked.

It wasn’t.

It flew open, giving away beneath Alex’s insistent shove like a petty criminal, cowering away from the truly unforgiving. For a horrible moment, Alex knew with complete certainty that he had been too late. The only thing his rogue behavior had earned him was an intimate view of Hunter’s murdered parents. Of course, the one time when it counted, the one time he needed-

It took him until he had his blaster leveled in front of him, eyes searching for Lothor, when he realized, again, that he had been mistaken.

Veera Bradley was staring up with an expression of muted surprise, paused mid-fold of a blanket that had been carelessly strewn across the living room couch. From the corner of his eye, Alex could see Marcus Bradley off in the kitchen wearing in a red apron, frowning down at an onion in contemplation.

Alex, being the seasoned veteran of time travel that he was, forced down the thrill of adrenaline and calmly reached for his-

“Why is the door unlocked?” he asked, overwhelmed by this peculiarity.

Yes, he should be reaching for his badge, but he needed to-

Veera, who was oddly composed all things considered, tilted her head. “Our sons will be home from training soon,” she explained. “We leave the door unlocked for them.”

“What?”

What? Hunter hadn’t remembered that?

“It seems fairly straight forward,” Marcus, similarly calm, added.

For a second, the simplicity of the answer was staggering. That was the agonizing mystery that had plagued Hunter all these years? That was the thing everyone had missed? A habit?

Without waiting for further explanation, Alex reached behind him and deftly slammed the door, sliding the basic lock and deadbolt into place. It wouldn’t hold Lothor - not by a long shot - but it would definitely add another hurdle to his stealthy entrance, and Alex would take whatever advantages he could get. He was not appropriately equipped to deal with the likes of Lothor.
“Are there any other doors unlocked—?” Alex turned to find a knife poised inches away from his eye. Marcus’ steady hand deadly as the blond considered Alex, who was, he belatedly remembered, an intruder.

“Time Force,” Alex explained, compelling himself to take a slow breath to edge the tension away from his shoulders. “Here.”

Though it was difficult to play off the blade obscuring his vision, Alex shifted his blaster and offered it to Marcus, handle out, nose pointed towards himself.

It was to his credit as a ninja master that Hunter’s father didn’t so much as blink at the proffered weapon, accepting it with a stoic peacefulness that Alex could only envy. He would ask him about it more, later- but now there was never enough time, and Alex had to prioritize.

“I’m going to reach into my pocket now and pull out my badge,” Alex said, eyes on Marcus. In his peripherals, Veera was a statue on the other side of the room, watching the exchange with complete detachment. She was preparing for battle, he realized. Putting herself in a state that could handle the possibilities of either a full-on brawl or negotiation. Either way, she was prepared.

It was painful, to see the echoes of Hunter’s quirks in their behavior. The source of their disposition. They had raised him.

There was no time; Alex didn’t wait for an affirmative from Marcus. He maintained his composure, knowing guilty parties would exhibit nerves, and acted professional.

He drew his badge in one deft movement, activating the hologram as visual evidence. “I’m Alex Collins of Time Force; our duty is to protect the sanctity of time by correcting alterations made by those abusing time travel technology. In three minutes, you are going to be murdered by Lothor.” He paused a second, enough for it to sink in – Hunter’s dramatics – but not enough to use time they didn’t have. “I’ve come to stop it.”

“The boys,” Marcus began, knife pulling away from its position of threatening Alex’s vision ever so minutely. “Are they—?”

“They survive,” Alex said, focusing on Marcus. “You don’t.”

“Lothor?” Marcus repeated the name and pulled back, allowing Alex enough space to maneuver around his knife. “Wasn’t that– Veera, that’s the shinobi who was banished from the Wind Ninja Academy, right?”

Alex moved to the other side of the room, eyes darting to all the entrances and back to his watch. This place wasn’t secure enough. The fact that they were aware now was one thing, that should be enough to prevent Lothor’s stealthy entrance, but Alex didn’t have enough info to determine how they would manage in a battle of pure strength. Whether Lothor would be stronger than whatever the Bradleys had to offer.

Alex made it to the other side of the couch. Veera might know of a more defensible position, but-

He was struck by an odd thought.

In that time, that horrible instance barely three days past, of all the things Alex had made Hunter witness, they had never seen Veera’s death. There was a horrible flash of Marcus, over and over again, slumping lifelessly to the ground, red stains pooling around his neck darkening into a vicious brown, unapologetic in its natural ugliness.
Alex saw it in every moment he closed his eyes, whenever he had the audacity to feign sleep, whenever he wasn’t consumed with the prospect of planning or details, he lived that moment, over and over and over again.

They never saw how Veera died.

She lunged, flitting forward in the seconds between breaths. Alex never saw the strike, but he felt it, a staggering pain that blossomed well after she had him tossed aside on the hardwood floors. Whatever technique she had used was sparking and painful and, more importantly, immobilizing.

“Veera, wait! The hologram, he’s–”

Marcus moved just as quickly, fast enough that Alex’s eyes couldn’t track the movement.

_Thankfully_, Alex thought, indulging in the bitterness for one awful second, _I know what happens next._

They were off to his side and he, paralyzed, couldn’t shift to witness it. Couldn’t move from where he rested, out of sight of the living room windows.

Couldn’t change his view from that of Veera Bradley’s dead corpse, neck already split open and obscured by the couch, out of Marcus’ vision.

It had never mattered if Alex let Hunter go. They had already been too late anyway.

Lothor had gained his own entrance through unlocked doors, then masqueraded as Veera to finish off Marcus. The why was irrelevant. All that mattered was the undisputed fact that there was nothing Alex could have ever done about it, regardless of his wants. And he, so very strongly, _wanted_ this for Hunter. This one thing he could have given the blond, and nothing else. Friendship and trust and support were a waste from Alex, but he specialized in this one capacity, and if there had been even the slightest opportunity for bringing Hunter happiness through that same capacity, then Alex had no choice but to use it. For his friend.

The friend that despised him, as he probably always had.

He heard it, the frantic patter of movements– punches maybe, fast footwork Alex never would have been able to keep a definite eye on– before there was a resounding _squelch._

Flinching Alex could manage, the reaction overpowering even in his weakened state. He heard the involuntary sputter, choked and laden with disbelief from Hunter’s father. He knew the face Marcus would be wearing – confusion. Hunter had been so angry that Marcus was _confused_ about what was happening, as though his father had trusted Lothor not to kill him as opposed to trusting his wife not to–

The body– for the vessel was empty, no room for a soul– fell in a heavy and graceless slump, collapsing with a wet sound; the blood pooling unapologetic patterns into the antique rug until it was indistinguishable, marring its beauty in permanence.

Not thirty feet outside this door, the Hunter and Alex of three days ago were vanishing in a flare of brilliant light. In five seconds, Hunter would be screaming obscenities and bloody murder, Alex would be shepherded into the house, and the guilt and overwhelming sorrow that had led him to this predicament would begin to accumulate until Alex had no choice but to yield.

This was always supposed to happen, that was why Trip had allowed his transgressions, this blatant abuse of privileges. Alex hadn’t been altering for the better so much as following his particular path
to a T, gifting Lothor with the distraction he needed.

For a second, Alex was indescribably glad that Hunter hated him, that they had come to this. Alex wasn’t sure if he could forgive the blond if he ever looked over this grievous offense.


By the sound of it, Lothor was still facing away from him, most likely still observing his work on Marcus’ body.

Movement, then, would be Alex’s goal. The rest of the story had yet to be written, as his murder could just as easily be on tonight’s schedule as anything else. It would not be difficult for Time Force to retrieve the body.

It startled Alex, even as he began testing the boundaries of his mobility, that he seriously considered the alternative. What was left for him in the future? More… this?

He was pathetic enough to admit that a life without company, however fake and unwillingly produced, sounded completely unappealing. Though, admittedly, suicide by psychotic ninja villain seemed like a rather permanent solution to his melancholy.

“I should thank you,” Lothor continued, voice full of mirth. He hadn’t bothered to so much as glance Alex’s way, clearly having evaluated the agent as being a non-threat. “For the show, at least. If nothing else.”

‘Not welcome’ was what Alex desired to say, unable to manage the pain of thinking up one of Hunter’s more sarcastic insults, of something that would do the blond proud. He lacked the creativity.

Alex managed a few jerky shudders, his fingers twitching as he ground out a, “Nggh.”

It earned him a laugh and, presumably, Lothor’s attention, as his voice seemed louder this time around, like he was facing him. “Not much of a conversationalist, are you?”

Full neck movement, gradual arm mobility – Alex still couldn’t focus exactly where he wanted, but he could get his arms under him. It was coming back, the speed of regaining his functions increasing by the moment. For now, though, he was a sitting duck.

Lothor didn’t seem too concerned. “No matter, I quite enjoyed your dramatic entrance. If not your timing.” He crouched down in one fluid movement, soundless, and wrenched Alex’s head back with one ruthless fist. “Looks like government lackeys are even ineffectual in the future.”

He traced a finger along the side of Alex’s face, laughing outright at the glare it earned him, and settled a hand against his neck. “I suppose I could take the time to properly deal with you, seeing as you went through the trouble of showing up. After all, I…”

He trailed off with a frown.

Alex followed his gaze. Lothor was staring at a clock on the mantel. It had just chimed the three quarter mark, ominous in the house’s quiet.

“Huh,” he said, sounding quizzical. “Well, I guess you’re saved by the bell.” He chucked Alex back to the floor just as carelessly as he had the first time.

Alex could hear his footsteps as he started trudging away, for Alex’s benefit – the brunette knew
better than most the silence of ninjas. Where was he going? What else could Lothor set out to do?

Alex needed to find out.

His arms– he got them under his chest, he could push up, he could probably get to his feet and stop him if he wanted to, even if Alex couldn’t necessarily feel anything yet–

“I’ve got two boys I need to take care of,” Lothor drawled, his volume lowering as he made his way towards the back door. “You understand how it is. So much to do, so little time.” He made a vague rolling gesture with one hand. “Yadda, yadda.”

“You can’t–” Alex struggled to his feet, forcing down the wave of terror threatening to overwhelm him.

Lothor didn’t kill Hunter and Blake, they lived. He was stopped before–

But Alex had no idea how Lothor was stopped. Hunter didn’t even know why Lothor had left things the way he had; the blond had assumed it was just to revel in the remaining Bradleys’ joint misery.

The idea that Blake and Hunter had been targets as well…

Lothor snorted, rolling his eyes. “Kid, I think I just proved I can do what I want, when I want. And now I’ve got to go murder some chillen’s so…” He cocked a sarcastic grin over his shoulder. “Toodles.”

He left, just like that. The carefully noisy footsteps disappearing and leaving Alex in complete silence.

Hunter– Blake– He couldn’t–

Alex didn’t think about it; he ran, pausing only to retrieve his blaster from where it had been discarded on the floor. Acting on instinct and need, Alex chased after that bastard of a human, knowing he would never be able to keep up in his wildest dreams and running anyway. He didn’t know how Hunter and Blake survived, but they had, and even if the very means to how that was achieved remained unknown to him, Alex couldn’t help but follow, knowing he had to be sure.

He also knew the only shot he would ever have of catching up to Lothor involved the use of his suit, and Alex didn’t hesitate a second before he initiated a morph.

It seemed to get Lothor’s attention.

When Alex’s HUD initialized, Lothor was frozen still, considering him with strangely serious eyes. They were in what looked to be a neighborhood park, nothing indicative of deep construction funds, but befitting a suburban area of this size. It was an odd juxtaposition to see him there.

“A ranger, huh?”

Lothor asked this as though he didn’t trust his vision to confirm the fact.

As though it, Alex realized, were simply too good to be true.

When the ninja’s stoicism was traded in for a predatory grin, satisfied, no – positively thrilled – Alex couldn’t fight a sudden feeling of dread.

“I’ve always wanted to kill one of those,” Lothor continued, finishing with an overdramatic cackle.
Alex was beginning to see the type of villain he was.

And then he didn’t see much of anything.

Pain erupted in his torso only half a second before it conquered his back, moving through a quick series of strategic victories he never stood a chance of countering as he crashed into the ground in a rough tumble, some fifteen feet away. His Chrono Sabers went flying, skidding from his grasp and there was no time—not to breathe, not to think—before Lothor was on him again.

It was a kick, Alex thought, vicious in its accuracy, hitting the same spot as before—left ribs, near the middle. Grass and sod crumbled beneath him, the rough outlines of a crater—a grave—forming on impact.

Alex struggled for his blaster, willing his sluggish fingers to move, to focus, but Lothor easily knocked his hand aside with a laugh. The pure joy he exuded was that of a child on Christmas; a cry of freedom and excitement that all he had desired was finally attainable, no effort required.

That was Alex; he was the non-effort.

“You don’t need that,” Lothor chuckled, tossing his gun aside. “This is a man’s battle. Fisticuffs mandatory. You don’t see me pulling out any fancy toys, now do you?”

An unyielding vice clutched around Alex’s throat and the brunette, still blinking stars from his eyes, was hauled roughly to his feet. He was released with a stumble, his feet almost coming out from under him again.

Alex jolted forward, scrambling, right into Lothor’s waiting fist.

The next hit sent him flying past the swing set, a sight barely confirmed due to the invasion of fiery pinpricks all across his body. There would be bruises, if he was lucky, though the probability of broken bones and internal bleeding seemed higher at this point, even with his morph.

There was a reason certain rangers only fought certain villains.

Each iteration of morpher sets was designed, in great detail, for a particular enemy. The equipment rangers had access to could potentially make them an armada in themselves were they not limited in such a way. If there was no specialization then there would be, by default, unlimited access, which was a very easy way to lead to tempting situations that need not exist.

Rangers, by their very nature, were good. Decent. That did not mean, however, that they were infallible.

Everyone had their weak days, and a person with access to very powerful resources employed in a very stressful career was not always going to be a recipe for success. Eventually, something would give.

To minimize the possibility of this ever coming to be, a system of controls was put in place by the Order of the Light, the governing body responsible for the discovery of the Morphing Grid in the first place. Most designers didn’t even realize it when they were building the morpher sets, but the only way for the power to be functional was if they created the armor and weaponry with specific parameters in mind. You couldn’t take more of something—agility, defense, firepower—without taking from something else.

Each team could have a basic power set, and then some additional attributes, depending on their opposition, to enhance them. Make them unique. The Earth rangers were not excluded from this
doctrine, even if they remained oblivious to its installation.

The Turbo team had their vehicles; the Space team had gear and transportation that held up to intergalactic travel. Lost Galaxy had their elemental connections, Lightspeed, the ability to constantly expand their arsenal. Time Force had time travel, and the ninjas…

Ninja Storm was all about speed, stealth, and the elemental techniques passed down to them through centuries of perfection. The Ninja Storm team was built for a kind of endurance no other team, save the Ninjetti, could ever possibly hope to match.

Alex did not have their speed. He barely had the firepower to hold Lothor temporarily at bay; from the very beginning his Time Force morpher had been hopelessly outmatched, and he had known that.

But ‘knowing’ and ‘experiencing’ were two completely different concepts.

This time it was his shoulder that took the brunt of the blow. It jarred at an awkward angle against the ground, flipping the brunette until he was collapsed face down, body rough and uncooperative beneath his struggled movements.

He needed to get up. He needed to fight back. He needed to keep Hunter safe. He had to. He had to.

He couldn’t let Hunter die. He didn’t want to live in a world without Hunter Bradley.

The concept snuck up on him in the shadows of his thoughts, camouflaged in the waves of adrenaline and panic clashing together with the self-disciplined need to be composed. Alex was so consumed with fighting Lothor and fighting for control that the idea, the fact he had been steadily ignoring or repressing– it finally had the opportunity to leap into the limelight, raised upon a pedestal, unwilling of silence.

Hunter hated him, and it was terrible and deserved, but a life without ever being subjected to Hunter – the hate and the sarcasm, the bitterness and the jokes and the walls – that was a life worser still.

That was something Alex didn’t want to live with, and he recognized that.

Once the thought was allowed private acknowledgement, it was all Alex could do to not focus on it.

Invariably, he failed. It was too overpowering, too much, too unfamiliar, strange, elating–

He froze mid-action, half-pushed off the ground as he recovered, overwhelmed with the idea of it, and almost instantly realized his mistake.

He was already pitifully slow in comparison to Lothor, and that was with his suit and fear of death rushing his actions. Pausing, however briefly, was asking for tragedy to strike.

Lothor saw this, and delivered.

The punch glanced off his chest and smashed against the chin of his helmet, snapping Alex’s cranium back in a fierce whiplash that knocked him up, onto his feet.

He stumbled back, flailing to regain his balance, arms windmilling out at his sides, and Lothor went in for the kill. His targets were without particular aim; Alex suspected, over the haze of punches, strikes so fast and so painful that Alex could practically feel his body shutting down in revolt, not desiring to continue such hardships. Alex barely had time to register one blow before another spike
of pain consumed him– right elbow, left shin, throat, lower torso, right thigh, torso, torso, torso, left
shoulder, ribs–

With each hit, Alex could do nothing but retreat, pushed back by the force of each blow. He had no
time to get his arms up in a guard; he had no chance of fighting back.

He could only hope that somehow this bought Hunter and Blake enough time. Even if it killed him,
he could live with that–

The morph wouldn’t hold. Not under this level of assault. The Time Force suit could take a lot of
damage, but most of that was electrical-related due to Ransik’s preference for mechanical minions.
Physical blows at this speed, with this repetition and force, would leave Alex no choice but to power
down soon, or the morph would be ripped away forcibly.

He wasn’t sure which would be the better alternative. To keep his enhanced defenses enabled for as
long as possible, followed by a period of brief disorientation at the power leaving him unwillingly, or
manually powering down, remaining in control, and being swiftly beaten into nothingness, helpless
without his armor.

Either way, there was only one ending.

It came before Alex had made his decision.

Losing a morph is not altogether a painful experience. It’s disquieting, mostly, because it wasn’t
something you were expecting. Unnerving, would be another apt description. It was easy to lose
track of your surroundings after being in the controlled cocoon of your helmet, where everything else
was a safe barrier away from sterile environment. It wasn’t just danger and rubble, but the sudden
onslaught of things like wind, smells, noises being louder, being more exposed, threw you.

And if you were especially unlucky, it actually threw you.

In this one instance, Alex kept his luck. He remained standing.

It was raining. He wasn’t sure how he had missed that. The water was slick and cool against his
back, plastering his hair down easily with thick, fat drops that poured in relentless sheets.

Had they gotten home? Hunter mentioned something about it raining, right? After they had gotten
home? Were they safe now?

“Not even a challenge,” Lothor spat, his earlier thrill of the chase stripped from him with bitter
contempt. “And to think, I wasted time on you.”

Alex stood, blinking through the haze of raindrops. He didn’t really feel them, which wasn’t a
surprise in itself, but he didn’t feel the bruises that much either. He wondered if Lothor had numbed
him again.

“Hey-” it came out as a strained croak.

They had stopped, Alex realized. Why had they stopped?

“Just pathetic,” Lothor sneered.

Were Alex paying attention, he would have caught the subtle headshake. He would have seen the
interception, and the blur of battle that only true ninja masters were capable of. He would have
processed the idea of cavalry, the backup Hunter had mentioned, coming to his house with
frightening timing, almost exactly after he and Blake had discovered their parents’ bodies.

But Alex had one other thing occupying his attention.

His shirt had been plaid– the over shirt, at least. Hunter had liked it, he thought, or at least liked to joke that Alex looked like a southern ranch-hand in it, with the boots.

Sometimes the comparison was a lumberjack, but Alex had never minded. If he were honest, he would say that was one of the reasons why he chose the shirt so frequently. He had no favoritism for articles of clothing, such things were inefficient and beneath him, but the fact that it had brought some levity to the blond had always made it...useful. Encouraged cohesion.

If the results were smiles and jokes, who was Alex to disagree with such effectiveness?

The shirt, like most of their shirts, was red. They were red, so their shirts were red.

The section of his shirt near the dagger was stained a darker red– blood, his blood– the hilt of the blade projecting where the knife had slid so neatly between his ribs.

Pathetic.

The blood was cold, and coated his hands in the same wretched stain as the Bradleys’.

Wind whirled in deafening madness, and Alex felt his legs collapse under him, oblivious to the dangers of being subdued, or the hands feeling for his shoulders.

The world went black.

Chapter End Notes

Totally borrowed the ‘Order of the Light’ from Tsukino Akume’s ‘Bright Skies’ (which you should definitely read, by the way, it is good business). I don’t believe it was used exactly as an authoritative body over the Morphin’ Grid, but that’s what it is for the intents of this story.

I’m sick so I don’t have much else by way of endnotes. Except that I just couldn’t not call her Vera.

Until next time :)
Hearts, stars, and horseshoes to the real vampire for being the beta-ing champion of this chapter. This chapter needed a bit of extra loving, and I am supremely grateful that vamps was willing to give it, so thank you! Additional love to Kei Luna Shoryu for supplementary edits and all around support. I could not ask for a better cheerleader, Kei :) 

If you guys are still on the prowl for some more Ninja Storm fics, you should check out 'My Brother's Keeper' by the real vampire (now complete!) or 'The Art of Cohesion' by Kei Luna Shoryu. They are both good times :D 

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was a beautiful day in the neighborhood.

Objectively. Or, you know, spiritually.

Hunter wasn’t really feeling it himself, but it was hard to deny the balance of pleasantly warm sunshine and mild winds, puffy clouds, zero humidity, and picture the day as anything other than perfect. In a practical sense, he guessed.

He was still working on the emotional sense.

Leo was probably at the beach now, connecting with nature in a way their pitiful brains could never hope to understand. The red ranger had been appalled when he discovered there were no fire ninjas (‘Sorry bro, your shinobi’s in another castle’, Blake had joked; it had been painful for everyone involved). He had wanted someone to discuss technique with, supposedly, but that was total bull because the brunette had been hanging around for the past two weeks and hadn’t so much asked for anything more than an Earth demonstration from Dustin. And even that had been more or less thrust upon him by the exuberant yellow ranger (part of Hunter knew it had been a distraction expressly invented for him, and he would never verbalize the relief he felt at the rare moment of almost-normality).

The red Lost Galaxy ranger hadn’t left. Hunter didn’t know why, it wasn’t like Leo owed him anything, or vice versa. What, he had officially met the other man a grand total of one time before this? And stalked him mildly before that, stealing his toothbrush like the creepiest creeper who ever did creep?

Leo didn’t need to stay, and if their positions were reversed and it was Hunter dealing with the crybaby with his head in the clouds, he would have told Leo to build a bridge and get over it.

With the exception of the one time he had actually like, experienced one of Leo’s moments of personal loss or whatever, and he had been kind of helpful (only kind of, as Alex in the early days would have been more than happy to express), but that didn’t count. Hunter had been shaken too. If he had been on his smartass A-game there would have been snappy comments all around.

Then again, his A-game would have required Alex’s A-game, and if the Time Force ranger had been
coherent, they probably wouldn’t have met Leo in the first place.

It was all details. Stupid, stupid details.

The others loved Leo. Hunter wasn’t sure why. The blond had hunches, rough guesses, but none that explained why they latched onto the older ranger’s presence so whole-heartedly. He figured Shane appreciated having another red ranger around who had already been through the trials of a shaky team. Dustin probably appreciated his enthusiasm, and Cam and Tori both liked the fact that he could make Hunter slightly less of a miserable human being than the rest of them.

That excluded, of course, the one time Leo had tried to get the blond to open up about Alex – how they met, what he liked – and ended up with a bloody nose and Hunter speaking to no one for at least three days.

Even then, the silence was only broken due to a monster attack, because it was difficult to coordinate battle strategies when your mouth was glued shut. From stubbornness.

He thought – not actively, not with too much concentration – but Hunter thought that the others looked so much to Leo because at least he knew who Alex was. Sort of. He had seen him, had seen Hunter with him. He knew more than any of them combined, and the tragedy, and the–

Hunter hated that Leo had seen him at such a low point. When he had been thrown by Alex’s ‘death’. It had been the first time he had experienced the possible loss of his– of Alex. No ownership implied. No illusion to some kind of meaningful relationship. Just to Alex.

_Damn_, this stupid ordeal had made him a hopeless sap. He hated that. He hated this. He hated–

Manning the register. Storm Chargers, menial work duty, whatever. They all drew the short straw eventually, but that didn’t mean he embraced it. If Hunter had his way, he would strictly be appointed to repairs and restocking, unloading, deliveries, _anything_ that didn’t involve talking to people. To being pleasant and helpful.

The clientele they received at Storm Chargers was probably the most tolerable to Hunter, but that didn’t make it easier to plaster on a winning smile. He and Blake might not need the money as badly now that they had moved into Ninja Ops, but racing expenses didn’t exactly pay for themselves. Besides, it gave him something to do. Something to occupy himself with that was productive and didn’t involve smashing every punching bag in Ninja Ops into oblivion, which was how he would have otherwise spent his time.

That, and running, but Hunter was starting to lose weight. He didn’t have much of an appetite nowadays – so now there was this.

Or, there had always been this, and it had been good, except when he had to man the cash register. He was really getting tired of pretending he didn’t want everyone to choke on their saliva out of spite for their happiness, and that was both depressing and aggravating to deal with.

Still, he really hadn’t been expecting a familiar face.

Leo had given him a stress ball, a stupid smiley face thing. Hunter wasn’t sure why he hadn’t set it on fire yet – it seemed like the thing to do, but something always held the thunder ranger back when he considered getting rid of the gift. It remained in his pocket most of the time, not that Hunter actively used it, or took it out (he would never hear the end of it), but it was there. Its mere presence seemed calming, which was stupid, like this was stupid, like manning the register was–

“Excuse me?”
Hunter blinked, his attention moving to the customer hovering near the counter. His fingers stopped their patter against the pocket in his jeans that held the stress ball. With weary practice, he accessed the situation.

Did she need a refund? Assistance? Wanted a purchase?

If it was another chick who tried suggestively winking at him and slipping a phone number over the counter, Hunter was done. He was walking out this time, for real. Productive distractions were not worth the conflicting emotions that came with flirtation.

He got it, really, he did. Hunter was the ultimate bad-boy, girls couldn’t resist his stoically murderous charm, it was completely understandable–

Hunter looked at the girl – the voice was soft, gentle and timid, and so very wrong for this store – and mustered up an expression that wasn’t completely disinterested.

“Can I help- Fran?”

Mouth ahead of brain – stupid – but Hunter was surprised, he couldn’t not be surprised, because it was Fran standing in front of him. Fran, the chick who had witnessed his and Alex’s first major blow out with dazed blinking and surprising calm. Sure, her hair was slightly longer and her cheeks more rounded, like she still had some baby fat; she was still growing because she looked a little bit–Younger.

Because they hadn’t met yet.

“Umm…” Fran blinked at him, and it was the same, doe-eyed confusion it had been before – later, whatever – “How do you know my name?”

Hunter’s mouth, which had clearly not learned its lesson, kicked into gear before he could think of an adequate excuse. “Lucky guess.”

Stupid. Stupid. Stu– He should just come clean now. Might as well show her his morpher too.

The blinking narrowed in suspicion.

Hunter didn’t fidget. “I mean,” he swallowed; he didn’t know what he meant. Or, what she should think he meant because he was, you know, failing pretty spectacularly right now. “I heard it around.”

“Around?” Fran echoed. Tilting her head.

Hunter nodded.

It was probably better if he stopped talking now.

“How do you know my name?” Fran parroted.

Hunter did not fidget. “The luckiest.”

There was a very awkward pause. Of course, now would be the time when there were no other customers in the store to use as a distraction. Hunter had been so proud of the fact he had kind of scared them away – sorry Kelly, okay, not sorry, but he was kind of sorry now.

Hunter cleared his throat. “So uh… how can I help you?”
“How do you know my name?” Fran repeated, her eyes settling on a fierce glare. Where had *that* been when she had discovered two power rangers invading her boss’ secret base– okay, Hunter couldn’t even finish thinking that sentence; this entire situation was too ridiculous. He wondered if this was how Alex felt all the time.

Oh. *Alex*.

Yeah, bad train of thought there.

“School,” Hunter tried. She wasn’t going to be appeased until she had some kind of explanation – Hunter recognized her expression as one Tori wore on a fairly regular basis – and it wasn’t like he could just point in the other direction and run away while she wasn’t looking.

Could he?

Fran raised an eyebrow. “I’m from out of town,” she said. “I’m here visiting my grandparents.”

Which explained why Hunter didn’t recognize her the first time he saw her. In the future.

“You’re spending your vacation in a sporting goods store?” he asked. “You have misplaced priorities.”

Unless her grandparents were really into skateboarding or something, in which case, props to her for knowing the only cool old people in the world.

No offense to Sensei Kanoi.

…maybe it was offensive to *include* him in that generalization in the first–

“Don’t try to deflect this onto me.” Fran waved an accusing finger in his direction. “Answer the question.”

“I’m not deflecting.” Hunter frowned. “If anything, I’m distracting.”

“Answer. The question,” Fran growled.

It was adorable in almost every way. Hunter would be laughing right now if it didn’t risk burying him any deeper.

Not that he had much more to lose.

“MySpace?” He didn’t even bother trying to sound sure of himself. He had kind of lost track to how many times he had struck out. It felt like at least eighteen, but it was more likely three.

Bet that was something Alex didn’t miss, Hunter’s over-exaggerations.

Fran tilted her nose in the air snottily. “I don’t have one.”

“You’re making this very hard for me,” Hunter sighed, rubbing a hand across his face.

Why was she still even talking to him? Would Tori still be talking to him if she was in this situation?

Nah, Tori would have probably punched him out by now and called the cops. Clearly, Fran did not share the same survival instincts.

“Me?” Fran was incredulous which was, in itself, kind of incredulous. Why was she humoring him?
“I’m- What are you, some kind of stalker?”

“Yes.” Hunter latched onto that with probably too much enthusiasm, but that worked well enough for him.

*Stalking*, why hadn’t he thought of that?

Fran reeled back, startled. Which was probably a reasonable response for something most people would have tried to deny.

He might have jumped the gun a bit on that one.

They stared at each other, Fran confused, and Hunter hopeful – hopeful and spent, clearly. He had run out of good lies, but it wasn’t like he had been all that good at them in the first place, when it came to time travel shit. Alex had hated that, he hated–

“You’re stalking me.” Fran repeated this slowly, like she was working her mind around the idea.

Hunter nodded helplessly. He was so tired of talking.

“Yep.”

Fran considered him, tilting her head to the side. Hunter continued to look… like himself, he guessed. He should do something stalkerish.

It was almost funny. He had literally been stalking at least a dozen different individuals for the past few months, but now that he had to be up front about it, he couldn’t dredge up the behavior that could be considered creepy enough. Go figure. Way to abandon him in his most trying hour, past-stalker-ism.

“I don’t think you’re stalking me.”

“Fran-” Hunter held out a comforting hand, trying to appear all-knowing. This conversation was surreal. “I am very much stalking you.”

“What’s your name?”

And ten points to Hunter for ignoring the name-tag rule. The blond’s apathy had totally won that argument against proper employee behavior with Kelly.

Not that she could have foreseen this circumstance. Hunter hoped.

“Shane.” The lie came easily. “Shane Clarke, with an ‘e’ on the end. You should be very clear about that in your police report.”

“I’m not going to the police.” Fran said it almost off-handedly, but with a determined weight. Like she wasn’t going to be swayed on that decision.

“You should definitely go to the police,” Hunter advised. “Because I’m, you know-”

“A stalker.”

Hunter nodded. That about summed it up. “Correct.”

“I don’t think you’re a stalker.”
Hunter blanched. They just-

“How do you know my name?” Fran pressed. She had both hands on the counter and she was leaning forward, insistent.

“Why does this even matter to you?” Hunter would care if a stranger knew his name, but he actually had justification for his paranoia by way of evil space ninjas wanting to murder him dead. Perfectly logical explanation for his concern.

Why was Fran so obsessed with this?

“I…” Fran leaned back, one hand trailing off of the counter as she increased her distance from the register. “I don’t have many friends.”

Oh. Oh.

Yeah, stab Hunter right in the soft spot. He–

He knew that. That was him, and Dustin, and–

Alex.

She just wanted answers, and she—well, at the time, back then, she had seemed cool. Very zen-ish, if a bit overwhelmed.

Hunter didn’t want Fran to be sad, not because of him. Something about Hunter’s spiraling depression made him desperately want to keep the fallout to himself (except his teammates, but this was a recent development, okay). He didn’t want to spread the misery (anymore), he didn’t want this, he didn’t want to keep breaking things. He had a limit. He had—sorrow. It was his, and his alone. It should stay that way.

The blond looked around the shop. There still weren’t any other customers in the store.

He sighed. “Gimme a second.”

Without waiting for a response, Hunter ducked away from the register and went towards the shop. He caught Blake contemplating two wrenches, eying the particular part that needed his attention, and gently knocked against the doorframe.

“I need to take a quick break; can you watch the store for ten minutes?”

There wasn’t any real reason for him to, but then again, there wasn’t a real reason for Blake not to. They hadn’t really done civil conversations—natural ones that didn’t feel odd, or painfully forced—since Hunter had gotten back. The blond had been too snappy, too wounded, and Blake… he was hurting too.

Hunter wasn’t talking to him, and they didn’t—Hunter didn’t just not talk. If there was anyone in the entire world that had Hunter’s back without question, it was Blake. His brother might be able to understand Hunter not talking to the rest of the team, but Blake should have been an exception.

It hurt his brother that he wasn’t, Hunter knew that.

A part of him had been glad someone else was hurting too, because he was actually a monster.

Blake considered this for a few moments—a pause that would have been replaced by an automatic ‘Sure, you slacker’ before, a joking laugh and a playful elbow to the ribs whenever he jostled by.
Hunter would have replied with some witty comment about Blake’s height, and then the outrage might be real, but it wouldn’t matter, because Blake had agreed and they didn’t go back on their promises.

Had Hunter ever promised not to block his brother out?

He didn’t dwell on it.

“Okay,” Blake said finally, his face blank.

Hunter didn’t wait beyond that. He didn’t need or want to, he had– Fran. He had Fran to deal with.

He went back to the register.

“Come on,” he said. He didn’t bother waiting to see if she would follow (even though she shouldn’t, logically; he had just demonstrated he was kind of insane). He walked until he hit that same park he had taken Leo to. One more heart-to-heart wouldn’t kill it.

Besides, he found the playground of children in the distance mildly comforting. And there were plenty of witnesses to assuage the anxiety Fran should have felt.

“So,” Fran said, dusting off the spot on the bench beside him before gingerly taking a seat. “You know my name.”

“I do.” Hunter nodded.

“Is your name actually Shane?”

“It could be.”

“But it isn’t.”

“It isn’t.” Hunter nodded again. He could handle that.

Fran turned to face him slowly, her profile to the kids laughing on the swing set. “Who are you?”

If this were a teen romance novel, Hunter would be the brooding but perfectly damaged leading man with a troubled past and a heart of gold. He would be entrancing in his mystery, and know too much about teenage romance novels, because he had a friend who was kind of vicious about the novels they chose for book club.

Tori had been really smug about it for weeks too.

Dustin had gotten back at her by enforcing mandatory soap opera days. They generally watched them on mute and made up their own storylines, funny voices mandatory.

Hunter sighed, tilting his head back to catch the sun’s rays against his cheek. It felt nice. Poetic. He supposed there was something nice about that too.

“I don’t know where to start,” he admitted quietly. “Wait, no– I actually do know where to start, but saying ‘this will sound insane’ at this point feels a bit redundant.”

Fran nodded thoughtfully. “You have a good point.”

He cringed. “Yeah, that’s what I figured.”
“What would you have said after that?”

Hunter furrowed his brows. “After…?”

“The insanity warning,” Fran continued, eyes wide. “What would you have said next?”

Hunter turned, considering her. She was very composed. It should be suspicious, but she wasn’t composed in Tori’s *I-actually-know-the-answer-to-the-question-and-it-shall-be-your-undoing* face, but more like she wanted to know, and wasn’t put-off.

Who the hell was this chick?

There were a lot of ways he could do this, and if he were Cam or Al—*someone else*, Hunter could probably map them all out in his mind in a few contemplative seconds, choosing the outcome that was most preferable, that allowed him the most control, and minimal impact to—

Well, he supposed the time stream wasn’t really his responsibility anymore.

He wished he didn’t feel bitter about that.

Hunter was tired. Tired of the endless cycle of volatile reactions to these burdens he had gained. He was tired of feeling strung out, of feeling like less. He knew there were productive ways to access this frustration and turn it into something good, and explaining his world views to a civilian probably wasn’t one of them.

“You know what this is?” he asked, offering up his morpher. It was as spotless as the day he had gotten it, free from any imperfections – unlike Alex’s – free from the trials he had suffered through–

“…a watch?” Fran guessed tentatively.

Hunter frowned at her, barely able to suppress a truly tempting roll of his eyes. “It would be a freaking ugly watch Fran.”

“Oh good, I’m glad you said that,” Fran gushed in a relieved exhale, smiling. “I didn’t want to insult your taste.”

“But you would gladly support my deductions.” Hunter frowned.

He wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

She shrugged. “It *would* be an ugly watch.”

And not a particularly well-functioning one, either. They didn’t tell the time, Hunter knew that, as much as he hated it (and Blake frequently bemoaned).

He was delaying the inevitable.

Hunter sighed, holding his wrist closer to Fran to allow for a better inspection.

“That,” he said, with all the dramatic pause the split-second between words allowed him. “Is a morpher.”

“A morpher,” Fran repeated. Her face was blank.

Hunter wasn’t sure if it was confusion or not.
“A morpher,” Hunter echoed.

Maybe saying it again would help.

Then again, if thinking about the same thing over and over and over again was supposed to be helpful, then Hunter was doing it the exact wrong way. Perpetually.

“A morpher,” Fran said one last time.

This was not one of Hunter’s more inspiring conversations.

The girl blinked, her expression dazed. “Excuse me for a moment,” she said quietly.

It was a very polite request, albeit not a very comforting one. Luckily, Fan didn’t go far.

Without a word, the small brunette stood up from the bench, arms resting flat against her sides.

What then followed was a subdued happy dance so profoundly exuberant that Hunter didn’t feel entirely comfortable viewing it. It was like Dustin on steroids. It was a spinnny, stompy, arms bent, eyes closed, high pitched squee-ing kind of subdued happy dance that was about as low key as five year old with free access to the candy store. As in, it wasn’t very.

Hunter grabbed the arm flailing closest to him and tugged the girl back onto the park bench before more people started looking. He waved off the few that already wore with a dopey – ‘oh, you know how… females are’ kind of grin he had seen Blake try – and immediately be punched for – once.

Okay, so their team wasn’t always the best at conflict resolution, but that wasn’t really the most pressing thing on Hunter’s plate at the moment.

“Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god,” Fran was whispering frantically, her smile manic. “I knew it.”

“Knew-?” Hunter allowed a second for his brain to catch up to his mouth, and frowned. “How?”

He tried to sound casual, but the immediate reflex of ‘threat’, ‘protect’, and ‘back off’ were too overwhelming to completely stifle.

Luckily, it seemed to do the trick to pull Fran out of her la-la land, even if it didn’t make the grin disappear from her face.

(Hunter was actually kind of relieved about that).

“Your ugly watch.” Fran’s grin was brilliant. “I saw and it– I mean, it was like the Lightspeed Rangers, and the Time Force guys? They have morphers on their wrists and I saw you through the window and you had that thing that– excuse me, yeah – it couldn’t be a watch, so I…” She trailed off, eyes bright. “And, it is.”

Hunter opened his mouth to very logically point out the complete lack of coherency in her response, but then Fran was up and running again, shooting to her feet in a new wave of excitement.

(“Your ugly watch.” Fran’s grin was brilliant. “I saw and it– I mean, it was like the Lightspeed Rangers, and the Time Force guys? They have morphers on their wrists and I saw you through the window and you had that thing that– excuse me, yeah – it couldn’t be a watch, so I…” She trailed off, eyes bright. “And, it is.”)

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“How?” Hunter grumbled. “Now sit down; you’re starting to freak other people out.”

“I get what you mean,” Hunter grumbled. “Now sit down; you’re starting to freak other people out.”

“Sorry.” She didn’t look it for all the smiling, but she complied, settling back against the bench
easily, hands on her knees. “Sorry. Just…” She trailed off, considering him with hopeful eyes. “Why do you know my name?”

It had gone so much better than Hunter could have hoped for, but he found that even though they had gotten to this point, he had trouble answering her question. Trouble knowing where to begin when he knew eventually, it would make its way back to Alex. It always did.

So he didn’t start yet. “You know, most people don’t believe in Power Rangers.”

“Yeah, well most people are stupid,” Fran replied, flipping her hair. It was light, but her eyes were determined again, serious. “My parents had to move us around a lot. We started off in Angel Grove when I was really little, but with all the attacks—” She swallowed, shrugged. “We moved, and then a few years later there were monsters there too, and then—” She smiled at him, but it was kind of bitter. “It’s like we’re monster magnets.”

There was something there, in what she hadn’t said, something born from destruction, of seeing the havoc of what was so difficult to comprehend with your own eyes.

Hunter was struck by a distant memory, one from intermediate school, back when his parents… well, it was Social Studies. The teacher had been talking about Christopher Columbus discovering America, how he had come upon the Indians. She had been talking about how things had been from their point of view, laughing at the absurdity of ever understanding it.

“Quick,” she had said, her smile wide. “Think of something you’ve never imagined, and be afraid of it.”

That was Christopher Columbus discovering the new world. Someone bringing something incomprehensible onto contented masses.

Now, Hunter thought of the entire concept as mildly horrifying.

So yeah, he understood where Fran was coming from.

Hunter swallowed, and moved on. “And you’re cool with this?”

He gestured between the morpher and himself. Now that the hard part was out of the way, he was honestly curious for her response. It would be nice to get an opinion from someone on the outside, someone who only knew the ugly underbelly of ranger movements.

Fran’s eyes lingered on his wrist for a moment, her brows furrowing. “Why wouldn’t I be?” she asked, leaning back against the bench.

*Because the person in charge of your safety has a tendency to act like a crazy person?*

It would have been a valid concern for Hunter.

Were their positions reversed, he would have already decked Fran and made off with the equipment so that someone *not* on the brink of a psychotic breakdown could take care of the whole ‘world-saving’ thing. You know, for the greater good.

Then again, assault and burglary probably wasn’t the greatest indicator of sanity.

Hunter could say these things, but at Fran’s continued blank stare, he knew it would most likely be a lost cause.
The blond ran a hand through his hair, glancing back towards the playground. Those were the days, weren’t they? When the biggest problem on your plate was if you could get the good seat on the swing set. The one that didn’t stick, that had the rubber guards covering the chains.

Hunter had only experienced those worries briefly, but it had been the highlight, he guessed, of his life.

He remembered the sound of his father’s laugh whenever he demanded to be pushed higher, higher, they could totally beat mom and Blake if they just tried–

Damn, he was feeling sentimental today, wasn’t he?

One day, he would have his head back in order. Hunter just didn’t know when.

“Hey.” A hand waved in front of his face insistently, nails trimmed and well maintained. “You still with me?”

“I’m with you.” Hunter’s voice was a little rough when he replied, but it was steady. Fran didn’t look like she completely believed him, so the blond quickly changed the subject. “I’m Hunter, by the way.”

He offered her a hand. After a second’s hesitation, she took it.

“Fran,” she said, grinning. “But you already knew that.”

“I did.” Hunter nodded. He knew what would happen next, he knew what this entire conversation had been leading up to.

For some reason, he wasn’t dreading it.

“So,” Fran said, making a show of her especially inquisitive bambi eyes. “Am I going to get the scoop on that, or what?”

He should say no. He had said no to Leo, to his brother, to his team, even to his temporary Sensei. He had promised to keep this thing under wraps, and Fran would almost certainly be the worst person to spill his guts to. She didn’t know him, she was a groupie, a ranger enthusiast, and even if she had seen the destruction first hand, that didn’t make her anymore qualified to listen to his rambles than anyone else. Why should this be the thing that burst the dam?

Hunter thought about Leo, about what he knew, about the sympathy inherently required from him for simply experiencing and understanding, somewhat, Hunter’s trials. He thought about how Blake could cut apart everything he did, would understand the motive for every one of his options, and then he thought about Fran.

Technically, this was the first time he had met her.

She didn’t know Alex. She didn’t really know Hunter. She was here on a time limit, and Hunter had officially reached his moment of no-longer-giving-a-damn.

“What were you going to do, anyway?” Hunter asked, a thought suddenly occurring to him. “Make small talk until you could slip, ‘oh, by the way, are you a power ranger?’ into the conversation?”

“I was going to play it by ear,” Fran huffed, punching his arm. There was barely any weight to it. “Forgive me for allowing a possibly once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to overwhelm my decision making paradigm.”
“Story of my life,” Hunter muttered.

Fran leveled a pouty face in his direction. “Are you going to tell me, or am I going to make you tell me?”

“Well I was going to go with option one, but now I’m very interested in your preferred methods of persuasion.”

“As well you should,” Fran nodded. It was slow, kind of wise. “There is ice cream involved.”

“I feel like I made a good choice,” Hunter commented mildly.

The brunette smiled, and it was nothing but warmth and absolute mischievousness. “Indeed.”

“My shift ends in an hour.” Hunter stood up, brushing stray dirt off of his pants as he turned back towards the way they had come. “If you can wait until then, you’ll get your story.”

Fran didn’t say anything when she followed up behind him; her only response was a cheerfully contented hum.

Hunter smiled, and fell in step with the beat of the melody.

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“Oh my god, your life is a soap opera.” Fran complemented her statement with wide eyes, shoveling another spoonful of ice cream into her mouth as she struggled to wrap her mind around Hunter’s (admittedly) complicated story.

“It’s not that bad,” Hunter muttered, hunching over his hot fudge sundae. He couldn’t help feeling defensive, it was freaking good, okay? And his story wasn’t that hard to follow.

On another note, it should be remembered that Fran was excellent at making good on her threats. Hunter had been expecting a pity-pint of chocolate or something at most, but as soon as his shift had ended, Fran had steered him towards the old-fashioned ice cream parlor just across the plaza. It was tucked into the corner of what was usually a pretty busy outdoor shopping center, but this place managed to provide a secluded refuge from the hectic bustle of shopping and movement outside. They had strolled in at an odd time of day, so the place was mostly deserted, leaving only a few tables occupied with people more focused on their phones or desserts than anything else.

They had laid claim to the back corner booth, arming themselves with sundae creations loaded down with enough syrups, nuts, cookie crumbles, whipped cream, bananas, marshmallow fluff, and even a cherry on top to make a nutritionist weep.

Hunter had made it halfway through his monstrosity by the time he finished relaying his story – ranger metabolism, and all that – but Fran was matching him spoonful for spoonful, looking unnaturally serious for someone who couldn’t stop smearing caramel sauce all over her face.

As though sensing his thoughts, Fran narrowed her eyes. “It’s that bad,” she insisted, waving her spoon for emphasis. “It’s bad enough that I would have believed you invented the entire story if it weren’t for the fact that you were a mopey McMoperson before I talked to you in that store.”

Hunter frowned, scooping up a piece of banana. “I was not--”

“Soooo much mope,” Fran complained, swirling hot fudge into a melted pool of strawberry and rocky road. “It was an impenetrable wall of angst. No wonder that store was empty.”
“It wasn’t *that* bad,” Hunter argued. He was beginning to feel oddly protective over a feat that had previously felt like triumph. Something about the way she exposed it so easily, without any consideration to Hunter’s possible instability, made the crimson ranger want to hide under the table.

With his ice cream, of course. It was his due.

“See.” Fran pointed her spoon at him, her eyes narrowing seriously. “I think that might be part of your problem.”

“My gloomy-ness?” Hunter rolled his eyes and reached for the pile of napkins.

“You keep telling yourself that everything’s ‘not so bad’ but your emotional state is like, the epitome of bad.”

Hunter narrowed his eyes, napkin ripping under his fingers as they curled into a fist. “And is there anything else you would like to inform me of, person I have just met?”

Fran waved off the threatening tone with a roll of her eyes, and scooped up another spoonful of mint chocolate chip. “A) Technically you’ve already met me, and B) –” She peaked at him over the top of her glasses. “The fact that you’re getting all defensive kind of proves my point.”

“It means nothing.” Hunter stabbed at his ice cream, cleaving a scoop of Cookies and Cream neatly down the middle. “Sure, it wasn’t the greatest time of my life, but it also wasn’t the worst.”

Though comparatively speaking, he supposed watching his dad get murdered the second time around held a certain special place in his nightmares. Especially with his morpher safely attached to his wrist and Alex holding him back.

Distantly, a part of Hunter acknowledged the possibility of Alex being concerned – reminded him of the moments where Alex was unaware of the full circumstances surrounding their missions – but that almost made it worse. Hunter would rather have Alex be an incompetent dickward than a concerned and cautious friend.

What would the brunette have said, if Hunter hadn’t started yelling (screaming, it was screaming) at him the moment they were free? At the time Hunter hadn’t wanted to know, couldn’t– wouldn’t have processed it, but now it wore on him, not knowing.

He would never be aware of what Alex wanted to say. Would he defend his actions? Apologize? Would it matter?

Of course not. Hunter was expendable; he was a burden Alex had learned to use for his own benefit.

Why would he matter?

Hunter swallowed, a clump of pecans rough against his throat.

Alright, so maybe Fran had a point.

Across the table, said brunette was trying very hard to look like her complete attention was on her sundae. She stirred the melted puddles in the bottom of her bowl, risking a few more-than-obvious glances in Hunter’s direction every few seconds.

Hunter gave in.
“Fine,” the blond huffed, keeping his eyes trained on a cherry as he tried to gather it up with an appropriate amount of whipped topping. “So it… it’s not great, okay?”

He wasn’t sure what more there was to say after that; Fran had already heard all the stories. All the stupid stunts and the secrecy and the bonding (which she had gushed over for about eight minutes too many, at which time Hunter had pledged his life to stealing what remained of her coffee ice cream).

They fell into silence for a few minutes, each dwelling on their own thoughts in contemplative quiet.

It wasn’t bad. Kind of peaceful, actually.

This was what life used to be, when Hunter found the balance between ranger-hood and friendship, world-saving, work, and school. This was about as good as he could have gotten, before.

Even now though, there seemed to be a certain something missing.

Eventually, Fran looked up, clearing her throat. She had marshmallow fluff on her nose. “You miss him, don’t you?”

Hunter looked down. He didn’t say it, but he could tell the moment she saw the answer for herself.

Yeah, he did.

The problem was, the real problem with his mission through time and space to fix time and space, was that it was never really meant for him. And even when he was a part of it by necessity, or by Time Force’s dictate because Alex’s head was on the chopping block, it had never really been Hunter’s to be a part of. He had gotten invested because that was the only way to persevere and, honestly, he wasn’t that big an asshole. He could empathize with the struggles of others; he could understand.

He had thought that the move to tolerate Alex had been one of his wiser ones. Hatred was too much effort, and it made things harder anyway and Alex wasn’t…well, he wasn’t all bad. He had qualities. Hunter had just needed to look for them.

Now those stupid qualities were as much a part of Hunter as his elemental connection to thunder. They were a collection of things not necessarily unique on their own merits, but made into something valuable through a combination created by the red Time Force ranger. It was the whole, not the parts, that Hunter found interesting. That Hunter trusted, respected, missed.

He missed Alex.

It was easier to be angry than it was to admit that. It was easier to be bitter, to focus his rage on himself and on the unfairness of the situation and on Time Force and on Alex and on the bastard that murdered his parents than it was to step back and realize the one thing that had been staring him in the face this whole time.

Hunter cared about Alex. He cared about Alex a lot. He quite possibly – and this was humiliating to think, but it needed to be done – cared more for Alex than the Time Force ranger did for Hunter.

The idea of partaking in a relationship where he was the more invested one was instinctively abhorrent to Hunter. That was a recipe for disaster, a guarantee for self-sabotage. There was no winning in that outcome, there was no benefit. Such a concept was for fools, and Hunter…

Until this point, Hunter had considered himself pretty competent when handling outer-team
communications.

And now he wasn’t.

It wasn’t a fall of which he was particularly proud.

“This sucks,” Fran grumbled, stabbing at her ice cream with a half-attentive spoon. “You have this huge, mind-blowing romance in the works and it gets cut down before the happy ending. That’s dumb.”

“It’s not a romance,” Hunter muttered, even when something tightened in his chest, and his heart beat a little faster. “And my life is not a movie.”

*So stop treating it like one,* Hunter thought bitterly. *It’s rude.*

And frankly, it was kind of cruel to remind Hunter of the possibilities he would never have. Even if it wasn’t a romance.

Yeah, even his objection was half-hearted at best.

“No,” Fran sighed, a dejected thing, and loaded a piece of banana mush into her spoon. “If it were a movie, you would somehow find your way to a tearful reunion where Alex would propose to you or–”

“But it’s not,” Hunter snapped. He forced himself to place his spoon against the table gently, not trusting his temper to get the utensil out of this conversation unbent. “It’s not and–”

That was all there was to it, really.

A strained silence fell over them, and Hunter didn’t bother continuing with his sundae. He wasn’t hungry anymore.

“Sorry,” Fran mumbled after a few minutes. She hadn’t bothered continuing with her dessert either. She poked at the remains of her ice cream half-heartedly, mixing the creamy pools until they were swirls of brown, green, and pink. “I just wish…”

She looked up at him, and it was then Hunter could see the serious weight of her gaze, that she was shucking off the games of fairy tales and formulaic endings.

Fran shrugged. “I wish you could get some closure, you know. I think you deserve it.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not gonna happen so just…” Hunter made a vague waving motion with his hand, averting his eyes to the window to avoid looking at her dejected expression. “Let it go.”

There was a subtle movement in his peripherals, and even though Hunter knew he shouldn’t look, *knew* that way would end in something distinctively unpleasant for him, Hunter turned his gaze back towards Fran.

The brunette’s posture was straight against the red vinyl booth seat, and her expression was a familiar sort from Tori; the determined ‘*it-will-be-done*’ face that had been Blake’s undoing many a time.

Hunter was not accustomed to this look being aimed his way, and it appeared now was the moment that fault was corrected.

Oh goody.
“That’s it?” Fran asked, smacking a palm down against the table, making her spoon jump. “You went through all…” Insert comical pause where she failed to determine any word that could possibly explain Hunter’s adventure. “That,” she creatively settled on. “And you’re just gonna let it end like this? I thought you were a ranger.”

“I really don’t see how one has to do with the other,” Hunter shot back, his brow furrowing. She could say he was crap at relationships all she wanted, Hunter wouldn’t argue that, but he wasn’t going to stand for his skills as a ranger being called into question. Not when he had trained so hard. “And what are you expecting me to do? It’s done. He left already. I can’t just call him up on the phone; he’s in a different time period.”

In the face of this unyielding logic, he expected Fran to back down.

He wasn’t sure why, maybe Hunter was just especially hopeful.


Hunter rolled his eyes. “It’s not a future phone, it’s a—” Actually, he had zoned out during the explanation every time Alex had given it, prioritizing information, and all that, so Hunter switched tracks. “And we don’t even know when to call, even if…” He shrugged.

This conversation was not doing much for his ability to confidently end sentences. Perhaps Fran should spend some time with Cam, maybe then he would shut up every once in a while.

“We’ll figure it out.” It should be worrying that Fran managed to mimic Shane’s determined-leader-eyes without ever having met him, but they were there, and her gaze was majestic and stubborn and strong, because if you were going to fangirl, you were going to fangirl right.

In the moment Hunter took to lament his circumstances, Fran decided on a game plan.

“That’s it,” the tiny brunette decided, confidently shoving her glasses up her nose. “Tomorrow we’re going to Silver Hills. When do you have to work?”

“I’m conveniently off-duty tomorrow and don’t you have grandparents to hang out with?” If Hunter had grandparents, he would be spending as much time with them as possible. He would have milked them for every story from ‘back in the day’ they had, and baked cookies and fished or whatever it was you did with grandparents. He would have done family stuff or boring stuff because it was with family, because that stuff was sacred, so long as the old people attached to your lineage didn’t happen to be knife-wielding psychopaths.

Hunter made a note to investigate Fran’s grandparents. And also to learn her last name. That might help.

“I’ll tell them I made a friend,” Fran replied easily, like she had been expecting this protest. “A friend in need. We’ll do it early morning; we’ll get this wrapped up in time for lunch.”

“So happy I could fit into your busy schedule,” Hunter deadpanned.

It earned him an annoyed glare. “I get that you don’t want people to help you Hunter, but moping around for the rest of your life isn’t healthy for you, or for the people who care about you. Stop deflecting, or distracting, and complaining and get some damn closure.”

She leaned forward, resting one palm against the table. “Capeesh?
Hunter looked out the window and considered the adorable angry face, then looked back to Fran.

Why not? Really, why not? He had nothing to lose. Fran had a point. He was hurting and angry and frustrated, and as fun as it would be to let that stuff stifle him, to let it simmer and grow until it exploded and consumed him entirely, the part of Hunter that had kept him sane this far kind of wanted to get on with his life. He had endured so much; it would be stupid to let all of his hard work go to waste over something as dumb as–

Maybe it wasn’t dumb, but it would still be a waste.

Hunter needed closure, and he wasn’t going to get that here.

He sighed. “In the morning, you said?”

“Nine o’clock.” Fran didn’t even pretend she was waiting for his agreement; the other teen was already off, bouncing with barely-contained enthusiasm in her seat. “We drive to Silver Hills, track down Eric, use the future phone, and the rest…” She grinned at him, a joyous, celebratory thing. “That’s up to you, my friend.”

“Someone should really talk to you about the terrors of stranger-danger before you suggest hour-long road trips,” Hunter mumbled, rolling his eyes to escape her cheerful disposition. “I could still be a psychopath.”

“You can model your suit for me before we go, if you want,” Fran offered slyly, eyebrows raised. “I promise I don’t mind.”

“Smartass,” Hunter grumbled. She giggled in response. “If we’re doing this, we’re taking my bike.”

“You have a bike?” That fact right there might be an even greater epitome of joy than discovering Hunter was a ranger. “I get to ride it?”

“Only if you want to go,” Hunter replied, smirking.

If they were going to do this, they were going to do it on his terms.

In a small way, it felt like a good first step to reclaiming control of his life.

“Fine by me,” Fran preened in a way that shouldn’t be quite so becoming on a tiny brunette mouse-person, but Hunter wasn’t going to begrudge anyone any amount of swagger life threw their way. It was all about the little things. “Though admittedly, I’m still confused as to why I mixed up – or, will mix up – Wes and Alex – they really don’t look that much alike.”

Hunter shrugged. “Probably one of those time travel paradox things that I have neither the will nor intelligence to understand.”

Fran nodded far too seriously for someone sporting what was the most impressive hot fudge mustache Hunter had ever seen. “Works for me.”

Declaration dully finished, Fran abandoned her spoon and brought her sundae bowl up to her mouth, happily slurping up the melted contents with a grand total of zero shits.

It was a mindset Hunter could get behind, and with a surprisingly genuine grin, he tossed his spoon to the side too, and dug in.

Mostly, if not entirely, because he could.
That ‘Think of something you’ve never imagined…’ line is actually from one of my history teacher’s in high school. To this day, the point is not lost on me ^_^.

This hopefully explains why Fran wasn’t really freaking out as much as she should have been the first time Hunter and Alex meet her ;)

The ‘soap operas on mute’ thing is very much a shoutout to the_wordbutler’s Motion Practice verse, specifically the story ‘Admissions, Interrogatories, and Other Discoveries’. If you’re a fan of the MCU, you should totally check out all of those stories, they will improve your life :D

Thanks to Celebrusc for the wonderful comment! Didn’t mean to overwhelm you, but it’s pretty cool that it happened ^_^.

Until next time.
Less Than You Deserve

Chapter Notes

Thanks to the endlessly talented the real vampire for beta-ing this chapter! Your eye for detail definitely caught some errors in this chapter, and I’m always grateful for the advice you so generously give me :). Additional thanks to Kei Luna Shoryu for supplemental beta-ing and all around support, for being a constant companion even when I bury myself in work and forget to come up for air. I am always in your debt, Kei.

If you guys are looking for some more Ninja Storm goodness, you should check out 'My Brother's Keeper' (so good!) by the real vampire, or 'The Art of Cohesion' (also good!) by Kei Luna Shoryu. It will improve your life :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first time Alex woke up, he had enough awareness to decide the lights were too bright before he promptly passed out again.

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The second time Alex woke was a little more interesting. He regained enough of his bearings to determine he wasn’t in a hospital. There was an IV (and, more embarrassingly, a catheter), but no hospital. The room was too comfortable. The walls were neutral, but not sterile. There was art and an old but well-kept rug.

His bed was on the floor, like something out of Feudal Japan.

He passed out again.

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The third time he woke up, he had company.

Company he recognized.

“Kid,” Eric said by way of greeting. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor, near Alex’s head. His shoes were missing, but aside from that he was appropriately dressed.

It definitely looked like he had seen better days. There were bags under his eyes.

“Hunter and Blake?”

He needed to know.

Eric considered him for a moment, mouth a solid frown. Alex held his gaze for as long as he was able. When he felt the pressing dregs of unconsciousness begging for attention, he said, “Please.”

At that, Eric sighed. “They’re fine.”
It was all Alex needed before he was asleep again.

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The fourth time he woke up, Eric was in the same clothes as before, but his hair was messier and he still hadn’t been sleeping.

“I tried to save them,” Alex said. Eric would understand the need to skip the small talk. The need to be at the heart of the matter. “I tried, but I couldn’t. I’m sorry. Tell him I’m sorry.”

“You saved him.” Eric said this as though Alex were unaware of the meaning, unaware of the epiphany hanging in his mind.

“But not them.”

And they had been the ones who were important.

He passed out before Eric could try to tell him otherwise.

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The next time he woke up, Alex wasn’t feeling better, but he did feel like less of a destroyed pile of broken parts, aching and weary where he wasn’t numb and overwhelmed with exhaustion. The possibility of staying conscious for more than a few minutes seemed like a reasonable possibility, which encouraged him somewhat.

He felt well enough to judge whether or not his past conversations had been the product of some rather wistful hallucinations or if, by some serious of improbably circumstances, Eric- Commander Myer, was actually present.

When Alex had been young, he’d been desperate for some kind of acknowledgement in his life. It had been a child’s desire for company, and when the world failed to meet this desire, he had imagined his own.

When you created your own friends, there was no rejection. There were no awkward pauses or judgments and no possibility of being misunderstood or harshly treated. In his mind, with his made-up friends, Alex had been safe, and wanted.

A mirage of Eric Myers sitting vigil by his bedside would not be totally out of the question, even after all these years. It actually seemed like the more probable option.

“Hey,” Commander Myers said, when he noticed Alex’s coherent gaze. “You with me, kid?”

“I’m awake.”

If he was talking to himself, would whoever was taking care of him assume he was crazy, or would it just be the wounds talking? With the variety of inflictions Lothor had helpfully doled upon him, a concussion would not seem entirely unfathomable.

“Where am I?” Alex asked.

Eric – Commander Myers – was wearing a different set of clothes this time, all appearing to be new. He looked cleaner, his hair more put together, but exhaustion was still evident in his features. It was a nice touch, Alex thought. To make his friend concerned.

“Wind Ninja Academy,” Eric replied. At Alex’s frown, he continued. “The Thunder Academy’s
kind of in an uproar because of…” He made a vague gesture. “Well, they thought it would be easier to keep you hidden here. Besides, apparently water ninjas are the best healers around.”

“What are you talking about?” Alex asked. And then, because he was curious as to what his subconscious would come up with as an answer, he added, “How did you get here?”

“Fun story,” Eric began, his eyes narrowing in the promise that it was anything but. “After your grand exit with Hunter, we figured worse case scenario, you would come back a sad shell of a man. Turns out, you managed to top our expectations by not coming back at all.”

“I had to—”

“It was just the modifier,” Eric talked over him, gesturing to the device that was now attached to his Quantum morpher. Alex hadn’t noticed it before. “So I called Trip and got him to walk me through hooking this up, figuring that at best, I would be hunting down your dead body somewhere. I was about half right.” His eyes were shining with a fury akin to Hunter’s, but this one was simmering in coolness, composure, held on an edge he could not surrender to. “I used my morpher to track you down only to find you bleeding out on half a dozen ninjas in a park somewhere. Jesus kid, what the hell were you thinking?”

“I had to save them.”

“Well, you failed.”

Alex flinched away from the words, but Eric kept going, relentless in his truth. “So now what? Are you going to go back? Try again? Take on a ninja master all by yourself, again?”

“I had to try.”

“You have to live,” Eric snapped. “Doesn’t that matter? You think it’s worth going on some suicide mission–?”

“Yes, alright?” Alex couldn’t just lay there and listen anymore. Not when it was really Eric. Not when, for some reason, the Commander had come after him, was lecturing him when Alex had been abandoned by just about everyone he had known and a few people he didn’t. He couldn’t come here and pretend he cared.

“Why can’t I try?” Alex asked. “You think it’s worth it, having…”

He didn’t know what else to say, wasn’t sure he could ever put into words this torrent of emotions and useless things with which he had never bothered. They had never helped him and now here he was, ruined.

They had ruined him.

“Kid,” Eric sighed. Alex was sick of the term. He wasn’t a child; he wasn’t Hunter. “Most people just apologize when they do something wrong.”

“How could an apology be enough?” Alex asked. He already knew that it wouldn’t be.

“I tell you what,” Eric murmured, gaze sharp as he studied Alex. “Getting yourself killed sure as shit is not going to make up for it. The kid would have kicked your ass for pulling this kind of crap.”

“If I had saved them—”
“And if you had died in the process?” Eric challenged, raising his eyebrows. “Would it have still been worth it for Hunter?”

For the first time since the conversation had started, Alex was truly at a loss.

“You know the answer to that,” the brunette replied quietly, eyes furrowed in confusion.

When Eric turned to look away, there was a glimpse of something achingly familiar in his features, something a lot like disappointment.

“No kid, you’re the one who doesn’t.”

He withdrew from the room with a casual suggestion for Alex to get more sleep. To escape his thoughts, the Time Force Ranger yielded to the idea.

He surrendered to unconsciousness, knowing all this was a dream.

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“Why’d you do it?”

Alex could not say he had startled awake – sleep was too elusive whenever exhaustion didn’t overwhelm him; it was more like a shift in the air, dragging him from a restless meditative state with sluggish awareness. He closed his eyes, inhaling deeply as he tried to gather himself. He picked up the scattered pieces of his defense and prepared for round two, setting his eyes on his opponent.

Perhaps the Commander was trying a different approach. Disrupting Alex in the early dawn sunlight – pinks and oranges spilling through the high window with careful tenderness.

Except his opponent was not Commander Myers.

There had been others that had visited Alex during his recuperation, though they were mostly, he discerned, individuals endowed with the task of healing him. There were midnight health checks and meditations and the occasional young student who came to replace the incense burning near the door, tasked with promoting good aura, he was told. Alex had only caught bits and pieces, and none were particularly interesting.

The child that sat kneeling before him was younger than the incense-students, and his garb, while similarly-subdued, was distinctly civilian. Strange, after all this time, how jarring a soft green sweater and worn pair of jeans were. The thigh areas were covered with mystery stains – oils and splatters indicative of carelessly wiped hands. It reminded Alex oddly of Trip. Always discovering new messes with apparent effortlessness.

The child, now sure that he had Alex’s attention, repeated his question. “Why did you fight Lothor?” His hands curled into tight little fists in his lap, but otherwise there were no outward changes. “You’re not a ninja; you had to know it was ill-advised.”
“I knew,” Alex confirmed weakly. His voice was soft, dry in the mimic of an almost-croak, but it held.

“Then _why_?” the child pressed. “If you knew you could suffer detrimental loss, why proceed?”

“Because I had already suffered a detrimental loss,” Alex murmured.

He flashed back to Hunter, to a warm April evening in a sheltered back patio, the blond’s face – his posture – contorted, tense and withdrawn while simultaneously loud and uncaring of who bore witness to his rage. He thought of Hunter past the point of comprehension, how the blond was at his most honest, his most bare, explaining the thoughts he had carefully restrained in an effort to peacefully coexist with Alex.

He thought of the family he never had, and the family he would never get.

There was no doubt he had already suffered a loss.

For the first time since the child had spoken, he allowed some of his youth to shine through. He rolled his eyes, exasperated with the unfathomable conundrum of Alex.

“That’s stupid,” the child noted, disregarding tact in favor of correcting Alex’s apparent error. “How could a suicide mission improve your circumstances?”

“Trying to help a friend is not stupid.” Alex uttered these words with as much seriousness as he could muster bed-bound, hoarse, and pitifully weak. He summoned the elegance of Adam, his quiet diplomacy, and the stubbornness of Eric, who simply delivered the facts as they were, leaving no room for arguments, and pointedly ignored the facets of Hunter, whose wounds were far too sharp to consider.

The child narrowed his eyes, unimpressed. “There is no point in helping if your plans lack the basic necessities of survival. What is the point of lending aid if you cannot help yourself?”

There was obvious truth to this. It was the same point Commander Myers had been trying to establish, the same point his caretakers had tempering their stares, silent inquisitions with gazes so heavy, so judgmental that Alex feigned sleep half the time, even though they were all aware he rarely partook of it so regularly.

The Alex of eight months ago would have easily agreed with the deduction and thought little of it. There was logic in it, and in logic, undeniable truth. What was the point of protesting?

And yet, Alex found himself doing the very same anyway.

“Say what you will,” he murmured, his voice a whisper of a thing, stark against the quiet room. “But my actions saved two children, and that, in no way, will ever be foolish.”

“You could have contacted the academy,” the child insisted, leaning forward with a determined glower. “If you had known, you could have reached–”

“I did not have the capability.” Alex interrupted him with a strength that didn’t know he still possessed. That unyielding thing he had hid from, the thing he had used while holding Hunter back— _too dangerous, do not engage_—

The child’s frown deepened. “But—”

“You do not have to be a ninja to fight.”
Alex wasn’t sure why this, of all things, was the one that brought the boy into silence, only that it did, with sudden effectiveness. The child snapped his mouth shut as though he had suffered a blow, reeling back slightly as he attempted to process this, and Alex…

Alex was very tired. Perhaps that would explain why he was even indulging in this conversation in the first place.

He had gotten this far though, and his audience was unsuitably captivated by the poor injured mystery man hidden in his school. If he were honest, Alex didn’t deserved the opportunity to preach any kind of courses of action, either right or wrong, but in this one instance, he could not help but feel it was necessary.

He wasn’t sure who he was exactly defending, but there was something this child needed to know. A mindset that needed to be broken.

Though this could not in any way turn back the hands of time and shatter Alex of his own narrow-minded assumptions, it felt comforting to at least try to make amends with the universe in this small gesture.

“Anyone can fight,” Alex said. The words carried in the breath of a whisper, but he could tell by the child’s expression of undeterred focus that he had caught every word of it. “Some are more skilled than others, but anyone can fight.” He closed his eyes, remembering training days with Trip and Katie, vehicle navigation courses with Lucas, Jen’s stubborn advancement through the ranks. “Some fight in different capacities,” he whispered, thinking about Fran as a team support. “They fight in ways suited to their own strengths—” He pictured Trip frowning down at his fussy piece of equipment, promising its imminent cooperation with an annoyed glare. “And they fight, because that is the right thing to do. Because someone needs to fight, and they are capable.”

The small fists were shaking now, the child’s shoulders tense as he leaned forward, insistent. “But Lothor’s—”

“You do not need to be a ninja to fight,” Alex repeated. On this, he would never yield. “And assuming such is an insult to all those who are not, who choose to fight regardless.” He was tired, unspeakably tired, but part of Alex, in this, felt almost…refreshed. “Do not invalidate their efforts with your foolishness.”

He looked to the child again, who was so small on that woven rug, so tiny and ruthlessly intelligent. The world would not be so easy on him, growing up, and while it was not something Alex could in good conscience indicate, it was something he sympathized with.

The boy was considering him, head tilted cautiously. Alex could see him replaying the conversation in his mind, weighing the arguments merit, the strong points, the weak. Alex wondered what his ultimate say would be on it.

The door cracked open before he got a chance to hear it.

“Cameron.” A tall man, one of the few that had walked Alex through meditation, stood posed in the doorway, his face a mask of stoic calmness. After a few seconds, Alex realized the sentences that followed weren’t in English.

Whatever was said, the child – Cameron – put up his argument in the form of a glare, his arms folding across his chest in prepubescent rebellion before he rigidly rose to his feet, turning to stalk out of the room as though by his own choice.
At the door, he paused, glancing over his shoulder to meet Alex’s eye. He said nothing – there were no words now, really – he simply nodded once, then disappeared out the door.

He nodded like he understood.

Maybe he did.

“I apologize for my son’s intrusion,” the man – Cameron’s father – offered quietly. “It shall not happen again.”

He, like his son, disappeared without a word, leaving Alex to his own thoughts and silence.

It was a very small thing.

Somehow, it felt like a victory.

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He wrapped his arms around the teen instead of commenting on the mess of hair jutting below his chin, disregarding any stimulation it provided that didn’t have to do with temperature.

“We say nothing of this,” Hunter warned, voice low and threatening retribution.

Alex nodded instead of answering, feeling like that was the appropriate response, and even if it wasn’t, Hunter seemed to have no complaints. He liked the feel of the ninja’s hair tickling his neck, deceptively softer than should be allowed - considering it was Hunter’s – silky and delicate in a misleading way. Perfect then, for Hunter. To contain this fragility, begging for human connection, a weakness, only to strike when least expected, when you had your guard down. That was Hunter alright, though Alex couldn’t find it in him to begrudge him that lifestyle. It worked for him, and it was that nature that Alex had found attractive anyway, because, in a bizarre way, he was up front about it. If you got to know him.

“Alex,” Hunter mumbled, a quiet exhale somewhere between annoyed and exhausted. “Just–”

He moved again, still cold, Alex assumed, unsatisfied (never satisfied; he wasn’t ever–) and then Hunter was on top of him, laying across Alex’s chest like it was his promised land, claimed and his by all rights, no negotiations. His legs fit beside Alex’s in an uncomfortably perfect way, unreal because of his build - tall and skinny where Alex was broad and average, painfully-average - but somehow making it work. Because Hunter liked to defy normal expectations. He didn’t appreciate them very much.

Alex put all of his focus on the tips of his fingers, the sensation of them sliding across Hunter’s back in a firm hold, resting them there. He put all of his attention on the soft cotton t-shirt just so he could ignore the constant pressure on his groin, Hunter still moving stubbornly, feeling vindictive, trying to arrange himself just so…

There were so many parts of Alex that hated it, because aside from Hunter being male he was Hunter, young and brash and tricky, wrong in so many ways, but something about him made Alex remember there were other things than work in life, other things out there to be achieved, other feelings to experience-

“I’m still–” Hunter complained with a quiet grumble, sounding almost endearingly petulant. Alex could have laughed about it, was going to laugh, but then—

“Hunter.” Alex didn’t so much as say the name as exhale it, body tensing as the blond began to tug
at the zipper of the brunette’s jacket, pressure teasing down the center of his chest.

“I said no talking,” the other ranger chided, frowning at Alex for his disobedience. Hunter quickly finished his work, jacket undone and Alex powerless to stop him, still wondering, knowing he shouldn’t— couldn’t— move right now. He wanted to know what was next.

“I just need—” Alex could just picture Hunter’s tongue poking out the side of his mouth, in that charming expression he got when he was intently focused on something, a look he insistently refused existed— “Just—” Hunter said again. Nothing more.

Alex felt the blond’s fingers teasing at the hem of his shirt, just the barest pressure before they dipped under the edge, fingertips cool and electric as they slowly pushed Alex’s shirt up, until it bundled underneath his armpits, leaving the majority of his chest exposed.

Even under their tent of blankets, it was the barest Alex had felt in a long while, knowing Hunter was posed above him, looking, feeling—

The hands pulled away, most of Hunter did, rearing back until just the pressure on Alex’s legs remained, Hunter perched on his waist like it was nothing, the blanket encapsulating both of them. In the quiet cocoon they had created, Alex realized that Hunter was rearranging something, moving…

A cloth was dropped carelessly against Alex’s side, and he realized it was Hunter’s t-shirt, the thin one he had been wearing before.

The blond settled down, content, one arm wrapping around Alex’s neck while the other one played with his side, the small section of his revealed chest pressed against Hunter, like it was nothing, just a necessity—

There was nothing, nothing necessary about the flaming heat that built in Alex’s stomach, something new, something worrisome, but he couldn’t care because Hunter’s face was pressed against his neck, lips touching just barely above his collar, skin and contact and a closeness Alex hadn’t felt-

“Still cold,” Hunter grumbled, and that time Alex did snicker, because of how put-off Hunter sounded about it.

His side was tapped lightly in return, a protest on principle. Despite how little it was, it felt so good.

“Sure,” Hunter groused. “Laugh about it.”

Alex intended to do just that, because he could, but the breath caught in his throat almost immediately.

It seemed Hunter’s complaint was not an empty threat.

“I mean,” Hunter continued conversationally, voice casual as he worked on the button of Alex’s jeans, fingers deft in unzipping his fly. “If this isn’t working, obviously we need to do some kind of exercise, right? Get the blood flowing?”

It was evil and teasing, knowing and vindictive and mean and Hunter, perfectly Hunter, unashamedly no one else, no boundaries, no apologies, no threat of ever changing.

His head tilted back, lips brushing against Alex’s jaw line in his trademark smirk, knowing victory was his, but trying to be nice about it.
“So, what do you say Alex?” Hunter asked, voice dripping in mock sweetness. “Are you feeling cold?”

He didn’t wait for an answer, mind already set on his next course of action, and the hand dipped lower, into his–

The dream wasn’t technically the first of its kind, but that didn’t make Alex any happier about being thrown into consciousness; the status of his dreams being so detached from reality that his brain couldn’t handle them after a certain point. Like he could only suspend his disbelief for so long.

Of course, that only left him awake and frustrated and angry, staring in the face of something undeniable because, he had to face it, his subconscious had never exactly been subtle.

Alex wasn’t sure what being righteous felt like. He had theories – private musings, really – where he entertained the idea of some fictional king, distributing justice as he saw fit. The King and his kinsmen – because it was always a team – would be overfull on feelings of self-satisfaction, of righteousness that they had done right, their cause was a just one.

It wasn’t a path he often allowed his mind to tread, as it was a useless one, but in the days of gradual healing after Lothor’s attack, he had more than enough time for meaningless perusals.

In the stark light of logic, righteousness was an empty thing. It was pride and ego, a factor that built up your own esteem until it threatened to drown out the truth. Righteousness, like anger, like sorrow, was a dangerous manipulator when it came to approaching a combat situation. It could make you lose focus of what was truly important, and on that basis alone, Alex had declared he had no use for it.

Six days after the attack that almost ended his life – almost two days since he had returned to Eric’s time period – and Alex’s subconscious betrayed the ideals he had held sacred for the majority of his life. He had no regrets for trying to save Hunter’s parents, none for successfully protecting the Bradley brothers – Hunter – he couldn’t. It went against everything he was taught, everything he had been valued for, but Alex could not fight it. He was glad. He was happy and relieved that he would meet Hunter, that he would know him, in whatever capacity – that this had been held safe.

It was selfish, as much as Alex wanted to hide it under the guise of protecting a future ranger, he had no real explanation for himself beside a dark and exceedingly desperate desire to keep Hunter Bradley alive. Even if the blond hated Alex for all eternity, how could Alex go on knowing there was a time – his time – that Hunter was not a part of?

Alex was tucked away in Eric’s guest bedroom (not his choice – personally, the room held too many memories of Hunter that he would rather soon avoid, but Adam had been insistent that the couch in Eric’s office was not a proper resting place for injured rangers) when it occurred to him. It was something he had addressed once before, banished to this space that he and Hunter had shared under pain of severe head trauma from the Commander, and hopeful stares from Adam.

Alex loved Hunter.

It was beautifully simple like that.

Through their antagonistic beginnings, timid attempt at friendship, to actual comradery and brotherhood beyond, Hunter Bradley had slipped through Alex’s shields with the mastery his
Discipline had implied and taken complete control, rendering Alex’s composure obsolete almost immediately. If he weren’t so exhausted recovering from Lothor’s attack, Alex wasn’t sure he would have escaped the grief.

Love was a gift Alex never thought he would be granted once, let alone twice. It seemed like too much for him, even if he knew deep down it was based on choice. A choice to care for someone, to be cared for. And if those were the rules, the qualifications into falling for something so devastatingly powerful, then Alex should have been perfectly safe.

But Jen… she had been hope. She had been a risk that hadn’t felt like a risk at all. Jen had been a safety net of Time Force familiarity mixed with new and good and bold and fortune. Fortune that she would choose to care for Alex.

Misfortune that she would leave.

Hunter was not hope.

Hunter had not been a choice, because there was, in no way possible, any way Alex could have been allowed a choice. There never would have been the possibility of not-loving Hunter, because Hunter would never be anything but himself. And that person, as he was, was… flawed.

He was foolish, and stubborn. He was determined, and noisy at the least convenient times and perceptive when you desperately needed discretion. He was contrary on whims, bitingly sarcastic, difficult to communicate with and deceivingly loyal when he had every right not to be. He wore masks of humor, but the true moments of comedy were small things. He played at being cool but was actually quite, as Adam put it, goofy, and-

Hunter was unforgivably himself.

And Alex loved him for that. Would always love him for that.

It was a problem, Alex supposed, but not one he regretted. Not one he would ever choose to mourn. Hunter would never love him – but Alex’d once had his friendship, and that could not be questioned. Even at the end of it, it was something Alex cherished.

That was all that truly mattered. Alex had spent a lifetime grieving love he did not know; he could spend the rest of it valuing the one he did.

Maybe that was righteousness. Maybe that was strength.

“What are you going to do now?”

That was the question, wasn’t it?

Alex considered Eric’s enquiry with a certain weariness, staring out the blinds of the great bay window Hunter had often claimed as his own. Climbing down the stairs had been a trial, but a necessary one. It had been easier than yesterday, and would only continue to improve.

Alex swallowed, considering his options. “I have to talk to Trip.”

It was something they all knew, but it felt all the more definite now that Alex had spoken it aloud. He could not avoid the green ranger forever; Time Force would only allow him so much time to recover.
Alex was surprised he had not already been recalled. Were it not for the fact that his method of time travel proved more trying on his body than they realized, he most likely would have been. Without the protection of a time ship, he would have to be in as best health as he could manage before making another transport.

“What do you think they’ll do?” Adam set down a mug on the small end table next to Alex, the warm, comforting smell more indicative of tea than the coffee they seemed to prefer. “Will there be any disciplinary action?”

Alex was too tired to laugh, too tired to shake his head or sigh. Of course there would be; how could there not? Alex had flagrantly violated too many codes. Even his ranger status would not protect him from the consequences of unsanctioned corrections. If he were lucky, he would have his memory wiped and serve out an extended probation with SPD, using his gen-locked morpher for their causes until his skills were needed again, if at all.

If he was unlucky, his morpher would be confiscated and destroyed, and he destined for the very same prison Ransik and every other criminal he had been responsible for apprehending was contained. A poetic end to his actions.

As his actions had led to the protection of two future rangers, that could provide him with some leniency, but it would be a tricky thing. House arrest, and a ban from Time Force. Memory wiping a certainty no matter what the cards held for him.

And wasn’t that the worst of it?

Alex chose not to voice these concerns, watching Adam settle on the couch, resting against the arm Eric had chosen to lean against, his arms folded across his chest in an unsavory picture of defensiveness.

“I don’t know.” It wasn’t a lie. “I have to call Trip.”

Trip wouldn’t try to soften the blow for him; he and Alex both understood the delicacy of his situation too well to respect the brunette’s sensibilities.

Eric frowned, fingers drumming restlessly against his biceps. “So you’ve said.”

Choosing not to reply, Alex picked up his tea and looked back out the window, taking comfort in the crimson ceramic beneath his fingers. He had to, while he could.

“You should be going on trial,” Trip said, his image blurred around the edges by occasional static. “Any other time, you would have been automatically recalled and mandated to base custody until they decided what to do with you.”

“Harsh way to treat your people,” Eric muttered, expending very little effort to control his volume.

Alex shot him an annoyed look before fixing his gaze back on the monitor on Eric’s desk, Trip’s holographic image dancing above the worn wood and piles of paperwork.

“It’s the law,” Trip explained, taking no offense at the Commander’s words. “Time manipulation is a serious crime Eric; no one is above the punishments.”

“You said ‘should’,” Alex spoke up, breaking into the argument looming. Eric narrowed his eyes in annoyance, but said nothing. “That I ‘should’ be, but I’m…”
For a moment, Trip looked confused, but then he was back on track. “Yeah, it turns out that was actually supposed to happen.”

He allowed a moment for that to sink in, a moment Alex wasted staring blankly across the room, with Eric cursing a rather creative string of insults under his breath. Not all of them were in English.

“What do you mean ‘supposed to-?’” Eric cut himself off with a growl, placing both hands against the desk so he could properly lean forward and leer. “That was actual history?”

“Yeah,” Trip chirped, oblivious to the threatening tone. “Without Alex’s intervention, the Bradley rangers would have died!” Alex flinched, but Trip didn’t seem to catch it, prattling on cheerfully as he built up excitement. “Something about a ninja prophecy— we don’t actually have that many details. Point is, Command’s treating it like you were just following orders so you’re in the clear. Is that good news, or what?!?”

‘Or what’, felt like the more appropriate option. By the remaining ache in his side, under the scar Lothor had given him, ‘or what’ felt like the only reasonable response.

“Thank you Trip,” Alex said instead, forcing his mouth around the words, feeling detached. “What’s the next course of action?”

Beside him, the Commander was still sputtering, his face twisted into an unpleasant expression. Trip, oblivious as he was, bore it no second thought.

He had been Eric’s teammate – Alex remembered – the green ranger was probably accustomed to such outbursts at this point, even if he and the Commander had not coordinated together regularly, or with any peace.

“You come home,” Trip said, like it was easy. “Jen and the others have apprehended the time-manipulator, so all the corrections have been taken care of.” He paused; and in the silence Alex’s world fell down around him, his barriers shattered and ears filled with a white noise so deafening he just barely caught Trip’s explanation.

“Just give the word when you’ve finished recovering,” Trip said. “And I’ll set up your return trip.”

And then Alex would go back, lost in a tunnel of light and pain and furious swiftness, landing in the place that had steadily, without his awareness, become less than a home to him. A place clinically clean, a place with rigid enforcement and increased isolation, a place that had molded him into what he was, a place where he would be alone again. Not here.

He would miss it, the modest two-story house with mismatched furniture. He would miss the hot dogs burned on one side, the low buzz of the television. He would miss the smell of books and the mess of paper in the office, the rough feeling of roof shingles beneath his back, the delicate wind chime hanging off of the back porch, whose craftsmanship was indicative of a younger set of hands, and its pastel color scheme a favorite of the young child next door. He would miss seeing animals so close with so little reverence given, he would miss the wide open skies and the sprawling suburbs, but most of all, he would miss having somewhere to come home to.

Someone to come home to, where he had been – at one time – wanted.

“We’ll talk to you later, Trip,” Alex heard Eric say, cutting off whatever sounds of concern Trip was making. The feed ended and Alex stared through the empty space to the bookshelf beyond it, knickknacks and photos lining the shelves. Useless things.

There was some shuffling by the door, a characteristic creak of it allowing entrance, before Adam’s
voice asked, “Is everything okay?”

The black ranger entered the room, coming to stand quietly by the door, arms folded across his chest in a posture that exclaimed patience more than defensiveness. It was a casual, standby position, and he wore it with the same ease as he traversed all of their conversations.

As much as Alex ached with the loss of Hunter, he would also miss Adam’s comforting presence. The black ranger had been a constant source of steady calm in the hectic storm of Eric, Hunter, and Alex’s combined neuroses, and Alex–

He would never be able to put into words how much he appreciated it. How much he respected the other man, how he– if he could do it again, start fresh as a ranger, he would like to model himself after Adam. Stern, but fair. Kind, but authoritative. Empathetic. Responsible. Adaptable.

Alex had thought he was adaptable. And in this experience, maybe he was. He could not say he was the same man now as he was when this mission had begun, but it felt like more of a detriment, a curse, than an aid. If he was truly adaptable, he would be able to let go.

Now, faced with the choice of leaving, of returning back to his own time – home – Alex found that he could not. Did not.

Beside him, Eric stayed silent, but he might be shaking his head, he might be frozen, he might be–

What did it matter?

What did any of it matter, it was done.

It didn’t. He was– would be, okay.

The Commander rubbed a hand across his face, letting out a weary exhale as he sat back in his weathered office chair with a creak. “So now what? I could try calling him later, maybe con him into–”

“I go home.” Alex’s words sounded hollow even to his own ears, but they held firm and that- that was what mattered, in the end. “I have my orders.”

“Your orders are bullshit.” Eric slammed a hand against the desk, causing various papers and knickknacks to wobble. “This whole thing is bullshit.”

“Eric–” Adam’s eyebrows were furrowed, knit together in an expression of concern, trepidation, but the Commander did not heed his warning.

“No.” Eric shook his head roughly, dismissing the other ranger and keeping his gaze fixed on Alex. “No, I’m tired of this. You wouldn’t listen before, but you’re going to listen now.”

“There’s nothing to say.” Alex almost sounded like he believed this response. Once he worked past the pain of it being real, of it being over– “I have my orders.”

“Great.” Eric spat the words out like venom, hackles raised in such righteous, subdued fury that it reminded Alex of Hunter, of a simmering time bomb waiting to explode and rip their fragile balance apart.

It wasn’t Hunter’s fault. Alex had been the detonator, he had known–

He had known, and proceeded anyway. That was ‘on him’, as Hunter would say.
Along with a few other choice words, but in a few days it wouldn’t much matter anyway.

“–that doesn’t change the fact you need to hear it,” the Commander was saying when Alex came to, escaping his melancholy in time to catch a rather determined grimace. “You keep avoiding this crap like it makes it better–”

“Eric,” Adam said, tone sharper.

“–but it doesn’t, and it won’t. So we’re gonna say it now, so it sinks in. This isn’t something you can escape; you need to realize it now before you’re back in your own la-la-land of repression and it’s too late to do jack shit about it.”

“Maybe now’s not the best time,” Adam suggested. He had taken up a neutral position, Alex realized, poised on the other side of the desk, yet equally between them, the top point of their triangle. He looked as uneasy as Alex felt, which was– it was generous. Empathy was not a gift Adam had to waste on Alex, but he did so anyway. That was generous.

For the first time since the conversation had started, Eric cast him a sharp look, weighted with too many intricacies – layers – for Alex to attempt to discern.

“It’s now or never,” he replied simply. Then his gaze was back on Alex.

There wasn’t anything to say.

“I have my–”

“You love him.”

The words hung over the room like a looming thundercloud, vicious and ugly, but unmistakably present.

Alex swallowed and looked away, but did not deny it. There was no point.

The Commander, knowing he had earned Alex’s silence, continued, “There is no one in this room who doesn’t know that. There is no one in this house who doesn’t support that except maybe –you, but that is a mess of issues we are not touching today.”

“I would have thought that would be the basis of your concern,” Alex replied automatically, unable to help himself. His chest felt tight, tension slowly strangling whatever will he had left to continue, to persevere, until he was reduced to nothingness.

He only had so much in him; why did the Commander have to draw this out?

Eric gave a slow nod. “Partly,” he allowed. “But this love-business is a two-way street. We’ve got the kid to think about too.”

“Of course.” Alex blinked rapidly, fighting away… something, he didn’t know. That made sense, their concern for Hunter– Alex had wrapped him up in this mess, he was the more-afflicted–

“Don’t give me that crap,” the Commander snapped, drawing Alex’s attention. He had looked away at some point. “Don’t–” He exhaled heavily through clenched teeth, dropping his gaze. When he did look back, his eyes were unyielding in their determination. “Jackass, I will say this a grand total of once – you are my friend, and I care about you.”

The words hung awkwardly in the air, but before Alex could press forward for more answers, further
clarification, the Commander continued, “I know we started off rocky.” Eric almost looked shy to admit it, as shy as he ever was, but he pushed forward. “But this— this assumption that we only give a damn about you because the kid does is ending here, because despite whatever unforgivable faults you think you might have, you are a decent-as-hell human being.”

Eric paused for a moment, allowing for it to sink in, for Alex to convince himself to keep breathing. It was harder than it should have been.

“And you are also,” Eric swallowed, hands folding in his lap. “—someone I am very honored to consider a friend. No—” he shook his head roughly. “You’ve stayed in my house and abused my appliances too long for just that. Alex, you’re…”

He looked up. At some point he had looked away, down at his hands, and Alex didn’t begrudge him that, but now he refocused on the brunette and his gaze was clear, was absolutely certain.

“You’re family, kid,” Eric said. He said it quietly, but not in shame. It wasn’t– Alex was shocked to realize – something he was ashamed to admit.

It was like all his energy had suddenly drained from him, adrenaline and righteousness finally failing after a trying period of confrontation and…

Eric had used that on Alex.

Alex, who he considered family.

For a brief, terrifying moment, Alex was taken back to the days of their earlier encounters – where he waited out the derision to be the punchline of a joke he did not understand – but nothing came. There was no laughter, no goading.

And – Alex realized – there hadn’t been for a very long time.

“Oh,” he said, and immediately wanted to apologize.

Was that all he could offer, just ‘Oh’? He didn’t have anything else, couldn’t provide something more satisfying to match Eric’s rather massive–

Motion– movement from the corner of his eye had Alex turning, causing him to remember that he and the Commander were not alone in the office.

The movement must have been intentional to catch his attention, because Adam wasn’t moving now. His previous expression of worry had been replaced with something softer, less severe as he considered Alex.

“For both of us,” he confirmed quietly, and it wasn’t until then that Alex realized it had been an unspoken question – that he had needed, with words he could not voice – to know the answer to that question. He turned away, blinking against the sudden heat watering his eyes as the black ranger continued, “Both of us – all of us – care about you, Alex. Care about both of you. We would like you to be happy, because that’s the only thing you really wish for your family. Happiness. Stability.”

“Those are two things,” the Commander noted dryly.

Alex heard more than saw Adam shrug. “They aren’t mutually exclusive.”

“I don’t-” Alex couldn’t listen to more of their banter at the moment– not when his heart felt so
heavy, so empty as the weight of reality set in. “I never had a…”

He didn’t finish it. Hated now, with an intensity he had never felt, the immediate understanding of his orphan status upon those he had revealed it to. Hated there was some kind of intangible feature about him that determined his loneliness, despite its truth.

“Yes,” Eric snorted. “Me neither.”

Alex paused, schooling away the beginnings of a flinch, and turned.

He had never… truly thought about it, but it made sense.

In that the Commander didn’t have any extra pictures around the house, or hadn’t mentioned extra family members during their stay there, not that there was something about him-

“Yes,” Eric continued. “We’re a unique hodge-podge of issues all together. Three orphans and a guy who might as well be, with how little his parents want to do with him.”

“It’s probably better this way.” Adam answered Alex’s inquisitive look with a shrug. “If they can’t respect harmless lifestyle choices then… yeah, it’s better.”

He nodded slowly, almost like he was trying to convince himself more than Alex, but the brunette didn’t say anything. That was a pain he was not familiar with, but could – from Hunter’s own… he could understand it, vaguely.

They were… they were a family.

An incomplete one.

That smacked Alex in the face harder than anything else, rendered him still the moment he thought about it.

The feeling of family, of home, settled into his mind with quiet ease. It had been there, a tentative concept visited only in brief moments – when he dared to entertain the idea of his own private utopia, or at least, the closest form of it. Not when he visualized perfection, but merely pondered the idea of this continuing, of celebrating more archaic holidays and discovering more ‘past-things’ and painting bad coffee mugs and using tooth brushes and doing all of that with Hunter.

With Hunter and Adam and Eric as his… his family. His team.

But that… that was a fairytale, a hope. Realistically, it had never been possible and now – with things left as they were, it was even less so. Even if Alex could find a way to stay in this time, what would be the point of it if Hunter couldn’t even speak to him?

Alex cared for Eric and Adam as well – would not bother denying it – but staying with that truth (however unfeasible) would be like a constant stab to the heart every second Hunter was not with them. Was not with him. Even at his most derisive, knowing he would willingly speak to Alex in any capacity, better than hateful silence and isolation – it, it would be better.

There was no way he would get that.

“Enough warm and fuzzy stuff,” Eric drawled, pulling Alex from his thoughts. “Now’s the time for action. We need a plan.”

Alex opened his mouth to reply, his stomach churning as he began to relay the orders Trip had just
given him, when the Commander cut him off.


“I don’t have a choice.” Alex wished he didn’t feel so bare when he explained it, wished he could say it with some amount of strength or grace. “I wish I did, but I don’t.”

He had his duties. There was a protocol that he had already broken in a grievous way and he couldn’t diverge from it again. He couldn’t risk being marked as a rogue agent – even if he tried, they would reclaim him and imprison him as they had many others, and nothing would be different.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Adam prop himself against the front of the desk, leaning against the worn wood gingerly, his eyes unfocused in consideration. “I think you do. Or at least, more of a choice than you think you do.”

Alex frowned. “In what way? He was very clear on the parameters—”

“No, he’s right.” Eric cut him off with a wave of his hand. “Trip said to call him when you were ready to go back.” He looked at Alex, eyes sharp, considering and – now that Alex registered it – thoughtful. For him. “He never said when that had to be.”

“I can’t live out a life here on a technicality.” Alex shook his head, interrupting any possible considerations of such a thing. “Eventually, they would come for me.”

“True.” Adam nodded his head, not a condescendingly, but carefully, in agreement. “But they probably wouldn’t notice a year, right? That would probably be just a drop in the bucket for them.”

“Past-expression,” Eric supplied before Alex could think to ask.

There was a possibility he might not have; the phrase seemed self-explanatory enough.

Instead, Alex focused on more pressing things. “What good would a year do me? In this time, when we are now, I haven’t technically met Hunter yet.”

“No,” Adam agreed. “But you will.”

Alex paused.

It was the truth. Currently, the Wild Force team were the active rangers protecting Earth, but based on the date displayed on the half-filled calendar splayed across Eric’s desk, Alex would meet Hunter – and subsequently recruit him – a little more than a year from now.

“He won’t remember me,” Alex murmured, and it hurt to think about, even though it was regulation, even though it was one of the few guarantees he had in his chosen profession.

A hand settled on the brunette’s shoulder, causing him to blink out of a daze he hadn’t known he’d entered. It was too overwhelming to think of— too much.

The hand squeezed, and Alex followed the arm all the way up to the face of its owner, meeting Adam’s supportive gaze with whatever lost expression he could offer.

“It might not be everything you need,” Adam said quietly. “It’s definitely less than you deserve, but at the very least you can talk to him. Whether he remembers you or not. You can get closure. You can...”

End it.
End it on good terms. Or, better ones. Ones that weren’t—

He imagined Hunter’s expression, twisted with hatred and betrayal, realizing now that their potency came from how strongly, how deeply he had been invested in Alex. That he— he had cared.

It had meant something to him too. Maybe not as much as it had to Alex, but there was weight there. He needed to address it.

Even if it could never come out the way he wanted it to in the end, Adam was right. This was one last thing Alex could offer Hunter; one small, humble action he could take to slightly mitigate the damage he had done, even if the blond had no way of recognizing it. He wanted that— no, he needed that, suddenly, with a desperation he could not convey, he needed to give that to Hunter. He needed to try.

He loved him too much not to.

“A year.” Alex nodded, taking it in. A little more than that— some cool-down time would be needed, and then—

And then he would speak to Hunter. However it turned out, that was how this mission would end. That was something he decided.

Eric and Adam shared an unreadable expression, but it didn’t matter, it was settled.

“A year,” they agreed.

Maybe that would be long enough for Alex to find the right words. It would have to be. Time Force be damned.

Chapter End Notes

The dream sequence it technically an extension of the cold cuddling scene at the end of chapter 13. And yes, that was baby Cam interrogating Alex at the Wind Academy. Couldn’t resist :)

Until next time!
You'll Be Alone

Chapter Notes

Every ounce of adoration and gratitude to the awesome real vampire for beta-ing this chapter! Were it not for vamps handiwork there would be so many more errors and inconsistencies, and I am always grateful and honored to get to work with such a lovely beta! Additional appreciation goes to Kei Luna Shoryu for supplemental beta-ing efforts and all-around cheerleading, for listening to all my rambles for both this story and future ones with equal patience and enthusiasm.

If you guys are looking for more Ninja Storm goodness and still haven’t tried out the same two stories I keep recommending (or literally just, any of their stories, they are all good ^_^), check out 'My Brother's Keeper' by the real vampire or 'The Art of Cohesion' by Kei Luna Shoryu. Try new things, live your best life :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was just a stupid front door.

There was nothing particularly special about it in the slightest. It was worn - not new, but not decrepit. Lived in, homey, well-loved maybe – those were better descriptions. Point was, in the grand scheme of doors, this front door was neither too old nor too new, too broken or too whole. It was right in the median; as average as average could be.

Hunter noted its difference from the backdoor he knew so well, a shining sight that had once promised shelter, protection, and freedom. He wondered if the paint was still peeling, or if Eric had given it a fresh coat. Maybe he’d even replaced it altogether.

Or maybe it looked just like this door, save for the fact that it did not bear an impenetrable amount of doom upon Hunter just from the mere sight of it.

Beside him, Fran fidgeted, head swiveling to scan up and down the street for pedestrians. A useless endeavor, as there weren’t any.

Hunter wondered how old Alice was, and promptly shoved the thought away.

It was a stupid door.

“Are you going to…?” Fran motioned towards the door, her expression uncertain, as though she doubted Hunter’s destination. Perhaps she was concerned, but Hunter didn’t know Fran well enough to handle that thought, so he threw that onto the list of ‘shit he did not care about’ and moved on.

“Gimme a minute,” he replied, shoving his hands deeper into his coat pockets.

There was a chance that this was all for nothing anyway. Alex could be done with his mission- Hell, Alex could have finished the whole thing years ago now that he didn’t have Hunter around to-

Help? Bother? Comfort?
Hunter wasn’t there, was the point, and Alex could just as easily not-be too.

If it was just his old pal Eric and frowny-pants Adam shacked up in the modest two-story house in front of them, it wasn’t quite so daunting, was it?

It wouldn’t have been, except Hunter remembered how it ended, and maybe they weren’t the greatest pals after all. Even in his rage, Hunter wasn’t sure what he could have expected from Eric, but maybe some support would have been nice.

Now, in hindsight, he understood the reasoning behind Eric’s… well, reasoning, but in the moment it had stung, a secondary betrayal so sharp it struck him silent even now months – years – later, hovering at the end of the Quantum ranger’s driveway.

“It’s been a minute,” Fran noted.

Hunter rolled his eyes, but privately appreciated Fran speaking up. Fran was safe, in a way, something that wasn’t so indebted with then and was too new to now to be anything other than neutral. Like, being both then and here made her the best barometer for how he should be acting, even if she wasn’t aware of the then-part yet.

Fran opened her mouth, probably to say something else equally ‘helpful’, and Hunter moved forward, making his way towards the front door.

Walking wasn’t hard, see? It was easy. It was just one foot in front of the other without thinking, just as he had done for the majority of his life.

His throat felt tight as he paused, hesitating between knocking on the door and using the doorbell, or hell, just going for the spare key he knew Adam had bullied Eric into keeping around. Would it still be there? Would they still be there?

There was only one way to find out, and Fran took the decision out of his hands by punching the doorbell, eyeing the front door with an intensity that almost rivaled Hunter’s, though with an enthusiasm he definitely lacked.

Jesus, he should just leave. What was he doing here, what was he expecting? Alex wasn’t going to be here; it was way past his time. Even if that time was relative to the visiting moments, that had been-

The doorknob rustled, tell-tale sign of someone unlocking it from the inside, and the door swung open, revealing Adam in all his glory.

He disappointingly looked pretty much the same. Different shirt, had clearly gotten a haircut recently, but it was the same guy. Seemed like he could be just as dependably consistent with his appearance as he was with mishandling anguished teenagers. How lovely.

Adam paused, but didn’t seem all that surprised to see him – not even Fran, when he deemed the brunette worthy of a brief inspection.

Before his nerve was lost, Hunter cut to the chase, putting on his best no nonsense expression with a side of ‘no, you will not BS me today’.

“Is he here?” Hunter asked. His stomach was tense, tight and twisted as he delivered the words. He managed to keep it off his face though, and that was the important part.

It probably would have been slightly more effective if someone (–cough– Fran –cough–) would
knock it off with the concerned eyes, but it was something. Adam’s attention didn’t stray from the thunder ninja, and that was what mattered. He

Adam didn’t miss a beat either – wasn’t thrown, didn’t pause, didn’t stumble – because Adam was a deceptively collected SOB and had been doing this longer than any of them.

“You can’t see him,” the black ranger said.

His expression wasn’t hard, not cruel in challenge, but there was definiteness to his statement that said he would not be budged on this.

Hunter would have revolted from it simply on principal, were it not for his mind’s determined urge to completely lose all train of thought.

Alex was there. Alex was here.

Even with all the posturing and planning and pep-talking, Hunter hadn’t actually expected it. Hadn’t believed– had known, with unforgivable clarity, that Alex couldn’t be here. It had been too long, the mission couldn’t– Even if time didn’t really matter to Time Force – it had to be over. It had to be done. Hunter wasn’t ever supposed to have a shot at closure.

And now here he was, trying not to fall to pieces again, all over the thought of Alex.

“Why not?” Hunter found himself replying before he had collected himself, had fallen into the old defense mechanism of snark and challenge, using the arrogance to guard his jumbled thoughts. “He too busy?”

Adam didn’t glare, but he did his rough equivalent, narrowing his eyes in a way that was half-disappointment, half-weariness.

Hunter had never liked that expression; it made the black ranger look old.

“You can’t see him,” Adam repeated, voice soft, but firm. “He needs…”

He trailed off, but Hunter had no problem filling in the gaps. Tori had forced them to watch enough crappy romantic comedies to be able to recognize the clichés that devolved from long separations.

He needs more time.

Hunter laughed at that, the sound sickeningly bitter with contempt even to his own ears, but he didn’t care. Didn’t care about Adam’s set frown, didn’t care about the concern pouring from the two individuals beside him, he didn’t care.

All that, for nothing.

“What?” Hunter drawled, smile sharp and predatory on his face. “What does he need?”

“Hunter.” There was something unreadable about Adam’s expression, and that only served to piss Hunter off more, like he was some kind of child at the spelling bee, awarded a consolation prize just for showing up.

News flash, Hunter didn’t want placation; he just wanted to end this.

He needed this to be done, but screw it, if the universe wasn’t going to help out with that, he could take a hint. Ignoring and repressing the problem it was then.
There was a hand on his arm – Fran’s – but Hunter shook it off, backing away from the doorway.

“Alright,” he said. Agreeing to whatever unspoken contract was hanging out there that would allow him to leave. “I got it; we’ll just get out of your hair.”

Adam’s frown was desperate, or insistent, or maybe it was – hey – just a frown, because it wasn’t like Hunter was the greatest at reading people anyway. This entire experience could probably support that with examples to spare.

The black ranger moved forward, eyebrows furrowed – distressed. “It’s just that now’s not a good–”

“Time.” Hunter laughed, but there was nothing mirthful about it. He grabbed onto Fran’s hand, as the brunette had chosen that moment to go all statue on him, unsure as to where to go. He moved towards his bike. “I get it. Perfectly understandable.”

It would figure that a guy who could get all the time in the world would be struggling for more. There was something ironic about that, or maybe that was just Hunter.

“Just give him a few days,” Adam continued. “Hell, a few hours Hunter. Just not now, okay? Things are kind of hectic right at the moment.” His voice was steady, but his posture betrayed him, the arms crossed defensively over his chest screaming worried. “A few days, and then–”

“I got it,” Hunter repeated, handing Fran her helmet.

He wasn’t coming back in a few days. He wasn’t coming back in a few months. He was done. This was done.

It had been stupid to come here.

“It was good seeing you again, Adam,” Hunter lied, shoving on his helmet so it wouldn’t be as obvious. It felt better, with his face shielded, natural. Like old times. “Give my regards to your boyfriend.”

The bitterness was muffled by the helmet – hopefully – and Adam’s reply muted behind the sunshielded visor. Hunter didn’t wait for it though, cutting off the black ranger’s response with a rev of his engine.

Fran settled in behind him, and though he could feel how her movements were uncertain, like she wanted to stay, she complied. She followed his ground rules because she was a good friend, and Hunter took advantage of that generosity the moment she felt secure on his back.

Hunter pulled out of the driveway and took off down the road, never looking behind him.

If this was going to be a trashy romantic drama, he was going to do this shit right.

-:-:-:-:-:-:-:-

They stopped at a park halfway back to Blue Bay Harbor, because parks, you know, were kind of their thing, and Fran was executing the desperate ‘rest stop now or pay the consequences’ signal she and Hunter had worked out before this thing had started, back when he was all nerves mingled with dreaded anticipation, instead of resignation and weariness.

He was waiting on a bench, parked outside the smoothie shop Fran had bee-lined for, when a secondary inquiry he had forgotten to bring up with Adam made itself known.
Leo plopped down beside the blond without so much as a ‘hello’, causing Hunter to roll his eyes. How the ‘Stop sending other rangers after me’ thing slipped his mind, he didn’t know, but there wasn’t much Hunter could do about it now.

“You followed us.”

It wasn’t a question. It couldn’t be a question; it wasn’t like Leo was just hanging around parks twenty miles from where he’d been staying the week previously just for funzies.

In his peripherals, Leo shrugged unapologetically. “It seemed like the thing to do.”

“You don’t have to, you know.” He was channeling Dustin up a storm today, jumping halfway through conversations they hadn’t had – but Hunter was too tired to dally with pleasantries and a natural conversational path. “It’s over, alright?”

Leo caught on, Hunter knew he had, but made no effort to show it.

“What’s over?” he asked instead.

Hunter wanted to punch him.

He didn’t want to deal with this anymore today. Didn’t want to handle the delicate prattling that Fran would inevitably throw his way, didn’t want to explain to Leo or his brother or his team or Adam or himself, frankly, the absolute depths of why and how and with what he was done.

“In general,” Hunter replied, glossing over the truth with a broad generalization. “It’s over, go home.”

Hunter wanted it to sound firm, dismissive – but at the end of it he sounded more like a child, petulant and moody, and it pissed him off more. He was better than this.

Leo, who was– honestly, Hunter didn’t even know him. He’d broken into the guy’s apartment once and there was that one time he’d given the other dude a pep talk– that was nothing in Power Ranger terms. They practically took turns giving pep talks every other day, and for ninjas, breaking and entering was just part of the equation. It happened. There wasn’t anything even special about it anymore.

But he – Leo, this virtual stranger – was still here anyway, had showed up anyway, and Hunter was at the point in his life where he really wanted to know why.

He was determining the most offensive way to ask this when Leo broke the silence, his gaze fixed to some kindergarten soccer game in the distance.

“You helped me, you know.”

There wasn’t more to the statement than that, Leo choosing for Hunter to make the next move. Probably a courtesy, or something.

Or maybe this was just how decent people conversed. Who knew?

“Once a ranger, always a ranger,” Hunter mumbled, refusing to look at the brunette. “And all that.”

“Could you be serious for five seconds?”

“I’m pretty serious about levity, if that makes you feel better.”
Leo turned to face him. “Are you?”

His eyes were blue, sharp and critical—no, more determined, like Shane’s when he was being stubborn and leader-y. Must be a red ranger thing.

The need to fix what you perceived as broken, maybe that was a red ranger thing too.

“Yes.” Hunter shrugged, but knew it was the wrong choice of words.

It wasn’t levity; it was defensiveness, it was a shield, and they both knew it.

There were things Leo wanted to say, Hunter could tell that, even with his gaze turned away as it was. Something mean, or sharp that he wanted to bite back. Bait he could rise too, but wouldn’t.

Yeah, that hadn’t worked on Alex near the end either.

Hunter needed to stop doing that.

“You saw me at…” There was a swallow—a falter almost, and that was what it took to gain Hunter’s attention. He looked at the Lost Galaxy ranger, but Leo’s gaze was on his shoes, his eyebrows furrowed in discomfort.

“It was my weakest,” Leo settled on, looking up. “One of my weakest, lowest moments in my life, and you were there to see it.”

“This isn’t a barter system,” Hunter replied. “We don’t have to go tit for tat.”

“No, but we could be, you know, friends.” Leo ended it with a grimace, over what, Hunter didn’t know. “My brother was dead. He was dead and I wasn’t there for him and he was dead and Kai—”

He swallowed again, looking away, and Hunter didn’t watch his throat bob. Didn’t follow the movement with uncomfortable familiarity. Didn’t understand.

He did, but he couldn’t. It wasn’t practical.

“This isn’t a debt being repaid,” Leo said suddenly, surprising Hunter with the strength of his tone. “I’m here because I owe you. I’m here because I understand, and sometimes having someone with that knowledge around—it helps, okay? It’s nice. You obviously aren’t comfortable with the idea of someone sympathizing with your pain, but that’s not what I’m here for.”

“You’re clearly here to get some lecturing out of your system,” Hunter drawled, unable to help himself. “If we’re going to be honest.”

Like before, Leo didn’t rise to the bait. “I’m here because I’ve been there,” Leo said. “I’m here because you’re my friend, and whether you believe it or not, you’re a good guy who deserves closure, who deserves this, and I will stay forever if that’s how long it takes for you to understand that.”

“And Kai’s okay with this?” Hunter asked, using the name because he was actually an asshole, and he had a point to prove.

He didn’t know who Kai was, but he was obviously a sore spot for Leo, and that was enough.

Leo though, he didn’t take it. “What’s your goal here, Hunter?” he asked, eye squinting in frustration. “What happens when you drive me off? What do you get then?”
“I’ll be alone, for starters,” Hunter replied, getting on his high horse. Finding it, discovering it, whatever.

“Yeah,” Leo said, almost sneering. “You’ll be alone.”

*And how would that be better than before?*

He didn’t say it, but the words hung there all the same, ugly and true.

How would that be better?

The real question here – Hunter thought – was would it be *different*?

It wouldn’t be.

And that was the part of the story Hunter had always known, but futilely – with the same stubbornness he approached rectifying the perceived wrongs done against him – failed to acknowledge.

They always left.

His birth parents– Hunter didn’t even remember them anymore; the Bradleys, Sensei Omino– no matter how many times Hunter tried to start over, it always came to the point where the blond was on his own, and that protection of concern, of familial investment, was gone. Blake was the only thing that was constant, but that was a choice made for his brother by someone else, solidified by their deaths. Blake’s very existence in Hunter’s life was a random stroke of providence that Hunter couldn’t dare repeat, and he was beginning to wonder why he had even tried.

This here, this was some teenage angsting at its finest – but even if Hunter tried to trivialize it, he couldn’t help but feel justified, validated; that he had the right to this.

The team tolerated him for his morpher, and maybe they were friends, maybe they were family, but maybe they weren’t. Part of Hunter wondered that if he didn’t care for them, or didn’t act on his concern, if *maybe* they would stick around. Maybe they would get to live longer.

Hunter had sabotaged himself.

He wanted to retcon his intentions, wanted to go back and declare his affection for Alex a result of what he had always known. Alex couldn’t stay, how *could* Alex stay? In what world would that have been possible? Even in Hunter’s best-case scenario, Alex couldn’t stay behind, and Hunter couldn’t *go*, because that’s what star-crossed lovers *were* (as bitter as he felt using the stupid term, it was appropriate). Alex lived- *existed* in the future. That was what he did. Hunter would die long before this person came into existence, and Hunter-

He wanted to think he liked Alex because he could have never had him; that his appreciation for Alex was more for the *concept* than the person. Love without consequence.

*Love.*

Damn it.

Hunter had destroyed himself, and he couldn’t even pretend he had done it on purpose.

There was some kind of messed up logic to that, but Hunter didn’t have the strength of mind to sort it from the overwhelming mess of emotions, so he set it aside and let it be, choosing to focus on his
surroundings instead.

At some point, he had moved to cradle his head in his hands, his arms bent, resting on his knees. There was an arm around his back – Leo’s, or else a really frisky stranger – and another curled against his side, like an awkward half-hug.

He could feel the heat building up behind his eyes, his face warm, throat suddenly thicker, and promptly hated himself for coming to this point for the eighth time in as many days, because no one was worth this much heartache.

“I’m sorry,” Leo said, a sound so muted that Hunter almost missed it in the noise of wind around them.

“It’s simple logistics,” Hunter replied, brushing away the apology and keeping his gaze to the ground, eyes wide and refusing the threat of tears. “Couldn’t have happened anyway.”

Saying it didn’t make it real. It had always been real. Hunter had always known.

If he spent the next ten minutes, folded over, eyes squeezed shut, swallowing down grief, that was no one’s business but his own.

-:-:-:-:-:

It turned out that Fran had actually finished up earlier during their conversation, but Hunter hadn’t noticed her until he had rebuilt his composure, straightening up from his half-crumpled position and squinting into the sunlight.

She was behind the bench a few feet, two Styrofoam cups clasped in her hands, communicating the additional purchase of smoothies on her pit stop. Fran took his glance as permission to join them, and she settled in on Hunter’s other side, carefully handing over one of the cups.

It was red. Of course it was.

“For paying customers only,” she explained without prompting, fidgeting with the straw of her beverage. Through the plastic lid, Hunter could tell it was yellow. A banana-pineapple mix, or something.

Hunter smiled. It felt appropriate.

“I’m Leo,” the brunette offered his hand with an easy smile, shattering Fran’s uneasiness with the same charisma that had won Hunter’s team over.

“Fran.” She accepted the hand with a tentative smile, and they shook over Hunter’s lap. The thing that they shared, beneath the grip they shared. Alex would get a kick out of that.

Hey, and now he was going down that road again.

“Whatever you’re thinking about,” Fran started, a definite frown on her face. “Stop it.”

Hunter scowled, glad to be able to dust off his sarcasm after far too many minutes of depression, when Leo interrupted whatever witty remark he was about to make.

“Do you know Alex?” Leo asked Fran, eyes wide, imploring.

“You don’t?” Fran’s face was pure confusion, cocked to the side in a way that would be adorable, if you know, Hunter was into that.
Hunter cast off that train of thought in favor of defending himself from the argument Leo was about to unleash, a declaration of inequality that he was still uninformed.

“She’s gonna meet him,” Hunter explained.

It didn’t help Leo’s expression any. “Like I already have?”

He frowned. Fran lit up in excitement, no doubt ready to unleash the full tale of Hunter’s squalid romance.

Yeah, better cut that off at the head. “Fine,” the blond said. “Fine. I’ll tell you.”

“And maybe you can give us the power ranger-y take on things,” Fran added, excitement coming in full force.

“How do you know I’m-?”

“Morpher,” Fran and Hunter said at the same time.

They shared a look, Hunter annoyed, Fran brilliant and bright and cheerful, and just like that, Hunter was done.

Kind of. Sort of.

It was a start.

Chapter End Notes

You get to find out why it’s a ‘bad time’ next chapter :)

I know this one’s short, but the next one makes up for it! Because apparently Alex has more things to say than Hunter ;P

Sooooo many thanks to lionheart18 for the amazing comment! I greatly appreciate the feedback, and hope you enjoyed this chapter as well :D

Until next time!
Chapter Notes

All the thanks in the world to the dedicated real vampire for beta-ing this chapter. Your patience and keen eye for detail saved this chapter from several grammar slip-ups, and for that I am grateful, vamps. Additional love to Kei Luna Shoryu for supplementary beta efforts and for being the best support team a writer could ask for. Both vamps and Kei are always up for trading theories and ideas which is a gift I shall never underappreciate. Thanks, guys!

If you are still looking for some more Ninja Storm goodness (and, for some reason, haven’t found it yet ;P), check out ‘My Brother’s Keeper’ by the real vampire, or ‘The Art of Cohesion’ by Kei Luna Shoryu. They are good times :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Time passed by.

Slowly, but it moved. Sometimes Alex would ache with it, burning in the conflict of too soon and not soon enough as the comforting moments of home slipped through his fingertips. It could never be complete with Hunter’s lack, but even with just Eric and Adam, it was a substantial weight in Alex’s chest. A warm fire that could not be dimmed. Home.

The first few weeks after Alex regained his mobility, he avoided the guest room. It was just the same as they had left it, one of Hunter’s sweaters discarded on the dresser, his toothbrush hanging in a depressed lilt in the water cup on the bathroom counter. There was the frayed edge of the blanket the blond had slowly picked away at when his mind wandered, his long fingers toying with the hem in a dance never made less graceful for its inattention. There were the red pillows angled just so on what had been designated ‘the blond’s’ side of the bed, there was the crimson towel hung haphazardly on the rod in the bathroom and, Alex was sure, if he fogged up the mirror he would be able to see the stick figure ninja battles Hunter had drawn in the condensation, a Time Force agent thrown in the mix with valiant precision.

No matter his efforts, Alex could not bring himself to stay in that room. He couldn’t be surrounded by the sheer presence of Hunter; he couldn’t wake up in the middle of the night and be immersed in the blond’s world. Couldn’t stand the idea of being half-coherent, wondering where Hunter was, deciding that surely he had to be downstairs, or on the roof, or running through forms in the backyard. Alex couldn’t do it and look for him and then not find him, he couldn’t stand that awakening no matter how aware of it he was in his waking hours, so he stayed away.

Eric’s office had a comfortable enough couch. Alex had been sure not to grab any of the blankets from the guestroom when he settled in there.

The others allowed it. Allowed Alex to lick his wounds in silence.

He had briefly entertained the idea of locking himself away from the world, but Eric had put a quick end to that. At the beginning of day two, the Commander had barged in without so much as knocking, forcing Alex out of his sanctuary before the brunette could even put his book down.
Adam, his focus on the stove, didn’t even blink when Eric shoved Alex into a chair at the kitchen table. “Harry Potter treating you alright?”

Alex attempted to school his expression of surprise, and felt his fingers curl around the edge of his book. “It’s… interesting.”

Hunter had suggested it. Or, more accurately, he had talked about it enthusiastically non-stop for the greater part of one of their stakeouts, and then casually mentioned that Alex was ‘missing out’.

Just as he had missed out on chocolate chip cookies, and the Karate Kid, and ‘real’ Mexican food. There was something about an orphaned boy living in a closet that settled uncomfortably in Alex’s chest, but friendships born from true courage and acceptance, fighting to do what you could with limited resources and knowledge, that rallied something in him as well. He could understand why Hunter would like it so much, even if the blond steadfastly claimed it was because of Dustin and his brother, not him.

“I always liked an underdog story.” Adam said it with a smile, flipping pancakes with efficient ease. “Let me know when you get to the third one.”

Alex nodded, feeling shaky. “Okay.”

“If we’re starting a bookclub, we’re taking turns, alright?” Eric grumbled, stretching back in his own chair as he settled down, a cup of coffee small in his hands. “And no trashy romances. There are lines people. Lines.”

Alex slipped out of the conversation then, blocking out mentions of ‘romance’ while Eric and Adam bickered over the fine points of a potential book club. He ran his finger along the spine of the book, a young adult’s novel, and focused on the smell of bacon and the feel of a coffee mug under his hand as Eric slid it his way. He decided, in that instant, that he could be okay. For the next few moments, he could make it through.

And in a few moments more, he could decide to do it again. One day at a time.

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“Is he going to come back?”

Alex paused, pretending to consider the question he hoped wouldn’t come, and consciously tried to ignore the inquisitive gaze of the mighty ten year-old.

The brunette swallowed, the small, plastic teacup trembling in his hand. “Maybe,” he said, keeping his tone level. “But not for a long time.”

Hunter could come back, for Eric. As angry as he had been with the Commander in that moment of despaired betrayal, it seemed logical enough that the blond would come back to him. They had been friends, good friends, for almost six months. It would be reasonable for Hunter to seek reconciliation with the Commander.

And even if he didn’t, that was no thought to share with such a young, hopeful mind.

Alice frowned, glaring down at her teapot. “How long?”

“I’m not sure.” A couple of years. “But he might.”
The sun was warm, blocked by enough clouds in the sky to be considered pleasant instead of stifling, which made it the perfect weather for a pretend tea party.

Why Alice’s parents were not more concerned about her frequent visits to play with the grown men next door, Alex would never know. Though he supposed that purple plastic tiara on his head and ever-shedding feather boa wrapped around his neck may contribute to his harmlessness.

(Were it his child, this would be quite the opposite, but Alex had enough awareness to see how frequently Alice was left alone – and that he could sympathize with).

“Okay,” Alice eventually decided. She poured another imaginary cup of tea for Eric’s birds, the white couple chirping at the attention. “More tea for us.”

“And cookies,” Alex added.

Alice looked to him sharply, her head twisting in a quick movement that indicated surprise as this thought truly registered. Slowly, a grin overtook her face, endearing even with the gaps from missing baby teeth.

“Yeah,” she said, handing him another one of the treats-in-question. They were Oreos today. “We can save him some later.”

“A solid plan.”

She smiled again, then initiated the super-secret-ninja-handshake she and Hunter had worked out (and Alex had unfortunately learned).

Later, Alex would catch Adam showing a ‘tea time’ slideshow to a work-weary Eric on his phone, the two of them exchanging small laughs and pleasant smiles.

The pile of paperwork was settled in front of Alex with a mighty thump.

He paused long enough to replace his bookmark, then carefully closed his book, setting it to the side of the paper monstrosity with understandable trepidation.

Across the room, Eric was searching through the refrigerator. Eventually, he emerged with a bottle of beer, twisting off the top and downing a few chugs of the drink before wiping his mouth roughly with the back of his hand.

A few seconds later, he answered Alex’s unvoiced question.

“Merger,” he said, frowning down at his beer. “Kind of. Merger and new beginnings and…” He waved vaguely. “Long story short, there’s a lot of paperwork involved.”

“Understandably so.” Alex nodded slowly, but did little else, failing to see what this had to do with him.

Eric finally looked his way, sighing. “You’re good with organizing stuff, right? Well-” He gestured to the paperwork mountain with a tired sigh. “Organize.”

Alex blinked, then looked down at the pile, beginning to formulate his objections. By the time he had looked up again, the Commander had disappeared from the room, a tactful and silent retreat.

“Oh, good,” Adam would say later when he started work on dinner. “That will give you something
Alex would have given him points for successfully pretending he and Eric had not planned this out to a T, but he was too busy creating proposals for new organizational struggles to bother formulating the response.

Dinner was victorious that night, for more reasons than one.

“You know who doesn’t have to put up with this crap?”

“Wes?” Alex hazarded, digging through his piles of paperwork until he found Eric’s tablet.

He prided himself in his ability to mention the blond without flinching. Even through the distraction of planning, it should have snagged something, but Alex felt whole. At this point, Wes was but just a speck on the horizon, left behind as Alex slowly worked his way forward.

“Wes.” Eric confirmed this with a nod that was as spiteful as it was mighty, scowling down at his laptop. Last Alex knew, the Quantum ranger was supposed to be preparing a presentation covering the coordination of federal and galactic governments, along with the transition of private entities into a public trust (both of which he complained about being grossly unqualified for) – but the tell-tale sounds of explosions hinted that quest may have been side-lined in favor of playing video games.

Across the room, Adam was probably a few minutes away from chastising the Commander, but in the meantime, he allowed Eric the digression.

“*No*,” Eric drawled, sarcasm clear and heavy. “All Wes has to do is schmooze with people, grease the wheels. He gets to hang out with Leo, Carter, and Andros, pretending to do actual work, while we’re stuck with the hard stuff.”

Adam frowned. “Hasn’t he been stuck in private meetings-?”

“Secret meetings,” Eric grumbled.

“-without any time off for the last three weeks?” Adam asked just as Alex turned his head and said, “What’s schmoozing?”

Eventually, Adam offered, “It’s Yiddish, I think.”

Alex furrowed his eyebrows. “What’s-?”

“I think it’s time for a movie break,” the Commander declared, snapping his laptop shut with one hand. “Gotta further your slang education.”

“A break,” Adam echoed, one eyebrow raised, his tone a perfect deadpan. “From all the hard work you’ve been doing.”

“*Now* you’re getting it.” Eric’s face was all smiles, infectious and fond enough that even Adam’s incredulity could not help but wilt under his stare and Alex-

He retreated into the living room with a lump in his throat, yearning for something that had never been there.
Still, competitively speaking, it wasn’t that bad.

“I got a call from Hunter.”

It took a few seconds for Alex to assure himself he had heard Adam’s statement correctly and another few to gather the composure to look in the other man’s direction, during which time, Adam had opted to continue, most likely realizing that Alex couldn’t provide anything to propel the conversation forward in his current shock.

“At least, I’m pretty sure it was Hunter.” Adam frowned. Beyond him, Eric’s head poked up above the living room couch, hair a messy disarray from when he had been napping. “I had Justin trace the call. It originated from Blue Bay Harbor.”

“They didn’t say anything?” Eric mumbled, rubbing a weary palm again his eyes.

Adam’s gaze flicked over towards him, morphing into something like fondness before settling back into serious professionalism. “Hung up, but I thought I heard a sudden intake of air when I guessed it was Hunter, so…”

“What does that mean?” Eric picked up the train easily, stretching his meaty arms over his shoulders until his joints popped with an audible crack.

Part of Alex appreciated how normally the Quantum ranger was approaching this, which helped, minutely, to mitigate his own growing anxiety. “His memory hasn’t been wiped. After all this time, they still haven’t…”

“An error on their part, most likely,” Adam decided, firm enough that even Alex didn’t want to question it, didn’t want to call in and report the lapse in regulations. “Let’s hope that holds.”

“Until…?” Alex knew the answer, but he needed it voiced, now, needed this impossible thing he hadn’t dared hope for be real, and he knew he couldn’t do that on his own.

As though sensing this, Adam graced him with a look honed from years of protecting the Earth in secrecy, one of truth and confidence that would not be denied, no matter how trying the situation. “Until we need it to.”

It seemed simple.

Alex knew better than anyone else that it wasn’t.

Over the top of the couch, Eric considered them with narrowed eyes, then rolled his shoulders. “I’ll call Leo. He can keep an eye on things.” Before Alex could begin to voice an objection, the Quantum ranger continued, “Don’t worry, I’ll be vague about it.”

And that, apparently, was the end of that.

Now to deal with the new influx of nervous anticipation until the opportune moment arrived.

He wasn’t sure when that would be, only that it wasn’t now.

Jen showed up on a Thursday.
Alex hadn’t seen her since his final walk with Hunter, the one that led to the last of their real barriers being torn down, to the leap of faith, to the show of trust that still staggered him to think about. The want to be back in that place, that small stasis of comfort and acceptance was almost overwhelming, and combined with the sheer presence of Jen – in the flesh – it was a wonder Alex had managed to hold himself together long enough to exchange a nod in greeting.

Jen took that to indicate her presence would be accepted and made the rest of the way into the room, closing the door to the back porch behind her. Alex couldn’t remember if he had locked it or not.

They were alone in the house. Eric was up at Bio Labs, running a patrol with the Silver Guardians, and Adam in meetings – as soon as he had officially moved into the Commander’s abode, the man had taken up employment with the company, enacting Alex’s suggestions for future development when the brunette couldn’t.

Without the others, the house hadn’t seemed so empty, not when there was still so much to do.

Now, Alex could barely remember what any of the things that previously held his attention so firmly were.

She was there. She was really there. Alex hadn’t seen Jen in person – in more than just passing – since her team’s debrief after the Mutorg incident (he had been called in out of courtesy, even if his part of their team was based on technicality alone, and not actual practice). Even then, he had retreated as quickly as possible upon close of the meeting to avoid small talk.

Their last real conversation had been during Ransik’s escape, when Alex had given his morpher back to Wes, and it burned now as strongly as it ever had. Alex losing things he cared about to the stubbornness of his own vices.

They probably knew that though. That was probably why they had sent her, to throw Alex off-guard – or maybe it was a pitiful attempt to present a commanding officer Alex should obey – even though Alex had never been under Jen’s command.

Jen didn’t move much further after the door shut behind her. Instead, she stayed posed against it, leaning against the wood as she took in the kitchen. Her eyes scanned over the mess of documents, diagrams, files, and notes littering the kitchen table, then flicked over to the drainer, the dishes stacked in it with careful precision. They glanced over the towels hanging over the handle to the oven – one red folded carefully, the other shoved on with wild abandon, no concerns for wrinkles or proper drying techniques.

When this was all finished, her gaze settled on Alex. “Hi there.”

The smile that followed was small, tentatively offered as a show of neutrality. Alex hated it, but like a lot of things that concerned Jen, the pain had dulled over the past year in Hunter’s presence, making a thing that was once a sore and gaping wound more of a phantom pain. Existing, but not corporeal. Not debilitating. More of a memory of what had hurt.

“Hi,” Alex offered.

It was stilted, but polite. He could do that much.

And then he subsequently ruined it by adding, “I’m not going back yet.”

Jen blinked, surprise flickering over her features before they were schooled again, the tiny smile
returning. “I know, that’s not what I’m here for.”

“I will come back,” Alex needed her to know, had to confirm they were on the same page – it was too important not to. “I have to. I know that, but not–”

“I know, Alex.” Jen’s smile was bigger, and for a moment, it left Alex unbalanced. Was she happy he wasn’t back? Celebrating his ability to disobey (creatively interpret, according to Eric) orders? “I told you, that’s not why I’m here.”

“Then…”

‘Why?’, seemed like the obvious question. But that might lead to answers that he didn’t want to know. He had seen her, he knew why. Jen was here for Wes, because she loved Wes.

Maybe Alex was ruining that somehow, by staying in this time.

“I’m here for you,” Jen confirmed, still smiling.

It was an ultimatum delivered in kindness. Even if Jen wasn’t here to collect Alex, to force his return, there would be an ending of some kind today.

Alex had already given Jen everything he had to offer. She had taken what she could from him and given back the ring – the ring he kept in a box buried under clothes back in the future – that was it. That should have been it and it almost felt unfair that it wasn’t. For a second, Alex was clutch by anger, by pure rebellion that she could somehow want more of him when he didn’t have anything left to give. Not for her.

Couldn’t he be left to care for himself in peace? Didn’t he deserve that much?

Some of this must have read on Alex’s face, because Jen’s smile had slipped away into an expression of concern, her brows furrowed. “Alex…”

“What do you want?” He forced the words out, forced them through the tension and resentment.

“We’ve already said our piece, what else do you want?”

I saw you with Wes, was what he wanted to say. Saw how easily you–

But it couldn’t have been easy. It wasn’t easy. Alex knew it from experience, knew how slow the process could be, knew you never really let go. Even in his love for Hunter, even if that never grew beyond the fierce, overwhelming fire of affection that it was, Alex knew he still cared for Jen. Or, he cared for the Jen that he had known. That he couldn’t let go of, and that–

He knew, if Hunter didn’t hate him – in the world where Hunter was his and he was claimed by the blond with equal intensity – that the crimson ranger wouldn’t fault him for it.

There would always be a small part of Jen that he carried around in his heart.

Perhaps like a small part of him that belonged to Jen in turn. Perhaps.

It was a romantic thought, at least.

Alex waited for an explanation; waited for the calm delivery he knew would follow. He waited for Jen to lay it all out for him as she had so many times, so they were equal-footed, so that Alex wouldn’t be left behind as he had so frequently in his life.

He waited for this, and was met with, “It’s over.”
It shouldn’t have felt like a blow to the chest, but it did, and Alex was sucking in a sharp breath even as Jen held her hands up, begging for peace, for patience.

“It’s over,” she repeated, her voice a little choked. “And I’m happy with that. I think we’re both good with that, but...” She trailed off with a swallow, and if Alex braved a look, he knew her eyes would be red, wet with the sign of premature tears. “It’s over, but that isn’t how it has to end. That shouldn’t be how it ends, Alex.”

“Why now?” Alex asked. “Why are you abusing our technology for the sake of your feelings when you could just as easily–?"

“Like you’re not?” Jen challenged.

“I haven’t done it multiple times.” Alex wasn’t sure when he had moved to stand, only knew the feel of paper creasing into his palms as he shoved his hands down, practically vibrating with tension. “I have committed one infraction. One. What is that to your multiple excursions here to visit Wes?”

“How did–?” Jen’s mouth worked around the silence, her body reeled back, almost like she was dodging a physical blow. “How did you know about…?” Her sentence drifted into silence, her eyes never leaving Alex’s.

It was easy to see the moment she realized it – Alex was glad for that, glad he wouldn’t have to tell her. Glad he wouldn’t have to speak more words he couldn’t articulate for her. Could barely articulate for himself.

“You saw us.”

It wasn’t a question. She tilted her head down, the fringe of brown bangs hanging to cover her eyes. He wasn’t sure what was in her tone – it was indecipherable but familiar, with a narrow margin of melancholy tint.

He had never planned to speak of it to Jen. Of course, that plan resulted from the fact he would never speak to Jen, period, which made avoiding particularly sensitive subjects all the easier. There was nothing more to it.

Sometimes the simplest plans were the most effective, if not the most brave.

Alex didn’t shift in the silence that fell over them, didn’t move from his hunched position even when his joints ached from the pressure, wanting to rebel against the constant rigidity. He couldn’t breathe unless he consciously reminded himself to. Wouldn’t keep going unless he reminded himself he was calm, collected.

He had made it through Hunter leaving. He had made it through Jen returning the ring. He had suffered a death he could not remember and captured one of the century’s greatest villains single-handedly. This, he could manage.

It may not feel attainable, but it was.

“How long had you…?” Alex didn’t complete it. He could, if he had to, but he knew it wasn’t needed. There was no point in pressing for strength at that moment when it could be conserved for greater trials.

Jen’s head tilted, her bangs sweeping to one side to reveal one eye. “A couple of months.”

Alex swallowed, but kept breathing. He remembered the logic: Jen was her own person, she could
do what she wanted, she could be with who she wanted and she didn’t have to answer to Alex for any of that. Had never needed to, as much as he would have preferred some consultation.

“I had permission from the Captain,” Jen continued, squaring her shoulders.

Slowly, her posture shifted, back straightening until it was the same battle-ready stance Alex had known so well in strategic planning sessions, had adored in the privacy of his own mind.

Because of this, it took a few moments for her words to sink in.

Permission.

“Alex-” Jen started once she saw his realization.

“You-” Alex felt his back hit the counter, his haste to move away taking him to the other side of the kitchen. “You-”

He didn’t have words for this. She went through official channels to arrange a visit to her past boyfriend. She had permission. She had been granted special permission to-

“They’re not leisure visits; there’s just the added benefit-”

“Of visiting your boyfriend,” Alex spat the words out with venom, but he didn’t care.

He couldn’t- Jen had done a lot for him, he had no right to be angry, but in a way it felt like betrayal. Like all the ground they had ever stood on evenly had burst into flames.

He was sure Jen had gone through her own hells when dealing with their relationship. That she had suffered different trials than time when dealing with Alex. It just hurt to think- As illogical as it was, that she had traded him in for a newer model.

“What is your problem?” Jen was prepped for an argument, her tone rife with authority and stubbornness. “I love Wes. I do. And I love you – a part of me will always love you – but would you honestly be so hurt over this if I had ended up dating Eric instead?”

Through the wounds, through the ache and self-pity, the loathing, Alex considered this. Was baffled by it initially, the idea of Eric ever being without Adam an unperceivable thing in his mind, but eventually settled on the conceptual level of her proposal.

Would Alex care? Would he still hurt?

Yes. Easily yes. He couldn’t – there was no way it wouldn’t burn, that the memory wouldn’t mark some kind of shame upon his life, but…

Eric wasn’t him.

Wes wasn’t him, would never be him, but Wes always felt too close for comfort because he was like the initial variant of Alex’s family line. He was the factory original, beloved, charming, with its own flaws and quirks but treasured despite that.

And Alex was… he was a failed replication, ultimately. Same genes, same blood, none of the similarities. His disposition was his own and it, for Jen, was lackluster.

He wouldn’t care if Jen was dating Eric. It would have hurt, but that would have been a recoverable pain.
With Wes, it was like an open wound that couldn’t heal.

She knew, without him having to say it, what his answer was. The sorrow registered in her features before Alex could look away. She had always been one of the best at reading him, but now he realized that had been more for survival than convenience. He would have made her drown, otherwise. Swamped with his inability to communicate until he dragged her down, down to where even her vibrant light couldn’t be seen.

That was what Alex did to people.

Heat and water welled in his eyes, tears dripping down his face with no care for decorum or sense of propriety. He wanted to push them away, but couldn’t stomach the energy to move. He would break, if he did. It was all he could manage not to collapse into a thousand unrecoverable pieces. As little as Jen deserved the grief, he could not hide it.

The touch was gentle against his cheek, familiar and soft. Alex tried to pull away, but Jen was insistent, closing into his space and framing his face with both hands. She was crying too, he realized. He had made her cry again.

“Alex,” she whispered, voice thick. “You are not Wes. Wes is not you. You share a morpher, but other than that you’re… nothing alike.” She said the last part with a watery laugh. Alex flinched against it, but Jen wouldn’t back away, making soft cooing noises until he stopped resisting. “That isn’t bad. Alex, there was- I was very happy with you. I would have loved to be your wife. I would have loved to mold Time Force with you. The future with you.”

The words weren’t anything Alex had been expecting to hear, not even in his unobtainable muses, when Ransik had stayed captured the first time, when nothing had gone wrong.

Even then, he had been the one hoping to offer some comfort to Jen, instead of receiving it.

“But under pressure?” She lifted his head so they could be eye to eye, so he could see the earnestness, the sincerity in her gaze. “Alex, we worked when everything was going our way, but as soon as things got complicated, got so stupidly difficult, we fell apart.”

Alex flinched. “I’m sorry-”

“It takes two Alex,” Jen was stern in this reminder. “I fell apart too. We didn’t communicate well. I had been so angry about losing you, about meeting Wes and him not being you, not being anything like you, that I didn’t take your return well. Not when I had grown to be his friend, to respect him. Alex-” She swallowed, a movement Alex heard but couldn’t look at, couldn’t turn away from her eyes, pinning him in place. “I was so hurt, suffered so much as a result of your death, that I never thought that maybe you had too.”

There was a whimpering sound, involuntary and soft, and it- it had come from him. Jen was shushing it, crying in earnest now, shaking apart at the seams. On instinct, Alex reached for her, pulling the pink ranger into a clumsy hold that he thought he would never experience again. She didn’t fight it, not that she could have, not that they could have, because the only thing keeping them standing was each other.

“You died and came back,” Jen whispered against his chest. “You had to deal with that too. Had to deal with the rest of us moving on, me moving on. And instead of trying to talk to you about it, instead of making you talk to me, I let you shut down.” Alex was shuddering, and Jen was too, but her voice was as steady as it had ever been, only wavering with a quick inhale of air. “I know you don’t handle those kinds of things well and this is- pretty much the worst thing and I just- I was so
mad. At you, at Ransik, at Time Force, that I didn’t stop to think that you just- you were trying to survive. Like you always do.”

“I could have done better,” Alex offered. He wasn’t sure how, had come to frustratingly unsuitable conclusions when he had tried for years, but if felt like it should be said. Had he known how, he would have done it. That was always part of the problem.

Jen knew that.

“And so could I.” Jen rode out the last of the shudders, her breath hitching, wet and thick. “Alex…” She pulled back, and even with both arms gripping his shoulders the distance felt like a light-year, the points of contact not nearly enough.

This was it. This was the ultimatum.

“Alex, we didn’t work,” she said it with brutal honesty, but it didn’t hurt.

He had already ridden that ship, knew the ups and downs as well as she did – there didn’t seem any point in being shocked by the obvious outcome in which they had lived for the past two years.

“I- We are not what each other needs. I don’t-” She shook her head, frustrated – mostly likely – that she couldn’t gather her thoughts. “I don’t need someone who idolizes me. I don’t need someone who looks to me as something to aspire to, I don’t- I need to be a person, Alex. I need to be treated like a human with faults. I need to be treated like something that can take damage; I need-” Her head dropped down, her bangs sweeping back over her eyes again, but the movement failed to hide the tracks of fresh tears rolling down her cheeks. “You treated me like glass, Alex. Like I’m something you have to keep your corrosive influences from and – aside from being a terrible mindset, I can’t– I can’t live like that.” She looked at him now, and her eyes– fire, pure determination, just– Jen, so strong that his breath stuttered in his chest for a moment. “I should have put a stop to it early on, but I had been so enamored by Time Force’s golden boy that I… I guess I didn’t recognize it as a problem, at first. I didn’t realize how… deep it went. That was my fault, Alex, not yours. But it established this precedent that we can’t shake even after we’ve been broken up for two years. It’s not healthy, it isn’t–”

She inhaled, an ugly gasp almost insufficient to fill her lungs, but the next one came easier. And the next.

Alex began breathing along with her, following her lead even though it burned his lungs, made him want to break from the effort.

“You…” The touch returned to his face tentatively, pondering if it was welcome (yes, was it welcome. Welcome more than words could possibly allow). “You deserve so much more than that, Alex. You deserve a partner, an equal. Someone you’re not afraid to talk to, someone who accepts you as you, and doesn’t–”

The fingers were shaking. Alex reached up to steady them on instinct, and Jen’s quiet exhale was staggering in its inability to be quantified. “Despite what you may think, Alex, you do not need a leader. You do not need a guard dog to keep you in check, you do not deserve derision, or loneliness or–”

She reached up with her other hand, but this was more for her, to ground her. For once, Alex recognized it, wondered how many times she had reached out seeking comfort, seeking support, while he remained oblivious to his ability to supply it.
“You need someone you are comfortable with. Someone you can be yourself around, someone that
doesn’t make you second-guess or doubt. These, Alex—”

The hands retreated as Jen took a step back, and then another. The distance between them, while small, didn’t seem as ominous before. Despite the tears, it was something that could be managed.

“These,” she repeated, eyes shining in a shared victory. “These are the things we need.”

“And they are not things we can give each other.”

It hurt to say, to feel; the words heavy and stifling on his tongue. But the moment he managed them, the moment he got them out – ripped from his body with the same monumental effort he had used for Ransik, it felt…

Complete.

This chapter of his life that he hadn’t known was still ongoing, these ties that bound him to Jen, despite how little they had spoken, how little they interacted – they were gone.

They were over.

They had been over, but this– this felt real. Felt like something Alex could move on from without it dragging him down.

He was not what Jen needed.

But she wasn’t what he needed either.

That realization taught him how to breathe again, taught him to exist without guilt, without– He had done what he could. He always did. That hadn’t been enough, but that wasn’t– that wasn’t bad. Jen hadn’t been enough either. As much as he had admired her, treasured her, he hadn’t felt safe enough around her to comfortably show weakness, to complain. With her, he had been constantly trying to prove himself worthy of her attention.

With Hunter, it was never in doubt. The blond had let Alex know easily enough where he stood.

It was a freedom Alex had never considered, but he was grateful for it despite not being aware of the possibility. Was glad.

Footsteps echoed from over his shoulder – out of the kitchen, Alex realized – and a moment later Adam was in the doorway, stopping at the threshold between the living room, an overstuffed messenger bag hanging off his shoulder.

He paused, concerned expression trapped on Alex before it flitted to Jen, taking in the entire picture in a few efficient seconds.

“I’ll guard the door,” he offered, and before Alex could protest, the black ranger had disappeared from view, back towards the front of the house.

“You…” There were giggles, relieved sounds, spilling from Jen’s mouth, and once they started she seemed incapable of stopping. “You– You’ve got a good team looking out for you, Alex.”

She said it with absolute joy and sincerity, happiness radiating from her smile, given freely. For him. For them.

“I’m glad,” she finished with a whisper.
“Yeah,” Alex managed. “Me too.”

Through hell and high water, his gratitude would never be quelled, would never cease. He offered it without guilt – something that felt very close to liberation, of loving without conditions or retribution.

If that was anything, it was glory.

He would take it.

Chapter End Notes

In case you were wondering, Jen’s little visit is the reason Hunter couldn’t see Alex when he went for closure. Great sense of timing on that lady, am I right? Ayyyy?

Because everyone needs closure, and Jen legitimately is not the bad guy of this story.

Thanks to lionheart18 and FlipCarson for the comments! The feedback, as always, is greatly appreciated, and I hope you continue to enjoy this story as it gets closer to its ending :D

Until next time :)
A bushel and a peck worth of thanks to the real vampire for beta-ing this monstrosity of a chapter. Your enforcement of order on a sporadic mishmash of scenes is always appreciated, vamps, and I am greatly in your debt. Additional thanks go to Kei Luna Shoryu for supplemental beta efforts and all-around support. You’re always ready to cheer me on as I wander aimlessly in the direction of what could be plot, and for that I am grateful :)

If you’re looking for something new to read, you guys should check out 'My Brother's Keeper' by the real vampire or 'The Art of Cohesion' by Kei Luna Shoryu. And if by chance you’ve already read them, maybe give them a re-read, you might discover something new ;P

“That was…” Leo’s head was tilted to the side, his eyes unfocused on the distance. It was the expression of an overloaded mind, and Hunter sympathized with it for all of two seconds. He took a picture with his phone in the next two, because he had a feeling that Kai-guy would appreciate it.

“Epic?” Fran was bouncing in her seat – she had empathized well enough in the recount of Hunter’s tragedy, but her natural enthusiasm could not be contained while they awaited Leo’s response. “Romantic? Awe-inspiring?”

“Complicated.” Leo still looked confused as he said it, but there was a nod as he set the definition in his mind, deeming it satisfactory. “Very, very complicated.”

“Thank you,” Hunter grumbled around the straw of his smoothie. That was comforting.

“The best love stories are,” Fran offered consolingly.

She even patted his shoulder, because she embodied ‘caring cliché’ like a champion.

He should introduce Fran to Dustin someday. The explosion of cheer that followed would be an amazing thing to see, even if Hunter could barely withstand it. Some sacrifices made you a better person.

Leo made no sign of hearing their comments. “I think…” He tilted his head the other way, as though this would help him to understand. “This is not as black-and-white as… your response–”

“I responded very appropriately for a guy who watched his dad get murdered.” That wasn’t something Hunter was going to argue about. He may have said some things he regretted, but the anger, the pure fury… that had been warranted.

“I meant–” Leo held a hand up, and Hunter could see the brunette understood this, that it wasn’t the argument he was trying to make here. “Today. Going to see him was a good move; there’s more to this– This needs to be settled right. Now that you’re willing to listen. Now that there’s a chance you’ll hear him out.”
“Tried it,” Hunter snarled, shaking off the brief sense of validation with a twist of his lips. “Got turned away like the nuisance I am.”

Fran made a sound of protest, but Leo talked over her. “Adam didn’t say go forever; he said it was a bad time. Did you ask why?”

“Why the hell else would it be a bad time? He didn’t want to see me.”

“Did he even know you were there?” That question came from Fran, but it was genuine, thoughtfully proposed. “Maybe Adam was just giving you a status update—”

“On what?”

“On the person you care about maybe having some issues to deal with as well,” Leo cut through Hunter’s anger with ruthless efficiency, his eyes hard, unsympathetic. “If you were ‘broken’ when you returned, think about what he had to deal with. He still had a mission to do. And now he had to do that, alone, with the guilt of watching your parents die because of some malfunction.”

“He didn’t care,” Hunter protested.

Even though that made sense. Alex was his friend – he could say that, they had parted as friends – but the job had won out in the end.

“Or he was scared,” Leo countered, eyebrows raised. “Sounded like something worth being scared about.”

Before Hunter could object – and he had a word or two to say about that (though it was hard to remember that day; hard to re-live the feelings of disbelief and sorrow and hurt) – Leo was talking again.

“Who knows why he couldn’t talk to you today. Maybe he was hurt, or sick. Maybe he was low, having some kind of breakdown of his own. Whatever it was, Adam felt that he wasn’t in any shape to give you what you needed, or for him to get what he needed from the conversation, so maybe you should stop being self-absorbed for all of two minutes and give the guy a little space.”

The words hung in the air; ugly, coldly delivered, and… true.

Very, very true.

Hunter didn’t feel ashamed, because he was entitled to hurt but… well, maybe there was a chance that Alex was entitled to his share of wounds.

It was hard to imagine that he did, but Hunter hadn’t fallen in love with a complete robot sociopath. Alex had feelings, Alex could- probably did, care.

On a small level, Hunter was sure he had grieved too.

When Leo picked up again, his voice was quieter, a gentle nudge in comparison to his earlier delivery. “I’m not saying you should forgive and let go, alright? I’m not saying you shouldn’t be angry. But maybe… maybe this is a sign, that you need some rebuilding too. And maybe this isn’t the place you should be starting with.”

“Okay, Mr. Genius.” Hunter swallowed, offering the pitiful nickname in a poor imitation of his usual carefree air. “Where do you suggest I start?”
“The same place every wise builder does,” Leo replied, the hint of a smile on his lips. “At the foundation. Gotta have a solid base before you build up.”

“His team is a little scared to talk to him,” Fran noted. She shrugged in the wake of Hunter’s glare (which was half-hearted at best).

Leo laughed. “Yeah, I know. They talk to me too.”

“You’ve met them?”

“Yep.” Leo’s smile was full now. “Tori’s teaching me how to surf.”

“Tori’s teaching you how to crash into the ocean in ever more spectacular ways,” Hunter grumbled, flicking imaginary dust of his pants as an excuse to look away.

“And that is a skill I will take back to Kai,” Leo replied blithely, unperturbed. “He’s a water guy,” he spoke over Hunter, aiming this towards Fran. “I’m pretty sure he’ll love it.”

“Or he’ll love watching you fail.”

“That too.” Leo clapped a hand on Hunter’s back.

“This feels very magical,” Fran quipped, smile in her voice. “Oh, hey. Do you want a smoothie?”

“Strawberry, please,” Leo replied.

That was appropriate and… manageable. Yeah, this was– it was tolerable.

Hunter had missed tolerable.

Leo told him to take it one day at a time.

Hunter had found this to be an especially irritating piece of advice as that had been exactly what he’d been doing, but he came around to the simplicity of it. He hadn’t realized, but in a small way Hunter had been waiting – with a bizarre, unfounded sense of hope – for this to somehow blow over. That he would magically wake up one day and the hatred would take. He wanted out of the mess of feelings he had towards Alex, the shades of gray drowning him in the conflict of care, concern, and betrayal. He thought maybe if he stuck with one for long enough that one emotion would win out. That would allow him to function again as he used to, as the team’s loose-cannon maverick, all smart comments and sarcasm and dashing charisma.

It wasn’t a pleasant moment when he realized that he couldn’t be that guy. Or rather, that he wouldn’t be that guy again for a long time. As much as he would like to pretend that Alex hadn’t changed him, that he hadn’t affected him, that he didn’t matter, the fact was, he did. Alex had changed Hunter. The blond couldn’t even say he regretted it, which was something that was frightfully infuriating, because he knew Alex hadn’t changed at all. Or, he had, just not enough to matter, just not enough to empathize-

Coming to terms with the loss was a… gradual process. Acknowledging it as a loss was the first step. It kind of made all the subsequent steps a little bit easier, even if they were small in comparison. Insubstantial.

In the end though, they were still going forward, and that was the part that Hunter felt counted the
most. At least he had come to terms with the fact that he had to leave some places behind him, and he couldn’t go back no matter how much he wanted to.

He had learned this, once.

Maybe this time, he would remember it.

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He started off with Dustin. The right thing to do would have been to start with Blake, but Hunter knew that was a battle he wasn’t ready to fight yet, knew that his brother would need more answers than Hunter was fortified to give, so he went with a comparatively easier target. Besides, Dustin needed it, if the perpetual kicked-puppy look was anything to go by.

A bonus point in the arrangement was that if he won Dustin back over, Shane and Cam would follow soon after (though Shane would require more, Hunter knew, since he was actually taking his team captain duties seriously). Maybe Dustin’s infectious attitude would get to Tori (though Hunter doubted it, as she was firmly in Blake’s corner and Blake’s corner alone), and if it didn’t, at least he would smile around Hunter again.

If there was one thing in all his moping that Hunter regretted, it was taking Dustin’s sense of comfort around him away. He wanted the brunette to feel free to be goofy near him. To be, well, himself. Hunter was an ass, sure, but he wasn’t that much of an ass.

He started off small, because really, that was the only way he knew how to.

Hunter smacked a bag of chocolate chip morsels next to the workbench Dustin was working at in the Ops’ garage. The brunette blinked out of his daze, his mind obviously wandering as he worked on Tori’s bike, and considered the package.

When the suspicion outweighed the hope and Dustin refused to meet his gaze, Hunter sighed. He had really fucked this one up.

There was no point in dancing around the subject. Dustin was one of the few people on this team that reacted more positively to the direct approach than subtle hinting.

“I’ve been a dick.” Hunter acknowledged, never taking his gaze from Dustin’s face. “And as my dickery was nothing you deserved, and you did, in fact, suffer the results of my dick-ishness, I think you are owed apology-cookies.”

There were questions brewing behind Dustin’s furrowed brows that the crimson ranger knew he wanted to voice, so he waved the brunette on with a cheerful hand.

“Go on, say it.”

Dustin took the prompting with a relieved smile, which was all the warning Hunter got before he was under the deluge of a typical Dustin-and-answer session. “Okay dude, first off, ten points for the multiple variations of the word ‘dick’-”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Dustin smiled. “Secondly, those are not cookies, those are chips, and third-” Hunter wasn’t sure why he hadn’t been expecting the hug, but it took him by surprise regardless.
Dustin smelled like motor oil and the lemon conditioner Tori gave him on a regular basis, and his hug was just as firm and demanding as it had ever been, before this mess had all started.

Were Hunter a weaker man, it may have brought a tear to his eyes. As it was, he fought off some minor irritation, his eyes heating up from allergies their morphers were supposed to protect them from, but stood firm nonetheless. It wasn’t a completely awful sensation.

“Knew you’d come around,” Dustin gushed. His smile was brilliant when he pulled back.

Hunter looked away and shrugged, feeling uncharacteristically off-balance. “Yeah well, had to happen at some point. Anyway-” He changed the subject before this got anymore touchy-feely. “I figured you would want to make the cookies together.”

“Damn straight I do,” Dustin chirped. He abandoned a wrench for the morsels bag with enthusiastic vigor, and moved towards the door, snagging Hunter’s wrist on his way out.

It was a terribly familiar sensation – though the hand should have been bigger, rough with different callouses and-

“We’re going to have to make a couple of batches,” Dustin exclaimed. “Since you’ve missed so many times. Oh, and make peanut butter chip ones too, if you want to get on Tori’s good side.”

“I think we could all benefit from that,” Hunter said, swallowing down the unpleasant sensation of longing.

It would always be like this, that was something he had to embrace. There would always be random moments where he was reminded of Alex but… that didn’t have to be a bad thing. It didn’t have to be debilitating.

It didn’t mean he had to stop living.

“Darn tootin’!” Dustin said.

His hand was warm, and carried smears of grease and other mystery stains from the corner of the shop Cam had laid out just for him.

It was, in its own way, perfect.

“Let’s make some cookies then,” Hunter said.

He un-ironically meant it.

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“I feel like you might be missing the point of this endeavor.”

Fran looked wild with her hair haphazardly plastered against her face from the ocean spray. She squinted her eyes – partly to guard from the sun and partly from the strain of missing glasses – and wagged a knowing finger at him. It would have been slightly more effective if it hadn’t threatened her already-precarious balance on her surfboard, and Hunter was treated to a few seconds of the panic game where Fran re-righted herself on the board before toppling into the ocean, as she had the last two times.

“I think I might at least have some of the point,” Hunter offered. While surfing was not one of his more well-versed pastimes, Hunter’s years of training kept his balance steady on his borrowed
surfboard as he and Fran bobbed in the ocean, waiting for the perfect wave.

“Watching Leo fall into the ocean wasn’t the point of this,” Fran protested, combing her sodden bangs out of her eyes. “This is supposed to be about forgiveness.”

Hunter kept his eyes trained to where Leo and Tori were surfing in the distance; Leo a pathetic scene of incoordination as he fell off his board yet again, Tori’s features schooled in a look of determined victory as she cut through the waves like a shark.

“I’m not going to really get that from Tori until I talk to Blake.”

It was true, as much as Hunter would like to think otherwise. Tori may be reasonable, but Tori’s sense of justice tended to fall in line with Shane’s, which meant that in order for reparation to be truly paid, Hunter would have to go beyond providing for the offenses made against her and go towards the most wounded party.

It was logic mixed with emotion, which was one of the things that made Tori so dangerous in the first place, but Hunter wouldn’t fault her for it. That was one of the reasons Blake loved her so much, and Hunter didn’t want anything less from his brother’s favorite person.

It was nice, knowing that there would always be someone there to guard Blake’s back when Hunter wasn’t there. Granted, it made the feeling of pending obsolescence more tempting to indulge, but that was Hunter’s own issue, and his alone.

Hunter cleared his throat, coming back to their conversation. “For now though, being here is a good step forward.”

“Towards friendship?” Fran’s idealism should have been sickening - the hope of a person inexperienced with scorn - but Hunter didn’t flinch. It worked, with her.

Or maybe constant exposure to Shane and Dustin had made Hunter more accepting of optimism, who knew.

“We’re already friends.”

The voice came from the side, startling Fran enough that her erratic flinch almost sent her tumbling into the ocean. Hunter had her steadied before she truly capsized.

Tori’s laughter, while apologetic, was delivered in a light, melodious sound, befitting of her grace. “Sorry Fran, I didn’t mean to spook you.”

“It’s good,” Fran insisted, surprise replaced with excitement. “I will never stop being impressed with your ninja skills.”

Tori laughed again, less reserved. “You should have seen us months ago; we were a real tragedy.”

“No way,” Fran protested, despite not knowing the skill-status of the Winds back when they had first started. “You’re too good. And besides, you’re rangers.”

“Part of being a ranger is growing,” Leo offered, paddling over to their mini speech session on the waves. His hair was spiked and dripping with salt water, but his smile was vibrant. “Start off bad, grow as a team. That’s what happened to us.”

“And us,” Tori added.
“Not us.” Hunter made a show of rolling out his shoulders, demonstrating his skill with disinterest. “Blake and I started off awesome.”

“And you were terrible teammates because of it.” Tori had both eyebrows raised, but she said this with fondness, tempering the criticism. “They had trouble communicating.”

“I can see how that problem has gone away,” Leo deadpanned, and that was enough to prompt a fresh round of laughter from the rest of the surfers.

Hunter joined in. To hell with it, he was not too cool for school.

And it was, you know, true.

It hurt, in a way, to think that maybe the last thing he’d said to Alex would stay the last thing he said to Alex – if the brunette was never ready to see him again, if his mission ended before Hunter had a chance to say the shit he actually felt instead of--

“Nah.” Tori’s head was shaking, her gaze on Fran and Leo, gifting Hunter with a slight reprieve. “We just needed to learn a new language. It was a little hard, in the beginning. But in the end, it was worth it.”

“You know I’m right here?” Hunter grumbled, dipping his fingers into the water to watch for the ripples, flicking idle drops to keep his focus down.

“Yeah, and I also know that we’re friends, and we will always be friends.”

It was the determination in her voice that had Hunter looking up. Tori still kept the smile on her face, but her eyes were focused, serious the way they would be during a battle-planning session, when she cooled tempers with logic and dismissed impulsive instincts for ones with better long-term effects. It wasn’t a look she used often on him (that was reserved for Blake, or Shane), and to see it now left Hunter temporarily speechless.

From the corner of his eye, Hunter could see Fran and Leo consciously occupy their attention elsewhere, huddled and exchanging a flurry of whispers as they gestured towards the groups of people scattered along the shore.

“No matter what happens, Hunter, we will always be here for you,” Tori said quietly. “It… sucks that you think you can’t– or, that you can’t talk to us, I get that. But even if it’s classified, you should know that if you’re hurting, we do care.”

She didn’t even say the word ‘classified’ with derision, as Hunter would, mocking it as an excuse instead of a truth.

“We would like to help you when we can, and you should know that… even if you go all closed-lipped-drama-queen on us…” Her head tilted to the side, and if there was some moisture in her eyes, Hunter was sure it was from the ocean. Water ninja skills, and all that. “No matter what you do, Hunter, you should know that we will always welcome you back. Even if you think you don’t deserve it, you are our friend– our family, and we support you.” She looked off towards the distance, making a show of watching the waves even though she was really giving Hunter a chance to live without scrutiny, and he loved her for that, he really did. “The only thing that makes me angry is when you doubt that.”

“Communication issues,” Hunter muttered, something catching in his throat. Tori ignored the stumble, however, and looked back to him with a supportive smile. “You know how it is. I’m a little slow.”
“I know,” she agreed with a tilt of her head. “I’ll do you a favor and not tell Cam you said that.”

“You are truly the most generous and kind human being I’ve ever met.”

She laughed with a start, unrestrained. “You bet your ass I am.”

“Does this mean you’re done bonding?” Fran asked, shattering the illusion that she and Leo hadn’t been shamelessly eavesdropping the entire time. “Because I would at least like to ride one wave correctly today.”

“You shouldn’t ask for the impossible,” Hunter chided, but Tori was already laughing over him and paddling to Fran’s side.

“Nothing’s impossible,” the blonde replied. “And for that, you get to demonstrate proper form to our new team support.”

“You will get something,” Hunter grumbled, turning his board out towards the waves. “The level of properness will be decided by you.”

“I wish I had a camera for this,” Fran whispered in awe.

“Already have it covered,” Tori replied. “Dustin’s camped out on the beach with a camera now.”

“You’re all traitors,” Hunter shot over his shoulder, but none of them spared him any attention. Not even Leo, his fellow red-ranger-in-arms.

“It’s so nice to have another girl around,” Tori said as he paddled away. “You have no idea how much I have missed another voice of reason.”

“My pleasure, ma’am,” Fran chirped. “I’ll give you my IM name for when I have to go back home. My services are at your disposal.”

“Good, you’ll be needing them,” Leo (unhelpfully) added.

Traitors, the whole lot of them.

At least they were his though.

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“I don’t actually care about your opinion that much.”

Okay, so it wasn’t the most delicate of conversation starters, but it was true, and Hunter felt like that counted for something after his perpetual parade of stupid avoidance the past few weeks.

Across the lab, Cam quirked one incredulous eyebrow, and settled his full attention on Hunter, which was as much of a welcome the blond was going to get. Hunter had already violated the solace of the green ranger’s special ‘tech time’ without getting his head bitten off; he probably shouldn’t have expected the warmest of welcoming committees. Still, an actual response didn’t seem like too much to ask for.

Cam was human though, and held more patience than all of them combined, so it wasn’t really much of a surprise that he was going to wait Hunter out on this one for an explanation. It was a fair tactic.

It was an annoying tactic, but still, a fair one.
“I don’t care for reasons we don’t need to reiterate right now,” Hunter dismissed with a wave of his hand, abandoning the safety of the door frame and entering the lab proper with a few languid steps. “But I would like to say – for however much it’s worth – thank you.”

That, Cam obviously hadn’t been expecting. The tech stilled, his hands uncurling from whatever technical gadget he had been working on, and processed this. If he were Hunter, he’d be examining the words for traces of sarcasm, for some kind of trap.

To circumvent the confusion, Hunter pressed on. He might not like Cam, but he did owe him this.

“Thank you,” he repeated, shoving his hands into his pockets. “I know I- I know you were concerned, in your own way, and you tried to-” To reach out, do what you could. “To help when I wasn’t really the most accepting of…”

“Help?” Cam offered. There was no snideness to it; it was a genuine proposal – a perfectionist wanting to complete the puzzle with just the right piece.

“Yeah,” Hunter chuckled. There wasn’t anything funny about it, but if he had known that Alex would somehow make him have this kind of heart-to-heart with Cam when he had first met the guy, Hunter would have laughed until he passed out from lack of oxygen. “That. I guess my point is that I’m sorry, and I’m grateful you tried.”

Even if Cam’s motivations were purely team-oriented, rendered from work and duty, Hunter had known it’d taken a great effort for him to seek the blond out. He could see, now, that Cam had been trying to goad him into good behavior by threat of Dustin’s hurt feelings because he knew Hunter genuinely cared about Dustin. And when that had failed, he was the one that initiated their brain-trust – had to be – because he was the one that kept them all on track, he was the one that kept them grounded when the problem of Hunter had emotionally compromised them.

“You’re welcome.”

He didn’t say it with a smile, or with any amount of real inflection, but Hunter could tell he had meant it.

However strained their relationship might be, Hunter and Cam always had a certain understanding. They communicated in another language, but it was theirs, and it was understood.

Hunter turned away, making a tactful retreat before this could get any sappier. “This doesn’t mean I like you now.”

“Wouldn’t expect you to,” Cam replied. The delivery was so dry, quiet because he had already turned back to his work, that Hunter had to fight down a smile.

There, order reestablished.

It was nice to know some things would never change.

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“Do you have any idea how pissed Blake is?”

Hunter fought the urge to roll his eyes. “I have an idea.”

“Or how sad you made Dustin?”

“Do you have any idea how pissed Blake is?”

Hunter fought the urge to roll his eyes. “I have an idea.”

“Or how sad you made Dustin?”
“Again, I have a good estimate.”

“That’s great.” Shane paused his dramatic pacing, looking every inch the dutiful ninja leader in his leather air student suit, black and red cloth a bold statement against the muted background of shedding trees that surrounded them. The browns and oranges would eventually lead to an actual chill soon. Winter in California, it would be a mild thing.

“You’re entitled to hurt Hunter; we all are.” Shane’s eyes were wide and imploring and every bit too much emotion for Hunter to deal with at that exact moment, but he managed. He needed to hear this, and more than that, Shane needed to say it. “I– we will never hold it against you if you’re feeling low–”

Which was a very nice way of saying ‘throw a gigantic hissy-fit and wallow in epic-emo-like submission for un-relentless periods of time’, but Hunter appreciated the effort.

“But you gotta know you can talk to us.”

“If this is the ‘friends support friends with friendship’ speech, you should know that Tori already gave it to me.”

“I know.” Shane nodded, more for himself than Hunter. “She told me. I just wanted you to hear it from me.”

Or, more appropriately, he just needed to be the one to say it, but Hunter understood the need. Shane was a man of action. He had learned the art of delegating duties to the most appropriate individuals early on in their team’s career, but at the end of the day, he still needed to contribute. There were some things, no matter how well they were handled by the assigned party, that needed to be reiterated.

Hunter was touched that Shane cared that much, but it shouldn’t really surprise him. The guy had the patience to befriend Dustin way back when, the stubbornness to stay on one of the worst academy teams in their early days of training, and the empathy and charisma to give a legitimate damn about each of them, every day, no matter the potential insignificance of their problems.

Generally, team Ninja Storm didn’t do small problems, but the point still stood, and Shane was still a hell of an impressive human being for it, as well as a phenomenal leader.

Hunter would know; he had seen quite a few of them in action.

“Okay, that’s it.” Shane rested against the tree next to Hunter, his back to the smooth bark as he considered the clearing in front of them. “We’re good.”

“What?”

This, Hunter had not been expecting.

Shane shrugged. “We’re good. You don’t need a lecture, and really, I’m not in a position to give one.”

After the drama-fest that was Shane/Cam/Dustin getting together in their boyfriend coalition of angst, Hunter fully supported that statement. Didn’t expect the reprieve, but supported in nonetheless.

Feeling uncharacteristically share-y, Hunter vocalized the notion. “I appreciate that.”

Shane smiled, his sideways glance friendly, but obviously testing the waters. “Figured you could use
a friend right now more than a leader.”

“And the day I take relationship advice from you—” Hunter snapped his mouth shut, panicking at the accidental slip.

Too much like old times, he hadn’t–

Shane smiled at him patiently, showing no interest at the lapse. He was, as he had said he would be, an open ear. Ready to listen, if Hunter needed it. Only offering direction if it was requested.

He was good on his word, in that way.

“Will be the day hell freezes over,” Shane offered.

Swallowing down the rough, disjointed feelings of Alex and his loss (it got easier, over time; that was some kind of irony right there), Hunter tried out a tentative smile. “Or Lothor wins.”

“So never,” Shane summarized with a laugh.

It was free, something Shane gave and shared with all of them without reservation. It wasn’t special, for such a frequent occurrence, but it had been so long since it had occurred in private between just the two of them, that Hunter found himself sorely missing it.

He would deny it if ever asked, but Shane was probably his favorite red ranger.

Not that he was biased.

(Clearly, Alex didn’t count)

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He waited for the most opportune moment to approach Blake. Last, of course, as he would be the most difficult, and also because Hunter was inexplicably a coward when it came to personal affairs, if the repetitive peptalks were any indication of his own struggles.

Of course Blake, being Blake (the guy who was raised with him and lived with him for as long as they could remember), knew Hunter’s tricks better than the blond did, so when Hunter finally worked up the courage to speak to him, Blake was ready and waiting, with an expression that indicated he would not tolerate further delays.

Part of Hunter appreciated that. The other part mourned the loss of the small-talk he had carefully prepared, but had always known wasn’t going to happen anyway, even if he had refused to acknowledge it. They weren’t those kinds of people on a good day; why would now be any different?

“Hunter,” Blake greeted him evenly.

He nodded his head. “Blake.”

So dramatic.

Hunter would be mocking them incessantly if Blake had been in the mood for it.

The blond picked his way across the carpet with precision, taking his place on the opposite end of Blake’s meditation mat, the woven fibers quiet as he settled into a lotus position, his hands folded in his lap. When they had first moved into Ninja Ops, they had unanimously and silently decided that a
portion of their private training area would be set aside for meditation. Mostly, this was out of habit, to remind themselves that the outcome of every battle was not solely dictated by physical prowess, but mental as well.

A small part of it though, Hunter knew but would never address, was to serve as a memento to the acts they had almost committed out of vengeance – that with their power came the duty to actually think things through, without allowing emotion to sway them.

Sort of made this the ideal meeting place, which was why Blake had chosen it. Hunter was not under the illusion that he had stumbled onto Blake here on accident; his brother knew him too well. And he was too aware of his brother.

The incense helped to kindle a gentle atmosphere, even if the tension in Blake’s shoulders didn’t demonstrate it. Hunter did that, but he would make it right. He wouldn’t wallow; he wouldn’t hide behind rules like Alex had.

It was exactly what he had been doing, as much as he wanted to deny it. And if Hunter was going to stop being a gigantic pile of garbage, than he would have to toughen up and get his shit together, facing whatever wraths he had rightfully incurred from his brother.

“I love Alex.”

The rapid blinks were the only indication that Hunter’s statement had taken his brother by surprise, but Blake masked it quickly, keeping his gaze level, face apathetic.

He had been expecting a rough start, but Hunter wasn’t going to dabble with gradual revelations when it came to his brother, there wasn’t any point.

“That’s what I said in my sleep, right? That I love Alex?”

Blake considered him for a moment, eyes judging for a trap, then nodded. That was the important part.

Hunter swallowed. “It’s true. I do love Alex. And that’s why I’ve been…” Hunter made a vague hand motion to summarize ‘total drama queen spaz’ nonverbally.

His brother was not impressed, looking past the levity for the key issues.

“Who is he?” Blake pressed. “How could you meet him when the rest of us didn’t? Why were you fine one day and pissed the next? What did he do to you?”

“Nothing,” Hunter snapped on reflex. Blake’s eyes narrowed, preparing to counter, so Hunter rushed to elaborate, “It’s complicated, okay? But I’m…”

He took a deep breath, settling his plans. He had already come this far. “I’m going to tell you, okay? All of it. But you’ve got to listen, you can’t… freak out.”

*Like I did pretty much the entire time.*

They already had one Bradley throwing the most anti-Time Force temper tantrum the world had ever seen; they really didn’t need Blake’s animosity added to that already impressive fire.

Blake considered him for a moment, knowing it was double-edged sword. If Hunter was warning him, the story was not going to be a pretty one. Hunter knew Blake could take a lot, could be passive through a lot, so to give him a warning in spite of that?
It was bad news all around.

Eventually, Blake nodded. He was willing to pay the cost.

Good. Great. That was a great start.

Or… something. It was something.

Vaguely, Hunter wished he’d had someone to warn him before this whole mess had started, but he knew there were no words that could have ever properly prepared him for Alex.

Better prepare for a supreme freak out then. If he couldn’t handle this, Blake probably wouldn’t either.

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“That motherfucker.”

“Blake.”

“I don’t care if it was a malfunction,” the navy ranger continued, talking over Hunter’s objections as though he had never heard them. “He should have let you save them.”

“Blake.”

“You deserved to try. We deserve-”

“Blake,” Hunter snapped. His jaw ached from the continued effort of holding his silence. The uncomfortable feelings of betrayal and lingering doubt churned in his stomach, a sickness he had barely overcome, ready to rear its ugly head again. “I know. I know.”

He didn’t want to express how he had fought this battle already – had hated the retelling, as much as he had glazed over some events.

It couldn’t be said that Blake didn’t get angry, that he was necessarily the more level-headed of their brothership, but he did bear certain features derived from a mindset that had landed him as a blue ranger. They were about even, when it came to deciding when to get mad and when to hold off, but Blake could usually channel his focus into the best way to respond to something, blocking off his emotions with critical detachment in order to evaluate a proper countermeasure.

Hunter could do it too, but he had nothing on Blake. It was probably the only reason his brother had listened to his interruption, whereas Hunter wouldn’t have stopped yelling for anything. Not for this.

He admired his brother for that.

As angry as he was, Blake would see, would stop and evaluate Hunter’s behavior since he had returned. Made a hell of a lot more sense now. He wasn’t happy about it, but they always tried to allow each other opportunities to recover in their own time, without interfering with the healing process, whatever it was.

Aside from being a coward, there was a reason Hunter had saved Blake for last.

On top of coming clean about everything, going through the whole kit and caboodle, on top of subjecting himself to the judgement of one of the people he cared about most in the world, on top of dealing with Blake’s justified anger when he had just barely gotten a handle on his own… Hunter hadn’t wanted to risk the aftereffects.
You know, the moment where the anger was settled, and Blake really thought about it and realized how Hunter had failed their parents.

Even if he could come to terms with not-hating Alex, even if he could let that go, Hunter would always hold a small amount of self-resentment for not seizing the opportunity to save his parents while he had it. That was something no amount of reconciliation would change.

“I know that look.”

Hunter blinked, surprised that Blake had managed to settle his rage so quickly. It was still there, he realized, settled in his brother’s shoulders like a vice, tension pulling his fingers taunt into a quivering fist, but his eyes were clear from the haze of frustration, and settled on Hunter with deadly seriousness.

The moment he saw Hunter acknowledge that, Blake continued, “It isn’t your fault, Hunter.”

The blond scoffed, turning away with bitter chuckles. Blake knew the score, knew what he would have said. What was the point of voicing it if they would never agree?

“It’s not,” Blake pressed, the agitation beginning to settle back in. “If our positions were reversed, would you blame me for this?”

“You wouldn’t have allowed yourself to get blind-sided,” Hunter snapped, his cheeks hot with shame he couldn’t articulate. “You wouldn’t have waited...”

“When?” Blake snapped. “Before we had joined this team? Sure, maybe I would have. But now?” Blake wasn’t backing down; he advanced into his brother’s space without consideration towards the blond’s feeling on the invasion. “Hunter, now we work with our teammates. It’s what we do. That’s a good thing. You trusted your teammate-”

“He’s not on my team!”

Hunter landed from the dash with a mild stumble, only realizing he had ducked around his brother to retreat to the side of the room that was Blake-free when he’d stopped moving. He needed space to breathe, he needed-

“I let myself think he was, and I shouldn’t have. I shouldn’t have, I-”

Hunter sucked in a gulp of air that sounded suspiciously like a sob. His chest heaved with it, the sound ugly, a motion resulting from the insufficient amount of air it brought in.

“I...”

*Miss him so damn much.*

Hunter pressed both of his hands against the far wall, his head hanging down, staring at the polished floorboards.

*Get over yourself.* Leo had told him to get over himself, and he could, he would- It just felt like he might never get over Alex.

There was a chance he would never want to.

Arms wrapped around his waist, Blake’s pointy chin resting against his spine as he draped across Hunter’s back. It was a familiar posture, though long since used. They had abandoned it as
children, they had matured, they didn’t need-

“I’m not mad at you, Hunter,” Blake whispered, his breath warm even through the thin cotton of Hunter’s shirt. “I’ll never be mad at you for trusting someone. I will never be mad at you for loving someone, and mom and dad wouldn’t be angry with you either.”

They would be proud, was what he didn’t say. They would be happy for you, they would be glad.

The words remained unspoken, even as the tears – he was so damn sick of crying – started to fall. Not from cruelty, but from a sense of efficiency.

Blake and Hunter never wasted words to communicate stuff they already knew.

It was a familiarity Hunter gladly submitted to.

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“Smile!”

“Can you wait until we actually get there before you start taking pictures?” Hunter grumbled, blinking the flash of Dustin’s camera away and leveling a mild glare at the brunette. “We don’t need to document us walking.”

Dustin was undeterred by Hunter’s grumpiness. If anything, it added to his enthusiasm. “I don’t want Fran to miss anything,” he gushed. Fran and Dustin had hit it off as chaotically well as Hunter feared they would. The two had become dutifully-sworn pen pals after Fran had to go back home to Ocean Bluff, and now the yellow ranger had taken it upon himself to document every outing to keep Fran up-to-date on the latest ‘ranger news’.

The only bright side to that explosion of cheer was that it deprived Cam of at least one hour of Dustin time per night (email and instant messenger had become quick favorites among the two brunettes), which Hunter knew was a mild inconvenience, at least.

He wasn’t a mature individual, but he would probably never be. Might as well own it with satisfaction.

“Do it again.” Tori shot Hunter a sideways glance that reeked of mischievousness. “I think I was blinking.”

“Try to get my good side,” Blake added from her other side, the two sharing amused smiles. Sneaks. Dirty, horrible rats. They were perfect for each other. “It might take at least eight more pictures.”

“Photo montage,” Dustin deduced with a thoughtful nod of his head. “Genius. Cam can set it up as a gif.”

“Or,” Shane interrupted the pending storm, butting in with a charming smile that was only more effective under the genuine care and compassion he extended with it. “We could wait until we get to the cliffs and get a shot of the view.”

Dustin snapped his fingers. “Even better.” He sidled up to Cam, offering up the yellow camera carefully. “Does this thing have a panoramic mode?”
“I upgraded the functionality,” Cam replied, his normal expression of stoic professionalism traded in for the tiny fond smile he reserved for Dustin and Shane especially. “It will allow for it.”

“Excellent!”

Hunter looked away when the earth ninja swooped in to kiss Cam on the cheek, not wanting to intrude on the moment.

Realistically, he didn’t want to be a part of the moment either – it still brought up too many things he couldn’t handle just yet, but he was getting better. He’d be there soon, one day.

In an effort to distract himself, Hunter bumped his shoulder against Leo’s, the older ranger having been content to watch the entire camera exchange in amused silence.

“Whose idea was it to go on a team picnic again?” Hunter groused.

“I believe it was yours.” Leo’s eyebrows were raised in a harmless challenge, giving the feel that he was laughing more with Hunter than at him, which was more than could be said for Tori and her evil-smirking ways.

“Right, terrible plan. Remind me not to have any more of them.”

“I don’t know,” Leo countered, putting on a wise air. “I think it has great promise.”

Hunter rolled his eyes. “You would.”

He had told the Lost Galaxy ranger that his services (wake up call/voice of reason/rock in this stupidly-dramatic storm) were no longer needed weeks ago, but every time he even hinted at bringing it up, Leo would brush him off, or act like the blond hadn’t said anything.

Hunter was grateful for that. Originally, he had felt guilty that Leo had taken so much time out of his life for him, and even if he had needed-wanted him to stick around, it hadn’t felt right to ask for it.

Whether it was through empathy, or the same intuition every red ranger seemed to possess, Leo had seen right through his protests. No matter how many times Hunter assured otherwise, he had stayed.

One day, he would leave. Hunter knew that. Knew he would probably keep in touch as well as Dustin and Fran would, knew that this experience had given him that gift of friendship. Brotherhood, even, if he was feeling especially dramatic.

It wasn’t a phrase Hunter used lightly, but he meant it. Truly. It wasn’t something Leo had earned, he just… was.

He would leave, one day, and while that would not be the most celebrated moment in Hunter’s history, he would, and could, manage.

There was a gift in that, he thought.

“Just try and keep Dustin away from the brownies for as long as possible,” Hunter urged, graciously delivering the advice. “Even if he made them and has probably tested out like, five already, the longer we can put off the inevitable sugar high, the better-”

Hunter had been eyeing the brunette-in-question when he said this, so he hadn’t realized Leo had stopped until there was a hand on his arm, urging him to do the same. Hunter turned, gaze flickering over Leo who was uncharacteristically still, his face serious and calm, attention focused on the far
He didn’t want to look. Even as Blake and Tori stopped— the leaders of their possession bringing a halt to the rest of their group, Hunter didn’t want to look. He knew there were shared looks of confusion – this was Academy land, so how would anyone (it was people, not person, people, Hunter knew that) get into the forest? He heard general murmurings from Shane, a whispered conversation between him and Cam as the tech consulted with CyberCam, but he couldn’t distinguish the words. Even when he felt Blake’s gaze boring into the side of his head, heard Tori whispering something – something calming and logical, probably, he couldn’t take his eyes off of Leo. He let the older ranger see for him.

It was an admirable plan, if admittedly short-term.

“Is that him?” Dustin had crossed to Hunter’s side in startling silence, his whisper gentle as looked forward. “Is one of them-?”

“Yes.” Hunter didn’t need to see it to know it was true, didn’t need to look at the others to confirm they had stopped their conversations to look at him. “Yeah, that’s Alex.”

Saying it seemed to break whatever will for denial he had left. Hunter had made it through mind control and murder, heartbreak and loneliness and sorrow, this– This, he could do. Would do.

Slowly, he turned his head, taking in the view at the other end of the clearing.

He looked the same. How long had it been, Hunter wondered? He would have suspected that the brunette had time traveled if it weren’t for the fact that Adam and Eric were behind him, flanking each side. The good commander had gotten a haircut, but Adam was dependably the same, if a little more worn.

“I think it’s time for that conversation, now,” Leo said quietly. He was probably trying to be poignant.

Hunter managed a glare. “No shit.”

“Hunter-” Concern and warning and ‘don’t screw this up’ were there in his tone, but even through the anger and the sorrow, Hunter got it. He did. He didn’t want to mess this up, whatever this would be, any more than anyone else wanted him to.

“I got it,” he bit out. He didn’t have anything else to say, nothing that would console. “Just… keep them back, okay?”

After a second, Leo nodded, his promise silent, but definite.

That was all Hunter could stomach before he deftly turned on his heel and started walking, ignoring a protest from Blake behind him.

Adam and Eric seemed to take this as their cue to vamanos. He passed them halfway, offering Adam a nod and Eric a middle finger (because he was personable, dammit), to which the Quantum ranger responded with a snort and a roll of his eyes.

Fucking hell, Hunter had actually missed that. Asshole. Why did they have to be so damn alike?

Hunter rode that dismay all the way over to Alex and stopped, trying to take in the brunette without feeling like he had been drowning. Trying to stand without remembering the last words he’d said to Alex ringing in his ears.
So… this was it then.

Alright fate, bring it on.

Chapter End Notes

Dun, dun, DUNNNNN.

Just when you think there couldn’t possibly be anymore cliffhangers, I found a way to sneak another in ;P

Remember the days when AOL instant messenger was like, the thing? I believe Ninja Storm took place during that period. They would definitely abuse instant messenger. Cyber Cam would, at the very least :)

Thanks to lionheart18 for the lovely feedback!! Hope this chapter has sufficiently offered some of the closure Hunter needed on his side of things, though I realize it wasn’t nearly as dramatic as last time ;D

Until next time
Closure

Chapter Notes

Thanks to the ever-talented real vampire for beta-ing this chapter. Your ability to sort through continuity errors is something for which I am eternally grateful, but that aside, you really are the bees knees. Like, every bee, every knee :D. Additional love to Kei Luna Shoryu for supplemental beta efforts and all around cheerleading. Kei, your enthusiasm is a treasure, and I am so glad that it is a part of my life :) 

If, for whatever reason, you are still on the look out for some more Ninja Storm goodness and you haven’t checked out the same two stories I’ve been recommending for roughly forever, why don’t you hit up 'My Brother's Keeper' by the real vampire, or 'The Art of Cohesion' by Kei Luna Shoryu. See what all the fuss is about :) 

And now, without further ado, what you’ve actually been waiting for :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You’ve got a hell of a lot of nerve, Collins.”

“I know.”

Each second he remained there, the urge to turn and run grew stronger; to simply retreat from this person to whom he had already caused so much needless damage.

“I know,” Alex repeated under that icy glare, those two cerulean eyes venomous in their perusal. “I just wanted to apologize.”

“You’ve already apologized,” Hunter spat, arms folded across his chest in rigid vices. “It’s about as worthless now as it was then.”

“I know.”

“Stop saying that shit.” The arms came down into harsh fists against his sides. “You don’t know anything. You’ve never known anything.” He looked away, back towards where Adam and Eric were keeping his brother and friends at bay – and Mr. Corbett; that had been a shocker, but somehow it seemed so stupidly appropriate that Alex had almost cracked a smile.

“You’re never going to learn anything,” Hunter muttered, still looking off to one side. “Not about what’s important.”

It was said more distractedly than bitter, and Alex wondered, fleetingly, who the blond was trying to convince.

He shook the hope off though; this conversation would be difficult enough to get through without the lasting hope of redemption weighing him down.

“You’re wrong.”

Alex’s throat was harsh in its tightness, the tension pulling his body taunt like a string, but he needed
Hunter to know this. This one thing he had struggled so hard to discover.

Hunter’s gaze snapped back to him in absolute deadliness, the hesitancy from before almost melting off of him. “Fuck off.”

“Hunter-” Alex reached out instinctively, needing – wanting, so badly, to touch the blond again. Now that he knew.

He stopped himself, thankfully, before he could do anything stupid like actually grab Hunter, his hand hovering over the ninja’s forearm for a few seconds before he hastily withdrew it, pretending not to see the subtle shift in tension in the teen’s body.

In the distance, Alex could see Blake making an impatient face, frustrated. If he was anything like Hunter, he was using it to mask his concern.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing anyway?” Hunter snapped, filling up the silence with resentful quickness. “What? You think you can just waltz back here, now that I’ve been given time to cool off, and everything will be okay? That I’ll actually listen to your stupid ‘sanctity of time’ shit and your passionate, totally brainwashed garbage about how your job comes before all else? You think that shit I wouldn’t listen to before, when I tolerated you, is something I would welcome now? Who do you think you are, man?”

He was pacing up a flurry in the small clearing, feet imprinting a line in the grass as he stalked back and forth, only a few steps in either direction before he would go back to glaring at Alex again. Step, step, glare. Step, step, glare.

“Who do you think-?”

“I went back.”

Alex said it softly. Combatting outbursts with murmurs was one of his more effective strategies when dealing with an agitated individual, forcing them to listen instead of escalating the situation. It seemed deliberate, but in truth, Alex was simply tired.

“You…” Hunter stared at him, eyes narrowing in a critical inspection, searching for tricks. “Went back where?”

Hunter wasn’t stupid. Alex wasn’t going to do him the disservice of pretending otherwise, so he continued, knowing the blond had already caught his meaning.

“I went around the front of the house, since we were behind it.”

“Went back where?”

“They had left the door unlocked for you. I think you might have blocked it out when you were coming to terms with things.”

Alex knew the realization had always been there, but that didn’t stop the blond from looking furious, his jaw clenching. “Shut up.”

“I tried to warn them, Hunter.” Alex held his gaze, as hateful as it was; held it and fought off the feelings of helplessness and desperation. “Lothor had already killed your mother. He used some technique to masquerade as her. That’s how he got close enough.”

“Shut up,” Hunter hissed. He was shaking now. Eerily still save for those minute quakes.
In his peripherals, Alex could see Blake’s movements become more insistent.

“I assume he dropped the disguise just as he got to your father. That’s what we saw. That was why—”

“Shut up!” Hunter snarled, saliva spattering Alex in graceless arcs. “So what? You actually went back and you didn’t even fix anything? Great! I’m glad that you’re so good at your damn job you can’t even deviate from your duties if you wanted to!”

“I did change something.”

Because that was the part that was important. Alex hadn’t intended to speak it, hadn’t wanted to tell Hunter the rest of the story, but in that instant, he wanted the blond to know. He didn’t want to burden Hunter with any feelings of debt towards a man he had every right to despise. That had been Alex’s plan going into what he knew would be a difficult confrontation.

But when faced with disdain, this helplessness— for his life, his feelings, his actions – it had come out.

Hunter always had a way of provoking undesired reactions from him.

Alex should have known better.

When he looked back to the blond, for once, Hunter appeared to be at a loss. The tension, the defensive posture, it still remained, but for all the world he looked visibly thrown. Like Alex had somehow ripped off that defensive mask of indifference the crimson ranger had on permanent retainer.

If he tried to back away now, Hunter would never let him go. Not until Alex explained himself. He was stubborn that way.

In a wonderfully, painful way.

“He was going to kill you too,” Alex said quietly. “You and Blake. That had been part of his plan all along, to get all of you. So I… I chased after him.”

There were no comments. No ‘dumbass’ or ‘and then?’ no – Hunter had nothing for Alex except curiosity. His need to know outweighed his need to establish hatred, or his desire to protect himself.

“The minor damage in the park was from Lothor and me.” Alex said, recalling one of the many details of Hunter’s recollection. “Not the ninjas. I fought– I held his attention until they arrived and they dealt with him.”

“No fighting?” Hunter asked. His voice cracked, but aside from that there were no tells of his discomfort.

“It was a rather one-sided fight, so I wouldn’t really call it that,” Alex admitted.

This was a parting comfort he could offer. Further inefficiencies at the hand of the moron who had hurt Hunter and his brother.

The blond considered him for a moment, his face expressionless and still. The total void left Alex uneasy, though he supposed if anyone deserved comfort in this situation, it was not him.

The following question was not one he had expected.
“How bad did he hurt you?” Hunter asked. His voice was rough, but his expression remained perfectly apathetic. He still hadn’t moved.

Alex blinked. “It wasn’t that bad.”

“How bad—” Hunter began again, his teeth gritting together. “-did he hurt you?”

What could he say? The truth was always an option, but Alex wasn’t even sure why it mattered. If this was to be some tally Hunter added to an imaginary score of Lothor’s wrongdoings, then Alex need not bother replying. Everything that had happened had been a result of his own understanding; he knew the risks and had taken them. Anything that happened afterwards was something Alex had long accepted.

When Hunter realized Alex wouldn’t answer him, he continued, “There was blood. On some of the responders, I mean. I thought it was from my parents – I remember seeing them at the Thunder Academy afterwards, even though they were trying to be sneaky and I thought—” He snapped his mouth shut with a vicious frown, looking down at his fingers. They twitched against his sides. “I thought it was from my parents.” He looked back to Alex, staring the brunette dead in the eyes. “But it was yours.” It was a statement, a truth acknowledged. “So what. The hell. Did he do, Alex?”

His gaze held a certain kind of mania, a pledge of determination Alex knew there would be no fighting against. It was either tell Hunter or have the blond examine him for scars, and Alex knew it would not be below the teen to start strip searching him in the middle of the woods.

*Though, it wouldn’t be all that bad—*

Not. *Now.*

There was no place for such things. Not now, not ever. Not with Hunter.

Hunter deserved better than this.

Alex yielded with grace, reaching for the hem of his shirt with steadier fingers than he could have thought possible in his current state. He pulled the material up in a quick movement, revealing the unobtrusive scar that blemished his skin, innocently pale between two ribs.

Where Alex had deferred to personal boundaries, Hunter had no qualms abiding by such concepts. His hand was out as soon as the mark had been revealed, weathered fingertips tracing the innocuous scar.

Alex shivered at the contact, loathing himself for his reaction, but Hunter had better things to do than pay him any heed. The blond was too busy mouthing obscenities, that Alex could tell, his eyes focused on the scar as he calculated just exactly *how* Alex had acquired it.

His eyes snapped back to Alex with renewed anger. “Why didn’t you suit up?”

“I did,” Alex replied, his voice somehow level. Hunter’s fingers were still tracing the scar.

“Then *how the hell—”*

“I lost my morph,” Alex explained. He wished Hunter would stop touching him. “I don’t know where he got the knife.”

“He always had it,” Hunter groused, eyes giving the wound another look over. “Ninja. You know
“I do,” Alex said. He moved to gently grab the blond’s wrist, recognizing that Hunter was currently too distracted to pull back on his own.

The blond froze at the contact, as though he had forgotten Alex might have the audacity to actually touch him. His gaze flickered away from the wound to Alex in cool sharpness. In a fit of spite, he unfolded his fingers until his entire hand rested above the scar. It was a challenge, from the haughty tilt of his head to the unyielding presence against Alex’s torso, daring the brunette to push him away.

Alex kept his grip on Hunter’s wrist, but aside from that made no move to shake him off. It wouldn’t matter in a few minutes anyway.

“What is this, Alex?” Hunter asked, his voice strained and quiet.

Alex wished he would appear less impassive, wished the blond would just be upfront with his distaste as he had been so many times before.

“Why are you here?” he continued. The pressure of the hand increased ever so minutely, with its owner’s frustrations. “What are you trying to achieve? Was this supposed to make things better?”

“I don’t think anything would make things better,” Alex admitted. “I don’t think there is anything I could do for you that would ever make this right.”

Even though the wound had completely healed, it still ached with a kind of phantom pain. Like most irregularities, the hurt seemed to increase by the minute quivering of Hunter’s fingertips. Restraint or inner turmoil— or both, who knew.

“Then why did you come back?”

There was no blinking, no obvious signs of emotion beside the fingers shaking over that pained scar. Hunter was frightening in his intensity, vindictive even, and under such attentions Alex was surprised he could even manage the words at all. Were he unused to Hunter, he wouldn’t have.

“You were right,” Alex said quietly. The temptation to rub small circles with his thumb against Hunter’s wrist was overwhelming, but the undeniable line of violation kept him in check. Instead, Alex focused on the blond’s eyes. “I wanted you to know that. I wouldn’t have done that to you, but if it were someone else…” Alex swallowed, looking off past the clearing towards those concerned faces, some he only knew through brief mentionings, others with painful familiarity. “I would have, because it was my job. And now I don’t think—” He looked back to Hunter and didn’t tighten his grip around the blond’s wrist. Didn’t swallow, didn’t shake at all.

“I can’t do that now,” he said. “I don’t think I could ever do that again.”

He took a deep breath, held it in as Hunter had taught him to, and released it slowly.

“I’m quitting Time Force.”

He didn’t care if the morpher was locked to his genetics; Alex couldn’t continue like this. It wouldn’t be the first time an agent dropped out of the force—some missions wore on people more than others. It was understandable.

Alex could always join SPD; he could still use his morpher for good. There was no real reason he had to work for Time Force in specific; it had simply seemed like the most prestigious option at the time. Alex thought he was more than capable of being the perfect agent for them.
But now he wasn’t. And he could never be.

“Great,” Hunter mumbled quietly. “I’m happy for-”

“It doesn’t make it better,” Alex interrupted the useless tirade of sarcasm and deflection while he could; wanting to continue before he completely lost his nerve. “This won’t help you, but I thought you should know- that you deserved to know, that you were right.”

“You quitting your dream job isn’t going to make them stop fucking around with people’s lives.”

“It’s not my dream, Hunter. That job isn’t my life and I can’t-”

The heat came unbidden, building behind his eyes in a threat. Alex scrambled to pull himself together by the tips of his fingernails, quietly screaming at himself possibly being so selfish about this. All those years of professionalism… he needed to use them; now was not the time to break down. Not when it was most vital.

“It gave me something,” Alex managed to continue. “When I didn’t have anything, Time Force gave me something to belong to. I was part of something that helped people and for that, for being allowed that privilege…” Alex trailed off with a swallow, glancing down at Hunter’s hand. He still hadn’t moved it.

“That’s why I tried so hard.”

Belatedly, he realized his fight for control had been lost somewhere down the line. His thumb, somehow of its own will, was rubbing tiny patterns into the pale skin of Hunter’s wrist.

For some reason, the blond had yet to react to the violation.

Something in that spurred Alex on.

“My favorite color’s green,” he said suddenly. There was a flicker of surprise in Hunter’s gaze that was immediately replaced by curiosity, then apathy. Alex pressed on, “We do have protein packs for field operations, but most people rely on traditional grocery stores for supplies. I am not excluded. While we do have replicators that are capable of transporting food anywhere within the Time Force facilities, all items are still prepared in a centralized cooking area. I like strawberries.”

He struggled for the words, knowing he was rambling. None of this mattered; it only made him more human and that wouldn’t help Hunter’s long-term hate, but once he had started he couldn’t control himself.

“We didn’t have access to fresh produce often when I was younger so the few times I got them were…” he trailed off, swallowing.

“There isn’t a lot of cinema from your time that withstood the test of the ages, but animated movies by the Disney Corporation are universally considered classics even if a lot of the concepts are considered archaic and perhaps a bit too mature for their intended audiences.”

“You like Disney?” Hunter asked. If Alex allowed himself to read into it, he would say the blond was incredulous.

“I like the music,” Alex replied. “And the… the underdog, I guess.”

“You would,” Hunter mumbled.
This was ridiculous, Alex realized. He was standing here, some teenager with their hand pressed firmly against his side and here was he, one hand on the ninja’s wrist, the other holding his shirt up. This apology was absurd, which in itself seemed appropriate, but Alex didn’t know what was going on anymore.

Hunter, always quick with his own thoughts, seemed to bear similar feelings.

“What the hell is the point of all this?” Hunter ground out. He pressed harder against Alex’s scar, and if it hurt – phantom twinges – Alex actively concealed any indication of such. “What do you want, Alex?”

“I don’t know,” the brunette admitted. Raw, he was raw; raw and so very lost. “I just want—” His breath hitched, but he knew what this was, what he wanted. “I would like you to have closure. Whatever you need. Whatever you want.”

He didn’t add, “I don’t know what to give you because I’m insufficient as your friend, as a person; I’m sorry I have to ask instead of knowing. I’m sorry that it won’t be enough. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Alex didn’t need to say those words aloud; Hunter wasn’t stupid. He knew the score.

“Closure,” Hunter repeated. His tone was lifeless, dull.

If Alex didn’t know any better, he would assume the blond was making fun of him. Maybe he would, if he had more energy.

“You couldn’t wait?” The blond laughed then, seeming to bring more life into himself. Prompted by something, he moved forward, into Alex’s space. “What? Wouldn’t that have been better? If you gave me more time to forgive and forget? Hell, if you had just waited long enough- if you had just come back at a different time, you could have satisfied all the guilt you wanted.”

“That’s not why I—”

“Bullshit,” Hunter hissed, leering into his face. “Why the hell else are you here with your sudden desire for a heart-to-heart? Why didn’t you wait?”

“I already did,” Alex said quietly.

Hunter paused, so close, too close, to Alex’s body – slowly moved away, eyes narrowed as he silently egged the brunette to continue.

“They sent me back to Eric’s to recuperate,” Alex said. Lied. Bended the truth. “I was supposed to go back after that. I didn’t.”

He stayed. He’d waited for a year, and then a couple more months, hiding and waiting, and even in all that time, he hadn’t figured out the right words to say.

“I’ve maintained a low profile, so they’ve marked me as a temporary consultant, but if things start picking up, they’re going to recall me to active duty and I can’t, Hunter. I can’t do it. So I’m here, now, because I…”

His throat, his eyes, the unrepentant heat of Hunter’s palm still flat against him, so tauntingly close without being anywhere near what he needed – wanted… it was all hell.

“When I quit,” Alex began, and he looked Hunter in the eyes. He didn’t turn away, he didn’t hide or
back down or deflect; he met his challenge straight on. “It is standard procedure to wipe an agent’s memory after a mission. To help them readjust.”

After this, Alex thought, I am going to forget you.

The tears won in the end, as Alex feared they would. He knew Hunter would perceive this entire conversation as an appeal for his forgiveness while Alex still could; he knew the blond only saw it in a professional light and it hurt. That they could not part as friends (or even with Alex as a person).

“I’m going to forget you,” Alex murmured. Hunter made no external judgments of his tears, didn’t even bother with a second glance. They, like most of Alex, was to be ignored. “I don’t want to forget you, Hunter,” he managed, throat thick. “But I’m going to, and I’m sorry.”

“Why?” Hunter asked. His blue eyes were shining with moisture, but due to nothing so dramatic as unshed tears. It must be a natural biological reaction, dust kicking up into the blond’s eye-

“Wouldn’t it be easier for you? To forget this?”

Yes. Forgetting this would be the simplest thing. Freeing himself of this ordeal would be the path of least resistance for Alex’s continued survival. He might be confused as to why he had resigned in the first place, after the memory wipe, but Alex could still dedicate himself fully to SPD; he could still be content with being a model agent.

Alex wouldn’t even remember how deeply empty that was.

Without Hunter, without Eric and Adam, without people, there was no point.

“I don’t want to forget the person you made me become.”

It was foolish – but heartfelt in that foolishness, perhaps clichéd and overwrought - but it was, in the end, the truth.

Unable to control himself, Alex let it all go, throwing decorum to the wind in a need to convey something he never believed himself capable of expressing.

“I don’t want to forget you; your sarcasm and your determination, your love of coffee, your baffling hatred of green beans. I don’t want to forget your passion, your unwillingness to ever back down from doing what you believe is the right thing. I don’t want to forget how you will fight for anyone who you think is in the right who can’t fight for themselves. I don’t want to forget how you would keep me in check, rules of etiquette and social cues be damned. I don’t want to forget you, Hunter.”

Alex looked down at the stupid hand still resting against his ribcage, unable to continue meeting Hunter’s eerily intense stare. “I’m aware of how perfectly selfish that is, even though it’s a matter of time before they do the same to you.” Why they hadn’t yet, Alex was unsure, though he suspected the reason lay somewhere with Trip and Commander Myer’s own looming presence. “The fact that I am leaving you in such a state until then, suffered by my own hands, is deplorable, and for that–” He squeezed Hunter’s wrist, warm and real in his palm. “For that, I will never forgive myself.”

“Until you forget,” Hunter replied. His fingers twitched, rigid with tension, but his expression remained tight, quietly wrecked. “So for like, a couple of days then.”

“It’s standard procedure, Hunter.” Alex wasn’t sure how he had managed to hold it together this long, but he regained some of his professionalism, standing up taller. “Even if I stayed, they would make me forget. If I left, they would make me forget. There’s no way around it.”

“Well isn’t that fantastic for you?” Hunter snarled. He yanked his hand away with a frustrated
growl, catching the edge of Alex’s shirt and pulling it out from his grasp, as he stamped away.

Alex stumbled, not expecting the move, but Hunter was already starting back up again. “You know, this was really nice. I liked the— no, I liked all of it. Great speech, Alex - fantastic.” He whirled back towards the brunette, stalking towards him with clenched fists, defensive and angry and driven. “I thought the tears were an especially nice touch.”

“This isn’t a show.” Alex’s voice shook when he said it. He focused on the ranting, the anger, because if he didn’t then he would be easy prey for devastation; that after all he had said Hunter still didn’t believe him. It was difficult – Alex had never been one to lie to himself, and though it was no less than he deserved – “Hunter, I meant what I said.”

“You expect me to think you actually give a damn?” Hunter snapped, thrusting a finger against the Time Force ranger’s chest. His voice had cracked, but his jaw was set in a frown of such disdain that Alex thought he had dreamt it. “You expect me to buy your massive change of heart? Like you don’t think I’m the biggest waste of time?”

“I never should have treated you like that,” Alex said, remembering the early days when he barely tolerated Hunter, how his every action was an annoyance, a trail to be ignored. “Hunter, I never should—”

“But you did,” the blond snarled. He went back to infringing upon Alex’s personal space, obviously deciding that was the more appropriate strategy. “And now what? You expect me to think we’re friends? That you care about me?” He glared at the brunette, pointed finger at his ribs, hovering right where the t-shirt covered the scar. “Hey Alex,” he began, voice mocking. “Do you love me?”

Had Alex not been directly confronted with it, he was sure he would have been able to deflect the query. It was something he could have over-looked, diverting his attention elsewhere to focus on Hunter, on the wrongs that lay between them, the bad blood. Alex could have delivered his apologies, made what amends he could, and witheld, keeping that one little piece of his soul strictly to himself for now and…until it was forgotten.

But those words, in that tone – wrong – with Hunter so close; Alex never stood a chance for schooling his reaction. He had not been expecting it.

He flinched, full-bodied and sharp, pulling away from Hunter’s gaze – his mocking derision. Horrified, Alex shoved a hand against his face to provide what cover he could, turning away.

He should leave now. He had said what he needed to say. Hunter was intent on remaining angry; he should go.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, one final time. Hopefully Hunter would see it as further atonement for their earlier argument, and not for what it truly was.

The shame, that he would – that this kind of person would love Hunter. Someone he hated. Alex couldn’t stand the thought of leaving him with that and then just up and forgetting about it.

“Hey, hey, hey, heeeey.” Hands – Hunter’s hands – pulled at Alex’s wrists, guiding his arms away from his face as the blond quickly cut in front of him. All speed, ninjas. Alex knew that, but it was odd seeing it here.

The anger was dropped, it seemed, replaced with confusion, maybe, curiosity. The open hostility with which Hunter had been regarding Alex was traded in favor of changing strategies, Alex realized Hunter was reevaluating.
“Hey,” he said again, still holding onto Alex’s wrists.

If he really wanted to, Alex could escape the grip with minimal effort.

But he felt that Hunter should be allowed this, whatever he wanted, whatever he could offer him, and if that required Alex’s shame or clear vision of his distress, then Alex would give it to him.

“Do you—” Hunter cut off with a swallow. He looked down at his hands and let go of Alex’s, almost as if he had forgotten them.

It was an opportunity for retreat. An allowance of distance-

“Do you love me?” Hunter asked.

—or an attempt to gather his strength.

The question was not mocking; there was nothing to it that gave the illusion of sarcasm or disbelief. This was, in all seriousness, a question Hunter desired to know the answer to.

There was nothing in Alex that could have possibly ever been capable of denying that query.

Not meeting his eyes, Alex nodded. “I’m sorry, Hunter.”

And then, as they had already gotten this far, and he was going to be given a clean slate very soon anyway, Alex added, “I love you very much.”

“I’m a kid,” the blond stated. He remained stoic as he made this point, but his hands were in fists again, and that had to mean something.

“You’re a shinobi,” Alex corrected. “You’re Hunter Bradley, and you haven’t been a kid for a long time.”

“What the hell are you doing, Alex?” Hunter asked.

Alex wasn’t sure why this question in particular seemed to be the sticking point. He felt like there would be no answer the blond would find satisfying, even though all of them were true.

He had nothing left for him.

“Goodbye, Hunter.”

Alex expected the hand on his shoulder as he turned to walk away, he expected the unyielding grip, he expected protests, further arguments, more obscenities.

“Hey,” Hunter snarled again, jerking Alex back to face him.

Alex expected many things.

He had not expected the kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Because kissing is the ONLY logical response in that situation ;P
Alex, answering questions that were asked in chapter two. Way to take your time, buddy.

Until next time :)
Chapter Notes

Thanks to the endlessly talented the real vampire for beta-ing this chapter!! It is thanks to vamps’ keen eye and patience that the rough edges of this chapter are smoothed away into something coherent, and for that, I am grateful. Additional love and thanks to Kei Luna Shoryu for supplemental beta efforts and all around support. Your enthusiasm is always a treat, Kei, thanks for being so generous in distributing it :)

If, by chance, you’re looking for something else to read, check out 'My Brother's Keeper' by the real vampire or 'The Art of Cohesion' by Kei Luna Shoryu. They are, indeed, very good fics :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

So, there had been a plan, okay?

This plan – this brilliant, sparkling plan that had been a beacon of prosperity for Hunter to strive towards just as fast as his little, shriveled up heart would allow it – mostly revolved around not-thinking about Alex.

But in a different way. Not in the ‘I-hate-you-so-much-it-buuuums’ kind of way as it had been when they originally met, or when they parted, and in depression, but in the ‘at-some-point-I-need-to-stop-feeling-awful’ kind of way that got Hunter through breakfast without needing to throw anything up.

You know, that kind of way.

It wasn’t fancy. It wasn’t particularly spectacular, but it was Hunter’s. He had focused on repairing his relationships and cultivating his self-respect, he guessed would be the best way to put it, and none of those things were made any easier by the overbearing thoughts of Alex. Those would occur naturally enough; there was no need for Hunter to consciously bring the brunette to mind, he would make his presence known in Hunter’s memories as he always did, when Hunter least expected it.

It hadn’t been great, but it had been good enough.

And then this nonsense happened.

In the weeks he had been back, Hunter had managed to embrace the fact that he would probably never get over Alex. That time would be the only cure for the baggage he had accumulated, and even that wasn’t going to fix everything.

Maybe fifty years from now (assuming he lived that long) Hunter would be able to look back on this experience and not be filled with a vacant kind of self-loathing. Maybe the conflict and confusion would dissipate into apathy, maybe his chest wouldn’t feel like it was trapped in an iron cage that twisted and squeezed whenever he dared to think on this, until berating himself was a quiet punishment he both deserved and despised.

Maybe one day, he would lose the self-destructive habit of missing Alex.

But that day was far from now.
It was both easier and substantially more difficult to miss Alex when he wasn’t around. When Hunter had no concerns for considering the brunette’s feelings, he could dissect the red ranger’s flaws with as much viciousness as he desired, remembering all his stupid corrections and freakish needs for control that put Cam to shame, his rigidity, his severe dedication to his duties to the point of absolute stupidity. It was easy to remember all the bluntly stupid crap he had said, when he was brusque and rude, when he was a tightass representation of ‘The Man’ in such an appropriately painful way it would have been hilarious, were it not for the fact that Hunter had to interact with him.

He settled on the small things, how Alex had brushed him off, had stonewalled his conservation, how he had been finicky and just plain dumb about personal space. It wasn’t like Hunter was all the more welcoming to the idea either, but they were mature individuals, they could’ve at least acted like it.

And after the little things, he could remember the worst of it, and that stupid story had already been told and retold so many times in his head that it wasn’t like Hunter needed to dwell on it to understand his true hatred for all things regarding Alex Collins.

That stuff was easy to remember.

But aside from the last of it, the small stuff was also easy to forget.

Because it was all from the beginning, and back then, yeah, Hunter could admit he hadn’t been the biggest ray of sunshine either. Actually, ‘a bit of a tool’ would have been the best description of early-hostage-Hunter, and he knew very well that while he wasn’t the greatest human being in the world, his initial interactions with Alex could not nearly be counted as an accurate representation of himself. Like, there were depths unrepresented here, stuff Hunter hadn’t wanted to share (because he had conditioned himself to survive, just as Alex had conditioned himself-).

The small things all disappeared whenever they had actually started working together, and it was impossible for Hunter to ignore that. Just that, in itself, was enough to ruin the majority of Hunter’s hate-that-bitch plan, because it always led him to the good stuff on Alex, and he couldn’t handle that shit and then think about the blood stained carpet, and the look on his father’s face when the knife-

He hated him. And whether ‘him’ was Alex or Lothor or just Hunter, it didn’t matter, it would never matter, because what was done was done and it wasn’t like Hunter was ever going to get a say in it ever again. Even with Leo and Blake and Fran all urging otherwise, the ‘inevitable confrontation’ had seemed like a fairy tale. In a way, Hunter was okay with that, because at least that meant it was over.

Bu then, this crap.  

Now, all Hunter could think about was that seemingly insignificant smooth patch of skin planted firmly between two ribs, just a few shades lighter than the surrounding area. He couldn’t stop calculating potential angles of entry, the depth, the force, the potential blood loss, how much it must have hurt. What had Alex been thinking, when it had happened? Had it even registered- did he even care? Was he scared? Lonely? Had he been bleeding out-?

And in all that, Hunter always came back to the ridiculously uptight Time Force agent that had abandoned the rules just because some pathetic eighteen year old had pitched a fit over his long-dead parents. It was old news, for everyone. Hunter shouldn’t have yelled, not after he freaking killed Alex, not when he was aware of how important it was for them to do what they did; he should have kept his freakin’ mouth shut like the dumbass he was and waited until he got home to lick his wounds.
And if Hunter could just stick with the labels, the generalizations – agent and kid – that would have been easy.

But they were so much more than a one-word summary.

Alex had fought, for him. Hunter wanted to scream until he was hoarse at how monumentally stupid that had been – the waiting and abandoning the rules; the getting stabbed part – but he couldn’t. He was empty, he was– he didn’t have anything else. They had said everything.

Alex had said his piece, and now he was going to leave, after what was probably one of the most excruciating moments of personal growth in his life, where he discovered his humanity and listed his wrongs and legitimately – like, Dustin-legitimately – pledged to do better.

He wasn’t even going to remember it. Alex wouldn’t remember how much it tore him to pieces, just like he wouldn’t remember Blake’s concerned and determined looks he kept throwing over Adam’s shoulders; the rest of the stupid huddle of individuals just a clearing away. He wouldn’t remember the lingering scent of oak leaves, the delicate warmth of the sunbeams that glinted through the tree branches. He wouldn’t remember the slight breeze ruffling their hair, or the exact number of times they had battled over blankets, or Adam’s recipe for the perfect Sloppy Joe, or Eric’s perturbed-but-I-guess-I-kind-of-like-you face, or their peace offering tacos, or hot chocolates on rooftops, or Hunter’s absurd victory dance.

He wouldn’t remember what it was like to just relax, or their great dinosaur escapade, or the great Fran escapade, or the great wizard-man maelstrom, or how he got his stupid scar in the first place, or why he quit Time Force, but he was going to do it anyway and Hunter was just going to stand there and lose it all, again.

For the first time since Hunter had railed Alex into the ground for his parent’s murder, he could not comprehend all of that bullshit and not do something about it.

So, he figured, he would just go with his gut. His initial reflex could probably get him through this – and it would have to, because he couldn’t think about this crap anymore; he was going to punch someone, and it would probably have to be himself, because Cam was just too damn far away and Sensei had very strict rules on appropriate shurikan usage.

The baseline of this rule was ‘never use them against your teammates,’ but Hunter was still hashing out the intricacies. Like, what if someone went evil? Or they thought they went evil? Shurikans would be very useful then.

Alas, ‘then’ was not ‘now’, because now Hunter was apparently going to die if he didn’t kiss Alex; and there were sort of other things he had to deal with at the moment than contemplating potential ways to injure Cam.

Yeah, he knew. Weird day. Never thought it would happen.

Alex tasted like spearmint; a crispness indicative of obsessive hygiene, just one part of a comforting routine Alex built his world around. His lips were soft, slack with surprise, and the wideness of his jaw was weird for about all of two seconds before Hunter was busy with his newest life goal of get-up-on-that. It felt very important. Very, very important.

He crowded into the brunette’s space, one arm wrapping around his neck to pull the stupid lug close while the other one – apparently; Hunter only realized it a few seconds after it happened – snuck under the other ranger’s shirt, palm spread flat across the marred skin. There was something insanely relieving about the rise and fall of Alex’s chest, the pressing warmth there reminding Hunter that his
socially-incompetent, stupid, bull-headed, duty-bound moron of a human being was actually here, alive and breathing and still frozen in shock underneath Hunter’s face-attack, and god dammit, had he misread the situation-?

What the hell, Alex wasn’t going to remember this anyway. Hunter should at least get a–

Things got a lot better when Alex kissed him back.

Because A) the mo-fo kissed with an intensity and skill way beyond that of a guy who ‘wasn’t that physical’, and because B) Alex kissed him back.

Yeah Alex, Hunter was kind of finding the first part hard to believe when he was- Hello.

The concept of personal space and respecting boundaries was sort of thrown out the window about the moment Alex threaded a hand through Hunter’s hair, his fingers scraping through the blond’s scalp with enough roughness to add another sense of urgency to Hunter’s own attentions, because his grasp on control wasn’t total and Hunter did that.

If that wasn’t sexy as hell, Hunter didn’t know what was.

Alex’s other arm was wrapped firmly around the thunder ninja’s waist, dragging him as close as the hand pressed between them – on that scar; the scar that could have killed him – allowed. Alex tilted his head, angling his jaw to allow for better access and – yes, yes the asshole was an anal-retentive nerd but Hunter sort of adored the idea of that knowledge being applied to activities Alex was less-familiar with.

“Wait. Hunter–” Alex pulled away from the blond with a swallow, trying to distance himself – not like Hunter would let him, with his red-flushed cheeks and the dazed blinking as he tried, fruitlessly, to orient himself. “What are you–?”

“Asshole,” Hunter muttered, a frown settling onto his face as he reluctantly pulled his hand out from under Alex’s shirt. He grabbed the brunette’s chin, forcing him to stay here, stay close, to look at him. “If you really think you can just waltz back into my life, admit to doing one of the most reckless, stupid, behaviorally-conflicting, nicest things anyone has ever done for me, and actually give a damn and not have that result in a desperate make out session, then you are not really as smart as you believe yourself to be.”

Alex’s response was a few more dazed blinks, the hand in Hunter’s hair trailing down until it came to rest on his hip. Eventually, he swallowed. “You are very fond of reminding me as much.”

Despite the serious business going down here– and this was pivotal, Hunter knew, a vital turning point – the blond laughed, breaking the floodgates of anger, rejection, hurt, and loneliness that had been plaguing him ever since–

“Hunter.” Alex’s voice was uncharacteristically soft, if characteristically serious. While there was still a distinct uncertainty behind his gaze, there was also that stupid duty– to what was right; to what he thought was right – that schooled his expression into something kind, but determined. “When we encounter trauma–”

“Oh my god.” Hunter was stopped from rolling his eyes by the feel of damp tear tracks under his fingers, by the slight catch in Alex’s throat. “I swear if you decide this is about trauma, or adaption, or you actually bring this back around to Stockholm Syndrome, I’m going to punch you in the face, and then I am going to kiss you again, and keep kissing you, until you realize the undisputed fact that I actually care, very deeply, about your uptight, dedicated, super-organized, super-kind, surprisingly
sarcastic, wonderfully perky ass.”

Hunter was willing to bet everything he owned, morpher included, that his last comment would have heated at least the tips of Alex’s ears in an attractive flush were he not still so obviously thrown by this latest development. As though Hunter was supposed to hate him forever and a day, like the blond couldn’t have possibly seen through all the bullshit of that situation and narrowed down to the good parts, to what he knew. To what he felt.

“Asshole,” he repeated, a quiet whisper into the bottom of Alex’s chin – screw distance; what good had it ever done him anyway? “If you honestly think you get to forget me that easily, you are wrong.”

Hunter didn’t care what rules they had to break. He didn’t care if they were hunted down by Time Force for the rest of their lives; Hunter had no intention of living without Alex. He was young – and that was another argument he could see Alex using – but he sure as hell wasn’t stupid. Hunter had weathered enough bad stuff to instill some deliberation into his life, enough to not blindly latch onto things that just felt good, that just seemed ‘nice’ and ‘new’, just like he knew Alex did.

This thing, their relationship, it wasn’t a whim. It wasn’t attraction inspired from desperation, to pass the time, to make things easy. It wasn’t weak, it wasn’t temporary, and it wasn’t going to change just because they weren’t on some crazy scavenger hunt through time, or were forced into it anymore.

What they had – Hunter realized – what they had been trying to deny, or ignore, or stubbornly push away, that was something permanent. It was something real.

And as terrifying as it was, this thing was also something he was willing to fight to hell and back for, just to have a shot.

He wanted Alex.

Hunter wanted Alex enough that he was willing to risk believing in the idea that Alex wanted him too. Knew it like the irrevocable truth that the sky was blue and you need air to breathe. To know without doubt.

And, fuck it all, Hunter actually did.

“Star-crossed lovers,” Alex whispered. It brought Hunter back to the present with ruthless efficiency, enough for him to catch a glimpse of less than pleasant of wistful disappointment in Alex’s eyes, no matter how much the red ranger tried to school it. “It was always too romantic for me.”

“I’m going to do you a favor and not punch you,” Hunter murmured, eyebrows furrowing in challenge. “Because I actually know that you’re implying I’m only in it for the romantic idea of it, that my feelings are actually that shallow –”

“Hunter.” Alex said it like he was confirming his worst feelings, accepting an outcome he had always expected, because now Hunter was going to get mad and leave just like he did last time, and look at that, Alex was right.

“I love you,” Hunter said. There, he could say it; would say it, again and again and again until Alex believed it. “And you can do what you want with that knowledge. You can leave, if you want, but I am going to find a way to follow you. You can try to move on, you can hide behind regulation, or duty, or ‘how it should be’, but last I checked?” Hunter cocked his head to the side, his thumb tracing soft patterns along the bottom of Alex’s jaw. “Last time you went against how time ‘should
Alex closed his eyes, trying to escape Hunter’s stare by turning his head, but the blond wouldn’t have it. He leaned right into the brunette’s space, resting his forehead against the other ranger’s. He couldn’t make Alex open his eyes, but he wasn’t going to let him escape this either. Not that easily.

“Last time,” he whispered, swallowing down the sudden attack of emptiness that came from the idea of Alex bleeding out, all by himself. For him. “You saved us. You did that. And then you came here, for me, so could you please—”

It took his voice cracking to get Alex to look at him again, and when he did, Hunter couldn’t say he was exactly ready for it, but he was grateful.

Grateful he had this chance.

“Could you please just, not pretend that doesn’t mean something?”

Hunter had lost a lot of people. He had built up walls to defend himself; developed a vicious wit and unforgiving sarcasm to cut down anyone who got too close. He was stupidly protective of his brother, respectful to his Sensei, and missed his parents – the only ones he knew – with a love he had never particularly pictured himself as capable of reproducing.

And this time, he didn’t. This love wasn’t the same.

Which was frankly a relief, because that would be creepy.

But it wasn’t nothing.

At that point, Alex finally took a page from the blond’s book and decided to kiss the thunder ninja senseless, which sort of invalidated the idea of talking for at least a few minutes.

They were very good minutes.

Alex pulled back enough to rest their foreheads together, his arms wrapped around the blond’s waist in a grip that was both secure and tentative. Hunter’s arms snaked around his neck as though they always belonged there, and – if he had his way (and he should; Hunter was kind of awesome), they always would, for now and forever.

Maybe there would be breaks for a few trips to the bathroom, but who knew? It was too soon to say.

Alex’s eyes – which were, you know, eyes, and therefore should not be particularly special as everyone else possessed the same assets – held that same quiet passion Hunter had been secretly missing, serious to the point of absolute lethality, but also – and this was very important – kind. They presented an honesty Alex didn’t bother to hinder, did not shirk away from, and that, in itself, made breathing sort of a difficult task for the next few seconds.

Hunter figured it out, of course. Like hell was he going to die from something so unremarkably stupid. Cam would be laughing at his grave.

And Alex would fall into a horrible depression – but that was a thought Hunter refused to dwell on, because he was breathing, and Alex was there, and this stupid something of theirs was just as substantial for him as it was for the others, and that meant everything in the world.

This had to be something like peace.
“You,” Alex began, eyes dark and (yes, it’s freaking corny, but-) beautiful. His hands traced idle patterns on Hunter’s lower back, as though grounding himself in the soft texture of Hunter’s flimsy Goodwill shirt. “Are not nothing.”

He said it with the absolute surety he would explain Time Force regulations – distributing the rules as the certain facts they were, and it would be stupid to ever contemplate them otherwise because they were rules and could not be negotiated. They weren’t opinions, which could be swayed. They were concrete, set in stone, and like hell was Alex going to waste anymore time talking about this, Hunter you stupid imbecile; he had better shit to do than to educate your dumb ass.

This was not something Hunter should find sexy.

Fun fact: Hunter found it remarkably sexy. Like – excuse-us-while-we-find-a-room-in-camera-laden-Ninja-Ops sexy. The kind of sexy that would not be safe for the eyes of his brother, who had probably started wigging out after the first kiss (but that little bitch could be dealt with later, after Tori had given him the appropriate amount of babying and Hunter was done laughing at him).

This was the thing Hunter had been missing out on.

He should have started flirting with Alex sooner. Way sooner.

“Then stay.”

Levity aside – peace and epiphanies and apologies all disregarded – this was the thing Hunter needed to address most. They already knew each other’s feelings (even if, based on their track record, there would need to be many more assurances and direct confirmations in the future, because they were losers like that). What Hunter needed, and would fight for – with the same ruthlessness with which he would one day avenge his parents – was for Alex to stay.

Or hell, for him to go with him, Hunter didn’t care. After they’d finished destroying Lothor and he had a definite-and-very-secure communication link with Blake established (that guy would- yeah, he would fall apart without Hunter, true fact). After that, Hunter could strong-arm his way into the future.

Whichever road led them to the long run, that was what Hunter wanted.

Blake would understand this. Now that he had met Tori, he would know.

Hunter wanted a partner he understood, who challenged him, who cared, and he could go on, but time was vital and navigating from here on out was too difficult to waste brain power on a list of adjectives that all fit Alex to a T.

The sorrow – pained sorrow, something Hunter really hated seeing, but something Alex wore with uncomfortable regularity – came back with a vengeance, a tight frown contorting his lips into a tense picture of subdued unhappiness. “Hunter–”

“You broke the rules once,” the blond interrupted, because they both knew the argument that was going to follow; they had only had it about half a million times before and if Hunter had to have it again, he really was going to shurikan the hell out of Cam’s face, and then they would have to deal with a blood-thirsty Shane and forlorn Dustin on top of everything else.

“You broke them,” Hunter continued. “And you ended up making things as they should be. Who knows that this wouldn’t be like that?”

There was a sigh, as though the very thought had already occurred to Alex (and Hunter knew there
was a reason he liked that guy), before he murmured, “Time–”

“If your next word is ‘Force,’” Hunter began, his voice low and full of warning. “I will hit you.”

“There is a lot of proposed violence in this relationship,” Alex noted. The look that followed could only be categorized as surprise, as though the words had slipped through his filter without approval. He flushed, looking off to the side, but before Hunter could laugh, the brunette continued, probably determining that he had already gone that far, “I do not believe it is conducive to a healthy atmosphere.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I promise all threats are entirely empty.” Hunter grinned, moving one finger to tap on the edge of Alex’s chin and reclaim the red ranger’s attention.

Reluctantly, Alex turned to meet Hunter’s gaze, his expression still bashful, with a smattering of blush across his cheeks that was really very distracting for all the right reasons.

Except for right now. Except for right now- Focus asshole, eyes on the prize.

Couldn’t get to the good stuff until they worked through the meddlesome shitstorm of now.

“Promise?” Alex repeated.

It was obviously meant to sound playful, a throwaway nothing to prompt Hunter into another tangent of lewd distractions, but the blond recognized the subtle hint of extra something in Alex’s voice. The insecurity, the hope, that he could not vocalize.

In response, Hunter kissed him, soundly with an added hint of taking his sweet freaking time, slow and lazy and just as powerful as the last few.

“I promise,” Hunter – just to make sure Blake was thoroughly freaked – whispered it against the brunette’s lips, just like they did in all those rom-coms Tori and Shane made them watch that he had mocked without restraint.

Yeah, it was a lot more enjoyable when he was the one committing cheesy-as-hell clichés.

“Hunter,” and this was a sigh, a small exhale of a word that was both contented and relieved, and if Hunter had to bet anything – again – he would say that this little reunion was turning out to be just the opposite of what Alex had expected it to be, but in the best way possible. “I can’t–”

The whistle was low but loud, and – as much as Hunter loathed to admit it – something he recognized from certain air ninjas who apparently had a death wish (and the really annoying ability to throw their voice farther than the average human being because air power). It was Shane’s siren call for if they were split up in battle, or his ‘everyone-stop-sparring-and-pay-attention-to-me’, or the one Hunter ignored the most, ‘Cam-and-Hunter-stop-trying-to-main-each-other-we-have-stuff-to-do-and-also-it-makes-Dustin-sad’.

In this particular instance, Hunter wasn’t sure exactly which of these meanings Shane was going for, but if the dumbass wanted his attention badly enough to interrupt one of Hunter’s once-every-five-years heart-touching moments, then it had better be something really damn–

Important.

Kind of like if, say, for some reason currently unknown, Alex’s twin brother Wes-the-smiley-man and a woman Hunter recognized as Jen, after a moment, sporting a white Time Force uniform, just happened to materialize by the huddle of concerned/freaked-out (still Blake) people on the other side
of the clearing.

“Jen,” Alex murmured, sounding detached (which was his equivalent of shocked).

“And Wes,” Hunter added, trying to be helpful. “Do we not like him right now?”

“I,” Alex began, emphasizing the word. “Don’t have any particular feelings either way. I don’t know about—”

“We don’t like him,” Hunter concluded with a nod. “And you know what, I don’t like her. Except for the part where her awfulness got me you.”

“She’s not awful,” Alex corrected automatically, fast enough that Hunter was sure it was more on principal than actual belief. “And you don’t have to hate people on my account, it’s—”


And by this, Hunter meant ‘you know you love it so ni-ner-ni-ner-boo-boo’, but he was pretty sure Alex got the message. His put-upon eye roll indicated as much.

“Exasperating,” Alex countered. Again, on principal. He loved it.

“Noted,” Hunter replied. It was easy, and terrifying, but with Alex, the concept of it didn’t seem as monumentally imposing. Nothing really did. He had knowledge in his hands, a confirmed surety, and Alex was there with his timid smile and warm hand and Hunter really didn’t need anything else in the world at that moment.

He stared down Wes-the-twin and Jen and started moving forward, pulling Alex gently behind him, keeping his face determined and strong. Whatever the hell they were going to say, whatever piece they had prepared, Hunter wasn’t going to be thrown by it. If they wanted Alex to go back, they were going to have to do it over Hunter’s bloody and unconscious body, and even then Hunter was not above harassing Eric until he had some kind of communication with Alex.

He didn’t put too much thought into that outcome however; there was too much- the terror building in his stomach- he couldn’t handle that now and be strong. Hunter took it one step at a time, Alex a firm presence just behind his shoulder, and looked at his newest challenges like the stubborn son of a bitch he was. The one Alex had - through some manner that still bewildered Hunter - fallen in love with.

Yeah, in love with. Hunter was that awesome.

Past-him would be so disgusted, but the Hunter of now had no damns to spare for that guy.

Hunter didn’t bother with pleasantries, didn’t put forth the pretense that he actually wanted to see any of these people (were it up to him, he would have corralled Alex back to his room at the Ops by now, but those were details he would attend to later).

“What do you want?” he drawled, eyes narrowing as he inspected the two newcomers.

Wes, for as much as he looked like Alex, carried himself in a completely different manner. He was loose and fluid where Alex was more composed and restrained. The air about him was an easy one, with a slow smile that was granted generously, whether or not it was appropriate. It was about as bizarre as it had been the last time Hunter had seen Wes, and it kind of made him want to punch the guy a bit. Though that urge could possibly be contributed by the feelings of low self-worth Hunter knew the blond Time Force ranger regularly inspired in Alex.
An overprotective nature could possibly be considered one of Hunter’s faults, but it had gotten him and Blake through a childhood rife with bullies who exerted their power-issues onto adopted kids like it was their life’s sole passion, so it had served him well thus far. Hunter protected his own and Alex—Alex was his.

Just like he belonged to Alex.

Never thought he’d see the moment where he could think something that horrifically corny and not gag, but hey, it was a bright new world today.

Alex shifted until they were side-by-side, but otherwise said nothing. He squeezed Hunter’s hand, letting that grasp communicate the things he could not vocalize, and Hunter squeezed back. They had this, they were a team, they stood together.

If this was how Blake felt with Tori, how Shane and Cam and Dustin felt in their pow-wow of confusion, then Hunter could honestly say he was glad for them. All of them.

It was a very powerful feeling.

Jen broke the silence first, her grin professional as she sized the two rangers up. Hunter did not shift in front of Alex when her inspection of the brunette lingered just on the side of too long, but given a few more seconds he would have, if she hadn’t learned to keep her damn eyes to herself.

“We’ve got a new assignment,” Jen said brightly, continuing the conversation as though the previous perusal had never occurred. “We’re being transferred.”

Alex said nothing, but his fingers tightened in Hunter’s grip—his quiet expression one of confusion and concern.

“Where?” Hunter asked. He couldn’t keep the sharp bite from his tone, but just because Alex wasn’t going to say something didn’t mean he was going to sit down and take… whatever this was.

Could Alex even be transferred? The brunette had explained once that he worked from Time Force’s main headquarters, allowing him easy access to all the necessary equipment and transportation to take care of his emergency missions. There were other bases, but they were—Scattered through time.

Huh.

Alex might have figured this out around the same time Hunter did, but the red Time Force agent kept his silence. He probably couldn’t hope that much, and Hunter—For him, it was too good to be true. But fuck if it didn’t sound remarkably convenient.

Jen, as though recognizing their awareness despite the impressive lack of reaction on their end, grinned wider. “You and I have been assigned to this time period to monitor the integrity of the current rangers’ timelines. I’ve spoken to Mr. Collins.” She tilted her head, indicating Wes beside her, and they shared a look; a mischievous, bright thing that Hunter wanted to tear into but couldn’t because, you know, what the hell was happening? “He’s agreed to let us use Bio Labs as our main base.”

Wes took this cue to step in, as if either Alex or Hunter actually wanted to hear what he said at that moment. “Which works out pretty well, seeing as Bio Labs is already familiar with working with Time Force.”
There was a snort somewhere off to the side, reminding Hunter that there were actually other people there, and one of those blessed individuals was Eric.

“Of course,” the Quantum ranger grumbled. “Only you would find a way to get your future girlfriend to live with you.”

Wes’ smile didn’t falter for a second. “That’s rich, coming from the guy who secretly reunited with an old flame from the past.” His gaze turned to Adam. “Mr. Park, was it?”

“Adam,” the black ranger confirmed, his quiet amusement an odd counter to Eric’s more open disdain.

There was talking- bickering, really, between the two Silver Guardians (good to know that Eric’s preference for arguing didn’t correlate to only one of the red Time Force rangers), but Hunter turned his focus to Jen, the one who really held their fate in her hands.

Her gaze lingered between them, on the fingers twined firmly against their sides, and a smile, bittersweet, played across her lips.

Hunter cleared his throat, and he could feel Alex’s tension beside him, feel the brunette lost at sea. It was enough to bring Jen’s eyes back up, and the smile was back with nothing but optimism.

“Though I’m sure the Wind Academy will be more than happy to… um, cater to your visits, Alex.”

“They would,” Hunter replied, his lips falling into their usual smirk. “In whatever capacity was needed.”

Blake’s voice rose from beyond the huddle. “Did you just get a boyfriend? Did you just-?”

The following noise of indignant objection was thanks to Tori, who was a little too eager in shoving a hand over Blake’s mouth. Still, props to her, Hunter really looked forward to having her as a sister-in-law whenever Blake managed to get over that particular hurdle of commitment.

Or, more likely, the aqua ranger would save them all the trouble and just propose to Blake herself. It would probably be more efficient.

Hunter’s mind was wandering, horribly. He was trying to stick to discerning what he could, the ups and downs and insanity of the past half hour rolling over him in welcomed chaos. Alex was here, Alex was going to stay here, Hunter loved Alex, Alex loved him- And no, things weren’t perfect, but they were the closest Hunter had ever been to achieving such a notion and that, for him, was pretty damn refreshing.

Alex had almost died for him, damning orders and all. It didn’t make up for everything, but how the hell were people supposed to grow if you held every mistake against them?

You couldn’t, and that was part of living. Screwing up and fixing it, moving forward one step at a time because it was the only thing you could do.

Hunter got additional bonus points for getting to walk forward with his man for now and forever. Go him.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Alex confessed quietly, a timid whisper as he leaned into Hunter’s side.

It was one of the things that made them fit together so well. The… reservation to believe that
something so good could be happening— it broke a little part of Hunter’s heart. Alex was afraid to commit, to believe this to be real.

Hunter would be a liar if he said he wasn’t feeling the same way, but thanks to his team - his family - he was willing to slowly edge himself in that direction.

He could have this. This could be his.

Jen, who seemed to know this as well, looked over the question with a smile so wide it hurt to look at. “I’m very happy for you Alex,” she whispered. “I’m happy we get to start over.”

“Yeah?” Alex’s lapse into slang was endearing, and watery though it was, it still made Hunter shake with a wave of fondness he would never be able to quantify.

Sappy, for him, but he could admit to its truth.

Jen laughed. “Yeah.”

Alex opened his mouth to say something, clearly trying to work out a response, when he halted the action with a series of confused blinks.

Looking down with absolute befuddlement, Alex seemed incapable of determining an explanation as to why a curly-haired brunette was suddenly wrapped around his body in a hug.

Hunter, who had seen this coming, decidedly said nothing when the red ranger turned a beseeching look upon him.

“I’m Dustin,” the earth ninja volunteered from his hugging huddle. “You’re Alex, and we are now friends.”

“…Okay?” Alex ventured.

He shot Hunter another imploring look.

This time, Hunter took pity on him. “Yes, that is correct.”

“Dude, of course it’s correct.” Dustin finally looked up, but never broke his one-sided hug with Alex. “He’s family now. Hey,” He craned his head up, chin resting against Alex’s shoulder, utterly oblivious to the violation of personal space. “How do you feel about waffles?”

“He hasn’t tried them yet. Someone.” The blond threw a meaningful look in Eric’s direction. “Refuses to buy a waffle iron.”

“You can get the same effect with pancakes,” Eric grumbled, pausing from whatever the argument with Wes had devolved into to glare at Hunter. “I am not catering to your diva pallet.”

“That is a horrible untruth,” Dustin replied automatically. He turned back to Alex. “Don’t listen to his breakfast propaganda; we will fix your waffle-deprivation.”

“Propaganda?” Eric sputtered, and Leo, bless him, was already taking pictures with Dustin’s camera (when he had gotten it, Hunter did not know).

“…Thanks?” Alex tried again.

Hunter nodded, allowing the brunette to relax. Two-for-two. In first meetings with Dustin, he was actually starting with the best track record.
As he had already showed tremendous restraint in not pushing the yellow ranger off of him, and because it was his dramatic reunion, damn it, not Dustin’s, Hunter shooed off the earth ninja with a few annoyed waves of his hand.

“We can fix it later, now get off my boyfriend. If anyone should be cuddling with him, it is me.”

“So you did—” Blake’s expression was one of pure betrayal when Tori silenced him yet again, his glare only deepening when the aqua ranger gave Hunter a thumbs up.

“I never technically asked you out,” Alex muttered quietly.

He seemed self-conscious about it, maybe even doubting and that-

That would just not do.

Quietly, Hunter settled up to the brunette, tracing his jawline with delicate fingers as he crowded into his personal space. “Now, what made you think you had to?” he challenged.

Brown eyes met his, hopeful, happy, and fond, and Hunter knew without a doubt that the other plethora of emotions traveling Alex’ gaze were easily reciprocated, and he did not give one good god damn about who saw it.

Sure, he still threw Leo the middle finger when he ruined the moment with another camera flash, but that was just on principle.

Alex’s laughter was too relieved for Hunter to really argue about it, and when it really came down to it, that was the only thing that mattered in his book.

He had his teammate.

This, they could have.

Chapter End Notes

Why yes, it is awfully convenient that they get reassigned to that time period ;P. I’d feel bad about that kind of deus ex machina, but since I have the power to create happy endings, I went for it, because Time Force peeps deserve love too :)

Next week there’ll be the epilogue and deleted scenes. I’ll probably take a couple weeks off before posting my next multi chapter story, ‘Such a Calamity’, but if you’re interested in dysfunctional Eric stumbling through love, you should give that one a chance. It also features Kai, Wes, Carter, Leo, and Taylor, to name a few ^_^.

Thanks to Celebrusc and FlipCarson for the feedback!!! I’m deeply appreciative that you two have taken the time to regularly comment on this monstrosity of a story, and I hope this resolution met your expectations :D

Until next time
“You have too many pots,” Hunter grumbled, giving the sauce pan in his grasp a weak glare on principal. All around him lay an explosion of cookware - skillets, pots, pans, the whole lot of it - and he had made his way through maybe a quarter of the harvest. “You should give some away.”

Eric paused his trek through the kitchen so he could properly communicate his disdain. “Most of those are a result of you lot, so I will hear none of it.”

Hunter started up a protest with a smile on his lips, “Technically-”

“None,” Eric repeated.

He would have been more menacing were it not for the two boxes stacked in his arms labeled ‘office/library’ in rainbow marker. On one of the boxes, a flower had been added for what Hunter assumed were aesthetic reasons. It remained unfinished; the line of orange marker trailing off as though the artist had been scared away mid-draw.

Considering Dustin’s frantic retreat into the kitchen fifteen minutes ago, this was probably the case.

Said brunette had busied himself on the other side of the kitchen island, packing away glassware. He’d picked up where Hunter had left off with the coffee mugs when the blond had gone to stare the cookware into submission, and he paused in his self-appointed task of wrapping mugs in newspaper to wave at Eric’s retreating back.

“Personally, I think he has just enough,” the earth ninja offered conversationally. “Could use some variety in his coffee cups though.”

“You should get to work on that,” Hunter suggested.

The thoughtful expression on Dustin’s face should probably be something Hunter felt guilty about – the Quantum ranger would be doomed to at least one horrifically bright coffee mug for each major holiday for the unforeseeable future – but he really didn’t. Eric should have known that Hunter never made empty threats for revenge, especially when Alex was involved. That was what the Silver Guardian got for splitting them up for ‘packing duty’ early this morning, insistent that if they were left together, they would abandon box-duty in favor of other… more interesting activities.

Granted, this was probably true, but since they were helping Eric pack up his entire house, the least the guy could do was allow Hunter some make-out times. He had earned it.

“How anyone seen the packing tape?” Tori strode into the room with a look that was eight parts determination and two parts a fury that would not be quenched by mere disorganization. “I have the front closet settled into order, finally, but the tape has wandered away. Again.”

Fun fact, Hunter had been working on the front closet up until the point where he opened the door and all the junk inside avalanched upon his poor, unsuspecting head, revenge-of-the-snowman style. Only his ninja training had allowed him to get out of the way in time and from that point on, he had sworn off Eric’s closet in favor of the kitchen.

At the time, Adam had only paused in his duties of packing up the living room to send the blond a
sympathetic look before he had called in the Calvary (i.e. Tori).

Second fun fact: Hunter and Alex were not the only separated couple that day, and there was a very good chance that Blake was procuring Tori’s tape whenever possible just to get a chance to see the water ranger. Who cared if he was stuck in the attic, pulling out holiday decorations (more or less thrust upon Eric over the years by the joint forces of Adam and Dustin); it was Tori’s tape he had to use.

Personally, Hunter suspected his brother was about two steals away from suffering prolonged Tori-wrath, so there should probably be an intervention at some point. That was something none of them needed.

When all else failed, call in the ever-loveable guy to stop the fire before it spread to the unsuspecting bystanders.

With a sigh, Hunter stuck his head out the window, shouting in the direction of the moving van. “Shane! Tape!”

The air ninja – despite being stuck on furniture loading duty with Wes – casually tossed one of the three rolls of packing tape he had tucked into the pocket of his cargo shorts, for just such a purpose. The poor bastard knew them all too well. It was kind of amazing he had maintained his sanity for this long when he was surrounded by such idiotic assholes. Hunter was impressed.

“Tell your brother he’s going to get his head bitten off if this keeps up,” Shane warned wearily.

The appointed ‘movers’ were putting on a good show for the neighborhood, pretending to be hot and tired at the comparatively mild labor they were performing.

Hunter paused a moment to salute their efforts.

“I don’t know if that’s as much of a deterrent as you think that is,” Hunter replied with a shrug. He ducked back in through the window to the sound of the red rangers’ laughter.

“Your packing tape, m’lady.” Hunter tossed Tori the tape with a practiced fling of his hand, offering her a dramatic bow to finish it off.

Tori raised one unimpressed eyebrow at him. “I heard that,” she grumbled, turning on her heel. “But at least one of you Bradleys is deciding to behave today.”

“Define ‘behave’, ” Leo quipped as he passed the blonde on her way out of the kitchen.

For him, Tori offered a smile; genuine cheer melting away her frustrations – enough that she even completed the red ranger’s proffered high-five.

Leo may not have that effect on everyone, but his initial interactions with the Ninja Storm team – a calming influence when they were in troubled waters – seemed to be a perpetual point of reference for them. Leo wasn’t the be-all, end-all fountain of wisdom (that was probably Adam, if anyone), but he was a good friend, and a good listener, and Hunter only gave him half as much shit as he gave anyone else because of it.

They were bonded by their time-antics, no way to deny that.

Which was why Hunter only rolled his eyes with half the sarcastic force he normally would have used when he watched that transaction. “Your commentary is not needed here, knave. Don’t you have a job to do?”
Leo allowed the comment to roll off him with a cheerful shrug. “Looking for one, actually. Figure I’ll leave the two scary blondes to do their thing in the front.”

“Taylor’s not that scary,” Dustin insisted.

Hunter didn’t roll his eyes at this – because his quota had been met and Alex wanted him to at least put forth a small effort to contain the urge – though he desperately wanted to. Once again, Dustin got off without the brunt of Taylor’s sarcasm and gruffness (she was basically a female version of Eric, which was terrifying in itself, but somehow that equaled to complete adoration from Hunter. Yeah, he had problems) due to his uncanny ability to be himself, and therefore loved.

The first time they had met, Taylor had cooed over him. Cooed. And then they were talking mechanics for over a mile a minute and anyone else’s attempts to join the conversation (say, other mechanics) was met with a glare from Taylor and continued rambles from Dustin, because he had never stopped.

Instead of pointing out the obvious lies in Dustin’s statement, Hunter moved on to Leo’s initial problem. “Try upstairs. Alex could probably use help with the guest bathroom.”

“Bathroom duty, got it.” Leo snapped his fingers, making his way towards the stairs.

“And tell my boyfriend to stop refolding all of their damn clothes for ‘optimal efficiency’, ” Hunter grumbled. “It’s creepy.”

“Telling your soulmate to doubly-increase his reorganizing methods,” Leo mis-confirmed with a grin. “Double got-it.”

“You’re terrible.”

“And you love it. And by ‘it’, I mean Alex, so…” Leo finished this off with a twirl of his fingers, and then he was up the stairs and out of sight.

“Sometimes,” Hunter declared, eying the red ranger’s retreating back. “I really don’t like that guy.”

“Yes, you do,” Dustin countered with a vague wave of his hand, newspaper flapping sporadically as he hadn’t bothered to pause his work. “You’re just being grumpy. Keep it cool man; I’m not with either of my boyfriends either.”

“Not for lack of trying.”

Hunter knew Dustin’s number. If Shane hadn’t pulled out the old ‘fair is fair’ card of leadership duty Dustin would have been outside with him, loading boxes and speaking sweet nothings to the moving van. Cam and Eric had already expressly forbidden any tampering with the thing – even if it would have ‘made it sooo much better’ – but something about vehicles with more than four tires took Dustin to a really weird place. Hunter didn’t even want to begin contemplating the brunette’s relationship with the Mobile Command Center. That was not a safe mental space to delve into.

Dustin brushed off his comment with a contented shrug. “At least I stopped complaining about it.”

Hunter leveled a small saucepan at Dustin. “Squeaky wheel gets the grease my friend.”

“I don’t want to think about your boyfriend and grease.” Eric traipsed in through the backdoor with a disturbed frown on his face. “I don’t need that mental image in my life.”

“You’re welcome!” Hunter called after his back.
Eric promptly responded by throwing up a one-fingered salute, and walking away.

“Watching you guys bond makes my heart hurt,” Dustin admitted with a frown, packing away two more wrapped coffee cups.

“I wouldn’t sweat it too much; that’s how they show love.”

How. How these people kept picking up on a conversation they could have only caught like, five seconds of, max, was beyond Hunter, but who was he to question Rocky?

The Hispanic man in-question crossed the room in a few quick steps, arms laden with a few more boxes marked from the office. It looked like the rainbow theme had been maintained, but in addition to the flowers, there were a few multicolored ninjas thrown in for good measure that Hunter suspected had not originated from Dustin.

“Hey,” Hunter called, pulling Rocky to a halt before he could get out the back door. “Are you guys going to follow them to Newtech soon, or are you sticking in Angel Grove?”

“Between you and me.” Rocky’s eyes darted around; an exaggerated show to make sure no one else was listening. “I think I’m gonna hand the dojo off and take Eric’s offer. But this is strictly hush-hush, of course.” Rocky threw them a wink. “Gotta make him work for me.”

“Where’s the red ranger comradery?” Dustin asked. “What about teamwork?”

“What about annoyed-Eric?” Rocky countered with a laugh. “Money can’t buy that kind of entertainment.”

“As always, you are a scholar and gentleman,” Adam deadpanned as he walked into the room.

Years of dealing with Rocky had left him with a cool kind of mindset that allowed him to cope with his friend’s eccentricities.

“Don’t tell Eric,” Rocky added in a mock whisper.

With that, and one last conspiratorial wink, Rocky was out the door, whistling a jaunty tune.

“I don’t know how you survive that guy,” Hunter admitted. There was no shame in this. Guys like Rocky and Wes were made out of a kind of chipper that should not be replicated. Having two of them in the same room was a trial – Hunter had no idea how Eric put up with it when they decided to join forces against the Quantum ranger.

“I take it one day at a time,” Adam replied easily. “Hey, I’m gonna put in an order for pizza. You guys want anything special?”

“Meatlovers,” Hunter replied, just as Dustin said “Garlic sauce.”

Hunter did not remind Dustin that Adam had been referring to the pizza, because they all knew better than that by now. Dustin loved pizza in all varieties, so long as there were no sardines or olives involved.

“And cheesy bread.” Aisha glided through the kitchen with a battered end table clutched in her hands. “Don’t forget cheesy bread.”

“I wouldn’t dare,” Adam assured, smiling fondly.

“How has this become my life?” Hunter groaned, missing the yellow Ninjetti ranger’s exit in favor of
glaring at the ceiling. “When did my bountiful excess of battle skills get reduced to wrapping newspaper around pots?”

“This is what friends do.” Hunter could hear the frown in Dustin’s voice. “And besides, you’re pretty much packing up your future house too, since you practically live here.”

“Lived.” Hunter pointed a menacing finger in the brunette’s direction. “Practically lived here, and that’s because Alex was so peculiar about ‘time ramifications’ that he wouldn’t get his own place.” With that, Hunter turned back to his pile, eyeing the various pots and pans with practiced disdain. “When we move to Newtech, he’ll be living with me, and we will henceforth be free of the Myers/Park coalition. Speaking of…”

Hunter caught Jen’s eye with a wave of his hand, causing the pink ranger to pause on her way out the kitchen, towards the moving van.

“Hold up, Alex’s stuff is going out front, into Cam’s car.”

“Why?” The vocalization of this befuddlement definitely came from Dustin, not Jen, which was what made Hunter pause. “Isn’t he going with…?”

“Nope.” Hunter rolled his eyes. “He’s commuting from my apartment until I finish training.”

“But I thought you guys got that house specially-built with two masters.” At this point, Dustin was turned towards Adam. “Wasn’t the other one for-?”

“I’m going to get everyone else’s orders,” Adam announced loudly, exiting the room before the earth ninja could finish the question.

Probably would have been a more effective interruption if Dustin hadn’t turned his attention to his next unsuspecting victim, aka, Jen. “-Hunter and Alex?”

“Do yourself a favor kid- keep your head down.” Jen offered this with a smile.

It was probably her leadership skills coming into play in the wake of what she perceived as an impending storm, but it was a lost cause on Dustin.

Said brunette spent the next few seconds rubbing the back of his head quizzically while Jen made her exit out the back door, the complete opposite direction of where she should be going.

Did she just-? Did Alex just-?

Two masters?

Okay, someone had some explaining to do.

Hunter abandoned a half-covered saucepan on the kitchen table with a clatter, ignoring Dustin’s concerned questions behind him as flitted up the stairs, his feet silent on the carpet. He was pretty sure the earth ninja was either going to seek out Cam, who was cleaning out the office, or Shane outside for further calming negotiations, so Hunter had a limited window of opportunity before an inevitable intervention.

He put that time to good use.

Thankfully, Kai – and his super crazy mysterious reflexes – was on the other side of the room, so Hunter had enough time to perform a leaping tackle onto the bed, straddling Alex’s waist, without
fear of being clothes-lined or backhanded or, on one unfortunate occasion (for Rocky), tazed.

The blue Lost Galaxy ranger paused his clothes folding and offered Hunter a small nod, indicating he had somehow known the blond was coming (guy was a freakin’ wizard or some shit), and Hunter responded with a grateful wave.

It had, after all, been kind of him not to warn Alex.

“Hey, Kai.”

The blue ranger didn’t move. “Hunter.”

“Hunter?” The blond’s attention was pulled from the stoic Lost Galaxy ranger in favor of staring at Alex’s confused face. The sweater the brunette had been folding lay in a tangled heap at his side, when he had pushed his hands down to brace for Hunter’s impact. “We’re not supposed to—”

“Did you know about the special fun-house they had built so we could all live as one big happy family in Newtech?”

Because Hunter could connect the dots that much. If it had come from Dustin alone, it could have been questionable (highly active imagination, and all that), but this shit had been supported by Jen, so there was some legitimacy here.

This was real.

Alex blinked at him - that special, detached way that suggested he thought Hunter was asking a trick question. “Of course. Adam consulted me for the ground plans. You helped pick out paint samples.”

Amidst the anger and frustration of being bamboozled (Dustin’s new word of the week, shut up, it was catchy), Hunter paused, jilted by the sudden memory.

“That was… for our condo.” Hunter drew the words out slowly, conflicted in the need and fear of reviewing that exchange. “All of that stuff had been…”

“…for the house?” Alex prompted, both eyebrows lifted. “Why do you think we were talking about designs with Eric and Adam so much?”

“Because they’re your bestest-best pals and you have trouble deciding what aesthetically pleases you?” Hunter offered, his voice raising at the end of the question to an unpleasant octave.

Alex showed no signs of it effecting him. If anything, his eyes darkened. The hands that had been abandoned to the bed for propriety and respect for the ‘no boyfriend’ rule, found their way towards Hunter’s hips, shifting the blond closer to him.

“I find you aesthetically pleasing.”

“Yeah, well…” Hunter did not blush, was not blushing, but he did suddenly find the opposite wall very interesting because who wouldn’t? It was a great wall. It was all pretty and beige, blank and devoid of all the art and stuff Alex and Hunter had collected over the years and not painful in that fact, because they were moving. People did that. All the damn time.

“Inside…” Alex landed a kiss just under Hunter’s ear, on his jawline, and the blond shivered, willing himself to keep looking away. “…and outside.”
“Th-thanks…” Oh, goddamn it, he was blushing now, but it was warranted. Who wouldn’t? “Back at you jerk, but that doesn’t get you off the hook for~” Another kiss met the hollow of his throat. It probably shouldn’t be so satisfying that Alex was doing this in front of other people (well, in front of Kai), but it wasn’t like Hunter’s numerous issues over the years had ever diminished so… yeah, yeah it did.

At least, until said other people felt like contributing to the conversation.

“I believe your ire results from a simple miscommunication.” Kai still hadn’t moved, but his expression looked thoughtful when he offered this, which was something.

Alex nodded, pausing his ministrations (damn it) to focus on the actual problem (double damn it). “I should have clarified. I’m sorry. It’s just that you seem to know everything.”

He said the last part without a hint of sarcasm, with an earnest truthfulness that went right to Hunter’s knees, pulling the strength from them. He sagged, folding down until he wasn’t towering over Alex anymore, allowing him to look at the brunette eye-to-eye.

Okay so… yeah, there had been mistakes on both their parts. Hunter could see that now.

Reluctantly, but he could see it.

He was being a bit of a jackass.

Luckily, there was this particular guy here who seemed okay with that.

“I shouldn’t have assumed,” Hunter said quietly. “I thought you were taking the initiative to look at listings and I never… actually looked into what you were doing.” Which sounded horribly dismissive and inattentive when he said it aloud. “Sorry.”

He leaned forward, excusing the move as a hug, but using the action to hide his face in Alex’s shoulder. Alex wouldn’t care, probably wouldn’t catch it, but Hunter hated the moments where he felt like he hadn’t done right by the brunette. At the time, it had seemed like a great plan. He wanted Alex to have control of where they lived, to be able to make that call. Hunter had wanted to support that, hadn’t wanted to invade the brunette’s self-appointed task.

And… if he thought about it, that was exactly what the other red ranger had done. He knew where he wanted to live and he made it happen; no doubts, no second-guessing. He was happy.

Hunter was dumb, but at least Alex was happy. He would take that score.

Alex’s fingers snuck below his chin, turning the blond’s head to face him, out of his shoulder.

Triple damn it – Alex knew him too well for Hunter to get away with that secret.

Despite the silence, the brunette knew what Hunter was feeling. They were freaky that way, when it came to each other’s emotions. Even if at times (cough NOW cough) Hunter did not prefer it.

“There’s nothing to apologize for,” Alex said quietly.

And even though it was the age-old adage of their relationship, how frequently they apologized to each other and how infrequently they acknowledged the other’s faults, Hunter still groaned.

Groaned, then switched it into a grin. “Then you have nothing to apologize for.”

“Then nothing is wrong.” Across the room, Kai summarized the exchange with unneeded attention.
He still hadn’t moved yet. “There is no problem.”

“Nope.” Leo, the rat bastard, agreed, exiting the bathroom he had most definitely been eavesdropping from with a jaunty swagger. “These two are masters of fighting over nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

Hunter frowned. “We don’t.”

“Shane,” Leo interrupted him, eyes trained on the door. “Don’t sweat it; they’re cool.”

“Can I still take pictures?” Dustin peeked around his boyfriend, who had, indeed, stealthed his way towards the door when Hunter had been occupied. “I need some variation for the moving scrapbook. Drama always spices things up.”

Hunter promptly responded by chucking Alex’s abandoned sweater at the brunette’s head. Dustin ducked out of reach with a giggle.

“Take that as a ‘wait until they’re not looking’,;” Leo advised.

“Take it as a ‘if you want your camera to remain in one piece, you will leave now’,;” Hunter countered, eyes narrowing at the all-too-amused Leo.

There was a put-upon sigh from the doorway. “Hunter, friends don’t threaten friend’s personal property,;” Shane reminded.

Yes, this was a frequent occurrence. No, none of them listened to him. Not even Tori.

You know what? Especially not Tori. She was feisty.

“I don’t believe it was a sincere threat.” Hunter didn’t need to look to know Alex was smiling. The brunette traced a hand gently down his spine in a prolonged pet, settling on the small of Hunter’s back in perfect familiarity.

“It’s usually better to play it safe with these two,” Shane replied with a weary smile. He tried to appear leader-ly and majestic, and may have succeeded were Dustin not still poking out from behind him, the yellow ranger’s face contorting into creepy monster expressions of mocking.

“…we should be packing, yes?” Kai settled a tower of folded shirts into a box on the dresser to punctuate this statement, his eyes scanning over the rest of the room’s inhabitants.

Hunter would say his expression was quizzical, but Kai’s face rarely gave that much away. Best guess, the guy was wondering why they were all still there.

While it was true Hunter had his work cut out for him when it came to understanding Alex’s inner workings, his efforts were child’s play compared to what Leo must be having to do. Sometimes it seemed like Kai was from a completely different world.

But that was a challenge the red Lost Galaxy ranger appeared more than eager to meet.

Leo beamed at Kai, going so far as to clap his teammate’s shoulder before addressing the rest of the room at large. “You heard the man folks, break time’s over. We have memories to pack away.”

Dustin paused in his face-pulling to frown. “It sounds depressing when you put it like that.”

“We’re unpacking them soon, if it makes you feel better.” Shane finally pulled his boyfriend out from behind him by wrapping one large arm around his shoulders, dragging him into his side.
Dustin yielded without a fight, draping himself against the red ranger as they turned away, heading back downstairs.

“You know what?” Dustin’s voice echoed. “It does.”

*Ugh*, they were sickening.

But perfect in that way, so Hunter couldn’t really complain.

Well, he could. But that was more from obligation than anything else.

From the direction of the bathroom, a throat was pointedly cleared.

“If you’re done being a drama queen,” Leo began, smile wide. “I suggest you go back and finish up the kitchen.” He finished this off with a jaunty wave, one finger swiveling towards the bedroom door in an exaggerated arc. “The sooner this is done, the sooner we get food.”

“I had assumed your concern laid in efficiency.” Kai’s gaze was trained on the next set of drawers to empty out. “I should have known it centered on your stomach.”

This was, in some dimension, probably adorable.

Bet Dustin would be mad that he missed *this* for his scrapbook.

The sentiment was especially exaggerated when Leo staggered back in mock injury. “I can care about efficiency too.”

Hunter shared a look with Alex.

Oh yeah, guy had it *bad*.

Kai paused, eyes blinking (confusion, maybe?) as he spared Leo a glance. “I did not mean to state this negatively. Food is important.”

Okay, definitely adorable. Hunter could admit that; he was human.

Were it possible, Leo’s smile stretched wider. “Thank you Kai, I appreciate it.”

Kai shrugged. Or, really, minutely twitched his shoulders- but *almost* shrugged. “It is no burden.”

With that, he turned back to his work.

Hunter gave Leo ten bonus points for not breaking out in a happy jig right then and there, though he could see how much the brunette obviously wanted to. For them, it was a pretty positive interaction.

Feeling generous, Hunter made a show of coughing, ‘clearing’ his throat loud enough that Leo would snap out of his look of complete adoration before Kai caught wind of it. “Bathroom, Leo?”

Confusion. Confusion. Confusion. And… *there* it was, realization splashed across Leo’s face in a flush. He exited back into the bathroom with a wave of his hand, conveniently forgetting how he had been prodding Hunter back downstairs as he went.

Kai, bless him, didn’t even look up.

Which left Hunter alone with his *own* favorite topic of conversation…
Who was currently trying to urge him off of his lap. Yeah, not happening.

“Hunter…” Alex sighed when the blond collapsed further into him, arms wrapped possessively around the Time Force agent’s neck. “We need to finish packing.”

“In a minute,” Hunter protested. “I’ve got you on a bed all to myself, I need to gather my willpower if I have to leave without receiving any of the usual benefits from this position.”

“You did this to yourself,” Alex reminded him, voice warm, fond.

And for him. For him.

That would never cease to amaze Hunter.

“Nonetheless.” Hunter buried his face into Alex’s neck, savoring the familiar scent of coconut shampoo and laundry detergent. “I’m depending on your support here.”

The other arm traced its way to Hunter’s back until they were both firmly wrapped around the blond’s waist. Alex’s head dipped down, cheek brushing against Hunter’s as he angled towards the crimson ranger’s ear. “And you shall always have it, gladly.”

Hunter didn’t bother to suppress the full-body shiver that inspired, even after four years – well, five, if they counted the mission, Hunter never stopped being amazed, or grateful, by the gift that was Alex’s acceptance into his life. It was a part he had gained, easily surrendering his own trust and dependency, and it was a part he treasured. Always.

Hunter turned, intending to press his luck for a kiss, when a series of gagging noises emitted from the bathroom.

“Seriously? We are still here. Go to work!” Leo called.

Alex paused, but Hunter went in for a peck anyway, on principle. Then, he turned his ire onto Leo. “Some of us are having touching moments right here. Can you wait?”

“You have like, eight of those a day,” Leo responded with an exaggerated roll of his eyes. “You can miss one. Now, vamoose.”

Begrudgingly, Hunter yielded to the older ranger’s shooing motions, leaving the warmth of Alex’s embrace to get upright again. “Fine, I’m leaving. Do you have any other demands you need to make, your majesty?”

“Just one,” Leo replied easily, showing no response to the title. “Is this my toothbrush?”

He pulled an item from behind his back – a familiar, if dingy thing; red and white, from Hunter and Alex’s initial raid together. They had probably kept it on that sentimentality alone, though neither one of them had ever addressed the fact.

This interested Kai enough for the blue ranger to stop working. “Why would they have your toothbrush?”

“That’s what I want to know.”

“And that sounds like my cue to leave,” Hunter offered apologetically with a shrug. “Catch you later.”

He gave Alex one last kiss, ignoring the brunette’s beseeching eyes as Leo slowly advanced (okay,
so technically he had taken the toothbrush or whatever, but explaining time-mission stuff was Alex’s forte).

He probably could have been more mature about it, but he had come too far to start stifling his laughter now.

Hunter made his way down the staircase, ignoring the resonating exclamation from Leo – “You made me miss my flight!?” – and mentally prepared himself for story time later. Hopefully, Kai would be able to cool the red Lost Galaxy ranger down through the sheer force of being present.

The blond paused just as he got to the foot of the stairs, a familiar ringtone blaring from his back pocket, signifying the one person who was missing from this shindig.

Missing, and very petulant about this fact, despite Alex’s insistence they were needed elsewhere.

Or, alternatively, the entire reason Dustin was creating a ‘moving scrapbook’ in the first place.

“Hey, Fran.” Hunter smiled into his phone, almost a hundred percent sure what she was going to say.

“Hey,” she replied easily, her voice beaming, half-shocked and half-exhilarated. “I just ‘met’ you.”

Hunter laughed. “Well, isn’t that crazy?”

“I think the crazier part is that you guys ended up dating,” Fran replied. “Man, you hated each other.”

“Or something like it.” Hunter shrugged. “You know what they say, there’s not much of a difference between love and hate.”

“I think there’s a very distinct difference there.”

“I didn’t mean literally, you philistine,” Hunter sniffed. “It’s like a metaphor or some shit. Like, they’re both really strong emotions.”

“And you say I watch too many soap operas.”

“You do!”

“Of the two of us, I don’t think that’s the biggest existing problem here. Also,” her tone morphed into a level of sassiness Fran would forever continue to deny existed, but Hunter had not one but two sassmaster blue rangers on his team, so he knew that particular level of sassiness when it was thrown his way, thank you very much. “You could have told me RJ was a ranger!”

“Ah, but what would be the fun in that?”

“A hell of a lot more fun than resenting my coworkers for vanishing every five minutes. I just thought it was some kind of out-of-towner thing.”

Hunter smiled and prepared his retort, settling back into his kitchen nook to wrap up the rest of the cookware Dustin had forced upon Eric, talking to a friend he had made completely by accident, in a world he was given completely by chance.

He had never considered himself a particularly romantic person, but with odds like that, it was hard for Hunter not to be amazed.
He was, after all, only human.

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“GUUUUYS!”

It had been a relatively calm day. Lucas was even willing to say it was peaceful.

He had never been one for taking solace in the slog of paperwork, but after the hectic few weeks they had, through some outstanding feat, managed to survive, filling out mission reports almost felt like a godsend.

Beside him on the couch, Katie perked up, clearly not sharing this mindset when she abandoned her datapad for the welcome distraction that was Trip. Of the three of them, she was the one that had taken to the redistribution of Jen and Alex’s work the hardest. Lucas suspected it was mostly because she missed the other two rangers – because Jen could be a mean drill sergeant when it came to filling in forms on time – but he wasn’t going to call her out on it. They each mourned the loss in their own ways.

Trip did his through shouting.

“GUYS!” The Xybrian yelled again, as though there could have been any possible way for them to have not heard him the first time. “Guys-guys-guys-guys-guys-guys-guys-guys-guys-."

The green ranger slid into the room, skittering to an awkward halt, one arm windmilling to keep his balance, the other clutching a datapad. He beamed as soon as he caught sight of them on the couch, his smile somehow growing progressively broader until its brilliance lit up the whole room.

Sappy, but for Trip, accurate.

“Guys!” he echoed again, throwing himself across the back of the couch in an uncoordinated sprawl, arranging himself so that his front was curled around Lucas’ shoulders while he draped his legs behind Katie’s head. “We did it! It happened!”

“Really?” Katie had one hand on Trip’s ankle, the movement more affectionate than for stability’s sake. “That’s great Trip!”

Lucas rolled his eyes. “Why are you surprised? This has been the last year of our lives; of course it happened.”

Trip blinked, smile falling off his face to make room for a more thoughtful expression. “It could have not.”

Yeah, but it didn’t, and that was what mattered.

Deftly, Lucas reached forward and flicked the green ranger’s nose. He schooled his face into a serious expression, even as Trip’s eyes crossed to follow the action. “No, it couldn’t have. We’re Time Force. Our job is to preserve the time stream.” He turned his lecture to Katie, knowing it would never really take with Trip, and if he at least got the yellow ranger on his side he could cut down on some of the giggling. “And if that involves playing cupid then – as creepy as it is – we do it. And we do it well.”

“Well enough that Captain Logan approved the transfer!” Trip added brightly. Lucas could feel him waving the datapad just over his shoulder, and with a sigh, he turned back to steady the green ranger before his waving completely ruined his balance. “And now they will live happily ever after.”
“They will live.” Lucas reached forward and grabbed Trip’s hand, holding him up after a particularly haring lurch. “That’s all we needed. Future generations of rangers, preserved. Some of SPD’s founders put into place. There, done. We did our jobs.”

“Why do you have to suck all the fun out of this?” Katie had moved to a full-on pout, her cheek resting forlornly against Lucas’ shoulder. “It’s not creepy, it’s love.”

Lucas frowned. “It’s an invasion of privacy.”

The yellow ranger’s eyes narrowed, dropping the pitiful act in favor of the strong-willed Katie they all knew and loved. “It’s sweet.”

“It’s meddlesome.”

“It’s our jobs.”

Lucas and Katie paused, turning as one to look at Trip. It hadn’t been the statement, in itself, that had captured the blue ranger’s attention, but the tone. It had been quiet, a half-hearted imitation of Trip’s usual vivacity, and almost… unsure.

The blue ranger felt Katie dig a finger into his side, as though this were somehow his fault, but Lucas kept his attention on Trip as the Xybrian adjusted his position on the couch, sliding down until he was sitting on Lucas’ other side.

His hands were curled around his knees, the datapad forgotten on the cushion next to him as he studiously avoided both of their gazes.

Okay, so maybe this was Lucas’ fault.

Before he could work up a proper apology, Trip started talking.

“It’s our jobs,” Trip repeated. “And I know a lot of that stuff had to be corrected regardless of our interference or not, but this was really important. Not just for us, or for time, but for our friend.”

There was something – a wave of what Lucas decided to identify as relief – that washed over him when Trip finally looked their way. He was smiling (and damn, Lucas was glad for that smile), though not as brightly as before. It was still real, unburdened with bitterness, and that subtlety – by Trip standards – overcame Lucas with renewed feelings of fondness.

This thing, this small thing, it was theirs. His and Katie’s.

“I don’t know what I’d do, if I didn’t have you guys,” Trip admitted quietly. “If we had never…” He trailed off, eyes darting to the side. Lucas watched his throat bob as he swallowed, watched it the same way he knew Katie studied Trip’s clenched hands. “If we hadn’t decided to try, if we hadn’t decided to…”

He looked back to them, and this one was all smiles, abandoning that unpleasant train of thought (Lucas didn’t like to think about it, didn’t like to dwell on the days of confusion and jealousy and hurt before they had discovered they could all have each other, that they were all wanted).

“I love you guys,” he said. Trip was the one who had said it last – too afraid that Katie and Lucas wouldn’t take him seriously, and a result of this was that he said it the most.

It might be his way of overcompensating, but it was now, as it had always been, unnecessary.
They had known. Even if they had never wanted to address it, they had always known.

As though following the same train of thought, Katie reached over Lucas’ shoulder to grab Trip, pulling him into the blue ranger’s chest and hugging around the both of them, kissing Trip over Lucas’ other shoulder.

“We love you too,” she said.

Lucas didn’t echo it, deciding to settle for stealing a kiss himself.

Trip laughed against his lips, relief, gratitude, and joy easily conveyed. Lucas wondered how he had missed it before, how he could have been so stupid, so stubborn to ignore what Trip had been trying to give both of them for so long.

In that way, he supposed, their recent assignment made perfect sense.

Relationships were probably the most difficult thing in the world. Mostly, because unlike any other challenges presented to a person in their lifetime, a relationship had no concrete definition, or standards for achieving success. All of that was subject to the whims to the two (or three, or more) individuals in question, and the goals – while obvious to some – were achieved, and set, in very different ways.

As much as he put on a show of disliking their last assignment, Lucas knew without a doubt in his mind that Alex would never have met Hunter, or loved Hunter, without their intervention.

It hadn’t been kind. Some of it had been morally questionable, and the fact that none of it could ever be spoken to Alex or Hunter, or even Jen or any of the other participants of that mission, landed Lucas, Trip, and Katie in the position of being truly terrible friends.

Lucas had been raised to believe that the ends never justified the means. This view was in direct conflict with most of Time Force’s guidelines, so he tried to be malleable, he tried to adapt, just as he had always been taught to. And in that, and this, he would celebrate.

The ends were necessary, as were the means to provide them. It didn’t make it right, but to declare it wrong on that basis felt like it would be a disservice.

With Trip cradled in his arms and Katie strong against his back – her stubborn positivity, Trip’s endless joy and intelligence – that could not be measured in terms of logic or philosophy or justice. It existed outside of those human concepts, in a place where only a select few were fortunate enough to enter. Its secrets guarded in compromise and a wild leap of faith.

If Alex and Hunter could settle there on their own, in part because, and in spite of, Time Force’s interference, then they deserved it.

They may have done their jobs, but Alex and Hunter were the ones who leapt. They fixed their own tie that was broken, built it up and strengthened it in a way that Lucas’ interference never could. That was theirs, and only theirs.

That was the thing about Time Force. They may move to preserve time, but after the fleeting moments of correction, of interjection, they left, going back to their lives. They never saw the results. They only guaranteed them by returning back to the place they started and hoping it was still the same as before, hoping that the people they loved still existed, that the culture they thrived in, they defended and supported, got to continue for one more day.

A hundred million variables dancing at your fingertips. Alex and Hunter were just two of them.
“You’re thinking too much.” Trip pulled back with a pout, his hair mussed even more than usual after Katie had thrown his hat to the other side of the room.

“What?” Lucas smiled, warmth and gratitude light in his chest. “You were the one who was all celebratory before; you’re going to get mad at me now for thinking over the ramifications of our victory?”

“Philosophical discussions later,” Katie breathed into his ear, voice low and husky. It sent shivers up Lucas’ spine. “Adoration now.”

Lucas laughed. “I am adoring you.” He peppered Trip’s face with random kisses to bring this point home, humming in appreciation as Katie returned the favor on his neck.

Trip batted off his advancements with an annoyed hand, obviously peeved that Lucas was avoiding his lips. “You’re doing it wrong.”

To this, Lucas cocked one eyebrow in challenge, as though to ask ‘Am I?’ Because that sounded like a challenge.

Katie was right; Lucas could go all existential on this later. Right now, he was going to do what all successful lovers got to partake in, that everyone – Time manipulated or not – were granted participation in when they took the choice to know someone. To care.

Lucas was going to live.

“I would ask you to show me,” the blue ranger whispered, running a hand through Trip’s hair – it was silky and smooth, and Lucas loved it as much as he loved Katie’s smile, as he loved their laughs. “But I don’t need to.”

There were some things he could do himself.

Chapter End Notes

This marks the end of an interesting experiment for me. ‘Breaking Space Time’ was the first story I have ever had completely written and beta-d before ever posting a single chapter.

I know it may seem odd – if the story was already finished, why not post it in its entirety back in December? Well, I didn’t do this for a couple of reasons. The first of which being that this undertaking has been a multi-year process (about 4-5, I know) for both myself and the real vampire, and I didn’t want to see all of that effort gone, more or less, in just a day. I wanted the story to have time to gain a following with regular updates, but mostly, in the period that I’ve been posting ‘Breaking Space Time’, I’ve been buying time to completely write, not the next story (which is already done), but the one after that.

The goal in all this was to find a way I could provide regular updates without the stress of churning things out quickly. By writing this story in its entirety, I could write what scenes appealed to me the strongest at any given moment. BST was definitely written out of order, but that was part of the fun. With this method, I could go back and tweak
things at the beginning that didn’t quite line up with the ending I wanted to make. It was a lot of work, but for me, it made the finished product something I was very satisfied with.

To be clear, none of this would have been possible without the skill and efforts of the real vampire, who helped comb through this monster of a story with more enthusiasm than it truly deserves. Thank you, vamps. You are an inspiration, and a truly talented writer. Thank you for all the feedback, for assuaging my concerns and cheering me on, for helping mold this story into what it eventually became.

And of course, thank you to Kei Luna Shoryu, for rolling with the punches that is a thirty chapter word dump and providing nothing but enthusiasm and helpful criticism in response. You are a treasure, and I’m so very glad you are a part of my life :)

Seriously guys, if you haven’t checked out 'My Brother's Keeper' and 'The Art of Cohesion', do it now, seeing as you’ve just wrapped up another story. Regrets, you won’t have them ^_^.

My goal going forward is to continue to provide regular weekly updates in this manner. I hope you continue to read my future stories, but if not, I am very grateful for everyone who read, followed, favorited, and reviewed ‘Breaking Space Time’. It was a story created on a whim that blossomed into something I’m very proud of, and I am deeply appreciative to every one of you that stuck around for the full ride. I hope it entertained you, or at the very least, provided any kind of relief that we often seek in the pages of fiction :) 

So again, thanks to Lee_Onew, WickedBlue, Zy_lar, lionheart18, FlipCarson, and Celebrusc (especially you last three, you multi-commenting MVP’s) for your feedback and kind words. Every author hopes to find a receptive audience for their work, and I was lucky enough to find you guys :D

Lastly, now that everything has been explained, I want it to be known that the “Let it go.” Line from chapter 26 was written before Frozen came out, and I want that to be appreciated.

Until next time :)
This is a collection of deleted scenes that didn’t manage to make the cut for ‘Breaking Space time’. Either I decided to go in a different direction, or they were ideas that didn’t aid to Alex/Hunter’s relationship progression as much as I would like.

Thought you guys might like to catch a sneak peak of what might have been :)

They are in chronological order.

Chapter 5 – Alternate Argument

**Notes:** I knew for chapter 5 Alex and Hunter were going to have a large argument of some kind, I hadn’t really decided where, or with whom, it would be. What follows is the vague outline I had planned out before I settled on Fran in Jungle Fury Pizza.

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Hunter: “Six months. Six frickin’ months I have spent with…that and you’d think at some point we’d level with each other, be like, ‘Hey, you’re a ranger and I’m a ranger and we’re both trying to achieve the same things and lets maybe not try to keep ripping each other’s throats out.’ But nope. That hasn’t happened. Instead we keep doing this.” Turns to Alex.

“You know what, fine, I give up. You win. No friendship. No teamwork. You hate me, I hate you. I’m a nuisance who should sit in a perpetual time out while you and your “professionalism” and “procedure” and whatever the hell you want to call it save the freakin day!” Waves hands in exasperation. “Watch out everyone, it’s Alex Collins, if you so much think of having an original thought, personal awareness, or creativity, he will suck out your soul!”

Alex: glowers “You’re overreacting.”

Hunter: “Hear that everyone?! I’m overreacting. You wanna know how long I’ve been overreacting? Six months. Because being any more lively than super-robot man automatically makes me an overreactor!” Points to world around them. “Fear me world! I am Hunter Bradley, and I shall not be contained by your societal restraints! I will go running though-”

Police man comes up.

PM: “Excuse me.”

Awkward pause

Alex: “I think you will be contained by our societal restraints.”

Hunter gives him an, “oh yeah” kind of look

They end up having to run away from police officer.
Gasping for breath somewhat.

Alex: “You are immature, irrational, and impossible to deal with.”

Hunter: “And you’re a dick.”

Alex: snaps “That’s it. We’re done. I don’t care how long it will take, you are going home.”

Hunter: spits out sarcastically “Thank you.”

Alex: glowers at him, eyes murderous as he casually replies, “It’s nothing.”

Chapter 11 - Alex’s attraction to Hunter Take 1

Notes: What follows is the first take of Alex realizing a physical attraction to Hunter.

His only saving grace upon the discovery of this was the fact that Alex consistently woke up before Hunter. How he out-stealthed the blond by removing himself from the situation without the other ranger knowing was beyond him, but after a certain point Alex wasn’t going to look too closely at fortune’s favors.

It would have been more manageable, more easily ignored, were it not for the very unfortunate, very real attraction he seemed to be growing for Hunter.

It was so outrageously ridiculous that the red Time Force ranger had rejected the idea outright for a very long time – they had only just gotten past barely-restrained hostility, they weren’t even truly friends yet, by any means, but despite all of these very logical arguments, there was something there.

A desperate need to self-destruct, Alex had thought bitterly, but still, the feelings persisted. The small, growing thing.

The physical appeal had always been there, Alex had known that. He had also disregarded it immediately, as physical appreciation would not be constructive to their current situation, but it had been there.

But now it seemed, with Hunter’s new resolve to be congenial – sarcasm and wit aimed not at Alex, but including him, friendly, almost – it was enough. Enough to spark that initial physical attraction he had disregarded weeks ago, a small stubbornly childish thing culminating in confused fondness Alex could only find fit to describe as a crush.

He remembered the signs from Jen well enough to recognize it for what it was now. There was no use in denying it.

Much though Alex wanted to.

It was mortifying and unethical, in a sense. While they were only a few years apart in age (were it greater, there would be another concern) but Hunter was Alex’s responsibility. His part in the mission was purely a result of Alex’s neglect and as such, it was up to Alex to return him in not only one piece, but as physically and mentally healthy as possible.

These feelings, as base as they were, edged on a violation of power that was not only inappropriate, but borderline deplorable. Alex needed to get himself in check.
With his shining personality, it was not particularly difficult.

Unfortunately, Hunter - despite the carefree air he attempted to exude - was not a constant chatterbox. Even with his efforts, he could not speak every moment of the day, could not provide Alex with the ammunition he could convince himself was entirely irritating to stave off this...these feelings. Not that the blonde ever would be now, under the weight of Adam’s critical stare.

The Black Ninjetti ranger, much to Hunter and Alex’s surprise, seemed to be a new fixture in the Commander’s abode. While neither of them spoke of it, it seemed like an arrangement that both the Commander and Mr. Park had unanimously agreed to. They why of which Hunter had attempted to badger out of Commander Myers a grand total of one time, before immediately rethinking his strategy under the threat of withheld...something or other. Nice cream, or something, Alex hadn’t been paying attention. As the Ninjetti ranger was aware of their situation anyway, Alex had no qualms to his continued presence.

And it was nice, for someone to be in Alex’s. Even if it was more on the basis of human decency than it was for Alex’s wellbeing in itself, he appreciated the results.

But even when Hunter wasn’t going out of his way to be obnoxious, he couldn’t help the moments when he was simply...him.

There was still a lot about Hunter Alex found grating – his carefree, or seemingly carefree, approach to their missions, his dismissiveness, his dry comments that bore no sensitivity to the conditions of their surroundings or the people they were protecting, Alex found it all remarkably annoying.

But there were moments of stillness, when Hunter would throw off the façade of loos whimsy and focus with killer deadliness, moments where he was the perfect soldier. They were few and far between, but it could never be said that Hunter ever actively hindered the mission. When it got down to it, he did what was needed, when it was needed. If with an excessive amount of complaining only he deemed appropriate.

Alex regrettabley found himself becoming accustomed to the bitter rambles. Even welcomed them, when the needed to pass the time.

It was worrying.

A physical attraction was worrying enough; Alex couldn’t afford to get emotionally invested in a person who should by all rights not even be there. Hunter was an unsanctioned individual who would probably require a memory erasing when this was all said and done, or at the very least, a vow of secrecy. Even if they managed some kind of friendship – the very idea was childish – there would be nothing for it. When the mission was over, Hunter was due back to his time and Alex back to his, and there was no room for negotiation in this matter, especially not for things as trivial as wants and feelings.

With this irrefutable truth lingering in their future, Alex shut down the majority of his conversational urges. He was cool, professional, not openly antagonistic, but not nearly as amiable as he could be. There was no room for attachments in his line of work, it was one of the reasons they supported isolationism. Some agents went undercover in the past for months, years even, to correct altered events. It was one of the reasons they had developed the memory wiping technology in the first place, to free agents from hindering associations they couldn’t have further contact with.

When this mission was over, there was a good chance Alex’s mind would be erased as well. It was probably for the better, he supposed.
It was his one salvation, in this trial.

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Chapter 12-ish - H first gets super attracted to Alex

Notes: Hunter considering relationships. I think I ended up with something like this in the actual story, but this was a rough first draft of Hunter realizing his attraction to Alex.

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It wasn’t like- and it should be noted here and now, for future purposes, that Hunter set off to do these things with the intention of pissing people off, because he didn’t. That was rarely the goal. Anger was a strong reaction, strong reactions made for memorable interactions and ultimately, if Hunter could help it, he didn’t want to be remembered. It was kind of a ninja thing, to be one of many in the crowd. Unnoticed, not warranting a second glance for you were deemed harmless and unworthy of further inspection. That was really all Hunter wanted in life. Just- to do his own thing without the judgments or considerations of others because hey, he got it, he was weird. Hunter, of all people, would never make the mistake of considering himself average. The ship on that possibility had sailed a long time ago, now it was all about getting by. Getting by, without anger, or super-hilarity (because that was another strong emotion people correlated experiences to) or, dare he think it, love.

Hunter had always excluded the third possibility on the very clear basis that it wasn’t going to happen- not for him. He could dream, maybe, he could hope and feel the phantom weight of his dead parents’ guilt, as though they were shaking their ghost heads at his reluctance to try, or his inability to consider it, but Hunter was a realistic person. He had issues. Piles of issues. Pie-fuls of issues, with paranoia ice cream a la mode and emotionally stunted sprinkles piled on top.

His best shot - in his hypothetical world where he entertained best shots and not the ultimate demise of the guy who had murdered his parents – was another ranger. Hunter knew that. He also knew that, hell no was he ever dating anyone on his team. After the Cam/Dustin debacle of too many months ago, Hunter had finished entertaining the idea of an inner-team relationship. They were too close, he was too…not their type, apparently. He didn’t begrudge it, there wasn’t anything to begrudge, this was all hypothetical, stupid.

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Chapter 16 - Awkward attraction - Trapped

Notes: I made a couple different attempts to work the forced-awkward-physical-proximity cliché to make both Hunter and Alex both aware of their physical attraction towards one another before I ended up with the club scene. The club worked out better because they had a clear goal they could use as a distraction, along with the crowd of people, pounding music, etc. – so this was ultimately cut, but still a fun concept :) 

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Their lives were such a cliché. Just, one big ‘ole ball of shameful cliché and predictability, wrapped up in every writing trope that would have Dustin cheering at his soap operas.

He was trapped.

Technically, he and Alex were trapped, but Hunter was doing his very best to pretend that Alex
didn’t exist right now, otherwise he would have to pay attention to the thigh that was thrust between
his legs, or the chest squeezed tight against his own or the unforgiving walls that jabbed them into
this corner, or the fact that there was barely any room to breathe, let alone room to hide from the
rangers doing battle in just the other room.

They hadn’t thought this one out. It wasn’t even either of their faults, they had just cut it close which
happened, which could be forgiven, but right now it really couldn’t be because sometimes Alex
moved his leg and Hunter discovered he would really prefer if the brunette just never did that again
ever.

This was such a cliché.

They were hiding – well, hiding and moving through what was either a utility space, or a vertical
crawl space (was it even a crawl space then?) or a thing that definitely wasn’t a hallway that they
were using as one, because they really needed to get away from the fighting before Alex’s timer
went off. That had been very important. Hunter remembered that being important.

It didn’t seem all that important now, now that they were about halfway into the space/sham-of-a-
hallway, with all the excessive touching and the moving and why hadn’t the gone one at a time?

Oh wait, they had, but then the wall/space ended, and they were trapped in a tiny corner, waiting for
the timer to go off and hoping to high hell the battle didn’t come down here, to their tiny corner,
where neither one of them could move because that would be far too convenient for Hunter’s libido.

Chapter 16 – Awkward attraction - Tango Maureen

Notes: Another take at the awkward physical attraction trope. I’m not sure why I settled on ‘The
Tango Maureen’ from the musical Rent, but it had seemed like a good idea at the time. The end
intent was for Hunter to jokingly drag Alex into a tango and then woosh, they’re so close awkward
eye contact, stammered blushes – you know, the works, but I abandoned the idea before it could
really come to fruition. Hunter’s commentary on Eric, however, I think makes the inclusion of this
deleted scene worth it.

“*The Tango Maureen, gotta dance, ‘till your diva is through-***” the cd player sang. Hunter
twisted around the living room, moving through his forms with practiced ease. There was something
comforting about it, some repetition that felt a lot like one of Alex’s coping mechanisms so Hunter
didn’t think about it, but it was still nice.

Guy had to train, after all.

“You pretend you believe her, ‘cause in the end you can’t leave her-”

Go figure. Go freakin’ figure that Eric would have the Original Broadway Cast recording of Rent
tucked away in his CD cabinet. Yes Eric. Everyone totally believes you are straight with your super
straight macho arms and your super-straight live-in boyfriend and your super-straight secret
collection of Broadway’s finest shows.

Like, Hunter wasn’t one to stereotype – or, he was, but only when it applied to him and came in
handy for potentially stabbing someone in the back – but Eric was like, the most repressed gay dude
he had ever met who was totally fine with his sexuality. It was weird. So very weird.
But tonight was not about Eric’s quirks and its possible complications on his flourishing relationship with Adam (with whom he had vacated his house earlier that evening, with the promise of ‘adult’s night out’ and ‘don’t burn my freakin’ house down’), tonight was about training. With music.

The only reason Hunter knew the show himself was because of Tori – or, more specifically, Tori’s older sister. The eldest Hanson was a theater major who specialized in musicals and, what do you know, that led to the only Hanson Hunter cared about being in possession of way too many recordings of musicals which she then (with Dustin’s help) thrust upon Team Ninja Storm’s unsuspecting hides.

Hunter wasn’t even a big fan of the music from the show itself, there had just been something kind of nice about finding a familiar cd among Eric’s collection, and putting on one of the least-terrible songs while he worked through his indoor-safe training.

It helped that is seemed to provide a source of continuous confusion to Alex. That was a plus.

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Chapter 24-ish - Hunter: reflecting on Alex

Notes: This tidbit was written to take place sometime after Hunter had been returned to his own time period. It didn’t end up working in the long run because Hunter turned out to be way too angry with Alex to reflect upon him in such a lighthearted manner (this scene was written as a one-off when I was working on the beginning of the story, as something to work to). It was conceived before their parting became horribly dramatic and jarring. So really, this is the alternate version, where Alex drops Hunter off after they’ve completed their mission, on semi-okay terms.

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To be fair to himself - not that the world tended to play with such a trivial concept – Hunter was not entirely sure when his constant burning annoyance for Alex stick-up-his-ass Collins morphed into the highly illogical urge to ride the man’s well-sculpted thigh like it was his personal steed, doing less-than-civilized things to the rest of the man’s body, slaving to discover just what it would take to get that perfectly-in-order hairstyle into messy disarray.

There were many things Hunter did he was not proud of, so he wasn’t all that bothered by another addition to the ever-growing list, but seriously mind, what the fuck?

In a small way Hunter welcomed it, just because Alex had a horrific (nonexistent) personality didn’t mean his body was capable of being objectified. Nope, the constant grating that were conversations with Alex seemed to do nothing but encourage Hunter’s perusal of him, as though it were some kind of insult. A blatant lack of respect that rendered Hunter incapable of falling into quiet apathy until the storm had passed. Oh no, not this time. This time Hunter had a target and an outlet and he used both of those vigorously. Mostly because it helped him get a handle on Alex, throwing something at the other ranger he had no obvious reference for dealing with gave Hunter a measure of control. But it was also partly because Hunter was kind of a dick and done with being separated from his brother, from his team, and tended to become just a little bit of a horrible human being when under extreme duress.

…okay, so it hadn’t necessarily been “extreme”, but you spend a few months with a by-the-book, socially oblivious jackass and you see how you feel about being reasonable.

You don’t. You don’t at all.
The fact Hunter had managed to go so long without throwing punches had been a source of continual amazement for him. He deserved just, by his rough estimate, a mountain of cookies for his efforts. A freakin’ avalanche of Dustin-cooked pastries.

And in his defense, again, because no one else was going to put forth an argument for himself, Alex wasn’t a bad looking guy. When he wasn’t talking, or frowning, or…obviously thinking about talking and saying more horrible things, when he found a moment in his hectically busy schedule to just be at peace and do nothing annoying or curt or horrible, he was a good looking guy. And Hunter had this thing where he liked looking at attractive males, something about his libido finding them kind’ve awesome, so he had taken that as his one consolation in this storm. Sure, he was going to get talked-down to and treated as a burden and annoying and less on the mere basis of being present (something that wasn’t even his fault) but he got some goddamn eyecandy so screw it, Hunter would take what he could get.

There was also, and there was a slight chance this was a result of partial-insanity on the basis of 1) he was Hunter Bradley and 2) after a certain point, spending a prolonged amount of time with one person, and only that person, sort of did things to your head, Hunter may or may not have had just a little bit of…fun.

It had been fun, okay? Screwing with Alex had been one of the most enjoyable things since smacking Choobo into a weeping and broken pile onto the ground, since watching his brother smile and grow to trust the rest of the team slowly but surely, making friends, and as pathetic as it was to admit, bothering Alex had somehow reached that level.

In the real world, filled with average people with average problems, Hunter recognized this could be labeled as harassment. And maybe it was. And maybe it was some tragically awful commentary about him as an individual to say that he did not care in the slightest, because it worked. It helped him survive.

And it was enjoyable.

Flirting with Alex had given him something to cope; it had given him a way to fight back.

And then somewhere down the line he had to pull a Hunter Bradley and ruin the entire arrangement, because apparently he had become serious.

Yeah, he wasn’t sure when it happened either. Only that it did.

Now those half-jokes he had been meaning, all those times he had openly scoped Alex out, the “affectionate” nicknames he had used to make Alex’s face scowl in that especially irritated way… Hunter missed those.

Which was, in itself, a horrible shame; because Hunter thought he could do better. Really, he knew that sounded just, pathetic, coming from him, but he honestly thought he was either going to grow old and die alone, or he would manage to find a person of either equal or greater insanity to be the yin to his yang.

He did not expect this person to be Alex Collins because there were so very many things that made Alex Collins the world’s biggest annoyance. Like how he never deviated from the rules and blindly followed his superior’s orders, putting his faith in them like they would get the job done, or how he was always so goddamn serious, and always demanded more of people, like whatever small improvements they made were nothing, clearly they should be doing better, and how nothing came before the mission.
But there was also the fact he was secretly the world’s biggest nerd, and even he could laugh at some of Hunter’s jokes, and that he was determined to do the right thing, even when he wasn’t sure what it was.

Hunter Bradley hated Alex Collins.

…and he also missed the stupid lug’s face like it was no one’s business, and it wasn’t, so excuse him for getting a little bit ticked off when the rest of the team kept asking about it. Besides, he had promised Alex he would never mention anything about their little “adventure”, so it wasn’t like Hunter could do it if he wanted to. He might not be a man of many things, but he could keep his word. Hunter could do that much.

And if he spent the rest of his life (and let’s be realistic, it would probably just be like, the rest of this month, it wasn’t like Hunter was capable of long-term feelings) missing that stupid Time Force Ranger and thinking about doing increasingly sexual things to his inexperienced and wonderfully well-maintained body…

Well, guy had to have his hobbies right?

Right. No judging.

None.

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Sometime after chapter 25 - Alex – Reflecting on Hunter

Notes: This, like the scene before, was written before I had a majority of the story done. Based in a reality where Alex and Hunter’s friendship hadn’t blossomed as much as it had, where they managed snarky civility and lamented being attracted to someone they didn’t entirely understand. It didn’t end up working with the story as a whole, but it is a kind of amusing sidenote.

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There was a horrible chance that Alex, future Time Force red ranger, was attracted to a kid about a thousand years behind him, technically long dead in his state of the world. The very thought made him mournful, of what was lost and also, Hunter, honestly, his brain, while never particularly kind, had always been straight forward. To himself, at least. Being attracted to Hunter felt something akin to a punishment, correcting an injustice Alex had no hand in, but there it was. There it stubbornly remained.

Maybe he really did hate himself, for failing the team, back when he had reclaimed the red morpher from Wes.

But, realistically, Alex knew it was simply how he felt. And the only thing you gained from putting rhyme or reason to feelings was a mild case of insanity so really, there was no point but to accept it and move on.

Hunter was dead.

Right now, at this moment, Hunter was dead.

And because Alex lived now, at this moment, sans Hunter, he would have to continue to live, sans Hunter.
It shouldn’t be impossible. He had done a very good job of living that way to this point.

He could do a few decades more.

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Chapter 32 - A & H heartfelt talk extras

Notes: I ended up switching to Hunter’s POV in chapter 32 for the content covered below, but I had this much written out before I decided to cut off chapter 31 where it was.

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It was as conflicting as ever instinct Hunter managed to instigate, determined and passionate – so very Hunter – but also desperate, in a way, like there was a shy veil of timidity underneath it all Hunter tried to drown out with overwhelming bravado of everything else.

The blond latched onto Alex – and it was happening, this was happening – one hand a vice against the back of his head, yanking him down to meet the ninja halfway, the other stealth encapsulated, sneaking underneath the hem of his shirt and resting atop his scar between breaths. His palm splayed across the marred skin, warm and real, and yet so very unimportant because Hunter Bradley was kissing him.

Alex reacted on instinct, moving before self-consciousness could sneak its way into his doubts and render him unresponsive. He hadn’t – it had been a while, for him, and he had never with a male-

It was different, but in the respect that it was Hunter and awkward and forceful and right, because it was Hunter. The blond crowded against Alex, destroying whatever boundaries they had left with a decisive growl.

This wasn’t how this was supposed to end. Hunter was supposed to hate him- and while the passions instigated by hatred and love could easily rival each other in strength, the distinction of aiding the fiend that murdered his parents should have safely sequestered Alex on the ‘hate’ side of Hunter’s temperament.

“Wa- wait,” Alex gasped against the blond’s lips. His breath came in heavy gasps, chest heaving as he tried to regain his bearings. Hunter, in the meantime, gifted him with an annoyed glare.

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Chapter 32 - Hunter make-out time extras

Notes: Here is some extra running commentary from Hunter’s POV before he starts macking on Alex. It was written before there were the additional chapters of Hunter readjusting to his time period again, so it wasn’t really necessary to keep this part.

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So, there had been a plan, okay?

This plan – this brilliant, sparkling plan that had been a beacon of prosperity for Hunter to strive towards just as fast as his little, shriveled up heart would allow it – mostly revolved around not-thinking about Alex.

But in a different way. Not in the ‘I-hate-you-so-much-it-buuuurns’ kind of way as it had been when
they originally met, or when they parted, and in depression, but in the ‘at-some-point-I-need-to-stop-feeling-awful’ kind of way that got Hunter through breakfast without needing to throw anything up.

You know, that kind of way.

It wasn’t fancy. It wasn’t particularly spectacular.

It wasn’t even – if you asked Cam (and Hunter never asked Cam for shit, but the green ranger tended to shove his opinion wherever he saw fit, and most of the time that was at Hunter) the other teen would be more than willing to go into excruciating detail on just how bad plan it was in the long run. But it was, in fact, the only plan Hunter could settle on that didn’t involve words like ‘closure’ and ‘moving on’ because while he was a guy of many talents, healthy concepts such as those were beyond him.

He knew it was bad. Blake knew it was bad. Even frickin’ Dustin knew it was bad, but they had a unanimous and silent agreement that if they ignored the others’ impending angst parties then their own rather impressive angst parties could be ignored in return.

Yes, Dustin had angst (sometimes). Don’t let the sunny disposition fool you, you don’t become super-duper chipper and latch only your friends for all your social experiences because you came from the most loving of households.

But Hunter was straying off topic.

That had been another tool in his gargantuan arsenal of not-thinking-of-Alex tactics. It was a tool he was rather fond of, and Shane’s concerned face at Hunter’s attempt to actually give a damn about the latest retelling of his stupid adventures at the skatepark made it all the worth it. Hell, Hunter had even joined in on a few of the red ranger’s remedial skateboard lessons with Cam, though for the most part he just heckled and took pictures whenever Cam fell on his face.

It would have been more satisfying if the expression of restrained annoyance on the green ranger’s face wasn’t so similar to another stern ranger Hunter had spent far too much time with, if he hadn’t recognized the steely glint in his eyes as the stubbornness that would not yield to the likes of physics when order and logic dictated this would happen, just like Alex-

If Hunter abruptly exited any of their skateboard-bonding times, the others were kind enough not to nag him about it. Too much.

Blake worried. But Blake always worried. It was a consistency Hunter could handle, even if they combined puppy eyes of despair from Dustin and the narrowed I-will-deduce-your-feelings inspections from Tori were bordering on the edge of too freakin’ much.

For now, Blake could keep the others at bay when Hunter couldn’t. Could keep them off of the emotional stuff and play into Hunter’s plan of meaningless distraction. Anyone else would have seen that as a positive, but Blake- he knew better. Eventually, he was going to call Hunter on his shit. Hunter had just hoped that maybe by then, he would have his head sorted out.

In the weeks he had been back – moping, Adam had called it (but what the hell did he know, he was already shacked up with his grumpy-pants dream-man anyway; he had nothing on Hunter’s angst) – Hunter had come to the steady realization that he would probably never get over Alex. That time (and wasn’t that the stupid theme of their relationship?) would be the only cure for the baggage he had accumulated, and even that wasn’t going to fix everything.
And that was all she wrote :)

Until next time :D

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