Who's Scared Now?

by Miss_Nihilist

Summary

What starts as nothing but a fight gone wrong quickly spirals out of control. Ben heals from his unfortunate injuries well-enough, but when he returns to hero work, he's greeted by the public's newfound hostility towards Rook, his Omnitrix, and aliens everywhere.

As the populous begins to turn on aliens, Ben finds himself juggling politics, a deeply-laid plan to rid the planet of aliens for good, dark thoughts he's always been content to ignore, and a rapidly-developing crush on his partner that he wishes would go away. It's a good thing that Ben knows how to multitask.
Chapter 1

His head slams into the wall so hard that it leaves his ears ringing and the world going black at the edges. For an alien with a skull made out of vines, it's an impressive accomplishment. The Omnitrix gives a beep that he doesn't process at first, and then Swampfire is gone in a flash of green light, leaving only Ben Tennyson on the ground. Everything goes white for an achingly long moment, but then the world is struggling into view and his head is pounding loud enough to keep him from unconsciousness.

Ben never got her name. He was just told that there was an incredibly aggressive female Tetramand tearing apart Undertown and then he showed up with Rook in time to get projectile-thrown through ten buildings. She had already destroyed a large portion of the underground alien town by the time they arrived, and the fight had only succeeded in making her path of destruction spread faster.

Despite the throbbing that reverberates through his skull like an ugly anthem, Ben forces himself into a sitting position. He blinks a few times, dazed, then chokes down a strangled cry as he abruptly throws his body weight to the right. Not a moment later, the Tetramand's foot slams down right where his leg had been a moment earlier. Used to life and death fights on the daily, Ben doesn't waste even a second thinking about what a close call that was. He ducks out of the way of her fist again, searching the destroyed streets for any sign of Rook. Last Ben had seen him, he was right next to him, but staying in one place is a bad call in any fight.

"Ben!" Rook's shout doesn't help the human to orient himself any, but it reminds Ben that he should really be paying attention to the fight. Again, he manages to duck out of the way just in the nick of time. He grunts as he throws himself forward onto his chest. Bits of the broken street rain over him, knocked loose by the large fist that crashed into the pavement where he was just a second ago.

The female Tetramand isn't the toughest person Ben has ever fought. Princess Looma is much bigger than she is, and Ben had still managed to beat her in the end. But if that's the case, why is he having so much trouble with this random alien? Four Arms had been the first alien he tried, but he had been knocked out so easily that he's still baffled by how that happened. This Tetramand isn't rational at the moment. Every attempt he's made to talk to her has only seemed to frustrate her further. He doesn't know what happened to set her off, but she's furious and wants to crush something. Preferably, him.

He's reaching for the Omnitrix when Rook makes himself known. Momentarily, Ben forgets himself, watching Rook launch himself at the Tetramand. It's kind of funny. He's almost two heads taller than Ben, but next to her, Rook looks like a doll. Her biceps are thicker than Rook's entire body. Maybe it's the residual effects of the concussion, but Ben smiles to himself at the thought.

Then his smile is gone, because she's grabbed Rook and thrown him so hard that he's out of sight before Ben can pull himself together.

He's still a little disoriented, but he knows that he needs to be on his feet and doing something to stop her. The problem is that that's easier said than done. Getting to his feet proves to be harder than Ben thought it would be. Not for the first time, he wishes that he had had the foresight to turn on the Omnitrix's voice control before the fight. He can't remember the code for voice recognition mode while trying to stay alive, let alone spit it out well enough for the Omnitrix to actually process his words.
Her fists cut through the air faster than he's ever seen a Tetramand move, not giving him even a moment to stop and think. He's too busy scrambling around and dodging her to even try activating the Omnitrix. Ordinarily, it wouldn't be a problem. He's managed to survive in his human form plenty of times before this, except that now, he's getting tired. If the backup is on its way, it sure is taking its sweet time arriving.

Rapidly, the fight becomes taxing. Not that he would ever admit it, but a part of Ben wishes that he had listened to Rook even once and trained in his human form like he should have. When it comes to fighting, human bodies tire so quickly. The harder it becomes for his muscles to move, the more aggressive the Tetramand seems to become. Ben doesn't know how long he can make it before he's too exhausted to keep dodging. It's been less than a minute, and already, his arms feel heavy, his legs are burning with protest, and he knows that he's landed on his ankle wrong at least a few times now. Still, it's either keep dodging, or test his luck against a colossal fist that must weigh a ton just on its own. He can tolerate the road burn on his palms and the dust causing his eyes to tear up. As long as he keeps moving, all of that is bearable.

And then Ben lets himself be distracted.

Hearing Rook's voice shout his name, Ben looks to the side. It's only for a second, but that's enough. The second that his eyes leave her, the Tetramand has him by the arm and is hauling him off of his feet. It feels like she's ripped his arm out of his socket, and he tries not to think about how her huge hands could snap his body like a toothpick, sinking his teeth into his lower lip in an effort to hold back a scream of pain.

For the second time that day, he's slammed against a wall. Only now, he has his right arm being crushed in her grip. His mouth opens for a shout that doesn't come, choking back tortured tears as she squeezes and Ben hears a resounding crack.

She lets out a grunt as Rook snaps her over the head with his baton. Frustrated, she drops Ben to the ground. He barely has time to recognize what's happening before her fist hits the wall above him, and the shaky structure crumbles like a house of cards. Ben has the sense to bring his hands up just in time to avoid getting his head crushed. His left hand listens to him, but his right arm only twitches before sending a hot flash of pain up his entire arm and the right side of his chest.

The world doesn't slip away from him, but he wishes that it would. Being buried by the wall isn't like how Ben's always seen it portrayed in books and in media. He doesn't black out, only to wake hours later in a hospital with his loved ones worriedly looking over him.

No, instead, he's painfully aware of every second that passes under the mountain of rubble. He was sweating before, but now it's stuffy and boiling hot under the rocks. There's no fresh air, and the air that he does have is so choked with dust that Ben is afraid to breathe it in. His left ankle feels like it's been snapped, and there are rocks digging painfully into the front side of his body, but somehow, his crushed arm still hurts more than anything else. His left arm is pinned in a guarded position above his head, which Ben considers to be a good thing. It's an uncomfortable situation, but it gives him a much-needed inch of space between his face and the rubble. He can't open his eyes, at risk of exposing them to the dust, but at least his head isn't being smothered. At his side, his right arm is pinched against the hard dirt ground by the pile he's buried under. The internal pain is so intense that Ben barely registers the bruises and cuts he has on the outside of his body.

He's had his arm broken before. This doesn't feel like that. It feels a little bit like someone splintered every bone in his arm and twisted the fragments into his muscles as painfully as possible.

And the worst part is, it's not even one of Ben's long-standing enemies who got the honor of
doing this to him. It wouldn't be so humiliating and pathetic if it was Vilgax or Maltruant. Instead, it's a lowlife that he doesn't even know the name off.

Outside, he can hear the fight continuing. He can't tell who's winning, but Ben figures that it's a miracle he can focus enough to hear the fight at all. He's not sure if he's going to pass out from oxygen deprivation or heat stroke first, but whichever it is, he hopes that it happens fast. Being found unconscious is better than being found whimpering and holding back tears. He refuses to let himself cry, but *damn*, does it sound like a good idea. He hasn't cried since he lost Feedback when he was eleven, but this feels worse than that ever did.

He's not sure how long he spends under the rocks. By the time the rubble above him begins to shift, Ben ignores it, convincing himself that it's just wishful thinking.

Fresh air hits him so hard that he actually chokes on it, coughing violently when hands reach between the debris to pull him out. They support his back, coaxing him to sit up. Thankfully, they don't ask him to stand. Ben is pretty sure that any attempt to stand will just end with him right back on the ground.

He can't tell who's holding him, but Rook must have called in backup at some point because there is definitely more than one person around him. There are voices shouting things that Ben doesn't want to listen to, and he can't help but wish that they would all just be *quiet*. His head is throbbing painfully, though Ben can't tell if it's because of the hit he took earlier, or because he's running on dust-fumes instead of clean air.

His eyes don't open, stuck shut with dirt that attached itself to every drop of moisture it could. At some point, someone tries to touch his right arm, only for Ben to react so strongly that they merely fold it over his chest and don't bother trying again.

The person holding him sets him down on what feels like a cot, which is much better for Ben's self-esteem. Being carried on top of being beaten by a low-brow Tetramand was a hard blow to his image for just one day. And with his luck, everyone at the Plumbers' base is going to know about it by the next day.

Using his good arm, Ben keeps his right arm against his chest. He's slowly getting used to the pain, but he's embarrassed to admit that it still has him shaking and hoping that one of the Plumbers brought some form of anesthetic.

Warm hands cradle his head, and Ben does his best to hold still while Rook wipes the build-up of dust and dirt off of his face. He doesn't need to open his eyes to know that it's his partner. Rook's hands are much bigger than his, with a thin coating of fur that would have tickled if Ben was in a playful mood. After a year of being partners, it would be more surprising if he didn't recognize Rook's touch.

He blinks a few times to get the rest of the dirt out of his eyes, grimacing as he looks around. "Jeez, Rook, did you call in the whole base?" He asks dryly. Part of his statement is hyperbolic, but it looks like over half of the Plumbers' base is swarming the destroyed town around them. Personally, Ben is just glad that they made all of the citizens evacuate before moving in.

In the distance, he can see two Plumber Tetramands struggling to hold the female back. She has several nets thrown over her and so many pairs of handcuffs latched to her wrists that Ben quickly gives up trying to make sense of it. Even as she's being corralled into one of the Plumber-grade armored trucks, she's still putting up an incredible fight. Ben knows that female Tetramands are typically stronger than the males, but regardless, the fury and power behind her struggles are *ridiculous.*
"I merely called for backup," Rook informs him, watching the Plumbers struggling to calm the Tetramand down. "Once they assessed the situation, they deemed it necessary to call for further reinforcements. It is a good thing that they did. Your arm is not supposed to look like that."

To this, Ben only nods. He's avoided looking at his arm so far, and he's going to keep it that way. "I'm fine," he says automatically.

It doesn't seem to convince Rook, but Ben can't blame him. He's breathing hard from the effort of not showing how much pain he's in, covered in bruises and cuts and a fine layer of dirt. Rook's Proto-Tool has a blade, and Ben privately wishes that his partner would use it to cut off the crushed limb. It feels so wrong against his chest — as if it's not even a part of his body. If it was gone, the pain would stop.

"Found the anesthesia!" A female Plumber that Ben doesn't know the name of jumps out of the back of the Plumber ambulance with a syringe in hand.

Ben has a moment to think, "oh, thank God," before there's a sharp prick in his good arm. The sedative sets in quickly, and there are people swarming him, hands lifting the cot into the back of the truck, and Rook's worried expression swims in his vision before it all finally goes black.

Waking up isn't how he thought it would be, either. Ben doesn't lay in bed for an hour struggling to regain consciousness. It doesn't happen gently, either. He pries his eyes open and shoots up in bed, heart pounding and struggling to remember how to breathe as he scans his surroundings.

There's an immediate reaction — a swarm of people surrounds him, coaxing him to lay back down, while others check his vitals, make sure that he didn't pull out any of the IVs stuck in his arm, and some of them even shining lights in his eyes and fussing over the small bandages.

It takes Ben a moment to remember that he's kind of a big deal, and that of course, the Plumbers would spare no expense to make sure that the Savior of the Universe is alright. He's in one of the private areas in the Plumbers' infirmary, and the room is filled pretty much from wall-to-wall with doctors and nurses and ranking officers.

He doesn't see Rook, which leaves Ben more unsettled than he would like to admit. Laying on the hospital bed, he feels uncommonly weak, and he could really use a friendly, familiar face. Several times, he's been knocked unconscious in battle before. He's got a few scars and marks from some hard hits he's taken without his alien forms to shelter him. He can vividly remember how it felt to stop breathing, only to have Gwendolyn perform CPR on him and then wake up to a broken arm.

But this isn't like those instances. He isn't going to be able to walk this off any time soon, especially if the thick cast around his ankle has any say in the matter. His arm is limp at his side, feeling foreign attached to his torso, and he doubts that he's going to be allowed to just put it in a sling and wheel out of the infirmary in under an hour.

No one says anything to him. They say plenty of things to each other, with big words that Ben doesn't understand, but no one updates him on his condition or tells him what's going on.

It's frustrating, but he sits back and lets the doctors fuss around him, equal parts alien and human. There are a lot more Galvan than Ben thinks that there should be. He's not sure how long it all takes, but by the time he's allowed to have guests, he's struggling to keep his eyes open.

Of course, his tiredness is immediately forgotten when Gwendolyn rams into him. He bites his tongue to hold back a groan of pain, ignoring the burning sensation shooting up his arm and the
sharp, stabbing pain in his chest.

"Gwendolyn," he wheezes, doing his best not to squirm as he sits up and hugs his cousin back with his good arm. "Jeez, if you're here, how long was I out?" He manages a laugh.

"A few hours." His answer comes from Kevin, who enters the room at a much calmer pace. Still, Ben can't help but be a little pleased by the thinly-veiled worry on his friend's face. "Don't worry, it's not like you were unconscious for days. As soon as your grandpa told us what happened, Gwendolyn teleported us here." He gives his girlfriend an unimpressed look. "Which I told her not to do, I should add. She almost passed out."

Behind him, Rook enters the room last. Ben relaxes at the sight of him. It feels good to have his partner around. "Um, Gwendolyn, are you sure that you should be squeezing Ben like that?" Rook asks, a frown on his face. "He has a lot of bruising on his chest, not to mention the extent of the damage to his arm."

Speaking of his arm, Ben can't wrap his mind around what the doctors were thinking. It's been bandaged, yes, but not very well. Ben isn't sure why that is. The doctors left before he could ask any questions.

At Rook's prompting, Gwendolyn lets go. She backs up quickly, looking alarmed. "Ben, why didn't you say anything?" She moves as though to touch him, only to just as quickly drop her hands. Ben feels bad for worrying her, but he's grateful that she's not fretting over him.

"It's fine, Gwendolyn," he assures her. "Just a, uh, stinging feeling. Whatever painkillers they have me on are working miracles." The faux smile on his face comes like second nature. It doesn't do much to reassure Gwendolyn, but she nods anyway and decides not to press it. To alleviate the tension, Ben clears his throat. "So, uh, where are mom and dad?"

Gwendolyn looks relieved by the change of subject. "Grandpa called them to tell them what happened," she explains. "They both wanted to leave work and come to see you immediately, but he managed to talk them out of it. The Plumbers don't plan on keeping you overnight, Ben. You'll probably be heading home with some strong painkillers tonight."

Ben nods. Privately though, he doesn't think that it makes much sense. His arm has been poorly bandaged and now they're not even going to keep him overnight? He's not a doctor, but he's pretty sure that having his arm shattered is a bit more serious than the way they're treating it. Is there something he's missing? No one is telling him anything, and the people that would tell him don't seem to know anything of substance. He's saved the universe plenty of times — why are they treating him like a child?

"We cannot be here for too long," Rook speaks up to fill the heavy silence. "Magister Tennyson asked Azmuth to come and talk about your accident. He will wish to speak to you alone."

Immediately, Ben feels more awake. He sits up straighter. "Wait. He called Azmuth?" Why? It's not like his Omnitrix arm is the one that got hurt. His left arm is as pristine as always. Other than some cuts and bruises and a faint throbbing sensation when he flexes the muscles, it all feels fine. The Omnitrix looks the same as always — not even a scratch. Why, then, would he care that Ben got hurt?

Kevin shrugs. "Dunno. He wouldn't tell us. It must be something pretty serious, though. They talked about it in private for a long time. Either way, to get Azmuth off of Galvin Prime, you know it's gotta be important."
Instead of replying, Ben only nods. He just hopes that it isn't another interstellar war or a planet in jeopardy something. As confident as he acts, Ben doesn't think that he's going to be much help with his arm the way it is. It's worse than a broken bone, and the last time he had his arm broken, he could barely fight even one of his weaker enemies. As much as he hates to admit it, the serious work is probably going to have to wait until he heals up.

'If you heal up,' he reminds himself petulantly.

Ben doesn't like to think about those negative emotions. Heroes don't have self-worth issues. He writes it off as just a part of being a teenager and something he'll eventually grow out of. Still, if he can't use the Omnitrix, then what does that make him? What if he's never able to use it again? What if Azmuth is only here to take it away and give it to someone more worthy?

He pushes the thoughts to the back of his mind, doing his best to ignore them. He's supposed to be a hero. The only reason he's injured in the first place is that he wasn't using the Omnitrix.

Without it, he really isn't anything more than a reckless kid.
The silence between the four of them is unnaturally awkward.

Ben doesn't know what to do. He's never had this problem before. He and Gwendolyn have been close since they were kids. Kevin is like a brother to him. And, usually, he and Rook can carry on meaningless conversations for hours if nothing interrupts them. Why isn't anyone talking? He wishes that he could get up and pace the room, but the thick brace around his ankle tells Ben that that's a bad idea. And even if he could, pacing wouldn't make the atmosphere any less tense.

A part of him almost wants a minute alone with Kevin to talk about what happened. Gwendolyn would be sympathetic, and Rook would be a good listener, but Kevin has always had the tough-love approach when it comes to Ben. It's something that he's always privately appreciated, even if the two of them don't talk about their feelings very often. The only thing that stops him from doing it now is the bitter reminder that he can't ignore these feelings if he's talking about them.

Rook finally starts to say something, only to be cut off as the door to the hospital room slides open with a mechanized whir.

It isn't surprising to see Azmuth at the threshold. He walks in without a word, and Grandpa Max pokes his head in after him. He manages a sympathetic smile. "Alright, kids, come on. You three can come right back in once Azmuth is done talking to Ben."

Despite the reassurance, there's hesitance on his friend's faces. None of them move for a long moment, but Gwendolyn finally stands up and walks towards the door. Kevin follows her, and Rook gives Ben a quick glance over his shoulder before going with the two of them.

Ben was expecting Grandpa to stay, but to his surprise, the door shuts with him still on the outside. He feels an odd wave of nervousness. Whatever Azmuth is here for, it isn't something to joke about.

The Galvan hops up onto Ben's hospital bed, carefully navigating over his right leg before settling down on top of his knee. There's a bruise just below his kneecap on that leg, but Azmuth is so light that Ben barely feels it.

They're both silent for a long moment. Ben wants to cross his arms to feign casualness, but he can't do that without causing himself more pain. He thinks about what to do to show his impatience. Eventually, he settles for laying back against the metal headboard and letting out a huff. "What is it, Azmuth? The Omnitrix is fine, you know. Not even a scratch." He holds it up so Azmuth can see.

"I know." The First Thinker spares the Omnitrix only a courtesy glance. Confused, Ben slowly lowers his arm, and Azmuth continues. "I came to you because your grandfather thought that it would be better for you to hear the news from me. To put it bluntly, if we leave your arm the way it is now, it's going to become infected and leave your body weak, at the very least leaving you incapable of fighting. Inflammatory response has already started, but the treatment we gave you while you were unconscious should prevent a systemic infection. But if that infection does spread to the rest of your body, there will be nothing that the medicine here on Earth can do about it." He pauses, making sure that Ben is still following along. "The first option is an amputation. They were
going to do it as soon as you were brought in, but your grandfather called me for my opinion on the situation before they could. It will be a clean procedure, but it goes without saying that the missing limb will affect your aliens. You can get a prosthetic, but I can't promise ever perfecting a way for it to sync with your Omnitrix and change with your transformations. Likely, it would fall off every time you changed. I don't think I need to tell you how painful that would feel."

The implication makes Ben grimace, fighting back a shudder. "Yeah, I get the picture…" he suddenly perks up. "But what's the second option?"

Azmuth doesn't answer him immediately. He studies Ben for a long minute, searching for something, before finally nodding. "It's… experimental," he admits. "Galvan medical practices are highly advanced, but most of them have never been developed to work on other species. It would be a long process, but it is possible for us to fix your arm. Probably."

With a scowl, Ben curls up around his arm protectively. "Probably?" He narrows his eyes. "What's the catch?"

Surprisingly, Azmuth smiles. The expression looks cartoonish on a face so used to centuries of scowling. "'The catch' is that we don't have the technology available on Earth to perform the operation. You'll have to be willing to stay on Galvan Prime for two to three months while we attempt to repair all of the damage to your bones," he explains. "And when I say 'stay on Galvan Prime,' I mean it. There will be no leaving the planet for anything. Not even if Vilgax chooses to invade Earth while you're away. In the state you're in, I doubt you would be much use in a fight anyway, not to mention that you would only be making your condition worse by doing so."

"You should think it through. Carefully. This isn't a fight where your good luck will save you if you blunder head first into a trap. Make a decision before those painkillers wear off and infection begins to set in. I can't create an entirely new arm for you if you manage to ruin that one." He stands up and hops off the bed, walking over to the door while he grumbles under his breath.

"Hey, Azmuth?" Ben speaks up before he can tell himself not to. "I'll be okay, you know."

The Galvan blinks, then scowls at him. "I'm not worried about you. I'm worried about the safety and well-being of the rest of the universe if you never recover from this."

Ben smiles back. "Of course you are." He watches Azmuth leave the room quietly, an odd feeling of fondness in his chest. He's known Azmuth for years now — and as intelligent as he is, he's still a terrible liar. It's nice to know that the creator of the Omnitrix cares about him, even if he'll never admit it.

After Azmuth's departure, Ben has to wait for less than a minute for his friends to come back in. This time, Gwendolyn doesn't hug him, hovering off to the side of his bed and struggling not to show concern on her face. Kevin puts a hand on her shoulder, silently doing his best to be comforting.

"I hope that your talk with Azmuth was about ways to heal your arm," Rook says, standing off to his side. "We are doing all we can to keep Blukic and Driba as far from you as possible, but I cannot say how long it will be until they get tired of our distractions and come searching for you."

Picturing it, Ben manages a laugh. "No, it's fine, Rook. I talked with Azmuth about my options," he tells them reassuringly.

Hearing this, Gwendolyn perks up. "You did? What did he say?" She bites her lip nervously. "I mean, with all of the technology Galvans have mastered, healing your arm shouldn't be impossible,
Well, he has to tell them at *some point*. Ben takes a deep breath. "Yeah, about that…"

Overall, the news is handled surprisingly well. Gwendolyn is immediately in support of Ben going to Galvan Prime for medical care, whereas Kevin is a little hesitant, but promises to call and stay updated on his condition. From someone as aloof as Kevin, the offer is touching, even if neither he nor Ben will admit that.

Most surprisingly, is that Rook says nothing. He listens to Ben's explanation in silence, thoughtful, but doesn't add his own opinion like the other two. Privately, Ben can't help but wonder why that is. He doesn't ask about it since Gwendolyn and Kevin are around, but he makes a mental note to question Rook later. Usually, he has plenty of things to say, especially when he thinks that Ben is going to make a stupid choice.

The four of them talk for a little while more before Grandpa Max comes in with a wheelchair and tells Ben that he's clear to go home. It still feels weird to have his arm loosely bandaged and not responding to any of his urges to move it, but Ben understands why that is. The numbing agents are so strong that he can't feel how broken it is. He's either going to get it removed or go to Galvan Prime for a long surgery, but either way, it would be pointless to give it a proper cast and mold.

In the end, he hugs Gwendolyn with one arm and gives Kevin a fistbump in parting. They'll be staying with her parents for a few days, just while Ben makes his decision, before heading back to her college. Gwendolyn jokes about not having an interstellar service for her cell phone, and while it doesn't really help get his mind off of what happened, Ben appreciates the effort anyway.

The Plumber infirmary had changed him into a patient's smock while he was unconscious. Ben is eternally thankful that Rook keeps a spare change of clothes in his Plumber dorm for him, for those messy missions. Dressing one-handed is kind of annoying, not to mention that he has to keep stopping whenever he jostles his useless arm, but he isn't about to wander around in a hospital robe. Being carried is embarrassing enough as it is.

"C'mon, Rook, the wheelchair is bad enough, but do you *seriously* have to pick me up?" Ben scowls up at his partner from where he's sitting in his wheelchair.

Ignoring his protests, Rook picks him up with annoying ease and sets him in the passenger seat of the Proto-TRUK in one smooth motion. It doesn't last long, but that's hardly the point. "I am sorry," Rook says, though he doesn't sound apologetic in the slightest as he buckles Ben in, "but with your injured ankle and arm, it would be rude of me to let you get into the truck yourself. Knowing you, you would probably break your other arm trying." It's supposed to be a joke, but the bitter expression on Rook's face gives his words a hollow feeling.

Ben crosses his good arm over his chest, keeping himself quiet while Rook folds up the wheelchair and sets it in the truck next to him. Finished with that, he gets into the driver's seat and presses the button to turn his truck into a space cruiser. The hatch to the docking bay opens with mechanized clanking, and the truck shoots out into the vacuum of space. They do have a teleporter for instant access to Earth, but personally, Ben thinks that it's only because Rook enjoys reentry. Not to mention, getting a ship through the teleporter is a hassle, to say the least. It takes so long that it basically renders the teleporter useless since the point of it is to move quickly.

It's always nerve-wracking to enter the Earth's atmosphere, but the Proto-TRUK handles it with
A part of Ben is desensitized to all of the amazing things that happen in space, but he still finds it impressive that they can go from a spaceship to a nondescript truck in a matter of seconds.

Even though the outside of the truck is probably still burning from the heat of reentry, it's not long until they're driving down the street towards Ben's house. They travel at exactly the speed limit thanks to Rook's careful driving. If Ben notices that Rook is even more attentive and aware of the road than usual, he doesn't comment on it.

Soon, they're pulling into his driveway. Rook barely has the truck parked before the front door opens. Ben reaches over himself to open the passenger door with his good arm, twisting his body so that his legs are dangling outside of the truck. He sits there for a moment, unsure. He can't really get himself out of the truck, can he? It's more annoying than Ben is willing to admit. The Hero of Earth can't even get out of a car on his own. How pathetic is that?

"Let me help you out, Ben," his dad says, grabbing his wheelchair and unfolding it for him. He sets it down on the ground, carefully supporting Ben and helping to lower him down into the seat. The sun is low on the horizon, and Ben is thankful for the dim lighting. It helps hide the embarrassed flush to his face.

"Oh, careful, Carl." His mom kneels down to be level with Ben's height, fussing over his hair and clothes and trying not to fiddle with the bandages. "Sweetie, are you okay? I mean, obviously you're not, but how's your emotional state? You can talk to Carl and me about anything, Ben."

If it was possible, Ben would have gone redder at the attention from his mom. He knows that he's in bad shape, but both of his parents have always been about treating him like an "equal" instead of a son. That doesn't apply when he's hurt. When he came home with a broken arm, they almost banned him from hero work entirely. "C'mon, mom—" He protests.

"Sandra," she corrects him gently, a patient expression on her face. It's a losing battle. She's been trying for nearly a decade to get Ben to stop calling her "mom," and it isn't going to happen any time soon.

"Mom, I'm fine," Ben stresses. Being incapacitated is bad enough without his parents treating him like a child. "Really! I've handled things tougher than this before, I promise."

Carl raises an eyebrow. "You have? Like when?"

Ben blinks. "Uh…" Stopping an Incursion and a Tetramand invasion at the same time, finally defeating Malware after five years, and going back in time to set off The Big Bang and make sure that the universe is created in the first place, are all more difficult than dealing with a busted arm. But he only tells his parents about his most tame victories. He's already on thin ice when it comes to hero work for coming home with such an injury. Telling them about all of the impossible things he's dealt with won't win their favor. "For starters, how about right now?" He settles on. Using his good hand, Ben pushes the wheel of his chair, but that only results in turning him to the right.

Next to him, Rook quickly bites back a smile and, thankfully, doesn't start laughing. He grabs the handles behind the wheelchair, pushing Ben towards the front door while his parents follow behind them. "It is probably not a good idea to try and push yourself with only one working arm, Ben," he says with something that might have been humor if it wasn't so forced.

"If I was any less mature, I swear I would go Four Arms just to spite you," Ben shoots back, tilting his head to look up at his partner.

Rook raises an eyebrow. "Then it is a good thing that you are not nearly reckless enough to do
something that immature. But I will admit, I am surprised that you have a limit."

Biting back an indignant reply, Ben sinks down lower in the wheelchair. Rook's statement is certainly something he would normally say, but there's no feeling behind it. There's not the usual lightly mocking tone that he uses to tease Ben. It sounds rehearsed. Ben wishes that he could tell what's wrong.

Apparently, he's as bad at being a good friend as he is at being a hero.

Once inside, Sandra goes to the kitchen to finish cooking dinner. Familiar with their house, Rook wheels Ben up to the dining table and moves one of the chairs out of the way for him. The kitchen is separated from the dining room by an open archway, making it easy for the four of them to keep talking while dinner finishes.

A sniff of the aroma from the kitchen causes Ben to grimace. "Ugh, mom, what are you cooking? It smells awful."

Unfazed, she begins spooning everything out evenly onto four plates. "It's vegan week, Ben," Sandra replies. "We're having a kale, black bean, and avocado burrito bowl. Gluten-free, too! It's good for you."

Ben props his elbow up on the table, resting his chin in his hand with a scowl. "That doesn't make it good for my taste buds…" He mutters.

As he takes his seat at the head of the table, Carl clears his throat. "So, Ben, are the Plumbers going to be able to do anything about your arm? It doesn't look like they cast it properly. Based on what dad told us, it sounded pretty serious." His face creases with a worried frown.

Unsure, Ben spares a glance at Rook. His partner is no help, merely offering a shrug before sitting at the other end of the table, across from Carl. If Rook is trying to teach a lesson on personal responsibility, then Ben really wishes that he could wait and teach it later.

"Uh, yeah… I have a few different options." Ben says finally. He sits back, dropping his arm to his side to drum his fingers against his thigh. It calms him down to have something to fiddle with. "I can get the arm amputated and get a prosthetic, but that means that I'll pretty much be out of the hero business."

His parents aren't exactly ecstatic that their son is risking his life daily by fighting aliens, but they know how important it is to him and how much good he does. Hearing this news causes Carl's frown to deepen. "Is there a second option?" He prompts for Ben to continue.

"Well, there's one other choice, unless I want to leave a dead arm hanging to my torso." It's a horrible attempt at a joke — Ben can't even be bothered to try and pretend that that went over well. He can almost feel his mom cringe from the kitchen. "You and mom remember Azmuth, right? I told you about him. He's the guy who created the Omnitrix. And, uh, he offered to let me stay on his homeworld for an, um, experimental surgery. It's not exactly something that's been developed for humans, but there's no procedure on Earth that can fix a shattered bone, so if there's any hope of fixing it, it'll be these guys."

Sandra sets his plate of food down in front of him with more force than necessary. Her lips are pressed into a thin line as she serves everyone, only speaking up once she's sat down across from Ben. "'Experimental surgery?' She takes a bite of her meal with no hesitation. Personally, Ben is having a little trouble buying that the substance on his plate is edible. "I'm not sure that I like the sound of that, Ben… How long would you be gone?"
Since this is mostly about getting his parents to agree to let him go, Ben forces himself to take a forkful of beans and swallow. His mom looks subtly pleased. "Azmuth said that it would be about two months… or more," he admits.

His parents share a look. "Two months?" Carl asks as he takes a small bite of his meal. He does an excellent job of covering his distaste. "That's an awfully long time to be away from home, Ben. We're not even sure if this surgery is going to work."

"But think about it, Carl," Sandra says before Ben can speak up. "You heard him, this is the only other option! And an amputation…" Her face pales, gaze fixating on Ben's limp arm. "Even if it's an experimental surgery, I think we owe it to Ben to go through with it if that's what he really wants. He's risked his life enough times for Earth that he deserves to take this one risk for himself."

She reaches over and takes Carl's hand, giving a fond squeeze. They gaze at each other in a way that makes Ben shift uncomfortably and look down at his plate.

After a moment, Carl sighs. Ben risks a glance up at them. His parents are looking at him now instead of each other, though their hands are still entwined. At least that's a little bit better. "Well… alright. But—" he continues before Ben can get too excited, "—there's going to be a few conditions. First, we're going to talk at least once a week. If this planet is as advanced as you say, then they can find some way to get us in contact with you, can't they?"

Ben nods, smiling with relief. "Yeah, definitely. It won't be a problem, dad." Not for the first time, he's glad that his parents are so relaxed about his hero life. He can manage a phone call if it lets him stay on an alien planet.

"And when we do call," Sandra picks up where her husband left off, "I want complete honesty from you, Ben. If you're having problems with the surgery or feeling homesick, I want you to tell us. We don't tolerate lying in this house or on other planets. Understood?"

Practically giddy now, Ben holds up his left hand. "Scout's honor," he replies solemnly. "When it comes to you guys, consider me completely transparent."

His dad smiles a little, though his expression quickly becomes serious again. "Last thing. We want Rook to go with you," he says.

To Ben, it seems a little unnecessary to say that. He hasn't even considered that Rook might not be joining him. His partner, on the other hand, looks very taken aback by the request.

Half of Rook's plate is cleaned, and his cheeks are stuffed to match his bulging eyes as he stares at Ben's dad. Rook swallows hard, struggling for another few seconds to find his words. "Sir?" He manages finally. "You want me to go with Ben? Why?" Ben sends a glare his way that Rook doesn't acknowledge. Why is he so surprised? They go everywhere together.

"Of course we do." Sandra seems equally as confused as Ben is, though her expression is much kinder and more patient. "You and Ben are practically inseparable. He speaks very highly of you, you know."

Ben burns red all the way to the tips of his ears. "Mom," he whines, giving her a pleading, desperate look. She chuckles but thankfully doesn't continue.

"Our point is," Carl continues, interrupting the awkward lull in the conversation. "You've been Ben's partner for a little over a year now. He's going to be on an unfamiliar planet for months, and I think we would all feel a little better about this situation if he had someone around that he knows
and trusts. I can't think of anyone better for the job than you."

Rook opens his mouth, only to just as quickly snap it shut. He looks conflicted for a moment before his expression smooths over and becomes indifferent. "I am honored," he replies with a voice that says the exact opposite. "I will let Magister Tennyson know that the trip has been decided and he can get in contact with Azmuth. Excuse me, I will do that now." He stands up, pushing his chair in before leaving the dining room. Ben stares after him, baffled. Rook is never rude enough to leave in the middle of a meal. And he loves Sandra's cooking almost as much as he loves Grandpa Max's. If Ben could walk, he would have been right on Rook's heels for that little stunt.

His parents, not noticing the odd behavior, continue on their conversation. "Ben, do you know what the weather on this planet is like? If it's cold, we might have to go out and get you a heavier jacket," Sandra says. "We have to start packing as soon as we're done with dinner! The sooner you get there, the sooner you can be coming back. And, oh, we'll have to get notice of absence from the high school..."

Her voice fades into the background, becoming white noise as soon as it hits Ben's unresponsive ears. His expression suddenly hardens into one of determination. He doesn't know what's wrong with Rook, but whatever it is, this time alone on Galvan Prime is the perfect opportunity to find out.

Not that being sensitive and understanding has ever been one of Ben's talents.

Chapter End Notes

The offer from the last chapter's author note still stands, for those interested.
Thankfully, both of Ben's parents have work the next morning. He loves his parents, really, but after his mom kept him up well-past midnight packing something for every possible situation and fretting over him, he doesn't want to bring them along to actually see him off. His dad was a lot more subdued, but if he presses his luck anymore, Ben is pretty sure that their concerns will bubble over and end with them deciding to be safe and ban him from going after all.

Grandpa cleared Rook to go with him without hesitation. Ben finds the idea that Rook wouldn't be able to go funnier than anything. He has the rank of Magister now, but other than that, Rook doesn't have any Plumber assignment other than being Ben Tennyson's partner. As soon as he graduated, they were pretty much signed up together. Not that Ben is complaining. He can't imagine how different things would be if he didn't have Rook with him.

The day after dinner with his parents, Rook shows up on his doorstep at seven in the morning. "The teleporter will be sending us off in an hour," he says in response sleepy scowl on Ben's face when he opens the door. "I did not want to be late. Azmuth will not appreciate it if we keep him waiting."

Ben sighs, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Yeah, alright... I probably should have set an alarm."

Luckily, he slept in his clothes last night, so there's no need to waste time by getting dressed. He's also managed to get the hang of pushing himself around in the wheelchair. It's a bit of a workout, but since his right foot isn't the injured one, he can use it in juncture with his left hand to slowly meander his way forward. It's better than spinning in circles or uselessly waiting around for someone to push him. Ben is getting pretty tired of letting himself be useless.

"Here, come in." He twists himself around and pushes himself forward into the house. Rook follows silently, shutting the door behind him. "Do you think they'll have more painkillers on Galvan Prime? The one they gave me yesterday is starting to wear off." He says with a grimace. It's not that distracting yet. Mostly, it's only an annoying throb every time Ben moves. The thought of how many nerves he's destroyed makes him cringe.

"I am sure that they will have plenty of painkillers," Rook reassures him on impulse more than any actual interest in the conversation. Like the night before, he's distracted and distant. "Are you packed? Your mother seemed very excited about getting you ready for an extended stay on an alien world."

Ben rolls his eyes. "Yeah, and she wasn't joking. She wanted me to bring my entire closet in case they didn't have washing machines. I need your help unpacking half of the things she gave me. I tried after she went to bed, but, uh... it was harder to do than I thought it would be," he admits. Moving is still awkward for him, let alone trying to do it silently with his parents in the room next to him.

Instead of pointing out that Ben shouldn't have been surprised by that, Rook only nods. He's a good friend like that. Ben really doesn't need to be reminded by anyone else that he's in a "fragile" state. "As long as it does not take too long, it is not a problem," Rook agrees.

In the end, it takes a while.

When propositioning Rook for his help, Ben might have neglected to mention that he ended up
tearing open every suitcase and dumping the contents out all over his room. It might have been a manageable mess had he been able to use both his hands while making it, but one handed and struggling to move in a straight line doesn't exactly help keep a room from getting messy.

Rook grumbles to himself the entire time they sort through the mess, and when all is said and done, they have to leave most of it where it already is on the ground. His mom had packed two umbrellas, every pair of socks that he owns, and everything from hairpins to activity books for when he gets bored. When he gets back, Ben is probably going to have to use XLR8 to scrub the house from top to bottom before his mom forgives him for this, but he really doesn't need to bring a lamp or a toaster with him, regardless of what she says. She tried giving him a house plant to help "brighten up the area." It was almost funny, except that it started becoming borderline embarrassing and sad sometime after she went and got a fourth suitcase from her room to put everything in. He only needs a bag with a few changes of clean clothes.

Of the allotted hour they had to get to the Plumber base on time, only five minutes are actually spent getting there. They were originally planning to say goodbye to Gwendolyn and Kevin first, but that didn't quite make it into the schedule. The last two minutes before eight o'clock pass with a frenzied rush (mostly on Rook's part) to get to the teleporter in time. It's in the rebuilt Max's Plumbing where the old entrance to the base used to be, but even though that's only a few miles away, Rook's driving shortens that time down to a mere minute.

Ben carries most of their luggage on his lap, doing his best not to let them aggravate any of the deeper bruises on his front. What Rook could have possibly packed, he has no idea, but it feels like his two heavy-duty suitcases are crammed with bricks. While Ben does his best to hold everything one-handed, Rook pushes him and mutters in his native language under his breath. It's better than if he was using contractions, even if Ben is pretty sure that a lot of what he says is curse words jammed together.

"There you two are!" Grandpa says as they teleport directly into the hub of Plumbers HQ mere seconds before they would be considered late. "I was starting to wonder if something happened. You don't usually cut it this close, Rook."

Still a bitter about the whole thing, Rook gives Ben a pointed look. "My apologies, Magister. It will not happen again."

Ben smiles sheepishly, but before he can utter out his hundredth apology in the last five minutes, the big-screen monitor in the center of Plumbers communications turns on. Azmuth's face takes up most of it, misleading with its size.

"I'm surprised you're not late," Azmuth says with a bored expression. "Stand clear of any important equipment and I'll teleport you both here when you're ready. After that, our best Galvan doctors will begin examining your arm and you'll be in surgery as soon as possible."

Sometimes, Ben finds that being on the good side of the most intelligent being in three galaxies can be pretty convenient. Galvan Prime is 76,000 light years from Earth. Ben doesn't need to be a scientist to know that that's a lot of miles to travel by regular means. He lets Rook pull his chair into the center of the room, giving themselves a wide area. The last time Azmuth teleported them, it ended up with a truck cut in half. They don't want to do that to any expensive equipment.

"While you're gone, Ben, I don't want you to worry about a thing," Grandpa Max says, putting a hand on his grandson's shoulder. He's trying to be comforting, but he's acting like Ben is ten-years-old again and having nightmares about an unnamed monster with a squid for a head. "We'll do everything we can to keep the press from finding out about your trip. All you need to do is focus on healing."
As much as he hates being talked to like that, Ben manages a smile. "Thanks, Grandpa." He waits for his grandfather to move back, then musters up some excitement and uses his left hand to give Azmuth a thumbs up from behind the pile of luggage on his lap. "Ready! Beam us up!"

Like the trip to Plumbers HQ, teleportation leaves his body feeling tingly and a little disoriented. It's a bit like an electric shock, rushing over his skin for only a few seconds and leaving him buzzed. It catches him off guard, how quickly they arrive on Galvan Prime. Maybe he's not smart enough to process it, but Ben's mind feels stretched thin just trying to picture that a second is all it takes to travel to an entirely different planet halfway across the galaxy.

Before he can think too long on it, the luggage is lifted from his lap. A female Galvan is using some sort of telekinetic ray gun to lift the heavy items with ease and gives him a smile and a nod when she notices him. Ben doesn't see Azmuth, but a group of Galvans is quick to push his chair forward, easily maneuvering him towards what he assumes to be the medical ward. When Azmuth said that they would be examining his arm once he arrived, Ben didn't think that he meant immediately.

He twists around in his seat, managing a half-hearted wave at Rook before the door they push him through shuts silently behind him. Hopefully, Rook is only going to be shown to their rooms. He's a guest too, after all.

After that, Ben quickly loses track of everything that's happening.

He understands when they remove the bandages around his arm. At the sight of the red and swollen limb, Ben grimaces, but the Galvans aren't phased. They stick him with a lot of needles and hold up machines to him that Ben can't even begin to guess the function of. The readings must be telling them something useful because not one of them looks concerned or worried in the slightest.

They have him strip for a full-body scan and physical examination, which is ridiculously thorough, but brief. He gets a new hospital smock made of thin cloth. Compared to the stainless-steel life they lead, the sight of fabric is almost ridiculous. Regardless, that's the last thing that makes any sort of sense to Ben.

Mostly because, after that, one of the Galvans gives him a shot of a thick, purple-tinted liquid in his injured arm. It makes the veins tingle, leaving an itchy path all the way from the injection site to his heart as every beat pumps the strange material through his body. Ben tries to scratch where he can reach, but his body won't move when he wants it to. Instead of panicking, Ben relaxes as numbness sweeps over him. When unconsciousness finally comes, he doesn't even try to fight it.

Ben isn't sure how the planet of the smartest beings in the galaxy could be boring, but it's a truly remarkable achievement.

After he wakes up, he spends a lot of time doing nothing. As rushed as the Galvans were to have him in surgery and healing immediately, things really don't move that fast. Mostly, it's a lot of him laying there and staring up at the ceiling while they study his arm and the rest of his body. Azmuth has supplied them with some texts from Earth on human biology, but that's pretty much immediately scratched when the Galvans consider it "intellectually lacking" and insist on doing their own research.

Any nutrients his body needs is pumped into his bloodstream via IV while another one filters the toxins from his blood, so he doesn't need breaks to go to the bathroom or eat. He never thought that technology like that could be dull, but if Ben had both arms working, he would definitely be
crossing them and sulking.

Like the Plumber infirmary on Earth, no one tells him anything. To be fair, he probably wouldn't understand it even if they did — but it's his arm, and he would at least like to be updated on the status sometimes. Instead, Ben drifts in and out of medically-induced sleep and occasionally reminds them to give him another dose of painkillers. It's a lot of waiting, really. Waiting and hoping.

And then when Ben opens his eyes after yet another surgery, he's in a bedroom.

He grimaces, feeling a headache developing immediately as he sits up. His right arm has been bandaged properly and put in a sling, most likely so that he doesn't feel the need to flail and slam it against the wall or something stupid like that. Azmuth probably told them that he's reckless enough to end up doing that, too. Ben would be mad, but he can't exactly blame them. The most annoying thing is that they kept him in the hospital-style smock. He's never appreciated pants this much before.

The bedroom he's in has obviously been developed to be human-sized. It's huge by Galvan standards, but if he were to put his hand up and stand on his toes, he would be able to touch the ceiling. The windows are small and closer to the ground than the ceiling, low enough that he would have to stoop down to peer through it. At least they got the furniture right. There are two beds, the other presumably for Rook, with nightstands next to them that kind of remind him of something that would be found in a motel. Maybe they have a Bible in one of the drawers to complete the setup. His bag is at the foot of his bed, with Rook's more neatly packed suitcases next to his own.

It's not very homey, but the bed is pretty soft, and anything's better than the cold examination table he's been sleeping on for who knows how long. He hopes that Rook knows what day it is. If it's been more than a week, his parents are going to kill him for not getting in touch.

As if responding to his thoughts, the bedroom door slides open with a mechanized whir, and Rook ducks his head to enter the room. He's so tall that there's barely an inch between the top of his head and the ceiling. Ben can't help but be a little amused. Though, before he can make a joke about it, he notices what Rook is holding.

"Is that… food? Like, actual solid food and not something I need to take through an IV?" It looks like a bowl of small, purple gelatin balls, but the fact that there's a spoon sticking out of it gives Ben some sort of hope. Even alien food would be a relief at this point.

Rook nods, handing the bowl to Ben. "Yes, it is the normal lunch here. I have already had mine. I was not sure if you would be awake when I got back, but the Galvan were perfectly willing to spare a bowl for Ben Tennyson. It is not like they have a shortage of food." He's still in that weird, not-happy mood, but Ben figures that he can hold off on interrogating his partner long enough to eat.

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The balls are gummy and have a crunchy center, and Ben does himself a favor and refuses to take a close look at them while he shoves spoonfuls into his mouth. He knows that he'll be able to choke them down better if he doesn't know what they're made of. "What day is it? They didn't exactly keep a calendar in the examination room," Ben chuckles.

Pulling out his Plumber's badge, Rook frowns. "I have set my badge for Galvan time already, but it has been two days here since I have last seen you." He pauses. "That is about five days on Earth, since I doubt you know how long it takes for this planet to rotate."
Ben scowls defensively. "Hey, it's not like I ever needed to know! At least I know that they have three moons!"

"They have four moons," Rook corrects automatically. "If you ever get bored, I do have resources on Galvan Prime for you to study. It is a fascinating subject and you could benefit from doing a little research into their culture since we are staying here."

It's tempting to refuse simply out of spite, but Ben knows very well that Rook has a point. And with any luck, maybe learning something about Galvan Prime will make his partner act like himself again. He hasn't made eye-contact with Ben once since he walked into the room. No matter how much Ben racks his mind for something he might have done to offend his partner, nothing comes up. Why is he so upset?

"...yeah, alright," Ben mutters, sinking down in the bed. "Maybe later. Do you know why they let me out of surgery? They're not telling me anything, but maybe that's because I was unconscious for most of what they did." He's lost his appetite by this point, but he keeps eating to have something to do.

"From what I can tell, they want to practice their methods on a model before performing the more complex surgeries on your real arm. Until then, the doctors recommended a lot of rest and that you try to limit yourself. That means, stay put as well as you can." He hesitates, thinking something over, and then leans over to open the nightstand by his bed. He reaches inside and, instead of pulling out a Bible, he holds up a glass jar of clear liquid. It has writing on it, but it looks more like hieroglyphics than anything Ben could even attempt to understand. "They also recommended this. It is for the minor cuts and bruises you have. They can accelerate the healing of your ankle on their own and your arm is going to need more care than a salve can provide."

Interested, Ben sets his now empty bowl off to the side. "A healing salve?" The minor injuries aren't affecting him much, but if there's a way to speed up the healing, then he doesn't see anything wrong with taking it. The only good takeaway from the failed fight in Undertown is that at least his face is unharmed. Not a scratch or a bruise — the way it should be. "Yeah, sure. I can do that." He holds out his hand for Rook to give him the jar.

To his surprise though, Rook shakes his head. "Ben, you are injured. I do not think that you should be applying this yourself. The doctors did say that you should be limited to as little physical activity as possible."

Ben rolls his eyes. "C'mon, Rook. If I can dress myself, I can apply some weird alien ointment. It won't even be hard." True, it hadn't been fun to dress before. It had mostly been a headache. Even so, he isn't going to start letting people do everything for him just because he's injured.

"Yes, dressing yourself is a great example of what you should not be doing. You might accidentally pull something and make this worse on yourself. I am your partner, Ben. It really is not asking too much to let me take care of you if that is what you are afraid of."

Rook frowns, unconvinced. "Yes, dressing yourself is a great example of what you should not be doing. You might accidentally pull something and make this worse on yourself. I am your partner, Ben. It really is not asking too much to let me take care of you if that is what you are afraid of."

Had his wheelchair been in the room, Ben would have climbed in it and wheeled over to Rook to kick him in the shin. "What? No, dude, this has nothing to do with that, I swear. I want to take care of myself. I'm not helpless," he argues.

"I did not say that you are." Rook crosses his arms stubbornly. "But I am saying that, right now, it is better in the long run if you stop trying to prove something and let me take care of you. That is part of the reason why I am here."

"No," Ben shoots back, "you're here because you're my friend, not a nanny. I've saved the
entire universe before! I think I can handle applying a stupid salve!" A part of him can't believe that they're seriously going to argue about this. Why doesn't anyone believe that he can take care of himself?

"And how many times have you saved the universe with no help?" Rook raises an eyebrow, unamused. "From what I remember, you usually have Gwendolyn, Kevin, or myself there to assist you. If you want to see this healing process as another mission, then that is fine. I am still your partner, and I am still going to help you, the same as I always do." He stands up, walking over to Ben's bedside and holding the jar well out of his reach. "Are you going to let me help or not?"

Despite how much he doesn't want to, Ben gives in. As stupid and humiliating and degrading as the experience is, appeasing Rook and getting him in a good mood is starting to seem impossible unless he's willing to put forth extra effort. The fact that this "extra effort" is letting his partner rub healing salve onto his injuries is something that Ben doesn't like to think about. At least Rook isn't rough about it.

He's not sure how awkward this situation is supposed to be for normal people, but Rook doesn't seem to mind. The hospital smock makes it really easy to expose bare skin without the painful process of taking his shirt off over his arm. It unties on each side for easy removal, and since Galvan are a pretty modest and respectful race, it means that he's at least wearing boxers underneath it. Had he not been, Rook wouldn't have had any hope of Ben letting him do this. There's a difference between being shirtless around his partner and being naked. Sure, he trusts Rook, but not that much.

In the past, Ben has had a few different girlfriends, with varying degrees of seriousness. The only person that Ben ever really exposed himself to was Julie. Maybe that's why this is oddly personal for him — it's not as though he makes a habit out of letting people touch his body. That might be why letting Rook do this has a weirdly intimate tone to it. Maybe he's imagining it, but the careful fingers that trace his every scar as if they're somehow important reminds him all too sharply of Julie's soft skin pressed against his and the nights where he would sneak out to hold her.

Overall, the process isn't as bad as he thought it would be. It's largely Ben grumbling to himself while Rook silently applies the salve to old and new scars. He's not sure if it can do much for the old ones, but Rook seems intent on trying, so Ben lets him. When the gel touches his skin, it's ice cold. It quickly starts to burn, turning a pale green color before hardening into a thin, wax-like layer. It's weirdly flexible, too. Ben expects it to be hard and brittle, but when he bends his knee, the gel moves with his joint perfectly fine.

When all is said and done, he looks a little bit like a failed crafts project. Most of his chest is green, but at least all he got there were cuts and bruises instead of a broken rib. Rook doesn't comment on it, tying the garb back into place and stepping back.

"You should sleep," he says after a long moment. "I do not know when they will be ready for your surgery."

Ben huffs, flopping down on his back purely out of spite. The look of disapproval on Rook's face makes the twinge of pain that shoots up his arm worth it. "When are you going to be ready to talk about whatever's got you so upset?" He shoots back. Subtlety has never been his strong suit. He's been as patient as he can stand, and the fact that he made it even two days before giving up is frankly amazing to Ben.

Privately, he's astounded that he's only been injured for two days. It feels like a lifetime.

Rook is quiet for a minute, considering him with a perfectly controlled expression. "That
depends," he says finally. "When are you going to be ready to talk about how this has obviously affected you?"

The question causes Ben to look away. What is he supposed to do? Rook said himself that he used to idolize Ben before meeting him. He's already ruined that by being himself, and he doesn't want to tarnish Rook's perception of him anymore. The Savior of the Universe isn't supposed to be so pathetic. It's bad enough that he let himself get injured in the first place. Talking about his feelings isn't going to do wonders for his hero image.

Though Ben doesn't say anything, that's enough of an answer for Rook. He sets the jar of salve down on his nightstand and exits the room, leaving Ben alone to his thoughts.

So much for trying to make Rook happy.
Chapter 4

On Galvan Prime, the days drag on and on and on. It's not that surprising, considering that their days are twice as long as days on Earth, but even factoring that in, Ben can't believe how long he spends laying around. At least when he broke his arm the first time, he could still walk on his own. Thanks to his broken ankle, that's not really an option. It heals pretty fine on its own, with only occasional x-rays to make sure that things are improving properly, and regular injections to help heal him at a faster rate.

He spends a lot of time being out of it. The Galvans have him taking painkillers almost all the time. The only time he's not on some kind of pill is when he's in surgery, and even then, he's kept unconscious. He tries asking about what the surgery entails a couple of times, and every Galvan he talks to automatically goes off on a tangent seemingly made only of words he doesn't understand. Suffice it to say, he has no idea how his arm is doing. They take the cast off sometimes, only to give him a sling and then cycle back to a cast. Whether that's good or bad, Ben might never know.

Out of the medical center, he mostly tries to pass the time. At first, it's not that hard to distract himself. The Galvans don't have a lot of experience with humans, especially not in a surgical sense, and it's almost creepy how eager they are to help him. Some of them also have a hero-worship thing going on, which Ben does his best to be polite about. It kind of reminds him of the first mission he had with Rook, though. They all call him "sir," and are overly enthusiastic about being helpful.

Bored out of his mind, Ben bugs Azmuth through the communicator in his Plumber's badge until the Galvan finally gets fed up with his badgering and updates his cellphone to be able to take interstellar calls. Since Ben's parents don't have a Plumbers' badge, this keeps them satisfied and he updates them about his status whenever something changes.

However, he isn't entirely honest with them. The occasional white lie helps keep them from panicking. He tells his parents that he's not unhappy, he's not bored, and as far as he can tell, Rook is doing fine, too. It's mostly true. After all, he's not miserable, and sometimes he's not bored, and Rook is eating well and still breathing, so he's doing alright. Whenever Gwendolyn and Kevin call, he feeds them the same half-truths, just in case someone gets the bright idea to compare notes. Ben feels guilty about lying, but he doesn't want his mom's overly-insistent help with this. His partner is upset, and Ben is perfectly equipped to fix it.

That's the plan, anyway.

Ben does eventually cave in and read Rook's resources about Galvan Prime, but it's all pretty much useless information and trivia that he forgets almost as soon as he reads it. It tells him that Galvan Prime is a technocracy, and though he reads the definition of that several times, all he gets is that the people who are good at what they do, get to be in charge of that field. It's supposed to apply to scientific areas, but to Ben, it explains a lot about the way that the Galvans treat him. Instead of acting like he's a celebrity the way that the people of Earth do, the Galvans treat him like a decorated war-hero. And, considering that he's the only person Azmuth considers worthy of wielding the most powerful device in the universe, they would have to be daft not to treat him with respect. Actually, that explains a lot about Albedo, as well as Blukic and Driba.

As "fun" as research is, not being able to leave his bed is still annoying. He suggested getting a one-arm crutch, only for Azmuth to refuse and tell him to "stay put for once." Part of him is convinced that Rook left him without his wheelchair on purpose. As humiliating as it is to wheel himself around in that thing, it would still be a huge improvement compared to laying around and
digging an indent in his bed. The only time he spends out of bed is the bathroom. Somehow, the Galvans have managed to thoroughly automate the entire process, and it's easily the most uncomfortable thing he's ever experienced. Ben tries to avoid it for as long as he can.

He never thought that this partner would be the type for the silent treatment, but it's good to know that they can both be childish. Stubborn as always, Ben does his best to ignore it. One of them has to crack eventually, right? Rook can't spend their entire time here being mad at him.

At one point, Ben does end up on the floor, mostly out of boredom. It doesn't get Rook to talk to him, though. It only earns him an exasperated look and physical contact that only lasts long enough for Rook to get him back on the bed.

For the first few days, Rook applies the healing salve for Ben like he did before. The cuts and bruises heal quickly though, even the deeper ones, and after that, there isn't much of an excuse to interact except for whenever Rook brings food back for him. Ben has no idea where his partner is all day, but it must be a pretty incredible place because Rook is always eager to leave as soon as he can.

Time passes in long, dull stretches with no one to talk to. The first two weeks of this, Ben is annoyed. It's not like he did anything wrong. He's allowed to keep his feelings to himself. With the third week comes self-doubt that has him lying awake at night. He's been trying not to think about it, but the nagging thoughts always seem to come with the sunsets. After all, if he can get himself seriously injured in a fight with a low-level criminal, isn't it also possible that he can lose his best friend over a small disagreement? Is he going to start a pattern of losing from now on? By the fourth week of silence, Ben is officially fed up.

It feels like a breath of fresh air to take the brace off of his ankle. With the accelerated healing available on Galvan Prime, a process that normally takes six weeks is shortened to only four. Rook is out of the room so often that Ben has plenty of time alone to teach his legs to work together again in the big space. The Galvans had offered to help, but Ben had declined. Seeing him fall all over himself probably wouldn't encourage their hero worship of him.

It doesn't take as long as he thought it would. He's not watching a clock or anything, but he can put his full weight on his ankle and walk on it with no problem in a relatively short amount of time. The painkillers they have him on are doing a great job of numbing any pain he experiences though, so that could be clouding his judgment. At least they've finally started lessening the doses. Ben is pretty sure that the sheer amount of drugs they had him on was nearing dangerous levels.

He's practicing jogging in place when Rook finally returns. In his hands, he has a bowl of tasteless, orange mush that Ben has come to recognize as dinner. When Rook sees Ben standing without help, he pauses, visibly surprised.

It's so nice to see him showing emotion. Unrestrained, Ben grins back in response. It almost feels like they're friends again. But almost as soon as he smiles, Rook's expression falls right back into the neutral, robotic look he's been stuck with for a month now. He brushes past Ben without looking at him, settling the bowl of food down on the nightstand.

When he turns to leave, though, Ben finally decides that he's put up with this for long enough. He grabs his partner by the wrist, glaring up at him. "Seriously?" He snaps. "It's bad enough that you've been ignoring me for a month, but after everything you said about wanting to help me, you can't even pretend to be happy that I'm getting better? I don't know if you just didn't notice since you barely take the time to even look at me anymore, but I am walking, Rook! Walking! Standing on my own! I can get from point A to point B at my leisure now, and you're not going to say a single word to me?"
Rook scowls, yanking his hand back as he turns to face Ben fully. "You could have spoken to me at any point, Ben!" It's such a relief to hear his voice that Ben can't even bring himself to care that he's being yelled at. "It is not purely my fault that we have not spoken in this past month. I was giving you your space so that you could heal all on your own. Is that not what you wanted?" The sarcasm in his voice is so thick that Ben has a hard time believing that there was ever a time when Rook was unfamiliar with it.

"Okay, first of all, I didn't say that it was purely your fault. I implied that you definitely started it. And secondly," Ben continues before Rook can cut in, "since when do you care if I wanted to do something myself? You were pretty insistent with that salve situation. I thought you wanted to help!"

His partner starts to reply, only to quickly snap his mouth shut. The two stare at each other for a moment, before something in Ben's thick skull finally clicks. "Oh, you've gotta be— Rook, were you waiting for me to want your help?"

With a huff, Rook crosses his arms, turning his body away from Ben. "...yes, that would have been nice," he grumbles. He spares a glance at Ben and, if the look on his face is any indication, he goes bright red underneath the cover of his fur. "Do not look at me like that! It is a perfectly reasonable thing to want! I was hoping that you would ask for my help again or even ask for company, but—" His statement is cut off when Ben suddenly wraps his working arm around him. It's not a very good hug, but hopefully, Rook gets the message.

He pulls back before his partner can return the gesture, a relieved look on his face. "I can't believe that you wanted me to ask you to play nurse for me," he says with a fond tone.

"I do not see how playing a nursing game is relevant," Rook replies flatly.

Ben chuckles, punching him in the arm gently. The gesture causes Rook's frown to deepen, but at least now he's only confused instead of angry and pouting. "Never change, partner," he says jokingly. "So... does this mean that all is forgiven and you'll stop ignoring me?"

At this, Rook actually hesitates. "Will I stop ignoring you? Yes. I am willing to take my share of the blame for both of our childish actions. However, that does not change what started all of this to begin with." His expression softens. "Ben, you are obviously upset about all that has happened. It is not healthy to hoard these sorts of feelings."

"I'm upset?" Ben asks incredulously. "Dude, I don't think you've even tried smiling since this whole thing started! You're not exactly spilling your heart and soul to me either, you know," he shoots back.

For a moment, Rook looks like he's going to argue. He stares at Ben for a moment, then an odd look crosses his face and he slowly nods. "You are right."

"Hey, you don't have to agree, but—!" He blinks, cutting himself off as Rook's statement slowly sinks in. "I'm... what? Did you say that I'm right?" Ben can't keep the shock off of his face. When was the last time Rook admitted that he was right about anything?

"I did," Rook confirms, though he doesn't look happy about it. "It is not impossible, Ben. You are right. I have not been fair or sincere with you. A partnership is about trust and honesty, which goes both ways." He grabs hold of Ben by his good wrist, leading him over to the bed. Taking a seat on the edge, he pats the spot next to him. "Sit. We will talk about anything you want."

Even though Ben is a little hesitant, he only takes a moment to think before sinking onto the bed
next to Rook. "Okay." He lets out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, pulling his knee up to his chest and wrapping his left arm around it loosely. He rests his chin on his knee, eyeing Rook quizzically. "Alright, uh… we should probably start with why you were so upset about what happened to begin with. I mean, it's not like you were the one who was injured. And your bad mood started way before we got here, so don't try to say that it's not because of that." He makes a face.

Rook looks uncomfortable, but he isn't the type to lie. He lets out a long sigh. "I was… upset with how I handled the situation with the female Tetramand," he admits. "You were only injured because I was a negligent partner. Your file described how you had your arm broken on a mission a little over a year ago when you were partnering with Gwendolyn. I promised myself when we became partners that I would not allow something like that to happen again, and yet it did. Only this time, you were hurt to such an extent that we needed to seek help from another planet to heal you." He shakes his head. "By all accounts, this is my fault. Ben, I am s—"

"If you try to apologize for this, I'm going to make the idiom literal and physically stick your foot in your mouth, Rook," Ben cuts in. He narrows his eyes at his partner, almost daring him to keep talking. When he doesn't, Ben continues. "Look, if we start playing the blame game, we're not going to get anywhere. Trust me, I've done this plenty of times already to last a lifetime. Rook," he sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose, "it's really not your fault. Even if you had been there, did you see her? If you tried to hit her, she probably wouldn't have even noticed. Either way, blaming yourself isn't going to keep the accident from happening and it's not going to get my arm healed up any faster. So… stop it. And if I catch you doing it again, I'll start getting smoothies without you."

To his surprise, Rook laughs, and not a faint chuckle, either. A genuine, side-gripping kind of laugh that makes Ben's chest feel weirdly tight. "Then I will not risk it," Rook jokes back, still grinning as he calms down. "I did not know that you could be so wise, Ben. Even if you finished your statement by mentioning smoothies."

Ben grins. It feels good to be laughing and joking with Rook again. He hadn't noticed before just how much he missed this. "What can I say? It's a part of the Ben Tennyson experience," he chuckles. "But in all seriousness, Rook, please don't start blaming yourself. If you start doing that every time I get hurt or mess up, you're going to be blaming yourself all the time. You're not going to make a habit out of this, are you?" He asks.

"No," Rook shakes his head. "I will not start doing this regularly. But in return, I want you to start taking training in your human form more seriously. You will not always have the Omnitrix to protect you, Ben. I would like you to be able to take care of yourself," he says, looking unusually earnest compared to all the times they've talked about this before.

Although he doesn't like the idea of training without the Omnitrix, Ben relents after a few seconds of thought and nods. "Yeah, alright," he sighs. "I guess a few sparring sessions couldn't hurt." If he spars with Rook, his partner will be smug for about a month, but it's still way better than seeing him pouting.

For a moment, Rook almost looks like he wants to hug him. The weirdest part is that Ben is floored by this epiphany that he might actually want Rook to do that. It only lasts for a second, but it's long enough to leave Ben confused. "I am glad you agree," Rook says, and Ben focuses on his voice to distract himself from his thoughts. "We have talked about my issues, then. What has you so upset?"

Despite himself, Ben can't help but laugh. "Uh, hello? Busted arm? Couldn't walk for a month? I thought that it was all pretty self-explanatory why I'm upset." He's grinning, but not because he's
happy. Partners aren't supposed to lie to each other, but his dismissive answer comes so reflexively that he's almost worried by it.

How can he talk to Rook about it when he can barely let himself acknowledge his own feelings?

Because there's a lot to talk about. There are a lot of things that Ben keeps wrapped up tight in the back of his mind and flat-out refuses to think about. It's easiest not to get muddled down in his thoughts when it's daytime, but they always seem to make themselves known at night. Gwendolyn has always told him that talking about it helps, but how can he possibly put everything into words?

Unsurprisingly, Rook doesn't look convinced. "Ben, your left eye twitches when you lie." He taps the side of his head for emphasis, then takes a deep breath. "I want you to answer this question honestly. How did it feel when you were buried under the rubble?"

Though he tries, Ben can't keep the confused look off of his face. That's all Rook wants to know? He looks away, shrugging dismissively. "I, um… well, it was dark. And really dirty. And…" he risks a glance at Rook and swallows thickly at the unimpressed expression on his partner's face. "...and I felt pathetic. It was so humiliating," Ben groans. "I mean, come on! I've died before! I've faced off against Vilgax, Maltruant, and Malware without blinking! I created the universe twice, Rook! And I get injured by a random Tetramand on a rampage! I'm supposed to be a hero, but look at me! Do I look like a hero to you?"

Catching him off guard, Rook puts a hand on his shoulder. The other cups Ben's chin, carefully tilting his head up so that he's making eye-contact with Rook. "Yes, you do," he replies with such conviction that Ben almost believes him. "You are human, Ben. You cannot get through every fight unscathed. What happened in our last fight was an accident, and you must accept that and move on. You are no less of a hero for this. Everyone makes mistakes, Ben. Especially you." He gives a wry smile.

Ben scoffs, playing pushing Rook away even as he fights to keep his own grin off his face. It's not like Rook single-handedly solved every issue Ben has ever had, but at least for the thing weighing most prominently on his mind, it's a start. "Yeah, okay," he agrees. "I guess we've decided, then. You stop blaming yourself for things that aren't your fault, and I'll work on accepting that I can't be perfect all the time. Deal?" He holds his hand out to shake Rook's.

"It is a deal." They shake hands firmly, and Ben tries not to let his thoughts linger on the way Rook is still holding his hand as he stands up, only letting go once he starts walking away. He crosses the room to Ben's bed, grabbing the dinner that he brought in earlier. "It has gone cold by now," he remarks with a frown. "I will get you a fresh bowl."

"What? Rook, no, c'mon! It's fine if it's cold!" He shouts at his partner. It doesn't deter Rook at all, and he's left the room before Ben can say anything more.

Technically, Ben could go after Rook since he's capable of walking now, but a part of him finds it cute that Rook cares enough to go get warm food. He struggles for a moment about calling another guy "cute," but eventually shrugs it off. It doesn't mean anything. Plenty of people think Rook is cute. Mostly girls, sure, but that doesn't mean anything weird if he feels the same, right?

He doesn't know why the thought makes him feel squeamish. It gets pushed to the back of his mind and tucked away with everything else he doesn't like to dwell on. After a month of treating each other like strangers, Ben has his best friend back. That's enough for one day.
"I have more important things to do than teleport you across the universe whenever you want me to," Azmuth says without looking up from his work. Ben can't tell what he's doing, but the Galvan-sized blowtorch he has is incredibly adorable in his little hands, even if the thing he's working on resembles a warhead. "I'm sure that one of you can fly a spaceship. Get back to Earth yourself."

Rook starts to laugh but manages to bite his tongue when Ben gives him a pointed look. Turning back to Azmuth, Ben holds up both of his hands. The physical therapy for his arm had been more intense than the one for his foot, but then again, they had needed to reconstruct almost all of the nerves in his arm. "Azmuth, come on!" He whines. "You pretty much banned me from going anywhere in your fancy Galvan-center building. If I have to sit in a spaceship for 76,000 light years, I'm going to go stir crazy. I'm all healed up, see? Which means that the sooner I get back to Earth, the sooner I can get back to the superheroing. You know, saving the universe and lots of other planets? Does that ring any bells?"

At the very least, Azmuth stops what he's doing and looks up at Ben. "Yes. It all sounds wonderful," he says sarcastically, not bothering to so much as glance at Ben's arm. "But you are severely underestimating how much energy teleportation takes. Not to mention, too much teleportation can eventually damage your body. My teleporter wasn't designed with humans in mind. Getting home to continue with "superheroing" doesn't qualify as an emergency that I need to waste my resources on."

He turns to get back to work when Ben suddenly smirks. "Aw, are you saying that getting me here for medical treatment was an emergency? I knew you had a heart in there somewhere."

In the end, to keep Azmuth from hating him entirely, Ben gives in and lets Rook drag him off to the shuttle bay. Galvan ships aren't very big, but Azmuth does have a few emergency ones designed for bigger species. It's likely that he foresaw that it would be a problem once he let a human keep the Omnitrix.

Luckily, Rook is good at pretty much everything, including flying spaceships. They put their luggage on the floor with them, since they don't have anything valuable that needs to be strapped down. Sliding into one of the passenger seats, Ben makes sure to buckle his seatbelt. If there's one thing that all species seem to agree on, it's that seatbelts are the way to go. At the front of the ship, Rook takes a seat in the piloting chair, familiarizing himself with the controls. They don't say anything while he starts up the ship and gets the engine going, but it's not an awkward silence. It has the simple ease that the rest of their relationship does, and Ben never gets sick of it.

"How long until we're back on Earth, Rook?" He asks impatiently, folding his hands behind his head and leaning back.

His answer isn't immediate since Rook is busy checking the instruments, but after a moment, he speaks up. "With my FTL drive, I would guess about an hour," he replies dryly. "I think that you can survive that long."

Ben huffs. As much as he hates the feeling of traveling faster-than-light, at least it won't take long. Well, "long," compared to the thousands of years it would take to travel this same distance even at lightspeed. Soon, he'll be back home with his parents and his friends and right back to kicking butt.

"Oh, um," Rook hesitates, suddenly taking his hands off of the controls. "Ben, before we leave, I
should tell you... Magister Tennyson did not want you to worry while you were still healing, but word of your trip here and your injury got out. He does not know how, but the press will be waiting for your return to question you. I doubt we will be there long before attracting their attention."

Instantly, Ben's good mood sours. He had figured that the press would start asking questions once he stopped showing up around town, but how had they figured out that he had been injured and left the planet? He prays that none of his enemies watch Earth news. If there's ever a good opportunity to conquer a planet, it's when the planet's protector isn't even on said planet. Ben would love to think that Grandpa would tell him if something serious happened to Earth, except that if something serious did happen, he might not have had the opportunity to get in contact in the first place.

Doing his best to ignore the paranoia, Ben nods. "Alright, then what are you waiting for? We've gotta get back there as soon as possible. Step on it!" He grins. If Rook notices that he's faking it, then he chooses not to comment.

The spacecraft lifts into the air, taking off out of the hanger as fast as Rook will push it. They wait until Galvan Prime is well behind them before Rook finally activates the FTL drive. Immediately, reality begins to warp. Everything around Ben distorts, stretching forward towards the nonexistent horizon of space. Time breaks and stitches back together around him at the same instant that existence becomes more of a theory than a fact. A trip that is supposed to be an hour feels like both a second and an eternity.

When they snap out of FTL, Ben feels tingly all over and he has to remind himself how breathing works, but other than that, he feels fine. He flexes his right arm a few times, feeling the muscle and unblemished skin. Sometimes, he still feels twinges of pain, like it's still broken. It's not real pain, he knows that, but it doesn't keep him from checking every time it happens.

He lets his arms drop back to his sides, focusing on the view of returning to Earth. Even though green is his favorite color, Galvan Prime had managed to make Ben sick of it. The color blue has never looked so good to him. Closer, the Plumbers base is floating in orbit around the planet, the same as he remembers it. Ben relaxes back in his seat, focusing on calming his pounding heart while Rook brings them close to the docking bay. As Rook starts to maneuver them into landing position though, Ben suddenly speaks up.

"Uh, hey, Rook, instead of Plumbers headquarters, can you land in Bellwood? If I'm going to be dealing with the hounding I'm going to get from everyone at HQ, I need at least two smoothies," he states.

The request gets him a weird look from Rook, but his partner only sighs before changing the course. "I suppose that we can make a quick stop since you have not had a smoothie in two and a half months, Rook," Ben corrects. "Two and a half months, Rook," Ben corrects. "It's been a while! I want to make sure they haven't gotten rid of the cucumber and wheat grass special. I'll even buy for you." He grabs his bag where it is between his legs, rifling through it to grab his wallet. Checking to make sure that his cards are still there, he puts it back in his pocket. It wasn't exactly helpful on Galvan Prime, but no reasonable teenager leaves their wallet laying around nosy parents.

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Some people still get surprised that Ben has his own money since he works more-or-less freelance for the Plumbers, but ever since he discovered that show based off of him a while back, he's slowly become more aware of how much of a financial influence his name carries across the galaxy. Earning money from merchandise is fair, seeing as how companies are using him to push their brands.
Rook shakes his head at the mention of Ben's smoothie combinations but uses the radio to get in contact with the public aircraft hanger. It's in the middle of an empty field, hidden underground by panels in the roof that open for ships to land and take off. When they get Rook's call, they seem surprised but agree to let them land. It's a bit odd, actually — usually, visitors have to pay to land there, since it's mostly for commercial or trade vehicles. Ben decides not to look a gift horse in the mouth. Mr. Smoothies is on the way from the hanger to the teleporter that will take them up to Plumber HQ. They can get Azmuth's ship back to him later.

The landing bay is where things start to get weird. From what Ben remembers, it's usually crammed full of ships and bustling with aliens, but when Rook lands them, there are almost no other ships around. There is a small trading cruiser, but from what Ben can tell based on the gathering dust, it hasn't been moved in at least a week or two.

He unbuckles his seatbelt and gets up, leaving the ship to get a better look around. The huge hanger looks desolite and unfamiliar without any ships in it. "Huh." He frowns, putting his hands on his hips as he glances around. "What do you make of this, Rook?"

With their bags in hand, Rook leaves the ship to stand next to Ben. "It is most unusual," he agrees. "April is a favorable time to be visiting Earth, for trade as well as leisure, but there are no any recent ships here. Perhaps the incoming traffic required a bigger hanger and they relocated?" He suggests.

Something about that doesn't sound quite right. It's plausible, but Ben can't ignore the doubt in the back of his mind. "Yeah," he agrees anyway. "C'mon, Rook. We better find a taxi if we wanna get anywhere from here."

"There is no need." Rook puts a hand on his shoulder to stop him from walking off. His other hand goes into his pocket, pulling out the keys to his truck. Ben had assumed that Rook had left those in his room at the base, but he should have known that Rook would keep a spare set on him at all times. Looking proud of himself, Rook presses one of the buttons and waits.

A little confused, Ben doesn't protest. He sticks his hands into the pockets of his hoodie and settles in to wait, mimicking his partner.

He's starting to question Rook after a good minute of this. Then, right as he decides to speak up, there's a familiar beep from outside. It sounds like Rook's Proto-TRUK, but when had he put in a homing feature?

"Kevin helped me upgrade it the last time he and Gwendolyn visited. Well, not including their visit two months ago," Rook says as he leads Ben outside, answering his unasked question. "I was going to tell you, but it was more exciting to wait until it was useful. And it was!" They step outside of the hanger and onto a gravel road, where Rook's Proto-TRUK is parked and waiting for them. "Well? What do you think?"

Ben laughs. "Well, I'm not really a car guy, but this is really cool, Rook! I'm impressed." He goes around the side of the truck to climb in. It's only been two and a half months, but Ben finds that he really did miss the feeling of Rook's truck. It reminds him of riding all over town together on those lazy days before the accident.

As he's buckling up, Rook puts their luggage in the back. When he finishes, he slides into the driver's side. He looks subtly pleased, which Ben is glad to see. After that weird month on Galvan Prime, he's found himself appreciating Rook more and more.

"Do you think much has changed since we've been gone?" Ben asks as they get going down the
old road. He rolls down his window to let in a breeze while Rook picks up speed. He had missed the feeling of wind.

"I doubt it," Rook answers after a moment of consideration. "We have not been gone that long. It is also possible that the media has moved on and will not be talking about you at all. Humans live fast-paced lives."

Ben nods, leaning his head against the door and watching the street with a disinterested expression. He doesn't reply, and Rook lets the conversation lapse into silence. After the uniform skyline of Galvan Prime, he can't believe how good it feels to look at trees and suburban houses. The homes give way to shops, then to companies, and before too long, the view is mostly concrete and steel. Ben never thought that he would be so fond of the color gray.

The familiar Mr. Smoothie sign comes into view, and Ben perks up. He still can't believe that it's been two and a half months since he ordered the Smoothie of the Day. He waits until Rook parks, but just barely. The door is flung open and he steps out, not bothering to wait for Rook.

Like always, the line is basically nonexistent. Ben doesn't know why more people don't come here. But in the end, it means less time waiting in line for him. There's only one person ahead of him, and Ben impatiently waits for him to finish up.

The guy doesn't take long, and by the time he's walking away with his smoothie, Rook has caught up to him. There's a short brunette working the register, and when she sees Rook, an odd emotion flickers across her face. Ben doesn't get the opportunity to place it, as it's quickly wiped away as she focuses on him instead.

"Hi, welcome to Mr. Smoothies," she says with false cheer. "What can I get you?"

Pushing the weird incident from his thoughts, Ben hums thoughtfully as he looks at the menu hanging above her head. They don't have any flavors he recognizes, unfortunately, but trying something new isn't the end of the world. "Okay, uh, let's go with a classic. Get me a large pickle and peanut butter smoothie, and…" he turns to Rook, "what do you want?"

Suddenly, the girl shakes her head. "Oh, um, I'm sorry, but we don't serve aliens." To her credit, she does seem like she's genuinely trying to be nice about it. It doesn't help soften the blow any.

Ben can't keep the surprise off of his face. "What? When did that happen?" He's eaten here with Rook plenty of times in the past! No one has ever mentioned the fact that he's an alien before, especially since people were starting to finally accept aliens as proper Earth citizens only three months ago.

The girl grimaces sympathetically, still avoiding looking at Rook. "It's a policy that we implemented last month. I get that he might be, like, your friend or something, but I really can't serve aliens. I need this job."

Even though a part of him is still stunned, Ben reaches for his wallet anyway. "Okay, then… give me a large grape, too. It's to wash down the taste of the pickles."

It's a poor lie, but the girl smiles anyway, relieved. "Coming right up." She turns away from the register, working on making their smoothies.

Now that Ben is thinking about it, he hasn't seen a single alien on the street since he left the aircraft hanger. He looks around, scanning the streets and people driving their cars. All human. There isn't a single tentacle or third eye or gelatinous body to be found. Is he missing something?
There's never even been talk of alien bans anywhere before. The last time he checked, people were more than willing to serve aliens as long as they had Earth currency. What changed?

"Thanks," Ben replies automatically when the girl hands him the smoothies. He hands over the proper money and gives Rook the grape smoothie.

Neither of them says anything on the walk back to the truck, but as soon as the doors shut behind them, Ben can't keep himself quiet anymore. "Do you know what that was about?" He asks, unable to help how shaken he sounds. "You're the one that Grandpa told all the important things! Did he mention anything about people suddenly banning aliens from their businesses?"

Rook shakes his head, starting the car. "No, of course not, Ben. If Magester Tennyson had told me anything about this, I would have told you," he says seriously. He doesn't look away from the road to make eye contact, but Ben doesn't have a reason to doubt him.

Letting out a long sigh, Ben sinks down far enough in his seat that he's almost on his knees. "This is——" he groans. "What was she even talking about? The rule passed a month ago! Who would ever think that banning aliens is a good idea? And everyone was finally starting to get along when we left!"

When his partner doesn't immediately answer, Ben quiets his melodrama to look up at him. Rook has his grape smoothie in one hand, the other on the wheel, but he isn't drinking it. His mouth is pressed into a thin line, his expression pinched with worry.

A weird wave of sympathy rushes over him at the sight, and Ben pushes himself up so that he's sitting properly again. He sets a hand on Rook's arm, doing his best to look supportive. "Hey. It'll be okay, alright? We're going to talk to Grandpa Max about it and fix whatever happened, and the next time we get a smoothie, you'll be the one ordering it. I promise."

As it turns out, everything is not fine.

They decide to take the long way to HQ so that they can look around the city for a little bit longer. There are billboards of people running for mayor who promise to do all they can to ban aliens. If someone driving spots Rook behind the steering wheel, they go out of their way to be as inconvenient and rude as possible. It results in Rook having to change his route four times. No matter which part of the city they get redirected to — from the slums to bustling downtown — the anti-alien sentiment meets them at every opportunity.

Once the Proto-TRUK finally turns onto the street where the entrance to Max's Plumbing is, they're met with an uproar. Literally. Ben's window is still down, so the sudden lurch in volume is easily heard. He can't help but stare at the sight in front of him, gaping.

It's not much of a secret that Max's Plumbing is a cover for Plumber HQ — well, even if now it just holds the teleporter to the actual HQ in space. But still, when Ben Tennyson and his alien partner ride around in a van that says "Max's Plumbing" and can turn into an aircraft with the press of a button, that does tend to raise a few eyebrows. Aside from the occasional desperate reporter though, Ben has never seen anyone waiting outside of the shabby building. Now, it's far more than
a few people.

There's a crowd of at least a hundred people outside of Max's Plumbing. One of the glass windows is shattered, probably by a brick that one of the protestors threw. There are people waving their signs around and chanting something that Ben can't make out. There are even a few small-time news anchors, with their vans parked on the other side of the street and their cameras already rolling.

"Rook, pull over here," Ben says suddenly, reaching over to tug on Rook's arm without taking his eyes off of the crowd. The crowd doesn't seem to care about being in the street and in the way of several cars. There's no way that they'll be able to park in front of the building or get around them without having to turn around.

Surprisingly, Rook doesn't argue. He silently does what Ben says and parks along the curb in front of a different building. For a moment, neither of them says anything. They stare ahead at the crowd, dumbfounded. This close, Ben can finally hear their chant.

"Aliens have got to go, they can't call Earth a home!"

They repeat it like a mantra, some of the protestors red-faced and almost screaming the words. It sounds sharp and bitter on Ben's ears, making him want to cringe away from the noise. He glances at Rook. If it wasn't for the fur covering his partner, he's pretty sure that Rook would be pale. His pupils have shrunk to have their usual size, and his grip on the wheel looks nearly painful.

Seeing Rook like that raises so many red flags that Ben is reaching to undo his seatbelt before he can even consciously make the decision.

Rook's hand shoots out, grabbing Ben by the wrist so tightly that he has to fight to keep from grimacing. His grip loosens almost immediately as he finally looks away from the crowd to lock eyes with Ben. "Usually," he begins in a horribly soft voice, "I would blindly charge after you into an unpredictable situation, but not this time, Ben. You need to learn to pick and choose your battles. This is one of those fights that is not worth it."

Glaring at Rook, Ben yanks his hand away. "How can you say that?" He snaps. "You can hear what they're saying! I can't just sit here and let them do that! I have friends who are aliens! I've got a whole side of my family that's alien! You—" His expression twists into one of sorrow. "You're an alien, Rook."

Even though the Revonnahgander smiles, there's no joy on his face. "Yes. I am aware of that, Ben. But this is not something that is important. If you go out there and cause a scene, what will it accomplish?" He waits a moment, but when Ben only answers by turning his head to glare at the protestors, Rook continues. "We have handled tougher situations than this, Ben. We will have to go through them to get inside, but we will do so calmly and not lash out. Agreed?" He asks in a patient voice.

Ben isn't an idiot. He can see the way Rook still looks shaken up. He's barely hiding the grimace on his face, he won't look Ben directly in the eye, and his hands have never looked so unsteady. Still, Ben nods. "Yeah, okay," he agrees. "No yelling or hitting anyone. Even if they're idiots and they deserve it—" He doesn't care what Rook says. He can restrain himself, sure, but none of the morons at the protest deserve that much. If he had a book, he would throw it at them. With any luck, maybe one of them would pick it up and learn something.

After a moment, Rook finally gives in. He sighs, pushing open his car door and stepping out. Ben does the same, staring at the ground in front of him challengingly. If he can go nose-to-nose
with Vilgax without blinking, then he can handle a crowd and a few news vans.

They start walking forward. As they get closer, Ben can finally make out some of the signs. They're all home-made and pretty ugly, but Ben might just be a tad bit biased against them. The signs say things like, "EARTH IS FOR HUMANS," and, "ALIENS GO HOME." His least favorite is one that says, "ALIENS CAN E.T. THEIR WAY OUT." It's not even clever! It's trying to switch "E.T." for "see," but the two words aren't close enough for that to work. It's like they're not even trying!

It doesn't take long at all for the crowd to notice them. Rook is an alien, after all. He's tall and covered in blue fur and distinctly not-human looking. Even without that, Ben does tend to attract attention. It isn't like he's doing anything to hide the Omnitrix strapped to his wrist.

Unsurprisingly, the reporters get to them first. It's a bit like stepping into a bubble. Ben isn't sure how it happened. One second, he's walking down the sidewalk with Rook, and the next, he's surrounded on every side by angry and jeering people, and there are several microphones being shoved in his face. The only slightly positive thing is that at least Will Harangue is likely out of the job — smearing aliens doesn't really work when you are an alien.

"Ben!" A female reporter with gaudy red lipstick grins at him with the worst fake smile he's ever seen. "Ben, what do you have to say about the recent nationwide Alien Ban being debated on, given that your partner is an alien?"

Despite his best attempt, Ben can't keep the surprise off of his face. "Nationwide Alien Ban?" He repeats, dumbstruck. Rook's hand closes around his, trying to tug him through the crowd, but Ben barely notices.

"Mr. Tennyson!" It's a male news anchor this time, looking eager. "What are your thoughts on the accusations of terrorism being launched against the Plumbers, including your grandfather?"

"Terrorism?" This has to be a dream. Ben can't wrap his mind around all of these absurd concepts. "What do you—"

"Ben, how can you call yourself the "Hero of Earth" when you have to rely on aliens to save it?" Another reporter asks.

"Do you think you're losing your touch and reaching the end of your superhero career? You were gone for over two months, Mr. Tennyson."

"Can I get an exclusive interview and your embarrassing defeat and cause of that debilitating injury?"

"Would you consider yourself pro-alien even after all that's happened?"

"With all those aliens on your wrist, many feel that you are part alien and say that you no longer have a claim to be an Earth citizen. What are your thoughts, Mr. Tennyson?"

Whether Ben wants to answer or not, he doesn't get the option to choose. Rook suddenly yanks hard on his arm, sending flashes of stabbing pain up to his shoulder. It's not real pain, he knows that, but it catches him off guard enough that Rook has no problem dragging him away.

The door to Max's Plumbing swings shut behind them almost angrily, and the keys in Rook's hand answer Ben's question of how he unlocked the door. On the other side, the protesters try to follow them, but Rook holds the door shut against them while he locks it in place. Ben can still hear them shouting through the broken window, but with something between them down, it seems
much less real.

He stands there for a moment, staring at nothing until Rook suddenly puts a hand on his shoulder. It causes him to jump but gets his attention. Looking up at Rook, Ben's expression hardens. Whatever is happening, he won't allow it to continue. He owes it to Rook to at least try.

Wordlessly, they turn away from each other and walk into the out of order bathroom at the back of the shop. Personally, Ben thinks that they ought to add some sort of identification method. As it is, all they have to do is pull the string that's supposed to flush the toilet, and the floor underneath them glows green and teleports them to the receiver in space.

Like traveling faster than light, teleporting leaves Ben's body tingling. It's a bit different from Azmuth's teleporter, but only because it's lesser quality and can't teleport things nearly as far as his can. Standing in the middle of Plumber HQ, Ben looks around. There's plenty of other people in the HQ, but Ben can't spot his grandpa's ungodly Hawaiian shirt anywhere. Maybe he's in the kitchen again. Either way, he has a lot to start explaining.

The two of them make it the rest of the way down in silence. He can tell that Rook wants to talk about what happened and how it affected Ben, specifically, but that can wait. It's not like Ben was the person they were attacking. When they're alone, then Rook can talk about his own feelings. As long as he wants to, anyway. Ben wouldn't mind, but he's not very well-versed in the Revonnahgander "bro code."

For now, at least, Ben turns to his partner and jabs his thumb in the direction of the Plumber kitchens. "Grandpa's probably stress-cooking. Come on. We deserve answers for this." Even if he wanted to, Ben doubts that he could wipe the scowl off his face. How could Grandpa not tell them about this?

Rook doesn't look convinced, but he nods anyway and lets Ben lead the way. They walk in silence for a minute, and then Rook clears his throat. "Ben, I want to tell you, about what happened —"

"Later," Ben interrupts. "This is our stop." He presses the release for the stairs. There's a quiet hum of a generator and a hiss of hydraulics as the floor at his feet unfolds to lower down to an even deeper level. Normally, Ben likes to ride down the railings, but he's not in a good enough mood for that today. He takes the stairs two at a time, eyes narrowed in suspicion as he looks around the empty kitchen. Why isn't Grandpa in here? Where else could he be?

"We could try his office," Rook suggests. "He does not spend much time there, but it is worth a try."

There's a split-second where Ben is amazed because he didn't know that Grandpa had an office, but then he nods resolutely. "Yeah. We might as well. Just lead the way, partner."

As it turns out, Grandpa's office is down the hallway by all of the apartments. They're for Plumbers with no home of their own to stay in, and also, to hide his grandfather, apparently. Ben has been down this hall a few times before (mostly to go to Rook's room), and he's never seen any office before.

Regardless, Ben doesn't bother knocking. He throws open the door to Grandpa's office hard enough that it bangs against the wall and he has to reach out a hand to keep it from closing in his face. Stepping inside, the room is about what he expects. It's a disorganized mess, with paper all over the desk and on the floor and overflowing the small wastebasket. The walls are covered in posters, everything from motivational cats to old Shag Carpeting tour schedules. There's an alien
plant in the corner (Ben swears that it's moving) and little knickknacks and bobbleheads on every flat surface available. Against the far wall is where Max has set up his desk, almost completely encircled by computer monitors and big screens.

As soon as he walks in, Grandpa turns off his computer monitor and gets to his feet. "Ben!" He's surprised for a moment, then his expression softens. "You look great, son. What are doing here?"

Whether "here" means "the Plumber HQ," or "in my office," Ben doesn't know, and he really doesn't care, either. He marches up to his grandpa, slamming his palms down against the desk for added effect. "We were coming to see about any new missions, but when we got here, there was a huge crowd out front protesting the Plumbers. And before that, this girl who works at Mr. Smoothies told me that she can't serve aliens! Since when is that a rule?" The thought leaves him grimacing. It was such an unpleasant experience.

The more he says, the less pleased Grandpa is to see him. When Ben finishes, the old man sighs, shaking his head. "I shouldn't have kept it from you," he says apologetically. "I thought that I could handle it while you were gone. I didn't want you sick with worry while you were supposed to be taking it easy and healing. And before you get mad at Gwendolyn and Kevin, I asked them specifically not to talk to you about it." He walks over to the wall, grabbing a string hanging down and pulling on it. Ben expects something awesome to happen, but all he does is unroll a map of the world. There are marks made with black Sharpie all over it, with notes scribbled next to some of them that Ben can't make out. "These are all the cities that have been attacked since you left," Grandpa explains.

"What?" Surprisingly, Rook is the one who speaks first, looking shocked. "There must be at least two-hundred marks on that map! It has only been two months!"

Grandpa nods, a grimace on his face. "They've all been attacked by rogue aliens. You remember one of those, don't you Ben? They're like the Tetramand that put your arm out of commission."

Reflexively, Ben presses his arm against his chest, grabbing onto his wrist. It doesn't do anything to protect him, but it makes him feel a little better. "Rogue aliens? So that means... what? There's no reason for their attack at all?" He asks.

"I'm afraid not," Grandpa sighs tiredly. "They're incredibly strong and angry beyond rationality. The Plumbers are spread thin already, and we can't handle an influx of activity like this. There are almost three attacks a day, all over the world. The locations are completely unpredictable. All we can really do is evacuate the people nearby and wait it out until the alien tires themselves out. We have detained a few of them, but all of them claim to have no memory of what they did. Some of them don't even seem to have a violent bone in their body — we've been bringing in alien artists and peaceful farmers. I don't think they woke up one day and decided to start killing humans."

Ben has to admit, the circumstances are suspicious. A bunch of angry and overly strong aliens start attacking at once? It doesn't make much sense. "You think that someone is staging these," he says, eyes widening in realization. "Someone doesn't want aliens on Earth." His first thought goes to the Forever Knights, but this is too subtle. They want to kill the aliens on Earth, not force them to leave.

"But how?" Rook asks, a frown on his face. "These aliens did not attack of their own free will. How could they have gotten a boost to their strength?"

This time, the string that Grandpa pulls does do something cool. A small panel opens in the wall, and Grandpa reaches in. He holds up a vial for them to see. Inside is a thick green liquid that churns almost as if it's alive. It looks foggy, like there's something else just underneath the surface.
"This," Grandpa says quietly, "is a serum that we derived from one of the aliens that we managed to subdue. It burns itself out by dissolving in the rush of adrenaline through the bloodstream. We can't find a single trace of it in aliens that we examined after their burnout," he tells them with a frown.

At the sight of the heavy drug, Ben makes a face. "Ugh, gross. It's like a poison, but for the public opinion." He pauses. "I'm gonna call it Venom."

Somehow, Grandpa manages a smile. "That's the perfect name for something this foul." He puts it away, closing the little hatch. "To make matters worse, it's been working. Before your accident Ben, aliens were beginning to apply for proper Earth citizenship and live on the surface instead of in Undertown. Now, aliens who visit the surface are harassed or assaulted. There are riots at all of the well-known entrances to Undertown, almost every day. People don't trust the Plumbers anymore, Ben. We tried telling the press about the drug we found linked to all the attacks, but they won't believe any research that comes from alien scientists. In their eyes, we're laughingstocks. You too, Ben. The people want all aliens off the planet and to shut down space exploration altogether. They want us to shut down." He speaks in a grim tone. He starts to put a hand on Ben's shoulder, planning to comfort him, only for his grandson to shrug his hand off and turn away.

"Yeah. Like that's gonna happen," Ben says with a confidence he doesn't really feel. Things have never felt so alien before. "What can we do to help, Grandpa?"

The smile on his grandpa's face is bittersweet, at best, but he doesn't try to talk Ben out of it. "Here. I was watching this before you came in." He walks over to one of his computers, turning it on and adjusting it to face them.

On screen, a live debate is in progress. There are two people talking at podiums, a man and a woman. Her graying hair is pulled back in a severe bun, making her tall, thin body appear more skeletal by comparison. In contrast, the man is almost small, his dark hair slicked back and his tanned skin giving off the healthy glow that she lacks. Both of them have passion in their eyes, but whereas her gaze is as cold as the icy-blue hue of her irises, the stare that the man fixes the camera with is burning with intensity. A small bit of information about each of them is in the corner of the screen; "Daniel Collins: pro-alien" and "Nancy McNeel: anti-alien."

"You have no sympathy!" Daniel says heatedly to her. "Not all of these aliens coming to us are criminals! A few crimes hardly means the collective is less trustworthy!"

The scowl on Nancy's face is bitter and harsh. "I have plenty of sympathy, Mr. Collins. I have sympathy for our people. I will never defend someone who has caused so much suffering. There has been a total of 213 attacks on innocent people! Hundreds of thousands of people all over the world are dead! How dare you! How dare you stand there, defend these monsters, and then lecture me about sympathy!" She snaps.

Her statement sends the crowd into an uproar, cheering for her and screaming their support. Before Ben can give in to the urge to punch a hole in the screen, Grandpa turns the monitor off.

"That was Daniel Collins. Have either of you two ever heard of him?" Grandpa asks, looking between them.

To Ben's surprise, Rook nods. "Yes. He was one of the first investors when Undertown began. Many of the buildings are his personal property. If it were not for his support, Undertown would not be nearly as big as it is today."

"Exactly." Grandpa commends him. "He's a very wealthy man, and incredibly pro-alien."
Tomorrow, he's going to be hosting a pro-alien protest outside of town hall. They're going to bring awareness to a recent bill that the city put into motion. It's going to make it so that it's illegal for aliens to be seen above the ground. If it passes here, other cities are going to follow suit. I don't think I need to explain how serious this is." He gives Ben a pointed look. "This is where you two come in. While we try to figure out who the mastermind behind Venom is, I need you two there for security and to give a good name to aliens again. Protect Mr. Collins and keep the protest from being interrupted. Don't hurt anyone. Understood?"

Instead of making a joke, Ben gives a resolute nod. "Don't worry, Grandpa," he says seriously. "There's no way that law is going to pass."

It takes a lot of willpower to keep himself from looking at Rook, but Ben manages. The idea of not being able to have Rook as his partner anymore is so unfathomable that he can't even entertain any "what if" thoughts. There is no "if." Ben will stop this law.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I want to thank ThisIsRidiculous for recommending this fic on TV Tropes' recommendation list. It means a lot to me! I hope you all continue to enjoy this.

Bodyguard duty isn't the most exciting job out there, but as much as Ben would love something to hit, he knows how important this is. Getting people aware of the truth is the key to keeping this law from passing.

A part of Ben is still reeling. He's lived in Bellwood his entire life, and it's slowly becoming unrecognizable. He's never seen so few people on the streets. And the people he does see look anxious and miserable. Everything is different. Citizens glare at him and Rook, all of his fan pages have been deleted or are suddenly bashing him, and every news channel that he puts on is spouting an anti-alien rhetoric. He knows that he ought to visit Undertown and make sure that things are going well since he wrecked a huge portion of it the last time he was there, but he can't bring himself to do that yet. First, he's going to do a little political damage control.

The protest is set to start at nine in the morning, ending at three in the afternoon, and Rook suggests getting there early. For once, Ben agrees. He isn't the type to set his alarm, but his parents can't wake him up for the rest of his life.

He doesn't sleep well that night. Maybe it's only that he's adjusting to an Earth sleep schedule again, or maybe it's the stress and worry that he's doing his best to ignore. He lays in his bed for a long time, staring up at the ceiling and trying to ignore the twinges of pain in his right arm. It's not real. He's losing sleep over the fictitious ghost of something that used to hurt when he should be losing sleep over the actual living beings that are currently being hurt.

And it's all because he wasn't around to stop what was happening.

In the end, Ben somehow falls asleep. He doesn't remember how, only that he was resting his eyes and the next second, his alarm is going off. He turns it off and climbs out of bed, getting dressed and ready for the day.

By the time Rook knocks on his door to pick him up, he's wiped the self-doubt from his thoughts and showered and gotten dressed. It's a serious day. That means that he seriously can't be wasting time the way he usually does.

"Heads up!" Ben swings open his front door, interrupting Rook mid-knock, and tosses an apple at him. "Mom left breakfast. And by "breakfast," I mean she put a bowl of fruit on the counter and a note reminding me that she'll know if I get into the fridge. At least we can eat on the go." He peels the banana in his hands, taking a bite out of it as he walks around Rook's truck to get into the passenger side.

Rook turns the apple over in his hands a few times, looking confused, before finally getting into the truck and setting it down in the cupholder for later. "You seem energetic today, Ben. That is good — today is going to be a difficult day." He puts the keys in the ignition, starting the car and heading down the street.
Rolling his eyes, Ben smirks and takes a bite out of his banana. "C'mon, Rook, how hard can it
be? All we have to do is keep things from getting out of hand. We're going to do an awesome job
and people are going to see that aliens are not ticking time bombs." Easier said than done, he
knows, but if Rook is going to be the realistic one, then Ben needs to bring the overconfidence. It's
what he does best.

"Were you not told?" He frowns. "Ben, there is more than one protest today. There is a counter-
protest organized to take place in the same place as the pro-alien protest. And…” he lets out a long
sigh, "I hate to say it, but the counter-protest has over three times the attendees than ours does."

"Oh." Ben blinks and looks away, staring out the window. "Well… the more the merrier, right?
The more people they bring, the more chances we have to sway them to our side. It'll be easy!"

Instead of helping Rook relax, Ben's words make him frown. "Ben, I do not think that you are
taking this seriously," he says stiffly. "There is a lot depending on this, and—"

"I know!" Ben interrupts, louder than he intended. He clears his throat awkwardly, and when he
speaks next, his voice is much quieter. "Look, Rook, I know that there's a lot at stake here. And
I promise that I'm treating this seriously. I'm going to do everything I can to make sure this goes
well. Alright?" He sets his banana peel down in the cupholder next to Rook's apple, looking at the
fruit to avoid eye-contact.

Even though Rook doesn't look entirely convinced, he begrudgingly nods. "Alright," he agrees.
Still, he doesn't say anything more, and Ben turns to glumly look out the window while the streets
blur past him.

City Hall isn't that far from Ben's house. It's in the middle of downtown, making the old-
fashioned dome building look out of place amongst towering skyscrapers. The dome is painted
gold and shines in the light, catching people's attention from even miles away. There are several
blocks of greenery between the City Hall and the closest building. At the right angle, it almost
looks secluded against the sun in the sky, like a perfect piece of history that's been preserved and
untouched despite modern development. It doesn't look like the kind of place where a protest
should be.

The protest isn't supposed to start for another hour, but there are already people starting to show
up. To Ben's surprise, there are also two news vans there in case something dramatic goes down.
He wasn't expecting the media to care, but then again, it's not every day that a multi-millionaire
hosts a protest.

They leave the truck in the community parking lot and head towards the front of the
building. Technically, they aren't supposed to enter City Hall, but Mr. Collins told them to meet
him near the front doors.

Unsurprisingly, their presence gets a lot of hostile stares and whispers, but no one tries to stop
them. Ben doesn't want to hurt any people, but he won't hesitate to if someone tries to start
something. Especially if that "something" involves harassing Rook only because he's an alien.

It doesn't take the two of them long to get to the front of City Hall. It's not hard to spot Mr.
Collins. He's wearing a suit that probably costs more money than Ben has ever seen in his life, and
there are four men who look like bodybuilders hovering near him at all time as he moves around. It
looks like he's making last-minute checks and preparations.

One of the bodyguards taps on Mr. Collins's shoulder, whispering something into his ear. The
politician looks up, smiling when he sees Ben and Rook approaching. He waves them over,
handed the clipboard in his hands to what looks like his assistant before hurrying over to meet them.

"Ben Tennyson! It's an honor to meet you." He grabs Ben's hand, giving him a firm shake before turning to Rook. "And Rook Blonko, his partner. I've heard a lot about you." He shakes Rook's hand too before taking a step back. "I'm glad you could make it. This protest hasn't even started yet and I'm already having problems."

Hearing that, Rook and Ben share a look. "Problems?" Ben prompts. "What kind of problems, Mr. Collins?"

The man chuckles. "Please, call me Daniel. I've been having a lot of technical difficulties. The microphone I rented hasn't been delivered yet, the speakers I'm using are on the fritz, and the fold-up stage isn't staying together." He sighs, running a hand through his greying hair. "It's all a little too much for me to be convinced that it's a coincidence. I'll figure out something, though. I don't want you gentlemen worrying about that." Daniel points at the other side of the square, where the anti-alien protesters are assembling. Already, there are many more people than there are on the pro-alien side. "Now, I have my own private security. I can take care of myself if it comes down to it. My supporters, on the other hand? See, that's what I need you two for." His expression turns serious. "I don't want a single person getting hurt. You two are probably used to dealing with aggression by now, but the people coming here to protest aren't. They're only here to support what they believe is right. Can I count on you both to keep the peace?"

Rook nods immediately. "Of course, Mr— um, Daniel, sir. No civilians will be hurt."

"Yeah," Ben chimes in. "We've handled stuff tougher than this. It'll be no problem for two seasoned Plumbers." He smiles in a way that hopefully looks reassuring.

Daniel laughs, reaching out and shaking Ben's hand again. "I knew I could count on you two," he says, doing the same to Rook. "It's been a pleasure meeting you both, but I need to get back to set up. Feel free to talk to people and enjoy yourselves, but keep an eye out. Why don't you try taking one side each? You can flip a coin for it." He gives a wink, turning around and jogging back other to where he left his security guards.

Unsure what to do, Ben and Rook stand there awkwardly for a moment. There's a beat of silence, and then Ben shrugs and turns to Rook. "So, which side do you wanna take?"

To absolutely no one's surprise, Ben ends up taking the anti-alien side.

No one over there likes him, but the protestors mostly ignore him. Aside from the occasional dirty look or snide comment, they do their own things, talking to each other and waving signs around and kicking up a huge fuss. It's better for Ben to take this side — if Rook had, then they would probably be ganging up on him. Somehow, Ben gets the feeling that the media won't care if he only harmed civilians because they harassed his partner first. The press has been twisting his actions for years now. As such, he does his best to avoid getting their attention. So long as he doesn't use the Omnitrix, it's easy to blend into the crowd.

One of the things that Ben notices is that the anti-alien crowd is very aggressive. Even when it comes to the differences amongst themselves, it feels like they're eager to fight and stir up drama. Ben tries to count how many fights he breaks up, but eventually, he gives up. The only blessing is that he doesn't need to use the Omnitrix. Usually, holding it up threateningly or dropping his voice a few octaves and partnering it with a glare is enough to send someone away, grumbling and muttering. He doesn't want to brag or anything, but he is a really good actor. As childish as he likes
to be, it isn't *that* hard to appear threatening.

It helps that he's also in a really bad mood.

Sure, people are entitled to their opinions and all that, but that doesn't really change the fact that there is a huge group of people here that consider his friends and family to be less than human. It's really hard to tolerate that. His grandmother, Verdana, and Gwendolyn are both Anodites. There's also the Lenopan side of his family that married in when he was ten. What happens if this bill passes throughout the entire country? Does that mean that cousin Lucy won't be able to visit anymore? Will Gwendolyn be forced to leave like so many other aliens will be? And what about Kevin, or Rook?

It's times like this that makes Ben wish that he was half as good at feeling confident as he was at faking it.

Aside from the doubt nagging at the back of his mind, the morning goes fairly well. The two groups get into a few shouting matches, but none of them escalate into a fight so Ben and Rook stay out of it. Confiscating megaphones becomes Ben's favorite pastime. Other than that, he spends most of his time standing on the edge of the large fountain in front of City Hall to have a good vantage point. It isn't a huge advantage, but Ben has about a foot on everyone else in the crowd, and it helps more than he thought it would.

By noon rolls around, Ben is honestly surprised by how many people showed up. The anti-alien side is still bigger, but their expectations look like they've doubled. And by the time Daniel takes the stage to give his speech, the open area in front of City Hall is pretty much packed.

Even though Ben's supposed to stay with the crowd, he leaves his spot by the fountain to look for Rook. The speech is supposed to be the main event. After it's over, Daniel is going to have other speakers come up and talk on their experiences and thoughts. There are some aliens around, some more confident than others, but they all seem nervous as they put their attention on the stage.

"Hello, everyone!" Daniel says into the microphone. He must have gotten everything working, because the sound is clearly audible, even over the roar of the crowd. "Welcome, welcome! Thank you all for coming out. I mean it, too. Every single one of you. Political activism is important and it's good to stand up for and support what you believe in. And that's what I've come here today to do."

His speech becomes background noise to Ben as he ducks and weaves through the crowd. Actually getting to Rook is a lot more difficult than spotting him. The crowd is constantly shifting and, ever the "give it your all" kind of guy, Rook doesn't stay in one spot for more than a few seconds. Eventually though, Ben manages to spot him. It's not that hard, in all fairness. He's very tall and gangly, in a way that would look unnatural on a human, and he's always wearing the same armor. Plus, not a lot of humans are covered in white and blue fur.

"Rook!" He catches up to his partner, who is standing close to the stage. Ben does his best to cover it up, but he is panting a little. Running isn't that strenuous, but in a hot, tightly-packed crowd, not to mention that Ben hasn't run in months, it does tire him out quickly. "Rook, hey." He gives a mock wave. "I think we should be watching the stage, don't you? If any of these counter-protesters want to make a scene, doing something in the middle of his scheduled speech is the best time to do it, right?"

Almost hesitantly, Rook nods. "Well… yes," he admits. "Ordinarily, Ben, I would agree with you wholeheartedly. But that is what he has his bodyguards for. He said so himself. I think that we should keep our focus on the crowd. If something *does* happen, I do not want any civilians to be
hurt."

It's a fair argument, but Ben still can't help but frown a little. "Yeah, but if we look out for something on stage, we can stop anything from happening at all and we won't have to worry about any civilians getting hurt," he points out. He looks at the stage briefly as Daniel's speech ends. There's a polite applause, and then the head of the anti-alien counter-protest takes the mic.

"Ben," Rook sighs, "I do not want to argue about this. We—"

Whatever he's about to say is drowned out by the noise. Ben is only about twenty feet away from the stage, and the intense wave of heat and volume that rushes over him is impossible to describe. He feels arms wrap around him and his head being tucked down, people rushing past him, and his ears are burning. From the heat or the noise, he isn't sure.

Even with someone sheltering him, Ben can feel the heat of the fire from where he's standing. His ears are ringing, drowning out everything else. There are lips pressed against his ear, trying to say something, but it's like trying to speak through water. The words don't register. All that Ben processes is the ringing, the heat, and the overwhelming desire to do something besides standing there.

He pulls away from the person holding him, looking up long enough to register Rook's face before his gaze fixates on the plume of smoke unfurling into the air over his partner's shoulder. It reminds him of poison, standing out starkly against the bright blue sky. He can't hear anything, not even the way his heart is slamming against his ribcage, but he doesn't need to hear to be able to understand what he's looking at.

It's carnage. Bodies are piled on top of each other, injured people that have their faces twisted in agony and tears running down their burnt skin. The wooden stage has gone up in flames, a twisted bonfire that burns hot enough to make Ben's skin tingle, even from this distance. A lot of people look like they're still alive, but the closer to the stage he looks, the worse it gets. The skin has splintered so badly that it's bleeding and cracking, peeling away like a bad coat of paint. He feels light-headed, but whether it's from the smoke in the air or the way he's hyperventilating, he isn't sure.

Though his mind is still whirring, trying to catch up, Ben's hand finds its way to the Omnitrix. He dials in the alien he needs without really paying attention. Anything will help. Any of them has to be more useful than he is.

His body tingles as he changes. His bones crack and fuse back together, his body burning for only a moment as the temperature of his skin leaps up and becomes liquid. The human features sink into his skull, his face flattening as the rest of him grows taller and more well-built. The transformations are always quick, leaving him only feeling a little off-balance. Ben barely notices. He's used to his new body thanks to years of use, holding his hands up and focusing on the heat of the flames without any effort.

As Heatblast, fire manipulation is as easy as breathing. The flames feel familiar, almost like a memory that's out of reach. When he calls on them, they listen, leaving the smoldering wood to leap into his hands. The world isn't in focus at the moment, but at least the body of a Pyronite knows what to do.

When the Omnitrix times out, he's panting. His right arm is searing like someone stuck a burning knife into his shoulder blade and is twisting it around. It isn't real, he keeps having to remind himself, but when Rook touches his arm, Ben still jumps back.
And just like that, reality comes crashing back in.

The ringing in his ears fades, gone all at once. There are sirens in the distance. Someone near him is screaming. Another person is crying. Some people are trying to help the injured, and he can hear the burned wood shifting as they get it out of the way. He’s assaulted by the smell of burning flesh and smoke. His eyes won't stay still either, taking in every inch of his surroundings. Finally, things seem to register.

There was an explosion. Someone must have planted a bomb. People are hurt. He needs to help.

"Ben—" Rook reaches for him again, only to cut himself off and freeze as Ben shoots him a withering glare.

"Later," he says, a warning edge to his voice. "Right now, people are hurt."

Waiting isn't something that Ben has ever been good at, but he's hardly finished speaking before he's running into the fray of people, activating the Omnitrix again. He doesn't know how many are dead or injured, but as XLR8, he helps whoever is closest. Faces pass in a blur, nameless and featureless. There's a girl with a sprained ankle and a nasty burn up that crawls all the way up her thigh. A boy who landed on his arm and twisted it so badly that Ben has to force himself not to look away. Two girls in hysterics, clinging to each other and refusing to let go or move until Ben eventually cuts his loses and leaves them.

The crumbled remains of the stage shift and Ben feels his heart jump into the throat as he immediately starts trying to move the boards off of whoever's underneath it.

He tosses the last board out of the way, shocked by who he sees underneath it. "Mr. Collins?" He calls. There's a man on top of him, who Ben recognizes as one of the bodyguards from earlier. He starts to move the bodyguard off, only to freeze. The person in his hands isn't breathing. Almost as if responding to his shock, the Omnitrix beeps, and XLR8 is gone in a flash of green light.

As himself, Ben presses two fingers to the bodyguard's muscled neck, looking for a pulse, but there's not even the faintest twitch. "Oh, my God..." he whispers. Sure, plenty of people had been injured, but none of them were dead. This is the first time that Ben has ever seen a human dead, and it's all his fault. Because he left Earth. Because he hadn't been there to prevent this.

Beneath the dead man, Daniel blinks his eyes open, groaning lowly. He's covered in soot and his skin looks blistered in several places, but other than that, he looks like he's doing fine. As much as Ben doesn't want to touch a dead man, he takes a deep breath and pulls the bodyguard out of the way as respectfully as he can. The man's entire back is a mess of blood and burnt skin. He had given his life to protect his boss, and that means that he at least deserves recognition. Ben doesn't even know his name.

Kneeling down, Ben puts an arm around Daniel, pulling him out of the debris. "Mr. Collins?" He tries again but doesn't get a response. He must still be out of it, then.

He half-carries and half-drag Daniel over to where they're setting down all the injured people. He lays the man down carefully, making sure that he's still breathing before he turns back to the stage. The anti-alien speaker is still buried under that stage somewhere, probably suffocating if the blast didn't kill him. Ben suddenly feels so tired but walks back over, anyway. It's not like he can leave the man to die.

When Ben finally moves the broken stage out of the way, he's greeted by a body that's been blackened by flames and left in pieces. The anti-alien protester had died as soon as the explosion
went off. And it's all his fault.

By this point, the paramedics have shown up. There are officials from City Hall that came running out when they heard the noise. If there wasn't much press before, then there certainly is now. The area is quickly becoming crowded, and the last thing Ben wants is to stick around and answer questions.

This time, when Rook reaches for him, Ben doesn't object. He lets the familiar hand on his shoulder steer him away from the sounds of the whirring sirens and cameras snapping and he doesn't look back. Not on the way to the truck, not on the drive back to the base, and not when every doubt nagging at the back of his mind tells him that he's missing something.

The two of them ride in silence. What is there to say? They messed up. Innocent people got hurt. It doesn't get more simplified than that.

When they teleport into Plumber HQ, everyone immediately looks away from them.

Ben isn't stupid. He saw what the TV was playing before it got turned off. For the sake of all of their mental states though, he doesn't say a word about it. He and Rook continue walking, unhindered, towards Grandpa Max's office.

"Now, Max, I know you want to be cautious, but—" Magister Patelliday cuts himself off as Ben and Rook step into the room. He shares a look with Grandpa Max. Neither of them says anything, but Patelliday turns to leave anyway. "Consider what we talked about, Max," he says with a pointed look. Finished, he shuts the door behind him, his footfalls coming muffled through the door.

Once the echoing footsteps fade away. Max sighs. He turns to his bank of computers, turning one of the monitors on and typing something into his keyboard. A few seconds later, the voices of the mass media are filling the deathly silent room.

"—completely unprompted attack on a good man, and a good cause," a woman with hair as stiff as her attempt at a sympathetic expression is saying. "With an attack like this, it would take a miracle from the radical pro-alien aggressors to keep the nationwide alien ban from—"

The press of a button makes the screen change. This time, the speaker looks slightly more saddened. "Truly, a travesty." He shakes his head. "This is what we all knew it would come to. Instead of "isolated" and "random" attacks like the pro-alien supporters have always claimed, this was an organized and very politically-motivated bombing. Sixteen were injured, two still in critical condition, and—"

"—local activist, Martin Gale, tragically lost his life in the attack. A modern martyr, protests all over the country have broken out to protest his death, even bleeding into other countries across the globe, and—"

"—only a heartless moron would continue to resist the alien bans, which are being implemented for our own safety!"

"The only way to stop the carnage is to remove all aliens from our planet! And obviously, force is the only method that these monsters will listen to!"

The monitor is turned off, leaving the room in silence so heavy that it's suffocating. Taking a deep breath, Ben walks up to his grandpa's desk. "I want this to end," he states in a resolute voice, eyes narrowed. "I don't care what job you give me, Grandpa. As long as it's going to speed up this
"investigation, I'll do it." His tone doesn't leave any room for argument.

"Ben, please." Rook walks up behind him, placing a consoling hand on his shoulder. "You could still be suffering the residual effects of hearing damage from that explosion, not to mention how it must have affected your mental state. You should not be putting yourself into another position where you could be hurt." There's a note of concern in his voice that leaves Ben unable to look him in the eye. Rook is never supposed to sound vulnerable.

"Actually," Grandpa Max speaks up, surprising them both, "I do have a job that you might be able to help out with, Ben. See, we recently questioned a few of the aliens who went berserk. Most of them remember different things when it comes to their last memory, but there was one place that kept coming up." He types something into his keyboard and then turns one of the computer monitors around, showing Ben and Rook a picture of a bar in Undertown. "Five of them remember visiting this bar. It might be a coincidence, but it's come up enough that it's worth investigating. Ben, after the way you handled being undercover during the Incursion invasion, I think that you'll be perfect for this job." Then he frowns, his expression serious. "But after the disaster that happened today... you should take your partner's advice seriously. If you aren't ready for something like this, I understand."

Clenching his jaw in frustration, Ben bites back a snippy remark. It hurts to swallow his pride, but Grandpa is right. If he had been doing his job properly, no one would have gotten hurt at all.

He glances at Rook out of the corner of his eye, thinking about his grandpa's words. Ben wants to be a good partner. Even if he doesn't show it as often as he could, Rook is invaluable to him. Losing Gwendolyn and Kevin was hard for him to accept, but losing Rook? He can't imagine anyone else as his partner. How long until aliens aren't even allowed on Earth and Rook has to be reassigned? What are the chances that the next rogue alien attack is Rook, being used and manipulated like the others? That can't be allowed to happen.

Rook had said earlier that he isn't taking this situation seriously enough. "Well," Ben thinks dryly, "how's this for serious?" His decision made, Ben looks up at his grandpa, determination on his face.

"I'm in," he says without an ounce of hesitation. "When do I start?"
The Omnitrix has over one million DNA samples inside of it. Finding one that Ben has never used isn't that hard.

No, the difficult part is finding one that he's okay with staying in for a week or longer. There's a good chance that nothing will happen if he visits this bar, but he needs to be ready to wait it out. The Plumbers are getting him an apartment in Undertown to stay in, a part-time job, and even fake IDs in case he needs them. The alien that he picks has to be one that he won't mind living as.

As a joke, Ben almost wants to pick an Anodite, but beings of pure energy don't have DNA, so there's no sample of them in the Omnitrix. It's a bit disappointing, but thinking about family gives him a different idea.

"What do you think?" Ben grins despite the serious nature of his mission. Maybe it's something about Lenopan DNA, but he suddenly feels like he's injected caffeine straight into his bloodstream. "I got a haircut. Can you tell?" He's simplifying it. Like he's seen his cousin, Lucy, do so many times before, he's holding his body into a humanoid shape. It looks the same as his normal self, actually, only made of mud. There's an unnatural energy that comes with it, too. Much like the way his mud body is continuously churning and shifting, Ben wants to move. Standing still has never been so annoying before.

In front of him, Grandpa and Rook eye him critically. They're the only two who know that he's going undercover — it's safer that way.


There isn't really a mirror laying around Grandpa's office for him to use, but Ben grabs the glass paperweight off of the desk and holds it up to peer into. He studies his face carefully, then takes a deep breath. He gives himself a few more inches in height, widening his jaw and making his nose a little bigger. His shoulders widen, his hair lengthens, and he makes his eyes a bit further apart. He's not sure if green eyes are common in the Lenopan species, but it looks alright to him. Satisfied, he sets the knickknack down and lets his voice drop an octave or two when he speaks next. "How's that? Better?" He asks.

His grandpa nods, looking subtly pleased. "Much. You look like a different person."

Rook doesn't say anything, but that's fine. Ben isn't looking at him, anyway. He's obviously not pleased that Ben is doing this, but that's not going to change the fact that someone has to do it. And who could be better qualified than Ben Tennyson?

"Guess I'd better lock it then, huh?" Ben clears his throat. "Omnitrix, user access, voice recognition mode." There's a beep from the Omnitrix to let him know that he's been heard. "Command code 0101, Tennyson, Benjamin. Engage life-form lock." The Omnitrix glows green for a moment, then there's a ripple that passes silently over his body. Using the life-form lock for too long can be dangerous, but Ben was fine after a month the first time he tried it. Even if he did end up craving insects for a week afterward and caught himself trying to use his tongue for simple tasks more often than he would like to admit.

Having a body made of mud makes it really easy to change his appearance. Ben smirks faintly to himself, concentrating on his chest. The mud wraps over the Omnitrix symbol that's sticking out,
pulling it into his body. It's still connected to him, but no longer visible. Walking around with that on his chest would be a dead giveaway.

"You guys can't call me Ben anymore," he says with an amused tone. "You can call me... Slyk."

Even though Rook still isn't pleased, he manages a semi-genuine eye roll.

Grandpa groans. "Really, Ben? That's the name you're going with?" Starting to say more, Grandpa cuts himself off and settles for shaking his head with a sigh. "No, it's fine. Your fake name isn't that important. I'll go finish off the paperwork you're going to need. You stay here and figure out a backstory for why you're on Earth. I won't be gone long." He leaves the room, shutting the door behind him gently and walking off.

Instantly, the atmosphere is awkward. Ben isn't sure what to say. He's going to be gone for an unspecified amount of time, and his only form of communication is going to be checking in with the Plumbers through his Omnitrix once a day. He should say something to Rook, but what is there that hasn't already been said?

"Do your parents know about this?" Rook speaks up, catching him off guard.

For a moment, Ben considers answering or not. But saying nothing would be childish, and he's trying to be responsible and serious. He lets out a sigh, looking away. "No. Not yet. They're both in work right now, but I'm going to leave a voice message explaining everything. By the time they finish their shifts and check their calls, I'll be out in the field already."

Rook frowns. "Are you sure that is smart? They are your parents, Ben. You ought to tell them something this important face-to-face." He sounds upset and a little disappointed, but that's fine. As long as Rook is safe, Ben can handle any of his moods.

"This is important," he says stiffly, making a point not to look at Rook. "I'll apologize when I get back. They'll forgive me later. Right now, there are some things more important than telling my mom and dad everything I do. I can make my own decisions." Ben can't keep the bitter tone out of his voice. He's been doing things without telling his mom and dad for years. Rook doesn't need to treat him like a child.

"I see. I apologize for questioning you, Ben," Rook says flatly. "I will do my best to refrain from giving my opinion next time."

At the accusation in his voice, Ben winces. He sighs, slumping in defeat. "Alright, I'm sorry about that. I didn't mean to be such a jerk about this, Rook." He walks over to his partner, placing a hand on his shoulder. "This is really important. Look, after all that's happened, I— Rook, I need to do this. By myself." Because it's his fault. Rook would try to insist otherwise, but it's true. None of this would have happened if Ben had been on Earth and taking care of it like he was supposed to.

Despite how reluctant he is to do so, Rook turns his head to look Ben in the eyes. "I am only worried," he admits. With one hand, he reaches up and lays it over Ben's, giving a faint squeeze. "The last time I left you alone, you got injured. This is much more serious than a single female Tetramand destroying Undertown. I do not want to see you hurt again." There's an honest note of worry in Rook's voice that Ben has never heard directed at him before. It makes his chest tight in a way he can't describe.

"Rook—" Ben hesitates but shakes his head, resolute. "It's nice that you care, but I'll be fine. I do more dangerous stuff than this on a regular basis." He tries to smile, but it quickly falls under the look Rook is giving him.
"My point exactly." Rook crosses his arms, and Ben lets his hand slip off of his partner's shoulder to fall back at his side. "I am starting to worry about your mental state, Ben. I know that it more-or-less comes with a job like ours, but after everything that has happened, it is more obvious than ever that you are using hero work and jokes to keep from addressing your real fears and concerns."

Ben's expression tightens. There's hardly a foot of space between them, but suddenly, it feels like a chasm. "So… what? You don't think I should go on this mission?"

He knows that he's hit the nail on the head but, most likely to try and appease Ben, Rook shakes his head. "Not… exactly," he says slowly. "I am simply suggesting that the mission would go smoother if I were to join you. Or perhaps if someone else entirely were to go undercover." That last sentence is said in a rush, all at once, as if Rook doesn't want Ben to pay it any attention. Unfortunately, that backfires horribly. Ben gapes, stunned, and struggles to formulate a reply. "You—" his look of surprise twists into a glare. "You don't think I can do this." It's not a question.

The look that Rook gives him is probably supposed to be placating. He holds up his hands in mock surrender but, infuriatingly, he doesn't look the least bit apologetic. "Ben, you cannot do everything on your own, especially with your current emotional state. I merely think that—"

"Think that I should just sit this one out?" Ben interrupts, furious. "That you're worried about my "feelings"? Since when has that ever been something we talked about? Stop dancing around the subject and admit it, Rook! You don't think that I can handle this!" He jabs an accusatory finger in Rook's chest, forcing him to take a step back.

Even though patience is usually one of Rook's virtues, he scowls, starting to get as worked up as Ben is. "I do not want to make this into a fight, Ben. Nothing I said was unreasonable." His voice has a warning edge to it, but Ben has never been good with subtlety.

"All of it was unreasonable! I am perfectly capable of doing something like this! I'm Ben Tennyson, dammit! I can take care of myself!" He shouts, stubbornly holding his partner's glower.

Rook takes a step forward, towering over Ben with a sharp glare of his own. "If you could take care of yourself," he finally snaps, "then we wouldn't be in this situation in the first place!"

The sting of the accusation makes Ben freeze up. His anger is gone just as suddenly as it appeared. He stares up at Rook, completely unsure how to reply. He opens his mouth, but nothing comes out. Immediately, Rook looks ashamed. It hurts to look at him, so Ben turns away, his mind swirling. Is that how Rook really feels, then? That all of this is Ben's fault? He isn't wrong, but to hear it from Rook with such venom hurts more than Ben would like to admit.

Before either of them can try to rectify the thick silence between them, the door to the office swings open. "Alright, here we are," Grandpa Max says, not noticing anything amiss as he hands Ben a manilla file. "That's everything you'll need to know for your temporary life, Ben. I hope that you've come up with a backstory and personal details because you're leaving in two minutes."

Over Grandpa's shoulder, Ben tries to meet Rook's gaze. But his partner is refusing to look at him, fixating on the ground instead.

They both politely avoiding looking at each other while Ben gets his final instructions.

In the end, it's a bit of an anticlimactic trip to Undertown. He doesn't get an official Plumber escort or even dropped off by Rook so they can have another minute together to talk and smooth
over the rift between them. Instead, Ben gets handed the keys to an old truck and is told to drop himself off.

The truck kind of reminds him of Rook's Proto-TRUK, but much less cool. There are no buttons to fire lasers or transform the truck into a spaceship. It's a perfectly normal truck that handles like a box on wheels. It could simply be that Ben is out of practice when it comes to driving, but somehow, he doubts that that's the case.

Still, he doesn't drive for that long, so it's not important. He leaves it parked being Mr. Baumann's Groceries and makes sure that there are no people around before he slips into the entrance to Undertown.

Oddly enough, once he gets into the main living area of Undertown, he gets stared at more than he ever did as Ben Tennyson. It must be because Lenopans don't leave their planet very often. Luckily, he does have a backstory for that bit of history.

His story is going to be that, like Rook, he grew tired of the same old things on his planet and started off on a trip to explore the galaxy. Unlike Rook though, he doesn't do it respectfully by becoming a Plumber. Lenopans have the reputation of being some of the meanest, nastiest aliens in the galaxy, and Ben isn't about to draw anyone's attention by living a fake, law-abiding life. No, if he's going to do this properly, then he has to go all out. And, since he's taking the criminal path in life, it's more incentive not to read the file that Grandpa Max gave him. Hardened criminals don't listen to their grandpas.

The first step is to get a job and avoid thinking about Rook. Ben's apartment is already picked out for him, and since it's in one of the shadier parts of Undertown, he figures that he'll stick with the theme and look for work around where he'll be living. After all, it's going to look weird if he's hanging around a bar every night and doesn't have any money to spend.

He's left alone as he walks the underground streets, and a quick glare at anyone staring at him for too long is enough to kill any curiosity. He doesn't like being rude to strangers, but Lenopans aren't a hospitable race, and the last thing he needs is someone questioning him on the first day.

All he has on him is a room key. Ben figures that he should get some belongings for himself, but he doesn't know what Lenopans eat, or even how often they need food. At least clothes aren't something he needs. If he can get money, buying some Instant Ramen, or the alien equivalent, anyway, should hold him over for however long this undercover mission is going to take.

Once Ben manages to find his apartment, he makes a mental note of where it is. It's a shambled building, barely more than brick walls and a rotting roof. He thinks that it might be against building safety codes, but as long as it doesn't collapse on top of him, he doesn't care. He doesn't go up to see what his room looks like, but he'll consider himself lucky if it even has a moldy couch for him to sleep on.

Done with that, he sets off down the street, scanning shop windows. Everything is written in an alien language, none of which he understands, but he can kind of guess what each thing means based on what the store looks like. He counts the characters on each sign, waiting for one with six letters that looks like it's been handmade.

One thing that's especially noticeable is how crowded it is. Sure, people give him a wide girth since he's a Lenopan, but with aliens ostracized from the surface and unwilling or unable to leave the planet, Undertown is more crowded than ever. Trash is building up, and the once-bustling marketplace looks more like a homeless shelter.
After a few minutes of searching, Ben stops in front of a store with a sign in the window that he's pretty sure says, "hiring." It looks more like squiggles to him, but it's the first word that he can even pretend to understand. Looking at the store doesn't inspire a lot of faith, though. It has animals visible in their cages through the windows. He would think that it's a pet store if it weren't for the inhumane conditions he can see. There's an Anubian Baskurr in a cage that barely allows enough room for it to turn around. He can see several Dasypodidaes in a cramped glass container, stacked on top of each other and writhing unhappily. He knows from personal experience that they like to hunt in packs by the thousands, but they aren't hunting, and they certainly aren't pleased to be left unable to move.

As sick as it makes him, Ben opens the door and heads inside. He needs a job, after all. And hey, if he can prove that there's illegal activity here, he can report the store owner to the Plumbers once he gets back and set all the animals free. Or at least force the store owner to improve their conditions.

He walks up to the front desk, ringing the little bell. It's difficult to ignore the pungent smell of the air, but manages, instead distracting himself by watching the enclosed pen of Cortalopuses while he waits. He distinctly remembers Grandpa Max cooking soup from the creature before, but even food deserves better treatment than this.

Finally, just when Ben is about to give up and leave, the door to the back room opens. Ben doesn't know what species it is, but it's one that he's seen around Undertown before. It has a single eye in the center of a blue mass of writhing tentacles. The rest of its body is lavender, with darker-purple liver spots covering it. The way its body hangs and sags reminds Ben of a limp carcass, to the point that he's surprised when it moves quickly and without any issue.

"Can I help you?" It says with a thick accent. What accent it is, though, Ben has no idea. He can't hear it all that clearly through the tentacles it's speaking through.

"Yeah, I saw your sign in the window?" He jabs his thumb at the sign for emphasis. It blinks at him, then nods. "You're here for job, then?" Ben thinks that it's frowning now, but it's really hard to tell. "A Lenopan, eh? Well, that'll boost image. Could use a hard-worker like one of you. Do you have any qualifications?"

Ben shrugs, giving a hesitant smile. "I, um… I've seen all of these species before if that counts? A friend of mine owns an Anubian Baskurr." He has to sound out the name slowly, unused to the technical term. The signs on the pens have the species printed in English, among other (less familiar) languages, which is his only saving grace.

To prove his point, he walks over to the cage where the animal is. Immediately, it growls at him, but Ben sticks his hand through the cage anyway and scratches it behind the ear. As soon as he finds that one spot, it goes limp, its tail wagging as it closes its eyes and leans into his touch. Admittedly, Ben wasn't expecting that to work, but he's glad that he at least picked up one thing from hanging around Zed. Even if the alien-dog did try to kill Ben multiple times before Kevin befriended her.

The shopkeeper looks on, impressed, and nods. "Yes, you seem to have a talent with at least that creature. I have never been able to get it to listen to me." He approaches Ben, sticking out his hand-tentacle-thing. "I am Crex'ylhn. Welcome to the job."

The name that he gives is filled with rolled consonants and alien gurgling sounds that Ben doubts he's capable of. Still, he nods and does his best to be polite, taking Crex'ylhn's hand and shaking it. The feeling of the several tentacles on the end of his limb wrapping around Ben's hand
and up his arm is unpleasant, to say the least, but he manages to keep from visibly reacting and quickly lets go.

"Thanks," he says with as much enthusiasm as he can muster — not that it's a lot. "My name is Slyk. Can I start today?"

In response, Crex'yhn blinks.

When all is said and done, Ben thinks that it turns out to be a pretty productive first day. He works out his work schedule with Crex'yhn, surprising the man by asking for as many hours as he's legally allowed to work in one day. His only request is that his evenings remain open. All Ben has to do is go to the bar in the evenings, so the more hours he has to work, the less time he spends being bored out of his mind in his apartment. When he's bored, he thinks about things that are best left alone. So, if Ben is going to be doing nothing but wasting time, he might as well be making money, too.

The actual work isn't that difficult. Crex'yhn gives him a crash-course in caring for the different alien species, including cleaning their cages and feeding them. Which, Ben notices, the shopkeeper doesn't do nearly as often as he should. Ben might have found the lessons interesting, were it not for the nagging thoughts in the back of his mind, regarding a certain partner, that he's doing his best to ignore.

But, at least for the time being, the mindless labor and quick-forming rituals give him something else to focus on.

After his shift, Ben follows the address he memorized to head towards the bar. It's called The Winking Muroid, and according to his grandpa's research, is a recent addition to Undertown. It's only been around for five months or so.

Compared to his undercover mission in the Incursion Armada, Ben finds this job almost effortless. Sure, doing work without his Omnitrix is a little annoying and tedious, but it's not like he has anything else to be doing. With the Incursions, everything was on a schedule, down to when he was allowed to go to the bathroom. At least this time around, Ben has much more free time and flexibility.

He's not sure what time it is since there's no sky in Undertown, but when he arrives at the club, there's already music thumping from inside and a line of aliens eager to get in. Ben knows that he isn't as book-smart as Gwen, but the sight still raises his suspicions. He doesn't know why at first, before he remembers that the bar is fairly new. How is it already so popular?

Mustering up more confidence than he really feels, Ben pushes his way through the crowd and up to the entrance. No one tries to stop him. Some aliens get annoyed, but taking one look at him is enough to have them averting their gaze.

Ben has to admit that being a Lenopan has its advantages.

Even in his humanoid form, the bouncer takes one look at him and merely grunts, gesturing to the door. A part of Ben can't help but think that it's all a little bit too easy. Still, he's not going to turn around now. He won't have any money to spend until Saturday when he gets his first paycheck, but the sooner he starts investigating, the sooner he can get back home.

He keeps his gaze focused straight ahead, doing his best to appear confident as he enters the bar. It doubles as a club, with a multi-colored dance floor that lights up every time someone steps on it. It's so crowded at the moment that the effect is a little lost in the mess of bodies moving to the beat.
In all the movies Ben has seen, the bar is the place to go to for information. He takes a seat, silent and waiting for the bartender to acknowledge him. Based on all the films with this trope, the bartender is supposed to be the most knowledgeable person around. He's pretty sure that it's a female of a species that Ben recognizes, but not by a proper name. She seems busy, so he stays silent, scanning the crowd in case anything interesting happens.

To his extreme luck and stupefied wonder, something does.

It's barely been a minute when there's a rush of someone moving on his left. By the time Ben turns his head, there's a male Kineceleran in the seat next to him, looking as relaxed as can be.

His faceplate snaps up, revealing a grin that Ben recognizes from his own experiences being XLR8. "First time at a bar?" He jokes. "It's hard to tell with you Lenopans, but you seem pretty young. Let me help you out. Hey, Jut!" His shout gets the attention of the bartender, who gives him an amused look. "My usual, please. And the same for my buddy here." He pats Ben on the shoulder.

As she goes about making their drinks, Ben turns in his seat to face the Kineceleran better. "Ah, thanks." He does his best to look thankful. "This is my first time in one of these. I left my homeworld recently."

"Say no more. I know the feeling." He shakes his head sympathetically. "My name is MH-1. You could say that I'm the greeter — that's what it says on my paycheck, anyway. I'm here every day, and I make a point of knowing everyone who stops by, even if it's only for one night."

A handshake wouldn't really work with Kineceleran claws, so Ben settles for a polite nod. "Thanks for the drink, MH-1. My name's Slyk." He considers being subtle to start off with, but that is something that Ben is notoriously bad at. Besides, he doesn't feel like wasting time. "So, uh, you know everyone here? Even the boss? They must be working miracles — this place looks amazing. I heard that it's only been open for a few months, right?"

Their drinks are set down in front of them. It's some kind of bubbling pink liquid, steam rolling off of it and over the lip of the square glass to dissipate in the air. There's a severed tentacle in it that twists and writhes, and Ben can see that the cut-off end of it is bleeding blue-tinted blood into the drink.

Looking delighted, MH-1 grabs the glass and slurps the tentacle out of it in one smooth motion. "It's always better when it's fresh," he sighs. "But, to answer your question, I do know the boss. I don't know how he's managed to make this place so successful. Between you and me, I don't think he's all there, you know? He's twisted in the head." Suddenly, MH-1 swivels his head around, gesturing across the room. "He's right over there — the guy with the white, skull-head." He snorts.

Even before Ben looks, he knows what he's going to see. Psyphon. What is Vilgax's third most powerful lackey doing managing a bar in Undertown? Ben doubts that the crime scene is really so dried up that he has to resort to this. He knows instinctively that Psyphon isn't the mastermind, but it at least confirms his suspicion that someone pretty high up on the food-chain is doing this. Psyphon wouldn't take orders from someone who didn't have a lot to offer.

But what could he possibly be getting out of terrifying the populous? Does he not know the full extent of what he's signed up for?

"I can see what you mean," Ben agrees, turning away from the lackey. He doesn't want to run the risk of being recognized. "He looks ridiculous — hard to believe that he really runs a cool place like this without help from his mommy. Did he start it himself?" He asks, trying not to appear too
interested.

At that, MH-1 laughs, though it seems a bit forced. "Ha! I knew you Lenopans are tough, but I didn't know you were funny, too! No, there's definitely someone else in charge, but I couldn't tell you who. I've never met them. And as long as this place keeps busy, I can't say that I care." He finishes the rest of his drink, then points one of his claws at Ben's. "Are you going to finish that?"

Ben shrugs, sliding the drink over to him. "Knock yourself out." He watches quietly as MH-1 downs the tentacle a second time. After a moment, Ben clears his throat. Subtlety is for people with more patience than him. "So, you know everyone who comes in here. I've been here a few days, and I've noticed some… weird things. Do you know anything about missing aliens?"

Nearly choking on his drink, MH-1 slams his glass down, looking alarmed. "What? No, of course not!" He laughs loudly. "I have no idea what you're talking about, kid." His voice is loud and jovial to the point that even Ben can't miss how hard he's faking it. The look in his eyes is nothing short of pleading.

It's his cue to drop the subject, but Ben stubbornly refuses to. "You're lying," he snaps right back, barely keeping his voice down. "Is it because of the guy who's really in charge? Is he making people… disappear?" He asks almost hesitantly.

Suddenly, MH-1 is on his feet. One of his claws grabs Ben by the wrist, holding him tight enough that it might have hurt if mud had nerve endings. Unaffected, Ben doesn't try to fight as MH-1 leads him outside. The Kineceleran gives a greeting wave to the bouncer, then turns into the narrow alley off to the side of the building, pulling Ben along after him.

There, he stops, turning to face Ben with a severe look on his face. "You can't talk about that here," he hisses. "It's not safe. You're going to get yourself killed if you start poking around here, kid. Trust me."

"But I want to help," Ben protests. "I can take care of myself. These missing aliens obviously can't. I'm not going to just wait around and hope everything turns out alright." He doesn't know how to work Lenopan facial expressions very well, but "serious" seems to be a universal norm for any species with a face because MH-1 hesitates.

Maybe he isn't used to people genuinely wanting to do something good, because he sighs. "Look," MH-1 takes a deep breath, "there are eyes and ears everywhere. You seem like a well-meaning guy, so I'm giving you a chance to turn around and leave before it's too late. I can guarantee that they already know you're here." His gaze suddenly fixates on something over Ben's shoulder, but when the hero turns around to look, there's nothing there.

"They?" Ben questions, turning back to the Kineceleran, but MH-1 is already moving on.

"I've been here since the bar opened, and I've been noticing the same things. I'm onto something big, I can feel it. If you're serious about this, come back tomorrow. I'll be here. I can explain everything then. Hopefully." MH-1 mutters that last part like he's hoping that Ben won't be able to hear him.

Before Ben can protest, there's a rush of air, and MH-1 is gone. Ben's hand closes around empty air where the Kineceleran's shoulder was a second ago. A thoughtful frown on his face, Ben stands there for a moment before turning to leave the alley. The entire walk back to his shady apartment, he can feel eyes trailing him.
Chapter 8

His second day undercover, Ben shows up at the bar at the same time as the day before. He sits in the same place and waits, the same as before.

Nothing happens. He visits the next day, and still nothing. On the fourth day of working undercover, Ben still doesn't see MH-1 at the bar again. He's starting to think that maybe the alien took off to avoid meeting up with Ben again. Still, it hadn't seemed like he was lying. He had seemed overly paranoid, sure, but given the circumstances, Ben can't exactly blame him. Besides, there must be easier ways to avoid him than simply not showing up. He had seemed pretty proud when he told Ben that he visited the bar daily. Had something changed?

Overall, it's a very suspicious set of circumstances. Ben does try asking other people at the bar when he visits every night, but all of the other aliens must have gotten the memo because they avoid looking at him and only answer his questions very vaguely before excusing themselves.

He knows that there's something he's not being told, like an unspoken consensus in the club that there are certain things you don't talk about. Ever. More than that, it seems to permeate all of Undertown. None of the aliens that Ben talks to, be it customers, someone he passed on the street, or the bar patrons, want to talk about anything even remotely helpful. They won't talk about the political atmosphere, they won't talk about the Plumbers, and they definitely won't talk about Ben Tennyson. No one goes near the well-known entrances to Undertown anymore, and when Ben does eventually venture closer, he only gets close enough that he can hear the angry humans screaming and chanting from the surface, before turning around.

It's beyond frustrating.

Luckily, Lenopans are "very good" at dealing with anger. By which Ben means that the more impatient he gets, the harder it is to control himself. He wants to hurt something, and that's the most disgusting part. Maybe it's the reason why Lucy is always pulling pranks and making herself laugh. As much as Ben likes to think that he would never hurt an innocent, alien or otherwise, that bar is suddenly filled only of moving targets. Being an Incursion had its own instincts that came with it, but never anything that honestly scared him the way he is now. He finds himself sizing up every alien he passes, imaging what each species' individual scream sounds like, or how long they could last against him before begging for mercy. The thoughts are terrifying.

Finally, as stupid as it is, Ben decides that he's had enough. He needs to get rid of his frustration, and the only thing that will do that is progress.

As much as Ben hates to admit it, the violent thoughts in the back of his mind are helpful for one thing. They help him quickly discern who the weakest-willed are. They're the aliens who are hesitant and reserved on the dance floor, who awkwardly laugh and can't make eye contact when a stranger talks to them, and the ones that glue themselves to the wall until whatever friend forced them to come drags them off to socialize.

Before Ben can stop himself, the thought of how easy it would be to manipulate them crawls into his mind. It's a horrible thought process that Ben refuses to follow any further. It's bad enough that he's about to indulge that part of his DNA.

His target is a small alien that Ben has noticed every day he comes here. Why it comes, he has no idea, but it sticks out in the crowd despite its small size. That's mostly because it's incredibly unattractive. It has a hugely disproportionate head, with lopsided eyes and a maw
filled with a mix of sharp and dull teeth. Its skin is dark orange and dotted red all over, reminding Ben of liver spots on a human, and there's a barely-there covering of wispy white hair all over it. All in all, it's an incredibly off-putting effect. The alien isn't a species that Ben recognizes, but it seems familiar with the bar, but not enough that it's comfortable or relaxes. It's perfect.

As luck would have it, the alien quickly excuses itself to the bathroom. Ben trails along behind it, doing his best to look nonchalant. It's not that difficult — he doubts that any alien in the building really wants to push their luck by messing with him. He waits in the hallway outside of the bathrooms, leaning against the wall casually. The doors are labeled, but Ben has no idea what they mean. The little pictures above the unfamiliar language have one alien with a bunch of tentacles, and the second door has one with six indiscernible limbs. There's also a third door, with a drawing of some kind of butterfly-creature. If the bathrooms are gendered like the ones on Earth, the Ben guesses that one of them is for the genderless species, like what Big Chill is. He doesn't see any Necrofriggians around, but then again, he doesn't know how many species in the universe are genderless. Come to think of it, how do any of these aliens even use toilets?

Entertaining the silly line of thinking helps Ben calm down. It's enough that, when his target finally leaves the restroom, he doesn't have the urge to maim the poor thing anymore.

It starts back towards the crowd of people, but Ben quickly steps in front of it. Instantly, it shrinks back. If the sight of a lesser creature cowering in front of him makes any of Ben's residual instincts spike with pleasure, then he manages to perfectly ignore it.

"Let's talk," he says lowly. Taking a step forward causes the alien to take a step back. Before long, it's managed to completely corner itself. The part of his DNA that Ben is ignoring sends a flair of annoyance through him — this isn't even fun. Weak prey offers no thrill. He has to remind himself that this isn't for the thrill, though. With two things on his mind that he's trying desperately not to think about, Ben has to practically force himself to take a deep breath. "I want information. I think you can help me with that, can't you? I'm not very patient." For emphasis, Ben holds his hand up, letting his humanoid fingers lengthen and sharpen until his hand is little more than a collection of scalpels. The implication makes him a little sick, but he can handle some intimidation. It's not like he's actually going to hurt this alien.

Swallowing hard, the pitiful thing lets out an alarmed squeak. "I— I h-have no idea what you're t-t-talking about! I swear!" It puts its arms over its face as if that's going to help.

"It's my fault," Ben replies, though there's not an ounce of sympathy in his voice. "I wasn't specific enough. I want to know about the disappearances. You know what I'm talking about — regular customers who suddenly stop coming." He pauses. "Maybe you need some help with jogging your memory."

The longer Ben continues talking, the more panicked it gets. It's shaking by the time he finishes, but thankfully, Ben no longer feels the residual urge to crush it. That doesn't stop him from thinking that he should find prey that provides a challenge, but at least it's a start.

Impatient, Ben reaches out his dagger-like hand towards the alien. It yelps, shaking its head. "Okay, okay! I'll talk!" Like MH-1, it seems paranoid, though its anxiety seems a lot more general, in an odd way. It's as though it doesn't know where the source of his paranoia is coming from. "No one talks about it. Aliens have been disappearing all over Undertown, not just from here. The guys that talk about it are the ones who disappear next, so— so you didn't hear this from me." It makes a move to walk around Ben, but freezes when he puts his clawed hand right in front of its face.

"The disappearing people," Ben hums thoughtfully, "do they have anything to do with the owner of the bar?"
At this, the little alien actually seems taken aback. "Who? Psyphon? Is that a joke? Everyone knows that he can't be in charge to save his life. He has a boss, but no one knows who. Does it matter?" Now, it looks a little annoyed. Suddenly growing a backbone doesn't fit with Ben's mental summary of this alien, but he doesn't outwardly react to it. "The guy wants to pretend that he runs a cool bar. I say, let him. It's not doing any harm."

Ben considers that for a moment. This situation still doesn't seem like something from the Forever Knights, but he's been wrong before. They're the hypocritical type, so teaming up with an alien as a way to get rid of aliens sounds like something they would do. Psyphon runs a bar as a front and finds good targets, and the Forever Knights drug them and drop them somewhere over the globe to cause a scene. It's likely that there's more than one "provider" for whoever wants these aliens, too. It seems sloppy to only rely on one person to bring in hundreds of victims. Either way, humans hate aliens, and with public support, it wouldn't be hard for them to push for all aliens to be removed from the planet.

Lifting his hand, Ben lets his fingers take on a more humanoid shape. "Thanks," he says without feeling. "You were helpful."

The alien is quick to scurry off, leaving Ben to his thoughts. A pounding headache has started up behind his forehead, and it makes him grimace. The Lenopan DNA isn't settling as well as he thought it would. It's been a few days already, and it feels like his control is getting worse, not better. Maybe he's only stressed. Ben knows how to be serious, but he's never forced it upon himself for days at a time before. Usually, he has breaks like playing video games or watching a movie to get his mind off of things, but nothing like that is available to him in Undertown.

He brushes the thought away. It's probably nothing. He needs to find proof that the Forever Knights are involved, and then it’ll be the all clear to return home. Once this whole mess is covered up, maybe he can talk things out with Rook. Or at the very least, ignore it until things go back to normal.

They were talking about a vacation before this whole mess started, but those plans understandably got sidetracked. Maybe some time apart would help, even. Rook can go home to Revonnah for the harvest, and Ben can do something normal and non-Plumber related. Going back to school for the first time in months might be a nice change in pace. The idea doesn't feel right, but Ben isn't sure if it's the idea of going to school that he doesn't like, or taking a "vacation" without Rook. He shrugs it off. There are more important things on his mind.

Walking back over to the bar, Ben waves to get the attention of the bartender. She's the same one that was there on the night that he met MH-1. Luckily, he's heard enough people shout her name over the last few days that it sticks in his mind. "Jut!" He yells to be heard over the music, earning her attention. "Hey, I wanna ask a favor. Do you know where MH-1 lives?"

A few minutes later, Ben is leaving the bar, holding one of those tentacle drinks that MH-1 likes. Personally, he thinks that Jut has a thing for the guy. She was hesitant to give out his address but had relented once Ben spun a fake story about being friends from a few years back and said that he had promised to visit MH-1 whenever he had the time. She's not that bright (she didn't even question why Ben didn't already know the address), but she's sweet. One of her conditions for giving him the address was that he had to bring MH-1 his favorite drink. According to her, it's free of charge.

All in all, Ben is feeling much more relaxed than he was before. The Lenopan DNA isn't as overwhelming when he's in control of his emotions. He's that much closer to real progress, and that makes all the difference.
The apartment building that MH-1 lives in is much nicer than the one Ben is staying in. Well, technically, he tries not to stay in his (he can't sleep, anyway), but MH-1 definitely has a well-paying job based on the look of his place. There's a small, green shrub area out front, and all of the rooms have big, open windows. He doesn't peer closely into any of the rooms, but from what he can see through passing glances, there are nice curtains and plenty of free space. For alien apartments, Ben would probably place it in the four-star range.

He walks inside, walking through the linoleum entryway to head towards the elevators. If Jut is right, then MH-1 lives on the third floor, in room 309. He gets a few odd looks from other residents, but no one stops him. The elevator is empty when he gets on, and it's a short, quiet ride to the third floor. Ben can't help but feel that it's a little anticlimactic, all things considered. The sound of his footsteps on the tile floor of the hallway is foreboding in the same way that nearing the climax always is, but even as he gets closer to room 309, nothing happens.

Nothing explodes. No one jumps out at him and makes a threat on his life. There's not a single distracting noise, no matter how hard Ben strains to hear something.

When he knocks on the door, holding his breath, there's still not a thing. Ben waits for a minute, hoping that MH-1 will answer and throw confetti in his face and tell him that he's been joking the entire time. That doesn't happen. Holding his breath, Ben knocks again, louder this time. "MH-1?" He calls hesitantly. "It's me, Slyk. From the bar, remember? Jut wanted me to bring this drink to you. Are you home?"

There's not a single sound from the other side of the door. Impatient, Ben puts his hand on the door handle. He considers using the Omnitrix to let the Plumbers know what he's doing but decides against it. He's not supposed to check in for another two hours, and even then, it's just a burst from the homing device so that they know he's back at his apartment. Activating his communicator proper will mean disengaging the life form lock, thanks to the failsafe programmed in. The life form lock also disables the communication line so that no one can get in contact with him and potentially compromise his position. Disengaging the life form lock now will make the Plumbers think that something is wrong, and Ben doesn't want them to come swinging in only to find out that MH-1 took an emergency vacation or something.

Steadying his nerves, Ben turns the door handle. To his surprise, it isn't locked. He pushes the door open, hesitating only a moment before peering inside.

Nothing looks out of place.

The apartment almost looks brand-new, though Ben can see the wear on the sofa and on the carpets, giving the room a lived-in feeling. A little underwhelmed, Ben steps inside and shuts the door silently behind him.

He gives the living room only a courtesy glance, quickly moving on to the small kitchen and adjacent dining room set-up. He leaves the drink that Jut gave him on the counter, the frown on his face deepening as he looks around. There's a bowl of… something on the table. Honestly, Ben has no idea what it is. It looks like a mixture grits and oatmeal, but puke-colored and cold to the touch. He's not sure if it's supposed to be eaten cold, but it doesn't inspire a lot of confidence. It looks dry — like it's been sitting out for a few days. There's a cup knocked over on the table next to it, and if the dark purple stain in the carpet beneath it means anything, then it's been left like that for a while. It doesn't take a genius to recognize that, whatever happened, it caused MH-1 to leave in a hurry.

Like the living room, the bathroom is untouched. Ben doesn't explore it too well, mostly out of the desire to stay as far away from the alien toilet and shower as possible, but it doesn't show any sign of a struggle.
The bedroom, on the other hand, is a disaster area.

Ben stands in the doorway for a long minute, taking everything in. The alien bed is turned over on its side, the purple pod leaking blue-tinted fluid all over the carpet. Somehow, the dresser has been broken in half, and the uniform clothes are laying underneath the splinters in a heap. There's a mirror laying on its back, the glass cracked and splintered in its frame, and even the lamp looks like it's taken a beating. The blinds are drawn tight, throwing the room into an eerie limbo between night and day. He tries the light switch but gets no results.

Carefully, Ben steps into the room. Uneasy, he tries searching for any clue towards what happened. There's a small, smashed desk in the corner, but a quick flip through the papers on the ground just reveals bills and business information.

Skeptical now, Ben turns his attention to the closet. It looks a little dented from whatever fight took place, but after a minute of yanking on the door, it finally gives and falls open. Peering inside, all Ben sees is clothes hung up neatly. He reaches out, pushing some of them to the side. Once again, random chance pays off. Shocked, Ben yanks them all off and drops them to the floor, not feeling the least bit bad about creasing the nice clothes.

What's behind them is so much more interesting.

MH-1 must be a fan of cliches. There are pictures, news articles, and cut-out paragraphs of text hung up on the wall by pins. Multi-colored lines of string connect them, drawing Ben's attention between certain events and people. Unlike the little alien that Ben had cornered earlier, MH-1's paranoia is certainly justified. He has pictures of several politicians put up, blurry photos of shadowy figures that he must have taken himself, and even the Forever Knights. He was on the track to solving the entire thing, and they — whoever "they" are — knew it.

Scanning over the set-up, Ben catches a few important words. Things like, "conspiracy," and "motive = intent." There's a picture of a man with his face scratched out in red ink, the words "LIAR" scrawled above it messily.

"Liar," Ben mumbles, a frown on his face as he reaches up to trace the word. "Who's the liar?"

"Right now, it looks like it's you," says a rough, unfamiliar voice from behind him.

Alarmed, Ben spins around to face him, only to be met with a face-full of water. He coughs and sputters, holding his hands up to try and keep the spray out of his face. At first, he thinks that the attack is a little ridiculous, only for an old memory to spring up. The Lenopan wedding that he had attended when he was ten years old had gone something like this because water makes Lenopans dissolve.

Panic surges in his chest and Ben suddenly lashes his hand out. Rather than hitting the assailant, he enlarges his hand, scooping up the splintered dresser and pile of clothes and throwing them towards the bedroom door as hard as he can. He's not used to fighting in this form, but that doesn't mean he doesn't know how to use it. The water stops, and Ben does his best to pull his body together as he rushes over to the man who attacked him.

He's surprised to see a normal human struggling to get the sodden pile of clothes off of him, but Ben doesn't stay motionless for long. He lets his humanoid form slip away, taking on the formless shape of a proper Lenopan. This time, it's indescribably difficult to hold back the urge to send another living creature into agony. His friend is missing, his partner and family could be banned from the planet if he can't fix this, and this human has the audacity to interrupt him when he was finally getting close to answers. His hand encircles the man easily, slamming him against the wall...
of the hallway outside the bedroom. Only the thought of how easy it would be to break him makes
Ben hold back his flood of rage.

It's not enough to calm him down entirely, but it does sober him up enough that he can think
reasonably again. He wants to scare his enemies, not himself. "What are you doing here?" He snaps
at the man in his hold. "Who sent you?"

Despite being held in the grip of an alien three times his size, the man only smirks. There's
something familiar about him, but Ben can't place where he's seen the man before. "Why don't you
tell me?" He replies, unfazed. "You're the know-it-all who's been snooping around. You're in over
your head, Tennyson."

Before Ben can reply, there's a rush of heat from down the hall. Automatically, Ben recoils,
dropping the man. He takes on his humanoid form again, almost against his will. It feels like his
body is trying to shrink to get away from the flames. There must be a second man. He should have
known that the enemy would bring backup!

Unlike water, which leaves Ben unable to maintain his shape, the fire forces his body to seize
up. He tries to move away from it, only to find a wall pressed against his back. Grasping at straws,
Ben thinks to break it down but finds his hands aren't responding to his desire to move them. The
mud is dried and cracked now as the heat runs up his arms and swallows his limbs. Compared to
the fire lighting up his right arm, the flames attacking the outside of his body feel more like ice. He
can't tell where the internalized pain ends and where the real threat begins. He's being attacked
with fire, he knows that, but then why does his arm feel like it's being crushed and twisted?

The last thing Ben thinks is how Rook is going to feel once he finds out about this — he was
right because apparently, Ben really can't handle this. The flames wash over him, turning his body
unbendable and brittle, and Ben feels a savage biting sensation rush over his eyes, turning them try
and sightless and brittle, and then he doesn't think about anything at all.
There's the hum of familiar words in his ears. Even though Ben can't tell what Rook is saying, his voice is low and soft, pleasing to listen to. They're sitting on a couch, but there are no details to observe. The walls blend into the floor, drowning his surroundings in formless consistency. The couch feels like nothing. It might as well not even be there.

They sit the way that Ben has often seen couples relax together, with his head in Rook's lap so he can look up and watch his partner chatter on aimlessly. Gentle hands run through his hair, and Ben lets himself giggle at the feeling, the noise echoing in his head and leaving him dizzy. Rook looks down at him, amused, and presses a finger to his lips. "Sssh," he practically cooes, and even though Ben can't remember speaking, he nods and obeys.

Remaining silent, Rook points up, towards the impossibly far away ceiling. Tilting his head to the side, a frown comes to Ben's face. There's a soft pattering sound right next to his ear, like fingers tapping on the walls. A sprinkle becomes a torrent, and it isn't until the first crash of thunder that Ben realizes that he's listening to rain. It doesn't make him feel calm. Fear shoots through his chest, leaving him breathless. The terror is familiar, in a way that should be more alarming than it actually is.

He reaches up towards Rook, wanting to say something, but his words get stuck in his throat. Unaware of Ben's emotional state, that half-smile on Rook's face only widens. He leans over Ben, pressing their lips together with a casual sort of ease, as though he's accustomed to doing it.

Just as Ben finally starts to ignore the rain, relaxing, the thunder booms. He winces as lightning cuts through them, jerking them apart. Rain splatters onto his cheek, but when Ben looks up, the endless void is still there. He doesn't see any clouds, and the longer he looks, the harder the rain comes down. By the time his clothes are soaked through, Ben decides that he ought to find a place to dry off.

His hand goes to where Rook had been sitting a moment ago but close on empty air. It doesn't leave Ben confused or conflicted. What else was he expecting, really, except to end up alone?

Thunder crashes again, and this time, the ground shakes with it. It happens a second time, unaccompanied by the symphony of the weather. The rain is pounding against him now, leaving his skin stinging and nearly blinding him. Despite the way the rain threatens to suffocate him and the wind whips his hair into his face, leaving stinging marks, his surroundings never change. Everything is the same shade of white, and as much as Ben wants to close his eyes, he can't. Something bad will happen if he does.

When the ground buckles for the third time, Ben has to take a knee. He starts to lift his hand to brace against the storm but lets out an inaudible cry when the faintest twitch sends a stabbing pain up from his fingertips all the way to his shoulder. Red materializes out of the white, and even with the rain burning his eyes, Ben can make out the hand wrapped around his forearm. It squeezes and squeezes, and more red blooms out of his paper-thin skin, dripping in time with the rain. Agony has him curling up, recoiling, trying to punch and kick and pry at the death grip on his arm. He's hyperventilating, unable to breathe, and the pain won't stop. Everything is so quiet that his ears are ringing with the silence. Somehow, the lack of noise hurts more than his own screams would. The ringing won't stop, won't go away, and he wants to rip his ears off if only it would
He snaps up into a sitting position, panting. With shaking hands, Ben pushes his hair out of his face. He bends over, closing his eyes and putting his head between his legs to catch his breath. His dream feels barely at the edge of his grasp. That's probably for the best. As ridiculous as it is to be worked up over a dream, his body is shaking and tingling. Ignoring it would be so much better than thinking about it.

After he calms himself, he finally lifts his head up and takes a look around.

Every wall looks indistinguishable from the next, and the same goes for the ceiling and floor. It's all pure white. There is absolutely no furniture in the room or even a visible door. It reminds him of his dream world, leaving Ben further uneased.

Quickly, he realizes that he's still in his Lenopan form. Ben doesn't time out while the life lock is on, but based on the way his attackers used his last name, looking like a Lenopan isn't going to help him feign some sort of ignorance.

He gets to his feet, running his hand over the nearest wall. It's made of a material that he isn't familiar with, but it's cold and smooth to the touch. There aren't any visible lights — rather, the walls seem to almost pulse with their own glow. More importantly, the room is built entirely seamless. He doesn't know if the room is completely airtight, but the fact that he can't see even a tiny hole for air to be filtered through doesn't bode well. As far as he can tell, Lenopans need to be able to breathe. Is he going to run out of air after long enough?

There aren't any cracks for him to work open, and he doesn't want to try smashing anything yet. The longer he can go without getting the attention of his captors, the better. In that same theme, Ben notices the lack of cameras in the room. He's still not willing to disengage the life form lock to try getting in touch with anyone, but he doubts that he'll need to. It feels like he's been out for a few hours, at the least, which means that he's missed his check in with the Plumbers. Most likely, if the scanners can't find him anywhere, then Gwendolyn will have to be brought in to track him down. She's tracked him all the way to Galvan Prime before, so even if Ben isn't still on Earth, it shouldn't be a difficult task for her.

Almost on a whim, he tries sending out the homing signal from his Omnitrix. He gets nothing but a weak beep, signaling that the device has failed. That can't be a good sign. Then again, he's not that surprised. If whoever is behind this was capable of strategically kidnapping and drugging hundreds of aliens, then they can certainly do something as simple as block transmission waves.

Even though Ben is still a little shaken from his dream, he knows that he needs a plan. The Lenopan instincts mostly involve finding whoever put him here and finding out what their insides look like, so in an effort born mostly out of the desire to keep those feelings in check, he decides to think about this situation logically.

The original plan hadn't involved him getting kidnapped, but now that Ben is thinking about it, this could work to his advantage. He's still partly convinced that the Forever Knights are doing this, but even if they aren't, the person in charge certainly knows who he is. Obviously, he isn't dead, which means that he's probably going to be getting an evil monologue. And as annoying as they are, monologues almost always lead to information.

So, with his mind made up and nothing else to do, Ben waits.

He paces the room for a little bit, but it gets kind of boring and after long enough, his feet are sore from standing. For a while, Ben uses his Lenopan abilities to entertain himself. He practices
making his body take on different shapes and textures, seeing how close he can get to things like skin and cloth and even wood. It's not exactly a useful battle ability, but it's at least mildly entertaining.

"Hey, just so you guys know, this is pretty dull," Ben calls out to no one in particular. "If the big plan is to bore me into going along with your plans, you're gonna be waiting for a long time. That's all I'm saying." He gets no response, but that's not shocking.

Laying down on the unremarkable flooring, Ben holds his right arm up in front of his face, frowning at it. He knows that he's not imagining the unbearable pain that flashed through it when he was attacked, but what Ben doesn't know is why he felt it. He should be healed. Everything feels fine when he moves it, but his body is made out of mud. He's not an expert on the Lenopan nervous system, but he doubts that it can explain away why he's feeling pain for no real reason.

With nothing to distract himself, Ben has to work harder than ever to keep his unpleasant thoughts away. He doesn't want to think about his nightmare, or Rook, or his arm, and especially not the aliens and people that could be getting hurt because he's wasting time instead of doing something. He's never had to work this hard to stop thinking about something before. Every other topic he tries to distract himself with circles right back around to the ones he doesn't want to think about.

Suddenly, there's a mechanized whir from the other side of the wall. Ben sits up, immediately on edge, and a seamless door slides out of place to reveal a simple, dimly-lit white hallway beyond it. He considers attacking immediately but holds himself back. Satisfying though it would be to flatten this guy, the "smarter" choice is to wait and see what happens.

As soon as Ben processes what he's looking at, his eyes widen. Seeing the face of the "mastermind" leaves Ben feeling conflicted, to put it mildly. On one hand, he's shocked and absolutely appalled. But, on the other hand, he's kicking himself for being surprised at all. In hindsight, he probably should have seen it coming.

"Mr. Collins?" He chokes, climbing to his feet. "You... you're the one that's been framing all the aliens?" The truth is right in front of him, finally. Why, then, is it so difficult to grasp?

When they first met at the pro-alien rally, Ben had thought Daniel Collins to be a respectable and classy gentleman. His hair had been styled so perfectly that it looked solid, his suit had been so immaculate that it was probably purchased that day, and his smile could have disarmed even the most suspicious intentions. Now, though, nothing about him is charismatic. His suit looks cheap in the eerie lighting, and his smile has a sadistic sort of gleam to it. The charming CEO persona is gone and Ben doesn't like what he's seeing instead.

Daniel chuckles, stopping in front of Ben as the door slides shut behind him. "Oh, come now, Ben. I told you to call me Daniel. I know that I'm a great actor, but I thought that the "Hero of Earth" would be able to tell when someone's being genuine or not. Maybe I overestimated you." He smirks, sending Ben's blood boiling and his fingers curling into fists. "You've done this so many times before, why don't you tell me; this is the part where I go off on a tangent about my plans to control the world, and you buy your time until your friends can show up to save you, right?"

"But what about Psyphon?" He blurts out. Daniel only raises an eyebrow, so Ben continues. "He was running that bar where the aliens were disappearing from. He doesn't have anything to do with this? This isn't the Forever Knights?"

Again, Daniel laughs, shaking his head. "Did you really consider him a suspect, Ben? I thought you would have seen the bigger picture. I've invested a lot of money into Undertown, you know."
Especially their black market and crime ring. For a man as influential as me, it's not that hard to find criminals willing to kidnap for money. As long as they get paid, they don't question what my company wants with the victims. Psyphon scouts for good targets for me, and so do many other "respectable business owners." That's it. I wouldn't trust any of those disgusting creatures with anything that takes even an ounce of brainpower," he says smugly.

Ben clenches his jaw, not even trying to hide how angry he's getting. "What's stopping me from flattening you right now?" He asks, his voice far more level than he really feels.

Daniel shrugs, seeming unbothered by the question. "Well, certainly not me. I couldn't stop you if you wanted to hurt me unless I had a squirt gun or a candle on my person. But consider; if you attack me, who's going to give you the answers you need? None of my employees know that this place exists. No one does, actually. Anyone who knows anything has to... "disappear"." He snaps his fingers for emphasis, looking pleased with himself.

Opening his mouth to retort, Ben suddenly pauses. Something clicks into place, and horror dawns on him. "You... you let that bodyguard at the protest die for no reason. Same with all of those innocent people who showed up to support you." And now that he's thinking about it, that man who attacked him at MH-1's apartment had seemed familiar, too. "Were your bodyguards the ones who jumped me?" He asks, almost whispering.

"Hm? Oh, yes," Daniel waves flippantly, almost as though he's bored by the conversation. "They're both dead now if that makes you feel any better. I just told you — anyone who knows anything can't be allowed to stick around. But speaking of the protest, did you like my performance?" He runs a hand over his jaw, tracing a line where Ben was certain there had been a grotesque burn the last time he had seen the man. Now, there's only a faint, barely-there red area on his face where the skin is still a little raw. "I couldn't keep myself from being damaged entirely, but when you have as much money as I do, you can get almost anything you want. As much as I loathe aliens, some of them have remarkable healing products available. It wasn't that difficult for my labs to synthesize their own compound based off of it. Besides, even if I couldn't heal myself, I would do that a thousand times over to get the effect that I got. Since you've been "underground," so to speak, twelve states have pushed the alien-ban to their respective supreme courts. It's going to be moved up to the federal level soon enough. We're behind the curve, actually — four countries are already implementing their anti-alien bills." He grins, a twisted, depraved sort of gleam in his eye. "It's almost too easy to make everyone hate each other. I think humans have always felt this way and they were only waiting for an excuse to make their hate acceptable."

Hearing him talk, Ben feels a little sick to his stomach. All of those innocent people who got hurt in the explosion and every person who's been killed or injured at the hands of an alien gone rogue — they were all hurt because of this man. "You mean that you hurt all of those people for no other reason but to make them into a propaganda piece?" His voice sounds lower now, almost like a hiss. "You're really not making a great case for why I shouldn't kill you."

Unlike in the bar, Ben's Lenopan anger doesn't make him want to torture this man. Rather, he can't help but think about all the possible ways to quickly and efficiently end him. It wouldn't even be difficult. He's not a stranger to killing people who are threats. Hell, he was willing to kill Kevin when he snapped, and Kevin is like an older brother to him. Still, a part of him is a little shaken by the stone-cold realization that it would only take a second and he's not the least bit perturbed by it. This man is human. Ben wouldn't have to try that hard, really. Humans are fragile in almost every way.

"I'm not going to pretend that I can hold you here. After all, you're the great Ben Tennyson, and if you can stop an intergalactic conqueror from taking over the Earth without even using the
Omnitrix, then I think you can escape from a little white room, can't you?" He gestures around him for emphasis. "But, let's say that you kill me. Then what? I'm not stupid enough to keep you right next door to where I'm holding my victims. The process is automated, you know. I have more important things to do than get my hands dirty. I'm sure that I'll eventually run out of aliens once my "assistants" stop getting wired money and no longer have any incentive to bring me any new pawns. How long do you think that will take, hero? How many more cities do you think they'll have to destroy before the entire planet agrees to ban all aliens, and the Plumbers, completely? Do you really think that you can stop something that you know nothing about?" He smirks, seeing the dawning revelation on Ben's face. "I'm explaining this because I've seen your school records, so I know you're not that bright. But even you can't be so mind-numbingly stubborn as to think that killing me now is a good move."

As much as Ben would love to crush this guy, he somehow manages to pause and think. Before he can do anything drastic, he needs to know where the other aliens are. True, Daniel could be lying about the process being automated, but he certainly has the money for something like that. Besides, Ben isn't willing to take that gamble. If the man kills his own employees because they had a hand in capturing him, then Ben doubts that anyone else working under him knows about this huge conspiracy. Even if Daniel isn't there to personally drug up aliens and drop them somewhere on the planet, how are they going to be released if Ben doesn't know where they are? They could starve to death in tiny cells, never knowing why they were kidnapped or having a chance to escape.

It's humiliating, but Ben begrudgingly forces his fists to uncurl and takes a step back. "Fine," he says in a dead voice. "If you're so confident, what happens now? Are you going to tell me your painful backstory and then reveal the master plan to kill me and take over the world?" He asks sarcastically.

"Tempting," Daniel replies casually, "but there's really no need. I don't need to kill you, Ben. Actually, I think you could be… useful. Somehow, word got leaked to the press that you're missing. Now, I wonder who could have done that?" He rubs his chin with a mock look of curiosity on his face. "I also don't need to take over the world. I'm thinking that my company needs to reconsider their stance on aliens, in light of the circumstances. After all, you're supposed to protect this planet, and this is the second time you've vanished and left the people to fend for themselves. Did you know that there was another alien attack today? It happened in D.C. — tragic, really. Luckily, the military managed to kill the horrible alien before it attacked the White House, but that doesn't bring back the thousands that died before they had time to roll in the tanks. Your Plumbers and their ridiculous "no kill" policy have proven that they've outgrown their use, and you, the Hero of Earth, are never around when the people need you. By the time I'm done, this planet will be begging to put me in charge."

Even though he's already decided not to kill the man, Ben can't hold himself back anymore. He rushes forward, his hand wrapping around Daniel's neck and shoving him up against the wall. The man's feet leave the ground, dangling uselessly as Ben squeezes. The feeling is tempting beyond anything he's ever known. Ben can feel Daniel's pulse throbbing in his neck and his heart pounding in his chest as he struggles to breathe.

"N-Now, now, Ben—" He chuckles, smirking even as Ben growls (he would normally be concerned about making such an inhuman noise, but he can't think through his rage) and tightens his hold. "If y-you do this, what— what's going to happen to your f-friends?" He forces the words out just as panic is finally setting in.

Abruptly, Ben lets go. Daniel manages not to fall flat on his ass by putting his hand out and propping himself up against the wall while he works on catching his breath. "What did you do to them?" There's an edge in his voice that makes Ben himself uncomfortable. He hates being
this furious, but if Daniel thinks that he's going to get off scot-free for hurting Ben's friends, then he's in for a surprise.

"I haven't done anything," Daniel replies indignantly, straightening back up. "Well, I haven't done anything yet. It wasn't that hard to capture you, Ben. I doubt that your friends will be that difficult. Your cousin and your teammate are aliens, aren't they? Gwendolyn and Rook, if I'm remembering correctly." Had Ben been in his human form, he would have gone pale at the mention of their names. "I don't know how well my "little trick" will work on your cousin, but that doesn't mean I couldn't hurt her. If only two men can capture you, how many do you think it will take to kill them? Three? Four? What are the odds that they can fend off a good, old-fashioned bullet as well as they take energy blasts? I already have men in position. I'm sure that if you broke out of here, you could get there in time to save one of them. But all you have to do is listen calmly for a few more minutes and I'll send the order to my associates to leave them alone." He finishes with a patient expression, not looking the least bit concerned while he lets Ben think things over it.

It's already plenty obvious that Ben can't trust this guy. Whatever his next step is, there's no doubt that it won't be pleasant for anyone. Still, something about what he's saying is honest. If Ben leaves now, he's not going to have time to get to both Gwendolyn and Rook, especially since he doesn't know where they are. Sure, Gwendolyn and Rook can hold their own in a fight, but normally, so can Ben. What if they're taken by surprise? What if they get outnumbered? There's no reason to believe anything that Daniel says, but is the risk worth it? Ben wouldn't be able to go home and live with himself if he found Rook or Gwendolyn injured, or even worse...

"So what happens now?" Ben asks, throwing his hands up in frustration. "Are you gonna drug me up and have me wreck all of China or something? To prove some grand point about how you can't trust heroes?"

Daniel shrugs. "I thought about it," he admits shamelessly, "but my serum was designed specifically so that it doesn't affect humans. If anything were to happen, I wouldn't want to run the risk of a human getting exposed to it and flipping a switch. It would completely undermine my entire movement. That little detail took me years to perfect, you know. The Tetramand that crippled you was a test-drive, and I've been adjusting the formula ever since to be stronger and longer-lasting. It's a happy accident that she injured you badly enough that you had to leave the planet. It gave me plenty of opportunity and time. I hated aliens long before you left for those two, long months. Since they started living on the surface, they've been crowding an already overpopulated planet. Humans were struggling before, and yet Plumbers invited aliens in droves instead of focusing on the planet itself. And for what? To take up space and reap the benefits of social safety nets paid for by taxpayers, all while turning around and sending their profits back to their home planets? And when they get sick of menial work, then what? Humans can't compete with super speed or four arms or enhanced intelligence. We were starting to get replaced on our own planet, and luckily, I stepped in to stop it. But enough about that. There is a point to all of this, and I didn't bring you here for an economic debate." He clears his throat before continuing.

"Do you remember an incident about, oh, seven years ago? I didn't know it at the time, but it involved a... what was it? Oh, yes, it was a To'kustar. It was the damndest thing, really." Despite his words, Daniel looks far from puzzled. He looks furious, glaring at Ben with hatred that the young hero has only received from the likes of Vilgax. "I have you to thank for that. After you destroyed almost half of downtown, they brought in an alien workforce to rebuild the town faster than humans could. I was asked to help fund the campaign. After what happened, I saw aliens as monsters and almost refused, but I'm glad that my advisors finally talked me into it. I directed those first alien workers to the caves beneath Bellwood so they could stay out of sight of humans, and once they got it into their heads that a city would be even better, they asked me to fund that, too. I had a foothold in Undertown from day one, Ben, and it's all thanks to you." He
chuckles humorlessly. "I thought that a charity project for the community would be good for my image. I would be bettering my hometown and increasing my approval ratings. Not only that, but being influential in the alien community turned out to be the perfect way to find the person responsible for what happened. See, there was this small hiccup in my life that occurred about an hour after you finished wrecking downtown. I got a call from the police. They had found the bodies of my wife and son in the rubble. Usually, when you turn down an invitation to go to a gala dinner with your wife, you don't expect her to be crushed by a giant alien that's throwing buildings around like they're paper!" There, he takes a deep breath, smoothing his hands over his jacket to calm himself.

The look he gives Ben is nothing short of complete and utter loathing. "But it's alright. I've learned from that loss. By helping aliens, I had ironically put myself in the perfect situation to make sure that they were never allowed on Earth. Sure, it took years of development, but it's been worth it. This has been a long time coming. When this is all over, the people are never going to trust you again. They're going to demand that you remove the Omnitrix or be banished from Earth entirely. And the best part is, I won't have to do anything. You're going to do it to yourself." He looks absolutely gleeful, almost giddy at the idea. Ben barely suppresses a shudder. To think that, when they met, the perfectly polite man that Ben had shaken hands with had only been thinking about how to ruin his life.

The worst part is that he isn't lying. Daniel is being entirely open. Ben remembers the incident that he's talking about with incredible clarity. The Omnitrix had been malfunctioning again, and he had only been ten-years-old and hadn't known how to fix it. That To'kustar fight in the middle of downtown had cost millions of dollars in city property, and Ben can only imagine how many people had been killed. He can distinctly recall having a skyscraper thrown at him, and while most of the workers were probably at home and sleeping, he can't bring himself to picture how many innocents had been crushed to death. Apparently, Daniel's wife and son had been one of them. He really isn't surprised that the man hates him and aliens so much, when his first experience with them had cost his company millions and, worse, had lost him the lives of the two people closest to him.

As weird as it is, Ben suddenly finds himself wanting to comfort the man. He would prefer the blind rage to this odd mix of pity and disgust. "Look, I—" He starts to take a step forward, only for Daniel to step away.

"Don't," he says in a hollow, cold voice. "The last thing I need is your sympathy. As I was saying, I had to do a lot of study into the human brain to be sure that my serum didn't affect humans. I'd like to show you what I've discovered on a personal level. Change back."

Ben blinks. "I… what?"

The man rolls his eyes, an abrupt shift of the coldness and hostility from a second ago. "Change back to human, Ben. Congratulations, you got me talking and monologuing, but my patience is starting to run thin. Change back — unless you've decided that you don't care about protecting your alien friends." Daniel arches an eyebrow as if challenging him.

For a moment, Ben hesitates, but gives in when Daniel starts to say something else. He reaches into his chest, the mud parting easily for his hand, and pulls the Omnitrix back up to the surface. As much as he doesn't want to, Ben clears his throat. "Command code 1010, Tennyson, Benjamin. Disengage life-form lock." He presses down on the Omnitrix, closing his eyes as his body morphs in under a second. What should be his skin solidifies and becomes soft, hair growing out of his scalp at the same time that the mud hardens into unmalleable bone. For him, the weirdest transitions have always been from flesh-and-blood to something like slime or metal. Mud is equally
as weird, and his body tingles for a few seconds until the feeling passes. "Satisfied?" He crosses his human arms, doing his best to look unimpressed. It feels disorienting to have bones again, but also relieving, in a bizarre way.

Daniel hums in confirmation, looking him over carefully. "Very." Without warning, he yanks a gun out of the holster hidden by his jacket, taking aim and immediately pulling the trigger.

Instead of a bullet, what lodges into Ben's right arm is a feather-tipped dart.

He moves his hand as though to pull it out, only to miss his arm entirely. A frown tries to work its way to his face, but Ben is suddenly having problems controlling his facial muscles. He opens his mouth to say something just as his knees shake and give out, sending him sprawling on the ground on his stomach.

There's the click of Daniel's dress shoes on the smooth floor as he walks towards Ben, kneeling down to be closer to his level. Ben thinks that the man is smirking, but to be honest, he's having trouble seeing straight. He doesn't think that the world is supposed to be this fuzzy, but no matter how many times he blinks, reality only seems to grow further and further out of focus.

"What do you think?" Daniel asks in a far-away voice. "It's a fast-acting sedative, made with secobarbital, sodium thiopental, some old classics like Rohypnol and GHB, and who knows what else. They whipped it up in the lab for me after a zoo I was sponsoring asked if I could synthesize something faster-acting than what they were using. I have no idea if it's safe for humans or not, but I'm sure you'll be fine." When Ben doesn't answer, Daniel reaches down, gripping the hero by the chin almost gently. He lifts Ben's head up, not that it helps the hero's heavy eyes stay open at all. Everything is spinning and multiplying, leaving him feeling dizzy even though he hasn't moved. "When you wake up," Daniel whispers, "you're not going to be nearly such a nuisance. There are many things worse than death. When I'm through with you, I promise that you'll be begging for me to end you."

Weakly, Ben tries to reach for the Omnitrix. One of his aliens can surely handle a high dose of sedatives. But his hand never makes it. The last thing Ben sees is Daniel's smirk swimming in his vision. His fingers brush against the metal band of the Omnitrix and his eyes slide shut, enveloping everything in darkness.

He wonders how Rook must be feeling right about now.

Chapter End Notes

For those who don't get the background story, you should probably watch the Ben 10 CGI movie from 2012, "Destroy All Aliens." I've seen all the movies (even the live-action ones), but "Destroy All Aliens," really takes the cake in terms of sheer destruction. Jesus, Ben must have killed so many people in that To'kustar fight. Also, that bit about an alien workforce being brought in to make construction go faster is canon, too. It's how Undertown was founded.

Reading obscure Wiki pages actually pays off sometimes.
Chapter 10

Pacing back and forth through Plumber HQ, Rook can't keep the scowl off his face. His nerves have been stretched thin lately. As much as he usually tries to keep himself calm and his emotions controlled, it's been getting more and more difficult with every passing day.

Near him, Gwendolyn is unsteady on her feet. Floating in the air in front of her, Ben's old letterman jacket is surrounded by magenta mana. She has said before that she can track Ben's life energy without thinking about it, but belongings with a stronger personal connection make the tracking easier.

After four days of no progress, it was impossible to get her to put it down. Though, as far as Rook can tell, the jacket hasn't helped at all. Her eyes are glowing with mana so bright that it burns, but there's still nothing. She's been pushing herself for this, Rook knows that, but that doesn't change the fact that there's been absolutely no progress. Even Kevin is starting to look seriously shaken up, and Rook can't blame him.

It's been fourteen days. Two entire weeks since Ben disappeared off of the face of the Earth. Gwendolyn's reassurances that he's alive and still on the planet don't soothe Rook in the least. They wouldn't be panicking or having this issue at all if Rook had been a better partner in the first place.

He could have insisted that Ben not go, or demanded that he go with him, or even observed Ben in person instead of watching the GPS map for the Omnitrix's homing signal every day. The second it hadn't come in, Rook had known something was wrong. Still, he had given Ben another hour, certain that he had just gone for some kind of smoothie break and lost track of time. He had been ashamed of the way his last conversation with Ben had gone, and afraid to make things any worse by calling in the Plumbers for a situation where they hadn't been needed. Despite everything he had been taught in the Plumbers' Academy, emotions had won out over protocol. So no matter what Gwendolyn says, it's his fault. Maybe if he had alerted the Plumbers immediately, this could have been avoided.

They had turned that stupid bar, The Winking Muroid, upside-down and inside-out, but there hadn't been even a single mud stain to point them towards what had happened to Ben. The bartender had claimed to have seen him when they started questioning people about a missing Lenopan, but the torn-up apartment she directed them to hadn't provided any clues. All it had shown was that Ben had been in a fight, and he had lost. Half of the apartment had been burned beyond anything that forensics could analyze.

"Still nothing?" Rook asks impatiently as Gwendolyn's eyes return to their normal color. "We have been doing this for two weeks, and you still have no clue where he is?" There's a harsh bite to his words that Rook wouldn't normally direct at Gwendolyn, but he's beyond the need to be polite. Kindness isn't going to find Ben. At this point, it's entirely possible that anything they find won't even resemble enough of a body to be recognized as Ben. Two weeks of little sleep and worst-case scenarios have sawn away at Rook's last nerve.

"Hey, back off!" Kevin puts his hands on his girlfriend's shoulders, letting her rest against his chest while she catches her breath. "She's been working almost non-stop on this! It's not her fault if he's—" He bites his tongue, not wanting to finish.

Gwendolyn sighs, twisting in Kevin's arms to look up at him while she clutches Ben's jacket against her chest. "He's not dead," she mumbles tiredly. After a week of this, she's probably getting tired of reminding them. "I would know if he was dead. He's still on Earth, but it's... fuzzy. Every
time I try to track him, it's like he's on three or four different continents at once, and I can never get more specific than that." She grimaces, rubbing her forehead tenderly. "I think something's interfering with my ability to find his mana…"

Unimpressed, Rook scoffs. "This perpetrator can kidnap hundreds of aliens without attracting our attention and synthesize a completely unique drug to make them behave like animals. Did you really need two weeks of failure to start thinking that something might be interfering with your mana?" A part of him knows that he's being unreasonable, but he really doesn't care. It's not that hard to upset an Anodite's tracking abilities — if whoever is doing this can create a machine to mimic the energy wave that Ben's lifeforce gives off, then it wouldn't be that hard to convince Gwendolyn that he's everywhere at once.

Under his accusatory gaze, Gwendolyn flushes red with humiliation, looking away. She doesn't shrink back, but Rook can almost feel her guilt and shame. Two weeks ago, she would have snapped back at him. The fruitless search has been taxing in more ways than one.

Kevin meets Rook's stare with a glare that could cut through steel. "Either you back off now, buddy, or I'll make you," he warns lowly.

"Good idea, but while you and I are doing that, who is finding Ben? It is not as though Gwendolyn has had any success at all," Rook replies sarcastically.

This time, Gwendolyn flinches. Kevin almost snarls, leaving her side to get right in Rook's face. "Then let's hear your brilliant idea to find him!" He snaps back, hands curling into fists at his sides. "She's doing the best she can!"

Rook meets Kevin's glare with a cold look. "Her best," he mutters, "isn't good enough."

The room goes silent. It's not like there were many people in the main room with them to begin with, but any stranglers quickly clear out as Kevin blanks. Later, Rook knows that he's going to have to apologize for his language, but he's so frustrated. Gwendolyn's headache really isn't on his list of priorities, because despite her constant assurances, Ben could very easily be dead. And if he isn't already, there's nothing saying that he isn't going to be soon. They're wasting time with all of this.

Suddenly, Gwendolyn's expression softens. After the way Rook was yelling at her, he almost wonders if he's misreading human expressions again, but she seems sincere. She walks towards him, reaching out to place a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Rook," she says gently, "I know you're worried about Ben. We all are, but you—" Her sentence is cut off as she lets out a sharp cry of pain. The hand on Rook's shoulder goes to clutch her forehead instead, and even though Gwendolyn has her face scrunched up in pain, the glow of her eyes is so bright that it's visible through her eyelids.

She yanks herself up into a proper standing position, having hunched over from the pain, and her eyes snap open. The magenta color is still there, but the way Gwendolyn is glowing has nothing to do with her mana. "I've got him," she whispers, looking awed and giddy. "He's downtown! Come on, let's go!"

Even as Rook is reaching for the keys to his Proto-TRUK, Gwendolyn raises her hands. Ben's jacket, which she had clung to for so long, is tossed aside. "Abeo Exorior!" She shouts. A bubble forms around the three of them, and before Rook or Kevin can utter out a single protest, they're gone.

The actual act of teleportation leaves Rook disoriented for a moment. His surroundings are
completely different, though his feet had never left the ground. In front of him, Kevin is trying to hold Gwendolyn up due to the sudden rush of exhaustion that accompanies teleportation, but Rook is focused on something else entirely.

They're in the middle of downtown, and it's a disaster. In the distance, Rook can hear police sirens approaching, but he doubts that they'll be able to do much. Buildings have been crushed like soda cans, and shards of glass decorate every inch of the asphalt street like stars in a night sky. There are several small fires already breaking out, and smoke is unfurling into the sky at an increasing rate. It's obviously another alien attack, but Rook isn't surprised that the Plumbers weren't alerted. No one on Earth bothers to tell their organization anything anymore.

What really catches Rook's attention is the sounds of destruction coming from around the corner.

He takes off, leaving Gwendolyn and Kevin to catch up when she can stand on her own again. His hands find his Proto-Tool with ease, and Rook swings around the corner just in time to watch a car lodge itself into the side of a building.

It's another rampaging Tetramand. The sight of it has Rook's grip on his Proto-Tool tightening. He starts to take aim, only to freeze. Ben doesn't use Fourarms very often anymore, but it's still impossible to mistake his Tetramand form. Even without that, the Omnitrix symbol displayed in his chest is a dead giveaway. Shocked, Rook can only watch as Ben smashes through the window of a business building and yanks out the receptionist desk, tossing it down the street. It splinters when it hits the ground, narrowly missing an on-the-scene reporter cowering behind her knocked-over news van.

That finally snaps Rook out of his stupefied state, and he brings his Proto-Tool up and takes aim. There's no doubt in his mind that this is Ben, but if that drug, Venom, can make hundreds of different aliens go on a rampage, then there's no reason why Ben couldn't be affected by it, too.

Before he can pull the trigger, Ben suddenly turns, still for a moment as he studies Rook. Their eyes lock and, almost beyond reason, Rook thinks that maybe he's going to snap out of it and turn back into himself. Ben doesn't. Instead, he kneels down and picks up the bus parked in the street next to him. He struggles under the weight for a moment, but still manages to send it flying like it weighs little more than a paper ball.

Quickly, Rook aims his Proto-Tool to the side. Instead of an energy beam, it shoots a grappling hook that embeds itself into the building across the street. Rook pulls himself out of the way in time for the bus to crash and shatter on the ground where he was standing a second ago. There's the ugly sound of metal grating and glass splitting into shards, and Rook tucks his head down and braces himself as the bus explodes and the mangled remains to go up in flames.

Bits of metal shower down over him and Rook only brushes a shard off of his head as he straightens back up. "Ben!" He turns to face Fourarms as he approaches, pure rage etched into his face. "Ben, you do not—" Cutting himself off, Rook jumps to the side to avoid Ben's fist, which punches straight through the brick wall with ease. Rook jumps to his feet, ready to dodge again, only for a pink bubble to flicker into existence around Ben's head.

Immediately, Ben stops his assault, grunting with effort as he tries in vain to pull the bubble off. Taking the escape opportunity, Rook stumbles back and runs off. He comes to stand next to Gwendolyn and Kevin, watching Ben carefully. Though Gwendolyn still looks a little weak and unsteady on her feet, she's staring determinedly at Ben, maintaining the simple spell with ease.

"Asphyxiation," Gwendolyn says in reply to Rook's unasked question. "It's a trick I picked up a while ago. It's easier than trying to fight him when he gets like this."
Luckily, it doesn't take that long for Fourarms to run out of oxygen. They watch him struggle with the mana ball over his head for a few minutes longer, before finally dropping to the ground. As soon as he does, Gwendolyn lets the mana drop.

The three of them rush over to him, looking down as Ben reverts back to his human form. Rook kneels at his side, taking Ben's wrist in one hand and pressing two of his other fingers underneath the boy's jaw. He holds his breath, waiting for an impossibly long second, and immediately relaxes when he feels the unmistakable throb of a pulse.

"He is alive," Rook announces. He doesn't hesitate to pick Ben up, cradling his head against his collarbone and looping an arm under his knees while the other goes to support his partner's back. "How long does asphyxiation last for humans?" He directs his question to Gwendolyn.

She frowns, walking up and pinching Ben on the cheek. He doesn't stir, so she reaches out and pries open his eyelid. Unfocused and unaware, his clouded green eyes stare blankly straight ahead. Gwendolyn makes a little huffing noise, dropping her hand. "Well, until we know that this is actually Ben and not a clone or imposter, let's hope that it lasts a while. Come on, we should get him back to HQ so they can make sure he's alright."

Despite her no-nonsense attitude and how aloof Kevin is trying to act, Rook can tell at a glance how relieved they both are. Gwendolyn looks like she's breathing again for the first time in two weeks, and the permanent scowl on Kevin's face has been wiped off. It's hard for Rook to describe, but he feels oddly calm, now that he knows Ben is fine. Holding Ben makes it easy to do a quick physical assessment. He doesn't feel underfed or like he's lost any weight, though he's always been on the skinny side. His skin is paler than usual, but not sickly, and the rate of his heartbeat and breathing are both at normal levels. Even his clothes, which are the exact same ones he was wearing the day he took the mission in the first place, are clean and only a little rumpled. The only out-of-place feature is the bags under his eyes. Maybe they're only standing out because of Ben's pale complexion, but they look closer to bruises than mild puffiness. Given that he's been held captive for two weeks, though, Rook can't blame him for the lack of sleep. It's odd that he doesn't show any other signs of stress or being mistreated, but Rook ignores that in favor of a more pressing feeling.

The relief he feels is a full-body rush that has him relaxed for the first time in months. A part of Rook feels that he ought to be embarrassed for it, but he isn't. He has been worried about Ben's safety in the heat of the battle before, but this is different. At least when they were separated for that month when the Incursions invaded Earth and made Ben leave the planet, Rook knew that he was alive and not being tortured. Actually, banishment had been a surprisingly merciful punishment. Then again, defeating Ben Tennyson on his own planet had to leave one feeling good.

Unlike with the Incursions, this time, there hadn't been any reassurances like that. Finally, Rook understands the human expression that, "it felt like a weight had been lifted off of his chest." He hadn't noticed it before, but everything suddenly feels so much lighter now that he knows that Ben is okay. Not even the insistent flashes from the recovered reporter can ruin his mood.

Gwendolyn suggests teleporting them back to HQ, but Kevin turns her down immediately. Instead, Rook uses his homing system to call on his Proto-TRUK. A few minutes later, he has Gwendolyn and Kevin on the passenger side, with Ben propped up and sitting between the two of them. His head is resting on Gwendolyn's shoulder, but while Rook is accelerating to break Earth's atmosphere, Kevin has his arm out like a guard to keep Ben from toppling over. No one says anything about it, and the ride passes in undisturbed silence.
Once they starting getting close to the base, Rook pulls out his Plumber badge. It's flashing, indicating that he has messages. He ignores them, immediately getting in contact with Max Tennyson.

The old man picks up almost immediately. "Rook!" He sounds angry, but no one in the truck is fazed. "Are Gwendolyn and Kevin with you? The other Plumbers said that you all ran off! There had better be a good explanation for this. The base is supposed to be on high alert until we find Ben."

Almost on cue, Ben shifts between Gwendolyn and Kevin, letting out a sleepy groan as his body tilts the other way and his head falls on Kevin's shoulder instead. Despite how hopeless he was just a few minutes ago, Rook smiles at the sight. The action is so human that he almost forgets that Ben is unconscious, and not sleeping. Kevin looks exceptionally displeased with his new situation, though he holds himself perfectly still and doesn't try to nudge Ben off.

"My apologies, Magister," Rook replies with the first bit of happiness he's felt in weeks. "Gwendolyn finally managed to locate Ben. He is unconscious, but we have him with us and we are returning to Plumber HQ now." When there's no reply after a few seconds, Rook speaks up again. "Magister?"

There's a shaky breath from the other end of the line. "Understood," Max says with an edge in his voice. "We'll meet you in the docking bay with the best medics we have. I want all three of you to give your own statements as soon as you get back, and then we'll figure out what to do. Am I clear?"

Rook's expression hardens. "Crystal clear, sir." He doesn't understand the metaphor very well (crystals can be quite opaque, in his experience) but it's something he's heard Ben say before. The words feel good when they roll off his tongue.

He hangs up the call and urges the engines as fast as they will go.

A flight that normally takes five minutes is shortened to forty-seven seconds, and all three of them are looking more than a little frazzled by the time Rook lands the truck and they slide out. Kevin is the one to get Ben out of the truck, holding him bridal style and shooting glares at anyone who looks like they might say something about it. Frowning, Rook has to suppress the odd urge to be the one supporting Ben.

Not wanting to think very hard on his feelings, Rook chalks it up to the fact that he's feeling guilty. They're partners, but he's partly to blame for getting Ben hurt. It makes sense that he would feel strongly about wanting to do better. The answer satisfies Rook, but his eyes don't stray from his unconscious partner for more than a second as the medical team works on getting Ben loaded onto a stretcher with practiced ease.

Since Magister Tennyson told all three of them to give their statements on what happened, Rook leads Gwendolyn and Kevin to the interrogation room. They don't do accounts of agents in person anymore. Instead, for mission recaps like this, everyone tells their version of what happened and a recorder in the room will log it. It's faster than doing it in person, which Rook is thankful for. When Ben wakes up, he wants to be right there, and to him, this is only wasting time.

This in mind, Rook volunteers first. He provides the microphone with a quick rundown of what happened. It doesn't take very long, thankfully. There isn't much to say. Rook chooses to omit a lot of his personal feelings on the matter, taking less than two minutes to finish his side of the story.

Once he's done, Rook leaves the room. Without a word, Kevin gets to his feet, leaving
Gwendolyn in the waiting area while he takes Rook's place and gives his own recount. Rook turns to start towards the medical bay, only for a magenta mana shield to manifest in front of him.

It's not designed to trap him, Rook notices. Rather, it's supposed to get his attention. Not saying anything, he turns to face Gwendolyn, and the shield disappears. She doesn't look angry or upset, but Rook still isn't very good at noticing all the finer details of human expressions. The lack of fur makes it very individualized, and he hasn't spent enough time with Gwendolyn face-to-face to be able to read her.

"Rook, I think we should talk." Gwendolyn gestures to the seat across from her. The tone she uses doesn't leave much room for argument. "Do you have a minute? It won't take long."

Even though Rook is in a hurry, he nods and takes the seat that she indicated towards. They have to talk at some point, and it's better sooner than later. Still, he keeps his head down, unable to meet her gaze.

"I am sorry," he sighs after an agonizing minute of silence, deflating. "The way I was acting was uncalled for and harsh. I should have been more respectful and patient. I know that you have been straining yourself all week and you did not deserve to be yelled at, regardless of my impatience."

When Gwendolyn doesn't immediately answer, Rook spares a glance in her direction. She's smiling now, which he takes to be a good sign. "I appreciate your apology, Rook. But that's not what I wanted to talk about." There's a pause, as though she's trying to decide whether to continue or not. "Rook, while Ben was missing, you were really… eager to find him. I mean, of course, you were, but you took it to an obsessive level. When was the last time you had a good night's sleep?"

She asks in a gentle tone.

It's a simple question, but Rook hesitates to answer. "It has been about a week…" he replies slowly. He's not being entirely truthful. The last time Rook had slept properly was back when he was still on Galvan Prime. And even then, the nights where Ben had been in surgery often passed slowly, with Rook struggling for sleep that wouldn't come. "Am I not supposed to be worried about Ben? I am his partner and he was missing for two weeks due to my shortcomings." A frown creases Rook's face. Ben is back with them now, but Rook is still worrying. What if something's wrong that he didn't notice?

"You know," Gwendolyn sighs after some thought, "an Anodite's abilities are based on emotion. When I get furious, I can do much more powerful things than I would normally. I thought that anger was the only thing that made my powers flare, but recently, well…" she purses her lips. "The reason I've been so stressed recently is that I've developed empathic abilities. Being in that room with you and Kevin was multiplying my own stress to almost unmanageable levels. And as worried as me and Kevin both were, you were… Okay, let me ask you this." She leans forward, a serious look of concentration on her face. "Do you love Ben?"

As much emphasis as Gwendolyn puts on the question, it's kind of anticlimactic for Rook. He gives her an odd look. "Of course I do. Ben is my best friend." He's never told Ben that himself, but maybe he should the next time they're alone together.

Gwendolyn shakes her head. "No, Rook. I know that he's your best friend, but I meant, do you love him? Like— like the way Kevin and I look at each other."

That is a much more surprising question. "I—" he starts to say something, but shuts his mouth when he realizes that he doesn't know how to answer. His feelings towards Ben aren't very complicated. Or, at least up until a few minutes ago, Rook didn't think that they were.
They're best friends, which is a simple relationship. Sometimes Rook gets frustrated with or confused by Ben, but they've never really argued and yelled at each other. Even when they disagree, they both respect each other enough to keep it civil. Their partnership at work means that Rook sees Ben nearly every day. At first, he thought that it would get grating to see Ben so often, but it doesn't. Or at least, it hasn't yet, but they've been partners for a year, so it probably never will. Their relationship isn't complicated, and that's what Rook likes about it. But he's had partners before. At the Plumbers' Academy, they would team up to tackle simulations of a field operation together. They were in a controlled environment, but even when the people that Rook would consider his best friends were injured, he had never felt so strongly about it. Those two and a half months on Galvan Prime had been absolute torture, and Rook can never forget how good it felt to watch Ben move his right arm again. He had been so happy that he was almost glowing.

But what does any of that have to do with love?

Almost immediately, Rook thinks of Rayona. They aren't dating anymore, having found the long-distance too difficult to manage, but Rook knows that he still has feelings for her. She had promised to wait for three revolutions for him and said that she would be ready and willing if he ever wanted to stop the Plumber work on Earth and return home. His feelings for Rayona and Ben aren't comparable — it's like trying to judge a pear based on the way an apple can swim.

Sure, he enjoys Ben's company. And, yes, Rook may be worried about him a lot, but that's only because Ben has such a penchant for getting himself into near-death situations. He's never thought about kissing Ben unless being oddly distracted by his mouth whenever he talks a lot counts.

Rook opens his mouth to give Gwendolyn his answer, only to shut it just as quickly when the door to the interrogation room opens and Kevin steps out. He looks between the two of them, confused, but Gwendolyn only stands up and gives Rook a polite smile. "Think about it, alright?" She waits for Rook to nod, then turns and heads into the room that Kevin left vacant.

There's an awkward pause, and then Kevin clears his throat. "You, uh… gonna tell me what that was about?" He asks.

With a sigh, Rook shakes his head. "I would if I knew."

Kevin grimaces sympathetically, resting a hand on Rook's shoulder. "Girls, huh?" They stare at each other for a moment, and then Kevin grins. "Hey, wanna ditch Gwendolyn and go see how Ben's doing?"

Even though Rook hasn't known Kevin for very long, he knows his friend well enough to recognize that the offer loosely translates to "I forgive you for earlier, and there's no hard feelings." Rook manages a smile in return, climbing to his feet. "Of course. Did you even need to ask?"

When they get to the medical bay, the full-body examination is still underway, but the current results are positive. "The odd thing," one of the doctors says to Rook when he asks, "is the hole in his skull. There was a hole drilled through his forehead, but I couldn't tell you why without a full brain scan. Brain surgery for someone who gets knocked around as much as he does isn't that surprising, but it's not from any surgery in my records. The scar in his skin is hidden by his bangs and hairline, but it looks faded and old like it's from a surgery that happened months ago. I can't make heads or tales of it," she explains.

Months ago? If Ben had had a surgery months ago, Rook would have heard about it. Especially if it was for something as intensive as brain surgery. He tells Kevin this, and once Gwendolyn meets up with them, the three of them discuss it to no avail. None of them has any idea what it...
Curiously, Magister Tennyson isn't anywhere to be found. Rook figures that he's still busy dealing with the press that has no doubt already heard of this, as well as the damages caused by Ben's rampage. Still, Rook thinks that all of that ought to be able to be held off for a moment or two in order to visit his missing grandson.

It doesn't take long for the tentative conversation to die off. There's something about the waiting room that makes talking seem impossible. Solemn and serious, the three of them wait impatiently for the examination to finish.

The most likely thing is that they're keeping Ben unconscious until they finish via the help of sedatives, so even when he's done being examined, there's no guarantee that Ben will be waking up soon. Even so, Rook wants to see him almost beyond reason. Ben was hurt because of his shortcomings as a partner. There are so many things unsaid between them that Rook might never get another opportunity to say. He wants Ben to know that he's sorry, and that he considers Ben to be like his second family, and that he'll do better next time so that this never happens again.

The funniest thing is that, if Ben was here, he would be telling Rook what an idiot he's being. The thought makes the Revonnahgander smile a little bit. Ben would probably be scowling at him, but in that fond, "I-can't-believe-you're-acting-this-stupid" sort of way that lets Rook know that he's not really angry.

For some reason, thinking on that makes Rook's chest feel warm and tight. Before he can contemplate too long on that, one of the doctors who was examining Ben comes out. He's different than the one Rook spoke to earlier, but at this point, anything would be better than sitting around and praying to Brallada for good news.

"Well, I have good news and not-so-good news." The doctor looks between the three of them before looking down at his clipboard and continuing. "Physically, Ben is fine. You've already been informed of the drilled hole in his skull, but other than that, there's nothing wrong with him. There's no bruising or scarring anywhere on his body. Wherever he's been for the past two weeks, he's had plenty of food. His weight is the same as when he disappeared. Unfortunately, that's where the good news ends." He sighs, lowering the clipboard. "We didn't find any traces of "Venom" in his system. We can't rule out the possibility that it's already dissolved, but unlike a lot of the aliens we bring in, humans heal relatively slowly. He should still have an injection site, even if he was drugged while in one of his alien forms, but there's no trace of anything like that. As far as we can tell, that rampage downtown was done of his own free will."

Almost immediately, Rook is on his feet. "That is impossible," he says calmly. "Ben would never do something like that of his own volition." He thinks back to their interaction on the street. Ben hadn't even faltered when he'd looked at Rook. That bus he had thrown hadn't hit where Rook had been standing on accident. No, he had meant to seriously hurt Rook and anyone else nearby. He refuses to believe that Ben would ever do something like that to someone he cares about. That rage in Ben's eyes had been raw and real.

The doctor gives an apologetic shrug. "I'm sorry, but that's what the tests show. It's possible that we got something wrong, but from what we know about Venom, it doesn't line up. Maybe he'll have more information once he wakes up. Other than that, I don't know what to tell you." To his credit, he does seem genuinely sorry. It doesn't change his implications, but it keeps Rook from snapping at him like he has everyone else.

There's an awkward pause, and then Gwendolyn gets to her feet. "Is it alright if we go in and see him?"
Strangely, even though the walk to Ben's room in the infirmary doesn't take long, Rook barely remembers it. What he does remember, much more clearly than he would like it, is the way it feels to see Ben in a hospital bed.

When he had broken his arm, it was worse. Even though Ben is much shorter than Rook is and just barely taller than Gwendolyn, he's always had a way of making up for his lithe, slight build by being loud. Ben is very good at grabbing attention. Every room he walks into almost becomes a stage, and he knows that he's the main star everyone wants to see. When he's unconscious and injured the way he is, the fragile illusion shatters.

Rook is starting to hate the color white. The medical ward is filled with it, and all it does it draw his attention to how pale Ben looks, and the way the hospital bed seems to swallow up all of his color and energy. It isn't right. Ben should be awake and joking and as energetic as always. Every time Rook forces himself to look away from the bed, he finds his gaze drawn right back as if Ben will have somehow awakened in the two seconds since he last looked.

Finally, Kevin sighs, an annoyed look on his face. "Dude, would you calm down? He's gonna wake up. Bouncing your leg like that is making me anxious."

He hadn't realized that he was bouncing his leg. Rook is quick to stop it. "How can I calm down?" He asks, more tired that he is annoyed. "I know that I have not known Ben as long as you and Gwendolyn have, but I have known him long enough to know that this is—" he gestures at the hospital bed, only for his breath to catch and the sentence on his lips to stop abruptly.

Staring right back at him are two very much alert and aware eyes. Even if Gwendolyn is the cousin who's actually physically capable of glowing, Rook thinks that Ben's eyes would give her a run for her money. Human eyes aren't supposed to be so green.

The three teenagers freeze and Ben's eyes jump between them all quickly. His expression doesn't change at all, and Rook almost worries that something is wrong. Why does Ben look as though he's assessing them? Like they're enemies instead of friends?

Then, to Rook's relief, Ben manages a smile. "Hey, guys," he waves weakly at them. "Jeez, what hit me? Don't tell me it was another Tetramand," he jokes.

Gwendolyn looks to be struggling between slapping him and hugging him, but she manages to restrain herself and only sits at the very edge of Ben's bed, not touching him. "Hey," she whispers, voice cracking as she gives a watery smile. "You've been gone for a while. How are you feeling?"

Ben looks excited to answer, and that alone almost has Rook needing to look away. It's so good to see Ben acting carefree again. Privately, Rook regrets every time he's ever told Ben to mature. "I feel way better than I probably should," he chuckles. "Man, you guys, it was crazy. I got kidnapped by the guys running this scam. I don't know how long I was there, but I busted out and sent the whole operation up in smoke. The last thing I remember was taking a huge blast to the face from this giant machine they mass-produced Venom in. And then, waking up here, I guess."

The story makes a lot of sense on the surface. Sure, inhaling a lot of Venom in an explosion could have resulted in Ben wrecking downtown, but there were no reports of anything nearby blowing up. Besides, there's no trail of destruction. It's almost like someone dropped Ben in the middle of downtown and he did the rest. Doubting his partner feels wrong, but Rook can't think of any way that Ben's story fits in with the puzzle pieces they already have. He must be lying about something — but what?
Rook shares a look with Kevin and Gwendolyn. Collectively, they all seem to agree without uttering a word. Because even though none of the aliens the Plumbers bring in can remember being kidnapped, they can all recall with a dream-like quality how it felt to crush cities and bones in their bare hands without having any say in the matter.

Which means that, if Ben is saying that he can't remember doing that, he must be lying.

"It is nothing, Ben," Rook reassures his partner. "It has just been a while. We are all glad that you are alright." It doesn't feel like Ben is alright — not by a long shot. But the statement makes Ben smile, and for a split-second, Rook can't help but think that that's good enough for now.
Chapter 11

Since nothing is wrong with Ben physically, he's discharged from the infirmary almost as soon as he wakes up. Even if the doctors don't entirely trust that he's being truthful, the DNA tests show that he's definitely Ben Tennyson. All the same, that doesn't do wonders to ward of Rook's suspicions. He almost wishes that he's dealing with an imposter or clone, because that would explain Ben's odd behavior from downtown. He settles for keeping a watchful eye on his partner instead.

It should be easy since they spend so much time together, but it's like Ben has suddenly gained the ability to go invisible and walk through walls whenever Rook looks away. If he turns to talk to Gwendolyn, then Ben is already in another room by the time he turns his head back. Each time, Ben has a different excuse. First, he claims that the room was loud and aggravating his headache. Then he says that he's looking for a bathroom, even though they both know that he's nowhere near one. He shrugs off Rook's questions about what he's doing, using anything nearby as an excuse to change the subject.

As frustrating as it is, Rook doesn't want to force Ben to tell him anything. He just got back, and anyway, if something is wrong, the last thing Rook wants is for Ben to know that he suspects something. So, as much as it bothers him, he settles for keeping Ben in his line of sight and leaves it at that.

"Ben," Rook speaks up as his partner's light-hearted conversation with Kevin finally pauses. "Can I speak with you for a moment?"

It's obvious that Ben doesn't seem to have the same problem with being around Gwendolyn and Kevin as he does with Rook. The question visibly makes Ben a little uncomfortable, but he only hesitates for a moment before nodding. He walks over to Rook, trying subtly not to look directly at him. There's an elephant in the room that they're both avoiding, and will both stubbornly continue to.

Before Rook can get a word in, Ben is already talking. "Hey, so, I talked to Gwendolyn and Kevin about what their plans are. Gwendolyn's got an extended leave from classes, so she and Kevin are gonna be staying at her parent's place until this whole mess blows over. Maybe they can start coming on patrols with us, like the three of us used to do in the old days. Wouldn't that be cool?" Ben is smiling, but it's forced, and his excitement doesn't sound believable at all.

Deciding to humor him, Rook nods. "Yes, very cool. Although Gwendolyn and I talk regularly already, it would be nice to get to know Kevin outside of our mutual love of cars and alien technology."

His statement makes Ben blink, confusion flashing across his face. It's almost genuine for a moment, but then Ben forces it away, and he's back to trying too hard to be aloof and relaxed. "I didn't know that you talked to Gwendolyn regularly," he remarks, doing a poor job of hiding his curiosity. "What do you two even talk about? Books? Incantations? The word of the day?"

Rook shrugs dismissively. "It is nothing specific, Ben, though your name does come up more often than it should," he admits. It's not like gossiping about Ben is anything new, though. Both Gwendolyn and Kevin have a lot of stories and personal insights that reading Ben's file can't give him. Shaking his head, Rook changes the subject. "But that is not what I wanted to talk to you about. I was talking about this with Magister Tennyson, and he told me that he would feel more comfortable if I were to spend the night at your home to keep an eye on you and your parents. Until
we know what happened in the weeks you were gone, we should be on guard and alert.” He's lying — Magister Tennyson didn't ask Rook to do anything of the sort. All of the detailed paperwork, and containing the hounding press, and things that require authority have been holding him up. As such, they've all decided to put off returning home until Magister Tennyson is finished and can see them off.

In actuality, Rook wants to see how Ben will take the suggestion. And if a part of him really, honestly wants to be there to keep an eye on Ben, then Rook ignores it.

Matching with Rook's expectations, Ben frowns. An odd look passes over his face, but it's gone so quickly that Rook can't even be sure that he saw it. "Is that really needed?" Ben asks, an annoyed scowl playing over his face. "I can handle myself, Rook. And I can definitely protect my parents. Nothing is going to happen to them or me. And what do you mean, "until we know what happened"? I told you guys what happened — I was held in a weird, white cell, they fed me, and I eventually escaped and smashed the machine that makes all the drugs! I don't remember anything until I woke up in the infirmary an hour ago! There's nothing more to know beyond that." He's angry, obviously, but Rook doesn't understand why.

As stubborn as Ben is, he usually treats his grandfather's suggestions and advice like they're gospel. Beyond that, his anger looks fake more than anything else, like he's trying too hard to convince Rook that he's upset about this.

"No one is saying that you cannot protect yourself, Ben," Rook says calmly. "It is purely protocol. We are partners, and if I cannot be counted on to watch your back, then who can?"

It looks like Ben still wants to argue but, to Rook's surprise, he only gives an annoyed huff before nodding. "Yeah, fine," he mutters. "Whatever, I don't care. Are you driving me home, then? If not, I can take my car. I don't know if I'll still be able to drive it after having you chauffeur me around for a year now, but I'll manage." If he's trying to make a joke, he doesn't do a very good job at it. Actually, Ben only seems to be more upset, grumbling to himself as he walks off without waiting for Rook to reply.

When Rook spares a glance at Gwendolyn, he finds her watching him with a knowing smirk on her face. Unfazed by his baffled expression, she merely taps her temple, winks at him, and turns away.

Whatever that is supposed to mean, Rook makes the resolute decision to ignore it.

After another hour of hanging around Plumber HQ, Gwendolyn and Kevin finally decide to leave. Ben gets a kiss on the cheek and a one-armed hug from them both respectively, and he and Rook stay for fifteen minutes more before deciding to leave, too. Whatever Max is doing, Rook and Ben are both mentally exhausted and want to relax for a while. It's hard to blame them for leaving early.

Even though Rook tries to make conversation in the truck, Ben's replies are stilted and awkward. After a few attempts, Rook cuts his losses and lets it drop. Ben isn't the type to hold grudges, but it's possible that he's still mad about the fight they got into before he left. Rook hadn't wanted to address it, but he did say a lot of things that he didn't mean. Hurtful things. Things that, as much as Ben tries to cover it up, was probably already doubting himself over. An apology is in order, Rook knows, but it doesn't seem like the right time or place to do it. Not yet, anyway.

The two of them pull up to Ben's driveway in Rook's Proto-TRUK, but unlike when Ben returned home with a broken arm, his parents don't come running out to greet him. For a moment,
Ben seems thrown off by this, but shrugs it off without comment before following Rook to the front door.

Even though it's his home and he lives here, Ben hesitates to reach for the doorknob. He shoots a glance at Rook as if he'll know what to do, so the Revonnahgander settles for knocking on the door. After all, it's the polite thing to do, especially if Ben is as uncertain about this as he looks.

After a moment, the front door opens. Sandra is the one who answers it, and for a moment, she only stares at Ben with a blank look on her face. She doesn't even seem to notice that Rook is there, too. Then, without hesitation, she brings her hand up and slaps Ben hard across the face.

The action is so quick and sudden that Rook finds himself floored. Both Sandra and Carl have always vehemently opposed all forms of corporal punishment, and to see a woman who is normally so calm and understanding slap her child...

Before either Ben or Rook can react, Sandra suddenly bursts into tears. She throws her arms around Ben's neck, crushing him against her as though hugging him tight enough will make the events of the last three months disappear.

"We were so worried!" She bawls, tucking her face against Ben's neck and sobbing against him. "Benjamin Kirby Tennyson, if you ever do anything like that again, I will personally rip that damn watch off your wrist!" It seems like there's more she wants to say, but all that comes out of her mouth is a hitched whimper. After a moment, she settles for breaking down in Ben's arms, sobbing listlessly.

For his part, Ben stands there and awkwardly hugs his mom back, not saying a word. His cheek is a little red, but he seems more confused than pained. He looks like he's still in shock, and honestly, Rook is too. Even though he's never seen Sandra cry and yell like that, he can hardly blame her. Ben didn't even bother stopping at home once he came back from Galvan Prime, leaving his belongings at Plumber HQ and telling his parents about his undercover mission via voicemail. He had been off-world for two and a half months before that, and after Magister Tennyson had to tell them that their son had gone missing while on a mission, it's no wonder that Sandra is feeling hurt and frustrated.

After a long minute, she pulls back, cupping Ben's face. "Oh, sweetie, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have— I didn't mean to—" She bites her lip, looking on the verge of crying again.

Ben looks unsure for a moment but then relaxes. He manages a smile, reaching up to lay his hands over his mom's. "I'm sorry, too," he says quietly. "I'm not mad, mom. I probably would have slapped my kid too, if he did half the stupid things that I do."

Having seen Ben's future and the sort of things that his son does, Rook knows that he's lying. Still, Sandra seems comforted and manages a laugh. "You better not hit your child, Ben. I don't think I need to tell you how much trouble you'll be in if I find you doing that." She presses an affectionate kiss to Ben's forehead, reaching to brush his hair out of his face.

Covering a wince, Ben takes a step back. He brings a hand up as if to touch his forehead, but then stops, giving an awkward smile. "C'mon, mom, not in front of Rook..." He tilts his head towards Rook pointedly, an embarrassed red tint to his face.

Looking at him, Rook is struck by the odd thought that he's never seen Rayona blush. That should be obvious, given that she has fur covering her body, but it also means that it was never easy to tell when she was flustered or not. With Ben, it's almost too easy sometimes. He's like an open book, and oddly enough, Rook finds it endearing. He's never understood someone so plainly
before. He tries not to think on what Gwendolyn was talking to him about earlier. Friends can find each other endearing. It doesn't mean anything.

With an understanding nod, Sandra puts her hands down. It's clear that she wants to hug Ben again and be close to her son, but she refrains and offers a smile instead. "Why don't you and Rook come inside? I haven't been cooking much since… since you left, but we can order a pizza just this once." She smiles awkwardly, hoping that Ben accepts her peace offering.

Always quick to forgive, Ben grins. "That sounds great, mom. Thanks." He gives his mom another quick hug. This time, when he pulls back and lifts his head, his dad is standing right behind her. He's probably been listening in the entire time because he doesn't look surprised or even angry to see Ben.

"I know it's not something we normally do," he begins, stepping forward to place a hand on Ben's shoulder, "but how about a hug for your old man?"

Unlike the awkward way he held his mom, the hug that Ben gives his dad is tight and easy. He's still grinning when he pulls back, letting his dad ruffle his hair. "Does that mean I'm not grounded?" He asks hopefully.

"Oh, you're definitely grounded," Carl replies, but there's a smile on his face. "We'll talk terms tomorrow. For now, you should come in and get some dinner and a good night's sleep. You've had a rough week."

The reminder makes Ben's smile become a little more forced and his mom lets out a soft whimper. It looks like she's going to start crying or hug Ben again or both, but Carl puts a hand on her shoulder and gently coaxes her back into the house. She goes willingly, and Ben follows behind them both. Rook hesitates, but considering that Ben's parents invited him to join, he steps inside and closes the door gently behind them.

"I'll order the pizza," Ben says when neither of his parents speaks up, a bit of added cheer forced into his voice. "I'll get you the veggie-lovers pizza with the vegan cheese and gluten-free crust, mom. Gotta boot up my computer to order online — be right back." He kisses his mom on the cheek before walking into his bedroom to place their order.

Alone with Ben's parents, Rook isn't sure what to do. He stands awkwardly by the front door for a moment, only for Sandra to glance at him idly and turn to her husband. "Sweetie, can you see if you can find the aspirin anywhere? And a glass of water, too?"

Nodding, Carl gives his wife a brief kiss. "Yeah, sure. If I can find any, that is. You know how quickly Ben can go through them? And a glass of water, too?"

Once he's gone, Sandra turns to Rook. Unlike Gwendolyn, she doesn't waste time waiting for Rook to get comfortable. "I don't tell Ben this," she begins, crossing her arms and giving Rook a decidedly unfriendly look, "but Gwendolyn does update me on how he's been doing whenever she can. And earlier today, we had the most interesting conversation." The glare she gives Rook has him honestly shaken, and considering the sort of people he's faced, that's saying a lot. "I think you know what I'm talking about. I want to know what your intentions towards my son are."

Rook holds up his hands defensively, shaking his head. "Mrs. Tennyson, I—"

"Sandra," she interrupts, stressing her name. Unlike all the times she's corrected Rook before, there isn't even a hint of patience on her face.
As much as Rook doesn't want to disrespect her, something tells him that using her name is the right call in this situation. "Sandra," he corrects himself, and when she doesn't interrupt, he continues. "Sandra, I promise, I have no intentions towards Ben at all. We are partners and friends, and that is all."

She arches an eyebrow. Even though she doesn't look convinced, at least Sandra isn't glaring at him anymore. "Is that how you want things to stay?" She asks. "I'll admit, I don't know how your culture considers relationships like that, but Carl and I decided once we knew I was pregnant that we were going to love and support our child no matter what."

If Rook wasn't covered in fur, his face probably would have been bright red. The last thing he wants is to be having this conversation. On Revonnah, two people of the same gender in a romantic relationship is more taboo than those who want to leave the planet. Though Rook Da had gradually accepted that both his son and daughter wanted to be Plumbers, even he wouldn't be able to warm up to the idea of one of his children being attracted to a member of the same sex. Interspecies relationships were even worse to most of the elders, seeing as how almost none of them have ever even considered leaving Revonnah. If Rook brought home a girl who wasn't a Revonnahgander, he had no doubt that his parents would never accept her. Shar might, but she's been exposed to more open-minded ideas since joining the Plumbers. Not to mention, Rook isn't even sure how he feels on same-sex relationships himself. It's never been a problem to see other people who feel that way, but he's never considered a relationship like that for himself. Why is Ben so different?

Instead of telling any of that to Sandra, Rook can only shake his head again. "Even if I did have intentions towards Ben, which I do not, I am perfectly happy with the way our relationship is now. There is no reason to complicate things, especially since I am positive that Ben does not return my feelings. Hypothetically, of course, since I have no feelings like that for him to return." Is this a real conversation he's having? All of Ben's romantic interests have been female, which is a pretty set-in-stone pattern. Not that he's going to tell Sandra this, but the fact that Ben has a wife in the future (a very human wife) is also very telling.

Ben is naïve in a refreshing way. Innocently, he has no problems dating members of different species. He's oblivious to the way a good portion of the galaxy considers such things taboo, and Rook wants to keep it that way. So far, he's kept the subject from coming up and, in the past, did his best to keep the mainstream media away whenever Ben and Ester would go on dates. The news would have a field day if they knew Ben Tennyson had dated an alien.

Still, Sandra only frowns at him. "You've never seen the way he looks when he talks about you," she says firmly. "And if we can accept that he's risking his life daily for people who treat him more like a tourist attraction than a real person, then accepting a relationship like— well, like this wouldn't be that hard. I'm only talking to you now so that you know this." She clears her throat, and the look she fixes Rook with is so intense that he has to resist the urge to step back. "He's been through enough. Things that he won't tell me or Carl. Things that give him nightmares so bad that he refuses to sleep. We try to give him his space and we let him indulge in junk food when he goes out and we let it slide when he's exhausted or upset yet insists on going out late superheroeing and skipping school for weeks on end. Ben has plenty of things on his plate already, and if you hurt him, I promise that I will show you what real misery looks like."

At that moment, Ben enters the room. Moving so quickly that it leaves Rook a little disoriented, Sandra is suddenly sitting on the armchair, a perfectly innocent expression on her face. "How much was it, Ben?" Already, she's reaching for her purse on the coffee table. "I'll pay for it."

Before she can grab it, Ben swoops in, plucking it off of the table and holding it out of her reach.
with a cheeky grin on his face. "No need, mom. Pizza is my treat since you've been so worried about me lately." He sets the purse over his shoulder, reaching into his back pocket to pull out his wallet. He had left it in Rook's room at Plumber HQ along with his luggage from Galvan Prime and other personal things so that he didn't have anything defining on him when he went undercover. Strangely, though, Rook can't remember Ben going to get it.

Seeing the billfold, Sandra frowns. "Money? You don't have a job. Where did you get that from?"

Ben rolls his eyes good-naturedly. "Uh, hello? I'm famous across the universe. Do you have any idea how much money I make from merchandise? I mean, most of it usually goes to the Plumbers to fix whatever I've broken, but since I haven't ruined anything in three whole months…" he pulls an alien credit card out of his wallet, brandishing it proudly. "Viola! A universal payment method. Good thing it's also tied to an Earth bank account — I don't think the pizza place would accept money from Petropia or Encephalonus IV," he finishes proudly, flopping down onto the couch.

While Ben's mom is digesting this information, Carl comes back into the room. He hands Sandra two pills and a glass of water, kissing her on the top of her head. "As requested," he says with a fond smile. Then, looking at Rook, Carl frowns. "Rook, there's no need to stand off to the side like a stranger. Have a seat. The pizza will be here soon."

"I got you pineapple with anchovies," Ben chimes in. Seeing the look that Rook gives him, he shrugs, giving a sheepish smile. "Hey, you seem to like fruit a lot, and the anchovies thing just comes with being a cat-like species, right?" He asks innocently.

Rook sighs, but takes a seat next to Ben on the couch, crossing his arms unhappily. "The fact that I actually enjoy fish does not prove your point." He says stubbornly.

His statement makes Ben laugh, and Rook has to fight back the urge to smile. Even with Sandra drilling holes in his skull with her stare, it feels good to see Ben laughing again. As much as he's always told Ben to be more mature and take things more seriously, he never realized how much he would miss that aloof, fun-loving attitude.

Then again, until Ben disappeared, there was a lot of things that Rook never realized.

Personally, Rook doesn't find pizza to be as good as Sandra's cooking. It's not the worst food on Earth, though. He thinks that chili fries are a lot less enjoyable, even if Ben is gradually wearing him down to become accustomed to the taste. Pizza is a tolerable meal, and while pineapple is more-or-less the opposite of amber ogia, the texture is similar enough for him to like it.

He's always known Ben to like pizza as much as he likes every other unhealthy food, but as soon as the front door opens and Carl takes three pizza boxes into his arms, Ben suddenly looks ill. Rook watches him out of the corner of his eye, trying to be subtle. He remembers that Ben once warned him to step back if his face turned green, but it's not green now. Actually, Ben looks pasty and pale. From looking fine and healthy a minute ago to suddenly looking ready to faint, Rook finds the transition a bit too severe to mean anything good.

Before he can say anything about it, Sandra and Carl are already heading to the kitchen, oblivious. "Come on, Ben, you got meat lovers for you and Carl, didn't you?" Sandra asks. She makes a face at the mention of "meat lovers," but otherwise doesn't comment on it.

Ben laughs weakly, shaking his head. "Actually, mom, I'm feeling a little tired. I'll eat the
leftovers in the morning, but I kinda wanna turn in." He stands up, thankfully steady on his feet. "Um, see ya in the morning, Rook. Since you're spending the night and all—" He walks off, leaving Rook to explain the situation to his parents. Did he do that on purpose? As sick as he looks, Rook can believe that he needs to lay down, but why does he look ill? The exam at the Plumber infirmary had shown that nothing was wrong with him.

At the end of the hallway, Ben's door clicks shut. There's a pause, and then Carl sighs. When Rook turns his head to look at them, there's a sympathetic smile on his face. "You can go check up on him, Rook. And don't worry about spending the night. We're in the practice of always keeping a guest room ready, anyway."

For a moment, Rook almost wants to thank them both for being such accepting and accommodating people. As much as he loves his parents, they would never do anything like that for an outsider. They only tolerated Ben in the first place because he's Rook's co-worker. If that connection hadn't been there, then there's no doubt in his mind that an introduction would have been far more awkward and unpleasant than it already was.

A simple "thank you" won't be able to express the enormity of his gratitude. Instead, Rook manages a smile. "Thank you. I will be right back," he says. Ben's parents nod, turning to head into the kitchen.

By now, Rook knows the way to Ben's room. It's past Carl and Sandra's room, at the end of the hall. Rook reaches a hand out to grab the doorknob, only to pause. He has to strain himself to hear, but it almost sounds like there are... voices coming from behind the door. At first, Rook thinks that it's the TV, but the hushed muttering reminds him of someone who has something to hide, not a TV show where the character's actions are inconsequential and their staged whispers still have to be loud enough for the audience to clearly hear.

Hesitating for a split second, Rook gives in to his curiosity. He kneels down and presses the side of his head to the ground, peering under the crack in the door. There's no illumination from a TV. The only light is a faint, green glow coming from Ben's bed. As much as Rook strains himself, he can't see more than the first few inches of the ground on the other side of the door. He settles for listening instead.

"...side-effects were expected. The healing process accelerates physical wounds, not internal ones. You know that," a distorted, unfamiliar voice says. It sounds like Ben is communicating through the Omnitrix, but how? The voice isn't any Plumber or ally that Rook recognizes, and who else does Ben know? None of his contacts need privacy like this.

"I know," Ben whispers back, annoyed, "but when you said, "hey, your senses will reset," I didn't think that you meant it would make even being in the same room as greasy food completely unbearable. I thought the plain food you kept giving me was, like, because you're a bad cook or something." As Ben gets more frustrated, his voice gets louder. It helps Rook hear him, but it doesn't help him understand what they're talking about.

There's silence from the other end for a moment. "I'm hoping that you didn't call me to complain about not being able to eat pizza," the voice says with a warning edge.

If Ben is surprised by the knowledge that the speaker is apparently monitoring him very closely, he doesn't show it. He sighs, resigned to something and clearly unhappy about it. "No, of course, I didn't, sir."

More silence. Is that good or bad? Rook has no idea who Ben could be talking to. He knows now that the voice belongs to a man and a man that Ben apparently respects a great deal if his use
of the word "sir" means anything. Not even once, in their year of being partners, has Rook ever heard Ben refer to someone that way.

After a long moment, the voice speaks up again. "You know the meeting place already. Be there tomorrow, at exactly midnight. Getting away from your "partner" won't be hard, will it?"

"No," Ben replies immediately. "It'll be easy. I'll be there, okay? I can't believe you even need to ask." His tone is suddenly much more playful, which bewilders Rook all the more. Is this man Ben is talking to a friend? That doesn't make sense either, because the way Ben called him "sir" was completely serious, without even a hint of a joke.

Even more confusing, the man laughs. Through the voice modulator he's using, it sounds more like a cackle than anything. "I know you will be, Ben. You've done well so far. Don't start disappointing me. And... try to get enough sleep tonight. I know you've been avoiding it."

The call apparently ends there, and Rook gets to his feet. Silently, he backs away from Ben's door. If being in the same room as pizza apparently makes him feel ill, then he doubts that Ben will be coming back out. Still, there's nothing saying that he might not want to leave his room now that his call is finished. Rook stands at the end of the hallway for a long minute, holding his breath and watching Ben's door. There's no a hint of movement or a single sound from the other side. Gradually, Rook relaxes.

He turns around, walking towards the dining room. Standing in the archway, he smiles when he has Sandra and Carl's attention. "Ben is fine," he assures them. "I am going to step out to make a call, but I will not be long."

Sandra nods, looking over at the pizza boxes on the counter. "Maybe I should take Ben a slice," she muses to herself.

It's a bad idea, but Rook doesn't want to stick around and waste time by telling her that. He turns and heads out the front door, closing it gently behind him. He thinks about it for a moment, before unlocking his Proto-TRUK and climbing into the front seat. Even if whoever Ben was talking to has cameras set up, there's no way that his truck has been bugged. It's been sitting safely in Plumber HQ ever since Ben went missing, and if that isn't enough, then the state-of-the-art security system Rook built in will automatically alert him to anyone even touching his car without authorization.

In the driver's seat, Rook leaves the truck off and pulls out his Plumber badge. It's almost eight o'clock, but he's pretty sure that Magister Tennyson ought to still be awake. And anyway, this is important. Rook calls him, waiting the few seconds it takes for Max to answer.

"Hello? Rook?" Max sounds a little tired but more confused and worried than anything else. "Why are you calling out of work hours? Did something happen with Ben?"

Rook hesitates. "Ben is fine. It is... more of a suspicion than anything I can prove. Ever since he returned, he has been acting very strangely. I worry that something happened in the week he was gone — something he is not telling us."

A part of him expects Max to hang up on him. He doesn't have a lot of solid proof, and Plumbers don't swing into action over gut feelings. He could call Gwendolyn and Kevin to get their support, but knowing that Gwendolyn is probably still trying to deal with her exhaustion from the past weeks along with her developing empathic abilities, Rook doesn't want to add even more stress to the two of them if he can help it.
The silence lasts long enough that Rook is starting to think that then connection cut out. Then, there's a sigh from the other end. "I wouldn't be surprised," he says, surprising Rook. "Ben has always been secretive about things that are bothering him. I guess a part of that has always been my fault — it's not like his parents are the ones that taught him to be such a good liar." He shifts on the end of the line as if getting comfortable before continuing. "What kind of things do you think he's hiding? His emotions, or…?"

Feeling a little relieved to have someone to listen to him, Rook hums in confirmation. "Yes, but he is always doing that. This feels… different. We ordered a pizza, and being in the same room as it was enough to make him look sick. Then—" Rook almost doesn't want to add it, but seeing that Max isn't interrupting, he continues. "He went to his room to lay down. I followed him, and I overheard a conversation he was having with a man I do not know. They mentioned… "side effects," relating to the way Ben reacted to the pizza. He said that his senses were "reset." Is that a normal, human thing?"

There's a sharp inhale from the other end of the line, giving Rook all the answer he needs. "No," Max replies seriously. "No, it's not. When I heard about the scar Ben has on his forehead and the hole in his skull, I thought that something like this might come up. If he said that his senses reset, then that means that in the weeks he was gone, he underwent brain surgery and healed in a way that should have taken months. After brain surgery, senses are heightened to the point that some people smell things before they even happen. I'm not surprised that the smell of pizza makes him nauseous, especially if he's still adjusting to it," Max explains.

It's a very simple, thorough answer, but it leaves Rook feeling light-headed. "So someone performed brain surgery on Ben?" He asks in a faint voice. "But why? For what purpose?" Advanced healing isn't difficult for him to believe, but the human brain is very fragile and can be influenced and confused easily. And if it's true, then Ben has been lying to everyone since the moment they found him.

"I'm afraid that I couldn't tell you. But we are going to find out." Rather than getting comfortable, now his shifting sounds like Max is preparing something. "Is there anything else that he said? Something that could tell us who this man is or what he's planning?"

Even as Rook goes to say no, he abruptly remembers the rest of what Ben said. "Yes!" His voice is a little louder than necessary, but he doesn't care. This is important. "The man said that they would be meeting somewhere tomorrow at midnight. I do not know where — he said that Ben already knew."

Max grunts. "Well, that's the best lead we've got." He pauses, considering something. "Rook, are you familiar with the Plumber training exercise of having two cadets spend a full 24 hours in an empty room with nothing but each other?"

At the memory, Rook grimaces. It had worked a few times, but more often than not, the fellow cadet that Rook got stuck with didn't like him more than before once they finished the exercise than they had before. "Yes," he says simply, keeping his distaste to himself.

"I want you and Ben to do that tomorrow. Bring him to HQ in the morning, and I'll have a room ready. I want you to see if you can get to the bottom of what happened in the week he was gone since he obviously seems to know. Try to get him to tell you where this meeting is taking place, too. If you can't find out, we can at least keep him from going. Tomorrow, I'll tell Kevin and Gwendolyn so that they know. Understood?" As far as plans go, Rook thinks that it's pretty solid. What else could they do?

Any number of Ben's aliens could slip away without being detected, and if whoever he's meeting
with can disrupt mana fields, then using Gwendolyn to track him isn't an option, either. It's too risky to try tracking Ben through the Omnitrix — he could turn the locator off, or the signal could be jammed if this person can do something as complex as messing with the mana field. Until they know where this meeting is supposed to be happening, keeping Ben away from it is the best they can do.

"Understood," Rook says resolutely. "We will be there early." He hopes that this all turns out to be unnecessary, and there's very logical, non-surgery related explanation for Ben's behavior. That's what Rook hopes, but the more he learns, the more impossible that hope becomes.

"Good." It seems like Max is going to hang up, but then he clears his throat. "And, uh, good job looking after Ben, Rook. I assigned you two together because I thought you would be good partners, but it's even better that you two became good friends."

Even though Max can't see his face, Rook smiles. "No need to thank me, Magister," he replies. "Being his friend is almost a full-time job, but I would never consider changing it." And as weird as it is, Rook means that, too. Ben isn't perfect by any stretch of the definition, but he's Rook's best friend, and he couldn't imagine being anyone else's partner. It's just another reason why anything Gwendolyn or Sandra hints at is absolutely not going to happen. If Rook did have feelings for Ben — which he absolutely doesn't (does he?) — the last thing he wants is to ruin their friendship.

"I'm glad to hear it. I'll see you and Ben tomorrow, Rook." Max's voice jars Rook out of his thoughts, and before he can think up a reply, he hangs up. Rook's Plumber badge beeps, telling him that the call has ended, and Rook puts it away with a thoughtful look on his face.

There's already enough going on right now. The last thing Rook needs is to start thinking about feelings that he absolutely does not have. Gwendolyn's powers are new and overly-sensitive — she's probably still working out what certain things feel like, and there are few emotions more complex than love. Rook does love Ben, of course, but as a best friend or little brother. Nothing more.

Or, he's pretty sure, anyway.

At least he has a plan for tomorrow. Thinking about how to execute it without letting Ben on to what he's planning is distracting enough that Rook finishes his dinner, has small talk with Ben's parents, and goes to bed an hour later all without ever letting his mind loop back around to the (strictly platonic) feelings he has for his best friend.
Chapter 12

"What did you say we're here for, again?" Ben asks, a frown on his face. He's holding the smoothie that Rook suggested getting in one hand, but Rook notices that he hasn't had even a sip from it. Is the smell too strong for him?

Attempting to feign aloofness, Rook shrugs. "Magister Tennyson wanted to brief us on another mission. He said that getting you back into the wave of things will help you feel better."

"Back into the swing of things," Ben corrects automatically, "and I don't need help feeling better. I'm fine. Anyway, why didn't he tell me himself? Do you think he's avoiding me? He didn't talk to me yesterday either, even though he said that he would." Luckily, Ben doesn't seem that upset. He looks more annoyed than anything.

"Of course not," Rook says reassuringly. "I was talking to Magister Tennyson and I suggested a mission as soon as he could. He already had one he was looking into, so that is why we are here." Even though his explanation still has plenty of holes in it, Rook has trust on his side. Ben isn't suspicious because he doesn't expect Rook to lie to him. As much as it stings to manipulate that bond, Rook can make up for it later. For the time being, making sure that Ben is alright is more important.

Instead of stopping in the communication hub of Plumber HQ like they typically do, Rook leads Ben down one of the many off-shooting hallways. It usually leads to the elevator that takes people down to the prisoner area, but instead of going there, the two of them keep walking. Even though the Plumber HQ hasn't been used for training in decades, a lot of the old rooms are still in use for something else. The room that Magister Tennyson wants them to go into used to be a cell before the prison area had to be expanded. Now, it's a storage room. At least, it was until the day before, when Max did the last-minute changes to have it modified. It's impossible to make the room completely Ben-proof, but Max at least arranged to have the room made into a dead zone. No calls go in or out, so until the door opens after the 24 hours are over, Rook can't get any calls on his Plumber badge, and Ben can't get any through the Omnitrix. There won't even a small camera to watch them — it's complete isolation.

"Right in here, Ben." Rook gestures for him to follow, using a simple keycard to unlock the door. He steps inside, Ben following without hesitation.

The room is pure white. White walls, white ceiling, white floor, and very simplistic white furniture. There are a couch and two small beds, but the only other feature is the hatch in the wall where they'll get food from on a timed schedule.

As soon as he enters the room, Ben freezes up. For a moment, Rook thinks that he's taking in his surroundings, but the look on Ben's face is far from contemplative. It's almost ridiculous of him to think such a thing, but to Rook, Ben looks terrified. Frowning, Rook reaches a hand towards him. He sets it on Ben's right shoulder, the way he's done so many times before, only for his hand to be slapped away.

He doesn't remember Ben being able to move so quickly, but there's suddenly a good few feet of distance between them, and Ben looks like a deer caught in the headlights. Breathing hard, it looks like it takes a conscious effort for him to calm down. His eyes don't stay still for one second, darting around the room like something is going to leap out of the walls at him if he lets his guard down.
"What's this place for?" Ben asks with faux casualness, gesturing around. "It's a little small to be the new break room."

A part of Rook wants to talk about whatever has Ben so upset, but he decides to let his partner keep to himself. This exercise is supposed to build trust, so maybe at the end of it, Ben will want to talk to Rook without needing to be coaxed into doing so. "This is what we are going to be doing today," Rook replies. He turns to the door, shutting it behind them. Drawing the keycard out of his utility belt, he slides it into the panel next to the door and hears a lock click into place. The screen on the panel lights up, showing a 24-hour clock that immediately begins counting down.

Whatever had Ben panicking briefly, he's definitely over it now. He's usually slow on the uptake, but there's a dark understanding in his eyes that has Rook avoiding his gaze. "Uh-huh. And what, exactly, are we going to be doing today? I've got an automatic distrust towards ticking clocks," he says, crossing his arms.

"Actually, this is a popular bonding exercise at the Plumbers' Academy," Rook tells him with an enthusiastic tone. As enthusiastic as he can manage, anyway. "For 24 hours, we will be locked in this room with nothing but a few places to sit and each other. It has been shown to improve partnerships and teams in the long run. So until that clock runs out or I use my card on the door, we will be stuck in this room." He puts the keycard into the metallic pocket on his upper thigh for safe-keeping.

Even though he was expecting Ben to be unhappy, the look on his face almost has Rook reconsidering the entire plan. "24 hours?" He repeats. "A whole day? In here? Alone with you?" Anger gives way to frustration and he groans, turning his back to Rook as he starts to pace the room. "This is some kind of ridiculous training exercise, right? Why do we even need to do this? We work great together! Does Grandpa not trust me anymore or something? Jeez, I was only gone for a week, and it was the most boring week of my life! Can't we just go get a smoothie or something and tell him that we did it?" He pauses his ranting to take a deep breath, and Rook cuts him off before he can continue.

"Ben, please relax," he says calmly. "This was my idea, not something that Magister Tennyson suggested. Like it or not, it has been a while since things were "typical" for us, and I thought that a trust-building exercise would help."

Rather than calming Ben down, he only seems more upset to hear this news. "Well— unthink it, then!" He throws his hands up in frustration. "Let me out, Rook. No offense to the Plumbers' idea of good bonding techniques, but I've got better ways to spend a Saturday." He waits for a moment, but when Rook doesn't automatically make a move to unlock the door, Ben's scowl turns into a confused frown. "Rook? You said that you can unlock it, right?"

Swallowing his concerns, Rook meets his gaze head-on. "I can," he replies haughtily, "but only if it is an emergency. Your discomfort does not count as an emergency."

He has to physically bite his tongue to resist adding, "as shocking as that might be for you." Maybe Ben is being unnecessarily rude, but he's been through a lot. In hindsight, locking a kidnapping victim in a small room probably wasn't the best idea. Even if "victim" and "Ben" feel like antonyms, Rook isn't going to pretend that his partner is resistant to mental health problems. It's too late to back out now, though. If Ben has a problem with small rooms, then this can be considered exposure therapy.

It's hard to maintain this stance when Ben's face turns a hilarious shade of red as he flushes with anger. "Rook," he says through clenched teeth, "I want to go. Now."
Not missing a beat, Rook crosses his arms stubbornly. Briefly, his mind thinks of how Ben reacted when he first saw the white room. "And I want you to stay."

Almost as though popping a balloon, Ben suddenly deflates. It's obvious that he's still not happy, but he looks more confused and annoyed than angry. "Fine," he sighs finally, making a show of dragging his feet over to one of the beds. He flops down heavily on top of it, burying his face in the pillow. "But don't expect me to like it, or for any bonding to happen! I mean it!" He shouts, muffled against the pillow.

The smile that comes to Rook's face is almost fond. Maybe this exercise won't be a complete waste of time. "I would not even dream of it."

The clock reads 23:58. Taking a seat on the couch, Rook settles in to wait.

It's not as boring as Rook was expecting it to be.

One of the few benefits to being born and raised in a reserved, farming household is that Rook is exceptionally patient. Waiting has never been difficult for him. He can get impatient like everyone else, but only when the stakes are high and he's being prevented from taking action.

While the stakes are high now, Rook considers waiting to be his way of taking action. Magister Tennyson wants him to get information, so that's exactly what he's going to do. Eventually. For once, it's a good thing that Ben is so impatient.

The clock says 23:09 by the time Ben finally sighs. Frankly, Rook is impressed that he's lasted even that long. He's been fiddling with the Omnitrix pretty determinedly, but even messing with the most powerful device in the universe must get boring after long enough when it doesn't yield any results.

Instead of wanting to bond or chat, Ben clears his throat. "So, uh, what exactly is stopping me from going Humungousaur and breaking out of here, again?"

There's a hint in his words, but seeing as how he's not reaching for the Omnitrix, Rook decides to answer. "Physically? Nothing. Although, now that I am thinking about it..." He hums thoughtfully. In hindsight, this should have been done earlier, but Rook had wanted to avoid it. Now is as good a time as any.

Feigning innocence, Rook gets to his feet, walking over to Ben. "It is probably nothing, but do you see right, here?" He taps the watch-face of the Omnitrix, only to grab Ben by the wrist and twist it behind his back. Despite the struggling, Rook holds him still long enough to clap a thick, plastic band over his wrist. It's solid black, the monotonous color broken up only by the small digital display screen, showing a clock that's counting down.

For a long minute, Ben looks shell-shocked. He stares at his wrist, trying to process what he's seeing, and the look he finally fixes Rook with is downright vicious. "Take it off." There's a warning in his voice that Rook has never heard directed at him before. Ben looks completely serious.

Even so, Rook shakes his head. "No."

He barely has a moment to brace himself before Ben launches himself forward, all skin and bones as he tackles Rook to the ground. They've never sparred before, but Rook finds it to be more
of a grappling match than any proper fight. Any form that Ben might have is completely lost in a flurry of weak punches that never hit the mark and attempts to pin him down that Rook can only assume have been inspired by the inaccuracies of television.

It doesn't take long for Rook to gain the upper hand. He catches both of Ben's fists, effortlessly using his body weight to roll them to the side and pin Ben to the ground beneath him. Rook holds himself still in that position, holding Ben's wrists on either side of his head. He doesn't say anything, waiting until Ben gradually tires himself out. It takes a few minutes, but Ben goes limp, glaring daggers at Rook but otherwise not doing anything else. His face is red again, the same brilliant shade as before, but Rook blames that on exertion and his bruised ego.

"I know you are mad," Rook begins, ignoring the way Ben rolls his eyes at that, "but please calm down, Ben. That clamp will come off as soon as the 24 hours are over or if I open the door. You aren't trapped."

This time, Ben snorts. "Really? Last I checked, holding me in a room against my will is kind of like trapping me." He wiggles his wrists. "And can you get off of me and give me my hands back now? Or do I only get those after 24 hours too, like everything else?" Ben asks sarcastically.

Rook scoffs, but nonetheless sits up and climbs off of Ben. He tries not to think about the position they were in. It was strategical, for the sake of keeping Ben from hitting him — it's not as though it had any other meaning.

"For the record," Ben pipes up as Rook starts to walk off, thinly veiled anger in his words, "I'm so not okay with this."

They pass the next few hours in silence. Whereas Rook can lay back on the couch or one of the beds, close his eyes, and let the time pass, Ben has much less success in that area. For a while, he tries pulling on the clamp around the Omnitrix. It's not anything special or durable, but it can at least withstand a human's idle tinkering, so his efforts go nowhere. After that, Ben does push-ups against the wall, but gets bored of that, too. He paces, jogs in place, tries to flip over his bed for no reason, and even attempts a nap. None of it entertains him for long.

By the time the clock reads **20:13**, Ben looks like he's going stir crazy. He's been doing everything that he can to avoid talking to Rook, but finally, he gives in.

"Isn't this some sort of psychological torture?" Ben asks, running a hand over the wall. "Not the part about being in here with you. I'm talking about the white room and white everything. It's kinda… eerie."

Faintly surprised, Rook nods. "I am surprised you know about that, Ben," he admits. "But, yes, it is a fairly popular torture method. It works very well with social creatures, like humans. The idea is to deprive the person of their senses. The white walls deny them color, and all food the prisoner receives is white and tasteless. There is nothing to do or see or hear, and most people can barely go a month without snapping. A year would drive a person to insanity."

Ben grimaces, shuddering at the image. "So… what? The Plumbers are torturing us?"

With a sigh, Rook shakes his head. "Ben, I do not think that 24 hours with your partner is going to kill you or drive you to insanity," he says with faint amusement in his voice.

He doesn't get a response from Ben, but whether that's because Ben is thinking about the implications of psychological torture or because he's back to ignoring Rook, it's impossible to say.
It won't make the time pass any faster, but with nothing better to do, Rook watches the clock. He's sitting on the couch while Ben takes to pacing the room again. This time, his patience dries up much sooner. The clock barely shows 19:42 when Ben suddenly throws himself onto the couch overdramatically.

His head is resting in Rook's lap now, but Ben doesn't seem to care. That same scowl is still on his face as he crosses his arms, letting one of his legs dangle over the edge of the couch. "So, when are we getting fed?" He asks dryly. "Are we getting fed at all, is probably the better question. All this talk about torture methods hasn't exactly inspired a lot of trust in our jailers, y'know?"

Rolling his eyes, Rook bats Ben's hand away as he not-so-subtly tries to reach for the pocket holding the keycard. "There is no need to be melodramatic, Ben," he replies. "We will get lunch. You could have finished your smoothie if you were hungry, but you made the choice not to. That is not my fault."

This gets no response — Ben only rolls his eyes and stares pointedly at the wall. Looking at Ben's pouting expression, Rook can't help but find it a little ridiculous that Gwendolyn would ever accuse him of having feelings for Ben. If anything, Rook feels like a pseudo-mother to Ben. He has always been attracted to people who are mature, not people who still pout like a child. Of course, being female is also one of his typical requirements.

A few minutes later, true to Rook's word, the little hatch by the door opens and two meals are placed inside. Since Max is worried about Ben's senses being reset and overly strong, the food has a very weak smell. It's steamed rice, with an assorted mix of grilled vegetables and a few different sauces to pour over top of it. It's, surprisingly, a completely human-made dish. Rook can't tell which human culture it's based on, but it has a noticeable lack of alien qualities.

Seeing it, Ben makes a face. "Ugh, I thought vegan week was only supposed to be the third week of the month..." Luckily, the smell doesn't seem to be a problem for him. He eats his lunch without comment, and even though it's pretty much tasteless to Rook, it's good to see Ben eating again. He expects the thought to remind him of motherly feelings again, but it doesn't. There's just a soft sort of satisfaction that Rook gets from knowing Ben is taking care of himself.

It's very, very off-putting.

Lunch keeps Ben from being bored while he eats, but after that, he's back to being restless. There are only twelve hours left until midnight, so there's also only nineteen hours left until the door opens to let them out. Even though he still has some time left, Rook starts getting anxious. What if he doesn't have enough time to find out anything useful?

The clock reads 16:53. Ben starts up some small-talk, and they both avoid talking about anything meaningful for almost an hour before they run out of topics. It doesn't alleviate the thick tension between them, but it's nice.

Really nice.

At 14:37, dinner gets delivered. It's the same thing as lunch, but Ben still seems to like it. At any rate, he doesn't complain while he eats it. The meal passes in silence, and Rook leaves the paper plates and plastic silverware in the small trash can in the corner. He's starting to doubt that this was a good idea, or maybe he's the wrong person to take on this task.
Gwendolyn or Kevin would have been a better fit. They have the kind of closeness with Ben that Rook doubts he can ever compare to.

When 13:58 rolls around, Ben decides to take a nap. Bored, Rook watches him for a little while. He likes that way that Ben looks when he's asleep. He's neither happy nor sad, only asleep. That serene expression is almost never on Ben's face otherwise. It reminds Rook a little bit of the way he looked after they finally beat Maltruant.

On the Contemelia's ship, billions of years before anything familiar to them would be brought into existence, they had both been oddly at peace. It's hard to compare anything to how it felt to create the universe, but if Rook had to put an emotion on Ben's face at that moment, it would be the one he's displaying right now — pure, unadulterated calm.

As the clock hits 11:45, Ben suddenly jerks awake. He's breathing hard and panting, looking shaken, but other than mumbling a quick "hey," when he sees Rook staring at him, he doesn't say anything. Wanting to be respectful, Rook doesn't ask him to.

There are only four more hours until midnight. They're both heavily aware of the deadline rapidly approaching. Ben has started muttering to himself, and even though Rook is better at controlling himself, even he finds himself pacing. A few times, he suggests that Ben go back to sleep, but each time, his partner adamantly refuses. Rook isn't surprised.

Privately, he wonders how bad the dreams must be to have someone who's died a handful of times refusing to sleep.

7:39 feels like a death sentence. 17 hours alone together, and Rook is no closer to figuring out anything about Ben than he was before.

He's running out of options. If Ben isn't going to do anything more than pace and tap his fingers against his thigh, then Rook will. He swallows thickly before speaking up. "Ben," he calls, "I want to talk about what happened while you were missing for those two weeks."

Even though Ben doesn't stop pacing, he groans. "Seriously? I told you guys, I—"

"No," Rook interrupts, cutting him off, "Ben, I mean that I want to talk about what happened to me."

That gets Ben to stop pacing. He hesitates for a minute, staring at the timer on the wall, before grudgingly taking the seat on the couch next to Rook. He doesn't say anything, but at least he's listening. That's about that best that Rook can hope for.

"I will admit that I did not conduct myself as well as I should have," Rook admits slowly, looking down at his hands. "When you did not send the homing beacon at the right time, I thought that you had forgotten or got busy with your cover. I did not alert Magister Tennyson until an hour had passed. If I had been more proactive, that would not have happened and you might not have gotten kidnapped."

Automatically, Ben opens his mouth to argue. Before he can say anything, Rook reaches over and clamps a hand down over his mouth. "Let me finish before you say anything, Ben," Rook says patiently. It takes a moment, but Ben eventually nods. It's obvious that he's not happy about it, but he's respecting what Rook wants, and that's enough.
With a cautious stare, Rook removes his hand and sits back. When Ben remains silent, he continues. "While you were gone, Gwendolyn was trying nonstop to track you. I do not know if you ever came face-to-face with the person behind all of this, but they had technology capable of disrupting an Anodtie's tracking abilities. Not surprising, considering how many aliens they must have encountered in orchestrating this. Still, no matter where Gwendolyn searched, she could not find you. And I... was unfair towards her." He sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I am not proud of how I conducted myself. I was rude and acted as though Gwendolyn was not trying — as if the fact that she could not find you was her fault. While you were away, I had a lot of time to think. About you, mostly. And I realized that I never told you that, as chaotic as it usually is, I cannot think of anything I would rather do than be your partner. I think of you as my best friend. And more to the point, I am sorry for the argument we had before you went undercover. I want you to know that I did not mean what I said. Not one word of it."

He looks up at Ben as he finishes, and the expression on his friend's face is not at all what Rook was expecting. Ben is smirking, looking almost smug. "Rook," he sighs, "if you wanted to spend time with me, you could have asked me out or something instead of doing all this."

Rook blinks. Did he hear that right? He tries to think of something to say, but his mind completely blanks. Instead, he frowns. "What?"

Rather than looking upset, Ben's grin widens. "Okay, c'mon, Rook. I know I'm kinda dense, but I'm not completely stupid. Girls can be confusing, but it's not that hard to tell when someone's into me. So, what was it? My charming personality? My good looks? The countless heroics?" He wiggles his eyebrows, as if this is a joke, while Rook is still struggling to catch up.

"What?" He utters intelligently.

He's caught off-guard when Ben suddenly clamps his hands down on either side of Rook's head. Well, it's more like he gently runs his fingers over the fur before cupping Rook's face, but that would be ridiculous. Ben doesn't caress things, and certainly not his partner's cheeks. If he was human, Rook is positive that his face would be bright red. Is this a dream? At some point, he must have fallen asleep and started the REM cycle, because that's the only logical way to explain this.

There's a playful scowl on Ben's face. They're suddenly very close to each other, and Rook is convinced that the human can hear how his heart is pounding in his rib cage, even through his thick Proto-Tech armor. "Do us both a favor, Rook," Ben mutters, "and stop talking."

Despite the way Rook opens his mouth to protest, nothing comes out. It takes his spinning mind a moment to realize that it's because there's something pressed to his lips. A few seconds after that, he finally processes that the thing pressed to his mouth is Ben. More specifically, Ben's lips. The idea that Rook is actually sitting on a couch with and kissing Ben Tennyson is so ridiculous that he almost laughs. Rather than ruining this though, Rook lets his logical processing take the back seat for once. Acting on instinct, he wraps his arms around Ben's waist and returns the kiss firmly.

The sound that Ben makes is a cross between a huff and a laugh. It must mean something good though because he responds eagerly by tilting his head to the side and deepening the kiss.

Something clicks. Even more so than the lips against his, the epiphany leaves Rook breathless. Everything he's spent months denying suddenly races to the front of his mind. The uncharacteristic terror he had felt when that female Tetramand brought a building down on top of his partner. The relief that flooded him when Ben proudly displayed his ability to move his arm again. Not to mention his insistent worry every second that Ben was working undercover, or how euphoric it was to know he was alive and alright, or the lingering heat that left him tingling long after Ben had stopped touching him.
How could Rook have denied it for so long?

Moving against him, Ben lifts himself up, only to drop down onto his partner's lap. The action garners the reaction that Ben was hoping for, as Rook shuts out his thoughts once more and focuses on kissing back. He has never really stopped to think about how small Ben is compared to him, but it's obvious now. Rook has to bend himself over to keep their lips pressed together in this position, and is caught between finding it cute and finding it weird. This entire situation is weird and Rook shouldn't be enjoying it the way he is.

Ben places one hand on Rook's chest, tracing the armor absentmindedly. Even though Rook can't feel his touch, he likes the gesture anyway. A low rumbling starts up in the back of his throat, and before Rook can quiet it, Ben chuckles against his lips. If it wasn't one of the best noises Rook has ever heard, he might have been annoyed.

"Dude, are you purring?" Ben mumbles against him. "I thought your species was only feline-based." His hand moves lower, resting on Rook's hip.

"And I thought that your species was only primate-based," Rook retorts, "but you would have to have an IQ comparable to that of a chimpanzee to think that that statement would make me want to keep kissing you." Of course, Rook immediately contradicts himself by pressing their lips back together, but Ben only grins and doesn't say anything more.

As Ben lifts himself up onto his knees to get a better angle, his hand drifts down to Rook's thigh. His other hand is still on Rook's cheek, fingers gripping the short hair on his face. Parting his lips, Ben darts his tongue out, swiping along Rook's bottom lip. The feeling coaxes him to shudder, and as Rook chokes down an embarrassingly high-pitched noise, Ben breaks the kiss and shoves hard on his chest.

The force sends Rook tumbling over the arm of the couch, landing on the floor with a pained grunt. He realizes a second too late that the pocket where he put the keycard is now wide open, and he pushes himself to his feet just in time to watch Ben unlock the door.

Without needing to think, Rook grabs his Proto-Tool. He aims at Ben and squeezes the trigger, sending his partner flying into the hallway outside of the door. The energy net that Rook fired sticks him to the wall but, even as Rook is running after him, Ben already has his attention focused on the Omnitrix. Too late, Rook remembers that the cuff over the watch unlocks with the door.

Not bothering to look, Ben slams it against the wall, and a flash of green light later, Jetray is pinned to the wall instead. He doesn't say anything to Rook. Without any real effort, he tears himself away from the wall and the energy net dissolves into nothing before it can touch the ground. A split second after that, Jetray is flying down the hallway towards the exit. In the narrow space, the noise is deafening, and the force of his flight has the air in the hallway suctioning right after him. Bracing himself, Rook fires after him, knowing full well that his energy blasts aren't fast enough to reach an alien that can travel faster than light.

"Brallada..." Rook curses as he pulls his Plumber badge out of his pocket. "Magister Tennyson," he says as soon as Max picks up, "we have a problem."
Chapter 13

The only good thing about Ben choosing to be an Aerophibian is that at least his speed is limited. That's probably ironic to say when talking about an alien that can travel faster than light, but Ben can't be going very far or off-planet. If he gets anywhere near the speed of light, the close quarters of being on-planet as well as the uncontrollable speed is going to result in a lot of damage, be it to himself or property.

Although, a noticeable trail of property damage would be helpful.

Even if they don't understand why, all of the Plumbers currently in the base are suddenly on high alert. The alarms are blaring, flashing red lights flooding the compound, and the sound of feet pounding on the tile flooring echoes from every level like a mantra.

"Scan for any unidentified aircraft!" Having been sleeping in his office in order to stay close to HQ, Magister Tennyson is still in his pajamas. Despite wearing bunny slippers and blue-striped pajamas decorated with little, sleeping moons, he still makes for an intimidating picture as he seizes command of HQ. "See if you can get a location on the Omnitrix, and scan for his DNA signature! And someone get in contact with Agent Levin! I want him and Gwendolyn awake and present an hour ago!"

There aren't a lot of Plumbers working the graveyard shift, but the ones present are quick to carry out his orders. Rook ignores them, running up to face Magister Tennyson. "Sir, I—" he starts to apologize, only for Max to shake his head.

"No time for that right now, Rook." He points to the monitor in front of him, where a map of Earth is visible. It zooms in on Bellwood, cycling through a five-second loop that the scanners recorded nearly a minute ago. On it, a few Plumber ships are shown patrolling. The Omnitrix symbol shoots by so fast that Rook can barely see it. "Five minutes to midnight. We've lost the Omnitrix's symbol. Rook, I need you to—"

"I am already on it," Rook interrupts, grabbing the keys to his Proto-TRUK. It looks like Ben is heading back to Bellwood, and if that's the case, then there's only so many places he can go.

"See if you can find whoever is behind this," Max says with a scowl. "If not, don't worry about it now. Just make sure that you bring Ben back here. He has a lot of questions to answer."

Rook nods, resolute. He turns to go, only for a mana bubble to materialize in the middle of the room. Gwendolyn and Kevin appear inside of it a moment later, and she almost immediately has to take a knee, breathing hard. Kevin kneels down, placing a hand on her shoulder. Still, the look he gives Rook is determined and severe. "What'd Tennyson get into this time?"

Standing up straight, Gwendolyn shakes her head. It obviously doesn't help with her dizziness, but she stubbornly forges on anyway. "Tell us on the way, Rook. Let's go."

Since Gwendolyn is wearing a pair of leggings and one of Kevin's shirts, and Kevin is only wearing socks and a pair of loose boxers, Rook lets them change in the back of his truck while he gets them caught up. They didn't exactly pack for the trip, but Gwendolyn summons a suitable change of clothes for them, much to Kevin's displeasure. Clothes don't take a lot of energy, but she's already dizzy, and more teleportation doesn't help.

"So he slammed down the Omnitrix and ran off?" Kevin asks from where he's sitting next to
Rook. Behind them, in the cargo space of the small spaceship, Gwendolyn has the divider parted slightly so she can still hear the conversation while she changes. "He didn't say anything at all?"

Frustrated with himself, Rook shakes his head. "No, he was silent. I managed to catch him briefly with an energy net, but Jetray did not have any problems breaking out of it," he explains.

"Huh. Interesting." Gwendolyn slides into the seat next to Kevin, her eyes glowing briefly as she teleports her pajamas home. Since Kevin had only been wearing underwear to bed in the first place, the act of getting dressed was much easier for him. "Ben isn't usually silent. Even when he's having trouble with his aliens, they'll say something. What do you think, Kevin?"

He shrugs, as if uninterested. "Does it matter? For once, I doubt this is something up with the watch. Either way, we'll knock some sense into him. And if this has anything to do with that brain surgery stuff, then we'll find the guy who did that and finish him." He gives Gwendolyn a pointed look, eyes narrowed. "And don't make me specify — you know exactly what I mean by 'finish,'" he says lowly.

Although Gwendolyn looks far from pleased, she only nods before turning to face Rook a little better. "What I want to know is, how did Ben get his hands on the keycard? You had it on you, didn't you?" The cabin of the ship goes quiet for a long moment. Gwendolyn raises a pointed eyebrow. "Didn't you? Rook?"

Shifting awkwardly, Rook clears his throat. "...there were extenuating circumstances," he admits slowly. "Ben's file did mention that he's an exceptionally quick pickpocket, but I take the blame for allowing him to get close, and... distracting me."

Even though he's not looking at Gwendolyn and Kevin, Rook can almost feel when the pieces snap into place for both of them at the same time.

"Dude, oh my God, that's—!" Kevin makes a gagging sound.

With a scowl on her face, Gwendolyn smacks him on the arm. "Kevin, be more mature! There's nothing wrong with—"

"I didn't say there was anything wrong with it," Kevin interrupts, "but I am saying that if you don't find some sort of doggie bag laying around here, I'm going to ruin these leather seats in about three seconds." In his defense, he is looking a little sick.

"Kevin Ethan Levin, there is nothing to be sick over!" Gwendolyn chastises him, though Kevin doesn't look at all convinced. "So what if Ben wants to be with Rook? I think it's sweet."

The look on Kevin's face is skeptical, to say the least. "Really? So you like thinking about what your teenage cousin could have been doing with an alien, alone in a room for twenty-four hours, with nothing but time to kill?" With phrasing like that, even Rook grimaces. It sounds a lot worse with context.

"Well..." Gwendolyn hesitates. "Well, maybe I don't really like thinking about it, but it's not our place to judge what they want to do together." She pauses, thinking about something. "...what are the laws of consent in space?"

"Can we change the subject?" Rook speaks up before Kevin can cut in. "All we did was— kiss. We kissed. Is that a satisfying enough answer? I doubt that he meant it anyway, considering his current state. It was most likely a tactic to get me to lower my guard so he could grab the keycard. It did not mean anything." Thinking on it leaves a bitter taste in his mouth. Knowing that Ben
didn't mean any of it is cutting, twisting his chest in an entirely non-physical way that still manages to leave him breathless.

And the worst part is that Rook is certain now that he truly wants Ben to mean it. He had been denying having any sort of feelings for Ben for months, convinced that any lingering doubts would fade on their own if he ignored them. The kiss has left him a lot to think about, but they can wait until later. Rook resolutely pushes his complex feelings away, squeezing the ship's controls to ground himself to reality.

The rest of the flight passes in silence, which Rook is grateful for. Reentry requires a lot of concentration. He doesn't exactly take his time or follow the proper procedures, but doing so would be a waste of time. He'll have to spend some time later touching up the scorch marks on his ship, but for the time being, that's the last thing he cares about.

"Gwendolyn, where is Ben? Can you locate him?" Rook asks as they near Bellwood. With all of the anti-alien propaganda around every corner, the spaceship is probably going to scare civilians. The sooner he knows where Ben is, the sooner Rook can be on the ground.

Taking a deep breath, Gwendolyn's eyes begin to glow magenta. She struggles for a moment, muttering quietly under her breath. "This would be so much easier with something that belongs to him… You're lucky that I'm so familiar with— got him!" Her eyes snap back to their normal green, and she points to the south. "By the warehouse district, it's not far! Rook, step on it!"

He doesn't need to be told twice. Gwendolyn has barely finished speaking when Rook slams down on the gas pedal. He's not normally a reckless driver, but given the circumstances, he can manage to forgive himself.

As they get close enough to see the warehouses in the distance, Rook brings the ship down closer to the highway. He presses the button to convert it back into a truck, and the three of them all brace themselves as the wheels hit the ground hard. It jars them for a moment, but the truck is quick to adjust to asphalt instead of open air. Rook doesn't let up on the gas for even a second, and he only just manages to bring the truck to a squealing stop before ramming into the side of one of the warehouses.

Without needing prompting, Gwendolyn's eyes are already glowing. She focuses for a moment, then points to her left. "Down there," she says, climbing out of the truck. Kevin follows her, with Rook close behind. "Be quiet, I don't think he knows we're here. We can sneak up on him."

Even though sneaking involves being quiet and therefore slow, Rook nods. Sneaking is the best plan so far. If Ben really tried, there is no way that the three of them could take him in a head-on fight. And based off of some of the things Rook has read about in Ben's file and had the rare opportunity to see for himself, he really doesn't want to see what it's like when Ben is actually trying.

They pass a few different warehouses, and the further down the line they go, the quieter everything gets. The hum of a few late-night workers fades away, and even the cars on the highway become faint and impossible to hear through the maze of buildings. With the sun long below the horizon and the moon high in the sky, darkness blankets their surroundings and suffocates all but the sound of the three of them breathing. Rook knows that it's an illogical thought, but he can't help but think that the air really is thick. It's hard to breathe, and even his exceptional night vision can't help him see in the near pitch blackness. Only the magenta aura of Gwendolyn's glowing eyes allows him to orient himself and put one foot in front of the other.

For a while, Gwendolyn had been leading them down the line of identical warehouses, but she
suddenly stops. The glow of her eyes is extinguished, and she wordlessly points to the metal door leading into the warehouse they're leaning against. From his angle on the ground, Rook can't see what the sign above it says, but looking around at the other falling apart buildings, it's most likely abandoned anyway.

The door that Gwendolyn points out is slightly ajar. Hesitantly, Rook steps up to it, peeking inside. The inside matches the idea that it's abandoned, too. There's no machinery or merchandise lying around. Instead, the interior is nearly completely empty, save a few small boxes and tarps lying around.

True to Gwendolyn's word, Ben is already there. The glow of his Omnitrix is weak but enough to tell Rook that it's him. He's pacing the room back and forth, obviously impatient.

Turning back to Gwendolyn and Kevin, Rook gives a short nod. They share a look, then Kevin reaches into his pocket, pulling out his phone. He holds it up for them both to see, pointing to where the time is displayed. Midnight. Which means that all they have to do is wait.

Unlike what they were expecting, the man that Ben came to meet doesn't show himself immediately. He also doesn't show himself a minute later, or five minutes after that. For all of the build-up, Rook is starting to feel a little underwhelmed. At some point, Ben stops pacing, but no one else appears or speaks up. For whatever reason, the man who Ben had risked his cover to meet had decided not to show up.

The three of them wait for a little while longer, but after ten minutes, Rook gives the signal to move in. He's not sure if Gwendolyn and Kevin understand basic Plumber-taught hand signals, but kicking the door of the warehouse open seems to be obvious enough to get their attention.

Shooting her hand out, Gwendolyn's eyes glow for a moment before a mana bubble surrounds Ben. Rook isn't sure if it's airtight like the last one she used on him, but he hopes not. The three of them run over to him, and surprisingly, Ben doesn't look the least bit perturbed to be in the bubble. He's annoyed, yes, and meets them all with a matching glare, but isn't even looking at the Omnitrix or trying to break out.

"You know, this isn't as bad as it looks," Ben says as they come to a stop in front of him.

Gwendolyn scowls. "Really?"

Giving a forced chuckle, Ben shrugs. "...no, not really. No." He starts to say something more, only to close his mouth as Kevin takes a step towards him.

"You've got a lot of explaining to do, Tennyson." He jabs a finger against the bubble and it sounds like he's tapping on glass. "I want to know what's going on. This is all way too convoluted, even for you."

This time, Ben doesn't even try to answer. Behind them, the door that they came through swings shut. The warehouse is plunged into darkness, saved only by the pink glow from Gwendolyn's mana bubble. Rook reaches for his Proto-Tool, tensed and on edge, but the next second, the lights are flicked on.

The building hums with the energy needed to power such old wiring, and a few of the bulbs hanging well-above their heads flicker before going out. "If you want answers," a familiar voice pipes up from the doorway, "I think that I can shed some light on that for you."

Immediately, Gwendolyn flicks her hand out. A thick rope made of mana lashes around the man
who spoke, pulling him to the center of the room where the rest of them are standing. Like Ben, he
doesn't seem upset by his situation. He comes willingly, a pleasant smile on his lips even when
facing all of them glaring at him. If looks could kill, as the saying goes, then Rook is certain that
they would have a funeral to plan. Still, the man doesn't look the least bit concerned.

Looking at his face, Rook gets the feeling that they've met before. He struggles to match names
to faces, only for Gwendolyn to suddenly gasp.

"Daniel Collins? What are you doing here?" For a moment, Gwendolyn looks like she's going to
let him go, only for her scowl to deepen and her fist to squeeze. A tiny part of Rook is pleased to
see Daniel choke, struggling to maintain his aloof persona. Now that he knows the name, it's easier
to see the resemblance. Rook hadn't recognized him with half of his hair singed away and a faded
burn mark across his left cheek.

"Wait, hold on a second," Kevin interrupts, taking a step forward as Daniel goes to speak.
"Who's this guy?"

It's tempting to skip the introductions and get right to the part where Daniel starts explaining
himself, but Gwendolyn beats Rook to it. "He's a wealthy philanthropist and the founder of dozens
of successful companies all over the world. And, up until a week ago, he was a very active member
of the pro-alien group. But after there was another alien attack in Washington D.C., his stance
suddenly changed." There's an angry accusation in Gwendolyn's voice. She brushes past Kevin to
stand directly in front of Daniel, contempt written into her eyes as she looks down at him. "What
changed? After being pro-alien for years, I doubt that one attack was enough to make you change
your mind."

Daniel shrugs about as well as he can with mana encasing his torso. "What can I say?" He grins.
"I was inspired to stop lying and finally be honest to the public. Since when is honesty a crime?"

Before Gwendolyn can give into the clear desire to beat him, Rook steps in. He places a hand on
her shoulder, coaxing her to calm down while he focuses on Daniel. "So," Rook says with mock
casualness, "you must be the one who forced Ben to undergo brain surgery. I want to know
why."

He's barely keeping himself from using contractions. With people like this, it's important to appear
calm and rational.

Still, that doesn't keep Rook from boiling with rage at the sight of the man who forcibly
modified Ben. And not just his body, either, but his brain. It's a very complex and easily damaged
organ, and thanks to this man, Ben doesn't know right from wrong, and Rook can't be sure how
much of his partner is still left in there. As far as he's concerned, Daniel deserves nothing less than
a life sentence at the bottom of a cold, dark pit, alone.

His unapologetic demeanor is probably the worst part. Daniel knows that he's a criminal, but he
doesn't care. To him, it's all justified. "Well, isn't it obvious?" He smirks, amused. "In my research
for this drug — which Ben tells me that you all call "Venom" — I had to be sure that it wouldn't
affect humans. This is a chemical designed only to target aliens. To succeed at this, I didn't have to
design the drug to attack alien brains. All I had to do was teach it to avoid human brains. Did you
know that one of the many companies I own that overseer the development of brain science and
advanced medicine?" His smirk widens as realization gradually dawns on the group. "In my
research, I found out some interesting things about the frontal lobe. Not only is it the easiest part of
the brain to access, since you can go through the forehead, but it's also the part of the brain that
controls reasoning, self-control, and decision making. Now—" If his hands had been free, he would
have been stroking his chin. "—I wonder what a wealthy man with nothing to lose
could possibly do with that information and a willing test subject? Well, "willing" is a strong word,
but he was unconscious, so—"

His statement is cut off as Kevin abruptly slaps him across the face. Coming from Kevin of all people, a slap is the last thing Rook had been expecting. Nonetheless, he grabs Daniel by the shirt front, hefting him off of the ground to glare at him. The contempt oozing from Kevin is tangible. For a second, Daniel's smirk even falters. "I'm only gonna say this once," Kevin mutters darkly, "so listen close. Fix him, or I will shove my hand through your chest and show you what that cold heart of yours looks like for as long as it's still beating."

Managing an awkward laugh, Daniel turns his head to the side and does his best to lean away from Kevin. "It's not really a matter of "fixing" him," he replies conversationally as if Kevin hadn't just promised to brutally kill him. "See, it's not like I rewired his brain. I simply added an implant that allows me to trick the synapses into connecting the way I want. The only problem is that it needs an injection every few days to keep the implant working." He stops there, giving the three of them an expectant look.

After a moment, Rook finally steps towards him. He signals for Kevin to move out of the way, which he does grudgingly, and Rook reaches into Daniel's jacket pocket. His hand closes around a long, narrow box. Pulling it out, Rook almost doesn't want to open it. Ben is being quiet, seemingly fine with everything that Daniel is telling them. He knows that he won't like what he sees if he looks at Ben, so Rook resists the strong urge. He opens the discrete black box.

Inside, as promised, is a syringe. The material inside of it is surprisingly normal looking. It's a see-through liquid with the consistency of water. Rook holds it up, letting Gwendolyn and Kevin get a good look, before abruptly dropping it on the ground and slamming his boot down on top of it. The serum seeps out of the shattered glass and into the floor beneath it, eroding the concrete and eating its way into the dirt below. Horrified, Rook almost drops the box.

"In my defense," Daniel says with an amused voice, "it doesn't do that to organic material. While in contact with skin cells and tissues, it's actually quite harmless."

"Except for the brainwashing part!" Gwendolyn snaps at him. "Is it reversible? You might want to think about your answer carefully, considering your position." To make her point, she squeezes her fist tighter, causing the mana binds around Daniel to tighten until he lets out a gasp of pain.

Even still, he manages to laugh. "How should I know if it's reversible?" He shakes his head. "It's a completely new product that I'm testing for the first time. To succeed in life, you have to be willing to be flexible and take risks. And Ben doesn't mind, isn't that right?"

They all turn to look at Ben, who is quick to shake his head. "No, not really," he answers. "Calm down, Gwendolyn. It's not like it hurts or anything — it feels kinda tingly, actually." The fact that he's restrained from saying anything until Daniel addressed him is unsettling, to say the least. It's almost as alarming as the fact that he's advocating for being manipulated and controlled. Good or evil doesn't change the outcome — Ben hates being told what to do.

Gwendolyn looks appalled. "Calm down?" She repeats, voice rising several octaves. "Ben, I can't believe you—that you're—I!" She has to pause to take a deep breath, though it doesn't seem to help her feel much better. "Ben, he's controlling you! Doesn't that upset you even a little bit?"

The question makes Ben waver. He thinks about it for a moment but is soon shaking his head. "Should it?" He frowns. "It's not like I'm all that trustworthy. What other choice did he have?"

Whereas his statement floors Gwendolyn, Kevin doesn't have that problem. "Alright, that's it!" He hauls Daniel up by the shirt-front, holding him off the ground. "First I'm gonna beat this guy
within an inch of his life, then we take him back to the Plumbers and get them to get that thing out of Ben's head. Any objections?" He pulls his fist back, ready for the go-ahead from the other two.

"Actually," Daniel speaks up, "being arrested doesn't really work for my schedule. Do you think we could postpone and I can squeeze you in on Tuesday instead?"

Kevin doesn't respond immediately. He looks a little lost, stunned by the arrogance being demonstrated. After a long moment, he lowers Daniel down to be at eye-level. "Do you think this is a joke?" He asks in a low, warning voice.

"Remarkably, no." There's no grin on Daniel's face anymore, but the gleam in his eyes can hardly mean anything good. "But being arrested puts a stop on my plans. You kids are starting to get annoying. My original plan was to release my Venom in gas form and flood Undertown, sparking a "rebellion" against the good people of Bellwood. It doesn't affect humans, so the populous will be running from evil aliens who are angrily wrecking everything in sight. I was going to have the great Ben Tennyson lead them in the first strike against humanity and frame it so that his alien half was to blame for his treachery, but he's starting to be more trouble than he's worth. I'm sure that the media conveniently finding the four, mutilated bodies of Ben and his team after the rampage is over will be enough of a statement." Ignoring Kevin, he turns to look at Ben. "You can break out of there now. Finish them off for me, won't you?"

Eagerly, as though having been waiting for the command, Ben activates his Omnitrix and slams down on it. There's a flash of green light, and when it dies down, Big Chill is left in his place. He presses his hands against the side of Gwendolyn's mana bubble, pushing on it. He struggles for a moment, but soon the tips of his fingers are sticking out, quickly followed by his head and the rest of his body. Alarmed, Gwendolyn drops Daniel and throws up a shield to protect herself when Big Chill abruptly lunges for her.

"Ben, stop!" She tries pleading, throwing a mana disk in Ben's direction. "This isn't you, you know that!"

If Ben hears her, then he chooses not to acknowledge it. Rook doesn't want to hurt him, but the net won't hold Big Chill, and he's obviously not going to stop of his own free will. He grabs his Proto-Tool anyway, using the blaster to nail Big Chill in his side and fling him back against the wall.

Using the split second that Rook bought them, Gwendolyn turns to Kevin. "Get him out of here!" She jerks her head toward Daniel. "Call the Plumbers and tell them that we found Ben! Rook and I will hold him off!"

It's obvious that Kevin doesn't like the idea of leaving his girlfriend to fight, but he nods and doesn't argue as he throws Daniel over his shoulder. The mana shackles hold as he makes a run for it. He's almost to the door when ice suddenly encases it, freezing it shut. A second later, Big Chill phases into the room through the wall, floating in front of Kevin. Necrofriggians aren't the most expressive race in the universe, but even so, the genuine rage in his eyes is impossible to mistake.

"No one is going anywhere," he hisses. Jumping out of the way in time to avoid a slash from Big Chill's claws, Kevin ducks down and touches the floor. A layer of concrete encases his body just in time as the next hit from Big Chill sends him skidding back. His heels kick up sparks where they're digging into the ground, leaving impressive grooves in the floor.

"That's more like it." Kevin grins. Keeping one arm around Daniel to hold him in place, Kevin's free hand lengthens and tapers off to a point, leaving him with an impressive concrete sword. "What'd'ya say, Tennyson? Another fight, just for old time's sake?"
Big Chill lands on the ground in front of him, his wings settling over his shoulders and head like a cloak. "If it's like old times, then this isn't going to be much of a fight."

He takes a deep breath, exhaling, only for the freezing gas to be stopped by one of Gwendolyn's mana shields. She takes a running jump at it, shattering the mana on impact and following through to land a kick square in Ben's chest. It sends him flying backward, and he digs his claws into the ground to catch himself.

The angry snarl that rips from Big Chill's throat is more unnerving than Rook wants to admit. Reality suddenly sinks in. Despite all they've been through together, in this moment, Ben doesn't see any of his friends as anything more than obstacles.

This time, when Big Chill takes a deep breath, what comes out isn't ice. It's freezing, gale-force wind, cutting through Rook's fur and biting into his skin. He takes a knee, trying to find traction where there isn't any. Gwendolyn gets knocked over first, crashing into Rook and sending them both to the ground. The wind stops, but the cold lingers until every breath makes Rook's lungs ache with frost.

He hears flurried movements and the sound of concrete cracking, then Kevin lands on the ground next to them. The concrete protection over him is cracked, revealing his skin and clothes. With a groan, Kevin pushes himself up, glaring at Daniel as Big Chill helps him to his feet.

Shivering and doing her best to keep her teeth from chattering, Gwendolyn raises both hands and aims them at Ben. "M- Meena Goh!" A focused blast of heat extends from her palms, cutting through the quivering air to engulf Big Chill in flames. Even though he's immune to extreme heat, the force of the blow still has Big Chill reeling.

Rook pushes himself up onto his feet, not hesitating to aim his Proto-Tool. He holds the trigger down, sending out rapid-fire energy bursts. Ben is quick to take to the air, dodging them, but doesn't last long against so many small projectiles. One clips his shoulder, making him freeze for a second too long. A flurry of blasts descends on him, flinging Big Chill back against the wall and prying a weak groan of pain from his throat.

"I've had just about enough of this," Kevin snaps impatiently, reabsorbing the concrete ground to fix his armor. "New plan. We finish off that Collins guy and Ben won't have any more reason to be loyal to him. All in agreement? Good." Without waiting for either of the other two to reply, Kevin forms his hands into hammers, taking a running start where he dropped Daniel.

"Kevin, don't!" Gwendolyn reaches out to stop him with a mana shield, but she doesn't move nearly fast enough.

"Don't touch him!" Big Chill shouts furiously, darting in front of Daniel almost faster than human eyes can track and sending Kevin flying with a wicked backhand. The sound of concrete snapping echoes through the huge warehouse as Kevin's limp body hits the far wall and crumbles to the ground. There isn't a hint of regret on Ben's face — only cold determination to match his burning outrage.

Finally getting back on her feet, Gwendolyn watches with horror. "Kevin!" It takes less than a second for that shock to turn to fury, and as she turns back to Ben, more than her eyes start to glow. Her skin radiates light, giving the appearance of her body being incinerated as she sheds the cover of skin to reveal the pure energy of the Anodite beneath it.

Ben doesn't seem at all bothered by this. Actually, it almost looks like Big Chill is smiling. "Why are you bothering?" He asks, hovering off of the ground casually. "We've fought before. You know
that you can't beat me."

The statement rings with an air of truth, but instead of being dissuaded, Gwendolyn raises herself to his level in the air, holding her hands out as they glow with mana. "Maybe I can't," she admits, her voice echoing with raw power, "but that won't keep me from trying. Eradiko!"

In a second that seems to last an eternity, nothing happens. The weight of the spell settles in the air around them, and then suddenly, Ben tenses up. He screams, a drawn-out, painful shriek as his body lights up and explodes from the inside out. The force sends him careening into the ground, smoke and dust billowing up around the shattered concrete where he landed.

As quickly as it appeared, Gwendolyn's Anodite form recedes. "Ben?" She calls in her normal voice. "Oh my God, Ben!" With Rook right behind her, she dashes over to where he crashed, kneeling down to wave away the smoke. "Ben, can you hear me? I'm so sorry, that spell is— I shouldn't have used it, I was—" Being an empath, Rook can hardly blame her for being angry. Everyone in the room was filled with hatred and hostility, multiplying her own unsteady emotional state by four. And considering how panicked and confused Rook's own emotional state is, it can hardly be easy for her to stay level-headed.

Just as Gwendolyn reaches out, Big Chill's clawed hand shoots through the smoke. He looms out of the crater, towering above them. Though he looks a little worse for wear, the hand wrapped around Gwendolyn's neck doesn't hesitate to squeeze. Without any effort or sympathy, Big Chill tosses her over his shoulder like she weighs little more than a sack of flour. Her body hits the ground hard, only to skid and tumble before finally slamming into the far wall. Gwendolyn lets out a low groan but doesn't move again.

It's hard to describe what Rook is feeling when Big Chill turns those glowing green eyes on him. He almost wants to take a step back, but what good will one step do? Instead, he swallows his trepidation and holds himself still, watching Big Chill carefully pick himself up out of the hole.

His wings look bent and torn, hanging off of him limply where they fold over his body. Scorch marks litter his torso, and there are indents in his arms and legs as if the blast carved holes in the weaker parts of his body. The pain must be more than Ben is letting on, because even though Necrofriggians don't need to breathe, he's panting like he ran a marathon.

At this point, fighting Ben seems inhumane. Not that Rook has a problem with taking on weaker enemies, but knowing Ben and having experience with how hard he tries not to let on that he's struggling or in pain, Rook can only imagine how horribly it must hurt. Making a split-second decision, Rook relaxes his position and swings his Proto-Tool over his shoulder, sheathing it in place.

Despite his limited facial expressions, Big Chill still manages to look surprised. "Why... why aren't you... attacking me?" He manages, struggling through every word.

Rook closes his eyes for a second. He's about to lie through his teeth to Ben, but if he knows his partner even half as well as he thinks he does, then this might work. Letting out a long sigh, he gives Ben the most apologetic look he can muster. "You are already hurt. There is no reason for me to make it worse, especially considering all the ways I have already gotten you hurt in the past few months." He holds up his hand, ticking off incidents as he names them. "It is my fault that your arm was badly damaged in Undertown, making your absence from Earth and the resulting anti-alien movement my fault, too. Once we came back, I allowed you to take a dangerous undercover mission alone and failed to immediately report it when you did not check in. By extension, it is my fault that you were forced to undergo surgery and that Gwendolyn and Kevin got hurt while fighting you today. If you are going to attack me, Ben, I will not stop you. This is all my fault, so I
deserve it."

The hesitance Ben is feeling is practically palpable. He actually takes a step back from Rook. "I..." He lets the word trail off, unable to finish.

The truth is that Rook doesn't blame himself for any of this at all, but he knows intuitively that Ben does. Somewhere in his head, the part of him that can't stand hurting his friends has to have at least a little bit of control.

For a second, Rook thinks that it's not going to work. He prays that his poker face is good enough to fool his partner. One close look shows all of the obvious tells — Rook isn't making eye-contact, he won't stop fidgeting, and it's a battle in itself to keep from biting his lip. Ben's eyes narrow, but then he falters. His body seems caught between taking a step towards Rook and saying something. Finally, Ben seems to reach a decision. He—

"What are you waiting for?" Daniel's harsh, impatient tone breaks the atmosphere between them. "Finish him off! I don't have the entire night to waste waiting for you to do what I ordered you to do!"

Big Chill stiffens, closing his eyes for the briefest moment. When he opens them, his face is expressionless. He raises his wings to lift himself into the air, ignoring the considerable effort it takes and the pain that it must inflict. Rook braces himself for a rush of icy air, but all he feels is a slight stir of cold against his fur as Big Chill flaps his wings and propels himself away.

"Tennyson! What do you think you're—? No, stay back! Stop! You're supposed to obey—!

Daniel's shout is cut off abruptly, and the warehouse is filled only with the sound of ice cracking and settling as Big Chill encases the business man's body from head-to-toe.

Stunned, Rook doesn't move from where he's standing. He watches Big Chill finish and land gracefully on the ground. The Necrofriggian manages to hold himself up for a moment, only for his legs to suddenly shake and send him to his knees. The Omnitrix beeps weakly, and a flash of light later, Ben is groaning on the ground in Big Chill's place. That finally pushes Rook to move, and he's quick to drop down at Ben's side.

"Ben! Are you—?" Rook isn't sure what he's going to ask. Is he okay? Is he himself?

Lifting his head, Ben manages a weak smile. "Yeah," he says with a nod. "I'm good, Rook. Mostly, anyway." He grimaces in pain, and while his arms (and likely the rest of his body) are lined with bruises, he looks fine otherwise.

Somehow, Rook musters up the energy to return Ben's smile. It's not the right time nor the place, but he can't resist pulling Ben into a hug. It's only supposed to last a second, but Ben returns it with a passion, clinging to Rook like he's going to disappear if they let go. Pulling away seems like too much to ask. Nonetheless, Rook does, holding Ben at arm's length to get a good look at him.

"How did you—? I thought that you were under his control." As much as he wants to be serious about this, the smile on Rook's face doesn't feel like it's going away any time soon. They did it. Daniel is captured, the populace is safe, and Ben is in control of his own body. Everything is going to be fine.

Smiling seems to be infectious because Ben is grinning like nothing could make him happier than sitting on that concrete floor with Rook, covered in bruises but very much alive and in control. "I still am," Ben admits. "It wasn't easy, to— well, you know what I mean. Whatever he did to me, I'm still not upset about it, but I finally figured out that the only thing I'm more loyal to than

In a perfect world, this would be the part where they kiss. Rook would turn Ben to face him, they would stare longingly into each other's eyes, and the feeling of their lips meeting would be passionate and sweet, as addictive as ecstasy.

Instead, Ben puts his hands on Rook's shoulders and shakily pushes himself to his feet. "I'm gonna call Grandpa Max," he says, already holding the Omnitrix up to access its communication features. "You get Gwendolyn and Kevin. They're both gonna kill me for this when they wake up. Not that I blame them."

Instead of replying, Rook nods and stands.

At least for the night, this is the only happy ending that he needs.
None of them are severely injured. There's a bruise around Gwendolyn's neck and an impressive bump on the back of her head, Kevin is going to be sore and swollen in the chest area for a few days, and Ben can hardly even blink without aggravating one of his bruises — but at least they're all breathing. Rook is the only one who's not injured. Beyond the typical soreness that comes with every fight, he feels almost disconnected from what happened.

Thankfully, the Plumbers give the group some time to get their bearings and pull themselves together. Since nothing is seriously wrong with them, they're merely given blankets and told to sit near the ambulance and wait. Not that the paramedics are happy about that, but there are more important things to worry about at the moment than bruises.

While Rook and Kevin are sitting on the padded bench that lines the side of the ambulance's interior, Gwendolyn and Ben take the gurney. There's something cute about watching them sit together. Even though Gwendolyn is in college now and Ben is a hero with endless accomplishments, they're leaning against each other and wrapped in the same blanket, awkwardly trying to be as close as possible without admitting that they're enjoying it. As much as Ben complained when Gwendolyn dragged him down onto the cot, he's more or less okay with it now, absentmindedly twisting strands of her hair around his fingers while she fusses over him and Kevin both.

That doesn't keep Ben from watching the scene playing out just a handful of meters from them. Even though he willingly turned on Daniel, there's a deep frown tugging on his lips as he watches the Plumbers load a human-sized ice block into the back of a prison truck. His fingers keep twitching, as though he's dying to slam down the Omnitrix and go out there to help the man he's supposed to have unwavering loyalty towards.

"Hey," Gwendolyn says gently after a few minutes of trying to get Ben to relax, "you don't have to be so tense. He's going away for a long time, Ben."

In response, he groans, burying his face in his hands. "That's the problem," he whines, voice muffled. "It's so difficult to think about him as an enemy. I know he's done bad things and that — this, whatever I'm feeling, is going to fade soon, but that doesn't stop me from wanting to help him."

Kevin snorts, crossing his arms. "Hey, if it'll help, I bet a few smacks upside the head will knock that implant loose." He holds his fist up for emphasis.

"Ben," sighs Gwendolyn, "don't worry. Focus on being here, with us. Ignore what's going on out there, okay? We'll get it removed as soon as we can."

Grimacing, Ben turns away from her. "Actually, could we hold off on that?" He reaches up, gingerly pushing his bangs out of the way to show the faded scar where his skin had been cut to gain access to his skull. "Look, he accelerated the healing on the outside so that I would recover
faster, but the experience of brain surgery is really not something that I want to relive any time soon. The implant doesn't even work without that injection he showed to you guys, so I thought that maybe we could leave it in…? Not forever, obviously, but at least until the scar is completely gone and my brain doesn't ache every time I shiver. I think I've spent enough time recovering from surgery recently, anyway," he finishes, looking at the floor instead of his friends.

The idea isn't exactly appealing to Rook. There's no way to be certain that Daniel was telling the truth about that syringe. It could have easily been for show. Still, it's not like that stopped Ben from fighting against it anyway, even if it feels like he betrayed someone important to him from his perspective. Rook sees Gwendolyn and Kevin share a look. They must all be in agreement, because after the long stretch of silence, Gwendolyn finally sighs.

"That's fine, Ben. No problem." She gives him a soft smile. "Let Grandpa know, okay? He should be here soon since the first responders already arrived."

Just then, one of the paramedics comes over to the ambulance. He climbs in, ignoring all four of them to grab what looks like a blowtorch off of the wall of equipment. "Sorry," he says as he squeezes past them again. "We need these so we can thaw out the suspect."

Had Gwendolyn not already been holding onto him, Ben might have jumped to his feet. "Wait! Can I help?" He holds up the Omnitrix, already cycling through his aliens. Most likely, he's going to try for Swampfire or Heatblast. "I'm pretty good at thawing people out, and I know who would be perfect for the job—"

"No need," the paramedic interrupts. Not seeming to notice the distress on Ben's face, he steps out of the ambulance, turning to give a reassuring smile. "We've got it all under control. Try to relax and don't worry so much." He shuts one of the doors, giving them a bit more privacy, and walks off.

Ben's face is burning red, but Rook doesn't find it cute as he has before. It makes his chest squeeze with sympathy. No one comments on what happened, but it's obvious that Ben is shaken up about it. Even beyond betraying someone you trust, it must be sickening for him to know that, as strong as his loyalty is, it's not really his and yet it still exerts so much control over him.

There's a knock on the ambulance door, breaking the tense silence. "Hey, kiddos," Max says with an easy grin. "Glad to see everyone's right. You all did a great job today."

It's a little bit awkward in the small space, but Ben and Gwendolyn both get up to greet their grandpa with a hug. Since they've grown up, he hasn't babied them as much, but the long hug that they share reminds Rook strongly of the man no one at the Plumbers' Academy would talk about — because what they like to lecture on is Max Tennyson, one of the greatest Plumbers in the organization's history. What no one will ever talk about is Grandpa Max, the normal man who followed his passions and made mistakes, and who never wanted his family to be involved with aliens at all.

After a moment, Ben is the one to pull away first. Gwendolyn is quick to follow, giving Ben a worried look that he doesn't acknowledge. "Hey, Grandpa, can we talk? In private?" He asks.

Max doesn't hesitate to nod. "Of course, Ben." He puts a hand on his grandson's shoulder, his smile never fading. "We'll be right back. You kids wait here."

They walk off together, turning the corner around the warehouse and disappearing out of sight. Only once they're gone does Gwendolyn finally sigh and climb back into the ambulance. She reclaims her spot on the gurney, with Kevin quick to join her.
He isn't the most open guy when it comes to expressing his emotions, but at least with Gwendolyn, he doesn't even bother trying to hide that he cares about her. They situate themselves so that she's bundled in both her blanket and his, Kevin sitting Indian style so she can sit in the space between his legs and he can wrap his arms around her waist protectively. Had Ben been there, he might have teased them for it or made a face, but the three of them remaining only sit in silence for a few moments.

As the silence is starting to become tense, Gwendolyn suddenly lets out a long, dramatic groan of frustration. "I'm so worried about him," she says, a deep frown on her face. There's no need to ask who she's talking about. "He isn't talking to any of us, and I know he's upset! I can feel his anxiety from here! I know that it can't be easy to realize that your emotions aren't your own and that you have no control over them. Not to mention all the other things he's been through recently! But he's so… so stubborn! When we were ten, I always assumed that he would grow out of it, but at least back then, I can name one or two times when he was honest with me! Now, he tries to act like he doesn't feel pain or experience inner conflict at all! What's he so afraid of? Doesn't he understand that I— I mean, we want to help him?"

A little taken aback, Kevin and Rook share a look. It's not like either of them know how to be comforting in a situation as delicate as this. Finally, Kevin awkwardly clears his throat, putting one of his hands on top of Gwendolyn's head to gently run his fingers through her hair. "That's how he is, you know? He'll open up when he's ready." He smiles, chuckling a little. "Once, he said I was like the big brother he never had. He must not have high expectations for family, huh?"

His words seem to help, as Gwendolyn relaxes a little bit. "Really?" She leans her head back to look at him. "When was this? I don't remember him saying anything like that."

Kevin shrugs dismissively. "It was when we got separated during that thing with the Perplexahedron. Remember that? We were looking for you, and while we were alone, we… talked. We talk sometimes. About stuff." His tone takes on a defensive edge.

Rather than pushing him, Gwendolyn giggles. "You don't have to explain it to me, Mr. Tough-and-Scary-Bad-Boy." She places a hand on his cheek, leaning up to kiss him.

Rook clears his throat, interrupting them before their lips meet. "In all fairness, Kevin, I have to side with Gwendolyn here. I have also noticed that Ben refuses to talk about what might be bothering him. The closest I have gotten is when we discussed Feedback, and he only told me because the situation forced him to."

The moment that Gwendolyn and Kevin were about to have is completely ruined now. Neither of them is annoyed by it, though. Rather, Gwendolyn looks worried again, and Kevin is confused. "Feedback?" He asks. "That's one of his aliens, right? The Conductoid? What does that have to do with anything?"

Absentmindedly, Gwendolyn reaches her hand back to pat him on the shoulder. "Don't worry about it, babe. I think Ben should be the one to tell you. The more people he talks about it with, the better. I, uh…" she bites her lip, looking at Rook with mild surprise, "I didn't know that he told you about it, Rook. Feedback was what really made him start closing up," she explains.

"I am not surprised." Rook nods. "That was his first real loss, right?"

The directness of his question makes Gwendolyn pause, but she slowly nods. "...yeah, I guess so. Back then, he faced some pretty bad people, but he always found a way to come out on top. There was an, um, "incident" where he thought that I was dead. I was fine, but I think that after he found
out I was alright, that was the first time we really hugged. And after that, he opened up to me and talked about his doubts and insecurities. I think that our bond after that is one of the reasons why we actually like each other now." She smiles at the memory, but it's quickly replaced with a frown. "But you're right, Rook. He doesn't do that anymore. Instead of getting more mature with age, it's like he's getting more reckless and carefree every year. I mean, I haven't seen him cry once since he was eleven. Eleven! I get that he has to be the unbeatable hero with no fears, but doesn't he know how unhealthy it is to hold that in?"

Before Rook can reply, movement through the open ambulance door catches his attention. The three of them fall quiet as Ben approaches, Max right behind him. Whatever they talked about, it must not have been good, because Ben looks more stressed than when they went off to have their talk to begin with.

"I don't want you looking into it, Ben," Max reminds him with a serious look. "I want you to take it easy for a week or two, then maybe I'll have some assignments for you, alright?" He gives Ben's shoulder a gentle squeeze, only for the hero to wince and shrug his grandpa's hand off.

"Yeah, fine, whatever," Ben says quickly. He climbs into the back of the ambulance, ignoring Max entirely as he takes Kevin's previous seat on the bench next to Rook.

Instead of being hurt, Max looks worried. He starts to say something but decides against it. He turns his attention to Gwendolyn and manages a smile. "I'll send over the paramedics to tell them that you kids are ready to be taken back to the base. Rook, are you riding with them?"

It takes some effort to resist glancing over at Ben, but Rook nods. "Yes, my truck will be fine here until I need it." The homing feature really is a lifesaver.

Max nods. "Alright. I'll see you all back at the base. Watch yourself when you exit the atmosphere." He gives Ben one more concerned look, then turns away and shuts the back of the ambulance behind him.

They sit in silence, broken only by the sound of the engine starting up after a minute of nothing. The ambulance must be convertible like Rook's Proto-TRUK because even though there were no visible wings when they climbed in, there's the unmistakable feeling of wheels leaving the ground and the hull of the ship shaking from the turbulence.

There are a lot of different supports for taking off. The gurney comes with a whole patchwork of straps and ropes to keep it steady, and Gwendolyn and Kevin slip some of them on while Rook and Ben settle for the regular seat belts that are attached to the wall behind them. Exiting the Earth's atmosphere doesn't actually take that long, but the ambulance ship shakes throughout it, jostling them around. Surprisingly, none of the equipment comes loose. It's all so tightly packed and placed well enough that it stays in position while everything else seems to shudder from the atmospheric force.

Once they break into space, the ride is significantly smoother. None of them unbuckle from the safety straps, but at least there's no longer the looming worry that the ship will snap apart trying to break the Earth's gravitational pull.

They sit in silence for a few moments longer, before Rook eventually decides to go for it. "So, Ben," he turns to his partner, "what did you talk to Magister Tennyson about?"

Though he asked to speak to his grandpa in private, Ben doesn't seem to have any problems answering this. Actually, he looks relieved by the topic. "Oh, you know. Just some, uh, things that happened. I gave him the recap. And I, well—I told him where Daniel was keeping me during the
week I was missing." He shifts awkwardly in his seat, looking at his shoes instead of meeting his friends' gazes. "It's not like it was bad, or anything… Even with the accelerated healing thing he has access to, I still had to recover from brain surgery. So, I was completely exhausted for two days, then there was getting used to— well, it's gonna sound weird, but I had to get used to being in my body again. I didn't feel like myself at all." It looks like he wants to say something more, but Ben shakes his head instead. "Anyway, he wants to see if any of the missing aliens are there. But I know they're not. We were underground, but it was a pretty small place. Only us. There's nothing useful there. He also talked about getting me a PET scan. Even if I don't want surgery immediately, they're gonna need to know where the implant is eventually, right? Better sooner than later." He tries to smile, but seeing the looks on his friends' faces, the expression quickly drops and the air between them lapses into a tense silence.

The rest of the ride to Plumbers HQ only takes two minutes, but it feels like an eternity. Even though he wasn't there for the conversation, it's obvious that Ben knows that his friends were talking about him. He knows that they're worried, and they know that he doesn't want them to worry. No one can think of anything to say, and for the first time since their partnership was new, Rook doesn't know how to talk to Ben.

When the ambulance finally lands in the Plumbers base, it's a breath of fresh air to step away from the tense atmosphere and into the docking bay. Since Rook isn't injured, he isn't shooed off to the infirmary like the other three are. He wants to follow after them but holds himself back. There's no hurry. He won't be allowed into the room with any of them until their physical exams are finished and any treatments are administered.

It's such a small thing, but for the first time in a long while, Rook takes his time.

He walks the halls of the Plumbers base leisurely, stopping to talk with co-workers that he's usually too busy running around to chat with. It feels like he's running on autopilot, as though the person talking and laughing like nothing is wrong isn't really him. It feels good, nonetheless. It's the sort of mundane things that he never takes the time to do. Doing normal things, as much of a lie as it is, feels therapeutic.

Eventually though, even without Rook consciously thinking about it, his feet carry him towards the infirmary. He needs to talk to Ben about what happened while they were in the seclusion chamber together. If it really was a show to distract Rook, then he doesn't want that to sit in the background and gradually ruin their partnership. He can handle if Ben was messing with him, but he needs to be certain before he has the time to get his hopes up.

Talking about something as trivial as a kiss would be a welcome distraction from all of the more complex thoughts threatening to suffocate him.

Surprisingly, when Rook turns the corner to the infirmary wing, Ben is already there. The harsh fluorescent lights expose the flaws that were hidden by the cover of darkness. Ben looks exhausted, with dark bruises under his eyes and his skin so pale that it's almost sickly. While normally unruly, his hair seems dimmer in color, and it's tangled like a bird's nest. He's sitting in one of the plastic waiting chairs, stiff as a board, and his leg bouncing with impatience. His gaze is laser-focused on the door across from him, and if Rook had to guess, he would say that that's the room where either Gwendolyn or Kevin is.

He takes a moment to gather up the courage, then Rook lets out a long breath and walks over to Ben. There's not even a hint of acknowledgment from the young hero, but Rook doesn't let himself be discouraged. He takes the seat next to Ben anyway, settling in to wait.

It takes a few minutes, but as Rook expected, Ben eventually sighs. He stops bouncing his leg,
leaning back and slumping down in his seat. "They won't let me in to see her," he grumbles, crossing his arms. It's such a surprisingly childish gesture that Rook almost laughs. Luckily, he manages to restrain himself to only a tired smile. "The doctors said that there's not really much they can do for my bruises, except some ice for the swollen ones and some painkillers if I need it. But they have to keep Gwendolyn for a brain scan to make sure that there's no internal bleeding, and they want to make sure that her throat isn't going to swell shut. And Kevin is being checked for a concussion and an x-ray of his chest." Ben winces, guilt flashing across his face. "...I hurt them pretty bad, didn't I?"

Unable to lie, Rook hesitantly nods. "Yes," he says gently. "But they are not angry, Ben. You were not in control of yourself. What is important is that you stopped before you could do something more than what medicine can heal."

Ben shudders at the implications. "Yeah, I guess so..." It's obvious that he doesn't really believe Rook, but before he can press the issue, Ben suddenly pushes himself upright. "Hey, listen. Before Gwendolyn and Kevin are released and things get awkward again, I want to tell you…" he takes a deep breath, then turns to face Rook. "I'm so, so sorry."

For the second time in the past hour, Rook is at a loss for words. It's starting to become a disturbing pattern. "Sorry? For what?" There's the obvious thing about attacking them, but Rook isn't the one that needs an apology for that, and something about Ben's expression tells him that this isn't what his friend is talking about.

"Uh, for earlier?" Ben arches an eyebrow. "Remember that? When I started flirting with you really badly and pretty much forced you into kissing so I could grab the keycard? I'm apologizing. I know that you're dating Rayona, and I shouldn't have gone that far, anyway. I just— it was impossible to think about anything other than midnight approaching, and I wasn't following orders. It's so sickening." He grimaces, disgusted.

"I am sorry, but are we remembering the same incident?" From Rook's perspective, Ben has nothing to apologize for. He wasn't in control of his own thoughts, and desperate people force themselves to do desperate things. If anyone needs to apologize, it's Rook, for kissing back despite already thinking that Ben was in a vulnerable place, and then enjoying it. "Ben, you have nothing to apologize to me for. It is not as if you were acting of your own free will," Rook insists.

But instead of answering, Ben looks away, his face turning red. It takes Rook a moment to catch up, but when he does, his eyes widen. "Ben?"

"I'm sorry!" Ben shouts, throwing his hands up in the air. "It's wrong, I know, and I shouldn't have done it, because we're best friends and I really, really like it that way, and you have a girlfriend on another planet, and my stupid brain implant doesn't change anything, because I've wanted to do that for a while now, and I never wanted to admit it, and—" He groans in exasperation, covering his face with his hands. "...you don't hate me, do you?"

The question is so ridiculous that Rook can't do anything more than open and close his mouth on loop. Hate him? There are only about two or three things that could make Rook hate anybody, and when it comes to Ben, kissing isn't anywhere near the top of that short list.

"No," Rook says finally. "I do not hate you. Actually, I came here to talk to you about that "incident" myself."

It doesn't do wonders to help Ben calm down, but he grudgingly lowers his hands. "Really? What for?" He asks, doing his best not to show how anxious he is.
"Well, since you are obviously controlling your own choices again..." Rook trails off, feeling his mouth go dry. Is he really going to do this? He could back out right now and live the rest of his life content to be just friends. The glorious future that Ben is supposed to have includes a wife and a son, and there's no room for Rook in that family dynamic. And yet... He clears his throat, averting his eyes. "Since you are in control of yourself again, I was wondering if you would like to do it again."

It all comes out in a rush, more like one word than one sentence, but Ben doesn't need longer than a second to formulate a response. "Again? Like, kissing again?" Mutely, Rook nods. Ben looks floored. "But what about Rayona? I thought she was the only girl in your village that you ever had eyes for."

Now, Rook regrets never telling Ben that they broke up. It hadn't ever been brought up, and it hadn't seemed important for Rook to mention. "We... agreed that it would be best to stop seeing each other," he says carefully. "Revonnah people handle relationships very differently than humans, Ben. The courting process is not easy when dealing with long distance, and as long as I am an active Plumber, I can never settle down and give Rayona the proper support we would need to start a family. I would have to retire and return to farming for a living, and while I— have a great fondness for Rayona, I cannot do that. Not yet, anyway." With admitting that, it feels like a weight has been lifted off of Rook's chest. Rayona is an amazing woman who will someday find someone who can make her happy and settle down with her, but as sweet as she is, Rook isn't ready for that. Maybe he never will be.

"Oh, wow," Ben whispers. "Rook, that's— that's some pretty heavy, soul-searching stuff. I didn't know." He looks like he's going to apologize again, so Rook shakes his head.

"That is my fault," he says. "There was never a good time to bring it up. But, while we are on the subject, what about you and Kai?" Rook knows that they kissed — once Ben finally returned to the base after his date, it had been all that he would talk about for the next two days.

Ben manages a grin. "Oh, you know. The usual. We kissed, went on a date, promised to call, never did, and..." He shrugs as if to say, "what are you gonna do?" It seems like there's more to the story that Ben isn't telling him, but there is a time and place for everything, and Rook wisely decides to hold his tongue.

"So..." He starts to say but trails off.

"So?" Ben prompts. If he's trying to cover the anticipation on his face, then he's doing a very poor job of it.

Usually, there's charm to these sorts of moments. A little nuance. A bit of flirting, a dash of banter, and not-so-subtle sultry looks that draw the two love interests together like a magnet. It's The Kiss. It's supposed to be magical.

Instead, in the brightly-lit infirmary hallway, Rook closes his eyes, leans over, and awkwardly presses his lips against Ben's. It's not so much of a kiss as it is two mouths touching, but after one impossibly long, heart-pounding moment, Ben presses back against him. His hand hovers between them, finally settling on Rook's shoulder. It feels surprisingly natural to move with each other, deepening the kiss as much as they dare. It's a lot slower than the last one — careful where the other kiss was hasty, and hesitant where the other was desperate. It doesn't last as long as the other one either, and after a few seconds, they both pull back at the same time.

Seeing the look on Ben's face, Rook can't help but grow nervous. "Well?" He prompts quietly. "Was it...?" Acceptable? Good? Maybe even worth doing it again?
"It might be better if we weren't kissing in the middle of the infirmary wing," Ben says, but he's grinning. "We can wait to talk about this until we get updates about Gwendolyn and Kevin, right?"

Rook nods, sitting back to give Ben his space. In a lot of ways, sitting next to Ben feels the same way it always does. Their hands just barely brush each other, the only part of them touching as the two awkwardly sit up straight. It doesn't feel like they just kissed, and as Rook thinks on it, he comes to the realization that maybe, it doesn't have to. No matter how the relationship they're trying turns out, Ben will always be Rook's best friend.

Or, at least, he hopes so.

Chapter End Notes

I was thinking about doing a sequel for this fic since there are some loose ends here that I do have explanations for. I also haven't seen a lot of works in general that really touch on the mental health repercussions of being a hero, especially for characters that started as young as Ben.

I realized about halfway through working on this that I was writing Ben with symptoms a lot like those who suffer from PTSD. I thought that a fic exploring that, especially getting therapy and help and learning to accept and move on from it, would be really interesting. There's a huge chunk to Ben's personality that I almost never see touched on, especially regarding his self-worth, his arrogant facade, and the way he bottles everything up. I mean, seriously. You can't create the universe twice and have absolutely nothing to say about it.

A sequel would also deal with Ben and Rook being a "thing" now. As nice as fluffy fanfics are, realistically, I can hardly believe that these two would have a sweet, nearly-perfect romance. And in my opinion, the awkward hiccups and the fumbling of trying to figure things out for the first time is more fun to write, anyway. If that sounds like something you guys would be interested in, let me know! I might have to work on writing it when I'm not doing homework.

Thanks for reading, and for all the comments! I do read and appreciate all of them, even if my social anxiety is too bad for me to reply. You guys are amazing!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!