| Rating:  | **Teen And Up Audiences** |
| Archive Warning: | **Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Major Character Death** |
| Category: | **F/M, F/F, M/M** |
| Fandom: | **Power Rangers** |
| Character: | **Wesley Collins, Eric Myers** |
| Additional Tags: | **Families of Choice, Depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Implied/Referenced Character Death** |
| Series: | Part 16 of **Bright Skies AU** |
| Stats: | Published: 2012-02-12 Updated: 2012-02-17 Chapters: 99/104 Words: 219702 |

---

**Bright Skies**

by **Tsukino_Akume**

**Summary**

When Wes' life starts to fall apart, an unexpected surprise gives him a chance at a fresh start in Newtech City, with Space Patrol Delta. But even a new life has its ups and downs - and weird friends. Meanwhile, Eric tries to move on.

**Notes**

**Disclaimer:** I don't own the Power Rangers, but if Disney's hiring any new writers I volunteer.

**Warnings:** A mentally handicapped person living in a medical facility, angst, male and female slash, non-cemented couples (In otherwords, pairings that will be separated), children created by scientific means, character death

**Author's Notes:** Welcome to the beginning of my totally wacked-out S.P.D. universe.
From here we will go into 'tribe-style' families, famous parentage, long-lost children, tragedy, and more aunts and uncles than you can shake a stick at. Such is the world of PR in my head. This might make slightly more sense if you've read any of A Darker Shade of Red (which is currently in the process of a rewrite anyway) but it's not required. This story was written for the pr_au100 challenge, and most chapters are titled to their responding prompt. It starts in 2010, and S.P.D. will (eventually) start in 2028. I wanted to stick to cannon, but due to plot that would make Sky born in 2003, which is a little too soon for this story. It was originally posted with every fifth chapter being written from Eric's POV, but for this posting I've decided to put the chapters in chronological order. If this is too confusing or you prefer the other way, you can find the original posting style at my LiveJournal. On a side note, the technology to create children between men does already exist. I read articles about it several years ago. (I'd link where I found it, but it was seriously like, ten years ago. Possibly more.) Enjoy!
Beginnings

He stared dismally at the drink in his hand. He had no idea what number he was on, but that wasn't the point anyway. The point was to drink himself into unconsciousness. If he was lucky, he'd die of alcohol poisoning.

Too bad luck was never on his side.

He blinked back tears, downed his drink, and decided he really didn't care. If anyone tried to make fun of him for crying, he was fully prepared to get into a drunken brawl. Even that had to be better than just sitting here, trying to determine how much alcohol it took to drown out the healing capabilities of his morpher.

He almost smiled. Drown out. Heh.

He jumped as someone plopped down on the stool next to him. Turning, he found a woman who appeared to be somewhere near his own age. She was pretty, shoulder-length blond curls falling messily into grayish-green eyes. A dress that seemed to be slightly big and didn't fit her quite right, and a drink in her hand.

She regarded him thoughtfully for a moment. "Hi."

He blinked back. "Hi."

"I'm really drunk." she informed him. "Otherwise I never would have walked over here."

His brow furrowed. "Why did you?"

"Because you look as miserable as I feel." She paused, raising her glass, and waited for him to toast her. "Life sucks," she announced, followed by a long swig.

He hmmed in agreement as he drank with her.

They remained together for hours, chatting about nothing in particular as they continued to get obscenely drunk. She hadn't asked why he was there drowning his sorrows, and neither did he. It was nice, really. Finally he'd found someone who understood that sometimes, you really didn't want to talk about it.

He liked her. She was nice, with a dry sense of humor and a way of bluntly stating her opinion that made her impossible not to like. And she didn't remind him in the least of -

"You wanna get out of here?" he slurred at last.

She blinked at him, giggled, and downed one last glass. "Okay!"

****

The sex was bad. Absolutely, horrifically bad. He wasn't sure if it even counted, considering how quickly it was over and how obviously neither of them had enjoyed it.

He watched the ceiling, sighing to himself as his morpher continued to burn the alcohol from his system. Man, this was so stupid. How exactly had anything he had done tonight helped his situation except to make him feel even more miserable? Rolling over onto his side, he fought the urge to cry. He wanted to go home, but now he wasn't even sure where that was.
She was watching him, a wry, somewhat amused smile on her face. "You're so gay," she told him.

He sighed, too tired and miserable to protest. "Yeah," he said at last.

She moved to sit up, not bothering to cover herself as she looked down at him. Her expression softened. "Relationship problems?"

The tears welled, and he was sobbing before he even realized it. Within moments, he'd spilled his entire story to her. Everything: from how they'd met, to becoming a Ranger, to moving in together, to their decision to try the experimental procedure, to the end of it all. He confessed how he'd known, all along, what was going to happen to their children, and how he'd promised Alex never to tell, to protect the Timeline. How *he'd* figured it out afterwards, and the things he'd said ....

His chest ached from crying so hard. "He hates me," he choked out. "He finally, *really* hates me ...
" The words dissolved into an inarticulate moan of loss.

And the entire time her arms stayed around him, one stroking his hair while the other rubbed his back soothingly. She didn't try to offer words of comfort, or vague, useless assurances that everything would be fine. She just listened, and he loved her for it.

Finally he looked up at her as the sobs faded, leaving him with red eyes and a raw throat. "What's your name?" he wondered at last, sniffling.

She smiled softly, continuing to run her hand through his hair. "Vanessa," she answered. "Vanessa Tate. You?"

He sniffled again, leaning against her. "Wes Collins."

****

A month and a half of silence.

He'd tried everything he could think of: catching his eye, trying to corner him, 'accidentally' ending up in the same room alone together, camping out at his doorstep... Other than a simple, professional attitude, Eric refused to speak to him. It wasn't like he wouldn't look at him. But it was even worse than that: any time they happened to catch each other's eye, Eric stared back with a completely blank expression, as though they were barely acquaintances.

The night he'd given up and officially moved back in with his father, he'd cried for hours.

It was Phillips who'd comforted him, arranging for the moving company that had picked up his things. He'd been the one to explain things to Dad and made sure that no one said anything that would remind him of ... him. Dad had been supportive, if not confused by the abrupt end of their relationship after all the times he'd joked about giving him a son-in-law.

And life went on.


Pretending he didn't remember what it was like to be stared at with those smoldering eyes, be held almost painfully tight by warm arms. The sight of one of Eric's rare smiles. Nights spent wrapped around one another as they came down from the high of making love.

He'd never felt this alone. Even he'd faced down hundreds of Cyclobots alone all those years ago, he'd known that his friends were with him in spirit even when he wouldn't allow them to be there at his side. He could still look down at his wrist and know that Eric had given him a powerful gift,
trusting to him to give it back.

Now when he looked down at his wrist, he was reminded of the friends he'd never see again. Of the vague, brief calls they had exchanged, when Eric had spoken to him indifferently. And that hurt more than anything else, because instead of being cold and shutting him out, Eric had pushed him away to the point that he didn't even matter anymore.

It had been another day of silence, longing, and pain. He'd just finished his reports for the day and was about to head home when he noticed someone waiting in the lobby. "May I help you?" he asked politely.

She turned, and he froze. "Vanessa?"

She looked at him solemnly. "Wes, we need to talk."

****

He slumped back in his chair, running a hand through his hair in shock. "Wow ... " he muttered. "I ... wow .... "

"I'm not asking you for anything," she informed him calmly. "I don't need money, and I don't want child support. I just thought you should know." She stood, pushing her chair in. "I'd better get going."

"Wait!" He lunged out of his chair, catching her wrist. "You - you can't just go!" he protested. "I mean ... this is ... this is .... "

"Unexpected?" she suggested, looking mildly amused. "You're taking this better than I thought you would."

He frowned. "What did you think I would do?"

"Panic," she answered simply, gently freeing her wrist. She sighed, looking up at him. "Look, Wes. You deserve to know that you're going to be a father. But I have a job to get back to in Newtech City. I'm not putting my life on hold to rearrange you in it - that's not what either of us want. I'm not interested in starting a relationship with you. I've got my life, and you've got yours. I'll give you my contact information if you want it, so you can keep in touch with your child when it's born, but ... This isn't going to start anything between us." Her eyes softened at his stricken look, and she reached up to gently brush a hand along his cheek. "You're still in love with Eric. And I'm not in love with you." She withdrew, turning for the door again.

"... What's in Newtech City?"

"Space Patrol Delta," she answered, glancing back at him. "I work in the science division. We're developing new technology in defense of the city, and eventually - we hope - in defense of the world."

He blinked for a moment. This had to be a coincidence. "... You're making Power Rangers?"

"What we're making is classified," she retorted.

He smiled wryly, lifting his left wrist to show her his morpher. "There isn't much that's classified higher than this sort of clearance."

"You're not part of S.P.D."
"I could be."

She shot him a dark look. "You are not joining S.P.D. just because - "

"Vanessa, please," he begged. His eyes were pained. "I need ... I need something ... different. Something not here. I'll never get past this if I don't move on. And that can't happen here." He shrugged helplessly. "I'm not trying to say I want to come to Newtech City with you just for our child."

"But the thought's there," she reminded him pointedly.

He sighed. "Yeah, it is. But you're right; there's never going to be anything between you and me. And ... " He ran another hand through his hair, giving her that pleading expression again. "I just need something new. I guess ... I need a new me. And maybe I can find that there. With you - as a friend," he added hastily.

She sighed too, studying him for several minutes. "You're running away because you can't solve what's wrong in your life, and that's not going to get you anywhere in the end." She held up a hand when he tried to protest. "But ... you do need a friend. And if you want a fresh start, S.P.D. is a good place to go." She eyed him for a moment. "You're only staying with me until you find your own place, though. I am *not* taking in roommates."

Anything else she had to say was cut off by his tackling hug. "Thanks, Nes," he breathed in her ear, smiling even as tears picked his eyes.

"Don't ever call me Nes again, and we'll call it even," she retorted, patting him awkwardly on the back.

****

"So you're moving."

He winced. Somehow he'd hoped for a better reaction than this. He knew he wasn't going to get the 'You can't leave!' he was hoping for, but ... "It's a great opportunity to work on a project that could really help ... well, everyone. This is more than just protecting Silver Hills. This is like ... planetary scale. Galactic, even." He gestured widely for emphasis.

"So protecting Silver Hills isn't good enough for you anymore?"

He shot him an exasperated look. "You know that's not what I meant."

"Do I?" Eric retorted. "Apparently there's a lot about you that I don't know."

He flinched, blinking rapidly at the abrupt flare of pain that hit him in response. "Eric, you know more about me than anyone. You know I - "

"No," Eric cut him off, his expression as cold and blank as ever. "Obviously I don't know. Do what you want, Wes. You want a life outside of Silver Hills, go for it. Doesn't matter to me."

He bit the inside of his cheek hard, tasting blood. "Why?" he asked, his voice a lot softer than he wanted it to be. "It should. Because you still matter to me."

But Eric was already heading for the door.
Endings

Chapter Notes

This one was a bit harder for me to write, so I hope it comes across well. For anyone who's curious, Wes thinks Trip can't sing because he's never heard what (my version of) Xibrian sounds like, which is actually very lyrical. Much love for Starlit Purple, who helped me work out the backstory of Wes' mom, and a great deal more love for her and the late psyco_chick32, who both supported and encouraged it.

He didn't really need to take a lot with him for the move. S.P.D. didn't exactly have a lot of closet space, as he'd been warned. But it was still a good idea to pack everything up so that it would be easier for his dad to store.

His life in boxes. Wasn't that a fun thought. Well, at least he knew it was going to be a depressing project when he started.

Vanessa had told him S.P.D. would provide uniforms, so he didn't really need many clothes. Just enough for some casual clothing for when he finally couldn't stand to be stuck in 'work mode' any longer. He found the suit his father had bought him for his birthday last year, among other things, and figured it couldn't hurt.

The red shirts were beginning to get annoying. He knew he wore Red a lot - pretty much the requirement of being a Ranger - but this was ridiculous. And T-shirts? When did he get all these Red T-shirts? He wasn't even really a T-shirt kind of guy: too restrictive.

He paused, wincing in memory. He'd started picking up T-shirts because his dad had warned him he'd need more clothing that he didn't mind ruining. And before that, it was because he only had one gi and he was sick of washing so many tank tops after workouts just so he could wear one under his Guardian uniform the next day.

When did he get this many movies? He loved Westerns, but this was getting ridiculous. *Three Faces West, New Frontier, Wyoming Outlaw, Stagecoach, Santa Fe Stampede* ...

*The Legend of the Lone Ranger.*

Instantly a warm smile spread across his face. "High-yo Silver, away." he whispered, tracing a thumb along the side of the case. God, how many times had he heard Trip shout that while he gave him a piggyback ride, pretending to 'gallop' around the Clock Tower? Katie always laughed at them, Lucas shook his head and pretended they weren't there, and Jen threatened to beat them senseless if they didn't knock it off before one of them got hurt. But it was worth it to see them all fighting smiles. And the way Trip's face always lit up while he waved his cowboy hat around ... 

He swallowed hard, and set the movie aside with the rest of them.

The amount of CDs he'd collected weren't anywhere near as bad as his movies since most of his music was downloaded now, but it was still a hefty amount. He knew he wouldn't be taking any of those, so he quickly sorted and began to box them up.
He groaned when he came across *The Sound of Music*. Katie had been *obsessed* with that musical for weeks. Trip hadn't been any better; he'd thought the happy music was just what they all needed. Eventually he, Lucas, and Jen collaborated a plan to steal the CD and hide it. Their timing couldn't have been better; after the nightmares with the Vennomark serum, and then Dragontron, and -

Anyway, she hadn't remembered to look for it, and by then they were wrapped up in that mess with the black knight.

He looked at it for a long time, remembering Katie's smile, her voice as she sang along merrily. Her laughter when Trip tried to join in, only to have Lucas cover his mouth and tell him that was cruel and unusual punishment. He still wasn't sure why Trip was so offended at the idea that he couldn't sing. There were plenty of people who couldn't; it wasn't a big deal.

He reached for another box and stopped abruptly. The side had been labeled *Pictures*, and the careful, childish scrawl wasn't his handwriting. It was his mother's.

It took several minutes before he was able to open it. A fancy leather photo album sat on top - probably another one of Dad's gifts for her. He wasn't surprised to find that it had only been partially filled, with pictures placed randomly throughout the book. He pulled it out and set it in his lap, slowly turning through it.

There were more pictures of them than he'd realized there would be. When he was five, the first time they met face to face. Her eyes were bright and happy as she reached for him, and the matching looks of awe on both their faces made his heart ache. At nine, feeding each other a slice of his birthday cake - they'd had to sneak that into the Center for her. Two, wearing nothing but a diaper and dragging around a blanket; his dad must have sent her that one. Ten, proudly holding up his first karate trophy. Twelve, when she'd fallen and hurt herself and they'd come to visit her. He was holding her hand and talking to her about the wildflowers he'd picked just for her while she watched him with an adoring expression. Six, playing with the barbie dolls they'd both gotten in their happy meals. He'd told his dad he wanted a toy just like Mom's, so they could play together.

He blinked rapidly.

In the back, on the very last page, a picture he'd never expected to be taken. Somehow she'd managed to convince one of the nurses to take a picture of her with him when he was born; her parents certainly never would have done it. He was still in NICU - Angel Unit, that's what Dad always called it - but somehow she'd talked them into letting her hold him. Tiny, red-faced and wrapped in a blue blanket, his beautiful, round-eyed mother beaming at him through her glasses. She looked tiny and paler than usual in the white hospital gown, but her smile lit up the room.

She was twenty years old. He wondered if she'd realized at that point that her parents were going to take him away from her. That it would take the best lawyer his dad had been able to find to allow her to see him again - five years later.

She probably had. The picture was worn, faded and slightly ripped along the edges. There was a thin spot in the photo paper itself over his face that looked like it had been rubbed repeatedly.

He forced himself to put the album aside at last and put the lid back on the box. He didn't think he could look at it anymore right now. He had enough memories of the past still left to sort through.

Another smaller box of pictures, this time in his own handwriting. He hesitated before he opened it, but forced himself to anyway. If he was going to get all this organized, it wouldn't help him to avoid anything.
This time he found the pictures of his friends goofing off with the Wild Force Rangers, snagged because he'd always regretted the loss of the polaroids they'd taken before the Clock Tower had been destroyed. Several shots of the guys from the Red Ranger mission when they'd all gone out for pizza just to annoy T.J. Minus Tommy of course, who'd had to head back to some major project he was working on, and Aurico, who'd gone straight home to Aquitar. He also found several scraps of paper with phone numbers on them from each of the guys, all wrapped up in a rubber band. He still wasn't sure where the lipstick mark on Cole's had come from, and he didn't think he wanted to, considering Cole had looked so confused himself. He took a moment to double check that he'd already put all the numbers into his cell phone before tossing the scraps back into the box out of habit rather than throwing them away.

He sighed to himself and went to remove them again, even though part of him was tempted to hang on to them just for the story behind Cole's. His eyes fell on another picture as he picked up the scraps, and he paused to stare at it. This time it was him and Eric, at the pizza joint with the rest of the guys. He'd somehow gotten himself suckered into an arcade battle with Carter over a shooting game - dumbest mistake of his life - and Eric kept lecturing him that he better not shame the reputation of the Silver Guardians. He'd been losing, Eric had grabbed his hand to correct his grip, and he'd turned to snap at him that if he wanted to play he'd have to wait his turn. Leo of course, had decided that was the perfect time to inform them he'd snagged a disposable camera on his 'trip to the bathroom' - *after* he'd taken the picture.

The look between the two of them was intense, despite the fact that he was glaring at Eric. He'd turned while Eric still had a hand on his arm, leaving them nearly chest to chest. It should have looked completely innocent, but somehow it just ... didn't.

And if he remembered correctly, it was T.J.'s wolf whistle that had finally separated them. Then he'd discovered Carter had never bothered to stop shooting, so there was no way he could even lose gracefully now. He and Eric had nearly brawled over the fact that he lost so spectacularly - which *was* Eric's fault. Then Cole had emerged from the bathroom with his face and neck covered in lipstick kisses, looking dazed and slightly frightened, while Andros directed him by the shoulder and looked around protectively. Leo had stood there taking pictures of them all and grinning, and Jason laughed so hard he nearly stopped breathing.

He'd finally managed to ask Eric out two months later, after many more intense stares and accidental closeness.

He dopped scraps *and* the picture back into the box and moved on.

His next find wasn't much better: the racing glove Lucas had pulled on, moments before completely humiliating him by showing off his driving skills. *That* was a weird day. He still couldn't walk past that poor driving instructor on the street anymore without fighting an urge to laugh hysterically.

He pulled on the glove almost absently, amused by the fact that it was slightly big on him. Lucas had left it behind, claiming *he* could always buy a new one, but Wes could use all the help he could get. It brought back fond memories of one of the few times Lucas had showed another side of himself, somewhere between Jen's faithful lackey and narcissism. When Lucas had seemed honestly happy, just for a few hours. The side of him Trip had always insisted was there; Wes just hadn't been able to see it yet.

Carefully placing it to the side, he wondered if Lucas had ever gotten finally got up the nerve to ask Trip on a date.
A few boxes later he found his prized possession: Jen's Time Force badge. His proof that whole incredible year of his life had really happened. That there really was such a thing as Time Force, that he really had friends from the future, that he knew a real, live alien. His reminder of everything they'd fought for: Jen's revenge for Alex, Lucas' loyalty to his team, Katie's fear for the people she loved, Trip's desire to do the right thing, his own need to break free of the life his father was trying to drive him towards. Even Eric's craving for Power and acceptance.

His Chrono Morpher couldn't give him that.

He tucked the badge inside Lucas' glove, and reached for a box labeled 'receipts' with a groan.

Of course not even receipts were a safe subject: he found several for new video game controllers, for all the times Eric had broken, worn out, or lost one. Then there was The Red Mighty Morphin Power Ranger action figure he'd had since he was little, now tied to the Q-Rex action figure he'd originally picked up to tease Eric about the Quantum Ranger's new popularity. Seeing them together gave him an uncomfortable feeling that he tried to brush off by thinking of how smug Jason would be if he knew that Wes had his action figure.

The next box revealed a framed hospital bill.

He stared at it, frowning as he tried to remember why in the world he had a *framed* copy of his dad's -

Oh.

He came out to his father and admitted about his relationship with Eric after just over a year together. His dad threw a fit, refusing to believe it, blaming Eric, accusing him - accusing them *both* - of doing this just to get back at him. The fights drove him to move in with Eric a lot sooner than planned, but they managed to make it work.

Everything came to a head at work one day, when his dad finally said something that pushed him over the line. He couldn't even remember what it was now, just that he'd literally seen red. He turned, shouted at him that he was a bigoted, self-centered jerk who couldn't put anyone else's happiness before his own, and punched his father as hard as he could.

He broke his nose. Nearly shattered it; they'd been extremely lucky that Wes hadn't tapped into any Ranger strength. As it was, his dad's face was wrapped in bandages for weeks.

Eric had been the one to calmly pick up his father, grab *him* firmly by the arm, and inform the receptionist that they were all leaving for the day. He'd forced them both into a car and had his father admitted to the emergency room, because the amount of blood was starting to become vaguely concerning. Eric was also the one who had shoved him into his father's private room (of course) and told them both to shut it, and if they didn't stop acting like five-year-olds and work this out, he'd stick them each in a corner until they were ready to grow up. Then he'd stood guard at the door, turning to stare at them both anytime their voices grew loud enough to be heard in the hallway.

In the end, Eric was right. After a lot of pointless arguing, he and his dad had finally talked. Dad confessed that it wasn't Eric he was so opposed to. He was worried for Wes, because he didn't want him to go through the same problems of being in a 'socially unacceptable relationship' that he'd had with his mother. He didn't want him to suffer like they did, being separated because everyone told him it was wrong. To be called horrible names because people didn't understand what it was like to truly love someone and see them for the person they were inside. They'd come to an understanding that day, and while Dad wasn't happy about Wes' choice, he respected it, and welcomed Eric with
open arms and his full support.

It was also right after that that he finally told Eric about his mom.

Eric had been shocked, more than slightly angry that Wes hadn't told him about her earlier. But he'd still done his best to understand, to the point that he'd become somewhat defensive of her himself after hearing the whole story. It had taken some prying to understand why, but Wes was grateful for it. And the following week, he took Eric to the Health Center to meet her in person, introducing him as his boyfriend.

His mom had smiled warmly at them both, and told Eric he was beautiful.

He tried to push the image of Eric's very red face and shy smile at her out of his mind as he stashed the bill in another box. Eric had taken a copy of it to frame, insisting Wes needed a momento of the second time he'd stood up for himself against his father on someone else's behalf. Especially now, when his first - the Clock Tower - was still under reconstruction.

The last box read simply Wes, in the handwriting Eric only used when he was angry or in a hurry - usually both. He didn't know how long he stared at it, trying to summon up the courage to open the stupid thing. It was just a box. Just a box, packed with stuff from his ex's house, shoved together the day Eric had showed up at work and pushed the whole thing at him. The day after Eric had yelled at him to get out and never come back.

He swallowed hard as he finally forced himself to reach for the lid.

The first thing inside it was that stupid Red Beret.

Apparently the Silver Guardians were only giving one commander the Red Beret, to prevent confusing anyone in the field. With him and Eric as co-commanders, they had to decide which one of them would wear it. Which of course, neither of them wanted to - it was a Red Beret for crying out loud. Eric said it pinched his head too tight and gave him headaches, while Wes swore Eric was the commander all the Guardians already knew. They'd settled it through rock-paper-scissors. Wes lost, and Eric laughed at him for the entire first week he showed up to work wearing it. He'd retaliated by dying all of Eric's uniforms pink.

He tossed the beret aside and reached in. Most of it was junk: mail, some magazines, personal hygiene stuff. But then he hit something soft.

Eric's shirt.

Just a random black shirt, some T-shirt Eric had probably grabbed because it was the first thing he saw. It had been wrapped around something to protect it, and he unfolded it to find a obnoxiously bright mug declaring 'Happy Birthday!' in childish print. The mug he'd given Eric for his twenty-eight birthday.

Ten days later Alexander was born, Benjamin following behind in the early hours of the next day.

He slowly set the mug aside, bringing the shirt up to his face. Inhaling deeply, he searched for a hint of Eric's scent and sighed in disappointment when he didn't find it. He took a moment to bury his face in it, struggling to bring himself back under control. Maybe he shouldn't have done all of this in one day.

It took effort to force himself to put shirt down, reaching in for the last item without looking.

He pulled out a blue baby blanket.
He froze, staring at it in horror. Almost instantly everything he'd been trying to push away came flooding back: his mother, his friends, Eric, Alex and Ben. Just looking at it he could already picture one of his tiny sons wrapped up in it, Eric grinning openly while reaching down to brush the baby's cheek with his finger ever-so gently. A flash of his mom with that brilliant smile and bright eyes behind the shine of her glasses, looking at him with such obvious pride.

The emotions swelled up over him, leaving him fighting tears. This was everything he had lost, everything he had given up, everything he was leaving behind. Everything he would never have again.

He was leaving to find a new life. A new place in the world, a place where he could finally find himself again. A place where he could finally know just who he was without Eric. And he couldn't bring all of these memories with him.

He didn't think he wanted to anyway.

****

When he left three days later, he packed two of the red T-shirts in with some slacks and tank tops, his suit and tie, and a couple pairs of shoes into a duffle bag. Carefully hidden inside the shirts were Jen's badge and his mother's picture in a brown frame that matched her eyes. Everything else remained behind.
This is totally, absolutely and completely, partially Starlit Purple's fault. This is so not where I was originally going with this story. It was going to be a bunch of drabbles about Eric and Wes during the time they were separated. Then Starlit Purple gave me ideas, the evil woman. Now this is definitely a few steps away from the original S.P.D. (To be fair, a good portion of this can also be blamed on starandrea’s fantastic Team Building with Jack Landers series and Of Love and Bunnies.)

"I am pleased that you have decided to join us at S.P.D. after all, Mr. Collins," Anubis Cruger told him as they walked.

His commanding officer was a talking blue dog; he was never going to get over that.

"Please," he interrupted with a faint smile. "Call me Wes. Mr. Collins is my father."

"Wes," Cruger corrected himself with a nod. "As you can see, while S.P.D.'s official presence on Earth has only been in operation for a few years now, we are working to create a permanent force here for the protection of this planet against outside forces."

"I'll be glad to help in any way I can," Wes assured him.

"I'm glad to hear it."

Wes found himself gestured through yet another silver door. Silently he wondered if he would *ever* figure his way around this place.

"S.P.D. currently consists of eight departments. These will be your co-workers," Cruger began. "This is our Deputy Commander -."

"Tommy!" Wes greeted, happier than he probably should have been to find himself confronted with a familiar face. "So what happened to settling down in Reefside and living the quiet life?" he teased.

More than one person in the room burst out laughing, and Tommy gave him an exasperated but amused look. "That was the plan. But then I got drafted into this and well ... the rest is history."

"So what do you do here?" Wes asked curiously.

That got him a self-deprecating grin. "Officially? I'm listed as Deputy Commander Specialist."

"S.P.D. rankings make absolutely no sense," a tall young man with short blond hair warned him. He wore a uniform in white leather with silver along his shoulders and down over the right side over his chest. "The less you try to think about it, the better off you'll be."

"We just call him Supreme R.C.," a curly brunette man leaning on a console chimed in. He wore a short-sleeved black tunic and slacks, with yellow stripes along his sides and shoulders.
Tommy sighed as Wes raised his eyebrows at him. "Supreme Ranger Commander," he informed him. "Dustin has a bad habit of nicknaming everything. It's another one of those things you'll get used to. Basically, S.P.D. lists everyone with an official S.P.D. rank, but Power Rangers also get our own ranking system through our teams. That's where the Specialist comes from - as the Green Ranger I was considered Specialist Rank."

"And Supreme Commander?" Wes asked, amused.

"Part of that is my Commander status from the rest of my Ranger teams. Specialist is the only Ranking that's never dropped; the others will always end up having you listed by the highest one - Commander in my case. I'm also the Deputy Commander for S.P.D. Earth, because I'm Cruger's second."

"All Rangers answer to the person in charge of their department, then Commander Oliver, then myself." Cruger explained. He gestured to a young dark skinned man dressed in a navy jumpsuit with black bands running along the arms and shoulders. "This is Captain William Aton, head of Security."

"Call me Will," he interjected with an easy smile that bordered on a smirk. "Black Overdrive Ranger," he added as Wes went to shake his hand.

"And this is Captain Dana Grayson of the Medical Department," Cruger went on, moving to a familiar blond woman in a white lab coat with a pink undershirt.

She offered him a warm smile. "It's good to see you again, Wes."

"Same here," he agreed with a grin as he shook her hand.

"Try not to come see me too often?"

His grin turned sheepish. "No promises."

That got a laugh out of the blond man who'd told him not to think about the ranking system. "I'm Zhane of KO-35. Silver Astro." He grinned. "I've got the fancy 'Ambassador' title."

"Captain Zhane is in charge of our Galactic Outreach Program," Cruger interrupted with a scowl. "The program was designed to seek out potential allied planets and help refugees of the Troobian Empire."

Wes had already been given the reports on the Troobian Empire to go over when he arrived; Zhane's Ambassador Program was far more important than he played it off. "Nice to meet you."

"You say that now," warned the Asian man in the same black outfit as the brunette. A green ball hung on a cord around his neck, with matching stripes on his uniform.

"This is Lieutenant Specialist Cameron Watanabe, the former Green Samurai Ranger," Cruger informed him. "He's been put in charge of our Morpher Development Project."

"And whatever else he can get his hands on," the brunette put in, rolling his eyes. "He bounces back and forth between Billy's people and our stuff. I'm Dustin," he added. He paused. "Oh, and uh, Yellow Wind Ranger. Or Ninja Storm. Whatever Karone's calling us now."

Cruger sighed. "Captain Brooks runs the Department for Vehicle Design and Maintenance."

"They added that Maintenance part on later," Dustin noted, "After I started calling us the DVDs."
Wes chuckled. "It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise, Dude," Dustin returned cheerfully, shaking his hand with more enthusiasm than was strictly necessary.

Cruger gestured to another blond woman, this time in a pink version of the black outfit. "Captain Karone is the head of our Information Department."

She shook his hand with a smile that seemed almost shy. "Former Pink Galaxy Ranger." She hesitated. "And - "

"The former Pink Galaxy Ranger," Zhane cut in, staring at her.

The look she gave him in return was not quite a glare. "I used to be Astronema," she declared firmly, tossing her hair.

Wes gave her his best reassuring smile, thinking of Nadira and Ransik with a fondness he might not have expected a few years earlier. "Glad to have you on our side."

"Specialist Captain William Cranston is the head of Technology," Cruger told him.

The man before him smiled with eyes that seemed far too old for his face. "Please, call me Billy," he corrected. "And if everyone insists on introducing themselves as thus, I was the first Blue Ranger of Earth."

"It's an honor," Wes said sincerely.

"And I've been told you already know the head of our Training Department, Captain Andros of KO-35. You'll be serving directly under him."

He smiled at the younger man dressed in light gray, the shoulders and sides of his arms and legs trimmed in red. "Good to see you again."

Andros smiled and shook his hand as well. "Same here. I look forward to working with you."

"Look what the old dog finally dragged in ... " a familiar voice called smugly.

"Sergeant Earhart from the Department for Vehicle Design and Maintenance has volunteered to finish your introduction to S.P.D." Cruger finished an irritated sigh.

He turned toward the doorway and smiled warmly at yet another familiar blond, this one wearing the same black outfit as Dustin. "Taylor." While she wasn’t Jen or the rest of the Time Forces Rangers, Taylor had become a good friend of Eric’s after they’d fought together. And Eric didn’t exactly have many friends.

Her grip nearly cracked the bones in his hand when she stepped forward to squeeze it. Oh yeah, she was mad at him. "Why didn't you warn me you were coming to S.P.D.?" she demanded, pulling back to look at him. "I could have brought you in with a lot less paperwork."

"Sure, *now* you tell me," he sighed, rolling his eyes with a smile as he tried not to wince at the pain in his hand. *Ow*.

She looked over his shoulder expectantly and paused, frowning. "Where's - "

"It's just me," he cut her off.
She stared at him for a long moment, her eyes seeming to search through him before narrowing abruptly. At last she stepped back to give him a slight smile. "It’s good to have you here."

"Thanks."

He hoped someday he'd truly mean it.

"Hope you don't mind being dragged all over the base for the rest of the night," Taylor added, smirking.

He laughed softly, even as he dreaded the questions he knew she was going to ask. "Not at all."

****

"S.P.D. is technically a police force, but it runs as more of a military base because it follows Galactic Standards instead of Earth's," Taylor explained to him as they walked. "Everyone enrolls as a cadet."

"Everyone?" he interjected with a frown. That was news to him.

"Previous Ranger experience doesn't count. Generally, everyone enrolls as a cadet. Once they made it through basic training, they can choose their track: technology, security, law enforcement, or Power Ranger."

He started. He'd heard about S.P.D. before - had even been offered a position, although he and Eric both turned it down at the time - but last he'd heard the program was really just establishing part of an intergalactic military force on Earth. There hadn't been anything said about it becoming more than that. Nes had hinted they were developing of Ranger technology, but he hadn't realized they were actually that far along in the process. "You're training Power Rangers here?"

"We will be. No one's made it that far in their training yet. In fact that's part of what the Training Department is, but I'll get to that. Each Department is assigned a captain, who gets to select a lieutenant. The only people above the captains are Commander Oliver and Commander Cruger. Below Lieutenant is either a basic officer or sergeant. Officers are just above cadets. Then there's Sergeants, into the Lieutenants. You're considered a Sergeant Captain. S.P.D. calls you sergeant just for being a Ranger at all, but under Ranger listings you're considered a Captain because you're the second on your team. It doesn't really matter which rank comes first here. They usually just go with what sounds better."

"I starting to feel Zhane had the right idea when he said not to think about it," Wes muttered, wondering when he'd been named second-in-command for the Time Force Rangers.

Taylor rolled her eyes. "The only things you have to worry about who's in charge of is your department. You report to Andros, or Jason if he's not around. If you need to go over their heads," she eyed him suspiciously, "It's Tommy, then Cruger. You won't really need to know anyone outside of the Earth base for awhile."

"That's a relief." He frowned. "I think."

"New personnel for uniforms," Taylor told the woman in the window they'd arrived at. "Red Ranger Training Greys." She nudged Wes with her elbow. "Where's your ID card?"

"Uh ... " He fumbled in his pocket for a moment, extracting a small, blank white card about the size of a credit card. "Is this it?"
"No, that’s your security rank card. Where’s the grey one?"

"Everything in this place looks the same," he complained, digging out the grey card.

"It won’t for long," she assured him, taking the card from him and handing it to the woman.

Several minutes later he found a small pile of light grey and red clothing being stacked on his arms, and his card placed on top.

"And by the way, never give either of your cards to anyone," Taylor warned.

He rolled his eyes. "So what about my department, if that’s the only one I’m supposed to be worried about?"

"The Training Department is divided into seven squads - eight now that you’re here. They’re lettered A though H. Squads A through D are Ranger track, trying to get into the Morpher program to become Power Rangers. The higher the level, the closer to being given an actual morpher a cadet is. Squads E through H are Law Enforcement cadets. Squads G and H are trained to remain with Earth S.P.D., while Squads E and F are trained for galactic duty."

"So my Squad is being trained for law enforcement on Earth?"

"Yes. All Squads are co-ed, but they room in pairs according to gender. There’s a men’s barracks hall, and a woman’s barracks hall. Your cadets will always be the ones at the end."

"Gee, thanks."

"I’ll introduce you to the rest of your department when we go in for dinner. For now ... " She took his ID Card again and flashed it at a doorpad. "This is your room," she continued as she put the card back on the pile.

The room left much to be desired. It was small, plain, and like everything else in S.P.D., slate grey. The strangest looking bed he had ever seen rested against the right wall, while the left held a pair of built-in bookcases. Blinds on the windows, a pillow and blanket folded neatly on the end of the bed.

He found himself blinking rapidly when the door slid closed behind them. It wasn't ... bad, exactly. But it didn't look like home. And that just brought back the fact that it wasn't all over again.

"Wes?"

He shook his head slowly, setting down his bundle next to the blankets. "Yeah?"

"Why isn't Eric here with you? I thought you two were always together."

He chuckled softly because he’d known that Taylor would never leave it alone, and it came out bitter. "There is no ‘me and Eric’. Not anymore." He tilted his head back as he sat on the bed, laughing softly at the ceiling as tears pricked his eyes. "I did what I had to to protect the timeline, even though it meant giving up our kids. And Eric hates me now, because I didn’t tell him what was going to happen."

"You’re not making any sense."

He sighed quietly. But Taylor was Eric’s friend, and his, and she deserved to know. "There’s a procedure in Europe, that combines DNA between men to create a child." He spoke slowly,
reluctant to remember what he had done. "Eric and I ... Well, he’s always wanted a family, and after everything that’s happened over the past few years, I wanted a family with him. We went through the entire process. Two beautiful little boys ... " He blinked rapidly again, tears burning his eyes as he remembered tiny hands clenched around his finger, dark eyes staring up at him. "The lab labeled them ‘A’ and ‘B’ to tell them apart, so we named them Alexander and Benjamin."

"Alexander? What, like that jerk that made you a Ranger?"

"Hey, there's a lot more to Alex than anyone ever knew."~

He swallowed hard. "A week after they were born, someone stole them from the lab in the middle of the night."

He could see Taylor's shocked expression out of the corner of his eye. "Eric was heartbroken - we both were. And I had to tell him the truth. I couldn't ... I couldn't lie to him anymore."

He looked down, trying to swallow enough for his voice to stop cracking. This was turning out to be even harder than he'd expected it to be.

"The last time the Time Force Rangers came here from the future, when we met you guys? There was more to it than that. Right after you went home, Alex - he was Time Force Red before I was - showed up. He was totally freaked out about - things that had happened." He knew what Alex had been freaked out about, but he wasn't going to share that with Taylor. That was Alex's story, not his. "He was here for about a week before they went home, and he and I sort of ... made peace with each other."

"Made peace?"

He nodded reluctantly. "We'd had issues in the past, over a lot of things. It's ... kind of a long story. It doesn't matter anymore anyway."

Not with what he knew now.

"Anyway, Alex and I shook hands. Something happened - I can't really explain it. But I ... *saw* Alex. His thoughts and memories. And I learned ... " He shook his head, drawing his hand over his face in pitiful an effort to calm himself. He wasn't explaining this very well; he knew she must be confused.

"Alex was raised in the future as the test subject for the Red Chrono Morpher. He was created using DNA taken from Eric and I. He ... he knew, that he was 'biologically' our son, as he put it, and he made me promise that when Time Force came back to take our DNA, I had to let them do it. Because in order for the Time Force Rangers to save 2001 and defeat Ransik, Alex has to be born to test the Red Chrono Morpher. Because without Alex and that morpher, I would never have been a Ranger. And I had to be, because it was meant to happen. So ... I promised him, that I would never tell anyone the truth. And when they came, I'd let them take what they needed."

He shook his head, and darn, now he was crying. "I never ... I never thought that it was more than that. I thought they'd just take samples or something. Not that they'd - " He choked on a sob.

'We each make our own destiny.' What a crock. He'd been so stupid back then, so full of himself.

"... I told Eric the truth," he managed finally. "That our Alexander is really Alex Collins. And that I knew we'd lose them, and we'll never see them again. And that I agreed to let it happen, because Alex told me it had to." He sniffled, and looked up to see Taylor staring at him. "Eric didn't see me lying to him and letting our boys be taken away as 'something that had to happen', to protect the
timeline. He told me to get out, and never come back. He hasn't spoken to me since.

He wasn't sure exactly when or how it happened, but at some point Taylor had ended up sitting beside him, her arms placed awkwardly around him. "I'm not good at this sort of thing," she murmured in his ear, "But I'm here, Wes. Whatever else may have happened, I'm still your friend, and I'm still here."

It was such an Eric thing to say, claiming that she wasn't good at giving comfort. They'd always had been too much alike.

Which is why, just like Eric would have done before everything had fallen apart, Taylor continued to hold him as he cried.
"Welcome to the cafeteria," Taylor told him, gesturing outward.

He surveyed the room, raising an eyebrow at more grey walls and awkward-looking furniture. "Charming."

"Dude! Wes, Taylor, over here!"

He smiled and waved at Dustin, then blinked as Taylor twitched. "Wait a minute. Commander Cruger said Dustin was the head of the Department of ... Vehicle Department. Didn't you say that's what you do?"

She nodded, letting out a long sigh. "Department of Vehicle Design and Maintenance. He's my supervisor."

He looked at her in surprise. "But isn't he younger than you?"

"He joined S.P.D. first," she admitted, "So he gets seniority. And ... " She glanced around quickly, then hissed in his ear "I will deny this to my dying day if you tell anyone, but he's got a good imagination and he likes to experiment, which is what we need. And when he actually focuses on something, he's pretty smart." She stepped back, scowling. "Even if he is an idiot." she finished louder.

"I heard that," Dustin called. "I love you too, Taylor!"

The dark-haired boy beside him raised his eyebrows. "Excuse me?"

Dustin flashed him a bright smile, leaning over to kiss his cheek in appeasement. "After you, Dude."

The other boy shook his head, looking amused as he wrapped an arm around Dustin's waist and stole food off his plate.

"Half of the Rangers that work for S.P.D. are gay," Taylor informed him with a sigh as she lead him to the buffet line.

"Not true!" protested a voice behind him. "Couples are six to nine, in their favor. See Dax, that's why you need a boyfriend."

"Thanks Rocky, but I uh, like girls," confessed another voice.

Amused, Wes turned to regard the pair in line behind him. Both wore the same 'Training Department Greys' as he did, but the short one had blue trim while the taller had the same red as his own. The taller also seemed older, with dark hair kept short and spiked and brown eyes that
"Liking girls has nothing to do with it," protested the man in red. "You can like girls just fine, as long as you get a boyfriend and help balance out our numbers."

"I don't even want to know how that works out in your head," Taylor informed him.

He grinned, then eyed Wes speculatively. "Are you single?"

Wes coughed, giving him a slight smile as his heart ached. He discreetly kicked Taylor's ankle to tell her to stop glaring on his behalf. "Recently left a relationship. Not looking just yet."

"Sorry, man," he offered, looking sincere. He held out a hand. "Sergeant Captain Rocky DeSantos, former second Red Ranger and Blue Zeo Ranger." He nudged the boy behind him with an elbow. "This is Sergeant Corporal Dax Lo."

"Former Blue Overdrive," Dax put in, shaking his hand with a bright grin of his own.

"Wes Collins," he returned, frowning slightly. "Um ... I'm Time Force Red, but I don't remember - "

"Sergeant Captain," Taylor filled in, rolling her eyes. "And I told you it really doesn't matter. The Training Department just like to brag."

"You'd make a great Drill Sergeant, you know," Rocky told her. "You're just too much of a grease monkey to leave DVDs."

"I never said I couldn't be a Drill Sergeant," she retorted. "I just prefer to spend my time with people of - " She paused. "Relative intelligence."

"Ooh, burn," Dax snickered.

Wes raised his eyebrows as the other two stared at him.

Dax blinked, then sighed. "I missed another one, didn't I?"

Rocky patted his shoulder comfortingly. "It's okay, buddy. You'll get them one of these days."

Wes shook his head, chuckling as he followed them to a table.

"We don't have any specific seating," Taylor commented as she sat near Dustin, "But we still tend to sit by department just because we have more to talk about."

"Hey, hey, no work speak at the table!" Rocky protested.

She shot him an annoyed look. "How else is Wes going to learn anything?"

"Rocky just doesn't want to talk about how far D Squad has fallen for disciplinary marks," commented another man with a slight smirk.

Rocky gave him puppy dog eyes. "Adam, you wound me. Why would that be the first thing you think of when we talk about not using work speak?"

"Maybe the fact that we all know you're behind half of the pranks they were marked for?" a young woman with long blond hair asked, looking amused.
"Deny it all you want, Rocky." chimed in an Asian girl with a mischievous smile. "We all know every prank has taken place in an area your squad was assigned to."

"Not to mention you pulled the doorknob slime prank back in high school." added a familiar voice. Jason Lee Scott nodded to Wes with a faint smile. "Hey, Wes. Welcome to the Drill Sergeants."

"Thanks." He eyed the rest of the group at his table warily. "I think."

"Where's the trust?" Rocky complained.

"We trust you," the man who'd brought up the discipline marks in the first place told him, "But we also know you."

"Why did you marry him again, Adam?" Jason drawled, stirring a portion of his tray with a fork.

"He's cute?" the man offered in return. Rocky scowled. "Okay, marriage jokes are not funny."

"Sorry, Rocko," he chuckled, squeezing his hand.

"Wes," Andros greeted as he joined them, a cheerful brunette at his side. "How are you settling in?"

"I have no idea what's going on," he told him honestly. There was a round of laughter.

"How about we start with introductions, and work our way from there?" Andros offered with a smile.

Jason was called Specialist Sergeant Commander and worked with the B Squad cadets. Apparently he was also second in charge of the Training Department. The man who'd squeezed Rocky's hand was Adam Park, former second Black Ranger, Green Zeo, and Green Turbo Ranger, Sergeant Captain of C Squad. E Squad belonged to the pretty Asian girl, Sergeant Corporal Cassie Chan, who introduced herself as the former Pink Turbo and Astro Rangers. The blond beside her was Lieutenant Sergeant Tori Hanson, Blue Wind Ranger, who ran F Squad.

To round things out, he learned that Dax had G Squad, while Rocky was in charge of the trouble-making D Squad. A Squad went to Andros, who he was informed was the only squad Sergeant able to choose his own cadets, and extremely picky about who he selected.

Each of the them wore the same outfit he did, but trimmed in their own Ranger Color. In the case of Jason, Rocky, and Adam, who'd apparently been more than one Color, the left and right sides of their uniforms were decorated separately to represent each one. He wasn't quite sure why everyone was required to wear their Ranger Color here, but at least it made it a little easier to remember who was who.

The brunette that had followed Andros was apparently his girlfriend Ashley Hammond, the former Yellow Turbo and Astro Rangers. Ashley wore the same white pants and a turtleneck that he'd seen Dana in earlier, but with a long yellow vest buttoned over the top, which she'd been more than happy to explain was the Medical Department's uniform. She also told him that he needed an 'S.P.D. Regulation' Physical Exam, but didn't really explain why he couldn't just use the results he still had from working with the Silver Guardians when he asked.
"So why are there so many Power Rangers at S.P.D.?" Wes asked finally.

"Bad luck?" Rocky offered.

Cassie threw a napkin at him with a laugh. "The Astro Rangers were recruited by the original S.P.D. to begin a base here on Earth," she explained. "We wanted people that we knew could take charge of a brand new organization that would someday be a part of Earth's defense against outside forces -"

"You sound like that handbook they tried to make us read," Tori interrupted, making a face.

Cassie rolled her eyes at her. "But it's true. We couldn't just start recruiting people into S.P.D. who barely knew about anything outside their *galaxy*, let alone their own planet. Not for leadership positions, at least. We needed someone who already had a basic understanding of what's out there."

Ashley wrinkled her nose. "And for political reasons, there had to be people from Earth so it wouldn't seem like we were training Earthlings for some sort of alien army for something."

Andros gave her an amused look. "The first person we recruited was Tommy Oliver. He's known for his years of experience as a Ranger as well as his knowledge of other potential S.P.D. candidates."

Wes raised an eyebrow. That explained some things. "So ... you just used Tommy's address book and started randomly calling people to say 'Hey, we're making a new base for some intergalactic police force on Earth. Wanna join up?'"

"Pretty much," Cassie admitted, grinning sheepishly as Ashley giggled.

"They showed up at the academy and asked if we still wanted to help protect Earth," Tori said with a wry smile. "What were we supposed to say? No?"

"No one was forced to join," Andros reminded them all pointedly.

"Well, yeah. But we're still Power Rangers aren't we?" Dustin piped up.

The man beside him nodded solemnly. "Nothing is more important than protecting this planet. If S.P.D. is willing to give us a better way to do that, then we have no choice."

"Once a Ranger, always a Ranger," Adam murmured.

Wes smiled, but felt a surge of guilt he hoped no one noticed. He remembered the day that Tommy had approached them - him, asking if he was interested in helping build a new organization to help better protect Earth. At the time, he'd been busy training new recruits for the Silver Guardians and his relationship with Eric felt like it was finally going somewhere. He hadn't thought there could be anything more important than that. So he'd turned him down.

Silence lingered for awhile.

He picked at his food, trying to force his thoughts somewhere else, and finally sampled his roast beef warily. He was pleasantly surprised to discover that it tasted much better than it looked. They had one up on the Silver Guardian's cafeteria. He tried to run over everything he'd been told so far in his head for awhile, at last giving up with a sigh. "There is no possible way I'm gonna keep everything straight," he declared.

Oddly that earned him several sympathetic smiles.
"It's really not as hard as it seems at first," Ashley tried to reassure him.

"Dude, I've so got a shortcut for you, and it *totally* works," Dustin announced from the table across from him.

"What's that?" he asked curiously.

Dustin grinned. "First off Dude, just call everyone by color until you get their names down. If you don't know, fake it."

"That explains a lot," commented the blond sitting next to Cameron on the opposite side of Dustin's table.

Dustin made a face at him before continuing. "You know Cruger, Tommy, and Andros already, so you just gotta worry about the departments, right?"

"Here come the nicknames ... " Jason groaned.

"Technology Department - Billy's people - are Techs."

Wes nodded slowly. "That makes sense."

"Department for Vehicle Design, me an' Taylor and the others, are DVDs," Dustin went on.

"It's Department for Vehicle Design and Maintenance," Taylor grumbled.

Dustin ignored her. "Will's Security Department is the Grunts."

Immediately a group gathered at another table all raised their fists into the air without bothering to look up and grunted in response. Wes was amused to note that nearly all of them had black or red trim to their navy jumpsuits. He squinted for a moment, then laughed softly as he recognized T.J. Johnson, Carter Grayson, and Ryan Mitchell among them.

"Ashley's part of the Medical Department, which is the Docs," Dustin continued, clearly enjoying himself now as he pointed at her uniform. "Information Department is the Know-It-Alls. You Training Department guys are the Drill Sergeants, and everyone in the Outreach Program is an Ambassador.

"The only complicated ones," he gestured to Cameron and the boy beside him, "Are everyone on the Morpher Project, since they go back and forth between Tech and DVDs, and those three." This time he nodded at the blond man, a darker man beside him, and the man at his own left. "Morpher Project people are Floaters. Shane, Hunter, and Blake just won't pick a department; if they're not in with the Grunts or Drill Sergeants, they're usually hanging around playing bodyguard, so that's what we call them."

"You mean what *you* call us," pointed out the darker man opposite him.

Wes couldn't resist, especially when one of them was practically wrapped around Dustin, while the blond kept leaning over Cameron's shoulder. "Bodyguards?"

Dustin flushed slightly and ducked his head, flashing a sheepish grin. "Cause of the way Shane always hangs around me, Hunter's always pester Cam, and whenever Blake's not busy, he's with Tori."

"Pester ing ... " Cameron mused tapping his chin as he studied some sort of print out in front of him.
"That sounds about right."

The blond, Hunter apparently, smirked and leaned in close again to whisper something in Cameron's ear. He was rewarded with an absent swat.

"Blake should totally go for Ambassador, though," Dustin commented thoughtfully. "He'd be good at that sort of thing."

Hunter humphed, mumbling "Not in this lifetime," just loud enough to be heard.

Tori chuckled, flashing Blake a smile. "It's all about that Bradley charm."

Blake laughed at her. "Yeah, 'cause Hunter's a real charmer."

"He is when he wants to be," Shane pointed out. "How else did he get Cam?"

"Blackmail and bondage?" Cameron muttered.

Wes choked on his roast beef.

****

He flopped back in his desk chair, looking around his room again.

There were thirty-nine former or current Power Rangers with positions in S.P.D. now, including him. Eight official departments, nine if you counted Dustin's 'Bodyguards'. Sixty cadets in his own department total, ten of which he was in charge of as of tomorrow. Just over nine hundred people total in S.P.D. Earth Base, and there was already talk of spreading out and building more bases on Earth. Ten people he'd known before hand. Three of which he might actually consider real friends, although he wasn't sure how much Vanessa counted when he'd only known her for two months.

What was he thinking when he came here?

He sighed, pressing the heels of his palms against his eyes because he *knew* what he'd been thinking. He'd been thinking that Eric wouldn't even look at him, living with his father was awkward as ever, and he wanted to get away from ... everything. He'd been thinking that maybe Tommy's offer was still open, and maybe it wasn't too late to still do something with his life.

Had he made a mistake? Sure, this wasn't the Silver Guardians, which meant he didn't have to face his ex everyday. And if something went wrong, he wasn't the first person everyone turned to - a fact which both strangely bothered and relieved him. No one looked at him as Mr. Collin's son or Commander Collins, but as just ... Wes. One of thirty-nine other Power Rangers. It wasn't anonymity, but it was closer than he'd probably get anywhere else.

But seeing all the people laughing and talking around him, couples flirting and being affectionate ... It drove home that not only had he lost the one person he thought he could *always* count on when it truly mattered, he had lost what they'd both worked so hard to create together. Yeah, there was the baby on the way, but it wasn't ... it wasn't *theirs*, not the way he'd had with Eric. He wouldn't have a family with Vanessa. And honestly, he didn't really want to anymore than she did.

Because she wasn't Eric. And the new baby wasn't Alexander or Benjamin.

What were they doing now, he wondered silently. He knew through what the Chrono Morphers had told him that his boys would never have a true childhood. They were too small to be able to morph yet. Were they being taken care of? Were they aware enough of their surroundings yet to
know that they weren't home, that these weren't the people who loved them? Did they remember that they *were* loved, that someone had wanted them for more than this once?

He rolled over and buried his face in his pillow. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm so, so sorry."

He didn't know who he was apologizing to anymore.
Dead Last

Chapter Notes

In which Eric gets adopted by a cat.

The first time he noticed it, he was trying to leave for work. It was five o'clock in the morning and still dark out, so the flash of white caught his eye under the streetlight. He watched it stare back at him before darting into a bush.

One of *his* bushes.

He debated chasing it away, decided he really didn't have time for it, and headed for work.

****

It was watching him again.

He scowled back through the window over his coffee cup. That stupid cat had been hiding around his house for over a week. Almost like it was expecting something.

Well it could just keep waiting. He didn't need a cat, didn't want a cat. Couldn't afford it when he had enough bills to pay.

It'd probably just try to eat the birds anyway.

****

"Fine!" he shouted, nearly slamming down the plate down on the front step. It wasn't much - just some leftover beef from dinner. He just threw it into the microwave long enough to make sure it wasn't growing anything. "Here! Eat it and shut up!"

He slammed the door behind him.

When he looked out the window again later, the plate was empty and the cat hadn't meowed in over two hours. Instead it was sitting near the streetlight again, watching him. He scowled and went to get his plate.

****

"Sir ... ?"

He glanced back over his shoulder, startled. "Wilson? I didn't know you shopped here."

"It's my day off, Sir," the young man told him, standing at attention regardless of the fact that they were both off duty and standing in the middle of a grocery store. He seemed surprised to see Eric there. "I didn't know you had a cat."

He frowned, glancing down at the bag of cat food in his arms. "I don't."

Wilson looked puzzled. "Then why ... ?"
"It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

****

He stared out the window at the rain. Fit his mood at least, even if he hated the rain now. He didn't used to, but things had changed since ...

He frowned, squinting. There was something small, white, and round huddled in his bushes again. It had to be that stupid cat.

He hesitated.

"All right, just this once," he muttered, heading for the door.

It didn't take much to get it inside. He opened the door, called out "Here, kitty, kitty," and stepped aside. In less than five minutes, there was a streak of white, and he shut the door behind it.

"Just this once, you hear me?" he demanded, searching for a towel. "You're not moving in. And the minute you go after those birds, you're back outside." He paused. "I'm talking to a cat." He groaned and hit his head against his palm. "I need therapy," he muttered.

The cat watched him from a corner, shivering.

****

He laid back on the couch, staring up at the ceiling. Three months without Wes, and nothing in his life had changed since it happened. It was back to the way things had been when he'd first moved to Silver Hills: he worked all day, went home and worked out, ate dinner, and stared at the walls before it was time for bed.

Things had been different with Wes. There had been surprise ambushes in the locker room at work. Being dragged out for lunch. Missing his workouts entirely because *someone* kept distracting him. Trying to focus on eating when food was being stolen off his plate. Ambushed again after dinner, no matter how many times he complained about it - not that he minded as much as he said he did. Laying in bed when it was still too early to sleep, Wes in his arms talking about things he really didn't care about while he watched the expressions he made and pretended to be paying attention.

~"Eric ... There's ... there's something I have to tell you."~

He sighed, rubbing at his eyes tiredly. Three months, and he still couldn't get over him. Sure, they'd been serious - more serious then he'd ever been with anyone - but that didn't change the fact that it was over now. He needed to forget about Wes and move on with his life.

~"I've decided to take Tommy up on his offer after all. I'm taking the job with S.P.D."~

The way Wes had already moved on from him.

There was a soft thump, the bed shifting, and something on his legs. He looked up just in time to see the stupid cat settling down. Great. Now he was going to have cat hair all over his pants. The cat stared at him in return with a look that almost dared him to shove it off his lap.

He sighed instead, reaching out to scratch her ears. "Nobody wants you either, do they?" he murmured, listening to her purr at the attention.
He rubbed under her chin, watching her eyes. One blue, one green - not everyone wanted a cat with mismatched eyes. Even after he'd cleaned her up, her long white fur wasn't silky the way most cats were. It was soft, but it always looked matted, even when it wasn't.

"The guy that chases off everyone who tries to care about him, and a mismatched alley cat. We're some pair, aren't we?" he asked softly.

She bumped her head against his hand, purring louder.

"Yeah," he sighed, leaning back and blinking hard. "We're a pair."
Okay, so didn't mean to play up the Wes Angst here. Oops? I hope it's not too
overdone - the point is supposed to come across at the end. And this is shorter than I'd
wanted, but hey, I wrote it in an hour and then it felt finished, so ...

And Sky's fucked up family tree begins. Who can spot the crossover here? -Grins- I
couldn't help myself! I was re-watching the movie awhile ago and was like, oh my
god, that is so totally *Eric*! They even look alike! (If you ignore the T.V. series,
even if I like the series better.) And it escalated from there. Yay.

I've seen Hayley's last name as 'Viktor' in a few places, but I can't confirm if that's
canon. So I'm using Michaels for this 'verse instead. (Although I'd love to know if it
*is* canon or fanon, if anyone can tell me.)

Whoever decided that putting ten cadets in one squad was a good idea should be shot. Wes
decided as he flopped down in a seat.

"You look like you're about to face-plant in your food," a voice commented.

He glanced up, barely lifting his chin from the table. "Hey, Nes."

Vanessa lightly bopped him upside the head as she set down beside him. "Don't call me that. Mind
if I join you?"

He eyed her in amusement. "Go ahead."

"Have I mentioned that work completely sucks today?" she added conversationally.

He smiled faintly. "No, but no arguments here."

She glanced at him as she took an absent stab at her carrots. "What happened to you?"

"Ten cadets," he said by way of explanation. "I barely know what *I'm* doing yet, and I've got ten
kids trying to move different directions. I've got two who both think they know everything there is
to know and can't stand one another, three who never listen, one who likes to experiment, and four
that keep trying to hide in the background. And no matter what I tell them, somebody has an
opinion about it. And - what are you doing?"

She glanced up, casually dropping another pile of carrots onto his tray. "I don't like carrots."

"Then why did you get them in the first place?" He frowned. "And why are you giving them to
me?"

"Because I used to like carrots," she informed him, adding more to the pile. "I used to love them.
But today, someone doesn't like carrots." She gestured to her stomach, which was just starting to
show. "And since it's all your fault that I don't like carrots anymore, today *you* like carrots."
He searched for a suitable response to that, then gave up with a sigh. "It's not worth arguing with you, is it?"

"Nope." she returned almost cheerfully.

He watched her for a minute. "So what happened to you today?"

Her eyes immediately darkened, and he was sort of sorry he'd asked. "We're working on a feasible new form for the base, to increase it's self-defense capabilities while still making it inhabitable. Blue Brat and Perfect Pink couldn't agree on what sort of design would make a good starting point - for *four* hours. Hartford kept trying to keep the peace until he gave up and left them alone, and Manx and I were trying to mind our business and do our own work, but they wouldn't *shut up*. Plus Manx keeps working on 'side projects' that she doesn't want anyone to see - I think she's got her eye on moving into the Morpher Project, but doesn't want to admit it yet. And of course Billy was gone all day, so he couldn't run interference when the Awesome Trio showed up and started 'commenting' on our designs while they claimed they were looking for something." She glowered, stabbing furiously into her entrée. "I'm about ready to rig up a security device to electrocute anyone that walks within ten feet of me or talks loud enough for me to hear."

Wes held out the brownie he'd grabbed with his lunch. "Chocolate?" he offered.

She eyed him again. "Are you insinuating something?"

He faked confusion. "I'm insinuating that you sound like you need chocolate."

He sighed when she continued to stare. "Eric likes chocolate after a bad day," he muttered. Jen and Katie had too, but he figured it was probably better not to mention that at the moment.

He started slightly as she kissed his cheek. "Thanks," she said simply, taking the peace-offering for what it was.

They ate in silence for a few minutes before he finally got up the nerve to ask. "Who are Blue Brat and Perfect Pink?"

She glanced at him. "Ethan James and Rose Ortiz. They're part of my department, and I can't stand them because they both have an ego the size of this base. It's the three of us along with Andrew Hartford, Katherine Manx, and Billy Cranston."

"And the Awesome Trio?"

"Cam Watanabe, Justin Stewart, and Hayley Michaels from the Morpher Project," she sighed. "Everyone treats the three of them like they can do anything they put their minds to, and they all know it."

He hadn't met Justin or Hayley, but Cameron had given him that impression, too. Not that he was going to admit it. "Wanna get out of here later?" he offered instead. "Leave as soon as we can make our escape, go to a movie and pretend S.P.D. doesn't exist for awhile?"

She set down her fork and looked at him. "Why can't you be straight?"

He blinked. "I'm bi."

She threw her arms around his neck. "I don't care."

****
He woke up staring at an unfamiliar ceiling, with an unfamiliar body in his arms. It took several minutes before he remembered S.P.D., and that this wasn't his room - it was Vanessa's. He'd walked her back after dinner, talking about anything that wasn't work or relationships. She invited him in, the conversation continued, and he fell asleep somewhere around three or four ...

And now judging by the window outside, the sun was just about to come up.

"People are going to get ideas about us," Vanessa muttered in his chest.

"You're having my baby. There's not much worse to have an idea about," he pointed out.

"They might think we're actually in love or something."

"You scare me."

She snorted. "And you don't find that attractive?"

"Not really, no."

There was a pause. "So what was it about Eric?"

He let out a long sigh as he thought of his ex-boyfriend. "He didn't scare me," he said eventually.

Her head lifted just enough for him to see her raise an eyebrow at him.

He smiled a little, his eyes distant. "Eric is all about showing himself off as tough and indifferent. 'You can't touch me.' But ... I knew he wasn't really like that. I met him before he got as bad as when he joined the Silver Guardians, so I knew better. I was always trying to find that part of him again, even during the times we didn't get along. He can be really sweet when he tries; he's just awkward about it. And he's not good with people, which makes him shy." He paused, thinking. "He's a lot like his dad, actually."

She cocked her head, waiting.

"His dad is a colonel in the U.S. Air Force. Served for so long that it strained his relationships with his family. And then - " He flinched, thinking of the broken, guilty look on Eric's face when he finally told him everything. " ... Eric had a younger brother, Charlie. Charlie got curious one day, found his dad's gun, and .... "

"That's horrible," she whispered. By her almost blank expression, she almost seemed to be saying it for something to say, because he needed to hear it. Then a hand drifted to her stomach, and he nodded in understanding.

"His mother left his dad over it. Eric had already moved out when it happened - we were in prep school together at the time. He and his brother had been really close when they were younger, and losing him ... Eric blamed himself because he wasn't there to stop him. I found out later his brother's death was part of the reason he dropped out of school. He wanted to be there for the funeral, and then there was the mess with his parents ... His dad was reactivated for awhile. Left again, and now he's *back* in service, in some classified department. He and Eric aren't all that close anymore, so they don't talk very often."

He closed his eyes, shaking his head. "Family is extremely important to Eric. When we decided to have the boys, he was so happy ... And then .... "

"But you were happy too, Wes," Vanessa pointed out softly.
"I - It's not the same thing," he protested. "I wanted them - " wanted them so much " But Eric ... he was *devasted*. For him, it was like losing Charlie all over again." He swallowed hard. "That's what made me realize that I had to tell him the truth about Alex."

She watched him for a moment, and there was an odd, almost calculating expression in her eyes. "Did you know Alexander was Alex?"

He sighed, because that was a tricky question. "At first? No. What Alex told me was that Time Force would steal 'genetic material' from Eric and I, and that I had to let it happen. He was never really specific about what that meant. But I guessed, after the lab technicians explained everything to us, that they'd take some of the unused samples." He shook his head again, running a hand over his face in agitation. "I should have said something then. I should have ... I should have told Eric, or had the security increased, or - or *something*! But I kept thinking about how I'd promised Alex, and how he told me it *had* to happen, because otherwise nothing else ever would. So ... I just ... "

~"... You knew? You're telling me you *knew*?! About all of this?! And you just let it happen?!"

"Eric, please. Eric, I didn't -"

"Get out."

"... What?"

"Get out of my house! I can't ... I can't even look at you anymore! Just *get out*!~"

He leaned his head back to stare at the ceiling, feeling tears prick his eyes again. "And now, because of me, because I didn't do or say anything, my boys are going to spend their lives as test subjects. Ben will never even get the chance to leave the labs before - " His morpher cut him off before he could finish the words, and his throat burned at the thought of what it wouldn't let him say. "Alex is so screwed up he barely even knows who he is. And I told Eric that I let it happen on *purpose*." He laughed softly, bitterly. "No wonder he can't even look at me. I can barely stand look at *myself*.

He reached up to scrub at his eyes. "Sorry," he managed after a moment. "I just - I can't stop - "

She cut him off with a gentle kiss, pulling away to tug his hand free and stare into his eyes. "You lost your children, Wes. You're grieving. And you're going to *be* grieving for a very long time."

He blinked slowly, reaching up again after a moment to cup her cheek. "Nes, I don't ... I *can't* ...."

"I don't love you, either," she interrupted gently, kissing his forehead this time. "But I can be your friend. And I can listen while you tell me everything."

"I already told you," he whispered, blinking rapidly again.

Her hand came up to wrap around the one held to her cheek, squeezing gently. Her eyes met his, soft and understanding. "Then tell me again."
Mwaha! And the S.P.D. Rangers are about to have their first major catastrophic event. Which, even in the womb, they have the ability to create. Because B Squad is just special like that. -Evil grin-

"Hey, Rose? You seen Nes?" Wes asked, poking his head into the Tech Department.

Rose Ortiz glanced up at him, raising her eyebrows in a look he could see through her protective goggles from all the way across the room. "Shouldn't be keeping your own tabs on your wife?"

He sighed, debating whether or not to argue over Vanessa not being his wife, then decided it wasn't worth it. "Have you seen her or no?"

"She was complaining about you again when she left, if that means anything."

"Ah ... " He nodded in understanding. "Baby issues."

"You know, it's sorta freaky how well you understand each other for two people who swear they're not dating," Ethan commented, brushing past him as he went into the lab.

Wes scowled. *Ethan* he could argue with; Rose was just ... scary sometimes. "I could say the same thing about you and Conner."

Ethan glared at him. "We're *not* dating."

"Neither are we," he retorted. "But at least I can say that Vanessa doesn't stay in my room every time she visits S.P.D. and spends half her time following me around until she finally gets bored."

Ethan flushed. "We're still not dating," he insisted.

"But you're something."

"No, we're not! Why does everyone have to label everything? Why can't Conner and I just be friends?" he ranted.

"With benefits?" Rose murmured absently.

Ethan spun around, reaching for something that looked heavy and blunt, and Wes bid a hasty retreat.

He was *not* getting in the middle of one of their arguments. The last one escalated bad enough for Andrew to call security. By the time they were finally separated, T.J.'s nose was broken, Carter had a dislocated shoulder, Zack limped for a week, and Hunter managed to 'accidentally' electrocute everyone in the room.

Ryan had been nasty to everyone for almost a month. No one had really been willing to ask what *he* injured.
"Hey, Dustin!" Wes called.

Dustin stopped, turning around to blink at him, then beamed. "Dude, Wes! What's up, man?"

"Thanks for the M&Ms," he told him with a grin.

Somehow Dustin's smile seemed to grow even wider. "Easter's coming, Dude. We gotta stock up on Tori Colors while we can," he told him seriously.

Wes shook his head, amused. "I'll take your word for it. You seen Nes?"

Dustin frowned, scratching his head for a moment. "Uh ... I think I saw her somewhere around DVD. She was taking a look at that project I had. The robot dog thing?"

Wes smiled, inwardly wondering why in the world anyone would want a robot dog. But with Dustin, he'd found it was better to just go with these things. "So she's in there?"

"Uh, no Dude. At least, I don't think so." He hesitated. "I left 'cause Carlos and Ronny were, uh ... " He shifted uncomfortably. "'Talking'."

Wes raised his eyebrows; he could *hear* the quotation marks in that sentence. "'Talking'?"

"... Yeah. Um, try with the Floaters. She might have gone that way. Just uh, try and keep away from the main Drill Sarge office."

He looked at him oddly.

Dustin sighed, glancing around the hallway for anyone that might overhear. "Jason and Taylor are uh, talking too. And they're sorta loud."

He stared.

"Later!" Dustin said quickly, hurrying down the hall.

After a minute, Wes slowly shook his head. Sometimes it seemed like everyone at S.P.D was pairing off these days. There must be something in the water.

He'd been a member of S.P.D. for about two months now. It was an adjustment, but he was finally starting to enjoy working here. There was always something to do, and some sort of crazy situation or rumor running around.

The Rumor Mill was a almost entirely a product of the Ambassadors, Kimberly, Zhane, Mack, and Tyzonn, although Zack had been seen snickering with them more than once. If there was anything to know or anyone having some sort of development in their love life, the Rumor Mill knew about it. Their current topic, now that the disbelief of that Taylor had *finally* cornered Jason long enough to ask him out - he'd had to listen to her debate over it for *weeks* - was over, was all the flirting between Carlos and Ronnie. Something they all feared, after the last time the pair had gotten into a fierce race while test driving the newest S.P.D.-issued jeeps. Carlos was normally a pretty calm and amiable guy, but something about Ronnie brought out a competitive streak in him no one had realized he had.

For some reason, some of the S.P.D. former Ranger crew had decided that they need a morale committee, or 'The Happy People'. (Dustin *really* needed to stop nicknaming everything.) Zhane apparently didn't have enough to do between his duties as an Ambassador and the Rumor Mill, so he'd recruited Dustin, Rocky, Dax, and Chip to help keep everyone's spirits high. Any pranks,
strange decorations, or random gifts were all credited to The Happy People. They were the ones who had somehow managed to sneak into his room and redecorate it in enough shades of red and white you could barely see any of the gray anymore - but that was one prank he didn't mind so much. They also put up holiday decorations (often for holidays no one else had even heard of before, yet they swore up and down really existed), re-labeled doorways, hid silly string in strange places, spray-painted washable graffiti, and whatever else they could come up with. The happy face posters they'd put up all over the place seemed to be their symbol. Their most recent protect plan had been to pass around M&Ms for Easter - Ranger Color specific, of course.

Wes now found himself with friends all over the place. He had Taylor when he needed someone to complain with, Carter, Ryan, Andros, or Jason if he wanted to spar and work off some steam. Karone taught him a lot about the galaxy he lived in, let alone the ones beyond them whenever he visited her. All of the Docs - Aisha, Ashley, and more recently Katherine - led by Dana, mothered him the moment they got the chance. He'd found a surprising kindred spirit in Mack Hartford, who was able to complain heartily with him about overprotective wealthy fathers and mothering butlers while his own father Andrew pretended to ignore them in the background. And of course Vanessa, his confidant and best friend. Anywhere he went, there was now someone to laugh and talk with, someone to tease and make himself smile in return.

S.P.D. was more than just a job for him now; it was a family. And the more he thought about it, the more he kind of liked it.

"Nes! There you are!" he called in relief. "I've been looking all over for you!"

Vanessa gave him another dark look. "I'm bloated, I'm tired, and I can't get comfortable no matter what I do. And it's all your fault. Choose your next words wisely: what the hell do you want?"

He held up his hands in surrender. "I was trying to answer the memo you sent me, but I'm still having trouble with the e-mail voice-message system thingy, so I figured I'd just track you down in person."

She rolled her eyes. "Honestly Wes, it's not that complicated. You select message mode, find the person you want to send it to in the database, label it public or private, press record, look at the screen, and say your message."

"I feel like I'm talking to myself whenever I do that," he complained. "And half the time I hit the wrong button instead of record, so I really *am* talking to myself. And I never get that public/private thing right."

She sighed. "We're getting ready to do the first tests for the Morpher Project next week. I thought you might like to be there. Are you coming or not?"

He blinked. "Sure," he told her, feeling flattered. The first testing for S.P.D.'s new morphers? That was a historic event. "Are you sure I have enough seniority to be there?" he asked after a pause.

She laughed at him. "It's not anything official. Our department and the Awesome Trio are just getting together for a test run. Dustin's showing up for any mechanical issues, and we had to promise Cruger we'd get one of the doctors and a couple of people from security. You can pretend you're working with security for the day. You've got the experience," she added with a teasing grin.

He made a face at her, secretly pleased that he'd been able to cheer her up. The pregnancy had been unexpected and unplanned, and she'd admitted to having trouble dealing with it at times. "Just for that I outta bring Hunter or Blake in with me, since you're going to have Ethan and Rose in the same room again."
"No!" she said sharply. "No one with any electrical abilities is setting foot in that room. Never, *ever* again, you hear me?"

He grinned. "You know they'd take offense if they heard you call it 'electrical'."

"Good for them. I'm already unhappy about Blue Brat and Perfect Pink being in a room together. Especially with His Royal Highness, the all-mighty Cam technically in charge of everything."

He gave her an amused look. "You know, it almost sounds like you hate everyone who works on the technology floor."

"You know me better than that by now," she pointed out with a humph.

He did; they drove her crazy, but Vanessa only complained about the people she loved and respected most.

Which said a lot about their own relationship when he thought about it.

He shook his head. "Dinner and a movie?"

"If you treat and make sure it's somewhere with a view, I'll be out before sunset."

He grinned. "Deal."
Author's Notes/: This one was fun, because you know the 'incident' that gave the S.P.D. Rangers their special abilities was not as simple as a few people looking up and blinking while Kat moves forward and stares at her hands. (i.e. I like coming up with strange happenings in S.P.D. )

And Rose will make sense soon, I swear.

"Hey, Wes." Aisha paused, looking him up and down suspiciously. "You look exhausted. Did you even go to bed last night?"

He gave her a weary smile. "Went. Had nightmares the entire night."

She frowned. "What about?"

He shrugged. "It wasn't really clear. Some kind of explosion. Lots of colors. Someone screaming." The he shook his head, managing a smile that seemed more energetic. "But enough about that. What about you? Any news yet?"

She smiled faintly, squeezing his arm in silent understanding. "No, not yet. We only did the insemination a couple weeks ago. We won't know if it worked for a little while longer."

He grinned. "Rocky's so excited. He can't stop talking about being a daddy."

"Yeah, that's Rocky," she laughed, shaking her head fondly. "And then there's Adam, who can't stop panicking over how I'm doing, and always checking up on me to see if there's an update."

"Worse than that," Rocky informed them cheerfully as he walked up behind her. "He's started reading baby books now. That a year in the life series, or whatever it is." He leaned down to kiss Aisha's cheek. "And how's the mother of our baby?"

She rolled her eyes. "Technically, it's not *my* baby, you know." she pointed out. "I just offered to carry it to term for you two."

"Which makes it your baby, too." Rocky told her seriously. "Me and Adam may have provided the DNA, but you're just as much a part of our family. And we wouldn't want it any other way."

Her responding smile was so warm and vaguely watery-eyed that Wes had to excuse himself. This was a little bit more private of a moment than he cared to be involved in.

And remembering Rocky and Adam's decision to make a baby together brought back painful memories he was finally just managing to suppress.

He wandered around for a bit as he waited for things to get started. Something that looked vaguely like a dentist's pick caught his eye, and he reached out to examine it curiously.

"Don't touch that!"
He recoiled, instantly scrambling back into a corner. "Sorry!" he said hastily, offering up both hands in surrender.

Cam, Kat, Vanessa, Ethan, Haley, and Justin all glared at him. Billy glanced up from his own work with a frown. "Maybe you should find a place somewhere a little more out of the way?"

He shifted uncomfortably. "Yeah. Got it."

A hand came down on his shoulder, making him jump. "Don't worry, Wes," Chip told him cheerfully. "They told me that six times in a row before Rose threatened to tie me up with some cables."

He frowned. "Is it just me, or does she seem really ... "

"Cranky?"

"... Yeah. Testy, maybe. She's sorta been like that for awhile now."

"Justin has, too," Chip noted, nodding to the other young genius as he fiddled with some sort of equipment with a dark scowl. "You think it's related?"

Wes gave him an odd look. "Rose and Justin? When do they have time to see each other? They're always in the labs. And ... " He glanced between the pair again. "She'd kill him. If they didn't fight over projects."

Chip frowned, cocking his head. "You think? I figured Justin would make her loosen up a little, and they'd give each other someone that understands what it's like to grow up in their shoes."

"Yeah, but is being two child geniuses a good basis for a relationship?" Wes pointed out. "I mean, look at her with Ethan."

Chip shuddered. "Okay, I can see your point."

"You guys are so horrible about Rose," someone scolded. "She's not that terrible."

Wes and Chip exchanged glances.

"Kimberly, I like you a lot," Chip began, "But have you tried to hold a conversation with her lately? It's ... it's .... "

"The easiest way to get your nose broken?" T.J. commented wryly, cocking his head from the wall he and Ryan had chosen to lean against. Neither of them were anywhere near the people setting everything up.

Ryan grumbled unintelligibly and shifted against the wall.

"Dude, sometimes I really wanna ask what happened to you, but I'm sorta scared to." Dustin said thoughtfully, breezing past them with some sort of device in his hands.

"I wouldn't suggest it," Ryan muttered darkly.

"This is a pretty strange crowd for a morpher test, don't you think?" Wes asked suddenly, frowning as he looked around the room.

"Not really," Chip told him. "Obviously we've got Cam, Justin, and Hayley here because they *are* the Morpher Project. And Billy knows more about the Power than anyone, plus Ethan, Rose,
and Vanessa know his work. And Kat's been doing some work on the morphers, too. Dustin's here
because they need someone who sort of understands what's going on, and 'cause he'll probably be
working on Zords and bikes and - "

"Chip!" Kimberly cut in sharply. She offered him a smile when he blinked at her. "You were
babbling."

He blinked. "Oh. Sorry. Well, Aisha's here 'cause they have to have a doctor on hand just in case -
which is actually probably why Rocky's here, since she is. Cruger told them to bring some Grunts
in and since most of them can't or aren't willing to be in the same room as Rose and Ethan anymore
- "

"Carter was," T.J. spoke up. "But Ryan wouldn't let him." He glanced sideways at the other
member of his department.

Ryan scowled. "It's my job to look out for my partner," he ground out.

Privately, Wes thought that Will and Zack, while good friends, had never been quite as ... 
protective of one another as Ryan and Carter tended to be. Even T.J., who had partnered with
Cassie's girlfriend Ko-lin, had formed a bond with the silent and stubborn woman, but not to such
an extreme. And before Ko-lin had arrived and it was decided that Nick didn't exactly require
someone to watch his back, Nick and T.J. had an amiable trust, but not the same fierce loyalty that
Ryan and Carter did with each other.

Maybe it had something to do with being brothers-in-law. Maybe because they’d been teammates?
He didn't know.

"So what about you and Kim then, Chip? Why are you guys here?" he asked instead.

Chip grinned, holding up a P.D.A. "I'm here as KIA. Someone's gotta record history as it happens!"

Kimberly rolled her eyes, chuckling. "I ran into Rocky in the hallway and he dragged me along.
Said he needed someone to be bored with if nothing happens." She glanced at Chip with a smile.
"So Know-It-Alls are KIA, now?"

"It's shorter," he said with a shrug.

"We're about ready to start the first test," Cam announced abruptly.

"Finally," Rose grumbled.

Justin leaned in to whisper something in her ear, then jerked back as she elbowed him in the
stomach. He scowled and turned back to his own station, muttering under his breath as he
message his stomach.

"What was that about?" Aisha murmured as she joined them again, sounding puzzled.

"Lovers' Quarrel." Chip whispered.

Wes struggled to hide a grin.

Then he froze as an icy chill ran down his spine.

"Something isn't right." Kat spoke up with a frown. "These readings are off the charts. The energy
output should be contained within the morphers."
Billy's head snapped up. "The morphers aren't containing the energy?" he demanded.

She shook her head as Justin turned to peer over her shoulder. "The energy is everywhere. And it's ... rising. I - "

"Everyone duck!" Justin shouted suddenly, shoving Kat to the floor.

Light exploded throughout the room.

Wes cried out as his head throbbed, and his left wrist began to burn. Somewhere in the blur of colors and screaming he could make out a brilliant flare of green. A burst of liquid silver flooded the room, mingling with everything else.

Both colors abruptly disappeared, and everything went black.
Sixth Sense

Chapter Notes

Feel the Eric angst! Much love for Starlit Purple, who helped me figure out why Eric always knows when the Time Force Rangers are in trouble, and just what all those extra buttons on his morpher are supposed to do.

The first time it had ever happened, he'd thought it was his imagination. Morphers weren't supposed to have lights flashing all over the place, right? But the longer he'd ignored the stupid thing, the brighter it got. And when it started getting bright, it started beeping - *loudly*.

It had taken him awhile to figure out what the stupid thing was trying to do, and he'd been less than thrilled when he finally got it. Somehow the Quantum Morpher had been pre-programmed with information on the Chrono Morphers, as though they were expected to be used as a group. Whether or not he wanted to be part of their little 'team', his Morpher seemed to think it was. And whenever that sensor thing it had noticed something was wrong with another Morpher, it started flashing at him. He'd found out the hard way that the only way to shut the stupid thing off was to trace the Chrono Morphers and go haul their butts out of whatever trouble they were in now.

While he still wasn't comfortable with the idea, he'd gotten used to it eventually. And after the others went back to the future and it was just him and Wes, he'd even come to appreciate that his Morpher could keep tabs on his boyfriend for him. Wes knew after he'd borrowed it to find Ransik that last time, and he'd never failed to tease him afterwards about denying what his morpher already knew: that he was meant to be one of the Time Force Rangers.

Which was a load of bull, and he'd told Wes so. Wes laughed at him, they argued a little, and eventually forgot about it. It had never been a big deal. Wes had even forgotten why it was that Eric always seemed to know when he was in trouble. Not that he minded; he wasn't crazy about the whole idea to begin with.

Now it was almost three months since Wes had left, and his morpher was going haywire.

It happened during a board meeting no less, when one of the Suits was in the middle of lecturing the others while Mr. Collins was vacationing in Europe. He, meanwhile, was trying to stay awake without being obvious that he'd rather be just about anywhere but here. Mid-sentence there was a brilliant flash of light, and his morpher began to squeal.

He barely acknowledged the looks they were all giving him, staring instead at his wrist in surprise. It never went off without warning like this. Usually it started with the flashing and only made noise if he ignored it for too long. There was never an instant need for his attention.

He fought to keep from showing the chill that ran down his spine.

"Excuse me," he said shortly, not bothering to see if anyone tried to stop him when he headed for the door.

It was hard not to bolt for his office, but he didn't want to alarm anyone. The last thing he needed was to start a panic, especially when everyone in the Silver Guardians knew what exactly was on
his wrist. Just like a lot of them knew what it meant if it was going off like this.

He managed to keep his wrist covered and out of sight until he made it to his private office. The moment the door was shut and he uncovered it the shrieking started up again, and he fought to keep from throwing it across the room and clamping his hands over his ears. Why the heck was the blasted thing so *loud*?

It stopped making noise when he hit the Morpher Tracking button, but the lights didn't stop. The mini-map it projected took him a minute to place, because it wasn't showing Silver Hills. The display was Newtech City.

That bad feeling was back.

"Wes," he whispered, swallowing hard.

The lights stopped.

****

He still didn't understand why they'd let him in here. He knew it had something to do with Taylor - she'd seen him yelling at the secretary to just tell him where Wes Collins was. The look she gave him made him incredibly uncomfortable, somewhere between anger, understanding, and reluctance.

Then she'd brought him to this room, and he didn't care what anyone else thought anymore.

"... Wes?" he whispered, staring at the body on the bed. His hands were shaking, and he clenched his fists in an effort to stop. He looked so broken ... "Wes ... can you hear me?"

Wes stirred, then groaned, writhing and twisting in his sheets.

He found himself beside him before he really thought about what he was doing, gently rubbing his shoulder to try and calm him down as he made noises he hoped were soothing. He didn't know if he was even helping him at all. It was hard to tell if there was anything bandaged near where he was touching.

Wes screamed.

"Wes!" he shouted uselessly.

Then he was being shoved aside as a woman rushed to Wes' side, flanked by two guys in navy jumpsuits. The guys pinned Wes to the bed as he struggled, still screaming. The woman stabbed Wes with some sort of injection, and he resisted the urge to demand to know what it was.

But Wes was still struggling, even as his movements slowed.

He found himself pushing his way through again, his hand rubbing that shoulder once more. "It's okay, Wes," he murmured. "Just rest for now. We'll talk later, okay? Just rest."

It took a few minutes, but at last Wes slowly began to settle down. He didn't know if it was his voice or the drugs that did it, but at least Wes wasn't screaming anymore. That had to count for something.

He let out a long, shaking sigh as he put a hand to his head and tried to calm down himself. Wes' scream had been ... bone-chilling. He didn't know what was going on but whatever it was -
"Eric."

He moved his hand just enough to look up with one eye. "Dana," he returned coolly as he finally recognized her. Crud. He probably wasn't supposed to be in here.

Well, whatever. He was here now, and if she thought he was leaving Wes alone like this, she was in for a fight.

But she just stared at him for the longest time. Something about her eyes and the way she was looking at him was creepy. It made him feel ... exposed somehow. Like she was silently judging him.

"Need him out?" offered one of the guys beside her.

"No," she answered at last, still watching him with that expression he couldn't read. "He's listed as his emergency contact. He has a right to be here."

He fought back his surprise. Hadn't Wes changed that yet?

"Eric."

He blinked forcing himself to focus on Dana again. "What?" he demanded, then immediately wished he hadn't snapped at her like that. She was probably the only thing allowing him to be in the room right now.

But she met his gaze squarely, not looking the least bit intimidated. "I don't know what happened between you and Wes. Honestly, it's probably not any of my business. But as his doctor, I will tell you that if you hurt him right now, I will personally see to it that you never get near him again."

She left before he could figure out something to say in response that didn't start with 'who do you think you are?' The two guys followed her, both eyeing him suspiciously on their way. Like he was some sort of criminal.

He shook it off, struggling to take deep, calming breaths. Well, at least that answers the question of what Wes told people, he thought bitterly. He wasn't sure how he'd become the bad guy here. Wes was one who -

Whatever. It didn't matter anymore.

He looked at the bed again, at Wes with his head and arm in bandages, looking like he'd just come out of a firefight. And somehow despite the fact that he hadn't talked to him in months and all of Wes' new friends seemed to think he was some sort of creepy stalker, he found himself collapsing into the chair next to the bed anyway. Reaching for his hand was almost an afterthought, as he silently prayed for him to be all right.

****

It was hours later, after going over everything in his head that he heard Wes stir again.

He'd been remembering, the good times and the bad. What it was like to have Wes in his arms, see Wes smiling at him, laughing at Wes when he did something stupid and he knew it. Remembering all the times he'd seen those shadows in Wes' eyes when they talked about the boys, and he'd always passed it off as just being nervous about becoming a parent. The look of shame and guilt in Wes' eyes when he finally confessed that he knew all along they'd never have kids together. That horrible feeling of being used, because Wes was being a good little Time Force Ranger.
"Get out of my house! I can't ... I can't even look at you anymore! Just *get out*!"

"W - who ... "

He swallowed hard, blink rapidly as he reached up to rub Wes' shoulder again. His hand automatically went higher this time, brushing along his neck. Somehow he found his thumb rubbing tentatively just below Wes' jawline. It was an old habit, from years of trying to get Wes to get his lazy butt up and out of bed.

"Eric ... " Wes sighed, just barely managing a smile.

Probably didn't even know he was really here.

He leaned forward before he could stop himself, carefully kissing his forehead.

"Love you," Wes mumbled.

There was a pause as he seemed to be struggling to talk. His voice was so soft he had to strain to hear him. "M'sorry. Wish ... wish I n'ver ... 'M so sorry,"

He closed his eyes tightly for a moment, struggling to hold in all the warring emotions running through him right then. Eventually he looked down at that pale, bruised face and tried to imagine the blue eyes open and watching him. Tried to picture that warm smile.

But all he could see was that guilty stare, and eyes that couldn't meet his.

He traced a thumb along Wes' cheek, swallowing. This was hard - too hard. He couldn't handle this.

Maybe ... maybe someday. Maybe not ever. He didn't know yet.

"I love you too, Wes," he said at last, keeping his voice soft. "And I'm sorry, too. For a lot of things." He kissed him gently, trying to avoid seeing Wes begin to smile again.

"But I don't think I can forgive you yet." he finished.

He turned and left before he could stop himself, before Wes could try to protest. He saw Dana on his way out, walked straight past Taylor, but didn't say a word to either of them. They would take care of Wes for him. They had to. Because right now he still couldn't stand to be anywhere near him.

Right now he was still trying to figure out what was wrong with himself for Wes not to trust him.

He reached for his phone. Mr. Collins still needed to know what was going on. Wes' father should be there for him at least, if he couldn't.
"... Wes? ... Wes ... can you hear me?"

He couldn't remember the last time he'd hurt this much. He couldn't remember ... Remember ...

Vanessa.

Chip.

Kat.

Justin.

The morpher tests - no!

He tried to cry out, but his throat clenched painfully and all he managed was a faint moan.

"Shh, shh," a voice whispered gently, rubbing - was that his shoulder? Why couldn't he tell?

He whimpered softly, struggling to clench a fist. Instantly his left - was that his left? - flared up in agony, and the whimper turned into a scream.

"Wes!"

There was rustling, movement, and something stung his arm.

"It's okay, Wes," the voice soothed again. "Just rest for now. We'll talk later, okay? Just rest."

No ... He didn't want rest, he wanted to know about ... about ....

****

He could hear someone breathing.

No, not breathing. Sobs. Someone was crying?

"W - who ..." he rasped, struggling to reach out.

A hand brushed his shoulder, moving up to stroke along his neck soothingly. It was calloused and warm, but the movements it made were gentle. Practiced.

He smiled, because he *knew* that hand. He knew that practiced movement after years of waking up to it. He relaxed slowly, nuzzling into the touch in relief. "Eric .... "

Lips brushed his forehead.
"Love you," he sighed contentedly.

The hand kept moving, reminding him of all those mornings lying in bed. Days when he didn't want to get out of bed because he was warm and comfortable. And that hand always would be there, gently luring him up and awake.

Except that it hadn't been, not for awhile now. And it was a lot harder to get out bed these days then it used to be.

His throat hurt.

He swallowed painfully, struggling to get the words out before he couldn't anymore. Because he needed him to know. "M'sorry. Wish ... wish I n'ver ... 'M so sorry," he whispered.

A thumb ran along his cheek. "I love you too, Wes," a voice murmured. "And I'm sorry, too. For a lot of things."

Another set of lips touched his gently, carefully, and he smiled as he tried to lean up into them.

Then they were gone. "But I don't think I can forgive you yet." the voice continued.

His eyes shot open.

He was alone in the infirmary. A private room, with a heart monitor and an IV nearby. His gaze shifted slowly down his own body, finding most of his left arm wrapped in bandages. He shifted his head tentatively and tried not to flinch as a wave of dizziness swept over him.

Then he blinked, and tears slowly began to leak from his eyes.

****

"How are you feeling?"

He shot a dirty look in the direction he thought Dana was standing.

"It's not a stupid question," she scolded gently. "I know you feel horrible. I know you're miserable. But I need you tell me *exactly* what feels wrong."

"Can't ... can't you tell?" he croaked. They'd given him plenty of water and a throat lozenge, but he still had trouble speaking.

"I want to hear it from you."

He sighed, then tried to suppress a groan as his body protested even that movement. "I hurt." he sighed.

"I know you hurt, Wes. *What* hurts?"

"Everything."

She made a frustrated sound. "Wes, I need to know more than that. What - "

"*Everything*," he stressed. "Whole body aches. Left arm ... burns. All the time. Throat hurts. Dizzy. Headache. Can't see."

He heard scribbling noises.
"Dana? What ... happened? Where are ... is everyone?"

"We're not completely sure." He couldn't understand how she could sound so calm. "Everyone from the Tech Department and Morpher Project were in that room. From what Vehicle Development was able to figure out, it looks like there was an explosion of energy that the Morphers couldn't contain."

He struggled to sit up. "Everyone - "

Gentle hands caught him, pressing him back down. "Kat is fine; for some reason she was barely affected, we're not sure why. T.J. and Justin woke up a few days before you did, and Hayley's awake, but groggy. The rest of you have been unconscious for nearly a week. You and Cam woke up at the same time."

Cam ... There was something about Cam. Something he thought he was supposed to remember.

But his head hurt, and he gave up trying. "How are .. others?"

Dana sighed softly. "Rocky and Kimberly seem to be in pretty good shape, although we haven't been able to pry their hands apart since we found all of you. Ethan, Dustin, and R-Ryan are stable, but don't show any signs of coming to." She caught herself as her voice trembled slightly, hesitating. "Billy, Chip, Tyzonn, and Trent all seem to be showing signs of discomfort while they recover."

"Trent ... ?"

"Apparently he's Ethan's former teammate. He'd come to visit him at S.P.D. Tyzonn was bringing him to Ethan when they found the lab covered in multi-colored light. We think Tyzonn tried to stop the energy by attacking the morphers. He and Trent were unconscious beside the rest of you."

Silver. Silver had wanted something. Was Tyzonn Silver?

He frowned. No, Tyzonn was the Mercury Ranger. And what did Silver have to do with anything?

Then he paused. Three names had been conspicuously absent from her report. "Rose and .. Aisha? And - " He swallowed. "Vanessa?"

He was not imagining the shaking sigh Dana let out. "They're ... Vanessa is in intensive care. We're not sure how this is going to affect the baby. Aisha is the same. Apparently she *is* pregnant."

His heart stopped. The baby. Rocky and Adam's baby. *His* baby.

Then he frowned again. "Rose?"

There was a long pause.

"Rose was pregnant, too."
Chapter Notes

I'm not sure how I feel about this chapter. I took out some of the vague parts that I wasn't sure were really working, but I still don't know if I like it yet or not. Feedback? Please?

He wasn't sure what made him reach for the phone beside his bed. He could have used his morpher to call, but this wasn't an emergency. And this gave him the option not to pick up if he didn't want to talk to him. Which was fair, really.

So he picked up the phone instead, dialing slowly. It was the number for the one person he wanted more than anything right now. The person he needed enough to dream that he was already here.

But no one picked up, and he waited silently for the answering machine to kick in.

"Myers. Leave a message."

"... Eric?" His throat was so tight now he could barely speak, but he didn't care. "Eric, please pick up the phone. I really - I really need you right now. Nes - I mean, Vanessa - she's ... " He swallowed and nearly choked on a sob. "There was an accident, at the lab. She's okay, but they don't ... they don't know how this is going to effect the baby. And I'm ... I'm really scared, Eric." He traced the wall with a finger, closing his eyes as he tried to picture Eric's arms around him right now, or even just a supportive hand on his shoulder.

But all he could see was that indifferent stare.

"Please call me," he whispered. "Please. I need you."

Hanging up the phone, he drew his legs to his chest and buried his face in his knees, trying desperately not to cry. *I'm scared, Eric. Please come. I need you.*

*I need you.*

****

He knew that Dana would have his head if she caught him walking around, but after hours of laying in bed staring at the walls, he was too restless to stay there any longer. His head still throbbed, but he had to find Vanessa. He had to see her for himself.

He wandered through the halls, lost but too wary of being sent back to his room to ask someone where she was. He knew he was still in the medical wing, so that had to be a start. All he had to do was find the right room.

There was an endless line of silver doors, each with a bed inside when he looked in. Each bed with someone in it, each someone with a person sitting at their side. People he knew, people he didn't. But they were all here, had been *there*, and none of them were Vanessa.

There was Ryan, Carter watching him attentively. He didn't know if it was because Dana couldn't
be there or not, but Carter had Ryan's hand gripped tightly in both of his. Maybe they really were
closer than he'd realized: the worry on Carter's face seemed genuine.

Billy with - was that Haley? - talking softly as the other man shifted and moaned in his sleep.
Unlike Carter she never touched him; just talked. But her eyes never left his face.

Tyzonn, either sleeping or unconscious; it was hard to tell. Mack leaned on the side of the bed, fast
sleep with his head pillowed on his arms. His father must have been the one to wrap the jacket
around his shoulders.

Shane pacing through Dustin's room while Tori talked to the unresponsive man in the bed. Cam
actually awake and sitting up, watching Hunter beside him. Hunter reaching out to gently run a
hand along Cam's cheek as he gazed at him with unguarded affection. In the hall between the two
rooms Blake stood guard over them all, his eyes on the ground.

He didn't know when Conner had arrived, but a girl he'd only met once - Kira? - had joined him in
the room where Ethan slept near another young man in white. Kira was holding the man's hand,
tears streaking her cheeks, while Conner sat on the side of Ethan's bed with a blank expression,
holding him close despite the fact that he was still unconscious.

Chip, limp and quiet in a way he never really was. Maddison stood beside him, leaning on Nick as
she cried silently, shoulders shaking. Nick was just as silent, but his eyes were dark and pained as
he held her close.

Rocky and Kimberly, placed in a bed just barely big enough to fit them both. Their hands were
clasped tightly together, and even in sleep they were turned to lean into each other. Adam stood
beside Rocky with a pained expression, pacing back and forth for a minute before stopping to catch
his hand again. On Kimberly's side Tommy had reached over to stroke the back of her hand with
his thumb, murmuring softly.

He passed Aisha. There were more machines here than the others had, leaving wires everywhere
and making soft beeping noises as they monitored everything they could. Zack was a silent,
grieving presence at her side with her hand clasped in his.

Rose's room.

He paused at the door, feeling abruptly guilty about the conversation he'd had with Chip just before
the accident.

~"Is it just me, or does she seem really ... "

"Cranky?"

"... Yeah. Testy, maybe. She's sorta been like that for awhile now."~

Lying there on the bed surrounded by machines, pale and unmoving, she didn't look cranky or testy
anymore. She looked ... young.

Justin sat in the chair beside her, one hand stroking her hair back from her face with surprising
tenderness. His eyes flickered up to Wes when he stopped, but he just nodded in acknowledgement
before his eyes dropped back down to watch her. There was something in his expression,
something carefully controlled.

And then he remembered Justin and Rose had been fighting. She was angry because he'd tried to
tell her something. "You knew?" he asked softly.
Justin closed his eyes, nodding slowly. "Yeah. Thirteen weeks. She's just starting to complain about getting fat." He let out a soft sigh. "I tried to tell her that she shouldn't be there, just in case anything went wrong. She threw a fit and told me I couldn't tell her what to do."

His eyes reopened to stare down at her with longing and ache. "Why couldn't you just listen? For *once*?" he whispered painfully.

Wes moved on.

Vanessa was in a room at the end. Just like Rose and Aisha, she lay pale and still.

He sank slowly into the chair by the bed, his eyes taking in the color of her skin, the limp blond hair scattered across her pillow. He remembered just enough from his years as a medical student to know that the machines were telling him her heart rate was steady, her blood pressure was low, and she was showing just enough brain activity to prove she wasn't in a full vegetative state.

He blinked hard.

Eleven years since he'd become a Ranger, and here he was again at someone's bedside, watching them fight for their life. Ransik's defeat, his relationship with Eric, all that he'd gone through with Alex, and losing Eric all over again. And now he was right back where he'd started: watching the woman who'd been his rock for the past three months struggling to live. Wondering if the baby inside of her - *his* baby - would even live long enough to be born.

He buried his face in his hands.

****

It was the hand on his shoulder that woke him.

Reflex made him jerk back, grabbing it to twist. But the hand moved with him, while another reached out to touch his cheek gently. "Wes?" a familiar voice asked softly.

He froze, blinking rapidly as his eyes finally cleared. "... Dad?"

"Oh, thank god," his dad murmured, pulling him close. "I'm so sorry I couldn't get here sooner - I was out of the country. I didn't get the news that you'd been hurt right away, and then customs was -"

"Dad," he interrupted. "Dad, it's okay." He managed a weak smile as he pulled away. "I'm ... I'm glad you're here."

"Master Wesley."

He found himself swept up in another hug, and returned it just as tightly. "Phillips ... " Butler or not, Phillips was the closest thing to a second parent he had.

He finally pulled away to look at them both with a watery smile. Knowing that they were here, that they cared, meant more than he could say. "I, um ... Thanks."

His dad's expression softened, and he reached out to gently ruffle his hair. "I'm wish we'd been here when you woke up. Speaking of which, what are you doing out of bed? Have you been cleared to be up and around?"

He swallowed hard as his smile faded. "I ... I had to .... " Unable to explain, he settled for gesturing
silently to the bed.

"She's a friend of yours?" Phillips asked carefully.

He winced. When he left for Newtech City, he'd told them he needed a change. He hadn't been quite ready to answer the question of what made that change Newtech City; he'd still barely been able to believe it himself at the time. And while he'd kept in touch, he still hadn't told them anything about the other reasons behind it. He couldn't find the words to explain what had happened.

And now he didn't have a choice.

He swallowed hard, blinking rapidly. "Her name is Vanessa Tate. She's my best friend," he said quietly, watching her sleep. He couldn't look his father, look *either* of them, in the eye. "... She's pregnant."

"The poor thing," his dad murmured.

"... With my baby."

There was silence.

He blinked hard again, fighting the sudden burn of tears. All that time he'd spent arguing with his father about Eric, about how he was the one and there'd never be anyone else. All the time and effort and money for a lost dream, for a life with Eric he could never have. And now here he was, telling his family about his illegitimate child with a woman he was only just getting to know. What would they think of him now?

What would he do if she - if *they* - didn't make it?

"Why can't I stop *crying*?!" he burst out, rubbing harshly at his eyes with a fist.

Arms came around him, and his dad's voice whispered soothingly in his ear. "Shh, Wes ... Just let it out. Let it out, son."

All he could do was bury his face against his father's shoulder, clinging to him like a child as he sobbed.

****

The story - the *whole* story, of Alex, Time Force, what happened with Eric, meeting Vanessa and everything that had happened since then - took hours to tell. His dad and Phillips both listened, saving their questions until the end, and even then they'd been supportive. His dad approved of his decision to stand by Vanessa, insisting that he was proud of Wes for taking responsibility for his actions. And he promised that he would continue to support him and his new grandchild, no matter what.

But it was Phillips who did the most, in one of the few moments when his dad had briefly left the room.

~"Master Wesley ... shall I have Mr. Myers ... 'taken care of'?"~

Wes had laughed, long and hard. He cried a little too, because it still hurt. Because Eric had never responded to his voicemail, and eventually he'd realized that Eric just wasn't coming. But Phillips, who had loved him and helped raise him, who had held him and made him cookies every time he...
got suspended for another fight over his mother, started his interest in karate, supported all his decisions both good and bad, was still here. His dad was still here. And that was enough.

Three days later, Vanessa's eyes finally opened. She blinked slowly, ignoring Dana's persistent gentle questions, and looked straight at Wes, whispering "Did ... anyone save ... my work?"
Wes jerked awake to the sound of something hitting the wall of his bedroom repeatedly. It took him a few minutes to first of all, remember where he was. The room wasn't nearly as red as it should be, and the bed seemed lower to the ground.

Vanessa's house, he remembered abruptly. The one she'd bought because she insisted she was not raising her child in S.P.D. headquarters. It was bad enough that both of his parents were S.P.D.; the baby was going to have its own life.

He'd moved in with her over the last two months of the pregnancy. She'd been tired a lot, and there'd been a lot of concern about side affects from the accident five months ago. None of the Docs or Techs had ever been able to pinpoint exactly what had happened or how it had affected the babies, but they'd still been warned to be careful.

Which really just meant that Vanessa kept threatening him for being too overprotective.

The thumping noise came again, and he finally forced himself out of bed, stumbling through the hall to open the door of the bedroom next to his. "Yeah?" he sighed, rubbing at his eyes. Silently he prayed this wasn't yet another 1:00am Jell-O run.

"It's about time," Vanessa snarled at him. "I was running out of shoes to throw."

"More ... Jell-O?" he yawned.

She made a strange sort of grunting noise, and the look on her face made him pause. "No ... " she hissed at last. "I need you to get the ... uhn ... car. Baby's coming."

He'd never woken up so fast in his life. "What, now?!"

The glare she shot him could've frozen fire. "No, in another six hours. Yes, *now*!"

"W - I ... are you sure?" he asked anxiously. "I mean, didn't Dana say it was going to - "

"I've been having contractions since this afternoon, I know what she said! I was there! And now *I'm* saying the baby is coming now, and you are going to get the damn car already!"

The tone of her voice gave him a sudden flashback of Jen, and he fought the urge to salute. "Right!"

"Wes, pull over."

He dared a glance over his shoulder at the backseat as he dodged traffic at a speed that brought
back fond memories of his Vectorcycle. "What, now?"

"I'm - I'm not ... gonna make it to S.P.D.," she groaned, looking pale.

"But - "

"Either find the nearest hospital, or - ah! Or your child is being born in - ooh - this car!"

His eyes widened, and he yanked the wheel to the side, frantically searching for a hospital as he nearly sideswiped another car. "Man, this kid's already causing me trouble," he muttered to himself.

"What did you - ah - say?!"

"Nothing, nothing!"

His eyes widened in recognition as he caught sight of one of the approaching signs. He jerked the steering wheel sharply and dodged through traffic in a mad rush for the exit with a level of expertise only a former Ranger could achieve. "Newtech General!" he shouted in relief.

Vanessa screamed and clutched the door, in pain or fear he didn't know.

He threw the car into park by the Emergency Room doors, throwing open the door and stumbling over his own feet as he scrambled to get out. He burst into the waiting room, looking around frantically for a nurse. "Someone help! My g - my friend's in labor!" he yelled.

It was only later, when he was finally calmed down and a lot more coherent, that he would understand that at 6:00am the hospital was barely opening its doors. Which is why, at 6:15am, the Triage nurse barely glanced up at him. "Maternity is the next building over," she murmured.

"Wha - y-you don't understand!" he protested. "She's in labor *right now*!"

"*Wes*!" Vanessa screamed from outside.

"Then I suppose you'd better hurry her over to maternity," the nurse returned, sorting through her paperwork.

He gaped at her.

"*Wesley Collins* so help me - !"

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" he called hurriedly, dashing back to the car.

Vanessa did not look well. She was pale, sweating, and obviously in pain. She wasn't even glaring at him anymore. "It hurts ... " she moaned.

"Don't worry, Nes," he tried to assure her, shifting into drive without bothering to put his seatbelt back on. "We're almost there, I promise. It'll be okay. Everything's gonna be fine. Just hang in there."

The nurses in maternity thankfully seemed used to handling such situations. They had Vanessa out of the car almost before he'd finished trying to explain. They were waiting for him when he finished parking, calmly filling in paperwork and offering to let him into the delivery room, asking if there was anyone else they needed to call.

He gave them Dana's extension at S.P.D., along with a vague explanation about having been on
their way to have the baby delivered there because she was their personal doctor. At the offer of joining her in the delivery room however, he shuddered. "No thanks. I'd rather not. This was a lot easier when the lab took care of everything and just told us when we could see them," he muttered, rubbing at his chest as his racing heart finally began to slow down again.

The nurse gave him an odd look, but didn't ask.

****

"He's beautiful, Nes," Wes breathed, running a hand along his son's face as gently as he could.

Vanessa shot him a weary but dark glare. "Call me that one more time, I *dare* you," she growled. "See what nine hours of labor does to my restraint."

"I'm sorry!" he said hastily, holding up his free hand in surrender. "I'm sorry. Vanessa. I won't call you - *that* again."

She humped, still glowering. "Both hands to hold the baby, genius. If you drop him, he'll end as smart as *you*.

"You can keep glaring and snapping at me all you want, but it's not going to bother me," he returned, smiling lovingly down at the infant he was holding. Blue eyes blinked up at him sleepily.

~ "They're beautiful," he breathed, tracing the tip of his finger down the nose of the baby in his arms. His son wrinkled his nose, and dark eyes peeked open to glare up at him.

He grinned back, feeling like he was walking on a cloud. "He has your eyes, Eric."

"Let's hope they don't act like me," Eric retorted as he smiled softly at the twin he was holding.

He laughed. "I'm quoting you on that, just so you know. Years down the road, I'm going to remember this moment, and remind you that you *didn't* want our boys to be just like you."

"Sure you will, Wes. Sure you will."

A soft cry jerked him out of his thoughts, and he blinked down at the baby. "Don't cry, Kiddo," he soothed, catching the tiny hand with a finger. "It's okay. Daddy's here to protect you."

"Wes ..."

He didn't look up at her, too busy trying to calm their son. "Yeah?"

Vanessa's voice was oddly soft. "You're one who's crying."

He blinked again. "Am I?" Reaching up to brush his cheek with one hand revealed she was right, and he stared at the damp fingers blankly. "... Oh." He chuckled weakly. "I guess I am."

"Wes."

He glanced over at her. "Hmm?"

Vanessa sighed, looking down at her lap. When she looked back up again she held out her arms expectantly. "Give me the baby. Let me hold him while you go call."

He frowned, confused. "Call who?"
She shook her head, rolling her eyes at him. "Your father for one, stupid. For another ... " She stared at him for a long moment, her eyes soft and understanding.

He stared back in growing horror, tightening his hold on the baby reflexively as he shook his head in denial. She couldn't mean ... "I - I can't. He -"

He fell silent as Vanessa reached out to put a hand on his arm. She squeezed gently, but her eyes were serious. "It's time to try, Wes. This is important to you, and he needs to be here for it."

"What if he won't come?" he whispered, swallowing hard.

"Then you still have us."

****

It took him a lot longer than it should have to finally dial the number. It went to voicemail, which didn't really surprise him anymore, but his throat still felt tight when it beeped at him expectantly. There was an awkward moment where he wasn't sure he *could* speak, and then he coughed a little.

"E-Eric?" He swallowed again. "Look, I ... I know ... it's been awhile. I just ... " He closed his eyes, leaning his head back against the wall of the lounge. "Vanessa finally had the baby. I don't know if you ever read the letter I left, to try and explain ... " He trailed off, feeling awkward and stupid.

At last he shook his head. "I'd like you to meet him," he said finally. "I can understand if you don't - if you'd rather not. But I want you to." He blinked hard for a moment. "We're at Newtech City Medical Center, room 503 - it's under Vanessa Tate.

"My cell phone number is still the same, if you'd rather call. Or something. If you still have it." He dropped his head against the wall with a slight thump, resisting the urge to hit it again. Why was he doing this? He sounded like an idiot.

Eventually he sighed. He wasn't sure if the voicemail was even still recording at this point. "I miss you, Eric. More than I ever thought I could," he whispered. "And I love you. Please - " He caught himself, shaking his head. "Just call me. Or come. Please?"

He hung up, staring at the phone in his hand.

Seven months now, since he'd left Silver Hills. Eric hadn't called, written, or so much as checked in with him. He on the other hand, *had* tried, over and over. When Eric wouldn't listen to his reasons when he told him he was leaving, he'd left a letter in his mailbox, explaining about Vanessa and the baby. Every time he called home, he asked his dad how Eric was doing. He'd called after the accident, practically begging him to come.

But Eric never responded. Not to the letter or the call. Dad hadn't said, but Wes was fairly certain he didn't ask about him, either. It was like he'd put Wes out of his mind and moved on.

And maybe ... maybe it was time for him to do the same.

The baby was asleep by the time he came back, but Vanessa was waiting for him. He flopped in the chair next to the bed, leaning forward to bury his face in her lap. He expected her to say something, but all she did was run her fingers through his hair while he struggled to bring his emotions back under control.

It was a long time before she spoke. "What are you naming him?"
He blinked up at her blearily. "Huh?"

"He gets my last name, but I'll let you chose the rest," she told him, her voice booking no argument. Her fingers never stopped.

He was quiet, thinking for a while. At last he realized there was only one name he could give his third child. The one he'd already promised.

~"Naming them based on 'A' and 'B' was stupid. What's the next one gonna be? 'C'?"

"Well, why not? You got a better name?"

A long pause. "Don't laugh."

"Never."

"I... I always liked Skyler." A look that dared him to tease.

"Skyler... Y'know, I kinda like that, too. Let's name our next kid Skyler."

"Wait, next? What do you mean, 'next'?!"

"Skyler," he said finally. "His name is Skyler Ericson Tate."

Goodbye, Eric.
This story exists for two reasons. One, because Eric needs a cat. Seriously. So I based his off one of mine, who really does act like this. She's a sweetie and I love her. And two, because Eric's side of the last chapter of Bright Skies needs to be told.

"E-Eric? Look, I ... I know ... it's been awhile. I just ... I have another son. I don't know if you ever read that letter I mailed you to try and explain ..."

"Vanessa uh, she finally had the baby. It's a boy. I'd ... I'd really like for you to see him. Me. Um ... you still have my cell number. I haven't changed it, or anything. We're at New Tech City Medical Center, room 503. It's listed under Vanessa Tate. Please call me. I miss you."

It hadn't taken much to get in. The security in this place was disgustingly pathetic - he'd have to post a few guardians just in case. Wes probably wouldn't have thought of that yet.

He paused, shaking his head. He was doing it again. He seemed to have this instinctive need to protect Wes. It was stupid and pointless; Wes could take care of himself. And Wes wasn't his problem anymore.

His eyes swept through the baskets of squealers behind the window. Noisy brats. He still didn't get what Wes' obsession with them was.

The bassinette he was looking for was surprisingly right in front of him. Wrapped up in a blue blanket - he never understood the whole blue/pink thing - and a tiny ID bracelet. The kid was awake, but oddly not crying. He looked around with wide, blue eyes.

Wes' eyes.

His fist clenched. What the hell was he doing here? He had no reason to be checking up on some brat that came from Wes' one-night stand with his new girlfriend. One stupid voicemail, Wes trying to sound all pitiful and lonely, and he came -

He froze, staring at the name labeled on the bassinette. Skylar Ericson Tate.

"You know, naming them based on 'A' and 'B' is just stupid. What's the next one gonna be? 'C'?"

"Well, why not? What letter of the alphabet would you use? S?"

A long pause. "Don't laugh."

"Never."

"I ... I always liked the name Skyler." A look that dared him to tease.

"Skylar ... Y'know, I kinda like that, too. Let's name our next kid Skylar."

"Next? What do you mean, 'next'?!"
He reached out to touch the glass, staring down at the infant. Skylar. Wes had actually ... actually kept his promise. Even though it wasn't theirs, he had ....

"It was supposed to be a *joke* stupid," he growled under his breath, blinking harshly as his eyes felt wet. "You weren't supposed to actually name the kid that."

His fingers ran slowly down as he studied the middle name. *Ericson: Eric's son.* Well, if that wasn't a blatant invitation he didn't know *what* was. But then, Wes wasn't all that great with subtlety when he really wanted something.

A faint smile crept across his face. Wes really wanted something.

It was gone in an instant. Was *he* ready for this? Ready to forgive? After Wes had betrayed him, betrayed him in the most cruel and heartless way ... Could he really let that go, so that they could be together again?

"Later, kid," he murmured to the infant, turning from the window.

****

He returned home to find the stupid cat glaring at him from the window sill. He ignored her as he opened the door.

She retaliated by curling around his ankles and forcing him to stumble when he tried to head for the kitchen. She ran when he cursed, but he saw her back in the window a few minutes later, watching him again.

Dumb cat. Why had he let the thing in the house, anyway? All it did was drive him crazy and try to get at the birds, which panicked the little things into near heart failure. It was a stray cat; not exactly helpless. Not his problem.

He made his coffee and sat down at the table with a heavy sigh.

*Skylar Ericson Tate.*

He swore, clenching a fist. After a minute he shook his head and buried his face in his hand.

Soft purring rumbled somewhere in front of him, and white fur rubbed under his nose.

He sighed again, sitting up to slowly stroke her back. "That's why you make me keep you around, isn't it?" he murmured.

She purred louder, rubbing against his hand and moving forward to nuzzle his chest.

He ran his fingers through her fur. "He was beautiful, Gracie. So tiny. Had his eyes, too. The way I wished they had." He stopped suddenly, shaking his head. "It's just a stupid, noisy squealer," he muttered to himself. "It's red and ugly and messy. Wes wants another one, fine by me."

She surprised him by pawing gently at his face.

He blinked, then let out another sigh. "Am I doing it again?"

She meowed softly.

He rubbed at his eyes, wiping away the tear streak with a thumb. "Five months ago he said he still loved me and he was sorry. Okay, so he was barely conscious and didn't even really know it was
me, but he said it. Last week he calls me to say the kid he had with someone else was just born and he
wants me to meet it, and he misses me. But I just ... " He closed his eyes briefly, then looked at her
helplessly. "How am I supposed to forgive him? I thought ... I honestly thought we were going
to make a family together. And he knew all along it would never happen? Did he just do it 'cause
that future guy told him to? What if he was just going along with it because it wouldn't work out? I
...
"

He groaned in frustration. In the year since he'd told Wes to get out and meant it, the seven months
since Wes left for Newtech City and never looked back, he'd asked himself the same questions
over and over. Why did Wes do it? Why didn't he warn him? Why didn't he try to stop it from
happening? Had he ever really meant to have kids together? Or was he just using him for some
DNA?

But the only answers lay with Wes, and he wasn't ready for that yet.

Seeing Wes lying so still and broken on that hospital bed five months ago, everything over the last
few years had come rushing back through the veil of anger he'd been trying to cling to. All the
great times they'd had together. Wes' mischievous grin whenever he teased, the way his eyes sorta
sparkled when he was truly happy. All the romantic junk that came with being in a relationship.

All the hard times they'd come through together.

But he still couldn't forgive him. He still couldn't accept him after what had happened. It wasn't
that he didn't want to; he missed Wes more than he could say. But every time he tried to look him
in the eyes he'd see that guilt, and his anger would come surging forward again, leaving him
wanting to strangle the other man.

After awhile he sighed, sitting back in his chair to regard the cat. "I must be losing my mind," he
grumbled. "Sitting here alone, talking to a stupid cat about my ex."

Her ears went back and she meowed loudly.

"Yeah, yeah. I'll get you something to eat."

Then he cursed as once again, she tried to wrap herself around his ankles.
"Well, she's perfectly healthy," Dana sighed, hanging her stethoscope back around her neck. "They both are."

Wes frowned, exchanging glances with Justin. "And we're sure about this?" the young man asked, looking down at his own daughter.

"There's no chance of anything we might have missed?" Wes added, shifting Sky in his arms. Three months old and already very alert, Sky's wide eyes watched his every movement as he spoke. He glanced down, offering his son a warm smile and rubbing his back.

Dana shook her head. "There's nothing wrong with them, Wes. They're happy, healthy, normal babies."

"Actually, that's not entirely true."

Both men looked at Kat Manx as she watched them solemnly from the doorway. "What's not true?" Wes asked sharply. He winced when Sky began to fuss and murmured soothingly to him, shifting him closer to his shoulder.

"I'm sorry to intrude," Kat began, "But I've been concerned over the possible complications that may arise from ... the incident." She lifted her chin a little higher. "I've been monitoring the health of both children and all those involved."

"And we've already concluded that everyone is perfectly healthy," Dana informed her, eyes narrowing. "And you don't have any authority to be performing those sort of studies without express permission, Miss Manx."

"It was my lack of attention that caused the accident in the first place," Kat shot back. "The least I can do is offer my help in case of abnormalities."

"Abnormalities?" Justin demanded. "What abnormalities?"

"It's very subtle - nothing that anyone would catch off-hand," Kat answered, frowning now as she suddenly looked vaguely uncomfortable. "When it became obvious that Sky was completely healthy, I began searching for any complications more deeply - "

Wes cut her off, not in the mood to listen to a long, boring explanation he wouldn't understand anyway. "What did you find?"

"It's in their D.N.A.," she told him. "It's a slight mutation, barely obvious enough to even classify them as anything but human."

"Mutation?" he repeated, horror dawning as memories of Ransik and Nadira flashed through his
eyes. His arms tightened slightly around Sky.

"Technically, yes," she confirmed. "They are human, but both children seem to have a slight shift in their genetic make-up."

"Of what nature?" Justin asked, frowning as he picked up Elizabeth. He began to rock her absently, and her eyes closed in contentment.

Kat hesitated, then shrugged. "I can't be sure. It's - "

"I want to see your data," he interrupted, voice firm.

"You can use the computers here," Dana spoke up, still glaring at Kat. "As the children's personal doctor, I insist on being shown this information as well."

Kat sighed, one of her ears flicking back. Wes raised an eyebrow at the movement, as he hadn't seen her ears move before, but he was too worried about what she said she'd found to really ponder it. "Very well," she said at last.

What followed was a bunch of graphs and charts and debate over things that Wes really didn't understand. He watched Justin get more and more upset, saw Dana give Kat the cold shoulder, and wished that Vanessa was here to translate for him. Unfortunately, she'd been involved in a project for the last week that she'd sworn to disembowel him if he interrupted. He was still trying to decide if something concerning Sky's health would be enough reason to get her if it wasn't an emergency and, judging by what he *could* get from their conversation, there nothing she could do about it anyway.

He winced, trying to summon up vague memories of his short-lived medical education. He'd caught the words 'neutral mutations'; that meant whatever was wrong with the kids wouldn't affect their health, which was good. He also caught 'permanent' and something about 'Loss-of-function' versus 'Gain-of-function'. So either Sky wouldn't be able to do something, or he'd gain some sort of extra ability. Great.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, then winced again a moment later when he realized the gesture was something Eric used to do when he was stressed.

"There are too many variables in this situation," he heard Kat argue. "It's impossible to declare a single result when you consider that a great deal of the problem isn't something that can be defined."

Justin was starting to look angry. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"There were sixteen people in that room at the time of the incident," Kat snapped. "Thirteen of them were Power Rangers at some point in their lives, and three of them are still active. Four of them were genetically altered during their time as Rangers on a greater level than simply accessing the Morphin Grid. Five, if you factor in Trent Fernandez when he and Tyzonn discovered what had happened. Three people still had an extra-sensory ability at the time, and one of them *actively* used it. That's in addition to the fact that we had pure Morphin Energy leaking through the room into two partially developed human infants and one human fetus. Not to mention that all three of them are descended from Rangers to begin with. There's no way to be absolutely certain of *what* happened until it *does*."

Wes stared at her, his stunned expression mimicking Justin's as Dana frowned, starting to look worried. "So ... something's wrong with Sky and Elizabeth, but we don't know why and we have no
"Something is wrong with *everyone* involved," she returned, narrowing her eyes at him. "More than one person was genetically effected in the accident. It's just so subtle that it's almost unnoticeable, especially considering that the effect is to former Rangers. There's no telling what could happen to anyone in the future."

Wes struggled to process all this, kissing his son's head and holding him close. First Alex and Ben, now Sky. Why couldn't he have a kid without weird experiences or random Power-effects? Why couldn't he raise *one* normal child?

Which is why, of course, it was that exact moment when the announcement came over the intercom system. "Attention: All former Rangers report to Command immediately."

****

It was odd to try and do the S.P.D. salute with an infant in his free arm, but he managed. There was no way anyone was getting him to put Sky down. Judging by Justin's oddly blank expression and the way he was clutching his daughter, he felt the same.

Command was more than a little crowded at the moment, and everyone had instinctively moved into departments. Wes frowned as he glanced at his own group, keenly feeling the loss of Rocky, Adam, and Cassie. Cassie had moved to head the Drill Sergeant squads at the new S.P.D. Japan division. While she kept in touch with the Newtech base frequently, it wasn't quite the same as watching her and Tori talking quietly together, or watching her laugh and flash them all a smile as she leaned on Ko-lin possessively.

His gaze moved on, noting the other former Rangers missing from the gathered group. Hunter Bradley, who had to everyone's surprise been given the command position of S.P.D. Japan - at Cruger's recommendation. Cam, who had followed him and brought some of the Morpher Project's work along as well as some of its non-Ranger staff. T.J. and Ko-lin from the Grunts, Ko-lin to follow her girlfriend and T.J. because he claimed he didn't trust either of them to stay out of trouble. Mack and Tyzonn, attached at the hip almost even more closely than Cassie and Ko-lin, who had become the S.P.D. Ambassadors in Japan. Andrew Hartford, who had jumped at the chance to head his own Tech department.

It was harder than he'd thought it would be to see everyone leave. He'd only been with S.P.D. for seven months now, and yet in that small amount of time he'd formed friendships with all of its former Rangers. Cassie's warm laughter and the playful way she teased, never afraid to show some muscle when it was needed. Mack was one of his best friends, and the first person he went to when his dad pestered him about how he and Vanessa were doing in that not-quite-subtle way he had. Tyzonn - well, he didn't know Tyzonn as well as the others, but he knew he was a friend and that he adored Mack. He missed the way Andrew sighed and told him and Mack they should try seeing things from their parents' point of view one of these days, even as he tussled Mack's hair fondly. He even actually missed Cam's sarcasm and criticism, Hunter hovering over his shoulder. He'd barely gotten a chance to know Katherine Hillard before she'd transferred to S.P.D. Japan's medical department, but she was always sweet and friendly, and he missed her warm smile whenever she saw him with Sky.

Right now he missed Rocky and Adam, who had gone to see the Japanese base to see how Cassie and the others were settling in and decide if there was enough room or need to add in a Ranger program there. Aisha just started her maternity leave barely two weeks ago, and she'd gone with them while complaining she was bored already. Zack had decided to tag along, but according to
Rumor Mill it was probably because Aisha's pregnancy wasn't going as well as everyone had hoped, and he was afraid to let his girlfriend out of his sight.

Tori frowned at Wes, tilting her head towards Sky. 'You okay?' she mouthed.

He shook his head, waving a hand slightly in a vague gesture of later.

"What's going on, Commander?" Will asked, stepping forward.

Cruger cleared his throat. "I'm afraid we have a situation, everyone," he informed them solemnly. "We've received a transmission from S.P.D. Japan that the plane carrying Sergeant Captains Park and DeSantos, Lieutenant Captain Taylor, and Lieutenant Corporal Campbell has been caught in a severe storm during its return flight to our base. In addition, their call stated that Ms. Campbell has gone into pre-mature labor pains."

"Now?" Ashley gasped. "But - she's only seven months!"

"As we are all well aware, Sergeant Hammond," Cruger agreed, nodding to her.

He was immediately bombarded with questions from the Docs, as well as well as anxious concerns from Kimberly, Tommy, and Billy. The rest of the room sort of faded into the background for Wes as everyone reacted to the news in their own way. He leaned against a console, holding Sky tight to his chest and kissing the top of his head. He closed his eyes for a moment, praying to whatever was listening for his friends to be okay, for his son to stay healthy, for everything to work out.

"Wes ... ?"

He opened an eye. "Hey, Tori," he sighed wearily. "Sorry - its been a long day."

She leaned in next to him, wrapping him in a one-armed hug and gently ruffling the fine whips of Sky's hair. "What happened?"

He rested his head on her shoulder with a sigh, musing to himself that he wouldn't have been this comfortable with her just a few months ago. "Sky has a genetic mutation left from the accident. They don't know what it is or what it means yet."

On the other side of the room, he could see Justin talking quietly to Rose, followed by her resounding "What?!"

He closed his eyes again, letting Tori hug him as he cuddled his son.

****

Six hours of endless coffee, anxiety, and fear before they got the message.

The plane had finally landed at Newtech City Airport, and Aisha and the baby were being rushed to Newtech Medical. She was in bad shape, and the boy might not even make it through another night. Rocky was a complete wreck. Adam had withdrawn into himself, hardly speaking unless asked a direct question.

It was Zack, to everyone's amazement, who had come through in the end. They learned later that he had taken charge of the situation, delivered the baby, and kept everyone calm while they fought to keep him alive throughout the flight. When the plane landed Zack had Aisha packed into the ambulance with Rocky at her side, knowing he would be useless for anything else. He hailed a cab and brought Adam and himself back to S.P.D., answering all Cruger's questions with a precise and
calm report.

Which is why when they all finally found out, nearly a week later, what the baby's name was, it wasn't as much of a surprise as it might have been otherwise.

*Bridge Taylor Carson.*

Bridge, Rocky had explained, because he connected two couples, four friends, and had been born between two completely different continents. Taylor for Zack, without whom he never would have made it into the world. Carson as a sign of the three people who created him: 'c' for Campbell, 'ar' from Park, and 'son' taken from DeSantos.

When asked why it was 'son' instead of 'san', he gave them all an odd look and answered that 'son' sounded better.
Save the Day

Chapter Notes

Wow, this sucker's long. But this prompt just wouldn't die short. It just kept *going* ...

Zofren is technically my alter-ego for a cannon character, as stolen from my Fade to Darkness universe. He really hasn't been there yet, though. I've never noticed if Z's necklace actually replicates with her or not since she's always hiding it under her uniform, so I'm taking liberties here.

It all started out seemingly innocent.

Wes was walking down the hall at S.P.D. when he suddenly noticed a baby, just barely learned to crawl, steadily moving along on her own. "Elizabeth Stewart-Ortiz!" he called, scooping her up to give her a firm stare. "And just what do you think you're doing out here, young lady?"

She blinked up at him with large brown eyes. She was a cute little thing, a bit pudgy with wispy brown hair starting to curl around her face. Just over a year old now and she was already proving to be very intelligent, learning to mimic things by watching the people around her.

"Time to go back to your mother, kiddo," he scolded, tapping her nose gently. He grinned when she stared at it cross-eyed.

With Sky, Elizabeth, and Bridge being born literally within months of each other, all of the former Rangers of S.P.D. had found themselves keeping an eye on the little rugrats. It wasn't anything anyone had been particularly asked to do, but it made things easier on all associated parents, and it just seemed to happen almost instinctively that way. Wes couldn't complain, as it kept Sky always in safe hands and usually playing contentedly with the other two.

He frowned, trying to remember who'd volunteered to baby-sit today as he shifted Elizabeth to one arm. He flashed her another smile as she continued to stare at him, and tickled her until she burst into giggles. She didn't smile often, too busy watching the world with those wide eyes, but she was absolutely adorable when she did.

He poked his head into Rose's office, glancing to make sure she was in there. "Hey, Rose," he called. "I found something that I think belongs to you."

She looked up, sighing in frustration as he walked in. "Elizabeth Saige," she growled.

"Hey, Rose! I think you lost something!" Nick announced, grinning as he and Madison followed behind him. In Madison’s arms was an equally wide-eyed baby, identical to the one Wes held.

"Rose, can't you keep a hold of your own kid?" Ronny complained from behind them, carting yet another infant.

Everyone froze as they all looked first at one another, then to the three identical children. "What in the world?" Madison gasped.

"Elizabeth?" Rose asked, calmly and carefully.
"Mama!" all three babies squealed in unison, holding out their arms.

"Hey Rose, do you have - whoa! Dude!" Dustin stumbled to a stop, staring at them all with wide eyes. "So, uh ... Does anyone think this was what Kat meant by 'unique DNA structure'?" he asked, blinking rapidly.

****

After extensive studies by the Docs, Techs, *and* Morpher Project's Floaters, everyone had come to the same conclusion: all three infants were Elizabeth. All three were completely identical in every way, down to their DNA structure. All showed the same reactions to different stimuli, and even seemed to be aware of one another. Genetically, there was simply no way to tell them apart.

Rose had gone into what Chip liked to call her 'Stern and Silent Mode', keeping her words short and precise. When she didn't speak, her eyes were narrow and her lips thinned. Justin on the other hand, was trying his best to be cheerful as he played with all three versions of what were apparently their daughter. His eyes never matched his smile when he talked to anyone, but he forced himself to treat the three little girls all the same as he usually would.

Frankly, Wes didn't know how he was doing it.

And then at the end of the day, Justin turned around from preparing her dinner to find a single baby, sound asleep in the chair he'd left her in. The other two had vanished.

****

"Like I said, I don't know for sure if this is a solution," Tommy warned.

"Are you sure he'll even come?" Nick asked skeptically. "I mean, I know the story behind Mystic Mother and all from my mom, but no one ever mentioned him."

"That doesn't mean he isn't still around," Tommy informed him. "And like I said, I don't *know* if he can help. But if R - " He winced. "Mystic Mother is gone, he's our best shot."

"Mystic Mother," Kimberly murmured, shaking her head in bemusement.

Wes gave her a sympathetic smile. He'd gone along with the three of them to greet Tommy's 'ally' that *might* be able to help Justin and Rose with Elizabeth mostly because he needed something to do before he went crazy. Vanessa hadn't taken the news about Sky well, and with Elizabeth's ... situation ... she hadn't let Sky out of her sight. He was desperate for a chance of something, *anything* that might help Elizabeth. After all, if this guy could help her, maybe he'd be able to help whatever happened to Sky in the future.

So he'd tagged along while they waited at the landing zone for this guy Tommy was looking for. Kimberly had come because for one, she was an S.P.D. Ambassador and she had to. But she also seemed to be there for Tommy judging by the way she had loosely hooked their fingers together, which struck Wes as odd, because while they had 'moments' every once in awhile that made everyone wonder, they really weren't a couple as far as anyone knew. But then, who was he to judge someone else's relationship? He still couldn't get over his last one even though it ended nearly two years ago, and he kept using his new status as a daddy and responsibility to help Vanessa as an excuse to get out of any chance of being forced into anything. He'd finally accepted that he and Eric were over, but he wasn't ready to think about dating any time in the near future.

He glanced at Nick, and smiled faintly. From what he could tell, Nick was just here from straight
curiosity. He might have used his position a Grunt to help him get there, but mostly he just seemed to really want to meet this guy.

What finally emerged from the shuttle when it landed, was the absolute *last* thing Wes had been expecting.

The man was thin to the point of almost being scrawny. Possibly even geeky-looking. Apparently in his late forties, his brown hair was already streaked with gray, and his face seemed worn and tired just from the flight - which, judging by the quality of the shuttle he was using, really hadn't been that long. He was wearing what looked like some sort of ceremonial red robes, while his forearms and calves had been wrapped in bandages.

He stopped in front of them all with a small, quiet smile, bowing gracefully in a way that reminded Wes of the way some of S.P.D. Japan's staff greeted them. "I'm honored by your presence, Power Rangers. Forgive my delay - our shuttle encountered trouble," he said softly.

Tommy blinked, hurrying to mimic Kimberly as she bowed back to the man, and Wes and Nick followed suit. "We're glad to have you," Kimberly returned. She gave him a smile, but Wes noted it wasn't quite as warm as she would usually have given. "Thank you for hurrying to help us."

"It's the very least I can do," the man murmured, his eyes falling to the ground.

Tommy cleared his throat awkwardly with the expression of someone who was still searching for a way to salvage the situation. "Well, uh ... You ... you remember me and Kimberly, of course." He winced even as he said it, and Kimberly shot him a glare. "This is Sergeant Commander Nick Russell of our Security Department, former Red Mystic Force Ranger. And Sergeant Captain Wes Collins, Red Time Force Ranger. Guys this is - " He stopped again, hesitating.

The man offered them all another soft smile, inclining his head. "Please, Tommy. Don't hurt yourself trying to be diplomatic," he teased gently. "I am called Zofren of Nastris." His eyes turned to them, and Wes was startled to realize his gaze was actually studying him intently. "I'm also the former Lord Zedd."

He tried not to gape, and discreetly stepped down hard on Nick's foot when he openly stared. *This* was Lord Zedd? This quiet, nerdy guy? He looked like a member of a monastery from one of Jen's old Kung Fu movies! How could this guy be one of the people who'd once tried to conquer Earth, the man Tommy had openly admitted to being his greatest enemy?

Then he blinked, and fought not to stare at Tommy now. This was *Lord Zedd* and Tommy invited him here on *purpose*? Was he crazy?!

Zedd - *Zofren* glanced at Tommy, peering up at him shyly from under his eyelashes in a way that was disturbingly feminine somehow, yet seemed to suit him. "You invited security to escort me while you surround me with Red Rangers?" he asked.

Tommy froze, looking horrified. "No! No, it's not like that at all! I didn't - we weren't trying to imply - "

He was cut off by Zofren's quiet laughter, which was more of a subtle shaking of his shoulders than anything. "Relax, Tommy," he chuckled. "I'm not offended. I still find it's fun to rile you up a bit."

Tommy stared at him for a moment, then scowled. "That's a bad habit," he warned.
Zofren shrugged. "Unfortunately, that's always been a part of my nature. I'm usually just more subtle about it than I was during that time."

There was another awkward pause, and Zofren gave them all another one of his calm smiles. "Well, then. You said you had a child in need of help?"

The Power Rangers were asking one of Earth's worst former villains to save the day and help protect their children. He never thought he'd live to see the day. To be honest, he hoped he never lived to see them this desperate again.

****

It surprised Wes a little when it was Justin that took more effort to convince to allow Zofren to look at Elizabeth, rather than Rose. Rose seemed to have reached the point of being anxious to find anyone able to figure out what was wrong with her daughter. Justin on the other hand, was one of Zordon's chosen Rangers. He knew exactly who and *what* Zofren used to be, and he didn't want him anywhere near his little girl. In the end it took Tommy swearing on his own life that Zofren wouldn't hurt her and both of them being allowed to remain in the same room - with Grunts - before Justin relented.

Zofren didn't really seem to do much, in Wes' opinion. After reading every lab and medical report from the incident, he played with Elizabeth. He watched her smile and giggle, and when she finally did ... whatever she was doing again a few days after he'd arrived, he just seemed to look at each one of her for the longest time.

At last he called for all of the former Rangers who'd been involved in the accident, and requested that Sky, Elizabeth, and Bridge be brought along as well. Cam, T.J., and Tyzonn had all been brought in via com call from S.P.D. Japan. No one was happy to be there.

"Would you like the good news or bad?" Zofren asked finally, offering them all a sad smile.

"There's good news?" T.J. muttered on one of the monitors.

"All of these children are happy, healthy, and perfectly capable of learning to control their abilities," Zofren informed him. "That *is* good news."

"Then what's the bad, Dude?" Dustin asked, frowning.

Zofren sighed heavily, reaching out to touch Elizabeth's hand as she grabbed for him with a happy giggle and tried to climb into his lap. "Elizabeth is creating copies of herself. These are complete copies; you can't tell the difference because there isn't one. They're extensions of herself. She's consciously aware that she's doing it, which is a good sign because she has a natural grasp of what she can do. Unfortunately, she seems to be very curious by nature and enjoying the trouble she's causing, which makes her more likely to do it as often as she can. Copying herself takes a great deal of energy, which is also why she sleeps for so long afterward. As she learns more about what she can do, she may become able to make copies with a lower level of sentience, which will use a great deal less energy."

He dug into his pocket for a moment, then offered something to Justin. Wes squinted, and blinked at the familiar silver 'z' symbol on a matching chain. "If you're willing to accept it, this necklace has enough magic protection and charms on it there's no possible way for her to replicate it. You can use it to help identify the original."

Justin stared at him for several minutes before at last taking the necklace with a slight nod. "Thank
you," he said quietly.

Zofren nodded solemnly. Then he turned to look at Sky, who stared back at him more warily. "Sky on the other hand, seems to have some sort of ... defensiveness about him that's probably linked to his power. It's also why it hasn't manifested yet, and why I can't really be sure of what it is. Because it's a more subtle ability, Sky hasn't needed to use it. That also means his should be easy to use as well."

"What about Bridge?" Adam spoke up, watching Zofren from the wall he was leaning against.

Zofren sighed again. He looked at Bridge, but unlike the other two, make no effort to reach out to him. "Bridge is unstable," he said bluntly. "I'm not sure if it's because of what his powers are, what life stage he was at when he absorbed them, or just that he isn't strong enough to control them."

"What *is* his power?" Aisha demanded, shifting closer to Rocky, who was holding Bridge. She reached out to touch Bridge's cheek, and he leaned against her hand with a happy sigh.

"He's an empath," Zofren told her. "It's some sort of energy empathy, which is why it's so unstable. He isn't just absorbing feelings, he's reading auras, possibly reading thoughts. He's young enough that he may even be imprinting."

"That's why he hates strangers," Rocky mused, rubbing his son's back.

Bridge grinned up at him and blew a spit bubble.

"The one good thing about Bridge's power is that it seems to be entirely in his hands, which means you may be able to dampen it by keeping them covered," Zofren went on. "I can't say for sure, because it isn't as if he's going to be able to tell the difference for a very long time. Until he can, the best thing to do is keep him from touching anyone that isn't one of his parents. They won't affect him."

"How are we supposed to manage that?" Adam demanded, looking agitated. "We all .. We can't - "

Rocky reached back, snagging his arm and pulling him to his side. "We'll figure something out," he murmured, resting his chin on Adam's shoulder. "It's gonna be fine. We'll make it fine if we have to."

"How did this happen?" Kimberly whispered suddenly, her eyes shining with restrained tears. "Everyone keeps blaming this on the lab accident, but no one knows *why*."

Wes saw caught Zofren's wince out of the corner of his eye. "What is it?" he demanded sharply. "You know something else."

Zofren hesitated. "Yes, I know something," he said slowly.

Kat's eyes narrowed as she spoke up for the first time since she'd joined them all. "Well?"

There was a long silence as Zofren seemed to search for what to say. "Have you ever wondered what happens when you combine the abilities of several Power Rangers?" he asked at last, his quiet voice echoing through the room.

Aisha sat down hard in a chair. Her face was pale, and her hands were starting to shake when Kimberly swiftly moved to kneel at her side, wrapping her arms around the other woman. They clung to one another, Kimberly fighting tears while Aisha just stared distantly at the floor.
Rose abruptly let out a sob, and Justin had her head against his shoulder in an instant as he buried his face against her hair.

Wes' head was swimming. This was *his* fault? Because he was a Ranger, now Sky was ... was ... a mutant? Sky had some sort of genetic defect because he still used the Power?

Distantly he was aware of Vanessa's voice in the background, demanding to know how he knew any of this for sure.

Zofren let out another soft sigh with a pained expression. "I lost my abilities as a sorcerer when Zordon's energy wave went through me," he began, and somehow Wes was still aware of the way Billy and Kimberly flinched, "But after twenty-thousand years of using magic I'm still sensitive enough to understand when it's around me. I'm also a member of the Order of Light, which makes me a 'priest' to the Morphin Grid, if you will. I know how to tell when the Morphin Grid has touched someone, especially in the way that it's touched all of you."

"A-all of us?" Chip stammered, freckles standing out against his white face as he gripped the back of a chair for support.

After a moment of looking at them all, Zofren finally picked up Elizabeth, smiling faintly as she giggled at him again. "In all of your times as Rangers, have any of you ever duplicated yourself?"

"I have."

Adam's head came up as he and Dustin stared at one another in surprise.

Zofren merely nodded. "Have any of you ever shielded yourself against your enemies?"

"My armored skin, from my Dino Gem," Ethan whispered.

"Me, too," Ryan said quietly, startling everyone. "I ... I'm not entirely human. My defensive capabilities are stronger."

Zofren looked at Bridge, who was blinking at up Rocky and Adam and starting to frown. "And energy?"

"Me," Cam informed them through his side of the call. His expression was blank. "My Samurai amulet is able to absorb and manipulate energy.

*Green,* Wes thought distantly. "I remember Green."

"Wes?"

He blinked slowly, glancing down at Vanessa as she frowned at him, looking worried. "I remember Green," he repeated. "There was Green, and then Silver."

"I saw Green, too," Dustin confessed quietly, eyeing him.

"Black," Ethan spoke up.

Ryan glanced at him. "Blue," he admitted as Ethan looked startled.

Adam shook his head, his eyes dark and distant. "I remember Yellow."

Billy looked lost. "I recall Yellow as Adam did, but also a great deal of Silver."
Cam raised an eyebrow, and Wes found dark eyes staring straight at him even through the visual link. "I saw Red."

"Pink," Rocky murmured.

Kimberly frowned. "I remember Rocky," she said plainly.

Everyone looked at her in surprise. "Rocky?" Kat repeated warily.

Kimberly nodded. "I think it was Red, but I remember reaching out to Rocky."

"You were holding hands when we found you," Tyzonn volunteered from behind Cam and T.J. "You refused to let go until after you were completely awake."

"Rose?"

Justin's concern cut through the conversation, and now they all watched the young couple worriedly.

"All I remember is white light everywhere, and then everything just sort of faded. That's when it started to hurt." she whispered, still leaning into him so that they had to strain to hear her. "It hurt so bad ..." She sobbed again, clinging tight to Justin as he rubbed her back.

Elizabeth slid down from Zofren's lap, crawling over to her parents. When she reached them, she plopped down on her behind, reaching up to tug on Rose's pant leg. "Mama?" she asked plaintively, holding her arms up.

Rose scooped her up in an instant, cradling her daughter as she cried.

Wes stared down at Sky as he frowned at them all curiously. Whatever his son became, it was *his* fault. He looked around, his eyes falling on Bridge as a chill ran down his spine.

Cam saw Red. He saw Green. He saw ... Cam?

"Wes ... ?"

"I think Bridge might have something from me, too," he heard himself say, moments before his vision grayed and someone shouted his name in alarm.
I'm not sure if this is quite where I had planned to go with this prompt, since it sort of wanders a little in the middle. But I can't bring myself to change it. Hopefully the point still gets across.

"I fill up my diary ... with all my dreams and hopes ... The future keeps changing ... like a rainbow kaleidoscope ... A special boy waits just for me, but ... even though he's so nice ... I know, inside ... I'll always be Daddy's Girl ... "

"*What* are you listening to?" Wes demanded softly as he entered 'The Baby Room', as it had been designated.

Zack glanced up at him, grinning faintly. "It helps Bridge sleep," he explained with a shrug.

Wes paused to check on Sky, gently untangling his blankets and running a tender hand along his cheek. Sky frowned and shifted in his sleep, and he smiled fondly. For a moment he just watched him, enjoying the feelings of affection and protectiveness that he felt every time he looked at Sky.

Finally he turned to the monitor, bringing up the playlist Zack had set up as more the last few lines of the song drifted through the air. "He's given me the perfect start ... right from the heart ... I'll always be Daddy's Girl ... "

He raised an eyebrow. "Sailor Moon?" he asked, looking back at Zack.

Zack shrugged. "Like I said, it helps him sleep."

"But a song called Daddy's *Girl*?" He shook his head, chuckling softly. "You're gonna give the poor kid a complex when he grows up."

Zack's return stare was just as amused. "Think about Bridge for a minute, Wes. Think about how he was born, and how he's being raised. There is no way he's *not* gonna have issues. What's one more if it gets him to take his naps?"

Wes considered that. He did have a point. Biologically, Bridge was the son of Rocky and Adam. Aisha had been the one to carry him to term for them, and the two men insisted that she was part of Bridge's life, too. Aisha's initial protests had been mild, but it hadn't taken long for her to settle into the role of being Bridge's mother.

Zack was the odd one. He had no biological connection whatsoever to Bridge. In fact if anything, it was sort of surprising he didn't resent the kid his girlfriend had given birth to for someone else - *while* they were dating. Instead, Zack helped with babysitting, diapers, feedings, and generally taking care of the kid. For that matter he was spending the most time with Bridge, because his department schedule was a bit more flexible than the one among the Docs or Drill Sergeants. And because he was watching Bridge, by default he usually took care of Sky and Elizabeth whenever the three of them were put in The Baby Room while their parents worked.
"How do you do it?" Wes asked suddenly, keeping his voice low to prevent waking any of the kids.

Zack glanced at him from where he'd been picking up toys. "Do what?"

"Take care of Bridge." He hesitated. "I mean, technically ..."

A wry smile answered him. "No, he's not really mine," Zack agreed. "But he *is* Aisha's, and I couldn't ignore him when she loves him so much. Besides, Adam and Rocky are my friends, too."

He shrugged. "We're all family. I can't *not* take care of him."

That was true too, Wes mused. The bond between Rangers was something he was becoming more aware of every day. It was never something he'd expected to be part of, but it was so ingrained in his life now he couldn't imagine things being any different.

When he was younger, family meant his dad and Phillips. His mom too of course, for all the few times he saw her, and he winced at the thought. But then there had been his team, right as the gap between him and his dad had finally seemed too far to reach across. Even now, he missed them so much it seemed like his chest was being squeezed whenever he thought about them.

Jen, the best friend he loved enough to want her at his side forever, even if the romance between them hadn't developed far. It could have, and even now he wondered what might have happened if it had, but she was still so much more than anything he could put into words. Katie was the sister his parents had never been able to give him, full of mothering and comfort even as she stood at his side whenever he was in trouble. Lucas, the brother he loved with a fond exasperation every time he thought of him. His bright-eyed little brother Trip, who could make him always smile with his enthusiasm. He'd never loved anyone else more than he'd loved the four of them. He wondered sometimes if he would ever be able to define whether they or Sky meant more to him.

Yet at the same time, he could look at Zack now and immediately acknowledge him as family as well. The bond between them wasn't anything near as strong was what he felt for his own team, but he knew without a second thought that he would easily lay down his life for any of the S.P.D. Rangers. Even with Sky to worry about now, he couldn't deny that these people were his brothers and sisters, too.

When he put it that way, he could understand Zack's casual attitude and acceptance of Bridge. Then he grinned to himself, because one of the first things he'd learned as a Power Ranger was to suspend all logic. Being a Power Ranger was never logical, and neither was anything that came after that.

Bridge stirred, but rather than crying, seemed to blink and glance around himself. His eyes lit up when he saw the two of them, and he struggled to pull himself up with the bars on the side of his crib. The mittens on his hands made him slip, and his face began to wrinkle up to cry.

Zack scooped him up in an instant, settling the tot against his side and tickling him gently with a warm smile. "Hey, little man. You hungry?"

Wes watched as Bridge grinned at him. "Da!" the kid burred happily, his tiny hands slapping lightly against Zack's cheeks.

"Do you ever worry about what to say to Bridge when he gets older?" Wes asked suddenly.

Zack looked at him, catching Bridge's hands with a soft laugh. "What? You mean about what I am?" He shrugged. "Not really. Right now he's calling three of us 'Da'. Well, except Aisha obviously." He gave a slight grin. "I think he just likes the sound of it. We'll sort it out for him..."
when he's old enough to understand."

He held out Bridge out. "Here, hold him for me a sec."

Wes accepted the rugrat easily, far too used to trading around kids after a year of this. He offered
Bridge a smile and made sure to avoid touching his hands. They always had to be careful with
Bridge, because no one could tell for sure yet what he was or wasn't picking up.

Bridge blinked up at him. "No' Da!" he declared abruptly.

Wes looked at him, startled. "Huh?"

Zack turned in alarm. "Bridge?"

"No' Da." Bridge repeated. He looked around, pouting adorably. He brightened when his eyes
finally found Zack staring at him, "Da!" he squealed in delight, holding his arms out.

They both gaped at him for several minutes. It had to be coincidence: Bridge was just over a year
old. He couldn't possibly understand -

But his eyes were starting to fill up. "Da ... " he wailed, reaching again.

Which of course, woke Sky and Elizabeth.

In the next half hour that it took the two of them to calm, feed, and placate all three children, both
men were too distracted to think about it. But once they were finally quiet, happily sharing some
building blocks that Sky and Elizabeth seemed to be more content to smack together than actually
build with, they glanced at one another. There was a long silence between them as the kids giggled
and made thumping noises.

"You think ... ?" Wes ventured at last.

Zack shook his head, but he seemed leery. "It's probably because he sees me so much. He's more
used to me."

But Wes hesitated. "What about ... you know. The accident? Maybe it's from something Cam."

He received a considering look in return. "Could be Adam, too. Adam's a lot smarter than he wants
people to know. And if it's from Cam's energy thing, why doesn't he think you're 'da' instead of
me? I mean, your energy's in him too."

Wes shrugged. "It's just a thought."

Zack sighed, watching the kids again. "Any idea of what he might get from you?" he asked after a
few minutes.

He winced. "I'm ... I'm not sure." He saw Zack eye him again, and sighed. "Sometimes ... I think
my Chrono Morpher gives me visions of the future. I'm not *sure*, but he might get that."

"Won't that be fun," Zack said wryly. He looked down at the children again and chuckled. "Well,
whatever it is, we'll deal with it. We always do."

Wes watched at him for a long moment. Until the kids had been born, he really hadn't had many
opportunities to get to know Zack. He'd always known he was a great guy, and he liked him well
enough, but it wasn't quite the same as the understanding they had now. But most importantly, he
realized suddenly what made Zack such an amazing guy was the incredible strength of character he
had. It wasn't obvious, even though he wasn't really trying to hide it, but this was one of those moments that Wes was suddenly very aware of just the sort of person Zack was, and just what kind of person he may be raising Bridge to be.

He felt more than slightly humbled by the experience.

Zack glanced at him. "What?"

"Nothing - Sky, no! Don't put that in your mouth!"
Bridge might seem rather precocious here, but because it's Bridge I think it still works. Plus he's too adorable to imagine otherwise. And I now have my own explanation behind toast that has forever changed the way I watch S.P.D. But I kinda like that.

Wes sighed, which turned into a yawn. He glared down at the paperwork piled in front of him. He was supposed to be going through them for cadet recommendations to other squads, but he just couldn't seem to focus on what he was doing.

Coffee, he decided. Coffee would be good.

Luckily for him, being in the last office on the end of the Drill Sergeant wing had turned out to be a good thing. The first two rooms, Andros and Jason's, were closest to Command. He and Dax on the other hand, were on the end - right next to the kitchen and break area. It made late night duties far more pleasant when he only had to walk about ten feet to find food or caffeine.

"Here you go, Baby," he heard a voice murmur.

He froze, instinctively pressing back against the wall.

"Don't want toast," whined a much younger, sleepier voice.

"It's special toast, Baby. It'll help you feel better if you eat it," Aisha coaxed.

"Better?" Bridge repeated, sounding skeptical.

"Much better," she assured him.

Wes winced. She must have had to wake Bridge up again. It hadn't taken long for his abilities to flare as he grew, and now he frequently suffered from emotional backlash whenever he tried to sleep, which gave him horrible nightmares. Nightmares he'd never wish on someone his own age, let alone a three-year-old.

"Mama?"

"Yes, Baby?"

"Uncle Wes s'outside."

He cringed. Great. He wasn't sure what emotions he'd be projecting right now, and Bridge was always vulnerable after he'd had another dream. He struggled to calm himself, focusing on his breathing for a moment.

"Maybe you should invite him in, then."

"Uncle Wes?"

He braced himself, trying to stay as calm and peaceful as possible before he went through the
doorway with a friendly smile. "Hey, Kiddo. What's up?"

"Mama woke me 'gain," Bridge pouted, holding out his arms expectantly.

Wes leaned down, giving him a careful hug and kissing the top of his head. Bridge still didn't really understand why his parents woke him up at night when he started to have another bad dream, and he tended to be cranky because of it. At least as cranky as Bridge ever got, which was still angelic compared to one of Sydney's temper tantrums. He wasn't entirely sure that Ryan's Terrible-Twos excuse was as reasonable as he seemed to think it was. "Well, I'm glad you're up. Now you can talk to me while I take a break from my boring old paperwork." He pulled a face and was rewarded with a slight giggle.

Aisha shot him a grateful look from behind Bridge.

"Whatcha doin'?

"Trying to decide which cadets I have are really good, so I can give them something better to do." Bridge frowned, tilting his head as he considered this. "You gonna promo-somethin' 'em?"

"Promotion," he corrected gently. "That's right. Where'd you learn a big word like that?"

Bridge brightened instantly. "Uncle Cam! He made me ... " He paused, wrinkling his nose as he searched for the right words. "Com'ter gram?"

"Computer program," Aisha told him.

He nodded, beaming. "Does all sorts o' stuff! Big words an' pretty pictures! An' numbers!" His eyes lit up, and he began to bounce.

"You like numbers?" Wes asked, smiling because he had to. Bridge was too adorable for words; he often reminded him of Trip.

The thought still left a dull ache, but he could deal with it now.

Bridge nodded eagerly. "I c'n count t' five!" he boasted happily, slurring his speech slightly in his excitement.

"That's fantastic. Can you show me?"

"One, two, three, four, five." Bridge recited carefully, and to Wes' surprise, he traced very sloppy shapes on the tabletop to represent the numbers he counted.

"Wow. You're really smart, Bridge."

Bridge blushed, ducking his head and beaming. "Nah ... " he said softly. "S'just 'cause o' Uncle Cam. Sky n 'lizbeth are lots better than me."

"Bridge, you are very smart. I don't wanna here you put yourself down like that," Aisha scolded gently.

Bridge slumped a little. "Sorry, Mama," he mumbled.

She moved beside him, running a hand through his hair. "It's okay, Baby." She kissed the top of his head. "You just remember how special you are, and how much everybody loves you."
Bridge sighed contentedly and leaned against her. "Yes, Mama."

Wes tried not to wince again, hoping Bridge wasn't picking something up from him again. He usually leaned on Aisha like that when he was trying to get away from the feelings around him. Wes didn't *think* it was him, but it was often hard to tell the difference between Bridge being the cuddly little boy he naturally was, and being genuinely in need of comfort.

"Eat your toast, Baby. It'll make you feel better."

Bridge was exactly as Zofren had warned them he would be: completely unpredictable. Not in the sense that he was a temperamental child per say, but his moods could change at the drop of a hat. One minute he'd be perfectly fine, the next he'd be screaming at the top of his lungs. More than once they'd caught him swearing, but Bridge had no idea what he was saying or why, and he couldn't be punished for what he didn't understand. The strain of not being able to help him was hard not only on Bridge's parents, but on Bridge himself. He often asked what was wrong with him, and when his parents continued to tell him nothing, he'd started trying to ask his aunts and uncles.

No one was willing to explain, let alone able. How do you tell a three-year-old you don't know what he's capable of? How do you explain *what* had happened, when they barely knew themselves?

How were they supposed to tell him he could never be normal, and there was nothing he could do to change that?

Wes pinched the bridge of his nose. *Bridge *is* normal, he reminded himself for the umpteenth time. There's nothing wrong with him, or Sky, or Elizabeth, or Jaz, or Sydney. They’re all perfectly normal, healthy kids.*

He hated himself for having to think about it. After a year of fighting Ransik and his mutants, any references to genetic enhancement scared him. And having to admit that his son was, by all medical definition, a mutant? Something he'd once sworn to fight against?

He could try reminding himself that the mutants he'd fought were criminals. It had nothing to do what *what* they were, so much as what they'd done. A part of his mind that sounded disturbingly like Jen always insisted that Sky and the others were *not* the same thing.

But then he would think of Nadira and Ransik, who had looked so much more human than the others. And he would wonder.

Sky hadn't even shown any abilities yet. They still didn't know for sure what he could do, but according to Zofren it would most likely be passive and defensive, so it shouldn't be too hard to deal with. The fact that he was grateful for such a small favor made him feel worse, because he didn't know if he would have been able to deal with Bridge on a daily basis the way Aisha and the guys did.

Aisha was his only mother figure. Somehow she managed to not only take care of him, but accept and mother him without the slightest bit of hesitation even when he was in the middle of another screaming fit. She kept all his information and time well-organized and divided between his four parents. She always seemed so self-assured and confident in what she was doing with him.

She really was an amazing woman.

"Uncle Wes?"
He blinked, glancing down at Bridge. "Yeah, Kiddo?"

Bridge was frowning. "You're turnin' colors again."

He winced. 'Turning colors' was the term Bridge used to explain when he was sensing another person's emotions. Cam had said something about aura perception before reluctantly agreeing to work with Bridge on understanding and controlling whatever he was doing, but Wes really hadn't understood the meaning. All he knew was that 'turning colors' meant he was projecting after all, and it was starting to bother Bridge.

"What colors is he turning, Bridge?" Aisha asked calmly. Her eyes studied Wes with a seriousness he didn't like.

"Purple-blue-yellow-gray," Bridge returned, absently munching on a piece of his toast. "S'not bright."

Which he was *pretty* sure mean it wasn't overpowering him - just being noticeable.

"And what did Uncle Cam say those colors mean?" Aisha prompted.

Bridge wrinkled his nose again. "Yellow's bad," he said slowly. "'Cept for Mama's, n' Uncle Dusty, n' Aunt Taylor, n' Aunt Ashley. It's ... " He paused again, searching determinedly for what he was trying to say. "Not happy. G-guilty?"

Aisha was definitely staring at Wes now. "And the other parts?"

Bridge shook his head. "Just two colors. Purple-blue is ... more than sad. Worried?" He frowned. "Whatcha worried 'bout, Uncle Wes?"

Worried wasn't quite what he was feeling, but he didn't really want to elaborate for Bridge what self-hatred and fear for the future of his children really was. Instead he offered a weak smile. "Just wondering if I'll ever be as good as your mom is, Bridge."

Aisha glared at him for the not-quite-lie, but Bridge shook his head. "*No one's* better 'n Mama," he informed him seriously. Then he cocked his head again. "But Sky loves you. An' Mama says long as you're loved, that's all that matters."

Wes smiled, and felt his eyes grow moist. "You're absolutely right, Bridge. That *is* all that matters. You are definitely one smart kid."

Bridge flashed him a smile, then paused to study his right palm. The gloves he wore had been custom-made from a fabric used on Eltar for dampening extra-sensory abilities. They helped, but Bridge's level of control was still limited enough to make them constantly necessary even though they weren’t always effective.

"My fingers are all buttery," he declared suddenly, wiggling said fingers.

The comment was so completely random and yet so *Bridge*, Wes and Aisha both found themselves laughing. The mood of the room began to relax, and Aisha finally stopped glaring at him.

"Of course they are. You were eating buttery toast, silly." Aisha teased, mimicking the way he'd wiggled his fingers.

"Buttery ... " Bridge mused, staring at his hand as he waved them again.
He blinked suddenly, then turned a bright smile up at Aisha. "You were right, Mama. Toast *did* make me better." He turned to hold out the remaining bit on his plate to Wes. "Maybe it c'n make you better, Uncle Wes. It's buttery," he offered, making the finger-wiggle gesture once more.
Chapter Notes

It came to my attention while writing this that not everyone knows what a bellyblaster is - or don't call it that. I also discovered it's very awkward to describe. -Looks sheepish- For the purpose of this story, a bellyblaster is when you put your mouth against someone's stomach and blow, which makes this whiny-fart noise out of the side of your mouth, and tickles the other person.

Wes sighed and flopped back on a bench, wiping his forehead tiredly. Attempting to corral a trio of three-year-olds and one two-year-old was exhausting, especially when you tried to combine them with the outdoors. Even dividing the kids between the two of them still left him ready for a nap.

Thankfully, they'd managed to get them all interested in the sandbox. At the same time, no less. As long as he kept an eye out to make sure no one ate anything they shouldn't, he could finally take a break for a few minutes.

He glanced wearily to his right as Rocky dropped down beside him, looking considerably less tired. In fact, he seemed almost amused. "I hate you," he announced flatly.

Rocky snorted. "Sure you do, Wes. Sure you do."

"Right now I do."

"I could always go home and just let you be," Rocky offered. "You can take care of all of them by yourself."

He reached out to grip the other man's sleeve. "Don't you dare," he warned.

Rocky grinned. "Nah, don't worry. I'm not that cruel." He paused for dramatic effect, then added "To the kids."

Wes swatted him absently.

They sat in comfortable silence for awhile, watching the four kids. Sky seemed to be sculpting something, staring very intently at his project with the tip of his tongue sticking out the corner of his mouth. Sydney was digging in the sand for no apparent reason, while Bridge seemed more than happy to help her do ... whatever it was she was doing. Elizabeth was working on her own project not far from Sky. After a moment she frowned, and a second Elizabeth began to pack in sand from the other side.

Wes suppressed a wince, his eyes darting around quickly to see if anyone had noticed the sudden addition of a twin to their little group. He slowly relaxed when no one appeared to have seen. They'd still have to talk to the kids about using their abilities in public again, though.

"Still dealing with it?"

He stiffened. "What?"
Rocky was watching him out of the corner of his eye. "You're still dealing with the kids," he repeated. His expression was almost completely closed off, something Wes had never seen on Rocky. "You still haven't accepted what they are and what they can do."

Wes closed his eyes for a moment, swallowing hard. At last he gave up, leaning forward to bury his face in his hands. "Everyone says Adam's the smart one," he muttered at last. It was the closest to an open admission he was willing to give.

"Adam *is* the smart one. I'm the observant one."

He didn't know how to answer that.

After a moment, there was a hand on his shoulder. "Your file says you fought mutants from the future in 2001," Rocky said quietly.

He took a deep breath. "I did."

"They're not the same thing."

His fists clenched. "I know they're not," he hissed, trying to hold back a sudden surge of anger. "I know there's a difference! But ... " He made a frustrated noise, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I try to remind myself of that every day," he said at last, keeping his voice too soft for the kids to hear. "I keep trying to make myself think of them like Katie, not like the criminals we were arresting. I know it's not their fault that they're special, that they can do any of this. And I'm *trying*. I don't *like* feeling this way about my own son, Rocky."

To his surprise the hand stayed on his shoulder, giving a comforting squeeze. "I know you don't. That's why you're always fighting with yourself about it, because you feel guilty for having an issue with it. But it's really not your fault, Wes. As a Ranger, you were told that mutants are your enemy. And now that you have to see them in a different light, it's not gonna happen overnight. There's nothing wrong with that."

"It's been three years. I should have gotten over this by now."

"Prejudice doesn't end overnight."

"It should," he grumbled, and he didn't care that it sounded unreasonable.

There was another long silence, and he lifted his head just enough to rest his chin in his hands. The kids were still all playing happily together. The other three hadn't even acknowledged the sudden appearance of Elizabeth's clone, just treated her as one of them. But then they had never been told that any of them were anything *less* than normal.

The only person that still had trouble believing that seemed to be him.

“You hear any news about Jaz yet?” he asked finally, pushing the thought away for now.

Rocky shook his head. “T.J. said nothing’s shown up yet. Kat keeps swearing it will, but so far he’s a pretty normal kid.”

Wes smirked faintly. “As normal as he’s gonna get?”

Rocky laughed at that. “Yeah. I gotta admit, I’m kinda curious to know if he’ll end up like Teej, or more like his mom.”

“That woman is one of a kind,” Rocky agreed, smiling. “I used to wonder if T.J. would ever meet the right girl, let alone one that his team would actually approve of. Guess transferring to Japan was the right choice for him after all.”

“Does Cassie know that?” Wes asked with a grin. “She’d never let him hear the end of it, after he kept using her as an excuse.”

“Probably. And yet here we are, a couple years later, talking about T.J. and his family.” Rocky’s smile turned fond. “It’s good to know he finally found what he was looking for.”

Wes shook his head with a chuckle. “Litania’s definitely something special.”

“Maybe he’ll get lucky and the new baby will end up just like her.”

“Now that’s just cruel and unusual punishment.”

“It’s T.J.”

Wes paused, considering that, and shuddered. “Good thing they live over there and not here, then.”

They heard a loud squeal from the sandbox, as Sydney threw a fistful of sand at one of the Elizabeths. The older girl glared and reached for her shovel. Wes started to move to intercede, but Bridge was suddenly waving something that he’d found in the air, distracting them both.

Sky, meanwhile, continued to ignore them all as his own sand pile grew.

“You ever wonder about Sydney?” Rocky asked. “I mean … ” He shifted, looking uncomfortable.

Wes sighed, glancing at him with a slight shrug. “Who doesn’t? I think Ryan shocked everyone when he brought Nichole in.”

“I’m not talking about Ryan introducing her,” Rocky said quietly.

Wes sighed again, looking down at his hands. The day Ryan had walked into S.P.D. to introduce his pregnant girlfriend to Dana had stunned everyone; no one had even known he *had* a girlfriend. But the thing that Wes remembered most, and what he knew Rocky was referring to, was the way Carter had reacted to her.

They’d all wondered at some point or another about the tight friendship between Ryan and Carter. Sometimes it seemed that Carter was closer to Ryan than Dana, his own wife. It had surprised everyone when Carter hadn’t known Ryan had a girlfriend either, and he’d reacted with open hostility toward her.

Ryan and Nicole’s relationship had ended not long afterwards.

While they stayed in contact, Ryan was the one with custody of Sydney. It had been more than a bit of a shock to see Ryan as a single parent, and loving every minute of it. Nicole kept visitation rights, and she seemed content with that.

Things had been noticeably tense between Ryan, Carter, and Dana ever since.

At last Wes shrugged. “There’s not really anything we can do, except hope that they work out whatever’s going on between the three of them.” He gave him a slight smile. “We can’t all be as understanding as the four of you.”
Rocky grinned back. “What can I say? We are the perfect family situation,” he boasted.

Wes swung at him halfheartedly again.

They went back to watching the four kids again in silence. Wes studied them all, the way Bridge seemed to have a natural way to break up arguments between the girls. The way Elizabeth was already showing signs of her mother’s confident attitude, and even hints of the superior intelligence of both her parents. Sydney was only two, but she had a heart of gold and a beautiful smile, as well as Ryan wrapped utterly and completely around her tiny fingers. And then there was Sky, who when he wasn’t single-mindedly focused on something, seemed to hover between being one of them, and treating them all like pests. Vanessa claimed he had an overdeveloped ‘big brother complex’, which Wes had doubts about finding in a three-year-old.

But sometimes the four of them almost seemed to have a natural bond between them. He couldn’t exactly describe it, but he felt like there was something under the surface that wasn’t so easy to see. It sort of made him wonder if …

"Are you scared of the future, Rocky?" he asked suddenly, his voice barely a whisper.

The answer was immediate. "Terrified."

He glanced at him.

Rocky sighed. "You know, it's usually easy to pretend something doesn't matter to me. I can play off just about anything: my Ranger career, giving up my Powers, my relationship with Adam, when my family found out I'm gay. But Bridge ..." He reached up, running a hand over his hair. "I can't pretend there's anything funny about Bridge."

Wes nodded, swallowing hard as his eyes flickered back to Sky again. His healthy, happy, beautiful son, with a bright future ahead of him. That was what really mattered.

"Bridge has your smile," he said suddenly, still watching them all. "And that weird way he laughs at nothing."

Rocky looked at him for a long moment, for a split second he thought he wasn't going to accept the change of subject. But then he humphed. "That's because he can see the humor in life. Unlike Sky, who takes everything too seriously."

"Hey, that's Nes' doing, not mine."

"As his father, it's your duty to correct that way of thinking," Rocky scolded.

Wes gave him an incredulous look. "How am I supposed to do that?"

Rocky grinned. "Easy." He stood, rubbing his hands together with an evil chuckle. Then he marched over to the sandbox, looming over Bridge. He reached down right as Bridge looked up, blinking, and seized him by the waist. Lifting him in the air, he quickly flipped the boy over, dangling his head above the sand.

Bridge squealed and giggled in delight.

"What in the world are you doing?" Wes demanded as he joined them at last, shaking his head in amusement.
"Daddy's helpin' blood go in my brain," Bridge volunteered, grinning wildly up at him. "He's makin' me smarterer!"


Wes eyed his son. "Oh, I don't know, Buddy," he commented, casually moving closer to him. "Maybe Rocky and Bridge have the right idea. We could always try it out on you and see."

Sky froze for a split second, and bolted.

Wes ran after him, easily catching his son and pulling him down on top of him as he tickled. Sky shrieked and laughed, squirming to get away. "Daddy!" he howled.

He gave him a bellyblaster.

Rocky may be the observant one, but he was still the funny one, too. And maybe he was right. Maybe he was overthinking it.

Sky struggled and nearly kicked him in the groin, and he gave him another blaster in retaliation.
Chapter Notes

A connection that finally occurred to me, and must be exploited. And then trying to write this conversation turned out to be a pain in the butt.

As the final hard kick to his ribs sent him flying into a wall, Wes found himself wishing that he'd taken the time to think this over better.

Instinct and self-preservation forced him to roll over, pushing himself up into a low fighting stance as he fought to catch his breath. Sparring session or not, he knew better than to turn his back on an opponent. Especially one as agitated as the one across from him now.

There was a moment of silence, then at last the Black Mighty Morphin Ranger powered down, leaving Adam in his place. The other man sighed, running a hand through sweat-soaked hair as he seemed to take a moment to just breathe. At last he looked up. "You okay?"

Wes powered down as well, wincing as he put a hand to his side. "Remind me never to offer to spar with you when you need to let off steam again," he groaned, standing slowly.

Guilt flickered across Adam's face. "Sorry."

Wes shook his head, trying to shake off the ache running through him as he forced himself forward. The Power would heal him soon; he just had to get past the initial lingering pain. "You needed it. What else are friends for?"

"Not beating each other up?" Adam offered wryly, still looking upset with himself.

Wes sighed. "Who else would you spar with?" he pointed out. "Jason, Rocky, and Andros are all on duty, Ryan and Carter took Sydney to the park, and Tori and Dax are working on their new training sim. Anyone else who might be willing to spar with you isn't available. And I don't mind. I just know that I'm nowhere near your level."

"That's not true," Adam protested, helping him to a bench. "You're - "

Wes flashed him a faint grin. "Relax, Adam. You're not gonna hurt my feelings. You're older, you trained longer, and you were a Ranger longer. The only reason I can last as long against you as I can is because of my morpher."

"The last thing we need is an injury." Adam persisted, frowning at him.

Wes shrugged, brushing off the comment in favor of what he really wanted to ask. "So, what's bothering you? You're usually one of the last people I see blowing off steam in the sparring rooms."

For a moment, Adam looked somewhere between screaming and bursting into tears. "Xander and Kira came by today," he said finally.

Wes frowned, trying to place what importance this might have for a moment. "Oh! They were part of your team when you and Tori were helping out the Overdrive Rangers, right?" He paused.
"That's right ... The mission file says the four of you worked with a Red Ranger who's identity couldn't be revealed because he was from the future."

Adam nodded, looking grim. "Bridge Carson, S.P.D. Red."

Wes stared at him.

After a moment, Adam sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. "You can imagine what they thought when I introduced them to my son," he muttered. "Especially considering how much I couldn't stand Bridge during the mission."

There was an awkward silence.

"Alex was a complete jerk," Wes said suddenly, his voice soft as he stared blankly at a wall. "Pretty much ignored me until he kicked me off the team and took my morpher, told me my father was dying and that my 'destiny' was to take over Bio-Lab from him, ran my team ragged and nearly got them destroyed, then had to be begged to give the morpher back. And after he finally decided to go back to the future, he told my team they were excellent Rangers and tried to leave before I could say so much as a word to him."

He could feel Adam eyeing him oddly. "Alex?" the other man asked.

Wes swallowed hard. "Alex and Ben were the twins Eric and I had together. They were - " He cut himself off, pinching his nose. Man, this was hard.

He took a deep breath. "They were kidnapped by Time Force, and taken to the future to test the Red Chrono and Quantum Morphers. I knew it would happen - Alex told me by accident the second time he came back, when we were dealing with the Mutorgs. Eric left me because I knew what was going to happen when we agreed to have the boys, but I never told him because I promised Alex that I'd protect the future."

Silence.

At last a hand squeezed his shoulder. "I thought Bridge was schizophrenic," Adam said quietly. "And the way he was always so cheerful, even his fighting style, reminded me so much of Rocky I started to wonder. Rocky and I were having problems at that point, and I thought that maybe ... " He sighed and shook his head. "He was always standing *right* next to me, and staring at me when he thought I wasn't looking. It drove me nuts, and I got really rude with him."

Wes glanced at him as he heard Adam make a pained noise. "What?"

Adam sighed. "You know how Bridge eats toast when he's upset, or when his Powers start to overwhelm him?"

"Oh, no ... "

Adam nodded, holding up his hands with one raised roughly a foot above the other.

Wes winced.

The two men stared off into space for awhile, each lost in their own thoughts of the son they had yet to understand. It was surprising for both of them to realize the connection between them, of meeting someone they could never really explain to someone else, and the feelings left behind afterward. It was nice, and Wes found himself just a bit relieved to know he wasn't alone in wondering how and why his son grew up the way he did.
"Bridge was fascinated with every little thing," Adam said suddenly. A wry smile drifted across his face. "The Zord technology, the security systems, the building. And then he actually spent more time watching the four of us than looking at all the historical artifacts in the Hartford Mansion. Even when we all promised the Sentinel Knight that 'Once a Ranger, always a Ranger', he never said it - he was too busy staring at all of us." He laughed softly. "It's sort of funny. Before, he just gave me this really weird feeling and creeped me out with the way he kept watching me. But knowing what I know now ... He was kinda cute, you know?"

Wes managed a smile. "Yeah. Alex ... Like I said, the first time I met him he was a total jerk, and I wanted to strangle him. But the second time was different. He was really stressed out, so I dragged him out to a local carnival just to get him some space to clear his head. Turns out he loves games, and he's got this massive competitive streak. It was so weird, now that I look back on it. For one day, he just seemed like a regular kid - except everyone kept thinking we were twins." He glanced over at Adam, who'd raised an eyebrow at him. "Alex looks almost exactly like me," he explained, "But he has darker hair and brown eyes."

Adam smiled. "Bridge doesn't look like any of us if you're not looking for it- that's part of why I never guessed who he was. He acts a lot like Rocky though. Or he will." He frowned.

This time Wes did grin. "Don't worry; I know what you mean." he chuckled.

Adam glanced at him speculatively. "You know, it's nice to find someone I can really talk to about this. I never could before."

Wes swallowed, smiling as his eyes burned. "I know what you mean." He saw growing concern in Adam's eyes, and spoke before he could say anything. "So does Bridge have your martial arts skills? That sidekick was *vicious*." He rubbed his ribs with a rueful grin.

Adam laughed. "Are you kidding me? Bridge has three black belts and Zack to teach him. He'll be lethal."

"I guess I'd better step up Sky's training then, if he'll ever have a chance of keeping up with him."

Wes commented.

"Good luck," Adam snorted. "You two will need it."
I do not own, work at, or am affiliated with Denny's Restaurants. I needed a family-style atmosphere, and that was the first place that came to mind.

Eric had known when he got up that Saturday morning that it was going to be an unusual day. For one, he wasn't working. Mr. Collins had pretty much booted him out the door yesterday and insisted he was taking today off. For another, Taylor had also called yesterday, informing that she was coming to see him.

She had, much to his surprise, been keeping in touch with him over the last four years, even after Wes' accident. Mostly through e-mail, but they bitched about the issues in their lives, kept up on how each other were doing, that sort of thing. He never asked about Wes, but she always casually mentioned him every once in awhile. He still wasn't sure whether to be grateful or not.

So he was up early, preparing for Taylor's visit. He didn't exactly know what she was planning to do while she was here - Silver Hills wasn't all that great for entertainment value - and she'd never told him how long she'd be there for. He'd changed the bed sheets and prepared himself for a night on the couch just in case.

At 8:00am sharp, he answered the doorbell to find Taylor standing on his porch. "You ever find out what it's like to take three four-year-olds and a three-year-old to Denny's?" she asked without preamble.

He stared at her blankly. "No."

"Get your coat. You're about to learn."

"*What*?!"

****

She lost a bet. What in the *world* kind of bet could she have lost to be forced to spend the day babysitting four toddlers? And why did she have to drag him into it?

It wasn't that he hated kids. He didn't really mind them, actually; it was adults he couldn't stand. And the rugrats weren't ... completely horrible. The dark-haired girl seemed to like to entertain herself, and the scrawny boy talked a lot, but at least he didn't cause much trouble. The little blond one was even kinda sweet; she'd taken to him immediately.

And then of course there was Sky, who he would have known in a heartbeat. He had those damn lips. And he was *constantly* pouting.

Taylor, of *course* designated him in charge of Sky and ... was it Sydney? She claimed the other two were harder to monitor, but Eric had his suspicions on that. The scrawny boy with the weird name was pretty obedient for a kid, and smarter than anyone his age oughta be, and the brunette was harmless as far as he could tell.
It was Sydney who spilled her milk, cried when she didn't get the cookies she wanted, refused to eat until he told her she wouldn't get anything else to eat and left her with it, and had to go 'potty' five times - apparently she was still being trained.

Sky stared at him the whole time, which was making him nervous. He colored on his menu whenever Eric reminded him about it, but a few minutes later, he'd be back to staring at him again. It was getting creepy.

"What is it?" he asked finally, just barely managing to remember to keep his temper in check.

Sky blinked up at him. After a moment, he pointed to the morpher on Eric's left wrist. "S'like Daddy's." he stated solemnly. "Yours has more buttons, but symbols look the same."

At this, the scrawny boy looked up, his face lighting into a bright grin as the other kids suddenly focused on Eric's morpher. "It is!" he agreed brightly. "Even feels like 'im!"

Eric stared back at Sky. Why in the world would he have thought his morpher looked like Wes'? They didn't look anything alike at all; the Chrono Morphers looked like silver eggs for some reason. His Quantum Morpher was more like a rectangular box. And sitting beside him or not, how had the kid picked up on 'buttons' so quickly?

"Sky, Bridge," Taylor spoke up, her voice soft but firm. "We don't talk about that outside of S.P.D., remember? Not everyone knows."

Bridge looked abashed, while Sky just continued to stare up at Eric. "Sorry, Uncle Eric," Bridge mumbled.

"Sorry Uncle Eric," Sky echoed, but judging by the look in his eyes, he was only saying it because Taylor told him to.

"It's okay," Eric heard himself say. "It's not really a secret for me."

Sydney nearly knocked over her milk again, and he took a moment to move it out of her reach this time. At last he glanced at Taylor. "'Uncle' Eric?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

She shrugged, tossing her hair back over her shoulder. "Anyone with a morpher is 'aunt' or 'uncle' around S.P.D. You get used to it."

Somehow he doubted he'd ever be comfortable with the idea of being Sky's 'uncle', but he kept that to himself. He glanced down at Sky. "You've got good eyes."

Sky's solemn expression didn't change, and he wondered if the kid ever smiled. "Thanks."

****

The park had been a relatively obvious choice in their search for something to entertain the kids. It was Eric who surprised Taylor, sneaking off for a quick purchase at the store where'd they'd stopped to get snacks and a lunch to go. He wasn't really sure what made him buy them. It just felt ... right somehow.

And for some reason, he found himself wanting to see Sky smile.

He kept them secret until after they'd set up camp, so to speak, with a nice spot to leave everything else and a big, open grassy area for the kids to play in. "I got something for you guys," he announced abruptly.
Elizabeth blinked up at him curiously. "Presents?"

"Presents!" Sydney cheered instantly, clapping her small hands.

"Spoiling them already, Eric?" Taylor asked, looking amused.

He tossed her the small, simple squirt gun in response. "Boys vs. Girls," he said shortly.

Taylor smirked as she caught her gun. "Oh, you are *so* on."

He took a moment to demonstrate to Bridge and Sky how the gun worked, and how to hold it. Bridge struggled at first, but his determination to get it right was kinda cute. The little boy lit up as he got the hang of it at last, turning to look at Sky with bright eyes. "Let's get 'em, Sky!"

Sky carefully clasped his small hands around the tiny gun and gave a quick nod to the other boy. Then he looked up at Eric, and smiled.

He'd been right; he did have Wes' smile.

****

Eric reclined with a sigh, tucking his arms behind his head. "Finally asleep," he muttered.

Taylor leaned against back beside him with a smirk. "You tired out all ready?" she asked softly.

He shook his head. "Nah. Just didn't think they'd ever lie down."

He took the time to glance over the four kids passed out on the blanket. Sydney had cuddled up together with Bridge, the little girl sucking her thumb contentedly. Elizabeth was sprawled on Sydney's other side, one arm flung across the other kids as she snored softly. Sky had laid down further away from the others, facing outward towards the rest of the park; it was hard to tell if he was being anti-social or trying to protect the other three.

"You think Sky's a sixth?" he asked suddenly.

Taylor raised an eyebrow at him. "He's four, Eric. Don't you think it's a bit early to be diagnosing his Ranger type? He probably won't even be a Ranger; Vanessa and Wes would never let him."

Somehow he doubted Wes would ever stop his own son from doing something he wanted to do, but he didn't know what sort of influence his girlfriend would have. And even then, something about Sky just seemed like Ranger material to him. He kept his thoughts to himself however, strangely content to watch the kids sleep.

An envelope hovered in front of his nose.

"What's this?" he demanded, snatching it out of the air.

Taylor elbowed him with a scowl. "Quiet!" she hissed. "You'll wake the kids."

But Eric was too busy staring to respond.

>You are cordially invited to attend the wedding of ...

"What the ... You're getting *married*?" he whispered furiously, just barely managing to remember to keep his voice down.
Taylor rolled her eyes. "Thanks. I'm glad to know the idea of me with a husband is Armageddon for you."

He shot her an annoyed glare. "I thought you said you and Jason weren't serious."

She shrugged. "We weren't. Then he asked me to marry him, and I said yes."

He paused, looking at her wary now. "You're not asking me to be part of the ceremony, are you?"

She snorted. "We had to limit the wedding party to teammates only; this thing is gonna be a mess as it is. All you have to do is show up and stay through the reception. I won't even demand you bring a gift - I'll just call you a cheap jerk for the rest of our lives if you don't."

Eric froze. "Reception?"

There was an awkward silence.

"He doesn't know you were there," Taylor said suddenly, her voice soft. "He wasn't coherent enough to tell the difference when he woke up, and Dana told security not to let him know you came because she didn't want to cause any stress during his recovery. As far as Wes knows, you've been in Silver Hills since the day he left, and you'll only be there because Jason and I asked you. He won't try and find you."

He sat there for a moment, trying to process her words. The initial surge of fear at the thought of being forced to confront Wes with why he'd left was gone now. Instead he felt his heart clench, and a hollow feeling filled his chest. Wes never knew he was there. He thought Eric couldn't even be bothered to show up when he was seriously injured.

"The hospital?" His voice sounded distant.

Taylor shook her head, but her eyes watched him with something between sympathy and pity. "He thinks his dad brought the Silver Guardians."

"If you hurt him right now, I will personally see to it that you never get near him again."

Apparently Dana was a woman of her word. He wanted to hate her for it, but he couldn't - she was trying to protect Wes.

"Eric?" There was concern in Taylor's voice, which brought him back to his senses faster than anything else would have.

"I'll be there," he said abruptly. He lifted the invitation to show what he meant. "I'll come," he repeated. He forced himself to smirk. "Someone's gotta watch the doors while you hold Jason in place."

She smacked him in the arm with a glare. "Jerk."

They settled back down after a few minutes, and Eric went back to watching the kids sleep. "Hey," he said suddenly. "Exactly what bet did you lose, anyway?"

"Hmm? Oh. I didn't."

He sat up, turning to look at her in surprise. "What? But you said -"

She didn't move, continuing to watch the park around them. "I said that to get you out of the house this morning. There was never a bet. I volunteered to take the kids on a day trip."
He stared for several moments as it finally dawned on him why she'd done it. He choked down his first response, forcing himself to lay down again and look at the kids once more. Sky had rolled over to face the others, and now he could see the innocent expression the boy had as he slept.

After a few minutes he managed to calm himself down enough to say something that he didn't need to scream at her. "You're evil."

"You had fun," she returned, unconcerned.

"Yeah," he whispered, swallowing hard as he stared at Wes' son. "But you're still evil."

Taylor gently laid a hand on his shoulder, giving a slight squeeze. "You're welcome," she murmured.
What was that?

Chapter Notes

Okay, not what I originally planned for this prompt. But I kinda like it.

This was also written in celebration of the California Supreme Court's decision to overturn the ban on gay marriage. The references to Rocky and Adam's troubles with securing their marriage license are in thought to the fact that while this is a fantastic victory for the Human Rights Campaign, realistically, I doubt that this will be the end of it. In the meantime, let's be thankful for what has been achieved, and pray that we will be able to continue to move forward from this point.

It was definitely not your standard wedding reception. For one, wedding receptions were generally preceded by the guests attending the actual *wedding*. In this case, Conner had called Tommy to tell him he and Ethan had just gotten married, and could he approve some time off for their honeymoon? Oh, and they'd be on their way back to Newtech City in a couple days, so would he mind calling everyone up and get them together so they could celebrate?

Tommy had, predictably, flipped.

Further probing from Kimberly later revealed he was not only stunned by the idea that his former students had gotten married out of the blue, but slightly hurt he hadn't been asked to be a witness. He claimed it was only because he was shocked by the sudden news, especially when just days before, Ethan was still swearing up and down that he and Conner weren't serious. But everyone noticed the dark looks he shot Kira and Trent during the party after the new couple had arrived.

Wes had to admit, Kimberly deserved credit for pulling together an odd, but comfortable party at literally the last minute.

The theme was fireworks. Red and blue fireworks, of course. There were balloons, ribbon streamers, and tables with white silk tablecloths. He couldn't remember the names of the flowers that had been spread throughout the room, but even they resembled small exploding fireworks, complete with matching red and blue ribbons curling through the bouquets.

She had conned Commander Cruger into allowing them use of one of the main training rooms, to make sure that anyone who was on shift could join them as soon as it was over. Tables had been kidnapped from random departments all over S.P.D., and placed carefully along the walls to make enough room for dancing. The food had been ordered from a nice takeout place. And because Tommy had informed her Conner would have a fit if his favorite food wasn't there, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches had been made.

It was the wedding cake that stole the show, however. Chocolate with chocolate cream filling (Ethan's favorite) it was decorated with gelled versions of red and blue fireworks exploding. And at the very top, someone had made a small representation of Ethan, looking horrified as a tiny soccer ball smashed into the laptop he was holding. Beside him, a small Conner looked sheepish.

Conner had been delighted when they finally arrived to the cheering of guests. Ethan just sort of stared around the room with a blank expression. Kira stage-whispered that he was still a bit shell-
shocked, patting Ethan's arm gently.

Conner wrapped an arm around his new husband and grinned brightly. "Well? Let's get this party started!"

****

"I can't believe he did it," Wes chuckled, shaking his head as the new happy couple danced. Technically, Conner was forcing a rather flustered Ethan into a tango, which had their former teammates in hysterics for reasons unknown to the rest of their guests.

"I can," Rocky returned with a smirk. "Conner's too impatient to wait around for Ethan forever."

Wes shot him an amused glance. "I meant I can't believe Ethan said *yes*." "I can still remember when I first met them," Blake said from Wes' other side. "I never would have guessed that I'd be at their wedding reception eleven years later." He paused, then suddenly laughed again. "I never thought I'd be at their wedding reception last *week*."

Wes and Rocky laughed along with him. "It was pretty sudden, wasn't it?" Wes agreed with a grin.

"I remember when Adam and I got married," Rocky said thoughtfully, his eyes moving across the room almost instinctively to find Adam, who was supervising Bridge at the moment.

"Which time?" Jason asked dryly as he joined them.

Rocky's eyes dimmed, narrowing slightly for a moment. Eventually he shrugged. "Any of the first few, really. I mean, it was really spur of the moment the first time, but after that it was sort of like re-affirming our vows, you know?"

Blake shook his head. "I'm glad Tori and I only had to do it once. That was enough of a nightmare."

Jason laughed, shooting him an amused look. "What, you didn't like the sudden tsunami?"

The younger man scowled. "If someone had warned us ahead of time that Tori's element was going to react to her emotions, I would have talked her out of having the ceremony on the beach."

"You probably were the only wedding party to nearly lose their pastor to the tide," Rocky teased.

A sudden malicious gleam entered Blake's eyes. "So, Jason. You guys decided where yours is going to be yet?"

Jason groaned, letting his head fall back against the wall. "Man, don't remind me."

"What's wrong?" Wes asked, frowning in concern.

"You know how Taylor's parents offered to pay for the wedding? Well, now her mom's trying to convince us to have this huge, fancy ceremony, no matter how many times Taylor's told her we wanted to keep it simple. They're already fighting over the date, let alone everything else."

Blake winced. "Youch. We were pretty lucky with that - Tori's parents just helped plan whatever we said we wanted. The only major problem we ever had was trying to dry out the wedding party during the reception."

Wes glanced at Rocky curiously. "Did you and Adam ever have an actual reception?"
Rocky shrugged. "Not the first time. We were pretty sure it wasn't going to be legalized for long
then, so it didn't seem like there was much point to celebrating. I mean, we got together with the
team for dinner and drinks, but that was about it. Whenever we went after that, it didn't really seem
too important. It was like we'd already had one, you know?"

"There was that big party for the last one," Jason noted.

Rocky smiled slightly. "Yeah. My mother complained about never getting to go to with us as a
witness whenever we applied, so we let her plan a party once we knew the license wouldn't be
questioned anymore."

"And now the groom and groom will share a special dance!" the group heard Kira announce,
followed by Ethan's scandalized cry of "Again?!"

Wes watched in silence as Conner dragged a loudly protesting Ethan back out to the dance floor,
absently noticing that Ethan's eyes had finally cleared, and he seemed to understand what was
going on. The stereo that had been brought down for the party kicked in, blasting out a new song.
He laughed as he recognized the strains of Barenaked Ladies' 'One Week', conceding to himself
that it did fit Conner and Ethan's bizarre relationship.

He used to wonder if he and Eric would ever get married. Nothing fancy; it wasn't really either of
their style. Something probably as simple as Rocky and Adam's had been, preferably without all
the political drama of trying to keep their marriage legal.

"Three days since the living room ... I realized it's all my fault but couldn't tell you ..."

"So this is where you've been hiding."

Wes' head jerked up, and he blinked at Vanessa. "Huh?"

She narrowed her eyes at him in a way that he knew meant she had noticed something about him
no one else had, and she was going to fix it whether he liked it or not. "You're dancing with me,"
she said shortly.

He blinked again. "Why?"

"Because you're available." She grabbed his arm, dragging him onto the dance floor as Rocky,
Jason, and Blake all laughed.

He moved automatically into position as she forced him in front of her, moving in a way that he
couldn't help but notice. "So, what was that for?" he asked quietly, keeping his voice low.

Her eyes moved up to meet his with that same penetrating stare. "You were starting to brood
again," she returned quietly. "Stop it."

He froze for a split second, because she was right. And it didn't matter what he used to wonder
about Eric, because it wasn't going to happen. And he was over this, and he needed to stop thinking
about it every time his ex happened to come to mind.

No matter how hard it was to let go of Eric, and all the memories of him.

Wes forced himself to smile, and found it wasn't as hard as he'd expected it would be. "So, who's
keeping an eye on Sky?"

"You are, as soon as we're done."
"It'll still be two days till we say we're sorry ..."
Later, Wes wouldn't be able to say for sure what part of the whole incident shocked him the most. He was watching the kids playing on the lawn on his day off, enjoying the chance to relax while they entertained each other. The sprinklers had just come on in the middle of their Frisbee game, and Sky had swiftly moved to the driveway to remain dry. The other three were happily darting in and out of the spray of water, giggling hysterically and calling for Sky to join them.

Elizabeth had apparently gotten fed up with Sky's refusal to get wet. Faster than Wes could call out to stop her, a second copy of the little girl had appeared behind Sky, gleefully shoving him forward onto the wet grass. "Got you!" both girls cheered in unison.

Sky moved in a way that had to be instinctive, flinging up his right arm. Blue light flared around the boy's hand, flaring to make a circle in front of him. The spray of water splashed harmlessly against it, and Sky remained dry.

It was followed by a look of horror and fear at his father.

There were so many questions Wes wanted to ask as he drove Sky and the other kids back to S.P.D., so many things he wanted to say. But trio in the back seat were strangely silent, and Sky had refused to look him in the eye after that first glance. It was ... painful, actually.

Dana looked only marginally surprised to see them when they arrived, giving her niece a cursory glance before turning to Wes. "Which one?" she asked without preamble.

"Me," Sky spoke up, looking up at her solemnly.

While Wes regarded his son in surprise, Dana barely blinked. "What happened?" she demanded, already pulling the pen from over her ear.

Sky took a deep breath, seeming to steel himself. "I used my lights," he told her. "I didn't want to get wet, so I did it." His chin started to lower, but he seemed to catch himself, looking back up at her again.

Dana's eyes narrowed slightly. "You've done this before." It wasn't a question.

"It was my fault," Elizabeth said suddenly, looking guilty. "I'm the one who pushed him. I just wanted him to play with us." She looked at Sky with tear-bright eyes, swallowing hard. "I'm sorry, Sky."

Sky stared at her for a long moment. "It's okay, Bethie," he murmured finally, giving her a hug. "M'not mad at you."

She sniffled, and Bridge abruptly burst into tears. Sydney blinked, wide-eyed, at the three older kids, then started to cry as well.

Dana shot Wes a look, but he was still staring at Sky.

*Why didn't you talk to me, Sky?* he wondered, feeling his heart clench.
"So," Wes said quietly, moving to sit beside his son.

"So," Sky echoed, staring at the floor as he kicked his feet back and forth. He didn't move from his perch on the patient bed, and he didn't look up.

Wes sighed. "How long have you known about this, Sky?"

Sky shrugged a shoulder. "I dunno," he muttered.

"Awhile?" Wes persisted.

Sky just nodded.

"More than a year?"

Another nod.

They sat in silence for several minutes. "Why?" Wes asked finally.

Sky started to shrug again, then hesitated. "I ..."

Wes waited, watching him with what he hoped was a sincere, non-judgmental expression.

"You don't ... like it," the boy said finally, frowning at the opposite wall. "When Bethie does stuff, or when Bridge acts up."

Wes felt his chest being squeezed, and it was suddenly hard to breathe. Sky had noticed. Sky had *noticed*. His own son was afraid to talk to him because he was prejudiced.

Slowly, he forced himself to take a deep breath and *look* at Sky.

Sky was holding his chin stubbornly firm - something he'd gotten from Vanessa. His eyes had not strayed from the opposite wall, but his fingers clenched around the edge of the bed. He sat perfectly still, except for the slight tremble to his lip and small shuddering in his shoulders.

Distantly, Wes wondered where Sky had gotten the habit of trying to be unaffected.

He pulled his son into his arms and held him tight against his chest. He squeezed tightly, kissing the top of Sky's head and just holding him in place for a moment. Then he took that moment to remember what it was like to hold his son - the only one he had left - and shut out everything else.

Sky shuddered again, then buried his face against his father's shoulder. There was a soft sob, and he snuggled closer.

"I love you, Sky," Wes told him softly. "And no matter what happens, that will *never* change. And I'm sorry I ever made you think it would."

"I love you too, Daddy," Sky sniffled from somewhere under his chin.

Wes closed his eyes and continued to hold him, thankful that Sky was alive, healthy, and in a place where he could watch over him. He vowed never to forget that again. He refused to lose this child, too.
I can easily call this the most challenging chapter I've written so far, and the strangest conversation/romantic situation I've challenged myself to write to date. But I'm kinda proud of that, even though I'm not sure how Carter's strange attitude is going to come across.

The morning run was a routine Wes had done since high school that he refused to give up, even with all the training he did with his cadets throughout the day. While most of the former Rangers of S.P.D. usually woke up early for a personal workout, everyone respected that it was also his time to think and get some peace and quiet, so he always ran alone. It was refreshing, and a great way to clear his thoughts as he jogged through the training grounds of S.P.D.

He was more than a little surprised to see someone sitting in the bleachers, face buried in their hands. After a moment of hesitation, curiosity and concern won out, and he found himself coming closer.

It was an even greater shock to realize the person was Carter, and he was crying.

Wes hesitated for a split second before sitting beside the other man and cautiously placing a hand on his shoulder. Carter didn't move, and he gave a gentle squeeze in silent support. Not finding himself pushed away, he settled himself better and kept his hand on Carter's shoulder, waiting for him to be ready to talk.

He wasn't sure how long they sat there together, but it was well past sunrise when Carter shuddered one last time before slowly looking up. His eyes were bloodshot, his face tear-streaked and red. Whatever was wrong, it was tearing Carter apart.

"Dana's transferring to S.P.D. Japan," Carter croaked out at last. He swallowed, more tears sparkling for a moment before he continued "And she told me I'm not coming with her."

Wes stared at him, just barely able to stop himself from doing an impression of a goldfish. Dozens of questions ran through his mind, and he struggled to find one that wasn't completely insensitive. "I ... I don't know what to say," he said lamely.

Carter shook his head, forcing smile so full of pain it made Wes wish he hadn't. "It's okay. Thanks for being here, Wes. I appreciate it."

Wes hesitated. He'd known Carter and Dana's relationship had been having some problems since Sydney was born, but this seemed completely out of nowhere. "Is it going to be temporary?" he asked carefully.

Carter closed his eyes for a moment, still wearing that pained smile. "No." There was an awkward pause, and he added "She's filing for divorce."

"Oh," Wes managed. After a moment, his eyes narrowed. "Just out of the blue like this?" he asked, frowning at the thought of how insensitive Dana was being. It wasn't like her, and he found himself
defensive on Carter's behalf.

Carter shook his head. "It's not really out the blue," he said quietly. "We've been seeing a marriage counselor ever since Ryan introduced us to Nicole."

So there *had* been more behind that story. Wes was itching to ask, and mentally cursed himself as he realized he'd been spending too much time listening to the Rumor Mill lately. Then Carter's words registered more firmly, and he frowned again. "Can I ask why?" he asked cautiously.

Carter sighed, leaning back on his hands as he stared at the sky for several minutes.

"What do you think makes up a relationship?" he asked suddenly.

Wes blinked, silently wondering if random thoughts out of the blue was a Lightspeed Rangers' thing. "Um ... I'm not sure what you mean."

"How do you think you should feel about the other person?" Carter continued, glancing over at him. "What sort of relationship do you imagine yourself having? One that's full of fire and passion? One that's like being with your best friend, but with benefits? Something filled with classic romance?"

Wes resisted the urge to snort at the thought of what Eric's idea of 'romance' had been, and his own somewhat distaste for it. He took his time considering his response though, knowing that Carter was asking him seriously. And a serious question deserved a genuine answer. "A little of both, actually," he said finally. "I want someone who's my best friend, that I know I can trust completely, but I want passion, too. A quiet relationship would be too dull for me; I like a challenge."

There was the usual dull ache at the thought of the challenge he'd lost, but he was used to it now.

"I always thought relationships should start out somewhere between fire and romance," Carter told him, sounding almost contemplative now. "Eventually you got married, and as the years went by, everything settled into a comfortable, warm sort of relationship, where you know each other inside and out. That the fire had to grow, so it could become warm."

This was far more poetic than Wes had ever imagined Carter could be.

"That's the way my parents were, anyway," Carter went on. He shrugged. "I thought that was what it was supposed to be."

Wes struggled to understand exactly what Carter was trying to say. "Are you saying you married Dana because you two were ... passionate?" he asked carefully.

Carter frowned in a way that he probably wasn't aware wrinkled his nose rather adorably. "It doesn't sound right when you put it that way," he muttered.

Privately, Wes wondered how it *could* sound right.

"So what went wrong?" he asked finally, hoping to move the conversation to a less awkward point. "You two aren't ... um, settling?"

There was a long pause. "When she told me she was leaving, I asked why," Carter said slowly, frowning at the ground as he seemed to search for what to say. "She said that what I was looking for wasn't in our relationship, because I already have it with someone else."

Carter snorted softly as he glanced at him again. "Yeah. And I've realized she was right; Ryan knows me better than anyone else, and I trust him completely. And I can honestly say I know him, and that he trusts me." He shrugged slightly. "That warmth I've been waiting to get to ... I already have."

Wes hesitated, but he had to ask. "Are you sure you can see yourself with Ryan in the physical sense?"

Carter shrugged, unconcerned. "Honestly? I never thought about it much before. But it doesn't bother me, if that's what you mean."

Wes frowned. "Carter I hate to say this, but just because it doesn't bother you doesn't mean - "

"I'm not innocent, Wes," Carter interrupted. "I've experimented when I was younger, and I've had dreams about Ryan before." It was slightly disturbing to see how little this bothered him, but Carter was already being more open that Wes had ever expected. Then he shrugged again. "I'd be more worried about the idea of trying to make a relationship with Ryan work."

That was an odd thing to say. "What do you mean?"

This time Carter was the one giving him a strange look. "Dating my ex-wife's brother? It'd be hard on everyone, and that's the last thing I want." Then he sighed, and leaned forward to put his chin in his hands. "I still love Dana," he explained, and the expression on his face was heartbreaking. "But I can say I love Ryan, too. I can't choose Ryan because Dana doesn't want me anymore, and I couldn't say I left her for him either. After everything those two have been through, the last thing I've ever wanted was to come between them."

"Which one could you see yourself with ten years from now?" Wes asked, because he suddenly wondered if even Carter knew the answer to that. "If there wasn't an issue of Dana leaving, which one could you see yourself still with?"

"Ryan," came the immediate answer. The corner of Carter's mouth lifted in a weary half smile. "I love Dana," he repeated, "But there's another reason she's leaving besides me. All the stress of working with S.P.D., on top of our problems, are making her so stressed she's snapping at everyone and constantly on edge. But she loves her job too much to leave it completely, which is why she's transferring to another base. But I can honestly say that S.P.D. isn't my life. I could leave here and find something else, and still be happy. She can't do that."

Carter paused, contemplating the grass once again. "Ryan, on the other hand ... If I told him I was leaving S.P.D., he'd ask me where we were going. And if I told him I was the only one leaving, he'd ask me when I was coming back. But he wouldn't try to stop me. He'd just understand that it was something I needed to do."

"Dana ... Dana doesn't have that. She worries so much about the people she cares for that she always wants to know where they are and what they're doing. She has to be involved. She can't just step back and let things be."

There was another extended silence as Wes just watched Carter for awhile. This was a very strange conversation, and it was more than he'd ever heard Carter say in the entire time he'd known the other man, let alone the fact that for once it had nothing to do with work. It was also much deeper and well-thought out than he'd expected, despite the few moments where Carter seemed almost innocent in his view of relationships and how they worked. He was a little more surprised to realize it had given him a bit of food for thought.
"So what are you going to do now?" Wes asked finally.

Carter let out a long sigh. "I think I'm going to take a break from S.P.D. for awhile."

"You're quitting?"

"Not quitting. Just .... taking a break. Getting my head together, I guess." Carter tilted his head to glance at him. "That make any sense?"

Wes nodded, suddenly wishing there was something more he could do for the other man. He felt strangely useless all of a sudden, and he wondered if he'd helped at all. "We'll miss you," he said at last.

Carter smiled, and this time it was wistful rather than pained. "I'll miss everyone, too." He stood, rubbing almost absently at his eyes with one hand as he offered the other to help pull Wes to his feet. "But I won't be gone forever. I just need some time."

"You'd better not be gone forever. We'd never forgive you if you were." Then Wes smiled, as his eyes caught something in the distance. He nodded toward the pair coming towards them. "More importantly, *she'd* never forgive you," he added.

They could hear Sydney's joyous squeal from across the field as Ryan carried her over to them on his shoulders. "Uncle Carter! Uncle Wes!"

The two men exchanged amused glances. "You'll be all right?" Wes asked, knowing it was a stupid question, but feeling the need to say it anyway.

Carter nodded, looking almost thoughtful as he watched Ryan and Sydney heading toward them. "Eventually," he promised.
Earth

Chapter Notes

I made the mistake of trying to plan a wedding reception for Jason and Taylor, as a chance to fulfill Dagmar Buse's request for more glimpses of them as a couple. This chapter is a result of Taylor getting the chance to vent my frustration about planning a fictional wedding. May I never have to plan a real one. x.x

I am also issuing a small challenge to anyone that's interested, namely out of boredom and curiosity. There are twelve future events foreshadowed in this chapter, through fifteen hints. (A couple are for the same event.) Brownie Points, Cyber Cookies, and a free Plot Request for anyone who manages to either find all the hints, or figure out all the future events. Most of them are minor events, so don't think too big.

Oh, and MegaBrownie Points to anyone who figures out the reference in Taylor’s nickname for Jason, and why.

"Just so you know, if you ever try to ask me to marry you again, I *will* kill you."

Wes glanced over at Jason as he joined the other man and Taylor at the table for lunch. Taylor was scowling at a notepad with several pages torn free and left lying around the two of them. Jason was frowning, but he seemed more puzzled than frustrated.

He looked up at his fiancée as she spoke, confusion turning to amusement. "I thought the point was *not* to have to do this again."

Taylor ignored him, scratching something out on one of the papers in front of her.

Jason tilted his head to study it and frowned again. "So ... how are we going to do this?"

"Nine groomsmen and six bridesmaids," Taylor groused. "Why can't there be more female Rangers? And why do they always have to be Yellow or Pink? What's wrong with a male Pink Ranger, anyway? It's a conspiracy, damn it."

"Seven bridesmaids," Jason corrected.

Taylor glanced up at him, and something seemed to pass between them for a moment. "Six bridesmaids and a Maid of Honor," she returned, but her tone was strangely soft.

Jason nodded in agreement and sighed. "Eight groomsmen and a Best Man. So who do we pair with the two extra guys? We can't exactly add in more bridesmaids."

"Why not?" Wes spoke up curiously. "If you don't mind me asking," he added quickly.

That got a smile from Jason. "The ceremony we decided on is going to be very symbolic," he explained. "We didn't want to do a traditional ceremony -"

"No matter *how* much my mother complains," Taylor interrupted darkly.
"And we wanted something that would mean more to us as Rangers," Jason continued, giving Taylor an amused look and reaching out to pat her hand. "The wedding party is going to have each of our teams, and part of the ceremony will be to show how we're all coming together."

Wes blinked, distantly thinking that was far sweeter and more sentimental than he'd ever expected either of them to want. Then he paused, frowning. "Wait. How does that give you six bridesmaids and nine groomsmen?"


"Zack, Billy, Rocky, Adam, Cole, Danny, Max, and Merrick, with Tommy as Best Man," Jason added.

"And we're asking Bridge to be our Flowerboy," she finished.

The question was on the tip of his tongue, but he held it in at the calm expressions the couple wore. Instead he forced himself to think about the people they'd listed, pondering how best to solve their problem. At last he shrugged. "Ask Cole to be a bridesmaid; he'll do it. Just tell him he's part of Taylor's honor guard."

Who was Trini?

Jason started to laugh and shake his head, but Taylor looked thoughtful. After a moment, she made a note on one of her many papers. "Now we just have to designate someone to escort him," she muttered to herself.

Jason stopped laughing, turning to stare at her incredulously. "You can't be serious."

In response, Taylor pulled out her cell phone, flipping it open. "Cole," she announced shortly, putting the phone to her ear.

There was several moments of silence.

"It's Taylor," she said suddenly. "Cole, would you be one of my honor guards in the wedding?" There was a pause, and she smiled. "Thanks, Cole. That solves - I mean, that means a lot to me. I really appreciate it."

Jason stared at her as Taylor cut the call short, turning to flash him a smirk. "Bridesmaids are taken care of," she declared.

"If Cole figures it out, I'm telling him I had nothing to do with this," he warned.

"He probably won't care," Wes told him with a shrug. "Cole doesn't really get worked up about that sort of stuff."

Jason pointed a finger at him warningly. "You're not allowed to offer any more suggestions."

"Cole's escort?" Taylor reminded them.

Jason frowned at her. "Well, who do *you* think would be willing to walk another guy down the aisle?"

Behind Jason's back, Wes raised his left hand to spell out *Rocky* in sign language to Taylor.

He was rewarded with a swat upside the head from Jason. "Knock that off," the older man warned,
but he was grinning.

"So what other problems do you still have?" Wes wondered, ducking away from Jason with a chuckle.

"Sorting out the guest list," Jason replied.

"Picking the menu."

"Finding locations big enough for the wedding *and* the reception."

"Ordering the cake."

"Decorations."

"Picking out the music."

"Picking out the flowers."

"Lodging for off-planet guests."

"Making sure nothing offends the off-planet guests."

"Clothes!" Taylor moaned, thumping her head against her arms.

"Her mother." Jason put in, rubbing his face with a look of exhaustion.

She glanced back up, her expression suddenly dark. "My mother."

"Wedding party gifts."

"Party favors."

"Did we mention her mother?"

"Explaining Toxica and Jindrax to our families?" Taylor suggested dryly.

"Explaining the Triforians and Aquitians."

Taylor's eyes narrowed. "Explaining why Maya never wears any clothes."

"Taylor wants us both to do that whole, 'old, new, borrowed, blue' thing," Jason commented.

She kicked him under the table before scowling down at her notes once again. "There are too many kids. People need to stop reproducing. How are we going to entertain this many kids?"

"Play area," Jason advised. "We can either beg for volunteers to take turns watching them, or hire someone." He paused to check another sheet and shook his head. "I was going to suggest we use some of the older kids to keep an eye on the others, but nevermind. After the last thing Leo said about them, I'm not trusting his twins in charge of *anything*."

Taylor scowled, writing something on yet another page. "We have ... thirty-one parents bringing their kids. I am *not* spending money on babysitters; that's ridiculous."

"How many of those are in the wedding party?" Jason asked.

"... Five. But with Bridge being involved, we really only need someone to keep an eye on Garrett."
She glanced up again. "Are you sure he said he didn't want to be in the ceremony?"

Jason nodded, sighing. "I had Kat ask him again, but he just said he didn't want to."

Kimberly set down her tray, swinging into a seat to lean against Jason's shoulder. "What are you two fussing over now?"

"Kids," Taylor said darkly.

Kimberly paused. "What about them?" she asked after a moment.

"Trying to figure out what to do with them all," Jason replied, wrapping an arm around her.

Her laugh sounded a bit forced, and Wes glanced over at her with frown, wondering if she was all right. She hadn't been looking so well lately, and even now she seemed a bit pale. He wondered if anyone else had noticed. Jason was looking at her a bit oddly too, but Wes couldn't tell if it was because he was concerned about her health, or because of the way she'd laughed at him.

"They're kids, Jase. Not pets. Leave them some things to play with and they'll take care of themselves," Kimberly promised them. "How many are coming, anyway?"

"Kids, or people in general?" Taylor asked dryly.

"Both?" Kimberly offered with a shrug.

She consulted her paperwork. "One hundred and sixteen guests including the wedding party. Seventeen of those are kids."

Wes choked on his water.

Jason reached over to thump on him on the back, looking amused. "Your count is off," he told Taylor.

She glanced down again. "One hundred and nineteen," she corrected.

Jason shook his head, grinning now. "You're still off. You're forgetting two."

"Who?" she demanded. "There's seventeen people in the wedding party, two guests from the Turbo Rangers, fourteen with the Astro Rangers, only eleven coming in with the Galaxy Rangers because Mike said Caitir wasn't bringing Xylina, nine from the Lightspeed Rangers, four for the Time Force Rangers, eleven with the Ninjas, eight from Tommy's Dino Thunder team, nine with the Mystic Rangers, eight for Overdrive, and Conner said that so far there were only going to be the five Jungle Fury Rangers. Then there's Lady Tel and her father, the Commander, and Kat from S.P.D. Your parents, your sister, my parents, Mr. 'Special' and Mrs. Mind Control, the ego-maniac, the bimbo, and the brat. And Garrett, obviously. Plus those two. That's one hundred and nineteen. Who am I forgetting?"

Jason paused dramatically, then leaned forward to look her in the eyes as she glared at him. "The bride, and the groom," he told her slowly.

She smacked him upside the head.

"Are you *serious*?!!" Wes demanded once he could breath easily again. "I thought you two were mostly inviting Rangers. Since when do we have so many kids?"

"We are," Jason assured him with a smile, rubbing the side of his head. "In fact, the only people
we invited that aren't former or current Rangers are our parents and siblings, and Taylor's niece. And then Cruger, Vanessa, and Kat from S.P.D." He paused. "Honey, isn't your niece like, fourteen? Why can't she watch the kids?"

"Because I don't trust her enough, O'Hara," Taylor returned. "Especially not with kids like Bridge and the others. She's a spoiled drama queen; either they'd eat her alive, or she'd scare them all half to death."

"That's a thought," Kimberly said absently as Jason rolled his eyes at Taylor's retaliatory nickname for him. "How many kids with special abilities are we going to be worrying about? Anyone that needs special attention?"

"Oh, crap," Taylor muttered, returning quickly to her notes. After a minute she looked up, disgruntled. "There's Ecliptor and Marinda, Elizabeth, Sky, Bridge, and Maya and the Galaxy Rangers' kids for sure. We don't know about Sydney, Jaz, or Keri yet, and as far as I know Garrett, Sora, Rhythm, and Melody are perfectly normal. And I know Garrett and Ran don't speak that much English. I'm not sure about the other four."

"I remember Cassie said that Ran was a Japanese citizen when they adopted her, and as far as I know she's human," Jason said thoughtfully. "Anyone hear anything unusual about Sophie?"

Kimberly shook her head. "Just Mack's usual bragging about how smart she is."

"Hey, guys!" a voice called cheerfully.

The group glanced up, all smiling at the sight of Ryan with Sydney clinging to his back. "Hey, Ryan. Hi, Sydney. Did you two have a fun trip?" Kimberly inquired.

"The best," Ryan returned with a bright grin. "We found a lot of great stuff. Got into a fight with some unfriendly locals, but Syd scared them all away."

Sydney waved at Wes happily in response to her name, despite the fact that he was less than eight feet in front of her. "Hi, Uncle Wes!" she chirped. "Daddy says I'm special!"

Wes blinked. "Of course you are, kiddo. What brought that up?"

Ryan smiled, swinging his daughter around to set her down carefully. "Why don't you show him, Princess?" he encouraged. "Just like we practiced."

Sydney responded by carefully removing something from her pocket. Holding a rock rightly in her right hand, she raised it to about shoulder high. "Fist of Rock," she declared firmly.

Wes, Jason, Kimberly, and Taylor all stared as light shimmered around the little girl's fist. Within seconds, her pale, unmarred skin was suddenly rusty red and uneven, and a light film of dust seemed to have settled around it. She brightened as the light faded, waving her arm excitedly. "See? See?" she demanded, beaming. "Now I'm special, too. Just like Sky, an' 'lizabeth, an' Bridge!"

After a long moment, Taylor cursed under her breath and made another note.
Air

Chapter Notes

I have decided that when they finally cooperate, writing the B Squad Midgets is a total blast. I also have a question: does anyone know if Syd ever calls Bridge 'Bridgey' in cannon? I think I've just seen it in fanfiction, but at the same time I could *swear* she does. Oh, and love for Rosabelle, because she declared that MiniJack should be poked into an apology. ^_^~

"You look funny."

Wes fought to hide a smile. It wasn't funny - really, it wasn't. But the look on his son's face was adorably scandalized as he stared at the other boy.

Jackson Zhane Johnson - Jaz for short - gazed back at Sky with a puzzled frown, as if trying to decide what to make of him. "You're all pale," Jaz continued. "Don' you ever play in the sun? An' wha's wrong with your face?"

"There's nothin' wrong with his face!" Elizabeth shot back hotly. Her eyes narrowed. "Maybe there's somethin' wrong with *your* face."

Jaz glared at her. "I wasn't even talkin' t' you. You're just a stupid *girl* anyway."

"Don't call Bethie stupid!" Sky shouted at him.

"What's wrong with girls?" Sydney demanded.

Jaz rolled his eyes with the sort of superiority only a three-year-old could muster. "'Cause girls have cooties. Duh. Ev'ryone knows that."

"They do not!" Sydney cried indignantly.

Faster than Wes and T.J. could blink, Elizabeth Stewart-Ortiz had launched herself at Jaz and was proceeding to beat at him with her tiny fists. Jaz yelled in outrage and yanked on her ponytail, making her squeal, and suddenly Sky and Sydney were involved and there was a mini-brawl.

"Hey, hey, hey!" T.J. cried, grabbing for the pile.
"Ow!" Wes yelped as someone bit him.

"Don't bite my daddy!" Sky hollered.

"It wasn't me!" Jaz shrieked.

Wes finally managed to get hold of Sky, hoisting him up and away from the fight, and reached out to snag Elizabeth at the same time as T.J. caught Jaz. "Come on guys, break it up!" he said sharply.

"That's not how you're gonna make friends here, Jaz," T.J. lectured.

"Sydney!" Wes snapped as finding herself no longer in the middle of the fight, the little girl turned and swiftly kicked Jaz in the shin.

She humphed and tossed her hair. "That's for saying girls have cooties."

Everyone froze as they heard a small sniffle.

Sky twisted in Wes' arms, dropping down and hurrying to Bridge's side. "You okay, Bridge?" he asked anxiously, frowning.

Bridge slowly shook his head, sniffling again and hugging himself tightly. "Everybody's red." he whispered, shivering. "An' not the good red, like Uncle Wes an' Daddy."

Before Wes could figure out a way to keep Elizabeth away from Jaz long enough to help Bridge, as she was still glaring furiously at him, Sky had wrapped Bridge up in a tight hug and erected a shimmering blue wall around them both. Bridge instantly sighed in relief, snuggling against the older boy. "Thanks, Sky," he murmured.

"Better?" Sky asked softly, giving Bridge a squeeze.

"Mmm," Bridge sighed, smiling contentedly.

Wes frowned at the two boys, trying to smother a sudden surge of nervousness. Sky had been way too efficient about what he'd done; this was not the first time it had happened. And judging by Bridge's lack of protest, nor was it the first time Sky had tried.

"... Wha's wrong with him?" Jaz asked hesitantly, frowning at the other boys. "He sick?"

"No," Z snapped back.

"Bridgey has special powers, just like the rest o' us," Sydney informed him haughtily. "He gets upset when people around him feel bad things." She moved closer to poke him in the chest. "So you hafta 'pologize, 'cause you started it!"

For a moment, Jaz seemed to puff up with indignation. But then Bridge sniffled again, and he visibly debated. "I ... I'm sorry, Bridgey," he muttered. "Don' cry."

Bridge scrubbed at his eyes and tried to give Jaz a smile. "S'okay," he hiccupped. "M'just weird."

One of Elizabeth's clones appeared at his side in instant, and whichever Elizabeth Wes was holding vanished a moment later. "You are not!" she told him insistently, hovering just outside Sky's shield. "You're special, just like the rest o' us. Your power's just ... harder than ours."

"Which just means you're even *more* special, Bridgey!" chirped Sydney.
"I know," Bridge mumbled, now starting to look a little embarrassed by all the attention.

"Hey, Bridgey!"

The group of children turned at Jaz's call to find him waving at them all. "Watch this!" he told them confidently. With that, he turned and walked straight into the wall.

And went through it.

Wes stared, turning to look at T.J. in surprise. "I thought you said Jaz didn't have any abilities."

T.J. shrugged, giving him a sheepish smile. "That's pretty recent, actually. We only found out about a month ago, and I haven't had the chance to pass along the news."

Jaz emerged from the wall suddenly, walking over to the other kids with a bright grin. "Ta da!" he declared triumphantly, presenting a large chocolate chip cookie. "For you, Bridgey."

Bridge lit up instantly. "That's so cool!" he gasped, reaching for the cookie. Sky hastily dropped the shield with a wince, and Bridge stared at his new present for a moment, frowning. "Uncle Wes?" he asked suddenly. "C'n you break this t' pieces for me?"

"Sure, kiddo," Wes assured him, coming over to take the cookie. "But we'd better not tell your mom about this, okay?" he cautioned, giving the group a wink. Heaven help him if Aisha found out he was spoiling Bridge's appetite, but anything to keep the tentative peace the kids seemed to have established.

"Five pieces, please," Bridge told him.

"But it's your cookie, Bridge," Elizabeth protested.

"It's mine t' share," Bridge said firmly. He distributed the pieces Wes offered him quickly, flashing the other four the brightest smile he'd managed yet. "Now we c'n be all be friends, right? No more fighting?"


"I won' fight if Jaz doesn' insult girls 'gain," Sydney sniffed.

Jaz stared down at his piece of cookie for a long moment. "Will you still be my friends when I go home after the wedding?" he asked suddenly, his voice very soft. "... The only friends I got at home are Ran an' Garrett, an' they started school already. An' Sora an' Keri' an' Sophie are all too small to play with."

The other four stared at him in surprise, and Wes saw T.J. wince out of the corner of his eye.

"Course we will!"

To Wes' surprise, Sydney was the first to reassure him, leaning over to give Jaz a hug. "We'll all be your bestest friends ever!"

"Forever an' ever!" Bridge agreed instantly, smiling happily at Jaz.

Sky and Elizabeth exchanged glances. "Well ... You can always have more than one bestest friend ... right?" Elizabeth said hesitantly.
Sky frowned slightly. "I guess so."

"Course you can!" Bridge told them cheerfully. "Mama an' Daddy an' Daddy are all bestest friends. An' Daddy says he has *five* bestest friends."

Wes grinned at T.J.'s puzzled looked as the other man stared at Bridge. *Later*, he gestured.

T.J. rolled his eyes, looking amused.

"Which Daddy's that?" Elizabeth wondered with a frown.

"All-Black Daddy," Bridge returned immediately. "He says his bestest friends are the most important peoples in his life, 'cept for me and Mama."

"Why'd you call him that?" Jaz asked, tilting his head curiously as he munched on his cookie with a much lighter expression than before.

Bridge blinked. "'Cause he's only black. Daddy's red and blue, and then Daddy's black and green. Mama's all yellow, though. She's *real* pretty." He paused, a dreamy expression coming across his face.

"Bridge sees people in colors," Sky explained to Jaz, who looked back in wide-eyed awe.

"Awesome!" Jaz cried, looking at Bridge eagerly. "What color am I?"

Bridge smiled tentatively. "Red, with orange sparklies in it. Uncle Cam says it means courage an' joy."

"Well actually, he said red meant 'stupidly brave' an' bein' a mar ... mar-tire? But Mama said it means courage."

"What colors are ev'ryone else?" Jaz wanted to know.

Wes noticed T.J. frowning at the kids again. "What?"

"There's five of them," T.J. muttered.

"Don't even think about it," Wes advised. "If we don't think about it, it can't happen." He glanced at the group of kids, who were still giggling together despite the fact that they'd all finished off their cookie. "You think it's safe to leave them alone yet?"

T.J. shrugged. "One way to find out. Jaz!" he called loudly.

His son glanced up. "Yeah, Papa?"

"Don't do anything that's gonna get you an Uncle Cam Lecture, understood?"

Jaz shuddered. "Yes, Papa."

Wes raised an eyebrow. "Be good, Sky."

Sky looked over at him with that exasperated look that he knew he to have gotten from Vanessa. "Yes, Daddy."

The last thing Wes heard as he and T.J. headed for the door was Sydney squealing "Say somethin' Japanese!"

"I think they might be friends now," he commented wryly.
T.J. laughed. "That's good; Jaz can always use more friends."

Wes glanced at him, raising an eyebrow. "So he walks through walls?"

"Yeah," T.J. sighed, reaching up rub a hand over his face. "Dana calls it 'phasing', something about molecular shifting or something. We're pretty sure Keri has it too; she's just not old enough to use it yet. Now that he's got the hang of it, he loves to appear out of thin air and scare people."

Wes frowned. So far all of the kids born after the accident were only children; until Keri, no one had any idea of what would happen if they had more than one. "So we know it's us now, not just the kids?" he asked quietly.

T.J. nodded, giving him an understanding look of misery. "Whatever happened in the lab that day affected all of us enough to pass it down to any of our children. Sydney wasn't a fluke after everything Ryan went through; between Jaz and Keri, we can definitely say it's something in the people involved."

Wes leaned back against the wall of the hallway, pinching his nose. "So Sophie is from Tyzonn trying to stop it?"

There was an awkward pause, and he glanced up to find T.J. looking uncomfortable. "What is it?"

"Sophie's problems aren't a result of the accident," he said quietly. "You remember that Tyzonn's a Mercurian, right?"

Wes nodded warily.

T.J. cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Mercury is poisonous to humans," he reminded him.

Wes went white. "Oh, no ... And Sophie was a genetic baby .... "

T.J. nodded. "Andrew's been working with Dana on some treatments for her to keep her from getting sick. So far they've been able to keep her blood fairly balanced, but every once in awhile she has fits."

"I thought they made sure this wouldn't happen before Mack and Tyzonn went through with it," Wes protested weakly.

T.J. shrugged. "Andrew warned them they couldn't be a hundred percent sure, but ... "

"Mack wanted a child so badly, and they decided to do it anyway," Wes murmured, feeling sick. He'd been the one who Mack had come to with questions about the process: how much did it cost, how reliable was it, how safe for the baby, what exactly did they need to have it done ...

A hand squeezed his shoulder, and he glanced up into T.J.'s concerned gaze. "She'll be okay, Wes. Andrew, Katherine, Dana, even Cam, they're all working together to help her. And if they can't do it, no one can."

Wes took a deep breath, nodding slowly.

After a moment, he pushed himself up off the wall and managed to give T.J. a smile that didn't seem completely fake. "Coffee?"

"Only if there's donuts," T.J. asserted. He made a face. "I still can't get Litania to appreciate sweets."
"Not a problem," Wes grinned.

As they headed in search of the lounge, T.J. glanced over at him again. "All-Black Daddy?" he asked skeptically.

Wes laughed.
This took me *forever* to get out! Eric refused to cooperate. Much love for Starandrea, because making her birthday banner got me into a creative mood, and BlackCrimsonLight, who helped me decide the finer points of Mirinoi terminology.

Newtech City was cleaner than he'd remembered it, which was a bit of a surprise. Of course, he was paying more attention to the scenery this time, and spending less time arguing with himself of why he was even there. It made for a nicer drive, at least.

Taylor had warned him when he got to S.P.D. someone would be waiting to meet him. She'd neglected to mention who that person was.

"Eric!" Cole Evans called, grinning brilliantly at him.

"Cole," he managed, moments before the other man gave him a rough hug.

Thankfully Cole had learned to let go quickly when taking his own life into his hands, or at least had finally come to realize that Eric wasn't anywhere near as forgiving about touching as Wes was. He stepped back still grinning, and completely unconcerned that less than a second slower and he'd be missing an arm. "It's great to see you," he said cheerfully.


"So, Taylor said you needed a place to crash while you're here, right?" Cole asked, completely ignoring the glare. He glanced down at the notepad he was carrying. "Looks like you're staying with ... the Carson family."

Eric frowned. "I was gonna get a motel. Who the hell are the Carsons?"

Cole smiled at him again. "Jason and Taylor decided it wasn't fair to expect everyone to pay for their own hotels, so a lot of the S.P.D. employees offered places for the wedding guests. You're staying with the Carsons: Rocky, Adam, Zack, Aisha, and Bridge." He checked his notebook again. "You'll be there with the incoming Mystic Rangers."

"The who?" he repeated blankly.

"Nick's team," Cole clarified.

"Oh." Eric frowned. He didn't know Nick all that well, and he sure didn't know anything about his team. And the Carsons? The only one of them he could recognize the name of was Bridge. And he was not staying somewhere because he knew their four-year-old. "Really, I'm fine with a - "

"Cole, have you seen Tommy?"

Eric stared at the tiny brunette who'd caught Cole's arm. She seemed alarmingly pale as she clutched Cole anxiously.
Cole blinked down at her. "Um, sorry Kim. Last I saw he was in the Command Center, talking to Hunter. I can call him for you."

"No!" she said quickly, catching his hand as he started to reach for his pocket. "It's ... it's not that important. I just wanted to know where he was. No big deal." She gave a smile that was obviously forced and turned to look at Eric. The smile warmed slightly, and she offered a hand. "Eric, right? I'm Kimberly Hart."

He nodded, shaking her hand more gently than he would have normally; she didn't look too healthy. "Nice to meet you," he said shortly.

"Are you sure you don't want me to call Tommy, Kim?" Cole persisted. "I don't think he and Hunter were talking about anything important. They said something about Cam and paint, but - "

"It's fine, Cole," she assured him, her smile turning slightly strained. "Just ... checking up on the wedding party. You know me; always need something to do. Well, gotta run!"

She was off before either man could say anything more.

Eric blinked, shaking his head after a moment and silently deciding this was why he didn't get out often. "Like I was saying Cole, I'd prefer a - "

"Addi and Neoma Chen-Corbett! You get back here, *right now*!"

Eric jerked back as two children streaked past him to duck behind Cole, clinging to the back of his clothes. "Hide us, Uncle Cole!" pleaded one.

"We didn't do it," added the boy, giving Cole a wide-eyed, innocent look.

Cole raised his eyebrows. "What didn't you do?"

The boy squirmed slightly, and the girl swiftly kicked him in the shin behind Cole's back. "Nothing!" she insisted.

"So then what does your mom *think* you did?" Cole asked, giving them both a patient smile.

"We were just trying to upgrade him," the boy insisted.

The girl groaned. "Addi!"

"Addi! Neoma!"

Eric turned around just as the two kids turned their charms on Leo. "Yes, Mother?" they asked in unison.

He choked.

Leo didn't bat an eye at being called 'Mother', and Eric was startled to see that Cole didn't seem to think anything of it either. Instead Leo folded his arms, glaring down at them. "Would either of you care to explain why Dustin's robot dog meowed when he tried to show it to me?"

"It did?" the girl asked, pretending to look surprised.

Leo narrowed his eyes at her, then turned his stare to the boy. "Addi? Do you have anything to say?"
Addi froze, and Neoma went to kick him again. He whimpered slightly before trying to give Leo his wide-eyed look again. "No ... ?" he tried.

Leo's stare only lasted for another moment before he suddenly sighed, dropping his gaze for a moment. His expression was gentle when he looked back up, and he dropped down to one knee, holding his arms out to Addi. "Come 'ere."

The little boy was in his arms in an instant, sniffling against his shoulder.

Leo gave him a hug, rubbing his back soothingly. After a moment he pulled back to wipe the boy's eyes. "Did she break anything? Or just more bruises?"

Addi shrugged, sniffling again and leaning against Leo's shoulder. "I think I'm broken," he sighed, clearly enjoying being fussed over.

Leo nodded, pretending to look serious. "Broken forever? Or would it help if I kissed it better?"

Addi considered this. "Probably forever. But kisses might help. Maybe even a piggyback ride."

"Not fair!" Neoma protested instantly. "Why does Addi always get fussed over?"

"Because you keep beating him up," Leo returned calmly, leveling her with another stare. "And you know better than that. You're supposed to be the one protecting your brother, not hurting him."

Neoma lasted for several more moments before suddenly bursting into tears and launching herself at Leo. "We're sorry!" she wailed. "We just wanted to make him smart! Why should a dog only have to make dog noises? He should be able to choose! But then it didn't work right when we uploaded it, and we *knew* Father would be mad and we're really sorry!"

"Really, *really* sorry," Addi added helpfully, shooting Leo a hopeful look.

Eric stared at them all. Okay, so he hadn't seen Leo in a few years. But first of all, since when did he have kids? And letting them call him *mother*? Last he knew, Leo was heading back to Mirinoi with presents for the rest of the Galaxy Rangers - something about needing shoes. He vaguely remembered a giant bag of disposable razors and shaving cream ...

And there was no way Leo could seriously be buying this act.

But there Leo was, smiling at the kids and pulling them both into a hug as he kissed their temples. "... So we'll go apologize to Uncle Dustin about R.I.C., and then talk to your father, right?"

"Yes, Mother," they murmured.

Leo caught their hands, finally noticing Eric as he stood. "Oh, hey Eric," he greeted. "Sorry; I didn't see you. How have you been?"

"Fine," Eric returned shortly, trying to hide how uncomfortable he suddenly was at the display of Leo's parenting skills. "You?"

"Busy," Leo said ruefully, grinning down at his children. "Well, we'd better get going. We'll have to catch up more later. See you."

"See you," Eric echoed dully. He glanced at Cole once the trio was out of earshot. "Mother?" he asked skeptically.
"Hmm?" Cole glanced up from studying his notebook again, blinking. "Oh! You didn't know about that?"

"No," Eric snapped back, feeling more irritated because he hadn't.

Cole shrugged. "Apparently on Mirinoi, fathers are the ones that enforce the rules, and mothers are the ones that nurture. So Leo is a 'Mother' and Kendrix's son calls her 'Father'." He shrugged. "It's pretty easy to get used to once you get the hang of it."

*Speak for yourself,* Eric thought silently, frowning at the other man. "Look Cole, I'd really rather get -"

"Uncle Eric!"

Eric oofed as he found himself abruptly cut in half.

"Mama an' Dad an' Dad an' Dad said that you're staying with us! That's so awesome! You're gonna have t' stay in one o' the guest rooms with Mr. Daggeron, but there's a bed all ready for you an' everything. Mr. Daggeron's very shiny and pretty, an' he seems really nice. But I don' know him enough to call him Uncle Daggeron yet. But I think I should, 'cause he's a Power Ranger an' that makes him family, an' I really don't think he'd mind that much. But since I don't really know him real well, he might mind. But he might mind that I think he minds, if he really doesn't." Bridge looked up at Eric, scrunching up his nose. "What do you think Uncle Eric?"

"... Whatever you feel more comfortable with, Bridge," he managed.

*What the heck did he just say?*

"So can we take you home yet?" Bridge asked anxiously, bouncing in place. He blinked, putting a finger against his chin in thought. "We should probably see Sky first, though. He *really* wanted to see you."

Eric blinked, more than slightly surprised. "He did?"

Bridge nodded solemnly. "Well, he didn't *say* he wanted to see you," he explained, "But I c'n tell." He grabbed Eric's hand, glancing over at Cole. "Can I have Uncle Eric now, Uncle Cole?"

Cole grinned at him. "He's all yours, Bridge."

Silently Eric wondered if he got a say in this as Bridge eagerly dragged him off, chattering away.

****

Eric reclined on his guest bed with a quiet groan. After hours of being dragged around by Bridge, greeted by children, meeting other Rangers, and seeing the old Reds he used to know, he was exhausted.

Which was strange, considering he really hadn't done much. It wasn't as if anyone had really had much to say to him, and things tended to be awkward when they tried. He just wasn't a very social person. The only reason he even knew these people was because they'd all been Rangers at some point or another, and the only reason they'd ever been considered his friends was because of - Wes. It always came back to him.

Wes was the socialite, whether he admitted it or not. He remembered birthdays, helped organize
get-togethers, sent holiday cards, wrote letters, and made monthly phone calls. He kept pictures of other people's families, neatly displayed in a special photo album that was left out where anyone could find it. He remembered details like what someone's favorite colors were, or what sort of things they were allergic to.

He was the light of any group, and if he wasn't the center of everything he was part of it. And he loved it whole-heartedly. He chatted people up easily, while Eric lurked in the background and nodded along. He reminded Eric to sign his name to cards and letters as though he'd actually been involved in writing them, and always gave well-wishes from them both.

He didn't know these people, and they didn't know him. He had no idea that Carter had gotten *married* let alone divorced. T.J., Andros, Leo, Hunter, and Mack all had kids now? When had that happened? Conner was settling down? Tommy was the Deputy Commander of S.P.D.? Hunter had been promoted? What idiot put Hunter in charge of *anything*, when the last time he'd seen him, the kid was still brooding over some argument with his boyfriend and whining about how being a teacher was stressful?

Without Wes to make the effort for him, these people barely realized Eric existed. He was just there. More substantial than a ghost, but less than a friend.

And he didn't have the slightest idea how to change that.
Once again, I have never been involved in a wedding. What you are about to read is my own active imagination combined with an obsession for the show 'Who's Wedding is it Anyway?' that came over me for several weeks. I planned out so many details of this wedding that never got used after all. -Sighs- Such is the nature of the muse.

"Has anyone seen my shoes?"

"What about my hair clip?"

"For goodness’ sake, who's got the hair curler *now*?!"

"Cole, will you *please* keep Rosa out from under foot?"

"Sorry. Come here, Rosa!"

Wes still wasn't quite sure what he was doing here, but as long as it gave him something to do by pretending to keep an eye on the boys, that was fine with him. He watched as the young wolf pup bounded over to Cole, her tail lashing at the air happily as she pounced against his side.

"Down, girl," he admonished gently, reaching over to ruffle her fur gently. "Don't upset Ruby."

The cub in his lap whined pitifully in agreement.

Tanya paused in the middle of doing her hair to eye Cole warily. "Cole, are you sure you really don't mind wearing that robe? I know Sergeant Earheart said he was going to get you one of the ones with a blue monogram instead, after the gift mix-up ... "

"This is fine," Cole assured her with a sunny smile as he continued to pet the his cubs. "Pink is almost red anyway."

Hayley snorted. "Not in our world," she reminded him with an amused glance.

Bridge frowned. "Does that mean I can't be a Pink Ranger?"

Several of the women fought grins as Aisha turned to her son with a warm smile. "You can be whatever Ranger you want to be someday, Baby," she promised, kissing the top of his head. "But first, let's wait until you're a little older, okay?"

"Okay, Mama," he sighed, happily leaning into her.

She frowned, hugging him closer and checking his forehead. "You feeling okay, Bridge? Anybody bothering you?"

"Uh-uh," Bridge mumbled, snuggling against her shoulder. "You're so shiny, Mama."

Aisha relaxed slowly in relief, stroking Bridge's hair gently. "Tell you what. If you let me finish
getting ready, I'll hug you all you want as soon as all this chaos is over with."

Bridge sighed reluctantly, pulling away from her at last. "Okay, Mama. Sorry."

"Don't ever be sorry, Baby," she admonished gently.

Wes watched Bridge carefully as Aisha moved back to getting ready, frowning as he saw the little boy wince slightly. "Bridge!" he called. "Hey kiddo, why don't you come sit with me? Aunt Tanya and Aunt Hayley will run you over if you stand there."

He ignored the irritated look Tanya shot him while Hayley seemed almost tolerantly amused, making sure to keep himself calm and relatively cheerful as Bridge scurried over and clambered into his lap. He wrapped his arms around the little boy, reminding himself of how much fun it was to watch Tanya and Aisha stress in contrast to Haley's calm and efficient work to dress herself up.

He was rewarded with a soft sigh, and Bridge snuggling against his shoulder. "Thanks for not tellin' on me, Uncle Wes," he whispered. "I don' wanna mess up Aunt Taylor's special day."

He gave Bridge a hug, silently musing how precious this kid was. He wasn't Sky, who he loved more than anything in the world, but Bridge was a charmer in his own way. "I'm here for you, buddy," he murmured, trying not to rumple the small suit jacket as he rubbed Bridge's back soothingly.

"Kim? Are you sure you're all right?"

He glanced up at Katherine's concerned voice. Kimberly was leaning over the vanity, her hands trembling as she clutched a hair brush. She looked up at Katherine's question, face pale and brown eyes teary. "I ..."

Her eyes suddenly went wide and she clapped a hand over her mouth, rushing for the bathroom and nearly knocking over Tanya in the process. The unmistakable sounds of someone being sick immediately followed.

The assorted bridesmaids exchanged worried looks, and Aisha stopped what she was doing to go knock on the door. "Kim? What's wrong?"

"I still think you should have gone with that beautiful designer dress we looked at," Daphne Earhart sighed dramatically as she followed Taylor and Alyssa out of the room in the bridal suite that had been set aside for the bride herself.

Daphne Earhart may have been an army wife at some point in her life according to Taylor, but Wes had taken one look at her and seen 'old money': a term his dad had taught him when he was younger. The woman had spared no expense on the wedding of her only daughter, and constantly lamented that Taylor hadn't allowed her to do anything more extravagant than this mess already was. She didn't hesitate to throw more money into the tiniest details, and pretended not to understand why Taylor could ever want something simple. Even now, on a day when no one was supposed to outshine the bride herself, her dress was a dramatic silver with a full skirt, calling far more attention to her figure than Taylor's simple golden gown.

Wes could see Taylor's eye twitch even from his position across the room. "First of all Mom, it was lacy. Second, I kept tripping over that stupid train. And third, that sash was *pink*."

"And what's wrong with pink?" her mother demanded. "You looked lovely in it."

"And I've told you a thousand times Mom, my color is *yellow*, not pink." Taylor ground out. Her
fists clenched sporadically at her sides.

Bridge whimpered softly against Wes' neck.

He stood swiftly, carrying the little boy with him as he headed toward Taylor. "You look beautiful, Taylor," he said loudly. "Don't you think so, Bridge?"

Taylor turned, startled, and he could immediately see her trying to force herself to calm down before Bridge came any closer. "Thanks," she told him after a moment, looking slightly uncomfortable at the compliment.

Bridge peeked out from Wes' neck to glance at Taylor, his eyes widening in awe. "Wow! You're almost as pretty as Mama, Aunt Taylor!"

The corner of Taylor's mouth quirked, her gaze dropping to the floor for a second. When she looked back up, she gave Bridge a warm smile. "Thank you, Bridge. That's very sweet of you to say."

"It's true," he said earnestly. "You're all sparkly golden colors. It's so pretty!"

She leaned down to tap her finger against Bridge's nose with a smile. "I'm flattered you think so."

Bridge giggled. "That tickles Aunt Taylor!"

She raised an eyebrow. "Oh, really? Then what about ... this?" Her fingers attacked Bridge's sides without warning, and he shrieked in delight as Wes tried to hold him in place for her.

"Is someone sick?"

Taylor paused as her mother's words registered, and Wes quickly took a step back, holding Bridge closer as he gasped for air and giggled weakly. "Sick?" she repeated, turning around.

"Kim," Aisha answered her, glancing at the bathroom door again. Kimberly had apparently managed to shut the door, but the retching sounds started up again after another moment. "I know she's been on edge all day, but she wouldn't tell me why."

Taylor frowned, moving to knock softly on the door. "Kim?" she called gently.

There was a cough, and a very weak "... Yes?"

"Are you okay? Do you need us to get you anything?" As she spoke, Taylor narrowed her eyes at Cole, nodding towards the door of the suite and mouthing 'Jason', followed by a slight tap to her left wrist on the new old-fashioned style communicator she wore.

Cole nodded, gently shifting his pups from his lap and patting his leg for them to follow him as he moved.

"Does she need a doctor?" Daphne asked, looking anxious. "Do you think she'll be able to make it through the ceremony?"

"Tommy!" Cole yelped.

Everyone turned in surprise as Tommy strode quickly into the room. Wearing a black suit with a white dress shirt, red vest, and green tie, as well a small blue flower clipped to his breast pocket, he would have looked almost comical if not for the determined set to his face and the dark expression in his eyes. He headed straight for the bathroom Kimberly had holed up in, pausing beside Taylor
to turn and gently kiss her cheek. "You look lovely, Taylor," he told her with a sincere smile. "Sorry about lurking outside like that, but I *have* to talk to Kimberly."

"She's all yours," Taylor returned, raising an eyebrow as she gestured to the bathroom.

"Thanks," Tommy told her. The smile on his face vanished as he turned back to the door. Thankfully Kimberly hadn't managed to lock it; something in Tommy's expression told them all that he wouldn't have hesitated to break it down to get inside.

Instead he turned the knob softly and strode through, shutting and locking the door behind him.

Taylor turned to look at the rest of the room, giving them all a bemused look.

Everyone else shrugged in response.

"We'll go over and tell Jason that there might be a delay." Cole offered after a moment, reaching down to scratch Rosa's ear.

"And we'll come with you, right Bridge?" Wes said quickly. He glanced to his side where Garrett Hillard regarded the rest of the room with solemn eyes. "You wanna come with us, Garrett? We can give the girls a chance to finish up."

The boy looked up at him for a moment, then slowly nodded.

"Daijobou?" Katherine asked, frowning down at her son. "You don't have to go if you don't want to."

Garrett nodded again.

Katherine sighed, smiling fondly at him. She leaned over to kiss his hair, ruffling it gently after a moment. "I'll see you later, okay Sweetheart?" She whispered something in his ear, and managed to get the first tiny smile Wes had seen yet out of the kid.

Wes glanced down at Garrett as he and Cole finally managed to escape the girls' suite. From what they told him, Katherine had been raising him to speak more Japanese than English, but he did know enough to tell someone when he didn't understand. Unfortunately, Wes' own grasp of Japanese was painfully limited, and he doubted Cole knew any at all. His contacts within S.P.D. Japan all spoke English first, and he hadn't exactly been expecting any wedding guests to be passing though Newtech City that didn't.

He wondered if Garrett had always been this quiet, or if he was just really shy.

The guys suite greeted them all jubilantly, looking up from a game of cards as they lounged around the room. Only Merrick, Adam, and Billy seemed to be completely ready; the other groomsmen were in various states of undress, and a miserable looking Danny was sitting in only his boxers. Jason meanwhile, was laughing as Rocky stripped off his dress shirt to set it down carefully on the chair besides him.

"Are you guys playing strip poker?" Wes demanded incredulously.

Zack shrugged, reclining back in his chair. He appeared to only have lost his jacket and tie so far, although he'd left his vest open for the time being. "Those girls aren't gonna be ready anytime soon, and it doesn't take that long to put on a shirt and jacket."

"Speak for yourself," Danny sighed, making Max snicker beside him. He shot his boyfriend a
wounded look.

Zack glanced up and frowned. "Hey Bridge, you feeling okay buddy?"

Bridge glanced up. "Yes," he answered quickly.

Adam sighed, coming over to take him from Wes. "No, you're not," he scolded gently, shifting his son against his side with a slight grunt of effort. Bridge was finally starting to get too big to be held. He rubbed Bridge's back as the boy snuggled against his shoulder. "Why didn't you tell your mom?" he asked.

"M'okay," Bridge mumbled. "An' I don' wanna mess up Aunt Taylor's special day." He paused, wrinkling his nose. "But Aunt Kim's sick, so that might mess it up 'fore I c'n mess it up."

"Hey, you can't mess anything up with something you can't help," Rocky told him sternly as he joined Adam. He wrapped his arms around his husband and son, leaning over Adam's shoulder to rest his forehead against Bridge's. "And Aunt Taylor would have been more upset if you didn't say anything and something bad happened, right?"

Bridge sighed softly, leaning into his parents with a relaxed and content expression. "Mm-hmm," he murmured.

"In one ear and out the other," Zack quipped, watching the trio with a fond expression.

Bridge opened an eye. "I might feel even better if you gave me a hug too, Daddy," he suggested hopefully.

Zack laughed openly, while Rocky and Adam exchanged amused looks. "Is that so?" Zack teased, even as he pushed himself to his feet.

"Uh-huh," Bridge answered, a smile starting to light up his face as Zack approached.

Wes watched the way Zack easily moved into hug Adam and Bridge as well, leaving the boy fully cocooned between the three of them. No matter how long he'd known the Carson family, they never seemed to stop making him take stock of how comfortable they were together, even though he knew Zack and Aisha had been married for just over two years now, and Rocky and Adam had been committed to one another for longer than he'd known them. But something about raising a child together had made them in their own way, a tight family unit.

And every time he remembered that, he couldn't help a small flare of jealousy.

"Group hug!" Rocky laughed, lifting turning his head to kiss his husband's cheek.

"Group hug!" Zack echoed, squeezing tightly as Adam oomped in surprise.

The look on Bridge's face was a mix of delight and pure bliss.

 Feeling uncomfortable, Wes glanced around. He noticed Cole talking to Jason, who was frowning in concern. Jason started to stand, but Cole caught him with a reassuring hand on his arm and a smile.

"What are you guys all still doing sitting around?" Tommy called from the doorway. "Isn't somebody supposed to be getting married today?"

Wes jumped slightly, turning to frown at the other man. "How's Kimberly?" he asked, concerned.
Tommy's smile dimmed slightly, but he nodded. "She's finally calmed down enough to be reasonable, and we're going to talk some more later. She'll be all right."

"What happened, Bro?" Jason asked worriedly, rising to his feet.

Tommy looked at him for a long moment. His serious expression suddenly broke into a wide grin. "I'm gonna be a father!"

Everyone in the room did a double take, followed by a resounding "What?!"

****

Wes slid into his seat beside Vanessa with an exhausted sigh.

"Tired?" she asked, sounding amused.

"You have no idea," he sighed. "But everything's finally just about ready to start." He turned to glance over at Vanessa and Sky and froze.

Eric Myers was sitting on Sky's other side.

"Eric ... " he murmured before he could stop himself, and he fought back a wince at the pained sound in his voice.

Eric nodded stiffly, looking distinctly uncomfortable. "Wes."

"Sky asked Uncle Eric to sit with us, since he doesn't know anyone else so well," Vanessa explained, and Wes noted the slightly pinched look to her face as she kept her voice cheerful.

He reached out instinctively to squeeze her hand where Sky couldn't see, silently reassuring her that he was all right. He swallowed, forced himself to smile, and looked at Eric again. He would not ruin today for anyone; Sky was going to bored enough as it was. "It's great to see you, Eric. How have you been?"

Eric's eyes narrowed ever-so-slightly as he stared at him, followed by a barely perceptible nod. "Same old, same old."

And even throughout the years they'd been apart, Wes still knew how to read him. Fine. If that's the way you want to do things, I'll play along.

"Nothing new?" Wes persisted, and from the way Vanessa was looking at him he could tell his smile was starting to look strained.

Eric hesitated for a second. "Got a cat," he said finally.

Wes blinked. That was ... far more normal of a response than he'd expected. "That's great," he said honestly. "What's its name?"

Eric rolled his eyes. "It's a cat; it doesn't need a name."

Vanessa's eyes narrowed slightly and Sky was looking up at Eric in surprise, but Wes saw through him in an instant. "Uh huh," he returned, smiling faintly. "So what's its name?"

The sudden start of music *should* have freed Eric from being forced to respond; Vanessa had already turned to see who was coming down the aisle. But Wes knew better then to look away from Eric before getting an answer, and now Sky was glancing back and between them with a curious
expression.

The final answer was so soft he barely heard it, but he caught it none the less.

"Gracie."

Wes smiled to himself and shifted to watch as Zack and Kimberly, who looked far better now than she had earlier, made their way to the altar.

The ceremony was simple, but beautiful. Each pair walked down the aisle proudly displaying their Ranger Color in their dresses and colored vests and ties, and in some cases, colors. Remembering what Jason had told him about combining their teams, Wes took the time to search for the symbols he knew they each treasured and found them. Every member of the wedding party wore one of the classic-style communicators - some obviously less worn than others, and a single flower somewhere on their person. Each flower was different, and displayed just as proudly. In addition, with the unavoidable exceptions of Zack and Kimberly, Billy and Hayley, and Adam and Tanya, each member of Taylor's team walked with a member of Jason's, from Danny and Katherine all the way to Tommy and Alyssa as the Best Man and Maid of Honor made their way together.

There was one exception to this, and the moment he saw him Wes understood.

A hand tugged gently on his sleeve, and he glanced over to see Sky frowning at him as Vanessa and Eric both looked bemused. "Daddy, why's Uncle Merrick walking by 'imself?" Sky whispered.

Wes leaned in to respond, gently stroking his son's hair. "You see that flower he's holding?"

Sky squinted, and Wes glanced over himself as Merrick solemnly walked with one arm crooked to the air for someone who wasn't there, carrying a single yellow daffodil in his hand. "Yeah ... " Sky answered, frowning in confusion.

"That's for Trini Kwan, the very first Yellow Ranger Earth ever had," he explained softly. "She was one of Jason's teammates, but she died in a car accident a long time ago. But even though she can't walk down the aisle with them, they want to remember that she'll always be part of their team."

"Oh ... " Sky said softly.

Wes couldn't help glancing at Vanessa and Eric to see if either of them understood. Vanessa he wasn't quite sure about; she was frowning as she watched Merrick. But Eric ...

A light had entered Eric's eyes, his mouth set in a grim line. And when Merrick passed them, he inclined his head ever so slightly in the direction of the woman who wasn't there, but should have been.

But then, Wes mused to himself as he did the same, Eric *would* have understood what it meant to honor a person who wasn't there.

Everyone turned to stand for the wedding march, and found themselves treated to quite possibly the sweetest thing that could have happened next to Merrick's walk.

Bridge, wearing a bright smile and an expression that told anyone who knew him how pleased he was with himself, walked arm in arm with Garrett. Between them the two boys clutched Bridge's flower basket, taking turns carefully spreading handfuls of yellow petals and leaves as they went. It was easy to see that Garrett was a last minute addition; Bridge was the only one of them to wear a small flower pinned to his jacket just like the groomsmen, and Garrett's suit was slightly rumpled...
and covered in what Wes suspected to be wolf hair. But he kept his gaze focused determinedly ahead as Bridge happily squeezed his hand and threw petals, pausing only once to wave at Sky as they passed them.

Somehow Taylor still managed to shine just as Bridge had claimed she did, in her own way. Between the pale golden gown hugged her curves gracefully and the large white flower pinned to her hair beneath the veil, she was beautiful in a way that wasn't often noticeable. But even as Sergeant Earhart lifted her veil and turned to give her away to Jason, Wes could see the smirk on her face rather than the happy smile a bride usually wore.

After all, fancy, symbolic wedding or not, Taylor was still Taylor.
Music

Chapter Notes

Here is the long awaited conversation between Wes and Eric that everyone keeps pestering me for. I rather enjoyed writing it. And I apologize to any Danny fans for offering him up as a sacrificial lamb, but ... Rosabelle suggested him. ^_^ For anyone who hasn't read *Fade to Darkness: Darkness Calling*, Litania is from the planet Gannos, where she is a princess of one of the ruling countries, therefore making her son a prince.

The song used is *Will You Still Love Me?* by Chicago.

"Admit it; you cried," Wes teased as he slid into his seat.

"For the last time, I did not!" Vanessa snapped.

There was a snort from somewhere across from him, and Wes looked up to find Ryan regarding them in amusement while Sydney examined her plate warily. "Well, at least we know we're sitting in a familiar group," Ryan commented with a grin, nodding to the place cards.

Glancing over them, Wes was amused to note that he, Vanessa, and Sky just *happened* to be seated next to Elizabeth, Sydney, Jaz, and their parents. "Smart move keeping the kids together," he murmured to Vanessa as he leaned over to poke Sky. "Hey. Napkin," he reminded him.

Sky sighed impatiently and set down his fork.

"Mommy, why are there chairs with flowers on 'em?" Elizabeth asked Rose as her mother set down a plate for her.

Rose frowned. "Chairs with flowers on them?"

Elizabeth nodded. "At Bridge's table."

There was a pause as the gathered adults caught on to what she was asking about, followed by an awkward silence.

"Do you remember the stories I used to tell you about Zordon?" Justin asked Elizabeth finally, leaning in to look her in the eyes.

She nodded eagerly. "He made you a Power Ranger, an' he was the greatest person *ever*!"

Justin smiled, and his eyes glimmered suspiciously. "He was," he agreed. "Well, Zordon can't be here today, even though we really wish he could. So Uncle Jason and Aunt Taylor left that pretty little yellow flower on that chair where he'd be sitting if he could be."

Elizabeth blinked. "Oh."

"What about the other chairs?" Sky spoke up.
"One of those is for Trini, Jason's teammate that I told you about," Wes answered softly. "The one with the wreath on it is for Princess Shayla, a very special woman who made Taylor a Ranger, and watched over her team. She couldn't be here today either."

"Was she like Zordon?" Sydney asked softly, watching them with wide eyes.

"That's right," Ryan told her, smoothing her hair. "Princess Shayla was Taylor's Zordon."

There was another pause as the four children processed this.

"Do you think it'd be okay if I said hi t' Zordon an' Princess Shayla, Daddy?" Elizabeth asked suddenly.

Justin froze. "What?"

"I wanna go say hello, an' tell 'em I wish they were really here," she explained.

"An' Trini," Sky put in quickly as Wes looked at him in surprise. "We gotta say hi t' Trini, too."

"Ooh, me too!" Sydney cried. "I wanna go too!"

Justin swallowed hard, forcing a smile at his daughter that was distinctly watery. "I think they'd like that very much," he told her.

She nodded, quickly bouncing out of her seat. "Come on, Sky! Come on, Sydney! Jaz, you too!"

"Bethie, wait up!" Sky insisted as the other three scrambled after her. "Wait for us!"

For several moments, no one said anything. Wes watched silently as the four children skidded to a stop at the large table where the wedding party had been seated, turning to the three empty chairs. There seemed to be some sort of debate for a moment, and he thought he saw Sydney make an awkward attempt at a curtsy before Taylor and Jason joined them.

"Are you gonna be okay?" Rose asked finally, squeezing Justin's arm gently.

He nodded, giving them all a pained smile. "Yeah. Just thinking about the day he died." He lifted his left wrist, flicking it slightly to reveal his Turbo Morpher. He stared at it for a long moment. "Just ... remembering how he said goodbye."

Rose gave him a hug, and he leaned into it gratefully.

The rest of them were saved from struggling to find something to say as the kids returned, clambering back into their seats.

"Aunt Taylor looks so pretty in her fancy dress. I wanna get married someday ... " Sydney sighed dreamily.

"Of course you will, Princess," Ryan promised her. "Once I'm too old to beat them up, you can start looking for a boyfriend."

Justin choked on his drink, coughing for a moment as he tried to hide a smile.

Rose looked at him, amused. "Admit it. You're going to do the *exact* same thing to Elizabeth's boyfriends."

"What boyfriends?" Justin asked innocently. "*Oh*, you think I'm actually letting her out of the
house once she hits puberty." He paused. "Yeah, no. Not happening."


"You thought so," he teased back.

Litania frowned at them all. "You don't *want* your children to find a partner?"

"Nope," Ryan returned immediately, sounding cheerful. "I'm not sharing my princess with *anyone*.

"But what about a prince?" Sydney demanded. "Daddy, you promised me someday my prince was gonna come on a white horse and sweep me off my feet and we'd get married an' have lotsa babies."

"And *someday* you will," Ryan agreed. "Just not anytime in this century."

"Strange Earthians," Litania muttered, shaking her head at them all.

Jaz was frowning in concentration. "You hafta marry a prince?" he asked Sydney suddenly.

She nodded, looking very serious. "Daddy says only the bestest, strongest prince in the land is strong enough for his princess."

Jaz considered this. "Well ... I'm a prince on Mama's planet."

Everyone else at the table froze.

"I could marry you!" he finished brightly.

Sydney looked him up and down for several minutes, studying him intently. "Daddy says you hafta be the bestest an' strongest," she reminded him. "You got a long way to go."

Justin leaned forward to bury his face in his arms, shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

Jaz puffed his chest out proudly. "I c'n do it!"

"You have to match up to my standards," Ryan told him solemnly, his eyes sparkling with amusement.

Jaz nodded. "I will," he declared fiercely. "An' then I'll come an' fight for Princess Sydney's hand!"

Vanessa buried her face in a hand. Wes reached over to rub her shoulder as he bit his lip so hard he was afraid it was about to start bleeding. Justin had not looked up since Sydney's critique, Rose was hiding behind her glass, and T.J. regarded his son with a bemused expression. Only Litania and the children seemed to be taking him seriously, his mother nodding along to his declaration.

"You'll have to train hard," she warned him.

Jaz nodded again. "I will!"

Wes couldn't take it anymore. "Excuse me," he choked out, rising from his seat and heading for the bathroom.

As soon as the door was shut behind him, he leaned back against the wall and laughed until his stomach ached. Eventually he straightened, wiping at the tears in his eyes as he let out the last few
chuckles. Man, he loved those kids ...

He headed for the sink to rinse his face and froze at the sight someone watching him in amusement. "Eric."

"Wondered how long it would take you to notice me. Your observation skills always did suck," Eric commented.

Wes stared at him for a minute. Now that Sky wasn't here, he wasn't sure what sort of conversation to be expecting. His mouth ended up responding for him. "Only when you were around, because with you I knew I never needed to watch my back."

They both paused, and he looked away uncomfortably as Eric studied him for several minutes.

"Look, I know this still doesn't mean anything, but I'm sorry," Wes blurted out suddenly. "I ... I just ... wanted to say that," he muttered at last.

There was a long, drawn out sigh. "All I want to know is *why* Wes," Eric said finally. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Wes turned to lean back against another wall. "Because I was afraid you wouldn't go through with it if you knew there was a chance we might lose them," he sighed. "I know; it's a stupid reason. I just ... I wanted us to have a family together so much. And I kept thinking that I changed my destiny twice already, so why couldn't I do it again? I wanted so much for Alex to be wrong, that I just ... thought I could protect them on my own."

"That's not how it's supposed to work," Eric said after a moment, his jaw clenching in a way that couldn't possibly be painless.

"I know," Wes whispered, closing his eyes. "And I regret that decision every day. I know I'll regret it for the rest of my life. Because if I wasn't naive enough to believe I could keep changing my future, I wouldn't have lost everything."

Eric snorted. "You didn't lose everything."

Wes glanced at him. "I lost you," he told him quietly.

They stared at each other, Eric in surprise and Wes with regret.

"I want to forgive you," Eric said at last, his voice incredibly soft.

Wes' eyes widened.

"I was there, you know," he muttered. "I mean ... when you were hurt. And when Sky was born."

Wes looked at him, and suddenly he just *knew*. "You were the one who brought the Silver Guardians to the hospital. And when I woke up ... That wasn't a dream."

Eric shook his head. "I just ... couldn't face you then."

Their eyes caught again, and Wes could see the agony in Eric's. "I *want* to forgive you," Eric repeated, looking tortured. "But I don't know if I can."

A cold feeling slowly settled over Wes, followed by a numbness that he suspected was supposed to mask the sensation of his heart shattering. "So that's it then," he whispered, and his voice cracked.
Eric flinched, taking a step toward him. "Wes, I - 

"Wes! There you are!"

They both jumped, and Eric snapped to a defensive position as they turned to the door. Danny stared back at them his eyes abruptly going wide. "Oh. Oh! Um, Sky needs you Wes. Vanessa said it was really important, so ... "

Wes blinked slowly. "Sky needs me for what?" he asked, clearing his throat to try and force some levity back into his voice.

Danny fidgeted. "Um ... I don't know. But I know they said it was really important, so we should hurry."

Eric's eyes narrowed. "Look, Danny. I appreciate the thought, but we're trying to have a conversation here. Now would you mind just - "

"But it's for Sky," Danny insisted.

"It's okay, Danny," Wes told him, and he was surprised by how normal he suddenly sounded. "I'm coming. We were finished here, anyway."

"Wes, wait - " Eric protested.

But he was already out the door.

****

He wasn't sure what made him do it. The night was finally starting to drag on. He'd been introduced to Lord Jason of Triforia and his daughter, Lady Tel, apparently the descendents of a lord that Jason Scott had helped out of a tight spot at some point. Jason of Triforia had apparently even been named after him out of respect for ... whatever it was he'd done. Something to do with Powers and lifespan changes.

After that he'd been stuck in the middle of a very awkward conversation between Billy, Hayley, Aurico, and his partner Cestro. Hayley had done all the talking, eager to learn more about their culture, while Billy had made stiffly polite conversation with a formality that made ice seem warm. The Aquitians had just gazed back at him serenely, and none of them brought up whatever the problem was. Which was strange, because he remembered reading in one of Billy's files that he'd lived on Aquitar for several years as a friend of the Aquitian Rangers.

He'd taken the time to catch up with Mack and Hunter, and Carter, who'd come back for a visit. He learned that Casey and Theo were 'off' again, and did his best to console the younger man even though he knew they'd be back together before the month was up. He fussed over the very pregnant Madison and asked her and Nick if they were ready for twins. He helped Leo break up some sort of argument that had interrupted between his twins and Sky and Elizabeth, then got into a discussion about the difference between raising kids on Earth and raising them on Mirinoi. Eventually he managed to find Kimberly and Tommy, making sure that she was really all right and giving him his congratulations - after learning through Zhane that it wasn't his imagination no one had even known they were actually more than friends now, or when that had happened. He broke up *another* fight among the kids as he, Rocky, and Conner tried to figure out if Cole and Merrick were really a couple, or just living together because it was convenient. He'd tried asking Cole about it and found himself talking about the new litter of wolf pups the pack that lived with them had, and how they'd brought two of them along because Ruby was sick and Rosa just adored
Cole too much to be left behind, while Shadow - which was apparently the large, black wolf that seemed to follow Merrick everywhere - was Merrick's companion.

Now he'd danced with Vanessa a few times, danced with every female member of the wedding party and Cole, who seemed to think that all bridesmaids were required to dance. And Rocky, who seemed to think someone needed to make Cole less conspicuous, as though that were even possible. He'd stopped various kids from getting into trouble six times, eaten more food than should have been healthy, enjoyed a slice of wedding cake before someone tripped and made him drop it, and was now past the sated feeling and into not-quite restless. He was one of the few who had; he frowned at the corner where Cole had curled up against Merrick's shoulder, snuggling close and obviously asleep as the other man stroked his hair and their wolves snoozed around them. The bride and groom were long gone, and other guests were finally starting to trickle out. Judging by the drowsy blinking that was starting to set in, Sky had finally worn off the sugar rush from the cake, so it was about time to be leaving himself.

He hadn't seen Eric again since they'd talked; every time they'd gotten anywhere near one another, someone or something had come up, and Wes found himself dragged off somewhere. It was a little too often to be casual, and he was fairly certain there was some sort of conspiracy running through S.P.D. to keep them separated. Probably instigated by Vanessa to protect him. He was a little annoyed, but then, they'd both already said everything they needed to say.

And yet for some reason he found himself approaching Eric as the other man got up from his seat. He smiled when Eric froze upon catching sight of him. "Dance with me?" he requested softly. "Just one, before you leave."

Eric stared at him for a long moment. At last his shoulders sagged, and he sighed. "Fine," he muttered. "But just once."

The moment the music came on, he knew it had to be a selection from Taylor's mother, because the soft, romantic song wasn't Jason or Taylor's taste. Eric stiffened and made as if to leave, but he caught his arm. "Come on, Eric," he said gently. "It's just a dance. Please?"

Eric took a slow, deep breath, and at last moved to put his arms around him. Wes let him lead; after years of dealing with Eric's issues, he'd learned that 'masculine pride' wasn't as important as keeping the peace. He moved closer as the vocalist began to croon the lyrics, and silently wished things could be different.

"You and me, two hearts drawn together bound by destiny ... "

He smiled to himself, resisting the urge to rest his head on Eric's shoulder the way he would have done years ago, when they would have been at home in Eric's old house, and he would have conned him into dancing to the radio. He'd always loved dancing together because it afforded so many opportunities to be close to one another. And whether he admitted to it or not, Eric wasn't a bad dancer himself.

"'Cause I am just a man who never understood I never had a thing to prove ... "

He chuckled softly. "This is your song, Eric."

There was a soft humph, but he couldn't hear any real annoyance in it.

"Will you still love me for the rest of my life? ... "

Yes, he thought to himself with another sigh, and this time it wasn't as amused. I will, Eric. No
matter what happens, I'll always love you. And ... I'm just going to have to learn to live with the fact that it's over now.

"No, I can't go on, if I'm on my own ... "

The feeling of warmth was suddenly gone as Eric broke his grip and stepped back. "I can't do this anymore," he muttered. "I just ... I gotta go."

"Eric, I - "

"Save it."

Wes stood there, watching Eric walk away from him for the second time in his life. And he let him go.

****

"You okay?"

Wes sighed, leaning back on the porch swing to stare up at the sky. There weren't as many stars here as there had been in Silver Hills, but at least they hadn't been completely masked by the city lights yet. "No," he said finally as Vanessa waited for him to answer her. "But I'll live for now."

She sat beside him, leaning over to wrap him in a hug. He put his arms around her, resting his chin on her head. Together, they watched the stars in silence.
"Ah, got it."

Wes mopped the sweat from his forehead with a rag that was probably dirtier than he was. There was something refreshing about spending a weekend working on his motorcycle. Dressed in a battered T-shirt and jeans, covered in grease, and a radio playing quietly in the background, he couldn't think of a better way to spend his Saturday.

It was barely a week since Jason and Taylor's wedding had ended, and all assorted guests had gone home. Eric had apparently left that same night; he wasn't sure if he was relieved by that or not. The chaos was over with, life was back to normal, and everything was as it should be.

He slid out from under the bike to toss the screwdriver aside and jumped at the solemn blue eyes staring down at him. "Sky!"

"Can I help, Daddy?" Sky asked quietly.

He let out a breath, laughing at himself. A Power Ranger and S.P.D. Sergeant, and he hadn't even noticed his own son sneaking up on him. Wasn't he on edge today?

But the fact that he wasn't on edge was strangely comforting.

"Sure, buddy," he agreed with a warm smile. He didn't get to spend every day with son, and he liked to cherish the ones he had. "You wanna help me fix my bike?"

"S' broken?"

Wes grinned. "Not exactly. I'm giving it a tune up, so it doesn't break."

A puzzled frown crossed Sky's face. "So you fix it when it's not broke?"

"Something like that. Why don't you pass me that ratchet right there?"

"This one?"

"That's the one."

They worked in mostly silence for awhile, as Wes quietly explained what he was doing, allowing Sky to lay down on the ground beside him and see up into the engine. He pointed out parts and talked about what they did, and answered Sky's occasional questions. It was surprisingly even more relaxing than he'd been by himself, and Sky's quiet fascination with how it all worked made it fun to share his passion.

"Were you an' Uncle Eric really on a team t'gether?"
Wes jumped again, nearly smacking his head on the underside of his bike. He turned to look at Sky in surprise. "What?"

"Were you an' Uncle Eric really on a team t'gether?" he repeated.

Wes stared at him, completely startled by the question. "Of course we were. What would make you think we weren't?"

Sky frowned. "You don' act like the other teams."

"We don't?" he echoed, too stunned to think of a better response.

Sky shook his head. "You were upset when you saw him. An' Uncle Eric went all ... stiff. And then nobody'd let you talk to each other." He looked up with a strangely penetrating stare. "Why?"

Wes took a long, slow breath, sitting up to run a hand over his hair as he tried to think of what to say. How could he explain this? Let alone to someone as young as Sky. He could barely understand everything that had happened between him and Eric himself; how was Sky supposed to?

"Daddy?"

He blinked as a small hand settled on his arm, squeezing gently, and looked into Sky's suddenly concerned gaze. "You don' hafta tell me if it hurts," Sky told him earnestly.

He stared at him for a long moment, pondering this amazing, wonderful child, and what he could have possibly done to deserve him after everything he'd done to his older brothers.

Abruptly he pulled Sky into his lap, hugging him close and resting his chin on his head. He paused to kiss Sky's hair, letting out another sigh and trying not to shudder. "I love you, Sky. You know that?"

Sky snuggled closer immediately. "I love you too, Daddy. I don' want you sad."

He took a deep breath. "It's kind of a long story. Are you sure you wanna hear it?"

"You don' hafta."

He was sorely tempted to make Sky let it go. But ... his son deserved to know something at least. And the longer he kept it to himself, the longer it was going to take him to get over it. Past experiences had taught him as much.

"Uncle Eric and I were friends, a long, long time ago," he began slowly. He paused for a moment to decide exactly how much Sky needed to know, and what he felt comfortable telling him. "But we lost touch for awhile. When we met up again, I was a Power Ranger, with a whole team of four of my friends. My friends were ... " He hesitated. "They ... came from a very special place, and they brought special toys that let them go back and fix things they didn't like."

The exasperated look Sky shot him was pure Vanessa. "M' four, Daddy. Not stupid."

Wes chuckled in spite of himself, squeezing his son a little tighter. "I'm sorry. It's kinda complicated." He turned Sky in his lap, leaning down to look him in the eyes. "They were from the future."

Sky's eyes went wide. "Really?" he breathed in awe.

He nodded. "Yup. They came back to the past so they could catch some criminals that escaped.
And when they met me, they let me become their Red Ranger." Eventually, he finished to himself ruefully.

"You got t' be the leader o' a bunch of future Rangers?" Sky was beside himself in delight.

His excitement was contagious, and Wes found himself grinning back. "That's right."

"What color was Uncle Eric? Where'd your friends go? Does your morpher still work? Do you have more toys from the future?" Sky demanded, grabbing for his father's morpher excitedly. He'd always known his father was a Power Ranger; it was hard not to when he spent a great deal of time at S.P.D. near his parents and their friends, but Wes had never exactly explained what sort of Ranger he was before.

"One question at a time!" Wes laughed, gently prying his wrist free from eager hands. "Uncle Eric was our Sixth Ranger, the Quantum Ranger. My friends went back to the future when we caught all the criminals. Yes, my morpher still works, and no, I don't have any more toys from the future. They went back with my friends."

Sky paused, looking up with another frown. "So Uncle Eric *was* on your team? But ... why aren't you bestest friends, like Uncle Rocky an' Uncle Adam an' Aunt Aisha? Or Aunt Rose and Uncle Dax?"

Wes sighed. "We used to be bestest friends, Sky. We weren't at first, because Uncle Eric didn't want to have friends, but ... after the rest of our team left, Uncle Eric and I ... became very good friends." He was acutely aware that he was on the receiving end of another of Sky's penetrating stares, but he chose not to respond to it. "But then, I did a very bad thing, and Uncle Eric decided that he could never forgive me for it."

There was a long silence, and he glanced down to see Sky frowning at the ground. "Sky?" he asked cautiously, uncertain as to what his son might be thinking of him now.

Sky looked up at him. "Tha's stupid," he said bluntly.

Wes blinked. "What?"

"That you think Uncle Eric'll never forgive you. Teams *hafta* forgive each other, or else they're not a team no more. So even if he's mad now, he'll still forgive you someday." Sky explained.

For a moment, Wes just looked at his son and wished that the rest of the world could have the wisdom of a four-year-old. "I don't think so, Sky," he said finally, and he swallowed the sudden lump in his throat. "What I did to Uncle Eric ... It was *really* bad. He was really hurt by it."

"Are you sorry?"

He closed his eyes. "Very, *very* sorry."

"Then he has t' forgive you someday, Daddy. Because tha's what friends do. I'd forgive Bethie if she did somethin' real bad, and she's my bestest friend ever." Sky shifted, and something brushed against his cheek. "So don' cry, Daddy. S' gonna be okay."

Wes let out a long, shaky sigh, and just hugged his son for awhile. "Thanks, Sky," he whispered.

Eventually he pulled away to look at his son, giving him a tired smile as he brushed the hair from his eyes. Then he paused, looking Sky up and down, and sighed at the grease staining his face and clothes. "Your mom is gonna kill me."

"Definitely."
More Stargate SG-1 crossover! This takes place right as Eric gets home from Jason and Taylor's wedding. I don't *think* Eric is OOC, but it was a hard to decide how he would react. -Fidgets- Comments, complaints? Please? -Puppy eyes-

"Eric ... Son, I really don't know how to tell you this ...."

*So don't.*

"Y'see, I've met someone ... new. Someone not your mom."

*Gee, you think?*

"And, well ... It's starting to get kinda serious. I mean, we're not actually getting married or anything - "

But you're saying you might as well be.

"But we are ... living together. Sort of."

How do you 'sort of' live together?! Either you do, or you don't!

"His name's Daniel. He's an archeologist with the military and - well, we've been working together for a couple years now."

So you've been suddenly gay for 'a couple years now' and never bothered to tell me.

"I'd really like you to meet him sometime."

Not a chance in -

"If you're too busy to get away from work, we could probably come out and see you." There was an awkward pause. "I ... I'll try back some other time."

The answering machine cut off, and the blinking light stopped at last. A moment later, Eric turned and put his fist through a wall.

Then he turned, sending a flower pot his mother had given him to the floor, breaking it into pieces. From there he went piece by piece through the living room, systematically shattering anything he owned that had been given to him by another person or had any value to it whatsoever. Nothing was saved; even a picture of his younger brother, the only one he had, ended up with the glass shattered and laying face down.

Ironically, it was that very picture that cut him as he broke it, forcing him to stop and look at his hands as the blood welled up. He stared at them for several minutes, barely processing the fact that the blood was dripping onto the carpet. His breath came in great, heaving gasps, and he noticed vaguely that he was shaking.
Abruptly he dropped to his knees, burying his face against the floor and letting out a loud, harsh sob. It hurt; his chest felt like it was on fire, and the tears burned as they streaked his cheeks. But there was absolutely nothing he could do to stop it.

Any chance he might have had to fix things with Wes ended the moment Danny walked through that bathroom door. He had never exactly considered Danny to be a friend per say before, but now he hated him with a passion. If he had just kept his stupid mouth shut and left them alone, he could have *told* Wes ...

And then there was everyone else at the reception, who kept cornering Wes or distracting him whenever he got close. Plus that blond chick, Valerie or whatever her name was, who was constantly dragging Wes off to dance the moment he so much as looked at him. Could she be anymore obvious? And just who did she did she think she was? Wes was *his*!

But he wasn't anymore, and a low moan escaped his throat at the thought.

No matter how hard he'd tried to fight it, Wes had become the center of his life. They'd worked together, lived together, slept together for roughly six years. In first few months after Wes had left Silver Hills, he'd had trouble sleeping now that there was no one else next to him in the bed. It felt strangely large, and empty. Without Wes he rarely went out after work anymore, and even then only when it was required. Conversations with Mr. Collins - he didn't dare call him Alan now - were strained and awkward. Without Wes, nothing felt the same anymore.

It was stupid, that he was this broken up over a relationship that had ended four *years* ago. Sky should have been proof of that. But somehow, in some dark, dumb corner of his heart, he'd actually hoped that it could still somehow be fixed. That Wes would come home, forget all about S.P.D., and maybe ... maybe even bring Sky with him. Maybe they could have a family after all. He could tolerate Victoria if it was only for visitation rights, couldn't he?

But apparently there was no saving whatever had gone wrong between them.

"I wanted us to have a family together so much."

*So did I*, he thought, another sob nearly choking the breath out of him. *I wanted that more than anything.*

"I wanted so much for Alex to be wrong, that I just ... thought I could protect them on my own."

"So you didn't trust *me*?!" he shouted, his voice as raw as his throat felt. "You couldn't *tell* me what was going on?!"

"I lost you."

"No, you idiot," he snarled against the carpet. "*I* lost *you*."

His voice broke on the last word, and he slammed his fist against the floor. *Couldn't you see how much I still love you?*

Something soft brushed his cheek, and a concerned meow suddenly sounded directly in his ear.

He rolled over onto his side, his chest aching too much to find the effort to actually sit up. His eyes met blue and green, and Gracie meowed anxiously again, pawing at his face. He tried to say something, found his throat to tight to speak, and pulled her into his chest instead. She began to purr instantly.
He couldn't say how long he lay like that, his clean hand stroking her fur as she purred loudly, staring blankly at the floor and the broken picture frame across from him. He couldn't find the strength to move. He just didn't care anymore; between Wes, Alexander and Benjamin, his father's boyfriend, and the fact that his mom had finally managed to move past his brother's death, he had nothing left.

He had a cat and a bloody hand that was staining his carpet.

Something about that thought pushed him up, got him to his feet and heading for the bathroom. He carried Gracie with him, only releasing her when he went for the sink. She curled around his feet while he cleaned and bandaged his hand, silently berating himself for letting it sit so long.

She trailed after him as he went for the phone, staring at it for a moment before silently debating. At last he picked it up, allowing her to settle in his lap as he sat on the couch. He dialed, waiting for a long moment before another answering machine picked up.

"Dad, it's me." He took a deep breath. "I can't get time off work; I just got dragged out to a wedding. But, you and ... Daniel, can come stay with me if you like. Just ... call and let me know when." He hesitated. "But at least tell me if I should say something to Mom before she finds out on her own." Then he sighed, ruffling Gracie's fur as she batted at his hand for ignoring her. "Sorry. That was mean. Forget it. ... As long as you're happy now, that's what matters." He hesitated. "And Dad ... I love you."

He hung up the phone, looking at it for another moment.

Eventually his gaze fell down to the cat in his lap, who was looking up at him suspiciously and needling her claws into his leg. "Yeah, that's right. You're gonna have to get up," he informed her. "This place is a disaster, and if we're having company over it's not going to look like a pigsty, or I'd never hear the end of it. I'm gonna get enough of an earful over *you*." He scratched her ears affectionately, then unceremoniously dumped her off his lap and onto the couch.

She gave him an offended glare and proceeded to clean herself indignantly.

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

He went to cleaning up his mess with a resigned sigh, gathering broken pieces and moving for the vacuum when he finished. He looked at the blood on the carpet and groaned, knowing that it'd cost a fortune to clean, and his dad wouldn't take too well to bloodstains in his house. It wasn't as if he couldn't afford it, but it was still an extra expense he didn't want.

He gave little thought to Wes for the rest of the day, and when he went to bed, he promptly stretched out across it, ignoring the coldness of the side by the wall. Wes was gone, and that was that. Life moved on.

And he'd just have to live with that.
I have come to the conclusion that Sky gets most of his bizarre facial expressions from his mother.

Much love and hugs for Rosabelle, who poked and prodded my muse throughout this whole thing when it didn't want to be written.

Wes caught the front door before Sky could shut it on him, frowning down at his son. "Bedroom. Now," he informed him shortly. "I'll come talk to you later."

"Whatever," his son muttered, marching off. He stopped at his door, glancing back with a furious scowl. "And I didn' do nothin' wrong!" he shouted, slamming the door shut behind him.

Wes sighed, running a hand over his face for a moment before pinching his nose.

"So what happened?"

He glanced up at Vanessa, who was already waiting for him at the dining room table with a cup of tea. He didn't used to drink it much, but ever since the incident at the bar that had led to Sky, he'd sworn off alcohol. After five years of living together, Vanessa had slowly gotten him hooked on this stuff instead.

He sat down and took a long, slow sip, trying to let the warmth soothe his temper. "Sky got suspended from school for a week."

She stared at him. "He's in kindergarten."

Wes nodded, scowling. "Elizabeth got two days, but Justin told me he'll probably make her wait until Sky goes back anyway. Mr. Hanson said it's the first time he's ever had to suspend kindergarteners."

"I'm almost afraid to ask what they did," she grumbled, rubbing her forehead with a sigh.

There was a long moment of silence as Wes took his time to answer, sipping at his tea and waiting for some sort of semblance of calm to finally reach him. At last he took a deep breath. "They got into a fight, and Sky went to protect him while Elizabeth kept everyone else away from them."

Vanessa reared back. "He did *what*?!

He sighed, pinching his nose again. "From what I can tell, that may have been an accident. But Sky won't apologize for it, and neither will Elizabeth. From what we've been able to get out of them, the other three were picking on Bridge. Elizabeth lost her temper, and Sky -"

"Always has Elizabeth's back," Vanessa finished. "How bad is Bridge?"

He shook his head. "Not good. Apparently that's what stopped the fight - he had another fit, and Sky went to protect him while Elizabeth kept everyone else away from them." He winced at the
"He was still shaking when Rocky carried him out."

"Poor thing," she murmured.

Wes just sighed again, staring down at his tea. "And Sky keeps insisting he hasn't done anything bad. He's acting like *I'm* the one who's wrong."

There was a long pause. "Well, it is your fault," Vanessa said finally.

His eyes snapped up to hers. "*What*?"

She shrugged a shoulder. "It is." She noticed his incredulous stare and sighed. "Wes, what would you do for your friends?"

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

She gave him one of her exasperated, 'Are you *really* that dense' looks. "Your team. What you do for the other Time Force Rangers?"

"Anything."

She nodded, as if that was exactly what she had expected to hear. "And the other Rangers at S.P.D.?"

He gave her an odd look, wondering where this was going. "Anything I could."

She paused at that, studying him for a moment. "Where do you think Sky might have learned something like that?" she asked finally.

He froze. "Are you saying he starting fighting because of *me*?"

She reached across the table to catch his hand, shaking her head. "It's not a bad thing, Wes. In fact, I think teaching him to protect his friends is one of the most honorable things you could teach our son. But Sky's too young to be rational about what it means to protect someone. And we both know Elizabeth is always the first to defend Bridge, whether it's with her mouth or her fists." She paused, frowning slightly. "Or both."

He sat still for a long moment, staring at the table. At last he leaned forward, lifting their joined hands to kiss the back of hers. "Thanks, Nes. You're the best, you know that?" He stood with a sigh. "I guess I'd better get this straightened out with Sky."

"Wes?"

He paused in the doorway, glancing back at her. "Yeah?"

The look she gave him was strangely intense, but gave nothing away as to what she was thinking. "What's the difference between anything, and anything you could?"

For a moment, he just stared back at her, wondering if she could possibly understand. "Anything means *anything*," he said at last. "For my team, I'd sacrifice anything, even my life. For my friends, anything I had to give away. But I can't promise to put them before civilian lives."

She frowned suddenly. "And Eric?"

He stiffened, but she didn't apologize for bringing him into the conversation. "Anything," he
whispered finally. He walked away before she could ask him what he'd do for her; he still didn't
know the answer to that.

****

He found Sky face down on his bed, face buried in his pillow. His heart clenched, and a sudden
surge of guilt flooded through him. Logically, he knew he shouldn't; Sky wasn't completely
blameless in this. But as a parent, it was hard to see his son upset and know that he was a part of
the reason why.

He sat next to him, gently rubbing his back. "Hey, buddy," he murmured. "I think you and me need
to have a serious talk, okay?"

"You gonna yell at me?" came the muffled response.

He sighed. "I'll try not to, if you try to listen too, okay?"

There was a moment of sitting there, waiting for a response. At last Sky slowly sat up, trying to
discreetly rub at his eyes. "What?" he mumbled.

Wes looked at him, and tried not to surrender to the urge to hug him close until the redness in his
face went away. "You ready to try and tell me what those kids said to you now?"

Sky's eyes darkened instantly. "It wasn' me an' Bethie. It was Bridge."

"What did they say to Bridge?" he asked gently.

There was a long silence as Sky seemed to be trying to fight with himself over what to say. At last
he muttered something under his breath.

Wes looked at him, and tried not to surrender to the urge to hug him close until the redness in his
face went away. "You ready to try and tell me what those kids said to you now?"

"They said special kids hafta go to special schools!" Sky snapped. He sat still for a moment,
blinking rapidly.

Wes froze. Oh, Sky ...

Sky took a deep breath. "An' then Bridge tried to say he wasn' like that, an' they called him a freak.
So Bethie yelled at him to take it back, an' he said she was a freak too, and so was everyone who
worked at S.P.D." He bit his lip, staring at the floor. "Bridge started to cry, an' then Bethie jumped
on the kid who said it. The other kid pulled her hair, so I went to help and ..."

"How did that boy hurt his shoulder?" he asked quietly.

Sky winced. "I didn' mean to. I tried to pull it 'hind his back, like when you an' Uncle Adam spar.
But he moved, an' there was this noise an' - " He broke off, shivering. "His arm didn' look right no
more."

Wes wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him closer. "Accidents like that can happen
in a fight," he agreed, rubbing Sky's arm soothingly. "That's why we have to train so hard, so we
can make sure they don't. Because it's hard to control your strength when you're still learning,
especially when the other person isn't as strong as you."

Sky buried his face against his father's chest, hands fisting in his shirt. "M' sorry I hurt him," he
whispered, his voice muffled once again. "But ... I'm not sorry for what I did! He hurt Bridge!"
Wes sighed, reaching up to stroke Sky's hair. "Sky? I'm going to be totally honest with you about something and I want you to listen, okay?"

Sky pulled away again, sniffling slightly as he looked up. "'kay."

"I used to get picked on as a kid, too. All the time. Remember the special place where Grandma is?"

Sky blinked, nodding slowly and frowning. "Yeah ... "

"Well, a lot of people knew about that. And they used to tease me because Grandma wasn't well. They thought I was sick too, even though I wasn't."

"That's not fair!" Sky protested.

"No, it isn't." Wes agreed, shaking his head. "But people can be really mean sometimes. I didn't know that then, and I got into a lot of fights trying to prove them wrong."

"Did you win?"

He gave him a disapproving look. "That's not the point, Sky." He sighed, taking a moment to think of a different direction to take this. "Do you know why I can't fight those people anymore?"

Sky's answer was instantaneous, his eyes shining with admiration. "Because you're a Power Ranger."

He nodded. "And Power Rangers protect people; we don't hurt them. And one of the most important things about being a Ranger is to never escalate a battle."

"But we didn' start it!" Sky protested. "They - "

"I know you didn't start it," he interrupted. "But you finished it with a lot more force than they started with."

Sky scowled. "Then what's the Megazord supposed to be?"

Wes rubbed his head, trying not to groan. He really wasn't any good at this; he'd always been the type to *cause* trouble, not try to stop it. "Sky ... There's a big difference between fighting against someone who wants to hurt everyone on the planet, and someone who says mean things just because they can."

"Not much o' one." Sky muttered.

"Yes, there is," Wes told him with a frown. Arguing with Sky was starting to give him a headache. "And someday when you're older, you'll have to learn what that difference is. Until then, no more fighting at school. If someone starts picking on one of you again, you walk away and tell a teacher, okay?"

Sky's scowl darkened. "So now I hafta be a tattletale?"

"A tattletale is better than hurting someone by accident because they don't know how to defend themselves from an attack." Wes pointed out, and Sky winced.

"Bottom line is that you're not allowed to beat up other kids at school," came Vanessa's voice from the doorway. "If you want to protect people weaker than you, become a Power Ranger. Until then, no fighting unless it's for training, and that's only if your teachers have approved it first."
"But that's not fair!"

"I'm the mommy. I don't have to play fair," Vanessa informed him. "And while you're suspended, you go to bed earlier. No TV, no games, and no Elizabeth."

"But - !"

"That's what happens when you're in trouble," she cut in. "Whether or not it was for a good purpose, you handled today badly, and you need to be reminded of why that was." She ignored his furious glare, waiting for Wes join her.

He tried to squeeze Sky's shoulder, but he shrugged it off angrily, and Wes sighed as they shut the door behind them.

Vanessa raised an eyebrow at him. "Never let you take care of the punishments again, right?"

He laid his head back against the wall with a quiet groan. "Please. I don't do discipline so well." He hesitated before muttering "Not when I would have done the exact same thing."

"Now *there's* a surprise," she said dryly, patting his shoulder as she headed back to the kitchen.
I have come to the conclusion that Silver Guardian co-commander or not, I cannot picture Wes as a stern, commanding leader. I have trouble thinking of him of a leader at all. I blame Jen for this, because she was a much cooler team leader than Wes could ever be. Another note: Sara is pronounce 'Saw-ra'.

There is a future A Squad Ranger cameo in this chapter; blink and you'll miss the reference. Much love and thanks to BlackCrimsonLight, who help prod my muse through this prompt.

Wes blew his whistle sharply, dropping his hand. "Time!" he shouted, checking his watch. "Twelve minutes and fifty-two seconds." He shook his head with a sigh. "You can do better than that, cadets!"

No one answered him, and he frowned, putting his hands on his hips. "You're not helping each other," he scolded. "This is a *team* effort, not a race. You should be crossing this finish line as a unit. And looking back to make sure the person who fell behind you is getting back up doesn't count, Mason," he added with a stern glare.

"He was getting up!" protested Mason.

Max, the cadet they were referring to, scowled and shoved his teammate's shoulder. "Yeah, thanks."

Wes sighed, shaking his head again. "Are any of you even listening to me?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir," mumbled Jessica as she leaned on Fae. Her eyes were closed.

He scowled at them all and finally sighed, exasperated. "Well, since you're all so unfocused today, why don't you take a mile jog and run through your stretches before you call it a day."

Victor wearily lifted a hand, flashing a familiar hand signal that was far from appropriate.

Karen reached out to smack him in the head, yanking his arm down. "Hey genius! Small eyes today, remember?" she hissed, jerking her head towards the stands.

Wes' eyes narrowed. "Just for that Cadet Lacetings, you can make that a *three* mile jog."

Victor's eyes snapped open as he struggled to sit up. "What?! That's not fair!"

"Brought it on yourself," Sara's translator garbled, his words hissing slightly around his large teeth.

"It's not my fault I forgot what day it was!" Victor tried to protest.

Wes shook his head. "We established that rule months ago, Cadet. No inappropriate language or gestures when Sky's visiting the squad. In any culture," he added, glancing at Sara, Fae, and the twins. "Now everybody up. Come on, cool down and head inside. We'll have the rest of the
teamwork lecture on Monday, so you can all spend your day off looking forward to it."

He was met with groans as the group slowly dragged themselves to their feet.

"You guys are lucky Commander Cruger and Deputy Commander Oliver aren't out today, or we'd all be in for an earful," he warned, giving them all a fondly exasperated look. "I know it's your Friday, but come on. At least *look* like you're putting some effort into it?"

"But it's *Friday*, Sir ... " whined Aralon.

"And it's movie night, Sir!" put in his sister Nolara.

Wes sighed, shaking his head. "One mile, cool down, and you're free." He pointed at Victor. "*Three miles*, cool down, and then you're free," he reminded him. He lifted his whistle, blowing it once. "Now get moving, cadets!"

"Sir, yes Sir!"

He watched them for a moment as they broke into a slow jog. Rag tag and often disrespectful, they were begrudgingly one of the best groups he'd trained so far. He didn't like to pick favorites, but something about the way they all maintained a sense of playfulness and casual attitude amused him. He knew they each had the potential to be better; they were only starting out at S.P.D., after all.

He smiled as Sky ran up to the group. Sky often liked to spend his Saturdays at S.P.D. these days, balancing his time between tailing after each of his parents throughout their day. His cadets had affectionately nicknamed him 'Shadow', and were all fond of him in one way or another. Several of them ruffled Sky's hair as he jogged past, and he ducked back with a slight frown that bordered on a pout.

Then he turned, and brightened as he caught sight of his father. "Daddy!"

He crouched down to catch his son with a laugh as he sprinted into his arms. "Hey, buddy. Bored out of your mind, yet?" he teased.

Sky shook his head eagerly. "Nu-uh. Can I train with you guys soon?" he pleaded.

Wes tousled his hair with a smile. "Maybe you can try a couple of the exercises next week, okay? We're almost done for the day now."

"Aw, man ... " Sky pouted, kicking at the grass. "I wanted to train, too."

"Maybe next time," he assured him, privately wondering if Vanessa would let him leave the labs if she heard that. "You wanna come with me after this, or do you want me to drop you off with your mom?"

"Whatcha doin' now?"

Wes grinned, making an exaggerated face because he knew what Sky's choice would be. "Paperwork."

Sky frowned. He seemed to hesitate, then at last sighed "Mommy."

Wes cocked his head, squeezing his son's shoulder. "Hey. You okay, Sky?"
"M' fine," Sky muttered.

The cadets returned before Wes had a chance to push, and he was forced to put his concern aside for now in favor of guiding them through their cool down stretches. Later, he promised himself. I'll figure out what's bothering Sky later.

****

Wes stared at the door, Sky's small hand tucked into his. "Experiment in Progress: Keep Out," he read aloud for Sky's benefit. He glanced down at his son. "Looks like you're gonna have to come with me after all, Buddy," he said apologetically.

Sky sighed. "Do you still have colorin' books?"

Wes ruffled his hair with a smile. "For you? Always. I even made sure Uncle Dax and Uncle Chip didn't find them all."

"What about Uncle Dustin?" Sky asked suspiciously. "He's sneaky."

Wes fought a grin; the idea of Dustin being sneaky was too funny. But then, he really did love coloring books for some reason. "I hid them in a very special place where he'd never think to look." he promised.

Sky humphed. "Uncle Dustin thinks different than most people," he muttered as he allowed himself to be lead along.

Fortunately, while Dustin struck again, he hadn't managed to find all of Wes' secret stash of coloring books. In ten minutes he was sorting through paperwork and updating files and lesson plans. Sky sat on the floor with a book in his lap, quietly coloring away.

"Daddy?" Sky spoke up suddenly.

"Yeah, Sky?" he said absently.

"Why aren't you and Mommy married?"

Wes froze.

After a moment, he turned to stare at his son, who was watching him with serious blue eyes. "What brought that up?"

Sky shrugged slightly. "Just wonderin'," he muttered.

Wes sighed. He turned away from his paperwork to face his son, leaning forward and folding his hands, pressing the tips of his fingers against his lips. After a long moment of searching for words, he took a deep breath. "Sky, I - "

Someone knocked on the door.

Sky shot a glare at the prospective intruder, while Wes breathed an internal sigh of relief at the reprieve. "Sorry, Buddy, he said regretfully, even as he let out a mental cheer. "It's open," he called louder.

Sara stood stiffly at attention as the door slid open. "Sir," he said quickly, saluting.

Wes waved a hand dismissively. "At ease, Cadet. What is it?"
"Sorry to disturb you Sir," Sara began, "But it's the twins again."

Wes groaned. "Mess Hall again?"

"Yes, Sir."

He glanced at Sky. "Come on, Buddy. Time to go lecture some cadets." he sighed.

Sky seemed to brighten at that. "Can I help?"

"I'm sure there'll be plenty of lecturing to go around," Wes promised him with a sigh. "Lead the way, Sara."

****

Wes sighed as he turned on the kettle. Vanessa was already tucking Sky into bed after their day together. As part of their nightly ritual, it was his job to prepare everything while she got him ready, and then he'd tell Sky a story and turn out the lights for him while she finished up with the tea.

It had been a long day of dealing with troublemaking cadets, intermittent with Sky's eagerness to learn along with them. And then there was the hilarious sight of his thirteen year old cadets getting a dressing down from his six-year-old son. Aralon and Nolara had been both chastised and subtly mortified to be lectured about 'proper behavior for an S.P.D. cadet' by someone seven years younger than them. The rest of H Squad had been vastly amused, and he knew the twins would never live it down.

"Mommy? Why aren't you and Daddy married?"

Wes froze, instinctively pressing himself back against the wall next to his son's room instead of going in. He knew there was no real reason for that question to bother him so much, but something about it made him hesitate to give Sky an answer. And if Vanessa was willing to explain for them both ...

"Does it matter?" Vanessa returned calmly.

"Brandy Harrison at school said *all* Mommies and Daddies are married. Or they were married, but they're not anymore. But you and Daddy have *never* been married. ... Does that mean you're not really my Mommy and Daddy?"

Wes winced, hearing the tremble in his son's voice. He *wanted* to go to him, to tell him that wasn't true. But that meant he'd have to explain...

"Sky ... " Vanessa sighed. "Your father and I both love you. You know that, right?"

"Course I do," Sky answered.

"Then does it really matter why we've never been married?"

There was a long silence.

"Yes," Sky whispered at last, so softly Wes almost didn't hear him. "Is it ... is it 'cause of me?"

His heart clenched. *Oh, no*, he pleaded silently. *Sky, that's not it at all ....* But his feet still wouldn't move.
"If anything Sky, you're the reason your father and I are friends." Vanessa soothed, and he could almost see her stroking his hair, the way she always did with him when he was upset. There was another long pause. "Your father and I met one night when we were both very sad. And a few months after that night, I realized you were going to be born. Your father wanted to stay with us, so he moved to Newtech City. That's why he lives with us now."

"... So you don't love Daddy?" He could hear the frown in Sky's voice.

"Your father is my best friend. I love him a lot, but not the way we would love each other if we were married."

"Do you love *anyone* like you would - like that?"

"No. I haven't met anyone that important to me yet."

"Has Daddy?"

"Yes." She sighed. "There's someone your father loves very much. But they had a fight and now they don't see each other anymore."

"... But Daddy still loves them?"

"More than anything but you."

"Do they still love Daddy?"

"We don't know. I think so, but it's hard to be sure."

Wes swallowed, squeezing a fist and leaning his head against the wall again. *No. He doesn't love me anymore. If he did ... things wouldn't have turned out this way.* He was mildly surprised to realize that while the thought of Eric still ached, it didn't bring that painfully tight feeling in his chest. Maybe he was finally coming to accept that things were officially over between them. Not over it; Eric had come to mean more to him than he'd been able to put into words. But he had learned to live with knowing that he just didn't mean as much to Eric.

"So they love Daddy, but they still won't see him?" Sky sounded outraged.

"That's right." Vanessa seemed amused.

"If I ever meet them, I'll punch 'em in the nose for hurting Daddy!" Sky declared with all the fury of a slighted six-year-old.

He couldn't help but smile. "Punch who?" he asked, turning to come into the room. He blinked as though he hadn't heard what they were talking about. Vanessa knew better, but she also wouldn't force him into talking about it.

"No one," Sky returned innocently. He held up his arms for a hug. "I wan' a bedtime story!"

"Oh, really?" he asked, trying not to laugh at Sky's demanding attitude.

"Uh huh. Tell me another story about the Power Rangers!"

"And that's my cue to leave you two," Vanessa interrupted, fighting back a grin as she stood. "I'd hate to intrude on your father-son time."
He shot her a glare as he sat down on the bed, knowing exactly what it was she was laughing at. "Okay, Kiddo. What story do you want this time?"

"Tell me more about your team, Daddy," Sky begged.

He couldn't help but grin. "Okay, then. How about ... the time I was replaced by a Ranger from the future?"

Sky's eyes went wide. "No way! No one can replace you, Daddy! You're the bestest Ranger ever!"

"Well, there's always someone better," he reminded him, pulling Sky into his lap. "Now, we were in the middle of another hard battle, when ... "

"
"We have a war room?" Wes asked, looking at Tori in surprise. "Since when?"

"It's mostly for meetings," she told him with a shrug. She frowned. "We've never needed that much space to use it, really."

They exchanged concerned looks. "You think this is big?" Wes wondered.

"Very big," Dax piped up from behind them, looking uncharacteristically worried. "The big dog called *all* Rangers. That can't be a good sign."

"Way to keep us calm, Dax," Tori told him with a wry smile, patting his shoulder.

He blinked at her. "What?"

"It's nothing, Dax. Don't worry about it," Wes muttered as they went in.

Dax paused just inside the doorway and groaned. "I missed *another* one?"

"It's not news, buddy," Rocky reminded him as he passed, giving his shoulder a friendly pat.

Dax sighed, flopping down in a chair with an expression that bordered on a pout.

"Rangers."

Tommy moved to stand before them all, putting his hands behind his back in a way that normally made him look intimidating. But something in his expression and the grim tone of his voice made them all sit up and pay attention. "We have some serious news," he informed them, looking troubled.

"Emperor Grumm has reached Galaxy 334-ARA1," Cruger announced solemnly.

Rose sat up straighter, frowning. "That's only two galaxies away from us."

Wes stiffened, as did several others. Emperor Grumm was not new to them; all of S.P.D.'s officers knew the story of Grumm's wave of destruction, even how their own commander's home planet had fallen to him. They'd been monitoring him for several years now, keeping a close eye on his location and conquests. They all knew what he was capable of, and what had happened to the people who had tried to resist him.

Tommy shook his head. "It's more than that. We have allies under attack in that system."

Aisha sucked in a breath. "Aquitar?"
He nodded reluctantly. "We received a distress signal from the Aquitian government only hours ago. We've decided to organize a team to - "

"Let me go!"

Everyone looked at Billy in surprise. The normally placid former Blue Ranger shot to his feet, his eyes wild and desperate as he stared at Tommy. "Tommy, please," he pleaded. "I - it has to be me! *Please*!"

Tommy's expression was torn. "Billy ... I ...."

"And would you like to explain why that might be, Captain Cranston?" Cruger asked, narrowing his eyes at Billy.

The look Billy shot him was one of sheer panic. "Because my daughter is on Aquitar!"

****

"I can't believe Cruger!" Tori burst out furiously the moment they knew they were too far away for the Sirian to hear. "How could he do that? It's Billy's *child* for goodness sake! He has a *right* to go find her!"

Blake rubbed her arm soothingly. "But Cruger has a reason to be concerned," he pointed out carefully. "He can't be sure Billy would be able to stay calm in that sort of situation."

She scowled at him. "And if it was Hunter or Sora?"

"I'd sneak onto the shuttle if I had to," he answered immediately. "But as Commander, Cruger has to make the decision to keep Billy here. Besides, we'll need his expertise for keeping in touch with the team that goes."

"They said they wanted a KIA and an Ambassador for sure," Wes murmured, still shell-shocked at the news that Emperor Grumm had turned up so close to their own galaxy, let alone Billy's sudden revelation. "Since it's Kim's niece, it'll have to be Zhane, and either Karone or Chip. And then whoever they decide to send with them."

"They'll need strong Rangers," Dax commented, looking thoughtful. "Ones who can handle working with a strange team, since the Mighty Morphin Rangers can't go."

"Or Zeo," Wes commented absently. "Tommy, Rocky, and Adam are all Morphin, and Katherine can't leave Garrett."

Blake frowned. "What about Tanya?"

Tori shook her head. "She's not S.P.D.," she reminded him. "Ranger or not, she doesn't have the training to go. And Cruger doesn't have the authority to send her."

"So that leaves the rest of the Astro team, Justin, Rose, Ryan, and the three of us," Dax counted off on his fingers.

"Astro will go," Wes said immediately. "Andros is the best Red we've got after Tommy, and Ashley's a Doc. They'll need her."

"But what about Marinda?" Blake wanted to know. "They can't both go; what if something happens?"
"But that's the chance we take as Rangers, isn't it?" Dax asked quietly. "We all knew what we were getting into when we joined S.P.D. Never mind treaties, can we really say we won't help Aquitar just because we don't want to leave our kids?"

The other three regarded him in surprise. "That was very insightful, Dax," Tori told him at last.

He blinked, then shrugged, offering them all a bright grin. "I have my moments."

"Wes?"

He turned, blinking at the solemn look on Tommy's face. "What is it, Tommy?"

Tommy sighed, shifting his stance slightly. "Come with me. We need to talk."

****

"You want *me* to lead the team to Aquitar?" Wes demanded, his voice nearly cracking in shock. He stared at Tommy and Cruger in disbelief. "Why me?"

Tommy sighed. "It came down to a decision between you, Andros, or Jason. And to be completely honest, your Squad will be easiest to cover while you're gone." He looked up with guilty eyes. "This mission is going to be sending you straight into a war zone. The few specifics we were able to get from Aquitar were, well ... " He hesitated, then passed over a file.

Wes read silently, feeling the blood drain from his face. This was .... He fought the urge to grab for a chair.

"You do of course, have the right to refuse," Cruger informed him.

But was Wes already shaking his head. "No. I'm a Power Ranger. I can't just leave those people to die." He took a deep breath, trying not to think of Sky and Vanessa, and what they would think of the news. "Who's on my team?"

"Zhane and Chip for sure. We're sending two more with you; any suggestions?" Tommy asked.

Wes considered for several minutes. "Tori," he said abruptly. "She's a strong Ranger, good fighter, and she has healer training."

Cruger nodded. "A good choice," he agreed.

"Do we have a Tech?"

"It'll have to be Justin or Rose," Tommy told him regretfully. "They're the only ones available."

"Justin," Wes said quickly, and tried not to wince when Tommy looked amused. "He's the best at not ruffling feathers, and he's more used to working on his own as a Ranger than Rose is." He hesitated. "And I'd like to request Dax as well."

"Sergeant Lo?" Cruger raised his eyebrows. "For what reason?"

"Rangers work best in teams of six, Sir. And out of the other available active Rangers in this base, it comes down to Ryan or Dax."

Tommy winced slightly. "And Ryan has Sydney."

Wes nodded. "Dax is one of the most loyal Rangers I know, and he notices things no one else sees.
I think he'd make a valuable addition to the team."

"Do you truly feel you need a six-man team, Sergeant Collins?" Cruger asked, studying him intently.

Wes met his gaze straight on. "I do, Sir. It's the way Power Rangers are meant to fight."

"He's right," Tommy said quietly. He looked at Cruger for a moment before nodding to Wes. "Permission granted."

Wes let out an internal sigh of relief. Then he frowned, doing some mental calculations. "What about Chip? He's the only inactive Ranger on the team."

Tommy gave a very faint, slight smile. "We've got something in the works for him. In the meantime, inform your team, head home, and get some sleep. We're sending you out at 0800."

Wes saluted. "Thank you, Sir. Tommy," he added with a quick nod.

As he headed for the door, one thought rang through his mind. *How* was he going to tell Sky and Vanessa?

"Wes."

He glanced back. "Yeah?"

The expression Tommy gave him was pained. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry."

Wes shook his head. "I'm a Ranger, Tommy," he reminded him. "It's what we do."

He walked out before he could tell them he changed his mind.

****

"Sky! Sky, please open the door," Wes pleaded.

It remained stubbornly locked before him, and he leaned his head against it with a sigh. "Sky ... I'm sorry," he said quietly. "But this is what being a Ranger is about. People need my help, and I have to go whether I want to or not."

He waited a few more moments, hoping. But the door stayed closed, and at last he sighed. "I love you, Sky. I'll miss you."

Vanessa met him at the front door, looking up at him with a solemn expression. "You're not packing anything?" she asked.

He shook his head. "S.P.D.'s providing all the equipment." He hesitated. "Vanessa, I - "

She kissed him.

He froze, and whatever he had been about to say was suddenly no longer important. It was a several moments before she pulled away, her hand resting on his cheek as she stared up at him. "N-Nes ... " he stammered, bewildered.

She covered his mouth, shaking her head. "You're hopeless, Wes." Her eyes searched his for a moment. At last she sighed, leaning forward again to give him another brief kiss. "Come back to us," she whispered. Her hand was shaking.
He caught it, feeling torn. He wasn't completely stupid, but he'd never even thought ... "Nes, I - "

"You're going to be late," she reminded him softly.

Something in her expression told him the last thing he wanted to know. She already knew his answer, and she wasn't expecting him to fall in love with her. But unlike Sky, Vanessa understood *exactly* what he was heading into.

Swallowing hard, he pulled her into a tight hug. And feeling like a complete jerk, he turned and kissed her cheek. "I - "

"I love you too, Wes," she murmured in his ear, squeezing tight. "Be careful."

"Yeah," he whispered, hating himself all the more.

He pulled away after a moment, hesitating one last time before heading out the door. His hand was on his bike and his keys in the ignition before he heard Sky's panicked yell.

Turning, he found himself nearly tackled to the ground as his son sobbed against him. He closed his eyes, leaning down and holding Sky as tightly as he could. "I love you, Sky," he told him again, wondering if he could say it enough. He brushed back Sky's hair, kissing the top of his head before lifting his chin to meet his eyes. "You be good for your mom, okay?" he reminded him, trying desperately not to sound as choked up as he felt.

Sky nodded, sniffling. "I promise."

He gave him one last hug and gently pushed him back towards the house and Vanessa's waiting arms. As he turned on the bike’s ignition and pulled on his helmet, he fought to keep himself from looking back again. He tried not to wonder about how long it would be before he came back, and what his son would look like then.

He didn't think he wanted to know.
Okay, so the original plan was for this chapter to be entirely angsty. But certain Rangers refused to cooperate. -Glares at said group-

The name 'Dome of Lights' for the Aquitian Rangers' headquarters comes from my other story, *Fade to Darkness*.

The Red Time Force Ranger stared out across the Abyssal Sea from the skiver he'd borrowed. After a moment he reached up to remove his helmet, shaking his matted hair loose and looking out again through his own eyes. The view didn't improve.

According to the reports they'd generated so far, the amount of pollution in the oceans was devastating, but by some miracle hadn't completely ruined the planet's ecosystem - yet. It would take years to repair the damage, and even then things could never be the same. Four months of fighting had changed Aquitar forever.

It had changed his *team* forever.

He glanced down as his morpher beeped. "Time." he said shortly.

"*It's Wind. You sulking again?*"

He rolled his eyes. "I'm not sulking. I'm scouting."

"*Any sign of the bat under glass?*"

He bit back a chuckle in spite of himself. "Stop listening to Mystic and Overdrive. They're bad influences." Then he sighed. "And no; looks like a clean getaway."

"*Darn,*" she muttered with feeling. "*You coming back down?*"

He gave one last look to the bleak horizon of what had once been a beautiful, serene world. "Yeah. I'm on my way."

****

He removed his helmet once again as he entered the Dome of Lights, trying to run a hand through his hair. He immediately wished he hadn't. "Status?" he demanded.

"*We're all clear,*" Justin told him, not even bothering to turn from the console he was at. He looked frustrated, just as they all were. "Absolutely no signs of any foreign entities left on the planet. Scanners register nine hundred forty-seven thousand seventy-three Aquitian life forms, six human, and one demi-human."

Wes tried not to flinch at the number. So many lives had been lost, and for *nothing*. They hadn't caught Grumm or any of his henchmen; they'd turned tail and run because they suddenly decided Aquitar didn't have enough mineral resources for them.
A hand squeezed his shoulder. "If you keep thinking of what we lost, you'll never remember what we saved," Dax reminded him solemnly.

He sighed and offered the other man a faint attempt at a smile. They'd all been affected by the last few months, but Dax was one of the most obvious. While he still had his moments of not getting the joke, he'd greatly matured, for lack of a better word. Now he was the first person Wes turned to for observations, as he had a tendency to notice things no one else did. He was quieter as well, just as they all were, but he'd also somehow learned to say just what they all needed to hear at exactly the right time.

The thought occurred to him that Dax had come to remind him of Delphine, and he tried to ignore the ache still left behind by the loss of three of the Rangers of Aquitar.

"If we are certain that our enemies have left us, then there is no need for us to require your services any longer," Tideus commented.

Wes looked at him in alarm. "But we can't just leave you like this!" he protested. "There's still so much to be done! And - "

"And Aquitar will find its own way to heal itself, as we have always done," Corcus told him quietly, looking weary. "We appreciate your assistance Rangers, and we respect what you have done for us. But there is little else that you can do here."

"We can help," Tori said stubbornly.

Tideus bowed slightly to her. "We are grateful to you, Tori. But you cannot remain on Aquitar indefinitely. You have your own families to return to, do you not?"

They all exchanged guilty looks. With everything that had been happening, they'd tried not to talk about their families back home too often in front of the Aquitians, but it was hard. Wes, Justin, and Zhane all had children to think of, while Tori was married and Chip had a serious girlfriend. Dax was the only one of them without a permanent family to go back to, unless you counted his Ranger team.

Well, his old team, Wes amended silently to himself. While he knew that he would always consider the other Time Force Rangers to be his 'true' team, there was no doubt in his mind that the group in this room was his team as well. As ragtag and strangely assembled as they were, he wouldn't trade any of them for anything. They had saved his life more times than he could count, and he knew they were more than just friends now; they were family.

"Aquitar will survive," Tideus insisted. "We are wounded, but our people are strong. We will build our world up again, as we have done before."

"Are you saying you don't want our help?" Zhane asked quietly.

"Never," Corcus said firmly. "But you have done all you can for us at the moment. If we are in need of assistance again, rest assured we will call the six of you straight away."

Dax smiled at that, and Wes blinked as he caught on. Oh, he thought as a warm feeling settled over him. Not S.P.D. - they'll call *us*. We're the ones they trust. It was a flattering and comforting thought.

He looked around at his team. Justin was still going over his scans, keeping only half his attention tuned to them. Chip had sat down to scroll through a data pad, leaning forward to rest his chin on his helmet as he held it in his lap. Zhane was leaning against a wall, watching their conversation.
Dax remained at his side. Tori sat in a corner with the last remaining member of their team, whose assistance had become invaluable to them all.

They were all in standby mode: morphed with helmets removed. They were all tired and dirty, thanks to the water shortage caused by all the pollution. Everyone bore scars from battles they'd fought, and explosions they'd just barely survived.

They were ready to go home, he realized. More than ready.

He sighed, tucking his helmet under an arm as he drew a slow breath. "If you're sure," he murmured. He looked up again, and found more than one person had turned to look at him with faint hope in their eyes. "Let's pack up and go home, guys."

"Take me with you."

He blinked, turning to look at Nerina. "What?"

"Take me with you," the teen repeated quietly, her expression firm. Even with her dark hair hiding the scales on her face, he'd been told she looked a great deal like her mother. But he all he could see was her father every time she looked at him with those bright blue eyes. "I want to go to Earth."

The two Aquitian Rangers stiffed. "Nerina - " Tideus began.

"You are not yet of age," Corcus reminded her sternly. "Circumstances have unavoidably changed your upbringing from what it should have been, but that does not allow for - "

"My *father* is on Earth, Elder," Nerina interrupted him in a very un-Aquitian manner, narrowing her gaze. "He is ... he is the only family I have left." Her voice caught slightly, and Tori squeezed her shoulders comfortingly.

The two Rangers exchanged glances, and Wes fought the urge to remind them that Nerina was half Earthian, too. She had a right to see her father's home planet. "We have plenty of room in the shuttle," he spoke up, glancing at Nerina.

She shot him a grateful look.

"Billy would be thrilled to see her," Justin commented absently.

"There's plenty of room at S.P.D. Newtech," Chip offered, leaning over to shift his skirt.

Zhane smirked slightly. "S.P.D. has lots of programs to help her adjust to life on Earth."

"And we'll be with her every step of the way," Tori agreed quickly, rubbing the girl's arm soothingly.

Corcus gave them what Wes had come to interpret as the Aquitian version of an exasperated expression. "Be that as it may - "

"When it seems like everything is falling apart, sometimes all you need is a chance for a fresh start," Dax spoke up, gazing calmly at the Aquitians. "No matter how hard it is to let go."

They looked at one another again, and at last Tideus sighed. "If it was anyone but the six of you escorting the spawn of our departed friend, we would refuse you," he said quietly. "However, we have come to trust you all with something far more precious than our lives, and that is not a trust we give lightly."
Corcus looked at Nerina solemnly. "You are certain this is truly what you want?"

She stood, her chin firm. "I have never been more certain of anything in my short span of life," she informed him.

He nodded slowly. "May the Power protect you," he stated softly, bowing.

"And you," she returned.

Her expression was as solemn as both of the Aquitians before her, but Wes could see the tears in her eyes as they shone with happiness.

****

"Do you think Ashley will want her morpher back?" Chip spoke up as they finished loading their gear. He glanced down at himself with a frown.

Wes couldn't help a slight grin. "I thought you were getting used to the skirt, Mystic. You said you didn't mind it anymore."

He shrugged. "I don't. It's just - "

"Skirts are sexist?" Tori suggested behind them.

"You don't like the restricted leg movement?" Zhane teased.

"You don't want to be a symbol of why Rangers shouldn't use morphers that weren't designed specifically for their gender anymore?" Dax offered.

Justin pretended to pout. "He just doesn't want to share uniforms with me anymore, that's what it is."

Chip sighed, rolling his eyes. "No, I was thinking about proposing to Clare when we get back, and I'm not sure if Ashley will be willing to let me keep using her old Morpher if I'm going to be gone from S.P.D. for awhile."

Everyone froze, turning to stare at him in surprise. "That's great! Congratulations!" Tori gushed, throwing her arms around him and giving him a tight hug.

"Finally taking the plunge?" Zhane teased, reaching out to pat Chip's back. "Next thing you know, we'll be getting birth announcements."

"That's fantastic," Dax told him with a sincere grin.

Justin just gave him an amused look. "You don't even have a ring yet, do you?"

"Guys!" Wes called, raising his voice to catch their attention. "Leave the poor man alone!" He turned to give Chip a smile as he squeezed the other man's shoulder. "I'm happy for you. I hope she says yes."

"Thanks, everybody," Chip muttered, turning nearly as red as his hair.

"Are all Earthians are strange as all of you?" Nerina spoke up, looking curious.

Zhane laughed, turning to grin at her. "Hey! I resent that! I'm Kerovian, not Earthian."
"Astro, you've been living on Earth since 1998," Justin pointed out dryly. "It's been nineteen years; give it up. You're legally an Earthling now."

"No!" Zhane protested, backing away and brandishing a flat box. "I refuse to let you and your strange ways contaminate me! I'm Kerovian, Kerovian I tell you!"

Chip grabbed him from behind. "Earth cooties!" he laughed as Dax, Tori, and Justin cheered.

Zhane let out a girly shriek. "Noo!"

Wes smiled as he heard a faint, barely audible giggle from Nerina. "Okay guys, enough clowning around. Let's get this stored away and get *home*."

"Home ..." Tori sighed.

Dax and Chip exchanged glances. "Race you!" they cried in unison.

"Hey! You two break anything and you get to ride back to Earth in the cargo bay!" Wes shouted after them.

****

He sighed as he got out of the cab. It was late when the Commander and Tommy finally allowed them all to escape, and he hadn't wanted to bother anyone by asking for a ride. He probably should have just slept at S.P.D., but after so long away from home, the first thing he wanted was to see Sky and Vanessa. He wasn't sure if he'd be able to sleep until he did.

He glanced at the clock as he slipped inside the door as quietly as possible and winced. They were both asleep by now, or close to. But he could check on them at least - reassure himself that they were both there, that they were still safe.

Vanessa was passed out over one of the desks in the room they'd set aside as her home lab, and the sight made him smile. He took a moment to just stand there, leaning in the doorway and watching her.

He still wasn't in love with her - not romantically anyway, and he doubted he ever would be. He'd had a lot of time to think about her and their relationship during the times he waited between attacks, or tried to sleep for the night. And he knew that he still thought of her as his best friend, closer than a sister. He loved her, but he could never marry her.

But even so, seeing her there, snoring softly over her diagrams, made him feel like he was finally home.

He leaned in, gently brushing her hair back out of her face. "Nes? It's time to go to bed."

She started to stir with a groan, and he smiled. "That's it, rise and shine," he teased. "You're suppose to sleep in your bed, not on the table. And you're drooling on your work again."

"Am not ..." she muttered sleepily. Then her eyes snapped open. "Wes?!"

He smiled at her warmly, reaching out to brush her hair back again. "Evening, sunshine."

He nearly fell over when she tacked him, and he pulled her tight against his chest with a contented sigh. "I'm home," he whispered. "I'm finally home."

"Thank god." Her voice was choked, and she turned to kiss his cheek several times before pulling
away again. Her eyes searched his face frantically, her hand drifting up after a moment to tug on his hair. "You need a haircut," she whispered.

He nodded. "And tomorrow, when you're more coherent, I might actually let you come at my head with scissors. But not right now."

She made a face at him, only to laugh breathlessly the next moment. "God ... I don't think I could sleep anymore." She hugged him again. "It's good to have you home."

"Fantastic to *be* home," he said reverently. "Is Sky already in bed?"

She nodded, leaning against him with a sigh. "It's a school night," she reminded him.

He rolled his eyes. "I'm not going to wake him up. I just ... I wanna see him." He frowned, thinking of the other fathers who'd finally come home to their children tonight.

Or in one case, had their child come home to them.

"What is it?" Vanessa asked softly.

He sighed, kissing her temple. "Just thinking. Come on; I wanna see Sky."

Being as quiet as possible, he carefully eased open his son's bedroom door and peeked inside. And froze at the sight of the empty bed.

"Sky?" he whispered. He could feel his heart clenching in his chest. "Sky?!"

Vanessa caught his arm. "Wes, calm down! It's all right!" she hissed.

"All right?" he snapped back, whirling on her. "How is it all right?! Sky is - "

"In your room," she interrupted with a sigh. "He sneaks in there sometimes when he can't sleep."

He stared at her for a moment, his jaw working. "Oh," he managed finally, feeling stupid.

Vanessa just shook her head, giving him a fondly exasperated look. "Come on, you," she murmured, pulling him along.

Just as she'd promised, he found Sky curled up in the middle of his bed, clutching one of his pillows. He swallowed at the sight as his heart ached. He'd missed his son constantly, but something about *finally* being able to actually see him right in front of him made his eyes burn.

He reached out to catch Vanessa's wrist as she tried to head for the door, shaking his head and tugging her gently towards him. She sighed, giving him the exasperated look again, but at last climbed into the bed beside him, laying her head against his shoulder. He wrapped his arms around the two most important people in his life, and thanked whatever was out there that he'd made it back to them.
Eric lined up his shot, took careful aim with the Quantum Defender, and pulled the trigger.

The sound of the tiny bottle of fruit-smelling cologne shattering was highly satisfying.

Ten months, he mused to himself as he stepped carefully around the glass shards to set up the coffee mug she'd given him for his birthday, bearing the words 'Fuck Off And Die'. A new record.

He walked back to the line and aimed again. He'd almost liked that mug, too.

But personalized mugs still made him think of Wes, and that was more than enough reason to get rid of it.

Wes had a habit of buying him random mugs, thinking he'd like them. Granted, Wes had always known him well enough to pick out something he didn't completely hate. Even the ones that were obviously just to poke fun at him weren't *too* horrible.

He sighed and un-cocked the Defender, annoyed at himself. Two years later and Wes was still in his head. He'd just broken up with his girlfriend, and he *still* couldn't stop thinking of him.

At least this time there was somewhat of an excuse. After all, in all technicality, it *was* Wes' fault Denise had left him. She'd said it herself - although not in so many words.

He'd so tried hard to make things work with her. After two failed attempts at girlfriends and one boyfriend, he'd thought Denise might actually be someone he could stay with. He'd been the one to repeatedly swallow his pride, apologize for things that weren't his fault, and fight to make her happy.

But in the end, apparently none of that mattered.

From what he knew, Wes had actually left Earth on some super-secret S.P.D. mission he wasn't allowed to know about. And the only reason he knew *that* was because he'd called Taylor up in a panic after two hours of the Quantum Morpher screeching and flashing at him, but refusing to give Wes' location. She hadn't been willing to tell him at first, so he'd held the phone up to the morpher so she could hear what he was going through. She caved in a heartbeat.

He didn't know where Wes had gone, just that it was to some place dangerous. He wasn't alone, but he wouldn't be in contact very often. And they didn't know when he'd back. Judging by the hesitant way she'd said it, they didn't know *if* he'd be back.

So Eric had suffered for several months with a morpher he felt naked without, that screamed at him at random times and couldn't tell him why. And even when he'd been forced to take it off and hide it somewhere he couldn't hear it just so he could sleep, there was still the worry that crept over
him. Why was Wes in trouble? Was he under attack? Was he okay? He wasn't alone, was he? What was *happening* over there?

Was he even still alive? Would he know if he died? Would anyone bother to tell him?

The sleepless nights had driven him absolutely crazy, leaving him nearly a zombie the next day. And then he still had to deal with the morpher's whining. He was lucky he worked for Mr. Collins, or else he'd have lost his job.

Denise on the other hand, had been far less understanding.

When she'd first found out he was a Power Ranger, she'd said she was proud of him. But that pride wasn't so obvious when he limped home from missions to find her waiting for him, looking troubled as she bandaged him up despite his protests that it wasn't necessary. More than once they'd fought over him going into a situation that required him in front of the Silver Guardians, taking most of the hits. He'd tried time and time again to explain to her that it was part of the job, and he didn't have a choice. But she just couldn't understand that.

*Wes never needed an explanation*, a tiny voice whispered in the corner of his mind. *Wes understood, because he was right there beside you.*

He scowled, snapping off a quick shot with the Defender. Shards of porcelain went flying, and he sighed, running a hand through his hair in agitation. Everything always came back to Wes.

He was over it. He had gotten out and dated, he'd stopped moaning over the loss and banished the last of the memories from his house and his head. Or at least he thought he had.

It wasn't as if he thought of him constantly, either. There were only moments here and there, when he saw something that reminded him of the other man, or thought how he would have reacted. Even with his Guardians, every once in awhile he wondered what Wes would have done in a situation.

Denise hated Wes with a passion, and she'd never even met him. She insisted Eric was always thinking of him when his mind wandered while she rambled, and she complained when he didn't want to go some place because it was somewhere he and Wes had gone. She hated the way his morpher reacted to him, and more than once tried to accuse him that he'd programmed it to do that.

She hadn't been all bad, though. She had a great smile and a killer body. She knew how to make him laugh, which was a miracle in and of itself. She took enough self-defense to protect herself but refused to compete, saying competition was for people with something to prove. She was always sure of herself in everything she did, and she had this way of smirking at him that made him weak in the knees.

But four months of watching him stress over what was happening to Wes, having dates and movies interrupted by his morpher's squeals, she'd had enough. She told him he was living in the past, and they could never move forward if he was still stuck on his ex. She said she cared about him, didn't want to leave, but she couldn't stand his lifestyle, and if he couldn't give up his morpher and settle down with her, then they obviously weren't meant to be.

What hurt the most was standing there staring at her, struggling to find something to say, and having her smile at him gently as she told him she already knew there wasn't a choice.

He set up the teddy bear she'd returned that he won her at a fair on the target area with a sigh. He missed her. She was a great girl, and he really had liked her. But she wasn't a Ranger, and she'd
never understand him completely.

She'd never be Wes.

He watched the teddy bear burst into puffs of cotton and fabric, floating down gently to the ground. He cursed under his breath as he realized it was on fire, diving for the fire extinguisher before the alarms could go off. The last thing he wanted was to explain exactly what he was doing here and why.

He stood there for a moment as he finished hosing it down, staring at the mess.

Taylor had called him this morning, just hours after Denise had broken up with him, to tell him that Wes had come home. She said he looked exhausted, dehydrated, and desperately needed a shower, but he was back at S.P.D. and safe. He and his team had come home.

She still hesitated when he asked her how his eyes looked. "I don't know him as well as you," she'd hedged.

His eyes had narrowed as he'd clenched his cell tighter. "That's why I'm asking you."

There had been a long silence. "He looks ... tired," she'd told him at last. "His eyes are distant, like he's looking at something no one else can see. They all have that look."

And if Taylor could read Wes that well, something was *definitely* wrong.

He didn't know if it was from two years as partners or six as lovers, but he had the fight the urge to go see him. Wes wasn't his responsibility anymore, and he knew that. But it didn't stop him from worrying. Didn't stop him from caring.

He pulled the final item from the bag of things he'd brought to destroy, setting it up. It was a picture of Denise flashing that smirk at the camera as he hugged her from behind. He'd never liked the frame; it was covered in shells and something that was supposed to be sand.

Moving back behind the line, he took aim for the last time, and watched as the last reminder of his girlfriend broke into tiny pieces.
The atmosphere of the War Room was tense to the point of snapping, and the cafeteria staff had finally refused to serve them any more coffee. In fact, most of S.P.D. had been giving them all a wide berth. Only other Rangers stopped to poke their heads in every once in awhile, waiting for someone to shake their head that no, there wasn't any news, and would shake their head in return that no, the other kids were all still safe. It was mostly Zack and Andros that they saw, Andros to verify that the remaining children were still secure, and Zack hoping for news about his son as he clutched his daughter, looking exhausted.

But there was nothing to tell.

Sky Tate, Elizabeth Stewart-Ortiz, Bridge Carson, Sydney Drew, and Jaz and Keri Johnson had gone out to the park four days ago with Nerina Cranston and never returned. Three days ago, Hawking Oliver had disappeared from his parents' apartment while Kimberly was making breakfast. And then yesterday, Trent and Kira Fernandez had showed up at S.P.D. with the news that they had been attacked and their twins, Rhythm and Melody, had been kidnapped.

And Kira swore that one of the attackers had said 'Broodwing will pay good money for these brats' after dodging Rhythm's Ptera Scream.

The thought made Wes sick to his stomach. Broodwing, who had been on Aquitar as a member of Grumm's forces. He was the reason they'd adapted to using nicknames, because he'd been disturbingly fascinated by Tori's water techniques and Chip's magic, and had begun to demand to know who they were. They'd done what they could to keep their identities secret from him, but apparently it wasn't enough.

He shuddered without meaning to, and felt Justin squeeze his shoulder. He glanced up at the younger man, and saw Justin shake his head slightly. *Wasn't you,* he mouthed silently.

Wes just closed his eyes, because no matter what anyone said, he had lead the team on Aquitar, and he was the one who had made the decisions about how to handle Broodwing's obsession. He was the one who had not let them use names, but hadn't hidden that they were S.P.D. And there were only so many S.P.D. bases with the same amount of color-coded officers to choose from as Earth had.

The silence of the room was suddenly shattered by a single soft beeping noise.

Billy, Justin, and Rose were on their feet in seconds, each grabbing a console and frantically typing away. Everyone else had turned to watch them, tensed in anticipation. Distantly, Wes registered the sound of Rocky muttering a faint prayer.
"Got it!" Justin's excited yell was deafening, but the effect was instantaneous. Tommy and Cruger were at his side, demanding answers. Aisha clutched Kimberly, both of them anxious and pale. Adam quietly spoke into his communicator, and Zack burst through the door in moments, Heart still in his arms.

"I'm telling you, this sequence has Nerina's influence all over it," Justin insisted over the sudden noise, glaring at up at Cruger. "I spent months working with that girl, and I *know* what she's capable of. Wes, back me up here."

Wes moved over to look at the list of information streaming through the computer, along with the flashing light and digital map as if he knew what he was looking at. He nodded solemnly, trying to hold in the growing anticipation at the thought of a lead at last. "That's Nerina," he confirmed.

He didn't have the slightest clue what Justin was doing or what any of it meant. But he knew Justin, and he knew that if Justin said it was Nerina, then it was.

Justin nodded, swiftly bringing up a map over the council table for everyone to see. "This is the projected landing path for the target."

"That's the middle of nowhere," T.J. spoke up, frowning.

"The object appears to be very large," Rose commented, still frowning at her own console. "Looks like they needed the landing space."

"So what's our plan of attack?" Ryan asked bluntly.

"That is not up to any of you," Cruger said firmly. "You are all emotionally involved; I cannot allow any of you on this mission."

Kimberly was on her feet and glaring up at Cruger before anyone else could barely voice a protest. "Don't you *dare*," she hissed, eyes blazing. "That is my only son, and I am *not* going to stay behind and sit here like a good little soldier when my child is in danger!"

"Are you threatening me, Sergeant Hart?" Cruger growled at her.

"If you're trying to keep me from my baby, then you bet I am!" she snapped back.

"You're out of line, Sergeant!"

"I'm a Power Ranger, and this is Ranger business! I don't answer to you anymore!"

Tommy grabbed Kimberly's shoulders as she shouted in Cruger's face, completely ignoring the fact that he was actually snarling at her now. "These are Rangers' children, and that means it *is* Ranger business, Commander," Tommy interjected, managing to sound calm despite the underlying current of anger in his tone. "That means it's my mission, and my decision of who is involved."

Cruger stared down at them both, his scales still bristling. "Very well, Deputy Commander," he snapped. He marched toward out the door without another word, his shoulders tensed in fury.

There was a long moment after he was gone when no one said anything.

At last Kimberly glanced up at Tommy, taking a long, slow breath. "Thanks," she said simply.

"Don't ever make me do that again," he returned, kissing her cheek before turning to the rest of
them. "First of all, Justin, you're sure about this information?" he asked, glancing at the man in question.

Justin shrugged. "Mostly. It's definitely a deliberate pattern, and it seems familiar. But we can't afford not to take it seriously anyway."

Tommy nodded, as if this was what he expected.

"It is a pattern," Billy interjected quietly. His eyes were distant for a moment. "It's an Aquitian lullaby."

Adam cleared his throat. "So we need a plan," he reminded them.

"Is there anyone in this room who isn't going?" Tommy asked, glancing over them all. His gaze lingered on Litania for a moment.

Her eyes narrowed in return. "Don't even think about it," she informed him shortly.

T.J. reached over to squeeze her hand, shaking his head. "Lit's gonna use one of my morphers. She won't be going in unprepared." he promised.

Zack sighed, raising his free hand as his daughter nestled against his shoulder, sucking her thumb and watching them all with wide brown eyes. "I'll stay," he volunteered. He forced a smile as Aisha looked at him in surprise. "Someone's gotta take care of Heart," he pointed out, stroking the infant's dark hair. "Just ... bring him back for me."

Trent and Kira exchanged pained glances. "We can't," Kira reminded them miserably.

"I beg to differ."

Everyone looked up in surprise as Ethan literally bounced through the doorway, Conner grinning as he trailed after his husband. "Catch," Ethan continued, tossing something to Trent and Kira.

A blue gem glittered brilliantly on the silver bracelet he wore.

Trent stared down at his own Dino Gem. "Ethan, how ... ?"

"We've been working on energizing different Power Levels for the Morpher Project," Rose spoke up. She smiled faintly for the first time in days. "The Dino Gems were one of the latest test projects. They never lost their connection to the Morphin Grid - we just had to fill up their Power Levels."

Kira looked up, tears sparkling in her eyes. "Then let's go get our babies back," she said fiercely.

****

Red Time Force froze, jerking up a hand in a gesture for everyone behind him to stop. Heart pounding, he waited for the two furry-looking creatures to pass by. At last he dropped his hand, nodding once, and moved forward again.

He wouldn't say it was probably the smartest plan they probably could have come up with. Probably not even the best. But if nothing else, it would be effective.

Checking one last time to make sure the hallway was clear, he pointed at Blue Astro, then down a separate hall. The other Ranger nodded, jerking his head for his own team to follow. Red Turbo, Pink Overdrive, and Titanium Lightspeed slipped off after him. He could see Red Turbo cracking
her knuckles in anticipation of their mission - complete and utter sabotage to the ship.

Red Time Force lifted his hand again for his own team, pointing in the opposite direction of where the others had gone. The rest of the group nodded, and they moved out in silence.

An explosion sounded outside, and there was the sound of shouting from somewhere else inside of the ship. *Distraction One, go,* Red Time force counted to himself. If anyone could be counted on to make a lot of noise and draw attention to themselves, it was the Dino Thunder Rangers.

Before long he was forced to dive back into hiding as someone raced in the opposite direction of the explosion, shouting angrily. "How many Rangers are there on this planet?!!" he heard them snarl.

*More than you'll ever be able to stop,* he thought fiercely, adding a swift *Distraction Two, go.* And that's our cue.

If he wasn't so furious at what they'd done, he might have pitied whoever was about to go up against the Mighty Morphin Rangers.

The sound of someone sobbing softly echoed through his speakers, and he froze for a moment. "Shut *up* already!" someone bellowed, and he heard a cry of fear as something crashed against a wall.

"Now!" he shouted, blood boiling.

The two furry women he'd noticed earlier screeched in alarm as they came around the corner. "Get them!" one of them shrieked.

"I don't *think* so!" Blue Wind snapped back. "Sonic Fin!"

A wave of energy knocked the pair back into a wall, pinning them there as they screamed and struggled.

"Turbo Hand Blasters!"

Red Time Force snapped his head to Blue Turbo as the women slumped to the ground unconscious, glaring at him through his helmet. "That wasn't necessary, Turbo."

The other Ranger shrugged coldly as he banished the guns. "It wasn't necessary that they take my daughter, either." he said shortly.

"Daddy ... ?"

He turned, and felt tears of relief well in his eyes. "Sky!"

The two cells were barely big enough to hold the seven children inside of them, and it was obvious they hadn't exactly been well taken care of. All of them were filthy with tear-stained faces, and it looked like Nerina was showing signs of severe dehydration.

He did a double take. Wait a minute. *Seven* children?

"Elizabeth?" Blue Turbo called, looking around anxiously. "Elizabeth?! Elizabeth, where are you?!"

"She's gone ... " Nerina wheezed.
"Star Chargers!" Yellow Turbo shouted, shattering the lock on her cell door. He moved swiftly to the next as Blue Wind rushed to help the teen.

"What do mean? Where is she?" Blue Turbo demanded.

"They told us ... " Nerina coughed, making a strange choking noise, and Blue Wind shushed her, hurriedly demorphing and summoning water to her cupped hands.

"They said you weren't comin'."

Red Time Force turned again at the soft voice, staring at his son as he clutched a shivering Bridge behind a wall of blue light. "What?"

"They said ... " Sky sniffled slightly, and his heart ached at the expression on the boy's face. "They said you tried to rescue us, but you ... that you were ... "

"I want my daddy!" Sydney burst out, starting to cry. "Where is he? Where's my daddy?!"

"He's here," Blue Overdrive assured her, crouching beside her and scooping up Keri in one arm as the two girls sobbed. "He's punishing the bad guys for what they did to you."

"They said no one was comin'," Sky continued, still gazing at his father. "So Bethie an' Jaz went to get help. They got out to find someone to help the rest of us."

"Sky?" Red Time Force said quietly, crouching down in front of the force field. "Sky, it's okay. We're here now. You can let the wall go, okay?" he coaxed.

Sky shook his head, squeezing Bridge as the other boy whimpered. "They said you were dead." he whispered.

"Where's Hawk?" Yellow Turbo asked worriedly, looking around.

"He's right here," Melody spoke up, pointing behind her. "He can't stop it."

As she spoke, there was a flicker of light, and Hawk appeared, wide-eyed and shaking. The little boy shrieked when Yellow Turbo tried to approach, and abruptly disappeared again.

"This is Tori," she told her morpher. "Kim, Aisha, we need you here now."

"On our way."

Red Time Force demorphed, keeping his eyes on his son. "I'm right here, Sky," he said softly. "It's me. Let's go home, okay?"

Sky shuddered, shaking his head. "Bridge ... " he muttered. "I gotta protect Bridge."

"Bridge?!"

Wes glanced back as Yellow Mighty Morphin squeezed into the cell behind him, swiftly demorphing. "Bridge, it's Mama," she crooned. "Come on, Baby. Look at me."

Slowly, Bridge's head began to lift as he continued to shiver. "M-mama?" he whispered.

"That's right, Baby." There were tears in Aisha's eyes, but her voice remained steady and loving. "I'm right here."
"I want Mama," Bridge muttered. He jerked suddenly, his eyes going wide.

Sky hugged him tighter, petting the other boy's head. "It's okay, Bridge," he said quickly. "I'm not gonna let nobody hurt you again, I promise."

"I promise?" Bridge choked out.

"Promise," Sky agreed. His eyes were desperate as he stared out at them, rocking Bridge back and forth.

"They're trapped."

Wes jerked as Adam crouched down beside him, studying the two boys. He hadn't even seen him arrive. "Bridge can't calm down, so Sky can't put down the wall."

"But Sky can't keep it up indefinitely," Wes protested.

"I know," Adam returned, his voice deceptively quiet. His eyes were tortured as he stared at his son.

Wes paused, his mind whirling. They had to get Sky to let them get to Bridge. But they needed Bridge to calm down before Sky would even let them approach.

"What do you mean she's not here?!"

He whirled, his eyes narrowing on Pink Overdrive as she grabbed Blue Turbo by the shoulders, shaking him. "How can she not be here?!" she shouted.

"Overdrive!" Wes snapped. "Get them out of here! Get everyone else out!"

And they waited, while the six children were gathered up and carried out. He could see Kimberly with her arms around Hawk as he flickered between invisibility and back. Nerina had to be supported by Tori and her father, Tori consistently summoning more water for the girl. Keri was sobbing against Red Turbo's chest as her mother tried to demand that someone tell her where her son was.

It seemed like an eternity until only Rocky, Adam, Aisha, and himself were left with the two boys. Wes took several deep breaths, forcing himself to relax. Everything could be dealt with later; right now, Bridge and Sky needed everyone around them to be calm.

"Sky?" he tried again. "You can stop now. It's okay, I promise."

He would never forget the look on his son's face as Sky looked up at him, a tear slipping down his cheek. "It's never gonna be okay again," he whispered. The wall dropped, and both boys fell forward, unconscious.

****

He didn't know for sure if the other man was waiting for him or not when he sat beside him at the top of the bleachers, looking over the training grounds. He didn't know what to say, either. But somehow, he needed to say something.

"So the transfer went through?" he asked finally.

Justin nodded slowly, his eyes distant. "Yeah."
Wes sighed, looking down. He wanted to apologize, say he understood, offer his condolences, and tell him not to leave all in one breath. He’d known Justin for six years now. They’d spent the last seven months as teammates almost by default, but they’d raised their children together. He’d been there the day they learned about Elizabeth's ability. He'd watched her take her first steps, bond with Sky, lectured them when they got into trouble together, and hugged them both when they were upset.

She may not have been his own daughter, but he was grieving, too.

The kidnappers had escaped that day, three months ago. The evidence they'd managed to confiscate proved that they were bounty hunters, hired by Broodwing to kidnap the children of Power Rangers with special abilities. Broodwing was planning to use them for scientific study, in hopes of reproducing their powers.

Elizabeth and Jaz had completely disappeared. All of S.P.D. had been involved in the search, from Rangers to their Squads. No one could find them. There was evidence that they had made it into a nearby town and split up, but after that the trail had gone cold.

The remaining eight children were all being seen regularly by a child psychologist, who was trying to help them work through their traumatic experience. They had learned that the extra abilities the Dino Gems had given their Rangers had been inherited by their children; under the stress of the attacks, Rhythm had produced his mother's Ptera Scream, while Melody had developed Trent's camouflage, and Hawk was still struggling to learn how to control his invisibility. Nerina had suffered a broken arm as well as dehydration; she had apparently been protecting the younger children by making sure their jailers' attention was drawn to her.

Whatever had happened during the four days they were gone had completely shattered whatever shields Bridge had managed to build. He could no longer protect himself from *any* emotions around him. It was like seeing him as a toddler all over again, and it was heartbreaking. Cam had done the best he could, but eventually, his parents had come to the decision that he needed help they couldn't provide. Rocky and Adam were taking him to see Zofren and the Order of Light. Aisha would be going with them temporarily to see Bridge safely there, and then return back to Earth, to Zack and their daughter.

T.J. and Litania had taken Keri and left Earth all together, heading for Litania's home planet Gannos and the Satra Galaxy S.P.D. T.J. had told them rather bleakly that he didn't know if it was temporary or not. Rose meanwhile, had withdrawn completely into herself, and Justin had finally put in a request to have them both transferred to S.P.D. Japan.

"How's Sky?" Justin asked suddenly.

Wes sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Depressed," he said finally. "He thinks everything that happened is his fault. He said that he was the oldest, so it was his job to protect the others. He thinks he failed them."

"Just like you," Justin remarked.

He swallowed. "Justin, I - "

Justin held up a hand, shaking his head. "I don't blame you for anything, Wes," he said quietly. "None of us knew what Broodwing was planning. It's not your fault."

There was a long silence.
"It feels like it is," he whispered finally.

Justin sighed. "I feel like it's mine, too. I feel like I failed her. Sometimes I even think Rose blames me for not getting to her in time." He shook his head again with another sigh. "That's why we've agreed to go into counseling together after we move. I don't want to lose them both over this."

I feel like I'm losing you too, Wes wanted to say, but he didn't. "I'll miss you," he said instead.

Justin glanced at him with a faint, sad smile. "I'll miss you, too."

And no matter that they promised to keep in touch, Wes couldn't shake the feeling that he had just lost a friend as well as a surrogate daughter.
I think I just made hints of Dax/Delphine. *So* didn't see that one coming. o.O;

"For the last time, I don't care about your stupid pictures!" Sky shouted.

It was amazing the amount of difference time could make, Wes reflected as he watched Sky and Sydney glaring furiously at one another. A year and a half ago, they would have been happily playing together, and Sky had treated her somewhere between a friend and an annoying little sister. Now, with Sky nearly eight years old and Sydney’s seventh birthday just past, they couldn't stand each other.

He'd like to say that they were just in that stage where they couldn't stand the opposite gender, but somehow he couldn't convince himself of it. They had both just changed too much over the past year, partially from the horrible experience they’d gone through back then, and from the fact that their lives had changed so drastically. They just weren't compatible anymore.

He couldn't say for sure if it had been the kidnapping itself, or losing Elizabeth and having Bridge sent away, but Sky had withdrawn into himself recently. He was quieter than usual, rarely got into trouble, and spent most of his time reading and studying. The only thing that seemed to draw him out of his shell anymore was S.P.D., whether he was trying to exercise along with his father's Squad, or helping his mother in the labs.

Sydney on the other hand, had gone through a dramatic transformation. One day, fresh from a therapy appointment, she had announced to her father that she wanted to be a model. And then she wanted to be beautiful and popular, and become a superstar.

And Ryan had taken her seriously.

She was only modeling so far, but Ryan had taken leave from S.P.D. expressly for turning his daughter's whim into a dream come true. He had hired her an agent, gotten her discovered, and become her personal bodyguard. He did anything it took to get more attention for Sydney's career, and it was already paying off.

Ironically just a few months after Ryan had taken Sydney and left S.P.D., Carter had finally returned. Wes still wasn't sure whether it was coincidental or not - or if Cruger had just asked him to come back now that their Grunt department was slowly diminishing. Surprisingly he'd brought Joel, Chad, and Kelsey along with him, and the three Lightspeed Rangers blended in at S.P.D. as if they had always been there. Chad had taken over Rocky's D Squad, and to everyone's amazement, had turned out to be a fantastic teacher. Joel had joined the Grunts with only a few complaints, covering Ryan's former position, while Kelsey moved into the Docs department with Ashley and Aisha, citing many jokes about Newtech City's 'Yellow Docs' versus S.P.D. Japan's 'Pink Docs'.

It was Carter who'd explained Ryan's dedication to his daughter's dream for the rest of his stunned co-workers. Ryan had never had much of a childhood because of Diabolico and the demons who'd raised him, he'd pointed out. So now that he had Sydney, he wanted her to have everything he never could. And if Sydney wanted to be in the spotlight, Ryan would do everything it took to give
it to her.

"Daddy?"

Wes shook his head to clear it. "Yeah, Sky? What's up?"

"Time," Sky reminded him, tapping his wrist pointedly.

He grinned, grabbing what he needed off the shelf and ruffling his son's hair as he passed him. "Thanks, buddy. Can I trust you and Sydney to both behave for your mom while I'm gone?"

Sky scowled. "Very funny, Daddy."

"Bye, Uncle Wes," Sydney said with exaggerated politeness.

He leaned down to kiss the top of her head. "Stop torturing Sky, Sydney," he told her gently. "And Sky, be nice."

"I *am* being nice!" Sky shot back hotly, just as Sydney insisted "I'm not torturing him!"

"Uh huh. Behave," he reminded them. He managed to keep the laughter in until after he'd closed the front door behind him.

****

"Boardwalk! Pay up!" Tori crowed.

"Who's big idea was it to play Monopoly tonight, anyway?" Zhane grumbled, sorting through his paper money.

Tori, Chip, and Dax all pointed at Wes. "His," they said in unison.

"Hey, we all agreed Poker was getting boring," Wes protested. "Monopoly is not poker."

"No, but it's the perfect game for the son of a business tycoon," Zhane retorted.

"Why are you complaining about me when you landed on Wind's property?"

"Because I was so busy praying not to end up anywhere else on one of *your* properties, I ended up on hers," Zhane argued. He glanced down at the game, frowning. "You already own most of the board anyway. Why are we still playing?"

"Because it was Time's night to chose, and it's better than Dungeons and Dragons," Tori replied.

"There's nothing wrong with Dungeons and Dragons!" Chip objected, pouting.

"I thought it was fun," Dax agreed, frowning in confusion.

Tori snorted. "I rest my case."

There was a pause.

"Hey!" the two men protested.

Wes cleared his throat, fighting a grin as Zhane snickered. "Okay, new topic for tonight. Who was up?"
"Overdrive," Tori answered immediately.

Chip regarded her in fascination. "How do you do that?"

"Do what?" she asked absently, flipping her money again.

"Every time Time has a question, you always have an answer. It's awesome!"

She smirked. "It's a chick thing," she assured him.

"I thought it was a Blue thing," Wes said without thinking. After all, Justin and even Dax more recently always had an answer for him. He flinched when Tori looked up.

"It's a chick thing," she said again, narrowing her eyes at him.

"Right," he agreed quickly. He forced a cough. "So. Overdrive. What are we talking about tonight?"

Dax looked thoughtful for a moment. "What do you miss about Aquitar?" he proposed at last.

Everyone paused.

"What do we miss?" Zhane repeated skeptically.

Dax nodded. "Well, we've gone over everything we could possibly hate about it already. So what do we miss?"

There was a long silence as everyone considered the question.

Game Night, formerly known as Poker Night, was a team tradition since shortly after their return from Aquitar. The six Rangers had gathered together every Tuesday night for a game of poker to talk about their week. Each game, a new person would come up with a topic for them to discuss. It was their own form of therapy to deal with everything they had gone through during those months, and returning to people who couldn't understand what it had been like.

Shortly after Justin and Rose had transferred to S.P.D. Japan, the group had decided that they could only play poker for so long before it became annoying. Instead, they instigated Game Night. Now for each week they met, there was one person to come up with the discussion topic, and one to bring a game for them to play. As part of the rules they had established, no one was allowed to refuse to play or answer a question, and there was no protesting said game or question.

It was one of the few ways their team had managed to stay connected after their return from Aquitar. Even Zhane, who they all acknowledged as being an Astro Ranger, was on some level still one of them. Game Night was a way to remind them all of that, and allow them to talk about grievances throughout the week that they weren't able to share with anyone else.

After all, there was nothing you couldn't say to someone who had gone to war with you.

"No Earth food on the menu," Zhane said suddenly. He smirked. "And no one had the slightest idea what a cheeseburger was, but they all knew how to make Kerovian Coranol Soup."

"Which is disgusting, by the way," Wes pointed out as they all laughed. He paused to think, then grinned. "No one asked me when Nes and I were getting married," he declared.

Tori laughed, leaning over to swat his arm. "You know we all know better," she argued. "It's just
fun to tease you."

"Yeah, and the teasing got old quick - about seven years ago," he returned wryly. "Your turn."

She smiled almost dreamily. "An entire planet of water. The only place that ever felt more like home was the Academy."

"And the way they thought you were some sort of Aquitian goddess at first because you could manipulate water?" Zhane teased.

She tilted her head with a coy look. "I guess that wasn't *too* bad ... "

Everyone laughed.

"I miss not being teased for wearing a skirt," Chip announced, sighing.

They gave him sympathetic looks. "Who was it today?" Wes asked.

"Nick," he grumbled. "I know he was teasing, but ... "

Tori shook her head, reaching out to squeeze his hand. "He just doesn't understand," she said softly.

"I miss Delphine."

There was another pause as they all reflected quietly on Dax's words. Delphine had taken Dax under her wing so to speak when they'd arrived, as he'd been more easily effected by everything happening around them then the rest of them. But then, while none of them had seen the amount of destruction as what had happened to Aquitar on such a grand scale, Dax had come from a team with the least experience in dealing with such pointless devastation.

Delphine was the reason Dax had matured so greatly. She'd seemed amused by his endless enthusiasm, but had taught him to temper it with a sense of maturity he hadn't had before. And in return, Dax taught Delphine to laugh.

They had all been hurt when they lost her to the war, but no one had grieved quite so much as Dax.

"Remember the look on her face when she found out Time, Turbo, and I all had kids?" Zhane asked finally, smiling in remembrance.

"You mean the look on her face when she found out *you* had a kid?" Tori teased gently, elbowing him in the side. "I always knew you were infamous on Earth, Astro; I had no idea you were infamous in space, too."

"What can I say? I'm just that important," Zhane boasted.

"Or that frightening," Chip snickered.

Wes cracked up, and smiled when Dax did. "I remember what she said when she realized we were the representatives from S.P.D. Earth," Wes chuckled. "'Earth has sent us - '"

"'*You*?'" everyone chorused mockingly, bursting into laughter.

There were bad memories of Aquitar, Wes reflected as he laughed at the memory of the Aquitian Rangers' scandalized reaction to how easily Justin had taken over their headquarters’ computers. But even then, they weren't all bad. And just as time had changed the relationship between his son and Sydney, it had also changed the way he saw things. It had turned a few people he barely knew
as co-workers into life-long friends, and was slowly changing the thoughts of war and strife and so many people he couldn't save, into an unpleasant memory, with flickers of happiness and laughter in between.

Time did heal everything - even a Time Force Ranger.
I hate battle scenes. They never come out like I want them to. Anyone with feedback or suggestions for improvement would be most welcome.

Character death ahead.

"This can't be happening."

Wes felt numb. Dimly he registered Kimberly's protest as she sobbed, but he couldn't find the will to summon a response. All he could do was stare at Carter's body as the heart monitor continued to assure them all that despite appearances, he was still alive.

'Rangers down'. The words had been echoing through his head since they'd gotten the call. The call that drove all of S.P.D. into a frantic mess.

Because the Rangers weren't 'down'.

Six of them now that had been destroyed by this monster. He'd gone after the Dino Thunder Rangers before anyone had even known what was happening. There was only the sudden news from a grieving Trent, now a single father and the last of his team, leaving them all stunned and horrified.

From the information they'd gathered, the Lightspeed Rescue team had stumbled across him by accident - they weren't even on duty. The frantic backup call had caught them all by surprise, and by that point Kelsey was already gone. Ryan had appeared mere moments before helped arrived, just in time to watch Joel shove Carter out of the way of a blast that would have taken his life - sacrificing his own and Chad's in the process. Ryan just barely managed to drag Carter back to S.P.D., the creature's cruel laughter echoing behind them.

And staring through the window of the hospital wing at Carter lying so still, Ryan in mourning at his side, those words just kept repeating over and over.

'Rangers down'. 'Rangers down'.

****

"Are you sure we should be out in the open like this?" Vanessa asked warily, glancing around them.

"It's fine," Wes said distantly, watching his son run after the baseball they'd brought along. "We're not even out of sight of S.P.D. And there are three patrols in this area alone right now."

"I still don't think it's a good idea," she muttered, eyeing him again. "It's like offering you up on a platter and saying 'Here: come and get it'."

He shrugged. "We can't keep Sky cooped up in the house forever. The tension in S.P.D. is driving everyone crazy as it is." He paused, turning to shoot her an amused look. "'Come and get it'?"
"Took you long enough," she humphed, a smile tugging at the corner of her lips. She glanced at him and sighed, reaching up to squeeze his shoulder. "Carter will be okay," she murmured gently.

His throat felt tight. "The others won't."

Her expression softened, and she squeezed his hand. She started to say something and stopped, forcing a smile to her face. "Sky's coming," she said under her breath.

Wes turned to smile at his son, trying not to wince at his solemn expression. Sky wasn't stupid; he knew bad things were happening, and that his Uncle Carter was in ICU. But he refused to let his son know just how bad things truly were. "Ready for another throw, buddy?"


Sky looked up at him for a moment, studying him quietly. "You promise?" he asked softly, a vulnerable look in his eyes.

Wes gave him a hug, trying not to let him see the way he had to blink back tears for a moment. "I promise, Sky. Everything's going to be okay. Uncle Carter will be back on his feet in no time, and you can ask him for more stories about being a firefighter."

"And you'll get the bad guy?" Sky persisted.

He pulled back a bit to give him his best winning smile. "Hey, the Power Rangers *always* get the bad guy, remember?"

Sky hesitated, biting his lip, then nodded. "I remember," he agreed, smiling tentatively.

Wes stood back up, snagging the ball from Sky's hands. "Now come on; bet you can't catch this one!" He wound up, throwing it to the other side of the clearing.

"You did that on purpose!" Sky protested, giving chase.

He looked at Vanessa again as soon as Sky was out of earshot, his smile vanishing with a sigh. What he had been about to say was interrupted by the sound of his morpher going off. He could see Vanessa tensing out of the corner of his eye as he reached for it. "Time."

The general alert message startled him. "Attention: all active Rangers report to Command immediately. Repeat: all active Rangers report to Command immediately."

He glanced at Vanessa and tried to give her a reassuring smile. "Everything's going to be okay," he repeated. "It's probably just another meeting."

"Don't lie to me," she said sharply. She looked like she was going to move towards him, but stopped, squeezing his hand painfully tight instead. "Be careful," she murmured. Her eyes flickered over to Sky, who had finally caught the ball and was now watching them with a frown.

He grinned at her and tussled Sky's hair as he passed him. "Gotta run, buddy. Duty calls." He turned slightly to wave back at them as he started to jog towards S.P.D. "I'll see you at dinner! Chinese - your treat Nes!"

The grin finally turned genuine as he heard her sputter in outrage, but he waited until he was out of sight of them before breaking into a run.
"Wind!" he called, jogging to catch up with Tori as she hurried along. "You have any idea what this is about?"

She shook her head, frowning. "Must be an emergency - Dustin hasn't said anything."

"What about Astro or Mystic?"

"Just as surprised as you," Zhane piped up behind him as Chip and Dax joined them. He hesitated. "You think it has anything to do with ... *him*?"


"I think that's exactly what it is," Dax commented thoughtfully, moving ahead of them to enter Command.

The other three exchanged worried looks.

The look on Tommy's face when they saw him was less than reassuring. His expression was tight and drawn, and he seemed oddly pale in the florescent lighting. "Rangers, we have a situation," he said gravely.

"Tommy?" Jason asked warily.

"Mirloc is attacking Newtech City," Tommy continued as if he hadn't heard him. "And not just Squads - he's going after civilians."

Everyone tensed. "Then we have to stop him!" Aisha cried.

Slowly, hesitantly, he shook his head. "The information we've learned about Mirloc tells us that his abilities are based around mirrors, and the ability to absorb and reflect energy."

Wes swallowed uneasily as a bad feeling came over him, and memories of Miracon drifted through his mind.

"That's how - " Tommy's voice caught for a moment, and he forcibly cleared it. "That's how he defeated the Dino Thunder Rangers and Lightspeed. By absorbing and reflecting their own powered-up attacks back at them."

"Your mission Rangers, will not be to confront Mirloc directly - you will be search and rescue *only*." Cruger warned them. "Get as many civilians out of the area as possible, and return to S.P.D. We will be sending in three separate teams, in an effort to cover a greater area as fast as possible without catching Mirloc's notice on any one group. Team One will be the Mighty Morphin Rangers, Team Two Astro. Team Three will consist of those Rangers without a full team in the area. Team One will cover the North and East sides of the city. Team Two will work through the residential district. Team Three will go through downtown Newtech." Cruger's eyes narrowed slightly at Wes. "Last reports declared seeing Mirloc around the Parkington Market area; be *careful*. If you see Mirloc, leave the area immediately. Do *not* confront him."

Tori's eyes widened in indignation. "But - "

"That's an *order*, Sergeant Hanson," Cruger growled. "I do not wish to inform another family of more Rangers we have lost."
"With all do respect, Sir," Dax spoke up, frowning at the commander. "You're not a Ranger; you can't possibly understand."

"I know how you feel, Dax," Tommy said softly. His eyes were tortured. "But we can't afford to lose more lives when we still don't have a way to beat him. We *will* get Mirloc back; I promise you that." For a moment, the broken look on his face turned fiercely vengeful. Then it faded, and for the first time in all the years Wes had known him, Tommy looked like an old man, grieving for the students and friends he had lost. "But not today," he finished quietly.

There was a moment of silence.

At last everyone began reaching for their morphers with a solemnity that they rarely had.

"It’s Morphin Time!"

"Let’s Rocket!"

"Time for, Time Force!"

"Ninja Storm, Ranger Form! Power of Water!"

"Shift into Turbo! Dune Star Turbo Power!"

"Overdrive, Accelerate!"

All thirteen Rangers regarded each another for a moment. At last Red Mighty Morphin stuck out a hand. Immediately, everyone else piled theirs on top. "Power *Rangers*!"

The forced enthusiasm fell painfully flat.

"Rangers."

They turned at the door to look at Cruger. His head was slightly bowed, his eyes partially closed. "I may not understand the ways of the Power Rangers, but I do understand what means to lose someone I care for." At last he raised his gaze to look at them all. "I do not wish to feel that way again. Be careful, everyone."

"Sir," they returned, saluting swiftly.

For a single moment that bad feeling returned to Red Time Force, overwhelming him, and a feeling of desolation swept over him.

Then he blinked, and it was gone.

****

"Going somewhere?"

The careless drawl sent chills down his spine.

Red Time Force turned to see Mirloc watching them all, leaning almost casually against a building as the rest of his team scrambled to clear the civilians. Cruger’s words flickered through his mind for the briefest of moments, followed by a series of images. Trent’s red eyes and voice ragged from crying as he gave them the news, Melody’s face buried in her father’s side as her brother looked up at them all with a lost and broken expression, Ryan with tears streaming down his cheeks and screaming for help as he clutched Carter’s limp body, watching Kat solemnly place three
Lightspeed Morphers in the vault. That vulnerable look on Sky's face as he asked him to promise that it would be okay.

And for a split second, he hesitated.

"It's him!" someone screamed, and suddenly he found himself surrounded by people running for their lives. The air was filled with cries of terror, and dimly he could see the blurs of blue and yellow as his teammates fought to get them to safety.

Mirloc moved.

"Not so fast Mirloc!" he heard himself shout. "Chrono Saber!"

The world dissolved around him, leaving nothing but Mirloc and the saber in his hand. Mirloc was *fast*; there was no time for anything but instinctive movement. He pushed away all thoughts of his team, of the innocent people around them, of the friends he'd lost, of his family.

And soon it became very clear that Mirloc was *winning*.

"Time! Duck!"

He dropped to the ground, moments before Yellow Turbo and Blue Overdrive launched themselves into his place. "Gyro Blaster!"

"Turbo Star Chargers!"

He rolled free from the trio, into Blue Wind, who hauled him to his feet as he gasped for breath. "Is everyone clear?" he demanded.


"Let's get them out while he's busy."

The world blurred again, into frightened children and a woman who had to be helped along. People who cried out and clung to him fearfully. Distantly he could hear explosions and battle cries around them as Blue Overdrive and Yellow Turbo continued to do their best to keep Mirloc busy.

"We're clear!" Blue Wind yelled after what seemed like hours. "We're all clear!"

He turned to call for the retreat and heard a horrible noise like nothing he had ever heard in his life, followed by a scream of agony.

Spinning in alarm, he found Chip - *not* Yellow Turbo - dangling from Mirloc's grip by his left wrist. Sparks of yellow light crackled around Chip's arm, and splinters of metal seemed to be digging into his flesh. His face was twisted in pain, tears streaming down his cheeks as he struggled weakly to get free. And clinging to the sword attached to Mirloc's right wrist was the remains of Chip's Turbo Morpher.

"Is *this* all S.P.D. Earth is capable of?" Mirloc mused almost absently. "I expected more of a challenge."

"Let him go!" Red Time Force shouted, charging forward.

"Gladly," Mirloc sneered. He tossed Chip aside like a rag doll, turning to face them head on.

Chip hit the side of a building and crumpled. He did not get up again.
"Wind! Get Mystic out of here!" Red Time Force ordered, gripping his Chrono Saber tighter.

"But -"

"Now!" he bellowed.

She ran for their fallen teammate's side. "I'll be back!" she called anxiously. The pair vanished in a blue streak.

He searched the plaza anxiously for any sign of Blue Overdrive. He hadn't seen him since he rolled into Blue Wind. Shifting his weight slightly, he circled Mirloc, trying to keep an eye on the villain while subtly looking for his teammate.

"If you're looking for your friend, I'm afraid that you're a bit too late," Mirloc gloated.

He clenched his saber. "Where is he?"

Mirloc tilted his head to the side, considering whether or not to answer. "Hmm ..."

"Where is he?!"

Mirloc shifted ever so slightly, turning his head to study the battered fountain in the center of the market. "Perhaps you're simply not looking close enough, Ranger."

Red Time Force bolted, grabbing desperately for the edge of the fountain as he nearly threw himself over the side to look. "Overdrive!"

Dax floated face down just below the surface.

He wrenched the other man over, hauling him up and onto the ground. A pale face with glazed eyes gazed up at him blankly. "No!" he shouted desperately, frantically pushing down on his chest before trying to feel for a pulse. "Come on! Dax, come on!"

"No!"

His head snapped up at the horrified scream to see Blue Wind frozen directly across from him. She stumbled toward them, reaching out for their fallen teammate. "Dax?" she whispered.

His eyes widened behind his helmet. "Tori! Move!"

But she turned too late, knocked flying by Mirloc's saber as it slashed her directly across the chest. She demorphed with a cry of pain, struggling to look up through long blond hair.

Then her eyes hardened, her fist clenching against the ground. "I never lost to Lothor, and I'll never lose to a monster like you," she snarled, pushing herself to her feet.

"Tori, run!" Red Time Force shouted. "What are you doing?! Get out of here!"

To his horror, she assumed a fighting stance. Her hands moved in a circular motion, and he could feel the rise of energy behind her. "Power of Water!"

Mirloc laughed. "Oh, that's priceless. You think you can destroy me with *water*?"

"Watch me!" she shouted back furiously.

"Tori no!"
She let loose a blast of pure, elemental energy, straight at Mirloc. And Mirloc smirked, reaching up to open his chest. The water splashed against something that shone brightly, glimmered with light, and rebounded, surrounding Tori before even Red Time Force could move.

"*No*!" he screamed, reaching out desperately.

The water around her seemed to have no limit, no end. There was only the blast of light and the water within it. He could see her struggling, trying to force her way free. For a moment, she seemed to calm, her eyes closing as she tried to find her center and regain control over her element.

Then he realized he was wrong as her body slackened, beginning to float inside the seamless bubble.

A wordless howl tore itself from his lips, and he dropped to his knees. Behind him the body of one teammate, before him the limp form of another. At S.P.D., two fighting for their lives. And six more that he would never see again.

And the sound of Mirloc laughing at him.

He didn't know where his Chrono Sabers had fallen. He didn't care. All he knew was that he whispered its name as he slowly climbed to his feet, and found them in his hands. And then he was moving, rushing at Mirloc with a fury he'd never known.

"Time Strike!"

The world went white, then red, and at last faded to black.
Choices

Chapter Notes

I think I have rewritten this chapter at least three times. Not sure if I'm happy with it yet, either.

He'd thought Wes' secret mission for S.P.D. was the scariest time of his life. The not knowing, the constant squeals of alarm from his morpher that he couldn't stop. Understanding that Wes was in danger, but there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

He was wrong.

Predictably, it was yet another board meeting he'd been forced to attend. Thankfully Mr. Collins was here, which meant he might actually get to voice an opinion this time. The rest of the jerks hadn't improved their opinions of him much over the years, but he'd learned to live with it. Not like he particularly cared anyway.

He'd been in the middle of trying to stay awake for yet another boring proposal that was good in theory, but would take a lot more effort and footwork on his part to instate than any of these idiots realized. Of course, it didn't matter if he tried to remind them of that. *He* was just a Guardian after all. Heaven forbid he actually show signs of intelligence.

"Eric? What do you think?"

A blink was the only sign that his thoughts had wandered, but he could see faint amusement in Mr. Collin's eyes. While their relationship was better now than it had been in the wake of the separation, he still didn't always feel comfortable around his boss and former near father-in-law. On the upside, they understood each other better than they had in the beginning. For one, Collins actually realized now that despite the type of work he did, Eric was far from stupid.

He opened his mouth to answer, and was cut off by a sudden flare of bright light from his morpher. Caught off guard, he glanced down at it in confusion. It flashed again repeatedly, and without warning, began to shriek.

He clapped a hand down over it, trying to muffle the stupid thing with his sleeve. It wailed louder, clamoring for his attention. He scowled at it before looking up at Mr. Collins.

The older man had paled slightly; after all, he knew *exactly* what Eric’s morpher was doing. He hesitated. "Would you check into that for me, Eric?"

Fighting back the instinctive urge to protest at the idea of trying to ask someone about Wes, he forced himself to nod. "Yes, Sir." He made for the door before anyone else could make any smart comments about his 'excuses' like they usually did.

The Quantum Morpher had been acting strangely for a few weeks now. There had been random light bursts every so often, but they'd usually faded fairly quickly. It was similar to what had happened during Wes' mission.
But shrieking was never a good sign. At the moment, it looked like his morpher was trying to -

Without warning, light flared around him, and Eric found himself blinking at the world through a tinted visor.

*What the ... ?*

His morpher hadn't activated on its own since his first few days as a Ranger, when he'd tried to refuse to help the rest of Wes' team. It would tell him when Wes was in trouble, but it never did *this* anymore. Which meant whatever was going on, Wes in serious trouble.

He hesitated. Wes wasn't his problem anymore. They were separated, and had no reason to ever see each other again. They'd ended things almost four years ago. He had no reason to go running off to save Wes' butt just because -

"Look at this! We are *Power Rangers*, Eric. And friends or not, we're the only hope this city has right now."

He cursed softly under his breath and headed outside. "TF Eagle!" he shouted.

As he leapt up into the pilot's seat, he could only mutter "You'd better make this worth it, Wes."

*And you'd better still be there when I get to you.*

****

The view over Newtech City was beyond words. Signs of attack were everywhere, and he found himself following the largest trail toward the west side. He could see people being herded along in long lines below him, with people in matching navy and gray uniforms directing and helping them along.

He flew over a large open area and felt his heart stop.

Rangers were milling through the remains of a battlefield, moving aside rubble to get through things. A few he vaguely recognized from the wedding that weren't morphed were trying to help. Off to one side, one man was screaming, struggling to get past two more that prevented him from getting closer to what looked like a body. In front of a fountain someone was carefully pulling a body bag closed.

And between the two bodies, a large crater with a familiar red form at its center.

He leapt from the Eagle before he was even consciously aware of doing so, racing for that form with no other thought in his head but to be at his side. He nearly lost his footing when he landed, scrambling past cracked and broken pavement. He tripped, and barely glanced down to acknowledge that he'd stumbled over Wes' Chrono Sabers.

But the moment he reached the side of that still form, he knew in an instant he'd been too late.

"Wes?" He never knew his voice could sound so soft, so broken. "Wes ..."

Slowly, carefully, he turned him over onto his back.

Wes' helmet had shattered, just as it had so long ago, in that moment that had changed his life forever. Once again, black marks had smeared his face around eyes closed with a expression of pain, and he had to glance down at himself to make sure he truly wasn't reliving that time. But his
Ranger uniform was still there, and unlike then, Wes wasn't pushing himself up again.

Someone had grabbed his shoulder, and other hands were reaching for Wes. On instinct, he flung himself over Wes' body, holding tight and shielding him. "Stay away from him!" he snarled, kicking out randomly. He was rewarded with a sharp cry of pain, and felt a surge of vengeful satisfaction.

"Eric!"

Something smacked the side of his helmet hard enough to knock his head to one side, forcing him to look up. The Red Mighty Morphin Ranger was staring down at him. "Eric, we can't help him if you don't let go," he said, his voice surprisingly gentle.

And just like that, the world realigned.

He wasted only another moment blinking stupidly, feeling like an idiot for the way he'd reacted. Then he was attempting to feel Wes' neck, cursing under his breath at the thick material covering his hands and Wes' neck. "Power Down!" he snapped impatiently, settling for the more simple method of laying his head on Wes' chest and listening for a heartbeat.

"Eric, what are you -"

"Shh!" he growled, holding a hand up in a gesture for silence. He waited, slowly, painfully, for any chance, any sign that Wes might not be -

A heartbeat. So faint he could barely hear it, the rise of Wes' chest barely noticeable. But they were *there*.

He sat up so fast it was painful. "He's alive!" he shouted. "I need a doctor over here! He's still alive!"

And this time, when the hands reached for Wes, he helped them along, steadying his head and moving with them. His eyes never left that blackened face.

****

No one seemed to notice him waiting outside for some sort of news. People passed by, looked in anxiously, turned to comfort one another with expressions of grief. Holding onto each other as though the world was coming to an end.

Who the heck did they think they were? Wes wasn't *dead*. He had a heartbeat, and he was a fighter. Wes would be fine. He would.

"Eric ... ?"

He looked up instinctively at the voice and stared. "*Taylor*?"

She was crying.

"I h-heard ... that you were the one who ... "She jerked her head roughly in the direction Wes had been taken, and nodded, sniffing. "Thank you."

"I'm not about to let him be destroyed just because we're not a couple anymore," he said flatly, annoyed at her strange need to thank him. "And he's still alive, so stop acting like he isn't."
Tears welled in her eyes again, and she let out a sudden sharp sob. "I ... Eric, it's not ..."

He frowned, growing concerned at her lack of control; this wasn't like her at all. "Did something happen to Jason?" he demanded, belatedly wondering if the Ranger who'd gotten his attention earlier was Jason or Rocky - he couldn't remember the difference. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." He heard her swallow, and her voice steadied. "Jason and I are both fine. It's ... Look Eric, I -"

"Taylor, I walked out of a business meeting two hours ago, and found myself standing in uniform with my morpher shrieking at me to go to Newtech City. Don't you *dare* tell me everything's fine. What the heck is going on?" He paused, realizing what she hadn't said, and another chill ran down his spine. "What's the news about Wes?" he asked carefully.

There was a long silence, broken only by the sound of Taylor's shaking breaths.

"He's in ICU now," she said finally. "We've been under attack for the last few weeks - his team ran into the monster that took out the others. Wes is ..." she faltered, and he could hear her struggling to regain control over herself. "Wes and Chip are in ICU. The rest of his team ... didn't make it."

He froze, staring at her. "Jen and -"

But she was already shaking her head. "Not Time Force. Wes has an S.P.D. team now. Had," she corrected, the tears returning to her eyes. "Chip is alive, but he may lose his arm; we'll know in a few days if there's any chance to save it. Tori and Dax were ... Mirloc destroyed them." Her eyes glazed slightly, turning to stare at after where Wes had gone. "He went after Dino Thunder first - we didn't even know until Trent came to tell us he'd gotten Conner, Ethan, and Kira. And then Lightspeed ... we lost Joel, Chad, and Kelsey."

A cold feeling settled over him. Former Rangers were ... they'd *lost* them? He *knew* the Lightspeed team - not well, but they'd fought together. And Conner ... he was one of the Reds. Didn't he just get married a few years back?

Wes had lost his *team*? The two Rangers he'd been fighting with were ... 

"What happened to the guy that did it?" he asked finally, his voice cold.

"Zhane got him." There was a fierce satisfaction to her voice that he could definitely appreciate. "He ... I guess he realized something was wrong ... I don't know how. He tried to get there to help, but by the time he did, it was too late. Andros said he just went berserk; Mirloc never had a chance."

"Didn't know he was that strong," he muttered.

She shrugged slightly, trying to discreetly run a hand across her eyes. "The Silver Astro Ranger was always rumored to be one of the strongest Rangers in the galaxy; I guess they weren't kidding."

"Mommy?" The young voice broke through the riot of emotions going through him at the moment, making him look up. Across the hallway Sky, much older than the last time he'd seen him, was tugging on his mother's arm. "Mommy, why can't I see Daddy?" he demanded.

The blond woman next to him was struggling to control herself, struggling to find something to say to him. At last she crouched down in front of him, reaching out to touch his cheek. She bit her lip when he shyed away. "Sky ... Your father is hurt. They can't let anyone in to see him while they try to make him better."
Sky stiffened, his eyes narrowing. "Why not? I'm not gonna do anything to him."

She sighed. "It's something to do with contaminates, Sky. We know you won't hurt him on purpose. It's just ..."

She was hesitating, and for a split second, Eric almost felt sorry for her. Almost.

At last she sighed again, and even from this distance he could see that there were tears in her eyes when she looked up at Sky again. "Your father is in a coma, Sky," she said softly. "He went to sleep, and they don't know ... if he'll wake up."

The world blurred around Eric. Wes was ... what? A coma? Might not make wake up? No! This wasn't possible! Wes couldn't - couldn't -

Something small and blond streaked past him, and distantly Eric could hear someone shouting for Sky and Taylor calling his name. He shook her off without thinking about it, going after the boy instead.

Sky wasn't hard to find; he hadn't made it far. The kid had collapsed just outside the main entrance to S.P.D.. He hadn't bothered to get up, still hunched over against the ground.


The boy looked up, tears streaming down his face. "U-uncle Eric?" he sniffled.

Eric's face softened ever so slightly, and he reached out to gently rub Sky's shoulder. "Sky -"

Sky jerked back angrily, pushing his hand away. "Don't touch me!" he snapped, glaring up at him furiously despite the tears still streaking his cheeks. "Y-you're not ..." He hiccuped.

In spite of himself, Eric felt his heart break just a little more. "No, I'm not Wes," he agreed quietly. "But your dad's gonna be fine."

Sky blinked, startled. "He is? But ... Mommy said ...."

"Wes is *[going]* to wake up. He's already lived when everyone said he wouldn't before. He's always claiming he can make his own destiny, and he won't quit now," he insisted.

The tears were slowing, and Sky watched him wonderingly. "You really think so?" he whispered, his eyes begging him for it to be true.

In that moment, Eric had never felt so sure of anything in his life. He lifted his left wrist for Sky to see his morpher. "I *[know]* so." he said fiercely.

Sky nodded solemnly, then looked down for a moment. "Is ... is it okay to be worried anyway?" he asked hesitantly, sounding small.

He hugged the kid tightly without even stopping to think about it, swallowing the sudden lump in his throat. "Yeah, Sky. It's okay," he murmured.

*Don't make me a liar, Wes,* he prayed silently.
Attitude

Chapter Notes

This is one of the chapters that shall be confusing, due to the way I originally set all Eric POVs as every fifth chapter. This takes place *before* Wes woke up from his coma. Sky is now nine years old - and freakishly smart. c.c;;

The picture of Eric and Wes together is based off an icon I found once, which I just learned was made by jadetate for Angel. It's too adorable not to use.

"It wasn't anything big," Eric explained quietly, absently running his thumb over the back of the hand in his grasp. He still didn't know why he did that, but he couldn't seem to bring himself to stop. "Just your dad, and a few friends I never realized Phillips had. Pretty quiet ceremony. But your dad made sure the place he's in is beautiful." He hesitated. "I left your old baseball with him before they lowered the casket. Figured you'd want him to have it, after he taught you. Didn't think flowers were real appropriate for you two. You dad wanted me to say something, but I really couldn't think of anything. He always just saw me as 'Master Wesley's boyfriend', anyway. And don't deny it - you know it's true. He only liked me when I made you happy." He swallowed for a moment, trying to gather his thoughts.

"Why do you keep coming here every weekend?" came a voice from the doorway.

His jaw tightened, and he took several deep breaths to calm his temper. "Because I can't be here every day," he said shortly.

There was a long silence as Vanessa studied him. "You really believe he's going to wake up, don't you?" she murmured.

"Of course I do," he snapped back. "And he *will*.*

"I don't get you," she said abruptly. "You dump Wes - which, granted, I can somewhat understand in the circumstances. You ignore him for years, only showing up when it suits you. Four years ago you walked out on him for good. And now you're at his bedside every week, holding his hand and swearing up and down to anyone who'll listen that he'll still wake up after over a year in a coma."

He glared at her. "I don't need your approval to be here."

She folded her arms and met his glare straight on, looking unimpressed. "Maybe you do. After all, I'm the one who's had Wes crying on my shoulder over you for eight years."

"And obviously you never got anything out of it," he snarled sarcastically, his free hand clenching.

"I didn't," she returned coolly. "The only things Wes has ever given me was Sky and a lot of headaches."

"Oh, please," he spat. "You can't tell me you've lived with him for all these years out of the goodness of your heart."

She straightened suddenly, staring at him. "You bastard," she whispered. "You're still in love with
him. After all this time, and all the shit you've put him through ... you still love him."

"And you don't?" he snapped back.

There was an ugly silence as each of them registered that the other wasn't denying the accusation.

Out of nowhere Vanessa plopped down in the other chair of the room with a sigh, rubbing her temples. "This is so ridiculously messed up," she muttered. "I keep wondering who I murdered in a past life to deserve Wes."

Eric humphed as he eyed her warily. "I can't believe that I'm actually saying this, but I know what you mean."

"And the worst part is that the more you try to hate him for it, the more you realize you can't," she grumbled, scowling at the form in the bed.

Eric shook his head, snorting faintly. "For someone that's in love with Wes, you sure give him a lot of crap."

She raised an eyebrow. "And you don't?" she parroted back at him.

He stared at her, unamused. "I spent a year watching Wes chase after Jen before he suddenly decided that he was in love with me, covered his butt when he did something stupid, kept him from getting taken out in a fight, and agreed to have kids together only to find out he knew we'd never get the chance to raise them. Then while I'm trying to find a way to keep from beating his face in, he tells me he's leaving for Newtech City out of the blue, mails off a letter to tell me that he's having a kid with someone else, and starts begging me to come see him every time there's something wrong with the kid. I finally, finally get the chance to talk to him, and he takes off before I can finish, deciding all on his own that there's no chance we'll ever be together again - which you by the way, were so kind to help me work out. Then he takes off on some 'mission' on another planet without so much as dropping me a line - 'conveniently' forgetting that my morpher is programmed to know when he's in trouble. I lost my girlfriend because of that mess. And then, when I almost got my life back in order, he ... " He swallowed, suddenly unable to finish, and gestured toward the bed.

Feeling uncomfortable at his outburst, he found himself staring at Wes' hand still held carefully in his own. "Wes has been in and out of my life for the past twenty years. You don't stop caring about someone you've known that long."

"Wes tried to understand you better than you think, you know," Vanessa said quietly. "Every time it came up with someone about why you two weren't a couple anymore, he always blamed it on himself - never you. I know for a fact he's never stopped grieving for those boys." She hesitated for a moment. "I told him I loved him once, just before he left for Aquitar." She forced a bitter smile. "He kissed my cheek and said he loved me, too." She reached out to stroke Wes' arm with a sigh before letting her hand fall. "I fell in love with him years ago. He was always so dedicated to Sky, rearranging his whole life around him and the other kids. And then he was so eager to prove himself, he was hard not to love." She looked up then, meeting Eric's eyes. "*I* love him. But Wes has never loved anyone but you."

A strange peace seemed to settle over the two of them.

"I'll never like you," Eric remarked suddenly. He looked at her with an unreadable expression. "But I don't entirely hate you right now."
She offered a hand, smirking faintly. "Likewise."

And she didn't so much as flinch when he made a point of squeezing tighter than was strictly necessary.

They sat there in silence for awhile, and neither bothered to check the time. Both knew that the peace between them was tentative and uncertain. But strangely, neither one cared whether it lasted or not.

"So," Vanessa spoke up after what could have been mere minutes or hours. "You ever thought about getting a job with S.P.D., to be closer to Wes?"

Eric blinked up at her, then looked skeptical. "And leave the Silver Guardians?"

She shrugged. "Besides being here more often, you're a Power Ranger; you're pretty much guaranteed a job with any department of S.P.D. you decide you feel comfortable in."

"I suppose so," he agreed carefully. "But that would mean that I'd probably have to sell my place in Silver Hills. And does S.P.D. allow pets in the rooms on base?"

"No. But I do."

He stared at her. "You're not serious."

She shrugged again. "It wouldn't exactly be free - you'd have to split the utilities with me. And rent is sharing responsibilities with Sky."

Shock had turned to suspicion as he eyed her again. "You're insane. This *idea* is insane."

She smirked faintly. "Sanity is something we all learn to put aside the moment we sign up for S.P.D." She stood up, leaning over to gently brush Wes' bangs back from his face before turning for the door. "Think about it."

When he knew for sure that she was gone, he leaned over to tussle Wes' bangs, leaving them lying haphazardly across his forehead.

****

The room was neater than he expected. It looked like someone had routinely gone through and dusted it - probably Sky, judging by the state of Vanessa's lab when he helped her move it out to the garage. Sky was probably the reason everything had been put into its proper place as well. Wes wouldn't have bothered, and the kid was freakishly neat.

He found himself wandering over to look at the nightstand. A picture had been left sitting out of him and Wes, both in Guardian uniforms, grinning at the camera as Wes grabbed him from behind in a hug. He stared at it for a long time, taking in how happy both their expressions were.

He went to pick it up and noticed something white sticking out of a corner of the frame. Frowning, he flipped it over and opened the back. He lifted out the picture, planning to adjust it in the frame.

A photo strip fell out into his hand.

Wes was grinning wildly in all four shots, next to a man who looked so much like him anyone might have assumed them to be brothers. The man wasn't smiling, even in the third shot when Wes started poking him in the ribs. But in the very last frame, a very tiny, hesitant, almost-smile had
begun to creep across his face.

Alex.

Eric stared at the strip, multiple feelings surging through him. He'd never known Wes had this. What was it supposed to be, a reminder of what he had to do?

No. Even through his anger and hurt, he forced himself to acknowledge that Wes wasn't like that. He had probably had the pictures taken to try and remember the other man by. He'd always been upset about not getting more pictures of the others besides what he had from the picnic on the Animarium. And maybe ... after he'd known, he hadn't wanted to give them up?

He tucked the picture and photo strip back in the frame together with an annoyed sigh at himself. There he was again, trying to make up reasons for Wes not to have meant what he'd done. He already *knew* why, but somehow he still kept trying to justify it to himself.

"Who's that in the picture?"

He jumped, silently cursing at himself for not hearing anyone coming. He glanced over at the doorway, where Sky stood watching him with an unreadable expression. "What?"

"The photos," Sky said again, his gaze dropping to the pictures in his hand. "I found it when I was trying to clean. Who is that? Why does he look so much like my dad?"

Eric sighed. He took a moment to calm himself, at last leveling a serious look at Sky. "Are you *sure* you wanna know? It might change how you think about Wes." He wasn't blind to Sky's hero-worship of Wes - and if he ever found out which moron from S.P.D. actually gave the kid his father's helmet as a memento he'd make sure they knew how much he disapproved of that - but he didn't know how comfortable he was with telling the kid his father wasn't the perfect hero S.P.D. was trying to remember him as.

Sky frowned slightly. "Will it change how I think 'cause you're mad at him?"

He blinked, startled. "What?"

"Dad told me once that he did a very bad thing to you, and you'd never forgive him for it," Sky explained. "It was right after the wedding, when everyone was acting funny around you both."

"You remember that?" he demanded incredulously. "You were four!"

Sky humphed, looking just the slightest bit smug. "I've got a good memory." He tilted his head in a way that was eerily reminiscent of Wes. "Is that why it'll change how I think of him?"

Eric sighed heavily, gesturing to the bed. "Sit down, Sky." He eyed the kid as they sat together. Never thought I'd have to explain things to him. *Thanks a lot, Wes*, he thought sourly. He took a deep breath. "Okay. How much do you know about me and your dad?"

"That you were teammates," Sky returned immediately. "He says you used to be best friends, too." He frowned slightly. "Sometimes he'd say you were close, but he wouldn't explain how."

Great; now I get to shatter *all* of the kid's illusions. "That's probably because he wasn't sure how you'd take it," he told him. "Your dad and I were a couple."

Sky blinked rapidly, trying to absorb this information. "You were?"
He nodded. "For about seven years."

Sky's brow furrowed suddenly, and he looked at up in confusion. "Why are you telling me that? Dad never would."

Eric shrugged. "You're old enough to ask, you're old enough to know. Wes probably wasn't comfortable with talking to you about it."

"Oh." Sky blinked again. "So what does that have to do with it?"

_Everything._ "Your dad and I decided after a few years that we wanted to have kids," he said slowly, trying to ignore the hurt and anger that still flared up after all this time. "So we - " He hesitated. "You know how Bridge was born, right?" Then he paused in growing horror. "You ... you do know about the birds and the bees, and all that, right?"

Sky rolled his eyes. "Bridge was genetically created with DNA from Uncle Rocky and Uncle Adam, and Aunt Aisha gave birth to him," he recited. "My mom explained it. And yes, I know about *sex*."

_Thank you, Vanessa_, he thought reverently. "Good," he coughed, clearing his throat uncomfortably. "Anyway, Wes and I decided to do that."

Sky sat up straighter, staring at him. "*What*?"

"We had kids together. Two - Alexander and Benjamin."

"How old are they?" Sky demanded, leaning forward. "Why haven't I met them? Where are they?"

He held up a hand to quiet the kid, shaking his head. "This is where it gets complicated," he sighed. "Has your dad ever told you about the Red Time Force Ranger before him, Alex?"

Sky looked puzzled for a few moments, then his eyes shot abruptly wide. "Alexander is *Alex*?!"

_Smart kid_, Eric mused to himself, more than slightly surprised. _Maybe smarter than me and Wes combined._ "Yeah," he said aloud. "Alexander is Alex."

Sky glanced at him warily. "This is gonna get weird, isn't it?"

He smiled in spite of himself. "Yeah. It gets weird." He took a deep breath. "Alexander and Benjamin - our kids - were kidnapped after they were born, before we even got the chance to take them home." He swallowed, forcing himself to finish. "Wes told me later he knew that it was going to happen, because Alex had already told him. He never said anything to me because he was 'protecting the timeline', and he thought he could keep them safe on his own." His voice came out more bitter than he'd intended.

Sky was silent for several minutes as he digested this, and Eric let him think on it. It was a lot to take in after all; he wasn't sure if *he* could handle it. Distantly he wondered what Sky would think when he looked at that helmet now.

The helmet that his older brother *and* his father had worn.

He tried not shudder.

"So you're mad at Dad, but not Alex?"
He blinked at the sudden question, glancing at Sky. "What?"

Sky was still frowning. "It's just .... I can see why you'd be mad at Dad for not telling you - I think I am too, a little," he admitted. "But wasn't Alex the one who told him not to? Why aren't you mad at him?"

Eric stared at him. "I never thought about that," he managed finally. Trust the kid to think of something I never did.

"So ... what happens to Alex and Benjamin?" Sky asked. "Do you know?"

Eric closed his eyes, swallowing hard. "Yeah," he whispered. He forced out the words, because Sky had a right to know. "They were taken to the future and raised by Time Force so they could test the Red Time Force and Quantum morphers. Alex was the first person to use your dad's morpher. Benjamin used mine," he lifted his left wrist, "And ... eventually it destroyed him. Alex brought him back to the past just after he died - that's how I met him."

Sky's eyes were huge. "Ben *died*?"

He nodded. "Or - he will. In the future." He frowned. "And in the future, Alex is still the Red Time Force Ranger. I guess he got the morpher back somehow after your dad - " He cut himself off, unwilling to finish that thought. Because Wes *wasn't dead*.

Sky was silent for awhile, and Eric didn't try to say anything. He knew he'd given the kid a lot of new information he probably wasn't ready for, but it wasn't fair to keep it from him. It wasn't fair to expect him not to wonder about who his father was - is, and not be told.

He'd spent enough years trying to understand his own father.

"If Dad hadn't done what Alex told him to, I wouldn't have been born, would I?" Sky asked at last, watching him solemnly.

He shrugged. "I don't know. Your dad always wanted more kids after the twins."

Sky blinked. "So that's why my middle name is Ericson?"

*Really* smart kid, Eric thought ruefully. "Your dad promised me once that if we had any more kids, we'd name it Skylar, 'cause I liked the name. Your middle name he came up with all on his own; I had nothing to do with it."

Sky considered this. "That makes you my step-father."

He blinked. "What?"

Sky's expression was serious as he looked up at him, but his eyes had brightened. "Well, you're not my dad. But I could have been your kid. So since you're helping take care of me now, that makes you more like my step-father," he explained earnestly.

Eric looked at him for a minute. "That's a pretty good attitude to have about this mess," he said finally.

Sky shrugged.

Sky bounced to his feet, offering a hand. "Come on, Eric!"

He blinked again, startled. In the span of one conversation, he'd gone from 'Uncle Eric' to just Eric. And step-father? He wasn't sure how he felt about that.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm coming Brat," he told him, tussling his hair as Sky made a face at him.

But maybe he could live with it.
I wrote the first part of this chapter during work, while waiting for something to happen. Somehow, that developed into one of the strangest debates I have ever written. Because in my little world, Eric is a closet gamer and semi-comic book geek.

Karone is here expressly for purplestripe66. I only got one part of your requests in, but here you go. Although I think I'm channeling Starandrea's Karone rather than canon. Um, oops? Uh ... It's all Zhane's fault! He's corrupted her!

* This chapter takes place while Wes is still in a coma.

It was the eyes that bothered him. The way they followed him set every instinct he had on edge. It took effort to keep from snapping some days.

He wasn't quite sure why they avoided him, although he had an idea. After all, these people knew Wes had left him and come here. They knew that something had happened between them at Taylor's wedding, and that they hadn't seen each other again until the day he'd showed up after - after Mirloc.

He knew they didn't trust him, didn't know him, and he felt the same. He was surrounded by an endless sea of faces he had never seen before or didn't know how to talk to now. The highlights of his days were working with his cadets, talking to Wes, and coming home at night to a warm meal, Gracie, and Sky. It was the sort of life he'd secretly dreamed of.

Okay, so that wasn't entirely true. For one, Vanessa kept staying so late at the labs that he was usually the one stuck making dinner. For another, she wasn't the greatest cook in the world. Neither was he to be fair, but after so many years of living on his own, he'd at least learned to follow a recipe. Vanessa still refused to make anything that didn't come in a box.

And then there was the fact that Vanessa was *not* the person he'd imagined himself raising a kid with. That had almost been Denise, and Wes before that. And when he was younger, he'd pictured having a family just like the ones his parents had.

He snorted to himself. Well, he certainly had that. He lived with a woman he could barely tolerate, they slept in separate rooms, and were rarely home at the same time. The only thing keeping them together was Sky.

The thought of Sky made him sigh. He'd only spent barely a year getting to know the kid, but somehow he couldn't imagine life without him now. Maybe it had to do with the memories of the time he'd known Sky when he was little. Maybe it had to do with knowing he was Wes' son. Whatever it was, he was fond of the kid. Maybe almost too fond.

He slid into a seat at one of the cafeteria tables with another sigh. He usually tried to eat outside to avoid the eyes, but the rain pouring down had nixed that idea. Maybe he'd get lucky and Sky would show up on his break or something to keep him company.
He was startled out of his thoughts by someone sitting down beside him. He glanced up and frowned. "What do you want?"

"Food," Taylor retorted, picking up her sandwich.

He scowled at her. "And you're sitting *here* because .. "

"I felt like it. So deal with it."

"Dude, I'm telling you, the Power Rangers could so take the X-men!"

Eric stared as the two men joined them without even bothering to stop their argument.

"First of all, the X-Men aren't even real," Shane countered. "And second, if they were, they would so own on any Ranger team they went up against."

"First of all," Dustin mocked back, "You used to say Power Rangers weren't real, too. And second, that's so not true, Dude!"

"*That's* what you've been arguing about all day?" Taylor demanded. "Are you two getting too much oxygen to your brains, or are you just that high?"

Dustin looked thoughtful. "Well, there was that oxygen tank that got loose in the shop. That could've had something to do with it."

The three of them stared at him, and he blinked. "Oh. You were kidding."

"You sure you're not channeling Dax, Dustin?" Taylor asked wryly. She froze instantly, wincing. Shane sighed quietly, glancing away, while Dustin looked down his plate. After a moment, he picked up his fork to slowly poke at his food.

The silence was oppressive. Eric knew about Dax and Tori - who didn't? They were planetary heroes. He also knew that his Squad, F Squad, used to be under Tori's command. That was the reason Shane had taken G Squad; he flatly refused to take over the Squad of his deceased best friend.

Eric hadn't known Tori, and taking charge of her still grieving cadets hadn't exactly been easy. There had been a long talk with them about how he wasn't Sergeant Bradley, he would never *be* Sergeant Bradley, and while he respected her and what she had done, they shouldn't expect him to treat them in the same ways as she had. The conversation hadn't been a happy one, but it had bridged the gap between him and the cadets much faster than he had expected, and smoothed things over between them. There were still rough patches here and there, but it was nothing he couldn't handle.

But then, he hadn't *really* known Tori or Dax. He respected them, grieved for the loss of good people, but they weren't his friends. The awkward conversations everyone else was still struggling with were no longer a problem for him. And the only person he had to grieve for was still alive. He wasn't okay, but he wasn't really gone.

"Which teams?" Eric asked abruptly.

The other three look at him, startled. "What?" Shane asked.

"X-Men ... ?"

"Uh, Animated Series," Dustin said after a pause.

"Against which Rangers?" he persisted.

There was a long pause as Dustin considered. "Original six Mighty Morphin."

Eric snorted. "X-Men would win."

"Dude, where's your Ranger loyalty?" Dustin demanded as Shane and Taylor stared at him.

"I *have* loyalty. I also have common sense," he retorted. "X-Men would win." He smirked faintly. "Time Force is a different story. We'd take them down before they saw what hit them."

"How can you say Time Force has a better chance than Mighty Morphin?"

He raised his eyebrows. "You ever heard of my mega-battle armor? Seen Jen when she's mad? Know what Trip can do when he puts his mind to it? Not to mention the whole Time Ship thing."

"Gee, Eric. Someone might almost think you like your team or something," Taylor teased, smirking.

He shrugged. "I know what my allies are capable of."

"So what about Ninja Storm?" Dustin asked after a moment, watching him curiously.

He eyed him. "All six, or set of three?"

There was a pause. "Six," Dustin said finally, although his eyes had darkened slightly.

He thought about it for a moment. "Ninja Storm. But it'd be close."

Surprisingly, that seemed to perk Dustin up slightly. Shane eyed him with a strange sort of respect and appreciation in his eyes. Taylor just shook her head like he was nuts.

"Eric. It's good to see you," someone greeted, and he looked up at Adam, Rocky trailing behind him.

"Good to see you're not avoiding us anymore," Rocky added with a grin.

He frowned. "I'm not avoiding anyone."

Taylor snorted into her drink, and he scowled at her.

Adam and Rocky slipped in to join them, once again without an invite, and Eric resisted the urge to glare at them all. Didn't any of these people have any respect for manners and common sense? When exactly did he say he wanted company?

"May I sit here?"

He looked up, and in that instant, decided he liked Karone. "Might as well," he returned with an indifferent shrug.

She glanced around the table, looking over everyone before turning back to him. "They get overwhelming sometimes," she said simply. "They're too friendly."

"I *have* loyalty. I also have common sense," he retorted. "X-Men would win." He smirked faintly. "Time Force is a different story. We'd take them down before they saw what hit them."
Rocky and Dustin were frowning at her, but Adam had already tried to hide his grin behind his glass. "You're one to talk," Dustin complained. "You're the reason I knew who everybody was when I first got here!"

She shrugged. "Information is my job." She raised an eyebrow as she picked up a muffin. "Besides, you hate being alone. Eric doesn't mind it."

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. He didn't actually like being alone, but that was just the way he always tended to be. But the way she'd said he didn't *mind* it suggested that she already knew that.

Interesting woman.

Then he paused, getting a good look at her. "I thought you were in the information department."

"I am," she returned calmly, taking a bite of her muffin.

Taylor looked like she didn't know whether to laugh or sigh. "Karone, are you wearing Zhane's shirt?"

"I couldn't find mine this morning," she explained, pausing to examine the muffin. "It was his turn to do laundry, and he forgot. So I took his last clean shirt. What flavor is this?"

"Don't ask," Adam warned her. "You probably don't want to know."

"Admit it, Karone. You just have a thing for wearing leather," Rocky teased.

She shrugged, tossing her hair. "I like to look good, and I have a nice body," she informed them. "I deserve to show it off."

"You know, Leo swears she used to be really shy, but I don't believe it," Shane commented, looking amused.

For a moment, Eric stopped eating to just look around the table. He didn't feel completely comfortable surrounded by all these people, but he didn't feel unwelcome, either. Had things always been like this and he just hadn't noticed, or did something change in the span of one lunch?

Was this how Wes had felt when he first got here, one of them, but ... not?

"You in there?" Taylor asked quietly as everyone else continued Dustin's X-Men/Power Rangers argument.

"Yeah. Yeah," he muttered. "I'm here."

She smirked, but her voice was soft. "Good. Because this is where you belong."

And maybe ... Maybe she wasn't *completely* wrong about that.
The sunlight was coming in through the window at the wrong angle.

His eyes shot open, his body tensing in alarm. A look to the nightstand did *not* turn up a clock, and neither did a quick survey of his room when he sat up. He scowled.

He was still buttoning up his jumpsuit when he stormed out of his room. He glanced at the wall clock in the living room and cursed loudly. "Who let me oversleep?" he demanded.

"I did."

He glared furiously at Vanessa as she sat at the kitchen table, sipping tea. "And did it ever occur to you that maybe I would have wanted you to wake me up?!"

"Of course it did." She gave him one of her 'How Stupid Can You Possibly Be' looks that he hated. "But this is an intervention."

"An intervention?" he echoed numbly. His eyes narrowed in indignation. "I'm not an alcoholic!"

"Never said you were. This isn't that kind of intervention," she said calmly, setting down her cup. She looked up at him. "You plan for today was a protein shake on the way to an hour of personal training, one hour of Squad warm up, four hours of Squad drills with an hour lunch break in between. Forty-five minute of Squad cool down followed by a fifteen minute announcements and feedback session. Two hours of paperwork and/or working with the Grunts, an hour visiting Wes, followed by one hour for dinner, then two hours with bonding with Sky and helping him do his homework. An hour of hiding in your room for 'me time', and then eight hours of sleep before you repeat the process all over again."

He stared at her as she listed his plan for the day. "What are you, psychic or something?"

She looked at him. "That's the exact same thing you've been doing everyday for the past six months. Except for Sundays, when Sky drags you out somewhere because you both have the day off."

"I have n - "

"Karone went through the surveillance videos," Vanessa interrupted. "It's been six months."

Silently he vowed that Karone would be punished for this. He didn't know how and he didn't know when, but he *would* exact revenge.

"Face it, Eric. You're stuck in a rut."
"I am *not* - "


He froze. "That's a low blow," he muttered at last.

She shrugged. "Whatever works."

There was a long silence.

"So you stole my alarm clock and made me oversleep by an hour and a half?"

"Actually, Karone noticed your behavior and informed Ashley, who talked to Aisha, who told Jason while she told Andros, who both went to Tommy, who made the executive decision that you're banned from S.P.D. for today and possibly tomorrow if you don't behave, and asked me to explain things to you. Sky stole your alarm clock," she added in afterthought. She smirked at his expression. "We work at S.P.D., Eric; we have no secrets."

It took several minutes to work through the anger, annoyance, and indignation before he could find something to say. "So what am I supposed to do all day?"

She shrugged again. "Go for a walk. Play some video games. Read a book, see a movie ... Do whatever you want. Just turn off the autopilot and *live* for awhile, Eric. Stop making your friends worry about whether or not you know you're a real person." She paused. "Wes wouldn't want you to push yourself like this."

He glared at her, barely suppressing a snarl. "And *that's* beyond low."

She met his gaze steadily. "Just because Wes can't be around doesn't mean he wouldn't want you to take care of yourself. And since he can't tell you that, I will."

"I hate you," he growled.

"I hate you, too. But Wes will still be there if you visit him a little later. So relax for a day. Try to remember why you're still alive."

He eyed her oddly. "Why I'm still alive?"

"You tell me."

****

The walk through the park was scenic, but boring. He went through the part that Sky always refused to go unless he was on a Squad Drill, but refused to say why. He still couldn't see what the big deal was; it was just another big, open grassy area. Nothing special about it.

It was weird to see a movie by himself, but kind of refreshing to see what *he* wanted to watch without worrying about whether it was kid appropriate. First time in ... almost four years now? And since it was an older movie he'd been wanting to see for awhile, the theater was practically deserted - just the way he liked it. Movie theatre popcorn on the other hand, most certainly did *not* improve over time.

He played video games at the theatre, and decided they needed some new ones after systematically winning each and every one - even the dancing game once he knew no one else was around. The games he had at home were better, which convinced him to find the nearest branch of the gaming
store he used to frequent in search of more. He was pleasantly surprised to find a few new releases he hadn't known about, and left after spending more money than he probably should have.

The book store took awhile of browsing to find the particular game guide the clerk had warned him he would need. He looked for books on getting revenge, but came up empty. It actually took him several minutes to remember the suggestion that he try reading a book, so he browsed the martial arts section for awhile before making himself to continue to look around. He found the comic book section by accident, and was forced to refortify himself with one of the frou-frou coffees they sold at the café before returning to browse what they had for nearly an hour. Comics lead into the sci-fi section, and he begrudgingly chose an actual book to read in case Vanessa tried to demand physical evidence or something.

He hadn't expected to spend another five hours reading. Stupid Douglas Adams and his dumb-okay, kinda-okay, *really* funny book series. Maybe he'd pass it along to Sky when he finished it.

He was late for dinner by the time he was heading home. To the point that he called ahead, and asked Sky if he wanted him to pick up anything.

"Anything but Chinese."

It wasn't until he was almost home, take out from that fried chicken place they liked in his passenger seat, when it suddenly hit him that he hadn't actually done much of anything that *he* wanted to do today. Frozen in surprise, he sat at a stoplight for too long until someone honked at him. Shaking himself awake again, he pulled into a parking lot for a moment and stopped the car.

He leaned back, staring up at the roof of his SUV. *What did I want to do today*, he wondered.

The immediate responding thought was that he wanted to see if he could push F Squad to shave another five seconds off their time on the targeting drill.

He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. Great. Vicky and the S.P.D. Invasion Squad were right - he *was* stuck in a rut. When was the last time he did something for himself, besides playing video games for an hour before bed?

He paused, frowning at the dashboard. "I don't even *like* SUVs," he muttered to himself. "Why am I driving one?"

But he already knew the answer to that. When he had told Mr. Collins that he was moving to S.P.D., he'd been offered one of newer models of SUV the Silver Guardians used - to help with chauffeuring Sky around, Collins had said. And he'd taken it, because like he'd ever bothered to buy a car when he had the SUVs to borrow from work, and carpooling was easier anyway.

*When was the last time I did something for myself?*

He realized with a sort of distant horror that he didn't know.

The sound of his cell phone going off startled him. "Myers," he answered shortly.

"Eric?" Sky sounded concerned. "You said you'd be home ten minutes ago. Where are you? Is everything all right?"

Was he really *that* bad? Ten minutes late getting home, so something must be wrong?
"I'm fine," he heard himself answer. "Just taking the scenic route."

"Oh." There was an awkward and somewhat disbelieving sigh. "Well, as long as you're okay ... "

"I'm fine. I'll be home soon."

He looked at the cell for a long moment after he hung up.

--"Try to remember why you're still alive."--

He leaned his head against the steering wheel with a long sigh. "And what if I don't know?" he murmured. "What if ... what if I'm still wondering why it's ... " Why it's always Wes that's mean to go, he finished silently. Why I'm always the one left behind.

The smell of fried chicken reached his nose, and he restarted the car with a sigh. Left behind or not, he had a kid to feed. And hungry kids rarely waited.

Maybe ... maybe he'd take tomorrow off, too. Spend some time reading.

And of course, plan his revenge against Karone for instigating his forced day off in the first place.

****

"Hey, Wes," he said quietly, taking the other man's hand as he sat down. "Sorry I didn't come yesterday - Vanessa and S.P.D. decided it was necessary to make me take a day off. Which I did, and I took today off too, so don't freak out on me. The closest I've been to S.P.D. today was walking past H Squad to see how Sky was doing on my way here, and then when I snuck it to Karone's office to - leave her a present."

He smirked, wondering what she would think of his retribution. Not only was Douglas Adams funny, but hey, who knew the guy could be inspirational too? And how lucky was he that they just *happened* to have written the perfect song to go with his 'present'?

He wondered if the smell was making Kat hungry.

The smirk faded into a faint smile. "You should have seen Sky today, Wes." He chuckled, thinking of it. "That kid ran rings around the rest of his Squad. Dru was the only one who could keep up with him, and even he had to struggle. And then you know what the brat did? He turns around and calls the rest of his Squad lazy. And Zack was too busy laughing to tell him to knock it off."

He shook his head. "He's getting too full of himself. I'm not sure which one of us he gets it from, either - could be you, could be Vanessa. Maybe even me." he admitted.

The sound of rustling next to him caught his attention, and he looked up at the bed, annoyed that one of the Docs hadn't warned him before they came in.

Wes' eyes were open.

They were wide with fear and confusion, and his lips were moving. The heart monitor sped up, and he seemed to choke on whatever he was trying to say. His hands fisted against the sheets.

Eric leapt to his feet, eyes wide in shock and growing moist. "Wes?!"
Look! Wes is still alive! This is quite possibly one of the most difficult characterizations I've had to do, especially with Wes, who's usually such a happy person. And best of all, Wes' trauma isn't over yet! Also because I can't remember if it's been clearly mentioned in *Bright Skies* yet or not, Wes knows American Sign Language because his mother is mentally handicapped and uses it as a primary means of communication.

Dark topics ahead.

The first time he woke up, it was to darkness. He tried weakly to move, even to just open his eyes, and decided it took too much effort. He laid back quietly, and let sleep overtake him again.

****

The second time he awoke, it was still dark.

But this time he could hear someone beside him, holding his hand and gently rubbing the back. "You should have seen Sky today, Wes," the person murmured. There was a soft chuckle. "That kid ran rings around the rest of his Squad. Dru was the only one who could keep up with him, and even he had to struggle. And then you know what the brat did? He turns around and calls the rest of his Squad lazy. And Zack was too busy laughing to tell him to knock it off."

His heart clenched painfully. He *knew* that voice. Even after four years, he could never forget the sound.

But what was he doing here? The last thing he remembered was -

"Tori!" The words tore themselves painfully from his throat as he tried to sit up. But something was holding him down, something that covered his face and made it hurt to speak or breathe. He tried anyway, desperate to find his team. "Dax!"

"Wes?!"

There was a pause, then a warm body leaning down over him, holding either side of his face. "Wes, calm down. You need to relax; you've got an oxygen mask on. Just breathe, okay?"

He struggled weakly. Didn't he understand? Where was his team? Were they okay? How was Chip? Was Mirloc still out there?

A thumb stroked his cheek gently. "Calm down, Wes," Eric soothed. "Just calm down. No one can tell you anything if you pass out, remember?"

Slowly, he found himself relaxing instinctively, taking careful, deep breaths. Damn him. He always knew just how to get him to listen, didn't he?

"Team ... " he tried to say.
"Easy, Wes," Eric returned softly. "I can't hear you. You're wearing an oxygen mask. Let me call the Docs, okay?"

His brow furrowed in confusion. Oxygen mask? And since when did Eric call Ashley and Aisha Docs?

The hands were eventually removed from his face, and he found himself missing the warmth. After what seemed like ages, he could hear voices in the distance, and he strained to hear them.

"This is *impossible* ... After all this time, he just - "

"I *told* you!"

"But medically, this is a miracle!"

"And I told you, over and over. Wes never does what's expected of him."

"Eric, there's a difference between what's expected and what's medically possible."

An indignant humph. "And since when are Power Rangers 'medically possible'?"

" ... he has a point, Aisha."

Aisha? When did she get back? Oh, no - Mirloc didn't find her team, did he?

He tried to ask, and made a pained sort of wheezing noise instead.


"Hey, Wes," It sounded like Aisha was right above him, and he flinched slightly. Why was the room so dark, anyway? Couldn't they turn on some lights already?

"It's good to see you with your eyes finally open," she teased softly. "Ash and I are just going to check you over, okay? You've been asleep for awhile, and we want to make sure you're okay."

He frowned again. Asleep for awhile? How long had he been out, anyway?

"Team ... he mouthed. Something occurred to him, and he tried to spell the word out with his right hand.

"I didn't get that, Wes. You need to go slower," Eric said softly.

He sighed impatiently, carefully signing \( t, e, a, m \) again.

"Team?" Eric sounded puzzled.

Yes, he signed.

There was a sharp intake of breath from someone, covered by a hasty "Let's worry about you for right now, okay? We can talk about them later," Aisha told him.

He scowled, signing again. This time he added \( n, o, w \). He paused, flashing \( okay \) as well.

He was not imagining their hesitation.

His jaw clenched, and he could hear something beeping in the background suddenly getting faster.
Was he on a heart monitor? How bad of shape had he been in, anyway?

"Wes, you need to stay calm for me, okay?" There was a slight warning in Aisha's tone. "You've been through a lot, and we don't want you to hurt yourself again."

Annoyance flared. If he'd been through a lot, why wouldn't they tell him what was going on?

"Okay, Wes. Now I need you to look straight into the light for me." he heard Ashley say.

Light? What light?

"I know it hurts to look at, but I need to check your eyes," she reprimanded gently.

Light, he signed at last, feeling frustrated. No light.

"What was that?" Aisha asked.

"I'm not so good at this stuff," Eric muttered. "Sky's better, but - "

"Can you try that slower, Wes?" Ashley interrupted.

His eyes narrowed. Son, he signed instead.

There was a long pause. "Sky's in school, Wes," Eric said at last. He could tell by his tone that he was trying to force a smile, and it wasn't working. "You'll have to make do with just me right now, okay?"

How could Sky be in school? It was June; he'd just gotten *out* of school. And he'd refused to go to any camps, saying he'd wanted to spend his summer at S.P.D.

What was going on here?

He could hear the beeping noise getting louder again, and forced himself to take a deep breath. With exaggerated slowness, he spelled out w, h, a, t, h, a, p, e, n, e, d. He glared in the direction Eric's voice had been coming from.

There was a long silence.

"Wes, look at me," Aisha ordered suddenly.

His eyes flickered to the sound of her voice. He spelled out light, sighed irritably as he wished that Eric was better at sign language, and added room dark.

Another long silence.

"The room isn't dark, Wes," Ashley whispered.

"Then why does he think it is?" Eric demanded sharply.

"Eric, calm down before I have to call Ryan and Carter," Aisha threatened. "We can't figure out what's going on if you jump down our throats." Her voice softened for a moment. "We want to know what's wrong with Wes just as much as you do."

There was a pause. "Sorry," Eric muttered at last.

"We'll have to run some tests," Ashley murmured. "Just to ... make sure of his condition."
"How long will that take?"

"A few hours probably."

"... Okay. I'll have Vanessa pick up Sky."

Wes frowned again. Since when did Eric know Vanessa? And why would he be picking up Sky?

Then Eric's voice was close again, and his hand being squeezed. "I'll wait for you to get done, okay Wes? I'm gonna be right here."

Wes stared up at the direction of the voice. Why he spelled out finally.

Eric hesitated. "Because I want to," he said at last.

Wes frowned. Eric was lying; that much was obvious. But he pushed the thought aside in favor of his other questions. Where was the rest of his team, and were they okay? Carter was back to work already? Ryan was home? Sky was back to school? What happened to Mirloc? How long had he been unconscious? What was Eric *doing* here?

And why couldn't he see the light?

****

"I know this is going to be a shock. I wish there was an easy way to put it, but ... "

He was blind.

"... lucky to be alive - "

Completely and absolutely blind.

"With all the medical technology available, and the brilliant minds at S.P.D. I'm sure there's something - "

Somehow, that last Time Strike against Mirloc had burned through his retinas badly enough to leave permanent damage. He'd gone after him with all the Power he had in that attack, and all it had done was drain his morpher completely and take his sight from him. But then, losing his sight was nothing compared to what else he'd lost ...

"It's ... it's been awhile .... We weren't sure that you'd ever wake up ... "

It had taken hours of endless questioning, but they'd finally given him the answers he'd thought he wanted.

"Y-your team?" A voice catching, a sound of pain. "We ... we couldn't ... there was nothing we could do, Wes. I'm so, so sorry ... "

Gone.

Tori and Dax had been destroyed by Mirloc. Chip had lost all movement in his left arm; he'd eventually left S.P.D. all together. Zhane was still alive, still here, but he'd never been the same. Something about blaming himself ...

"Sky isn't quite ready to see you yet. I'm sorry. It's just that ... you've been in a coma for a long time now. He's just scared, that's all ... "
But it didn't matter if his son wanted to see him or not, did it? He'd never see Sky again.

He'd never see anything again.
"Stupid cadets *still* weren't listening, so I sent them on a double run through the obstacle course. Then they were too tired to do anything *but* listen," Eric went on smugly.

Wes dropped his fork against his plate without warning, making a frustrated noise. "What are you doing here?" he asked irritably.

"Visiting you," Eric returned, sounding amused by the question.

"*Why*?" Wes ground out.

There was a pause. "Why *wouldn't* I visit you?"

He pinched his nose, feeling frustrated and annoyed, and wanting nothing more than for Eric to go away. "Because four years ago we agreed things were over between us, and you told me - and I quote - 'I can't do this anymore.' And when I tried to say something, you walked off. I haven't so much as gotten an e-mail from you since then. What are you doing here now?"

There was a long pause. At last Eric cleared his throat. "Actually, it's been eight," he reminded him gently.

He closed his eyes, feeling that familiar well of despair. Four years. Four years of his life gone, and he could never get them back. He'd gone into a fight with his team at thirty-eight years old, leaving behind an eight-year-old son, and woken up at forty-two years old, blind, with a twelve-year-old he didn't know, his team destroyed or gone from S.P.D., and a man he'd given up on years ago suddenly trying to find a place in his life again.

"Right," he muttered, not bothering to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "My mistake."

"And what I meant when I said that back then was that I couldn't dance with you and pretend I didn't still care," Eric said quietly.

His head snapped up again. "*What*?"

Eric sighed. "Wes, I told you that I wanted to forgive you, but I didn't know if I could. I never said I didn't want to *try*. *You* walked out on me before I could finish, and then showed up and asked for some sort of farewell dance. I couldn't pretend that I didn't love you anymore just like that."

He stared at where he thought Eric was sitting, feeling very cold all of a sudden. "Wait. Just ... wait," he said, shaking his head and holding up a hand. "Are you trying to tell me that we ended
our relationship because of a misunderstanding?"

There was a long sigh. "Vanessa seems to think so."

His fist clenched. "And ... what? Now you're here to patch things up? Feeling guilty because I got hurt and you weren't there? You think because I can't even remember what the year is, we can fix things between us? What?"

"Wes, that's not what I - "

"Get out," he interrupted.

Eric paused. "What?"

"I said, get. Out," he growled. "I don't want you in here anymore. In fact, I don't want you anywhere near me. Why don't you do us both a favor and just get the hell out of my life? You're good at that." he added, sneering.

He didn't expect the sudden flare of pain in his jaw as his head snapped to the side.

There was a long silence, filled with the sound of them both breathing heavily. "I'm sorry I hit you," Eric said carefully, his voice tight with restrained anger. "But you're being a jerk."

His eyes widened in indignation, but Eric was talking over him before he could even voice a protest. "First of all, if you'd ever bothered to listen to *anything* I've been telling you over the last few days, I live here. I have a job with S.P.D. I help Vanessa out with Sky, and I'm a part of his life now. I have friends here that I'm not leaving just because you don't want me to be here.

"Second, I didn't leave you. *You* left me."

"You *told* me to get out!" he shouted back.

"And then you walked out on me," Eric snarled, finally losing control over his temper. Wes was vaguely surprised he'd kept it in check this long. "And I've been trying for years to get over you, because you didn't want me anymore. But I keep coming back to one thing: *I love you*. And every time you've been in trouble, I was there. The only time I didn't was when you weren't even on the planet, and I had no way to get to you. Which, by the way, made my life miserable, so thanks for that."

"You never bothered to tell me you were there!"

"Because I wasn't ready to talk to you. That doesn't mean I didn't care enough to come at all!"

"You can't just expect to walk back into my life after all this time and pretend nothing happened!"

"That's *not* what I'm trying to do!"

Furious, Wes reached, his fingers scrambling for something, anything -

They settled on his lunch tray, and he threw it in the direction he thought Eric was standing. "I don't need your pity, and I don't need you! Get out of my room!"

There was a tense silence. "Fine!" Eric snapped finally. "Forget you!"

"Screw you!" Wes yelled after him.
He waited after he heard the door slam, waiting for what seemed like an eternity to be sure he was really gone.

Then he rolled over and buried his face in his pillow. "Darn you, Eric," he growled into it, trying to fight back the sob that he could feel welling up in his chest. "Why do you always do this to me?!"

The dam broke, and he sobbed in frustration and hurt.

****

"Dad ... ?"

The voice was unfamiliar, but there was no one else it could be. He sat up straighter, looking anxiously for its owner. "Sky?"

"Yeah." The sound of shuffling feet, but as far as he could tell, Sky wasn't coming any closer. "It's me," he said finally.

He forced a smile. "I ... how are you?"

"Better than you," came the abrupt answer, and he frowned. Something about that response was eerily familiar, and he didn't think he liked it.

"Well ... what are you doing now? How's school going? Any new friends?" The smile was still awkward, but he tried to sound cheerful. "Tell me about yourself."

There was a long, drawn out sigh. "I'm an S.P.D. cadet - H Squad," Sky said at last. "I don't go to public school anymore; they started schooling younger cadets, and I joined up was soon as the new program started. I don't have time for friends."

"No time for friends?" He forced a laugh. "What about Bridge and Sydney? And ... I think someone said something about a guy named Dru?"

"Haven't seen Bridge in years, and Syd's a pain. She's always off on tour, and she's a total drama queen whenever she visits." There was a pause, and Sky muttered "And Dru's just a guy on my Squad. We barely know each other."

"Sydney's on tour?" he repeated, wondering when she'd started going by Syd.

Sky snorted. "Yeah. She convinced someone that she could sing, and now she's all over the place."

"Sky, that's not nice," he said automatically.

There was an awkward pause.

"She says worse," Sky said eventually. "Thinks she's the greatest thing since S.P.D."

"Still - "

Something slammed, and he flinched, tensing. "Look, Dad," Sky said quietly, the words sounding forced. "I'm not eight years old anymore. I've grown up. You can't just lecture me like a little kid and expect me to listen."

"That's ... that's not what I was trying to do," he protested weakly. A painful lump was forming in his throat. "I just ... No matter what's happened Sky, you're still my son. And I love you."
"Wesley, you're my son."

"You don't know me."

He swallowed hard. "I want to."

There was another long silence.

"I know about Alex and Ben."

He froze. "... What?"

"Eric told me a couple years ago. He didn't want to, but I made him. So don't blame it on him."

Sky's voice was surprisingly sharp.

"... You two sound close."

"He has raised me for the last four years, so yeah, I guess so."

Wes flinched.

"Eric never lies to me, either. He always tells me everything I want to know when I ask," Sky went on.

"I never lied to you!"

"You never told me the whole truth, either," Sky pointed out. "'I did a very bad thing, and Uncle Eric couldn't forgive me for it'? That's how you sum up my older brothers, that I never even knew *existed*?"

"You were four! What was I supposed to say?"

"Something better than 'I did a very bad thing!'" Sky snapped back. He sighed in frustration. "I should go," he muttered.

"No!" Wes sat up straighter, trying to reach out for him. "Don't - don't go!"

"I promised Eric I wouldn't yell at you, but I don't if I can do that anymore," Sky said shortly. "So before he gets pissed off at me for upsetting you, I'd better leave."

"Sky, wait! Sky - "

"Later, Dad."

He froze, listening to the sound of the door banging shut. For a moment he struggled, trying to find a way to stand up. But the machines still monitoring him held him back, and he nearly sobbed in frustration. "Sky, I'm sorry," he whispered.

He closed his eyes, leaning back against the bed again. *Whatever you want me to apologize for, I'm sorry.*

****

"Hey, Wes."

The voice was decidedly more chipper than any of the others that had visited him yet, but a far cry
from what it had sounded like before, and it took him several moments to place it. "Zhane?"

"That's me." A chair scraping against the floor, and the voice was suddenly next to him. "How you holding up?"

The question was unusually serious, and completely unassuming. All the same, it made him blink harshly for a moment as he had to regain control of himself. He'd cried too much already. "I'm fine." he said at last. "You don't have to baby-sit me."

"You're not fine." Zhane's voice was flat. "You're not going to be fine for a long time. I'm *still* not fine, so I know you aren't."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded.

Zhane sighed. "I know you've read my file, Wes," he said pointedly.

It took him a moment to remember. "Believed to be killed in the attack on KO-35 in the year 1996, awoke two years later and joined the Astro Rangers in the fight against Astronema and Dark Specter," he murmured without thinking.

"And later married her," Zhane agreed wryly. "But anyway, I know better than anyone else what you're going through right now."

Something inside of him snapped, just as it had with Eric. He didn't know what it was or why, but in an instant, he was furious.

"How can you *possibly* know what I'm going through?" he snapped. "You can still *see*. You didn't wake up to find your team destroyed, your ex taking over your life, and a son that hates you!"

"No." Zhane's unwavering calm only made him angrier. "I woke up to find my best friend had moved on, my team had abandoned their mission, and I was on a ship with four people and an Alpha unit I had never met before who all expected me to just be one of them in a heartbeat, without any question or discomfort on my part. Maybe I can still see, and maybe I didn't have a son that didn't know how to talk to me anymore, but I still understand you better than anyone else possibly can, Wes. And that's why you can yell at me all you want, but I'm not going away." He paused, and in a softer, broken tone, added "And it was *my* team, too."

He wanted to hate him. Maybe even more than Eric. After all, he hadn't gone with them; he hadn't watched it happen.

He hadn't failed them.

A hand brushed his shoulder, startling him. "There's one thing you're forgetting, Wes," Zhane continued quietly. He paused. "We've all had time to grieve for what we lost. You haven't."

He could feel the tears spilling over, slowly streaking his cheeks. "I failed them, Zhane," he whispered. "I failed ... everyone."

Arms came around him. "Even heroes fail sometime, Wes." Zhane's voice was painfully gentle, and filled with an understanding no one else had shared with him. "We fail ... but we still have to live with the consequences."
Once again, Zofren and Brawda are characters from my other fic, *Fade to Darkness.*

His fingers traced the plaque carefully, struggling to feel out the letters well enough to understand them. He'd started learning Braille recently, but it was still hard. And no one would have bothered to think they needed Braille on a monument.

*In honor of the Power Rangers Space Patrol Delta: The true meaning of sacrifice. We will never forget.*

He knew what it looked like; Zhane had described it to him. A life-sized statue, depicting the ten Rangers who had been lost in the battle against Mirloc. To the left the three Dino Thunder Rangers, posing heroically in each person's particular stance. On the right, three Lightspeed Rescue Rangers saluting. And in the center, what had become as known as the first official S.P.D. Rangers. Yellow Turbo off to one side, holding his Magistaff in honor of both of Chip's uniforms. Blue Wind in a fighting stance beside him, Ninja Sword at the ready. On the opposite side Blue Overdrive with his Gyro Blaster pointed out in front of him. And in between the two blue Rangers, Red Time Force, a Chrono Saber in each hand in memory of his final Time Strike.

Apparently there had been some debate over adding Silver Astro and Blue Turbo to the group. After all, they had been a team together. And Astro was the one who brought in Mirloc in the end. But eventually they'd decided to keep the memorial as a symbol of the Rangers who had fallen against Mirloc specifically.

He wished they hadn't.

He couldn't see it, but the idea that there was a giant statue of himself in morph sitting just inside the main entrance of S.P.D. was disturbing. He had tried walking down the halls around his room in the hospital wing to stretch his legs, and kept getting startled by random S.P.D. personnel stopping to tell him it was an honor to meet him. All he could do was force a smile and thank them awkwardly, still unsure of what to say in response.

He wasn't a hero. He had done the job he had been given the day Jen allowed him to have his Chrono Morpher back, the same job he had vowed to continue doing when he joined S.P.D. There was nothing heroic about fighting for your life just because you had people to protect.

Besides, heroes didn't lose everything they had been fighting for. He wasn't a hero. He was a victim.

"You shouldn't be down here in the dark, you know."

He tensed at the sound of the voice, swallowing hard after a moment. " Doesn't make much of a difference to me."

"I guess it wouldn't." A pause. "You know, this is the first time I've seen it, too. Couldn't look at it before - Turbo still doesn't want to. It's - "
"Creepy," he whispered, still running his fingers over the plaque. "Knowing that they declared me dead and called me a hero. And all I know is that - " His throat closed up, and he closed his eyes in pain. It was a reflex action, one that changed nothing now, but he found it was still a hard habit to break. "I'm sorry," he choked out. "I know it can never be enough, but I'm so, so sorry."

"For what?"

He flinched. "Chip, I - "

"It's what we do, Wes," Chip returned quietly. "Do I regret helping those people that day? No. I don't. Do I wish I hadn't gotten hurt, and I could still use my arm? Of course I do. Do I wish there was something I could have done to save Tori and Dax?" He paused, and his voice cracked slightly. "Everyday."

But then he took a breath. "Am I glad to know you made it after all?" The voice was getting closer, and a hand touched Wes' shoulder. "I'm ecstatic," Chip finished.

Wes shuddered. "I never asked ... how many ... ?"

"Two," Chip returned, knowing what he was trying to say. "It used to be three, until you woke up."

He paused, looking at him. "What?"

"There were no civilian casualties that day, Wes," Chip said gently. "We got them all out. You and Tori found all the stragglers. The only people that we lost were Tori, Dax, and you."

"Sounds impossible, doesn't it?" came another voice, and he froze. "But Power Rangers have always been about the impossible. It's good to see you guys again," Justin continued, and Wes felt a hand touch his shoulder, carefully pulling him into a hug. "I missed you."

Wes hugged him back fiercely, a smile finally managing to make it to his face. "Missed you, too. Things just haven't been the same without you around."

Justin sighed quietly and let him go. "I feel guilty too, you know. I always wonder if we hadn't transferred ... "

"You and Rose wouldn't have been able to work things out," Wes interrupted, frowning at him. "And we may have lost you, too."

"The Turbo Morphers were practically useless against Mirloc," Chip pointed out. "You might be in my situation right now."

"Or if you'd tried to attack him head on, like I had - "

Wes was cut off by the sound of Justin chuckling softly. "You guys are too much, you know that?" he asked quietly. He sighed. "So, where's Zhane hiding?"

"I'm not hiding," came the retort, and for once, the sudden voice didn't startle Wes at all. "I'm the reason no one bothered Wes the whole way here. It's not my fault none of you noticed me."

There was a long silence as the four men just stood there, thinking of the teammates they'd lost and the three friends they still had.

"Wind would *so* kick out butts right now, you know that?" Chip said suddenly.

Another slight smile crept across Wes' face. "She would," he agreed with a chuckle. "She was
always the fiercest one of all of us, wasn't she?" His chest ached at the words, but his smile remained at the memory of the ways Tori would badger them into doing what she thought was best.

He frowned as something occurred to him. "Where's Blake? No one's said anything about him. And what about Trent and the twins? How have they been doing?"

There was a pause. "You know, that's the second time tonight that you've asked about someone else in days," Zhane commented.

He flinched again, and a feeling of shame swept over him. "I - "

"It's okay," Zhane finished softly, and there was another squeeze on his shoulder. "We understand, Wes. It's just good to see you finally acting like yourself again."

"Blake moved in with Trent, actually," Chip told him.

He blinked. "Blake and *Trent*?" he demanded incredulously.

The other three started laughing. "Not like that!" Chip protested, chuckling. "See, Blake got super depressed after. No one's quite sure what happened, but I guess Hunter showed up one day and - "

"Beat the stuffing out of him?" Zhane asked, still snickering.

"More or less. Anyway, whatever he said to him, Blake left S.P.D. one day without really telling anyone where he was going. I guess he went to go see Trent, since they were both kind of in the same boat."

"But Trent's a single father with twins," Zhane pointed out.

"So the next thing anyone knew, Hunter said that Blake had moved in with Trent to help him out with the kids," Justin finished. "Apparently it's been good for him; whenever he talks to Hunter at Shirei, he complains about what the twins are up to now."

Wes frowned. "Shirei?" he repeated in confusion. He still didn't know much about S.P.D. Japan, he realized with a slight pang of guilt.

"That's what we call Command over there," Justin explained. "All of the departments are labeled in Japanese. I refuse to call him 'Hunter-sama' like everyone else does, though." he added, sounding amused.

"Hunter-*sama*-?"

"He hates the sound of Shikikan, and most of the Newtech Transferees can't remember to call him that, so he settled with Hunter-sama."

"Very humble of him," Zhane snickered.

"Why's that?" Wes wondered.

"Sama is the way you address a lord, or a superior." Justin told him. "If Hunter was really trying to be less of a figurehead, he should have gone with Hunter-san. But as Cam likes to say, Hunter's so full of himself, of *course* he likes to be called 'Lord Hunter'."

They shared another laugh, and Wes felt just a little more of the ache and tension in his chest fade
Resting quietly in his room of the hospital wing, Wes reflected on the last week of his new life. He still wasn't used to waking up every morning and trying to turn on the light, but he'd started to accept it at least. He was still trying to deal with the loss of his friends, but that would take more time than he'd been given so far.

"Hey, Uncle Wes!"

He looked toward the door, frowning. "Who's there?" There weren't many kids that called him 'Uncle Wes', but he didn't recognize the voice.

"Bridge Carson, at your service!" the boy returned cheerfully. "How are you feeling? Well, besides the obvious. Because obviously you don't feel *well* with everything that's been going on. Why do people always ask how you're feeling when they already know the answer, anyway? Dad says it's polite, but what if you offend the other person by asking a question you already know the answer to? Is that still polite? So is it more polite to ask anyway, or just not ask at all? Or - "

"Bridge!" he cut in, laughing. "I'm okay. I'm not well, but I'm okay." He smiled warmly, remembering the little boy he'd helped raise. "I missed you. How are you doing? What are you doing here, anyway? Sky said he hadn't seen you in years."

"Oh, I've been with Zofren and the Order of Light for about five years now," Bridge told him brightly. "Zofren taught me about meditation and control, and then he introduced me to Brawda, who taught me about controlling my empathy. I can even sort of project now!"

"That's great," he said sincerely.

"I still have to wear gloves to help me keep things under control, but I can read auras a lot better. Brawda said I'm an aura empath, so that's what we've been focusing on. Although they think my powers will keep mutating as I get older - I'm eleven now, by the way. Almost twelve. Hey, maybe I'll even learn to read minds someday!"

Wes grinned; something about Bridge always cheered him up. "I'm glad you're doing well. So what are you doing back here?"

"I came to see you. Well, and join up with S.P.D., of course."

He blinked. "You're joining S.P.D.? I wouldn't think your parents would be okay with that."

"They're uh, not," Bridge said sheepishly. "In fact, they sorta don't know I'm doing it yet. I haven't exactly told them what that 'school paperwork' I made them all sign really was."

He stared, stunned at the sneakiness of what used to be the sweetest boy in the world. "You're awfully determined to join S.P.D.," he managed finally.

"Almost as much as Sky. But Sky says he wants to be the Red Ranger, just like his dad. I'd be happy being any color, really. Hey, do you think they'll make a Purple S.P.D. Ranger? 'Cause that would be neat; I'd be the first Purple Ranger in my whole family!"

"Sky wants to be the Red Ranger?" Wes interrupted, frowning. No one else had mentioned that before. He paused as his heart abruptly sunk to his toes. "He wants to be like Eric, doesn't he?" he asked quietly. "Eric's not a bad role model, he argued with himself. "There are a lot worse people for
"I don't think so," Bridge said thoughtfully. "We don't talk as much as we used to - I've been super busy with all my training exercises, and Sky's e-mails always sound like status reports." He sighed irritably before continuing. "But the only 'dad' Sky ever talks about is you. I guess he thinks of Eric as a step-father, but he doesn't call him dad, just Eric. Which was kinda confusing when he stopped calling him 'Uncle Eric', but then I realized that Sky really didn't know Uncle Conner very well, so he probably wouldn't know who his brother was."

"But Sky can't stand to be in the same room with me. Why would he want ..." Wes trailed off, wondering if he should even finish the thought.

"Because he idolizes you," Bridge answered immediately. "Everyone knows that you're Sky's hero. I mean, he's never even let any dust settle on that helmet he has."

Wes sat up a little straighter, frowning again. "Sky has my helmet?"

"Mm-hmm. Someone from security gave it to him after Mom and Aunt Ashley said they didn't know when you'd wake up. Uncle Eric was really mad about it for some reason, but Sky won't give it back. It's his favorite thing now."

There was something more than vaguely disturbing about that, and he swallowed uncomfortably. "I'm not a hero," he muttered instead.

"Sure you are," Bridge returned. "I mean, there are a lot worse people for Sky to look up to than someone who saved a whole bunch of people and almost died in the process."

He glanced over at Bridge oddly, wondering if he'd known what he was thinking earlier. "I'm not a hero, Bridge," he said again. "It was just what Power Rangers do."

"That's why Sky and I both want to be Rangers. Although Sky doesn't know I'm joining up yet, either; you're the first person I've told. I'm trying to get Syd to come, too. She's been complaining about how boring being a superstar is getting, so I told her she could always enlist and be with us again. Just like the Three Musketeers!" Bridge paused. "Although Sky and Syd don't get along so well anymore, so it might take a little work to be bestest friends again."

Wes listened to Bridge ramble, thinking quietly about how much had changed for his son while he was ... gone. He wanted to be there for Sky, but it didn't seem like he was wanted anymore. And what was he supposed to do in the meantime? The last thing he wanted was to drive Sky further away.

"Oh, check it out, Uncle Wes," Bridge said suddenly, and a warm, *non-gloved* hand slid into his. Alarmed, he tried to pull free. "Bridge - " Then he froze, any protest he was trying to give dying in his throat.

*He could see.*

It wasn't quite the same. Everything was blurs of color and sparkles of light. It was like nothing he'd ever seen before, and the closest he could come to describing it was like watching a never-ending morph. "Bridge ... " He swallowed, and tried again. "Bridge, is this what you see?"

"... Huh? Oh! Yup. When my gloves are off, anyway. Pretty, isn't it?"

"It's beautiful," he murmured, slowly turning to look at Bridge.
His face wasn't as clear as it would have been with normal eyesight, but he could see that some of the roundness had finally gone from it. There was a strange balance of Hispanic and Korean features that made it difficult to notice his ethnicity if you weren't looking for it. He was still a bit small for his age, but Wes had heard that Adam had been short for the longest time as well. Around him swirled sparkles of bright green, with flickers of blue.

"Thank you, Bridge," he managed at last, his voice barely a whisper. "Thank you for sharing this with me."

"I love you, Uncle Wes," Bridge said simply. He smiled suddenly, and orange flickered in-between the green and blue. "Don't worry; everything is going to be okay. I know it."

And somehow, Wes couldn't find the will not to believe him.
"Why aren't you packed yet? I told you we were moving you out today." Vanessa demanded.

Wes let out a slow breath, fingering the morpher he'd refused to let them take away from him for some twisted reason he couldn't define. At last he turned to look at her. "Nes, are you sure about this?" he persisted. "I mean, I can't exactly contribute to the bills or anything. And - " He faltered. "I know things would be a little crowded now, with Eric there and all." Something he *still* didn't understand.

Somehow during the time he'd been ... gone, Vanessa's opinion of Eric had done a complete 180. She'd gone from trying to distract Wes from thinking about him and trying to keep them away from each other to ... well, giving Eric his place in her life.

He tried not to wince at the thought, but it was true. Eric was now living with Vanessa and Sky, in the room that used to be Vanessa's lab. He helped her with Sky, shared the cooking and the bills, and generally seemed to have made a working relationship with her. Even the way they talked to one another was filled with light teasing, and he'd never seen them actually argue even once.

Several times he had tried to make himself think of the way it might have gone if he *hadn't* woken up. Would he want Eric to be helping Vanessa with Sky, become friends with her and raise the son he'd always wanted them to have together? Would he want his friends to move on with their lives, stop mourning over him?

Of course he would.

But he was back, for lack of a better word. And that changed things. The comfortable relationship between Vanessa and Eric made him sick to his stomach in ways that he had a sinking feeling were related to jealousy, and he didn't particularly care to examine which one of them it was for. He didn't like the easy bond Sky and Eric seemed to have. He even hated that Zack had partially taken over his Squad, sharing duties with Tommy so he could remain a part of the Grunts.

"Wes?" Vanessa's voice was forcibly sweet, and he flinched instinctively.

"Yeah?" he asked warily.

"Get your crap and move your ass. Now."

He fought the urge to salute, forcing out a sigh instead. "Yes, ma'am," he muttered instead.

****

He looked around as he finished putting away the last of the clothing, gifts, and equipment he'd brought with him from S.P.D. He'd already felt his way around the room several times, even though he knew it wasn't necessary. The technology Cam had developed should be arriving soon,
and while it wouldn't restore his natural eyesight, it was supposed to work similarly to echolocation, or bat radar. There'd been talk of perhaps getting him a seeing-eye dog as well, but he wasn't sure how he felt about that just yet.

Someone knocked on his door.

"It's open," he called distractedly, assuming it would be Vanessa.

"Hey."

He paused, and Eric continued quietly "You still willing to let me in?"

He fought to keep from clenching his fists. "I said you could, didn't I?"

He heard Eric sigh, and the door shut. "Mind if we both sit down?" Eric asked. "This could take awhile."

"Why's that?" he asked warily.

Eric sighed again, and he could almost picture him running a frustrated hand through his hair, or pinching his nose as he tried to keep his temper. "Just sit down, Wes."

He debated for a moment, not sure if he wanted to. But they couldn't live together if they didn't work something out at least, and that wasn't fair to Vanessa and Sky. With a sigh of his own, he felt for the edge of the bed and slowly sank down on it. "Okay. What do you want to say?"

There was a long moment of silence, and he knew Eric was counting to ten in his head. It was hard not to smile. Prodding at Eric's temper had always been one of his favorite, if not dangerous, hobbies.

Back in the days when it was just a game, anyway.

"This isn't about us anymore," Eric said finally. "We both agree that whatever was between us is over now. You can blame me all you want, but that's the way things are, right?"

"Right." He tried to pretend the thought didn't still hurt a little.

"But we still have Sky to think of. And Vanessa. So, for Sky's sake, I'm asking for a truce."

"A truce?" he echoed, frowning uncertainly. Since when did Eric truce over *anything*?!

He could hear another soft sigh. "I love Sky, Wes," Eric said bluntly. "I've cared about him ever since I met him, but after the last couple of years, I love him like he was my own kid. I'm not going to leave him now and put him through anymore than he's already suffered. So for Sky, let's just agree to get along, no matter how much we can't stand each other."

Wes stared at him for several minutes, utterly stunned. Of all the things he'd expected Eric to want to talk about, expected him to say, this was one he'd never considered. Several thoughts whirled through his head at once.

Why couldn't you have told me this *before*, when I practically begged you to talk to me again?! All that time as Rangers when I asked you to work with me for the sake of someone else, and *now* you finally get it through your thick head that it's possible? When did Eric become so selfless?
"I never said I can't stand you," he heard himself say.

"You said - and I quote - 'get out of my life'," Eric mocked. "I figure there was some room for interpretation there."

Wes bowed his head, resting it between his knees as he grit his teeth. "I think we've had this conversation before," he muttered. "But last time, *I* was the one telling you there were more important things than what was going on between us, and you were the one who didn't want to hear it."

"And you were right," Eric returned easily.

Another awkward silence settled over them.

There were so many things that Wes *could* say, that he wanted to say. But he didn't know what he wanted now. Did he want Eric to forgive him for what had happened before, did he want them to be together?

No. He'd changed - they'd *both* changed too much for that. He didn't even know the man across from him.

Did he want to keep hating him, for taking what was his because it was what he would have wanted?

No. Hating Eric was exhausting, and he was tired of hate and anger. He was tired of fighting.

Did he want Eric out of his life completely?

The answer took longer to come to than most of the others had, but somehow it didn't surprise him. No, he didn't. Because even now, he still loved Eric, and he would *always* care about him on some level. Even before they'd been lovers, Eric had been one of the best friends he ever had.

He let out a long sigh, slowly lifting his head again at last. "Things can't be like they were between us," he said quietly. "Everything's changed now, and I don't know if we could have a relationship like that again. But ... " He took a deep breath. "I miss being friends, Eric. I miss knowing that you always had my back, and that I could count on you for anything. I won't pretend that I'm not still angry, or that I'm not - " Jealous, his mind whispered, "Uncomfortable around you. But ... I still care about you. Whether that's as a teammate or a friend, I don't know right now."

There was a long pause as Eric seemed to consider his words. "So does that fancy speech mean we can truce for Sky's sake?" Eric asked finally.

The corner of Wes' mouth twitched, and he was forced to ruefully admit to himself that some things about Eric would never change - like his directness and impatience. "It means I'll try not to fight with you for Sky's sake. But it also means that ... I want us to try and be friends again."

"That's a lot to ask," Eric muttered.

"I know." he said quietly.

"But that's about all I'm looking to get right now, isn't it?"

He blinked, startled. "What?"

"Nevermind," Eric sighed. A hand reached out to take his, squeezing it in a firm handshake. "So,
we truce for Sky. I'm not promising we can be friends again. ... But I'll try."

A smile broke out over his face as he eagerly shook back. "That's all I ask. Truce," he added belatedly.

"Am I interrupting something?"

Wes' head snapped in the direction of the door, and Eric humphed. "What's up Brat?" the other man asked.

He could hear shuffling feet, and Sky muttered "I ... I, uh .... "

"Want to talk to your dad?" Eric prompted, a faint hint of warning in his tone.

Sky sighed. "You don't have to threaten me into it, but yeah." he grumbled.

"Good," Eric said simply. Wes felt him pat his shoulder, and the bed shifted as he got up. "You two should have a nice, long chat." He muttered something at Sky as he left, and Wes could just barely catch it.

"Be nice, Sky. He's hurting, too."

He swallowed uncomfortably. Since when did Eric care so much about not letting other people upset him?

Since when did Sky listen to Eric?

The silence between them lingered, and Wes struggled to find something to say. Should he apologize for not telling him the truth about Alex and Ben? Should he go for small talk again, try to learn more about him that way? Should he ask him about the helmet, or wanting to be a Ranger? Maybe he should ask him to sit down ...

"The last thing I remember was you telling me that everything would be okay, and the Power Rangers always get the bad guy," Sky spoke up, his voice painfully quiet. "And making Mom promise to get Chinese food for dinner. And then ... then they said you'd been hurt, and she told me they didn't know if you'd wake up, and I couldn't even go see you."

Wes was on his feet in an instant, somehow making his way straight to his son's side. He wrapped his arms around Sky, pushing aside the awkwardness and discomfort between them. That single crack in Sky's voice made it impossible not to hold him, tell him he was sorry. "Sky, I - "

He was cut off as Sky suddenly buried his face in his chest, clinging to him. He heard a faint sniffle from somewhere, and settled for holding his son with a quiet sigh. After a moment, he kissed the top of Sky's head. "I'm sorry I left you alone, Sky," he said softly. "I'm sorry I haven't been there for you. And I'm sorry you had to go through all that."

"It was like Bethie and Jaz all over again."

Wes paled. He hadn't made the comparison before, but now that Sky mentioned it ...

"Bethie said they'd be back with help, and I never saw them again," he choked out. "And then ... everyone kept saying you'd never wake up. But Eric wouldn't believe it; he always swore that you would when you were ready. He kept telling me it'd be okay, and I'd get to see you again. But after awhile, it was so hard to - "
"I'm sorry," Wes whispered back, waves of guilt sweeping through him. "Sky, I'm so, so sorry ..."

Sky sniffled again. "I keep thinking I'm dreaming," he muttered. "That I'll wake up one morning and you won't be here anymore. That it was just my imagination."

"I'll be here," he said fiercely. "I'm not letting anyone keep me away from you again, Sky. I promise."

Sky sighed quietly, but didn't answer. Instead they continued to cling to one another, reassuring themselves that Wes was alive, that Sky was safe.

_**I promise, Sky,**_ Wes thought, silently vowing never to leave his son behind again.
Wes looked up as the front door slammed, followed by Sky's bedroom door a minute later. He debated to himself for a moment, wondering if he should try now, or later.

There was a soft whine by his feet, and he looked down with a smile at the Golden Retriever curled up beside him. "I take it that's a 'go now'?" he asked ruefully.

She whined again, nosing his hand.

He patted her side fondly. "All right, you win." He slapped his hand against the side of his leg as he stood. "Come on, Jen."

She bounded to her feet, tail beating happily against the air. He caught the handle of her harness and allowed her to pull him along.

He didn't really *need* a seeing-eye dog with the technology Cam had fitted him with. It allowed him to 'see' well enough to keep from tripping over anything on his own. But Sky and Eric had both been very insistent that a guide dog wouldn't hurt, and Vanessa had laughingly agreed just to side against him.

As guide dogs went, she was far too spoiled. She had the training as a working dog, but Sky had been known to treat her more like the family pet more than once, and he'd caught Eric sneaking her food under the table when he thought no one would notice. As a result she was a little too friendly around strangers, but thankfully remained loyal to both her owner and his family.

Her name was entirely Sky's fault. When they'd picked her out as a puppy, he'd absently commented that since dogs were supposed to be 'man's best friend', she should be named after Wes' best friend. There'd been a few arguments about the merits of naming her Eric or Vanessa - which both namesakes were violently opposed to - but they eventually decided that would be too confusing. So instead, she was dubbed 'Jen', a name which often made him wonder what the real Jen might have thought of that.

"Sky?" he called, knocking gently on the door.

Jen whined, pawing anxiously at the frame.

There was a long moment of silence, and at last he could hear a grumbled "Come in."

Jen bolted from his side the moment he opened the door, racing to the side of the bed and whimpering as she tried to nose at Sky. The teen sighed, rolling over and reaching out to scratch her ears. "I'm fine," he told her. "It's not a big deal."
Wes raised an eyebrow. "Sounds like it was. And you know Jen hates to see you upset." he pointed out, sinking down on the bed.

Sky sighed again, looking up at his dad. "I broke up with Bridge," he said bluntly.

Wes started, and fought to keep his dismay from showing. It wasn't news; Sky had talked to him before about how things were going with Bridge, and that it wasn't working out. He'd done his best to be supportive for whatever Sky wanted to choose, but secretly he'd been hoping they'd get through it. He'd always liked Bridge, and he thought he was good for Sky.

"How'd it go?" he asked finally.

Sky made a frustrated nose, absently petting Jen as she whined at him again. "He made me promise we'd always be 'bestest friends','" he muttered.

Wes raised his eyebrows. "And ... this is bad?"

He could almost *picture* the exasperated look Sky was giving him. "He was totally faking again. He *knows* I hate it when he pretends everything's fine even though it's not, but he did it anyway. I said it wasn't working out between us, and he just stood there, blinking at me, and then gave me that *stupid* smile!"

Wes cringed internally. 'That stupid smile' Sky had always hated was something everyone knew Bridge had inherited from Rocky. Whenever something bothered one of them, they both flashed the brightest smile they could and acted like everything was fine. It was frustrating, because it was the most obvious way to know that they really *were* upset about something. "And that's when he made you promise?" he asked.

Sky shook his head. "He said he kinda figured that, but it's okay, because he's just not the one for me. But he wants me to find the one for me, because he wants me to be happy." He sighed, sounding confused and annoyed. "And *then* he said we'd always be bestest friends, and made me promise we would."

Wes was quiet for a moment. "Well, at least you won't lose your friendship," he said at last. "You and Bridge have been friends since he was born; I'd hate to see you lose that."

"But now everything's going to be awkward!" Sky protested. "I mean, it's not like I can't just stand around while he's babbling and not remember what it's like to - " He cut himself off abruptly. "It's going to be weird acting like friends again."

Wes looked at him suspiciously, but didn't push it. "Would you rather not be friends at all?"

"Of course not," Sky sighed. "It's not like I have a lot of friends to begin with," he added, grumbling. He sat up suddenly, looking at his father with interest. "Is this what you went through with Eric?"

Wes winced. Now that Sky knew now about the former relationship he'd had with Eric and the fact that they'd had children together, he was never shy when it came to asking them about it. More than once he'd dropped hints that he thought it was too bad things hadn't worked out between them, and while he claimed to accept it when they reminded him that they were just friends now, he still had a habit of looking at them speculatively once in awhile.

"It wasn't quite the same for me and Eric," he reminded him at last. "We weren't around each other all the time when we broke up, like you and Bridge are."
"But you were at first," Sky argued.

He sighed. "The first time, when we were still working with the Silver Guardians, yes, we were. But we weren't really talking to each other then. We didn't try to be friends until After."

'After' was code for when he'd woken up from his coma. 'Before' was what they referred to the time before that final battle with Mirloc as, and the few times that the coma itself was brought up, it was called 'Then'. None of them particularly liked to talk about it, Wes most of all, and everyone respected his wishes.

"Well, what about After? You guys still had to try being friends after everything."

Wes sighed again. "Yeah, we did." he agreed. He paused, trying to think of how to explain. "It's ... the feelings you have never really go away," he said at last. "They fade a little, but you still find yourself thinking about things you used to do together before. It's more that you just have to try and keep yourself from doing what you would have when you were together. Yeah, it hurts, but ... sometimes it's for the best."

"So you still think about what things were like when you and Eric were together?" Sky asked. He didn't really want to answer, but if it helped Sky right now ... "All the time," he said quietly. He let out a slow breath. "I never cared about anyone else the way I loved Eric."

"Loved?" Sky repeated skeptically.

"Loved," he told him firmly. "And you can stop dropping hints already. Eric and I are not getting back together. We've both moved on."

"If you've both moved on, why are you still single?" Sky asked slyly.

"Sky .... " he warned.

"Fine, fine. Sorry." Sky sighed, flopping back on the bed again. "So you're saying things are always going to be weird with Bridge, and I just have to learn to live with it?"

Wes gave him a sympathetic look, reaching out to rub his shoulder. "Unfortunately, sometimes that's just the way life happens."

"Life sucks," Sky grumbled.

Wes swatted him lightly. "Watch your mouth. You're spending too much time with Dru."

Sky sighed again. After a few moments, he shifted around on the bed to make more room, patting the blankets. "Up, Jen."

Jen was on the bed in moments, snuggled up against Sky's side and panting happily.

Wes gave his son an amused look. "Whose dog is she supposed to be again?"

Sky shrugged unapologetically, already ruffling Jen's coat. "You're the one who kept saying you didn't really need a guide dog anyway."

"Which I was outvoted on," Wes reminded him, leaning over to pat Jen's head before he stood. "Stay. Good girl."

Jen whined, wagging her tail slightly as she watched him head for the door, but remained beside
Sky.

Sky frowned up at him a little. "You sure, Dad?"

Wes smiled at him. "You need her more than I do right now," he told him gently, shutting the door behind him.

****

"Hey."

Wes froze, swallowing uncomfortably. At last he glanced up, forcing a smile at Rocky. "Hey."

Rocky joined him at the small table in the break room, sipping absently on his coffee. "How's Sky?" he asked abruptly.

"Upset," Wes said eventually. Was it normal for things to be this awkward between friends when your kids broke up? "How's Bridge doing?"

"He says he's fine, but we can hear him crying sometimes at night," Rocky told him bluntly.

Wes winced.

"But he's starting to let Heart sneak into his room, and that seems to help."

"He always does push everything aside for her," Wes murmured, thinking of how protective Bridge was of his younger sister. No one was sure if it was simply because they were more or less siblings, or because Heart had the same aura empathy as Bridge.

"It's not fair, you know," Rocky commented absently. "I always said I'd beat up anyone that hurt Bridge. Even warned Sky when he first asked him out. But now that they've broken up, I keep wondering how I'm supposed to beat up a kid I still remember changing diapers for."

"That might make things difficult," Wes agreed after a pause. He hesitated. "For what it's worth, I wish he hadn't."

"Me, too," Rock sighed. He glanced over at him after another moment. "So ... since we can't beat up each other's kids, what are we supposed to do now?"

"Spar?" Wes offered.

Rocky snorted. "I know better than that. Ever since you got that fancy head piece and started training with R.J., you've been practically lethal." He eyed him suspiciously. "How does that thing work, anyway? Everyone keeps telling me you're not actually *seeing* anything, but whenever they try to explain, it goes straight over my head. And half the time I really can't tell the difference."

He smiled faintly. "It's sort of a cross between radar and a body heat sensor. There's a pulse in the device that consistently sends back a map in my head. It's *not* like regular sight - but it lets me interpret body language well enough." The smile turned into a grin as he reached up to tap the circle about the size of a dollar coin attached to his right temple. "And I don't always use the SightMap when I spar, you know."

"I know," Rocky shuddered. "That's the worst part."
"Afraid to take up the challenge?" Wes teased. "You're losing your touch, DeSantos."

Rocky stiffened. "Okay, that's it," he growled. "You and me in Sparring Room 3, as soon as shift's over."

"You're on."
Leaving it all behind

Chapter Summary

Many thanks to BlackCrimsonLight for the reason behind Dru's transfer.

Most of the lower Squads had come to see Dru off, in addition to the Drill Sergeants and D Squad itself. Wes was a little startled to see Bridge had come out; it was well known that he and Dru didn't get along, a fact that often put Sky in an awkward position. The rest of the Squad was no surprise, though only Sky and Charlie seemed to be truly distraught over their teammate's impending departure. 'The Deadly Trio' as Rocky liked to call them, were finally being separated.

To be honest Wes wasn't really surprised, although he did think it was a little unfair. While he agreed with Tommy and Cruger that the three of them should be punished for the stunt they'd pulled, he wasn't so sure they deserved to be separated for it. He was just as infuriated about it as anyone else; D Squad's best trainees or not, they still had no business trying to arrest criminals on their own when they *knew* they didn't have the experience or jurisdiction to do so. And the amount of damage to public property still had his head spinning. But forcing them to be separated was just ... wrong somehow.

He knew Dru's departure wasn't really Tommy's fault, though. When the report had reached S.P.D. headquarters, Commander Birdie had taken an 'interest' in the trio and the discipline for their actions. Rocky's submission to have Charlie promoted to C Squad had been pushed through alarmingly fast, Dru had been 'suggested' into the transfer program, while Sky remained a member of D Squad. The three had been devastated by the news, Rocky only slightly less so. D Squad had never lost its reputation as being the Squad for troublemakers and pranks, and The Deadly Trio had been three of his favorite cadets.

But in all honesty, Sky was the one that worried Wes the most as he observed him exchanging a handshake with Dru that looked like it had nearly cracked a few bones.

He paused, tilting his head slightly in thought. "Have either of you ever wondered about that friendship band?" he asked hesitantly, keeping his voice too low for anyone but the pair on either side of him to hear. "I mean ... why did Dru only give one to Sky and not Charlie? And the way he's always displaying it ... it's almost like a brand."

"Oh, thank god," Vanessa muttered, sounding relieved. "I didn't want you two hassling me for being the one to say it."

Eric sighed in annoyance. "You're both reading too much into it. It's just a friendship bracelet. Maybe he figured Sky needed it more or something. Besides, they've known each other longer than either of them have known Charlie. They've been together since H Squad; Charlie didn't transfer from KO-35 until F," he pointed out.

"That's true," Wes admitted.

"But why does Dru always show it off then?" Vanessa demanded quietly. "And the way he's *constantly* hanging on Sky?"
"Cultural thing," Eric returned cryptically. "Dru's always been touchy with people he likes."

"You seriously don't think there's anything between Sky and Dru?" Vanessa asked in disbelief, looking at Eric.

"I think they're best friends, and you're both blowing it out of proportion," he retorted. "I also think you're being rude. Our kid's losing his best friends, and you're both arguing about what his bracelet means."

Wes flinched slightly while Vanessa glanced over at Sky, who was now nodding to Dru as Charlie stepped back from him. All three hastily joined in the group salute as Dru grabbed his duffel bag and headed onto the shuttle, while Charlie and Sky watched him go.

"Well, at least Sky won't get into so much trouble now," Vanessa mumbled finally.

Watching as Bridge moved touch Sky's shoulder and stopped himself just before he did, Wes privately wondered if that was a good thing.

****

Wes sighed, trying not to think about his awkward attempts to comfort Sky after Dru had left, only to be brushed off with a claim of 'I'm fine' before he went to help Charlie move into her new room. Things were better between him and Sky, but they still weren't quite as close as they'd been before. There were a lot of reasons for it he supposed, but he didn't like to think about them too often. For one, Eric tended to pop up during that train of thought, which wasn't a good way to keep up their somewhat repaired friendship.

"You brood a lot more than you used to, you know."

"I guess I have a lot more to brood about."

"Well, stop it. It's out of character for you."

Annoyance surged at the memory of Zhane's words, followed by another sigh as he stopped to lean against a wall. Much as he hated to admit it, Zhane was right - as usual. He'd thought he was getting better, but there were still times when dark thoughts tended to get the better of him. It was strange and it wasn't him, but he couldn't seem to stop.

The sound of blaster fire startled him almost as much as the voice that followed. "You couldn't hit the broad side of a barn if it was on fire."

"I'm still learning!" Sky shot back hotly.

"No excuse," Eric returned. "You should learn to aim before you learn to shoot."

"You're the one who handed me the gun!"

"Hey," Eric said sharply. "It's not a gun. That's the Quantum Defender; there's a difference."

"It shoots the target when you pull the trigger. It's a gun."

"It's about to be a blaster you're not using if you don't start showing some respect."

"Well, *sorry*." Another blast.

"For crying out loud, who's been teaching you to aim?"
"My file says I'm better at hand-to-hand combat, but Rocky says I'll get better at targeting with practice."

"Practice starts now. Get over here."

A sudden ache filled Wes as he leaned back against the wall of the hallway for a moment. Sky couldn't talk to him about Dru, so he went to Eric. He tried to be glad that he'd at least found someone to talk to, but it still hurt. His son had always gone to him when he was younger, but now ...

"Is this how you got over Dad?"

The sudden question startled him even more than the first shot had, and he found himself raising his head to listen. He shouldn't; he knew this was something private between Eric and Sky, and he had no business being here. And he had a sneaking suspicion that he probably didn't want to hear the answer. But he couldn't bring himself to move away.

"That's none of your business."

Sky sighed. "Sorry."

There was a pause. "If you have to know, it's my standard way of dealing with exes," Eric grumbled. "It's great stress relief."

Wes found himself suddenly undeniably curious to know exactly what they were doing.

"So you did do it after Dad." Another shot.

"Sight the target along your arm, not just the gun. And no, I didn't."

Wes started, and Sky's confused question echoed his own. "You didn't?"

This time the sigh was Eric's. "No. I destroyed something else."

"Did you feel better afterwards?"

"Not really. But I got over it. The point of this is to think about all the things you hated about them while you shoot. It helps; trust me."

A deep breath. "Okay. Dru ... was unreliable. He never did what you expected of him, when you expected him to do it." Two quick blasts. "He was constantly getting me in trouble, and he always complained I needed to loosen up and pull my head out of my butt." Another longer round of blasts. "He never respected how serious I was about my goals. He always fought with Bridge - " The words broke off into a series of rapid-fire shots.

"And what exactly does Bridge have to do with Dru?"

An irritable sigh. "Bridge is still my friend, you know. More or less. Just because we're not dating doesn't mean I'm not going to look out for him."

"Is that what you call it?" Eric sounded smug. "I thought Dru and Charlie said it was 'babying'."

There was another longer sigh, followed by silence.

"You miss him already, don't you?" Eric asked softly, his tone surprisingly gentle.
"Maybe a little," Sky muttered. "I mean, it's not like we actually broke up. That's why he gave me this, so I wouldn't forget. And we'll talk as much as we can and stuff."

"But it's not the same as him being here."

"No." Sky sighed again. "Am I being stupid, Eric? I mean, Dru and I haven't even gone out for anywhere close to a year. But ... I just .... "

Wes started, his eyes widening. Sky was dating Dru? But hadn't Eric just said earlier that they were just friends?

His eyes narrowed suspiciously, and he peeked around the corner into the room to see if Eric was at all surprised by the revelation.

Instead he saw Sky with his head bowed, looking miserable and guilty. Eric had stepped closer to rest a hand on his shoulder with a sympathetic expression. "You're not stupid, Sky," Eric told him gently. "You're lonely. You don't get to pick how fast or how close you get to someone - it just happens."

Feeling both incredibly guilty for intruding and hurt that not only had Sky not told him about his boyfriend, but that Eric had kept it from him as well, Wes pulled back to leaning against the wall for a moment and close his eyes.

"It's strange," Sky commented suddenly.

"What is?"

"Holding the same gun that my older brother used."

Wes' eyes shot wide with a pained wince, and he hurried down the hall again without hearing Eric's reply.
Years of relying on sound and touch to navigate had taught Wes a great deal about moving silently. R.J. had commented once that he reminded him of someone he knew. The way he'd chuckled as he said it had made Wes decide that it was probably better not to ask. He liked R.J. well enough - particularly for his ability to drive both Eric and Sky up the wall in less than five minutes - but there were times he just didn't want to know.

Wes grinned to himself as he remembered when he and Vanessa had actually timed how long it had taken R.J. to annoy them both. Eric and Sky had been irritated at R.J. and furious with the two of them when they finally noticed the stopwatch. R.J.'s response had been "Whoa, I'm getting a lot of negative vibes over here. Why don't we all just take some deep breaths, and spend a little time focusing on some calming thoughts?" Eric stormed off with a frustrated growl, Sky proceeded to lock himself in his room, and the remaining three laughed themselves sick.

His grin widened as he noticed two figures outside of the labs. And according to his SightMap, a certain someone was blushing. He moved in, silently vowing to never let her live it down.

Vanessa's scream of surprise as he grabbed her from behind and tickled her was music to his ears.

R.J. chuckled, getting a glare from Vanessa. He held up his hands in defense. "Whoa ... Mellow out, Minx. It's just a joke."

Her scowl darkened. "Don't call me that."

"But it's who you are," Wes and R.J. said in unison, R.J. sincere and Wes mocking.

She elbowed Wes and continued to glare at R.J. "Cute. I'm going back to work." She hesitated, glancing warily at Wes before sighing at last. "See you Saturday at eight, R.J." she muttered as she quickly went in to her lab.

Wes smirked to himself. "So things are going well?" he asked.

"The flow of energy between us has been surprisingly steady," R.J. returned almost thoughtfully.

Wes just nodded, used to R.J.'s ... R.J.-isms. "No fighting?" he asked suspiciously. He loved Vanessa, but her temper was almost as bad as Eric's.

R.J. grinned. "I never said that. But what's romance without passion?"
"Is that what you're calling it?" Wes snorted. He smiled after a moment. "But I'm glad things seem to be working out for you two. Vanessa needs someone more than she admits."

"The Minx needs someone to share her wisdom with, not someone to watch over her," R.J. corrected him, raising a finger.

Wes raised his eyebrows. "Which is why I'm glad it's you," he returned. "You're probably one of the few people in the world patient enough to be able to maintain a relationship with her."

R.J. smiled. "And with you, Eric, and the young Weasel as well."

Wes just shook his head at R.J.'s name for Sky. "You're a great guy R.J. and I like you, but I don't think I'll ever get you."

He nodded amiably. "Learning to understand someone on all levels is one of the most difficult achievements in life."

"I'll take your word for it. I've gotta get going - monthly status meeting. I'll catch up with you later, R.J." Wes smiled faintly as he turned and began to make his way to the main conference room. "And don't drive Vanessa to try and kill you again!" he called back over his shoulder.

"But that's half the fun."

He chuckled to himself as he walked. Casey had introduced R.J. to him during one of the Red Ranger Reunions not long after he'd woken up. He claimed that if anyone could help him get back to the shape he'd been in Before, it was R.J.

Wes liked R.J. He was funny, patient, and a great guy. And he'd been an amazing teacher; in some ways, Wes was actually in *better* shape now than he'd been Before. He'd given Wes a lot of his self-confidence back, and even more than that. Now that Wes could not only fight once again, but was also trained in a special combat style, he'd finally gotten his job back with S.P.D.

It wasn't quite the same; while he was in charge of H Squad again, he now only handled their training on his own. When it came time for missions, his Squad was usually paired with another for 'safety reasons'. It frustrated and annoyed him to no end, but it was the most Cruger had been willing to bend the rules to get him back at S.P.D. As somewhat of a compromise, he also was given time to offer a special class for anyone who wanted to learn his specific fighting style, whether they were from another Squad, or an entirely different department. The class was surprisingly popular, and while he still hated being treated as a lesser teacher when leading his own Squad, he felt a certain satisfaction with his specialty class.

Vanessa and R.J. had met not long after R.J. had begun to teach him, and sparks had immediately flown - literally. He'd made the mistake of introducing them in the labs, and Vanessa had become so annoyed with R.J.'s manner of speaking that she'd accidentally knocked over a burner and set off a small fire. Needless to say, the day R.J. had stopped training to ask him quite seriously if Wes minded if he asked her out had shocked Wes. But it was the cryptic response he'd gotten when he assured R.J. that he had no claim on Vanessa that had convinced him that there could be something between them if they both wanted it.

"I'm not asking to make sure she doesn't belong to you. I'm asking out of respect for her family, to know that I have your permission to know her better - if she allows me to."

He found it interesting that R.J. had also asked Sky and Eric as well before he actually approached Vanessa herself.
"Boo!"

"Hi, Rocky," Wes said absently, holding the door open for the other man.

Rocky sighed in frustration. "One of these days you're going to jump, Wes."

"Sure, Rocky. Sure."

The meeting room was more than full. Most of the department heads had already arrived, and it sounded like everyone but Shane had shown up from the Drill Sergeants. Wait - that wasn't Vanessa in the Tech Head's Chair; she was fidgeting too much.

Wes grinned and waved at Nerina Cranston, and heard a soft whisper of "Greetings, Sergeant Collins." While an amazingly brilliant young woman, Nerina was still painfully shy and soft-spoken. Which was what was so fun - cruel, about the way Vanessa would send Nerina to meetings in her place when she didn't feel like going.

Wes slid into his seat, leaning over to his left towards where Eric always sat. "What's her reason this time?" he asked, nodding towards Nerina.

Eric snorted. "Some new experiment - unstable molecular fabric or something."

Wes raised his eyebrows, amused. "Spending some time catching up on the classics?"

He could hear the smirk in Eric's voice. "Gotta get in some good reading while the minions are off running themselves ragged."

Wes rolled his eyes, chuckling at Eric's nickname for his Squad. 'Minions', which he'd shortened from 'S.P.D.'s Minions' when Tommy had warned him not to let Cruger hear it - while trying not to laugh himself. They'd managed to keep the original name a secret among Rangers, but more than once someone had gotten an odd look for laughing too hard when they heard it.

Wes paused, tilting his head. "Shane and Dustin finally remembered what time it is," he remarked as he listened to the pair hurrying down the hall.

"If they have the smell, I don't wanna hear about it," Eric warned.

Karone glanced up on his right in mild interest. "I do."

"Sergeant Clarke, Captain Brooks," Cruger spoke up as they slipped into their seats. "So good of you to join us."

"We got held up," Shane said quickly.

Rocky snorted, and Wes could hear Zhane and Ashley trying to muffle their laughter.

Karone leaned closer. "Did they? They look like it," she said softly.

Wes smiled faintly. "No," he murmured. "I'd be able to smell it from here if they had."

Karone made an amused noise, moving back to her seat. It wasn't the first time he'd been asked to check for something like this, and he doubted it would be the last. He didn't mind *too* much, although Eric always seemed to be annoyed when someone asked.

There was a long silence, and at last Cruger cleared his throat. "Very well, now that we're all here, let's commence with the meeting."
Status Meetings, by default, were boring. Mind-numbingly, painfully boring, and everyone knew it. They all hated them, and yet they all had to be here. But the fascinating thing about being a Ranger was that it taught you an extreme form of multi-tasking *very* quickly, and it was a skill that never left, even years after giving up the Power.

It was a skill that kept them all from falling asleep.

Currently, Wes himself was involved in a game of hangman with Eric, which was interesting because he had no way of knowing if the other man was cheating - and he suspected he was. He would sign the letters into Eric's hand below the table, and Eric would sign back *Yes* and tap out a number, or *No*. So far Eric was winning, hence the reason he thought he may have been cheating. Just how many words used two 'a's, a 'u', and an 'o', with only four more open letters, anyway?

Beside him, Karone was doodling on her notes. Rocky and Dustin were playing something he suspected to be tic-tac-toe because of the way they kept exchanging notepaper between them. Shane was apparently groping Dustin's knee under the table to make him squirm, and Adam had been designated note-taker for the meeting on behalf of everyone else who was distracted. Jason and Zack had snuck in some sort of electronic mini-game, and Billy was busy scribbling on his own notepaper. He apparently wasn't taking notes, because the pauses in his writing weren't in time with what was being said. Zhane and Ashley were trying not to giggle as they played a hand game of their own, with Andros trying and failing to ignore them and actually pay attention to the meeting. Kimberly wasn't shy about her glances at Zhane and Ashley's game, and in between Wes could hear her tapping a rhythm out with her pen and marking something down.

Only Nerina was actually paying close attention to what was going on, along with Cruger and Tommy by default as they were the ones running the meeting. If Cruger knew what was going on, he pretended he didn't. Tommy seemed amused, but he didn't pause in his update of the current budget numbers.

"Captain Andros, are you prepared to share the details of A Squad's last training mission?"

Wes blinked at Cruger's words, forcing himself to put more of his attention into the conversation as Andros stood up.

"The mission went better than expected, Commander," Andros began with a note of pride. "The hostages were rescued without incident in record time, and no casualties were recorded. All three kidnappers were contained and brought in with relative ease."

"Relative?" Tommy repeated, sounding curious.

Andros hesitated. "Well ... there was ... a minor incident. One of the kidnappers made a derogatory comment in reference to Ran, and Michael took offense." He sighed, muttering "And when Sara and James finally removed him, Charlie punched him."

There was a round of soft snickering.

"Is Ran all right?" Ashley asked, sounding concerned about her best friend's daughter.

"She's fine," Andros assured her. He hesitated again. "Although Charlie was upset that she didn't get the chance to ... 'correct' his behavior before he was contained."

"And the punishment given to Cadet Charliesia for assaulting the accused?" Cruger asked.

"Night detail for three weeks."
Zack let out an angry hiss. "You sunk my -"

Jason snorted hastily, trying to cover Zack's exclamation. "You're always too lenient on Charlie, Andros. Admit it; you favor her because she's Kerovian."

"I do not," Andros returned, annoyed.

"A Squad *does* seem to be getting a bit ..." Ashley hesitated.

"Big for their britches?" Zhane suggested.

"Hah!" Rocky crowed, pointing across the table at Zhane. "Earth-ism! You owe me twenty bucks!"

Zhane cursed under his breath.

Tommy coughed awkwardly. "Moving on ..."

"Oh, dude!" Dustin perked up suddenly. "I have a request." He paused. "Well, technically it's Taylor's request, but I said I'd bring it up for her."

"Yes, Captain Brooks? What is it?" Cruger interrupted, sounding impatient.

Dustin flushed and fidgeted as everyone turned to look at him, their interest caught by the idea that Taylor had actually requested something. Shane elbowed him gently, and he straightened. "Uh ... Right, dude. Well, you see, you guys all remember about Danny and Max, and how Danny started that thing with helping kids living on the streets, right? Well, they haven't seen a couple of them for awhile, and Danny's like, real worried, so Max asked -"

"*Max* said something?" Adam interrupted incredulously. "Max hates Danny helping out those kids. He keeps complaining that they cost too much money and one of them is going to rob them blind one of these days."

"Oh dude, they did," Dustin responded cheerfully. "They woke up and all of Max's clothes were gone. And most of Danny's old stuff. Anyway, Danny's all depressed about it, so Max called Taylor, and Taylor asked me to ask if we could keep an eye out for them."

Cruger considered for a moment, and to everyone's surprise, nodded. "That shouldn't be a problem. Do you have a description of these children?"

"Oh! Uh, yeah." Dustin quickly shuffled through some papers. "Uh, Jack Landors. African-American Human, presumed age is around seventeen years old. Here's a picture -" He passed over a small photograph. Tommy projected it onto the screen in center of the table for them all, and everyone leaned in to study it. Wes squinted, wishing his SightMap had better reception for finer details.

"The girl next to him is Z Delgado. Uh, Hispanic Human obviously. Presumed age is seventeen, too. Danny says they're both good kids, but they don't really trust anyone. Max says they're both trouble and not to trust a word they say, but I think he was like, still steamed over the whole clothes thing. Although he did say something about them having some kind of special abilities, and to be careful about surprising 'em."

"Does anyone else think they look familiar?" Zhane spoke up, sounding puzzled.

"No," Andros returned, glancing at him. "Why?"
Wes could *hear* the way Zhane rolled his eyes as he spoke. "Not you. You and Karone don't count. You two wouldn't notice if your own pants were on fire."

"I could set yours on fire," Karone offered almost casually.

There was a pause. "I'm good, thanks," Zhane said finally as everyone else snickered. "But seriously. Does anyone with any observational skills think those kids look familiar? Ow! Andros, I'm serious!"

"You're right," Eric said slowly. "I can't put my finger on it, but that girl ... I feel like I've seen her somewhere before."

"You said they stole clothing, Captain Brooks?" Cruger asked suddenly.

"Uh, yeah. Why?"

"I believe I may have a lead on where they might be. We'll send someone in immediately to track them down." Cruger sounded strangely almost thoughtful.

Jason raised a hand. "B Squad volunteers. Sky's been whining about being bored again; they could use something pointless to do. Or a good workout, whichever these kids happen to be."

Adam looked at him. "You just love torturing our kids, don't you?" he asked, sounding amused.

Jason shrugged. "If they want to be Rangers, they're going to have to work for it."

"Yeah, like it was so hard for us," Kimberly teased him. "Come on, Jase. What was it Zack? 'We're gonna save the world?'"

"'Hey! Nice stereo!"' Jason mocked in return.

"A fully sentient, multi-functional automaton," Billy murmured with a faint smile, barely glancing up from his design.

Tommy coughed. "So we'll send B Squad after the lead to see if they can find Danny's kids. Is there anything else anyone wanted to bring up?"

There was a moment of silence.

Wes could sense Eric stiffening beside him. After a moment, the word *look* was spelled into his hand.

He frowned. His SightMap couldn't pick up finer details like facial expressions, so Eric and Vanessa had taken to letting him know silently when Tommy and Cruger got their 'we know something, and you won't like it' looks. If they were doing it now, that wasn't a good sign.

"We've just received word that Emperor Grumm has left the planet Alandria," Tommy said quietly. "Or rather, left what *was* the planet Alandria."

There was a long, heavy silence as they all bowed their heads in respect, silently grieving for the loss of life.

Eventually, Cruger cleared his throat. "We've now learned that Grumm is on his way *here*; to the Sol Galaxy, and Earth."

Everyone froze.
"We need to prepare for the worst," Cruger went on as Wes fought down the urge to shudder. "As of now Grumm cannot enter this galaxy due to the Sirian Web covering the only wormhole close enough to give him access to us. However, there are ways to counteract the web."

"A proton accelerator," Billy agreed, sounding worried. "If Grumm manages to appropriate such a device, it would be, for lack of a better term, child's play for him to bypass the security net the Sirian Web has erected and enter our galaxy."

"Can he get to us without one?" Zack asked, leaning forward.

Nerina shook her head. "That would be impossible," she said softly. "The Sirian Web is so complex and thoroughly secure that only the proton accelerator would have enough power to overload it, allowing Emperor Grumm and his forces to pass through the wormhole."

"So we *have* to keep him from getting that proton accelerator," Tommy said grimly.

"I have some people I can talk to," Kimberly spoke up. She glanced at Zhane. "We can call in some favors, ask around for people willing to help protect Earth."

Zhane nodded. "I've got plenty of contacts I can go through," he agreed, sounding grim.

"In the meantime, we must plan for the chance that Grumm *is* able to get through," Cruger warned them again. "It is clear that A Squad will not be able to handle Grumm's forces alone. They will need help." His turned to Jason, staring down at him. "Do you believe B Squad would be up to the challenge?"

Billy stiffened. "Do you intend to implicate the secondary set of Morphers we had prepared in case of emergency?"

"I believe this situation would qualify as an emergency, Captain Cranston," Cruger reminded him. He looked at Jason again. "Well?"

Jason hesitated. "Honestly? I don't know. They can fight, and they've defeated every training sim we put them up against. Bridge is a technological genius, Syd's a lot tougher and more compassionate than she looks, and Sky has great leadership potential - if he'd stop quoting the S.P.D. handbook every five minutes. But outside of training, they have little to no teamwork capabilities, they're always bickering, and Bridge and Syd have short attention spans. Sky on the other hand pays too *much* attention to detail - he refuses to think outside of the box, and that's a bad quality in a leader. But Sky *is* their Squad Leader; Bridge would never stand up long enough to take charge, and Syd could care less most of the time."

"Do you think they're ready?" Tommy asked him quietly, watching his best friend. Somehow, he seemed to understand that there was something Jason wasn't saying.

Jason sighed. "Do we have a choice?" he muttered. He shook his head. "Look. We've all started out worse than they have. From the S.P.D. standpoint? No, I don't think they're ready. I'm not sure they'll *ever* be ready. But as a Ranger? I know what Rangers are capable of, and I know what a true Ranger looks like." He looked at them all solemnly. "They may not be a team yet, but those three kids have more heart and determination than anyone I know. Put a morpher in their hands, and they'll make us proud."

"Very well. Thank you, Sergeant Scott." Cruger said at last, nodding quietly. "Captain Cranston, I apologize for further disrupting your vacation - "
"Forced vacation," Wes heard Billy mutter darkly under his breath.

"But would you please inform Ms. Manx to retrieve the secondary S.P.D. morphers, and begin preparing to promote B Squad to their new status," Cruger continued.

"Of course, Commander," Billy returned.

"I believe that concludes our meeting. You are all dismissed."

Everyone stood, swiftly saluting. "Sir!"

For as long as it took to fill, it took surprisingly less time for the meeting room to empty once again. Wes took his time, not in any particular hurry. Or interested in squishing his way through the halls for that matter.

After a moment, whispering between Tommy and Cruger caught his ears. He found himself listening out of habit, and tried not to make it obvious that he was eavesdropping.

"I have a bad feeling about all this. I don't know why, but something just doesn't feel right. I think we need to prepare for the ultimate worst-case scenario."

"Agreed."

There was a sigh. "I'll call Hunter," Tommy murmured as the door shut.

"Wes!"

He blinked, turning to Eric. "What?"

"You okay?"

He shook his head, deciding in an instant that it was better not to share his commanders' worry with anyone else at the moment. "I'm fine." He paused, tilting his head suspiciously. "What was the word, anyway?"

"Chuàn dào," Eric returned, sounding smug. "It means 'boring'."

Wes stopped, turning to stare at him for a moment before his eyes narrowed. "You used Chinese? That's cheating!"

"Never specified what language we had to use," Eric said absently.

Wes turned to hit him, and found himself chasing the other man down the hall as he laughed.

And for a single moment, he could pretend that the world wasn't about to fall down around him again.
And once again, Danny is my scapegoat. I don't actually hate the poor guy, I swear. He just ... seems to end up in these situations with me. ^_^;;

Slight change from canon here, but nothing serious. Well, more so then it's changed already, anyway. Partly to work in a plot, and because I'm trying to figure out how Jack and Z went from being in a cell at night to Z wandering around outside in bright daylight.

Wes sat down heavily in the officers' common room, letting out a sigh.

"Drink?" Rocky offered.

"Tea," he corrected. "Green, please."

He clutched the mug as it was pressed into his hands a moment later. Then he set it down with a sigh, burying his face in his hands. He was sure that somewhere under all the nausea he was proud, but mostly he just felt sick.

His son was a Power Ranger.

"We knew this was going to happen," Adam reminded them all gently.

"Well, yeah. But did it have to happen this soon?" Rocky argued. "I mean, Bridge was supposed to be a Ranger someday, not .... now."

Carter sighed. "I never thought thinking of Syd as a Ranger would be so ... "

"Terrifying?" Aisha offered.

"Disturbing?" Rocky added.

"Nauseating?" Wes put in.

"Troubling," he finished, staring at them all.

Ryan leaned on him, putting an arm around his shoulders. "I'm proud of her," he said simply. "I wasn't always sure she'd make it. But I know she'll do well."

Carter glanced at him. "You should tell Dana," he murmured, sounding uncomfortable. "I'm sure she'd want to know."

There was a sound of agreement, but he made no effort to move.

"Do you think Zordon ever felt like this?" Zack asked suddenly. "I mean, worrying about us like this? 'Cause if he did, I have an even greater level of respect for him then I thought I did."

Several others shuddered, and Wes winced slightly. "My dad probably felt like this ... " he
"He did," Eric informed him as he joined them. The couch Wes was sitting on shifted as Eric sat beside him, and a hand lightly bopped him upside the head. "Just be glad Sky isn't going to do this your way," he continued.

"I don't know if it's better that we know, or not," Rocky grumbled. "I mean, we probably would have figured it out anyway, since we all know the signs. But now I can think of all the things that happened to us, and think about it happening to Bridge and the others."

Wes put a hand to his stomach for a moment, wishing it would stop rolling around.

"But isn't that a good thing?" Ryan asked.

"Now you know what to watch out for. We can help them with whatever happens."

"But things always seem to change for every team," Aisha murmured. "And Grumm is nothing like Zedd and Rita. And ... " She hesitated. "Would that be right?"

Everyone looked at her. "Would what be right?" Eric asked suspiciously.

"Would it be right for us to interfere?" she asked them all. "I mean, it's different if they ask us for advice. But should we help them every step of the way, or let them figure things out on their own? And what if something goes wrong? Should we morph to bail them out?"

"No," Adam said firmly. "None of us ever had our parents rescuing us, and we won't humiliate Bridge, Sky, and Syd like that. There's no need to help them unless they ask for it."

Rocky groaned, slouching back on his couch. "But that's even worse!" he complained.

"Daddy?"

Everyone looked up as Heart Carson hesitated in the doorway. At thirteen years old, she was still short, and Wes had been told she looked a great deal like her mother, but with Zack's smile. Standing the way she was, clutching what looked like her brother's stuffed animal, she looked much younger than she was.

Zack opened his arms. "Come here, girl."

She scurried over, flinging herself at him and burrowing against his shoulder. "Is Bridge gonna be okay?" she asked in a small voice.

"Of course he is," he assured her gently, stroking the top of her head. "Are you kidding me? Our Bridge is gonna be the best Ranger there ever was - besides your old dad, of course."

Heart peeked up at him. "But Sky says *he's* gonna be the best."

"Well, that's 'cause Bridge is too nice to tell him otherwise," Zack said easily, and smiled at his daughter when she giggled faintly.

"And I'm sure Bridge'll tell you all about what it's like to be a Ranger when he gets home, Kiddo," Rocky agreed, leaning in to grin at her.

She brightened. "You think so?"
"I'm sure of it."

Jason wandered into the room without warning, heading straight for the food synthesizer. He wandered back to one of the couches with something in his hand that smelled unpleasant, and sat down with a heavy sigh. He took a long swig of his drink, grimacing at the taste.

"Jason?" Aisha stared him worriedly. "You look green. What's wrong?"

He looked up after a moment, toasting them all with his drink. "Syd is Pink, Bridge is Green, and Sky is Blue," he informed them abruptly. "Sky's furious - Kat and Cruger never warned them what they'd be beforehand, and they morphed without knowing. He keeps trying to demand to know why he isn't red. I'm giving them drills tonight in hopes of wearing him out long enough that he'll stop asking."

Wes winced. He wasn't quite sure what the big deal was - Sky was still a Ranger, after all - but he knew his son had dreamed of wearing a Red uniform for years. They'd have to talk to him, try to help him work it out.

"Oh, stop looking so smug," Rocky grumbled, glaring at Adam.

"I wasn't," Adam denied, looking down for a moment and forcing a cough. "I'm just happy Bridge is a Ranger at all. It's what he's always wanted."

"And the fact that he's wearing your color has nothing to do with it, right?" Zack asked dryly.

"Of course it doesn't," Adam sniffed, but the pleased undertone to his voice still wasn't completely gone.

"So they're Rangers, and obviously they're okay, so why are you drinking?" Aisha asked suspiciously.

There was a long silence as they all waited, and at last Jason let out another long sigh. "I read Sky's report about the Parkington Market thieves - the ones we sent them to check up on, see if it was Danny's kids?"

"And?" Rocky prompted when he hesitated again. "Are they?"

Jason swallowed. "You remember those special abilities Dustin warned us about? Sky said the boy, Jack, walked straight through a wall."

Everyone in the room froze.

"And the girl, Z, can make clones of herself," he continued. He paused to take another long swig of his drink. "Cruger's got them in a cell downstairs. He's ... he wants them to join B Squad. He's gonna make them an offer to join S.P.D."

"I'll destroy him," Eric growled suddenly and fiercely. "How could Danny not know?! Did he even bother to read the descriptions we sent out?"

"Jason, you can't mean Jaz and Elizabeth have been with Danny and Max this whole time," Aisha protested. "That's ...

"Her name is Elizabeth Delgado, but she goes by Z," Jason told her, meeting her gaze steadily. "She can clone* herself, Aisha. Real, somewhat sentient clones. She almost took down Syd completely on her own. And Jack Landors walks through walls*. How many people do you
know that can do that?"

Wes stood abruptly, unable to listen any longer.

"Wes, where are you going?" Adam asked in concern.

"To meet them," he said firmly.

"Wes -"

He raised his hand, cutting off Aisha's soft protest. "I may not be able to see them, but I spent more time with Elizabeth than anyone other than Sky and her own parents. If that's her down there, I'll know. And I'm *going* to find out."

He left the room before anyone could try to stop him again.

****

"I see potential in you. You can serve your time in prison, or become part of something else. Something bigger."

"Can we think about this?"

"Of course. I shall return in the morning for your decision. Rest well."

Wes looked up at Cruger as the commander stopped abruptly in front of him. "Sergeant Collins; you startled me."

"Yeah, I get that a lot," he said wryly, trying to reign in his sudden burst of anger at Cruger. What was he thinking, trying to throw Sky's childhood friend into B Squad with no warning or preparation? Did he even think about how Sky - the kids might feel about it? "I heard about our new guests, and I was hoping to meet them myself. They sound pretty special."

"Of course. Perhaps you can show them that there is more to life than petty theft and helping those in need on a basic level." Cruger hesitated, and suddenly put his hand on Wes' shoulder. "I truly believe that S.P.D. is where these children belong, Sergeant Collins. I hope you can help them to see what they might accomplish here."

Wes stared after Cruger as he walked away. Was that ... Did Cruger actually *care* about who these kids might be? He knew he wasn't a *cruel* man - dog - whatever, but Cruger had a tendency to forget things on a more emotional level, in favor of S.P.D. policy and protecting civilians on a grander scale. It was a bad habit Sky had picked up, and everyone was *still* trying to break them both of it.

"I see potential in you," a male voice mocked. "How corny can you get. Does that guy actually believe what he says?"

Wes smiled faintly as he moved in front of the door where he could see them. "Usually. And believe me, he's said worse. You guys got off pretty lucky, actually."

"Who are you?" the girl asked suspiciously.

"Wes Collins," he returned easily, trying to ignore the flare of hope at the way her tone reminded him instantly of Rose. "I run H Squad. Thought you guys could use a meal after all the running around you did today," he added, holding up the overflowing tray he'd brought along with him as a
peace offering. "Open."

They were on top of him the moment he stepped through the door, and he swung out of the way with ease. A quick grab and hip throw, and Jack was on the floor. Z moved in, and he heard movement at his back. He went for the spin kick, knocking them both back, and paused to rebalance the tray. "Are you two done yet?" he asked pleasantly. "Or should I put the tray down first?"

"You -"

"Why don't you eat first, and then we'll see if you can beat me," he coaxed. "Come on, you guys must be hungry." He grinned. "And I promise there's no drugs or poisons in the food - I'll even taste test if you want."

"Why are you doing this?" Z asked warily.

He shrugged. "Because I know from experience that starving teenagers tend to be cranky when they haven't eaten, and they eat a lot. I have one of my own." He pointed to the tray. "Now eat."

"Sir, yes sir," Jack grumbled mockingly, even as he moved toward the tray anyway.

Wes made a face. "You're not in my Squad and you're not part of S.P.D. yet, so don't call me sir. It's just Wes."

"Wes," Z repeated almost thoughtfully. "Where'd you learn to fight like that? There aren't many people who can take Jack and me down."

He smiled at the pride in her voice. "There's always someone better," he reminded them. "And I had a special teacher who helped me with my problem."

"Problem?" she echoed uncertainly.

He felt faintly surprised that they hadn't noticed yet. "I'm blind," he told her, reaching up to touch his SightMap on his temple. "This helps me get around, but I can't actually see."

She sucked in a sharp breath. "Oh! I'm so sorry. You ... are you okay?"

He grinned. "I'm the one who should be asking you that. I beat you, remember?" he pointed out.

"Where did you get that thing?" Jack asked around a mouthful of food, sounding interested despite himself.

"A friend made it for me after I lost my sight."

"You mean you weren't always blind?"

"Jack!" Z hissed, elbowing him.

Wes shook his head. "It's all right. I don't mind talking about it." He did, but if talking about what had happened helped these kids, then he'd do it in a heartbeat. "I was blinded in battle. The alien I was fighting against used my attack to overpower me, and it permanently damaged my eyesight." He lifted his left wrist, showing them the morpher that he refused to take off, even now. "This morpher is the only reason I'm still alive."

They stared at him.
"Why'd you do it, then?" Jack asked at last, his voice low as he looked at the ground.

"Because there were people in danger. I'm - I was a Power Ranger. It was my job to protect the innocent. Even if I had died then, I wouldn't regret it, because my fight helped other people to live."

Z was gazing at him with a strange tilt to her head, but Jack humphed. "You'd give your life up for other people? That sounds stupid," he muttered, but Wes could tell he didn't really mean it.

"By the way, Danny's worried sick about you two," Wes added suddenly, feeling a need to change the subject before the memories overwhelmed him again.

They both stiffened. "You know Danny?" Z demanded.

"Of course," he returned cheerfully. "We've teamed up together before. He used to be a Power Ranger, too," he added, in case they hadn't known. "So was Max."

"Mama Danny was a *Power Ranger*?" Jack said skeptically.

Wes tried to keep his laughter in. "Mama Danny?" he repeated.

"Because of the way he mothers everyone," Z answered, watching him.

"And Papa Max, just because he hates it," Jack agreed, sounding smug.

"And Max can always stand to be teased more," he agreed with a grin. "Taylor will be thrilled to hear it."

"Taylor?" Z questioned.

"Taylor Earheart Scott. She's their former teammate - she works at S.P.D. too, in the DVD department." He paused, catching himself. "Sorry. That's the Department of Vehicle Design and Maintenance."

"DVD?" Jack sounded faintly amused.

"The head of DVD has a habit of nicknaming things, and they stuck," he told them with another grin. "You'd like him, I think. He's a real goofball, but he works hard."

"So what department are you?" Z asked, and he could hear the smile in her voice now.

"Drill Sergeants - the Training Department. My Squad is H, is the lowest squad. It's for basic training. I train all types of cadets to fight before they chose which department they want to be in. I also run a special class for anyone who wants to join, on learning to fight in situations where you can't see your enemy," he explained.

"So who's B Squad?"

"B Squad is the second-highest of all Squads, and the second-highest of the Ranger Track Squads. They were just promoted - today in fact - to Power Rangers."

"So those guys who tried to arrest us after we helped them really are Power Rangers now?" Jack asked skeptically. "They're gonna get their butts kicked!"

Sky ... he thought with a weary sigh. "They're not our only Rangers; we have A Squad, too. And no one's said their training is done yet." He frowned. "In fact, I think Jason - B Squad's Sergeant - said
something about more training drills tonight."

"So they're not top of the chain after all." Z sounded almost disappointed.

"Technically, the 'top of the chain' is S.P.D. Command Headquarters, which isn't even in this galaxy," he pointed out. "We've all got our superiors. But B Squad is one of the highest, and one of the best." He couldn't help the note of pride that slipped into his voice.

"Is S.P.D. really a part of something greater?" Z asked abruptly, her voice soft and somewhat small.

And suddenly he could see it. Her posture, her tone ... the way she ducked her head. It was all there.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Wes. I didn't *mean* to ... "

He swallowed. Oh, Elizabeth ...

He knelt down in front of her, waiting for her to look up at him. "S.P.D. has hundreds of bases, top-of-the-line weapons and technology, and some of the most brilliant minds that ever existed. We have teachers, technicians, scientists, and Power Rangers working here, because we all believe in protecting people," he said gently. "I believe S.P.D. is the greatest organization that has ever existed on Earth, and that it can only become greater. I think that someday, we won't just be protecting galaxies - we'll be protecting time itself."

Because there was absolutely no doubt in his mind that one day, S.P.D. would become Time Force.

Z looked at him for a long time. "I ... I'd like to talk to Commander Cruger, if he's still awake," she said almost shyly.

Wes smiled at her. "I'll go get him for you."

He made it out of the cell and most of the way down the hall before he had to stop. He leaned against the wall, shuddering as he pressed a hand over his eyes.

"Going somewhere?"

"Time! Duck!"

"Is *this* all S.P.D. Earth is capable of? I expected more of a challenge."

"I never lost to Lothor, and I'll never lose to a monster like you!"

"Time Strike!"

"Wes!"

He jumped, looking around wildly.


He swallowed, biting his lip and lowering his head as he tried to bury the memories again. "Thanks, Eric," he muttered finally.

Slowly, the hand slipped around his shoulders, tightening slightly. "Come on," Eric told him
quietly. “Let’s go get Cruger so the kid doesn’t have to sleep in the cell tonight.”

“You were listening?”

“No. But you were talking to her.”
Chapter Notes

At the end of Beginnings, I’ve realized Sky had a *really* bad day. So, I made him live up to Eric’s nickname for him. Oops? c.c;;

"Someone want to explain to me why we've all been called in here?" Tommy asked, folding his arms and leaning back against a console.

Zack pointed at Wes. "Ask him. This is his party."

Wes sighed, taking a moment to think. He'd called all of the former Rangers, Vanessa, and Nerina to the War Room, warning them there was no excuse for not showing up. The kids had just returned from their battle; A Squad was had gone out on the town for a break, Sky, Bridge, and Syd were on downtime, and Jack and Z were cleaning windows. It was time to tell them what he knew.

"Z Delgado is Elizabeth," he said abruptly. "I'm sure of it. You can try a DNA test if you want, but I know she is. And if Z is Elizabeth, then I'm pretty sure Jack is really Jaz."

There was a long, heavy silence.

"So what do we do about it?" Tommy asked finally.

"We can't exactly send them home to their parents," Jason pointed out wryly. "They're Rangers now. We need them here."

"But they don't know about their parents yet," Ashley protested. She paused. "Do they?"

Taylor shook her head. "Danny said they showed up at different times, at different ages. He's had Z since for about seven years, and Jack for only about three and a half. They didn't even know each other until they met at his place. Whatever happened to separate them, they don't remember it. I think it's safe to say they don't remember who they are, either."

"But they remember their names," Rocky argued.

"First names," Billy corrected. "It is entirely feasible that while they were able to retain the knowledge of their singular names, due to the traumatic experiences that took place, they may have forgotten everything else that they had previously known. In addition to that, they were only six and seven years old when the incident occurred."

"That's right ... " Karone murmured. "Jack's profile has his presumed age at seventeen."

Tommy looked at Aisha and Ashley. "What do you two think?"

"Medically, I can't say I recommend telling them right away," Aisha said slowly. "It could send them into shock, or frighten them into running. I don't think we should keep it from them forever, just ... not yet."
Ashley nodded in agreement, looking troubled. "Once they have a better sense of stability here, it wouldn't be quite so terrible."

"What about their parents?" Kimberly asked quietly. "Should we keep this from them?"

There was a long, awkward silence.

"Which is more cruel?" Eric asked finally. "Telling them their kids are alive, but they can't see them yet, or letting them find out later that we've known they're alive, but didn't say anything?"

Ashley let out a slow, shaky breath. "I'll tell them," she said quietly. "I'll ... I'll ask them not to approach them yet, but - " She cut herself off, sounding pained. They were talking about the children of two of her best friends, after all.

"Do you really think Rose can stay away?" Taylor asked pointedly.

"Cruel to be kind," Adam muttered under his breath.

Ashley shook her head. "They have a right to know," she insisted, not sounding sure of herself at all.

Andros reached out to squeeze her hand, but he looked at them all solemnly. "There's something else we have to consider. Do we tell the kids?"

Another awkward silence lingered, and Wes could feel the eyes on him. Elizabeth had been *his* son's best friend. Should he torture Sky by letting him know? Or should he hope he just wouldn't figure it out on his own?

He bowed his head for a moment. "I think we should tell them, but ask them not to say anything yet," he said at last. He looked up again at Eric and Vanessa. "What about you guys?"

Vanessa made an annoyed sound. "I think we're screwed no matter what we decide," she grumbled.

Eric humphed. "Miracles never cease. We actually agree on something."

Wes looked at them oddly, wondering what had brought that on. He'd never seen any issues between them. They got along better than he'd ever expected they would.

The two stared at each other for a moment. "Do it," Eric said abruptly. "He'll never forgive us if we don't."

Vanessa hesitated. "I ... Yeah. Tell them."

Jason raised his radio. "Sergeant Scott to B Squad. Cadets Carson, Drew, and Tate, report to the War room. *Now*."

He blinked at them all when they stared at him for the serious tone and shrugged. "Syd won't stop to fix her hair if she thinks it's an emergency," he pointed out.

"She's not that bad," Ryan protested.

Carter snorted. "Only in your eyes."

The door slid open, and the three cadets hurried inside. "Sir!" they chorused, sliding swiftly into a salute.
Jason waved a hand vaguely. "At ease. Find a seat."

They all eyed him warily. "What’s the emergency, Sir?" Sky asked suspiciously.

Jason gave him a pointed look. "The emergency is that you're being brought into a very important meeting. Sit down."

"Sir, yes Sir," Sky grumbled, finding a place between Eric and his mom. His posture remained painfully straight, and he radiated annoyance.

Bridge and Syd seemed to relax in an instant. Syd happily planted herself in Ryan's lap, while Bridge sat cross-legged on the floor beside Rocky. He glanced around the room, frowned, and started to shift slightly.

Rocky caught his hand, shaking his head. "Don't bother. We'll tell you what's going on," he promised him softly.

Bridge studied him for a moment. "Should I stand on my head?"

Rocky tussled his hair. "Not yet. You can if you want after we're done."

Bridge nodded, shrugged, and looked up at them all curiously.

The adults in the room looked at one another, silently debating who had to be the one to break the news to them. Wes sighed, knowing he was going to find himself elected at some point anyway, and nodded his head.

He could feel Sky's intense gaze on him. "This is about Jack and Z, isn't it?" Sky asked abruptly.

Wes glanced over at him. "You already know what I'm going to say?"

Sky shrugged carelessly. "That Z is Elizabeth Stewart-Ortiz, the missing child of Justin Stewart and Rose Stewart-Ortiz. And Jack is most likely Jackson Zhane 'Jaz' Johnson, the son of T.J. and Litania Johnson."

Eric smacked the back of Sky's head without warning, just hard enough to make him flinch. "Knock that off," he warned him.

Sky scowled, sighed, and muttered "Sorry, Dad."

Wes looked at him for a moment. He knew Sky wasn't exactly being rude just for the sake of being mean. Today had shaken him up, in several ways, and he didn't know how to deal with it. So instead, he settled for being callous and acting, quite frankly, like a jerk. Something he'd frustratingly enough, picked up from Eric.

"Wait ... " Syd spoke up slowly, sounding puzzled. "You mean Jack and Z are Ranger kids, too?"

"That's right," Ryan told her, playing absently with her hair. "You probably don't remember Elizabeth very well - you were only six when she disappeared. And you didn't get to see Jaz all that often."

She frowned, snuggling under Ryan's chin. "I think ... I remember something. It was before ... before all the bad stuff happened, right? When we had to see that icky Dr. Felix, who smelled like cat food?"

Ryan kissed the top of her head. "That's right."
"If he's a cat-based species, does that mean he really smells like cat food?" Bridge pondered absently. "Or does he just smell like food? Does he think we smell like human food?"

"Bridge," Adam interrupted gently.

Bridge blinked, looking up at them all. "Hmm? Oh. Well, if you want to know what I think, I'd think it's obvious who they are. I mean, they have special abilities just like us, and it's not like their auras have changed that much - "

"You remember what their auras used to look like?" Rocky asked, frowning down at him.

Bridge blinked again, and Wes noted the way his body temperature rose slightly. "Sure. Why wouldn't I? I mean, we spent all that time with Elizabeth and - "

"*Bridge*." Adam's tone was short and sharper than Wes had ever heard him use with Bridge. He stared down at his son.

Bridge flinched slightly, swallowing and trying not to squirm. "Well, I, um ... They seemed really familiar. 'Cause you know how everyone's aura is unique and - "

"Bridge." This time Rocky's tone was gentle, and he leaned down to look the teen in the eyes. "You were imprinting even back then, weren't you? That's how you knew."

Bridge nodded slowly, looking down guilty. "It wasn't ... it's not like it was a big deal, or anything ... " he murmured uncomfortably.

"Yeah, Power forbid Bridge actually admit when something's *wrong*," Sky snipped.

"Sky!" Syd snapped. "Don't pick on Bridge!"

Bridge raised a hand. "No offense, Syd? But I can fight my own battles."

"*Hey!*" Jason bellowed.

All three teens froze.

"We called you three in here to let you know what's going on, and you're acting like children," Jason lectured.

Bridge held up a finger. "Technically, we *are* children," he pointed out.

"Bridge ... " Jason warned, rubbing his temples.

"Sorry, Sir."

Wes sighed. "We brought you three in here because we wanted you to know that yes, Jack and Z are Jaz and Elizabeth. But you can't tell them that yet. We're going to wait until they're a little better adjusted, and then break the news to them."

"So we're going to lure them into a false sense of security, and then shatter all of their illusions. Brilliant," Sky said sarcastically.

Eric smacked him upside the head again, just as Wes and Vanessa both snapped "Sky!"

Sky stood, shoving his chair in angrily. "Whatever. Are we dismissed, Sir?" he asked, looking directly at Jason.
Jason scowled back at him. "Yeah, Sky. Get lost. And come back when you've got a better attitude."

Syd opened her mouth to say something, but Ryan hushed her.

"Whatever," Sky growled, storming out of the room.

"He's hurt," Bridge spoke up suddenly, looking thoughtful. "He doesn't know what he did wrong."

"Baby, it's rude to read into other people's emotions without permission, *especially* when you tell other people about it. You know that," Aisha reprimanded.

Wes sighed, pushing himself to his feet. "I'll talk to him."

He paused in the doorway to glance back at Bridge and Syd. "I'm serious, guys. Don't tell them yet. We will, just not ... yet. We don't want to scare them away."

Bridge nodded solemnly. "I understand, Uncle Wes."

"Are you sure we can't scare Z away? Or maybe at least to another room?" Syd asked hopefully.

He shook his head, letting the door slide shut behind him. Jason had his work cut out for him, and he didn't begrudge him that one bit.
This was *so* much fun to write. BlackCrimsonLight, Rosabelle, and my brother all deserve credit for suggesting various parts of the chapter.

Sadly, I'm not so sure how I like Cruger's part at the end. But it demanded to be written, because Cruger is secretly evil.

"Hey, Wes? Have you seen Andros around anywhere?"

He glanced up. "Sorry, Jase. Last I heard he was somewhere around Tech. Tommy said something about a mission for A Squad coming up, so he's trying to get them outfitted."

Strangely, Jason seemed to perk up at this. "So A Squad's busy?"

Wes tilted his head, studying him. "I think so. Why?"

"Uh, nothing. I just ... gotta talk to Andros. Hey, do me a favor and make sure B Squad stays in S.P.D. for awhile, would you?"

He shrugged, feeling more than slightly curious. "Sure."

"Thanks, man."

Wes leaned back in his chair with a soft sigh, bracing his arms behind his head. He'd hidden himself in a corner of the Squad Common Room to work on his next lesson plan for his private class, because the Officer's Common Room had been surprisingly overcrowded today. He found that it was a nice way to work on blending in with his surroundings, as none of the cadets had noticed him yet, and he'd had a rather peaceful day. But still ... his Squad had been sent out on patrol with G Squad again, and while he knew Shane would take care of them, he still wished ...

"Wow, she's *hot*!" he heard Jack exclaim. He glanced up to see the teen staring after someone who'd just passed him.

"It's good to know that you find her attractive, Jack," Bridge commented casually, almost thoughtfully, and Wes fought a grin. So that's who Jack had been staring at. "But calling her 'hot' when you're not referring to her having a temperature is sort of derogatory, don't you think? Unless she actually has a fever - then that's a different story. But since I just saw her this morning, it's highly doubtful she's developed a fever that fast. Unless it's an alien strain, and we were all vaccinated when we joined S.P.D.

"So, since she doesn't have a fever, that would mean you used it in a derogatory sense. And if you used it in a derogatory sense, that would mean you just insulted her. And since I know *she's* too nice to tell you if she's offended - "

"Bridge!" Jack interrupted, sounding exasperated. "Would you just get to the point already?"

"Oh. Okay."
There was a muffled thump as Jack was swiftly pinned against a wall. "What the - ?!" he sputtered.

"Keep your hands off my little sister if you like being able to use them." Bridge tilted his head. "Was that better?"

"Mmm ... It gets the point across faster, but I think it lacks that certain flare that says 'Bridge'," Syd commented, blowing lightly on her nails.

"Wait - *that's* your sister?" Jack said incredulously.

"Yup. That's Heart." Bridge's voice was completely fond and full of affection. He paused to wave cheerfully back to Heart, who had stopped to send him her own enthusiastic greeting. He let go of Jack as someone else came up behind Heart, making the other teen stumble. "Sorry, guys. I'll be right back - more people to threaten."

Z stared after him. "You know, that's not the first impression I got from Bridge at all. I would never have guessed he could be so ..."

"Creepy?" Jack muttered, dusting himself off.

Z gave him a dirty look. "Hypocrite."

"Congratulations, Jack," Sky mocked, patting the other boy's shoulder as he passed. "You just hit on Bridge's thirteen-year-old sister."

"Wait - what?!" Jack demanded. "There is *no way* that girl is thirteen!"

"Heart hit puberty kinda fast; that's why Bridge and her dads are so protective," Syd explained. She paused. "Oh, and just so you guys know? Bridge's threat goes for me an' Sky, too."

Z looked at Syd, bewildered. "How long have you guys all known each other?"

Syd shrugged in disinterest. "Practically forever. Besides, you'll feel the same way eventually. Scared another one away, Bridge?" she continued as he wandered back over.

"Yup," he returned, sounding pleased. "Heart says 'hi'."

"She having any problems?" Wes spoke up absently, scanning through his data pad again. He didn't know how Cam had managed to make him one that tapped into his SightMap, and he'd learned a long time ago that it was better not to ask.

All five teens jumped at the sudden sound of his voice, although Sky and Bridge recovered quickly, while Syd just shot him an annoyed glare. "Nope. She said she's been around Hawk and Casey all day, and they always give off good energy when they're together." Bridge told him after a pause.

"Wes?" Z asked curiously. "Oh, sorry. It's Sir now, isn't it?"

"Technically, but don't worry about it too much," he dismissed with a smile.

Sky came up behind him, leaning over his shoulder to see what he was looking at. "New class schedule?"

"That's right. You coming?"

"Wouldn't miss it." Sky's tone was short, but he could read the sincerity behind it. He smiled up at
him, and felt Sky shift slightly as his expression relaxed a bit.

"Great, you're all here."

Jason sounded entirely too pleased, and Wes found himself glancing up as Sky's stance shifted again.

"Sir?" Sky asked warily.

"B Squad, you're about to do a very important training exercise." Jason paused, turning to him. "Hey, Wes. You wanna help Dustin and Taylor, Andros, or pretend you have no idea what's going on?"

Wes raised his eyebrows.

****

"Are you sure we have clearance to do this, Sir?"

"Relax, Cadet Tate. Captain Andros gave us his permission, and he's gonna talk to Cruger." Jason assured him through the comm. link.

Taylor looked at him in amusement. "I thought the plan was Andros is *distracting* Cruger."

"What was that?!"

"Nothing, nothing! Relax. You've got clearance, B Squad. Now head out."

"Sir!" they chorused.

Wes lifted his morpher. "Eric, do you read?"

"Loud and clear, Wes. We gonna get this show on the road, or what?"

"They're on their way out now. Are you and Q-Rex in position?"

"Ready for damage control. So who do you think we should watch out for?"

"Jack," Taylor responded immediately.

"Z," Dustin answered.

"Sky," Jason contradicted.

Wes frowned. "Probably Bridge or Syd."


"Geez, you guys sure have a lot of faith in them," the Quantum Ranger said wryly.

"Who do you think is going to be trouble?" Wes retorted.

There was a pause. "Karone said Bridge, right? I'm going with Bridge. Twenty bucks," he added.

"You're on."

Jason's brilliant idea had apparently been to get Andros to allow B Squad to 'borrow' A Squad's
Delta Runners. There were several reasons for this: for one, B Squad had no Zords of their own to go with their new morphers. While Dustin and Taylor were willing to build a second set specifically for B Squad, they needed to know more about their skills as a team, and more specifically for Jack and Z, who they'd never seen in action before, to know what would work best for them. The third reason was that no one had ever been in the unique situation of having two Ranger teams with one set of Zords, and they weren't sure how the Power would compensate for knowledge in this case.

So, Jason had elected to allow B Squad a 'practice run' with the Delta Runners, to make sure there were no problems when they tried to use them. Andros had somewhat reluctantly agreed to his logic, and had been volunteered to distract Commander Cruger, as no one was quite sure what his thoughts on 'borrowing' Zords would be. And while Tommy was still technically in charge of all Rangers in S.P.D., Cruger had become increasingly more involved with the news that Emperor Grumm was headed their way.

Dustin and Taylor's job was to monitor the training exercise, record all information they received, and use the data to either solve their problems, or plan for a new set of Zords. Karone was, as usual, playing KIA, because all KIA seemed to like to record anything they wanted to term a 'major event' for S.P.D. Wes was there to keep in touch with Eric, as his morpher was the only way to communicate with him on a line S.P.D. couldn't trace. Eric meanwhile, had morphed and was standing by with the Q-Rex in case anyone's Zord got too out of control.

"Hey, Wes? Did the floaters ever figure out why that still works, dude?" Dustin asked suddenly, nodding at his wrist, which displayed an image of the Quantum Ranger just above his morpher.

Wes sighed, feeling irritated at the memories of all the tests he'd had to go through when his morpher had suddenly started communicating with Eric's again. "Billy said he thinks it's possible that it still had enough energy left in it to keep just the communications functions going once it was repaired. Hayley thinks it's a technological miracle that it works at all, and that Time Force might be involved somehow. Kat thinks it has some sort of self-repairing function, but this all it was capable of doing on its own."

"So no one knows," Taylor said dryly.

"No one knows," he confirmed with another sigh.

"Um ... Can someone please tell me what exactly I'm supposed to be driving?"

"What was that, Cadet Delgado?" Jason asked. "Say again?"

"Can someone please tell me what I'm driving?" B Squad Yellow repeated. "I mean ... Jack's got that police car thing, Sky's got a helicopter, Bridge is driving a semi, and Syd's ... *kinda* looks like an ambulance. So what is this thing supposed to be?"

Wes bowed his head to hide his snicker. The Delta Runners had all been the first Zords Dustin, Taylor, Carlos, and Ronny had collaborated on, with a lot of help from the Morpher Project and a few people from the Techs. And the entire process had been a nightmare of arguing, debate, fighting, and eventual compromise.

Dustin had wanted cats. Taylor insisted birds would make a better base for the Zords. Carlos thought they should be better oriented for space battle, and Ronny wanted something fast. The resulting arguing had almost scrapped the project all together until Billy had been brought in to mediate, being the single person in S.P.D. to have both the experience working with multiple Zord designs, and the knowledge of how to build and maintain them.
After consulting S.P.D. regulations and a few more mediated deputes, they used a combination of technology gained from studying Storm Blaster and the Turbo Powers - with Justin's permission of course, and the information on the Lightspeed Rescue Zords brought by Angela Rawlings, their original creator. A great deal of thought had been put into each Zord's design and specialties, as well as the movements and capabilities of the Delta Megazord. Of course, that wasn't to say that Dustin had managed to slip a bit of his own sense of humor into the way certain things worked, or Taylor hadn't gotten her flyer, or Ronny her speed.

Having the most seniority, Dustin had claimed Delta Runners 3 and 5 as his projects; one with the extra cargo space he'd insisted might be useful (and his specialty 'attack'), and one with aquatic capabilities - no one had questioned why. Delta Runner 2 was Taylor's angel, and she took great pride in it's maneuverability and hidden attack of its own. Ronny had designed all the specs of Delta Runner 1, and almost nothing could keep up with her precious baby.

Delta Runner 4 was Carlos' work. He designed it to be able to break through anything, with armored plating that could withstand nearly everything thrown at it. The floodlights he'd added as an additional safety precaution, claiming that at least one of the Zords needed to be armed with high powered lights. As a result of being more concerned with strength and usefulness, he'd never bothered with a particular design to base it around. Instead, they'd all dubbed it as -

"That's Carlos' Rustbucket," Jason answered her with a grin of his own. "And no, we don't really know what it is, either. And asking the mechanic who made it just makes him mad. Rustbucket is fine."

"Are you kidding me?" Yellow demanded.

"If only," Taylor sighed.

"Did anyone else hear that?" Red asked suddenly, sounding wary.

"Hear what?" Pink wanted to know.

"Someone just said - hey! Bridge, watch it!"

"Sorry, Jack!"

Jason sighed. "Let me guess; Jack met Heart today, didn't he?" he asked the room at large.

Wes tried not to smile. "Yeah. He said she was hot."

He leaned forward over the com. "Cadet Carson, please remember that this is a *training exercise*, not bumper cars. Save your personal problems for later."

"Sorry, Sir," Green returned cheerfully.

"And doesn't he just sound it," Taylor murmured, amused.

"Look, why don't you all just take a bit to get used to the controls before we try any drills, okay?" Jason told the comm. at last, sounding more than slightly exasperated.

"Not a problem. Watch this," Blue announced smugly.

And for a few minutes, they were all treated to an impressive aerial show. Loops, acceleration, swift stops; Sky had it all under control. *He must have been spending extra time in the flight simulator,* Wes mused to himself.
At least, they *thought* he had it all under control.

"Cadet Tate," Taylor said sharply. "Tate, pull up. Sky! You're going to hit that - "

Everyone in the room froze at the sound of grinding metal.

"I don't wanna know. I don't wanna know," Jason whispered, covering his eyes with a hand. "I just made a hundred bucks; I don't wanna know why."

"Actually, you didn't," Karone informed him, studying the read out. "He missed the building; Q-Rex caught him just in time." She paused, tilting her head slightly, and giggled. "I never knew Zords could glare."

"Ooh! Dude, lemme see!" Dustin said eagerly, peering over her shoulder. He laughed. "Dude, it so is!"

"You wanna try taking that a little slower next time, Cadet Tate?" Quantum Ranger asked irritably.

"Sorry, Sergeant Myers," Blue muttered somewhat reluctantly.

"Bridge! What did you do?!" Yellow shouted suddenly.

The adults monitoring the battle turned to stare as a new image came up, now displaying Delta Runner 4 hopelessly tangled in crime scene tape, courtesy of Delta 3. The blaster was still sticking up from the back of the semi, while Delta 4 revved its engine, trying fruitlessly to break free.

"Sorry, Z," Bridge said mournfully. "I just wanted to see how it would work ... I'll get you out of there. Somehow."

"Okay, who said that?" Red demanded hotly. "Seriously! It's not funny anymore!"

They all eyed the comm. warily. "Cadet Landors, are you all right?" Jason asked suspiciously.

"No, I will *not* get out of the vehicle! What are you - whoa!" Red yelped suddenly.

Delta Runner 1 shot forward, speeding down the street with a loud shriek from the sirens. It darted wildly around trees and around buildings with no apparent direction in mind. And all the while, they could hear S.P.D. Red yelling at the top of his lungs.

"Someone help me! How do I shut it off?! Get me out of this thing!"

"Landors, calm down!" Jason shouted into the comm. "Eric, can you grab him?"

"If he'd stop swerving, I'd have had him already!" Quantum Ranger snapped back. "I don't know if you've ever bothered to notice Jason, but Q-Rex doesn't exactly turn on a dime!"

"Corners like a Buick is more like it," Taylor groused as she and Dustin typed frantically at their consoles, trying to regain control over Delta Runner 1.

"*Hey*! Don't insult the Zord, Earheart!"

"Hey, I hate to interrupt, but what does this button - ahh!" Pink shrieked.

"Sydney! What happened?!" Jason demanded.

A faint wail answered him. "Why didn't someone tell me that was the aqua mode button?!"
"Jack, Syd, look out!" Yellow cried.

They all watched in horror as Delta Runner 1 ran straight into Delta Runner 5, which had been stranded in the middle of the street with its tires inflated beyond normal use. Delta 5 tipped dangerously, but rebalanced itself. Delta 1, on the other hand, flipped onto its back and stayed there as the two Rangers screamed bloody murder.

Delta 1 rocked for a moment, trying to get back on its wheels. Its progress was halted as at last, the Q-Rex caught up to it and snatched it up in one claw. Standing over Delta 5, Delta Runners 1 and 2 in each claw, Eric's Zord somehow managed to radiate exasperation and irritation.

"Um ... I hate to bring this up, but I think I have a problem."

Jason pressed a hand against his face. "What's wrong now, Cadet Carson?"

"Well, you see, I think better upside down, right? And I was trying to think of a way to get Z free. So, I tried to think and - "

"Bridge, did you try and do a handstand in your Zord?"

There was a long, awkward pause. "You know, these cockpits aren't really as big as they look."

"So. You think they need their own Zords?" Dustin asked, looking around at them all.

"Just maybe," Taylor said dryly.

****

"Captains, Sergeants."

Everyone abandoned their drinks as Cruger entered the Officer's Common Room, forcing themselves to their feet for a weary salute. "Sir."

"At ease." He looked over them all for a moment. "Long day, I see." Something about his tone seemed almost ... amused.

They all looked at him warily. He didn't ... know, did he? Andros was supposed to keep him busy. He couldn't possibly -

"Oh, yes. I had meant to tell you, Sergeant Scott," Cruger said suddenly, sounding almost thoughtful. "Captain Andros shared the most interesting information with me earlier. It seems Cadet Charlesia has managed to program an Artificial Intelligence into her Zord's computer systems, with Sergeant Robinson's permission. Supposed to be some sort of alarm system, she said. When it detects foreign pilot in the Zord, it asks them to remove themselves before at last taking control of the entire vehicle until forcibly extracting them. Of course, the captain has promised me that he will discuss with her the advantages and disadvantages of such a security system. After all, in case of an emergency, it's highly ineffective to only allow one person to pilot Delta Runner 1."

They stared at him. Wes felt his sunglasses slipping down his nose, but he didn't care. Did Cruger just say ... ?

"Well, then. I suggest we all get some sleep. After all, tomorrow may be an even longer day than this one."

Cruger made it halfway down the hall before they heard the sound of his laughter echoing back to
them.
Okay, shorter chapter than I'd hoped for. But this is when it felt finished. -Shrugs-
Psychoanalyzing Jack is surprisingly easy.

"What are you thinking about?"

Jason jumped, spinning around to glare at him. "Man, Wes! Make some noise next time, would you?"

He grinned. "But it's not as much fun that way." He tilted his head. "Seriously, though. What are you thinking about? You two have been out here for hours."

Jason sighed, turning to watch as his cadet worked his way through the obstacle course yet again. "I'm just ... wondering about Jack, I guess. Maybe feeling a little nostalgic while I'm at it."

Wes raised his eyebrows. "Jason, according everything I've ever been told about you when you first started out as a Ranger, you were *nothing* like Jack was today. If anything, I keep hearing about how you were practically the perfect leader. I think you put us all to shame a long time ago."

Jason snorted. "Thanks for the ego boost Wes, but that wasn't what I meant."

There was a long pause, and at last Wes let out a mental sigh. "So what did you mean?" he prodded gently.

Jason let out a slow breath. "I was scared spitless," he said bluntly. "I mean, looking out for my friends was one thing. I'd been doing that for over a year. But being the leader of the Power Rangers is *completely* different. For months I had nightmares that I was going to get my friends killed."

Slowly, Wes nodded as he started to understand what Jason meant. "I was lucky," he admitted. "Jen was always our leader. But there were times when I had to ... and I hated it. It was terrifying."

Jason sighed. "So, I figured I'd try and understand Jack a little better. Try and get today from his point of view, you know?"

"So what'd you come up with?"

"He's nothing like T.J."

"Thank goodness," Wes muttered under his breath, remembering his own issues with T.J.'s warped sense of humor and the horror stories of his time as a Red. He glanced at Jason again after a moment. "And after that?"

"He's terrified, just like the rest of us," Jason said simply. "But it's worse for Jack, because other than Z, these *aren't* his friends. He doesn't know the other three at all. He's just been told he's responsible for the lives of people he met last week. That's gotta be hard to deal with."
"So he pushed them away by acting like a jerk," Wes realized. He frowned. "Sounds like what Jen tried to do to me - although for slightly different reasons."

Jason folded his arms as Jack stumbled to the finish line once again. "But he only hurt himself when they rejected him. The look on his face when Cruger took his morpher away ... " Jason shook his head.

Wes fought to suppress a surge of jealousy for something he couldn't exactly sympathize on. "He wasn't expecting to already care. That's why he fought so hard to get it back."

Jason nodded. "And he earned his right to keep it, as far as I'm concerned. I haven't seen anyone that hasn't agreed yet."

"You won't get an argument from me," Wes agreed. "He worked for it in that battle; he *wanted* it."

"He needs it," Jason sighed. "That kid's been shattered. He's cocky, but he doesn't really have a lot of self-confidence." He nodded down to the teen who was once again stumbling his way through the obstacle course. "He hides it pretty well, but - "

"But you're a master at getting inside people's heads," Wes interrupted, bemused. "You should have gone into psychology instead of S.P.D."

"Nah. It's more useful as a Ranger."

"True," Wes commented as they went back to watching Jack.

"So I come out here looking for the Brat, and I get a two-for-one special."

"What's up, Eric?" Wes asked absently, observing as Jack stumbled. "You'd better send him back to his room before he breaks something," he warned Jason.

"Or collapses and drowns in the mud," Jason muttered.

"How long have they both been out here, anyway?" Eric spoke up, nodding at the two Rangers below them.

"Jack's been there since Cruger dismissed them," Jason told him. "I think Sky came out sometime after dinner."

Eric huffed in annoyance. "So you've been letting them brood for hours? Why didn't you send them out for some drills or something instead?"

"I think Jack's got his drills covered," Jason said dryly. "And Sky still refuses to look me in the eye. Why do you think I let Cruger deal with them today?"

Wes frowned. "He's still mad at you?"

Jason let out a frustrated sigh. "I don't know *what* he is anymore. Sometimes I think it's because he's mad at me, and sometimes I'm getting the impression he thinks *I'm* mad at *him*. Eric, stop infecting Sky. It makes him impossible to deal with."

Wes snorted, while Eric shot Jason a dirty look. "Sure, Jase. Give me a few; I'll suck my poisonous influence right out of him."
"Why are you guys all standing around up here?"

Wes glanced at his son, who was watching them all with folded arms. "We're being teachers, Sky. It happens," he told him with a smile. "Speaking of which, why are you still out here? Shouldn't you be heading in for bed?"

Sky shrugged, glancing down at Jack, who had stopped to take a breath again. "Waiting to see how long he plans on punishing himself."

"Yeah, like you wouldn't know anything about that," Eric retorted.

Sky scowled at him.

"Sky," Jason interrupted. "Get some sleep. I'll make it an order if I have to."

"Sir," Sky muttered, saluting swiftly without meeting Jason's eyes. He walked away quickly, leaving them all staring after him.

"See?!" Jason demanded in exasperation. "What's that about? How am I supposed to talk to the kid if he won't even look at me?"

"Sit on him," Eric suggested. "Always works for me."

Wes sighed, shaking his head at Eric. "Just let him be for a bit, Jase. Sky'll come around eventually. And if he doesn't, I'll talk to him."

"And if that doesn't work, we'll sick Bridge on him," Eric smirked.

Jason chuckled faintly. "Thanks, guys. I'll catch up with you later. I think I've got a cadet to carry to bed."

They remained there for a few minutes, watching as Jason headed down towards an exhausted Jack. The teen started, trying to gesture that he was fine. After a moment, they both looking on in amusement as Jack nearly fell on Jason, and finally allowed himself to be helped back to base.

"So what do you think of Jack?" Wes asked at last.

Eric took a deep breath. "I think the kid's got the heart to be a good leader, if he'd get his head into it. Once he starts realizing that he's stuck with the job whether he likes it or not, he'll grow into it. Eventually."

The corner of Wes' mouth quirked. "Eventually," he agreed. "So what do you think about Sky?"

An arm came around his shoulders, gently but firmly steering him towards the parking lot. "I think the kids aren't the only ones who need to get to bed, and Sky is a problem for another day. Now come on, before Vanessa starts calling people to make sure you haven't fallen off a cliff somewhere."

Wes smiled faintly, and found himself leaning slightly against the arm. "Worrywart."

"Yeah, she is."

"I wasn't talking about Nes."

"Yes, you were. Because if you weren't, you're about to fall over."
His smile widened. "Whatever you say, Eric."
I hate this prompt. I hate this chapter. I hate Sky for being a pain in the ass, and Wes for either over or under-reacting.

I love BlackCrimsonLight and Rosabelle, because they worked me through it. I still hate what came out, but at least now I can move on.

Wes leaned back in his chair with a sigh, staring off at nothing in particular. "You know, sometimes I don't know if I want to hug my son, or strangle him."

Rocky snorted. "Welcome to parenthood."

Jason raised a hand. "At the moment, I vote for strangling."

Tommy, Zack, and Rocky all raised hands as well. "Here, here!" Zack declared.

Wes scowled at them all.

"Wes, I hate to say it, but Sky was a total self-centered brat today," Jason pointed out. "And believe me, I *really* hate to say it - he's *my* cadet. But he disobeyed orders, let a major resource fall into Grumm's hands, and completely disrespected not only his Squad leader, but Kat."

Wes sighed, letting his head fall into his hands. "I know he screwed up today, Jason," he said quietly. "And I know Sky knows it, too."

"Why do you think I convinced Cruger to give him light punishment?" Jason asked. "Sky'll punish himself better than any of us ever could."

"That kid's got a serious chip on his shoulder these days. I mean, come on. He won't even play *lightball* anymore," Rocky complained. "And that game's a total blast!"

Jason looked at him, amused. "You're just saying that because you still like to think of it as a training exercise."

Adam shook his head. "You know, you might try thinking about this from Sky's point of view," he reminded them.

"I have," Tommy informed him. "In fact, that's why I told Kat to make him Blue."

Wes looked at Tommy in surprise. "You mean *you're* the one who made Sky Blue? I thought it came from Cruger."

Tommy snorted. "Cruger may be getting more involved in the Ranger Program, but I'm still R.C. Making Sky Blue was *my* idea."

"Why?"
He sighed. "After Jason said Sky wasn't ready to be a leader, I took some time to think about why. That's when I remembered all the reasons I've heard Sky give on why he has to be the *Red* Ranger. He wouldn't even consider anything else. And his reasoning ... " He shook his head. "I'm not making him a Red because he thinks he *has* to be. That's not what Red is. It's not what we do. And as much as I'm sorry to say it, Sky isn't ready for Red. Maybe he will be someday, but not now."

Wes frowned. "So why Blue then?"

A faint smile crossed Tommy's face. "He follows Blue Tradition."

'Blue Tradition' was a newer S.P.D. term, cooked up by former Rangers to describe the similar personalities of Rangers who wore Blue. Blue Rangers had developed a reputation of being focused, naturally suspicious of anything they didn't know much about, and extremely defensive when provoked. They were also excellent tacticians, almost fanatically attentive to detail, and fiercely loyal to those who earned their respect.

Yeah, that was Sky all right.

After a moment, Wes found himself smiling a little, too. "You're right," he admitted. "That is Sky. I just wish he could see that." He pushed himself to his feet with a sigh. "I think I'm going to try talking to him again."

"Good luck with that," Zack told him.

"If he stops listening, go for strangling," Jason advised.

Wes shook his head with a sigh. "Later, guys."

****

"Look, Sky. The reason why I left you at the warehouse was that I was pretty sure those Krybots were coming back, and you're our strongest fighter."

Wes froze in the hallway as he heard his son's retort. "Yeah, right."

Well, apparently Jack had come to confront Sky before he could. Hopefully there wouldn't be *too* much fighting. In spite of himself, and even though he knew he shouldn't, Wes found himself listening in. He wasn't quite sure if Sky and Jack could talk to each other reasonably yet, and the Drill Sergeant in him balked at the idea of leaving them alone in case something happened.

"I'm serious." There was a long pause. "I know you don't trust me, and hey, hey, I don't blame you, okay? I'm still learning to trust myself. But I'm willing to working with you, if you're willing to work with me. What do you say?"

Sky let out a slow sigh. "Well, it's not working bumping heads."

Wes allowed himself to smile a little. Maybe they didn't need help after all. Maybe Jack was already growing into his role as a leader, and learning to take responsibility. And maybe Sky had finally realized that Red Ranger or not, he still needed to learn how to work as a part of a team.

"So tell me; is that you in that picture?" Jack asked, sounding amused.

"Yeah. Why?"
"Nothing. It's just ... aren't you supposed to *smile* for pictures?"

"Very funny. It wasn't exactly taken at one of the highest points of my life, okay?"

Wes leaned back against the wall with a sigh of his own as he realized what they were talking about. He hadn't even realized Sky still had that picture.

It had been taken several months after they'd lost Elizabeth and Jaz. Sky had been slowly but surely recovering through his therapy sessions, and lots of attention from himself and Nes. In an effort to draw Sky a little more out of his shell, someone - he couldn't remember who now - had come up with the idea of letting Sky get his picture taken with his 'hero'.

While Wes had been more than slightly embarrassed at the idea, Sky had been thrilled - at first. The moment he got in front of the camera he became so nervous they couldn't even get him to lift his head. It took a great deal of coaxing and reassurance to get Sky to look up at all, and even then he'd refused to smile. The end result was quite frankly, one of the worst pictures Wes had ever had taken: it was shortly after a newly butchered S.P.D. haircut, Sky was nervous and as a result looked like he was furious to even be there, and seeing himself in standby mode with that S.P.D. badge he'd taken to wearing after the mission to Aquitar just made him feel ... old. Maybe even out of place. The man in the picture didn't even really look like him anymore.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" Jack paused. "Why do you want to be the Red Ranger so bad? I mean, Bridge and Syd seem like they're happy just to be Rangers, but for you, it *has* to be Red. ... I kinda wondered why that was."

There was a long pause as Wes couldn't bring himself to either join them, or walk away. Jack had asked the question that had been bothering him for months, years even, and maybe ... just maybe .... He'd be the one to *finally* get an answer.

"You know, if it's too personal, you can just tell me it's none of my business," Jack said suddenly, sounding somewhat alarmed.

Sky sighed, finally beginning to speak after a long pause. "You see this? This is my dad."

"Your dad was a Ranger, too?"

"He was the Red Time Force Ranger, one of the best Rangers to have ever been part of S.P.D. Even *Cruger* calls him the best of the best. He saved Silver Hills from criminals from the future - twice, spent four months fighting Grumm's forces off on Aquitar, saved a group of kids from being turned into alien medical experiments, and gave everything he had to protect civilians during the biggest battle S.P.D. Newtech had ever seen before Grumm came to Earth. He's lost two teams: one to the timeline, one to battle. He woke up from a coma after four years and built his skills back up so he could join S.P.D. again."

There was the sound of shuffling. "Then there's Eric, my dad's teammate. He's the Quantum Ranger. He raised me while my dad was gone even though he never had to. He taught me how to fight, shoot, tutored me in school ... He became my father when no one else was there. And the whole time, he swore my dad would wake up again; he never lost faith that he would."

"That's - "

"And there's Alex, and Ben."

Outside the door, Wes froze.
"My dad and Eric weren't the first to wear their Ranger uniforms - my older brothers were. Alex was Time Force Red, too. He lives with my dad's team, in the future. He was nearly destroyed trying to protect people, just like my dad. And Ben was the Quantum Ranger. He ... he gave his life in the line of duty." Sky took a deep breath, sounding choked. "My father, my step-father, and both of my older brothers were all Red Rangers. All I ever wanted was to live up their legacy. I did *everything* S.P.D. told me to! I followed orders to the letter, no matter *what* I thought of them. But for some reason, whatever I did wasn't good enough. I'm not good enough to be Red. I'm *Blue*.

"Sky .... Man, I'm ... I'm sorry. But don't you think - "

The world had begun to gray around Wes. Jack's voice faded in place of the pounding in his ears. Somewhere he could hear himself wheezing, struggling for breath.

Sky ... he thought distantly, the bitter sound of the way he'd said *Blue* twisting like a knife to his heart. He'd thought ... He'd always believed Sky wanted to be Red for some reason, but that Sky thought he *had* to, just because he and Eric were? Because ... because Alex and Ben were?

He wasn't even aware that he'd walked away until he bumped into someone. He blinked for a moment, mumbled what might have been an apology, and tried to go around.

Hands caught his arms, stopping him. "Wes? Wes, what's wrong?"

He blinked again. "Eric?" His voice sounded distant even to his own ears. "Oh. Hi. I've ... I've gotta go .... " He tried to move again, but Eric's grip was firm.

"I don't think so. I think - " There was a pause. "Come on. There's a better place to talk."

"Eric, I - "

"I'll carry you if I have to, Wes. You're not getting rid of me. Now come on."

He was too busy thinking to care about where Eric was leading him, so it was a bit of a surprise to find himself being directed to sit. Glancing around, he realized with a start that he was actually in his own officer's quarters within S.P.D. While he didn't live here anymore, he still kept the room in case of emergencies. Apparently Eric had decided this warranted being classified as an emergency.

He stared at the walls for a long moment. His SightMap didn't do colors so well, but he still remembered that they were supposed to be Red. He'd never bothered to repaint them after what Dustin, Rocky, Dax, and Chip had done.

He closed his eyes at both the memory of the color, and the friends no longer with him.

"You ready to tell me what's going on now?" Eric's voice was soft, but there was an undertone to it that warned he wouldn't let the subject drop.

Wes sighed, leaning forward to press his face against his hands. "Did you know why Sky wanted to be Red?" he asked at last.

There was a pause. "I've got an idea."

He tilted his head just enough to look up at him. "Did you know it's because of all *four* of us?"

Eric froze. "Four?" he repeated slowly.
Wes nodded. "I went to talk to him about today - heard Jack ask why he wanted to be Red." He rubbed his face tiredly, suddenly feeling worn. "He said it was because his father, his step-father, and his older brothers were all Red. He wanted to live up to our 'legacy.'" The words came out more bitter than he'd intended.

He could feel Eric studying him for several minutes. "I can't blame him for wanting to live up to your reputation," he said finally.

"I'm *not* some *hero*!" Wes exploded.

He went still as Eric stared at him, slightly surprised at his own outburst. "I'm not a hero," he continued at last, quietly. "I did what I had to. And the last thing I want is for Sky to think he has to follow in my footsteps, and go through the same things I have. Or to think he has to be just like Alex and Ben." He shuddered, both at the knowledge of what had happened to them, and the implication of what it would mean for Sky.

"Maybe ... Sky needs to learn what being a Ranger is all about. And that Red has nothing to do with it," Eric murmured.

"What do you mean?"

Eric sighed. "I've got ... an idea. It *might* help Sky; I don't know. Unfortunately, it's gonna have to wait a bit."

Wes frowned. "Why?"

"Because there was a reason I came looking for you, and Sky wasn't it." Eric looked at him, and everything in his stance radiated seriousness. "Tommy's called a meeting. It's about A Squad."

He sat up, concerned despite the riot of emotions he was still working through from his revelation about Sky. "What is it?"

"Cruger and B Squad might not be able to answer their distress call," Eric said grimly, "But that doesn't mean *we* can't."
"We all know why we're here," Tommy began solemnly. "We received a distress signal from the A Squad team in an unknown location at 1400 hours today."

Wes cursed silently, trying to convert the time in his head. He *hated* military time, and years of working at S.P.D. had *not* made it easier to deal with, despite what everyone had tried to reassure him. Why couldn't they just use Earth Pacific Standard Time, anyway?

"While we can't authorize a Squad to go after them, that doesn't mean that we're not sending a rescue team. I've been talking with Hunter, and we've agreed to send a rescue team from each branch of S.P.D. Earth to search for A Squad. The two teams will spread out to cover more territory, but they will remain in constant contact with the Techs at S.P.D. Japan, and with each other. We are *not* losing anyone else."

Tommy paused to look at them all. "I'm not gonna lie about this, guys. I don't know where we're going, or what we'll find when we get there. I don't know what shape we might find A Squad in, or if we'll even find them at all. I can't even give a timeframe on how long we'll be gone. The only things I *can* promise, is that I'm not taking anyone we can't spare, and that we're not coming back without some sign of A Squad."

"I'm going," Andros stated quietly, his eyes dark and haunted. "It's my Squad out there - I'm going after them."

"And I'm going with you," Zhane informed him.

Neither response surprised Wes, even as he felt a pang at the thought of losing his last remaining S.P.D. teammate, even temporarily. Anyone who had ever met Andros and Zhane knew they were like brothers, and practically inseparable. Aquitar, while necessary, had been sheer torture for them both.

"Better make that three," Ashley said with a forced smile. She turned to look at Karone. "You'll keep an eye on Miranda for us?"

Karone nodded, squeezing the other woman's hand. "You didn't need to ask."

Andros looked up at them both, frowning. "Ash, I'm not sure -"

"It's Ran, Andros," Ashley interrupted, her voice gentle, but firm. "I'm going after my niece. Besides, you'll need a doctor with you. And Adam will keep Miranda busy." She took his hand, her expression softening. "You know Miranda would be the first person to tell us to go get her."

Andros sighed quietly. "I know," he muttered. "That doesn't mean I have to be happy about it."

"I'd like to volunteer," Billy spoke up. He gave a faint smile. "You'll need someone who actually
has an idea of how to trace their signals, won't you?"

"And a mechanic," Hayley commented. "Because if there's a Red going, something's going to either break down or explode. Which means I'm going to have to fix it."

Zhane, Kimberly, Dustin, Ashley, and Aisha all burst out laughing. Taylor and Vanessa both smirked, while Adam, Billy, and Ryan fought smiles. Nerina shot a slightly confused glance to Tommy, who was scowling at Hayley.

"Thanks, Hayley. So glad to have you aboard," he grumbled.

She shrugged. "If you're going, someone has to keep you in one piece."

Everyone else in the room froze.

"Wait, Tommy's going?" Rocky demanded. "Then who's R.C.?

"You're not ... you're not leaving Cruger as R.C. are you?" Shane asked warily. "I thought we had some excuse about him not needing the extra stress or something."

Tommy bowed his head, bracing his hands against the table for a moment. It was only when his shoulders started to shake that Wes actually realized he was laughing. "Doggie's not *that* bad, you know," he told them all, still chuckling. "He's inexperienced at dealing with Rangers, but that doesn't exactly mean he's incompetent - *or* completely heartless."

"That's not what Shane meant," Adam said quickly, silencing whatever Shane had been about to say in protest with a quick stare. "It's just ... we don't have a very good record of working well with Cruger."

"Which is why we make you deal with him," Rocky put in.

Tommy shook his head with a sigh. "If it makes you all feel better, I *have* decided to appoint a temporary Acting Ranger Commander while I'm gone."

"Thank you," Eric muttered reverently, ignoring the look Wes shot him.

"Kim."

She looked up from a notepad, blinking. "What?"

"I'm appointing you as Acting Ranger Commander," Tommy clarified.

"What?" she demanded, staring at him. "Are you insane?!!"

The rest of the room on the other hand, had gone silent in contemplation.

She turned to stare at them all. "You guys can't seriously think - "

"You are one of the few people who isn't afraid to stand up to Cruger, Kim," Aisha pointed out.

"You have one of the longest running Ranger careers of everyone that's staying," Karone reminded her.

"Adam was a Ranger longer!" Kimberly objected.

"But if I go too, Adam would be the Acting Drill Sergeant Captain," Jason said quietly. "He'll have
"Wait, you're going?" Zack asked Jason in alarm. "But if you go, who's going to be in charge of B Squad?"

"That'd be up to Adam. But it wouldn't be impossible to find a temporary Sergeant for B Squad." Jason sighed, looking down at the table. "I promoted every single one of those kids, Zack," he reminded him softly. "I told them they were the best, and made everyone else believe it."

"We *all* did that, Jase," Adam reminded him gently.

Jason dropped his head in his hand. "I know." He sighed. "I can't ... I can't really explain it. But I *need* to be out there looking for them."

Tommy nodded slowly. "If that's what you want, Jase. We're glad to have you aboard."

"Wait a minute," Kimberly protested. "I never agreed to be in charge yet!"

Tommy looked at her. "Kim, I said I was *appointing* you. That means you don't get a choice. It's already been decided. The only thing that would change my mind is if someone else had any objections." He glanced around the room.

Kimberly scowled at the silence, dropping her head into her arms on the table. "I hate you all," she muttered, voice muffled.

****

Wes looked up in alarm as Jason stormed into the officer's common room, throwing his datapad against a wall before flopping down into a chair. Even Wes could read the dark scowl on his face through the stiffness in his shoulders. "Jase ... ?" he asked cautiously. "What's wrong?"

"Cruger's taking over B Squad," Jason ground out.

"What - are you serious?" Shane demanded.

"I wish I wasn't," Jason muttered furiously. "We just had a big meeting about it. Kim and Adam are 'too busy' with their own departments on top of their usual duties to take on mentoring a Ranger team, and the rest of us are too 'emotionally involved' with B Squad, because they're Ranger Kids."

"Are you kidding me?" Taylor said incredulously. "That jerk's more 'emotionally involved' with Grumm's attack than any of us!"

Wes tried not to wince. He didn't want to say it, but ... he couldn't exactly blame Cruger. He was 'emotionally involved' with Grumm's attack too, after all - in a way that had *nothing* to do with Sky and the other kids.

--"Power protect us ... "

"They cracked the city dome. All those people - "

"We have to do something!"

"It's too late ... They're already gone."--

--"Oh no .... " Astro breathed.
He stared in horror at what had once been a beautiful ocean. Dead fish floated on the surface of the black water, seaweed stained a color that should not be found in nature at his feet. Somewhere in the distance, he saw what looked like the remains of a whale. A type Cestro had told them was very rare, and considered to be the pride of Aquitar.

There was blood in the water around the hole-filled corpse.

"Why ... why are we always too late?!" Mystic shouted, his voice filled with pain and guilt.

"I'm gonna be sick," Wind choked out.

He saw Turbo sit down hard out of the corner of his eye.

"Is there anything left to save?" Overdrive whispered.

"There has to be," he heard himself say. But even he didn't believe it."

"Fall back! Fall back!"

"No! We don't have Delphine! We have to - We have to -"

Overdrive, she's *gone*! We've gotta get out of here!"

"No! I'm not leaving without her! I'm not! Lemme go!"

"Sir?"

The hesitant sound of his son's voice snapped Wes's attention back to the room around him. He blinked rapidly for a moment, keeping his head down. It took several attempts at swallowing the lump in his throat before it was safe to look up.

Sky stood at attention, flanked by Bridge and Syd. Sky looked uneasy, while Bridge and Syd seemed downright upset. "Permission to speak, Sir?" Sky asked quietly.

Jason sighed, shaking his head. "At ease. Have a seat, guys. And forget the sir for now."

It was a silent understanding that whatever was said in this room was no longer under the restrictions of Drill Sergeant to his Squad.

Syd and Bridge were immediately on either side of him, looking anxious, while Sky remained where he was. "You're leaving?" Syd cried, sounding almost tearful. "Uncle Jason, you can't leave! We need you!"

"And why is the Commander taking over our Squad?" Bridge wanted to know. "Do we need a re-evaluation or did we do something wrong or -"

"Is this happening because we disappointed you?" Sky asked quietly.

"Whoa, *hold it*!" Jason snapped, holding up a hand. "Who said you did something wrong?"

There was an awkward pause.

"That's why Cruger's been sending us out, isn't it?" Sky said at last, his eyes on the ground.

Jason pushed himself up, walking straight up the teen. "Sky, look at me," he commanded. He waited for a moment while Sky slowly looked up. "I'm *proud* of B Squad, and everything you're
doing. You stepped up without question, and did what we needed you to do. You've done absolutely nothing wrong." He turned to include Bridge and Syd in his stare. "*Nothing*.

"Then ... why?" Syd asked softly. "Why are you turning us over to Cruger?"

He sighed. "Because we're going after A Squad."

That single statement seemed to make all three cadets light up in an instant. "You are?" Sky sounded somewhat hopeful.

Jason nodded. "We're sending a team from Newtech *and* a team from Japan. We're not going to leave them high and dry - you know better than that," he chided gently.

The tension in the room slowly began to relax. "Rangers protect their own," Bridge agreed cheerfully.

"That's right." The smile in Jason's voice was audible.

"But ... why Cruger?" Syd asked curiously.

Jason sighed. "I didn't get a choice. He made the order - not me. I was planning to put you under Adam, or have him appoint someone else, like Karone or maybe Carter."

"I like that plan," she said eagerly.

"Cruger wants to be involved."

Wes looked up as they all stared at him in surprise. He wasn't quite sure why he said it, but something about the way they were discussing Cruger's decision bothered him. Maybe he wasn't exactly thrilled with Cruger taking over B Squad, but that didn't mean he couldn't understand why.

Sky was looking at him oddly. "What do you mean, Dad?"

"He *needs* to be involved," he said again. He sighed, leaning forward to brace his chin against the tips of his fingers. "You're all forgetting something very important. Cruger's the last Sirian, remember? He's on Earth to make sure that doesn't happen again. He *needs* to work with you, to make sure Earth doesn't become a repeat of A - Sirius."

"Wes?" Taylor moved to touch his shoulder. He hadn't even seen her approaching him, and the concern in her voice was strange. "Are you okay?"

He looked up at her, blinking, and forced a smile. "When am I not okay, Taylor?"

"Don't make me call Eric," she retorted.

"Don't make me call Eric about what?" came from the doorway, and Wes scowled at her.

"Did you hear, Uncle Eric?" Bridge asked. "The commander's taking over B Squad."

"Oh, great." He could hear Eric rolling his eyes. "The most important time in building our defense, and our Ranger Squad is being directed by a non-Ranger? You guys are going to have to have your work cut out for you."

"What do we do if Cruger gives a command we don't approve of?" Sky asked hesitantly.

Eric leveled him with a look. "That would be considered insubordination, Cadet Tate." More
quietly, he added "If you hadn't already cleared it with the Acting Ranger Commander, seeing as she *is* the Supreme Commander over Ranger activity."

Wes shook his head, amused. "Are you *trying* to get them in trouble?"

Eric looked over at him. "Actually, I was trying to find something you stashed somewhere, and now I can't remember where it is."

He raised his eyebrows. "And what would that be?"

"I need the 'special' phone."

Wes straightened, staring at him in shock. "What? What do you need that for?"

"To prove a point." Eric glanced at Sky. "Come on, Brat. We need to make a phone call."

"What?"
"So ... *what* are you doing exactly?" Sky asked finally.

"Trying to get this stupid piece of futuristic junk to work," Eric muttered darkly, fussing over something as he tried to set the unit up on the kitchen table. They probably shouldn't have done it in such an open area, but Vanessa wouldn't be home for hours. And it wasn't like she didn't already know about it anyway; Wes had spilled that little secret long ago.

"It's not supposed to be that hard to set up," Wes argued. "I mean, it never was before."

"Yeah, and *you* set it up before - not me."

He sighed. "There *is* an instruction book, you know."

Eric's head came up with a glare. "I do *not* need instructions to do this. It's not that complicated."

"Then why isn't it working yet?" he returned, annoyed.

"Because I'm not done yet. Just be quiet for a minute and let me do this, okay?"

"Fine, fine. Whatever."

Sky gave him a skeptical look. He shook his head, silently raising a finger to his lips when Eric wasn't looking. It wasn't worth arguing about - at least not until Eric finally gave up.

"Hah! Got it!" Eric declared triumphantly, and Wes fought back a smile at the note of pride in his voice.

And then realized with a sinking feeling that he still wouldn't be able to operate the communicator. His SightMap couldn't see the details beyond that the stand was there. No screen. Which also meant that he wouldn't be able to see ...

He swallowed, and forced a smile as he gestured to the device. "Well, Eric. This is your show."

Eric looked at him oddly. "Are you -"

"Go ahead," he interrupted. "You know what you're doing."

At his side, Jen whined and nosed his hand reassuringly. He glanced down with a slightly warmer smile, scratching her ears reassuringly.

"Right. Well ... here goes."

There was a long moment of silence, and the screen seemed to flicker.
"Is it supposed to do that?" Sky asked warily.

"Shut it, Brat." Eric muttered, then started.

"This is Captain Scotts, head of Time Force Ranger Patrol. How can I - "

"Jen," interrupted a fainter, equally familiar voice. "That's not the main comm unit. That's the special one."

"The special ... ?" A confused pause, followed by a gasp. "Oh my - Wes? Eric? What are you - what's going on?"

"Wow, you guys look old!"

Wes snorted in spite of himself, ducking his head to hide the tears were beginning to threaten. "Gee thanks, Trip. You always know how to make a guy feel good about himself."

"What's going on? Why are you guys calling us?"

Eric shrugged. "Actually, I was calling for Sky, so he could talk to Alex."

Wes and Sky both looked at him in surprise, Wes in slight admiration and Sky in growing horror. If there was anyone who could help knock down Sky's hero-worship of Alex, it was Alex himself. Five minutes into a conversation and they'd be at each other's throats.

"I think you may have dialed the wrong time period, Wes," Trip apologized. "Technically, you should have been able to reach us at the same age as you are now - how old are you guys, anyway?"

"Who's Sky?" Jen asked suspiciously.

"For the record, *I'm* the one who called," Eric snapped. "And if you *have* to know, I'm forty-seven."

There was a stunned silence. "That ... that's weird," Trip said finally.

"What is?" Wes asked.

"We just got back from visiting you in the past a week ago," came another voice. "In fact, the last time we saw you, you were barely a year older than Jen, Katie, and I."

"Speaking of weird, since when do you hang all over Trip, Lucas?" Eric retorted.

"Since I'm allowed to touch my boyfriend," Lucas returned calmly.

"Lucas!" Trip hissed, in that embarrassed tone that meant he was blushing furiously.

Jen - the dog - whined beside Wes, and he knelt down to hug her, ruffling her fur. "It's okay, Jen," he murmured. "It's okay." He knew why she was upset; being in and out of S.P.D., the strange technology didn't bother her in the slightest. But on the other hand, she was extremely sensitive to his moods, and he was ... He wasn't sure if he could listen to this for much longer.

"What was that, Wes?" The human Jen sounded concerned.

"He's talking to Jen," Sky spoke up, and while he *sounded* confident and unaffected, Wes could read the undercurrent of nervousness in his son's voice.
"The dog," Eric clarified. "We call his dog Jen."

There was a sound that sounded suspiciously like a muffled snort.

"You have a dog, Wes?" Trip sounded fascinated. "I always wanted a dog ..."

"You have Circuit," Lucas reminded him.

"Well, yeah, but -"

"She was sort of ... necessary," Wes told them with what he hoped looked like a real smile.

"Why's that?"

There was an awkward silence at Trip's innocent question.

"Don't you know?" Sky demanded, sounding defensive. "I mean, you're in the future aren't you?"


"No, it's not. These people are supposed to be your teammates, aren't they? How can they ask something like that?" Sky asked hotly.

He stood up again, keeping a hand on Jen's head to keep her calm as he moved to squeeze Sky's shoulder. "Sky. Don't worry about it. It's fine." He forced another smile. "It's not like they haven't had their own issues to deal with."

"Why are you calling us with a civilian in the room?" Jen interrupted, and Wes fought the urge to flinch at her 'drill sergeant' voice. "You both know better than to let just anyone see this technology."

"What civilian?" Eric demanded. "Sky's a Ranger, not a civilian. And hey, I thought maybe he might like to talk to his brother. Excuse me for being sensitive."

"His what?" Lucas sounded puzzled.

"His brother," Eric repeated impatiently. "Look, is Alex available or what?"

"Actually, he's in a meeting with Ca - I mean, Admiral Logan," Trip said apologetically.

"And why do you need Alex?" Lucas asked warily.

Eric sighed in annoyance. "Do you people actually listen, or do you just have selective hearing? I thought Sky might want to talk to his brother. So how long is Alex going to be?"

"What does Sky's brother have to do with anything?"

There was another long silence.

"Are you being deliberately dense?" Eric asked finally.

"Eric!" Wes snapped.

"What? I say I wanted Sky to be able to talk to his brother, they tell me Alex is busy, and then ask what Sky's brother has to do with anything. Is there some sort of secret code you're all using that I don't know or something?" He folded his arms like he was getting angry, but Wes knew that it was
actually a defensive gesture; one he used when he tried to hide the fact that he was confused and a little hurt.

"What does Sky have to do with Alex?" Trip asked, sounding confused.

Wes, Eric, and Sky all froze.

"That's ... that's not funny, Trip," Wes managed at last.

"Who is Sky?" Jen demanded, sounding irritated.

"I'm Sky," the teen snapped back, equally frustrated.

"We're talking about Sky," Wes clarified, hoping they were just confused. "My son."

Even though he couldn't see them, the resounding shock was audible in the sudden silence.

"Your what?" Jen whispered.

"My son," he repeated, the feeling that something was very wrong beginning to grow. "Sky Tate."

"S.P.D. Blue," Eric added, sounding slightly smug.

"But ... there are no records of - "

"Trip!" Jen cut in sharply. "I don't understand. Wes, you ... you have a son?"

"Three, if you want to be specific," he returned quietly. "But you already know that."

"No. No, Alex and Ben are - " She cut herself off abruptly. "I have to go."

He felt a pang of disappointment and faint hurt. "But - "

"Will you at least tell Alex that we called?" Eric asked, sounding aggravated now.

"We'll ... we'll be in touch," Jen told them distantly.

"Hey, wait a - "Eric let out an angry huff. "So much for that."

"What were you trying to do, anyway?" Sky asked warily.

"You want to know so much about your brother, I figured you should be able to talk to him." Eric humphed again, glancing at the comm unit. "Didn't think it'd turn into another episode of the Time Force Weirdness Variety Hour."

Wes wanted to argue with him for insulting his friends, but he was suddenly very, very tired. He lifted a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose before rubbing his eyes.

"Wes?" Eric sounded concerned.

"Are you all right, Dad?"

"I'm fine," he said easily, waving them both off with a hand. "I just ... I think I'm gonna go lay down for awhile. I'm a little tired."

He was very aware of the two of them watching him as he went into his room, Jen trailing behind him.
It wasn't until they were both safely inside, door shut and locked as he lay on the bed with Jen curled up beside him before he allowed himself to relax. He buried his face against her neck, listening to her whine softly and lick at his shoulder while he tried to fight down the urge to cry.

All these years, and he couldn't even see their faces now. He tried to be upset that they hadn't known about Sky, or what else was going on in his life, but somehow it paled in comparison to that single thought. He tried desperately to bring them to mind, forcing himself to picture what they would have looked like. Jen all serious in her white Time Force uniform, Trip looking strangely perky and young for his position. Lucas, devastatingly handsome as ever, leaning over Trip's shoulder to see them just because it flustered the younger man.

And he realized with a sick, distant sort of feeling, that he *couldn't*. 
Ko-lin, Cassie's wife, comes from my *Fade to Darkness* fic. For anyone who's curious, I used this website to psychoanalyze her: http://www.phobias-help.com/complete_list_of_phobias.html

Wow, do I like to give my characters issues. o.O

The scream of delight would have gotten his attention if he'd been asleep, let alone going through paperwork like he was.

"Aunt Dana!"

*Dana's here?* he wondered distantly, rising to his feet. His eyes widened. Weren't Carter and Ryan supposed to be coming back from patrol right about now?

"I'm so glad you're here!" He could hear Syd gushing from the common room as he headed in their direction. "I could totally use some Pink support, but Aunt Kim's been too busy complaining about what Uncle Tommy did to her, and Aunt Karone's *always* busy."

"Then it's a good thing that I'm here, isn't it?"

"You have no idea," Wes interrupted as he entered the room. "Syd's was complaining about needing some serious girl talk, and all of Newtech's girl talkers are never available."

"Wes!" The warmth in Dana's voice was reassuring, although the sudden hug surprised him. "How are you doing?" she continued.

"I'm ... all right," he told her with a somewhat forced smile, trying to push away thoughts of last night's 'phone call'. "Getting by."

"Getting by?" She stepped back to put her hands on her hips, although the tone of her voice remained playful. "Am I going to have to schedule you for another physical?"

He pretended to shudder, holding up his hands in surrender. "No! No, that's not necessary." He paused to give her another smile, a real one this time. "You sound good."

"I'm 'getting by', too." she told, a smile in her voice that had been absent for longer than he cared to remember. "In fact, I wanted to ask you how Carter and Ryan were doing."

He froze. "Doing?" he echoed uncertainly.

"Yes, doing. Has Carter finally stopped being overly gentlemanly and 'fessed up to Ryan? Or did Ryan finally force him into something?"

"Uh ... " He had the sudden feeling he'd missed something in the conversation. "Um, forgive me if I'm overstepping my bounds here, Dana. But ... are you actually saying you *want* Carter and Ryan together?" he asked warily.
She sighed quietly. "I've had a lot of time to put things in perspective, Wes. And a lot of time to think about ... " She swallowed. "Kelsey, and Chad and Joel." She looked up at him again, and somehow he knew that her smile was slightly watery. "I want my team to be happy. And Ryan and Carter can make each other happy."

"That's if they'd actually get their acts together," Syd sighed, sounding unusually serious. "I mean, it's so obvious that there's something going on between them, but they're worse than Jack and Sky!"

"Jack and Sky?" Wes repeated, startled.

"Um, oops. I never said that. Seriously. Sky would *destroy* me," Syd said nervously. She turned to her aunt. "So, when can we go shopping?"

Wes looked at her oddly. "Shopping?"

They both gave him an exasperated stare. "Girl talk starts with shopping," Syd informed him.

"Be glad you never had a daughter, Wes. You'd never last," Dana agreed.

"Wes!"

He oomphed as he was nearly tackled in a hug, his eyes going wide in shock. "Cassie?! What are you doing here?"

The younger woman pulled back slightly, her enthusiasm subsiding. "We're meeting up with the Newtech Rescue Team," she explained. She forced a laugh. "And of course, we have to check up on the kids."

He gave her another hug, feeling guilty for bothering to ask. Ran Ko-Chan, A Squad's Pink, was Cassie's adopted daughter. And if Ashley had passed along the news about Jaz and Elizabeth, then of course Cassie would want to meet her friends' children for herself. "It's good to see you in person again. It's been way too long," he admitted.

"Same here," she agreed, squeezing tighter.

Cassie and Tori had, after all, been the only female members of the Drill Sergeants. And with Cassie at S.P.D. Japan, there was a certain lack of pushy feminism their department lacked now. A lack Wes found he sorely missed.

Cassie pulled away at last, turning to Syd. "And what's this I hear about shopping and girl talk?"

Syd flung herself against the two former Pinks with what sounded like a suspiciously teary sigh. "Why can't there be more Pink Rangers at Newtech?" she whined.

"Because Cam needs women willing to help him bully Hunter into things," Dana teased gently. "And Yellows are too soft for that."

"While we Pinks are bold and demanding, and proud of it," Cassie laughed.

It was true, Wes reflected quietly. And Syd fit into the 'Pink Tradition' well. She had the attitude and bold personality that many Pinks personified, as well as a certain delight in self-pampering - although some of that could be blamed on how much Ryan liked to spoil her. And as she'd proved earlier today, she had a bold, loving heart beneath it all.

"Dana ... "
Wes looked up, wincing as he saw Carter frozen in the doorway. He should have given the other man more of a warning before he walked in to find his ex-wife talking with his niece. The stiff and awkward way Carter was standing made him look like he'd been hit with the Canine Cannon.

And to his amazement, Dana walked up and hugged Carter, with a warm greeting of "Carter! I missed you."

A glance to Cassie showed she wasn't nearly as shocked by this as he was. In fact, the other woman seemed almost ... pleased.

He looked back to Carter and Dana just in time to see her pull back slightly - and gently slap him upside the head.

"W-what was that for?" Carter stammered, his hand going to his temple.

"For being stupid," she said simply. Her tone wasn't mean however, but almost ... motherly. "Give me about half an hour, Syd. Then the three of us can kidnap Kim and Karone to do some serious mall trolling."

"And Kim will *never* say no to mall trolling," Cassie agreed, wrapping an arm around the teen.

Syd waved cheerfully as Dana directed Carter out of the room. "Have fun, Carter! See you soon, Aunt Dana!"

"Why do I get the feeling I just missed something?" Z sounded amused as she came in, glancing back over shoulder at the retreating pair.

"Oh, Aunt Cassie! You have to meet Z," Syd gushed. "She's our Yellow. Z, this is Aunt Cassie - she's from S.P.D. Japan. She's the former Pink Astro Ranger."

Z looked stunned, but being Z, quickly recovered herself. "It's an honor," she said sincerely, offering a hand.

Cassie shook it, shaking her head. "Amazing," she murmured.

"What?" Z asked suspiciously.

"It's nothing," Cassie told her. "You just ... remind me a lot of someone I know."

Wes' eyes widened behind his sunglasses, looking at Cassie in alarm. She wouldn't ... would she? Ashley had said she'd make sure everyone knew not to say anything yet!

"Really? Who's that?" Z wanted to know.

"Ronny," Cassie replied, a grin to her voice. "She's S.P.D. Japan's Yellow Spot. You carry yourselves the same way - must be a Yellow Tradition."

Wes let out a slow sigh of relief as Z seemed to brighten at the thought. He cursed Cassie silently in Aquitian. Because he knew Cassie, and that near-comparison to a certain someone that Z greatly resembled *wasn't* an accident.

"You are causing trouble again," someone commented mildly.

Wes looked up and smiled at the sight of Ko-lin, Cassie's wife. She looked as stiff and formal as ever, but that was something he'd come to understand was just a part of Ko-lin being ... Ko-lin. The
Phantom Ranger had always been socially awkward from what he knew of her, and T.J. liked to swear that they would never have known who she was if Cassie hadn't hunted the mysterious Ranger down and forced her into staying on Earth.

"I am not," Cassie protested. "I was just saying that you can tell Z is a Yellow Ranger."

"I might have guessed that by the alarmingly citrine trim to her uniform," Ko-lin replied, turning to nod to him solemnly. "It is good to be in your company once again, Wes. I trust you are well?"

He grinned at Ko-lin's overly formal speech, which hadn't faded in the slightest for all the years he'd known her. "As well as can be. And you?"

"Much the same," she returned.

"You're so mean, Lin," Cassie sulked. "You know what I meant."

"Of course I do. I am also well aware that Sergeant Robinson does not appreciate being known as S.P.D. Japan's 'Yellow Spot.'" Ko-lin reminded her. She inclined her head to the two teens. "Cadet Drew. Cadet Delgado. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am certain that you will both bring pride and honor to the Rangers who have served before you."

Both girls flushed, and Syd actually remembered to make herself salute, Z quickly following. "Thank you, Sergeant Specialist Ko-Chan," Syd said solemnly. "That means a lot to me, coming from the Phantom Ranger."

Z started, and Wes could see her taking stock of the older woman now.

Ko-lin nodded, hesitantly stepping forward to lay a hand on Syd's shoulder. "I say this also as an ... 'aunt', Sydney. I believe that you will make us proud."

She flinched when Syd glomped her happily, and looked more than slightly relieved when Cassie pried Syd free.

"Lin doesn't do the touching thing, remember Syd?" Cassie reminded her gently. "She thinks everyone else has cooties."

Even Wes could see the irritated look Ko-lin shot her as Syd giggled. Ko-lin didn't do 'the touching thing' because she had an actual phobia of being touched, due to the traumas in her past that led to her becoming the Phantom Ranger. There were more phobias she suffered from, but he couldn't remember them all off the top of his head. The psych file on the Phantom Ranger had been required reading when he'd first joined S.P.D.; Ko-lin was still jumpy around them all and had a tendency to get a bit trigger happy when startled. He still didn't know how or why Cassie had chosen to marry a woman with as many issues as Ko-lin had, but ... well, as long as they were happy.

"Daddy!" Syd squealed, startling Wes' attention back to her. She threw herself into Ryan's arms, giggling in delight when he spun her around obligingly. "Daddy, Aunt Dana and Aunt Cassie are gonna take me shopping. Can I take the gold card?" she asked in the sweetest tone she could manage, and Wes was willing to bet money she was batting her eyes at him.

Unfortunately, Ryan had frozen at the first name she'd listed. "Dana's here?" he asked uncertainly.

"Daddy ... " Syd whined, tugging on his sleeve. " Didn't you even hear how I brought in Rhynx today? *And* got Bridge and Boom to upgrade R.I.C. for Uncle Dustin? He can bark again!"
"Of course I did, Princess," Ryan answered, looking down at her. He reached out to stroke her hair gently. "And I'm *very* proud of you. You deserve a chance to go have some fun." He kissed her forehead, pulling back to look at her. "Are you sure your aunt's really here?"

Syd nodded. "Mm-hmm. She already dragged Carter off when she saw him. She said she'd be ready to go in about half an hour."

"Dana and Carter are going to be alone for half an hour?" Ryan swayed like he was going to be sick.

"It's okay, Ryan," Cassie interrupted, sounding amused beneath her gentle tone. "Dana's just going to straighten a few things out with Carter, and then you can have him back." She paused, and Wes knew she was grinning. "Hey, maybe you can even get you to tell you about her big news later."

"It is *not* big news," Dana retorted from behind her brother. "It's just a date." She caught Ryan in a hug when he turned, squeezing just as tightly as she had with Carter. "I missed you, big brother," she told him quietly.

"Date?" Ryan demanded. "With who?"

Wes looked curiously at Carter, who seemed stunned. He waited for Carter to look up before tilting his head inquiringly. Was Carter okay?

Carter shrugged slowly, looking back at Dana and Ryan with a stunned expression.

"We'll have to catch up later tonight, after the meeting. In the meantime, the girls in Pink are having a day out," Dana said at last. She kissed Ryan's cheek, then turned to kiss Carter's as well. "You two have some things to talk about too, I think." She stepped back to put her hands on her hips again. "And I want results by the time I get back. Or else I'll have to get involved, and I *know* you don't want that."

Carter shuddered. "No! No, um ... we can ... we can handle it, Dana. Thanks."

Wes suddenly *really* wanted to know what she'd told him while they were alone.

Dana turned to Syd and Cassie with a smile. "Well? What are we waiting for?"

Cassie gave Ko-lin a quick kiss. "Don't wait up."

"I would not dream of it," the other woman returned dryly. "Please refrain from any action that would require me to discuss your situation with the local law enforcement."

"That was one time!" Cassie said hotly. "When are you going to let it go?"

"Enjoy your night with the girls," Ko-lin returned, kissing her lightly.

"Come on, Cassie. We can complain about our love lives while we shop," Dana reminded her. "Let's go get Karone and Kim."

Cassie eyed Syd as the three walked out of the room arm in arm. "You said something about a gold card?"
Wes sighed as he wandered down the hall. He was brooding and he knew it, but he couldn't help it. While B Squad was being debriefed about their newest enemy, so were the former Rangers.

**Broodwing.**

Lacking substantial evidence or not, there was no doubt in his mind that Broodwing was still tied up with Grumm, even after the colossal 'failure' the Trobian Empire considered Aquitar to be. Just as there was no doubt that Broodwing was responsible for the kidnapping and eventual loss of Elizabeth and Jaz. Just as he knew for a ***fact*** that Broodwing had a hand in Mirloc.

He tried not to shudder at the name.

"Hey, Uncle Wes! What are you doing on this end of S.P.D.?” a voice called jubilantly.

He turned to find himself just outside the Squads common room, blinking at Bridge as the teen waved from where he’d braced himself upside down against the opposite wall. He sighed, smiling faintly as Bridge tended to make him do, and headed over to him. "Hey, Bridge. What are you thinking about?” he asked as he sat down.

"Meditating," Bridge returned cheerfully. "It's more comfortable like this."

"I'll take your word for it." He paused, studying the young Ranger more closely for a moment. "I heard you had a rough day. You okay?"

"Mmm ... Mostly. A bit bruised, but those are going away."

Wes sighed, looking down for a moment as once again, memories of Trip flickered through his mind. "And the other bruises?" he asked quietly. "The ones the Power doesn't heal?"

There was a pause.

"Even those fade eventually," Bridge said softly. He swallowed. "You know, Brawda taught me a lot about empathy, and learning to read through surface emotions. He always said that no matter what you ***thought*** a person might be feeling, if you really wanted to know, you'd have to dig deeper to see their 'true heart'." He paused, his voice quieting further. "I know the others are annoyed by me sometimes, but I know that doesn't mean they don't care at all."

Wes looked at him for a long moment. "You're an amazing person, Bridge," he said at last, reaching out to ruffle the boy's hair despite the awkward position. "You really are."

And in an instant, Bridge was back to his usual perky self. "Thanks, Uncle Wes."

"There you are. I was lookin' for you," a voice called.
Wes looked up as Jack wandered almost hesitantly into the room, stopping to flash a smile at Bridge. "I'm glad you're okay, Bridge," he told him, pausing to pat Jack's shoulder as he passed him. "I'll let you two talk."

He made a slight detour just outside the door, listening to their conversation with half an ear as he quietly keyed his morpher. "This is Time. I need anyone from the Carson family."

"What's wrong with Bridge?" came Adam's voice immediately. "I thought they said he was fine."

"Kat said she checked him out, and he was healing without any complications," Rocky agreed, sounding anxious.

"He is," Wes interrupted, knowing how much Rocky could build himself up into a frenzy if he was allowed to worry long enough. "But he sounds like he could use some reassurance." He paused, thinking of the best way to put it. "He's having an Adam Moment."

"Oh ... " Rocky, Zack, and Aisha murmured in unison.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Adam asked sharply.

"It's nothing, Adam," Rocky tried to reassure him. "I'll take care of it."

"I'm stuck in here for another hour before someone else shows up," Aisha sighed in frustration. "Zack, hug him for me, will you?"

"You got it."

"*What* are you all talking about?"

He ended the transmission without listening to the answer for Adam's frustrated question, leaning back against the wall for a moment.

Bridge was, without a doubt, his parents' child. He had Rocky's incredible charm and easy smile, Adam's quiet brilliance, Zack's energy, and Aisha's determination to get things done right - whether others agreed with him or not. It would have been easy to blame his perfect blend of personalities on his ability to absorb thoughts and emotions around him, but Wes doubted that was it. Somewhere underneath all the babble and seemingly random trains of thought, Bridge was entirely his own person.

Unfortunately, what Wes had labeled an 'Adam Moment' was a reference to the quiet way Bridge was forcing himself to forget that something had been bothering him, and move on. It was a horrible habit that Adam had developed long before he'd met him, and much to everyone's dismay, Bridge seemed to have inherited it along with Rocky's ability to fake a smile. Also unfortunately, just like with Adam, it was like pulling teeth to make him admit that something had ever been wrong at all.

The startled yell from inside the room made him spin, rushing back to the two teens. He found Jack flat on his face on the floor, moaning, and Bridge looking mildly concerned. "Are you okay, Cadet Landors?" Wes asked, crouching down beside him.

Jack grunted faintly. "Yeah ... Yeah, I'm fine." He groaned as Wes helped him to his feet. "Somebody remind me to never, ever do that again."

"Never, ever do that again, Jack," Bridge repeated obligingly.
Jack sighed, his head dropping for a moment. "Thanks, Bridge."

"Why, Cadet Landors. You have the look of someone who's been 'Bridged'," Rocky said cheerfully as he passed them, heading straight for his son.

"'Bridged'?" Jack repeated warily.

"Don't ask," Zack advised, clapping the teen's shoulder and making him start in surprise. "It's a Rocky thing."

"What's a rocky thing?" Jack wondered.

Bridge, to Wes' surprise, laughed as he launched himself easily out of his handstand and back to his feet. "No, not rocky as in uncertain. Rocky as in my dad - Rocky DeSantos." He gestured to Rocky with a broad smile. "And then this is my dad, Zack Taylor."

"And your dad Adam Park, who still wants to know what an 'Adam Moment' is," the third male parent of the Carson clan muttered, moving to hug his son.

Zack snickered at the look on Jack's face. "It's not as complicated as it sounds," he assured him.

"Don't bet on it," Wes murmured with a faint smirk, unable to resist.

Zack reached out to swat him. "Technically, Bridge has two dads - Rocky and Adam."

"Three!" Bridge corrected in a muffled voice, somewhere from where he'd been sandwiched between said parents.

Zack chuckled. "Let me finish, Bridge. Rocky and Adam are Bridge's biological parents," he went on, looking at Jack again. "I'm the dad who helped raised him, partly because I'm married to his mom."

"And because you helped him birth him!" Rocky retorted in much the same tone as Bridge had used.

Zack sighed, shaking his head. "My wife is Bridge's mom because she was the surrogate mother for Rocky and Adam, and she's the one who actually gave birth to him. So because he's Bridge and it's just easier that way, he calls her mom and all three of us dad."

"Easier for all of you, you mean," Wes pointed out.

Zack waved a hand. "Whatever. Got it?" he added to Jack.

"Uh ... "

"Good." He patted Jack's shoulder again absently before moving to the trio in front of them. "All right, move aside, make some room. I gotta give hugs for two, you know."

Wes smiled as Jack looked at him helplessly. "Simple version?" he offered.

"Please?"

"Bridge is a tribal baby. He was raised by four people; three dads, one mom. Same with his sister." Wes explained.

Jack threw his hands up. "Why couldn't he have just said that?" he demanded. "Is he the one where
the Bridge Talk comes from?"

"No, that's just Bridge." Wes paused. "Maybe a little Cam."

"Cam? Who's Cam?"

"Um ... that's ... not important. Don't worry about it." He smiled, reaching out to wrap an arm around Jack's shoulder and direct him back toward the door. "Let's let them be for awhile, shall we?"

"Is there something going on here that I'm not allowed to know about?" Jack demanded even as he followed.

Wes sighed, glancing back over his shoulder to make sure they were well out of ear-shot. "Bridge had a Green Day. He just needs a little reassurance, is all."

"What's a 'Green Day'?"

"Well, at S.P.D. we sort of have a habit of stereotyping Ranger Colors," he admitted. "With Green, there's technically two types: the trouble magnets, and the ones who like to fade into the background so they can take care of everyone else. Bridge is sort of a little of both unfortunately, and today was kind of a sample of that."

Jack looked at him oddly. "You can stereotype our colors?"

"Oh, sure. It's pretty easy, actually. Reds are stubborn leaders, and bad things tend to happen around us. Blues are even more stubborn than Red, and tend to be the smart ones. Yellows are the ones who try to make you feel better, but they won't take no for an answer if you try and avoid them. Pinks are bold and pushy, but loving ... " He thought for a moment, then decided against mentioning anyone else: Jack really only needed to worry about the colors he was working with now.

Jack was silent for a moment. "Am I a good Red?" he asked quietly. "I ... I don't ... trust my team very well. And I'm still working on the whole 'leader' thing .... "

Wes stopped him, not caring that they were in the middle of the hall. "Jack," he interrupted quietly. "You're trying, aren't you? And you're learning. That counts for a lot more than you think it does."

Jack looked up almost shyly, reminding him once again, that he was really just a young kid from the streets, still trying to learn how to do the right thing. He hadn't asked for this, hadn't wanted it, was barely earning it. But he still tried. "It does?"

He smiled at him. "Yeah. It does."
This ... is not what I planned to have happen at all. But it did, and it actually kinda works out better than what I was planning. So, um ... -Hides-

--"Who's Sky?"--

Wes sighed, rolling over. The strange conversation with the Time Force Rangers had been bothering him for the last few days, but now that he was in bed with nothing else to distract him, Jen's words kept flickering through his mind. Over and over, on constant repeat, with flickers of Trip and Lucas between.

--"Wow, you guys look old!"--

--"Who's Sky?"--

He glanced up at the clock at his bedside. Yet another thing specially made just so his SightMap could pick it up. Billy had tried to explain how it worked, but Wes had stopped him before his head could hurt too badly. It worked, and that was all that counted.

11:02pm.

--"Speaking of weird, since when do you hang all over Trip, Lucas?"

"Since I'm allowed to touch my boyfriend."--

He'd always wondered if Lucas and Trip had finally gotten it together and started dating. Trip's crush on Lucas was painfully obvious to anyone with eyes, but Lucas had always been too restrained to respond. His answers had always been different every time Wes had tried to ask why he didn't do anything about it: 'Trip? Are you kidding me?' 'This isn't the time for working on relationships', 'I can't see Trip that way', 'This time period doesn't deal with male couples well', 'It's just a crush; he'll get over it', 'Trip's just a kid' ...

But every time Wes had asked, he'd always noticed that each time, Lucas' answer was different.

And apparently, now Lucas had finally worked through whatever issues he had. Trip seemed happy, if not embarrassed. And Lucas wasn't shy about it, which was good. If Lucas spent less time on himself and Trip learned to speak up, they'd make a good pair. Although he was pretty sure Katie would go into Big Sister Mode on them both to make sure things worked out.

He wondered where Katie had been during the call. It wasn't like her to stay silent in the background, so she must not have been there. Maybe checking up on Alex?

--"Actually, he's in a meeting with Ca - I mean, Admiral Logan."--

So the good captain got promoted. He didn't know much about him, but he hoped it was something he deserved. Jen had always seemed to trust him, at least.
"Why are you calling us with a civilian in the room? You both know better than to let just anyone see this technology."—

Squad Leader Scotts at her finest, as Katie had liked to say. Oh, wait - it was Captain Scotts now, wasn't it? There was something about being promoted after they'd gone back to the future with Ransik and the others...

He smiled faintly. By Ranger standards, Jen would be considered Commander Scotts, while he was the captain. He wondered what her S.P.D. title would have been. He could see her as part of the training department... Sergeant Commander Scotts. Yeah, that sounded about right.

Huh. Jennifer Scotts. Jason Scott. Maybe they were related somehow. Jen *did* act a lot like Taylor, and Casey looked just like her father...

"Who's Sky?"—

He looked at the clock again.

12:16am.

He laid back again with a sigh. He knew he *needed* to sleep. He had work tomorrow. But for some reason, his brain just wouldn't shut off. He couldn't seem to just relax and stop thinking for once.

"You have a dog, Wes? I always wanted a dog..."—

A glance to the foot of the bed found Jen fast asleep, stretched out to cover as much space as she could possibly take up. She wasn't a small dog, but she wasn't big, either. And yet somehow he was still forced to pull his legs just to the side of her if he wanted to stretch out.

He smiled fondly, shaking his head. Silly mutt.

"She was sort of... necessary."

"Why's that?"

"Don't you know? I mean, you're in the future aren't you?"—

He sighed, laying back against the pillow. Did they not know about... what happened? Or were they just not allowed to say anything because it could change the future? Maybe Trip was just being - well, Trip? He didn't always think about what he was saying before he said it.

But S.P.D. was always touting him as some hero. And if Time Force was the future of S.P.D., wouldn't they know then? Maybe... maybe Time Force *wasn't* S.P.D. He'd always thought it was, but maybe he was wrong.

"These people are supposed to be your teammates, aren't they? How can they ask something like that?"—

He rolled over again to bury his face against his pillow. Trip could be a little dense sometimes, but he wasn't insensitive. And Jen wouldn't have let him get away with saying something that could be interpreted the wrong way. Lucas hadn't even said anything about it at all.

Maybe they really *didn't* know. About... about the - Then. That he was blind. Maybe they just... didn't know. They weren't pretending not to know, or being cold about it. They just didn't know
any better.

But *why* didn't they know any better? Why wouldn't Time Force have records of the battle? They'd lost *Rangers*; wouldn't they at least have some sort of memorial to them still? Some sort of historical document stating that they gave their lives to protect civilians?

--"What does Sky have to do with Alex?"--

He closed his eyes tightly, swallowing hard. What did Sky have to do with Alex? *Everything*! Sky wouldn't even have been born if he hadn't done what Alex needed him to - hadn't allowed Time Force to -

He sat up, blinking.

Time Force kidnapped Alexander and Benjamin. Alex said he was created from their DNA. That was what he told Jen and the others, and it was what Wes had learned from the Chrono Morphers.

He could feel the blood draining from his face.

*Alex didn't know.*

They hadn't known that Sky was Alex's brother because they didn't know Alex was his *son*. Alex thought ...

"No ... " he whispered, feeling his chest grow tight.

Alex didn't know he had parents. He thought he was just part of a DNA process; he'd never even known they actually *wanted* him. All he'd ever known was the labs, and the scientists who'd used him to perfect the Red Chrono Morpher. Without Ben and Trip to look after, and later Jen to mellow him out, he might not have considered himself to be *human*.

--"*Who* is Sky?"

"*I'm* Sky."--

Alex had never known anything beyond Time Force. So Time Force had never told him more than he was the genetic child of two Time Force Rangers. That was what he'd told Wes by accident when their morphers merged - not that he was kidnapped.

I thought they were going to steal some samples of our genetic coding. Not our *kids*, he thought distantly.

His stomach rolled over before he did, and he ran for the bathroom.

****

The tea wasn't doing as much to settle the nausea as he'd hoped it would, but he knew there was no way he could sleep now.

--"*But ... there are no records of - ""

"Trip! I ... I don't understand. Wes, you ... you have a son?"

"Three, if you want to be specific. But you already know that."
He buried his face into his arms, trying not to whimper.

"If you squeeze that thing any tighter, you're going to start bleeding."

He glanced at his right fist, where he'd been holding on to Jen's Time Force badge since he'd wandered back out to the kitchen. He wasn't sure why he'd picked it up at first, other than a fierce desire to throw it as far across the room as he could in hopes it would shatter. But then he'd taken to looking at it, and realizing that he could barely remember what *that* looked like anymore, let alone his old team.

Hands gently pried his fist open before he was aware of what Eric was doing, carefully removing the badge to set it on the table. "Yeah, *that's* gonna leave a bruise," Eric remarked. He shot him a look. "Smart, Wes. Real smart." Then he froze, staring at him. "Wes ... ?"

"Yeah?" His voice sounded hoarse and weak even to his own ears.

There was a soft sigh, and Eric sat down beside him. "How long have you been awake thinking about whatever's going on in your head?" he asked quietly.

Wes shrugged. "What time is it?"

"Quarter to four."

"Almost six hours." He sighed, burying his face against his hand. His forehead hit his Chrono Morpher by accident, and he reached for it furiously, grabbing at the strap to rip it off and throw it across the room.

The moment his hand touched it, a dark, desperate feeling of *wrong* swept through him.

Before he could stop to contemplate the sensation, Eric had caught his hand. "Whoa! What the heck are you doing?" he demanded.

"Alex doesn't know," he heard himself say. Great, his mouth was working for him on its own again. Wasn't that fun?

Eric looked at him like he'd grown another head. "What?"

He shook his head, laying it against the table again a moment later. "You always thought I let Alexander and Benjamin be kidnapped," he said thickly, wondering distantly if he was going to cry again. "But that's not exactly what happened."

The hand on his tensed. "... What do you mean?" Eric asked slowly.

He let out a shaky breath. "I knew ... that Alex is our son. Genetically. What I learned when our morphers merged, was that Alex was born from DNA created from you and me - and so was his brother, Ben. I told him that made him - them - our sons, and it didn't matter how they were actually born, because it didn’t. But I didn't know that Time Force would actually kidnap our boys because they *were* Alex and Ben."

He heard Eric suck in his breath sharply, and looked up with moist eyes. "I thought, that I was going to protect them from *hurting* the boys - not take them away from us completely. I thought about it, but I didn't think Time Force could actually do that without damaging the time stream." He swallowed, and knew for certain that he was crying now. "And when I was thinking earlier, I
realized that Alex doesn't know that he's our *son*. He thinks he's just a DNA experiment."

Eric was staring at him, sitting so still he barely looked like he was breathing.

"He doesn't realize he was born because I love you," he finished, his voice cracking.

But Eric just continued to remain where he was, frozen in shock.

Wes slowly pulled his hand free and rose to his feet. He smiled faintly to himself, shaking his head before raising an arm to wipe at his face. "So I gave up everything, just to make things worse."

"Everything ... ?"

Eric's voice was so quiet he barely heard him.

He glanced back, forcing a watery smile. "Well, yeah. I gave up you, didn't I?"

And because there was no possible way for Eric to hate him anymore than he already did, because his heart felt like it had shattered into splinters for what had to have been the third time in his life, and because he so desperately wanted ... something, even for a moment, he leaned in before Eric could say another word, and kissed him.
Welcome to the Club

Chapter Notes

Um, short. Written just before work. And not exactly answering the last cliffhanger, either. Sort of. x.x

"What were you thinking?" Eric shouted. "Or were any of you even thinking at all? Did it ever occur to you that maybe you were doing something completely *stupid*?!"

The five teens in front of him shifted uncomfortably.

"What *possible* reason could have come into your heads for this?" he snarled, turning to look directly at Sky and Jack. He knew, instinctively, that they'd been the ones to instigate what had to be the dumbest stunt B Squad had attempted yet.

While on their day off, B Squad had gone out for some time away from S.P.D. It was something they'd all been encouraged to do, as everyone knew the team was still fairly young, and needed plenty of time to bond. Perfectly acceptable.

But B Squad apparently couldn't be trusted to do as they were told. Apparently they'd caught sight of a group of criminals in the process of stealing a car. Being that they'd arrested such a group before, they'd decided to take it upon themselves to get involved.

What they'd gotten involved in was a massive drug bust investigation that had been going on for *months*. F Squad had nearly caught them multiple times, suffering many injuries in the process. And maybe his Squad wasn't Ranger track, but that was what they were *trained* to do. B Squad had no business getting involved, especially on their day off.

"You know why you don't get involved in fights you haven't been sent out to, without backup," he growled, deliberately looking at Sky, Syd, and Bridge. "And if you need a reminder, I can send you over to C Squad to talk to Cadet Fernandez."

All three cadets visibly flinched.

Cadet Rhythm Fernandez was the son of Trent Fernandez. It was his mother, Kira, that had been destroyed in a fight she'd had no reason to be involved in. And as the one of her children who had inherited his mother's abilities, Ry had taken it upon himself to join S.P.D. as a way to honor her memory. Something that both his father and sister refused to condone: they both blamed S.P.D. for Kira's loss.

"Breathe, Sergeant Myers. No one was hurt, and everything worked out. Even Storm Blaster came through without a scratch."

He turned to scowl at Justin Stewart as the younger man joined him. F Squad had needed a certain reassurance that the car the thieves were after couldn't be stolen, so he'd gotten the idea to call Justin up for a favor. The former Ranger had brought his sentient car all the way from S.P.D. Japan just for this final arrest, and if he hadn't, there was a good chance it wouldn't have happened at all.

"This is *my* lecture, Lieutenant Stewart. I'd appreciate it if you'd let me deal with it my way."
Justin shrugged. "Well I would, if you weren't lecturing more like an overprotective parent than a Drill Sergeant," he said simply. "And like I said, no one was hurt. Yes, they shouldn't have gotten involved, but they're Rangers, aren't they? That's what we do."

Eric growled. "They're the only Rangers S.P.D. has right now; they can't afford to be taking stupid risks!"

Justin looked at him for a moment, studying him. Then he shrugged abruptly. "It's your base's Squad. How you want to handle this is your decision."

He sighed, pinching his nose in frustration. Great. *Justin* thought he was out of line, and Justin was freakishly easy-going. Which meant he *was* out of line.

"Cadet Landors, take your Squad to Command and report to Cruger," he sighed at last. "Tell him I sent you, and tell him why. Cadet Drew, you will be stopping by Sergeant Oliver's office and informing her that you have a Ranger disciplinary issue, and ask her to accompany you to Command before you join the rest of the Squad. If either of them have any questions, have them call Squad Leader Randall." He waved a hand. "Dismissed."

"Sir!"

He sighed again as Sky hesitated while the others were leaving. "Yes, Cadet Tate?"

Sky frowned. "Sir ... permission to speak freely?"

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "What is it, Sky?"

"Is ... is something wrong?" Sky asked warily. "You don't seem like yourself today."

*Don't seem like myself.* He fought down a laugh. *Don't seem like myself? Well, maybe because I'm not! Maybe someone did something completely *stupid* and I don't know how to deal with it now!* Does anyone around here ever bother to *think* before they act?!

He took a deep breath. "It's nothing, Sky. Don't worry about it."

The Brat was giving him one of Vanessa's 'Who Do You Think You're Kidding' looks now. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine." It came out sharper than he'd meant it to, and he sighed again. "Just ... go, Sky. I'll see you later."

"Sir, yes Sir," Sky grumbled, giving a pathetic attempt at a salute before he walked off.

Eric resisted the urge to throw something after him.

"She's beautiful."

Justin's soft words made him pause as he tried to think of where that might have come from, then winced as he realized what the other man meant. "Yeah, she is," he managed, feeling incredibly awkward.

Justin smiled faintly. "She looks like her mother."

"Has her attitude, too," he muttered. "That girl refuses to back down on *anything*, even when she knows she's wrong."
"Yeah, that's Rose all right," Justin chuckled. He glanced over at him. "So what's the issue with you? And don't tell me it's nothing, because I'd have to be Andros or Karone not to notice."

He snorted in spite of himself. It had become somewhat of a running joke around S.P.D. that Andros and Karone had a tendency to be painfully oblivious to what was right in front of their faces. Both siblings profusely denied it, but after the stories Zhane had been more than happy to share, even he had to admit they were pretty bad.

"My kid's driving me crazy. My Squad made an arrest by the skin of their teeth. My love life stinks. What else is new?" he said finally.

Justin clapped him on the shoulder with a bemused smile. "My daughter doesn't even know she's mine, and I got to watch her nearly get shot today. My wife is taking off on a rescue mission that she doesn't know when she's coming back from. And my car likes to complain that I need to get out of the lab and go driving more often. Welcome to the club, Eric."

He sighed, shaking his head. "Can I revoke my membership?"

"If that was possible, there wouldn't *be* a club. Come on. Let's go see how well your Squad cleaned up the mess those guys left."

****

"Wes screwed up again, didn't he?"

He glanced up at Vanessa as she leaned against the doorframe of his office. "If you're going to ask about this, we're doing it with the door closed," he said flatly.

She raised an eyebrow as she stepped inside, allowing it to slide closed behind her. "He must have *really* fucked up," she commented.

He stared at his desk, but he wasn't really seeing the paperwork spread out all over it. "He kissed me," he said finally.

There was a soft groan, and the sound of Vanessa sliding into a seat across from him. "He must have *really* fucked up," she commented.

He shrugged. "He was talking about Alex being born because he loves me. And that he gave everything up just to make things worse. Something about Alex not knowing he's ours - he wasn't making a whole lot of sense."

"And then he just kissed you?"

He nodded.

There was a long pause. "I could go beat the crap out of him for you, if you want," Vanessa offered.

He buried his face in his hands with a groan. "I don't know what I want."

After a moment, he felt a hand gently squeeze his shoulder. "You will," she said softly. "You will."

He was tempted to tell her she was full of it, but he couldn’t bring himself to say it. Nothing was ever as simple as Vanessa liked to claim it was. Especially not with Wes.
*Especially* Wes.
"Hey, Time."

He glanced up, forcing a faint smile. "Hey, Turbo. What are you doing here?"

Justin shrugged as he joined him on the bleachers overlooking the training grounds. "Rose is about to leave with one of the rescue teams, and Eric called me up to see if he could borrow Storm Blaster. Which turned into him flipping out on B Squad, and finally telling me his love life stinks. So I figured if *Eric* is having issues, you could use a friend."

He sighed, rubbing his temples. "I did something really stupid," he muttered finally. "Really, incredibly stupid."

"Which was?"

"I kissed him."

Justin tilted his head. "And you did this because ... ?"

"I realized something about Alex the other night - Future Alex. And I told Eric, but he just kept ... staring at me. I figured there was no way he could possibly hate me *more* so, I ... "

Justin reached up to rub his forehead. "Not one of your more brilliant decisions," he admitted. "What'd he do?"

Wes sighed, burying his face against his hands. "That's just it. He didn't ... do *anything*, really. He didn't push me away; just stared at me when I finally stopped. Then he got up and went to his room. Just left me standing there. I've never felt like such a complete jerk before." he mumbled.

"Sure you have. You just don't remember."

"Thanks, Turbo. Really appreciate the support."

"What are friends for?" Justin leaned back on his hands, looking thoughtful. "What I find interesting is Eric's reaction. He doesn't push you away - just walks off like it never happened. But with him being a total baka today, it hints that he's bothered by it for some reason."

Wes glanced at him. "Are you channeling Wind? And what's 'baka' mean?"

A hand smacked him upside the head. "No, *that's* channeling Wind," Justin returned pleasantly. "And baka means idiot. There's better words, but." He gestured vaguely at his wrist.

"And I'm not the idiot?" Wes muttered, rubbing his head.

"Well, if you want to get technical. Although we could also call you sescah."
"Sea scum." He sighed, shaking his head at the Aquitian word. "Thanks."

"Anytime."

Silence lingered for a moment as Wes continued to rub his temples.

"Headache?" Justin asked finally.

"Growing migraine," he corrected. "I've been getting them a lot lately. Probably stress."

"Maybe it's your SightMap. Is it malfunctioning?"

He shrugged. "Not that I can tell. Like I said, it's probably just stress."

"Maybe you should probably just go to one of the Docs." While Justin's tone was light, it wasn't quite a suggestion.

"I'm fine," he answered, smiling faintly. "Stop worrying. You really *are* channeling Wind."

Justin shrugged. "It's a Blue thing."

Wes glanced at him. "So what would you say if you were channeling Overdrive?"

"Hmm ... " Justin tapped his chin thoughtfully. "Overthinking leads to headaches. So underthinking means less headaches, which means you should stop thinking all together."

He blinked. "Wow. You're good."

"Thank you, thank you." Justin glanced at him. "So you mind if I ask you?"

Wes didn't bother to wonder what he meant. "What do you want to know?"

There was a slight turn of Justin's head, and while he couldn't really see it, he suspected the corner of his mouth was lifted in that way he did when he was amused. "You have to ask? Everything."

He smiled a little. "Well, she's very bold. Strong, determined. She managed to memorize the S.P.D. Handbook inside a day - Sky complained about it for hours. She butts heads with Syd and Sky constantly. Gets along with Bridge about as well as anyone else does. She calls Jack her brother, but she's not afraid to tell him off for doing something wrong."

Justin chuckled softly. "So she's a Yellow through and through?"

He nodded. "Complete with the attitude."

"She looks just like Rose."

"So I hear," he said easily, ignoring the slight flare of annoyance because he couldn't agree. His head throbbed again, and he reached up to rub his temple.

"Are you sure you don't at least want me to take a look at the SightMap?" Justin asked, sounding concerned.

Wes waved him off with a hand. "It's fine."

"Sergeant Collins, Sir."

He glanced up. "At ease, Cadet Delgado. What is it?"
Z seemed to hesitate, glancing at Justin. "Well ... I heard that Lieutenant Stewart was the one who owns that blue jeep we saw today - "

"'Owns' is a strong word," Justin interrupted wryly. "But yes, he's mine."

"I was wondering if I could take a look under the hood," She fidgeted slightly, which was odd for Z. "I was curious to know more about the engine."

Justin rose to his feet with a smile. "You're into cars?"

"A little. I used to help Papa Max fix his car sometimes. He hates spending the money to go to a mechanic, but he's not good enough to do it himself. So he gets in over his head a lot."

Justin laughed. "Yeah, that sounds like something Max would do." He glanced at her. "Your last name is Delgado?"

There was a long silence. "Mama Danny took care of me for as long as I can remember," she said finally. "I don't have anyone else besides him and Jack."

Wes struggled not to wince. How could Justin just stand there and listen to that? Even *he* wanted to say something now. But ... was Z ready to hear it?

"Sounds like you really love him," Justin returned. "But you're forgetting something. You don't just have Danny and Jack anymore; now you have a whole team to depend on. And besides that, you're S.P.D. No one is ever alone at S.P.D. - no matter how much you wish you were."

Z laughed, an open, clear sound that startled Wes with how much her sudden smile reminded him of Justin. "So ... does that mean I can take a look at your car?" The sweetly manipulative tone to her voice would have made Syd proud.

"Let's see how he feels about it."

Wes watched the two of them walk away together, laughing and chatting. He smiled faintly. Maybe Rose wasn't the only one of her parents Z took after.
What cool toys you have!

Chapter Notes

-Sighs- Another short one that wasn't quite what I had expected it to be. Wes is being difficult again, but he's off being disciplined now, so hopefully that will help.

Purple Haze is the name of an actual drink that contains Opium. That's not exactly what Wes is drinking, but it's something similar.

And most importantly, BlackCrimsonLight made me another trailer! http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d01_rYpY5Ak Go look at it!

"Battle drills?" Wes blinked. "Why do we need to have a meeting about developing battle drills?"

Dustin bounced in place - literally. "Well, see, me an' Taylor have been working on building new Zords for B Squad, right? Well, we happened to hear from Nerina that she found this like, way old project for defending the base that got scrapped, like, a really, really long time ago. So, we sorta kidnapped Nerina for awhile so we could work on it."

"But why do we need *battle* drills for a base defense project?"

To his surprise, Taylor chuckled. "Because this isn't just a base defense program."

"It was Ethan's idea," Dustin explained, his enthusiasm fading along with his bounce. "He said something once about not wanting to go through the Dino Cave again." He fell silent for a moment, and Wes found himself thinking longingly of the Clock Tower, as well as the memory of feeling it shatter around him.

"Anyway," Taylor said loudly, recapturing both of their attentions. "Ethan came up with a few ideas for making sure that if something happened, S.P.D. Newtech would be able to protect itself and anyone inside."

"But after ... well, after, the Techs scrapped the project. Too many issues and too many bad memories, I guess. But Nerina found it and brought it to us." Dustin paused. "We really need to just kidnap her already, you know? I mean, she like, spends half her time here anyway."

"And she spends the other half in Tech," Taylor reminded him. "Face it, Dustin; she's her father's daughter. She's practically Morpher Project already."

Wes coughed pointedly. "So what exactly *is* the base defense program?"

Dustin and Taylor exchanged mischievous looks.

****

"You turned the *base* into a Zord?" Shane demanded incredulously.

"Actually dude, we turned it into a mobile command center," Dustin corrected. "*Then* we turned it into a Megazord."
"But why a Megazord?" Adam asked, looking at him oddly. "I thought you guys were supposed to be working on the B Squad Zords."

"We are." Taylor shot him an annoyed glare. "But they're taking longer than we'd expected. The designs we finally went with are more complicated than anybody expected, and we didn't want to leave B Squad without backup in the meantime."

"The designs are complicated?" Kimberly frowned. "What made you decide on them, then?"

Dustin and Taylor exchanged glances again. "It was uh, a very special process," Dustin said evasively. "DVD secret, and all."

"But ... didn't you just cover the eyes of that boy and have him throw a dart at the board you made?" Nerina asked, sounding puzzled. "Boom?"

"Boom? What went boom?" Aisha asked sharply.

"No, Marion Williamson. Boom?" Zack reminded her.

Wes smiled faintly at the thought of the young man Zack was referring to. While his dream had been to join the Ranger program, a heart condition discovered only days after he'd arrived at S.P.D. had crushed that dream in an instant. For some reason, Kat of all people had taken pity on him, and convinced him to join the Tech Department. To everyone's surprise, he had turned out to actually be quite smart - but *extremely* accident prone. Hence his nickname, 'Boom'.

"Wait, wait. Are you saying you threw a *dart* to decide what Zords to design?" Justin sounded like he was still trying to decide whether or not to laugh.

"Well, we couldn't agree on anything, so ..." Dustin shrugged. "And technically dude, Boom's the one who threw the dart. We just made the board for him to throw at."

"Everyone's always harping on us to find solutions without fighting," Taylor pointed out rather smugly.

Kimberly sighed, rubbing her temples. "I'm finally starting to understand why Tommy's always complaining about headaches," she muttered. After a moment, she lifted her head again. "Is the Megazord safe for non-Ranger personnel?"

Taylor nodded. "There are designated safety zones already in place for the transformation. We just need to plan out the drills to organize everyone into the right areas."

"It's actually pretty simple," Dustin put in. He held up a closed fist. "See, this is like the safety area with all the people inside, right?" He clasped his other hand around the fist, but still allowing the fist to rotate inside the other. "When the transformation sequence turns on, the safety areas turn into like, free-floating rooms. So no matter which way the Delta Command Megazord moves, nobody gets hurt."

"That was Dustin's design," Taylor added idly, shrugging a shoulder as Dustin blushed hotly in response. "Even Cam was impressed with it."

Dustin fidgeted, obviously flustered now. "It's not like no one's ever done it before," he protested weakly. "I mean, it's a basic Zord design. I just figured out how it worked."

"After taking apart half of the Overdrive Zords," Taylor returned dryly, but she sounded amused.
Dustin shrugged as everyone stared. "I understand it better that way," he said sheepishly. "All those blueprints like, seriously make my head hurt."

"You did ... put them back together afterwards. ... Right?" Carter asked cautiously.

"Dude! Of course I did!" Dustin protested, offended.

"So we need to design battle drills for all our cadets and staff members," Eric spoke up, and from the tone of his voice he was frowning at the table. "That's ..."

"Fifteen hundred thirty-two," Karone answered him absently, watching in fascination as she tried to balance her pencil on her finger. "Not including B Squad."

"Joy," Eric grumbled.

Wes kept his eyes on the table, silently thankful he'd decided to wear sunglasses today. He didn't always, since he really didn't need to and they occasionally interfered with his SightMap, but he'd woken up that morning with the mother of all migraines and Jen whining in his face. The sunglasses were helping for more than just keeping his eyes slightly more shadowed: they hid the redness, and kept anyone from seeing how much it hurt to hear Eric's voice from across the table.

For the first time in three years, Eric hadn't sat at his side during the meeting to offer silent warnings when someone had an expression he couldn't read, or poke him - literally - if he started to doze off, or just ... be there. It was strange to sit between Vanessa and Justin, and it hurt.

Because not only was Eric sitting away from him, but Vanessa had been the one to take the seat in between them, and had mostly ignored him for most of the meeting.

The strange seating arrangement hadn't exactly gone unnoticed, but no one had brought it up. Mostly because they all knew that his relationship with Eric had always been ... unusual. Although that could also have something to do with Justin sitting abruptly beside him before anyone could say anything and striking up a conversation as though nothing was wrong.

He was grateful for Justin's decision to stay in Newtech City while Rose was gone, subtly hoping to get to know his long-lost daughter better. And he was grateful to have a teammate with him when the others were elsewhere. But even so, he felt isolated. He hadn't realized how much he'd come to depend on having Eric to sign information into his hand, or Vanessa to pointedly interrupt someone who hadn't given information about something he couldn't see for himself. Without the two of them beside him, he felt alone.

For the first time in almost eighteen years, Wes wanted a good, stiff drink.

****

"You want to *what*?" Justin demanded incredulously.

"I want to go out for a drink," Wes repeated firmly. "Are you coming or not?"

Justin stared at him. "You can't be serious."

Wes crossed his arms, giving him an irritated look.

"You are," Justin breathed, sounding stunned. "Wes, you *hate* alcohol. You always said you'd never drink again after the last time."
He shrugged. "I can change my mind, can't I? So are you coming or not?"

Justin sighed. "Of course I'm coming. I'm not letting you go alone when you're this depressed."

"Can you blame me?" he muttered, his voice sounding hollow even to his own ears.

Justin looked at him for a moment. "You really want me to answer that?"

"Shut up and get your stupid car."

****

"You know, there's no point in going out driving when you don't drink," Wes informed his friend.
"And you don't have to worry about drinking, 'cause your car c'n do it for you."

Justin eyed him over his coke. "Yeah, and listen to the lecture for it the whole way home? No thanks."

"Is that car your mother or somethin'?"

"Practically," Justin snorted. "He likes to think he's 'taking care of me'."

"Being taken care of stinks," Wes agreed solemnly. He pointed a wobbly finger at Justin. "Which is why you should n'ever care. 'Bout anyone. Hurts less that way." He took a long swig of whatever vile stuff he'd been given - he hadn't cared much when he ordered it, and he definitely didn't now.

Justin was watching him again, and he scowled, taking another swig to avoid the stare. He didn't need to see Justin's face to know what the look on it was. Pity was the last thing he needed right now.

"What is this stuff 'nyway?" he asked abruptly, frowning down at his drink.

"Purple Haze," the bartender informed him. "It's specially made for Rangers - the effects last a bit longer than most before the Power burns it away."

His expression darkened. "M' not a Ranger," he muttered. "Not anymore." He took a swift drink, setting the now empty glass on the counter before pointing once again at Justin with a glare. "An' don' give me that 'once an' always' junk. S' not the same thing."

He winced suddenly as his head throbbed, reaching up to snatch away his SightMap without warning.

The world did *not* plunge into immediate darkness as he'd expected it would. It was dark, yes. But there were glimmers of light, flickers and flashes of color. Sort of like a darker version of Bridge's aura empathy.

He smiled, turning to look at the bartender. "This is some *good* stuff," he informed him carefully, pointing at the empty glass.

"You stupid, arrogant, piece of - "

Hands grabbed him, spinning him around faster than he could follow, and the world went black.
"Stupid, arrogant, piece of - "

Eric stared as he spun Wes around to face him, and the other man promptly passed out.

He glared at Justin. "What the heck was he drinking?!"

Justin held up his hands in surrender. "The bartender said something about Purple Haze. Said it was a Ranger drink."

"And you let him have it?" he demanded. "He's not a Ranger anymore, you *moron*!"

"I know that!" Justin shot back. "But Wes just decided he wanted a drink, and he wasn't taking no for an answer. What did you expect me to do? Let him go alone?"

"You could have at least kept an eye on what he was drinking!"

Justin's eyes narrowed. "You're not the only person who cares about him, Myers."

They glared at each other.

"As Wes' teammate, I'm warning you now," Justin said at last, his voice deadly soft. "I won't let you hurt him again. And I know Zhane and Chip feel exactly the same way."

He fought to keep in the urge to growl. "First of all, check the uniform, Stewart. Wes is *my* teammate. And second, for the record, he's the one who hurt *me*.

Something in Justin's eyes darkened in a way that seemed out of place on his face, and the effect send chills down Eric's spine. "When you go to war with someone, you earn the right to call them your teammate," he said quietly. He looked up again, his stare strangely intense. "And I never said Wes didn't hurt you. But I can still remember hearing him scream for you in his nightmares. So don't tell me that you were the only one hurt by what happened."

Eric stared at him. "Wes ... called for me?" The words came out more hesitantly than he'd meant them to.

"Screamed," Justin corrected. "And somehow, I get the feeling he's not the only one missing someone." He nodded meaningfully toward Wes.

Eric glanced down to find that Wes had snuggled up against him, hands fisted in his shirt. At some point, he'd wrapped his arms around Wes, holding him possessively. Everything about the way he was standing screamed that Wes was *his*, and conscious or not, Wes wasn't complaining.
"It's not ... " Eric swallowed. "He'd do that to anyone."

Justin raised his eyebrows. "Oh, yeah?"

He stood, reaching out to take Wes, and Eric had to fight the urge to pull back. But Wes it seemed, was already making the decision for him. He moved away from Justin's hands, clinging tighter to Eric's shirt. The protest he was about to make that Wes was just holding onto him for warmth died with a murmur of "Eric ... " that bordered on a whine.

For a moment, he took stock of the man in his arms. What had once been the promise of laugh lines were now soft wrinkles around his eyes and mouth. The golden blond hair was more military cut now, although it had grown out a little, and now held more than one hint of silver. It wasn't the same face he'd admired years earlier, but for a second, the soft whine made the years melt away, and he saw the face of the man he'd loved.

Then he blinked, and found himself looking at the face of a man he was still getting to know.

His head snapped up as a hand settled on his shoulder. The defensive glare as he took a step back was instinctive, but somehow Justin didn't seem surprised.

"Eric," Justin said softly. "If you won't try to work things out for you own sake, do it for the people who've had to watch you two torture yourselves for years." He sighed, patting Eric's shoulder before reaching down to brush back Wes' bangs in a strangely affectionate gesture. "Well, I'm going to head back to S.P.D. before Storm Blaster gets the wrong idea about why I've been in here so long and starts to pitch a fit. Good luck getting Wes home."

"Wait - what? You're leaving?" Eric demanded. "How am I supposed to get him out of here? He's not exactly weightless, you know!"

Justin looked amused. "All right, all right. I'll help you get him out to your car. But after that, you're on your own."

"What car? We're on a space station! I brought the TF Eagle!"

Justin shrugged and offered a suggestive wink. "Well, I guess he'll just have to ride back in your lap."

****

"Tell me he didn't meet a girl," Vanessa demanded from the kitchen as he finally lugged Wes through the front door.

He gave her an exasperated look. "Stewart was with him the whole time."

"That doesn't necessarily mean anything," she retorted. She paused, giving him a calculating look. "Stewart? He must have really pissed you off."

He hesitated. "Vanessa ... What would you say if I wanted - "

"You want him back," she interrupted, her tone flat.

He wondered when she'd learned to read his mind, even as his heart sank. "You're not okay with it."

She sighed, folding her hands in front of her face in a gesture that was eerily reminiscent of Wes.
"Wes was never mine, Eric," she said quietly. "He was yours before I ever had a chance."

"Vanessa - "

She held up a hand to cut him off. "I'm not saying I still want him. In fact - " She hesitated, looking almost guilty. "I think ... I think I might be falling in love with R.J."

He stared at her in surprise. Yeah, she'd been dating R.J. for awhile, but he hadn't realized they were getting serious.

He winced. Darn it, that meant he'd actually have to start getting used to the weirdo. Or at least learn to tolerate him.

"Oh, get over it," Vanessa snapped. "Yes, that means you're not going to be able to get rid of him any time soon. And don't even try to tell me that's not what you're thinking about - it's written all over your face."

"It is n-"

"It is," she interrupted again with a scowl. "You do realize that half the time, R.J. acts the way he does just to piss you off."

"What about the other half?" he muttered, shifting Wes carefully on his shoulder.

She huffed in annoyance. "Look, Eric. My point is, you don't need to worry about competition for Wes from me."

He frowned. "But if you're not interested, then why are you not okay with the idea of us getting back together?"

She sighed, moving toward him. "Because I've been Wes' shoulder to cry on over you for the last seventeen years. I've been your shoulder to cry on over Wes for the last nine. And I'm sick of it. If it weren't for the fact that you've both told me multiple times you fight constantly, I'd be the first person to lock you in a closet together." She stopped in front of him, stroking Wes' hair with a tenderness she usually reserved for Sky. She glanced up. "But I'm tired of seeing you two suffer because of the stupidest things. And if you get back together, you're just going to keep fighting, and I'm going to have to keep listening to it because Taylor isn't patient enough and there's very few people either of you actually trust enough to talk to about your problems."

He stared at her as she clenched a fist, scowling darkly at Wes. "Never realized it bothered you so much," he grumbled.

"Of course it bothers me!" she snapped back. "I want to smack your heads together because your both so *stupid*! And I have to sit here playing sympathetic friend, when I just want to strangle you both!"

"I - "

"You're both complicated, stressful, obnoxious hard-heads, and half the time I just want to scream at you," she went on, clearly enjoying the chance to rant at him. Then she paused, taking a deep breath and rubbing her forehead with sigh. "And you're so obviously in love with each other it's painful to watch."

He frowned at her. "Are you trying to say I *should* try and fix things with Wes, or I shouldn't?"
"I don't know half the time," she muttered. She sighed again. "Look, Eric. You drive each other nuts when you're together, and you drive everyone else nuts when you're apart. So ... whatever you're going to do about it, do it already. This has gone well beyond ridiculous and into pathetic."

"If that's your way of giving me your blessing, it needs work," he informed her.

"How this for a blessing then?" she retorted, moments before smacking him none-to-gently in the forehead. "Now go put Wes down before you drop him."

"And I thought arguing with Stewart was a pain," he muttered darkly, shifting Wes again and heading for the bedroom.

"And just think; you still have threats from Zhane and Chip to deal with," she returned in a sickeningly sweet tone.

"I really hate you."

"Yeah. Kiss my ass."
He woke up in what felt like his own bed, in a dark room. It took a moment to find the energy to feel for the nightstand and find his SightMap. His hand found a glass of water as well, and he drank it greedily before slipping the SightMap in place and activating it.

Eric was sitting in a chair beside his bed, staring at him.

He jumped slightly. "Eric, what are you - "

"What do you want from me, Wes?" Eric demanded suddenly. Somewhere in the abrasive tone Wes could hear hurt and frustration, and it made him feel worse than the hangover already did. "What? You wanna start dating, hold hands? Get married and raise Sky together like a happy little family? Be each other's best friend for the rest of our lives? What do you want from me, because I'm b of all this back and forth."

He closed his eyes and sighed. It didn't help the hangover anymore than Eric's refusal to lower his voice was, but he knew better than to ask him to. "We'd both be miserable if we got married," he said quietly, reaching up to rub his forehead. "That's why we never did - we'd be divorced inside six months. We both know that."

"That's what I thought, but apparently you don't agree," Eric snapped. "You tell me you want to be friends again, and then you pull this? What was going through your head, Wes? Or was there anything going through it at all?!"

"What was going through my head?" he repeated, and chuckled darkly. "The same thing that's been going through my head since the day you kicked me out of your house." It hurt to call it Eric's house again, but in the end, that's what it had always been.

Eric tensed, his jaw clenching as he read into the words Wes hadn't said. "You're the one who walked out on me during the wedding."

"Because you said you could never forgive me," Wes reminded him.

"I never said I didn't want to try!"

There was a stunned silence that left them staring at each other.

"You ... " Wes swallowed. Hard. "How can you - "

Something in Eric changed suddenly, relaxing the tension in his shoulders as he sighed. "You never
forgave yourself, did you Wes." The soft statement wasn't a question, but a sudden understanding.

He buried his face into his hands, suddenly unable to watch the other man anymore. "What Alex told me was what he knew at that moment, when our Morphers merged," he whispered, his voice hoarse with emotion. "And at that moment, he knew that he came from you and me, and that Time Force had raised him as a test subject for the Red Chrono Morpher. That he was nothing more than their science experiment brought up to be my replacement. And when I held him to tell him that I was proud of the man he'd become, because I am, and that I thought of him as I son, because I do and I knew he needed to know that … he told me that I had to *let* it happen. That he had to become the Chrono Morpher's test subject. He made me promise not to change the timeline."

He shook his head, struggling to keep the tears in. So many years had gone by since that moment, and the thought of what Alex had been through still made him want to cry. "When we decided to have the boys, I thought that Time Force would do something to our child. So I did everything I could to make sure it didn't happen, without giving away what Alex had said." He took a deep breath in an effort to calm himself before he started to sob, because Eric needed to hear this. "And it wasn't enough. I lost Alexander and Benjamin, and then I lost you because of what I'd done. I *never* said that I didn't love you, Eric. If anything, sometimes I think I love you too much."

"You have a funny way of showing it," Eric returned. There was no emotion in his words, and it sounded strange. "So what was up with the way you blew up on me After?"

He tilted his head just enough for one eye to peek out and reveal that Eric was still staring at him. "I woke up from what felt like days to find you living in my house, spending time with my best friend, doing my job, and raising my son. Everyone thought I was gone or on the way, and you ... " He grit his teeth and forced himself to say it. "You took over my life. Everything I had was yours now. And I tried to tell myself it was what I would have wanted, because if I hadn't come back ... It would have been." He swallowed the sudden lump in his throat. "But I woke up and found out that I didn't have anything to wake up *to*.

"That's - "

"But Sky ... Sky loves you. And as much as it hurt to think that he loves you more than me, I couldn't take you away from him. So even though it killed me to have to act like nothing was wrong, I figured ... Well, I didn't want to fight anymore. I still don't. And if we couldn't be together that way, I wanted to at least have my best friend back." he explained quietly.

"So why'd you kiss me then?"

He hesitated. But if they were getting it all out in the open ... "I realized something the other night, when I was thinking about Jen and the others not knowing who Sky was. I hadn't really taken the time to work through the memories I got from Alex when we connected, but it hit me all of a sudden." He looked up again, looking straight to Eric. "Alex doesn't know. He has no idea that he's actually our *son* - he just thinks he's a Time Force science experiment made from our DNA."

Eric's stare didn't waver, and he dropped his eyes back to the bed again. "I can't ... I can't even put words to how that made me feel, when I realized that," he admitted. "At that point, I figured there was nothing I could possibly do to make you hate me even more than you already did, so I - " He cut himself off, not wanting to finish.

But Eric had never been the type to let anything sit between them after they'd actually gotten together. He was more likely to hash out every single detail, no matter how much it hurt them both. Because Eric would rather be angry than confused any day.
"Why*, Wes,* he demanded quietly. "Why did you kiss me? Don't give me all this junk about Alex, and feeling like a miserable excuse for a human being. At that moment, what made you do it?"

Wes let out a weary sigh, turning to look at him again. "Because I miss you. I miss being with you. I always did. And at that moment, the only thing I wanted was you."

The tension in the air was palpable.

"Things can't be just like they were, Wes.* Now Eric was the one who sounded tired.

He laughed weakly, and it was an unpleasant sound. "Believe me, I know. I've known that for years." He shrugged helplessly. "But you're the only person I've ever really loved, Eric. And if it hasn't changed in twenty-seven years, I really doubt it's going to change now."

"What about Jen?"

He shook his head. "That was different. There could have been something between us," he admitted, "But we were both seeing signs of someone else in each other. And I never loved Jen the way I love you."

"You never dated anyone else?"

"When?" he asked, shrugging a shoulder. "Between work and Sky, I didn't have the time to look. And I really didn't want to. I had my son and my friends, and that was enough."

"I dated other people."

He nodded, unsurprised. It hurt, but somehow he knew that it was necessary for both of them that he hear it. "I wanted you to. I'm just sorry none of them worked out."

A shrug. "They weren't you," Eric said bluntly.

He smiled faintly as that familiar deep ache swelled in his chest, one he thought he'd buried long ago. "I guess we ruined each other from meeting anyone else. We were just too good a match."

"Yeah. We were."

He started slightly as the bed shifted, and a warm forehead leaned in to rest against his. "It can't be the same," Eric continued softly, his breath tickling Wes' cheek. "But that doesn't mean we can't still try."

Warm lips pressed against his, and the ache evaporated into a sudden feeling that nothing in the world had ever felt this right.

****

"Samuel Thorn, your mother is going to kill you."

The cheerful tone to the threatening words made Wes grin as he turned to greet his teammate. "Mystic!"

"Time! Good to see you," Chip returned happily. They clapped hands, and Wes pulled him in for a one-armed hug.

Chip tilted his head as he stepped back to study him. "You look different," he declared suddenly.
"Good different."

Wes smiled, fighting the urge to duck his head in embarrassment. The happy glow from that morning's conversation with Eric hadn't faded, and everyone had been giving him odd looks all day. "Oh, just ... a good day. But hey, what about you?" He gave the other man a light punch in the arm, grinning at him teasingly. "Why didn't you ever tell me you and Clare had a son? I about had a heart attack when B Squad finally brought him in."

"Yeah, well. We've been a bit busy." Chip turned to look at the six-year-old, the humorous tone fading from his voice. "And what have you got to say for yourself? Everyone's been worried sick about you!"

Sam shifted guiltily. "I'm sorry, Dad," he mumbled. "But ... I wanted to see S.P.D., and have an adventure just like you did in all your stories."

Chip sighed, crouching down to rest his good hand on his son's shoulder. "Adventures can still happen when you're older too, you know," he reminded him. "And if you wanted to see S.P.D., you could have just asked me. Instead of worrying your mom and making us search all over the place for you."

"I'm sorry," Sam whispered again, staring at the floor.

Chip hugged him close, resting his chin on the boy's head. "I know, kiddo. But you're still gonna have to apologize to your mom too, okay? And Grandma and Grandpa and Uncle Daggeron."

"I will," Sam promised softly, and Wes found himself wondering where the boy who'd shouted at Z for lying to him had gone.

Chip relaxed his arm, pulling back just enough to meet his eyes. "Don't worry, Sammy; you'll be a superhero someday. You just gotta train hard with Grandpa and Uncle Daggeron, and try and remember what Mom and Grandma teach you."

Sam lit up instantly. "And then I'll get to be a Power Ranger, right? Just like you?"

"Nah. Better than me," Chip tussled his son's hair. "You're not a Yellow, anyway."

"Then what color am I?" Sam asked eagerly.

"Hmm ... " Chip glanced up. "What do you think Wes?"

Wes pretended to study the kid, fighting back a smile. It was sweet to see the bond Chip had with his son, and nice to know that for all his shyness and attitude earlier, Sam took more after his father than he realized. "White," he declared finally. "You'll be a White Ranger, because White rangers are all about honor and integrity. They're very rare, too."

"Cool!" Sam cried in delight. "I'm gonna be the White Ranger!"

"Getting the kid's hopes up?"

Wes shot a smile over his shoulder to Eric as he came up behind him. "Well, it can't hurt can it? To give him a dream to shoot for?"

"I guess not."

"You've mellowed out a lot over the last few years," he noted, watching as Chip helped his son
learn to 'fly', and Sam shrieked in delight.

"Parenthood does that, apparently." A hand discreetly found his and squeezed for just a moment before letting go, a subtle reminder that he wasn't the only one thinking about this morning.

He smiled, watching as B Squad was dragged into a came of 'catch' with Chip - using Sam as the 'ball'. "Good," he said softly.
I hadn't planned on this happening so soon, but then I realized Z is a lot smarter than anyone really gives her credit for. So, key emotional reunion. Hope you like. ^.^;;

"Penny for your thoughts?" Wes asked softly as he joined Z in the Squad Common Room. It was late; so late in fact, he almost hadn't seen her there. He'd been on his way out when he registered her slouched in a corner, staring off into space.

"Sorry. Due to inflation, they're twenty bucks a word now," she informed him, just a faint hint of her normal attitude in her tone.

He chuckled, even as he worried about what had the usually energetic teen so down. "How 'bout I owe you later, and you get what's off your chest now?" he offered.

She was silent for a long moment. "You know who I am, don't you?" she asked abruptly.

He gave her a confused look even as his chest tightened. "You're Z," he reminded her, forcing amusement at the question. "S.P.D. Yellow Ranger."

Something about the tension in her shoulders and posture as she looked up at him made the urge to lie fade away. Somehow he knew: she already knew the answer.

"Cruger said that our parents all worked for S.P.D.," she said quietly. "And you're Sky's dad, which would mean that you knew my parents. So you know who I really am."

He frowned. "Z, the only person who knows who you are, is *you*."

"I'm not asking for philosophical mumbo-jumbo, Sir," she said sharply. "I'm asking about my family."

He sighed. "First of all, we're not talking as Sergeant and Cadet right now, so drop the sir. You can call me Wes." He took a deep breath. "And yes. I know your parents. And I know that they're not dead, and they miss you very much."

"Why didn't anyone say so before?" she demanded. "If you've all known this whole time - "

"Because we didn't want to scare either of you away," he interrupted. "You were just getting used to the idea of being involved with S.P.D. - we didn't want to overwhelm you. And for the record, it was *my* idea not to say anything, so if you want to get mad at someone, make sure it's me."

"Do you know who Jack's parents are?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I do. But do you think he's ready to hear that yet? Or will he run?"

He could feel her temper subsiding. "No," she said at last. "He knows that he could ask, but he's not ready. He's still getting used to S.P.D."
"Are you sure *you* are?"

There was a long silence.

"Yes," she whispered at last. "I want to know who I was. Who I am."

He reached out to squeeze her hand at the pained tone. "Your name is Elizabeth Sage Stewart-Ortiz," he began softly. "You were born October 12, 2011, and your parents gave you both of their last names because they couldn't agree on which one you should have." He smiled when she giggled slightly. "Your parents are Justin Stewart and Rose Ortiz. Justin is part of the Morpher Project at S.P.D. Japan. He's the Blue Turbo Ranger, and one of my best friends. Rose works in the Tech Department there. She's Pink Overdrive, and you two are so alike it's uncanny. You have her attitude, her face, her smile ..."

"They sound really smart," she said softly.

"They are," he agreed. He nudged her gently with a smile. "And so are you. You memorized the S.P.D. handbook in *one* day. And believe me, I heard about it. Sky wouldn't stop complaining for hours."

She was silent for a moment, and he frowned. "What is it?"

"Syd said she grew up with Sky and Bridge," Z said pointedly.

He took another breath. "And so did you," he admitted. "But I asked them not to say anything to you, either."

"But if we all grew up together, why doesn't it seem like it? And why's Sky such a rude jerk all the time?"

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "It has to do with ... what happened."

"What *did* happen?" she asked hesitantly. "I mean ... if we grew up together, why ...."

"No one abandoned you, so don't ever think that," he told her firmly, squeezing her hand again. It was important to him that she know that most of all, before anything else. "The five of you are all what we like to call Ranger Kids, which means that your parents were Power Rangers, too. And the four of you were being raised together, here in Newtech. All of us took turns taking care of you as a group, to make it easier on everyone."

"What about Jack?"

"Jack's family was part of S.P.D. Japan. You didn't meet him until just before Jason and Taylor's wedding." He smiled at the memory. "In fact, you got into a brawl with him. Well, everyone but Bridge - he was the one who stopped it."

"We did?" She sounded incredulous, but there was still a smile to her voice.

"You did," he confirmed. "Jack insulted Sky and said girls had cooties, so you jumped him and the other two followed. And five minutes after we broke it up, you were all bestest friends."

She laughed. "Are you kidding me?"

"Nope." He shook his head, grinning. "You guys were a handful - especially you and Sky."
She tilted her head in confusion. "Me and Sky?"

He sighed again, his grin fading. "You two were best friends," he told her gently. "You did everything together: got into fights, shared snacks, learned to do things. You were even suspended together."

"What'd we do?" Her voice was softer now, almost nostalgic.

He snorted. "Some kids were picking on Bridge. Sky decided a long time ago that he had to project Bridge, and you always backed Sky up. But the fight got out of hand, and you both got suspended for it."

"So ... if Sky was my best friend, why is he such a jerk now?"

"I can't say for sure, because Sky doesn't talk to me about it," he warned, "But I think it's because he doesn't know how to deal with you."

"How to deal with me?" She sounded offended.

"Hear me out," he requested. "You and Sky were best friends; you did everything together. But - " His voice caught in his throat, and he forced himself to breathe deeply for a moment. "Some of the Ranger Kids were kidnapped by a group of bounty hunters when you were seven years old. By the time we caught up with them, you and Jaz had gone for help. We never found you after that, no matter how hard we looked. Your parents transferred to S.P.D. Japan a few months later, because they couldn't handle the memories, and Jaz - I mean, Jack's family left Earth altogether.

"The other kids were pretty traumatized by what happened, Sky in particular," he explained carefully. "He was never the same after he lost you. And the way he's acting around you now, is almost the same way he treated me when I woke up after the battle where I lost my sight. He'd spent four years without me around, and now that I was suddenly back, he didn't know how to talk to me anymore. And I *think*, that's what he's been doing with you. He doesn't know how he should act around you right now."

"So he acts like a total moron?" she demanded.

He shrugged. "Hey, I never said Sky was the most emotionally adjusted person. He takes too much after Eric." He glanced at her. "Is there anything else you want to know?"

She was silent for a moment. "My parents. Do they ... do they still ... ?"

He raised his wrist before she could finish. "Time for Turbo," he requested quietly.

"What's up, Time? Something wrong?"

"Can you come up to Squad Common? Z would like to talk to you."

"Be there in a heartbeat."

"Thanks." It wasn't necessary, but he said it anyway.

He looked at Z again as he lowered his wrist. She had tensed, and was actually starting to fidget. "I ... I don't know if - " She hesitated. "I'm not sure if I'm ready for this."

He squeezed her hand. "All you have to do is say so, and I'll tell him nevermind," he told her gently. "Or if you want to, you can just meet him. You don't have to say anything."
She hesitated.

"Time? Z?" Justin paused in the doorway. "What's up?"

Z looked up, and Wes didn't have to see her face to know there were tears in her eyes.

Justin was in front of her in an instant. "Z? What's wrong?" he asked anxiously.

There was a long moment of silence.

"Daddy," Z choked out, launching herself at him without warning.

Justin caught her, staring at Wes in shock even as he squeezed her tightly.

Wes just smiled gently at him, and nodded.

Something about Justin seemed crumple around him, and suddenly he was hugging Z, kissing her hair and whispering into her ear. Z in turn sobbed, clinging to him and burying her face against his shoulder. It was beautiful, sweet, and sad to see them finally reunited after so long.

Wes quietly made his way to the door to give them their privacy.

Sky was outside, waiting for him. "Eric said you were still here," he said by way of explanation. He hesitated. "Is she ... ?"

"She'll be fine, Sky," he interrupted softly. He smiled. "She's finally home."

Sky nodded, looking at the floor for a moment. "Dad ... ? I - " He hesitated.

Wes pulled him into a hug. "I love you too, Sky," he murmured, smiling to himself as his son squeezed back just as tightly.
Wes frowned, crouching down next to the boy sitting in a corner, doing nothing more than staring at a wall as he munched on a piece of toast. "Bridge?" he asked carefully. "What's wrong?"

"I'm contemplating this wall," Bridge informed him, not looking away from his intense study. "It's a very nice wall, don't you think? Very shiny. Plain, but in a classic way. Nothing special about it. It just sits there, waiting for someone to hit it, or fall on it, or - "

"Bridge," he interrupted. "What's wrong?"

The teen shrugged. "Sky and Jack are working on their alpha male issues. Conveniently, they happened to do it right outside my bedroom, so inconveniently, I had to vacate the premises to get rid of the migraine they were giving me from all the energy flow." He held up a hand and wiggled his fingers by way of explanation. "Unfortunately, this particular migraine seems to be a stubborn one. That is, if migraines had feelings. Or conscious thought, which would actually be kinda weird - "

"Bridge."

He blinked. "Oh. Right. Well, I decided I needed something simple and uncomplicated to contemplate for awhile, so my headache might go away. That's when I found this wall. It's really a very nice wall, at the end of this isolated hallway, away from all the emotions and troubles of the rest of S.P.D. I think I may set up a cot here, and just live by this wall for awhile."

"You want me to call your mom?" Wes asked quietly, resisting the urge to give the boy a hug. That was probably the last thing he needed right now.

Over the years the one thing that had stayed constant about Bridge's unique powers was Aisha's ability to ground him. Sky seemed to have lost that in the wake of their breakup, a fact that dismayed all parents involved and secretly, Wes knew, Sky as well. While Bridge's powers grew and changed, Aisha remained his center, just as he played the same role to his sister.

Bridge shook his head. "I'll be okay. I just need some space."

Well *that* was a bad sign; Bridge only liked to be alone when his powers were really bothering him. "You want me to put a keep out sign at the end of the hallway?" he offered.

"Please?"

The undisguised relief in his tone tugged painfully on Wes' heart. "You got it, kiddo." He tried to sound cheerful as he resisted the urge to tussle the teen's hair.
"Thanks, Uncle Wes."

****

Sign in place, he sighed as he went off in search of Sky and Jack. He didn't like the idea of making the boys feel guilty by telling them they'd upset Bridge, but they needed to remember to be more careful about where they argued. Bridge had apparently empathically absorbed some of the emotions between them; the anger in his voice had been audible.

"You're so - argh! Why can't you admit when you're wrong for once?!

"Maybe because I'm *not* wrong!"

"Hey!" he barked out. "What's going on here?"

Both boys stiffened, turning to salute. "Sir!"

"One of you want to explain to me what you're fighting over? And why you felt the need to argue about it in the middle of the hallway?" he demanded.

"Sir, he - "

"I - "

"*One*. At a time," he cut in, raising his hand. He hesitated for a moment, because no matter which one he chose to speak first, the other would accuse him of favoritism. "Cadet Landors," he sighed at last. "Would you like to tell me what started the argument?"

He could feel Sky scowling at him as Jack launched into his explanation. "You see Sir, Sky and I were discussing what when wrong in this morning's training mission. *Sky*," he shot a glare at the other teen, "Seems to think our Squad needs to go through more endurance training to build up our speed. I say we just had an off day, and he's blowing it out of proportion."

Wes raised his eyebrows, glancing at his son. "Sky?"

"Sir," the other boy returned stiffly. "B Squad's training scores have suffered a significant eight percent drop since adding the two unknown variables to our team. I believe retraining for the entire squad is - "

"For crying out loud, we have names!" Jack snapped.

Wes tried not to wince. Unknown variables? That was cold even for Sky. "Cadets," he interrupted before another argument could break out. "What is the first rule of H Squad?"


"Maybe you two should start thinking about that first before you start arguing over what's wrong with your team," he reprimanded gently. "And maybe next time, you'll also make sure not to start fighting in front of Cadet Carson's room."

Sky froze in horror, while Jack looked between them oddly. "Is he - " Sky began.

"He's spending some time alone to calm down," he answered. "I'm sending Aisha after him in about half an hour."
Sky's shoulders slumped. "I'm -"

"Don't apologize to me, Sky. I'm not the one who needs to hear it," he told him quietly. "Just try and be a little more considerate next time, okay?" He nodded to Jack. "And try explaining things for Jack while you're at it? For Bridge's sake, at the very least."

Sky nodded. "I will, Dad," he promised.

Jack started as Wes turned to leave them be. "Wait - *that's* your dad?!

He smiled faintly to himself. Sky *really* needed a better picture of them together.

But then, hadn't Eric reacted the same way when he'd learned who *his* father was, back in prep school, back when they'd just barely been friends?

Come to think of it, Sky and Jack were a lot like him and Eric.

Sky, like Eric, had that desperate need to prove himself for reasons no one else could see. He was rude and standoffish because he feared getting close to people. And heaven help you if you tried to prove him wrong about something, because he was *never* wrong about *anything*. If he didn't know better, he'd have thought Sky was Eric's son rather than his - which, in a way, he was.

Jack meanwhile, was struggling to fit into a way of life he didn't know and could barely understand. But that, if anything, only made him try harder. He both wanted and feared seeing things outside of the norm, although while Wes had only pushed himself forward, Jack had a tendency to pull further away when he was outside of his comfort zone.

Sky and Jack fought like cats and dogs, which brought back interesting memories. Sky and Eric loved authority and strove to be respected; he and Jack went out of their way to push people's buttons and could care less what others thought of them most of the time. He and Jack were the first to own up when they did something wrong, while Sky and Eric would rather pretend it never happened.

He snorted to himself. Jack's best friend was Z, just has his had been Jen, and now Vanessa. And Eric could hardly stand Jen *or* Vanessa, just like ... Sky ... and Z.

He froze in the middle of the hall. Were Sky and Jack fighting because they were fighting the tension between the two of them, not just because they saw each other as some sort of enemy? Because they were drawn to each other in a way that neither one wanted to admit to, just like he and Eric had been?

Oh, that put a whole new, not-so-nice spin on what was wrong with Bridge earlier.

"What are you brooding over now?"

He glanced up, blinking in surprise. Distracted or not, very few people could sneak up on him anymore, and he was pretty sure R.J. didn't count.

Namely, only one.

"Eric," he greeted. He frowned as the other man's words registered. "I'm not brooding. I was just realizing that Sky and Jack are a lot like you and me."

"T ook you long enough," Eric snorted. "If you want to know something really tragic, there's the fact that Sky's still holding a candle for Dru."
"Even though he's MIA?"

"Yup. So even though he's attracted to Jack, he won't do anything about it because he thinks he'll be betraying Dru."

"Poor Sky," he murmured. He glanced up at Eric. "Hey, out of curiosity - do you still think of me as your enemy?"

Eric stopped to look at him oddly. "I've never thought of you as my enemy. My rival, maybe. But a lot of that was because I wanted things you had in your life to be in mine." He raised a hand before Wes could protest. "Yeah, stupid, I know. I was a lot dumber when I was younger. I've grown up since then."

Wes felt a smile tug at the corner of his mouth. "So we're not rivals anymore?"

Eric humphed, wrapping an arm around Wes' shoulders. "Only in bed," he informed him with an audible smirk.


Silently, he wished Jack the best of luck with Sky. He'd need it.
Re-watching Idol provided many amusing revelations. For instance, Jell-O shall never be the same again.

"Something's wrong," Eric murmured in his ear, an arm wrapped intimately around him. "Harrington's arrival is suspicious."

"I agree," Wes whispered back, tilting his head as though Eric was trying to nibble at his ear. "MIA for a year, and no official report? And now he can't even give us a real reason for being here?"

Eric nodded, pretending to nuzzle his neck before subtly writing down his response on the paper resting between them. After a moment he slid it across the table to Kimberly.

She read it and gave a soft sigh. "That's a good idea, but do we have the manpower for that?" she asked, adding her own message.

From Kimberly the note went to Taylor, then Vanessa, Adam with Zack reading over his shoulder, Karone, and finally Aisha. "If we had enough volunteers to run through a setup drill, just to make sure it'll work out, we could," Adam commented.

Kimberly giggled softly, and everyone glanced at her. "Sorry," she murmured, trying to hide a smile. "I just realized that Jell-O has become the new smoothies."

"Don't mention Jell-O," Wes and Vanessa groaned in unison as Zack laughed.

"What's wrong with Jell-O?" Karone asked curiously.

"Nine months of Jell-O cravings, that's what," Vanessa grumbled.

"Nine months of 1:00am Jell-O runs," Wes muttered in agreement.

Eric snorted, and he elbowed him lightly.

"Kim talked to Jack this morning. Dru tried to say he was in Command looking for Cruger, and Jack let him know he was suspicious. Sky's not talking to Jack now, but Kim convinced Jack to back down and apologize until he can prove something," Eric added quietly.

"Did she tell Jack we're suspicious, too?" he asked softly.

Eric added to the note again.

"How can you compare Jell-O and smoothies?" Taylor asked warily.

Kimberly chuckled softly. "You know how we all get Color Cravings? Well, right about the time we were Chosen, we all started drinking color-coded smoothies. For some reason, I just couldn't seem to stop drinking strawberry smoothies."

"Licorice and blackberry for me. Ernie always had the coolest flavors." Zack looked thoughtful for
a moment as he studied B Squad's table. "Hey, is it just me, or are Z and Syd acting ... closer than usual?"

Wes snorted, trying not to choke on his drink. "But Ryan already promised Syd to Jack," he murmured, fighting a grin.

"Do I wanna know?" Aisha asked, sounding amused.

He shook his head. "Probably not. Old joke."

The sound of the alarms going off made them all pause. "Back to work, everybody," Kimberly sighed. She shook her head. "I hate being in charge."

Zack wrapped an arm around her comfortingly. "Because you can't slack off with the rest of us?" he asked sympathetically.

Eric leaned over like he was going to kiss Wes on the cheek as they both moved to get up. "Everyone agrees; something's going on. Harrington's lying. Adam says Rocky won't listen, though."

He tried not to sigh. "He did always love the Terrible Trio," he murmured as they hurried to find out what was going on.

****

"I can't believe it," Rocky said quietly, sounding tortured. "I mean, how could this have happened?"

He had slouched down in a corner and was now leaning heavily against Adam as his husband stroked his hair with a sympathetic expression. Aisha sat on his other side holding his hand, while Zack leaned over the back of the couch to squeeze his shoulder.

"Hey man, none of us could have guessed what would have happened when Dru was transferred," Zack reminded him gently.

"And Birdie's the one responsible for that," Taylor agreed, scowling at the drink in her hand.

Kimberly rubbed her temples with a sigh. "Not that he cares," she grumbled. "I had to deal with *that* conversation while Cruger was still recovering."

"And Birdie still has a head?" Karone asked, looking surprised. "I mean, he did take away one of our cadets and let this happen to him. You didn't tear into him for that?"

"Oh, I tried," Kimberly told her wryly. "I accused him that if Dru had never been taken from Newtech in the first place, he would never have had a chance to meet up with the sort of people who convinced him that money was more important than honor." She sighed again. "And he told me that if we'd done our job training him in the first place, he wouldn't have needed to be transferred."

"Are you kidding me?" Eric demanded.

"Tell me you let him have it," Shane begged.

"He ended the call before I could," she muttered darkly.

"I just keep thinking ... " Rocky whispered. "Maybe ... maybe if I'd done something differently, this
never - "

"Stop it."

Everyone was looking at him in surprise, but Wes didn't care. "Stop it, Rocky," he repeated sharply. "If you keep thinking about what could have been different, you'll never *stop* thinking." He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to push away the memories. "And focusing on what you can't change doesn't help the things you *can*. We each make our own destiny, remember? And right choices or wrong, Dru made his."

Slowly, Rocky began to nod. "You're right," he agreed softly.

Wes swallowed. "That doesn't mean I wanted to be," he reminded him.

"Dru was working for Broodwing."

Everyone turned to stare at the door. Sky stood at what would have been attention had it been anyone but Sky - for him, the pose was slouched and made on instinct alone. "He said Broodwing taught him that money and power were the most important things in the world."

Rocky made a pained sound, and Adam leaned over to kiss his forehead soothingly.

Sky cleared his throat awkwardly. "Dad, can I talk to you for a minute? Alone?"

"Sure, Sky. My office?" he offered, even as part of him wondered why Sky wanted him. Eric was his confidante.

Sky just nodded, following silently as he left the officer's common room.

He'd barely closed the door behind them before Sky was in his arms, clinging to him and sobbing. He wrapped his arms around his son instinctively, calling for the privacy lock. "Sky?" he asked softly, rubbing his back.

"He said he didn't need me anymore," Sky choked out. "After all this time, waiting and hoping he was okay, and now he doesn't need me anymore."

*Oh, Sky...*

He hugged his son close, letting him cry. He didn't tell him it was going to be all right, because it wasn't. He didn't say anything, because that wasn't what Sky needed.

So he let Sky cry, and tried not to cry over his son's broken heart with him.
Chapter Notes

I've been looking forward to writing this chapter for awhile now. Partly because it gets everything out in the open, but mostly because I love writing Keri. She's such a blast. ^_^

He tried not to seem like he was eavesdropping, but it was kind of hard with overdeveloped hearing. So he pretended he was busy going over his datapad, and completely ignoring the conversation going on in the corner of the officer's common room. The conversation he *really* didn't want to interrupt.

"So you two are getting along all right?"

"We get along great," Z sounded almost cheerful. "We've spent a lot of time working on Storm Blaster together." She hesitated. "He talks about you a lot."

"Well, that's a first," Rose returned wryly. "If we're not fighting and he's got something technological to work on, he barely remembers I'm alive."

Wes fought the urge to protest on Justin's behalf.

"That's so not true!" Z argued. "It's obvious Dad adores you!"

There was a soft beeping sound, and Wes winced while Z glanced at her wrist and sighed. "I gotta go. We're getting ready for Syd's surprise party. She's had a rough day, so we thought we'd cheer her up."

"Justin remembered to get her something from the both of us, right? And it's not tools?"

Z laughed. "He's not that bad!"

"You haven't known him as long as I have."

There was another soft chuckle, and Z hesitated. "I ... I miss you, Mom," she said awkwardly. "I can't wait to meet you in person."

"Me too, Z," Rose said softly. "I miss you. Stay safe, keep your father out of trouble, and tell Syd happy birthday for me, okay? I love you."

"I - " Z swallowed. "Me, too. Later."

"Talk to you later."

The comm went silent, leaving Z standing there staring at where her mother's face had been. After a moment she reached out to touch the screen. "I love you," she whispered.

Wes knocked over a clipboard, pretending to scrounge around for it for a moment. "Oh, hey. Isn't it time for us to get going soon?" he called loudly.
Z jumped slightly. "Yeah, you're right."

He stood, offering her an elbow as he joined her. "Since this isn't an S.P.D. party, can I escort you?"

She laughed. "Sure. Until Lieutenant Myers sees us, anyway. Then I had nothing to do with you."

He grinned. "Fair enough."

She was silent for a moment as they headed for the door. "Hey, Wes?"

"Yeah?"

"You're *really* bad at being subtle."

"Yeah, I know. But you've gotta give me credit for trying, right?"

He could sense her smile as she leaned against his shoulder slightly. "Maybe just this once."

****

"Surprise!"

Wes smiled as everyone ran to greet Syd, listening as Z teased Sky for needing to relax. He hung back as everyone else gave their hugs and well-wishes, leaning on the railing of the gazebo with a soft smile. Birthdays tended to make him a little melancholy, and unfortunately, today was no exception. Happy as he was for Syd, he couldn't help but remember the birthdays that he'd missed, for all of the Ranger Kids. For Alex and Ben. For Jen, Lucas, Katie, and Trip …

Syd's surprise party was far from last minute; they'd managed to get the rest of B Squad in on hiding it from her. While they all knew that she loved her fancy parties Ryan and Nicole liked to throw, as it was one of the few times of the year when she could see both of her parents at once, it wasn't practical for a Ranger. So instead, they'd gathered her friends from S.P.D., from fellow Ranger Kids to other cadets to officers. All of C Squad had shown up, as well as Hawking Oliver, Heart Carson, and the Russell twins visiting all the way from Japan with gifts from Garrett Hillard and most of the S.P.D. Japan staff. The Mirinoi Rangers hadn't been able to attend, but there were gifts and well-wishes sent on their behalf. Chip had even brought Clare and Sam to Newtech for the day.

And Syd was loving every minute of the attention.

"Uncle Wes?"


"I'm catching up!" she returned cheerfully. She hesitated for a second. "Hey, Uncle Wes? If … if I do something I'm not supposed to, would you get mad at me if it's really for the best?"

"Syd?" he asked warily.

She shook her head abruptly. "Nothing. Now come on, stop brooding. It's my birthday!"

He laughed as she tugged him down the stairs to join the rest of the group. "All right, all right." He paused, titling his head to listen. Then he grinned as he recognized the person sneaking up behind them.
"Uncle Wes? What is it?" Syd asked in concern.

"Gotcha!"

Wes flinched at the ear-piercing shriek, watching with an amused smile as Syd whirled to greet the younger girl who'd attacked her from behind. "Keri!" she squealed in delight. "What are you doing here? Oh, it's so good to see you!"

"Are you kidding me?" Keri demanded. "Miss my best friend's birthday? Not in *this* light-year."

Syd giggled, and they hugged again. "Look at you!" Syd gushed happily. "Red? Are you primary or secondary?"

"Secondary." The pride in Keri's voice was unmistakable. "Mama's already appointed me her heir. And what about you? Pink at last?"

"Like I'd take any other color!" Syd laughed. "Ooh! You have to come meet everyone!"

Wes froze in horror, but Syd was already dragging Keri away.

A hand rested on his arm. "We're going to have to tell him someday," Vanessa reminded him quietly.

"But ... what about Keri?" he asked worriedly. "She's not exactly ... subtle."

"That's the understatement of the year," she retorted with a snort. "Come on, Wes. It's not your job to protect them from the world. Just enjoy the party."

He let her pull him along, swallowing back the urge to reply. Because it was; they *were* Ranger Kids, after all. And he'd already failed Jack and Z once.

****

The food was halfway gone, and the cake well devoured. Wes sat back in a chair with a contented sigh, listening to everyone talking around him. Something about Syd seemed to inspire people to relax; even Cruger was talking with Kat - and for once, it had nothing to do with S.P.D.

"Happy birthday, Syd. Sorry; being a Ranger doesn't pay that much."

"Tell me about it," Syd laughed conspiratorially with Jack, and Wes smiled faintly at the sound. "It's perfect. Now I'd like to give you a gift."

He froze, watching as she leaned in to whisper into the other teen's ear. "Your birthday is February twenty-second, and you're seventeen years old, just like me."

Jack went still, staring at Syd as she pulled back to look at him solemnly. "Syd?" he stammered.

"What - I don't understand. How do you ... ?"

She touched his hand gently. She said nothing; just watched him as he struggled to understand what she was telling him and why.

"Syd? What are you doing over here, girl? Aren't there still presents to open?"

Wes stiffened, even as Syd turned to look at Keri. "Keri! I - "

Keri paused, tilting her head as she studied Jack. "You look familiar, but I don't think we met yet."
She offered a hand. "Karone Andros Johnson - call me Keri."

Jack seemed to shake himself, quickly accepting the handshake. "Jack Landors. Nice to meet you."


"What? Something wrong with my name?" Jack demanded suspiciously.

"Of course not," Keri sniffed, waving a hand dismissively. "It's just ... I used to know someone named Jackson." She shook herself, much the same way as Jack had, and Wes could see Syd looking between them both warily. "Anyway, did you get a slice of cake, yet?" she asked. "It's almost gone."

Syd sighed. "Keri, are you playing cake cutter again?"

"Hey, it's not my fault your mom forgot to bring the knife again," Keri protested. "And it's not like I mind. Besides, my hands are clean." She reached out towards the birthday cake, flattening her hand out. It shimmered for a moment, then reformed, more solid than ever.

She sliced through the cake like it wasn't there, carefully lifting a slice onto a plate and offering it to Jack. "The sides look a little funny, but it tastes the same," she said cheerfully.

Jack stared at her as he accepted the plate numbly. "You - you have powers, too?"

"Powers? Oh! You mean this." Keri focused on her hand, softening it again. "Well, technically it's called re-molecularizing. I can make my body more solid. I know, it's weird, but it has it's uses."

Wes moved to stand as Jack looked at her like she'd grown a second head. There was no way this could end well.

"But ... I do that," Jack said, sounding stunned. "Well, sort of." He moved, dropping his hand through the table as it shimmered in the same way Keri's had. "I go through things."

Keri went very still, and behind her, Syd had gone pale.

"You re-molecularize, too?" Keri asked, her voice deliberately soft.

"Yeah." Jack forced his tone to sound lighter. "I've never met anyone else who could do that before."

Keri ignored him, turning to stare at Syd. "You knew," she accused.

Syd flinched. "Keri, I - "

"You knew!" Keri shouted. She whirled, turning to look around the assembled group. "You all knew, didn't you? You knew all along! And what, you just decided not to tell me? It didn't matter that I'm *still* *looking*, and he's been here the whole time?!"

Karone came forward, reaching out to put a hand on her shoulder. "Keri - "

"Don't touch me!" she snapped, jerking her arm away. There were tears in her voice. "How could you? How could *all* you?!!"

"Keri!" Syd cried as the younger girl bolted. "Keri, wait!"

Marinda Hammond caught her arm, shaking her head gently. "We'll talk to her," she said quietly,
tilting her head towards her cousin. Behind her, Ecliptor nodded.

"What's going on ... ?" Jack asked cautiously as Ryan and Nicole moved to their daughter.

Syd looked up at him. "Jack ... " she whispered, sounding tortured. "Keri is your sister."

She turned to bury her face against her father's chest, and Wes watched, heart breaking, while Jack froze as everything he'd thought he'd known crumbled to pieces around him.
Thank You

Chapter Notes

I’m not sure if this chapter came out as nostalgic and emotionally-charged as I was hoping for, but I tried.

Much love to starandrea, as I was inspired for Jack’s part in this while rereading her The Seduction of Schuyler Tate.

Somehow it didn't surprise Wes to find B Squad in the officer's common room rather than their own. Over the years, the kids had developed a habit of coming there when they were looking for family, not superiors. And in the aftermath of Syd's birthday party, family was *definitely* something they all needed.

But Jack, he noted, was suspiciously absent from the group.

"So ... how long have you known, Z?" Bridge asked finally. He'd selected a place on the floor as he tended to do in these situations, leaning back against Adam's knees with Rocky on his other side. He seemed more content than Wes had seen him in days.

She shrugged lightly from where she sat near Justin - close, but not quite touching. "After Cruger told us that our powers came from the lab accident, and that Sam was like us, I realized that meant that someone at S.P.D. had to have known my parents. So, I cornered Wes and made him tell me the truth."

"Thank you," Justin spoke up, glancing over at Wes as he gently stroked Z's hair. "I can't remember if I said it yet or not. But thanks, Time. I owe you."

Wes smiled faintly, shaking his head. "Not really. I've missed the little trouble makers too, you know."

"Hey!" Syd protested, cuddling between Ryan and Carter. Ryan seemed pleased with the placement; Carter had the sort of feel about him that said he wasn't sure whether or not he should be happy about it. "I wasn't a troublemaker!"

The assembled parents laughed.

"Syd, the first time I met you, you were still in your Terrible Twos," Eric informed her dryly. "And you were three."

"When was this?" Wes asked, looking at him in confusion.

Eric coughed, shifting uncomfortably. "Taylor decided to introduce me to Sky and the others, so she brought them to Silver Hills for the day."

"What'd we do?" Z asked, looking interested.

He shrugged. "We took the four of you out for food and played in the park for awhile. Then she took me home. The next time I saw you all was at the wedding."
Justin snorted, and tried to smother it behind his hand. But it was too late; Wes started to snicker, while Ryan hugged Syd a little tighter with humph that sounded entirely too amused to be real.

"What? What's so funny?" Syd wanted to know, glancing up at her father.

"Did you know you're engaged, Syd?" Justin teased.

She stiffened, turning to stare at him. "*What*?!" She looked up at Ryan sharply. "Daddy?"

"No, you're not," Ryan promised, chuckling. "Not really."

"I don't know. Litania took it pretty seriously," Justin snickered.

"Stop scaring her, Turbo," Wes told him with a grin. He smiled reassuringly at Syd. "We got into a discussion during the reception about when your dad would be willing to let his princess date, and Jack decided that since he was a prince on his mom's planet, he'd train hard and come back to fight for your hand one day."

Syd stared at him. "No way."

He shook his head, struggling to keep in his mirth. "Yup. He really did."

She wrinkled her nose. "Me and Jack? Ew."

"Thanks, Syd. Really."

Everyone looked up at the dry tone as Jack emerged from the wall. He stuffed his hands in his pockets, radiating discomfort. "So ... is this party invitation only, or can anyone join?" he asked awkwardly.

"Depends. Am I going to have to fight you for Syd's hand?" Z retorted.

He gave her an exasperated glance, and Syd giggled for a moment before her amusement faded to worry.

"Please stay, Jack," she begged. "This is about you, too."

He hesitated.

"It's easier to ask questions when you're not hiding in the wall, you know," Wes pointed out.

Now he was the one getting the annoyed stare. "Is there anything you *can't* hear?" Jack demanded.


There as a sigh that came out as nearly a huff, and Jack flopped in a chair. A chair that was strangely close to Sky, Wes noticed, and fought not to say anything about it. "So?" Jack said finally. "You were talking about Syd being trouble?"

Syd humphed, and Wes couldn't resist the chance to tease Jack a little more, if just to put him at ease. "Actually, you caused a lot of trouble the first time you met the other four yourself, Jack."

"That's right. Didn't you say something about a brawl?" Z asked, sounding smug.

He nodded with a smile. "That Jack started."
"Hey, how did *I* start it?" Jack asked suspiciously.

"You picked a fight."

"Why am I not surprised?" Sky muttered, flinching as Jack elbowed him.

"You said something rude to Sky, and when Z tried to defend him, you told her that her opinion didn't matter because she was a girl, and girls have cooties," Wes informed him, grinning as Jack's body temperature rose. "So Z jumped you, Sky went after her, and Syd started to help." He paused, thinking. "I know Bridge was the reason it stopped, but I can't remember him actually being involved."

"I remember cookies," Bridge commented with a sort of dreamy expression. "And saying we were bestest friends forever." He paused, frowning. "And Sky."

"Sky?" Z echoed, looking at him oddly.

"Sky used to protect me when my powers got out of control," he explained. "His shields kept everything else out. So when I couldn't ground myself, Sky tried to keep everyone away."

"Sky always had a thing for protecting Bridge," Zack commented almost wistfully. He shot Z a playful grin. "You did too, but you weren't as exclusive. You'd protect anyone you thought needed it."

"Especially Sky," Wes agreed with a smile.

"What, were they dating or something?" Jack asked suspiciously.

Sky shot him an exasperated look. "Of course not. We - " He stopped, looking uncomfortable for a moment before at last muttering "Elizabeth was my best friend."

"Oh," Jack said awkwardly.

"How did that happen, anyway?" Z asked softly, but her eyes were on Sky. "We're so different; how'd we end up as friends?"

Sky shrugged, practically radiating discomfort. "Bridge wasn't around as much because he had problems with his powers, and Syd was younger than us. We - " He hesitated. "We were only a month apart, so we ended up spending a lot of time together."

"More than just spending time," Wes commented gently, because they all needed to hear this. "You two had each other's back."

There was an odd silence, as everyone seemed to be searching for something to say.

"So ... " Jack took a deep breath, seeming to brace himself. "What happened? I mean, why were Z and I on the streets?"

Wes flinched. "It's - "

"If you finish that sentence, I *will* hit you," Eric threatened, squeezing his hand tighter than what was strictly necessary.

He sighed, shooting Eric an irritated look. "It's a long story," he finished.

"Which isn't your fault," Justin put in lightly.
He scowled at the other man. "Will you both stop trying to reading my mind already?"

"That's an idea ... " Bridge murmured thoughtfully, almost as though he wasn't paying attention to the conversation at all anymore.

"What's not your fault?" Z asked, looking at Wes quizzically.

He resisted the urge to correct her that it was, because he knew Eric's threat had been more serious than it sounded. For a moment, he searched for the best way to begin. "You've all seen the statue in the main entrance way, right? The ... " He swallowed. "The S.P.D. Newtech Rangers?" He paused for only a moment, not bothering to check whether any of them had actually nodded or not. "It's not entirely accurate - they're missing Turbo and Astro. But basically, that was the team that was sent to Aquitar - " He stopped, frowning slightly, and glanced instinctively to Justin.

"Ten years ago," his teammate supplied instantly.

"Aquitar was the first time Emperor Grumm had managed to get so close to our solar system. Our allies there sent out a distress signal, so S.P.D. Earth sent off six Rangers on a rescue mission to do what they could to help." He took a deep breath, trying to shake away the memories. "Well, long story short, that's where we first met Broodwing."

"Wait - Broodwing?" Jack demanded sharply.

He nodded. "Broodwing was fascinated by the six of us and what we could do. And he started trying to learn more about us and where we were from. I thought we covered our identities pretty well, but ... "He shook his head.

"It wasn't enough," Justin finished quietly. "Grumm eventually pulled his forces from what was left of Aquitar, and Broodwing tracked the six of us back here - to Earth. No one knows exactly how long he spent studying us, but at some point, he hired a group of bounty hunters to kidnap several Ranger kids for scientific study." He reached out to touch Z's shoulder lightly, running a hand along her cheek as she stared at him. "Including the five of you."

"By the time we tracked everyone down, Elizabeth and Jaz were already gone, trying to find help," Wes murmured, too lost in the memory to remember what to call them now. "Nerina was injured. Everyone was cold, hungry, and frightened out of their minds - Hawk couldn't even calm down long enough to keep himself visible. Bridge had gone into empathic shock, and Sky was trying so hard to protect him he couldn't let go of his shield."

--"It's never gonna be okay again."--

He jumped as something pinched his arm - *hard*.

He looked up, blinking, to find Eric studying him intensely. "Stay with me, Wes," he murmured, too low for anyone else to hear.

He swallowed hard, and nodded.

"What did you just call me?"

It took him a moment to realize Jack was talking to him, and he noted that Sky was watching him in concern as well. "Sorry, what?" he asked, shaking himself mentally.

"You said ... Elizabeth and ... Jaz ... ?" Jack sounded wary, as if he wasn't sure they were still talking about him.
Wes blinked. "What ... oh! Um, sorry. Jaz is - *was*, your nickname. Jackson Zhane Johnson, Jaz for short."

He could feel the odd look he was getting. "Jackson Zhane?" Jack repeated skeptically.

"That's what I said," Rocky commented absently, only to be elbowed by Adam.

"You named our son 'Bridge'," Adam reminded his husband. "Be quiet."

"It's a Johnson family tradition," Justin explained. "Each kid that's born to the Johnson Family - no matter which set of parents - is named with proceeding letters of the alphabet. For instance, Theodore Jarvis, who comes after Steven Ian, and is followed by Urwin Kenneth." He shrugged slightly. "You got stuck with 'J' and 'Z', and Teej decided to name you Zhane, after his teammate. I think Jaz was because Litania wanted a more unique name."

"So are my parents still alive?" Jack asked after a pause. Something in his tone said he either expected they weren't, or still wasn't sure if he wanted to know either way.

"Yes, they are," Aisha told him gently. "After no one could find you two, they decided it was just too painful to live on Earth. So they transferred to S.P.D. Gannos, in Litania's home galaxy." She hesitated. "They know that you're here, and that you're okay, but they're waiting until you're ready to talk to them."

"What about Keri, then? No one bothered to tell her? Or does she just like being dramatic and making a scene?"

Wes knew he wasn't the only one who winced.

"Keri is the Red Silver Star Ranger of Gannos, and heir to your mother's throne, which means she can't leave her planet very often," Carter said carefully. "She's ... well, she hasn't made a secret of the fact that she's been looking for you since she was old enough to search. And she's a lot like your mother. Everyone realized that if Keri knew, she'd come straight here to meet you and try and drag you back to Gannos."

"Which is the last thing we figured you needed," Zack agreed.

Jack was silent for a moment, staring at the floor. "So you guys all knew?" he asked abruptly, looking up at Sky for a long moment before allowing his gaze to flicker to Bridge and Syd.

"Yes," Sky answered simply.

Syd winced. "We didn't want to scare you away," she confessed quietly, and Ryan rubbed her shoulder comfortingly at the meek tone to her voice.

"Or make you feel obligated to join S.P.D.," Bridge added. "Or more obligated, that is. Since you were sort of forced into it. Or bribed, as the case may be."

"He gets the idea, Bridge," Rocky murmured.

Jack stood, shoving his hands back into his pockets into what was obviously a defensive gesture as he headed back to the door. He paused just in front of it, but didn't turn around as he spoke. "I guess I should say thank you, for being honest with me. Finally. I'm ... I'm not gonna say I'm not mad. Furious, actually." He let out a slow breath. "But ... before anybody panics, no, I'm not going anywhere. Whether I like it or not, S.P.D. is more or less my home now."
He phased through the door without bothering to wait for it to open, not giving anyone a chance to say anything in return.
This didn't come out quite as I'd hoped it would, unfortunately. -Sighs- But lecturing Cruger was still fun. ^_^

“I can't believe we finally found a worse Sixth than me,” Eric muttered as he and Ryan prepared the ‘ambush’, for lack of a better word.

"Merrick was worse than you,” Ryan reminded him.

"No, Merrick was brainwashed by an evil mask, and then avoided his team like the plague out of guilt and the fact that he didn't know how to deal with life a century after he was supposed to have died," Eric retorted. "I was just a jerk."

Ryan gave him a dirty look. "Tried to destroy my own sister?"

"Raised to believe your family abandoned you to demons," he returned.

Ryan frowned. "Ko-lin."

"You mean the mysterious Phantom Ranger who almost sacrificed herself for the forces of good - twice - and only avoided talking to her team because she was so traumatized by the last one she thought they'd be disgusted by her if they knew who she really was?"

"Magna Defender."

"The tragic hero who was semi - brought back to life by Mike Corbett and later sacrificed himself for the sake of Terra Venture, or Mike Corbett, who sacrificed himself for his team? Also twice."

"Trent ... ?"

"Technically, he's not a Sixth - it was a five-man team. And either way, he was possessed by an evil rock."

" ... Tommy?"

He gave him an incredulous look. "Did you seriously just say that? Tommy Oliver, who was brainwashed to serve evil and later sacrificed his Powers and nearly his life for the sake of the planet?"

Ryan threw up his hands. "Fine. You're the worse Sixth ever next to Cruger. Happy?"

He rolled his eyes.

"You really need to stop spending so much time with Wes, by the way; all that brooding is catching."

He stiffened. "That was out of line," he growled.
Ryan paused, glancing over at him. "Sorry," he said quietly.

They worked in silence for several minutes.

"I've got Tommy, Jason, and Zhane on Comm 1," Eric spoke up at last.

"Cam's standing by on Comm 2," Ryan said after a moment.


"On our way, Fish-Face."

Eric looked up, narrowing his eyes at Ryan as the other man snickered. "What?"

"Nothing," Ryan chuckled. "So should I stand clear of you two when Karone gets here?"

"We agreed to a temporary ceasefire," he informed him, perfectly serious. "This discussion is more important."

The ongoing prank war between him and Karone had become legendary at S.P.D. for several reasons. For one, no one had expected either of them to hold a grudge for roughly five years now. But they had; ever since the day he'd retaliated against Karone's nosy interference in his life when he'd needed it most by covering her office in fish, and she'd later responded by coming to find him and slapping him across the face with one of said fish.

Their war was taken very seriously by both parties, and had silent 'rules' involved. Pranks were only to be made against each other, and never involved innocent bystanders. No one else was allowed to help; they had to come up with their plans on their own. And most importantly, all effects must be temporary, and never truly harmful.

The rest of S.P.D. watched them with something between awe and disbelief. Hot-headed, self-centered Eric Myers, reduced to meticulously gluing furniture to ceilings and spray painting an entire office lavender? Sweet, curious Karone re-labeling his workspace in seventeen different alien languages, and setting loose a litter of Harunian Powderpuffs in his office just before dousing him in sugar, their favorite treat? There was no way this could last forever.

Everyone had severely underestimated how stubborn they both could be.

"What is the meaning of this, Captain Karone?"

"It's an intervention, Commander," Karone replied smoothly as she led Cruger into the meeting room.

"What sort of 'intervention'?" Cruger asked suspiciously.

"A Ranger one."

Eric glanced at the Comm screen Tommy was sitting in front of looking solemn, Jason and Zhane on either side of him. "Anubis Cruger, what you did today was unacceptable, and it can't happen again," Tommy continued.

Cruger stiffened, and Eric silently cursed. His eyes flicked to Karone to make sure she'd locked the door to keep Cruger from trying to leave. She nodded; whether he liked it or not, Cruger was *going* to listen to this.

"I don't see how I handle my Squad is any of your business, Mr. Oliver," Cruger growled.
Jason moved to say something as his eyes narrowed, but Tommy put out a hand to stop him. "S.P.D. Newtech Commander or not, I'm still Ranger Commander, Doggie," Tommy told him quietly. "And in this case, you answer to me."

"And what, exactly, do you feel I have to answer for?" Cruger snarled back.

"You're a Sixth Ranger now," Zhane spoke up, his voice so calm and patient that even Eric wanted to hit him. "That means you have a different set of rules to follow as a Ranger. You have to work harder, and you have to be better than anyone else on your team."

"The Sixth is there to strengthen the team," Cam put in, pushing up his glasses on his nose with an annoyed expression. "We receive our Powers when the team needs them most."

"The Sixth Ranger is an entity outside of the team. We can fight alone when it's necessary, but we can combine our strength with them when it's needed." Ryan added, his eyes a bit distant.

"The Sixth doesn't get to pick and chose their battles," Eric added, scowling at his morpher. "They fight when they're needed. If the call comes, you go."

"The Sixth Ranger exists to protect the team. Once they become part of it, they fight with them until the enemy is destroyed." Tommy finished.

"This has nothing to do with B Squad being Ranger Kids," Jason informed him, still frowning over the implication that B Squad was Cruger's now. "You're not just the Commander of S.P.D. Newtech anymore. Now you're a Ranger, and that changes how you react to situations."

"I reacted to the situation as their Commanding Officer," Cruger snapped. "B Squad believed that with me to 'protect them', they no longer had to work to defeat Grumm. That is unacceptable in any situation."

"It is," Zhane agreed. "And they should be punished for that. But it has nothing to do with your position as a Ranger."

"It's hard to go from a mentor to a teammate," Tommy said quietly. "Believe me, I know. You have to be their teacher, their protector, and their friend all at once. But that's what we do. You just have to figure out your own balance to it."

There was a moment of silence, which was at last broken by another soft growl. "Do you actually expect me to believe an actual set of rules for being a Ranger exists?" Cruger demanded at last.

"Would you like to see the Eltarian, Edenite, Triforian, Bavarian, or Earthian translation?" Karone offered immediately.

"S.P.D. isn't the first place to teach Rangers, Doggie," Tommy reminded him. "The Ranger Collegiates have existed for centuries, just as the Power Rangers have. We each have our own way of doing things, but we all have an edict to follow. There's a reason we have Color Tradition, just like there's a reason we have the Ranger Etiquette Laws."

"It's not a tradition - it's a way of life," Zhane insisted.

Karone stepped forward, pressing a datapad into Cruger's hand. "This has every Ranger Etiquette Law on file, translated into Sirian and Earthian," she told him softly. "Earthian is a little different: a lot of rules were adapted by Zordon to fit with the Earthian way of life."

"You're a Ranger now, Doggie," Tommy said again. "And that changes things."
Cruger looked down at the datapad in his hand for several minutes. At last he looked up, glaring furiously at them all. "Is this intervention of yours finished then?"

Tommy sighed. "Yeah. Let him out, Karone."

They all watched him storm out of the room, still snarling under his breath.

"Well, that went well," Cam sniped.

"Do you think he'll read it?" Zhane asked, glancing at Tommy.

"He'll read it," he sighed. "Doggie may not admit it, but tradition matters more to him than you'd think. He's just embarrassed at having to be lectured by people he thought were his subordinates."

Eric humphed, feeling just the tiniest bit smug. "Not anymore."

"How's the search?" Karone asked.

Zhane just smiled grimly as Tommy sighed and Jason looked away. "Could be better," he told her with a shrug. "How's the defense going?"

Eric tuned them out as he leaned against the wall. Cruger better have learned his lesson. Promise not to interfere or not, as long as he had a morpher, he wasn't going to sit back and let B Squad get hurt again.

He wouldn't do that to another team.
Heart

Chapter Notes

The original plan for this prompt was something else. Instead, 'Heart' takes on a new meaning, under a different spelling. -Shrugs- I'm not sure if I'm happy with it, but at least everyone gets to see FireyKimberly at her finest.

"You *what*?!

Wes flinched, glancing over at where Kimberly was glaring up at Sky, who looked like he was trying not to backpedal. "What happened?" he asked softly, glancing over at Shane.

The other man shrugged. "I don't know. But whatever it is, it doesn't sound good."

"What could have *possibly* given you the idea that you even had the *authority* to do something like that?!!" Kimberly shrieked, and now most of B Squad seemed to be cowering behind a flustered Sky. "I don't care *what* level you are, Squad members don't get to expel other cadets! *Especially* when that cadet happens to be a transfer from S.P.D. Japan!"

"Uh oh," Wes muttered. He glanced at Shane. "You don't think they -"

Sky seemed to be trying to argue his point, and Wes resisted the urge to tell him to stop. If Kim was angry, it was best to just let her rant. Fighting back was the *worst* possible thing he could do at this point.

"Skylar Ericson Tate, you take that back right now!" Kimberly shouted. Her hand raised as though she was going to slap the cadet in front of her, and Sky flinched back instinctively.

"Should we intervene before she takes his head off?" Shane asked warily. "Whatever Sky did must have been pretty stupid."

Wes nodded, already moving forward. "Sky ... he sighed under his breath.

"First of all," Kimberly snarled as they came closer, stabbing Sky in the chest with her finger. "Sophie is a *she*, not an it. Second, she is *not* a cyborg, she has cybernetic implants because of a health condition. Or did you and your pig-headed prejudices ever stop to ask why before you decided to kick her out of the academy, which, again, you had absolutely no authority to do?!!"

"Sophie?" Wes stiffened, looking at Kimberly in alarm. "Wait, *our* Sophie? Sophie Hartford?"

"Did something happen to her?" Shane asked urgently.

"Wait ... did you say Sophie *Hartford*?" Bridge asked slowly.

Wes gave him an odd look. "Yeah, Cadet Sophie Hartford. She just transferred here from S.P.D. Japan a few weeks ago for D Squad."

The glare Bridge shot Sky was unmistakable, as was the way Sky shifted uncomfortably in a very
unSky-like way.

Wes took a deep breath, looking at his son. "Sky? What did you do?"

Sky flinched. "We - " Then he swallowed, seeming to brace himself. "I, learned earlier today that Cadet Sophie is a cyborg. We - I, suggested she be expelled from S.P.D. on the grounds that she admitted to trying to hack the D.B.D.S. system last night, and was a security risk."

"And the rest of us agreed," Jack put in, glancing at Sky.

"Okay, putting aside the fact that you didn't even have the right to do that," Shane said slowly. "Why didn't you report her to someone else?"

"I ... it didn't ... occur to me. Sir," Sky muttered, staring at the ground.

Kimberly took a deep breath, taking the time to let it out before she spoke. "We'll deal with punishments later," she said at last. "But let me get one thing clear to you - all five of you. Sophie Hartford is a Ranger Kid, just like all of you. She's also half-Mercurian. One of her parents is part of the S.P.D. Japan Rescue Team looking for A Squad; the other is running Japan's Ambassador program alone. She came here because she wanted a chance to earn her way into S.P.D. without anyone else's influence. Cybernetic implants or not, she's still a person - just like you." She glared at the teens. "I can't put into words how absolutely furious I am. With *all* of you. Sky may have made the suggestion, but no one else stopped him." She stopped again, shaking her head and turning to look away. "Go find Sophie, and bring her home. That's an order. I'll deal with you when I can stand to look at you again."

"Sir," they all muttered, sliding into a salute.

Wes saw Sky glance at him for a moment, and just shook his head.

Sky seemed to sag, his eyes on the ground as he hurried off with the rest of his squad.

****

"It works! It works! It works!" Dustin cheered, bounding into the Command Center. Wes grinned at the other man as he followed him. "So Dustin, does it work?" he couldn't resist teasing.

"All right already, we get it," Taylor grumbled, but there was a definite lack of hostility to her tone as she shot Dustin an exasperated look.

"Congratulations Captain Brooks, Lieutenant Earhart," Cruger rumbled as he finally detransformed with a flash of light. "Your program was the key to the success of today's battle."

"With Sophie's help," Bridge put in, flashing a smile at the younger girl. She grinned and ducked her head shyly in response.

"Not our program," Dustin corrected, his enthusiasm fading somewhat. "Ethan's."

"Yes," Cruger agreed solemnly. "Let us all have a moment of silence in gratitude for Lieutenant James. Without his contributions to S.P.D., we would not be where we stand today."

Everyone present in Command bowed their heads silently, and Wes found his own thoughts drifting through his memories.
"Dude, this is the coolest thing I have ever seen! Can you imagine playing Ultimate Space Blaster on that screen?"

"Why does everyone have to label everything? Why can't Conner and I just be friends?"

"With benefits?"

"Kat, can you hand me - no, not you Kat, the other Kat. No, you."

"It goes this way!"

"No, it'll work better if you do -"

"Am I interrupting something here? And while I'm at it, James what is your arm doing around my girlfriend?"

"What? Wait - it's not like that, I swear!"

Thank you everyone, for your hard work today," Cruger told them solemnly at last. He glanced at Kimberly, his eyes flickering to Rocky and Adam after a moment. "Lieutenants Hart and Park, Sergeant DeSantos, may I speak to you privately for a moment?"

"Of course, Commander," Kimberly returned easily. "I'll be there in just a moment." She turned to Sophie before Cruger could even voice a protest, sweeping the teen up into a tight hug. "Are you okay, Sophie? You've been to see Aisha already, right? And Vanessa?"

"I'm fine, Aunt Kim," Sophie told her sweetly. "Really."

"Are you sure?" she demanded, taking a step back to look the girl over. "Do you need anything? How's your arm? I heard you hurt it earlier."

"I'm fine. Really," Sophie insisted.

Kimberly gave her a skeptical look. "You're not pulling your dad on me, are you?"

Sophie giggled softly. "No, I'm not. I'm really okay."

Kimberly sighed, kissing Sophie's temple before taking a step back to smile at her. "Good. Because your dad would destroy me if anything happened to you."

Sophie shook her head, giggling again. "No, he wouldn't. Father would kill you. Daddy would give you the puppy eyes."

"Which is practically the worst punishment ever already," Kimberly returned wryly. "I'll catch up with you later, okay?"

Sophie turned to smile awkwardly at B Squad. "So, um ... Does this mean I'm still expelled?"

Wes coughed, reaching out to pat her shoulder with a smile. "No, Sophie. It was all a misunderstanding. You were never expelled."

"I'm sorry for that," Sky said quietly. "I was out of line." He looked up, meeting her eyes directly. "I'm sorry I misjudged you."

"It's okay," Sophie assured him, instantly sounding cheerful. "I mean, it's not like we really knew each other very well."
"Well, that's about to change," Bridge promised, patting her arm.

"After all, you're a Ranger Kid," Syd agreed brightly. "And we Ranger Kids stick together."

"For better or worse," Z murmured, sounding amused as she glanced at her Pink teammate.

"Whether we like it or not," Jack sighed, and Wes fought the urge to stare at him. Did that mean Jack was starting to accept knowing how he really was?

Sophie laughed, openly and clearly, and it was so much like Mack it was almost disturbing. "That's true," she giggled. She paused, her eyes widening. "Oh! Um, I hate to do this, but are we dismissed? I have to make a phone call," she confessed, fidgeting.

Wes smiled at her. "Mack?"

"Oh, I should probably call Daddy, too," she returned thoughtfully. "But that wasn't who I meant. I forgot to call someone earlier today, and he's probably worried now."

"Who's that?" Syd asked, tilting her head curiously.

Sophie ducked her head again, but the happiness in her voice was audible. "My boyfriend."

The rest of B Squad regarded her in surprise. "You mean you and Bridge aren't ... " Z trailed off.

The pair in question stared at her. "Sorry ... " Sophie said slowly. "But ... I have a boyfriend back home."

"And I'm not interested in Sophie," Bridge put in, looking at Z funny.

"Oh. I'm sorry," Z said quickly. "Syd thought - "

"*I* thought?!!" Syd burst in, glaring at her. "You thought so too!"

"You thought it first," Z retorted.

"Why, you - "

"Ladies! Ladies, please!" Jack said loudly, waving his hands to get their attention. "Can we please keep the lover's spats out of Command?"

Both girls turned their scowls on him. "Oh, like you're one to talk," Syd scoffed. "You and Sky have lover's quarrels mid-*battle*."

"Hey! Leave me out of this," Sky protested.

Wes stared at them all as Sophie glanced at Bridge. "So ... everyone on B Squad is dating each other?" she asked, sounding confused.

"Well, not everyone," Bridge told her. "I'm still single. But Sky and Jack sort of have a thing, and Z and Syd have been together for almost three months now."

"Really? Are all Squads like that?"

Bridge shrugged. "Strange things sorta happen around B Squad. We're just lucky that way. Yours might not be like that."
"Oh, I dunno about that," Rocky piped up, sounding way too happy. "I think Sophie's new Squad has its own issues."

"New Squad?" Sophie echoed hesitantly.

"We're promoting you to C Squad, Sophie," Kimberly told her gently. "You've earned it, and we think you'll fit in there."

"Isn't C Squad full of Ranger Kids, too?" Z asked warily.

Bridge laughed, turning to look at Sophie. "You'll fit right in. Just don't let Sora and Casey scare you away; they're not as mean as they sound."

"Like the Commander?" Sophie giggled again.

Wes just stared as they all debated what the C Squad cadets were really like, if the Commander was really as mean as he pretended, and if Sora Bradley-Watanabe and Casey Earhart Scott were as terrible as they sounded.

His son was dating Jack? As in they were actually a couple now?

When did *this* happen?!
"Sky?" Wes called. "What are you doing wandering around over here? Did you need something?"

The teen turned. "Just looking around," he answered casually.

Wes raised his eyebrows. "In the training offices wing?" He frowned. "What do you need over here?"

"I was hoping to study the area. Learn the layout better, in case of a surprise attack. You never know what could happen."

"Yeah, sure. Hey, don't forget: Chinese for dinner tonight. Uncle Eric's teat."

"Sounds great. I'll catch up with you later, then."

"You got it, kiddo." He drew his right hand forward from his forehead before dropping it to hug his elbows.

Sky mimicked him almost absently. "Later."

Wes watched subtly as whatever he'd just talked to walked away, heart pounding. He waited several minutes after it had turned the corner before raising his morpher. "Eric? We have a situation."

"What's up, Wes?"

"Go talk to Sky, would you? He's just leaving the training offices wing, heading right. You ... you'll see what I mean."

"Wes, what - "

"Eric, just trust me, all right?"

There was an annoyed sigh. "Don't I always?" Eric muttered just before cutting off the link.

Wes leaned back against the wall for a moment, trying not to shudder at the thought of the person he'd just spoken to. It wasn't Sky. The posture, the tone, the way he spoke ... it was all wrong.

It wasn't Sky under the influence of someone else; ignoring the disrespectful way he spoke - not one 'sir', let alone 'Dad' - there was the fact that he hadn't known anything that Sky already did. For
one thing, Sky had already memorized entire layout of S.P.D. Newtech years ago, down to the smallest crawlspace. He'd grown up here, after all. And he only came over to the Squad offices when he needed to talk to someone.

Then there was the fact that Sky *hated* Chinese food, and hadn't called Eric 'uncle' since he was nine. 'Kiddo' had always been his nickname for Bridge, while Sky had begun protesting 'buddy' as soon as he hit puberty. And most importantly, Sky was fluent in American Sign Language because of his grandmother; there was no way he would have mistaken the sign for *son* as a gesture of goodbye.

So if wasn't Sky ... who was it?

He closed his eyes for a moment, thinking. The kids had brought someone in earlier ... It had been unusual, because Cruger had wanted him for questioning instead of straight containment, to verify if he was -

Wootox.

He shuddered as he remembered the name, and what that name meant to him now.

--*Images of endless wasteland and black water, farther than the eye could see.*--

--*Screaming for his friend to stop, that it wasn't worth it, there was nothing to do now* - --

--*Cestro crying out weakly, feeling blindly for Aurico's hand. Aurico's despair that his partner could no longer feel his touch.*--

--*The silent wave of sorrow from three remaining Aquitians as they joined them in their grief, the fourth who stood alone with a blank expression.*--

--"*Cestro, no! Don't!*"--

His head snapped up as he gasped for breath. After a moment he shook it hard to clear it, blinking. He stood still for several minutes, focusing on his breathing and letting it even out as R.J. had taught him, trying to clear his thoughts. Now wasn't the time for this.

A single frustrated thought slipped through his attempts: would the flashbacks *ever* end?

"Wes."

He looked up sharply, relaxing a bit as he recognized Eric. "Eric."

"You're right," Eric said grimly as he joined him. "I don't know what that was, but it's not Sky. Something about him ... it's not right."

Wes nodded. "Shape-shifter most likely. Which means we need to identify what it is and how it got into S.P.D., nullify the threat, and find the real Sky."

He blinked as he realized Eric was staring at him. "What?"

"You ... " Eric hesitated. "You've changed."

He smiled distantly, knowing instinctively that the expression on his face was less than pleasant at the memories the words evoked. "Had to."

Eric grabbed his arms, kissing him abruptly with a passion that left him breathless. "I'm not
missing anything else," he whispered fiercely.

Wes nodded slowly, still stunned by the sudden display. "Let's go get our son back."

****

They moved stealthily through the hallways with the ease from years of practice as they protected each other's back. Both watched warily for any signs of the shape-shifter.

"So, if Sky's not ... Sky, where is he?" Eric asked quietly.

"Gotta be Wootox. Which means Sky will be where Wootox *should* be - the cells. We've gotta get him out of there."

They both froze, looking up as the alarms went off. "Sounds like Sky didn't want to sit and wait for us to find him," Eric snorted.

Wes sighed, shaking his head. "He gets that from you," he grumbled as they raced forward.

"Yeah, try checking a mirror sometime."

"Whatever - there!"

They skidded to a stop, staring in surprise as a large purple creature with gold armor ran past them, dodging security as it went. Someone nearly overtook it, only to be roughly shoved aside. But rather than attack, the alien kept going.

Wes and Eric glanced at one another. "One way to be sure," Eric murmured.

Wes nodded. "Cut him off on either side of the hallway. You get him on the other end - you're faster."

"Always," Eric snorted, saluting cockily before he bolted.

Wes moved swiftly, gripping his blaster tightly in his fist as he braced his elbow with the opposite hand. For a moment, he desperately missed his Chrono Blaster, or even V1. Something about the S.P.D. standard issue just wasn't the same.

It took less time then he'd expected to hear the shout of "Freeze!" ahead of him. There was a garbled sound in an alien language, and the purple creature was in front of him. They both froze.

--"Watch your puny planet turn into a toxic paradise before your very eyes!"--

--"Oh, is the little Ranger sick?"--

--"So much death and destruction. I want more! *More*! I want to see *everything* on this planet bleed itself dry!"--

It took effort to keep from shuddering. "Freeze," he ordered quietly, but firmly. "We don't want to hurt you."

Wootox waved his arms, crying out in that strange language again.

"Your move, Wes," Eric called from behind the creature. "This is your show."

Taking a slow, deep breath to calm his nerves, he raised his right hand to his head, drawing it out
like he was adjusting a baseball cap. Then he dropped his hand to hug his elbows, and waited, heart pounding.

Wootox jerked back. There was a moment of tense, impatient silence as no one moved. Then slowly, Wootox raised an open claw perpendicular to his forehead and pressed his thumb against it, wiggling his talons hesitantly.

Wes let out another quick breath, lowering his blaster. "Sky," he sighed in relief. At the very least now that they knew which one was Sky, they had a chance to figure out what to do about Wootox.

"You sure, Wes?" Eric asked warily.

Wootox turned around slowly to look at him. After a moment, he slowly worked his three claws in four deliberate movements. They weren't quite right; his 'fingers' were really too long, but somehow he managed to spell out a passable imitation of \textit{b, r, a, t}, before pointing at himself.

Eric braced the Quantum Defender against his shoulder with an exasperated sigh. "Just can't keep yourself out of trouble, can you?" he grumbled. He gave them both a significant look. "We need to get him out of here. Not everyone else knows how to tell the difference apparently."

Judging by the way Wo - *Sky's* shoulders sagged, he was well aware of this already.

"We can go through the training grounds and out through the obstacle course," Wes decided. "No one will expect us to go through the hardest way to get out of here."

W - Sky nodded in agreement, while Eric sighed irritably again. "Great. Just how I wanted to spend my afternoon. Slogging through the mud because no one else knows the value of what it means to *not* shoot first and asking questions later."

Wes rolled his eyes at the hypocritical statement, exchanging an exasperated glance with Sky that would have felt far more normal in any other situation.

A sudden shriek from the Quantum Morpher made all three of them freeze.

"Morpher, location," Eric commanded, pressing a button. He squinted at his wrist as Wes and Sky waited impatiently. "Darn it," he muttered. He glanced up at them, tightening his grip on the Quantum Defender. "Change of plans. Wes, you get Sky out of here. I'm going up to the labs - someone activated the alarm."

Wes cursed under his breath. As a safety precaution after the explosion that had caused so many side effects all those years ago, an alarm had been installed into the labs in case of emergencies. The alarm went first of all to the Commander's desk, and second, to any active morpher or communicator within the S.P.D. base. Which meant that Kimberly, Zack, Rocky, Adam, Aisha, Ryan, and Carter had all gotten the same alert that Eric just had. It was just a matter of who was able to answer it at the moment, and who got there first.

But being that it was the labs, that meant -

Sky pressed his thumb against his chin, wiggling his open fingers frantically with another garbled cry.

"Don't worry, Sky. I'll protect her," Eric promised him. "You two get going before someone else gets in the way."

Wes nodded. "We'll catch up with you later. Be careful."
"You, too."

****

"Stupid, stupid, *stupid* kid!" Wes snarled under his breath as he darted down another alley. Eric and Vanessa would probably have a fit if they realized what part of Newtech City he was in, not to mention the fact that he was *alone*, but he didn't have time to care. If he managed to catch up to Sky before someone else did, he was going to ... to ..... well, do something very angry and parental to his son.

And that's when he heard the one sound he didn't want to hear.

"S.P.D., Emergency!"

"No, no, no!" he shouted, pushing himself faster.

He barely registered the cries of fire, or the grunt of pain from Sky before he threw himself in front of his son, arms spread wide as he screamed "Hold your fire!"

"Hold it!" Red Ranger bellowed.

An errant blast nearly clipped him in the shoulder before he found himself being shoved roughly to the ground by Sky, who growled fiercely at him and gestured something angrily with a hand that looked vaguely like it was meant to be bad. Or possibly stop. Which was odd, because the two signs weren't normally that similar.

"Sergeant Collins!" Yellow Ranger cried.

"Let him go, Wootox!" Red Ranger yelled.

Wes pushed himself to his feet, batting the claws away. "Rangers, hold your fire!" he shouted again, planting himself firmly before Sky.

"Sir, what are you - "

"That's an *order* so* grounded for this stunt!"

Somehow, Sky clearly managed to plant his hands on his hips to display his exasperation.

"Sir, what are you doing?!!" Red Ranger demanded. "Get out of the way!"

Wes glared fiercely at him. "If you want to hurt him cadet, you'll have to go through me. And there is *no way* I'm letting any of you lay a hand on my son."

The four Rangers jerked in surprise. "What?" Pink gasped.

"Sir, I don't understand," Green protested. "What do you mean?"

"None of this is what you think it is," Wes insisted. He resisted the urge to sigh as they all continued to stare at him in confusion. He was starting to understand how Bridge felt sometimes. "The person you think is Sky isn't really Sky. There's a - "

The rest of his sentence was cut off by the sight of Sky bolting past him to flip swiftly over the heads of his teammates.

"Whoa, what's he doing?"
"How did he ... ?"

"Let's go!"

"Yeah!"

"Skylar Ericson Tate, you get back here *right now*!" Wes shouted furiously.

But the doors were already closing, and he realized with a sickening sort of feeling what it was exactly that had Sky so desperate to get back to S.P.D. he didn't have time to try and explain. "Oh, no ... " he breathed in horror, staring at the base began it's slow transformation into the Delta Squad Megazord.

"Whoa!"

"What's happening?"

"It's turning into the Megazord!"

"Wootox must have taken over the controls!"

"This is *bad*! We can't stop it!"

Sky ... Eric. Vanessa, Wes thought desperately, clenching his fists helplessly. Please be all right.

****

"B Squad, hold your fire! That's an *order*!" Wes roared, forcing his way into the middle of the melee. "Wootox is a shape-shifter. He's taken Sky's body and put Sky in his own!"

"They've changed bodies," came another voice, as Shadow Ranger put a hand on Red's Delta Blasters, gently forcing them down. "We can't be sure who's who."

"We changed bodies, but we changed back! *I'm* Sky!" the teen snapped out.

The alien roared angrily, gesturing wildly with his claws.

"What?" Yellow demanded, sounding frustrated.

"So what do we do?" Red asked, glancing back and forth between the alien and what looked like their Blue Ranger.

"I know," Green spoke up, taking a step forward. He demorphed in a flash of green swirls, and Bridge reached up to remove of his gloves. "There's no way *any* Sky, real or fake, can hide from me," he informed them all calmly.

There was a flash of green light as he waved his hand carefully, studying first the human, then the alien. Then he turned to the human and smiled warmly, walking straight up to him.

Wes knew something was wrong the moment what looked like Wootox bellowed loudly, taking a step forward and reaching in Bridge's direction.

But at the same time as Wootox cried out, Bridge sent a spin kick into Sky's chest that would have made any one of his martial artist parents proud.

It was swiftly followed up by a wrist grab and hip throw that landed the fake Sky flat on his back,
Bridge's knee planted just below his rib cage. "Anyone mind helping me pin him down?" he asked brightly. "I don't think this position's gonna work so well for switching them back."

Wes let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. In retrospect, he shouldn't have worried. It *was* Bridge after all.

But even so, he still waited impatiently as Yellow and Pink helped Bridge pin the fake Sky, while Shadow and Red hovered behind what looked like Wootox. He watched anxiously as Sky forced their foreheads together, making them both flare with bright lights that hurt to look at for long. And he stood back as Wootox was judged for his crimes, and at last contained as he should have been all along.

*Then* he grabbed his son, holding him tight and refusing to let go, even when Eric and Vanessa showed up at last to fuss over him in their own ways.
Healing

Chapter Notes

This chapter was, quite frankly, a bitch. It's also not what I originally intended for this prompt, but after I ended up writing my own version of Recognition for Traumatized, there were some loose ends that still needed to be tied up. So, here it is. Finally. - Grumbles-

This is the second chapter that I'm dedicating to my Zhane for her birthday. Here's your AngstySky, sweetie. ^_~

"Wes? What are you still doing up?"

He glanced up, offering a weak smile. "Couldn't sleep. What about you?"

Aisha sighed. "Cleaning up the medical wing after everything earlier. Most of the injuries have been taken care of, but there was still a big mess left behind - and not just from the Megazord transformation."

He stretched, pushing himself to his feet and slapping his thigh abruptly. Jen barked once in affirmation, and he caught hold of her harness. "You planning on heading home?" he asked.

"I was thinking about checking on the kids one more time before I go," she admitted. "I know it's silly, but ... "

"But today was pretty bad," he finished quietly, nodding. "I was thinking the same." He offered her an elbow. "Keep me company?"

Jen barked loudly, and he gave her an apologetic look. "Sorry. Keep *us* company?" he corrected ruefully.

Aisha giggled a little, sliding her arm through his. "I'd be delighted."

They'd barely passed the squad common room when they heard the sound of shouting.

"Don't even try and deny it! I *heard* you, Z!"

They exchanged glances for a moment before hurrying their pace.

"Maybe it's none of your business, Jack. Did you think about that?" Syd shot back nastily.

"My team, my sister, my business," Jack snapped.

"Jack, I'm fine," Z sounded nothing but irritated. "It's not a big deal."

"You were *screaming*! That *is* a big deal!"

"Just let it go, Jack!"
"Will you all just knock it off all ready!?! Sky interrupted suddenly. "Can't you be quiet for *five minutes*?!"

Wes stopped to crouch down next to Jen. "Go get Sky," he whispered, patting her side.

He watched her bolt ahead of him for a moment before glancing up at Aisha. "Let her calm him down first," he advised. "It also makes us less suspicious."

Aisha shook her head. "Like I care about being suspicious when the kids need me," she muttered, but she waited and helped him up anyway.

"Aunt Aisha? Uncle Wes? Is everything okay?"

The both glanced back as one of the doors further down the hall opened, Sora Bradley-Watanabe poking her head out behind Marinda Hammond. Both girls looked sleepy and bewildered. "Seriously," Sora piped up. "I mean, B Squad fights a lot, but at this hour?"

"We'll take care of it, girls," Aisha assured them. "You two go back to bed."

"You sure?" Marinda persisted, sounding worried. "We heard someone scream earlier ... "

"We've got it," Wes promised. "Now get back to sleep before night patrol comes through here; it's Carter and Ryan tonight."

Marinda let out a muffled eep before scurrying back into her room. Sora sighed, throwing her head back in exasperation. "Good night, Aunt Aisha. Good night, Uncle Wes," she informed them. She paused, one hand on the door. "Oh, heads up? I think Keri's still wandering around somewhere. She said she was having trouble sleeping earlier."

"Thanks, Sora," Wes told her, wincing internally and praying that Keri and Jack didn't run into each other. While Jack seemed to have somewhat resolved things with his squad, he and Keri had made no attempt whatsoever to get along with each other, and neither one seemed to be inclined to make the first move. Another fight between them was the last thing they needed tonight.

Sky barely glanced up as they entered the common room, too busy petting Jen as she whined and tried to lick his face. Z was slumped against one of the couches, Syd standing front of her protectively as she faced off with an obviously irritated Jack. Bridge took a little longer to find; he was hiding further back in a corner, a plate of toast in his lap as he munched quietly. All of them were in their night clothes, and tension practically soaked through the atmosphere of the room.

"Oh, Baby ... " Aisha sighed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Bridge glanced up guiltily. "Sorry, Mom," he muttered. "I figured you were busy."

"I'm *never* too busy for you, you *know* that," Aisha scolded. She looked around the room. "All right, first of all, who needs aspirin? Sky?"


She nodded. "Anyone else?"

"Um ... no, thanks," Jack said after a moment. "Uh ... why are you here?" he added as Aisha retrieved a glass of water from the synthetron and handed it to Sky, along with a small packet.

"The reason we stayed here this late, or the real reason we're here?" Wes asked wryly, leaning over
to pet Jen as he watched Sky for a moment.

"What's the difference?"

"We're parents, Jack," Aisha informed him. "We were coming to check on all of you because we were worried." She pulled Bridge up off the floor, dragging him into her lap as she sat down on a couch and wrapped her arms around him. She handed him another piece of toast as soon as they were both comfortable. "Eat, Baby," she reminded him gently, kissing his temple.

Z watched the two of them for a moment, tilting her head a little. "You actually *let* him eat all that toast?" she asked finally, sounding skeptical.

Aisha looked up, and Wes saw Bridge cringe slightly. "All what toast?" Aisha demanded. "How much toast has he been eating?"

"When is Bridge *not* eating toast?" Jack returned, looking at her oddly.

Aisha stiffened, and Bridge ducked his head down.

"Bridge is always eating toast?" Wes asked carefully, trying not to look at Sky or Syd. He knew they *knew* what it meant. They couldn't have forgotten that much over the years of their strained friendship.

"Well, not always," Syd murmured, glancing aside in a way that made it all the more the obvious that she was lying.

"What's the big deal?" Jack wanted to know, looking over at Bridge again. "It's just toast."

"Toast," Aisha said tightly, "Is the comfort food Bridge eats when his powers are out of control."

Bridge sighed, dropping his head into his hands. "It's not that big a deal," he mumbled.

"Yes. It is," she returned, her tone booking no room for argument. "Now eat your toast. We'll discuss that later. Right now I want to know what has all five of you sitting in here at this hour."

"Migraine," Sky answered her bitterly. "But that's what happens when your mother smashes a microscope into your skull."

Wes sat down next to him, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. "You'd be more upset if she hadn't tried to defend herself against him at all," he pointed out.

When Wootox had surprised Kat and Vanessa in the lab earlier that day, the story was that Kat hadn't realized it wasn't Sky at first - but Vanessa had. While Wootox was distracted with Kat and trying to demand that she tell him where the Delta Command cockpit was, Vanessa had snuck up behind the impostor and bashed him with a small microscope. Eric arrived just as Wootox sent her flying into a wall.

From what Aisha had said, Shadow Ranger wasn't the one responsible for most of the bruises Sky's body had suffered in his absence.


"Look, I'm just here because I heard Z screaming in her sleep," Jack said loudly, in a very obvious and unsubtle attempt at drawing everyone's attention away from Sky.
"For the last time, I was not!" Z snapped at him.

"Then you're a lot stronger than I am," Wes spoke up quietly.

He had the eyes of all five teens on him in an instant, and he ignored the careful way Aisha was studying him. "You have nightmares too, Uncle Wes?" Syd asked hesitantly, taking a seat beside Z and leaning against her shoulder.

"Almost every night," he told her, feeling strangely proud of the way his voice didn't waver.

"Nightmares are pretty common for Rangers," Aisha put in. "We go through a lot during our careers. It'd be impossible for anyone *not* to have nightmares from some of the things we've seen."

"What do you have nightmares about, Mom?" Bridge asked curiously, turning to glance back at her.

She stroked his hair gently. "I'm pretty lucky," she admitted. "I didn't see as many bad things when I was a Ranger as some of the others have. My nightmares are usually watching the Thunderzords be destroyed, or when Master Vile turned back time." Her voice grew a little softer. "When Kim was losing her Powers. When I gave up mine." She swallowed. "When I felt Zordon die."

Bridge turned sideways to wrap his arms around her, and she hugged him close with a sigh. "I'm okay, Baby. Thanks," she murmured.

There was an awkward pause.

"What about you, Sergeant Collins?" Jack asked after a moment.

"You can call me Wes, Jack," he told him, squeezing Sky a little as he felt his son tense. "We're not on duty now." He took a deep breath, reaching down to pet Jen again before she got agitated. "I ... "

"You don't have to, Dad," Sky said suddenly, his voice oddly sharp.

He sighed quietly. "We all have nightmares, Sky. Some of us ... just have more to think about. More to remember." He glanced up, noting the way Jack was watching him somewhat intently, the almost hopeful rise to Z's shoulders, the curious tilt to Syd's head as she snuggled up against her girlfriend.

The way Aisha watched him without judgment, Bridge nestled securely in her arms.

"I've been a Ranger for a long time," he heard himself say at last. "I was twenty years old when I got my morpher, and I was thirty-eight the day I lost the Power. I've worked with two teams, fought more villains than I can name, lost a war for a world that wasn't mine, and gave up my eyesight and four years of my life for people I never knew."

"Why?"

He looked up, smiling softly at Jack's bewilderment. "Because I'm a Power Ranger. Because that's what we do. We fight, so that other people don't have to."

"What do you dream about?" Z asked, her voice so quiet he almost didn't hear her.

"The last battle for Silver Hills," he said after a moment, swallowing. "I dream that my friends never came back to help, and Ransik won. I dream about the months on Aquitar, the first time I
ever saw what a real battlefield looks like. I dream - " His voice caught, and he had to force the words out. "I dream about the day I lost my team, when I almost died. Sometimes I even dream about what might have happened if I never woke up."

Sky squeezed him then, and he held his son closer. "Lately, I dream about all of you," he continued quietly. "I dream about things that could happen, that I couldn't stop."

"Me, too," Aisha told them softly, kissing Bridge's head again and hugging him a little tighter. A long silence fell.

"I ... I dreamt that ... we killed Sky," Z whispered suddenly. She closed her eyes, and the tears in her voice were painful to hear. "That no one stopped us, and he died because we couldn't tell the difference between our friend and a monster."

Syd hugged her instantly, kissing her cheek and resting her head on her shoulder. "I dreamed about that too," she admitted. "That we didn't save Sky."

"Me, three," Jack muttered.

"I didn't," Bridge announced almost thoughtfully. "But that's because my dreams aren't very cohesive. Or clear, really. Or much of anything, now that I think about it."

"Bridge .... " all four of his teammates sighed in unison.

"My dream was blue and red. And pain. Blackness. Despair," he continued as if he hadn't heard them, the dreamy tone turning distant. He was staring blankly at a wall, and the effect was unsettling.

"Bridge," Sky said sharply. "You okay?"

Bridge glanced at him, blinking for a moment. "I will be," he answered at last, shrugging slightly. Sky frowned. "That's not what I asked."

For some reason, this seemed to make Bridge smile, which in turn made the tension in Sky's shoulders relax somewhat. "Just a little displaced," Bridge admitted. "Feeling you as not you, and him trying to hide behind you was worse than I expected it to be."

"Then why'd you - "

Bridge looked at Sky, and the older teen shut up. "Because you're my friend, Sky," he reminded him quietly.


"You're my friend," Bridge repeated.

"What did you dream, Sky?" Syd asked suddenly, her voice barely audible. It was obvious by the way she wasn't looking at him that she expected to already know the answer.

"Nothing," Sky shrugged at the skeptical looks he received. "I'm not kidding. I haven't slept yet."

"You want a sedative?" Aisha offered.

He shuddered slightly. "I'd rather not."
Wes considered. There was something he and the others - Jen and the others - always used to do after a really rough day. Maybe that could help the kids ...

"... Dad?"

He glanced up. "Hmm?"

Sky hesitated. "When you ... when you first saw me in Wootox's body, you ... You recognized him, didn't you?"

He froze.

--Images of endless wasteland and black water, farther than the eye could see.--

--"So much death and destruction. I want more! *More*! I want to see *everything* on this planet bleed itself dry!"--

--Screaming for his friend to stop, that it wasn't worth it, there was nothing to do now - --

--"Oh, is the little Ranger sick?"--

--"Cestro, no! Don't!"--

He shook his head, hard.

Someone was squeezing his arm painfully tight. He looked up to see Sky staring at him, far closer than he'd been before. "Dad?" he asked anxiously. "Should - should I get Eric?"

"No. I'm fine," he managed. He forced a smile. "Really, Sky. Just ... " He took another deep breath. "Yes. I knew Wootox," he admitted. "That's why Cruger wanted you to bring him in. We didn't have any solid evidence that he was part of Grumm's attack on Aquitar, just witnesses. Until Justin and I saw him, we couldn't verify that he was one of the ones we were looking for."

"What did he do?" Jack asked quietly.

He closed his eyes for a moment. "Wootox is the Destroyer of Planets. He enjoys random, pointless destruction. His method of choice on Aquitar was to poison the three largest oceans with some sort of toxin - we couldn't identify it until it was too late. Cestro ... " He took another deep breath, pretending not to hear Aisha's soft gasp of recognition at the name. "The Blue Aquitian Ranger was infected by the poison while trying to stop it. He didn't ... He never recovered."

He reached out to squeeze Sky's hand, feeling his eyes burn. "But you brought Wootox in. He'll be forced to answer for what he's done now."

Even if containment is too good for him, he finished silently.

"I have an idea," he announced abruptly. He stood up, reaching for Jen's harness. "Everybody come with me."

He headed for the door without waiting to see their reactions, calling back over his shoulder. "I'd let you guys use my room here, but it's better if to use one we already know Bridge is comfortable in."

"Dad, what - "

"Sir - "
He led the way to Sky and Bridge's shared room, ignoring the questions. Leaving Jen by the door, he dragged both mattresses to the floor in between the beds - one of the annoying things about his team's method was that there was never enough cushions on the floor to keep from waking up with sore backs. Well, except for Trip, but that's because he had a spine like a cat.

He felt everyone staring at him from the doorway as he began dragging out blankets and pillows, tossing them into the mattress pads.

"Dad? What are you doing?" Sky asked warily.

"Dogpile," he answered shortly, stepping back to survey his work. "We used to do this in the clock tower all the time."

"You did?" Aisha sounded almost amused.

"Of course." He glanced back at her, smirking faintly. "That place was drafty as heck. It was *freezing* at night."

That got a snicker out of Z, which had been his goal, and he smiled warmly at her. "We also did it when we'd had a rough day, just to remind each other we were all home, and we were all okay, you know?" The smile turned rueful. "Took me forever to get used to sleeping alone again after they went home."

"You really think it'll help?" Syd sounded skeptical.

He shrugged. "Can't hurt."

Bridge was the first to move, plopping himself down easily on the floor and looking up expectantly at the others. "Aren't you guys coming?" he asked innocently.

Syd and Z exchanged glances before settling themselves next to him. Syd immediately wrapped her arms around Bridge as they laid down, Z in turn hugging her from behind. "Ooh, I could get used to this ... " Syd murmured contentedly.

"Don't even think about it, Princess," Z retorted.

"Aww ... " she and Bridge protested in unison.

"Wes smiled faintly, turning to look at his son. "Just try it, Sky," he said quietly. "Trust me."

Sky looked at him for a long moment. "Good night, Dad," he said finally. And to Wes' surprise, he actually gave him a hug before turning to survey the group with a sigh. "Move over," he grumbled as he took Bridge's other side. "I'm not letting anyone roll me into the bed."

"That's what the blankets are for," Z retorted, even as she shifted further back, pulling Syd with her. "Hey, who picked this arrangement?" Jack demanded as he stared at them all. "How is this fair for me?"

Z snorted, apparently getting whatever he was protesting about. "Go with Sky, Jack. I'll live without you for one night."

Aisha glanced at Wes as they quietly backed out of the room, letting the door slide closed in front of them. "Did you really do that when you were a Ranger?"
"We didn't get mattresses," he returned wryly. "But yeah." He paused, looking away for a moment. "We did it on Aquitar, too. It just felt ... safer, that way."

His morpher went off just as she squeezed his arm reassuringly. "Time," he answered it automatically.

"Would you like to explain to me what you're doing still at S.P.D., and not at home in bed where you belong?"

"And how would you know?" he countered. "We don't share a bed. And why aren't *you* asleep?"

"Save the stupid questions for when you're here. Which should be *now*.

He rolled his eyes, shaking his head with a slight grin. "On my way. See you soon, Eric."

"I'd better," the other grumbled as the transmission cut off.

Aisha chuckled. "I'll let Ryan and Carter know not to bother them," she promised, tilting her head towards the room. "You'd better get home."

"If he wasn't my boyfriend, I'd call him my mother," Wes sighed, but he was still smiling.

"I'm glad you have someone who worries over you so much, Wes," Aisha told him quietly. She gave him a hug. "Saves the rest of us some trouble. Now get on home and go to bed. Good night."

"Night, Aisha."
I think my favorite part of this entire prompt is all the subtle interactions between everyone. Namely Shane and Dustin, but Wes, Eric, and Vanessa are a good second. They amuse me.

"So, does anyone know just how mad Hunter is?" Rocky wanted to know.

Kimberly groaned, thumping her head against the table as he joined them. "He said unforgivable three times - somewhere in between almost five minutes of cursing Cruger in Japanese. I never realized there were so many ways to insult someone's intelligence and looks," she muttered in aside.

"Be glad he's not mad enough to get into heritage," Shane advised.

"You think Hunter'll flip on the kids?" Eric asked suspiciously.

"Nah," Dustin dismissed, leaning around Shane to steal his partner's chocolate milk and ignoring the glare he received for doing so. "Hunter knows they were just like, following orders. It's authority he's got issues with, dude - not the people who get stuck listening to it."

"And how did he get promoted to S.P.D. Japan's Commander again?" Adam asked, sounding amused.

"Cruger wanted to get rid of him," Zack answered easily, making them all laugh.

"Why *didn't* Cruger just ask S.P.D. Japan for backup anyway?" Wes wondered aloud. "I mean, they have all of the Overdrive Zords there already. Why not just ask Mack to borrow them? It would have been easier than bringing the entire Newtech base to Kyoto and leaving our area unprotected."

"Which is how we lost that Iridium," Eric said grimly.

"What does that stuff do again?" Shane asked.

"It has the ability to harden metal into a more solid form," Vanessa informed them, deliberately pushing her way in between Wes and Eric to sit down and ignoring the glares they gave her for it. "In Grumm's hands, it's dangerous. Let's put it that way."

"Give it back!"

Everyone looked up as Marinda Hammond pranced into the cafeteria, dancing away from Rhythm Fernandez and holding a notebook just out of his reach. "No way!" she returned cheerfully. "Not until you listen!"

"Give it back, Rindy," Rhythm warned.

"What's the big deal, Ry?" Sora Bradley-Watanabe demanded as she followed her teammates.
"Why don't you want anyone to see what you're writing?"

Casey Earhart Scott snorted. "Bet you it's love letters for Rindy."

Sora whirled to look at her, lighting up instantly at the idea of a potential argument. "Bet you it isn't."

"Why else would he not want anyone to see it?" Casey countered.

"Maybe it's some secret plot against D Squad, to prove that we're still the better pranksters," Sora returned.

"What kind of idea is that?!"

"A good one!"

"You know, you *could* just try letting it go and admitting that I'm right for once."

"Why should I?"

"It could be that it's something very private Ry doesn't want to share with anyone," Ecliptor spoke up quietly, moving between the two girls to effectively end the argument. Sophie trailed after him, glancing back and forth between the pair warily.

"What, like a diary or something?" Casey asked skeptically.

"But that's so simple!" Sora protested. "Why can't it be something worth hiding?"

"And his diary isn't?" Sophie sounded puzzled.

"It's *not* my diary," Rhythm insisted, trying once again to snatch the notebook from Marinda. "But it's still personal, and I don't want anyone to see it!"

"Why not?" Marinda demanded. "It's good, Ry. Really!"

"Rindy - "

"Ecliptor, catch!" she called, tossing the notebook high above her head. Pointing with two fingers, she guided the book through the air towards her cousin.

He reached up to take it, and immediately handed it back to Rhythm.

"Ecliptor!" Marinda groaned.

"Thanks," Rhythm told the other boy.

Ecliptor just nodded, pausing to tussle Marinda's hair as he passed her on the way to the buffet. "Stop torturing Ry," he told her quietly. "If he doesn't want to talk about it, then don't make him."

Marinda huffed in annoyance. "But it really *is* good! And if he won't listen to just me, how else am I supposed to make him see?"

"Just a tip, Rindy?" Sora commented, putting a hand on the other girl's shoulder. "Picking on a boy to tell him you like him is *so* grade school."

Both Marinda and Rhythm flushed instantly. "That's not what I'm trying to do!" Marinda protested.
"And wouldn't that kind of defeat the point when they're already dating?" Casey pointed out wryly. She elbowed Sora aside to grab something from the serving line.

"Isn't that what Sora does with Keri?" Sophie asked hesitantly. "I mean, they're always fighting."

"No, that's flirting," Casey informed her. "They're both into S&M."

"We are not!" Sora snapped. "We just have a tendency to rub each other the wrong way."

"Must make life in the bedroom interesting."

"C Squad!" Adam barely raised his voice, but it echoed across the room none the less. "Please remember that you are in a very public place, and we can *hear* you."

All six cadets froze.

"Yes Sir, Sergeant Park," Rhythm answered weakly.

"Sir," the rest of his Squad echoed, sounding distinctly embarrassed.

Adam sighed, elbowing his husband as Rocky sniggered. "It's not funny," he grumbled.

"Oh, yes it is," Rocky returned with a grin. "You just got to hear more about your cadets than you ever wanted to know."

"Why is it that Ranger Kids seem to end up with each other, anyway?" Kimberly wondered, leaning forward to rest her chin on her hands. "I mean, we've got Rhythm and Marinda, sort of Keri and Sora, Sophie and Garrett, Sky and Jack, Z and Syd, and Hawk and Casey have been inseparable for years."

"And Heart's interested in Ecliptor," Adam reminded her.

Zack looked at him in alarm. "She is?"

"Maybe ... Ranger Kids just understand each other better?" Dustin offered, scratching his head. "I mean, most of us ended up dating other Rangers. Maybe they're the same way."

"Could be," Wes said thoughtfully.

"Hey, question," Rocky piped up. "Did anyone else think it was weird that Jack suddenly started asking for sword training?"

"He's been looking up Red Rangers in the archives, according to Karone," Eric told them.

Dustin gave him an odd look. "Why, dude?"

"How should I know? Ask the squealer."

Are you two ever going to bury the hatchet?" Kimberly demanded, sounding exasperated. "Five years over some silly prank war is ridiculous!"

"There's an idea ... " Eric muttered to himself.

Wes reached out to smack him upside the head just as Vanessa elbowed him.

"Hi honeys. We're home," Jack called loudly from the doorway.
Wes smiled as the rest of B Squad trailed in behind him. "How'd it go?"

"Terrible," Sky grumbled, taking a seat.

"Ignore him," Syd announced. "He's just mad because he lost a race against Aunt Ronny."

"What *possessed* you to accept a race against *Ronny*?" Eric demanded of his son.

Sky humped, folding his arms indignantly. "She said that B Squad had nothing on Overdrive," he grumbled. "So I tried to prove her wrong."

"He wasn't that bad, actually," Bridge spoke up thoughtfully as he sandwiched himself between Rocky and Adam. "She didn't get a full lap in before he finished."

Wes hid a smile as Sky muttered darkly. Of course Sky had to prove her wrong, and it wasn't just about his team's pride. After all, Eric was the one who'd taught him everything he knew about driving and flying.

"So ... Is the Tokyo base always like that?" Jack asked as he flopped down next to Sky, shoving the other teen over and sitting practically on top of him.

The gathered adults chuckled, knowing what he was talking about. "Surprisingly, yes," Zack snickered.

"Hunter like, has issues with authority, so he likes to think of himself as the anti-authority, dude," Dustin explained. He leaned across Shane again, reaching for his French fries. He ducked back as Shane slapped his hand away.

"Tell me about it," Shane muttered in agreement. He made the mistake of glancing at Dustin, sighed at the other man's expression, and slid the plate in between them. "You have your own, you know," he grumbled.

"But yours taste better, dude," Dustin argued. He kissed Shane lightly before stealing another fry, and pretended not to notice when Shane threw his hands in the air, exasperated.

"Ew, Uncle Dustin," Syd whined. "P.D.A.!

Dustin looked around for a moment before glancing down at his hip, where his datapad remained securely fastened. "No, it's right here ... " he said, sounding confused.

Wes fought back a grin as Syd huffed indignantly, because Dustin knew *exactly* what Syd meant - he'd done almost the same thing to Hunter and Cam over the Comm last week.

"So how did things go between Hunter and Commander Cruger?" Kimberly asked.

"Well, the Commander's still there, if that tells you anything," Z informed her. "They told us to head home after we finished seeing some of the highlights of Tokyo."

"So did you guys have a good time?" Adam asked, glancing down at his son as Bridge snuggled against him.

"Mm-hmm ... " Bridge sighed.

"You okay, Bridge?" Z asked, sounding concerned. "You aren't worn out from earlier, are you?"

The relaxed atmosphere around Bridge was gone instantly as all three of his fathers looked down at
him in alarm. "Earlier?" Adam asked sharply.

Bridge looked up slowly. "Um ... I'm a marginal telepath?" he offered tentatively.

Wes held up his hands in surrender as Zack and Rocky glanced at him. "Not me," he protested. "Check with Cam."

"Are you all right?" Rocky demanded, checking Bridge over.

"I'm fine. Just tired." Bridge assured him.

"Do you need your mom?"

"No, I -"

"Maybe we should have you check you over, just in case."

"Dad -"

"You know, you should probably come home tonight. It might be better for you."

"Dad!"

Adam sighed, Zack shook his head, and the rest of the former Rangers fought smiles as Rocky blinked and looked at his son in surprise. "What?"

"I'm *fine*, Dad. Really," Bridge promised. "I just need some sleep."

"What are you doing here, then?" Rocky demanded.

Bridge looked up at him. "Feeling loved," he said simply, shrugging a shoulder.

It was obviously the right thing to say; Rocky melted in half a heartbeat, pulling his son into a tight hug and resting his chin on his head. "Anytime, Bridge," he murmured. "Anytime."
He didn't like not knowing where he was.

It bothered him to have this obsessive need to always know. It wasn't like him to worry over people like this. That was *his* job.

He found him sitting on the front porch swing. He sighed as he leaned against the doorway and folded his arms, trying to sound more exasperated than concerned. "What are you doing out here, Wes?"

"Listening."

He swallowed. Something about the tone of Wes' voice was off. "Where's Jen?"

"Hiding under the bed. She doesn't like the thunder."

He moved to sit next to him, but Wes didn't so much as glance in his direction. "So why are you listening?"

"Reminding myself that it's just a storm." He could just barely make out a slight shrug in the darkness.

He sighed quietly. "You could have asked for company, you know. It would have been better than sitting out here by yourself."

"I don't mind."

"I do."

Wes looked at him, and he caught a brief glimpse of a slight smile during a flash of lightning.

"I'm serious, Wes," he insisted. "I don't like seeing you sulk like this. It's - " He hesitated. *It's wrong.*

A hand reached out to squeeze his. "I'm sorry," Wes said simply.

He sighed, leaning his head back against the bench. "Me, too."

When he'd first told Wes that things couldn't be the same between them, even he hadn't realized how much they'd already changed. Back when their relationship was still new and just starting out, it was a constant challenge, trying to find some sort of balance between them. Wes had dated other
guys before - Eric hadn't. And there was definitely a difference between dating a girl, and dating a
guy. Those first two years had been filled with almost nothing but fighting, and it was a miracle
none of their breakups during that time had been permanent.

But eventually they'd both realized two things: first, that they actually *enjoyed* fighting with
each other. Wes claimed they both liked a challenge; Eric maintained it was because they liked
'making up' afterwards. Or that they were just sadists.

The second was that somewhere in all the arguments and occasional fist fights, they genuinely
cared for each other.

It had been something of a shock for Eric to realize; there were very few people in the world that
he truly loved. His brother had been one of them, and losing him, and eventually both of his
parents, had made him withdraw from getting close to anyone again. But Wes was nothing if not
persistent, and somewhere in between all the fighting, Wes had always insisted that they were
friends - no matter how he treated him.

Maybe Wes was masochistic. Maybe he was just stupid. Either way, it was sort of ... charming. In a
'Wes' sort of way.

Their simple relationship had been forced closer a lot faster than either of them had anticipated in
the wake of Wes' father's disapproval, and he'd found himself with a roommate he hadn't planned
on or even wanted. It had been hard at first, maybe even harder than learning that under all the
fighting, there was still something between them. He hadn't wanted to admit it then, but now he
could look back and see that he had started a lot of those problems himself. Frankly, Wes had to be
some sort of saint to put up with him.

And then what had started out simple had gone from roommates to damn near married within
another four years. Things had worked out with Wes' dad, Wes' mom adored him for reasons he
couldn't understand. Even the Silver Guardians had seemed to accept that they were together. He
still didn't know exactly how it had gotten out, or who'd spread it around - and he'd have killed the
person who did it if he ever found them - but strangely, their guys had been mostly okay with it.
Everything just ... settled into place in a way he'd never expected it to.

Then they'd started talking about families.

He'd always wanted kids; getting together with Wes hadn't changed that dream. His family had
been so screwed up that he wanted a family of his own, one that was wholesome and *normal*.
Maybe Wes wasn't exactly the wife he'd pictured when he was a kid, but he loved him, and he
could still see the two of them with kids that laughed and smiled, and came home to two parents at
the end of the day. In his dreams it was perfect, and it was wonderful.

Those perfect dreams had kept him from seeing the shadows in Wes' eyes when he mentioned it.
They blinded him to Wes' hesitation as he talked about the lab in Switzerland, leaving him too
ecstatic at the new possibility to see. And those dreams had kept him going, telling himself it was
just nerves, that Wes really was just as excited as he said he was.

The dreams that had come true in the shape of two beautiful little boys, one with his eyes and Wes'
lips, and another with his face and Wes' eyes.

They'd shattered barely a week later, and shattered again a month after that, when he finally
learned the truth. Wes confessed everything, breaking his heart and ruining what he thought had
become *their* dream. But it had been tainted all along. He'd just never realized it.
It had taken years and multiple failed relationships to realize that problems or not, Wes was the only person he could stand for long periods of time. He was the only one he trusted at his back in a fight, and the one he wanted in his bed at night. He'd *never* connected with anyone that way before, or since.

He wasn't the type to believe in 'soulmates', or any of that new age junk, but if he had been ... 

"What are you thinking about?"

He blinked at the sudden voice, glancing over at him. "You," he said honestly. "What are you thinking about?"

Wes smiled faintly. "You."

"Liar."

"Yeah. But it sounded good, didn't it?"

He laughed slightly in spite of himself. "Moron." It came out entirely too fond. He paused. "What are you really thinking about?"


"Grumm didn't attack Aquitar the way he's attacked Earth," he said after a moment. "At first he did, but ... I don't know if he doesn't have as many resources now, or if he's just trying to distract the kids while he works on a bigger plan. Maybe it was because he'd already defeated the Aquitian Rangers by the time we got there.

"Whatever the reason, Aquitar was a war zone, plain and simple. People ... I saw people fall down and never get up again. I saw an entire city dome shatter. Some of the Aquitians ... " He swallowed. "People did what they had to, to save themselves and their families. You never knew who you could trust anymore. All I had were the other Rangers. And there were times when we had to split up to handle different threats." He shivered, wrapping his arms around himself. "I never felt so alone in my life," he admitted softly.

Eric swallowed, watching the way Wes seemed to curl in on himself as he talked. *Stop it. I don't wanna hear this.*

But he had to. Because this was a part of Wes he didn't know anymore, and knowing that tore him apart. And Wes would never get through an experience he never talked about.

Wes had taught him that, years after losing his brother, when his father had retreated back to the military life he knew, and his mother couldn't even stand to look at him anymore.

He reached out to touch his shoulder, rubbing it soothingly. "How'd you get through it then?" he asked quietly.

Wes glanced up, and he found himself caught in bright blue eyes as the lightning flashed again. "I thought about you."

He blinked. "Really?"

Wes nodded. "At first I tried thinking about Sky, trying to remind myself what I had to come back to. But when I was alone, I'd remember things you used to tell me in training. From there, I started thinking about what you'd do if you were there."
"I wish I was," he heard himself whisper, and cursed silently. He hadn't meant to say that out loud. "I'm glad you weren't," Wes said simply. "I wouldn't want you to go through that, too."

But *you* did.

He kissed him, slowly and searchingly, almost as if he were trying to pull Wes' mind back to him, to now. The response was a little more hesitant than he'd hoped for, but none the less there. He even heard a contented sigh when he finally pulled away.

A hand drifted up to touch his cheek, and for a moment, he could imagine that Wes' eyes were really staring into his.

A year of fighting against one another and another of fighting side by side. Months of hesitant flirting, seven years of the most bizarre romance he'd ever been involved in. Ten years alone, trying to move on and never being able to. Four years of sitting at his side day after day, silently begging for him to wake up. Five years as friends, and finally, *finally* something more again.

"You're making that face again," Wes whispered. "Stop it."

"We've gotta be the most screwed up couple at S.P.D., you know that?" Eric told him. He wasn't sure why he said it so softly; almost as if he was afraid of breaking the mood.

"Nah. There's worse."

"Oh, yeah? Who?"

"I'll tell you when I figure that out," Wes murmured, leaning in to kiss him again.

It took several minutes of slow, lazy kisses working their way into something more needy before he finally realized where they were going with this. "Maybe," he forced out between Wes' lips meeting his again and again, "We should. Take this inside."

"Nes will never. Forgive us."

He doubted that; Wes wasn't the one who had to listen to her complain about how drafty the garage was, and how much she missed her 'real' lab. Or her pointed looks when Wes went into his own room at night alone. Or the 'present' she'd given him two weeks ago, with a card that instructed him to use it well.

"She'll get over it. And if she doesn't - " He struggled to keep from gasping as Wes did something very pleasant to the side of his neck. "She can bite me," he finished.

"Nah," Wes breathed in his ear, and dang, he'd forgotten how seductive Wes could be when he tried. "That's my job."

****

It would have been the perfect way to wake up except for two things: The black ball of fuzz curled around his face, and the large golden lump trying to shove his feet off the bed.

"Coffee's done! Get your asses in gear before you're late to work!"

Make that three things.

He groaned, gagged on cat hair, and shoved the stupid cat off the bed. "Damn it, Sheep," he
growled. "Stay in your own room." He added a glare down at the dog looking up at him sleepily. "You, too."

There was a muffled chuckle against his shoulder. "You know, technically it's their room too."

"Not when I'm trying to sleep it isn't," he grumbled, wrapping an arm around Wes and pulling him closer.

"Mmm ... " Wes sighed, nuzzling under his chin. "We should get up. Work, and all that."

"Don't want to," he muttered, kissing the top of the blond head. He'd almost forgotten how nice it was to wake up next to someone. How nice it was to wake up next to Wes.

He paused as something finally filtered through his sleep-fogged brain. "*Their* room?" he repeated.

Wes sat up, turning to look at him. It was one of those perfect instances where the sun filtered through the window just right, the blanket had slid to that seductive place just around his hips, and his hair seemed to have a temptatious golden halo around it. And then he smiled, and it took Eric's breath away.

"Well, Vanessa *does* want her lab back ... "
Supreme Commander Fowler Birdie may be one of the first characters I've ever hated within two minutes of listening to him talk. I tried to come up with reasons for him being such an ass - which was harder than it should have been. I have a sad one, and an evil one as suggested by the infamous Rosabelle. Guess which one I went with.

Wes resisted the urge to make an obscene gesture at the shuttle as it finally pulled out of port.

Vanessa didn't.

"Ms. Tate, please retrain yourself," Cruger sighed.

"It's not my fault no on else is brave enough," she muttered.

Cruger scowled as several of the cadets snickered, turning to glare at them. "Wipe those silly looking grins off your faces! If you think that it's going to be a holiday around here now, well you're wrong. You're soft. Spoiled. Stubborn. Every last one of you. Aren't you supposed to be attending some training at this particular moment?"

The gathered cadets froze.

"Oh."

"Um - "

Wes smiled to himself as they scattered. Commander Anubis Cruger at his finest. Too bad the kids couldn't seem to tell the difference between a truly angry Cruger, and one that was just throwing his weight around because he could.

"Ooh, it's so good to be back," he heard Cruger murmur to Kat as she tried not to laugh.

He was really going to miss this place.

He turned with a soft sigh. Better clean out his office before anyone realized what was going on. Somehow he knew the news wouldn't go over well.

He barely made it down the hall before he heard "Sergeant Collins. May I speak with you for a moment?"

He held in another sigh. Was Cruger trying to make this even more difficult than it already was? It wasn't like there was anything he could do about it - the order had come from 'Supreme Commander' Birdie, after all. "Of course, Commander."

There was a long, awkward silence as they continued toward his office together.

"Where is Jen?"
"I had Vanessa take her home earlier. Figured I'd keep them both out of trouble for as long as I could."

Cruger nodded, clearing his throat uncomfortably. After a moment, he glanced at him sideways as they walked. "Are you aware, Sergeant, that the selection of S.P.D. employees is entirely up to each base commander?"

He tried not to tense. "No. I didn't."

"Yes. It has always been an established rule that a commander would be more familiar with the needs of his own staff than someone who is not as close to the situation."

Wes stopped with a sigh, turning to look at him. "Look. Commander. I appreciate what you did in bringing me here in the first place, and allowing me to come back. But ... " He shrugged, fighting to keep the hurt and insecurity from his voice. "Birdie's right. What's a blind man doing as a training instructor? How can I help my cadets when I can't even see what they're doing wrong?"

"You seemed to have managed just fine in the last few years," Cruger returned calmly. "A wounded warrior is still a warrior. And what makes you think training H Squad is the only purpose you serve here?"

Wes frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I've been told that on several occasions, B Squad has turned to you for advice and comfort. You were the first to realize that S.P.D. had been infiltrated by a shape shifter, as well as being instrumental in identifying the location of the true Cadet Tate. I am also well aware that you are solely responsible for convincing Cadet Delgado to join S.P.D. Many of our current cadets consider you to be an inspiration, both as a Ranger and a person." Cruger paused. "To be honest, I'm not sure if S.P.D. would survive without you. You are after all, the only person who manages to keep both Sergeant Myers and Ms. Tate from driving everyone, and most importantly myself, insane."

The protest he'd been about to make died with a faint smile. He bowed his head, the smile fading a little. "But is that - "

A large hand rested on his shoulder. "We need you here, Wes," Cruger told him quietly. "I am asking you, both as a commander and a friend, to stay."

He looked up at him. "A friend?" he repeated in surprise. The only one of them that Cruger had *ever* treated as anything like a friend was Kat - and sometimes Tommy.

"It was brought to my attention not too long ago that the bonds of friendship among Rangers are not to be taken lightly. I am still learning how to be a Ranger," Cruger admitted, and secretly Wes was shocked at the rare moment of humility from his commander, "But there is one thing I do understand: Rangers take care of their own."

He patted Wes' shoulder once again as he turned to walk away. "I hope to see Jen back with us again tomorrow. It's good to have a decent conversation once in awhile."

Wes stared after him, and slowly felt himself begin to smile. Maybe there was more to the old dog than met the eye after all.

Shaking his head, he tried to make his way toward his office again - for some time alone now, rather than anything else - and stopped short at the sight of the person standing in front of it. "Kim?"
Kimberly looked up with a faint smile as she leaned back against the door. "Hi, Wes." Her voice was strangely subdued, and the effect was discerning. "I figured I'd just wait for you here in case you planned to do something stupid. For the record, I had to fight Eric for the chance," she added.

Somehow he wasn't surprised, even though he did wonder a little why she was there at all. "Did you need something?"

"I'm here to pick you up for the 'So Long and Good Riddance Feather-Brain' party," she informed him. She paused, studying him speculatively. "And to make sure you're not going to do something stupid."

"Stupid?" he echoed. "What do you mean?"

She looked at him for a long moment. "I'm acting R.C., Wes," she reminded him quietly. "When someone tries to get rid of one of my Rangers, I know about it."

He swallowed uncomfortably. "Oh. Well, Cruger's already taken care of everything, so don't worry about it."

Her hand settled on his arm before he could make his escape. "I *am* worried, Wes. Because I know you. And I know how much you've been through, and how much you overthink things."

He blinked, wondering distantly when he'd gone from being the one who never thought things through to being the one who thought about things too much.

"Kim, I'm - "

"Don't you *dare* try to tell me you're fine," she interrupted, her tone gentle despite the way her eyes narrowed. "I'm not fine, and what Fowl-Up did to me wasn't anywhere near as bad as what he tried to do to you."

He raised his eyebrows. "Fowl-Up?" Then he paused, frowning. "What did he do to you?" he demanded.

She sighed, looking away. "I'm not the Commander," she said flatly. "And I'm not *really* Ranger Commander, either, so I'm invisible to that stupid fluffed-up jerk. Not even worth his time," she added bitterly under her breath.

"Kim, you know that's not true," he protested softly. "We *need* you here. You're part of what's keeping us all together."

"No, that's you." She glanced up with a faint smile. "I keep the formers in line. You've been keeping the kids sane." She squeezed his arm gently. "They need *both* of us."

He sighed. "Kim, I'm not going anywhere. I already told Cruger I wouldn't."

"I know you won't. That's not what I'm trying to get through your head." She leaned forward, lightly bumping her palm against his forehead. "I'm trying to make you believe that we're not just saying it because it's what you want to hear. We're saying it because it's true. Everyone here has their role, Wes. Yours is just as important as anyone else's."

He sighed again, because he'd never win this argument and he was tired of getting lectured. "I'm trying, Kim," he said finally. "It's just ... harder to remember that then it used to be."

He could sense the way her face softened, and she leaned up to hug him. He held on for a moment,
because he didn't like to admit that he needed it, and somehow he thought she did, too. "Did you at least get the chance to give Birdie a piece of your mind?" he asked quietly.

"No," she muttered into his shoulder, sounding annoyed. "Adam locked me in a closet."

He laughed before he could stop himself, and she pulled away to scowl at him. "Are you serious?" he asked, trying to hold it in and failing.

"Yes," she grumbled. She put her hands on her hips when he didn't stop. "You can stop laughing anytime now."

"Sorry," he chuckled.

She sighed, tilting her head. "Well, at least it got you to smile."

His laughter faded with a soft sigh, and he looked at her. "Kim ... I - " He stopped himself, wondering if he should say something or not.

She touched his arm again in concern. "What is it, Wes?"

He looked at her, taking a deep breath before forcing himself to just say it. "Something about Birdie gives me a bad feeling. And I don't mean just because I don't like him. It's ... more than that."

"Can you describe it?" she asked, and he could hear the frown in her voice.

He shrugged helplessly. "Worse than the feeling before the lab explosion, not quite as bad as right before the battle against - that battle." He shook his head. "I can't explain it any more than that."

She nodded. "Okay. We'll have to be careful around him." She considered him for a moment. "You want to talk about it?"

He shook his head, offering her an arm and a weary half-smile instead. "You said something about celebrating?"

****

"You okay?"

He glanced up as Eric joined him in watching as a grinning Jack tried without success to drag an extremely adamant Sky into the center of the room for a dance. Z and Syd were already there, Syd's head on Z's shoulder despite the fact that it wasn't a slow dance, while Marinda was trying to coax Rhythm out of his stick-figure like state. A quick survey of the room revealed Bridge laughing with Sophie, and Ecliptor, Sora, and Casey chatting with a group of D Squad cadets.

They were all still here, still fighting despite Fowler Birdie and his rude comments about sending children to fight wars. Despite his insistence that Newtech City S.P.D. needed to 'weed out' some of its officers. Despite his demands that they give away the four morphers being kept safe, never to be used by anyone else.


No matter what Birdie thought, he knew the kids would be great. And as strange of choices for Rangers as they may be, he knew Grumm would be defeated. Because they were Rangers, they were *Earth* Rangers, and they wouldn't settle for anything less.

And one day, Fowler Birdie and his arrogance would be forced to see how amazing they were.

"Yeah," he said at last, allowing a faint smile. "I'm okay."
Agony

Chapter Notes

This prompt has been a pain in the butt, and I don't like it. That is all.

He sighed, leaning back in his chair with a pleased smile he couldn't hold in. Only six bruises today. He was getting better. And a couple of them couldn't have been avoided - people who hadn't seen him coming. The rest were, well, there still weren't as many as there'd been yesterday. He was finally getting somewhere. He had to be.

And at least the migraines were finally gone.

He glanced at where he'd put his datapad, knowing he should do some more paperwork. But ... he was so tired ... One little nap wouldn't hurt, would it? Just a short one. He'd earned it, with everything he'd done today.

Yeah. Just one little nap ...

****

He awoke to the sensation that something was wrong. He rubbed his eyes as he sat up in his chair.

Eric stared back at him, arms folded as he leaned against the doorway.

He blinked, rubbing his eyes again.

No, he was still there.

He straightened in his chair, excitement surging. Out of habit, one of his hands went up to run over his hair. It passed over his temple in the process, and he froze at the feeling of cold metal under his hand.

"Forget something this morning?" Eric spoke up, his voice deadly soft.

Wes stared back at him blankly. If Eric was hoping to make him feel guilty, this was the wrong way to go about it. And while he wouldn't admit it, there was a lingering feeling of disappointment he had to fight to hide.

Eric sighed, moving away from the door to take the chair opposite him. "You wanna tell me why you've spent the last two days wandering around S.P.D. without your SightMap?"

For a moment, Wes had to fight with himself for what to say. Part of him wanted to refuse; Eric had barged in here without warning, and just ... Well, the way he'd woken up, thinking he was ... It hurt, and it made him want to hold that in because it was Eric's fault for making him think that, even for a moment. But he also knew that he owed Eric honesty after everything that had happened in the past, and that lying to him now would only tear apart the trust they'd been slowly trying to rebuilding between them.

He sighed, because in the end, he did owe Eric his honesty.
He got up to pace. "This is going to sound crazy," he warned. He took a deep breath, forcing himself to turn and meet Eric's eyes. "I think my eyesight's coming back."

It sounded stupid the moment he said it aloud, and he struggled not to wince. "I'm starting to notice light patterns, and I think I can sort of tell colors - sometimes," he added hastily.

There was a pause.

"So what's up with not wearing your SightMap?" Eric asked quietly. "Not to mention that you only have Jen with you half the time."

"I can't try to ... try to see if there's a difference, when I wear it," Wes muttered, his hand moving up to touch the device nervously. "And I finally realized it was giving me headaches, so ... I thought I'd try and figure out how much I can see on my own."

"And leaving Jen at home?"

He let out a slow breath, finally giving a shrug. "Would you settle for an 'I don't really know'?"

"That's such a copout," Eric grumbled. "Can I at least get what brought this on?"

Wes was quiet for a moment. "What's that new Ranger look like?" he asked suddenly.

"Four days ago, *something* saved the kids from being overwhelmed by Krybots," he reminded him. "During the meeting, Cruger said it was described as a white streak. The best glimpse the satellite cameras got was something white that everyone agreed was most likely a new Ranger."

He paused. "You know what I saw?"

"Wes - "

"Nothing," he interrupted. "Because I can't even read a stupid viewscreen. I had to listen to the kids argue over who saved them all from the Krybots, and I couldn't even tell what they were talking about. Do you have any idea what that's like?"

Distantly, he noticed he was shaking.

Eric pushed himself to his feet. "Come on."

Wes frowned. "Why? Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

****

"Well?" he asked quietly, trying not to fidget.

While he was glad Eric had believed him, going to the medical wing was *not* what he'd had in mind. Point of fact, he'd instinctively tried to bolt when he'd realized where they were. It was only Eric's hand on his arm that stopped him, forcibly pulling him inside and asking Aisha if she was available for an exam.

She'd listened quietly before bringing him into an examining room. The whole thing seemed to take forever, as she carefully and thoroughly checked his pupils, ran tests, and asked questions. Through it all she'd been calm and patient, not giving away a hint of what sort of results she was
"You were right," she told him simply. "The damage to your eyes has been healing, enough to the point that you've developed some sensitivity to light. Your SightMap was giving you headaches because it was sending signals to your brain that it was already getting. I'll ask Justin to make some adjustments for you."

She kept talking, but he didn't care. His eyesight was coming back. It was coming *back*. He'd be able to see again. It was a struggle to keep in the cheer he wanted to give while she was still explaining things.

Then her hand touched his shoulder, startling him as she leaned in close. "Wes," she said quietly, gently. Something about her tone gave him the impression she'd noticed he wasn't listening. "Your eyes *are* healing. But they're not going to recover fully."

He froze. "What?"

The hand squeezed. "The scar tissue has healed, but there's no way it could ever be completely repaired; the damage was too severe. It's not enough to completely restore your vision. I'm sorry."

He swayed slightly as she whispered her apology, and somehow he could feel the tears just beginning to brush his cheeks. Not enough? But ... but he could tell shadows now. And bright colors. It wasn't enough? He'd never ... He'd *never* ...

Someone was in front of him, large hands cupping either side of his face and brushing his cheeks gently. And then he was pulled forward into a strong chest, hands rubbing his back soothingly. There was a light kiss to his hair.

His hands fisted in Eric's shirt before he was even aware of it. He buried his face against the other man and cried like he hadn't in years.

Because no matter how hard he tried, no matter how much he wanted it, he'd never see again.
This prompt has achieved the new Worst Prompt Ever status, because it is evil. -Kicks
Sam-
Much love for Starlit Purple, who read this over for me when I fussed about it.

"So. Mind explaining to me one more time why we're hiding Sam from S - I mean, Omega?"
Rocky asked.

"Because people who know their future tend to do stupid things," Eric retorted.

Wes shot him an irritated glare, which was ignored. "Yes, *Jen*," he muttered under his breath, wincing at the elbow that was promptly jabbed into his ribs. "We don't know how or why Sam joins S.P.D. If he runs into himself from the future, it might change the way things are supposed to happen," he explained to Rocky. "Younger Sam might find out something he wasn't supposed to know yet, or older Sam might prevent something that's supposed to happen in his own past that he doesn't like."

"So we don't trust Sam not to do anything stupid no matter how old he is," Rocky summarized.

"Yup," Eric agreed.

Wes gave them both dirty looks. "That's *not* what it means."

Rocky flinched slightly as he stared at something ahead of them. "So, uh ... Is that why Vanessa just shoved Sa - I mean, Omega, down a flight of stairs?"

"What?" Wes demanded in alarm, whirling to see.

They raced forward as Omega twisted in mid-air, managing to land on his feet just in time. He dropped to one knee from the momentum, looking up warily as they approached. "Can I help you, Sergeants?" he asked suspiciously.

"Are you okay, Sam?" Wes asked, putting a hand lightly on the young Ranger's shoulder.

"I'm fine," Omega returned briskly, standing up and brushing himself off.

"Are you sure?" Rocky asked suspiciously. "I mean, that kinda came out of nowhere -"

"I'm fine," Omega repeated. "My younger self just came around the corner and surprised us is all. Nothing to worry about. If you'll excuse me Sergeants, I need to get back to my duties." He snapped off a casual salute that was just shy of being disrespectful before walking away without another word.

The three of them stared after him.

"Okay, that kid seriously needs some butt kicking," Eric informed them.
"Are we *sure* that's really Sam?" Rocky asked, tilting his head as he watched the Ranger head off. "I mean, what proof do we have other than his own word?"

Eric nodded, glancing at him. "And that arrogant little snot is nothing like Sam Thorn."

Wes sighed, rubbing his forehead. "First of all, what proof do we have that he *isn't* Sam? And second, people change when they grow up. Maybe there's something in Sam's future we haven't see yet that made him this way."


Wes shook his head. "Look, let's just worry about keeping him away from Sam for now, okay?"

"Sir, yes Sir," Rocky snorted, exchanging glances with Eric as they both saluted.

He swatted them, trying not to grin. "Oh, shut up."

****

It was an eventful day, to say the least.

"Omega, would you - "

"Sam Alert!"

"Wha - hey!"

"Excuse me, but - "

"Sam's coming!"

"Ahh!"

"It's Sam! Sam, duck!"

"Huh - ow!"

"Look out!"

"Wo - ah!"

"Sam!"

"Wait a - "

"Oh, no ... "

"In here!"

"Not again!"

"Hey ... Time?"

Wes glanced at Chip, smiling brightly as he pretended not to notice Sky shoving a flailing Omega into some bushes. "What's up?"

Chip looked at him for a minute. "Sammy's playing outside with the twins," he said abruptly. "So
you can tell me the truth about what you're hiding."

For a moment, Wes considered lying. But this was Mystic, and he could never lie to his teammate. "You trust the Russell twins with him?" he asked instead.

Chip smiled faintly. "No. But it's better than leaving any of them alone." He raised an eyebrow at him. "And even they've noticed that Ranger you're trying to hide."

Wes started. "They have?"

"Who did you think shoved him in the fountain this morning?"

"That was them? I thought it was Sky."

"Technically, it was Hex. But Jinx was glaring at him for it, so he was probably planning on doing the same thing." Chip tilted his head. "So who is he?"

Wes was silent for a moment. "Sam," he said finally. "He's Sam, from the year 2043. He said he came back because S.P.D. was supposed to fall, and he was sent to stop it."

Chip nodded slowly. "So everyone's been beating him up so he won't run into Sammy?"

"Beating him up?" Wes echoed in surprise.

"There was the staircase, the balcony, the console in Command, the mud, the closet, the fountain, and the bushes just now," Chip counted off on his fingers. "And that's just what I noticed."

"Sam didn't see anything, did he?" Wes asked in alarm.

Chip shook his head, grinning. "He keeps asking if it always snows this early in Newtech."

"Snowing?" But he grinned back even as he repeated it. Omega's uniform was a pretty bright white, and with the way they'd been shoving him around all over the place ...

Then he winced, because they'd been shoving him around all over the place.

"I guess we'd better apologize," he murmured, more to himself than Chip. "I was so busy trying to keep them from running into each other, I didn't really think much about what we were doing to Omega."

"Can I meet him?"

Wes blinked, hesitating for just a moment. "Well ... I guess ... It shouldn't be a big deal."

Chip smiled, but whatever he was about to say was cut off by the sound of Wes' morpher going off.

"Time," he answered.

"We've got a status report meeting from the Rescue Teams in half an hour. They said they have news," Karone responded.

"Can I come?"

He and Chip both glanced down at Sam before glancing at each other. Wes hesitated. "Well, um ..."
"B Squad can handle it," Karone informed them. "Bring him along; it's about family, after all."

"Yes!" Sam cheered.

Chip raised an eyebrow at Wes. He shrugged in response.

****

"Can we get something to eat, Dad?" Sam asked, tugging at Chip's sleeve.

"We'll take him, Uncle Chip," Jinx offered.

Hex brightened. "I'll keep them out of trouble," he promised with an odd gleam in his eye.

Chip hesitated; Wes couldn't blame him. The Russell twins were notorious for leaving chaos and destruction in their wake, something everyone mutually agreed had been inherited from Nick. He couldn't exactly blame Madie for sending them with Chip and Sam on their visit to S.P.D. Newtech when she had the chance.

"Okay," Chip agreed at last, sounding somewhat reluctant.

The twins raced for the door, grinning, while Sam looked up at his father. "Don't worry, Dad. I'll keep an eye on them," he whispered in assurance before running after the teens.

There was a long pause as everyone watched them leave, before Wes and Chip finally exchanged amused glances.

"So ... " Chip said finally, shifting a little. He sounded oddly hopeful.


"Is that okay?" Jack asked warily.

Wes shrugged. "Honestly? No idea. I've been screwing up the future for years. This wouldn't be the first time."

There was a muffled snort from Z, and what sounded suspiciously like giggling from Bridge and Syd, while he noticed Sky throwing his hands up out of the corner of his eye.

"Wasn't keeping Sam and Sam away from each other *your* idea to begin with?" Eric demanded.

"That's because Sam meeting himself isn't the same thing as Chip meeting Sam," Wes pointed out. "So where is Sam, anyway?"

"A little help up here .... ?"

The words made everyone start, looking up at the ceiling. The adults stared.

"Sorry, Sam. Just a sec," Jack said smoothly, reaching for his blaster.

Wes stiffened. "Jack, that's not -"

Four shots fired, there was a ripping sound, and the duct tape that had been holding the Omega Ranger gave way, dumping him face-first on the ground.
There was a long silence.

"... a good idea," he finished with a sigh.

"You okay, Sam?" Chip asked, moving to help Omega up without so much as a second thought.

"Yeah, I'm fine," the young Ranger said briskly, dusting himself off. "My cadets have done worse." He eyed the rest of B Squad for a moment, and Wes could have sworn he was looking straight at Sky for some reason.

"The commander allows that?" Eric asked skeptically.

Omega snorted. "Are you kidding? I think he's encouraging them behind my back."

"Why would Cruger do that?" Syd wondered.

"Don't ask me; I wouldn't know," Omega shrugged, turning his attention to Chip. "Hi, Dad."

Chip smiled. "Hey, Sammy. How are you?"

"Stranded sixteen years in the past with my superior officers beating me up. I could be better," Omega returned dryly. "What about you?"

"Babysitting Jinx and Hex."

There was a long silence.

"You win," Omega said finally.
"So," Adam said finally as they watched the fight finally wind down. "Team building activity?"

Kimberly nodded. "Oh, yeah. Suggestions?"

"Well, obviously fighting for their lives together didn't work, and I wouldn't wish a DeSantos Family Reunion on anybody," Aisha remarked.

"Hey!" Rocky protested as Kimberly and Adam shuddered in agreement. He paused as they looked at him, Aisha folding her arms and raising her eyebrows. "It wasn't *that* bad," he muttered rebelliously.

"What else do we have?" Shane wondered. "Cause I wouldn't recommend one of Sensei's training missions."

"Can't be anything public, either," Dustin said thoughtfully, leaning on Shane's shoulder absently. "I mean, having a Ranger running around where just anybody can walk up to him is like, totally asking for trouble, dude."

"Don't look at me," Wes put in, holding up his hands in surrender. "My team bonded because we were forced to live in a drafty clock tower together."

Karone shrugged a shoulder. "The Galaxy Rangers had a sleepover with me, but Sam doesn't need to sleep. And the Astro welcome wouldn't work either; he doesn't need slippers."

Eric gave her an odd look. "Slippers?"

"T.J.," she returned simply, and he nodded in understanding.

"So ... who else's team had a private bonding session?" Kimberly asked.


"Somehow I can't see them agreeing to sit through a movie night," Adam sighed.

Rocky snorted. "More like spending the whole time fighting over what to watch first."

"I don't trust any of them with fire, so Wild Force is out," Taylor said dryly.

"You really think they'll sit through a board game without fighting?" Aisha looked skeptical.

"We could always put them through those cheesy team building exercises the Silver Guardians had to do," Wes joked. He paused when no one laughed. "Guys, I wasn't serious."

"They'll hate us," Eric commented, sounding almost pleased.
Zack grinned. "Nothing like uniting against a common enemy to build trust."

Wes groaned. "For the record, I had nothing to do with this."

****

"We were just a little - "

"Jealous."

"There is no room for jealousy here! You are my Rangers. You are my team. You will just have to trust that. Trust in yourselves. Understood?"

"Yes, Sir!"

They managed to wait until Cruger had stormed off, still furious over B Squad's behavior. He was improving, Wes mused to himself. At least he had finally admitted that they were a team.

"*Ow*!"

He looked up at Sky's yelp as Eric smacked him in the back of the head, followed by a "What was that for?!"

"For being a brat," Eric informed him coolly. "Jealousy doesn't have any place on a Ranger team."

Wes struggled to hold in an awkward cough; he failed.

Ryan covered his reaction by moving swiftly to pull his daughter into a tight hug. Syd clung to him, leaning into his shoulder as he reached up to stroke her hair. "Where's Carter?" she asked, obviously trying not to sniffle.

"You want Carter, too?" Ryan returned softly. He kissed the top of her head when she nodded. "Let's go find him."

He watched them leave, sighing to himself. While Syd's time under mind-control had been thankfully brief, that didn't change the fact that she'd lost her free-will today. Before they did anything else, she needed some time with her parents.

"What are you thinking about?" Aisha asked quietly beside him.

He glanced at her. "You ever get the feeling ... we're just coming in to pick up the pieces?" he asked quietly. "Like we're just here to fix what went wrong after they go through something?"

"All the time," she sighed, giving his shoulder a brief squeeze.

They watched the kids for a moment, as Sky tried to argue with Eric and failed, Justin pulled Z against his side in a loose, one-armed hug, and smiled when she leaned into him, Rocky moved to show something to Bridge, who watched him with rapt attention, and Jack ...

He blinked. Jack was talking to Keri.

"When did she get here?" he whispered to Aisha. He paused. "And why aren't they killing each other?"

It was true: the two teens were talking quietly, Jack leaning back casually against a console with his arms folded. Something he said seemed to agitate Keri, who immediately got into his face, jabbing
her finger at him for emphasis. But Jack just laughed, grabbing her finger and pulling her closer to
ruffle her hair. She glared furiously at him, merely getting a cheeky grin in response. Finally she
sighed, leaning her head on his shoulder and slapping a hand against his chest almost absently.

"I have no idea," Aisha murmured, looking just as stunned as he felt. She glanced at him. "Don't
look a gift horse in the mouth," she advised.

He smiled slightly. "You think if we pretend not to notice, they'll keep doing it?"

"We can only hope."

"B Squad!" Kimberly clapped her hands to get their attention. Omega Ranger stood beside her,
glancing down at her almost warily. She smiled when they finally looked at her. "I think it's time
for a talk, don't you?"

Wes could have sworn he heard more than one cadet sigh.

****

"I swear, they come up with these things just to torture us," Z grumbled.

"I miss Lieutenant Scott," Syd sulked. "At least when *he* made us do teamwork exercises, they
didn't hurt in strange places."

There was a pause.

"I didn't mean it like *that*! You guys are sick!"

Wes smiled at the sound of muffled snickering, shaking his head. Teenagers.

"Still, that was pretty random, even for S.P.D.," Jack mused.

"That's because that wasn't S.P.D.'s idea," Sky informed them all. "I've seen them use the Human
Knot exercise in the Silver Guardians, when I was visiting my grandfather. Same with the Trust
Fall. Which means that was either my dad's idea or Eric's. Eric probably agreed to it just to annoy
us."

Wes shot an amused look at Eric, who humphed quietly, while Justin smothered his laughter.
Grinning, Wes raised a finger to his lips. They didn't want the kids to know they were listening;
that would defeat the whole point.

"Why would they do that to us?" Z asked, sounding annoyed.

"Because they want us to function as a team," Bridge piped up. "'Cause you know, not functioning
as a team sort of defeats the whole ... team thing."

"You mean because of what happened today," Jack said flatly.

"Apparently they think we can't function as a unit," Sam remarked.

"I think we can manage that just fine," Z protested. "I mean, sure, we had our problems, but that
doesn't mean we can't work together. So what's the issue?"

"That we're supposed to work together and actually get along?" Bridge offered.

"Did they ever do this sort of stuff to you in your time, Sam?" Syd asked suddenly.
"Not exactly. My cadets started a prank war - *that's* how we bonded. Between trying to protect myself and them trying to get me back, somehow we just ... worked out our issues."

"And the commander allowed this?" Sky sounded skeptical.

"Are you kidding?" Sam's tone was wry. "I think he *encouraged* it."

"Sounds like things at S.P.D. have changed a bit in your time," Jack commented.

"You have no idea," Sam laughed. "Some things are still the same, but there's definitely some difference between here in the past, and where I come from."

"Like what?" Z wondered.

"Sorry, but I really can't tell you. The commander made me swear not to alter the timeline any more than necessary." The teen sounded genuinely regretful.

Wes frowned slightly, glancing at Eric again. For someone who was sent to change the past, why would Sam be worried about changing the timeline? If he was supposed to stop the future he came from, it shouldn't matter what he told them ... right?

"Well, can you tell us about you and your team, then?" Syd asked. "Like, how old are you? Are you seeing anybody ... ?"

"Older than you. And um, sort of."

"Sort of?" He could hear the grin in Z's voice. "Come on, tell us about them. Girl, guy? Are you actually dating, or what?"

"Okay, okay!" Sam laughed. "She's a girl, but we're not really dating. There's ... well, we'd like to, but her brothers are really protective. So I haven't really had a chance to do more than spend time with her."

"Aw, that's so sad!" Syd protested.

"Sounds like her brothers are doing their job."

"Jack!"

"What? Isn't that what brothers are supposed to do?"

"Exactly," Bridge sounded oddly cheerful about the idea.

"You guys are hopeless," Z informed them.

"But my sister's still single," Bridge reminded her.

Wes bowed his head, trying desperately to cover his chuckles. The worst part was, Bridge was *right*.

"Unfortunately, so is she," Sam grumbled.

"You really like her, don't you?" Syd asked thoughtfully.

There was a pause. "Yeah, I do," Sam said at last, sounding wistful. "She's ... she's something special."
"You miss her?" Jack seemed uncomfortable.

"I miss *home*," he returned. "I mean, don't get me wrong: it's nice being here, and it's fun to see everybody I know the way they were, but .... I miss my friends." He paused again. "And showers. The first thing I want to do when I get home is take a nice, long, hot shower."

"So they still don't have any idea how to get you demorphed?" Z was sympathetic.

There was a sigh. "From what I can tell, my morpher is stuck in high alert mode - something about stepping into the timestream. It thinks I'm constantly in danger, so it won't let me power down."

"That stinks."

"Tell me about it," he groused. "I haven't slept in days. I never thought I'd miss just being able to *sleep*.*"

"Is that why you're so cranky sometimes?"

"Syd!"

"What? It's a good question!"

"Maybe he's cranky because he's stuck in a time that isn't his own, and he can't power down," Sky spoke up pointedly.

"Oh. Right." Syd sounded sheepish.

Sam laughed suddenly.

"What is it?" Jack asked warily.

"Nothing. It's just ... I'm glad to see some things never change."

"You mean we're still all together like this in the future?" Syd sounded oddly surprised by this.

"It wouldn't be S.P.D. without the B Squad," Sam said simply.

"That's ... kinda cool," Z seemed pleased.

"Yeah, it is."

"Definitely."

"Yeah."

"Nobody's going to call for a Power Rangers cheer, are they?" Sky asked suspiciously.

More laughter, and Wes glanced at his fellow eavesdroppers with a smile. Yeah. B Squad and the Omega Ranger were going to be just fine.

"Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Sure, Sam. What is it?"

"Does anyone really know *why* someone painted a giant sun on the ceiling of the common room?"
"Welcome to life with 'The Happy People'," Sky informed him dryly.
I wasn't planning on turning this entirely into Eric and Sky interaction, but that's what it is. Enjoy.

"Sky. Sky! I know you're still bothered that I was chosen to be the Red Ranger, but you've gotta get over it!"

Eric paused, file in hand, glancing ahead of him to see Sky stop and turn to look at Jack with an irritated expression. "Listen. I know I had a problem with that at first. And I still don't always agree with some of your methods. But you've done a good job as Red Ranger. This is not about you."

He took a moment to note the slightly stunned look on Jack's face as Sky said he'd done a good job. Did they still need to work on that kid's confidence?

"Then what's it about?" Jack demanded finally as Sky began to walk away. "Your dad? Your family? What?"

Eric could see Sky gritting his teeth, starting to raise his head as he kept going, and watched impassively as the teen froze directly in front of him. "Sky," he greeted quietly, letting him know instantly that whatever was said between them had nothing to do with S.P.D.

Sky swallowed. "Eric."

Eric considered him for a long moment. There was a lot of things he could say to him. But none of them really deserved to be said in public. And would Sky even listen to him?

Probably not, but since when had that stopped him?

"You two come with me," he said finally, jerking his head for them to follow. He paused to look back when they hesitated, narrowing his eyes. "*Now*.

"Sir," they both mumbled, trailing after him reluctantly.

He led them back to his office, dropping the file he'd been carrying on his desk and pointing to the pair of chairs in front of it. "Sit."

He leaned against the edge of the desk as they obeyed, folding his arms and staring at them both as he thought for a moment of the best way to put this. "I wasn't aware you had such a low opinion of Power Rangers, Sky," he said finally.

Sky straightened in his chair, staring at him incredulously, while Jack gave him an odd look. "I don't! I - " He hesitated as Eric continued to stare at him, swallowing again. "All I've ever wanted to be is a Power Ranger," he said finally, looking down again.

"Then why do you think anyone who doesn't wear Red isn't good enough?" Eric countered. He paused as something occurred to him, narrowing his eyes at his son. "Never realize you thought so little of *me*."
"What?!" Sky surged to his feet. "That's not true! You're - "

Eric placed a hand on the center of his chest, pushing him firmly back into his seat. "I'm a Sixth, Sky. I may wear Red, but I was a Sixth first. Does that make me less of a Ranger than your dad is, because I'm not a Red first?"

Sky stared, clearly struggling for words.

"Or Taylor, since she's Yellow? And a girl, now that you mention it. Why don't we say that Adam's not a 'real' Ranger, then? He's never worn Red."

"That's not what I meant!" Sky shouted at him, and he could see a brief glimmer of frustrated tears in the teen's eyes.

"Then what did you mean?" he returned coolly.

Sky shook his head. "You wouldn't understand," he muttered bitterly.

Eric struggled not to clench his fists. "Is this one of those teenage angst things? I can't understand because I'm not *you*?"

Sky's head came up, eyes flashing in a way that reminded him eerily of Wes when he was *really* angry. "You're *not* me," he snapped, "And you *wouldn't* understand."

"Cadet Tate to the Command Center. Cadet Tate to the Command Center."

He tried not to growl in irritation. "This conversation isn't finished," he informed Sky. He jerked his head towards the door. "Go on."

"Sir," Sky snarled back, snapping up a salute and storming out.

Eric let out a long sigh, reaching up to pinch his temples. Stupid kids kept giving him migraines. What did he do to deserve this?

Oh, yeah. That's right. He met Wes for the second time and picked up this dumb morpher.

"Sir ... "

He opened an eye, regarding Jack warily. "What is it?"

"You know why Sky's so bent on being Red, don't you?" Jack asked, looking solemn.

He heaved another sigh. "He thinks Red is some sort of test of worth, like it's a family tradition or something," he agreed. He shook his head. "And he doesn't want to listen when we tell him it's not."

"It doesn't bother you that he's not a Red Ranger?"

He snorted. "Bother me? Heck, I'm *thrilled* he's not. My greatest fear would have been him being a Red."

"Why's that?"

"Because Red is a curse," he told him bluntly. "Reds get the worse part of the deal, because we have to be stronger, faster, and better, so everyone knows they've got a capable leader to follow. We don't get to show weakness in front of the enemy, because that's the fastest way to have it
exploited. The only ones who get have a worse reputation to live up to than Reds are Sixths."

There was a long pause. "Things must not be easy on you, then."

He shrugged slightly. "That's life. We do what we have to." He resettled himself a little. "Sky being a Blue is a relief. I still have nightmares of what might have happened if he was Time Force."

Jack frowned. "Why's that?"

Eric looked at him. "Because I've lost everyone I cared most about to that uniform. I'm not going to lose Sky to it, too."

****

He drummed his fingers on the main console impatiently. Sky sure was taking his time. Either there was something wrong with whatever it was the guy he'd been sent off to interrogate earlier had wanted in exchange, or the kid *really* did not want to talk to him.

He frowned at the thought. Yeah, sure Sky had been avoiding him since their earlier conversation, Ranger activity notwithstanding - to the point that he'd 'volunteered' to take Sky back to Gamma Orion just to force the subject again. But the Brat had been stubbornly silent the whole trip, only muttering 'I'll be back' before he went in to confront his informant again.

There was a shout from somewhere inside, and his morpher chirped at him in warning.

He was out of the shuttle and racing for his son before the guards could do more than yell after him.

"Morpher, locate S.P.D. Blue," he snapped at it as he ran. His eyes skimmed over the map even as he kept going, dodging more guards and prisoners reaching for him. One arm proved to be persistent in trying to cling to him, and he twisted it sharply without a second thought, ignoring the shriek of pain as he continued on.

He found Sky in a dark room with a circular cell, ashen-faced and restrained by guards. He fell back into a fighting stance on instinct. "Let him go," he snarled in warning.

"He helped the prisoner to escape," returned the one standing further away from him, who looked like he might be in charge. "We're taking him into custody."

"He's a *Ranger*, and if you even think about hauling him in, I'll have the nearest Collegiate on you so fast your head will spin," he snapped back.

"He's a *Ranger*, and if you even think about hauling him in, I'll have the nearest Collegiate on you so fast your head will spin," he snapped back.

The guard sneered at him. "And what authority do you have?"

He raised his left wrist. "Do I need any more 'authority'?" he returned coolly. "That's one of S.P.D. Earth's defenders you're holding, and my student. Take your hands off him *now*."

The guard hesitated for a second, and he smoothly turned his wrist, lifting his other hand to settle his finger over the morphing button.

There was a swift nod, and Sky was released to stumble awkwardly to his side.

"You okay?" he asked, keeping his voice low as his eyes remained on the guards.

"I ... " Sky hesitated, and shook his head.
He glanced at him, forcing himself to keep the frown from his face before looking back at the head guard again. "Which prisoner has escaped?"

The guard shifted uncomfortably. "It was Mirloc."

The room was deadly silent, so much so that he could have sworn he could hear the sound of his own heart beating. He swallowed once, hard. "You're sure he's gone?"

The guard nodded.

"We're leaving."

"You can't just - there are protocols - "

He whirled moments before the man could lay a hand on his arm, eyes narrowed dangerously. "I have a base to warn," he hissed. "Because if Mirloc is free, I know exactly where he's going to go. And I could care less about your 'protocols'. Now get *out* of my *way*.

No one stopped them again.

It wasn't until they were in the shuttle and he'd already started up the take-off sequences before he was finally able to turn to his son. "Sky?" he asked quietly.

Nothing.

"Sky, look at me," he commanded, slipping a hint of steel to his voice.

Slowly, the teen raised his head. His eyes were red, a dried tear track on a pale cheek. His mouth worked soundlessly for a moment before he finally just nodded that he was listening.

He reached out to cup his cheek. "What happened?" he asked quietly, forcing those painfully bright blue eyes to meet his.

There was another moment of Sky struggling to speak. Finally he swallowed, and his voice came out as barely a whisper. "He said ... he said he collected ... memories."

Eric struggled not to swear aloud.

"He wanted to hear ... my worst memory," Sky went on, his eyes staring blankly ahead. "And then ... he laughed at me. And when I turned around, he was just ... gone."

He pulled the teen into a tight hug, fighting to keep in what he wanted to say. Sky was in shock, and they *so* didn't have time for this. And whatever Sky had told that freak had just ripped open all the emotional wounds he, Wes, Vanessa, and even R.J. to some extent, had spent *years* trying to sew up.

"He laughed when I told him how I lost Dad," Sky choked out, clinging to him without warning.

He closed his eyes in pain, squeezing Sky just a little bit tighter. Losing Wes wasn't what he would have expected Sky's worst memory to be after some of the things the kid had seen, but he knew it had definitely been one of the most cataclysmic events in his life. And to have someone throw that pain back in his face and *laugh* at him for it ...

Mirloc had better hope the Quantum Ranger wasn't the first to find him.
The shuttle hummed contentedly, reminding him that they didn't have time to sit here. "Sky," he began finally, pulling away just enough to look him in the face. "This is *not* your fault." He ignored the faint snort of disbelief he got in return, seizing both sides of the kid's face and forcing their gazes to meet again. "I mean it, Sky. Mirloc is an evil, manipulative monster. This is not your fault. No matter what you may feel right now, it isn't. But right now, I need you to fly this thing home. We've gotta get there as fast as we can, and I need to call ahead to warn everyone what's going on. Okay?"

Sky swallowed again, some of the color returning to his face as he nodded slowly. "Okay," he echoed quietly.

He waited for a moment longer to make sure he could see the signs of Sky returning to himself in his eyes, before at last releasing him with a curt nod. He turned for the communications console, swiftly bringing up the codes he needed and searching for a direct line to Cruger. He paused, thinking better of it, and went for Kimberly and Zack as well. S.P.D. Newtech may need to know, but their Rangers needed to know more than anyone, and as did the Head of Security.

"... Eric?"

"Yeah?" he murmured distractedly.

"What was Mirloc in for?"

He froze.

He was going to *strangle* Cruger.

"No one told you?" he asked carefully.

"Just that he had his hand in every dirty deal, and knows every shady character in the galaxy."

He took a slow breath. "You know the memorial statue in the entrance hall at S.P.D.?"

"Yeah. Who doesn't?"

He closed his eyes for a moment. "Mirloc is the reason behind that memorial."

He heard a strangled noise from Sky just as the comm keyed in to reveal Kimberly and Cruger, with Zack on a split screen. "Eric? What's wrong?" Kimberly asked, looking concerned.

"Sky and I are on our way back from Gamma Orion. Mirloc has escaped." He wasn't sure how he managed to sound so calm.

Kimberly went white. "No ... " She whirled to look up at Cruger. "I'm pulling in all Rangers and Squads. Immediately."

Cruger nodded. "Have the base put on high alert. I want to know where everyone is at all times, *especially* our Rangers - active or not."

She went to salute, and he caught her arm. "Kimberly - be careful."

She gave him a warm smile that Eric had never seen her send in Cruger's direction before. "I will. You, too." She squeezed his shoulder before glancing back at him. "Get home as fast as you can, Eric. And let me know the *moment* you two are landing."
"Yes, ma'am."

"Commander, I have a problem," Zack interrupted tersely.

"Yes, Captain Taylor?"

"Wes just left my office."

Eric swore under his breath. "He heard?"

Zack nodded, looking grim. "He heard."

"We'll get there as soon as we can. In the meantime, send everyone you can after him until I can get to him," Eric informed him. "Lock down the base if you have to, but *do not* let Wes out of there."

"Do you think he'll go after Mirloc?" Cruger asked solemnly.

Eric snorted. "Commander, I don't *think*. I *know*.*"

"Understood. See you shortly."

"Be careful, Eric."

"Same to you guys."

He sighed again when the call ended, resisting the urge to bury his face in his arms. Whoever came up with the expression 'when it rains, it pours' needed to beaten. Severely.

It didn't rain; it turned into a category five hurricane.
I have finally achieved a cliffhanger that may be almost, if not as bad as Hopelessness. And I'm kind of proud of that.

"S.P.D. Command, come in! This is Blake Bradley, do you copy?!"

"Mr. Bradley, this is Corporal Garrison, what - "

"I need Ranger clearance to S.P.D. I've got wounded. We were attacked by Mirloc - "

"Blake, for crying out loud, you're worse than - "

"I'm *fine*, damn it! Why won't either of you *listen* to me?!"

"Someone will meet you at the garage, Sir."

"Hurry!"

He barely looked up as someone slipped through the door, shutting it silently behind them. "What's the news?"

The younger man let out a quiet sigh. "Max's condition hasn't improved much. They don't think he'll go under completely, but he hasn't woken up yet. Danny refuses to leave him and Jack and Z are out for blood. Merrick and Cole showed up with Alyssa to check on Max, saying that they'd been attacked, too. But the pack protected them - Cole just grinned and said Mirloc got off worse than they did. Aisha didn't yell at him, so apparently he wasn't kidding. Xander's about to be released; he's in good spirits, but he starts staring at a mirror and tracing the scar whenever he thinks no one's paying attention."

"And Tanya?"

He sighed again, at last shaking his head. "There's nothing they can do. Cam's already trying to design some sort of translator for her, but Aisha said the damage to her vocal cords was too great."

There was a pause. "You hear about Blake and Trent?"

He nodded. "Heard it before you came in."

"What are you thinking?"

"He's going after our weaknesses," he murmured. "He's not just trying to stop anyone with the Power or the potential - he's trying to break us." He paused, glancing back at the other man. "Eric still mad?"

"Try panicked," came the retort. "He's got Nerina scanning for you constantly, and he calls Sky every hour just to keep tabs on him. He's even tried hovering over Vanessa - until she nearly tore his head off for it."
"Thanks, Justin," he said distractedly, already marking more locations and names on the map in front of him.

"Any patterns yet?"

He shook his head. "Just random choices. I think he's deliberately trying to confuse us."


"Not hungry."

"You know the deal," Justin's voice was sharp. "I keep an eye out at S.P.D. and don't tell anyone where you're hiding as long as you're careful and you don't forget to take care of yourself."

He started to make a disinterested noise, only to jump as Justin seized his arm, forcing him to look up into angry hazel eyes. "*Now*, Wes." There was a pause, his voice lowering slightly to become even fiercer. "I'm not losing another teammate to Mirloc."

They stared at one another for several moments, before at last Wes let out a long sigh. "All right. All right," he muttered, pulling his arm free to remove a hamburger from the paper bag. He made a face at it before at last forcing himself to take a bite, chewing slowly.

"Oh, be honest, Wes. Don't force yourself to pretend to like it just for my sake," Justin said sarcastically, rolling his eyes.

He paused, looking over at the other man for a moment before at last setting down the burger. "Turbo -"

But Justin waved him off, sighing. "It's fine. We're both just stressed right now. Let's just say you owe me a lunch or two after this is all over."

"Deal," he agreed softly, staring at his friend. He tried to smile, but the stress of nearly two weeks under the threat of Mirloc had frayed his nerves too badly for it to be sincere.

Two weeks of constant fear, never knowing who was going to be attacked next, or where. Hiding in an abandoned warehouse to keep from being discovered by S.P.D. and dragged back. Because he *had* to be the one to end this. He *had* to.

And only one person truly understood that.

Justin reached out to squeeze his shoulder in silent understanding, turning to find the radio after a moment and tuning it again.

"Still no news on the condition of pop star Tanya Sloan -"

"More and more people have reported seeing a strange alien figure in various reflective surfaces. If you see this character, you have been asked to call -"

"This is D Squad Leader Cadet Zimmerman, reporting in. No suspicious activity sighted. No signs of Sergeant Collins, either."

Wes could feel Justin's eyes on him, but he didn't look up from his maps.

"Commander, I've lost the signal on Carson and Delgado."
Both men whirled, staring in shock at the tiny radio.

"Something's wrong. Check with the others."

Wes looked up, his eyes meeting Justin's. There was a swift nod. "I'll be back," Justin promised, slipping out the door as swiftly as he'd come.

He leaned forward, pressing his hands against his forehead. Why wouldn't this just end? Why couldn't Mirloc just -

"Can anyone find any traces of them?"

"That's a negative, Sir. We can't even track their morphers."

"No ... Not again ... "

His heart clenched at Kimberly's fearful whisper.

"Cadets. Anything suspicious."

"No, it's all quiet on this end, Sir."

"We've lost contact with Bridge and Z."

"Look out!"

His head snapped up in horror. No. No no no. This couldn't be happening.

"I've lost the comm signal!"

"Then get it back. Now!"

"I'm *trying*.*"


"Commander ... They're gone."

His arm swung wide, knocking everything but the map flying from the table. He hunched over it, shoulders shaking as he struggled to fight down the tears in his eyes.

Not Sky. Not his son.

What did Mirloc *want* from them? He'd spent over a week attacking former Rangers, former Rangers who didn't even have the Power anymore, and now he was suddenly going after B Squad ... What did he ... ?

Slowly, he paused.


*He was drawing them out.*

Wait. Why did Mirloc want to draw out S.P.D.? That wasn't his M.O. And Grumm hadn't known most of them still had the Power. Not to mention Mirloc hadn't even touched S.P.D. Japan. Which meant there was something, some *one*, that he wanted from Newtech City. But who? And
*why*?

Unless ...

But how could Mirloc know? And why would he even care? Sure, he was a sadistic monster, but what did the one that got away matter to him?

Perfectionist, whispered a corner of his mind that sounded suspiciously like Trip. They always have to come back to finish what they start.

If Mirloc wanted him in exchange for B Squad, he'd give himself up in a heartbeat. But if Mirloc was involved with Grumm, there was no way he'd surrender the kids. He'd be walking into a trap for no reason at all.

He slammed his hands against the table abruptly. "If only I could ... " he snarled to himself, blinking back more tears of frustration. "If I wasn't so *useless*.

"The city is under attack."

"We can't send out the Megazord without the other Rangers."

"I bet Sam wouldn't mind if I borrowed his OmegaMax Cycle."

"Do it!"

"I'll bring it online."

Trap, his mind whispered again, and this time it sounded like Jen. Has to be. Silent for days, then he suddenly shows up to kidnap four members of B Squad and starts attacking the city?

He laughed bitterly. "Great. I'm going crazy," he muttered to himself. He shook his head. And what was he supposed to do, anyway? Walk straight up to Mirloc and hope to provide some sort of distraction long enough for Jack and Sam to free the others?

But for Sky ... Did he really have a choice?

****

He could hear the sounds of battle long before he ever reached the plaza. They were barely a block from S.P.D. It wasn't Parkington Market, but he couldn't help the shiver that ran through his shoulders, or the cold chill that settled over him. He resisted the urge to reach for the blaster he'd stashed in the back of his belt.

"It's over, Ranger!"

He looked up in alarm at the yell of pain, staring in horror as Omega Ranger came flying through the air, crashing to the ground in heap. Whatever attempt at a plan he might have had was abandoned instantly, as he raced to the young man's side. "Sam! Are you all right?!

There was a groan, the helmeted head lifting at last to look at him. "Sergeant Collins ... ?" There was a pause, and the Ranger tensed. "Sir, what are you *doing* here?! It's not safe! Get out of here!"

"Well, well, well. Look what we have here."

He swallowed. After a moment to gather his courage, he slowly turned to face the creature across
from him. "Mirloc." His voice came out surprisingly even.

"If it isn't the Ranger who wouldn't die," Mirloc sneered. "Tell me, is it difficult to live with the knowledge that you failed to protect your friends?"

"Every day," he returned calmly. "Is it difficult to live with the knowledge that I’m about to tear you apart?"

Mirloc laughed at him, and his fists clenched. "You wouldn't dare. You’re S.P.D.; that badge is your life."

"That's where you're wrong," he hissed. "My *family* is my life. And you have no idea what I'll do for family."

"You mean that worthless Ranger you call your son?" Mirloc sounded amused. "What a sorry family you must have, then."

"Don't you *ever* talk about my son!"

"He seemed to think he would avenge you, did you know that? And look where that got him."

It was the groans and pained whimpers that caught his attention. He looked around wildly, trying to see where they were coming from. "Sky? Syd? Bridge? Where are you?!"

There was a long moment of silence.

"Oh, that *is* precious." Laughter filled his ears, mocking him. "I thought perhaps Broodwing’s information had been wrong, but you can't even see them crying out for you, can you Ranger? You truly are pathetic. After all, what good is a blind hero?"

His gaze snapped back to Mirloc. "I may be blind, but I am *not* pathetic," he snarled, willing himself to believe it. "Now release them before I do it for you!"

"Now why would I do something like that? After all, Emperor Grumm will pay good money for these children."

"Uncle Wes!"

He paused, the faint cry just barely reaching his ears. "Bridge," he whispered, his heart clenching.

"Uncle Wes, everything is going to be okay! It's time! Trust me!"

"Time ... ?" he echoed, frowning in confusion. "It's time, trust ... ?"

"Talking to yourself is one of the first signs of senility, you know."

"It's time, trust me," he murmured, ignoring Mirloc's taunt. "It's time. It's ... " His eyes widened. But if there was ever someone he could trust, it was Bridge.

He swallowed hard. He wasn't exactly the praying type, but if there was ever a time to start, it was now. Please, he pleaded silently. *For Sky. *Please*!

After so many years, his body still moved instinctively into the appropriate gestures. And despite his fear and nervousness, his voice rang out loud and strong. "Time for, Time Force!"
The world went Red.
I tried to attempt an actual battle scene. -Crossing her fingers- Thoughts and feedback on how effectively it comes across will be *much* appreciated, as I normally suck at these. I’m mostly satisfied with it, but I’m sure there’s room for improvement. c.c

He lifted his head slowly, the Power already soothing the incredible migraine hammering at his skull. There was pain, but it didn't matter anymore. Because all that mattered now was that he was *back*.

"Sergeant ... Collins?" Omega sounded stunned.

"Well, isn't this a surprise?" Mirloc mused. "But you can't honestly expect that a single, old, has-been Ranger will make a difference."

"I'm not just an old has-been Ranger," he murmured, more to himself than the creature across from him. And then he froze.

Mirloc was standing casually, head tilted in a mocking manner. And on the glass windows building behind him, faint images of the five B Squad Rangers. Obviously in pain, but whole. And in color. Natural, non-blurred or neon, *color*.

There were tears in his eyes, he realized suddenly.

"Sergeant Collins? Are you all right?"

He glanced down at the hand on his arm, smiling at the bright white against red. It hurt to look at, because the pain in his head was still fading.

"Never better," he said fiercely.

He broke away to move in front of the younger man, pointing at Mirloc. "You're looking to finish what you started with the Newtech Rangers, right Mirloc?" He spread his hands wide in a 'come and get me gesture. "Well, here I am."

"Sir - "

"Stay out of this, Sam. This is *my* fight."

Mirloc laughed heartily. "One moment of courage, and you're so eager to fight me? You *are* a treasure. Which would you prefer: to join your son, or follow your friends?"

"How 'bout we lock you in a three by five card for the rest of your pathetic existence?" he shot back. "Chrono Sabers!"

His hands clenched around the twin swords, and he smiled beneath the helmet.

Mirloc charged, and he slid to one side while slashing at his back almost absently. Mirloc spun
around, and their swords caught as he blocked. His feet slid back, and he dug in, leaning forward.

"Not exactly still in your prime, are you Ranger?"

He laughed, suddenly feeling better than he had in years. "Are you kidding me? I'm in my *best* shape *ever*!" He punctuated his words by letting his sword slide free as he swiftly ducked, and slamming a fist into Mirloc's stomach.

Mirloc grunted, and he laughed again. "What's the matter, Mirloc? A little out of shape after nine years in prison?"

His answer was an inarticulate snarl.

Mirloc, he swiftly began to realize, was a swordsman. With a sword in his hands, he was deadly. But in hand to hand combat ...

*If you see a weakness in your enemy, exploit it for all it's worth,* Tori's voice reminded him.

He tossed first one sword into the air, then another, swiftly catching them again as he rotated his grip to aim the blades backwards. Because sword fighting, while something he'd learned while being a Ranger, was *not* his normal fighting style. And thanks to R.J., he knew just how to turn that to his advantage.

He ducked another slash, moving under and up with a cut to Mirloc's chin. He added a swift knee to the stomach, backhanding the villain across the face with the flat of one of his swords.

Mirloc's scream was music to his ears.

"Ooh, you got him!" Bridge cried.

"What's the matter, Mirloc? Getting slow in your old age?" he taunted.

He wasn't expecting the sudden shot that caught him in the stomach, sending him flying into a cement overhang. He groaned as he struggled to push himself up, one hand going to his ribs. Oh, Aisha was not going to like this ...

"Come on, Dad! You can do it!"

He forced his head up at the sound of approaching footsteps. His gaze met the business end of Mirloc's blaster.

"Any last words, Ranger?" Mirloc sneered.

His eyes flickered to something in the distance, and he smiled. "Watch your back."

An explosion of blue fire nailed Mirloc from behind, sending him crashing to the ground amid cheers from the faint reflections of B Squad.

Blue Turbo kept his Hand Blasters trained on Mirloc as he struggled to get up. "You all right, Time?"

"Oh, yeah." He forced a grin to his voice as he stood up, ignoring the protest his ribs made.

"Hitting someone in the back ... Not very Rangerly of you," Mirloc managed as he finally climbed to his feet, clutching a shoulder.
Blue Turbo snorted. "Honor is for people who've never fought to survive. I'm a Newtech Ranger - and you're the guy who destroyed my family and kidnapped my daughter."

"A Newtech Ranger, eh?" Mirloc chuckled breathlessly. "You must be the one who left his friends to die without him. Tell me, is that hard to live with?"

"It won't be once you're back in prison," the Ranger returned calmly, but Red Time Force could see his hands trembling slightly.

"Your mind games won't work anymore, Mirloc," he spoke up, confidence surging again. "You can talk all you want, but it won't get you anywhere."

"Well, if you'd prefer not to talk ... "

He was expecting the blaster shot, throwing himself to one side in a round-off that landed him back on his feet, fists raised. "Turbo! Trade off!" he called.

Absently he noted the brief salute with a Hand Blaster out of the corner of his eye as he charged in again. Mirloc slashed at him, and he leaned backwards to avoid it, abandoning his original attack to drop down for a sweep kick. He was on his feet and moving back the next moment as Blue Turbo went in with a cry of "Turbo Sword!"

He took a moment to catch his breath, studying Mirloc for signs of weakness as he and Blue Turbo exchanged a flurry of strikes that sent showers of sparks across the ground. Mirloc was tiring, but it wasn't enough. They needed a way to defeat him completely, as well as a way to force him to release Sky and the others.

Turbo stepped back, and he moved in again.

Mirloc was ready for him, and once again a swift blast to the stomach caught him before he had a chance to react. He dropped to his knees with a grunt as pain radiated through his chest, clutching at his sides.

"Time! Argh!"

"Dad!" he heard Z scream.

"Leave them alone!" Omega shouted. "Omega Morpher! Electro Mode!"

He looked up as Omega's fist began to glow in a way that struck him as disturbingly familiar, moments before the white Ranger slammed his fist into the ground. Golden light streaked across the pavement toward Mirloc, flaring brilliantly.

When it faded, Mirloc was gone.

"No!" Omega cried in dismay. He looked around frantically.

Red Time Force pushed himself to his feet using one of his Chrono Sabers as a brace. "He has to be here somewhere," he growled.

"Mirloc?" Omega called. The young Ranger's fists clenched. "You're a Coward! Show yourself!"

Red Time Force moved in a slow circle, raising his sabers cautiously. "I know you're hiding somewhere, Mirloc. Afraid to admit you can't hack it against an old has-been Ranger?" he taunted.

He turned a moment too late.
"Sam! Your visor!"

There was a flash of light as Mirloc emerged from the reflection, and Omega Ranger cried out in pain as his arm was twisted and yanked behind him roughly. "The future doesn't look good for you," Mirloc sneered.

"Shows ... what you know ... about the future!" Omega gasped out.

"Come on!" he heard Jack call in frustration.

"Time for you to join your friends," Mirloc chuckled.

A shower of sparks at the white Ranger’s back followed by another pained grunt, and Omega crumpled.

"Sam!"

"Hold on!"

A hearty laugh echoed threw the air as Mirloc looked down smugly at the fallen Ranger. Omega's fist clenched as he struggled to move. "Sorry, Rangers. He put up a decent fight, but now he'll be joining you ... "

A moment of clarity settled over Red Time Force.

"Chrono Sabers," he whispered, trying not to call attention to himself as he moved into position. Please, he prayed again. I can't afford to mess this up. Please let this work!

"Now to complete my collection to present to the Emperor," Mirloc laughed, reaching up for his chest. His movements were painfully slow, as he relished in Omega's desperate attempts to get up. Slowly ... slowly ....

*Now*.

"Hey, Mirloc!"

The villain's head shot up. "What?"

"Reflect on *this*!"

"No!" someone yelled in panic.

The Power surged behind him, filling him with energy. He leapt into the air, focusing everything he had. "Time Strike!"

Mirloc was laughing again. "Foolish Ranger!" he shouted.

Everything around him was growing brighter, the images warping. But he kept his gaze focused on his target, refusing to lose sight of the goal.

And at the last possible moment, he dropped his second saber, thrusting the hour saber forward - straight into Mirloc's chest.

He barely managed to land on his feet, clutching at the remaining saber as the sound of shattering glass echoed through the air. Mirloc howled in wordless agony. Chest heaving, he closed his eyes for the briefest of moment, hoping, praying frantically that he had not just killed his son as well as
his enemy.

And then the sound that he’d most wanted to hear.

"Guys! Are you all right?"

"Z?!"

"Dad!"

He forced his eyes open, looking up to see Z swooped off her feet in a bear hug from Blue Turbo as she threw her arms around his neck. Behind them, Omega looked over the rest of B Squad anxiously. They were obviously a little worse for wear, but alive. Alive, and *free*.

"Dad ... ?"

He stood up carefully, wincing as his ribs protested the movement. "Sky ... " he breathed in relief.

His son had blond hair, whether from his mother or father, it was hard to say. His face was oval shaped, with those damn Collins lips. And his eyes were the same bright blue as his Wes' own.

He was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

"Everyone okay?" he managed at last. He reached out to grasp Sky's shoulders, making it obvious what he was really asking.

"We'll be fine," Sky affirmed quietly. He hesitated for a moment. "You?"

"I'll live," he returned wryly. His hands squeezed briefly before releasing the teen, turning to look over the rest of the group. "Everybody else? Turbo?"

"Aisha's going to kill me," his teammate grumbled in response.

"Yeah. Yeah, we're all right," Jack answered, giving Blue Turbo an odd look. He shook his head before giving his team a fierce nod. "Let's capture this clown once and for all."

"Foolish Rangers," Mirloc wheezed. He was still standing, but a fist remained clenched over his chest. "Don't you realize, if you catch me, I'll only escape again. Ask him. He's worthless. Just like his father."

Red Time Force snarled under his breath, fists clenching in fury, but Syd beat him to a response.

"That's just the lowest. Uncle Wes is an amazing Ranger."

"Yeah, and so is Sky!" Bridge said fiercely. "He's the best!"

"Right!" Z declared, glaring and pointing at Mirloc. It was hard to say whether Blue Turbo hovering just behind her shoulder ruined or completed the look. "We're *all* proud to fight by his side."

Sky shifted slightly, his eyes flickering over the group, and some of the tension faded from Red Time Force's shoulders. Whether they realized it or not, Sky's friends had just told Mirloc *exactly* what had Sky needed to hear. And while Sky would never admit it, that made all the difference in the world.

"How touching. But he still doesn't have what it takes to defeat me. None of you do," Mirloc
taunted again.

"Sounds like you forgot about Newtech Silver real quick," Blue Turbo commented pointedly.

Mirloc flinched faintly before forcing another smirk to his face. "And what good will *he* do? He isn't even here. None of *you* are strong enough to defeat me."

"We'll see about that," Jack retorted. He turned abruptly to look at Sky, reaching behind his back to retrieve his morpher. "Here. Take it."

Sky stared at him blankly, and he wasn't the only one. "What?"

"It only seems right that you bring him in," Jack insisted. Their gazes lingered for a moment, and something seemed to pass between the two silently. His voice lowered, and he said something that no one else could hear.

Sky hesitated. "You sure?" he asked at last.

Jack smiled at him. "Go for it."

Sky nodded once, taking the morpher from the other teen's hand and stepping forward. His gaze flickered to Red Time Force, and he smiled hesitantly. "This one's for you, Dad." His voice was so soft it was hard to tell if he meant to be heard. "SPD, Emergency!"

Red light flared, nearly blinding everyone in the plaza. When it finally faded, a slightly taller S.P.D. Red Ranger stood proudly before them. His gaze remained on Mirloc, and he shifted into a ready stance.

Mirloc looked less than impressed with this development. "I don't care *what* color you are, you're going down!"

"I don't think so!" the newest Red snapped back. "S.P.D., Battlizer! Cyber Mode, Activate!"

"Give it your best shot," Mirloc humphed.

There was something strangely different about listening to reports through a comm, and actually standing back and watching it happen. Now he was watching his son, his baby boy, going head to head against his greatest enemy. Sky was holding his own well enough, and he bit back a cheer as Mirloc cried out in pain, but there was still some part of him that wanted ...

S.P.D. Red took a few steps back as Mirloc struggled to recover himself. "Battlizer, Sonic Mode!" The sound of R.I.C. barking could be heard somewhere in the flashes of red and blue. "Battlizer Mode Two, Complete!"

Something in Red Time Force ached as he watched S.P.D. Red raise his new sword.

"I missed it again, didn't I?"

"It's a chick thing."

"Joel Rawlings: Sky Cowboy, at your service."

"Crazy is my middle name."

"Sorry I'm late; I got a little caught up at the beach - "
"I knew you were a lost cause the moment you mentioned Computer Club."

"Why does everyone have to label everything? Why can't Conner and I just be friends?"

"So, Dr. O. This is what the quiet life looks like, huh?"

It was a vague chance, and he knew it. But he couldn't help himself. "You want a hand, Sky?"

The younger Ranger started, his helmet turning just slightly to look back at him. "I'd be honored," he said at last.

He nodded, closing his eyes and reaching for the sensation he hadn't felt since Ransik's defeat. There was a moment of silence, and suddenly a flare of response from somewhere he couldn't identify. He thrust his hand into the air, feeling the flames erupt from it as he was bathed in cleansing fire. "Red Battle Warrior, hyah!"

Mirloc flinched as he came forward to stand beside S.P.D. Red. "What?!"

"Battle Fire Saber!" He smirked beneath his helmet, glancing at his son. "You ready?"

"Oh, yeah!"

Both Rangers swung their swords wide, powering up.

"Fire!"

"Ignite!"

The burst of fiery explosions was heaven, filled with Mirloc's bellow of agony. Somewhere through the noise he could hear a howl of "I will escape again!"

Yeah, he thought viciously. Not frickin' likely.

"Power Down!" S.P.D. Red called.

He should have done the same, but instead he lowered his sword, walking slowly to look down at Mirloc's containment card. He could see the villain beating at it, shouting in rage to be released. All it would take is one downward blow ... No matter what Kat said, the card couldn't be completely indestructible ...

A hand settled on his arm. "Dad?"

He let out a slow breath, forcing himself to crouch down and pick up the card. He held it out to Sky. "You take it," he told him quietly. "I don't trust myself."

"Okay," Sky agreed softly. He continued to stared at him, and after a moment he realized he was being studied. "How?" the teen asked finally. "I mean ... I thought ..."

"So did I." He glanced over at Bridge. "But apparently I was wrong."

But Bridge just smiled.

"Wes?" It was Justin at his side now, opposite Sky, and he reflected absently how strange it was to have a blue on either side of him again. But Justin's eyes were staring at him, and there was more than a hint of concern there. "The battle's over. We got him," he reminded him pointedly.
He let out a long, slow sigh. "Yeah. Yeah, we did," he murmured. He looked up for a moment, his eyes searching the bright blue sky. And then he turned to give one last look at his son. "You have your grandma's eyes," he told him finally, trying not to sound as pained as he felt.

At last he let out another sigh, bracing himself mentally, and quietly declared "Power Down."

The next moment he was hunched over, clutching his ribs with grunt of pain. "Aisha's never going to let me leave the Medical Wing," he groaned.

"Join the club, Time," Justin retorted. "Besides, you're forgetting who *else* isn't going to let you out of their sight."

He sighed, wincing as he did so. "I'm gonna have to face Eric sometime, aren't I?"

"Either you face him, or he'll find you," Sky pointed out wryly.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm going," he grumbled, opening his eyes at last. He winced again immediately, a hand going to his head. "Ow!"

"Dad?!" Sky demanded anxiously. "What is it? What's wrong?"

He paused. It couldn't be. Could it? Aisha said -

But Aisha probably didn't expect *this*, he reminded himself. This time the mental voice sounded strangely like Katie.

He realized his hand was shaking when he reached up and carefully removed his SightMap, but he couldn't help it. He didn't even bother to try.

"Dad?"

"Uncle Wes?"

"Time, what are you ... ?"

Slowly, he reopened his eyes.

The first thing he saw was Sky staring at him anxiously, a worry line creasing his forehead.

When the tears welled up and spilled over, he didn't bother to wipe them away. He just reached out to cup his son's cheek before pulling him into a tight hug.

And then he laughed.
Chapter Notes

Originally this was the first part of the chapter for prompt #79: Moon, but after spending too long staring at it and being annoyed because it really didn't *feel* like it should be one chapter, I went ahead and made it two. The title isn't actually in the prompt list; it's just something off the top of my head.

S.P.D. was the same drab gray as it had ever been. Gray, navy, and black uniformed people wandered through the hallways, and he grinned at the way they automatically moved to give him wide berth. He waved to them in thanks, and laughed at the strange looks he got in return.

"You know, grinning like a loon is not going to reassure them any."

He shot his teammate an amused look. "Quiet, Concussion Boy."

"If you didn't crack a rib, you're off the hook for lunch," Justin retorted.

"I could have broken every single one of them, and I wouldn't care right now," he returned happily, waving to more cadets.

"If you'd broken every single one of them, a punctured lung would be the least of your problems," the other man snorted. He paused. "You *didn't* puncture a lung ... did you?"

He chuckled, wincing as his chest protested against all the movement. "I'm fine, Turbo. Just bruised them is all."

"You'd better have," Justin grumbled. "Rose will *not* be happy if Eric rips me to pieces before she gets home."

Jack, Z, and Sam all laughed as they entered the Command Center. Wes wondered if they realized he wasn't kidding.

"Wes!"

Arms came around him, crushing his aching ribs as he cried out in pain. Katie? he wondered muzzily. No, that couldn't be right ...

He gasped as he was released, only to have his shoulders seized painfully tight. "You always have to play the hero, don't you Wes?" Eric snarled at him. "You never bother to think anything through. You don't *think*. You just have to do it your way, right now, without even thinking about anyone else. You didn't even bother to call for backup before you went charging in on your own!"

He smiled, drinking in the sight of Eric's features twisted in fury, dark eyes flashing. "You have gray hair, Eric. Did you know that?" He pointed, delighting in the streaks of hidden silver. "Right there."

Behind him, he could hear B Squad fighting snickers while Cruger coughed. He was sure Justin was rolling his eyes.
It hurt when his head snapped to the side, but he was expecting it enough to roll with the punch a little. Either Eric realized his face was the only part of him that probably wasn't injured - for once - or he was too furious to care. It was hard to say with him.

By the time he looked up, Eric was already storming off.

"You okay, Dad?" Sky asked anxiously.

"Yeah," he assured him, rubbing his jaw idly. "Wasn't that bad. And I deserved it, anyway."

Jack raised his eyebrows. "You *deserved* to get punched in the face?"

"Don't even try and figure out how their relationship works," Justin told him. "It just leads to migraines."

He made a face at the other man, before turning to look at Cruger. "Sir," he said cheerfully, sliding into a salute.

"Sergeant Collins, are you feeling all right?" Kat wondered, looking at him warily.

"He needs to see a doctor and he's been acting like a drunk since we came in here, but otherwise he's fine." Justin answered for him.

"Like you're one to talk," he retorted, but he couldn't stop grinning.

Then Cruger stepped in front of him, and suddenly it wasn't so funny anymore. "Sergeant Collins, are you aware that you have been absent without leave from S.P.D., and that such an occurrence could be considered grounds for immediate dismissal if not imprisonment?" he growled.

"But that's - "

"Commander, you can't - "

"Sir - "

"Silence!" Cruger bellowed.

A deathly still settled over the Command Center.

Wes met his commander's gaze directly, unflinching. "Yes Sir, I am. And I'm prepared to face any punishment you may have in mind."

"And do you have any explanation for your behavior?"

He hesitated. There were so many ways he could respond to that. Things that he *could* say, things he didn't want to, and some it was probably best not to say at all.

*I'm a Power Ranger, and this is what we do.*

*I owed it to Tori and Dax.*

*Mirloc was after *me*; everyone else was just bait to him.*

*I couldn't just stand *by* and - needed to finish what I started.*
I'm tired of being useless.

I just stood there and *watched* them *die*!

But it all really boiled down to the same thing.

He closed his eyes for a moment, swallowing hard. "With all due respect, Sir. It had to be me who brought in Mirloc. I can't explain it anymore than that, and if you can't understand why ... " He shrugged helplessly. "Then there's nothing else I can tell you."

"So rather than use the resources S.P.D. has to offer, you chose to deliberately place yourself in danger by acting alone, and without the approval of your team?"

"I knew where he was," Justin interjected. "Eric may not have, but I've been helping Wes with information the entire time he was gone. So if you're punishing him, you should punish me, too."

Wes glanced back at him, shaking his head slightly. Justin's help was appreciated, but he could face this on his own. Whether Justin had chosen to support him or not, acting alone had been his decision.

He looked back to Cruger's unreadable expression. "If I had stayed, I could have helped find him, but I never would have been allowed to bring him in," he said quietly. "I can't even take my own Squad out for training missions; there was no way anyone would let me face Mirloc myself. That monster destroyed my *family*, while I stood there and watched it happen." His voice caught for a moment, and he clenched his fists as he struggled to reign in his emotions. He hadn't planned to say that. "Of anyone in this base Sir, I thought *you* would understand why I had to do this myself," he finished quietly.

There was a long silence.

"As S.P.D. Commander, I would have the grounds to demote you to cadet for acting like one," Cruger said finally. There was a pause, and he sighed. "As a Ranger, which it seems you now are once again, the decision of what to do with you goes to the acting Ranger Commander."

Wes started, looking behind Cruger to where Kimberly stood, watching him. Then he mentally recovered, sliding into another salute. "Sergeant Oliver."

She walked towards him silently, stopping directly in front of him to look him in the eyes. "You can see me, can't you," she said quietly.

He nodded, swallowing down the smile that threatened to break out again.

She hugged him, suddenly and carefully, holding on to him as she whispered in his ear "I'm so happy for you, Wes. And I'm very, very proud of you."

He hugged her back, trying not to bury his face against her shoulder to hide another grin.

Then she stepped back again, frowning. "I thought Billy said your morpher was gone."

"Um, I can explain that," Bridge piped up, holding up a finger.

Everyone looked at him, even Cruger suddenly showing interest. "And how is that, Cadet Carson?" he asked.

"Well, see, when Uncle - uh, I mean, Sergeant Collins, did his .. " He paused, scratching his head
and frowning. "Final Strike?" he guessed finally, "Against Mirloc, he used an incredible amount of
energy. But his morpher was never *actively* destroyed - it was just drained of its power. So the
connection to the Morphin Grid was still *there*, it just wasn't strong enough for him to morph.
And after nine years of just sitting around on Sergeant Collin's wrist, it had a lot of time for the
energy levels to fill back up. And once they were full, it became possible for him to morph into a
Ranger again."

Most of the room was trying to work through what Bridge had said, but Wes was staring at him in
shock. "You knew all along ... " he murmured. "The first time I saw you after I woke up, when you
held on to my hand, you said everything was going to be okay. You already knew then, didn't
you?"

Bridge smiled, ducking his head shyly in a way that made him look just like Adam. "Yeah," he
admitted. "I could sense the Power was still there. But I didn't know how long it would take for the
energy levels to be stable again, so I didn't want to get your hopes up telling you to wait for it."

"You never take it off," Justin said suddenly, looking at Wes now. "The one time I asked you about
it, you said it felt wrong to take it off. So you've had it on this whole time, while it's been
energizing itself enough to do things like use the communicator again."

"And the Power heals its Rangers," Kimberly murmured, a slow smile drifting across her face.
"Your eyes ... the Power was healing you all along. It just needed that final burst to finish the job."

"So ... Uncle Wes changed his destiny *again*?" Syd demanded.

Everyone burst out laughing.

Wes smiled with them, but he didn't laugh. He'd believed destiny could be changed when he was
younger, but he wasn't entirely sure that he still did. He'd always based that belief off what he knew
of the future when really ... he hadn't known anything about the future at all. The only thing that
*hadn't* changed since the day he met Jen and the others was the fact that he still wore the Red
Chrono Morpher on his left wrist.

Some days that was more of a comfort than it should be.

"Oh, I don't know about that," Kimberly commented smugly as the laughter finally settled down
again. "I know one destiny Wes can't change - or Justin for that matter." Her grin widened as the
both men looked at her in alarm. "Your punishment is to be contained in the medical wing, for as
long as Aisha sees fit."

Wes looked at Justin. The younger man nodded, and they both bolted for the door.

B Squad stopped them before they could make it down the hallway.
He wasn't quite sure if he was actually waiting for Eric when he started a kata in the backyard. He had some pent up energy to be sure, but he didn't think that was it. He couldn't really pinpoint *why* he was doing it; just that he was. It felt like the time to practice, and so he did.

It had been two weeks, he reflected. Two weeks after Cruger threatened to demote him for his actions and Kimberly banished him to the medical wing. Two weeks of everyone but Eric coming to visit him, of Vanessa yelling at him for almost an hour, of finally being released from the medical wing only to have Eric walk out of rooms he entered. Of cadets hailing him a hero and Rangers scolding him for acting on his own.

He already knew why Eric was avoiding him. He understood Eric better than anyone after all, and he knew how he thought. He knew exactly what was going on, which is why he could smile when Sophie hesitantly asked him if he and Uncle Eric were all right. It was why Z's demands to know what was going on didn't upset him, or Kimberly's gentle prying to make sure things were really all right between them wasn't annoying. But by the time Justin had bluntly asked him if he needed him to kick Eric's butt for him, or when Taylor had demanded if she needed to kick his for Eric, he was getting a bit exasperated with them all for not wanting to believe that maybe they could work things out on their own. Even Bridge's oddly bright smile for him out of the blue one day wasn't necessary to tell him when Eric was finally starting to calm down.

Tonight Vanessa had informed him that she was staying at S.P.D. to work on a project, and yes, she wouldn't be alone, and yes there was a place for her to sleep while she was there, and *yes* she knew where his room was if she needed it, and would he stop fussing already?! He had promised not to burn down the house, not to break anything that couldn't be replaced, and not to do anything with Eric in any places Sky wouldn't want to know about. Sky it seemed was staying at S.P.D. this weekend; not completely unusual, but he normally liked to come home for the weekends to see more of his family. He'd decided it was probably better not to ask.

He knew the moment he had company, despite the fact that the sun was almost set. He could see again, but that didn't change the fact that his senses had been heightened, or the way he liked to train with his eyes closed out of habit. The fact that he knew *who* was watching him was more logic than anything else, but it didn't really matter.

A fist came flying at him from the left, and it was sheer instinct that made him duck, twisting around to grab the arm for a throw. He was blocked, and found himself on the receiving end of a fast series of punches that set him immediately on the defense. He opened his eyes briefly to see Eric's stormy expression as he attacked, and closed them again before trying to track the speed of what was coming at him overwhelmed him.

The disorientation of sight to blackness wasn't fast enough; he caught an uppercut to the jaw that
made him briefly see stars. He moved back to recover, but Eric wasn't letting up. Another jab caught him in the ribs, and he swung wide more from reflex than actual defense. His arm was caught, twisted, and he could hear Eric breathing heavily behind him.

Oh. This was one of *those* fights.

He jabbed his free elbow back into Eric's ribs twice, and stopped hard on his foot. He took several steps back as he was released, settling himself into a better stance as he listened carefully for the next attack.

He didn't have to wait long.

He ducked the kick that would have knocked him sideways, moving forward to knee Eric in the stomach. He followed up with a right hook that connected when he hadn't expected it to, and aimed a left just in case. The left was caught, and he jerked his head to the side to avoid another punch. He went for a kick, but his leg was grabbed instead. He turned with it, jerking his head back and moving into a flip. Eric was on him again the moment he landed.

They traded blows, Eric deliberately aiming for his ribs and stomach, while he went for facial hits. Once Eric was knocked hard enough in the head, he tended to surrender the fight faster. Unfortunately, it took a *lot* to hit Eric hard enough to disorient him.

Eventually he was forced to realize it was too much. Aisha had finally released him from the medical wing, but she'd warned him to be careful. Somehow he had the feeling her idea of 'careful' didn't involve sparring with Eric. And judging by the way it was starting to hurt to breathe, he was probably right.

It was in the middle of one of those flares of pain in his chest that he found his feet swept out from under him and himself flat on his back, staring up at the sky. The moon was almost full tonight, he reflected absently. He probably could have moved to get up again, but he was tired, and he was only fighting the inevitable.

When the heavy weight settled against him, he met the lips that crushed his eagerly.

****

The fingers carding through his hair were unexpectedly gentle.

"It's too much to ask for you not to aim for the obvious weak spot next time, isn't it?" he murmured, leaning into the muscular chest under his cheek.

"It's too much to ask for you to stop leaving me out of everything," came the sharp retort.

Ah. Time for talking now.

He forced himself to sit up enough to look down at the other man despite how exhausted he was. "Eric, I *had* to bring in Mirloc. I couldn't sit back and let someone else do it," he explained quietly. "Tori and Dax ... They were *family*. I owed it to them to bring him back."

"Owed it to them, or owed it to yourself?" Eric returned flatly.

"I - "

Eric shook his head. "You're not getting it, Wes. You still don't understand why I'm so mad at you. This has nothing to do with you going after Mirloc."
"It doesn't?"

Eric sat up, shaking his head again with a sigh before looking him in the eyes. "You went after Mirloc without *me*.

He stared at him. "What? But - "

"Yeah, I wasn't here the first time around. So maybe I don't understand why the rest of you hate him so much. And I didn't know the other teams like you did. But that monster hurt *you*, Wes. He was after *you*. I deserved the chance to get him back just as much as you did."

He closed his eyes, feeling worse than ever. So Eric had figured out what Mirloc was after, too. "Oh," he said quietly.

There was another sigh. "You're good at making speeches when it comes to other people Wes, but you never put yourself in there, too." Eric said finally. He waited for Wes to meet his eyes again before reaching out to grab his left wrist, bringing the morpher there against his own. "This means something. Yeah, they were your teammates, and Justin is too. I get that. But *I'm* supposed to be your partner. You're the one who put it that way - not me. How are we supposed to be partners if you won't let me back you up when you need me most?"

Wes stared at him in dismay. "Eric, I ... "

"Are you really sorry? Or do you just feel guilty because you never thought about it that way?"

"Both, I guess," he said softly, feeling like a heel.

Eric let out a puff of air, staring up at the moon for a moment. Finally he glanced over to him. "This has to stop, Wes. We can't be partners without being *partners*. It doesn't work that way for us. Never has. Are you really willing to go that far with me?"

He paused, frowning at him. If it were anyone but Eric, that might almost have sounded like ...

"Eric, what are you ... ?"

"Partners, Wes," he repeated. "In everything. We face *everything* together. Are you ready for that?"

He blinked once, slowly. His mind was reeling. "I thought we said we'd never do that," he said finally, his voice so soft he wasn't even sure if Eric had heard him.

He received a slight shrug in response. "There's a lot of things I never thought I'd do with you."

For some reason, that made him smile.

He leaned in, resting his forehead against Eric's. "No more secrets, no more fighting alone," he promised.

"Actually listening, and not pulling away," Eric agreed just as quietly. A hand reached up to touch his cheek. "I love you, you know." The words were hesitant, uncertain because they were rarely actually said. "Even if you are the most frustrating person I've ever met."

He chuckled, leaning in to brush swollen and bruised lips together again. "Aren't those supposed to be my lines?"
An effort to explain why B Squad went from being perfectly fine to at each other's throats in S.W.A.T. Which, admittedly, is an awesome set of episodes. Bridge being cute, and Cruger and Kat show vague hints of a relationship that's actually almost amusing and not just creepy. (The look she gave him when he told Z she fried the Quantum Enhancer was *priceless*. ^_^) And Sheep, 'cause Rosabelle wanted him in here.

"So, you know those B Squad Zords we were building?" Dustin began conversationally as he took a bite of his pancakes.

"You mean you finally finished them?" Eric asked dryly.

Dustin paused, blinking at him. "Yes and no, dude," he said finally.

"What he means is, we finished the Zords," Taylor broke in, rolling her eyes. "But that's not all we did."

"You didn't build another robot dog, did you?" Adam asked warily.

"Yeah, dude," Dustin returned, just as Taylor said "No." She rolled her eyes as he continued with "Why?"

"Yes he did, but that's not what we're talking about," Taylor informed them. She paused, making sure she had everyone's attention before she grinned. "We made them a Power-up."

Justin cleared his throat loudly, and Nerina frowned slightly.

"Well, us and Morpher Project," Dustin corrected. "But anyway, dudes, it's like, *totally* awesome!"

"But Jack already has a battlizer," Rocky pointed out.

"Exactly," Taylor agreed with satisfaction.

There was a pause as everyone just stared at her blankly.

She rolled her eyes again. "*Jack* has a battlizer. What about the rest of the team? It's about time someone who isn't wearing Red got a Power-up again, don't you think?"

Wes swallowed down his first response, his eyes flickering over Justin, Dustin, and Taylor each in turn. "Sounds like a great idea to me," he said finally, managing a smile. He elbowed Eric before he could make a comment.

"So, we made this super-cool Team Power-up, and dude, wait 'til you see the Zords," Dustin went on eagerly.
"They are pretty cool," Justin admitted, fighting a grin.

Wes laughed at him. "Your inner-geek is showing, Turbo."

He got a rude hand sign in Aquitian in return.

"So, what are we going to have them do to earn it?" Zack asked, looking at them all.

"Earn it?" Wes echoed, giving the other man an odd look. "Why would they have to earn it?"

"We all had to earn our Power-ups," Shane pointed out.

Dustin frowned. "But dude, didn't Cam just - hey!" He glared at Shane as the other man stole his chocolate milk. "Dude, what was that for?"

Shane smiled at him innocently. "Yours looked better."

"Hey, Syd!" Adam called loudly, warning them all that they were no longer alone.

She barely stopped, glancing at the staff table distractedly. "Hi, Uncle Adam," she murmured, moving toward the buffet.

Wes raised his eyebrows as several others exchanged looks. "Is she okay?"

Rocky shrugged in response. "Who knows, man."

"Syd!" Z called as she walked in, sounding exasperated. "Would you wait up?"

"Everything okay, Z?" Justin asked as she started to pass him.

"Huh?" She paused, glancing at him, and blinked as she noticed how many people were looking at her curiously. "Oh. Uh, yeah. It's fine. Nothing to worry about."

Justin gave her a skeptical look.

She smiled a little. "It's fine, Dad. Really. I'll see you later, okay?" She leaned in to kiss his cheek before heading after her girlfriend.

Justin blinked for a moment, a hand going to his cheek. A slow smile spread across his face. "Okay," he murmured, despite the fact that she was already out of earshot.

"Are you sure you don't need aspirin or something Bridge?" Sky asked as he came in, trailing after his younger teammate. He still had his backpack slung over his left shoulder from spending the night at home, which meant he must have overslept again. Not that he'd ever admit it.

"I'm fine, Sky," Bridge sighed, one hand rubbing his forehead. "And I can't take aspirin, remember? It causes negative responses in my powers due to the chemicals affecting - "

"Right, sorry," Sky interrupted, cutting him off. "I forgot."

Bridge muttered something inaudible, waving absentely at the staff table without actually looking as he headed for food.

Wes cleared his throat. "Morning, Sky."

"Morning, Dad. Morning, Eric," he answered without looking. Like the rest of his squad, he was
too focused on the morning buffet to pay much attention.

Wes exchanged an amused look with Eric, who rolled his eyes.

Being that they couldn't talk about what was supposed to be a surprise at the moment, everyone busied themselves with small talk and eating. There was a moment to greet Jack as he entered, who seemed far more awake and less distracted than the rest of his Squad. If anything, the brief yawn as he waved was the only sign he gave of being anything less than, well, Jack.

So it came as a bit of a surprise when Jack suddenly yelled at the stop of his lungs and went scrambling back out of his chair.

"Sheep!" Sky gave his bag an exasperated look as the adults turned to see what was going on. "How did you get in there?" he demanded, carefully removing the small ball of black fuzz.

The tiny kitten stared at him with his usual pouty face and meowed loudly.

"Did you just call that cat Sheep?" Z asked, looking amused.

"Oh, he's so cute!" Syd cooed. "Can I pet him?"

Sky shrugged, moving slightly so Syd could reach out to pet the kitten without actually forcing him to hand him over. "He's Eric's. Dad got him for him. Don't ask me why he named him Sheep, it's his cat."

Yeah, Wes mused to himself, trying not to grin at the way Sky kept the kitten cradled carefully against his chest. Eric's. Right.

"Are you okay, Jack?" Bridge asked, looking warily at his squad leader.

Jack had backed away from them all, and was now hiding behind the barstool he'd been sitting on. "I-I'm fine," he stammered. "Just ... just keep that thing away from me!"

"What thing?" Syd wondered, scratching under Sheep's chin. "Oh, aren't you just the cutest?"

"That!" Jack pointed wildly at Sky.

Everyone looked down at the black fuzzball Sky was holding. "You mean Sheep?" Sky asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Cow, rooster, pig ... I don't care *what* you call that thing. Just get it out of here!"

"Jack ... " Syd tilted her head, looking amused. "Are you afraid of him or something?"

"Of course not!" Jack snapped back. "I just don't like cats, that's all!"

"But how can you hate such a cute face?" Bridge wondered, leaning in to bump noses with Sheep.

Sheep meowed again, and Jack shuddered.

Z paused, looking at Jack with an odd look in her eyes. "Sky, maybe you'd better take Dog somewhere else."

"His name is Sheep," Sky retorted. "It's not that hard to remember!"

"I don't care what it is, just get rid of it!" Jack shouted at him.
"Don't yell at me!"

"Guys, chill! It's not a big deal!" Syd protested.

"Look, can everyone just calm down?" Z demanded.

"Whatever," Sky snapped. "Fine. I'll take him home. Come on, Sheep," he muttered at the kitten, hitching it closer to his chest as he grabbed his bag and headed for the door.

Sheep meowed.

"What was that about?" Syd asked Jack as soon as both Sky and Sheep were gone.

"I don't. Like. Cats," Jack ground out, still clutching the back of his chair.

"You gonna be okay, Jack?" Z asked carefully, reaching out slowly to put a hand on his arm.

He flinched away from her. "I'll be fine," he said after a moment. "I just ... let's just finish breakfast, okay?"

Syd frowned down at her food. "I don't think I'm hungry anymore," she murmured. "You guys finish without me. I'll catch up with you later."

Z looked up. "Syd, wait - " She growled in frustration as the blonde headed for the door, glancing back at Jack. "I gotta go. Call me if you need me, 'kay?" She went after Syd without bothering to wait for a response, shouting for her to wait.

Bridge looked up at Jack, who was slowly calming. "Toast?" he offered, holding out a plate.

Jack just looked at him. "Thanks, Bridge," he sighed.

The adults turned to look at one another. "So. More teamwork building?" Rocky suggested.

****

"So after all that, it turned out that Syd and Z were fighting because Syd was nervous about introducing Z to her mom?" Wes asked.

Sky nodded, still draped along the couch with Sheep curled up on his chest. He was *supposed* to be back at S.P.D. in an hour for curfew, but Wes wasn't exactly going to shove him out the door. "Something about wanting to officially have her mom meet her girlfriend, I guess. Anyway, she started nitpicking while she was trying to figure out how to ask Z about it, and Z took it as Syd trying to change her or something." He rolled his eyes. "So they were blowing the whole thing out of proportion. Again."

Wes fought back a smile. "And Jack?"

"Turns out he had a bad experience with a cat as a kid. He's scared to death of them. But since it's Jack, he'll never admit it," Sky explained, reaching up to scratch Sheep's head absently. He smiled faintly at the kitten as he began to purr. "I thought he was just being a jerk."

"And Bridge?" Wes asked, leaning over the back of the couch to stroke the kitten as well.

Sky shrugged a shoulder, frowning slightly. "I'm not really sure what his problem was. I know Jack said he and Bridge were talking the other night, which is why they've been so buddy-buddy the last couple days. But as for why he was being so testy, I really don't know."
"You think maybe he was reacting to the rest of you?"

Sky's frown deepened. "Maybe. That might explain all the weird questions. But it's not like he'd say anything if he was," he groused.

"True," Wes mused with a sigh. He kissed the top of Sky's head just because he could, ignoring the face he got in return as Sky continued to pet Sheep.

They both looked up at the bright flash of light.

Vanessa smirked at them, camera in hand. "Oh, that one's going on the wall in the lab at S.P.D. That was just *too* cute."

Wes looked at Sky. Sky's eyes flickered down to Sheep, and back to his father. Wes nodded, and stalked toward Vanessa.

"What are you two doing?"

"Eric, catch!" she called, tossing the camera moments before Wes reached her. "Adorably embarrassing pictures of Wes and Sky!"

Eric paused for a split second. Wes went after him, and he bolted.

"Don't let him get away, Dad!"

"Hide it, Eric!"

"Eric, give it back!"

"Gotta catch me first!"
I have come to the conclusion that Bridge is not an angry person. Not only can I not remember a single incident where he ever actually yelled angry-like at anyone, but it’s impossible to write him that way. Which is incredibly inconvenient for this prompt. - Glares at him-

Much love to Starlit Purple, Rosabelle, and my Shi-chan for helping me wrestle with this prompt.

B Squad looked like they'd been steamrolled - twice, Eric decided, eyeing the five teens draped around their usual table in the cafeteria. Draped being a literal term: Syd had scooted her chair close enough to Z to lean over her shoulder and close her eyes. Z was either tolerating this, or too tired to care. Jack was about to nosedive into his French fries, and Sky seemed to be sitting up straight by sheer force of will, staring blankly ahead as he slowly drank his juice. Bridge had already lost the battle for consciousness, snuggling contentedly with his tray.

"Poor things," Kimberly murmured sympathetically. "It's been a rough week for them, hasn't it?"

"No kidding," Wes sighed, leaning against Eric.

"Been a rough week for us, too," Eric murmured to no one in particular, fighting the urge to wrap an arm around Wes and pull him close.

Rocky grinnned faintly. "No kidding."

Wes made a gesture at him.

"What does that mean, anyway?" Zack asked, leaning in to sample some of Rocky's plate. "I see you and Justin do it all the time, but no one ever wants to explain."

"You don't need to know," Justin returned, elbowing Wes lightly from the other side. Eric glared at him as the movement shifted him as well, and got an eye roll in return.

"It's something rude," Karone informed Zack. "The Aquitian version of - " She paused, jerking her left fist upward. "The Earthian thing. Flipping. But a slightly different meaning, which is the only reason the Power lets them get away with it."

"Where did you guys learn that?" Shane asked, eyeing them oddly.

Wes and Justin glanced at each other, smiling faintly. "Corcus was an interesting guy," Justin commented evasively.

"That he was," Wes snickered.

"And I'm telling you, you are *never* getting to pick for movie night again," Casey Earhart Scott informed Sora Bradley-Watanabe as C Squad wandered in for lunch. "I don't know who told you that you have taste in movies, but *I'm* telling you they lied."
"Fight Club is an awesome movie!" Sora argued. "It's about a guy with mental problems and people who hate authority! And if there's any place that deserves to celebrate that, it's S.P.D."

"Stop channeling your dad, Sor."

Rhythm Fernandez sighed, glancing at Ecliptor Hammond. The other boy shook his head in return. At Ecliptor's side, Heart Carson giggled softly.

Eric frowned slightly. Okay, seeing Keri Johnson walking around with C Squad while she was visiting wasn't odd, or occasionally Hawk Oliver whenever he was here, but what was Heart doing with them? She wasn't S.P.D., and she was barely a year older than Casey, who was the youngest on the Squad.

Heart paused suddenly, her gaze flickering across the room. She frowned, nudging Ecliptor slightly with her elbow and waiting until she had both of the older boys' attention before nodding across the room to B Squad. Sora and Casey stopped arguing - for once - turning to look as well. The rest of C Squad exchanged glances, Sophie frowning slightly, Marinda biting her lip and looking worried.

Eric sighed, shaking his head as C Squad went over to bother their higher-ranked cadets. It was good that the two squads got along - mostly - but there were times he wondered if it was worth how much they aggravated one another.

Sky, for instance, was constantly annoyed by Sora and her love of arguing the most meaningless points just for the sake of arguing. While Keri and Syd were best friends, things between them had been a bit strained since Keri found out about Jack. Jack, who she obviously could barely get along with as it was. Of course, Keri wasn’t even technically C Squad, but she always acted like she was when she came to Newtech City. Ironic, being that she was A Squad in the Satra Galaxy S.P.D.

The rest of the two squads actually got along. Bridge and Sophie were still good friends, and somehow Z's street girl-rocker attitude blended surprisingly well with Casey, C Squad’s gothic girl. Marinda was too sweet and friendly for anyone not to like, while Rhythm and Ecliptor kept mostly to themselves.

Which further proved his personal view that Sky and Jack were trouble.

“So everyone got their schedules ready for today?” Kimberly asked.

“Yes, Mom,” Zack teased.

She swatted him. “Hey, you guys are the ones who stuck me with this job,” she reminded him, scowling. “And the moment Tommy and the others come home, I’m dumping it all back on him.”

Somehow Eric doubted it; Kimberly may hate being R.C., but she was too good at it to just stop.

“Whatever you say,” Rocky agreed, echoing his thoughts.

Kimberly glared at him, and everyone laughed.

The end of lunch chime went off, and Eric glanced back as Rhythm practically leapt from his seat. "Time for class," he said loudly. "Let's head out, everyone. Keri, are you coming?"

Keri hesitated, finally sighing and looking annoyed. "Yeah, I'm coming." But she punched Sky in the shoulder as she got up.

Eric fought back a grin as he watched them. Sky was his kid, but Keri reminded him of Taylor
sometimes: one woman with a **whole** lot of attitude.

He paused as Ecliptor offered a hand up to Heart. She smiled brilliantly at him as she accepted, and her hand remained on his arm as she turned to look at her brother. "I'll see you later, Bridgey. Be safe?"

Bridge glanced up at her, his expression softening. "I'll try."

Heart's smile faltered a little at his resigned tone, but she nodded before walking to the door for her next class. Her hand never left the crook of Ecliptor's elbow, and not one member of C Squad gave it so much as a second glance.

Eric blinked for a moment before glancing around the table to make sure he wasn't the only one who'd seen. Kimberly had a soft expression on her face as she stared after the couple. Rocky was frowning, Zack looked amused, and Wes startled. Justin, Karone, and Shane didn't seem to have noticed.

"Hey, did I just see ... ?"

He glanced back as Syd straightened in her chair.

"Wow, you're slipping, Bridge," Jack commented, smirking.

Bridge glanced up, blinking. "Huh?"

"You're letting your little sister date. That's against the Big Brother Code."

Bridge stared at Jack blankly.

"Seriously, after the way you've warned people for just looking at her. It's kind of a surprise," Z agreed, grinning.

Bridge muttered something inaudible, looking back at his tray as he poked at his breakfast.

The rest of his squad exchanged puzzled frowns.

"Well, that just means it's time to set Bridge up with someone," Sky declared suddenly.

Bridge's head came up. "What?"

Sky smirked at him. "Well, the rest of us are dating, so now we need to find someone for you." He glanced at Syd. "Any ideas?"

If he hadn't looked back at Bridge, Eric wouldn't have noticed his fist clenching. There was a pause, and suddenly he stood, grumbling something under his breath. Grabbing his tray, he headed for the door.

Z moved to catch his arm, frowning. "Bridge, we're just teasing."

"Don't touch me!"

The cafeteria went abruptly silent.

Bridge closed his eyes. "Don't. Just ... don't."

"Bridge, what's wrong?" Syd asked, looking worried now.
Again, Bridge looked like he wanted to say something, but visibly stopped himself. "It's nothing," he muttered. "It's nothing."

But Sky had already stood, reaching for him as he tried to head for the door again. "Bridge - "

Bridge whirled, just barely dodging Sky's hand with a furious glare. "I said don't *touch* me!"

Sky frowned. "Are your powers acting up again?"

Bridge stared at him for a moment, then began to chuckle softly as he bowed his head.

Jack rose to his feet, looking concerned. "Bridge ... ?"

"You think my powers are acting up?" The words were soft, but impossible not to hear in the silence. He looked up slowly, and the faint smile on his face was somehow disturbing. "I'm an empath, Sky. My powers don't 'go away' - they're always like this. Just because my gloves keep me from seeing auras or sensing thoughts doesn't mean I stop being an empath. I thought you knew that. But then, I thought you and Syd knew how my powers work, too. And obviously you don't, because any time it matters, you don't believe me when I tell you something unless I prove it to you."

Syd looked horrified. "That's not - "

"T-Top," Bridge cut in, counting on his fingers. "The Fernovian bank robber. Telepathy. Dream fighting. It doesn't matter that I told you, because you can't see it. Or you don't trust me. I don't know anymore. I don't know if I even care."

"Bridge - " Z tried.

"It gets old, you know?" Bridge went on, sounding almost conversational now. "Always being the weird one. Always knowing things I'm not supposed to. Or hey, even being the single guy when all my friends are pairing up. 'Cause it's not like I don't sense how you all feel about each other. And it's not like I can turn it off either, which is convenient. 'Cause then I get to watch everyone pair off when we fight Krybots, and try not to feel how protective of each other you are while I'm fighting all by myself. It's not like that doesn't ever bother me, you know? But I can't say anything about it, because then I'll make everyone feel bad."

"Bridge, that's not what - "

"It's hard, trying to be happy for all of you," Bridge spoke over Jack like he hadn't even said anything. His voice was quiet, his eyes distant. "I am, because it's hard not to be happy for someone else who's happy, but sometimes ... " He shook his head. "Well, that doesn't matter anyway."

"But it *does* matter, Bridgey," Syd protested, sounding like she was about to cry.

"Bridge." Sky held out a hand, suddenly looking calm and confident. "Let me help quiet things for a little while."

Bridge shook his head. "That's not going to help, Sky."

"You don't know that," Sky argued. "Just try."

He grabbed Bridge's shoulder as the younger boy sighed, and blue light suddenly surrounded them both. Sky glanced down at his teammate, and Eric realized with a sinking feeling that Sky thought
that he had just solved whatever was bothering his friend.

But Bridge looked back at him solemnly. "This is me, Sky," he said quietly. "These are my feelings. You can't make them go away by trying to protect me."

Sky stared, looking startled. "But - "

Bridge shook his head again. "You've never understood, Sky. And I doubt you ever will."

Sky glared at him. "And what don't I understand?"

Bridge looked at him for a moment, sighed, and leaned closer to whisper something in Sky's ear.

Sky's eyes went wide.

Bridge pulled away to watch him with another sigh. "You really need to stop being meaner to me just to prove you don't have feelings for me anymore, by the way," he murmured, almost in afterthought. "I get the point."

He brushed off Sky's hand casually, dropping his tray in the return bin by the door. He glanced over at Rocky and Zack as he passed them, shaking his head again as Rocky started toward him. "No, Dad. I just need to be alone for awhile. And tell Mom not to worry about it; she doesn't need to drop everything for me. I'll be fine."

There was a stunned silence as he left, the former Rangers exchanging worried looks while everyone else seemed to be shocked by what was, for Bridge, the closest to a nervous breakdown that anyone had ever seen him. Eric glanced at Wes, who was frowning, and turned to see what he was looking at.

B Squad was staring at one another. Jack seemed agitated, as he often was when he didn't know how to handle a situation. Syd had finally broken down, clinging to a stunned and worried Z as she cried on her shoulder.

And Sky remained where Bridge had left him, looking stunned.
This was surprisingly fun to write. I kept giggling. ^_^ It was originally one chapter because I ran out of spare prompts after rewriting Reflection, but I decided to split it into two for this repost.

"Good?" Wes asked, nodding to Vanessa's plate.

"Mm-hmm," she murmured, stirring the noodles with her fork. She glanced up. "Why the sudden treat, anyway? You never eat out in fancy places like this."

He shrugged. "I thought you could use it after the last few days. Seems like everything was going wrong at once. Figured you could use a break."

Vanessa rolled her eyes, muttering under her breath. Conveniently, about the time Kat had decided to accept Commander Birdie's offer for a position at S.P.D. Headquarters, everything in the base seemed to fall apart. And with only a handful of staff at her disposal and Boom to cover Kat's duties, Vanessa had been more than slightly stressed. In addition, DVD had been so busy fine tuning the last of the specs for the S.W.A.T. fliers, they'd completely neglected the Delta Runners and Sam's Omegamax Cycle. Which of course, happened right when they needed them.

"So ... better?" he prodded, nudging her foot under the table with his.


He raised his right hand, placing the left over his heart. "The richest chocolate they have," he promised.

Vanessa continued to poke at her plate. "It's funny. The kids are so attached to Kat, they think the base went to hell just because she left. And of course, she came back right around the time we got everything under control again, which was perfect timing." She rolled her eyes again.

Wes smiled sympathetically at her. With Billy gone, Kat had been elected as the Tech Department's representative for dealing with B Squad. Vanessa *should* have been the one, being the actual head of the department in his absence, but she'd refused. While she didn't admit to it to most people, Wes knew it was because she was worried she wouldn't be able to keep her cool if something happened to Sky. He also knew that despite her calm, professional attitude, she wouldn't have: she loved her son too much. "So what did you say to her when she came back?"

"Don't ever leave Boom in charge of your responsibilities again. What do you *think* I said?"

He laughed. Vanessa and Kat still tended to bump heads a lot, but in her own way, Vanessa was fond of the other woman. That didn't mean her attitude towards her would change any, though. Thankfully, Kat seemed to understand that, and maybe even respect it. She gave as good as she got when she and Vanessa fought over something.
"Speaking of Kat's return ... "

He glanced up warily.

Vanessa's eyes flickered side to side, making sure there was no one within hearing distance. "I noticed Justin confiscated her morpher practically the moment she walked in the door," she commented pointedly.

He let out a slow sigh. His eyes moved around the room to check for eavesdroppers out of habit. "They don't *make* disposable morphers, Nes," he said quietly. "The Power doesn't work that way."

Her eyebrows went up. "And the machinery involved can't - "

He shook his head. "I'm not Trip or Justin, but I've picked up enough from both of them to know that's not possible. Which means whatever Birdie gave her ... " He shrugged slightly. "There's either something wrong with it, or they didn't make it right."

Her eyes watched him suspiciously. "Or you have another theory," she murmured.

He hesitated, swallowing. "I ... You know how I get ... feelings? Dreams sometimes?"

She nodded.

"Something about Birdie ... " He shook his head. "I can't explain this very well. Something about him just ... doesn't feel right."

"Doesn't feel right how?"

He hesitated again. "It's like ... sometimes it's like there's something he's hiding from us. Other times it's just a bad feeling. Like something bad is about to happen."

"Wes.\" Vanessa's voice was quiet. "You realize that if you're suspecting Commander Birdie, you're suspecting S.P.D. as a whole."

He sighed, running a hand over his hair. "I know," he muttered. "Sometimes I have to ask myself if it's because I think S.P.D. is going to become Time Force someday, and with what I know about Time Force ... " He shrugged helplessly. "But that doesn't make the feelings stop."

She raised her eyebrows again. "S.P.D. is Time Force?"

"I think so. I don't have any real proof, but the signs are there.\" He smiled faintly, but there was no real humor in it. "Sam, for one."

Her eyes flickered back over his shoulder. "What's taking those three so long, anyway?\" she demanded abruptly.

He shrugged again, trying not to eye the person who walked past him. "Maybe they're having trouble getting a hold of them."

She looked at him again, studying him more carefully now. "Are you sure you're ready for this?"

He smiled a little. "I'm so nervous I feel like I'm about to jump out of my skin, if that's what you mean."

She shook her head, looking amused. "I can't believe you're actually going to do it."
"Why? Because you figured you'd do it first? Or because I always said I wouldn't?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "First of all, R.J. doesn't see the point in it and you know it. Not that I care," she added quickly as he looked at her suspiciously. "But you *did* always say you wouldn't."

He grinned. "Well, there's a lot of things I never thought I'd do that I have. Apparently, this is another one."

She smiled, and the expression softened her face as she reached out to squeeze his hand. "I'm happy for you, Wes. I really am. This is ... maybe I didn't expect it, but I'm glad. You deserve it."

He gave her a look, and they both laughed.

"Okay, that's not what I meant and you know it," she chuckled.

"It's what you were thinking," he teased back. "That I deserve Eric."

"Well ... "

"Nes!"

"No one else is willing to put up with him," she pointed out.

He smiled, shaking his head. More like no one else is willing to put up with *me*, he thought wryly.

Her hand squeezed his again. "What is it?"

He shrugged a little. "It's just ... I thought I'd be doing this twenty years ago, you know? Back then, I figured that at the age I am now, I'd be sending my boys off to college and celebrating finally having some time alone with each other again. And now here I am, forty-eight years old, and it's *finally* happening. And I've already got a son that's pretty much out of the house. It's just ... not the way I thought it would be, you know?" He smiled weakly. "It's not that I regret Sky, or my life here, it's just ... "

"You wanted to raise your son together," Vanessa murmured.

He nodded, feeling guilty. It was a selfish thought, really - especially after everything Vanessa had done for him; everything he'd put Eric through. But the dream was still there sometimes, no matter how deep he'd tried to bury it.

"It's not too late, you know."

He blinked. "What?"

She glanced up, looking a little uncomfortable. "For you two to have children together. You still technically could." She hesitated, biting her lip. "If you wanted to ... " Her chin firmed a little as her eyes met his. "If you still want to have more kids, I'll be your surrogate."

He gaped at her. "Nes ... "

Her eyes narrowed. "If you stop calling me Nes."

He ignored her, shaking his head. "That's ... that's an incredible offer Nes, but ... I'm almost fifty. I'm a little old to be chasing toddlers around the house. Besides, I'm sure the last thing you want in
your house is more - "

He cringed as her hand squeezed his again, painfully tight.

"I'm not making this offer lightly, Wes," she warned him, eyes flashing. "Let's get that straight right now. I *hated* being pregnant. And this isn't exactly going to be a heyday for me if I did. I may not have gone through menopause yet, but I will be soon. This would pretty much be my last hurrah with children." She paused, taking a deep breath. "But. You're my best friend. ... And whether I like to admit it or not, you and Eric both mean a lot to me. I want you to be happy. And this would get me off the hook for trying to figure out some sort of gift for you two."

He laughed in spite of himself, the laughter fading into a warm smile. "Thanks, Nes. I'll think about it," he promised. He leaned across the table to kiss her cheek.

Someone cleared their throat loudly.

"I leave you two alone for ten minutes, and you're already making out," Eric grumbled.

Wes grinned up at him as Vanessa made a face. "Actually, she's trying to break my hand," he informed him, trying to pry himself free from her grip. He winced as he got a good look at his hand. "Ow, by the way," he added, trying to wring it out.

"Well, we found a place," Sky informed them as he reclaimed his seat at the table. His eyes danced with mischief. It was a welcome change from the pale, solemn face he'd had when Wes had decided to drag everyone out. He didn't know what Bridge had said to Sky a few days ago, but whatever it was, Sky was still deeply troubled by it. "And they even video tape the ceremony, so you can fend off all the people who will be mad at you for not inviting them later."

"Good idea," Wes agreed as Eric rolled his eyes. "Did you get Justin and Taylor?"

"Justin said they'll meet us there," R.J. assured him. He smiled. "He seems to think Storm Blaster will get him there before us."

"I don't doubt it," he chuckled. He glanced at Eric. "And Dad?"

"He'll be there," Eric told him. He shook his head. "Not mine, though. Dad's not home, which means he's probably on another mission. And ... " He trailed off, swallowing uncomfortably.

Wes squeezed his hand sympathetically under the table. Eric's strained relationship with his mother had pretty much dissolved over the last few years. He knew it bothered Eric more than he liked to admit. "Well, we didn't exactly give them a lot of notice," he pointed out.

Sky snorted. "Let's go out to dinner. Hey, while we're out, why don't we get married?" he mocked. He grunted as Eric kicked him under the table.

Wes chuckled again, because that was pretty much what had happened. "Well ... " He squeezed Eric's hand again, smiling brightly at everyone. "Let's get this show on the road, shall we?"

Vanessa glared at him.

"After dessert," he corrected hastily.
Stephanie Collins is a character I developed in another side fic, Mother’s Baby. There’s an explanation for her behavior there. I just haven’t decided whether I’m completely happy with that backstory or not yet to post it here.

--Remember that promise we made awhile ago? ... Have you ever thought about making it official?"

".... Okay. I'll go make some calls. Come on, Sky."

"Wait, what?!"--

"Are you kidding me?" Justin stared at him, looking far too amused. "That's what happened?"

He nodded, grinning sheepishly. "He took a little while to think about it, and I didn't actually think he'd take me seriously, but well ... Here we are." He gestured wide.

Justin shook his head, grinning. "Astro and Mystic are going to kill you."

"They tape the ceremony. Sky checked," he informed him.

Justin laughed, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. "You two are *so* lucky that your son thinks ahead."

He chuckled. "He gets it from Vanessa."

"So. You ready?"

"Not quite, I think."

Wes looked up, his face lighting up as a familiar face entered the waiting area the attendants running the chapel had given him. "Dad!"

Alan Collins was just passing seventy years old, gray-haired and starting to feel his age. But the sparkle in his eyes as he greeted his son with a hug was as bright as ever, as was the warm smile he gave. "Wasn't sure we'd make it," he sighed, sounding relieved.

Wes looked at him quizzically. "You know I'd never let them start without you, Dad. And who's we?"

His father pulled away, moving back through the door he'd just entered through. When he came back, he was pushing a wheelchair. And seated in that wheelchair, carefully wrapped in blankets and bundled in warm clothing was ...

"Mom ... " Wes breathed, smiling warmly at her as tears welled in his eyes. He put the thumb of his right hand to his chin, waving his fingers.
Stephanie Collins lit up as she caught sight of him, her entire face shining with joy. While she wasn't the woman she'd been, the woman his father had fell in love with, Phillips had told him once that the inner sparkle she'd had never faded. She rocked her arms together, giggling loudly. "Wes!"

He knelt down in front of the wheelchair, leaning forward to hug her carefully. He looked up at his dad over her shoulder, swallowing back the surge of emotion running through him. "How did you ever ... ?"

"I convinced one of the nurses to let me smuggle her out for the day," his dad explained, smiling at the two of them. "I knew she'd want to be here."

He swallowed, squeezing her slightly. "Thanks, Dad," he whispered.

Someone knocked on the door. "Dad?" Sky asked, poking his head in. "Are you almost - " He broke off, looking startled. "Grandpa!"

"It's good to see you, Sky," Alan greeted, giving him a hug. "I see S.P.D.'s been treating you well."

Sky nodded, recovering quickly. "I do my best, Sir."

A hand cuffed him upset the head from behind. "Don't call your grandfather, Sir," Vanessa lectured. "This isn't S.P.D."

Sky rolled his eyes, pausing as he caught sight of Stephanie. "Grandma," he murmured, signing the word as he spoke.

Stephanie beamed, holding out her arms. "Blue!" she squealed happily.

Behind him, Wes heard Justin snort awkwardly, and tried to fight down a laugh of his own. "Wow, she's good," Justin commented, eyes dancing.

Wes gave him an amused look as Sky glared before moving to hug his grandmother. "That's been her nickname for him since he was little," he explained. "I think it was for his eyes, actually."

"Better than Eric's," Sky muttered as he stood, smirking.

Wes sighed, glancing at Justin's questioning look. "She calls Eric ‘Beautiful’," he told him.

Justin choked.

He socked him lightly in the arm, grinning so his mom wouldn't think anything was wrong. "Eric only lets *her* call him that, before you get any ideas." Not that the look on his face wasn't priceless any time she did.

"Wait'll you see his face when she does," Sky snickered.

"And yours?" Justin asked, grinning at him.

He sighed. "Baby."

"Aw, how sweet," the younger man teased, and he fought to keep from punching him again – his mother was already looking at them curiously. He knew Justin wasn't really making fun of him; his teammates had learned about his mom a long time ago, during one of their talks on Aquitar. But they would never allow something that had been a sensitive subject for him once to stay that way.

Sky cleared his throat. "Taylor says Eric's about to bolt for the door," he informed his father. "So if
you're not ready yet, she needs to know so she can justify hogtying him."

Behind him, Vanessa looked hopeful.

Wes snorted. "Sorry, but no. I'm ready."

Sky nodded, but he could have sworn he heard him mutter "Darn," as they left.

"We'll just take our places, then," Alan agreed, waving at them so Stephanie would understand what was going on.

"I'll be right out," Wes promised.

Stephanie giggled and waved as he wheeled her out the door.

Wes sighed, taking a slow, deep breath.

"Are you really ready?" Justin asked, the teasing note gone from his voice as a hand squeezed his shoulder.

"As I'll ever be," he affirmed.

"I'll go find my spot, then. See you up there." He paused, and Wes looked at him oddly.
"Congratulations, Wes. I'm happy for you," he said sincerely. Then he grinned. "And remember, if Eric ever hurts you, I'll kick his butt."

He shoved him out the door with a laugh. "Thanks."

Once the room was empty, he took a moment to adjust his tie again, brushing back his hair one more time with his hands. The streaks of silver were still a bit discerning, but Eric didn't seem to care, which was what really mattered in the end. He glanced down at his left hand, absently wishing they'd thought to get rings or something first. Maybe later.

There was another knock on the door. "Are you *ever* coming out?" Eric demanded as he leaned against the frame. "R.J.'s been giving me funny looks, and it's starting to creep me out."

"He does that just because it bothers you, you know," he returned absently, adjusting his tie once again. "What happened to being ready to bolt for the door? Or did Taylor make that up?"

Eric snorted. "I'm waiting on *you*, genius. Taylor's just twitchy because she thinks one of us is going to try and make a run for it for some reason."

He shook his head with a smile, trying to get his collar to lay flat. That sounded like something Taylor would do. "Hey, does this look straight to you?"

Hands closed over his. "It's fine," Eric told him. "Stop fussing." He paused, studying his face for a moment. "This was *your* idea, you know."

"I know." He managed a weak attempt at a smile. "Just ... I guess now that it's actually happening, it feels a little weird."

Eric’s expression was unreadable. “Changed your mind?”

“No! No, that’s not - ” He shook his head, gesturing wildly before catching Eric’s hands. “That’s not what I mean at all,” he insisted. “I *want* this, Eric. I want *you*.”
There was a pause as Eric studied him, judging his sincerity. “Bad feelings?” he suggested finally, giving Wes’ morpher a meaningful look.

Wes shook his head again. "Not bad feelings. I just ... " He shrugged a little, and this time the smile was pained. "I'm guess I'm just not used to getting a happy ending, you know?"

Eric looked at him for a long moment, at last leaning in to kiss him gently. "Well, this is one you're not getting out of," he promised quietly. "We're doing this."

His smile warmed a little as he squeezed Eric's hand. "For better or for worse?"

Eric snorted. "More likely to be worse, in our case." He lifted their hands to kiss the back of Wes' in an oddly affectionate gesture that didn't seem to suit him. "Partners," he reminded him.

"Partners," Wes agreed quietly. He squeezed Eric's hand one last time before they headed for the door.

"Are you kidding me?!" Vanessa's sputtering reached his ears before the music did.

He glanced at Eric, confused, before going over to see what was the matter. "Nes?"

She continued to glare at R.J., who shrugged lightly in response. "Is that a 'no'?" he asked innocently.

Vanessa punched him in the arm.

"Uh ... did we miss something?" Wes asked, eyeing Vanessa warily. It was never good when she was in a punching mood.

"R.J. just asked Mom to marry him." Sky informed them. Judging by his expression, he wasn’t sure whether to be amused or not.

Wes did a double-table, staring at his friend. Beside him, he could feel Eric's incredulous stare.

R.J. shrugged again. He seemed surprisingly content despite the reaction he was getting. "The positive vibrations in this place made it seem like the right time to ask. But if you're not down with legalization of our relationship, that's cool."

Vanessa was still glaring at him. "Most people get an engagement ring. And time to plan some sort of fancy wedding."

"We're not most people," R.J. countered.

She hesitated.

Wes raised his eyebrows. Was she actually considering ...

It was Sky who finally sighed. "You guys are screwing up the whole procession, you know," he muttered. "If you're all getting married, who's giving away who now?"

R.J bowed to Wes, offering an arm. "I'd be honored," he said sincerely.

Wes blinked uncertainly. Had Vanessa even said yes yet? "That's ... "

"Sure, stick me with *Eric*," Vanessa muttered, snagging Eric's elbow.
Eric stared at her like he'd just been offered a live snake. "Uh ..."

Wes looked at him and shrugged helplessly. "See you at the alter?"

Sky shook his head in exasperation, but he was clearly trying not to smile. "I'll go tell them it's a double wedding," he grumbled, slipping into the chapel.

Wes glanced over at Vanessa. "So what am I supposed to give you?" he asked, feeling bemused.

She snorted as Eric's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "See you there," she murmured, hauling Eric through the door before he could manage to voice a protest.

Wes looked at R.J.

"Happy wedding," R.J. offered pleasantly.

He sighed, chuckling a little as he shook his head. "Happy wedding, R.J."

They moved through the main door together as the music continued. There was a pause, and R.J. suddenly leaned closer to whisper in his ear. " Totally digging the crooked tie, by the way."
When I re-watched Missing for this prompt, I realized how perfectly it fits in with Lunch. I also noticed the way Sky completely *freaks* over Bridge's disappearance. - Fangirl squee- And the comment about Bridge contending for Sky’s title is made from my own observations; Bridge is a *much* better fighter than he lets on when you pay attention.

Wes didn't bother to wait for an invitation to join his son; he just sat down beside him in the grass. Sky was staring up at the stars, a loudly purring Sheep cuddled to his chest, while Jen whined plaintively at his side. He said nothing, but the look on his face was painfully blank.

"Sky?" he asked softly, reaching out to squeeze his shoulder.

There was a long silence.

"Sorry you had to cut your honeymoon short," Sky murmured at last.

"I'm not," he returned, watching his son worriedly. "I always want to know when something’s happening to you guys, you know that. It would have killed me if we came back and no one had bothered to tell us something was wrong."

Sky didn't answer.

He frowned. "Sky?"

Nothing.

Something in his chest felt like it was being squeezed. "Sky, look at me," he commanded softly.

Slowly, Sky turned. His eyes were agony, and now Wes could see the tear-streaked side of the teen's face that had been turned away from him. Sky swallowed. "Yeah?" His voice cracked.

Wes hugged him, pulling his head down against his shoulder. He winced as he felt his shirt getting wet, but he continued to rub Sky's back, letting him cry. Sky didn't like to show his emotions around other people, so when he finally let go, things tended to hit him hard.

Like nearly loosing a teammate.

Wes could emphasize. He'd thought he was going to lose Jen against Steelix. Eric to Conwing. Countless other times when he wasn't sure one of them would make it.

And then Dax, Tori, and Chip.

Being a Power Ranger was an incredible experience. You saw, did, and learned things you never would have experienced without the Power. You met people you never would have imagined existed. And you formed bonds with your team, bonds that never faded no matter how great the distance - or the time. Your team became your Family. And when your Family was in danger, it
was personal.

They'd nearly lost Bridge today.

He'd gotten the call from Justin while enjoying the sight of Eric beachside in a swimsuit, and they'd headed back for S.P.D. in a heartbeat. There he found Rocky climbing the walls, Adam frantically assisting Kat, Vanessa, and Nerina in their search for Bridge while Aisha paced a hole in the Command Center floor. Zack was conducting a search on foot with several other Grunts and some former Rangers who'd volunteered their services. Eric had gone out to meet up with them.

Wes had been about to join them when he saw Heart sitting curled up in a corner of Command, wedged back out of everyone's way. Ecliptor had been with her, giving a helpless look when he saw him approaching. Heart had looked up at him, tears in her eyes, and asked him softly if Bridgey was going to okay.

He hadn't left her side until B Squad returned, a pale and shaken Bridge wedged between Jack and Sky.

They were lucky that day. If so many people hadn't been pooling their efforts to help Jack narrow down Bridge's location ... If Dustin and Taylor hadn't had the foresight to send R.I.C. to Bridge with the tools he would need if his morpher was damaged. If Bridge wasn't so good with technology, and hadn't been able to fix it as quickly as he had ...

He could still remember Cruger praising them all. The way that Jack's smile hadn't been the smug look it usually was. The way Sky and Bridge hadn't smiled at all; the first staring ahead blankly, while the second had been obviously distracted. Only the girls had managed to smile, and by then he wasn't sure if it was for Cruger's words or the fact that he was blatantly scrounging for compliments by then. Sam, well ... who could tell if he ever smiled under that helmet?

"Did you know him?"

He glanced down. "Who?"

"Bork."

"No. He wasn't part of Grumm's forces on Aquitar."

"He kept calling himself the 'ultimate master',' Sky mumbled. "It was *seriously* annoying."

"Explains why he took Bridge, then." While he never bragged about it, Bridge was easily Sky's best contender for the title of strongest fighter on B Squad. His personality tended to make everyone forget that he *was* the son of four black belt martial artists. Most people didn't notice unless they actually bothered to take the time to monitor the Ranger's fights.

"I'm worried about him," Sky whispered. "Did you hear him? When we went to contain Bork, he said 'lucky for you we do have laws'."

Wes winced. That was a ... rather bloodthirsty statement. And not like Bridge at all.

"He didn't even protest when his parents said they wanted him to come home tonight," he continued. He shuddered slightly, and Wes squeezed him tighter.

"You guys can have him back tomorrow night, once they've all calmed down," he reminded him.

There was a long silence.
"Bridge is still in love with me."

Wes froze. *Oh, *no*.

"He told me so," Sky went on, staring dismally at the ground. "When he yelled at us all the other day. I thought he just needed to get away from everyone else's emotions around him. But - " He shuddered again. "He said that I was the one who broke up with him, and he never said he didn't love *me* anymore. And then he said to stop being harsher with him, and ... " Sky let out a shaky sigh. "I haven't been able to say anything about it to him. He acts like it never happened, and I don't know what to say."

Wes squeezed him again, searching desperately for something to tell him. This wasn't exactly something in his line of experience. What was he *supposed* to say to something like that?

"I think Jack knows something's up," Sky added quietly. "He hasn't said anything, but he keeps looking at me funny. And today ... " He swallowed. "When he went out to look for Bridge, he stared at me before he left. I don't know what he was looking for, but all of a sudden, he just ... " He shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. Something about his face was like ...

*Like he found something he didn't want to see,* Wes finished silently, heart aching for his son. Because Sky was dating Jack. But he'd known Bridge since he was born; they'd grown up together, played together. Sky had been his protector for years. Still was, when he let himself stop being afraid someone was going to read into it.

And deep down, on some level, Sky would always care for Bridge.

Just like *he'd* always care for Jen.

Eric had come to understand that. Respect it even, even if he didn't always like it. But Jen would always have a place in his heart because of the things she meant to him, the things she represented. And while he loved Eric, Jen was something special.

But could Jack understand that?

He kissed Sky's head, sighing quietly. In the end, he didn't say anything, because he didn't know *what* to say.

Eventually Sky pushed himself to his feet, not even bothering to set down Sheep. "I think I'm gonna stay home tonight, too," he murmured. "I ..."

"You know you never have to ask, Sky," Wes reminded him gently. He knew what Sky was thinking: going back to S.P.D. meant going back to an empty room, even if it was just for a night. He didn't blame him for wanting to avoid that. "R.J. made some pizza earlier - the mostly normal kind. It's still in the kitchen if you want some."

Sky just nodded, and Wes sighed as he watched him go.

When Sky was gone he glanced to the darker side of the porch where he knew Eric was watching. "You get all that?"

"Yeah." Eric hopped over the window sill, moving to join him with a sigh. "Poor kid."

"Which one?"

"I meant Sky, but all of them, I guess." There was a long pause. "I don't think what's between is

Eric nodded. "Maybe someday it could be, but right now ... " He shook his head.

"Darn," Wes murmured with feeling. He didn't want to see Sky get his heart broken again.

They sat in silence together, Wes eventually reaching out to pet Jen as she snuggled up to his side, looking up at the same stars Sky had just been watching. It was strange to look at them now, he reflected. Before he'd become a Ranger, they'd been something beautiful. Now he looked at them and wondered how many threats they housed. Where Grumm was hiding among them. If T.J. and Litania would ever return to Earth to meet their son.

"You still haven't told me," Eric said out the blue.

Wes blinked. Told him ... ? Oh! He flushed a little, glancing down at the ground. "You mean what Nes meant about our gift."

"And why it's got you so up in knots," Eric agreed, eyeing him.

He bit his lip. "We were talking, while you guys were off making calls. I said something about how this wasn't quite the way I pictured my life happening, and we sort of ... got into talking about kids." He swallowed, then shook his head, forcing a laugh as if it didn't matter. "She tried to tell me we're not too old to have more. And that if we wanted to, she'd be our surrogate mother. She said that'd be her wedding gift to us. Crazy, huh?" He turned to look at Eric with a smile that he hoped didn't look completely fake.

Eric wasn't smiling.

Wes swallowed. "Like I said, it's silly," he tried. Eric's silence was creeping him out. "She was probably just pulling my leg. Don't worry about it." He moved to stand, unable to bear it any longer.

Eric's hand caught his.

"What if I said it wasn't silly?"

He paused, closing his eyes. "Are you sure?" he whispered. "I mean ... we don't have to do this. Again, I mean."

"... You don't want to?"

"That's not what I meant!" And then he winced at the frantic note to his voice. Sighing, he reached up to pinch his nose.

A hand caught his, and he glanced up to see Eric watching him with an expression he couldn't completely read. "Picking up my habits?"

He blinked, and then sighed. "Apparently."

"Wes," Eric interrupted. His eyes were intense. "Do you want to have kids with me? Again?"

He hesitated. At last he sighed, nodding slowly. "I think so."

There was another long silence as Eric just watched him. "Do we have a time limit to think about
it?" he asked at last.

Wes stared at him. "Are you ... are you seriously thinking about this?"

Eric shrugged, but his eyes were nervous now. "I wouldn't have said it if I wasn't."

He kissed him.

He grinned when they came up for air, his nose touching Eric's. "I can't believe we're actually thinking about doing this again," he laughed breathlessly.

"Hey, I said I wanted to *think* about it," Eric cautioned, but there was a faint, almost shy smile on his face.

"We're just thinking about it," he agreed, but the idea that they were even contemplating it sent excitement surging through him. He grinned wickedly, eyes dancing. "And hey - just think. This time *you'll* get to enjoy diaper duty!"
Spring

Chapter Notes

I was mostly happy with the episode History except for two things: B Squad being all high-and-mighty towards the Dino Thunder Rangers, and the way the three of them just forked over their Dino Gems to Kat, someone they’d just met like, an hour ago. (Okay, so Kira and Ethan forked them over, and Conner hesitated for like, a split second.) So, I fixed at least part of that. And then, well, I couldn’t leave Rhythm out of this chapter now could I?

"I hate this," Kimberly murmured, staring out the window.

Wes sighed, knowing exactly what she meant. The moment Kat had detected foreign Ranger energy signatures in Newtech City, Justin and Nerina had run them through the archives to match them against any known Ranger teams who might possibly be on Earth. For all they knew, someone had come seeking help.

What they found was impossible.

The Dino Thunder Rangers, here, *alive*, in Newtech City, *right now*, Walking around the Command Center. Living, breathing. More than just a memorial statue in the main entryway or a memory Wes clung to of the friends he'd known once.

Ethan, who had been a member of S.P.D.’s infamous Tech Lab, and Rose’s firm rival in everything she did. Conner, full of life and laughter, someone he used to see at the Red Ranger reunions they held every year or so, until they lost the energy and the time and the means to support them all. Man, he'd been at their *wedding reception*. Maybe he hadn't known Kira as well as the other two, but they'd fought together, and he'd always liked her. And now they were all in S.P.D. and he couldn't even *say* anything, for fear of disrupting the timeline anymore than it already had been.

It was torture, plain and simple.

There was a select group of former Rangers who had known the Dino Thunder team, and only a handful of those that knew them well. Once they'd been detected, it had been mutually agreed that those formers who knew them should stay out of the way. Honestly, it was less because they were afraid of scaring them with information about their future and more because it was really just too painful.

The handful of them that had known the trio best were gathered in the officer's common room with doors locked. Dustin was leaning against Shane on one couch, one hand playing idly with Shane's shirt as Shane ran a hand over his hair and stared into space. From what he knew, they had already known the three by the ages they were now. Adam didn't know them yet, but he would soon, through his connection to Kira. He couldn't be sure yet if Tommy had already brought Conner to a reunion to meet him, Eric, Rocky, and Carter or not. Kimberly would eventually meet them through Tommy once their relationship was finally reformed and become another mentor for Kira; both women shared a passion for music and a certain prehistoric Zord. And Justin, who had build S.P.D. Newtech's computer systems from the ground up with Ethan and Rose by his side,
constantly bickering with Ethan for 'flirting' with his girlfriend.

He sighed again, leaning his head back against the couch and trying not to think about what the three of them were doing right now.

Which was of course, when the alarms went off.

All eyes in the room went to Kimberly.

She hesitated, biting her lip. Finally she sighed and looked at Justin. "Can you hack into one of the Command Center's security screens from here?"

"Is Cruger blue?" the young man snorted, heading for a computer console.

There were several minutes of tense waiting as everyone waited, trying not to interrupt. "I'm in!" Justin cried suddenly, and instantly found himself surrounded.

"They've never encountered this many troops at once before."

"You gotta let us in on this!"

"No! I won't put your lives in danger. If anything happened to you in this time, the results could be catastrophic."

"Yeah, but if your cadets *lose*, none of that matters anyway."

Wes smiled faintly as Conner argued heatedly with Cruger. It was funny and nostalgic all at once, because that was Conner. And in all the years Wes had known the younger man, he never changed.

"Kat, dispatch Omega Ranger to the scene. This is not your battle. I'm going to help the others. You are to stay here, that's an order! S.P.D., Emergency!"

Once again, everyone in the room was suddenly looking at Kimberly. If Cruger was going into battle, that officially left her in charge of S.P.D. - and the Command Center. Whatever happened now was her call.

Kimberly was silent, her eyes watching the screen. After a moment, she closed them. "I'm going to the Command Center," she declared quietly.

The fact that she didn't order anyone to remain behind was immediately noted, and she wasn't the only one to head for the door.

****

"Let me guess. That's Grumm," they heard Ethan say as they rounded the corner.

"This is serious," came Kat's voice, sounding uncharacteristically worried.

"That's it. I say it's time to get prehistoric on Grumm and his goons."

"Cruger ordered us to stay here!" Kira protested.

"I don't care what happens in the past or the future. The others need us *now*!" Conner insisted.

"He's right," Kira admitted.
"Let's do it," Ethan agreed instantly.

"If you're gonna go out there, at least go prepared. Give me your Dino Gems."

"Uh ... " Conner hesitated, eyeing her warily, and Kira and Ethan immediately followed his lead. "No offense, but uh, I'm not so sure - "

"It's okay, dudes," Dustin called bouncing through the doorway with a bright smile on his face. "Kat's cool. You can trust her."

"Dustin?" Kira said incredulously. She moved to hug him, Ethan immediately following suit to bump fists as Shane made his way to grip Conner's hand with a grin. "What are you doing here? Did you get pulled forward too?"

Wes tried not to sigh at that, because of all of them, Dustin showed his age the least.

Dustin gave her a sheepish smile. "It's like, a seriously long story, and we don't really have the time, dude," he reminded her.

Kat stiffened as she caught sight of Kimberly. "Commander Oliver. I'm sorry to disobey orders, but the Rangers clearly - "

"Wait, did she just say Commander *Oliver*?" Ethan demanded. "As in like, Dr. O?"

"It's okay, Kat," Kimberly assured her with a warm smile. "You're not doing anything wrong." She gave Ethan a slight grin. "Don't you know knowing too much about your future is a bad thing?" she teased, winking at him.

Shane smiled reassuringly at Conner. "It's okay, man. They're on our side."

Kira and Ethan glanced at him, and Conner hesitated for another moment before begrudgingly removing his bracelet. "What did you have in mind?"

"A long time ago, someone proved to me that it's possible to re-fill the Power levels of a morpher that has been drained, but not destroyed," Kat explained as she worked. She didn't so much as glance at Justin as he moved to give her a hand.

"Which means ... " Conner demanded, looking annoyed.

"It *means* she can make us Rangers again, doofus," Ethan retorted, his eyes lit up eagerly.

"Which means you can go help B Squad," Kimberly affirmed.

Eric gave her an odd look. "Are you sure that's a good idea? I mean, can't we just send - "

"We don't want Grumm to see all our resources until we absolutely have to," she reminded him. "And trust me, Eric. I know what I'm doing, okay?" Her expression softened a little.

He sighed. "As long as someone does," he grumbled.

"All right," Kat declared as she held out the Red and Yellow Dino Gems. "You're all set."

Ethan stared at Justin for a moment, frowning as their eyes met when the older man held out his Dino Gem. "Hey. Do I know you from somewhere?"

Justin smiled humorlessly. "Not yet."
Ethan's brow furrowed. "Oh. Right."

"I'll teleport you directly to the quarry site," Kat promised. "Ready?"

"Wait, teleport?" Conner demanded, moments before the three of them dissolved into columns of colored light.

"Dude, since when do we get to use teleportation for battle sites?" Dustin demanded.

"Since we don't want them to get a good look at Newtech City," Justin reminded him.

Carter glanced at Kimberly. "Are you sure about this, Kim? Letting them fight, I mean. Didn't Cruger say - "

"Cruger doesn't know what I know," she interrupted. She gave them all a faint smile. "I wasn't sure if I should, but ... Let's just say that Tommy told me once about something that hasn't happened yet. We need them here, and we need them fighting." She looked at Kat. "Just be sure to have the Delta Squad Megazord ready to help Sam when they call for it."

Kat nodded. "Yes, Ma'am."

****

B Squad and the Dino Thunder Rangers were laughing when they came into the Command Center again, and Wes smiled at the sound. At least the two teams were finally getting along now, from what Kat had told them about their first meeting. He'd have to remember to talk to Sky about that later.

Kira brightened as she saw her fellow Yellow Ranger, moving to stand beside Dustin and squeeze his arm. "Hey! Why didn't you guys come join us out there?"

"Yeah, seriously! We could have totally kicked butt!" Ethan agreed with a grin. He paused, frowning slightly, and glanced around the room. "Hey, where's Tori anyway? I haven't seen her yet."

Wes cringed, and it was impossible not to see the way Dustin winced as Shane stared at the ground.

"Dustin ... ?" Kira asked softly. "What's wrong?"

He swallowed. "We're ... we weren't brought forward, like you guys were, dude," he explained quietly. "This like, *is* our time. We both work at S.P.D. now. Tori ... " He hesitated, and the pain in his eyes was unbearable.

"Tori isn't with us anymore," Wes spoke up quietly. He owed it to them both at least; after all, he'd been there when she ... "She fell in battle, protecting Newtech City." His eyes burned at the memory, but for once he managed not to let the tears show.

Kira looked horrified, Ethan stunned. Conner stared at him blankly. "You mean she's ... "

"Gone," Shane said hollowly. "Nine years now."

There was a long moment of silence.

At last Conner swallowed. "The guy who did it. Is he ... "

"Trapped in a three by five containment card being held in a maximum security prison," Sky told
him, and the fierce pride in his voice was unmistakable. "He won't be hurting anyone, ever again."

"Good," Kira said softly, squeezing Dustin's arm again.

"I said get your hands off me!" a voice snapped.

The older Rangers froze, and Wes struggled not to swear. The one person they'd tried desperately to keep from knowing what was going on, to keep from seeing them ...

**Rhythm.**

He strode into the room, glaring furiously back at the rest of his Squad. Sophie looked guilty, Ecliptor exasperated, while Marinda seemed to be near tears and the other two were glaring right back. "Don't *tell* me I don't have a right to be here!" he snarled, and it was disturbing to see the usually peaceful and somewhat shy cadet so furious. "I have more of a right to see them than *anyone* in this entire base!"

Then he turned around, and froze.

The three Dino Thunder Rangers blinked back at him, while the former Rangers tried not to look anxious at the unplanned meeting. It took a moment, then Sky, Syd, and Z winced in realization. Jack just frowned, not understanding what was wrong. Bridge was rubbing his temples, and out of the corner of his eye Wes could see Adam moving toward him.

"Hi," Rhythm managed at last, his voice soft.

Kira tilted her head as she offered him an uncertain smile. "Hi," she greeted. "Um ... do I know you?"

Rhythm flinched like she'd hit him.

"Hey ... Dude, now that you mention it, you look kinda like a guy we know," Conner said thoughtfully. "You wouldn't happen to be related to a Trent Fernandez, would you?"

He swallowed. "He's my father."

"Seriously?" Ethan demanded, looking incredulous. "You're Trent's son?" He shook his head as Rhythm nodded uncertainly. "That's totally wacked."

"What's your name?" Kira asked, her smile warming a bit as she offered him a hand.

He stared down at it as if he wasn't quite sure what to do with it. "Rhythm," he said finally. "Rhythm Fernandez."


"My mother named me," Rhythm informed them, his eyes still on Kira's hand. "I have a twin sister named Melody."

"Rhythm and Melody? That's sweet."

He finally looked up as Kira smiled warmly at him. He smiled tentatively, and for just a moment, it wasn't an expression that Trent usually wore.
Strangely it was Conner who noticed. He was frowning, staring at Rhythm a little more intently now. "Hey, who's your mom then?"

"Conner!" Kira hissed, glaring at him. "That's a little rude, don't you - "

"Kira Fernandez."

She paused.

Conner and Ethan stared.

"My mother is Kira Fernandez," Rhythm continued quietly. He closed his eyes briefly. "She ... she, um ...."

But somehow, Kira seemed to understand. She moved forward to take his hand, giving him that same warm smile as their eyes met. "Hi, Rhythm," she said softly. "It's nice to meet you."

He just looked at her for a moment.

"How long has it been?" she prodded carefully. "Since you've seen her?"

He bit his lip, his eyes flickering over to Kimberly. "I ..."

But Kimberly wasn't telling him no, and she raised a hand when Cruger went to protest, shaking her head slightly.

Because Rhythm needed this, Wes realized.

"Nine years," the teen confessed quietly. "She's uh, the reason I joined S.P.D."

"I'm sure she's very proud of you then," Kira assured him, her smile softening.

He returned it shyly.

Something about the expression seemed to melt Kira's discomfort, and she pulled him into a hug. It was hard for those watching them who knew what had happened, what *would* happen, not to wince at the careful way Rhythm hugged her back, trying not to bury his face against her shoulder.

"But dude, how - " Conner whispered, followed by an "Ow!" as Ethan elbowed him again. "Dude, what?!"

"Hopeless," Ethan grumbled.

"I told you!" Sora hissed triumphantly to Casey in what was practically a stage-whisper in the silence. "Uncle Conner and Uncle Ethan *so* got together back when they were Rangers!"

The two in question spun around to regard her in horror, instinctively backing away from each other several feet. "Say *what*?" Ethan demanded.

"You're kidding, right?" Conner sputtered.

Casey rolled her eyes. "Way to go, genius," she grumbled.

"Oh, like Rhythm didn't say something worse!" Sora retorted. "They were practically side-by-side earlier; what's the difference?"
Kira glanced up at Rhythm, seeming highly amused. He shrugged a little, and she laughed. "Oh, I can't wait to tell Dr. O!"

"He already knows," Kimberly murmured, grinning faintly.

"Where is he, anyway?" Conner asked hastily, in a rather obvious attempt to change the subject. "I mean, you'd think fighting off ugly aliens trying to take over Earth was totally his thing."

Kimberly laughed, giving him a fondly amused look. "He's our Ranger Commander, in charge of the Rangers at S.P.D. Newtech. Unfortunately he isn't here right now; he's off on a rescue mission."

"So ... who are you?" Ethan asked warily. "Kat called you Commander Oliver, didn't she?"

She smiled. "That's right. My name's Kimberly. I'm Tommy's wife."

"Dude, Dr. O. gets married?" Conner looked disturbed.

"So do you, man," Rocky told him with a grin.

Conner brightened at that. "To who?"

"You'd never believe me if I told you," she laughed.

Conner scowled at him. "We have to stick around at least long enough to meet the future Dr. O. when he gets back. I mean he's like, what? Sixty?"

"Try fifty," Kimberly smirked back. "And totally in denial."

"But you can't stay," Adam spoke up from the corner where he now had Bridge leaning against him. He shrugged his free shoulder. "You're needed in the past. There's still things you have to do."

Ethan frowned. "But do we have to go right now? I mean, I still think you guys need us here to deal with Grumm. He's gonna be madder than ever."

"Yeah, and what about Broodwing?" Kira put in as she finally released Rhythm. "He's still around slumming about somewhere."

"It's obvious we should stay," Conner declared. He flashed a flirty smile at Syd. "We work great together."

She smiled back sweetly. "Nice try. But I don't date older guys. And I have a girlfriend."

"Ooh!" Jack crowed as Conner stared at her in shock.

Z smirked and slipped an arm around Syd's shoulders possessively.

"We appreciate your offer to stay Rangers, but that's not possible," Cruger explained.

Syd tilted her head, leaning a little closer to Z. "Besides Kira, if you don't get back you'll never start your recording career."

Kira perked up slightly, glancing at her curiously. "My recording career?"

"Of course. You become a huge singing sensation. I grew up listening to your songs." Syd grinned.
"Yeah, and everyone knows about the Conner McKnight soccer camps," Sky put in. "They're all over the country."

He would, Wes reflected, amused. Vanessa had sent Sky to one when he was ten. Being Sky, he'd hated every minute of it - until he came home.

"For real?" Conner lit up, glancing excitedly at his teammates. "Wow!"

"And Ethan," Bridge spoke up, smiling a little now even as he continued to lean on his dad. "You have to go back. You develop some software that we still use here at S.P.D."

A sly grin slipped across Ethan's face. "You mean I'm a genius?" Like Conner, his eyes flickered to the other two. "Sweet."

"Relatively speaking," Wes heard Justin mutter, and he hid a grin as Kat elbowed him discreetly.

"Your lives as Rangers have made a difference," Cruger agreed. "But you go on to lead exciting and significant lives after you hang up your helmets."

Conner hesitated, looking at the other two.

Kira had forward to take Rhythm's hands. "Tell me one thing," she requested. "Is he happy?"

Rhythm nodded. "I think so. He misses you, but ... He has someone else to look after him now."

"Good." She smiled warmly. "Tell him that's all I want for him, okay?"

"I will," he promised. He hesitated for a split second before leaning in to kiss her cheek. He was blushing when he pulled back.

Conner nodded as Kira stepped back between him and Ethan. "I think we're ready to go back, Commander."

Cruger nodded solemnly. "Your courage and dedication will live on in Ranger legend. Thank you all."

"Hey, wait a second," Ethan piped up, looking at Rhythm again. "What year were you born?"

Rhythm blinked at him. "2012. Dad says Mel and I were Spring babies."


"Ethan!" she exclaimed, elbowing him hard as he grunted slightly. "That is *not* funny!"

"Don't worry, Kira," Kimberly told her. She gave the younger woman a sympathetic smile. "First of all, he won't remember. To protect the timeline, we're going to have to erase your memories of what you saw here when we return you." She paused, and her smile turned mischievous. "Besides, Ethan's going to marry Conner one day."

Ethan's eyes went wide, while Conner looked horrified. "I am not!" they exclaimed in unison.

"Tell me they have kids," Kira begged.

Kimberly shook her head, smiling, as Kat spoke up softly. "Goodbye, Dino Rangers. We'll never forget you."
There was a sparkle of light from the three Dino Gems tucked into the center console, and then the three former Rangers were gone.

There was a long silence.

"The Dino Gems?" Cruger began.

"Will be locked in the vault with the Lightspeed and Blue Wind morphers, where they should have been all along," Kat assured him, gathering the three Gems together.

Cruger nodded. "Dismissed, everyone."

They scattered, but Wes glanced back as Kimberly lingered, her eyes on the spot where her husband's former students had stood.

"Besides," she continued quietly to no one in particular, a sad smile on her face. "They may not have had kids, but Eric McKnight named his daughter Conner Ethan McKnight in their memory."
"Cruger!" Wes bellowed, storming into the Command Center. More than one person looked up in surprise as he came in, but he only had eyes for the big blue dog seated in his command chair. He seized him by the front of his uniform, yanking him close. "What were you *thinking*?!" he shouted furiously. "How *dare* you send *my son* off on some ... some - "

"Sergeant Collins, please calm yourself." Cruger wasn't angry. Cruger was almost placid, staring back at him coolly.

"*Calm* myself?!

"Are you going to tell me you have not volunteered yourself in exactly the same manner as Sky did today?"

"That's different," he snapped. "That's - "

"Not you?" Cruger retorted, giving him a disdainful look. "Did you not once put your own father into the very same position as you are now, forced to watch his son do what has to be done to protect innocent lives, even if that may be at the cost of his own?"

"I - "

"Wes." He could hear Kat behind him, but he didn't really care. "Sky volunteered for the mission. Cruger was forced to make the ultimate decision of who was going to go, but Sky was never forced. If anything, he would have stowed along in exactly the same manner that Jack did."

Jack had stowed ... ? No ... Not both of them. Not ....

"That doesn't excuse what you've done!" he shouted. "He's not even eighteen years old! They're not old enough to make that sort of decision!"

"Do you think I made this choice lightly?" Cruger demanded, the scales on his neck starting to rise in agitation. "Do you think I *enjoy* sending my cadets on a mission they may not return from? You are *not* the only one who's afraid they won't make it back!"

That cowed him, but only for a moment. "They're not your children, Doggie," he reminded him flatly.

Cruger's cold glare met his own. "As you and the other Rangers have repeatedly reminded me, blood does not make a family. While we do not share lineage, I consider all of B Squad to be my children just as much as you do," he growled softly. "Do not presume that I have no feelings of my own about their safety."
Wes closed his eyes, fighting to reign in his temper and failing. "If they don't make it back ... "

"You will not be the one I answer to," Cruger returned coldly.

He spun and left to find Vanessa. If anyone knew how to track what was going on with Sky and Jack, she would.

****

Unlike the tense quiet of Command, the Tech Department was utter chaos.

Justin and Vanessa had each commandeered a console, while various staff members ran around doing ... something. He wasn't sure what. In one corner Boom seemed to be talking on a split comm link with Andrew Hartford and Rose Ortiz. Which was odd, but he couldn't remember why right now.

He made straight for Vanessa. "Did you know Jack stowed away on the S.W.A.T. Megazord with Sky?" he demanded.

"We just got his transmission," she answered distractedly, fingers flying. "Justin, can you get - "

"On it."

Only a couple of minutes had passed before Dustin was hurrying up to them, looking uncharacteristically worried. "Dudes, I'm doing the best I can, but I don't know. Maybe if they gave me more of a chance to work on it before he left, I could say for sure. But like, trying to fix it by remote just isn't the same. That's Cam's thing, dude."

"Then get Cam on a comm," Vanessa snapped back. "Whatever it takes to get this done, do it."

Dustin flinched back, staring at her in surprise.

Justin glanced up enough to reach out and squeeze the other man's shoulder. "Can you get him?" he asked. "We don't have much time before Sky gets there."

Quickly recovering himself, Dustin nodded. "I'll see what he can do, dude."

"What's going on?" Wes asked, frowning uncertainly.

"We're not sure if the S.W.A.T. Flyer Cannon has enough power to actually destroy the meteor," Justin answered, not bothering to look at him. "Right now, it's either going to blow it up, or put a nice hole in it. We have to find a way to recalibrate the energy levels on the Cannon to make sure it'll work before Sky gets there."

Wes stared at him. "You mean it might not work even if he gets to the meteor?"

Justin hesitated. "No."

Wes reached out for a console to steady himself, feeling the blood drain from his face. He *knew* his son. He knew how much Sky valued his duty as a Power Ranger. How much pride he took in his family line. If the S.W.A.T. Flyer Cannon didn't work, Sky would do whatever he had to to stop that meteor.

*Whatever* he had to.

"Taylor!" He heard someone call. "How are the Megazords doing against the Dragoul?"
"Darn it, not now! Ask me later!"

"That answers that question," Justin grumbled.

"We're forming the Delta Command Megazord," Kat announced calmly over the loudspeaker. "All cadets to safety zones."

Distantly, Wes wondered if the labs were in a safety zone. It didn't seem to matter, because no one was moving.

"Cam's got the Cannon!" Dustin shouted suddenly. "He said he amped it up as far as it can hold!"

"What now?" Boom asked, looking nervous.

"Now we cross our fingers and pray," Vanessa muttered.

"Double-team, Sky?"

"You got it!"

"Having trouble locking on here. Urgh! We've only got one shot!"

"We're being pulled into its gravitational field!"

Everyone in the room kept their eyes fixed on the comm link, scarcely daring to breathe.

"Almost there ... "

"Keep it together, Jack!"

"I'm ... trying!"

"Hold 'er steady!"

"She's gonna tear apart! Do it now!"

"Locking on. Lasers, fire!"

There was a long, tense silence. Wes blinked hard, heart hammering in his chest. Please ...

"Yeah!" they heard Sky declare suddenly.

"Well, that was a little nerve-racking," Jack chuckled weakly.

The entire department broke out into cheers.

"Hey, I'm still mad you tagged along."

"Ah, we got the job done, didn't we?"

"No ... "

The word was soft, and Wes glanced at Vanessa in surprise. "No!" she shouted, slamming her hands against the console.

Almost immediately, they began to hear the sound of an alarm through the comm.
"We blew a hole in it," came Sky's frustrated voice. "And it's still on course."

"What happened?" someone demanded. "Why didn't it work?"

Dustin closed his eyes, leaning back against a wall. "Cam says we calibrated too high. Instead of like, just hitting what was in front of it, it went for a long distance target," he called wearily. He rubbed a hand over his face.

"Quiet!" Justin shouted suddenly, listening intently to the comm.

"Sky, take your flyer back to Earth. If I take my flyer and hit the core, maybe I can destroy it."

"Would that even - would that even work?" Boom asked, his voice shaking.

"It might." Wes could barely hear Vanessa's response through the sudden rushing noise in his ears. "It's ... we don't have any other way."

"I'm sorry, man. The way I see it, that's the only way."

"You can't do this!" they heard Sky shout.

"*I'm* Red Ranger, and *that's* the plan!" Jack snapped back.

Throwing his weight around for once, Wes thought numbly.

"Configuring auto-pilot." There was a pause, followed by a very soft "Later, Sky."

"Jack, no!"

"S.P.D., Emergency."

"There has to be something else we can do!" Boom protested.

"Like *what*?" Vanessa demanded. "In the next half hour?" She brushed an arm across her eyes impatiently.

"Re-align to target!"

"NO!" someone screamed over the sound of an explosion.

The room went absolutely silent.

Wes slid down the console, not bothering to fight the sob that escaped. Vanessa was rubbing at her eyes again, and Justin bowed his head against the screen. Boom had frozen, looking lost and confused. Around the room, more than one person stood with their head bowed.

"It's gone," Sky confirmed softly, barely audible. "Jack, why'd you have to be so stubborn!" he shouted suddenly, and Wes could hear the tears in his son's voice.

There was a long silence as Sky muttered something to himself. At last they heard a gruff voice threaded with grief declare "S.P.D., Emergency." There was another pause, then at last another statement that was obviously meant to be overheard. "I'm going back! Full power!"

The silent mourning remained.

Wes wasn't sure how long he sat there, letting the tears streak down his face. At one point Justin

"We blew a hole in it," came Sky's frustrated voice. "And it's still on course."

"What happened?" someone demanded. "Why didn't it work?"

Dustin closed his eyes, leaning back against a wall. "Cam says we calibrated too high. Instead of like, just hitting what was in front of it, it went for a long distance target," he called wearily. He rubbed a hand over his face.

"Quiet!" Justin shouted suddenly, listening intently to the comm.

"Sky, take your flyer back to Earth. If I take my flyer and hit the core, maybe I can destroy it."

"Would that even - would that even work?" Boom asked, his voice shaking.

"It might." Wes could barely hear Vanessa's response through the sudden rushing noise in his ears. "It's ... we don't have any other way."

"I'm sorry, man. The way I see it, that's the only way."

"You can't do this!" they heard Sky shout.

"*I'm* Red Ranger, and *that's* the plan!" Jack snapped back.

Throwing his weight around for once, Wes thought numbly.

"Configuring auto-pilot." There was a pause, followed by a very soft "Later, Sky."

"Jack, no!"

"S.P.D., Emergency."

"There has to be something else we can do!" Boom protested.

"Like *what*?" Vanessa demanded. "In the next half hour?" She brushed an arm across her eyes impatiently.

"Re-align to target!"

"NO!" someone screamed over the sound of an explosion.

The room went absolutely silent.

Wes slid down the console, not bothering to fight the sob that escaped. Vanessa was rubbing at her eyes again, and Justin bowed his head against the screen. Boom had frozen, looking lost and confused. Around the room, more than one person stood with their head bowed.

"It's gone," Sky confirmed softly, barely audible. "Jack, why'd you have to be so stubborn!" he shouted suddenly, and Wes could hear the tears in his son's voice.

There was a long silence as Sky muttered something to himself. At last they heard a gruff voice threaded with grief declare "S.P.D., Emergency." There was another pause, then at last another statement that was obviously meant to be overheard. "I'm going back! Full power!"

The silent mourning remained.

Wes wasn't sure how long he sat there, letting the tears streak down his face. At one point Justin
had come to sit beside him, leaning against his shoulder as they grieved together. In his mind, Wes could hear "*I'm* Red Ranger, and *that's* the plan!" being shouted over and over.

What was he supposed to tell B Squad? What was he supposed to tell *Keri*? Or T.J. and Litania? Their son had lived, only to sacrifice himself before they ever had a chance to meet him.

"Hey ... dude?"

He sighed, not bothering to cover the shaky sob that followed. Sitting here crying wasn't going to change anything, but he wasn't sure if he had the strength to get to his feet yet.

"*Dude*!" Dustin shouted suddenly. "Will somebody get over here already?"

He glanced up, more than slightly surprised, because Dustin almost never yelled. And he was ... staring at a screen?

"What is it?" Vanessa asked, her voice slightly strained.

"Maybe we should try confirming the damage to the Flyer before we start declaring Jack gone, dudes," Dustin told her irritably.

Everyone froze.

Justin sat up a little straighter, staring at him. "What?"

Dustin gave them all an exasperated look. "Dude, first of all, Carlos built the armor on the S.W.A.T. Flyers. You'd have to fly them straight into the sun to completely crack it. And second dude, we have a tracking signal on all the Zords. If it was gone, we'd know already."

Vanessa watched him intently. "You mean ... "

"I *mean* dude, I like, already found the Flyers. The problem is that the explosion knocked them into a spin, and since I can't get Jack to answer, dude, I think he's unconscious. Which means he can't straighten out to bring himself back to Earth on his own." Dustin explained.

"So ... Jack's not dead?" Boom asked, looking painfully hopeful.

Dustin snorted. "Dude, I told you. *Carlos* built the armor on those things. He's obsessed with like, super-strong defense."

"Where's he headed?" Justin asked, pushing himself to his feet.

"Looks like empty space, dude. Which means we gotta get him back here *fast*."

"Can we override his controls by remote?" Wes wanted to know, looking between Dustin and Vanessa.

She was already back at her console, fingers typing away once again. "No, damn it," she growled in frustration. "There's something wrong with them, either from the hit or locking in the autopilot. Maybe both. I could probably take control from the Command Center, but right now, that's not possible."

Wes climbed to his feet, sighing in frustration that there was nothing more he could do to help. He really needed to start taking some computer courses or something. His eyes happened to flicker down toward his wrist as he stood, and he frowned.
His Chrono Morpher was flashing.

He lifted it cautiously. "This is Wes."

"Hey, what's going on over there? I've been trying for practically forever to get someone to confirm our arrival so we can land, but no one's answering."

"*T.J.??*" he demanded incredulously. "What - where are you?"

"Hovering in the air above Earth for practically an hour now. I can't get anybody to answer my transmissions - at *either* base."

He paused. "You're in a ship? Around Earth?"

"Yeah, man. I finally conned Litarian into coming to visit if I promised to give her enough coats. She still thinks summers in Newtech are freezing." He could hear the amusement in the other man's voice.

Justin spun around, eyes meeting his.

Slowly, Wes grinned. "Hey, Teej. We need a favor. You mind picking up a wandering Megazord, headed off into empty space before you land? The pilot's taking a nap on us."
Resistance is Futile

Chapter Notes

I'm not completely satisfied with this one, but it does have its moments I like. Behold:
Eric's side of the episode Badge.

"I don't know but I've been told!"
"I don't know but I've been told!"
"F Squad's barracks are mighty cold!"
"F Squad's barracks are mighty cold!"
"We work all day and don't talk back!"
"We work all day and don't talk back!"
"'Cause Sergeant Myers don't take no flack!"
"'Cause Sergeant Myers don't take no flack!"

He rolled his eyes as his squad cheerfully echoed their leader, ignoring the stares they were getting
from the civilians they passed.

"And des-pite everything you may have heard!"
"And des-pite everything you may have heard!"
"Calling him hard-ass is not the word!"
"Calling him -"

"All right, all right, that's enough," he cut in. "Thank you, Cadet Maxwell, for those inspiring
words."

His squad leader grinned cheekily at him. "Anytime, Sir!"

He smirked unpleasantly. "And why don't you think up some more while you're on kitchen clean-up
detail all next week?"

Maxwell groaned and sighed, muttering "I'm sure that won't be a problem, Sir."

"How sweet," a voice sneered. "S.P.D. cadets bonding with their instructor."

He moved to stand in front of his squad, eyeing the alien across from them. Something about the
way he'd practically spat the words 'S.P.D. cadets' told him this wasn't your average friendly visitor
to Earth. "Can I help you with something?" he asked warily.

"You could start by handing me your S.P.D. badges."It sounded almost casual. "After that, I have
"Maxwell, get the squad back to S.P.D.,” he said under his breath. "Have someone beep my morpher when you're inside, not a moment before. I'll cover you."

"Sir - "

"That's an *order*, Cadet," he hissed. "Now!"

They bolted, and he moved to block the alien from following them. "If you've got a problem with S.P.D., why don't you try taking it up with me," he suggested darkly. "I'll pass the word along."

"Sounds fine by me," the alien drawled. He lifted his sword.

In the split second his eyes settled on the sword, he forced himself to roll to one side the next, bringing his morpher around. "Quantum Power!" he bellowed.

The familiar flash of red in his vision didn't reassure him any, nor did the noise of interest the creature made. He'd only caught a glimpse of the sword, but it was enough to notice something awfully familiar. And if that was what he thought it was, he was so screwed.

"Another Power Ranger?" the alien mused. "But you don't wear an S.P.D. badge."

He snorted, moving into a defensive stance. "Not every Ranger who works for S.P.D. is actually S.P.D., you moron. Check the uniform: I'm Time Force."

Now there was something he'd never thought he'd admit to. Hopefully Wes never caught wind, or he'd never hear the end of it.

"Time Force?" The alien tilted his head. "What would I want with Time Force? If you're not S.P.D., then I have no use for you. Ocean Saber!"

As soon the sword began to power up, he was moving, because it *was* what he thought it was, and there was no way he was going to wait around to get hit. "Quantum Defender!" he shouted, shooting straight for the alien’s chest.

Almost at exact same moment, his morpher beeped.

"TF Eagle!" he called, just as he saw the wall of water headed his way.

But he was already in the flyer, soaring toward S.P.D., glancing back only to see that the ground where he'd been standing a minute ago was nothing but shredded pavement.

****

"This is bad," Cruger was confirming as he entered the Command Center immediately after confirming all of F Squad was safe. "We're three Rangers down. I don't want to see anyone else get hurt."

"We're what?" he demanded sharply. "What happened?"

Kimberly looked up at him, open relief shining on her face. "Eric. Thank goodness ... " she breathed.

"What happened to Sky?" he insisted.
She hesitated, and it was Justin who came forward to meet his gaze seriously. "Sky, Bridge, and Syd are in the medical wing," he said quietly. "Sky was attacked on patrol, and Bridge and Syd were hit just as they were coming back to S.P.D. Aisha said their condition is stable, but she doesn't want them moving any time soon."

He swallowed down the fear and anxiety that surged through him. "If they got hit with what I saw, I'm not surprised," he said instead, looking at Cruger. "My squad was attacked on our patrol, too. An alien using something that looks like your Shadow Saber, only he calls his 'Ocean Saber'."

"Icthior," Cruger growled. "He was my rival at my S.P.D. academy before he was eventually expelled. He earned his sword there, much the same way I did."

A hand settled on his shoulder. "You all right?" Justin asked.

He glanced at him, wondering why he was worried. "Fine. He never got a hit in on me - I was just buying time for the cadets to get back to S.P.D. He wasn't really interested in me once he realized I wasn't wearing an S.P.D. badge after I morphed. Said he didn't have any use for Time Force."

"Sir!" interjected one of the interns from the medical wing, sliding into an anxious salute as he skidded to a stop in front of them. "Sir, Captain Campbell sent me to inform you that we have more incoming for the infirmary."

"What?" Cruger demanded. "Who? What happened?"

"G Squad was attacked, Sir. Lieutenant Clark has been injured, as well as Cadets Maevis and Call. And we're getting reports that C Squad is on their way in with injuries as well."

Cruger snarled, and Kimberly paled. "I'm on my way," she promised. She glanced at them, then back at Cruger. "You guys coming?"

Cruger hesitated, then shook his head. "No. I must find a way to track down Icthior. I cannot allow him to harm anyone else."

She put a hand on his arm, her expression softening as she nodded. "Be careful, Doggie."

"The same to all of you, as well."

****

The moment he saw Sky, he felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. "What - why is he ... ?"

Aisha glanced up at them from the data chart she was making notes on. "Don't worry; he doesn't have any spinal damage," she promised. "I put that on him to keep him from sitting up while his ribs heal."

He nodded numbly, his eyes still on Sky. He looked so pale and still lying on the hospital bed. "Is he asleep?"

"Sedated," she returned irritably. "He's one of the worst patients I've ever had. I keep telling him the Power won't be able to heal him if he doesn't lie still, but he insists he's fine." Her stern gaze drifted down the row of beds to Bridge, who gave her a sheepish smile. "Syd has a bad concussion and a twisted ankle, which is why she's sleeping for now. Bridge had a dislocated shoulder, but I don't want him moving it just yet."

"What about Shane and everyone else?" Justin asked behind him, watching Syd sleep.
She let out a sigh. "Shane definitely has broken ribs, no matter what he says. Maevis is another concussion but not as bad as Syd's, Laura broke her arm, Casey has a sprained knee, and Marinda strained her mind."

Eric blinked, looking up from staring Sky at last. Did he hear that right? "She what?"

"She tried to telekinetically throw too many objects at once, and her mind couldn't handle it. I've got her sleeping for now, but telling that girl not to use her telepathy is like telling Sky to stay still," she grumbled.

"Captain Campbell!" someone shouted. "They're bringing in Omega and the Commander!"

She cursed softly, and Justin winced. "I can take care of Sam," he promised her. "You worry about Cruger."

Eric glanced back down at Sky, finding himself squeezing the teen's hand as he tried not to think about what might happen if this guy wasn't stopped. "We are so screwed," he muttered.

****

Below, he watched Storm Blaster skid to a stop as the two Rangers bailed out. Justin had offered a ride when they agreed to follow Jack and Z, but frankly talking cars, no matter how useful, still gave him the creeps. Gathering himself, he leapt down from the TF Eagle to land in front of them. "Where are the kids?" he asked without preamble.

"There!" Blue Turbo cried, pointing.

"Hey!" Red Time Force shouted. "Someone forget to invite us?"

"Sergeant Collins! Sergeant Myers!" Jack cried in surprise.

"Dad!" Z echoed.

"Well, well, if it isn't the original S.P.D. Power Rangers," Broodwing sneered. "Getting a little old for your spandex, aren't you?"

"You're aging right along with us, you bat under glass," Blue Turbo sniped.

Broodwing tensed in anger. "I'm sure your badges will fetch a handsome price on the black market."

"Just try and take them you freak!" Red Time Force returned. "Chrono Sabers!"

"Turbo Hand Blasters!" Blue Turbo echoed.

*I am *so* not a part of this,* he thought irritably. "Quantum Defender!"

He fought his way through to the teens, shooting randomly before glaring at them through his helmet. "Why haven't you morphed yet?" he demanded.

"But I can't make clones when I morph!" Z protested weakly.

He tried not to growl in frustration, because teenagers always thought they knew best. "Just do it!" he ordered.

"Yes, Sir," Jack grumbled. "Ready?"
"Ready!"

"S.P.D., Emergency!"

He turned to cover them, firing a round of shots at anything that moved and wasn't wearing a primary color. There was a shower of sparks, but more Krybots always seemed to pop up in their place. "Darn flunkies," he grumbled to himself, snapping the defender around to sword mode.

And then he was slashing his way through, aiming for anything that looked vital. Out of the corner of his eye he could see flickers of Red and Yellow move past, and he sighed in relief, because now there was no one to protect. "Time to party," he snarled.

He went to slash at something else and found himself face to face with an Orangehead. He ducked, kicked its feet out from under it, and roll back to stand, sword ready. It surged up to strike at him in a move that was more desperate than showing any actual power or grace, and he stabbed down into its shoulder, kicking it roughly away.

Something met his back, and he glanced back to find Red Time Force. "What are you doing?" he demanded.

"I don't know if you noticed Eric, but we're slightly outnumbered," came the retort, sounding slightly amused.

"They think we're an easier target if they keep herding us together," Blue Turbo agreed from somewhere he couldn't see.

Beside him, he felt S.P.D. Yellow shift awkwardly. "I think we're in trouble. This might not have been one of your better ideas, Bro," she called back.

"Ya think?!" S.P.D. Red snapped irritably.

"Hi-yah!" someone shouted, and another round of fiery explosions surrounded them.

The next moment, he could see himself being shielded by S.P.D. Green.

"Hey! You guys okay?" came an annoyingly familiar voice.

"Sky ... " he growled.

"What are you guys doing here?" S.P.D. Red demanded.

"Yeah, you're supposed to be in bed," S.P.D. Yellow added.

"And miss all of this?" S.P.D. Pink returned cheerfully.

"There's no way we'd do that," S.P.D. Blue agreed.

More explosions, and he could see several Krybots go flying before someone dropped behind him.

"Very tricky, Jack," Omega Ranger teased.

"Stubborn is more like it," put in S.P.D. Green.


"And *oh* so grounded," Red Time Force muttered.
He snorted, unable to help himself. "Yeah, Wes. You're the real model of smart Rangering."

An elbow jabbed him sharply in the ribs. "Haven't you ever heard of do as I say, and not as I do? And who are you to talk?"

"You're both hypocrites," S.P.D. Blue interrupted. "Now can we discuss unfair punishments later?"

"Cruger!" Broodwing snarled.

"Doggie!" echoed Icthior.

"Ready, Rangers?" Cruger called.

"You know it!" S.P.D. Red answered. "S.P.D., S.W.A.T. Mode!"

"Force from the Future! Omega Ranger!"

"Huah! S.P.D., Shadow Ranger!"

The next call surprised him more than he'd admit. "S.P.D. Newtech! Red Time Force!"

"Blue Turbo!"

He sighed, because like it or not, he could use the energy boost that came with all the ridiculous posing. "Quantum Ranger!"

"You'll never dishonor S.P.D.! We'll always stand united and proud!" Cruger insisted.

And then the world became nothing but blaster fire and scrap metal.

****

"That, was a *long* day," Justin declared as they relaxed in the officer's common room, drinks in hand.

"But a good one," Wes reminded him, leaning forward to clink their glasses together. He eyed Eric pointedly.

Eric sighed, leaning forward to roughly shove his glass against theirs. "As long as the kids are back under Aisha's supervision where she can yell at them better than we can, I guess it was," he grumbled.

Wes chuckled. "I can't believe they actually snuck out while she was out of the room."

"You know she was expecting it," Justin pointed out. "That's what any of us would have done. Rangers are strongest as a team, and we don't leave the team when they need us - no matter what."

"True," Wes agreed, sounding oddly thoughtful.

Eric frowned at him, reaching out to kick his foot. "Hey. What are you thinking about?"

Wes blinked, then offered a smile that didn't fool him for a minute. "Just thinking about teams," he said innocently.

He narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "Why?"

Wes and Justin exchanged glances, which didn't reassure him any.
"You know ... " Wes began, "Earlier, during the battle? You answered my team call."

He frowned again, trying to remember what he was thinking of. "When you said 'S.P.D. Newtech'? Yeah, what about it? You didn't expect me to start calling 'Time for Time Force, did you?"

"But the point is, you answered the call," Justin insisted, grinning

He started, staring at them both. "Wait, you're - "

Wes put a hand on his arm with a faint grin. "Come on, Eric. You can't tell me you didn't notice you've been inducted," he teased gently.

"Inducted into *what*?" he demanded.

Justin laughed and Wes dug something out of his pocket, placing it in his hand. "Welcome to the Newtech Rangers, Eric," he told him with a smile.

He looked down, staring at the tiny silver badge reading 'S.P.D.'. "What is this?"

"The Newtech Rangers started wearing them after we came back from Aquitar, to show we were a team," Wes explained. "Even Zhane has one."

"The Power can sense when Rangers form a team," Justin told him, "Even when they don't wear the same uniform. That's why when we morph now we still have the badge on. Because the Power is consciously recognizing that despite what uniforms we wear, we've become a team of our own. It's a way of acknowledging that sometimes, teams have to change."

He kept staring at the badge in his hand, trying to process what they were saying. At last he sighed and looked up at them. "This is another one of those things I'll never hear the end of if I don't agree, isn't it?" he grumbled.

Justin flashed him a smirk. "We are Rangers: resistance is futile."

He muttered darkly, and Wes kissed his cheek as Justin laughed.
Sleepless

Chapter Notes

This chapter was inspired by watching the StarTrek 2009 movie for the umpteenth time. In the midst of giggling hysterically over the 'You call this a favor?' incident, this came to me (Hence the rather obvious reference.) In my personal fannon, I attempt to make sense of the horrible Wormhole episode by saying it happened the same day as Insomnia. This is also my attempt to make the connection in this story.

The ‘Month of Doom’ is a personal joke that will eventually be explained, but most likely not in this story. If you’re really desperately curious, ask me and I’ll explain it, but it’s not really that funny.

Anyone who doesn't recognize 'Dr. Taylor' is hereby directed to go read A Tale of Five Carsons, which I shall be posting here shortly.

Love to Starlit Purple for beta!

He knew he shouldn't be doing this, but he couldn't help himself. He'd lost so much time already. Paperwork had been piling up on his desk for days, both of his squads had been ignored, and none of the scheduling he'd been supposed to do for H Squad had gotten done. He wouldn't be able to sleep until he knew he'd accomplished *something* tonight.

"You know, most people who are recovering from the Litharian Flu stay in bed."

Wes didn't look up. "Most people who had the Litharian Flu don't have work to do."

There was a sigh, and the chair on the other side of his desk was pulled out. "You know if Eric or Vanessa find you in here, they'll drag you back to medbay in handcuffs and have you tied to the bed," she informed him. "And don't even get me started on Aisha."

She was right, but he still wasn't moving. "I have work to do," he repeated, finishing off a report and adding it to his outbox.

There was a long moment of silence.

"Why are you still up, anyway?" he asked distractedly, frowning at a supply request he should have dealt with days ago. "It's almost midnight."

"I can't sleep when one of my friends is mad at me."

That made him look up. "I'm not mad at you, Kim."

She looked at him contemplatively, leaning forward to place her chin on folded hands, elbows resting against the edge of his desk. Her eyes seemed sad. "Really?" she asked skeptically. "I wouldn't blame you."

He sighed. "Okay, so I am upset," he admitted reluctantly. "But I'm working through it." He let out a long breath. "I'm trying to work through it," he muttered, scowling at the stack of paperwork.
Another pause.

"I wouldn't have sent you even if you weren't sick, you know," Kimberly said softly.

He looked up again, frowning. "What? Why?"

She sighed quietly. "Do you remember when Conner, Ethan, and Kira were brought forward to this time, and I let Rhythm talk to them even though Cruger tried to stop him?" she asked finally.

He nodded warily.

"It was because I knew something that Cruger didn't." She paused, seeming to search for words for a moment before looking down up at him. "The security camera on the shuttles showed Cruger erasing the memories of Conner, Ethan, Kira, Trent, B Squad, and himself. Who wasn't there?"

He blinked for a moment. "Tommy," he realized, eyes widening. "He didn't erase Tommy's memories. Or Sam. He was still on the ship, setting the coordinates to take them home."

She smiled faintly, but her eyes were still solemn as she nodded. "I'm not quite sure why he didn't erase Sam's. It may have something to do with Sam being a time traveler anyway. It's not like I can really ask him now," she huffed, and he tried not to smile. "But Tommy wasn't there. He'd gone back to the Dino Cave because he couldn't take the chance of being seen around the others while in morph. So his memories of that day were never erased."

"And he told you," Wes said slowly.

She nodded again. "He wanted me to know just in case he wasn't here to make sure they went back." She hesitated. "And ... I think just because he wanted someone else to know about it. Most of Reefside remembers the ship, but the only other person who knew that the S.P.D. Rangers had ever been there was Hayley."

"Must have been lonely," he said softly, thinking of his own trouble with things other people couldn't remember or didn't know.

She reached across the table to take his hand in both of hers, making him focus on her again. "I know you and Eric know the most about time travel," she went on, her expression earnest. "And if I'd had any choice, I would have sent the both of you and Justin. But I had to make sure it was B Squad. I wish I could have done it another way, but I couldn't."

"Because there are some things you just can't change," he murmured, heart aching. He forced himself to look back at her and tried to smile. "I understand, Kim. Really. And I'm not mad. Not really. It's just ... "

"The meteor mission all over again?" she suggested softly. Her face was far more understanding than she had any right to be.

He swallowed hard, blinking rapidly for a moment. "I ... I know Sky is an incredible Ranger," he said quietly. "They all are. And I couldn't be more proud of them. But ... " He swallowed again, and his eyes burned. "He's my son," he whispered, voice cracking. "And he's the only one I have left. Watching him fight is hard enough as it is. Seeing him sent off on missions he might not come back from."

Kimberly was in front of him before he'd even realized she'd moved, kneeling down in front of him and wrapping her arms around him tightly. "I know," she murmured back. "I wish I didn't. Sky isn't Hawk so it can't be exactly the same, but he's still my nephew just as much as Bridge and any of
the others, and it's torture every time I have to send them out to fight. There are so many times I want to just ... lock them all up in a closet somewhere to keep them safe!"

He smiled despite himself, even as he tried to hold in the tears he was so close to shedding. "Bridge would hack the lock," he muttered. "You know he would."

"I'd take away his tools first. Give me some credit."

He chuckled quietly, pulling away after another moment and wiping at his eyes. "It seems kind of silly," he admitted, looking at his paperwork again. "To be so upset over this when nothing really happened."

"Sometimes the possibilities are worse than the reality," Kimberly said softly. "It's the possibilities that keep you awake at night."

He glanced back at her. "The voice of experience?"

She smiled humorlessly. "I've been a Ranger for thirty-five years, Wes. I've lost more sleep than most people lose in their entire lifetime."

"Even when you weren't active?"

Her expression darkened a little. "Especially when I wasn't active," she whispered, eyes haunted.

He reached out to squeeze her hand without thinking. "We need hot chocolate," he declared.

Kimberly blinked after a moment, at last managing a slight smile. "I thought you weren't supposed to be allowed sweets while you're recovering," she reminded him.

He gave her an innocent grin and winked. "I won't tell if you won't."

****

Wes yawned as they wandered down the hall toward the squad common room. The officer's common room was technically closer, but their synthetron had been on the fritz for weeks, and Wes wasn't in the mood to attempt to scrounge up the materials to make his hot chocolate from scratch. Besides, Nes had threatened to skin him alive if he used the Bunsen burners in the tech department to boil water again.

"Finally getting tired?" Kimberly asked, glancing at him.

He shrugged. "Worn out more than anything," he admitted reluctantly. "My body wants to rest, but every time I lay down I think about all the things I should be doing instead."

"Workaholic," she teased.

"Hypocrite," he shot back with a grin. With all the stress of the last three months, he'd forgotten how much fun hanging around Kimberly could be. She had a way of cheering people up that was contagious.

A sudden voice caught his attention as they neared the door to the common room, which was oddly open. "I guess we all let Cruger down in our own way."

Wes frowned at Jack's words, even as Sky sighed and added "Yeah. You're probably right."

"How could you possibly have let anyone down, let alone Cruger?" he asked with a frown,
glancing around the room as they entered. He was only mildly surprised to see most of B Squad, minus Sam, sitting around in their p.j.s looking upset.

"And what in the world are you all doing up at this hour?" Kimberly put in, hands on her hips as she glared at them all in disapproval.

"That's a little hypocritical, don't you think?" Z pointed out, raising her eyebrows.

Sky was frowning. "Aren't you supposed to be in bed, Sir?"

Wes shrugged lightly, rolling his eyes at the title. Even if they weren't on duty, Sky couldn't bring himself to say 'dad' when he was at S.P.D. "Couldn't sleep, so I was catching up on paperwork. Kim came to pester me."

She rolled her eyes, shoving him lightly in the shoulder. "Uh huh. You know how I just live to make other people miserable," she said dryly.

Wes grinned at her and headed for the synthetron. "As to why we're here, the synthetron in the officer's common is down again, and I wanted some hot chocolate."

Sky intercepted him with a scowl. "You're not allowed to have sweets right now," he lectured, moving to select a drink. "It counteracts the vaccine Dr. Taylor gave you."

Wes eyed his son suspiciously as he was handed a mug of tea instead. "Did Eric enlist you behind my back again?"

"It wasn't behind your back, we were standing right in front of you," Sky retorted. "It's not my fault you were asleep at the time. And you're supposed to be resting."

Wes rolled his eyes again as Sky pushed him gently down on one of the couches. "I'm hardly even sick anymore," he complained. "You guys don't need to keep fussing over me."

Sky looked indignant. "I'm not fussing," he sniffed.

"Technically Uncle Wes, the Litharian Flu is supposed to take two to three weeks to completely recover from," Bridge told him with an apologetic look. "You've only been sick for a week now."

"How'd you get the Litharian Flu, anyway?" Syd asked, frowning.

"Yeah, isn't that supposed to be one of those weird space diseases that are really hard to catch?" Jack put in.

Wes scowled down at his tea. "It comes from a bug in the Tal System, but it spreads really fast if you catch it. S.P.D. uses a vaccine to inoculate everyone against it. That's what they were injecting everyone with last week."

Z gave him an odd look. "So ... if you got the vaccine, then why - ?"

"Turns out some people have an allergic reaction to the vaccine that makes them get the flu anyway," he muttered darkly. "Guess who gets to be one in six hundred and fifty-three?"

Z winced. "Ouch."

Kimberly sat down next to him, patting his shoulder. "Fortunately while *Wes* is going to be suffering, he won't be able to give it to any of us. He's just too stubborn to stay in the medlab and
rest," she added, giving him a playful glare.

"How does it spread?" Syd cocked her head curiously.

Wes gulped down his tea to avoid answering, while Kimberly coughed. "Through, um. Intercourse."

There was an awkward silence.

"Oh," Syd said softly.

"Poor Uncle Eric," Bridge murmured.

"So why aren't you in bed, Dad?" Sky cut in loudly, staring at the wall across from him. Jack glanced at him, amused, and Z was clearly fighting a grin at his obvious discomfort.

"I was working on paperwork because I can't sleep," Wes told him, grateful for the change of subject even if he'd already told them. "Kim kidnapped me and said I could have hot chocolate." He frowned down at the mug of tea.

"Oh, I did not!" Kimberly exclaimed, glaring at him. "You are *not* blaming this on me when Aisha finds out!"

Jack, Z, and Syd snickered, while Bridge smiled absently at the mention of his mother.

Wes took another drink, glancing around at the cadets as he pointedly ignored her. "So, what are all of you doing up?"

Another moment of silence.

"Couldn't sleep," Jack said at last, his tone oddly short.

Kimberly gave him a curious look, smiling up at Sky when he offered her a steaming mug of hot chocolate. "Thank you, Sky. Why can't you sleep?" she added, disregarding the glare Wes gave both her and his son. "It's not November yet."

"... November?" Z asked warily, frowning. "What's wrong with November?"

"November is the Month of Doom. I'm sure you'll find out why," she added lowly, glaring at her chocolate.

Wes made a face in agreement.

"Um ... I don't know about anything to do with November, seeing as this is October and not November ... At least not yet ... " Bridge said slowly. "But ... well." He hesitated.

Wes frowned, setting his tea down on the coffee table. "What is it, Bridge?" he asked gently.

Bridge shifted uncomfortably. "Well, you see, none of us could sleep? And we were all sort of thinking about something we heard the commander say earlier, and how it pertains to each of us. Or doesn't pertain, as it were." He frowned.

Wes waited patiently. When Bridge didn't continue, he looked around at the rest of them, raising his eyebrows as he waited for someone to explain.

Eventually Sky sighed. "We overheard Cruger talking to Kat earlier by accident. Cruger said that
he wondered if A Squad was still here, we'd have defeated Grumm already."

Wes blinked.

"Of course you would have," he said finally, looking around at them again in confusion. "With twelve Rangers, there's no question about it."

They all looked back at him, clearly startled. "I uh, I don't think that was quite what the commander meant, Sir," Jack said after a pause.

"You mean you think he meant if we had A Squad and not B Squad fighting Grumm?" Kimberly asked shrewdly. She shook her head as more than one of them looked away guiltily. "Guys," she said gently. "Even if A Squad was still here, you still would have gotten your morphers. Maybe some of the battles would have gone differently, but you'd still be Rangers. You were all promoted *before* we knew they were missing. That had nothing to do with any of you."

"What about me and Jack?" Z asked softly. "Would you still have made us Rangers if they were here, even though we weren't S.P.D.?"

"Yes," Wes said firmly. "Because you were meant to be Rangers. We've always known that. One way or another, you still would have found your way here. Maybe it would have been sooner, maybe it would have been later. But you'd still be here."

Z looked up at him. Her eyes were a little too bright. "So does that mean I'm a Ranger because I deserve it, or because of who my parents are?"

Wes was on his feet before he was consciously aware of doing it. He ignored the immediate wave of dizziness that swept over him, going to take Z's hands just as Kimberly had done for him barely half an hour before. "Z. You *deserve* to be a Ranger," he promised. "You've proven yourself from the very first moment you joined S.P.D. The fact that you joined at all was proof. You've earned everything you have here all on your own. No one handed it to you. Yes, it was a possibility that you'd be chosen because of Justin and Rose. It was a possibility for all of you. But that's not why we gave you the morphers."

"We gave them to you because you're the best of the best," Kimberly said softly, looking over each of them. "Because you have what it takes. Grumm may not be gone, but Earth is still safe. All of you are still here. That's what matters. And I'm proud of all of you for everything you've managed to do so far."

"We all are," Wes agreed, smiling at Z as she finally managed a teary smile back.

There was a moment of silence, although the atmosphere of the room felt considerably lighter. At last Kimberly set her mug of hot chocolate down on the table in front of her, looking up at them all expectantly. "So. Anything else on your minds keeping you awake?"

"No, not really," Syd said slowly. Kimberly eyed her immediately, and she hesitated, biting her lip and hugging Peanuts closer. "It's just ... "

"Just what?" Wes asked finally, frowning when no one else stepped in to explain.

Eventually Jack sighed. "It's nothing, really. It's just ... you know that feeling you get when you come back from a mission, and you're all keyed up and full of energy?"

Wes nodded, Kimberly doing the same beside him as she considered the teen carefully.
Jack shrugged. "I feel like that. Even though we didn't do anything today."

"Me, too," Z admitted.

"Me, three," Syd sighed.

Sky nodded silently, while Bridge seemed to be counting on his fingers before he looked up abruptly. "Me uh, four. Or five. Or - "

"Bridge," the rest of his Squad sighed in unison.

Bridge fell silent, looking sheepish, and Wes saw Kimberly hide a smile.

"There's this feeling, too ... " Sky said softly. "Like there's something I've forgotten. But I can't figure out what it is." He looked frustrated.

Bridge looked contemplative. "Which considering you may have forgotten whatever it is you forgot, trying to remember what you've forgotten that you can't remember is - " He paused, catching sight of the glare Sky was giving him, and blinked. "Um, me too. I forgot something, too." He frowned. "I think."

Kimberly looked at Wes, frowning in concern. There was a silent question in her eyes, and Wes managed a faint reassuring smile as he shook his head. "Time Lag," he told her quietly.

She closed her eyes, letting out a barely audible sigh of relief. She may have admitted that she worried about the kids as much as he did just awhile ago, but it was still a little reassuring to actually see it. Kimberly was better at burying her concern in the face of professionalism than he was, he acknowledged silently.

"Time Lag?" Z echoed with a frown of her own.

"The sensation of traveling through time, when your body physically remembers what's happened, but your mind can't catch up," Sky answered her distractedly as he stared at Wes and Kimberly. He didn't seem to notice the surprised looks the rest of his squad gave him in return. "Why would we be suffering from Time Lag?" he demanded.

Wes and Kimberly exchanged glances. Kimberly hesitated before at last nodding slightly, and Wes sighed. "Because you traveled to the past today," he told Sky, glancing around to include the other four in his statement. "That's why you've all been tired and distracted. Cruger, too. You're all still worn out from the mission. And your mind won't shut off because there's something you're supposed to be remembering, but you can't. Those are standard symptoms of Time Lag."

Sky looked incredulous and furious at the same time. "Our memories were erased?" he guessed, glaring as Wes nodded. "So no one was going to tell us about this?"

Wes sighed again. "It's not like we're keeping it from you. You went on a mission to follow Grumm through a timehole to 2004. Cruger erased all of your memories after erasing the memories of the people you met there, because he seemed to think it wasn't fair that you remembered and they didn't."

"The people we - " Sky caught himself, frowning. "The Dino Thunder Rangers?"

The corner of his mouth lifted. His son was too smart for his own good. "That's right," he agreed softly.
"But we've already met them," Z argued, scowling. "Why would it make a difference if we remembered meeting them on this mission or not?"

Kimberly shrugged, giving her a sympathetic look. "I wish we could give you an answer, but I really can't. Cruger didn't talk to me before he left, and I have no idea what he was thinking when he did it. The rest of the main staff knows you went back, and we've confirmed that you teamed up with the Dino Thunder Rangers because there's not really any reason to hide it from any of the other Rangers. But most of the general staff doesn't know the details other than Kat, since she was in charge of the mission in the first place. All I can tell you is that you went back and met Conner, Ethan, Kira, and Trent, and helped them fight Grumm and Zeltrax's armies. Beyond that, the details aren't that important."

"We got to meet Uncle Trent in the past?" Bridge looked disappointed.

"So why do you know all this?" Jack demanded. He had the same scandalized and outraged expression on his face as Sky and Z.

She smiled a little. "When Cruger went to erase everyone's memories, he forgot to erase Tommy's. He was the Black Dino Thunder Ranger," she added as Jack and Z frowned in confusion. "He fought with you when you were there. But he had to leave right afterward, so he wasn't there to say goodbye when the rest of you did, and Cruger never thought to erase his memory beforehand. He's the one who told me what was going to happen, so that I'd know to send you all back today."

"A paradox," Bridge murmured thoughtfully, more to himself than anyone else. "We had to go back because we were already there. And we had to have our memories erased because we already did."

Wes nodded, trying not to grin and failing. "That's right."

There was a long silence as B Squad contemplated, all of them frowning. "Well, that stinks," Syd said finally, scowling deeper. "I mean, what was the point?"

"According to the shuttle's security camera, you said something about it not being fair that all of you remembered and they didn't, and Cruger said you were right. Then he flashed you," Kimberly told her with a shrug.

Silence.

"So this is all Syd's fault?" Z said finally, frowning.

"It is not!" Syd cried hotly. "It's not like I actually asked him to do it! I just made a statement. He did it on his own. And you can't blame me for something I don't even remember," she added with a huff, folding her arms.

Wes watched them argue, sipping his tea and trying not to look amused as Jack was dragged into it. Kimberly just shook her head. He felt Sky hovering just behind him, and looked up to offer his son a faint smile.

Sky just shook his head, rolling his eyes as he adjusted to sit on the arm of the couch. "So why can't you sleep, Dad?" he asked at last, eyeing Wes.

Wes sighed. "Too much on my mind," he admitted quietly. "Things I should be doing, things I should have done. Things I'm probably going to do."

Wes glanced at him. "And you?" he pressed gently. "Why aren't you asleep? Is it just what Cruger said?"

Sky sighed. "That's part of it," he confessed. "I kept thinking ... Well, nevermind. It doesn't matter now."

"What on Earth are all of you doing up at this hour?" Cruger demanded from the doorway. "It's nearly one o'clock in the morning!" He paused, growling softly at Wes. "Sergeant Collins, were you not under orders to remain in the medlab until both the vaccine and the Litharian Flu have run their course?"

"Have you ever tried to keep Wes in bed before, Commander?" came an irritated voice from behind him. Eric moved around Cruger, folding his arms and glaring at Wes. "Trust me, it's harder than it looks."

"There's a visual I didn't need," Jack muttered, grimacing and putting a hand to his forehead. Sky looked startled before moving to smack him upside the back of the head with a glare.

"Ew," Syd agreed, making a face.

Eric rolled his eyes, coming to grab Wes' arm and gently haul him to his feet. "You're going back to medlab, and I'm going to strap you down to that bed," Eric informed him with scowl.

"Hypocrite," Wes retorted, reaching for his tea.

Sky beat him to it, returning the mug to the synthetron for him. "I'm pretty sure we've had this conversation before," he interrupted with a sigh. "And you're both terrible about staying put when you're supposed to be resting. That's why Mom always complains I get it from you." He didn't bother to clarify which one of them he was referring to, and Wes supposed he might have had a point.

Not that he was going to admit to it.

B Squad reluctantly moved toward the door, Sky waiting to hover at Wes' side as Eric wrapped an arm around his waist. "I can walk," Wes complained. "I'm sick, not an invalid."

"The last time you told me that, you fainted on me," Eric reminded him, rolling his eyes. "I *didn't* faint," he muttered rebelliously.

"Fine. Passed out. Whatever."

Cruger shook his head and followed B Squad, Kimberly stopping to smile at the three of them. "Wes? If you *try* and get some sleep tonight, I promise to have someone bring you paperwork to do in bed tomorrow," she offered.

"Done," Wes said immediately, looking grateful. He paused and frowned suspiciously. "What if I try, but I still can't sleep?" he asked warily.

"Stay in bed anyway, and we'll call it a deal."

He nodded swiftly. "Done."

Eric raised an eyebrow at him as she left. "You're actually going to stay in bed?" he asked sarcastically.
Wes made a face at him. "I'll grab a book or something."

"Just as long as I don't have to hear about whatever Eric does to keep you there," Sky informed them, making a face.

Eric raised an eyebrow. "Thanks for the suggestion."

Wes laughed as Sky gave Eric a dirty look. He hid a yawn as Eric smirked back in response, shaking his head at them both. He was surprised to realize he felt better than he had when he'd first dragged himself out of the infirmary in search of something to shut his brain off. Maybe sleep wouldn't be so far in coming after all.

*I have really got to put an end to these late-night counseling sessions,* he sighed to himself, only to smile as Eric reached out to smack Sky upside the head for something he hadn't heard. Behind him he could hear the sounds of the rest of B Squad wishing each other good night and heading into separate rooms. Ahead of him Kimberly was lecturing a rather amused looking Cruger about who-knew-what.

He shook his head, still smiling.

*Nah.*
Resurrection sucked except for the moment when Charlie demorphs, and Jack and Sky are going ‘Red’s a girl?!’, the girls cheer, and Charlie asks Jack if he’s got a problem with that. This is my version, filled with happy reunions and cranky B Squad.

Wes tilted his head in acknowledgement as he passed Cruger on his way into the Squad Common Room. "Commander."

"Sergeant Collins," came the cool reply. Things between them were still awkward since the meteor mission, and neither one of them was in a hurry to fix it.

He glanced up and sighed. "Bridge!"

The teen’s head snapped up as he jumped slightly. "Yes, Sir?"

He folded his arms, looking at him pointedly. "Toast?"

Bridge winced. "It wasn't all for me," he protested. "I made some for everyone, but then no one wanted any." He paused. "Do you want some? It's really - " And then he cut himself off, slamming his left hand down over his right to keep it in place.

He smiled, shaking his head. "Sure, Bridge. Thanks." He eyed the other three teens as he grabbed a slice. "All right. Who's been teasing Bridge now?"

"We weren't teasing him," Z protested.

"Sky was," Syd put in, giggling as the other girl shoved her lightly in the shoulder. "He said that Bridge can't say buttery without wiggling his fingers because it's ingrained in his cellular makeup."

He gave his son a dirty look. Now that he'd been taking the time to notice, Bridge was right: Sky was really harsh on him sometimes. "It is not ingrained in his cellular makeup," he sighed. "It's habit. He's been doing it since he was three years old."

"I have?" Bridge looked curious.

He nodded. "Your mom used to feed you toast when they had to wake you up in the middle of the night." He smiled fondly at the memory. "She said it was 'special' toast to make you feel better. And the finger wiggle thing started because you noticed you'd gotten butter on your gloves."

Z frowned. "Why did she - "

Sky elbowed her sharply with a warning look, and she stopped.

Bridge answered her anyway with a sad smile. "Sometimes when I dream, I pick up on other people's thoughts or emotions. It was really bad when I was little, because I didn't have any control over it. So I'd have nightmares of things I didn't understand, and my parents had to wake me up so they'd stop."
Z looked guilty. "Sorry. I guess I shouldn't have asked."

"It's okay," Bridge assured her with a smile. "It's not like you would have known."

She sighed. "I hate this sometimes," she murmured. "Not remembering what it was like to grow up with you guys. I mean, I've tried to. But it's just ... I can't."

Syd leaned forward to squeeze her arm. "Don't force yourself. It's not like we don't understand," she said softly.

"Z, in all probability, you suppressed everything for a reason," Wes reminded her gently. "The kidnapping ... " He shook his head, wincing. "Things were pretty bad."

"They sent me for empathy training after that," Bridge agreed, his voice going quiet. "After everything that was happening, I couldn't control it anymore. Zofren told me if it wasn't for Sky, I probably wouldn't have made it."

"Did you need something, Dad?" Sky spoke up, looking at him in an obvious attempt to change the subject.

"I was actually coming to ask what all of you are up to," he informed him. "Because whatever it is, I was going to tell you to take a break."

"Break?" Syd perked up.

He tried not to smile and failed. "Sergeant Oliver's orders. You're officially being given the day off. And if you're not Bridge, she'd prefer you find something to do that isn't at S.P.D."

"Why not Bridge?" Z frowned.

"Because Bridge's idea of fun is playing in the lab," Syd told her, shooting an amused smile at her teammate.

Bridge grinned and shrugged sheepishly. "It's true," he confessed.

"Why do we have to leave S.P.D.?" Sky wanted to know.

Wes gave him a fondly exasperated look. "Because you've been practically living here twenty-four seven for the last few months. And whether you like to admit it or not Sky, that's not like you."

Z raised her eyebrows. "It's not?"

He rolled his eyes as Sky glared her. "Take a walk, Sky. Go find a cat. Since you've pretty much stolen Sheep for your own, we need a new cat for Eric. Or a dog. Some birds. Something. Get out of S.P.D. for the day. If something comes up, we'll call you."

Sky seemed to brighten a little at the suggestion of looking for pets, but being Sky, he still pretended to be annoyed. "If I have to," he grumbled.

"You know, that kinda sounds like fun," Z decided. "You mind if I go with you?"

"We don't all have to go look for Uncle Eric's new pet, do we?" Syd asked warily. "'Cause I have some serious shopping to do after that incident the other day," She shot a dark look at Bridge, "And we all know whatever Sky gets is just going to end up as his anyway."

Sky scowled at her. "Go steal your daddy's charge card, Syd."
"I will. Thank you," she chirped back, wrinkling her nose at him. She bounced out of her seat, pausing to give Wes a hug as she passed. "Thanks, Uncle Wes!"

"Don't thank me," he protested as he gave her a hug back. "This was Kim's order."

"Then tell her I said thank you!" she called over her shoulder as she disappeared down the hall.

"I wonder if Kat will let me play with her quantum enhancer," Bridge mused as he stood.

"I doubt it, but feel free to try," Wes told him, sliding an arm around his shoulders for a brief hug as he passed. "And don't forget your toast."

"Oh. Right. Thanks, Uncle Wes."

He grinned at Sky and Z as Bridge doubled back to grab his plate before heading off to the labs. "Well? Come on! Get going!"

Sky rolled his eyes, but Z smiled. "Thanks, W - " She paused, smiled a little, and gave him a quick hug. "Thanks, Uncle Wes," she said softly.

He snagged Sky before he could get past, trying not to make a big deal out of Z's gesture even as he inwardly glowed. "I don't think so," he teased his son, pulling him into a tight hug. "You have to pay the toll."

"You can't claim hug tolls," Sky sighed in exasperation, but he hugged back anyway. He paused in the doorway as Z passed him. "And for the record? I did *not* steal Sheep."

"Sure, you didn't," he retorted with a smile. "Have fun, guys."

He waited until they were long gone before he sighed, running a hand over his hair. "Enjoy it while you can," he murmured, his gaze falling to his wrist. Because a lull in the fighting months after it had began always meant something was coming, and all of the former Rangers knew it.

He blinked as his morpher went off. "This is Wes."

"Wes!" Justin cried happily. "They're back! Newtech's rescue team is back!"

He started in surprise. "What? Are - are you serious?!" he demanded.

They all knew that both rescue teams had promised to return under one condition. Which could only mean ...

"They've got A Squad," Justin confirmed. "We've got them in the infirmary now."

"I'm on my way," he promised, bolting down the hallway. He dodged a pair of cadets, just barely remembering to toss a "Sorry!" over his shoulder.

Somehow, some way, A Squad was *back*.

****

"Astro!" he called.

Exhausted, weary, and obviously in need of some rest, none the less Zhane's smile was as bright as
ever when he looked up from the wall he was leaning against. "Time!" he greeted jubilantly.

They exchanged a tight hug, holding on for longer than was strictly necessary. Wes closed his eyes for a moment, breathing in the sight and sound and smell of his teammate. It had been *far* too long.

They pulled back at last and Zhane frowned at him. "Something's different," the other man declared.

"Yup," he agreed, grinning. "A few things, actually."

Zhane's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "How many fingers am I holding up?" he demanded suddenly.

He smirked. "None, you nimrod. But you hair is finally starting to show the silver."

Zhane stared. "You ..."

He nodded, still smiling.

The next instant he was swooped up off his feet in a bear hug and spun around, laughing, as Zhane tried to squeeze the breath out of him before at last setting him down. "When?! How?!!"

He held up a hand, still laughing. "Calm down! It's kind of a long story. And - " He paused, eyeing Zhane as his left hand was seized.

"You're *married*?!" Zhane shouted. "To who?! Why wasn't I invited?"

"Who do you *think*?" he retorted. "And you weren't here. It was sort of a spur of the moment thing."

"He asked Eric if he'd ever thought about making things official while they were out to dinner, and Eric said he'd make some calls," came another voice. Justin smiled at them both. "No joke."

"Turbo!" Zhane cried in delight, and Wes chuckled as Justin was treated to a flying hug of his own.

"Astro! I can't breathe!" he choked out.

"You don't need to breathe!" Zhane returned happily. "You're a Power Ranger. The Power will keep you alive anyway."

"I'd rather not find that out the hard way, thanks," Justin grumbled as he was finally set down. He looked up, clearly hopeful. "Where's Rose?"

Zhane winced. "Ah. Well, see, they're not back yet. They found a slave ship, and sort of ... decided to take care of things. I think Ko-lin and Tyzonn were going stir-crazy. They said they'd meet us back here." He cleared his throat. "So. Where's this long-lost daughter of yours I heard so much about?"

"I kicked most of B Squad out for the day," Wes told him with a guilty smile. "They haven't had much to do, so I told Sky and Z to go find Eric a new cat." He paused, glancing at the window behind them with a frown. "How are they?" he asked softly.

Zhane sighed, running a hand over his hair. "They're alive," he confirmed quietly. "But they're in pretty bad shape. Health-wise, nothing some vitamins and TLC won't cure. But ... " He shook his head. "Ran was having nightmares on the way home. They were getting pretty bad."
"And the others?" Justin wanted to know, frowning worriedly.

He let out another sigh. "Charlie's acting like Ms. Perfect soldier. The only thing that makes her show *any* emotion whatsoever is Andros, and for some reason she won't meet his eyes. It's like she feels guilty, like she let him down or something. Sara ... well, Sara's Sara. He's the only one being more quiet than Charlie, but at least with him that's normal. James has been making weird comments about things. Like - the infirmary is brighter than he remembered. Or S.P.D. never seemed so shiny before. Stuff like that. Michael mostly hovers over Ran, and Ashley's got the idea that we shouldn't say anything to Cassie or Ko-lin about that just yet."

"What do *you* think?" Wes persisted, looking at Zhane. Because he knew fewer people that were a better judge of character than Zhane.

"Justin! Wes!" Ashley squealed from down the hall, running towards them with Andros following at a more sedate pace.

And then there was rounds of hugs and greetings and welcoming home the rest of the rescue team, making sure everyone was all right. They were all tired, but happy, and definitely glad to be home. Having them all together should have made him feel more peaceful than he had in a long time.

But it didn't.

Because something was off. He didn't know what it was, just that something wasn't right. And whatever it was felt like an itch in a place he couldn't scratch: it wouldn't stop bothering him, but he couldn't do anything about it either.

Somewhere during all the chatter he found heard Kimberly call over the din as she finally turned away from her husband. "Cruger wants A Squad and B Squad in the Command Center as soon as Aisha is willing to let A Squad out of her sight."

He sighed. "That should be interesting," he grumbled. "Somehow I can't picture the debriefing going over very well."

"How'd they do?" Jason spoke up, his eyes intent despite his exhaustion.

He looked up, meeting his gaze and offering him a soft, reassuring smile. "They made you proud."

"I knew they would," Jason scoffed immediately, but he radiated pleasure even as he folded his arms.

"Hey, wait a minute," Zhane said suddenly, turning to stare. "You married *Eric*?!

****

"You've got to be kidding me. B Squad?! When was the last time Cruger called us B Squad?! I mean, we work our butts off all year. And then we're ordered to leave the command center like some D Squad newcomers?!"

Wes sighed, glancing to Justin as they heard the shouting from all the way down the hall. "I was afraid this was going to happen," he murmured.

Justin shrugged. "Can you blame them?" he asked practically. "They've been our only Rangers for almost a year now. And now they have to share that spot with another team, and act like they're okay with that."
He shook his head. "There's gotta be a better way to work things out than to make them feel like they're lesser Rangers just because they're in a lower Squad. I mean, they're A Squad level now!"

Jason looked at him in surprise. "You really think they are?"

He nodded seriously, unsurprised when Justin agreed. "The things they've been through the last year ... They're not our little cadets anymore, Jase. They're really Rangers now."

Jason sighed too, frowning down at the ground for a moment. "We'll have to talk things over with Andros and Tommy, then," he murmured. "See if we can work something out. It wouldn't be right to just treat them like lower-level cadets all over again."

"And Kim," he said without thinking.

It wasn't until Jason eyed him that he realized what he'd said. He shrugged. "Kim's been our R.C. for a year. She knows B Squad, and she knows Cruger."

"And she's an expert negotiator, which can't hurt," Justin offered.

"That doesn't mean we have to like it," they heard Z say as they rounded the corner and watched the four angry cadets.

"Or maybe Cruger was thinking he'd debrief A Squad while someone else finally got the chance to talk to you guys," Jason spoke up.

Wes grinned as B Squad turned to look at them. Jason just smirked, waiting expectantly. Behind him, he could hear Justin and Zhane snickering.

"Uncle Jason!" Syd shrieked, sprinting across the room to fling herself into his arms. "You're here! You're *back*!" She paused, pulling back to stare at him suspiciously. "You are back, aren't you?"

"I'm *home*," he corrected her with a smile, ruffling her hair lightly. "And yes, we're home to stay."

"Oh, thank goodness!" she wailed, clinging to him again. "It's been horrible! Not that the Commander's bad exactly, but he just doesn't understand how we work, or why we do things, and he doesn't know when to let us figure things out on our own! And he's always making me break a nail, and get my hair dirty, and he never even cares! And so much has happened, and he couldn't make it better the way you do. He just ... he's not .... "

"He wasn't a Ranger," Sky finished quietly as he came forward. "And even now that he is, he's not you."

Jason's smile softened as he squeezed Syd in one arm, using the other to pull Sky close mostly against the teen's will. "I missed you guys," he told them quietly. "And I'm sorry I left you for so long."

"It's okay, Uncle Jason. We forgive you," Syd promised, patting his arm.

He raised an eyebrow. "You forgive me without bribes?"

She giggled. "Well, I didn't say that ..."

"There's a lot we need to catch up on," Sky told him. "A lot's happened."
"I want to hear every word of it," Jason promised. Then he glanced around, frowning. "Why do I have a suspiciously empty spot in front of me?" he demanded abruptly. "Where's my other nephew? Bridge?"

Bridge it seemed, was staring out a window, ignoring them all.

Sky sighed. "Bridge!"

Bridge jumped, glancing back, and Wes tried not to think about whether or not it meant something that he only noticed Sky calling for him.

"Uh, sorry. I was just thinking," he confessed. Then he blinked. "Uncle Jason?"

Jason smiled, tilting his head in invitation. "Come here, Bridge."

Bridge wandered over obediently to give Jason a hug of his own, but it was obvious that he was distracted as he smiled blandly at no one in particular.

"Bridge?" Jack spoke up. "You all right?"

"Hmm?" Bridge blinked over at him. "Oh. Sorry. It's just ... I have a really bad feeling guys, kinda like the feeling I had before?"

"Bad feeling?" Sky asked warily.

Jason frowned. "Like what sort of bad feeling?"

Bridge shrugged a little, glancing briefly at his feet before looking back up to meet Jason's eyes. "Well, right before A Squad disappeared, I noticed their colors were off. And I just had this really bad feeling, like something bad was about to happen."

Immediately Wes found Jason looking at him, and he sighed. "Yeah," he admitted. "I can't say anything about auras, but the bad feeling's been lingering for awhile. And it didn't get any better when I saw A Squad."

Almost as if in answer, alarms began shrieking throughout the room.

Jack reached for his morpher without thinking, and he wasn't the only one. "Go for Jack," he ordered.

"This is Wes." He paused, glancing back over his shoulder. "I'm with Justin, Zhane, Jason, and B Squad. What's going on?"

"Cruger's been kidnapped," Eric informed him, sounding grim. "And video surveillance shows A Squad as the ones that did it."

The room went deathly still. "We're on our way," he said at last.
"How could this have happened?" Ashley murmured in stunned disbelief as they stared at the security feed playing on repeat over the center monitor of the war room table.

"Obviously they weren't who you thought they were," Jack informed them all.

Sky punched him in the shoulder - hard. When Jack turned to stare at him, he glared furiously. "You don't know the A Squad, Jack," he snapped. "Whatever's happened, this isn't them. So just shut your mouth, okay?"

"What, and you do?" Jack demanded.

Sky's glare turned glacial. "Charlie was one of my best friends from F Squad through D Squad. I've known Sara since I was six years old and he'd just joined the academy. He coached me for half of my S.P.D. career. Ran is a Ranger Kid, from S.P.D. Japan - Aunt Cassie and Aunt Ko-lin's daughter. She used to mail us snacks that we liked. Sara introduced me to James, and he used to sneak me his old notes from courses he'd already taken, so I wouldn't have to study so hard. Michael transferred in a couple years ago, and he's always helped me out when I've been in trouble." He stared down at the table for a moment, taking a deep breath. "You're the one who doesn't know, Jack," he said at last. "And don't assume you do."

There was a long silence.


Zhane sighed, looking up from where he'd been idly drawing patterns on the table with his finger. "I think something happened that they weren't telling us," he said at last. "I know that's A Squad - Ash confirmed it down to their dental records. They're not fakes, they're not a stand ins, they're not Psycho Rangers. That *is* A Squad."

"Brainwashed?" Jason asked, leaning forward to brace his elbows on the table.

"No," Ashley answered softly. "I scanned for altered brainwaves or magical residue, too. That's really them."

"You said Ran had nightmares." Justin eyed Zhane as he spoke. "Do you remember what they were about?"

"She was screaming she was sorry." It was Andros who spoke, his eyes haunted. "She would scream over and over that she didn't mean it. That she didn't want to do it anymore." He looked up. "I knew something was off when I saw them. Charlie's never been afraid to talk to me before. I
thought that maybe if we got them home, where they could finally relax instead of being on edge all the time ... " He shrugged helplessly.

"We all agreed with you, Andros," Tommy reminded him. "This isn't anyone's fault." He hesitated. "Can you think of anything else they might have said or done that stood out to you?"

There was a pause, and Andros' eyes narrowed suddenly. "I told Charlie that I was proud of her for keeping her team safe, and she said 'we do what we have to'."

"We do what we have to?" Taylor repeated, raising her eyebrows.

He nodded solemnly.

"But what do we do in the meantime?" Z demanded. "I mean, we can't just leave Commander Cruger."

"We're not leaving anybody, Z," Kimberly promised her as Tommy gave them both an odd look. "But it helps if we understand what's going through A Squad's heads right now."

"Sergeant - I mean, Commander Oliver," Kat spoke up, frowning as she completely ignored her slip. "We have a message." She hesitated. "It's for B Squad."

"Put it on screen, Kat," Kimberly and Tommy said in unison. They glanced at one another, him looking startled and her bemused.

Everyone tensed as Charlie appeared above the table. "You want us B Squad? Come and get us. We're waiting."

Jack looked around, exchanging glances with the rest of his Squad. "Let's go," he commanded, rising to his feet. "Not you, Sam." he added when Omega Ranger moved to join them.

"But - " Omega protested.

Jack just shook his head. "This one's on us. Keep an eye on things around here, would you?"

Kat stared at them in shock. "Rangers, you can't go. It's a trap."

"We know," Jack returned, not even bothering to look back at her as they headed for the door.

"Be careful, Rangers," Kimberly called softly.

There was a pause as Syd glanced over her shoulder and Jack saluted, but within moments they were gone.

"You were right, Wes," Jason said quietly. "They have made me proud."

"More than you know, Jase," Zack informed him, patting his friend's shoulder.

Kimberly took a deep breath. "Okay, everyone. Cruger's missing, and our Rangers have gone to fight. We need a contingency plan; we *cannot* lose this base," she reminded them sternly.

"I say we team up anybody with a morpher and prepare to defend our home," Justin informed her bluntly.

She nodded. "How many Rangers do we have right now with active morphers?"
"Eighteen," Karone supplied. "Eight Mighty Morphin, four Astro Rangers, two Lightspeed, the three Newtech Rangers, and Omega Ranger."

Tommy was already shaking his head. "That's not enough for a real defensive stand. I mean, it's something, but this base is huge."

"It's what we have," Hayley reminded him.

"Actually ... it isn't," Nerina spoke up hesitantly, her voice soft.

Everyone looked at her in surprise, but before anyone had a chance to ask, Boom burst through the doors. "B Squad's getting pulverized!" he cried desperately.

"Kat - " Kimberly began.

But Kat was already putting the life feed of the battle site on the center screen.

It took a moment for Wes to sort through all the explosions to figure out what was going on. A Squad was winning, but so far B Squad was holding their own. He frowned to himself as he wondered why they hadn't gone to S.W.A.T. mode yet.

"Isn't there something we can do?" Boom persisted despairingly.

Kat was frowning worriedly at the screen, shaking her head as she ran something through a console. "The A Squad has had much more training and experience. They're in a different league."

Eric raised his eyebrows. "What fight are you two watching?" he asked skeptically. "Cause it doesn't look like B Squad is down yet to me."

Wes smiled a little. "We're Power Rangers, Kat. We're at our best when the odds are hopeless," he reminded her.

The room shuddered, and everyone scrambled to brace themselves.

"What was that?" Tommy demanded.

"Give me a moment and I'll tell you," Vanessa snapped back, grabbing a computer screen next to Kat's.

There was a long pause, and at last Kat breathed out a soft "Oh, no."

"What is it?" Carter asked sharply.

"We've been attacked." Vanessa returned shortly. "It's large, heavy, and blunt, and it just breached the outer wall. We're being invaded."

Wes sucked in a breath, closing his eyes for a moment with a sigh. Well, there was his bad feeling, then.

"How do you *do* that?" Justin demanded, glaring at him.


"Everybody with a morpher, grab a Squad and get out there," Tommy commanded.

"Are you kidding me?" Kimberly demanded, glaring at him as she caught his arm. "We're not
"We don't have time for a plan!" Tommy insisted, scowling back. "We're under attack *right now*!"

"Which is why we need a plan," she retorted. She looked around the room, eyes narrowing. "Dustin, Taylor. Make sure all the Zords are available and stash whatever you have time to move in the underground Zord Bay. Vanessa, call anybody you can get a hold of at S.P.D. Japan and ask them to send reinforcements yesterday. Sam, get all the Squad Leaders you can find and have them round up their Squads. Kat, Boom, I want you two in the Command Center. I need you to monitor the Rangers and the base itself. Whatever happens, do *not* let anyone in that room," she ordered. She turned to Nerina expectantly. "You have an idea?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Wes could see Tommy, Jason, and Billy gaping at Kimberly as if they'd never seen her before. Ashley, Zhane, and Hayley were openly amused, while Andros just seemed puzzled. But then, none of them had dealt with Acting Ranger Commander Sergeant Oliver before.

Nerina hesitated for only an instant. "There are five available morphers sitting in the vault," she stated quietly, her eyes serious. "And while I may not have known them all as well as you, I do not believe Tori would want to see her morpher lying unused when it could have helped saved lives."

Kimberly stared at her for a long moment. "I agree," she said softly. "Respecting the ones we lost is one thing, but I can't believe they'd want us to ignore any help we have. Go get them, Nerina." She reached out to squeeze the young woman's arm. "And be *careful*," she warned her.

Nerina paused only long enough to give her a warm, shy smile, before she bolted out of the room and down the hall.

Then Kimberly was all business again, turning to frown at them all. "We still need to protect the main entrances, the hanger, and the prisoner vaults."

"And the labs," Taylor put in. "Weapons, Zords, and the general labs all have too much that we don't want in enemy hands."

Kimberly nodded swiftly. "First thing's first. We've got to cover that main entrance. Newtech Rangers, that's your job."

Wes swiftly saluted her, feeling Eric and Justin do the same on either side of him. "Yes, Ma'am."

He glanced back at them both and nodded swiftly. "Time for, Time Force!"

"Shift into Turbo! Mountain Blaster Turbo Power!"

"Quantum Power!"

"Let's go!" Red Time Force shouted as the three of them raced down the halls. "Turbo! Can you get Storm Blaster to help from the outside?"

"You got it, Time!"

The moment he saw the entrance, he knew there was no possible way the three of them could ever be enough.

Krybots were *everywhere*. More than he could see even out of the corners of his eyes, and still
more pouring in through the hole in the wall. And leading them, cackling delightedly and crowing at his own brilliance ...

"Broodwing," he snarled under his breath, pure, black hatred surging through him. "Chrono Sabers!

"Turbo Hand Blasters!

"Quantum Defender!"

And then it was nothing but fighting, striking, slashing, ducking, spinning to avoid blows and falling back when a lucky blow made its way in. He didn't know how long they worked. He could hear the angry rev of Storm Blaster from outside, the sound of blaster fire and flashes of Blue and Red on either side of him. There was no time for thank yous when Blue Turbo took down a Krybot that would have caught him from behind, or your welcomes when he cut another pair out from under the Quantum Ranger. At one point he saw a flashes of Yellow, and he could have sworn he saw Blue on opposite sides of the room at the same time, but he couldn't summon the time or effort to care.

He thought he heard Omega giving a rally call, and there seemed to be even more people fighting beside him. A Bluehead nearly dragged him down, but someone in gray was pulling it off, freeing him just in time to slash another Krybot out of the way. But the cadets weren't Rangers, which only became more obvious when he was forced to protect one of them from what could have been a lethal sword strike. They were doing their best, but they were in the way almost as much as they helped.

"Wes! Duck!" someone shouted.

He dove for the floor moments before a cry of "Drive Vortex!" echoed through the air. The voice was strangely familiar, but he didn't have time to figure out who'd claimed Dax's morpher, because the Krybots never seemed to end.

And then the floor was beginning to move, and he realized in horror what was happening. "Everyone to a safety zone!" he bellowed at the top of his lungs. He sprinted for one of the side hallways, praying that the others had heard him or at least realized what was happening themselves.

He kicked a Krybot as he ran, stopping only once he knew he'd crossed the safety line. A hand grabbed his shoulder, and he clutched it instinctively, whirling for a throw.

Instead he found a vaguely familiar Yellow helmet that it took him a moment to place. "Tanya?" he gasped out, lungs burning from exertion.

"Sorry - try again," returned a disturbingly cheerful but equally breathless voice.

"Mystic?" he retorted automatically, because Chip was barely forty, and he had almost nine years on him. "What - how - what are you doing here?"

Running footsteps were coming in their direction, and he tensed automatically for another fight. Beside him, Yellow Zeo straightened just enough to slide into a defensive stance.
Blue Overdrive and Yellow Lightspeed rounded the corner, bare seconds before the walls began to shift. Neither one stopped running until he found his arms full of Blue Overdrive, and he steadied whoever it was instinctively. Behind them, he watched numbly as a trio of Krybots tumbled over the gap and prayed reverently that Eric and Justin had heard him.

"Thanks, Wes," Blue Overdrive wheezed, and he froze in horror as the voice finally registered.

"Vanessa?!" he demanded. "What the - who in their right mind gave you a morpher?!"

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," she snorted, shoving him away as she tried to straighten up. She wobbled for a moment, but recovered herself. "And who said anyone gave me anything?"

"Please don't tell me you stole it," he groaned.

"Who else were they going to give it to? Some random cadet in the hallway?" she returned irritably. She shook her head, only to put a hand to her helmet a moment later. "I cannot believe you all do this every day," she muttered. "Let alone on *purpose*. You have to be a special kind of twisted to enjoy this."

"Normally you get used to the disorientation pretty fast," Yellow Lightspeed informed her, putting a steadying hand on her shoulder. "You got thrown into a bigger battle than you'd normally get at first. Not to mention your uniform team isn't here, which means the Power's confused if this is where you're supposed to be."

Blue Overdrive sighed. "I used to be able to call you all weirdoes for treating the Power like a living entity, you know," she grumbled.

The other woman snorted. "Becoming a Ranger changes your perspective on things."

"Taylor?" he asked warily, and tried not to sigh at the answering nod Yellow Lightspeed gave him. "What are both of you doing down here? Shouldn't you be protecting the labs?" He glanced at Yellow Zeo. "And how'd you get Tanya's morpher? For that matter, what are *you* doing here?"

Yellow Lightspeed held up a hand. "One question at a time, Wes," she told him pointedly.

"And is this really the time for this?" Blue Overdrive put in.

He sighed, sliding down the wall behind him to sit. "We don't know how long we're going to be stuck in here," he pointed out. "Until someone can transform the Megazord back, we're trapped in here."

There was a pause.

"I hate it when you're right," Blue Overdrive griped before finding a seat herself. She sighed too. "Fine. I'm here because ... Well, I honestly don't know. I grabbed this morpher when no one was looking and tried to use it. When all the blue lights faded, I just found myself running here." She paused as the rest of them stared at her. "What? I'm serious!" she insisted irritably.

"Same here. Well, Kim actually *handed* me the morpher, but I came here because this is where I needed to be." Slowly Yellow Lightspeed nodded. "Tanya found me while I was on my way. She said she heard through Xander that I was coming, and she wanted me to have her Zeonizers." He shrugged, his voice softening a little. "She said she couldn't use them anymore, and she didn't want to see them go to waste."
"I don't understand," Blue Overdrive spoke up after a pause. "Why aren't any of you weirded out by this ... 'I needed to be here' thing."

"Because it's the Power," Red Time Force told her. He sighed, because if it hadn't been for Delphine, none of the Newtech Rangers would have ever understood. "Normally, teams are identified by wearing the same uniform, right? Well, sometimes - very rarely - things change, and we have to figure out how to fight with what Rangers we have. If those Rangers form a ... bond, I guess you'd say, the Power begins to recognize them as a team." He sighed again, looking at Yellow Zeo. "I'm not explaining this very well, am I?"

"Nope," the other man returned pleasantly. He turned to look at Blue Overdrive. "Okay, look at it this way. You'd say you're close friends with Wes and Eric, right?"

She nodded reluctantly. "If I have to."

Red Time Force glared at her through his helmet and kicked her foot. He tried to dodge as she kicked him back.

"Well, the Power knows that somehow. So even though your morpher is different, it can tell that you're close to them. So it makes you a team with them, instead of making you one of the Overdrive Rangers. It doesn't always work that way," he added. "But in our case, knowing that something is wrong with our team is just another part of being a Newtech Ranger."

Yellow Lightspeed sighed. "Great. Now I've gotta get used to *another* group of idiots. Except for you, obviously," she continued just as Blue Overdrive began to fold her arms indignantly. "But you're the exception."

There was a long silence as they all contemplated their situation.

"Anyone have guesses on how much longer we'll be here?" Yellow Zeo asked finally.

Red Time Force shook his head. "Until someone stops the Delta Command Megazord, I guess."

The tiny area rocked wildly and without warning, and he found himself bracing Blue Overdrive as she was flung against him. He glanced down, sighing quietly and wrapping an arm around her shoulders. "Hang in there, Nes," he said softly, squeezing her a little. "The kids'll get us out of here soon."

"You have a lot of faith in them," she murmured back, but there was no malice in it as she leaned into him.

He smiled faintly beneath his helmet. "Comes with being a Power Ranger. You'll get used to it."

"Oh, I hope not," she sighed reverently.

It was hard to say how long they waited before the ground shuddered, and the corridor slid open again. The moment it was open they were on their feet again, all pulling weapons. "Careful, everyone," he cautioned, slipping out to the front of the group as he crept forward to the end of the hall.

The Krybots were nothing more than a pile of scrap metal. The main doors were open, outside he could see what looked like someone fighting with -

Broodwing.
"Let's go!" he ordered, waving a hand forward.

Yellow Zeo was right on his heels, Yellow Lightspeed and Blue Overdrive only seconds behind. He burst through the door and stared as Blue Turbo exchanged blows with the giant bat, Quantum Ranger hovering nearby as he waited for the right moment to switch.

He didn't bother to wait, snarling "Chrono Sabers!" as he charged forward. Blue Turbo ducked back as he swung for Broodwing's stomach. Blocked, he spun for another slash, and then more one right after another without giving the alien a chance to recover.

He drove him back into the Quantum Ranger, who pushed him against Yellow Lightspeed. She passed him off to Blue Overdrive, and a blast of the Drive Vortex sent him crashing at Yellow Zeo's feet. Another round of sparring, and Broodwing was stumbling, making sloppy mistakes and struggling for breath as they refused to let up on him.

"Give it up, Broodwing!" Blue Turbo taunted.

"You've finally met your judgment day," Red Time Force agreed. "And this time, there's no escape."

"So here's something I've always wanted to try, especially now," Blue Overdrive commented, "And now you've given me the perfect opportunity."

She hit something on her morpher, and barking could be heard in the distance, charging straight for them.

"R.I.C.!" she commanded, tossing the artificial bone in the air.

All of them watched as R.I.C. transformed, instinctively moving into positions they shouldn't have known. Yellow Zeo and Blue Turbo knelt on the ground to support the base of the cannon, each with their female color counterparts behind them to help steady it. And the two Red Rangers moved behind, Wes with his hand on the trigger, and Eric with a hand beside his.

"But - how can you - you can't even use that thing!" Broodwing protested.

"Somehow, I think you're about to find out we can, the hard way," Quantum Ranger returned darkly.

"I'm sure we can come to some agreement!" he tried.

"Canine Cannon!" Red Time Force shouted, feeling somehow like it was something he'd done a hundred times already.

And somewhat to his own amazement, R.I.C. obediently began to power up.

Broodwing quaked in fear.

"Fire!" he ordered.

The sound of explosions and screaming was heaven, and distantly he thought he heard Broodwing shrieking "You can't do this to me!"

Music to his ears, he thought fondly, even as he felt R.I.C. transforming back into dog form beneath his hands. He knelt down for a moment to give him a pat. "Thanks, R.I.C.," he told him sincerely. He had no idea why the robotic dog had chosen to help them considering he was B
Squad's, but he was grateful all the same.

R.I.C. barked in response, wagging his tail happily.

"I can't believe we did it," Blue Overdrive breathed. "I mean ... Broodwing's gone ... right?"

Blue Turbo crouched down for a moment on the pavement, finally raising a small silver card. 
"He's in my hand," he said almost wonderingly. "After all these years, and I've got him *sitting* in my *hand*." He shook his head in disbelief.

"Can I hold him?" Yellow Zeo asked tentatively. "I mean ... Just to make sure it's real?"

Blue Turbo passed him over without question, and Red Time Force rose slowly to his feet. 
"Broodwing is out of our lives for good," he said softly, hoping saying the words out loud would make it feel more real. He smiled a little as he still felt numb. "He can never come after us or hurt our kids again." There were tears in his eyes, and he blinked them away rapidly.

A hand settled on his shoulder, and he looked up at Quantum Ranger with a faint smile. There was something in the way the other Ranger looked at him that he could tell even through the helmet, and he found himself laughing, hugging his husband and leaning into his shoulder. Because he knew. He knew what Eric was thinking, and he knew that Eric could tell that he felt the same way.

"We have really got to work on our timing for these decisions," he chuckled.

"Us? Timing?" Quantum Ranger snorted, even as a hand came up to touch his back.

"This is Turbo - I mean, Justin," he heard the other man say ruefully. He turned to watch him with a smile, leaning against Quantum Ranger. "The Newtech Rangers are accounted for, and we have a containment card in hand with the galaxy's ugliest bat inside."

"Go for Shane. Lab areas are secure. Zeo team is all here."

"Carter. Lightspeed has the hanger bay secured."

"Andros. Astro team is accounted for, and the prisoner vaults are safe."

"This is Jason. We've got all the weapons we started with, and a whole lot of scrap metal over here."

"Tommy. More scrap metal, and a few dents in a couple of Zords, but otherwise we're all right. Great job, everyone."

"This is Kat. The Command Center is once again secure."

"Let's meet up in the war room," came Kimberly's voice, and the moment she spoke it was obvious there was something wrong. "Kimberly out."

Red Time Force looked up at his team. "Let's go, guys," he said solemnly.

****

The war room was a riot of color, and he stood back against a wall with his team because he couldn't be sure who was who anymore. There were more Rangers than there should have been, and some of them were taller or shorter than he remembered. He stared as he saw Red Turbo perched on the table, because he knew for a fact that T.J. did not have breasts.
"Everybody quiet down!" someone shouted, and instinctively they all stopped talking.

Pink Mighty Morphin Ranger stepped forward, reaching up to remove her helmet and shake her hair free. She glanced around and sighed. "Will everyone please go to standby mode? I can't keep anyone straight like this."

The sound of helmets being unbuckled was painfully loud, and he glanced around automatically to see who was who.

The Zeo team Shane had spoken for apparently consisted of himself in Red, Dustin in Blue, and was that Blake Bradley in Green? What was he doing here? *When* did he get here for that matter? Beside Dustin, Nerina clutched Blue Wind’s helmet awkwardly, looking nervous.

Carter's Lightspeed team wasn't exactly anyone unexpected, although the sight of Karone in Green was a little odd. Hayley wore Blue like she'd been made for it, with an annoyed expression as she tried to figure out a place to put down her helmet so she wouldn't have to hold it. Ryan had an arm wrapped around Carter as he scowled at him, while Carter was favoring his left foot and trying to pretend he wasn't.

The Astro team wasn't anything unusual except for the presence of Red Turbo beside them, and he laughed when he saw Litania trying to untangle all her curls the moment her helmet came off. T.J. gave her a fondly exasperated look, moving to help, while Ashley giggled at them. Zhane looked up at Wes as he watched, smiling faintly before aiming a thumb back pointedly at his right shoulder, to the tiny silver S.P.D. badge he still wore. They nodded to each other in silent acknowledgement that no matter where Zhane stood, his heart would never settle for one group of friends.

The Mighty Morphin Rangers were a bit discerning if only for the fact that there were two Reds and two Black Rangers among them, which became considerably less confusing once they all removed their helmets. It was strange to see Tommy wearing White, but none of his teammates seemed to think anything of it. Billy had tried to explain it to him once, about how in death, Zordon had somehow reactivated all of the old Power Coins, Zeonizers, and Turbo Keys, but it had gone over his head almost instantly.

"Do we have everyone here?" Kimberly spoke up, glancing around. Nods went around the room, and she sighed in relief, shoulders relaxing. Then she braced herself, looking up at them all. "B Squad has been captured," she informed them. "We're not sure exactly when or how. Charlie's pretty sure it has something to do with Piggy."

"Wait - *Charlie*?" Shane said incredulously.

Something shifted in a corner of the room, and Wes stared as he recognized the A Squad. All of them looked exhausted, but strangely defiant. Charlie stepped forward, lifting her chin. "Piggy's been working all *three* sides of the war," she informed them all. "Grumm and Broodwing have been threatening him, and he's pretended to still be loyal to - " She paused, swallowing. "Cadets Landers and Delgado."

"What's going on here?" Taylor demanded. "Aren't you the ones who turned Cruger over to Grumm?"

Charlie visibly flinched, and Andros moved to squeeze her shoulder. "They didn't have a choice, Taylor," he told her quietly.

Charlie took a deep breath, and Wes noticed the way that she didn't actively meet anyone's eyes.
"We were shot down in the Helix Nebula," she began, her voice firm and strong. Her eyes on the other hand, begged for forgiveness and understanding. "We nearly - we almost didn't make it. We were ..." She swallowed again, and Sara stepped forward to rest a hand on her arm. "One of Grumm’s ships found us," she said at last. "He offered us a chance to survive, and all we had to do was give him Commander Cruger. Ran was sick, James had an infection - " She broke off, shuddering for a moment, before forcing herself to look up again. Tears shone in her eyes. "There was no other way for us to survive. And I gave him my word as a Ranger that I would keep my promise."

Sara squeezed her arm again, and James said solemnly "I promise we *all* made."

And a Ranger *never* went back on their word, Wes remembered numbly, staring at them all. It was a matter of honor - Jen had drilled that into his head years ago. And a Power Ranger without honor wasn't a Ranger at all.

"And the fight against B Squad?" Carter asked, his eyes narrowing slightly.

For some reason, that actually made Charlie smile a little. "Sky doesn't work hard enough if he's not pushed," she informed them all. "We needed to know B Squad would be strong enough to go after Cruger." She shrugged. "But after Broodwing stole the Delta Command Megazord, our obligations were over. We promised Grumm Cruger - we didn't say *anything* about S.P.D."

"That's when you turned the Delta Megazord to help B Squad?" Tommy asked, but he seemed curious rather than angry.

"We didn't spend months fighting so hard to come home just to lose it to Broodwing," Michael said fiercely.

There was a pause as A Squad glanced at each other. "And now we want to go after B Squad and the commander," Charlie said abruptly.

Behind him, Wes felt Eric and Justin tensing, and he reached back to hold them both in place.

Kimberly was the one who came to meet Charlie's gaze, her own calm and unassuming. "Why should we believe that you'll really bring them back?" she asked quietly.

"We owe them," Sara spoke up.

"Because B Squad is family," Ran spoke up from behind her teammates, moving to look at Kimberly directly. "And we don't abandon family."

"You have my word as a Ranger," Charlie added solemnly. "We won't come back with without B Squad and the Commander."

"And mine," James put in.

"My word," Sara agreed.

"My word," Michael promised.

"My word as a Ranger," Ran said quietly.

Kimberly reached out to squeeze Ran's hands. "Be careful," she requested softly. "I want *all* of you home safe, where you belong."
"Ma'am," they chorused, sliding into a salute.
"With both teams of S.P.D. Rangers gone, that leaves it up to us to defend this base," Kimberly informed them all. "We may have Broodwing, but no one knows what Grumm's up to now, which means we need to be prepared for anything," She looked to the center comm they'd linked up to the command center. "Kat, I need you to gather any of the S.P.D. staff who isn't on a Squad. If we're going to be setting up a base defense, we're going to need everyone willing to fight for S.P.D. Give them the choice to leave while they can, but gather as many willing to stay as you can get. We'll need them."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Aisha, Ashley, we're going to need a mobile medical center. We won't have time to be sending people to the infirmary," she continued. "And I want Carter in it as soon as you've got everything set up until his ankle's healed."

"I'm -"

She turned a sharp glare on Carter as he started to protest. "We need you at your best, Carter. The faster you let it heal, the sooner you'll be able to help the defense."

Carter sighed, and behind him Wes could see Karone and Hayley exchanging grins. "Yes, Ma'am."

"We need to protect the main entrance, the back, and both sides, as well as the Command Center," Kimberly went on. She frowned. "Can someone give me a map?"

Billy moved to bring it up, glancing at her and shaking his head slightly as he did so. "We also have possibly entryways through the hanger and Zord bays," he reminded her.

She scowled. "Darn," she muttered, looking worried. "Seven places. We'll have to split up Mighty Morphin again." She bit her lip as she thought. After a moment she glanced at Vanessa. "You couldn't get anyone at S.P.D. Japan?" Then she paused, blinking. "When did you get a morpher?"

Wes snorted, wincing as Vanessa elbowed him sharply in the ribs. "I wasn't going to sit around being useless," she returned. "And no. I couldn't get any answer at Japan." She hesitated. "They have an automated comms down message playing."

Kimberly paled. "Which means they're probably under attack, too."

Tommy put a hand on her shoulder. "They're not helpless, Kim," he reminded her softly. "We'll just have to do what we can here."
"I have an incoming transmission," Billy commented suddenly, looking up. "It appears to be coming from an inbound ship."

She nodded. "Put it through."

Wes paused as a sudden wave of *wrong* swept over him, so strong he found himself automatically clutching his stomach.

"This is Commander Birdie of S.P.D. Galaxy Command. Sergeant Oliver." The image on the screen tilted his head politely. "We received word that S.P.D. Earth was under attack. I'm bringing you reinforcements."

"Thank goodness," someone sighed in relief.

"I'll open the hanger," he heard Billy say.

"*No*!"

He rushed forward before he'd even realized he'd been the one shouting. "Don't," he insisted. "Whatever you do, do *not* open those doors!"

Billy looked startled, and Tommy was staring at him in surprise. "Wes, what are you talking about? We need their help."

Frustrated, he turned to Kimberly, grabbing her arms in desperation. "Kim, if you've *ever* believed in me or anything I've told you at all, *don't open those doors!*"

Her eyes met his, and she nodded sharply. "I'm sorry, Commander," she told the comm as she turned. "But with our current situation, I'm afraid I'm not letting anyone into S.P.D. Newtech without a morpher."

On the screen Birdie looked startled, and most of the room was staring at her like she was crazy. "You can't be serious," Birdie protested. "We came to offer you help and you won't even allow us to land?"

I'm sorry, Commander, but that's the way it is," she said firmly. Then she paused, her eyes narrowing. "And now that you mention it, we never had time to send out a distress signal. How did you know we needed help?"

"I -"

"And since when do you call me Sergeant?" she demanded.

Something in Birdie's face changed, twisting into a furious, dark expression. "Stupid girl," he hissed. "I knew I should have thrown you out while I had the chance! And that blind imbecile you call an instructor, too. Absolutely *worthless*!"

The base rocked wildly and without warning, sending more than one person scrambling to brace themselves.

"Earth will fall to the magnificence of Emperor Grumm, and I will take *personal* pleasure in watching you crumble at my feet!"

"Just try it, Fowl-up!" Kimberly shouted back, slamming a hand on the console to end the call. She braced herself as the room shook again, looking up at Wes as it steadied. "Thanks, Wes," she
breathed.

He nodded, trying to calm his racing heart. "Thanks for trusting me."

"Okay!" she shouted, raising her voice for everyone to hear. "Aisha, Ashley, get that medical center up and running. Carter, go with them. When they release you, join Lightspeed at the Hanger. Astro, Zeo, split the side entrances between you - I don't care who gets what, you decide. Tommy, Rocky, Adam, I want you guys back with the Zords. Use them as part of your defense if you have to. Newtech Rangers, you've got the main entrance again. Jason, Zack, Billy, and I will take the back entrance. Take any cadets or staff willing to help fight you find on your way, but keep them in the back. I don't want to lose anyone today." She paused to take a breath, her eyes determined. "Keep Fowl-up out of my base. Good luck, everyone."

"Ma'am!" everyone shouted, saluting.

As he ran for the door, helmet in hand, Wes could have sworn he heard Tommy say "Who *are* you? What happened to my wife?!"

****

"Road blocks in place?" Red Time Force asked.

"All set up," Yellow Zeo confirmed.

"Have we got everything in the parking lot in the path of anything that tries to make it into S.P.D.?"

"Every jeep that can be moved, and Sky's going to kill us if something happens to his motorcycle," Quantum Ranger returned.

"He wanted a new one anyway. C Squad is armed?"

"Armed and ready," Yellow Lightspeed assured him.

"And do they know to stay towards the back?"

"They know, but I doubt they'll do it," Blue Overdrive snorted.

Blue Turbo jogged over to join them. "Storm Blaster's all set," he announced.

Red Time Force took a deep breath, looking up with a start at sound of clanking metal. "That was faster than I hoped they'd be," he murmured. "Everyone to your positions!" he shouted. "C Squad! No heroes!"

"What about elemental attacks?" he heard Sora shout back.

He rolled his eyes beneath his helmet. "Attack however you can without leaving your position!" he called back to her.

He could hear her cheer as he grabbed his Chrono Blaster and moved to wait behind one of the S.P.D. standard jeeps for their attackers.

When he saw them, déja vu hit him hard. Yet again, a wave of endless robots marching toward him, a clear blue sky above, and no one standing behind him. *I'm not alone,* he reminded himself, blinking harshly. *I'm not alone. My team is with me. We'll get through this.*
"Wes!"

He started, turning to look at the Quantum Ranger as he crouched down behind Sky's motorcycle. "Don't forget!" the other called. He raised his left wrist, displaying his morpher.

Slowly, he smiled to himself. Somehow Eric always knew him better than he thought he did. He raised his own morpher in response, whispering "Partners," to himself.

Because he wasn't alone. His team was all around him.

He ducked the incoming blaster fire instinctively, coming around to fire back. Somewhere through the streaks of return fire, he saw bolts of crimson strike one of the Orangeheads directly in the chest, dropping it like a rock. He fought a smile at Sora's triumphant yell, aiming for a pair of Blueheads.

Storm Blaster charged through their front lines, Blue Turbo leaning out of the driver's seat to fire his Hand Blasters in tandem with the car's lasers. Some of the Krybots scattered, but he still heard the screech of metal of those that didn't. The car spun around, and suddenly they were in the middle of the battle, Krybots trying to climb all over the jeep.

"Get out of my car!" he heard Blue Turbo shout furiously.

He cursed, jumping up from his cover position and running to help, firing rapidly as he went. He holstered his Chrono Blaster as he neared them, shouting for his Chrono Sabers instead. The split second of distraction cost him a blast that knocked him to one side, rolling to his feet and slashing at the offender before moving on. He fought his way to Blue Turbo and Storm Blaster, seizing the Krybot trying to remove his friend from his seat and bodily throwing it.

He turned and ducked as an Orangehead came at him, coming up to exchange a series of sword strikes. A kick caught him in the ribs in exactly the same place as he'd already been shot, and he grunted, dropping to one knee. Throwing himself to one side, he just managed to avoid a downward stroke that could have been his last. He grabbed for his Chrono Blaster again with his free hand, firing rapidly.

It was only when the Orangehead went down and he climbed back to his feet that he realized he'd dropped one of his sabers at some point.

"Time!"

The desperate call made him look up. "Turbo?"

He couldn't see him.

There was nothing but Krybots all around him. He spun, slashing with his saber and aiming his Chrono Blaster at the same time. "Turbo?!" he called frantically.

The call didn't come again.

He swore, trying to get a look at the buildings to figure out how far he'd gotten from S.P.D. But there wasn't time - the Krybots never seemed to stop. He slashed wildly, trying to get some space between them and himself. His heart was starting to pound, and he couldn't tell if it was from adrenaline or fear anymore.

Something tackled him from behind, and he swung a wide kick, frantically struggling to get free. If he didn't get back up now, he knew instinctively he wouldn't get up again.
"I refuse to go out like this!" he screamed silently.

And then the Krybots on top of him were gone, and he could suddenly breathe again. He shuddered, clutching his Chrono Blaster close and hugging his ribs as he looked up. They'd taken his last saber and thrown it somewhere ... he didn't know where ....

The Red Dino Thunder Ranger was standing over him.

"*Conner*?!") he gasped, unable to believe his eyes. Oh, his ribs hurt.

"I kinda prefer Connie if you don't mind," the Ranger returned, glancing back over their shoulder as they held the Tyranno Staff out to keep the Krybots at bay. "Sounds a little more like a girl's name, y'know?"

It was then that he finally noticed this Ranger was wearing a skirt, and slightly shorter than she should have been. The way she stood was wrong ... The body shape was definitely wrong ....

It was Connie McKnight, he realized. Conner's niece, that his brother had named after him. Connie McKnight was the Red Dino Thunder Ranger.

"How ... " he managed.

She shrugged a shoulder. "Hey, Mel calls and tells me we have to get to S.P.D. 'cause Ry needs us, and the next thing I know, Heart's handing me a shiny red rock. I don't know any more than that." She glanced back. "Can you stand?"

"Yeah." The Power was surging through him, numbing the pain and clearing his thoughts as he moved to stand. "This isn't your fight, Connie," he said at last as he put a hand on her shoulder, because he felt he had to. "Thank you for the help, but you don't have to stay here."

She gave him a look he could read through her helmet. "What part of 'Mel said Ry needs us' did you not hear?" she retorted. "I don't care about S.P.D. I care about my family. And Dad says Uncle Conner always swore that the Fernandezes were family."

He smiled faintly. "Thank you, Connie," he said again. He turned to the Krybots in front of him. "Chrono Sabers!" he shouted, feeling them come back to his hands. He glanced at her. "Do you know how far we are from S.P.D.?"

"Does it *look* like I know Newtech City?" she demanded. "I followed the battle sounds and saw the shiny red thing fall down."

He laughed breathlessly as he glanced around at the building. Teenage Rangers were always refreshing in the middle of a fight. Wow. Third street? How'd he get that far?

"This way," he told her finally, pointing one of his sabers. "If we can get back about two blocks that way, we'll be at S.P.D."

"That's convenient," she remarked as she swung the Tyranno Staff around. "That's where I left Mel and the others."

"Others?" he asked as he ducked a swing.

"Um ... Mel, Ry, Heart ... I think they said his name was Hawk? I'm not sure I heard right, and it wasn't like I had time to ask."
The Fernandez twins, Heart Carson, and Hawk Oliver were the Dino Thunder Rangers. He probably should have seen most of those coming. Although Heart was a little odd.

"You still have a Thundermax Saber?" he asked, banishing his Chrono Sabers and grabbing for his Blaster again.

"Uh ... yes? That's the thing on my hip, right?"

He tried not to smile. "Put it in laser mode, and shoot at anything that moves and isn't wearing a primary color."

"Got it!"

"Follow me!"

****

The two Red Rangers burst through the final line of Krybots, leaving a wake of sparking metal behind them.

The fight at S.P.D. hadn't improved any. He could see splashes of Blue, Yellow, and White among the Krybots, but not enough to get a clear look at who was still standing. Even as he watched, Omega Ranger was being overwhelmed. He tried not to wonder about what might have happened for Kat to send him away from the Command Center to help.

"Sam!" he shouted as three Orangeheads knocked the younger Ranger flying. He raced forward, trying desperately to get to him in time.

And then a giant, swirling circle of light knocked him back.

Red Dino Thunder caught his shoulders, bracing him. "What is that?" she demanded.

"It looks like a time hole," he answered, staring in confusion. Hope surged. "But that would mean -"

And out of the time hole strolled a Ranger.

Dressed in silver with blue accents and gold trimming, a theme that was obviously designed to match Omega Ranger's. Her helmet made him think of a cross between a fighter pilot's helmet and a cobra. And judging by the way she stood, this new Ranger was definitely female.

"Time travel," he finished, trying not to show his disappointment. For just a moment ... he'd hoped that there would be more than one Ranger coming through that portal.

"Force from the future!" the new Ranger called defiantly. "S.P.D. Nova Ranger!"

A small group of Krybots charged toward her, but she calmly reached for a morpher that matched Omega's. "Electro Mode!" she shouted. "Hi-yah!" A forward thrust of her fist, and the entire group went down in a brilliant flash of light and explosions.

"Nova!"

Whatever reaction he'd been expecting from Omega at the new arrival, it wasn't for him to surge to his feet, seize her by the shoulders, and demand "What are you *doing* here?! The commander's gonna freak if he finds you gone!"
"Yeah, you're welcome for the save," she sniped back. "I've just been looking all over the *timeline* for you."

Omega sighed, his shoulders sagging. "Thank you," he said more quietly. "I'm glad you found me."

She tilted her head, reaching up to place a hand on top of one of his. "I couldn't let you stay lost, you know," she reminded him.

Red Time Force swallowed. Something about the way they looked at each other made him uncomfortable, and he didn't know why.

And then the ground shook as something large, dark, and ominous landed directly in the middle of Newtech City.

"This planet is mine!" a husky voice rang out through the air. "And none of you, shall be able to stop me!"

"Cue the giant Zord battle," Red Time Force breathed, staring up at it in horror.

"Run little people, run!" the voice laughed, as the staff in the Zord's hand began to power up. "No more Power Rangers to save you now! You will all bow down, to my magnificence!"

"Everyone get clear!" Kat's voice rang out over the loudspeaker. "I'm initiating the Delta Command Megazord!"

"We've got to get out of the way," Red Time Force shouted to Red Dino Thunder as he seized her hand. "Come on!"

She screamed as explosions went off around them, sending cars and more than one person flying through the air. He squeezed her hand tighter, dragging her after him as he ran for the shadow of a building. Once there, he yanked her close, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. "It's going to be okay, Connie," he assured her as he could see her shaking. "Just calm down. Everything's going to be all right."

"How can you be sure?" she demanded, audible tears in her voice.

"Because it always has been before." He looked up, silently praying he wasn't wrong. "Because the Power Rangers have always protected Earth, and we always will."

He watched as the Delta Command Megazord fired repeatedly at the giant Zord. The Delta Command Megazord was huge, but this new Zord still towered over it. And one Megazord, with one pilot, would never be enough to take it down.

And then he saw the lasers hitting it from behind and above, as the Delta Squad and S.W.A.T. Flyer Megazords joined in the attack.

"They made it out," he breathed, relief sweeping over him. "Both Squads made it out."

"Look out!" someone shouted.

He whirled, instinctively throwing Red Dino Thunder behind him. He cried out in pain as a blast caught him straight in the chest, knocking him back into her. He heard her scream, and fought weakly to get to his feet.

He looked up to see Fowler Birdie coming towards them, sword in hand. "I'm going to enjoy this,"
he sneered.

There a long moment of silence as he stared up at the down-swinging sword, the gleeful look in the eyes of someone he had once thought of as his commanding officer. He had fleeting thoughts of Eric, Sky, Vanessa, and even R.J. as he waited, knowing there was no way he could possibly get up in time.

Something in Birdie's face changed. His sword suddenly dropped from his hand, clattering on the ground. And then slowly he slumped forward, falling face-down onto the pavement. 

The Pink Turbo Ranger stood behind him, Wind Fire held awkwardly in one hand. "Yeah, that wasn't what I meant to do," the Ranger remarked, glancing down at it.

He stared, resisting the urge to rub his eyes. "H-\textbf{Hunter}?" he gasped out, one hand clutching at his chest.

He was leveled with a glare he could see through the visor. "Not one word," Pink Turbo warned, pointing at him. He paused, shifting Wind Fire behind him as he offered his free hand. "Can you stand?"

He tried, and cried out in pain.

"I'll take that as a no," Pink Turbo said wryly. He glanced over his head at Red Dino Thunder. "Can you help me carry him? We've gotta get him to someplace safe before one of the Zords steps on him or something."

"Does that actually happen?" she asked in alarm.

He shrugged, lifting Red Time Force up from under his arms. "I don't know. Never found out. Get his feet, would you?"

"Be nice ... " he wheezed. "Connie's ... new."

"And you should stop talking," Pink Turbo retorted. He glanced around. "If I remember right, there's a café a couple of streets that way. Let's get him over there."

He chuckled weakly at the thought. "Not Piggy's ... "

"Will he be all right?"

"He'll be fine. It's just blaster shock. Once he gets some time to rest, he'll be fine."

He smiled distantly at the sky as he felt himself being carried along. The Power was pulsing weakly through his veins, trying its best to dull the pain. The effect was something like being drunk, and right now, he welcomed it.

The ground shook badly enough that he felt himself slipping, but they caught him before he dropped. "We'd better hurry," Pink Turbo said grimly.

They weren't the only ones to find the café, which seemed to have been set up as an impromptu medical center of its own. Looking around, he found cadets scattered around, some injured, some helping take care of others. Blue Mighty Morphin seemed to be in charge of supervising the arrangements, while one of the Red Might Morphin Rangers was crouched down, dabbing water against someone's head. The rest of the Dino Thunder Rangers were there, White with her helmet removed to reveal a scowling Melody Fernandez, left leg propped up on another chair while she
and her brother glared at one another. Rhythm wore the Yellow Dino Thunder uniform, but lacking the skirt, standing with his helmet tucked under one arm.

White Mighty Morphin came to meet them, doing a double-take. "Put him there," he ordered. "Does he need something, or is the Power handling it?"

"Not sure," Pink Turbo returned, shaking his head. "He's still out of it."

Chip looked up as he was placed on the ground beside him. "Time!" he greeted happily. "You're okay!"

"More or less," he told him. He glanced around, frowning to himself. "Where's the rest of the team? What happened?"

"I'm not sure," he admitted guiltily. "Last I saw, Turbo said he was taking Storm Blaster to look for any stragglers, and Lightspeed and Bo went with him," he explained.

He gave him an odd look. "Bo?"

Chip shrugged. "We already have an Overdrive," he said simply.

He nodded, his eyes flickering over his friend. "Any injuries? How's the arm?"

Chip glanced down at his left arm, which lay limply by his side. "I'm fine, except the arm. I not doing as well as I thought I was," he confessed. "I mean, my arm's been doing a lot better than it used to be. I've done spells, and – “ He stopped, shaking his head with a quiet sigh. “The strain finally got to it, I guess."

Wes reached out to squeeze his hand reassuringly. He knew how much being a Ranger meant to Chip. "What about Eric?"

There was an awkward pause, and Chip wouldn't meet his gaze. "I don't know," he said at last. "I ... the last I saw him, he grabbed Sky's bike and said he was going after you."

Icy fear clutched his heart, and he tried to get up. But his body wasn't ready yet, and the Power couldn't do more to help than a faint surge of energy he couldn't do anything with. He made a pained sort of wheezing noise, and found Chip holding onto him with his good arm.

"Calm down, Time," Chip soothed. "You can't help him like this. Just lie back and wait a little longer, okay? Besides, it's Quantum. He's probably holed up somewhere cursing at the world."

He leaned against the other man, closing his eyes as he tried not to remember Eric slowly slumping to the ground amongst the blaster fire, a stunned look of pain on his face as he fell. "He ... he'll never let you call him that, you know," he managed finally, trying not to cry in frustration and worry.

"He's a Newtech Ranger. He doesn't get a choice," Chip reminded, helping him lie down again.

It was hard to say how long he lay there, staring up at the sky. No one removed his helmet, knowing the Power would heal him faster if he was morphed. Around him he could hear people moving, some in pain, some whispering words of reassurance. After awhile he closed his eyes, resisting the urge to yank his helmet off and press his hands against his face because this was not Aquitar.

They would be fine. B Squad was strong, and now they had A Squad to fight beside them. They
weren't going to lose. This wasn't the end of Earth, not by a long shot.

"It's down!" someone shouted at last, and he looked to see what they were talking about. "The Zord is down! The Rangers took it out!"

A wild cheer went up.

"We'd better get everyone back to the base," Blue Mighty Morphin spoke up, looking around.

White Mighty Morphin nodded. "Everyone who can stand on their own, grab someone who needs help!" he ordered. "Let's get everyone up and out of here!"

Chip looked at him, squinting for a moment. "I think your eyes are clearer," he declared. "How do you feel?"

He took stock of himself, trying to move arms and legs. The ache in his chest had only dulled, but he determinedly pulled his feet under him. The Power surged again, and he looked up. "I'll be fine," he promised.

"Then you're a fantastic liar," Chip informed him. "Cause you still look awful."

He grinned faintly, patting his friend's shoulder. "I'll be all right, Mystic. Can you morph?"

"I'm a Newtech Ranger, of course I can," he retorted, but his smile was wry. Because Newtech Rangers had a higher pain tolerance - something the first group of them had developed while fighting on Aquitar. Because there were times you didn't have the option to rest for a moment, and this was one of them.

It was harder than he wanted to think about to keep his feet under him when Chip stepped away, but he tried not to make it obvious.

"It's Morphin Time!" Chip called, moving his arms in a bizarre series of movements that made Red Time Force wonder what they were for. "Zeo Ranger II, Yellow!"

His eyes narrowed as his teammate stumbled slightly the moment the yellow lights faded. He didn't call attention to it though, only moving closer to him. "Be careful with that arm," he murmured, too low for anyone to hear.

"Try not to get hit again," Yellow Zeo returned playfully, but there was an undercurrent of pain in his voice.

They moved to the front to keep an eye out for enemies, because while they could move, they both knew neither of them was strong enough to support anyone else. Red Time Force thought he saw White Mighty Morphin staring at him, but the other Ranger didn't say anything.

He pulled his Chrono Blaster and moved slowly through the streets, keeping Yellow Zeo in his line of sight. The sound of fighting reached his ears once again, and he held up a hand for everyone behind them to stop. Glancing at his teammate, he pointed, gesturing for him to investigate.

There were several minutes of waiting, heart pounding as he waited for Yellow Zeo to tell them what was going on. Pink Turbo had moved up to take Yellow Zeo's place, aiming his Turbo Wind Fire with the awkwardness of someone who was still trying to figure out how to use it.

And then Yellow Zeo came running back to them. "The fight's not over yet," he gasped, chest heaving. "We'll have to leave the injured here. There's Krybots everywhere, Kim's going head-to-
head with Birdie, and Cruger's fighting Grumm. They need our help!"

"How many Krybots *are* there?!!" one of the cadets shouted in frustration. "All we've been doing is blowing up Krybots and they're *still coming*!!"

"Someone must have left the cloning machine on again," Red Mighty Morphin quipped, and he knew instantly it was Rocky.

"Cadets, stay here," White Mighty Morphin ordered. "Rangers, with me. Let's go give them a hand."

"Yes, Sir!"

The front of S.P.D. was a mess. Broken cement and fallen pieces of building were everywhere, and more than one overturned car blocked their path. Krybots were still circling a group of Rangers, and the Pink Mighty Morphin Ranger was fighting with Birdie just as Yellow Zeo had said, using a sword that he had no idea where she'd gotten. In the distance, the Shadow Ranger and Emperor Grumm exchanged furious sword blows of their own.

He fired rapidly, clearing the way, and swiftly changed back to his Chrono Sabers as Yellow Zeo charged ahead of him. He whirled away from a Bluehead, stumbled into a regular Krybot, and ducked just in time for them to destroy each other. Rolling to his feet, he slashed randomly at any Krybot that got in his way, more focused on getting to the Rangers than actually destroying any of them.

The last Krybot in his way stumbled back, and he found himself turning to just in time to see the A Squad Red and B Squad Blue Rangers literally threw a pair of Orangeheads into one another. "Still solving your problems with fighting, you two?" he gasped out, grinning beneath his helmet.

"Very funny, Dad," B Squad Blue retorted.

"Nice to know you haven't lost your sense of humor, Sergeant Collins," A Squad Red added sarcastically.

"Electro Mode!"

He turned in surprise as a crowd of Krybots went down in a heap of bright light and sparking electronics. Behind them, Omega and Nova stood back to back, each with a fist glowing brilliantly.

"Another one down," Omega quipped.

"And another thirty to go," Nova said wryly.

"The Lights of Orion!" Red Time Force shouted abruptly, frightening the Krybot he was fighting against into taking several steps back. He pointed one of his Chrono Sabers at the two S.P.D. Rangers in excitement. "*That's* what that reminds me of! That's been driving me nuts for *months*!!"

The Krybot stared, and he slashed it absently across the chest, turning to meet another.

"Good to see you haven't changed much, Sir," A Squad Blue spoke up from his other side.

He glanced at the other Ranger as B Squad Blue swung another Krybot wide, spinning around to end up back to back with his former mentor. "If I didn't know you Sara, I'd almost think that was a compliment," he teased.
"Good thing you know me then, Sir," A Squad Blue returned, nodding to him before dropping to one knee to fire rapidly at another Orange head. B Squad Blue stood behind him, firing a spray of blaster fire around them.

The two S.P.D. Ranger teams seemed to be doing most of the work in finishing off the Krybots. Between the ten Delta Enforcers and Omega and Nova's Electro Mode, there was nothing but pile after pile of robotic parts. The remaining Rangers cleaned up what managed to get through, and before long he realized he'd was looking around for something to fight and coming up blank.

A loud clang made him spin around just in time to see Grumm on his knees, Shadow Ranger standing over him with sword held ready. The shattered pieces of Grumm's staff lay around him as he stared up at the Ranger.

A deathly still settled over the area.

"Show me no mercy, Cruger," Grumm demanded weakly. "No mercy!"

Shadow Ranger struck, and everyone stared as Grumm's single horn went flying. Grumm howled in fury and pain, clutching at his head.

"Now they match," Shadow informed him flatly, holding out his morpher. "Confinement Mode!"

There was a long silence as Shadow Ranger powered down, kneeling to pick something up off the pavement. Cruger stared at the card for a moment. At last he raised his head, holding the card high. "Justice is served!" he shouted.

A rugged cheer went through them all, everyone too exhausted to summon the energy for much enthusiasm.

"Power down," Red Time Force murmured, trying not to stumble as the Power faded. He reached up to run his fingers through sweat-soaked hair, taking several deep breaths. It was over. Grumm was gone.

*Grumm was gone.*

Automatically he took stock of everyone around him. Both B Squad and A Squad were accounted for, gathered in pairs of Color in various parts of the area. He smiled as Syd and Ran exchanged hugs, while James said something that made Z laugh and punch him in the shoulder. Bridge was talking eagerly to a rather bemused Michael. Sara and Sky were looking for more intruders as if they couldn't quite believe they were all gone, and Jack and Charlie seemed to be engaged in a heated debate. He watched them warily for a moment, but neither one actually moved to hit the other, so he continued looking around.

Tommy was running to Kimberly, sweeping her up in a hug and spinning her around as she laughed more openly than he'd seen her do in months. The moment he set her down, she was yanking him towards her for a passionate kiss, arms thrown tightly around his neck. In one hand, she clutched a tiny silver card.

Rocky and Billy had their hands clasped as they celebrated, exchanging weary grins before going to greet Tommy and Kimberly as well. C Squad and the Dino Thunder Rangers emerged from up the street, Yellow Dino Thunder carrying White on his back. Much as with everyone else, the teens were tired, but relieved.

He saw Hunter stopping to talk to Tommy, Dana ranting at Chip as he sat on the ground looking sheepish. Justin was leaning against Storm Blaster as Cassie tried to hug the breath out of him and
Ko-lin tried fruitlessly to pry her off. Carlos standing beside them, shaking his head and wincing at the overturned car lying a few feet away. Taylor had perched on Storm Blaster's bumper, and was leaning over to talk to Vanessa in the back, who seemed to have something covering her eyes.

But no matter how far he looked, still couldn't find the person he was looking for.

"Let's get everyone inside!" Kimberly called over the din as she came towards them, Tommy's arm around her waist as she held Billy's hand with free one. "I want everybody with an injury in the infirmary, and if you're not injured you should be taking someone else there!" She stepped away from her teammates turned to glare at Cruger as she approached him. "You," she said flatly, poking her finger into his chest, "Scared ten years off my life. Don't do it again."

"My apologies," Cruger returned, looking amused.

She reached up to hug him, forcing him to lean over and nearly engulf her in return. When they separated, she turned with a playful smile tugging at her mouth and hands on her hips. "Did I or did I not just give an order? Let's get moving everyone!"

****

It seemed like hours had passed before he was finally cleared from the infirmary. He told Chip to stay there and relax for awhile, got yelled at by Taylor and Vanessa, the latter of the two immediately hugging him and refusing to let go. He found Sky and the rest of the two Squads, fussed and was fussed over. Then there was cleanup, removing the rubble from the outside of S.P.D. and trying to clean up the mess inside. He ran into Justin outside, who was trying to fix up Storm Blaster, and was yelled at again for disappearing on them.

The work took long enough that by the time the announcement came over the loudspeakers for everyone to meet in the hanger, he'd barely noticed it was getting dark.

The hanger was full of S.P.D. staff and cadets, some bandaged, some not. Everyone had arranged themselves by Squad, department, or Ranger team, and he absentely swept his gaze over them all as he took his place among the Newtech Rangers. The hanger was still battered, but intact, much like the rest of S.P.D.

Somehow, he wished he could find the will to care more.

"Today, Earth can celebrate," Cruger began as he stood before them all. Tommy, Kimberly, and Hunter on either side of him, while the rest of the room remained at attention. "We have our greatest enemy in containment, held in a place where he will not be released again. Where that place is, only a select few know, to keep our planet and our galaxies safe.

"This battle has been S.P.D. Earth's finest hour. I cannot say how proud I am of each and every one of you. When things were at their worst, you rose to the occasion most admirably. S.P.D. Newtech still stands today because of your determination and integrity.

"Unfortunately, this battle has not also been without loss. While we have defeated Emperor Grumm at last, we have learned that his reach has stretched farther than we could ever have imagined - even to S.P.D. itself. Fowler Birdie and several members of his staff have been arrested, leaving Galaxy Command without leadership. As a result, I have been offered the position of Supreme Commander of Galaxy Command."

Cries of protest rang out from the crowd.

"Quiet!" Cruger bellowed. He waited as they begrudgingly complied, and when he spoke again it
"was gentle. "I am grateful for your loyalty." He paused, his eyes sweeping over the Rangers before moving to the three at his side. "And your friendship. I have learned much from S.P.D. Earth. Galaxy Command needs someone with the knowledge and determination to restore S.P.D. to its former glory and integrity. On that need alone, I have decided to accept the position. But rest assured, I will *always* consider Earth to be my home."

He cleared his throat. "As a result of my new position, I have decided to promote Deputy Commander Thomas Oliver to Commander of S.P.D. Newtech. In addition, I am promoting Sergeant Kimberly Oliver to Deputy Commander, as well as Ranger Commander."

Beside him, Kimberly was glaring with a look that clearly said she wanted to kick him in the shin.

"This is a new day for S.P.D., a new year. We find ourselves surrounded by new friends," He gestured to the Dino Thunder Rangers, "And the return of old ones." His hand moved to include A Squad, and even from where he was standing Wes could see Charlie swallow hard. "We must work hard, all of us together, to keep the organization of S.P.D. at the honorable standards S.P.D. Earth has show us all today."

He looked like he was going to say something else, but Hunter suddenly stepped forward, raising a hand. "S.P.D. may have a new year ahead of us, but some things should never be left in the past," he informed them. "I got word just a little while ago that S.P.D. Japan's rescue team brought home a group of refugees they rescued from one of Grumm's slave ships. I think it's time those refugees got a proper welcome home, don't you?"

There was a murmur of confusion among the staff, and then Hunter pointed.

Standing at the top of the stairs behind them, Rose Ortiz stood beside what could only be a female Syrian. She looked tired and her scales were dull, but she carried herself with a grace that spoke of a woman who had suffered, and survived. She looked out over crowd, lighting up as she caught sight of Cruger. "Doggie!"

Cruger looked completely stunned. He actually glanced at Hunter for a moment, who reached out to pat his arm reassuringly. Then he looked up, shouting "Isinia!" with a note of joy Wes had never heard him use before, bolting through the crowd and up the stairs to her side.

And then there was Justin was shouting for Rose, running forward to catch her in his arms as she ran down the stairs. They kissed passionately, breaking apart only as Z joined them, allowing mother and daughter to embrace for the first time in years. He could see Cassie crying as she hugged Ran, Ko-lin hovering over them both protectively. Ryan had Dana in a bear hug that lifted her off her feet as she laughed, and Carter was squeezing Syd against his side as she chattered excitedly. Carlos coming to see T.J. and Litania, who stood with *both* of their children, and Jack didn't even protest when his dad wrapped an arm around his shoulders. Hunter was being teased by Blake, Shane, and Dustin as he glared at them, Nerina hugging Billy with a complete lack of her usual reservation.

S.P.D. was safe, together, and reunited. It *was* a new day. A day that shouldn't have left Wes fighting tears.

"Okay, *what* did I miss?"

He froze as the voice came from behind him. "Eric?" he whispered, scarcely daring to breathe. "Eric!" he heard Sky shout, and he turned as his son ran to attack his step-father in a hug, something he rarely did in public. "Where have you *been*?!!" the teen demanded sharply.
"Lost," came the retort as Eric scowled at him. "I found Broodwing's hideout and finally got rid of all those darn Krybots. Apparently he left a general in charge of making more when he raided S.P.D. Took forever to destroy all the machinery. And then I had to *walk* back to S.P.D., because I crashed the bike and it's not exactly easy to fly the Eagle with a concussion."

"You have a morpher. You could have called," Vanessa spoke up, pushing in to hug him herself. She glared. "And when Aisha clears you for head injuries, I am *so* beating the crud out of you." Then she groaned. "I *hate* this censoring thing!"

"You're the one who grabbed the morpher," Eric reminded her, smirking.

"Did you just say you crashed my bike?" Sky demanded.

And then he was looking at *him*, and Wes couldn't move, couldn't speak. He'd honestly thought ... Begun to believe ... That Eric ....

He ran, grabbing his husband and seizing him in a hug so tight his arms hurt, and he could hear Eric's pained grunt. He kissed him until he ran out of air, pulling away to stare into his eyes. "You're alive ... " he murmured, tears prickling in his eyes. "You're alive."

And then he stepped back, and socked Eric in the jaw.

"*Ow*!"

He glared at him. "Don't *ever* do that do me again!" he shouted at him. "Do you have any idea what it's like to have to go through this *twice*?! Darn it Eric, stop trying to get yourself destroyed!"

Eric glared right back. "I am *not* trying to - "

"Wow," someone spoke up. "It's kinda creepy that you do that even now."

He turned instinctively to find Nova Ranger watching them, head tilted curiously. "Sorry?" he managed, trying to rein in his temper for the sake of someone who wasn't Eric.

She shrugged. "It's just weird, you know? That even back then - now, I mean, you still acted like this. I always thought it was old age or something."

"Who are you?" Eric demanded, looking at her warily.

"Huh? Oh, that's right! We haven't met yet. Power down!" she announced cheerfully.

Nova was about average height, with blond hair trailing past her shoulders, a mischievous smirk, and dark brown eyes that sparkled. She folded her arms, still smirking, and it was hard not to stare. "You can call me Nova, since I'm technically not supposed to tell you my name," she informed them. The smirk turned into a grin. "The commander would kill me."

She looked like Eric, Wes realized. She had his smirk, his jawline, and his brown eyes. The blond hair was the same shade as ...

"You ... " Sky stared at her. "You look just like Eric."

She giggled. "Yeah, I get that a lot," she admitted, tossing her hair.

"Nova!"
Omega Ranger was suddenly standing behind her, arms thrown up in exasperation. "What are you *doing*?" he demanded. "You're not supposed to tell anyone about their future!"

She shrugged a shoulder. "It doesn't matter anyway. They always said they decided after they defeated Broodwing, and that already happened. So seeing me isn't going to change anything."

"Nova ... " he groaned.

"Oh!" She brightened. "That reminds me. Br - uh, someone told me to give you this." She seized Omega's left arm, did something to his morpher that made it flash brilliantly, and suddenly they found themselves staring at a young man.

Sam definitely looked like his father, and he hadn't lost any of his freckles. Judging by the look of him, he was a couple of years older than the rest of B Squad - maybe early twenties. The only odd thing was his hair, which had gone from red to blond.

"What happened to your hair?" Sky asked, giving him an odd look.

Sam blinked up at him, then for some reason, flushed guiltily. "Um, well ... Would you believe it was a slight magical malfunction?"

"He was trying disguise spells and he permanently bleached it by accident," Nova informed them, snickering.

He glared at her. "Thanks, Nova."

"Anytime!" she returned perkily. She glanced around. "Now, not that I'm not enjoying the weirdness of S.P.D. fifteen years ago, but isn't it about time we headed home? I mean, the guys might be a little upset we've been gone for so long."

He stared. "... You didn't tell them you were coming after me?"

"And have someone tell me no? Are you kidding me?"

He groaned, rubbing his forehead. "I am *so* dead when we get back."

"At least you can finally get that shower," Sky told him, smirking.

Wes blinked at his son for a moment. He looked like Nova when he smirked. Or she looked like him. That was kinda creepy.

"I'm holding you to that," Sam muttered. He looked at Nova. "You have the portal key, I take it?"

She held up a device that looked sort of like a TV remote. "Never leave your own time without one!" she answered cheerfully.

Sam glanced at her and shook his head, but something about it was oddly fond. "I missed you, Nova," he chuckled.

"Hang on a second," Sky protested. "Z will kill me if you leave without telling her." He raised his morpher. "Guys. Sam and Nova are heading home. We're over by landing pad three - hurry."

Within moments Z was running over to them. "Don't you even think of leaving without saying goodbye!" she ordered, flinging her arms around Sam and hugging him tight. There was a pause, and she stepped back with a frown. "Hey, you demorphed. When did that happen?"
Eric and Sky snickered as the rest of B Squad came to join them. "Sam! You're human again!"
Bridge remarked in surprise. He paused. "Well, that's not to say that you weren't human before. It's
just that - "

"Bridge," Sky interrupted with a sigh.

"Sorry."

For some reason, that made Nova giggle, and Sam elbowed her with a warning look.

"Thank you, Sam," Jack spoke up, stepping forward to shaking his hand. "Thanks for everything."
Sam accepted it with a smile. "You guys make it sound like I didn't have something to gain from
this," he teased.

"Goodbye, Sam," Syd said wistfully as she moved to hug him. Automatically she turned to Nova
and blinked. "Hi. I don't think I know you."

"Not yet," Nova told her, giggling again. "I'm Nova." She jerked a thumb at Sam. "I'm here to take
him home."

"Oh." Syd blinked again, shrugged, and hugged the other girl anyway. "Thanks for your help."

When Bridge went to shake their hands, he stared at Nova for a moment. "Oh, wow. You're - Hi."
She giggled and hugged him. "Hi, Bridge."

And then to everyone's surprise, she turned and hugged Sky. "See you soon," she told him, giving
a sweet smile.

He hesitated, then hugged her back carefully. "You ... you really are, aren't you?" he asked finally.

"I'm not supposed to tell you that," she reminded him, but her smile didn't fade as she stood on her
tiptoes to kiss his cheek. "Later, Sky."

"Bye, Nova," he told her quietly, giving a faint smile back.

She went on to hug a startled Vanessa as Sam and Sky looked at one another. "Thanks for making
my life miserable," Sky said abruptly, ignoring the way everyone stared at him for it.

Sam grinned, looking completely unrepentant. "It's not my fault - you told me to."

Sky rolled his eyes, moving to shake his hand. And then he suddenly yanked Sam close, muttering
something in his ear. Sam's eyes went wide, and he looked uncomfortable when he stepped back.

"Yes, Sir," he mumbled.

"You wouldn't be planning to leave without saying goodbye to *me*, now would you Sam?"

The young man turned, smiling at Cruger. "Of course not, Sir." He saluted. "It's been an honor to
work with you, Commander Cruger."

Cruger reached out to put his hand on Sam's shoulder, his free hand still clasped with Isinia's as she
stood behind him. "It has been my honor as well, Sam," he said solemnly. "Have a safe journey
home, you two."

"Yes, Sir," he and Nova chorused.
"Sam," Kat called, her smile warm as she approached. She gave him a hug, stepping back to look at him. "Thank you," she said simply.

"No problem, Kat."

"Stand back everybody," Nova warned as she lifted her remote, pressing a series of buttons. Another glowing circle of light appeared in front of them.

"That's our ride home," Sam sighed. For some reason, he didn't sound entirely happy about it. But when he glanced back at them all, it was with a smile. "Goodbye, everyone. And thank you, for making our future safe."

"Later!" Nova called cheerfully.

"Goodbye, Sam. See ya in fifteen years," Z said softly, her smile sad.

"I'll be there, Z," he promised. "Let's go, Nova. Goodbye, my friends."

There was a burst of light as they walked through the portal, and they were gone.
Found

Chapter Notes

I hated the original version of this chapter because it didn't seem to fit in with the story very well. So I rewrote it. This version was *much* more fun. -Evil grin-

For Starlit Purple and Rosabelle, who put up with all my whining, babbling, and complaining as I tried to write this chapter and encouraged me along the way. (And extra love to Rosabelle for beta work.) You're both awesome. ♥

Wes had an ability to know when things were going to happen. Whether it was something that came from his morpher, the Battle Fire, or just Wes being ..., Wes, was hard to say. All that anyone knew for sure was that when something bad was coming, Wes knew about it. Occasionally he could tell when something good was on the way, but he was better at judging bad. Zhane liked to refer to him as 'The Prophet of Doom'.

Eric didn't have any special psychic powers. What he *did* have was excellent observational skills. While he was lousy at meeting new people, he was great at reading them. And who needed social skills when the only people he cared about having in his life were already in it?

He knew his friends. He knew Vanessa would always do the opposite of what she was told. Taylor would only follow orders if she trusted the person giving them, or when she didn't have a 'better' idea. Justin *always* had a better idea, but you never wanted to ask him to explain it. Jason wasn't as arrogant as he liked to pretend, but Hunter was. Tommy, surprisingly, never knew as much about what was going on as he seemed to, but whatever he didn't know, Kimberly did. Don't mess with Kimberly. Never hide an injury from Aisha or Ashley: it's not worth it. Karone has a nasty streak hiding behind all that innocence, and anyone who says otherwise is a liar. Zhane enjoys being obnoxious, but he's one of the first people you on your side in a fight. Andros is one of the most stubbornly loyal people he has ever known, second only to Carter.

He will never, ever, understand R.J.

Yet there were two people he knew to a point that bordered on mind-reading at times: Wes, and Sky. Sky, because after four years of being the only father figure the kid had, they'd become closer than Eric could ever have imagined himself with a kid. And Wes, because after a year and a half of school, two years as Rangers and slowly becoming friends, seven years as a couple, and now as more than that, there was no way he *couldn't* know him.

Which is why, when he saw Red Time Force fight his way to Blue Turbo and his car, he knew something bad was going to come of it. Because Wes was a trouble magnet, and if anything was going to wrong in this fight, Wes would be in the center of it.

So the moment he heard Turbo shouting "Time!" without hearing Wes answer back, he absolutely did not panic. He swore as much as he was able, knocking a Krybot flying into the one behind it with more force than may have been strictly necessary, but it was understandable. Wes was about to do something stupid again, and he was going to have to go save him. Again.

Instead of panicking, he very calmly grabbed Sky's patrol bike out of the barricade they'd set up
and threw a leg over while starting it up. "I'm going after Wes!" he announced, not particularly caring if anyone heard him or not.

A hand grabbed his arm. "Are you crazy?!" Yellow Lightspeed snarled at him. "You can't just take off! We're in the middle of a fight here!"

"You can handle it without me," he said shortly, shifting into gear and lifting his foot off the ground. "Wes needs help." He brushed her arm off and gunned the bike.

"You *prick*! Get back here!"

Sky was right, he thought absently as he pulled out the Quantum Defender and shot at several Kybots as he passed. *This thing definitely needs a tune-up.*

****

The Kybots were *everywhere*. It seemed like no matter how many he shot down, there was always more to take their place. The blasted things just didn't *end*.

Even worse, they weren't the only things on the street.

"Let her go!" he snarled, snapping the Quantum Defender into sword mode with one hand. He slashed the Kybot across the chest, elbowing it sharply in the next movement to send it crashing to the ground. The woman it had been holding onto stumbled, but the other one still had a firm grip on her arm. At least it had, until he removed the arm from its body in a single slice.

The woman shrieked, and he shifted the Defender back to blaster mode, shoving it back into its holster. He pried the fingers of the arm free, tossing it aside. "Are you all right, ma'am?" he pressed, trying to force himself to sound gentle.

"I - I - "

He suppressed a sigh. He didn't have time for this. "Go to the shelter," he cut her off, squeezing her shoulder lightly. "There's one on Fifth Street. You'll be safe there." She stared at him blankly, quivering, and he gave her a light push in the right direction. "Go!"

"I ... thank you!" she blurted, still shaking. "Thank you so much!"

He nodded swiftly, gesturing again. "Go!" he insisted, watching briefly as she took off running.

He shook his head once she was gone, grabbing the Defender again and taking a moment to survey the street. No more civilians that he could see. Unfortunately no sign of Wes either, and that was definitely not good. "Probably neck-deep in trouble," he muttered to himself irritably, pausing to shoot at another group of Kybots as they came around the corner of the building across from him.

Wes, *where* *are* you?

He'd thought he was following in the only direction Wes could have gone, but now he wasn't so sure. He should have caught up with him by now. At this point he was wishing he'd thought to summon the TF Eagle instead, but that would mean abandoning Sky's patrol bike in the middle of downtown, and he'd never hear the end of it even if he dared to try. Besides, the Eagle only had seating for one; at least with Sky's bike he'd be able to take Wes back without having to strap him to something so he wouldn't fall.

*He's fine,* he told himself firmly, shaking his head and shooting at another group of Kybots as he
continued down the street. He's probably just lost somewhere. We'll meet up in a couple blocks, and he'll be absolutely fine. Heck, knowing our luck, he'll probably be the one bailing *me* out of trouble again.

He sighed, steering the bike straight into the rest of the Krybots, firing at them as they scrambled to move out of his way. He ducked under a return blast absently, shaking his head again with another internal sigh. *Who am I kidding? This is *Wes*.* Of *course* he's in trouble.*

The further away from S.P.D. he drove, the worse the destruction became. He rescued more people than he could keep track of, mostly small groups who were easy to free and send off towards the nearest safe place. The worst was the group from school: twelve kids ranging from kindergarten through fifth grade, with two teachers and someone's older brother from the high school. The Krybots hadn't been too difficult, but the kids were scared and crying, the teachers didn't want him to leave them alone, and the teenager was sporting a broken arm.

"Look," he said loudly, cutting into the argument as he struggled to keep his temper. "I can take you to a shelter. But I can't stay with you. There's too many other people out here that need my help. That's the best I can do."

The grateful looks they gave him made him feel guilty for hesitating in the first place.

"Okay, come on." He grabbed a couple of the smaller kids, setting them one after another on the bike. He managed to squeeze one more on it, looking them all over carefully. They were exhausted, but no one was hurt too badly. "Okay. I need all of you to hang on tight to each other, okay?"

They nodded eagerly, and the girl in the middle eeped as the boy behind her grabbed on a little too tightly.

"I won't let you fall," he assured them. "Just sit tight, okay?"

They nodded again, and the tiny girl in the front dared to give him a shy smile. He smiled back at her before he remembered she wouldn't see it behind his helmet.

He shook his head ruefully, glancing over the group before finally settling on the smallest boy. He looked like he was barely out of preschool, his blue eyes wide and scared. His right thumb was firmly stuck in his mouth.

He shouldn't, but he couldn't help it. The kid looked too much like Sky at that age. Keeping a firm grip on the bike, he leaned down to the kid. "Hey. You want a piggyback ride?" he offered gently. It wasn't easy, keeping an eye out for Krybots and walking down the street with one kid on his back while trying to hold up the bike with three more sitting on it. It occurred to him about three
blocks later, watching the teachers and the teen, whose name he learned was Landon - *poor kid* - keeping the other eight corralled in a circle as they walked down the street, that this probably wasn't the brightest idea he'd ever had. With one hand holding the bike and the other holding the kid, how was he supposed to protect them if they were attacked?

The answer came three blocks later, when another group of Krybots came around a corner - this time lead by a Bluehead. He spun instinctively to drop the kickstand on the bike, ignoring the shrieks of the children as the bike tilted slightly, but remained upright. Continuing the spin, he drew the Quantum Defender and swung the kid on his back into one arm at the same time, shoving the kid into one of the teachers. He charged forward, firing rapidly to bring the Kybot's focus to him. He rolled under the return fire, silently hoping the adults and Landon were smart enough to get the kids out of sight and bringing the Defender up to fire again. Three of them stumbled back, but the Bluehead just looked annoyed.

He muttered darkly under his breath, cursing whoever had studied the designs of Ransik's Cyclobots. The similarities hadn't escaped his notice: they were subtle, but still there. Which meant that this was going to be a lot harder than it should have been. Cyclobots had an annoying but convenient tendency to move in sync; Krybots didn't.

He switched the Defender to sword mode, charging forward again. He ducked under the Bluehead's first swing, reaching back to grab and pin it's sword arm as he kicked out at one of the ones trying to rush up behind him. He used the momentum as his foot came down to swing the Bluehead around and throw it into the trio that tried to attack him all at once, knocking them all to the ground. He slashed at the ones still standing, cutting more than one chest open and removing a few body parts. He spared the thought to hope the teachers were smart enough to keep the kids from watching: robots or not, this probably wasn't something they shouldn't see.

The moment of distraction cost him. One of the Krybots from the fallen pile managed to grab his ankle and wrench his feet out from under him. He landed hard on his back, helmet bouncing off the ground as his vision whited-out briefly. He shook off the feeling, rolling swiftly out of the way and kicking himself free of its grip. He came up on one elbow, snapping the Defender back to blaster mode and aiming at the direct center of their chests. They fell back, sparking, and he surged to his feet, looking around sharply. Nothing twitched.

He waited, pausing to kick one that didn't look completely destroyed just to be sure. It rolled limply, and he sighed, holstering the Defender again. "All clear," he said loudly.

It took a good few minutes for them to stumble out of hiding, all looking even more frightened than they had to begin with. The thumb-sucker kid shuffled up to him, looking up with those huge blue eyes again. He made an odd sound that sounded vaguely like 'okay'.

It was another minute before he realized that kid was asking *him* if *he* was okay. "Yeah," he said belatedly, absently ruffling the kid's hair. "I'm okay. We'd better get moving."

The kid smiled tentatively behind his thumb, and offered a hand.

The trip to the shelter took a good half hour. They were attacked six more times, and each time left the kids more scared than the last. No one had been hurt, but the teachers were getting anxious, the kids were tired and slowing down, and Landon was starting to look like that arm might be more serious than he'd been letting on. He eventually learned the thumb-sucker's name was Oscar - and seriously, who was *naming* these poor kids - and that the teachers were Emily and Quincy. He'd probably learned the rest of the kids' names, but by the time they finally reached the shelter, he'd forgotten most of them.
It took another five minutes to convince Oscar to let go of his arm so he could go back out to the streets.

"There are other people out there who need me," he told the boy finally, crouching down to look him in the eyes. "There's someone else I still need to find, so I can make sure he's okay. And I still gotta take care of the bad guys. I can't stay here." He brushed the kid's cheek before moving to squeeze his shoulder lightly. "You'll be okay," he promised.

Oscar stared at him before abruptly launching himself forward to glomp the Quantum Ranger's neck. "Be careful," he whispered.

It was the first time the thumb had left his mouth since he'd met the kid.

****

He'd barely made it down the street when the shockwave sent him and the patrol bike sprawling.

"This planet is mine!" a husky voice declared over a loudspeaker. "And none of you, shall be able to stop me!"

The Quantum Ranger was too busy picking himself up off the ground to care. He shook his head slowly, putting one hand to his helmet with a quiet groan as his ears continued to ring. "Not a good sign," he muttered to himself as his right side throbbed in agreement.

He looked up to see the hulking Zord towering over the city. "Run little people, run!" the voice laughed as the staff it was carrying started powering up. "No more Power Rangers to save you now! You will all bow down, to my magnificence!"

For about thirty seconds, time stopped. His breath came short and fast, his eyes wide in horror. He could see the blaster fire coming from the Zord, the cars and tiny objects that looked like bodies flying through the air. But none of that mattered. Because if there were no more Power Rangers, then ...

Sky, he thought weakly, struggling to reign in his emotions. His eyes burned as they closed, and there was a choked sound between a wheeze and a sob coming from somewhere. No. Not my kid. Not my Sky.

Reality reasserted itself a few minutes later with another shockwave as the Zord moved. In the distance he could see the Delta Command Megazord moving to stand against the other Zord. The ground shuddered as they moved, and he wondered distantly if they'd always made that much noise, or if there was something different about the way they moved today that hadn't happened before.

He put a hand to his head, shaking it carefully again. He was tired, he realized. He'd spent too long in morph. That was why it was getting harder to think clearly.

The Power Rangers weren't gone. Not if the Delta Command Megazord was still moving. That meant at least Kat Ranger was still fighting. And if she was fighting, what the heck was he doing sitting here on his butt staring at the Zords?

He surged to his feet, shaking his head again as the Power responded, giving him the energy boost he desperately needed. Okay, mental assessment. Tired, sore, but still functioning. A little slow mentally, which meant he'd probably been knocked around in the head one too many times, but nothing he couldn't handle.
He closed his eyes, thinking. Kat Ranger was handling the Zord. The Newtech Rangers and the
Squads would handle the fight around the base. What did that leave?

Wes.

The Krybots.

He hesitated. His first instinct was to find Wes, but the intense need to get to him was gone now.
He was still edgy, but not in the way that meant he needed to get to Wes right now.

Which left the Krybots.

It was a running joke among the staff that Grumm had a factory somewhere that produced Krybots
twenty-four seven. They'd always laughed about it, because seriously. The amount of resources
alone that would take? Besides, how could they possibly have missed something like that?

*Cloaking. Hiding the tech in an area we wouldn't bother to look for it. Keeping the production
underground. Paying off anyone who ran across it to keep quiet,* his mind supplied.

But where would they be able to find all that?

He paused, fists clenching as it finally came to him.

The Harbor District.

Growling softly, he righted Sky's bike, swinging a leg over. He raised the Quantum Morpher to his
face. "Morpher, map. Newtech City Harbor District." he commanded. His eyes ran over the
projection, narrowing as he silently narrowed down which buildings were inhabited, and which
ones wouldn't be big enough. He was left with three choices.

He shook his head, grabbing the bike with both hands as he turned it on. "Start with option one," he
grumbled to himself.

The sound of blaster fire made him look up at the Zords, just in time to see the S.W.A.T. Flyer and
Delta Squad Megazords joining Delta Command in attacking the other Zord. He smirked, shifting
the bike into gear. "That's my boy," he murmured.

****

The Krybot factory turned out to be the second building he'd suspected; not the one closest to the
water, but not the furthest, either. In fact, it was disturbingly close to where Jack had rescued
Bridge from Bork's cell. The Rangers had been barely a block away from it on more than one
occasion and no one had ever noticed.

Granted, no one else had ever been attacked when they tried to approach the building, either.

He swerved, trying to steer with one hand to avoid the lasers coming at him and shoot back at the
same time. He managed to take out the front line before one of the Orangeheads was smart enough
to shoot his front tire. He saw it coming, tried to dodge, but there was no time. The sound of the tire
bursting was loud even through his helmet, and he found himself flipping over the handlebars as
the bike went flying in the opposite direction.

He skidded along the pavement, and only sheer willpower kept him from demorphing when he
slammed into a steel pillar. He cried out in pain without meaning to, rolling over onto his stomach
on sheer instinct alone. The sound of more blaster fire jerked him back to the situation, and his
head came up in alarm just in time to roll out of the way of another round. Pain flared down his right side.

He sucked in a breath, forcing himself to focus. He cursed as he realized the Quantum Defender was a good ten feet from where he lay. Without the Defender he was as good as toast.

But if he didn't move, he was toast anyway.

He closed his eyes, drawing another breath, and twisted his body around awkwardly in a move that brought him to his feet and made him regret it in the same instant. The moment he was upright he raised his fists, eyes narrowing as he studied the Krybots surrounding him. Nine Krybots. Four between him and the Quantum Defender.

Piece of cake.

He kicked the one to his immediate right, sending it flying backwards into another behind it. The pair in front of him fell to several vicious punches, and he elbowed the one trying to sneak up on him in the gut, grabbing its head when it doubled over and slamming it against his knee before throwing it at another group. A roundhouse brought down the third, leaving one more between him and the Quantum Defender. He didn't even bother to attack this one, somersaulting right past it and grabbing the Defender on the way. He rolled back to his feet, bringing the Defender to bear and smirking wildly. "Oh, yeah. Time to party."

One of the best things about the Quantum Defender was its versatility. It enabled him to blast dozens of Krybots without ever needing to reload, shifted to sword mode with the push of a button when any of them got too close, and shifted back to blaster the moment he had breathing room again.

But it wasn't enough.

The Krybots never seemed to end. No matter how many he blasted, sliced, or otherwise incapacitated, there were always more behind them. And unlike Krybots, *he* could be worn down.

He cursed under his breath as he dodged a slice that came too close for comfort. There was nothing for it. He didn't have a choice.

"Mega Battle!" he shouted into his morpher. "Activate!"

The Mega Battle Armor was both a curse and a blessing. It was powerful, there was no doubting that. The blasters and the Mega Battle Sword alone made it worth the time and energy it took to use it. And the initial power boost it gave him was always a big help.

The downside was trying to *move* in the stupid thing.

Whatever idiot thought rollerblades in the middle of a battle was a *good* idea needs to be shot, he thought darkly as he skidded past the Krybot he was aiming for. He compensated by spinning around sharply, killing his momentum long enough for him to get off three shots.

It wasn't the first time he'd thought it, and it wouldn't be the last.

*I am getting *way* too old for this,* he groused, jumping into the air and spinning again to avoid more blaster fire. He felt his ankle give way as he landed, dropping him to one knee. He continued firing, even as he swore internally. He'd been morphed for too long; he could feel it.
The day Eric had first taken the Quantum Control Box, and by extension the Quantum Morpher, the morpher had connected him to the Power and the infinite source of knowledge that it was. It was what all morphers did, and his had been no exception. Which was one of the reasons why he'd always resented the Rangers insinuating he didn't know what he was doing when he took it. He knew *exactly* what he was doing.

The Quantum Morpher was faulty. Something in its design hadn't come out the way it was meant to, the way the Time Force Morphers did. He hadn't known everything then, about Ben and Alex and who or what they were, but he knew the moment he stuck his hand in that box, it was entirely likely the Morpher would destroy him.

He just hadn't cared.

Back then, his parents' divorce had just been finalized. He'd left college for Charlie's funeral and been dropped completely, which cost him his scholarships. There was no way he could afford to go back without them. His dad was hiding out at the cabin, his mom couldn't even look him in the face anymore. And his little brother, the one person he'd sworn to protect, to take care of no matter what, was gone. He had nothing left worth living for.

And what could be worse than giving his life to protect the city?

He grunted as his back hit the wall behind him, silently cursing again. Another downside of this stupid armor: how was he supposed to fire on anything with wheels on his feet? He braced himself, leaning into the wall and firing in opposite directions as he leaned forward a little, trying to keep his balance. Normally it wasn't this hard to use, but he was tired. He was kind of impressed he'd lasted this long without a problem.

Neon green text began to flash at the bottom of his line of vision. *Energy Levels Fluctuating. Loss of Power Imminent.*

He swore violently, swinging his arm around to blast at a Bluehead trying to sneak up on him. He needed a plan, and he needed it an hour ago. If he didn't come up with something fast, he'd be standing in the middle of a swarm of Krybots with only a S.P.D. standard-issue blaster.

"Mega Battle! Aerial Mode!"

It was hard to focus, hovering just high enough above the Krybots to keep out of sword range and still manage not to hit the ceiling. There was still plenty of blaster fire to dodge too, and his morpher was getting more insistent about its energy levels. He yelled before he could stop himself as one of them clipped his right arm, gritting his teeth as he struggled to keep holding on to the blaster. If he dropped it now, there was no way he'd be able to form the Mega Battle Sword.

There. It was almost impossible to imagine, but there was a large box-like machine along one wall, complete with Krybots standing along a conveyor belt as they added more parts. Fully formed Krybots came out the end, where a pair of waiting Blueheads did something to them with what looked like a divining rod. There was a sharp cracking sound, and the Krybot it touched sat upright, swinging its legs around to stand.

He swooped past it, firing on every piece of machinery and Krybot in his path. The Krybots when crazy, scrambling for weapons and trying to dodge his attack at the same instant, as if it had never occurred to them before that they might be attacked at their own factory. Somewhere he could hear an Orangehead shouting "Attack! Attack!" over and over.

He brought his blasters together, hovering lower. "Mega Battle Sword!"
"Time to end this," he murmured, powering up the sword. "Hyah!"

He swung three times, feeling the Power surge through him. He pushed for as much as he could, drawing on whatever reserves were left. He couldn't afford not to end this now.

The last thing he remembered was the sound of Krybots and something exploding.

****

--"We have really got to work on our timing."--

He groaned softly as the words echoed through his mind. Man, his head hurt. He was tempted to ask someone for ice, but that meant moving. And he was fairly positive if he moved right now he'd puke.

Okay. Mental assessment.

Head hurts. A lot. A tentative move to touch it found blood and made him incredibly dizzy, which meant he probably had a concussion. His arm also felt like he'd just set it on fire the moment he moved it, so there was something wrong there, too.

His left arm moved without a problem, but his hand ached and it was hard to move his fingers. Careful movement of his legs discovered more pain, this time in one ankle and down the outside of his entire right leg.

He really did not want to open his eyes.

The world spun the moment he did, and he lurched to his left, propping himself up on his elbow as he heaved. Closing his eyes seemed to help with the dizziness but not the smell, and he rolled over onto his back again, taking several deep breaths through his nose in an attempt to calm his stomach. Pain flared in his chest.

Great. And now bruised ribs at the very least. Just what he needed.

Okay. A plan. He needed a plan. Laying on his back next to a pile of puke wasn't going to get him anywhere.

He needed to get back to S.P.D., and as much as he hated to admit it, to Aisha and Ashley. The TF Eagle would be the fastest way there, but there was no way he was going to chance trying to fly through downtown with his head swimming the way it was. Which meant his best bet would be -

His eyes shot open. "Oh, sh - "

He lurched up to a sitting position, groaning as his entire body protested the movement. A sharp look around made his head spin and told him that he was sitting in a pile of rubble. Sky's bike was nowhere in sight.

He buried his face in his hands with a moan. "I am *never* going to hear the end of this."

For several minutes he stayed where he was, letting his body complain and waiting for the Power to respond well enough to let him move. It came slowly, which told him he'd *definitely* been morphed for too long. Forget about Sky and his bike; *Justin and Billy* were never going to let him hear the end of this.

-- Billy Cranston stared at him with an intensity he'd never seen in the other man. "Are you
mentally deficient?" he asked slowly, his voice low and threatening. "You confess to accepting a morpher that you not only knew nothing about, but were *aware* that it was in dire need of repair. Yet you continued to use this morpher without considering the possible repercussions to both yourself and the object in question? Even after making social connections to other Rangers and their teams, as well as various tech support, you never once thought to mention this problem, despite what it may do to your body, let alone what the possible outcome would do to those comrades who consider you to be a close and welcome companion? And you only *now* thought to mention this because it's 'making a funny noise'?!"

He turned to stare at Justin blankly.

"Your morpher has problems and you should have asked someone about it," the younger man informed him. "You're an idiot." He paused, considered, and abruptly smacked Eric upside the head. "And that's for not telling anyone that you knew it had a problem sooner. Moron." --

He rubbed his temple gently, sighing. It wasn't that the Quantum Morpher was broken, exactly. The problem was that if he stayed morphed for more than four hours - which was already pushing it - the system started to go haywire and eventually left him force-demorphed. Something about the way it had been built was wrong according to Justin, who'd taken the time to explain it in calmer, less migraine-inducing words. It wasn't that he didn't understand what Billy was saying; he just found it irritating to have to translate him long enough to hold a conversation.

Well, sitting here wasn't going to get him anywhere. The bike was probably somewhere under all the rubble from what was left of the warehouse, and even if he *could* dig it out, there was still a blown tire. He couldn't take the Eagle. Which meant he was going to have to walk back to S.P.D.

He groaned again. "I hate my life."

****

The problem with walking, Eric decided, was that it left you with too much time to think.

Well, that and it hurt like - well, it hurt a lot, to put it mildly. Between the sprained ankle, the road rash from crashing the bike, the blaster burn on his arm, the ribs, the concussion, and general exhaustion? He was about ready to just crash somewhere and sleep for a week.

Unfortunately, he knew better than to sleep with a concussion; especially when he'd already blacked out once. He wasn't sure what time it was, but the sun was getting low on the horizon, which wasn't a good sign. On the upside, he hadn't run into any more Krybots. The downside was that Newtech City was a mess, which meant his squad would probably be stuck on cleanup duty for the next week at the very least.

Assuming his squad was still alive, of course.

He huffed quietly at himself. F Squad was good. He knew they were, because he'd trained them himself. They'd be fine. They weren't some green rookies who could barely keep up in a fight. They'd be fine. Probably make fun of him for weeks for the way he had to limp back to base.

Just like B Squad. They'd probably laugh themselves sick at the shape he'd gotten himself into. The great Sergeant Myers, bloody and shuffling along at a snails' pace? C Squad would start spreading it down through all the lower Ranks. Even the illustrious A Squad would get in on it. It'd be all over S.P.D. by tomorrow morning.

He reached up to wipe the sweat from his forehead. Man, he was tired.
Justin and Billy would be all over him for stressing his morpher when he knew better. Probably Cam, too. Maybe even Hayley. She'd been hanging around Billy a lot these days. Kat and Nerina would probably be in on it, but Nerina wasn't pushy enough to really get involved, and Kat would be too busy dealing with B Squad.

*Vanessa* on the other hand. Now she'd have him doing one of Cruger's stupid senseless punishments. Cleaning out the mud swamp with a spoon or something. She'd be into that kind of thing.

Carter was probably right back into the Infirmary, with Ryan laughing at him behind his back while Aisha read him the riot act for doing something stupid. Zack was probably reorganizing security for the base and grumbling about how much of a pain it was going to be to keep track of things until they got the repairs done. Taylor and Dustin would complain about Tommy and the others trashing the Zord Bay and all the work it was going to take to fix it. Rocky and Shane were probably complaining about their squads getting stuck on cleanup, while Jason and Adam were probably volunteering theirs. Andros was probably trying to keep track of A Squad's rehabilitation and doing six jobs at once until someone else - probably Ashley or Zhane - forced him to stop. Karone was probably doing the exact same thing as her brother, but without getting caught. Cruger and Tommy were probably trying to organize everyone and keep track of everything, not bothering to notice Kimberly and Karone were already taking care of it. Not to say that Tommy or Cruger weren't capable leaders; the girls were just better at organizing.

Must be something about being pink, he decided, wincing as his ankle twinged again. Jen was like that, too.

Not that he'd ever really known the Pink Time Force Ranger all that well. Or any of them, really. He'd only ever bothered getting close to Wes. They'd been Wes' friends, not his. And he was fine with that.

They'd always butted heads, anyway. Jen, Lucas, and Katie all thought he was arrogant. Jen seemed to think he was an idiot, too. Always trying to tell him how he 'didn't understand' something. How he 'didn't know' what was really at stake.

The sudden flare of pain in his left hand told him he was clenching his fist, and he looked down at it in surprise. Darn. Popped knuckles. That was gonna be annoying to fix.

Trip hadn't been too bad, he supposed. He was kind of annoying, but at least he listened more than the others. Made the effort.

He smiled wryly to himself. And he'd know all about not listening, wouldn't he?

--"I promise to listen. I promise to always be there, however I can, whenever you need me. No more fighting alone. We're partners, now and forever."

The smile he got in return was warm, blue eyes sparkling with emotion. If they didn't hurry this thing up, Wes was probably going to start crying. Not that he'd ever admit to it later.

"I promise to stop hiding," Wes said softly, swallowing hard. "I promise to always be honest with you, no matter what. No more secrets. Partners in everything, whatever it takes. Now and forever."

"You may now kiss your spouse."

But he was already too lost in blue eyes and soft lips to hear the minister's words.--

He took a slow breath, stopping for a moment to close his eyes as his ribs protested. *Wes is fine, he*
told himself firmly. *Stop worrying about him. You know he's fine. He always is.*

Because Wes always came back. When the odds were against him, his friends from the future rescued him, he survived the war, his morpher kept him alive, his sight was restored. **He *always*** came back. Because Wes was just that kind of guy.

His ribs were *really* starting to ache now, and he found himself glancing around for a place to sit down. There was a large chunk of cement sitting on what used to be someone's car; he figured that'd do.

What was it R.J. always said? "People worry when they have something worth caring about. If it’s not worth caring, it’s not worth worrying."

He smiled faintly. Huh. Who knew R.J. had something worth remembering to say?

*I wonder if I can get him to make me one of his pizzas*, he thought idly. *Steak, sausage, bacon, mushrooms, onions, and bell peppers. Red sauce, because Wes is a freak and white sauce does not belong on pizza. Ask R.J. for some of that bruise cream he keeps stashed in their room while it’s cooking. Watch Sky play with Sheep and Jen while Vanessa lectures him about keeping the animal hair out of her lab. Laying in Wes' lap on the couch, listening to him talk about something I could really care less about ...*

The sharp pain in his chest was the only thing that alerted him to the fact that he was starting to fall asleep.

He blinked, shaking his head slightly, and took another slow breath. Right. Awake. Awake is good.

*Where is R.J., anyway?* he wondered distantly, slowly pushing himself to his feet with a grimace. *He should have been here by now. Ocean Bluff isn't *that* far from Newtech City.*

Eh. The hippy'd probably already beaten him back to base. He smiled again at the thought, giving another slow head shake. Probably already planning some sort of weird celebratory party for Grumm's defeat. R.J. was good with parties. He was good with anything that involved cheering people up or taking care of others, really.

R.J. a weird guy, but a decent one. He'd make a great guardian for the new baby. And Vanessa would keep him in line when he started getting weird.

He closed his eyes as his smile widened. He was having a baby. He and Wes were going to be parents again. The *right* way this time: together. Like it always should have been.

He limped along slowly for three more blocks, wondering what the baby would look like. Alex looked like Wes with his coloring. Ben looked more like him with Wes' coloring. Sky looked like his mother, but he had a few hints of Wes in there. So the baby would probably look more like Wes. He couldn't really say he was against that.

Probably a boy. The O'Neill side had a tendency for boys. The Collins were half and half. He'd like a girl, just because, but another boy would be good. Someone for Sky to look out for, keep out of trouble.

Keep them *both* out of trouble.

Because the kid *would* be trouble. It was practically hereditary; from both sides - not that he'd admit it. Which meant they'd have their hands full. But he didn't really mind that, either.
Kid was gonna need a good name, he mused. Something simple. Last name was gonna be a pain, though. And he didn't care if it was easier: there was *no way* Wes would ever get him to agree to hyphenate their names. That was just stupid.

They'd probably just use a coin. It'd be worth it to see that look on Alan's face again. See if they could get Sky to make that same look.

He chuckled softly at the memory, wincing as his ribs throbbed. Okay, laughing ... not such a good idea.

He glanced up when the pain finally died, sighing in relief as he realized where he was. Delta Drive. S.P.D. was just around the corner. He was almost home.

Home. There was a term he thought he'd never use.

Growing up, home was his baby brother. Charlie was the only permanent thing in his life, bouncing between military housings while Mom was always off on some new project and seeing Dad was even rarer. College housing had been just as temporary. Then they'd lost Charlie, his parents had separated, and he was struggling just to figure out how to find a steady job, let alone a residence. He'd lived with Wes for awhile, but even then it hard been hard to call it 'home'.

And now ...

Now he had Wes back in his life. He had his kids, whether they were lurking around S.P.D. or a thousand years in the future. He had his friends, his squad, his coworkers. He had Vanessa and R.J.

He had a family.

It hit him hard, just as he finally made it into the Hanger. There were people everywhere, gathered in crowds mostly by squad or department. His eyes automatically tracked all seven squads, all battered but more or less in one piece. All of the Rangers they'd had when he headed out for the main entrance were still there. Even the members of the Rescue Team from S.P.D. Japan were in the crowd. And - was that *Cruger* hugging another Syrian? Wasn't Cruger supposed to be the last of his kind?

But the two most important things he'd been trying to find all day were standing with their Squads, looking on at the people being reunited. There was even Vanessa was standing by Wes, holding her helmet and scowling as always. And that was what mattered.

He was home. *They* were home.

He sighed to himself in relief, even though he still had no idea what was going on. "Okay, *what* did I miss?"

Wes glanced up from his Shirley Temple, raising an eyebrow. "The first time I got drunk, I ended up with Sky. The second time I got drunk, Eric and Vanessa stopped talking to me for a week. I love my son, but I'm not doing that again."

"Don't you trust us to keep you from doing something stupid?" Leo wheedled.

Wes leveled him with a glare. "I trust Andros and Carter to keep me from doing something stupid. I trust T.J. to egg me on, Cole to have no idea what's going on - or at least pretending he doesn't, you to take pictures of it, and Jason to laugh himself sick while it happens."

"What about me?" Eric asked suspiciously.

Wes leaned over to peck his cheek. "I trust that you'll torture them all for ever allowing it to happen ... *after* it's over."

Shane stared at him. "What did you guys *do* before we joined these things?"

"You don't want to know," Andros informed him.

Beside him, Cole shuddered in agreement.

They hadn't had a Red Ranger Reunion in years - not since Mirloc first appeared. Even after Wes had woken up from his coma, it just hadn't felt right without Conner there. But Grumm was gone, both bases of S.P.D. Earth were under reconstruction, and the farewell party for Cruger and Isinia was over. And somehow in all the excitement, all nine of them still tied to S.P.D. had come to the decision they need a good, stiff drink.

Jason wanted to celebrate Grumm's defeat and Tommy's promotion, and had orchestrated most of it. Tommy claimed it was all due to the fact that his wife had taken his job and he now found himself in charge of a base that was not the same one he'd left. Hunter wanted to forget the fact that he had *ever* worn a skirt.

The rest of them had sort of fallen in after that. While the S.P.D. associated Red had been gathering, Rocky put in calls to Leo and Cole, who had come to join them with surprising eagerness. But then, as Cole had said when they'd all greeted one another, "Now that the Earth is safe again, it's time to celebrate old friends." Nick, Mack, and Casey hadn't been able to make it: Nick was working on cleanup at S.P.D. Japan, Mack was celebrating Tyzonn's return and spending some time with Sophie, and Casey had said something about a night in with Theo.
Things had certainly changed over the years, Wes reflected ruefully. They were all old men now, who'd fought their battles and gotten through to the other side. Shane and Cole were the only ones without kids as Carter and Eric had more or less adopted their partners', although Cole liked to call the menagerie of wild animals that flocked around the cabin he shared with Merrick their children. They had lives and families now; they weren't just a group of ambitious young Red Rangers, all out to prove which one of them was the best.

"We need a toast," Jason said suddenly. He lifted his glass. "To Grumm finally getting his, and Tommy getting stuck with all the paperwork."

Tommy glared at him as the rest of the guys laughed appreciatively, raising their glasses to meet his. "To Tommy!" they cheered.

"Thanks, guys. Really," Tommy said sarcastically.

"Anytime, Bro," Jason returned cheerfully, throwing an arm around Tommy's shoulders and laughing as he was he shoved away.

Shane was watching Hunter in amusement as he continued to chug his drink, at last slamming it down on the table and gesturing to the waitress for another. "You might want some water or something, you know," he informed his friend. "Cam's gonna kill us all if you come home stone drunk."

Hunter leveled him with a glare. "Cam," he informed him darkly. "Was one of the jerks who painted the pink stripe on my command chair."

Wes snorted his drink, accidentally inhaling it, and coughed as Eric pounded his back. He glanced up with watery eyes when he could breathe again. "Are you serious?" he wheezed.

Hunter gave him another look, and grabbed his new drink off the tray as it was brought to him, immediately chugging that one as well.

"Wasn't Cam the one who painted the green stripe?" Leo asked, eyes sparkling madly.

T.J. chuckled. "No. That was some of the cadets. They were trying to make a point."

"What point was that?" Cole wondered, blinking at them.

Shane snickered into his mug. "That Cam isn't just Hunter's second in command - he's the Co-Commander of S.P.D. Japan."

Hunter humphed in annoyance, but Wes was amused to note that he didn't actively protest.

Someone walked past them to the bar, barely brushing against Andros as they passed, but somehow he still managed to reach out and snag an arm through the heavy coat. "Charlie, what are you doing here?" he demanded.

The figure turned as the rest of them started in surprise, and Charlie scowled down at him "Getting a drink. What's it to you? I'm of age."

Andros sighed, rubbing his head with his free hand. "Sit down, Charlie."

For a moment, it looked like she was going to refuse, but she finally snagged a seat from the next table, spinning it around backward and flopping down with a sigh of her own. "So. Red Ranger thing, huh?" she asked after a moment, waving to the waitress.
"Reunion," Jason informed her. He paused, frowning. "Uh, guys this is Charlie of KO-35, A Squad Red. Charlie this is - "

"Leo Corbett and Cole Evans," she interrupted, nodding to Leo and Cole. "I remember studying about you both in Ranger History. It's an honor." She brightened as she received a drink that she hadn't actually taken the time to order, and Wes wondered how well the bartender knew her.

"Nice to meet you," Leo said, sounding amused. "You come here often?"

She shrugged a shoulder. "Lately? Yeah." She hunched forward slightly over the back of the chair, eyes darkening. "Got a lot of things to stop thinking about these days." She chugged her drink without warning, gesturing for another before she'd even set the mug back down.

There was an awkward silence.

"It's been a long year, hasn't it?" Wes said at last, staring down into his glass.

"You have *no* idea," Charlie muttered.

"I still can't believe it's over," Tommy spoke up, shaking his head. "If I hadn't held that card in my hand .... It just doesn't seem real yet."

"We've been through a lot," Jason agreed.

"And a lot's changed," Leo remarked thoughtfully, eyeing them all. "This isn't the same S.P.D. I used to visit anymore."

Shane smiled faintly, but there was a hint of bitterness to it. "That's true enough. We've had to work too hard to survive this year. Not that any of the other fights we've been through haven't been bad, but this one was ..."

"Every one of us was part of it, and we still thought we were going to lose," Eric pointed out. "That makes it more personal." He frowned, and Wes squeezed his thigh beneath the table.

"There were a lot of Rangers involved this year," T.J. frowned into his own mug, thinking. "Just how many S.P.D. Rangers do we have now, anyway?"

There was a pause as they all tried to think.


Eric shifted a little at the reminder of the newest Ranger, but didn't say anything.

"Fourteen Power Rangers." Jason shook his head, looking bemused. "And we started out with *five*. Man, you rookies can't keep up."

Tommy elbowed him as more than one person glared. "You ended up with six, you know."

"Well, yeah. But we were still doing all right before you joined." Jason grinned at him. "We just asked because you looked like you needed something better to do with yourself."

Tommy promptly dumped his beer mug over Jason's head.

"Can I get another round over here?" he called to the waitress politely as everyone else laughed. Even Charlie cracked a smile.
Jason gave him a dirty look as he tried to shake off some of the excess drink, but he grinned along with the rest of the table. "Thanks, Bro. I could have done without the shower."

"You deserved it," Tommy humphed, taking his new drink as it arrived and pointedly looking away from his best friend. He yelled as Jason seized him in a tight hug, soaking him as well.

"How did B Squad get so many Rangers, anyway?" Charlie asked, frowning a little. "When we left, they only had five. How'd they end up with nine?"

"Kat made Cruger a morpher, and he became Shadow Ranger," Wes explained. "Then the Omega Ranger came from fifteen years in the future after we received a distress signal saying that S.P.D. was going to fall. He stayed with us because he couldn't get home - he turned out to be an older Sam Thorn. Kat became the Kat Ranger after Birdie gave her a morpher to help stop Mooney. And then Nova showed up looking for Sam while we were defending the base from Krybots."

"Wait, *Kat* is a Ranger?" T.J. demanded. "How did that happen? And Birdie was part of Grumm's forces trying to attack Newtech City - I saw Kim's containment card. Why would he give Kat a morpher?"

Carter shrugged. "Our best guess was that he was trying to prove he was on our side. But the morpher he gave Kat was faulty, so it only lasted for a short period of time. Justin fixed it and gave it back to her as we were preparing the base defense."

"So that's why she was able to control the Delta Command Megazord," Wes murmured. "I wondered."

"I heard Kat's thinking of heading to S.P.D. Command after all, to help out Cruger," Shane added. "And if she goes, that puts us back at ten S.P.D. Rangers."

"She probably will," Hunter spoke up, still glaring into his mug. "She said she didn't like the idea of Cruger trying to rebuild S.P.D. with just him and Isinia."

Eric snorted. "Don't tell Vanessa. She'll plan the going away party."

"Ten Rangers isn't so bad," Cole pointed out. "Now one squad can rest while the other handles the emergency."

Wes paused, frowning as something occurred to him. "I don't think we should treat them as two squads anymore."

Jason looked at him, still trying to squeeze some of the beer from his clothes into an empty glass. "Oh?"

"Why not?" Charlie demanded.

He raised a hand. "Hear me out, Charlie. You're *all* Rangers now, right? All ten of you. B Squad finally reached your level. And if we keep treating you like two separate teams, we're just keeping up the old rivalry. For big emergencies when you need a full team, sure, send a whole squad. But if it's just a basic investigation, why not send whoever fits the situation best? It shouldn't matter the Squad, as long as they can do the job."

"I like it," Tommy said suddenly. He smiled. "Good idea, Wes."

"Sounds like more team building exercises to me," Eric remarked. He took a drink, raising an eyebrow at Wes. "The kids are gonna hate you."
"They haven't yet," Shane pointed out. "Wes pretty much took over B Squad this past year."

"Hey! I did not!" he objected.

Jason gave him a considering look. "Am I going to have to fight you for my squad, Wes?"

"You just might," Eric agreed over Wes' protests. "Syd, Bridge, and Sky still adore you, but Z goes to Wes before anyone else. They've gotten used to answering to him."

"Not true!" Wes argued. "Jack's talked to Kim when he had an issue."

"That was what, once? Face it, Wes: it's your Squad now."

"It is *not*," he grumbled, stirring his drink. He *really* didn't want this to turn become a problem. Jason had been furious over Cruger taking his Squad; he'd just stepped in to give the kids someone to talk to who was more parent and Ranger than S.P.D. He hadn't taken over the squad. That was ridiculous.

"So tell me more about how they did without us," Tommy spoke up, glancing between Jason and Wes. "I noticed you have a battlizer *and* a Team Power-up."

Shane shrugged. "The Battlizer was for Jack. Dustin and Taylor decided the new Zords needed a Team Power-up to go along with it."

"Two Yellows went for the Team Power-up?" Leo looked amused. "Somehow that doesn't surprise me."

"Who designed that battlizer, anyway?" Jason demanded suddenly. "I mean, the shoulder area is fine, but it looks like - "

"Jason," T.J. interrupted, holding up a hand. "Before you finish that sentence, remember that it's my son who's wearing it."

Jason held up his hands in surrender, and Cole abruptly sat up straighter, raising one hand for silence. His eyes drifted around the room, finally settling on someone in a corner. His brow furrowed for a moment.

"What is it?" Andros asked, looking wary. Ever since the first Red Reunion, when Andros had been forced to 'rescue' Cole, he'd tended to treat the other man like a younger brother.

Cole shook his head. "I'm not sure," he said softly. "When Jason started talking about Jack's battlizer, I sensed a lot of anger and defensiveness from that person."

Wes tried not to groan. "Please let me be wrong," he muttered. He stood up, eyes narrowing on the person huddled over their table. "Cadet Landors!" he bellowed abruptly. "Attention!"

The person jumped, stumbling, and jerked upright. There was a pause, and a groan.

Wes pinched his nose. "Jack, get over here," he ordered.

The teen rose reluctantly from his seat, pushing back the hood on his sweatshirt to reveal a disgruntled look as he made his way to their table as slowly as possible. "I'm not even on duty," he complained. Wes glared at him, and he hastily added "Sir."

"How did you even get in here?" T.J. demanded, snagging a chair from another table and gesturing
for his son to sit beside him.

Jack shrugged. "Apparently they don't card Rangers."

"Not that it would have mattered with all the fake I.D.s you've got, right?" Wes gave him a pointed look.

There was a pause, and Jack shrugged. "Nope," he agreed, raising his hand for a drink.

"Soda, please," T.J. told the waitress as she passed. "He's not old enough for alcohol on our planet."

She nodded, and Jack shot him a scandalized look. "I've been drinking for years! What's the difference?"

"The difference is that you're not doing it in front of me," T.J. said flatly, giving his son a look of his own. "And somehow I doubt Danny and Max allowed it either."

"What they can't pin on me doesn't hurt them," Jack grumbled, taking his soda irritably as it arrived.

"How long have you been here?" Carter wanted to know, frowning at him in disapproval.

Jack shrugged. "You guys came in after I did."

Jason considered him for a moment. "So what do you think, then?"

Jack glanced up from his soda. "Which part?"

Jason shrugged back. "Any of it."

Jack sighed, swirling his soda around. "It *has* been a long year, and I *don't* feel like Grumm's been defeated yet. There's nothing wrong with how many Rangers we have - and just because they're not here doesn't make Omega, Nova, or Shadow not part of the team anymore." The glare he shot them all dared them to disagree. "Kat should go with Cruger so he'll have someone to watch his back. Combining the Squads seems like the best idea anyone's come up with yet. Wes' team building exercises stink, and there is *nothing wrong* with my battlizer."

"Good memory," Hunter commented. He smirked slightly. "But you forgot one part of the conversation."

Jack sighed again. "No, I didn't." He looked at Jason. "Look, no offense, but I don't know you," he said bluntly. "I mean, Syd and Bridge used to rave about you all the time, and Sky sort of does in his own way, so I'm sure you're a good teacher. But the Drill Sergeant *I* know is Wes. And he's been my Drill Sergeant pretty much since I got here. When it wasn't Cruger, we went to him. He's been there for us, and that's the way we work now. I trust him more than just about anybody in S.P.D. - my squad doesn't count. So if you really want my opinion, Sergeant Collins already *is* B Squad's Drill Sergeant."

Wes stared at his drink, feeling distinctly uncomfortable and trying not to blush. Jack trusted him? He knew he wouldn't have said it if he didn't mean it - Jack wasn't like that. But ... he trusted him? Really trusted him?

That was probably one of the greatest compliments he'd gotten in a long time.

"Okay," Jason said at last, breaking the long silence.
Wes looked up at him warily. "Okay?"

Jason shrugged. "Okay," he repeated. He smiled a little. "B Squad is your squad, Wes. I'll take over H Squad." He shrugged again as Wes stared at him. "Hey, I always liked working with beginners. They work harder, and they need more reassurance. Besides, just because it's your squad doesn't mean they're not my nieces and nephews anymore." He raised his glass. "We're good, man. Honest."

Wes hesitated, at last raising his own glass to bump it against Jason's with a small smile of his own. "Thanks."

"So what are you doing here?" Charlie asked Jack, eyeing him over her glass suspiciously.

Jack shrugged a little. "Getting over a broken heart."


"I broke up with him," he interrupted. Something in his eyes seemed lost for a moment, then he shrugged again and took another drink. "It was for the best."

"How do you figure?" Charlie asked, giving him a dark look that abruptly reminded Wes she *had* been Sky's best friend at one point.

Jack let out a long sigh. He glanced up at her. "You know, if it was anybody but you, I'd tell you it was none of your business," he told her. He set his chin against a fist, leaning over the table. "But since Sky told me how close you two used to be, I won't."

There was silence as he seemed to search for what to say. "I can get over Sky," he said at last. "Bridge can't."

She started. "What?"

Another small shrug. "Bridge had a nervous breakdown about ... a month ago maybe. Sky made a comment about him needing to get set up with someone now that Heart's dating Ecliptor, and he started going off about how none of us trust him because we never believe in what he can do. Somewhere in all the words I actually figured out what he was really saying for once - and then I cornered Sky awhile later to prove it. Apparently when Bridge was whispering in his ear, it was to tell him that he's still in love with him."

The stunned silence was broken by Rocky's nod. "Yeah," he agreed quietly. "He won't say anything about it, but we can tell."

"But that doesn't explain why you - "

Jack held up a hand to hold off Eric's argument. "Sky was really freaked out about it," he went on. "Kept thinking it was his fault or something. Which made me realize that Sky still loves Bridge, even though he tries to pretend he doesn’t. So I've been thinking about it for awhile now. And I realized that they couldn't get over each other for two and a half years. I mean, I get the whole first love thing and all, but ... " He shook his head. "I don't think it’s like that for them. They’ve always been together, y’know? Sky’s always looking out for Bridge, and Bridge is always there to back Sky up. Something about them is just ... comfortable, I guess. Like they just fit or something." He sighed, staring down into his soda. "I like Sky a lot. More than I thought I would, really. But what’s between him and me ... it’s not like what he has with Bridge. They have something deeper. And I don’t want to be in the middle of that anymore."
He took an abrupt swig, setting the cup down to look up at them all with a light shrug. “So I broke up with Sky so that as soon as he stops being an idiot, he can get back together with Bridge.”

"Are you sure that's what Sky wants?" Wes asked after another long pause.

"Whether he wants to admit it or not, Sky still loves Bridge - that's why he's been so upset over finding out Bridge hasn't moved on. And his reasons for breaking up with him in the first place were stupid." He rolled his eyes. "Eventually he'll get over it, figure out that Bridge is still waiting for him and I'm not. So they'll get back together, and I'll find someone else." He shrugged and downed his soda with an abruptness that suggested he wished it was something stronger.

"What about you?" Charlie asked, giving him a look that almost bordered on respect.

Jack shrugged again. "Like I said, I can get over Sky. I love him, but it's not the end of the world for me if we're not together. When I tried to put myself in Bridge's shoes, I realized I couldn't hang on to someone for that long. If it's over, it's over. And as long as they're both happy and we're all still friends, I'll be okay."

Her eyes narrowed. "What's the real reason?"

He shot her an amused glance. "That *is* the real reason. I've been thinking about this for awhile, remember?" He paused as she continued to stare at him and sighed. "I realized I was checking someone else out," he muttered finally. "And if I'm interested in someone else, that means I can probably move on from Sky."

Charlie looked at him for a long moment. "You think too much," she said at last, handing him her mug before T.J. could move to intercept it.

Jack chugged half of it and choked, pushing it away with a grimace. "That's disgusting. What is it?"

"Kerovian beer."

"It's horrible. Keep it away from me."

"Yeah. Sure," she snorted. The moment T.J. shook his head and looked away from them, she handed it back. Jack finished it off without a second thought.

Eric snorted. "That's one way to have a team building exercise," he muttered, trying not to smirk.
You Only Hurt the Ones you Love

Chapter Notes

A conversation that had to happen, and kept trying not to. -Glares at Adam and Bridge- I don’t like it, but it’s another one of those chapters that I can’t seem to improve. >.

It had taken a lot of work to convince everyone to let him be the one to wait. There were plenty of people who wanted to yell, several who wanted to fuss, and most wanted to do both. Adam had been the hardest to argue with, but in the end he’d finally made him see reason. He needed to be the first to greet Bridge, for a lot of reasons.

Including some he wasn’t going to share.

He watched as the Time Portal opened, and S.P.D. Red stumbled out. "Ooh, that is not a fun feeling," he mumbled. "Power Down."

Then Bridge looked up and saw him, and went abruptly still. It was a good minute before he recovered, at last sliding into a salute. "Sir!"

"At ease, Bridge," Wes told him quietly. He gestured to Tommy's command chair. "Have a seat."

The teen hesitated. "Sir?"

He shook his head. "I'm not here as your commanding officer, Bridge. You'll get that lecture later. Now sit."

Bridge sunk slowly down in the chair, swallowing hard. "Then why *are* you here, Uncle Wes?"

He leaned against the console across from him, watching him carefully. "Adam told me once how he treated you while you were there."

Bridge froze.

There was a long pause before he swallowed again, and Wes could already see the shine of tears in his eyes. "A-and how was that, S - I mean, Uncle Wes?"

Wes sighed quietly, pushing himself up to move closer. Bridge seemed very young and small when he looked up at him, and he touched the teen's cheek in understanding. "Bridge," he said quietly.

And that was all it took for the tears to spill over. Bridge sniffled, trying to hold them in, but Wes pulled him into a hug before he could brush them away. Bridge clung to him immediately, and Wes could feel his shoulder getting damp.

He sighed again, stroking the boy's hair as he kept his feelings soothing and sympathetic. This was why he'd insisted on being the one to meet Bridge when he finally returned from the mission to the year 2007. Not to lecture or yell at him for stealing Jack's morpher and taking his place - which he really *should* be doing, even though he already knew it wouldn't do any good - but because he knew that after what Adam had said about his treatment of Bridge when they'd teamed up together,
Bridge was going to be heartbroken when he finally came home. He knew his cadets, and in Bridge's mind, his father had rejected him.

Adam's feelings on the subject were entirely different, but he admitted that he'd been rude to Bridge. And now that he knew his son, he knew just as well as Wes did that Bridge had taken away an impression from that mission that they didn't want him to have. That was why Adam had fought so hard to be there to meet him when he came home. It was only Wes' firm belief that Bridge needed a little time before he saw his dad again that had finally convinced Adam to wait.

It was hard to say how long they stood like that, Bridge sobbing into his shoulder. He didn't say anything, didn't make any empty promises Bridge didn't need to hear. Because Adam would fix things between them as soon as he saw his son again; that wasn't even a question. But it didn't change the fact that at this exact moment, Bridge felt that his dad found him annoying and childish. Outside of the family connection they shared, Bridge had learned that his own dad didn't like him for being the person he was.

Wes knew better, but he understood how Bridge might have interpreted it. And he could definitely sympathize when it came to having a father who didn't like you being who you were - he'd gone through that twice himself. He and his dad were closer now, but that didn't change the fact that at some point when he'd tried to stand up and do the right thing, or tried to be honest about himself, his father had refused to accept him.

That was the sort of pain that doesn't really go away, no matter how sorry the person is later.

He waited until well after Bridge's tears had dried before he moved away enough look down at him again. He inspected the teen's face for a moment offering him a small packet of tissues and a bottle of eye drops. Bridge blinked at him, and he smiled a little. "I've got some experience in trying to hide how you really feel about something," he explained.

Bridge nodded, taking his time in getting cleaned up. He didn't seem to be in any sort of rush to see anyone, and Wes didn't push. When he finally looked up, it was with a sad, pained smile. "There's no way I can get out of this, is there?"

Wes shook his head, wishing there was more he could do. "They're all probably pacing outside the door right now."

Bridge looked thoughtful for a moment, then shrugged a little. "Well, no use putting off the inevitable." His voice was deceptively cheerful, and Wes wondered if he realized Adam would see through that in a heartbeat.

“… Uncle Wes?”

“Yeah, kiddo?”

Bridge looked at him solemnly. “Thanks.”

He tussled the teen’s hair gently. “Anytime.”

The crowd of people waiting to yell at Bridge wasn't much of a surprise. Rocky beat Aisha to his side by half a second, immediately fussing over him. Aisha began checking him over for injuries, despite Bridge's assurances that he was fine, then smothered him in a tight hug. Sky was already lecturing in the tone of voice that said he'd been more worried than he wanted to admit. Z was yelling at him for scaring them, while Syd went for a guilt trip that Wes could have told her wasn't going to work.
Jack strolled over with a deliberate casualty as he moved past Sky to offer Bridge a morpher - the S.P.D. B Squad Green morpher. "How'd it go?" he asked, accepting his own morpher in return and sliding it almost absently into his pocket.

Bridge shrugged a little, and there was something off in his smile that only Wes, Sky, and Jack seemed to notice. "The past is safe and now I'm hungry."

"Wait a minute," Kimberly interjected, her eyes narrowing at Jack and Bridge. "Jack, did you know Bridge was going to help the Sentinel Knight in your place?"

"Of course." Jack gave her a strange look and shrugged, unconcerned. "I'm the one who gave him my morpher."

This of course, launched Tommy into another lecture about not being able to pass around morphers to your teammates whenever you feel like it. Jack nodded and looked contrite at the appropriate moments, but there was a glazed look in his eyes that said not only did he not care, but he'd do it again in a heartbeat. Wes was tempted to tell Tommy it was pointless, but he didn't want to interrupt when he seemed to be hitting his stride.

Instead Wes watched Bridge, and the way his eyes moved around the room without settling on a single person. He was smiling, but like Jack, it wasn't in his eyes. It took a moment before Wes realized just who was missing, and who it was that Bridge was looking for.

Sighing, he slipped out of the room and went to track down the missing Carson parent.

The search took slightly longer than he'd expected, but eventually he found Adam sitting outside on the fountain in front of S.P.D., staring off into the distance. The other man didn't react when he sat down next to him. Wes didn't bother to try and get his attention; he knew Adam would start talking when he was ready.

"You know back then, I wondered why the Sentinel Knight recruited Bridge for a mission he said needed veteran Rangers," Adam said eventually, leaning forward to rest his chin on his hands. "I kept thinking he was obviously a rookie, so what was he doing here? We needed Rangers who knew what they were doing, not a kid who couldn't stop staring at everything he saw. And the way he was always watching me ... " He shook his head.

"Every time I looked at him, all I could see was someone who wasn't serious enough about this, who seemed more like a big puppy than a real Ranger." There was a faint pained sound, and Adam scrubbed at his face with a hand. "I saw Rocky," he muttered finally. "I looked at Bridge, and the way he talked, the way he fought ... I saw Rocky.

"And then it kept bothering me: if Bridge was from the future, did that mean he was Rocky's son? And if he was Rocky's son ... " He trailed off and shook his head, swallowing hard. "Rocky and I had a huge fight over me going to help the Overdrive team. We'd been having issues before that, but ... " His eyes closed, and the grief and guilt in his expression was overpowering. "I thought Bridge was proof that I was going to lose Rocky someday, and I took it out on him because I couldn't handle that."

"... And now?" Wes prodded after another long silence.

"... Now?" Adam looked up with a faint smile. "Now I look at Bridge and I see coloring books, and late nights, and hugs, and skinned knees, and the sweetest smile I've ever seen. I see martial arts lessons and history books and computer pieces all over the floor. I look at him and I see Rocky, and Aisha, and Zack. I see the reason I have a family."
His smile faded. “I look at him now and I see my son, and how much I love him and how proud of him I am. And I wonder ... why couldn't I see that then? Why was I so self-centered that I couldn't even see my own son standing right in front of me and realize what an incredible person he is?”

He let out a soft groan as Wes watched him, running a hand over his hair in frustration. "How am I possibly supposed to explain that to Bridge?"

Glancing up as he noticed something out of the corner of his eye, Wes smiled. "Maybe you don't have to."

Adam looked up and froze as he saw Bridge watching them from the other side of the fountain. He swallowed audibly. "Bridge ..."

Bridge smiled.

It was bright, happy, and reached his eyes - the sort of smile Bridge rarely gave. It was the sort of smile that took people's breath away when they saw it. "Dad said I should talk to you," he said by way of explanation. His smile didn't fade.

Adam hesitated. "How much of that did you hear?"

Bridge shrugged absently. "I think I came in about the time you said I reminded you of Dad."

"Oh." There was a pause. "Bridge, I -"

"I know. I heard."

Bridge moved, and Wes smiled as he and Adam hugged tightly. He turned to head inside, figuring they could use the time alone. He didn't have to wait to hear Adam tell his son he loved him, or Bridge's reply.

Because if he already knew, obviously they did, too.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!