Brighter Days - An MMPR What-if

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Brighter Days - An MMPR What-if

by FirstCommand

Summary

This canon divergent fanfic explores three big what-ifs: 1) What if Saban caved and gave his actors great pay, leaving the OG team intact? 2) What if he kept JDF on VR Troopers and brought in Brad Hawkins to play White Ranger as planned? 3) What if Masked Rider continued only in MMPR, and to the point, what if Billy and Dex developed something neither are willing to name?

Chapter 1: Kiba

To the casual onlooker, the mountains beyond Angel Grove city limits are simply backdrop to the sprawling SoCal metropolis. But to several teenagers with attitude, they are much more. The rocky terrain gives cover to the area's best kept secret—the home base for Earth's mightiest defenders:

The Power Rangers.

The year 1994, in a word, is wild. The past fourteen months have let the world get used to the idea of aliens, almost to the point of indifference. Perhaps the reassurance the Rangers provide is responsible for this nonchalance, Billy Cranston reasons.

The genius teen spends many an evening in the Command Center alongside Alpha 5, the trusted android assistant to the immortal Zordon of Eltar, the tube-trapped mentor to Billy and fellow teammates Zack, Kimberly, Trini, and Jason.

Oh, and Tommy, the now-former Green Ranger.

Billy stands over the one console bearing a screen he installed himself, his first systems upgrade since the communicators he invented a year earlier. His task? Analyzing the trace amounts of green energy left in the now-defunct Dragon Coin. It's consumed the Blue Ranger for the past two weeks, which is how long it's been since Tommy, again, departed.

"It's nearly eight in the evening." Alpha, thought to be dormant, crosses the platform to join his human friend. "You require a third meal at this hour, if I am not mistaken."

Billy glances over, chuckles. "That's usually the case. I am hungry, indeed, but I've recorded some interesting patterns." He scoops the coin off the console and points to the claw at center. "Patterns that could support my theory on how to reenergize Tommy's powers."

Alpha, while never short on commentary, is silent. Billy senses the hesitation but doesn't press the issue. Instead, he clears his throat, sets the coin down, and puts the screen to sleep.

"Dinner, yeah. I should."

The towering pale tube at the north wall sizzles as Zordon materializes into view. The Eltarian's face appears as solemn as his young pupil's. "We appreciate your efforts, truly."

Billy nods and forces the smallest smile in spite of his sadness—their sadness. Grieving someone who isn't dead feels weird and somehow worse, Kim confessed to the team days earlier. Pondering the what-ifs has proven torturous for all of them, leading Blue Ranger to the fruitless endeavor of exploring a path back for Tommy. Zordon and Alpha, however, are far too merciful to say a thing.

"Good night, you two," Billy says, preparing for teleport.

"Good night," Zordon says back. "And may the power pro—"

The alarms.

Night attacks are rare, but tonight has nothing to do with Lord Zedd, because the alarms stopped their wailing in three seconds flat, the first sign something else is up.

"Alpha?" Billy asks with eyes back on the consoles. "Did… did our perimeter shields just—"

"Open? Yes," Alpha finishes. "Nobody can do that, unless they have a power coin or—"

"Unless they're me," Zordon cuts in. "Or of me."

Before Billy can ask a follow-up, a column of white light begins to pour onto the platform. Thi isn't some teleport streak, he realizes. The stream is cold and steady with an angelic aura, like sunlight sourced directly from Heaven. A figure shimmers center-stream and starts to descend. He, or she, begins as a shadow and ends as a fully formed figure with twin white boots touching down with grace.

A stunned Billy steps forward, but Alpha is quick to catch his arm. "Don't. Wait."

The light fades and reveals what appears to be a Power Ranger—a White Power Ranger.

"Greetings to all."

It's a male voice. Strong, yet soft. Billy and Alpha look back in unison at Zordon, who is stone-faced. "Hello, Kiba."

A quiet ay-yi-yi leaves Alpha as he falls back to the console nearest the tube. Billy stays put, his eyes taking in all of the White Ranger: the black and gold chest plate, the strange emblem at center, the curved blade at his hip with an unusual headpiece on the hilt. It all belongs to—

"Kiba?" A bewildered Billy looks back. "Who is Kiba?"

"Kiba is," Zordon begins, then pauses. The tension in the Command Center is thicker than a hundred Pudgy Pigs. "Kiba is my son."

Kiba looks to Billy, then Alpha, then back to who evidently is his father. He says nothing and neither does Zordon. The weight of the silence proves too much for Billy, so he speaks, nervously so. "Sooo… hi! Welcome to the Command Center. My name is Billy. Billy Cranston."

A hand goes out to the visitor, but he does not take it. Kiba moves past and approaches the base of the tube, then proceeds to unsnap the fasteners of his helmet. Billy watches intently as Kiba does this, and when the disguise is fully off, his hair face drops. Zordon's son is diabolically, breathtakingly handsome.

"Whoa—I mean, oh! You're human!"

"Eltarian," Zordon and Kiba say in unison.

Billy, sensing the tension break, smiles hard.

"Eltarians are humanoid to be precise," Kiba explains, his focus still trained ahead. "Human-presenting but biologically Eltarian."

Billy nods while remaining stunned by their unexpected guest's appearance. Kiba is the storybook definition of princely: golden blonde hair that's not too short nor too long, piercing blue eyes with a heroic gaze, and a square jawline that could cut ice.

"You look… well," Kiba says quietly.

"No need to humor me, my son." Zordon's face shifts to somewhere more fragile and less guarded. "I've been stuck in this time warp for some time now, as I am sure you have heard. How… how are you?"

Kiba doesn't answer. Instead, he lays a hand flat against his father's tube. The pressure produces a faint hum and hiss, which steadily grows as he pushes more firmly. The surrounding console and column lights begin to flicker, catching Alpha and Billy by surprise and causing them to step back.

"My son," Zordon says, firmly. "I understand you're upset with me, but—"

"That's an understatement," Kiba scoffs. He pulls his hand back, and the lights return to normal. "Do you have any idea…"

He trails off, unable to complete his sentence. Billy is moved by the raw emotion in Kiba's voice, as well as Zordon's—it's hurt and pain he's hearing, from both.

"I've crossed over a dozen systems to find you," Kiba continues with half the composure he started with. "For centuries, I've searched, far and wide. And every time I entered a new galaxy, I told myself—this is it. I will find him here. But all I found was trouble, Father. New enemies and new fights. I almost di… I…"

Kiba's voice is shaking. It's clear to Billy what he was going to say, and his heart breaks for him. Silence continues to fill the space before Zordon shifts his focus, which Kiba tracks to Billy and Alpha.

"Is this why you stayed, Father? For them?"

"Kiba, I never meant to abandon you—"

"Not so much a prison as much as a choice, huh?" The White Ranger zeroes in on Billy next. Billy tries to maintain eye contact but the staredown forces him to look elsewhere.

"And who are you to my father?" Kiba asks, reducing their distance to near zero.

"Um… the Blue one?"

"Blue one?" A galled Kiba spins back. "Father, the Blue one? You made this child the Blue Ranger?"

"Excuse you, but we look to be roughly the same age!"

"We are definitely not the same age!"

"Yes, Billy is the Blue Ranger," Zordon jumps in. "The other coins have also been assigned. To his friends."

"His friends?" Kiba laughs. "Okay. So that's how it works now."

"They're all great, seriously!" Billy says. "You'd like them… I think… I hope."

Kiba does not look convinced. At all. Billy reaches into his back pocket and produces his power coin bearing the Triceratops. The White Ranger stares at it for a moment, then shakes his head.

"I'm… I'm speechless."

"Technically, you're not, heh. Because you're talking." Billy's attempt at humor lands like Bulk inside a dumpster.

Kiba and his indignant stare turn away.

"I stayed to stop Rita, the Bandora Witch," Zordon continues. "Our two-millennia war ended in her imprisonment… and my own. But ten-millennia later—"

"Yes, yes, I've heard the story from others. She somehow escaped, and now Earth's survival depends on her capture." Kiba runs a hand through his messy blonde waves. "But is it true? The rumors? In my travels, I heard Rita's been banished once again, by your br—"

"Lord Zedd, yes," Zordon answers fast. Billy winces. "I am afraid he has returned."

Kiba's face shifts from sour anger to genuine worry.

"Oh dear, that's awful news indeed."

Billy winces again—because that wasn't Kiba. His eyes move to the blade at White Ranger's left hip. "It… talks? Your sword talks!"

"Saba, you've been quiet for some time," Kiba says, unsheathing the sentient weapon. "Did you have a good nap?"

"You know I don't nap—I transition into a meditative state."

The wide-eye curiosity on Billy's face catches Kiba off-guard as he approaches for a closer look. The blade's hilt is shaped like a visorless helmet atop a tiger's head, adorned with tiny red eyes and tiny white fangs that show whenever it speaks.

"Hello, Saba," Zordon says. "It is good to see you again."

"And you, Elite Commander Zordon."

Billy looks up from Saba. "Elite Commander?"

Zordon grimaces as Saba breaks from Kiba's grip and comes to hover between father and son. Billy again is mesmerized by what he is seeing.

"Master Kiba, if I may," Saba begins, gently. "Together we've scoured half the universe looking for your father, and today we have found him. And as I predicted, you find yourself hurt and disappointed, because your finished search did not close the wound. Am I correct?"

Kiba is silent, which answers for him.

"Take heed, child of Eltar," Saba continues. "A wound does not close because you found which was lost. It only closes when you understand why it was lost. The truth is you came here for a reason, so please… don't run. Stay. Stay for the truth."

Kiba looks over his shoulder at Billy and Alpha. Billy gives a perceptible smile in return.

"Though Zordon chose Billy and his friends, they chose to stay," Saba continues. "If you decide to stay here, to stay with him as you long-planned, it will be because you decided to—to close the wound and heal."

A visibly-fraught Kiba shifts his watery gaze to the floor, then back to his father who appears equally moved. Zordon closes his eyes, and Billy sees for the first time that his mentor could cry. Then, ever so gently, the gold emblem on White Ranger's chestplate starts to glow.

Billy's mouth goes agape as the Command Center begins to flood with White Light. It spills across the floor, over him, over Alpha, then climbs and consumes the entirety of Zordon's tube.

The chamber flashes pure white, and when it fades a second later, Kiba appears fully unmorphed, now wrapped in a fine princely garb. White, of course.

"The White Light has chosen," Saba proclaims, returning to his master's hand. "Now… let the healing begin."

Chapter 2: New Start

Another night in with MTV, AOL chatrooms, and my intrusive thoughts. Prodigious…

… not.

I've got to fix this noise emitting from my Compaq Presario. Until recent, the whirling and grinding from the beige box was a mere hum and helped me concentrate here in my garage AKA my lab AKA my spare parts depot where I pull gadgets from my blue spandex behind by request. But now, the whirling and grinding is louder and currently competing with Billy Corgan for most annoying sound (MTV is playing the Pumpkin's *Disarm* for the second-time since I turned the counter TV on, and I've yet to see *Buddy Holly* from Weezer, which honestly feels like nerd erasure.).

Apologies, but today's journal is going to be all over the place because *I've* been all over the place. The recent escalations from Zedd have been nothing short of challenging, but we somehow survived. I guess Kiba sticking around has helped somewhat.

Pfft… **somewhat**. Fine, he's helped *a lot*. I hate to admit it, considering how things have gone with the guy over the last few weeks, but Zedd's monsters have proven far superior to Rita's with a vast amount of strength. We absolutely needed a new Ranger, and now we have one. But not everyone's happy about it—including Tommy. We'll come back to him.

Since Kiba's arrival, I've officially discontinued Project Power Up, the name I gave my investigation into reviving the dead Dragon Coin. As he settled in, it dawned on me that I was trying to restore the coin as much as I was trying to engineer away my bad feelings, and I could never achieve either. Just as well, because for better or worse, we're back to six.

To be perfectly fair, Kiba is trying, but he's new to Earth, so he's getting a pass (for now). And I can only imagine fixing a multi-millennia estrangement with your spectral father isn't a walk in Angel Grove Park, but I see their thaw progressing fine. Every time I beam in after hours to help Alpha with logging and maintenance, Kiba is already there speaking with Zordon in their native tongue (Eltarian sounds like upside-down Spanish, if that makes sense).

I have no idea what they're saying, but I assume they've discussed his messy integration into the team at least once. And I'm don't type this lightly: the guy's a bit of a jerk.

For starters, he doesn't accept why or how his father qualified five teenagers to protect Earth from Rita, even after Zordon explained it three different ways. I only know this because Alpha's a gossip and has literally no one to spill to unless we're alone in the halls. *Ay-yi-yi.*

Then there's his first-ever visit to Ernie's, where he stared at Zack's chili cheese fries like they were a biohazard. After that, he bemoaned our "strange affinity" for Halloween, explaining it's weird to honor demons by emulating them and demanding treats without a trade offering. Trini smiled politely and gently explained the concept of joy for joy's sake—that when you're a human with a far shorter life span, silly little rituals are what make a planet worth

defending. She even offered to help him pick a costume for the upcoming haunted house party Jason's throwing. It was probably the first time Kiba had shut up and listened. Speaking of Jase…

With Jason, there are no Trini-levels of grace. Kiba had just spent centuries on a solo quest, so he has a thing about taking orders. He interprets Jason's tactical calls as light suggestions, probably because he thinks being older and Zordon's son makes him Vice President of the Power Rangers.

"Hey, buckethead!" Jason had yelled over the zord comm in a recent fight. "I'm the leader here! Why don't you chill and let me handle the Megazord formation, alright?"

"The Tiger Megazord would be far more effective over the standard mecha, Jason of Earth! Let me drive!"

"Stop with the Jason of Earth shit already, it's mad annoying," Zack grumbled.

And quickly, before I forget—that thing Kiba almost said the night he arrived: *"In my travels, I heard Rita's been banished once again, by your br—"*

Jesus. H-Drive. Christ. I ran the linguistic probabilities, and phonetics leaves very few nouns starting with b-r that apply to a personal relationship between two individuals. I have several ideas regarding how Zedd relates to Zordon, and I don't like any of them.

Oh good, Disarm is done and has been replaced by a teaser for the next Beavis and Butt-Head (looks like Beavis may finally find TP for his bunghole). I don't care either way, but those nimrods would be a welcome distraction from making myself journal about Tommy.

Tommy's been acting strange, and I think I understand why. We're trying our best to make everything feel normal, like he's still part of the team, but he's not dumb and knows we're trying. He's too nice to call it out because Tommy is always too nice, even when things are bad. Remember, this is the guy who pulled an all-nighter to salvage Kim's parade float after the Putties destroyed it. He's also the guy willing to get eaten by a giant mollusk just to annihilate it from the inside, with minutes left on his Ranger clock.

Tommy is and will always be the best of us.

Now, as I always do, I'm going to recount the last few battles, specifically the last three since Kiba showed up. But unlike my past records, there's no happy ending ahead—just another goodbye no one saw coming.

Two Weeks Ago

The weather is just warm enough to make you think summer never stopped, which is why picnicking remains popular, even here in late October. Saturday is the one day of the week where the Ranger teens don't have busy schedules to keep: Jason and Zack aren't teaching karate or hip hop kido, and the school clubs Kim and Trini captain don't meet again until November. As for Billy, baking the perfect quiche for the picnic Kim planned today is his sole objective.

Arriving five minutes early, which he calls being on time, Billy sets his covered dish onto the checkered blanket. Jason, Zack, and Trini are running behind, Kim says, so for now, it's just her, Billy, and an unusually quiet Tommy.

"Ooh, Billy! I finally remembered to bring you the new Cranberries!" Kim reaches into her tote and pulls out a CD. "I'm still obsessing over Zombie."

"Ha, same!" Billy takes the album and examines it, front to back. He considers placing it in the boombox, but Zombie is decidedly too somber for the mood he wants to curate, especially with Tommy present.

While Tommy's dark green henley doesn't stand out, it's a stark reminder for Billy of recent events: his friend's final battle, Jason's renewed guilt over the Green Candle, Kim pursuing a fortune teller for good news about Tommy, and the unexpected addition to the power team.

"Kiba coming?"

Billy looks up at Tommy as he sets the album down. "I did make mention of our scheduled fellowship when I saw him the other night in the Command Center, but he didn't exactly commit."

Tommy nods, then lies back on the blanket, pulling Kim down with him. Her giggle put a smile on his face, which was bordering on sullen the minute prior. Billy knows today was supposed to be a date, just the two of them, but plans changed (Kim's doing, which Billy assumes has to do with keeping her boyfriend included, if not making him feel comfortable around Kiba).

"Guess we'll find out in a second," Billy says under his breath, seeing four figures approach from the parking lot: Jason, Zack and Trini, with Kiba trailing close behind.

Tommy glances over as his expression shifts south. His smile isn't completely gone, because again, he's too nice for that. Instead, he wipes his palms on his jeans and stands to great the newcomer.

"Hey!" Tommy says, cheerfully. "Look at this, the whole crew's here!"

He extends a hand to Kiba, which the Eltarian learned not to dismiss. "Good afternoon. Good seeing you again. How are you?"

"Ha, why so formal?" Tommy cracks, finishing the handshake with a one-arm bro hug Kiba was clearly not expecting. "Glad you came, man."

Kiba smiles politely, then looks back at Trini. "I brought homemade fudge brownies," she announces, handing her yellow Tupperware over to Billy. "My mom's recipe."

"Heck yeah, love your mom's brownies!" Zack says, crouching onto the blanket. He reaches for the radio to pump up the jams. "I brought subs. Ernie's recipe!"

Everyone laughs, including Kiba, who doesn't quite understand why they're laughing. Billy's smile hangs, which Trini clocks after seeing his gaze hold in Kiba's direction. She also clocks the white-and-navy stripe polo Kiba is wearing as Billy's.

Days ago, Billy told Kiba his clothes were strictly on loan, but once he got a look at the fit, he knew they were Kiba's to keep. His broad shoulders, the way the polo hugged his back and chest—it'd be criminal to take them back. Perhaps a trip to the mall Kim's planning will give the 17-millennia-year-old some new options—Something less distracting, Billy quietly hopes. He and Trini trade knowing looks, meaning they will be talking later—in private.

The picnic continues on, and Jason and Zack are now in the field showing Kiba the basics of football, with Kim and Trini playing cheerleader off to the side. Tommy opts to stay back with Billy to help with clean-up, prompting Billy to ask if everything's fine.

"No, not really," Tommy answers. He picks up several empty cans of soda and pitches them into the recycling bag Trini supplied (Clean Up Club forever!).

"Oh… You wanna talk about it?"

Tommy shrugs as he turns back to gather some other trash, then pauses. He looks up at Billy with a type of sadness rarely seen.

"I'll be real with you, bro," Tommy says, stepping closer. "Kim mentioned you were trying to experiment on my coin, to figure it out."

Billy feels a lump form in his throat and nods. "Affirmative. It's true."

"It means the world to me, but… let it go, really. You don't have to stay up all night and… and… *fuck, bro.*..you've got a full team right here."

Tommy gestures to the field where Kiba is throwing the ball across the field toward Jason, though it goes too high and winds up lodged in a tree. Zack collapses in laughter.

Billy chuckles, but when he looks back at Tommy, he sees sad resignation staring back, causing the lump in his throat to double. "I, um… I recently shut the project down. I've hit way too many walls and spent way too many hours I had no business spending at the Command Center. And, you know… with Kiba here and all—"

Before Billy can finish, the air over the field cracks with a jagged flash of crimson. Energy bolts rain and hit Kim's purse by the picnic blanket, and within seconds, two grotesque figures materialize—one with a head shaped like a purse and the other a walking tube of Siren Song Red lip stick.

"We've got picnic crashers!" Jason barks as surrounding civilians scream and scatter.

Muscle memory is a cruel thing, because as Z-Putties start to appear around Zedd's gruesome twosome, Tommy is already flipping his way toward the action, landing cleanly beside the team, ready to rumble. Billy, still by the benches, cringes on the inside.

A clay brain lunges at Tommy, and Tommy easily drops it with a spinning kick to the Z. Pop goes the Putty. "Ha! Still got it!"

Jason starts to smile, but when he sees the army spread, leader mode kicks in. "Tommy, protect the civilians! We've got… whatever the hell those things are."

"Roger that, I—"

"Wait, no!" Kiba cuts him off, stepping squarely between Tommy and the advancing monsters. "You're out of power and have zero protection. You must seek refuge with the other non-combatants."

The words hit Tommy harder than any Putty could, right as Billy joins. Frozen on the lawn, he sees Jason and the team reach for their morphers.

"Kiba, he's fine! Let's go!" Jason shouts. "It's morphin' time!"

Tommy rolls clear, just in time for the surge of power bursting forward.

"White Tiger!"

"Mastodon!"

"Pterodactyl!"

"Triceratops!"

"Saber-tooth Tiger!"

"Tyrannosaurus!"

Back to Present Day: Billy's Garage

Tyrannosaurus finishes its echo as the CRT monitor flickers against Billy's glasses, while the cursor blinks rapidly at the bottom of the prose-heavy document, as if drumming along to Basket Case.

Before Billy can continue chronicling Zedd's surprise two for one, a familiar chime cuts through the grind of his beige box. It's a new instant message, propping itself front and center.

Saber-tooth-77: Y up so late?

Billy smirks as he considers an ornery reply to Trini's inquiry.

TriceraGeek: Why are YOU?

Saber-tooth-77: Diarrhea! U FINALY ready to talk about Kiba?!

From the TV, Armstrong sings about melodramatic fools, which Billy almost takes personally. He grimaces at the music video, then his chat with Trini. Switching windows, Billy scrolls up and reviews his admission about the polo shirt and broad shoulders. Anyone else on the team would question his word choice, but not Trini. She's the sole keeper of his secret, the one safe space outside his journal.

Billy slowly exhales as he reaches for the keys, types three letters, and hits Enter.

TriceraGeek: Yes

Chapter 3: Magnetic

Billy, fresh from a shower, is more than ready for bed. His tired eyes cut to the alarm clock before setting his glasses down beside it. "2:06 A.M. Damn."

His late night IM with Trini went longer than intended, which turned into a phone call halfway through because paying for extra dial-up hours is in neither of their budgets.

So... she knows. Trini now knows I kinda have a thing for Kiba. Crap... Why did I... Crap!

Billy, his back flat against the bed, stares at the slow-spinning ceiling fan above, his mind combing over everything he confessed to his best friend and greatest confidant. Trini's ability to listen with zero interjection is something he's always admired about her. Since the day they met in the fifth grade, Trini's been a nurturer, always there to calm the storm by offering an ear—especially when Billy revealed his first guy crush a year earlier: Nightwing. Yes, *Nightwing*, the fictional superhero.

"Are you sure you even like Kiba like that? Or are you simply infatuated with an avatar of all the worlds you're dying to explore?"

"That, um... wow. That's a fair question, Trini." (A stupidly attractive avatar, but a fair question nonetheless.)

Billy turns on his side while replaying the rest of the conversation in his head, all while staring out his bedroom window. The stars dotting the night sky represent all the possibilities and mysteries of the universe, which he has barely scratched the surface of, even as a Power Ranger.

Desire for intimacy versus desire for knowledge—two completely separate things that feel confusingly the same.

A rare shooting star catches Billy's eye, causing him to sit up on his right forearm. He can't help but to smile, even at this late hour. Signs have never been a thing for Billy—a borderline atheist—but in a vulnerable headspace, it's easier to give himself permission to believe in something. Perhaps, a big perhaps, Kiba is that something, a key to unlock the door to the great unknown—and whatever's inside Billy yearning to be free.

Tonight's journal entry is next to replay as the Blue Ranger drifts to sleep, specifically the next battle he started to chronicle after his call with Trini: the battle to stop Magnet Brain and its plan to destroy the planet's polarity.

Eleven Days Ago

The expansive forest capping Angel Grove sits between the city and the mountains where the Command Center stands tucked away. The greenery is perfectly pristine and untouched by

man, and at seven in the morning, it's the kind of place where only conversations between owls and robins can be heard—and shortly, two Power Rangers.

Billy materializes in a streak of blue atop a log, his breath already pluming into the morning chill. He adjusts his backpack first, then his glasses, while his free hand grips a small rectangular gift box. The nerves felt earlier continue to rage as he hops down, his feet crunching a bed of leaves and scaring a rabbit.

"Sorry," Billy whispers as it flees.

These were the coordinates Alpha supplied him last night, and Alpha's data is always right, so... where's Kiba? Before bed, Billy had researched the coordinates to see where exactly he was headed. He imagined finding the White Ranger running early-morning katas with Saba and swiping at bushes, like some artsy martial arts film.

Not even close. What the...

Maybe thirty yards ahead, situated among the redwoods, a familiar column of light pours through the canopy. Suspended several feet off the ground, positioned center of the celestial White Light, floats Kiba.

A stunned Billy stops dead in his tracks. Kiba's legs appear folded in lotus position, his hands resting palms-up on his knees and body draped in the flowing Eltarian robes he first arrived in. His eyes are closed in meditation, appearing less like a teenager with attitude and more like a monk who's achieved nirvana.

Less staring, more walking. You have school soon. Go! Go!

Billy steps forward and clears his throat, causing the White Light to pulse and inform Kiba he is no longer alone. A sleepy smile forms when his half-open eyes identifies the visitor.

"Greetings, Billy."

Billy sends a shy little wave as the light dissolves into a shower of white-and-gold motes, sending Kiba down onto his feet.

"To what do I owe this visit?" he asks, his voice heavy, not unlike any human who's just awaken. "Has Zedd attacked?"

Billy shakes his head. "Negative. Just, um... a special delivery, something I've been working on," he says, moving closer. "But first, if you don't mind my asking, what were you... I mean... do you charge like a solar battery, orrrr...?"

Kiba wipes the sleep from his eyes, then looks up at the canopy from which the light poured. A cluster of motes continue to swirl, with some landing on his face like illuminated freckles. "Nothing of the sort," he answers. "As necessary, I enter a form of stasis while inside the White Light. It helps repair cellular fatigue and gives me time to center my spirit."

"Oh... So sleep then."

"Sure. Sleep." Kiba crosses and tucks his arms into his wide-flowing sleeves, hiding the faint tremor in his fingers that Billy clocks but doesn't pursue. But he has another concern to address.

"Wait," Billy says, scanning the clearing. "Not seeing a tent or anything. Are you... sleeping out here?"

Seemingly amused by the question, Kiba shrugs. "As you know, the Command Center has inner quarters, but I need to be outside to channel my White Light—which, for the record—gives me just as good, if not better rest, than a typical Earth pod," he explains as his eyes track to the item in Billy's left hand. "Now, what have you brought me?"

"Oh, right." Billy pops open the case to reveal a brand-new, ultra-shiny wrist communicator, its band woven with white titanium links. "It's a narrow beam transmission module that allows wave function over an extended interval."

Kiba blinks once, then twice. "Sorry?"

"Your official Ranger communicator. Like mine." Billy holds up his left arm as he extends the box with the other.

Kiba takes it and removes the communicator from its velvet bed, lifting it between two fingers and turning it over with genuine interest. He sets it to his wrist and presses the metal flat, as if expecting the thing to self-adhere. When it nearly slips off, he scowls. "Installation seems a wee bit convoluted, I'm sorry to say."

Billy bites back a smile and steps in. "It's a standard watch clasp, Kiba. Have you seriously never worn a watch?"

"I have an internal clock I can read fine, but this is not like any time piece I've seen your fellow humans wear."

"Because it isn't. It's for talking to me and the other Rangers, plus Alpha and Zordon, hence Communicator. Allow me."

Billy sets the box down and takes Kiba's left hand. Kiba's skin is alarmingly warm considering the weather, a possible side effect of White Light stasis, he reasons.

Standing this close, he smells like... it's hard to describe, like... spring rain on white stone? Woodsy? Whatever it is... it's morphinominal.

Billy focuses and starts securing the communicator around Kiba's wrist. Mid-fitting, he feels Kiba's stare, pulling his own gaze up to check from the safety of his peripheral.

"There," Billy says, looking away after the clasp sets. "It's officially on. What do you think? Too snug?"

Kiba raises his left arm and flexes his wrist to examine the fit, his eyes sparking with satisfaction. "It's remarkably compact," he says, his gaze drifting to Billy, then to the strange contraption sticking out his backpack. "Did you construct that device as well?"

"Huh? Oh, my polarizer?" Billy's chest puffs up a little, his hand reaching and patting the device in question. "I did. Something I whipped up in my garage recently."

"Oh. What's it for?"

"Astrophysicists are predicting a rare solar storm in the atmosphere later today, and I want to record the data for my school's Science Club."

Curiosity returns to Kiba's face as Billy pulls the device to give his teammate a closer look. The White Ranger gives it a once-over, then smirks. "So, you built a mass spectrometer from, what, silicon and wire? Solely for knowledge sharing?"

"Well, that, and it's a good head start on the spring science fair, so..."

Kiba nods and continues to examine the device. "Back on Eltar, our Science Guild required advanced matrices to track solar flares." His blue eyes fill with something that could be interpreted as pride for his planet, or something else entirely—Billy wishing the latter. "You possess formidable intellect. You would thrive among our scholars."

Billy's stomach does a full gymnastics routine that would earn a ten from Kim. He pushes his glasses up his nose while grinning like an idiot. "Seriously? Wow, that's... so kind. Um, I-I'd love to discuss that guild and the tech they oversaw."

Kiba's grin falters some as he gives Billy's right shoulder a light squeeze. "Maybe another time, yeah?"

"Oh, I didn't mean now, I—"

"When we do, remind me to tell you about a good friend of mine. He lives on a distant planet, a real technology haven. Edenoi. He's also an engineer, among other things. He'd find your resourcefulness fascinating."

"Edenoi?" Billy cocks an eyebrow. He's certain he's seen the name in the database before. "Isn't that—never mind, doesn't matter right now." He shakes his head, realizing he was about to go full nerd with school starting in fifteen. "I gotta go. First bell is soon."

Billy packs his polarizer and zips it as far as his backpack will allow, while Kiba watches with mild amusement. "See you later. Oh, and don't forget to answer your communicator if it beeps!"

"Understood, Billy."

"Oh, and tap the button by the head to answer, or hold to teleport!"

"Got it, Billy."

"Oh, and if you need to reach out—actually never mind, I'll show you later, heh. See you!"

Please, beautiful blue light, get me the hell out of here!

And just like that, Billy shoots away, leaving Kiba to ponder his new gadget... and his suddenly awkward teammate.

Later That Day

The final bell rings at 2:55PM, and no one is more excited to bolt than Billy. Running past the bus loop, he unlocks his ten-speed and dashes from campus like a mad man. The solar storm is due to kick off within the hour, but with lack of sleep catching up, a detour to the nearest QuikTrip becomes priority number one.

Billy finds himself standing in front of a beverage cooler stocked high with Jolt, Mountain Dew, and a dozen other beverages he's never heard of. But as always—

"Jolt," Billy murmurs, his hand pulling the red can from its row.

Shutting the door, he turns, then nearly knocks into the body standing three-feet left. "Oh, gosh, I'm so sorry!"

A flustered Billy locks on to who he nearly mowed over—a girl, sixteen, maybe seventeen, her petite frame sporting a green sleeveless vest and khaki shorts that scream *scout leader*. "Lucky you, because I never earned a concussion merit badge."

A nervous laugh leaves Billy as he takes a step back to give the girl space. Her face... he's seen it before. "I know you, right?"

"Mm-hmm. Starts with L... ends with aura."

Billy turns a shade of red for not remembering straight away. "Laura, right. Kim's friend. Again, I'm sorry. It's been, like, a week or two?"

"Something like that," Laura says through a giggle. "Kim's helping again with my Angelettes. We're headed to the forest shortly so the girls can demonstrate their compass know-how, and, um—I'm sorry, but what is that?"

Billy looks over his shoulder to see where Laura is pointing. "Funny," he starts, "You're the second person today to ask about my polarizer."

"*Polarizer*?" Laura beams as Billy presents it. "Details please."

Billy cheeses hard at the opportunity to explain all over. "An electromagnetic phenomenon is happening shortly, so I made this to capture all available data points."

Instead of her eyes glazing over, the standard response Billy is used to getting, Laura beams harder. "Wait, you built that?" she asks, leaning in for a closer look. "That's incredible, really. My dad and I built a ham radio last summer, though it only picks up trucker static and one very specific preacher."

Billy chuckles as he feels an unexpected prick of heat. "That's, um, also incredible..."

A beat of silence as Laura scans the boy before her. "So... you invent stuff," she says. "Kim said you're the smartest person she knows, so that checks out."

"I think *amateur tinkerer* is a more accurate descriptor, but that's very generous, thank you." Billy rubs the back of his neck, unsure what else to say.

Laura thinks, then grabs a tiny pencil and slip from the adjacent lotto counter. "Here's my number. Call me this week. Let's hang and talk science... or whatever. Cool?"

Oh. Wow. Crap. Holy crap.

Laura presses the slip into Billy's hand. Billy, who usually requires direct social cues, has no problem registering the vibe of female flirtation. "Affirmative. I mean, *yes*," he stammers, tucking the slip into his front pocket. "That'd be nice."

"Amazing. Catch ya later!" Laura gives a little wave over her shoulder as she heads for the register.

*That just happened, right? A girl, a **pretty** girl, expressed real interest in what I do and gave me her number? And I... I liked it? Of course I liked it! I'm not ga—*

"Bye, Billy!" Laura's voice is heard as she exits, snapping Billy from his silent spiral.

The exchange is all he can think about—from the moment he paid for his Jolt to the bike ride over to Angel Grove Park. Billy settles by one of the benches and starts his setup. Talking with Laura ate most of his prep time, but her flirtation lingers and soothes his writhing anxiety.

Let's hang and talk science... or whatever—Laura's words echo as Billy continues his setup, followed by Trini's after meeting Laura prior at Ernie's—*She's pretty, don't you think?*

Finally, Kiba, his words warm in the morning chill—*You possess formidable intellect.*

Not a flirt like Laura's, or even encouragement like Trini's—but still nice, Billy thinks. The way Kiba looked at his contraption was really no different than Laura, but there were key differences—differences he doesn't have time to sort because the wind starts to whip, rustling the trees and his messy blonde coif.

"It's solar storm time," Billy says giddily as he hurries to finalize his settings. *Beep. Beep. Boop.* It's on. "As Zack would say—*jammin'*."

Billy steps around the bench to begin his recording, which is precisely when the surrounding bushes explode in red-hot energy. A half-dozen claybrains appear, each one flanking Goldar who stands at center.

"Oh great," Billy huffs.

"I've come for that device!" The general bellows. "Hand it over, power twerp!"

Billy sets his polarizer down and goes to work. Hopping atop the bench, he vaults into a forward flip and lands his Timbs on Goldar's chest, knocking the snarling gold monkey onto his butt.

"Give it up, Blue Ranger! You're outnumbered!"

The dance commences with the usual sequence of fists, kicks, and complicated flips. And as it goes, Putty attacks are prologue for what's to come. One of the goons slips from the huddle, snatches the polarizer, and tosses it at Goldar.

"Hey! Hands off!" Billy shouts mid-kick. His foot lands against a Z, popping the Putty clean to pieces.

Two others grab hold of Blue Ranger and vault him against a tree trunk. In that time, Goldar raises the polarizer high into the sky to receive his master's spell.

CRACK! Scarlet red lightning streaks from the clouds and strikes the polarizer, creating an instant plume of fire and smoke. Out of it steps something truly horrifying as the remaining Putties and Goldar vanish.

"Oh no," Billy groans, seeing what's become of his polarizer—a seven-foot monster with a magnet-shaped head and metallic body, its hands gripping a staff marked with *N* at top and *S* at bottom.

"Ha-ha-ha! It's a perfect day to polarize! Surrender, human, for I am Magnet Brain!"

"Yeah, right!" Billy snaps. "You picked the wrong Power Ranger to polarize! It's morphin' time!"

Back to Present: Days Later

The weekend arrives in a beat-up Ford Pinto with a dragging muffler, because that's how long it took to get there—according to Billy anyway. As for his fellow Rangers, the mood is mixed.

Zack is more hype than normal, which usually means girls. Kim's been busier than usual with Gardening Club and gymnastics. And Trini's been helping Jason and Tommy prepare for the '94 Team Ninja Finals—the guys working their Mighty Morphin' asses off to notch their second win together.

Billy and Kiba enter the bustling Youth Center and begin to weave their way through. One one end of the fighting ring are Jason and Tommy, fully decked in black ninja garb. On the other end, the masked competition in red are performing... Tai Chi? Zack and Kim trade confused looks over the spectacle, right as Billy and Kiba arrive.

"Hey, boys!" Kim chirps. "Happy Saturday!"

"Oh, is it?" Billy groans as he plops down on the bleacher. "Last night, I downloaded a leak copy of the Windows 95 beta, and now I'm stuck in bootloop hell!"

Kim grimaces and slides an arm around Billy. "I have no idea what Windows 95 is or what bootloop means, but I'm sorry that happened to you, my special little unicorn."

Billy shrugs her arm away as she giggles into Zack's shoulder, who also laughs. Kiba sits in confusion, unsure what to make of Kim's use of *unicorn*.

"So," he starts, sounding unsure. "What's good in the hood?"

Zack and Kim stop laughing and stare at Kiba for a second. "Good in the hood?" Black Ranger deadpans, before cracking into a mammoth-size smile. "Bro, you watched my VHS of *Juice?!* I love you!"

It's not long until the Team Ninja Finals commence. Zack is on his feet whistling through his fingers, while Kiba remains seated with arms crossed over his white hoodie, his face analyzing the Earth warriors with quiet admiration.

As a red ninja leaps into a high crescent kick, Jason ducks, allowing Tommy to vault over and land a flying crane. The red ninja flies back into the ropes as the crowd roars.

"Gung ho!" Trini screams from the ringside. "You got this, boys!"

Billy applauds along with his friends, but his attention is split between the match and his journal recounting Magnet Brain's mayhem—*How rad was it that I got to see Kiba use his communicator for the first time that same day?*

Billy turns his head slightly to see his comrade enthralled with the match, his eyes trailing next to the communicator he secured—*He looked geeked that he can teleport without having to push his White Light for travel. It's like going from horse buggy to sports car, I imagine.*

The ref rings the bell—it's the end of round two and the teams move to their respective corners. Kim is busy selling Kiba on a second mall trip, while Zack takes the opportunity to flirt with a yummy one row back. Billy, on the other hand, stays in his head—Magnet Brain standing center, cackling, and twirling its staff.

The creature's reverse-polarity waves were a solar storm unto themselves. To be Crystal Pepsi clear, I knew we'd pull through, but I was worried for a minute that we wouldn't. I guess we can thank Kiba again for the assist. A week earlier, he would have ignored Jason and charged the monster alone. But to my surprise, he listened when Magnet Brain grew a hundred feet and waited for Jason's call. Remarkable! But as far as Laura goes—

"Point! Match! Angel Grove wins again!" The referee's arm chops down, and the crowd goes wild.

"Yooo, that's what I'm talkin' about!" Zack cheers, high-fiving everyone as the trophy makes its way to the ring.

Even Kiba seems uplifted, in his own quiet way, offering an approving nod toward Tommy and Jason. Over in the ring, the repeat champs pull their masks to reveal their sweaty smiling

faces, before turning and bowing to their opponents. The red boys bow and remove their masks next, revealing two good-natured, albeit exhausted smiles.

"We were so close!" the tan teen says, smacking Jason's shoulder.

"Yeah, sure, Rocky!" Jason laughs heartily. "Adam, nice foot work today. You're damn quick."

The Asian teen gives a modest smile as he towels the sweat from his face. "Thanks, Jase. That means a lot coming from you."

Jason waves over the rest of the crew from the bleachers. Billy, Trini, and Zack hop down to weave their way toward the ring, while Kim hangs back, appearing locked in a deep conversation with Kiba.

"Rocky, Adam, you remember my friends from the Halloween party, right?" Jason asks as Billy, Trini, and Zack step up to the ropes.

Adam's gaze darts past and locks on Kim, his slightly burning face saying he definitely remembers. Billy catches the direction of Adam's stare, drawing his eyes to the bleachers, then back to Tommy beside him. The grin on Tommy's face has completely vanished, replaced by a tight-lipped grimace as he watches Kim chat up the White Ranger.

Frowning, Billy looks back over at Kim. Even thirty-feet away, he can hear her laugh is a decibel too high in her effort to feign normalcy. But Billy files the matter away for later, because the event photographer is ready to immortalize Jason and Tommy with their newest, and perhaps final, trophy.

"How's Stone Canyon been treating you guys?" Trini asks, bumping shoulders with Rocky. "And where's Aisha? She didn't come?"

"The S.C. is good, and Aisha has a dance competition over in Reefside," Rocky says, reaching for his water bottle."Hopefully she fares better than we did!"

Everyone laughs, everyone except Billy, who's retreated inside his head again.

Jason's Halloween bash was the first time I met Rocky and Adam. They're a fun time, and I can see why Jase stayed in contact after meeting them at martial arts camp three summers back. However, the fun had morphed into fright as soon as Zedd inserted himself—by sending a truly devious diva we thought we had seen the last of—which, in hindsight, was only half as bad as another fight that night, one within our own ranks.

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