

Blood Runs Thicker Than Water

"Yes sir, I am. I will." Dexter answered.

"Do I need to prepare a speech for it?"

"No, sir, but I'll tell them the same thing my father told me when I was a cub. Do I have to be in uniform?"

"Yes sir, I actually do. I'm in the foyer, waiting for it as we speak."

"Power Rangers, Miles loves it so much."

"Great, doing well in school, especially in P.E., tells me he wants to be a Power Ranger."

He and the higher rank shared a laugh over the phone.

"It's crossed my mind, believe me. But he's still too young to know these things." "Me? Hopefully he doesn't. I don't want him to go through what I have, doesn't need to prove it to me either. As long as he keeps his nose clean and doesn't hurt anyone, I'd be proud of him."

"If he really does, I'll support him all the way."

"Thank you, sir. Have a good morning, sir." And he set the phone down on the small standing table beside the stairwell. The last half hour he glanced at the foyer's door, where he constantly imagined the frosted glass showing the silhouette of a delivery van driving up on their driveway. The company sent him an email that morning that his package was to arrive at nine in the morning. Dexter glanced at the clock and it was thirty-two past.

He had paid quite a fortune for the costumes, ten times more than your average store-bought apparel. It was from the internet. An interesting place, Dexter learned, where anything you need could be found there. You want a digital copy of 'The Final Knight' by

Tuck Alvarez? There's countless retailers for that. If one wanted a physical copy, you definitely could buy one and it would be shipped to you within days. But he felt the need to pay via a credit card was hazardous, especially when his browser prompted him to save such information, even his passwords.

Dexter sighed impatiently, the heat getting to his head. He opened the door to let the cold autumn air in to cool down his thoughts of being scammed. But he bought the outfits from Boooooutique Customs, an artisanal branch of the mainstream costume store. He'd seen their shop not too far off from the mall, and the site he input was from a brochure he got while passing by on his way home from the base. He recalled having to do it twice just to make sure it wasn't a fake site. There were stories about them online, people having lost their passwords, identity, and 'piracy'. That did not sit well with him.

The wolf was about to go up the stairwell and get on his computer in the study, maybe he had to check his email in case there were delays, or if he could even access it in the first place. That worry settled in his mind. Fortunately it would be short-lived as he felt the vibrations of a vehicle rolling onto his street, from the intersection that he was a block away from. Followed by the engine sound of a utility vehicle. Dexter dashed onto the door and peeked out and saw the box van of 'Wolf-Pack'. The package was here, and only thirty five minutes late. He swore to himself to never **ever** use credit cards for online purchases ever again. A weak promise that would only last for a month.

Dexter made sure that he was presentable. He showered earlier today, combed from headfur to tail, and his teeth brushed and flossed. And would have to do it again some time before going to base with his son and Chase later. Speaking of his son, he looked upstairs and saw the corner of Miles' door closed, and with the wiggle of his ear he could hear him still watching his Saturday morning shows. Power Rangers Wild Force this time around, and then a Dino spin off tomorrow morning. There were just a lot of Power Rangers. Both in spin-offs? Or series was a better way to articulate it. And don't get him started on the merchandise his son accrued over the last several years.

He turned back to the door, the delivery man already walking across his patio. Dexter opened the door to meet him before he could ring the doorbell, and in front of him was a tall horse. Their kind weren't common out here in Canada, because it's mostly canines and felines. It was always fascinating to see them.

The young brown, white-nosed horse, dressed in his grey-black delivery uniform, presented a black cardboard box, and atop was a form for him to sign with the pen clipped to it already. "Package for a Mister Fennix."

"That would be me, sir..." Dexter was impressed by how quick he was to present himself– someone very composed and efficient but showed no signs of stress to a very tedious and demanding job. Or maybe he had the so-called Halloween spirit in him? He inputted his name at the check marks, signed over them.

"Baxter," the horse whinnied as he said the name. It sounded rehearsed, and it was pleasant to hear. That was one of the fascinations he had with horses, and how their mannerisms were conveyed through the sound they made. Like how cats purr to something delightful, or wolves howled to remember those they love.

"Thank you, Baxter." Dexter exchanged the pen and signed papers for a package that felt lighter than it looks. One arm may not be enough for the common person to hold it, for him it was because of his career path, but having two trivialized it. He tilted it side to side to get a feel of its contents; the helmets were in the middle, and they rested above the folded outfits of his custom Power Ranger costumes. And in the bottom leftmost corner was a small box he ordered from a different website but delivered alongside; an SD card that would give his camera a larger storage space.

"Thank you for choosing Wolf-Pack, Mister Fennix," he whinnied again, and went away as the door closed behind him. "Have a spooky day!" It was definitely the Halloween Spirit.

Dexter's tail swayed side to side, almost like Christmas came early when he was a young cub. He walked over to the living room and set his 'gift' down onto the sofa, then rushed into the adjacent kitchen looking for his scissors or box cutters. For some reason they were never where he thought they would be, and the thought didn't jinx itself to be found. Which meant it was in his study. The wolf used his soldier technique to jog up the stairs on his soles that only made the steps creak.

He listened in on his son's shows for a moment, and heard the loud riffs of a guitar with the roar of a leopard, cougar maybe? Dexter could not help but scoff each time he heard that because the lead role was supposed to be a red lion, but the intro used another feline. He dwelled on this for a moment because lion's roars were low and guttural, the noise did not come from their throats, rather from their chests. The wolf shook his head and walked normally to the study, which he unlocked using a key that he hid over the protruding door frame. Something that his son could never reach, not even if he could use any chair in the house. And God only hopes he doesn't stack them. Because even if he did, he thought as he opened the door, there were only boring mahogany shelves, a boring wood-laminated desk, with his new boring computer set on it. The latter was connected via a series of wires to a small rectangular object closest to the window called a 'modem', which was then connected into a wall that led outside connecting to the telephone poles. A lot of mumbo jumbo that Dexter didn't understand, Chase *certainly* does not, and he had to enlist one of the ITs from Langley Base to assist.

The wolf stepped into the fairly short room where his head was about a meter away from the ceiling already. A dozen bookshelves overall lined each side, organized with gifted encyclopedias he was yet to read, and several old textbooks he's used when studying military theorems. At this point they were souvenirs from a difficult past. Long nights that led to very early mornings of rigorous work, the exercise he endured, and the deconstruction of his perceived self only for it to be rebuilt into someone better. Unfortunately, that did not result in a smaller figure as he had to scoot around the side of his desk.

Chase and Miles, the one time he showed them this room, asked him why not simply move the desk into one side of the room, turn it around, or arrange it horizontally. All valid critiques which he answered with a simple 'it looked cooler this way'. And he later told Chase alone that he kept alcohol much older than either of them in a small compartment under the desk. Sure it was locked but that would've piqued Miles' curiosity nonetheless and he'd rather save it for special occasions with his boy.

Back on his desk, the boxcutters were beside the keyboard because he used them to open the mail. There were three folded letters next to the mousepad, and their discarded envelopes in the nearly empty bin below the desk, and next to the wooden compartment where he kept his aforementioned alcohol.

Two of the letters were bulletins from his suburban community, pertaining to a Halloween party being hosted at the communal center, and a subsequent Christmas fundraiser that started next month. The third one came with a foldable wristband that was stapled on the upper left corner of the letter: A guest pass with the words 'V.I.P.' written on it, for tonight's Halloween festivities at Langley's Ground Base.

Dexter picked the letter up and read through it once more. There would be an exhibit that showcased their bat special forces, the ground logistics for on-the-field supply, and his favorite: the bond of canine soldiers through the spirit of a howl. His superior chose him to be the speaker for it later, and the more he thought about it, the harder it seemed for him to get the message across to several attending families. And knowing the faces he's seen around base, majority of them weren't canines.

He stood there, putting the letter on his keyboard as he looked through the paragraph that would be his responsibility. The semantics of the howl were to forge a unity with his fellow wolves, dog-brothers, and those within the canine spectrum. That even those who are not the same species could even join, like foxes and deers, and even lions and tigers with their ferocious roars. Out in the field, he explained to himself, it was meant to scare enemies as it clouded their noise as they made their moves. And mostly, it was to present themselves as true wolves, in the same manner that eagles' screech, or hyenas' laugh in their own high-pitched way. What he just thought there was impressive, and all he needed to do was to explain it with the same energy he would brief his squadmates as if he were their leader, but to other non-military personnel and their offspring. Terminologies would be different, tone should be more welcoming. He would be sharing it with civilians for a particular initiative. Maybe intimidation would not be a pleasant concept to bring up.

All this was a part of the *Armée Canadienne's* initiative to involve the public more with their military as a means to show appreciation. And by that extension, future involvement. Dexter had his reservations regarding this move, only hoping his son wouldn't have to be involved by obligation. His knowledge of the politics motivating this move would be similar to the internet; he wouldn't know anything about it, and nor would Chase, but this time the IT guy wouldn't know anything about it either.

He took the army's letter and the boxcutters, and locked his study, returning the key to its hidden spot. With all that settled, he had one question: Where were his scissors? It wouldn't be with his son after reminding him several times that the kitchen scissors were not a toy, and that his school scissors would be enough. And he was certain he didn't bring it to the bedroom because he already had a tailor's scissors for threading patches onto his uniform. The wolf walked quietly down the stairs again, trying to retrace several times over where his scissors— it could be in the garden. No, it was definitely in the garden. With his mind preoccupied with his military duties, he had forgotten that he was cutting weeds yesterday afternoon when he got the letter. That eased his worries, but he was one to make sure everything was in place. He left the letter and the boxcutter on top of the package, dashing once more to the kitchen, and going into the fenced backyard. His scissors were there, blade stabbed through the cool soil, surrounded by dead weeds, and once he would cut sooner if he weren't busy. He tugged it out with ease, and opened it to remove the bits of sodden dirt between the blades, and cleaned them with a kitchen paper towel doused with rubbing alcohol after he had gone inside.

The scissors went back to its proper drawer, next to the knives, and the skillets. Now, with nothing to distract him, he returned to the living room with relative excitement. Power Rangers were hardly his forte, only knowing about Wild Force and Dino whatever it was, but his son was suspiciously knowledgeable in their lore and variations. They were at a toy store for half an hour two months ago when he started explaining the entire lore of three different Power Ranger series, to the point that the other kids and their parents were listening with intent. The young wolf's display of detail retention was almost as good as his own, but alas he was not quite sociable compared to the other kids in the block. He often noticed that Miles' focus would be for this franchise, and rarely went over to other shows. Like what his fellow officers referred to as Smallsters, a form of Japanese card game about small monsters, and Metalmaker, an American movie series about transforming metal men. That was the fad, and admittedly he had seen their CGI and overarching stories, but Miles was persistent with this. Having given up trying to broaden his preferences, he doubled down.

Putting the letter aside, with a quick work of his box-cutter, holding it like a knife with its blade pointing downwards of his palm, he sliced with silence and precision, clean handiwork that impressed himself. The pair of box flaps have been opened, and inside was

a sea of pink foam peanuts, and the tips of two helmets peering out. He lifted one of them, a small one which would be for Miles.

The helmet was made of polycarbonate plastic, with its visor, the wolf's mouth, being made of fiberglass. These were materials normally used on motorcycles, and they resembled the Silver Wolf Ranger's features such as the pointed wolf-like ears, a visor with plastered-over see-through eyes, its muzzle shape resembling an exaggerated ferocious wolf, a silvery bump that would be their chin rest, and a red ribbon tied behind the upper head that resembled a bandana. The color scheme contrasted its origin too; it was black with red accents, and the eyes were reflective pseudo-gold. The color scheme and the extra tidbit of the aforementioned ribbon came to him in a dream after that day of his son's retelling of the series. He dubbed this aesthetic as the 'Blood Red Moon', that wrought fear to anyone who dared oppose the Power Rangers. A fanged grin, his fur standing in the awe of its imaginative power, and the ingenious pride in himself that the package arrived on the day of a Blood Moon. One of the best moments of his civilian— nay, his whole life. And he could only hope Miles appreciated it as much as he did. The inspection continued.

Dexter extracted his own helmet and tried it on, the smell of lingering foam, and even a few foam peanuts on the back of his head were there. Apart from that, it was comfy with its inner padding, easy to see through, his ears slipped into its slots and could even hear the sound of nature and passing cars through it. An excellent product overall, and all that's left to check were the main costume pieces, and the SD card for his camera.

The uniforms were buried closer to the box's base, neatly folded. And he had almost forgotten the stark yellow-and-gold belt with buckle that was separate from it. Unlike the original Silver Wolf costume, its sash was separate, made of velcro that hugged the wearer. His foresight and dream told him to incorporate it on the suit, where upon unfolding the color-matching nylon leotard, there were four lines of gold going around from the neck, and around his right side before rising up his back, and they both met on a ring around the costume's neck. The right side of the embossed sash had red, whereas the left of it was a reflective black fabric. The sleeves of both respective colors were cut off by the golden wrist of white gloves that had fake golden detachable clawed tips. And past the waistline, there was an embossed golden ring around both calves.

The people in Boooooutique Customs delivered when he asked for 'ferocious'. His tail wagged, and he turned it around to see what the back looked like. There was the black zipper that hid itself in folded fabric to maintain the illusion of 'realism' for such suits. When in the series, these costumes were digitally summoned by a walkie-talkie device that constructed themselves over their body and clothing. There was another liberty he took as well; the series did not have holes for their tails. It would be like having your foot stuck in a shoe that was a size smaller than yours, and you can't wriggle it around which numbs and cuts the blood off. Knowing his son, and his love for him, the moment these costumes were on them, it would be worn for more than half a day, and for his son specifically, it would be about two thirds of a day if not for a week straight.

He fished his arm into the peanuts one more time into the box's corner to fetch his memory card. It was quick to find, pulling out its even smaller cardboard packaging. From the Ber brand of photography and camera accessories was a specialized SD card. It could contain up to 1GB storage, or about five hundred high definition photographs. When he cut open its flaps from the weak adhesive tape with just his claws, he saw this black card with a transistor chip on the opposite side encased in plastic. This small card, almost as wide as big as a knuckle, cost about \$680 CAD. Over a fourth of a standard C7 Rifle. In fairness, however, he got his hands on the pinnacle of technology. A computer, then this SD card. He treated it like delicate military hardware, putting it on the small table beside the couch. And he put the box down on the floor as he sat on the couch itself, going over the suit once more. Made sure there were no rips, tears, or any gnashes. On both his and Miles', and their helmets after. Everything in the mail was flawless, and he ought to leave a good review for it tomorrow.

Dexter glanced at the clock, already half an hour past ten. Chase was supposed to arrive at eleven with their lunch. His recommendation of this European-infused burger joint that was the talk of the town in the last month. He and his son may as well try it because everyone at base had been raving about it too. The more he thought about it, his son could teach him a thing or two about partaking in new fads. He enjoyed Power Rangers and never deviated from it, and maybe he himself should stop going after trend setters because it doesn't appease him half the time. These comedies and dramas don't get him anywhere, and the fries-dipped-in-ice cream was just disgusting to even consider. The costumes in his hands were meant as a way to bond with him after all, and it had his personal spin to it. It looked really good and felt proud of setting it all up. He wasn't one to

brag with the other officers, unless asked of course. Sometimes it felt like he messed up somewhere along the line that he didn't behave like the other officers either, especially with Miles having to grow up with a father, and a godfather. She missed Alexa for that moment, but she was at peace at last.

He shook his head and reinvigorated himself with the thought of having gotten this far. His wife, Miles' mom, would be so proud of them both. And he would've gotten her a costume too.

Ding Dong

"Got it!" Dexter set aside the suit and ran to the doorbell. That cheeky sneaky panther with his blurred silhouette waiting behind that door. He opened it; a buff panther in his army t-shirt and slacks stood in front of him. It was Miles' godfather, his best friend.

Chase had a smug grin on his face, holding against him a bag of their hybrid lunch, and his own duffel bag slung behind his shoulder for his own costume as well. "A point for me, finally."

"Twenty to three?" Dexter patted his side with the food, and hugged the other as to not crush it. "Got me while I was inspecting the costumes."

"Oh?" Chase's ears perked up. He rolled his right shoulder to emphasize the duffle bag that had his own. "Mine's spot on, even tried it before I left. Worth every penny."

That was reassuring to hear, "Nice. Good call on not wearing it going here, don't want you or Miles messing up your uniform with gravy." He stepped in, tilting his head inward so Chase may come in.

Chase followed, rolling his eyes though humored by that incident long before, "That was one time, okay? It wasn't even my fault, Private Liam tripped because his laces were untied."

"And Colonel Talcolm gave you an hour to unfuck it." Dexter muttered under his breath.

"You can't just remove gravy from a dress uniform in an hour." Chase set his duffle bag, and their food back next to the box and inspected the wolves' costumes too. He whistled, impressed at their make. Almost like his except it was patterned after a panther instead. As well as the same color scheme but his right, just before the sash, was a black color, and his left would be red.

That train of thought died down for Dexter, going over to the more expensive item of the bunch. He grabbed the plastic encasing with two hands and presented it to a confused Chase. The panther's brow was raised as he leaned to get a closer look of the small card. Dexter said, "Six-eighty CAD."

"What the fuck?!" Chase repulsed and stepped back. Dexter was holding something akin to a radioactive substance because it was fragile and too expensive to break.

"Oi," Dexter glared, "My son's upstairs you know." If it weren't for those shows of his, he may have learned how to speak like a soldier a decade too early.

"It's a six hundred and eighty cuss word, I think it's worth it." Chase retorted, leaning in again and looked at it from above and below. He thought it was like paying for a second camera.

After having let his friend inspect it, accompanied with light conversation about its price tag, his stomach grumbled as the clock struck eleven. "Chase, prep up the kitchen, and I'll go fetch Miles and put this thing in the camera before either of us breaks it."

"Yes, sir," Chase grabbed the bag of food goodies and went on his way to the kitchen. While Dexter went up the stairwell without the pretense of being sneaky. Miles' shows would've been done by now, and he knew that going up these stairs at this time meant lunch. He did so with the SD card in its encasement clasped between his hands.

"Son!" Dexter shouted enough for his son to hear him. His tail wagged whenever he did.

Miles peeked his head out, the smaller version of himself with white fur and the same color of red eyes, "Lunch time?"

"Lunch time," he said upon reaching the final step. "Say hi to your 'uncle' Chase and wait for me before our lunch. I just gotta find the camera."

His son's eyes widened, knowing that there was something new worth taking photos of, especially during this time of the month. He grinned from ear to ear, stepping out of his room in his pajamas and walking down the stairs.

Dexter chuckled as he opened the door to his bedroom, "You're not allowed to put on the costume after eating. Not after what happened last time." He raised his voice the closer Miles was to the first floor. It was something similar to Chase's mishap but without the military jargon and punishment.

"That was one time," he yelled back, followed by an excited gasp. "Thanks dad!" He said.

The young wolf didn't see his father's wide smile as he stepped into the bedroom. Quaint, clean, with the scent of after-shower faintly lingering. There were two torso mannequins for his formal and parade uniform next to the closet, opposite of it would be the queen sized bed with its lupine aesthetic headboard. With the precious SD card in hand, he spotted his camera on the bedside drawer and sat beside the bed itself, putting both of them on his lap. Dexter opened the SD compartment located in the camera's bottom, saw the small filled receptacle and pushed it inward so the card could pop out. He pulled out one of the lower drawers for a small SD container, a sturdy plastic box big enough for one. It was odd that the one he bought did not come with it. He opened and extracted the old card and gently placed it inside. It had 256MB worth of storage that came free with the camera. Filled with priceless vacation photos he was yet to store into his computer.

The process of inserting a newer SD card was as stressful as watching an EOD specialist defuse a car bomb, without the mortal risk at the very least. Like the metaphor, he was slow and precise with removing the card from its plastic casing, and slipping it into the camera. Immense relief when it fit, furthermore when it slid in and locked into the device.

Dexter had worked up a sweat as he booted up the camera, half full on battery, and with a large amount of free space. "Yes!" He cheered, victorious.

It would be his turn to rush downstairs excitedly, and he saw Miles inspecting his own helmet even though his wide eyes screamed the temptation to put it on. His father's presence hesitated him from doing so, and that's good.

Dexter looked towards the kitchen to see the plate of burgers, mashed potatoes, and something that resembled a stew, had been served. The scent followed and the infusion hit him. There was that combination of a western grilling that was met with European spices like saffron and rosemary. Despite the clash of culture, and his initial reaction to the hesitation to try new things, hunger was something common to everyone and he couldn't wait to satiate it.

With a firm hold on Miles' shoulder, he assured him that he could put on his costume after they were done eating. The white wolf put down his helmet on his costume and dashed for the kitchen, Dexter's soldier reflexes were quick enough to avoid bumping into him. Wouldn't want to hurt his son today of all days, or drop his camera on accident.

The white wolf was quick to find himself on the seat, eyeing the burgers that just so happened to be in line with his costume. Chase sat next to him, and Dexter approached them while tweaking the timer on his camera. Technological expertise he was familiar with because he had done it countless of times, even before Miles was born. Exploration through the menu with his dials, and he sets the camera to take a photo after ten seconds, and positions it on the kitchen timer facing the table.

Dexter sat down and signaled his family to face the camera. He leaned back from his seat to include their lunch in it too. Chase smiled while his son had a toothy grin. And after ten seconds, with the photo taken, they quickly said their prayers, and both Chase and Miles got down to trying the burgers while he attended to the camera.

The photograph was beautiful, as usual, but it captured more detail because he can see the fluff of their fur, the aging eyelids that he and Chase had, as well as the growing stubble on Miles' upper muzzle. He looked over the food and made sure it was all there, but why would he salivate over the photograph when the mix and match aroma it had was right

there, tugging at his snout with its savory aroma. There were four out of the six burgers, with thick patties and vegetables uncommon in Canada like purple cabbages and pickled zucchinis. Next to it were mashed potatoes seasoned with chives, cayenne, something that looked like butter– no, it was cream cheese, and cloves of garlic. Miles took a sample of it with his spoon, and he piled his plate with a good serving.

"You should try this one first, Dex," Chase took a spoonful of the yellow-white starch with red powder and green seasoning on it, and dumped it onto his plate.

The smell was much more powerful closer to him, sweet and spicy, and he took a portion of the potatoes with a hidden clove in it. Everything clicked as he started chewing, the cayenne's kick, the garlic flavor to balance it, and cream cheese to give it this creamy and salty texture. Dexter now wanted to try the burger, and it tasted good yet different compared to what he was used to. A different take with the saffron and rosemary infused in what tasted like turkey. He gasped and ate more into the sweet and succulence. Chase then started to serve them each a bowl of East European stew, borscht as they called it. All three of them looked at the odd purple broth that, like the other foodstuffs, had an inviting scent to it too. Its flavor was sour that turned into sweetness, and Chase used it as sauce for the mash potatoes and encouraged the Fennixes to try it too. And this was where they felt the infusion making sense the most. A blend of an entirely different continent that brings out its best. Something Dexter hoped that the world could come to realize.

But he'd rather hope for tonight to go smoothly. Dexter left them for the moment as he fetched the letter by the costumes. He turned around to see Miles looking past him, really eager to put them on and wear them for the rest of his young life. "Don't forget to wash your face," Dexter said to his son while stroking his own chin. The beet-colored borscht had stained his fur and was about to leave and get tissues when Dexter passed him a roll for him to wipe with.

"Thanks dad," Miles smiled before taking a bite on his second burger, staining his chin once more and wiping it with a folded tissue paper.

Dexter removed the wristband from the letter, "Son, remember that talk we had about going to the military base?" And showed it to him.

Miles leaned in while chewing and read the fine black print on the orange accessory, it said: 'V.I.P.'. He nodded and swallowed, "Mhm, do I have to put it on now?"

"Not yet," Dexter helped himself to a spoonful of mashed potatoes. He said once he swallowed, "But I just have to let you know to observe proper decorum and not to wander around without Chase or I with you, okay?"

Miles had no recollection of the place other than his father showing him photos of it during his training days. "Yes, dad." He said, smiling. And he doubts he'd leave them at all. The young wolf was afraid of being away from family, and if his father were out doing work, at least his Uncle Chase was there to look after him.

Chase interjected, "And whatever the guys will tell you about your old man is one hundred percent true. Even the time he nicked the Major's éclair off his desk."

Dexter could not deny that fact, so he shot Chase with another, "And Chase here is not allowed to operate a kitchen, even if he's the last able-bodied person to do so."

"Miles already knows that," Chase winked at the young wolf.

They went back and forth with each other, Miles learning that his father had moments of questionable thought processes, like chugging a bottle of hot sauce, shaving the fur off his face, and mistaking salt for sugar. The young wolf had a giggle about it, his own tail wagging as he got to learn the fun side of his father's career.

After eating, Dexter and Miles went to the living room to finally put their costumes on. He informed his son to put the suit first before the helmet, because Miles was about to insert his head into the wolf mask.

Miles exclaimed, "I can't believe we're our own Power Ranger squad!" He put on the leotard that clung onto him over his fur and clothes, and it was even all around. The zipper on his back couldn't be reached so Dexter zipped it up for him, and the helmet was on within moments.

Dexter was slower with putting on the suit as it looked deceptively small at first. And ramming his muscles through might cause a tear to his \$160 CAD costume. The nylon was nice on him, well-fitted because it expanded to his size, and the sash felt bulky almost like kevlar. It would be amazing if, in lore, this was how they incorporated armor into their suits. Speaking of incorporation, there were built-in soles into the suit that would be comfy for the amount of walking they were about to do. As he slipped his arms into its sleeves, he felt the surge of confidence, tingling at him as if it was the power he had in his dream. The ferocity of a wild wolf with the intellect of a domesticated one, and the will of the anthropomorphic within. Unlike Miles, however, who embodied the exaggeration of being a Power Ranger; an action hero who runs around swinging imaginary swords.

He put on his own helmet after he zipped himself up, and a part of him felt complete. Or united with something intangible, like a wish fulfilled. Perhaps it was his son hugging him, the smaller Power Ranger looking up, and he could see the joy beyond the mask.

"Thanks dad, I love it so much," Miles clamored his gratitude, a tone more jubilant than he had ever heard. "This is the best!"

Dexter did not show his tears falling down his cheeks, crouching down to hug him tightly. "I'm glad you loved it son."

SNAP

"Wow, you could see the fabric of the nylon with this setting, Dex," Chase said as he reviewed their candid photograph. He stepped into the living room, leaving behind a kitchen in a state better than when he went in earlier. Dexter praised the angle taken, and entrusted it to him for their photo ops in the backyard. Though, for now, Dexter asked for the device so he could put on his costume, already offering his duffel bag in exchange.

They swapped, and Chase went to the bathroom next to the foyer because these slacks were too thick for the leotard— cargo pants in green and dark green camouflage.

Miles went up to his room to fetch his toy sword and 'Morpher' which was a bulky watch that allowed them to morph. But in its toy version, it made noises that repeated lines

from the show's Silver Wolf, clanging of blades, and the howl of a fake wolf in a compressed audio recording. Dexter fetched the wristband from the kitchen so he could put it on Miles, but he paused at the last moment, waiting until after their photo ops instead. He would want pristine shots without the stark orange wristband. The downside of the suits though were the lack of pockets, and the belt and buckles did not have any slottable pouches unfortunately. Maybe he could use his army pouches, the same that went on rigs. The belt was strong enough to support the weight of about two.

Chase returned first, helmet and costume on his person. His duffle bag may not fit the outfit but the utility it provided reinforced his overall look. "How do I sound with this helmet on?"

"Like speaking with a motorcyclist." Dexter replied, muffled but heard well enough. "Without the hassle of traffic." And if he were to take a stroll, or even drive down in public with these, it'd not only be somewhat normal, but also quite comfortable. The suits weren't insulated, and even at noon, it wasn't all too hot. Then again it was in the middle of autumn.

Chase plopped his bag on the sofa, most likely where he would be sleeping tonight later. "Where's Miles?" He looked over to the kitchen.

"Went to get his props," Dexter said, hearing the door creak open followed by the compressed howl coming from a toy speaker. The young wolf rushed down and appeared between the foyer and the living room with his sheathed sword wrung around his belt, and a toy Morpher on his left wrist.

Miles announced and engaged himself in one of the many poses they do on the show, "Miles Fennix, Sil..." He was unsure what to call himself since he was not technically a Silver Wolf.

"Blood Moon Ranger," Dexter suggested.

"It is I, Miles Fennix: Blood Moon Ranger!" He shouted the title almost cinematic like.

'Blood Moon Ranger' had that very mature and very edgy theme to it. Dexter disregarded the semantics because it lined up with the lunar cycle tonight. People would be impressed about it later.

"Does that make me the Blood Moon Panther?" Chase struck a pose that was not from any of the shows. Miles went over to him and made a pose for his godfather to copy, and he tried to match that.

Dexter noted how some of the poses were exaggerated stances people used for kung fu, and it felt silly to do as a grown man. More so than dressing up like this. Regardless, he posed one from memory that he and his son did during their trick or treat a few years ago, when they still wore the Silver Wolf costumes. And all three of them warmed up to it, and he even set up a timed camera to snap three shots of their bonding. With some added filters, or a bit of editing done on the computer, maybe he could make an official poster out of it. He should do that for Miles' birthday gift.

"Now I need you two to come with me," Dexter led the way to the kitchen, gesturing at them to come along. "Chase, bring the camera, please."

"Yessir," Chase grabbed and looped its own wristband around his wrist, and motioned Miles to go ahead of him.

They stepped into their backyard, half-trimmed that Dexter swore to finish tomorrow. The rest of his plants were resting as the seasons took its course. Winds blew in conjunction, cold and howling that normally sent chills if they were not thick-furred wolves, and a panther who let his pelt grow longer just in time for the seasons.

Dexter opened the wooden backyard fence gate that led to a path overlooking a forested ravine thick with pine and maple trees. He wanted to use this landscape to also warm him up for his speech later. And what better place to do other than the near untouched wildscape just behind their suburb's backyard. There were manmade elements of it; mostly the short wall barrier that prohibited people from sitting over unless confronted with the risk of a very steep fall; a reasonable concrete ramp-and-staircase was built onto the cliff, both it and the barriers above were alight with lamp posts to represent the beacon of civilization, and help keep the wildlife outside of course. Though they only

covered the cliffs as far as the suburbs were, and the ones on the declining ramp only went down until the last step of the staircase. Anything past it was dirt, and popular walking paths. There was a small bridge there, originally made by beavers, upgraded by old settlers with a wooden rail carved from logs. Which were now surrounded by vines and moss as nature retook her assets.

The river was about six steps wide, and both sides had a mixture of maple and pine trees, accompanied with lines of bushes, thick grass, and other saplings yet to mature. Given its proximity to the suburbs, wildlife don't often roam these parts. Fish still swam down the river and it was legal to fish here without a permit, something that Dexter and Miles have done in the past. With little success though. Miles knew better not to run around here or risk getting lost, or if anything like his previous camps here with his father, get bit by a lot of mosquitos.

Dexter started, "Chase, I've been instructed by our C.O. to give a speech about the wolf's howl later. And I wanted to bring us here so I can get a feel for it." The suit felt like it did in his dream about being a wolf ranger. That he was one with nature, and that he was her guardian. It would've been his sworn oath to guard her from those who seek to do it harm, like putty henchmen from one of Miles' shows.

But Chase wasn't buying it, "Mhm," he disagreed, "You just want to take nifty photos out in the woods with your costume too."

Eighty percent true, "Alright, yeah. But I also want to rehearse what I have to say later. And it'd be easier with my son around because I'd tell them what I tell him." He turned to Miles who had turned to him, having noticed that he was a subject of their discussion.

"You're going to be a guest speaker at the party later?" Miles asked, and then he expressed hype, "While wearing the Blood Moon Wolf costume?" His tail wagged back and forth.

"Mhm!" Dexter nodded once, and his son was hopping in place.

"Can I stand with you later, we'll be like partners in crime!" He raised his hands excitedly, and then he turned to Chase, "Can Uncle Chase be with us too! We'll be an elite squad of Power Rangers." There were stars in his eyes behind those golden visors.

"For the photos, yes, but I have to remove my helmet when I make the speech, and the focus will be on me." Dexter explained, "Chase will have to be at the back recording me doing it." Was the excuse he came up with, legitimate enough for Miles to understand. This event was, after all, a drive to add awareness to the military with the hopes of getting more people onboard.

"Aw, okay," Miles nodded and understood. But the idea of photo ops then, and now too, brought back his eagerness. Almost like his father, the young wolf tried to find a nice spot to pose in front of, and also listen to his father's speech. His dad, after all, was great at doing that.

"What're you doing, son?" Dexter followed where he looked.

"Places where we can do our action poses," Miles said, walking closer towards the river.

Dexter was impressed and flattered by his son's attempts. Almost like him when he had his vacations. And the river was one of the first spots he thought of. There was a clearing nearby but the bushes that led to it were thick, and there was a wide path enough for them to pose in but the soil looked too marshy and they might sink and trip on it. He could cross the river but he'd rather not risk it, especially not the camera too. So Miles' spot will suffice. "That'll do, son, good job." He commended.

"I learn from the best," Miles posed with a hand on his hips, then the other pointed to his father.

Chase took an impromptu photo, "That's very sweet." He looked around for a spot to rest the camera on a timer, and there were a few flatrocks far enough from the river to not splash it. But being accustomed to Dexter's request for him to take his photo over and over again, he also considered the background at which the lens faced too. He squatted down,

not wanting to dirty his knees, and ensured that the background they faced did not have the cliff nor its barriers, and had a good but not overwhelming view of the river.

Once that was settled, both the adults copied his son's pose when he pointed at Dexter, and instead all of them pointed at the camera.

SNAP

Next was something of Dexter's concepts. He pointed towards the left and right, with Miles on the former leaning forward with a bent knee, hand resting over his visor as if on a lookout, while Chase leaned back with a wide knee, pointing finger guns in his direction.

SNAP

Miles reached out with ferocious claws towards the camera, while Chase pulled his elbows inward, with sharp claws pointing upwards from twitching ferocious hands. And Dexter, arms and legs spread as he leaned his entire head back, mimicking the notion of a howl towards the early afternoon moon orbiting over the nearly clear skies.

SNAP

The next poses and snapshots focused more on the families fooling around; Dexter giving Chase the noogie, his son riding on his shoulders as they ran around. They brought the camera with them as they walked along the treeline going upward of the creek. In one of the photos, Miles held out his sword pointing forward as he held onto his father's helmet.

Miles yelled, "Fear our wrath Master Org!" As Dexter picked up the pace. Chase followed behind snapping shots while avoiding rocks.

Dexter, though not tired, had to put Miles down as they returned to their original photo spot. He had him sit on the rock where the camera was earlier. While he himself took deep breaths to build up motivation for the speech. It wasn't something he hadn't done before as he had told the locals back in Afghanistan and Kuwait the intentions of their unit. Or having spoken to a room full of civilians regarding mundane army matters. He could do

another lecture on wolf biology, he had the textbooks for it in his study; aspects of a howl, why they do it, how they do it, even where and when. He glanced at Chase who looked back at him with curiosity, denoted by his raised and tilting head. Perhaps he could explain it to him like a friend? But with his son in view, that he turned to, and he could tell his joy from the rapid wagging white fur right behind him. Maybe he could be more personal and relatable? A mix of both though because he was still in a military environment. The ambiance of a family get-a-long but as a veiled on-site duty with free dinner tonight.

He paced back and forth, overhearing Miles asking Chase what was going through his father's mind, rarely seeing him bewildered like this. Chase put it best when he explained, "Your father's going to make a speech that he normally tells to you, in the same manner that your grandfather, his father, told him prior."

Miles said, "He should say what his heart wants."

"I could, son," Dexter answered. "But there's more to the aspect of a howl in the military."

Miles nudged Chase, and Chase nudged him back. Both of them grinned behind their masks as Dexter began his explanation.

Dexter said, "When we talked about this before, son, howling takes an aspect of maturity both physical and emotional. Your vocal chords need to 'drop', as they say, while understanding the kinship bond you have with other wolves and canines." He went on, "But the same process applies to the military; I've mentioned it at certain points that that's what the military is about. Building a bond that you share with your fellow soldier beside you. The howl signifies that well past the species, well past ourselves to commit to a unified fighting force to easily overcome any challenge, any struggle. It is in this same manner that I, as a wolf, despite not being a bat or a chameleon, can do stealth processes just as efficiently: we were taught to by those who are gifted with such talents. We bond, we foster relationships. How Chase and I have, even though his species is more suited for logistics and medical work. There are semantics too regarding lions who roar, which is almost like a howl, but I digress." He paused for a moment, his tail wagging at the thought that he was nailing this, "To summarize it: the act of howling is the pinnacle of camaraderie of everyone in the military. In the same way the military builds up everyone to be competent

regardless of what species you are." And then he flourished his golden-tipped claws, "And howling is meant to instill fear in our enemies."

Miles was taken aback to it, but Chase held him up while giggling at Dexter's theatrics.

The panther knew full well the extent of Dexter's last line, having seen the aftermath of it. Such things were best left in classified dossiers.

"Us wolves, and Chase here, are fine because we're all family. And you've listened to me do it many years over, and you've done it yourself about three times so far. But in areas full of enemies, the howl of a wolf determines the strength of a fighting force. The kind that not every roaring jet, nor rumbling tank could replicate easily. Because the howl carries an indomitable spirit. Likewise it is to also pay respects to those fallen." His tone shifted to somber, calming down. "And to howl is not only to honor them, but it is an honor to do." Dexter nodded to his son, who nodded three times back to him.

Miles was impressed by the wordplay, applauding at his word-while skill. Everyone at the party would be wowed, he thought.

Dexter leaned back against the tree and took off his helmet. The speech felt great but the initial pressure lingered for a moment. He wouldn't have that issue later, but maybe a lengthy lecture with his helmet on may not be a good idea. The cold autumn air cooled him down, letting out a sigh as he envisioned a night of realistic applause, and an unrealistic expectation of being promoted to Major because of one measly speech.

Chase and Miles follow suit too, the latter commenting, "That was an awesome speech, dad."

"You'll be fine, Dex," Chase added, applauding him too.

"As long as you didn't have it on camera." Dexter scoffed and watched the river to help bring that sense of calm.

"I didn't," he replied. "Talk from the heart and everyone, even the non-canids, will understand."

"Yeah." Dexter smiled at them, and they back at him. "What time does the event start?"

"Seventeen hundred." Chase said.

"Noon's still early." Dexter looked up and saw the sun only starting its western descent. "Do we have to bring food?" He looked at Chase wondering if there was any more input from them. They had all the time then, and sometimes the line of work meant surprises that they had to go around or commit to.

"Nah, mess hall's got this. They even got cake from Lou's." Chase stood, bouncy too.

"Lou's!?" Miles stood up and bounced again, the wet dirt below him sinking with each stomp.

"Relax, son," Dexter pointed at his feet, and his son stopped. He himself was excited for Lou's, one of the more prominent bakers in this side of Canada. Well known for his lava cakes in the winters, and his ice cream cheesecake in the summer. Whenever he or Chase came home from tour, they brought with them a small sized cake to share with them. But they were quite strict about it to themselves because of the amount of carbs one bite potentially had. To have him during Halloween of all times? Maybe the mess could let him have seconds.

"It's lava cake time!" Miles raised his sword in proclamation.

"But first it will be shower time," Dexter chimed in. His son pouted, a sad 'aw' came out of his mouth. "That includes you too, Chase." The panther copied what Miles said and all three of them chuckled.

"Good one, Dex."

"I'm serious." Dexter said flat-faced.

"Yes, sir."

They all trailed back to their home to freshen themselves and their suits up. After showering, they put on outdoor civilian clothes, but Chase and Dexter prepared their bags with their military clothing should the need arise. An hour was spent cleaning the soles of their outfit with alcohol and rags. Chase worked on his own while Dexter worked on Miles' first because the young wolf was watching with intent, ready to yank the costume the moment all the dirt had been removed.

It was swiped out of his hands when the last speck had fallen onto the wash bin below, the white wolf rushing upstairs to his bedroom and putting it on. Dexter commented, "Great, he'll be wearing it for the next day." He started cleaning his own.

"Last time was twelve hours, right?"

"Mhm, and then he wore it as his pajamas for over a month. I think he'd wear that one to school if they let him."

"Hah, he'd probably wear it to prom, borrowing your suit."

"No way." Dexter shook his head smiling. "He'll outgrow them in three years. Just you wait." He said it with such confidence, yet he would keep on waiting by then. Cleaning his suit was easier thus quicker, and he put it on, his feet still cold from the alcohol. He heard Miles open his door and rush downstairs. It was probably the zipper.

Miles dashed into the living room and turned around seeing the flaps of his suit swinging freely. He gestured to either of them, "I forgot I can't reach this part of my back yet." He tried to approach the zipper with both his arms but it was at a spot that neither of them could reach.

"Here," Dexter went over and zipped it up for him.

"Thanks dad!" Miles rushed back up for his helmet and other props.

Dexter zipped himself up as Chase started suiting himself up too. He glanced at him, almost like they were back to a time before Miles' conception. When these two used to do missions together. A quick flashback of a rainy evening back in Kuwait, out for a patrol along the outskirts of the city. He let out a small howl that night, and remembered it no matter how insignificant of a time, and of a sound-off it had been. He did so because he heard another youthful wolf do so, lighthearted in tone, and he replied quietly to honor it.

"Thanks for taking care of Miles whenever I'm on tour." Dexter said.

Chase was caught off guard, unsuspecting of being thanked right then and there. Even if today felt like a standard day where all three of them were together. He replied, "You're welcome." And it almost hinted to ask why but did not pursue it. "And thanks for being a good role model for him and for me."

Dexter blushed, he too was caught off guard by the compliment. He was a father, a soldier, and a role model where the latter usually intertwined. But not the first and the last. It didn't cross his mind a lot that he had been setting an example for his best friend too. Oftentimes his mind was committed to what his gut and heart had been telling him. Glad that he could do it. Glad that his late wife knew how successful he had turned out.

Miles returned downstairs moments later with his helmet and toys, but he wondered about another, "Should I also bring my Jack-O-Lantern?" It was in the pantry and he was about to fetch it himself.

But Dexter said, "No need. The base will give you one full of candy." Particularly the feline logistics exhibit later. "And of course there will be Lou's too."

"Lou's!?" Both Miles and Chase said together and bounced on the carpeted floor, humoring themselves and the big black wolf who crossed his arms and shook his head.

"I love you both so much." Dexter grabbed the camera and took a photo of them mid jump. Their goofy expressions and wide smiles would eventually earn itself a small portrait that would be on the foyer table.

Dexter did have something to give his son though, which was the wristband that he swapped it for a camera. "I'll clip the pass on you now, son. Remember: Don't wander around without Chase or I in sight." He held his son's wrist and taped the bracelet around his wrist.

Miles looked at it closer, smelling the duct tape off of it. He then waved it around, as if a great power had been bestowed upon him. Dexter and Chase let him around enough before his son tired out. This time the adults slung their bags over their shoulders.

"Chase," Dexter pocketed the car keys out of his bag's pocket and tossed it to him. "Start the car up for me, just gotta make sure everything's proper upstairs." The panther nodded and gestured Miles with a wave for them to head out.

"Everything in my room should be turned off," Miles zipped to the front door, waiting for him.

"Alright, I'll still check." He patted the panther to move ahead, and ruffled his son's helmet before going upstairs. His bedroom was quiet, as was Mile's though his son needed to clean up his scattered action figures tomorrow, and his study was unlocked for a moment and the computer was off. He checked the utility closet opposite of the study and everything was fine too.

The door was open by the time he went downstairs, and he double checked the kitchen and ensured the door to the backyard was locked. Their fence was closed too. He wiggled his ears and made sure he didn't miss any running water or of the sort. Silence other than the refrigerator humming. Everything was clear. Time to go.

He stepped out onto the patio and he saw Chase had brought the car onto the driveway; a simple sedan meticulously maintained despite having gone through a lot of mileage. Red in its color, likened to his eyes, without being pronounced as it was a common color to see. His best friend sat on the back, with Miles riding shotgun, both of them wearing their seatbelts.

Once he was inside, "One more thing son." He passed his helmet to the backseat. It would be easier for him to drive without it. "If you lose track of Chase or myself, we rendezvous at the mess hall, okay?"

"Yes, dad." The young wolf shot him a salute.

Dexter smiled, and glanced at Chase who was ready too, helmet on in solidarity with his godson. It was a warm feeling, apart from the heater, that his son understood military lingo that wasn't cuss words. Maybe he'd turn out to be a soldier. He drove off their driveway and made their way to Langley's Army Base.

It would be an hour-long drive from their home, having to drive through Westbay and Lonsdale. Everyone was infused with the Halloween spirit, and from hearing Miles and Chase exclaim it, most of the costumes tonight would be werewolves. Except for one that they said would go as the literal moon. He laughed at that and could only imagine someone walking around as a red tinted sphere. Whoever that person was would steal any show they would be in.

The time on their car's dashboard was at sixteen-hundred by the time they were on the lone two-way road that led to the base. To Dexter and Chase's surprise, the army did not skimp out on putting thought into this year's Halloween. Trees were covered in cobwebs, pumpkin head lamp posts, and hanging cartoon bat decors between the trees.

"They're serious about this, huh?" Chase said.

"Do you think they'll do it for Christmas too?" Dexter said. "I wouldn't be opposed to free food."

"If you make a good speech later, I bet they will."

"Can there be one for my birthday?" Miles chimed in.

Dexter chuckled, "We'll celebrate that at our home instead." He reached over to ruffle his helmet again. Ambitious if not quite vain of him, almost like himself.

The outer perimeter wall of the base was tame, and there was no decor on their logo and sign that was carved into stone where it read 'Langley Army Base of the Canadian Armed Forces'. They were still a serious organization after all, that even the guards posted at the gate were in their normal fatigues, wielding assault rifles with reserve magazines in their belt pouches.

Chase knew some of them, name dropping 'Liam', that bastard, he added. And Gabriel who was known for scoring a perfect ten with his handgun in the shooting range. Both of them were dogs of different breeds, the former a Husky, and the latter a Shiba Inu. Their faces were stone cold which meant either; 'God I wish I was not at this post right now', or 'My nose is itchy'. Or some other excuse.

Dexter stopped in front of the hazard bar beside a kiosk that had a Jack-O-Lantern on its desk facing them. The decor even had a lit candle inside. He cranked his window down and saw the deer menacingly stare at him. The antlers added to that touch, well-maintained, sharp, if not a bit too reflective.

The deer eyed his car's windshields, seeing a registered army sticker on it. He saluted, looking straight past the car. "Good afternoon, sir. May I request your passengers to remove their helmets so I may verify their identities."

"Yes, sir." Dexter nodded, then turned to Miles, "Son, take off your helmet so Sergeant Adams here could see your face, okay?"

"Yes, dad," Miles started removing his helmet as his father turned to Chase doing the same thing too.

"Give me your ID too, just in case, Chase." He reached out to him.

Chase set his helmet aside and rummaged through the side pocket of his bag for his wallet, unfolded it and passed a laminated army-green card with his information and portrait.

"Thank you," and back to Miles, "Also son, present your wristband, please."

With a quiet nod, Miles raised his wrist enough for the sergeant to see.

Dexter passed Chase's ID to him, and fetched his own that were in the glove compartment and gave it after.

Sergeant Adams cycled through their IDs, leaning down to verify Chase who had moved his head forward between the seats to make the clarification process much easier. He returned the IDs to Dexter and saluted them, "Welcome back Lieutenant Fennix, Lieutenant Quicksilver, and welcome Mr. Fennix to the Langley Army Base."

Dexter and Chase gave him back a salute, and even young Miles did so improperly. And when they had finished theirs a half-second later, the deer did so too and lifted the bar for them. He drove ahead and into the rotunda situated just past the entrance gates.

A massive flagpole stood in the middle, surrounded by trimmed grass and bushes, and a cemented plaque that read out the Canadian Army's mantra. And the flag on top flew the Canadian flag first, and the base's flag second just below it.

Dexter made the exit on the left side of the rotunda, driving at a regulated speed of ten kilometers per hour. Miles beside him looked around with wonder, tossing a few questions at his father about this place. The building next to the rotunda was the guest center where all the parents and peers could meet with their beloved ones during days off, and graduations. And those days only. Next to the left was a long structure with vertical sliding metal gates, those were garages for their IFVs. One of them was in the process of opening so Miles could see what Dexter called a 'Coyote'; a green and dark green eight-wheeled armored vehicle capable of carrying infantry, and this version had a turret that wielded a 25mm Bushmaster and a 7.62 coaxial light machine gun.

"Do you drive that dad?" Miles looked over his seat as they passed it.

"No, I'm a sniper. I've ridden in one before, and so did your uncle Chase." Dexter said.

"Relatively cramped at times," Chase added. "Think of this car but you have to fit eight people inside."

"That's a lot," Miles said, looking around their car in fascination.

"Mhm, and you still have a driver, a gunner, and a commander so that's eleven soldiers all in all." Chase said.

"Can I ride in one in the future?"

"I can try and convince the driver to let you inside, but I doubt he'd allow you to ride in it. It's mostly used for training here." Dexter said.

"Aw, okay," Miles was bummed for a moment, but the consolation of sitting inside one was enough for him.

"Though I can't promise it will be later. Maybe in the future, okay son?"

"Okay dad," he replied.

They also passed by an active duty barracks which resembled more like an apartment. Even painted in a shade of mint green too. There were balconies with potted decor on them, some having the Halloween spirit included statues of wolves, witch props, and even a pet cat that watched them drive by. Chase gave a quick explanation to the young curious Miles that that's where he lived for several months while he processed his papers for an actual house. And he said that the benefit of having their own house meant privacy, and being able to wear civilian clothes any time.

But it was Halloween, and the residing soldiers were given the opportunity to wear costumes. They encountered more of them upon approaching the mess hall. Some dressed as witches, others wolves, but there were a handful who had gone as movie icons like cyborgs and androids, and others were wearing WW2 and WW1 costumes from the Allies side. And one of the Majors, a lion from the British Columbia Regiment went as a Spartan, who was strolling with his lioness daughter who dressed as Rapunzel.

When Dexter turned to park, stopped by a few of the recruits-in-training who dressed as the Beatles, Miles pointed out another Power Ranger, the blue shark one he said.

But neither Chase nor he knew who it was behind the mask, and was walking away. This Power Ranger wore the costume with his tail inside it as well. Guy was committed, he gave him that.

After they had parked, Dexter said, "This is the mess hall son. This is where we..." he rolled his hands to him to finish the sentence.

"Rendezvous, sir," he said, saluting his father before putting his helmet back on. Chase, and lastly Dexter too. He slipped his keys around his neck, the fluff held onto it, and the helmet's large frame hid it enough for it to not mold out.

Dexter had never felt more proud of this direction that life had led him too. Best friend, best and only son all uniformed in their own way. He disembarked from their vehicles, as did the other two. And they all closed their doors simultaneously. But something welled up in Dexter. A familiar feeling when he had left for the Army more than a decade ago. The same pride that his parents felt when he went on this journey. Excitement, confidence, and optimism knowing that he was in a position for his son to see the place that helped him become *him*. His heart was beating fast, and he glanced over to Miles who looked around much more with curiosity. It was a diaspora to see the civilian vehicles intermingle with army ones like trucks, and hummers with camouflage to match their arboreal setting.

He went over to him asking, "Well, what do you think, son?"

"I think it's cool!" Miles said, hugging him.

Chase was about to put up Dexter's camera but the bigger wolf waved him down. He decided to take a few snapshots of the scenery. Even the moon that was turning an intense orange, almost like the fruit if it were high above their atmosphere, and very large and full of craters. A second sun, one would say, while the first one was sinking into the horizon already.

It was the cue for the lamplights to turn on, and for their PA systems scattered throughout the base to relay spooky ghost noises, with subtle cackling, and organs playing in the distance. They really did not hold back on this.

Dexter held his son's hand, and Chase followed beside as they made their way into the mess hall that had been decorated as a big mouth of an alien creature from a franchise they do not know. The big windows were covered by eye-shaped cardboards with red blinking bulbs. A mix of foam and carpet had been rolled out at the main door to resemble a bluish tongue, and fangs on the door frame requisitioned from, he guessed, mine clearing devices. And there was a bat standing on top of the building, looking over them deviously. He wore Dracula's iconic outfit, cloak and all. And yes, it was a soldier who looked the part, and it just so happened his posting was atop the building.

He and Chase, with their trained eyes, could see the belt attached to sturdy rope that latched itself onto a hook behind the structure, for the soldier's extra safety. Whoever that soldier was, he would never hear the end of it but it really sold the setting.

As they lined up to enter, Dexter could not distinguish his peers from their costumes. Some wore the iconic Ski Mask from that classic slash-thriller Monday the 13th, or others wielding fake fire swords that had a plastic flame with orange light imbued into them while dressed in robes from the recently premiered Stellar Battles. But what caught his attention the most was a father-and-son duo who he was not afraid to admit had the best costumes for the night: A pair of horses approached from where they had parked, and they caught most of their attention that even the bat stationed on the roof heard the clanking of their knightly attire. Not only did it seem like real armor, Dexter overheard two parents' elated discussion on how they dressed as the Knights of Purple and Gold. According to them, it was a near faithful recreation with their predominantly purple metallic painting, accented in gold, with pauldrons bearing the Emblem of the High Horse on the left shoulder, and Inylsen's three aligned moons on the right. The taller of the two, presumably the father, wore a velvet cape, while his son did not.

"Dude, that's dedication right there." Chase was impressed.

But Miles only cared for the Power Ranger he saw earlier, and the Blue Ranger did indeed return. This time, though, he was accompanied by a shorter Black Bull Ranger, who had the same guest pass as him. The young wolf waved over at them.

Dexter saw them and waved along, "There he is again. Chase, do you know who that might be?" Because anything and everything about Power Rangers he had only gotten from Miles. Everyone else in his unit was either a rocker, a gearhead like himself, or a historian. Or, like Charles, all three combined.

"No clue. Also, line's moved. Let's go." He patted his shoulder and turned his head towards the mouth.

The Blue and Black Power Ranger were able to wave back at Miles as his father guided him inside, and the young wolf hoped to see them later.

The lighting inside was an eerie ice-white because this was not the mess hall's typical fluorescent bulbs. No, these were surgery spotlights, and it illuminated the room's more peculiar decorations; IV stands with acid-green bags hanging on from them; broken in medicinal cabinets with traces of blood next to the restrooms, and a large mural of an alien's X-Ray painted on the wall where their division's flags are usually hung. He didn't know from what franchise, but this creature had thirteen arms of various length and bone structure.

Dexter saw that the tables were decorated like operating tables; medical green cloth draped over them, some with blood stains that were either blue or red, and the chairs were stationary stools. Each seating had a metal tray laid out for them, with their utensils and plates in them. A smart move that would've made kitchen clean-up more efficient, especially with the children. Some were shouting, others were crying because of youthful phobias like doctors and dentists. The mess hall that day did smell like a medical office, its disinfectant and odd leftover magazine scent. Opposed to the typical exhaustion of day-to-day training, or the greasy food.

The officers that normally sat away from the lower ranks also had their own theme too. Almost ominous, their seatings were perched atop of the kitchen that overlooked the entire mess hall. Its aesthetic was very mansion-like as their normal eating area was shrouded in a faint red light. He could barely see the oak table they usually ate on, but it had authentic candelabras on top, with a silver chandelier dangling above, and the normal lounge chairs they had were replaced with tall wooden ones with armrests.

Even with all these displays and decors, there were unclothed soldiers stationed at most doorways. Authority was something that needed to be followed. The only part of it that had been lax was the noise discipline.

Dexter, Miles, and Chase, found themselves sitting in the center right of the mess hall. The panther started taking more photos of the decor, and of themselves. Miles felt shy trying to pose something related to Power Rangers with all these people around, so he simply waved for the camera, and his father was not one to pressure him into it.

Before long though, refreshments were served by soldiers in their fatigues who wore aprons and bibs over them. The one who attended to them was a Mink named 'Antoinette'. They were given small caramel-coated apples, a choice of water, juice, or soda served in fake-glass goblets, and a boysenberry jam sandwich with the jelly oozing out, almost like blood. Chase and Dexter opted for water, the latter especially as he was to give a speech in a matter of hours. Miles opted for a pink-colored juice that turned out to be four seasons.

The turnout was far larger than Dexter expected. Almost every table had been occupied, and they were joined by a family of five who dressed as the cheerful and quirky Evvens family. This would be, by far, the most people he would talk in front of.

Miles noticed his father's uneasiness, and held his paw, giving it a gentle squeeze. He said, "You'll be fine, dad."

Dexter turned to him, his words drowning out the crowds talking over each other. He patted his son's back and reminded himself that all he truly needed to focus on was his son. Everything will be alright after. He recalled what he brought up earlier and armed himself with it. A cohesive mind would be needed for tonight, and he would get it before then. Hopefully.

Buzzing filled the air, intersected with the audio hijinks of a microphone being plugged in. This caught the attendees' attention, with a few parents hushing their children to behave for a moment. The speaker who brought the noise discipline was the person Dexter had spoken with in the phone earlier: Major Harding. A horse who provided all the executive decisions of his unit during their tours. Always eager to see action even though their higher ups remind him that his duty was from a command post. A good soldier,

Dexter thought. He should've known he would be the host, but what caught him off guard was his costume as a very big pencil.

"Good evening, everybody." His stern eyes scanned the room and betrayed his outfit. "I am Major Harding, leader of the Ghost Unit." That was Dexter's unit alright. "And I would like to thank you all for coming to the Canadian Armed Forces' first ever Halloween Party." He said flatly. The horse never had a hype man's voice, and he would never hear the end of it if he tried. "This was an initiative for the military to be more inclusive of the every-soldier's family." Applause filled the air with that sentiment, and some of the costumed soldiers cheered aloud knowing there would be no consequence for it later.

Dexter looked at Miles, with his helmet back on, focusing on the pencil man. He ought to acquaint them later.

Major Harding continued, "Thank you." He waved at them to settle down for a moment. "Tonight's activities will be a trip to Freedom Square where our special units have prepared an impressive feat of stealth and acrobatics." Which piqued the interest of some of the children. "Followed by a tour around the ground logistics hangars." That only the soldiers applauded. "Where they will give a presentation." Where no one made noise about. "And give everyone free candy." And the room was full of cheer, the likes that Dexter had only seen during graduation. Even Miles raised both his arms and screamed onto the top of his lungs. This lasted for a moment until the parents once more instructed their kids to stand down.

"Lastly," Major Harding said. "A special demonstration from one of Canada's finest wolves on the semantics of howling." And some of the wolf cubs in the crowd started howling, to the awes and laughter of different parents.

Dexter appreciated the stretch of a compliment– he was far from being Canada's finest. But Miles certainly saw that in him, tugging at his arm with excitement.

His son said, "You're going to howl for us later?"

Dexter patted his helmet, "Mhm. And you'll see why I picked this costume for us." He patted his back, and they both turned once more to the pencil man on one of the steps that

led to the officer's personal dining room. While the commotion was being calmed down, it only occurred to him that the costume would be too big for him to fit in the short headspace. "You're going to howl with us too, son."

"I am?!" Miles yipped with excitement and Dexter nodded to him.

He turned to the panther. "Chase," Dexter caught his attention, and pointed at their Major.

He looked at him, "What's— oh. Hah!" Chase slapped the table along with his short humored outburst that died down as the room did. That was close.

Major Harding continued, "Everyone here will be escorted by our Privates and Sergeants. Please observe proper decorum, and guests." He emphasized the visitors. "Do not be without your guest pass, or with your enlisted family member. There will be consequences for the soldier in charge should they break protocol." He cleared his throat, signaling towards all the soldiers present in the crowd. "Am I clear, soldiers!?"

Every costumed individual, even through their masks answered, "Sir, yes, sir!" In unison, standing up as part of the protocol. Firm and steady.

"Good." Major Harding applauded them. "Guests, give your beloved family a round of applause. They are true defenders of the flag and you should be proud of living with them. At ease, troopers."

Every soldier in the seating area sat down to a round of applause, followed by a lot of hugs and kisses from their families.

Dexter, Chase, and Miles shared a group hug, their god/son telling them, "That was awesome! How'd you guys rehearse that?"

Both the wolf and the panther laughed, knee-slapping, and genuinely humored by that. Miles looked at them in disbelief. Dexter explained, "It's one of the things you learn when becoming a soldier; forming this unified bond."

"Woah," Miles said under his breath. "Maybe I should be a soldier instead."

Dexter reacted with a smile because he genuinely didn't know what to say to him at that point. Half proud yet half concerned because of the hazard being a soldier brings. "You sure?"

"Kinda," Miles looked around. "You and uncle Chase do a lot of cool things and help protect our country."

He held his shoulder and gripped it, "We'll talk about this when you grow older, son." Without sounding distraught. It was not only for his son's sake, but for his own too. Because he couldn't make that speech— presentation without him later.

Chase sat there confused, and out of Miles' view with similar confusion on how to entertain his godson's interest. Neither he nor Dexter had the experience to talk about it, but maybe these other parents could give them insight.

"May I have everyone's attention." Major Harding announced, "Our special forces are ready with their demonstration. Please follow our Privates who will be escorting you to Freedom Square. Private Lima."

Private Lima, a female rabbit stood at attention, arms to the side. "Sir!"

"Please lead the escort."

"Sir, yes, sir!" She split her legs in a narrow v-shape, placed her hands behind her back. The Private was about to shout. "May the guests closest to the exit please fall in line in front of me!"

It was quite the rolecall, Dexter thought. She may have potential to be squad leader because everyone followed her order. Parents who definitely had higher ranks, and their children fell in line with relative silence. The first set moved on their feet, a few murmurs from parent to child regarding candy, and other questions of who the shouting lady was.

Private Lima paid no heed and continued, "The next set of rows, please fall in line beside them! And the next right after!"

That was Dexter's table, and they awaited the row before them to finish lining up. It reminded him of his early days in bootcamp. But drill sergeants would penalize you if you were slow. Something he struggled with when he started. Normally if these were a bunch of cadets, and they took this long to line up, every second wasted was a push up. And this would've been two hundred, and he could see that pained relief from the other soldiers that didn't have to go through it again. Others even shared it, among other tales of punishment they had endured back then.

After three hundred and sixty potential push-ups, Private Lima stood proper once more, took a step forward, and rotated her steps in place. She turned around on the spot, and stood once more, then stepped forward. "Follow me." And everyone did in the same manner they had stood up, the first set of rows were the first to exit, followed by the next and so on.

Dexter could only imagine if this was a regular day and everyone had gone about marching in colorful costumes. It was weird yet humorous, and he hoped there would be a next year for this. He, Chase, and a few of the adults marched to that standard military beat of left-left-left-right-left, whereas Miles did so but with the opposing direction instead. His son's got spirit, and he was yet to have the conviction.

Once they stepped outside, Dexter could see the red tint paint the moon, and he could see its light touch the rooftops of the buildings, and the faint shade against the dark green of distant trees. A subtle blanket over the nearby sprint-field, distorted by the stronger light of the lamps that lined along the streets. But he could see the little effect that it did on their suits, Chase saw it too but Miles didn't yet. The red on their uniforms shimmered like energy; they were Blood Moon Rangers after all, and it would be on nights like these they would make such a difference. As childish as the notion seemed to be, Dexter felt more confident about his speech later. It gave him an idea too.

The costumed civilian division passed by the libraries first, and walked through its ground floor arch decorated with more cobwebs and headless horsemen on both sides. At the end was Freedom Square, an open park-like space which served as a recreational area

for graduates and officers, or so the other parents have said. Even Private Lima was not allowed past the arch, replaced by a fruit bat in standard fatigues. Chase pointed out that he was from the Specter Unit. This opening had several benches and walking paths, even around the square that the panther had jogged around in. Four grown pine trees stood proud at the same height as the other, not far off from the corners. And in the middle was a fountain that depicted Sir Logsworth, a Honeybadger who was the first General of the base when it was established in the 1890s.

They were all instructed to stand in a square formation surrounding it, facing outward. Besides from the library, Freedom Square was surrounded by the officer's personal quarters, a chapel, and an office for logistics and communication. These structures were, however, unlit. The guests and even the soldiers among them went silent as the collective felt that they were being watched. Not even the spooky sounds from the speakers reached this serene park.

Dexter and Chase could only identify one bat hiding in the tree where the library and chapel connected. But given standard unit protocol, there were supposed to be six total, and the bat that guided them was simply in disguise. His wolf eyes tried to peer around the shadows that hid far from the moonlight. It was then Miles noticed that his suit dazzled under it, and he showed it to his father. Both the older wolf and the panther scoffed.

After minutes of waiting for this presentation, the fruit bat said, "How'd you like our presentation so far?"

Some of the children didn't seem to understand. Neither did Miles. The costume soldiers looked around more frantically, wondering where their ambushers were. Dexter and Chase glared at the same tree where the one bat hid well, and a few others tried to see what they saw but simply couldn't. Every soldier had been taught about flanking, maneuvering, setting up and anticipating ambushes. Specter Unit and Ghost Unit were taught to do it better.

The same fruit bat walked around and noticed the Ghost Unit's finest had caught one of their own. "You're in big trouble Perkins!" He shouted at the tree.

"Those guys are from the Ghost Unit, not bad." Lieutenant Perkins was a flying fox who unfurled himself from his upside down wing-made cocoon that remained near perfect against the darkened leaves. The outfit he wore benefited greatly during the night, wearing fabric that utilized experimental fabric that helped absorb any light to blend in with a dark backdrop. He went over and shook both their paws.

"Not bad yourself," Dexter shook his winged hand. Miles' eyes were star studded with his father's impeccable display.

The young wolf said, "Do you see the others?" He asked, looking around with curiosity. Eyes trying to trace the shadows.

Dexter looked at their escort who wore their fatigues, "This one's hiding in plain sight." The others among them stared at the fruit bat who was caught red handed.

"Well played, I'm Captain Abbott, squad lead of Specters." He reached out to Dexter.

And he shook it too, "Dexter, co-lead of the Ghosts."

"I've heard about your endeavors as the New Moon Sniper, or Wolf, was it?"

"New Moon Wolf," Dexter corrected, and the murmurs behind him followed.

This would be Miles' first time that others would revere his father in such a manner. Anything and everything about him that had been told was simply him being a good soldier. Him doing his duties. Him going on tour to bring peace. Nicknames like 'Dex' or 'Fen' whenever he encountered his dad's friends in public. But not 'New Moon Wolf'.

Dexter couldn't bring himself to lie or maintain the facade to an officer, unfortunately, and he let the murmurs continue. He and Miles heard them talk about his infamous howl, and how he 'liberated' a town almost by himself. Chase was there too but he ran spotter and logistics for him. And he cut the tension by introducing Miles to the Captain, "This is my son, Miles."

"Miles, eh?" Captain Abbott shook the young wolf's hand. "Your father's a great soldier. Knew where Perkins hid, and identified me as a combatant. Did you know there are four more of us here?" He said not only to him, but to the guests and other soldiers too.

"Specters!" The captain stepped back. "Shriek!"

And the dark corners between buildings, even on the rooftops, yelled "Strike!" There were four more indeed, all dressed in the same experimental outfit. The most prominent was one who hid quite plainly in sight, hung down from one of the inner patios of the officer's segment. He waved at the attendees whilst in this position.

Dexter applauded for them, Chase, Miles, and everyone else followed. Specter Unit was on another level, and he could feel the need to beat them at their own game without the use of specialized fabrics. He would have to get creative for that. But he had to learn about it first.

Captain Abbott began explaining the concept of stealth, ambush, and tactics that could put more than a hundred people at a disadvantage against just six. Clever positioning, communication, and utilizing hand signals. The soldiers noticed his terminologies were all child-friendly, and it did intrigue the younger members of the group. That as they were being escorted out, spoke highly about wanting to be a soldier. The army's plan at work here.

Next, they went around the regular soldier compound that served the housing, the classrooms, and other typical public facilities exclusive to them like clinics, gyms, and even a grocery. The latter of which was opposite of where the mess hall was, and closer to the garage that was opened fully on display; the same Cougar was still there, accompanied by army trucks. Those who typically operate it were raccoons who were well known for their detail, and innate mechanic nature. They talked at great lengths about their army trucks, tall six wheelers, a pair on the front, and two on the back. It was also added that those in the back could be interchanged for tracks, the same used on tanks, to handle rough terrain. The soldiers were the most intrigued given these vehicles have contributed to their survival in distant areas.

Dexter told Miles that these trucks were the reason they had coffee or poutine out there in Kuwait. He was a good soldier, that he would say, but logistics were as vital as doctors and cooks in the army. And the speaker gave examples of what they brought: food, clean water, fuel, medicine, and candy most of all that had gotten the attention of all the kids. They handed out plastic Jack-O-Lantern bags packed to the brim with store bought snacks. The adults were also given too but it only meant more for their kids. Dexter received one as they were passed out from the back and side of the trucks, and admittedly he wouldn't mind indulging in some of these. The chocolates were a no-go, but those fruity hard candies were from his favorite brand.

And once everyone had gotten their own bag, some already lighter than others, the driver/logistician also reminded everybody to thank the hand that gives because they always saved lives. Everyone thanked them, and some of the soldiers gave a more heartfelt thanks for all their effort during high intensity conflicts in prior years.

Private Lima regrouped with them and informed them of an intermission before their final presentation. Her screaming voice had tired out but her performance earlier had made everyone aware of her, "There will be an intermission at the mess hall where dinner would be served. Please follow me." And the strict stance she had had softened to, simply gesturing them over and slouched with her walk.

Dexter noticed that the moon's tint had intensified from a light red to a scarlet red, and the colors that matched on his suit glowed, almost like a calling to the moon itself. People murmured not only about the suit, but the wolves' ties to the moon itself. Almost mythic, with his already strong reputation amongst his fellow soldiers. Chase had been receiving the same kind of murmured praises. And a few whispers about Miles too. Rumors were exchanged, and it all shifted once they were back inside the mess hall.

Officers and their families were already laughing at their table in the distance, whereas the butler-soldiers had prepared their proportioned meals at the table. And as crowds typically went, they also whispered amongst themselves about Lou's. The rumor spread and everyone was talking about it. Where they sat it didn't matter, as long as they found a spot with food on it. The parents, however, told their children to wait until everyone had sat down. A sort-of soldier tradition to wait until the order had been given.

Major Harding, everybody's favorite Pencil, returned on the steps with a slightly bent eraser head on top of his costume, "Good evening everybody. I see that our soldiers have understood the semantics of mess hall discipline. I applaud that," he applauded by himself. "At ease, and do enjoy your dinner."

"Yes, sir," every soldier responded in unison, followed by the sound of indulgence.

"Dessert will be served after the last presentation." Major Harding said before returning the mic to a private.

Miles and Chase began eating into their meals of bat-shaped burger sandwiches, served with sides of pumpkin-shaped chicken nuggets, and squash risotto with skull-drawn cream on top of it. Dexter, however, stood up and went over to the Major for a request.

And he returned, an ingenious smile on his face.

"What did you say?" Chase said after swallowing.

"Add more flair to my presentation, 'tis all." Dexter started with the risotto first. It was sweet, creamy, and warm enough to soothe his nerves.

Conversation continued around the mess hall and the talk was mostly about the children's impressions about the military. Given the child-friendly manner at which it was introduced to them, they were more than excited to become a soldier. Miles, though, wondered more about his father's endeavors on the field.

Dexter patted his son's back and feigned the response by eating food, taking slow sips of water. His son was preoccupied with his own meal too, as well as finding that other Power Ranger pair. But when he finally had to explain it, he did so simply.

He said, "I was a sniper who had to guard a village back in my first tour of Afghanistan. I did my job well and I was praised for it by my superiors and the locals." Then he explained why the specific title, "New Moon Wolf" was because I howled." He drank some water to that effect, knowing he would do one within the hour. "In a manner that scared off

anyone who wished to do that village harm." His eyes darted to Chase with a smile, "And my best friend was there to witness it."

"Yep," Chase confirmed for him. "Your father is scary when he's serious."

"Definitely," Miles agreed. "Broken vase..." was all he said.

"You were younger, and you wanted to have fun. Even until now." The father gave his son assuring pats that eased the tension. "I realized that I shouldn't punish you for an honest mistake." Those words were carried by a weight that Miles' innocence should not bear witness to, keeping his face straight to not hint the true horror behind it.

After half an hour had passed, the pencil pusher returned to the steps, "Good evening once more, ladies, gentlemen, children, and soldiers. Our last presentation is about to start, so if I may request Lieutenant Fennix of the Special Ghost Unit, to please guide everybody outside."

Dexter stood up in a snap, stepped aside and replied, "Sir, yes, sir!" He removed his helmet revealing red, determined eyes behind it.

Miles heard a different wolf out of him, and he felt compelled to follow.

Dexter continued, "May I request everybody to return all your utensils to your trays, and proceed outside in an orderly manner." Followed by, "May I request everyone with helmets and masks to remove their headgear too."

The soldiers among them in their tables replied with a 'Yes sir!' in unison. And they had stowed their utensils and drinks onto their tray like clockwork. Their guests had done the same too without being rigid.

Miles tried to do it robotically, and Chase was able to take a photo of him doing so, with his father standing firm in the background as they all waited for the sound of shifting utensils and plates to cease.

The silence lasted for a moment as the sound of a marching pair of shoes walked towards the entrance. Dexter ordered, "Proceed!" And the mix cue of soldiers and guests stepped outside with haste and curiosity. All the canines had their helmets close to their hips, Miles did too. He moved through the crowd, Chase followed soon after having given the camera to Major Harding with the request to record it. All of them joined their father who stood close to the road where the street lamps were turned off. Once everyone had gone outside, the mess hall's lights behind were switched off too. Followed by an eerie silence that no murmurs escaped anyone's lips. The speakers had been shut off, and the preliminary howls of the wind blew over them.

Light from the Blood Red Moon, stark and bright, glowed Dexter's suit, as did Miles and Chase beside him. For a minute, Dexter had closed his eyes. The nature of his kind thumped loud in his heart, and the act of wearing this suit surged him a primal sense of authority that coincided with his dreams. How it glowed the brightest, reflecting almost the same glow as the moon itself. Darkness around him disappeared, and he became the source of a red ominous light. There was a tug on his hand, his son looked up to him in awe and fear. He greeted him with a loving gaze from that of a father, and held his shoulders to assure him. Wordless, that he loved him. Everything he had accomplished was to ensure the safety of his beloved Miles. Though their fur didn't match, as a surprise to most of the soldiers who knew about him. But their eyes were the same, and they saw a familial bond that none dared to sever. Guarded by their closest friends, their country, and under the Blood Red Moon, where tears and sweat trickled down easily, blood does not. It would be stuck with them no matter what. "I love you, son." Dexter whispered.

"I love you too dad, you got this." Miles assured him.

That was all he needed, and he returned his gaze towards the moon, "We wolves, dogs, jackals, coyotes— canines everywhere, howl during full moons. Here in the military, we howl as a unit, as an army; as one." There was a pause, and an audible exhale for dramatic flair. Dexter put his arms to the side, a step forward, and turned his heels towards them. The suit brought out the red glow of his eyes, natural, commanding. "Soldiers perform their duties so that their fellow soldier," he held Chase close to him. "Your friend can fulfill their duties too. That way we may protect," he held Miles' shoulder, "the ones we love the most with utmost strength, virtue." He went on, "To the military, it did not matter if you were a bat, a raccoon, or a wolf. A bird, a shark, a dolphin, a horse. We will take you in

and honor you as our own. Regardless of your nature, so we may nurture you as a competent force of nature. Your loved one accepted the call to protect Canada, and swore their own life to do so. I have too. To protect my son Miles, to protect my best friend Lieutenant Quicksilver." He patted them respectively. "And Chase here would do so for me, for my son; for all of you."

"So, why a howl?" Dexter explained, "A howl serves as a reminder that even in the hardest days, these darkest of nights, we are always there for each other. You will hear us across the battlefield, the regions, the continent, to carry the message that we are together. Always. And it mattered not if you were a feline, or a lizard. The bond of a soldier is transcendent of our nature. And no effort from Specter Unit, or the Logistics Division, the cooks and servers in the mess hall, would be accomplished without your fellow soldier beside you. Trusting them, respecting them. The howl ensures that. So I invite all of you, ladies, gentlemen, soldiers, children, regardless of species to join us in this act of unity."

Those who hadn't removed their helmets earlier were moved by such words and finally did. They watched the Blood Moon Ranger turn around and face the moon.

"Look up towards the moon, and follow my lead." Dexter said. He waited for a moment to ensure that most had looked up, some of the children howling beforehand, leading to a subtle giggle. The merriment died soon after, and he could feel the emotional stirring in his chest. His nerves blazed hotter than they had before, the Blood Moon empowered him.

The howl started with one, and the next minute his son joined. Dexter reached out and gripped his son's hand, the young cub's howl was deeper than before, almost as if the moon had affected him too. And every canine behind him followed, their continuous hymn echoing across the night and blood-like sky. The non-canines followed with their mimicry of a wolf's howl, some good, some not-so, lions roared, and snakes hissed, but Dexter welcomed it as their own howl regardless. And the next chorus followed, a longer tune that tugged from the depths of his diaphragm, now adjoined by the city of Langley, and then the surrounding forests, and further on as West Canada, under one voice, were united. From the elderly to the infant, they all heard and felt the lifeline that made up their country, any country for that matter.

The closing hymn ended with the creeping silence as their voices lowered. Whether by instinct or exhaustion, silence throughout the night. Not even the crickets chirped nor the feral owls hooted. And Chase instigated a cheer, and everyone followed with applause and embraces between their families, and newfound friends. The formalities closed with the lamplights reactivating and brightening the mood for everyone. Dexter was found hugging his son, and Chase taking the photo after, with the blood moon in sight, and as their suit's dazzle waned to the gentle orange light.

Major Harding appeared to congratulate Lieutenant Dexter for his moving speech and presentation, shaking his hand as he announced that dessert awaited them inside the mess hall. Yet stressed discipline and composure so everyone could get a fair share of Lou's famous Autumnal Lava Cake.

The Blue Power Ranger, and his Black Power Ranger companion approached the Fennixes. They were both German Shepherds, the former was Staff Sergeant Blake Ollson, an explosives specialist who invited his nephew, Adrian Ollson, to partake in the Halloween event. The latter was shy, but he did not hide the amazement towards their suits.

Blake invited the Fennixes and Quicksilver to join them for dessert. He asked Dexter where he was able to source those costumes, and the following exchange happened over a fragrant and chocolate oozing lava cake, topped with ice cream. Miles and Adrian were exchanging their preferred candies, and Chase returned with camera in hand. He reviewed the video that Major Harding recorded which captured the shimmer of red light against people's costumes, the audio was crisp and it captured his entire speech without flaw. And the howl made him recoil because of how loud it was on the vibrating device. Once it had settled, a few more photographs were taken about Miles' newfound friend, and Major Harding having a difficult time trying to go up those steps.

Their night in the mess hall lasted for another two hours before Major Harding, once again, thanked everyone for coming and wishing them a safe trip home. Particularly for those who drove here.

Dexter bade Blake a farewell, as did Miles to Adrian. Both these children had an inkling that this would not be the last time they saw one another. His family were once again back in their car, and Dexter yanked out his keys from his neck and put it into

ignition, car humming to life as the headlights turned on to several costumed families going to their homes here, or to their cars. It took a while before the crowd thinned out for them to drive home, so he turned to Miles who was counting his candy, and he kissed his forehead before hugging him.

"That was a good howl you did there, son," Dexter said.

Miles' tail wagged against the seat, "You really think so?"

"Mhm, you get better at it as you get older." He gave him fatherly pats on the shoulder. His son was growing up, and was glad to have been there for the most crucial ones. Tonight was one of those. And he hugged him again, tightly. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, dad."

"And thank you, Chase." He lifted his head over his son and rested on his other shoulder.

Chase was browsing the extra fifty photos he took throughout the event before he made eye contact with Dexter, "No problem, Dex. Thank you for your speech, you sure warmed up to a lot of people, and made all the soldiers bond with their families much more."

"You really think so?" Dexter fished for more compliments.

"Of course," Chase jabbed his arm, "As competitive as we are at times, we all have a strong bond with one another."

Dexter loosened his breaks now that there was a large enough gap for his car to pass through, "Honestly, I winged that last part of the speech."

"Really?" Miles said.

"No kidding?" Chase raised a brow as he put his seatbelt on, crossing his arms awaiting the wolf's explanation.

"Yeah, the trail of thought just shifted around, realizing halfway through that I can't bring up the whole intimidation factor." He drove towards the exit, giving a quick salute to the deer who held up a salute as more cars left the base.

"It'll come up eventually," Chase watched as the Halloween decor had gone by. "Maybe when you become Captain and you tell all them wolves that howling scares the enemy silly."

"The infamous New Moon Howl." Miles said. "Can you tell me about it, please?"

Dexter sighed, smiling, "I'll tell you this, son: I forced a howl."

Miles digested that information, bouncing back and forth what that meant. Correlating the act of howling to full moons, and then what Chase said about intimidating their enemies. And when it finally clicked, "How did you do it?!"

"Like Captain Abbott said, 'It's all about positioning'." Dexter said. But that was a story for another time.
