Darker Shades

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Darker Shades

by UnromanticPoetess

Summary

Third in the series after "A Darker Shade of Green" and "Spells and Illusions." Tommy kept his Power Coin when he left Rita's service, and she's not going to let him get away with it. Tommy has to struggle to keep his powers... and his life. Covers the season 1 episodes "The Green Candle" parts 1 and 2, "Doomsday" part 1 and 2, and "Return of an Old Friend" parts 1 and 2; then season 2 episodes "The Mutiny" parts 1-3, "Bloom of Doom," "Welcome to Venus Island," "Green No More" part 1 and 2, "Beauty and the Beast," and "Blue Ranger Gone Bad." Not necessarily all in that order... I tend to mish-mash and take the best themes of each episode.
This is Hell

Chapter Summary

Book 1: The Green Candle

Part 1 of my rewrite of (obviously) "The Green Candle."

The alarm rang again. It was the third time.

"Tommy? You getting up?"

Tommy groaned, and his head gave an extra throb. He'd been up half the night with nightmares. His sheets stuck to him, sodden in cold sweat.

And he had a Chem test today.

He weighed his options. It would be hard enough trying to catch up if he missed today. Billy had helped him study all week. Plus, there was a martial arts demonstration after school he didn't want to miss. He'd promised Jason to introduce him to anyone he happened to know.

But, then, there was that two hours of sleep he'd gotten…

Tommy groaned again and slowly pulled himself out of bed. "I'm up!" he yelled to his dad.

"I'll call the papers!" his dad yelled back. "Now get ready already!"

A shower, a change of clothes, and Tommy felt no better. He couldn't really put his finger on what was wrong. He ached all over, especially his head, which felt like two metal plates was pressing on each side. He was exhausted, though he thought lack of sleep had something to do with that. And the cereal and fruit his dad was setting the table with was turning his stomach.

He sat down, determined to choke down a couple bites just to keep his dad from worrying.

"You look terrible," John said from across the table, a note of concern in his voice. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Tommy mumbled. Then he forced a smile on his face. "Really, dad. I'm okay."

He tried to ignore the fact that was already sweating, and it couldn't have been higher than 50 degrees outside.

"Remember Sylvia and Billy are coming over tonight," John said. He paused. "But if you're not feeling up to it…"

"Dad…" Tommy said. "I'm completely fine. I think I'm just overtired. Been training too hard, maybe. Don't worry. And I'll come here after that thing in the Youth Center to help out."

He got up before his dad could start on him again, hoping that his dad didn't notice he hadn't touched his cereal.
He threw his backpack in the van and backed out, turning on the air even in the chilly weather. All right, so most of what he’d told his dad was a lie. He didn’t feel fine. He hadn’t been working out at all lately because he’d felt too tired. He was probably coming down with something… hopefully a cold. They just couldn’t afford for him to get sicker than that.

"… … … flunk out… … …"

Now, why would his math book be saying he was going to flunk out?

Then he heard laughter and realized his ear was being crushed against something… a desk…

"Wha-huh?" Tommy said, picking his head up. He’d been sleeping, and his ever… cheerful… math teacher was glowering down at him. Tommy surreptitiously wiped his sleeve against his notebook, as he was pretty sure he’d been drooling. "Coach Warren… I didn't catch that."

"Obviously," Coach Warren said with a wealth of sarcasm. "Bulkmeyer, tell Oliver what I was saying."

Bulk brightened, always happy that he wasn't the one in trouble. "He said if you were aiming to flunk out of the class, you were doing a good job."

The class laughed again.

The coach smirked as Tommy felt his face burn in humiliation. "Sleep on your own time, Oliver. And that doesn't include the detention you've earned this afternoon."

Tommy quickly stifled a groan. That would make him late for the Youth Center. But he knew arguing the point wouldn't do anything.

Mercifully, the bell rang. Tommy made double-sure he'd written down the homework assignment before packing his bags and running to meet Billy.

Billy was sitting in the school lounge area, his head buried in a thick library book. Tommy couldn't even decipher the title.

Tommy sat across from him and rubbed his eyes. Only two more hours before he could take more pain medicine.

Billy glanced up. "Did you contract the cold virus that's been circulating throughout the school?"

Tommy concentrated on the words, picking them apart. He was usually pretty good with Billy-speak, but not when he felt like this. "I dunno. Hope not."

"I was going to inquire as to whether you wished to go to the Youth Center, but it might be more expedient just to send you home."

Tommy shook his head and stopped when it made him dizzy. "I'll be alright. Can't do either, actually. I have detention. Fell asleep in Warren's class."

Billy frowned. "We could go up to the Command Center. The medical diagnostic equipment…"

"Is being upgraded, if you remember," Tommy said. "Look, I'm just going to head to the library… see if I can get any homework in. See you at the Youth Center later?"

"I have a meeting with the Science Club that might run late. But I'll see you tonight."
"Yeah," Tommy said. He forced himself up and tried to get away from Billy as quickly as possible. Billy was his best friend, but the last thing he needed was someone worrying over him.

Tommy slumped out of the building after detention. He didn't know if he'd had a longer day in months.

The good news was, he was starting to feel a little better. Maybe it was just some minor food poisoning or something. He was just glad he wasn't actually sick.

The bad news was, he was still exhausted, and he still had to head over to the Youth Center and then to his house for supper. All he wanted was to flop in his bed and sleep for a year.

Suddenly, arms wrapped around his neck and hands covered his eyes. "Guess who?"

The corners of his lips curled up in the first real smile he'd had all day. "Betty Rubble?"

"Hey!" Kimberly swooped around him, her arms still circling his neck. "I don't even want to know what weird fantasy made you say that."

Tommy grinned and pulled her in for a kiss. He shouldn't have, just in case he was contagious, but he couldn't resist. "You waited for me?" he said when they broke apart.

"Not for too long. Cheerleader practice ran late. Figured you wouldn't mind some company."

Tommy gave a fake sigh as they started walking, still not fully detached from each other. "I guess I can put up with you."

"Oh, so someone doesn't ever want to make out… ever."

"Always with the trump card…"

Tommy felt himself relax even more now that she was around. She didn't ask if he was okay… and that was good. She knew when to push and when to back off.

It was a short drive to the Youth Center, but a rather longer make-out session in the van in the empty parking lot.

Finally, Kimberly broke away. "You promised Jason you'd show to this thing."

"Oh, come on," Tommy said. "It's almost over already."

"Uh-uh. No more smoochies for you. Now march."

Tommy gave her a fake salute and killed the engine. There better as hell be a freaking amazing fighter in there, he thought.

The crowd had thinned, obviously, as Ernie and the other employees were working hard to clean up. Tommy spotted Jason, Zack, and Trini right off. He and Kimberly joined them at the edge of the mat.

"Hey," Trini whispered. "Don't bother the boys right now. This fighter has had them hypnotized for the past ten minutes."

"Well, she's amazing," Jason whispered back.
Tommy smirked and turned to the fighter in the center. His smirk melted.

The fighter, a woman in her 40's, was quickly dispatching a male fighter twice her size. She was too quick for him, dodging each of his impressive punches and kicks. Almost as if her body was a fluid, she instantly turned attacks around on her sparring partner, and she finally downed him in three quick punches and a kick. It was all so graceful, it all looked like one smooth motion.

She turned smilingly to her cheering audience. "If you want to be true martial artists," she said, as if she were continuing a lecture that had been interrupted by a fight, "you can't follow one particular fighting style. Now, I know there are those who will disagree with me, and I've wiped the floor with a few of them. The most important thing to remember is to strike fast and strike hard. Even if you have to hold yourself back if you're competing, which I most assuredly did, you'll do yourself a great service by becoming stronger than anyone else. If you learn to punch hard enough, you'll end any fight with one blow." She smirked. "I took four because I was showing off, and I didn't want to hurt the Hulk over here."

Jason was nodding slowly. He'd been in too many life-or-death situations recently to discount strength.

Trini was frowning. This fighter had too much emphasis on violence, not enough on discipline.

Zack was wondering if the guy's real name was the Hulk.

Kimberly was staring at Tommy, her brow creased in worry.

Tommy was panicking. Please don't say anything... please don't...

"Would you like to help me demonstrate, Tommy?" the fighter said.

Tommy set his face in a glare, trying to ignore the fact that the entire room was looking at him, including his friends. "I don't have anything to say to you," he said in a tight voice.

"I wasn't suggesting we talk," the fighter said in an amused voice.

"I'm not feeling well."

"Whiner."

Without warning, Tommy attacked. She'd been expecting it, of course. She always knew what he was going to do before he did it. Every attack was blocked or dodged, though he was avoiding all of her attacks as well.

He finally saw an opening and went for it... and then a wave of dizziness and pain seized him. He stumbled, and then found himself on the floor, her foot on his throat.

"You give?" she said smugly.

Tommy mustered another glare. "I give."

The fighter addressed her audience again. Tommy realized everyone was watching with astonishment at the humiliating skirmish. "Tommy's mistake there, of course, was losing concentration and not taking an opportunity I accidently gave him to win. You can't drop your guard. Not ever." She smiled. "This concludes the demonstration."

The crowd dispersed with murmurs of disbelief. Tommy's friends, on the other hand, rushed forward
to help him up.

"You okay, bro?" Jason said quietly as he pulled him up with one hand.

"Peachy," Tommy grumbled.

The fighter was gathering her things. "You're getting sloppy, son. Comes from inadequate training. I warned you about that when you left."

Tommy gritted his teeth.

"Son?" Zack said.

Jason was looking at Tommy, then the fighter, then Tommy again.

Tommy sighed. "Guys, this is my… mother. Penn Oliver."

"Anderson, actually," Penn said brightly. "Now, Tommy, introduce your friends to me."

Tommy's vision went red. "Mom, these are my friends. I won't bother telling you their names because you won't bother remembering them. That good enough?"

Penn rolled her eyes. "Oh, don't be so dramatic, Tommy." She turned to Jason, who had obviously caught her attention as the most obvious fighter. "I'm Penn," she said, offering her hand to shake.

Tommy couldn't stand it. He couldn't stand to see her be so nice and reasonable to his friends, and his friends making nice with her. Knowing full well he was being as dramatic as his mother had accused him of, he left the group and stormed out of the Youth Center.

The cool air felt good: it had been close and warm in the Youth Center. Or maybe it was just he found it difficult to breath properly around his mother.

"Tommy?"

Tommy felt his shoulders tense instinctively, as if part of a defense mechanism. He tried to force himself to relax. "Hey, Kim," he said in an awkwardly casual voice. He forced a smile on his face. "Sorry for running out like that. I really have to get home."

Kimberly's eyes were a little too understanding. "She didn't even call, or anything?"

Tommy looked down, laughing a little. "Not her style. She always likes to shake things up. Need a ride home?" He didn't want to hang around until his mother left the building.

"Sure…" Kimberly said, and Tommy knew she noticed the frequent changes of subject.

The drive passed in a sort of dreadful silence. Tommy felt himself reverting back to what he called "Crazyland"… as always when his mother was around. Already his brain was jamming up and clouding over.

"Does your mom do this often?"

Tommy considered this was difficult for Kimberly. They had just come to terms with each other for the past couple weeks, but they didn't really talk about their personal lives. Tommy resisted pushing her away, even though he really didn't want to talk about it.

"Every once in a while," he said. "If she shows up, she shows up out of the blue. And then she
leaves just as quickly."

"I'm sorry," Kimberly said. "My… my dad used to come all the time. Not as much anymore."

Tommy didn't respond.

"I know it's really hard when parents split up…"

Tommy stopped the car. "We're at your house. Sorry, but I really gotta…"

"It helps when you talk about it," Kimberly said a little louder, refusing to be cut off. "Especially
with someone who knows how you feel."

Tommy found himself grinding his teeth. "I don't want to talk about it right now. And… you really
don't know what I'm going through, Kim. I'm sorry, but you don't."

Kimberly paused and looked down. "Fine," she said, a little frostily. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Tommy watched her go, and then let his head fall back on the head cushion. "Great, Tommy. Alienate everyone in your life."

He took several deep breaths. He still had dinner with his father, Sylvia, and Billy that night, and he
was determined not to hurt anyone else.

"Well…" Scorpina commented. "This is very interesting. About as interesting as watching Squatt
and Baboo do inventory."

"That is actually quite interesting," Finster said. "Particularly when they get to the weapons room and
start giving all the guns funny names."

Scorpina looked at Finster. "You get really bored up here, don't you?"

"Indescribably."

Scorpina chuckled silently. For the past few hours they'd been monitoring the events on Earth on the
screen in Finster's lab. Scorpina reflected that "monitoring" more resembled "creepily stalking
teenagers." And what she was seeing was not exactly fun to watch.

"I wonder…" Finster said, absentmindedly working the monster clay. "You do not have to
participate in these monitoring activities with me, Scorpina. I do not need rest at the present. You
must have more interesting pursuits. Goldar, for instance…"

"No." Scorpina backed down from her abrupt interruption. "I mean…" She scowled. "Let's just say I
really don't have anything more interesting to do at present."

She gave Finster a hard look, and he backed down. The fact that she and Goldar were no longer
sharing sleeping quarters, or speaking except in the context of work, was an open secret around the
moon palace. Rita had apparently decided to ignore the situation, so everyone else pretty much
followed her lead. Finster, however, tended to be meddlesome.

The truth was, Scorpina wasn't entirely certain why she was staying. She'd turned down two good
job offers, and she was starting to get restless anyway. She found no joy in fighting the Power
Rangers. They were good fighters, but they were so dramatic and took everything so personally. She
also completely disagreed with Rita's tactics, though she admitted that fighting interdimensional
beings like Zordon was not her specialty.
And there was Goldar, of course…

And Tommy…

And that was another thing. Scorpina spent half the time worrying about her own little love dramas, and then the rest of the time frustrated that she was putting her career on hold for men. She was known for never letting herself get tied down.

So why couldn't she leave?

She scowled at the screen, wondering how much more slow drain Rita would put Tommy through before actually attacking.

"How much more do you think he can take?" she asked Finster casually. She hoped he wouldn't interpret anything more in her tone other than mild interest.

Finster was too preoccupied with the screen to notice anything in Scorpina's tone, it seemed. Scorpina looked at him closely for the first time since she'd been there. She was not adept at reading his expressions—he didn't have many—but she was sure he was just as unhappy about this attack on Tommy as she was. He fidgeted, and he wasn't able to look away from the screen for very long.

"I… doubt Queen Rita will prolong his suffering for very much longer," Finster finally said. "We've let the candle burn for two weeks, now. Queen Rita will get impatient."

"Any guesses on if he'll survive this thing?"

Scorpina didn't have to guess at his expression now. There were definite worry lines creasing his face. That was one expression she'd gotten used to with Finster. "I suppose it will depend on how he reacts. Queen Rita will certainly give him the opportunity to come back."

Scorpina snorted. "That, and Goldar will take up knitting."

"I admit it doesn't seem very likely."

Scorpina felt certain Finster did not want to see harm come to Tommy. She wasn't too keen on the prospect herself, truth to tell. But there was no way to defy Rita. Neither of them ever could.

She could only hope Tommy would blunder into yet another solution to his problems. He seemed to have a knack for that.

Billy was sitting in the dining room when Tommy got home. He had a sort of stunned look on his face. Tommy could hear his dad and Sylvia in the kitchen.

"You're not going to believe it," Billy said in a low voice.

Tommy's mind went into a wild panic. Did his mother contrive to get there before he could?

"What's up?" Tommy said, matching Billy's volume without knowing why.

"They wanted to wait until you got home," Billy said, still in the stunned voice. "Wanted it to be a surprise, but they're really bad at hiding things."

"Hiding what?"

"The diamond ring on my mom's finger."
Tommy sat down. Or, Tommy's legs gave way under him, and he was lucky a chair was there to catch him.

"You're joking."

"I'm not," Billy said. "Act surprised."

Sylvia turned from the stove, carrying some dishes to the table. Tommy took them, greeting her more naturally than he felt, and began setting the table with Billy's distracted help.

When he'd finished, Billy looked at him. "Tommy, I said act surprised," he said in a whisper.

Tommy realized his face had split in a huge grin. He hadn't even noticed until that moment, hadn't even really been aware of his thoughts. He bit his lips, trying to make his face serious. He couldn't. And Billy's face was breaking into a grin even as Tommy struggled.

"What are you two grinning like idiots about?" John asked as he wheeled to the table.

Billy laughed a bit giddily. Tommy gave him a severe look, the effect ruined because he just couldn't stop smiling. He cleared his throat. "Um… nothing, Dad. So, you have an announcement for us?"

Sylvia suddenly looked down at her hand, apparently just realizing she'd left her ring on. The two boys laughed.

"It's apparently impossible to keep secrets around these two," Sylvia said, a little miffed that the big surprise was ruined.

"But it looks like we didn't need to worry about how they'd react," John said, his face breaking into a grin to match Billy's and Tommy's.

"Are you kidding?" Tommy said. "This is great!" He looked quickly at Billy, remembering the stunned mood Billy had been in. "It's great, isn't it?"

"Of course it is!" Billy said. "I mean, we're going to be brothers and everything…"

Tommy felt his eyes sting, and he quickly turned his thoughts toward something a little less overwhelming. A real family… "Have you thought about when?"

"It won't take long to plan the wedding," Sylvia said, serving the plates with food everyone had forgotten about. "I mean, second marriages for both of us, we're not looking at anything extravagant. Just a party, I think."

Tommy's mind froze a little at the mention of second marriages. In the rush of excitement, he'd completely forgotten. He was just trying to think of when to break the news to his dad when he heard a knock on the door.

Not now, dammit, his brain screamed.

John looked completely confused. "I'm not expecting anyone."

"Girl scouts, maybe?" Sylvia said. "Oh, wait, they sell in the spring."

Tommy's grin now felt forced and frozen. "I'll see who it is."

The walk to the door was only a few steps, but it seemed like an eternity. He wished anything would happen… Irate neighbor… Putty attack…
Sure enough, Murphy's Law was in full force. Penn stood smiling at the other side of the door.
"Aren't you going to invite me in?"

Tommy was still in frozen panic when Penn swept past him easily. "Oh, good, supper. I'm starving,
by the way, thanks for asking."

Sylvia looked astounded at this insinuating stranger breezing through the dining room as if she
owned it. John's face had turned stony. Billy, always quickest on the uptake, looked a little panicked
at the impending crisis.

Penn surveyed the dining room and then smirked. "I don't suppose there's any room at the table for a
hungry ex-wife, is there?"

Sylvia's astonishment changed instantly into something that was completely unreadable. Tommy
admired Sylvia's self-control for not trying to throw Penn out on the spot. Of course, that probably
had something to do with her knowledge of Penn's fighting acumen.

"Penn, this really isn't the time..." John said.

"Not at all," Sylvia interrupted stiffly. "After all, she is a guest."

Tommy suddenly felt the urge to laugh out loud.

"Boys, could you scoot over, and we can make room for..." Sylvia was already getting the extra
chair and another table setting.

"You can call me Penn," the woman said, either unaware or delighted at the trouble she was causing.
"And... I'm sorry, but I didn't catch your name."

John was holding his head. "This is hell. Yes, I recognize it."

Sylvia stuck her hand out in answer to Penn's introduction. "Sylvia Cranston, John's fiancée. And
this is my son, Billy."

Penn's smile grew wider as she sat down, either not hearing or completely ignoring Billy's greeting.
"Well, fiancée. This is happy news."

Billy and Tommy ate and looked at each other as passive-aggressive hell went on around them.
Sylvia and Penn exchanged deadly pleasantries through gritted teeth as John sat there, looking
dismayed. Yet he wouldn't be able to find out what Penn wanted and thus attempt to get rid of her
until after Sylvia and Billy left.

When Billy's communicator went off, Tommy almost cheered. He gave a significant look at his dad,
saying, "We're done. And we really need to get some homework done tonight."

"That sounds fine, Tommy," John said, giving him a look that clearly said "This isn't fair."

"Thanks!" Tommy said, returning a look that said "Tough." "Come on, Billy."

It seemed as if Sylvia hadn't even noticed, until Billy was almost out the door. "Home at 10, Billy.
It's a school night."

They made it out. "Thank God," Tommy said.

"You think we should have left them in there?" Billy said.
Tommy laughed humorlessly. "Even if we had a choice, I'd rather face a billion Putties than what's going on in that house right now."

When they teleported up, the others were already there, focused on the Viewing Globe. The Globe was covered in what looked like electrical snow, with occasional flashes of what looked like a one-eyed monster.

Zack was clearly irritated. "Count on Rita to pick family dinner night to attack."

"Oh, we didn't mind," Billy said. "Really."

Tommy unconsciously positioned himself beside Kimberly, momentarily forgetting their snit earlier. She hadn't, as her pose became icy.

Zordon, as usual, waited for them all to show before giving the mission specs. "Power Rangers, it seems as if Rita has broken her two-week suspension of hostilities. A monster and squadron of Putties are attacking the Angel Grove shopping mall."

"Unfortunately," Alpha broke in, "we can't get a good picture of the monster. It seems to be surrounded by a shield that inhibits our surveillance… and maybe even teleportation."

"Where's the nearest place we can morph in?" Jason asked.

Billy was already at the controls, calculating the barrier as Alpha continued to try to punch through the interference. "Looks like the street across from the front entrance."

"Be careful, Rangers," Zordon said. "Rita obviously wishes for you to fight blind. Even if we gain further information, we may not be able to communicate it to you."

Trini stared helplessly at the staticky Viewing Globe. "There's no telling how many people are at the mall right now."

Jason nodded. "We gotta go now. Alpha, just keep trying to get through the interference. I don't like not being able to teleport out."

"Will do, Jason," Alpha said.

A quick morph, and the six Power Rangers faced the recently-built Angel Grove mall. No one was running out of the building in a panic… a bad sign. It was also very quiet.

"Okay…" Jason said uneasily. "We'll split into pairs. Trini and I will take the front entrance. Zack and Kim, you're on east entrance near Sears, and Billy and Tommy take the one near the movie theater. Go in quiet and take down as many as you can without attracting more attention. The main goal right now is to get people out. We meet in the middle near the carousel if communication goes out."

They broke, staying away from any windows or store fronts that might have guards.

"Of course," Trini commented to Jason, "Rita could be monitoring us and reporting everything to her monster."
Jason shrugged. They were about to enter the front entrance, and Jason was hoping there'd be plenty congregrated right there in the food court. "But, then again, Rita could be suffering from the same interference. And we can't just give up the possibility of the element of surprise like that."

They got past the doors with no trouble and stepped gingerly through the food court. No Putties, but they found some mall employees holed up in the Magic Wok.

"It'll be okay," Trini said in a soft, hurried voice as she pulled a middle-aged man in an apron to his feet. "Please exit the building and get far away from the mall. We'll cover you; don't worry."

"Thank you, Power Rangers," a girl said, and Trini was startled to halfway recognize her as someone they went to school with, two years older. She was always startled when normal life intruded on Ranger time.

Zack and Kimberly, in the meantime, were sneaking past the lawnmowers and appliances. They'd met with a few Putties, but no mallrats yet.

Zack jerked his head to one side as they got to the clothes. "Dressing rooms?"

"I'll check," Kimberly said with a smirk. Sure enough, two Putties guarded a group of cowering shoppers in the dressing room near the Juniors' section. Kimberly quickly dispatched the two.

"Come on, get out," she said, pushing a girl out who's clothes still had the tags on them. "Don't worry about shoplifting; you can return them tomorrow. And..." she winced at the hang of the dress on the girl, "I'd return that, if I were you."

As for Tommy and Billy, they did not find a couple of Putties and small groups of cowering people. They found a whole slew of Putties.

Billy methodically chipped away at the attacking Putties. They hadn't found any people. Hopefully, all the people had gone to less dangerous parts of the mall, or even outside. "Looks like the attackers have congregated here," Billy said to Tommy as soon as their lines of attack pulled them in close proximity. "We should call the others here for backup."

Tommy at first didn't answer. Was it Billy's imagination, or was Tommy struggling more than usual? "...Yeah..." Tommy gasped. "...sure..."

As soon as Billy carved out some breathing space, he hit his communicator. "Red Ranger, come in," he said, using Ranger designations just in case anyone was listening. "Do you read, Red Ranger?"

Static answered him. He wasn't even sure if the signal had gone through at all. He bit back his frustration. "Looks like we can't get through, Green Ranger. We should work our way toward the middle to rendezvous with the others."

There was no answer. Billy suddenly realized the Putties were no longer attacking him, but were huddled around a prone green figure. They were beating him mercilessly.

Without conscious thought, Billy threw himself at the Putties and destroyed them all, a feat he could never achieve even morphed under normal circumstances. Now that the Putties were all gone, Billy could see Tommy wasn't moving. His costume flickered once... twice... and then disappeared.
Tommy had demorphed, and he was unconscious.
Waxing and Waning

Chapter Summary

Book 1: The Green Candle

Part 2 of my rewrite of "The Green Candle."

Though the Rangers were effectively cut off from the Command Center as well as each other, Rita could see perfectly. She saw the shopping mall as if it were an enormous board game. It gave her enormous satisfaction to see her plan go so perfectly, as if she'd staged it that way.

Scorpina lounged in a desultory fashion, sulking after Rita hadn't given her anything to do. Rita didn't altogether trust Scorpina in this. She sensed in Scorpina an affection towards Tommy that would not do in this plan to specifically make Tommy a victim. It was puzzling. Scorpina had inflicted more damage on Tommy than Goldar, and had done so willingly. But now Rita sensed reluctance and regret. She'd have to be careful about her friend.

Rita stared down at the prone body of Tommy. The Blue Ranger was very near panic over him, and had even removed his helmet and gloves in his attempts to help him. Rita knew Tommy was not seriously hurt… yet. His body was just too overwrought to support the powers. It was elegant enough. The candle drained the powers, and the powers, in an effort to maintain strength, drained Tommy of his own vital energy. Rita wondered if Zordon had ever made clear to these teenagers what risks these powers were. She suspected he hadn't.

Rita was sure he was all right for now. He was strong enough to last another few days at least, no matter what she threw at him. And he was far too sensible to allow himself to be killed. If it was one thing Rita knew about Tommy, right from the beginning, it was that he knew how to compromise.

Billy's heart thudded. There was no one around anymore, but he didn't altogether care. Tommy was unconscious and wouldn't, or couldn't, wake up. That was all that mattered, secret identity be damned.

For the millionth time, it seemed, he checked for a pulse. It was strong and steady, beating reassuringly under his skin. Tommy seemed perfectly healthy, except for the fact that he wouldn't wake up.

Billy suddenly wished he'd spent less time with machines and more time studying biology. That was really Trini's expertise. She'd know in a minute what was wrong, or at least what to do in this situation. Billy found himself uncomfortably ignorant… and he definitely didn't want to do anything wrong to Tommy. He might hurt him more…

Billy shook his head furiously. He pulled his helmet and gloves back on. There was no way to get word to the Command Center or the other Rangers. He also couldn't leave Tommy alone, not when Rita was probably itching to take advantage of a time when Tommy was this vulnerable. That left him with a decision. He could either meet the Rangers at the rendezvous point in the middle of the
mall, Tommy in tow, or he could run outside, where he would be open to attack while carrying Tommy but at least he might make it to where he could teleport out of here and get Tommy help. But that would leave the other Rangers wondering where they were.

Tommy lay still, making his decision for him.

Billy threw Tommy over his shoulder in a fireman's hold and ran for the exit. The door was open… Billy ran at full speed.

He slammed into an invisible barrier. He fell; he tried to cushion Tommy from the worst of the fall.

"Wha…?"

A weak sound came from Tommy's mouth, the fall having jolted him enough to wake him.

Billy crawled over to him. "Tommy… God… are you…?"

"I'm okay…" Tommy said in half a groan. He tried to raise himself on his elbows.

"You're not." Billy pushed him down with one hand. "You were practically comatose a few minutes ago. Lie down and rest while I try to find a way out of this barrier."

"Um… Billy?"

Billy followed Tommy's wide-eyed stare. He groaned. Of course the monster would target them.

The monster was the shape of a candelabrum. Its various flames flickered on and off, and its eyes were whirling orbs of fire. Around its waist was a golden rim that caught the candle wax in a pool.

"Someone's been watching Beauty and the Beast," Tommy said.

"I don't think I've ever witnessed anything so terrifying in Disney."

Tommy laughed, and then stopped, holding his head. "That demon thing in Fantasia would give it a run for its money."

"Sorry to break in the conversation," the monster said silkily. "But I believe you know what happens now."

Billy flashed a worried look at Tommy. "Promise me you'll stay here, and run if I tell you."

"Go fight already."

No promise, but Billy's couldn't delay any longer. In one move he turned from Tommy and drew his lances. "Ready to die… Candleman, or whatever you're called?"

"Candleman is fine," the monster said. "And we all die. Candles burn, wax melts, and lights go out."

"Are we going to discuss existential philosophy or engage in violence?"

The flames on Candleman flickered brighter. "Violence, I think."

Billy gripped his lances, not at all sure if he could take the monster himself while protecting Tommy. He'd just have to try… and maybe they could make enough noise that the Rangers would come running.
Jason was starting to feel sick as he took the fortieth turn on the carousel. It wasn't the best place to be trapped.

He'd been so stupid. Left himself wide open for attack. He hadn't even seen the monster. He was sure it had been a monster. He'd never seen a Putty do this.

Again, he wriggled his fingers and felt the wax around them slowly loosen. It was wax, alright. He was completely encased in it. He could breathe thanks to his helmet, and half of his face, including one eye, was free from wax. But the rest of his body was completely surrounded by a fast-drying, hard-as-steel, wax-like substance. And all he could do was chip away at it by slight and steady pressure at his extremities.

"I think he was over here," Trini called out.

He heard running footsteps coming from behind him. In a moment, thanks to the carousel, he could see that Trini, Kimberly, and Zack were staring at what had to be a pretty ridiculous sight.

Zack crossed his arms, shaking in laughter. "Need some help, Jas?"

"Get me down before I beat you down," Jason said.

"Not very threatening, Jason," Kimberly said.

Zack pulled his axe out. Jason closed his eyes in anticipation, but Zack's aim was dead-on accurate. He sliced through the wax easily and didn't even scratch Jason.

"Don't say I never did anything for you," Zack said.

Jason rolled his eyes. "If you're going to be like that, keep your favors to yourself. Have you guys seen Billy and Tommy?"

Trini shrugged. "I haven't seen anyone in the past ten minutes. I think all the civilians have been evacuated. After we split up, I got doused with the same wax as you. Zack got me out. You know the rest."

"So we've got a sneaky wax monster on our hands," Zack said.

Kimberly was looking around, worried. "Please, don't let it be an ear-themed monster. I just can't handle that amount of gross in one day."

They heard a crash, the only sign of life in the mall. "Looks like Tommy and Billy found the party," Jason said. "I don't think we should disappoint."

Billy had adopted a strike-and-dodge strategy. Mostly because he didn't want to get hit, he didn't want to lead the monster away from Tommy and thus leave Tommy defenseless, and the monster was actually very slow. Billy's leg was stinging from a burn from the monster's flames, which had blackened his uniform. He didn't want to know what the flame could do with prolonged contact.

"You can only last so long, Blue Ranger. Your strength is burning out. Soon you will go up in smoke."
"Not before you run out of candle puns," Billy said. "And if you're like any of Finster's other monsters, I'd say I could last a long time."

As he was saying it, though, the monster's flame shot out and caught Billy full in the face.

He fell back, clawing at his face. The helmet protected him, but only just. He could feel it melting under his hands, and it still felt like his face had at least third-degree burns. As he tried to rally himself to keep fighting, the monster threw something at him, and Billy was frozen.

He watched horrified as the monster turned to Tommy, who had pulled himself to his feet.

"Come, guttering flame," the monster said, his voice sounding like the spitting crackles of burning wood. "Shall we fight as well?"

Tommy's eyes were burning, and then they were covered in a dark visor as he morphed. The transformation seemed to energize him, but he still moved slower than usual. "Your move, Candleman."

Flames lashed out, and Tommy could only barely dodge them. His boots were singed, but he didn't have any time to rest. The flames were relentless. Billy struggled futilely against his wax cocoon, desperate to help the obviously flailing Tommy. And still he wondered… what did the monster mean when he called him "guttering flame?" Was it just trash talk?

Tommy got in a few solid hits between the flames, but the blows seemed to stagger Tommy even more than it did the monster. In one deft move, the monster knocked Tommy to the ground and spilled wax over his legs. Tommy was pinned and couldn't even reach his blade blaster.

With clinical deliberation, the candle monster marked both of Tommy's shoulders. The fire seared through Tommy's shield. He writhed in pain, but refused to cry out. The monster marked him again, concentrating on the same places. The purpose, as far as Billy could tell, was not to kill. It was to reinforce Tommy's helplessness. Billy hadn't seen anything quite like it since, well, since Tommy had done it to him.

"STOP IT!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Billy could see the other Rangers, weapons out and rushing to the monster. In response, the monster positioned the flame deliberately over Tommy's heart.

"Guys, stop!" Billy cried out desperately. "That fire penetrates our shields. It'll kill Tommy!"

The other Rangers froze, as surely as if they'd been coated in wax.

"Listen to your blue friend," the monster said. "Though you needn't worry. Tommy's time has not yet burned out yet. Soon, though."

"What do you mean?" Jason said. "Another one of Rita's empty threats?"

"No threat," the monster answered. "Empty or otherwise. Once you understand what is wrong with the Green Ranger, Empress Rita wishes to speak to him. Perhaps his doom is not so eminent."

With that, the monster disappeared in a burst of flame.

Jason, Trini, and Kimberly ran for Tommy, who, from the impact of the monster's final flames, had demorphed again. Zack ran for Billy to free him from the wax.
"My eternal gratitude," Billy said as he wiped the last of the wax off himself.

Trini had cut through the wax pinning Tommy with one of her daggers, and Kimberly and Jason were pulling him to his feet.

"What did he mean, something's wrong with you?" Jason said.

"I'm fine," Tommy snapped. He tried to shove Jason away, nearly falling in the process. Kimberly caught him easily. He hung limply in her arms, breathing hard.

"Tommy, I don't think you have a cold. I think Rita did something to you." All trace of the former coldness had gone from Kimberly's voice.

Jason's communicator crackled to life, making the Rangers jump. "Rangers, the forcefield is gone, and the shopping complex is all clear," Alpha's voice rang out.

"Thanks," Jason said. "We'll be right there." He hazarded a glance at Tommy. "Start getting the medical equipment prepared, alright?"

They teleported, demorphing in the process. Rita wouldn't be attacking again right away.

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It was starting to get late. Jason's eyes itched with fatigue, and he tried not to think about the chapter he still had to read that night. Served him right for putting it off to the night before.

Zack was already home. His parents had been a bit uptight about his frequent lamely-explained absences. Trini was working on more serum, having used the last treating Tommy's and Billy's burns. Billy was surveying the medical equipment with Alpha.

Tommy was just… sitting. He had barely spoken a word since they'd teleported up. Kimberly sat beside him, equally silent. She looked like she desperately wanted to say something to him but was afraid of what would happen.

Jason strolled over to Billy. "How's it going over here?"

Billy shook his head. "There's no way we can get this ready before tomorrow afternoon. We still need to input the new data, and without that it just won't work properly. I can work into the night and take a few hours sleep."

"What do you think is wrong with him?"

"I honestly can't even hazard a guess." Billy glanced over at Tommy, who seemed to be pointedly not looking at either of them. "Zordon and Trini don't know, and Trini's serum didn't work on anything but the burns."

Trini walked up, looking as tired as Jason felt. "Either Rita dosed him, like she did last time when I tried to use the serum…"

"And Tommy isn't having seizures, so unlikely," Jason said.

"Right. Or… the only other possibility I can think of is that she's messing with his powers somehow. The serum can react with our powers in order to heal physical injuries. But if the problem is in the powers…"
"That's probably it," Tommy broke in, startling everyone. He got up, his footing for the first time quite steady. "Ever since I unmorphed, I've felt better. It's like… morphing drains me, somehow." He turned his attention to Zordon, who had looked up from his computer link. "Do you know how she's doing this? You said that since the Green power coin has been in her possession, that there are some changes. Can she be affecting how I access the power, through some spell or something?"

"There are several possibilities in that direction," Zordon said. "Yet most of the possibilities are rare or unlikely. The best we can do right now is to wait for tomorrow, when we can examine everything properly. I want you all to get rest, especially you, Tommy. If Rita attacks tomorrow, unless we have solved your problem… I don't want you risking yourself in any fight. I'd rather you not train, either… until me know more."

Jason saw Tommy's eyes go hard. He knew Tommy had to be humiliated. The monster had beaten him thoroughly, and now he couldn't even fight.

"Don't worry, Tommy," Kimberly said in a low voice. "We'll figure this out."

Tommy pulled away from Kimberly gently. "I have to go home anyway and help my dad clean up… unless that's too difficult for me in my weakened condition."

Before anyone could respond to Tommy's bitter words, he teleported out.

Zordon sighed and shook his head. "Jason, can I rely on you…?"

"I'll make sure he takes it easy," Jason said. He turned to Kimberly, who was hugging herself in worry. "Don't worry about it, Kim. You know how he reacts when anyone thinks he's weak."

"I do," Kimberly said. "You saw what his mother was like. Imagine being raised by someone like that."

"It made him into a good fighter…" Jason said.

In a moment though, Jason realized he'd said the wrong thing. Kimberly rounded on him. "Oh, sure," Kimberly said, "never mind mental abuse. Never mind the fact that she makes him feel like crap, and that he's only worth his next fight, as long as he's a great fighter. You know, Jason, you can be a real butthead sometimes."

Kimberly vanished, leaving Jason sputtering at nothing. He looked at Trini in bewilderment.

Trini shrugged. "She's right, you know. You can be a butthead." She vanished as well.

Jason looked up at Zordon, who looked like he was trying not to laugh. "Butthead…? What is it with these girls?"

"No man knows," Zordon intoned, the dignity of his voice broken by amusement. "And when they think they do, that's usually an indication that they're dead wrong."

Tommy slouched into his house, letting the screen door close with a bang.

"That you, Tommy?"

"It's me, dad." Tommy walked into the living room, where his dad was watching some old movie on
television. Tommy didn't recognize the movie, but apparently Cary Grant was upset over Katherine Hepburn and a leopard. "Were you waiting up for me?"

"I knew you wouldn't be too much longer," John said. "The 'all-clear' signal came on the news about an hour ago. You save the day?"

Tommy fell onto the couch and felt like he could merge with it, he was so tired. "Not exactly. It was a set-up. Rita has something bigger planned." He took a breath and let it go through his teeth. He knew he'd have to tell his dad something, especially if he passed out. His dad would need to call the Command Center, not the ambulance.

"Billy's staying over here tonight," Tommy said as a way of forestalling. "That's what Sylvia thinks. He really needs to work at the Command Center tonight. Sorry to use you as an alibi."

John shrugged. "If it'll help you guys out, I don't mind. Just don't abuse the privilege. Like, for instance, fake an emergency just to get out of a difficult situation…"

Tommy glanced over at the stairwell. "She's not here, is she?"

"She knew enough to know that would be inappropriate. She's staying at a hotel." John smirked. "Your Uncle Steve doesn't like her… I think that had something to do with it, too."

Tommy nodded tiredly. Truth to tell, Uncle Steve didn't like Tommy, either. He thought he was too much like Penn.

Now Cary Grant was wearing a women's robe.

"Dad… I don't want you to worry, but there may be something wrong with me. Something that Rita's doing. That's why Billy's staying at the Command Center tonight."

"What do you think it is?" John said. He was obviously not saying a lot he wanted to say.

Tommy buried his face in his hands. "Something to do with my powers. I dunno." He laughed a little. "I just get a little worried when Putties can use me as a piñata."

"What can I do?"

"Just… If I pass out, use the communicator on my wrist. Zordon will get the message."

John nodded. He stared at the television screen. He wasn't watching the movie anymore.

It was a strange moment. Tommy remembered the nights upon nights they had sat there, waiting for test results for John, or waiting in a hospital room, or just trying to deal with the latest attack. Though his father was doing better than he had in years, it was uncertain if that would be true tomorrow, or the next day.

Now it was Tommy who was uncertain.

He remembered that afternoon on the beach after the spell had broken, when Scorpina had come to him. She'd warned him of what Rita could do to him. That Rita had sworn vengeance against him specifically. He couldn't help but feel that the moment had come, and he had no idea what Rita was doing, or what she wanted to talk to him about.

John wheeled over to the shelf that held all their VHS tapes. "So… Die Hard or Lethal Weapon?"

Tommy glanced at the clock. "I have school tomorrow. I don't have time to watch a movie."
"You're calling in sick," John said. "I don't want you falling out in the middle of science class. And I wasn't asking which one… I was asking which one first."

Tommy felt himself want to go into stubborn teen mode: snap that he was fine, get all moody and make everyone uncomfortable. But… he found he was just too tired. He settled back into the couch. "Die Hard, of course."

As his dad popped in the tape and started fiddling with the tracking, Tommy prepared to shut off his brain. His powers, Rita,… his mom… He could take care of them tomorrow. It wasn't like he could do anything right then.

Goldar sat in a little-used room, appearing to sleep. He was, in fact, meditating. His senses were at their utmost, his sword drawn over his lap. He could feel the entire room and would respond to any disturbance in an instant with violent force. No one was allowed in this room but him, not even Rita. Those were her explicit instructions.

Nothing moved in the room but one solitary point: a candle. The object of Goldar's guard. He was to protect the flame or die trying.

Goldar opened his eyes to stare at the candle. It was melting fast… faster since Tommy had fought that day.

Goldar grinned. Two more days, at least, and the Green Ranger would be no more.
Burn or Freeze

Chapter Summary

Book 1: The Green Candle

Part 3 of my rewrite of "The Green Candle."

Jason barely let himself fully materialize before walking over to Billy, Trini, and Alpha, who were huddled around the medical scanner console, deep in conversation. He held his breath. From Billy's and Trini's expressions, and the lack of wild gesticulations from Alpha, it didn't look like they had good news.

"Alright..." Jason said, forcing himself to plunge into the topic, "what's the verdict?"

Billy turned around and rubbed his eyes. "Inconclusive, at this moment."

"It doesn't look good, anyway," Trini chimed in.

Billy clenched his teeth in what Jason was sure was irritation. "We can't prove anything yet, Trini. We haven't..."

Trini rolled her eyes. "Everything we've found out for now points to a significant power drain that's either affecting the Green power coin itself or Tommy's connection with it. We know that he's compensating with his own biological energy in order to keep a connection to the Morphing Grid, but the human body isn't built to do that, so it's hurting Tommy. And we know that Rita is perfectly aware of this, so we can safely assume she is causing the power drain, either through magical or technological means, or simply through her own connection with the Green power coin."

"So the bottom line?" Jason said, aware that Billy was practically shaking with unspoken objections.

Trini was completely cool next to Billy's agitation. "The bottom line is Tommy is losing his powers. If he doesn't give the up, they could kill him. And I'm betting Rita has it set up that she ends up with the power coin one way or the other."

"We don't know it's killing him," Billy broke in. "It could just be an illusion Rita is putting him through, or some sort of potion that we haven't yet detected. We can draw these conclusions before all the data are in."

"We can run these figures from now until Judgment Day and we'll still come up with the same thing. Holding the Green power coin is dangerous for Tommy. Rita is using it to attack him directly. And we know her goal is either to gain it... or him... back." Trini braced herself. "And you're letting your personal feelings keep you from seeing this."

Billy opened his mouth angrily, but nothing came out. Instead, he coldly turned his back to them to run more tests.

Jason motioned to Trini with a jerk of his head, and they walked to the other side of the room. "Where's Zordon?" he asked, indicating the empty tube.
Trini looked like she wanted to take back what she just said. Instead, she said, "He's gone to follow
up a few leads. He has some sources in the magicks and… well, all that stuff that's over all of our
heads." She paused. "Zordon agrees with my conclusion. It's the only thing that makes sense."

Jason nodded grimly. "Billy will come around. You know how protective he is of Tommy. I'm just
glad Tommy's not here right now. It would drive him crazy."

"Where is Tommy? I haven't seen him since he came for a bioscan this morning. He wasn't in
English."

"He stayed home from school, recovering his strength," Jason smiled. "Must be nice to have a dad
who knows about… special circumstances."

"Tommy's dad is taking this superhero thing far better than any of our parents would."

"Too true."

The moment was broken by klaxons. Jason saw his surprise mirrored on Trini's face. He honestly
hadn't expected an attack that day.

"Oh, ay-yi-yi!" Alpha wailed. "There's an attack on the Angel Grove amusement park, but Zordon is
still gone!"

"It's okay, Alpha," Jason said, already putting his wrist communicator to his mouth. "Kim, Zack,
come in."

A few seconds later, Kimberly's voice crackled through the speaker. "We're both here, Jason."

The Viewing Globe focused for a single second to show the Candle Monster, and then reverted back
to static. Of course. "Monster attack on the amusement park. Looks like the center of the attack is
near the midway. Meet us there."

"Gotcha," Kimberly said.

Jason noted Trini and Billy were already next to him, getting out their power coins. "Alpha, do not
call Tommy, and if he calls in tell him we've got it under control. Got it?"

"Ay-yi, Jason," Alpha said.

"He's gonna be pissed," Trini said.

Jason pulled out his own power coin. "But he'll be alive."

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Tommy rolled over in bed and blinked at the clock. It was nearly 4:00 in the afternoon. He'd been
asleep for most of the past twelve hours, and he still felt like a truck ran over him.

Biting back a groan, he forced himself to his feet. His father was probably worrying too much
already: he needed to go downstairs and show that he was still alive.

A quick shower, and Tommy almost felt human again. He trudged down the stairs to the smell of
coffee and syrup. His father was in the kitchen, flipping pancakes on one eye and frying sausage in
another.

"What's all this?" Tommy sat at the table, trying not to show that the food smells were making him
nauseous.
John started dishing up the first batch of pancakes. "I heard you get up. I couldn't figure if this was breakfast, lunch, or dinner, so I settled on the easiest to make."

Tommy smiled. "Let's just call it 'brinner' or something."

"Sounds like a compromise." A pause. "You feeling better?"

"Yeah," Tommy said, realizing he'd said it a little too quickly.

As John put some plates on the table, he felt Tommy's head. Tommy didn't pull away, taking comfort in the contact. "Well, whatever's affecting you, it's not giving you a fever. But all that sleep and you still don't look rested."

Tommy shrugged and tried to force some food in his mouth. He took a swig of orange juice, knowing he was going to get dehydrated if he wasn't careful. "I hope we'll know something today. That monster implied that it wouldn't be all that difficult to figure out."

John nodded and rolled over to get more coffee for himself. Tommy grabbed the nearby TV remote. He wanted an excuse not to talk.

As he clicked it on, John's head whipped around. "Wait…"

It was too late. The TV immediately flashed to a breaking news report of a monster attack. And the Power Rangers were on the scene already.

They hadn't even called him. Tommy knew that, even through a deep sleep, his ears were already attuned to the communicator enough that it would have woken him up.

It was that candle monster, terrorizing the amusement park. The cameramen and reporters were, of course, at a safe distance, but the flame from the monster and the flashes and sparks from the Power Rangers' weapons were visible enough.

They hadn't even called him. Not even so he could be on standby. It was as if… they didn't need him.

And why should they? Hadn't they been a team before him? Hadn't they foiled Rita time and time again without his help? They newscasters didn't even comment on his absence. And why should they?

On one level, as Tommy continued to stare at the coverage, he knew he was just feeling sorry for himself. He knew he had real friends with the other Rangers. They had several times proven that he was part of the group. Jason had even given him a command once, and now his Zord could merge with the others.

But not truly… He knew of two Zord combinations involving the DragonZord, one of which they had tried. And none of the combinations involved all of the Zords. Both excluded Jason completely.

He told himself not to think like that. But… he couldn't help but feel that his very presence was like a false note.

John had put his hand on Tommy's arm, and this time Tommy pulled away. He didn't want pity. He wanted action… action he was being denied. Because he didn't belong. No… worse than that. Because he was weak.

The television cut away from the battle footage to a news anchor. "This just in. We have an alert at
Adams Park. This is a confirmed Putty attack. Please evacuate the surrounding area as safely as possible. No word as to whether the Power Rangers will be able to handle this threat."

Tommy hadn't even felt himself stand up.

"Tommy… you can't," John said, his voice going hard and stern. "You know this is exactly what Rita wants you to do."

Tommy pulled his power coin out of his back pocket. His self-pity was melting away. "Sorry, dad. I also know I have a responsibility. Don't worry: I'll be back before you know it."

As he teleported away, he hoped he could keep that promise.

Alpha didn't experience emotions like humans. He knew the principles of biological emotion, with their hormones and brain chemicals and automatic reflexes.

For an android, it was much different, even for an android programmed to approximate the personality of a biological being. For instance, while panic for biological beings was mostly about adrenaline and dozens of other chemical reactions, resulting usually in a "fight or flight" reaction, for Alpha panic consisted of a crowding of computations in his mainframe and a simple logical paradox: he had to prevent something that he had no power to prevent.

Such was the case at this moment. Zordon was gone at the moment, so ostensibly Alpha was in charge of the Command Center. The Power Rangers were fighting at the amusement park, where the candle monster had once again thrown up a dampening field that prevented any communication or visualization in or out. And Tommy was pretending to have trouble with his communicator.

"… sorry, Alpha. … breaking up… … back to… later…"

"Tommy, your communicator is NOT breaking up. You're approximating that affect by making vocal sound effects. I can tell the difference. And you are not cleared to be in battle right now."

There was a pause as Alpha watched Tommy, morphed, take out two more Putties while making his way to the center of the park, where Putties were terrorizing a group of teenagers. "If you know of anyone else who can save these people, send them. Otherwise, I'll see you later at the Command Center. I have a job to do."

Alpha wondered what a human would do if this happened. He considered. "Well, damn," he said to the empty Command Center.

It had all started as a bit of training in the park, as the football field was being used by the senior football players.

Bulk and Skull clung to each other as the Putties surrounded them in a whirl. Bulk's teammates were doing much the same, all vestiges of manliness forgotten.

Granted, they'd all faced worse, especially during the attack on the high school weeks ago. And both Bulk and Skull had shown that they were more than willing to stand up to these aliens.

But these were a lot of Putties. And a force field… that was getting smaller.

"Guys…" Bulk said, "this may be the end."
"I told you we shouldn't have gone to the park. Bad things happen in the park," Skull mumbled.

"And if we die," Bulk continued, "we die like we play: as a team."

"I'm not even on the team," said Skull.

Scotty, a fellow linebacker, found his voice. "You're right, Bulk. We face death as men. As Angel Grove Tigers."

Skull looked around and shook his head. "Jocks are crazy."

There was a crashing sound, and the forcefield flickered out of existence. Bulk and Skull stared as two Putties were thrown across the park by the Green Ranger.

"Rather than die like men," the Ranger said, "why don't you run like hell?"

It was easier said than done. Putties were swarming in all directions, and they seemed to multiply as soon as the Green Ranger could put them down. The other football players could get away through sheer strength and adrenaline, but Bulk had to make sure Skull got out, and Skull didn't seem all that eager to go.

Skull's blood was boiling. All fear was forgotten. He didn't care what rumors were going around about the Green Ranger working with the Power Rangers. This was the man who had shot him. Who had hurt Kimberly. Skull didn't have a clear idea what he would do about it, but he just couldn't leave without doing something.

"Come on, Skull!" Bulk said. "We gotta get out of here!"

Bulk dragged Skull away bodily, but stopped when his path was blocked by flame. The flame died away to reveal a monster… a monster that looked like the candlestick from Hell. Some wax spilled from the monster, coating the ground and freezing Bulk and Skull's feet in place.

Bulk's mind stopped in sheer panic. Skull forgot all about his anger from moments ago.

The monster regarded them coldly. "You're in my way," it said. It raised two candlesticks, preparing to roast the two teens.

They closed their eyes.

A scream reached their ears, and to their surprise it had not come from either of them. They screwed their eyes open to see a wall of flame that failed to reach them. A green figure was blocking it.

The flame stopped, having melted the wax on the ground. The Green Ranger slumped to the ground, blackened by scorch marks. The helmet turned up to them.

"Go," the voice came out in a pained whisper. "Get inside somewhere."

Bulk and Skull ran wildly in the other direction, wishing they could get that scream out of their heads.

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Tommy forced himself up. Just before coming between those two and the flames, he'd powered up his golden shield as much as he could. He hadn't even realized he could do that until that minute. The scorches were superficial, but it had still hurt like hell.
"Still flickering, are we?" the monster commented.

Tommy opened up his mouth for a sharp retort… and then he realized he was no longer morphed.

He was in front of a monster. Unmorphed. Hurt. And no backup in sight, if he was right in that the monster prevented teleportation near him.

The monster raised its flame again. "Empress Rita said to leave you alive. But I don't see why you should remain unscathed."

Gritting his teeth at the weakness of the move, Tommy ran.

He made it just into the patch of woods, hoping that he could lose the monster and find a way out of its teleportation field, when he found out where all the Putties were coming from. Dozens were hidden in the woods, and they all converged on Tommy at the same time.

He dodged as best he could and kept running for the other side of the woods. He couldn't get caught fighting Putties. They were just there to keep him in the same place while the monster tracked him down. With trembling hands, he tried to morph, but it wouldn't come. The power was there, but his body was too weak to access the power.

He could see the light… he was making it to the other edge of the woods… when one of the Putties got in a lucky savage blow to Tommy's head.

Tommy reeled, the ground tilting and spiraling under his feet. He tried to keep one foot in front of the other, but soon he realized he was going to hit the ground. He hit hard, tearing his jeans. A rock tore a gash in his arm.

As he fought back the nausea from the blow to the head and the pain, he brought his uninjured arm to protect himself from another blow from a Putty. They were converging on him, not allowing him to recover enough to get to his feet. He curled so the Putties couldn't get to his vitals and prepared to take the beating.

A Putty flew off him. Then another. The other Putties scattered as they became distracted by another foe. "Bout time," he muttered to himself, fully expecting to see the other Rangers.

It wasn't, he saw as he looked up. It was a single female fighter, who seemed to be whaling on the Putties as if they were punching bags.

He pushed himself to his feet. "Mom…?" he whispered.

"Don't… you… EVER…" she screamed, punctuating each word with a punch to a Putty's stomach, "lay… a… HAND ON MY SON!"

With the last few words, she snapped the Putty's head to the side. It would have broken a human's neck. It was still a game-ending blow to a Putty. The Putty disappeared, instantly recycling to inert Putty clay in Finster's lab, Tommy knew.

The sight of his mom fighting seemed to give Tommy new energy. He threw himself into the fight, coming alongside his mother. "What are you doing here?" he snapped over his shoulder.

"You're welcome," Penn said. "And I'm just as entitled as you to break monster curfew to fight some of these goons. I mean, how often do you get to let loose like that? No wonder you love it here!"

Tommy fought back-to-back with his mother. His mother's enthusiasm was infectious: even through
his weakness, he was starting to lose himself in the fight.

The remaining Putties, knowing they were outclassed, high-tailed it into the woods.

"Come back here, you gray bastards!" Penn shouted, running after the lot of them.

"Mom!" Tommy yelled futilely after her. He cursed under his breath. There was a damn monster on the other side, and his mother didn't know, and she was going to get herself fried. He tried to morph. Still no luck. Cursing again, he plunged into the woods after her.

She was in a clearing near the center, where weeks ago Tommy would have had his fight with Jason. He wished Jason was there now. Hell, he wanted the whole team there. He had no idea where the monster was, but he still couldn't teleport, so the monster was close. He had to protect his mother, who had no earthly clue what she was getting into. And probably didn't care, he thought to himself grimly. He had to find some way to get his mother out of there, without revealing his identity, before the monster got there.

"Mom!" he yelled as he joined in the fight. "We have to get out of here! It's not safe!"

Penn gave him a scathing look. "I know it's not safe. We're fighting aliens. Of course it's not safe."

Tommy bit back a number of retorts. He couldn't really take his attention off the fight. He could feel himself weakening, slowing. His blows weren't downing the Putties as effectively. They were getting more hits in. He was having trouble catching his breath…

"Does it seem hot to you?" Penn said.

Tommy looked around wildly for the Candle Monster, but it was nowhere to be seen. He could smell smoke, though. And they seemed to be surrounded by an orange glow…

"Fire," he yelled. "The woods are on fire!"

He grabbed his mother's arm and ran for the woods, but his way was already blocked by flames. He could hear trees falling, crashing into each other. The fire escalated faster than any natural fire. He and his mother ran around the edge of the clearing, looking for a safe spot to cross. There was none. Tommy looked behind him to see that all the Putties were gone. Of course.

"Well, shit," Penn said. "It was a trap."

Tommy glared at his mother. "Of course it was a trap. But they wouldn't have caught us if you had…"

He broke off coughing. His eyes were streaming, and Penn didn't look like she was in any better shape. The smoke was becoming unbearable.

Tommy tried to form words, but couldn't. He didn't want the last thing he said to his mother to be "I told you so." He looked to his mother…

But his mother was looking right past him, her eyes wide with shock. Then there was intense cold, and then Tommy knew nothing.

He awoke slowly to a feeling of radiant warmth. He could hear his mother next to him on the ground.

"It's about time you superhero types got here," she snapped, getting to her feet.
Tommy opened his eyes slowly to see his five fellow Rangers standing over him, Trini (or the Yellow Ranger right now, as he should call her) holding up some sort of device that was thawing them and the ground around them. The rest of the partially burned forest was frozen solid in ice.

And Zack's Mastadon Zord sat next to the park, its trunk pointed directly at the forest.

Tommy got slowly to his feet, waving off help from Kimberly. It would be too suspicious if he was too familiar with them. Penn, though, wasn't paying attention. She was bearing down on Jason, who looked taken aback even with his face hidden.

"You realize I and my son almost died here?" Penn said. "Tommy was almost killed by those gray alien things, and would have if I hadn't come by. And then we almost burned to death. And thanks to you almost froze to death."

"Ma'am," Jason said, his hands out to try to calm her down, "we came here as quickly as we…"

"Bullshit!" Penn said. "It's your responsibility to fight these things, no ours. If I hadn't been running to my hotel, I never would have seen my son in danger."

"Mom…" Tommy said. "You don't have to do this. We're fine. And the Power Rangers did get here as quickly as they could." He paused. "And I could have handled myself."

Penn rolled her eyes. "Of course you could, but that's not the point. The point is that civilians shouldn't have to fight these things, even though it's really, really fun."

This time Tommy rolled his eyes. "Fine, whatever. I'm going home."

"Wait… Tommy," Penn grabbed his arm.

Jason coughed. "So, uh… Well, as long as you two are alright, we'll be leaving now."

"You do that," Penn said.

Tommy knew the others were frustrated. He was sure they'd hoped Penn would go away so Tommy could teleport with them back to the Command Center. For once, though, Tommy didn't feel all that inclined to go with them. So he walked through the slowly-melting ice with his mother, savoring the strangeness of snow in California.

"What is it now, Mom," Tommy said. "I really need to get home. Dad will be worried."

"Yes, I'm aware that you have to be dutiful to your father," Penn said. "But I've been trying to see you away from him for two days now, and I'm not giving up this opportunity."

Tommy sighed. "So now we get to the real reason you're here?"

Penn smiled. "Well, to see my son, of course."

Tommy gave her a look.

"Okay, here's the thing," Penn said, dropping her innocent act. "I'm here to ask you to come back on the tournament circuit with me."

Tommy stared at her. Then he broke into a bitter laugh. "Is that all?"

Penn frowned. "What more were you expecting?"
"Exactly." They had stopped, and Tommy started walking away from her.

"Oh, don't get all hormonal on me," Penn said. "I'm asking you to move back in with me… or travel with me at any rate. The tourneys are no fun without you, and you won't believe the competition this year. Plus… I think I can get you into the adult competitions."

Tommy paused in his steps. "How would you manage that?"

Penn smiled mischievously. "Oh, come on. You know I have some pull. And you can still continue your schooling… when you go to school, anyway."

"And what about dad?"

Penn shrugged. "What about him? You can still visit him. And… it's not like you're going to be leaving him on his own…"

Penn started to slow down as she knew she was reaching touchy areas. Tommy remained silent.

"Your father's getting remarried," Penn plowed on. "I know you stayed on to take care of him, and I'm so proud of you for doing that. But now he's going to have other people to take care of him, and even he knows you've got your own life of live. I've already discussed it with him, and he said it was completely up to you."

Tommy stopped in his tracks. They had reached the edge of the frozen woods, and emergency response vehicles were wailing in the distance. He knew they needed to get out of there if they wanted to avoid being detained by the police or the hospital.

"You really don't get it," Tommy said. "You think I'm putting my life on hold to take care of dad. That's not it at all. You're proud of me for doing something that was as natural to me as breathing."

He looked at her, and decided to avoid the old argument. "Have fun fighting, mom. I'm going home."

Penn had crossed her arms, preparing for the old argument that didn't come. "I'll be in town for a few more days, if you change your mind." She walked away. Any more words would just drudge everything back up between them.

Tommy walked in the other direction, ducked behind an icy, blackened tree, and teleported as soon as his mother couldn't see him but before any police could.

"You are correct in your surmise, Zordon," the familiar voice of Rita Repulsa filled the Command Center. "The wax is ancient, but it is still viable. You can see yourself from the readings you've undoubtedly taken from the Green Ranger."

Tommy crept closer, hanging back in the shadows outside of the main control area. No one realized he was there, as he'd teleported into one of the rooms so he could shower before facing the others. Still, no one saw him, as Zordon, Alpha, and the Rangers were all transfixed at the image of Rita on the Viewing Globe.

"To what end, Rita?" Zordon intoned. "Surely you don't mean to kill one so young just to reclaim the power coin that can no longer be fully yours."

Rita considered. "One thing at a time, old man. And it doesn't have to end in death, of course. He could voluntarily give the coin to me…"
"He'll never do that," Zack cut in.

Rita paused, giving the Black Ranger a hard look. "I realize that. He is too in love with the power to ever give it up. And since that is the case, he can always come back and work for me."

"Rita, you are being unreasonable…"

Rita glared at Zordon. "Unreasonable, am I, old man? I am simply trying to regain what is rightfully mine. I won that coin in the toss, and you have no right to keep it within your power, Zordon. It's mine, and I will have it."

Tommy strode to the center in the line of sight of the Viewing Globe. The recent fire had nothing on the rage that was burning in him now. "You won't have it. I won't let you."

"Tommy…" Jason began, but stopped.

Rita smiled. "Why, Tommy! I was hoping you'd join us. I hope the last two battles have proven that you cannot continue as you have been. You've heard your choice, obviously. The old man will fill you in on the rest. I urge you to be sensible."

"Sensible?" Tommy almost screamed. "I told you months ago I would never let you have the Green Power Coin. You gave it to me; it's mine. I can't allow you to do to another person what you did to me. And I won't allow you to use it to hurt my friends or destroy the Earth, no matter how it have to defend it. You can have this coin if you can pry it from my cold, dead fingers."

Rita smiled kindly, and a bit sadly. She said, before winking out, "Tommy, my boy… that's the idea."
Rita slumped in her chair by the telescope, a pain lancing through her temples. She held her head, trying to not think about that look of utter hatred on Tommy's face.

"That seemed to go well," Scorpina's voice came from around the corner.

"Well, of course it didn't go well," Rita snapped. "We're taking our revenge. You expect it to be pretty?"

Scorpina drew back.

Rita rubbed her eyes, regretting but not thinking about apologizing.

Tommy's bitter words lanced through her head. She realized she absolutely believed him, that he would never come back to her. Not even to save his powers, or even to save his life. And Rita wondered if she could actually let him die.

Rita looked up. Scorpina had gone. Everyone was elsewhere, preparing for the inevitable attempt to infiltrate the moon palace. The Rangers would surely make an attempt at the candle. And she was not going to make it easy on them.

After Rita's image blinked off the Viewing Globe, no one was sure what to say.

After a few awkward seconds, Tommy forced a smile and a casual tone. "So… Zordon. What's this wax then that's sucking up all my powers?"

Zordon seemed to be proceeding cautiously in the face of Tommy's forced chipperness. "It is a candle… an ancient magick. The wax bonds itself to a powered individual as soon as the individual touches it. I… was unaware that Rita had access to such power."

Tommy laughed. It sounded grating in the large, quiet room. "I never touched any wax."

"It must have been when you were working for Rita," Zordon said in as calming a voice as he could manage. "It would have required prolonged contact. You may not even have realized what you were doing."

Tommy was staring into the distance, as if piecing something together. "Not even realize it…" he said, forming his hand around an invisible something. "Of course… that's why she came down in the first place…"

"Who…?" Kimberly started.
But Tommy had turned his violent attention back to Zordon. "I seem to remember you saying that the only way to take away these powers was if I voluntarily gave them up. And even then it needed some help. So is accidentally touching the candle volunteering?"

He had started pacing. The other Rangers backed up to give him room.

"So… was it this candle you were talking about?" Tommy said. "You were just going to suck us dry when you couldn't use us anymore?"

"Of course not," Zordon said, sounding vaguely horrified. "It is a sword…"

"Of course!" Tommy interrupted, now grinning and chuckling to himself. "A sword. Because that makes sense. It's all candles and swords and coins and forces so ancient…" Tommy realized he was starting to shout. He stopped, forcing himself to breathe normally. "It's all so ancient and huge that one little human doesn't matter all that much, does he? We're just pawns in a war that's been going on for millennia. We live, what, maybe a century? If that? What's that to people like you?"

Kimberly had ventured forward, putting her hand out to Tommy's arm. He had stopped pacing. "Tommy, are you all right?"

He flinched away from her touch, as if he were burned. "NO!" She backed away, her eyes wide with shock. Tommy saw the shock and hurt, felt ashamed, but couldn't make himself normal for her. "No," his voice went to a murmur. "I don't think I'm all right at all. Don't you see? The candle… it's burning." He looked up at Zordon. "I'm right, aren't I? The candle. Once it burns out… so do I."

"It is not quite as simple as that," Zordon said. "It's not exactly draining your powers, or at least not draining powers from the Green Power Coin itself. Then it would be completely useless to Rita. What the candle is doing is interfering with your ability to draw upon its powers. The reason you have been so ill is that your own body is compensating. You are using your own life energy to fight as a Power Ranger. But the human body can only maintain that for so long.

"You see, you were wrong when you said that humans are insignificant in this war. They are not. You… are not. All six of you have the rare quality that allows you to become Power Rangers: the ability to draw on the power and bond to it. Only a few in the billions of species in the Universe can even use these ancient powers, and only a scattering within each of those species can use the powers to their fullest extent. Humans are one of those species. That is why Rita targets Earth. It's not necessarily for any strategic position, or for any resources. It's because of humans. It's because of their power. That's why I've been on Earth for centuries now. I waited for the chance to guide humans into their destiny.

"And you, Tommy, are important to Rita. She has derailed her entire attack plans… just for you."

Tommy was looking down. He was no longer shouting, no longer laughing. "She wants me back… she's trying to pull me back in." Tommy looked up. "She's not giving me a good choice, is she?"

Zack finally couldn't keep his peace any longer. "Oh, come on, Tommy, you're not going to believe everything she says. She wants you to believe you have one choice."

"She does that," Trini said. "She's evil, remember?"

"She's desperate," Kimberly said. "She wants revenge, but she knows that she can't beat six Power Rangers."

"Particularly when one has special knowledge of her plans and defenses," Billy said. "It's like you told me: when your opponent is desperate, you have the high ground."
Tommy stared at his friends, looking as if he hardly dared to have any hope. "That's all great, but she already cast this ancient magick. It's already done most of its job."

Jason rolled his eyes, keeping the upbeat atmosphere. "And, of course she wouldn't make that reversible, on the odd chance you joined her side." He smiled, dropping the sarcasm. "And the thing about candles… They can be blown out."

Phones calls were made, alibis given, and Zack had gone for pizza and drinks. The table Trini used as a work station was in the center of the Command Center, cleared of chemicals and equipped with the large sheets of paper and markers Kimberly had used for parade float plans.

The war council had begun.

"We can't take the Moon Palace by force," Jason said, accepting a slice and a napkin from Zack. "We'll have to get to the candle by stealth… and that mean just one person."

"Yeah, because it worked so great the last time," Zack said.

"And why just one person?" Kimberly said, her words slurred through food. She gulped. "I mean, why not two? After all, we have no idea where it is, and two could search quicker than one."

"In all probability, Rita is expecting this course of action," said Billy. "She will not only be expecting infiltration into the Moon Palace, but she will also attack the Earth during said infiltration."

The six exchanged worried looks. "There's no way only four of us can take that Candle monster," Trini said. "If it grows…"

"And knowing Rita, it will," Zack chimed in.

"… we'll need a Zord combination to defeat it," Trini finished.

Tommy was busy flipping a marker in the air, catching it. "No worries. After all, I'm the one who's going to go after the candle."

The other five looked up and began to protest. Tommy waved them off.

"Look, it makes the most sense," he said. "I know the Moon Palace better than any of you. I'll be able to make my way around without being seen much better. I'll only morph if necessary, both to conserve my powers and for stealth reasons. And, besides… it's my fight, anyway."

"You can't go up there alone," Billy said.

Tommy shrugged. "You need all five of you to make the MegaZord. Besides, if I get caught… I'm already in danger. I don't want to put you guys in unnecessary danger."

Jason opened his mouth to argue, but Zordon interrupted him.

"Tommy, all that you say makes sense," Zordon said. "However, there is an added complication of which you should be made aware."

Tommy's face darkened, but he listened without protest.

"The candle in question is bound to you and your power," Zordon said. "It will react to your proximity. Unfortunately, that means that the closer you get to the candle, the faster it will burn."
Tommy ground his teeth. "Meaning if I go up there, I might become a lost cause pretty damn quick."

"I'm afraid that is so. You must let one of the other Rangers go in your stead."

Tommy punched the table. It shuddered, but he left the outburst at that.

"So then it's up to me," Jason said. "I'm going. That is…" he trailed off, looking at Tommy.

Tommy pushed back the disappointment as best he could. "Jas, there's no one I trust more to do this. I just wish you didn't have to fight my battles."

"We fight each other's battles," Jason said. "That's what a team is about."

Zack cleared his throat. "And that's all well and great, but how do we know where the candle is? The clock is definitely ticking. Rita gave us 24 hours. That could be when the candle runs out."

"So let's get started," Jason said. "Billy, Trini, Alpha… any toys you have to keep me alive up there would be great. I especially want some serum just in case."

"I think we've got a few ideas," Billy said, already halfway to one of the doors off the Command Center.

"Alpha and I will compile for you all the information you need on the candle," Zordon said.

"Thanks," said Jason. "Zack and Kim? I need both of you to check on the Zords. Run full diagnostics. I want to make sure the Zords are in top condition should you all need them tomorrow."

"On our way," Zack said, snagging a pizza box as they headed for the docking bay.

"And me?" Tommy said, sounding a little deflated.

Jason threw him a marker, making him drop the one in his hand. "Map of the Moon Palace. And I need to know everything you know about that place."

Tommy sighed and began drawing. "Well, it's something, anyway."

Two hours passed. Tommy filled the sheet with directions, possible candle locations, and blind spots for Jason to memorize.

"Remember, if you meet Squatt and Babboo, just make believe you're one of Finster's Putties in disguise. They're stupid enough to buy that, usually. Goldar or Scorpina will be guarding the candle itself, so the other will be patrolling the halls. You'll want to hide: you don't want to fight both. And be especially careful of Finster. He's no fighter, but he's got mad skills of his own. He'll probably be in his lab anyway, and I can't imagine the candle being stored there. Too unpredictable, what with the Candle monster being stored there and Finster's experiments going off all the time."

"So you're saying the candle could be stored in the throne room, the training room, the weapons room, or the prison area."

"Check the throne room only as a last ditch effort," Tommy said. "You really don't want to engage Rita."

During Tommy's monologues, the others had wandered back in one at a time.
"I think I've got a few things to help you avoid detection," Billy said, balancing several devices in his arms. He dumped them onto the table.

Jason picked up one. "Isn't this the teleportation inhibitor we used at the hospital?"

"Same principle, but modified," Billy said. "This will generate a small cloaking field around you, but you've got to have it off to teleport. Be prepared to turn this on as soon as you arrive. It will protect you again electronic detection and some magical detection. Though," he frowned, "if Rita is looking for you on purpose…"

"Then I'm screwed anyway," Jason said lightly. "What else you got?"

Tommy looked through the pile. "Well, those are smoke bombs. Not exactly high tech."

Billy smirked. "Things don't need a microprocessor to be effective. And Jason's familiar with these. The red pellets, there, are special. They're decoys. Throw them when you need to distract someone."

"Seems a little too simplistic," Trini said slowly, knowing from the twinkle in Billy's eye that he was holding something back.

Smiling, Billy tossed one up in the air. As soon as it made impact with the floor, Rita's voice seemed to come out of nowhere. "Get to the throne room, you moron! Don't keep me waiting!"

Tommy had turned a shade paler. "If I didn't know any better, I'd thought she was right here."

"I'd say that would distract anyone," Kim said. "Except Rita, of course."

"And, again, do anything you can to avoid Rita," Tommy said. "You don't want to face her on her home turf."

Jason took a steeling breath, suddenly wishing he hadn't been so insistent on a one-man attack. "So, I've got my maps and toys and serum… So when should I go?"

"I'd say around 5 or 6 in the morning," Tommy said without hesitation. "If there's a time when any of them could be asleep, it's then. Rita will be expecting an attack either tonight or closer to the 24-hour deadline."

"If that is so," Zordon spoke for the first time in two hours, "it will behoove all of you to get some sleep. Alpha, take Tommy's map and convert it to something digital Jason can carry."

"Thanks," Jason said, intensely relieved he wouldn't have to memorize the whole thing. That would mean absolutely no sleep.

"We'll all meet here at 5 to see Jason off," Zack said. "We gotta be prepared just in case shit goes down."

"Agreed," Billy said, and the others nodded.

Jason left first, ready to force himself to sleep as much as possible, though he was sure chances of sleep were doubtful. The rest left one by one.

Tommy stayed to look over the maps, making sure he'd gotten them right.

"Nervous?" Kimberly said. Tommy jumped. He didn't realize she was still there.

"Why should I be?" Tommy said. "Jason's going to take care of it." He smiled. "If there's anyone I
know who can walk right into a trap and overcome impossible odds, it him."

Kimberly smiled sadly. "I just hate she can still control you like this."

Tommy stared in her eyes. He had the powerful urge to kiss her. He restrained himself, though he could see a note of disappointment in Kimberly's eyes. "Get some sleep," he said. "I'll see you in the morning."

Kimberly turned to go. For the first time that night, Tommy felt a pang that had nothing to do with what was happening to him.

Despite his assurance that he would never get to sleep, Tommy had dropped off a few minutes after lying down, the power drain sapping his endurance even through the high stress. His sleep was troubled, though. Dreams kept flickering through his sleep, dreams of himself coated in wax, slowly burning, while his friends reached toward him from a far distance.

It was not a dream, however, when he felt his arm brush against cold metal.

He jerked awake, but he wasn't fast enough. A metal-clad arm pushed his chest down into the mattress and a warm hand clamped around his mouth.

"Sh… shut up, Tommy," a whispered voice said. "Shut up or you'll get us both in trouble."

Tommy forced himself to stop struggling, though his heart was thudding in his chest and his sweat was already soaking through the sheets. As his eyes adjusted to the dark, he could see Scorpina's face loom over him. He wondered what sort of torture Rita had planned for him, knowing even if he could reach his power coin, which was pointlessly sitting on the bedside table, there was little he could do against Scorpina.

"That's better," Scorpina said as Tommy got more control over his breathing. "Now if you promise to stay quiet and listen to me and not call your little friends, I'll take my hand away from your mouth."

Tommy rolled his eyes. How could he promise if he couldn't speak?

Scorpina pushed him further down. The pressure on his ribs was almost unbearable. "Just nod your head," Scorpina whispered.

Tommy narrowed his eyes. If Scorpina was there to kidnap or kill him, she would have already done so. Slowly, he nodded his head.

Scorpina removed her hand and wiped the sweat off on the sheet. Tommy suddenly realized that all he was wearing was a pair of boxer shorts.

"What are you doing here, Scorpina?" Tommy said. "And, more to the point, what are you doing… here?"

"This was the only place and time I was assured of no surveillance, not from your friends and not from Rita. Everyone is preparing for an attack within the Palace, but I knew better than to think you'd plan a night attack."

Tommy said nothing. No matter what her purpose, he couldn't give away any of their plans of attack.

"Anyway, I'm here because you don't have a lot of time," Scorpina said, slowly easing the pressure
on Tommy's chest, but still not letting him have his full range of motion. "You won't last the day out, if Rita has her way, and… and… I'm here to give you a chance."

Tommy stared hard at Scorpina, the rage that had been hibernating all evening suddenly awakening. "What, another private meeting? No beach this time, because then you could destroy me even more."

Scorpina caught her breath. "Oh."

"Yeah, 'oh.'" Tommy said bitterly. "You got me to touch the wax in the first place. Rita may be pulling the strings, but you're still the one doing her dirty work. The stuff Goldar is too honorable to do."

Scorpina's lips thinned, and the pressure on Tommy's chest grew. "You'd best leave it alone. I had no idea of the lethal qualities of the wax, or else I wouldn't have touched it. And if you haven't noticed, I'm trying to help you here."

"By assaulting me in my bed?" Tommy said, his voice going a little shaky at the concentrated pain.

Scorpina seemed to notice and eased on the pressure. She smirked. "Excited, are we?"

"You wish," Tommy said. Oh, God, I hope she doesn't notice I sorta am excited, Tommy thought. If Scorpina noticed, she gave no indication. "I don't have a lot of time. Listen… the candle is in the training room. Goldar is guarding it, and it's got a shield around it that prevents any matter from getting to it, so it can't be knocked down or snuffed out by hand. Has to be blown out."

Tommy gritted his teeth. "And I'm supposed to trust you? Because that worked out so well in the past."

"Your friends can't help you and I'm all you've got," Scorpina said, this time whispering in Tommy's ear. "I can't act on your behalf up there, and you're still the enemy, and you better as hell not tell anyone I was here, but I don't agree with what Rita's doing to you, and this is the only way I can help. If I see you or one of your friends up there, I will attack without mercy." Her voice lowered to a near murmur, and Tommy could only catch it because her lips were brushing against his ear. "This changes nothing between us."

"And what is between us?" Tommy said, barely able to breathe.

Scorpina looked into his eyes. He realized she was sweating, too, and her body pressed against him in a weird hybrid of flesh and metal. Tommy stayed still.

Abruptly, Scorpina rose to her knees, her hands completely leaving him. "Don't you have a girlfriend?" she said in a monotone.

In a swirl of flame, she teleported out. Tommy blinked against the echoes of the flame. "Cold shower," he breathed. "Yeah, sounds about right."

The Command Center was dark when Tommy teleported up. He was an hour early. Alpha was powered down, and Zordon was absent from his tube, gone to wherever he went when he wasn't needed.

Billy was there, hunched over the equipment Jason was to take on his mission.

"Couldn't sleep?" Tommy said.
"Not in the slightest," said Billy, the cloaking device in his hand whirring through a diagnostic. He smiled tiredly. "I didn't think I'd have to pull all-nighters until college. Now I'm lucky to get a full night's sleep."

"Know what you mean," Tommy said. He propped against a console, staring at the equipment blankly. His map was gone, obviously converted to digital format.

Billy shook his head. "Mom has no clue, of course. She's been gabbling on about wedding plans."

*The wedding*… "Oh, yeah," Tommy said.

"So… what you do think's going to happen after?"

Tommy shrugged. "The house we're at now is Uncle Steve's. He's just letting us live there rent-free for now, but…"

"So you're not going to go with your mom?" Billy said abruptly.

Tommy's eyes widened. "You… heard?"

"Your dad apparently told my mom that's probably what your mom was after," Billy said. "And I get that you want to spend time with your mom…"

"Whatever gave you that impression?"

Billy rolled his eyes. "You act all tough about it, but… And if we aren't able to save your powers…"

"Billy, slow down," Tommy said impatiently.

Billy looked up, and Tommy could see the uncertainty in his eyes.

"First off," Tommy ticked off with a finger, "we have nothing to worry about, because Jason's going to save my powers. Secondly, even in the very remote chance that I lose my powers today, which is not going to happen, but even then… I'm not going to leave with my mom. I'm here for good."

Billy's eyes slowly crinkled in a smile. "Okay. Good." He went back to running the tests.

Besides, Tommy thought, his face growing grim, Rita's probably not going to let me live through this anyway if Jason doesn't beat her. But he let Billy forget momentarily what exactly was at stake.

The other Rangers, Alpha, and Zordon trickled in as the hour wore on. No one spoke much. Jason was the last to show, looking decidedly green but also resolved.

As Jason started preparing, Tommy decided to launch into his new information, making it sound as casual and off-hand as possible. There was no way he was going to tell anyone there that he'd had a nighttime visit from Scorpina.

"I'd check the training room first," he said to Jason. "You know, the room where you… er… saw me before?"

"Yeah," Jason said grimly. "I know that room. You sure that's where I should check?"

"Seems the most likely," Tommy said. "And… I sorta forgot this last night. Rita has some sort of magical shield around most of her important objects. It shield against physical attack… and from being knocked over."
Jason started to look a little suspicious. "So you think the candle is going to be guarded by this type of shield?" His eyebrows knit. "What about just blowing the candle out?"

"Um… Jas…" Zack coughed. "You forgetting your helmet?"

Jason shrugged as he stuck the digital maps into an equipment belt. "I'll just have to take the helmet off, then."

Everyone in the room thought that was a bad idea, but they knew that Jason knew it was a bad idea, so no one said anything.

"Jason, it is time. Are you ready?" Zordon said.

"Ready as I'll ever be," Jason returned. He turned a serious look to Tommy. "Give me as much time as you can. Only go on the battlefield if the others absolutely need you."

Tommy gritted his teeth and hoped this was the last time he'd be barred from the battlefield. "Got it. Good luck up there."

Jason smirked. "Can't do any worse than I did last time." And before anyone else said anything to jinx it, Jason teleported away.

The Rangers stared at each other for a few seconds in the wake of Jason's absence. The room seemed to echo still with the crackles of his teleportation beam.

And then the alarm sounded, splitting the silence with a frantic wail.

"And it starts," Trini said moodily.

The Viewing Globe flickered on to show the Candle Monster and a group of Putties trouncing through a construction site on the outskirts of Angel Grove. There were already workers there even this early.

"You think Rita knows that Jason's up there?" Kimberly said.

"Oh, I think so," Zack said.

"Whether or not," Zordon called their attention, "we cannot contact him without compromising his position, and the Candle Monster is still wreaking havoc on Angel Grove."

The Rangers positioned themselves around Zack. Tommy had already pulled his power coin out and was halfway there to assume position for morphing when he caught Zordon's stare. Then he remembered. He backed away, inwardly seething.

It was dark and quiet. Jason crouched in an inner recess that seemed to hold cleaning supplies. He briefly wondered who had janitorial duties in the Moon Palace. The Putties?

He waited, regulating his breathing and letting his eyes adjust to the dark. He had more knowledge and caution than the last time he'd snuck through the Moon Palace, but that would just make it more embarrassing if he were caught this time.

And he assiduously tried not to think about the last time he was at the Moon Palace. The time he'd come so close to dying.

He inched forward, his black clothing blending in with the shadows. A squeal came from down the
corridor, and Jason drew back sharply.

Squatt and Baboo were lumbering down the corridor in what looked like 19th century nightshirts and caps, each holding a bowl and a cereal box.

"Cartoons!" Baboo crowed.

"We're watching Ninja Turtles!" Squatt rejoined.

"Nuh-uh!" Baboo yelled. "Thundercats! You promised!"

"Ninja Turtles!"

"Thundercats!"

Thankfully, their echoing voices disappeared down the corridor to wherever their television was set up. No one else stirred.

Again, Jason slowly eased his way out of his hiding place. The smell of ammonia was getting to him. He slid down the corridor, using the darkest shadows and the ever-present fog on the ground to his advantage.

His heart almost stopped when he caught a glimpse of gold. He stopped. Scorpina was coming down an intersecting corridor, her hand on the hilt of her sword. Jason stopped breathing. He fingered a Rita-decoy.

She left, yawning at the obvious boredom of her sentry duty.

This is too easy.

The thought flicked through Jason's mind, but he quickly quelled it. It wasn't as if he'd gotten all the way to the training room.

The training room. The one place Jason dreaded in the whole building. He would face Rita in her throne room any day than face the training room… and who he knew would be there.

Briefly he considered checking other places: the weapons room, or Finster's lab. But he trusted Tommy's judgment, and he knew his reluctance had nothing to do with logic and all to do with fear.

And he had to face that fear sometime.

As if by magic, the training room door appeared right in front of him. He'd been dreading it, so the walk to the training room had gone quickly and uneventfully.

Jason palmed his power coin, said a quick prayer, and pushed the door open.

"Red Ranger," the voice from his nightmares rumbled at him. "You've kept me waiting."

Jason opened his eyes when he realized he'd closed them. Goldar stood in the middle of the room. The candle, a field shimmering around it, was at the far side. As Goldar lifted his sword, Jason morphed in a panic.

Goldar laughed. "Foolish child… I wouldn't have attacked you before you were ready."

"Oh, yeah?" Jason said, forcing steel into his voice. "That something you come up with recently?"
Goldar smirked. "Different times. You aren't my prisoner… I'm guarding something. Now… are you ready?"

Jason drew his own sword. He gulped, schooling all traces of fear from his face. "One minute." With one hand, he pulled his helmet off and threw it to the side. He held his sword before him at attack-ready. "Now I'm ready."
Burn Out

Chapter Summary

Book 1: The Green Candle

Part 5 of my rewrite of "The Green Candle."

Tommy realized he was biting his nails. He forced his hand away from his mouth and continued to watch the fight on the Viewing Globe. So far, the four remaining Rangers had cleared the area of construction workers. Now they just had to fight while severely outnumbered. It looked like Rita was pulling out all the stops.

"Come on, Jason," Tommy said under his breath. "Blow the damn candle out so we can win this thing already."

The Rangers were finding out that a construction site was a rather complicated place to fight in. Especially when they were outnumbered twelve Putties to one, with a monster shooting flames and wax at them whenever they looked away.

Trini positioned herself at the far end of the yard, far away from the skeleton of the three-story building at the center. She didn't want to be chased up the girders, like Zack was right now.

A spew of wax flew through the air as she kicked two Putties away from her. The wax hit her wrist, pinning it to the fence. She pulled, but the wax had effectively covered her hand; she wasn't getting away unless she took the whole fence with her.

Before she could cut herself away with her daggers, a half dozen Putties decided she would be perfect for a punching bag. She dodged the best she could, keeping the blows away from her vitals, but she had very little range of motion. She cried out as a Putty practically flew in for a kick to the sternum. Her ears buzzed, and she dropped her daggers.

She crouched as best she could and hunted for them. Her fingers clutched around metal. But when she pulled it up, it was…

"A staple gun?" Trini said.

The Putties flailed around her, momentarily entranced by her unexpected find.

She smirked and pulled the trigger.

The Putties sprang back as she pulled the trigger again and again. They clutched their faces and chests where the staples were embedded, though impossible to see as they were the same color as the Putties. Trini took the distraction to grab a dagger from the ground, cut herself away from the fence, and immediately start to attack. As she did, she put a little distance from the fence. It wasn't any safer than the building after all.

Billy had noticed her plight, but he had too many Putties to deal with to be of any help. He fought methodically, but by the time that he took care of some of them, other Putties he'd previously fought
off had already gotten up.

_It would be easier_, he thought, _if I could do something to ensure that they would dematerialize. Like, if there was a self-destruct button on their chest. But that would be stupid, of course._

Realizing he wasn't making any headway, Billy quickly scanned the area as he retreated to higher ground. Something caught his eye, and he grinned.

"Hey, Putties!" he yelled, pointing in the opposite direction. "Look that way!"

The Putties, gullible as ever, looked in the direction he was pointing, but all they saw was the Candle Monster. When they looked back, he was gone. Shrugging, they dispersed themselves among the other more visible Rangers.

Right then wasn't the time for Kimberly to get more Putties to fight. She had accidentally situated herself closest to the monster, and so she was consistently fighting off Putties while avoiding flame attacks. She tried her best to attack the monster directly, but the Putties seemed determined to keep her attention. She flipped backward when a Putty she didn't notice kicked her in the head. Stars burst in front of her eyes. Not allowing herself to be phased, she used her own momentum to roll and flip back up. She tried to put some distance between her and the Putties, so she could use her long-range weapon, but a gout of flame boxed her in.

"You know, I used to think candles were romantic," she quipped, turning her furious attention to the Candle Monster. She pulled out her Blade Blaster in blade mode. If the monster wanted a short range fight, he was going to get it.

"I doubt your boyfriend will think candles are romantic after today… if he lives," the monster said quietly.

Kimberly yelled in frustration. "Call off the Putties so I can kill you already!"

The monster made no reply, but suddenly Kimberly saw not flames but lasers shoot past her, blowing the Putties back across the yard. A few of them broke apart in the air as they went.

Kimberly shielded her eyes against the sun to look at the top of the building. Zack was perched atop a girder, his axe over his shoulder and smoke billowing from the hole in the top of the blade.

Kimberly waved her thanks and turned her attention to the monster. "Just you and me now, big boy," she said sweetly. She dodged the inevitable wax spurt and attacked.

Zack stood his ground—or girder—and shot at the highest concentrations of Putties while avoiding his fellow Rangers. Trini was in the most trouble, the remaining Putties surrounding her as Kimberly fought the monster. Billy…

Where was Billy again?

Zack had little time to ponder when he felt something grab his ankle. He looked down to see a few Putties who had climbed the construction. Acting on instinct, he brought the blade of his axe down onto the arm of the Putty grabbing him. Instead of letting go, though, the Putty's grasp tightened. Zack bit back a curse as the Putty fell, pulling Zack down along with him.

Zack hit the ground hard. His head was protected by a helmet, but he could still feel the impact. His vision dimmed and his gorge rose. He wondered absently what it would be like to puke in his helmet. He concentrated on breathing through his nose as his head slowly cleared.
"Rangers! Duck!"

The sound of Billy's voice echoed through Zack's helmet, and he knew that Billy was using their comlink so as to not tip off the enemies. Zack freed himself from the Putty's grip and rolled under the frame of the building. He saw Kimberly and Trini hit the deck.

The monster and Putties looked around, confused. Then they got hit by a pallet of girders flying through the air. All but two of the still-standing Putties were knocked down with such force that they broke up on the ground, vanishing. The monster itself was hurled back and toppled over, its wax spilling over. The monster flailed, and the Rangers realized that the monster was glued to the ground by its own weapon.

Zack laughed wildly, running to the center of the site. Trini and Kimberly got up too, both laughing and yelling.

"Great crane technique, Billy!" Trini yelled as Billy jogged toward them.

"That's terrible, Trini," he laughed.

Zack surveyed the cleared site and the flailing monster. "That was a lot easier than I expected."

"We should put the thing out of its misery," Kimberly rejoined, drawing her bow. "Before you jinx us any more, Zack."

Before Zack could retort, familiar lightning crackled from the sky, hitting the monster. The wax melted away as the monster grew in size.

"Told you so," Kimberly said, though the amusement was lost in her voice.

Tommy had resumed biting his nails, and his thumbnail was down to the quick. "It's gonna be a Zord fight," he said quietly.

When Zordon didn't respond, Tommy whirled to face him. "Zordon, I gotta get down there. They're not going to be able to take that thing without a Zord combination."

"Out of the question," Zordon said firmly. "We must wait to hear word from Jason."

Tommy growled out his frustration. "Oh, come on, Zordon, it won't take a minute. I'll call the Dragonzord, we'll combine, bing-bang-boom, monstersplosion, and that'll be the end. Look, if you want I could even control the Dragonzord remotely from here." He started to pull out his power coin.

"I absolutely forbid you to morph, Tommy Oliver!"

Tommy dropped his power morpher. He froze at the unexpected outburst from Zordon, whose face had grown stern, forbidding… downright scary. He suddenly knew how Zordon could hold his own against people like Rita for centuries.

Zordon's voice grew quieter but no less stern. "I realize it is frustrating to wait at the sidelines, unable to help your friends. Believe me when I tell you, I completely understand this feeling in ways you cannot possibly comprehend. But, if you enter the battlefield now, you will negate everything that your friends are doing for you. The candle will burn even faster—three times as fast or more—if you call your Zord. I will not allow you to throw away your power and life at a moment's notice."

Tommy's heart was still in his throat. He didn't dare to pick up his power coin, but let it lay there next
to his feet.

Zordon's voice softened considerably. "We can hope that Jason will return soon. If it is absolutely necessary, you will enter the battlefield... but only under the most extreme circumstances."

Tommy swallowed. "Yes, Zordon," he said. He slowly turned back to the Viewing Globe to see the Rangers calling their Zords. In the quiet, he could actually hear the Zords leaving the hangar to rush to the Rangers' call. His own Dragonzord lay in the ocean, as helpless as Tommy felt.

*Come on, Jason,* he thought. *It can't take this long to blow out a candle.*

The training room reverberated with the ringing clashes of sword on sword. Jason blinked away the sweat that was gathering in his eyes, not daring to wipe it away. Goldar smirked, obviously amused at the human weakness. Jason growled, ducked slightly away from the sword point, and kicked Goldar in the stomach, sending the bigger warrior stumbling backward. Still no openings, though.

The fight had been going on for longer than Jason cared to think. Maybe half an hour, possibly more. At each opportunity, Jason had tried to circle around Goldar to gain access to the candle, but Goldar was like a wall. He followed Jason's every movement with uncanny accuracy, blocking the way to the slowly-burning candle.

And even now, Goldar seemed to magically get to his feet before Jason could take a step past him. Jason knew from his previous experience in this room that Goldar was fast, but he hadn't been morphed then. Even now, Jason couldn't keep up with the seemingly-lumbering warrior.

"How are you holding up, Red Ranger?" Goldar taunted. "Need a water break?"

*Oh, God, I would just love a tiny sip of water.* Instead of saying that, Jason smirked. "I'm fine. I could go like this all day."

"The traitor doesn't have all day," Goldar reminded him.

"His name is Tommy, if you can't seem to remember," Jason said. "I'm sorry he's not your best bud anymore, but he's no traitor."

Jason punctuated the words with a series of attacks, which Goldar fended off with difficulty. Goldar may have been taunting him, but Jason could tell the alien warrior was not as sharp as he was at the beginning of the fight.

Goldar laughed deep in his throat. "Now I know why you're so desperate, Red Ranger. You're afraid."

The words themselves were like a sucker punch. The worst thing, Jason knew, about giving up his helmet this fight was not the loss of protection: it was the loss of the mask. Without the dark visor, Goldar could easily see the feelings that Jason could have otherwise kept carefully hidden, such as the fear that Goldar and this room inspired in him. Partly what was keeping him from the candle was that he was being too cautious, especially around Goldar's sword. He could still feel the sharp metal sliding through his gut: the pressure only, and then the pain, and then the nausea, and finally the blackness with the certainty of death.

"You're afraid," Goldar said grimly between sword swipes, "that Tommy is going to take Rita's offer. Join the other side again."

Wait, what?
The suggestion made Jason pause. Goldar took the opportunity to punch Jason's face with the hilt of his sword. Jason fell and rolled to the side automatically, evading Goldar's follow-through. His eyes were watering in pain as blood ran from his nose. Probably broken, Jason mused. He tried to ignore the pain.

"I struck a nerve," Goldar smirked.

Jason grimaced. "Tommy's never going to turn. He was being mind-controlled before. He'd never turn on his own."

"He very easily could," Goldar said. "I don't want him to. I'd rather see him die than join us again. He's caused too much trouble to be let back in this easily. But there's something about his connection with Empress Rita that none but them understand, and as much as he claims he'd rather die, there's still a part of him that wants to go back to her."

Jason could see the green candle behind Goldar. It flickered strongly, the flame glowing brighter as the wick grew shorter. He was wrong. There was no way that Tommy would turn on them.

No way.

Jason wouldn't give him the chance.

The Power Rangers had rarely ever piloted their Zords separately.

"You sure we can't use Titanus to combine?" Zack asked Billy over the private comlink tied into their helmets, keeping their plans private from the monster.

Billy was concentrating on the somewhat less familiar controls of his Triceratops Zord. "Negative... at least not in a way that would afford us a significant boost of power. The Tyrannosaurus Zord and the Dragonzord are the real power centers."

"I'd rather give the monster four targets rather than one easy target," Trini said.

"Sounds about right to me," Zack said. "Kim, you're the one with the real mobility. You keep flame-head busy while we flank him. Gotta keep him away from the rest of the city."

"I'm on it," Kimberly said.

Flashes of light rained from the sky to the Candle Monster as Kimberly dive-bombed. The first few hit the monster, sending sparks flying, but the monster quickly constructed a wax shield that blocked the rest of the barrage.

By this time, though, the other Rangers had gotten into position. The three remaining Zords sent energy blasts from all sides.

"Not sure how long he'll let us keep this up," Zack said as he kept the blasts going.

The monster, howling in frustration, threw great handfuls of wax in an arc around himself. The wax congealed instantly, forming a shield that now seemed to deflect all energy blasts.

"Oh, you're not getting away that easy," Zack said. He punched the freeze control on his dashboard. Instantly a stream of powerful ice erupted from the Mastodon Zord's trunk. The ice froze the wax, making it super brittle.

"Now let's hit him with a few physical attacks," Zack said over the comlink.
"Affirmative," answered Billy as he charged his Zord for full ramming speed. It broke through, sending the icy wax harmlessly to the ground, and the horns locked with the Candle Monster's two candlesticks, which were also harmlessly frozen. With a great swing, Billy sent the monster flying through the air, straight at Trini.

"Guess it's my turn," Trini grinned. Pulling back for a cat-like leap, she tackled the monster with her Saber-tooth Tiger Zord. The monster could do nothing to react as the Zord sent it rolling.

"Now for the finish?" Kimberly said, eager to rejoin the battle.

"All together," Zack said.

They all turned their Zords to the inert monster.

Before they could fire, there was a flash of fire and light. The Rangers were temporarily blinded. The Zord shields were practically knocked out, and Kimberly was sent spiraling into the distance, only her quick reflexes keeping her from crashing.

When their vision returned, they saw the monster in the same place it had been, but... changed. It was no longer inert and frozen. It seemed to have grown more candles and more flames, and the flames themselves were like looking into the sun.

"We're in trouble," Zack said.

The silence stretched through the Command Center. Even Alpha had stopped his continual fretting.

Tommy didn't dare speak. He didn't dare look at Zordon. He knew what he had to do, and he knew the risk, but he also knew how many people didn't want him to take that risk.

Jason wasn't there. He hadn't come back when Tommy had been sure it wouldn't take this long.

Tommy was forced to acknowledge that Jason might not succeed. And this realization was clawing through Tommy's insides. He felt like he was dying one little bit at a time.

And he wanted to fight. Wanted to cleanse this pain in battle and achieve some sort of victory before everything was ripped away from him.

The power coin was on the ground beside his feet.

He already felt that he had lost it.

"Go."

Tommy looked up at Zordon. His voice sounded like it was coming from someone else, but there was no mistaking the look on Zordon's face.

"Go and fight," Zordon repeated. "Just... teleport back the instant you feel your power fading."

Tommy didn't say anything. Feeling more defeat than the usual excitement for the fight, Tommy scooped up his power coin and morphed out.

Music rent the air, and the familiar shrieks of the Dragonzord followed almost immediately.

"No..." Billy whispered.
"But Jason hasn't reported back," Trini said.

"Tommy, what are you doing here?" Zack yelled into his comlink.

Tommy's voice was strained. "Just following orders. Now let's combine so we can put this thing in the ground as quick as we can."

Zack shook his head. "Okay… one Dragonzord in Battle Mode coming up. Kim, you run interference while we combine."

Kimberly forced her brain from worrying about Tommy. She could help him better if she focused. "Right."

The Pterodactyl Zord dived at the monster, repeatedly attacking and retreating, as the rest of the Zords changed and attached to the Dragonzord. The cockpits combined to form the control room, where Tommy was already sitting at the head.

"You sure you feel up to this?" Zack said as soon as he slid into position.

Tommy was holding onto his control panel, and Zack noticed he was gripping it rather hard. "Don't have much of a choice." He paused. "I'll be all right. We need to help Kim, though."

"Power systems online," Trini reported. "It… looks like the zord combination is affected by Tommy's power drain, though. We're not as powerful as last time."

"It'll have to be enough," Tommy said.

Zack, Trini, and Billy glanced at each other. They knew that Tommy would keep fighting until it killed him… literally. It was their responsibility to pull him out, by force if necessary, before he endangered his life.

"I think I can manipulate the power levels to our advantage." Billy kept his voice all-business, not wanting Tommy to know what was going through their heads. "If we keep switching the power between offense and defense as needed and rely on Kimberly to add a bit more fire power, I think we can save up enough energy for a finishing move. We'll just have to be careful to not let our defenses drop too much."

"Let's do this, then," Tommy said. He paused as he started the opening attack sequence. "Be careful. We're going to be burning through power faster than normal."

The first attack was a sucker punch, knocking the Candle Monster to the ground while it was busy with the Pterodactyl Zord's attack run. The Zord quickly transferred power to its forward shields as it not entirely dodged a retaliatory flame attack from the monster.

"Shields are holding," Trini reported.

"Kim, keep the distraction going as long as you can," Zack said into the comlink. "We can't expend too much power if we're going to build up to a finishing move."

"Can we get an estimate to when that is?" Tommy called out to Billy.

Billy was working furiously, redirecting power for the most part manually. The screen in front of him showed the forward view of the monster as well as the readouts for Tommy's attack sequences. There was a rhythm to it, but it required Billy's strict attention. "Not sure yet," Billy said shortly. "Bit busy now."
"I won't bug you," Tommy said, and there was a hint of humor in his voice, though it was deadened and hoarse. "Just tell me when I can shoot the big gun."

Over the fight, Jason had calculated the rate in which the candle was burning. He was decent at math, and Trini had given him a simple equation to use after Billy had confused him with too many numbers and complicated words. He'd found it useful to figure out how long he had to get past Goldar.

The candle was burning twice as fast. Then it began to spark violently.

Goldar noticed it, too, and grinned. "Looks like the Green Ranger has joined in the fight now. Not much time left."

"Enough time to beat you," Jason said, though it was with a hollow voice. Goldar was right. He needed to end the fight quickly. If Tommy was taking chances, Jason needed to do the same. What he really needed, of course, was a distraction. Just long enough to get past Goldar. Afterwards, he didn't care what happened to him.

In his planning, he had edged to a far corner, while Goldar kept his position between him and the candle. Goldar, though, watching for signs of conventional attack, didn't notice Jason fumble with his belt, accessing the things he had in his civilian clothes underneath his uniform. As usual, the items came when called for.

With a sudden movement, Jason threw everything in a wide arc across the room.

Smoke bombs ignited instantly. The smoke combined with the fog covering the floor to turn the whole room into an inscrutable, pearlescent white. At the same time, Rita's shriek resounded in the room.

"Get to the throne room, you moron! Don't keep me waiting!"

Over and over, the demands from the Rita-decoys shouted through the room. It didn't fool Goldar one bit, but still all he could do was cover his ears as the sound deafened him as much as the smoke blinded him. It was like being caught in a nightmare.

Jason was already on the move. He slid to the floor quietly, keeping to the fog in case the smoke dissipated quickly. He was careful not to make a sound and not to knock any of the smoke bombs or decoys, knowing that the deprivation of sight of hearing would only distract Goldar for a few precious seconds, and that any movement on the floor would alert Goldar to his location immediately. Through a brief clear spot through the smoke, Jason saw the flash of a blade and knew Goldar was swinging his sword at random.

For a breathless second, Jason's vision was filled with Goldar's foot. Then it moved to the side… and behind him.

He was between Goldar and the candle.

Jason sprang from the floor, practically flying to the candle.

And then the world dissolved in pain. His vision exploded in red and, nauseas from the pain, he barely registered hitting a wall, much less flying through the air.

Jason forced his eyes open, realizing he had no idea how long he'd been unconscious. His eyes stung, and he wiped at them. His vision started to clear, but he realized his gloves were as red as the
rest of his costume. And there was a blinding pain lancing from above his right eyebrow, down past
the bridge of his nose, and all the way down his left cheek to his jaw. That's where Goldar's sword
had caught him.

Jason vaguely wondered how much blood he was losing, and what he looked like with a broken
nose and disfiguring facial scar.

Then he remembered the candle. He estimated he'd been out for just a few minutes. The smoke had
dissipated, and the air rung with the silence as the decoys stopped imitating Rita's voice. Goldar had
waited through the whole thing, still firmly between Jason and the candle, his sword resting in front
of him.

"Recovered?" Goldar asked. "I'm sure it would be foolish to ask if you were just going to give up."

"You'd be right," Jason said. He realized for the first time he sounded like he had a cold, as the blood
stopped his nose up. "You could have done anything to me. Done away with me altogether. Why
wait for me to wake up?"

Goldar looked insulted. "That's not what this is about. You think Zordon is the only one to follow a
code?"

"Right…" Jason said. "That's why you almost killed me last time?"

"You're the one who walked into a sword, you idiot. That's a rule of combat, actually. Unless you
have pincushion abilities, don't walk into swords." Goldar scowled. "Let's focus, already. We don't
have a lot more time."

Focus…

And Jason realized he'd been a complete idiot. He'd wasted so much time trying to fight Goldar
when his attention was completely on the candle. And that was a good way to fight if he wanted
Goldar to take advantage of every weakness or every lag in attention to the fight. How else could he
not notice when a sword was where his face was going to be.

He had to concentrate on the fight. He had to completely defeat Goldar before he could even think
about the candle. And he didn't have a lot of time.

Goldar saw the change in Jason's eyes and tensed. Now he was going to get the fight he wanted.

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There's not going to be enough power.

The thought made Billy's mind freeze. His hands hovered over the keyboard… at exactly the wrong
moment.

The cockpit exploded in sparks as the Candle Monster landed a direct hit while their shields were at
minimum. Caught off-balance, the Zord fell and rolled on the ground. The Rangers could only hold
onto their consoles and try to keep from being thrown out of their seats.

"What the hell happened, Billy?" Tommy said as he tried to regain the Zord's equilibrium before the
monster could take advantage of their weakness.

"Sorry! It… it's my fault! I…" Billy's hands flew over the console, desperately trying to work his
former magic with the power levels. Unfortunately, his momentary lapse had cost them dearly.
"It's okay, Billy," Tommy said. "Just tell us what we've got to work with."

His firm, calm voice dispelled Billy's panic. He forced himself to take a breath and focus on the problem at hand. "One second."

Trini looked from Billy to Zack to Tommy. "Shields aren't looking good," she said quietly. "Not sure if we can take another direct hit."

"And you're not looking so good, either," Zack added.

Tommy realized he was visibly shaking from the effort of keeping himself upright. He'd hoped no one would notice.

"Don't let on," Tommy said. "Until Jason gets back, it's up to us to take care of this thing, and you guys need a Zord with a power center… even if that power center is failing."

"You guys okay?" Kimberly's voice crackled over the speaker. "I'm keeping Lumiere here busy for now, but I'm not sure how long I can keep this up before he gets bored and…"

There was a loud crash over the speaker, and nothing.

"KIM!"

Tommy turned the Zord toward the battle. The Candle Monster was slowly advancing on the Pterodactyl Zord, which was stuck to the ground, half inundated with wax.

"Kim!" Trini yelled into the comlink, "are you okay?"

There was a pause as the Power Rangers held their breath. "Yeah…" Kimberly finally said. "I'm stuck, though. The wax is stronger when the monster's bigger."

"Hang on, Kim," Tommy said. "Billy, get me something to work with."

"We don't have enough power. I'm sorry, but we just don't. I'm sorry…"

"Looks like we'll have to go all or nothing," Zack said quietly as Billy trailed off.

Tommy nodded. Kimberly's danger had given him new focus. "Billy, I'm calling the Power Staff. I want you to stick all our remaining power in there. If all goes wrong, I want everyone ready to teleport out. That means you, too, Kim. Put your power in the shields just in case you're too close to the explosion."

"Got it," Kimberly said. "Good luck."

Tommy keyed in the sequence that called the Power Staff. It materialized in the Zord's hand. The lights dimmed as Billy put most of their power in the Staff.

The monster was already aiming at the Pterodactyl Zord.

"Now!" Tommy screamed.

The drill end of the staff went straight through the monster. It looked down at the metal poking out from its chest. With one last burst of power, the Zord lifted the monster with the staff away from Kimberly's Zord and threw it across the battlefield. The monster hit the ground and was immediately surrounded by smoke and sparks.
"Yes!" Kimberly shouted.

The Zord had come to a stop, but inside the cockpit was filled with cheers of relieved victory.

"That'll show Rita that she can't stop us," Zack yelled.

"We have enough left to shoot Kimberly free, Tommy," Billy said, gathering the last of the power reserves.

There was no answer.

"Tommy?" Trini said.

For the first time, the three other Rangers looked at the front of the cockpit. Tommy was slumped over his console, half falling out of his seat.

Zack pulled Tommy back into his seat with one hand. Tommy didn't respond at all. He was unconscious. The Dragonzord was maintaining his morphed state, but only just.

"We have to get back to the Command Center," said Trini. "Maybe Zordon…"

"Guys!" Kimberly, unaware of Tommy's danger, had been watching the smoke from the monster's remains while she waited to be freed. "The monster! It's not dead!"

"What?" Zack leaned over Tommy to access the battle controls. The monster was showing at full power.

"That's impossible!" Billy yelled. "We don't have any power left! We're…"

"Going to lose," Zack finished his sentence in a hollow voice. "Rita's won."

The candle burned forgotten in the background. Blood flew threw the air in droplets as Jason gave retaliatory slices across Goldar's few bits of exposed flesh. Goldar grinned through the blood, and Jason realized he was grinning as well.

He was enjoying the savage oblivion of a fight where all strategy had devolved into sheer brute force and speed, reflex and wound. The yells and snarls from the two battling warriors blended with the musical clangs of swords.

Gone was any fear of death or failure. Gone was any self-questioning or worry. He felt neither pain nor fatigue. Jason lived in the fight… through the fight. He was the fight.

With a thrill of victory, he realized he was no longer afraid of Goldar. Because, in this very moment… he was better.

In one deft movement, Jason slid his power sword between the plates of armor protecting Goldar's shoulder. The sword sheathed itself through muscle and bone, only stopping when it hit the armor on Goldar's back.

Goldar froze, his eyes going wide, pain finally registering through the adrenaline of battle. In a second he knew exactly what Jason was going to do, and he only had a few seconds to brace himself for the inevitable.

Jason pulled the sword in an upward motion, tearing his sword away from Goldar rather than simply pulling it out. Goldar's shoulder piece flew through the air, carrying with it bits of flesh and alien
Goldar was barely able to bite back his scream. He snarled in pain and, hitting the floor, he pulled off his glove so he could apply pressure to the wound safely. Then he screamed.

Jason watched as Goldar struggled. The adrenaline was bleeding out of his system. His stomach turned at the bloody spectacle. He had done that. In the heat of battle, he had mangled—possibly killed, if the blood loss was any indication—his enemy.

"Y-you can call for help, right?" he said. He tried to remember where Finster's lab was in relation to the training room.

Goldar's laugh sounded more like a cough. "Weak human child, as ever, though you have potential. Don't you have a mission to complete?"

His eyes growing wide, Jason threw himself across the room to the forgotten candle. It was barely a bit of green wax and a wick, and the flame was sputtering weakly. Keeping a careful distance from the forcefield, Jason blew on the flame.

Nothing happened.

He did it again, thinking insanely of the trick candles at birthday parties that never went out. The candle stayed burning. In desperation, Jason lashed out at it... and only caught air. The image of the candle disappeared as soon as his hand passed through a light overhead.

"A… projection?"

Goldar's laughter, which had continued in the background through Jason's attempts, was growing stronger. "A projection. You've been wasting your time, Red Ranger."

He whirled around to face Goldar. "So… where… what…"

"Even if I told you where it was, you'd never get there in time." Goldar grinned even broader. "You failed in your mission as soon as you started fighting me. From the moment you got here you never had a chance. I hope you've enjoyed sorting out your personal demons as your friend dies."

Jason was practically blind with fury. He strode over to the prone Goldar and kicked his hand away. He deliberately shoved his foot against the open, bleeding wound. Goldar writhed, but he seemed beyond screaming at this point.

"Tell me where the candle is, or you bleed to death now." He relived the pressure from the wound so that Goldar could talk.

Goldar had stopped struggling, the pain overcoming him finally. "You're finally talking like a man, not that it'll do you any good. The candle is in a series of caves on Earth, guarded by Putties. There are five caves like this across the Earth, and even I don't know which one is the real candle. And that projection is a projection of the real candle." He managed a laugh. "Think you can manage all that in five minutes?"

Jason heard frantic knocks on the door, which was of course locked.

"How do you open the door?" Jason said in a quiet voice.

Goldar tried to motion, but his arm only moved weakly. "Hidden panel on the left side, near the raised panel. Hit the first, seventh, and second buttons."
"Well, guys," Zack said as they watched the monster heal itself with its own wax, "we're out of options, and we can't surrender. Looks like it's time for Code 9. Set to self-destruct and teleport out before it blows. Should take the monster with us if we can get it between the two Zords. Kim, you got that?"

"Yeah…"

"Zordon, you hear us?" Zack said.

"Belay that, Black Ranger." Zordon's voice sounded grim… grimmer than normal.

Before Zack could ask what the hell Zordon expected them to do, a flash of golden flame lit up the battlefield. A second later, the newly healed Candle Monster was sliced through with a wicked, curved sword. As the pieces flew through the air, a monstrous stinger dashed the bits into nothingness. As the smoke from the resulting explosion dissipated, the wax on the surrounding battlefield, including the wax surrounding Kimberly's Zord, dissolved and faded into nonexistence.

"Meet me on the ground, Rangers," Scorpina said in her pinched, monstrous voice. "The battle's over."

The Rangers looked at each other, but they realized they were in no position to engage Scorpina, not when she had dispatched the monster so neatly, a monster that had nearly defeated them.

They teleported to the ground, Zack taking Tommy with him. The Zords magically disappeared back into the hangar.

Scorpina was already waiting for them, now in her normal, beautiful form. She looked no less deadly.

As soon as the Dragonzord disappeared, Tommy's costume faded and he began to push himself from the ground where Zack had laid him.

"W-what happened?" Tommy whispered, staring around in confusion at the Rangers who surrounded him and Scorpina feet away.

"We lost," Zack whispered calmly. "Scorpina fried the monster."

What color was left in Tommy's face fled.

"Like I said, the battle is over." Scorpina's voice was calm and quiet, and her face was a blank. "Tommy has less than five minutes to make his decision. If you wish… if it will make you feel safer, you may retreat to your Command Center. The Red Ranger is probably there waiting."

"But… Jason…" Tommy sputtered.

"He has failed as well," Scorpina broke him off. "There is no chance that you can find the Green Candle in time." Scorpina's face softened slightly. "Empress Rita has no wish to kill you, Tommy. Either serve her in the capacity of Green Ranger, or the whole of your powers go safely to her. Either way, the power coin will go to her. There's nothing you can do." She paused. "Rita will contact your Command Center shortly."
The five Power Rangers teleported to the Command Center, four of them unmorphing in the process.

Jason was sitting on the step at the edge of the consoles. He was covered with blood, both red and what looks like a deep purple. Dried blood gathered around a cut that dominated his face, and his nose was crooked and bruised. Sweat and what they soon realized were tears mixed on his face, making the blood run afresh.

"It was a decoy." Jason's voice was desperate. "I… fought Goldar, but he wasn't guarding the candle. It was a projection the whole time, and I only found out a few minutes ago. Goldar told me where the candle was but it would take us hours and…"

"Scorpina told us there wasn't enough time," Zack said, placing a hand on Jason's shoulder. "You did all you could do."

"I… I failed." Fresh tears started rolling down Jason's face. "I failed you, Tommy. I'm sorry… I'm sorry…"

Tommy's eyes were closed. He was leaning against a console, not looking at Jason. Everyone knew that the only thing keeping him upright was Kimberly's arm around him, steadying him. "No, Jas… It's all right. Rita… It was all part of Rita's game. She knew exactly what we would do. She knew how to keep us busy while the candle burned."

"Tommy is exactly right," Zordon said. "As I have been trying to tell you, Jason, you are not to blame, and now is not the time to give in to defeat. We must make a decision. We must keep Rita from gaining power from this."

"You mean I have to make a decision," Tommy said.

Zordon paused. "That is correct, Tommy. The candle affects you and only you. Therefore it is your decision."

"What are you guys talking about?" Kimberly said, her grip tightening around Tommy. "There is no decision. Not unless you're suggesting Tommy go over to them…"

"I get it," Trini said.

"But…"

Alpha broke off Kimberly. "The Moon Palace is hailing us."

Tommy pulled away from Kimberly, calling on the last of his strength to keep steady on his feet. He was determined not to appear weak in this moment. "Answer it," he said. "I'm ready."

Rita appeared, sitting on her throne and looking not triumphant but composed. "Well, my Green Ranger. You have but a minute left. It's time."

Tommy smiled. He knew what was going on behind the calm façade of this queen sitting on her throne. He knew because he knew Rita better than anyone. They had shared a mental connection, been in each other's minds. There had been a time when he didn't know where he ended and she began. It had been love… obsessive, controlling, selfish, unhealthy love, but love all the same. It was the reason Rita wasn't killing him. It was the reason he felt, just for a moment, the strong temptation to rejoin her. To remake that connection.
The feeling passed, though. Tommy knew what he'd have to give up, and that was harder than what he was about to do.

"I'm sorry, Empress Rita," he said softly, using her title deliberately for the first time since he'd broken the spell. "This whole plan has been brilliant. You beat us, fair and square. You even had the opportunity to kill all of us, and you didn't, because you wanted this one thing." He pulled out his power coin, free from its morpher. "Yes, you beat us. You beat me… and I'm sorry, but I can't let you win anything from it. I just can't let you.

"If you haven't noticed," Rita said, the mask slipping as her anger showed, "you don't have much of a choice. As Scorpina told you, the power coin goes to me no matter what. There's nothing you can do about that."

"There is, actually," Tommy said in the same tone of voice, not reacting to her mounting anger. "The Green Candle is affecting me. It touched my hand. It's tied to me… not the power itself." He gulped and braced himself. "Jason, come here, please."

Jason, in a confused daze, stumbled to his feet.

"No… don't you dare…" Rita said, practically spitting in anger.

Tommy grabbed Jason's hand and shoved the coin into Jason's hand. "Jason, Red Ranger, I officially give my Green Ranger powers—coin, Zord, and all—to you, for you to use in battle for the protection of the Power Rangers and Earth."

Jason's mouth flew open. He stood stunned, unable to say anything.

"You've got to accept," Tommy whispered. "Hurry… I don't have a lot of time left. You've… got to protect them from Rita."

Jason wanted to throw the coin away from him, to beg Tommy to give it to someone… anyone else. He'd already failed to protect Tommy. He couldn't just take the powers like this.

"Please…" Tommy's voice was barely audible.

"I accept."

As soon as Jason said the words, Rita screamed in fury. An aura surrounded the two Rangers, and Jason felt himself buffeted with power. He morphed without even meaning to, a fresh onslaught of knowledge flooding his mind. Knowledge of the Dragonzord, of all the green power coin was capable of. He realized the Green Ranger's golden shield had formed around his shoulders.

Tommy was holding himself up on a console, but he looked healthier than he had in days. He was no longer sweating or shaking, and the color returned to his face.

Somewhere in a cave on Earth, a sliver of a candle turned from its brilliant shade of green to a dull gray seconds before burning out completely.
Colored lights flashed in the Command Center, shining dully against the metal circle of computers, as the Rangers trickled in for their usual meeting on Sunday afternoon. There was little they wanted to discuss, but the Zords needed repairs, and none of them would have given up the familiar routine for the world.

Trini, Billy, Zack, and Kimberly all looked at Jason expectantly. He was silent, staring off into the darkness… waiting.

"Jason…" Trini said quietly.

Jason snapped out of his reverie. "Sorry," he said. "Just… waiting for us all to get here."

There was an uncomfortable silence as the other four Rangers looked at each other. Billy quickly looked at a computer readout. Kimberly was stony-faced.

"Jas…" Zack said. "I… I think this is all of us."

Jason opened his mouth to say something, and then closed it again. Then he forced a cheerful tone that didn't sound like him. "Well… he's tired, obviously. Probably slept in. We'll see him at school tomorrow." Abruptly, he started toward the door leading to the Zord hangar. "Come on; let's get these repairs done already."

The Rangers looked uneasily at each other before following him. Billy shoved the communicator further into his pocket: the green-tinted communicator he'd found in his lab that morning. He'd gotten to the Command Center first, shown the communicator to Zordon… but found he didn't have the nerve to tell the other Rangers about it. Not yet, at least. Not before he talked to Tommy.

"He won't talk to me," Kimberly said miserably.

She and Trini were sitting on the wing of her Pterodactyl Zord, letting their legs swing as they let the internal diagnostic systems do their work.

"I mean," Kimberly continued, "I'm trying not to be selfish or anything. I know Tommy's devastated about… what happened. But I thought… maybe if he talked about it…"

She trailed off.

Trini clasped Kimberly's hand, trying to give her strength. "Have you tried going over there?"

Kimberly shook her head. "I thought that would be too pushy. I tried to talk to him before he left the Command Center yesterday, but… he didn't seem like he wanted to talk. And I called him last night.
His dad is fielding his calls, but I could hear Tommy in the background."

Trini tried to smile, and she squeezed Kimberly's hand. "Tommy's done the recluse thing before. That's his way of dealing with stuff. Not the healthiest way, but it's what he does. He'll come around. And if Jason's any indication, he's still welcome as part of the team."

Kimberly's eyes narrowed. "Tommy would hate it. Hanging around, but not being able to help in the big fights. Being left behind all the time." She shook her head sadly. "I don't see Tommy coming up here anymore."

"And that's his choice to make," Trini said. "But that doesn't mean he stops being our friend. And that doesn't mean the thing between you and him is ended," she said a little more heatedly.

Kimberly looked down. "Am I really that obvious?"

"To me you are."

Kimberly smiled a little at that. "The thing is… everything's been going so great. At least until this green candle thing, everything's been… well… not perfect, but really, really good. Tommy had even stopped getting that haunted look he gets sometimes, like when he thinks about when he was under the spell." She smiled a little more. "I was even hoping he'd ask me to his dad's and Billy's mom's wedding. I mean, I was going to come anyway, but…"

"I almost forgot about that," Trini said, a little brighter. "See, Kim? He's not disappearing off the face of the Earth. He's still here, and the thing you two have going has absolutely nothing to do with any powers. He's still… Tommy."

Kimberly stopped talking as she tried to let Trini convince her that everything was going to be alright. It seemed stupid of her to think that everything was over just because Tommy lost some powers he'd only gotten a couple of months before. She wanted to think that what they had was more than that.

But she still knew that Tommy loved the powers in a way that none of the rest of them did. That he defined himself by strength, and that there would be a hole between them every time Kimberly went off to fight the bad guys, leaving Tommy behind to get to safety. She wanted to believe their relationship would survive that, but… would it?

Tommy lay in his bedroom. His father had forced him to come downstairs a few times, but Tommy slipped back out of sight every chance he got.

He was in the dark. The sun had gone down, and he didn't both turning the light on. Maybe he would just keep lying here. Let another day end. Let sleep just eventually take him until…


And maybe he could pretend it all hadn't happened. He had never held power. Never been part of a team. Never even been put under a spell. That the Green Ranger was just a strange dream, and now he was awake. With reality. School. Friends. Family. Days to get through. Life to be lived.

Except…

He couldn't pretend none of it had happened. Couldn't pretend that it didn't kill him to see the Rangers go into action without him. To see them fight without being able to help even a little. To see Jason wield his shield, his dagger, his sword. His, dammit. He'd fought an Empress just to keep
them, and Jason hadn't had the sense to blow out a damn candle…

Tommy realized he was breathing hard. He was pacing his room… when had he gotten up? He forced himself to stop, to sit on his bed. He didn't want his dad to worry.

He hadn't told his dad what happened. He wasn't sure why.

So he could pretend? Pretend he still had his powers, that he still had a place in Angel Grove?

That he wasn't afraid?

Tommy clasped his hands over his head. His stomach clenched in a knot as he thought of what he'd been trying to avoid all day. In this final defiance against Rita, he'd essentially painted a target on his back. How was he to stop her from enacting vengeance by going after his blood this time rather than his powers?

She could. She could have easily killed him with the Green Candle, but she hadn't. She had shown mercy, hoping that he would rejoin her, or at least surrender the powers to her peaceably, so that they could go back to what they had been. So that they could become even. And now… he had openly defied her in front of everyone, humiliating her, and he had given up any protection against her while doing it.

How could he tell the other Rangers that he feared attacks from every corner? That he couldn't go anywhere without the creeping feeling he was being watched? Because he was. She could see him wherever he was, and no matter how vigilant he was, she could strike at any time.

And even if Rita would never strike, she would have the pleasure of seeing him eaten up by his own fear and jealousy. For he knew, deep down, he would be more and more jealous of the Power Rangers. Even as his friends grew in power – even as his father pulled together a family – he would not grow. He would turn angry, then bitter, and then he would fall back to all the things he'd done before Angel Grove.

He knew this about himself, but he also knew he was completely powerless to stop it.

And then there was Kimberly.

She'd called… He hadn't called her back. It wasn't that he didn't want to talk to her. A need to talk to her, to see her, to hold her in his arms… the need flashed through him in waves, taking him unawares.

But he resisted. He knew what she would say. She was sorry. It must be so hard… He was still a part of the team… They could still be together… Maybe even that she would find a way to pay Rita back, or maybe there was a way to get him powers, or maybe he could help out in other ways, or maybe…

It was all well-meaning, good, and beautiful; just like Kimberly… And exactly what couldn't happen… what wouldn't happen. They would drift apart as he hid in the shadows while she battled gloriously in the light.

He knew, on one level, that Kimberly was worth it. And not just Kimberly: his friends. The chance for a family. Billy, who would become his brother… It was all worth it—all the fear and bitterness and maybe even a family could save him from that.

He picked up the phone.
Goldar opened his eyes. The world was bleary. He tried to blink it into reality. Scorpina's face came into focus.

She smirked and sat back. "Welcome back to the realm of the living… finally."

Goldar was awake enough to notice the waver in her voice. He glanced at the timepiece near his bed. He'd been out for most of a day, and he knew Scorpina had probably been there the entire time.

He was in his bedroom. It must not have been as bad as all that.

"You're too much of a worrier," Goldar said in a hoarse voice. His throat threatened to close up around his words, and he coughed. What felt like a knife jabbed into his shoulder. So he wasn't quite healed.

Scorpina poured him some water and helped him drink. "Bullshit. Our erstwhile Red Ranger probably doesn't know that your heart is a bit higher than he's used to." She caressed just to the side of his shoulder wound. The wound had obviously done enough damage without piercing his heart. "I wouldn't give him credit for such a bloody move."

"He's a child playing with matches," Goldar said. "Speaking of… is the traitor still alive?"

Scorpina's smirk faded. "You're lucky to have been out the past day. Tommy… is still alive. He gave the green powers to the Red Ranger." She paused. "Apparently the candle affected his access to the powers, not the powers themselves. The powers drained from the candle and went to the Red Ranger at the last minute. Rita… was not pleased."

"I should stay sick for a while."

"I'd advise it."

Goldar stopped talking, finding it exhausting. It would be a while before he was up on his feet, though he'd be damned if he let the Red Ranger know how close he'd come to killing him. Instead, he watched Scorpina, wishing he could see her like he used to.

"Rita gave everyone hell, of course," Scorpina said, "though it wasn't our fault." Her voice took a sharper edge. "We all apparently did exactly as we were meant to."

Goldar didn't respond. He knew that Rita had taken Scorpina to task for her nocturnal share time with Tommy the night before the attack, even though they had counted on Scorpina doing just that.

"You lied to me about where the power coin was," Scorpina said. "You manipulated me."

"And you shared that information with an enemy the first opportunity you got," Goldar said, a little more strongly than he felt. "I didn't tell you to betray us. If I might point out, I might never have gotten this sword wound if you hadn't been so eager to share."

Scorpina opened her mouth to retort, and then stopped. She looked miserable.

"Why did you do it?" Goldar said wearily. "Why risk so much all for that… human?"

Scorpina didn't answer.

"I'll admit," Goldar pushed, "I have no desire to see the traitor dead…"

"Will you use his name?" Scorpina broke in.
Goldar stared at Scorpina, his eyes burning. "Are you in love with Tommy?"

Scorpina took a few seconds to register the question. She gave a sharp laugh. "Don't be an idiot."

"That doesn't answer the question."

She started to laugh again, but broke off. "I want this clear. I am not in love with Tommy. He's far too young, he's way too emotionally complicated for my taste, and, as I must remind you again, I don't conflate sex with any sort of long-term emotional attachment."

Goldar sighed at the old argument. He didn't point out that those were all reasons for her and Tommy to not be together. None of them were proof that she didn't love him. "Then why did you help him?"

"Because you and I both know that the taking of power like that is a serious thing," she said in a rush. "It would have been better to kill him. Then at least he wouldn't have to face what's coming, and powerless at that."

The air tensed, and Scorpina seemed to realize she'd said too much.

"What have you heard?" Goldar said in a quiet voice.

Scorpina shrugged, looking away from Goldar. "Rumors. Just here and there. Rita's been making waves, what with her increased magic use and what you did to that fire elemental. She's been attracting the wrong kind of attention."


"I'm just saying," Scorpina said in an unreadable voice, "that if Rita's going to conquer Earth, she better put a move on. Because I think we're running out of time." Scorpina sighed. "You asked me why I helped Tommy? I wanted Tommy to be able to protect himself. Tommy represents all that's gone wrong for Rita. That makes Tommy his most likely target, powers or no powers."

Kimberly drove up Tommy's driveway in her mother's car. Tommy hadn't been at school that day, hadn't answered any of her phone messages… She was determined to talk with him. He wasn't going to shut the world out anymore.

The trees parted, and she saw that there were already several cars parked in the driveway.

Her breath caught, and she wondered if Tommy's dad was all right. The cars just seemed so… ominous.

Parking so that she wasn't blocking anyone, Kimberly ran to the kitchen door and knocked. She was startled to see Billy answer the door. Behind him, grouped around the table, sat Tommy's father and Billy's mother in stony silence, trying not to look at the woman Kimberly recognized as Tommy's mother.

"Is… everything all right?" Kimberly said in a low voice to Billy.

Billy looked angry, angrier than she'd ever seen him. "You're not going to like it," he said.

"Billy… what? Is it Tommy? Is he okay?"

"He's leaving," Billy said shortly. "He's leaving now… this afternoon."

In a flash Kimberly slipped past Billy and ran up the stairs. No one tried to stop her.
She shoved her way into Tommy's room. He was facing away from her, shoving shirts into a duffel bag. Two other bags lay packed near the door, and his room looked ransacked from packing in a hurry.

Tommy didn't acknowledge her, though a tightening of the shoulders told her he knew she was there.

"So… that's it?" Kimberly voice was shaky and high-pitched. "You're just going to leave town?"

Tommy paused in his motions. He still faced away from her. "Yeah…" he said, his voice flat and hoarse. "My mom offered to take me on the road with her. It's a good opportunity…"

"A good opportunity." Kimberly spat the words right back at him.

Tommy started shoving things in his duffel back with renewed vigor.

"Were you even going to say goodbye to anybody?" Kimberly's voice went harder. "I was just supposed to hear about this from Billy?"

"I didn't want to make this harder." Tommy's voice was growing harder in response to Kimberly's. "Billy found out by accident. I just thought…"

"That you didn't have to care about your friends?" Kimberly challenged. "That you could just disappear and be done with us? Life doesn't work that way, Tommy. You can't just leave people like that."

"I was going to write a letter…"

"How can you put stuff like that in a letter…?"

"How the hell else am I supposed to handle this?" Tommy exploded.

He turned around. His eyes were narrowed with anger, but Kimberly could see the fear in his eyes. But afraid of what?

His voice got softer, but his fear and anger did not dissipate, instead turning inward. "I didn't try to talk to anyone because I knew what would happen. You'd all try to convince me to stay, that it didn't matter that I didn't have any powers anymore. I just wanted to save everyone the trouble. To make this as painless as possible."

"Just because you don't talk to us doesn't mean there's no hurt. It just means you don't have to go through it."

"So you think this is easy for me?"

Kimberly kept meeting his gaze, but it was getting harder. "I think you're running away. I think you're abandoning your friends. I think you're leaving behind your family just when your father needs you the most." She paused, her indignation rising with every word. "Remind you of anyone?"

For a few breathless seconds, Kimberly almost thought Tommy was going to attack her. His eyes were wild and dangerous, and he kept clenching his fists. The moment passed, though, and Tommy's face became more sardonic.

"It's so easy for you, isn't it?" Tommy said. "You still have power, remember? You can still fight. You won't have to stand by every time your friends go into battle, knowing you can't do anything to
help. You—you and the rest—think you can just keep me around and everything will be okay.”

"So you're just ready to give up. But let's forget about any powers for just a minute. What about us, Tommy?" She swallowed, her voice becoming thick with unshed tears. "Don't I matter to you? Aren't I worth sticking around for? After all we've gone through? After all I've forgiven you?"

His sardonic look vanished, and Kimberly was horrified to see the haunted look again.

"I'm sorry, Kimberly, but I can't be okay for you."

"That's not fair."

"No, it's not." He almost smiled. "I told you before... I'm not a good guy."

Before she could retort, he grabbed his bags and left the room.

The kitchen below practically hummed with the tense silence. Billy purposefully looked away when Tommy entered the room. They'd already had it out when Billy tried to give back his communicator. There was nothing left to say. Billy too had accused him of running away, of not caring about his family and his friends. Billy had said he understood, that when he was in the hospital he'd nearly given up.

All Tommy could think about was who had put him in the hospital in the first place, just to break his confidence and to make him give up the power.

And there was Sylvia. How would she feel if she knew that Billy's attacker was finally getting his just desserts?

And there was his father.

Penn, perhaps sensing that her presence was making this all harder, jumped up from the table. "All packed, then? I'll wait out in the car." She shouldered one of Tommy's bags, as if forcing him not to back out at the last minute.

Tommy kept looking at his father. "I'm sorry, Dad. You... you know why I'm leaving."

"I know why you think you're leaving," John said wearily. "That's all I can say."

Tommy shifted, uncomfortable at the stare that he always knew could see right through him and his bullshit. "I'll call... on the road... when I can. And I'll try to come back for the wedding."

"I know," was all John could say.

Tommy walked over and pulled his dad in to a hug. His dad clasped him painfully, as if he never wanted to let go. Which he didn't, of course, and Tommy knew that. Tommy bit back a sob. In one crystallized moment, he understood exactly what he was doing to everyone. For a few fleeting seconds, he hesitated.

But he had to do this. He knew he did. As gently as he could, he pulled away from his father.

John was holding back tears. "I love you, Tommy."

"I love you, too, Dad," Tommy said, trying with his eyes to convey all of his guilt and regret to his father. The things he couldn't say without it tearing him apart.

With one last parting glance at those who could have been his family, he left before he could change
Billy left his mother to do what she could for John and went upstairs. Kimberly was sitting on Tommy's bed, holding her knees and crying.

She looked up. "I'm so stupid. I wanted to stop him leaving, but…"

Billy sat down next to her and let her head rest on his shoulder. "His mind was made up to go, anyway. No one could have stopped him."

Billy felt Kimberly nod against his shoulder. If Rita wanted to break them, Billy reflected, she was doing a fine job of it.

Rita watched the car pull away from the house and head on to the highway.

For a few insane moments, she considered sending Putties down to attack the car. Or to just blast at the car with her wand. Something to throw some damage his way. To hurt him and keep him from trying to escape her.

The escape attempt was laughable in itself. She was on the moon, after all. The whole of the Earth was accessible to her. She simply centered her attacks on a small town on the western coast of one continent because that was where Zordon and the Power Rangers based their operations. She had to defeat them first before taking the rest of the planet.

Leaving Angel Grove would not save him. It would possibly make him more vulnerable, as his friends were no longer within easy reach to save him.

It would be so simple to be rid of one human forever…

"To hell with him," she muttered under her breath. She swept out of her telescope room. "Finster! Bring out your monster plans!"

The five Rangers sat around a table at Ernie's. Jason and Zack had cancelled their class. Trini had brought her workout gear, but she hadn't done anything about it.

"So he just left?" Zack said. He didn't realize it was the third time he'd said it.

"Just like that," Kimberly said in a hollow voice. She sounded like she had used up all her emotions, and all that was left was a dull shell.

Trini was watching her two best friends carefully. Her eyes reflected her frantic struggle to find something to say to comfort them, but she was obviously afraid of saying the wrong thing.

"It's not completely unexpected," Billy said. "After all, his mother did make the offer before… this happened. He just said he would never go with her. But that was before…"

Before. The word seemed to echo among the group. They could clearly remember their group before the green candle. Before they had lost a sixth of themselves. What they couldn't remember clearly was their time before he had gotten there, before they had even heard about the Green Ranger. With his absence, superficially, it seemed like nothing had changed… that he had never been there. Deep down… they couldn't do that. He had changed them… their group… irrevocably. It was like a missing beat.
"We can't blame him," Jason said softly, speaking for the first time.

The group looked at him. He was staring at a point in front of him, a haunted look reminiscent of Tommy's on his face.

"He didn't give up his powers," Jason said, his voice low so that no one else could hear. "They were forced from him. I… failed him. He trusted me to keep them safe, and I couldn't even do that. Why should he trust me to keep him safe now that he doesn't have powers?"

They opened their mouths for the familiar protests, that he was not to blame, etc. He waved them off.

"He'll come back if he wants to. In the meantime… we keep fighting."

But the dull defeat in Jason's voice belied his words. Rita had beaten one of them… utterly. And there was nothing they could do about it.
Trini closed her eyes and breathed the cold air... or the coldest air they were going to get in Southern California, anyway. The sun was out and her senses seemed to open up to all of nature. The park was alive with voices and activity, but it was excited and harmonious. Not the usual yells and explosions of battle she frequently experienced in this park. She smiled. This was what the first day of Christmas holidays was supposed to be.

"Ma'am?" Came a timid voice, and she felt a hand pulling at her jacket.

Trini frowned at the "ma'am," but she couldn't help but smile at the little girl holding up a trash bag that was twice her size.

"Where am I supposed to put this?" The girl held the bag up.

Trini pointed to the edge of the park with her pointed stick, a piece of paper hanging from the end of it. "Over there. That's where it will be separated for recycling."

The girl nodded. "Thanks! I can't believe how littered this place was. I have this whole bag and it doesn't look like I touched anything."

Trini sighed. "That's the way it usually is, unfortunately. The important thing is to keep working at it."

But the girl was already gone, obviously wanting to join her friends. Trini smiled as the girl ran. She was so glad that kids her age cared about the environment. She'd seen so many older people just give up.

Speaking of...

She glanced around for it seemed the millionth time, looking for her friends. This time, though, she was rewarded. Zack was running up to her, trailing a bag and a stick behind him.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "Good turnout. I nearly got trampled by a boy scout troop."

"Watch out for them," Trini said, her mouth quirked up. "I've already had to break up a stick sword fight among them."

He laughed. "Come on, Trini. That's one of the great joys of being a kid." He brandished the stick as a weapon, but stopped at Trini's stern look. "But, of course, fake fighting is not as much fun after getting into real fights."

One of the head volunteers, holding an authoritative clipboard, walked by, so Trini and Zack started actually picking up trash.
As they worked, Trini decided to carefully broach the subject. "So… when did the others say…?"
Zack shot her a look.
Trini's face fell. "They're not coming, are they?"
"What, and break out of the sinking holes of depression they've been wallowing in?" Zack gave one sharp, bitter laugh that didn't suit him.
Trini jabbed at a crushed can with far more force than necessary. The day was starting to lose its charm.
"I sense a break in the usual Trini calm," Zack said. He sighed. "You know why…"
"Oh, yes, I know why," Trini said. Her own bitterness was starting to show, and she didn't like it. "I know exactly why. One word."
They didn't need to say it. They were thinking the same thing.
She jabbed again at the ground, completely missing the paper she was aiming for. It floated away in a sudden breeze, and Trini allowed it to blow away rather than chase it down. "And I know they all have good reasons. Jason's still bummed that he couldn't save Tommy's powers, Billy is having family drama because of it, not to mention that he was really close to Tommy to begin with, and Kimberly sort of thinks he dumped her and also thinks she pushed him away."
"And in the meantime, they're really depressing to be around," Zack said.
The two looked at each other. Neither of them wanted to say it, but…
"You're really sick of it, aren't you?" Trini said.
"Oh, God, yes," Zack said. "You?"
Trini looked down, the guilt already forming on Zack's face for the seemingly selfish admission mirrored in her own thoughts. "I—I really feel sympathy for all of them, and I've especially tried to be supportive to Kimberly and Billy. I mean, I've eaten the ice cream and watched the science fiction…"
"Wait," Zack said with a grin, "which one is which?"
Trini shot him a withering look. "But," she said with emphasis, "it's been weeks. And I'm exhausted. And it doesn't look like there's an end in sight. I mean, I'm not being selfish, am I? I'm really worried about all of them. If they don't break out of this sometime…"
"You don't have to tell me," Zack said. "I've gone through all this with Jason… minus the ice cream and science fiction." He scowled. "But it's just getting worse. He bailed on teaching our class this week and didn't even tell me. I feel like I'm covering for him all the time."
"You know you have," Trini said softly.
Zack looked up. "So you noticed?"
"You haven't been advertising it, but, yes, I've noticed that you're taking charge during monster attacks… when Jason hasn't."
Zack shrugged. "Not that the monsters have been stellar. Rita is definitely off her game."
"Remember the last time Rita put us through a lame attack? The last time we fought Pudgy Pig?"

Trini made a face at the memory of that particular monster.

"Yeah," Zack said. "Right before Rita nearly destroyed us with an evil Power Ranger. I get your point."

"And it was Jason that pointed out the lameness of Rita's attack that time," Trini said, lowering her voice as a group walked past them. "He had us patrolling hot spots, and he was complaining that we weren't taking Rita seriously enough. Has he been doing that now?"

"I guess he'd have to pay attention to the fight to notice," Zack grumbled. He kicked at a can before spearing it. "Zordon's worried. And I'm thinking if he decides Jason is no longer a fit leader, he's going to pick me to take his place, and I really don't want to lead."

"And Billy, on the other hand, won't stop working," Trini said. "Even when Zordon tells him to go home, Billy just holes himself up in his garage."

Even with the sun, the day seemed gloomy. Trini could no longer see the beauty of nature. All she could see was the trash on the ground.

Zack, though, was staring at a message board, where half of the fliers had migrated to the ground. Apartment rentals, cars for sale, lost pets, and alien attack warnings pasted the board in almost fossilized layers, barely protected by a small roof from the rain. The newest, most brightly colored poster hung dead center, and that was what Zack was staring at.

"Trini," he said, grinning, "I think I know of a way to cheer everyone up."

"Finster, I believe this is your finest work to date."

"Thank you, my Queen," Finster said. He was adjusting the settings on a panel connected to a large box, prominently displayed in the middle of the throne room. "I must say, I'm particularly pleased with the outcome, especially since technology of this sort is not exactly my specialty."

"You're too modest, Finster," Rita said. "After all, used correctly this machine could prove more effective than any of your clay monsters. And with just the right amount of magic to make the connections…"

Scorpina stared blankly at the machine. "It's fabulous! What's it do, by the way? And what does this have to do with wherever you sent the two fools? Unless, of course, you think you can't trust me with that information."

Rita sighed. "Scorpina, do try to stop being such a wet blanket. We've been over this. You experienced a perfectly understandable lapse in judgment… and it isn't as if the temptation is still there. And we will begin as soon as Goldar gets here."

"I'm here, Empress." Goldar entered the room. Scorpina noticed that Goldar had finally finished the repairs to his armor. He was finally starting to look like his old self. "And did I hear those idiots Squatt and Baboo correctly?"

"You did indeed, Goldar," Rita said. "But first, before we get into any of that… I'll let Finster introduce his innovation."
Finster was fussing with the machine and seemed surprised to be put on the spot. "It's quite a simple device, actually. It is designed to collect and store psychic energy, and then actualize it into a usable energy source."

"Psychic energy," Scorpina said flatly. "What are we talking about… brain waves? Emotions?"

"In a manner of speaking."

Scorpina laughed. "And I was starting to get excited. I've seen experiments done with this, and the one flaw with psychic energy source is that it's not reliable. People change their emotions faster than any machine can compensate, and the energy expended collecting and compensating is more than the intake. It needs a much bigger and more stable energy base than any one person can provide."

Finster had drawn himself up against these criticisms. "I assure you, I am perfectly aware of the technology and drawbacks of previous experiments. But you have never seen my design, and you have never seen it paired with Queen Rita's magic, I assure you."

Goldar was nodding slowly. "With a large enough group of people, and with their emotions pushed in the right direction…"

"Precisely," Rita said. "Do you have anything else to say, Scorpina?"

"Yes," Scorpina said, unperturbed by the smug amusement in Rita's voice. "First off, this is a battery, not a weapon. Secondly, what about interference? You can isolate your power source all you want, but the battery itself will be fueled by everyone in the near proximity. How are you going to compensate for, say, the Power Rangers' teen-angst emotions?"

"Why, Scorpina," Rita said, "that's precisely what started me on this idea in the first place."

Scorpina looked at Goldar. "Translate, please."

"Despair," Goldar said simply. "The Rangers' own despair will fuel the instrument of their destruction. The more they despair, the more they will lose, and the more they will despair."

"Of course," Finster said absently, "since using their emotions would probably not prove stable, we will have a more stable power source to act as a base."

Scorpina raised her eyebrows. "And this instrument of their destruction…?"

There was a crash outside, and the sound of falling rocks.

"What the hell?" Scorpina mumbled, used to the absolute silence of the moon.

They ran to the balcony. The usual view of the moonscape and the Earth in the distance was blocked, though. Outside stood a huge… Zord? It was white, person-shaped, with red diamonds, one eye, and a horn on its head.

"Why is there a Zord hovering next to the window?" Scorpina asked weakly. "Should we be worried?"

"The Power Rangers have… Zords," Rita said. "I prefer to call it a battle machine."

"And it's mine," Goldar said proudly. "Up until this moment, I've kept it under the Moon Palace. It was lacking a power source that would serve for combat."

"So…" Rita turned to Scorpina, "any other objections?"
Scorpina stared at the battle machine, watching Squatt and Baboo clamber down from the cockpit. "Okay, now I'm impressed," she said with a grin. "When do we begin?"

It was several days later. The park had been made clean and pristine by the clean-up groups, though it would not stay that way for long. And, for once, Trini found she didn't care that much.

A single, huge banner stretched across the entrance of the park – a banner emblazoned with the words "Power Rangers Day."

The five teens faced the entrance, intimidated by the entire concept.

"I'll admit," Jason said, "I didn't really believe it until now."

Kimberly was looking past the entrance. "I think a rainbow exploded in there."

Zack pushed forward and beckoned them onward. "Come on, guys! This is supposed to be fun! We can check out the booths until we have to put in our appearance."

The other Rangers reluctantly followed. Past the entrance they could see the displays and booths better. The park was set up like a giant midway, with a stage in the middle where they supposed they were expected to show up, morphed, later that day. The colors of the Power Rangers were splashed everywhere in booths, flags, costumes, T-shirts, balloons…

"It seems a bit crass, doesn't it?" Billy looked pointedly at the balloons that looked like Power Ranger helmets being sold next to the Power Ranger colored cotton candy. Or, at least, pink, blue, and yellow cotton candy that was passing as Power Ranger colors.

"It's for charity," Trini answered. "And it doesn't matter if it's a little… cheesy. It's all in good fun."

Jason was staring at the group of martial artists dressed as Power Rangers and Putties, obviously about to start a show. "I gotta see that. Who's coming?"

"Are you kidding?" Zack said. "I smell food, and it's about to drive me crazy."

In the end, they all split up. The booths sprawled outwards in every direction. There was food, arts and crafts, T-shirts, games… and just simply booths collecting for various organizations.

Billy wandered to a booth put together by the local community college and amused himself with looking at diagrams of scientific theories for how the Power Rangers technology worked. He looked at the boy manning the booth. "If the Power Rangers are robots themselves, why would they pilot larger robots if the technology exists to instantaneously enlarge combatants?"

The boy shrugged. "Beats me. I think the Power Rangers are aliens anyway."

Billy smirked and read on. That was a rumor they'd spread deliberately. It was good that it had stuck.

Jason watched the highly choreographed fight between the "Rangers" and the "Putties." The guy playing himself had an annoying habit of striking poses after every move. That couldn't be what people thought of him. He laughed at one particularly cheesy heroic pose.
"Hey." Zack walked up behind Jason, holding a hot dog, a couple of brownies covered in cellophane, a caramel apple, and a bag full of popcorn.

Jason raised his eyebrows. "Got enough there?"

Zack shot him a look. "I was hungry." He paused. "And I was going to share." He stuffed the brownies in his pockets.

"Sure you were," Jason smirked.

"So, is the fighting good?" Zack said.

Jason shrugged. "Decent. But we don't do those stupid poses, do we?"

"Course not!" Zack said through a mouthful of hotdog. "We woulda noticed."

The "Putties" on the stage disappeared, and Jason and Zack winced when the exhibition fighters dressed as them decided to mix in dialogue.

"They're running away!" the "Pink Ranger" said, giving a little cheerleader-like skip. Her voice was high and breathy.

Jason laughed under his breath. "Good thing Kim's not here to see this."

Zack just laughed, inwardly sighing with relief. This was the first time Jason had truly laughed in weeks.

"We have saved the Earth once again," the "Blue Ranger" exclaimed… in a voice that was far, far too deep.

"All thanks to our mysterious, alien powers!" the "Yellow Ranger" said in an even deeper voice.

"Dude," Zack whispered, "do they have a guy playing the Yellow Ranger?"

By now it was all they could do to keep from bursting from laughter.

"And all thanks to the power of love and friendship!" the "Black Ranger" said in an earnest voice.

"That was so lame. No fair!" Zack said.

Jason was nearly falling down with laughter. "At least they got one of us right," he said in a low voice.

"Just wait," Zack said. "You're up next."

"Indeed, fellow Power Rangers," the "Red Ranger" said, putting his hands on his hips and facing the audience. His voice was annoyingly heroic. "With love, friendship, good study habits, and flossing, we have once again defeated the evil space witch. We will now go to our secret base orbiting the Earth so that we can resume our secret identities. For only as civilians can we save the environment, feed hungry orphans, and make social changes through nonviolent means."

Jason and Zack stared at each other.

"Nothing like us," Zack said.

"Not at all," Jason agreed.
"But wait!" the "Blue Ranger" exclaimed. "Something is wrong here! I feel a new power rising!"

"I feel it, too!" The "Pink Ranger" grew even breathier.

"We've never felt this much evil before!" exclaimed the Darth-Vader-esque "Yellow Ranger."

A forced evil laugh came from a cloaked figure just off stage.

"Who are you?" the "Black Ranger" said.

The figure threw off his coat dramatically to reveal… "It is I, the evil Green Ranger! And I will defeat you, Power Rangers, for my evil Space Empress demands it!"

Zack bit back a curse. He felt Jason freeze up beside him.

"You will NOT defeat us!" the "Red Ranger" exclaimed. "We will defeat you and convince you to come to the side of good!"

"You are foolish, Power Rangers!" the "Green Ranger" said, striking a pose. "I am more powerful than all of you. I and my sidekicks Golden Monkey and Scorpion Lady will defeat you once and for all!"

Sure enough, bad caricatures of Goldar and Scorpina showed up by his side. What followed was a surprising accurate portrayal of the first battle with the Green Ranger, except with the "Green Ranger" defeating all of them in turn.

"Come on, Power Rangers!" the "Red Ranger" exclaimed as the fighters repositioned. "We have to band together to defeat the evil Green Ranger and save him from his wicked ways. We have the power of love and friendship on our side!"

The fighters lined up for the next part of the choreography, and of course this time the "Power Rangers" vanquished their enemies.

"Run away!" Golden Monkey and Scorpion Lady yelled, running off stage.

"You have vanquished me!" the "Green Ranger" yelled. "Now I understand that I should work for the side of good! You have saved me!"

Zack was already pulling Jason away from the stage. "Come on… there's gotta be something else around here.

Jason allowed himself to be led. His face was already regaining the same strained look he'd had for weeks. "They make it seem so easy, don't they?"

Zack looked around, desperate for a distraction. He spotted Kimberly and figured that was good enough.

"Hey, Kim!"

Kimberly turned around. She was eating a red Popsicle with a Ranger helmet design on the side.

The guy stared at her. "Is it just me, or does that look really wrong," Zack said.

"It's not just you," Jason said.

Kimberly glared at their smirks. "Okay, you guys are sick. And what the hell is with this Pink
Ranger fetish anyway? Why isn't there a Yellow Ranger fetish?"

"I think people think the Yellow Ranger is a guy," Jason said.

"Well, it's not fair, anyway. Just because… she wears pink and a skirt, she gets all the exaggerated drawings?"

"Exaggerated drawings?" Zack said. "Where?"

The boys rushed past Kimberly to trace back her steps. Kimberly glared at the retreating figures.

She sighed as they disappeared in the crowd. The joy of the day seemed to be draining away. She threw away her Popsicle and wandered, willing the minutes to tick by so they could make their appearance and get out of there.

It wasn't that she didn't appreciate the… appreciation. It was amazing that the people of Angel Grove had banded together to honor the local heroes, especially when the news tended to exaggerate losses, property damage, the few civilian injuries, and disturbing theories. It was nice to be celebrated.

But it didn't really feel like it was them being celebrated, she thought as she looked around at the costumes and balloons. Angel Grove was celebrating some Power Rangers that didn't really exist. Power Rangers that always won, had no problems, and never faced any hard, moral choices. It was like a good and evil melodrama acted out on a stage. She wondered if that was really what it looked like to everyone: brightly-colored, masked heroes fighting grotesque monsters.

That had to have been what it looked like. It wasn't like other people could see behind their masks, or could tell how many times they'd almost died recently, or what they sacrificed to do this, or what they'd lost…

Tommy hadn't called. Not once.

Kimberly's stomach clenched up, as it always did when she thought of this. Billy had told her Tommy called his dad every few days, but that was it. He hadn't talked to any of his friends, or former friends, Kimberly thought ruefully.

She hadn't realized the last time they'd talked was breaking up.

That's what it had to be. Boyfriends didn't just stop calling and disappear from town and stay boyfriends.

But why would he even want to talk to her after what she'd said…

Kimberly felt the tears spill, and she dashed around for a bathroom. She ran into the park's public restrooms to wash her face before she got too blotchy.

After splashing her face, she noticed that Trini was at the far end of the row of mirrors. She was…

"Hey, Trini," Kimberly called out, relieved that her voice and face didn't show her lapse in control. "Whatcha doing?"

Trini had been pushing at the sides of her chest, looking at the effect in a mirror. She stopped with a squeak and put her arms behind her back. "Nothing."

Kimberly, however, spotted the flyer on the sink: "Yellow Ranger: Chick or Dude?". "You know," Kimberly said gently, "they're not going to grow by pushing at them."
"I know that," Trini snapped, but then she relaxed. "Sorry. It's just... why don't I get a skirt?"

Kimberly put an arm around her, leading her out of the bathroom. "Does it really matter all that much? I mean, at least you don't have shipping wars over you pairing you with the other Rangers."

"You'd be surprised..." Trini said. "Anyway, you have yet to see the most entertaining booth yet."

"Not the one with the drawings," Kimberly groaned.

"Of course not," Trini said. "Much more interesting than that."

Trini led them to a particular makeshift booth, but one that was surrounded by people. Kimberly tried to see over heads, but to no avail. She had to wait her turn. Finally, the crowd cleared enough to see the inside of the booth: Bulk and Skull, with a banner over them advertizing "The Great Secret Identity Guess Contest."

"Kimberly!" Skull greeted her. He'd gotten much friendlier towards her ever since Tommy had left. "Wanna cast a vote? Only a fifty cents donation."

Kimberly glanced behind the two, where each Ranger color was displayed with names listed underneath each.

"Isn't Arnold Schwarzenegger too busy to be the Red Ranger?" Trini commented.

"He was a write-in," Skull shrugged.

"What's up with Bulk?" Kimberly said. Bulk was slumped over the booth, boredly sorting slips of paper.

Skull shot him a glance before lowering his voice. "He... sorta didn't realize the money was for charity. He just found out."

"Ah," Kimberly said. "I see you included the Green Ranger." She found that she could talk about him easier this time. "Thought you hated him."

"Dude saved our lives," Skull replied. "I don't know what changed him, or where he's gone now, but I think saving me from a giant candle monster makes up for shooting me that one time."

Trini decided to turn the conversation to safer ground. "Yeah, well, somehow I doubt that the Green Ranger, or any of the Rangers, is Jean-Claude Van Damme, Bill Clinton, or Ernie from the Juice Bar."

Bulk perked up at this. "Ah, but have they ever been photographed together. It's always the ones you least expect, remember?"

Kimberly laughed lightly. "You're right. It could be any one of us. Good luck with the booth, guys."

They walked away, leaving Bulk and Skull to argue the possibilities of an actor having the time to be a superhero.

"Seems like the Green Ranger is the big star today," Kimberly said, keeping her voice light. "Practically every other booth has something about him."

"Yeah..." Trini said carefully. "He's the big mystery, after all. And he sort of has a subculture following. Some girls in black lipstick were going on about how dark and complicated he was."
"If you like that sort of thing," Kimberly said absently.

Trini cast her a worried look, and this time Kimberly noticed.

"Okay, truce," Kim said. "You promise to stop walking on eggshells around me and I promise to
stop talking incessantly about him… and, you know, moping about."

"I didn't mean…"

Kimberly smiled. "I know you didn't. I've been stupid lately… letting myself be depressed over a
guy. If he comes back, maybe we can work things out. If he doesn't… I have my own life to lead.
And…" She checked her watch. "I think it's time to meet the guys at the entrance."

"All right," Trini said, "it's a promise. But that doesn't mean I'm not here for you any time you need."

Their communicators beeped.

"All right, we're coming," Kimberly hissed into her communicator.

"It's not that," Jason said over the speaker. "We've got a Putty attack across town. Meet us there."


Goldar smirked as the Power Rangers met the Putty attack promptly. "That should keep them busy,"
he muttered. "Empress Rita, the Power Rangers have left the crowd at the park."

At that moment, Squatt and Baboo teleported back into the throne room. "We did it, Empress Rita!"
Squatt crowed.

"All those little sensors are in place, just where you said."

"The humans thought we were in costume."

"Good boys," Rita said, hurrying to the telescope. "Scorpina, report!" she barked.

Scorpina walked into the throne room. "The lower dungeon is fitted up and secure. And I hope you
have something better for me to do than to wire up a cell."

"All in good time," Rita said under her breath. "Now, Finster," she called to him in his lab, "as soon
as it registers a charge, initiate teleportation."

Without warning, the Putties disappeared.

"Hey!" Zack said. "I wasn't done with them yet."

Jason's eyes were wide. "This isn't good," he said. "This was just a distraction. Let's get to the
Command Center."

As soon as they teleported in, the blaring warning klaxons assaulted their ears.

"Rangers," Zordon said, and the Rangers were surprised to hear a note of panic in his voice,
"something dreadful happened as soon as you left the park. Behold the Viewing Globe."

They crowded around the globe. It showed overhead scenes of the Power Rangers Day at the park. There were the booths, balloons, paper… and no people.

"Wait a minute," Zack said. "A few minutes ago, that place was jammed. Where did they all go?"

"It was a distraction," Trini said. "I thought it was weird that the Putties didn't attack the festival."

Billy was already at the controls with Alpha. "Have you been able to get a lock on where they went, Alpha?"

"No, Billy," Alpha said mournfully. "They could be anywhere."

"They could be at the Moon Palace," Kimberly pointed out. "I mean, we pretty much know Rita took them."

"But we can't know that they're at the Moon Palace for sure," Jason said darkly. "We can't just assume that." He frowned. "Do we know how many people were at the festival?"

"It had to be in the hundreds," Trini said. "And a lot of them were kids." She looked up at Zordon. "Why did Rita take them? If she wants them for ransom…"

"Don't you think teleporting all of them is a little bit overkill?" Zack said. "I mean, she could be pissed off that they're celebrating us."

"Or she could be building that monster army she was planning," Kimberly added.

"It could be any number of reasons," Zordon said. "Unless we can find the missing peoples’ location, we may not know until Rita makes her purposes known to us."

"It's not going to come to that."

The Rangers looked at Jason, who, for the first time in weeks, was focused and in command.

"I'm tired of Rita playing us like pawns," Jason continued, "so we're going to figure out what she's up to before she has a chance to manipulate us. We know that Rita can't just teleport whoever she likes. There are safeguards against that. So she must have used something to teleport that many people that quickly. And whatever she used could still be in the area. We'll need to search the park."

"We might also be able to trace the teleportation signature from the ground level," Billy said excitedly. "I've got some components in my lab. I'll meet you…"

"We'll go together, all of us," Jason said. "I don't want Rita catching us separated."

"Alpha and I will continue our investigations up here," Zordon said. "Report back as soon as you know something."

"And if Rita contacts, give us a buzz," Jason said. "Let's do this. Billy's lab first."

One moment, Bulk and Skull were tallying up votes. Because of the popularity of their booth, the mayor had asked them to present the "winners" of the voting in the lead-up to the Power Rangers' appearance.
Now, however, they were shoved into a dark, dank room with what seemed like half of Angel Grove. And that crowd was not happy.

People yelled and shoved. Children screamed. It was all Bulk and Skull could do to keep on their feet.

"Bulky?" Skull said, trying to make himself heard over the din. "This wasn't supposed to happen, was it?"

"No, doofus, I don't think the city was planning to throw us all in a dungeon," Bulk growled.

"Good," Skull said. "Wait... not good. Cuz that means we've been kidnapped."

Bulk was about to retort when a sharp whistle pierced the air. The crowd stopped yelling to look for the source of the noise. Finally, all eyes found Mr. Kaplan, who was standing on a small platform at the head of the room.

"People of Angel Grove," he said in his best principal voice, "please do not panic. We have a lot of children in here, and we don't want anyone to get trampled."

"What's happened to us, Mr. Kaplan?" a teenager's voice yelled.

"Yeah!" an older man called out. "Where are we?"

The crowd started to murmur again, some yelling out questions, but Mr. Kaplan expertly silenced the room. "Where we are, we can only guess. We can only assume that we have been taken prisoner by Rita Repulsa, the enemy of the Power Rangers. If this is the case, and it probably is, we can be assured that we will be saved by the Power Rangers."

"But what if they don't?" a woman yelled.

A burly man shoved to the front. "What, we're just going to sit here and wait to be saved? Let's take the fight to them!"

A few people in the crowd yelled their agreement.

Skull looked at Bulk. "Most of these people have never actually faced a monster, have they?"

"Yeah, no kidding," Bulk agreed.

Mr. Kaplan, despite the opposition, still had control of the room. "I would usually be the first to head up an attack against our kidnappers. But it's too risky. First off, we're locked in a place that might not even be on Earth. Second, there are too many children here who could get hurt. We have to rely on the Power Rangers. We can't risk ourselves and have the Power Rangers' efforts be all in vain."

"Rely on the Power Rangers," the burly man said sarcastically. "You mean the ones who couldn't even save the people who were celebrating them from being kidnapped?"

There were several yells against the man, but also several yells in agreement.

"This is so lame!" Bulk said furiously. "A few minutes ago everyone loved the Power Rangers. Now people are blaming them for us being kidnapped?"

"Yeah, this is lame," Skull repeated darkly.

Mr. Kaplan looked around furiously. "Now, let me tell you all something. I was there the day of the
attack on the high school. The Power Rangers visited me the night before, and I helped them install security in the high school so we could protect the students. I saw them fight with no regard for their own safety to protect all those students. Not only did the Power Rangers save everyone, but they healed the students who were injured. Now you cannot tell me the Power Rangers aren't doing everything in their power to save us. I have faith in the Power Rangers. We all must have faith in the Power Rangers."

While he was talking to increased encouraging shouts, a large screen flickered to life. A woman in a pink dress with an elaborate conical headdress filled the screen. At the end of the speech, with a flick of her hand, Mr. Kaplan was struck with a bolt of green energy from out of nowhere. He fell, insensible, and was caught the crowd standing near him.

The crowd yelled in shocked anger.

"Oh, don't worry, puny humans," Rita said, her voice easily silencing the crowd. "I have not killed your spokesman. He's going to sleep for a bit," she smirked, "while I tell you exactly why the Power Rangers will not save you."

Bulk was looking furiously around at the crowd, infuriated by the sudden calm that had swept over them. They were looking at the screen, entranced. "What's come over everyone?" he muttered to Skull. "Just because we're not going to fight back doesn't mean we have to listen to the witch."

Skull was not listening to Bulk. He was staring glass-eyed at the screen.

Bulk glanced to the screen, preparing the tell Skull off… and he forgot everything but what the woman on the screen was saying.
The Rangers teleported behind Billy’s house and raced around for the side entrance to the garage. Billy's advanced security on his lab prevented them from just teleporting in.

They were about to run in when Billy stopped, his hand hovering over the doorknob.

"What's wrong?" Trini said.

Billy squinted over the frame around the doorknob. "The lock's been forced."

The teens looked at each other significantly.

"There's only one way to find out," Jason said.

They cautiously entered the lab, ready for anything.

What they found was Scorpina, sitting on the edge of a table, wearing human clothes and eating steadily through a package of Oreos.

"Hi!" she said brightly to their stunned faces. "Took you guys long enough. We knew you'd probably have to make a pit-stop here."

"What are you doing here, Scorpina?" Jason said. He took a few threatening steps closer to her.

Scorpina rolled her eyes. "I'm not here to fight, and I doubt Billy over there would appreciate having his lab smashed up over a pointless battle."

Billy held up a restraining hand to Jason.

Jason backed off, frowning. "I'd still like to know what you're doing here. Why did you break into Billy's lab?"

"Didn't want to break in," Scorpina said through a mouthful of Oreo. "I dressed as a human to get your mom to invite me in all nice and peaceable, and then I was just going to wait here. But then your mom wasn't home, so I had to force the door."

"Are those Oreos from my kitchen?" Billy said tightly.

Scorpina looked at the package, and then looked back at them. "What, you're surprised? I got hungry while I was waiting for you. Got bored with just staring at what you call a lab. By the way, Blue Ranger… you don't want to have those two things so close together." She pointed with a cookie to two innocuous-looking machines on a table across from her.

"Why not?" Billy said.
Scorpina shrugged. "It's on you if your whole house blows up." She smirked. "You've got a lot of dangerous stuff just lying about. If I were you, I'd learn what some of this stuff was before you go salvaging it from the Command Center."

"I know what I'm doing," Billy said with a glare.

"Suit yourself."

Billy still glared, but he did separate the two components, putting them at opposite sides of the room.

"Speaking of dangerous things lying about," Jason said, looking pointedly, "I'll ask a third time before it comes to blows… what the hell are you doing here?"

Scorpina put down the Oreos and brushed her hands against her clothes. The Rangers tensed up for any possible attacks, but she merely stayed on the table, swinging her legs. "I'm here to give a message, straight from Rita."

"And that message is?"

"We're not asking for ransom."

The Rangers stared at her, but she only stared back, declining further explanation.

"What do you mean, you're not asking for ransom?" Kimberly challenged. "Why kidnap all those people then?"

Scorpina smirked. "Wouldn't you like to know," she said mockingly.

"If you think," Zack snarled, "that you can just take a whole bunch of civilians and we won't do anything about it, you've got another thing coming."

"Oh, we expect you to do something about it. That's why we've set up such good safeguards against anything you can think of to recover them," Scorpina said. She got up and walked slowly around the room as she was talking, fingering idly all the things on the shelves. This time Jason had to restrain Billy's protective efforts.

"I'm not telling you not to try to recover the civilians," Scorpina said idly. "I know we can do little to stop your efforts on that line. I'm just saying that there's no way to bargain with us for these people. You see, this is not a personal attack. I know we've been doing all sorts of psychological warfare and… what did Tommy call it… personal attacks." She smirked at the effect produced of merely mentioning the missing Ranger. "But that's not what this is all about. This is a physical attack, pure and simple. You can look for the missing people all you want, but make sure you're ready for the fight to come. It will be your last." She had made her way to the door through her whole speech, and her hand was on the doorknob. She regarded them one last time. "Oh, and if we see any of you trespassing at the Moon Palace, you will be killed immediately." She looked at Jason, and this time there was real anger in her voice. "That's for our own protection."

She left, closing the door behind her. Zack and Trini rushed out after her, but she'd already teleported.

Zack glanced around the room. Billy was fidgeting with his various devices, obviously spooked by what Scorpina had said about dangerous items. Kimberly was staring down at the ground. And Jason… had obviously lost his focus. He was staring at where Scorpina had left the room, his face paler at her words. Zack wondered what that last look Scorpina had given had meant, to affect Jason so much.
Zack sighed inwardly. "Billy, we came here for a tracking device."

"Affirmative," Billy said after a surprised look.

Trini cast Zack a significant look before going to help Billy.

Zack, in the meantime, focused on Jason and Kimberly. "Well, that was weird," he said.

Jason looked up, also looking like he'd been startled out of a reverie. "What was weird?"

Zack rolled his eyes. "What wasn't? Okay, so we knew that Scorpina likes to play dress-up and has a weird obsession with snack food. What was actually weird was what she was doing here in the first place. I mean, Rita's never taken the time to explain to us her intentions unless she wants something out of it. So why send one of her warriors down here just to tell us that she's not going to ask for a ransom?"

Kimberly shrugged. "Could be she just wanted to spook us? I mean, showing up in Billy's lab and everything…"

"Good thing that didn't work," Zack said.

The others missed the sarcasm.

"Or maybe Scorpina was just bored," Jason said dismissively. "Look, we just need to track where the civilians are, and then we can worry about Rita's plans. We can't guess at them beforehand anyway."

Zack opened his mouth to debate the issue, to tell Jason that he had everything backwards, but Billy chose that time to hold up his new tracking device, which looked a lot like a hair dryer.

"Ready," he said. "We'll need to be at pretty close range, though. And we'll need to analyze the findings at the Command Center."

"Let's get going, then," Jason said.

Jason, Billy, and Kimberly filed out. Trini paused, as Zack hadn't moved, still looking furious. "I saw what happened," she said in a low voice.

"Oh, how he completely cut me off and didn't want to, you know, strategize or anything like that?" Zack said.

Trini sighed. "Let's just get this done at the park. We can discuss what Scorpina said at the Command Center. I know Zordon will be interested."

Zack followed Trini out. "Yeah, well, no more allowances for his grief or depression or whatever. Next time he acts like that, I'm lettin' him know."

The park was no longer empty, though that didn't mean all the people were back. A huge crowd had gathered around the edges of the park, held back by police tape. The only people that could be spotted in the center of the park were policemen, conducting some sort of investigation.

"Maybe we should have morphed," Kimberly said under her breath.
Jason shook his head. "We'd draw too much attention of the wrong sort. Billy, how close do you need to be?"

Billy had hidden the tracking device behind his back, although they knew anyone who knew Billy would not question his having some sort of high-tech device. "I'm not sure. The perimeter of the park might actually be a good place to start taking readings. Rita must have set up a localized field."

"Mayor Thompson, please. You're at risk here."

The Rangers were distracted by a plain-clothes policeman talking to the mayor just inside the police tape. They were speaking in low voices.

"We are all at risk here," the mayor said breezily. She surveyed the deserted festival. "Our alien attackers have proven that they can kidnap large groups of people, so why should the danger be solely situated in this area? I'd rather the people of Angel Grove see me working toward a solution rather than hiding in my office. And on the matter of finding solutions, what have you found out?"

The policeman scratched the back of his head. "As usual in cases like this, there's not much we can do. There's no sign of a struggle, and we know the Power Rangers were fighting Putties near the downtown area." He sighed. "It's like someone just scooped these people off the face of the Earth."

"So we'll have to rely on the Power Rangers," the mayor said. "We'll need to prepare for a monster attack. I don't want anyone else in danger today."

The two wandered out of the Power Rangers' earshot. They looked at each other, hoping the mayor's faith in them was well-placed.

"Huh," Billy said, crouching down near the entrance to the festival.

"What's up?" Jason said.

Billy held up a tiny silver disk.

"That could be anything," Kimberly commented. "Decoration, something from a costume…"

"Except it set all my readings off the charts," Billy said. "I doubt a sequin would do that."

"Oh, thank God!"

The five looked up to see Billy's mother rushing up to them, John Oliver in a wheelchair not far behind. Billy quickly stowed the disk in his pocket and put the tracker behind his back as casually as possible.

"I knew you were all going to be here. I was frantic with worry." She looked pointedly at Billy. "You couldn't have given me a call?"

Billy put on his usual look of wide-eyed innocence he used when he was fudging the truth. "We just found out about it, Mom. I went home, but you weren't there."

"We had just left the park when it happened," Trini said.

John shot them all a look, smiling at the half-truths. "Well, as long as you're all safe. Sylvia, we'd better clear out of here. It doesn't look like the festival is going to resume."

Sylvia turned to leave with John, but she shot them all a hard look. "You kids be careful. I don't want you in the streets if there's a monster attack."
"They'll be fine, Sylvia," John said easily. "They know what to do."

The two left, and the teens felt relief at how John had deftly covered for them.

"How are the readings coming?" Jason asked Billy.

"I think I have all the information I need," Billy said. "At least, as much as I can get without getting spotted."

"Then let's get out of here."

Finster monitored the power levels carefully. Rita was sitting on her throne with her eyes closed, resting.

"My Queen," Finster said, "If your energy is expended, we can delay the attack…"

"No," Rita said harshly. She opened her eyes. They were slightly bleary as she coped with a headache. "This will not be a monster attack, so it will require little of my energy. I will still be able to easily maintain the connection between Cyclopsis and the power source. Now stop fussing over me and report on the power levels."

Finster took one more wary look at Rita, but he knew there was no arguing with her. Not in good health, anyway. "We are nearly at optimal power levels. The group hypnotism is producing a stable level of despair." Finster looked up. "We should be able to attack in minutes."

"Right, then," Rita said. She got up and swept over to her telescope, pushing away the signs of fatigue. "Goldar, report to the throne room," she sent over the comm system.

Scorpina slunk into the throne room. "He'll be here in a minute. He's just running a last check on his toy."

Rita acknowledged Scorpina with an off-hand wave. "I trust you delivered the message?"

"Rangers officially spooked," Scorpina said. "What else you got for me?"

Rita was scrutinizing the Earth through her telescope, noting the Rangers were nowhere to be seen. Probably holed up in their Command Center. "Yes, Scorpina. I want you to guard the prisoners."

Scorpina's face fell. "Really? But… that's incredibly boring."

"Scorpina…" Rita said, danger in her voice. "Let me remind you that you are far from being in my good graces. You will do as I ask until I deem you trustworthy again, or you can leave."

Scorpina closed her eyes, mastering her anger. "I gotcha. And if I see any Power Rangers running about?"

Rita smirked. "Do as you promised. I want to make sure they understand what happens when they trespass, war escalation be damned."

Billy and Alpha worked in tandem, analyzing the readings and the mysterious silver disc.
Trini gave Zack a look, and Zack knew it was time to bring up their strange visit.

"So, Zordon," he said, "you saw that Scorpina was there waiting for us at Billy's lab?"

"I did indeed," Zordon said. "What she said was certainly interesting. What are your thoughts?"

Zack opened his mouth, but Jason cut in. "I think she was just trying to spook us," Jason said. "Just distract us from our mission."

Zack gritted his teeth. "Yeah, but what she actually said was pretty damn important, too. I mean, the last time we got a personal visit from Scorpina, she was arranging for ransom…"

"She said she didn't want ransom…"

"And," Zack said emphatically, "we found out that Tommy was the Green Ranger. So Rita had something else in mind when she sent Scorpina down. Something about the last thing she said."

Zordon frowned. "That was in itself singular. While she would be well within her rights to kill trespassers, that would be a huge escalation of the war. We created the treaty to prevent wholesale fatalities on both sides. The killing of a sentient being must be taken seriously." He paused. "And, of course, the preservations of your lives are of extreme importance." He sounded as if he was afraid he was being insensitive.

Jason was looking away.

"She said something about it being for their protection, though," Trini said slowly. "Like they were concerned with what we might do. But that doesn't make any sense. They're the ones who have threatened our lives."

"But it does show that the civilians are probably on the Moon Palace," Kimberly pointed out. "If that's the case, how can we not go there to rescue them? I think Scorpina was just laying it on thick to keep us from any rescue missions."

Jason was looking away, pointedly ignoring the conversation. "Billy, have you processed the readings yet?"

Billy was frowning. His hands had frozen over the console as he listened to the debate. "It's confirmed. The silver disc is one of several surrounding the park. It's what allowed Rita to teleport all those people out."

"But I don't get it," Zack said. "I thought the Command Center security prevented Rita from teleporting whoever she wanted from Earth. It's all part of the security shield the Command Center generates around Earth that prevents large-scale invasions."

"That would normally be true," Zordon said. "The Morphin Grid itself maintains the security system. However, Rita has proven that she can bypass that preventative measure. She has so far confined herself to one person. Now she has found a way to teleport many people."

Billy didn't comment on the name Zordon chose not to mention. "But she had to expend a lot of effort and energy to do so. These devices not only confined the area of teleportation, but it allowed Rita to only teleport people, rather than the booths and landscape."

"And that's why Rita wanted us out of the picture right then," Trini commented.

Billy nodded. "The good news is that since Rita expended so much energy, we were easily able to
follow those energy signals and trace where the civilians were taken.

"Ay-yi-yi!" Alpha added. "We've tracked the teleportation signal straight to the Moon Palace."

"Of course," Jason said under his breath.

"So that's it," Zack said. "We head for the Moon Palace. I mean, there's only so many places big enough to hold that many people, and Tommy pointed them all out last time."

"That is highly dangerous," Zordon said. "However, as civilian lives are at stake…"

"We're not going to the Moon Palace."

Everyone looked at Jason, who had spoken with surprising vehemence. He was avoiding everyone's gaze, but his mouth was fixed stubbornly.

"But…" Trini said cautiously, "If it's the only way to save the civilians…"

"We're not going and that's final," Jason said. "Zordon, we can find a way to teleport them all out, can't we?"

Zordon was looking at Jason carefully. The others expected Zordon to call Jason on overriding his authority so blatantly, but instead Zordon said, "We can certainly try, Jason. However, I wonder if you are prematurely discounting a rescue mission."

"It's not worth the risk," Jason said. "You heard what Scorpina said. I'm not risking…"

"What are you talking about?" Kimberly said, flaring in anger. "You're saying hundreds of civilian lives aren't worth risking our own lives to save? And, yes, we all heard what Scorpina said. She said they didn't want ransom, and we all know that means they're using the civilians for something else. Like, I don't know, making monsters like they tried during the attack on the high school."

"Rita could be doing anything to them," Billy said. "We can't just assume they're going to be safe. Rita has proven that she doesn't care about hurting civilians."

"And I've already said we're not going to the Moon Palace," Jason said stubbornly. "I don't know why this is still an issue."

"Okay, that's IT!"

Zack had been silent throughout the entire debate. Now, though, he confronted Jason.

"You've been ignoring all of us ever since Scorpina's visit. And I'm sick of it. First you practically bail out on all your responsibilities and I have to cover for you, both in and out of battle, and now you're shooting us all down and even overriding Zordon. You're hiding something, and I want to know what it is."

Jason glared, but was clearly shocked by Zack's outburst. "You're out of line," he said softly.

Zack didn't back down. "What did Scorpina mean, Jason? She said that last comment to you alone. What did she mean about not coming to the Moon Palace?"

"That's none of your business."

"It's all our business when it affects us all!" Zack tensed, prepared to defend himself after his next comment. "Why are you so afraid of going to the Moon Palace?"
The air tensed as they saw Jason clench his fists. Zordon prepared to intervene.

Jason's face, however, grew pale, and his anger dissolved, leaving only a look of misery that shocked the other Rangers.

"I… I…" His face took on a look of panic. "I can't tell you what she means." He turned away from them.

The others were silent. Zack looked both angry and guilty at the sudden turn things had taken.

"Jason," Zordon said, finally breaking into the argument. "I must insist you tell me what happened up there. It is obviously interfering with your ability to perform your duties."

Jason just shook his head, looking past words.

"Jason, that's an order," Zordon said in a gentle but firm voice.

Jason looked up, his eyes red. "You… you said that the death of a sentient life was important. That it could escalate the war."

Zordon nodded slowly, while the other Rangers stood wide-eyed. Alpha absentmindedly dropped the readings he'd been holding.

"I… It was the battle with Goldar. Over… the Green Candle. I was fighting as hard as I could, trying to reach the candle in time." He sounded like he was trying to justify his actions, though the misery in his voice still showed. "I wounded Goldar in the right shoulder. I… I pierced the shoulder with my sword, and then drove the sword up."

Trini grew pale. Zack's face hardened. Both Kimberly and Billy looked sick.

"He thought I didn't know, but… I'd studied his biology in the Command Center records. I knew exactly where his heart was. I… just missed it. But he was bleeding so much. And then when I found out that wasn't the real Green Candle, I kicked his hand away from his wound and drove my foot into it." He looked up, his eyes pleading. "I was trying to find out where the candle was."

"So you tortured and almost killed him," Trini said in a hard voice.

Jason again looked away. He was trembling with the effort of telling what he'd kept from them for weeks.

"And what did you do after that, Jason?" Zordon said, his voice still soft.

"Well…" Jason frowned, "I opened the door to the training room. Finster was right there to patch him up."

Zordon said. "While I will not deny that what you did was rash, you must remember, Jason—and all of you—that you are in a war. Jason was defending the life of a fellow Ranger, for it was a distinct possibility, you remember, that Rita meant to kill Tommy. He had to use more force than usual to achieve his goal. While his actions to retrieve information were not pleasant, he did it to retrieve information, not for retribution. What you must all realize is that you will all be faced with impossible situations, and over time you will gain the wisdom to deal with those situations. What you did, Jason, you felt was necessary at the time, and so it was."

Jason nodded slowly, but he looked slightly less miserable. "But now it looks like Scorpina is holding a grudge against me."
"She probably is. And you will cope with that. But I caution you—and, all of you—not to keep secrets like this. Just like when you were tortured with the memories of the Island of Illusion, secrets like this can destroy the entire group from within. As Zachary said, it's all of our business when it affects all of us."

Jason faced the others. "Guys… I'm really sorry. I was just so afraid of what you would all think of me. I... I was afraid of myself."

"I would have done the same thing," Zack said.

"You had to defend yourself against Goldar, and Goldar had already proven he'd kill you in a second," Kimberly said.

Billy still looked a little green. "You didn't have much of a choice."

Jason looked at Trini, who was so against unnecessary violence. Who had already accused Jason of torture. Trini's face softened slightly. "Okay... I don't agree with what you did. But I can't condemn you." She sighed. "You did what you could for Tommy."

Jason smiled, knowing that what the most he was going to get. Then his face fell. "Damn! We've wasted so much time on me, and we have people to save."

At that moment, the alarm sounded.

"A monster? Now?" Kimberly said.

"I'm afraid it's no monster," Zordon said darkly. "Behold the Viewing Globe."

The globe flashed on to show what looked like a white Zord rampaging through the downtown area.

"Umm... is that a Zord?" Zack said. "Cuz I thought we had all the Zords."

"That, Rangers," Zordon said, "is a Zord called Cyclops, belonging to Goldar. I never considered it a threat because it had no power center, so it was all but useless in battle. I believe now we know what the civilians are being used for."

Billy looked horrified. "How are they using civilians as a power source? They're not..."

"Nothing like that," Zordon said quickly. "I believe, instead, they have found a way to use psychic energy to power the Zord. While the technology has never proved stable in battle, I would not put it past Rita to find a way to use that energy source."

"So that's what Scorpina meant," Jason said. "How powerful a Zord are we looking at?"

"Very," Zordon said. "Be careful, Rangers. You must use everything you have to defeat this enemy. Jason, I know you are hesitant to use the Green powers Tommy gave you... but it will be necessary this time."

Jason's face hardened. "Yes, Zordon. Okay, guys... let's take down this Cyclops thing. In the meantime..." He paused.

"Alpha and I will look for a way to teleport the hostages away," Zordon affirmed. "They are in no danger in the short-term, but being used in this way for a long time will be dangerous for them... and for us as well."

"Then let's do this," Jason said.
All around Angel Grove, the monster attack sirens blared, and everyone ran for cover. People holed up in basements in the center of town, and those who could, headed for the relative safety of the suburbs.

In the center of town, Goldar piloted his battle machine in the first time in centuries. He gloried in the feeling of being behind the wheel of Cyclopsis once more. It had been a spoil of war; he'd killed the previous heroic owner in one of his first battles for Empress Rita. It had become his personal vehicle after that. Yet the machine was so ancient that once the power source had burned out, there was none compatible. It had been forced to lie dormant. But now it was back, as good as new.

Goldar laughed and knocked down a few billboards. He didn't want to hurt any humans yet. They'd already pushed the Power Rangers enough for right then. He wanted to deal with hopelessness and despair, not suicidal righteous fury.

He heard the familiar clanking of an assembling Megazord. He turned his machine to face the Zord, so different-looking from when he himself fought it. "Just in time."

His speaker crackled to life. "So what's it gonna be, Goldar?" the voice of the Red Ranger sounded over his speaker. Apparently they had patched through a communication link. "Do you just want a big fight, or are you looking for something else?"

"So paranoid, Red Ranger," Goldar laughed. "I just wanted to try out my toy. Figured crushing you pathetic excuses for fighters would be a great way to break it back in. So what part of the Megazord you want smashed first?"

He took a step forward, but he heard a shriek behind him. His sensors went wild and the ground gave out underneath him. As he was flying through the air, he realized the Dragonzord had thrown him.

His stomach froze up. Tommy couldn't be… But no. He remembered Tommy had given his powers to the Red Ranger. The Red Ranger had probably just taunted him to keep him distracted while he controlled the Dragonzord via dagger.

Goldar maneuvered Cyclopsis back to its feet. "If that's the way you want to play it…" he said.

He pushed a button, and immediately missiles erupted from the cannons on the machine's chestpiece. The other Zords had no other choice but to take the missiles, as dodging them would have endangered the buildings behind them… as Goldar knew would happen. The Zords scrambled to recover, but Goldar was already on the move. He grabbed the Dragonzord's tail and swung it into the Megazord. Both skidded away several feet.

Before they could fully come to a stop, the Dragonzord rolled onto its back and launched the Megazord at Goldar with its feet. Cyclopsis couldn't quite move fast enough; the Megazord hit Cyclopsis with both fists.

Just five more minutes until the Megazord could call its Mega Sword, Goldar reminded himself. He still had to be careful about damage at this point. He could not quite get enough power from the hostages, and the Power Rangers weren't producing the right sort of ambient psychic energy to draw from. Not yet, at least. But when he got enough power… Goldar grinned. By that time, even the Mega Sword wouldn't be able to help them.

"So you want hand to hand," Goldar said to himself, not caring if the Rangers could hear him. "Let's
see you contend with this."

Goldar punched in commands that allowed Cyclopsis to call on attack sequences it had used before. The advantage to using an older Zord like this (for it was a Zord originally, no matter what he called it now) was that it had untold experience stored in its memory. While the Rangers knew how he himself fought, they would have no idea how Cyclopsis fought.

Cyclopsis ripped through the two Zords like they were nothing. "And that," Goldar said, "is just the beginning." He watched the power reserves rise, and he keyed in the next sequence.

On the Power Rangers' side, they were wondering what had hit them.

"Okay, let's chalk another one to stuff I've never seen before," Zack said. "What the hell was that?"

"Shields are holding," Trini reported. "Minimal damage to both the Megazord and the Dragonzord."

The atmosphere in the Megazord was tense. Not only did the Rangers have to control their Zord, but they had to keep the Dragonzord functional as well. Jason was showing the most strain, as he had primary control over both Zords.

"We can deal with this," Jason said tightly. "Kim, let's hold off on the Mega Sword and power up some of the energy weapons. Let's test the limits of Goldar's new toy."

"Right," Kimberly said. "Redirecting power."

While the Dragonzord kept Cyclopsis busy, the Megazord opened up a barrage of energy attacks to the left of the fight. At the last minute, the Dragonzord flung Cyclopsis into the path of the barrage. Cyclopsis fell, erupting fire and smoke.

"That's what I'm talking about!" Zack yelled. The others cheered in response.

"Don't be so premature," Billy said. "I'm reading a huge influx of power going into Cyclopsis. It's self-repairing as we speak. And... it's getting stronger."

Goldar's mocking voice crackled over the speaker. "Ready to surrender, Rangers? There's not much shame in admitting defeat."

"Not on your life," Jason growled. "We're just getting started. Billy," he said in an undertone, "break off communications."

There was a pause. "Done."

"We need a little more power," Jason said. "You think the Dragonzord in Battle Mode will cut it?"

"It'll leave the Tyrannosaurus and Pterodactyl Zords vulnerable," Trini said.

"It'll also stop us from using the Mega Sword," Kimberly added.

"If we use the other form, we may not need the Mega Sword," Jason said. "Zack, you'll be in charge of the Dragonzord combo. Kim and I will run interference while you power up the staff. The staff doesn't take as long as the sword anyway."

"Got it," Zack said. "Just start distracting him as soon as you get out. We'll be open for attack as we
make the new form."

They keyed in the sequence, and the Zords immediately began reconfiguring. Kimberly broke off first and immediately began dive-bombing Cyclopsis, avoiding energy attacks from the other Zord. Jason joined in with the Tyrannosaurus Zord, using his greater speed to his advantage.

It was immediately apparent that their new configuration was a mistake.

An orange beam rippled out of Cyclops' horn, seeming to tear the air itself. The beam ripped through a wing of the Pterodactyl Zord. Jason heard a scream over the speaker, and the Zord flew out of the battlefield, barely clearing the tops of the buildings.

"Kim!" Jason yelled. "Are you all right?"

When Kimberly's voice came over the speaker, there were warning klaxons in the background. "Yeah," she said. "I just had to crash, and I couldn't do that in the center of town. I'll be a few minutes in repairs."

"Right," Jason said, but his lapse in attention was already costing him. The orange beam shot toward his Zord and nailed him in the shoulder before he could react. Now his own warning klaxons were sounding.

"You guys ready yet?" Jason yelled over the commlink.

Instead of answering, Jason saw the Dragonzord in Battle Mode swoop past him, nailing Cyclopsis in the chest with its staff. The two Zords struggled while Jason scrambled to repair his Zord. He also had to keep the Dragonzord stable through the battle, as he was the primary controller no matter what form the Dragonzord took.

"Staff is fully charged!" Trini crowed over the speakers.

"It's now or never!" Zack said.

The staff, practically crackling with power, swooped down on Cyclopsis. The last time they had used this attack, the monster had practically imploded on itself.

The blow glanced off, and part of the energy rebounded on the Dragonzord.

"No…" Jason said. His stomach was in his throat as he watched Cyclopsis brush off the attack like it was nothing.

"It's too powerful!" Billy yelled over the speakers. "And it's getting more powerful by the minute!"

Before anyone could react, Cyclopsis threw out cables that latched on to the Dragonzord. What looked like blue lightning flew over the cable. The Zord itself glowed white-hot, blinding Jason.

"Guys!" he yelled into the commlink. "What's going on?"

The light faded. Cyclopsis was in the middle, surrounded by the four Zords on the ground, forcibly broken into their individual components.

"We're okay," Zack said. "Jason, if you have any new ideas, I'm ready to hear them."

Jason closed his eyes. "Soon as we can, we form the Megazord again." But his voice was dead-sounding even to him.
Goldar smirked. He could no longer hear the Rangers, but he knew from his own power cells that they were starting to despair. Cyclopsis was picking up the ambient psychic energy from the Rangers faster than it could the hostages from the Moon Palace.

Goldar started assimilating the new power into Cyclopsis, unlocking untold powers and abilities. He waited for the Rangers to recover. He wanted to kill them on their feet.

"Finster!" Rita yelled, her eye still glued to the telescope. "I want this fight over quickly! Can't we get any more power to Cyclops?"

Finster scrutinized the machine. "Certainly, my Queen. I will need to an instrument from my laboratory to boost the power flow."

"Go get it, then!" Rita said. "And put a move on. We've got victory in our grasp, and I want the MegaZord crushed. I want to see those Rangers really despair."

Finster hurried as much as he could down the hallway. Even he was finally seeing this attack as a moment of victory, rather than an academic problem. And they had used their resources to the utmost: Rita's magic, his own technical genius, Goldar's fighting prowess… As long as the Rangers didn't suddenly come up with a surprise attack, there was no way they could lose.

Finster rounded the corner, through the doorway of his lab, and realized he was staring down the barrel of a laser pistol. He froze and looked up.

"Hi, Finster," Tommy said, one hand poised over the lab's communication console while the other pointed the gun at Finster. "Stay still and quiet, all right? I really don't want to shoot you."
Penn shoved the hotel key card into the lock. It beeped and flashed red. She growled and did it again, this time more deliberately. The lock had barely glowed green when she pushed her way through the door.

Tommy was lying on the bed, watching an action movie. He did not acknowledge her violent entrance.

"What the hell was that?" Penn asked in barely-contained fury.

Tommy looked up finally. His eyes were defiant, though his face was a mask. He said nothing.

Penn glared at him. "I've been talking to people for over an hour. I was barely able to keep from paying fines, and it's damn lucky the other fighter isn't filing a suit against you."

Tommy kept his face immobile. "It's not like I hurt him. Not permanently, anyway."

Penn's hands balled up into fists, but she kept her arms tightly crossed. "Not… permanently… Tommy…" She took several breaths, as she'd become so angry she was beyond sense.

Tommy, in the meantime, had turned back to the movie.

Penn strode over to the television and turned it off. Tommy continued to stare at the blank screen, avoiding his mother's glare.

"Look at me, Tommy, " Penn said in a dangerous voice.

Tommy looked at her. This time the mask was beginning to slip, and Penn could tell Tommy was as angry as she was.

"I just want to know what kind of stupid Cobra Kai stunt you were trying to pull," Penn said slowly. "I taught you to hold back in fights. To fight safe, to never hurt people in the ring. And then you nearly break some guy's leg. Why? Because he was winning?"

"You taught me to end a fight quick," Tommy said, his voice shaking from… anger? Something else? "It's not my fault he couldn't keep up."

"You can blame me for a lot of things, Tommy, but there's no way in hell you can blame me for what you just did," Penn said, her voice growing calmer and calmer. "Ever since you left Angel Grove, it's all been the same. No one wants to fight you, because you keep pushing the limits… going too far…" Penn shook her head. "Whatever's gotten into you, it's not because of me."

Tommy stared at her, his eyes burning.
Penn sat on the bed, her anger melting away. "Okay, Tommy, let's have it out. What happened in Angel Grove?"

"What?"

Penn chuckled drily. "I acknowledge I'm not the best mother in the world, but I'm not bone stupid. I know when you're unhappy." She paused. "I know you only went with me because you were running away from something."

Tommy's eyes were wide. Penn could read... something... in them. Fear? Possibly. But there was too much else going on, and Penn truly had to admit that she knew next to nothing about her son.

"What was it, trouble at school?" Penn hazarded a guess. "Or some of those things your dad tells me about but you never talk about?"

Tommy scowled. "I've been clean, okay? Not that you'd know anything about it."

"Right, then," Penn ploughed on, unfazed. "Girl trouble? That girl I saw before we left? What's her name?"

"Kimberly," Tommy said, and his voice was clouded with pain.

"Or was it that your father is getting married again?" Penn said softly.

Tommy kept looking away.

Penn stared at him for a few minutes, waiting for him to say something. He didn't. "Fine," she said. "Have it your way." She got up to leave.

"It was fine with everyone," Tommy said in a low voice.

Penn stopped.

Tommy was smiling bitterly. "It was great. Sylvia is awesome, and Billy's my best friend. And... things were going so great with Kimberly. And dad was happier and healthier than he'd been for years. And I wasn't having any problems with any of them until I... left."

"So why did you leave?" Penn said.

Tommy looked at her, the anguish in his eyes tell her more than he could articulate. "I... I really can't tell you. I just had to get out of town. Maybe... maybe I was running away from something. I dunno. I just knew it was better for everyone if I just left."

Penn sat on the bed again. "Would I be overstepping my bounds if I told you that you were flat-out wrong?"

"What do you mean?"

Penn laughed. "Tommy, I of all people should know that no one's better off when it comes to running away. I mean, look at me." She steeled herself, ready to share more than she'd ever meant to. "When your father got sick, I was terrified. I talked a lot of bullshit—still do—about not wanting to be tied down, but the truth? I was scared to watch him die. So I bolted. I ran away, leaving you and your father. And now I've ruined my chances forever with both of you."

Tommy was watching her carefully, and for the first time he didn't have that little reserve of anger he'd always shown to her.
"Your father is finally finding happiness," Penn continued. "And you… you belong with your father. I can't keep trying to take you with me when you've obviously found someplace where you belong. So…" Penn held out an envelope she'd kept folded in her pocket.

Tommy opened it, his brow creased in confusion. He pulled out some money and a bus ticket.

"It leaves this afternoon," Penn said. "You can be back in Angel Grove in a day."

"Mom…" Tommy said. "You've never sent me home before. I… I thought you wanted me on the tournament circuit. Why did you ask me to join you in the first place?"

Penn was avoiding his gaze this time. "Maybe I keep wanting that second chance with you, but I have no idea how to go about it. I know it's not going to be through keeping you from your… family." She smiled. "You lit up when you were talking about your friends… and Sylvia. I'm not telling you what to do, but you're not happy with me. You're happy with them." She smirked. "Besides, you're banned from this circuit anyway, for at least a year. So you have no excuse, do you?"

Tommy pulled her into a hug, and Penn felt tears sting her eyes. They didn't fall, though, as usual. She pulled back. "Come on. Let's get you packed before the bus leaves without you."

It wasn't until he saw the city limit sign through the bus window that his heart started pounding.

He was stupid to come back. If he was smart, he'd take another bus to… anywhere. Not Angel Grove. He didn't care what his mother said. He didn't belong here. Rita had proven that.

Every time he thought of Rita his insides clenched. The time away had done nothing to dispel his dread of facing Rita. If anything, the fear had grown. He knew how vulnerable he was. He was in more danger simply because he had once been a Power Ranger. He drew more attention than any other—his fist clenched at the word—civilian.

His mother had been right about one thing. He'd been running away, but not from any of his relationships. At least, not any among the humans.

He wondered what his mother would say if she knew what exactly he was running away from. Probably call him a coward.

The bus stopped, and he realized he hadn't called his father. No one knew he was there. He smiled grimly. He always got pissed off when his mother would show up without calling, and here he was.

He grabbed his bag and got off the bus after letting everyone else go in front of him. He stretched the stiffness out of his limbs as he walked to a payphone. He told himself he wasn't looking around at shadows because he expected an attack at any moment.

The phone rang several times, but it sometimes took his dad a few minutes to get to the phone. They didn't have an answering machine anymore.

There was a palpable pause after the phone was picked up. Tommy gulped. Somehow his dad always knew. "Hey, dad," Tommy said before his father had to say anything.

"Tommy," John said lightly, in that cheerful voice he'd take to that Tommy hated so damn much. "How are things on the road?"
Tommy cleared his throat, trying to think of the best way to tell him... but failing. "I'm... I'm home, dad. At least, at the bus station part of home."

Tommy couldn't decide how he felt about calling Angel Grove "home."

This time there was no pause. "That's fantastic!" John said. "Do you need me to pick you up? Just give me time to call Sylvia... We should do something special tonight. Maybe go out..."

"Dad, it's all right," Tommy said, a bit overwhelmed. "I can walk home. It's not far."

"Oh, we're definitely all going out tonight," John said. His voice was jubilant.

Why, Tommy thought, did his father always accept him back so easily? He never held it against him.

"You... you might be careful around the park," John added. "Coming home, I mean."

Alarm bells rang in Tommy's head. "I didn't hear the monster sirens. Is there an attack?"

"Nothing like that," John said. "I... I just wanted to warn you that there's some sort of celebration honoring the Power Rangers going on at the park today. Your friends are all there, of course. I didn't know how you'd..."

Tommy smiled. He'd been preparing for the worst, so this seemed much less dire then he had thought. "Dad... do you mind if I go there first? I'll come straight on home after."

"Tell you what," John said, "I'll meet you there."

Tommy walked slowly to the park, dropping by the Youth Center and stowing his bag in a locker on the way. He tried to decide how he felt about this celebration thing, but it was all bound up in being back in Angel Grove. His friends were there. Kimberly was there. It was a day celebrating the Power Rangers. He'd been a Power Ranger... but then he hadn't, really. He was always the extra. He'd started out as an enemy. Then... he'd lost his powers.

So why did he feel so compelled to go to the park? Why did he want to see such a flagrant celebration of something he'd lost?

On the road with his mother, he'd been able to ignore what he'd lost. Forget that he'd ever been a Power Ranger. That he'd ever been part of a group. Or, at least, he thought he'd been able to forget it. But he realized every fight he'd been in—all the fights he'd been pushing... nearly hurting people—he'd been fighting against this one thing.

Angel Grove had destroyed him. And... he had to find a way to rebuild himself. And if he was going to do that without going off the deep end or hurting someone, he was going to have to face what he'd been avoiding.

He walked past the gaudily-decorated gate. He had enough time to smile at the color green included with the other Ranger colors... when everything disappeared.

Shit. Shit shit shit shit SHIT!

Tommy closed his eyes and pressed himself against the stone wall, willing himself not to be there. Hoping against hope that he was having one of his nightmares. That he couldn't possibly be in one of the lower dungeons of the effing Moon Palace!
He opened his eyes slowly. It wasn't a dream. It was the effing Moon Palace.

Tommy slumped to the ground. He didn't know what sort of surveillance they had in the dungeon at the moment, but he definitely did not want to be spotted. He was pretty sure, since he wasn't the only one who'd been teleported, that he wasn't the target, and he could even speculate that Rita didn't know he was there. It wouldn't stay that way forever, though. He'd be spotted, and he knew what would happen then. Rita wanted revenge on him. Everyone did. And he was powerless to stop them.

He realized his heart was thudding in his chest. He forced himself to breathe normally and pay attention to what was going on around him.

Tommy's head jerked up when he heard Mr. Kaplan's voice. "People of Angel Grove, please do not panic. We have a lot of children in here, and we don't want anyone to get trampled."

The crowd yelled out confused questions. Tommy could feel the panic in the air, the panic that merged so neatly with his own. Through it all, though, Mr. Kaplan's calm, authoritative voice kept the room's attention. "Where we are, we can only guess. We can only assume that we have been taken prisoner by Rita Repulsa, the enemy of the Power Rangers. If this is the case, and it probably is, we can be assured that we will be saved by the Power Rangers."

Tommy watched as the crowd challenged Mr. Kaplan's faith in the Power Ranger. He smiled at the all-too-quick loss of faith in the town's heroes. They'd been celebrating the Power Rangers. He hadn't been able to see much of the celebration, but from the crowd he knew it had been pretty big.

As an afterthought, he scanned the crowd for the Power Rangers, looking in a few strategic spots he knew Jason would aim for immediately. They'd be trying to find a way out of the dungeon without raising any suspicions from the crowd. But, no. He'd known all along that they wouldn't be there. Rita would have lured them elsewhere before gaining her hostages.

"I would usually be the first to head up an attack against our kidnappers," Mr. Kaplan answered the challenges. "But it's too risky. First off, we're locked in a place that might not even be on Earth. Second, there are too many children here who could get hurt. We have to rely on the Power Rangers. We can't risk ourselves and have the Power Rangers' efforts be all in vain."

"Rely on the Power Rangers," a man said sarcastically. "You mean the ones who couldn't even save the people who were celebrating them from being kidnapped?"

There were several yells against the man, but also several yells in agreement. Tommy felt like hitting the man.

Mr. Kaplan looked around furiously. "Now, let me tell you all something. I was there the day of the attack on the high school. The Power Rangers visited me the night before, and I helped them install security in the high school so we could protect the students. I saw them fight with no regard for their own safety to protect all those students. Not only did the Power Rangers save everyone, but they healed the students who were injured. Now you cannot tell me the Power Rangers aren't doing everything in their power to save us. I have faith in the Power Rangers. We all must have faith in the Power Rangers."

While he was talking, Tommy watched helplessly as Rita flickered onto a screen and struck Mr. Kaplan down with a bolt of magic. The crowd yelled in shocked anger.

"Oh, don't worry, puny humans," Rita said, her voice easily silencing the crowd. "I have not killed your spokesman. He's going to sleep for a bit," she smirked, "while I tell you exactly why the Power Rangers will not save you."
Tommy shrank back against the wall. She didn't see him, though. She looked to be concentrating on something else.

He looked around the room. They were spellbound… Mouths hanging open, the most aggressive now staring blank-faced. Even the children were silent and still.

A spell…

Tommy quickly turned away from the screen and looked at the wall beside him. He felt the old magic tugging at his brain, prompting him to stare at his former empress, but he could recognize the impulse for what it was.

Tommy considered what to do. He had no idea why Rita was putting everyone under a spell, but it couldn't be anything good. She was obviously using them against the Power Rangers, and not just as hostages for ransom. He could think of a dozen possibilities, and each presented dire consequences if they stayed under Rita's power too long. Not to mention what would happen when he was spotted.

And yet… what if he just gave in?

Rita's voice was still there. He somehow knew that if he gave in to the spell, she would recognize him immediately. The struggle and fear would be over. If he was under her power, he wouldn't even care what she did to him. There would be peace and certainty.

But it was one thing to be taken by the spell. It was quite another thing to surrender to it voluntarily.

He realized his brain was finally calm. The worst had happened. The very thing he'd been dreading most.

He looked at the prone figure of Mr. Kaplan. He could see the purple suit through a sea of legs. Mr. Kaplan didn't have any powers. He was just a human, and not very young or athletic at that. And yet he was brave. He'd been the only one to stand up and try to rally the other prisoners. He'd stood up to Rita's forces armed with nothing but a baseball bat.

Tommy remembered the day of the attack on the high school, the day Mr. Kaplan had referenced. Tommy had held Mr. Kaplan at gunpoint, but the man hadn't backed down. Tommy remembered… the spell on him had almost broken in that instant. Mr. Kaplan, without even knowing it, had almost beaten him through sheer nerve.

Tommy had been worrying so much about losing his powers, afraid that he wouldn't be able to fight. That he'd be at the mercy of Rita without them.

Yes, he was vulnerable. Yes, he could no longer fight monsters. But that didn't mean he was supposed to give up. And that didn't mean he didn't have a responsibility.

Rita was droning on about the inadequacies of the Power Rangers. In the meantime, as if he'd known the whole time it was there, Tommy felt the loose stone give behind him. Without anyone having seen him, he slipped through the tiny opening and replaced the stone behind him.

The trip through the passageways was rat-filled but largely uneventful. Tommy worked his way upwards, toward the light and heat, where he knew Rita kept the palace the most habitable.

Finally, he decided to chance it and pushed through a weak panel in the wall. He held his breath and
made as little noise as possible. Even Squatt and Baboo would pose a danger to him at this point, not to mention if Goldar or Scorpina happened to be hanging about.

A deep, rich, earthy smell assaulted him, and he had to shield his eyes from the light. A loud electronic buzz filled the room.

*The hydroponics lab…*

Tommy replaced the panel in the wall and ducked behind some tomato stalks. He'd lucked out and emerged in the one place that was sure to be deserted during an attack: Finster's hydroponics garden, where he grew fresh cooking ingredients as well as the plants commonly needed in various potions. The room also helped with the oxygen supply for the palace. And it was conveniently connected to Finster's lab, where there were computer systems that connected to communication and teleportation.

So far he'd had bad luck in entering the park the second everyone was kidnapped, and then good luck finding an escape and emerging in the best possible place to avoid detection and plan an attack. Tommy knew that his good luck would not hold out for long.

He slid through the garden, careful not to rustle leaves too much, keeping an eye out for surveillance cameras. There was little need for surveillance in the hydroponics lab, and the door between the hydroponics lab and the main lab was probably not wired. The real danger was that Finster was probably in the lab. He'd have to be subdued quickly and quietly. Tommy didn't want to hurt the scientist. He'd always done right by Tommy. But Finster was still the main obstacle between himself and freedom. He'd try to go as easy as possible and still keep the little alien from incapacitating him or calling Rita. He still remembered how effective Finster was in containing Jason.

"Well, I'll be damned," he whispered, seeing the empty lab.

Tommy knew he only had minutes. Finster was probably in the throne room or possibly even doing something around the prisoners. He would be back very soon. First, Tommy felt around the edges of Finster's main lab station. He pulled out Finster's emergency laser pistol and took the safety off.

Thus armed, senses keen to anyone approaching, he keyed in Finster's access codes to the communication channel. He'd watched Finster work with the computer so many times that he'd memorized the basic access codes. And it helped that Finster absent-mindedly said the pass codes to himself as he keyed them in every time.

One eye still fixed on the door, with gun at ready just in case, he sent the signal.

"Ay-yi-yi, Zordon!" Alpha exclaimed. "We're receiving a communication from the Moon Palace!"

Zordon sighed heavily. They had been watching the disastrous battle between their Zords and Goldar's Cyclopsis. Zordon was just starting to realize that the Zords lacked the power to combat Rita's new source of power.

"Rita probably wishes to gloat over her impending victory," Zordon said heavily. "And yet, we cannot ignore her call, as she may give us an opportunity…" He trailed off. "Alpha, answer her hail."

"Zordon, finally. I thought you weren't going to answer."

Alpha let out a squeal and accidentally knocked a minor security system out in his surprise. Zordon
was speechless for the first time in years.

"Ay-yi-yi-yi-yi, Tommy!" Alpha said. "What are you doing up there?"

"There's no time right now," Tommy said urgently. "I'm in Finster's lab, and everyone's too distracted by the battle to notice me, but Finster won't stay away for long. And if Scorpina catches me here, I'm pretty much screwed. So we gotta hurry."

"Agreed, Tommy." Zordon had sufficiently recovered himself. "Do you think you can weaken the defenses around the prisoners?"

Tommy laughed uncertainly. "If you talk me through it." He grew more serious. "I'm watching the battle on Finster's screen. It doesn't look good."

"The Power Rangers' only hope is that we break Rita's power supply," Zordon said. "Once we rescue the prisoners, Goldar will have no choice but to retreat or lose Cyclops altogether."

Tommy paused. "Then let's do this."

Tommy's brain had stopped. He stared down the pistol barrel at Finster, who had frozen in the doorway.

"Zordon," he said over the communication speaker, still keeping his eyes on Finster, "we need to hurry. I've been spotted. Rita doesn't know yet, though."

"We'll have enough time," Zordon said reassuringly. "We've made the connection between the computers, so Alpha is working on the problem. We'll have the prisoners—and you—teleported out of there very soon. You must not move, or we will lose your signal."

"Right," Tommy said nervously. "Just... hurry."

Jason was never gladder to be back in the Megazord cockpit.

"Okay, Kim," he said, "what do we have in the way of power?"

Kimberly had started working frantically as soon as they'd formed. Her costume was scarred black from her recent crash. "We can get the MegaSword, but it'll take ten minutes. If all goes well, at least."

"We're still suffering structural damage," Billy said.

"And shield damage," Trini added.

Jason sighed. "Zack, can you keep us on our feet?"

"As long as you keep us away from the harder punches," Zack said, "I'll keep us upright."

Jason assessed the situation. Cyclopsis was still, staring at them and waiting for them to make the first move in that irritating way Goldar had done to him so many times. Goldar had the upper hand. He had enough power to outlast them, so he didn't need to be in a hurry.
"What about Titanus?" Jason asked the group. "We know there's an 'UltraZord' combination. We should use that."

"It would give us enough power," Billy said, "but we'd need all the Zords to combine. I doubt Goldar will let us. He'd most likely attack when we were at our most vulnerable: mid-reconfiguration."

"And it will mess up any chance of getting the MegaSword," Kimberly said. "We need power to call it forth."

"Guys…" Zack broke in, "is that building glowing?"

The others followed where Zack was pointing. A building just to the right of Cyclopes was glowing orange.

"And there's another," Trini said weakly. "And another…"

"We're getting a communication from Goldar," Billy said.

Jason felt like the air was being sucked from the room. "Answer it," he said in a low voice.

The speaker crackled to life. "I grow weary of waiting, Power Rangers," Goldar said in a smug voice. "We all know this is the end… that I've just been toying with you. If you surrender now, I will show mercy to these humans. If you persist against the inevitable, whatever humans are in these buildings will die. So what's it to be?"

Jason stared at the buildings, imagining the panicking people inside.

"Come on," Goldar gloated. "It's Power Ranger Day. Be the heroes."

"What do we do, Jason?" Zack said in a low voice.

Jason felt the others staring at the back of his head. They were hoping he'd come up with a brilliant strategy, but he had nothing. They had lost. There was nothing they could do.

Tommy drummed his fingers against the work table, shooting nervous glances at Finster. The laser pistol was getting heavy in his hand, but he didn't dare waver. Finster knew every inch of the lab, and he could cause Tommy no end of trouble if he gave him the chance.

"When do you have to report in to Rita?" Tommy asked.

Finster merely stared at him. "Tommy… you must not do this."

"What, save a whole bunch of people?" Tommy said. "Because I have a feeling those people won't last through what you have planned for them."

Tommy was used to Finster looking kindly and slightly absent-minded. At this moment, Finster looked dangerous.

"You must not go against us like this," Finster continued as if Tommy hadn't spoken. "You are no longer a Power Ranger, and Queen Rita has not sought out a fight with you. It is not your place to fight against Queen Rita. She will only kill you for your trouble."
Tommy tightened his grip on the pistol and glanced at the battle below. The Rangers were losing very quickly. If they didn't break Cyclops' power in the next few minutes…

"There's still time," Finster said, his voice growing more insistent. "Allow me to break the connection with the Command Center, and I will teleport you out of here unharmed. Queen Rita need never know of this. I can ensure your safety if you call off this attack. However," Finster's voice turned grim, "if you continue, you are declaring yourself our enemy: in league with the Power Rangers. Queen Rita has declared death to any Power Ranger who strays into the Moon Palace." He paused. "Do not try me in this way, Tommy."

Tommy kept one eye on Finster and one on the battle. "How can I take your offer? How can I save myself when it means so many deaths? Finster… I am your enemy."

The speaker crackled to life, breaking the silence. "Tommy, we're ready to teleport everyone out now. Just key in the teleportation sequence from your end."

"Don't," Finster said shortly. "You don't know what you're doing."

Tommy shot Finster a challenging look and pressed the button.

Several things happened at once.

Scorpina shouted in shock when the dazed, staring prisoners disappeared. She turned on her heel and ran to see what was going on.

Hundreds of people appeared in the park, accidentally knocking down a few police officers. They awoke from their trances instantly and had little memory of what transpired.

The downtown Angel Grove buildings stopped glowing orange. Goldar cursed as he jabbed at his console, realizing his nearly unlimited source of power wasn't there anymore.

The machine in the throne room sparked and shorted out. A recently-installed matching component in Cyclops shorted out as well, but not before casting out a wave of reserve energy as the containment field failed.

The Power Rangers sensed that, too, and their upsurge of hope drained the remainder of Cyclops' power reserves.

Rita screamed in fury and sent a message throughout the Moon Palace, demanding to know what was going on.

Finster, as soon as Tommy pressed the button, stepped on a hidden button on the floor he'd been inching toward for the past few minutes. Sirens wailed throughout the Moon Palace and a panel dropped down to close off his computer station, nearly taking Tommy's hand off.

"What just happened?" Tommy said in a shaky voice.

"You have… saved… the prisoners," Finster said in a hard voice. "I have also activated emergency security protocols. All but I and Queen Rita are locked out of the computer system. That pistol has
been deactivated, and Scorpina is headed this way." Finster was calmly loading a syringe. "If you stay in one place, you may still be teleported out in a few minutes. Do you think you can last in one place that long?"

Tommy heard running footsteps echo down the corridor. With a curse, he threw the pistol away and ran into the hydroponics lab before Finster could get near him.

Oblivious to their friend's peril, the Power Rangers watched as their power level rose.

"Billy…?" Jason said.

"I don't know," Billy said. "Cyclopsis has apparently lost its power source, and it's significantly weaker. In the process, however, the Zord's excess power was thrown from Cyclopsis, and it seems both the MegaZord and the Dragonzord was able to gather some of that excess power."

"Translation," Jason said, hardly daring to believe.

"We're at full power," Kimberly said.

"Shields are at full," Trini added.

"And the major functional repairs have been completed," Billy finished. "We just don't know how any of this happened, except the simple explanation of a malfunction."

Zack was the first to give a whoop of joy. "Who cares how it happened? I say it's time to take this puppy down!"

Jason grinned. "You heard the man. Let's do this!"

He was about to call for the MegaSword, but he stopped. "On second thought, let's do this in style. Goldar's been grandstanding this whole fight. See how he likes it."

With one voice and one mind, the five said, "We call on the power of Titanus and the UltraZord!"

How they all knew the next move, they didn't question. They were in sync as they hadn't been for weeks. Something about the energy wave from Cyclopsis had not only saved their Zords but had energized their spirits.

Cyclopsis began backing up in fits and starts—obviously experiencing power problems—when Titanus appeared on the battlefield. The other Zords, in the meantime, recombined to join with the Dragonzord.

The six Zords, brought together by Titanus, dwarfed Cyclopsis. They couldn't believe minutes before they'd been afraid of it.

Jason opened his mouth to order the attack, but then he stopped. They had to get rid of Cyclopsis, but Goldar had no way to defend himself. "Billy, open up a channel to Goldar," he said, hoping he wasn't going to regret it.

The others seemed to know what he was going to do, but they did nothing to stop him. "Goldar," he said, "now would be a good time to retreat."

A string of unfamiliar words came over the speaker in what was probably alien cursing. "I can't
"Move Cyclopsis, as you very well know, Red Ranger," Goldar answered.

"Leave it behind," Jason said. "We're going to fire in a few minutes whether you're in there or not. I just thought I'd give you fair warning."

There was a pause. Jason half-expected the speaker to burst into flames from the obvious fury on the other end. "You'll pay for this, Rangers," Goldar said.

"I expect so," Jason said calmly. "Guys, lock on and fire all weapons."

The sky grew dark from the brilliant blaze of the UltraZord's weapons firing all at once. The blasts consumed Cyclopes, so that not even rubble remained.

The Rangers cheered at the dramatic and sudden victory.

Jason hit his communicator. "Zordon, come in. Since Cyclopsis lost its power, I assume the prisoners are all saved?"

There was a pause. The Rangers stared at each other. Zordon usually spent this time congratulating them.

"Not… all of the prisoners were saved," Zordon said grimly. "Please report to the Command Center immediately."

Not sure of what to expect, the Rangers sent their Zords back and teleported to the Command Center. Alpha was working frantically at the controls.

"I can't find him, Zordon," Alpha cried. "He must have been unable to keep his position."

Billy quickly joined Alpha. "What are we looking for?" Billy said. "I can help you hone the sensors."

"Thank you, Billy," Alpha said. "We are looking for Tommy."

"WHAT?"

The chorused word would have been funny if the situation hadn't been so serious. Billy swallowed any questions and got straight to work.

The others, however, didn't have an immediate task.

"What do you mean, you're looking for Tommy?" Kimberly said, her voice squeaking from the surprise. "He's off with his mother, isn't he?"

"He is in the Moon Palace at present," Zordon said. "I do not know how he came to be there. Ten minutes ago he contacted me from the Moon Palace with a plan to save the prisoners. He was able to give us access enough to teleport the prisoners back to Earth. However, we were unable to teleport him out before the Palace's security blocked us. He has moved from his last known location, so we are completely unable to locate him."

The Rangers stared at Zordon, their mouths hanging open.

Jason was the first to recover. "It doesn't matter how he got up there. The important thing is that we get him out. If Alpha and Billy can't teleport him out, we'll have to go in after him."

"It's risky," Trini said. "Do you remember what Scorpina said?"
"Doesn't look like we have much of a choice," Zack said. "It's not like Rita is going to negotiate with us. She's not going to let him go until he's dead or evil again."

"Agreed," Jason said. "He's the reason we won the fight. He saved the prisoners, us, and Angel Grove all in one swoop, and I'll be damned if he pays for that with his life. If they can't teleport him out in the next few minutes, we're going."

"Your intentions are admirable," Zordon said. "However, you will be unable to teleport in. Security prevents it right now. We will be using all our power to find him and teleport him out."

"We've got to do something!" Kimberly said desperately.

"You might be quiet," Billy snapped. He turned from the controls. His eyes were wide and panicked, and his face was sweating. "I'm sorry," he said a bit quieter, "but I need to concentrate if we're going to save him."

The other four nodded, not wanting to distract him any further. Trini wandered over to the side, muttering about preparing more serum, just in case. No one wanted to remind her that the serum wouldn't work on Tommy anymore. Jason, Zack, and Kimberly stood and watched helplessly. Even when they'd been completely overpowered by Cyclopsis they didn't feel so helpless.

Scorpina didn't know why she didn't go straight to the throne room. She didn't know why, of all places, she chose Finster's lab. She just had a gut feeling that something was wrong there. Squatt and Baboo stood in the corridor in front of her. "The prisoners are gone, and you're in trouble!" they sang together at Scorpina.

"Out of the way!" Scorpina thundered, brandishing her sword at them. They scattered.

Finster was keying in the sequence to unlock his computer from the extra security. A loaded syringe was on the table beside him.

"What happened?" Scorpina said.

"You're not going to believe it," Finster said shortly, any signs of absent-mindedness gone.

Scorpina's heart was thudding. She wasn't going to show up before Rita without at least an explanation. "Amaze me," she said through gritted teeth.

"Tommy used my computer to contact the Command Center. I was just able to trap him, but I could not prevent him from stealing the prisoners."

"You're shitting me," Scorpina said. "How the hell did he get up here in the first place? Wait… that doesn't matter. Where did he go?"

Finster brought up a map of the Moon Palace. "I'm tracking him through the hydroponics lab. It connects to a duct system. From there he can get to anywhere in the Palace, including any place with a teleportation panel."

Scorpina was already halfway through the door to the hydroponics lab.

She scanned the technological garden. The buzz coming from the generators, lights, and irrigation system just barely obscured a faint rustling among the leaves.
"Tommy!" she called out.

The rustling stopped near the far-left corner of the room. She grinned and began walking vaguely toward the right as a feint.

"You can't escape, Tommy," Scorpina said. "Maybe if you surrender yourself, Rita will go easy on you."

Scorpina heard a distinct laugh, and this time it was coming from her immediate left rather than the far left. Was Tommy throwing his voice? When did he learn to do that?

Then it dawned on Scorpina. He was already in the ductwork.

Without warning, she let loose a power surge from her sword. Several plants and part of the wall blasted open. She heard a scuttling behind the wall. She'd missed him.

She felt a surge of fury against him. She had risked everything to protect him, and still he acted against Rita, inviting her attacks. Ever since he'd joined the Power Rangers, he'd slowly become one of them: pigheadedly fighting against what he didn't understand, consequences be damned.

He wasn't the same person anymore. He was one of them.

"If that's the way you want it," Scorpina growled. She'd been tracking his movements slowly and carefully. There was one other duct in the room, and he was just about to pass it.

Scorpina launched her stinger at the vent right when she heard him approach. There was a scream, and she felt her stinger pierce flesh. She knew the poison was already in his blood system.

She heard him move, this time slower and more uncertainly. But she wasn't worried. He would be dead in minutes.

Tommy clung to consciousness desperately. The pain was overwhelming, and his vision and hearing kept fading in and out. He clambered forward, ready to escape the ducts into a corridor at first opportunity. He would rather not die in a wall like a rat if he could help it.

It was starting to feel as though he wouldn't be able to help it.

He saw stripes of light and pushed his way through. He tumbled out onto the floor, the duct cover making a loud clang that seemed to echo through the entire Palace.

"I don't believe it," a gruff voice said behind him.

Tommy felt like screaming when he heard Goldar's voice, but he didn't. His whole body seemed seized up with a combination of fear and whatever Scorpina had done to him.

"So you're the cause of all this," Goldar said, his voice turning venomous. "You're the reason I lost Cyclopsis, you bastard."

Tommy somehow got to his feet, and he didn't take time to answer his accuser. Instead, more by instinct than any plan, he launched himself into a very familiar door. The door slammed shut behind him. He keyed in the code that would lock the door. It wouldn't hold forever, but it would keep him from being killed immediately by Goldar.
The door shuddered. It sounded like Goldar was trying to knock it down. And Tommy knew that, with his luck, the golden warrior would succeed.

Desperately, he tore the mattress on the bed open. When Scorpina had dumped and burned his stuff, she hadn't thought or cared to check his mattress.

After what seemed like forever, his hand closed on what he was looking for: his spare communicator, one that Finster had given him. With the last of his strength, he pressed the button that would send him to the Command Center.

He felt the tingle of teleportation, and then hands grab him. Then, he felt nothing.

"Get that table over here!" Trini said.

Kimberly and Billy set the table in the middle of the Command Center, and Jason and Zack laid Tommy on it. He'd teleported in their midst mere moments before; Jason had just been able to catch him to keep him from falling on the floor.

Alpha was already there with a medical scanner. "Ay-yi-yi-yi-yi! I'm detecting an unknown substance in his bloodstream."

"Can my serum counteract it?" Trini said.

Alpha looked up sadly. "Yes, Trini, if the serum had any effect on him."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Zack said angrily.

Zordon's voice was heavy with emotion. "It means that Tommy no longer has a Power Coin. The serum only affects Power Rangers."

The Rangers stared at their dying friend, Trini holding her serum ineffectually.

Jason was losing himself in panic. Tommy was going to die, and it was all his fault, and…

"He doesn't need a Power Coin," Kimberly broke the silence. "He's a Power Ranger, always. And he has us. We can be his power."

Billy looked excited. "Affirmative! If I could save Skull, then all of us can save Tommy."

Hope stronger than what they'd felt in the UltraZord filled the Rangers. Somehow, they all knew what to do. Alpha stepped aside as the Power Rangers surrounded Tommy and held out their Power Coins. Jason held out both.

Power radiated around Tommy's prone form. The Rangers squinted against the brightness, but they kept filling Tommy with power.

For the tiniest of seconds, Tommy seemed to flicker into the form of the Green Ranger.

"Now, Trini!" Zordon said.

Trini rushed forward and injected Tommy with the serum.

The power seemed to absorb into Tommy's skin. He gave one great shudder and then opened his
"Hey, guys," Tommy said weakly, "did you win?"

Amid the shouts of relief, Jason said, "Yeah, bro… I think we did."

Goldar reported from the telescope, "It's confirmed. I've spotted the traitor Tommy on Earth, alive and well."

The news met with a tense silence. Scorpina was clearly agitated; she leaned against a wall, but her stinger, which she usually kept safely tucked away, was lashing about her. Everyone else kept their distance. Squatt and Baboo were watching the stinger nervously. They'd been threatened out of singing about her getting into trouble for the third time, and they knew she was near attacking them. Finster was ignoring everything and cleaning up the mess of the ruined device from the throne room floor.

Only Rita was still. She was glaring from her throne. She seemed too angry to yell and scream. Bags were under her eyes and her forehead was lined with pain, a testament to the strain she'd put herself through during the attack.

They waited. They were ready for the recriminations, the punishment… everything that went along with a loss.

"You all performed to the best of your abilities," Rita said softly.

They all looked up in shock, but they didn't say anything.

"Goldar," she began, "you were admirable on the battlefield. You were even able to save some of Cyclopsis's components before you were forced to abandon the battle machine. I'm… truly sorry you lost it."

Goldar looked stunned. "Thank you, my Empress," he said in a dazed voice.

Rita turned her head to Finster and Scorpina. "Both of you dealt with the… security intrusion to the best of your abilities. While you were unable to keep him from teleporting out the prisoners, Finster, you put the Palace under security lockdown as soon as you could at risk to your own life. And Scorpina… you administered a killing blow against the… intruder." She smiled weakly. "I will never question your loyalty again."

Scorpina tried to draw back the tears standing in her eyes. She couldn't say anything.

"The fault is mine," Rita said in a stronger voice. "I have allowed these Power Rangers to last longer than they should. I have allowed them too many opportunities. And I made a mistake in simply attacking them through brute force this time. That allowed them to come around and attack us personally." She clenched her fists and pushed herself from the throne. "Next time, the attack will be intensely personal. I will teach them to feel the loss and betrayal we have felt. Next time, we will teach them despair."

"They don't really do those stupid poses, do they?"
The five Rangers—six, Tommy reminded himself—along with John and Sylvia had gathered at the local pizza place. There were sitting at a few tables shoved together. Like many people after a monster attack, they were laughing and talking loudly in relief.

Of course, these people had more of a reason to celebrate. Not only were six of them Power Rangers, but all of them were celebrating Tommy's return.

Jason and Zack had been recounting the little skit at the festival, speaking carefully in code, of course, as they had to hide their identities from Sylvia as well as the others in the restaurant.

"Of course they don't," Jason said.

"And if there are poses, they're cool-looking. I mean, these are the Power Rangers we're talking about."

The general conversation turned to the rest of the day: the battle (discussed in code), Tommy's kidnapping along with the rest of the festival attendants (again, discussed in code), and the triumphant appearance of the Power Rangers at the end of the festival, where they'd received cheers and cries of gratitude.

"Thankfully," Sylvia said, "no one seemed too affected by the kidnapping. Was it horrible, Tommy?"

Tommy shrugged. "It was kind of intense. I don't think many people remember much about it, because there was some kind of spell going on." He laughed. "It's just my luck that as soon as I take one step in the park, I get kidnapped."

"Mom, why didn't you tell us Tommy was there?" Billy said. "We had no idea until we saw him later."

"I didn't know," Sylvia said. "John, why were you so tight-lipped? I wondered why you suddenly wanted to go to the festival."

John's shrug was identical to his son's. "I wanted it to be a surprise, and then when everyone was kidnapped I didn't want to worry until I knew where he was."

"And you didn't want to say anything until you were sure I was actually there," Tommy said softly.

John shifted uncomfortably. "Well, there's that."

But everyone was in too good a mood to bring up any uncomfortable truths. Tommy was glad. He knew he had to make it right with all of them. His father had welcomed him with open arms, as usual. Sylvia had been a little more reserved, but she was trying to follow John's lead.

His friends were another story. They'd been so relieved that he didn't die that they didn't even take him to task for leaving town for weeks, not calling any of them, and then not calling to let them know he was coming back. At least, not yet.

Dinner ended, and they began drifting off to their own homes. John and Sylvia insisted on paying for dinner, shouting down any objections.

Tommy and Billy waited while their parents settled the bill. Billy was absently looking at the little vending machines selling fake tattoos and sticky hand toys.

"I'm sorry for not calling," Tommy said abruptly. The words had been burning at him. "And for…"
well… everything. It was stupid and cowardly."

Billy smiled slowly, still not looking at Tommy. "You don't think I get why you did it?"

Tommy looked away, too. "Even so, I'm still sorry. I… I thought I didn't deserve a place here. A family and a home." He shook his head. "I still don't deserve it. I don't deserve your mom, or you, or…"

"You really are stupid," Billy said.

Tommy's head jerked up. Billy had always told Tommy he wasn't stupid. And now…

"You can't do anything to deserve a family," Billy said, finally looking at Tommy. "You just have one. Families are people who love you no matter what you've done. You don't deserve family… you need them."

Tommy couldn't think of anything to say.

"Look…" Billy said, "I'm just glad to have you back. You're part of this… all of this. Even if you run away, you're still part of this."

Tommy knew, at once, that Billy meant the Power Rangers, their friendship, the family their parents were forming… all of it at once. Tommy was about to respond when John and Sylvia met them by the door, ready to go.

When they got to the parking lot, Tommy rushed forward to help his father in the van, but John waved him off and motioned to someone standing at a distance.

Tommy walked to her, more afraid than he'd been when he'd found himself in the Moon Palace. She was standing in the light of a streetlamp next to her car, her arms folded. She didn't look severe, though.

Words sprang to his tongue. I'm sorry. I should never have said those things to you. I should never have left. It was the stupidest thing I've ever done in a long list of stupid things I've done in my life, because it hurt you. I'll understand if you don't want to…

All of those words tumbled through his brain, but they couldn't reach his lips. He opened his mouth to force them out…

"Please don't." Kimberly said, her voice quiet but firm.

Tommy felt himself sweating. "What? I…"

"If we start saying we're sorry, we'll never stop," she said. "Can… can we just start over?" Tears were standing in her eyes, and Tommy felt his own throat burning. "I mean, do you still want…"

Tommy kissed her. In that kiss he felt like he was making up for weeks of kisses, and it still wasn't enough. She kissed him back, passionately and fiercely, as if she was articulating and letting go of all the weeks of worry and pain in the kiss.

They broke apart to gasp for air. The words "I love you" tumbled out of Tommy's mouth before he realized he'd said them out loud. His heart froze until he heard the answering "I love you," and he kissed her again with mounting passion.

When they broke away, it was with regret. They said a few stupid things about meeting later, but that
didn't matter. What mattered was Tommy realized he was finally and truly home.
Tommy sat in the Juice Bar, staring idly at the television, which was broadcasting live footage of the MegaZord fighting a gigantic fish monster. He sighed. At least he knew why Kimberly was late.

The other teens hanging out in the Juice Bar barely paid attention to the fight. They were all under monster curfew, so they weren't allowed to leave, but they also didn't seem all that interested in the fight. They talked, worked out, studied, and laughed like it was just a normal afternoon.

The truth was, these fights were becoming a near daily occurrence. And there were only so many times people could get worked up over them. Tommy was surprised it was even getting air time on the news.

Lightning hit the MegaZord and formed itself into a giant sword. Tommy tried to imagine the last desperate fish-based pun the monster got out before it was predictably carved into filets.

That was pretty good. Tommy smiled at his own pun.

A reporter gave a wrap-up as the Zords disappeared, and the channel flicked back to afternoon cartoons. Tommy stopped paying attention.

He was almost okay with sitting on the sidelines while he watched his friends fight.

What he'd been expecting hadn't happened: he'd been expecting Rita to attack him mercilessly. He and Billy had upped the security on his house. Billy had given him back his communicator, and now Tommy kept it on at all times, only taking it off to shower. It didn't make him feel entirely safe, but it did remind him that he was still a part of something… if not an active part.

He ordered a strawberry smoothie and a juice for himself and waited.

Kimberly ran in, breathing heavily. She had obviously come straight off the battlefield and ran from the nearest teleport point. "Sorry I'm late," she breathed. Ernie set the smoothie next to her, and she immediately took a huge drink.

She grinned and kissed him. "Best boyfriend ever," she said. The kiss tasted like strawberries.

"I do my best," Tommy said. "Rough day?" he said, this time sotto voce.

Kimberly scraped the hair out of her face. She looked worn, though still beautiful. "Same as every day… unfortunately. This whole daily attack thing is getting kind of old. Jason's super worried, too."

They moved to a far table so they could talk with no one listening in.

"I can imagine," Tommy said. "Rita's crying wolf."
"Huh?"

"Crying wolf. Like in the story."

Kimberly took a long draw of her smoothie. "But she's not bluffing. She's actually attacking us… if you'd call that fish monster an attack."

"Exactly," Tommy explained. "She follows up kidnapping half the town with a bunch of little, routine attacks. The monsters barely have any special powers. You keep expecting her to pull out the big guns, but she doesn't."

Kimberly's face was grim. "She's planning something big. And she's trying to throw us off our game… wear down our endurance." She rubbed her temples. "She's doing a pretty good job of it."

Tommy smiled. He really wanted to keep theorizing about what Rita was up to, but he could tell Kimberly needed a break. So he said the one thing that would drive fights with evil aliens completely out of her head. "So, you almost done with the wedding decorations?"

Kimberly looked at him like he'd just been speaking Portuguese. "You're kidding, right? The wedding's this weekend, and I still don't have all the table settings done. And my calligraphy pen broke… do you have one I can borrow?"

Tommy just looked at her.

"Right," she said sheepishly. "And I wanted to have everything done by now, but…"

"Dad knows you've been busy," Tommy said. "And Sylvia…"

"Is so laidback and pragmatic that I could show up with Land Before Time themed paper hats and kazoos, and she'd be thrilled," Kimberly said.

"I wouldn't." Billy approached, looking far more tired than Kimberly, with a pile of books in his arms. "She might think the theme was a comment on her age."

Tommy glanced over Billy's shoulder. None of the other Rangers had come in with him.

"The others are still up there," Billy answered Tommy's unasked question, using the euphemism they used for the Command Center. "I'm just here to work on a project, as I will be prevented from doing any work this weekend."

"I swear, if Rita attacks this weekend, I will go completely insane," Kimberly said.

"Nothing bad's going to happen this weekend," Billy said reassuringly.

He started to back up at the awful looks Tommy and Kimberly gave him. "What?" he said.

"You realize you're jinxing the hell out of this weekend, don't you?" Tommy said.

"Why would you even say that?" said Kimberly.

Billy's eyes were wide and panicked. "I didn't think… But… I'm… just going to go work over there," he finished.

Tommy and Kimberly watched him as he slumped off.

"Too hard on him?" Tommy said quietly.
"Probably," Kimberly answered. "This weekend was jinxed long before he said anything."

Tommy nodded, going over in his head for the millionth time the security measures they'd set up. The wedding was going to be Saturday afternoon in the garden outside the summer home. Camouflaged among the plants were teleportation inhibitors, guided surveillance shields (so that the Command Center could monitor but Rita couldn't), and sensors that would only allow humans to enter without setting everything off. Billy and Tommy had spent most of a Saturday fixing everything up while their parents were out. And still, Tommy worried. Rita would still find some way to mess everything up.

"Hey..." Kimberly said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "I'm not going to say everything will be perfect, but we've prepared the best we can. If anything bad happens, we'll deal."

Tommy gave a thin smile. "The thing is... I want this weekend to be over with already. And I shouldn't feel like that. I sorta feel like in some way she's already won."

Kimberly's eyes were sympathetic. For a moment Tommy felt like pushing her away, acting like old Tommy. The feeling passed. He was getting better at not being a jerk, he mused.

"Hey... you wanna get out of here?" Kimberly whispered, her eyebrows raised significantly.

Tommy grinned. "Hell, yeah." A good makeout session did wonders for too many worries.

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Jason finished one battle record and began another. His eyes followed the movements mechanically. He practically had this battle with the teapot monster memorized, but what if he had missed something?

"Jason, it is late," he heard Zordon say behind him. "Perhaps you should go home and rest."

Jason rubbed his face, forcing himself to not look as tired as he felt. "Just a little more time," he said, thinking he sounded absurdly like he had when he was a child asking for a few more minutes of TV before bedtime. "I know I've watched these tapes a hundred times, but I can't just give up."

Zordon looked steadily at him, considering. "All right. But you must leave soon. Your powers can only help you so much when your body and brain are exhausted."

"Thanks," Jason said, turning back to the globe.

Ostensibly, he knew what Rita was doing. She was wearing them down with minor attacks, not only breaking down their resistance but also stealing any semblance of a normal life from them. Jason reflected that he really needed to be doing homework, but he knew he wouldn't be able to concentrate. Chemistry and English would just have to wait.

He also didn't want to admit to himself that he was learning nothing from these fights. They were repetitive, unpredictable... the monsters unremarkable. It was like Finster had cleaned out the attic and, instead of having a garage sale like a normal person, decided to make all the junk into monsters. A teapot, for Pete's sake.

What tortured him was that there might be something... some clue... hidden in the fights. Something that would lead to Rita's big plan. After all, hadn't the Candle Monster dropped clues left and right that a candle was sapping Tommy's powers? What if there was something like that and Jason was too thick to see it?
Trini and Zack were long gone. Trini had stopped long enough to refresh their supply of serum. They'd been having more injuries lately, just from exhaustion and carelessness. Zack had stayed with him to help study the tapes, but he'd given up finding anything on there.

What Jason really wished was to get Tommy up there to help him. He knew that Tommy was brilliant when it came to battle strategy. Probably better than he was, though Jason would never admit it, he thought with a wry smile. But... no. Zack was right: it would be cruel to ask Tommy to watch the fights more than he had to. Tommy was already dealing with not being able to fight alongside them. Why shove it in his face? Plus, right now he was dealing with all his family stuff. Jason just couldn't ask him for help.

"I'm done," Jason said wearily, shutting the replay mode of the Viewing Globe off. The globe immediately switched to night scenes of Angel Grove. He ambled over to Alpha, not eager to go home and have his homework stare accusingly at him. "What are you working on?" he asked.

Alpha jumped and covered the controls with his hands. "Working on? Uh..." The robot looked up at Zordon.

Jason was a bit startled to see Alpha so flustered.

Zordon saved Alpha from having to explain. "Alpha and I are merely running an experiment. We do not wish to reveal the details until everything is finished. Now, I would insist that you go home and get some rest."

"Yeah, sure, Zordon," Jason said, bewildered at being thrown out of the Command Center for no apparent reason.

"Well?" Rita hovered over Finster at his work station. "Can you do it?"

Finster would have been annoyed at this intrusion had he not been absorbed in his work. He brushed past Rita to tap at his computer before answering. "Most probably," he said. "The Blue Ranger is a singular talent, and he has the resources of Zordon behind him, but he is still very young, and his implementation lacks sophistication."

"So you can have their security measures down."

"In a twinkling," said Finster. "Just give the signal."

Rita smiled to herself. They would feel safe. Safe and happy. And she would rip that all away from them.

It was the evening before the wedding. Tommy had spent the day suspended from trees, hanging twinkle lights. He wondered where Kimberly had dug them all up, and he shuddered to think about having to take them down in a few days.

Tommy sat in the garden in the gathering dark, barely able to move. Billy emerged from one of the dark recesses near the woods and sat next to Tommy, shutting off one of his numerous mechanical blinking boxes.
"Last check-up of security," Billy explained. "Everything's working correctly. There should be no surprises… and I'm jinxing things again, aren't I?"

Tommy laughed wearily. "Sorry about earlier, man. We were just messing with you."

Billy nodded, but his brain seemed far away from jokes. "And you've got the alibis just in case any of us have to leave…"

"Billy, don't worry," Tommy said. He felt peaceful for the moment. "We've been over the contingency plans a thousand times. There's nothing more we can do tonight." He sighed. "I just wish this felt more like a wedding and less like a war."

"We will survive the wedding," Billy said. "Then we will only have to worry about moving."

"Hey, that's something I'm practically an expert at," said Tommy. "We already have half our stuff at your house anyway."

In truth, Tommy was also feeling nervous about him and his father moving in with Sylvia and Billy. It made the most sense. They didn't even own the house they were staying in: that was his uncle's summer house. Yet Tommy still couldn't set foot in the house without remembering what he'd done to both Billy and Sylvia in his worst act as the evil Green Ranger. He imagined that living there would possibly make things easier, but would he ever be able to call it home?

John wheeled over to Tommy and Billy. "Everything okay?"

Tommy and Billy shot each other a look. They'd reluctantly let John in on their precautions… not to make him nervous, but to put him on his guard.

"The security precautions have been completely implemented… John," said Billy. "I'm going to run one last security check from the Command Center in the morning." He smiled. "Zordon said he appreciated the invitation, though his condition and various other… circumstances… prevented him from attending."

Tommy grinned, remembering the look on Zordon's face when Tommy and Billy had delivered the invitation for both him and Alpha. It had been strange to give a wedding invitation to the giant floating head of an intergalactic being.

"I knew he wouldn't be able to come," John said easily. "I just didn't want to ignore him because of a medical condition. Besides, he's such a big part of your lives. Felt strange not to acknowledge that."

Tommy wondered if he could ask Zordon for permission for his dad to see the Command Center. After all his father had done for them, it was the least he could do.

"Supper's ready, by the way" John said. He jerked his head toward the dining room, where Tommy could see the outline of Sylvia through the curtains.

"Great, I'm starving," Tommy said, willing himself to get out of the chair.

John cleared his throat. "Steve's here."

Tommy looked at the window again. Sure enough, there was a second outline, shaking hands with Sylvia. Tommy groaned. "I thought Uncle Steve wasn't getting here until tomorrow."

"Be nice," John warned. "He's my brother, and he wanted to be here first thing in the morning to help me out."
"I'll be nice if he will," Tommy said grumpily.

"Tommy," John said, a hard edge coming into his voice.

"Yes, Dad."

John rolled to the back door. Billy got up to follow, but Tommy stayed where he was, suddenly losing the will to ever move again.

"I take it you're not exactly pleased to see family?" Billy said.

Tommy sighed. "Uncle Steve… well… we just don't get along. Just… if I get too pissed, can you make a reason for both of us to leave?"

"Of course," Billy said. "But…"

Tommy hauled himself up to his feet. "You'll see."

They walked inside, grabbing glasses and napkins to set on the table as they went. Tommy steeled himself. "Uncle Steve, good to see you."

Steve stood up from the table. He looked a lot like John… slightly older, and more imposing. At first it seemed like Steve was what John would be like if he had his full health, but there was also a hardness about him that was obvious even when he smiled.

"Tommy," Steve said shortly, barely giving him a glance. "And you must be Billy," he said more warmly. He held out his hand. "I've heard so much about you from John. Top of your class, and won several science awards, am I right?"

"Yes, sir," Billy said, a little uncomfortable at the man's attention.

They sat down to the meal. Tommy decided to stare mostly down at his plate and let the others talk. It was better not to engage. And supper went on companionably enough. John, Sylvia, and Steve talked over plans for the next day. Sylvia and Steve seemed to get along well. Billy answered when he was spoken to and kept shooting worried glances at Tommy.

"Surprised to see you here, Tommy," Steve said abruptly. "Weren't you off with your… mother?"

John spoke up before Tommy had a chance. "I told you he came back a little before Christmas."

Steve was still staring at Tommy. "I can't wait to see how long you stay around this time."

Tommy looked up sharply, but Steve had already moved his attention to Sylvia. "I'm impressed with what you've done with the garden, Sylvia."

There was a bit of reserve lurking behind Sylvia's smile, though she was obviously making an effort for John. "It was a friend of Billy's and Tommy's that did most of the work." Her smile broadened. "And Tommy nearly killed himself putting up those lights. Scared me to death."

"Get used to that," Steve said under his breath.

"Hey, Tommy," Billy said suddenly. "Don't we need to get take some of your stuff to the house? You can even stay over if you want." He sent a questioning glance to John.

"Just be back bright and early in the morning," John said.
Tommy felt himself being led upstairs to his room by Billy. Billy grabbed a couple of boxes without looking at them while Tommy threw together a quick overnight bag. As they stomped back down the stairs, they said goodbye to their parents and loaded up in Tommy's van.

When they got on the road, Billy finally spoke. "Okay, what was wrong with your uncle? I mean… that was uncalled for."

Tommy's pulse was finally slowing, and he forced himself to calm down even more for driving. "Sorry about that."

"You didn't do anything," Billy said, seeming to catch Tommy's siphoned off anger. "He's the one who should apologize."

Tommy shook his head. "It's been like that for a long time. Dad and I have gotten used to it… for the most part. At least, we know there's nothing we can do about it without cutting ties with Uncle Steve altogether, and Dad really doesn't want to do that. Not with all his uncertain health stuff."

"But what is… it… that you can't do anything about?"

"Uncle Steve thinks I'm too much like my mother," Tommy said in a monotone. "It's really her he's angry about. He blames her for abandoning Dad when he needed her the most. Since she's not around, then…"

Billy shook his head in confusion. "But… you have been there. Your mom abandoned both of you. At least, that's what you've always said."

"And if any of this made sense, Uncle Steve would have gotten over the whole thing years ago, like Dad did," said Tommy. "And Uncle Steve knows about all the times I've cut out on Dad. He knows about my run-ins with the police, all the schools I've gotten kicked out of… and he knows about the time I 'disappeared' when I was under the spell. So in his book, I'm not always there. And when I am there, I'm just a burden on Dad rather than a help." Tommy realized he was driving too fast. He slowed down. The last thing he needed was Uncle Steve to hear he'd gotten a ticket.

"I knew he was rude to you on… the answering machine. But I just thought he was irritated that you wouldn't answer your calls." Billy looked nervous that he had brought up the answering machine tape that had helped break the spell. It was something they generally didn't talk about.

Tommy shrugged. "Listen, it's no big deal. Just something else to deal with tomorrow. Uncle Steve and his family barely spend time with us. Uncle Steve's loaded, if you haven't been able to tell, and his wife sort of comes from a rich family, so she doesn't like spending time with the poor side of the family. And I think my cousins are a little afraid of me. The occasional family thing is all we'll have to deal with." They were getting closer to Billy's house, so Tommy decided to lighten the mood. "You don't have any crazy relatives, do you?"

"You'll see what there is of them tomorrow," Billy said. "I don't really have much family on my dad's side, but my mom had three sisters who decided fecundity was a virtue."

"Say what?"

"Tons of cousins."

"Gotcha."

"Not all of them will be there tomorrow, anyway. Mom just invited the ones living in town." He sighed. "If this is what a small, stress-free wedding is like, I'd hate to see a big one."
"We just have to get through tomorrow," Tommy said as he pulled into the driveway. "As long as we can keep Rita from crashing the party and me from attacking my uncle, I call the day a win."

They grabbed the boxes and tooted them through the house to Tommy's new bedroom. It used to be a guest room, and there was still a feeling of falseness about the place. It was too clean, though Tommy supposed he'd take care of that within a week of daily living. He'd never been exactly tidy or organized. The boxes went in a corner. It hadn't been essential to bring them: just an excuse to get out of there.

"I'm too wired to get to sleep," Billy said. "Do you want to work on the car?"

Tommy realized he was completely tense. There was no way he'd be able to sleep in this house. At least, not that night anyway. "Billy… I'm sorry. I think I'm going to drive back. I… I want to just make sure I've got everything all packed."

The lie sounded lame even to his own ears, and Tommy knew it didn't fool Billy one bit. "Sure…" Billy said in a small voice. "I guess I'll see you in the morning."

Tommy left, feeling pretty bad for blowing Billy off that way. But he just couldn't spend the night in that house until he could feel like he could call it his house. And that wasn't happening until after the wedding.

And he had plans with his dad that Uncle Steve was not going to ruin.

When Tommy pulled up, the porchlight was on. Tommy grinned and stopped before he'd pulled all the way up the driveway.

John was sitting outside in his wheelchair, holding a basketball. "Knew you'd be back."

"As promised," Tommy said. "One more game as a single man. How'd you get rid of Uncle Steve? And where's Sylvia?"

"Told Steve to go to his hotel already. And Sylvia's asleep in one of the guest rooms." He started bouncing the ball. "She wants to refrain from any activity until after the wedding."

"I so don't need to hear that." Tommy circled around and made for the ball, but John was too quick for him. He swapped sides with the ball and wheeled himself around toward the goal.

Basketball was a ritual they kept to themselves. It had started out as physical therapy for John. Now they played for fun, at least once a week. It was the one thing they did that made Tommy feel like his father was whole and healthy, like he was when he was a kid. Tommy barely noticed the wheelchair, as John was so good without it.

They played. They didn't keep score. They taunted each other and laughed. When they stopped, they were gasping for breath. Tommy sat on the pavement beside his father, who was rubbing his hands from the friction from the wheels.

"You ready for tomorrow?" Tommy said between breaths.

"Nothing's going to change, Tommy."

Tommy looked up, glaring at his father. "No fair reading my mind like that."
John chuckled. "Can't help it. But I mean what I say. We're going to be moving, and we're making our family bigger, but nothing's going to change between the two of us."

"I'm supposed to be supporting you," said Tommy. "You're the one who's getting married."

"We support each other, like always," John answered. "I... know it's been really difficult ever since you lost your powers. I know it's been hell for you sitting on the sidelines while your friends fight."

Tommy swallowed and nodded. Leave it to his father, even through the flurry of the wedding, to see past his brave front. In truth, he would give just about anything to morph just once more.

"I just wanted to say how proud I am of you," John continued. "No matter what Steve says, and no matter what you think of yourself, and no matter if you have superpowers or not... you're a hero."

There were times in his life when Tommy would have pulled away. But this was one of those moments when he knew it was time to open up and leave all that cynical bullshit behind. "Not as much a hero as you, Dad. Never will be."

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Billy watched Tommy drive off, feeling disappointed. He'd sort of wanted to use this time to get used to Tommy being around. And he knew his mom was staying over at the summer house, so he'd be alone.

He briefly considered teleporting up to the Command Center, but he knew Zordon would just tell him to go home and go to sleep.

Instead, he made his way to his lab. Maybe he could get an hour's work in on a little project he had going.

He flicked the light on in the lab. It didn't come on. He instantly reached for his morpher. Before he could reach it, he felt rope coil around him. The rope seemed like a living entity. It bound him tightly, keeping his arms and wrists covered so he couldn't reach his morpher or communicator.

He felt a presence in front of him, holding the other end of the rope. Instinctively, he threw a lightning-fast kick. His foot struck solidly and he heard whoever it was land untidily on one of his tables.

Rather than wait for the attacker to get up, Billy went straight for his emergency beacon that would send a distress signal straight to Zordon. Unfortunately, he hadn't counted on there being more than one attacker. A leg swept his feet from under him and he landed on his back on the concrete floor. He hit his head against the concrete and lay there, partially stunned.

A female voice cursed in an unfamiliar language. "Damn kid is getting too good for his own safety."

Billy felt a tug at the rope, and in no time he was on his feet. It was like the rope was somehow connected to his nervous system. It made him stand up and stay still even when every thought and impulse in Billy was screaming to keep fighting.

This isn't happening... Not again... Not again...

A light came on. Scorpina was standing in front of him, holding an end of the rope and nursing a cut on her lip. She was also surrounded by Putties, making it quite a feat for Billy to have gotten as far to the emergency beacon as he had.
"All clear," Scorpina said aloud to no one in particular.

Billy decided he didn't want to appear as frightened as he felt. "What's the matter, Scorpina? Too scared to face me on your own? Felt you needed all these Putties to keep you safe?"

Scorpina sneered at him. "I'd watch your mouth, if I were you. Just because Rita hasn't ordered a kill…"

Adrenaline pumped through Billy. It almost felt like he could override the ropes if he got himself worked up enough. Faintly, he realized he was actively channeling Tommy. "You know, that threat gets less and less scary every time. Goldar tries to kill Jason; he fails. You tried to kill Tommy while he didn't even have powers… and you failed. I don't think you're even trying anymore."

Scorpina raised her fist, and Billy concentrated on steeling himself and not wincing.

"That's enough!"

The side door to the garage lab had flown open. Scorpina backed off immediately. Billy's stomach dropped to his shoes as his fear reached all new levels.

Rita Repulsa. Empress of Evil. In his lab.

Rita brushed her dress and haughtily surveyed her surroundings. "Ugh… I'll have to bathe for a month after this."

She looked straight at Billy, who was getting less and less concerned about showing fear. He was too terrified. "Oh, don't worry so much, Blue Ranger," Rita said with disdain. "I do not have the love of physical violence that Scorpina here does… nor my former Green Ranger, for that matter. And I don't want him injured," she said, turning her attention to Scorpina. "He must be able to blend in."

Billy swallowed back his fear. "Whatever you want from me, you won't get it. I've already pushed a beacon to contact Zordon, and he…"

"Please dispense with the tiresome lies," Rita said. "We have little time. Finster was able to easily break down the security over your lab, but the wedding site is a far different story. So we need a little help in that department."

Billy felt the ropes loosen slightly. He was right. His fear and anger were driving his adrenaline up, which was overriding the control the ropes had over him. He also suspected that Scorpina's anger was rising, making her lose control of the ropes. Now if only…

"If you think I'm going to help you, you're even crazier than you look," Billy said, practically spitting the words out. Just a little more… "Can't you get it through your head that you can't rule the world by sending us minor inconveniences? We've won every time so far. What makes you think this time will be any different?"

Scorpina raised her fist to Billy with a shout, but Billy wasn't there. The ropes had slipped off his frame, and he ducked and rolled under a table. He grabbed his morpher.

Purple lightning arced across the lab, shattering several beakers and hitting Billy square in the chest. His morpher fell to the ground. He realized he couldn't move at all.

"Billy," Rita said in a warm voice, "stop being ridiculous and look in my eyes. Just look in my eyes and follow my voice. I won't hurt you, Billy. I just want a simple favor, and then I will leave you alone. Just follow my voice, and everything will be okay."
Billy felt a warm rush through his body. His heart slowed. He could breathe easier. He was no longer afraid.

"Will you do me one favor, Billy? After that I will leave you and your friends alone."

That sounded completely reasonable, Billy decided. "What can I do?" Billy said. As he said the words, he felt himself relax even more. He hadn't realized how tense he was.

"I need the security codes to disable the security at the wedding site. I want the security down tomorrow."

Billy frowned, confused.

"What is wrong?"

"There are no security codes," he said, glad that he had the chance to explain. "The security measures can only be disabled by a key, and I'm the only one who can disable them."

"Where is this key?"

"It's in the Command Center," Billy said immediately. He hoped he was doing what Rita wanted. For some reason—Billy had given up trying to question anything—he didn't want to disappoint her.

"Hmm…" said Rita. "This needs thinking."

"How are you doing that?" Scorpina said. She was coiling up the rope and staring at Billy, though Billy didn't ever notice her while Rita was there.

Rita waved her hand dismissively. "Simple magic-fueled hypnosis. It won't last forever, and it's certainly not as sophisticated as the spell I put on Tommy. I'm just gauging how far I can push it. Ordinarily, you can't hypnotize people into doing anything they wouldn't do in the first place. For instance, you can't hypnotize anyone to kill themselves. However, there's magic to get around that."

"But you're wondering how far it would take before the Blue Ranger's natural instincts kicked in," said Scorpina.

"Precisely." Rita scrutinized Billy, who simply stared back at Rita, waiting to be addressed. He didn't understand anything Rita or Scorpina were saying at the moment. "It would have been simpler to get him to recite security codes. But a trip to the Command Center, and then to the wedding site, all without alerting anyone…" She smiled. "I've got it."

Rita muttered a few words, and a thin stream of red light arced from her wand to Billy's head. He gasped once and fell down.

"What did you do to him?" Scorpina asked in alarm. "I thought you didn't want him unconscious."

Rita chuckled. "I chanced a little stronger magic so I could work a tiny spell around him. Let's just say that it's sort of like Tommy's spell, except with a time limit. He'll act normally and have full use of his abilities and intelligence, but only for our purposes. That is, until noon tomorrow."

Billy was already getting up. "That was certainly a rush, Empress Rita. Are you sure this is only temporary? It's a shame," Billy said good-naturedly. "I haven't felt this good in months."

"And how do you feel?" Rita said, smiling.

"Completely and utterly loyal to you, my Empress," Billy responded immediately. "Also a little
"That will pass," Rita said. "You know what to do?"

"Let's see… Go to the Command Center, quietly disable Zordon and Alpha without alerting anyone else…" He was ticking his fingers off as he listed what he would do. "Grab the key, and at your order tomorrow disable security at the wedding." He looked up. "Is there anything else I can get while I'm there?"

Rita considered. "Has Zordon found the Sword of Power yet?"

"No, Empress," Billy said, looking disappointed. "I've helped him look, and right now we're at a dead end."

"No matter," Rita said soothingly. "Can you manage the Dragon Coin and Dagger then?"

Billy's face fell more. "Not the coin, as that's linked to Jason's vital energy at present." he brightened. "But I can manage the Dagger easily. I can just tap into the Morphin Grid, and Jason won't know because he's not as attuned to the Green Powers."

"Well, I think that's a fine night's work," Rita said with satisfaction. "I leave it in your hands, then. When you attain the Dragon Dagger, leave it on a table in your lab, and I will send Scorpina to retrieve it. At some point tomorrow, I will send Putties to the very edges of the protected area around the wedding site. As soon as this happens and the other Rangers are involved in fighting, I want you to quietly disable security. The Putties will lead the Rangers away from the wedding. I want you to join the Rangers then in fighting and act with them until the spell wears off. Can you manage it?"

"Just leave it to me, Empress" Billy said confidently.

Billy, Scorpina, and the Putties left. Billy felt more wide awake than ever. He looked at his watch. Just an hour before Zordon and Alpha usually shut down for the night. He'd wait until then. All it would take was a temporary disruption of Zordon's link with their dimension. He could then replace Zordon with a projection that could interact with anyone for routine interactions. And Alpha he could just put in a diagnostic feedback loop and claim the robot shut down after getting a virus.

He pulled over a computer and began working on the Zordon program. For a second, he felt an itch in the back of his mind, as if he realized this was somehow wrong. But as he started working on the program, he got so involved that he almost lost track of the time. When he looked up, two and a half hours had passed.

"They'll be sure to be asleep now," Billy said to himself. He copied his program to a disk and teleported up.

Sure enough, the Command Center was dark. Alpha was off to the side, standing in stasis. Swiftly and deftly, Billy pushed a few buttons on his chestplate, effectively sending him into a coma of internal diagnostics. He wouldn't get out of that until Billy did it himself.

As soon as Billy pressed a few buttons on the communication console to disable Zordon's link to the Command Center systems, Zordon blinked into view in the tube. He looked startled. "Billy, what are you doing?"

"Quiet, please," Billy said. "I'm working here." He started uploading the program. At the same time, he pressed a few buttons on another console, tapping into the Morphin Grid. The Dragon Dagger materialized at the very top of the computers.
"Billy, you are obviously under a spell," said Zordon. "I know the spell is powerful, but you do have the ability to fight it. Think about what you're doing."

"I know exactly what I'm doing," Billy said. "And the spell is only temporary, so it's not really expedient to fight it. By noon tomorrow, everything will be over."

Zordon's alarm was mounting. "Billy, you don't want to ruin your mother's wedding, as I'm sure is the object. Think about how much this will hurt her."

"No one is going to get hurt," Billy said reassuringly. "I'll take you out of this as soon as I shake this spell." He smiled. "See you tomorrow."

Before Zordon could say another word, he winked out of existence. A few seconds later, an exact replica of Zordon took his place.

"Billy," the replica said, "it's far too late to be working. I was about to shut down myself. Go home and get some rest."

"Yes, Zordon," Billy said smilingly. Casually, knowing this replica would not point anything out, he took the Dragon Dagger and teleported out.
Predictably, Tommy overslept.

He awoke to the feel of a hand on his shoulder, shaking him gently. He almost thought it was a dream when he squinted to see Kimberly's face over him.

"Tommy…?" she said gently.

Then he realized that Kimberly was in his bedroom, standing over his bed, while he was just waking up and mostly naked.

When she saw the look on his face, she blushed furiously and turned around. "Sorry… People are starting to get here, and I just wanted…"

"It's okay," Tommy said, not daring to say what he wanted at that particular moment, and it had nothing to do with what was going on downstairs. "I'm up. Just… give me a few minutes."

Without really thinking, he grabbed her hand and kissed it, wanting her to turn around, wanting to kiss her lips, wanting…

They heard bounding footsteps on the stairs, and reality interjected. With a squeak, Kimberly ran out of the room.

Tommy decided to take a shower. It was probably for the best they'd been stopped before anything could happen. Things were heating up between him and Kimberly, but Tommy could tell Kimberly wasn't quite ready yet. And, boy, did he not want to screw this relationship up.

It didn't take him long to dress. Thankfully, there would be no tuxes. Part of that was because they just couldn't afford the rentals, but it was also because the entire wedding was really formal. Men were in suit jackets and ties, women, including the bride, in spring dresses of their choosing, no attendants or wedding party, and the whole thing would be a quick ceremony followed by a lunch outside. Tommy was definitely glad it was going to be a short wedding. Less time for everything to screw up.

When he finally got downstairs, still tying his tie, he saw Jason and Zack setting out tables. He rushed forward to help them.

"Oversleep?" Zack said with a smirk.

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Whatever made my dad plan a Saturday morning wedding, I have no idea. Where are Trini and Billy? Doing the security check?"

"Billy took care of that early this morning," Jason said. "Security checks out great, too. Not that we'll
be relaxing our guard."

"Guys, relax," Trini said, walking up with an armful of tablecloths. "All three of you seriously look like you're gearing up for war."

"With you and Kim decorating, aren't we?" Zack said. He dodged a centerpiece that Trini threw at him.

Kimberly stormed up. "What are you doing?" She glared at all of them. "If even one of those centerpieces is damaged, all of you will be sorry."

Trini was giggling. "Sorry, Kim. We'll be good."

"Is everything all right?"

The five teens turned around to see Sylvia, who was wearing a pale yellow spring dress. She was also smiling broadly. She was so happy and relaxed that Tommy couldn't help relaxing himself.

"Everything's fine, Ms. Sylvia," said Kimberly, a little manically. She was obviously not affected by Sylvia's calm. "But you should be down here. It's bad luck…"

"I'm sure we'll survive this if I break a few arbitrary rules," Sylvia cut in wryly. "I just wanted to thank all of you for getting here early to help. You've all done so much."

"It's no problem," Jason said.

"Yeah, glad to help," Zack added.

"I don't know how anything would have gotten done without all of you," Sylvia said. She looked around vaguely. "Tommy, have you seen Billy?"

"Not yet," Tommy said, omitting that he'd only just gotten up, so he'd have no opportunity to see anyone not right there.

"I sent him to get ice," Trini said. "He should be right back."

"And hopefully he's buying ice and not inventing an instant ice-making machine," said Sylvia. "I still remember the time I sent him to buy a birthday cake."

"Don't you worry about it," Kimberly said with nervous cheer. She started herding Sylvia back into the house. "We'll take care of everything."

"I'm sure you will," the teens heard Sylvia say with laughter in her voice.

Please… Tommy thought, please nothing go wrong today.

Billy, at the moment, was not bound by the usual rules of teleportation being used for only Ranger business, so he was able to slip away unnoticed. He'd be able to get the ice in plenty of time without anyone noticing. There were advantages to putting Zordon out of commission, he pondered.

He stood in his lab, drumming his fingers impatiently against his work table. He absently thought of picking up one of his projects, but that just didn't seem to matter to him as much at the moment. He was bothered a little by that, but not too much. He knew it would only be a temporary condition.
There was a flash of fire, and Scorpina appeared in front of him.

"It's about time," Billy groused. "I can't absent myself for too long or else the others will suspect something."

"It's your job to make sure your fellow Rangers suspect nothing," Scorpina said shortly. "Rita still has use of you before the spell runs out."

"And what are Empress Rita's orders?" Billy said. He was a little perturbed that Empress Rita sent Scorpina to tell him rather than telling him herself. However, he reflected, she hadn't seemed to like his lab all that much the night before.

"Not so fast," Scorpina said. "We have the Dragon Dagger, but Rita wants to know how well you've done with your other orders."

Billy folded his arms, impatient just to get on with the plan. "I have the key right here, of course." He patted his pocket. "And both Alpha and Zordon are out of commission right now. Alpha is in a diagnostic loop, so he's unable to function without the other Rangers suspecting. And Zordon is cut off from this dimension for right now. I have a computer program in his place, so no one will notice that Zordon is gone."

"A computer program," Scorpina said dubiously. "Those are usually so fake that anyone would notice it for a program right off. You can't just replace a whole person with a program without raising eyebrows."

"I don't have to fool anyone for a long time," Billy said. "Just as long as Empress Rita needs Zordon out of the way. Also, I'm pretty practiced at this. I've made a replica of myself so I could fulfill Ranger duties and my mother never noticed the difference. It was easier for Zordon since he's non-corporeal."

"Are you sure they're out of commission?" Scorpina asked, not to be put off her suspicions. "The last time the Command Center was disabled, it had to be destroyed wire by wire."

"That's because Tommy is a blunt instrument, whereas I am a technical genius intimately familiar with the Command Center," Billy said. "Now can we get on with it?"

Scorpina sighed. "You're lucky Rita trusts your abilities while you're under this spell. Okay, Blue Boy, here's the deal. You know that once you bring down security, you're to rejoin the Rangers and act like you're completely one of them."

"I do remember last night, thank you," Billy said. "But I surmise my duties will not end there."

"Of course not," Scorpina said. "We have something in mind that only you can do…"

The garden was completely decorated. The Rangers sat on lawn furniture that had been shoved to the side, resting before everyone quite got there. Two of Sylvia's sisters had shown up and were helping her in the house (Tommy had noticed a distinct wine bottle shape in one of their purses). Uncle Steve was in the house with John, for which Tommy was intensely grateful. Bill's very young cousins were chasing each other among the chairs, though even Kimberly couldn't bring herself to get up and stop them.

The guests started appearing, and the Rangers reluctantly got up to show the guests to their tables.
Most of the guests were their parents, all being friends with Sylvia from years of their kids associating with each other. There were some other adults that Tommy didn't recognize, but he figured they knew Sylvia. His father didn't have many friends. Moving around and hospital stays took care of that.

Tommy was watching Jason talking with his parents when he felt a hand clap on his shoulder. He turned around, thinking it was his Uncle Steve wanting to pick a fight, when he saw it was a man he didn't immediately recognize. Kimberly was at his side, looking like she'd just stopped trying to tug him away.

"So you're Tommy," the man said. "I'm Frank Allen, Kimberly's stepfather. Kimberly just wanted to introduce us."

"Of course, Frank," Kimberly said through gritted teeth, panic in her eyes as she looked at Tommy. Tommy tried to act as normal as possible. "Good to meet you, Mr. Allen," he said, shaking the man's hand.

Tommy steeled himself for whatever intimidation tactics the man wanted to impose, but Frank just smiled. "I met your father the other day. He's a good man. I'm so glad Sylvia found someone like him."

"Is this the boy you like?" Kimberly's brother, Tommy recognized, had followed them. "Why's his hair long like that?"

Kimberly grabbed Tommy's hand. "Thanks, Frank! Shut up, Kevin! Bye!" She pulled Tommy away from them.

Tommy was laughing when Kimberly stopped at the other end of the garden. "They seemed nice," he said.

"It's a nightmare," said Kimberly. "The sooner this day is over with, the better."

"Kimberly, your decorations are gorgeous," a warm voice came behind them.

"Thanks, Mrs. Kwan," Kimberly answered the woman. "This is Tommy, by the way."

"Yes..." Mrs. Kwan said, a little hesitant. "Good to meet you."

Kimberly tried to ignore Trini's mother's hesitation. Tommy knew that this wedding was a veritable minefield, possible attacks from Rita notwithstanding. Especially since his disappearance, he knew he'd have to be a subject of gossip. Just because his friends had accepted him back didn't mean everyone had. And they didn't have to be as hostile as Uncle Steve to still be cautious of him.

But had everyone accepted him back? They'd been busy with the wedding, so Tommy hadn't had time to dwell, but he still felt a certain amount of reserve from his friends. Billy, not so much, but Trini, Zack, Jason, and even Kimberly. It was like they didn't want to get too close to him, just in case he decided to leave again. Tommy... guessed he could understand that. He'd just have to prove to them that they could trust him. It would just take time.

One of Billy's aunts walked up to Tommy. "It's almost time," she said. "Your father wants you to meet him at the back door."

"Thanks," he said. He smiled and squeezed Kimberly's hand. "See you in a few?"
"Good luck," she said. "Well… that doesn't make sense, but you know what I mean."

Tommy rounded the corner of the house to where the garden path began. That's when he heard the crash.

"No…" he whispered. "Just… let me be wrong for once."

The crash had come from the front of the house. It sounded like their garbage cans. A raccoon. Please. Or a bear. Hell, even the Grizzlinator.

Maybe if he just ignored it…

Another crash.

Tommy cursed under his breath and walked past the back door to the front of the house to investigate. He peeked around the corner.

Putties filled the front yard, just past the boundary of the security protection around the house and garden. They were holding some sort of device, possibly to break through security.

"Of course…" Tommy said under his breath. "Because she couldn't just leave me alone." He punched his communicator. "Jas, we've got Putties in the front yard. They look like they're going to bring down security."

Jason's low voice crackled through the speaker. "We're on it. You stay with the guests and make sure no Putties break through our line."

"Got it," Tommy said in a resigned voice. He really wanted to fight with the rest, but he knew it made more sense for him to stay within the secure area. He started walking back to the garden path.

One by one, he saw the Rangers go to the front yard, trying to look casual even as they hurried. Jason in the lead, Kimberly, Trini, Zack…

"Huh."

At first he wondered if Billy stayed behind to keep an eye on the security, but that wouldn't make sense. Tommy could keep an eye on security just fine, and Billy was needed in combat.

He glanced in the house, trying to decide if he needed to tell his dad to wait before starting the ceremony, when he saw Billy in the hallway, doing something to the hidden control panel that powered the entire security system.

Tommy slipped into the house. "Hey, Billy, is security holding up all right?"

The blow came out of nowhere. So unexpected was it that even Tommy's finely tuned fighting reflexes didn't kick in until it was too late. Tommy felt himself hit the ground at Billy's feet. Billy had sucker punched him in the stomach, his blow aided by a heavy metal component of the security system.

"I really wish you'd stayed out of the way," Billy said coldly. "Empress Rita didn't want you involved yet." He smirked. "But I guess I can make this work."

Before Tommy could regain himself, a foot came out of nowhere, and all was darkness.
Jason took down the Putties holding the device, finally having broken through the outer circle. The other Rangers were positioned between the house and the Putties.

He saw a flash of blue. "Billy, where the hell have you been? I need you to look at this device."

Jason stopped short, though, when he saw the look on Billy's face, a pale, horrified look he hadn't seen since the Island of Illusion.

"It was a trap," Billy said in a hollow voice. "The Putties weren't here to bring down security. We've got to…"

There was a buzzing sound, and then silence. A Putty broke through their lines and went straight for the house. It passed right through where there should have been a barrier.

Jason's stomach dropped. "Security's down!" he bellowed. "Catch that Putty!" He jabbed at his communicator. "Zordon, we need to…"

"I'm sorry, Jason," Zordon said over the communicator. "It's too late. Security would be superfluous at this juncture."

Jason turned as pale as Billy, and they both ran to the garden, tossing aside the Putties as they went. The others followed.

The silence hadn't just meant that security was down. Everyone was gone.

The Rangers stared in dumb silence at the deserted garden. All that was left was decorations and a few scattered personal belongings.

"What about in the house?" Trini said, turning on her heel to run in.

The others followed. Trini vaulted upstairs while the others took the ground level. They found no one, until…

"Tommy, NO!"

Kimberly's voice rang through the house. The others followed the sound to see her crouching by an unconscious Tommy. The side of his head was bruised and bleeding slightly.

Trini crouched to inspect the wound. "He's probably not too bad off, but I don't like head injuries. We'll need to get him to the Command Center to check him out."

"Any idea how he got like that?" Zack asked. "It's not like he's going to get hurt like that by a Putty, even if one could get through security that fast."

"I hit him."

Everyone turned at Billy's quiet statement. They stared at him, but Billy stared at Tommy's prone figure. He looked like he was going to be sick.

With one foot, Billy nudged Tommy's hand. A tiny black device fell out of it.

"The key to the security system," Trini said quietly. "But… that's supposed to stay at the Command Center."

"That was the plan," Billy said wryly. "I… I wanted to make sure the security system was safe. I guess I was being paranoid, but… then I saw him… And then there was nothing I could do."
The air grew sickeningly tense.

"No," Kimberly said quietly, though she had stopped stoking his hair. "He can't be under a spell again."

"Why else would he bring down security?" Zack said hesitantly.

"NO!" Kimberly's face was livid. "It can't be. Billy, you saw things wrong. Why would Tommy warn us about the Putty attack?"

"As a decoy," Zack said. "To keep us out of the way."

"He could have gotten the key this morning when we thought he was asleep," Billy said dully.

Kimberly looked like she wanted to say more, but she was interrupted when Tommy moaned and stirred.

"Let's get him into custody," Jason said. "We can figure out what happened later. Right now, we've got to figure out a way to get our parents back."

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Tommy felt himself coming out of a fog. His head was throbbing, and a buzzing sound near his ear made it no better.

He was surprised to see he was lying in the middle of the Command Center. Only, the Command Center was obscured by a faint shimmer in all directions. He carefully pulled himself to his feet. His elbow touched the shimmer, and sparks flew. He pulled back, rubbing his elbow, and he saw his friends staring at him.

In a rush, he remembered what happened.

"Guys! Security's been brought down! It was…"

Tommy's voice failed him as his brain kept putting the pieces together. Billy was standing to one side, aiming a monitoring device at him.

"Why am I in a force field?" Tommy said slowly.

It was Jason who answered. "Drop the act. We know you're working for Rita again. Billy's already confirmed that you have a spell on you."

Tommy kept his eyes on Billy, who looked like he was trying hard not to smile. No one else was looking at him, though, as all eyes were on Tommy.

"Guys, you have to listen to me," Tommy said, trying to keep his voice calm. "At the beginning of the attack, I caught Billy bringing down the security system. He attacked me before I could stop him. He called Rita 'Empress.' He's the one with the spell on him, not me."

"You know, I remember evil Tommy being a lot smarter before," Zack said. "This spell must not have taken as well."

"We should not underestimate Tommy," Zordon said. "He has deceived us before."

"And especially with the whole 'innocent' gag," said Jason. His face was immovable.
Unsurprisingly, he hadn't bought Tommy's story. Hell, if Tommy hadn't lived through it, he wouldn't have believed it either. "Tommy, we caught you. You were found at the security system with the key in your hand. You knew the system well enough to bring it down."

"Same could be said for Billy," Tommy reminded him.

Jason's face hardened. "Also, the Dragon Dagger is gone. The dagger you placed under my care, along with your powers. How do you explain that? What possible reason could anyone but you have for stealing the Dragon Dagger?"

Tommy's heart was thudding in his ears. He felt like he was getting sucker-punched over and over again. Billy was evil. The Rangers thought he was evil. The Dragon Dagger was gone…

"Why would I want to steal the Dragon Dagger?" Tommy reasoned. "I can't even use it."

"Rita could effortlessly reinstate you," said Zordon. "You would only require your Power Coin."

"And getting the Dragon Dagger would deprive me of a weapon, so that getting the Dragon Coin would be that much easier," Jason added.

"Jason, we can't waste any more time," Zack said.

"You're right." Jason folded his arms and fixed Tommy with a cold stare. "Where has Rita taken our parents? You'll be helping everyone out if you just come clean."

Tommy opened his mouth to reiterate his innocence when he stopped dead. "P-parents? You mean, Dad? And Sylvia? And…"

"Everyone," Jason said. "Everyone at the wedding except us. Teleported out seconds after you disabled security. So tell us where your empress is keeping them. I know she probably promised safety for your father, but you and I both know she's not famous for keeping her promises."

"I don't know," Tommy said. "And you're wasting time questioning me. I'm not under any spells. You need to work at finding our parents right now."

"We have," Trini said. "We've scanned the Earth, contacted Rita, monitored for attacks…"

"We fully expected either an attack or a message after their kidnapping," Jason said. "We get neither. So we have to conclude that you're the message. So what does Rita want?"

Tommy was working to control his breathing. If he went into a panic, things could turn bad. He remembered how the Rangers had treated him when he was evil. They knew he was dangerous, and they took every precaution, even preemptive ones. He wouldn't be surprised if they had plans to gas him if he went into a fit.

"Do me a favor, okay?" he said calmly. "You said Billy confirmed that I was under a spell. Have someone else run the test. Alpha?"

"Alpha's running an indepth diagnostic," Billy said. "He apparently contracted a virus. He won't be operational for hours."

"Zordon, then." Tommy looked up. "Zordon, you know me. You could tell if I was under a spell."

Zordon's face was as impassive as ever. "The readings were eminently conclusive. You are under a spell."
"No!" The word tore out of Tommy as he heard Zordon tell an outright lie for the first time ever. He looked around at the group, desperate for someone who would believe him. "Kimberly," he said finally, noting that she was the only one who hadn't denounced him yet. He hadn't wanted to appeal to her, as he knew this would be a move evil Tommy would make—using personal feelings to get free—but he was desperate, and she was the most likely to believe him. "Kim, please. You know I'm not evil."

Kimberly looked miserable, but her face was still hard and resolute. "I didn't think you were evil when we first started dating, remember?" she said quietly. "Why else would you come back to Angel Grove if it wasn't Rita pulling the strings?"

"Why… else… what?" Tommy said, completely bewildered this time.

"You see, we figured it out," Billy finally chimed in.

Tommy marveled at how sincere and hurt he sounded. Was I that cold-blooded? Tommy wondered. Billy walked closer to Tommy, looking directly in his eyes as he lied. "You left and went off with your mother, bitter about losing your powers. Perhaps even bitter against all of us, who still had our powers intact and had failed to save yours. Rita, of course, still wanted you back, as she had when she was using the Green Candle against you. She teleported you when you were out of our immediate surveillance. She placed you under a spell and then sent you back to Angel Grove. Convenient that you arrived the day, the very minute, she kidnapped those people. Almost as if your arrival was the signal to teleport everyone up. And then you happened to find a way out of her impenetrable dungeon, made your way to Finster's lab, made contact with Zordon without tripping any security, and got the prisoners out… all without your powers. Of course, you had to be the wounded hero, so Scorpina had to poison you just so you could teleport back to the Command Center with a device you got from Finster… just in time for us to save you. We were so happy from winning and so proud that you had saved all those people that we didn't even give you a hard time for leaving in the first place. We just accepted you back, no questions." There was a ghost of a smirk on his face. "How am I doing so far?"

Tommy stared at him, horrified. He could tell why the others were so taken in. Billy had figured out exactly how to frame him, leaving no loopholes. After all, the heroic deed of saving those people had happened in the Moon Palace. The Rangers had not actually seen it happen.

"It makes sense," Kimberly said in a strangled voice. "We kept waiting for Rita to attack you, to get back at you for spoiling her plans, but she didn't. She let you gain our trust back. You've…" her voice broke, "you've been infiltrating our group just so you could do this. And you did a much better job of it than before. If it hadn't been for Billy, we would have never known until it was too late."

Every word from Kimberly felt like a dagger. He'd sensed that the group hadn't fully forgiven him for leaving. But to believe the only reason he had to be friends with them was under Rita's orders? "I didn't need anyone to make me come back," Tommy said, omitting the fact that his mother had told him to come back. "I came back because leaving was the worst mistake I've ever made in a life full of horrible mistakes. I was miserable on the road. And… I didn't come back at first because I thought I'd screwed up so badly here that no one would have me back." His throat was closing up, and the Command Center was obscured by more than the force field. "I'm sorry. Kimberly, please… I'm so sorry. Zack, Trini, Jason, I know I let you all down. And, Billy… somewhere under that spell you're still there. Everything you've said is valid, even if it's not true, and I'm so sorry I broke your trust that badly." He sighed and closed his eyes. "Do what you need to do to feel safe. Lock me away, knock me out… whatever. Just save our parents."

There was silence in the Command Center. Tommy was beyond caring what happened to him. All
he could picture was his father locked in a dungeon, and every minute he spent defending himself against and unbelieving audience meant one more minute his father and Sylvia had to spend in fear.

"That's a very touching performance," Billy said coldly. "Almost enough to get us to take the force field down, if we were blindingly stupid."

"I'd just like to know one thing," Jason said quietly. "When did Zordon start talking like Billy?"

The silence in the Command Center grew tense. Tommy opened his eyes. The others were gaping at Jason.

"Through this whole time," Jason said, his voice growing colder, "Zordon barely speaks up, even when I expect him to say something. And when he does, it's just to confirm what Billy has already told us, and it's all 'eminently conclusive' and 'effortlessly reinstate.' Zordon uses big words, but not like that. That's Billy-speak."

Zordon, suspiciously, didn't say anything. In fact, he hadn't moved his face for several minutes, something no one but Jason had noticed.

"Trini," Jason said, "would you mind scanning…"

Before he could properly get the words out, Billy dived for a console. He pressed a button, and green gas immediately poured from the vents along the floor around the consoles. Billy fitted an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth as the Rangers slumped to the floor, all of the weakly pulling at their Power Coins.

Tommy watched in horror. The force field protected him the gas. "What have you done to them?"

Billy smirked through his oxygen mask. "Don't worry. It's not poison or anything. It's just a security measure, like we fitted into your cell when you were evil." He grinned. "You didn't tell me how fun this was."

"Billy, you've got to listen to me. The spell makes you feel really good… I know that for a fact. But it's destroying you. Think about it. Your mother has been kidnapped, and you helped the people who did it. You've just attacked your friends. Just… really think about what you're doing."

"I am," Billy said. He pulled off the mask when the gas had dissipated. "The spell is only temporary. I have," he consulted his watch, "another fifteen minutes before the spell's worn off. That gives me just enough time to finish the plan."

Time limit. That was just the glimmer of hope Tommy was looking for. All he had to do was to keep Billy talking. "What plan? Rita already has the Dragon Dagger and our parents. I mean, yeah, you didn't succeed in framing me, but…"

"Framing you wasn't Rita's idea in the first place." Billy was searching through Zack's pockets at the moment. "She just wanted me to cause a diversion. When you stumbled on to me dropping the security, I figured this was the best diversion possible."

"So if you're not after me, what are you really after?"

Billy stood up with a grin on his face. "These." He held the black Power Coin in his hand. He pulled a wooden box from a hidden compartment and placed it carefully inside. Then he pulled the morpher from Jason's hand.

It took all of Tommy's self-control to stop from throwing himself at the force field. "Billy, no! That'll
"Then why not... just... ransom off the Power Coins?" Tommy said desperately. "Rita has leverage. She could ransom our parents off for the Power Coins. You know they'd choose to give up their powers before any harm came to our parents."

Billy had moved on to the girls' Power Coins. "Unfortunately, Empress Rita has not made me privy to her plans after this. I can only imagine she has something in mind." He placed the last of the Power Coins into the box, and then pulled his own out of his pocket and placed it with the others. "One more thing," he said. "Empress Rita said that if I had the opportunity, I was to put you out of commission. This looks like as good an opportunity as ever."

He punched a few buttons on a console and teleported out without a word.

Tommy looked around. Zordon was gone, replaced by a flickering, silent image. Alpha was in the corner, silent and immobile. Jason, Trini, Zack, and Kimberly were sprawled out on the floor. Billy had gone with the Power Coins, his dad and Sylvia were kidnapped, and there was nothing he could do. He wondered if there was any way possible this could get worse.

As if in answer, sparks hit his already injured elbow. He drew back, hissing in pain, only to brush against the force field from the other direction. He stayed still, trying to keep in the center of the slowly contracting circle.

"Guys?" Tommy said tentatively. "Now would be a great time for you all to wake up."

Billy sat on top of a picnic table in the park. He'd been waiting at the rendezvous point for a few minutes, but he was impatient. The Rangers would surely not stay unconscious forever.

"Come on," he said under his breath. "We're almost out of time."

Jason woke up to a headache, a sour taste in his mouth, and the sound of cries of pain and panic.

He pulled himself up as quickly as his body would allow, but he stumbled as he was shunted aside, the point of a high heel scraping his face.

"Sorry!" Trini said breathlessly. "But I've got to..."

Jason's eyes refocused to see the source of the cries. Tommy was closely surrounded by the force field. He had pulled off his suit jacket to shield his face, but the force field had already burned away the cloth at his shoulders and was starting to burn into his skin. The entire field was sparking wildly, and the smell of burnt cloth was heavy in the air.

"Hurry!" Jason yelled out, aware that Zack and Kimberly were doing the same, Kimberly crying from wild panic.

In an instant, the force field was gone. Tommy fell forward, and Kimberly caught him. Trini was already running to get serum.
"Never mind me!" Tommy said furious, throwing the jacket off his head. "Billy has all of your Power Coins. He's going to give them to Rita, but there may still be time!"

Zack took over the controls before Trini could reach them. Tracking a fellow Ranger was something they all knew how to do. "He's in Addams Park, and Goldar's with him."

"Get down there!" Tommy said.

All four jammed at their communicators and disappeared, leaving Tommy to stare helplessly at the Viewing Globe, too worried to care about his burns.

Flames appeared in front of Billy, forming themselves into Goldar.

"It's about time," Billy said. "I can only hold off the other Rangers for so long."

"You've done well," Goldar rumbled. "You have the Power Coins?"

Billy held up the box. "I have them right here." He paused, frowning and remembering Tommy's words. "I want assurance that the hostages will be all right."

Goldar brandished his sword threateningly. "That wasn't part of the deal, human. You are to follow orders. Now hand over the Power Coins."

Billy frowned at the box in his hand. His brain was turning... odd. Like he was two people, and he didn't know which person he was at the moment.

Suddenly, he felt a jolt like almost physical pain run through his head. He felt himself walking slowly forward, half willing and half unwilling.

"NO!"

He heard cries behind him, and he fought to turn his head. Jason, Zack, Kimberly, and Trini were running toward him. He opened his mouth to ask what was wrong, but before he could they were blown back. They fell to the ground.

Still staring at his friends trying to raise themselves from the ground, Billy absent-mindedly held the box out at arm's length. He felt it pulled roughly from his grasp. There was a loud laugh, a flash of fire, and Goldar disappeared with the box in hand.

At that moment, the spell dropped, and Billy thought clearly for the first time in hours.

He dropped to the ground, shaking violently, his eyes wide with silent terror and denial. He barely registered the tingle of teleportation.

The Rangers were at the Command Center once more. Trini was at a console, trying to get Zordon back, while the others stared in helpless horror at Tommy and Billy crouched in the center.

"Billy, you need to listen to me. Just calm down and listen."

"It... but... it wasn't... but I... It was all me. I did that."
"It wasn't you, Billy. Not really. You had no choice, Billy."

Tommy was holding Billy's shoulders, trying to steady him. Billy noticed Tommy's bleeding arms.

"I did that," he repeated. "Oh, God, I… I almost killed you. And our parents are gone and Zordon's gone and the Power Coins are gone and everyone's going to die and it's all my FAULT!"

The cry tore from his throat as a more-than-physical manifestation of pain. He started hyperventilating from the sheer panic.

"You can't blame yourself," Jason said desperately, seeing that Tommy couldn't calm him by himself.

"You were under Rita's control," Zack added.

"Come on," said Kimberly, "you were the first to stand up for Tommy! You were in the same situation."

Trini abandoned her attempts at finding Zordon. "Billy, you've got to calm down!" She crouched at his side and tried to pull him into a hug, but Billy flinched away.

"We're all going to die because of me," Billy said, his voice barely over a whisper. "Rita's won, and…"

Tommy's voice hardened in response. "Okay, fine! You did all those things!"

At the outburst, Billy stopped hyperventilating. In fact, he was barely breathing. But Tommy finally had his attention.

Rather than talk more, Tommy pulled Billy off his feet, ignoring the almost unbearable pain in his shoulders. He pushed Billy to the main console. "You're going to start making it right, because that's the only way you're going to be able to live with yourself. Now get Zordon back from wherever you sent him."

Billy was still trembling, but his color was starting to return to normal. Almost mechanically, he keyed in a complicated set of commands into the console. The fake image of Zordon flickered away, and the real Zordon was restored seconds later.

Billy slumped against the computer, as if the effort of not going mad had exhausted him.

Zordon, in the meantime, got the faraway look that meant he was accessing all the events he'd missed. "I'm sorry, Rangers," he said quietly. "I'm sorry I could not prevent this from happening."

"We couldn't have seen this coming," Jason said in a low voice.

Zordon closed his eyes. "Trini, we cannot use your serum without the Power Coins, but Tommy's wounds must be treated. You will find the appropriate medicine in the utility closet."

"Right," Trini said, dashing off and obviously glad to have something to do.

"Billy," Zordon said even more softly.

Billy flinched, unwilling to look up. He was no longer showing outward signs of panic, but Tommy knew that just meant his feelings had all turned inward.

"Billy, you must keep yourself together long enough to recover everything. You may break down as
much as you wish after the danger has passed. Do you think you can manage?"

Billy looked at Zordon, a shudder passing through his frame. "I… I think I can."

"Good," Zordon said, his attention turning to the rest, "for we must prepare for Rita's inevitable message to us."

"Why would she contact us?" Zack said grimly. "She's got everything already."

Zordon gave an uncharacteristic bitter smile. "She does not have everything. Not yet, at least. She does not have me, for instance."

Jason paled. "You… you think she's going to try to ransom off our parents for… you?"

"That is one possibility," Zordon said. "One of many. She holds your Power Coins, and therefore your very lives, since even Billy parted with his unwillingly in the end. She also has your parents, which is of a greater concern. Power can be replaced, though not easily. People cannot."

"We can't just give you up to her," Kimberly said.

Zordon smiled kindly. "I appreciate the sentiment, but that is not entirely up to you."

Trini arrived with the medicine and pulled Tommy aside to treat his wounds. The look on her face told them she'd heard enough to know what was going on.

"It doesn't have to come to that," Tommy spoke up, more to ignore the pain than from having any ideas. "We can mount a rescue. I'm betting since Rita expended so much energy on daily monster attacks, the spell, and teleporting all those people, she's relying on the Moon Palace's security system to protect both our parents and the Power Coins. It'll be risky, but…"

"She's calling," Billy broke in, his voice dull and exhausted. "Rita's hailing us."

Jason chanced a look at Zordon. "We can't do anything but listen. She holds all the cards, after all."

Zordon nodded. "Put her on the Viewing Globe, Billy."

Rita's smirking face filled the screen. "Well, I see my recently former servant couldn't properly dispose of my other former servant," she said. "Too bad. He did everything else so well."

"Stop this, Rita," Zordon said, trying to save Billy further anguish. "Surely we have more important business to discuss."

Rita was laughing to herself. To Tommy, she looked like she was wild with joy, but only just containing it. "I suppose so. I hope you all realize what incredible danger you're all in."

"We don't need reminding, thanks," Jason said through gritted teeth.

"I only said it," Rita said, "because I want to give you all the opportunity to save your parents and regain your powers in one fell swoop."

"Waiting for other shoe to drop…" Kimberly said quietly.

"And what's the price?" said Zack. "Haven't been visited by three ghosts, have you?"

Rita frowned for the first time. "I will ignore that inane human allusion." She regained her good humor. "The price is simple. You must work for me. You will be my Power Rangers."
The Rangers looked at each other in disbelief. Jason turned back to Rita. "You've got to be kidding. What makes you think we would work for you willingly?"

"How about a dead prisoner a day?" Rita said coldly.

The Rangers stared at her, unable to say anything. It was as if their insides were frozen.

"I'll give you an hour to think on it," Rita said. "Have your answer ready then, or one of your parents dies. I will make it quick and painless, but they will be dead all the same." She smirked. "See you in an hour."

She blinked off the Viewing Globe, leaving a picture of a peaceful Angel Grove. But they knew that Rita didn't need monsters to destroy Angel Grove.

"Well, what the hell are we going to do?" Zack broke the silence. "We can't risk a rescue mission without powers."

"We could agree to it… just long enough to get our parents back," Kimberly said a bit wildly. "And then we could fight back."

Trini was shaking her head. "That would be too much of a risk. Rita would have some sort of insurance against a trick like that. She'd put a spell on us, or corrupt our powers, or make candles for all of us, or something…"

Billy wasn't talking. He looked like he had drawn in to himself to suffer silently.

"Jason," Zordon said, "I think it's time to tell everyone Rita's mistake."

Jason's face split into a grin. "I didn't know how long I could contain it."

Tommy was starting to smile, too. "I was wondering if anyone else had noticed. I was about to say something before she called."

Trini, Zack, and Kimberly stared at Jason and Tommy as if they'd just started spouting Greek. Even Billy looked up to puzzle at their smiles.

"Okay, for those of us who haven't gone completely insane," Kimberly said, "do you two mind explaining?"

"In a minute," Tommy said. "Billy, if nothing else will comfort you… You were resisting the spell as much as you could the entire time."

Billy looked absolutely lost. "But… how…?"

"By intentionally making mistakes," Jason said. "And if I wasn't such a bonehead and actually followed your clues, I would have kept us from getting into this much danger. The one clue I should have noticed is, while we were on Earth, you never actually said that Tommy was the one who brought down security. You, in fact, told no lies.

"Then, I finally noticed the really crappy reproduction of Zordon. Not only was he pixilated around the edges… but I've already told what tipped me off about Zordon."

"You were also the first to accuse Tommy, and you didn't even defend him." Kimberly's face went serious. "If we hadn't…" She stopped, casting worried glances at Tommy.

Tommy sighed and smiled ruefully. "I don't blame any of you for not trusting me. I should have
apologized a long time ago. Hell, I should never have left, especially like I did." He linked his hand
with Kimberly's and pulled her closer. "Kim… I…"

"I know," she said softly. "I'm sorry, too."

Zack cleared his throat loudly. "Guys, there's time for PDA later… or not at all, please."

Tommy and Kimberly reluctantly broke apart, looking happily guilty.

"What I want to know is," Zack continued, "what Jason, Tommy, and Zordon are so freakin' happy
about."

"The last thing Billy could do," Jason said. "The biggest mistake in our favor he could possibly
make, and the one thing Rita obviously didn't count on."

Billy was starting to break out of his fugue state. "What are you talking about? She has our parents,
the Dragon Dagger, all five Power Coins…” Billy trailed off, realization slowly dawning on his face.

Jason slowly pulled from his pocket the Green Power Coin. "The thing is… there are six Power
Rangers."

He turned to Zordon as the other stared at the Green Power Coin in shock. "Now, Zordon, I think it's
time you told all of us about those experiments you and Alpha have been running."
Power at a Price

Chapter Summary

Book 3: Something Old, Something Green

Part 3 of my rewrite of the episodes "Return of an Old Friend."

Mr. Scott was the last to return to the center of the room. "Well, it's official. No way out."

The assortment of wedding party and guests shivered in the cold dungeon, most of the women wearing the men's suit jackets. They had just spent the past half hour scouring their prison cell for weaknesses and escape routes. However, they all knew without saying that escape would be difficult at best, since they had no idea where they were and they had to contend with children, as well as John's wheelchair.

The children were properly distracted at the moment. Kimberly's brother Kevin had Billy's young cousins over to the side, leading them in a game of Simon Says. Kevin had puffed up importantly when given this job. Steve had finally convinced his own son and daughter to join, and they were playing along dubiously, obviously considering themselves much too old and cool to play with little children.

"So where does this leave us?" Mr. Kwan said. "And where's the rest of the children?"

A shadow of a smile passed over John's face when his son and his friends—the defenders of the Earth—were called children. John knew he had to most reason for confidence for their eventual rescue, but he also knew he couldn't reveal the reason for that confidence.

"Our obvious best course is to wait," Mrs. Taylor said, speaking as if she were speaking at an academic seminar. "We are either being held for something we have or, more likely, we are being held as hostages in order to coerce someone else."

"How can you be so sure?" Steve interjected irritably. "I mean, we don't even know who's holding us."

Most of the group just stared at Steve as if he'd just said this was the perfect place for a beach vacation. There were a few wry chuckles. John decided not to comment, as his brother usually had a hard time believing anything he said.

Mrs. Allen, Kimberly's mother, responded first. "You're not from around here, are you, Mr. Oliver? You're in Angel Grove, monster attack capital of the world."

"Actually," Mrs. Scott interjected, "we may not even be in Angel Grove right now. Aren't those aliens based on the moon?"

"So, what, this has something to do with those Power Thingies?" Steve said.

"Power Rangers," Sylvia corrected. "And no one expects you to believe anything, Steve, if you don't want to acknowledge the truth."
John grinned at his soon-to-be wife. "You'd best listen to her, Steve."

Steve looked pouty, but the others had already moved on. "We still don't know where the kids are," Mrs. Kwan pointed out.

One of Sylvia's sisters cleared her throat. "If you're talking about Billy's friends, I saw four of them running along the side of the house through the window. I figured they were running to fetch something for the wedding."

Mr. Scott was shaking his head wearily. "That's what they do. They just leave with no warning, and then show back up with no explanation."

The rest were staring at him.

"What?" Mr. Scott said. "No one else has noticed?"

The parents shifted uncomfortably. John's mind raced. In all actuality, he thought the other parents had a right to know what their children were doing, especially since it involved risking their lives on a daily basis. On the other hand, it was not his decision to make, and it seemed this Zordon, who had been so good to his son, was rather insistent on the kids keeping their secret identities. So…

"There had to have been something to signal this kidnapping," John broke in before the others could think any harder. "They could have seen those alien things around and went to investigate. Besides, I'm glad they left before they got stuck with the rest of us. Maybe they can alert the Power Rangers in some way."

"That's definitely what they would do," Frank said. "In the meantime, it looks like all we can do is wait."

John felt a hand tighten on his as the group broke up. Sylvia was still beside him, practically shining in her dress in the middle of the dungeon.

"Don't worry," John said in a low voice. "We'll be free soon, and we'll get good and married."

Sylvia's hand tightened even more. "I just don't like it. This is the second time… I… just can't help but feel we weren't picked as random victims."

John ached to tell her everything. But that would include telling everything about his son, and he just didn't know how Sylvia would react.

An older man in a collar approached: the priest who was supposed to officiate the wedding. He'd searched the dungeon with them but had chosen not speak until then. "I know not all the guests are here," he said, "but I can still perform the ceremony if you wish it."

Behind his words, John knew, was the fear that they would not leave that dungeon alive. That this was the last opportunity they had to become husband and wife. For a moment, John was tempted…

"We can't without Billy and Tommy here," Sylvia said firmly. "Don't worry, Father Rourke. The Power Rangers will save us. We might just have a bit of a wait."

John relaxed, glad that Sylvia felt this way. He couldn't bear it if the rest of this new family wasn't there with them.
"What experiments?" Tommy said slowly.

The Rangers were looking between Zordon and Jason in amazement. Billy looked less miserable as Jason's intriguing words distracted him enough from his guilt. Zordon, on the other hand, looked stern and grim.

"I do not believe this is the proper time, Jason," Zordon said. "It is too soon, and we do not have the help of Alpha."

"This may be our only hope," said Jason. "As long as Rita has our powers and our parents, we can't do a thing to her. Hell, we'll end up having to serve her, just to keep our parents safe. There may not be another time."

"And if we all knew what we were talking about…" Zack said.

"I can do it," Billy said quietly. "I can follow Alpha's part exactly."

Zordon shot him a surprised look.

Billy looked away. "I… looked around a little. When I was evil, I mean. But I didn't say anything to Rita," Billy finished in a rush. "I just want to try to fix what I did."

Kimberly crossed her arms. "You know, this whole talking about something without actually talking about it is getting old real fast."

"I agree," said Tommy. "Now what's so dangerous that we can't even attempt it at the end of the world?"

Zordon sighed. He seemed resigned. "Something that could very well end the universe."

"I know it has to be dangerous," Jason began.

"You don't know, Jason," Zordon said, not unkindly. "It would require using the morphing grid in a way that was never intended. It would be a mortal risk to both parties, and that's only if it were a controlled disaster. Opening up the morphing grid like this could destroy reality if we make any wrong steps."

"But we did something like it," Billy said. "Weeks ago. We were able to transfer power without the help of any mystical artifact. And I did it to save Skull."

"Wait a minute," Tommy said, his voice suddenly sharp. "Are… you talking about…"

Jason held up the green power coin again. "We've proven that Tommy's body can handle morphing energy… just not direct access to the green power coin."

"The theory," Zordon picked up, "is that we can use power to bridge the gap between Tommy's own energy and his green power coin. I conceived the idea when you Rangers charged Tommy's body to use the serum to counteract Scorpina's poison. For a mere second, he morphed. If a quick power transfer from all of you was able to make him morph for a second while he wasn't holding a power coin…"

"Are you saying there's a way to get my powers back?" Tommy was starting to pace. "And we're not trying it yet? What are we waiting for? I could go up there and get our parents, the power coins, and the dragon dagger all in one go."
"That's right," Trini said, her calm, doubtful voice cutting off Tommy's nervous energy. "We don't have the power coins. We can't do any power transfers, dangerous or not."

"So how are we supposed to charge Tommy up?" Zack said. "Where's the energy coming from?"

"From me," Zordon said.

The six stared at Zordon, open-mouthed. He allowed his pronouncement to sink in before saying, "Billy, I believe you can access all the information you need. If you start preparing the connection to the morphing grid I believe we can attempt this before Rita's deadline."

"Hang on," Zack said. "What do you mean the energy comes from you?"

Billy's face now no longer looking haunted. "I didn't read that anywhere. We will be using your own life energy?"

Trini glared at Jason. "How could you even consider that?"

Jason's eyes were wide. "I didn't know where the energy was coming from. I just thought it was coming straight from the morphing grid. I... Zordon..." He turned to face Zordon, whose face had grown hard. "I thought you were just exaggerating when you said it was going to be dangerous. We can't..."

"Jason, you were correct in your summation that this may be our only hope," Zordon cut him off. "Whenever we've sent you Rangers up there unprotected, it has been disastrous and near fatal. We must have a full Power Ranger up there. Now, Billy... prepare the machinery."

"Wait, you said this was going to be dangerous to both of you," Kimberly said. "And even reality itself. I think this is a bigger issue than lost power coins... and," she swallowed hard, "even our parents." Her voice was shaky. "We haven't even talked about other ways yet."

"I can go up there," Tommy said. "I don't need powers. I can still get past security..."

"You will be killed on sight," Zordon said. "All of you will. And this is not simply about power coins and parents. This is also about the fate of the universe. If the Power Rangers are defeated now, you will not be able to face... Jason, would you give Tommy his power coin. We will be ready in minutes."

While the others had protested, Billy had automatically followed what Zordon had said. Jason found himself doing the same.

"What about the dangers to Tommy?" Kimberly insisted. "And to you, Zordon?"

"I don't care about the risks to myself," Tommy said, "as long as you can protect yourself, Zordon." He smiled weakly. "By the way, those risks are?"

Zordon looked almost annoyed at the continued interruptions. It seemed to the Rangers that Zordon knew he was rushing to act rashly, and that he wanted to continue to do so. "I cannot force you to take these risks, Tommy. Your body will be forced to process energy that is alien to it, and your power coin can only protect you so far. If this works, you will be able to morph and access your Zord as you used to... when you retrieve the Dragon Dagger, of course. However, your body will not be able to sustain the power, and you will burn through it. When you begin running out of this infusion, you will suffer the same effects as you did with the Green Candle. This is not a permanent solution, Tommy. And I have only described the best of circumstances."
Tommy's smile was grim. "If you're willing to take the risks, then what are we waiting for?" He held up a hand to the already-forming protests from the others. "My dad's up there. All of our families. I won't let Rita destroy us all like this." He took a breath. "When do we begin?"

"Now," Zordon said. "Rangers, back away from Tommy. Billy, begin the process."

The Rangers had seconds to back away before blinding light filled the Command Center. The Rangers threw their hands over their eyes, and Billy operated the controls more from touch than sight.

The light dimmed. The Rangers slowly blinked their eyes to normal, driving the spots away.

Zordon was floating in his tube as usual, but his blue color had faded to gray, and his eyes were closed. Tommy, on the other hand, was standing in the middle of the Command Center, morphed, breathing fast, and visibly radiating with power.

"Holy crap, it worked," Zack breathed.

"Are you all right, Zordon?" Trini asked quickly.

"I will recover," Zordon said, his voice somewhat more subdued than normal. "Tommy, you must hurry. Rita will surely sense the power shift soon. We will not retain our element of surprise for long."

"Right," Tommy said, his voice barely containing the excitement. "Billy, could you teleport me there? I don't want to waste power."

"Wait a minute, Billy," Jason said. "Tommy, when you get there…"

"I'm not coming back without our parents," Tommy said quickly.

Jason smiled. "I wouldn't expect any less. I was going to say that as soon as you find the Power Coins, teleport them back here. That way we can help you if we need to."

Technically, this was an order to find the power coins before the parents. But Tommy didn't protest. He knew once he teleported the parents out, he wouldn't be able to get back to the Moon Palace. This plan was all or nothing.

"Half an hour, huh?"

Empress Rita opened her eyes to acknowledge Scorpina, who was pacing through the throne room, her arms fidgeting. She'd knocked against the telescope three times already.

"Try to have a little patience, Scorpina," Rita said wearily. "You can't make time go faster with your pacing." She applied pressure to her temple, trying to will the headache away. "Besides, we are finally 'doing something,' as you've been harping on for weeks. We are near the end."

Scorpina scoffed. "Near the end where the Rangers become your new henchmen? Even if they go along with it, that doesn't mean they'll cheerfully enslave their own planet, even if we hang their mommies and daddies over their heads. As young as they are, they'll still know they can't sacrifice a whole planet for just a few people."

"I don't entirely expect them to agree to work for me," said Rita. "I can't rely on blackmailed
servants, just as I couldn't put them all under a spell." Rita smiled unpleasantly. "I expect them to die, to fight to the bitter end, rather than surrender. You might be planning which one of them you want to off. I think Goldar might have dibs on the Red Ranger."

Scorpina hid her distaste. No matter how much she wanted to defeat the Rangers, and no matter how close she'd come to killing Tommy, she just couldn't find pleasure in killing children like martyrs.

"I'm going to check on the prisoners," Scorpina said, more for an excuse to leave than anything else.

At the entrance to the dungeon area, she heard screams. Cursing under her breath, she ran the rest of the way to the largest cell, where the cell divider had been made transparent. The people in the cell were backing to the farthest corner, some of the adults trying to calm the screaming children.

Goldar was standing on the outside of the cell, looking confused. "I just came to check on them, and they started up like this. What's their problem?"

Scorpina rolled her eyes. "You are, you moron. You're a monster. And why'd you have to go scaring them like that?"

"What do you want from us?" a man in a red shirt and sports coat demanded.

Scorpina shot a threatening look at the cell and drew her sword. "Who the hell said you could talk?"

The man backed down, glaring. One tiny boy burst into tears.

"You were saying?" Goldar said smugly.

Scorpina sheathed her sword in irritation. "What are you doing down here, anyway? Aren't you supposed to be guarding the Power Coins? Those Rangers are sure to want their powers back, no matter how many hostages we hold." She ignored the intakes of breath as the prisoners realized no heroes would be coming to save them.

Goldar waved off the concern. "All five coins are safe in the weapon room. There's no way the Rangers can break in there. Right now the room security is keyed to my own DNA. Even you couldn't break in there, should you decide to turn traitor."

"And thank you for the vote of confidence," Scorpina said snidely. Her voice grew more serious. "I thought I'd done enough to prove my loyalty."

Goldar looked away, obviously unwilling to start up the same old argument right there in front of the prisoners. Scorpina looked at the prisoners. There were those who were obvious parents of the Rangers, who showed the same heroic virtues that made the Rangers such infernal pains. The man in the red shirt who had first challenged them was obviously Jason's father. A woman with Trini's skin and hair had the same calm resolve. Kimberly's mother had the same fiery defiance. And then, of course, there was woman standing next to the man in the wheelchair. Billy's mother she had seen during Tommy's attack on her that Saturday so long ago. And John, Tommy's father, had seen her before. Knew exactly who she was. He was staring at her, obviously longing to defy her and yet afraid of revealing what he knew…

"Say, Goldar," Scorpina said quietly, her heart suddenly beating uncomfortably fast. "How many coins did you say you collected?"

"Five, of course," Goldar said impatiently. But even as he said the words, fear dawned on his face. At the same time, John, now no longer defiant and afraid, smirked at Scorpina.
"Hurry!" Scorpina shoved Goldar. "Get to the coins. I'll stay here with the prisoners. He may already be there!"

For there was no question in the minds of Goldar, Scorpina, or John, though the other prisoners looked deeply confused. They knew exactly how the Rangers would fight back.

Goldar skidded to a halt in front of the weapons room, praying that he still had time to secure the coins they had before reporting his blindingly stupid oversight to Empress Rita. He desperately keyed in the security code and ran into the room as soon as the door opened.

There was the box, still in the middle of the room on a pedestal. Goldar ripped open the box. Still there. Still five coins of gold, inscribed with prehistoric animals and glinting weakly their color designations. And the Dragon Dagger still sat right next to the box. He picked it up too, just to make sure it wasn't a fake.

The dagger went flying out of his hands. He turned to see the Green Ranger framed in the doorway, catching the dagger as if it had been drawn like a magnet to his hand.

"Thanks, Goldar," the voice said, distorted but still unmistakably Tommy's. "I couldn't have gotten past security without your help."

Goldar kept a firm grip on the box. Tommy might have control over the dagger, but he couldn't just call the power coins to his hand. He drew his sword with the other hand. "I won't ask how you got in here," Goldar said roughly. "I will ask, though, how the hell you got your powers back."

"Like it?" Tommy said. "Pure Eltar energy straight from Zordon. Enough to kick your ass all the way to Earth and back."

Goldar could hear the exhilaration in his voice. Perhaps Tommy was too drunk with power to fight intelligently. That was something Goldar could use. "So you've got a new toy and power source? Because that always seems to work out."

Tommy laughed. "I honestly thought we'd never be able to do this again. I mean, the last time I beat you, all I did was teleport your power source away." He shrugged. "Of course, that did mean your Zord got trashed, but…"

Goldar knew it was a stupid move even as he did it, but the way this day had turned so horribly had thrown him, and Tommy bringing up the loss of Cyclopsis was just too much. He attacked wildly, his sword swiping across Tommy's chest in one powerful swing. Goldar did have the presence of mind to keep the box safely away from Tommy's reach.

Sparks flew from the point of attack and, instead of knocking Tommy down, they blew Goldar back into the weapons room. He hit the gun racks with an echoing clatter, and several went off, filling the room with dangerous radiant energy and rubble.

Goldar barely had time to recover before Tommy was on him, stronger than he'd ever been before. It was as if Tommy wasn't fully in control over his power. It seemed to form a shield around his entire body. Goldar felt himself thrown across the room again, this time hitting against the bladed weapons. His armor protected him mostly, but his face suffered some cuts.

"Come on, Goldar!" Tommy yelled, already crossing the room for another attack. "Don't crap out on me yet. I could go like this all day!"
Goldar realized with not a little fear that Tommy didn't even seem to be going for the Power Coins. The power had made him oblivious to everything but the fight. While that meant that Tommy was fighting stupidly, it also meant that he might not care whether Goldar, or anyone else, for that matter, lived or died.

Tommy, in the meantime, was taking his time. He picked up a sword and inspected it. "Ah, man, I remember this one." Goldar did, too. It was the sword he had given Tommy, and that Tommy had given back to him after joining the Power Rangers against them.

Goldar pushed himself to his feet, his sword raised in defense. "You're wasting your time, Green Ranger," he said desperately. "Your father is in the dungeon below, and you would risk Empress Rita removing him to a safer location just so you can throw me around the weapons room?"

Goldar could not see if Tommy's expression changed thanks to those damned helmets, but he knew he had hit a nerve in the way Tommy's sword grip changed. "You're right. Better beat you quickly so I can get down there. Thanks."

"No…" Goldar said, amusement tingeing his voice. "Thank you!"

At the last word, Goldar pressed a button from a remote he'd palmed near the gun rack. It controlled one of the bigger guns, which blasted Tommy in the back. Tommy pitched forward, and Goldar launched himself to meet him, catching him with a wicked slash to the ribs.

Tommy recovered, but the gun shot and attack had obviously drained him of some of his excess energy. Goldar knew Tommy would no longer be able to shrug off attacks or throw him around. One worry down.

That's when Goldar noticed something horrible.

Tommy was still there on the floor, clutching his ribs in pain, his chest heaving. And in his other hand was the box.

"Gotcha," Tommy said in a shaky voice.

Before Goldar could even react, the box disappeared, teleported, no doubt, directly to the Command Center.

"What the hell is going on in there?" the voice of Empress Rita shrieked through the air.

"Empress Rita…" Goldar said in a hollow voice, "we've… I've lost the Power Coins."

There was a pause. Goldar could see Tommy laughing silently. "And how, pray tell, could you be so abominably stupid as to allow such a thing to happen?" Rita said, danger dripping from her every syllable.

"Don't blame Goldar, Rita," Tommy spoke up. "After all, I bet even you couldn't have guessed the return of the Green Ranger."

Rita only acknowledged Tommy's taunt with a second pause. Her next words were hurried. "Goldar, do not let the Green Ranger escape. Kill him if you have to. He won't leave without the hostages. I will send Scorpina to Earth for proper distraction."

"Sound strategy, Rita," Tommy said, laughter in his voice. "Let's just see what happens, then."

She didn't answer. Probably fuming as much as Goldar was at the moment.
Tommy shrugged at the silence. "Hostages in the dungeon, right?"

Goldar glared and secured his position in between Tommy and the door. He knew Tommy wouldn't teleport straight there. Tommy had to know that Goldar would follow straight away to continue the fight and secure the prisoners. And Tommy wouldn't want a fight near the prisoners, as that would endanger both the prisoners and even his secret identity.

No, Tommy would be sure to put Goldar out of commission before even going near the dungeon. And Goldar was determined not to be put out of commission so easily.

Sure enough, rather than teleporting, Tommy raised his stolen sword. Goldar raised his own in reply. The fight resumed, this time with grim determination.

There was a collective celebratory whoop when the box containing the power coins shimmered into view on a console.

"That was quick," Zack said. "He's been up there ten minutes."

"Rita can't have been expecting this," Kimberly said.

They were hurriedly passing the box around, their desperation to regain their powers ill-disguised.

"Tommy will have a more difficult time rescuing your families," Zordon spoke for the first time since Tommy left. "Rita must be aware of his intrusion. She will be throwing everything at her disposal at him."

"Then let's get up there and help him," Jason said.

"Finding a hole in security," Billy said. "We'll have to run to the dungeon."

Billy was cut short when the alarm went off. The Viewing Globe automatically showed the scenes of the attack at the amusement park near Angel Grove. Scorpina was there, in monster form, sending around squads of Putties to wreck the park rides, some of which still had children riding them.

"Of course," Zack griped. "And it would have to be children."

Jason stared at the Viewing Globe, obviously still wanting to go up to the Moon Palace. Billy's hands were still poised over the controls.

"We can't ignore this," Trini said quietly. "We all have to go down there to protect those children."

"But she just wants to distract us from saving our parents," Kimberly said in a fury.

"I know," Jason said miserably. "But we don't have a choice."

"Go down to Earth to fight the attack," Zordon said, his voice growing somewhat stronger in the crisis. "I will summon you if Tommy's situation turns dire."

"We end this fight as quickly as possible," Jason said. He gave a grim smile. "Who knows... maybe Tommy can pull off a rescue, too."
Despite the desperate situation, Tommy felt better than he had in months. Possibly it was the fact he was fighting in a major battle, this time with the protection and strength of actual power. Possibly it was the Eltarian energy from Zordon still coursing through him, linking him closer to the Morphing grid than he'd ever been.

Possibly it was that he was kicking Goldar's ass.

Tommy evaded a wild attack from Goldar and got inside his defenses, cutting him savagely through some chinks in his armor. The cuts weren't deep or fatal, but they were obviously painful as Goldar roared in rage.

They'd been at it for several minutes. Tommy was surprised that even with the power drain from the gun shot, he was still easily outclassing Goldar in terms of strength and speed. However, Goldar was infinitely resilient. He might go down, but he didn't stay down for long. And Tommy just couldn't risk a fight near his dad, Sylvia, and everyone else. He'd never forgive himself if any of them got hurt.

They were now fighting in the hallway near Finster's lab and the living quarters. He knew Finster would be monitoring the prisoners from his lab in Scorpina's absence. If he was lucky, he'd be able to sneak a peek to make sure the prisoners were actually in the dungeon. Then he could take the shortest path down to the dungeon. With Goldar down (if all worked out as Tommy intended), Rita wouldn't be able to afford to send Scorpina to fight him, as the rest of the Rangers would probably follow her. That meant that Rita would have to confront him herself.

Tommy prayed it wouldn't come to that. If he was quick enough, it wouldn't have to. Rita was probably too exhausted from throwing all this magic around, anyway: security, teleportation, Billy's spell, the constant attacks over the past few weeks…

All of the sudden, as Tommy was preparing to evade and counter the next attack, things started to go Tommy's way.

The two fighters heard a yell from Finster's lab. It was enough to distract Goldar. While Goldar swiveled his head toward the lab, Tommy pulled out his dagger and crossed it with the sword, using the lightning he hadn't used since he was evil. It was a slow attack—Jason had been able to dodge the attack several times the last time—and he wasn't using it at full power like he had before. Goldar went down, unconscious before he hit the ground.

Tommy paused long enough to check for a pulse. It was still there, strong as ever. Goldar was just going to be unconscious for… how long? Tommy couldn't guess. He considered the sword… and then left it beside Goldar. It wasn't his anymore: it wasn't right to keep it.

He ran to the lab. He still wanted to check to see if his dad was indeed in the dungeon… but that yell from the lab also worried him. Was there a prisoner in the lab? Was Finster in trouble? They were enemies, but Tommy still felt some connection to the little scientist who had fussed over him all that time he'd been under the spell.

He skidded to a halt in the lab. He'd been prepared for anything: prisoners, monsters, weird science experiments, but… It was empty. Finster's work table looked scattered, as if the scientist had gathered several things in a hurry. The work bag that always sat next to the main computer was missing.

The surveillance screen on the computer was still running. Tommy looked at it. His heart stopped. He ran.
In the dungeon, the transparent door of the cell was wide open. No one was even attempting to escape, though. They were all crowded in the middle of the room. A wheelchair sat discarded to the side.

"Stand back, please," a white, wizened figure said. "Give me some room."

The humans backed away, all except Sylvia. She stayed where she was, as white as Finster, kneeling on the other side of John Oliver.

"We have to get him to a hospital," Steve said in a panicky voice.

Finster started hooking John up to diagnostic equipment. "Human hospitals," Finster said scornfully. "If he leaves my care, he'll be dead before he's even checked in." He keyed in a few life support settings to the portable medical computer. "I will need some assistance," he said curtly.

Jason's mother broke from the crowd. "I'm a nurse," she said. In fact, she'd been trying to attend to John before Finster had shooed her away.

"That will do," Finster said. "Resuscitation may set off seizures."

"Right," Mrs. Scott said. She pulled her husband's coat from her own shoulders and folded it up. She put it under John's head, careful not to disrupt any of the equipment surrounding John.

Sylvia had moved a little further away to give Mrs. Scott room. She still stayed within reach of John, as if her presence could keep him alive.

Finster pressed a button, and John's body gave a violent tremor. Some of Sylvia's sisters pulled the children to the side, not wanting them to watch. The others watched as if entranced.

Finster spouted off some unrecognizable words. "It can't be related to his disease." He thrust a device into Mrs. Scott's hands. "You, run this slowly over his body and stop if I tell you."

Mrs. Scott did as instructed, falling back into her nursing reflexes. She began with the torso and started moving up, knowing that most immediate problems happen there first. After a minute, she was at the head.

"Stop," Finster said. "Hold it right there."

From his computer screen, Finster could see exactly what was happening in John's head. A burst blood vessel. It had probably burst half an hour before, when Finster had noticed John going to sleep. Like everyone else in the room, he'd thought John had had a fit related to his MS. Nothing too bad, since he hadn't convulsed like usual. Nothing too bad...

Finster pulled his micro-surgery toolkit from his bag. He'd have to fix the blood vessel quickly. John was close to bleeding out completely.

"Is he going to be okay?" The question came from Sylvia.

Finster couldn't answer. "He's suffering from a cranial aneurysm. He's been bleeding for some time, though I may be able to repair the vessel and replenish his blood."

Mrs. Scott had turned white. Finster knew that he wasn't fooling her. Probably not fooling anyone in the room. Even with his advanced technology, there was little chance.
In a part of himself that Finster kept firmly to the side, he was panicking. John couldn't die. Not him, out of all of them.

Working steadily, Finster closed up the blood vessel. He then began the delicate process of mini-teleportation: a medical process that would cleanse the blood in his brain and teleport it back where it needed to be. He'd never used it on a human, but the principle was the same.

Now for the larger problem: John had been dead when Finster got there. He couldn't tell for how long. Could he even be revived?

Finster hurriedly removed the micro-surgery kit and pressed the resuscitation button. John's body jolted. Before Finster could even check, Mrs. Scott had taken over the cardio-diagnostic equipment. "No heart rate, doctor," she said.

For several minutes, Finster and Mrs. Scott tried.

"He's gone," Finster said in a dead voice. He found himself looking up across to Sylvia, whose eyes already bore the knowledge. "There's nothing I can do."

"Try it again."

Finster froze. A wave of cold passed over him as he recognized the voice, even behind the filtering of the helmet.

"Did you hear me?" Tommy sounded more and more inhuman with each syllable. "Try it again!"

"He's dead." Finster said, surprising himself with how calm his voice was. "He was dead before I could get here."

The silence was broken only by Sylvia's sobs. Finster looked up to see Tommy, morphed into the Green Ranger, pointing his blaster at him with a shaking arm.

"Get against the wall," Tommy commanded. "Unless you want to join him."

Finster moved faster than he ever had in his life. He threw himself against the wall, half expecting Tommy to kill him right there. Instead, he watched as Tommy addressed the prisoners.

"I need you all to grab each other's hands. Make sure you all have contact with each other, and…" He looked at John, but Sylvia and Mrs. Scott already had hold of him. Someone had even grabbed the wheelchair.

He pulled a teleporter stolen from Finster's lab out of thin air. He handed it to Frank. "This will take you back to Earth. Rita won't be able to capture you again. I'll make sure of that."

"Wait!" Sylvia said in a thick voice. "Aren't you coming with us?"

Tommy slowly shook his head. "There's still something I have to do."

The prisoners disappeared, leaving a deafening silence in their wake. Tommy was still staring at where they'd disappeared… where his father had been lying only seconds before.

"I'm sorry," Finster heard himself saying. "Tommy… I did everything I could."

"Shut up." Tommy's voice was weak… barely human.

Finster had no idea what to say. He'd given countless people news of the death of a loved one… but
never an enemy. But was this an enemy? Finster remembered vividly his own declaration of their enmity weeks before. But now none of that seemed to matter. The fight over Earth, the fight against good and evil… all of that paled in the wake of what had just happened.

"No…" Tommy said, "I know it's not your fault."

For a second Finster wondered if Tommy was thinking the same thing he was.

"It's Rita." Tommy's voice sounded distracted. "It's always been Rita. And now again…"

"No…" Finster had been around warriors long enough to know exactly what Tommy was thinking. "I know you were listening to everything. He died of a cranial aneurysm. Even if he had been in a hospital at the time and a doctor had caught it immediately, there would have been a very low chance of survival." Finster gulped. "If Queen Rita had not kidnapped him, he would have died just the same."

But he could already tell Tommy wasn't listening. He was past reason.

Before Finster could do anything, Tommy smashed the hidden computer controls to the room, left the cell, and closed and locked the door.

Tommy decided not to think. Not right then. Couldn't handle it.

He ran down the hallways. Past the entrance to the dungeon. Past the weapons room. Past the living quarters, near the lab. And there was Goldar, still unconscious. And there was the sword beside him.

The sword…

It would be enough. Full power, the sword and dagger crossed. And even if she deflected it, even if she had the power to deflect it back on him…

He'd see his dad again.

The amusement park was finally deserted, all except for the fighters. The Rangers had cut a path through the Putties, enough for everyone to get out.

Jason was practically screaming in frustration. Too long. It had taken so damn long. There had to have been at least fifty Putties throughout the park. Just when they cleared an area, more came.

In the meantime, Scorpina was fighting like one possessed. She attacked the park itself as much as the Rangers. She'd almost pulled Jason's arm out of its socket.

Jason heard Zordon's voice, but he couldn't make out the words. He knocked two Putties out of his way and ran behind a booth. "Repeat, Zordon!"

"My readings show that all of Rita's hostages are now on Earth. I have reestablished security around the house via remote."

A weight that Jason was only now aware of lifted off his chest. Tommy had done it. They were all safe. "That's fantastic, Zordon. If Tommy's able, we could really use his help here."
Zordon's voice was suddenly worried. "Tommy did not teleport down with the others. I can only assume he is still at the Moon Palace."

Some of the weight settled back on Jason's chest. "Maybe he still has to find the Dragon Dagger. We don't want Rita having control over the DragonZord."

"I will let you know if he checks in," Zordon said.

"Right." Jason broke off communications and leapt back into the fray. "Our parents are safe!" he pronounced.

There was a chorus of celebration from the Rangers, a growl of fury from Scorpina, and the battle resumed with renewed energy.

Rita sat on the chair next to her telescope, but she didn't look through it. It didn't matter what was happening on Earth. She'd sent Squatt and Baboo away. They didn't know what was going to happen, or else they would have never left.

She was waiting.

She'd been following Tommy's progress through the palace, unable to do anything about it. She was so exhausted…

In her exhaustion, in Tommy's pain, the connection had reopened. Rita could feel it. She had felt the moment when Tommy had realized his father was dead.

He was coming to her. Her enemy. Her poor, broken boy.

Still, she refused to give up. She wasn't going to risk her life over some grieving boy trying vainly to gain revenge, a revenge that he would immediately regret. She was exhausted, but she was still Empress of Evil. With Zordon locked away, a mere echo of himself, she was the single most powerful being in that section of space. If she truly decided to do something, nothing could stop her for long.

And she'd decided no one else was going to die that day.

The cabinet near her shook slightly, the thing hidden inside of it affected by the combined emotions of Rita and Tommy. Rita took several breaths to calm herself. She didn't want to give away the location of her power source. For hidden inside the cabinet was the embodiment of the power she'd drawn from the dimensional portals. It was dangerous to draw from it when her own power was tapped out, but at the moment it was more dangerous for her to have no power at all.

She remembered when she'd gained control over the dimensional portals. She'd used it to open the Island of Illusion, to force the Rangers to face their worst nightmares.

She wondered if this was one of the things he saw on the island.

Even as she was considering, she heard footsteps. He was here.

"Turn around."

Rita slowly turned in her chair. The Green Ranger towered over her, bristling with wild power as he'd done before. His sword and dagger were poised to deliver the killing blow. He didn't move.
The words came to Rita as naturally as air. "Take off your mask."

Tommy was visibly trembling. He seemed to be unable to catch his breath. "You don't get it, do you? I'm here to kill you."

And underneath the bravado, Rita knew Tommy felt the connection between them. Not one of control. Never again. One of... something... that neither Rita nor Tommy could define.

"I understand you perfectly well, Tommy," Rita said in a quiet voice. "And I'm so, so sorry."

Slowly, Rita got up, her wand raised. She could do any number of things to Tommy at that moment, but right now all she wanted to do was defend and protect. To keep him from killing one or both of them. From destroying everything.

Just to distract him, Rita aimed a thin stream of lightning at him. He dodged, his dagger and sword uncrossing. She knew if he didn't have the sword he would have the power but not the focus to use his own lightning attack. She decided to work on depriving him of that sword.

He dodged the next of Rita's attack deftly. She could tell Tommy was trying to get in close, too close for Rita to use her most effective attacks without endangering herself. He obviously thought she was aiming to kill. Muttering a spell, she cast a defensive shield around her. It wasn't strong enough to keep him away, but it could slow him down, and it could certainly slow his reaction times down.

For a moment, Tommy moved as if he were swimming through sand. That was all the time Rita needed. Lightning arced toward Tommy. It hit his hand, forcing the sword to fly out of his grip. It also left his glove black and smoking. But he didn't scream, though Rita knew by all rights he should have. It was as if he were beyond mere physical pain.

And still, through the fight, she could feel Tommy's anguish. It was starting to be difficult to concentrate. She had to end the fight soon.

Before Rita could react, Tommy had broken free of the shield and pulled his blaster. He fired off three shots, and Rita barely had time to dive out of the way. One shot singed her dress, another hit the telescope. The telescope was too powerful and durable to be hurt, but the shot sent it toppling out of the balcony.

She didn't worry about it, knowing she could retrieve it later. She was more worried that the third shot landed dangerously close to the cabinet. If a mix of Eltarian and morphing energy hit her dimensional power source...

From momentary panic, Rita shot a far more powerful bolt than she meant to. It sent Tommy careening into the larger throne room. Rita forced herself to her feet and followed, already muttering a spell to have ready. She had to end the fight, but the problem was she wasn't a fighter. She had very little experience in direct combat, usually able to easily defend herself with magic...or other warriors.

She considered briefly calling Scorpina to her side. She rejected the idea. It had to be them. No one else could interfere.

She sent her lightning to meet the blaster attack before her eyes had fully registered it. The energy met in the middle, crackled, and dispersed. Again and again Rita matched the attacks, knowing she was wearing Tommy down.

And then she realized her inexperience was showing. She wasn't wearing Tommy down. Tommy was drawing her closer, getting her to the center of the room where she was most vulnerable and had
no chance of escape.

There was a blast of trumpet, and she felt herself blown back. She barely had enough time to grab the railing of the balcony to keep from being thrown out onto the lunar surface.

When she looked up, Tommy had the sword back. He was limping, his breath ragged. His shoulder seemed at an odd angle, and Rita realized the force of her last blow had been enough to dislocate it. Still, he was standing, and Rita found she couldn't draw enough power to get up. She stared at Tommy, her mind racing for something to say. She could fight back... but not before he could strike.

The sword and dagger crossed, but the energy didn't come. Tommy just stood there, shaking.

"Why can't I do it?" he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Rita realized she was shaking as well, and not just from exhaustion. She suddenly knew for certain he would not kill her. That he didn't even want to kill her.

The connection was clearer than ever. Rita didn't need him to take off his helmet to see him. She could see into him perfectly.

"Perhaps," and Rita marveled at how strong her voice was, "you do not want to lose someone else."

"But I hate you."

Rita smiled at the desperate lie. She didn't say anything. Carefully, she opened her mind to the connection, trying to send comfort.

The blades uncrossed. He dropped his sword, and the dagger disappeared.

Rita was just considering what to do next when flame erupted in the throne room, and Tommy was gone, teleported away by Goldar. Neither Tommy nor Rita had noticed him.

Rita slumped into a chair, tears rolling down her face even as she passed out.

Something was wrong.

A burst of golden fire erupted in the center of the battlefield. The combatants froze, watching the scene.

Tommy and Goldar were fighting. No... Tommy was fighting. And ineffectually, barely landing a blow on Goldar. Goldar evaded the wild and pathetic attacks.

Scorpina and Jason had been fighting, but they stopped. Jason heard Scorpina gasp. She turned back into her regular form without seeming to know what she was doing. Her face was bloodless and shocked.

Something was wrong, and she knew it.

"Fight me!" Tommy screamed. His voice was ragged and thick, barely his own.

Goldar didn't answer. He didn't attack Tommy. He didn't even look angry.

After a few more half-hearted attacks, Tommy stopped. He knelt on the ground. He was shaking
uncontrollably. He didn't seem aware of anyone or anything, not even Goldar.

Jason was ready to step in, but Goldar didn't attack. He merely looked up, his face unreadable.

"You'd better take him home," Goldar said to Jason. "He's just lost his father."

Goldar, Scorpina, and the Putties disappeared, leaving the Rangers in the abandoned amusement park, with Tommy still on his knees, now sobbing.
Mourning

Chapter Summary

Book 3: Something Old, Something Green

Part 4 of my rewrite of the episodes "Return of an Old Friend."

Tommy sat on the steps in the Command Center. He was vaguely aware of Kimberly sitting next to him, her arms trying to reach around his shoulders. He was also vaguely aware that he was still shaking. No longer sobbing. Just shaking.

On a different plane, he wasn't sure if anything around him was actually happening. If anything that had just happened had actually just happened. There was a sense of unreality to everything, as if it was happening all to another person, to some idiot who had just lost his father.

It became difficult to breathe.

Voices were coming to him from far away. The others were anxious, he knew. They should have gone back to the summer home immediately. If they stayed longer, alibis would become more and more difficult.

"Rita's forces have retreated," Tommy heard Zordon saying. "I doubt very much she will attack any time soon."

"Are we completely sure… it was… natural?" Jason said. "I mean, Rita did say she was going to kill…"

"Yes," Tommy said. Even his voice didn't sound like his own. "Finster tried to save his life. It was an aneurysm. Completely random."

Everyone was looking at Tommy, but Tommy didn't look back at them. He felt Kimberly's arms tighten around him. He realized for the first time he was holding one of her hands, tight. He wondered if he was hurting her, but she didn't complain or pull away.

"But it could have been the stress of… " Zack began.

"No," Tommy said firmly. "She didn't have anything to do with it." He knew Zack wanted to strike back at Rita. He knew they all did, really. He wasn't even sure why he was defending her.

There was silence. Tommy could still feel eyes on him. He stared determinedly away.

After a minute, Trini's hesitant voice broke it. "We… we really need to get back."

Tommy felt his throat close up the rest of the way. He knew what was coming.

"We…” Jason stopped. "We're not going to be able to… to show that we know what has happened."

Tommy felt a slight weight come off him. It was a relief to hear someone else say it.

Kimberly spoke for the first time. "Excuse me?" Her voice was hard and shaky. Tommy realized
she'd been crying. "Are you saying he… we're going to have to act… surprised?"

"We don't have much of a choice," Trini said softly.

"The hell we don't," Kimberly said. She got up. "There's keeping our identities secret, and then there's just…" She took a breath. "There's no way we can ask Tommy to pretend like that. It's just sick."

Everyone was looking at her. Tommy chanced a look at the fight that had everything and yet nothing to do with him.

"So what do you suggest, Kimberly?" Zordon broke in.

Kimberly looked like she was steeling herself. "I know we're not supposed to reveal our identities, and I'm not saying come right out and say it. I'm saying if they find out, then they find out."

"Do you really want your parents finding out like this?" Zack said. "I mean…"

"It would be just the same as telling it to their faces," Jason said. "I know this is hard on everyone, but it's the only way."

"It's sick," Kimberly repeated, "and I won't be a part of it."

"Do you really want Sylvia finding out right now?" Trini said.

They all looked at Billy, who had been completely silent until then. He looked as if he was barely paying attention. He looked at them, opened his mouth to speak, and then closed it.

"I know this is difficult," said Zordon. "I realize I cannot force any of you…"

"Can I say something?" Tommy said, standing up.

Zordon fell silent. Everyone looked at Tommy, as if they'd forgotten he was there.

"I don't want Sylvia, or anyone else, finding out. Not right now, and not ever, if I can help it," he said. He realized his voice was steadier than it had been in a while. "I can pretend if I have to… It's okay, Kim. Really." He tried to smile. It made his face hurt.

Kimberly grabbed his hands, her face no longer angry. "Tommy… are you sure?"

Already Tommy felt his heart rate slowing down, his eyes clearing, his face smoothing. He could detach himself and make himself pretend. He could do it for Rita back in the beginning. He could do it to protect Sylvia.

"Let's get back," he said, trying not to be aware of the sudden concern from all of his friends, as they were obviously disturbed by watching his transformation. "Or else we'll never be able to do this."

It was late, nearly two in the morning, but no one wanted to go to bed.

The day had been one of hellish mundanity, Billy reflected. The immediate reunion with their parents. The alibis. The coroner. It was all painfully familiar. He'd done it all before, with his own father.
Kimberly, Zack, Jason, and Trini had stayed with them as long as they could. They'd sat with them, mostly silent. But then they'd gone.

Now Billy and Sylvia were home. Tommy was with them. Steve was in the summer house. Sylvia had steered Tommy into their car before he'd been able to object.

Billy was sitting next to his mother on the couch. Her eyes were red. The day for her had been bursts of manic energy, of trying to clean up the summer house's garden or feed everyone or take care of funeral arrangements, followed by times of intense lethargy and silence.

Tommy was sitting in a chair, eyes staring into nothing. He'd acted admirably, pretending to find out about his father's death. Kimberly's stepfather had stopped him at the door and told him. Now, though, Tommy didn't have to act.

"Do you have everything you need?" Sylvia said suddenly, looking at Tommy. It was the first time she'd spoken in an hour.

Tommy shook himself, as if waking from a dream. "Yeah," he said. "I packed a bag just in case. I..." He looked around the room, as if trying to find something to talk about.

"Did you get hold of your mother?" Sylvia said.

Tommy stopped looking around. "Yeah... finally. She's on a bus now. Should be here in time, if she doesn't..." His voice trailed off.

"Good," Sylvia said. "I'm... I'm glad she's going to be here."

Billy considered the irony of her words. Sylvia had had many rather unpleasant things to say about Penn. But, then, none of that seemed to matter.

"Thanks for taking me in, Sylvia," Tommy said. "I mean..."

"Don't be ridiculous," Billy said. "As if we were going to leave you alone with..."

Billy felt his mother's hand tighten around his, and he fell silent. "I want you to feel right at home here, Tommy," she said. Her voice was starting to shake again.

Tommy looked away. "Thanks. I... I think I'm going to bed."

He practically ran from the room.

Sylvia leaned against Billy, and Billy felt tears slide onto his shirt again. He tightened his grip.

In some ways, he knew exactly what Tommy was going through. Yet he'd been younger when his own father died. He'd perhaps been less intensely invested in the relationship. It had been his father, and he'd loved him, but he'd never been his father's caretaker. They had never had the friendship that Tommy and John had obviously had. It had never been just the two of them. And he still had his mother.

"Is this how it felt?" Sylvia said in a tiny voice.

Billy knew instantly what his mother meant, but he was slow to articulate. "What?"

Sylvia cleared her throat. "I guess I never understood what it was like to be there, like you were. I tried to imagine it. I tried to understand. But..." She took a moment to wipe her face. "Karen Scott told me back then, but she'd only been with patients. Never... And she was here today, trying to
"I'm sorry," Billy said, not sure what he was sorry for, except perhaps just everything.

"But at least you tried to help your father," Sylvia continued. "All I could do was sit there... helpless..."

"There were qualified people to help John," Billy said, noting the strangeness of calling Finster "qualified people." "You did exactly what you were supposed to do. I... I did the best I could, but..." He trailed off again. He didn't want to get into the fact that he'd actually been doing CPR wrong, possibly hurting more than helping.

Sylvia was shaking now. "I... I'm sorry. I know... It's just...Today was supposed to be..."

She stopped. She didn't have to go on. Billy let the tears fall that he'd been fighting back. He kept expecting John to come wheeling around the corner, complaining that they were sitting around when they needed to be getting things done. Or laughing at their worries, as he always did when he'd have a fit, or show his illness in some way.

It was odd. Life had completely changed that day, and it seemed as if even mentioning the life from before was a sacrilege. There had been plans. A party after the wedding. John and Sylvia were packed up to go to the cabin for the weekend. Tommy and Billy had planned a party with the guys... and they knew Kimberly and Trini were planning on crashing the party sans parental knowledge.

All of that was gone. Celebration... plans to be a family...

Tommy's mother was coming. He would probably go with her. And that would be the end.

And still, buzzing in the back of Billy's mind was the fact that he was to blame. He'd been the one to bring down security. He'd been the one to destroy the wedding. And there was still the possibility that the stress of being captured had facilitated John's death.

John wasn't coming back.

And he realized he was crying as hard as his mother.

"Can I join you?"

Scorpina stared down at the top of Goldar's head. He wasn't looking up. He may have been past the ability to look up.

"This is nearly drunk up," Goldar growled.

Scorpina held a fresh bottle in front of his face.

"By all means," said Goldar.

Scorpina sat on the floor next to Goldar, her back to his bed. She'd have to drink fast to catch up with Goldar.

"How's Empress Rita?" Goldar said.

"Sleeping." Scorpina opened the bottle. She'd spent the last half hour searching her ship's storage to
find it. It was Golden Honey Whiskey, guaranteed to turn bad feelings into good. Scorpina supposed she wanted to put that to the test.

Goldar took the shot she poured him. "This is high quality. How in hell did you get this?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Scorpina took her own shot. It didn't hurt, at least. "You check in with Finster?"

"He apparently can't get drunk. Completely unable." Goldar shook his head. "Poor bastard. I think he's going to worry over Empress Rita for a while."

"Something to do," said Scorpina. She lowered her voice. " Doesn't look like we'll be doing much now."

Goldar just nodded. They knew how Rita worked. She wouldn't attack. Not for a long time. She had tried to strike at the Rangers personally, and she had… but it had still blown up in her face. And no matter how much they called Tommy an enemy and a traitor, Scorpina still felt his loss and grief intensely. They all did.

Scorpina realized how little all the hurt feelings and betrayal mattered. Death did that, she reflected. What side you were fighting on… how you were hurt… who did what to whom and why… It was all meaningless. What mattered was people. What mattered was right now.

Perhaps that was why, after months, it seemed completely natural to lean against Goldar, to kiss, to throw the drink aside and lose herself in him once more.

Jason, Trini, Zack, and Kimberly, all in Kimberly's car, pulled up to the funeral home and, with difficulty, found a parking space. John had not had time to make a lot of friends in Angel Grove, but Sylvia was a teacher. She was well-known. The funeral home looked crowded, with a few people they recognized standing on the front porch, smoking. They would usually be irritated with the smokers. Especially Trini. But none of them cared. People tend to make a lot of allowances at funerals.

They got out of the car silently and walked slowly to the crowded building. Their drive had been one of tense silence, matching the uncomfortable clothes. The girls were in black. Jason and Zack made sure they weren't wearing the same clothes from the wedding. Somehow that wouldn't have seemed right.

They willed themselves forward. They were already late. They needed to be there. It was just… the crawling awfulness of funerals was holding them back. They'd been with Tommy and Billy almost continuously since… it had happened. It wasn't that they couldn't face them. It was just… the funeral itself. It was a tradition that was supposed to be comforting, but all they felt at the moment was dread.

They walked past the smokers into the lobby. People were standing around, talking in low murmurs. There seemed to be a purposelessness in the air. Zack suddenly didn't know what to do with his hands. Jason was counting the people he knew without really looking at them. Trini, noticing that Kimberly was hopping on her toes, trying to see over heads, helped her look.

"Where is he?" Kimberly said.

Jason was staring at a large archway. A book on a podium was right next to it. "I guess they're all in there."
They signed the book. Zack noticed his parents had already signed. He wondered briefly where they were.

The smaller room was lined with chairs and couches that were both ornate and manufactured-looking at the same time. Sylvia was near the casket, surrounded by people. Near her were Tommy's uncle and aunt, talking politely to the strangers who had come to pay their respects.

Billy was crumpled in a couch outside of the crowd. He was staring into space, his face blank, and he only noticed his friends when they approached.

"Hey," he said in a rough voice. "Thank God you guys are here. I was…” He glanced around the room.

"Looks like it's been pretty packed," said Zack.

"Yeah," said Billy, moving over so Trini and Kimberly could sit. "Mr. Kaplan's already come through, and most of the teachers. Even Ernie, and I don't think he ever met John." The name seemed to stick in his throat, and he fell silent.

"Where's Tommy?" Kimberly asked. She looked like it had taken great restraint to keep from blurring the question out right away.

Billy closed his eyes, a pained look coming over his face. The others held their breath. He couldn't have skipped town. Not again.

"He went to meet his mother at the bus station," Billy said. "She just got into town. She called up to the funeral home asking for directions. Tommy was there near the office. He told her he'd pick her up."

"You let him go by himself?" Trini asked.

Billy shook his head. "I was going with him, but he gave me the slip." He paused. "I think he wanted to do this alone."

Tommy pulled into the bus station parking lot. The engine of his van was making a funny clunking sound. He'd have to get that checked out. Maybe Billy could help him.

Even as he thought about van repairs and meeting his mother, a small part of his brain seemed stuck. *This isn't real. This isn't real. This can't be real.*

His mother was standing at the corner, a small bag in her hands. She had left most of her stuff… somewhere. He got out of the van and pulled her into a fierce hug. She was shaking. His eyes started to burn again. They didn't let go for a long time.

A horn honked. Tommy's van was blocking someone.

"Up yours, asshole!" Penn screamed, pulling away from Tommy.

"What did you say to me?" the man in the Buick yelled back. He leaned on the horn again.

Penn started forward. "I'll teach him what he can do with his horn."

Tommy caught his mother and steered her to the van. He noticed the smell of alcohol practically
streaming from her breath and clothes. There was a clink of glass bottles from her bag. He decided it
would be best if she wasn't taken in for drunken assault, no matter how much he himself wanted to
pound the horn-blower's head in.

"I could have taken that guy," Penn grumbled as Tommy started the van again and pulled out of the
parking lot.

"I know you could have, Mom," Tommy said.

Penn pulled a bottle out of her purse and took a swig. Tequila. That wasn't good.

"Where are you going?" Penn said. She looked remarkably sober for someone so obviously drunk.
"These aren't the directions the funeral director gave me. This a shortcut?"

Tommy sighed. "We're going to the summer house. I want you to sleep this off."

"We're not going anywhere but the funeral home," Penn said furiously. "I came here for the funeral,
so you better turn this thing the right way." She put a hand over her mouth, and Tommy got ready
for the sick, but she merely burped. "Or I'll turn this thing around for you."

They were at a stop light. Tommy looked at his mother. She was dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt,
none of which looked all that clean. Her face was pasty and tinged with a light sheen of sweat. She
looked like she hadn't slept… possibly since Tommy had called her the other night.

But she was here. And who cared if she didn't look good. Who made up the stupid rule that you had
to look good for funerals?

He turned the way to the funeral home when the light changed, and Penn settled down again with
her bottle. At the rate she was going, Tommy mused, she might be asleep by the time they got to the
funeral home anyway.

The teens sat by the side, talking to no one and waiting for Tommy to get back. Kimberly itched to
contact him on the communicator, but he was with his mother. And this wasn't Ranger business.
They had to keep their identities secret.

That had been the worst. They'd had to… act surprised. It had shriveled Kimberly up inside to try to
help Tommy act like he wasn't dying inside, that he didn't know his father was dead. All in the name
of their damned secret identities.

Kimberly had never been angrier at Zordon than she had right then. She almost felt like she hated
him… And she suspected he had known John was dead as soon as their parents got to Earth. He just
hadn't wanted to distract them from the fight.

But then he'd been so weak-looking. He had sacrificed a lot to give Tommy back his powers so he
could save everyone. Kimberly couldn't stay angry at him for long. It was like what Jason went
through when the Command Center had been trashed, and Jason had to choose between rebuilding
security and teleportation or search for Zordon. He'd made the hard decision then. Zordon had to
make the hard decision now.

She realized she'd started crying again. No one noticed this time. Everyone seemed wrapped up in
themselves. That was what death did. You were supposed to open up, come together, be there for
each other, comfort each other… And you tried to do that, but either you didn't know what to say, or
said that wrong thing, or repeated those God-awful phrases that everyone says at funerals… And then there was just silence and waiting for normal life to start back up again.

But would it be normal again? Kimberly knew from when her grandfather died that eventually you got through the pain, and eventually you could go a day without crying, and then you sort of accepted it. You couldn't help going back to normal life. But at the moment, it felt like nothing was ever going to be the same again. It felt like the pain would never end, that it would consume you. And even after you thought you were normal again, nothing really was the same. Not really. It hadn't been when her dad left.

And that was at the seat of her worries for Tommy. Ever since he'd come back down from the Command Center and had to play like he didn't know his father was dead… he hadn't stopped. It was like he was pretending none of it had happened. Even when he was just with them, he wouldn't talk about the Moon Palace. He barely even talked about his father.

He wasn't dealing with it. Kimberly knew that for sure. It was like he hadn't even realized his father was dead.

That would change. He would come to the realization and actually mourn. In the meantime, all Kimberly could do was wait.

Jason got up. His parents had walked in. Sylvia went directly to Jason's mother and pulled her into a hug. Jason had told them all that his mother felt bad after not being able to help more. She was glad Sylvia was thanking her.

Of course, Sylvia knew what to do at funerals.

Kimberly remembered Billy's dad's funeral vaguely. Her mother had made her go. She hadn't wanted to. Billy was the weird kid from across the street that no one liked to play with, but her mother always forced her to go over to his house, and then his dad was dead, and it had all been too much. She remembered Billy sitting on a couch, staring at the ground.

With a start Kimberly realized Billy was sitting exactly where he had been all those years ago, in the same posture and everything.

John had almost been his stepdad.

Billy startled everyone by getting up and walking out of the room.

Kimberly, Trini, and Zack stared at each other.

"I'll go," Trini said quietly, getting up. Kimberly was grateful. She wanted to wait for Tommy.

The kitchenette was small and dingy compared to the rest of the building. Billy drank water from a paper cup. He accidentally dropped the cup. Water splashed on the table. He watched the water spread over the table and drip to the floor.

There was a soft knock on the door. Trini. She always did those little knocks, even for open doors in public places.

"Hey," she said. She started wiping the table with a napkin.
"I should not have run out like that. My apologies."

Trini sat on the plastic chair next to him. She put a hand over his. "I was just worried. I didn't want you to have to be on your own."

Billy felt himself nodding. "I'm just… I'm so sorry…"

"Billy, it's okay…"

"No, it's not," Billy cut her off. He felt his throat closing up again. "I don't know if he'll ever forgive me. Or if he should."

Trini's grip slackened in surprise. Billy didn't look up, but he knew Trini was watching him carefully.

There was a sharp intake of breath. "Oh, God, Billy, I…" She was probably going to say that she'd forgotten, but she stopped herself. "We've been so focused on… Mr. Oliver… I… I can't imagine what you're feeling after the spell. I know when it was Tommy…"

"I can predict what you're thinking," Billy said. "I was the first to defend and accept Tommy after the spell broke. I know I was. And, academically, I do know that I was being controlled. I even remember Jason's convincing description of how I was resisting." He swallowed. "But… It was still me. I absolutely, unquestioningly remember doing all those things. It's… it's my fault John…"

Trini gripped Billy's hand hard. "Billy, I'm sorry, but John died of a cranial aneurysm. It was a completely natural death."

"Most likely aggravated by the stress of being kidnapped. Or even teleportation…"

"We can't know that," Trini said. "And… even if it was… An aneurysm is usually preexisting. It could have happened any time." She smiled. "And I know you're not going to listen to me."

Billy felt himself smiling. It felt strange. "I am, Trini. I appreciate it. It's just… Everything's torn apart now. In a moment, and everything's gone." He shook his head. "John's gone Mom's in pieces. Tommy doesn't have a reason to stay…"

There was a yell… a commotion. Billy and Trini looked at each other, bewildered, and then ran for the viewing room.

"Listen, jackass! I may have left him, but you never cared about him in the first place, so don't you come up to me with…!"

Penn was standing in the middle of the room, facing off with Steve. Tears were streaming down her face. Steve looked ready to burst, his eyes wild with more than anger.

"How dare you come here like this?" Steve's voice was quiet and deadly. "You're a disgrace. You and your son… it's always like this. I'm glad John's not here to see this."

"I'm sure you are," Penn said. "I'm sure you're glad John's gone."

Steve's face looked shocked at what he said. "I didn't mean…"

But Penn had already thrown a punch. Steve went down immediately. His wife screamed. Penn was about to go after him again, but Jason and Zack grabbed her before she could.

"Mom, no!" Tommy had watched the altercation, helpless. Now he ran forward to help restrain his mother. "Mom, please don't do this."
"He can't… I won't…" She was mumbling. Her eyes closed, and she went limp.

Jason and Zack carefully sat her on a couch. Tommy reached his hand to help his uncle to his feet, but Steve knocked his hand aside.

"How could you even think of bringing her here like that?" Steve said, getting up and rubbing his jaw. "You wanted this to happen, didn't you?"

Tommy's face was a mask. "She wouldn't have done all this if you had just left her alone."

Steve ignored his wife, who was trying to pull him away. "That's it. I'm tired of the both of you. You were nothing but a constant source of worry and heartache for John, and I'm not going to stand here hearing you stick up for that mother of yours. And if you think you're staying one more day in my summer house, you're…"

Billy half expected Tommy to take a swing at his uncle like his mother. He didn't. He stood there, taking the abuse and seeming to shrink in the pain and humiliation. Steve may have forgotten everyone was around, but Tommy was obviously intensely aware of everyone staring at him. And he could have done anything… but he didn't. He just stood there. Billy wondered if his father's death had taken all the fight out of him.

Billy was considering pulling Tommy physically out of the room when his mother stood in front of Tommy, facing Steve with her arms crossed.

"You can leave," Sylvia said in a low, clear voice that carried throughout the room.

Steve's eyes widened from their angry slits. "What did you say to me?" His face grew angry again. "You can't throw me out of my brother's funeral."

"See if I can't." Her voice was growing louder, but she didn't seem to be shouting. "You know, you've been saying a lot about John." Again, her voice seemed to stick at the name, but she continued. "But you've got him wrong. You always have. John took a lot of things lightly: his illness, the people who wronged him… What he never took lightly was love. That's all he really understood. He would have understood his ex-wife getting drunk and crying over him, and even hitting you. What he wouldn't understand, and would never approve, is what you're doing to his son. You're driving away the last bit of John you have left."

Again, Steve's eyes were filled with emotion beyond simple anger. "There's nothing of John in that boy. And if he thinks he can sponge off me…"

"He won't," Sylvia cut him off. "You have assured that you will never see him again, unless he deigns to forgive you. And you needn't worry about your precious summer house. He will always have a home with me." She was holding Tommy's hand, partially to prove her point and partially to keep him from running away. "Now leave, before I prove that Penn isn't the only woman here who can throw a punch."

Steve's wife finally succeeded in pulling Steve away, murmuring apologies as she went. But Sylvia was already ignoring him. She had pulled Tommy into a tight hug. He had a stunned look on his face, and he seemed unsure of what to do with her.

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Tommy laid his mother in his own bed. He would take the couch. He surveyed the room, noting that he had just thought of that bed as his own. Funny what a few hours would do.
He and Billy had already sent the other Rangers home, Tommy stammering out thanks to them all. After the funeral, they’d all rushed to the summer house to pack what was left of Tommy's things while Sylvia helped Tommy gather anything of his father's he wanted. There wasn't much. Tommy had never cared about stuff anyway. He cared about his father more than his stuff. It was all willed to Tommy anyway, but Uncle Steve could do a lot of mischief before any legality was involved.

Tommy turned out the light and closed his door softly. Not that it mattered; Penn would sleep for hours more. More for something to do, he walked out to the van to check if there was anything left.

The back doors were still open. Kimberly was sitting on the edge.

"Your mom all right?" Kimberly said quietly.

"She will be," said Tommy, sitting next to her. "I thought you'd gone home."

Kimberly shrugged. "I will. I just…"

"Wanted to see if I was okay?" Tommy supplied.

Kimberly ignored the tone that was almost harsh. "I know you're not okay."

She leaned again his arm. That felt good. For once, it didn't feel like she was trying to hold him together or comfort him. It was just a natural gesture of affection. It was far more comforting than anything she'd done before.

"Hey, Kim. What are you doing tomorrow?"

Kimberly looked up at him without moving her head from his arm. "You want to hang out?"

"Unless you're busy."

"No," Kimberly said. "I just thought… I mean…" Her face grew more cautious. "I just thought you'd want some time…" She couldn't finish.

Tommy understood. Every time he had a personal tragedy, he knew he pulled away. But… "Kim, I want to spend every minute I can with you."

Kimberly clung closer. She didn't answer… only nodded. Tommy clung right back to her, wanting to savor every single moment he could get with her.

That was the unspoken fear he'd felt around everyone. The thing that had prompted Uncle Steve's anger, that had caused Sylvia to claim him in public. He knew everyone had expected him to leave town, with or without his mother.

But he wouldn't. He couldn't. This was his home now. Not just the tiny house that held such confusing memories and emotions now, but Angel Grove. Billy. Sylvia. Kimberly. His friends. And…

They held each other until Tommy insisted on Kimberly going home. She left reluctantly, only after they'd set a concrete date. With one last wave and kisses burning on his lips, he closed his van doors and went inside the house.

Sylvia was in the living room, tucking sheets into the couch. "I forced Billy to go to bed, and I'm going to do the same to you." She rubbed her eyes. "I really wish Penn would sleep in my bed. I can take the couch."
"No way," Tommy said. "You need to get rest. And believe me, I've slept in worse circumstances."

Sylvia smiled at him. Her eyes were dead with fatigue.

"Sylvia…" Tommy said slowly, "thank you. I mean, you didn't have to…"

"I meant what I said," Sylvia broke in softly. "Tommy, your father loved you so much. I can't do any less." She grasped both of Tommy's hands. "You would have been my son. And I don't care if I never got to say 'I do'…" Her voice broke. "I still consider myself married to your father. That makes you family. You have a home here for as long as you want."

Tommy couldn't say anything, but Sylvia seemed to understand. She walked to her room and shut the door.

Tommy glanced down the hallway. He was alone. This was the moment he was waiting for. He pulled out his communicator and teleported.

The Command Center was dim. Alpha was in stand-by at a corner. Zordon, however, was still floating in his tube. He seemed to be waiting.

"You knew I was coming," Tommy said.

Zordon seemed resigned. "I did."

Tommy cleared his throat. He'd had everything planned out. He'd been planning what to say all day. But now, facing Zordon…

"I used up a lot of power at the Moon Palace," Tommy said, putting off what he really wanted to say. "Too much. But I still want to be a Power Ranger. I mean, I'm sticking around."

"I knew you would," Zordon said.

Tommy ground his teeth. "You know a lot. Seems you know everything."

"Not everything," Zordon said lightly. "I wish I knew how to truly help you."

"Zordon, you know what I'm going to ask," Tommy said abruptly. "Let's stop pretending."

"Tommy, I can't do what you ask," Zordon sighed. "I can't bring your father back to life."

"Can't or won't?" Tommy said. "I felt how much power there was in the Morphing Grid, and you're tied directly to it. It gives the power for Trini's serum to work, and it can work miracles. Why…" He cleared his throat, which was threatening to close up. "Why not this one?"

"Because there are certain immutable laws of nature. People who are mortally wounded can be cured… but not this…"

Zordon's eyes narrowed. "There's something you're not telling me."

Zordon looked like he was trying to choose the right words. "Tommy, it is true that the Morphing Grid holds great power. It can do a great many things… but there's always a change. You and the other Rangers have been changed subtly by the power, mainly protected from permanent change through the use of your morphers. Rita could have tapped into the power to save your father… but it would have come at a price. He would have become a monster."

Tommy fell to his knees. There was the truth. The truth he'd sensed in Rita, the truth he'd almost
known but not quite understood through his contact with the Morphing Grid.

"I almost killed her," Tommy heard himself saying. "I almost killed her, but I couldn't. And she could have saved Dad, but she couldn't..."

Zordon showed no surprise at the revelation of his fight with Rita. He, of course, knew that had happened. He knew everything.

"Tommy..." Zordon began cautiously.

"I'm fine," Tommy said, getting to his feet. He managed a weak smile. "I had to try..."

The park was an unearthly bright, the sun glittering on the water of the lake like diamonds. It was like a park in Angel Grove... and yet not. It was too nice, with no evidence of the many battles.

There was the bench, where he knew it would be. He sat. Seconds later, he felt her warm presence.

"It's been a while," he said.

"You'd pulled so far away before," was her answer.

Again, she looked younger, without a strand of gray in her hair. This time, instead of the white dress, it was black. For mourning, he knew.

"Is it true?" he said. "Did you even consider it?"

"I thought of it, of course," Rita said. "I'm not the type to just let things happen. I always fight back... something we have in common. But... it wasn't worth the price. I could not do that to you... even if it might have meant you would have come back to me."

Tommy looked around impatiently. "He was here last time. I wish he was here now."

"As do I." Rita was not fading. In fact, she was becoming clearer. It was Tommy who felt more faded, less real.

"We're not enemies anymore, are we?" said Tommy.

Rita smiled. "My dear boy... we never were."

End of Book 3

Next time on Darker Shades... Book 4: Mutiny

Preview:

Far from Earth, but hurtling ever closer, was a giant metal serpent. Inside the giant metal serpent was a man with no skin.

The man with no skin was impatient. He was fresh from conquering several solar systems, but that only left him wanting more.

Earth was tiny and insignificant in itself... but it was a planet of Power that hid the Eltarian Zordon, the most powerful leader against the Alliance of Evil and one who held the keys to the Morphing Grid itself. And the so-called Empress of Evil, Rita Repulsa, was squandering her chances at defeating him, as she'd always done.
If the man without skin could defeat Zordon, it wouldn't just be Earth under his control. He'd have the opportunity to replace Dark Spectre himself.

The man without skin laughed a mirthless laugh and clenched his metal claws, imagining the universe crushed between them.
The Storm

Chapter Summary

Book 4: Mutiny

Part 1 of my rewrite of the season 2 premier "The Mutiny."

"Damn, Billy, we're camping for two nights, not a week."

Tommy threw his gear on the couch and picked his way through the clutter of the living room. It was usually reasonably neat, but at the moment countless tools and survivalist equipment were spread out, while Billy was sitting in the middle with a large pack folded open.

"The scout motto is "be prepared," Billy said absently. "We don't know what we'll need once we're in the mountains, and if we leave the mountain we're disqualified."

Tommy tripped over a strap and landed hard in a chair. He chose to stay there. "I was never in the scouts, and I don't think they're going to take money away from charity just because we forgot our toothbrush."

"Have you packed your toothbrush?"

Tommy frowned. "Oh, yeah. I will in a minute."

Billy had miraculously packed half of the stuff on the floor, and his pack still looked practically empty. Tommy wondered if he was using some sort of alien miniaturization tech. "We also have added responsibility because of our powers. What if we were to face an attack from…"

"Bears!" Tommy cut him off. Sylvia had just gotten home from her teacher meeting.

"Where's bears?" Sylvia asked, her voice sounding tired.

"In the mountains," Billy said, recovering seamlessly. "Though I doubt we'll be meeting many of those."

Sylvia looked at the state of the living room. "Billy, you're camping for two nights, not a week."

"Told ya," Tommy said.

Sylvia looked over at the kitchen. "Billy, I asked you to do the dishes before you left."

"Sorry, Mom," Billy said distractedly.

Tommy got up and hopped over the chair arm to avoid the obstacle course. "I'll do them."

"Oh, no, Tommy," Sylvia said, trying to keep him from the kitchen. "You already do too much. You've cooked supper twice this week before I've had a chance to get home."

"You've been busy," Tommy said, successfully slipping past Sylvia. "And it's the least I can do."
He didn't say that he hadn't even really thought of it. He and his father had always split the chores as evenly as possible between them, and Tommy had usually shouldered more of the burden. It seemed weird to just let Sylvia do all the work and never pitch in.

Sylvia seemed to admit defeat and sank into a dining room chair. Tommy put the kettle on, knowing Sylvia would want some tea. "When is Kimberly picking you up?"

When Billy didn't answer, Tommy looked up from the hot suds. "Should be any minute. We have to be there by 5:00 to make it to the campsite before sundown."

"I hope you boys have fun." Sylvia pulled the newspaper toward her and pulled out the crossword puzzle. "I'm glad the school is fundraising with something like this and not selling candy yet again. Trying to keep up with all those boxes…"

"I've never been orienteering or camping before," said Tommy, giving a pot a good scrub. "I'm kind of looking forward to it."

The kettle was going off. Sylvia got up to make her tea before Tommy could get to it. She lowered her voice. "I can't believe you talked Billy into camping. He's skipped these things ever since…"

"I think he's trying to prove something to me," Tommy said in the same low voice. "About recovering, you know?"

Sylvia looked like she was trying to hide her surprise. Tommy focused back on the dishes. It had been a month since his father's death. Tommy knew he would never be the same, and he would never really recover from it. It was still like a very important piece of himself was missing, and he still had trouble sleeping at night.

Despite all of that, he'd grown a little tired of how everyone treated him. It was like they were walking on eggshells around him. It wasn't as bad as the first week, but there were still softened voices, and no one called him on his crap. He'd even skipped a Ranger meeting once just to see what would happen. Neither Jason nor Zordon had called him on it. Jason had just asked if he was okay, or if he needed a break.

He guessed he understood Sylvia treating him differently. She was grieving herself, and she was also trying to cope with having another teen in her house—one so different from Billy. Tommy had seen her speechless when he'd sold the van without telling her. But he'd done it so he wouldn't be such a financial burden on her.

"Hi, Ms. Sylvia! Are the boys ready?"

Kimberly had breezed through the screen door after barely knocking. Tommy looked up from the dishes with a wide grin. Kimberly was the only one who really seemed to treat him normally. Of course, he couldn't do with other people what he did with her…

"They will be in a minute, Kimberly," Sylvia said, glancing around at Billy, who was trying to stuff the last of his supplies into a pouch. "How was school?"

"Fine," Kimberly said automatically. She rolled her eyes. "Bulk and Skull decided at the last minute to camp this weekend. They actually asked me to sponsor them. I imagine they're running around town in a panic by now."

"Let's just hope they're not at our campsite," Billy said, swinging his pack on his shoulders with surprising ease.
"I thought those boys had stopped picking on you," Sylvia commented.

"They have," Billy said. "They're just annoying."

"Yeah, if they're around, there will definitely be bears," Tommy added, draining the sink and wiping his hands.

"Bears?" Kimberly asked sharply. "What about bears?"

"Don't worry, Kimberly," Billy said. "I've packed a fire extinguisher."

The three Rangers laughed as they gathered their things and left, while Sylvia regarded them with amused confusion. She seemed to decide it wasn't worth asking.

Kimberly, Tommy, and Billy picked their way through the crowd. When they found the rest of their friends, Jason and Zack were busy arguing over a map, while Trini was shaking her head at them and rechecking her pack.

"Thought you guys got lost already," Trini teased.

"We're not late," Tommy retorted. "It's only…" He frowned at his watch. "It's Kimberly's fault," he said quickly.

"Not even," Kimberly said, playfully shoving him. "You forgot to get your toothbrush, so we had to go back for it."

"Well, you're not really late," Trini said in a softer tone.

Tommy gritted his teeth. There it was again.

"That would take us into the next county, genius," Jason burst out.

Trini rolled her eyes again. "Billy, could you teach those two how to use a compass? They won't listen to me."

Tommy decided not to look at the map. He could make his way around pretty well, as long as there was a road and a map. But when all you had to go by was streams, trees, and woodland landmarks, he was completely lost.

"Jason wanted me to remind everyone not to teleport, even if we do get horribly lost," Trini added in an undertone. "We're normal humans this weekend."

"As long as the 'weather' holds out," Tommy said sardonically.

They all knew what he was talking about. Rita had not attacked once in the last month. Zordon confirmed she and everyone else was still at the Moon Palace, but she seemed to have given up trying to attack.

Of course, Jason reminded them that she'd lulled them into a false sense of security before. Just because she was not attacking didn't mean she wasn't planning something big.

Privately, though, Tommy wondered if she ever would attack again. There was that dream he'd had… And possibly she was treating him like everyone else did. He found himself wishing that she
would just send a few Putties down… just to prove that everything was normal again.

"Okay, fine," Zack snapped. He grinned to soften the effect. "I guess that route makes more sense."

"Just as long as we don't lose the path during this stretch," Jason said, pointing to the map.

"Don't make me laugh," an overly-loud voice broke in. "You guys couldn't find your way out of a paper bag."

"Yeah! A paper bag!" a second voice wheezed.

As one, the Rangers looked over to the approaching Bulk and Skull. They were both wearing their usual black leather, and Tommy was trying not to think about how they were going to handle a hike in that material. Bulk had a crumpled map and a compass that looked like it was taken from a Happy Meal. Skull was barely upright, loaded down by more bags than the six of the Rangers were carrying. What looked like a hero sandwich was poking out of the side of a duffel bag.

"I see you got enough sponsors," Kimberly said.

Skull had put down a few bags. "You can still sponsor me if you want, Kimberly."

Kimberly rolled her eyes even as she grabbed Tommy's shoulder to prevent him from doing anything. "You know, that one was weak. You really need to work a little harder on your pick-up lines."

Tommy decided not to take issue with Skull's usual pathetic attempts. He was in too good a mood. It was the first day in a long time he'd felt normal again.

"You know," Jason said, eyeing the bags, "we're only camping for two nights, not a week."

Tommy smirked at Billy, who glared back.

"This is for two nights," said Bulk. "And we're the ones who are going to be laughing when we get back before you."

"This isn't a race," Trini said exasperatedly.

"If you're going to beat us, you better hurry," Tommy said seriously, deciding he was annoyed enough to mess with them. "They've already sounded the starter pistol, and the last two groups won't get campsites."

Bulk's eyes went wide with panic. "Come on, Skull!" he yelled, throwing the bags back onto Skull. He grabbed the staggering Skull and pulled him toward the trees. Skull kept raising his finger, obviously trying to point out Bulk's mistake to him, but he never got the chance before they disappeared into the woods.

The other Rangers laughed. "That wasn't very nice," Kimberly scolded.

"They'll figure it out eventually," Billy said. "In the meantime, I believe we will achieve our destination if we keep to a northwesterly direction."

Jason and Zack shouldered their gear and started walking. Trini was able to tap Zack on the shoulder before they got too far.

"He means that-a-way," Trini said, pointing in the opposite direction.
Jason and Zack started just as confidently in the direction Trini had indicated, and the rest of the Rangers tried to keep their laughs at a minimum.

"The Rangers seem to be perfectly safe, Zordon," the little robot exclaimed.

"Nevertheless, Alpha, keep a scan on the Rangers and set an automatic alarm if anything should happen," Zordon said. "We must move to the lower laboratory for this phase of the project, but we must not panic the Rangers should we fail to appear when they need us."

"Ay-yi-yi, I hate all this secrecy. Why can't we just tell the Rangers what we're doing?" Even as Alpha complained, he followed Zordon's orders to the letter.

"The Rangers will know all in due time," said Zordon. "If we tell them all now, they will try to use things they are not ready for. But we must prepare everything for when it is needed."

"I suppose you're right, Zordon." Alpha set the Command Center on auxiliary power. "Teleporting to the lower laboratory now."

"I will meet you there," Zordon said.

Zordon winked out of sight seconds after Alpha disappeared in a flash of light. The Command Center was dark, powered only by emergency lights.

One lone light was blinking a console, completely unnoticed by Zordon and Alpha. They had been rushed to complete their work while the Rangers didn't need them, or they would have noticed. Or perhaps they had been so intent on monitoring the Earth and the moon that they hadn't bothered monitoring the space beyond.

Goldar stood in the doorway of Finster's lab. Finster had already shooed him out of the room, but Goldar was unwilling to leave yet.

"Is she okay?" Goldar fretted. "Why did you have to put her under?"

"I didn't need to," Finster said. "She wouldn't lie still otherwise."

Finster twisted several dials on his new diagnostic table, on which Scorpina was now lying prone. Goldar knew it was probably wise to knock her out. Scorpina had been sick for days now, and he'd finally had to drag her physically to Finster to get her checked out. She hated physicals, and she hated being told what to do.

"Please do not worry. This will take at least half an hour, and I will contact you as soon as it is done," Finster said impatiently.

Goldar took the hint. Finster didn't want him haunting his lab while he worked. That was fair enough.

Goldar walked down the hallway, considering what to do. He'd read the intergalactic news already. There was nothing interesting scheduled on the central media outlet, and he didn't understand human media from Earth. He'd already trained that day. There was just nothing left to do to fill the hours.
Truth be told, he was getting stir-crazy. As was Scorpina. As was everyone, really. He'd seen Squatt and Babboo blowing dust bunnies into the air, trying to keep them floating the longest. Finster had constructed a whole diagnostic table out of sheer boredom.

He thought about Earth again and felt the urge to attack. To do… something. Not even for world conquest, but just to screw with the Rangers. To shake things up.

But he knew he could do nothing without Empress Rita's permission. And he knew he didn't want to talk to Rita about it. He'd tried. Scorpina had tried. All for naught.

Goldar took a breath and set out for the throne room. He at least needed to let Empress Rita know about Scorpina. She'd want to know.

Rita was sitting at her telescope. Goldar didn't ask what she was looking at. Even if she was spying on the Rangers, he knew no plan for attack was in the works.

"Have you ever been camping, Goldar?" Rita said without turning around.

Goldar frowned. "Yes, though hardly for pleasure." He smiled grimly. "I was stranded on a deserted planet for a year. I suppose that counts."

Rita pulled back from her telescope. "I suppose it does. I was just thinking…” She trailed off.

Goldar shifted uncomfortably. Rita was in one of her moods. She had been… meditative of late. Regretful. But not really of anything specific. She never mentioned what had happened. Goldar still wondered about the connection between her and Tommy. Perhaps it was to the point that they shared emotions, and she was affected by his grieving.

"How is Scorpina?"

The question came suddenly, startling Goldar. So she had been paying attention. "Finster is running a diagnostic on her now."

"I'm glad you were able to convince her to go to Finster," Rita said. "I tried to talk her into it. I didn't want to order her, though…"

Goldar hadn't realized she and Scorpina had been talking. Rita had shut herself away from everyone else. Perhaps the fact that the two were friends helped in that.

"I realize how bored you are," Rita said, again startling Goldar. She smiled at him. "Once we hear back from Scorpina, I want to organize an attack. The Power Rangers are cut off from civilization at this moment, hiking on a mountain, and it will be easy to cut them off from the Command Center as well."

Goldar's brain raced. It was as if they'd been in a long, dark tunnel, and suddenly there was a light. He could tell Rita's heart wasn't really in it, but at least she was trying.

The ground shook.

Rita and Goldar looked around in bewilderment, and then locked eyes.

"Moonquake?" Goldar guessed, knowing that was particularly nonsensical.

Before Rita could laugh, the ground shook harder. The telescope fell, and Rita and Goldar were sent sprawling to the ground. Goldar hastened to get up so he could help his empress to her feet.
"Jane, get me off this crazy thing!" Squatt and Babboo stumbled into the throne room, clutching at each other.

"Have you two started the castle's engines again?" Goldar barked.

"That wouldn't have started to whole moon moving!" Squatt retorted.

Goldar looked outside. The fool was right. The moon was shaking, and something was casting a deep red light on the surface. Goldar looked at Rita, hoping she had some explanation. Perhaps some magic she'd been working on?

What Goldar saw made his insides freeze. Rita's face was warring between anger and fear. She held onto her staff for support, but Goldar could already feel the power radiating off it as she prepared for… something. There was no question, though, that she knew exactly what was coming.

And as Goldar watched her face, he put it together. He knew who had arrived as well.

Before either could articulate it, a voice boomed through the castle.

"I am Lord Zedd, Emperor of all I see."

It wasn't shouted. It wasn't a boast. It was a calm statement of fact. It made Goldar, for the first time since he could remember, want to run and hide.

He watched Rita. Her face had won its battle; her face was now set in determination. Only a sudden cold sweat belied the fear that Goldar felt himself.

"He'll be headed for the upper throne room, his Chamber of Command," Rita said in a calm voice. "The one he created especially for himself when he owned this castle."

Squatt and Babboo had stopped yelling and were silently cowering. Only Goldar's pride kept him from imitating them. "What are we going to do, my Empress?" He wished his voice was stronger.

Rita looked around, as if she had just remembered they were there. A ghost of a smile stole over her face. "You will do nothing. He has laid claim to my imperial holdings, and only I can defend them. Squatt. Babboo."

They raised their heads and stopped their frightened whimpering at her voice.

"You two alert Finster to what's happening… if he doesn't already know," she added wryly. "Then hide. Keep hidden no matter what happens."

"But Empress Rita…" Babboo squeaked, "what about…?"

"You heard me," Rita said firmly, though there was compassion in her voice. "I don't like repeating myself."

The two ran for the exit, Rita's orders giving them courage.

"If all else fails," Rita said, "Finster can activate the intergalactic teleporter. It can get all of you out."

Goldar realized Rita was now speaking to him. He found himself drawing strength from her. "I will not leave you, my Empress. I will defend you to my last breath."

Rita finally looked at him, and he was startled to see gratitude in her expression. "Then come with me to face him. But do not interfere." Her voice hardened. "Not without my permission."
Finster had thrown himself on the diagnostic equipment when the shaking began, trying to keep any needles or sensors from being dislodged from Scorpina. She was still unconscious, though Finster knew he could wake her quickly if he needed to.

The quaking stopped, then started again. Then stopped. Finster stayed where he was until he was reasonably sure it was over.

His considerable brain raced for explanations. None of them were good. There was a possibility that their own presence on the moon and the powers Rita utilized had somehow destabilized the cold, barren satellite. Then there were the Power Rangers, though that was unlikely, as they would hardly have a reason to attack. Unless for revenge… but it had been a month, and Finster was reasonably sure that Tommy no longer blamed Rita.

Squatt and Babboo stumbled into his lab, gasping for breath. Finster moved to intercept them so they wouldn't upset any of his equipment. He opened his mouth to protest… but then the sound died in his throat at the looks on their faces.

"Lord Zedd's here," Squatt gasped out.

Finster's mind spun in panic. "But… but… what…?"

"I don't know," Babboo said, his voice growing squeaky, "but we're gonna hide!"

The two pushed past Finster and ran into the hydroponics lab beyond.

Finster sat down slowly as his legs gave way beneath him. Lord Zedd… He had heard rumors that the tyrant was looking to expand his territory, but to challenge Queen Rita for her's… To take what she'd acquired not only through inheritance, but what she'd worked for all her life.

Finster ached to go to Rita. He knew she would meet Zedd's challenge directly. She was powerful, but Finster knew she was no fighter. She knew more about magic than that skinless usurper, but she could not match him in either raw power or fighting prowess.

He got up, ready to run to Rita's side, to die there if he must…

But he looked at Scorpina. She was still not ready to wake up. And even if he did wake her up, she would want to fight and she was in no condition to do so. He had to stay and protect her. It was what Rita would want him to do.

Besides, he wasn't going to lose another patient.

Resigning himself, he flicked on his computer monitor, knowing all he could do was watch.

They could have teleported to the upper throne room, but Empress Rita seemed to need the walk. She needed time to prepare. Goldar knew at this moment she was pulling as much energy from the dimensional portals as she could safely handle. From what he'd heard of Lord Zedd, Goldar only hoped it would be enough. He could lend his own strength, but compared to either of these magic users his strength was insignificant. He was a warrior, not a ruler.
As they moved from one level to another, the castle seemed to change. Already power was being restored to the disused portions of the castle. Wind moved by magic drove away the smell and dust. Lights blinked on as they walked, following them down the hallway.

Lord Zedd knew they were coming.

For a second, Goldar considered running. Just grabbing Rita, running for Finster's lab, and getting him to teleport everyone out of there before Zedd could even realize what was going on.

But he couldn't. Rita still had her pride. She would never forgive him. And even as he thought of running away, Goldar found he couldn't stomach it. There was retreating from a battle, and then there was cowardice.

Sooner than he wanted, they reached the upper throne room.

It was vast and spacious, with a much wider balcony. There were no shelves or trinkets littering the throne room, no tables and maps. It was stark and cold. A giant throne on a raised dais dominated the room.

The man himself stood staring at the earth, a red glow from his eyes piercing the distance.

Perhaps this was the moment. When his back was turned, before he could expect it, Goldar could strike at the self-proclaimed emperor, perhaps weaken him enough for Rita to finish the job. Even if Goldar died in the process, it would be worth it.

Two things stopped him, though. The first was his promise to Empress Rita. He was not to interfere. It was her battle, and she would fight it on her own terms.

The second was seeing Lord Zedd. He'd seen him from a distance, long ago, when he'd been a young soldier. He'd seen pictures. But nothing like that could prepare anyone for the horror that was Lord Zedd.

The man was powerfully built, but had no skin, and no skull, from what Goldar could tell. All he could see was exposed muscle and, at the top of his head, half of an exposed brain. He'd heard magic protected Lord Zedd from the elements, but all Goldar could see was a silver mask and more silver that not only protected various parts of his body but kept tubes in place. Even from a short distance, Goldar could see mysterious liquids pumping through the tubes.

Lord Zedd turned around to face them. Wrapped around his arms was a deadly-looking python. As he strode to his throne, the snake formed itself into a wicked-looking metal staff. The infamous Z-staff, which was rumored to be the source of Lord Zedd's powers… and was also rumored to be indestructible.

"Lord Zedd," Empress Rita said in a steady, slightly mocking voice. "It is good to see you after all this time."

Lord Zedd sat at his throne. He had no discernable expression because of his mask, but he seemed to exude insolence. Goldar was startled to see the room shift in color. "Is it?" Lord Zedd hissed.

If this was supposed to intimidate Rita, she did not show it. "Welcome to my home. If you had announced your coming, I would have prepared a more hospitable welcome."

While Zedd was working to intimidate, Rita was emphasizing their equality and Zedd's status as guest and/or interloper.
"You need not go to any trouble." Zedd's own voice had taken on a mocking tone. "As you can see, I've made myself right at home."

Again, the room's color shifted perceptibly. Rita pretended not to notice, though Goldar could see a single bead of sweat trickle down her temple.

"I can certainly see that," Rita said. "I am surprised the old place still works."

For the first time, Zedd showed a bit of impatience. "We can drop the pleasantries, Empress Rita Repulsa. You know exactly why I'm here."

Rita's hand tightened on her staff. "I am afraid I am at a loss. Unless it is to sample the Earth cuisine. I would recommend the donuts, particularly the ones with Bavarian cream. Though, with your obvious difficulties…" she ended with the ghost of a smile.

Lightning lanced from the Z-staff, arcing mere centimeters above Rita's head. Goldar jumped back on instinct, but Rita did not flinch, did not even drop her mocking smile.

"Enough of your prattling and time-wasting," Lord Zedd growled. The chamber had shifted to a deep red, and a red glow emanated from his body. "I am here because you have failed in your mission. For millennia, you have failed. Zordon still lives, and you cannot handle the conquest of a mere backwater planet whose people have not even made it out of their own solar system!"

The room seemed to amplify everything about Lord Zedd, and for the first time Goldar felt real hopelessness. There was really nothing they could do against this monster.

If Rita felt any despair, she did not show it. "I will forgive your inexperienced assumptions, Lord Zedd. You have not fought Zordon, and you have not contended with the power he commands, or else you would not speak of him or any planet on which he resides so flippantly."

"The power he commands…" Zedd practically spat back at her. His voice had grown calmer and more serious…more dangerous. "Coins, machines… teenagers. These are the mighty weapons he uses against you?" He laughed humorlessly, deep in his throat. "You stand defeated by mere infants. You dare call yourself Empress of Evil?"

Goldar felt Empress Rita's voice in his head. It was short and to the point. Move back.

"You are a fool," Rita said evenly. "You are foolish to think the war against Zordon is that easy." She smiled. "And it would be unwise to underestimate those… infants, as you call them. Though young, the Power Rangers wield the might of the Morphing Grid." She raised her staff. "I would let you try… but I have no desire to give you my domain."

Zedd raised his own staff. "Very well… if you insist on suicide, I will not stand in your way."

Goldar had backed away, but the force of the two attacks meeting blew him off his feet. His head smashed against the wall. Shaking off a wave of dizziness, he fought his way to his feet and shielded his eyes.

In the center of the room, Lord Zedd and Rita Repulsa were locked in combat, though no combat Goldar had ever seen. Rather than punches and kicks, energy was radiating off them.

A thousand attacks met in the middle, and then the bolt of energy grew fewer, yet bigger. Finally the attacks converged into one large attack.

Goldar stood awed by the power, and especially the power of his empress. She was radiant… almost
a goddess.

The battle raged, composed of magic and thought and things that Goldar could sense and not see. It was unbearable to be in the same room as these battling titans, but Goldar could not leave. Far from his promise, he could not tear his eyes away from the battle.

The six teenagers looked up from the trail to the sky. The sky boomed with thunder. Multi-colored lighting arced across the sky. There was thunder and lightning… but no clouds. It was like a hurricane on a clear day.

"That's impossible," Billy breathed.

"Looks like the 'weather' has stopped holding out," Zack groused. "And that was the funnest break ever."

Jason had already checked that they were alone before moving aside his sleeve to reach his communicator. "Zordon, are you getting this?"

Only static answered him.

"Zordon, do you read?" Jason said, a measure of panic creeping into his voice.

Again, no answer.

The six Rangers stared at each other in surprised fear. Above their heads, the bizarre storm continued.

"We should get to the Command Center to see what's wrong," Trini suggested.

As one, they pressed their communicators. It was almost without surprise that they realized they couldn't teleport either.

"It has to be some sort of magical interference," Billy said. "The storm and our communicators have to be connected somehow."

"Should we go back?" Kimberly said. "Maybe if we get off the mountain."

Jason looked at Tommy, who nodded his head.

"We have no reason to believe it's just this mountain that's cut off," Jason said. "It could be all over Earth. But we do need to keep close to civilization."

"Yeah, Rita could be attacking the city," Zack said. "And we don't even have a vehicle to get there if we're out here."

"We don't even know if or where she is attacking, if she is," Trini commented.

"Billy, don't you have a transistor radio in that bag?" Tommy said. "We could monitor the news through that."

"Solid plan," Jason said. "In the meantime, we keep our eyes peeled. I just can't help but feel that Rita will want to attack us here, and that freaky light show is just to shake us up."
They kept hiking. Tommy allowed himself, though, to fall behind as he rubbed his head.

"What wrong?" Kimberly asked in a low tone, falling back to keep pace with him.

Tommy shook his head vigorously. "It's nothing," he said. "Just got kind of a headache. Must be this storm."

Tommy looked up at the storm again. For some reason he felt more of a prickle of fear at this storm. Like… it wasn't just another attack.

Zedd stood motionless, tall, with energy to spare. Rita, though, showed the strain. Her teeth were gritted, tears and sweat streamed down her face, and yet she did not blink, did not move, for to let up even a tiny bit would mean certain death.

Lord Zedd held himself in check, staring at Rita, waiting for something. Instinctively, Goldar knew he was waiting for a surrender.

But Empress Rita would not give up. She would not give in as long as there was breath in her body.

She's going to die, Goldar realized. She was going to let the power consume her, let the borrowed portal energy eat her alive rather than give up. She was past caring about her own benefit, past caring about anything… as she'd been all month.

But she cared about her followers, her… family. She was going to sacrifice herself to allow all of them a chance to escape. Goldar could feel this knowledge come straight from Rita… not in telepathic words, but in unrestrained emotion. He knew what she wanted him to do: run to the lab, gather Finster, Scorpina, Squatt, and Babboo, and use the intergalactic teleporter to escape.

That was what she wanted him to do. But he knew just as well he couldn't allow her to die. She may not have cared, but he did.

He felt a single tear slip past his control as he realized exactly what he needed to do.

In a flash he knew would be unnoticed by Zedd, who had not acknowledged him once since his arrival, Goldar teleported to Empress Rita's throne room. He forced his hand not to shake as he grabbed the source of Rita's power, the crystal that held her access to the dimensional portals. He took a breath and teleported back.

Rita's eyes widened in surprise when she saw Goldar. With heart thumping to burst through his chest, Goldar held the crystal aloft so Rita could see it clearly. Her face broke into confusion… then rage… then fear.

Deliberately, Goldar threw the crystal to the floor, knowing the impact along with the strain already put on it by Rita would immediately smash it. Simultaneously, just as Goldar had hoped, Rita threw herself to one side to avoid Zedd's attacks, just in time for her power to break.

There was a ringing silence as the energy abruptly ceased. Rita had sunk in a heap on the floor, wracked with physical pain and, Goldar knew, the pain of betrayal.

For the first time, Lord Zedd's gaze focused on Goldar. He took in the shattered crystal on the floor.

"Your name, warrior?" Lord Zedd barked.
Goldar tried not to flinch. "Goldar… my Emperor."

At those words, Rita looked at him in wild yet silent fury. He knew that if she had her old power, he would be vaporized on the spot. Instead, Goldar had to force himself not to look at Rita… force himself to look at Lord Zedd. To force himself to…

"I vaguely remember your name," Lord Zedd said, his voice growing calculating. "It was you who broke this woman's power?"

Goldar nodded, not trusting his voice at the moment.

Lord Zedd seemed to regain his swagger. "I hardly needed your help. However, you have saved me from cleaning up after a rather messy death… You have proven yourself as useful and loyal. Therefore, I will grant you some of my own strength. You will need more power to serve me."

Goldar felt a sudden burst of power shoot through him, energizing him beyond his previous conceptions. And yet, the words cut into him. Goldar forced himself on. "Thank you, Lord Zedd. I am willing to serve."

"I bet you are," Zedd said mockingly. His gaze turned on Rita, who was trying to pull herself from the floor, but to no avail. She was too weak to move. "Well, now, my Empress. It seems as if your right hand man has deserted you, and taken your powers along with him. I would be willing to continue this fight… but it seems as if you no longer wish to."

Rita raised her head. Fury smoldered in her eyes, eyes that were no longer tinged with despair. "I cannot account for this traitor," she said in a broken voice. "You are welcome to him, and anything else you wish to take. I would only ask mercy for my other followers before you kill me."

Lord Zedd laughed. "And you believe you deserve an honorable death?" His mood shifted suddenly deadly. "Your followers and all your possessions are no longer yours, and therefore no longer your concern. You are hereby stripped of your remaining power and banished to your former prison." He waved one clawed hand, and strange-looking Putties formed from midair. "Putties, escort the Empress of Evil to her traveling vehicle."

In one swift move, Rita drew herself to her feet and to her full height. She left her staff where it lay. For one moment, Goldar thought she would begin the attack again. But she merely glared at Zedd and held her head high. "I can make my own way, thank you."

With one last look at Goldar, a look that he knew would haunt him forever, Empress Rita Repulsa marched to her "space dumpster," held aloft by Zedd's Putties. She did not look back as a bolt of energy from the Z-staff shrunk her and sealed her in. With a dismissive wave from Zedd, the dumpster flew from the balcony and disappeared into the void of space.

"Now then, Goldar," Lord Zedd said without a backwards glance to the balcony, "tell me about these Power Rangers. Then I believe we can deal with the rest of Rita's… followers."

It was Rita who had just been imprisoned, but Goldar knew he had just built for himself a far crueler prison. One that he had to preserve and strengthen… if he was going to keep everyone alive.

All he had to do was keep from dying inside.
Crash

Chapter Summary

Book 4: Mutiny

Part 2 of my rewrite of the season 2 premier "The Mutiny."

Finster impatiently wiped his eyes so he could see the screen. Unfortunately, there was not much to see. The battle of magic had fried a lot of his equipment. But he had to keep trying to track her; If he could plot the trajectory of the space dumpster early on, he would be able to retrieve it… or at least teleport it to a safe place.

He heard a groan behind him. He glanced back to see Scorpina fighting against the effects of the drugs.

"Please don't get up yet, Scorpina," he said.

"What's going on? I've been half-conscious the past ten minutes, but…"

Finster sighed. He had not been looking forward to telling her.

"Finster, if you don't tell me now I'm just going to beat it out of you," she said groggily.

"Lord Zedd has arrived," Finster said.

There was a pause. "Oh? And what does that blowhard want? He's not still collecting artifacts, is he?"

Finster found he couldn't answer. The words stuck in his throat.

"Finster?" Scorpina's voice took on an edge of panic. "I'm going to find out anyway, so go ahead and tell me."

Finster paused in his search for Queen Rita. His hands were shaking too badly to continue. "Lord Zedd has stripped Queen Rita of her power and imperial holdings and has consigned her to her former prison."

There was an inarticulate scream as Scorpina began struggling even more violently against her own body. She rocked the diagnostic table so hard it came crashing down, dumping Scorpina onto the floor. Finster abandoned his efforts to find Queen Rita, the immediate concern of a hurt patient calling his attention.

She was physically unhurt. In fact, fear and anger had flushed out the last effects of the drugs. "Where is he?" she screamed. "I'll make him pay…"

"You'll die if you do," Finster said, feeling himself grow cooler next to her heat. "Please listen to me before you rush to your own destruction."

Scorpina was panting with rage. She looked far more dangerous in a simple cotton gown than she
did in full armor. "How could this happen?" she gasped. "Even without my help, both Rita and Goldar could have…"

Finster had not planned on telling Scorpina right away, but she read it in his eyes. Rather than raging, she seemed to grow cold with shock.

"I'm sorry," Finster said. "Goldar betrayed our empress. He broke her power source at a critical moment in the fight. He… Goldar serves Lord Zedd now."

As Finster talked, Scorpina seemed to draw inward. The fire in her eyes went from blazing to smoldering. "So what can be done?" she said in a blank voice.

Finster turned back to his controls. "I am at this moment trying to track Queen Rita," Finster said, "but…” He cursed and pounded at the controls in desperation. The few minutes of distraction had cost him dearly. "Lord Zedd is already spreading his control over the palace through his chamber of command. He's blocked most of my sensors. He's also blocked long-range transport."

Scorpina threw off her gown and began looking for her clothes. She was cold and businesslike even in her nudity. "Can you upload a projected flight trajectory to the nav computer on my ship?"

Finster's eyes widened, though he concentrated on the new task while he still had some access to his computer. "You're going after her? Can you possibly free her from the dimensional transport?"

Scorpina was pulling on her armor. "I'm a bounty hunter. I can catch anything as long as I've got a direction. And I don't have to free her. I just have to collect the transport. I can take it to someone who can crack it open."

"Where will you go?" Finster said.

"I dunno," Scorpina said. "Somewhere where we can re-group. Maybe to her father's. Or Rito might know someone." She paused. "It's a single transport, and I can't fit you in storage if I'm going to have room for Rita."

"Please do not concern yourself with me," Finster said. "Our primary concern is for Queen Rita. But be careful. Lord Zedd will try to stop you."

Scorpina's face turned ugly, and for a moment Finster could see the scorpion lying just within. "Let him try. And if he sends Goldar… so much the better. It'll give me a chance to give him the killing he deserves."

"Try not to get in a fight," Finster pleaded. "And do not teleport. I have not had a chance to evaluate your readings, but your teleportation already takes its toll on your body. I can't guarantee your safety."

"Fine then. How long will it take you to evaluate the readings?" Scorpina asked.

"Five minutes."

"I can't wait that long," Scorpina said. "I'll run to my ship; it's not far."

Even as she prepared to leave, the air split with the sound of Lord Zedd's voice. "Scorpina, report to my throne room immediately."

"Screw that," Scorpina said under her breath. "Finster, I'll contact you as soon as I know anything. Could you try to keep Zedd out of the castle's security system until I get to my ship?"
"I will do my best," Finster said.

"Then I have nothing to worry about," Scorpina grinned. "See ya later, old man."

With that, she was gone, leaving Finster alone in a lab that was quickly becoming not his own. With the remainder of his control over the palace's systems, he put up a few hasty barriers around the inter-

security systems. They were just simple misdirects, but perhaps they were so simplistic that Zedd would ignore them. He knew he was playing a dangerous game, as he would be at the mercy at whatever fate Zedd deemed proper for him, but he also knew his primary loyalty was to Queen Rita. He'd known her ever since she was a little girl, and then had been her first servant when she'd first come to her inheritance.

Even if he wouldn't see her anymore. Even if he was going to die this day… he wasn't going to betray her.

The fallen diagnostic table clicked as the results of Scorpina's exam completed earlier than Finster had expected. He had no time to consult it. He quickly uploaded the results to Scorpina's ship and continued with his battle over the last bit of control over the castle.

"It does not appear your paramour wishes to report, Goldar."

Lord Zedd was sitting on his throne, which Goldar was beginning to realize could be used to control the entire palace… at least, that's what Lord Zedd had boasted. Goldar wondered how completely he could control a building so ancient and complex as the Moon Palace. For the Moon Palace was old… far older than either Zedd or Rita.

"She's… she was Rita's friend, not her employee," Goldar said, trying to keep the anger out of his voice. "She's a freelance bounty hunter. She has no other ties to this place or this mission."

"That may be…" Lord Zedd said softly, "but she cannot be allowed to help the fallen empress or challenge my authority. Do you think she's planning to leave quietly?"

Goldar wished he could say that she was, but he had the unnerving feeling that his new master could tell when he was lying. "No, my lord," he said quietly. Trying to hide his reluctance, he made the offer he knew he had to make. "Shall I bring her here by force?"

Lord Zedd regarded him for a moment. Goldar could read nothing from him. "Unnecessary," he said. "That inept monster-maker is helping her get to her ship. She expects an attack within the palace itself… but that will not come. Let her get to her ship then. Once she does, she will be powerless to defend herself."

Goldar realized Zedd intended to blast her out of the sky, force her to crash land. Or even just vaporize her… but no. Zedd would want to give her one last opportunity to work for him. He had brought no forces of his own, other than this new brand of Putties. Lord Zedd was renowned for not keeping long-term minions. He would want Scorpina's help. And if Goldar could play it right, he could either talk some sense into Scorpina or convince Zedd that it wouldn't be worth the trouble he'd have with Scorpina's guild if he killed her.

Goldar was cut short from his frantic plans. "We need not worry about her at the moment," Lord Zedd continued. He waved his Z-staff, and images floated in midair of the Power Rangers. Goldar recognized the image from the fight in downtown Angel Grove, when they'd been herding the teens to the portal to the Island of Illusions.
"I have the records and information about these… heroes," Zedd sneered. "But I wish to hear about them from you. What is so special about them that they would continually foil Rita's efforts? Tell me about them in turn, beginning with their leader."

"That would be the Red Ranger," Goldar said, and in response an image of Jason flashed on the screen, an image of him fighting Putties. "His name is Jason. He's a formidable warrior… the best among them, save perhaps one." Goldar allowed himself a smile. He was feeling more comfortable with plans to defeat the Power Rangers rather than helping Zedd exert dominance over the Moon Palace. "I've almost killed him on several occasions, but he keeps finding a way to survive. He's most dangerous when he's up against a wall."

"So in your opinion he would be the most dangerous?" Lord Zedd said. He seemed absolutely absorbed in Goldar's words, though Goldar knew that Zedd was probably monitoring Scorpina, continuing with his takeover of the Moon Palace, and analyzing the information on the Rangers and their battles with them. Lord Zedd's connection with the Palace seemed to give him a connection with the computers, such that he didn't need access terminals or screens. Goldar was sure that the floating images in the throne room were for Goldar's benefit, not Zedd's.

"In a way," Goldar said. "The others respect him and his leadership. He's not the most subtle of tacticians, however. His few attempts at stealth have ended… disastrously."

The screen shifted to the Black Ranger. The scene was an early one, one in which they'd gotten him on his own to fight the Black Knight. Goldar smiled at that memory as well: back when the battles had been simpler, before those complicated emotional ties had messed everything up.

"The Black Ranger is named Zack. He is usually the second in command. While not as skilled a fighter as the Red Ranger, he is rather more unpredictable." On the screen, the scene had shifted to a Putty fight, where Zack had gone into some of his dance moves, utterly confusing a group of Putties before he kicked them down. "He seems at first to not to take anything seriously, but he's a determined and passionate fighter when he needs to be." Goldar remembered vividly when Zack assumed command of the Rangers when Jason was prisoner at the Moon Palace.

But Zedd didn't seem altogether interested in the Black Ranger, as the images had moved to the Yellow Ranger.

"That is Trini," Goldar supplied. "She is perhaps the most disciplined fighter among them, which perhaps makes her the most predictable. Her intelligence and logic serve as greater threats than her already formidable fighting." The screen was showing her efforts in defeating the Pudgy Pig. "While not as much of a battle strategist, she is especially honed to finding and exploiting weaknesses in monsters. Her greatest skill, however, is medical. She has developed some sort of medicine that will allow her to heal any of the Rangers, even those at the brink of death, as well as the random civilian."

"And you have not made her a target when she is so crucial to the Rangers' survival," Zedd offhandedly commented. "Interesting. That will be remedied. Carry on, Goldar."

Goldar was unnerved by the mockery, but he forced himself to carry on as images of the Pink Ranger flashed across the screen. "This is Kimberly, the Pink Ranger. She's a gymnast rather than a fighter. Of all of them, she's probably had the least amount of training in fighting. However, that makes her an unpredictable fighter. She's most dangerous, though, when she's threatened, as the other Rangers feel particularly protective of her."

"Ah. The damsel. Go on."
Goldar knew enough of Kimberly that he knew how she'd react to being called a damsel. However, he chose not to say anything, as the images had already shifted to the Blue Ranger.

"At first glance, the Blue Ranger, Billy, does not seem dangerous. Though he's been training for the past year, he's still the least experienced of the fighters. However, he's a genius… a scientific prodigy. He's been able to secure the Rangers' homes from surveillance and teleportation, and despite his inexperience he's usually able to cope with anything technical we throw at him."

"Yes, I can already tell he's one to worry about," Lord Zedd said impatiently. "Just tell me about the last one. Scorpina has gained her ship."

This was the one Goldar was most reluctant to talk about, but he knew he had no choice. "The last is Tommy. He… he originally worked for E… Rita. She gave him the green power coin and put him under a spell to gain his loyalty. The spell was eventually broken and he joined the enemy, refusing to give back his power coin. In retaliation, Rita severed the connection between him and his green power coin, but he kept the power coin from us by giving it to the Red Ranger. Last month, he was able to regain temporary control over his own powers…"

The power chamber flashed red, and the redness radiated most prominently around Lord Zedd himself. He waved a clawed hand dismissively. "Yes, yes, I know all about Rita's failure, that she lost control of a weapon she herself cultivated. But what about him?"

"He's dangerous," Goldar said shortly. "He's the best fighter and the best tactician among them. He's occasionally emotionally unstable, though, and as of now he has a disadvantage because of the temporary nature of his powers."

Lord Zedd seemed to be laughing. "Thank you for that revisionist history. I believe I am quite caught up. We do not need to worry about three of these Rangers. They will be gone soon, I believe. The other three are much more worrisome, but they will be dealt with."

"We will attack at once. I believe I have tracked these children onto what looks like a mountainous area. We will block off teleportation and communication around that mountain to all but our own forces. You, Goldar, will lead one force, while a monster of my own design will lead the opposing force. Your job will be to simply attack. Force the Rangers to morph and call their Zords. The monster will do the rest."

Goldar was unnerved by the swiftness of Zedd's order, as well as his lack of explanation or sharing of his plans. These new Putties were already surrounding Goldar, waiting for his orders, while another group stood by, obviously waiting for the monster. Lord Zedd was moving to the large balcony without a second glance to Goldar. With an almost off-hand gesture with his Z-staff, Zedd sent an arc of lightning. Goldar wondered if he was making a monster… or already attacking Scorpina.

Goldar realized with a pang he could do nothing either way. He had his orders.

The storm had calmed, but the Rangers still shot nervous glances up at the sky. Communication was still on the blink.

"So there was just no way we were going to get a nice, normal day, was there?" Zack groused.

Trini cut him a sharp look.
"Just trying to break the tension," Zack mumbled.

"I don't like this," Jason said. "Communication has been out way too long. We need to teleport up to the Command Center."

As one, the Rangers touched their communicators. Nothing happened.

In a moment, Billy pulled his backpack off and rummaged through it. He pulled out a tiny set of tools and cracked his communicator open.

In the meantime, the other Rangers kept watch, knowing it would be suspicious if even Billy was found working on a high-tech wristwatch in the middle of the forest.

Kimberly moved closer to Tommy and lowered her voice. "What's wrong? You're making me nervous."

Tommy realized he was still looking at the sky, squinting as if he could see past the atmosphere. "I… it's…" He shook his head. "Something really wrong, and I don't know what it is. I don't even know why I think something's wrong."

Kimberly pressed her mouth into a fine line. She didn't like Tommy's continued connection to Rita, but she was trying to learn to live with it. "Do you sense something from Rita? Like, an attack or something?"

"I don't think it's that," Tommy said in a vague voice. He looked at Kimberly. "I… I guess I'm just jumpy."

Kimberly frowned. "We all are," she said, though she knew Tommy was just saying that so he didn't have to explain himself.

Without realizing what he was doing, Tommy started looking up into the sky again. This time, though, he discovered a source of worry. "Uh… guys? Something's falling from the sky."

The Rangers' heads jerked up to search the sky. They didn't have to search long, for whatever was falling was falling fast and extremely near their location.

"Is that a satellite?" Trini said.

Billy shook his head. "It's too small… but a fragment that small would have been burned up in the atmosphere. Unless it's a smaller piece of something bigger…"

"Some new attack from Rita?" Jason suggested.

"Whatever she's doing, she's also blocking teleportation in this immediate area," Billy said, putting his tools away. "My communicator is in perfect working order, but we still can't get a signal."

"I think it's going to hit pretty near here," Tommy said. "Should we go investigate?"

"If it's an attack from Rita, we'll have to face it sooner or later," Zack said.

"Let's go then… carefully," said Jason. "I don't want to escalate a fight here unless we have to, not with the whole mountain swarming with people who won't be able to get away easily."

Billy estimated where the object would land, and the others followed him. Tommy and Kimberly held back.
"Still sense something wrong?" Kimberly said.

Tommy nodded but didn't elaborate. It was like he'd forgotten something, or was missing something…

The object landed half a mile from the Rangers' position, but the crash was still deafening. It was like an explosion during a Zord battle, but usually the Rangers had helmets on for protection. After the sound came the explosion: a giant plume of fire and smoke that shot above the trees.

Trini rushed forward, caution abandoned. "Someone may be hurt! And we can't let that fire spread!" she called behind her.

The Rangers ran after her, their concern also overriding their caution.

"Are those people from the crash site?" Zack yelled as they spotted figures ahead.

The Rangers skidded to a halt when the figures came into view, emerging from the smoke as lighter patches of gray.

"Are those… Putties?" Kimberly said hesitantly.

"They sorta look like it, but…" Jason said.

Tommy was the first to break out of the confusion. "They've got to be some new thing Finster cooked up. Either way, they're keeping us from the crash site."

"Then let's break through the lines," Jason said with more confidence. "But no one goes to the crash site alone."

The new Putties seemed to be faster than the old ones. Even as they spoke, the Putties had formed a perimeter around the Rangers with the highest concentration immediately blocking the way to the fire. As one, the Rangers threw themselves into battle.

After only a minute, the Rangers felt just how different these new Putties were.

"What are these things made of anyway?" Kimberly called out. She dove to the side, her few second of diverted focus costing her dearly. A Putty's foot caught her in the stomach, knocking the wind out of her. She rolled out of the way of the fighters, struggling to catch her breath.

"They seem to be of a superior construct…" Billy couldn't continue. He found himself fighting two at once, and he was using every trick Tommy had taught him just to keep from getting pummeled.

Zack had cornered one and was trying to punch it until it went away like usual. "It's… just… not… breaking… apart!" At the last word, Zack was thrown back several feet as the Putty, hardly phased by Zack's blows, struck him across the face. Trini ran to his defense, saving him from two Putties who seemed to want to pay him back for all the blows their fellow had taken. She could barely hold them back, though.

Jason and Tommy were holding their own at the center of the fight, but Jason noticed that Tommy was weakening significantly. This was their first battle in over a month, since Tommy had become the Green Ranger again. Jason remembered Zordon's words of caution, that Tommy's powers would not be permanent. It also seemed that as Zordon's power transfer ran out, the Green Ranger powers fed off Tommy's life energy even when he wasn't morphed. And, no matter what anyone told him, Jason still felt intensely responsible for Tommy losing his powers. Subtly, he tried to pull more Putties to himself, hoping Tommy wouldn't notice.
"Hey, Jas?" Tommy said breathlessly.

"What is it?" Jason asked, hoping Tommy wasn't going to call him out for being protective.

Tommy took a minute to answer. "I think I want to try the obvious. You know, the one thing we're all avoiding?"

"Punching the Z?" Jason said.

"Exactly."

It was the most distinctive feature on this new breed of Putties: the button with the giant Z in the middle of their chest. It was eye-catching and looked easy, tempting, to hit. So all of the Rangers had been avoiding it like the plague. It was too obvious a target, something in which Rita could lay any trap she wanted.

"Let me do it first, Tommy," Jason said.

Even though Jason couldn't see him, he could practically feel Tommy's scowl at those words. "I'm okay, Jason," he said.

But Jason didn't want to risk Tommy's precarious strength on an experiment. "Leader's privilege. Just be ready to drag me out if something happens."

"Got it," Tommy said.

Jason made sure he wasn't vulnerable to any immediate attacks other than the Putty in front of him. He threw the Putty on the ground and, taking a breath, punched the Z as hard has he could.

Tommy turned around in time to see the Putty glow slightly at the touch, starting with the chest Z. It broke apart and disappeared. Tommy grinned at the sight. "You got him, Jas… Jason?"

Jason had crumpled to the ground, holding his arm and trying not to yell in pain.

Tommy kicked some Putties away from Jason. "Are you okay?" he said, momentarily forgetting his own too-soon exhaustion.

"It was like lightning went up my arm," Jason gasped. "I... I just wasn't expecting it." He shook his arm. "Still tingles, but it's okay now."

"So that's the trick," Tommy said. "We can get rid of these things, but only at a price."

"Putties were always meant to wear us down," Jason said.

They looked around. The center of the fight had moved away from them, and the Putties were targeting the other Rangers, who had moved closer to the crash site. The fire from the crash had gone out, but there was still smoke billowing from it. But between them and the crash site were screams: the unmistakable yells of Bulk and Skull.

Jason sighed. "Tommy, you're not going to like this. I need you to sneak away from the Putties and get to the crash site without being seen."

Tommy glared at him. "You're telling me to run away. You don't think I can handle these Putties."

"I'm saying that we're going to need to morph soon if we're going to hide our identities from Bulk and Skull—and whoever else is here—and I need you to conserve your power while we're cut off
from the Command Center and Zordon. I told you you wouldn't like it, but that's the way it's gotta be."

"Right," Tommy said in a resigned voice. "I'll try to send up some signal if I need backup."

"Thanks," Jason said, but Tommy was already disappearing into the trees. Telling himself that protecting Tommy and defeating Rita was more important than trying to make Tommy feel better, he ran to the others.

Billy, Trini, Kimberly, and Zack and formed into a group, trying not to get surrounded. The Putties were holding the line, waiting for the Rangers to attack.

"Where've ya been?" Zack said. "You've been missing out on the fun." The levity in Zack's voice was spoiled by the edge of fatigue.

"Where's Tommy?" Kimberly asked, chancing a glance around.

"Sent him to sneak to the crash site," Jason mumbled just loud enough for the Rangers to hear. "Listen, we gotta morph, but before we do that I found their weakness."

"The Z?" Trini asked.

"Right," Jason said. "They disappear, but it hurts like hell when you hit it, and I'm betting that being morphed is not going to change that much. In fact, it may even weaken our powers temporarily."

"So they are designed to weaken us in the more efficient way possible," Billy surmised.

"But we have to get rid of them," Kimberly said. "We can't just let them wander around free to hurt people."

"So we morph," Jason concluded. "Try out weapons and blasters. Only hit the Z's if you absolutely have to. Zack and Kimberly, you guys work your way to where Bulk and Skull are. Billy, Trini, and I will get to the crash site to help Tommy, and you guys meet us there."

Kimberly looked rebellious, but Jason gave her a look that told her he wasn't going to budge. He needed to get to the crash site, Trini was their only person with medical skills just in case anyone was hurt, and he needed Billy with him just in case there was something technical to figure out at the crash.

He only hoped no one was hurt at the crash. It was taking them too damn long to get there.

Tommy crept through the trees, following Jason's orders and hating every second of it. He knew the logic of Jason's orders. He knew that if the Putties specialized in weakening and draining power, Tommy was more vulnerable than any of the other Rangers, and for now he couldn't get a power transfer from Zordon. And even if he could, the power transfer was just plain dangerous.

He understood all that. That didn't mean he had to like it.

Tommy stopped in his tracks, ice flooding his insides as he heard a familiar growling voice. It was getting closer. Tommy drew further back into the brush, hating himself even as he did it. He didn't want to admit it to Jason, but the fight with the Putties had really taken it out of him. There was no way he was up to facing Goldar, especially when he was surrounded by those brand new Putties.
Goldar finally loomed into view, though Tommy knew the warrior wouldn't be able to see him. "Have you found her yet?" Goldar barked at a Putty.

The Putty danced around, though the sign language was obviously a negative. Tommy frowned in confusion. Her? They were looking for someone? Couldn't be Kimberly or Trini: they knew where they were. Someone else?

"Well, keep looking!" Goldar said. "She can't have gotten far. And you bring her to me first, you understand?"

The Putty danced away, looking behind leaves and branches. Tommy shrank back as the Putty got closer… and he nearly yelled as he backed into something warm and alive.

Instantly, a gauntleted hand clamped around his mouth. He lost his balance and stumbled into the figure. He found himself nose to nose with Scorpina.

Scorpina's eyes were wide with fear. She shook her head vigorously and motioned with her head to the searchers.

Tommy's heart rate slowed. He pulled her hand away from his mouth and got back into a crouch. He didn't know what was going on, but he was pretty sure from Goldar's tone and Scorpina's eyes that Scorpina was in danger. That was as far as he could get, as the idea of Goldar hunting Scorpina with a bunch of Putties was so bizarre he couldn't manufacture any circumstances that would fit. Surely a lovers' spat wouldn't go this far.

He'd passed a hidden enclosure not far away. He motioned for Scorpina to follow him. The Putties were getting closer, and he couldn't fight them at the moment. He also didn't want to have to defend Scorpina before he could talk to her.

She shook her head. He rolled his eyes, thinking that she didn't trust him, but then he looked down at her leg. There was a metal shard embedded in her thigh. She obviously couldn't move without damaging her leg.

Tommy took off his backpack and put it over Scorpina's back. Before she could recover from her shock at his odd movements, he pulled her onto his back, trying to secure her without touching the wound.

Scorpina was obviously not happy with the arrangement, but she did nothing more than dig her fingernails into Tommy's shoulders. Tommy ignored it and started off as quietly and quickly as he could, keeping an eye out for Putty patrols.

"So then I said, 'But Bulky, wouldn't that be the exact kind of thing that would get us attacked by monsters?' And then you said, 'It'll be all right… we haven't been attacked in months.'"

"Less talking, more running," Bulk growled.

Bulk and Skull were running as fast as they could, tripping over tree roots and rocks as they went. They'd lost the trail long ago, as well as most of their luggage. Bulk was cradling one arm. As a desperate attempt, Bulk had tried punching the Z. The Putty had broken apart, but Bulk had been severely hurt. It was all Skull could do at first to keep Bulk on his feet. Now they ran.

"So then I said, 'Knock on wood. If you say it's not going to happen, it's going to happen… unless
you knock on wood."

"They can hear you, Skull. Shut up."

"So then what did you do? You knocked on the dashboard… which is not wood!"

There was a crashing in the undergrowth, and the two were suddenly surrounded by Putties.

"I just figured if we were gonna die," Skull continued, "I wanted to get that off my chest."

"We're not gonna die," Bulk said.

"How do you know that?" Skull grumbled.

"Because there's a Power Ranger right behind you."

Skull turned around to gape at the Pink Ranger, who waved at them cheerfully.

"You know, he's right," she said brightly. "You really do need to knock on wood. Now would you guys mind ducking for a minute?"

They ducked, and she threw a roundhouse kick that caught an approaching Putty full in the face. It fell back, and the two straightened up to again gape at the Pink Ranger.

"Thanks," Bulk managed to say.

"No problem," the Pink Ranger said. "Now run away a whole bunch… and don't try punching the Z."

The two ran for the underbrush, but Bulk stopped Skull as soon as they were well-hidden.

The Pink and Black Ranger were methodically fighting through these odd-looking Putties. The Black Ranger drew his axe and sliced one across the chest. The Putty exploded apart, but the Black Ranger yelled as soon as he made contact.

"No good on the weapons," the Black Ranger called to the Pink. "It still feels like an electric current."

"Maybe it's because its metal!" the Pink Ranger replied.

"Don't tell me we're gonna need wooden stakes for these things," the Black Ranger said.

"Let me try," the Pink Ranger said in an exasperated tone. She drew her bow and had arrows whizzing through the air in an instant.

Most of the arrows missed the dancing Putties, but one hit its mark. The Z on the Putty glowed dully, but it didn't disappear. The Pink Ranger kept hitting the one with arrows. It seemed to lose some mobility, but it wasn't exploding apart as it did from a good, solid blow.

"Of course it wouldn't be that easy," the Pink Ranger grumbled. She put away her blow and pulled her blade blaster from her belt. She shot it square in the chest. The Z glowed violently. It started to fly apart, but as it did energy gathered and blew straight back at Kimberly, including all her arrows. She hit the ground, stunned momentarily.

"So no blade blasters, then," the Black Ranger said.
The Pink Ranger got up, brushing herself off. "Doesn't look like it. We'll just have to hit them, I guess."

"Okay," the Black Ranger said. He drew his fist back. "Deep breath, expect the pain."

The two Rangers fought off the Putties, wincing and giving involuntary yelps each time they hit a Putty. They tried to vary their attacks, punching with different arms and throwing in kicks so no limb would get too hurt. By the end, when all the Putties had disappeared, the two Rangers were limping.

"Come on," the Black Ranger gasped. "We gotta get back to the others. You okay, K—"

The Pink Ranger suddenly grabbed the Black Ranger and put her finger over the mouth on her helmet. "You guys okay over there?" she called out to Bulk and Skull.

"Yeah," Bulk said.

The Black Ranger looked in their direction. "Go the opposite direction, away from all that smoke. Don't worry about anything you left: just get to safety."

The two Rangers ran toward the smoke and quickly disappeared through the trees.

Bulk pulled Skull out of their hiding place. The little clearing was completely peaceful, as if a life-or-death battle had never taken place there.

"Wow…" Skull said.

"I know," said Bulk.

"Just… wow."

"You know what this means, don't you?" Bulk said.

"That we can go home and watch X-Files?"

"No, doofus," Bulk sighed. "The Power Rangers! They have names! The Black Ranger almost used the Pink Ranger's name before she stopped him. There's real people under those costumes. They talk and make jokes and everything."

"But we knew that, didn't we?" Skull said.

"Sort of," Bulk said. "We guessed it, anyway. But they could have been aliens or robots or something. I heard Ernie talking about how he'd heard they were aliens. But would aliens know about wooden stakes? Would robots get hurt like I did when I hit a Putty?"

"I guess not," Skull said. "Unless they watch TV. And speaking of TV…"

"We're going to find out who they are," Bulk said, his tone making it sound like an inaugural address. "We're going to discover their identities."

"We did that, with the booth," Skull said.

"That was just a joke," Bulk said impatiently. "Of course Bill Clinton isn't a Power Ranger. No, the Power Rangers live around here. We may even know them already."

Skull's face turned serious. "But… Bulky… why do you want to know who they are?"
Bulk paused, his excited expression falling. Truth was, he didn't exactly know why he wanted to know who they were. He remembered all the times the Rangers had saved them: the time the Green Ranger had protected him at his own cost from a Candle Monster. The time when the Blue Ranger had healed Skull from a blaster wound. He remembered what he'd told Mr. Kaplan… that it was hard to feel grateful to someone you didn't even know.

"We'll become famous!" Bulk heard himself saying. "How many people want to know who the Power Rangers are? Newspapers and TV news will pay a fortune just this kind of information. But we'll be the ones who found out when no one else could."

"Hey, and maybe the Power Rangers will make us into their sidekicks or something if we found out," Skull said, warming up to the idea. "Like the Alfred to their Batman."

"Alfred was the butler. We don't want to be butlers," Bulk said. "But you could be right. Come on, Skull. This is going to take some planning."

"But after X-Files, right?"

Bulk was about to retort, considered, and then sighed. "Right after X-Files, we find out who the Power Rangers are."

It had been almost impossible getting to the crash site. The perimeter was thick with Putties, and all attempts Jason, Trini, and Billy had made at hitting a Z without physical contact had failed. Fighting in morphed form seemed even more of a disadvantage, as the power feedback was even greater when there was more power behind the blows.

At much cost to their own energy, they'd broken through the lines of Putties until finally they got to the crash site. After fighting so many, the site was eerily deserted.

"It's a ship, though it doesn't seem to be large enough for more than one person," Billy said, prodding a piece of debris with a stick. The debris was still too hot for even their gloved hands to touch.

"This doesn't make sense," Jason said. "Zordon would have told us if he was expecting someone, and why would the Putties keep us from someone on Rita's side?"

"Whoever it was is gone," Trini said. "And I can't spot a blood trail." As soon as she'd seen there was no one in the wreckage, she'd taken to searching the surrounding area. "I can't find Tommy anywhere either."

"The pilot might have jettisoned or teleported away before the crash," Billy said.

"Or might have been carried away by the Putties," Jason said. "There's way too many Putties in these woods just for us. There's something really weird going on and Rita doesn't want us to find out about it. And Tommy…" Jason moved an arm to scrape his hair back before realizing he was wearing a helmet. His head was aching from the chaos. "He must have gotten sidetracked. We need to stay here to rendezvous with the others. Then we can worry about finding him… if he doesn't find us first. In the meantime, let's learn what we can from this ship."

"Okay, on the count of three."
"Just do it and stop being such a pussy."

Tommy yanked the metal fragment out more roughly than he meant to. Scorpina's eyes went wide, but she remained completely silent. Immediately, the wound began to bleed. Just as Scorpina had told him to, Tommy placed a flesh-colored patch over the wound. It burned bright red and then faded into skin that was only slightly lighter than Scorpina's natural skin tone.

Tommy glanced past the trees as Scorpina rubbed the synthetic skin into place. "I don't think they'll find us here," Tommy said, his voice low. He turned on Scorpina, trying to keep his voice under control. "Okay, what the hell is going on?"

"Nice to see you, too, handsome," Scorpina groused. She stretched and winced. "I shouldn't complain. If I hadn't activated the emergency dampeners in time you'd be scraping me off the ground."

"So your ship crashed? Decided to take a joy ride?" said Tommy.

Scorpina glared at him, but the effect was ruined by the haunted look in her eyes. "I was trying to rescue Rita, okay? Lord Zedd must have shot me out of the sky before I got to her." She looked around. "Can't decide if I was lucky or unlucky to end up here."

But Tommy hadn't been paying attention. The air seemed to freeze around him. "Rescue… Rita? But… what? What happened to her?"

He realized his knees had given way. Something had been bothering him, but… this? It was just too…

Scorpina was looking at him with sympathy. "Guess switching sides changes nothing, huh? You're still hers."

Tommy decided to ignore this, not wanting to again figure out the odd and complicated connection he still had with Rita. "Who's this Lord Zedd? What's he done to her? He hasn't…" Scorpina had been trying to rescue her. He imagined Rita floating in space, fading magic failing to protect her from the vacuum of space.

As if she could read his mind, Scorpina shook her head. "She's not dead. She's just in her old prison, the one she thought she'd escaped. But now she's alone." Anger came back into Scorpina's voice. "And I can't save her now. Even if I could get another ship, I've lost her trajectory. She could be anywhere."

Tommy tried not to think about Rita floating in space, this time alone in a prison. That made it hard to think. "But how the hell did all this happen? Where were you?" He didn't mean the accusation… but he sort of did.

Scorpina shot him a murderous look. "I was sick and unconscious, thank you very much." She sighed. "Lord Zedd is a rival emperor… less responsible than Rita and more dangerous. He wanted to take over her property as well as the fight with Zordon. She fought for her place… but she didn't lose," she said with an ugly look. "She was betrayed."

As if on cue, Tommy heard Goldar's voice drifting closer to their hiding place. It didn't take long for Tommy to put it all together.

He felt an arm on his shoulder holding him back, and he realized he'd rushed forward, ready to attack Goldar head-on.
"Settle down, idiot," Scorpina whispered in his ear. "Neither of us are in a position to take him."

Tommy was trembling. He had to admit she was right. Scorpina was obviously sick and hurt, and he couldn't take Goldar after that Putty fight. He felt his power draining, like a sickness… just like when the candle was burning out.

For a moment, Tommy had forgotten he was a Power Ranger, that he had orders, teammates waiting on him. That he needed to tell the others of the new danger. Rita was gone, and he had to make Goldar pay for it. That was all that mattered.

But then it all came back to him. He couldn't rush into revenge. He had to get back to the Rangers, to figure this out. And… he had to take Scorpina with him.

"Soon as Goldar leaves," he whispered, "we're going back to the crash site to rendezvous with the rest of the Rangers. We need to get off this mountain and find a way to the Command Center."

Scorpina smirked. "Oh, so I'm part of the team now, huh? You think I'm going to be welcome in your Command Center?"

Tommy paused, considering her. She was sweating even though it was cold, and her skin was pale against her golden armor.

"You're hurt. You're obviously in no shape to be a threat to us… and there's a bigger threat," Tommy said. "Look, I could leave you here. For some reason you can't teleport out."

"Where would I teleport?" The mocking tone barely hid her fear at her vulnerability being laid so bare.

"And if we see Goldar…" Tommy said, "we give him the killing he deserves."

Scorpina grinned. "There's my boy. Let's get out of here."

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From his balcony in the Moon Palace, Lord Zedd watched the mountain.

Three of the Power Rangers were at the place where Scorpina had crashed, while two more ran to intercept them. They did not recognize or know the ship design. They also still thought the old monster-maker and the fallen empress were behind their troubles. They had discovered the secret behind his Putties, but they had not discovered that they lacked the power to truly match even the weakest of his forces.

The red one was staring warily around, keeping guard as the other two picked through the debris. Already, Lord Zedd could tell that this one would not last much longer. True, he was an effective leader and a more effective strategist than Goldar gave him credit. The others trusted him implicitly, following orders even when they did not like them.

However, the wear was starting to show on the boy. He had led the Rangers for a year, and it was he who had to make every hard decision and bear the brunt of every defeat. The cracks were beginning to show on the Red Ranger's confident veneer. He would soon give up his place… or die in the battlefield. He was dangerous, but not one of the most concern.

The Yellow and Black Rangers would also not last much longer. The girl obviously hated violence. Records showed she was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the type of life a warrior had to
lead. The Black Ranger, too, resented the amount of time he had to spend fighting. Neither were likely to die: they protected themselves too much. They would give up their powers, especially if their leader did it first.

No, the other three were the real dangers. They were the ones who truly loved being warriors, who found home, place, fulfillment in the battle. The boys especially were threats. This Blue Ranger was a true prodigy, though he was perhaps just as much a danger to himself as he was to others.

And then the Green Ranger…

The chamber flashed red, but Lord Zedd ignored this. The Green Ranger would be the most logical choice of leader, and he could not be allowed to gain leadership over this band of warriors. He would gain the confidence that would make him a true threat. Likewise, he was a lasting reminder of Rita's failures. He must be stripped of the rest of his failing powers and not be allowed to restore them fully, even if it meant ending his life.

As he watched, the unmorphed Green Ranger and Scorpina crept through the trees, avoiding Goldar's forces. Lord Zedd decided not to interfere: his new warrior must prove himself against his former teammates.

His own monster would find them soon, was already making his way ever closer. And then the true battle would begin.
Stolen Toys

Chapter Summary

Book 4: Mutiny

Part 3 of my rewrite of the season 2 premier "The Mutiny."

Kimberly and Zack crashed through the underbrush to the crash site, expecting a fight. Instead, they saw Jason acting as lookout, while Billy and Trini examined the wreckage.

"Well, this is a letdown," Zack said. "I can't believe we hurried."

"Where's Tommy?" Kimberly asked immediately.

"I don't know… and don't go running off yet, Kim," Jason added quickly. "He knows where we are, and we can't go running all over the place when we don't have communication."

Kimberly crossed her arms. "Then what are we supposed to do? We can't use our communicators or teleport, and he's somewhere out there… possibly hurt or captured."

"I may be able to help," Billy said, grabbing everyone's attention. They crowded around where Billy had somehow transformed bits of wreckage into some sort of antennae.

"What ya got, Billy?" Jason asked. "And… how did you do it that fast?"

Billy barely seemed to hear him. He was carefully adjusting something on the side with a wrench. "These spaceship components are damaged, but they are also highly sophisticated. Thankfully, they bear some rudimentary resemblance to the technology in the Command Center. With it, I believe I was able to assemble a short-wave device that can reverse the polarity of the neutron flow."

Jason looked at Trini for help.

"We're breaking through the force field blocking communication… probably." She grimaced. "Truth is, we don't have much of a power source, as our own powers are incompatible. We're having to tap into our communicators. We may not be able to teleport, but we can at least get a message through to Zordon. He may not even be aware we're in trouble if this force field is strong enough."

"Assuming it is a force field and Zordon's not been put out of commission again," Zack said.

"Rather not think that way," Jason said. "Not with the Rad Bug unavailable. Billy, get the message out as quick as you can."

"Um…" Kimberly said, "I think we have bigger things to worry about."

"We can look for Tommy later…" Jason began.

"I meant… that no one was standing guard," she said.

The Rangers whirled around. They were surrounded. These Putties apparently knew how to keep silent.
"No, continue your conversation." Goldar was standing at the edge of the clearing. "You were saying something about a message?"

"Yeah… we have a message for Rita," Jason said, glad his face was hidden so Goldar couldn't see how much the ambush had affected him. "Tell her that whatever she's done with the pilot she shot down, we will find him… or her. And if she thinks these new Putties will do anything to defeat us, she has another thing coming."

Goldar shook his head, chuckling softly. Jason was startled; the laugh sounded… sad, somehow. "Ah, Red Ranger… always a step behind. Well, I won't enlighten you. You'll find out soon enough. I would like to test your claim about the Putties."

Goldar nodded to the Putties. They stared at him and didn't move. He growled, "Well, attack already!"

In the meantime, Jason, Trini, Kimberly, and Zack had formed a flank around Billy, allowing him to work on the machine.

"I don't know how long we'll be able to keep the Putties off you," Jason told Billy in a low voice. "So hurry."

They'd been lucky. Tommy's usual choice of green was well-suited to blending in with the forest, and Scorpina had the uncanny ability to slip in and out of shadows without her bright armor catching the light. They'd had to circle around the largest concentration of Putties and take the long way around to the crash site.

They'd been lucky… at least until Scorpina had lost her balance and fell straight into about six of them.

Now they were throwing off the Putties as best they could while running. Mostly running. Tommy tried once to hit a Z. The Putty had disintegrated immediately, but Tommy had nearly passed out from the power drain.

He was morphed, too. This gave him a bit more of an edge and protection against the Putties, but the cost to his power was higher, and he was starting to feel uncomfortably like he was about to demorph. While he was sure… relatively sure… Scorpina would not attack him, he still didn't want her to know how uncertain his powers actually were.

"How ya holding up, handsome?" Scorpina gasped as they were momentarily cornered.

"Better than you, it sounds like," Tommy said. "We have to break through and get to the others."

"I can't believe I'm running to the Power Rangers, of all things," Scorpina grumbled.

Tommy was about to retort when he pitched forward, his foot catching a tree root. He twisted just in time to kick the Putty attacking him. He avoided the Z and settled for using the Putty's forward momentum to launch it past him. That gave Tommy enough time to pull his foot from the root… but by that time he was surrounded by Putties.

"Well… that's just great," Tommy braced himself. Scorpina had already gone, obviously not having seen Tommy's dilemma… and possibly not caring, come to think. After all, all he had was Scorpina's word that this all wasn't some elaborate trick by Rita…
No. He knew that wasn't it. Everything felt different. And… there was that feeling. That something was missing. That he'd lost someone… again.

Tommy launched himself into the fight, not entirely caring what happened to him.

"There." A burst of light pulsed through the machine and seemed to shoot into the sky. It looked vaguely like their teleport beams. Not as elegant as their communicators, but it was possibly powerful enough to reach the Command Center when nothing else could.

Billy regretted that there wasn't much else of the spacecraft to salvage. Perhaps he could have found some components for his latest experiment, some that he couldn't quite sneak out of the Command Center… but there was nothing for it. Besides, he had to be fighter and not scientist at this particular moment.

And his fellow Rangers needed the back-up, Billy saw immediately. Goldar hadn't even needed to join the fight, and they were really slowing down. Billy kicked a Putty who was about to attack Trini from behind. She would have usually sensed this attack instantly.

"Thanks, Billy," she gasped out when she noticed. "You've sent the message?"

"Affirmative," Billy said, though he couldn't expound much. The strength of the Putty attacks continually took him off guard, and he knew it wouldn't be long before he was in the same dire straits as the rest of the Rangers.

"We need to tell Jason, then," Trini said. "Now that that's accomplished, we may need to retreat."

"Understood," Billy said. He started trying to wend his way through the fight, cursing that communications were still down. They had no way to coordinate. In his periphery, Billy saw that one of the Putties had already destroyed his device. That was fine. It had done what it needed to do.

"Going somewhere, Blue Ranger?"

Billy grimaced at the inevitable and turned to face Goldar, who was obviously preventing their easy escape. Goldar knew the Putties were wearing the Rangers down… and then what? What was their ultimate agenda? And where was the pilot of the spacecraft?

Billy had no time to ponder more. Scorpina had come crashing into the clearing, so Billy distracted Goldar by attacking him. He wanted to give Jason enough time to come up with a plan before Goldar and Scorpina could regroup.

On the other side of the battlefield Jason had certainly noticed Scorpina's entry. He decided to change tactics. He saw that Billy was taking care of Goldar, and maybe if they beat both Goldar and Scorpina they'd call off the attack enough for the Rangers to regroup.

Jason shoved aside two Putties to get to Scorpina. For a second, she looked genuinely surprised, but only for a moment.

"Figures," he heard Scorpina mutter. She looked exhausted… had the others been fighting her before? They hadn't mentioned it, and they would have. Maybe Tommy… But if that was the case, her entrance into the battlefield and Tommy's continuing absence gave Jason a burst of energy. He kicked her down, renewing the attack every time she got up but before she had time to recover fully.
"Where is he?" Jason growled as Scorpina got to her feet even more slowly. "Was this just a plan to isolate us? Drain Tommy's powers?"

Scorpina spat some blood out of her mouth, though Jason was sure he hadn't caused that wound. "Bite me," she growled.

Jason had had enough. They'd been cut off from the Command Center, attacked with Putties that physically hurt and drained them, and now Tommy was lost... possibly unconscious in the woods or taken prisoner... and it was all Jason's fault because he'd sent Tommy off without any protection... He drew his sword and raised it, ready to hurt Scorpina until she told exactly what she'd done with Tommy...

And then he heard a scream. Not a woman's scream, not Scorpina. She was looking at the ground between them, horrified. Tommy was there, his powers flickering dully, and then disappearing. He'd gotten in the way of Jason's attack. He'd taken it for her.

"Proceed with caution, Alpha," Zordon said. "Those components must be attuned perfectly, or they may be lost."

"Yes, Zordon," said the ever-patient Alpha. He gave one last adjustment and typed in the start-up program. He wiped the metal casing above his ocular sensor. "That should do it. We only need the last few components, Zordon, and we can only gain those from the Rangers' present Zords."

"I have a feeling they will need these soon," Zordon said darkly. "I believe that is all we can accomplish at the present. We will have to wait to work on our next project. I do not like staying away from the sensors too long. Open the link to the main Command Center."

As soon as Alpha hit the sequence, after securing the project he had just finished, the lab exploded with the sound of alarms.

"Ay-yi-yi-yi-yi!" Alpha yelled. "Something seems to be wrong on Earth, Zordon!"

"Meet me in the main Command Center, Alpha," Zordon said urgently. "We must contact the Power Rangers immediately."

Zordon shifted locations. The familiar Command Center's alarms were screaming and flashing, and had been for a while. Before Alpha even had a chance to teleport, Zordon accessed the security logs. Zordon didn't often experience fear. These readings, however, nearly sent him into a panic. He had only one immediate thought. Get the Rangers to safety. Without consulting Alpha, Zordon tapped into the Command Center's controls and began making a hole in the force field, using Billy's message as a focal point.

"Tommy... what...?" Jason stammered.

For a second it looked as if Tommy was going to pass out, but when he looked up his eyes were blazing. "She's... she's not with them," Tommy gasped out. He was covered in a cold sweat, his hair slicked and his shirt soaked through. "Goldar and the Putties were hunting her. She was the pilot of the spaceship."
"And now we've found her."

The battle had stopped around them. Even the Putties seemed startled. Goldar was staring at Scorpina, his arms crossed.

Tommy made a failed attempt to get up. "You want her, you're gonna have to go through me," he shouted.

"Shut up, Tommy," Goldar snapped. "This doesn't concern you."

"The hell it doesn't," Tommy retorted. "You're gonna pay for what you did to Rita. You and your… boss." Tommy spat the word out.

"Wait… I'm confused," Zack said.

"You're not the only one," Kimberly said. She'd run across the battlefield to join Tommy, joined by Billy, Trini, and Zack. They had now formed a flank around Tommy and Scorpina, but Kimberly was eyeing Scorpina suspiciously.

"Then let me clarify things," Scorpina said. Her voice sounded oddly controlled, like she was just keeping from screaming. She pushed past the Power Rangers, ignoring Tommy's warning hand as he was being lifted to his feet by Kimberly and Jason.

Goldar regarded her coldly, but he did not interrupt her.

"This… bastard…" She gasped from both exhaustion and suppressed passion, "betrayed Empress Rita. She was fighting a rival emperor—Lord Zedd—and could have driven him off if YOU hadn't broken her power source. I know what happened, Goldar, and because of you Empress Rita is in prison and I've lost all chance of finding her. She's lost forever, you asshole, and it's your fault."

Everyone stared at Scorpina, horrified at the implications of what she was saying.

"Wait, is this true?" Jason said. "Rita's really gone? And who's this… Zedd… guy?"

Goldar was still staring straight at Scorpina, his face unreadable. "That is certainly a version of events. Lord Zedd has claimed Rita's title and holdings… and he is waging war on you, Power Rangers." He glared. "He had not planned to wage war on you, Scorpina. If you would just be reasonable…"

"Reasonable?" The dam finally broke in Scorpina's anger. "You… you… You attacked Rita! You served her for years! You'd pledged your unending loyalty to her! She was your empress!"

"Things change," Goldar said, his voice as emotionless as Scorpina was angry. "Rita is unharmed… and I can guarantee your safety if you just come with me."

"You COWARD!" Scorpina no longer seemed to care that she was injured and alone. "All you really care about is your own worthless life! So you're just going to toe the line for that new master of yours. Well, you can do it without me." She pulled herself to her full height. "I may not have actually worked for her, but she's my friend. I remain loyal to Empress Rita Repulsa."

Goldar shook his head. "I've tried all I can, Scorpina. Putties, take her. You can't be allowed to remain in rebellion against Lord Zedd."

Scorpina drew her sword and braced herself for what she knew would be a losing battle… but then she felt herself pulled back. The Red Ranger stood in front of her, quickly joined by the other
Rangers. Tommy had managed to morph again, though he was unsteady on his feet.

"I don't claim to understand everything's that going on," Jason said, "but there's no way in hell you're 'taking' anyone, especially someone who's injured and defenseless. You can tell your new boss that."

Goldar's eyes turned suddenly dangerous. "You'd best not meddle in things you don't understand, Red Ranger. Lord Zedd will not be as forgiving as Rita was."

"Don't you mean Empress Rita?" Tommy interjected snidely.

"Shut UP, Tommy, if you know what's good for you!" Goldar snapped.

But Tommy was laughing softly."And you had the nerve to call me traitor."

Whatever retort Goldar had prepared was drowned by a sudden grinding noise. Pieces of Scorpina's wrecked spaceship were starting to blink back on… even the parts connected to nothing.

"Um…" Billy stammered. "There's no power left in that ship. That's not supposed to be happening."

"There's reserve energy left, but you're right," Scorpina said, momentarily forgetting her anger. "Goldar, this something you cooked up?"

"Oh, he has nothing to do with it. He was just supposed to distract all of you."

The source of the voice was partially obscured by heaps of the wreckage that was now beginning to fly through the air, swirling around one point. The metal shifted and formed itself into armor around…

"A fish?" Kimberly said.

"That's Pirantishead," the monster said calmly. "And as I said, Goldar was just a distraction. I'm the main attraction."

Usually the Rangers would have laughed at the ridiculous name. They would have made jokes about him not being "attractive," or just would have joined in the banter. Now, though, too many things had them wrong-footed. They were fighting against an unknown element, and the monster had just made armor out of a wrecked ship.

Before they were forced to act, though, they felt a familiar sensation. Teleportation. Zordon had gotten their message.

As they disappeared, Goldar nearly screamed in frustration. He turned on the monster. "You took your time!"

"I was following orders," Pirantishead said coldly. "As well you should. Lord Zedd wishes you to report back. You have served your purpose. I am to kill the Power Rangers and the rebel Scorpina."

Goldar opened his mouth to retort, and then closed it. Scorpina was gone. He couldn't do anything else for her. Now there were others in the moon palace to save. He had to at least try.
The Power Rangers leaned against consoles and took off their helmets. Now that the battle was over—at least for now—the extent of the power drain from fighting the Putties hit them. Tommy was sitting on the steps, his face showing an unhealthy gray tinge.

Jason, exhausted as he was, stayed on guard. He drew his blade blaster and pointed it at Scorpina. She looked at the weapon and smirked. "Really?"

"Sorry, Scorpina, but you're a security risk," Jason said.

"Dude, I don't think…" Zack began.

"I don't think she could hurt a fly," Kimberly said.

"But he's right," Tommy said, forcing himself to get up. "She is a security risk. She's not a Power Ranger."

Scorpina smiled sarcastically and playfully put her hands in the air. "Like she said, I couldn't harm a fly."

But Jason wasn't paying attention to what Scorpina was saying. He was looking up at Zordon.

"That is unnecessary, Jason," Zordon said.

"Oh, so we're trusting each other now," Scorpina said, the mocking tone not hiding her surprise.

"Alpha, you have the extra security measures in place," Zordon said.

Alpha stepped up to the main console area and hit a few more buttons. "Yes, Zordon. Security tracking for Scorpina is working perfectly."

"Security tracking?" Scorpina said, this time a little uncertainly.

Zordon's face was unreadable. "You will be able to walk around freely. However, if you move within two inches of any of the consoles or other technical device in this entire compound, or if you choose to attack person or property, the security system will knock you out and teleport you to a secure lower chamber of the Command Center. You may teleport out of the Command Center…"

"But why would I do so?" Scorpina finished. She carefully walked to the center of the Command Center, far away from any of the computers. "I would ask what you were planning to do with me, but it seems you have more important concerns at the moment."

"You'd be right," Jason said. "Zordon, is all this stuff about Lord Zedd true? Who is this guy, and why haven't we heard of him before?"

"Before we begin this discussion," Zordon said, "we must complete a few tasks. Trini, your serum will be able help everyone partially recover from the Putty battle. Please start with Tommy before he loses consciousness."

Sure enough, Tommy had slumped to the floor, and Kimberly had only just prevented him from falling completely. She knelt beside him, looking nearly as exhausted as he was. Trini ran for syringes.

"Billy, you must help Alpha take down the force field surrounding the mountain completely. We must regain complete sensor coverage of Earth. Zack, after your injection, I want you to add the extra security measures Alpha will hand you to each of the Zords. Jason, the sensors were able to
draw a reading from the monster Pirantishead. Begin an analysis on it, and see if you can take more readings after the force field is down. We will reconvene in fifteen minutes."

The Rangers were already moving to fulfill Zordon's orders, knowing to hold all questions for later. Scorpina watched them with a bemused expression and then crouched to check on Tommy.

"Like a well-oiled machine," Scorpina commented to Kimberly. "Somehow I didn't picture all of you acting like actual soldiers."

Kimberly eyed Scorpina warily. She'd come to the woman's defense minutes before… but she knew that was mostly because Tommy would have taken her side. She didn't trust Scorpina at all, and she didn't like the way Scorpina looked at Tommy… or the way Tommy was ready to risk everything for Scorpina.

"Who's acting?" Kimberly finally said. "Isn't that what we all are?"

Scorpina smirked. "I'm freelance, sweetie. Just doing this as a favor for Rita." She scowled. "And if Zedd could get that through his thick skull… metaphorically speaking, of course…"

"Hey, what do you know about this Zedd guy?" Kimberly said. "Should we be worried? I mean, could he be any worse than Rita?"

"Honey, he shot my ship out of the sky. Zordon teleported me, long an enemy, into your secret sanctum rather than leaving me on Earth to fend for myself. Yeah, I think there's reason to worry."

Kimberly had no time to retort. Trini had run up the steps, ready syringe in hand. Kimberly and Scorpina backed away. As soon as she injected Tommy, a shudder passed over his body. All the cuts and bruises healed, and his skin returned to a human hue. He didn't wake up, though.

"He still needs rest to recover," Trini said, already moving to Kimberly with another syringe. "He should be awake soon, though, and then we'll never get him to rest. Let him sleep for now."

"No arguments here," Kimberly said. She pulled off her jacket and wedged it under his head as a pillow, knowing if she tried to move him he'd just wake up.

Trini was heading for Billy and Jason, and then paused. "Sorry, Scorpina, but this really only works for people with power coins."

"Please," Scorpina said. "I have no need of your help. I can recover far quicker than you humans."

Trini rolled her eyes and walked away. Kimberly, though, knew she was just acting tough. Scorpina looked as if she could barely stand, like her armor was pulling her down. What skin her armor didn't cover was covered with scratches and dirt.

"You want a shower?" Kimberly said.

"God, yes," Scorpina breathed.

"Come on then."

As Kimberly waited while Scorpina showers in the bathroom she and Trini shared, she wondered what she was doing. She'd spent a good portion of her time hating Scorpina. Scorpina had always seemed much more human than everyone else up at the moon palace, and therefore a lot more real. It wasn't like Goldar, who was so monstrous, like you'd expect him to be evil. Or the evil sorceress Rita. Or the others—Finster, and Squatt and Babboo. They were all so alien. But Scorpina… she
was alien, all right, and had a monster form, and even hid a stinger somewhere Kimberly didn't want to discover… but otherwise, she seemed unnervingly normal. And that just made her seem like more of a threat in some ways.

And then there was her history with Tommy. She and Tommy had obviously been quite close when he'd worked for Rita. They'd gone to the party together just to humiliate Kimberly, and Kimberly could still picture them kissing. Hell, her greatest nightmare had been seeing them together. Kimberly had no clue what their relationship had been like during that time. Tommy never really talked about his time working for Rita. Kimberly understood, of course, but it was still horrible to think about what Tommy was possibly hiding.

The shower cut off. Minutes later, Scorpina walked out of the shower room, towel in one hand and armor in another… with nothing else on. Kimberly turned away quickly, face burning.

"Oh, come on, sweetie," Scorpina said, her voice amused. "It's not like I don't have anything you don't… well… maybe I have more of it…"

"My name's not 'sweetie' or 'honey,'" Kimberly snapped. "And don't you have any other clothes?"

"Shipwreck, sw… Kimberly. And I didn't exactly have time to pack." More amusement crept into her voice. "I doubt the boys will mind the show…"

"I think I've got some spare clothes," Kimberly said, thinking it would be a cold day in hell before Scorpina starting prancing around naked in front of any of them… Tommy included. "Just wait here, all right?"

She closed the door quickly behind her. Trini was walking past, so Kimberly flagged her down. "You don't have any clothes Scorpina can borrow? She's way too tall for anything I have."

Trini made a face. "Do I really…?"

"It's either that or nude," Kimberly said pointedly.

"I'll go get them," Trini sighed.

Kimberly rested her back against the door and closed her eyes. The sooner they got rid of Scorpina, she decided, the better.

The six Power Rangers were gathered before Zordon, all morphed and helmetless except Tommy, who was more concerned with saving energy. Scorpina stood on the steps at the edge of the group, looking entirely uncomfortable in borrowed clothes.

"We are facing a new enemy," Zordon began. "You have already tasted a portion of his power: new, more effective Putties. That is simply a foretaste of what is to come. Lord Zedd is far more dangerous than anything we have ever faced before."

"So, what, you're saying he's more powerful than Rita?" Trini said.

"Anyone else feel like heading for the hills, then?" Zack laughed nervously.

"He is not more powerful than Rita," Scorpina snapped.

The Rangers eyed her uncomfortably. They were still unnerved that she was standing right in the middle of the Command Center, no matter what security measures Zordon and Alpha had put in place.
Scorpina ignored their stares. "That doesn't mean he's not dangerous, but you'd still be idiots to disregard Rita when she comes back. She has access to incredible power, and she only taps into tiny portions of it. Zedd, however… he has no such reservations. He's not more powerful… he's less responsible. Ever since he's gotten here, he's been hemorrhaging power: the force field, the Putties, the monster, blowing my ship out of the sky, all the while taking over the entire Moon Palace and putting it under his direct control. Rita could do all that, but it would destroy her." Scorpina smiled grimly. "Zedd lets it destroy him."

"What do you mean… AUGH!"


Billy quickly checked the transmission. "That's being broadcast all over the world, with every form of electronic communication, and simultaneously translated in all languages."

"Translated? It… he's not saying anything," said Trini.

"Citizens of Earth," the deep voice said. "I am Lord Zedd, henceforth your new lord and master. Empress Rita Repulsa is no more. You will consider Earth a minor holding of my empire from now on."

"So that's Lord Zedd," Tommy said under his breath.

"What happened to him?" Kimberly breathed. "Is he supposed to look like that?"

"No one's supposed to look like that," Scorpina said darkly.

"Sh…" Jason said as the voice continued.

"Fortunately for you newly-conquered people," the monstrosity continued, "the Earth is playing unwitting host to an intergalactic fugitive. Zordon, if you are watching this, and I'm sure you are… you cannot hide forever. I will come for you, no matter how many children you hide behind."

Scorpina opened her mouth indignantly. If there was anything she knew, it was that these Power Rangers were no children. They had accomplished in the past year what most people didn't in a lifetime. They may have had limited experience, but… And then she stopped as she gazed at their faces. All six of them, Tommy included, were horrified... transfixed at the appearance and words of Lord Zedd. Scorpina felt herself grow cold. Lord Zedd was right. They were children still, no matter situations they'd been forced into.

Lord Zedd was still speaking, "If you give yourself up quietly, I will allow those children to live. The longer you stay hidden, the more I will attack them… until they drop, one by one. I will see to it they suffer for your cowardice."

As the broadcast ended, the Viewing Globe turned to scenes of Angel Grove. Pirantishead was standing near the television station. Lightning was arcing around him and going back into all the electronic devices around him. With a wave, the monster detached and levitated the satellite dish at the top of the TV station.

"Looks like we're up," Jason said quietly. "Okay, guys, that Zedd guy can do what he likes to psych us out, but remember this is just a monster attack. This is what we do."

The Rangers seemed to regain focus at Jason's confidence. Scorpina, however, could tell he was still just as unnerved.
"The monster can control technology," Jason continued, "though it has to be in a device. It can't just control electricity. Its control over technology is centered on that flute it's carrying. We break that, and we break his greatest weapon. We just have to be careful about letting him near weapons. I saw we lure him back to the forest... get him away from any tech. That's going to be easier if we force him to grow. I'm right that Zedd has the ability to do that?"

"He does," Zordon answered.

"But then wouldn't the Zords be vulnerable?" Trini said.

Zack's eyes widened. "That's that extra security I added!"

"The extra security should protect you from the monster's control, Rangers," Alpha said. "But try to avoid any beams he may employ."

"So we're careful," Jason said. "We can't afford to lose our Zords. Okay, guys, we're off. Tommy, you're not coming with us."

"What?" Tommy looked angry and defiant at the same time. "You're going to need to DragonZord if you're going to maneuver that monster into the forest."

"We'll make do," Jason said drily. "What we need is a reserve, just in case the worst happens. You haven't fully recovered from the last battle, and your powers are draining by the minute." Jason's face turned darker. "And if you ever get in the way of one of my attacks, I'll make sure you never fight with us again."

Tommy's face turned even paler. "I was trying to prevent...

"Save it," Jason snapped. He had obviously been waiting until Tommy was on his feet to say all this. "You could have yelled out a warning. You just didn't trust me enough to think that I would stop. As a result, I almost killed you and would have had to live with that. Think about that while you're sitting here. Come one, guys."

The Rangers lined up and morphed out, casting uneasy looks at Tommy's stricken face as they left.

"Wow," Scorpina broke the ensuing silence. "And I thought Rita had tantrums."

Tommy tried to shrug it off. "It's nothing. Who cares, right?" His voice was hard and hollow, and Scorpina couldn't help but remember that she was the one who had connected Tommy with the Green Candle in the first place.

Zordon had been strangely quiet since Lord Zedd's announcement... not that anyone could read what he was thinking. Now, however, he seemed to come back to himself. "Tommy, you must be able to rejoin them in battle. The Rangers' present Zords are insufficient to battle Lord Zedd's monsters. The other Rangers will need you... very soon, I expect. If you are willing, we must risk another power transfer."

Tommy smiled. He hadn't wanted to suggest it, since he was essentially asking to borrow from Zordon's own life force, but he hadn't seen another way around it. "I'm ready whenever you are," he said.

"Wait..." Scorpina said, suddenly sounding alarmed, "you're transferring Eltarian energy to give Tommy powers. It's that insanely dangerous?"

"Imminently so," Zordon said. "Alpha, please begin the sequence."
Alpha had not already done so, hoping they would change their minds. When it looked like both Zordon and Tommy were set on this course, Alpha shook his head and began. "Oh, ay-yi-yi… I have a bad feeling about this."

Tommy grinned at Scorpina and braced himself. "Don't worry. If the universe ends…" He stopped and frowned. "Well, I was going to say something witty, but…"

Power arced from Zordon to Tommy, cutting him off in mid sentence.

"Well, you gotta give him this… the monster works fast."

Zack was obviously making a valiant effort to keep up his usual joking manner, but his tone was subdued. In the few minutes Jason had devoted to speech-making and… other things… the monster had rebuilt the entire uptown area. In places there was still the familiar buildings and storefronts, but all of that was mostly hidden by a maze of wires and metal from vehicles, mostly, but also from televisions, streetlights, neon signs… The monster had remade the city.

"At least the announcement gave people enough time to evacuate the area," Kimberly said. "Now just to find the monster."

"I may be wrong, but I would imagine the monster is at the center of the labyrinth," Billy suggested.

"Agreed," said Jason. "If we meet any people, we teleport them out and then teleport straight back in. I don't want anyone hurt."

They edged forward, senses primed for traps. The monster, and Lord Zedd by proxy, seemed to be pulling out all the stops to keep them off balance… and it was working. Even as they searched, they couldn't help but think of the way Zedd talked to, and about, Zordon.

"I can't believe he called us 'children,'" Trini groused.

"Yeah, well, Rita used to do the same thing," Zack said. "We proved her wrong, didn't we?"

"We might not want to talk about this when Zedd is obviously listening in," Jason snapped.

The Rangers stopped talking, although they all shared a look when Jason wasn't looking. Apparently that message from Zedd had unnerved him more than he let on.

Part of the electronics started moving, and all of the Rangers jumped. They pulled out their weapons, knowing they were less likely to be controlled by the monster than the blade blasters.

"Welcome, Power Rangers," Pirantishead called conversationally. It was still nowhere to be seen. "Zordon is not turning himself in, then."

"Not on your life," Jason growled, "which is going to be ending soon, by the way."

The monster flashed into the open, jumping out of the wall of electronic parts to slash at Zack and Billy. The two jumped to their feet to retaliate, but the monster had already disappeared among the electronics again.

"So this is the new upgrade Zedd is bringing to his monsters? Cowardice?" Jason challenged.

"Am I the one hiding behind children?" the monster's voice echoed through the labyrinth.
"We're not children!" Kimberly retorted, immediately aware that that had made her sound rather childish.

"Let's get one thing straight," Jason said. "Zordon's not running. We're defending the Earth, and we're not going to sacrifice anyone to do it."

"Yeah," Trini said, "if Zedd thinks he can just lay claim to Earth like that, he's got another thing coming."

As they were talking, the Rangers were watching the walls carefully. There was a barely perceptible shifting where the monster was swimming through the electronics around them. Their helmets were just sensitive enough to pick up on the movement. Very slowly, they set themselves into an attack pattern…

The monster launched himself out of the wall, but the Rangers were ready for him. Kimberly, from the back, shot three quick volleys at the monster, which knocked it off its momentum. Zack immediately buried his axe in the monster's stomach, further disorienting the monster despite its technological armor.

The monster stumbled over to where Billy and Trini were waiting. They attacked, maneuvering the monster into position while chipping away at its armor with daggers and lances. Finally, the monster faced Jason. It seemed like the monster was finally ready to put up a fight, but Jason was too quick for it. Jason took it down with three slices before the monster could even move. The monster fell, defeated.

"That's what I'm talking about!" Zack yelled.

"That was unexpectedly easy," Billy said.

Trini gave him a look. "Oh, come on. Like it's over."

"I dunno," Kimberly said doubtfully. The hold over the electronic city had faded, and metal and wires were raining down on them. "Seems like he's done for if this is happening."

"He's not," Jason said boredly, even as some electronic parts swirled around the fallen monster. "But I think we've successfully stepped up the battle."

Lord Zedd gazed down at the battle, considering.

These Rangers did well in battle. Now that they had recovered from their initial shock, they were working as a team seamlessly. They were all both strong and intelligent, and they were accelerating the battle, not from impatience, but from strategy. They were showing skills honed from experience with fighting monsters.

They, however, had never fought his monsters. They also were obviously rattled by the little proclamation he'd made, the red one most of all. He was taking it out on the others.

The green one—Rita's mistake—had not accompanied them. He would have to be drawn out.

After a minute more of quiet consideration, Lord Zedd held out his hand. Power surged through his arm and materialized into a gray sphere. He threw it, knowing the magic would unerringly target his monster.
Goldar stood off to the side, wondering not the first time what to do. Everything was slipping out of his control. Rita had always been gleeful in sharing her plans, explaining every part… or at least some part. Lord Zedd stood silent and acted on his own.

Goldar wondered if, after all, he was just another Putty now.

Jason let out a breath when the monster caught the gray sphere and pulled a stopper out of it. Smoke filled the air and dissipated to reveal the monster rapidly growing. It was done. The first part of their plan had worked.

"Okay, guys, let's get the Zords here as fast as possible," Jason said.

They called their Zords, ready for the transformation sequence… but nothing happened. The Zords appeared, but they remained frozen except for the Tyrannosaurus Zord.

"Um… guys?" Billy said. "I believe the extra security has not worked."

"It's like the Zords are frozen," said Trini. "All except yours, Jason."

Jason cursed under his breath. "Looks like we've found the limit to his powers, then. I'll just have to take the monster on by my…"

He cut off. His Zord was moving on its own, and if he didn't know better, he'd think it was targeting…

They all saw it at once. The Rangers threw themselves into the nearest alley as the Tyrannosaurus Zord shot an energy attack out of its mouth.

"I don't think he reached his power limit," Zack said. "So what do we do now?"

Jason nearly screamed in rage. That monster was using his own Zord… his own Zord!

"Billy, what are the chances of getting control of our Zords back?" Jason asked.

Billy shook his head. "I can't give an estimate now… not enough information. The security should have protected the Zords from just this, but it seems the monster is more powerful than even Zordon anticipated. I need time."

"Time we totally don't have," Kimberly said. "Jas, he's going to use your Zord to destroy the city."

"Like hell he is," Jason said. He took a breath, knowing what he had to do. "Tommy, we need your help down here," he called on his communicator.

There was a pause, and Jason wondered if Tommy was getting back at him for what he'd said earlier. Instead, he just heard the words, "Understood."

The welcome music of the Dragon Dagger pierced the air seconds later. Tommy was nowhere to be seen, having teleported to the other side of the battlefield so he could lead both the monster and the Tyrannosaurus Zord in the right direction: away from the city and the Power Rangers.

"Oh, a new toy," Pirantishead said as the Dragonzord lumbered up to the other giant combatants.

"Jason, are you sure that monster won't just take control of the Dragonzord, too?" Zack said.
"Not much of a choice," said Jason, wincing as the Dragonzord and his own Zord engaged in battle, the monster hanging to the side and watching.

Tommy, on the other side of the battlefield, felt more powerful than ever. Zordon's most recent transfer of power left him feeling strong… almost giddy. He carefully controlled himself, however, remembering how he'd acted the last time he had received a power up from Zordon. He couldn't afford to make any mistakes this time. Not when so much was riding on him and his Dragonzord.

The Tyrannosaurus Zord was obviously the most powerfully build of the five original Zords, and almost a match for the Dragonzord. But Tommy knew that the Dragonzord could keep up with the Megazord in a fight. He'd be able to subdue the Tyrannosaurus Zord without destroying it. He'd at least buy everyone some time so they could gain control back over the Zords. If he could only get to that monster's flute…

Then, suddenly, he realized the Dragonzord was no longer responding to his mental commands. As soon as he realized this, he started running.

Sure enough, the Dragonzord had turned its finger missiles on him. He ran, each missile barely missing him. He pulled his wrist to his mouth to report what had happened… as if it wasn't obvious… when suddenly the attacks stopped. Everything was quiet.

"Power Rangers," the monster said. "The gracious Lord Zedd has granted you a reprieve. I have complete control over all of your Zords. If I wished, I could obliterate this entire planet on the power alone… but Lord Zedd does not wish for wholesale destruction. All he requires is Zordon, and he will allow your planet peace."

Bullshit, Tommy thought, smiling grimly. A person who looked like Lord Zedd had no concept of peace.

"The gracious Lord Zedd allows you one hour in which to convince Zordon to surrender himself. Your toys will remain under my control, but they will cause no more destruction… for an hour. At the end, if Zordon has not surrendered himself, I make this city into a crater."

Tommy heard Jason's voice crackle over his communicator. "We're headed back to the Command Center."

"Right," Tommy said back. He took one last look at his Dragonzord, now completely beyond his control. He wondered how much more he could bear losing.
The Command Center was completely silent. It had been so for several minutes. No one seemed to know what to say.

Tommy was determined not to be the first to speak. He'd been worse than useless, and he knew it. Rather than using Zordon's sacrificed power to rescue the Zords, he'd just provided another weapon for Zedd.

Kimberly was leaning against him. He suddenly, inappropriately, wanted very much to slip away with her to one of the back rooms. The pressure with which she held his hand, the way she pressed against him, told him she wanted that as well.

But they stayed. Tommy knew they were just scared and depressed, and he didn't want that to be the reason for a make-out session, even if it wasn't the worst timing in the world.

Billy was staring at some readouts absently, but he obviously wasn't really seeing them. Jason, Trini, and Zack didn't even have that pretense to fall back on. They stared ahead, too stunned to do anything.

The most surprising silence was Zordon. Tommy had never known him to be at a loss for words, even at the darkest times.

"So… I'm curious."

Jason had broken the silence. His voice was forcibly light, and Tommy could hear the turmoil under it.

"That… thing, you know. That Zedd said. That whole fugitive thing."

"Are you asking me if I'm a criminal, Jason?"

Jason didn't answer. He seemed suddenly afraid to. They all held their breath.

"Just as Rita did," Zordon began, "Lord Zedd seems to hold a talent for only telling part of the truth. The part that is most troubling."

"So you are a criminal?" This time Trini spoke up, her voice small.

"As are all of you, according to Lord Zedd and those on his side," Zordon said. "Scorpina there would gain a sizeable bounty if she were to take any of you to the proper authorities."

Tommy suddenly looked around, realizing what was missing. "Wait… where is Scorpina?" he said.

He felt Kimberly stiffen against him. He hated that he had to ask, knowing that Kimberly had a real
problem with Scorpina, and rightfully so. He knew he still didn't have feelings for Scorpina… but…

"She is resting," Alpha supplied. "She was sick, apparently, at the time Lord Zedd usurped Rita."

Tommy chafed inwardly at Zedd being afforded a title and Rita not, but he didn't say anything. He knew his lingering connection with Empress Rita was not exactly popular.

His stomach knotted up. He had to turn his thoughts from her.

Jason was speaking again. "I'm sorry, Zordon, but I need a little more explanation."

Zordon's eyes were looking far away, and suddenly he seemed much older than usual. "I have been in this war for a long time. Longer than any of you can conceive. The whole universe has been at war since before I was born, and I imagine it will continue to be so long after I am gone. The war has become part of this universe, integral to the ebb and flow of energy… to the construction of society." He paused. "We are criminals in the eyes of evil, the force that would enslave the universe. The ones who would mutilate themselves and everyone else in a desperate bid for more power, more control. All of those you know on that side—Goldar, Scorpina, Finster, Squatt and Babboo—they have all mutated themselves to gain more power, knowledge, longevity… Lord Zedd is just more extreme an example than what you've encountered.

It was more than Zordon had ever said about himself. More than he had ever said about what was going on in the outside universe. It gave scope to what they were doing, but it also made them feel sort of insignificant. Like the loss of Zords would not matter all that much in a war that spanned the universe and had lasted for millennia.

On a different note, Tommy wondered what Rita or Scorpina would say to being called evil. Probably smirk and call Zordon pompous.

Again, his stomach clenched. He tried to breathe normally.

"All is not lost, Power Rangers," Zordon continued, his voice more confident and less wistful. "It may seem as if Lord Zedd is too powerful, that he has us beaten."

"I wonder what made us think that," Zack said. "When his Putties kicked our collective asses or when his monster stole our Zords and turned them against us?"

"Unless you're saying we have other Zords or something like that," Kimberly said.

Zordon seemed to smile. "I am saying exactly that, Kimberly."

The mood shift was immediate.

"I can't believe it," Trini said over the excited cheers. "You were holding out on us!"

"I knew it wasn't the end," Jason said, sounding more cheerful than he had all day.

Billy looked a little stunned. "I can't believe he hid something that large from me in the computer system."

Zordon looked like he was trying to look stern, but couldn't for his own laughter. "Before everyone gets too excited," he said over the cheers, "it's not going to be as simple as just changing over Zords."

"When is it ever?" Tommy said.
Zordon chose to ignore this comment. "These Zords will not only provide you with more powerful forces, but they will also strengthen your own morphed powers. You will better be able to cope with Putty attacks and any other monster Zedd chooses to send. As such, you will need to connect these Zords with your own powers, and you will need to recover something for that task."

"So what mystical artifact are we going to have to get this time?" Jason said.

"You will have to regain control over your old Zords."

The cheering broke immediately. The room was now dead serious.

"I am sorry," Zordon said. "I wish it were not the case, but your Zords are tied directly to your powers, and they have components that must become part of the new Zords."

"The other problem, Rangers," Alpha said, "is that the new Zords are not ready yet. They must charge for a few more hours before they become operational. Oh, ay-yi-yi."

"Guys," Jason said, now smiling again, "we can handle this. After all, what idiotic mistake has Zedd made that Rita always made?"

"He gave us time," Tommy said, before even remembering that he was still annoyed with Jason.

The slight change in Jason's expression told that he had also not forgotten their tension from earlier. "Right. So our main problem is that Pirantishead has control over all of our Zords, and the focus of his power is that flute. We won't be able to get close enough to the monster. Not with the Tyrannosaurus Zord and the Dragonzord with him. He'll be able to hold us all off, and then he'll start destroying the city... for starters." He glanced at Billy. "Looks like it's up to you. Can you do it?"

Billy was frowning and looking down, a sure sign that his mind was racing through possibility. Thankfully, his possibilities were other people's improbabilities. "I believe I can," Billy finally said. "I will need to disrupt the frequency by which he controls the Zords. It could take time."

"If you go outside of the hour, we'll buy you your time... somehow," Jason said. "The rest of us will see what we can find out about this monster. See what weaknesses he has, just in case we have to get the flute from him anyway. In the meantime, we rest. Get ourselves prepared for battle."

Even though things still looked dire, a new force seemed to energize the Rangers, as if they had already gained their new powers.

Something in the back of Tommy's mind bugged him. Something about Zordon's talk about new powers... but he decided not to worry about that. For now, he was wondering about Scorpina.

Billy was gathering things, preparing to teleport down to his own lab. "Trini, can you assist me?"

"I'll be down in a minute, Billy," she said. "I promise. First I want to check on Scorpina, just in case I can help her."

Billy shot her a puzzled look but didn't challenge her. Tommy was sure he noticed Kimberly mouthing "thank you" at Trini, even as she kept a grip on him.

Tommy smiled sardonically, getting the message. For the peace of all involved, he needed to stay away from Scorpina for the moment.

"I'm sure she'll be okay," Kimberly said to Tommy. "I mean, if she's mutated to grow more powerful, then..."
"Thanks," Tommy said, hoping he had kept the sarcasm out of his voice. He was grateful that Kimberly seemed to care about his feelings, but she had definitely made sure to refer to Scorpina as one of the evil ones: the opposing side in the war that Zordon had referred to.

But then, was it as simple as Zordon made it out to be? The forces of good and the forces of evil… it all seemed too straightforward. Like one of those children's programs. Tommy wasn't entirely sure that Zordon was being truthful. Or, maybe he simply suffered from only seeing one perspective: the opposing side was evil because they were the opposite side.

Try as he might, he just couldn't see Scorpina as evil. Yes, she wasn't entirely moral. She was a bounty hunter. But then, she wasn't a murderer or anything. She had a moral code, twisted as it was. She never killed unless she could help it, and Tommy knew she had an aversion to torture or some of the more twisted aspects of violence. Her humor was twisted, not her brain. Despite the scorpion transformation, and despite all she had done against them, he just couldn't see her as evil.

Finster was another example. He was fiercely loyal to his queen and had a vast inventiveness for monsters, but he was a doctor. He was kind. He knew how to act as a soldier when it was called for, but he'd never been needlessly cruel. He'd tried to save Tommy's dad…

Squatt and Babboo… were idiots. He had to remind himself that they were scientists in their own right, but mostly they played games and watched television, marveling at each new discovery.

Tommy wondered how they were faring. Scorpina had tried to escape, and she'd been shot out of the sky. There didn't seem to be any chance for escape for the others, and Zedd did not seem like the merciful type.

Again, Tommy's fury flashed when he thought about Goldar and his betrayal. Earlier, Tommy hadn't been fit enough to fight him. While he knew he shouldn't welcome the fight, knowing he was squandering borrowed power when they had a bigger fight on their hands, he wanted to make Goldar pay.

And Rita…

"Hey, it's gonna be okay." Kimberly's voice interrupted his reverie. "We're going to get the Zords back."

He smiled at Kimberly, and he was surprised to feel that the smile wasn't forced. Even though she didn't know what he was thinking about—she couldn't, really—she knew how to ground him. To set him back on his priorities. What did definitions of good or evil matter, anyway? Zedd was holding the Earth hostage with their own weapons. He had friends and… family… to protect, not vengeance to take.

She smiled back and jerked her head over to the back room no one used. His grin widened and he followed her willingly.

Zack rolled his eyes as he watched the two leave after mumbling incoherent excuses. "Could they be any more obvious?" he griped.

Jason shook his head, now reviewing the footage they were able to capture of the monster. Not that it told him much. "You want to stop them, be my guest." He rubbed his eyes. "There's nothing any of us can do for now anyway. This monster doesn't have a weakness except what Billy can exploit. He let us beat him down before; that's pretty obvious now. He won't let it happen again now that we've had time to prepare."
"You really think this monster is that tougher than all the other monsters we've faced before?"

"I think Lord Zedd is tougher than Rita ever thought about being," Jason answered. "You heard what Scorpina said. He's reckless. He lets his power destroy him. This is not the type of guy to retreat or pull his punches."

Zack looked dully at the monster. "So… spar?"

Jason shrugged. "Yeah, all right."

Trini sat on her bed in the room she and Kimberly shared, waiting for the sounds of vomiting to stop in the adjacent bathroom. Quietly, she opened up a medical scanner from her lab.

Minutes later, Scorpina emerged from the bathroom, looking pale, sweaty, and unsurprised to see Trini.

"How'd the fight with the monster go?" Scorpina said in a hoarse voice.

"We lost the Zords," Trini said, keeping her voice as light as she could. "We're getting more, though. Zedd's giving us an hour."

Scorpina smiled and shook her head. "I might have known Zordon had something up his sleeve, figuratively speaking, of course." Scorpina slumped onto Kimberly's bed. "Thought about joining in the fun. Would have if I weren't feeling like shit."

"Uh huh," Trini said. "How long have you been pregnant?"

Trini dodged just in time as the attack she was ready for came. "Scorpina, settle down! The security system!"

Scorpina froze just as she was changing directions to follow Trini, who had retreated near the door, ready to bolt and lock Scorpina in. Scorpina panted, her whole frame shaking from the sudden exertion.

"How…" she gasped, "the …hell… did you know? I only just found out."

Trini held up her medical scanner. "And you've been so mysterious about this illness that I knew you knew. And you didn't insist on joining the fight, even to try to get back at Zedd. Something was up."

Scorpina finally lowered her fists. She allowed herself to fall back onto the bed. "Damn perceptive of you. Too perceptive. Looking in on what's not your business…"

"It's specifically my business for several reasons," Trini said, "not the least of which is I'm now the only one you know in the nearest thousand miles qualified to give you medical aid. Unless you want to try your luck at a human hospital… or the moon palace."

Scorpina shot Trini a dirty look. "Don't get excited, honey. I'm not set to deliver for months. My species can carry without showing for up to eight months. And my power-up surgery complicates matters, sometimes prolonging pregnancies." Worry flashed through her eyes. "I never thought I'd have to worry about this when I talked to the surgeons."

Trini shifted uncomfortably. She suddenly wished he hadn't brought up the pregnancy thing. She'd done it without thinking. Now that it was out in the open, she didn't really know how to handle it.
"Um…" Trini began, "do you need…?"

"I need nothing from you," Scorpina said shortly, regaining her balance. "I need to get off this stinking rock of a planet." Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "And if you tell anyone else, security be damned, I will end you."

Trini let the pointless, desperate threat pass. For really the first time, Trini felt overwhelming sympathy for the other woman… and now she could think of Scorpina as a woman and not just the enemy. On the day she found out she was pregnant, she'd lost everything and nearly died. Trini just couldn't imagine what it was like to be her right now. Suddenly the simple loss of Zords did not seem so bad.

"Does Goldar know?" Trini asked.

"Why should he?" Scorpina barked. She stared at Trini for a minute, as if wondering how much she wanted to share with this person who knew way too much about her already. "Goldar picked his side. He doesn't deserve to know a damn thing. And, I repeat, neither does anyone else. I don't want any significant glances or any of that bullshit. This is not a bonding experience. You violated my privacy, and you're going to keep quiet if you're going to keep alive."

Trini's face hardened. "And, again, I say I'm the only one in the area qualified to treat you. In the past few hours you crashed to Earth, almost got seriously hurt by Jason, and then tried to engage the father of your baby into a fight to the death. So, yeah, if you want you and your baby to stay alive, you're going to have to put up with a little invasion of privacy." Trini paused. "You do care about your baby. I mean, you are going to keep it?"

Scorpina looked puzzled for a minute, and then disgusted. "What do you think I am, a monster?"

Trini didn't answer.

Scorpina sighed. "Look, I know you mean well. You Rangers always mean well. But this changes nothing. Rita's still gone, I'm still in hiding from Zedd, and there's no way I can risk leaving the planet while he's this strong." Scorpina shrugged. "I'm stuck… but you have far more to worry about than a knocked up, down-on-her-luck enemy. I imagine your resident brainiac is coming up with some brilliant solution to fix everything?"

"That's the plan," Trini said, taken aback at the direction this discussion had taken.

"Then go help him, already," Scorpina said. "Hour's almost up."

Trini teleported out, not wanting to run into anyone. She knew that she wasn't going to tell anyone… but she didn't want anyone to read there was anything wrong on her face. Billy would be too distracted to notice, but she didn't want to chance Tommy finding out.

Billy was pulling apart the components of a piece of alien technology in his garage lab when he heard the door creak open. He didn't have to look up to see who it was. "What kept you?" he said without thinking.

Trini handed Billy a screwdriver he'd been reaching for. "Nice to see you, too. Progress?"

Billy realized he was being rude. "Sorry… and the progress is nominal. I'm not entirely certain I can build this in under an hour."
"You built that communication antenna from Scorpina's ship in record time," Trini pointed out.

Billy stepped back and looked at the mess on his work table. "That device was mostly operational to begin with. I merely repaired its operating circuits and recalibrated it for the correct frequency. To build this from scratch…"

"Can't we use anything from the Command Center?" Trini said.

"I am. Hardly any of this is human technology." Billy pulled off his glasses and wiped them on his shirt absentmindedly. "That's a bit of the problem. I have to fit all these disparate alien technologies together to combat yet another alien technology that we've never faced before and that's probably also coupled with magic."

Billy looked at Trini's calm, knowing face and realized he'd been panicking.

"We take it one step at a time," Trini said. "If one thing doesn't work, we try another. Think about the process, not the deadline."

Billy had already started to gather the pertinent components. "I am forever appreciative of your assistance, Trini."

Trini smiled at him. "And, hey, look on the bright side. At least we're not camping."

Billy frowned, though Trini couldn't see. He was incredibly relieved there would be no camping trip, actually. He'd forced himself to go along with the others rather than skip like he usually did because he wanted to prove something to Tommy. Yet the more recent memories from the Island of Illusion made the thought of camping even more difficult.

But what had he really been trying to prove to Tommy? That he could recover, could get over it? Was that what Tommy really needed to learn?

"Trini?" Billy said hesitantly. "Do you think…"

Trini looked up when Billy didn't finish his sentence. "What's wrong?"

Billy shook his head. "I'm not entirely sure how to phrase the question… so I'll just go ahead. Do you think Tommy's in denial about his father?"

Trini looked startled at the abrupt turn of conversation. "I don't know… I mean, I haven't spent as much time with him." She frowned. "He freaked out quite a bit right after it happened."

"Initial shock," Billy said, a little dismissively. "It's just… I know he wouldn't react the same way I did when I lost my father because of the age difference, and I don't want him to lay around depressed all the time, but…"

"It's like it didn't even happen," Trini supplied. "As if his father is at the hospital, and Tommy is waiting for him to come home."

Billy kept his eyes away from Trini, not wanting to show quite how much he was worried. "So I haven't imagined it."

"Of course not," Trini said softly. "Kimberly's noticed it, too. She doesn't bring it up with Tommy, but she told me whenever anything about it is mentioned, Tommy just blandly changes the topic, or… he doesn't react with any sort of emotion, or something."
"That has been my experience," Billy said, glad he had someone else to confirm it. He was afraid he was just expecting too much from Tommy, given his own personal experience. "He sold his van like it was nothing, and he barely took any of his father's possessions. I'm not sure if Tommy is pretending his father's not dead, or pretending his father was never there in the first place."

"It all started right after John died, you know?" Trini said. "When Tommy had to pretend he wasn't there at the Moon Palace, that he didn't know anything of what happened. I'm not entirely sure Tommy has stopped pretending." She laughed a bit. "I catch myself talking to him like he's some kind of invalid… mostly because I want him to be more bothered. Because… he is. He's just not letting himself be bothered, and it's really going to damage him."

Billy paused long enough to fit two of the major components together and determine the appropriate power source. "I suppose I thought of it because…" He paused again. This time he wasn't sure if he wanted to continue the thought.

"Rita," Trini finished for him.

"Rita," Billy repeated sardonically. He shook his head. "I may have been under her spell for a few hours, but I'll never truly understand Tommy's relationship with her. It's like he doesn't even understand that she enslaved him."

"Oh, I think he understands that well enough," Trini said. "I just think he sees their relationship as more complicated than that. I'm… not entirely sure he ever saw Rita as an enemy. No matter what she did to him. It was all personal to him, not sides in a war."

"Thinking about what Zordon said?" Billy said, with a ghost of a smile.

Trini nodded.

"I suppose I never thought of us as soldiers in some far-flung war," Billy said. "It was much more comfortable to think of us as superheroes, protecting the Earth and such."

"We still are," Trini said. "Zedd was just trying to psych us out. He thinks of us as children, remember?"

Billy realized that, with all his worries over Tommy, which were really just covering for his worries over their situation, he'd been wasting their precious time. "So I suppose we should stop acting like children and focus on the mission. I believe the device is ready for the first test."

"Then let's do it," Trini said brightly, handing him some goggles.

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It was near the end of their hour, and the developments didn't look good.

"How much more time do you need?" Jason said over his communicator.

Billy's voice was tight with stress. "Thirty more minutes… maybe more. The calibrations are just not quite right."

"We'll try to buy you as much time as we can," Jason said, trying to keep the resignation out of his voice. He cut the communication link and looked over at Zack. "So… yeah."

"We can stall as much as we can, I guess," Zack said, "but when it comes down to it, the monster's
gonna attack the city with our Zords and we can't do much to stop him."

"I can't accept that," Jason said. "There's got to be another way."

"Can't we climb into one of the other Zords and get back control manually?"

Jason and Zack turned to see Tommy. Kimberly wasn't with him. Jason avoided his eyes and turned
to Zordon. "Well?"

Zordon frowned. "That is a possibility, though we can't know how much control Pirantishead has
over the frozen Zords. One would have to force entry and climb through the Zord to the cockpit, all
the while hoping the monster does not simply activate the Zord under his control."

"If the monster could control more than my Zord and the Dragonzord, why isn't he doing it already?"
Jason said. "Why didn't he just wait for us to form into the Megazord?"

"You thinking there's limits to his power?" Zack asked.

"Could be," Jason said. "But… we really can't depend on that."

Zack checked the time. "Time's running out. I'm going to grab something to eat before we do this.
Don't say anything brilliant without me."

Before Jason could stop this abrupt departure, Zack was gone. He couldn't help but think that Zack
had been looking for an excuse to get Jason and Tommy alone together. Jerk.

Tommy was looking at some readings of the monster, carefully keeping his attention away from
Jason.

Jason sighed, knowing he needed to get this over with before everyone came tromping back in. He
could feel Zordon's stare at the back of his neck. "Tommy… listen… I didn't mean for what I said to
come out like it did."

Tommy continued to stare at the readings for a minute. When he turned to Jason, it was with a smile.
"You sort of did, actually."

"Yeah, well, I didn't mean that I didn't appreciate what you tried to do," Jason said with difficulty,
"even if I didn't really agree with how you did it."

Tommy laughed slightly. "Jas, you were right. I endangered all of us with that idiot stunt. And you
were right to say it like you did. It's just what I needed to hear. I mean, even since…" He searched
for words, seemed to give up, and shrugged. "Well, people have been treating me differently. Like I
was fragile or something. So, yeah, I didn't like it, but I appreciated it."

Jason heard footsteps, and he decided to drop it. While he still wasn't convinced Tommy wouldn't
attempt something insanely stupid, he at least knew that it wouldn't be because he was trying to
prove something to Jason.

"So, ten minutes til the hour's up," Kimberly said. "How the hell are we going to stall for time?"

Zack walked up next. "What about Tommy's idea? Try to gain control over one of the other Zords?"

"That would still take time," said Jason. "We'd need a distraction. Something a bit more than a few
Rangers showing up empty-handed. Zedd would see right through it. What we really need is
something to occupy Zedd or the monster without making them resort to using the Zords against the
"If he just wanted a relic and not Zordon we could come up with some sort of decoy," Tommy said.

"I believe you Rangers are forgetting an alternative," Zordon interrupted. "Something that will certainly distract Lord Zedd."

"Yeah, I know what you're going to say," Jason said. "It's not even an option. We're not turning you in, and you really get no say in the matter." He took a breath. "If we're soldiers in a war, then you're our general. If we don't protect you, the war's lost."

Zordon looked surprised for an instant, but he didn't push the matter. Jason pointedly didn't look up at him, obviously a little rattled at how he had spoken to Zordon.

"We could try to arrange a meeting directly with Lord Zedd," suggested Kimberly. "Like, insist on not going through a channel?"

"Something to keep in mind, but it could backfire," Jason said.

"I could be wrong…"

Scorpina's voice startled them, as they were so used to hearing it on the battlefield, not in their headquarters. Scorpina smirked at their startled expressions. She had doffed Trini's clothes and was now wearing her full battle armor. She looked deadly.

"As I was saying, I could be wrong, but you seem to be in need of a distraction," she said.

Jason regarded her warily. "What do you have in mind?"

Scorpina shrugged. "Perhaps… a fugitive? One you could use as a bargaining chip in a desperate attempt to protect your beloved mentor."

"You sure you're up for that?" Tommy asked. "I mean, just a couple of hours ago you were shot down from space and hunted by Putties."

"As much as I appreciate your concern for my wellbeing," Scorpina said loftily, "you're still thinking of me in human terms. I have suffered and survived far worse. I may not be part of your team… thank goodness… but I have a score to settle, and I'd appreciate it if none of you would stand in my way." She smiled. "And you seem to have run out of time and options, dearies."

The Rangers looked like they were going to protest, but couldn't think of anything to say. Jason, however, tapped his communicator. "Billy? We're going down. It looks like we've bought you the extra time."

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Zack approached the big toe of his Mastodon Zord. It wasn't until that moment that he realized how big the damn thing really was. He wondered if he'd even be able to reach the manual control in time.

He pulled out his axe. It took three swings to crack the emergency entrance open. A panel fell away. It was completely dark inside, but the night vision in Zack's helmet showed him a ladder.

"Right," he said. "Climbing." He went through the hastily memorized directions one more time, pulled the panel shut to hide his break-in, and began climbing.
Tommy stepped out of the elevator to the top floor and looked around for roof access. He wondered what would have happened if the building hadn't been vacated, and laughed. No one was there to hear him, though. The floor opened up to a reception area and some closed offices. Obviously this is where the bosses worked.

The roof access was locked. Hoping the building security wasn't armed, he broke the lock and headed up to the roof, where the sun was slowly setting.

He kept low to the ground and watched as Scorpina, Jason, and Kimberly approached the monster. Casting a nervous glance at the Zords, he drew his blade blaster and aimed straight at the monster, ready at a moment's notice to draw his Dragon Dagger to regain control of his Zord.

"I expected more of a showing," the monster said as the two Power Rangers approached him, Scorpina in tow. "Two Rangers and one fugitive? Have the others wisely decided to give up and run away?"

"Like we need more than two to take care of you," Kimberly said snidely.

Jason held a hand out. He had his other hand firmly on Scorpina's bound arms. "We're not here to fight, okay? We're here to make a deal."

"If you say anything other than you are turning in Zordon directly, no deals will be made," Pirantishead said.

"There, you see?" Scorpina growled over her shoulder at Jason. "It's not going to work. Now let me…"

"Look, you're not getting Zordon," Jason said, and he braced himself for the lies he knew he had to tell. "He won't give himself up, and we can't do anything about it. We tried already. So, we're here to make a counter offer." He shoved Scorpina forward. "Lord Zedd's been looking for this one, right? Well, she's yours… but only if you relinquish hold of our Zords."

The monster stared at them for a minute, and then laughed. "You think one rebellious bounty hunter can stand in for Zordon? Who do you think you are dealing with… Rita Repulsa?"

"I think Lord Zedd can profit nothing from wholesale destruction," Jason said. "I think he's going to have to take what he can get if he wants anything."

"And I think you do not understand a thing about Lord Zedd," the monster said. "Do you truly believe he gives a damn about this dirt ball? This speck of a city? He would destroy everything without a thought. If you're going to survive the next five minutes, Rangers, you're going to have to do much better."

"And if you're going to get anything from us," Jason answered, "you're going to have to work with us." He was sweating, though. The monster wasn't taking the bait, and if he activated the Zords, they'd be finished.
"They're stalling for time, Lord Zedd," Goldar said aloud before he could stop himself as he watched the action from a small computer screen in the corner. He would have already said this and more to Empress Rita. Scorpina was, uncharacteristically, standing there sedately, the other four Rangers were obviously planning something…

Lord Zedd was silent for a minute. Goldar believed that Zedd was ignoring him, until he said, "Do you believe that is information I do not already know?"

Goldar gulped, but then gritted his teeth. He was getting pretty damn sick of being talked down to. He was a warrior, after all, and highly experienced with fighting the Power Rangers, whereas this was Zedd's first time. "I think, my lord," Goldar tried to conceal the frustration in his voice, "that it is unwise to allow the Rangers any more time. They are incredibly resourceful, and you've already allowed them an hour to plan their counterattack. The missing Rangers are worrisome, as well."

Again, Zedd waited before speaking. Goldar was holding his breath. He'd just criticized Lord Zedd in a way he'd never done with Empress Rita. He started wondering if he actually had a death wish.

"The Power Rangers are indeed forming a counterattack," Zedd said boredly. "The Blue and Yellow Rangers are hiding at the Blue Ranger's residence, coming up with a machine to disrupt Pirantishead's control over the Zords. They are unaware that the security over their residences is now insufficient to block them from surveillance. The Black Ranger I last saw sneaking into his Zord, obviously on a mission to regain control of it manually. The Green Ranger is presently acting as a sniper from a nearby building." He paused. "For a group of teenagers, the plan is quite competent."

"So what's the plan to combat these counterattacks?" Goldar asked.

"They are insignificant," Lord Zedd said shortly. "I will allow them to keep themselves busy. In fact..." Amusement crept into his voice. "They are facilitating my plans. It would have been annoying if the simple hijacking of their Zords had incapacitated them so thoroughly. I would have lost the opportunity to prove to them how powerless they are, and especially how inadequate Zordon is. If they are lucky, they will die in the next fifteen minutes. If they are not, they will live to see the destruction of all they hold dear."

Goldar knew Zedd had not shared his entire plan… but what could make him so confident that he would destroy the Rangers?

"There is one complication you may address, Goldar," Zedd said, pulling Goldar out of his thoughts. "Scorpina could be troublesome. She is obviously a decoy in this matter. I wish you to take her out of the equation by any means necessary."

It was the blow that Goldar knew had been coming. The only way to dislodge Scorpina from the others would be to offer himself to fight. And he had no desire to fight Scorpina. However… there was no other way.

As Goldar blinked out, Lord Zedd considered the situation on Earth. Perhaps he should make even more of a distraction.

Zack knew from experience that his Zord acted as a giant echo chamber. When he heard the familiar warbling of Putties bouncing off the walls all around him, he knew they could be anywhere and he wouldn't know where until it was too late.

He felt a hand close around his ankle. "Of course," he said. "It would be boring if this was too easy."
He gripped the ladder firmly and kicked down hard. He didn't have to hit the Z. The force of his kick made the Putty lose its grip and fall. Even if the Putty survived, it would take it forever to climb up this high again.

More hands brushed at his legs, and he yelled in surprise. He struggled upwards, doubling his pace. When he got ahead enough, he drew his blade blaster and aimed. Instead of hitting the Putties—risky at best, given the potential for rebounded energy—he hit the ladder itself at a weak point. It broke and, loaded down with Putties, fell away. The Putties closest to Zack lost their foothold and fell as well.

"Nowhere to go but up," Zack said to himself. He wasn't far from the manual override now, and he knew he'd have to fight through Putties at the top. He only hoped the others were having better luck than he.

"So what's it going to be, Pirantishead?" Jason said, unnerved at the monster's silence. "Scorpina or nothing."

"You really didn't think we'd fall for that, Rangers."

Goldar's voice came from behind, making everyone jump.

"I don't need your help," the monster said disdainfully.

"I'm just following orders," Goldar barked impatiently. "Now if the Rangers will hand Scorpina over, they'll be less likely to get themselves killed."

Meanwhile, Jason had tightened his grip on Scorpina. "Stick to the plan," he whispered at her. "You're gonna get hurt if you…"

"Plan's going to change anyway," Scorpina whispered back. "I'd give him about half a minute more…"

A bolt from a blade blaster caught Goldar full in the back. Goldar pitched forward and used the momentum to start running away from the blasts, putting him in Scorpina's line of fire.

Without even breaking away from Jason, Scorpina let her stinger fly through the air at Goldar, catching him in the shoulder. He yelled, but it obviously wasn't but a shallow cut, as Goldar could draw his sword with ease.

Jason tried to call off the attack, but he could already tell the whole plan had fallen apart for now. Everything was descending into chaos, so he decided to go with it.

"Come on, Kim," he grunted as Scorpina finally shook him off and launched herself into battle with Goldar. "We have to keep Pirantishead distracted enough so he won't start using the Zords. Try to get at the flute."

Kimberly had already drawn her bow and was letting a volley of arrows fly at the monster, who was having to keep the flute behind him so it wouldn’t get hit. Jason cut a wide path around the path of the arrows to be able to attack the monster from the side.
At the top of the building, Tommy was having his own problems. Immediately after his attack on Goldar (he knew he'd be facing one of Jason's lectures for that bit of impulsive idiocy), he'd realized a whole squad of Putties had been positioning themselves to ambush him. They didn't even give him an opportunity to teleport, move the fight down on the ground near Goldar and the monster. He was handling the fight much better than he had earlier, but they were still a drain on his power, and he knew his power was much more limited than the other Rangers'.

Scorpina could not give a flying fig about Zords, the Power Rangers, or even Lord Zedd at the moment. All she could see was Goldar, and she concentrated every fiber of her being into hitting every inch of him she could get to. He was going to pay for what he did, and the rest of the universe could go hang.

The battles raged on: Zack desperately trying to get to the controls of his Zord, Tommy trying to escape from the rooftop, Jason and Kimberly continually missing the monster's control flute, and Scorpina furiously fighting Goldar, who seemed to be more and more effected by the miniscule amount of poison from Scorpina's sting, as well as the ferocity of her attacks.

"THAT'S IT!"

The monster, before Jason and Kimberly could regroup to attack him again, teleported to the top of the Dragonzord's shoulder. Seconds later, the Tyrannosaurus Zord and the Dragonzord began to move.

"Billy," Jason said shakily into his communicator, "now would be a good time."

All he got was static, though. Even if Billy and Trini were finished with the device, they might be unable to teleport to the battle from the interference.

"Now, Power Rangers!" The monster's amplified voice boomed over the battlefield. "You will pay for your resistance!"

The Tyrannosaurus Zord's eyes flashed red. The Dragonzord armed its missiles.

And Jason realized he had no clue what to do. This was the end.

There was a yell, and Jason and Kimberly saw something gold and green flash across the sky. Tommy had launched himself from the room to the Dragonzord, using the extra power from Zordon to make himself almost fly. The monster did not have time to react to the impulsive attack before Tommy tackled him and sent them both hurtling to the ground.

"Alpha, teleport Tommy to the Command Center now!" Jason yelled into his communicator.

Seconds later, there was only one body crashing to the ground, and both Jason and Kimberly could breathe easier.

"You okay, Tommy?" Kimberly said into her communicator.

"Yeah," was Tommy's breathless reply. "Quick thinking, Jas."

"Same to you," Jason laughed. "Try to get in touch with Billy. We need that disruption device right now, before the monster recovers."

Jason barely finished his sentence when he felt himself tackled from the side, just in time to see the tail of the Dragonzord swing past them by inches.
"I think our time is up," Kimberly gasped as they ran for cover in an alley.

Before Jason could respond, the temperature dropped. The Mastodon Zord was blasting icy air at the Tyrannosaurus Zord and the Dragonzord, effectively freezing them in mid attack.

"I think Zack bought us some more time," Jason said. "Let's get to that monster. Tommy," he said into his communicator, "if you're not busy, we could use the help."

"Be right there," Tommy said. "Billy and Trini couldn't teleport to the battlefield, but Alpha and I cleared that up."

Jason and Kimberly ran for the center of the battlefield to face the monster. They were joined by Tommy, Billy, and Trini.

"Sorry it took so long," Trini said as Billy bent over the machine.

"You're here, and the plan worked well enough," Jason said. "Well, Pirantishead, looks like Lord Zedd's plans have failed spectacularly. I'm disappointed… I thought he'd pose more of a threat than this. Billy, you ready?"

"Affirmative," Billy said.

With that, the machine whirred to life. There was a high-pitched noise. The Rangers clamped their hands over their ears, momentarily forgetting they were wearing helmets, but the noise was gone in seconds.

Pirantishead stood before them, looking furious. His control flute looked black and was emitting smoke. He threw it from him in frustration.

"See what I mean?" Jason said. "Now is Zedd ready to admit defeat?"

"Hardly," said Pirantishead. "So you've got your Zords back. Do you really think you can defeat me with them?"

"Oh, let me guess," Tommy said. "Let my monster grow?"

"Okay, guys, it's time to form the Megazord," Jason said. "No…" he smiled. "Let's show Lord Zedd what he's really up against. It's time to form the UltraZord."

Jason, in the back of his mind, knew the smarter thing to do would be to retreat and gain the power of the new Zords. But he also knew the monster posed more of an immediate threat and could do a lot of damage during the changeover. He also knew… he wanted to give the Zords one last triumphant battle.

The six Rangers joined in the cockpit of the UltraZord: the six of them in the same cockpit for the first time.

"This Zord is freakin' awesome!" Tommy said. "I wasn't here last time… No wonder Cyclopsis got pulverized."

"Guys… let's take this monster out," Jason said.

Before the monster could even start an attack, the Power Rangers released the full power of the UltraZord. The sky lit up with the sheer power of the blasts. As it was hit again and again, the monster fell to the ground as if in slow motion. Just as it had happened time and time before, the
monster exploded before the last volley was struck.

The cockpit was filled with cheers. The monster had threatened that they would die within ten minutes. Within fifteen, they had regained control over their Zords and defeated Lord Zedd's first monster.

"I think we've given Lord Zedd something to think about," Trini said happily.

"Okay, guys, let's get these Zords back to the Command Center," said Jason.

They tried to start the process for dismantling the UltraZord… but nothing happened.

"Guys?" Billy said in a hollow voice. "Something's wrong. The monster… It did something. It's pulling the UltraZord in! There's nothing I can do!"

Zordon's voice crackled over the speakers in the UltraZord. "Rangers! You must abandon the Zords immediately, or you will be pulled into the Earth's crust."

Now that the smoke had cleared, they could see where the monster had exploded was a fissure. And the UltraZord was being pulled inexorably in.

"Billy, can we save the Dragonzord at least?" Jason yelled as the cockpit around them began exploding.

"Tommy can remotely pull it from the combination with his Dragon Dagger," Billy answered in a panicked voice.

"Do it!" Jason yelled. "Send the Dragonzord back to the harbor!"

In minutes, it was over. The Dragonzord had miraculously escaped back into the harbor, but the rest of the Zords…

The Power Rangers stood at the edge of the fissure. It had sealed up as soon as the five Zords had disappeared.

"It's over," Jason said dully, kicking uselessly at the edge of the fissure. "There's no way we can power the new Zords without the old." He looked at the others. "I'm sorry, guys. I thought we could save them."

The others looked at him silently. They couldn't say anything.

"Let's just get back," said Kimberly, her voice shaking. "Hey… where's Scorpina?"

The six Rangers looked around the ruined battlefield. Goldar and Scorpina had disappeared.

Goldar woke up with a pounding headache. His armor felt twice its usual weight, and the place where Scorpina had stung him felt like it was on fire.

He got slowly to his feet. Everything around him was red. No, it was glowing with heat, a dead forest of perpetual fire.

"It's my last present from Rita," Scorpina's soft voice rose over the fire's roar. "It's another dimension that only I can open. I hope you like it."
Goldar whipped around to see Scorpina. She was watching him calmly and had obviously been waiting for him to wake up.

"So what's it going to be?" Goldar said, his heart hammering.

Scorpina smiled mockingly. "I just wanted some alone time, lover," she said in a sexy, almost dreamlike voice. "Lord Zedd… the Power Rangers… they can be so distracting. If I'm going to kill you, I want it to be special… private…"

Goldar stared into Scorpina's eyes, his sword at the ready. Her eyes were slightly mad and dead cold. He realized, with both panic and… relief… that he would not get out of that dimension alive.
Lord Zedd looked grimly at the battlefield below. The Power Rangers thought they had lost, thought that their precious Zords had disappeared forever. That was what Lord Zedd had intended. He'd designed Pirantishead to be unstable, and for any victory on the Rangers' part to be their undoing.

Now, he saw, he'd quite underestimated Zordon. All of them had. It was not these children who had bested Rita again and again. It was he. No wonder he was so dangerous to the Alliance.

As easily as thought, Zedd intercepted the teleportation beam of the Power Rangers, scooping them from their intended destination and putting them in his own Dark Dimension. He felt he needed to speak with them, and he had no intention of setting foot on their pathetic planet. As for Zordon, the conversation with him would have to wait.

Giving barely a thought to his vanished minion, Zedd stepped into the Dark Dimension, leaving his chamber empty and hollow.

"Guys, either Zordon's redecorated in the last half hour, or…"

Kimberly's joke trailed off in the echoing darkness, and she shivered. Tommy pulled her closer to him.

They were all still morphed, but they had no idea where they were. There was only enough light to see immediately around them. All else was darkness.

"I guess we found out another way Zedd is different from Rita," said Zack. His voice sounded harsh and constricted, so unlike his usual levity.

"What's that?" Jason asked.

"He doesn't let us retreat," Zack answered. "When we lose, we lose."

Trini shook her head. "We haven't lost, have we? I mean, we don't have our Zords, but we have our powers."

"And the Dragonzord," Tommy added. "Much good it will do us. I'm not sure Zedd's brought us here to finish us off, though."

"How can you be positive?" Billy asked.

"That wouldn't get him Zordon," Jason said. "And that's what he really wants."
"Very astute, Red Ranger."

The voice split through the darkness, and a red light illuminated a large silver throne. On it sat the monstrous form of Lord Zedd, who might have been watching them the entire time.

The Rangers instinctively drew closer together. Despite the assurances of Tommy and Jason, none of them were feeling particularly confident in their own safety, morphed or not. Rita Repulsa had always been commanding, terrifying even, but Lord Zedd looked capable of killing them without a second thought.

For the moment, though, Zedd seemed more inclined to study them, to wait for them to make the first move.

"So if you're not interested in killing us," Jason tried to keep his throat from closing up around the words, "why did you bring us here? If you're looking for fashion advice, I would say anything else."

"My appearance frightens you, does it, children?"

No one had anything to say to that.

"It is the price of war," Lord Zedd continued, almost casually. "A war that has lasted longer than your own pathetic Earth history, and I have lived through much of it. So has Zordon… the war has also taken his toll on him, as I have heard. Live long enough, and it will destroy your bodies and minds. I believe one of you is already suffering the initial effects." He nodded toward Tommy.

"It would be worse if we just let you take over Earth, wouldn't it?" Tommy snapped.

Lord Zedd stared at Tommy for a long time before continuing. "Perhaps."

Zedd rose from his throne and stepped forward. The Rangers moved back, raising their defenses. Zedd laughed at their efforts. "Don't be ridiculous, Power Rangers. If I were here to fight you, you would be dead. I merely brought you here because I wished to have a conversation with you."

"So you called us here to gloat," said Zack, his voice still hard and humorless. "I mean, you've already won, haven't you?"

"Have I?" Zedd said, reflective. "I myself for a moment believed myself to have defeated you Power Rangers… and I had, really. I did not, however, take into account Zordon's genius and foresight. I see now you are not the only tools at his disposal… though you are perhaps the most vulnerable."

"What are you talking about?" Trini said. "Our Zords are gone."

"Your Zords are exactly where Zordon wanted them, where he knew I would send them. He detected Pirantishead's additional… ability, so he readied your new Zords. What you do not realize, Rangers, is how old Zordon is, and how long he has been on Earth, how long he has been able to mold the Earth to his own purposes. He has made the Earth's core into a forge, and in that forge he has combined the remaining essences of your old Zords with your new ones. They should be waiting for you at a moment's notice."

"So he meant for us to lose," Jason said.

Lord Zedd seemed amused at the statement, though he did not laugh. "That is of no concern right now. For the moment, I am more concerned with you six. I could not get to Zordon by killing you, but you are definitely the keys to his downfall. The more I study, the more I am convinced that a Power Ranger will be his destruction." He paused. "I have studied both you and your pitiful culture,
and I now know how to destroy you all. You have earned some modicum of respect, so I will give you each two chances. The first chance… if any of you wish to renounce your powers right now, I will leave you alone completely."

"You know none of us is going to do that," Jason spat back at him.

"And I did not realize you made decisions for the entire team when this was supposed to be an individual decision," Zedd said wryly.

Jason took a step back, and even though his face was hidden everyone knew he was unnerved even more than when Zedd had threatened their destruction.

"I can't answer for everyone else," Tommy spoke up, "but I think you're crazy if you think a few idle words, and a mutilated body will keep me from doing everything I can to stop you from taking over the Earth. Zordon, the Earth, the ultimate power cylinder of whatever… it doesn't matter what you're after. I'll fight you with my last breath."

"I'm with Jason and Tommy," Zack said.

"You already admitted you have not beaten us," said Billy.

Trini nodded. "You may think you're so much worse than Rita, but what I see is someone who's going to underestimate us… like you've already done."

Kimberly shrugged. "What we're pretty much trying to say is… suck it, Zedd."

Lord Zedd paused, regarding them. "Your second chance," he began, as if they hadn't even spoken, "as you've decided to take the road of bravery rather than wisdom… I will give each of you a clue. Whether it will help you… that is up to you. Understand, though, that as soon as you leave this place, your lives are forfeit." He paused, obviously wanting this to sink in. "You will merely be used as tools in the battles between myself and Zordon."

"We've always understood the risks," Jason said.

"Have you." It was not a question. "Very well… Yellow Ranger, Trini Kwan."

"Nothing you can tell me can hurt me," Trini said. "You're just trying to shake us up, and it won't work."

"There is no need to raise your defenses," Zedd said. "As I said, I am merely trying to help you. Your clue is 'nosce te ipsum.'"

"Yeah, well… what?" Trini had been prepared for an angry retort, but the words were so confusing, she fell silent.

"Zachary Taylor, the Black Ranger."

"Yeah, do your worst," Zack said, though not entirely sure he wanted to hear.

"Your clue is 'amazing fifty.'"

Zack shifted at the words. "Thanks so much for being so cryptic."

But Zedd had already shifted his attention. "The Blue Ranger, William Cranston, your clue is 'victor.'"
The others could almost see Billy's eyebrows raise quizzically. "That seems rather unthreatening… though I suppose it depends on who is the victor."

"This is all ridiculous anyway," Kimberly broke in. "None of what you're saying actually makes sense."

"Another betrayal," he said.

"What?"

Zedd's shoulders shook slightly with laughter. "That is your clue, Kimberly Hart, Pink Ranger. I hope it is not altogether too cryptic. And Jason Lee Scott, Red Ranger," he said, brushing Kimberly aside, "I have only one word… 'Cincinnatus.'"

Jason placed a hand on Kimberly's shoulder, who was making moves to attack. "What, is that supposed to be where you're attacking next? Tired of Angel Grove?"

This time Lord Zedd did laugh, a long, terrible laugh that filled the darkness. "No more clues, Red Ranger. And I was led to believe you were intelligent. I suggest you exercise that intelligence when I send you back."

"Wait a minute." Tommy took a threatening step forward, though his voice was showing the strain of staying morphed that long. "You've forgotten someone."

Zedd's laughter grew silent, and the air seemed to grow icy. "I have forgotten no one, Thomas Oliver, holder of the stolen green power coin."

"You can call me the Green Ranger," Tommy said. "That is who I am, after all."

"You represent all of Rita's failure," Zedd said, ignoring Tommy's correction. "She gave you one of her most valuable weapons, inexpertly enchanted you, and then allowed you to not only live, but also work against her when you left her control… armed with the power she herself gave you. I must admit, I was no entirely honest before. Everyone here had the opportunity to leave… except you. I cannot allow you to live."

"I hear a lot of threats," Tommy said. "So what's the clue?"

Though even the possibility of a face was covered, they could hear the smirk in Zedd's voice. "Two weeks."

A pause. "You're lying," Tommy said, his voice hollow. "Or you're bluffing. You can't defeat me in that amount of time."

"That is how long your power will last," Lord Zedd said. "Two weeks, and it will be gone, and then you will die."

"LIAR!"

"I do not comprehend why you are so upset," Lord Zedd laughed. "Isn't this what you want? After all, you'll be reunited with your father."

Tommy was too quick for his friends to stop him. He rushed at Zedd blindly.

He gained only ten feet before Lord Zedd raised his staff. Lightning shot from the Z of the staff and stopped Tommy dead in his tracks. He screamed and crumpled to the ground, writhing in pain.
"Zedd, let him go!" Jason yelled.

Zedd looked up at Jason, lightning still arcing from his staff to Tommy. "If you interfere, you will get more of the same. He must learn my power."

Jason gritted his teeth. "He gets it, okay, and you unfairly provoked him if you weren't planning to do this in the first place. You said two weeks, not two seconds."

Lord Zedd regarded him. "Fair enough, Red Ranger." He broke off the lightning.

Tommy did not get up. He was unmorphed and shaking uncontrollably. The others ran to him, and Billy and Zack propped him up on their shoulders.

"Remember my words, Power Rangers," Lord Zedd said, all amusement gone from his voice. "You have all squandered your chance of escape, but you may yet survive… most of you, at least."

Lord Zedd waved a hand casually, and the Power Rangers disappeared.

Goldar clutched at his shoulder. The cut Scorpina had given him was shallow, but from the spots already developing in his vision Goldar knew the poison was working quickly to his heart.

"What do you think to accomplish, Scorpina?" Goldar said, his voice raspier than normal from the pain. "None of this is going to bring Rita back."

Even as Goldar was trying to put up a defense with his wavering strength, Scorpina was idly picking dead, burnt leaves from a nearby tree. She looked almost bored, though Goldar knew she was raging as much as the fire that surrounded them.

"I happen to remember you insisting on calling her 'Empress,'" Scorpina said quietly. "A lot has changed in a day."

"I'm sorry, but she's no Empress. Not anymore. Not after what Lord Zedd did to her."

"What YOU did to her!" Scorpina's face twisted into a snarl, and Goldar briefly saw the monster that laid just below the surface.

Just as quickly, though, Scorpina resumed her bored façade. "I seem to also remember something about you loving me. You were the one who was always banging on about commitment and all that. Was that a lie, too? Commit as long as it's convenient… as long as there's no risk?"

"Are we talking about Rita or about you?" Goldar said, bristling at every word in spite of himself. He had to keep reminding himself that Scorpina had no idea the sacrifice he'd made for his loyalty. That he saved everyone, herself and Rita included, by appearing to be a traitor. He could say all this… except for the fact that he had no idea if Lord Zedd was watching, and thus he would invalidate all the work he'd done, and for the fact that Scorpina would not believe him.

Scorpina was laughing as this all flew through his mind. "It's about neither, lover. It's about you. You and how long I'm going to play with you before killing you."

"I thought you were never one for killing," Goldar said, just trying to stay conscious. "Bounty hunter and all that."

Scorpina smirked and raised her curved sword. "You're special. I'll make an exception."
Goldar did not fully understand how he was able to dodge her onslaught of attacks, considering his weakened condition. He figured he was just able to react on instinct. It helped that Scorpina's attacks were wild and uncontrolled, contrasting with her calm front. She was operating on pure rage, and Goldar realized he could use that to his advantage.

In an erratic move, rather than going for a straight block, he allowed Scorpina to slice his hand open while he countered with smashing the hilt of his sword into her nose. It was a dirty trick, and her yell was a mixture of rage and pain. Yet she was blinded and stunned, nonetheless, allowing Goldar to pick her up bodily and throw her into the fire.

He knew it wouldn't hurt her. They teleported by fire, after all, but it would disorient her long enough for him to grab at an antidote in his armor. He drew out the syringe, injected himself right in the shoulder, and then hid the syringe carefully back in his armor.

His vision began to clear, but he was careful to appear just as weak as he had. He'd never dared to tell Scorpina he always carried an antidote to her poison just in case their sex play got a little too interesting. Now it was standing him in good stead... though for a reason he'd never expected.

"Smart move, lover," Scorpina said as she pulled herself from the fire, her voice a little obscured by a broken nose. "But you didn't go in for the kill. Sloppy."

"I don't intend to kill you, Scorpina," Goldar said, keeping his voice weak and unsteady as before. "I never did. I was just trying to keep Lord Zedd from killing you." He could tell that truth, at least.

"I'm touched," Scorpina said mockingly. "I mean, what with you attacking me with Putties and hunting me down in a forest, ready to drag me back to that new master that you're protecting me from. Now I see you really do care."

This time, Goldar really didn't see the attacks coming. He barely had time to raise his sword before she sliced through a weak point in his armor, just under his chest place. He growled in pain and tried to counter, but she was too quick for him, her attacks now more controlled. Her rage was still there, but it was now tempered by deadly purpose. She had obviously learned from how easily Goldar had taken her out before.

Another slice, and Goldar's chest plate was completely severed. Goldar briefly wondered if Scorpina's aim was to get him naked and then kill him... oddly fitting, considering their relationship. But, no... her stinger was coming in for another dose of poison, and this one he knew would be aimed directly at his now-exposed gut. And he didn't have any more antidote.

Again, he went for the low blow. He grabbed at the ashy, gritty dirt under them and threw it directly in her face. The dirt was still slightly burning, and Scorpina's eyes were not as well protected from fire as the rest of her was. In the meantime, he was left with a conundrum. His chest plate was completely destroyed, and he couldn't do anything about Scorpina's stinger without damaging her permanently. There was no escape, and he wasn't even sure if Scorpina had an escape from this twisted dimension. He couldn't keep fighting her without killing her or himself or both.

But maybe that wouldn't be so bad...

In an instant, Goldar's energy left him. He barely put up a fight as Scorpina stopped rubbing her eyes and fought him again. A few attacks, and Goldar felt himself driven to his knees. He found himself not really caring... no, not that. He found himself welcoming it, welcoming the relief.

Scorpina's sword hovered over Goldar's throat. Goldar's sword hung loosely by his side, and Goldar couldn't even find the energy to release his grip on the hilt. Time seemed to stop, the only sound
coming from the perpetually burning forest surrounding them.

"What, are you giving up?" Scorpina snarled at him, nicking his neck lightly with her sword.

Goldar did not reply. He didn't even flinch as the sword caused more blood to trickle down his chest.

"You're not allowed to give up." Scorpina was gasping with more than simple exertion. "Get up and fight me, you traitorous piece of trash.

Again, Goldar said nothing. He was starting to get a little annoyed with Scorpina. For he had realized he wanted to die. He'd wanted to die ever since he'd seen Rita leave her staff and go into her prison. He knew his reasons… he held on to his reasons like a lifeboat, but they were getting dimmer, and now all he could see was the look of betrayal on his empress's face. His empress, with whom he had shared centuries of imprisonment, to whom he owed his entire existence… and he had destroyed her. He deserved to die.

And still, Scorpina did not strike. She was breathing hard, her sword trembling at his neck. Goldar closed his eyes, hoping it would come soon, knowing there would be no warning when Scorpina decided.

In an instant, the brimstone cleared from the air, and instead Goldar breathed in the vaguely polluted, damp air of Earth.

The pressure on Goldar's throat vanished. He looked up to see Scorpina, who was no longer angry. Instead, she looked tired… and defeated.

"Count yourself lucky," she said, her voice strangely thick. "The connection with the other dimension ran out, and you're back under Lord Zedd's protection now." She backed away and sheathed her sword.

Goldar realized he was on his feet, although he didn't remember getting up. "And I suppose you're now under the protection of Zordon?"

"If he teleports me in the next minute… yes."

Scorpina stared at Goldar, her eyes demanding… begging… an explanation, and Goldar wished with everything he had that he could give it. But that was the past. Even his own death wish was gone. He had taken up a responsibility, and he had to follow it. As long as Scorpina stayed away from Lord Zedd, she was safe. That part of his responsibility was fulfilled. He had others to look after.

Scorpina shook her head as Goldar kept his silence. "I wish I could kill you."

Before he could say anything, she disappeared in a golden shimmer, the lack of flames showing that Zordon was indeed protecting her.

"I wish you could, too," he said softly.

The Command Center had the unmistakable ringing silence of a hastily halted argument. Scorpina felt her skin prickle at repressed anger around her, though in her mood she found the atmosphere fitting.

"No, don't mind me," she said, putting on an airy façade. "I'll just…"
"It's okay," Kimberly said. "The way Jason was shouting, you'll hear us anyway."

Jason glared at her. "All right, I'll lower my voice… but I haven't changed my mind." He turned to Zordon. "I don't like being kept in the dark. If you meant for us to destroy the Zords, we would have."

"The mission would not have been a success if you had changed your mission objectives," Zordon responded, his voice aloof. "We would have lost everything. You needed to win… and you needed to believe you needed to win."

"We can't fight in the dark," Zack added.

"We didn't know what the monster was capable of," continued Jason. "What if the whole thing had exploded in a more populated area? We were right next to the city. And what if we hadn't saved the Dragonzord, leaving Tommy with no Zord whatsoever?"

Scorpina suddenly glanced around. "Where is Tommy, anyway?"

"Lord Zedd attacked him," Trini said, emerging from a room and rejoining the others. "He's going to be all right, though. He's resting."

"I think I'll…" Kimberly started, sliding away.

Trini blocked her. "Give him a bit, Kim. He's not even awake right now."

Jason had acknowledged the news of Tommy's well-being, and then launched back into his argument. "Zordon… I know we're soldiers and all. But… it's like you don't trust us. Like you don't think we can think on our own, or that we'll mess it up if we do. Remember, we've gotten by without you before."

Zordon stared down at Jason, seeming to weigh his words. "Jason… I hear your concerns. It is understandable that you feel…"

"Manipulated?" Billy supplied in a quiet voice.

Zordon's head flexed in a way that the Rangers had come to recognize as a nod. "Perhaps I should share more with you… and I will in future, as you all become ready for more information and power. There are still many things about the universe you do not know, and your most recent discoveries have been admittedly unpleasant." He frowned. "However, when I don't fully disclose every detail of a mission, it is for not only your protection, but for the protection of the Earth. I make no power plays, and I hold myself to my own rules… I will never use you for personal gain."

Jason looked unconvinced, but he didn't look like he wanted to press the issue at the moment. Zack looked ready to pursue the argument, but he took his cue from Jason. Billy and Kimberly merely looked relieved that the fighting had stopped.

Only Trini spoke. "There's one thing I'm worried about. Lord Zedd was able to teleport us away at a moment's notice. Can he do that whenever he wants? Does our security on our houses do us any good anymore?"

This time it was Scorpina who answered. "He can't just teleport you up out of nowhere. Your Power Coins interfere with that, and the shielding Zordon has placed around Earth has made unwilling teleportation very difficult. Hence all the magical devices Rita used. He didn't take you to the Moon Palace, did he?"
"It was some weird dark place," Kimberly supplied.

"Sounds like another dimension," said Scorpina. "Those things have a limited window and a time limit. You can't just pop in and out as you like. He probably made it seem like he just let you go in his own time, but he had to stay in the time limit. The dimension shunts you out otherwise… a little rule that saved Goldar's life today," she added wryly.

"So, in that respect, you are indeed safe from Lord Zedd," Zordon added, clearly pleased that the conversation was in safer territories. "Another thing that will help against Lord Zedd is the Thunder Zords. Alpha should have finished the transfer from the Earth's core into the docking bay by now. These Zords will not only be more powerful than your old Zords, but they will also strengthen your own powers. You will now be able to fight the Putties and the monsters in your morphed form with more ease, and the extra strength will even transfer over to your natural bodies. The fights with Lord Zedd's putties and monsters will still be difficult, but they will be more manageable than today."

"It's certainly a relief that we won't have a repeat of the fight with the Putties today," Billy cut in, "but what about Tommy?"

Zordon's face turned grim again. "I will inform him later, when he's stronger. Unfortunately, I was unable to give him the power upgrade. His connection with the Green Power Coin is still weak. I could not upgrade his Zord, either. Fortunately, you were able to save his Dragonzord, which will nonetheless be able to combine with your new Thunder Zords through the power of Titanus. But… no. He will not be able to fight as effectively, and each time I share my own power with him it gets more and more dangerous." He looked distracted for a moment, and then smiled. "That must be a problem for another time, though, when Tommy is feeling stronger. For now, Alpha has informed me that the Zords are ready. Please meet me in the docking bay to see them."

Even through the grimness, it was with excited anticipation that the Power Rangers jogged to the docking bay.

"Rangers!" Alpha V greeted them as soon as they turned a corner. He was excited, unaware of earlier unpleasantness. "I've had to rearrange things a little bit, so your Zords will be in different places. Kimberly, yours was able to stay in the same place. It's nearly the same size." He indicated the large, bird-like machine right in the entrance.

Kimberly leaned over the edge of the railing on the entrance platform. She could just reach the "beak" of the bird with her fingers. It looked far more animal-like than her previous Pterodactyl Zords, which had looked more like a modified plane than a Pterodactyl. "This thing is gorgeous. It's more red than pink, though. You sure it's not Jason's?"

"No, Kimberly… I know which one is Jason's," Alpha said with a chuckle.

Billy was looking over at the blue Zord. "I can't seem to make out what these Zords represent. They are clearly animals, but they are too obscure to identify."

"And I can't even find mine," Jason added. "I only see four."

"Your confusion is understandable." Zordon's image flickered onto a security screen in the wall, transmitting directly from the Morphing Grid. "Your former Zords were powered by the brute strength and physical nature of the dinosaurs of your own planet. The answer growing more powerful lies not in more strength, but in the power of magic and imagination. Thus, I have pulled from the mystical power of mythology to combat Lord Zedd's brute force. Kimberly, your new Zord is the Firebird, or Phoenix, a mythical creature with powers of regeneration and eternity."
"After today, I like the sound of that," Kimberly said, her voice hushed.

"Billy," Zordon continued, "your Zord, which you could not recognize, is inspired by the Unicorn, a creature of great magical ability noted for its untamed freedom. Draw from it the strength of imagination."

Billy nodded, though he longed to ask why it didn't have a horn.

"Zack, your new Zord is based on the Lion, particularly the lions of Chinese mythology. Your Zord will thus have powerful defensive magic, and the ability to shield and guard others."

Zack grinned. He would miss being able to shoot ice storms, but at least his Zord was still massive. He was used to a big Zord.

"Trini, your Zord draws its power from the divine Griffin. As a combination of lion and eagle, the Griffin is a creature of regal and divine balance, good at both attack and defense."

Trini nodded. She had been as unable as Billy to identify her Zord.

"So, is my Zord in another hangar?" Jason said, craning his neck to see if it was hiding behind any of the other Zords. "Is it still in the Earth's center?"

"Jason… look up."

All five looked up at once and gasped. The long red Zord was suspended from the ceiling and filled up most of the hangar.

"The Red Dragon Thunderzord contains the highest fighting power and will, as was previous, serve as the center for the MegaThunderzord. It will also have power over the elements." Zordon smiled. "With its power, Zedd will no longer be able to open the Earth to swallow your Zords."

Jason gulped at the sight of the massive Zord. "Zordon… If this is the result… I think I'm kind of fine with you manipulating us."

The Power Rangers had rushed out to look at their new toys, leaving Scorpina alone in the echoing deserted chamber.

"Hell of a day," she said under her breath.

She felt a bit of nausea, but it passed as she focused on breathing. She felt otherwise strangely numb, as if she could just close her eyes and the past day would disappear.

On one level, she tried to tell herself that not much had changed. After all, she hadn't seen Rita in centuries up until a few months ago. She hadn't seen Goldar either. Now she might not see them for a few more centuries. Sure, she had a baby on the way, but that was a good thing, she kept telling herself. Nothing had really changed in the grand scheme of things.

But in being around these humans, she realized her time sense had shortened. She was losing sight of the long term, and could only think of how miserable she felt now.

And a human's life was so short. Humans didn't have centuries.

She was only mildly surprised to find herself at the door of the room where Trini had had left
minutes before.

She entered quietly so as not to wake him, but Tommy was sitting up in bed, adjusting a security monitor.

"I saw you coming," he said, indicating the screen.

Scorpina smirked. "Did you play unconscious so Trini and your girlfriend would leave you alone? Not very manly."

Tommy shrugged, wincing as he did. "I knew I didn't have another Zord, and I really didn't want to have to deal with everyone's sympathy. Besides, I tried to attack Lord Zedd in a stupid front assault, and I got Force-lightninged for my trouble. I think I've had enough of 'manly' for today."

Scorpina laughed. "I would have paid to see that. I can't believe you thought you could take him."

"Wasn't thinking," Tommy said in a brittle voice. "He provoked, I swallowed the bait. He really wants to kill me. Said it would take two weeks. He said he wanted to get rid of Rita's greatest failure."

"He's a dick, Tommy."

"He's a dick with a lot of power," Tommy answered. "And I'm not convinced he can't do what he says." He laid back in bed and closed her eyes, wincing again.

Scorpina sat at the edge of the bed. For some reason, she was gratified to be with someone as miserable as she was. "I couldn't kill Goldar. Had him in a dimension with a portal Rita gave me. I had my poison in him and had my sword to his throat, but I still couldn't do it. I let the time run out before I had to make the fatal blow." She closed her eyes. "I'm sorry."

Tommy chuckled, making Scorpina open her eyes in surprise. "Would you get mad if I said I knew you wouldn't be able to kill him?"

Scorpina couldn't help but smile. Even when wildly grieving over his father, Tommy had been unable to kill Rita. Of course he would understand.

"Come with me."

The words were out of her mouth before she had even fully formed them in her mind, but she didn't entirely regret them once they were out.

Tommy looked startled. "What?"

"I've already talked it over with Zordon," she said, her heart beating faster. "He said he can arrange a long-range teleport to a neutral planet of my choosing, and with the new power to the Zords he can protect the beam from being co-opted by Zedd. If he can teleport one, he can teleport two."

"That's crazy, Scorpina," Tommy said, half laughing.

"How is it crazy?" Scorpina insisted, trying not to sound like she was begging. There's a whole universe out there so much bigger than this tiny planet, and you're too smart to stay here. You can join me in my search for Rita, and then who knows?"

Tommy frowned. "Scorpina, I can't go back into Rita's service. I can't… join your side."

"I'm not asking you to turn against your friends, and I'm not asking you to join any war. The
universe is so much bigger than even this war. We could just travel… or something," Scorpina trailed off.

Tommy stayed silent, not meeting Scorpina's eyes.

"Tommy, Zedd will kill you if you stay," Scorpina insisted, surprised to feel her eyes stinging. "Besides, what's holding you to this planet? What do you have to stay for?"

Immediately, Scorpina knew she'd said the wrong thing. Tommy glared in answer. "You know what's… keeping me here. I have friends… a family. I have Kimberly. What would you offer me in return for all that?"

Scorpina stopped breathing as she desperately tried to regain control. "Nothing, apparently," she said. "Forget I asked. I was just offering you a chance for some kind of life off this mudball."

Tommy's anger was fading. "Look… if there's anything you need… especially since you're going to find Rita."

"Can't think of a thing you can offer," Scorpina said, making her voice flippant and brusque. "After all, you're just a pathetic human with a death wish, apparently. What could you offer me?"

Tommy didn't become angry this time. "Nothing, apparently," he repeated. "I… I just want to make sure she's safe."

Something in his voice made Scorpina pause, made her forget her own anger. "Tommy… I do think there's something you can do."

Tommy looked up, his eyes burning. He was sitting up now, but his pale, drained face made Scorpina pause. But if it worked…

"You can try to contact Rita through your connection with her," Scorpina said in a rush. "Maybe she knows where she is. She can tell you her coordinates… or something."

Tommy looked slightly disappointed. "Scorpina, it doesn't work that way. The connection was severed a long time ago, and what remains is like an echo or something… not a real connection."

"That's not what Rita said," Scorpina replied. "She said something about communicating… meeting in a park or something like that."

Tommy's face drained of color even further. "Those… those were real? Those dreams?"

"Rita was pretty sure they weren't dreams," Scorpina said. "And now I have proof. If I know her, she going to try to reach out to any link outside of her prison she has. All you have to do is reach out to her."

"But… but I've never done it like this. Like I said, it's only been dreams."

"I'm no expert," Scorpina said, "but I think you just need to concentrate. Rita will do the rest."

Tommy was still frowning, and even looked a little scared. "I'm… I'm not sure it will work, but I can give it a try."

Scorpina watched as he planted his back against the wall and closed his eyes. His breathing evened out, and he seemed to go into a trance.

She held her breath, a little scared at how easy it had worked. Now all she had to do was wait.
The sky was gray. For the first time, the park was not sparkling under the bright sun. There were sounds... birds and the like... but they were muffled and faraway.

Tommy was alone. It was like he was trapped in an airless room rather than a park. He tried to ignore the feeling of utter loneliness and suffocating silence. Even the birds had stopped...

The bench was still there, as it always had been, but it looked abandoned. Like it had been out in the sun and rain too long. One look told him Rita was not coming there anymore.

With sheer force of will, he looked around. He wanted to leave. This space, which he'd always thought of a place of safety, now seemed ruined. But he might be able to find Rita there. He couldn't just give up.

The park seemed insubstantial, the horizon disappearing into grayness. It made Tommy's eyes hurt to look into the void. He knew this place was not a dream any longer, but what was it? His own mind? Some sort of magical... thing, which connected him and Rita?

Or was he still just imagining this place? Did he just want to see Rita that much, and he was hallucinating some sort of hope that wasn't there?

As if he'd been looking for it the whole time, his eyes focused on a cave. The park had changed, becoming more rocky. And now there was the ocean. It was a beach now, and the cave was surrounded by high tide.

And now Rita was in the cave, staring into his eyes. Had she been there the whole time?

"So you've found me," she said in a quiet voice.

Her usual pink dress was replaced now by a gray robe. Her eyes were sunken and dull.

"Yeah," he answered. "Are... are you...?"

"Are you going to ask me if I'm okay?" Rita broke in, her voice sharp with sarcasm.

Tommy looked down, unable to meet her eyes.

"I'm glad you found me, Tommy." Her voice softened. "Is... is everyone... safe?"

"As far as I know," Tommy answered. "Scorpina is, anyway."

"And you?"

Tommy squared his shoulders, trying to look less tired and scared than he actually was. "Lord Zedd thinks he can destroy me. But then... so did you."

"I guess you showed me."

Tommy shifted. "Scorpina... well, she wants to know if you know where you are."

Rita looked around sardonically. "I'm in a cave on a beach, apparently."

"No, I mean really."
"I know what you mean, Tommy," Rita said. She sighed, closing her eyes. "I have very little awareness of the universe outside of my prison. It took me centuries to gain awareness and control the last time. I do not know when I can gain any awareness of my position, and," she added with a wry smile, "I do not think you will be able to make contact with me again."

"Scorpina is coming to look for you," Tommy said.

"And you?"

Tommy looked away. "I can't." He started to turn away.

"Wait!" Rita was holding out an arm, trying to reach past the water. "You can't leave me."

"I have to."

"You don't understand." Rita voice was sharp with panic. "I'm all alone this time."

Tommy opened his mouth to reply, to try to reassure her, when he realized he was surrounded by water. It had risen around him quickly, and when he opened his mouth, it was filled with brackish water.

"You have to stay with me." Rita's voice had grown louder... booming... filling Tommy's head and drawing him toward the cave.

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"Tommy, are you with us? Tommy!"

Tommy flinched when he opened his eyes, the fluorescent light blinding eyes that were used to the gray of sea and rock. He had been... where? A beach... a cave? Somewhere darker and more confined?

Now he recognized the metallic smell of the Command Center, and he could feel the press of bodies hovering over him.

"I'm fine," he said slowly, feeling like his mouth was filled with cotton. He tried to sit up. His whole body felt oddly weighted.

His eyes focused. He was still in the same room, though how long he'd been in this trance was unknown to him. It could have been hours or merely seconds. His friends surrounded him, concern etched on their faces.

"So where is she?" Scorpina asked eagerly.

"She didn't know," Tommy answered immediately, though his answer was somewhat muffled by a scream of rage.

Kimberly had launched herself to Scorpina, who backed to the wall, looking startled, if not a little scared. Kimberly was still morphed but helmetless, as they all wer since teleporting back from the battle. Her face was twisted with rage. It looked for a second like Kimberly was going to draw a weapon, but instead she pointed a threatening finger at Scorpina.

"How dare you?" Kimberly growled. "You asked him to do that weird trance thing to find someone who has done everything in her power to make his life a living hell, all when he's already weakened. He almost loses himself in the attempt... and... you..."
Scorpina's face set in a hard expression. "I understand your concern..."

"You don't understand a damn thing," Kimberly said. Her eyes narrowed dangerously, but she backed up. "You said you were going to leave?"

Scorpina nodded. She was obviously itching to teach Kimberly a lesson, but she was surrounded by Power Rangers within their own territory. She had no chance.

"Then what's keeping you?" said Kimberly. "The battle's over."

The message was clear. Stay away from Tommy.

Scorpina glared at her, trying to regain her swagger. "Fine," she said frostily. "I hope you two crazy kids will be very happy with each other... at least, until Lord Zedd murders him horribly." She looked up at Tommy, her eyes losing their anger. "Is she alright?"

Tommy thought momentarily to comfort Scorpina, but something in the way Kimberly acted made him realize how much Scorpina had made him risk... all needlessly. He suddenly felt very little sympathy for Scorpina. "No," he said shortly. "None of us are."

Scorpina glared back at him, turned on her heel, and left.

They could hear her in the next room. "Zordon, get me the hell out of here already!"

"You are still alive."

Goldar was angry. For the first time, he looked at Lord Zedd and felt little to no fear. At least, he thought so. But he was more angry than afraid.

"Yes," he growled. "Still alive. I heard you destroyed the Zords."

"And these Rangers already have new ones," Lord Zedd said nonchalantly. "You were not exaggerating about their resourcefulness... though this is mostly Zordon's doing. I look forward to testing their actual capabilities. Now, if you will wait a minute, I have a bit more clean-up to do."

Goldar was startled to hear soft footfalls behind him. He stood aside.

Squatt and Babboo walked in, pushing each other to the front. They looked absolutely terrified.

"Ah... thank you for joining me," Lord Zedd, his voice a mockery of civility.

"You said if we didn't report to you immediately you would roast us alive," said Squatt.

"And then you would feed us to the worthless beasts of the planet below," finished Babboo.

"And I still appreciate your prompt arrival," Lord Zedd said, waving his hand to dismiss their words. "I called you here to discuss your future."

They gulped, clinging to each other while still trying to present a brave front.

"Goldar here has proven his loyalty, and he has some fighting prowess that is useful to me." Lord Zedd sat on his throne and leaned forward, holding his staff menacingly. "Explain to me how you are useful."
"We're... scientists..." Squatt said with a faltering voice.

"I am perfectly aware of your skills," Lord Zedd cut him off, "and have little need of them. However, little need is better than no need at all. In the meantime, the two of you will act as janitors. You are dismissed. And let me warn you..." He pointed his staff threateningly at them. "If I catch you working against me, or working to find that fallen Empress of yours... your deaths will be slow and lingering."

Squatt and Babboo fell over each other running out of the room. Goldar watched them go with mixed feelings. On the one hand, he was glad they seemed safe, for the moment at least. On the other hand... they were fools, but Squatt was a premiere xenobiologist and Babboo was a genius chemist, able to keep up with Rita and Finster when it came to potions. To see them solely reduced to mopping floors...

"Finster, you may approach."

Goldar tensed. After Scorpina, of course, this was the one he was most worried about. Finster had served Rita the longest of all of them. He called her "Queen" because that was how he had known her for years. Rumor had it that he even delivered her, and he had most certainly been one of her tutors growing up. Goldar had failed to learn any more than that, as Rita was not one to talk about her past, and Finster would not gossip about his Queen.

One thing was for sure: Finster was the closest to Rita, and thus he was in the most danger.

Finster shuffled in, looking markedly diminished. "Yes, Lord Zedd." He said in a neutral tone. Only Goldar, who was used to Finster's moods, could detect the anger in his voice.

"You have ceased to track Rita's prison container," Lord Zedd said in even tones. "That is wise."

"I had little choice in the matter," Finster said just as evenly. "You have disabled most of my computer control throughout the castle, and I no longer have access to the long-range scanners."

"You probably have enough control to have noticed Scorpina's departure by long-range teleport."

Goldar quickly stifled a sigh of relief. He'd been half-afraid she would stick around and assist the Power Rangers, if only to gain revenge against Lord Zedd... and himself.

"I surmised that was the source of the power surge," Finster said. "I also noticed that you let her go when you had the capability to intercept her teleportation."

"You give me too much credit," Lord Zedd said. Goldar was surprised he wasn't angrier at the way he was being addressed by someone he surely thought his inferior. Instead, he sounded amused. "I could not have safely accessed sufficient power to stop her teleportation... without vaporizing her, of course." Lord Zedd leaned back in his throne. "Tell me... why should I not kill you immediately. You constitute a security risk, and you are fairly useless to me."

"You cannot afford to kill me, Lord Zedd." Finster didn't even flinch at the very real threat, and Goldar's respect for the little scientist went up dramatically. "This castle and all its inhabitants cannot continue without me. I realize you do not need my skills as a monster-maker... or at least you believe you do not, as your Z-staff can approximate my clay and machine method... though your monsters do tend to be more unstable."

Goldar flinched, sure that Finster was buying himself a quick death. Lord Zedd merely stared at the reckless old man.
"I will point out, though, that I use science for far more than monsters. I maintain the castle, lessening
the magic expenditure by cultivating oxygenating plants that also supply a food source. While you
have admirable control over the computer systems, you will not wish to perform maintenance on the
machinery. Most importantly, though, I am a doctor. I just finished healing Goldar after a harrowing
battle, and I have a feeling that my medical services will be needed by you as well, given your...
condition."

Lord Zedd was quiet for several long, nerve-wracking seconds. Finster did not look away or even
show that he was afraid, though his always-steady hands were trembling slightly.

"You have made a convincing case, though unfortunately there is little you can do for my condition.
Very well... you may remain alive. If you try in the slightest to search for or give aid to your precious
Rita, you will be killed instantly. Do you understand this?"

"I understand it perfectly, Lord Zedd," Finster said, though he again remained infuriatingly calm,
almost defiant.

Lord Zedd again regarded him, and then, without any warning, he raised his staff and sent lightning
coursing through the little scientist.

Finster hit the floor, shrieking, all self-control disappeared. He didn't say a word... didn't beg... but it
looked like he was past all words or all thought.

Goldar heard himself shouting. "Lord Zedd... my lord... please! He's old... he's just a scientist. He
can't bear this."

But Lord Zedd had already halted his assault. "You will learn to rid yourself of insolence, Finster.
Goldar is telling the truth. You cannot withstand much of my displeasure. Now leave my sight... and
dispose of that thing."

Finster pulled himself slowly to his feet, gasping wheezily. Goldar almost started forward to help
him, but that might make things more difficult for the old man. Instead, he handed Finster the object
to which Lord Zedd had referred: Rita's staff/wand, now no longer shining ruby with power.

Finster wrenched the staff from Goldar's grasp, not looking at him. He leaned on the staff heavily as
he left. Goldar knew Finster would preserve the staff in safety. Goldar could only hope the old
scientist would find a secret enough hiding place.

When Finster had finally cleared the door, Goldar rounded on Lord Zedd. "My lord, there was no
need to torture the old man. He's no threat to you."

"Intelligence is more dangerous than power or strength," Lord Zedd said, and Goldar knew that was
a barely-veiled insult.

Goldar knew he was just asking for a taste of lightning himself, but he'd had enough. He'd lost
everything and had come close to dying. And perhaps he still had that death-wish.

"My lord," he said, adopting the title to mitigate his words, "I have tried to serve you today as well as
I have... others before. But I can't fight well if I don't know your plans."

He broke off. Lord Zedd was laughing.

"I will forgive this one slip, as you have served me faithfully today, Goldar. But you cannot possibly
think to question me. You, who aided Rita Repulsa in failure after failure after failure."
Rage again coursed through Goldar, but he held his tongue. He knew that Lord Zedd's caution was a very real threat.

"I'll tell you what," Lord Zedd continued. "I will tell you all of my plans right now. I will do better... I will show you by tapping into the castle's computer system."

Lord Zedd waved his Z-staff. Goldar flinched, but no lightning came forth. Instead, the air was filled with light. Goldar shielded his eyes as they adjusted. Soon, the light began to form itself into words. Not just words, but pictures, numbers and equations, diagrams, lists... There were a few fleeting mentions of words Goldar recognized, but for the most part the jumble was just that... a jumble. And then Goldar realized the visualization was not just in that particular room, but spread as far as he could see in the moon outside, past the balcony.

The light faded, everything disappearing before Goldar could even comprehend the smallest part of it. He was left gaping, feeling as stupid as Lord Zedd obviously thought he was.

"You are dismissed, Goldar," Lord Zedd said in an amused rasp, already turning his back on him to more important matters.

The Power Rangers had returned to their homes. They had no excuse to stay longer, as the monster attack had wrecked the camping trip and caused all the other teens to go back to their own homes. It was a simple enough alibi as to why they were so late.

Tommy sat out on the front porch, watching the lights flicker in the houses around him. They all seemed so safe. He knew, of course, there were problems and secrets behind every door and shutter, but the dim, cool evening and cheerful lights shining through windows gave the sense of safety and rightness. A safety Tommy felt quite distant from at the moment.

Even as he brooded over the evening, Kimberly stuck her head out of her own bedroom window and waved. He waved back.

"Care for some company?" Her voice crackled over his communicator. They were technically not supposed to put the communicators to casual use, but none of them seemed to care about that at the moment.

"I'd welcome it," Tommy answered in a quiet voice, keeping an ear out for Sylvia. She was still watching television.

In a few minutes, Kimberly had disappeared from her bedroom window, appeared at her front door, and crossed the street. Tommy moved over to give her room on the bench.

"Rough day, huh," Kimberly commented.

Tommy laughed and pulled her closer. Her head nestled against his shoulder, and her warmth seemed to drive some of the gloom away.

"I'm sorry I got all violent-possessive earlier," Kimberly said, her voice hesitant.

"You mean when you got all 'get-your-hands-off-my-man'?" Tommy kissed the top of her head. "I kind of liked it... if that isn't weird." He sighed. "And you were right... though, really, I shouldn't have tried that. I didn't realize how much I was risking. I mean, another stunt like that and I'll really prove the whole 'two-weeks' thing wrong."
Tommy could almost feel Kimberly's frown. "Zordon said Zedd was probably bluffing. He was just trying to psych us out, and we've dealt with that before."

"Yeah, well... Zordon didn't know what any of the clues meant, either, except mine. At least that's what he said."

"What did he say to you when we all left?" Kimberly asked. "Unless it's private or something."

Tommy shrugged softly, so as not to dislodge Kimberly. "It's not private... just what we know. I don't have to power to support a new Zord, and thus I also don't get the power upgrade to help me in Putty fights. So I have to be careful, and we have to be careful about power upgrades from Zordon. They're getting more and more dangerous." He smiled. "But he said he was working on a solution. Now that Rita's gone, we can maybe undo a little of her magic without her interfering."

"I didn't even think of that," Kimberly said. She shifted. "What do you think the other clues mean?"

"No idea," was Tommy's tired reply. "Jason's obviously doesn't refer to a city, that much is clear."

He felt Kimberly push closer against him. She wanted to say something, but she couldn't bring herself to.

Tommy shifted and put his arms on her shoulders, pushing her back so he could look in her eyes. "I promise you this, though... I'm not going to betray you. I never will."

Kimberly answered by kissing him passionately. She didn't pull away for a long time.

"I know you won't," Kimberly said breathlessly when they finally pulled apart. "I dunno... maybe that was why I was the way I was around Scorpina, but even when I was telling her to back off I knew it was ridiculous to feel jealous."

Tommy paused for a second, but he knew he had to say it. "Scorpina asked me to go with her." He smiled cautiously. "She wasn't too happy when I told her no."

Kimberly's eyes widened in surprise, but she took it in stride. "Thanks for telling me. You didn't have to."

"I just don't want there to be any secrets between us," Tommy said. "I'm in this all the way. I'm staying... no matter what Zedd threatens."

They didn't say anything for a long time. They were too busy kissing.

Tommy thought about what he'd said... about not keeping secrets from her. He knew he still had one huge secret, one involving Scorpina. But even as he thought of it, he knew he couldn't tell her. Even though it had been before they'd really been going out, even if it had been when he was drunk and ensnared by a curse... He just couldn't tell her. Not yet.

Billy glanced through his lab window, and then looked away. They were still at it, and probably wouldn't let up for a while now. Probably not until his mother or Kimberly's called them apart.

So Billy had time.

He closed the blinds to his lab window, setting the proximity alarm to let him know if anyone approached. He didn't entirely know why he was being so cautious. He just knew he didn't want the
others to start asking uncomfortable questions.

Making sure the door was locked, he turned to his machine, the machine Trini had been too distracted to even notice. It would be ready in days... and Lord Zedd's arrival had driven home to Billy the machine's importance.

"Victor, huh?" Billy said under his breath. Could Lord Zedd know what he was planning? Was he telling him he was going to succeed?

With a smile, Billy set back to work on the machine that would change everything.
Victor

Chapter Summary

Book 5: A Darker Shade of Blue

Part 1 of my rewrite of the episode "Blue Ranger Gone Bad."

This episode is out of order (the season 2 finale, in fact), but I wanted to use the themes here. It's also a fairly loose interpretation of the episode.

Tommy sat in the Youth Center, watching Jason and Zack teach their class. He was also waiting for Kimberly, ignoring his math notes, and trying not to think about his calendar at home... the ones with the dates crossed off.

It had been almost a week. A week, and... nothing. It was Friday now, and so he had nine days to worry. It had taken Rita months to activate the Green Candle. How could Zedd defeat him in another week if he wasn't even going to try? Was he planning something big? Zordon and Alpha said they weren't able to sense anything big happening on the moon, but what if they couldn't sense what Zedd was doing? After all, the Green Candle had taken everyone completely by surprise. Zedd seemed to lack Rita's subtlety, though.

Tommy winced. He'd completely recovered from the lightning blast, or whatever it was, Zedd had hit him with, but he could still remember it. It had been the most physically painful experience of his life, a life that was unusually experienced with physical pain. It had felt as if his blood was boiling in his body, as if his bones were twisting out of his skin. Like his insides were too big for his outside. He knew it had only lasted for a minute or two, but it had felt like hours. Tommy knew Zedd had done it to make him afraid, and Tommy didn't want to admit that it had sort of worked.

And still his mind went back to the calendar at home, each day since Saturday marked through with a black X. Nine more days...

“I'm either impressed with your concentration on Jason and Zack's class... or you're completely checked out.”

Tommy jolted out of his reverie to see Trini in the other chair at his table. She'd even had time to order a drink.

“Sorry about that,” Tommy said. He didn't offer an explanation. Everyone was feeling off ever since Zedd's takeover.

“Kim's stuck with the cheerleaders,” Trini said. “She said she was sorry, but not to wait for her. Sorry.”

Tommy tried to shrug it off. “It's okay. It's Friday, anyway. We'll have all weekend.”

“She also told me to ask you to stop acting like this was your last weekend on Earth.”

Tommy looked up in surprise.
Trini smiled apologetically. “Okay, that wasn't her. That was me, and it was a bit harsh. I just can't stand that everyone is letting... the guy upstairs... get to them.”

Tommy chuckled. “I think we need another code. That sounds like we're either crazy or weirdly religious. And don't tell me you're the only one of us not worried about your own clue.”

“What clue?” Trini said with some agitation. “Nosce te ipsum? Know thyself? I don't even know if that's just general advice or if he's referring to something specific. Two of the clues are weirdly complimentary: 'victor' and 'Cincinnatus,' since we found out he was referring to a virtuous Roman leader and not a city. With Kimberly he's obviously trying to psych her out, and Zack's is just plain incomprehensible. Your clue is the only one that makes any sense.”

“Yeah,” Tommy commented. “Makes me feel a whole lot better.”

Trini sighed. “You know what I mean. I think he's just trying to make us think he knows more than he does, or just make us spend all our time worrying about these clues rather than focus on actually fighting him. I mean, we spent the whole meeting Sunday just discussing clues rather than doing anything productive.”

“You're right,” said Tommy. “I know you're right. We need to be focusing on learning how to deal with this new guy.”

“Or maybe just living our lives,” Trini said, a bit wistfully.

Tommy looked at her again in surprise, but Trini wasn't paying attention to him. She was staring off into space, much like he'd done before. He wondered if the past week had gotten to even the ever-calm, ever-balanced Trini.

“So you're just here to bring a message?” Tommy said, uncomfortably aware that they didn't really hang out all that much. The most significant time they'd spent together, he'd been unconscious and usually near death.

“No.” Trini broke out of her reverie and looked a bit uncomfortable as well. “Um... is Billy around?”

“Billy's in his lab, like usual lately.” Tommy had thought she wanted to talk about Kimberly, but as soon as she mentioned Billy he knew where she was going with this.

“Don't...” She looked like she was trying to pick her words carefully. “Don't you think he's been acting... weird lately?”

“Weirder than usual, you mean?” Tommy said with a slight smile. He'd always known Billy was different from most people he'd ever known, but living in the same house with him had opened up new avenues of daily weirdness. “Well, he's been spending a whole lot of time in his lab.”

“Like, all of his time,” Trini said. “I mean, when's the last time he's watched TV. Or just hung out. Non-brainiac things.”

Tommy's brow furrowed. “Not for a long time, I guess.” He tried to shake it off. “But doesn't he go through these phases?”

“Last time he acted like this was when his dad...” She stopped.

“You can say the 'd' word around me.”

Trini sighed. “I just want to know what he's doing in that lab of his. He usually at least gives me a
hint at all of his projects. If he was just working on the security system, I would be helping him, and he would be spending a lot more time...” She lowered her voice, giving up on any code. “... at the Command Center. But Alpha said he's barely ever there.”

“Come on, Trini.” Tommy could tell that she was getting upset. “So he's spending a lot of time with his gadgets. What's the worst that could happen?” He smiled sheepishly as she looked at him. “Yeah, I can't believe I just said that, either.”

Trini tried to smile. “Okay, probably nothing... but he shouldn't withdraw from everyone. We all need to stick together, now more than ever, and I'm worried that...”

“Billy might go off the deep end?” Tommy frowned. “Gotcha. So what do we do about it?”

Trini gave a quick shake of her head, and Tommy turned around to see Billy walk in. Now that he was looking for something, he realized what Trini was worried about. Billy looked... grimmer. Or... not really that, but he didn't look depressed or anything. He was obviously excited about something—probably something he was working on—but he was definitely keeping that a secret.

“So, did Sylvia make it to Chicago okay?” Tommy said as Billy approached, though he wasn't entirely sure Billy knew they were there.

“Huh? Oh... yes, she did,” Billy answered vaguely. “She called just before I left.”

“Chicago?” Trini asked.

“Teacher's conference,” Tommy said when Billy didn't respond. “Won't be back until Tuesday. So you finally remembered that you were going to help me with the math?”

“Yes,” Billy said, with an annoyed look. “You weren't at home.”

Okay, now Tommy was worried. Billy had never snapped at Tommy, and he had definitely never acted like helping Tommy was a burden or annoyance. “I knocked on the lab door,” Tommy said, keeping his tones as even as possible. “You didn't answer, so I decided not to bother you.”

“Oh,” Billy said. “I didn't hear you. So, do you need any help.”

“No,” Tommy lied. “It's a Friday, anyway. We've got all weekend.”

“Billy, if I ask you what's wrong, are you going to give me any kind of answer?” Trini said.

This time Billy tried to smile, though he didn't pull it off very successfully. “I am perfectly fine. I'm... I'm working on a project, and it's not going very well at the moment.”

“So it's making you get cranky with your friends?”

Billy looked up, a little surprised at Trini's words. “Sorry.”

“It's fine,” Tommy said easily. “You're overworked, and ever since last weekend we've all been on edge. We need something to take our minds off of...”

His eyes went out of focus. All the things he'd just said clicked into place. He couldn't believe he hadn't thought of it long before. He was definitely losing his edge.

“Tommy, what's wrong?” Trini said.

Tommy looked up and grinned. “We're throwing a party tomorrow night.”
He waited, still grinning, for the stunned looks to pass from Trini's and Billy's faces and for them to martial their arguments.

“What do you mean, we're going to throw a party?” Trini said in a lowered voice.

“I mean one of those things where a bunch of people get together for some unsupervised fun, possibly with drinking, loud music... all that stuff that scares the adults out of their wits. I say this has been a complete crapfest of a week, and that the only cure is some rebellious fun.”

“So it will be just us?” Trini asked.

By “just us,” Tommy knew she was referring to themselves and the rest of the Power Rangers. “No offense, but how is that any different from most afternoons? No, we're getting as many of our friends there as possible.” He was painfully aware, though, that the only friends he had were the Power Rangers. At least, those were his only human friends.

Trini crossed her arms. “Billy, what do you think?”

Tommy braced himself for the reasonable arguments, the chief of which involved parents, monster attacks, trouble with the cops...

“I think I'm too busy with my project right now,” Billy started, “and that no one is going to come to a party at my house. I'm the school nerd, remember?”

Huh. Completely unreasonable arguments. That was unexpected, but not unwelcome.

“Listen,” Tommy said before Trini had a chance to respond. “People will come. It's a party, and you're not the social leper you think you are. You have lots of friends who are not us, and who said they won't come to parties? And as for this mysterious project, you already said you're stuck, and wasn't it you who told me that when you can't get something, you should take a little time off from it? Get a fresh perspective?”

Billy was starting to look reluctantly convinced, so Trini looked over Tommy's shoulder. “Jason, Zack, talk him out of this stupid party idea.”

“Party?” Zack said, his face brightening. “Cool. When and where?”

“Our place, tomorrow night... if we can convince Billy,” Tommy said, smirking at Trini's exasperated face.

“Wait,” Jason said sternly, holding a hand up.

Tommy frowned. He'd been expecting the whole responsibility lecture from Billy, but now he knew it was going to come from Jason. He braced himself to argue, knowing that it was really Jason with the make or break vote.

But Jason merely waited as a few of his students walked by, waving as they passed.

“Okay,” he said in a low voice as soon as they were gone, “what do we need to do for the party?”

Tommy grinned. “We need to get the word out. We need snacks... that's pretty easy. And we need beer.”

Tommy fully expected that to shut the whole thing down, but Jason just nodded. “My sister's in town. She can probably fix us up on beer, but we'll need to give her money.”
Trini was shaking her head in disbelief. “Wait... and I can't believe I'm having to say this, but... do you really think this is a smart plan?”

“No,” Tommy said glibly. “I think it's a really, really stupid plan. I think we run the risk of getting into trouble with our parents and even with Zordon. I think that Zedd might even take the opportunity to attack us. I also think we need to completely ignore any consequences and be as irresponsible as we can.” He paused. “We need to something that's not about protecting the Earth. We spend so much time protecting humanity... let's just be human. For once.”

In the back of his mind—the part he was ignoring—Tommy knew there was more going on in his mania for putting together a part than just distracting Billy, or even anything he just said. It had more to do with the calendar in his room, and the grave he hadn't seen for the past month...

“Okay, I'm with you,” Billy said. “I don't think anyone will come, but I'm still with you. Let's be irresponsible.”

Trini rolled her eyes as Jason and Zack were slapping Billy on the back. “Fine, fine... I'm in, too. I dunno... maybe Kim can talk you all out of it.”

“What can I talk you out of?” Kimberly said, still wearing the sweats the cheerleaders practiced in.

“A party,” Tommy said.

Kimberly's eyes widened. “Right! I forgot Mrs. Sylvia was going to be out of town. Tomorrow night, right? That's my parents' date night, and Kevin's going to be staying over with a friend, so there shouldn't be any problems from across the street... Trini, what's wrong?”

Trini was banging her head on the table. She looked up. “Nothing... go on.”

“You can get the cheerleaders to be there, right?” Jason said.

Kimberly rolled her eyes. “Of course.”

“Then that takes care of getting the word out. Where cheerleaders go, everyone else follows,” said Tommy. “Let's say 7:30 tomorrow. Before then, we need to up security, get a sound system, and party-proof Billy's house.”

“Don't tell me that geek is throwing a party.”

They were congregated on the raised juice bar section, and they didn't realize that Bulk and Skull were right below them in the gym area.

Billy seemed to shrink a bit, the comment confirming his worst fears. This, however, had a rather positive effect in the ever-protective Trini.

“Yeah, that's right,” she said. “Not that you're invited.” She turned her back on them. “Come on, guys. If we're going to make this happen, we can't just sit around the Juice Bar.”

The teens filed out, leaved Bulk and Skull at a loss for words.

“Skull, I think our plan is working,” Bulk said in a low voice, pulling him away from anyone who could overhear.

“But you said we needed eavesdrop on people to see if they're Power Rangers,” said Skull. “All we found out about is a party we're not invited to... and that's not new news at all.”
“Oh, come on, think,” Bulk said. “I didn't mean that people would be talking about being Power Rangers or mentioning anything about them. I mean, how stupid could you get? What I meant was that we could find out where the next monster attack would be. That's where the Rangers will be patrolling.”

“Oh... huh?”

Bulk sighed. “You've tracked the past few months' monster attacks. Where have they been?”

“The mall,” Skull ticked off the list on his fingers, “the park... a lot, Power Ranger Day, a wedding, the camping fundraiser...”

“All places where people are gathered,” Bulk finished for him. “It's always been like that. The monsters attack wherever people are, especially social events. So don't you think the Power Rangers would go to those events just in case they got attacked?”

“Oh...” Skull said slowly. “But then, if they were already there, wouldn't the monsters just be attacking them?”

“Same difference,” Bulk said dismissively. “Listen, we've narrowed it down already that the Power Rangers have to be young, probably athletes of some kind, and live in Angel Grove... or at least close to it.”

“Unless they're aliens.”

“Unless they're aliens,” Bulk conceded with some impatience. “But if they're not, would young athletes living in Angel Grove go to parties?”

“Sure,” Skull shrugged. “So, are you saying we gate-crash, Bulky?”

“Why not?” Bulk said. “Those geeks may talk tough, but they wouldn't actually throw us out of a party in front of everyone. They're too goody-goody. That's not their style. Besides, we're way more popular than any of those geeks.”

“If you say so, Bulky,” said Skull. He then started laughing. “Hey, wouldn't it be weird if the Power Rangers were actually throwing the party?”

Bulk smacked Skull on the back of the head. “Come on, those geeks? Besides, the Power Rangers are heroes. They have way better things to do than throw parties. Only reason they would go to them is if they were protecting others.”

“You're right,” said Skull. “I'll get my recording equipment.”

“I wish you could come over,” Tommy said. He untwisted the phone cord so it could stretch to the living room chair. “Come on... Billy's in his lab. It'd just be you and me.”

“No go, Romeo,” Kimberly said, amusement in her voice. “Family game night, remember? And my folks know Mrs. Sylvia is out of town. So...” her voice lowered. “Not this time.”

It was a frequent phrase between them. Not this time. Wrong place. Someone may be watching. We'll get caught.

A week ago, they'd decided they were ready to have sex.

The decision had been long in coming, but now they were seeing how difficult the logistics really
were. They were monitored almost all the time: by Zordon, by Lord Zedd, by parents... They knew Zordon would disapprove, though he tried to keep out of their private lives. They knew their parents were the real problems... at least, Kimberly's parents. Tommy didn't know how Sylvia would deal with it, not really being his mother and all. And, finally... they really, really didn't want the shred of a possibility that their first time be watched by Lord Zedd. The very thought of it made them sick to their stomachs. But the only place with good enough security so that they couldn't possibly be monitored by Zedd was the Command Center, where there were no secrets from Zordon, and they own houses, which was usually populated by parents.

Now that they'd decided to take the plunge, it was getting harder and harder to wait. And being practically alone in the house when Kimberly definitely couldn't come over was driving him mad.

“Besides,” Kimberly said, still with the low voice, “isn't that why you cooked up this whole party idea? To sneak off and have some alone time?”

Tommy grinned. “Am I that obvious?”

“Like the wig on Mr. Kaplan's head,” Kimberly retorted. “But I don’t think anyone else figured it out. Hey... come over here tonight. Don't let me face my family and Clue alone.” She paused. “My mom's making tacos.”

“Tacos?” Tommy said. “Are they, like, made now? I'm starving.”

“They're almost done, Romeo,” Kimberly said, laughing. “If Billy's hungry, bring him. Mom always makes way too much.”

“I doubt he'll come, but I'll ask. I haven’t seen him ever since we got back home.”

“He’s probably just working on the security,” Kimberly said. “See you in a few.”

“Bye.” Tommy got up to hang up the phone, debating whether he should share his worries about Billy with Kimberly. He might... if they got around to it. From his experience with Kimberly’s family, they probably wouldn’t get a second to themselves.

Grabbing his keys, he knocked on the lab door. “Hey, Billy. Kim’s mom made tacos, and she invited us over. You coming?”

There was a pause. “Can’t tonight. I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

Tommy frowned at Billy’s tense voice. “Okay... Just don’t forget to eat.”

“Not hungry,” was Billy’s terse response.

Tommy decided to let it drop. He decided Trini was right: there was something really wrong with Billy. This was just not the right time to confront him. He left Billy to his work, locking the door behind him.

Billy let out a sigh. Finally, he was alone in the house. He could work and know that he wouldn't be interrupted.

He looked at the clock on the wall. The next phase of the experiment had to be timed precisely if he was going to keep Zordon from seeing what he was doing. And he knew just the time when Zordon and Alpha would go into temporary shutdown of the Command Center in order to harvest energy from the Earth's core.
Right on the dot, Billy's sensors picked up the power fluctuation. He let out a breath. He'd been afraid Zordon had done it early today, and he might have missed it.

Fingers flying over his keyboard, he went through the riskiest procedure of all: he hacked into the Morphing Grid.

Getting in was easy, he reflected, as he connected his own computer as quickly as possible. The difficult part would be to camouflage the connection so that Zordon wouldn't be able to detect it once the Command Center came back online, which would be in five more minutes at least. But that's what he'd been practicing for, running simulation after simulation over the past week.

It wasn't as if he wanted to keep this completely secret from Zordon forever, he mused as he started work on the dummy program hiding his own meddling. He just wasn't sure Zordon would initially approve of his experiment. He'd come around, of course, when he saw the success, but right now Billy felt that discretion was the better part of valor.

It was done, and Billy withdrew a full minute before the Command Center came back online. Billy breathed a sigh of relief and leaned back in his chair. It had worked. He'd even beaten his own time.

Still, he kept an ear open for his communicator. If Zordon or Alpha noticed his intrusion, he'd know soon enough.

After that nerve-wracking process, Billy allowed himself a few minutes to rest and breathe.

He'd left his experiment earlier. Partially because there was nothing left to do until he had to hack into the Morphing Grid, and partially to make sure all of his friends would be busy. The party was an annoyance, to say the least, but at least it kept everyone busy, and now Billy's sole responsibility for the party was to strengthen the security around the house. Which he would do in his lab, of course. Luck ran with him: Lord Zedd had not attacked. That would have set Billy's experiment back another week or more.

And, really... wasn't the party, and things like it, the reason Billy was doing this in the first place? Human things... a normal life... it was all what they wanted. What they deserved. Especially Tommy.

No, that was the reason he'd started the experiment in the first place. To try to find a solution for Tommy's powers. He had no clue how to counteract the magic, though he was gaining a pretty good grasp of the hybridized magic and science that made up the Morphing Grid. But he could create a duplicate to house the powers, allowing Tommy to separate his own life force from the harmful connection... and even perhaps separate the coin from him long enough to disconnect both of them from the candle's lingering harmful magic. The double would be safe for the experiment, and Tommy would be safe from any negative outcomes.

From there, cloning had been the next logical step.

Billy smiled as he remembered the moment he'd realized the repercussions of his experiments. Creating doubles... doubles who were made from the Morphing Grid and from the essences of their own Power Coins. The technology he was using was certainly cloning technology, after all, but the problem was that it created bodies and nothing else. It needed magic to help along with the rest.

The machine, now dominating the corner, had transformed from a simple panel to a domed gurney large enough to hold a person.

The plans became more elaborate. As much as it was fun to be a superhero... some of the time, at least... even Zordon knew they couldn't continue like this forever. And as much as they played at
being soldiers, they weren't. They were teenagers. They still had to get through high school, eventually go to college... live their lives. Already, Billy was facing missed opportunities from lack of time and having to be on call for monster attacks. It could only get worse now that Lord Zedd was in charge. He knew the others were feeling it, too. Even when they attempted to live normal lives, like the camping trip last weekend, they were stymied at every turn. Only Tommy and Kimberly were having some sort of healthy relationship, and they were both Power Rangers. It was convenient for them. If only Trini would...

Billy shook his head. Not an option. She'd never think of him that way.

Giving up the powers was no solution. There were few people who could serve as Power Rangers, they didn't have the Sword of Power to transfer powers, and it would just transfer the powers, and problems, to other people. No, there was a better solution. He could clone them, powers and all... and improve on them.

The revelation that the new Zords had strengthened all of them in their civilian forms had completely changed his design for the clones. At first he had wanted to simply clone himself and his friends, to create duplicates who could serve as Power Rangers full time. Or at least share in the work load. Now, though, he realized he wasn't creating humans: he was creating new beings. He could program them any way he wanted. He could program them to be better. Faster, stronger, able to take more damage. Trini's serum had come in handy, for it would strengthen the clones' immune system. They would no longer need the serum to heal, as they would be able to do that on their own. He would not only create replacements... He would create heroes. Ones who would finally be able to defeat Lord Zedd.

He considered Trini, wishing he'd been able to enlist her help. She was definitely better at biology than he, though he had learned quite a bit in the past month. But, just as she had been with the party, she was too scrupulous. She might have set the experiment back months, even years, with her insistence on testing and debate. Tommy didn't have that much time.

And maybe, if this worked, it would be a way to finally free Zordon from his prison.

A bead of sweat ran down Billy's face. His heart started pounding. It had to be tonight. The two weeks were running out. He had to try.

He sat up in his chair. He had to calm down. He had to keep steady hands and cool nerves if he was going to do this correctly.

With only a moment's hesitation, Billy set the security around his lab at its highest setting, even blocking the Command Center. If Zordon or Alpha noticed this, they would simply think he was testing the security system's capabilities.

He quickly put on his safety goggles and gloves, trying to keep his hands from shaking. This was it. He was actually going to do it. He lifted his Power Coin out of its morpher and placed it in the slot on the machine. A sample of his DNA was already in the machine, as well as a few sundry raw materials necessary for flesh replication.

Working quickly, before he could change his mind, he connected the machine to the Morphing Grid. He almost wished he had a giant switch to flip, or something more dramatic. Instead, clammy hands shaking over the keyboard, he keyed in the start sequence.

The machine whirred to life.
Billy watched, breathless with the enormity of what was happening, as the sensors tracked the progress. It was perfect: flesh was forming, mental processes were starting to register, power was starting to show…

And then the power surged. Billy stared at the readouts, dumbfounded at the unexpected power buildup from the Morphing Grid. He reached out to stop the sequence, but blinding light flashed from the machine. Billy threw his hands up to shield his eyes just in time to shield his face from an energy surge that followed the light. The energy surge threw Billy back against the wall. His head hit something hard. He blacked out before he could begin to respond.

Lord Zedd calmly watched from the Moon Palace, his vision able to easily pierce through Billy’s security around his lab. “It is done.”

“Zordon, I’ve picked up a strange power surge in the Morphing Grid.”

Zordon looked from his monitoring of the transfer of the new energy into the Command Center Core. “The Morphing Grid, Alpha? What kind of power surge?”

The little robot didn’t answer for a minute, and then threw his hands in the air. “I don’t know, Zordon. It doesn’t seem related to our recent power transfer, and it stopped as quickly as it started.” Alpha cocked his head. “Perhaps it has something to do with our recent experiments with the Morphing Grid.”

“We are attempting something rather new,” Zordon conceded. “Perhaps a few unexpected readings from the Morphing Grid are to be expected. Please continue to monitor the Morphing Grid for any more abnormalities.”

“Yes, Zordon,” Alpha responded, and the Command Center returned to its quiet vigil, unaware even that they could no longer monitor Billy’s lab, or what was transpiring there.

Everything was… changed.

The creature stood in the middle of the lab that was his… but wasn’t. Out of eyes that no longer needed glasses. With a body that felt bursting with strength. And with a brain that was filled with memories, and yet entirely new.

“I obviously did not compensate for the amount of power that would be harnessed from the Morphing Grid. Perhaps a mistake with one of the formulas.”

The words sounded strange coming from the creature’s mouth. He had a vivid awareness that he was not the one who had formulated or conducted the experiment. He could not have been… but he had memories. Memories that grew fuzzier as the event came closer, and then memories that completely diverged. These memories. These were not Billy’s memories: waking in a coffin of light, standing naked in a cold room, regarding his double on the floor.

“Something went wrong, I suppose.”

Again, the words sounded strange in his mouth. As if another person were talking through him.

He took a step and experienced nausea, but not a physical kind. He was/wasn’t Billy, and he
couldn’t quite negotiate that paradox. He remembered growing up in that house, with his mother and father. He remembered his father’s death, and his own desperate attempts at saving his life. He remembered withdrawing into science and knowledge, relying on his mother but trying desperately to drive everyone else away. He remembered becoming a Power Ranger, gaining knowledge and power so alien to his own experience, and he remembered the full knowledge hitting him that he saved the world, that that was what he did. He remembered friendships... growing closer to the other Rangers until they shared a secret language, a secret bond. He remembered Tommy, being tortured, almost giving up, saving Tommy, becoming brothers...

But those were echoes... shadows... vivid in their own way, but not truly belonging to the creature that had just been born.

He left his mirror self, his memory self, on the floor, only dimly noting that from the bodily signs Billy was obviously suffering from a major blow to the head. The creature did not worry. The new power-up from the new Zords would help heal his double. Instead, the creature padded out of the lab to the rest of the house.

Again, nausea hit him as he regarded... home? Was it his, though? He was Billy... but he wasn’t Billy. Billy was lying on the concrete floor of his garage lab. He... whatever he could call himself... felt almost like a trespasser in the living room, the hallway...

He stopped by the bathroom. He was almost shocked by how much he looked like what he’d expected. Still the wide blue eyes, though with apparently perfect vision. Still the blonde hair, but slightly darker and plastered down. Same face... same body, even down to every hair and mole.

He was shocked, because he felt different. He thought different. He was different.

The creature turned from the mirror quickly, no longer able to bear his own reflection. It reminded him too much of the person he’d left on the floor in the lab. He ducked into the bedroom (his bedroom?) to dress himself.

The clothes felt odd on his skin, and he almost wished he hadn’t put them on. They weren’t his. Not really. His very skin felt like someone else’s.

The door slammed, and the creature instinctively crouched into a fighting stance. Billy. But... no. That was the front door, not the lab door.

The creature stood in the hallway and watched as Tommy turned the corner from the living room. Tommy gave a violent start. Had he noticed something? The creature prepared to defend himself...

“Billy, don’t scare me like that,” Tommy said breathlessly, his hand over his heart, laughing. “I thought you were in the lab.”

The creature paused, considering. Finally, he said. “I finished there.”

“Well, it’s late. You missed out on tacos. You need to eat something before bed. It’s going to be a late night tomorrow night, remember?”

“Party,” the creature said. “Yes. I remember. I remember everything.”

“Hey, don’t rub it in to those of us with Swiss cheese memories,” Tommy joked. “Anyway, no one’s coming until late tomorrow afternoon, and then the rest of the gang is going to bring stuff and help set up.” Tommy yawned hugely. “By the way, never play Clue with Kimberly. She’s cut-throat. Night.”
The creature watched as Tommy walked past him and shut the door to his own bedroom. Food. Tommy had mentioned food, and the creature was hungry.

The eating of food was another new and disturbing experience, like the wearing of clothes, the creature reflected as he ate warmed up food Billy’s mother had set aside for them for that weekend. His mother? No, Billy’s mother. No matter what he was of Billy, he could never be Billy. There could only be one…

“He will destroy me. He'll... he'll kill me.”

It was as if the thought had been in the creature’s head ever since birth, the most logical conclusion in the replicated logical mind of Billy, now aware of the new repercussions of Billy's actions, as well as the new perspective of what cloning could and would actually do. The creature wondered briefly if those reasons and motivations for creating a clone still made sense. Perhaps at one time, to another person, but not now. He knew Billy would feel the same way, would seek to remove his mistake, his aberration. It was the only reasonable course of action.

And a flash of perfectly reasonable anger went through the creature’s brain. He was eating macaroni and cheese, metabolizing the carbohydrates into usable energy and feeling completely wonderful while doing it. His clothes shifted on his body, a body pulsing with power and life and if that… person… lying bleeding on the floor thought he could take that away from him he was dead wrong. Dead wrong…

The creature’s snarl twisted into a wide grin. He left the empty container on the table, now fully focused on the lab door. He opened it slowly, quietly, not wanting undue attention from the person just now falling asleep at the other end of the house. Even the quietest movement sounded like thunderclaps throughout the house, and the creature wondered briefly if that was simply his own heightened perceptions.

Billy had not moved. He might have been sleeping. He might have been dead, if not for the slow breathing that only the creature could hear. He looked innocent and peaceful... but the creature reminded himself of what Billy was capable. Of what Billy had done, and could do.

He lifted a knife from the worktable, usually meant for stripping wires. It was the creature's lab, after all. Or it could be. He could replace Billy... or he could carve out something new for himself. He just knew he wouldn't be allowed to do any of it with his well-meaning creator alive.

The creature regarded the knife. He would make it quick... as painless as possible. He did not hate Billy. That would be akin to hating himself, and he could not do that. He was not out for revenge: merely survival. For he was entirely sure that Billy would kill him. There was no other way out of this.

He held the knife aloft, his own breath matching his creator's. Sweat trickled down his face, and his body went through the same throbings as Billy's had before activating the machine. The knife was there, security was dense enough that no one could intervene, Billy was helpless...

The knife dropped out of the creature's shaking hand. The creature gave one dry sob. He stood there, hand still held as if it were holding a knife. He stared at Billy and didn't move.

It was perhaps little surprise when he felt the teleportation beam envelope him.

Completely unaware of the monumental changes going on just a few streets down, Jason set the balls on the pool table in his basement while Zack chalked a pool cue.
“You sure your folks don't mind you staying over two nights in a row?” Jason said, his voice quiet. He didn't want to tip his parents off to tomorrow night.

Zack shrugged and prepared to break. “Long as I bring home the grades, they don't really give a crap where I am. Convenient most of the time.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Do you think we should be worried that we don't have to try all that hard to lie to our parents?”

Zack finally broke, and the pool balls scattered. None went into a pocket, and Zack scowled. “I dunno. Maybe they've just given up. I mean, ever since the whole evil Green Ranger thing, we've had to disappear at a moment's notice.” Zack smiled grimly as he watched Jason line up a shot. “It's not like it was before.”

Jason was about to shoot, but then stopped, a wave of fatigue overtaking him. “I kind of don't remember what it was like before.”

They played half-heartedly, not really caring about the game. It was just something to do, a little ritual left over from dozens of sleepovers, ever since Jason had moved to town. It was comforting, but it was also rather disturbing: like a remnant from another life.

“Do you mean before the Green Ranger, or before we became Power Rangers?”

Jason looked a little annoyed. “Why do you keep calling him the Green Ranger? Do you still have it in for Tommy?”

Zack's eyes widened. “Dude, of course not. That's the thing: I'm completely fine with Tommy. We're not friends like he is with Billy... or he is with you... but he's cool. I'm talking about... ever since the whole Green Ranger thing, everything's been kinda...” He trailed off.

“Grim?”

“Or something like that,” Zack answered moodily. His expression quickly shifted to a grin. “Still, the party's gonna be cool. I still can't believe we didn't think of it as soon as we knew Billy's mom was gonna be out of town. My parents never travel at the same time, and I still have siblings to deal with.”

“You're surprised that we didn't think of throwing a party at Billy's house?” Jason said pointedly. “As for me, I can't believe Billy's okay with this. You remember when he told on us on that field trip in junior high? To my coach, too.”

“Yeah, well, we were shooting spitwads at that Aztec display,” Zack said, grinning.

Jason grinned at the memory as well. “I don't think I sat right for a week after my dad was through with me.” He shifted uncomfortably, though not for that particular memory. “I sort of let Billy have it after that.”

“We all picked on Billy,” Zack said, also uncomfortable. “Cept for Trini, of course. She was always sticking up for him... until he'd get mad and tell her off.” Zack shook his head at the memory. “Billy's changed, though. Loosened up. Still can't believe he's letting us have that party.”

“We've all changed,” Jason said. He'd enjoyed remembering the past for a bit, but it also made him remember how stupid he used to be. How... entitled. He hadn't had to go through the painful adjustment period when he'd moved to Angel Grove. He'd immediately befriended Zack, which let him in to the athletes, cheerleaders. The cool kids. Wrestling and especially football had clinched
his status, and while he'd never engaged in the bullying Bulk and Skull were so fond of, he'd made sure everyone around knew his status. He wasn't rich (though he wasn't poor), but he was handsome, athletic, and outgoing. Zack had always been the same way, as had Kimberly. Trini had been popular, but never as forcefully so as the others. She was athletic, but she had rarely participated in social events just for their own sake, and she had never ever excluded anyone. Especially Billy.

Yes, ever since joining the Power Rangers, Billy had loosened up. Particularly when it came to things that didn't matter: rules, cutting school, hanging out. He'd done all that because being a Power Ranger with a secret identity made breaking rules and cutting a necessity. Then, he'd just started hanging out with them, because that just seemed natural to do with the people you risked your life with every single day. They all had a bond deeper than usual friendship. Something they didn't often discuss.

Billy wasn't the only one who had changed. They'd all changed. Jason couldn't remember the last time he'd played even a light prank on Billy... something he'd indulged in occasionally during their pre-Ranger days. He looked back on some of those “jokes” and winced.

And he didn't really hang out with the popular crowd anymore. None of them did. Most of the time, none of them could hang out, since they had to be able to drop everything and fight at a moment's notice. Kimberly was still a cheerleader, and still determinedly hung out with some of the old crowd, but it always seemed more of an attempt to keep ties with a normal life rather than any caring about popularity. In fact, the party was going to be the first time in a long time Jason would hang out with some of the people he'd hung with every day... before.

“I figured out my clue.”

Jason's head snapped up out of his reverie. He'd been staring at the pool table for quite a while, and perhaps Zack had only said that suddenly because he was tired of waiting for Jason to make a shot.

“You... you what? Your clue? Amazing fifty, wasn't it?”

“Yeah,” Zack said with a grimace. “And don't ask me what it is right now. I... I wanna think about it a little longer.”

“Oh, come on,” Jason said, his cue hitting nothing as he flubbed his shot. “That's not fair. I told you mine. At least give me a hint.”

“A lotta help yours was,” Zack said grumpily. “Actually, yours was some help. It let me know how much stuff Zedd knew about Earth. Mine is a pop culture reference, by the way.”

Jason opened his mouth, his brain turning feverishly to figure out the clue. Finally he shook his head.

Nah, can't figure it out. You gotta tell me.”

“Later,” Zack said firmly. “You figured out more about yours?”

Jason glowered at Zack, frustrated that Zack wasn't more in the sharing mood. He was genuinely curious, but he wanted to know mostly so he could help his friend with it, as it was obviously weighing on him. And, yet again, Jason couldn't forget that he had a responsibility as the leader of the Power Rangers to support his teammates and foil Zedd's plans.

“Not much more about Cincinnatus,” Jason finally said when he knew Zack wasn't going to continue about his own clue. “He liked farming. And his sons weren't really as good a leader as he was. He mostly just helped out Rome whenever Rome was in trouble.”

Zack frowned. “Zedd can't just be talking about being a good leader. There's got to be something
“Would it help if I knew how you figured it out?” Jason said slyly. “I mean, what'd you do to...”

Zack shook his head, smiling now. “Nuh-uh. You're not getting it out of me that way.”

Jason shook his head and stood back, allowing Zack to circle the pool table. He decided to change the subject. “Talked to my sister. She said she couldn't get around Billy's until almost time for the party, and that we need to have the money by then.”

“Do you feel it's been, like, forever since we've done anything normal?” Zack said, anticipation of the following night shining in his eyes.

Jason shrugged. “It's not like we fight all the time. There was that last month with Rita that she didn't attack at all.”

“Yeah, and that was real normal,” Zack groused. “I mean, even right now I keep expecting my communicator to go off. And we don't know anything about Zedd. We know he's going to take down Zordon, and we know he probably wants to use us to do it, but how? What's he got planned, and why won't he make another move? Is he recharging his magic, like Rita used to have to do? When is he gonna...?”

Zack made a shot, perhaps on accident, and the cue ball went flying off the table and hit the opposite wall hard.

“You boys be careful down there!” Mrs. Scott yelled from the living room.

“Sorry, mom!” Jason yelled back, and then gave a significant look to the sheepish Zack. He picked up the cue ball and put it back on the table, not really caring where he put it.

“I hear you,” Jason said in a low tone, knowing his mother would keep a sharper ear out for them. “I've tried to study up on Zedd, but information about him is sketchy, and Zordon won't let me see half of what we have on him. Honestly, that's making me more nervous than if he just showed me everything. But we can't let that rattle us. We beat him once, we've got new Zords... And, really, he's already attacked us with a monster once. How different can his tactics be from Rita's?”

The first thing the creature noticed was the cold. He'd forgotten to put on socks or shoes, and the icy stone bit into his bare feet. The second thing he noticed was a golden sword pointed directly at this throat.

“Just try something,” the voice of Goldar growled, “and we'll see how far your healing can work when all your limbs are cut off.”

The creature merely stared at Goldar, wondering why the warrior looked so nervous around him when he wasn't even morphed. Could Goldar actually be afraid of him? That was an interesting twist.

“Now, Goldar, you are being rude. Take that sword out of his face. He's too intelligent to attack blindly.”

The creature's field of vision cleared, and he could see around the room. He was standing in an expansive room. The floor was covered in fog, which the creature knew from Tommy was a result of atmospheric generators. The room opened to a wide balcony, which again the creature knew from Tommy was protected by a forcefield. And on a raised dais stood a massive throne, where Lord
Zedd glowered down at him.

Of course, the creature considered, that's Lord Zedd's only expression, thanks to his mask. He had no idea how or why Zedd had teleported him to his own throne room, but he instinctively knew that his intentions were not malicious. For some reason, Lord Zedd seemed less monstrous than he remembered.

“So this is the Moon Palace,” he said, trying to sound like he was not impressed, though he would have given anything to stare out of the balcony into the depths of space. “This is my first time here.”

“It's your first time anywhere,” Lord Zedd pointed out, his voice almost amused.

The creature raised his eyebrows. “That's right, I forgot. I get confused about which memories are his and which are mine. I guess that’s only going to get worse.”

“You would be the only one to know,” Lord Zedd commented. “Sentient cloning is banned through most of the known universe, and its one of those bans that most people follow.”

“Why is that?” the creature said. “It certainly can't be for ethical reasons. People let themselves get turned into monsters but not into doubles?”

“There are several reasons, and once you live a little while longer, you'll learn to broaden your definition of ‘ethical.’” Lord Zedd stepped down from his throne. The creature did not flinch back, partially to not show fear and partially because it would give Goldar a reason to attack. Goldar was watching him intently, obviously ready to spring if the creature showed signs of fleeing or attacking.

“Well, how about that,” the creature commented. He looked down. Apparently Lord Zedd was able to teleport both creature and creator at once. He caught a glimpse of Billy's face underneath the fog. “I don't think Zordon will be at all happy about this.”

“All the more reason to discuss your future,” said Lord Zedd, reaching out and grasping the creature's shoulder with his gauntleted hand. With the same move, Zedd kicked the unconscious Billy out of the way. For some reason, he seemed to be forcing an almost paternal demeanor, and the creature knew Lord Zedd wanted something from him.

“You knew he was creating a clone,” the creature said, motioning with his head to Billy. “You were watching him. How did you get past security?”

“Easily,” Lord Zedd said, contempt dripping from the each syllable. “His security guarded against Rita's telescope frequencies. I use another means of surveillance. Getting ready for your both to teleport was the harder part. I had to break through that security, which is quite effective, and I had to be sure no one was going to raise the alarm too early, including that pesky Green Ranger. I then allowed you to make your decision considering your... creator.”

The creature still felt the knife in his hand. He wondered what would have happened if it had gone the other way, if he had actually brought himself to act.

“I do not blame you for hesitating,” Lord Zedd said graciously. “It is absurdly like suicide. However, there's still the problem that we cannot expect him, or Zordon, or any of those other Rangers to hesitate to kill you. You understand they would not see you as human.”

“I understand perfectly well,” the creature said grimly. He ducked out from Lord Zedd's clutches. “What I don't understand is what you plan to do about it... or, more to the point, what you want from me.”
“You might do well to show Lord Zedd some respect,” Goldar growled, “considering you're completely at his mercy.”

The creature felt himself grow cold, and he glared at Goldar. He was satisfied to see the warrior back up at his look. “You realize I can kill you before you even have time to swing that sword of yours. And you forget you're not talking to a human. I am more than human, and I won't cower before anyone.” He stared at Goldar long enough to get the point across. “Neither will I be rude,” he said in a lighter tone, “especially when Lord Zedd is on the edge of offering me a way to survive.”

“Quite the right attitude to take,” Lord Zedd said, laughing. “Goldar, make yourself useful and take that,” he indicated Billy with a flick of his staff, “to our specially-prepared dungeon for him. Allow Finster to give him medical attention. We don't want him dying just yet.”

Goldar looked like he was going to argue, but he wisely chose to follow orders. He grabbed Billy roughly and slung him over his back. Billy's glasses fell, and then crunched under Goldar's foot as he walked out of the room.

In an instant, Squatt and Babboo popped into the room. They bowed to Lord Zedd, looked curiously at the creature, and swept up the mess. They were gone within a minute.

“They have been improving,” Lord Zedd remarked. He turned his attention back to the creature. “Now, then, Billy, now that we're alone...”

“Please don't call me that, Lord Zedd,” the creature said.

“What...” Lord Zedd said, momentarily wrong-footed.

“That... that name,” the creature said. “I'm not Billy. I may have his memories, his looks, his abilities... but I'm not him. I'm something different.”

“Commendable,” Lord Zedd remarked, his voice actually softening a great deal. “You are adjusting far better than I would have hoped. Tell me, though, what do I call you? I can't very well just call you 'clone' or 'dude,' as is in your teenage vernacular.” His voice sneered momentarily over the words, and the creature took note that Lord Zedd had a sense of humor lurking behind that monstrous form.

The creature considered, appreciating that Lord Zedd was giving him time to collect himself... quite literally.

The creature finally looked up. “I think I want to be called Will.”

Lord Zedd nodded once. “Very well, Will. Now let's discuss how we can benefit each other.”
Chapter Summary

Book 5: A Darker Shade of Blue

Part 2 of my rewrite of the episode "Blue Ranger Gone Bad." The title of this chapter is a reference to two chapters in the middle of the first story of this series, "A Darker Shade of Green." Some themes carry over, if you want to refresh your memory.

The phone rang, and after a few rings Tommy realized it wasn't part of his dream. Somehow, he willed himself to slump to the side, finally reaching the phone extension in his room.

“Hello?” His voice sounded like it was filtered through steel wool.

There was a pause. “I'm sorry, Tommy. I didn't mean to wake you up.”

Trini. What the hell? “It's okay. Is it an emergency?”

“Billy's in his lab, right?”

Tommy glanced over at Billy's room through his open door. It looked decidedly unoccupied. “Yeah. He'll probably be there all night. Why?”

Another pause. “I guess I'm still worried about him,” she said in a small voice. “Did you see how he was acting at the Youth Center? And then later when we were all talking?”

For a moment, Tommy considered there might be something more behind Trini's worry for Billy. He'd never really gotten the romantic vibe between the two. That was more Kimberly's realm. But why else would Trini call at one in the morning?

“Trini, take it from an expert at depression,” Tommy said. “Cause that's what I think Billy's going through. If you push, you're just going to make him angry, or make him feel guilty that he's not feeling better. Sometimes, it better just leave a depressed person alone for a while.”

“You might be an expert at depression, Tommy,” she answered, her voice a little stiff, “but I'm an expert at Billy. He spent elementary school depressed and angry at everyone. I don't want him becoming that person again.” She paused, and when she started talking her voice was softer, more cautious. “When he was in the hospital, if we had left him alone, he would have quit being a Power Ranger.”

Tommy's jaw clenched. Trini may not have meant it as such, but that reminder had guilted him onto her side. “Okay, I get it. Look, why don't you spend the day over here tomorrow getting ready for the party. You can observe and prod Billy to your heart's content that way.”

“Thanks, Tommy,” she said. She sounded a bit more at ease. “I'll hang up now. Sorry I woke you up.”

“No problem,” Tommy mumbled, and hung up. He was asleep again before his head hit the pillow.
Will was surrounded by Putties.

In another life, he reflected, this would have been a cause of worry, especially since he was alone against the Putties. It was getting harder and harder to remember that other life, however. Now, as the Putties surrounded him, dashing in ways that would have caused them to be a blur to Billy, Will could see each movement clearly. Time seemed to slow, and he had all the time in the world.

One dashed for him, and he was ready. He threw the attacking Putty into another one, clearing the way for him to kick an unsuspecting Putty straight in the Z. Another attacked, expecting at least a full second of weakness on Will's part. There was no such weakness, however, and Will dispatched the rest of the Putties in quick, methodical succession.

After a mere two minutes of fighting, Will was alone in the middle of the throne room. He wasn't even breathing heavily.

“Was that satisfactory?” he asked.

“That depends,” Lord Zedd's voice came from the darkness. The room brightened at a flick of his clawed hand. “How much would you say you are affected by the power-draining abilities of my Putties.”

Will frowned, considering. “I only started feeling any effects by the eighth Putty. I suppose the power drain is having some sort of effect on me, though my regenerative properties more than compensate. I realize, though, that I will be putting those abilities to a more practical test in the next few days.”

“We both know you can easily defeat the Power Rangers while they are in their unmorphed forms, yes,” Lord Zedd said, considering Will carefully. “It will prove perhaps more challenging when they are morphed and working as a team, you realize.”

Will furrowed his brow. As Lord Zedd was talking, he'd gotten a sudden, sharp headache. It would have brought Billy to his knees, but Will just acknowledged the pain and stood firm. The pain passed as Lord Zedd stopped talking, and Will could breathe easier.

“We have already deprived them of one important member of their team... my creator,” Will added with a touch of irony. “I must admit, I will not be able to stand in for Billy for very long, and I have little desire to, in fact. We must break up the team further if we're to succeed.”

Lord Zedd was still staring at him curiously. “I would like to know one thing.” he said slowly. “It is certainly one thing to say that you want to stay alive, to prevent your creator or any of the other Rangers from trying to take away your life. It is also understandable that in accepting my help, you are accepting the necessary evil that targeting and eventually defeating the Power Rangers will be part of the bargain.” He paused. “It is quite another thing, though, to actively plan the destruction of those who you remember as friends. I have put no spell on you; I have not coerced you against your will, and I do not plan to. You could have, in fact, accepted my offer to simply send you to another planet, where you could live your life in a far more exciting way than on this speck of a planet.”

“So you're wondering why I chose to stay and help you in your fight against the Power Rangers, especially when I was seemingly unwilling to kill my creator?” Will finished for him.

Lord Zedd indicated he go on.

Will smiled. “I may not be Billy, but I have his memories, his experiences. What I don't have is his inhibitions. I find I just can’t leave this planet with so much unfinished business.”
“Billy's business,” Lord Zedd pointed out.

“Business I inherited, when that idiot gave me his DNA,” Will pressed on. “Billy was weak. He never could take what he wanted. He never let people know how he really felt. He was always afraid of how people would react to him, that people would reject him. So he let everyone walk all over him, and he never called them on it. Even if they apologized, he would just say that everything was fine... all the while pushing all that resentment and other more interesting emotions deep within him. He never let his will be known.”

Lord Zedd laughed. “I believe I have cracked the clever code surrounding your name.”

Will looked at him strangely, a bit put out that his rant was interrupted, but then he smiled. “I suppose it was a little on the nose, but I couldn't resist the pun.” Will turned serious. “Billy created me to be his version of the ideal. Not just physically, though I am nearly unstoppable physically. He wanted to overcome all of his own shortcomings through me. I am Billy's will... all the things Billy couldn't or never would allow himself to do or be.”

“It doesn't seem to be working out very well for Billy, though,” Lord Zedd commented.

“There's an old human saying,” Will remarked wryly, “though I suppose the idea is not exclusive to Earth. Be careful what you wish for; you just might get it.”

Lord Zedd glanced at his own Z-staff, though the motion was so quick Will wondered if he had imagined it. “Yes, that idea does not only apply to Earth.” Again, an unexplained twitch, as Lord Zedd shook his head. “I gather, then, that you have certain plans for the Rangers?”

“I have,” Will said, “if you'll allow me to operate.”

“I will monitor your progress,” said Lord Zedd. “I would suggest, though, that if you wish to pass as your creator you should not use your powers too dramatically. We know that Zordon has safeguards against his signal being scrambled, so we can't get rid of him. You must work under his radar. Don't give him or anyone else cause to suspect you until it is time to strike.”

“That won't be a problem,” said Will. “Just keep Billy up here, and once I'm done with the Rangers, they'll be too broken to do anything against you.”

Billy woke up shivering, lying on what felt like cold stone. It certainly didn't feel like the floor of his lab.

He opened his eyes slowly. His brain sluggishly assimilated all the new information, and none of the new information was pleasant.

He heard a whirring next to his head, and his instincts kicked in. He pushed up with his hands and let his body whiplash around to make his feet connect with the source of the whirring. It was a move Tommy had taught him, and Billy did it so unexpectedly that it would have worked... if he and the source of the whirring were not separated by a force field.

Billy yelled at the sudden shock that shot through his leg. Darkness again passed over his vision, but he made himself recover. He would not pass out again, not when he needed to stay as alert as possible.

“Now, now,” a kindly voice admonished. “You will undo all of my medical attentions at that rate. I suggest you relax, for there is no escape from this cell.”
Billy forced himself to breathe normally. He was still on the cold floor, and the tingles in his leg were fading to a dull ache. He realized his vision was not clearing up because his glasses were gone. All he could see was a white blur moving across a dark blurry background.

“What have you done with my glasses?” All in all, this was probably not the most important question, but Billy knew that his lack of sight would be the most daunting obstacle to his escape.

The voice sighed. “They were unfortunately broken in an accident. I wear glasses myself, so I would have never taken them from you. I cannot remedy this situation, as Lord Zedd would most assuredly say that lack of glasses would make you more helpless and less apt to escape.”

Lord Zedd... Billy's brain raced through the list of Rita's minions still left in Lord Zedd's employ. “Am I speaking to Finster, then?”

“At your service, such as it is,” Finster said. “I must say, I am quite delighted at making your acquaintance. I have often had to contend with your inventions. I was rather impressed with the frequency disruptor earlier this week. Quite like building a communications array out of string and a pineapple.”

Billy wasn't entirely sure if he was being complimented or insulted. He'd certainly had to contend with plenty of Finster's inventions over the past year. That didn't mean, though, that he was “delighted” at meeting the other scientist.

“I appreciate the kind words,” Billy said, “but they are perhaps less effective seeing as how I'm a prisoner.”

“Yes...” Finster said slowly. “Quite unfortunate. And I believe the unpleasantness will only continue.” He sighed. “I have healed you of any adverse effects your recent lab explosion had on your health, which included a concussion as well as a fair bit of radiation poisoning. In the meantime...”

“He's to watch.”

Billy did a double-take at the new, yet not new, voice. He still couldn't see, though he didn't need to. He knew it was his clone. The clone he had created.

“You're... you're actually alive,” Billy said, his voice barely above a whisper.

The clone laughed sharply. “I think you mean to say, 'He's alive! ALIVE!!'”

Billy couldn't see how well the clone had turned out: how much the clone's appearance matched his own. The voice sounded the same... but not. It was harder. More confident, and yet more cynical. It was odd enough to hear his own voice outside of his own head, like hearing a recording. But then it was further twisted from how he sounded. It was like hearing the mean, selfish voice inside himself that he always kept in check. Only it wasn't in his own head, where he could silence and hide it. It was moving around, speaking to him.

The clone was continuing to laugh. “I realize this must be disorienting for you. It was odd enough for me coming to life with you unconscious on the floor. I can't exactly afford to sympathize with you, though. Too much to do. Miles to go, huh?”

Billy tried to grasp for some sort of sanity. He got to his feet shakily. “I'm... I'm sorry I wasn't there. But, why did you go straight to Lord Zedd?”

Another laugh. “He recruited me. In time to save you from being killed by me, so I would think you
would be grateful."

Billy's mind reeled at the implications, but he knew at this point his only escape was to convince his clone to help him. He and the clone could outfight and out-think anyone in the Moon Palace, if it came to it. "I don't know what Zedd told you," Billy said, "but you have to know he only wants to use you. Whatever he's offered, it's all lies." He gulped. "Our only hope is to get out of here and get to the Command Center."

There was silence, in which Billy could only hear his own harsh breathing. "You're pathetic, you know that?" was the clone's quiet reply. "You're desperate to escape; I know that's why you're saying all this. And I have no illusions about Lord Zedd. I know he only wants to use me for his own ends. But... I also have no illusions about you or Zordon. You may want to study me for a while, but eventually you will want to destroy me. Even if you haven't thought of it now, you will."

"That's ridiculous. How can you know that?"

"Because I've already thought of it," said the clone. "And I'm you, remember? At least, I'm the person you always wanted to be. I've decided to go by Will, by the way."

Billy considered for a second. "Clever."

"I thought so," Will said. "Finster, Lord Zedd wants you to set up a screen in here and tie it into your Earth surveillance."

"Certainly nice to be needed," Finster commented drily. "I will attend to it."

There was a faint shuffling, and Billy knew he was now alone with his clone.

"What do you intend to do?"

"What do you think?" Will said in an amused voice. "Think, Billy. What are the things you've always wanted to do, but never allowed yourself. To feel, but never admitted to yourself."

"If you hurt any of my friends," Billy said tightly.

"Interesting that you would go right there," Will cut him off. There was a grin in his voice. "Just sit back and enjoy the show, Billy. If you ask nicely, I might even let you participate. After all, tonight's a party. There's going to be games for everyone."

Billy's temper flared. "When I get out of here, and make no mistake that I will, I'll..."

He couldn't finish, and Will gave one more harsh laugh. "See? I knew it wouldn't take long. But know this: I'm not just some science experiment you can scrape into the trash or disassemble. I'll fight you and your friends with everything I have, and anyone who tries to destroy me." There was a scrape down the hallway, and the blurry clone shifted to turn away. "See you around... Victor."

Billy dropped to his knees as the clone teleported away. He got it. Oh, God, he got it. His clone, clear of mind and without any delusions, had gotten it before him.

"Frankenstein," he whispered to the dark room, and he realized he'd always known, but he'd forced the idea away from his conscious thoughts, so sure he was that he was doing right.

The scraping got louder, and then finally stopped, but Billy paid no attention to it. He slumped against the wall in his cell and closed his eyes, wishing he could undo it all, wishing like hell he could take back the last few hours...
After several minutes of mumbling over mysterious activity, the voice of Finster pronounced, “There,” with some measure of satisfaction.

The room lit up, the light flashing. Billy could feel it against his eyelids, but he did not want to open them.

“How, Billy,” Finster said in a sharp tone. “Lord Zedd wishes you to watch the screen, and you cannot do that with your eyes closed.”

“I want nothing to do with what Lord Zedd wants,” Billy said snidely. “If he wants to force me, let him come down here himself.”

“You don’t entirely know what you’re asking for,” Finster said anxiously. “All right, I will try this approach. If you have any hope of escape, you will want to gather as much information as possible to assist you in those attempts, and you will especially want to gather information about your clone in order to combat him.”

“I thought you said there was no escape,” Billy commented ruefully. “Besides, how can I gather information? How can I do anything about the clone if I can’t even see?”

It happened before had time to react. The gentle hum of the force field flickered off. Billy felt two tiny pinpoints of intense pain hit the sides of his eyes. He yelled, unable to even move from the pain as the force field's hum began again.

“You've just missed your first opportunity of escape,” Finster pointed out. “Please try to relax. The pain will end soon, and you will be able to open your eyes again,” he added in a kinder voice. “I'm only doing this because I can't stand to see anyone give up so easily, particularly one with such a brilliant mind as yours.”

Billy was about to growl an angry retort, when he opened his watering eyes. The room was suddenly in sharp focus, with only a light shimmer denoting where the force field was. Beyond the shimmer, an old, white, canine-like alien stood, regarding him rather sternly.

“Did... did you just fix my eyesight?” Billy said.

“A simple procedure,” Finster acknowledged. “The remedy will not work on my own eyesight, as I am allergic to it, but a general medical scan from when I was treating you showed that you were a candidate for the corrective chemical.”

“Thanks,” was all Billy could say.

Finster nodded. “You will perhaps not thank me later,” he added sadly, and then he turned on the screen.

It was mid-morning, and Tommy was still asleep. The gas was finally dissipating, ensuring that Tommy would sleep through all that needed to be done.

Will marveled at his own regenerative capabilities. He had prepared to bar himself in the lab until the gas had done its job, but on a whim he’d decided to breathe it in. He'd felt a wave of dizziness, but that passed quickly as his regeneration compensated. He wondered if he even needed to sleep, or if he had bypassed even that human necessity.

He took one last look at his preparations before he went to gather Tommy. The trap was set.
Will stood over Tommy's bed, considering him. At this moment, Tommy looked far from the danger he had once posed. Will, through his borrowed memories, could still see him as a cold-hearted instrument of evil, could still feel the blows that, in his new life, he could shake off in seconds.

A sharp pain again lanced through his temples. He wondered if it was something he should worry about. Surely, though, it was simply a side effect of being recently born.

The pain left, and Will grinned, suddenly eager to start. He picked up Tommy's dead weight as if it were nothing and carried him to the place he'd prepared.

The archway between the kitchen and the living room, where the chin-up bar was still installed.

By the time Will had finished connecting Tommy's arms to the added restraints, he heard a doorbell ring.

He grinned, wondering who had next fallen into his trap.

Trini wondered if she was perhaps being psychotic. It was ten in the morning, after all. It was not early for her, but it was for them. With the late night Billy had pulled and Tommy's notorious oversleeping, there was no way someone would be there to open the door.

But still, that innate trouble sensor Trini had learned to trust was going off like mad. The last time she was this worried about Billy like this, he'd been lying on the floor with a chest full of broken ribs. It still haunted her to think what would have happened if she hadn't gone to check on him on a whim.

She rang the doorbell again. If no one answered in the next minute, she was just going to go home. Or maybe get breakfast somewhere in town, so her parents didn't start thinking she was as psychotic as she felt.

Trini heard footsteps, and she prepared to face a groggy Billy or a disgruntled Tommy.

Instead, a fresh, grinning Billy swung open the door, startling Trini quite as much as if he'd been mortally injured.

“Trini!” he said cheerfully. “This is certainly surprising. Your visits are usually more advanced in the day.”

He hadn't invited her in yet, and in fact he seemed to be blocking the view into the house. Trini wondered what Billy couldn't have possibly been hiding from her. “Tommy said I should come over to help with the party. I know I'm a little early,” she said uncomfortably, “but...”

Billy smiled reassuringly. “You've been worried about me.”

Trini was startled out of trying to look past Billy's shoulders. This was the old Billy: the one who pointed out exactly what she was meaning to say. “Was I that obvious?”

“Your hovering rate has gone up exponentially in the past few weeks.” He smiled again. “Though you know I never mind.”

Trini looked at him sharply. “You're in a good mood this morning. Wake up on the right side of the bed, for once?”

Billy chuckled. “I suppose one could say that. Trini...” His eyes went wide with the old manic energy. But this time, it was the type Trini associated with brilliance and creation, rather than self-
destruction depressive obsession. “I'm really glad you're here, actually. Not about the party. I need help with a project that I think is going to revolutionize our fight against Zedd. Are you interested?”

“I'm on the edge of my seat,” Trini said. As usual, the cheerful, manic energy pulled her right in. “Want to go to the lab?” She indicated the garage entrance.

Billy looked down at his feet. “Let's go through the house. I neglected to wear shoes.” He moved to the side. “Come on in.”

Trini walked into the house and started to turn around to say something to Billy... when she stopped dead. It took her nearly a minute to process what she was seeing, during which time she heard a door slam and felt a vise-like grip snake around her wrist.

“What do you think?” Billy's voice was low and amused in her ear. “Dissection? See what makes him tick?”

Trini wrenched away and lashed out, only to feel her wrist twist painfully. She couldn't break his grip, but she didn't need to. She could fight just fine with the rest of her body.

She slammed the heel of her hand right at Billy's nose, aiming to blind him. She heard a yell, but the grip didn't give way. She sank her fist into his stomach, ready to hit him as often and as hard as she could to bring him down. She followed up with a knee to the groin, and then another punch to the stomach. Once he was down, she could teleport him up to the Command Center once she could touch her communicator, get him behind a force field, and teleport back down to free Tommy. Then they could call the gang all figure out how to break Billy out of the latest evil spell.

After the tenth punch, she noticed something completely terrifying. Billy wasn't going down. He was... laughing. And her communicator was gone.

She stopped punching him and looked up into his eyes fearfully. She barely recognized her friend as he looked down on her with cold amusement.

“Oh, don't stop now,” he said with an uncharacteristic leer. “I know how badly you want to touch me.”

Trini almost screamed out loud, the words and expression so wrong coming from her best friend. “This is more than a spell, isn't it?” she said, the fear choking her voice into a whisper.

“Much more,” Billy whispered back, though his whisper sounded far more intimate. “I honestly can’t tell you how glad I am it was you who walked through that door. I could have fun with anyone, but you're special. So beautiful... the only one who can even hope to come close to my intelligence... You were the only one who ever understood me.”

He reached out to brush her hair out of her face with his free hand, and she jerked away violently. He retaliated by twisting her arm, which drove her to her knees.

“I'm going to put you to sleep for now,” Billy explained patiently. “But don't worry. We'll have plenty of time for fun later. I just have some setting up I still have to do.”

Trini opened her mouth to scream—Kimberly was just next door, if she could just get her to hear—but before she could make a sound, she felt a sharp sting against her skin, and all went black.

Will pulled the broken fake glasses off his face. A shard of plastic was still embedded in his cheek. He carefully pulled it out and felt the skin repair itself.
The suddenness of Trini's attack had taken him momentarily by surprise. He'd expected her to go into shock, or try to reason with him and figure out why he'd gone all evil. He hadn't expected the "punch now, ask questions later" approach. He'd let her get in a few blows after he'd recovered, only to prove to her that there was nothing she could do against him.

Will laid her on the couch, brushing his hands through her hair as he did so. He had plenty to set up now, and it would be inconvenient if he had more early morning visitors.

First, he locked the door and activated his own additions to the alarm system. Usually, even with the alarm system at full, any Power Ranger or Alpha would be able to enter the house and lab. Now it was shut tight.

He'd also used the Morphing Grid to feed the Command Center false information. There was as yet no indication that Zordon knew anything strange was going on, and Will wanted to keep it that way as long as possible.

It was all rather easy, Will reflected as he gently picked Trini up and carried her down the hallway. Everything was so clear now. Things that would have taken time to test and double-check now took no time. It was almost like the whole world was moving in slow motion, and he was the only one moving or thinking at normal speed. He knew he had to be cautious. He could easily become too confident. But, deep down, he knew there was no one who could pose a challenge to him.

He checked himself. There were three who could be dangerous to him. One was behind a force field at the Moon Palace, one was hanging in his living room, and one was now being fastened to electrified restraints connected to his bed.

Yes, he had to worry about Jason, Zack, and Kimberly, Will reflected as he left Trini sleeping on his bed. They had all proven more than once to be strong, smart, and resourceful. But they did not pose the same danger as the others.

As he was leaving, Will stopped to regard Tommy. He would awaken while Will was gone. He would be frightened and confused, but he would immediately grasp the poetic justice of the situation. He would be unable to escape his bonds and would wait patiently for either rescue or for Will to return. Perhaps even Trini would wake up, and they would theorize about what was happening, logically assuming that their friend Billy was being controlled by Lord Zedd. Then, once they had sufficiently frightened themselves, Will would return, to take what was his.

In the meantime, he thought, turning his back on Tommy, he had three other Rangers to work with. It promised to be a productive day.

It wasn't yet noon, and the Youth Center was crowded with Kimberly's aerobics class. Kimberly was now in the corner, stretching. She'd left most of the girls to finish changing in the locker room for a minute of peace before having to teach.

From the bar, she saw Jason and Zack motioning to her. In trying not to attract attention, they were gathering even more attention than normal. Though, Kim noted, her younger girls would have noticed them anyway. She'd already heard plenty of locker room conversations about her friends to last her a lifetime.

“Hey, guys,” she said in a low voice, knowing her gathering students were staring. “I didn't think you two were interested in aerobics.”

“Not here for the class,” Jason said. “Just wondered what the homefront situation was going to be.
We have equipment to move in to Billy's house, after all.”

Kimberly crossed her arms. “No go until after 6:00. Frank's planning yard work most of the day, and he'll get pretty suspicious if you move too much stuff in. He knows Billy's mom's gone for the weekend, after all.”

“Right. Figures,” Zack said. “Looks like we'll need to steer clear of Billy's house today. Don't want to put up any red flags. Hey...” he said slowly, “we couldn't just... you know... teleport the stuff in there...”

Jason shot him a look. “I'm gonna pretend I didn't hear that.”


Kimberly looked over her shoulder, realizing the buzzing sound from her students was growing even louder. “Speaking of responsibility, I really need to get started. Keep me updated?”

“Sure thing,” Jason said. “We're going to check in at the Command Center anyway.”

Kimberly nodded. They'd been doing that daily ever since their encounter with Lord Zedd. “Well, if I don't see you before then?”

Zack hadn't been paying attention. He'd been staring at Angela, his on-again off-again relationship... more off lately than on. More pursuit than relationship, in fact.

Kimberly followed his eyes. “She said she'd going to be there tonight. You can stalk her then.”

Zack shook out of his gaze. “Really? I mean... it doesn't really matter...”

Jason rolled his eyes. “Let's just get out of here.”

Kimberly laughed as Jason half-drug Zack out of the Youth Center. Inwardly, though, she was about to jump out of her skin. She was really glad there was something that would distract her, like a class, and she hoped the day would give her even more distractions.

*I'm having sex tonight. With Tommy. We're really going to do it.*

The thought came unbidden, suddenly. It had been doing that recently, catching her off-guard when she was doing other things. She flushed as she started the class, but her brain wasn't really in it. She was thinking about Tommy's smile after they'd kissed goodnight the night before, her parents' proximity making anything further impossible.

She hadn't even told Trini yet. Trini seemed distracted lately... something about Billy. Trini had a full plate right now, and she knew Trini would tell Kimberly she was going too fast.

The thing was, she knew she was going too fast. She knew if it wasn't for Zedd and his threats, they wouldn't be in such a hurry to have sex.

Yeah... she knew that. That didn't mean it was going to change her mind, and it didn't mean she was any less excited and pleasantly terrified for that night.

When Jason and Zack materialized, they had expected to be the only ones there.

“Hey, Billy,” Zack said. “You lose your glasses? And what are you doing up here? I thought you were supposed to be working on the security for the...”
Jason kicked him as subtly as he could.

Billy raised his eyebrows and smiled. “The extra security is all taken care of. I just came up here to take a few readings of Lord Zedd’s surveillance transmissions, and I believe the new measures should compensate for any possible security breaches.” He paused. “And I’ve decided to try out contacts.

“And not a moment too soon, Rangers,” Alpha chimed in. “About the security... not the contacts. There was a slight power surge at Billy’s house last night, and we believe it to be the work of Lord Zedd, that he was attempting to break through the security.”

Jason furrowed his brow. That was way more disturbing news than he'd bargained for. He'd just been grateful that Billy had covered for Zack's almost slip about the party, but this was serious. “We gotta be sure, Billy. We know that Zedd is gunning for Tommy especially, and I really don't want to have to keep him at the Command Center.” He smiled. “And we all know he doesn't want that either.”

“I already said I was sure about the security,” Billy said, a bit of frost in his voice.

Jason looked at him in surprise, but Billy had already turned back to a monitor. “Sorry,” he said. “Not criticizing... just worrying.”

He looked at Zack, who just shrugged and mouthed “working too much.”

Jason, more to do something other than piss off Billy, looked at Zordon’s vacant tube. “Zordon off again, Alpha?”

“Yes, Jason,” Alpha said. “He's working on a special project. I can call him the minute he's needed.”

Jason again shared a look with Zack. The same answer, word for word, Alpha had given every time Zordon was gone. It was getting more and more frequent. Jason didn't like Zordon not being there when they were facing a largely unknown enemy, but he didn't know how to talk to Zordon about that. Not after the way he'd shouted at Zordon just a week before.

“In the meantime,” Zack said, “Lord Zedd is planning something. We know that from the power surge.”

“Right,” Jason said, grateful that Zack had provided him with something to discuss that wasn't Zordon's or Billy’s odd behavior. “Billy, can you figure out what that power surge was?”

“Just now receiving the scan details,” Billy said.

Jason again frowned. There was again that almost imperceptible hint of impatience, though he supposed that could be because of stress. There was certainly enough of that to go around.

“The power surge is most probably an attempted teleportation beam,” Billy said, squinting at a readout. “There are a few variations, but the frequencies match.”

“He's just planning to teleport Tommy out of his bed?” Jason said. “Not very inventive. I thought Lord Zedd would come up with something else. Something...”

“Not stupid and easily foiled?” Zack provided.

“For a start,” said Jason.
Billy set down the read-out. “This may perhaps be a mere testing of our security. Though, you're right. Lord Zedd isn't able to simply teleport us up, and he shouldn't believe himself capable of such. He must be attempting something entirely different.”

Jason rubbed his head. He really didn't want this stress today, but the unpredictable Lord Zedd was a constant source of worry. He hadn't realized how complacent he had gotten with Rita's usual patterns. Even when she tried something new, they'd all gotten so used to her capabilities. With Zedd, they had no idea what he would do, or what lines he was willing to cross.

“Okay, Zack and I were going to train,” Jason said, “but we'll be on hand just in case Zedd starts something up. Alpha, would you mind giving me a call if Zordon shows up this afternoon? I want to know what he thinks about these power surges.”

“Sure thing, Jason,” Alpha said.

“In the meantime, if you're not too busy, could you keep investigating?” Jason turned to Billy.

Billy shrugged. “I have a few things I need to do at the house today, but I can run a few tests. Do you have anything specific in mind?”

Jason clapped Billy on the back, and again noticed Billy tense, as if for an attack. “I'm sure you'll know it if you see it. See ya.”

As Jason and Zack walked down the hallway to their training room, Zack waited until they were out of earshot. “Okay, so both Billy and Alpha are being kind of weird.”

“You noticed, too,” Jason said. “I guess we're all a little crazy right now. I think Alpha's being weird because Zordon is working on something he doesn't want us to know about. Maybe I can get him to drop a few clues this afternoon.” Jason frowned. “I don't know about Billy, though. I haven't seen him that uptight for a long time.”

Zack grinned as they began their warm-up. “He just needs to loosen up. What do you think tonight's all about?”

“I thought it was all about you trying to make time with Angela?” Jason said with a smirk.


“I'm glad you've come to terms with that,” Jason said, enjoying the good-natured trash talk. He'd worry about everything else later.

They were gone. Will brushed at his shoulder and watched their signals on the security monitor.

He didn't have a lot of time. It was the brightest bit of luck he could have hoped for when he found Zordon had gone on one of his mysterious disappearances. Jason and Zack had been a momentary hindrance, but they were now sufficiently distracted.

As soon as they shut themselves in the training room, Will made his move. He calmly walked over to Alpha, who was running some program, and jammed a disk down his back.

Alpha froze. Will watched the outward manifestations of the new program. It was similar to the virus program Finster had provided Tommy when he attacked the Command Center, but it was more sophisticated. It allowed him a window of access to Alpha's programming, and then would erase Alpha's memory and all evidence of tampering. Alpha head trembled as the new program fought for
dominance, and then the robot was still.

“Right,” Will said breezily. “Alpha, I need remote shut-down capability of the Command Center. I also need you to enact and authorize the false data I will input into security. Understood?”

“Yes, Billy,” Alpha said blankly, almost sleepily.

Will cut his eyes over at the robot, even as he moved to a work station. “Don't call me Billy,” he growled.

But Alpha didn't respond. He was already working fast at the computer, and Will found if he concentrated he could keep up easily. If luck kept with him, he could have this done with no other interruptions.

Tommy hurt.

It wasn't like he was waking up. It was like a slow fog was lifting, like he'd been conscious for hours but unaware of it, unaware of anything.

With great effort, he opened his eyes, the only part of his body he could move. The... living room?

The yell left his throat before he could stop it. He'd realized his situation before he could consciously process it, and it terrified him. Terrified him in such a primal way that he did have any defenses against the fear.

He tried to jerk out of his bonds, but what felt like an electric jolt shot through his arms when he pulled at the metal encircling his wrists. The electricity brought feeling back into his arms. They'd been asleep from his position cutting of his circulation. Now they felt like they were one fire as they tried to hold up his weight.

“Tommy?”

He realized he was still crying out, gasping in pain and fear. He hadn't realized it before.

“Tommy, calm down.” The voice grew urgent. “Breathe, or you're going to hurt yourself.”

Tommy struggled to find his footing. His legs were better than his arms, and once he found purchase on the floor he could take some of the pressure from his burning wrists and shoulders. He had to move carefully: he could sense that any resistance against his bonds would cause the electrical defenses to activate, and he didn't want to lose consciousness again.

He at first thought the voice was his imagination, but the voice called out again. He moistened his mouth as much as he could so he could talk. His mouth felt like sandpaper and his throat ached. “Who's there?” His voice didn't sound like his own, but at least he was no longer panicking.

“It's Trini. Tommy, are you okay? Are you hurt?”

Tommy didn't wonder that he didn't recognize her before. Her voice was hardly her own. It was rough, though from pain, emotion, or thirst. “I... I guess I'm okay,” he said, trying to convince himself of that. “Soon as I can get circulation back in my arms.”

“Good,” she said, though she sounded far from relieved. “I thought, when I lost consciousness, that he'd...”

“So you saw him.” Tommy said. He was finding it difficult to calm himself. “It's... it's Billy.”
He knew the answer before Trini could even voice it. Only Billy would hang him here, like this, and leave him to discover his situation. He knew exactly what message Billy was trying to send. This was revenge—straight up payback. He was finally going to pay Tommy back for what he'd done to him on that Saturday afternoon all those months ago.

“Yes, it was Billy,” Trini said. “He knocked me out as soon as he had me in the house. He's... not himself.”

“So it's not just Rita who's into mind control,” Tommy said dully. “You're pretty sure it was a spell?”

Trini paused, and Tommy kept himself from asking if she was still awake. Panicking would do nothing.

“I think so,” Trini said, as if she were slowly coming to an answer, though he knew she'd probably been thinking about this for a while. “He was stronger and faster, though. Under normal circumstances, I could take him easily. I punched him as hard as I could, and he didn't even flinch.”

Tommy, as his primary trainer, knew Billy's capabilities. He wasn't sure if Trini could “take him easily” any longer. Billy was much stronger and faster than he let on... but only people like Goldar could take a punch like that.

“Must be something a little extra from Lord Zedd,” Tommy said. “Or he could have been morphed under his clothes.”

“That would make sense,” Trini said. “When do you think Zedd had a chance to do anything to Billy?”

The feeling was starting to come back into Tommy's arms, which were settling into a dull ache. He found he was getting calmer. “We don't know what Lord Zedd is capable of. I mean, he could have scooped Billy into another dimension at any point, if he planned it right, and we'd never be the wiser if we don't know what to look for.”

“So we're stuck, and fighting blind,” Trini said. “That's just perfect.”

Tommy paused before he launched into the question he'd been reserving until he was ready for the answer. “Trini, are you all right? Did he hurt you?”

“I'm fine,” Trini said quickly.

It was too quick. Tommy didn't like it. “Trini, where are you? Did he tie you up in the bathroom?” That would have been fitting, Tommy decided. It was what Tommy had done to Sylvia, and it was Trini who had found Billy and Sylvia first. If Billy was just looking to mirror what had happened...

“No,” Trini said, her voice growing miserable. “I... I'm...” She obviously didn't want to say what had happened, but could think of no reason to keep it secret. “I'm tied to Billy's bed in electrified arm restraints. Are your restraints electrified as well?”

Trini had somehow forced her voice into its calm, analytical tone she used when solving a problem. That made the horror somehow worse.

“Yeah, I can't struggle without getting shocked, either,” Tommy said. He paused. There was a question he had to ask, but he didn't want to ask and didn't want to hear the answer, just as much as he knew Trini didn't want to be asked or have to answer. Trini wasn't a part of Billy's revenge against Tommy. Just as Tommy's position made Billy's plans for him clear... Trini's position made Billy's plans for her all too clear.
“Are...” Tommy's throat went even drier, but he pushed through. “Are you...” He couldn't say it. “...okay...?”

Trini didn't say anything, but Tommy got the feeling she understood what he was asking.

“I'm okay,” she said finally. “I'm... decent. But...”

She broke off, and Tommy felt sure she was crying and didn't want him to know.

As the silence stretched, Tommy felt anger replace his fear. It was not directed at Billy, though Tommy knew that was the immediate foe he had to contend with. No, Billy was a victim, just as Tommy himself had been when he'd been under the spell. All the rage was reserved for Lord Zedd, who seemed to find all this funny.

Tommy knew there was little he could do at present but plan for what he would do when Billy got back. He knew his primary objectives: keep Trini safe, and keep Billy from doing anything that would destroy him when the spell was lifted.

“Trini?” Tommy called. “You still there?”

“Still tied up, so yeah.” Trini's voice was harsh with fear and tears. Tommy knew now that she was assured of Tommy's relative safety, her medical instincts were going by the wayside, and she was now free to be scared for herself. Even as fear overtook her, though, Tommy felt himself calming. He had a plan, and he was pretty sure it would work. He just had to keep his nerve about it.

“Trini, when Billy comes back, I need you to keep quiet. No matter what you hear... unless you hear any of the others, of course.”

“What do you mean?” she said, her voice rising a few tones. “Tommy, what are you planning?”

“Billy's not getting past this room,” Tommy said. “Not if I can help it.”

“And what you are going to do, flail at him?” Trini said.

“I'll just talk,” said Tommy. “I can keep Billy interested in me. That will buy the others time to figure out what the hell is going on and come rescue us, or for Billy to screw up enough that Zordon will find out about all this.”

“Tommy, you're crazy if you think I'm going to let you take a bullet for me.” Tommy was gratified to hear the fear bleeding out of Trini's voice. She sounded pissed and determined. “You'll just get yourself killed.”

“Billy had the opportunity to kill both of us, and he didn't,” Tommy said. He sighed. “Look, Trini... all he wants to do is beat me up. To pay me back for what I did to him. Once we're rescued, all you have to do is shoot me up with serum, and all that goes away.” Tommy paused. “If Billy goes after you... Serum can't do a damn thing to fix that. And I'm not letting Lord Zedd do that to you OR to Billy.”

Another pause, though Tommy knew he'd convinced her. “Fine,” Trini said sharply. “But if you die, you realize I'm going to have to face Kimberly after all this. So don't get yourself killed.”

Tommy wanted to retort that his two weeks weren't up, but he knew that wouldn't do anything to help his situation of his mood. He needed to mentally prepare for what he had to do. “Glad that's settled.” He shifted his position. In the silence, he could hear the clock ticking, though he had no idea what time it was. He realized if he didn't keep talking, even though ever word was starting to become
tortuously painful, he was going to go insane.

“Hey, Trini,” he finally said. “You wanna play I Spy?”

“You've got to be kidding.”

“It's either that or listen to the clock tick.”

“I spy something blue,” she said quickly.

Tommy laughed drily. “Yeah, thanks. That narrows it down.”

“Glad to be of help.”

Billy wished he was alone. Witnessing this and having Finster right there was... unpleasant.

No, strike that. He didn't wish he was alone. He wished he was free. He wished he had his power coin and communicator, and he wished he was freeing Tommy and Trini.

Most of all, he wished he was drop-kicking that clone's sorry ass all over Angel Grove. That image gave him a measure of satisfaction.

The Moon Palace surveillance could not find the clone. It was probably at the Command Center, then. That worried Billy almost as much as what might happen to Tommy and Trini. While Zordon and Alpha were there, the clone could not do very much damage, but then Billy didn't truly know all of the clone's capabilities. And what if Zordon wasn't there, and the clone somehow managed to gain control of Alpha...

Footsteps echoed down the hallway into the entrance of the room containing Billy's cell. Goldar finally emerged from the darkness. Billy pointedly didn't look at him, as he was determined not to show fear. He couldn't forget the last few times unmorphed Rangers had run around the Moon Palace. Both Jason and Tommy had almost died in the attempt to escape, and Billy could still vividly remember Goldar's sword sticking out of Jason's back.

“Lord Zedd wishes to know if the prisoner has been watching the screen,” Goldar said.

Finster did not look at him, either. “I would have reported if the Blue Ranger had not been watching,” he answered stiffly.

Billy realized Goldar wasn't even listening to Finster. He was instead watching the screen, watching the portion where Tommy was hanging from that damn chin-up bar.

Surreptitiously, Billy watched Goldar. Was it his imagination, or... yes. It was. Goldar's eye twitched. Was he actually concerned about Tommy?

Billy considered. Just as Rita and Tommy had always had a connection that none of the others really understood, Goldar and Tommy had once been friends, and their fights were always far more personal. In some ways, perhaps they were still friends. Perhaps Goldar actually still cared somewhat about Tommy. Perhaps this was something Billy could use to his advantage.

Perhaps he was deluding himself, but he had to press every opportunity for escape. Since he was denied fighting and technology, he had to use his words.

“Looks like the clone is getting ready to kill Tommy,” he said casually.
It wasn't his imagination. Both Goldar and Finster flinched. Interesting.

Billy forced himself to continue coldly. “Looks like Lord Zedd doesn't care all that much. I mean, we all know Zedd's gunning for Tommy. Told us himself.”

Billy was actually rather shocked how much it was working. He wasn't being told to shut up. In fact, Goldar and Finster looked like they didn't want to acknowledge him. It seemed that Lord Zedd was not as good at inspiring loyalty as Rita was. Must be something about being a scary, skinless creepy guy.

“Of course,” Billy continued, “that clone is nearly unstoppable. It would take someone who knows everything about it to really stop it. Someone who maybe created it.”

That got Goldar's attention, though Finster kept looking away. “You are right,” Goldar said, advancing on the cell. “You are the creator of that thing. You're lucky I'm not killing you right now.”

Billy forced himself to keep eye contact with Goldar, though he felt himself start to sweat. Without changing his expression, Goldar drew closer to the cell, apparently to threaten Billy further. Instead, he whispered at a volume barely over the static of the screens and the hum of the force field. “Be prepared. Tell no one.”

Billy carefully schooled his expression to show no hope or relief. Perhaps Goldar did not even believe he heard it, but Goldar did nothing to assure himself. He slashed at the force field with his sword, causing sparks to fly and Billy to back up hastily.

Billy watched as the warrior left. He'd gotten what he wanted... maybe... but he was thoroughly confused. Why was Goldar helping him? Why was Goldar telling him he was helping him? And... if Billy's words about Tommy had affected the warrior that much, why had he betrayed Rita? Why had he gone after Scorpina in that way? What did Lord Zedd have over him?

Billy shook those thoughts from his head. He still had a lot to plan. He had no idea what Goldar was going to do, but he had to prepare for every eventuality.

“It's beginning,” came Finster's quiet words.

The escape plans lost their purchase on Billy's brain. He knew this was why he was here, and he knew he was just playing into Lord Zedd's hands... but he couldn't turn away.

The doorknob clicked and turned. Tommy tensed up, his stomach knotted with anticipation, but his mind clear and dispassionate.

The image of a smiling Billy rattled that mental calm. He'd been able to accept the idea of his best friend under an evil spell, but facing the reality of it was far more unsettling.

Billy was wearing a short-sleeved shirt. If he was still as strong as Trini said he was, he couldn't be morphed. He'd have to see.

“I'm home,” Billy said, closing the door.

Tommy managed a grim smile. “Took you long enough.”

“So we're going for the tough bastard routine,” Billy laughed. “Good. Much more entertaining than stoic hero approach.”
“Oh, good,” Tommy said, a bit mockingly. “This is the portion where you try to prove how much better than me you are. And here I thought you were going to be unpredictable.”

“You have no idea what's going on. You think you do, but you don't.”

Tommy rolled his eyes. He found that the casual act was getting easier and easier, especially since Billy was playing right into his expectations. “Oh, you've made it painfully obvious what this is all about. So... who am I a message for?”

“For whom am I a message, you mean.”

“Step number two... make Tommy feel stupid by making petty corrections.” Tommy laughed. “Now you're going to physically intimidate me. Of course, not in a fair fight. You're going to keep these things on me because you know you can't take me in a fair fight. And then comes the beating, which will, I'm sure, give you some personal satisfaction for a while.” Tommy smirked. “How am I doing?”

He knew he'd struck home. Billy was speechless and frowning at him, as if he were some computer component that wasn't acting quite right.

Finally, Billy said, “I hate to disabuse you of your own superiority, but there is no way you can now match me for power or speed. Those bonds are only to hold you up.”

“So you did get a power upgrade from Zedd,” Tommy said. “I wondered about that. I still know how you fight, though. No matter how much stronger you are, I'm still better.”

Billy stared at Tommy, almost hungrily. Tommy knew that was the right tack to take. This wasn't about vengeance. This was about proving something, at the heart of it. Tommy knew Billy always felt inadequate, and suddenly Tommy had become the focus of all those inadequacies. Maybe not suddenly, either. Tommy knew that, in some ways, Billy was jealous of him. He just had to drive that in, and Billy would do exactly what he wanted.

Finally, Billy shrugged. “Believe what you want,” he said, and then started for the hallway.

For the first time, Tommy panicked. Billy had figured out he'd lost control of the situation, so he was going to take it out on Trini. That was definitely not the plan, and Tommy needed to do something quick.

“Oh, come on,” Tommy said, trying to keep the desperation out of his voice. “You don't want her. Not really. Where's the satisfaction?”

Billy turned around, his eyebrows raised. “Do I really need to explain the birds and the bees to you?”

Tommy tried not to think too hard about what Billy just said, just to keep from vomiting. This wasn't Billy. It was, but it wasn't. “Come on, Billy. This is me. You can't fool me. Yeah, I know you like her, but do you really think she'll accept someone who doesn't even have the balls to face me?”

Billy was still staring at him. He hadn't turned back to the hallway.

“Think about it,” Tommy said, grinning fiercely. “I'm the Green Ranger. I came in here one Saturday afternoon, tied up your mom, and beat the living shit out of you. I made you hold yourself up for me so I could beat you easier. I made you beg me to keep beating you.”

Billy turned paler, his expression unreadable.

For Tommy, it was a little piece of hell. It was like he was taking Billy apart again, like he'd done so
long ago. He willed the tears from coming to his eyes, but they spilled out nonetheless. He wasn't even sure if Billy saw them, or if he was just seeing the Green Ranger tower over him yet again.

Tommy swallowed hard. He had to finish it. “You couldn't even call yourself a man after that, could you? Oh, sure, you got healed. You threatened me with that big gun. But you still couldn't forget how I beat you, how I made you beg for it. How you were grateful when it started again. Tell me...” Tommy cleared his throat, “was it because you were protecting your mom, or was it because you really did want it? You kind of dug being my punching bag, didn't you?”

“Shut up.”

The voice was barely human, and Tommy knew he had him.

“That's is, isn't it,” Tommy said in barely a whisper, so Billy had to focus solely on him just to catch the words. “That's why you won't touch me, and you certainly won't touch her. You're afraid you won't be man enough. And you know the real thing that's pissing you off?”

Billy's eyes were dilating, and Tommy knew the moment had come.

“We both know you're right.”

The first blow cracked Tommy's rib easily, but Tommy didn't care. He kept laughing, even through the beating... but he knew he deserved every bit of it.
Will stared at Tommy, waiting for the serum to take effect. He'd lost track of time. He knew no one would bother them, and he really didn't care if they did. The serum took longer every time, and Will knew that it was because of Tommy's fading power.

He knew he could probably solve Tommy's problems with his Green Ranger powers. Just a few hours with the Command Center computer and the Morphing Grid, and Will knew there was very little he could not do.

But why? Why should he deny Tommy the suffering he so richly deserved?

Pain overcame him, and for the first time, Will allowed himself to be driven to his knees. He grasped his head as if to keep it from exploding.

The pain ebbed, finally, and Will slowly pulled himself to his feet, just in time for Tommy to open his eyes, at long last healed enough to regain consciousness.

"You ready for a third session?" Will asked softly.

Will had the satisfaction of seeing Tommy's face twist with fear and dread as he remembered the past hours of torture. He was breathing hard—gasing—but he wasn't tired or injured. The serum erased all evidence of harm. Will had methodically broken Tommy's arms and legs, and now they were completely whole. The only thing that couldn't be recovered was blood, which painted Tommy's clothes and pooled under him on the tile floor, staining a deep red where it touched the carpet.

"Come on, Tommy," Will said again, his voice still soft. "It's either this, or I go after Trini. I just want to know if you're ready."

Again, Tommy didn't answer. He just stared at Will, eyes wide and almost glassy with fear. Will considered... could Tommy have broken already? Was he going to buy a few moments' peace by letting Will go to Trini?

Will smirked, knowing that Tommy probably wasn't pushed that far, but the possibility was definitely there. "Okay, then," he said, shrugging and turning on his heel.

"Wait..."

It was barely a whisper, but Will's hearing was better than any human's. He stopped, still facing away, knowing he could imagine Tommy's expression as easily as seeing it.

"What is it you want?" Will said, his voice mocking. "You only have to tell me."

"Don't... don't leave me."
Will turned in surprise. Tommy's gaze was barely readable but steady. Was he just keeping Will from going to Trini, or... was there something else?

"What do you mean?" Will smirked. "Are you going to beg to be beaten? It's your turn, after all."

Tommy didn't react to that. It looked like he was going through pain just to put together words. "Please..."

Will moved forward, hanging on his every word.

"Please..." Tommy continued. "I... I don't want to lose you. Just stay with me. Don't do something you'll regret."

It was insane. Perfectly insane. Even after two beatings, even after torture that would break most people... Tommy still cared about him. Cared enough to sacrifice himself to keep him from destroying himself.

No... not him. He didn't care about Will. It was Billy. Tommy was doing this all for Billy, thinking he was being tortured by his best friend with an evil spell. Once he found out about Will, he would be just like the rest.

Will's face broke into a smile. "I'm only too happy to oblige," he said quietly. He picked up the kitchen knife from the end table and wiped the blood off it before beginning.

"Thanks, Kristen," Jason said, loading the last of the beer into the back of his car while Zack acted as look-out.

Jason's older sister laughed. "Just make sure to pay me back tomorrow. Honestly, I'm thrilled. I thought you spent too much time volunteering to do anything fun."

"Since when did I get that horrible reputation?" Jason said.

"Oh, please. You're the golden child." Kristen slammed the trunk shut. "Just don't get caught, okay, little bro? You know mom and dad are going to blame me." She cocked her head. "Though, you're pretty good at keeping secrets. I mean, you're so goody-goody, but none of us know where you run off to all the time. Even Dad has stopped asking."

"Study group," Jason said, his face unreadable.

Kristen smirked. "Yeah, right. Zack, you think you can keep my little bro out of trouble?"

"Full time job," Zack quipped. "Jas, we gotta meet Curtis for the stereo equipment. We done here?"

"Yeah," Jason said, getting into the car. "Thanks again, Kristen."

As they drove away, Zack let out a low whistle. "That was close."

Jason shrugged. "My sister's less delusional than my parents. She's always trying to guess what I'm up to."

Curtis was less inquisitive. He was more worried about giving them detailed instructions about the installation and care of the equipment, as well as dire warning of what would happen to them if any of it was hurt.
"Party starts in a couple of hours, but we can't move this stuff into Billy's and Tommy's until 6," said Zack. "So what do we do until then?"

Jason was about to speak, but his communicator beeped at that moment. He shot a worried look at Zack. "What's up, Alpha?"

"Jason," Zordon's voice sounded over the communicator. "Alpha informed me you wished to speak with me."

"I'll be right up, Zordon," Jason said. He cut the channel. "You wanna come up with me?"

Zack shrugged. "I think you'll probably do better on your own. Tell you what... I'll take care of this stuff. Meet you at Billy's at 6?"

"Be careful," Jason said, handing him the keys.

"Good luck," Zack said in answer.

Jason got out of the car and teleported up. Billy was no longer in the Command Center, for which Jason was grateful. He wanted to talk to Zordon without interruption.

"So," Jason began, "how's your special project going?" He decided the direct approach would be best. Zordon would figure out what he was thinking soon enough, anyway.

"It is progressing," Zordon said evasively. "One moment, Jason. Alpha, I sense an echo in the security feed. Would you mind checking the auxiliary security room?"

"Will do, Zordon," Alpha said, walking down the steps to the corridor.

"Zordon, what...?" Jason began.

Zordon silenced him with a look. He seemed to be waiting for Alpha to get out of earshot. Finally, Alpha's clanking footsteps faded in the distance.

"Jason, we do not have a lot of time," Zordon said quickly. "Alpha V has been tampered with. I also sense some corruption in the security feed, the archive footage, and even the Morphing Grid.

If Jason had expected anything, it wasn't that. His mind reeled, but he knew he didn't have time to panic. "What do I need to do?"

"Intercept Alpha as he returns from the security room and put him into emergency diagnostic mode. You can do that by pushing the top three of his chest buttons at once. It must be done manually. He cannot be allowed to reach the Command Center consoles again, now that he knows he's locked out of security."

"Right," Jason said, and he turned immediately to the dark corridor. He forced his brain to keep from thinking about who could have accessed the Command Center systems. It had to be a Power Ranger who did it... but he couldn't think of that. Not if he was going to complete his mission.

He met Alpha in the corridor, and was perhaps not surprised to see Alpha carrying a laser pistol. He rolled forward just in time to dodge Alpha's first shot, and then sprang to his feet and leapt to avoid the second. Alpha didn't have time to shoot a third time. Jason brought his hand down on Alpha's chest plate, and Alpha immediately powered down, pistol aimed straight at Jason's heart.

At that point, the fear and shock hit Jason like a sucker-punch. "What... the... hell...?"
He pulled the laser pistol out of Alpha's grip and stowed it in a storage room. Alpha was too heavy to move, so he left Alpha where he was and hurried back to the main room to report to Zordon.

"So... do you have any theories on who sabotaged Alpha... to the point where he almost shot me?" Jason said, laughing out of shock.

Zordon looked shocked as well. "I would not have sent you unmorphed if it had been that serious, Jason. I'm sorry. I did not think Lord Zedd's plans would be this lethal."

"Yeah, well," Jason said, "we don't know him all that well, do we? I mean, we could get in real trouble if we keep thinking he's just like Rita."

"Agreed," said Zordon. "I find I have been fighting Rita too long."

"Zack's been with me all night and day," Jason said. "I saw Kimberly teach aerobics this morning, and then I think she was supposed to take her little brother shopping today."

"That is confirmed," Zordon said. "She is currently in a shopping mall having an argument with her brother that's so loud I fear it will soon set off our alarms."

Zordon must be thrown, Jason thought. It wasn't like him to crack a joke like that. "I saw Billy here earlier. He was working specifically on security, and he said there was a power surge at his house last night."

"Sensors are unable to account for his whereabouts, as well as the whereabouts of Trini and Tommy," Zordon responded. "Both Billy and Trini would have the capability to take control of both Alpha and the Command Center, and Tommy..."

Jason broke in. "He'd be the obvious choice. He trashed the Command Center last time, but he might want to throw us off his scent by being more subtle." He scraped his hand through his hair. "Security feed doesn't tell us anything, does it?"

"It has been expertly wiped," Zordon said. "You will need to investigate in person. The problem stands, though, that I cannot sense Billy, Trini, or Zack anywhere on Earth."

Jason frowned. All of the technical geniuses—at least the ones with hands—were either shut down or suspects. He would have to branch out a little to investigate. "What about Billy's house?" He moved to the console that controlled surveillance. "That could be where everything is going down... unless they're at the Moon Palace."

"The Moon Palace is more probable," Zordon said resignedly. "Call Zachary and ask him to investigate Billy's house."

"Right," Jason said. He punched up his communicator, not familiar enough with the communication system in the Command Center to use the console. "Zack, come in."

There was a pause. "I read you, Jas. What's up?"

"We're going into 'oh shit' mode," Jason said, knowing the joke would keep Zack from freaking out. "One of us is under a spell, and the suspects are Tommy, Trini, or Billy. We can't find any of them, so we're pretty sure they're either at Billy's house or at the Moon Palace. I need you to investigate Billy's house, but stay safe. Don't engage."

"What makes you think something's up?" Zack asked, all business.
"We've got breaches in security, Alpha, and the Morphing Grid."

"Where's Kimberly?" Zack's voice was shaky, but he seemed to be steeled by Jason's abrupt orders.

"With her brother," Jason said. "She can't ditch him right now, but I'll get in touch with her as soon as I can."

"I'll report when I know anything."

Jason cut communication and turned to face Zordon. "We'll need to..."

But he was cut off. There was a sharp klaxon, and then the sound died, along with the rest of the power. The room went dim. It was only illuminated by Zordon.

"What the hell?" Jason jabbed at the controls, but they were already dead. The Viewing Globe was blank, and he could see the power out past the main control room.

"The Command Center power has been completely cut off," Zordon said. "I am able to maintain my link with this dimension only from reserve power." Zordon paused, his face growing more fearful. "I have lost access to the Morphing Grid."

"Dammit!" Jason hit the controls. "Our communication must have been monitored. I shouldn't have told Zack that much. Now whoever is doing this knows that we're on to them."

"Agreed," said Zordon. "At this level of preparation, we may even be dealing with more than one person."

Jason's stomach went cold. "I didn't even think about that. I assumed that one was under a spell, and the others had gotten captured. You think it may be all three of them?"

"That is a valid theory, but one upon which we cannot act." Zordon looked like he was concentrating, probably trying to gain access to systems that weren't available. "Luckily," he continued, "there are aspects of the Command Center that only I know about. Even Alpha does not have complete knowledge of the Command Center. If I can..."

Jason gulped. He was trying not to panic. With teleportation and communication down, he was essentially stuck in the middle of the desert. He wasn't even entirely sure he could morph, but he didn't want to try right then and break Zordon's concentration. In the meantime, he'd sent Zack into certain danger, their communications were still being monitored, which Zack didn't know, and Kimberly was entirely in the dark.

Not to mention all the party-goers who were going to show up in a few hours to a possible base for evil Power Rangers.

Zordon broke out of his semi-trance. At the same time, Jason saw ambient light coming from an as-yet-unexplored corridor completely opposite to the one that held their living and work spaces.

"Unfortunately," Zordon said, "I have been unable to establish a link to the Morphing Grid, and I can't gain control of the Command Center's main systems. I can't do it until whatever is blocking me is put out of commission."

"Which is probably something Tommy, Trini, or Billy has," Jason said. "And meanwhile, we're hours away, and Zack's walking into a trap. We can't do anything about any of it."

"Certainly, our options are limited," conceded Zordon. "But it is premature to say there is nothing we
can do."

Jason glanced over at the light source. "What are your orders, then?"

"You have probably been worrying about morphing," Zordon said. "My connection with the Morphing Grid has been severed, but yours hasn't. However..." Zordon said a bit louder before Jason could even try morphing, "since our attacker has control over the Morphing Grid, you could be in incredible danger if you tried morphing. If you teleported out of here, the attacker might be able to redirect you anywhere he or she wants. If you tried to travel in your Zord, which I'm sure you're eager to, the attacker could deactivate your powers in midair. The attacker has shown that he or she has no compunction against killing."

"Right," said Jason. "Don't exactly want to be caught in a giant metal dragon that's falling. Those answer all the protests I might have against your plan. Now let's hear the plan."

Zordon gave a ghost of a smile. "I have been holding certain equipment in reserve, merely because they have not been necessary, with teleportation, Zords, and Billy's car. I will be able to infuse you with some of my own power, which will allow you to use this mode of transportation. You will be able to stay morphed for a short time without drawing directly from the Morphing Grid, and thus you will be able to avoid detection."

Jason frowned. "What about the risks to you, in this power transfer?" And to me, Jason thought, but didn't think it would be very brave to voice those concerns.

"I will not need to give you as much as I have Tommy, and you will not be in quite as weakened a state, so the dangers should be minimal." Zordon shot him an apologetic look. "I would not ask if it were not absolutely necessary. Your transportation should lead you directly to Angel Grove. There, your mission is to gain back control of the Command Center. All other concerns are secondary."

Jason felt his face flush with anger, but he held it back. He knew Zordon was making the hard decisions, even if those decisions were going after the device rather than saving his friends. He himself had made that decision before. "Understood. You'll know when I succeed."

"Then prepare yourself," Zordon said. "This may be uncomfortable."

Jason braced himself against a console. He remembered when Tommy had been infused with Zordon's power for the first time. He'd looked elated, almost wild. Jason had always sort of wondered what it had felt like.

And then he didn't have to wonder. The power slammed into him, infusing his whole body with warmth. No... cold. It was like both at the same time. It was a lot... way more than he'd ever... too much...

It ended. Jason realized he was on the ground, and he was gasping.

"Jason, are you all right?" Zordon's worried voice called out.

"I... I'm fine," Jason said, pulling himself up from the floor. "Just unexpected." He was unsurprised to see he was morphed. He was glad. He wasn't sure how to morph without using the Morphing Grid. "I'll contact you as soon as I've gained control."

"May the power protect you, Jason."

Jason waved his hand jauntily as he left, trying to reassure Zordon as well as himself. He followed the light source to a dusty, stale room. He'd walked past rooms like this when they'd used the outside
entrance of the Command Center, but he'd never thought to explore the rooms.

"Oh, yeah..." Jason breathed, grinning behind his helmet. "Can't believe Zordon was hiding this."

In the center of the room, each on a lit platform, stood five motorcycles, each of a different color and fashioned after their old Zords. His, in the middle, was all Tyrannosaurus teeth and cherry red.

"Well, at least the desert drive is going to be fun," Jason said.

Billy paced his cell. He shot angry glances at the screen and wondered when the hell Goldar was going to enact this unknown escape plan.

The clone had stopped torturing Tommy for the moment and was playing with some mechanical device. It looked like some sort of remote control, or at least that's what the design looked like. In the meantime, Tommy was barely conscious. The clone had not yet healed him.

It was hell. Tommy's words, then his screams, then his dogged insistence on keeping the clone right there. Billy tried to ignore the tears that were coursing down his own face. They wouldn't help him, and he had to be ready to escape at a moment's notice. Perhaps Goldar would only be able to secure him the barest second in which to escape.

What Tommy had said at first had been hard to listen to, but Billy had been able to survive it, knowing from what he'd said to Trini before that he was just trying to goad the clone, who he thought was Billy. Those words weren't necessarily what Tommy actually thought, and Billy knew enough about him to know he would never really think those things.

But then... seeing Tommy tortured. Hearing him beg that the clone... Billy... would stay with him, because he didn't want to lose him. Didn't want Billy to do anything he would regret while under a spell. It was the single greatest thing anyone had ever done for him.

But that just makes it all hurt more, Billy thought. It's not a spell. It's not Lord Zedd, even though he's done his share of damage in this situation. It's me. I'm responsible. I made the clone, and so I'm responsible for everything Tommy's going through... everything Trini's going through. Any damage that clone does is all my fault.

Billy had been thinking of little else, even when he should have been trying to figure out each possibility in his escape, and what he would do after. He just knew he had to do something to make up for everything. And he had to do it before the clone could cause any more damage.

Tommy was no longer shaking. He hung limply in his bonds. Billy stared at him, wishing with all his might he could do something. He... he would. Billy knew he had to stop the clone. Even if it meant his own life. It was the least he could do.

The power flickered. Billy caught his breath. It flickered again.

Finster looked around wildly. "What...?"

It was all Billy needed. He timed a leap once he caught the pattern of the flickers. His toe caught in the flickering force field, but he ignored the pain. He launched himself straight at Finster, who only had enough time to look surprised before Billy kicked him in the face. Finster went down immediately.
Remembering that Finster was far more resilient than he looked, Billy went through the old scientist's pockets as quickly as possible. No teleporter. He'd have to make his way to the lab, or any nearby computer panel with teleportation capabilities. But he had to move fast. The clone had stolen his power coin and communicator, and he wouldn't last two seconds if Lord Zedd caught him. Even Goldar probably wouldn't be able to ignore Billy if he ran right in front of him.

Billy found a weapon in one of Finster's pockets, obviously for use in guarding the prisoner. It was better than nothing. Holding it in front of him, Billy ran for the exit, sacrificing stealth for speed.

The corridor was deserted. Billy tried to recall everything he knew about the Moon Palace from the maps Tommy had drawn. He knew to go toward light and heat, and the lab was near the living quarters. It was the brightest room in the Palace, Tommy had told him.

He ran, following light, adrenaline pushing the fear away. He wasn't even afraid for his own life. He was past that. He was just afraid of not being able to get to the clone in time. In the back of his mind, he was imagining what would happen when the clone got bored with Tommy and went for his other prisoner.

"But you were supposed to clean the lab!" a voice broke through the dim corridor. "It was your turn!"

"We're supposed to do it together," another voice said impatiently. "It's not like there's anything else to do here anymore. We can't even watch TV."

Squatt and Babboo, Billy thought. And they were headed to the lab.

Composing himself, Billy intercepted them, pointing the gun deliberately in their faces.

"Don't move," he said calmly. "You were saying something about a lab?"

Squatt and Babboo looked at each other, not even seeming to be surprised. They shrugged. "It's right over there," the blue one—Billy wasn't sure which was which—pointed out. "Second door on the left."

The gun in Billy's hand faltered. "Uh... thanks."

"No problem, weird human guy," the taller one said. "You might want to run."

Billy took him at their word and ran for it. From what he could tell, Lord Zedd had no idea how to inspire loyalty.

He reached the lab and immediately assessed the controls. They were all fairly unfamiliar, and he had no way tell whether he was going to teleport himself or start a self-destruction sequence on the Moon Palace. Though, admittedly, he figured it wouldn't be that easy to blow up the castle.

He looked around desperately... and, as if by magic, he saw one of Finster's teleportation devices, the same kind Tommy had used. He knew how those worked.

Praying that he was pushing the right button, he activated the device. The lab disappeared... to be replaced by green. He was at the park near the hospital.

Knowing that he was completely open to attack and Lord Zedd would know very soon, if not already, that he had escaped, he pocketed the teleporter, thrust the gun into his other pocket, and broke into a run.
It was near 6:00, and Kimberly was finally dropping off Kevin at his friend's house.

"I hope you get mono from your boyfriend," he said angrily, grabbing his backpack from the back seat.

"Yeah, and I hope you get seizures from your cartoons," Kimberly yelled over his slamming the door.

She gunned the engine, as soon as she saw he was in the house. She was furious that her mom had saddled her with her brother all afternoon. She was just glad he was going to be spending two nights sleeping over. She had been tempted, more than once, to teleport him to the middle of the desert that afternoon.

She didn't meet any cops, thankfully, and her parents were already gone by the time she drove up. It was official. Kevin was bad luck, and good luck came when he was away from her.

She parked the car and pulled some shopping bags from the trunk. She was about to go into the house, intent on changing clothes before running over to Tommy's and Billy's, when she saw Zack turn the corner, making her drop her bags.

"Give me a heart attack, why don't you," Kimberly said angrily. "What are you doing skulking around here? The party starts in an hour and my parents are gone. Shouldn't you be setting up?"

"Oh, damn, the party," Zack said. "I didn't even think of that. I parked Jason's car a street over." He looked at her seriously. "You're not gonna like this."

Kimberly steeled herself, knowing it would have to be something pretty damn serious if it made Zack forget about a party. "Lay it on me."

"We've got an evil spell problem," Zack said. "Someone hacked into Alpha and the Morphing Grid. Suspects are Tommy, Trini, and Billy, and they may be holed up at the Moon Palace... or over there," he nodded at Billy's house. "We can't find any of them, and now I can't contact Zordon or Jason at the Command Center."

Kimberly sat on a porch chair quickly. "Okay... why do we think they're over at Billy's?"

"I dunno," Zack said. "Following Jason's orders. I just thought... if we're dealing with all three, or if one of them is keeping the other two hostage, I needed backup. We can't let anyone get hurt."

"Right," said Kimberly. She unlocked the front door and shoved her bags into the house, and then locked the house back up. "Let's get over there... carefully. That house, what with Billy's lab and the extra security for Tommy, might be as dangerous as the Moon Palace."

Zack flashed her an unsteady grin. "I guess it's Morphin' time, then."

Will watched the screen in the lab. "Looks like it's just about to start," he said quietly.

He glanced down at Tommy, who was now lying in the cloning device... where Will had been born only hours before.

He had considered making more clones. He had considered it more than once ever since he'd begun
his stand. Especially Tommy and Trini... the closest people to Billy.

He knew, though, he couldn't. No matter how lonely he was, no matter how lonely he knew he would be... he just couldn't do that to someone. He couldn't bring another clone into the world and make him or her suffer as he did. It wouldn't be right.

However, the cloning device served as a convenient hiding place. He couldn't allow Tommy to be rescued, but he couldn't guard him all the time. After one last look, Will closed the lid on the unconscious Tommy and began thinking of his other prisoner.

He glanced back at the outside security monitor. The Black and Pink Rangers were now cautiously making their way to the front door. They knew the lab door was too well guarded and the windows were too secure.

Will smiled. He had time.

He locked the inside lab door behind him and ignored the front door. He knew the security system would do its job. Instead, he turned sharply and walked toward Billy's room.

He knew Trini heard him, no matter how quiet the carpet made his footsteps. She'd been listening as hard as she could for hours. He smiled. He wouldn't have time for a great deal of fun, but...

She was gone.

Will stared at the bed. The bedstead was made of cheap metal, and it looked like she'd dislodged the bar where he'd secured the restraints. Scorch marks on the bed showed that she'd quietly suffered through electrical shocks until she'd freed herself. He felt the scorch marks. Still hot. Not enough time to even leave the room.

The closet.

"Trini, I know you're in there," Will said, keeping his voice calm. He started for the closet. "I do not wish to hurt you any more than necessary."

He was reaching for the closet when he felt something tackle him from behind. Something hard wound around his throat, and his whole head seemed to explode with pain.

Jason sped past Stone Canyon. The motorcycle was not faster than Billy's car, but that was only because he had to go across land.

"Just a few more miles," he said under his breath.

Billy nearly screamed in frustration when he met the third Putty patrol. He was staggering with exhaustion, but he knew he had to keep moving, and he couldn't let the Putties hurt any civilians.

As he punched the first Putty right in the Z, wasting no time, he reflected that the power upgrade the new Zords had given them was making the fights easier... as well as the training Tommy had given him.

Still, his entire body ached, and he felt like he'd been running for days. He couldn't keep this up, and
he still had his clone to fight and his friends to save.

Taking a breath, expecting the pain he was starting to feel more and more, he fought on.

At the sound of yells, Zack and Kimberly looked at each other. They'd spent the past few minutes trying to bypass the security that would have usually responded to their power coins.

"We gotta get in there now," Kimberly said. She hit the small panel next to the door, usually hidden by the house numbers. "Dammit!" she yelled, holding her hand. "The whole thing's electrified."

"Screw this," said Zack. He summoned his Power Axe. "We don't have time to worry about property damage."

He swung the blade into the side of the house, aiming for a place that avoided doors and windows. The wall came away with the blade, and a few more swings produced a small hole that led into the kitchen. Billy had obviously not thought anyone would come through the wall.

"I'll take it from here," said Kimberly, stopping Zack from swinging again. "I think I can get in there and open the door from the inside."

"Hurry," Zack said. "We had to have attracted attention."

Kimberly crawled through the hole easily. She immediately sprang to her feet, ready for any attacks. None came.

"You okay, Kim?" Zack yelled through the door. "Open up, already!"

"Got it," Kimberly yelled back. Just on the top of the doorframe she found it: the quick security failsafe all of their houses had. She flicked it, and an almost-imperceptible buzzing went away. She unlocked the door.

The yelling had stopped, and the house was utterly silent. Zack motioned to the fresh bloodstains between the kitchen and living room, and Kimberly put a hand over her mouth, momentarily forgetting she was morphed. The two inched into the house, weapons ready for any attack.

They heard a weak coughing sound from Billy's room. They rushed forward in time to see Billy struggling from the floor, his throat solid black and red from bruises and burns. Trini was beside him, unconscious and shackled.

"Thank God you guys are here," Billy rasped at them past a damaged throat. "It was… it was Tommy. He was just here, but he must have left before you guys showed up."

Billy started to fall forward, but Zack caught him. Kimberly knelt next to Trini, removing her gloves so she could feel for a pulse.

"What did he do to you?" Zack said.

Billy ignored the question. "Is she okay, Kim?"

"Yeah… I think so," Kimberly answered. "These restraints are electrified, and I don't know how to get them off. Mind giving me a hand, Billy?"

Billy shook his head. "I tried. We both tried, but without the key we can't get them off, and Tommy
has the key." Billy frowned. "Tommy had just taken mine off so he could try something… else… with me, and we both attacked him, but he was morphed. We couldn't reach our morphers."

Kimberly looked up from Trini. "What kind of spell was it, Billy? I mean, it can't have been like the one Rita put on him. Tommy hates Zedd. He couldn't be loyal to him."

Billy was visibly shaking. He looked away. "He… he said Lord Zedd approached him with… a job offer. Said that Zedd would restore his powers if he just worked for him." Billy looked up, fear and misery etching his features. "He… he took the job."

"No way!" Zack said, taking a step back. "Tommy'd never sell himself again, not after last time."

"I agree," said Kimberly. "But he's obviously under a spell, and Zedd's making him lie just to throw us off. I mean, evil Tommy wasn't the most honest person ever."

"I'm more concerned about what Tommy has planned next," Billy said quietly. "Do you think…?"

"Yeah, we gotta get back to the Command Center," said Zack. "I wasn't able to communicate a few minutes ago, but hopefully we can…"

He tapped his communicator. Nothing.

Billy ripped off his own communicator and opened it up. "There's nothing wrong with the actual devices. Either Lord Zedd is blocking our communication or teleportation like last time, or…"

"Tommy's done something to the Command Center," Zack finished for him. "Neither way is good. Jason was at the Command Center, and if the Command Center is blocked off, Tommy must have put him out of commission." He gulped. "That means we're on our own with one injured and one unconscious."

"And party guests coming in an hour," Kimberly reminded.

"Right," said Zack. "Because otherwise it'd be too simple."

"I suggest we make our way to my lab," said Billy. "If nothing else, we can use the car like last time."

"Which will take an hour," Kimberly commented. "Not perfect, but it might have to do."

"I'll take Trini," said Zack, pulling away his Power Axe.

The three moved cautiously through the house. Kimberly kept her Blade Blaster out, knowing that Tommy could attack at any second.

Billy unlocked the lab quickly, but Kimberly pulled him back so she could enter first and make sure it was safe. Seeing no one, she motioned the others in. Zack immediately headed for the covered gurney in the corner.

"That's not a good place for her," Billy said sharply. He quickly cleared a table. "Put her here."

Zack laid Trini on the table. "She doesn't look good. Billy, you have some serum in your lab, don't you? I thought I remembered…"

"Used up with recent experiments." Billy wasn't looking at him. He was busy with his computer. "I can't gain access to the Command Center." He pulled out a metal cylinder from his pocket. "Maybe I can…" He broke off as he started working. "I... I can't believe Tommy would join Zedd like that."
"I can't believe it either," Kimberly said, her voice firm.

"I mean, he..."

"No, I mean I really don't believe it," Kimberly spoke over him. "I don't know what game Zedd is playing, but Tommy's not playing along willingly." She took a breath. "I won't lie. There were times I thought he'd rejoin Rita. But not Zedd. His connection to Rita won't allow it, not even to save his powers."

Billy stopped working. "I... I promised Tommy... I promised him, a long time ago, that if he ever turned evil again..." He looked up at them. "He doesn't want us to save him. He made me promise..."

"Where are your bruises?"

Billy looked up sharply at Zack's words, his hands absently straying to his neck.

"I thought you said you didn't have any serum," Zack continued, his voice turning hostile. "Without the serum, it would have taken days for those wounds to heal. So what's going on, Billy?"

Billy's eye twitched. "I had a little serum..."

"Then why lie?" Kimberly demanded. "Why not give it to Trini?" She had her blade blaster trained on Billy now.

"I think we know what happened to Trini," said Zack. "And I'd like to know what's in this thing you were so nervous about me getting in to."

He made a move to the bed-like machine in the corner, but Billy intercepted him. Zack prepared to throw Billy off without hurting him... but then he realized he couldn't move his arm, and Billy's fingers were like iron around his arm.

"I do not think that would be wise." Billy's voice had grown soft and dangerous. He twisted his hand, and Zack was brought to his knees momentarily from the pain.

"Let him go!" Kimberly yelled. She was edging forward, trying to position herself between Billy and Trini.

Billy looked up at Kimberly, and she wondered how she had been fooled before. The look in Billy's eyes was barely human. He regarded her with amused contempt. "Go ahead, Pink Ranger. Fire on an unmorphed human."

"This isn't you, Billy," Kimberly said slowly.

"Interestingly perceptive," Billy said, a wry smile on his face.

"How are you doing this?" Zack spoke up. His voice was strained. He couldn't move without parting company with his arm, and he was confused as hell about that.

"There are several theories," Billy said. "You'll have to ask Trini about that."

"Billy..." Kimberly said slowly, "you're obviously under some sort of spell. I don't want to do this... but you'll thank me for it later."

In the microsecond before Kimberly pulled the trigger, aiming for a leg, Billy twisted Zack around to take the blast for him. Zack yelled, and Billy had raced across the lab before either of them could react. He punched a few keys on his computer, and then stood, smiling.
Kimberly realized she was no longer holding a blade blaster. She and Zack stared at each other, into scared eyes that were no longer hidden by helmets.

In that look, they instantly knew they had to retreat. With an incomprehensible yell, Zack picked up one of Billy's heavier machines and threw it at him. It didn't hit him, but it gave Zack and Kimberly enough time to grab Trini and start running.

They made it out of the house by the front door. "If we can make it to my house," Kimberly gasped, "we can maybe secure it against Billy."

"The man who designed that security system?" Zack pointed out. "No chance. We've got a better chance in your car."

"Both plans have flaws."

They stopped short. Billy had magically appeared in front of them, blocking their way to Kimberly's house.

"Where's Tommy?" Kimberly asked. "Did you turn him in to Lord Zedd?"

"All these interesting theories..." Billy smiled and shook his head. "How do you know what I said wasn't true? Who said Lord Zedd couldn't have two Rangers under spells, especially two who live in the same house? You can't say Tommy wouldn't do anything to preserve his powers."

This time Kimberly didn't have her helmet to hide how much Billy's words bothered her. Still, she said, "You're still lying. The last time you were under a spell, you wanted to make Tommy into the bad guy. You're repeating yourself."

"Do you really think all that matters?" Billy laughed. "I have control over the Command Center and the Morphing Grid, I've gained some mysterious powers, including super strength, speed and healing, I've denied you your power, you're holding up your unconscious best friend... and you're worried about your boyfriend."

They heard a motorcycle start up on an adjacent street. Zack and Kimberly glanced at each other. They were in the middle of the street, in full view of everyone and blocking traffic. They had to move this stand-off, and soon.

"You've got a point," Zack said, speaking before Kimberly had a chance to react. "But so does Kimberly. You're repeating yourself. Last time, you wanted something from us to give to your new boss. What is it this time?"

"So you're really still thinking in terms of ransom?" Billy said. "I'm simply here for destructive purposes. I control everything. I can give Lord Zedd everything he wants... including entertainment as I destroy you."

"Not buying it," said Zack. "You could have killed any of us at any time, but you haven't killed anyone. If you can actually deliver Zordon to Zedd, and I don't think you have, because that's his goal, and he wouldn't still be dicking around with us if he had Zordon. So... what's your real motive?"

Billy considered Zack coldly, and then laughed. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you. Suffice it to say... I just want to hurt you. Make you all feel like I've felt all my life. And there's not much you can do about it. I can promise you, though, that if you come back into the house quietly—all three of you—you might live through this. Otherwise."
He didn't get a chance to finish his threat. He was distracted by a motorcycle hitting him.

Zack and Kimberly stared as Jason, morphed as the Red Ranger, had throttled down the street on a red motorcycle. At the last minute, he skidded the bike on its side to hit Billy, who was thrown down the road, rolling for several feet. A streak of blood marked the road from Jason's motorcycle to where Billy landed.

Jason was already off the bike and running to Billy. Instead of helping him, however, he started going through his pockets.

"H... Holy shit, Jas!" Zack stammered. "Holy shit! Y-you killed Billy!"

"Didn't kill him," Jason said. "He's already healing." He grabbed something from Billy's pockets and pulled the communicator from his wrist. "Into the lab, guys! Hurry!"

Still shaken by seeing their friend splattered over the pavement, they still followed Jason as quickly as they could into the lab. As soon as they were in, Jason blocked off the door and reactivated security.

"That can't hold him off forever," Jason said. "Zack, I need you to block off that hole near the front door. Use one of these." Jason handed him one of their portable security stabilizers, something Billy had cooked up when they needed to secure an area temporarily. "Hurry. He's probably already waking up."

"Are you sure he's okay?" Kimberly demanded as Zack ran from the room.

"I'm sure," Jason said. "I heard enough to know he would be." He was pulling a syringe out of his uniform, which he gave to Kimberly before moving to the computer. "Brought some serum. Give Trini this. I'm going to need her help if we're going to regain access to the Command Center and the Morphing Grid."

Kimberly still glared at Jason, but she did as she was told.

Trini gasped awake as the serum instantly healed her. Kimberly steadied her on the table.

"T-Tommy," Trini said, breathing hard from the sudden awakening, or perhaps from panic. "Where is he?"

"We don't know," said Kimberly. "We... we haven't had a chance to look. We only just got away from Billy."

"Billy!" Trini looked wildly around. "He... he isn't here."

"He's outside," Jason said, "and I need your help to make sure he stays that way. Sorry, Trini," his voice softened, "but you're the only one who can do this."

Trini's face set in determination, and she hopped off the table and gently pushed Jason away from the computer terminal. "I'm strengthening security," she said. "What the...?" She began typing furiously. "He's hacked into the damn Morphing Grid."

"And has control of it," Kimberly supplied. "He made me and Zack unmorph. Jas, why are you still morphed?"

"Zordon infused me with some of his power," Jason said offhandedly. "Trini, he could be here any second."
"Yeah, I know," Trini said tightly. "How did you keep him off this long?"

"Jason hit him with a motorcycle," Zack said, returning to the room. "Extra security is set on the hole in the wall."

"Okay, later I definitely need to be filled in," Trini said. "Right now, though, I can keep Billy out, but it's going to take me hours to even start getting the Morphing Grid back."

"Just work on the Command Center, and then Zordon can do the rest," Jason said. "As long as we can teleport out before Billy..."

Kimberly screamed, breaking Trini off, as she opened the bed-like machine in the corner, revealing an unconscious and badly-beaten Tommy. At the same time, Jason launched himself across the room at Billy, who had just walked into the lab from the kitchen.

"I'm taking the fight outside!" Jason yelled behind him and he slammed Billy into the wall. "Get in Billy's car and get to the Command Center!"

"We need some serum for Tommy!" Trini yelled back, clearly torn between fear of Billy and concern for Tommy.

"Guys... wait..." Billy choked, his eyes wide with panic. "There's been a misunderstanding."

"Don't give us that bullshit again," Zack sneered. He's picked up one of the heavier components in the lab, and he was clearly ready to start throwing things again. "You've already tried to tell us that two beaten and unconscious people are actually evil. Who are you going to blame next... Alpha?"

"Actually..." Jason said.

Billy had stopped struggling, trying to gain enough breath to talk. "Throw Tommy the serum, Jason. I won't run."

Jason loosened his grip in shock. He knew evil Billy was a good actor, but...

"Jas, the serum," Kimberly said urgently.

Still staring at Billy, Jason pulled another vial of serum from under his uniform. He handed it to Zack, who passed it to Kimberly.

"So why the changed tune, Billy?" Jason said. "Evil spell wear out, or is this another game?"

Billy gulped, his eyes darting wildly about, but there was no longer any slyness about him. He wasn't predatory... just scared. "There was never an evil spell. I've been held prisoner at the Moon Palace since last night."

The four Rangers stared at him, the silence only broken by Tommy's gasp as he healed.

"What do you mean, you've been at the Moon Palace?" Trini said, her voice shaking. "I know exactly where you've been. How dare you..."

Trini, again, cut off short. There was a loud banging against the garage door, almost always closed ever since Billy turned the garage into a lab. The force field around it sizzled, but the force of the blows was enough to shake the door.

"It's a bit pathetic, Rangers," Billy's voice clearly sounded through the garage door. "I wasn't expecting you to hide like this, especially when you know it won't take me long to gain access. If an
The Rangers looked to the garage door, then to Billy, then back to the garage door.

"Uh, guys?" Tommy said weakly. "Since when are there two Billys?"

"That's not me," Billy said in a hollow voice. "It's... one of Lord Zedd's creations. He infiltrated the house last night when Tommy was gone, and then he delivered me back to Lord Zedd so he could take my place. I escaped from the Moon Palace a while ago, but I didn't have my power coin or communicator, and Zedd sent Putty patrols to slow me down. I... I'm sorry I couldn't get here sooner."

Zack had peeked out of the garage window. He immediately jumped back. "It's true," he said shakily. "There really is another Billy out there."

"So Zedd made a Billy clone," Tommy said, pulling himself painfully from the machine. Kimberly steadied him: it seemed the healing serum didn't work on him as well. Faint lines traced the cuts on his skin, and he still had a few bruises. "That makes more sense than some of my theories. But he made the clone pretty exact. That clone is exactly like you, Billy... if you were evil and superpowered."

"We can figure this out later," said Jason, finally backing away from Billy. "Right now, we need to get control back of the Command Center and Morphing Grid. Billy, can you undo what the clone did?"

"I expect I can," Billy said, running to his computer.

Trini backed away quickly. Momentary flashes of fear and anger crossed her face. She hid them, though, by moving to Tommy.

"I don't like this," she said, inspecting Tommy's unfaded wounds. "The serum should have healed you completely."

"Has to be my connection to my power coin," Tommy said in a low voice. "Don't make a big deal out of it. We have more important things to worry about."

Trini nodded. She shot a worried glance back at Billy. "Thanks, by the way," she said to Tommy. "He didn't..."

"No," Trini said quickly. "You gave me enough time to free myself, though I was too late to help anyone else," she finished bitterly.

Kimberly looked from Trini to Tommy, but didn't say anything. It wasn't the time for questions.

In the meantime, the pounding on the garage door was getting more insistent.

"He can't break through the force field with his bare hands, can he?" Zack said, positioning himself next to Jason to guard the door.

"We don't know how strong Zedd's made this thing," said Jason.

Billy was continuing to type furiously. "It seems the clone had a remote device, and he's moved all control to that. There's little I can do without the device."

"Yeah, I think I saw him with it," Tommy said.
"You mean this?" Jason asked, producing a metal cylinder. "I pulled it off him while he was unconscious… along with a few other things."

He tossed the cylinder to Billy, along with his morpher and communicator.

Billy breathed a sigh of relief. "If the clone bears as much resemblance to me as I think, I should be able to undo what he's done fairly easily."

The garage door was shaking violently, and Jason drew his sword. "Soon as you can, Billy."

With a crash and an electric sizzle, the garage door flew open… but not before the Power Rangers disappeared.

"Good work, Billy," Jason said, finally demorphing. "I didn't really want to fight that clone by myself."

"Welcome back, Rangers," Zordon said. "I take it we were wrong in our assumption of an evil spell."

"Zedd's made an evil clone of Billy," said Zack. "Freaky thing, too."

Billy, in the meantime, was already moving to a panel. "I was only able to gain teleportation, Zordon. We still need to gain access back to the Morphing Grid."

"Please place the remote on the scanning device, and I will be able to interface with it," Zordon said. "In the meantime, Billy, please see to Alpha. His primary functions have been corrupted."

Billy turned even paler, but nodded. "Where's…"

"He's just outside the security room," Jason supplied. "Don't turn him on. He was in some sort of attack mode when I shut him down."

Billy ran for the corridor. The other Rangers waited, not wanting to distract Zordon.

Kimberly helped Tommy sit on the steps, still pale. Both he and Trini had flinched away from Billy as he'd passed.

Jason edged toward the steps. "So… you and Trini have had the most contact with the clone," he said to Tommy in a low voice. "What are we dealing with?"

Tommy and Trini exchanged looks. They seemed to be silently debating how much to tell. There was a sort of understanding between them that scared the other Rangers more than what they might hear. Tommy and Trini had never been particularly close. If they were this much attuned now, that meant something truly horrible had happened.

"I didn't see much," Trini said shortly. "I came to Billy's house to help with the party and got blindsided by the clone. He's strong… really strong. We know that. And I think his endurance is not just healing. He can withstand lots of damage. I punched several pain centers, and he didn't even flinch. I… was tied up in another room for most of the time." She looked at Tommy. "Tommy made sure he didn't get to me. He goaded Billy… the clone… into beating him so I could have time to escape."

Tommy was looking away. The others seemed to accept Trini's story, though Kimberly was watching her carefully. "I…" Tommy began. He swallowed, clearly trying to put his brain back together. He finally shrugged and smiled. "The clone doesn't just have Billy's looks and intelligence. He has his memories. He decided to recreate what I did to Billy when I was evil. That might have
been just… you know… Zedd messing around with me, but I was able to goad him with stuff that
would have worked on Billy. That would have only worked on Billy." Tommy grimaced. "He's also
no slouch on torture. And he kept pumping me full of serum so he could start again."

"I'm not sure if I can ever really repay you," Trini said.

Tommy chuckled, breaking out of a reverie. "Amount of times you've saved my life…"

"Zedd's gonna pay for this one," Zack said darkly. "That clone coulda killed us all."

"But it didn't," Jason pointed out. "And it had opportunity. So what game is Zedd playing? If Zedd
just wanted to kill us, he could have made the clone do it easy."

"Are we sure Zedd has full control over the clone?" Kimberly said. "I mean, what the clone has done
seems more, like, personal, from what Tommy said."

Trini left the room abruptly. Zack made to follow, but Tommy held out a hand. "Wait…" He looked
at Kimberly. "I'm gonna be okay, but I think Trini needs you now."

Kimberly gave Tommy a slightly startled look, but then nodded and got up to follow Trini.

Billy jogged back into the room. "I've had to leave Alpha in a diagnostic scan, but he should be
operating correctly within the hour." He glanced at Tommy, flinched, and then looked away.

"How much do you know?" Jason asked him.

Billy continued to look determinedly away. "Everything. At least, since before I escaped. Zedd made
me watch. Finster even fixed my eyesight when my glasses broke during my capture, just so I could
have a front-row seat to everything the clone was doing."

"I'm sorry," Tommy said, drawing everyone's stares. "Billy… I'm sorry for what I said. I didn't
know… well, I did know you were listening, but I thought you were under a spell. I didn't know…"

"You said what you had to say," Billy said. "It… wasn't easy to hear, but I knew you didn't mean a
word of it. I'm grateful, in fact. I'm… sorry for what the clone did."

Tommy waved his hand. "Don't be. You couldn't help that Zedd picked you to be a clone."

Billy opened his mouth to say something, stopped, and then nodded.

There was a loud whirr, and then the lights turned back to normal in the Command Center. The
Rangers looked up at Zordon, expectantly.

"Rangers," Zordon began, "I have restored power to the Command Center and control over the
Morphing Grid. However," he continued darkly, "there is still much to worry about. I did not sense
any resistance to my efforts from Earth. The clone was not trying to maintain his control,
meaning…"

"He's got his sights set on something else," Jason finished. "Since we're all at the Command Center,
he's changed his objectives. But to what?"

"I have not sensed any power surges from Billy's house, which means he has not teleported away. I
can also not sense him anywhere else on Earth, so it is probable he has not left the house."

Jason, Billy, Zack, and Tommy all looked down, thinking. Then they looked at each other, panicked.
"The party!"

Will heard the doorbell ring as he put the final touches to the stereo system he'd carried from Jason's car. He turned on some music and smiled. "Party time."
The Monster Inside Me

Chapter Summary

Book 5: A Darker Shade of Blue

Part 4 of my rewrite of the episode "Blue Ranger Gone Bad."

Kimberly held on to Trini, who was shaking slightly, but not crying. She absolutely didn't know what to say. Tommy was right in sending her after Trini, but if he thought she had some sort of magic words to help...

"You're amazing, you know," she stuttered out finally. "I mean, the way you escaped and..."

"I had to," Trini replied in a low voice. "Tommy was..." Her face darkened. "I had to help him."

Kimberly tightened her grip on Trini's hand. "Zedd's so going to pay for this. This time he's gone too far."

Trini hesitated. "Yeah." She wiped her eyes, pulling away slightly. Apparently she had been crying, but silently. "Listen, I don't want the guys to know about this. It's enough they know I was held captive. They don't need to know any more. Tommy knows... but he's not going to tell."

"Of course," Kimberly said. "Are you going to be...?"

"I have to be fine, don't I?" Trini said, rather bitterly. "Not much of a choice there."

Kimberly frowned, but didn't say anything. Again, she wasn't sure what to say.

"I mean to say," Trini said in a hollow voice, "the fight has to go on. We're still Power Rangers, no matter what. Right now the clone has to be fought, and then whatever else Zedd has planned, and it doesn't really end, does it? We'll get better powers, he'll grow stronger, or someone else stronger will take his place, and in the meantime we can't ever be..." She stopped. "Tommy had to pretend he didn't know his father was dead, just to keep our identities secret." She looked up at Kimberly. "How else will we have to compromise ourselves?"

Kimberly realized this was a moment in which she could not argue, even though she couldn't help but feel that Trini was only focusing on the negative... understandable at the time, of course. She felt intense relief when she heard a knock at the door, because that meant she wouldn't have to answer.

Zack stuck his head in. "Sorry, but we're starting to plan a counterattack. Thought you'd like to know."

Kimberly realized she mustn't argue, even though she couldn't help but feel that Trini was only focusing on the negative... understandable at the time, of course. She felt intense relief when she heard a knock at the door, because that meant she wouldn't have to answer.

Zack stuck his head in. "Sorry, but we're starting to plan a counterattack. Thought you'd like to know."

Trini got up immediately, nodding without a trace of her former emotion. Kimberly watched her carefully, but she realized there was little she could do.

When they reentered the main hub of the Command Center, Billy's house was on the Viewing Globe. Billy and Jason were hunched over a console. Tommy looked like he was trying to watch as well, but he was clearly having trouble staying upright. Even after the dose of serum, his skin was sickly pale, and his eyes had a hollow quality that Kimberly didn't like. She positioned herself beside
him. It was supposed to look like she was leaning against him, but surreptitiously she allowed him to
lean on her. He shot her a grateful look, part for the help and part for not making a big production of
it.

"Oh, the damn party," Kimberly breathed, noticing the too-many shapes against the windows.

"It seems we had such an easy time regaining access to the Command Center because the clone had
other things in mind," Billy supplied. "I can't imagine what he's planning with all those civilians."

"Can't you?" Trini asked, her voice harder than usual.

Billy looked up in surprise, and perhaps... something else. Some emotion Kimberly couldn't identify.

Tommy shifted. "Sorry, Billy, but Trini's got kind of a point. She and I have spent the most time with
the clone, and... he's incredibly similar to you. He's got your memories, your intelligence, your..."

"He isn't me," Billy insisted. "I was the first person the clone attacked, remember? And... the stuff he
did..." He cast an uncomfortable look, first to Tommy, and then to Trini. "I'm nothing like him."

Jason clapped a hand on Billy's shoulder. "Look, man, that's not what they're saying. They're not
blaming you for what happened. What they're saying is that if that really is a clone... like, a you if
you were evil... you've got special insight into what it will do. And you're the only one of us who
can match its intelligence."

"And looking at how fast and strong that thing is," Zack supplied, "we need every advantage we can
get."

Tommy shook his head. "We can cope with how fast and strong it is. I figure it's about as fast and as
strong as any of us morphed. What's really dangerous is the whole healing thing. Even if we can best
the clone in a fight, how can we destroy it?"

Zordon, perhaps taking pity with how uncomfortable Billy was looking, finally broke in. "I believe
Billy is the one most qualified to study the clone, to see what weaknesses the clone has. The rest of
you must protect your classmates. While they are at Billy's house, they are at the clone's mercy."

"Right, Zordon," Jason said. "We don't have a lot of time. We need to find a way to infiltrate the
party. We have to distract the clone and get everyone out. We'll go down there, morphed. We take
no chances. Zack and I will take the frontal attack, while Tommy and Kim will evacuate everyone as
quickly as you can. Billy and Trini, in the meantime..."

"Jas?" Trini interrupted. "I want to go down with the rest of you. You need me to help figure out any
security the clone will throw at us... and I think Billy can work better at this alone," she said, without
looking at Billy.

Jason nodded. "Fine. You're with me and Zack, and then once we're through the front door, you run
to the back to help out Kim and Tommy. Billy... we'll try to keep the clone engaged, but we really
don't know all of its capabilities. The sooner you can get any information to us, the better."

"Understood," Billy said, already moving to a terminal.

Jason looked darkly at the Viewing Globe, which still showed the all-too-peaceful view of Billy's
house. "It's been twenty minutes since the party started. Who knows what he's doing to them?"
"And this is why you need a nerd at the party," Will said with a smirk, pulling a crank on a small freezer unit. There was a grinding sound, and what looked like steam shot from the lining around the unit's case. Will opened it and tossed a can to a nearby football player.

He near dropped it. "Damn... it's cold! It was warm just a few seconds ago. How'd you do that?"

The crowd who'd gathered to watch the show murmured in amazement as Will started passing the beer around.

"Trade secret," Will laughed. "Just try not to wreck the house too much."

The crowd started to disperse, the music having turned to something danceable, but quite a few people stayed around Will. He shot them a few confused glances, but shrugged and went with it.

"You haven't seen Kimberly, have you, Billy?" a cheerleader Will thought was named Tracey asked. "Or is she pulling one of her disappearing acts?"

Michael, the football player who was still passing his cold beer back and forth between his hands, laughed. "Have you tried Tommy's room?"

Tracey peeked down the hallway at the conspicuously closed door. She returned, grinning mischievously. "Finally. She's been obsessing over him for, like, forever."

Will let them talk, answered when addressed... marveled at the ease of the conversation. Billy had always dreaded social gatherings. Feared his own awkwardness, feared being shut out by these people, feared leaving his own group of friends.

But they were all just people. Easily impressed, easily manipulated. A little light show and cold beer, and the years of him being an outcast were forgotten.

He could hear, even above the music and loud talk, footsteps. Three at the front door, two at the back, all wearing boots. He smiled, opened his own beer, and took a drink. They wouldn't be able to breach security for at least another half an hour. He had time.

Pain lanced through his head yet again, but he'd learned to ignore it by now. The pain never really went away anymore, so the sudden bursts were easier to handle.

Two voices in the laundry room... At first, he assumed it was a couple just trying to gain some private time, but then he picked out the actual words.

"Bulky, do you really think any of these people are the Power Rangers?" Skull whispered. "I mean, we go to school with everyone here. We know all of these people."

"We can't rule anyone out," Bulk answered irritably. "And if not... it's a party. Just enjoy it."

Will smirked and took another huge swig out of his beer can before getting up. Again, not his business... but Billy had some unfinished business with those two.

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Tommy and Kimberly stood on either side of the back door, waiting for the signal. Tommy leaned against the wall and wished he could have waited until the last minute to morph, or even lying in the bed only a few feet away.

He was grateful, though, that Jason had included him on the mission. He had to have known that
Tommy was drained, but he didn't force him to stay in the Command Center. Of course, he'd given him the least taxing job and kept Kimberly right beside him... but that was better than watching all this on the Viewing Globe.

Kimberly gently leaned her helmet against the wall. "Some night, huh?" she said in a low voice.

Tommy chuckled. "Not quite what we expected, huh?"

"Oh, I wanted to be alone with you," she said. "The plan just involved less clothes... not more."

Again, Tommy longed for the bed... but now for different reasons.

"Trini... she told me what you went through..." Kimberly's voice went even lower. "Tommy... are you...?"

"Okay?" Tommy finished for her. He considered. He thought about saying something snarky, or saying something reassuring. He knew Kimberly wouldn't take either reply. She knew him too well. "I think once I actually stop enough to think about it, I won't be okay," he said finally, surprising himself with his honesty.

Even past the helmet, he could feel Kimberly's eyes on him.

"I mean..." He found it easier to talk to her now that he'd started. "It was different from all those other times I almost died. I couldn't escape. I couldn't see an end in sight. I even had to keep egging him on, because I knew the alternative." Tommy paused. "I never really knew, never understood, what I'd done to Billy before. What I'd done to you, too." He looked up at Kimberly and felt his throat closing up.

"Tommy, what you did to me was nothing." She paused. "Well, it wasn't nothing, but it never damaged me like you thought it would. I got angry, and then I could deal with it." She looked away. "Trini's angry. I could tell. She never let the situation control her. Tommy... you've got to get angry."

"At who?" Tommy said. "Billy? Wasn't his fault. Not even the clone's fault, as he's just doing what he was built for."

"And what about Zedd?"

Tommy shook his head. He wouldn't tell her, but he couldn't even feel anger at Zedd. All he could feel was dread.

Kimberly made an irritated noise. "Come on, Tommy. Don't think I don't know why you suddenly decided it was time to move our relationship ahead all of the sudden. I've been wanting this for months, but you kept saying we needed to wait until we were ready. Now suddenly you're ready... just after Zedd said you had a lifespan of two more weeks. It's... it's like you're taking him seriously. Like you've already given up."

Tommy was starting to not like honesty all that much... but he knew she was right. "Kim... Zedd banished Rita and almost killed Scorpina. He's sworn my death, and I can't stay morphed half the time without a super-dangerous power transfer from Zordon." He gulped. "But... you have to know I'm not giving up. I'm just also being realistic."

"And you really think I'd let you die?" Kimberly said. "We still have stuff to do, and sex is only one of those things. You're not dying, mister. Not if I have to kill Lord Zedd himself, and Goldar along with him."
Something in the way Kimberly said this made him feel less tired, gave him hope. "Thanks," he said, not trusting himself to say more.

"Besides," Kimberly said, "do you realize how long it would take me to train up another boyfriend?"

If Trini hadn't had protective gloves on, she would have been burned as soon as she pulled out the panel.

"Did the clone fix the house?" Zack whispered. "That hole I made is completely gone."

"Looks like it," said Trini. "And he's strengthened security. The forcefield covers the whole house, not just the doors and windows. It's running through the walls as well, from what I can tell." She frowned. "This is going to take forever. I think this thing is even smarter than Billy."

Jason frowned at the walls. "Wouldn't that eat up a lot of energy? I mean, I think I remember Billy designing security to use some electricity, but then he borrows most of the energy from the Command Center so our power bills don't go through the roof."

"Yes... you'll remember, I helped design those security systems as well," Trini answered. "But we've already severed the connection between this house and the Morphing Grid."

"Could he be getting his power from Zedd?" Zack asked.

"That's most probable," Trini said. "Now, please, I need to concentrate."

Jason nodded and stood at one side of the door. They couldn't open the door, but perhaps the door could be opened from the inside, and if a party-goer decided to cut out early, they could take that opportunity. They couldn't count on that, though. In the meantime, all they could do was wait.

One plus, he thought, was that it didn't sound horrible in the house. No screams of terror. It just sounded like a party: the one he had planned with his friends. He gritted his teeth. One more piece of life Zedd had cheated him out of.

Billy tried to keep his mind on his work, to keep his eyes off the Viewing Globe, to not feel Zordon's eyes bore into the back of his neck.

"I was able to collect a tissue sample," Billy said, "from the blood on Jason's uniform. It will take the computer a few minutes to run the analysis. In the meantime, we should evaluate how strong and resilient the clone is."

Zordon didn't answer at first. Billy looked up to see Zordon concentrating. After a few seconds, his eyes refocused. "Billy, I was able to access some information. I am sending it to your terminal."

"Right, Zordon," Billy said, wondering what kind of information Zordon had that could help them at all.

As soon as he saw the read-outs, his heart started pounding. His hands fell from the terminal, and the air seemed to have left the room.

"Zordon... I..."
"I was able to gain access to your lab's computer," Zordon interrupted. "It did not take me long to find your... project. Explain your actions."

Billy winced. He'd never heard Zordon sound like that. He'd heard Zordon angry, frustrated, and even afraid, but this...

"I..." Billy licked his lips. His mouth was completely dry. "I was just trying..." His brain, usually so helpful with plans and possibilities, was frozen. "I'm sorry, Zordon. I can't explain my actions."

"Billy, please look at me."

Billy forced himself to look up at Zordon, and it was suddenly worse, because now he could see not anger, but disappointment etched over the features of that face. Fear and shame hit him like nausea, but he kept staring up, trying to steel himself for what was to come.

Zordon sighed. "I know you have an explanation. I know you have your reasons. However, I also know that you have realized that, in the wake of what has happened, those explanations have proven feeble.

"I am going to explain to you what you have done, partly because this is what you must learn, and partly because it will help you save your friends from what you've done. I know you have stolen technology from the Command Center, technology I expressly forbade you from using. I did not explain fully why, and I was perhaps remiss in that. The cloning process you've used has been banned through most of the known galaxy. I will not list the wars and disasters caused by cloning, as you have experienced that disaster on a small scale. The treaty between Rita and myself specifically addressed cloning, and, while not held to a treaty, Lord Zedd would never go so far as to create a clone. He would only allow you to do so, and then manipulate the circumstances.

"Clones are unstable. When you create a clone, you are creating a body. What comes with the body, what animates the body, is the problem. Most clones fail to gain independent thought, and are simply automatons, lower than Putties. The ones who gain consciousness beyond the mere physical... those are the dangerous ones. Most of them lack morality... pity... and eventually sanity."

Billy somehow found his voice. Even though he felt like he was dying, he was utterly fascinated by everything Zordon was saying. "Zordon, are you saying the problem with the clone is that... he doesn't have a soul?"

Zordon considered. "That interpretation is fine, though imprecise. The clone you created was linked to the Morphing Grid, so that allowed for consciousness, but the other effects are unpredictable. From the clone's actions, it seems as if Trini and Tommy were correct: your clone has your memories, your personality... and frustrations and desires. It seems the clone has made it his goal to achieve what you could not. Unfortunately, your lingering resentment for Tommy and your crush on Trini, in the clone's mind, become sadistic torture and attempted rape."

Billy felt himself grow even sicker. "I... I had no idea. I didn't know this was going to happen. I just thought... It was the next logical step in my research..."

"And so it was," Zordon affirmed. "If I had known which direction your research and experiments were taking, I would have warned you... tried to guide you. But you did not allow that. You hid all this from everyone, even to the point of tapping into the Morphing Grid and making sure I wouldn't notice." Zordon closed his eyes, as if momentarily overwhelmed by his disappointment. "However, we do not have time to analyze all of the ramifications of your irresponsible actions. For now, we must correct what you've done. Now that you're not trying to hide anything from me, we can study the clone more effectively and see if there's a solution, before the clone can cause any more harm to
Billy wanted to run away from Zordon's gaze, wanted to shut himself away... but he couldn't. He knew that his friends were counting on him, and he'd already let them down so much without their knowing. He moved back to the console, pulling up his initial work on the clone design.

"Zordon?" His voice sounded small in the echoing chamber. "About the others..."

He stopped. Zordon didn't say anything, though he probably knew what Billy was going to ask. He always knew.

"Could... could you not tell the others what I did? I mean, they don't have to know."

Zordon still said nothing.

"Please." Billy's voice got thicker with emotion. "Zordon, I couldn't stand it if they knew. If they knew that... it was all my fault. What happened to Trini. To Tommy. They'd... they'd never forgive me. Please don't tell them."

"So you wish me to participate in deceiving your friends, so they can continue to believe you the helpless victim of Lord Zedd's cruelty."

Billy couldn't look up at Zordon. His glasses were fogging up from the tears he'd tried so hard to hold back.

"Very well, Billy," Zordon said coldly. "I will not volunteer the information. However, that is because you will tell them."

Billy looked up, his eyes wide.

Zordon's face was stern, though there seemed to be pity lurking behind the sternness. "I must remind you how your friends react to being manipulated and lied to. I will allow you to choose when and how to tell them that the clone is your creation. If you fail to do this, I must reconsider your appointment as the Blue Ranger. Please do not argue... that is my final word."

Billy shut his mouth against the protests that were already forming and forced himself to continue his work. He had to save his friends... even if they probably wouldn't be his friends for very much longer.

Will considered the people who surrounded him. How easily they were swayed. The day before, they would not even have looked at him... or, at least, they would never have looked at Billy. The most popular he had been was when he was in the hospital after being attacked by an evil Power Ranger. But now... lose the glasses, play some music, chill the beer, and suddenly he was visible. He was worth their time.

At the same time, he found himself having to keep a sneer from his lips. What had made him want their acknowledgment, their approval? Why had he gone through agonies at every snub, even cruel laugh? What did they matter? They were shallow, barely even people. They flitted their way through life while wars raged around them, all the while making themselves feel a little better by preying on the weak.

And speaking of preying on the weak... there was Bulk and Skull. Will did not feel the same type of
contempt for them. Oh, they mattered. They knew exactly what it was to be rejected, to be on the outside, and instead of gaining empathy, they’d taken it out on Billy. They’d hurt him… all the while knowing exactly what they were doing, exactly the type of pain they were causing. Sure, Billy had eventually stopped them… but that didn’t make up for years of misery.

And here they were, in his home, enjoying themselves. Acting as if they belonged there.

Will stayed in the kitchen. He watched the two circulate around the party, conducting their little investigation. That’s why they’d come… as part of some ridiculous plan to find the identities of the Power Rangers. Again, to find people better than themselves, and drag those people down… all to makes themselves feel better.

They would be coming to the kitchen now, searching for beer and party food. Will grinned as they approached.

"Billy!" Bulk said, a little taken aback at seeing the host of the party he was crashing. "Great party! Listen… no hard feelings about what I said earlier, right? I was just kind of giving you a hard time."

Will didn’t answer, but continued to grin.

Bulk smile faltered, and he was obviously searching for something to say, or even an escape.

Skull spoke up in the silence. "Hey, where’s Kim? Rest of your friends? I thought you guys all planned this together."

"Been listening in on people's conversations?" Will said slowly. "Is that what you do now? Bullying not enough anymore?"

The atmosphere shifted perceptibly in the room. Both Bulk and Skull took a step back, clearly not prepared to answer to a vindictive former victim. Of course, they really had no idea what they were getting into.

Will pressed a button on the remote in his pocket, and the kitchen door shut and locked.

"Did I ever properly thank you two," Will said, his voice growing softer as he enjoyed the looks of growing fright on the other boys, "for making my life a living hell?"

Bulk looked like he was trying to make words, but they never got past his mouth. Skull's eyes were darting around for an escape. Oh, how this was glorious. The growing fear, the attempts to reason or run away… lovely childhood memories played out before him in his former tormenters. Justice couldn't get more poetic.

He had just decided to start on the kneecaps—no fun tackling football players without those—when a voice filled his head, adding enough to the pain that he almost blacked out.

"The Power Rangers and Zordon were within your grasp, and you prefer to play with insignificant children."

The voice was unmistakably Lord Zedd’s. Bulk and Skull's lack of reaction proved that the voice was solely in Will's head. A type of telepathy.

Will shut his eyes and thought back. "Leave me alone. You couldn't even keep my creator out of the way."

There was a pause, and Will thought he had actually scared Lord Zedd off. That is, until the slight
buzzing of his forcefield disappeared. Zedd didn't have to speak. The message was clear: Will was not to be distracted from fighting the Power Rangers.

He regarded the pathetic shells of the two people he'd once most feared. It was true; they were insignificant. It was time to move on... to the people just outside the back door.

Trini stopped working. "Security's down, and I didn't do it." She looked at Jason. "Ideas?"

They heard a crash in the backyard, and Jason cursed. "Sounds like I didn't put Tommy in the safest place after all." He looked to the side of the house. Putties on one side, and probably on the other as well. "It's gonna take too long to get past those. We'll have to run through the house, but that'll cause a panic, and we can't let anyone think there's a monster fight at Billy's house."

"Just leave it to me." Zack's unfiltered voice broke in, and Jason and Trini were surprised to see him unmorphed. He winked. "Keep out of the way, and don't worry."

Jason and Trini pulled back into the shadows as Zack threw open the door and rushed into the house. The music cut, there were a few angry yells, but Zack's voice rose above the din.

"Cops are on their way!"

The effect was instantaneous. There was panic, sure, but panic of long practice as the teens filed out of the house and dispersed in twos and threes. Few had brought their cars, and the ones who piled pedestrians in their cars obviously hadn't had enough time to get drunk. The street was clear in five minutes.

As soon as the coast was clear, Zack morphed and Jason and Trini ran into the house after him. Jason threw himself through the kitchen door and nearly plowed into Bulk and Skull.

They didn't seem to be very aware of their surroundings. They looked a bit petrified. Jason guessed that the clone had decided to play with them before the attack. Thankfully they didn't look harmed, though they would have to find out later how much the two knew. "You two," he said roughly to snap them out of their stupors. "Get the hell out of here."

Jason still wasn't sure if they were all that aware of what was going on, but at least that got them moving, and in the right direction. Jason trusted their long practice of running from monsters to keep them safe and ran to the back yard.

The three Rangers froze. The Billy clone was holding a knife to an unmorphed Tommy's throat. Kimberly had her bow trained on them, but she was already lowering it, knowing she couldn't shoot the clone without hurting Tommy.

"Red Ranger," the clone growled. It was breathing hard, though it couldn't be from the fight. Any injuries it had sustained were quickly healing, whereas there were several black marks on Kimberly's uniform and Tommy looked near dead. "You ran me over with a motorcycle."

"You see to be doing fine now," Jason said, purposefully keeping his voice light. "How 'bout you let Tommy go so we can settle that?"

The clone's face looked wild, and Jason for once had no problem seeing that this creature wasn't Billy. "What, and then fight? Four against one? Shame on you, Jason. Thought you had more honor than that."
"You dare to even mention honor?" Trini's voice was brittle.

The clone regarded her coldly, its face not reflecting the least bit of shame. "I suppose honor is for men." Its eyes slipped a little further into madness. "And that is one thing I can never be. I'm something else, aren't I? I'm not human. And that's what scares you, what makes you all hunt me."

"Right now I think it has more to do with the knife you're holding to my throat," Tommy pointed out, his voice rough with exhaustion.

"Yes, you are all quick to point out that I attacked first," the clone said. "I readily admit that. But what chance did I have? What choice did I have? Do you actually say that any of you would have allowed me to live?"

No one spoke. The words were utterly confusing. No monster had ever spoken like this.

"If you wanted help we would have given you help," Jason said. "All you had to do was ask. If you knew anything about us, like you pretend to, you would know that we help people, even the ones who have hurt us... if they want help. If they want to change."

The clone was starting to sweat, its grip on the knife shaking. "High words, Red Ranger. I wish I could believe them."

Without warning, the clone threw Tommy toward the Power Rangers and tossed the knife aside. Zack caught Tommy, and as soon as he was out of the way Jason had drawn his sword. Kimberly in an instant drew up her bow and began firing.

The clone's face momentarily showed his surprise, but it adapted quickly. It picked Kimberly's arrows out of the air and threw them aside, then easily sidestepped both Jason's and Trini's first attacks.

One by one the four Power Rangers attacked, and one by one the clone sent them sprawling. He was faster than fast, and even if it wasn't as strong and was fighting bare-handed, it deflected and used their own power against them.

"Okay," Zack said under his breath to Jason, "this is starting to get embarrassing."

"There's no way a monster could be this powerful," Trini supplied. "Even Zedd's first monster wasn't this good. Where's it drawing its power?"

"We don't know what Zedd's capable of," said Tommy, his voice once again filtered through his helmet. "I have a feeling he was playing around with us last time."

"Tommy, get the hell out of here," Jason said, keeping his eyes on the clone. "You're no good to us like this. And tell Billy to hurry it up. We can't last much longer."

Jason waited for Tommy to protest, but he was surprised to hear the crackle of teleportation.

The clone looked amused. "He wasn't able to stay morphed for more than a minute. I suppose he didn't want you to know."

"Okay..." Jason was trying to hold on to the last shred of sanity in this situation. It had to end, and quickly. This was one fight that could never show up on the news. It would generate too many questions. "Listen, it sounds like you're not too keen on Lord Zedd, and I don't say I blame you. But you're accomplishing nothing by fighting us, just like we're apparently not accomplishing anything by fighting you. We're not your enemy. We don't want to hurt you. And we can make sure Zedd
never gets to you, if you just work with us."

The clone rolled its eyes, and for a second it looked like Billy did when anyone was too slow on the uptake. "How should I know what Lord Zedd wants? I imagine right now he wants chaos, and I'm only too happy to oblige. But you still don't get it." Its lips curled back in a snarl. "I'm not afraid of any of you, or anyone, really. You can't hurt me, none of you can. You all stand there, so assured in your superiority, when I'm faster, stronger, smarter, invulnerable... I'm practically a god..."

It broke off, falling to the ground and shrieking. It held its head in its hands as if it should explode.

Billy, morphed, emerged through the back door, pointing a device at the clone. He twisted a knob, and the clone stopped screaming. It looked up from the ground, and the Rangers drew back. Blood was trickling from its nose, mouth, and eyes.

"You are not a god," Billy said calmly. "You are an automaton, and a failed one at that. Your brain is deteriorating by the second, and certain sonic waves can accelerate the process... just as they can suspend the process." He paused. "If you wish, I can help you. But you have to stop hurting people. You have to stop working for Lord Zedd."

"Billy, I know he looks like you and everything," Kimberly said with a low voice, "but think about what you're saying. Do you really want to help one of Lord Zedd's monsters? Tommy was one thing, but this one was created by Zedd in the first place."

"I was?"

The Rangers looked at the clone, who had pulled itself to its feet. The blood was no longer flowing, but it didn't look as if the clone had recovered in quite the same dramatic way as so many times before.

"Wait, you didn't realize Zedd created you?" Zack said.

The clone did not answer. Instead, it was looking straight at Billy, its face calculating. Billy stared back, the device forgotten in his hand.

"That's right," the clone said slowly. "That... clarifies things immensely. Forgive me, Rangers, but I must have a few words with my... creator. Enjoy the momentary reprieve."

With that, the clone vanished.

Will appeared in the throne room and laughed. Laughed harder than he had in his whole life, literally. The laughs echoed unpleasantly around the room, making even Will's skin prickle, but he continued nonetheless.

"I am glad to see you in such excellent spirits," Lord Zedd boomed from his throne, "and yet I fail to see the cause of this hilarity, particularly since you have failed in every objective thus far, and the Blue Ranger now has the means of your destruction."

Will cut off, still grinning. "Oh, very good. You've summed it all succinctly, in your limited fashion."

The room turned a dangerous red, and lightning lanced from Zedd's staff. Will, however, caught the lightning with one hand and threw it out of the balcony across the moon sky.
"You cannot threaten me, Zedd," Will said in a soft voice, relishing the backwards step of Lord Zedd, the only clue as to his fear. "I have been growing in power ever since my creation, drawing more and more power straight from the Morphing Grid. I am also dying." The pain was sharp, but the constant nature of it somehow made him more able to endure. "You knew I was unstable and did nothing to warn me. You merely wanted me for your own purposes. Well, looks like you got your wish. I'll take care of the Power Rangers. In fact, I'll take care of all of Angel Grove for you. You just stay the hell out of my way from now on."

Will turned his back on Zedd, not giving him enough time to respond. It would all be threats and attempts to placate him anyway. He didn't need Zedd. All he needed was in Finster's lab. He pushed roughly past Goldar, not even giving him a second glance, and barged into the lab.

"I need to use your lab," Will said, barely even looking at Finster. "If you try to stop me or raise a hand to me in any way, I will kill you. Understood?"

"Completely," Finster said drily, moving back into a corner of the lab. "I take it you are starting to deteriorate. I hope you don't expect me to try to solve your problems."

Will chuckled as he pulled various devices from shelves, immediately intuiting the purpose and design for each. "I wouldn't expect you to. I've long given up any illusions of help. I am a creature, an automaton. I am here to be destroyed, not helped."

Finster was staring at the components Will was gathering. "I will say, however, that none of those devices will help your problems. None of them are medical or biological in nature. In fact..." He trailed off.

"Caught on, have you?" Will said with a smirk, not pausing in his swift work. "I feel my insides decaying even as we're standing here. I'm not going to survive, not even if you and Billy and a whole team of experts got together to save me. I'm smarter than all of you and I know it can't be done." He hefted the device. "But that doesn't mean I can't take everyone with me."

Jason dispatched the last of the Putties. The ones guarding the sides of the house had been left to their own devices after the clone teleported up, and those devices ended up being an attempt to dismantle Billy's house. Thus, rather than teleport to the Command Center and regroup, the Rangers had spent their time fighting Putties while trying not to hurt the house too much.

"Guys, in the back yard!" Kimberly said in a harsh whisper.

The five looked up to see a car coming down the street. As they ran behind the house, the car pulled into Kimberly's driveway.

"At least they never found out about the party," said Zack. "They're home early."

"Yeah, it's a good thing the clone attack kept us from getting grounded," Kimberly said wryly.

"I don't get why the clone went and disappeared on us," Jason said. "What sort of game is Zedd playing? Sending us a monster that didn't know it was a monster? What did the clone think it was doing? It couldn't have thought it was Billy. And if it did... why attack us?"

"Is there something you're not telling us, Billy?" Trini said. "How did you figure out how to defeat the clone so quickly?"
Billy was pointedly not looking at Trini, though his face was hidden by his helmet. "I... the clone has some sentience. And he knew he was a clone of me, but he doesn't want to be me. He calls himself Will." Billy looked up. "I'm not sure how Zedd's using him, but I'm pretty sure Will is out for himself. Zordon has information on clones... including their instability. It's actually against galactic law to create a clone like him because of that instability."

"Zedd's not one for keeping to the rules, apparently," Jason said. "Let's get back to the Command Center, see if we can predict where the clone's going to strike next."

Their communicators beeped, followed by Zordon's voice. "Rangers, the clone is at the very center of town. He seems to be planting an impact bomb. If this bomb is allowed to go off, it will completely destroy Angel Grove and kill everyone in it."

"So much for subtlety," Kimberly groused.

"We read you Zordon," said Jason. "Billy, we'll distract the clone while you take care of the bomb. I'll take the device so you can concentrate."

Billy reluctantly handed Jason the device. "You're not going to..."

"If you're right, and the clone has sentience, we can't kill him outright," Jason said firmly, meaning also to let the others know his plan. "He's hurt us... some of us more than others... but he might have been coerced or acting out of fear or ignorance. We have to give him a chance. Everyone clear on that?"

Kimberly took a quick glance at Trini, who was nodding. She nodded as well, along with Zack.

"So we take care of Angel Grove first, of course," Jason continued, "and then we see what we can do for the clone. Our job is to distract and incapacitate."

"I'll help with the bomb," Trini said. "If that's okay."

"Right," Jason said. "Zordon, teleport us to the clone's coordinates."

Tommy wished he had the energy to pace. Instead, all he could do was to sit on the stairs, leaning against a console, and watch the Viewing Globe.

"I should be down there."

"Tommy, you must rest before you try to enter the battle."

Tommy flinched at Alpha's voice, who had recovered minutes ago and was now monitoring power levels at a computer console. He hadn't realized he'd spoken aloud.

"What for?" Tommy said. "It's not like I'm any help to the Rangers, even when I'm all rested up. May as well be down there with the bomb," he added sullenly.

"You must not think like this," Zordon said. "You are a valuable member of the Power Rangers..."

"Come on, Zordon, what have I done today that hasn't been completely humiliating?" Tommy broke in, not really wanting to hear a pep talk. "I get taken prisoner by the clone. Trini's able to escape, but I can only hang there like a punching bag. Then I get taken prisoner... again... failing to fight the clone with Kimberly. And then I can't even hold a morph for more than a few seconds, so I turn tail..."
and run." Tommy swallowed hard. "I'm useless. No, worse than useless. I'm a liability."

"What has happened today has not been your fault," Zordon said firmly. "You are as strong and brave a warrior as you ever were... even more so, now that you're fighting under the most adverse of conditions."

"I couldn't spot a clone when it's right in front of me," Tommy reminded him. "I should have seen it... should have known it wasn't Billy. I could have..."

Tommy trailed off, and Zordon didn't answer. Tommy knew what Zordon would say, that it was profitless to second guess himself like this. That he was dwelling on his own problems while his friends were in danger, and they all needed to focus on getting everyone out alive.

Or maybe Zordon wouldn't have said the last part, but it was what Tommy knew. His frustration over his weak powers was not only a wish to help his friends. He wanted to fight, to be powerful, to be a Power Ranger. He wanted the powers... and they were slipping through his fingers.

"After they beat the clone," Tommy finally said, "we've got to come up with some permanent solution to my powers. I just can't go on like this."

"Agreed, Tommy," Zordon said, clearly heartened that he was sounding more positive.

He didn't know that Tommy was getting more and more sure that it would be Zedd who came up with this final solution... at the end of two weeks.

Will stood up and faced the Rangers as soon as he heard the crackle of teleportation. They were all standing in a darkened, deserted street; a street made up entirely of offices, where no one was working late on a Saturday night, though that would not save them. The explosion would take out most of the city. The bomb was placed at the feet of a statue of some old politician none of them recognized. It was deadly quiet.

"I see you've taken charge of that device, Red Ranger," Will said quietly, his voice echoing across the plaza. "Going to murder me?"

"Not if I can help it," Jason said. "Will... that's your name, right?"

Will's eyes widened. He didn't respond.

"Will," Jason continued, "you said you never had a chance. Never had a choice. Now... let's just forget what all that's happened. We can get back to that later. Right now, all that matters is... I'm giving you that chance. Come with us, and we will devote everything we have to helping you. All you have to do is disable that bomb."

Will smirked. "You always were good at giving speeches. What if I said there was nothing that can be done to save me? That I was going to die, no matter what?" He chuckled. "It's coming. I can feel it, in my head. I have less than an hour. Honestly... I'd rather go out by bomb, and take you all out with me."

"I can't believe that."

This time it was Billy who spoke. He stepped forward, and Jason stepped aside, shooting a quick glance at Trini, who nodded.
Will noticed all of this. He knew that either his creator or Trini would try to disable the bomb, and everyone else would try to distract him. Wondering what would happen, he started to pace, moving away from the bomb. Perhaps he'd even engage in some violence, just to see what happened. All of his plans ended with the bomb—the one on the ground or the one in his head. He was starting not to care which.

"I can't believe you would destroy everything. That you would give up hope so easily," Billy continued. "You're a clone of me. In a sick way, you've acted like me this entire time. Zordon said you had no conscience... no soul... but I don't believe it. You wouldn't care so much about everything if you didn't have a soul."

"Plenty of people with souls have caused plenty of suffering," Will retorted. "History is full of them. Perhaps all of these villains—even the monsters—have souls." His eyes hardened. He had approached Billy, and they were circling each other, as if to fight... but they would not fight. Maybe. Trini was headed for the bomb, and the others were on standby, Jason at the ready with the device that would kill Will quicker. "And since when did you start believing in souls, or anything that couldn't be proven by hard science? Hasn't that been your problem all along? Pure materialism, without taking into account the spiritual?"

Billy swallowed. "I have been guilty of some... oversights... but that doesn't mean nothing matters, like you seem to think," he said. "I know you don't think of yourself as me. I know you hold me in contempt. And maybe that's partially my fault. I... I want to make it up to you. I can help you; I can fix you. Please, let me try."

Will smiled slowly, his heart hammering. This was it... the ultimate defeat. The one his creator had fashioned for himself. "How is it your fault? After all, I'm one of Zedd's monsters, aren't I?"

Billy was silent. The other Rangers were staring at him, clearly perplexed. Will allowed the silence to draw on.

"Oh, go ahead and say it already," Trini called out from behind them.

Will turned. She was in the process of teleporting the bomb away... to let it detonate in deep space. An oversight. He closed his eyes. The last one he would ever make.

"Go on, Billy," Trini repeated. "Everyone else is going to figure it out eventually."

Billy was visibly trembling... or perhaps Will was shaking so much with the pain he looked like he was trembling.

"I created the clone. It... it was my fault." Billy's voice was choked, but he forced himself to go on. "I tapped into the Morphing Grid and used stolen technology from the Command Center."

Will's smile broadened as he watched the other three Power Rangers draw back from Billy, clearly shocked. There is was. All the revenge he needed on his creator.

"Will, let me help you. I can fix you... please. Just come back to the Command Center with me, and..."

He was still trying. Billy's life was in shambles, but he was still trying to make everything better. "So..." Will's voice was rough, and he realized his vision was starting to fade. It was going all fuzzy... like he needed glasses. "Still trying to fix things. Still thinking I can be repaired, like a broken circuit. Well, you're wasting your time. It's too late for me." He coughed, and he was sure blood was coming out with it. "But I got some of my own back. You get to watch yourself die, and
now everyone knows what you did... that you're responsible for everything I did." He looked around at Trini, who drew back. "Think you'll ever forgive him? Or will you always see him tying you to the bed instead of me?"

"Stop it," Billy said.

"Oh, don't like to hear the truth," Will laughed painfully. Another round of coughs brought him to his knees. "I get it. But know this, dear creator... the truth's all you have now. Victor Frankenstein... the man who tried to play god. The man who couldn't take responsibility for his own creation. You've spent your life being so perfect: the honor student, the good boy, the righteous hero, the scientific prodigy... Now you're the monster."

He couldn't see Billy's face, but he knew what he would find behind the helmet... and it made him happy. He had destroyed his creator just as surely as his creator had destroyed him.

He was lying on the ground now, waiting for unconsciousness. It would...

His mind flew into panic. The serum. It wouldn't allow him to go unconscious. The serum running through his veins would keep him alive and awake enough to feel every bit of his body fail until there was not enough body to support the serum. How long would that take? How long would he have to endure...

"Jason..." he croaked out, desperate to voice his request before he lost the ability to speak, "you have to kill me with the device. The serum's not letting me die properly. I'm going to..."

He saw Jason nod. He smiled, ready for oblivion. Jason activated the device.

Nothing happened. Will had lost his sense of hearing, but he could see Jason fumbling with the device, and then force it into Billy's hands.

Will had already figured out what was wrong. He was too far gone for the device to work. The device was tied to the Morphing Grid, and Will had completely lost his connection to the Morphing Grid only moments before.

He stared up in the sky, resigned to his fate, just in time to see lightning hit him and erase everything.

Jason saw Billy drop the device. That lightning was oh-so-familiar.

The smoke cleared, and in the place where the clone had been lying moments before stood a monster... a blue werewolf.

It did not speak. It growled and screamed, its voice eerily similar to Billy's, the last agony and frustration of the clone creating madness in the form of a monster.

"Rangers, form up!" Jason yelled. "If Zedd's changed it enough, maybe it doesn't have regeneration anymore."

Before the Rangers could react any further, the wolf had attacked, running straight at Billy. Billy threw his arms up, only weekly trying to deflect the attacks. Zack, the closest, drew his axe and sliced at the monster.

There were no sparks. Instead, blood flew through the air. Jason wanted to throw up, even as the cold warrior part of him noticed that the wolf wasn't healing from that attack. This wouldn't be like a normal monster fight. They would have to kill the clone-turned-wolf in a more literal sense.
Jason drew his sword and steeled himself. He noticed that Kimberly and Trini had hung back for an instant, but then they drew their weapons as well, ready to do what was necessary.

In one sense, Jason knew they were doing the clone a favor. He hadn't gotten to know Will very well, but he knew that the clone, there at the end, wanted a quick, painless death. He hadn't wanted to be anyone's puppet or creature. More than anything, he'd wanted freedom.

If they had to kill him to give that to him, they would.

The werewolf screamed through the attacks, seemingly obvious to the multiple wounds across its hide. Blood painted the plaza, but it kept attacking, lashing out with razor-sharp claws that sent the Rangers fling whenever the blows struck home.

It wasn't aiming for anything. No strategy. There was no sense at all in its attacks. The wolf just lashed out in a mad rage, all teeth and claws and flailing limbs. It wasn't like fighting a monster at all. It was like putting down a dumb beast.

"Come on, guys, let's end this," Jason yelled in a ragged voice. "Bring the weapons together."

But before they could begin, the wolf let out a piercing scream, louder than any, and then a whimper. A lance was embedded in its chest. The wolf fell, thrashing about in agony.

Billy stood over it, his other lance poised over the wolf. "I'm sorry," Billy's voice sobbed. "I'm so sorry. I..."

In one swift movement, Billy brought his lance down on the wolf's skull, crushing it. The wolf laid still, and then vanished utterly.

Billy demorphed, and the other four followed him. They knew somehow that Zedd would not attack them at that moment. He'd already done enough to them.

"Zedd must have known the only way to kill him would be to change him into a monster, to override all of his enhancements... including my serum." Trini's voice was quiet as she provided the explanation.

"Zedd showing mercy," Kimberly said. "Go figure."

"I... I hate to say it, but..." Zack looked like he was working up to saying something that everyone would hate, though he always tried to say what everyone else was thinking and no one would say. "Do we absolutely know that was the only clone? That the Billy right here isn't a clone? I mean..."

Without warning, Jason took two strides to Billy and punched him in the face. Billy fell senseless, not even having time to brace himself.

Trini ran to the unconscious, medical instincts overriding personal feelings.

Jason had already turned away. "Is he getting up?"

"No," Trini answered.

"Then he's not a clone," Jason answered, his voice bitter. "Let's get the hell out of here."
"So, the plan is..." Goldar began hesitantly, "to let the Rangers screw up, but then make it easier for them at the end?"

Lord Zedd did not look at him. He was gazing at the Earth, the red outline of his visor burning against the black sky. "You would call that easy, would you?"

Goldar didn't answer. He knew any attempt would just irritate Zedd. The emperor preferred to have someone stand around stupidly and hear his plans, and playing that part was an easier way to actually learn those plans.

"I just made the Blue Ranger kill himself, after a fashion," Lord Zedd explained. "I have forced the Green and Yellow Rangers to go through a day of torture. I have allowed blame and mistrust to poison the Rangers' relations with each other in a far more effective way than any spell could. I made the Red Ranger lose his temper with one of his teammates. And I barely had to lift a finger."

"And yet I have known the Rangers to recover from far more than this," Goldar pointed out. He had figured out everything that Zedd had told him. Now it was time to goad him into revealing his next plans.

"If I allow them time to recover, they would. Your former empress," amusement slid into Zedd's voice, and Goldar had to restrain himself from throwing a punch, "would have given them at least a week or more, partially to recover her own weak powers... one of her many mistakes."

She would have also known immediately if any subordinate had sabotaged her plan, Goldar thought. Tommy was alive; Goldar had accomplished that much by freeing the Blue Ranger. And the boy had even had the good sense to stay out of the final battle. As long as he could keep Tommy alive, all this was worth it.

Lord Zedd had stopped talking, still gazing at the Earth, though Goldar had no idea what the emperor was looking at. The Power Rangers were surely all in the Command Center by now. Yet he knew better than to interrupt Zedd again. He would just have to wait to learn what Zedd was planning.

"That was out of line!"

Tommy shouted these words at Jason as soon as the team materialized. He was on his feet, anger giving him strength.

Jason glared back at Tommy, as if he'd been prepared for this. "I was just trying to make sure Billy
"Bullshit," Tommy broke in. "You were mad, you couldn't deal with it in a smart way, so you hit him."

"Are you questioning how I run my team?" Jason didn't raise his voice, but the dangerous edge to his voice attested to his growing anger.

Tommy knew he was getting on dangerous ground. The last time he and Jason had gotten into a shouting match, Zordon had thrown them both out of the Command Center. But he couldn't let this drop. "In this instance, yes. I think you're a great leader, and I follow your orders even when I don't like it. But since when did great leaders hit the people they lead... just because they're mad?"

Off to the side, Kimberly had replaced Trini next to Billy's side. Billy groaned and raised a hand to his face. "Wha... what hit me?"

"Jason," Kimberly replied.

"... Oh... What's going on?"

Kimberly gave him a little smile. "That's Tommy going apeshit over it. Let's just let Tommy have his say."

Jason was now starting to raise his voice. "Billy almost killed us out there because..."

"He made a mistake!" Tommy interrupted again. "And it wasn't Billy who almost killed us. It was the clone. And as soon as Billy could escape from being held prisoner, he was working as hard as he could to stop the clone."

"He hid what he did from us..." Zack started.

"Wouldn't you?" Tommy challenged. "Wouldn't any of us? Especially if it earned a punch to the face and all of your friends turning on you?"

No one responded, so Tommy went on. "Look, I don't know why Billy created a clone. I don't know why he didn't tell us about it. But I know Billy. And I know he would never intentionally hurt any of us. So I wish everyone would stop acting like he was evil or something."

Jason's anger was bleeding away. Zack looked uncomfortable, clearly wanting to say something, but not really knowing what to say. Trini had been silent the entire time, using Billy's usual trick of avoidance by appearing absorbed in something on a computer terminal.

"Your objections are noted," Zordon said. "However, this is not up to you... and neither is it up to you, Jason, to reprimand Billy. It is I who must take full responsibility. Now, Billy, please get up."

Attention turned to Billy as everyone realized he had woken up. Tommy reached out to him... but then held back. He knew from the look on Billy's face that he would not welcome comfort right now.

"I think we all better..." Kimberly said, starting to walk away and motioning for the others to follow her.
"I wish all of you to stay and hear this," Zordon said.

The Rangers stopped, all of them looking a little scared. This was, after all, the first time any of them had screwed up this badly.

"Please let me say something first, Zordon," Billy said, his voice quiet. "I... I'm not going to defend my actions. I just need to..."

Zordon nodded, his expression unchanging.

"I... I appreciate Tommy defending me," Billy began, sparing a quick glance to Tommy, "but I made more than just a simple mistake. I have to acknowledge that. I engaged in dangerous and illegal experiments, though I was unaware of the legality, and I willfully ignored the dangers. I also kept everything in secret, further endangering everyone. And I irresponsibly created life, only to doom it to a painful and violent death." His voice was beginning to shake. "I'm sorry for what I did. I know I can't properly apologize for this, but..." With a shaking hand, he pulled his morpher from his pocket. "I know, after all this, that I'm not worthy to be a Power Ranger. I voluntarily give up my ownership of the blue power coin."

The Rangers gaped at him as he held the morpher up to Zordon. Zordon looked on, his expression unreadable.

"Billy, please put your morpher away. I will not take your power coin."

Billy looked a little stunned, but he did as Zordon asked.

"Under ordinary circumstances," Zordon continued, "you would be suspended from your duties as Power Ranger for a short amount of time. You are correct in your assessment of your error in judgment, especially since you provided Lord Zedd with a weapon, which he effectively used against you all. However, it is Lord Zedd that makes any suspension, even temporary, untenable, just as your surrendering your power coin is impossible.

"I must admit some responsibility of my own. I have long been aware of your genius and capabilities... as well as your curiosity. I should have paid more attention. Instead, I denied you access to technology without telling you why. You give so much of your genius and energy to the team, and I took no time to help cultivate that genius. I am truly sorry for failing you in this way... but I will not fail you any longer, Billy. I am now taking your education in hand.

"As such, I must ask you to follow a few rules. If I am to guide you, I must have full knowledge of your scientific activities. You will give me full access to your lab and report every experiment and invention to me, at every stage, that exceeds Earth science. You are also not to work with any equipment from the Command Center without my knowledge and permission. If I am not available, Alpha is authorized to act in my stead.

"I realize you probably think this a punishment, and certainly if you had not gone so far in these experiments, I would not be so cautious. But understand that I have your welfare primarily in mind. You are a scientific prodigy of the rarest talent. You are capable of great things... as well as great destruction. I only wish to make sure you achieve greatness." Zordon paused. "For now, though, I suggest you get some rest. You are dismissed for tonight."

The dismissal was abrupt, but Billy looked grateful for the chance to escape everyone's stares. Without a further word, he teleported away.

"Rangers," Zordon continued, breaking the echoing silence after Billy's teleportation beam died
away, "I must ask you all not to speak of any of this to Billy. In your duties as Power Rangers, I expect you to treat him no differently. I realize I have no power over your personal relations, but I urge all of you to support him... or at least not treat him with open hostility. Any one of you can suffer an error in judgment... and some of you have." Zordon sighed. "Zedd's strategy is troubling. But we will discuss it at tomorrow's meeting. In the meantime, we must assess Billy's laboratory and remove any dangerous devices... including the cloning device. I need someone to accompany Alpha..."

"I volunteer," said Trini. "I'll understand everything there better than anyone else can."

Kimberly touched Trini's arm as she passed. "Call me later?" she said.

Trini gave a little smile. "Yeah, I will."

Trini and Alpha vanished. Tommy wondered if Billy would be able to hear them. He was sure he would.

"I... I gotta get down there," Tommy said. "Make sure Billy's okay."

"Tommy..." Jason said, his voice much quieter now, "you'll make sure Billy doesn't interfere..."

Tommy glared at him. "After today, I'm more worried about what Billy's going to do to himself... but, yeah, I'll stand guard over him if you want."

Tommy vanished, leaving Jason to glare at the empty space he'd just vacated. He rounded on Kimberly and Zack. "So you guys want to pile on, too?"

Kimberly held up her hands in mock surrender. "Hey, I'm neutral. I just... think everyone's emotions are running kind of high." She sighed. "Look, this is all too much to sort out right now. I'm going home and going to sleep for a very long time. See you guys tomorrow."

"Sleep sounds good," Zack said after Kimberly teleported away.

Jason shook his head. "Too wired to sleep. I mean..."

"Yeah, me too," Zack said. "I just said it sounded good. I can't believe anyone would want to sleep tonight." He paused, considering. "Epic video game tournament?"

"You read my mind."

Tommy teleported into the back yard. It was trashed, and the back door was hanging wide open. Tommy sighed. At least they'd have plenty to keep them occupied if they were going to make the place presentable before Sylvia got home.

He heard a muffled curse and a thud, and he ran into the kitchen. He nearly panicked when he saw Billy on a ladder.

Then he saw the screwdriver on the floor, and Billy trying to reach for it.

Tommy handed the screwdriver to Billy, who averted his eyes and kept on with taking down the chin-up bar. "Thank you," he said quietly.

"We should have taken that thing down months ago," Tommy commented. "It's not like either of us
use it. Better equipment at the Command Center." He stopped. That was probably the wrong thing to say.

Billy did not acknowledge the comment. He pulled the chin-up bar from the wall with one last tug and handed it to Tommy.

"What do you want to do with it?" Tommy asked. "I mean, it used to be your dad's..."

"Throw it out," Billy said, his voice barely human. "It's... too much..."

Billy stumbled off the ladder, and Tommy caught him and guided him to the couch. Billy slouched into it, looking barely able to hold himself up.

Tommy threw the chin-up bar into the garbage. He reconsidered, picked it back up, put it in a new garbage bag, and started cleaning the cans from the living room.

Billy remained silent. His eyes stared at nothing... a look Tommy recognized in himself. Had Billy himself felt as helpless and frustrated when it was Tommy who had that look?

"Why... why did you defend me?" Billy asked when the silence had become almost unbearable. "After I..."

"After what the clone did while you were imprisoned by Lord Zedd?" Tommy said pointedly.

Billy cursed under his breath. "You know what I mean. Even if it wasn't my hand that did it, it was still my fault. I created the clone. I'm responsible for everything..."

"So you told the clone to be crazy," Tommy said sardonically. "You told him to attack your friends."

"It doesn't matter whether I told him or not," Billy said. "I created him."

"And so, by that logic, our parents are responsible for everything we do."

"Well, legally, since we're still minors..."

Tommy laughed. "Billy, I think it's time we stopped purposefully misunderstanding each other. Now, you asked me why I defended you, and I sort of gave you the runaround."

Billy looked up. Misery etched his face, but he also looked confused.

Tommy put the garbage bag down and sat on a chair. He remembered clearly the first time he'd been in Billy's house. He had forced Billy on the couch, and then sat in that very chair. All to threaten him, to intimidate, to exploit what Tommy had thought was a weakness. He could still see the scene, still hear his own mocking laugh and Billy's panicked breathing as he desperately tried to find a way to save his mother.

"You were there for me," Tommy said, his voice quavering slightly with emotion. "You were the first to believe in me when I was under the spell. You were the first who wanted to be my friend, when I hurt you the worst. I didn't forget that, Billy. And there's no way I'm going to abandon you."

"I wasn't under any spell," Billy said.

Tommy smiled. "There's all kinds of spells. You don't need an evil empress to get in over your head."

Billy was silent, but Tommy saw with relief that a tiny bit of the misery was starting to fade.
There was a sound from the lab. Billy was on his feet immediately, obviously preparing for another attack.

Tommy grabbed Billy's arm. "That's not an attack or anything. I don't think Zedd's going to try anything so soon. That's..." Tommy stopped. How was he supposed to say that Alpha and Trini were cleaning out his lab, like he was some kind of drug addict.

But Billy had already figured it out, as his panicked face settled into humiliation and resignation. "I suppose I should have expected it. Zordon did say..."

"That he was going to teach you," Tommy supplied, sitting back down as Billy lowered back on the couch. "Listen, I know it's not fun. I mean, I have to stay in the Command Center half the time while you guys are fighting just so I won't unmorph on the battlefield. But it's not a punishment. We can't think of it like that."

But even as Tommy said the words, he knew Billy wasn't even listening to them. His eyes had glazed over. Billy didn't want assurance, just as Tommy hadn't wanted assurance during his darkest times.

So they sat together, silently, waiting for Alpha and Trini to be done in the lab.

Finally alone, Zordon answered the message, the message he'd hidden even from Alpha. Effortlessly manipulating the Command Center controls, he opened a communication channel.

A few seconds later, Lord Zedd appeared in the Viewing Globe.

"I requested a meeting in person," Lord Zedd said in greeting. "Is this all the respect you will give my request?"

"Yes," Zordon said. "I have reason to retain my distance from you, considering your goals." He smirked. "As you can probably tell, I have difficulties meeting anyone in person, and I do not wish to spend the energy to create a dimensional meeting place."

The air around Zedd seemed to radiate red, and Zordon knew he had struck the right chord. It was dangerous to let one like Zedd to remain in control.

"Your children have been misbehaving," Zedd pointed out, sounding calm despite his obvious anger. "I trust you have lectured them properly. All you can do is lecture, after all."

"Ingenious tactic," Zordon commented. "You saw what I could not see. Victor. Cleverly misleading. It provided just the right push to make the Blue Ranger do exactly what you wanted."

"You think I wished a clone?" Zedd sneered. "I merely saw it happening, as you say, and decided to clean up your boy's mess."

"Not before you manipulated circumstances to create the most damage." Zordon wondered what the emperor was getting at. He hadn't tried to contact Zordon when he'd first taken over Rita's place. No, he'd waited for this moment. This had to be part of a larger plan, one which Zordon was only dimly aware of. He was suddenly nostalgic for Rita's plans... and ability to show facial expressions.

"I'm giving you one last chance, old man," Lord Zedd continued. "You have hidden behind children for far too long, and you're letting them pay the price for your cowardice."
"And what would you propose to do with me if you had me?" Zordon said wearily. "As usual, Lord Zedd, you try to control a game that is far bigger than you, try to control power that is too much for you. I know I am merely a piece of a far larger picture, but you..." Zordon shook his head. "You underestimate the powers you play with, just as you underestimate these humans you call children. You say I am hiding... If I were hiding, you would never find me. I am preparing."

"Preparing?" There were no facial expressions, but Lord Zedd looked somehow less certain.

Zordon did not respond.

"Remain cryptic if you wish, old man," Lord Zedd said dismissively. "Your days of relative freedom are numbered. Soon, your children will be dead or shadows of themselves, and you will have no more protection. I will break you to the very heart. I've given you a chance, and you have squandered it." The Z Staff crackled. "I look forward to the day when you are under my control."

Zedd's image flickered away from the Viewing Globe. Zordon closed his eyes. Zedd might be in over his head, but that also meant he could cause a great amount of damage. He was no longer dealing with Rita, who was responsible in her ruthlessness. Who observed the laws of nature and magic, and even in her desire to win over him understood a certain balance had to be maintained. Lord Zedd... he knew no responsibility, no boundaries, no balance, no respect. He would destroy the entire universe, himself included, without a thought or regret. He followed ambition and knowledge without morality or a thought to the future.

And Zordon had foolishly allowed Billy to make those same very dangerous mistakes. He'd been negligent as a mentor.

He'd given five young people extraordinary power and a crushing amount of responsibility. He'd adopted a sixth. He'd tried to support them as they realized their responsibility, as they'd grown in their power, and he'd tried to teach them the best he could. And they were all admirable: strong, courageous, self-sacrificing. Even when they made mistakes, they realized and owned up to them. Even without the powers and weapons Zordon had given them, they were heroes.

But was Zordon good enough? He considered. He'd given them powers, tried to guide them, tried to protect them in his own limited fashion, but had he really done them any good? Hadn't they always solved their own problems? Hadn't they achieved greater things when he was away? Wasn't he the only reason they were being attacked in the first place?

His recent failure with Billy... no, not recent. He'd failed him, failed them all, since the beginning. He'd given them powers and just expected them to cope. And now they were all slowly breaking apart. Cincinnatus. Nosce te ipsum. Two weeks. Another betrayal. Amazing fifty. And... Victor. Yes, Lord Zedd had the keys to all of their destruction... but Zordon couldn't help but feel that he'd provided those keys in the first place.

Alpha returned with a box loaded down with various parts. "Zordon, I teleported the cloning machine into the vaporizer. I need your authorization to destroy it completely."

"Thank you, Alpha V," Zordon said wearily. "Please activate the vaporizer. Do not place those other components too far away. I still wish to encourage Billy in his investigations."

"Yes, Zordon," Alpha said, already keying in the command to the vaporizer deep in the basement of the Command Center.

"Alpha..." Zordon said, "I apologize. I did not ask you how you are recovering."
Alpha looked up at Zordon, cocking his head quizzically. "I am fully functional, Zordon. My programming is no longer corrupted. Do you wish me to perform another diagnostic?"

Zordon sighed. "Unnecessary. Thank you, Alpha."

"You are very welcome, Zordon," Alpha said mechanically, carrying the box to an adjoining storage room.

Tommy was making sandwiches in the kitchen. He was starving, and he had to get Billy to eat. But it was also to escape the living room for a few sane moments. The tension while they waited for the lab to clear was getting unbearable.

He heard a soft knock and turned to see Trini hovering uncertainly in the doorway leading from the kitchen to the lab. "We're all done here," she said softly.

"Great," Tommy said. "He got a lab left?"

Trini glared at him. "You know I didn't want to do any of this. I was just best able to help Alpha... and I wish you'd stop thinking that you're Billy's only friend right now."

Tommy smiled at his own earlier complaint thrown back at him. "Sorry. I guess... old memories."

Trini hugged herself. "Yeah." She paused. "How's he doing?"


"I hope we have that time," Trini said. "Lord Zedd just used our own actions against us. Who knows what he's going to do next?" She shook her head. "Listen, I know you're probably going to still talk to Kimberly tonight. Could you tell her that I'm too tired to talk tonight? I just want to go home and sleep for a few days."

"I'll tell her." Tommy felt like sleeping for about a year himself, but knew there was no way Billy was going to sleep, and he wanted to be awake for him. "Hey... no one really mentioned," he said with a smile. "You kind of saved the world today."

Trini's smile started to return. "I guess I did, didn't I?"

There was a sound, and Billy appeared in the doorway. Trini's smile faded, but she wasn't backing away from him.

"Trini..." Billy said, obviously steeling himself for something unpleasant, "can we talk?"

Trini closed her eyes and nodded.

Tommy cleared his throat. "Um... I'm going to go to the living room... and watch something really loud on the TV." He grabbed a sandwich and a soda and got out of the kitchen as quickly as he could.

The TV, however, was not loud enough to shut out their conversation. It wasn't that their voices were raised, though they didn't seem to be at pains to lower their voices. It was just that Tommy found it impossible to ignore conversations going on around him... a trait he'd inherited from his father.
"I don't suppose there's an apology sufficient for what I've done," Billy said.

Trini sighed. "Look, Billy, I know you're not really responsible. Yes, you created the clone, but you didn't tell it to tie me to the bed. I... really should have realized that. I mean, I know you've sort of had a crush on me for years, but..."

"I know you don't think of me that way," Billy interjected. "I've always known that. The clone was just..."

"Maliciously and dangerously insane?" Trini said. "Yes, I know that."

There was a long pause.

"Trini, I just wanted you to know that I consider you a friend. Always a friend."

Trini did not respond immediately. It sounded as if she were trying to think of something to say.

"I... I'm not entirely sure we are friends, Billy," she said quietly, pain in her voice. "No... let me finish. I've always thought I was the only one who could understand you. Back when you talked like a thesaurus, and no one else could tell what you were saying, and I had to translate your every sentence. I always wondered what you would do without me. But then life happened, and you got more confident, and you stopped hiding behind your big words... but I still thought I was the only one who really understood you. I really did think you considered me a friend, despite what other feelings you had.

"But you haven't really treated me like a friend. Yes, I can keep you with you... barely... in all these inventions, but you hide things from me. You don't trust me. I'm... an assistant. A convenience. You rejected my serum that I created for you and didn't budge from your hospital bed until Zordon told you to, and then you turn around and use my serum in that thing you created. Those are not the actions of a friend." Trini paused to regain control of her breathing. "Billy, this isn't because of what the clone did to me. I fully understand that wasn't your fault. This is between you and me, and it's been building a long time. I thought I understood you. Now... I have to admit I don't understand you at all."

They paused, but it didn't sound like Billy could respond.

"I'm sorry," Trini said, her voice finally breaking. "I know you didn't need to hear this tonight. I shouldn't have said anything. I'll... see you tomorrow."

There was the crackle of teleportation, and then silence.

Tommy waited, not daring to go back into the kitchen right then. He didn't want to admit he'd heard everything. And he wanted to give Billy the time he needed to pretend like none of that happened.

It was fifteen minutes before Billy came back in the living room, carrying his own sandwich.

"They actually didn't take that much from the lab," he said. "Just a few of the components that have their own power source. I suppose it could have been worse... and I will appreciate Zordon's guidance, and..."

Billy's voice failed him. He was staring unseeingly at the infomercials on the television. The food remained untouched on the end table.

Tommy got up and headed to his room. A few minutes digging through an unpacked box yielded what he needed. The paper sleeves were almost falling off them, and the tracking was a little off on
one of them, but they would still serve their purpose.

"So," he said as he reentered the living room, "Lethal Weapon or Die Hard?"

Billy looked up at him, confused.

Tommy shrugged. "It's what my dad and I always watched when we couldn't sleep and didn't want to think too much."

That actually brought a smile to Billy's face. "I haven't seen either. Which is better?"

"I wasn't asking which one to watch," Tommy scoffed as he ejected the tape from the VCR and stuck Die Hard in. "I was asking which one first."

Tommy ran to the kitchen to pop popcorn while the warnings played and Billy tried to adjust the tracking. He didn't care how long it was going to take... he was going to get Billy through this.

"Dude, you are not playing as Ryu again."

Jason pressed the button selection for Ryu. "He's my best character. Just because you keep swapping out characters..."

"If I have to hear 'hadouken' one more time... You overuse that move, Jas," Zack laughed.

"Fine," Jason grumbled as he deselected the character. "I'll be Ken. Happy now?"

"That's not funny."

They were at Zack's house and had finally chased away his little brothers... or had let Mr. Taylor send the kids to bed. Zack's dad had raised his eyebrows at their plan for an all-night video game tournament, but he hadn't said anything. They were almost bored with Street Fighter II, but there were plenty of other games.

After several more rounds, Jason set his controller down. "Tommy was right. I shouldn't have hit Billy."

Zack raised his eyebrows, much like his father had done. "I wasn't gonna say anything, but... yeah, that was really the wrong move."

Jason stared at Zack. "You defended me."

"To piss off Tommy," Zack said with a grin. "But, yeah, I agreed with him."

Jason scraped his hair back. "I don't know what came over me. I mean..." he took a breath, "I was just so angry that he endangered all of us, and didn't even think fit to tell us anything about it. But a leader can never lose his cool like that. I have to be..."

"You have to be the leader all the time?" Zack asked quietly. They'd lowered their voices just in case anyone was listening in.

"Yeah, I sorta do," Jason said. "If I drop my guard even once... especially now that Zedd's obviously playing us against ourselves..."
"I hear ya," Zack said. "But it's not just you. It's all of us. Hell, we can't even have a stupid party without all hell breaking loose. Why do you think Billy made the stupid clone in the first place?"

Jason's eyes widened. "You think he wanted to make replacements for us?"

"Why else would anyone clone themselves?" Zack said. "Yeah, Billy went a little mad scientist, but..."

The door opened, and Zack's father looked in. "I'm going to bed, guys. Zack, you have that book I let you borrow? Finished with it?"

"Yeah, dad. It's on my desk."

Jason saw the corner of it over the edge of the desk. He grabbed it, but accidentally brought several comic books sliding to the floor with it.

"Hey, careful, Jas," Zack said. "Those are collectibles."

"So they shouldn't be stacked precariously on the edge of your desk," Mr. Taylor pointed out. "Don't stay up too late, boys."

Jason helped Zack gather the comic books together as carefully as he could. They were all in protective sleeves, which made them slide around like crazy. He finally settled some of them into a stack, an old *Amazing Spider-Man* comic on top. He stared at it while Zack still gathered. It was sort of a sad cover, with Peter Parker, defeated-looking, walking away from a large image of Spider-Man, whose back was turned. The words "Spider-Man No More!" were in the bottom corner. It had to be old, as a few other of the comics, ones with Venom dominating the cover, were numbered around the late 300's, and this one was only issue 50.

Fifty. Amazing...

"Zack?"

Zack looked over at what held Jason transfixed, and then closed his eyes. "Knew I shoulda hid that."

"But..." Jason's mind reeled. "This is the answer to your clue?"

"Pretty damn creepy, right?" Zack said. "Zedd knows not only that I like comic books, but also that Spider-Man is my favorite character, AND the plots of specific issues. All within a few hours of getting to Earth. I just can't think of a word for that level of genius."

"And he knew what you're planning to do," Jason supplied quietly.

Zack shifted uncomfortably. "Yeah, all right. But... I know I can't leave yet. And... I know Peter Parker was wrong for giving all that up, but..."

"There are other people who can take your powers," Jason said. "Other people can continue the fight. You weren't bitten by a radioactive spider, you got a magical coin from a big floating head."

"Not sure which origin story is more bizarre," Zack laughed. "And here I thought you were going to be pissed. Me abandoning the team and all. And even thinking about it with Zedd hanging over our heads."

Jason stared at the comic book, trying not to think about how defeated Peter Parker looked. He'd been thinking about this for a long time, and he'd convinced himself it wasn't cowardice, and it
wasn't a defeat. At least, he believed he'd convinced himself... After all, his own clue wasn't a defeat.

"Cincinnatus," Jason said. "I never told you the whole story about him... all that I found out."

Zack shook his head. "I knew you were holding something back, but..."

"Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus," Jason said. "He assumed dictatorship over Rome during this huge war against all of their enemies. But then after the war was over... he gave up everything. Renounced his power completely. Let someone else take the reigns." He looked over at Zack, whose eyes looked like they were going to pop out of his skull. "So, I guess... it's not just you."

Zack let out a breath. "Both of us then. But..."

"I hear ya," Jason said. "Right now's not a good time. We're facing a huge threat in Lord Zedd. A huge, unpredictable threat. And on top of that, Tommy's power is failing, and we've all got to face the fact that he may not be a Power Ranger for too much longer."

"And then there's who's going to replace us," Zack added. "I mean, replacing me is one thing, but replacing the leader?"

"Not forgetting that we don't have the Sword of Power yet, the thing that makes power transfer possible in the first place." Jason sighed at the mounting impossibility. "It's not that I don't want to help people. I'm not running away. I'm just..."

"Scared of what we're turning into?" Zack supplied.

Jason nodded. "I mean, look at what I've been doing. Snapping at people, berating my friends... Tonight's proof that I'm just the wrong person to lead the Power Rangers right now."

"And I don't want to be a soldier," Zack added quietly. "I was fine when we were superheroes... but this whole war thing? This ongoing war that's become part of the universe and causes people to mutilate themselves," He shook his head. "I'm not a soldier. I'm here to save people, not to fight in any war."

Jason put the comic books back on the desk. "I guess we talk to Zordon, then. I mean, he's always said we could give up our powers when we wanted. He's got to have some sort of plan for this."

"Yeah..." Zack said. "But let's not tell the others about it. I mean, I was terrified about tell you about it. Can you imagine how Kim or Trini is going to react?"

The phone rang. Tommy glanced over at Billy, who had slumped over on the couch, asleep. Even the phone didn't wake him up.

Tommy stopped the tape and grabbed the phone. He didn't have to ask who was on the other line. He'd been waiting for her call for an hour. "Hey."

"Hey," Kimberly said. "Sorry it's so late. I was waiting for Trini."

"Trini said she was too tired to talk," Tommy said. "Asked me to pass the message along."

Kimberly sighed. "I guess I'll see her tomorrow anyway. How's Billy?"

"Miserable," Tommy said. "And asleep."
"And... how are you?"

Tommy stretched the phone into the hallway. "Okay, I guess. I was tired, but now there's no way I can sleep."

"Me, neither. I... just sort of can't believe today happened. I wouldn't mind if I could just wake up and redo the day... the day that was supposed to happen."

Tommy laughed. "Didn't you have to take your brother shopping today?"

"I would even go through that again."

Tommy's heart started thudding. "It... it could still happen. I mean... do you want to come over? Now?"

There was a pause, during which Tommy's heart almost pounded out of his chest.

"Yes," Kimberly said breathlessly. "I'll be right over."

Tommy turned the TV off, tiptoeing around so as not to wake Billy up. He silently opened the door just in time to see Kimberly softly close the front door of the house and run across the street.

Lord Zedd nodded in satisfaction. "All are distracted. It is time."

Tommy bolted awake at the pounding at the door. Kimberly looked blearily around. "It's not even morning... I didn't mean to fall asleep."

Tommy was already on his feet and pulling on pants. "Get dressed just in case." His voice was shaking a little. "I'll get the door."

He pulled on a T-shirt as he left his bedroom. The door sounded like it was going to burst in. Billy had woken up, but he was too out of it to do anything but stare at the door.

Tommy unlocked the door and opened it to face a nightmare: Frank, Kimberly's stepfather.

"Is she here?" the man cried out, already trying to elbow past Tommy.

"Just tell me if Kimberly's here!" Frank said furiously. "Kimberly!"

Then Tommy realized something bigger was going on. Across the street, he could see three police cars at Kimberly's house. A policeman was standing behind Frank, an arm on the man's shoulder to prevent him from entering the house.

"Son," the policeman said calmly, "I'd answer the man's question if I were you."

"Frank?"

Kimberly emerged from the hallway, fully dressed with her hair smoothed down.
"Oh, thank God!"

Frank broke through the policeman's hold and shoved past Tommy to throw his arms around Kimberly. She looked at Tommy, her eyes wide with shock. She'd obviously been expecting a different response from being found at her boyfriend's house late at night. Tommy certainly had. His stomach clenched with fear. Something bad had happened. Something really bad.

"Frank, what's wrong?" Kimberly said in a panicked voice. "Is it Mom...?"

Frank pulled back a little to brush her hair back. "Wh... when your mother went upstairs to wake you, and you weren't there... She's waiting by the phone right now. We've got to get back over."

"I'm not moving until you tell me what's happened," Kimberly demanded.

"It's..." Frank swallowed hard. "Kimberly..." he said in a soft voice, "it's Kevin. He was kidnapped from the Davis' house. We... have no idea where he is or who took him."

Kimberly wailed, her knees giving out. Frank held her up, trying to comfort her and walk her out of the house at the same time.

Billy was on his feet, a stunned expression on his face. Tommy went cold. They followed the policeman, Frank, and Kimberly across the street. Frank looked at Tommy, first with a flash of anger, and then with weary acceptance. He motioned with his head for both of them to follow.

"I... can call the others," Billy said quietly, and Tommy knew it wasn't going to be over the phone. Tommy nodded and continued following.

As soon as they walked in the door and Kimberly was in the arms of her mother, Frank turned to face Tommy.

"I... I'm sorry," Tommy stammered out.

Frank's lips went in a thin line. "That's for later. Right now, you can help us by answering a few of the police's questions."

Confused, Tommy turned to the policeman who obviously looked to be in charge. He was holding a notebook and an evidence bag.

"Mr. Oliver," the policeman said drily, "I'm Lieutenant Hall. Has there been anyone following you and Miss Hart? Have you noticed any odd strangers... received any phone calls recently?"

"No," Tommy said immediately. Of course, he couldn't tell of the stranger that followed their every move and constantly harassed them.

"Are you sure," the policeman demanded.

"Yes..." Tommy looked around. "I don't get it. It was Kevin that was kidnapped, and it was at someone else's house. What does this have to do with Kim... or me?"

Lieutenant Hall silently showed Tommy the evidence bag. In it was an envelope with the words "To Kimberly Hart and Tommy Oliver" inscribed. And, in the top right corner, was a bright red letter Z.
Chapter Summary

Book 6: Shadows in the Cave

This Book is perhaps my wildest reinterpretation of this story. I'm not rewriting episodes so much as using elements from episodes to tell a larger story. The episodes I'm incorporating, however, are the season 2 episodes "Bloom of Doom," "The Green Dream," "Welcome to Venus Island," "Green No More," and "Beauty and the Beast." You might rewatch those episodes for some of the innokes...

Tommy joined Billy outside. The sky was just starting to turn a dull gray. The sun would come up soon.

"Couldn't get the envelope away from the police," Tommy said in a low voice. "You reported everything in to Zordon?"

Billy nodded. "He wants us to report in as soon as we can. Jason, Trini, and Zack are already there."

"Don't know how Kim's going to get away." Tommy cast a worried look back through the doorway. Kimberly was sitting next to her mother, looking miserable and drained. He sighed. "We'll think of something."

"We always do," Billy said. His voice sounded bleak.

"So... what do you think?" Tommy said, knowing they had to leave soon and wanting something coherent to say to the others.

"I... I don't know," Billy said shakily. "If you're asking me if I know anything about what Zedd..."

Tommy stared at Billy, who faltered.

"Zedd will find a way to send us the ransom. He knows we can't get to it," Billy said, recovering. "There's no reason to kidnap Kimberly's brother unless he wants something from us."

"But what?" Tommy said. "And why Kimberly and me specifically?"

Billy shook his head. "He has something planned. Everything is a mind game for him. Those clues, for instance. He's never going to make a direct attack."

"Yeah..." Tommy frowned. Of the clues, they now absolutely knew what Billy's was. And he was almost positive about his own clue, as he thought about the calendar on his wall. He needed to mark out another day. The rest of the clues... as far as he knew, they were all in the dark. Zedd had obviously used the clone as a distraction for Kevin's kidnapping, though he hoped no one said that aloud around Billy. No, Zedd wasn't like Rita. Rita liked to confuse with spells and illusions, but she was for the most part direct. For Zedd, it was plans within plans, and he never showed his whole hand.

"Right," Tommy said after a minute of silence, where they could only hear the low sobbing of
Kimberly's mother, Frank's frustrated pacing, and the police radio. "We have to go. Zedd may have already contacted the Command Center by now."

Tommy peeked in and caught Kimberly's eye. He motioned to his wrist. She nodded and held up a finger, signifying she would join them in a minute.

Tommy followed Billy over to their house so they would have a safe space to teleport. He supposed that the police would take issue at him leaving like this, but he honestly didn't care. The police wouldn't be able to help in any way. This was Ranger business. This was the only way to get Kimberly's brother back.

The sun was slowly coming up. Tommy again thought of his calendar. One less day.

Goldar dismissed the Putties with a wave of his hand before entering Zedd's throne room. His lip curled at his latest mission. Kidnapping a little boy... The brat had screamed and kicked through most of the night. It had been a relief when the boy had finally passed out from exhaustion.

"Is the boy secured?" Lord Zedd asked without ceremony.

"He is, my lord," Goldar replied.

"Good." Lord Zedd was continuing to look at Earth, his back still to Goldar. Every few seconds, Zedd let a burst of lightning from his staff arc to the Earth, but he did not say what he was doing. Goldar waited, knowing better to interrupt him.

It was several minutes of intermittent silence and lightning bursts, and then Zedd began to sway on his feet. The swaying grew more pronounced until he began to pitch forward toward the balcony.

Goldar reacted on instinct. He ran forward and placed a hand on Lord Zedd's shoulder, steadying him. The armor protected Goldar, but even then there seemed to be some sort of electrical field around Zedd which set Goldar's whole arm tingling.

"Remove your hand from me this instant," Lord Zedd growled, the throne room immediately flashing red.

"My deepest apologies, my lord," said Goldar, a bit sardonically. "I did not think you wished to test the moon's gravity or our security field."

"I do not need your assistance to stay upright." Lord Zedd was unsteady on his feet, however, and he leaned on his staff heavily to get to his throne. "My new monsters have merely drained some of my power. It will pass."

Monsters. Plural. That was interesting, Goldar thought. And, for the first time, Lord Zedd was showing some of the same weaknesses that plagued Empress Rita. Perhaps he was not as invulnerable as he liked to claim.

"The attack will begin immediately," Lord Zedd continued. "My new monsters will take the frontal assault, while you, Goldar, will stand by for my orders."

Goldar grimaced, again rankling at the fact that he was cut out completely from any plans or goals. Hadn't he, after all, just protected Lord Zedd? And why had he? Was he becoming the spineless traitor everyone thought he was?
Lord Zedd noted Goldar's frown, but did not comprehend the full import. "Do not worry," Lord Zedd said, sounding horribly affable. "You are witnessing the beginning of the end of the Power Rangers. You will, in time, accomplish the most important part of this plan. You must save your strength for that."

On that ominous note, Zedd placed a hand on his head and leaned back, either through exhaustion or the communication with his monsters. All Goldar could do was wait.

"We've been following what's going on through the Viewing Globe," Jason said by way of greeting when Tommy and Billy teleported up. "Sucks you couldn't get the envelope."

Tommy shook his head in disgust. "I tried to open it there, but it wouldn't open, and of course the police kept it as evidence. They can't get it open either."

"Zedd doesn't want it opened with civilians looking," Trini said. "That will be part of the magic."

"Or perhaps Tommy and Kimberly must open it at the same time," Billy added.

Trini and Billy were pointedly not looking at each other. Trini moved away from a console so that Billy could take over, but Billy made no moves toward it.

It was just a few short hours and almost no sleep since Jason and Tommy had had a shouting match, and Trini and Billy had had the conversation Tommy wished he hadn't overheard. The tension was palpable in the air, but they were all determined to not let it affect what they had to do.

Zack was either oblivious or chose to ignore the tension. He was too angry. "Zedd's gone too far this time. I mean, yeah, Rita once kidnapped our parents, and then half the town, but that was different. He's picking on a little kid this time."

"Alpha," Zordon said, also choosing to ignore the tension in the room, "have you been able to breach security at the Moon Palace?"

"Negative, Zordon," Alpha said promptly. "Lord Zedd's security is much stronger than Rita's ever was."

"And we don't even know if he's at the Moon Palace," Jason supplied. "We've made that mistake before. Kevin could be held somewhere on Earth, like the Green Candle."

"And while he's got Kevin," Tommy continued, "we can't do a damn thing."

"I still don't get how he could have blind-sided us like this," Zack said. "I mean, we knew something had happened those other times people were kidnapped. There were power surges, right?"

Trini had moved back to the console, realizing that Billy was not going to take over. "Those kidnappings were massive in scale. I can read a minor power surge around the time when he was probably taken, but it could easily be anything. After all," she looked up, "we didn't sense when Tommy was taken, when he first became the Green Ranger."

Tommy frowned. Yes, the best thing in a crisis was to revisit those good old memories. "Zedd may be waiting for Kimberly to teleport up before he sends any messages."

The alarm klaxons rang, and the Rangers stared around in bewilderment.
"But..." Zack sputtered, "This doesn't make any sense. Why would he send a monster when he hasn't sent any ransom?"

"Two monsters," Zordon said as the Viewing Globe illuminated the early morning hours of downtown Angel Grove.

"Zedd's not wasting any time, either," Tommy pointed out. "They're already giant-size."

"Right," Jason said. "Our first priority is to protect the city, and unless Zedd sends us any threats against Kevin, that's what we're going to do. Now's as good a time as any to try out our new Zords." He paused, casting an apologetic eye to Tommy. "Tommy, I gotta ask you to stay here as backup. You're too drained from the recent fights."

"I believe we can risk another power transfer," Zordon said. "If you have need of backup, we will make sure Tommy's at full power."

"Thanks, Zordon," said Tommy. He wasn't going to put up a fuss about being left behind, not when so much was at stake, but it was nice to know he wasn't just being shunted to the side.

"Alpha," Jason said, "call Kimberly. I know it's going to be difficult, but we need her if we're going to use the Thunder Megazord for the first time." He paused. "And let us know the second Zedd makes contact."

"Wait..." Zack said, "Don't we need the specs on the monsters if we're going to fight them?"

Jason looked surprised for a minute. "Uh... right. Zordon?"

Zordon looked concerned at this lapse, but he did not address it. "Much like Pirantishead, these monsters seems to be generating a great deal of interference with our equipment."

"That's an understatement, Zordon," Trini said, frowning at the console. "If it weren't for the Command Center monitoring the police radio, we never would have picked them out or gotten their location." She looked up, bewildered. "It's like they're not there."

"And they're not even attacking," Zack pointed out. "It's like they're... waiting, or something."

"We will try to break through the interference," Zordon said. "In the meantime, you must call your Zords before the monsters have a chance to attack."

"I've made contact with Kimberly," Alpha announced. "She said she will join you on the battlefield within a few minutes."

"Right," Jason said. "Let's go."

Kimberly threw herself into her room to change clothes, less to get rid of the clothes she'd been living in a full day and more to give herself time to think.

If she teleported from her room, her parents would think the worst. They were already grieving for one lost child. They would think that the mysterious kidnappers had plucked her out of her own bedroom under the noses of the police. That would send everyone into a panic, and she had no idea when she'd been able to come home.

No, she had to leave the house, and she had to have her parents know she was leaving the house...
but then there was the excuse. Study, exercise, spending the night... those excuses were all over. This was no longer a game, and she couldn't handle it like a game. She had to make sure her parents wouldn't prevent her from leaving and wouldn't try to follow her.

Rage shot through her, unexpected. It was Zedd. This was all Zedd's fault.

Without coming to any conclusions, Kimberly ran down the stairs. She would just have to wing it.

She reached the door and almost ran into Frank, who noticed her change of clothes with surprise. "Where do you think you're going?" he said, trying to block the door.

She could easily brush past him. "I'm going out," she said, her voice resolute. "Not sure when I'll be back."

"Frank, what's going on?" her mother said from the door to the kitchen. "Kimberly? What...?"

"You're not running off," Frank said. "Not now."

"I'm sorry," she said at the door, noting Frank's grasp on her shoulder and knowing she could easily get away. "I've got to go now. I can't explain..."

"You very well better come up with an explanation," her mother said, her face starting to turn angry. "I can't believe you would leave at a time like this. I've already got one missing child and I'm not going to have another running around who knows where..."

"I'm going to look for Kevin." She stared at her parents, whose fury had turned to shock. "The kidnappers wanted my attention, and they have it. I'm going to look for Kevin, and I'm not coming back until I have him."

"You need to let the police handle this," Frank said.

"The police can't handle it!" Kimberly knew she was shouting, but she didn't care. "The police couldn't even open the envelope. Kevin's kidnapping..." she choked, knowing she was coming dangerously close to revealing too much, "It's not natural. And if these... aliens or whatever they are... want my attention, I'm going to give it to them."

With that, she ran from the house, no longer caring how her parents reacted. All that really mattered right then, was Kevin.

The cockpit of his Zord was brighter and newer, Jason noted. There was no longer a sense of antiquity anymore. There was, however, a strangeness about it, almost as if the Zord itself was somehow living.

"Call in," Jason said, starting to tap out flight sequences. As usual, the new information came to him intuitively.

"Lion Thunderzord, standing by," Zack's voice answered automatically. "This thing is freakin' amazing!"

"Griffin Thunderzord, standing by," Trini said. "Still doesn't look like a Griffin to me."

"Unicorn Thunderzord, standing by." Billy's voice was monotone and mechanical. Jason started to worry if he'd be able to keep it together.
Jason paused. "Red Dragon Thunderzord, standing by," he said. "I guess we'll have to stay separate until..."

"I'm here!" Kimberly interrupted. "Firebird Thunderzord, standing by," she said breathlessly.

"Good to have you here, Kim," Jason said. "Let's form the Mega Thunderzord, then."

As he keyed in the combination sequence, Jason kept an eye out for the any monster mayhem. He'd briefly seen what the monsters looked like, but they'd been unclear, as the Command Center instruments had been unable to even register them. There didn't seem to be any destruction going on, and he couldn't see the monsters approaching, though Jason knew they were close. It was almost as if the monsters were waiting for the Zords to combine... which was convenient, but damn troubling.

As soon as all the Rangers appeared in the newly formed cockpit of the Megazord, Jason started moving them closer to the downtown area. "Billy, I need some readings on the monsters if we're going to know what we're facing. See if any of the sensors can't pick up anything on them."

"Uh... right," Billy answered uncertainly.

"Kim, how're our power reserves looking?"

It took a few seconds for her to call up the information. "We're still looking at a sword attack, almost just like our old Zords. It's already at our side, though, so it'll take less power to charge."

"Quicker finishing move, always a plus," he said, "but we don't want to waste it until we know more about the monsters. Trini, throw a little more into our shields. And Zack?"

"Keep us on our feet," Zack said. "Got it."

They turned a corner, and suddenly they were face to face with two of the strangest monsters they'd ever seen in their lives.

Rather than a bug, or an armor-plated lizard, as they'd come to expect as standard fare, these two looked almost human, with the exception of the fact that they were towering of the city. They'd never seen a human in giant form. Even Scorpina had turned into something more monstrous before growing.

The man was covered in armor, an armor that looked like it had suffered through ages of battles. The armor was gouged deeply, but there was something about it that seemed impenetrable. He held a spear that was almost as tall as he, and a massive shield. His skin, however, was flawless and glowed golden, while his eyes glowed silver.

The woman with him had the same golden, flawless skin and the same eyes, but that was where the similarities ended. She was clothed in a loose white shift that clung to her form, accentuating rather than hiding. She had no weapons and seemingly no protection... which just made her all the more strange and dangerous on the battlefield.

"Oh, look," she said with vague interest. "It's the metal man he told us about."

"This one has power," the man commented. His voice seemed to make the buildings around them tremble. "No... not one. Five."

The woman's face shifted into a mocking smile. "Oh, but they're children. I understand now. They are merely the playthings that will lead us to the one he's after." She crossed her arms. "I generally don't like children. My own son is troublesome enough. Though young men..."
The man frowned. "They think themselves warriors. One of them especially has tasted and spilled his own share of blood. It has been a long time..." He trailed off, his face splitting into a terrifying grin.

The woman waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, you with your wars. War will not destroy them. There is a much more powerful force..."

All this time, the Power Rangers, still manning their Megazord, watched the two talked and treated the Rangers as if they weren't even there. "Um... excuse me," Jason said, putting his voice through the loudspeaker. "I hate to interrupt you two, but was there a reason you turned giant and started walking through downtown Angel Grove?"

"He hit a weak point in our shields!" Trini said. "Down by forty percent! We can't take another hit like that!"

"Transferring power reserves to defense!" Kimberly said.

There was a pause.

"Billy, damage report!" Jason said furiously.

"Uh..."

Jason was able to keep up with the attacking man, but he got the distinct impression that the man was just toying with them. "Billy!" Jason yelled again. If he didn't get an answer, he decided, he'd reassign Trini to repairs.

"The monster hit our main power regulator," Billy said before Jason could do anything. "We won't be able to channel power to any external source, including our sword. No final attack."

"Just great," Jason said under his breath. "And I'm barely keeping up with this guy."

"Dude," Zack said. "You're treating this thing like our old Zords. What about the special features?"

"Right..." Jason accessed the new information. After a few deft moves that gave him some distance from the attacker, Jason keyed in a new sequence.

The lights dimmed as the Megazord drew not from their own internal power, but from a completely different source, a source none of the Rangers fully understood. The light then grew brighter and pulsed outward. It formed a barrier between the Megazord and the "monster."

The man stopped and laughed, his silver eyes shining. "Much better, children. Your first time drawing from spirit. You are still children, though. I am convinced he was correct, that you are not ready for true battle." He smiled grimly. "You are lucky. I usually have no patience for teaching,
especially those who dare raise weapons against me. It is at his request that I not kill you outright."

The woman stepped forward. "You need not test your patience any longer, lover. We must leave these children for now. It has been accomplished. We have distracted the children long enough."

"What are you talking about?" Jason said over the loudspeaker. "What's Zedd's game?"

"If you've done anything to Kevin!" Kimberly yelled, unable to contain herself.

The woman smirked, her arm restraining the man's shoulder. "The child is safe. I have personally attended to that. No, dears... you should worry about your master. Zordon, is it?"

"What have you done to him?" Jason growled. He raised the sword threateningly at the pair, wrapping the new shield around the weapon to give it more power.

With barely a motion, the woman swept away the shield. It flickered and died.

"Return to your own realm, children, and we will return to ours," the woman said dangerously, her voice barely above a whisper. "Once you are ready, Venus Island awaits you."

The two disappeared. They had devastated the Megazord, but they had not touched a single building.

The Command Center's lights were dim and flickering. Tommy was on the floor, unconscious. Zordon's tube was empty, and Alpha was punching desperately at the controls.

Kimberly ran to Tommy, and Trini ran past to grab some serum.

"What happened, Alpha?" Zack said, stunned at the scene.

"Rangers!" Alpha's voice had gone shriller in his desperation. "It was the power transfer! It went... wrong."

"Calm down, Alpha," Jason said, though he himself was far from calm. "Just tell us if Tommy and Zordon are all right, and then tell us what happened."

"Tommy's condition is stable," Alpha said, stopping Trini dead in her tracks. "He was overwhelmed by the power transfer, but I was able to cut it off before he got seriously hurt. But Zordon..."

Showing a presence of mind he hadn't shown all day, Billy glanced over the readings. "It's okay," he said. "Zordon is just too drained of power to manifest in this dimension. He'll need time to regain his energy."

"There was a power surge in the Morphing Grid that caused the transfer to go wrong, Rangers," Alpha said. His voice was going calmer, but somewhat bleaker as he realized there was little he could do.

If he was feeling helpless, it was nothing to how Jason was feeling. He slumped, the color draining from his face.

"It was a trap," he said in a hollow voice. "The whole damn thing was a trap. Those monsters weren't a distraction. They made us destroy ourselves."

"How do you figure?" Zack said.
Jason scraped his hair back. "Zedd drew us out with monsters we knew little about, and made them grow so we had to fight with Zords we’d never fought with before. He knew Tommy was drained from the recent attack, so he had to know Zordon would try another power transfer. Then he made sure we had to draw on the new mystical power while the power transfer was going down... thus overloading the system." Jason looked up, his expression bleak. "Then either the Zords, Zordon, or Tommy would go down. Zedd wins no matter what."

"So how long until we get Zordon back?" Trini said.

Alpha threw up his hands in his version of a shrug. "This has never happened before, Trini. It could be hours, or days... or weeks. Sooner the less you all draw from the Morphing Grid."

"I doubt Zedd will give Zordon any time to recover," Zack said darkly. "He'll make sure we're pulling as much power as we can from the Morphing Grid."

"He still has my brother," Kimberly said, still crouched over Tommy's prone form. "We still don't know what he's done with Kevin, or what he wants from us."

The five Power Rangers and Alpha stared in silence, helpless and lost. Jason was slouched on the ground, not looking at the other Rangers, not sure of what to do next or how to lead them after so many losses. Zack was looking around wildly, as if hoping that one of them would suddenly provide answers. Trini was switching a bottle of her serum back and forth between her hands, the bottle now useless. Billy was still staring at the console, but his eyes had gone out of focus. And Kimberly still held Tommy's hand, but she was glaring at Jason, who seemed to have given up.

Tommy's return to consciousness broke the helpless silence. He looked at the empty tube and scared faces surrounding him. "Shit," he said in a shaky voice. "How bad is it?"

Tommy's recovery and fear seemed to give Jason heart. "Not as bad as it could be," he said. "Zordon's going to recover; it's just going to take some time. In the meantime, we need to come up with some answers before Zedd decides to attack again. Billy, start up the Zord repair systems and prioritize that power regulator that got damaged."

Alpha looked up, a bit affronted. "Jason, I was going to..."

"Jason shook his head. "Alpha, we need you to be Zordon right now. You need to tell us about these monsters. After all, Zordon wouldn't have attempted the power transfer until he knew it was absolutely necessary."

Alpha looked down. "Oh, ay-yi-yi, Rangers..." Alpha said sadly. "The monsters... are not monsters. They are not manufactured by Lord Zedd, or even Finster. They are far worse, something Zordon could never have accounted for."

"Alpha, spit it out," Kimberly said, losing patience. "We can't fight what we don't know about."

"I'm not sure if you can fight them at all, Rangers," Alpha said in a small voice. "They are not monsters. They are gods."

The Rangers stared at Alpha, Billy pausing in his repair work.

"Gods," Jason said. "What do you mean by gods?"

"Like, gods gods?" Zack said. "All powerful and the whole shebang?"

"There's no such thing," Billy said flatly. "That's impossible."
"And if it were possible, why would gods attack us?" Tommy said.

Trini hadn't spoken. While the others were exchanging dubious glances, Trini had pulled up the little-used archive computer. The Viewing Globe shifted from scenes of Angel Grove to two pictures that looked like they were taken from a Grecian urn. One was of a man in armor, carrying a spear and shield. The other was of a beautiful woman with a gown that exposed her breasts.

"Ares," she pointed to the man, "and Aphrodite. Gods of war and love, respectively."

The Rangers stared dumbfounded at the images. The woman who had broken through their defenses so easily was more modestly dressed than in the picture, but there was no mistaking the two. Those were the ones they had "fought."

"So Zedd somehow wrangled two ancient Greek gods to mix with us in downtown Angel Grove?" Zack sounded like he wanted to laugh, but he didn't.

"I'm not buying it," Billy said. "This has to be something that Zedd created. There... there can't be gods."

"Just like there can't be magic and superpowers?" Trini said softly.

"Advanced science," Billy said dismissively. "If science becomes advanced enough, it..."

He stopped. He obviously remembered what he'd recently done with advanced science and couldn't go on.

Trini sighed. "Look, I've had to research more into the 'magic' side of things. Yes, a lot of what we use can be explained by advanced science, but there is a magical component. Rita and Zedd use potions and spells, doing things that engineering and chemistry can't. Our new Zords can draw from and manifest magic. That serum that I made, that I realized we're all taking for granted... it uses magic." She looked around at them all. "And that magic doesn't just come from alien worlds. The reason we can use these powers is that Earth has a magic of its own. And these 'gods'... they're part of it. I'm not wrong, am I, Alpha?"

"You aren't, Trini," Alpha said. "I'm sorry, Rangers. Zordon could explain it better. I did not realize you would react to the word 'gods' like that. Think of them more like spirits, manifestations of human magic. These elemental spirits are tied to human emotion and culture, in this case, love and war. Just as the Zords formed into creatures from pre-history, and then mythology, Lord Zedd was able to call forth these dormant spirits and control them in some way. The problem, Rangers, is that he shouldn't be able to control them completely. I don't know how he's doing that."

"If he isn't controlling them, he's got them convinced somehow," Jason said. "We might be able to convince them to stop following him."

"And then what will they do?" Trini said. "I mean, if you read mythology, you'll know that just because they're gods they're not good guys. They're always trying to rape people as bulls, or turning people into trees."

"Okay, things just officially got more messed up," Zack said wryly.

"Here's the million dollar question," said Tommy. "Are we dealing with just those two, or a whole Pantheon?"

They all shot worried looks at each other. They hadn't been able to touch either of the gods. How could they cope with more?
Kimberly crossed her arms. "We're getting distracted. That Aphrodite woman said she had Kevin on some kind of island. Shouldn't we be trying to figure out where that is?"

"I think I may have found something," Billy said. He'd gone back to the Zord repairs as everyone else was talking. His eye twitched. "It's an… envelope. Stuck to the end of the MegaSword."

Jason smiled grimly. "Aphrodite. She must have put it there when she broke the shield. Can you teleport it here?"

Seconds later, a shimmer produced an envelope on the edge of a console. The envelope was identical to the one the police had found at the scene of Kevin's kidnapping.

"Now we get a fair chance to see what Zedd's written," Tommy commented.

Kimberly had already snatched it up. She tried to rip it open, but it resisted her attempts. She growled in frustration.

Tommy covered her struggling hands with his own. "I think we're supposed to open it together," he said in a soft voice.

She looked up at him. Tears were standing in her eyes. It looked like it was taking all she had in her just to keep it together. "Fine," she said. She allowed him to grab a corner, and they tore the parchment together.

A letter did not fall out, as they expected. Instead, there was a flash of light that blinded the Rangers. As soon as they were able to see, Lord Zedd was standing in the middle of the Command Center.

The Rangers yelled and scrambled for their Power Morphers. Billy started keying up some emergency security protocols.

"Rangers!" Alpha turned up the volume on his voice so he could be hears over the Rangers' yells. "It is merely a holographic projection! He's not really here!"

It took the Rangers several seconds to calm down. Once they looked at the figure of Lord Zedd, they could see that he was not as well-defined as a real person. They could see the Viewing Globe faintly through him.

"I trust that you've all calmed down enough to listen to me," the projection of Lord Zedd said mockingly.

"What's your game, Zedd?" Jason said.

The projection of Zedd laughed silently. "And now you've probably said something threatening to me. I am a projection, simpletons. A recording. And as this recording will self-destruct soon, I suggest you pay attention to what I have to say. It's the only way to save the little boy, after all. I suppose now I should pause for the Pink Ranger to throw a fit."

Kimberly glared at him, wishing Lord Zedd was there with them. She didn't care how much power he had, or how many lightning bolts he could throw from his staff. She wanted to tear him apart with her bare hands.

"Very well," Lord Zedd said. "Now I suppose you wish to know where Venus Island is. I will provide you with the dimensional coordinates… but only if you follow certain conditions. I am giving you a chance to rescue your dear little brother, but only at a cost. However, I am generous. I will give you a choice as to the cost."
The projection paused, obviously waiting for those words to sink in.

"You will notice this letter was for the Pink and Green Rangers. Those are the only two I will allow in this rescue attempt. There will be dire consequences that I will explain if any other Rangers sets a foot on Venus Island.

"Kevin is in a mountain at the center of the island. Both island and mountain are riddled with dangers, so you will have to survive all these obstacles to even get close to Kevin. If you survive, you will find Kevin in a sealed chamber. If you pay close attention, there are clues that will lead you to the correct chamber. This chamber is locked with magic, but it can be accessed under certain conditions. One person may enter, and one person may leave. After those conditions are met, the enchantment will be activated: the occupant of the chamber will be placed under a spell, making him or her completely loyal to me. I believe all of you are familiar with this type of spell."

The Rangers stared at him, dumbfounded.

Lord Zedd continued. "I'm sure by now you've asked what happens to Kevin if you don't rescue him. I've implemented a time limit of two hours. If he is not saved within that time limit, he himself will be made evil. I have little use for a small child with no power… but that does not mean I will not have uses for him. I leave that up to your imagination, Rangers."

He paused again, this time obviously wanting to give the Rangers an opportunity to imagine what might happen to Kevin.

"That leaves you with a choice. Shall the Pink Ranger take her brother's place in serving me, or shall the Green Ranger take his rightful place on the side of evil? Tommy, I know I told you that I would not allow you to live, but, as I said, I am generous. I will allow you to serve me, and I will even return full ownership and power of the Green Power Coin to you. That is your only chance for survival. However, if it is you, Kimberly, who takes your brother's place… I will give you the opportunity to save your boyfriend's life once you are in my service… if you indeed still want to save him.

"I realize this is a difficult choice, and there are several possibilities. You may debate them however long you will, but the clock is ticking. The coordinates for Venus Island are written on the inside of the envelope. Only the Pink and Green Rangers are allowed on the island, and they must have their Power Coins. One of you must enter the chamber in two hours, allowing Kevin to escape, or he will be under my power. The one to enter the chamber will become my evil Power Ranger. I await the excitement, Rangers."

The projection disappeared, leaving the Command Center in stony silence.

Kimberly tore the envelope away from Tommy's grip—they'd been holding the envelope together the entire time without realizing—and tore around the edges to open up the inside of the envelope. "Here's the coordinates, Alpha," she said hurriedly. "We'll need to teleport soon."

"Right, Kimberly," Alpha said uncertainly.

"I don't like it," Jason said. "There's got to be a way all of us can go there. Or… we have the coordinates. Can't we just teleport Kevin out of there?"

"We can try," Trini said, "but I doubt it will work. The island is in another dimension, and that chamber is sealed with very specific magic. Even if we could interfere with the magic seal, we can't know the consequences."
"Well…” Zack cast around for ideas. "I mean… if we just wait for the spell to turn Kevin evil, and then Zedd sends him after us, we can just capture him and cure him like we did Tommy. Right?"

He backed up as both Kimberly and Tommy rounded on him.

"We're not gambling with Kevin's life like that," Kimberly said. "We can't know what Zedd would do with him. We might never even see him again. Zedd might kill him outright, or send him to some sort of Hellraiser dimension."

"And even if we could capture him, you want to put a little kid through what I had to go through for my cure?" Tommy said. "Like Kim said, we have to follow Zedd's instructions to get Kevin out of this."

"Now, wait a minute," Jason said. "I'm not going to allow either of you to get turned evil. It's not just Kevin's life on the line right now. Zedd could use either of you to destroy the world, especially if he can get Tommy to full power like he said. We can't deal with another evil Power Ranger. A few of us almost died last time that happened."

"We've got to come up with another option," Trini pleaded. "We can't just waltz into Zedd's trap like this."

"Sorry, guys, but it's not your choice," Kimberly said. "Not your brother, not your mission."

"We know the dangers," Tommy said. "Zedd made them painfully clear. That's why, if it comes to it," he gulped, "it's too risky to try to save me again. Zedd's not going to allow that. You're going to have to kill me soon as you can."

Tommy knew this statement would cause outrage, though he didn't quite know the tack it would take.

"Excuse me?" Kimberly's hard voice cut through the silence. "And since when was it going to be you to take Kevin's place?"

Tommy turned to face Kimberly. "Since always, Kim. That's the only way for this to go down. I'm not letting…"

"You're not letting?" Kimberly interrupted. "Like I said, my brother. I'm going to be the one to take the spell for him."

"Guys…” Zack began.

The two turned and stared him down. Zack backed off.

"I'm the most logical choice, Kim," Tommy said. "I've been under a spell before, so I might be able to resist it."

"You were under Rita Repulsa's spell," Kimberly countered. "Zedd has already shown that his magic is more powerful than Rita's. I, on the other hand, have a responsibility, a responsibility you don't have. I'm not going to risk my brother and my boyfriend when I have the power to save them. I'm not losing you again like that, Tommy. Not when I can take your place."

Tommy's eyes narrowed in frustration. "I'm sorry, Kim, but you're not making any sense. If I'm under the spell, it will be one fully-powered Ranger against five. If you're under the spell, it's one Ranger against four fully-powered and one whose powers are on the blink… and we won't be able to power me up any more. Zedd's going to kill me anyway, and he's lying when he said he would let
you save me. My days are numbered anyway, and I'm not going to let you throw away your life for a dead man."

"You're not dead!" Kimberly yelled. "And you're not going to be if I have anything to say about it. And, okay, here's some logic for you." She hesitated for a second, knowing this would hurt Tommy. "I'm stronger than you. Even if you disagree with me, there's not much you can do to stop me."

"You're forgetting I'm infused with power from Zordon," Tommy said. "I'm stronger now than I've ever been. I can feel it. So don't think you can put me down so easily."

"Will you just get it through your head that I'm not going to let you throw away your life?" Tears were streaming down Kimberly's face, which was red from anger and any number of other emotions. "You're coming down there with me, and you can help me get to the chamber, but then you're staying out of it."

"I can't let you go through what I did," Tommy said in a voice shaking with emotion. "The spell… it'll hurt you in ways you can't even conceive. I told Rita I'd never let her put anyone through what she put me through… and I'm not letting Zedd get away with it either. I… I know I'll hurt you if I'm evil, but not as hurt as you'll get if you become evil."

"I welcome whatever pain Zedd causes me if it saves you," Kimberly said quietly. Tommy's face grew hard. "Then I guess we'll have it out when we get down there."

"I guess we will," Kimberly said. She'd stopped crying. Her face grew hard as well. "Alpha, can we teleport yet?"

"Yes, Rangers," Alpha said with uncertainty. "But…"

"Unless it's about getting us to the island, save it," Tommy said. Alpha dropped it. "Tommy, Kimberly… tell me when you're ready to teleport."

Kimberly and Tommy turned to the other Rangers, who could only look on helplessly as the two argued over who would become a sacrifice. "We're going," Kimberly said. "Once I'm evil, do what you can to keep my family and Tommy safe, because I have a feeling I'm going after them first. If it's safe, try to break the spell… but do what you can to shut me down, anyway, even if it kills me."

Tommy glared at Kimberly throughout this speech. "I've already said my piece, and you know who my targets are going to be."

Jason looked angry, but he seemed to acknowledge that he could do little enough to stop them. "Whoever doesn't get turned evil… get yourself and Kevin back safely. We'll do what we can from here. We're going to look for alternatives… but don't worry. We won't do anything that endangers Kevin."

The two looked at him gratefully, though they were too angry at each other to express it. Neither wanted to be evil, neither wanted to die, neither wanted to sacrifice the other… and the consequences of running away were too high. Zedd said they had a choice, but they really didn't. They had to sacrifice themselves, and they had to fight each other to do it.

"We're ready, Alpha," Kimberly said, her voice emotionless.

The two disappeared in a shimmer.
"Right," Jason said. "We need alternatives before both of them get themselves evil or killed. Billy, Trini, and Alpha, start running scans on the island. Make sure we can communicate with Kimberly and Tommy. Zack and I are going to start researching those 'gods,' and anything else Zedd might throw at them. I want to give them any information they need to survive this."

Alpha looked around at the Rangers. Jason and Zack looked more likely to destroy the computer consoles than to use them for research. He looked at Billy and Trini, sensing their discomfort at working together, and he knew he would have to communicate carefully with both of them. And Zordon's tube remained depressingly empty.

Alpha was a robot. Despite all the talk of gods, he did not pray. In that moment, though, he wished he could.

As soon as they were finished teleporting, Tommy felt a sharp, paralyzing pain at the back of his neck. He fell before he could fully register the sensation.

"Sorry, Tommy," Kimberly said, coming into his range of vision and rubbing her hand. "Had to use a trick Trini taught me. I needed you to get on the island, but you're not going anywhere near the mountain. Soon as you can move, follow me, but only so you can get Kevin out of here safely. I… I love you."

On that note, she ran, leaving Tommy struggling for consciousness.
Kevin sat in the middle of the bare room. He was entirely surrounded by glass walls. The floor was littered with all the stuff, mostly rocks, he'd thrown at it. He hadn't been able to make a crack.

He had been scared. He hadn't cried… and now that he actually cared about that, he was proud of himself… and he'd done everything he could to escape. Still, here he was, alone in a glass box, kidnapped by space aliens. By that gold monkey the Power Rangers always fought.

He wasn't scared anymore… at least he told himself that. He'd been scared during the kidnapping, and scared when he finally woke up after he'd passed out, but now he was just hungry, thirsty, and achingly bored. Even throwing rocks got boring when they didn't break anything.

"But why me?" he asked the still air.

It didn't make sense. He'd been kidnapped before, of course; at the wedding. But then, there'd been others. He'd never heard of a single person being kidnapped by the space aliens. It always happened in groups… that he knew of.

And it wasn't like this was a random kidnapping, like the aliens just needed a kid. If it was like that, they'd have just taken a kid off the street or the playground. No, that monkey had come for him on purpose, and even knew he was away from home that night. He played around with the idea that he'd actually been after Jess, since it was his house. But, no, the alien had asked for his name, and, too scared to think, Kevin had given it…

Kevin heaved a huge sigh, letting his shoulders rise and fall with exaggeration. It was stupid. He couldn't figure out why he was there or how to get out of there. All he could do was sit and wait for a Power Ranger to show up; if they even knew he was kidnapped.

And the last time he'd been kidnapped, someone died…

There was a soft sound. Kevin had been so long in silence that the slightest noise startled him. He jumped to his feet and grabbed a rock.

"You will not be able to throw it at me," a warm, motherly voice answered him. "Please relax, young Kevin."

Kevin sneered and pulled his arm back, but then relaxed his arm in confusion when he saw the source of the voice. It was a sort of big woman in a toga. She looked like a mother… not his mother, who was thin and active, but the sort of mother you saw on cartoons: plump and wearing a flour-stained apron over her toga.

"I bet you're hungry," she beamed at him. "It's nearly breakfast time, and after your ordeal…"

"Who the hell are you?" he asked roughly, trying not to be taken in by her non-threatening manner. She was, after all, on the side of his kidnappers.
She clicked her tongue. "Manners, young man. And I must say that I thankfully have little to do with 'hell.'" She looked at him with undisguised pity. "I can't say that I approve of kidnapping children, but I am in the minority among my fellows. All I can do is try to make your stay more pleasant. And, unlike some other places, it is safe to eat the food here."

The rock had fallen to Kevin's side, but he still looked at the woman uncertainly. Now that he got a good look at her, he realized her eyes were not really eyes at all, but glowing silver orbs. Even through her whole motherly looks, she had an unearthly quality. Alien… the word went through his mind, just as his stomach gave a loud rumble.

Even as she started to chuckle, Kevin conceded. "Fine, I'm hungry. But there's no door to this place. I've been trying to find an opening for hours. Can I get out of here?" He knew there was no hope in beating that space monkey, but he might be able to get away from a fat woman with weird eyes.

"A door will appear for the right person… but that is not me," the woman said. "However, that need not deter me from providing food. Tell me, young Kevin, what is your favorite fruit?"

Kevin shrugged, completely disarmed by the strangeness of the question. "Apples, I guess."

She smiled. "Apples are quite easy." She closed her eyes and furrowed her brow.

In the corner of the glass box, there was a crackling sound. Hoping the glass was miraculously breaking, Kevin turned in time to see a tree shoot up from the ground. In minutes, the tree sprouted, growing tiny green fruit that grew bigger, then ripened to a deep red color. An apple tree, grown to full harvest in minutes.

Kevin stared at the tree, suddenly more scared than he'd ever been. "W-who are you?" he asked, this time without the slightest hint of aggression.

"You need not be afraid of me, child," the woman answered. "I am Demeter, goddess of the harvest. No," her voice grew darker, "it is my fellow gods you must fear… as well as our leader."

"Okay…"

It was the third time Jason had said this, with no further words, but no one wanted to point that out.

"Okay…"

Truth was, Jason was angry. Tommy and Kimberly had thrown themselves into the abyss without even discussing strategy or alternatives. No, they'd let their emotions rule them, and so…

"Here's what we're facing."

Trini, Zack, Billy, and Alpha looked startled that Jason had broken out of his verbal paralysis so suddenly.

"Two Power Rangers have just waltzed right into a trap Zedd has made specifically for them. They're fully armed and prepared to fight each other to sacrifice themselves to take Kevin's place in being evil."

"They're also now out of communicator and teleporter range, Jason," Alpha supplied.

Jason closed his eyes. Of course. "So, our possible outcomes; either Tommy or Kimberly succeeds in
becoming evil, saving the boy. However, Kevin and the other Ranger are not out of danger, since the evil one will probably attack… if they're even able to protect Kevin after what will probably be an intense struggle. And we don't even know if Zedd's going to let them go anyway."

"And no Zordon," Zack added. "And it's not like any of us are at our best."

Jason's face hardened. "I don't accept that. I don't accept either of those possible outcomes. We're better than this. Zedd thinks he has us trapped. He thinks he has us figured out, but he doesn't know anything about us."

Trini, Zack, Billy, and Alpha stared at Jason, obviously wondering if he had anything to back up his confident words.

"Alpha," Jason began, "We've dealt with Zordon disappearing before. Do you think there's any way we can help Zordon reenergize? Like, maybe another power source he can use."

"But, Jason, the nearest available stable energy source is the Earth itself," Alpha fretted. Then he looked down. "But maybe I could…"

Jason grinned. "Do what you can, Alpha. Getting Zordon back is your main job right now. No, Trini, I need you on something else," Jason said as Trini made motions to join Alpha.

She looked slightly startled. "I'm not sure how much the serum…"

"It's not the serum, though it would be nice if you pulled together another miracle," Jason said. "Trini, we're going to do everything we can to make sure Tommy, Kimberly, and Kevin aren't turned evil. But if one of them is… we need an easier way to turn them back. Something that doesn't get the rest of us killed."

Trini looked a little intimidated at her task, but she pursed her lips and nodded. "We still have all of the information from the other evil spells. They're all Rita's spells, of course, but Zedd's have to be comparable."

"And let's hope we don't even need to use it," Jason said, patting her on the shoulder as she swept past. "Now, Billy…"

Billy had been staring vacantly at the whirl of activity. Now he flinched as Jason made eye contact with him for the first time that day.

Jason felt a twinge of regret. Zack and Tommy were right. He'd handled the whole Billy thing wrong. While Zordon had addressed the problem with patience and wisdom, Jason had lashed out from anger. However, he didn't have time to apologize (he told himself), and he didn't have time for Billy to be out of commission.

"Billy, you've got the most important job if we're going to save Tommy and Kimberly. I need you to get in touch with them. Either get communicator contact with them, or find a way for us to teleport down without endangering Kevin. We've got to make sure Zedd doesn't gain control of a Power Ranger."

Usually, when Jason presented Billy with a challenge, a manic gleam popped in his eyes. Now, though, his eyes were shadowed with misery. "Like he almost did with me… right?"

Even as Jason face grew hot from anger, he reigned himself in. "Billy, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, but I'm going to need you at full capacity right now. It's Tommy and Kimberly down there, and they're in danger. You've got to focus on that right now."
The look of misery didn't leave Billy, but he nodded grimly and took his place at the communications panel. At least that was something. Hopefully Jason would have more time for damage control later.

He turned to face Zack, who had his arms crossed, leaning against a panel. "Not much for us to do, then?" There was a bite of sarcasm in his voice, which Jason knew to be a reaction to the pressure.

"Are you kidding?" Jason said. "Zack, you're going to get in the archives and find out everything you know about Ares and Aphrodite… and any other Greek gods you can find. I wouldn't put it past Zedd to resurrect… or whatever… all of them."

Zack stared at Jason dumbfounded. "Research Greek mythology? Are you kidding? We're talking about something at least the size of the Marvel Universe… only with harder words. Come on, can't you get someone else to do it?"

"The others are busy… and I don't want to do it," Jason grinned. "Besides, isn't your mom a literature professor? Doesn't she know all about this stuff?"

"That's my mom, not me, and she specializes in American literature, not Ancient Greek," Zack groused. "Okay, fine… but what are you going to do?"

"What I should have done a long time ago," Jason said. "Learn about the new Zords. It's embarrassing when our enemy knows its abilities better than we do."

Jason left for the Zord docking bay, aching for the quiet it would provide. He'd done a good job of being proactive and confident… but he didn't know how much longer he could keep that up.

When did Kimberly learn how to do that?

That was Tommy's first thought when he woke up alone in the clearing. His second thought was to look at his watch, which told him he'd been out for at least ten minutes. His third thought was of rage.

Not at Kimberly. He understood exactly why Kimberly did what she did, even if he didn't fully understand how. No, he was angry at himself. He'd let her get the drop on him, and there was no excuse for that. He was still thinking of her as his girlfriend, the one person who wouldn't hurt him.

Well, she was his girlfriend, and he'd be damned if he let her sacrifice herself.

Standing up, brushing himself off, and vowing to be more careful, he surveyed the surrounding area. His first impression of the clearing in the forest had been similar to the Island of Illusion: mysterious forest hiding obstacles, but nothing remarkable in itself. He was wrong, though. The forest was hotter, for one. More humid, denser, and… stranger, for lack of a better term. It looked more like a tropical rain forest, or at least it resembled the pictures from that nature documentary they'd watched in science class not too long ago. But the plants were almost… moving. He wondered if any of the plants were carnivorous. Venus Island… it was a short mental jump to Venus fly trap…

He spotted where Kimberly had broken through the trees and, steeling himself, gave chase. Hopefully the forest was too much of a barrier to give her a true head start.

As he crashed through the strange plants, he fumed. Okay, he was also angry at her, he admitted to himself. The trouble was, Kimberly had no idea what she was getting into. Her instincts were admirable, and he felt she was right to have that much of an obligation to family. But… it was an evil
spell they were talking about. She had no clue. She hadn't spent weeks under an evil spell… and he had. Even when you break the spell, even when you start to function again… you never really recover. You're never really the same person. Tommy knew what he was getting in to. He could… well, not handle it, but at least he knew what to expect. At least he was already damaged. Kimberly, though…

No. He had to protect her from that. He couldn't let her go through what he had gone through. At least if it was he who was evil, she'd know how to cope.

He heard a yelp, and then tripped, landing hard on his butt.

"Hey, what are you doing awake already?" Kimberly was scrambling to her feet, brushing herself off. "Trini said hitting that pressure point could knock a grown man out for at least half an hour." She sounded angry, but slightly relieved. Perhaps she'd been worrying if she'd really hurt him.

That just made Tommy feel insulted. "When she said grown man, she probably wasn't meaning a fully trained martial artist who is also a Power Ranger infused with Zordon's energy." His words came out harsher than he meant, but he found he wasn't all that sorry.

"Fine then," Kimberly groused. "So how did you catch up with me so fast? I've been running all this time. That Zordon energy give you super speed?"

"I've only been running for a few minutes. The clearing…” He looked back at where he'd left. Only dense trees and other plants answered him. Past the trees, rather than daylight, was a dense blackness. He turned back around to ask Kimberly if she saw it, too, but she was staring at the sky, open-mouthed.

"So…” she said in a shaky voice. "Zedd said there'd be some obstacles?"

There was darkness and trees all around then, but it wasn't a natural darkness. It was a darkness that was drawing nearer, enclosing them like a bubble.

Tommy and Kimberly took battle stances, standing back to back. The darkness drew ever nearer.

"Hey, I've got a crazy idea," Kimberly said. "Let's get the hell out of here."

"I'm with you," Tommy said. "Any ideas that are more to the point?"

Kimberly cast about desperately. "Uh… the bubble hasn't closed in at the top yet. Maybe…” Her eyes lit on a tree. "You up for climbing?"

Tommy looked at the tree ruefully even as Kimberly was already pulling herself onto the low branches. "I guess it's the only way out."

Truth was, he thought as he awkwardly climbed right behind Kimberly, he'd never climbed a tree before in his life. He'd missed out on that particular childhood pastime; Too busy with training. And if he had, he probably wouldn't have picked this particular tree, covered as it was in a fungus that he didn't want to think about. Kimberly, however, looked like she'd spent half her life up a tree. Of course, that was probably a combination of gymnastics and desperation.

Tommy forced himself not to look down and concentrated on finding his next handhold. He let his upper body do most of the work, as trying to look down for footholds would be counterproductive. Kimberly was balancing near the top of the tree when he felt his foot stick in something cold.

He looked down and panicked. He couldn't see his foot. He saw his leg, his ankle… and then
darkness. He could feel his foot, though, and it felt like it was bathed in ice, even through his shoe. Kimberly saw it too, and she was scrambling down as quickly as she could. "Hang on, Tommy."

"Not much choice," Tommy said, trying to keep the fear in his voice to a minimum. Kimberly braced herself on the other side of the tree, looped her legs over a branch, and cautiously hung upside down from the branch so she could get the best view of his foot… or lack thereof. "Good news is," Kimberly said, "this black thing is solid. I think we could even slide down it if we wanted, which means we can't just fall into it."

"That's a great deal of comfort, except for the fact my foot is stuck in it."

"Other good news is the black thing is not touching your skin. Just your shoe. I'm going to help you ease your foot out of the shoe, okay?"

Tommy started working his foot out of the shoe, realizing this was the best… well… the only plan. "New and interesting ways to get me out of my clothes, huh?"

There was a stony silence. "Just trying to lighten the mood," Tommy said. "And, remember, you knocked me out."

"I remember," Kimberly said, her voice softening. "And I appreciate what you're trying to do… I really do. I'd just also appreciate it if you didn't make this harder."

Tommy suddenly felt the cold leave his foot, and he ground it against a branch, getting it away from the dark bubble that had now claimed his shoe. His foot tingled fiercely, as if it had fallen asleep, but it was still there. Kimberly flipped up to sit on the branch, her face flushed from hanging upside down. "It was complicated to begin with," Tommy said. "Zedd wanted it that way." He smiled. "You know, I was sort of planning to take you out today. To celebrate, you know?"

They were both clinging to the tree trunk, their faces close. He was startled to see Kimberly blinking back tears again. "That would have been nice. I…" She blinked hard several times. "God, why did Zedd pick now to do this? I just wanted it to be nice. Not…"

"I thought it was nice," Tommy said. "I mean, not… I didn't mean nice. I meant…"

Kimberly laughed through her tears. "I didn't mean that either." She looked into his eyes. "Last night was the best night of my life. I don't care what Zedd does, he can't take that away from us. I mean… right?"

Tommy answered Kimberly with a kiss, their cheeks scraping against the trunk. He felt her tears renew, and he wasn't surprised to feel his own eyes stinging. It was some time before they stopped. They knew they were wasting valuable time, but they couldn't bring themselves to stop clinging to each other.

When they finally opened their eyes, the black bubble was gone. They were surrounded by bright green forest and daylight. They climbed down, instinctively knowing the danger had passed. Tommy immediately found his shoe on the ground. Instead of white with green outlines, however, it was now gray and crackled. It
looked like it had aged about a hundred years.

"Well, we've gotten past one obstacle," Tommy commented. "Glad that wasn't my foot."

"Yeah," Kimberly said softly. "I... I guess we have. Hey, Tommy?"

"Yes?"

Kimberly heaved a sigh, as if steeling herself. "Okay, I know you're still determined to sacrifice yourself, and so am I, but it's stupid if we try to fight each other while we're trying to get through the forest. Between fighting each other and getting past the obstacles, we might run out of time, and all this would be pointless. How about we just get to the compound and then figure out who's going to save Kevin."

Tommy nodded. "Of course, you realize what we're going to have to do, whoever it is who ends up saving Kevin."

"Give Kevin our Power Coin before he leaves the room?"

Tommy grinned. "That's it. And that means he finds out our secret identity. You okay with that?"

Kimberly rolled her eyes. "I've always hated this secret identity thing anyway. If Kevin finds out, he finds out."

Tommy didn't add that he would have preferred keeping his own identity a secret, what with his evil past. Instead, he turned his attention to the forest, now safely lit with sunlight. The possibly-carnivorous plants didn't seem all that bad now. After Tommy pulled on his aged sneaker, knowing that some protection was better than none, they cautiously started toward the compound.

"There, you see?" Aphrodite turned from their view of the alternate dimension, smirking from her perch on the balcony. "Love triumphant."

Ares leaned against the wall, eyeing his lover appreciatively. "So they made up. I still think it's better when they're tearing each other apart."

Aphrodite laughed, the sound echoing around the room. "My love, after all I've taught you, and you still don't understand. There can be no true pain without love." Her eyes betrayed nothing, still blank silver orbs, but the skin crinkled around them in amusement as she looked past Ares. "My Lord Zeus understands this. He could have flayed them alive, but he preferred them to tear each other apart."

Goldar's eye twitched at the words. He was standing near Lord Zedd's throne, claiming his superiority to these Earthly apparitions. "Lord Zeus?" His voice was low enough for Zedd to hear, but not the two gods, who were too busy arguing.

"A convenient match with this Earth deity," Zedd said in a low, amused voice. "A little lightning show convinced them enough, and my name..."

As they watched, the two gods had begun to kiss violently. Goldar ground his teeth: he could not help but think of Scorpina.

"Oh, stop it, you two," a low voice snapped from the hallway.

A clunk-drag sound followed the voice, and a hunched, grizzled god limped into the throne room.
His leg drug uselessly behind him. While the other gods had perfect skin, or were artfully scarred, as in the case of Ares, this one's skin was criss-crossed with jagged scars and ill-healed angry welts. If there was a god that looked like a monster, it was he.

Ares and Aphrodite pulled apart and stared at the newcomer with contempt. "Oh, don't be such a bore, dear husband," Aphrodite laughed. "I don't know why you even bother with jealousy anymore. It's not like we…"

Lord Zedd rose, and the gods grew quiet. The newcomer looked at Zedd with the same amount of hatred as the two lovers, but with a healthy amount of fear mixed in.

"Hephaestus," Lord Zedd said, fully aware of his effect on the lame god. "The humans have evaded your first trap. I trust you have more in store for these children."

Hephaestus was obviously trying to hide his fear of "Zeus." Goldar wondered what this god felt he had to fear from someone who was supposed to be his lord. "Present company would attest that I am adept at nets."

Ares and Aphrodite glared back.

"The humans will find it challenging, though not impossible to surpass. They should be distracted enough for your purposes."

"These humans…" Ares spat out the word. "They are clever, and the boy is gifted in war, but I do not understand why they are so important. Why not transform them… or transform yourself, if you desire them so much." The last was said with heavy irony.

Goldar started massaging his temple. The gods talked with great familiarity, making references that he couldn't begin to understand. Lord Zedd was no help in elaboration, as his vast knowledge allowed him to understand their oblique references to Earth mythology perfectly.

Goldar did understand that Zedd didn't appreciate the insinuations Ares was making. "Age and experience teaches subtlety, something you, god of war and bloodshed, know nothing about. Your consort is correct. There are some things that cut deeper than a sword."

Ares snorted in derision. "Just tell me when the real attack begins. I tire of watching children run through the woods."

"Soon," was Zedd's answer. "After they tear themselves to pieces."

That answer seemed to satisfy the gods. Goldar, on the other hand, glared at the screen suspended off the balcony, showing Tommy's and Kimberly's progress through the hostile forest. They were, at the moment, dodging fire-breathing plants… a collaborative invention between Aphrodite, Demeter, and Hephaestus. Their faces were grim and set, and they kept glancing at each other, their temporary treaty still uncertain.

Whatever Zedd had planned, it would not end in any way the Rangers expected. They thought it was a mere matter of choosing who would sacrifice themselves. They thought they would be able to save the boy easily, that they would be able to keep any power away from Zedd.

And, through all this, Goldar knew he couldn't do a thing for Tommy. He just hoped the fool would be able to keep himself alive as he always did.
Too antsy to focus on the theoretical powers of the Zords, Jason had wandered into the main control room. He was trying not to hover, or look like he was hovering, but the way Billy kept shooting glances at him and tensing up, he knew he was failing on both counts.

"I'm trying something new," Billy finally said. "I… I can't guarantee any success, but…"

"What are you trying?"

Jason wanted to reassure Billy. Wanted to tell him that he had full faith in his abilities… but the words couldn't get past his lips. He also knew that reassurances wouldn't help. Billy was breaking down, and whenever he broke down, focusing on a goal was his only way to recover. He didn't react well to what others would term pity.

"It's…" Billy hesitated, obviously trying to come up with an explanation that would make any sense to Jason. Trini wasn't there to translate, after all. "It's sort of a back door. We have the coordinates to the dimension straight from Zedd, and I can use those coordinates to open another portal. I have a little experience in alternate dimensions, just from working with Zordon, but this is something entirely foreign to me. Trying to patch into another dimension, a dimension that Zedd controls, is theoretically possible, but extremely dangerous."

"What kind of danger are we talking about here?" said Jason. "How bad can boosting a signal be?"

"I realize it's counterintuitive, but sending a message to them is impossible," Billy said. "Teleporting in, however, isn't impossible. We can set up a back door, one that Zedd isn't monitoring. If we can hide our own signals well enough, or disguise them in some way, Zedd doesn't even need to know we're there until we choose to let him know. The disguise is a problem, though. And the fact that, since it's a back door, we can't tell where we'll enter the dimension. And one miscalculation could create a feedback loop through the Morphing Grid…"

"Billy, the chances of that are really small." This time it was Alpha to interrupt. "We need only calibrate some signal boosters to help create the door."

Jason saw Billy flinch. Right. He'd forgotten that in Zordon's absence, Billy was supposed to report to Alpha with all experiments… but he couldn't help that Billy was taking it a bit too far. Not reporting when he found a good, relatively safe solution to their problem immediately…

"You have an idea about our disguises, too," Jason said. He tried to keep the impatience out of his voice, knowing that he had to keep Billy calm if he was going to get any brilliance out of him. "Tell us your idea."

"We disguise ourselves as Putties."

Jason frowned. "What… paint ourselves gray?"

There was a ghost of a smile on Billy's face at that. "We won't have to go that far. We're not going to see Zedd in person. He's probably viewing the dimension from the Moon Palace, so if we overlay a Putty energy signature on our own, we'll register as Putties to all but the naked eye."

"Or creepy eye visor," Jason said. "Sounds like a plan. Hopefully, once we get there, we can find another way to save Kevin. I don't care what Zedd thinks he has planned. None of us are getting sacrificed."

He clapped Billy on the shoulder. "Good work. Listen up, people." Zack looked up from his computer console, clearly relieved to be interrupted, and Trini appeared from the lab just off the main control room. "Billy's found us a way in, but it's a little risky. Soon as Billy and Alpha can calibrate
us a back door, we're going in. Trini, I need serum and tools we might need to break Kevin out.”

Trini nodded and ran back into the lab. Billy looked a little startled that the plan was going ahead, but he set to work next to Alpha without a complaint.

"We sure this is safe?" Zack asked in a low voice. "I mean, Zedd did threaten Kevin if we…"

"It's better than letting those two emotional time bombs handle it on their own," Jason said. "What have you found out?"

Zack scowled and rubbed his head. "Too much and not enough. I'm guessing we're going to face Aphrodite, given the name of the place, but that's all I can predict."

"Well, we know she can rip through the Zord shields without any effort," Jason said. "What other powers do you think she has hiding?"

"That's the thing," Zack said. "It's not like one guy just sat down and wrote out everything about the Greek gods and made it all make sense. Some things remain pretty much the same, but we're talking about hundreds of years of writing and stories that all contradict each other. Take Aphrodite, for instance. No one can agree on her origins, and her personality changes with every story. And she may have been macking on Ares there, but her real husband is Hephaestus, so she might have him doing something."

"And who's Hephaestus?"

"God of the forge," Zack supplied. "Skilled workman. Genius… I guess we'd call him an engineer. He's most famous for making a net to catch Aphrodite and Ares doing it."

"And who better to trap Tommy and Kimberly, than someone who's already good at trapping people?" Jason smiled bitterly. "Good work. Read up some more on Hephaestus. We don't know how much those myths will help us, but it's better to not jump into a fight blind."

And Jason was grateful that Zack didn't point out that that was exactly what they were doing.

Kimberly pushed aside yet another sticky branch… and gasped. It was the compound. They'd made it.

She took a step forward, but then stopped herself, not really needing Tommy's warning hand on her shoulder. They didn't say anything, but they knew the clear field between themselves and the door was a deception.

"They've done weird aging darkness, packs of super-fast wolves, fire-breathing plants, and some sort of lion thing," Kimberly said, keeping her voice low.

"I think that was a chimera," Tommy said.

"Right," said Kimberly. "No pattern, though. What do you think is going to be between us and that door?"

Tommy scraped his hair out of his face. "Zedd's using Greek gods, right? Something… Greek?"

"That's helpful," Kimberly groused, looking away.
She felt Tommy's anger behind her. Even when he was morphed, which they'd only stayed morphed in short bursts, so as to save Tommy's power, she could tell what he was feeling. She wondered if the night before had anything to do with that, or if she'd just grown that close to him, and had just now noticed.

"Today's not my best day, all right?" Tommy finally said.

Kimberly sighed. "Mine neither." And she knew what the problem was. They'd worked together wonderfully trying to get through the forest, but now they were facing the compound. A decision had to be made soon. She had to keep both her brother and her boyfriend safe… and somehow come out of it alive. She wasn't certain how angry Zedd would become when she showed up to serve him sans power coin.

Her stomach tightened. She hadn't, until this second, truly thought about the fact that she would be serving Zedd… Lord Zedd, soon enough. That she would betray all of her friends, working as hard as she could to make life miserable for them.

And Tommy. She would hurt Tommy. She knew she would.

She wanted to tell him that she loved him, that whatever she did, nothing would change that. She wanted to imagine what she would do if… when… she were evil, and tell him what to expect.

But she knew he wouldn't accept it. That he would interrupt her and argue with her, and the words would come out all wrong. No, she could tell him anything. Couldn't even say goodbye. She had to face this alone and hope he could sense all this from her without her saying it.

Tommy's hand returned to her shoulder, and she looked back at him. And there it was. The things that made her resolution harden, even as she was just starting to consider letting him sacrifice himself. There was, after all, a lot of sense in what he said: he knew what it was to be under a spell, and they knew what to expect from him. It would make so much sense, and she'd be able to truly protect her brother… but for that look in his eye. The look he'd had for a week. The death wish.

She knew what he would do. Spell or no spell, he would make sure that Zedd killed him. Zedd wanted to kill him anyway—he'd already established that. And Tommy… whether through guilt, or loyalty to Rita, or a wish to join his father, or just not being able to face it anymore…

If Tommy sacrificed himself, all that was waiting for him was death. She just couldn't allow that. Maybe if he was trying to save her, he'd find a reason to live.

"We go cautiously? Morphed?"

Kimberly nodded. "You do the honors."

"You know my mother's going to keep at it." Kimberly dropped the phone back on the hook and shifted on the couch to lean against Tommy. His arms curled around her.

"Don't know why everyone's in such a damn hurry," Tommy grumbled, trying to reach the remote without jostling Kimberly. "I mean, we've only been married a couple of years. It's not like we're a baby factory."

Kimberly chuckled. "And Mom didn't used to be so desperate to be a grandmother. Honestly, people act like women shrivel up by 25."
Tommy started feeling at Kimberly's ribs. "You don't feel shriveled to me."

Kimberly shrieked and tried to shove his hands away. "Stop it," she gasped as he tickled her.

She finally wriggled out of his grasp. "The dryer just cut off. Now, keep your hands to yourself and you can help hang up the clothes."

He grinned. "You sure know how to tempt a guy."

He followed her and moved the clothes from the washer to the dryer as she dumped the clothes onto the bed. She picked up one of his green shirts. There were some stains that hadn't come out in the washing.

"How do you keep ruining your clothes?" Kimberly grumbled. "I swear, you go through more T-shirts."

The dryer turned on, and Tommy tossed the shirt that Kimberly handed him in the trash. "At least my shirts stay on a hangar," he teased, holding up one of her strappy shirts.

She pulled the blouse from his grasp and rolled her eyes, knowing that he was useless at hanging up her shirts. But it also had something on it. Something red…

She shrugged. There was something wrong, but it didn't have anything to do with right now. They finished the laundry. They cooked supper. They started a movie, but left halfway through for the bedroom, half of their clothes littering the living room floor.

They did the same the next day.

And the next day.

And the next day.

They laid in bed beside each other, sated and gasping. And then…

"There's something wrong, isn't there?"

There was a hitch in Tommy's voice. Kimberly closed her eyes and saw what she always saw when she slept, when she blinked… It was a golden net, surrounding her.

"I don't want there to be." Kimberly's voice came out in a whisper. If only Tommy had kept quiet, they might have…

Kimberly grabbed Tommy, holding him close to her. No, there was nothing wrong. They were married. Safe. Their fighting days long behind them. This was the reality she wanted. The thing she craved. Tommy was alive, they were together, there was no evil emperor watching over them, wanting to kills and enslave them…

"But this is okay, isn't it?" Tommy said, his voice turning desperate. "Just a few more days. We could…"

He stopped talking, and Kimberly opened her eyes. Instead of seeing their dark bedroom, they were suspended from the ground in a golden net. They'd been clinging to each other, and Kimberly pulled her hands away to see that her fingernails had broken Tommy's skin. Her own arms felt sore, and she knew she probably had bruises.

"We weren't able to sustain the morph, I guess," Tommy said quietly. "Do you think we can morph
now?"

Kimberly turned her face away, hoping Tommy didn't see the tears she couldn't help. Not after that. "I guess there's only one way to find out."

They morphed, and Tommy pulled his blade blaster out to cut the net. It was surprisingly easy to cut, and the two tumbled to the ground.

Kimberly checked the time in her helmet. "Shit! We're almost out of time!"

She ran to the compound, Tommy close behind her. She threw the doors open to encounter an innocuous hallway. She didn't care if there were traps or not: she had to get to Kevin before time was out.

Even though he'd had plenty of reassurances, Jason was still glad they hadn't materialized as Putties.

Trini and Zack were close behind him. Zack had stopped describing the possibilities of spiders after Trini had snapped at him to shut up. Jason frowned at the further evidence that the Rangers were starting to crack under the strain. Trini had never snapped like that before.

Billy was not with them. Jason had left him to guard the signal boosters, which they relied on to get home. He knew it had hurt Billy to leave him, but they needed someone there to pull them back, and Jason just couldn't trust Billy in a fight. Not with him on the edge like that.

They'd met no obstacles. They'd seen a few wolves, but the wolves ignored them. The dimension and its obstacles weren't for them. Jason was thankful. They could get to Tommy and Kimberly all that much sooner.

But time was running out, and they still didn't have sight of the compound. Their equipment was scrambled just enough that they couldn't detect any life readings, not even their own. It was like the place wasn't even there, and it was creepy as hell.

Jason stopped as he felt Trini grab both of them. "There."

Sure enough, to the left, there was a building that could only be the compound. Jason almost let out of a whoop of triumph, but stopped short. He knew they needed to keep from being noticed this close to where Zedd was monitoring. They knew, however, they didn't have a lot of time, so they ran for the compound…

Only to be stopped at the door. Aphrodite, still looking as beautiful and as dangerous as she had towering over Angel Grove.

"Well," she began, "I can't say I'm surprised. Lord Zeus said you would be resourceful… but I cannot allow you to interfere."

Jason opened his mouth, about to ask how Zeus knew anything about them, when he had to duck golden energy bolts. He used his next few words to morph, and then all plans of strategy or reaching the compound were moot, as they were fighting just to keep up and stay alive.
Kimberly heard Tommy gasping for breath beside her, and a quick glance showed her that he couldn't sustain the morph even for that long. That worried her, but she also knew she had another reason Tommy couldn't sacrifice himself. He needed to get back to the Command Center as soon as possible for help. Whatever powers Zordon had given him were obviously not helping.

She was about to throw open another door when Tommy's hand caught her. She glared at him, but he couldn't see her, and catching her like that had obviously hurt him.

"If we get trapped now," Tommy said, "we'll never get to Kevin. This room may be Kevin's cell, but it could also be even more of a trap as that net. Kim… slowly."

Kimberly forced herself to breathe normally. Everything told her she needed to run to Kevin, but she had to acknowledge Tommy's good sense. It would all be lost if she let herself fall into another trap.

They opened the door together. Kimberly at first thought it was some sort of oven… the heat was oppressive. There was a bright orange light at the other side of the room, and the room echoed with the ringing sound of metal on metal.

Tommy and Kimberly inched forward. The figure at the end of the room became clear. The light turned out to be a fire encased in a furnace. In the fire was bright orange sword that was glowing with the intense heat. And beside the furnace was a man with glowing silver eyes.

"Net took longer than I thought it would," the man grunted. "I understand. Probably felt very safe compared to this."

The man himself was stooped, with a scarred body and a deformed leg. He turned from the two and pulled the sword out of the furnace. Laying it on an anvil, he began hammering away at it and humming to himself.

He was also in front of the only door.

"Is my brother past that door?" Kimberly challenged him, unnerved that he had yet to attack.

The man ignored her and continued to hammer. The sword was beginning to glow less as it cooled.

"You're… Vulcan. Right?" Tommy asked. "You're one of the gods."

The man smirked. "I go by Hephaestus, actually. Never did like the Romans. None of us did. Well, maybe except Dionysus…"

"Is my brother past that door?" Kimberly asked again.

The man began hammering again. "Do you see any other doors?"

The two Rangers paused, considering. At the moment, Kimberly was pretty sure she would be able to outrun and possibly outfight the god, especially as he had a lame foot, and her weapons were swifter than his hammer or unfinished sword. Yet she had Tommy to consider. He couldn't morph. If she ran past the god, she would leave Tommy facing him unprotected. If she tried to fight him, she risked Tommy's safety as well as running out the time limit. They only had ten more minutes…

Hephaestus considered the sword, and then plunged it back into the furnace. "Fascinating thing, metal," he commented. "It comes out of the ground, pitted with impurities. Worthless. It's only through heat that it can become strong."

Kimberly was about to surge forward, but Tommy again put his hand on her shoulder. She was that
close to breaking that hand, but she stayed put nonetheless.

"The heat," the god continued, "makes it pliable, but it also makes it strong. Purifies it. If I didn't put the sword through this, it would turn brittle. Break at the first blow."

"That's a great hobby of yours," Tommy groused, "but what does it have to do with us?"

Kimberly was about to retort that none of it had to do with them—that the god only wanted to separate them from her brother, and that time was running out—but she silenced when the god started talking again.

"It feels good, doesn't it?" The god was beginning to hammer again, but they could hear his words perfectly. "Young love, in its first blush. Feels like you can conquer anything."

"What do you know about it?" Kimberly said, her voice turning harsh.

Hephaestus's shoulders began shaking with laughter. "More, perhaps, than you think. I've seen you around the forest. You want to fight each other, and that's part of it, but you can't. You're too wrapped up in each other. You cling to each other. Real life, life outside of each other's arms, has just stopped making sense, hasn't it?"

Kimberly felt Tommy's frame stiffen behind her. He was obviously more interested in what the god had to say than she was.

"So you found us out," she said. "Not like everyone else hasn't," she said with a blush, and she was damn glad she still had her helmet on.

"That passion… that heat…" The god had stopped looking at them, and was staring at the sword in the fire. "It consumes you. At times it's too much, but it's still wonderful. And it makes you stronger. Binds you closer together, until you become one entity."

Hephaestus took the sword out of the fire and began to stare at it, this time not lifting his hammer. Just letting it cool on the anvil. "But it doesn't last, does it. Much as you want it to, it never lasts. Heat cools. Passions go away. The first blush fades, and all you're left with is a hunk of metal. Have you hammered it enough to keep it strong? You never know, and it's usually too late when you try."

Tommy laughed slightly. "Sounds like you had a bad experience."

The god looked up again. "Me and Love… we've never gotten along, you could say," the god said with dark humor.

"What the hell are you two talking about?" Kimberly said through gritted teeth. Either the room was getting hotter, or it was anger that was pouring from her head in hot waves. "We need to…"

"You'll betray him."

The words from the god took Kimberly's breath away, making her forget what she was about to say. Zedd's words. Another betrayal…

Hephaestus shrugged. "Or he'll betray you. Or you'll just drift apart, realizing that what you had belonged to youth, or to hormones, or to duty, and there was nothing left to bind you. You'll hang on. You'll feel obligated. But do you really think you've found the person you're going to be with forever when you're only sixteen?"

"Shut up."
The words came out of Kimberly in a growl. She felt Tommy start, but that didn't bother her. Her hands were itching to grab her bow, and this time she wouldn't let Tommy interfere.

"Hephaestus, we didn't come here for a lecture that should, by all rights, be coming from our parents… well… Kimberly's parents. And I can't help but feel that you just want to keep us from that door."

Hephaestus shrugged again. "I see two young people, all honor and idealism and good intentions, and I feel I have to warn them. Take it from someone who's been disappointed in everything he's ever done. I can create anything… but I can't do anything right. If you survive all this, you'll both have to think about your future. You won't be in high school forever. You won't be Power Rangers forever. Without that, what do you have?"

"Shut UP!"

She drew her bow in one swift move. Tommy backed away, and Hephaestus grinned.

"Kim, that may not be…"

"I don't care," Kimberly snapped. "Hephaestus, you've got it all wrong. I'm going to sacrifice myself to save Tommy. I know he's in it so Zedd can kill him…"

There was a startled gasp behind her, and Kimberly knew she'd guessed right.

"But I'm not going to let that happen. Don't you see? I'm not going to betray Tommy. I'm going to do everything in my power to protect him. You think we haven't been tested enough, do you?" Her voice started to shake again, but she didn't care. "You don't know what we've been through. We've been turned evil, nearly died so many times, been kidnapped and saved the world… Even when we both tried to run away from each other, we always came back. We've been through in a year more than what most couples go through in a lifetime. And I don't care what you think you know about us." She paused, gasping, wishing the god would acknowledge what she was saying or even the arrow pointed at him, wishing she could see Tommy's face… "I love Tommy, and I plan to spend the rest of my life with him."

With one crashing blow, Hephaestus brought the hammer down on the sword. It shattered.

White noise filled Kimberly's head, and she screamed. Pumping as much energy as she could into it, she let the arrow fly at Hephaestus.

Hephaestus lifted his hammer in front of him and knocked it back at her. She sidestepped it.

There was a scream. A sizzling sound. Then silence.

Kimberly felt her heart pounding, but nothing else. The world felt unreal around her, the figure before her distant. The air smelled burned, somehow, a burning that was not coming from the furnace.

No. It wasn't… that… that didn't happen… She was still holding her bow she hadn't shot an arrow he was still back there, there was no scream, no sizzle, no burn no…

Her knees gave way, and she fell hard, her bow clattering to the ground.

"That… was unfortunate," Hephaestus said, his voice low and without a trace of irony.

Kimberly opened her mouth to retort, but all that came out was a sob.
Hephaestus began gathering up the pieces of the broken sword. "There was no need to attack me. Never a need for violence. I hate violence, as it often happens like this. My orders were to keep you here. I was sincere in what I said, but I never would have lashed out if you hadn't made the first attack." He sighed. "You could have walked right by me, and I wouldn't have done a thing. I am not as bloodthirsty as my wife's paramour… or my wife, for that matter."

He extinguished the furnace. The lights in the room rose in electric sconces on the walls as the firelight faded. Kimberly knew he was moving closer to her, but she couldn't move in response.

As he walked past her, he patted her on the shoulder. "I'm sorry. So very sorry."

The door behind her closed, and she was alone.

Kimberly, body almost convulsing, turned to see if she could do anything. Maybe there was…

What greeted her was a pile of ash. A pile of…

There was another scream, a ragged animal shriek, and Kimberly wondered vaguely if there was another trap, and animal coming for her, but then her throat hurt, and she realized…

"Tommy… TOMMY…no god no god no god no god no TOMMY!"

What would she…

There was no…

He had to be… he couldn't…

Her fault…

And, still, the second ticked inexorably onward, and Kimberly knew she had to leave. Tommy was… There was only one sacrifice.

She forced herself to her feet, leaving the pile of ashes that could not… could never be… She pushed open the door. It opened easily to a hallway. Breath ragged, and pulled herself down the hallway, the pain numbing to a low burn, the voices in her head fading to a low buzz, and the thing that didn't happen…

Another door, and then a room with a bright glass cell in the middle. And Kevin.

"Pink Ranger!" Kevin was on his feet in an instant. "I knew you guys would save me. Listen, there's no door, and I think there's some kind of gas… It's been seeping in, and my head feels all…"

Kimberly almost smiled. Her brother, right there. He'd be…

"It's all right," she said, her voice sounding almost human. "I can get you out easy. That gas won't…"

"But there's no door," Kevin said. "There's a woman who calls herself Demeter somewhere around here. Maybe she can."

Kimberly approached the cell, and a door appeared, the glass suddenly more opaque. She wondered if it were always there, just invisible to all but her.

With a moment's hesitation, she pushed the door open. It closed behind her. With one more hesitation, she demorphed, preparing to follow the plan no matter what.
Kevin's eyes went wide. "K… Kimberly? But… that means…"

Kimberly was finally able to smile. She pulled Kevin into a hug, and noticed for the first time they were almost the same height. "Kevin… it's going to be okay. The door will open only one more time… for you. Only one person can go through. Y… you need to leave me here, okay?"

Kevin, even through the shock and confusion, turned angry. "You think I'm going to leave my own sister here? I don't care if you're a Power Ranger or not. We have to…"

Kimberly gripped Kevin's shoulders. "You have to listen to me, Kevin. My… my friends will be able to save you. You just need to run. Take this." She handed him her wrist communicator. "Get clear of the compound, and press the top button. It will take you straight to my friends. Start pressing it as soon as you can, because people might want to stop you."

"Bu… but…" Kevin was shaking, tears running helplessly down his face. "I can't…"

"No… listen." Kimberly felt her face heating up, and breathing was becoming harder. "We don't have a lot of time. I'm going to go… well… I'm going to go away for a while. My friends will explain it. You have to tell them…" Her voice caught, but she had to keep talking. This was the last chance. "Tommy is dead. He… he died fighting. Tell them that. Please. No matter what I say later on, they have to know…"

Kevin disappeared, there was a pain in her head, and then he reappeared above her. She'd fallen.

"Kimberly!"

She growled, rage starting fill her numb body, steadying her shaking limbs. "Get OUT of here, Kevin!" She got to her feet and grabbed his arm when he didn't move. He yelped in pain, but she just gripped him harder and shoved him to the door. The door opened, and she pushed him. He fell hard to the floor, and the door closed.

Distantly, she realized she'd accomplished her mission. Now there was the waiting…

She still had her power coin.

Kimberly slumped against the wall, dragging her fingernails across it even as it disappeared. She knew she would never be able to get past it now, not until the spell had done its work.

She deserved it, though.

Kimberly's whole body wracked at the thought. Guilt and loss and fear and more unspeakable feelings coursed through her, twisting into something almost other than herself, something darker. And words echoed through the room, or perhaps just in her own head. Another betrayal. Another…

Just as suddenly as the attack had begun, it ended. Aphrodite smirked at the gasping Rangers. "It's done."

She disappeared, but the three Rangers were already on the move. They launched themselves through a hallway, a room, another hallway…

Jason skidded to a halt when he saw Kevin, running and clutching a wrist communicator.

"S-she's in there! Kimberly! She…"
Kevin was pale and shaking, but his face looked determined. Rather than explain, he grabbed Jason's hand and pulled him down the hallway. "You've got to help her. She got me out of that glass box, so maybe you can."

"Maybe we need to get Kevin out…" Zack began.

"No!" Kevin rounded on them. "I have a pretty good idea who you guys are, and you're not going to let my sister die in there. Not after…"

He went silent, and Jason felt ice form in his stomach.

"Kevin…" Trini's voice was barely controlled. "Where's the Green Ranger?"

"That's the one Tommy was?"

Trini took a step back. There was a strangled cry, and Zack's knees gave way. He fell to the floor hard.

Kevin looked shocked at his own words, but he kept pulling at Jason's arm. "I'm sorry, but if you don't come, Kimberly's going to die, too."

Jason pulled himself away from Kevin and brushed past him, running for the door. He vaguely heard the other three follow him. A glass cell dominated the room, and Kimberly, unmorphed, was slumped against a wall.

"Kim!" Jason ran for the case, making plans to break it… but then Kimberly slowly stood up.

He looked at her face, and he knew it wasn't Kimberly anymore.

"Hey, guys," she said, a bright smile on her face. "Did you come to rescue me?"

Jason could hear struggling behind him, and he knew that Trini and Zack were preventing Kevin from rushing forward. He didn't look back, though. He kept his eyes on Kimberly.

"We did, actually," Jason said, trying to keep his voice calm. "Sorry we're too late."

"I'm not."

She started pacing around the cell, and Jason kept pace with her. She was unmorphed and without a wrist communicator, but her power coin and morpher were clearly visible from her pocket. She looked like she'd been crying—more than crying—which made her smiling, mocking face all the more unnatural.

"What happened to Tommy?" Jason's voice caught at the name, but he forced himself to keep talking. "Was it Zedd? Or one of the gods? Is he…?"

"Oh, didn't Kevin tell you?" She grinned over at her brother. "Of course not. Bad boy. Gonna have to tell Mom."

"W… what's wrong with her?" Kevin's voice sounded tiny, much different from the determined boy in the corridor.

Kimberly chuckled. "I guess you could say I reached a moment of clarity. I will admit, things were pretty confusing when Tommy died, but…" she shrugged. "Tis better to have loved and lost…"

"Shut up!"
Kimberly raised an eyebrow. "Look at you, Zack. Didn't think you even liked Tommy all that much." She grinned wider. "Or maybe you were just jealous of me. I mean, he was good looking…"

"What happened?" Jason interrupted her.

"I killed him."

If Jason had been expecting any response, it wasn't that.

"Did you hear me, Red Ranger?" Kimberly said, her face turning angry. "Because, just in case Kevin told that ridiculous story about Tommy dying heroically in battle, and before you make up all sorts of images to go along with that… He wasn't fighting. He wasn't morphed. He wasn't even expecting it. And I was the one who killed him. I shot him, and he's just a pile of ashes."

"But you didn't even turn evil until you entered that cell." Trini's voice was almost emotionless.

"Exactly." She looked up, as if hearing a voice from above. "Looks like this little conference is running out… as is this whole dimension. Try to escape. It would suck if you ended up dying here before I get a chance to play with you."

There was a bright flash of light, and the compound disappeared, replaced by the image of the park and Billy standing next to the signal boosters.

Jason opened his mouth to say something, but his throat was completely closed up. "Let's…” he strangled out, "let's get the hell out of here."
Rights of Mourning

Chapter Summary

Book 6: Shadows in the Cave

(This chapter title is misspelled intentionally. Puns!)

Lord Zedd stood at his balcony and waited. For a few brief seconds, he ignored his myriad plans, his monitoring of worlds and dimensions, even his strict attention to the glamor he had placed on these Earth spirits… and he waited.

The throne room was deserted. The gods were elsewhere, and Goldar had left the room without explanation. In the echoing silence, there was a flash of light, and he heard the unsteady shuffle of sneakers on a stone floor.

"Whew! Dizzy. That was really not like the teleportation I'm used to."

Lord Zedd turned to regard the human girl, who was at the moment shaking her head vigorously. Her face was still red and blotchy, evidence of her rather emotional transformation. That was good. The emotion was a necessary catalyst.

She stopped shaking her head and turned to look at him. The first time she had ever seen him, she'd flinched. She'd barely been able to keep her eyes on him. Now, though, her face lit up, and she smiled.

"No longer afraid, child?" Lord Zedd said.

She cocked her head. "Why would I be afraid, Lord Zedd?" She paused. "Should I call you Lord Zedd? I can't sense much from your mind, but I do know you keep the gods in line because they think you're…"

"You may speak normally around them," Lord Zedd reassured her. He couldn't help but be a little surprised at how much she had picked up from the few minutes she'd been under his spell. Among other things, he'd established a low-level telepathic bond between them, and he'd made it reciprocative. Yet she was adapting to the connection more smoothly than he'd expected.

"Right, the glamor," Kimberly said, rolling her eyes at her lapse. "Good. I'd really rather call you by your name… Lord Zedd." She smiled when she said the name again. "So… how's this going to work?"

"How would you like it to work?" Zedd began approaching her, and still she did not flinch.

Kimberly crossed her arms. "I mean, I'm supposed to serve you, right? A bit of bowing and scraping, my life and service is at your command… like that?"

Her tone was a combination of flippancy and uncertainty, so Zedd looked beyond what she said. Just there, in a brain that was desperately trying to reconstruct itself after it had been shattered, was what she meant.
He took her hand, now inches from her. She was startled, but not from fear of him. And she didn’t pull away.

"Don't you think there are things that can go unsaid?" Lord Zedd softened his voice and kept eye contact. It wasn’t for any silly reason like reinforcing the spell, or any of the other ineffective methods Rita had used. It was an invitation, an establishing of a relationship that went beyond spells and control.

The silence was charged as thoughts and decisions warred behind Kimberly's eyes. The template was there—her loyalty to Lord Zedd. But there was so much to establish, so much freedom within that simple fact.

"I think…" her words came out as a whisper. "I… think we have a lot to get done. And quickly, if we're to stay ahead of the Rangers."

Lord Zedd allowed the change in tone. She was still confused, still sorting her feelings. That was what he wanted. The less certain she was about her relationship with him, the less she would think to question the basis of that relationship in the first place. "You obviously have some plans."

She took a step away from him, drawn to the breath-taking view from the balcony. While her eyes widened in wonder, her voice resolved itself to business. "I'll need a few things. Thankfully I didn't give away my power coin like I'd planned, and I don't need my wrist communicator, but there are still things I need to do while the Rangers are grieving and not paying attention." She looked back at him and smiled. "We can't let them regroup. As soon as they can recover even a little bit, they'll be planning to steal me back." Her smile widened. "And we can't let that happen."

"No, indeed." Lord Zedd beckoned to her. "What do you need?"

Kimberly shrugged. "A little mayhem at the ready, though I think I can break in pretty easily before they change the security protocols. They'll be too devastated to remember right off. Just in case, though, I need their attention elsewhere."

"Do as you need to do." Lord Zedd flicked the Z-staff as he spoke.

Kimberly jumped as a thin strip of electricity surrounded her wrist. The electricity cleared to reveal a wrist communicator, much like those of Billy's design, but looking as if it had been created from Zedd's silver armor.

Kimberly traced the more delicate design lightly with her fingers. She looked up and said, "I do like presents." With one last smile, she disappeared.

"I don't believe it."

Billy had replaced his shaking voice from before with flat, emotionless tones. He had listened patiently through Jason's short recital with crossed arms and a stony face.

Alpha was in the next room, escorting Kevin to the bathroom. He hadn't reacted to Kimberly's brother suddenly showing up in the middle of the Command Center: he'd merely taken charge of the boy while the Rangers talked. He had also not reacted to the news of Tommy's death and Kimberly's spell. It was as if his programming was ill-equipped to respond.

Jason figured it was like that for both android and human.
"Billy…" Trini started in a shaky voice, but backed off at Billy's glare.

"I mean, did any of you check for a body?" Billy said. "Any sort of proof? You're all just going to take Kimberly's word for it? You know, while she's evil?"

Trini opened her mouth, but then closed it. There were tears silently running down her face. Had been ever since they found Kimberly in the cell, taunting them about killing Tommy.

Zack was crumpled on the steps, shaking with silent sobs. Silent now, anyway. He hadn't been able to maintain sound past the few minutes it had taken for Jason to tell the story.

Neither Trini nor Zack could help him. Jason gave a hard swallow and steeled his face, wondering briefly how he had kept from getting sick this long. "Kimberly said he was… was a pile of ash. No body to find. And… she didn't act like she'd been lying. She'd obviously been grieving when she was put under the spell."

Billy's voice took on a bitter, sarcastic edge. "Yeah, because we all know that people under evil spells always tell the truth. That's always been our experience, has it not?"

"What do you want me to say, Billy?" Jason said. "I mean, if Tommy is still alive, where is he? Why would she play this game, when she could just paralyze us with a threat against Tommy's life?"

"Tommy can't be dead," said Billy. "At least, I'm not about to accept that like you all are. Not until I see definitive proof. After all, it's under Zedd's two-week deadline. Perhaps Zedd has captured Tommy. That's much more believable than his death."

"I'm sorry, Billy, but you're not making sense," Jason said, weariness creeping into his voice. Lord, how long until he could be alone and stop having to be strong. "We have no reason to doubt what Kimberly said."

"We have every reason to…" Billy started furiously.

"Excuse me."

Jason, Billy, and Trini turned to see Kevin standing just outside of the circle of consoles, brushing off Alpha's attempts to pull him away.

Jason was suddenly very aware that they were all demorphed. That standing there was the first civilian to ever learn their true identities. That they'd shot one of Zordon's rules all to hell. Under any other circumstances, this would be a very big deal. Now, though…

"She wasn't evil when she told me what happened," Kevin said, his voice sounding shaky and hollow. "I… I mean… like, this is some kind of spell or something? She gave me this and told me that Tommy died in battle."

He held out the wrist communicator. Billy took it with shaking hands.

"The power coin," Billy said, his eyes suddenly wide.

Trini shook her head, finally finding her voice. "Kim didn't have time to give Kevin her coin."

Billy waved her off irritably. "I mean Tommy's power coin. It would last beyond him." With a burst of energy, Billy went to the console that monitored the Morphing Grid, the one they usually used to search for Zordon. "The green power coin is linked directly to the Morphing Grid. Even if it's in another dimension, I can track it."
The alarm klaxons sounded, and Kevin let out a yell of surprise. Trini joined Billy at the consoles before Alpha could climb the steps.

"Shit!" Billy's fingers were flying over the console, his face twisting with anger. "It's the Firebird Thunderzord!"

"Kimberly's broken into the Zord hangar," Trini said in a calmer voice.

Jason felt like bashing his own head in. Kimberly hadn't needed to break in: they'd spent these precious minutes arguing over events when they should have been changing the security codes. "Lock her in! If we can keep her here, we can…"

"Her Zord's already cleared the hangar," Billy said.

"If we can intercept her…" Trini began.

"Ay-yi-yi! Rangers, that's not what the alarms were warning you about. There's an attack on Angel Grove Park!"

Jason turned to the Viewing Globe, still furious at himself. In the park, well-dressed people were scattering wildly, abandoning blankets covered with food as giant dogs ran through the crowd. The Viewing Globe shifted to focus on two figures armed with bows at the edge of the park, both dressed in togas with silvery eyes.

"I'm guessing that's Artemis, goddess of the hunt, and those are her hunting dogs," Zack said in a rough voice. Jason jumped; he hadn't noticed Zack get up. "And that'd be Apollo right beside her, her twin brother, though why he's hunting too…” He ground his teeth. "They're hunting that church picnic."

"That takes priority," Jason said, his head pounding with all the emotion he kept having to suppress. "You up for this, man?" he asked Zack in a low voice.

Zack didn't look at him, but nodded.

"We can't go after Kimberly, so we've got to write off her Zord for now. Alpha, you update security to lock her out."

He barely registered when Billy and Trini abandoned the computers to take their positions behind him to morph. All he could think of was their two missing members.

Artemis was silent as she shot her arrows, intentionally missing, just as her dogs did no harm. Lord Zeus had been very specific, that their enemies would become unmanageable if any people were truly hurt this soon. True devastation would come later.

Artemis did not care. She gloried in the hunt, and she did not see the point in always killing her prey. The humans were poor sport, anyway.

Heroes, on the other hand, were perfect sport.

The one in red immediately drew his sword and deflected one of her arrows. Wordlessly, he motioned for the ones in black and blue to draw the dogs off the running people. The one in yellow joined him in facing Artemis and her brother.
"I'm glad you're here, heroes," Artemis called out, noting the efficient way her dogs were distracted from their prey. "I was promised a good hunt. Were we not, brother?"

Apollo regarded her with sneering weariness. "You find what joy you can in your hunts, sister. I will shoot no arrows until it is necessary."

Artemis snorted contemptuously. "I suppose you would rather be chasing after your girls... or your boys. So, yes, I will have my fun while you pluck your lyres."

While they were talking, the last of the humans escaped over the hill. The dogs would have pursued easily, but the heroes were routing their attempts to hunt expertly. The one in blue ran nearly as fast as the dogs, charging into their hunting patters with ease and only using his weapons for reinforcement, much as a wolf would use teeth. The one in black used his axe to fire energy at the dogs. While it did not harm his precious creatures, they were cowed enough by the heat and light to run back to their mistress. The heroes rejoined the other two, neither of whom had made any moves to attack.

"The civilians are gone," an irritated voice called her attention. She turned to regard the hero in red. He still held his sword at the ready, but if there was anyone who looked less likely to attack, it was he. Though he was completely covered and masked, weariness and defeat marked his every movement. The other three were much the same.

"The civilians are gone," the red hero repeated. "So your game is lost. If you're planning on attacking us, or growing, or inflicting whatever pointless violence Zedd wants you to do... do it. We'll fight because we have to, though it won't make a damn bit of difference. A year of fighting, and nothing gained except for scars, and everything to lose..." He paused, as if too weary to continue. "What does it matter if we lose the rest today?"

Artemis raged. This was her hunt, her perfect prey? She'd been promised heroes, not broken children. In a fury, she raised her bow and prepared to unleash her arrows...

And then she stopped. Her brother had his bow trained on her. Blinking in disbelief, she lowered her bow.

"That's enough," Apollo said with an even voice, just masking the cold fury beneath. "It is decreed that all have the right to grieve, to bury their dead. We will allow them that right."

Artemis merely pursed her lips in fury, but she couldn't say anything against her brother. He rarely raised his hand in violence, but when he did... She gave a nod, and Apollo lowered his bow.

"Be warned, heroes," Apollo said. "Today we attacked as part of a game. I, however, play no games. When I attack, it will be war. My arrows are poisoned."

"Was that proof enough for you?" Jason said as soon as they teleported back. "Even the gods say he's dead."

"These gods," Billy's eye twitched, "or whatever they are, believe that Lord Zedd is Zeus, ruler of Mount Olympus. Do we really think they're trustworthy?"

"I think you're in denial."

And I think," Billy's temper flared, "that I've going to have to have a hell of a lot more proof if I'm
"going to go to my mother and tell her that Tommy's dead!" Billy sneered. "And what was that, anyway? None of it matters? A year gone and we've gained nothing? Were you planning on winning the fight by pity, because I think it worked!"

"Oh, you're the last person to talk to me about pity!" Jason felt his brain fog over, as if the rage that he'd needed for the fight had delayed until now. "You've been moping around all day in your own self-pity, just like you did when Tommy attacked you." He laughed unpleasantly. "All it takes is someone to hit you, and you fold like a coward."

"Guy, we need to stop this!" Trini said. She made motions to come between Jason and Billy.

Zack held her back. "Nah, let them. I mean," his voice dripped in heavy sarcasm, "it's not like we can do anything against the people we're actually supposed to fight. Let's go ahead and tear each other apart."

"Coward?" Billy said through gritted teeth, ignoring the other two. "I'm not the one who just whined at his enemies until they decided he wasn't worth fighting. That was you. I was doing something useful, if you don't remember."

"Like you got us to Tommy and Kimberly in time?!"

"THIS SUCKS!"

The Power Rangers stopped, their hearts pounding as they realized they weren't alone. Kevin, Kimberly's little brother, stood directly under Zordon's empty tube. Alpha had obviously been trying to restrain him, but to no avail.

"Y… you..." Kevin was pointing a shaking finger at them. His face was red, and tears were streaking down his face, but he didn't acknowledge them. "You're supposed to be the Power Rangers! The defenders of the Earth. Real, live, honest-to-God superheroes!" He wiped his face impatiently. "You save people, and protect us from monsters, and you always always win.

"And now I find out that you're my sister's stupid friends. And you let her get kidnapped by a space alien and get turned evil. And you let Tommy die..." his voice broke at that, and Trini reached out to him, but he shoved her hand away. "And Tommy was one of you, a Power Ranger. Power Rangers aren't supposed to die..."

Kevin stopped talking, breathing hard. His breath was the only noise in the Command Center. The Rangers were stunned out of their bickering, out of their anger.

"Just..." Kevin's voice had shrunk to a whimper. "Just get my sister back. Don't let her die."

As Kevin broke down, Jason found his last reserve of strength. "Kevin... I'm sorry. I'm sorry you had to see this, but you have to know that we're not going to let that happen." He fixed Kevin's eyes in what he hoped was a reassuring look. "We're going to get her back." He smiled a bit. "After all, we've done this before."

Kevin looked like he wanted to believe, but he was still obviously disillusioned.

Jason sighed. "Trini, take Kevin home. His parents are worried about him. Kevin, I have to ask you to swear that you're not going to tell your parents what happened. Nothing about our secret identities. Just say that you escaped your kidnappers, and you're not sure where Kimberly is, but she must still be searching for you." He knew he couldn't promise anything, but he had to give the boy something. "And not a word about Tommy, either. We're going to get Kimberly back as soon as we can. If something happens, take Kim's communicator and contact us. Can you do all that?"
"Yeah," Kevin said bitterly, though he took the wrist communicator from Billy reverently. "I'll go down myself. It'll be too suspicious if Trini goes with me."

Jason crossed his arms, his anger slowly transforming to shame at the way Kevin was looking at him. "Fine. Alpha, could you teleport him down?"

"Yes, Jason," answered Alpha in a subdued voice, and Kevin disappeared in a crackle of white energy.

And everyone's eyes were on him again, the mixtures of anger, shame, and despair he felt mirrored back to him. Jason cleared his throat.

"Trini, you were working on a cure for Kimberly. Progress?"

Trini closed her eyes and slumped, as if the question were crushing her physically. "Anything we can do, we have to capture her first. No antidote that we can just dose her with. She's got to want it, just like Tommy." Trini shook her head. "And I'm not sure if she's going to want to come back. Not after what happened."

Jason tensed for Billy to continue the argument, but he remained silent.

"Alpha, did we get any readings from Kimberly while she was in the Command Center?"

"Affirmative, Jason," Alpha said. "It's not as close as a medical scan…"

"But it'll have to do," Jason said. "Trini, assess those readings. I'm not sure if Kim is even going to let us capture her. She knows how we dealt with Tommy: she's going to want to prevent us from doing the same thing."

Trini nodded wearily. "Alpha, please send those readings to my lab," she said as she walked away.

Just a few more minutes. He had to get away from them…

"Billy, we need a new Zord combination. Without the Firebird and the Dragonzord, we're stuck in our separate forms. See what Titanus can give us? Get creative if you have to."

Billy moved to a console, barely acknowledging the orders. Alpha had already stationed himself at the Morphing Grid monitor, continuing the search for Zordon without even asking.

"Zack," Jason said, shaking by now, but trying desperately to hide it, "I need you to check the Zord hangar. We can't rule out Kim sabotaging our Zords while she had the chance."

"Right." Zack looked hollowed out, barely alive, but he didn't question the orders, didn't ask to just go home. He just disappeared down the familiar path to the Zord hangar.

Jason watched him go. Attention was finally off him. He could…

He looked up at Zordon's tube. Empty. Always empty when they needed him most.

Damn you, he thought. And I bet you knew this could happen. But we're just soldiers… right?

He turned from the tube and walked to their bedroom, their blessedly soundproofed room. He ran the last few steps, closed and locked the door… and finally allowed himself to cry.
Kimberly climbed onto the wing of her Zord and jumped to the ground, flipping twice in the air and sticking the landing perfectly.

Amazing what you could do when you were a superhero.

Kimberly pulled off her helmet, flipped her hair, and grinned. The hangar she'd parked in was cavernous, as if designed to hold an army of Zords. And it was hers alone. She supposed Goldar's Zord Cyclopsis had been held there before, but now the whole place was hers.

Something shiny caught her attention, and she frowned. A wall… a wall that didn't make sense. She squinted, and then put her helmet back on for the night vision. She focused in on the "wall," took a step back, and gasped.

It wasn't a wall. It was a tiny piece of the biggest Zord she'd ever seen.

The hangar was massive, but the Zord easily reached all the way to the top, probably as tall as the Moon Palace itself. She jumped back on the wing of her Zord to get a better look. What she'd taken for a wall was just a foot: the Zord itself was a dragon, vaguely Chinese, but with arms and legs, unlike Jason's Zord. And it was massive. It seemed to go on forever.

She felt a touch of warm amusement that had nothing to do with her own feelings at the moment. Zedd, she thought, and realized that what she was looking at was Lord Zedd's own Zord. And he had most definitely felt her awe as she'd stared at it.

She grinned at his smugness and decided to speak to him. What can I say? she thought at him, or at least she hoped she had. You really know how to impress a girl.

She could hear his laughter in her head. If you like that, you should see my Empire.

Shaking her head in amusement, Kimberly hopped back off her Zord. She knew at one time, the mental link with this Emperor of Evil would have disturbed her, frightened her. Now, she felt an odd sense of comfort at his presence in her head. Much like his Zord, he was huge, overwhelming even, towering over her own Zord… but it was right. It was the most right she'd felt ever since… well, ever since she'd become a Power Ranger. Maybe ever since ever.

He didn't have to command. He was just there. A fact. The only way her life made any sense.

Kimberly gave the two Zords one last look and made for the door. She knew she could just teleport to the throne room, but she had time, and she wanted to see the Moon Palace… her new home.

As soon as she stepped out of the door, she was completely lost. The door to the hangar let to a 3-way intersection, and all three ways looked completely disused. She huffed in irritation, not wanting to pester Lord Zedd with such a silly problem.

Lord Zedd… Kimberly closed her eyes, focusing on their connection in a way she hoped would not bother him. Of course, he probably knew what she was doing, but he let her get on with it.

Without really thinking, she turned right, and then left, and then right again, and then up a flight of stone stairs. She heard voices this time, and she knew she'd reached the habitable portion of the Moon Palace.

She knew, as the new resident of the Moon Palace, she would have to confront everyone else eventually, so she started to stride forward confidently. She stopped when she realized the voices she was hearing sounded hushed, furtive. Knowing that any secrets kept from Zedd could not be good, and would certainly not be displayed for her, she ducked around a corner before the voices overtook
Two figures who could only be Squatt and Babboo slowly walked down the corridor. They were wearing rags on their heads and looked filthy… ill-cared-for. They stopped at an open doorway. "Finster," the blue one whispered, "we have everything."

A wizened, bat-like old alien emerged from the bright room. He'd been in the middle of removing a blue band from his head. He wordlessly accepted a black strip of cloth from Squatt or Babboo, and he quickly tied it around his head in place of the blue.

Kimberly felt her stomach heave. She had to force herself to breathe. This wasn't right… this was… She wanted to run, but she couldn't look away.

Squatt and Babboo were likewise tying black strips of cloth to themselves as Finster gathered a bundle that clinked dully as he lifted it. He handed the bundle to one of the others and picked up a longer package.

"Let's go…" Finster said, his voice low and dull. "And let's be quick about it. We can't afford to be caught… but we have to do this…"

The three set off down the corridor silently. Kimberly followed behind as close as she could without giving herself away. She didn't have to follow long. The three went only a few doors down, creeping very carefully past one door. There was a crash behind the door, making all four of them jump, but no one emerged. The three aliens visibly relaxed and moved down two more doors. Finster opened the door with an old-fashioned key, and they let themselves in.

When they disappeared, Kimberly inched forward, hoping that the door wasn't closed. Of course, it would be, as careful as the three were… but then it wasn't. The three were obviously too distracted to notice.

Kimberly demorphed silently, knowing her bright pink costume might catch attention while her light pink shirt and blue jeans might blend in better. She still felt the urge to run away. There was something in what was happening to make her very afraid, not of physical harm, but of something else. She had to know, though. She had to see what was happening.

The room was dark, illuminated only by a few candles that the black, winged alien was lighting. The blue alien was fiddling around with what looked like a guitar, but not quite. In the middle, Finster unwrapped the long package and set it on a table against the wall. It was a sword… a very familiar sword.

The blue alien began to play softly, almost too softly to hear. It was so strange, and so familiar. The black alien kept lighting candles, until finally there was enough light to make out a pattern on the wall.

Kimberly almost gasped, covering her mouth to keep from blowing her cover. The pattern on the wall was the same as on the green power coin. Her heart pounded as she finally made out what the blue alien was playing. She didn't know the name of the song, but she'd heard it enough while riding around with Tommy. It was a song by Nirvana.

"We're gathered here," Finster said quietly, his voice barely reaching above the quiet music, "to… to mourn the death of a good man. To mourn the death of Tommy Oliver."

The blue alien hit a jarring note, making everyone flinch, but he continued.

"He died," and Finster almost seemed to smile, "in battle, fighting the one who destroyed his
Empress." Finster's hands were shaking, but his voice remained steady. "I commend him to the afterlife… to a better place than any of us could hope to see." He paused, and then when he started speaking again, his voice had grown shaky. "I'm sorry, Empress Rita. We could not protect him for you."

Get out… get out now… Kimberly had to get out… she couldn't think of any of that… she couldn't…

Kimberly backed away as silently as she could, prepared to run back down the corridor as soon as she wouldn't be heard. As she was backing up, almost far enough away, a door burst open. A glass bottle shattered on the wall next to her head, and she shrieked her surprise.

Goldar stood in the doorway, looking murderous and not a little drunk. He pointed a shaking finger at her, and she felt herself glued to the spot.

"You…" he growled, anger seething from that single syllable. "You… killed… you… dare…"

Kimberly knew she needed to defend herself, that running away like that would just make her weak, and that she had to hold her own against her former enemies. But Goldar looked beyond reason, beyond caring about consequences, and Kimberly was, for the moment, unmorphed. He would kill her if she let him. She ran from him and didn't slow down until she got to the throne room.

"My dear," was Lord Zedd's calm greeting. He spread his arms, welcoming her. "I see you've regained your belongings, though I'm sure in time we can find a far better vehicle to replace that. Now, I believe…" He stopped, his arms lowering. "My dear Kimberly, what's wrong? What has upset you?"

Without really planning it, Kimberly shielded her mind, keeping Lord Zedd away from the images she'd just witnessed. She felt guilt at this little act of disloyalty, but… those images were not for him. Were not even really for her. They were precious.

"A little residual emotion," Kimberly lied blandly, using the words from Lord Zedd's own mind. "Brought on by adrenaline. Please be patient with me, Lord Zedd, it will pass."

If Lord Zedd suspected she was holding anything back, he didn't let on. He merely nodded gravely. "Soon, my dear, you shall be rid of all of that. I expect to make it easy for you to forget."

Kimberly smiled, her mind calming of its own volition. What did it matter, in the long run, these little rituals and tantrums from Rita's old minions? She had Lord Zedd. Everything would be fine.

"So…" she said brightly, "let's figure out what to do when the Rangers come out of hiding tonight."

Jason cleared his throat as he entered the lab. Trini was sitting at a spacious desk in the corner, documents spread around her in an order that probably made sense… but she didn't hear him, and she wasn't paying attention to the documents. She was staring at the wall, her fingers listlessly playing with a pen.

"Trini," Jason said.

At that, Trini jumped, dropping the pen on the floor. She started gathering papers. "Jason! I… I was just about to try a new formula…"
Jason shook his head. "I just sent Zack home. You need to…" He sighed. "We both need to go home. I was just about to tell Billy, but…"

"Billy said he was going to work in his lab at home," Trini said. She swiveled around in her chair and leaned back, rubbing her head. "I doubt it, though. Alpha and I didn't leave him much to work with, especially since Alpha won't reestablish his lab's link to the Morphing Grid, or even the Command Center computer."

Jason had never looked into the particulars of the new restrictions Zordon had placed on Billy, the restrictions that Alpha had to enforce in his absence. Of course, that had only happened last night.

"If it hadn't been so urgent, I wouldn't have had any of us working today," Jason said. "Besides, Billy needed to get out of here. To… cope."

"How, though?" Trini seemed past crying. Her expression was more distant than it had ever been, as if her usual calm had turned almost violently against her, separating her from her emotion. "How do we cope now? I mean, we've talked about death before, but I never really believed it. Even all the times you've almost…" Jason knew she was thinking about the scars on his chest and back. "Even when we get Kimberly back, what do we say about Tommy?"

Jason crossed his arms, revisiting the unpleasant thoughts he'd had all afternoon. "We… we may not be able to say anything. I don't know what Zordon is going to want us to do, but saying that Tommy died in the line of duty as a Power Ranger would definitely be revealing our secret identities."

Trini looked up at him, her distant calm cracking for a moment into shock. "What, and never tell anyone? Never tell Ms. Sylvia, or his mother? Just… let it be a mystery?"

"Everyone knows that Tommy tends to run off without warning," Jason said. "It's not that far a stretch. People might search for him for a while, but eventually…"

"Oh, God…" Trini said, now staring off in the distance. "That's what would happen to us. My parents would never know what happened to me. They would just think I had run away, or had been taken, or killed, and they would never know for sure."

As much as Jason had ruminated over the dangers, and as much as his own life had been in jeopardy, he had never quite thought of it like that. It was shocking to hear Trini say it so plainly. He reached out to her to grab her shoulder, to give reassurance, but she dodged away.

"No," she said. "I had a lot of time to think about this. All yesterday, when I was tied to Billy's bed, I kept thinking… what if I couldn't get out? What if I died there, and what if he disposed of my body, and there would be no way anyone could find out. We spend most of our days in a fortress in a Nevada desert, miles and miles away from home, and our parents don't know where we are. They don't know what we're doing, and we're absolutely forbidden to tell them. And if anything happens… we disappear."

"Now, time with our family has become obligatory. We have to put in face time with our family to keep them from worrying, but we never talk to them. I used to share everything with my mother. I used to tell her every minute of every day. Now… I have to pretend like everything's okay, and everything's not, but I can't tell her anything, and she knows that I'm holding back from her, and it hurts. All the time." She wiped a tear away, though her face remained distant. "I used to think this was an exciting game, being superheroes and keeping a secret. But it's not. It's a sick joke. That's why I want to…" She stopped, her eyes widening at what she was about to say.

"That why you want to leave," Jason said softly. "Am I right?"
The calm was starting to bleed from Trini's face. "How could you know that? I never said…"
Perception dawned on her. "You, too?"

Jason gave a weary nod. "And Zack… I don't think he'll be pissed at me telling you. And Zedd
knows. Both of our clues are exactly about that."

Trini actually smiled at that. "You have no idea how… I thought it was just me!" She jumped up to
hug Jason, who put his arms around her mechanically, waiting for her to get past the initial relief.

"But, wait," Trini said, pulling away. "I guess it's impossible now. Tommy's…" she swallowed,
"and even if we can regain Kimberly, that just leaves her and Billy. We can't leave like that."

They both knew what Trini meant to say. We can't leave the Earth in their hands. The past two days
had proven that enough.

"We'll see what happens," Jason said evenly. "I haven't even talked to Zordon, and…" He was about
to say that they'd been in worse positions before, but he knew they really hadn't. "Things could still
turn out all right. And Zordon has other candidates to replace us. If we can just get through this…"

"As long as we're in Angel Grove, we're part of this," Trini said miserably. "For whatever reason,
the forces of the universe decided that one small town in California should become a battleground.
We can't just go back to our regular lives. I don't even remember what our regular lives were like,
really."

"I'm not sure what to say… other than, we can't give up hope."

At this, Trini broke out of her reverie. "Okay… hope, then. I guess even if I can't remember what our
regular lives were like, at least we can have a taste of them." She swallowed. "Home. School. Work
on saving Kimberly."

Jason plastered on a smile, getting ready to fool the world.

With their friend's death fresh in their minds, with another friend's corruption hanging over their
heads, all feeling loss in every sense of the word, the Power Rangers went home to eat supper with
their families.

Trini's family was full of discussion over Kevin's appearance and Kimberly's disappearance. They'd
assumed Trini had accompanied Kimberly, so they were surprised when she came home at her usual
time with no idea where her best friend was, and even more surprise at her lack of concern.

"She's probably with that boyfriend of hers," Trini's mother said when all her inquiries to Trini failed.
"It's still suspicious that the kidnappers mentioned him as well as Kimberly. You don't think he's led
her into something criminal…"

"No, I don't," Trini said quietly, picking at her food.

The Taylors were not as close to Kimberly's family, though they were well aware of what had
happened that day. They, however, had Zack's younger siblings to contend with, so most of the
dinner conversation centered around a lecture on caution.

"And that goes for you, too, Zack," Dr. Taylor rounded off, putting a hand on her son's arm. "Angel
Grove is dangerous enough without you running off at all hours. I want you all home by 5:00 every
day until things become more stable."

"Mom…" Zack's little brother Marcus rolled his eyes exaggeratedly. "I'm fourteen, and Zack's sixteen, and it's not like Kevin had much of a choice. He was kidnapped out of bed. It could happen to anyone."

Zack ignored the ensuing argument, as he had the lecture before. He couldn't even bring himself to wonder how he was going to get out of the new curfew. He concentrated on eating as quickly as he could so that he could retreat to his room.

Kimberly's family had rejoiced at Kevin's return. His parents and the police asked him question after question. He almost used the excuse for not having many answers that he'd been drugged, but he realized what sort of things that implied just in time. After all, he'd watched 60 Minutes before.

Instead, he claimed that all he could remember was a dark room, and that it had definitely been aliens. He wasn't sure if they believed him, though their recent experiences at the wedding backed him up. He claimed he didn't know why the aliens needed him, or why they let him go. When they naturally asked about the Power Rangers, he furthered the lying on sudden inspiration.

"It was the Green Ranger, just like before," said Kevin, surprising himself by how believable it sounded. "He saved me."

If his parents doubted his words, they didn't let on. They wondered at the Rangers just letting Kevin go home alone, but the news reported the attack in the park, so that explained that.

The police didn't bother doubting his words. They were used to giving the Power Rangers jurisdiction over anything alien.

Kimberly's continued disappearance, however, remained unexplained. Kevin shrugged and looked concerned, trying to hide the real fear from his parents. He had promised, after all. Ultimately, he exaggerated his very real fatigue to cut the questioning short. The police said they would call if there were any developments in the search for Kimberly, got the phone numbers of all of her friends, and departed as Kevin went to bed.

Billy, whose mother was still at a conference, sat in his dark house, the house still littered with the remnants of the party he'd been unable to attend. The mess was less disturbing than the shambles of his lab, which had been horrifically stripped of equipment and power. He supposed that was to be expected, but now he had to go to the Command Center, the one place he wanted to avoid, to get anything done.

Principally, he wanted to search for Tommy. He couldn't believe that everyone was just accepting Tommy's death like that with no proof. Billy was no stranger to death. He'd lost his father when he was a child, he'd recently lost the one who was to be his surrogate father… but in each case there had been a body. He'd been witness to his father's death. With Tommy… the circumstances were too unreal. If they'd just thought to get a sample of that ash so he could do some DNA testing. It's what he would have done.

The phone rang promptly at 6:00, and Billy answered it.

"Well, the speaker I wanted to see has cancelled," Sylvia said by way of greeting. "Honestly, this whole conference has been a joke. How are you, dear? You and Tommy not getting into too much trouble?"

"Hi, Mom… and, no, we're not." The words almost stuck in his throat, but he kept going for her
"I'm at the airport," Sylvia said. "I was able to change my flight home to an earlier one. I'm not going to miss more work for this waste of time. Honey, are you okay?" she ended in a softer voice. "You don't sound right."

Billy closed his eyes, willing himself to sound more normal. "Yes, mom, I'm fine. Do you know when your flight is coming in? I can pick you up at the airport."

"I should be in very late tonight, and I've already arranged a taxi," she said, sounding momentarily convinced by Billy's tone. "I don't want you or Tommy to wait up for me. He's out with Kimberly, I expect?"

"Yes," was all Billy could say.

"Oh, they just called my flight. See you tonight! Love you!"

Billy hung up the phone, started cleaning up the house, and wondered what he would tell his mother when she got home.

Jason, in the meantime, was listening to his sister talk about her classes to their parents. His parents were thankfully silent about all that had happened that day. They'd stopped questioning Jason's frequent unexplained disappearances. He supposed he should be worried, like they'd given up on him.

Mostly, though, for the moment at least, he was grateful. He didn't have to try to explain his actions. He didn't have to speculate over kidnappings and disappearances, of which he had too much information that he couldn't under any circumstances share. He could just eat, listen to his sister, think about how the hell he was going to get through school the next day… and not think about his friend, the fact of whose death had not really become a reality, as much as he argued with Billy.

Kristen was giving a very animated description of her sociology professor, who she was sure was a misogynist, when the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," his mother volunteered.

"No, let me get it," his father grumbled, throwing his napkin down. "I want to tell whoever it is what I think about people visiting during suppertime," he pronounced, as if there were a universal, sacred suppertime that all should respect.

As Kristen continued her story, Jason listened dully to the background noise of his father, interested in exactly how he would deal with the late-night visitor.

"Hi, Mr. Scott! Can Jason come out and play?"

Jason was out of his seat in an instant. "DAD, GET DOWN!"

Before he could get to the hallway, he heard the whine of some sort of electronics. At the door, he saw his father turn around in confusion, not able to see Kimberly press buttons on the hidden security panel by the door, or the Putties waiting on the other side of the road. "Jason, what the hell are you talking about? It's only Kimberly."

Jason didn't answer. He grabbed his father's arm and drug him away from the door, ignoring Kimberly's laughter. Pulling him into the dining room, Jason shoved the heavy mahogany dining table over, the food sliding to the floor. Before any of his family could react, he pulled them behind
It was just in time. The explosion rocked the house and took out most of the front hallway, by the sound of it. Jason had clapped his hands to his ears, but it wasn't enough. They were ringing painfully in the aftermath, and he was blinded by the smoke.

"What the f…" Kristen mouthed, her wide eyes turned to Jason. He ignored her, along with the stares of his parents, and concentrated on regaining his senses.

When he could hear, he could hear slow footsteps, unsteady in trying to pick through gravel.

"Oh, come on, Jason, stop hiding!" Kimberly called out cheerily. "There's no way out, anyway, so you're going to have to face me. There's a forcefield around the whole block, so no cheating your way out, either."

"What is she talking about?" his mother whispered. "Jason, what's going on?"

His father was just looking wildly at him, as if seeing him for the first time.

"Stay low," Jason said, "and run when I tell you."

"Jason, what do you think you're doing?" his father demanded.

Jason closed his eyes. "What I always do, dad." At that, he stood up.

The devastation had not been exaggerated in his mind. The front of their house looked like a gray, smoking shell. Kimberly had armed the destruct sequence, only to be used in extreme emergencies when enemies were trying to gain access to the door. It was to be used as deterrent and distraction.

Now, though, Kimberly had used it to destroy far more than the front of the house. She stood among the wreckage, still clothed in light pink shirt and blue jeans, grinning as she had done so many times before…

"There you are," she said. "Knew you couldn't stay away from a fight for too long."

"If it's a fight you want, Kimberly, I can give that to you," Jason said tightly. "Just leave my family out of it. Please."

"Oh, I think we've gone past that," Kimberly said. "We've gone way past that. It's time for… wait."

Her grin broadened. "You usually say that, don't you?"

Jason began to sweat, knowing what she wanted, and very aware that his whole family was staring up at him, and there was no way to get them out of there.

"Isn't it morphing time?"

At her words, Jason felt the power swirl around him, even as he watched her change. He breathed clean air as the helmet filtered the smoke out, and he heard his parents exclaim words that he could make out.

"And isn't it better this way?" Kimberly said in a much softer voice.

Jason smiled grimly behind his mask, putting thoughts of his family's reactions from his head. Somehow… yes. This was better. "So it's open war you want," Jason said, knowing his filtered voice wasn't fooling anyone anymore. He pulled out his sword and pointed it at Kimberly. "So be it."
Kimberly pulled her bow. The war had begun.
The War Begins

Chapter Summary

Book 6: Shadows in the Cave

As you can tell, this is where we take quite a wild divergence from canon.

Trini was silently helping her parents wash up after supper, wondering if she would be able to skip school the next day to work on a cure for Kimberly without getting into too much trouble, when she heard the crash outside.

"That sounded like a car crash," her mother commented, setting a bowl down so she could peer through the blinds. "That was really close to the house…"

Her mother ended with a shriek. The glass in front of her shattered. Trini ducked and rushed to her mother's side, breaking her fall to the ground.

Trini's father ran in from the kitchen. "What's wrong?!" He looked at the wall across from the window. "Is that an arrow?"

"Dad, get down!" Trini yelled. She's already determined her mother was fine apart from a few scratches, but her father was in the line of fire.

Her father ducked just as a flurry of arrows pelted into the house. He crawled towards his family, trying to avoid the broken glass.

"Are you all right?" He stared at the blood trickling down his wife's face.

"I'm fine, Yuan," she said. "But we have to get out of here. Do you think the back door is being watched?"

Trini almost smiled. It was as if being under siege from archers was a daily occurrence.

Any chance of a smile faded, though, when she heard the mocking voice of Artemis.

"Hero! You're not making the hunt fun! Stop cringing and act like a hero!"

There was a pained sigh. "You'd best do as she says, hero," came the long-suffering voice of Apollo.

Trini closed her eyes, her body growing cold. "Mom, I think the back door is a good idea, but you won't get far. I want you and Dad to run. I'll buy you time. If there are Putties or… other things… don't try to fight them."

"Trini, what are you…?"

Trini ignored her father. Taking a breath, she prepared to break one of Zordon's rules. As if Zedd had left her with a choice.

"Alpha," she said over her communicator, "can you teleport my parents to the Command Center?"
She tried not to look at her parents, who were gaping at her. She concentrated on Alpha's voice crackling over the tiny speaker.

"Ay-yi-yi, Trini!" Alpha said, and in his tone Trini's fears were confirmed. "I'm trying, but a force field is preventing all teleportation." He paused. "The others are also being attacked."

Trini nodded, more to calm herself than to confirm what she'd already figured out. "Right. I'm going to try to get them out of here. Could you monitor and teleport them up the moment you can?"

"Will do, Trini!"

Trini finally looked at her parents. Her own determined calm she saw now reflected in their faces. That was good. That would keep them alive.

"Don't worry about me," she said. "I'll be much safer if you two are safe. I'll explain everything later."

With one last look, Trini stood. As soon as she appeared in the window, arrows flew at her, but she was already morphed. She knocked them out of the air and away from her parents.

"I'm here, Artemis," Trini said, trying to keep the gods' attention. "You know, you don't act much like gods. Attacking innocent people and the like. I thought you only went after those who offended you."

It was Apollo who answered. "We are much more than those Hellenist children's stories, hero. And you have offended a god. Lord Zeus has much to say against you."

"Zeus, huh?" Trini tensed, knowing a battle would start soon. "And you've always done everything he said, right?"

"Not always," Artemis said, smiling. "But it suits us now. We've been revived after centuries of lying dormant, and he gives us good sport. So now that your distracting progenitors have fled, are you ready?"

Trini did not look back to make sure her parents were indeed out of the way, knowing that was what Artemis intended. "I have no objections."

"So, did I ever tell you guys I was the Black Ranger?"

Zack yelled the words as he used his Power Axe in cannon mode, blowing back squadrons of Putties as he, his parents, and his three younger brothers hunched in the rose bushes.

"We gathered that," his mother said shakily. "And how…"

"Dude, did you just turn your axe into a cannon?! That is so badass!"

"Marcus, let me finish!" Mrs. Taylor said. "And don't curse. Zack, how long has this been going on?"

"About a year!" Zack said. "Since last summer, anyway."

"That explains quite a bit, actually," Mr. Taylor said. He was almost laughing, though that might have been from shock. "Any ideas on getting us out of here?"
"A few," Zack said, trying not to think about the house he was blowing apart—the house he grew up in—as he kept the Putties at bay. He had to keep aiming for the areas around the Putties rather than the Putties themselves just in case the power feedback rebounded on his family. "In fact," he quickly pulled his communicator out of his glove, "Dad, I need to you to talk to Alpha for me. See if he can teleport us out of here."

"Okay…" His father looked at the wrist communicator dubiously. "Who am I talking to?"

"Oh, give it here," Mrs. Taylor snapped, pulling the communicator out of her husband's hand. "And keep down, Byron," she said, pulling her youngest son closer to her as he tried to peek out at the attacking Putties and the explosions. "Who's Alpha?"

"He's a robot. Says 'ay-yi-yi' a lot, but that doesn't mean anything," Zack said. "Just ask him how we can get out of here."

"Right." She pressed the button. "Is this Mr. Alpha? Please answer."

"Ay-yi-yi-yi-yi! Is this Zack's mother? Is Zack alright?"

Mrs. Taylor grimaced at the voice. "Zack is quite fine, except for the fact that he is firing heavy artillery and that he's been involved in a dangerous war for almost a year, and his parents knew nothing about it. If you're responsible for this, Mr. Alpha, you will have a lot to answer for, but in the meantime, I'd appreciate it if you got me and my family out of here. My son mentions that you have teleport capabilities?"

There was a pause, in which Zack imagined Alpha had to regain his bearings after that haranguing from his mother. "Yes, ma'am," he said meekly. "Unfortunately, the area is surrounded by a force field. I believe I can teleport you all out of there if you can make it to Oak Street."

"And now we have a plan," Zack said. "Thanks, Alpha. Okay, when I say move, we run out the back gate. Mom, you lead the way and keep hold of Jamie. Marcus, you go after her, and Dad carries Byron behind them. I'll take the rear and cover us all. I think we can cut through yards. We need to move fast, but we also need to stay out of the open. And no one touches a Putty. I've got protection, but those things can really hurt you guys."

He said all this quickly, mostly to keep his mother from interjecting. He'd have to have it out with all of them, but especially her, later, but at the moment he was responsible for getting them all out of there alive.

And, indeed, his mother opened her mouth to argue, but Zack cut her off, even as he tried to concentrate on keep the Putties back. "Sorry, but no arguing. That's the plan. I've been doing this for a long time, whether you like it or not. You've got to trust me to get us out of here, okay?"

His mother still didn't look happy, but she nodded anyway. Zack turned his focus back on the Putties, counted to three, and then purposefully shot at the car.

"Now!" he screamed as the resulting explosion blew the remaining Putties back into the distance. His mother immediately took off, pulling a stunned Jamie behind her. Marcus took off next, and his dad scooped up Byron. Zack's senses were on full alert as he covered his family past the back gate and into the neighbor's yard. Just because he had taken care of those Putties for the time being didn't mean Zedd didn't have any other tricks for them, especially since he had to know where they were going. Zack just hoped that the anti-teleport force field worked both ways and they didn't have any nasty surprises materialize right in front of them.
"You know," his dad puffed as they ran across the street, "I always expected one of my sons would find a way to wreck the car. I just didn't think it'd be like this."

"Jason!" Alpha called over the communicator. "Trini and Zack are escorting their parents to teleport zones. You must do the same!"

Jason gritted his teeth as he deflected shot after shot from Kimberly's bow. "A bit busy right now, Alpha." He glanced over at his own family, who were barricading the back door with the refrigerator against Putty attacks. "Better send Billy to check on Kimberly's family."

Kimberly laughed. "Come on, Jas, you don't think I'd attack my own family. This was all about protecting my brother in the first place."

"I think when you work for Zedd, your priorities get pretty whacked," Jason retorted, wishing he could trade his sword for his blaster so he could go on the offensive… or at least get in close so his sword could work better than a really narrow shield. "Your family's in danger, anyway, or did you think that just yours would be spared from the destruction of Earth. Remember, that thing that Zedd wants to do?"

"Lord Zedd," Kimberly corrected pointedly, "wants to take over Earth. Who said anything about destruction?"

There was plenty of destruction happening at the moment, but Jason didn't have the time to spare to point that out. Instead, he finally pulled his blaster and sent enough shots Kimberly's way to blast her into the other room.

"Stand back!" he yelled at his family, who ran to one side. Jason picked up the fridge, kicked open the back door, and threw the fridge at the gathered Putties with enough force to send them flying across the yard.

As he led his parents and sister across the yard to the nearest teleport point, he noticed his house had caught fire. He tried not to think about how it would probably be ages before the fire department could respond to the fire. Getting his family safely to the Command Center was all that mattered at the moment.

Billy had just finished cleaning up and was trying to figure out a way to explain the hole in the wall next to the front door when his communicator beeped. Rubbing his eyes, wondering what could possibly be going wrong now, he answered.

He couldn't possibly have prepared for what he heard next.

"Billy!" Alpha shrieked from his communicator. "Lord Zedd has attacked the homes of Jason, Trini, and Zack, forcing them to morph in front of their parents and preventing them from teleporting out via force field. You must secure the safety of Kimberly's family and bring them to the Command Center as well. There does not seem to be a force field around your region, but you must be there to establish a more stable lock."

In those few sentences, Billy felt as if he had aged several years. Shakily, trying desperately to integrate the new circumstances, he said, "Right. But… my mother is in a plane going from Chicago
to the Angel Grove airport. Do you think they could…"

"Oh, ay-yi-yi, I didn't even think of that, Billy! I will attempt to track her as soon as I can!"

"I can help you when I get up there," Billy said. "Billy out."

Without a second thought, he morphed, knowing he could get Kimberly's family to believe him as a Power Ranger quicker than he could as just Billy. The street was eerily quiet as he raced across it, first arming the security system his clone had put in place during his incarceration. He hated to use the technology, but he didn't want Zedd to gain access to his home either. He took the time to knock, not wanting to send Kimberly's family into a panic.

Frank opened the door. "Wha…?"

"No time, sir," Billy said, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt. "Your family is in danger. I must teleport all three of you out of here."

Kimberly's mother appeared in the doorway, looking exhausted and confused. "Frank, what's…?" Her face set into angry determination when she saw a Power Ranger at her door. "Where's Kimberly?"

Billy barged past Frank into the house and closed the door. He pulled open a wooden panel in the door frame to the hidden security controls underneath. He could focus the security enough at the windows and doors while he gathered the family together, and they would still be able to teleport out. "I'm sorry, but there's no time. You've got to go get Kevin."

"Was it you who kidnapped him in the first place? Did you plant that in our door?" Frank looked like he was setting himself to do something desperate.

"Sir, ma'am," Billy said as patiently as he could, "I did not kidnap Kevin or Kimberly. I'm trying to protect you all, and to do that I've got to get you all out of here. The longer we stay, the more danger we're in. So please get Kevin as quickly as you can."

"So you can kidnap us all?" Kimberly's mother retorted.

"I don't care who you are, you're not going to do anything to my family," Frank growled. "Power Ranger or no, I see no reason to trust you when it looks like the only dangerous thing around is you."

With a wave of cold realization, knowing it was the only way he'd gain their trust for the moment, Billy pulled off his helmet and showed his true face. Their expression of anger and fear were replaced with shock.

"Mrs. Judy," he said, using the name he'd used since he was five and he'd been forced into play dates with Kimberly, "Mr. Frank… please go get Kevin."

"What happened to the whole secret identity thing?"

Kevin had appeared at the foot of the stairs, dressed in his pajamas. Knowing they were running out of time, Billy grabbed Kevin and Frank, and then ran for Judy. Within seconds, the house had disappeared around them to be replaced with the screaming alarms of the Command Center.

"Oh, ay-yi-yi-yi-yi, thank goodness you're all okay!" Alpha said, running from console to console. "I was just trying to contact you. It seems that…"

There was the sound of an explosion, but not one in the Command Center. Billy turned to look at the
Viewing Globe, where plumes of fire and smoke filled the screen.

"Is…" Judy's voice was shaking to the point where she could barely form words, "is…is that our house?"

"Affirmative, Mrs. Harris," Alpha said quietly. "If you had all waited a minute longer…"

Frank was walking Judy to the steps to sit her down before she fainted. Kevin stared at the Viewing Globe, even after it moved from the explosion and started showing flashes of what was happening to the other Power Rangers.

Billy put his helmet back on, wanting to hide the horror he felt at their close call and what was happening in general. He took over a monitoring station, allowing Alpha to focus on regulating the power from the Morphing Grid.

"Looks like… yes. Trini's parents are almost at the teleport spot," Billy reported. "That will free up Trini to help Jason. She's closest to him and his parents, and it looks like he's in more trouble than Zack.

"She has Artemis and Apollo right behind her, though," Alpha pointed out. "They may follow her and make Jason's situation worse. He's already fighting one archer."

Billy knew Alpha was avoiding having to say Kimberly's name, given present company. He glared at the readings. Trini had been able to distract all attention from her parents, but they were really the only ones in the clear. Jason was actually in danger of running into Trini's battle with his whole family, and Zack was worrying over Putties when he getting close to a large power signature Billy couldn't identify… possibly another god. If he could just punch past the force fields, he could teleport them all out.

Billy smiled at himself grimly. Punch past… he was thinking in terms of combat, when he needed to think scientifically. He had all the tools there, and teleportation worked along the same lines as their surveillance and communication. If he could focus on just one at a time…

"Alpha, I'm going to try something against these force fields," he said, hoping Alpha wouldn't require any more specifics, as there just wasn't time. "The teleporters are set to lock on to Trini's parents as soon as they're in range. We can send Trini after Jason, and I'm going to concentrate on that force field. Zack's closer to his teleport spot, but it looks like he's got a god to worry about."

"I'll warn him, Billy," Alpha said. "Just focus on the force field over Jason."

Billy nodded, shut out everything that was going on, even the gasps of shock as the Kwans materialized in the middle of the Command Center, and set to work.

Trini saw Jason leading his family into the battlefield just after Alpha contacted her.

"Get down!" she yelled, and she set herself between the onslaught of arrows headed straight for the Scotts. She was able to deflect most of them, though a few caught her in the shoulder. Sparks flew on her uniform, knocking her to the side.

Jason ran past Trini, deflecting arrows the entire way in an obvious bid for a closer fight with the two gods.
Artemis laughed. "So do you care now, hero?"

Jason didn't answer, but he succeeded in making the gods' bows useless in a close fight. Trini considered following Jason, but she knew that he expected her to protect his family. She ran for them, and none too soon, as it looked like the pursuing Putties had caught up. Trini gritted her teeth and hit the Z's as hard as she could, taking down a squadron of six even as the pain made her bones vibrate.

"I can get you to the teleport point if you just follow me," she said, trying not to show how much she was drained by the recent fight.

"But... Jason..." Mrs. Scott was staring at Jason's attempt to take on Artemis and Apollo at the same time.

Trini itched to join him, but that would leave his family unguarded. "He can look out for himself. And I can help him as soon as you all are safe.

Mr. Scott was about to say something when he was stopped by Kristen, who grabbed his arm. Trini turned, stomach already sinking to somewhere around her feet. Of course it wouldn't be that easy.

"Ares and Aphrodite," Trini said under her breath. "Okay, now things have gotten more complicated."

"Can you give me something more to go on?" Zack snapped into his communicator. "Which god are we talking about?"

Presently, his family was hiding in someone's front yard behind a tall wooden fence. The street separating them from the teleport point lay on the other side, and the coast seemed clear... except for the enemy that Zack obviously couldn't see that Alpha was telling him about.

"I'm sorry, but I can't give you any more specifics, Zack," Alpha said. "Billy is working on a way to break through the force field, but it may take too much time. Please be careful, Zack."

"Wait, Billy is a Power Ranger?" Marcus made a face. "That geek?"

"Hey, that's my friend you're talking about," Zack retorted. "That 'geek' is trying to save your life, so you better shut up about what you don't understand!"

"Don't you talk to my son that way!" his mother yelled at Zack.

"Adella..." his father said slowly.

"Oh, and I'm apparently not your son anymore?"

"You haven't been part of this family in a long time, Zack," his mother hissed at him. "Here I am, trying to keep you safe, and you go off playing at war?!"

"I'm not safe, mom. None of us are. Not unless I keep us safe, and I couldn't tell you about it, and all you cared about is whatever bullshit grades I got when I have to..."

It was the scream that cut Zack off. Byron was screaming. Zack whirled around, but could see nothing. Something was wrong. Byron had barely cried even when he was a baby.
Something was making him scream. Something was making Zack and his mother yell at each other.

"Show yourself!" Zack screamed, drawing his axe again and swinging it into the dark.

Jamie ran first, having joined his younger brother in screaming. Marcus followed after him. Zack tried to stop them, but his parents were already after them, his father still carrying Byron.

"Wait!" Zack yelled. "That's the wrong direction!"

A low malicious chuckle made Zack swing his axe blindly. "Where… Who are you?!

"Settle down," the voice said, its voice alive with cruel merriment. "Have a drink. Or are you not having fun?"

At that, Zack stopped thinking, and everything exploded in a haze of darkness and pain.

Billy was halfway to teleporting down when Alpha stopped him.

"Whatever god is down there, it's obviously driven Zack out of his senses," Billy said furiously. "Zack and his family have no protection."

"And whatever is hurting Zack, it will do the same to you," Alpha said. "Please, Billy, you have to focus on getting that force field down. Jason and Trini are in trouble."

Billy glanced over at Trini's parents, who had joined Kevin and Kimberly's parents at staring at the Viewing Globe. Alpha was right, of course. If he could get through the force field over Jason and Trini, he could do the same for Zack.

"Billy…"

Billy froze at the sound of Alpha's voice. Alpha could display a surprising array of emotion, but cold terror was new to him.

"I… I've tracked your mother's plane. In twenty minutes, it will be intercepted by the Pink Firebird ThunderZord."

Billy's vision went white with panic. His mother was effectively trapped, and there was nothing he could do…

"Alpha," he said with new resolution, "you've got to run the program to knock the force field out. I have it set up, but you need to focus it on Zack instead of Jason and Trini. Send me the coordinates of my mother's airplane."

"But… Billy… your Zord can't fly," Alpha said, even while doing as Billy asked.

"I don't need a Zord," Billy said before teleporting away.

Jason found himself on the ground, his head spinning. Trini was soon to follow.

"So," he said groggily, "ever thought we'd be fighting four gods?"
"Well, three at least," Trini said, "but four does seem a bit excessive."

At the moment, thankfully, Ares and Aphrodite were not focusing on his family, and Apollo and Artemis were not attacking. Unfortunately, it didn't look like they were going to let his family leave either.

Jason closed his eyes, letting himself breathe for a moment. They were overpowered and all escape attempts were blocked. Even if they called their Zords, the fight escalation would just result in four super-sized gods in a suburban neighborhood. There was the chance that then his family would be able to slip away in the scuffle, but that wasn't certain, and it wasn't worth the risk.

Surrender was starting to look like the only option.

Jason drew breath to start dealing with the gods, and by proxy Lord Zedd, when the dark street disappeared to be replaced by a different sort of mayhem.

"Jason! Trini! Thank goodness!" Alpha yelled, but that was not the first thing that drew Jason's attention.

Zack was morphed and surrounded by a force field in the middle of the Command Center. He was swinging his Power Axe, making the energy spark dangerously Kimberly's and Trini's parents were trying to calm down the rest of the Taylors, who were screaming and twitching in unknown panic.

Trini rushed forward, followed closely by Jason's mother. Trini picked up her medical scanner and directed it at Zack's eight-year-old brother, Byron.

"It looks like they've been affected by some sort of hallucinogen," Trini reported. "It doesn't look like it's done permanent damage, though. They're metabolizing it fast, so it should be out of their system soon."

"Double the energy on that force field around Zack, Alpha," Jason said. "We don't want any accidents up here." He glanced over the suddenly crowded Command Center. Kimberly's parents and brother, Trini's parents, Zack's parents and three brothers, his own parents and sister, along with Trini, Zack, and himself. The only one missing was…

"Where's Billy?"

Sylvia, at first, thought they were dealing with severe turbulence. She gripped the arm rests. She'd never liked flying, and part of her wish to come home early was to get the return plane ride over with.

That was when she heard the unearthly shriek outside, and the thumps on the roof of the plane.

Everyone started yelling confusedly at the impossibility—they were in flight, after all. Sylvia started unbuckling her seatbelt. As soon as she did, the man sitting beside her knocked her into the aisle in his haste to run.

"Idiot!" she yelled after him. "They're only going to…"

The next few minutes were a confused blur of pain, in which Sylvia vaguely realized someone had kicked her in the head. She fumbled with the seat beside her, trying to lift herself up out of the way to keep from being trampled. Reality faded in and out.
She felt a hand close around her arm, and she was so grateful she leaned against the new support, not realizing the flesh that now touched hers was decidedly not human.

She started struggling, and the hand on her arm tightened into a vise. She was being pulled through coach to the back of the plane as the gray Putty shoved the panicking people out of its way, and Sylvia had no choice but to follow and try to keep the alien from wrenching her arm out of its socket.

As soon as they reached what she assumed was the cargo bay, a wave of fierce wind hit her, and only the Putty kept her from being blown back. She tried to fight against the Putty, hoping that she could slip away before the Putty got her off the plane, which was what it obviously wanted to do. But its grip crushed her arm, making her sick from the pain.

There was a flash of blue. Her captor's grip slackened, and a gentle arm caught her around her shoulders before she was blown back into the plane.

"We have to get out of here!"

Sylvia was relieved to hear her rescuer speak, for she had never heard a Putty speak. She closed her eyes against the wind, having to trust her rescuer to get her to safety. It was not a big leap in logic to realize she was being saved by a Power Ranger, though she had never seen one out of Angel Grove.

She was jostled a bit as the Ranger was obviously fighting off other Putties, but she let the Ranger lead her until finally they had entered a…

…car?

Sylvia opened her eyes slowly as she heard the sound of an engine start up, even over the rushing wind. The engine revved loudly a few times, and then took off with a screech… straight for the bay doors. Sylvia shrieked and threw her hands in front of her, but they were not falling. They were leaving the plane behind and flying away.

She could hear someone gasping for breath, almost hyperventilating, and she realized that was herself. She forced herself to breathe deeply and slowly. "That…" she began. "That was…"

"It's not over yet," the Blue Ranger said grimly. "We'll need to keep an eye out for a Zord, a red and pink metal bird. You check your window."

Sylvia did as he said, but could see nothing but darkness and clouds, with the plane she'd just been on shrinking to a speck. Her luggage was on there.

"Wait…" She looked around slowly, her brain working in fits and starts. "This… this is Billy's car. His cousin gave it to him, and he's always working on it."

The Blue Ranger didn't say anything, but gripped the steering wheel and avoided her gave. She looked closely at him. His voice was distorted, but other things about him were unmistakable. His posture, his nervous ticks…

"Billy?"

The Blue Ranger… Billy… hung his head, his posture sagging. "Mom… I'm sorry. I'm really really sorry. I can explain everything later, but right now we have to…"

The whole car pitched to the side. Billy struggled with the steering wheel as the car rolled in the air, the two of them held to their seats with centripetal force. As soon as they leveled off, Sylvia scrambled to get her seatbelt on. "Was that turbulence?" she said.
Billy was looking around wildly. "The flight brace on the car accounts for turbulence. No, that was…"

Red filled the front window, and there was an unearthly shrieking sound, the same that had signaled the attack on the plane. The car's headlights illuminated the giant bird Zord Billy had mentioned.

Suddenly, a burst of static came from the car's radio. On instinct, Sylvia began fiddling with the knobs, but Billy stopped her with one hand.

"Real cute, Billy." The static had cleared as soon as the voice came on. "I could have tracked a Zord in minutes, but the car?"

Sylvia was staring at the radio in horror. "Is that… Kimberly?"

Billy shushed her, as Kimberly was continuing.

"Unfortunately," Kimberly said in a slightly wistful tone, "that means you're in the middle of nowhere, miles from the ground, in what is pretty much a flying toaster. I could shoot you down right now, but Lord Zedd is giving you a chance. Your mom's safety for your complete allegiance to Lord Zedd." She chuckled. "Think about it. You've always done much better work when you're not trying to be all goody-goody. That attack on the wedding you orchestrated… the clone…. What do you say, Victor?"

Billy, not taking his eyes off the air in front of them, let go of the steering wheel with his right hand and punched through the radio. It shattered easily under his fist. "There's my answer, Kim," he said quietly.

Sylvia, though, was staring hard at Billy. The attack on the wedding. That could only refer to her own, one of the worst days in her life, along with the day George died on that camping trip and the day she and Billy had been attacked by the Green Ranger.

Her eyes started to fill with tears. For the last year, her whole life had changed because of the Power Rangers, but she hadn't even guessed the half of it. There were the weekly monster attacks, during which she'd had to stay with her class of 10-year-olds and try to protect them, all the while worrying if Billy was safe with no way to contact him. Then there were Billy's frequent unexplained disappearances during the attacks, finally explained. Then the attack on herself and Billy, when the Green Ranger had attacked them, and now she knew that Billy had been a Power Ranger at the time, that it wasn't a random attack, and he knew who that Green Ranger was. And then the wedding, and John's death, and now she knew Billy had something to do with that…

She swallowed the questions. Swallowed the hurt and betrayal. They were in danger, and she had to rely on Billy to get them to safety. She couldn't attack him now. Instead, she picked something easier. "So, I assume that Kimberly is also a Power Ranger, and that she has now turned evil?"

Billy paused, obviously noting her several omissions. "Right. She's led an attack against our families tonight. Kimberly's family is safe in the Command Center, and I'm pretty sure the Kwans are okay. We were trying to teleport out the Scotts and Taylors when I saw you were in danger."

"So where are we going? This… Command Center? Where is it?"

"I can't say exactly where because we may be monitored right now, but it's somewhere in the Nevada desert."

"You've been spending most of your time in Nevada for the past year?"
Another hit against the car saved Billy from having to answer right then. As he struggled to get the car under control, he finally managed to say, "We'll be safe there, if we can just get there. Mom, I'm going to need you to hold the wheel for a second."

Before Sylvia could respond, Billy half-climbed out of the driver's side window, drew his blaster, and started firing on the pursuing Zord. Sylvia grabbed the wheel in a panic, trying desperately to keep the car from flipping over.

I'm flying a Volkswagen Beetle midair and under attack while my son the Power Ranger shoots at our attacker, a giant metal bird, she thought. She began laughing nervously.

She shifted back in her seat when Billy started pulling himself back out of the window. "It's okay," he said, and even through the helmet filter she could hear the relief in his voice. "We have backup now."

There was a different, deeper shriek that rent the air, and the windshield was filled with red again. Once the big, red thing passed Sylvia looked in the rearview mirror to what had saved them: a giant red serpent-like dragon, which was now chasing down Kimberly's Zord, keeping her away from the car.

"Who…?"

"Jason," Billy supplied. "Looks like his family is okay, and that means that Zack's family is okay, too, since I made sure they were saved before the Scotts."

Sylvia felt her world flip a few more times, even though the car stayed completely stable. "That's… just… Are all your friends Power Rangers? The whole bunch of you? What about Tommy?"

Billy didn't answer. She could see his whole body tense up, and the steering wheel began to crack under his tightening fists.

Before Sylvia could come to any conclusions, Billy yelled and swerved the car sharply. A mass of dark metal had suddenly appeared right in front of them. Sylvia held on to the seat, willing her stomach back down her throat, while Billy tried to keep them from crashing.

"Is that another Zord?" Sylvia asked. "More help?"

"I don't think so," Billy said in a scared voice. "It's nothing I've ever seen."

Billy had been flying upwards, slamming them both back into the seats, as he tried to lose the new… whatever it was… that was attacking them. There was a blast a green light that almost caught the back driver's side, and Billy had to avoid what looked like a curved metal pole sticking out from the attacking machine.

"I'm going to try to lose it in the clouds," Billy said. "I've got night vision in this helmet, so I'm going to turn off the headlights. We're nearly past the security field anyway, and nothing can get us there."

Before he turned off the headlights, though, they gained enough altitude to see their attacker. It was a Zord, unfamiliar, that looked similar to Jason's Zord, except dark and massive.

"That's not one of ours," Billy breathed.
Jason breathed a sigh of relief. He hated fighting Kimberly, even if it was only with Zords. But he only had to distract her long enough to get Billy and his mother safe. Soon as he got the signal that they were safe, he'd follow back to the Command Center, and they'd regroup from there.

"Kim," he said through the Zord comm system, "I don't know what you wanted to accomplish, but if it was to kill our families, I don't think your heart was in it. Give it two more minutes, and Billy's mom will be safe in the Command Center's security field... which you're locked out of, by the way." He sighed. "Kim, no matter what you say, no matter what the spell is telling you, I know you realize this is all wrong. Whatever you had planned has pretty much all gone to hell, and Zedd's going to be pissed. If you come back with me, I promise that we can protect you from him. Just... please. Come back."

There was a pause, and Jason thought he could detect uncertainty. That's what he was banking on. Tommy, after all, had been uncertain and unstable under the spell, and he hadn't even felt a real bond with the rest of them. Kimberly was one of them. Perhaps that would be enough to weaken the spell.

Instead of uncertainty or even anger, laughter erupted from the speakers... but it wasn't only Kimberly's laughter.

"You think I've been abandoned, Jas?" Kimberly said. "You think this was about killing our families? Jason, look behind you."

With growing dread, Jason wheeled around his Zord toward the direction of the Command Center. He couldn't see the car. His entire field of vision was taken up by the largest Zord he'd ever seen: a giant metal dragon.

"May I introduce you to Serpentera, Red Ranger?" Came Lord Zedd's cold, mocking voice. "Enjoy the sight, as it will be your last."

Green light erupted from the mouth of Serpentera. Jason swerved his Red Dragon Thunderzord. The green light caught his left side, sending his Zord reeling. Alarms screaming, he tried to regain control and plot a course for the Command Center.

"Trini," he said over a private channel, "got any readings on that thing?"


Jason closed his eyes. "That's what I thought. Am I right that it's Lord Zedd piloting?"

"Can't confirm, but considering he was the one on the comm..."

"Right," Jason said. "Are Billy and his mother all right?"

Before Trini could answer, the Thunderzord shuddered violently. Only static came from the speaker, and Jason felt his stomach drop as his Zord began to lose altitude.

A direct hit. Controls were not responding. He was going down.

Jason braced himself. If he ejected, he would be vulnerable to attack from both Serpentera and Kimberly. If he tried to regain minimal power, though, he just might be able to aim his Zord to crash behind the Command Center security field. Yes, his Zord would be damaged, but both he and his Zord would be out of Lord Zedd's reach. Lord Zedd had done a lot that night, but Jason knew enough about the Command Center to know that Zedd would find it impossible to break through that field.
Knowing it was a huge risk and he would be completely helpless if it didn't work, Jason tied his power coin directly into the Zord's system, giving it that boost of power that it needed. He was in luck. The Zord's controls shuddered to life, and Jason was able to maneuver just enough out of the way to avoid one more attack from Serpentera. Half a mile… a few hundred feet…

He was in the security field just as the Zord lost power for good. His Zord was safe, so he ejected out and jumped behind a sand dune to avoid the impact of his Zord's crash. Sand crashed over him, half-burying him, but his suit protected him from the worst.

Trying not to think about how his Zord looked, lifeless on the desert floor, he teleported away.

"The countdown is ten more minutes, Power Rangers. After ten minutes, there will be no negotiations. This town will be razed to the ground, and then we will do the same to the next town."

Jason, Billy, and Sylvia had walked into the Command Center, where it was dead silent except for the voice of yet another god speaking through the Viewing Globe. Zack and his family had recovered, though they still looked rather in shock. Trini and Alpha were at the Command Center controls, though Trini's hands stilled over the console when she heard that message.

She looked up when she noticed Jason. "They're at a fundraiser at City Hall. They're holding the mayor and the city council hostage, as well as a whole bunch of other people. And… we know how many gods there are now."

The Viewing Globe showed the scene. There were ten people dressed in robes, armed, with the golden skin and silver eyes that set the gods apart from other humans. They could recognize Ares and Aphrodite, then Artemis and Apollo, but the others remained a mystery.

"That fat woman called herself Demeter," Kevin broke the silence.

Everyone looked at him, and he shrugged uncomfortably. "From when I was kidnapped, you know?"

"So now there's only Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Athena, Dionysus, Hephaestus, and Hermes to account for," Mrs. Taylor said quietly.

"They think Lord Zedd is Zeus," Zack said, "and I don't think Zedd would want to revive Zeus' wife, so Hera's out, too. I'd say that stooped one there is Hephaestus, since he got thrown off Mount Olympus by Zeus. Dionysus is that guy with the cup, and Hermes has the winged shoes. The other two in the middle there have to be Poseidon and Athena, then."

Zack's family stared at him in mild surprise. Zack shifted uncomfortably. "Jason made me study up on them."

"And, normally, you'd tell us what special powers they might have," Jason said, "but I don't think we have time for that. Ten minutes, right? Less now. We better get down there."

"Now, wait a minute," Mr. Scott erupted. "What do you mean, we better get down there? You're just planning on turning yourselves in like this?"

"Lee is right," Mrs. Kwan said. "You're all walking into a trap. You're safe here…"

"And you're down to four," said Frank. "You couldn't stop whatever is going on when you were six,
so you might need to regroup before you start trying to fight those gods, or whatever they are."

"And in the meantime, Angel Grove is destroyed," Trini said.

The room fell into a shocked silence.

Jason reached up to rub his head, remembered he was still morphed, and let his hand fall. "We know it's a trap. We've been falling into Zedd's traps for days now. But we're not going to forfeit Angel Grove just because we're… not at our best right now."

"You don't really think those things would destroy Angel Grove, would they?" Mrs. Scott said. "I mean, what are they really after? It can't be a town in California, or your kids. They're aliens. Why…"

"What they're after, Mom," Jason interrupted, "we don't have right now." He glanced up at the empty tube, but turned away quickly. "But don't think for a second they're bluffing. Zedd has proven he doesn't bluff. And, yes, we're safe right now. But what if Zedd put all of his energy and resources to breaking into the Command Center." Jason shook his head. "We're going to do what we can to protect people. That's our job. That's what we've been doing for almost a year now, and we're not going to give up just because it looks like…" He trailed off.

"Five minutes, Power Rangers," the god who they had identified as Athena reminded them.

Jason snapped out of his reverie. "Right. We've got to get down there now. If anything happens to us, just trust in Alpha. He'll know what to do, right, Alpha?"

"Uh… right! Sure, Jason. You can count on me," Alpha said, reassuring no one.

Four Power Rangers teleported into the street and walked into City Hall. The surrounding guard of Putties let them in without contest. A news van had just pulled up, and a reporter and camera crew were running up behind them, also uncontested. The reporter began shouting questions at them, but the Power Rangers ignored him.

The Putties led them into a ballroom, all fitted out for whatever charity the rich and influential had been touting. Said rich and influential were now huddled in groups, still in dresses and tuxes, all with scared and defiant expressions. The Mayor was standing near the top of the room with Athena and Poseidon. She looked terrified, but she was obviously keeping a brave front for everyone else in the room. She also looked relieved that the Power Rangers were there.

In fact, there were several people who looked relieved. A few even burst into cheers and applause, quickly silenced by a threat from a god. Artemis in particular looked ready to shoot anyone who moved.

The Pink Ranger ran in from another entrance. "I thought I was going to be late. Has it started yet?"

"Not yet," Athena said. "Your cohorts have just gotten here."

The first break in the relief the crowd was feeling happened when the Pink Ranger, rather than joining the other Rangers, joined the gods.

"We are here, as you asked," Jason said. "We can negotiate, but I want you to let these people go first. There's been enough civilian lives at risk today."
"We are not here to discuss your terms, Red Ranger," Athena said. "We are here to discuss your surrender. And Lord Zeus stipulated that it must be public, so the people stay."

A bead of sweat fell down Jason's face. "Surrender, huh? Don't you think that's a little soon? We still…"

There was the twang of an arrow, and a scream. An arrow was now pinning the Chief of Police to a wall by the shoulder. A doctor Jason recognized as working with his mom rushed to him, and Artemis grinned. "Oops," she said. "But I get really bored with deluded heroes."

There was the ghost of a smile on Athena's face. "You've made your point, Artemis. At least, I hope so. We could kill everyone in here, Rangers. Hermes could kill all of them before you had time to blink. Dionysus could drive everyone mad, yourselves included, and leave you all gibbering idiots. And that's only two of us. How can you cope with all ten? How would you be heroes when all the people you've sworn to protect died?"

Jason's heart thudded in his chest. All eyes were on him, including his fellow Rangers. Kimberly had drawn her own bow, ready for a fight, and he could feel the others tense for battle behind him. He could get Alpha to teleport them all away, but that wouldn't solve the problem. Zedd would just find more hostages, and the gods would be out of control.

"If we surrender," Jason heard himself saying, and ignoring the gasps around the room, "I want all of Earth protected. No one dies."

Athena looked to Kimberly, who was looking up slightly, obviously communicating with Lord Zedd. She shrugged. "We won't directly cause any deaths. Of course, if you get us what we want, there's no reason for us to stay on Earth anyway." Jason could hear the grin in Kimberly's voice. "So, what's it going to be?"

Jason glanced back at his fellow Rangers. He couldn't see their faces, and they were remaining silent, but he knew they were scared.

But their families were safe. And now they had to protect the Earth.

"Yes. We surrender."

Everyone was staring at them, including all of the gods. The news camera was rolling, and he could hear the reporter giving a live commentary. He didn't care. They would be safe. Jason was past caring what happened to him. He only wished he didn't have to surrender Trini, Zack, and Billy as well.

"Very well. Artemis, put your bow away," Athena said.

Artemis did so with little grace.

"Now, Power Rangers," Athena said slowly, "take off your helmets."

"Why?" Jason said before he could stop himself.

"Artemis, you can take you bow out again…"

"Wait!"

With hands that he tried to keep from trembling, Jason reached up to undo the clasps of his helmet. After a pause, he heard the others do the same. And, to his surprise, Kimberly joined them in
removing her helmet, smirking as she did so.

There was a surge of murmuring. Perhaps a few recognized them, perhaps knew their parents. He definitely heard the word "young" quite a few times, and the newscaster was trying to describe them from his view from the back. He knew that the next day their entire biographies would be on TV for all the world to see.

Jason wondered if this is what Kimberly wanted in particular.

"We honor your bravery and heroism, Power Rangers," Athena said. "And you do not have to come to harm. All you need to do is deliver Zordon to us."

"As Zedd knows," Jason said, trying to control his voice now that he couldn't rely on the filters, and cringing at how small and weak it sounded now, "We have lost Zordon. He does not have enough power to manifest, and now we've lost his dimensional signature."

"How long before you recover your leader?" Athena said.

Jason glanced at Billy.

"There's no way of telling," Billy said. "It could be hours, it could be months. And we can't just…"

Jason cut him off with a warning look. No one, though, seemed to take seriously Billy's attempt at resistance.

Kimberly, instead, spoke up. "You have a month. One month, starting today at this hour. If you don't deliver, you all turn yourselves in, and I take a crack at finding him, with all my new resources and plenty of incentives for you to help me."

"In the meantime," Athena said, "we will keep Angel Grove as assurance of your continued support, Rangers. Poseidon?"

The man next to her disappeared.

"What is he doing?" Trini said. "You promised that you would…"

"He's putting a wall over Angel Grove, cutting it off from everywhere. The Power Rangers will be able to teleport in and out, since they will need access to their Command Center, but otherwise no one gets in and no one gets out." She smiled. "The waters of the Pacific Ocean now cover this grove of angels, and it is now the domain of the gods. We will keep to our promise: we will not directly kill anyone. But neither will we make it easy on anyone. These humans will pay for your incompetence, Power Rangers."

"Oh, and something to think about," Kimberly said, drawing her bow and aiming it at Jason.

Jason waited, tensed, knowing Kimberly was aiming to hurt and not kill, and that dodging or teleporting away would only make it worse.

Instead, he heard a shout of pain as Kimberly changed her aim at the last minute and let the arrow fly at Zack. Billy and Trini moved to catch his fall as he writhed in pain.

"That was an arrow I borrowed from Apollo," she said. "Now I suggest you all get out of here."

Jason took one last look at the people in the ballroom. His whole purpose of surrender had been to save them, but all he could see was looks of betrayal on their faces.
The entire city of Angel Grove was surrounded on all sides by a wall of water, even through the ground, linking the field of water together through sewers and underground springs. Tunneling didn't work, and the water itself was as hard as stone. Angel Grove awakened to being completely shut off from the world and under the rule of ancient Greek gods.

The news of the surrender of the Power Rangers, as well as their identities and the corruption of one of them, swept the town by noon. The reporter, frustrated in the attempt to communicate beyond the borders of Angel Grove, broadcast through a local channel. Media and communication were compensating the most quickly from not having outside help, and people were scrambling for rabbit ears and radios to keep up with local news.

The Power Rangers, though, had not gone back to Angel Grove. Immediately upon returning to the Command Center, Zack's injury became first priority. Trini had cared for him with the help of Mrs. Scott, and his condition was stabilized, though the serum did not entirely clear his system of whatever Apollo's arrow had been poisoned with. Trini was now studying the poison from the arrow.

There had not been the confrontation that the Rangers had expected when they got back. Their parents had been too horrified. Instead, they made food and sleep a priority. The Rangers tried to stay up, but as soon as Zack was stabilized, their parents had forced them to bed, where they fell asleep immediately, having not slept for almost 48 hours.

The next morning, Billy found his mother in their woefully understocked kitchen. He'd woken up hoping to get started on repairs, but at the look on his mother's face he sat down, knowing he'd never be able to grab a bite to eat and run.

"It's time for you to tell me where Tommy is. And… who he was."

Billy looked down, barely acknowledging the cup of coffee and Pop-Tart she gave him. "It happened… God, it was just yesterday," he said quietly. "Kevin had been kidnapped, and Zedd sent a ransom to Tommy and Kimberly: one of them had to surrender to an evil spell to take Kevin's place." He took a breath. "Kimberly's the one with the spell, obviously. She… claims… to have killed Tommy, but there's no proof. Suffice to say, Tommy is missing and we haven't had a chance to find him yet."

"Right," Sylvia said, sitting down across from him. "And…"

Billy sighed. "You already know it, Mom."

Sylvia closed her eyes, the tears burning behind her lids. "And you didn't think I needed to know any of this?"

Billy was still staring down. "It's… it's not like we had a great deal of choice in the matter. It's the three rules of the Power Rangers: Never escalate a fight, never use our powers for personal gain, and never reveal our identities. That included everyone."

"I'm talking about Tommy," Sylvia said. "And you. You two have had this whole history that I was barely a part of. You… you forgave him, and I never got the chance."

Billy opened his mouth to say something, but he stopped when Mr. Taylor, along with Marcus, Jamie, and Byron, trooped into the kitchen. The others soon followed, with the parents trying to make the food stores last for one meal. It was obvious they'd have to come up with a solution soon if
their stay was going to be this extended, but no one wanted to have that conversation just yet.

Jason looked in on the kitchen after a while. "Everyone's up, and Zack's okay for right now. We're all meeting in fifteen minutes."

"Acknowledged," said Billy. He'd stayed in the kitchen long enough. He walked to the central Command Center, and, to his surprise, everyone else followed him.

Jason was already there, and so was most everyone else. Someone had brought a chair for Zack, who looked like he could barely hold himself up. Alpha looked like he was guarding the computer consoles, clearly uncomfortable that so many people were there.

Jason smiled, looking not that much better than Zack. What sleep he'd gotten the night before had obviously not been enough. "Well, since everyone's here, I guess we'll get started. I know there's a lot of questions, and even more worries. It's time we started answering both.

"Last July, after she escaped from an interdimensional prison, Empress Rita Repulsa attacked Earth. She did this for two reasons. First was her long-standing rivalry with Zordon. The second reason was Earth's potential: its inhabitants are some of the few in the galaxy who can become Power Rangers. You all remember that first attack: the earthquake, the Putties… that was when Zordon recruited us.

"There are only certain people who can become Power Rangers, even on Earth, and he found five in one city. It was a chance he had to take. So he teleported us to the Command Center, gave us the Power Coins, and asked us to become Earth's defenders. We refused… at least, until we were attacked by a squadron of Putties and had to morph in order to fight it. From that moment, it was no question. We accepted the power and responsibility, following three rules: don't escalate a fight unless we're forced, don't reveal our secret identities to anyone, and don't use our powers for personal gain.

"That's what we did. We started the life of a superhero, fighting aliens, trying to keep up with schoolwork, and trying to hide our disappearances from our families. It wasn't easy. Lying doesn't come naturally to any of us, but we believed we were protecting all of you. We didn't want any of you involved any more than we had to.

"Everything went great… until the attack of the Green Ranger in September. Rita had recruited herself a Power Ranger, someone to get in close and betray us, to hurt us in a way she couldn't. And, yeah, it was bad. He wrecked the Command Center, threw us out of the Megazord, and… well… you know what he did to Billy. I tried to find out who he was at the Moon Palace, but I let myself get captured and almost killed, while the Green Ranger was revealed to be Tommy.

"He couldn't keep us for long, though. We regrouped, and his spell was unstable, so that we were able to capture and cure him. He voluntarily became a Power Ranger to atone for what he blamed himself for. However, that meant that Rita marked him for a traitor and thief, as he kept the Power Coin she'd given him. In time, after attacking with all sorts of spells and illusions, she attacked him by draining his power, so that he could no longer become the Green Ranger, and he had to give his powers to me to keep them from Rita's hands. That's around the time he left town.

"He came back, though. He saved everyone on Power Ranger Day, the day he came back, and he stayed around, though he couldn't use his powers anymore. That is, until the day of the wedding. We had done everything we could to protect the wedding from attack, but Rita was a step ahead of us. When Billy was alone, she put him under a temporary spell, making him bring down the security field so you all could be kidnapped, and then making him steal all of our Power Coins. He didn't steal the Green Power Coin, and so we put together a risky plan for Zordon to infuse Tommy with his own powers so Tommy could again morph. He did, and he went up to save all of you and
recover the Power Coins, and… well… you all know the end to that story. And yet we had to keep our identities a secret. Tommy couldn't let on that he'd been there. None of us could, but it was getting harder to keep these secrets. Our excuse that we were protecting you all was starting to not make any sense.

"After that, Rita did not attack us much, possibly spooked by the consequences of her attacks, but Rita was not going to stay in power long. Almost two weeks ago, Lord Zedd attacked Rita, stole all of her power, and sent her back to her interdimensional prison. He began an attack on us as well as the forces that remained loyal to her. He destroyed our Zords, but not before Zordon was able to create new Zords for us. Tommy, however, was losing power fast, and Zedd was getting us right where he wanted us.

"The past few days have been a series of distractions, all culminating in the attack last night. He kidnapped Kevin, forcing Kimberly and Tommy to sacrifice themselves. Kimberly was turned evil, and Tommy… Tommy died. Then the attack on us… they were just preparing for last night."

The shock of the news of Tommy's death weighed heavily in the room. Some of them knew, some of them didn't, but it had so far only been talked about behind closed doors, not openly. Billy crossed his arms, wanting to contradict, but knowing it wasn't the time, that it wouldn't do any good.

"I know everything looks dire right now," Jason continued. "That's because it is. Zedd has stayed three steps ahead of us at every turn. But now he's made the mistake that all of our enemies make: he's given us time. We have time to find Zordon, and we will find him, but not to give him away. He's the only reason Zedd doesn't destroy the entire Earth outright. We need to find him because we need his wisdom and guidance. He's the only one who's been able to beat Zedd at his own game, and we need that right now.

"Our other priority is Kimberly. The thing is, I'm completely aware that we don't have any proof that Tommy is dead."

Billy looked up sharply and saw that Jason's eyes were on him.

"But lack of proof that he's dead is not conclusive proof that he's alive," Jason said. "If we're going to have any chance at saving Kimberly, as well as saving the people of Angel Grove, we can't spend all our time on trying to find someone who is probably dead and whose remains are in a dimension that Zedd controls. If he's alive, he'll find a way to us. In the meantime, one of our own is corrupted, being used as a tool to destroy the Earth. I'm not willing to let Kimberly go like that, not when we have the resources to save her.

"So, here're our priorities for today. Trini, you're working on curing Zack, of course. That leaves you, Billy, with working on a way to break Kimberly's spell, perhaps with less pain than Tommy had to go through. Alpha, you're on Zordon search, and that leaves me with working on fitting out the Command Center with supplies. I doubt there's going to be any major attacks, so my Zord can wait, although…"

"You're forgetting something, son."

Jason looked at his father, startled at the interruption. He'd thus far kept up an expression of stony command, but it slipped when his father spoke up, and he let show briefly fear and uncertainty on everyone else's faces.

"I know you're used to working alone, but you've forgotten that there aren't just four people here, plus your robot. There are fourteen more people here, and none of us are going to stand by while you kids run yourselves ragged. We may not be able to morph or fight, but there's plenty we can do."
"And the first thing we should do is hold a funeral for Tommy," Sylvia said, her voice trembling but strong. "If... if he's really dead, and we have to accept that, we need closure. I can take care of preparing that for tonight."

Kimberly's mother, who was near her, grabbed Sylvia's hand. "I'll help you."

As the meeting broke apart, each person taking on a different task, Jason leaned against Zordon's tube, exhausted with the effort of keeping it together.

"You know," he whispered, "now would be a great time for you to come back, Zordon."

His eyes flew open when he felt a hand on his shoulder. "You did good, son."

There was his father, eyes shining with pride, an expression Jason realized he hadn't seen in a long time.

"That couldn't have been easy," his dad said, "but you made the hard decisions and kept us going." His dad smiled. "If I knew this was what you were up to, I wouldn't have given you such a hard time."

"Dad, I have no idea what the hell I'm doing," Jason admitted, feeling completely undeserving of the admiration his father was giving him. "I know I said that we had a chance, but I just don't see it. One dead, one evil, one lost, and Angel Grove at Lord Zedd's mercy. What do we have left?"

"As you said, time. And each other. You've done everything in your power to keep as many people as safe as possible." His dad put his arm around his shoulders and squeezed. "Now, it's time to rely on others for a while. Together, we're going to beat this thing."

Jason forced himself to smile, not admitting what was really destroying him. In that speech, he had given up on even the slimmest chance of recovering Tommy. Really, he felt like he was the one who had killed Tommy.

It was dark.

No, it wasn't dark. He'd known darkness before. No, his eyes were just closed.

Tommy opened his eyes to see a palace of marble, which glimmered dully in the half-light. A man and woman were standing there, with the golden skin and silver eyes that marked a god.

"You're awake," the man said, grinning broadly. "Welcome to the Underworld, Tommy Oliver. I'm Hades, and this is my wife Persephone."

Tommy began to struggle to his feet. "Hades... Does that mean I'm dead?"

"Yes, you're dead," Hades said, still grinning. "You hit the coffin nail right on the head, oh deceased, consigned to the Underworld forever."

Persephone scowled. "Husband..."

Hades burst into laughter. "Sorry... sorry... not a lot of laughs in this job. No, Tommy, you're not dead." His smile turned cruel. "But neither are you getting out of the Underworld alive."
"So, let me get this straight."

Tommy let his eyes take in the surroundings, even as he made sure these new gods couldn't take him by surprise. On the one hand, he knew that trying to escape would do little good, considering he was currently in a place that didn't seem to have a way out. He'd already tried his wrist communicator to teleport out, and that hadn't worked. On the other hand, he didn't really want to be under the power of Hades.

"You say I'm in hell, but that I'm not dead."

Persephone rolled her eyes. "I told you those Christians would take over with their own worldview. As soon as Dante put together that wretched travesty."

"Now, my dear, let's not blame the boy for being misinformed," Hades said. "You were ill-informed enough when you first came here."

"Considering I was kidnapped for your nefarious purposes..." Persephone cooed sarcastically.

Hades heaved a sigh. "I swear, summer can't get here soon enough..." He finally looked up at Tommy, who'd been taking the opportunity to take in as much of his environment as possible. "Right! Well, half-right. You are in the Underworld, Tommy, but it's not that hellish existence that your Bible would claim. It's actually quite nice here. Who knows? If you'd actually died, you might have gone to Elysium. However, you are not dead, so you have not been judged." Hades smirked. "My dear brother probably thought I would kill you outright. He's always lacked subtlety, with all his thunder and lightning."

"Brother. Lightning. You're talking about Zeus, right?"

"Heard you had some trouble with him," Persephone commented.

Tommy considered the two. How much were they a part of Zedd's plan? It was nothing they said, but there seemed to be a bit more sarcasm when either of them talked about "Zeus."

For that matter, what was Zedd's plan? Get him out of the way? Make the others think he was dead? Or was it something more?

Things were a lot simpler when we were just fighting Finster's bug monsters, he thought.

Tommy was about to say something, continuing to play for time and information, when there was a crackling behind him. He whipped around to see... well... he could only describe it as a rip in the air. It looked vaguely like the portal that had dragged them in the Island of Illusion, and at that thought he promptly backed away from it.

"It seems you've chosen," Hades said darkly. "Honestly, hero, we have little interest in you or my
dear brother's plans. We know he wants you destroyed, we cannot begin to guess why... We only
know that we were to keep you talking until you picked your own judgment. You have done so."

Tommy felt the air around him compress and pull him forward. He dug his heels in the ground but he
could get no traction, and he slid across the floor. He tried to stumble sideways, and he was finally
able to grab hold of a statue.

"What do you mean, I chose?" Tommy retorted. "I barely said anything..."

"Thoughts are real here, hero," said Persephone, unfazed by the wind.

"The good news is, hero," Hades smirked, "you're departing my realm, and we will hopefully not
meet again. The bad news is... well..." He laughed. "We are often our own worst judges."

Tommy had no time to think about what he meant before being pulled from the statue to the void.

Lord Zedd stood at the balcony in his throne room, staring at the water-encased city on Earth. That
would occupy everyone for quite a while. Long enough, anyway. Everything had fallen into place
quite better than he'd expected.

"All right, where is he?!!"

Zedd turned, a bit startled at the sound of angry shouting in his chamber... at least angry shouting that
wasn't his own. What greeted him was the sight of Kimberly stomping into the room, face red with
rage. If the chamber responded to her emotion rather than his own, it would have blazed crimson.

"You!" she raged. "My dark lord. Explain yourself."

Zedd felt his own rage mounting, and if it weren't for the fact that this had been a spectacular day, he
would have struck the girl down where she stood. Yet it had been a good day, and he realized her
rage was affecting him. Therefore, he responded with patience.

"I will explain, my dear," he said, "when you tell me what you want explained."

The calm reply did not affect Kimberly in the slightest, though the shrill edge did leave her voice
somewhat. "I want explained why, upon returning to the Moon Palace, I find out that my house is in
ruins. I got the footage from Finster. It wasn't a god, it wasn't an attack... it was a bomb. You
bombed my house, and you didn't even warn me!"

Zedd considered the raging girl. This was actually a rather dangerous moment. Zedd had not tested
Kimberly in her loyalty to her family, or how readily she would be able to rid herself of it. She had
sacrificed herself, after all, in order to save her brother.

"You act as if you are now deprived of a home," Lord Zedd said coolly. "I was under the impression
that you were to live here."

"First off," Kimberly said, "it's not like you've given me a place here to stay. What am I supposed to
do, sleep in my Zord? And secondly... that's not the point."

"And what is the point?" Zedd said. "Are you, perhaps, worried about your family? Did you notice
that your house only exploded when your entire family vacated the area? Did you think that was a
coincidence?"

Kimberly rolled her eyes. "Of course I realized you didn't mean to blow up my family. In the first
case, if you wanted to kill my family, you would have succeeded. In the second case, the resulting 
grief would have endangered the hold you have over me."

"Perceptive of you," Lord Zedd said slowly. Perhaps too perceptive. Yet he could still feel the bond 
between them, and Tommy had been just as perceptive of his own spell. "As for a place to live, I'm 
having a large apartment readied."

"And just what am I supposed to put in it?" Kimberly demanded. "You just blew up everything I 
own! My entire wardrobe."

"Your... wardrobe." Lord Zedd stared at her. "Are you telling me that you are upset over clothing?"

"Do you have any idea how long I've worked on that wardrobe? How big it is?"

"Kimberly, at my side you have command over the world."

"Some of that was designer! I got it on clearance!"

Kimberly had moved toward him through the entire argument, and now their faces were inches from 
each other. There was the sound of a throat clearing, and Zedd and Kimberly looked over to see 
Squatt and Babboo hovering in the doorway.

"The... the Pink Ranger's room is ready," Squatt said uncertainly.

Zedd and Kimberly looked back at each other, the tension broken. They both laughed.

"I know that was ridiculous," Kimberly said. "Let's just say it's been a pretty stressful few days."

"You had every right to be angry," Lord Zedd conceded. "I believe the building you call the 'mall' is 
vacated at this time. You're entirely welcome to whatever you wish to take. It is at your command."

"Wait..." Kimberly narrowed her eyes. "You're giving me the mall?"

Zedd nodded.

Kimberly's face broke out into a grin. She threw her arms around him, kissed him on his mask where 
his cheek would be, and squealed "Thank you!" before running out of the room.

Lord Zedd stood there, unmoving... stunned. He traced a claw right where the Pink Ranger's lips had 
made contact.

That was... that...

Breaking out of his reverie, Lord Zedd made sure Kimberly was safely out of the Moon Palace, and 
then contacted Finster.

"Yes, Lord Zedd," came Finster's perfunctory reply.

"Don't think I don't know why you gave that footage to the Pink Ranger," Lord Zedd said without 
preamble. "You made sure she knew about it. If you try to sabotage my relationship with her again, 
or interfere with any of my efforts, I will make sure it's the last thing you think about as you die 
screaming. Do you understand?"

Finster's voice remained impassive. "Understood, Lord Zedd."

Lord Zedd considered adding more, but he'd made his point. "Send Goldar to me when he's woken
from his hangover."

Zedd cut communication before he had a chance to reply. He stood at the balcony, gazing at Angel Grove, and considering his plans.

The fire banked low as the wood was consumed. It was dark outside, and the youngest children were starting to get restless. But no one wanted to leave.

Few had spoken during the simple ceremony. After his speech earlier that day, Jason had barely spoken two words, and what he did say was all business. He'd spent the day overseeing the organization of their new living situation... and trying to ignore both his own feelings and what was being shown on the Viewing Globe of Angel Grove.

Sylvia had tried to speak, but her voice failed her after only a few words. The iron control and strength she'd shown at the father's funeral failed her at the son's. Billy had tried as well, but his usual verbosity had devolved into low mutters. Jason had fully expected him to protest that they had no proof that Tommy was dead, but he said nothing.

Zack said nothing as well, though it wasn't for lack of trying. He'd insisted on leaving the building for the ceremony, but by the time he'd limped out with the help of his father and Mr. Scott, he'd collapsed into the chair they'd brought out for him and remained only half awake. Trini hovered over him, looking helpless.

Kimberly's mother spoke. She and Frank had forced the truth of the circumstances around Tommy's death out of a reluctant Trini earlier that day. They'd disappeared with Kevin after that, only emerging right before the funeral. Judy Harris, formerly Hart, looked wrung out but determined as she spoke confidently about Tommy's love and sacrifice for her daughter and son.

Alpha stood to the side, looking unsure in this extremely foreign ceremony. As long as he had lived, mortal death had remained rather unknown to him. He'd monitored the death of thousands in the various wars in his time with Zordon, he'd worked to prevent the deaths of thousands more, and yet he could not seem to process the death of this one. The fact that Tommy would no longer be around was incomprehensible, and that was difficult for a computer.

The halting words stopped, and the fire banked low. Everyone was unwilling to leave, as they knew that inside they had to make plans, to provide for their own shelter, to work on problems... and to let Tommy finally die. They had no time to linger, but they did not want to leave as the cold and darkness overtook the flickering fire.

Zack decided for them as he began shivering uncontrollably. His father and Mr. Scott immediately lifted him back into the Command Center, and the rest followed, Trini running ahead to the lab that now acted as a hospital room for Zack, with Mrs. Scott close behind.

That afternoon each family had cleared out rooms for sleeping quarters, putting together better arrangements than the night before. Each family was together, with a few exceptions. Kristen, Jason's sister, was now rooming with Trini in Kimberly's place. They'd also found a room for Zack's brother's and Kevin to share, so that Marcus and Kevin could look after Jamie and Byron.

Jason had assumed that, with Zack now sleeping in Trini's lab, he and Billy would be sharing a room still, and he'd been dreading that. Yet when he returned to the room he'd shared with Billy, Zack, and Tommy, he found it empty. Billy had moved his belongings.

Jason left the empty room to check on Zack. The room was quiet and dark, with Trini and his mother
hovering over the patient, and Zack's parents looking on near the door.

"How is he?" Jason asked once he'd figured he wasn't interrupting anything.

Trini sighed and rubbed her forehead. She'd gotten very little sleep for the past three days, Jason reminded himself. "He's as stable as I can get him. It's easier on his body to keep him unconscious."

"Even that can get dangerous," Jason's mother said.

Trini nodded slowly. "Yes, it can. It's just... that poison on the arrow. It was able to pierce through Zack's uniform without difficulty, and it's somehow infecting his body and his connection to the power coin in ways I can't even begin to figure out." She sagged. "I... I just can't believe Kimberly did this."

"It wasn't her," Jason said firmly. "You remember what things Tommy did when he was under a spell."

But mentioning Tommy's name was precisely the wrong thing to do at the time. The air became tense as the knowledge of Tommy's death, that they had just come from his funeral, settled back into the room.

"But can you do anything for Zack?" Dr. Taylor called them back to the present. "Why can't we just take him to a hospital? Any hospital, not just the one in Angel Grove."

"Two reasons," Jason answered her, his voice still shaky from the mention of his dead friend. "One, Trini is now the most qualified person on Earth to treat Zack. The poison is infecting his powers as well as his body, and regular hospitals wouldn't be able to deal with that. Two, if we take him out of the Command Center, he'll be open to attack from Lord Zedd. Right now, we have to be cautious about anyone leaving the Command Center."

"But we're able to leave for food," Mr. Taylor pointed out. Indeed, that very afternoon they'd set up a fund of what money they had between all of them and set up a budget for the month. Thankfully, they were able to access all of their bank accounts, and the Kwans had gone to a grocery store in Stone Canyon, with Jason carefully monitoring them in case of trouble.

"Buying food for half an hour is one thing," Jason said. "And we still have to be very careful, as Zedd could use any opportunity to take advantage of moments of weakness. Being in a hospital bed, though... that's something completely different."

"So you're saying we're prisoners here," Dr. Taylor said hotly. "That we have to stay here until a month passes, and then who knows? I don't even work in Angel Grove, and you're saying I and my husband have to disappear from our positions at the university for a month."

"Adella..." Mr. Taylor said softly.

"Do not try to placate me," Dr. Taylor said severely. "I simply find it hard to believe that I must submit to the judgment of one of my son's teenage friends, one that has already failed to protect all of Angel Grove, not to mention three of his friends and teammates."

Jason paled. This was the moment he'd been dreading. So far all of the parents had been cooperative, without arguments. They'd been shocked at the sudden change of circumstances, busy with the new living arrangements. Now they'd had time to adjust, Jason had been expecting a challenge to his authority.

"Now, wait a minute," his mother spoke up. "How dare you talk to my son that way? When all he's
been doing is trying to protect us all?"

"Operative word, 'trying,'" Dr. Taylor said scathingly. "My son is poisoned, Kimberly is under some evil spell, Tommy is dead, and all of Angel Grove has been imprisoned and terrorized by this evil alien and Greek gods, for some reason. In the meantime, all your son has done is surrender and allow all of it to happen."

"My son..." Mrs. Scott said, her breath quickening, "has done everything he could to save everyone, including us. You seem to forget that yesterday we were all being chased by Zedd's forces, and now we're safe from them."

"Yes..." Dr. Taylor said. "Safe to hide. Safe to leave our normal lives and hope our teenage sons and daughters can save us while we wait."

She was obviously revving up for more, but was stopped when Trini slammed her hands against a table. Everyone turned to her as she rested her hands on the table, her eyes closed and her breath fast.

"I'm sorry," she said in a barely restrained voice, "but I need quiet and peace around Zack if he's going to get rest and if I'm going to have a hope in saving Zack's life. If any of you want to criticize my efforts, don't do it around me and don't do it in this room." She looked up to stare at Dr. Taylor. "What if Zack had been awake to hear all that? Do you think he needs any of that in his condition?"

Dr. Taylor's lips thinned in rage, but she allowed herself to be led out of the room by Mr. Taylor, who just looked weary rather than angry.

Jason knew he had to follow them. He could understand Dr. Taylor's fears and objections. She wasn't used to taking orders from someone she'd known as just Jason, her son's best friend. For that matter, Jason wasn't used to having his family up in the Command Center, not to mention everyone else.

Tommy reminded himself to open his eyes. It was hard to remember things like that where he was.

He wasn't even sure if he was in a place. He existed, he thought... at least he thought he had a body, but all around him was gray. No sky, no ground... he wasn't even sure what he was standing on, or even if he was standing. He closed his eyes again. The gray infinite made his eyes hurt.

He'd been there for a long time. Or had it been a few minutes? He'd been talking to Hades and Persephone, and then a wind had taken him to this place... What had they said? He'd chosen his own punishment?

And when had referring to conversations with Greek gods become normal, his only grip on normality?

And if he'd chosen, what had he chosen? There was nothing there. No monsters. No scenes of torment. As far as torments went, he'd had worse. He'd been imprisoned for weeks, twisted by spells, tortured in both body and mind, and suffered more loss than ever he imagined he would... all in the past six months. And he'd survived all of it. Despite the losses, he was better off than he'd ever been. And now that it was time to die...

The thought had come unbidden to him. Was he? Was this death? Had Hades been fooling him? Had he been there at all? Was Tommy just imagining all this? Was this hell? Being trapped in your own mind, with nothing but your thoughts for the rest of your life?

What was he talking about? The rest of his life... If he was dead, this was it. Eternity. Forever,
immovable gray. No loved ones.

His father. Rita... She wasn't dead, but he almost thought of her that way. He'd never see them.
Forever alone. With himself.

He screamed.

Kimberly spread the best of the dresses on the counter of her favorite store. The mall was abandoned,
the residents of Angel Grove more interested in finding food, shelter, and safety than in shopping.
Kimberly had to admit it felt a bit lonely. Erica, who always made sure she knew when the new
arrivals came in. The guy at the snack shop who always slipped her free pretzels. Candy and Sarah,
her friends from junior high, who she barely hung out with, but they still went shopping every
month.

Where were they now? Votaries of one of the gods? In the safe haven? Hiding in their houses,
hoping none of the gods or Putties found them there?

Kimberly sighed and tried to put it out of her mind. No one was being directly hurt... and why should
she care anyway? Everyone hurts. Everyone dies. In the meantime, all she could do was to outfit her
room, which Squatt and Babboo had filled with fish for some reason, and outfit herself.

Yet the "shopping" trip had lost its joy, and the beautiful clothes were nothing more than fabric. She
sighed and starting gathering them up.

She heard running feet, a tiny shriek, and then a curse. She looked up, startled. She'd thought she
was alone.

A little girl was on the floor, apparently having fallen while running. Someone was running toward
her while yelling at others to keep going. Seconds later, Bulk and Skull appeared.

They stared at her, and she stared right back, her stomach freezing inside of her. For some reason,
facing them felt even stranger than facing her friends the day before.

She tried to smirk. "I'm not going to do anything to you. Go ahead, get her to safety."

Bulk scooped the girl up and made ready to bolt, but Skull stood frozen on the spot.

"Come on," Bulk urged.

"You go on, Bulky," Skull said in a low voice.

Bulk curse under his breath. "Now's not the time, numbskull. You're going to get yourself killed."

"She won't hurt me," Skull said.

"She always does."

Skull shot a pleading look at Bulk, who shook his head wearily and ran.

Kimberly was now assiduously avoiding Skull's gaze by gathering the clothes with more care than
she needed. "So," she said with an offhand voice, "what's with all the heroics? What, herding kids to
that safe haven Demeter set up? Gathering supplies?"

"Both," Skull said in a tense voice. "Someone has to."
Kimberly finally let herself look at Skull. He seemed to be trying to look past her, as if he could somehow stare hard enough and figure out why she was doing all this. "And you can stop it with these new-found heroics when it comes to me. I'm not some damsel you can save. I'm the bad guy."

"And a Power Ranger," Skull added. "That was a surprise. I mean, it really really makes sense now, but..."

"But what?" Kimberly broke him off. "All that time of pining over me, half-stalking me, and you never even considered why I disappeared every time a monster attack happened? I mean, half the time we weren't even subtle about it. God, you're all so stupid."

"I'll admit that," Skull said quietly. "I mean, Bulk and I have spent the past couple of weeks trying to find out who the Power Rangers were. I really should have known." His voice broke, and Kimberly was startled to see his eyes shining with tears. "Kimberly, what happened to you? I've been thinking about it ever since I found out, and I've realized how amazing you are. The attack on the school alone... W-what made you evil? Was it Tommy? Was it..."

He broke off, and Kimberly realized she'd thrown a stiletto shoe at him. She had the other one in her hand, ready to throw. "You're gonna stop right there," Kimberly said through gritted teeth. "I don't have to explain myself to you. I don't have to explain myself to anyone. You... you..."

She smiled, reining in her rage. "You're just a pathetic little boy with a crush, and you can't even see that there's much bigger things happening around you. You say you've figured out so much about me, but haven't you heard?" She set the shoe down. "I kill my boyfriends."

The screaming had ended, and he knew one thing. His throat hurt. He was thirsty.

Even as his throat ached worse than it had in his life, he treasured that pain. He held onto it. It meant he had a body. He wasn't dead. Dead people weren't thirsty.

And of course he wasn't dead. Not only was he thirsty, he carried the pains from his recent torture from Billy's clone, the pains that the serum had not quite been able to take away. He wondered if the clone had made him resistant to the serum by using it as a part of the torture.

Those weren't pleasant thoughts. But he held onto them, just as he held onto the pain. He had a body. He was alive. This was all just a part of Zedd's plan.

"I create my own hell," Tommy said, croaking the words out through an aching throat. "Well, this hell is stupid. Now that I've figured it out, it's really not doing anything. How bout we change the scenery a bit."

Tommy remembered an old Daffy Duck cartoon, where Daffy was on a page shouting at an artist who kept drawing things on him, or erasing him, or putting him in horrible settings. At the time he'd laughed, but now that he found himself in the place of Daffy, it suddenly wasn't funny anymore. And, even as he was thinking that, the setting formed around him, dispelling the gray. First pencil outlines, then color, then depth, until it formed the complete illusion of Addams Park park.

The illusion was complete, but Tommy knew it to be an illusion. Addams Park had been shut down ever since the fire/ice storm had destroyed the woods in the middle. Now its convenience as a more elicit hang-out was gone, and the city apparently didn't want to spend the money to restore it.

"You know, I sort of knew it was going to be you," he said, even as he felt the air crackle with heat.

"I'm glad you've finally seen the light," came the inevitable ironic reply.
Trying not to show his fear, and yet knowing that to be futile, since this was all generated from his own head, Tommy turned to face the Candle Monster. Had it ever had a proper name? Tommy couldn't remember. He supposed it didn't matter, really.

"Run out of fire puns?" he asked.

"You tell me," the monster said.

Tommy smiled tightly. It wasn't the monster he feared, though both the flame and the wax combined to make one of the toughest and most dangerous foes he'd ever faced. It was what the monster represented. The moment when his life had started to end.

"Well, yeah, this is all in my head, right?" Tommy said. "So I should be able to handle this, right? This is all about conquering my fears. I've already done it once."

"If you say so," the monster said enigmatically.

"Right." Tommy pulled his power morpher from his pocket. If the whole situation was imaginary, then he should be able to draw on his powers, no problem. They would only fail if he thought they would fail. So as long as he kept his absolute confidence that they wouldn't fail, he would have no trouble. Yes, the monster was tough, but he was tougher.

He morphed. Nothing happened.

He tried again. The power wouldn't come.

"You're thinking too consciously," the monster said in that same calm, mocking voice he'd been using. "If you had reacted on instinct, you may have had a chance. As it is, you can't draw on your power because you know you have none. You can't defeat me because you know you can't."

The monster threw a gout of flame, hitting Tommy on the shoulder. Pain exploded where it hit, and he ripped off his smoldering shirt. The shirt took some skin with it. He clutched at the wound, staring wildly at the monster.

"And you can be hurt because you know that fire hurts," the monster finished smoothly. "If you are to defeat me with your brain, you'll need more than words. You'll need to really believe, and that will mean disconnecting yourself entirely from reality. Are you ready to do that?"

He'd stopped screaming. He was too afraid to scream. Instead, he ran, knowing the monster was right behind him the whole time.

___________________________

Alpha and Billy were at their work stations. Alpha was working on restoring Zordon, and Billy was working on another project... closely monitored by Alpha.

"You! Mr. Alpha!"

At Dr. Taylor's entrance, Jason could have sworn that Alpha flinched. He certainly diverted his attention from his work. "Yes, Mrs..."

"Dr. Taylor," she corrected, glaring down at him. "And since you seem to be the only one in charge, I want several explanations, the first being how you plan to save our children."

Alpha took a step back and glanced at Jason. Billy looked up from his work, his eyes wide with shock.
"Dr. Taylor..." Alpha said, his voice calm but higher than normal, "I am currently looking for Zordon, which will..."

"Don't give me that," Dr. Taylor interrupted him. "I've never even met this Zordon character, and I have no assurance that he's going to do anything to help us since he's already made the grave error in judgment of recruiting children as soldiers."

By this time, she'd grabbed the attention of the other parents. The Kwans, the Harris's, and Jason's father and sister were trickling in to the Command Center, and Jason could just see what he thought were Kevin and Zack's brothers hiding around a corner to listen.

Now that he'd had time to recover, Alpha became less timid. "Dr. Taylor, you said that I was in charge. I'm sorry, but you're wrong. Zordon made Jason leader of the Power Rangers. He's in charge, and your own son is second in command."

"I refuse to go along with this..."

"You have no choice," Alpha said, his voice lowering from his usual pitch. "And if you stand in the way of the Power Rangers and their duties, I will have to put you in custody."

Dr. Taylor looked apoplectic with rage. No one else spoke at these words, and Jason looked on with clenched jaw, wanting to intervene, but unsure of what to say.

Alpha looked around at the suddenly-gathered audience. "Oh, ay-yi-yi. I suppose as long as everyone is here..." He pressed a few buttons on the console. "This will only be a recording. Ever since his previous disappearances, Zordon made these as a precaution."

The tube at the head of the Command Center crackled to life, and several people gasped as the image of a large head appeared. Jason felt his eyes sting, wishing for the world that it was actually Zordon there and not just a recording.

"Greetings," Zordon said. "If you're playing this recording, it means the worst has happened. I am gone, and my Power Rangers have had to evacuate and shelter their families in the Command Center. Logically, this means that Lord Zedd has gained a major victory.

"Power Rangers, I realize all seems lost, and I truly wish I was there to counsel you. A recording must seem like a dim echo full of platitudes, as I can't advise you in particulars. But such as I have, I will give to the best of my abilities.

"First, I wish to welcome the families of the Power Rangers. I have long held the greatest respect for you all for producing such fine young people. I highly regret the need to hide the truth from you all, but the Power Ranger must work in secret, must divide their personal lives from their duties as warriors as much as possible. I realize this secrecy is moot now, given the present circumstances, but you must believe this policy was for the protection of yourselves and your children.

"I predict now that the difficulty you all face is that you must allow yourself to be directed by your own children. You must think of them as warriors, as defenders of Earth, who are now working for the safety of Earth, as well as your own safety. They must be allowed to fulfill their duties, and I urge you all to support them in any way possible, even if it means hiding, or staying out of danger, and letting them take the necessary risks."

There was a slight break in Zordon's voice, but it wasn't from the recording. In fact, it seemed as if Zordon was fighting back emotion.

"Forgive me, but I have such pride in the Power Rangers, who have over the past year proven
themselves far greater heroes than I expected, far greater than I have ever been. Allow me to reintroduce them to you, as I have come to know them.

"Mr. and Mrs. Scott, your son, Jason, the Red Ranger, I appointed as the leader of the Power Rangers, and he has proven himself time and time again. In the beginning, he took to the powers first and best, admirably using his powers for the protection of Earth and encouraging the others to do the same. He has had to make some sacrifices along the way, giving up football and devoting himself to his fighting and to his leadership duties, and that has led some to believe him irresponsible, but he is the most responsible person I've ever known. When I disappeared the first time, he led the Power Rangers alone, taking initiative and risking his life multiple times for his friends. He remains my chosen leader. If there's any hope in this situation, it's in following his plans.

"Mr. and Dr. Taylor, I present your son, Zack, the Black Ranger, the second-in-command of the Power Rangers. You all know Zack has a way of seeming like he doesn't take anything seriously: his studies, himself... Even he believes this. What Zack takes seriously, though, is his friends, his family, and his duty toward all of them. He laughs in the face of danger, not because he doesn't understand the danger, but as a way of defeating it. He has led the Power Rangers multiple times when Jason could not, and he took on the responsibility admirably. Even as he supports Jason in his leadership, he challenges him, taking on the unpopular opinion to push Jason in the right direction.

"Mr. and Mrs. Kwan, I would like to introduce you to your daughter, Trini, the Yellow Ranger."

"Are you sending this to Trini's lab?" Jason asked Alpha quietly.

"Of course, Jason," Alpha answered.

"I'm sure both of you already know your daughter's talents as a fighter as well as peace-maker. She is the ideal defender: a genius in every area she undertakes, yet always thinking of others, always questioning her own motives, always treating others with compassion in their weakness. Months ago, she surpassed all my expectations by creating a serum that would react with the powers to instantly heal whatever wounds the Rangers incur. This involved knowledge of science and magic that is beyond even me, and yet she created it just in time to heal Billy from his injuries, and the serum has saved almost all of the Rangers' lives. Ever since, she's devoted herself to the well-being of her team.

"Mr. and Mrs. Harris, I present your daughter, Kimberly, the Pink Ranger."

There was the sound of a choked sob. The Harrises were holding each other, and no one could tell who had made the sound. They were both silently crying.

"Kimberly was at first reluctant to take on the powers. She claimed she had other things to do, that the prospect was too strange for her. Yet the truth was she did not feel herself equal to the task. She did not consider herself a warrior, or a tactician, or a genius. Secretly, though she never said it, she always considered herself unequal to her remarkable friends. And, already, the protests are all forming on your lips, as they are mine. Of all of the Rangers, Kimberly embodies what it truly means to be a Power Ranger: strong and passionate, ready to defend her friends, ready to take on any risk. She is willing to sacrifice the most. Forgive the obvious pun, but she is and will always be the heart of the team.

"At last, Mrs. Cranston, I introduce you to both of your sons: one your own, and one you have accepted as your own."

Sylvia did not react. She looked past emotion by this point. The ordeal Kimberly's parents had gone through had steeled her for what was to come.
"First, your son Billy, the Blue Ranger. If I were to list his accomplishments, the things he's built and done, it would take all night. The wrist communicators, the security systems, the improvements to the Command Center, the flying car, and solution after solution to the attacks Rita Repulsa and Lord Zedd have thrown at us, Billy is always equal to the task. Yet, even more than that, Billy has molded himself into a warrior, having to show more personal courage than any of the others. Unlike the others, Billy did not begin as a fighter or athlete. He considered himself weak, a target, a victim... and his enemies tried to use that against him. Billy proved them, as well as himself, wrong. He's a prodigy, certainly, but even more grown into the hero he was always meant to be.

"And, finally, Tommy, the Green Ranger. While the others have faced personal attack from our enemies over and over, Tommy has dealt and faced more persecution than any. Unlike the others, he was not chosen by me, though I would have chosen him without hesitation to be a Power Ranger. No, Tommy was chosen by Rita Repulsa: given his powers and placed under a powerful spell that turned him against his father, his planet, those who would be his friends, and all that he knew to be right. Yet, through all that, he retained his strength of character. With the help of his friends, he fought and broke the spell, and since then he's worked toward the redemption he believes he needs.

"Yes, Mrs. Cranston, Tommy was the one who attacked your son. He attacked all of the Power Rangers, causing Jason to be imprisoned, tormenting Kimberly, and attacking Trini and Zack. He had no choice. When he had a choice, when he had control over himself again, he made enemies of his former employer to protect others from her machinations, to protect the Green powers from corrupting another. He's devoted himself to defending his friends, and he's suffered far more than any wrongs has warranted.

"Now that you have met them anew, I urge you to trust your sons and daughters. Whatever has gone wrong, whatever we have to fear, they are the ones who will prevail. Not because they are Power Ranger, but because they are heroes in themselves. And, my Power Rangers," a ghost of a smile came on Zordon's recorded face, "may the Power protect you."

The image winked off, and the tube was as empty as ever.

Jason glanced at Billy in the silence, who looked pale but determined. Billy nodded. Now was the moment.

"I know that doesn't answer everything," Jason said in the quiet. "But it answers enough. You may help as much or as little as you want, but I want you all to know the score. In the next month, we have four goals. One is to find Zordon, as I've said before, not to turn him over, but because of the help and guidance he can give us. The second is to find a cure for Zack, especially since we're all at risk from those arrows if we're to attempt the next two goals."

"I'm assuming that recovering Kimberly is one of those goals," Frank spoke up.

Jason allowed himself a smile. "That's exactly right. For that, we'll need your help. We were able to recover Tommy last time by using what we knew of him, and using his father's own words, recorded on an answering machine. If Zordon is right about Kimberly, that she never thought she was worthy of the power, we'll need to remind her of what she's lost, and part of that is her family.

"The last goal, but certainly not the least," Jason said, taking a breath, "is to find a way to take control of Angel Grove back from Lord Zedd and the gods." He stared at the Viewing Globe, which was now showing quite a different Angel Grove. "That's going to prove the most difficult. We've been avoiding talking about what's going on down there... except Billy. Billy, you may as well lay it on us what's happening down there."

Billy looked startled. He'd been monitoring Angel Grove in secret, he thought, not knowing that
"Right," he said, sounding decidedly awkward to be addressing the group of parents, especially after Zordon's message. "As far as I can tell, the gods have kept to their word. They have not directly killed or injured any civilians. That doesn't mean, though, that they haven't caused damage. It looks as if several of the gods have carved out territories for themselves. Poseidon has taken the coastline, of course, as he has to maintain the barrier. Athena has set herself up at city hall, and she's either taken the mayor hostage, or the mayor is staying there of her own accord. The gods Aphrodite, Ares, and Dionysus have taken over huge territories... and people have started joining them." Billy frowned.

"Perfectly understandable," Dr. Taylor said quietly. "In a tragedy, people tend to act rashly. Out of character."

Jason looked at her and nodded briefly. That was her way of apologizing, and Jason was relieved.

"Affirmative," Billy said. "These gods have no shortage of votaries, consider Dionysus' territory is a kegger, for lack of a better term, Ares' territory seems to be a giant wrestling match, with plenty of people as participants and spectators, and Aphrodite's territory is... well..." Billy stammered.

"An orgy?" Kristen said helpfully.

"Precisely," Billy said, seemingly relieved someone else had said it. "The rest seem less interested in votaries. Hermes seems to be amusing himself with running around, terrorizing civilians who haven't found shelter yet. Hephaestus has gone underground, and even the Command Center surveillance equipment can't penetrate his territory. We have to think he's doing something for Zedd. And Apollo and Artemis seem to be the most dangerous. Artemis has set her territory in the park and populated it with the animals from the zoo. She and Apollo spend time hunting the animals, but both they and the animals serve as an indirect danger to anyone who gets too close."

"What about the last one?" Jason said, frowning as the report got more and more troubling. "Demeter. The one who took care of Kevin when he was a captive. She doesn't seem the type of spread terror and debauchery."

Billy smiled. "The one bit of good news. Demeter has set her territory at the Youth Center, where she's surrounded it by a grove of trees. I saw Hermes try to run in, and he bounced right off. In the meantime, Demeter has been smuggling in as many people as she can, mainly children. She seems to be creating a haven for anyone who wants safety. I'm just surprised Zedd hasn't intervened yet. We know gods can't enter, but we don't know about Putties or monsters."

"If this Lord Zedd were smart he would let it stand," Mr. Kwan commented. "He's secured your surrender, but not the people of Angel Grove. Just as some will sell themselves as votaries, some will also want to fight back. Allowing a haven will slow down outright revolutionary tendencies."

Jason smiled. It was exactly what Trini would have said. "Zedd definitely doesn't want a revolution on his hands. His only recourse would be to break the conditions of the surrender with us. He'd lose his hostages after letting us have time to plan an attack."

"Speaking of planning an attack," Jason's father said.

"We can't do anything to aid the civilians or directly attack the gods at this point," Jason said. "That would break the surrender, and right now the surrender is the only thing protecting the civilians and buying us time. I think the key to this is to break the spell Zedd has over these gods. Deprive him of his weapons."
"Wouldn't that just put people in danger?" Mrs. Harris spoke up. "Right now they have more direct control over Angel Grove than Zedd does. They'll go wild if they realize they've been tricked."

"And then they'll turn their attention away from the people of Angel Grove," Billy said. "They'll attack Zedd, not random people."

"Correct," Jason said. "These are Earth spirits that Zedd has awakened and fooled, not literal gods. He's forcing them to spend their magic and energy toward his plans, and in the meantime he's saving his energy for the spell on Kimberly and the Putty patrols. If he had to spend his own power on monsters, he'd never be able to maintain this level of control: he'd die in the effort. So, we cut him off from his power source and let his former weapons turn against him. That'll be easier when we can get Kim back on our side... or it will make getting Kim back easier. Zedd will have to use his magic to defend himself against vengeful gods, so he won't have the magic to spare on maintaining the spell over Kimberly." Jason deflated a bit, and suddenly felt extremely tired. "So, those are our goals. No specific plans, but that's what we're working with. I and the other Power Rangers are used to working alone, but I also know we're down in numbers. Any of you can help us if you want... as long as you know that we fight alone, and no one leaves the Command Center without my permission and proper security. Now I suggest we all get some sleep. We start a big job tomorrow."

Jason leaned against a panel as everyone started filing out. It had been rather horrible, but it could have gone much worse. The sight of Zordon and the mentions of Kimberly and Tommy had rather gutted any opposition. He caught his dad looking over, with the look that plainly read "you're getting rest, too, son." Jason nodded wearily, but made no move, and they were all distracted when Dr. Taylor and Frank caught the boys in the hallway trying to sneak back to bed. A few more minutes, and it was quiet, with Alpha and Billy back to work.

"It could have gone worse," Billy commented, echoing Jason's thoughts.

Jason looked up in surprise. Billy had spoken to him easily when they were planning a few minutes before, but this was the first friendly words he'd spoken since... well, since Jason had punched him.

"That's what I keep telling myself," Jason said. Then he gritted his teeth, hoping that if he went ahead and said what he was about to say, the weight from his chest would ease a little. "Billy... I..."

Billy looked up from his work, a little startled at Jason's different tone.

"I'm sorry," Jason said in a rush. "I'm sorry for making you give up on Tommy, for losing both of them, for surrendering, for hitting you, for..."

"Jason," Billy interrupted as Jason's apology began to lose coherence. "If there's blame and apologies, I have my share of it. Between reckless endangerment and providing Zedd with the perfect distraction just when he needed it..." His voice choked slightly, and he paused, regaining control. "And after all that, Angel Grove is captured. The city we've protected for a year, the city whose only crime is being our home... We can stay safe up here and they have to suffer, and it's all my fault."

Jason shook his head. "It's mine. I surrendered. I should have been more prepared, more clever... If I hadn't been so thrown by the attacks on our families, I could have..."

"Oh, ay-yi-yi, and if the moon were made of green cheese, we could defeat Lord Zedd with a pizza oven."

Jason and Billy had been working themselves up quite nicely, but Alpha's ridiculous new attempt at human slang stopped them short.
Alpha was still staring down at the controls, working even as he talked. "Jason and Billy, both of you heard Zordon's message, but neither one of you paid attention. That wasn't just for the parents, that was for you: to make you aware of what you're capable of. Just because there have been a few setbacks doesn't mean we can't prevail in the end. Or do you think this is the only war Zordon and I have ever been in?"

Jason and Billy stared at Alpha, and it was Jason who smiled first. "That really wasn't very helpful, was it?"

"It wasn't, Rangers," Alpha said. His voice softened. "But understandable. Now, Billy, I suggest you appraise Jason of what you've been working on."

Jason gave Billy a surprised look. "Already? I thought you'd only been monitoring conditions in Angel Grove?"

Billy allowed himself a small smile. "I'm not at the top of my game, I'll admit it, but I'm still a genius. And one thing that we haven't taken into account is that Zedd needs to establish an outside power source in order to maintain the manifestation of and the spell on these gods." His smile broadened. "And guess where the biggest concentration of power in Angel Grove is?"

Jason shrugged. "Underground?"

"Underground. Where Hephaestus disappeared."

"So you have a way to take advantage of that?"

"I have several ways," Billy said. "They'll take time, and they involve risk. I'll eventually need to go underground myself, if I'm not mistaken."

"We'll all need to go down there, eventually," Jason affirmed. "But it's on our terms. Zedd has given us a deadline of one month. I say we take half that time. When the time comes, we break surrender, and make sure the advantage is ours."

"I like the sound of that," Billy said. "Trini will have Zack back on his feet by that time. I'll keep you posted on what I come up with."

"Right," Jason said. He hesitated before leaving the room. "I'm still sorry for hitting you."

"It's okay," Billy said. "I'm sorry for calling you a tin-plated, overbearing, swaggering dictator with delusions of godhood."

Jason frowned. "You never called me that."

Billy eyes widened. "Right... that must have just been in my head."

Jason laughed and shook his head as he left. Somehow, things seemed less hopeless.

Tommy lay in a heap. He didn't know if the monster was there. He was past caring. Scars and burns covered his body, but he couldn't see how he could prevent the monster from doing whatever it wanted with him.

The monster would come back. The pain would come back. At first Tommy had tried to think it away, to control the environment as he'd done, but he couldn't. All he felt was pain and fear and that would never go away.
"Are we giving up?"

The mocking voice had changed. It wasn't the monster now. It was so... much... worse...

"I don't blame you, son," the voice continued cheerily. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw legs as the figure sat down beside him, and he felt fingers run through his hair. "After all, we always knew it would come down to this. You could never stick to anything: not training, not people... Always with this fatalist approach that you were going to fail, that you were going to lose everything, that you somehow deserved it. What part of your life hasn't been a masochistic bid for self-destruction and misery?"

He tried to think of his friends. And the figures of Jason, Billy, Trini, Zack, and, clearest of all, Kimberly, glimmered into existence.

His mother, for that was what she was, carelessly swept aside the visions with one hand, and they disappeared right before his eyes. "Oh, come on. That's the worst of all! Jason, who you imprisoned and taunted, just because he cared about you and unthinkingly risked his life to save you. You spend most of your time jealous of him. Zack, who's never really forgiven you for what you did to his friends. Trini, who has always been far too forgiving, and makes you feel all the much more horrible. And then there's your new brother and girlfriend. Let's not even get started with the torture and guilt wrapped up in both of those relationships."

Tommy tried to look away. He had so far only seen his mother's legs, clothed in the green of her favorite gi. He knew if he looked up, if he saw just how much disappointment was in her eyes... but wouldn't that be his? Wasn't this still all in his mind?

"You're not real," Tommy growled out.

"Oh, son," his mother's voice dripped with sarcasm, "of course I'm real. This is all more real than that pitiful existence that you have on earth, where you try to have relationships with people who hate you and make you hate yourself, and whine over your lost powers while you siphon off Zordon's power in a pathetic, desperate bid to remain relevant. Powers that used to be mine."

It wasn't green. It was magenta. Dark pink fabric that swirled around as the figure circled him.

"And you took those powers and used them against me, leaving me wide open to attack. It was your fault I was banished, and you didn't even try to help me. Didn't even try to track me down... and it wasn't as if you lacked resource or opportunity. No, easier to think me dead."

"No..."

Rita laughed. "And still, you can't let me go. Talk about masochism." She knelt over him, put her lips near his ear. "Soon. What you're waiting for is soon. You'll be ready."

Tommy pulled away from her, curled up against everything, wishing for the gray to return, for him to feel nothing.

Kimberly knocked on the door timidly. She didn't mind barging into the throne room, but this was different. She wasn't even sure she was allowed in here.

"Do come in, my dear," Lord Zedd said.

Kimberly pushed open the door, taking in the opulent bedroom, though only a bit larger than her own. She'd been expecting something more like the throne room, all wide space and stark metal, but
this room was furnished heavily in dark wood and crimson. Heavy velvet hangings lined the wall and hung from a giant four-poster bed, which was heavily carved with intricate designs.

The velvet opulence barely hid the medical equipment surrounding the bed, all equipment that seemed ready to attach to Zedd's many tubes. Kimberly wondered if Zedd did it all himself, and how he did it with those clawed hands.

"I trust your accommodations are to your satisfaction?" Zedd commented. He was just putting down an old volume from a tall bookshelf that was filled with leather-bound tomes.

"Uh... yeah," Kimberly said, thinking of her beanbag chair, her daybed, her chintz armoire and posters. It suddenly seemed like a kid's room compared to this. "It's great. Still airing out the fish smell."

"So you thought you'd... what's the term? Hang up?"

Kimberly grinned, knowing that Zedd was joking. He was too smart to make those mistakes. "Hang out. Yeah. You don't mind, do you?"

Zedd gestured to the bed. "Please have a seat. Forgive the lack of other furniture. I do not usually entertain here. I will have to remedy that situation."

"It's fine," Kimberly said, still gawping at the decorations. "This was really not what I expected."

"What did you expect?"

"I dunno. Metal slab with lots of lightning and Z's?" she said lamely.

Zedd laughed. "I'm an Emperor. Why should I not live in luxury? I simply do not advertise my more profligate ways."

Kimberly smiled. "What were you reading?"

"A book of Rita's, actually," he shelved it carefully. "She owned some important works on dimensional portals, and was quite a genius in them, as you should know." He looked at the books. "Mine now, I suppose."

Kimberly frowned at the books. "Do you think she'll ever come back?"

Zedd was still staring at the books, seeming lost in thought. "In a universe of infinite dimensions and infinite possibilities, one can never tell." He seemed to snap out of his reverie. "And what about you, my dear? You must have a reason for this visit."

Kimberly was looking away uncomfortably. "I feel better when I'm around you, okay?" She frowned. "Saw some people I knew on Earth. This guy... he always had this hopeless crush on me. Seeing him..."

"Made you realize you were now separated from that life forever?"

Kimberly almost laughed at her fears being stated so baldly. "Okay, ya got me." She looked at Zedd. "But when I'm around you, it's not so bad. I... I mean... I know you only did this as an attack against the Power Rangers. I know it could have been either me or Tommy, and it probably wouldn't have made much difference to you. You would have probably preferred Tommy. It was just because I..."

"Stop right there."
Kimberly stopped. She realized there were tears in her eyes, and she hated herself for it. Why couldn't she keep it together? Why was it that every emotion she ever felt wrote itself plainly on her face?

"Let me make this perfectly clear." Zedd had moved toward the bed, though he didn't look threatening towering over her. "I was not playing the odds, whether I would get you or that failure of Rita's. If it had been him, I would have used him, but I would have made it hard on him. He would have known quite clearly that he was not the one I wanted."

Kimberly's eyes widened, and she felt her breath still within her. "You... you wanted... me?" she said in a small voice.

This time Zedd actually sat on the bed next to her. "Dear Kimberly," he said, "do you think I would have allowed anyone else in my bedchamber? Do you think anyone else could have the connection we share?"

Kimberly looked down quickly, realizing her face was as red as the curtains around her. "I..." She felt something warm. Her hand was covered by Zedd's, the metal claw blending with her new communicator. But...

She drew her hand back in surprise. "It doesn't feel like metal."

Zedd chuckled low in his throat. "I wondered when you would realize."

Kimberly considered. When she'd impulsively kissed him on the cheek, or what passed for a cheek with him, it hadn't been what she'd expected, but she'd been in far too much a hurry to wonder at it. Now, though... She ran her hand down his arm. It felt like flesh, her hand stopping just above the metal encasing his exposed muscles. It was warm and soft, exactly the texture of unblemished flesh.

Kimberly pulled back, shaking slightly. Then she reached out for the metal mask.

Zedd grabbed her hand lightly, but didn't pull it away. He brought her hand closer to the grill where a mouth should be and, to her shock and fascination, she felt actual lips kissing the tips of her fingers.

She pulled back her hand. It was deadly silent in the room, though she knew herself to be breathing hard. Suddenly, before she could think any better of it, she kissed him.

She half-expected for him to throw her down, berate her for her presumption, but instead he responded, moving his lips tenderly against hers. He was unpracticed and clumsy, but that only made it better when she realized why.

She pulled away, wishing he had an expression she could read. She was still gasping from the contact, and he looked the same.

Shyly, she tested the connection between them... and what she felt was far from anger or indifference. She grinned. "So... that."

"Articulate as always, my dear," Zedd said, a slight laugh in his voice.

"Was it... what..." She stopped, seeing his laugh increase. She decided to change tacks. "Why do you have invisible skin? Is it your real skin?"

"It is not my real skin," Zedd admitted. "That's long gone, and I won't break the mood with that dreadful story. No, this skin is magic. It's part of my protection. The metal helps generate it."
"But it feels so real." Kimberly pushed at his chest, and it felt... correct. She blushed, realizing that other places would probably be just as correct. All the places she'd felt so far were naked... She scooted away as imperceptibly as she could.

"That's from practice," Zedd said, with a bit of quiet pride. "Most who rely on this merely make a covering and leave it at that. As I told you, I enjoy my luxury."

Kimberly giggled, and then hated herself a little for that. "Well... yeah. I mean, why have all these cushions around if you can't even feel them?"

"I can't."

Kimberly's stomach froze at the words. "You... can't?"

Zedd chuckled wryly. "Magic can do a lot of things. I can do a lot of things... but connecting the protective skin to a central nervous system that must be deadened of all sensation is quite beyond me."

"So... the kiss... you didn't even feel..." She looked into the visor, knowing that he was generating the invisible illusion of eyes where there were none. "Why do you have to shut down your nervous system? Why can't you feel?"

"The pain," Zedd said simply. "The magics I use tear my body apart. I have been able to conserve as much as I can, and this equipment can do some to repair the damage, but if I allowed myself to feel anything, the pain would destroy me beyond repair."

Kimberly was holding his arm, knowing that he didn't even feel it. He probably had some way to sense if someone was touching him, or something like that. Or maybe he just saw her hand on his arm, wondering what it felt like...

"I do remember what touch feels like," Zedd said, anticipating her thoughts. "I wasn't always like this, and I made my choice."

Kimberly realized tears were running down her face in a steady stream. "But... but that just..."

"Sucks?" Zedd suggested.

Kimberly laughed through her tears, wishing she had her purse for some tissues.

"Do not worry, my dear," he said. "As I said, I made my choice. And just because I do not feel, does not mean I do not... feel."

This time, it was Zedd who reached out with the connection, and Kimberly didn't have to guess what he was feeling. She knew. And it was so... much. It made her head spin.

Perhaps sensing this, Zedd pulled away, both physically and with the connection. "Bed, I think."

Kimberly's mouth dropped in shock.

Zedd chuckled. "Your bed. The fish smell must be gone, and I still have business to conduct. Goldar should be waiting in the throne room. Send him in as you pass."

Kimberly got up, stumbled a bit, but mercifully caught her footing and was able to leave with some semblance of dignity intact.

"And Kimberly?"
She stopped.

"I'm sorry I ever called you a child."

Goldar remembered the time he fought the fire elemental for that potion for Empress Rita. It had been one of the worst fights in his life, including the one where the Red Ranger almost killed him. The fire had ripped through him in pain at every contact with the creature, no matter who was dealing the blow. Sheer determination had kept him on his feet.

At this moment, he was thinking wistfully of that time. It was better than he was feeling now.

His sleep, when he'd finally slept, had been fitful and full of nightmares. In some, Rita stood over him, accusing him of failing to protect those she cared about. She demanded he die in Tommy's place, ignoring his attempts to protest that it was impossible. In others, Tommy and Scorpina were playing cards with him, only Tommy kept bleeding over the cards, and then Scorpina shifted to Kimberly, and there was an arrow sticking through Tommy's chest...

It didn't take a genius to figure out those dreams.

For not the first time, Goldar wondered why he didn't just leave. He had a way. Zedd didn't know it, but Goldar's teleport ability was far better than Scorpina's. He didn't need a ship to get to the next civilized planet. And Finster would be able to get himself, Baboo, and Squatt out of there, if they would get it through their thick skulls that she wasn't coming back. That it was all over.

But he stayed. Standing here, waiting for Lord Zedd to summon him, when he'd much rather be drinking some more.

Kimberly came out of the hallway that led to Zedd's bedroom. She looked flushed and disheveled, wearing only a flimsy pink nightdress. She smirked when she saw Goldar.

Goldar's vision went red. She had killed Tommy, and now here she was, coming out of her master's bedroom like...

"Lord Zedd wants to see you," she said flippantly.

Goldar growled, but didn't respond as she flounced off. Well, it wasn't any of his business. Why should he care?

Zedd was at his bookshelf, opening an old, dusty volume. "Ah, Goldar, you're looking quite the worse for wear."

"Oh, Goldar, you're looking quite the worse for wear." Goldar stifled the urge to tell Zedd to go screw himself. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes..." Zedd was thumbing through some pages, half-distracted. He seemed to find the correct page, because he put the book on a small wooden table and propped it open. "I hope you're up to a mission. I haven't had much for you to do since kidnapping the brat, but I'm about the change that."

"A mission, my lord?" Goldar said dully.

"Oh, yes," Lord Zedd said casually. "I want you to kill Tommy Oliver."

Goldar stared at Zedd, beginning to doubt his sanity. He was stretched a bit thin magically, after all. It could be that he was starting to lose his memory.

"My lord, the Pink Ranger already took care of that," Goldar said, trying to keep his voice steady.
Lord Zedd chuckled. "She thinks she has."

The words hit Goldar like a hammer. Tommy... not dead? The whole thing had been a ruse, a way to turn Kimberly and isolate Tommy?

In the same moment, Goldar rejoiced at the news, despaired at the mission that would make the news null, and tried to keep all of this from Zedd. He believed he fairly succeeded, but he was not thinking clearly at the time. He may have had a nervous breakdown on the spot and wouldn't have known.

Zedd was barely paying attention to him, however. "Yes, Tommy is alive and... relatively... safe in another dimension. This dimension has latched on to him and is now torturing him mentally and physically, but it will only deal the killing blow if Tommy turns suicidal, and that will take too long. So I'm sending you in. He's psychically linked to the dimension, and it's keeping him alive, so you'll have to break him first. From what he's been facing in that dimension, it shouldn't take long."

Goldar digested this. He didn't think there was a way out of this, at least, not one that presented itself to him.

Lord Zedd consulted the book and started waving his Z-staff. "Remember, Goldar, you must break him first. When you have killed him, retrieve his power coin and you'll be able to return.

Goldar saw little choice, and consigned himself to his task. He'd already failed in everything he'd set out to do. May as well make the failure complete. "I am ready, my lord."

"Of course," Tommy laughed. "I knew it would have to be you."

The visions had slowly disappeared, and even the burns only survived as vivid memories and dull aches. He'd been alone, but this time he hadn't tried to think his way out of the situation. All he'd done was wait for the next torment, whether it be from Zedd or his own mind.

Was this Goldar a phantom? Or was he real? Was there a way to know, to absolutely know?

"You know your girlfriend thinks she killed you," Goldar said. "Driven her a bit crazy. We all thought you were dead. Everyone else still does."

Tommy looked closer, past his own fear to what was actually in front of him. Goldar looked wrung out, hung over. He looked like he hadn't slept in days, and yet he was looking at Tommy like he wasn't even sure if he believed...

"Oh, god, you're real," Tommy breathed.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Goldar grunted. "And shouldn't that be my line."

Tommy shook his head vigorously. "It's... it's this place. Makes me see things. Makes me see my worst fears."

"So I'm included?" Goldar asked wryly.

"Do you even have to ask?" Tommy said. He gulped. "So, uh... Zedd's obviously sent you to kill me. Had this place soften me up for the kill."

"Not just that," Goldar said. He drew his sword. "I'm to break you first."

"Like you broke Rita?" Tommy said harshly.
Goldar winced. "You... you could say that."

Tommy laughed. "And this is all Zedd had to throw at me? He commands gods, and he sends a little shit like you to, what break me? Break me?"

Goldar gritted his fangs and raised his sword. "You forget yourself, human. You think just because you've miraculously escaped every fix you've gotten yourself into, and you've only stayed safe because everyone pitied you... That makes you somehow better than me?"

"Interesting way to interpret me kicking your ass every time we've fought."

Golden flames erupted around Goldar, but he was not teleporting. Tommy was almost knocked down by the sheer energy radiating off Goldar. "That's it!" Goldar shouted. "I tire of the mockery, the contempt! From those who cannot begin to understand me!" The flames banked higher. "I am Goldar! One of the greatest warriors in the galaxy! You, human, you're nothing compared to me! I am your superior in every way..."

As he said this, he rushed at Tommy, who didn't have a chance to even attempt to dodge. Goldar hit him with the hilt of his sword, and Tommy went flying, blood streaming down his face from a broken nose.

"And I want you to acknowledge it," Goldar finished with a snarl.

Zack groaned and raised his head. "Did I pass out?" He put his head back down when it was too heavy.

"You did." Trini was smiling softly, though Zack could easily see the worry and fatigue that she was trying to hide. "Don't worry, though. The modification of the serum is working for the moment. We might even try to get you to keep down solid food tomorrow."

"Such is the exciting life," Zack said. "I..." He looked away. "I passed out at the funeral. I remember now. I wanted to stay awake for it."

"It wasn't much to see," Trini said. "No one really knew what to say." She rubbed her forehead. "You... you missed the action, though. Your mom pitched a fit at Jason when he wouldn't let you go to a hospital, and apparently Alpha laid down the law."

"Alpha took on my mom?" Zack chuckled weakly. "I would have liked to see that."

"I watched it from this monitoring system... after I kicked her out of the room," she ended with a smirk.

Zack whistled. "Look at you. Well, I can picture you doing it, but Alpha?"

"He showed this video recording that Zordon made," Trini said. "He apparently made all these recordings just in case something happened while he was gone... since, you know, we've found out how easily he can disappear. Talked to our parents. Said really nice things about all of us."

Zack winced at the pain in his shoulder. "I'd like to hear some nice things. He didn't happen to have a recording just in case if Zedd used Greek gods to terrorize Angel Grove and force us to surrender while one of us is dead and another evil?"

"I imagine he would have if he thought of it," Trini answered.
Zack closed his eyes, the jokes becoming more difficult to find. "Trini, why didn't I get out before? I've wanted to leave for the past two months, but I waited around. Didn't want to seem like a quitter. And now..." He chuckled. "Didn't think I was going to go this way."

"Zack, you're not going anywhere," Trini said, her voice quavering. "You're not going to die."

"Tommy did," Zack said. "For the same reason."

Trini's face set in a stubborn frown. "Well, Tommy didn't have me. I've saved Billy, Tommy, and Jason, and I can save one more."

"And Kimberly?" Zack added despondently.

"And Kimberly," Trini said, her voice softer but determined.

Zack opened his eyes, trying for a smile. "Well, if we survive this, I'm cutting out. I don't care what it takes, I'm leaving. I'm tired of the pain, and getting almost killed, and having my world turned upside down on a weekly basis. Zordon's going to have to find another pawn in his war."

He was startled when he felt arms around him and tears splashing onto his face. He put his arms around Trini as well. She was sobbing.

He knew. Trini wanted to leave, too. And Jason. But... they would be leaving the team with no one. Tommy gone. Kimberly evil, and even if they could save her, she'd be in no shape to go on, especially with her friends abandoning her. And Billy... Billy had proven that he perhaps didn't even need to be a Power Ranger.

"It'll be okay," Zack heard himself saying, but he wasn't sure who he was trying to fool: Trini... or himself.

Tommy waited for the next blow, knowing there was little he could do to stop it. Goldar had thrown away his sword and was fighting with his bare hands, but Tommy didn't even make an attempt for the sword. He knew Goldar would anticipate that, and he didn't want the gut wound that Jason got.

"Fight back, you worthless piece of shit!" Goldar yelled. He kicked Tommy hard, sending him rolling across a floor that was already stained with their blood: Tommy from his wounds, and Goldar from his bleeding hands.

Tommy propped himself up. "You're... you're..."

Goldar glared at him. "Are you going to say it?"

Tommy shook his head sadly. "You're out of your mind, Goldar. What is this all about? Why do you care so much?"

"I..." Goldar mouthed the words, but they didn't come. Now that he wasn't hitting Tommy, he looked strangely lost. "I..."

Tommy painfully pulled himself to his feet. He coughed, and blood came out, but less so. "Goldar, you can beat me up all you want. This place won't really let me fight back. But that doesn't make you better than me. You betrayed everything you knew, just to save your own hide and for more power. The power isn't worth what you did."

Tommy felt better. In fact, the place was getting less oppressive. It was starting to change... and he
realized his wounds were healing.

Goldar, on the other hand, looked diminished, like he was crumpling under a weight. He ran for his sword, tried to lift it, but seemed to have lost all strength.

The room, on the other hand, had formed into the Moon Palace, into a room that Tommy had never seen before, but it was similar to Rita's throne room.

Even as he was processing this, a portal opened near a large balcony. It wasn't pulling him irrevocably in like the last one, but it did look inviting. Perhaps it led back to Earth. There was only one way to find out.

"No!" Goldar was starting to panic. "Don't leave me here!"

And Tommy understood. The place, whatever it was, had somehow disconnected from Tommy and become attached to Goldar.

It was as good an escape as any.

Tommy refused to look at the increasingly-panicked Goldar, and jumped into the portal.
When Tommy opened his eyes, he saw trees. Earthly trees. Beautiful, green, not-part-of-a-nightmare, honest trees. He nearly cried out with relief, only stopped by the fact that his throat was closed with emotion.

He thought back to Goldar, now caught in the dimension that used his own thoughts against him. It had started to form into the Moon Palace, which probably meant that the nightmares were turning against Goldar... possibly what allowed Tommy to go free. He felt a twinge of regret. Goldar had been terrified, and well he should. Tommy knew exactly what it would do to the other warrior. It would probably be especially hard on Goldar, who wasn't much for self-reflection and now would have it thrust upon him. He had cried out, begged for help...

Exactly as Rita had possibly cried out to him. And Goldar had turned his back on her. Tommy ruthlessly swept aside his regret. Let Goldar feel the pain, the consequences of his actions.

Tommy took stock of his surroundings, knowing that he needed to join his friends, that they were probably in trouble, but savoring the feel of being back on Earth. That's when he noticed everything was wrong... and horribly familiar.

There were trees, yes, but they were not moving. There was absolutely no wind, and the stillness of the air was only matched by the absolute silence. No animal noises. No rustling of the leaves. Nothing.

"The freakin' Island of the freakin' Illusions," Tommy said through his teeth, anger and disappointment filling him. Yes, it was exactly as he remembered it. He was, in fact, right where he'd had his own illusion with Goldar, and he could even see the marks where he'd run from nothing. That was the very tree that he'd thought had been split by Goldar's sword.

He knew the whole place was an illusion, that he was actually in a lab hooked to devices generating the illusion. Before any scenarios started to play out for him, for he was fed up with his worst nightmares, he yelled, "Quagmire!"

There was silence, but Tommy knew he didn't want to give up. Absently, he tried his communicator. It didn't work, but that didn't faze him.

"Quagmire, get me the hell out of this device! It's not going to work on me again!"

There was still silence. Tommy started to doubt whether he was possibly on Earth, and his communicator was just not working... but no. This place was a pale imitation of Earth.

"Okay," Tommy groused. "But I'm not going to play your game. Hit me with whatever illusions you want, but I've already faced worse today." Without another word, Tommy sat down and closed his eyes. He concentrated on his own breathing, ready for anything Quagmire had to throw at him.

He was sitting there for he knew not how long, as time had no meaning in this dimension, when he
felt a pressure on his head he hadn't realized had been there lifting.

"Tommy Oliver! What are you doing here?!!"

Tommy opened his eyes. He was strapped to a chair, and the white lab and shocked face of Quagmire greeted him.

"That's exactly what I wanted to ask you," Tommy growled. "Can you get me out of these? I don't feel like tearing through them myself, though I will."

Quagmire absently snapped his fingers, and the straps loosened and fell away.

Tommy exploded out of the chair before Quagmire could react. He grabbed the shorter man by the throat and slammed him to the wall. Quagmire's feet kicked in the empty air and his fingers clawed at Tommy's hands, but Tommy held firm.

"Is this a little favor you're doing for Lord Zedd?" Tommy asked in a threatening voice. "What's the game this time?"

Quagmire coughed and spluttered. He seemed to get his thoughts back in order and, eyes narrowing, he gestured his hand in a defensive move, sending Tommy hurtling back against the opposite wall. Quagmire fell with a thud, massaging his throat.

"If you hadn't noticed, Green Ranger, I have freed you and have not threatened you at all. I just got back to my lab and found you strapped to the chair. That's what happens automatically when people come to my dimension... but that never happens twice to anyone. And why, pray tell, are you talking about Lord Zedd?" His haggard voice was starting to normalize. "I thought you were fighting Rita Repulsa."

Tommy pulled himself up, frowning. "Not anymore. Zedd took everything from Rita and banished her. We've been fighting him ever since." He folded his arms, trying to look threatening even through his confusion. "So, if Zedd didn't send me here, how the hell did I get here?"

Quagmire had looked startled at the news of Rita's banishment. He looked at Tommy strangely, as if wondering what he should do with him. "Come with me," he said slowly. "You look dead on your feet. You've obviously used up a lot of energy."

Tommy took a step back. "Why should I trust you? The last time you had me here you tortured me and my friends."

"You can trust me, Tommy Oliver, because I neither want nor need anything from you... except perhaps as much information as you're willing to give." He smiled. "Besides, lunch is far more pleasant when shared. Why do you think I always provide my 'guests' with a feast?"

Tommy was about to retort when his stomach made a loud grumble. Trying to ignore Quagmire's smirk, he shrugged. "Fine... I guess I could do with some food."

"Well, at that polite acceptance..."

Tommy sighed and forced himself to calm down. He was still really disappointed he wasn't on Earth. "Thank you. I... Things have been pretty stressful lately."

"And I'm dying to hear about it," Quagmire grinned. "But the chicken is getting cold! Come along, and we'll discuss your situation."
"Okay, dad, try it again!"

Jason waited, baking in the metal shell under the desert sun. But if this worked...

There was a grating roar, and the metal hummed under Jason's feet. He heard a whoop of victory from his dad.

"I think that got it," Kristen said, smirking at their dad's excitement.

Jason and Kristen climbed down from the Red Dragon Thunderzord, which, after nearly two weeks of laying on the desert floor just inside the protective barriers of the Command Center, was finally showing signs of life.

As soon as they hit the ground, Mr. Scott looked out from the head of the Zord, where he'd been coaxing the Zord back to life with the help of Jason's power coin. "What do we do next?"

Jason wiped his forehead and wondered whose turn it was to make lunch today. The desert morning had drained him far more than a full day at the Command Center. "Well, if you throw me my power coin, I can send it back to the Command Center by remote. You can ride along if you want."

His dad's eyes widened. "Do you even have to ask?"

Jason laughed and caught his power coin. "Wanna ride with dad? Or teleport?" he asked his sister.

Kristen was still laughing. Their dad looked like a 5-year-old about to take a pony ride. "Nah. I'll take the cycle back with you. We need to conserve energy for tomorrow."

Jason started to process to send the Zord back. "And you want to keep your eardrums."

"That might have crossed my mind, yeah," Kristen commented drily. "We've got to get back soon, though. Mrs. Kwan has had to do without me and dad all day."

"Any updates on the status of Angel Grove?"

Kristen smiled thinly. "I'll save the report for the meeting, sir."

Jason winced a bit as he got on the motorcycle and handed Kristen a helmet. "I didn't mean it like that."

"I know," Kristen said. "I just..." She sighed. "Do you know how weird it's been? I mean, you're my kid brother and everything, and now I'm taking orders from you to save the world."

"Believe me, I know," Jason said before starting the cycle up.

They were silent on the drive back, unable to talk over the roar of the motor. Jason tried not to think too much about what was waiting for them at the end of the drive. Despite the heat, he'd actually enjoyed getting out of the Command Center for once... and getting away from being the leader of Earth's now-extended defenders.

Besides the other Rangers, his own family had actually been his greatest support. It had taken a while to settle into various roles, but both his parents and sister had done their best to rally everyone and help organize. On the first day after their exile, his dad had insisted on a sign-up sheet for various jobs, for both domestic chores and for contributing to the world-saving effort. Once Jason, Billy, and Trini had agreed on what needed done, and particularly what the parents would be able to help with, his dad had practically pushed everyone to the sign-up sheet. Jason had had to prevent his dad from
signing up for everything.

It was Kristen who'd had the idea to form a group to study Angel Grove, a group that now comprised of herself, their dad, and Trini's mom, with others contributing when they could. They were compiling maps of Angel Grove, particularly taking into account the changes in geography and social structure now that the gods were in power. They had the territories of the gods marked, had monitored Haven's defenses, and had kept track of the gods who had no territories, as well as the Putties and animals that now roamed Angel Grove unchecked.

They'd also started monitoring the new groups that had risen up. A few human women had joined Artemis in the hunt. The media was still in operation, but under the thumb of Hermes. They were able to get several things past him, though, giving hope to the refugees and the residents of Haven. Most interesting, though, were the freedom fighters, a group who were defying the Putties and running supplies to Haven. From what Jason had seen, they were mostly young adults and teenagers... doing exactly what the Power Rangers should have been doing.

Jason realized he was going too fast. He slowed down.

The other major group was led by Kimberly's parents and Sylvia, who were working on the problem of Kimberly. They'd been studying the information on Tommy, both when he was under the spell and when the spell was being broken, as well as what had been recorded when Billy was under that temporary spell. People helped that group when they had the time, though no one could match their passion for the problem. For the Harris' it was understandable, but for Sylvia... it seemed to be a way to help Tommy, even though he was past help.

Trini put in the most extra time in that group, but she and Jason's mom spent most of their time with Zack. From what Jason could understand, the poison was so complex that any attempt to completely eradicate it also risked eradicating Zack. Even Alpha's medical programs had not helped.

Jason knew they needed to cure Zack soon, for tomorrow...

He turned his thoughts away from the next day. He'd just end up psyching himself too much.

The rest of the parents took care of the kids and household needs of the Command Center. Chafing after the first day, Dr. Taylor had decided to form a school for her own children and Kimberly's brother. The Rangers themselves had only barely gotten out of sitting classes, and that was only because every second of every day was taking up in working and planning. Dr. Taylor and Mr. Taylor taught English and history, respectively, Sylvia taught math, and Mr. Kwan taught science, with Kristen occasionally helping him out. A grouping of old, disused rooms near the docking port had served as classrooms, and the bitter complaints from the young kids had finally died down.

Jason keyed in the security sequence that would allow him to dock the motorcycle. A door opened up to allow them in, and the dark coolness of the Command Center greeted them.

As soon as he parked, Kristen hopped off the bike, pulled off her helmet, and shook out her hair. "I'm headed to the security room. See you at lunch?"

Jason waved as she ran off, and he started hooking up his bike, perhaps more slowly than he needed. He knew today would be different, and he needed time to prepare.

The speaker on his communicator crackled to life, ruining the cool peace of the docking bay. "Oh, ay-yi-yi, Jason. I'm glad you're back. We must go over a few things before tonight's meeting."

Jason sighed. "I'll be right there, Alpha. Gonna check on some things first, all right?"
"Right, Jason," Alpha answered.

Jason scraped his hair back. It was time to be the Red Ranger again.

He walked past the classrooms, where Dr. Taylor was taking the youngest through some grammar exercises. Kevin and Marcus were apparently read War of the Worlds together. Jason wondered why Dr. Taylor was having them read something so on the nose... but then that might be the best way to do it.

He came out of the hallway into the apex of the Command Center. Mrs. Kwan and his dad and sister were conferring with Alpha before heading to their base in the security room, and Billy was absorbed in some read-outs they'd just given him.

His dad looked up as Jason passed by. "Zord's all hooked up for repairs, Jason. Alpha said it should be ready for anything by tomorrow."

"Thanks, Dad," Jason said. "Talk to you in a bit."

He didn't get far, though, before Sylvia stopped him. "Are you headed to see Karen and Frank?"

"That was the plan," Jason said.

Sylvia closed her eyes. "Now's not a good time. Maybe after lunch." She seemed to be steeling herself for something. "Do you mind if we talk? Somewhere quiet?"

Jason nodded cautiously and gestured toward the room he shared with the other boy Rangers. She seemed to flinch at the room, but went in with no complaint. Jason, however, cursed himself for not thinking. Sylvia had been practically living the footage of Tommy's cure from the spell for the past two weeks, and this was the room where it had all taken place. It was no longer set up as a cell, but it was still the same room.

When Sylvia didn't seem quite ready to speak up, Jason asked her, "How's the work on Kimberly's cure going?"

Sylvia sat down on a bed, seemingly to stop herself from pacing. "We have theories. Possibilities. Nothing that will absolutely result in breaking the spell."

When Jason didn't respond, she went on. "The thing is... Yes, the spell is similar to Tommy's, but she doesn't have the same motivations. Tommy wanted to break the spell, and, what with the extenuating circumstances, we're not sure it's the same for Kimberly."

This time Jason sat down. "So you're not sure Kimberly wants to be saved." He closed his eyes. "That's why her parents want to be alone right now, right?"

Sylvia looked away. "It not the conclusion we wanted to come to, and I've tried to reassure them that it's hardly conclusive. But..."

"What makes you all think this way?" Jason said.

"It's..." She took a breath. "When it was Tommy, his salvation laid in breaking the spell. All the evil he'd done, he'd done under a spell. It had made him hurt all of you, ignore his father... But it was a spell driving him to all that. Yes, he'd have to deal with the guilt, but a part of him always wanted to return to himself, to return to that responsibility. And it helped that all of you accepted him afterward. For Kimberly... if she's to be believed..."
"She killed Tommy before the spell," Jason said, making his voice flat and emotionless.

"Essentially," Sylvia said. "When she took her brother's place in the cell, it was a sacrifice for her brother, just as she'd intended, but we think she was escaping having to face what she'd done. Even if our theory holds, that it was an accidental death, she still blames herself." Sylvia smiled faintly. "She's a young woman in love, who killed the person she loved. I can't imagine anyone coming back from that easily. It's hard enough..."

There were real tears in Sylvia's eyes, and Jason looked away, unsure of what to do. He couldn't imagine how Sylvia had been able to keep it together this long. She'd just found out that her adoptive son was both the Green Ranger and dead a mere few weeks before, and she'd had to rip open those wounds every day just so she could help Kimberly.

"Kimberly won't run away from her responsibility forever," Jason heard himself saying. "That's just not her. She..." He smiled. "When we were offered the powers, she refused at first. Didn't want any part of it. Even after we all accepted, she made a joke about not wanting the powers... about having to deal with helmet hair."

Sylvia smiled a bit through her tears, and Jason remembered that it wasn't just Tommy: Sylvia had babysat Kimberly, had lived across from her family for years.

"But... out of all of us, she's the most passionate about helping people, and being a Power Ranger. Zordon, in that message he left, didn't say how much Kimberly cared about all of this. She... she may be running away now, maybe because she cares too much, but she's going to come back. She's going to want to come back. I just know it."

Sylvia was nodding, although Jason couldn't decide if it was because she believed or because she wanted to believe. "Then we'll need to capture her. Get her away from that awful Zedd, just like with Tommy. Her parents and friends are here. I... I know you wanted a quicker fix, but I don't think it's going to work. The problem isn't with a spell. The problem is with Kimberly."

Jason nodded and got up. "Thank you. I... We can take that into consideration now. I'm not sure if I can bring her in like I did Tommy, but... we'll come up with something."

Sylvia didn't move, and Jason knew she wanted to stay in the room long enough to control herself. He laid his hand awkwardly on her shoulder before leaving. There was still so much to do.

Kimberly reached up for the blindfold, only to have her hand swatted down.

"My dear, you'll ruin the surprise."

Kimberly smiled and gripped the hem of her dress to keep herself from taking off the blindfold. "Come on," she said. "I'm going to trip over something. Why can't you just wrap the present?"

"It's a bit large," Lord Zedd said. "And I won't let you fall," he whispered in her ear.

Her grin broadened and she allowed herself to be led across the room. She could tell they were in the throne room, and they ascended the two steps near the balcony carefully. She was about to lose patience again and reach for the blindfold when Lord Zedd pulled it off.

She blinked at the sudden light and looked around, confused. Then her eyes focused on the telescope at the edge of the balcony, pointed right to Earth.

Kimberly squealed. "That thing can see what's going on down there?" she asked breathlessly.
"Not beyond certain magic barriers, but essentially yes," Zedd said. "I know you've been frustrated by being unable to see what's happening on Earth, so this will help you be more... involved."

Kimberly threw herself around Zedd in a hug. "I love it." She jammed her eye on the eyepiece and started playing around with the knobs. It was fairly easy to adjust, and was already trained on Angel Grove anyway.

"Now I can actually see if there's anything for me to do, and I don't have to just take your word for it," Kimberly said a little tartly.

"Now, my dear..."

"Oh, don't you 'my dear' me," Kimberly said, though she kept her voice light. "I haven't had a thing to do since the surrender. Even shopping gets old after a while, especially when it's not even shopping. It's looting."

"My..." Lord Zedd paused. "Kimberly, you know there hasn't been anything to do. I'm only keeping the gods occupied while your former friends search for Zordon."

"And why did you give them so much time?" Kimberly said, hoping she didn't come off as whiny as she suspected. "I could take over the Command Center easy, and then we could..."

"Let you near that Command Center, where the Power Rangers will lay all sort of traps for you, to steal you away from me?" Lord Zedd chuckled. "Have you tired of me so quickly?"

"Of course not!" Kimberly protested. "I... I just wonder... if you're being a little protective of me. I'm a fighter, not a damsel."

"And I am the first to acknowledge that," Zedd said coaxingly. "But I must ask you to be patient, just for a little while longer."

"Don't even know what you're waiting for," Kimberly groused.

"Kimberly..." Zedd said, a warning in his voice.

Kimberly rolled her eyes and looked through the telescope. It was mayhem in Angel Grove, of course. She watched the freedom fighters taking care of some Putties for a while, and considered asking Zedd if she could fight them for a while. She looked around and saw that Zedd was gone. He probably would have said no anyway.

It was the inactivity that was really bothering her. When she'd first come under the spell, there had been a whirlwind of activity: retrieving her Zord, the attack on the parents, the surrender... But then nothing. Two weeks of just sitting around. It was maddening. She didn't know how Zedd stood it.

Of course, he knew what was going to happen. He had things to occupy him. And here she was, locked up in a castle like a damn princess.

Kimberly realized that if she stayed in the Moon Palace one more second without going out, she'd scream. She searched around Angel Grove with the telescope, hoping to find some place she could go that wouldn't just get her into trouble.

The Youth Center...

It was deserted. The freedom fighters had apparently used it for a little while as a base, until Artemis found out and chased them out. Yet it was relatively intact.
Kimberly felt a strange hunger, a yearning that came on her sometimes. With a sudden decision, she teleported to the Youth Center.

It was eerie, she decided. She associated the Youth Center with people, activity, events... Even though it looked much the same as it had ever done; everything that made it what it was... had disappeared.

Almost unconsciously, she approached the balance beam, kicked off her shoes, and hopped on. She put herself through her most familiar routines, taking quiet comfort in the well-known aches and stretches. Too many aches, though. She'd been lax in her training. She'd have to watch that, if she ever got any action ever again.

She flipped off the balance beam with a twist, raising her hands at the dismount... and nearly fell down when she heard applause.

Jason was leaning in the doorway, slowly clapping at the performance. He was smiling, though the smile somehow didn't quite reach his eyes.

Angry at the intrusion, Kimberly started pulling her shoes back on. "What are you doing here?"

Rather than answer the question, Jason looked around. "I can see why you came here. It looks barely touched. I'd have thought at least one of the gods would have set up a territory here."

"Yeah, well, maybe it's not such a great place as we always thought it was," Kimberly answered tartly. She sighed. "Okay, what are you doing here?"

The smile fell from Jason's face. "I guess I wanted to talk."

Kimberly crossed her arms. "What could we possibly talk about?"

"Quite a bit, actually."

Kimberly smirked. "Don't think I don't get what this is. You're here to show me the error of my ways. To make me the good little girl I was before."

"And who ever said you were a good little girl?" Jason said, his voice light.

It was quiet, and cold. All she was wearing was a light summer dress, because it was warm on the Moon Palace, and it seemed to have gotten unseasonably cold in Angel Grove... possibly courtesy of Poseidon's water shield. "But that's what you're here for. To break the spell?"

Jason shrugged. "Didn't have much hope, to tell you the truth. Talking never helped Tommy, after all."

"It did, in fact," Kimberly countered softly.

"Oh, but you're different," Jason said. "After all, Tommy didn't have a choice. You did... and you chose the spell."

It was getting darker, Kimberly noticed. "So what are you saying? I'm hopeless? Is that it?" She smirked. "Or did you just come to watch me. You know, I always suspected you of having a crush on me."

"After what you're doing with Lord Zedd?" Jason said in a hard voice. "I can hardly look at you."

Kimberly winced. "How do you know..."
"Everyone knows," Jason sneered. "The gifts. The kisses. Prancing around in those dresses. I bet it was a relief to get Tommy out of the way."

"Stop it."

"Don't you remember?" And now it wasn't Jason. It was Tommy. Tommy, with an arrow through his chest. "You kill your boyfriends."

Kimberly woke with a start. She was slumped over the telescope, alone in the throne room.

She rubbed her face vigorously. That had been happening a lot lately... and it was starting to scare her. It was one of those things she tried to hide from Lord Zedd, but it was scaring her, and she had no idea who she could talk to.

Tommy followed Quagmire down a glass hallway, and then into a tropical garden, where a table was laid out with fried chicken, corn on the cob, green beans, and mashed potatoes. Tommy couldn't think of a meal that more fit his hunger at the moment. As he sat down, though, the perfection of the meal made him look up suspiciously. "This isn't an illusion, is it?"

"It's very real, I assure you," Quagmire said, "though I will admit it was merely a figment of your imagination five minutes ago. I was going to have soup, but I was so taken by your culinary daydream, I just had to make it happen."

Tommy decided that, given the weirdness of the... day, he assumed, though the time he'd been away from Earth could have been quite longer... this was as normal as he was going to get. At least, it wouldn't stop him from tearing off half of a chicken breast in one bite. After some vigorous chewing and a huge swallow, he asked, "Make it happen?"

Quagmire, who'd been busily arranging sides on his plate and ignoring Tommy's lack of table manners, looked up. "I have rather a lot of power, actually. Due to my relative youth, I depend on a few devices to focus my power, and due to my propensity of making the wrong kind of enemies, I'm rather stuck in this dimension... but within this dimension, I can make anything happen."

"Can you restore my powers completely and get me out of here?"

Quagmire frowned, considering. Tommy had the impression that, while the strange being holding a chicken leg was staring at him, he was seeing things about Tommy that weren't readily apparent.

"Yes and no," Quagmire said after a few minutes. "I could restore your powers... but only within the confines of this dimension. Leave, and the effects go away. And, no, I don't think I can send you back to your dimensional plane."

"You did before," Tommy said, his fork moving mechanically at his food.

"That was different," Quagmire sighed. "You were under my power. Everything was going strictly according to the rules. Now, though..." He shook a chicken leg at Tommy. "I wasn't joking before. You aren't supposed to be here. No one who's been here can ever enter this dimension again. It's convenient in avoiding violent outbursts from people seeking revenge... like some I could name. But the fact remains, your existence here is impossible. Literally impossible, and I don't use that word lightly. Either word, really."

Tommy looked down at his plate. He was finally getting full, and he'd barely tasted his food. He supposed this was special, extra-nutritional food that filled him up with just a few bites, but that sort of sucked with the food he liked. He took a slice of pecan pie Quagmire offered him and picked at it,
"How did you get to this dimension, Tommy?" Quagmire asked. He'd finished eating, and was now swirling a brandy in a snifter.

Tommy shrugged. "It was weird to begin with. Zedd sent me to this other dimension that only responded to my thoughts... Well, not really my thoughts, but more my subconscious. All the things I really believed about myself or that I feared would happen came true for me, and I couldn't do anything to oppose it."

His throat tightened up at the thought of the place. He only knew that he would do anything to stay away from it. Again, he thought of Goldar trapped there. Perhaps Zedd had saved him from it. Then again, knowing Zedd, and knowing that Goldar had only gotten stuck there when he lost Tommy as a prisoner, Tommy really doubted it.

"Anyway," he said as Quagmire waited for him to resume. "Goldar went in after me with orders to kill me, and he pummeled me for a bit, but somehow the dimension latched on to him, and then a portal appeared, so I jumped through. I thought it would lead back to Earth, but it just led here."

Quagmire looked down, apparently lost in thought. "Yes... and I was able to sense from your thoughts the things you left out. I have to say, I have a grudging admiration for Zedd. Making everyone think you're dead and that your girlfriend killed you, all the while torturing you and then planning to kill you." He shook his head in silent wonder. "Genius."

Tommy felt his anger rise up again. "Yeah, genius unless you're part of it. Kimberly and the others are in real pain..."

"I do not deny it," Quagmire cut him off. "I bear you no ill will, so do not take offense at my little interests." He cleared his throat. "I recognize the dimension of which you speak... rather like mine, except far more primitive. Effective, though."

"You got that right," Tommy said, willing himself to let his anger go. If he was going to get out of this fix, he was going to need help, and Quagmire, sadistic little cretin he was, looked perfectly willing to help.

"The point is, you're human," Quagmire continued. "Yes, you're a Power Ranger, but a Power Ranger whose powers are failing, and nonetheless human. Unless someone like Lord Zedd or Rita created the portal, and without outside help, you should not have been able to escape like that, let alone enter another unenterable dimension. Even more powerful beings cannot simply hop dimensions with severe repercussions. Take myself, for example. Or take your own leader, Zordon."

Tommy frowned at the mention of Zordon. Was he still lost? If he was, it was Tommy's fault, and now, from what Tommy understood, it was Kimberly, Zedd, and the gods against Jason, Trini, Zack, and Billy. Not the greatest of odds.

"Well..." Tommy started slowly, "let's put aside how I can dimension hop, and just take for granted that I can. How am I going to get home? My friends need me. I'd never forgive myself if they got hurt and I wasn't there to help."

"It's all well and good to worry about your friends, but I'd worry about myself, if I were you," Quagmire said darkly. The food had disappeared from the table, and cups of coffee were in front of both of them, though Tommy hadn't noticed the transition. "You speak of dimension hopping so casually. Even if it is, for some unknown reason, possible for you, it's the most dangerous thing you could attempt in this situation. Do you realize how lucky you are to have appeared in my
"dimension?" He laughed. "You could have ended up anywhere. There are worlds beyond your wildest dreams. Some worlds would flay the skin off your body before you had a chance to react. In others you could awaken ancient forces that would then follow you wherever you went... including Earth, by the way. There are far worse things than that tyrant Lord Zedd around."

"So what are you saying?" Tommy challenged him. "Give up? Hang out with you for the rest of my life. No thanks." He smiled wearily, getting up. "I don't care if it takes me thousands of years. I'm going to get back to Earth, to my friends. I don't know much about dimensional travel, or other dimensions, but I do know that these dimensions are outside of time. I could travel for years, and only minutes will have passed on Earth." He sighed. "And even if it turns out differently, I just have to try."

Quagmire shook his head slowly as he got up. "I knew I wouldn't be able to dissuade you, and let me assure you that I am just as eager for you to leave as you are to leave. I only ask one thing."

"What's that?"

"Allow me to monitor you as you perform this dimension hopping trick," Quagmire said a bit too casually. "It will be completely unobtrusive: I'll just adjust my equipment to your vital signs."

Tommy raised his eyebrows. "Seems to me like that would help you figure out a way to escape this dimension."

Quagmire smiled slyly. "Or something."

"What did you get imprisoned for?" Tommy said. "What made you those enemies?"

Quagmire crossed his arms behind his head, looking mischievous. "I suppose that is fair enough. I created certain artifacts... that could be construed as..."

"Evil?"

Quagmire snorted in derision. "Evil is as evil does. You yourself know that it's not the power that has morality, but the person. Your green power coin is neither good nor evil: it can be used either way, but it is neither in itself."

"Fair enough."

Quagmire waited.

Tommy looked around and gestured impatiently. "I said fair enough. Get your equipment."

Quagmire looked surprised, and then grinned. "It will take but minutes."

Tommy sat on the ground in the garden. He closed his eyes, trying to remember how he did it the last time. Was it something like the way he had communicated with Rita? He could close his eyes and concentrate, but there was another impulse, something that he couldn't name.

Even as he heard what he figured was Quagmire's equipment, he felt himself grow further away from this dimension, like his body was just figuring out it wasn't where it belonged. This time, the portal didn't open, and he didn't have to walk through. He called the portal to himself, and it swallowed him up.

When Jason left the boys' sleeping quarters, Mrs. Kwan and his father and sister had left the apex for
the security room. He'd meet with them later. Right now he needed to visit Zack and Trini.

When he reached the lab-turned-hospital-room, his mother was alone with Zack, who was under some diagnostic equipment, half-asleep as the machine ran its tests. His mother was noting down readings on a clipboard.

"I sent Trini to get some sleep," Mrs. Scott said, greeting Jason with a smile. "Zack had a rough night last night, and Trini stayed up through most of it."

Jason crossed his arms, looking worriedly at his friend. "I can't believe nothing Trini has tried can kick this. She was able to come up with that serum. I thought for sure..."

"Just shows I'm a complicated guy," Zack said, grinning. "I think that does it with the tests, Mrs. Karen." He pushed the equipment away. "How'd I do?"

"You'd do better to rest," she said sardonically, pushing his chest lightly to keep him from bounding up. "And if you'll give me a minute to look over this data. I'm not quite as quick with the math as Trini."

Jason couldn't help but grin at the sight of his friend, smiling and joking. "Heard you had a bad night last night."

Zack snorted. "Just had nightmares of what the Putties were doing to my comic book collection. Nothing to worry your little head over. You got enough to worry about."

"No kidding," Jason said. He spotted some papers on a table next to Zack's bed. "What's that? Don't tell me your mom finally got you with some homework."

"Don't think she hasn't tried," Zack said, grabbing the papers. "These are my tickets out of essays about Julius Caesar. I got Kristen to get me copies of all the stuff they've been putting together."

Jason shook his head slowly. Zack never bothered with planning or strategy. He was more of a guns-a-blazing type of guy, and only planned when someone forced him. It said a lot for his circumstances that he was resorting to looking over data and making battle plans. "And?"

Zack shuffled a few of the pages, looking for something specific. "Well, I know you and Billy are really focusing on what Hephaestus is doing, and I think you're right to worry. But I think the real danger... or at least an important part of the danger... is going to come straight from Dionysus."

"Dionysus?" Jason was starting to worry now. He couldn't forget that Zack was sick, and the sickness could be affecting his brain. "Dionysus of the infinite kegger? He's even more harmless than Ares or Aphrodite."

"Dude, you're talking to someone who's actually faced Dionysus... and not come out of it with just a hangover." Zack had picked a piece of paper and was running his finger over the numbers. "He's one of the most dangerous of the gods period, but that whole kegger thing is, I think, a front."

"What makes you think that?" In the back of his mind, Jason wondered if Zack wanted to make a case against Dionysus. Pay him back for what he'd done to him and his family.

"Look at these numbers," Zack said, shoving the paper in Jason's line of sight while still holding the place with his finger. "These are the statistics of people in each territory. Look at Dionysus compared to the others."

Jason squinted at the numbers. "Yeah... it's pretty high. Nothing compared to Haven, but..."
"And getting higher," Zack said emphatically. "Daily."

Jason tried not to shrug. "I mean, if you weren't going to go to Haven, I'd think Dionysus' territory would be the best. Plenty of food and drink, constant partying, no fights or awkward PDA."

"That explains why it's high. Not why the number's rising." Zack pulled back the paper. "And this isn't any small increase. Between twenty and thirty people a day, while all the other territories have pretty much leveled off in the past week. People are leaving other territories, especially Haven, to go to Dionysus's territory. It's not natural. Dionysus has to be enticing them with more than Budweiser."

"So why would Dionysus care about getting that many votaries?" Jason said slowly, grabbing the paper so he could look at the numbers anew.

"Exactly," Zack said. "He's planning something, and he needs humans. We already know what he can do to humans, so I think we may be looking at a wild mob in the near future."

Jason nodded slowly. "Do you think he knows that we're planning an attack? Is he getting ready to mobilize those humans against us?"

Zack shrugged. "It's a possibility. I've already told Trini, and she thinks I'm on to something, too." He shook his head. "If Zedd mobilizes humans against us, we're even more helpless than we are now. Right now we're preserving surrender terms that will keep the people of Angel Grove safe. If it's the people of Angel Grove themselves attacking us..."

"It's a problem," Jason said. "Good work, Zack. See if you can calculate how many people exactly is in Dionysus's territory, especially if they're able-bodied. In the meantime, mom, let me know how those tests come up?"

"Soon as I get done," Mrs. Scott answered, holding her head as she made calculations.

Jason bumped fists with Zack as he left, hoping against hope that Zack would be able to join them the next day.

"You know," Kimberly said, trying to keep her tone casual, "those gods sure are acting strange."

Lord Zedd barely glanced up from the book he was reading. Lately, he either stared at Earth or read his books.

"What was that, my dear?" he finally said.

Kimberly smiled at the accustomed form of address. "I'm saying that the gods are being weird," she repeated. "All secretive and stuff. They never come up here anymore, and I haven't seen Hephaestus since this began."

"I wouldn't think you would object to that," Lord Zedd said, a little distracted.

"That's not what I'm trying to say. Are you even listening to me?"

Lord Zedd put down the book. "I am, my dear. The gods are occupied. They are serving their purpose in keeping Angel Grove as a hostage. As long as they don't kill anyone, what they do is entirely up to them."

"And you're not worried," Kimberly said.

"Why should I be?" Kimberly could practically see the smirk on Zedd's invisible face. "The gods
may call themselves gods, but they are really Earth spirits; spirits completely under my control. They dare not raise a hand against me, and they have no reason to. The Power Rangers, in the meantime, are completely helpless. They've already surrendered, and they have no choice but to do as I say. Even if any of them do rebel, they can never hope to win. The cost is too great."

"I was a Power Ranger," Kimberly said. "And right now I know that the Power Rangers are working on a way to foil your plans. That's what happens when you give them time."

Lord Zedd chuckled. "I'm flattered that you're so worried, but you must put your mind at ease. You may have expertise with the Power Rangers, but I can calculate all the possibilities. There is no variable I haven't taken into account, no loophole they can exploit. Billy's not going to create an invention, Trini's not going to find a cure, and Jason's not going to defeat a monster. You yourself took Zack out of the equation."

Kimberly smiled, trying to be assured by his words. "You talk like you can see the future or something."

"Or something," Lord Zedd said wryly. "I can see the possibilities and weight the probabilities. That's how I think, and that's how I can stay three steps ahead of everyone."

"Okay," Kimberly said, letting him think she was reassured and had completely forgotten about the gods' strange behavior.

She left his bedroom, left him to his reading. She wasn't sure what to do, as usual. She didn't want to go to Angel Grove. She didn't feel particularly welcome down there, by anyone, really. The gods regarded her with distrust, and the people with fear. The problem was, she was also unwelcome in the Moon Palace as well. Lord Zedd loved her and made her feel welcome, but no one else. Goldar had disappeared completely-Zedd had mentioned a secret mission-Squatt and Babboo ran when they saw her, and with Finster it was all terse words and glares.

She supposed that was normal, and it wasn't like she wanted to become best friends with Finster, Squatt, or Babboo... but it got lonely. Really lonely. Especially when Lord Zedd was lost in his work.

It would have been different if she had something to do. If she was fighting, or planning, or... she ended lamely. She'd had a blast that first night of the attack. Taking on Jason's Red Dragon Thunderzord with her own Zord and Serpentera had been spectacular... but then nothing.

She had thought of asking Finster to connect her computer in her room with... TV, or something. She had no idea how to work the computer, and her few experiments had turned up nothing. But going to Finster, especially in a quest for entertainment, was completely off the board. She could just imagine how he would look at her. Of course, she could appeal to Zedd and get him to tell Finster what to do, but it wasn't worth getting Finster in trouble.

She flashed back to the funeral he, Squatt, and Babboo had held for Tommy. No, she definitely didn't want to get them in trouble, though she wasn't entirely clear on why.

The funeral made her think, though, of a place that she hadn't even tried to explore. She looked up and realized while walking she'd come to the door she wanted: Tommy's old room.

The door slid open for her, and she walked in cautiously, making sure no one was watching her. She'd never been forbidden from going in there, but she couldn't think of anyone in the Moon Palace who would react well to her being in there.
The room was spare and small, and barely anything of Tommy's remained in there. Only the dragon symbol remained on the wall, a panel next to it Kimberly recognized as a computer access. She pressed the panel, and the symbol slid aside to reveal the computer.

It was paused, the video showing herself in the Command Center.

Hesitating, Kimberly pressed play.

"I don't know, guys," the Kimberly on the video said. "I mean, the outfits are cool and everything, but my hair gets all tangled up in that helmet. I don't think I can do it... NOT!" she called at her friends' disappointment.

A chair bounded off the screen, leaving it undamaged, and Kimberly realized she'd thrown it.

"Shut up, you stupid girl!" she screamed at the image of herself. The chair method of turning of the screen failing, she pressed stop and sank onto the bed, sobbing.

She laid there for some time, regaining herself. She didn't move until the door opened, and she started off the bed.

Finster looked at her coldly. "I noted there was a computer access in this room." His face seemed to twitch. "Is there something wrong with your computer terminal, Pink Ranger? Can I be of assistance?"

Kimberly rubbed her face, knowing it was red and blotchy, but hoping the alien wouldn't know what that meant. "As a matter of fact, my computer hasn't worked since I got here."

"Then if you'll follow me to your room..." Finster said, motioning to her.

"Are you kicking me out of here?" Kimberly challenged. "Sending me to my room?"

"Far be it from me to overstep my bounds." Finster was practically sneering. "After all, you are Lord Zedd's consort."

"I'm not consorting with anyone!" Kimberly spat furiously. "I get enough nightmares criticizing me. I don't need you doing it."

"I wonder why you have nightmares," Finster said drily. "It can't be a guilty conscience. After all, you seem to have forgotten him so quickly."

"Shut up about what you don't understand," Kimberly hissed. She realized tears were streaking anew down her face, but she didn't care. "You're not the only one who misses him."

"You're the one who killed him," Finster pointed out.

"And then I died," Kimberly said.

Finster stared at her in shock, even forgetting to look angry.

But Kimberly had collapsed on the bed again. "Why couldn't I have joined him? I... I know I should be happy, but he's gone, and..."

Her head seized up in pain, and her vision clouded red. She felt gentle hands picking up her, guiding her away, but she couldn't seem to sense anything else.
Jason left the security room, satisfied with the report so far. He’d asked them to pay special attention to Dionysus's territory along with City Hall and Haven.

They'd had lunch. He'd met with everyone except Billy and Alpha, and he wanted to give them as much time as possible, so he'd talk to them before the meeting, which wasn't for a few hours. He had time.

Checking to see no one was watching him, he ducked down a corridor that led far from the living and working areas of the Command Center, until he finally reached a small room at the back. The door opened for him, but it would only open for him, thanks to the red power coin.

The light turned on automatically to reveal, in one corner, a computer console on a desk, and, in another corner, a board that Jason had filled with notes. It was the only place in the Command Center where he could be alone, and the only place where he could work on this project. He didn't know why Zordon had never told him that he had a private office, but there it was, where he'd discovered it three days after the surrender. No one knew it was there... at least, he thought. If Alpha knew, he hadn't mentioned anything.

Jason smiled at the flashing screen. Teleportation was successful. He'd finally gotten what he wanted.

A tray popped out of the computer. Jason put on some gloves and carefully lifted out the container of white ash. It had taken him days to figure out the access to Venus Island, and still more days to trace Tommy's and Kimberly's footprints... and where Tommy's ended. In that exact place, he'd found this pile of ash.

He'd been lucky. Zedd was distracted, and none of the gods were monitoring this area. If anyone had found out what he was doing, the attack against Angel Grove might have been escalated. As it was, Jason had left no trace of his surveillance.

Jason held the ashes, staring at them. There were so few, but then, they might be just the right amount for a human body.

Jason tried to ignore his emotions. He had a job to do. It was a job that only he could do. Billy had to focus on the Angel Grove plans, and it was his responsibility to make sure whether Tommy was dead, or if Zedd was keeping him captive. Tommy wasn't on Venus Island, Jason was sure of that, but that didn't mean Tommy couldn't be somewhere else. Maybe even on the Moon Palace, hidden away from surveillance.

He set the equipment to analyze the ash, and then he accessed the read-outs for Venus Island. He might have teleported up the wrong ash, or there might be other clues.

Unmistakable, though, was the scorch mark on the wall near the entrance. There had been an attack. What it had to do with Tommy's death or disappearance remained a mystery.

An hour later, the analysis equipment beeped. The ash held no human remains. There was no indication of either a communicator or power coin on Venus Island.

Jason pushed the equipment away, smiling slightly. So these were not Tommy's remains... but that didn't prove anything, necessarily. Tommy could still be dead. There was a possibility, however, that Zedd had taken him captive., and it was a possibility that gave Jason hope.

Of course, he would have to be careful. News about Tommy would definitely distract everyone from their plans, and it was vital to keep everyone focused. The situation was too uncertain as it was. It
was horrible, but it was smarter to keep Tommy dead for the time being.

He also didn't know how Zedd was going to react... or what Zedd was planning in the first place. Obviously, Zedd wanted Kimberly to think Tommy was dead, for all those reasons Sylvia had listed. But if Jason let Zedd know he knew the truth... if he did... Zedd would become unpredictable. Right now Zedd was content to stay in the moon palace, letting the gods run rampant through Angel Grove, and that's where Jason needed him to stay.

No, the time to investigate Tommy was after they freed Angel Grove, and after they captured Kimberly. Then, Tommy would become vital if they were to break Kimberly of her spell.

Jason carefully severed the link between his computer and Venus Island. It would soon be time for the meeting. And tomorrow... the attack.

Kimberly woke up in a bright room. She shielded her eyes, and the lights were suddenly muted. She realized she had a cold cloth on her head.

"Are we feeling better?"

Kimberly squinted to see Finster hovering over her. She realized she'd passed out, and he'd helped her.

"Why?"

Finster chuckled. "Not an answer to the question, but then you humans are not always logical. Goodness knows I've had experience with that," he ended fondly.

Kimberly didn't respond. It sort of hurt to talk.

"I was so... caught up... in my own feelings, I forgot the damaging psychological effects a loyalty spell can have on a human," Finster said mildly. "And as long as you are here, you are under my care."

She tried to raise up, but Finster pushed her back firmly. "I'm still loyal to Lord Zedd."

"Of course you are," Finster said. "But you also never told Zedd about my funeral. For that, I am grateful, and I am sorry you have not had the chance to mourn for him."

"So... the nightmares?"

"Will not go away," Finster said. "I'm sorry, but even Lord Zedd cannot protect you from them. Your brain knows something is wrong, and since the spell won't allow you to face it, it will come out in your subconscious."

Kimberly did not ask what was wrong. She knew... but she didn't want to know.

"You won't tell Zedd?" she asked weakly.

Finster nodded. "My official report is that you are suffering from a human illness, which I am treating. Lord Zedd will not care to inquire more thoroughly, just as he doesn't seem to look too deeply into your thoughts."

Kimberly thought briefly that she should be worried about that... but she decided not. Instead, she let herself fall asleep again.
Billy, Jason, Zack, and Trini stood near Zordon's tube, a table separating them from their families. On the table was a map of Angel Grove, and Billy was writing down the plans.

"There's no way we can convince you to wait?" Mrs. Kwan said. "After all, there's two more weeks..."

"Of gods and Putties terrorizing the people of Angel Grove?" Mr. Scott cut her off. He was currently handing out sheets to everyone. Each sheet had a summary of the plan, as well as what each person's assignment was. Some would monitor each Ranger, some the rest of Angel Grove, some the moon palace... Others would work on communication, teleportation, security shields... They'd all been trained by Alpha or Billy in their jobs. Even the children were going to act as messengers between all the adult workers.

"Trini," Jason said, "you're going to go down first, to City Hall. What's your objective?"

"Distraction," she said. "I'm to act like I want to bargain with Athena for more time, and try to convince her that Zedd is not Zeus. That's what Zedd will expect. I'm also going to request Kimberly's presence... and, unless it's impossible, take her by force."

"Are you sure you're up for this?" Jason said seriously.

Trini smiled, though her smile was nervous. "You did it before, and I have serum just in case. I'm as prepared as I could."

Jason nodded. "That will leave me and Billy to get to Haven, where we can get underground without Zedd's surveillance. Billy?"

"Objectives are to find Hephaestus and neutralize Poseidon's water barrier... safely," Billy answered promptly. "From what I've been able to tell, the center of the gods' power lies underground... and that will be where the spell over them is anchored. If possible, we break it."

"Right," Jason said. "And, Zack..."

"I stay here unless I'm needed," Zack responded, obviously trying to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

Jason remembered the number of times Tommy had acted the same way when he'd been unable to participate fully in battles. "You say that like you won't be needed. You will. All of us are going to be distracted or out of reach. That leaves you to take care of any unexpected problems... and there probably will be." Jason put a hand on Zack's shoulder. "It's going to be your call, no matter what. When you do get involved, make sure it's the right time and for the right reason."

Zack looked a bit heartened after that speech. "You know me."

Jason looked around at them all, their expressions mixed with fear and excitement. "We go in the morning. I'm not going to give you a speech. Lord knows I've been doing enough of that. I'll just say what Zordon would say... May the power protect us." He grinned. "Now let's go save the world."

City Hall. The only other time Trini had ever gone there, it was to surrender two weeks before. Now, she was entering the stronghold of the gods, alone, with a set of objectives that she wasn't even sure she could accomplish.

She was morphed, and she knew she was being monitored by her parents, who were ready to teleport her up if all else failed. That was something, at least.
The Putties surrounding City Hall regarded her, obviously not sure of what to make of her. Trini wondered what she would do if they attacked. After all, she wasn't allowed to fight back, or risk their tenuous surrender.

"I'm here to speak to Athena," she said in a loud, clear voice. "I come in peace. Take me... um... to your leader."

The Putties continued to stare at her, and Trini wondered what to do next. The Putties, however, parted as if by command... which it probably what happened.

"Thank you," Trini said. The Putties were ignoring her, though, and probably didn't understand courtesy anyway.

City Hall was completely empty. The ballroom still held traces of the gala that had been interrupted two weeks before, but the people were gone. Trini knew that only Athena, the mayor, and a few city workers remained in the building at all times. The others had gone to various territories or Haven.

"I wonder what you hope to accomplish."

Trini jumped. She thought she'd been alone as she entered the hallway to the mayor's office, but there was a figure leaning casually on a wall, one winged shoe crossed over another.

"Hermes," Trini said. "Gathering information?"

Hermes shrugged. "As always. Bargaining for time?"

Trini winced at the accuracy of his prediction, but her mask hid the reaction perfectly. "There are things I must discuss with Athena, her being Lord Zedd's representative on Earth. You're welcome to peek in. I'm sure everyone would be more interested in what I have to say than your brand of propaganda."

"What are you talking about?" Hermes scoffed. "My ongoing series on Angel Grove: The New Paradise has the highest ratings on television and radio."

"It's the only thing on television," Trini pointed out.

Hermes grinned infuriatingly. "I'm not here for you. I'm simply waiting on the travelers."

Trini stared hard at him, but she wasn't going to get anything out of those blank silver eyes. She continued on her way, and didn't see when he left.

The mayor's office seemed unguarded, but Trini knew better. Contained inside was Athena, and that was enough guarding any place needed. Trini reminded herself that the purpose was not to engage Athena in battle. After all, Athena had burst from Zeus' skull armed and in full battle gear. This was not a god to fight lightly.

"Come in, hero," the calm voice of Athena called from the other side of the door.

Trini pushed the doors open. In one corner, the mayor sat in a chair under a lamp, coolly reading a book. Athena was at the desk, where a map similar to the one they'd made was spread out. The only difference was the figures on the map, denoting gods, people, and Putties, were moving. It was Angel Grove in perfect miniature replica.

Now why would Athena need that?
"Your town's mayor had finally given up trying to intercede for her people," Athena commented, looking up from the map. "At least for now. Things were starting to get a bit quiet here." She looked Trini over. "It is unnerving to speak to a helmeted hero. It isn't as if you had anything to hide."

"I will take off my helmet if it makes you more comfortable," Trini said, putting action to her words. "Am I right that you are Lord Zedd's representative on Earth?"

Athena looked back down at the map. "Lord Zeus takes little interest in the doings of Earth. He'd rather stay in his palace on Artemis' rightful realm. And you obviously wish to bargain for more time from him. If you wish to speak to him, I suggest you go to him directly."

"Then may I speak directly to you?" Trini said.

This caught Athena's attention. "What could you possibly have to say to me, hero?"

Trini took an imperceptible breath and began. "Don't you think Lord Zeus has been acting... strangely... ever since this began?"

Athena knitted her brow. "Impulsive, violent, with a liking for young girls... Not particularly."

"And since when does he want to take over towns like this?" Trini countered. "Have you even considered why he would want the mentor of heroes captured?"

Athena's expression didn't change, though she did seem to be regarding Trini more carefully. "You are questioning the gods, hero. This is dangerous territory, as I'm sure you've read."

"And yet here I stand," Trini pointed out. "Athena, Zeus is your father. Is this truly the Zeus you know?"

Athena took a breath. "I know you, hero. You are the one I most respect. You have intelligence, but also responsibility. You are calm and diplomatic. That is why I give you this warning. Leave this place. Hide in your fortress. You've already surrendered; now let events unfold as they may."

It was Trini this time who was confused. She'd expected resistance, and she'd certainly expected Zedd to interrupt her by now, but she hadn't expected this response.

"Trini..." The mayor had lowered her book. Trini could now see the fear in her eyes. Something was... wrong. Something not readily apparent. "Yellow Ranger, there's... she's..."

The Mayor froze. Literally froze, mid-speech.

"That's enough out of you," Athena said cooly. "Now, hero, there's little you can do here. Whatever you're trying to tell me, can wait. I believe your true objective is here anyway."

They heard a slight knock at the door. Kimberly, morphed and helmetless, was leaning against the doorway. "Mind if I come in?"

Trini was talking to Athena, so it was time. Jason and Billy, unmorphed so as to avoid unnecessary attention, teleported as close to the school as they could: the Youth Center.

The Youth Center was deserted, but he and Billy did not stop to investigate. They had to make it to the high school, otherwise now known as Haven.

"I haven't left the Command Center in two weeks," Billy said quietly. "This is... the word uncanny comes to mind."
Jason nodded. "Remember, we're not here to fight, and we're not here to draw attention to ourselves. At least, not yet."

"You don't have to tell me twice," Billy said, eyes scanning for any signs of trouble as they walked down the sidewalk.

The path was so familiar, and yet so strange. Jason guessed that was what Billy meant by uncanny. They'd made this walk so many times that they could do it in their sleep. But now... it was eerily silent. The Putties, denied human targets, had taken out their destructive tendencies on cars, buildings, benches... This area had long been trashed by the Putties, and it was only due to the gods that all of Angel Grove still had electricity and running water. Otherwise, life had quite literally come to a standstill, and Angel Grove was no longer the town it once was.

"Two weeks," Billy mused, echoing Jason's thoughts. "Two weeks, and the town's like this. I wonder what would have happened if we'd waited the entire month?"

"Part of the reason I cut our time in half," Jason said. He frowned at the wrecked suburban area, knowing that this was nothing compared to the center of town. "Even if we do succeed, how are we ever going to recover?"

"We'll have to," Billy said. "We're not the first town to come under siege. We'll recover."

Jason knew that on one level Billy was talking about the town, but on the other level he was talking about them. They had lost so much. So much had changed in just a short time. First the clone, and all the damage it had done, then Tommy's death or disappearance, then Kimberly's turn to evil, then the complete loss of their secret identities... and now Angel Grove. It wasn't just the town, it was all of their reality that had been destroyed.

Jason supposed Billy was right. They would all recover because they had to. The alternative was to give up, and that was something Jason just couldn't stomach.

Lost in thought, he didn't even notice when a figure darted out from the alley in front of him, knocking him over.

Immediately Jason went on the defensive, having just enough presence of mind to avoid attacking the figure. The figure, on the other hand, seemed to be pointing a flimsy pole at him and looked ready to attack.

"What are you doing out here?" It was a boy around Jason's age, with short brown hair and a face that looked ill-suited to his menacing expression. "If you're one of the votaries, you're not getting these supplies unless you come to Haven, got it?"

Jason held his hands up in a calming gesture, unsure of what to do. "We're no votaries, and we're on our way to Haven anyway."

By this time, a black girl had run up, nudging a backpack more securely on her shoulders. "Okay, Rocky, what have we talked about with attacking random people? Not everyone is our enemy."

Rocky, though, was frowning speculatively at Jason. "I... know you..." He dropped the pole and immediately aimed at punch at Jason's face.

Jason was too taken off-guard to completely avoid the blow. He staggered, but he was ready for the next attack. Rocky had taken the time to drop the supplies from his back, which were over-balancing him, so when he attacked again, Jason swiped at his legs with a kick, knocking him down, and immediately pulled him into a half nelson.
"Rocky!" the girl yelled. "What the heck are you doing?"

Billy's eyes were shaded with understanding. "I believe your friend Rocky took issue with who we are," he said quietly.

Rocky, in the meantime, was unsuccessfully trying to break the hold. Jason kept him down, though, a bit amused that he'd immediately resorted to his wrestling training. He wondered if his dad were watching at the moment. "Now..." he said as calmly as he could, "I know you have plenty of reasons to be pissed, but we're not going to do this. I'm going to let you up, and instead of attacking me, you're going to lead me and my friend to Haven so we can have a chance at saving Angel Grove. You okay with that?"

Rocky looked livid, but his signaled his agreement, and Jason let him up. The girl, in the meantime, seemed to have figured out what was going on.

"The Power Rangers," she said, ice in her voice. "I've got one question for both of you." Her face hardened. "Where have you been?"

"Didn't I tell you?" Rocky said, a bit breathlessly. "They've been hiding in their Fortress of Solitude or something like that." He rubbed his neck. "Letting us do all their work for them while they and their families live in safety."

Jason let out a breath. He'd been expecting this reaction, but that didn't mean he found it welcome. "Let's start over, okay? Hi, I'm Jason, and this is my friend Billy. As you've probably heard, we're Power Rangers, and we've spent every second of every day for the past two weeks working to save the world and all the people in it. I've already mentioned twice that we need to make it to Haven, and the longer we stay out in the open, the longer we're in danger... something I'm sure you know very well by now."

Rocky was scowling, though some of the anger was obviously leaving him. Jason wouldn't have put it past him, though, to attack again.

Instead, the girl walked forward, her hand outstretched to Jason. "Hi, I'm Aisha, and you've met Rocky. We took the unluckiest trip from our hometown Stone Canyon to Angel Grove, and now we fight to protect the people of Haven." Her confident expression cracked a bit, and Jason could see her exhaustion and uncertainty for a moment. "Can you really save us?"

"Wouldn't be here if we couldn't," Jason said.

"Uh... guys?" Billy was looking over to the side toward the nearby park area. "I suggest we proceed to Haven a bit more expeditiously."

The cause of Billy's alarm became soon apparent. An arrow whizzed past their heads and embedded itself in the wall beside them. From a distance, they could hear the voice of Artemis. "Those fighters are at it again!" she yelled.

Before another arrow could make a luckier shot, Rocky, Aisha, Billy, and Jason ducked in the alley and ran down its length. They came out the other side and started running down the back alley behind some shops.

"I thought the gods weren't supposed to hurt people," Jason said furiously.

"They're not supposed to kill people," Aisha corrected. "That doesn't mean they can't do whatever they want with us otherwise."
"That one's been after us for a while," Rocky said darkly. "We're supposed to get supplies from City Hall, but City Hall doesn't supply Haven... only votaries. And the supplies are always either out of stock or sub-par anyway. Demeter supplies us with food, but we've got to sneak out for whatever else we need."

"And what supplies are those?" Jason said.

Rocky shrugged. "Hygiene. Clothes. What we've got here is medical supplies. We've got the flu virus going around, and it's already killed off a few of the older people."

They were about to turn a corner, but Jason had stopped in his tracks. They turned to look at his pale face and wide, haunted eyes.

"People have died?" he said quietly.

Aisha was starting to look stern again. "Well, what did you expect? Normal life stops, you throw several hundred people into a tiny space... Disease gets to be a problem. The deal you made with the gods was that they wouldn't directly kill any people of Angel Grove. A lot of other stuff can happen, too."

She and Rocky turned to continue, and Jason and Billy had no choice but to follow. "You didn't seem all that surprised," Jason said under his breath.

"I had somewhat expected it," Billy said. "We couldn't do surveillance on Haven, but... yeah. That can happen in refugee camps."

Before Jason could continue, their guides stopped in their tracks. While they had outrun Artemis, they had also run into a squadron of Putties.

As if from long practice, Rocky and Aisha dropped into defensive stances. Rocky brandished the pole, and Aisha pulled some grocery bags out of her pocket and wrapped her hands into makeshift boxing gloves.

Jason also dropped into a defensive stance, but Billy grabbed his arm. "We've surrendered, remember? We can't do a thing against the Putties. We can't even take the medical supplies, because that might be interpreted as acting against Lord Zedd, and we have to consider that he's probably watching us now."

Jason hadn't seemed to recover from the news of the deaths in Haven. "But... we can't just let them fight by themselves and just... watch. These are Lord Zedd's Putties, after all. Remember how much it hurt to fight them?"

Billy gave him a thin smile. "You haven't been reading all the reports. Just watch."

The freedom fighters had been listening in. "Yeah, Power Rangers, we'll show you how it's done," Rocky crowed. Two Putties were circling him. As they attacked him from two sides, he whipped the flexible pole around, smacking one in the Z, and stabbing the other in the same target. The stabbed one immediate broke apart, and the other looked dazed, allowing Rocky to finish him off. Rocky was unharmed, and it seemed as if the power surge had been turned back on the Putties.

Aisha was faring just as well, hitting Putties with her wrapped hands with no problem. She took down three in fairly quick succession.

The Putties, however, had been joined by reinforcements. They were ignoring the Power Rangers-a first-and were concentrating on the two active fighters. Rocky and Aisha did well, but there were too
many of them. First Rocky's pole broke in two, and he had to use them as shorter sticks, but the sticks were losing integrity. Aisha suddenly cried out in pain. She grabbed her hand, which was revealed through a hole in the grocery bag.

Jason again buried the urge to help the two with fighting. Instead, he yelled, "You guys gotta retreat! Follow us!"

The four ran, Rocky having abandoned his weapon for the sake of speed. They sprinted the two blocks to the high school.

Rocky and Aisha grabbed Jason and Billy before they knocked into the barrier. "The four of us request haven!" Aisha gasped out.

The Putties were seconds behind them, but the barrier flickered enough to allow the four entrance. It slammed back down, knocking the Putties back.

Rocky wiped his brow as the four of them caught their breaths. "Well, guys, I don't know why you came here in the first place, but... Welcome to Haven."
Haven, part 2

Chapter Summary

Book 6: Shadows in the Cave

This time, Tommy didn't recognize anything. It wasn't Earth, he knew that for sure. The gravity was too heavy for Earth, and the rock formations and desert surrounding him definitely had an alien feel.

"Well, he did warn me," Tommy said to himself. He brushed sand off his clothes, which for the first time he noticed looked faded. They had been dark green before, and now they had faded to more of a pastel.

"Great," he groused. "Now I'm all dressed up for Easter."

The sun beat down on him. He shaded his eyes, realizing that this dimension hopping really was as dangerous as Quagmire had mentioned. He had no idea where he was, whether he was alone or not, whether anyone was going to attack him. He was in completely foreign territory in about every possible way.

But he had been to other dimensions. The Island of Illusions and the one Zedd had thrown him in, but also the place Hades and Persephone were, Zedd's Dark Dimension where he'd given them those creepy riddles, Venus Island...

And one other. One that he'd visited in dreams, that he'd found out later was intensely real. The place he'd spoken to Rita, the place where she'd almost trapped him.

Again, he thought about how familiar it felt to transition between these dimensions. Was it because... he'd already done so? He'd already had practice?

He was starting to sweat. He knew if he were going to attempt to escape from this dimension, he needed to get out of this sun. He'd never be able to concentrate otherwise. Casting about, he found a cave. It was the only semblance of shelter around.

"Better than nothing, I guess," Tommy said. His voice echoed uncomfortably in the desert, and he figured the cave wouldn't be any less creepy.

The opening to the cave was narrow, so he could barely squeeze through. The opening led to another narrow passage, where Tommy had to weave through rocky outgrowths. He pushed forward, hoping he would find a place to rest soon. The higher gravity and heat was really taking it out of him.

When he finally reached the end of the passage, he did not see an empty cave, as he'd been expecting. What greeted him was an ornate chamber, enclosed by a fence and gate, lit by candles that surrounded an altar with a jar on it.

"Yeah, Tommy," he said to himself, "just walk into the nearest cave. It's not going to hold anything creepy. It'll be totally fine."

While he was wondering if it would be better to about face and try his luck in the alien desert, or
investigate further, a voice split the silence.

"WHO DARES DISTURB MY SLUMBER?!!"

They were planning something, Kimberly realized as she watched Trini go to City Hall. They were planning something, and Lord Zedd didn't even want to hear about it.

He was too self-assured, she realized. Too assured of his own cleverness, and she wasn't even worried if he sensed that she thought that. If he let the Power Rangers win by underestimating them... as he'd done before... it would not be because she herself underestimated them.

"The Yellow Ranger has something in mind," she said. "We can't let her talk to Athena. Not for any amount of time."

"She's going to Athena as my representative on Earth," Lord Zedd said lightly.

"Not a chance," Kimberly answered. "If she wanted to talk to you, she would have contacted you. It's not that hard, but we haven't had any messages from the Command Center. No, she wants to talk to Athena... either to get the gods of their side, or at least to weaken the hold you have on them."

"She would be unwise to do so," Lord Zedd commented.

Kimberly rolled her eyes. "When are you going to learn that us humans aren't always wise. We're often stupid, especially when we're desperate. She's going to try, and she may even be distracting everyone from what the other Rangers are doing."

"What do you propose, then, my dear?"

Kimberly grinned and abandoned the telescope. "Let me fight her."

Zedd stared at her.

"Oh, come on!" Kimberly said, frustration spurring her argument. If she didn't get out of there... do something soon... "It's not like we have to break the terms of the surrender to do it. We could just... fight. Muck up whatever plans Trini has with Athena. Plus..." she took a breath, "I've got to do something. I love you, but I'm going crazy here. Let me take out my frustrations on the Yellow Ranger rather than on the furniture."

"Are you sure you aren't personally motivated?" Zedd asked.

"Oh, I'm completely personally motivated," Kimberly countered. "Not using one's powers for personal gain is the first of the three rules for the Power Rangers, and it's time I leave that behind. It's a deeply personal grudge that I want to work out, and we can take out the Rangers' healer at the same time. Think about it. After Trini, there will only be two left."

Zedd spread his arms in acquiescence. "How can I continue to argue with such sound judgment. Do what you want with her... just don't kill her, my dear."

Kimberly grinned. "As you wish... my dear," she said teasingly, before teleporting out.

Jason and Billy followed Rocky and Aisha past the opening gate of Angel Grove High School, now renamed Haven. The grounds were covered in trees, vines, stalks, and buds growing every kind of fruit or vegetable Jason could think of, and not all of them were native. People were busy harvesting
the plants, but none of the plants looked in danger of running out.

"Like I said," Aisha commented, "we're not in danger of running out of food. Demeter takes care of that, and then some."

"Yeah, as long as you don't mind living as a vegetarian," Rocky said. "We finally captured some goats to get some milk, especially for the babies."

"Wait... you're drinking raw milk?" Billy said.

Rocky grinned. "What do you think we are, stupid? Some of our science types rigged up something to pasteurize the milk."

Billy looked relieved, but Jason still looked on edge. He was obviously looking around for the signs of death and disease.

"You'll want to talk to..." Aisha began as they entered the front doors, but she was cut off.

"Rocky, Aisha, you're back! Did you get..."

Principal Kaplan had just walked through the front corridor, which was stacked on all sides with supplies. His smile fell when he saw Jason and Billy.

"We've got the medical supplies, Mr. Kaplan," Rocky said. "Along with some diapers and other... uh... stuff."

He was looking nervously between Mr. Kaplan and the Rangers, neither of which seemed to want to move.

"Thank you, Rocky," Mr. Kaplan said, his voice distant. "Take those over to processing. They could really use a lot of that in the flu ward."

Rocky nodded and took his and Aisha's packs toward the student lounge. Aisha stayed, apparently curious as to what was about to happen.

When Mr. Kaplan finally spoke, it seemed as if he were continuing a conversation they had already started. "When you left... two weeks ago... and you didn't come back, and things turned out like this... I was sure that all of you were dead."

That statement was worse than anything Jason and Billy had experienced yet. Worse than Rocky's attack, or Aisha's accusations, or reports of deaths, or the Putty fight they'd been unable to participate in. The sheer amount of pain and betrayal in Mr. Kaplan's voice in that one statement nearly destroyed the two of them.

"We..." Jason cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, Mr. Kaplan. We..." The words wouldn't come. They sounded lame next to all that was going around them. The justifications he'd so confidently spouted to Rocky and Aisha died in his throat now.

"We surrendered to protect Angel Grove, Mr. Kaplan," said Billy. He still sounded uncomfortable, but he could at least get the words out. "If we hadn't left and let this happen, everyone on Earth, including everyone in Angel Grove, would be dead now. Zedd had us cold, and we had to regroup. We've been working every second to defeat Lord Zedd since then. And... we may have found a way, but we're going to need your help."

Mr. Kaplan looked from one to the other, quite as if he were trying to judge what type of punishment
a couple of misbehaving students needed. Aisha was staring at them all, her mouth unconsciously hanging open.

"What Billy says is the truth," Jason said, finally finding his courage. "We're sorry that so many people had to suffer, but we had to plan our attack."

"And when are you planning this attack?" Mr. Kaplan asked, some of his ire melting away.

"It started about half an hour ago," Jason said. "You'll only have to stay in Haven one more day, because today, Lord Zedd falls."

The words echoed through the hallway, and it was accompanied by a few whoops and energetic applause. Apparently a crowd had gathered without any of them noticing.

Mr. Kaplan looked around, and Jason knew exactly what he was thinking. Whether or not Mr. Kaplan trusted them, the people of Haven needed this hope just as surely as they needed food and medical supplies. Jason's fears about not being welcomed, confirmed by Rocky's attack, now melted away as he realized that people were desperate for them to... well... not just save them, but to do anything against their oppressors.

Mr. Kaplan nodded. "Do what you need to do, Mr. Scott and Mr. Cranston. Just... if there's going to be an attack on Haven, something that will endanger the people here, we need to know."

"We won't bring anything down on Haven that we're not prepared for," Jason promised. That was one promise that he was determined to fulfill.

"Ms. Campbell, if it's convenient, would you mind helping them with whatever they need?"

Aisha's mouth quirked up at her last name. Apparently that was a habit that Mr. Kaplan had dropped that had been revived by the unexpected reappearance of his former students. "Sure thing, Mr. Kaplan."

Mr. Kaplan gave Jason and Billy a wary look as he left, heading toward where Rocky had disappeared. There were still more cheers, and several people started surging forward with what Jason knew would be questions, complaints, information, congratulations...

"All right, guys," Aisha said in a loud voice. "The Power Rangers have a job to do, and most of you have jobs to do, too."

Aisha seemed to be regarded quite as highly as Mr. Kaplan, for people backed off at her word. It must have been her position as a freedom fighter that gave her more clout.

She led them toward the art classroom, which had been converted into a weapons room. She set one grocery bag into a recycling bin, and then placed the one without the hole in a pile with others.

"Rocky's weapon got lost, and I have one damaged bag," Aisha called to the corner of the room.

A curtain opened up to reveal a table set up with a Bunsen burner near an open window. Bulk and Skull were crowded around the table with surgical masks on.

Bulk was the first to speak after pulling off his mask. "Oh. These guys." Bulk rolled his eyes. "You know, me and Skull were trying to find out who the Power Rangers were, and you guys weren't even on the list."

"Sorry about that," Jason said drily.
"Seriously, Ernie was before you guys," Bulk reiterated.

"Where is Ernie?" Billy asked.

Bulk shrugged and continued with his work. "Haven't seen him since this started."

"Oh." Jason shifted uncomfortably. "So..." He looked around, completely bewildered. "What are you doing?"

"My discovery," Aisha said proudly. "Well, mine and my friends'. We found out that you don't get hurt fighting Putties when you fight them with plastic. It, like, insulates you from the power feedback. I mean, even wood conducts the power feedback, which makes no sense, but not plastic."

Billy was squinting at what looked like a plastic arm brace. "It's possible that plastic, being, as far as we know, a completely artificial substance made only on Earth, and it is able to bypass whatever causes the power feedback... simply because it's a substance unknown to the creator of the Putties."

"Thanks," Bulk said sarcastically. "And, hey, you were a dick to us at the party, Mr. Blue Ranger."

Billy winced. "Um... sorry about that. Evil clone. Things got a bit out of hand."

"They tend to do that when you guys are around," Bulk said. It looked like he was gearing up to get a lot of things off his chest. "We've had a lot of time to think, to put things together. What I don't get is why you guys hide your identities when it puts everyone around you in danger. It's not you guys just getting attacked. It's all of us. And I figure you guys are the reason that space aliens attack, out of all the places on Earth, Angel Grove. I mean, what kind of sense does that make unless they're just attacking where the Power Rangers live?"

"The whole Earth's in danger anyway..." Jason began.

"Save it," Bulk growled. "You all walk around like normal teenagers, getting spells put on you that end up hurting everyone around you... having evil clones throw parties... letting monsters attack the school... and let's not forget week after week giant monster fights in the middle of town... and you just let it happen. No one understands what's going on, and all of you just smirk while you keep your little secret..."

"Bulky..." Skull looked up from his work. "Back off. They saved our lives... like, a lot. Maybe they wouldn't have needed saving if they weren't... but I don't think we can blame them on that."

Bulk scowled, but Skull spoke against Bulk so few times that when he did, Bulk paid attention.

"Thanks..." Jason said awkwardly. "All this is amazing, by the way. You guys are doing a really good job."

"Yeah, well, we're doing the best we can," Skull said. Despite his defense, he was obviously not happy with his classmates. "Just tell me one thing. What are you planning to do about Kimberly?"

Jason signed. "Trini's on that one. That's all I can say right now. Look... I'm sorry we couldn't tell anyone anything. That was part of the rules when we received our powers, and we weren't prepared for everything... but right now we've got to get underground. Hephaestus is putting together something down there, and it may be the key to getting rid of the gods. This was the only place Zedd wouldn't see us. Is there a way to get underground?"

Bulk answered this time. "The basement... that earthquake we had a week ago opened up the floor. We've got it roped off just in case someone falls in."
"I think we'll need to fall in," Jason said. "Can you show us where that is?"

"Yeah, sure," Aisha said. "Let me just get some flashlights..."

"Won't be necessary," Billy cut in. "We can take it from there, if you'll just lead us to the chasm."

"Right..." Aisha said slowly. Then she turned to Bulk and Skull. "I'm going out later: I'll need some pretty sturdy equipment. And please don't try to sell me on the Tupperware armor."

Skull had already gone back to their job of melting plastic. Bulk nodded. "Hey... Aisha. Find any traces of Adam out there?"

Aisha looked down. "Not yet," she said in a low voice. "But we'll find him."

As they left, Jason asked hesitantly, "Adam?"

Aisha tried for a smile, but it looked too painful. "He's my best friend, along with Rocky. We all came here with Adam's older brother, who's a teacher at Stone Canyon. He'd found out that... well... not a lot of people know this, but Stone Canyon is about to lose its accreditation. We're too small a school, and our test scores can't justify school funding. So we were coming up to check out the Angel Grove High campus." She gave a hollow laugh. "I guess we did, and then some."

"What happened to Adam?" Billy asked.

"Everything was going fine," she said. "He was a freedom fighter along with me and Rocky... but then his brother disappeared a couple of days ago. He thinks he went to Dionysus' territory, and he obviously went after him. Rocky and I can't get anywhere near Dionysus' territory, so we can't search for him, and we know people at Haven are depending on us..."

She broke off. "I..." Her voice was unsteady, though her eyes remained dry. "I guess you probably know how it feels... Not being able to save people because everything could fall apart. And everyone blaming you when things go wrong."

"We do at that," Jason said quietly. He was looking out a window to the backlot, which held a green space near the parking lot. There were makeshift grave markers.

Aisha looked out the window, too, hugging herself. She addressed Jason and Billy without looking at them. "Look, I know you guys can't turn back time, or make it all not happen. And I know what I said, but I don't blame you for this, and I don't think anyone else does, either. Well, Bulk and Skull do, but they've got their own issues. I just have to ask... Can you save us?"

Jason considered lying. Considered saying confidently that the Power Rangers always triumphed. But...

"I will give everything to protect the people of Angel Grove... of Earth," he said evenly. "Right now, things are bad. There's no denying that. But by tomorrow, it will all be over."

Aisha nodded. "Thanks... for not lying." She was actually able to achieve a smile this time. "Let's get you to where you can do some good, then."

"Guess what?" Kimberly said, grinning from ear to ear.

Trini kept herself from taking a step back. She hadn't seen Kimberly since the night of the surrender. It was unnerving to see Kimberly so normal-looking, like she was excited to tell Trini about a new
sale going on at the mall.

"What?" Trini said, guardedly.

"Lord Zedd said we can fight!" Kimberly exclaimed, practically bouncing at the announcement. "I mean, seriously, he's barely given me anything to do so far, and you guys are taking so long... But when I saw you on Earth, I just had to ask if we could have it out. And just to be fair, no poison weapons, I promise. I already took Zack out that way: I wanna keep things interesting."

Trini stared at Kimberly. Athena was ignoring them both. The mayor remained in the corner, frozen.

Kimberly did a fake-pouty face. "What, you don't want to fight me? Cause we're best friends and all that? You could never hurt me?" Kimberly rolled her eyes. "Are you really going to be that boring?"

"No, I want to fight you."

Kimberly's stance lost its casual feel. Trini had obviously surprised her. Then her face brightened. "Oh, you think you're going to capture me like Jason captured Tommy. Break me of this nasty old spell." She laughed. "You're welcome to try, but I gotta warn you, if you take me to the Command Center, I don't think Lord Zedd's going to honor the surrender anymore."

"You mistake me, Kimberly," Trini said in a quiet voice. "I want to fight you... not to capture you, but to punish you."

Kimberly's smile faded.

Trini's face remained impassive. "You hurt Zack. You killed Tommy. You attacked our parents. You helped enslave Angel Grove. And all because you voluntarily gave yourself to a spell." Trini put her helmet back on. "Do you really think I'm interested in taking you back after that?"

Kimberly's stance had now lost all of its confidence. "But..." she spluttered. "But you took back Tommy, after all he'd done."

"He didn't have a choice. You did," Trini said. "Now are we going to fight? I don't think this is a good place. How about the ballroom? Remember, that's the place where you shot Zack. I've been working on a cure for him for the past two weeks, and I'm not sure how much more I can do."

Kimberly no longer looked eager to fight. In fact, she was starting to look panicked. "How can you talk to your best friend like this?"

"Oh, so now we're best friends," Trini commented with quiet amusement.

"Jason wouldn't allow this," Kimberly countered, starting to get angry.

"I'm not Jason. He's not here." Trini actually smiled this time, letting a bit of contempt shade her voice. "That's what you were counting on, wasn't it, Kim? The guys would never want to fight you. Of course they wouldn't. Jason, Billy, Zack... they're gentlemen. Chivalrous. You're their best little sis, and no matter what you do, they'll always forgive you, and they'll certainly never fight you seriously." Trini drew her Power Daggers, showing her impatience. "But I'm different, Kim. I'm your best friend. I don't let you get away with anything. And I don't have to be chivalrous."

Kimberly's face twisted into an ugly sneer before she put her helmet back on. "You cold, unfeeling bitch. Fine. If you want to play it that way, I won't hold back."

"I hope not," Trini said breezily as she followed Kimberly down the hallway to the ballroom. "You'll
need to come at me with all you've got, if you're going to have a chance. Remember, Kim: I'm better than you."

There was a scream of rage and an attack, but Trini countered easily and threw Kimberly into the ballroom, using the momentum of the ill-judged kick against her.

"Like I said," Trini said firmly. "You've had gymnastics and a year of fighting... while I have years of martial arts training and the discipline to go with it. You're going to have to do a lot better than that, Kim."

Jason landed hard on the ground. Billy was near him, but between them was a golden net, only just visible.

Billy got up first and reached for a twig. He tested the barrier with the twig, and it sizzled once and disintegrated.

"That's one question answered," Jason said. "Let's morph and see how it stands up to our weapons."

"And hope it doesn't do the same to our weapons as it did to the twig," Billy commented, but he morphed along with Jason. The helmets gave them night vision and other sensory advancements, none of which could tell them anything about the net.

Jason first fired at the barrier. No change. He struck at it with his blade blaster in blade mode. The weapon didn't disintegrate, but it also couldn't cut through the net.

He'd actually expected that. He'd just wanted to morph for the added protection, now that they were to the dangerous part of the mission.

Billy eyed the net closer. "It seems to be Hephaestus' handiwork. He possibly knows we're coming, and he wishes to separate us."

"Or maybe one of us is caught in a giant net, and the other isn't?" Jason suggested.

Billy shrugged. "I suppose this predicament is forcing us into opposite directions? We, after all, do not know where Hephaestus is."

"Splitting up looks to be our only option, yeah," Jason said. He looked worriedly down the dark earthen corridor, now only illuminated by his helmet. "Good luck then."

Billy nodded. "I guess, for better or worse, we're going to change everything here."

"And hopefully Trini's having luck with Kimberly," Jason added.

"So those were the Power Rangers," Aisha said as she judged the weight of two traffic cones.

"In the flesh," Bulk said. He was loading sand into a plastic bat and securing it with electrical tape at the end. "Last people you'd expect, too."

"Why is that?"

Bulk furrowed his brow. "I dunno. Guess it makes sense in one way. I mean, they're goody-goods, and they got all weird last year, which is right around the time the Power Rangers showed up." It was obvious he'd put some thought into this. "But... it's not like they've ever acted heroic or anything. And that Billy kid was always weird. And..."
Aisha grinned. "I think you're disappointed. That's why you were so hard on them. You had them built up as completely different people, and now that it's people you've always known..."

Skull walked in with Rocky at that moment, so they dropped the subject. "You ready to head out?" Rocky said. "Or are you going to show the heroes around some more?"

Aisha rolled her eyes. "It'd be nice if you took that chip off your shoulder and concentrated on the mission. The Power Rangers are doing their thing, but..." she took the bat from Bulk and shouldered it for effect, "that's never kept us from doing our thing. Now get suited up. I'll be waiting at the front."

She twirled the bat as she left, getting used to the weight.

Rocky started grabbing grocery bags and filling his pockets. "I guess she's right," he said with a sigh. "It just bugs me that the Power Rangers disappear for two weeks and just expect us to take care of the gods ourselves."

"You guys are doing a pretty good job of it," Bulk commented.

Rocky grinned. "Thanks. Got any bats like that for me?"

"Fresh out of bats," Skull said. "But I reinforced that sword you broke a week ago." He threw the sword at him.

Rocky caught it and gave it a flourish. It had been part of a child's ninja playset, but now, against the Putties at least, it had turned deadly. Skull had filled it with liquid cement, making it the strongest weapon in their plastic arsenal.

"I mean to say," Rocky said slowly as Skull started gathering him some shields and throwing weapons. "I mean, it's not like the Power Rangers are at full strength anyway. One of them got shot the night of the gods' takeover, and that other one got taken over by Zedd..."

There was a crash, and Bulk made a shushing motion at Rocky.

"So that takes out two," Rocky hurried on, a little more quietly. "But weren't there six? What happened to the Green Ranger?"

Another crash, and Skull actually left the room this time.

"What'd I say?" Rocky said, looking worriedly after Skull.

Bulk sighed and started regathering the equipment for Rocky. "Both of those are sore spots for Skull. You know he's always had a thing for Kimberly-the Pink Ranger."

"I sorta got that impression," Rocky said.

"Well, it's a little more complicated than that," Bulk said. "See, come to find out, her boyfriend Tommy was the Green Ranger."

Rocky nodded, then frowned in confusion. "Uh... yeah? I mean, so he's the Green Ranger. What does that have to..."

"You weren't there when Tommy first moved here... which was right around the time the Green Ranger showed up," Bulk said. "See, not many people remember that Tommy slut-shamed Kimberly right in the middle of the Youth Center, at a football victory party. Skull tried to call him on it, and
got a black eye for it. Turns out, I guess that was also when the Green Ranger was all evil, but it makes sense."

Rocky sat down, slowly nodding. For someone who didn't even live in Angel Grove until he was forced to two weeks ago, getting the inside scoop of the civilian lives of the Power Rangers was fascinating.

"Then there was the attack on the high school," Bulk continued, clearly getting into the story. "Kimberly took out a bear with a fire extinguisher, but then she got knocked out by the Green Ranger. Skull tried to protect her, but the Green Ranger shot him, and he would have died if the Blue Ranger hadn't saved him." Bulk smirked. "I threw the Green Ranger off the roof, by the way."

"So what you're saying is..." Rocky said slowly, then grinned. "Nah, I don't know what you're saying."

"Well, it's like this," Bulk said. "After that, Tommy was Kimberly's boyfriend pretty quick, and the Green Ranger saved us from some sort of candle monster in the park. So we're grateful... but Skull's got this whole history tied up with Kimberly and Tommy... pretty much from the fact that he either gets caught in the crossfire or throws himself between them. It's only recently that he got the whole story... and he's not coping well."

"And in the meantime, Kimberly's evil and Tommy's..."

"Dead."

Rocky looked up, startled.

"That's what Skull said, anyway." Bulk said. "He talked to her, and she said she killed her boyfriends, and there was stuff said at City Hall that night, and he didn't show up that night, either." Bulk shrugged. "Personally, I think he'd dead or just more injured than Zack, though I don't know why they can't heal either of them when they were able to do that for Billy and Skull."

Rocky was looking at the sword, frowning. "I guess I was too hard on them. I mean, here I thought they were just hiding, staying all safe in their fortress of solitude or whatever. But if one of them died..."

Bulk shoved the equipment into his hands, breaking him out of his reverie. "Look, the Power Rangers can take care of themselves. They always have, and they've never really cared who got hurt in the process. So don't worry about them. Now you need to look out for your own."

"Adam. Right," Rocky said. He put the sword in a makeshift scabbard on his back and pocketed the rest. "Thanks. When this is over, you'll be equipping three of us again."

Billy walked down the corridor, senses primed to maximum. So far the only bit of "technology" had been the netting that had separated him from Jason. And one could hardly call that technology.

Magic. Billy almost growled at the thought. That's all he'd been doing for the past few weeks, is dealing with magic. They'd gotten Zords with magic powers. His was a unicorn that didn't even look like a unicorn. And the one time they'd tried to use the more magical powers of the Zords, it had knocked out Zordon.

Then there was the clone, the thought of which still twisted Billy's stomach. His mother had heard the clone mentioned, but she hadn't pushed any further, for which Billy was grateful. He supposed he should share with her everything, but his absolute worst, most shameful moment ever?
The trouble with the clone is that magic had gotten in the way. It hadn't been pure science. Somehow, the clone had had a "soul," forged from the Morphing Grid and patterned after himself.

And then, the gods. Somehow, it had been better when they'd been fighting a witch. Rita was magic, but her magic worked in scientific ways. She had limitations, and an internal logic to her actions. Lord Zedd and the gods, though... I mean, they were gods! Even the brilliant engineer of the group, Hephaestus, used magic rather than machines.

And that was the problem. Billy had tried, he really had, but when there was magic in the mix, he really had no idea what he was doing. He was fighting things that didn't make sense.

He was literally walking in circles.

Cursing, Billy looked at the part of the wall where he'd made a mark, just so he wouldn't lose his way. He'd walked in a straight line the entire way, and there the mark was.

He took one more step.

Billy walked down the corridor, senses primed to maximum. So far the only bit of "technology" had been the netting that had separated him from Jason. And one could hardly call that technology.

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Billy walked down the corridor, senses primed to maximum. So far the only bit of "technology" had been the netting that had separated him from Jason. And one could hardly call that technology.

Billy walked down the corridor, senses primed to maximum.

Billy walked down the corridor...

Jason glared at the walls around him, cursing at his own helplessness.

Not just in the moment, although, lost underground and cut off from the Command Center, he certainly knew he was rather helpless. No, he was completely helpless in the long-term.

People had died. He knew he'd probably been stupid not to have predicted it. After all, people died from disease and old age all the time, and it wasn't his responsibility. That's just the way the world worked. It was up to him to protect people from alien monster attacks, not to keep everyone from dying.

Except, it was his fault. He'd allowed Lord Zedd to take over Angel Grove, thinking he was protecting people in the long-run. He'd let himself have more time to plan this attack, thinking that people were safe in Haven.

But people had died because of Haven, because they were forced to live in a refugee camp with no supplies. And that was on him. That was all on him.

That was all on him.

That was all on him.

That was all on him.
The ballroom rang with clangs and screams, mostly coming from Kimberly. Trini, characteristically, made minimal noise, though by now her cries were mixed with grunts of pain. After the first few minutes of completely dominating the fight, Kimberly had finally regained some of her composure and had struck some blows against Trini.

"So how's the punishment going?" Kimberly taunted Trini as she drove her back with a series of arrows.

Trini ran the circumference of the room and kicked against the back wall to propel herself toward Kimberly, who barely had time to put up a defense before Trini struck out with her daggers. Sparks flew, and Kimberly rolled away, black marks appearing on her uniform.

"You might not want to spend time in taunting me," Trini commented as she pressed the attack with a series of punches and kicks that Kimberly could barely keep up with. "That's always been your problem. Too entranced with your own cleverness to pay attention to what you're doing."

The insult had struck true, but it had also energized Kimberly, who was able to knock Trini across the room with a powerful kick.

"Oh, and you're so much better," Kimberly sneered. "So calm, so controlled. Oh, the perfect Trini, who's never had a bad day in her life."

Trini found herself losing ground, just trying to keep up with Kimberly's attacks. Kimberly was now using her bow as an offensive weapon, and it was perhaps even more effective than the daggers. The daggers were sharper, but the bow was larger and blunter, and Trini could barely slip an attack in before Kimberly started pummeling her.

"What are you talking about?" Trini said, annoyed at the way the fight was turning.

"Everyone thinks you're so perfect," Kimberly continued. "Everyone loves you, and you don't even have to work at it. But I know the truth." There was a sadistic smile in Kimberly's voice. "You're so calm and controlled that you won't let yourself feel anything. Boys fall all over you, and you don't even notice they're there. You've never had a crush, never had your heart broken, and even if you did, no one would notice... because you won't let anyone in. I mean, look at how you treated Billy. You were almost raped by his clone, and you didn't even shed a tear. You just coolly devastated him, and then went right back to working with him. The world ends, and you work at your desk."

All this time, Trini was being beaten back by Kimberly's attacks. Now, though, everything went white. When Trini came to, Kimberly was thrown against the ground, screaming, and Trini was pulling her arm back behind her.

"Oh, you want me to lose control, like you did?!" Trini heard herself yelling. "You want me to show how I really feel about you, Kim?!” Trini pulled hard, and Kimberly screamed as something popped in her arm. Trini kicked her hard in the ribs, sending her skidding across the floor. "Well, you got your wish."

Tommy's heart hammered in his chest from the shock. He whirled around, but there was no source for the noise. Keeping on the defensive, he moved past the gate, which opened easily for him. The voice had echoed everywhere, but it had seemed to originate from this chamber. Either there was some sort of speaker system, or the magical equivalent thereof, or...
"ANSWER ME, RUFFIAN! I WILL NOT HESITATE TO ATTACK!"

Tommy was sure of it. The voice was coming from the jar at the altar. He edged closer and decided to take the cautiously polite approach. After all, it wasn't like he was a ruffian, and outright hostility had gotten him nowhere with Quagmire. "Hi. I'm Tommy. I didn't mean to... disturb... anything. I lost my way and was just trying to get out of the sun."

"THAT IS NOT MY CONCERN, VANDAL! BEGONE!"

Tommy's eye narrowed. He was really struggling to keep his cool. "I'm not a vandal and I'm not a ruffian, either. And if you'd like to eject me from... whatever this is... I'd prefer you do it face to face. Or am I going to have to shake you out of that jar?"

He heard a sigh that echoed gustily in the jar, and then there was a flash that blinded Tommy after the darkness of the cave. As soon as his vision adjusted, Tommy was able to look at the mysterious being from the jar.

Blue. Very very blue. Tommy wasn't sure if he was encased in blue armor, or if that was just what he looked like, because there was no skin showing, no breaks in the armor. He had a sword strapped to his back, and a golden N on his chest and forehead.

"I'm guessing your name begins with an N?" Tommy ventured.

"You are addressing Ninjor," the being said. His voice was much quieter out of the jar, but it was still loud, as if he'd been in that cave so long that he'd forgotten what a normal volume was. "This is my inner sanctum. No one has ventured here for thousands of years. Explain your presence here, intruder."

Tommy was starting to get a little tired of the being's attitude toward him, though he supposed if he hadn't spoken to anyone in thousands of years... "As I said before, my name is Tommy. I just got lost hopping dimensions. I'm trying to find my way back to Earth, but..."

Ninjor held up a hand, and Tommy stopped talking, hoping that Ninjor was reacting to the mention of Earth. If he knew a way back, maybe he could be persuaded into sharing.

"I know you," Ninjor said quietly. "Green Ranger. Holder of the green power coin."

Tommy grinned. Maybe this would be easier than he thought. "That's me. How do you know about..."

Tommy didn't even see the attack. After a few moments of confused movement and pain, he opened his eyes. His head had smashed against the cave wall, knocking down a candelabra. Ninjor was standing over him.

"Evil-doer," Ninjor said with as much venom as Tommy had ever heard in a voice. "Blight upon the purity of the power coins."

"Wait a minute...!" Tommy tried to protest, even as he dodged another attack. "What are you talking about!?"

Ninjor had no expression, of course, but Tommy could practically see hatred streaming off him from every movement. "You gained your coin from the forces of evil, and you used it on their behalf."

"Well, I mean... yeah, I did," Tommy said, a bit flustered at suddenly having to justify himself to a complete stranger. "Of course, I was under a spell then."
"A spell that lingers, leaving its taint on all of your actions," Ninjor replied. "Merely an excuse, this spell. You cling to the connection with your former master. You use the power she gave you, and the abilities she taught you."

"Look, I kept the power coin to keep her from doing to another person what she did to me!" Tommy backed away, trying to gauge his chances of escape, should this attack turn deadly. "And it's not like I'm actively fighting Rita now. Zedd took over all of her powers."

"And because of your insistence on keeping the power coin," Ninjor continued, as if Tommy hadn't even spoken, "you have allowed it to be compromised and weakened by the forces of evil. Lord Zedd is even now planning to harness its power, and rather than protect it, you have used it to give yourself power... to make yourself feel better." Ninjor drew his sword.

"Wait..." Tommy was starting to panic. Ninjor had forced him into a corner far away from the exit. "Why do you care so much?! What have I ever done to you?"

Ninjor raised his sword. "I am the architect of the power coins. I created them, and the Zords... all the tools of a Power Ranger." He advanced on Tommy. "I created the power coins to be implements of good, used by virtuous warriors who would protect the innocent. When they became embroiled in this foolish war, when they became political bargaining chips... That's when I left. I removed myself to this realm, and I will not have this war played out in my realm of peace."

"They're not bargaining chips!" Tommy protested wildly. "The Power Rangers... we protect the innocent. You've got to believe me!"

"Goodbye, Green Ranger," Ninjor said, raising his sword.

Tommy closed his eyes. His only hope was to dimension hop right then. Come on... someplace safe. Someplace with someone I can trust!

Zack stared moodily at the Viewing Globe. Jason and Billy had made it to Haven, and Trini was confronting Kimberly. And here he was, sitting on his hands. He didn't even have a job to do like the rest of the non-fighters.

Mrs. Scott laid a hand on his arm as she passed by. "Don't worry, Zack. They're going to be all right."

"I know they are," Zack said. "They can take care of everything... without me."

Mrs. Scott shook her head. "Zack, you know you'll be putting yourself in danger if you throw yourself into the fight. Not to mention putting us all in danger with your mother's reactions."

Zack laughed a little, but not before checking if his mother was listening in. "I know you're right. It makes sense strategically, and I know my health is better, but not great." Zack, in fact, felt horrible, but he was not about to actually tell anyone that. "And it's not like I'm itching to fight. I just can't stand to see my friends go down there and I can't help them."

Mrs. Scott squeezed his shoulder. "Like Jason said, they're not going to be able to do without you the entire time. And none of us are going to hold you back when you have to go." She chuckled. "I'd just prefer you stay here, but that's the mom and the nurse in me talking."

Zack was about to thank her, when they were cut off by a warning klaxon.

"Oh, ay-yi-yi! Not now!"
"What's happening?" Zack said, trying to hide the thrill of excitement in his voice. This sounded, after all, like he was needed.

It was his mom who answered him. "It's as you said, Zack. There's a power surge in Dionysus' territory."

"And it looks like the other territories are depleted," Mrs. Kwan reported. "It seems that everyone who isn't in Haven or City Hall is with Dionysus, and Ares and Aphrodite have disappeared."

"People can't love beer that much," Zack said. "Okay, it looks like I'm going to have to check it out. Can I get some more information on that power surge?"

Alpha started to move to the monitoring system, but Dr. Taylor was already on it. "It seems to be originating from the Earth's core and going upward, but it's manifesting a lot like whatever Dionysus did to us the night of the attack."

"So it's full-scale, crazy riot, and using people we can't fight," Zack said. "Anyone else think this is pretty suspicious for gods who are supposed to be holding the fort for a couple more weeks until the ransom comes due? And speaking of crazy... Mom? You not going to stop me?"

Dr. Taylor's lips were in a thin line, ignoring all the people staring at her. "I'm going to follow up on this and report anything you need to know. In the meantime, you're going to go save the world, son."

"We're backing you up all the way," Mr. Taylor said, unsurprised. They had apparently been discussing this beforehand.

"And give Dionysus an axe to the head for me," Zack's eldest younger brother spouted off.

Zack laughed and pulled out his power morpher, suddenly feeling healthier than he'd ever felt in his life. "See ya at the afterparty!"

Billy walked down the corridor.

Billy walked down the corridor.

Billy walked...

And then he stopped.

And thought.

And looked behind him.

There was the golden net. In front of him also was the golden net.

"Genius, Billy," he griped at himself. "And how long have I been caught in this time loop?" He looked at his watch. "An hour, if this is to be believed."

Now that he was aware of the net, he knew he could walk forward without the illusion taking him over. The problem was, he'd been thinking of this as just magic, and that had discouraged him, possibly trapping him in the loop. But just as Rita's magic had worked on scientific terms, or at least terms with an internal logic, there must be a logic to this.

After all, he reasoned, the gods were just magical beings. They were based on humanity. They were based on elements, or emotions, or simply parts of society. Hermes was the god of thieves and
messengers... and he'd apparently translated that into the 20th century with the media. Dionysus was wine and debauchery, Ares war, Aphrodite love, and Hephaestus...

He was science, pure and simple. And if Hermes translated his powers to the 20th century, surely Hephaestus would as well. He was an engineer, after all. He didn't create things out of nothing. He built things. He was god of the forge, not god of the replicator.

Before, Billy had approached the net as something to be attacked, but that was a meathead solution, not befitting a scientist. This time, instead of examining the net, he examined the area around it.

The net was not really a net, but more of a barrier that hugged the dimensions of the cave, but the cave was rough, and the net did not fit securely. The net was impervious to attack, but the wall wasn't.

Billy pushed at a weak area of the wall. A rock fell, leaving a hole, and the "net" sagged a bit, opening the hole a bit wider.

He'd have to be really careful. Just punching through the wall might cause the cave to fall in, and he knew the high school was right above him with lots of people who would be endangered. He tested the wall and surrounding area, calculating just the right amount of force.

He gave the wall a short, measured blast with his blade blaster. The wall crumbled a bit, but held firm, and the net fell to the floor. Apparently tied to each other, the other net winked out of existence.

Billy considered his next move. He could go after Jason, but what would that accomplish? He tried the communicator, but just as he'd feared, it was not picking up any signal. Either he couldn't communicate with Jason because the equipment was dampened, or Jason was caught in a similar trap.

But they had to deal with Hephaestus, and Billy knew that he stood a better chance against the god of the forge than Jason. Jason would be able to find a way out of whatever situation he was in, and in the meantime, Billy had to push on.

Rocky wondered if he was ever not going to feel ridiculous wielding his plastic weapons. As much as the weapons were necessary, and as much as the people of Haven admired him... particularly the girls... he just couldn't get over the feeling that he was wearing an 8-year-old's Halloween costume.

Of course, this was a place that worshipped heroes in multi-colored spandex, so he guessed the standards weren't all that high.

He and Aisha were currently slinking in the shadows of a building, waiting for a bear in a pith helmet to wander by.

"We should try to knock it out," Rocky whispered at Aisha.

"Don't you dare," Aisha answered angrily. "That bear doesn't hurt anyone, and the gods don't touch it because it's apparently not from Earth, and that's how we leave it. Besides," she smirked, "I'd like to see you try to knock out a bear."

"I could if I wanted to," Rocky grumbled.

Aisha shot him a look. "We're here for Adam. We can't lose sight of that."

"Right," Rocky said. He paused, swallowing. "What if... well... what if he's a votary? What if he
didn't, you know..."

"He's not a votary," Aisha said. "He wouldn't do that, and you know it."

"I'm just saying we need to be prepared for the worst," Rocky said. "He went off on his own. Who
knows what could have happened? I mean, yeah, we're supposed to be protected..."

"He's not dead, either," Aisha said calmly.

Rocky was about the respond, but the bear had finally moved away, and they had their chance. They
sprinted two blocks, thankfully encountering nothing but some birds pecking at trash.

"Okay," Rocky said when they stopped to rest. "We're two blocks away from Dionysus' territory,
and we haven't met anything except a rogue bear. You see anything wrong with this picture?"

"This could be our lucky day?" Aisha ventured a guess.

"Or something," Rocky said. "Look, when we get there, we sneak in, find Adam, and go. But... I
want us to be careful. Artemis has been hunting us, and she may have put the other gods on the
lookout for us."

"You think Artemis captured Adam," Aisha said.

"Or something," Rocky said grimly. "I just mean..."

There was a crash. Rocky and Aisha whirled around and crouched into a defensive stance... and then
almost dropped their weapons.

Not Putties. Not gods. Not animals. Humans. Humans... so many people... marching down the street,
seemingly intent on destroying everything that was still intact. The people looked similar to someone
affected by Dionysus' berserker rage... except they looked completely in control.

"Well, that's something you don't see every day," Rocky commented.

They were so intent on looking at the grim riot that they didn't hear the Putties approaching until it
was too late. Aisha was knocked out before she could even raise a weapon, and so many attacked
Rocky that he could only watch helplessly as she was carried away.

Zack was really glad he was the Black Ranger. He couldn't imagine trying to hide from rioting
votaries if his colors were red or blue.

The problem was, he was faced with an enemy he couldn't fight. These weren't Putties or monsters.
These were humans. He couldn't even show himself without the risk of hurting them. It was genius,
really... whatever Dionysus was doing.

Zack was more and more convinced that this was Dionysus' doings, and that at least Ares and
Aphrodite were in on it, if not all of the gods. Zedd was too concerned with recovering Zordon to
risk taking their attention. It was unlikely also that this was retaliation for if Zedd had figured out was
Trini, Jason, and Billy were doing, as this had obviously been planned for a long time. Yes, Zedd
surprised them, and worked two steps ahead of them, but none of this made sense in his plan. This
was the gods.

Zack also had to remind himself that he had to avoid the gods and the Putties at all costs, at least until
the last resort. Even if the gods were going against Zedd for whatever reason, they were still
officially allies of Zedd, and to raise a hand to them would be to call off the surrender. And it would
be the citizens of Angel Grove, Haven included, who would be forfeit.

He was a block away from the territory. Dionysus had taken a multi-story office building with a
private club at the top, and he'd repurposed it as a long dance and drinking party for his votaries.
They'd never been able to get a true visual of the inside of the place... and now Zack could guess
why. Dionysus was hiding what he was doing from everyone, including Zedd.

Zack turned a corner... and there were some Putties.

"Oh!" he said, smiling brightly as he tried to edge away. "Hey, guys! I... I heard there was a party
going on, and I just thought..."

The Putties had obviously gotten over the shock of seeing him, and they started to charge him. Biting
back a curse (he knew his mother was watching), and hating what he had to do, Zack turned and ran
the other way.

He got about a block before he realized the Putties were no longer chasing him, and there were yells
and... amazingly... the sound of Putty breaking apart.

He turned to see a boy around his age fighting the Putties with a traffic cone. And winning pretty
thoroughly.

"Oh, right... plastic," Zack said, remembering the reports he'd been looking over when he had
nothing else to do. He wished he could help the boy, but he seemed to not need any help... until a
squadron of votaries showed up.

The boy looked around wildly, obviously unsure of what to do.

"Come on!" Zack said, holding his hand out. "Follow me!"

The boy threw the traffic cone at some approaching Putties and ran toward Zack. Zack tried to slow
down from his morphed speed, but the boy was able to keep up well enough.

"Why are we running?!" the boy asked breathlessly. "You're a Power Ranger!"

"Yeah, a Power Ranger that's surrendered and not at his best anyway," Zack admitted. "I need to get
to Dionysus' territory."

"Then follow me!" the boy said. "But you're not going to find anyone there!"

"Maybe Dionysus, though," Zack countered.

The boy grinned. "Adam Park."

Zack frowned. "That place burned down, and we're going to that office building anyway, not
Addam Park..."

"That's my name," the boy corrected him patiently. "But never mind that. Can you tell me what's
going on? One minute I was in Dionysus' territory, pretending I was under his thrall and trying to
find my brother, and then the next minute all hell broke loose."

"You're one of the freedom fighters," Zack said. "I remember now. Plastic weapons, man. Awesome
idea. But, anyway, all hell has broken loose, and I think the source is Dionysus. We need to get to
him."
"You're going to challenge Dionysus?" Adam stopped and motioned Zack into an alcove. "Are you insane?"

"A little bit," Zack admitted. He was starting to breathe hard, the poison telling on him.

"Anyone who stands up to Dionysus gets blasted with his magic... or... well... they just go crazy." Adam pushed his hair out of his face. "I was able to sneak around there for a day by playacting and avoiding him. And from what I hear, Power Rangers are not immune to the gods' powers."

"You're right about that," Zack said, desperately trying not to show how badly he felt. "But it's people he's using, and I don't care if they're votaries or not."

"Not all of them are votaries," Adam said quietly. "My brother..." His eyes flashed. "Okay, Black Ranger, if you want to take on the mad god, I'm going with you."

Zack hadn't expected this. He couldn't just take a civilian with him into the lion's den. "Dude, you need to get back to Haven. Join the rest of the freedom fighters. I can make it the rest of the way to Dionysus' territory."

"One, we're already here," Adam said, smiling mischievously. "And, two, I'd never make it to Haven. I'd get attacked by people I can't fight, and you'd have sent me to my death."

Adam was still smiling as Zack grabbed his helmet in frustration. "Okay, freedom fighter, it's your funeral. But if it gets down to it, and I say run, you run, got it?"

"Of course," Adam said, still smiling, and Zack was sure he wasn't entirely being truthful.

But he had no choice. Defeated, Zack said, "Okay, then, lead me to Dionysus."

Billy ran, leapt, and ducked around the spinning laser beams. Apparently Hephaestus was drawing his inspiration from spy movies.

He could tell the pattern, though, as long as he didn't really think about it. Right... left... right again... down... roll...

As he internalized the pattern, he could concentrate on other things. Namely, shutting the security system down before he got tired and made a mistake. The room seemed to be free of electronics except for the panels generating the laser beams, and those might well be illusory. There was a tiny metal panel on the far side of the room, but it was impossible to reach it unless Billy spent too much time inching himself toward it. He couldn't afford that time.

In the back of his mind, he was happy to reach this obstacle. It meant he was getting closer to his objective.

Compensating the best he could for the change in pattern, Billy took a shot to the leg as he threw one of his lances at the panel. His aim was true, but the lance bounced off and hit the ground.

Billy cursed, but forced himself to calm down. All it was a puzzle. Think it through. Find your center, and...

As an experiment, he drew his other lance and used the reflective head to catch a laser beam. It reflected and sparked against another laser panel, shorting it out.

Coolly noting the most likely trajectory, he aimed a laser at the appropriate panel. It threw up sparks,
and the lasers disappeared.

Not missing a step, Billy checked the room and door for more traps. He kept his mind calm and remote, knowing instinctively that protected him from any illusory traps.

He knew it would work, he realized, because it was what Trini would have done.

They'd stopped talking. Kimberly was no longer taunting her, but had turned strangely silent except for a few gasps of pain.

Trini, on the other hand, raged. She said no words, but she shouted with each blow and attack. Long gone were her disciplined and restrained attacks. She was lashing out at Kimberly to cause as much pain as possible.

Kimberly gave one last effort at attack, but she was too slow from the pain. Trini landed and powerful kick to her chest, again launching her across the room. This time, though, Kimberly landed with a thud and demorphed.

She looked dazed. Despite the protection of the uniform, her arms and legs were covered in bruises and cuts, and she tucked her right arm against her body in protection. Her eyes, though, were most unlike her. She was regarding Trini with a wild animal terror.

Shakily, Kimberly reached for her wrist communicator. It did not look like the one Billy had given her, but more like Zedd's armor.

Trini drew her blaster and shot Kimberly's wrist. Kimberly screamed in pain. The communicator had turned black, and Kimberly was trying to tear it off her wrist.

Trini demorphed as well. "No escape, Kim. We're going to play this out, and since you can't unmorph..."

Kimberly tried to run, but Trini easily intercepted her. Her attempts at fighting back turned more and more feeble, but Trini persisted. Long gone were any plans to capture Kimberly, or any plans at all. Trini had forgotten why she was there. She no longer thought. All she knew was she had to keep fighting Kimberly, had to keep fighting...

Trini raised her arm... but couldn't bring it down. Someone had hold of it.

"Stop it!" the voice yelled. "She's had enough! You're a Power Ranger, remember?"

Trini's body filled with ice. She looked up at her hand, and she realized she was holding a sharp piece of glass. It was cutting into her hand... but if she had brought it down on Kimberly.

A sob escaped Trini's throat. All at once, the primal rage that had urged her throughout the fight drained away, and she saw the damage she'd done: the blood, the fear... she'd almost killed...

Trini felt herself be pulled away, but she pulled back. She dropped a syringe from her pocket next to Kimberly on the floor, the serum she'd planned to use on her. Kimberly didn't notice, but at that moment, she disappeared, along with the serum.

"Come on!" the voice urged her on, and Trini found herself running to match the girl who was leading her.

They'd gotten down the street when the girl pulled Trini into a building. Trini slumped to the floor
while the girl checked to see if the coast was clear. Trini vaguely recognized the girl from reports on the freedom fighters of Angel Grove. She didn't recognize her otherwise, though they were about the same age.

"Are you better now?" the girl asked sharply. "We're gonna need to move soon."

"I... I..."

And, again, the sheer madness of what she'd done to Kim... what she'd almost done to her best friend... twisted her stomach. She pitched forward, dry heaving.

Instantly the girl was holding her, pulling her hair back just in case. "Hey, whoa, girl. Deep breaths, okay?"

Trini closed her eyes and breathed. She started shaking, and weakness spread over her whole body. She knew, though, she needed to move. This girl was probably in danger because of her, and she had to protect her.

"Wh-who are you?" Trini asked, finally able to open her eyes.

The girl was staring into Trini's eyes and mopping her clammy forehead. "I'm Aisha. We gotta move. Putty patrols will be out looking for me, and who knows what'll be looking for you. You okay to run?"

"Yes," Trini said, getting up, and she found that the deep, slow breaths were restoring her calm. "I'm Trini."

Aisha gave her a tight-lipped smile. "Yeah, I know. Your boys Jason and Billy are at Haven now. They'll be worried about you."

As she was talking, Aisha was combing through the debris. "Yes," she hissed as she found a plastic sword and shield playset from the debris, and Trini realized they were in a ruined toy store. "Can't believe this is still laying around." She strapped the shield to her arm and brandished the sword.

Trini was starting to doubt the sanity of her unexpected savior.

Aisha, though, was brimming with confidence. "Okay, I've already been through this with the boys. I don't know how you were able to fight Zedd's pet Ranger like that and get away with it, but the barrier's still up, so everything's apparently still cool. Still, if you lift a finger against a Putty or a god, it's all over. Stay close and leave the fighting to me."

Trini nodded her understanding and prepared to run.

Inside, though, she felt like she was dying. She'd lost control. She'd almost destroyed her best friend, and she'd definitely tortured her. No serum would make up for that. And she'd failed in her mission. Her mission had been to capture Kimberly, but she'd been too focused on fighting... no... hurting Kimberly to help her.

And why had she done it? Why had she lost control like that?

Trini ran, knowing she would have to answer for what she'd done. To the other Rangers... and most importantly to herself.

"I don't have time for you, hero," a grouchy voice snapped from the center of the room.
Billy shielded his eyes from the sudden brightness of the room. In the center of the room, Hephaestus worked feverishly at what looked like a combination forge and nuclear reactor. Billy suddenly didn't want to enter the room.

He swallowed his misgivings and walked forward. "Your traps weren't very difficult, Hephaestus. I'd almost suspect that you wanted me to find you."

Hephaestus spat in derision. "Those traps were just to keep your muscle-bound friend away. Too much like Ares, that boy." He looked up. "You, though... I knew I couldn't keep you away. You'd burrow through the Earth with something you whipped up in an hour if I didn't provide you with a way in."

Billy crossed his arms. All the while the god was talking, Billy had been trying to figure out the purpose for the machine he was working at. None of it looked good.

"Yes, well..." Billy began, "I haven't been at my best lately."

"What, because of that clone incident?"

Billy's arms dropped and his brain clouded. That wasn't what he was expecting, and definitely not what he needed right now.

Hephaestus waved his arm. "Things happen. You make mistakes. That's the nature of the forge. For every six good pieces of equipment, there is at least one piece that will fall apart at the slightest. The trick is to find the mistakes right off... and own them. Your problem was you didn't own your mistakes, not that your experiment didn't work." Hephaestus grinned. "But that's not what you came to hear. You came to figure out what I was doing." Hephaestus stepped back a bit, sliding his useless leg behind him. "What do you make of it, hero?"

Billy stepped forward and looked more closely. Now that he'd gotten used to the strangeness of the amalgamation of ancient and modern technology, he could tell the purpose a bit more clearly. He stepped back.

"It's a... a cannon." He looked at Hephaestus with wild eyes. "It's a cannon, using the Earth's energy in a way that will preserve the Earth, even if it will rip through the immediate surface. But..."

"Found the equipment down here waiting for me," Hephaestus crowed. "Looked like some of those giant metal things you heroes pilot, except destroyed and scrapped. The Earth's core itself was..."

"These are the pieces of our old Zords," Billy breathed. "Zordon was able to use them to create our new Zords, using the Earth's core as a forge. But... if this is a cannon, where is it pointing?"

Hephaestus laughed heartily. "Check the scopes yourself, boy."

Billy had been worried that Hephaestus would attack him, but that did not seem to be the god's intention. Billy therefore turned his back to him and looked through the targeting scope for the cannon.

It was the moon, centered on the tiny dot that represented the Moon Palace.

Billy pulled back with a gasp. "But... you're..."

"Why do you think I went underground, hero?" Hephaestus said. "Why hide what I was doing? From you heroes, when you're too busy hiding and regrouping to pay attention to an old lame god?" Hephaestus grinned. "Even Zeus cannot survive the powers of Gaia."
"Is it just you?" Billy said, his mind whirling. "Or..."

"All the gods are rebelling," Hephaestus said. "Now it seems to be fashionable to hate Lord Zeus, ever since he went insane and starting troubling himself with intergalactic beings and teenage heroes. We are gods. We are above all this, so the only conclusion is that Zeus has gone insane, and the only way to deal with him is to kill him."

"You'll blow through the town above us," Billy said desperately. "Can't you rebel against Zeus without killing everyone above?"

Hephaestus waved a hand. "That won't be a problem," he said. "Poseidon will have drowned everyone long before then... but not before Dionysus leads his votaries in a riot that will sufficiently distract Zeus from sensing the activation of the cannon."

Billy struggled to keep up with all the new information. "That... Hephaestus... I can help you in your rebellion against Zeus. That's who we're fighting, after all. But not if people's lives are in danger. There's got to be another way. Maybe we can move the cannon..."

"We do not need the help of human heroes," Hephaestus cut him off. "You've all already lost, anyway. After we defeat Zeus, the gods are going back to sleep, so you heroes can help rebuild after the destruction. It's only one tiny town, after all. A second Pompeii, and all the world is saved."

"Then I'm going to have to stop you," Billy said.

Hephaestus shook his head slowly. "No, you won't. And don't try to come back here. There won't be puzzles anymore. Just walls."

Billy felt a swooping sensation in his stomach, a feeling of rushing wind, and then sunlight. He was back at the front doors of the high school, and Jason was next to him.

That was all on him now.

That was all on him now.

That was all...

"Oh, enough, already!"

Jason took another step and tripped, landing hard on his side. He realized he's been walking in place, and from the ache in his feet he'd been doing so for quite a while.

He squinted in the darkness. He'd been caught in a trap, but something had freed him. It was a good thing, too, because he wasn't sure how he'd have been able to escape himself.

That voice... was really familiar.

There was a flash of light, and Jason came face to face with Tommy.

He took a step back and yelled in surprise. Heart thudding and eyes stinging, he tried desperately to form words. "Y... Tommy... I... I knew you were..."

Tommy's face twisted with compassion. "I'm sorry, hero. I didn't think. Of course this form would have affected you, but I needed to take an appropriate form. One that you would trust."

Jason took a few steadying breaths. He'd called him "hero." That sounded like a god, a god that was
"Yeah, that's great, take the form of my dead best friend," Jason said bitterly. "That's gonna win points."

"Oh, shut up." It was eerie to see Tommy's face twist in annoyance, like it had done so many times before. "Don't start with me, Jason. This is the face you most wanted to see, and you know it, so let's move past this so we can actually get a few things done. Earth is in peril, remember?

Jason frowned. "Fine. But if you're a god, who are you? And why did you help me?"

The figure bearing Tommy's face gave a sarcastic smile. "I'm not a god. Not technically, anyway. And I'm not going to tell you who I am, because then I'd have to explain too much, because human teens don't study their history worth anything. We're on a schedule, Red Ranger. That's why I broke you out of that trap." He crossed his arms and rolled his eyes, looking so painfully like Tommy that Jason wanted to cry. "That trap was designed to break when you stopped with your self-pity and actually learned something about yourself. But you've done that before. You're just having a minor crisis of faith right now, but that's not something to risk the world over. And if Hephaestus and the other gods don't like it, they can just suck it."

"So this is a trap from Hephaestus?"

The figure nodded.

"And you're not a god."

"Not technically," came the mysterious reply.

"And all that trap was about finding my confidence, and dealing with my failures as a leader?" Jason said.

"In a nutshell," the figure said. "But, like I said, you've dealt with that before. You can't control everything, you can't save everyone, all you can do is your best, and all that Hallmark crap." The figure grinned Tommy's grin. "Now's not the time for self-discovery, Jas. If you want self-discovery, go on a vision quest or a walkabout or whatever you humans do to man up. In the meantime, the gods are in rebellion against this Zedd guy that has them under their thrall. They still think he's Zeus, but gone crazy. And they're going to sacrifice all the people of Angel Grove to get back at him. But Billy can fill you in on the details: he's learning them from Hephaestus pretty thoroughly right now."

"This is..." Jason's mind was racing. This was far bigger than they'd thought. If it turned into a fight between Zedd and the gods, and the humans got in the way... "Okay, now I'm really confused," he said. "You say you're technically not a god, and you know who Zedd is, and you're helping me? I gotta know who you are."

The figure raked his hair back in frustration. "Do I always have to spoon-feed you humans information? Take the stone and the flint, make the fire. It's not that difficult." He took a breath. "Who I am doesn't matter. What you do in the next few hours matters a great deal. Do not trust any of the gods, do not take anything for granted, and, first and foremost... protect the humans. Gods are relics, Zedd is a power-hungry tyrant, but humans are more powerful than any of them. The gods may claim to be the true spirits of the Earth, but it's just not so. It's humanity. It's you."

The figure bearing Tommy's form pulled a vial from his pocket and handed it to Jason.

Jason looked it over. "What is it?"
The figure grinned again. "Just call it fire."

The room dissolved around Jason, and he found himself at the entrance of the high school next to Billy.

The barrier flickered, and Rocky ran through. He was bleeding and limping, his face distorted in wild panic.

"It was an ambush," he said. "Dionysus's votaries are rioting in the streets. I couldn't fight them like I do Putties. And Aisha's been taken, I don't know where." He dragged himself up the steps to the two Rangers. "Please... tell me you know what to do. I just don't know what to do anymore."

Jason and Billy looked at each other, and then looked back at Rocky.

"Don't worry," Jason said. "I think we know what to do. We need to gather up the forces of Haven."

"I don't think you'll need to wait for long," Rocky said.

The two Rangers turned and realized the front corridor was full to the brim with people, all staring at them.

Jason took a breath. "All right, everyone. Who wants to help save the world?"

At first, Tommy thought he'd been too late, and that the sword had done its job. And then he realized he was feeling the familiar swooping sensation of dimension hopping.

He was a bit afraid to open his eyes. Afraid that he'd taken Ninjor with him, or that he'd face someone or something worse. He preferred to remain in blissful ignorance.

But maybe it was Earth. It didn't feel like Earth, but maybe...

It wasn't Earth, he knew as soon as he opened his eyes. It reminded him, in fact, of the place he'd gone after his meeting with Hades and Persephone. Instead of a gray infinite, though, he was faced with white as far as he could see.

No, it wasn't. There was a dark blur to his right. He started walking to it slowly without making a real conscious decision. The journey home was starting to feel hopeless, and his dimension hopping pointless, dangerous meandering. How long had he been at it. Days? Years? Mere minutes?

He thought of Goldar's words. His friends thought he was dead. Kimberly thought she'd killed him. He couldn't let them keep believing that. He couldn't let Zedd use that against them.

Yet... how was he going to get home?

The dark blur became clearer. It was a series of large screens, with consoles under them that formed a familiar-looking circle. There was a figure in the middle, moving from console to console. For a wild second, Tommy thought that it was Billy... but the figure, while young, was bald, slightly smaller than Billy, and definitely alien.

The figure looked up at Tommy, shock distorting his young face. He immediately turned from the console and started walking dazedly toward him.

"T... Tommy?" the man said. "What are you doing here?"

It was impossible. It was more than impossible... it was ridiculous. There was no way that, in that
panicked shot in a million, that Tommy could have travelled here. It was...

"Zordon?"
Haven, part 3

Chapter Summary

Book 6: Shadows in the Cave

Tommy realized he was sitting on the floor. He didn't remember falling. Maybe he'd lost consciousness? Someone was kneeling near him. It was... But that was impossible.

"Tommy, are you sensible again?"

Tommy shook his head vigorously. It hadn't been a dream. It wasn't a hallucination. It was real. But...

"You're really young!" he blurted out, possibly not all that tactfully.

But the small smile was so familiar, even though he'd only seen it projected in a giant green tube. The shake of the head resembled the distortions caused by movement he'd seen in the Command Center so often. There was no mistaking it. This was Zordon.

"Like, really really young!" Tommy repeated.

"I had no idea that one of my Power Rangers would find his way to my dimension," Zordon said in a voice that was higher and softer than the sober booming voice Tommy was used to. "The image I project approximates my true age... but I was young when Rita trapped me in this dimension."

"But why don't you..."

Zordon actually laughed this time, and it was a strange sound. "Tommy, would you follow someone who looked even younger than you? I had to find a way to project authority and experience."

Tommy pulled himself up. "I dunno. I think floating in a giant green tube would have been enough." He looked around. "This is where you live?"

"For... well... quite a long time," Zordon said wistfully, also getting to his feet. "Longer than I can think about and keep my sanity." His eyes sharpened, and Tommy was again taken aback by the familiar movements, now in physical form. "Tommy, how are you here? How did you get here? I had realized that Kimberly had not killed you, that Lord Zedd had sent you to another dimension for his own purposes, but..."

"Yeah, I was stuck in one of his dimensions," Tommy said, frowning. "But I was somehow able to access a portal and escape."

"Access... a..." Zordon spluttered, suddenly looking appropriately young in his confusion. "Do you mean you are able to move between dimensions at will? Tommy, you're not supposed to be able to do that," he ended lamely.

"I've been told," Tommy said. "Had a conversation with Quagmire when I hopped over to the Island of Illusion... which I wasn't supposed to be able to access twice. At least, that's what he told me."
"Island of Illusion?" This time it was Zordon who looked like he needed to sit down. "Tommy, where all have you been? How long have you been at this?"

"Not long," Tommy said. Then he frowned. "Or maybe a long time. Can't really tell. I met Hades and Persephone, and then I went into this weird nightmare dimension that linked to my mind and showed me all sorts of nasty stuff, but then Goldar showed up to kill me and the dimension linked to him. That's when I escaped and found myself in the Island of Illusion-Quagmire is much nicer when he's not torturing you, by the way-and then I went to a dimension with this guy named Ninjor, and when he tried to kill me, I panicked, dimension hopped, and came out here."

This time Zordon did sit down, right on the steps next to his Command Center lookalike. Tommy was reminded forcibly of the amount of times he and the other Rangers had done the same.

"Why did Ninjor, the inventor of the power coins, try to kill you?"

Tommy shrugged. "He said something about me tainting the powers. I don't think he understands evil spells all that well."

"He doesn't," Zordon said contemplatively. "Ninjor's problem has always been that he cannot grasp ambiguities. For him, there's a sharp separation between good and evil, and deed and intent are equal. He's never been able to understand the strange paths of a long life, and the steps that must be taken to combat evil. Hence his self-imposed exile."

"And his hostility to me," Tommy added. "Guy who got his powers from an evil empress and fought for the side of evil."

Zordon nodded, and Tommy was surprised to see a satirical look in his eyes, a look that had never quite translated to the projection in the tube. "Ninjor will not follow you here. We have already had our disagreements."

Tommy had moved from the steps to the center of Zordon's computer installation. He was shocked to see a projection of the Command Center, as well as scenes from Angel Grove.

"I thought you were still cut off." Tommy said. "How are you seeing all of this?"

Zordon smiled and shook his head. "An inaccuracy that even Alpha continues to spout, and one that I have not felt it necessary to contradict. It is not I that am lost, but my connection to your world. No one can move through dimensions... present company excluded, apparently. In essence, I can see, but nothing else."

Tommy squinted at the screens. He sat down again, unable to process the images.

In the Command Center, Alpha and Billy were working at a console, but they were accompanied by Jason's father and sister, as well as Trini's mother. At the side of the screen, he could see Jason talking to Sylvia.

In Angel Grove, the streets were deserted, with the exception of a few people, all running or hiding, and animals, hunted by bow-wielding gods. A group of teenagers were attacking a squadron of Putties with some sort of weapons, covering for others who were running with supplies. In other areas, people drank, fought, or made out, all seemingly under the thrall of a god. Only one area remained unmonitored: the high school.

"The goddess Demeter has created a haven for civilians at your high school," Zordon commented. "I've tried to break through her shields, but I'm not sure I could succeed even if I had full access to the Command Center."
Tommy gave Zordon a look. "That was literally the last of my questions. Gods taken over Angel Grove? Parents in the Command Center? And why aren't the guys protecting people? What's going on?"

"The Power Rangers have surrendered to Lord Zedd," Zordon said. He smiled. "It's quite a long story. Suffice to say, after Kimberly was put under Zedd's spell, she and certain gods led an attack against all the Rangers' families, forcing the Rangers to reveal their identities and protect them by hiding them in the Command Center. While thus distracted, the gods took over City Hall and held the entire town hostage, forcing the Rangers to reveal their identities and surrender. Currently, the terms of the surrender maintain that Lord Zedd and the gods hold Angel Grove, which is encased with the waters of the Pacific Ocean by Poseidon, but are not allowed to directly kill anyone. In the meantime, the Rangers are to find me and turn me in as ransom for Angel Grove."

"So you're obviously scrambling your signal even more so they don't find you too early," Tommy said. "What plans do they have in motion?"

If Zordon was surprised by Tommy's quick adjustment to the circumstances, he didn't show it. "They are currently working to cure Kimberly, as well as Zack, who was hit by a poisoned arrow. They're also working on breaking the hold Zedd has over the gods. It seems Hephaestus has gone underground, so they're starting with him."

Tommy nodded. "He seems the most likely to go against Zedd. There didn't seem to be any love lost between Hephaestus and Zeus. But they've got to be careful. I don't think the gods really care about any of the people. With the civilians of Angel Grove trapped like that..." He looked up at Zordon. "I've got to get back there. I have to help them."

"Agreed," Zordon said. "We both do." He moved over to a console, punched a few buttons, and then began gathering equipment stored under the console. "I believe it is time to unlock the secret of your dimension hopping, something that should have killed you instantly."

Tommy forced himself to look away from the screens. "More tests, huh? I guess I'm ready."

Billy took the vial and studied it. "I think he was being literal, calling it fire. This is... well... elemental fire. I read about this in the Command Center databanks. It's really rare."

"And can it... oh... possibly take care of those pesky waters that form a barrier around the city and might just drown us all any second?" Jason said casually.

Billy smiled. "I'll have to diffuse it for that. It's concentrated too tightly in this vial. Might take a big machine."

"Which happens to be your specialty," Jason commented.

"I'll need help," Billy said. "And equipment." He pressed his communicator. "Alpha, I'm going to need to build a machine that can diffuse elemental fire across the water barrier. Any ideas?"

"Billy! Elemental fire? Ay-yi-yi-yi-yi, Billy, that's dangerous!"

"Playing with fire is always dangerous," Billy answered. "I know that more than anyone. But this is the best solution... This is the only solution. Poseidon's going to let the waters drop, and everyone's going to drown. So let's work on a solution."

"Oh, ay-yi-yi..." Alpha said, now just worried. "I'll send down the equipment you'll need, but it's going to have to be big."
"Set it all right outside Haven, and don't worry," Billy said. "This is what I do."

He cut communications and looked around at the surrounding people. He spotted the people he needed. "Mary Katherine! Vince! We still have that computer in the old science lab, right?"

Billy's two fellow members of the Science Club had not spoken to Billy, and they looked startled to be addressed by their friend-turned-Power-Ranger.

"It's still working," Mark Katherine said. "We didn't have a reason to cannibalize it these past few weeks. But what...?"

"Start it up," Billy said. "Anyone with computer or engineering training is needed in the second floor science lab," he called to the crowd. "I also need people to brave outside the barrier long enough to grab heavy things."

"You heard him," Rocky said when no one was moving. They listened to Rocky, though, affording him the same respect they'd shown Aisha. "Get moving! We've got a city to save!"

Jason nodded to Billy, and then turned to help grab equipment. He almost ran smack into Mr. Kaplan.

"Mr. Scott?" Mr. Kaplan said. "My office?"

Billy gave Jason a worried glance, but Jason waved him off. He knew this was coming anyway.

He followed Mr. Kaplan to his office, which looked oddly normal compared to the rest of the school.

Mr. Kaplan sat down and motioned Jason to do the same. Jason did, though he was itching to move around. He had so much to do... but this was Mr. Kaplan. He deserved some sort of explanation.

"I gather that you're mobilizing Haven to fight Lord Zedd and the gods. Am I correct?" Mr. Kaplan began with a thin smile.

"And what a way to begin. Jason let out a breath. "Not to fight. To resist. Exactly what you've been doing."

"And thus opening up Haven to danger?" Mr. Kaplan's eyes grew hard. "You've only seen the able-bodied people at Haven. The freedom fighters. The people handling supplies. There are children here, and sick, and wounded. And the barrier around Haven is their only protection."

Jason's face shadowed. "It's not going to be protection for long. Isn't that right, Demeter?"

Demeter had been hovering in the doorway, unnoticed and unspeaking. She was glaring suspiciously at Jason. "I do not know what you mean."

"Then let me spell it out, because this was the one thing that had me confused this whole time," Jason said, leaning back in his chair casually. "All this time Dionysus has been collecting votaries. That was enough to tell us that the gods were planning something against Zedd, but that wasn't enough. Then I meet a fairly interesting fellow underground, one who likes to give humans fire and isn't technically a god."

Demeter's silver eyes went wide.

"Right," Jason said. "I'm guessing the Titan Prometheus knows a little more about what's going on than any of us do, and he made sure to tell me to not trust gods, and to protect the humans of Angel"
Grove. He's always been pretty partial to humans, right?"

Demeter's face grew dark.

"So then I figured that... well... why should he be worried about saving humans?" Jason continued. "There's a god-or goddess-that made a special place just for humans' protection. Unless, of course, it's not for protection. Because, wouldn't you know it, it's right above the cannon Dionysus is aiming at the Moon Palace. Not to mention that these supposedly protected humans are wandering off to join Dionysus by the droves... and not always because they want to."

"You talk too much, human," Demeter sneered.

Mr. Kaplan rose out of his seat. "Demeter... why? I know some of your history, and your daughter..."

"My daughter will not be able to return home from the Underworld with the world in this state," Demeter cut him off. "So I care for my daughter. Should I then care for everyone's sons and daughters?" She laughed. "You humans are far too trusting of your gods."

"Never mind that," Jason said. "You obviously don't want us to scatter, and you don't want Zedd to know what you're doing, so I can count on you to keep the Haven barrier up, with the same rules as before, right?"

Demeter crossed her arms, but looked a bit taken aback by Jason's words. "Certainly, human, but..."

"Then don't interfere with what we're doing," Jason said. "We're probably going to fail anyway. If you interfere, I will break the terms of surrender myself, and all the barriers will come down anyway, only this time endangering the cannon. Got that?"

Demeter gave him a furious look, but nodded and left the room, her beatific, motherly presence now spoiled.

"So there's that," Jason said as he watched Mr. Kaplan slowly lowering himself into his chair. "That's what I'm getting Haven to help with. Dispelling the waters of Poseidon, and keeping the people of Haven safe. No actual fighting if I have anything to say about it. Yes, we have to fight the gods and Lord Zedd, but the people of Haven... no, the people of Angel Grove are our priority right now."

Mr. Kaplan was silent for a minute, and then let out a low breath. "A+.

Jason grinned, but he was cut short by a clatter in the outer office, and then Bulk barging into the office, out of breath.

"Two things," Bulk gasped. "One, Aisha's back, and she didn't find Adam, but she's brought Trini, who looks pretty bad. Two..." he gulped, "Skull is gone. And he's taken all the best weapons."

Trini had slumped under an orange tree on the grounds of the high school. Aisha had left her there after she refused to go in. She... she just couldn't face them.

She'd failed. She'd failed in about every way she knew how. Not only did she not retrieve Kimberly, but she'd completely lost control. She hadn't even tried to capture Kimberly. She'd just wanted to hurt her.

And why? That was really what haunted her. Had she... had she really... hated Kim?
One thing she'd found out was that Kimberly was definitely jealous of her. That had been... shocking. Trini had always thought of Kimberly as so confident, the girl that everyone loved. The girl that everyone fought over. Who was true enough to herself to give her heart to someone, damn the consequences.

And Kimberly had been right. Trini pushed everyone away. She had friends... lots of friends... and she was closer to the rest of the Rangers than she was with anyone else, but... there was a barrier. A line that no one crossed. A line that she herself never crossed. But she just couldn't admit to him... these past two weeks, all year, working so close to him...

No, it was more than that, although that... her feelings for him... had been building for quite some time. It was with everyone. With herself. She spent so much time being calm and focused and detached that she never gave anyone a chance. And if someone opened up to her, she threw it in their face. With everyone. Even with...

She opened her eyes, and knew she would see Billy. And there he was.

"I heard you got back safely," he said quietly. He tried to adjust his glasses, and then remembered for the hundredth time he didn't wear them anymore.

Trini closed her eyes again and buried her face in her hands. "I... I failed. I didn't get Kimberly, I lost control, I..."

An arm was around her, and Trini realized that Billy was trying to comfort her. That just made it worse.

"Aisha told me a bit of what happened... and I sort of filled in the rest," Billy said. "It's going to be okay."

"How?" Trini said, practically howling the word. "I nearly killed Kimberly. And I did it... because... I was jealous of her. And I hated myself for it."

Trini felt Billy grin against her hair. "Would you believe me if I said it was a mistake? Just a mistake?"

Trini pulled away from Billy, shaking her head. "No. It was horrible. You didn't listen to me. I nearly killed Kimberly."

"Operative word, nearly," Billy said. "And you lost control. It... it happens to all of us."

Trini felt a wave of cold wash over her. A mistake... Billy was forgiving her, just as she hadn't forgiven him. Not the same mistake, but certainly close...

"You understand yourself a bit better now," Billy said. "Being disciplined is not about never making a mistake. It's about learning from those mistakes."

"That's what Tommy always did," Trini said in a small voice.

Tears leapt to Billy's eyes. "Yes... That is what he did. And now..." Billy swallowed hugely, "now that he's dead, we can..."

Trini cut him off with a hug. She knew he was giving up a lot in admitting that Tommy was dead. "I... I'm sorry." She hugged him tighter. "I... You... You never treated me like an assistant. I'm sorry I said that..."
"You were right," Billy said. "But... now I'm asking, not for your assistance, but for your help. We're building a machine to disperse the water barrier, and I'm a bit out of my depth. But... us together..."

Trini punched Billy in the arm. "You let me go blubbering on when there's world-saving to do? What's wrong with you?!" She ran to the high school, rubbing the tears off her face.

Billy smiled, rubbed his arm, and followed her.

Zack and Adam did not have to search for long for the mad god. He was waiting for them in the front lobby, the remnants of a truly epic party around him. He was swirling some wine in a Spider-Man glass.

"Ah, the two I was so hoping to speak to," Dionysus said. "And I take issue with all that 'mad god' nonsense, spy."

Adam bristled. "You are insane, though. What you're doing to all these people..."

"Is perfectly reasonable," Dionysus answered. "At least, it is for my purposes. What is not perfectly reasonable is a teenager from Stone Canyon leading a resistance movement against the overlords of a place he does not even live in, and then risk everything to recover a brother who came over here voluntarily."

Adam ground his teeth. "You're lying."

"Am I?" Dionysus said, taking another sip. "Further madness: the Black Ranger. Barely able to keep on his feet, and wielding powers that is only making the poison affect him worse... thinking he can defeat me and help his friends."

Zack didn't answer. He didn't want to risk sounding weak... and Adam was also doing a pretty good job of pumping the god for information.

"Why use the votaries like this?" Adam demanded. "Why put so many people under this thrall? You forget that I've been... well, yeah, I've been spying around. And I know not half of these people came here willingly. They're your zombies."

"A messy metaphor," Dionysus said good-humoredly, "but I'll allow it. And they're only for effect. As long as I control them, as long as Zeus has to worry over them, he'll never see what's coming."

Zack clapped Adam on the arm. "Good job, Adam. Now get out of here. I think I can guarantee you safe passage now."

Adam looked confused, but it was nothing to the look on Dionysus' face. "You have indeed gone insane, Zachary Taylor. I'm sorry, but you are not thinking clearly, and it's not from my magic. Hallucinations and delusions often accompany the latter stages of Apollo's poison, so you must be reaching the end of your life."

"Not crazy," Zack laughed. "At least not in that way. You're rebelling against Zeus, and you're the distraction, but it'll only work if you can concentrate on the votaries." He pressed his communicator. "Alpha, who's monitoring the votaries? How are they acting?"

"Confused," his mother answered. "They'd been rioting in earnest before, but now they've calmed down."

"Thanks, mom," Zack grinned. "And that's just from having a conversation with you, Dionysus.
What do you think of a fight?"

Dionysus took a step back. "You can't. You'll break the terms of surrender."

Zack shrugged. "Zedd can't see us. You wouldn't have told me so much if he could. And you don't dare let him, because then he'll know you're in rebellion and he'll be able to spoil your plans. Now, I'm guessing you're pretty drained, and the rest of the gods are busy, so..." Zack pulled out his axe. "You want a party? You got one."

It hurt. It *hurt*. So much.

Kimberly reached weakly for the syringe Trini had left behind. Trini was gone, gone with that other girl. Of course she was gone. She'd already done her damage.

Kimberly's hand closed around the syringe, and she jabbed herself in the arm. She could feel her ribs knit together, and some of the cuts and bruises disappeared, but she still hurt so much.

Half-strength. It had been a trap, and the serum was only for half-strength, just like when Jason had captured Tommy.

Kimberly sobbed at the pain. Not just the physical pain. What Trini had done to her. How Trini had looked at her. What she'd said...

Her communicator was useless, but she felt the tingle of teleportation anyway. She blinked, and she was in Finster's lab.

"It's all right," Finster said soothingly. "You'll be all right. Just take some of this."

Kimberly felt a liquid being tipped down her throat, a liquid that burned. She coughed and spluttered, but Finster held her firmly.

She felt some energy return to her. It wasn't quite like the serum, but then she'd never been injured that much. Ever.

"Lord Zedd wishes to see you," Finster said, "as soon as you're ready."

"I can't," Kimberly sobbed. "Not like this. Not after..."

"You shouldn't worry," Finster said, smoothing back her hair. "I think you'll find him sympathetic. He'll only reserve anger for those who did this to you."

Kimberly breathed deeply. She realized she'd been panicking, and she needed to get a grip on herself. Of course Lord Zedd would help her. That was their relationship: that's what he did for her.

"Thank you, Finster," she said quietly, pushing herself off the table. "How... how are things on Earth?"

Finster's face was in shadow. "I'm sure Lord Zedd will apprise you of the situation. He sounded impatient."

"Right," Kimberly said. She half-ran to the throne room, wondering why she was in such a hurry... wondering why Zedd was so impatient.

"My dear!" Lord Zedd greeted her, beckoning her to him. "I'm so sorry. I tried to warn you, wanted to protect you, but..."
"It's okay," Kimberly said in a small voice, and then paused. Why did she feel like something was wrong?

"But your friend... your former friend, sorry... tried to kill you! An act for which she will not be spared, I assure you. I was afraid of this from the beginning, afraid that your friends would not be so forgiving."

Kimberly allowed him to embrace her, but she felt little of the compulsion toward him that she'd once felt. What was wrong? What was wrong with her?

"And your clothes!" Zedd exclaimed. "Even your uniform could not protect them, my dear."

Kimberly looked down at her clothes. They were ripped and torn, though not in embarrassing ways, thank goodness. "I guess I should have changed before I got here," she said.

"I was saving this, but I think now is the perfect time. And it's in your favorite color." The chamber was flashing redder and redder, and Zedd was looking more and more agitated. "Squatt! Babboo! You fools bring the dress in here, or I'll be making you into a dress."

The two scientists-turned-Janitors silently filed in, carrying a package wrapped in tissue paper. They shoved it in Kimberly's arms, and backed away as fast as they could.

In a daze, Kimberly slowly pulled off the tissue paper. A voluminous pink dress tumbled out of the package. A pink dress with a broad, stiff black collar. It was...

"This is Rita's dress," Kimberly said softly.

"And it will look far better on you," Zedd added.

"This is Rita's dress."

"Would you like to change now, my dear, or..."

"THIS IS RITA'S DRESS!"

Kimberly held the dress between her fists, and then looked at the telescope. Rita's telescope. Rita's dress. Rita's books, that he gazed at so lovingly.

"You're trying to make me into her," she said in the stunned silence. She could sense Squatt and Babboo stopping the doorway, watching, and she knew Finster was monitoring from his lab. "But... why? Why, unless..." Her face contorted in horror. "But if you love her, why did you banish her? Why replace her with me?"

"You're confused, my dear," Lord Zedd said in a deadly voice. "I merely wished to give you a gift, and you seem to attribute my actions to some misguided infatuation with a deposed empress."

"And you don't even know," Kimberly said in horror. "That... that's really sick."

Her brain raced, and with it came new understanding. He rarely called her by her name, he barely even looked at her... and then the spell itself. Always keeping her at a distance, drawing her in just enough to keep her intrigued. To keep her infatuated with him.

The connection was still there, but it had turned sour, and now she saw him for what he really was. A skinless monstrosity. Not because of what he looked like, but because of what he was.

"You over-played your part," she said coldly. "You wanted me to completely abandon my friends,
but still feel guilty enough and feel enough self-hatred so I wouldn't dare think for myself. You orchestrated that whole thing with Trini... and the whole thing with Tommy."

"The person you killed?" Zedd said pointedly.

"You wanted me to," Kimberly said, the words hurting her throat. "It was all a damn set-up. Another betrayal, right? And another, and another..."

"Think about what you're saying, my dear," Zedd said slowly. "Do you really want to turn against me? Your last friend in the universe?"

Kimberly bared her teeth. "I don't care if I don't have any friends. I don't even care if the Power Rangers hate me now, and I know they do. And I don't even care that the spell isn't broken, because I still don't want it to be broken. But I will not be used. Not by you, not by anyone."

He raised his staff, but she was too quick for him. She couldn't take time to morph, but she was the fastest of all of the Rangers. She ran past Squatt and Babboo, and hoped they had the presence of mind to clear the immediate area as well.

He'd be expecting her to go for her Zord. Despite her continued pain, not entirely cured by serum and whatever Finster gave her, she morphed mid-run, but didn't go to the Zord. Instead, she gave it a mental command to go to the Command Center. She may not be welcome there, but Alpha would surely not refuse the recovery of a weapon like that.

The communicator Zedd had given her was useless since Trini shot it, and she couldn't ask for help from Finster. She remembered that Finster had teleportation capabilities in his lab, and if Tommy could access it, she could as well.

The door to Tommy's old room was open.

She did a double-take. His door was never open. No one went in there. Unless...

She ran in, got halfway to the computer, and then realized there was something on the bed.

A wrist communicator. A red wrist communicator.

She heard heavy footsteps in the hallway. She grabbed the communicator and jabbed it. She wouldn't be able to get to the Command Center, but there was nothing stopping her from getting to Angel Grove.

Kimberly started running as soon as she teleported. She was in the park.

She cursed. She really didn't need to meet up with Artemis or Apollo, or any of their crazy zoo animals.

She made it to the edge of the park when a squadron of Putties intercepted her, having obviously received new orders from Zedd.

All the while, Zedd was yelling in her brain. The compulsion to go back to him, to obey him, was strong, but she wouldn't. She refused. It had been an infatuation with him, and that was over. He obviously didn't know how accustomed she was to having... and getting over... crushes. He didn't know what it was to be a teenage girl.

"Okay," she breathed, preparing to fight, "let's see if I remember how to do this."
Adam had considered doing what Zack said... but something kept him back. The mention of his sickness, and the fact that he didn't have backup. All the rest of the gods were busy, but so were probably the rest of the Rangers.

He also knew he'd be facing the wrath of both Rocky and Aisha when he got back. He could wait a little longer on that.

He watched Zack fight the god. The god looked like he was struggling, but so did Zack. However, Zack was obviously too professional and too desperate to let any weakness slow him down.

It was the first time he'd seen a Power Ranger fight up close. There had been a battle in Stone Canyon involving the Pink and Green Rangers (his stomach twisted: one disappeared, rumored dead, and one evil), but he hadn't been there. And he'd seen Ranger fights on the television, but it was nothing like this. It was martial arts-a bit dance-like with this one, for some reason—but with extra speed and the vague sense of power that seemed to hang in the air. It almost hurt to stand this close.

If Adam got in the way, he knew he would be killed... but he couldn't move. He couldn't look away. He felt an odd sort of hunger. To be able to do that... to have that sort of power.

And then, everything went wrong. Dionysus seemed to lose his temper. His silver eyes turned fiery, and Zack fell. With a dull flash, he demorphed, and Adam finally saw the boy his own age under the mask, looking young and scared through the pain.

Dionysus looked up. "Watch him die, spy. Know that that is the fate for anyone who gets in my way." With a flourish, Dionysus left the building.

Adam ran to Zack's side. Zack was writhing and screaming, completely lost to his surroundings. Adam had no earthly clue what to do, but he knew he had to get help. The simple fact that there was no help to be had, that they were cut off from Haven, the other Rangers, his friends... everyone... that did not deter him.

Adam tried to hold Zack down, to keep him from hurting himself, but even Adam's carefully-trained strength was nothing to the Ranger's convulsions. He did, however, come away with Zack's watch. A watch that didn't look like a watch, as it didn't tell time.

Figuring that it was the best he could do, Adam started pressing buttons. The thing crackled with static. That was hopeful. Static was better than nothing.

"Hello?!" he yelled into the thing, realizing he sounded more panicked than he'd thought he was. "C-can I talk to a Power Ranger or something? Is anybody there?"

The speaker crackled for a few interminable seconds, and then a voice came through. "This is the Red Ranger. Who is this? Why do you have a communicator?"

"This is the Black Ranger's communicator," Adam said quickly, "and that's the Black Ranger screaming in the background. He got some sort of blast from Dionysus. Dionysus said he was going to die. We're in Dionysus' territory right now, and it's cut off from surveillance, and I have no earthly clue what to do."

There was a pause, and the voices became suddenly muted. Then there was a loud scratching sound over the speaker, and then a new voice. "Adam, is that you?"

Adam paused. "Uh... hi, Aisha. Kinda busy right now..."

"Do you realize I thought you were dead, or a votary, or..."
There was another scratching sound. "Adam, right?" the Red Ranger said. "This is Jason. We can't teleport Zack up where you are. Can you move him clear of the building?"

Adam regarded the flailing figure. He was getting worse, if anything. "I can try," he said.

"We'll be able to teleport him out, but not you," Jason said. "Sorry, but you're going to have to get to safety as soon as he's clear."

"Hey, no problem," Adam said, and he put the communicator in his pocket. He could hear Aisha in the background. Yeah, he was in for it, but right now he had to help Zack.

After several minutes, though, he only moved Zack a few feet. The problem was, it seemed, that Zack panicked whenever he was touched, and lashed out at whoever was touching him. And the hallucinations weren't diminishing Zack's strength or aim. Adam staunched his bleeding nose as best he could and tried to move him a few more inches.

There was a clattering sound, and a girl with long black hair and a syringe ran into the building. "Hold on, Zack!" she cried.

Adam stepped back. He realized this had to be the Yellow Ranger.

"Adam!" she yelled. "Can you hold his arms for me?"

Adam darted forward again. He'd gotten groggy after the last few blows, but he still felt equal to taking care of half of the flailing limbs.

"I hope this works," Trini said, and jabbed Zack in the stationary arm.

Adam was thrown to the ground by the reaction, Trini following him as they slid across the room. Zack had redoubled his convulsions, and it seemed he'd gone beyond screams. He was completely silent, only his face screaming.

"No! Dammit!" Trini cried.

And then, as quickly as it had started, it stopped. Zack lay on the ground, breathing heavily and drenched in sweat, but wide-eyed and smiling.

"What just happened?" Zack said, his voice perfectly normal, if a bit hoarse.

Trini laughed shakily. "What I expected to happen. Dionysus gave you a fever, which, along with the pain and hallucinations, finally burned through Apollo's poison. Once you'd burned through that, you just needed the antidote to Dionysus' fever."

"How did you figure that out?" Zack asked, his eyes wide.

Trini launched up from the floor. "Haven't you heard? I'm a genius. And I've been waiting a long time to do something."

She pulled Zack in for a kiss.

Zack looked shocked at first, but his eyes turned joyous rather quickly and he went with it. Their kiss deepened, turning rather enthusiastic.

Adam looked away, waited a minute, and then cleared his throat. "Uh... guys?"

They ignored him.
"There's this whole saving Angel Grove thing? I thought we were on a time limit."

Still ignored.

The communicator in Adam's pocket beeped. He pulled it out and answered it.

"Is that still you, Adam?" Jason said. "How's Zack doing? Did Trini get there? Is she helping him?"

Adam smirked and said in a voice louder than necessary, "Yes, Zack's doing extremely well right now. Trini's helping him out quite a bit..."

They broke apart, and Zack snatched the communicator from Adam's hand. "Hey, Jas. Great to hear from you. So, this whole god rebellion thing..."

"Yeah..." Jason said slowly, a little suspiciously. "You guys need to get back to Haven as soon as you can. Everything is about to hit the fan."

"Right," Zack said, and cut communication. He grinned at Trini. "I say we postpone a few things until after we save the world. That alright with you?"

"Perfect," Trini said. "And... Adam?"

"I won't say a thing," Adam said, smiling.

"Good," Trini said, and the three of them ran out of the building.

Kimberly ran. She was unmorphed, limping, and bleeding from the head. At the same time, her brain was filled with Zedd's words, Zedd's emotions... but she wasn't giving in. She shut them out, shut out the pain and fatigue, and ran.

Behind her were Putties. And Artemis, who was less following orders from Zedd and more relishing the hunt. And votaries, all of whom blamed her for Angel Grove's capture.

She looked around for the freedom fighters and her fellow Rangers. If she was going to have the whole world against her, may as well make it complete.

One alley, another, another... She knew where she was going, knew where she might feel safe, but she couldn't lead them all there, and she couldn't fight them all. She had to get away. Had to lose them.

One more corner, and she was alone. If she could just get there... She didn't know why it was so important to her, but it was.

She slammed through the back door, the lock long useless, and ran past the storage area, the office...

There is was. The Youth Center. And she knew she'd done a stupid thing.

Why had she come here? She panted and held a hand to her bleeding head. Brain damage? Likely. But it was peaceful here... and also the last place where anyone with half a brain would expect to find her.

"Kimberly?"

She froze, looked over at the doorway, expecting another nightmare.
"Skull?" she said with a shaky voice.

There was a crash in the back storage area, and Kimberly realized she hadn't lost them at all. They were coming for her.

"Come on!" Skull yelled, holding out his hand.

Kimberly ran to him. He grabbed her arm, and they ran out the front door.

As they ran, they were beset by Putties, but Skull was ready for them. He shoved a plastic sword into her hand, and then started lashing out at them as they ran. He did not drop pace, even though he was obviously getting tired. Kimberly lashed out with the sword, and to her surprise, the Putties exploded without the slightest feedback.

Of course. She remembered the freedom fighters had found a way to fight Putties. She'd warned Zedd about that more than once.

She stumbled at the thought of Zedd's name, but Skull pulled her ever forward. She realized they were heading to the high school. Haven. She almost pulled back, but something in the assured pressure from Skull's hand kept her going.

They reached sight of the high school, sprinted across the street, legions of Putties with Artemis close behind at the heels, and Skull gasped out, "Two for Haven's protection!"

The barrier flickered. Skull crossed the barrier, but Kimberly slammed into it and fell to the ground.

She stared despairingly at Skull, not wanting to look behind her. She knew what was coming.

Skull, however, shouted desperately, angrily, "Come on! I said two! Two for Haven's protection! Lift the barrier!"

And Demeter was there, regarding him placidly. "Give Haven for Zeus's pet girl, the one who took Hera's rightful place? I think not."

Skull was jumping up and down in frustration. "Will you gods get it through your thick heads that you're following an alien, not freakin' Zeus! And she's changed, she's rebelling against Zedd. She needs protection."

Artemis laughed, having come to the head of the Putties and seeing Kimberly's predicament. "She's still under Zeus's thrall," she said mockingly. "The connection is still there."

"So what?!" Skull ran out of the barrier and set himself between Artemis and Kimberly. "She doesn't deserve whatever you have planned for her. She's under an evil spell, but she's good. She's been fighting the spell this whole time, and no one's taken the time to notice!" He set his face in determination. "If anyone wants her, they're going to have to go through me."

Several things happened at once, and Kimberly could only stare.

Artemis raised her bow, and Kimberly could tell from the design of the arrow that it was one of Apollo's.

A yell rent the air, and Zack and Jason attacked Artemis on both sides, Zack's Power Axe knocking the bow into the air, and Jason's Power Sword knocking the goddess down.

The barrier fell, and the air grew moist. It began to pour with rain.
Kimberly felt herself being pulled toward the high school, even as both Artemis and Demeter cackled gleefully, and the surrender was broken. Demeter's protection was over, and Poseidon's water barrier was coming down on their heads.

"DO IT, BILLY!" Jason yelled into his communicator.

There was a burst of heat, the air erupted in steam, and a crackling barrier right in front of her, separating them from the two goddesses. Then Kimberly finally sank into darkness.

Kimberly woke up. It was bright... too bright. She tried to shade her eyes... but she couldn't move her arms. She pulled, but the ropes, while not uncomfortable, were definitely secure, both on her arms and legs.

She blinked as her eyes adjusted. She was in what looked like the art room, but the easels were now holding up what looked like weapons. Well, they would be weapons, except for the fact that they were made of plastic.

Right, she reminded herself. The plastic weapons for the Putties. They had to make those somewhere.

Finally, her eyes lighted on Skull, who was sitting against the wall on the opposite side of the room. She couldn't avoid his gaze any longer.

"It wasn't my idea to tie you up," Skull said quickly.

Kimberly smiled. "I know it wasn't. Jason's just not going to take any chances. I understand."

Skull shifted uncomfortably. Kimberly knew why. He'd been set there to guard her, probably, while Jason and the others tried to figure out what to do with her. They probably didn't want Skull to hear what they had to discuss.

Or, possibly, Skull was there to act as a buffer against her many enemies. Allying herself with Zedd could not have made her very popular there.

And, still, she could hear Zedd, though his voice was muted at the moment. Perhaps he was waiting for a chance to spur her into an escape attempt.

Kimberly scooted around so that she was sitting up, difficult in the bonds. "So..." she began, "what the hell happened there at the end?"

Skull shrugged. "Billy and Trini did something that made us not drown, and that Command Center of yours put up some sort of barrier around Haven. That's all I know."

Kimberly nodded slowly. She couldn't tell if Skull really didn't know what happened, or was keeping information from a possible spy. Then again, he'd never been good at keeping secrets.

"Artemis was right, you know," Kimberly said. "Nothing's changed, really. I'm still under Lord Zedd's spell. That hasn't changed."

"Still don't care," Skull said quietly.

Kimberly looked down. She scratched an itch on her shoulder against the wall and wondered how long they were going to keep her here. After all, Lord Zedd was going to move against them soon, now that the surrender was broken. They didn't have a lot of time. She wished they'd just talk to her.
She had a few ideas that would probably surprise them.

She considered an escape attempt. Her power coin was gone—she could feel that from the emptiness of her back pocket—but she could spot an exacto knife within easy reach if she could just get Skull distracted enough... which she knew she could.

But her power coin was gone. And she had nowhere to go. So she waited.

"I don't get it, though," Skull said, breaking into her thoughts. "I mean, you say you're still under a spell or whatever, so what did it? What made you run away from Zedd?"

That she was definitely not going to tell Skull. "He... I..." She looked away. "I just didn't like how he was using me, okay? Maybe I'm just teaching him a lesson, or whatever." She looked back at him. "How did you know I was there? At the Youth Center? I barely even knew where I was going at the time."

This brought a smile back to Skull's face. "Because that's where you always go."

If Kimberly was expecting any answer, this was definitely not the one she was expecting.

Skull had picked up a bit of leftover plastic and was toying with it. "I knew you didn't remember. You weren't really awake. But you go there practically every day."

Kimberly frowned, though that definitely sounded familiar. She'd had nightmares daily in the Youth Center, but actually being there...

"I saw you there about a week and a half ago," Skull continued. "I was foraging for supplies. We had just found out about the plastic, so I was seeing how many plastic crates I could smuggle away. And I saw you. You never said anything. You just did a gymnastics routine. The same one, over and over. I tried to say something to you, but then you just freaked out and teleported away."

Kimberly realized she was holding her breath. She didn't want to hear this. This was... something... something that she wanted to avoid. It was important, because if she acknowledged this, then she would have to...

"I came to see you every day, around three," Skull said, looking away from her. "You didn't come every day, but most days. I didn't tell anyone. I tried to talk to you, but then you'd shout at me... but it would be shouting at someone else, and then you'd bolt. I dunno if this Zedd character knew about it, but I think that's why the Youth Center was never bothered as much as all the other places in Angel Grove. It was your territory."

Kimberly flinched. "I... I don't remember any of that. Well... nightmares, or something."

"I think you were fighting the spell," Skull said. "I think that's why..."

There was a knock on the door, and both of them looked up. At the door were Jason, Billy, Trini, and Zack. Jason had her power morpher and the communicator she'd used in his hand.

"Oh, yeah, this place is secure," Jason said. "Let's put her in the weapons room."

"Well, where else?" Skull said, getting up. "All the other places are taken, and I don't want her anywhere near any other people. Who knows what they'll do to her while she's helpless."

"Your mistake is thinking that she's helpless," Jason corrected. His eyes lighted on the exacto knife. Zack had seen it at the same time, and pocketed it.
Skull looked like he was getting upset again. "Look, I keep trying to tell you, she's fighting against the spell. If you just give her a chance to explain..."

"Skull?"

Skull stopped at Kimberly words, quiet and yet firm.

She tried to smile, though she was finding it more difficult now that the Rangers were in the room. "Thank you. I'm grateful for what you've done for me... it's more than I could ever deserve... but I think I need to take it from here."

Skull nodded once, but he didn't leave the room, and he looked ready to jump to Kimberly's defense at a moment's notice.

Kimberly took a breath. The Rangers had formed a wide circle around her, so she had to look down if she didn't want to look at them. Trini was the furthest away, for which Kimberly was grateful. She found herself shaking at the thought of Trini.

"Like I told Skull..." Kimberly said, "and like you probably heard Artemis say, I'm still under Lord Zedd's spell. We still have a connection, and not just some lingering connection. I'm still evil, you got that?"

The faces of the other Rangers hardened, though it looked like they'd been expecting this.

"So what are you doing if you're still under a spell?" Jason said, his voice strained and emotionless.

"Zedd and I had a disagreement, and I'm rebelling against him," Kimberly said. "He thinks just because he has me under some spell doesn't mean he can make me into whoever he wants. I'm Kimberly, not R... not his... Well, whatever he wants me to be, which is none of your business, by the way, I'm not going to be it, and that put me into a kind of a difficult position, okay?"

"So why keep the spell?" Trini asked. "Why not break it and be done with it?"

Kimberly refused to look up. "I don't know. Maybe you'd like to beat it out of me?" She tried to sound tough, but a quaver came into her voice.

The proper effect was produced, though it looked like they'd been expecting this.

"It's not going to come to that," Jason said evenly. "No one is going to hurt you. Ever again, if I have anything to say about it. But I'd still like you to answer the question."

Kimberly's stomach churned. She'd loved the spell for the peace and clarity it brought to her life. She'd suddenly been able to do what she wanted to do, to live honestly, to not have to deal with any of her problems or guilt or the one that she couldn't think about, couldn't face... But that peace was gone. And she was finding out it was never there. She'd acted out nightmares in real life at the Youth Center. The people, her former friends who'd she'd attacked and declared as enemies were now caring for her, even the one who'd brutalized her, and she could see that behind their stern exteriors what they really felt, and it was too much for her, and now the man who was supposed to have brought peace to her life was the source of all her pain...

"I can't let it go," she said in a strangled whisper that she was barely aware of. "Not yet. I can't face... Because it would mean..."

"Well, Jason, she's obviously evil through and through." It was the first time Billy had spoken since
entering the room. Kimberly looked up in surprise. Two weeks ago he'd been a hollow shell of his former self. Now he seemed more confident than he ever had in his life.

Of course, he had just saved Angel Grove from drowning.

"Yes, Kimberly is a hopeless case," Billy continued. "Our evil nemesis for as long as stays completely loyal to the evil lord she's running away from," he finished breezily. He flashed a smile at Kimberly.

Kimberly knew and didn't know what Billy was doing for her. All she knew was that she was eternally grateful.

"It's not for nothing that Blue Ranger's a genius," Kimberly said with a new edge to her voice. She felt some of her strength come back. "Yeah, I'm evil, but that doesn't mean we can't make an alliance against my master Lord Zedd. And we'd better hurry, Rangers. He's going to be pretty pissed off... for multiple reasons."

Jason's eyes widened in shock. "You're saying you want to fight with us against Lord Zedd?"

"Absolutely."

"But not break your spell."

"Exactomundo."

"And what do you get out of this?"

Kimberly smiled. "Personal gain? Escalating the battle? I mean, I've already revealed my identity. I figure I can blow the rest all to hell as well."

Jason frowned. He was looking at the other three, and they were having a silent debate, but Kimberly was so familiar with them that he knew exactly what they were saying. Trini was still upset about Kimberly's comment, but she was ready to set that aside for the time being and work with Kimberly, partially for atonement of what she felt was her own wrongdoing. Billy was obviously taking Kimberly's part, and he obviously felt that his work with Tommy made him better able to help Kimberly break her spell. Zack was more reticent, less ready to truth Kimberly, but he was holding out judgment until now. And Jason was taking into account all of their reactions, all that he knew about Kimberly... and the fact that they were now facing the might of Zedd and the gods with only a small forcefield protecting them and only part of the inhabitants of Angel Grove.

Kimberly knew what decision he'd make, so she waited for him to say it.

"Okay," Jason said. "But you stay here for right now, under guard, and not Skull. Sorry, Skull, but she could overpower you incredibly easily, and you're too biased to guard her well. So, Trini...?"

"Not her!" Kimberly said furiously. She knew Trini wouldn't hurt her now, but she still felt every blow.

"I'll do it," Zack said. "I'll stay with her. Just fill me in on plans sometime, okay?"

Jason clapped Zack on the arm and smiled. "Shouldn't take more than an hour. We have to hurry. Kim, you're under guard until you're needed, and only then do we tell you just what you need to know. You still have a mental connection with Zedd, so he probably knows you've joined forces with us, but I'm not giving you the opportunity to tell our plans to him. When we need you, I'll give you back your power coin, but I've also got the demorphing gun, so if you try to go against us, I'll
take your powers, no matter how dangerous it is. Got all that?"

Kimberly smiled. "Got it, boss. Now go do hero things. You may not have an hour."

They left, Trini making a wide berth around Kimberly. Skull left reluctantly, pulled along by Billy.

Zack watched them go, secured the door behind them, and put on a forced smile. "So, how bout cards?"

Kimberly rolled her eyes. "Without arms?"

"Um..." Zack cast about nervously, "I Spy?"

Kimberly was about to retort, but then she smirked. "Fine."

Zordon scraped his hands over his head, a motion that had never been translated over the tube in the Command Center. Of course, Tommy supposed, he'd possibly never had a reason to make that gesture of frustration before.

"This is impossible. Completely impossible."

He'd been muttering that for several minutes, and Tommy had stopped asking what he meant. He knew Zordon would explain himself in his own time. Meanwhile, Tommy kept glancing up at the screens, the only way he could keep his time sense. They'd been at it for several days, according to what was happening on Earth, and Tommy had not felt the need to eat or sleep in all that time.

Speaking of impossible...

"Okay, Zordon, let me have it," Tommy said wearily. "Am I really dead? Have I been a ghost this whole time? Or is this just a dream? Honestly, I'm prepared for any weirdness."

"You're no longer registering as fully human," Zordon said, finally breaking out of his shock. "You're registering as part Eltarian."

That was a weirdness Tommy was not prepared for.

They sat in silence for some time more, ignoring the screens and completely losing their time sense. Possibly hours later, Tommy spoke up.

"It's from those power transfers from you, isn't it?"

Zordon shook his head. "That was meant for your power coin. It doesn't make sense that you still have it when your power coin is almost used up, unless..."

Another pause.

"Maybe only part of the power was going to my power coin," Tommy commented. "That's why I couldn't keep the coin powered up for very long."

Zordon shut his eyes in sudden comprehension. "Because the link between you and your power coin was weak. That's what the Green Candle attacked in the first place, not the coin itself. I should have thought of that before."

Tommy grinned and jumped to his feet. "Well, it's not like anything like this has ever happened before, has it? Don't be so hard on yourself. So that's why I could survive dimension hopping?
Because of this Eltarian energy?"

"Correct, though it doesn't explain how you gained that ability in the first place. I have Eltarian energy, and yet I am trapped in this dimension," Zordon observed.

Tommy winked. "No problem. I've figured that out, too. Now, I've got a plan you're probably not going to like, but I think it's the only way."

"But how are you going to find your way back to Earth?" Zordon asked, looking odd in his confusion.

"Only way I know how," Tommy said. "Retrace my steps."

Zordon had gone pale. "If I'm correct... Tommy, you cannot do what you're thinking of. You'll endanger Earth, your friends... and most particularly, yourself. Even I do not know the extent of that power." He took a breath and stood up as well. "Tommy, I forbid you from taking this course. You will return to Earth, but..."

Tommy put a hand on Zordon's shoulder, who stopped and flinched away, obviously not used to physical contact. "Zordon, I respect your warnings... but I can't follow your orders."

"And why is that?"

Tommy smiled. "I'm no longer a Power Ranger."
Kimberly flexed her arms as much as she could, wincing at the ache. The restraints weren't tight, but holding her arms like that for that long was starting to get old.

"It's your turn," Zack said.

She huffed impatiently. "Fine. I spy a big elephant in the room."

Kimberly smiled at the silence, at Zack's discomfort. Well, hell, if she was uncomfortable, he was going to be the same.

"I didn't think you wanted to talk about it," Zack said. "I mean, that's why you're holding onto the spell, right? So you don't have to face anything."

Kimberly rolled her eyes. "Come on, Zack. I shot you with an arrow. I deliberately hurt you. You don't have anything to say to me?"

Zack stared at her. She'd struck a nerve, but it didn't have the effect that she'd hoped.

"Okay..." Zack took a measured breath. "I think I know what you're expecting. Like, me blaming you and stuff. I think that's what you want, right? I mean, that's what I did to Tommy back in the day."

Kimberly said nothing.

Zack smiled easily. "But I'm not going to do that. I'm going to tell you what's happened instead." He cleared his throat. "Two weeks ago, a man kidnapped your brother. He forced you and your boyfriend to fight over who was going to sacrifice themselves for your brother... and both ended up sacrificed. Convenient, huh?"

Kimberly glared at him.

"After that, well, things went pretty much to hell," Zack continued. "And, again, conveniently to the man's plan. The man had everything he wanted: a Power Ranger under his spell, the one he hated dead, the rest revealed and publicly disgraced, and a whole town being held by his own private army.

"And then he waited. Why? We don't know, but he waited for a long time. In the meantime, most of his allies, the ones he'd forced under a spell or manipulated, rebelled. His enemies gained time to come up with a defense. Right now, he fights alone, surrounded by enemies."

"What's your point?" Kimberly was angry, and she wasn't entirely sure why.

Zack shrugged. "I dunno. Just seems strange that someone so good at manipulating would manipulate himself into a corner like this... unless it wasn't a corner. Unless he wanted you to rebel."
Kimberly looked away. Her heart was pounding, and she wished he hadn't started this conversation. "Zack," she began quietly, "that's where you're wrong. I mean, you're right that he's had a lot of things set up for a long time, all to play into his traps, but I don't think he meant for me to run."

"Why did you?" Zack asked.

Kimberly glared at him. "That's none of your business."

"Why'd you have a red communicator with you?"

"I found it," Kimberly said. Then she laughed. "I just remembered. Jason left his communicator when he was captured in the Moon Palace. He never got it back."

"Oh, yeah," Zack said slowly. Then he smiled. "Hey, remember when we went on that mission in the Command Center's basement?"

"Yes..." Kimberly said, uncertainly.

"We talked about what scared us. Spiders. Things we can't fight."

Kimberly looked away. She knew he was going somewhere with this, but she didn't know what. She couldn't put up her defenses.

"The thing is," Zack continued, "we've learned a lot about fear. We went to a whole dimension full of it. We've faced new scary things over and over, Lord Zedd included, by the way... and we've always overcome them. We're going to overcome him, no matter what he has planned. But... none of those things are what we should be scared of. You know what should scare us?"

"Ourselves..." Kimberly said in a whisper. "We're the monsters."

Zack again smiled and shook his head. "Not monsters, Kimberly. People. People who have the potential to do anything they want... and that's what scares Zedd. That's why he tries to enslave us, kill us, force us into no choices, play these stupid games with clues and all that bullshit... because he can't stand that we have power and potential, and we don't use it for ourselves. Even now, you're protecting others, Kim. You said it yourself. You don't want to be used."

Kimberly closed her eyes. If she accepted what he said, then she'd have to... No. She couldn't. She was evil, pure and simple. She didn't have a choice. She...

Before she had to respond, Billy opened the door. "It's starting," he said. "I'm supposed to stay here while you get debriefed on the mission, Zack, and then we're off."

"Right," Zack said with a sigh, getting up. He looked disappointed that he hadn't done more. He'd probably had some fantasy that he'd be able to break Kimberly out of the spell.

Kimberly smirked, coming back to herself. He'd have to live with disappointment.

Billy took up Zack's post as they were left alone, though he didn't sit down. He smiled at Kimberly. "I'm glad to see you're starting to work things out. Spell still intact? Zedd still buzzing around in there?"

Kimberly glared at him. "And, seriously, what's up with all this? Why aren't you being so serious?"

Billy shrugged. "Had a talk with Skull." He smiled. "Once you figure it out on your own, you'll be fine. You're almost there, and I don't think any of our meddling is going to do much to help you
Kimberly stared at him, wondering what on earth could have made him so different. It had only been two weeks.

"So... Zedd," Billy said casually. "What's it like to live with him? Does he just stare at the Earth all day, being all villainous, or does he, I don't know, have hobbies or something?"

Kimberly rolled her eyes. "Shut up."

"Because I was, for some reason, picturing stamp collecting. Do they have stamps in space?"

Kimberly started giggling, and then stopped herself. "Seriously, shut up. We're talking about the Emperor of Evil here. I don't think he goes in for stamp collecting, space or otherwise."

"If you say so." Billy paused. "Model spaceships?"

"Shut up!"

Zack slowly made his way to the first classroom near the entrance, which was being used as a strategy room at the moment. It was slow going because he was having to fight against a press of people going the other direction. Whatever Jason had planned, it was obviously starting already.

Mr. Kaplan let him in. Trini was finishing up some notes on the chalkboard while Jason was giving some short instructions to Alpha on his communicator.

Trini gave him a radiant smile, and Zack gave one in turn. He suddenly wished he hadn't volunteered to guard Kimberly. Maybe they could have snuck away...

In the middle of the biggest battle he's ever faced, and he was thinking of kissing Trini. He shook his head violently. "So... what's the plan? Why are we evacuating the school when the barrier's still up?"

"Mr. Taylor," Mr. Kaplan said, "you might want to look out the window."

"And don't freak out," Trini said, still smiling.

Zack dodged around some desks and looked out the row of windows along the far wall. He sat heavily on the nearest desk, feeling like the breath had been knocked out of him. "Um... is that...?"

"Serpentera," Jason said, clicking off his communicator. "We got the specs on this thing in a fraction of the time it usually takes Alpha and Zordon. Seriously, having parents as our tech crew is not half bad..."

"That weirdness aside," Zack said, "what the hell is Serpentera? I can't even see the top of this thing!"

"Zedd's personal Zord," Jason answered. "That's the thing that shot my Zord out of the sky. My Zord looks like a tinker toy next to this thing."

"The Megazord won't fare much better," Zack said.

"None of that," Jason said sternly. "We haven't used a fraction of this new Megazord's potential power, and, like it or not, I think we're going to have some help from the gods. In the meantime, Bulk and Skull are leading the evacuation, and once they group the people of Haven in the right place, Alpha will teleport them all out."
"Haven needs to be completely unoccupied before you start up the fight," Mr. Kaplan said. "Never mind that thing out there, one of the feet on that Megazord will crush this school."

"Agreed," Jason said. "We'll... do what we can for the rest of the people of Angel Grove. There were a lot of votaries in one place that Alpha already teleported out, but there's no way we can absolutely know if we've evacuated everyone. And the mayor..."

"There are people taking care of it," Mr. Kaplan said.

Jason looked at him, surprised.

Mr. Kaplan gave him an amused look. "Mr. Scott, you can't possibly think that a few teenagers were the only people fighting in Angel Grove. There's a whole group of policemen and firefighters, posing as votaries, doing their best to protect the people of Angel Grove." Mr. Kaplan straightened his suit. "Since you seem to have everything in order, I will join my surprisingly heroic students in the evacuation. Just..." he smiled, "good luck to all of you." With that, he left.

Zack looked surprised as well, but at Jason. "Jas, did you really not read the reports?"

"I pretty much read them," Jason hedged. "Um... anyway, now that Mr. Kaplan's gone, we also have to worry about the cannon right under our feet. You know, the one that's going to blow up Angel Grove?"

"Oh. That thing," Zack said glumly. He looked up at Serpentera. "So, you know that saying 'between a rock and a hard place?' What about 'between a god-cannon and a giant lizard?'"

"I'm sure Homer was thinking exactly that," Trini said. "And, please, no more Greek mythology. I'm not half sick of it." She crossed her arms. "I've already had Alpha scan for it. There's no way to destroy or deactivate the cannon from here, and we can't teleport to it. In the meantime..."

"Serpentera," Jason said darkly.

"Exactly," Trini said. "We can't take care of both at once, and we can't split up our team, especially when one is still under a spell. So how do we take care of the cannon?"

"Well, you could ask for help."

The three turned. Mr. Kaplan had left the door open, and Rocky, Adam, and Aisha were gathered in it.

"How long have you been there?" asked Jason.

Rocky shrugged. "Long enough to hear that you Rangers are in a pickle. Cannon underground that's gonna destroy Angel Grove, huh?"

"Sounds like a job for the freedom fighters," Adam said.

Aisha rolled her eyes. "Stop talking about us like we're some superhero team, Adam. We're not the superheroes here." She smiled. "But that doesn't mean we can't take care of this cannon thing while you guys go be heroes."

"Are you sure about this?" Trini said. "I mean, fighting Putties is one thing, but disabling a cannon of unknown design and taking on a god all at the same time?"

"We've been fighting gods and the unknown for a while now," Adam said.
"And the gods will be expecting 'heroes' to fight them," said Aisha. "Not us civilians."

"Besides," Rocky smirked, "I don't think you guys have a choice. Am I right?"

Everyone looked at Jason, who was smiling. He pulled the red communicator out of his pocket, the one he'd taken off of Kimberly. He handed it to Rocky. "When it's done, you use this to let us know, and then use it to teleport out." His smile broadened. "Now, you go be heroes."

Serpentera loomed in the sky, towering over the city. Even inert, the Zord looked dangerous. If the whole city didn't already know to evacuate, they did now.

"And we come up to about its shin. In the Megazord." Kimberly sighed. "If I'd known this was your plan..."

"What would you have done? Gone back to him?" Jason asked.

Kimberly didn't answer. She focused on her own console in the Megazord, mumbling what she thought Jason could do with his plan.

Jason chose to ignore what he definitely heard. "Is he in the Zord? Is Zedd piloting, Kim?"

Kimberly looked up from her controls. "Yes, he's in Serpentera," she snapped. "Where else would he be?"

"Why hasn't he attacked yet?" Zack asked.

Kimberly paused. "Well, obviously he's the one with the really big advantage. He's waiting to see what we'll do... While shouting in my head for me to get out of the Megazord and go back to the Moon Palace. Shut UP, Zedd! I'll do whatever the hell I want!"

"And I don't think we're topmost of his worries," said Trini. "Look."


Jason began to sweat. "Alpha," he called on his communicator, "has Angel Grove been evacuated completely?"

"Yes, Jason," Alpha answered. "The only people left are you and the three freedom fighters, and we've already lost track of them."

"Good," Jason answered. "Because I think this is going to get messy really really quickly."

As if in answer, the nine dots suddenly expanded into nine giant-sized gods, towering over the Megazord but not quite as large as Serpentera. Jason backed the Megazord up quickly. He usually felt so huge in the Megazord. Now, though...

"Do not interfere, humans," Athena thundered. "This imposter has allowed his manipulation of us to lapse. We know him for what he is, and we shall destroy him."

"And what about the cannon?" Jason asked.

Kimberly looked at him sharply. "Cannon?"

"It remains," Athena answered, "as a warning to all who would meddle in the affairs of gods. You
have saved all the people you can. Now save yourselves."

Jason glanced at the other Rangers. Even though their faces were hidden by helmets, he knew what they were all thinking. It would be easy to let Angel Grove go. To save the three freedom fighters they'd just sent on an impossible mission, hole up in the Command Center, and let the gods take care of Zedd, which they looked perfectly capable of doing.

And, of course, let the gods have free reign of Earth. Without a clue how to stop them.

"Better the devil you know than the devil you don't," Jason said under his breath. "No dice, Athena," he said loudly. "You're not taking Angel Grove down like this, and if that means we have to fight you, so be it."

He cut communications and began keying in attack sequences. "Let's hope Zedd is too busy with the gods to fight us or attack the city."

"Lord Zedd has no interest in attacking us right now," Kimberly spoke up. "He's willing to focus on the gods and allow us to join the fray in that capacity. He... he's already tried to send the gods back to the ether as Earth spirits, but he's apparently lost control of them, and I can tell them whatever I WANT, Zedd! Do you want to defeat the gods or not?!"

"As long as we're allowed," Zack said drily.

"I suggest we take on Artemis and Apollo," Billy interjected. "We can counter their long-range weapons better."

"Agreed," Jason said. "Let's take us out some gods."

Tommy floated, his head pounding. He was gasping for air. The air seemed thick and inert.

Matter and time seemed to coil around him, and he wondered how he was able to tell that. He didn't used to think in terms of matter and time, at least not as material things.

He couldn't breathe. Why couldn't he breathe? The last few hops had been as easy as blinking, but this...

He closed his eyes. Focused. Then let himself drift. If he couldn't go back the way he came, he had to get at least somewhere.

Ninjor wasn't letting him through. That much he could tell. At least he wasn't openly attacking Tommy, though this tack may prove to be just as fatal.

Light and sound formed around Tommy, and it became easier to breathe. He took in deep lungfuls of air. If he didn't have to go through that again, it would be...

He opened his eyes. A park bench. A lake. A park. Of course it would be here.

The last time he'd been there, the lake had been gray and steely, and the day had been overcast, a far cry from the beautiful clarity of his first visits. Now, though, it seemed white. Washed-out, somehow.

"Rita?" he said hesitantly, his voice barely carrying past his own throat. He wasn't sure if he wanted to see her, considering their last meeting, but at the moment he wanted to see someone. Something to remind him that he was still human and alive.

Alive. Still alive. It was a bit of a miracle, that. But, then, did it matter all that much?
"You know the answer to that, son."

This time, when Tommy couldn't breathe, it wasn't the air. It was the impossible person beside him.

"D... dad?"

It was a bit difficult to look at him. There was something just so immaterial about him, something that didn't quite translate to Tommy's brain right. He was at once young and old, physical and a spirit.


Tommy smiled. He was starting to feel a little more peaceful. "Right. Thinking too literally. You could be a ghost, or a part of me, or a hallucination, but it doesn't really matter, and I'm here because I needed it. I needed Quagmire, and Ninjor, and Zordon... all of them helped me figure out what was happening to me, how I was doing it, what I was doing wrong, and what I needed to do." He cleared his throat. He was speaking as calmly as he could, but tears were running steadily down his face. "So what are you here to show me?"

This time John laughed, and it was a little bit of heaven to hear that sound again. "I always knew you were smarter than you wanted me to believe. You tell me, then. You came to this place between you wanted to... but not to see Rita. To see me. Why?"

Tommy thought. Time stretched, but time had stopped mattering to him. This was important...

"Well..." he said slowly, "the last time I was here with you I had to come to a decision. I had to break a spell."

"Not just that," John said. "You were right the first time. You had to decide. Decide your loyalties. Decide how to use the power you had."

"I wanted to come here..." Tommy said, "and maybe before this I would have chosen to stay here, but now... I'm sorry dad, but I want to live."

"You're not betraying me by not staying with me," John said quickly. "It was my fault... mine and your mother's... for making you choose like that."

"I know," Tommy said softly. "But... if it's not you, if it's not a death wish, then what am I forgetting? I have the power, and I have a plan. I know what to do now, and I know what I have to do to leave this place. So..."

"You're doing this to stay alive... to preserve life... so that no one will die," John said. "Think, son. Who are you forgetting? Who needs your help?"

Tommy closed his eyes. "Dad... Why? Why him?"

Tommy felt arms around him, giving him peace. "I think you know," his father said. "I... I'm just glad we got one last chance..."

"To say goodbye," Tommy finished. He touched the hands around him, one last time, and then let go and disappeared.

"So, it's dark."

"We heard you the first time."
"And we have no idea what we're doing."
"Of course we don't."

Rocky stopped, shining his flashlight upward. "So... why did we volunteer for this then?"

Aisha and Adam stopped, giving each other a significant look. "How long did we say?" said Adam.

"Bout this long." Aisha said. She looked at Rocky. "You were the one who volunteered, remember? We followed along, like usual."

"Waiting for you to realize what you'd done... like usual," Adam said.

"Yeah... well..." Rocky cast about for words. Then he glared. "What do you mean, 'like usual'?

Adam laughed and started walking. Aisha grabbed Rocky's arm and started pulling him along. "We mean that you get these grand heroic ideas and jump in head-first, but then you realize what you've gotten yourself into later on and you freak out... like you are now."

"I'm not freaking out," Rocky protested. "Besides, when have I ever done that?"

"There was that sky-diving incident."

"And that time we got lost in the Nevada desert on the four-wheelers." Aisha frowned. "I still wonder what that weird building was..."

"And then becoming freedom fighters in the first place..."

"Okay, fine," Rocky said. "And you don't even have room to talk, Adam. Didn't you go sneaking off to Dionysus' territory?"

"That was different, and I thought you guys were past getting on me for that," Adam said. "Besides, Rocky, you're a bad influence."

"Guys, hush," Aisha said, suddenly serious. "I heard something."

The three fighters stopped, listening to the dense silence around them. They'd been talking the entire time, trying to dispel the creepiness of the underground tunnel. Now, in the silence, it felt as if the walls were going to close in around them.

"Didn't the Blue Ranger mention, like, traps in here before?" Adam said uncertainly.

At that, the floor gave way, and the three fighters fell.

They screamed, Rocky's coming out more high-pitched than he would admit to later. The cold air rushed past them, then turned hot.

And then everything stopped. They were in a brightly-lit room with a giant machine in the center. They hadn't landed on anything... they'd just sort of appeared there.

"I will have to leave soon," a rough voice called out from behind the machine. "That's why I hurried this along. I needed to make sure you three wouldn't miraculously sabotage this thing. You've all proven uncomfortably competent in the past fortnight."

The god Hephaestus emerged from the machine.
"Uncomfortably competent... always wanted to be called that," Rocky snarked.

"Uh..." Aisha said, "can you guys hear that?"

"If it's a god that's about to get his ass kicked..."

"Not that," Adam said slowly.

Hephaestus smiled unpleasantly as the sound grew louder. It was warbling... horribly familiar warbling.

Putties. Dozens of them.

"Even if you have any of your ingenious plastic weapons on you, they won't work," Hephaestus said. "Artemis captured these Putties for me, and I made a few modifications. They're immune to your weapons. They have a bit less of a power feedback on them... but it takes much more effort to kill them." He leaned against the cannon, grinning. "Attack."

Rocky, Aisha, and Adam formed a circle and prepared for the first attack.

"By the way, heroes," Hephaestus said as the Putties advanced. "You only have fifteen minutes."

"Okay, guys," Rocky said in a whisper. "Aisha knows the most about computers, and it sounds like Heph is going to split soon. Get my drift?"

"Got it," Adam and Aisha said in unison, and shot each other a look. Rocky was past his freakout mode. It meant that things were pretty bad, but in this mode he usually had a way of pulling them through it all in one piece.

The three had trained together before they became protectors of Haven. They'd, in fact, been in training for a team ninja tournament, and their teamwork definitely helped them now. Six Putties attacked them at once, and the three were able to dodge around, swapping opponents on a dime and setting each other up for hits.

Soon, though, they had to separate. Aisha was the quickest, and she used her quickness and slight figure to dodge through holes in the combat, positioning herself closer and closer to the cannon. If she could get close enough, Hephaestus might chicken out, giving her enough time to sabotage the machine. She had no idea how to do that, she considered as she flipped to avoid a Putty lunging at her, her foot catching its chin, and then springing into a kick against the next one. However, she thought it might have something to do with those controls. Of course, if she'd brought any of those scientists from Haven... or the Blue Ranger... but, no. Her guys were disastrous around computers, so it was up to her.

Adam, in the meantime, was trying to pull as many Putties away from Aisha as possible. He concentrated on balancing strength with speed. He knew the Putties were less strong, but he could still feel each blow shudder through his bones, and he knew he could only permanently take out a few before becoming incapacitated. He tried to aim more kicks at the Z's than punches, hoping that his rubber-soled shoes would afford him a little bit of protection, though he knew that would just slow him down more. Still, if Aisha was able to get to the cannon, he'd be able to limp back up to the surface well enough. If she didn't... well... no amount of limping would help them.

Rocky fought wildly, throwing Putties as much as kicking or punching. He was the strongest of the three, and he used it to his advantage. Yelling to keep the Putties focused on him, he tried using one Putty to hit another Putty's Z... by using its head as a weapon. It worked once, but the Putties wised up quickly, and Rocky quickly found himself surrounded by more than half of the remaining Putties.
Unperturbed, he battled on.

Still, the three of them were beginning to realize one thing. They weren't going to be able to get past the Putties in the time limit.

Hephaestus had realized this, too. He was laughing deep in his throat. "Well, I guess I'd better warn my fellow gods of the impending blast... though I wouldn't mind leaving some behind. Valiant effort, heroes, but..."

He stopped mid-sentence, looking surprised. There was a hand sticking through his chest. There was no wound, but Hephaestus was becoming immaterial. He tried to yell, but his words sounded like they were far away, until he dissipated to reveal a long-haired teenage boy in a green flannel shirt.

"Uh... huh?" Rocky said, and then grunted in pain as the Putty he'd forgotten about hit him across the face.

"Okay, heroes," the boy said. "Thanks to you, I finally got up enough energy to take care of Heph there, but I can only do it a few times, and it's not going to be worth anything if this cannon goes off. And I'm crap at any technology beyond fire. Can I count on you heroes?"

Aisha had escaped her attackers and had run up to the boy. She took in his green clothes. "You're not..."

The boy grinned. "I'm not. Just a Titan with an obsessive interest in humans."

Aisha grinned in turn. "You called us heroes."

The boy didn't answer. He winked and disappeared.

"Hey, guys!" Aisha yelled at her battling friends. "I think that was a god or something, and he called us heroes!"

"That's... great... Aisha..." Adam said between attacks.

"What are you talking about?!" Rocky said. "Sabotage the damn cannon already!"

"Oh, right!" Aisha said, and then went to work.

"Billy, next chance we get, you're designing seatbelts for this thing!" Jason yelled as he struggled back to his station.

"Trini, get off me!" Kimberly yelled, pushing the Yellow Ranger back across their shared bench.

"You just worry about the power flow, and maybe we wouldn't be thrown around like this!" Trini snapped back.

Billy was too busy managing repairs to give an immediate answer, but he finally said, "Perhaps shared benches are not the best design for combat scenarios."

"You think?!" Zack said, trying desperately to keep them on their feet. He'd already gotten squished three times with the combined weight of Jason and Billy.

"Guys, focus," Jason said. "Trini, you see if you can't get our forward shields a little stronger. I think I'm going to try something."
"I need a little more power for it. Kim?" Trini said hesitantly.

Kimberly didn't respond at first, and then she shook her head violently. "Okay... fine. That enough?"

"Yeah," Trini said, momentarily surprised that Kimberly had apparently been too distracted to be rude to her.

It was just in time. They'd dodged around Serpentera's left leg to gain a little time, but Artemis and Apollo tracked them easily, each coming from a different side and aiming their bows.

"Let's see if this works again..." Jason said, and then activated the power.

The shield grew bigger and glowed as the arrows hit it. Grinning, Jason sent the shields back at the gods, knocking them away.

The shield, though, didn't seem to faze Serpentera, even though the strongest part of it went through Serpentera's leg. That was worrisome.

"Shields are strengthened by twenty percent," Trini reported.

"I don't think we can pull from the Morphing Grid like that too many times," Billy said. "We risk exhausting our power reserves."

"Not looking like there's much of a choice, though," Zack said as the two gods came back. "We're only dealing with two gods, and Zedd's got the others... and Hephaestus is lurking around somewhere. We gotta take care of these two quick."

"But if we exhaust our powers before facing Zedd..." Billy protested.

"Kimberly!" Jason broke into the argument. "I need a report on those power reserves."

"Okay, fine!" Kimberly said. "We're... we're okay. I guess."

"Not good enough, Kim," Jason said.

"What the HELL do you want from me?" Kimberly said, her voice strained. "Now that Lord Zedd's not controlling the gods with his magic, he's turned all his attention to me... for a change. How'd you like to pilot with an evil dictator screaming in your head the whole time?!"

The Thunder Megazord shuddered. The gods were back, having moved around to the other side. The whole Zord tilted yet again. Zack braced for impact as his other two teammates slammed into him for the fourth time.

Kimberly slid to Trini's side this time, and Trini was shocked to feel Kimberly shaking uncontrollably. The strain of internal and external combat on Kimberly was obviously immense.

"Zack, take over shields for a sec," Trini said. She helped Kimberly back to her station and abandoned her own.

Kimberly tried to pull away. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Just trying to help," Trini said. She got as close as she could to Kimberly and placed the others' hands over the controls. "I want you to try to match your breathing to mine."

Kimberly had stopped trying to pull away, but she was still furious. And still shaking. "Don't think I don't know what you're trying to do. Do you think being near you is in any way relaxing?"
Trini forced herself to breathe slow and deep, ignoring everything that was happening around her. "I was jealous, Kim. I'm so sorry. I know that doesn't excuse what I did, but I just wanted to tell you that. I've always envied your strength and passion so much. Even now."

Kimberly had stopped trembling. As Trini was talking, she had, in fact, started matching her breathing to Trini's.

"Okay," Kimberly said in a low voice. "Now what?"

"Now think about why you're fighting," Trini said. "Not why you're rebelling against Zedd, but why you're fighting. Concentrate on that. That's the one thing Lord Zedd can't take from you, that he's never been able to touch."

The tension in Kimberly's frame seemed to slacken. Her hands starting moving over the controls, almost of their own accord. After a few minutes, Kimberly said, "Jas? Got something for you."

There was a pause as Jason read what Kimberly had sent through the computer. "You gotta be kidding."

"What is it?" Zack said, sounding a little strained from having to take over two systems. He glanced over his shoulder at Trini and Kimberly. "Uh..." His voice seemed to go an octave higher. "What are you girls doing back there?"

Trini gave Kimberly's shoulders a squeeze.

"Thanks," Kimberly said, in a voice too low for anyone else to catch.

Trini smiled and slid back to her station, taking back control of the shields. "None of your business, Zack."

Kimberly laughed. "Honestly, Zack. Gutter mind, much?"

"Guys, pay attention," Jason said. "You're going to want to see this."

As Apollo lunged at them, tired of the shield blocking his arrows, the Thunder Megazord let loose a fiery blast. For a second, the blast seemed to take the form of a bird. It ripped through Apollo's chest, leaving only ash behind.

The Power Rangers whooped with triumph.

"One down, nine to go," Billy reminded them.

"Yeah, we know, just give us this moment," Jason said impatiently. "Okay, guys, Artemis is going to be pretty brassed off, so let's get that Power Sword ready."

Tommy closed his eyes, his head feeling like it was going to split down the middle. He imagined his head dividing into two equal pieces, like a watermelon.

He quickly shied away from that image. Thoughts were too dangerous where he was going, and it would be pretty embarrassing if he got there only to...

Dimensions rushed past him. He could catch glimpses. Some were open spaces. Some nightmares. Some prisons. Some alternate realities. He caught glimpses of himself. Good. Evil. One in which he'd never broken the spell, and was serving as Rita's heir. And another in which he'd never been chosen by Rita, in which the green coin belonged to Zordon, and the other five to Rita. He saw
himself battling friends.

And more confusing images. White armor. A red helmet with a star. A black staff.

It was too much... He had to focus...

And then it was cold. He heard shouts. He opened his eyes.

It was the Moon Palace. Not a place he'd ever been before, but unmistakable. It was a spacious room, dominated by a wide balcony showing the Earth and a giant throne on a raised dais.

Lord Zedd stood near the throne, Rita Repulsa opposite him. The room was quaking with the energy they were throwing at each other, the light almost blinding Tommy.

He understood. This was the moment when Zedd defeated Rita. When he took everything she had and imprisoned her.

And he remembered. Zedd had had help. Rita had been betrayed. By...

And there was Goldar. Standing away from the combat, shielding himself as best he could. Any moment, he would teleport out and attack Rita's dimensional power supply. Tommy clenched his fists. It was a wonder, with this battle going on, that the destruction of her power hadn't outright killed her. Zedd, after all, was far from merciful.

But...

Tommy watched in shock as the battle waged on. As Rita visibly weakened. As she started using her own life energy to fend off Zedd's attack.

And then as Goldar disappeared and reappeared, holding the crystal. As he made sure she saw and understood, giving her time to protect herself.

The crystal smashed against the ground, and everyone disappeared: Zedd, Rita, Goldar...

"She was going to die!" Tommy shouted into the empty throne room.

There was a sharp intake of breath, and Tommy realized he wasn't alone.

"Goldar?"

He was in a dark recess, but Tommy could see him now. He was... hiding. Tommy had never seen him like that. He'd retreated before, and he'd shown shame at failing Rita, but this...?

"She was going to die," Tommy repeated, slowly walking up to him. "If you hadn't broken her power, she would have died."

"Caught on, have you?" Goldar said miserably.

Tommy's eyes went out of focus. He could see it all. Goldar didn't have to explain it to him. The vision didn't have to repeat. Rita had faced Zedd's challenge, but she could not match Zedd's reckless use of power. She had realized this, but had opted to die rather than give in, had opted to sacrifice herself to give her followers enough time to escape.

Goldar had taken the sacrifice for her. He hadn't died in her place, but it was as good as. For a warrior as loyal and honorable as Goldar to even appear to commit such a betrayal... But Goldar had swallowed the guilt and shame, not to protect himself, but to put himself in a position where he could
try to save those loyal to Rita: Finster, Squatt and Babboo, Scorpina... and even Tommy.

"Yes. I have caught on," Tommy said in an unsteady voice. "I... I'm sorry."

Goldar flinched back into the shadows, as if Tommy's apology had been an unwanted physical touch. "For what? It doesn't matter. It didn't do anything. It just made everything worse. Rita's who knows where, Scorpina doesn't have the ghost of a chance of finding her, and I can't do a damn thing against Zedd. Or for him. He treats me like..." Goldar broke off.

Tommy's father had known. Or, if it hadn't been his father who talked to him, Tommy himself on some level had known. The betrayal... Goldar's actions... Goldar's sudden severe incompetence... None of it had made sense. This, though... this made sense.

"Goldar, that was the bravest thing I'd ever seen," Tommy said, crouching so he could look in Goldar's eyes. "You saved her life. She was going to throw it all away, and you saved her. You sacrificed everything. Do you think for a second that I don't wish I could have done that same? That... when my dad..."

His throat closed up, but he shook away the emotion. This was important, and they were running out of time. "You... you said before... that you wanted me to acknowledge you as my superior. Goldar... I do. What you did..." He looked over at the throne room, at the place of the battle, at the place where Goldar had smashed the crystal. "That was better than anything I've ever done in my life."

The throne room was dissolving, the dimension emptying of nightmares. When he looked back at Goldar, it was to see Goldar getting to his feet. Tommy raised up from the crouch and, a little stunned, took the hand that Goldar offered him.

"Comrades?" Goldar said, a ghost of a smile in his voice.

Tommy grinned broadly. "Comrades." He cleared his throat. "And... uh... if you ever tell anyone what I said..."

Goldar barked out a laugh. "Your secret is safe with me, human. Now..." Goldar looked around. "Do you have any idea how we're going to get out of here?"

A shriek rent the air, then a flash of light, then yells of rage from the other gods.

"Got a report on that, Kim?" Jason said, trying to keep up with the rage-filled Artemis, who had since been joined by Hermes. Hermes was fast, but Jason had been able to channel some of their Thunder powers to up their speed. Didn't change his reflexes, though.

"Lord Zedd has killed Athena," Kimberly said. She'd had to reopen her mind to Zedd, so her voice sounded strained again as she worked to resist and ignore him. "He's now fighting Demeter, Dionysus, and Poseidon."

"Can he handle all that?" Zack said.

There was a smile in Kimberly's voice. "Serpentera has unlimited power reserves. Only reason he's taking so long is..."

She cut off as the Megazord shook violently.

The Power Rangers were silent as they battled Artemis and Hermes, their only saving grace that neither god seemed to work together very well. They knew that they were hemorrhaging power,
while Lord Zedd had power to spare. That had always been the problem: Lord Zedd never saved power. He used it dangerously, and had plenty to call on.

Once the gods were taken care of, the Megazord didn't stand a chance against Serpentera. The battle for Angel Grove might quickly become a moot point.

Jason shoved the worries in the back of his mind. He knocked a few more of Artemis' arrows away, trying to aim a few at Hermes. Hermes avoided them, but only just. He was getting slower. That was actually hopeful, as perhaps the more gods died, the less power the remaining gods would have. Or they were just getting tired.

But the Megazord's power reserves were suffering as well. If they didn't have help... It was horrible, but having Lord Zedd momentarily on the same side was pretty useful. If it weren't for the fact they were spelling out their certain doom...

Artemis was out of arrows, Jason noticed. If he could just get her in close combat... but he had Hermes to contend with.

"Uh..." Zack was pointing to the screen, momentarily forgetting his station. "What the heck is that?"

At first they thought it was Hephaestus. It was a small human-sized figure that was getting bigger, just like the gods had... but then it wasn't Hephaestus. It was human, with long brown hair and a green flannel shirt.

Jason and Billy were the only ones who didn't yell with shock. Jason knew it was Prometheus, and he'd only had enough time to tell Billy about the form the Titan had taken.

Kimberly screamed.

"It's okay!" Jason yelled, though it still shook him to the core to see the form of his dead friend right in front of him so suddenly. "It's not Tommy! It's Prometheus! He's taking Tommy's form."

"Well, why the flying shit would he do that?!" Kimberly yelled. "I know I'm evil but that's just plain sick!"

"For once in agreement with evil spell girl," Zack said.

With a wink at the Megazord, Prometheus lunged at Hermes, who had not noticed the Titan and was going in for an attack at the Megazord. Prometheus grabbed Hermes by the neck, thrust his hand into the god's chest, and threw the god at Serpentera. Hermes dissolved into thin air before he could hit the giant Zord.

Billy cleared his throat. "Let's leave aside Prometheus' questionable choices and just let him help us. We're still against seven gods here."

"Six."

Billy glanced back at Kimberly, who shrugged. "Somehow Lord Zedd knows Prometheus already took out Hephaestus."

"So the freedom fighters have a clear shot at the cannon," Jason said happily. He contacted the spare communicator. "Rocky, you there? How's the sabotage coming along?"

They waited for a response, and Jason was just about to call Alpha to see if he could reach them, when he heard static.
"Not sure if we're gonna be able to get this shut down."

Rocky's voice was calm, but hollow. It told Jason everything he needed to know. They had tried, and were still trying, but the cannon was created by a god, after all.

It was going to go off, taking Angel Grove and the Moon Palace with it.

"You've done your best," Jason said. "Teleport out of there. You'll need to hang onto the two others to..."

"Already tried it," Rocky said, with a slight laugh. "There some kinda force field, or maybe the cannon is doing something." He sighed. "The cannon's going off in five minutes. Head for cover."

"Oh, no you don't," Jason barked. "You three aren't giving up yet." He switched channels. "Alpha, that cannon is about to go off, but the three freedom fighters are still down there. Can you teleport them out?"

"I'll try, Jason," Alpha said, "but Serpentera is causing so much interference."

"So, that's what's happening," Jason said under his breath. "Keep trying and stand by," he said to Alpha, and then switched back the channels. "Rocky, hang on. Keep trying on the cannon, but be ready to teleport out."

While Jason had been coordinating communications, Zack had taken over combat. Now, though, he looked at Jason, confused. "What's the plan, Jas? You're not..."

"No choice, and we're not talking through Kim this time." Jason gritted his teeth and opened up a communications channel to Lord Zedd. "Lord Zedd, this is the Red Ranger."

There was a breathless pause, and then static.

"He says he's busy right now," Kimberly said.

"Tough," said Jason. "And he's probably going to want to talk to me when he hears this. Zedd, there's a cannon pointed right at the Moon Palace right now, and it's about to go off. I figure you can neutralize that cannon easy enough. We can distract the gods if you need time."

This time the speaker crackled to life, and it was to Zedd's laughter. "And you, Red Ranger, decide now to tell me of my danger?"

Jason gritted his teeth. "We have people down there. They can't shut down the cannon, and they can't escape. And it's good for both of us if you shut it down." Jason swallowed. "We need your help."

The laughter died down. "Do you not think I've known about the cannon this entire time?"

The Rangers stared at the speaker in shock. Artemis was able to get a hit in on the Megazord, and alarms shrieked, but that was the least of their worries.

"If you knew about the cannon... It's going to blow up the Moon Palace. It was made by Hephaestus, so I think it can get the job done," Jason said.

"And you notice I am not currently in the Moon Palace," Lord Zedd said. "I am in Serpentera, which can protect me from whatever the gods throw at me. I will lose nothing important, and it is not in my best interest to..."
"There are people on the Moon Palace!" Kimberly cut him off. "You can't just let them..."

"There are traitors on the Moon Palace," Zedd corrected her. "The followers of a fallen empress. I have already rid myself of one. Why not the rest?"

With that, Zedd let out another burst of fire, destroying Demeter and Dionysus at the same time. The ground shook underneath the Megazord, and Serpentera began to move.

Rocky kept staring at the communicator. The Power Rangers had promised they would be saved... but that was a little hard to believe underground with a cannon that was about to go off.

"Aisha..." he said hesitantly.

"I... I can't," Aisha said in a sharp voice. She always sounded angry when she was scared. "Nothing I've tried has worked. Nothing..."

"Hey," Adam said. He'd been walking around the cannon itself, and Rocky had assumed that he wanted to be alone before the inevitable. "This cannon is right over a hole that's going to the Earth's core, right?"

"That's what the Blue Ranger said," Aisha said in a tight voice.

Adam smiled. "And it's only being held up with a few stays. What if it dropped?"

The three didn't even take time to think or coordinate. Aisha abandoned the computer, Rocky put the communicator on his wrist, and the three started pulling at the stays at the edge of the cannon. They pulled off easily: apparently Hephaestus had set the cannon to be destroyed easily just in case. The three began to shout in joy even as they rushed from one stay to the next.

Rocky took long enough to tap on his communicator. "Hey, Rangers? I think we got this taken care of."

At that moment, the cannon went off as it fell.

As the cannon fell, even as it activated, its power center was damaged. A spout of energy blasted from it, knocking the three freedom fighters back against the wall, alive but unconscious.

The blast blew through the ground and obliterated the empty high school.

With one quick move, the Megazord stabbed Artemis through with the Power Sword, even as she tried to escape the blast. She fell back into the blast and was disintegrated immediately.

As the cannon hit the Earth's core, the blast strengthened, the power concentrated in a tiny beam. Even as Serpentera tried to escape, the blast burst through its chest, tearing a gaping hole.

And then everything was quiet, the cannon completely consumed by the Earth's core.

The Power Rangers stared at the scene in shock. The high school was in ruins, the fruit trees around it burned to a crisp. Prometheus was currently doing the same to Poseidon as he'd done to Hermes, but he was obviously distracted by what had happened.

Ares and Aphrodite took one look at each other, one look at Serpentera... and then teleported away.

"First thing's first..." Jason said slowly, still keeping a wary eye on the seemingly inert Serpentera.
"Alpha, can you get a reading on the freedom fighters?"

"They are safe, Jason," Alpha answered. "They were able to sabotage the cannon at the last second by dropping it into the Earth's core. I was able to establish a lock on them, and I have teleported them to a hospital in Stone Canyon."

"Good," Jason said.

"What about...?" Kimberly said. She didn't have to finish.

"The energy blast of the cannon seems to have crippled Serpentera's power center," Billy said, frowning over the controls. "I can't get a lock on Lord Zedd, though. It's possible that..."

Billy broke off as the rest of the Power Rangers yelled in shock. The eyes of Serpentera had lit up. Jason started backing the Megazord away, when...

Kimberly screamed.

Prometheus, still wearing Tommy's visage, had been cautiously approaching Serpentera. Seconds after the eyes lit up, a gout of fire exploded from Serpentera's mouth, incinerating Prometheus instantly.

Tommy, very much alive, sat on the floor in Goldar's bedroom. Only it wasn't Goldar's bedroom. They were still in that other dimension, the one that showed nightmares.

Only Tommy had realized something. It wasn't nightmares. Not really. It was what they needed to see. The problem was, the things he needed to see usually involved nightmares.

Goldar sat across from Tommy. The table was set with cards and whiskey. It was late at night... and there was a missing place at the table.

Tommy swallowed. He'd been able to tell Goldar some of his plans, when this place had popped up. The one thing he had to tell Goldar... and the one thing he knew would break Goldar's trust, that trust he needed so desperately right now.

"You can stop worrying, Tommy," Goldar said quietly, after several minutes (hours?) or silence.

Tommy looked up, surprised. He'd been trying to form the words, to explain to Goldar, but now those words flew right out of his head.

"I know why we're here," Goldar said. "I know what you... and Scorpina... did. I've known... well... since it happened."

Tommy realized he was barely breathing. "I... I'm..."

"Don't say you're sorry," Goldar said wearily. "She didn't. I don't think she was, really, though I think she hated what it did to me." Goldar smiled bitterly. "Don't you wonder why we weren't able to gain the power of Titanus, even though we were ahead of you and the Red Ranger?"

Tommy buried his face in his hands, and then scraped his hair back. He could almost take Goldar's rage better than this.

"And I'm not sure how much choice you had in the matter," Goldar said. "You were drunk, so was she... and she was definitely stronger than you."
"It was a mistake," Tommy said. "One that I regret every day. I mean..." he smiled, "Scorpina's amazing, but..." He winced. "I hated breaking your trust like that."

"Trust is so easily broken," Goldar said. "And the breaking of trust is not always the end of everything. It's... it's just what happens. It's life. You live long enough... you get used to it."

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Oh, don't pull that wise old man bullshit on me."

Goldar grinned. "I thought you preferred your friends full of self-righteous, pompous speeches."

Tommy laughed. "It doesn't suit you. I..." he sobered, "I know you don't want me to say it, but I'm still sorry."

"I could have told you that," Goldar said. "Oh, come on, Green Ranger," he said as the room started to dissolve around them once again. "You can make up for everything by getting us out of here. You've been dimension-hopping, eh? Can you hop us the hell out of here?"

Tommy frowned. "That's... going to be difficult. I don't think Zedd was going to make it easy for me to get out of here."

"There should be a way out," Goldar said. "After all, he sent me in."

"Yeah..." Tommy said slowly. "He did, didn't he?"

Goldar looked confused, and then his eyes widened. "What are you hinting at, Tommy?"

Tommy sighed. "I don't think Zedd meant for just one person to die here. After all, didn't he ask you to bring back the green power coin?"

"Yes."

"Why?" Tommy crossed his arms. "If he has control over this dimension, or at least access to it, why didn't he just wait for me to die and then call the power coin to himself?"

Goldar started pacing. "He... He..."

"He knows what you did for Rita... and why," Tommy said. "He's super smart... he has to know. That's why he's been keeping you so out of the loop. That's why he sent you in here in the first place when he didn't even need to."

"So how was he going to get the power coin?"

Tommy looked down, thinking hard. "He could have killed me right off. He didn't. He sent me to another dimension, one that would drive me crazy... I don't think he knew about the dimension-hopping, though I don't think it would have mattered. He knew I would try to find a way out of here... In fact, he was counting on it. He would want to show my corpse to my friends, after all. So he sends you to speed things along. One option: I kill you or leave you here, and then I escape with my power coin. I... I think he set that up so that it would kill me."

"How do you know that?" Goldar said.

"Just some things... someone... said about this dimension," Tommy quickly evaded. He didn't really want anyone to know that he'd actually met Zordon like that. "So, then, if that's true, option two is that you kill me, grab the power coin, and the same happens to you. You die, and he gets the power coin."
"And option three?" Goldar said.

Tommy smiled grimly. "We kill each other, and he still has access to the power coin. Or either of us figure it out, leave the power coin, and he can kill us. I'd be stripped of power, after all, so I'd be easy pickings."

"Sounds complicated."

"Haven't you noticed that's how Zedd does everything?"

Goldar considered this for a moment. "So... are we stuck, then?"

"No," Tommy said quietly. He pulled out his power coin, free from his morpher. It glinted dully, always taking a green tinge. "It just means I have to give this up."

Goldar's eyes widened. He stared at the coin, and then at Tommy. "But... think about what you've suffered to get that power back. To keep it. Everyone has tried to take it away from you, and..."

"Exactly," Tommy said, his voice sharpening. "I've hurt so many people trying to keep this power. Hell, I endangered the whole universe just to keep it." He sighed. "Someone told me... that I was keeping it just for me. To feel powerful, or to feel useful. And... yeah. I sort of get that. It..." He strangled the words out. "It's time to give it up."

With an effort that felt like a knife slicing through his brain, Tommy opened a dimensional portal. He couldn't keep doing that. He could feel the blood rushing in his ears, and he knew this control over dimensions was starting to take its toll. Keeping the portal open just wide enough, he threw the coin in. The portal disappeared.

"There. It's out of reach of everyone now." Tommy smiled. "And since we didn't have the Sword of Power to separate it from me, no one's going to be able to use it to its full potential, even if someone finds it."

Goldar stared at where the portal had just disappeared. "I hope you didn't just make a huge mistake."

"Me, too." Tommy said. "But it's out of Zedd's hands, anyway."

"But you're still defenseless," Goldar pointed out. "Zedd's going to kill us when we get back. You have a plan for that?"

"Of course I do," Tommy said, sounding a little insulted. "Look, I was able to catch up with what's going on on Earth. I can take care of Zedd-don't give me that look, I can-but there may be some trouble on the Moon Palace. You with me?"

"How can you possibly hope to take care of Lord Zedd, as you say?" Goldar said, irritated. "You said it yourself. You don't have any power anymore."

Tommy grinned. "I never said that."

Jason touched his communicator. "Are you sure you tracked him in this direction, Alpha?"

"Affirmative, Jason," Alpha answered. He paused. "I must also inform you that your parents are asking why you're not teleporting back to the Command Center."

The five Power Rangers looked at each other. It was a good question.
Serpentera was gone. It had used what little energy it had left after blasting Prometheus (Kimberly's parents had calmed Kimberly down through the communicator this time, and Kimberly had been far too quiet ever since), and now Serpentera was in orbit around Earth.

Lord Zedd, though, had not returned to the Moon Palace, as it was currently under the control of Ares and Aphrodite. Alpha had tracked him to a cave near Angel Grove, which was imperfectly protected by failing force fields.

He was running. He'd severely drained his power, and he had nowhere to go.

"We have to end this," Jason said, to himself, to Alpha, to the parents, to the other Rangers... "He's hijacked our lives, terrorized our people, destroyed our town... He killed Tommy. He has to pay for what he's done."

Billy, Trini, and Zack nodded, ready to follow Jason. They had no plan, but they knew they had to finish it.

Kimberly, however, didn't move. "Wait..." she said. "We can't just..."

"It's not up for debate, Kim," Jason said. "We're going after Zedd. You can go up to the Command Center if you want... or wherever you want to go. We won't stop you, as long as you don't stop us."

Kimberly clenched her fists. "You're all just after revenge. You don't care about the war anymore. You just want to pay Lord Zedd back."

"That's part of it," Jason admitted.

"But not all," Trini said.

"Yeah, Kim. You know if we let Zedd regroup, he's just going to start all this over again," Zack said. "We have to make sure the Earth's safe. Too many people have been hurt this time."

Billy didn't say anything. He was just staring intently at Kimberly.

"You've got it wrong," Kimberly said. "If you're looking for revenge for Tommy's death... take it out on me." She was gasping for air, as if each word was an effort. "I'm the one who killed him..."

At those words, Kimberly dropped to her knees, clutching her head. She demorphed involuntarily. Her eyes were squeezed shut, and her mouth was open in a silent scream.

Just as suddenly as it started, it stopped. Kimberly tried to get up, stumbled, and stayed on her knees. The other Rangers rushed over to her.

"It's broken, isn't it," Billy said.

"Yes," Kimberly said in a rough voice. "I... god... I..."

Tears were streaking down her face in a steady stream, but she didn't seem aware of it.

"I killed Tommy," she whispered. "And then I tried to run away from it, and I ended up just hurting so... many..."

Her face was frozen in silent horror, in an expression so familiar to the others.

"You need to go back to the Command Center," Trini said cautiously. "You don't have to..."
"No!" Kimberly said, surging to her feet and wiping her tears away. "I... You're right, Jason. This has to end. I have to face him. I... I can't keep running away."

Possibly it was a wish to pay Zedd back for what he'd done to her. Possibly it was a way to confront what had happened to her. Possibly it was a deathwish. No matter what, it was the first truly free decision Kimberly had made for weeks. The team, now whole again, walked into the cave to face Lord Zedd.
"Why aren't they coming back?"

The question was voiced by Kimberly's mother, who was leaning against a console in fatigue. She was mirroring many of the other parents. It had been a harrowing day, and only Alpha seemed to be able to remain fully upright. The two youngest of the Taylor boys were currently curled up on a sleeping bag behind the Viewing Globe, too deep asleep to be woken up by the sounds of battle. Marcus and Kevin were at the opposite end of the Command Center, leaning against Zordon's tube and trying to keep up with everything that was going on.

"They've won," Mrs. Harris repeated. "The gods are gone... most of them anyway... Zedd's big machine thing is damaged, and Kimberly's well again... They've already done everything."

"They can't just let Lord Zedd get away," Mr. Scott said darkly. "They have to end it."

"But what are they going to do to him?" she said. The group looked at her, their faces grave. "They wouldn't… kill someone," Mrs. Harris ended in a whisper.

"Someone who kidnapped and corrupted our daughter," Frank pointed out softly, holding a hand out to her.

She flinched away. "And so killing the person who did it will solve everything, will it? The town's still destroyed. People are still dead. What happened to Kimberly... that's not just going to go away. And now they have to add killing to their conscience."

"You're right," Dr. Taylor said. She was looking down, trying to ignore the scenes of destruction on the Viewing Globe. "You're absolutely right. There's no reason for any of them to go in that cave except to..." She glanced at her children, and couldn't bring herself to say it. "I don't want my son with that on his conscience, and I'm sure none of you do either. But... what if we don't stop Lord Zedd here?"

"Violence only begets violence," Mr. Kwan said. "And I can't believe, whatever type of lifestyle my daughter has taken up, that she would go along with this."

"This is the daughter that nearly killed Kimberly, right?" Mrs. Harris asked, her voice suddenly hard. Mrs. Kwan's eyes flashed in anger at the challenge. "And what gives you the right to say that? Kimberly nearly killed Zack, and she definitely killed Tommy."

"She was under evil influence," Frank responded hotly.

"Not when she killed Tommy," Mr. Kwan pointed out.

"I thought it was agreed that was an accident," Mr. Taylor joined the fray. "We're forgetting that Kimberly was a victim in all this. It was Lord Zedd who orchestrated this whole thing, and I don't
think any of them should feel particularly bad in taking him out."

"But not when everything's like this," Mrs. Harris protested. "Not when they're barely on their feet, and Kimberly's just broken the spell. They need to come back, figure out how to get rid of those other two gods..."

"And let Lord Zedd start everything all over again, right?" Mr. Scott said. "My son's right. They need to finish it."

"They're going in there for revenge, and nothing else," said Dr. Taylor. "And... honestly... I don't blame them. And don't you think Kimberly wants to atone for what she's done?"

"For what Zedd made her do," Frank said hotly. "And if any of you try to blame her for anything when they get back..."

"You think they're coming back?"

It was Sylvia's voice who had hushed them. She'd been silent and had abandoned her post ever since Prometheus, in the form of Tommy, had been destroyed by Serpentera. As Kimberly's parents had consoled Kimberly over the communication system, Mrs. Scott and Kristen had stayed with Sylvia. She looked up now, for the first time taking interest in what was going on, her eyes red.

"Of course they're coming back," Mrs. Scott said, gripping Sylvia's hand. "They just went in to finish Lord Zedd, and then they'll..."

But Sylvia was already shaking her head, pulling her hand from Mrs. Scott's grasp. "I've made a study of Lord Zedd, and so have you, Judy. Even after losing control of the gods, losing that spell, losing his Zord... he's still powerful. He still has the Z-Staff, and they all just walked willingly into his trap. They're not going in to finish him. They're going in to die trying."

Everyone in the Command Center froze, no longer paying attention to anything on Earth. No one wanted to voice it aloud, but there was too much sense in Sylvia's words to cast them aside. This was still the evil overlord who had casually sent their whole world into hell. Who had raised and commanded gods. Even if the Rangers managed to defeat... to kill... him, he would not let them go unscathed.

"Alpha, you can stop them," Kristen said. "You can't agree with what they're doing, and I don't think Zordon would either. You can just teleport them back."

Alpha had not been paying attention to the argument. He had noted what was going on, but he'd been witness to too many similar conversations to take it seriously. Now, though, he looked up. "I could stop them, Kristen, but I will not."

"Why not?" Kristen said angrily. "This is their lives we're talking about, and they're obviously out of their minds."

"Oh, ay-yi-yi, I know all that," Alpha said. "But I wasn't lying when I said Jason was in charge, not me. This is Jason's decision. Of course Zordon wouldn't want this. The Power Rangers are putting themselves in danger. If they do kill Lord Zedd, there will be a dangerous power vacuum in this sector of the galaxy, and there are forces for evil more dangerous than Lord Zedd. But... Jason understands all that. He's not out for revenge. He knows this needs to be done."

"How do you know all that?" Sylvia asked.

Alpha looked back at the console. "Because we've already discussed it. This was always part of the
plan, if it came to it. All the Rangers know exactly what they're doing."

The decision had been made. As the families of the Power Rangers processed this, Alpha finally broke through the flickering security around the cave, allowing them to monitor the Rangers. He also prepared to teleport the Rangers out immediately, should they need it. It was the Rangers' sacrifice to make, but he was not going to let them die if he could help it. He'd abandoned his search for Zordon, all of his concentration on helping the Power Rangers.

The rest watched the Viewing Globe, dreading what was to come.

If they had kept monitoring Earth as closely as they had during the previous battle, they would have noticed a sudden power surge... and a certain appearance in the wreckage of the high school. As it was, the sensors of the Command Center were trained on Power Rangers alone, so the two figures went unnoticed.

The five Power Rangers walked through the cave, silent and tense. Ahead of them they could see a faint red glow, drawing them inexorably forward.

Kimberly held on to the wall, trying not to show weakness. She'd broken the spell. She'd expected pain, and had braced herself for it even as she made the conscious decision to break the spell, but this was nothing quite like what she'd expected. It was like a burning, starting from her insides and working out.

She suddenly wished she'd asked Tommy more about when he'd broken his own spell. He was the only one who had experience with it... But she'd lost her chance.

She'd killed Tommy. She'd gloated over it when she'd first come under the spell, but otherwise she'd avoided it ever since. Using excuses. It was an accident. There was nothing she could have done. She had more important things to worry about than blaming herself... like serving Lord Zedd.

But Zedd had used her and hadn't even given her the peace she'd been seeking. So, now, she faced her sins. She was responsible for Tommy's death. Zedd may have orchestrated the circumstances, but it was her fault.

She kept repeating that to herself, even though it tore another little bit from her soul every time. Even though, with each step, she felt like running away, hiding, just so she could get away from her friends, who she'd hurt, who now glanced at her with eyes that mixed caution and pity.

And she remembered abandoning Tommy when it had been him. Pulling away from him, just so she could sort out her own feelings while he was dying inside.

She wondered if Zack still had the scar from the arrow wound.

She still felt Trini's fists.

She saw the shadows on Jason's face, telling of worry and sleepless nights.

And Billy. Who kept giving her encouraging smiles. That was somehow worse. She'd made him suffer along with the others.

Why didn't any of them hate her? She'd killed Tommy, after all.

"We're almost there," Jason said in a hushed voice. He glanced back at Kimberly and noticed her struggling. "Are you making it?"
"Yeah," she said, steeling herself. The pain was growing worse, but this was something she had to do.

After all, she knew there was no going back. She was here to end it. She would end it. She had to make up for what she'd done... even if it meant making the sacrifice she'd planned from the beginning.

The five Rangers stepped into the red light. Lord Zedd stood in the middle of a cavern, holding his Z-staff at ready. He didn't look defeated. He looked like he'd been expecting them.

"Welcome, Power Rangers," he said. "Welcome to the end."

"Reinforce that door," Finster yelled over his shoulder as he worked at his computer. "And pushing my cabinet in front of it is not enough. Use your brains."

"Do you really think the gods are going to come after us?" Squatt said as he and Babboo abandoned the (wheeled) cabinet and starting setting up some of Finster's portable forcefields. "What would they want with us?"

"If not the gods," Finster cursed, "who are currently taking over the throne room, it will be Lord Zedd. Or the Power Rangers, if it comes to it. We've overstayed our welcome and usefulness, long ago."

"Finster, are you trying to get the long-range teleporter back working?" Babboo said. "Last time you did that the computer blew up half your lab."

"The inessential half," Finster said. "Lord Zedd has already thrown us to the wolves. We have to try to get away from here."

"What about our plan to steal Serpentera?" Squatt suggested.

"Your plan," Finster said. "Never mine, as that would be even more tantamount to suicide than this is. And the gods' cannon has already damaged Serpentera's power center. No..." Finster moved to another console, "best to leave all these crazies to just kill each other. In the meantime..." He called Rita's staff from its hiding place, "we just need to pack and go."

Ares and Aphrodite, unaware and uncaring of the escape attempt going on in the palace, surveyed the Earth from the balcony of the throne room.

"How the realm of Artemis has been misused..." Aphrodite said slowly, sadly, as she surveyed the monstrosity of metal and stone around her.

"Oh, don't act like you actually cared about her," Ares snapped at her. "You two never got along. Her with her damned celibacy."

Aphrodite turned a cold eye on him. "You realize we're the only ones left. Even that human-lover Prometheus is gone. And all because of that monstrosity who called himself Zeus."

"Nothing to lose, love," Ares said. He sauntered over and sat on the throne. "So we wait for that bastard to come out of hiding, and we take him apart. Pull him apart muscle by muscle, and bathe in his blood as his palace burns around him."

Aphrodite leapt on top of him. "I love it when you talk dirty."
Everyone's attention was elsewhere: the Command Center surveyed the cave, where the Power Rangers and Lord Zedd were ready for the final fight, the Angel Grove survivors in Stone Canyon, where the freedom fighters were recovering in the hospital, Rita's minions trying to escape, and the last gods... were distracted. So no one noticed the two figures materialize in the wreckage of the high school.

"Oh, man," Tommy said quietly, surveying the damage. "Looks like I don't have to worry about math homework."

"What do you think is happening?" Goldar said.

"I don't know." Tommy squinted his eyes and looked around in the dying light, but all was quiet. "I honestly thought we were going to find a huge battle going on. It looks like everything is over."

"I don't think so," Goldar said. "Everything has just moved. If either side had won, we'd see evidence of it... not just quiet."

"They're ahead of schedule," Tommy said. "So we have to hurry. You get to the Moon Palace, and I'll..."

"I remember the plan, human," Goldar growled. "You just make sure you don't blow up the world or anything. Not that that wouldn't be convenient..."

Tommy smirked. "See ya later, then."

"Do we really need to point out that you've lost?" Jason said. "You may have hurt us, but you've lost control of the whole situation."

"Have I?" Lord Zedd stood impassively, looking down on the Rangers.

"Oh, don't keep on with that bullshit," Zack said. "You've lost the gods. You've lost Kimberly. In the meantime, we're still fine, and you're no closer in getting Zordon. He brandished his axe. "And we've got you cornered."

"Ares and Aphrodite have taken over the Moon Palace," Billy said. "The internal damage to Serpentera is also quite extensive."

"In other words," Trini said. "You have nowhere to run. Do you wish to talk terms of surrender now?"

"And you might even convince us into letting you surrender," Jason said.

Lord Zedd stared at them, looking like he was actually considering what they'd said. Then, he laughed.

"You actually think you've won!" Lord Zedd exclaimed. "You rank amateurs. You... children." He spread his arms. "Don't you see that the gods... that all that's happened in the past two weeks... it's all been a distraction. You already lost. You lost the night I gave you those clues."

"Keep talking," Jason said. "You're just postponing the inevitable."

"Indeed," Lord Zedd agreed. "Or, perhaps, waiting for the fulfillment of my plans."

"Whatever," Kimberly spoke for the first time. "Just get on with it already."
Her voice was laced with pain, and the rest of the Rangers were surprised to see her stooping and trembling slightly, as if it took all of her energy to stay upright.

"Just as you wish, my dear..."

"Don't call me that!" Kimberly shouted. "Don't you dare."

Zedd inclined his head and turned his attention from her, even as the others tried to help Kimberly stay on her feet. "Let me tell you, then, since you're all too slow to figure it out.

"It all started when I talked to you after you gained those new Zords. I gave you all... well, most of you... the chance to back out. You insolently rejected my kind offer, so I gave you certain clues. Even if you figured out the clues, none of you responded to them correctly. They were your chances to foil my plans, but you did not act on them.

"My clue to you, Blue Ranger, was a warning. Not for what you would do, but for what you are. Victor. Too intelligent and reckless for your own good, unwilling to take responsibility for your own actions... or to ask for help when you need it. Convinced of your own 'victory,' you served not only as a perfect distraction, but to weaken your friends. You awakened their rage and their own sense of fallibility. You were also embarrassingly unsuccessful in your attempts to help your friends, Kimberly and Tommy, when they needed you the most. But... you knew all that already.

"Red and Black Rangers... Cincinnatus and amazing fifty. I will not reveal the meaning of your clues, as you obviously do not want anyone to know them. However, rather than acting on them in good faith, you became convinced that you could not act on them, thus not allowing for certain opportunities. Again, you relied on yourselves alone, never even considering asking for help, when there was plenty around."

Jason clenched his fist. In other words, he thought, if they had given up their powers to someone else, things might have worked differently. Or, if he had allowed the people of Angel Grove to fight, as they had wished...

"And now to the Yellow Ranger," Zedd said, letting his attention slide from them. "Nosce te ipsum. You've always thought yourself a pacifist. A creature of calm and discipline. Yet rather than examine the self-delusion that dominates your life, and thus become wary of the wealth of violence and rage that calm demeanor hides... you allowed the violence to overcome you. You've done far more damage to yourself than you ever could have to Kimberly, in ways you have not yet realized. And you squandered an opportunity that would have truly stymied my plans. You did not remove Kimberly to the Command Center."

"Enough of the psycho-analysis," Jason interrupted. "So we've made a few missteps. I still don't see how this makes you any less screwed. If our faults are a lack of self-examination or an unwillingness to ask for help, then yours is arrogance. You're still congratulating yourself for manipulating our emotions... even while you're hiding in a cave. What does all this matter, in the long run? All this stuff you've talked about... we've dealt with it, or we're dealing with it. So what's the point?"

"The point is... I also gave Zordon a clue. One that I'm sure even now he still doesn't understand." Lord Zedd regarded the silence with amusement. "The night of the clone's death, I contacted Zordon. I gave him a chance, the same as you, and he refused. I told him I will cut him to the heart. I have done so. When he returns, he will do one of two things. He will either give himself up to me, or he will flee, thus abandoning all the protection he has built for himself on Earth. There is no question in this."

"He won't abandon us," Zack said hotly.
"Black Ranger, he will not think of it as abandoning you," Zedd laughed. "He will think of it as protecting you. He will see the cost to all of you is too high. He has shown in the past that he will go to any lengths to avoid death. This little character flaw has allowed the war to continue as long as it has. He's more interested in saving the few warriors he loves than in saving the universe. And when he finds the death and destruction committed while he was gone..."

"Tommy is dead... I'll concede that," Jason said darkly. "But if you think Zordon's going to sacrifice everything just because of that, you really don't know Zordon."

"And you do?" Lord Zedd laughed. "Rangers, you've never even seen his true face. And as for conceding Tommy's death, Red Ranger, why is it then you've spent all your time searching for Tommy when you could have been concentrating on fighting me, or saving the people of Angel Grove."

The rest of the Rangers looked at Jason, clearly shocked.

"But it is not merely Tommy's death to which I refer," Lord Zedd said blithely. "I have not finished explaining the clues. The Pink Ranger's clue, for instance. Another betrayal. You have obviously never figured that one out."

"I know what it means," Kimberly said in a strangled voice. "I betrayed Tommy. I betrayed everyone, I know that now. So you think that's going to..."

"If you knew what the clue meant, you would understand why you're in so much pain," Lord Zedd said smoothly.

Kimberly had fallen to her knees finally. With a gasp of pain, she demorphed, no longer able to support the transformation. She was not only shaking in pain. Her face was twisted in anguish, and a fine net of red lines covered her body, as if her veins were visible through her skin. The red lines throbbed and turned livid.

"Rita may have allowed a traitor to live and fight against her," Lord Zedd said, this time deadly serious. "But I will not suffer a traitor to live. I will not brook another betrayal."

Tommy was expecting quite a few extreme reactions from his sudden disappearance. He knew enough from observing from Zordon's dimension that everyone thought he was dead. Still, he knew of no other way of handling this but to just show up and hope everything went well.

Plus, he had to know what was going on. If the Rangers were no longer fighting, it could be they were getting ready to take out Zedd. He had to be there.

So, when he teleported up to the Command Center, he tried to teleport in the bedroom or the training room. Somewhere out of the way, so he wouldn't startle anyone.

He materialized, there was a scream, and he realized he was looking straight at the Viewing Globe. Damn.

"It's okay, everyone!" Tommy said quickly, surveying Alpha and all the family members drawing back from him, as if he were a ghost. "I was never dead, and I just now got back."

He let everyone remain silent, staring at him, as he held up his hands as if to calm them down. He was wasting time, but he couldn't afford to be held up by anything going wrong.

"Tommy..."
His stomach dropped. Sylvia. She was here. Of course she was here. But, then... now she knew everything. She knew what he'd been... what he'd done to her and Billy...

All the scenarios he'd imagined over the past few months played through his head. He'd always dreaded her finding out that he was the Green Ranger. The others were so forgiving, Billy included, but he'd attacked her son, and then he'd allowed her to take him in, to treat him as a son...

He turned to face her, but she was already near him, and she threw her arms around him before he could react. She crushed his ribs, but he couldn't pull away. He was reminded of the hug she'd given him at the funeral home.

She wasn't going to reject him. A block of ice that had settled in his stomach ever since... well... ever since he'd broken Rita's spell... the ice melted, and Tommy felt true relief for the first time in ages.

"I thought you were dead... but you're here. You're alive."

"Yeah, I am," Tommy said, awkwardly trying to hug Sylvia and pull away from her at the same time. "I... I sort of have something to do, though, so..."

"You probably want to know what's happening," said Mr. Scott.

"Yeah, I do," Tommy said, finally succeeding in pulling away from Sylvia, though still reluctantly. "I know there was a battle, but..."

He was almost thrown off his feet when a mass of metal tackled him around the middle, and he realized Alpha had taken Sylvia's place in hugging him.

"Alpha!" he yelled. "What...?"

"Oh, ay-yi-yi-yi-yi!" Alpha said. "Everyone will be so happy! Zordon, and the Rangers, and..."

"And you, yeah, I get it," Tommy said with a strained voice. "But you don't have to crush me to make your point."

"Oh, Tommy, I'm sorry!" Alpha said, pulling back. He looked like he'd been pretending to be fine and in control for weeks, and now he couldn't stay in control anymore. "I don't know what's come over me! I have to... the Rangers... Oh, ay-yi-yi, the Rangers are confronting Lord Zedd, and they're going to sacrifice themselves!"

"Not if I have anything to say about it, and thankfully, I do," Tommy said. "I've got someone taking care of things on the Moon Palace." He glanced at a console, since no one seemed able to tell him what was going on. "He should be able to take care of those two remaining gods. In the meantime, I need you to teleport me as close to the showdown between the Rangers and Lord Zedd as possible."

"But, Tommy!" Alpha exclaimed, also looking at a console. "This shows you no longer have a power coin. What are you going to do?!"

Tommy grinned. "It's a surprise. And you can't stop me... Zordon."

Everyone looked up at the tube, where Zordon had appeared without anyone noticing. He was frowning.

"It's too much of a risk, Tommy," Zordon said. "You can't know what's going to happen. I absolutely forbid you to try this."
"As I said, I'm no longer a Power Ranger," Tommy answered. "You can try to stop me, but I don't think you'll be able to." People looking at Tommy's face saw his eyes glow slightly at this pronouncement, and they drew back.

Zordon looked appalled. "Tommy, maybe I can't stop you, but I can appeal to your reason. You'll be risking everything. This could be the end of us all."

Tommy smiled. "It won't be. I know it with my entire being... which is not quite human right now." His smile broadened into a grin. "No one's going to die today. No one."

With that, he disappeared.

"Alpha, why did you teleport him out?" Zordon said, his voice laced with panic.

"I didn't, Zordon," Alpha said. "He just... disappeared."

Finster, Squatt, and Babboo looked up in fear at the pounding at the door. The restraints on the door whined in protest, and the door started to give. They'd hoped that the gods weren't coming after them, but it looked like they'd been mistaken.

"I can't get us out of here," Finster said. He quickly put Rita's staff back in hiding. He'd be damned if any god were going to get that. He just hoped Rita would be able to find it later. "Do either of you know how to fight?"

Squatt and Babboo looked at him helplessly.

Finster sighed. "I have a few weapons. It's better than trying to run." He threw a few pistols to them. "Too bad I don't have enough energy to animate some of these monsters."

The pounding stopped. There was a wrenching sound of metal tearing, and the door flew open, revealing not a god, or Lord Zedd, or a Ranger, but... Goldar.

The three opened fire, but Goldar was able to easily deflect the blasts with his sword. "Stop shooting at me, already!" he yelled. "I'm not going to hurt you, and you're going to drag the gods into this before we're ready!"

Finster lowered his weapon, and Squatt and Babboo stopped shooting.

"That's better," Goldar growled. "Now, Finster, you're going to need to..."

Finster raised his weapon again. "Give me a good reason why I shouldn't shoot you?"

Goldar sighed. "One, it wouldn't do any good, as you've just seen. Two, if we're going to retake the Moon Palace from those two gods, who are currently humping each other on Lord Zedd's throne, we're going to need to work together. And third..." he looked away, as if it was painful to continue, "we're following Tommy's plan."

"Tommy?"

"He's alive?!!"

The three looked staggered. Squatt had actually dropped his weapon, and Babboo had accidentally shot his off to the side, incinerating some of Finster's clay monster models, who shrieked in tiny voices.
"What do you want us to do?" Finster said.

Goldar grinned. "This is for all three of you. You're going to disrupt the spell that Zedd used to call forth these Earth spirits. I made sure to analyze it before I... left. It's some strange science mixed with magic, a spell whose source is in Lord Zedd's bedchamber, but the computer is keeping it going. I reckon you, Finster, can purge it from the computer, while Squatt and Babboo can stop it safely at its source."

"But Lord Zedd's bedchamber is past the throne room," Babboo said. "We'd never get past the gods, even if we teleported."

"That's where I come in," Goldar said darkly. "I'm going to keep the gods... distracted. Ares likes a fight, and I believe Aphrodite will enjoy a show. I can keep them going as long as you need."

"What makes you think we won't abandon you, as you did Queen Rita?" Finster said.

"Because it's Tommy's plan," Goldar reminded. "And... because you're better than me. You won't do that."

With that, he left. The three looked at each other.

"Well, you heard him," Finster said. "Just be ready to sneak past those gods." He turned to his computer.

"What's wrong with her?!" Trini had knelt beside Kimberly, absent-mindedly preparing a syringe with some serum.

"I would not do that if I were you, Yellow Ranger," Zedd said. "That will make her die quicker. Yes, she is dying. The curse activated when she broke the spell, as I had planned. She will die, and there's nothing you can do but watch her die. Even I can't stop the process now. It will take ten minutes... and if you physically move her, she dies quicker." He laughed at the Rangers, who were hovering over Kimberly, helpless. "I told Zordon I would cut him to the Hart." He laughed at his own pun.

Four Power Rangers drew their weapons, overcome with grief and fury, ready to fight Lord Zedd to the death... but Kimberly grabbed Jason's arm with surprising strength.

"No..." she said, her voice ragged. "You guys stay back. You still need to protect the Earth. Rebuild. Make up for what I've done."

"What are you talking about, Kimberly?" Billy said, his voice afraid. "You sound like you're going to..."

Kimberly drew herself up, wincing at the pain but pushing through. "I always meant to sacrifice myself," she said quietly. "I'm just living up to my promise. Guys, tell my parents and my brother than I'm sorry, and that I'm so grateful for everything they did." She said this in the rush, as if she were running out of words. And, indeed, she was. "And... thank you all. I truly and deeply don't deserve friends like any of you."

Lord Zedd was shaking with laughter, and he finally gave voice to it. "What do you think you're doing, you silly little powerless girl? You think because you have been evil, that because you've overcome the spell on your own, that you have some sort of chance against me?"

"Exactly," Kimberly said calmly, even smiling. "You said it yourself. It's a curse. A curse tied to our
connection. The same connection I broke on my own. I wonder, though, what would happen if I reopened the connection."

"Satisfied, are you?" Goldar yelled, hoping to startle the two gods.

They looked more annoyed than startled. Aphrodite slid off Ares and smirked. "So, the imposter's lapdog is ready to bark."

Goldar grinned. "You'll find my bite is a lot worse than my bark."

"I think I hear a challenge," said Ares, getting up from the throne. "But I have seen little enough fighting spirit from you, golden one. Aren't you better at kidnapping little boys than fighting men?"

Goldar brandished his sword in front of him. "Would you care to try me, Nimrod?"

"That's Ares," he said with a frown. "Sometimes Mars. And I don't understand why 'Nimrod' has become such an insult..."

"Not the point, dear," Aphrodite said.

"Indeed not," said Ares. "So you wish to fight."

"Oh, no, let's just keep talking," Goldar said sarcastically. "You know," he said with a smirk, "I had a paramour... sort of like your Aphrodite. She hated lengthy discussions. Of course, it must take a lot to keep her happy. Feeling a bit spent?"

"You're really begging for a beat-down, you know that?" Ares said.

"Talk talk talk talk talk," Goldar said. He had seen Squatt and Babboo out of the corner of his eye. He needed to escalate things quickly. "Are you the god of war or not?"

Ares attacked, and Goldar suddenly felt like all was right with the world.

Squatt and Babboo stared at the bedchamber, a bit intimidated by its creepy luxurious decor.

"I'm guessing it'll be something shiny," Squatt said.

"Or something hidden," Babboo pointed out.

They looked at each other. "Shiny sounds easier," they said. They started their search.

Something miraculous happened. Something that hadn't happened through all the threats the Rangers had thrown at him. At Kimberly's words, Lord Zedd took a step back.

"Y-you can't do that," Lord Zedd said, obviously trying to keep his voice steady. "I created the spell. You can't take charge of it like that."

"I already have," Kimberly said, still smiling. "Just like with the gods, you lost control of me long ago. Besides, Tommy could always reopen his own connection, when he was angry or stressed or afraid." A bead of sweat traced down her face. "I think I've got all that covered."

She took a step forward, and to the Rangers' amazement, Lord Zedd took another step back and raised his staff. For the first time they'd ever seen him, he looked afraid.
"So you're going to be able to shut down the curse if you reopen the connection?" Zack said. "Then we can figure out how to break that spell without hurting you."

"That's not the point," Trini said, near tears. "It's... she's..."

"Kimberly, you don't have to do this," Billy said. "There has to be another way."

"Wish there was," Kimberly said, her voice growing shakier, "because this really hurts." She made a visible effort to steel herself, and advanced on Zedd again. "We go together, Zedd. Even if you can manage to save yourself from this curse, you won't manage it unscathed."

She started to concentrate, sweat now glistening on her face. The air crackled around her, and Zedd put a hand to his head, as if trying to shield it.

"Wait..." Zedd said, his voice actually showing a bit of panic. "You did not allow me to explain the last clue. The one for your beloved Green Ranger. Two weeks."

Kimberly opened her eyes, her concentration broken. "You said he would die in two weeks. You didn't exactly keep that schedule because of me, but you still reached the same end."

"You didn't kill Tommy, my dear. I merely led you to believe you did."

The Rangers stared at him in shock. Zedd was starting to get some of his old swagger back as he was no longer quite so directly threatened by Kimberly.

"You were right, Red Ranger, to investigate Tommy's death," Lord Zedd said. "When Kimberly 'killed' Tommy, she shot an arrow at Hephaestus. Hephaestus rebounded the arrow behind her, and she heard a cry of pain, and then saw a pile of ash. At the moment, though, that the arrow grazed past Tommy, I opened up a dimensional portal for him. He's been stuck in there ever since."

"So this whole time, you were just pretending he was dead?" Jason said. "These..." he stopped. "Two weeks."

"Two weeks." Lord Zedd confirmed. "I knew you Rangers would take this long to attack, that you wouldn't wait the entire month I'd given you. I merely needed to position you just so."

"But what's the point in all this?" Trini said. "Why just store him in another dimension?"

"A nightmare dimension," Lord Zedd said, a smirk in his voice. "One that will break him in ways I could not possibly achieve. One that will utterly destroy him, for it uses his own nightmares against him. I sent Goldar in there for good measure. I also rigged the portal so that anyone who comes out of there with a power coin... dies. It will be quite a relief to Tommy after these two weeks of torment. Would you like to see him?" He raised his Z-staff, and swirling energy started to form against the wall of the cave.

"Don't do it!" Kimberly cried, on her knees from the pain now. "Haven't you done enough?!"

"Never enough," Lord Zedd laughed. "And if I remember, you were threatening to kill me minutes ago. Now say hello to your dead boyfriend!"

The Rangers waited, frozen in horror. Nothing happened.

They looked at Zedd, who was just staring at the portal.

"It's empty," Lord Zedd said after a full minute. "Why is it empty? That's the dimension I sent
Tommy into, and there's nothing. Not even the green power coin!

With a violent wave of his Z-staff, he closed the portal. He leaned against the staff, staggered from fatigue and confusion. "But if he's not there," he said, mostly to himself, "then where is he? Where..."

There was a clattering of running footsteps echoing through the cave passage.

"No..." Lord Zedd said slowly.

Moments later, a grinning Tommy rounded the corner and stopped short. His clothes, the same ones he'd worn two weeks before, were bleached white, but otherwise he looked exactly the same as he had before.

"Did I miss anything?" he said.

Tommy rushed up to the other Rangers, who looked stunned even through their uniforms and helmets. "You won't believe how glad I am to see you guys again," Tommy said. "You all look... so great. Well, except you, Kim, but we can fix that."

Everyone was still silent, and Tommy wondered if he was going to have to deal with having his ribs crushed again once the shock went away. "Uh... guys? Did you all fall asleep under those helmets? There really is no way to tell."

"Prometheus?" Jason said, his voice cracking a little.

"Uh-oh..." Tommy said. "Looks like Jas is slipping a little. Not Pro... Oh, whatever that name was. It's Tommy. Tom... my," he said slowly. "Oliver. Ringing a bell?"

"You're alive..." Billy said, moving forward.

Tommy took a step back. "If Sylvia's any indication, I really can't take any more Cranston hugs today. Yeah, guys, I'm alive. Never was dead."

"But you were in another dimension," Trini said. "You're talking about doing the impossible here."

"A lot of people have been telling me that lately," Tommy said. "Don't worry; I'm going to explain everything."

"Green Ranger, you will explain to me how you escaped that dimension."

Tommy's eyes hardened. He looked over his shoulder. "I'm talking to my friends right now." His voice was slow and dangerous. "Wait your turn."

Tommy turned back, a smile back on his face. "This guy, huh? Won't shut up. Anyway... Zordon's back, by the way. Not that that guy's going to get anywhere near him, but it's nice to have him back."

"What happened to you?" Zack said. "Zedd said you were dead... or were going to be dead, or crazy, or something..."

Tommy laughed. "Yeah, he thought he got me. I'll explain in a minute. First..." He knelt down next to Kimberly, who had turned as white as Tommy's clothes. "Are you okay?" he said softly.

Kimberly half-laughed, half-sobbed. She grabbed Tommy's hand, as if to assure herself that he really was alive. "Well, I'm dying, and it's going to happen pretty soon, but... You're alive, Tommy. This is
the best day of my life."

Tommy grinned and stroked Kimberly's hair. "No one dies today, Kim. I promise."

With a kiss to Kimberly's forehead, he straightened up. He saw Zedd raise his staff. "I'll be with you in a minute!" he snapped at the increasingly angry and confused tyrant.

"Okay, guys, I'm sort of seeing everything pretty clearly right now, and I know what your plan was. I know you made the call, Jason, that you were going to kill Zedd here no matter what the cost. I may have an alternative, though. Jason, do you trust me to do this?"

"No one dies today?" Jason asked.

"I promise," Tommy said.

"Then I trust you."

Tommy nodded once, and then finally turned to face Lord Zedd.

Lord Zedd was grinding his staff into the ground, furious at being treated like that, yet curious enough to not outright attack Tommy. "Do you have time for me now?"

Tommy glanced at Kimberly, whose skin was pulsing between white and red. "Not a lot of time... but I need you to understand. You need to know what I'm about to do, so that you'll know to run away."

"Don't be ridiculous," Lord Zedd laughed. "You don't even have a power coin. Hid it from me, did you? How?"

"By dimension-hopping," Tommy said simply. "You put me in that nightmare dimension... and I was able to cross over into other dimensions."

"That's... that's impossible," Lord Zedd scoffed.

"Again with that word," Tommy sighed. "Impossible, yes. I've done a lot of improbable things in my life, the past two weeks being no exception. And, yes... I've figured out your clue, though it definitely didn't feel like two weeks when I was crossing through all those dimensions. Time sort of lost all meaning in there..." Tommy's eyes unfocused for a second, but then he came back. "The thing is, you thought I was just a normal human with a defunct power coin. You had no idea the power I was toting around."

"Power..." There was a sneer in Lord Zedd's voice. "What power? You have no power. You're not even a Power Ranger anymore."

Behind him, Billy had gasped. Tommy smiled. At least one person had figured it out.

"No, I'm not the Green Ranger anymore," Tommy said. "Those days are behind me forever. See..." he pulled at his clothing sardonically. "Not even wearing green anymore. No, I'm not talking about a power coin. I'm talking about power so pure... so alien to your concept of power... that you can't even sense it."

"When I was trying to reenergize my failing powers, thanks to Empress Rita's green candle, Zordon and I made a few wildly dangerous experiments in power transfers. Namely, he transferred his own power into me. Now, I thought it was all going to my power coin, but my link with the power coin was weak. Some of it was going there, but most of it was being stored in my body as potential
energy.

"It's been changing me, not the least giving me the ability to travel safely between dimensions. I say safely," Tommy held his head, "but even I have limits for that. I think those last few hops did a number on me... but anyway. I was able to visit a few people and get a handle on this new power of mine."

"Eltarian energy would give you the ability to hop dimensions, as you say," Lord Zedd conceded, "but how did you even know how to do that? If you're lying to me..."

"Not lying," Tommy said. "Holding back a few crucial facts, but not lying. The thing is, I've been hopping into dimensions for months now. Rita taught me how. I even traveled to her prison... Not willingly, but I did." Tommy grinned. "You see, that's the thing. You thought you were fighting a human... a Power Ranger with failing powers. And that's what I am. But I'm also someone trained in certain mental powers by an Empress you far underestimated, infused with pure Eltarian energy.

"Now is the part where you're going to run away, and I'll tell you that it's probably safe to go back up to the Moon Palace. Goldar is currently taking care of that pesky god problem you have up there, and you'll need plenty of time to recover your powers."

"Why should I run?" Lord Zedd sneered. "I simply see a child who thinks he has power. Perhaps you are able to cross dimensions. Perhaps you do have some vestiges of energy you stole from your mentor. You couldn't possibly..."

"You don't get it," Tommy interrupted. "We're talking pure Eltarian energy. A power that fuels the Morphing Grid. Ultimately purifying, based on the creativity and will of the wielder. It's true I only have a tiny fraction of the potential power of a true Eltarian, but in close quarters, with your power weakened as it has been... It will destroy you, Lord Zedd. I've giving you the chance to get out of here. I can't stall for too much longer."

"You can threaten all you want, you ingrate!"

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Lord Zedd, I really am sorry, but you're not going to believe me unless I make you believe me." He held out a hand, and a tiny spark of light flew from his fingers.

It hit Zedd on the shoulder. He looked at it for a moment... and then screamed.

The scream was deafening, unlike anything the Rangers had ever heard. Tommy and Kimberly clamped their hands over their ears, and the rest quickly adjusted the sound input on their helmets.

"What's his problem?" Zack yelled. "What did you do to him, Tommy?"

"He's feeling pain," Kimberly said. "He told me if he feels pain, even for a second, it could destroy him completely."

"Zedd, you have to get back to your medical equipment!" Tommy yelled. "I can't give you another chance!"

There was no real indication that Lord Zedd even heard him, but he teleported out nonetheless. Left behind him was an echoing silence.

Ares flew across the room, though not of his own volition. Before he could pick himself off the ground, Goldar was swinging a sword at his head. He used his spear to block the blow, and the spear snapped in half.
Ares frowned. He was losing power.

"Oh, come on!" Goldar said. "I haven't had a proper fight in ages. The little boy put up a better fight than this."

"You'll pay for that," Ares growled.

Goldar laughed and dodged the attacks easily. He buried a fist in the god's stomach. Ares doubled over in pain, and Goldar brought his sword hilt down on the back of Ares' neck.

"You know," Goldar said as he waited for Ares to recover himself, "I've been making myself sick lately. So worried about what's going to happen. So guilty over what I could have done, what I did, what I didn't do... All that is bullshit, though. I lost my way. And thanks to you, I think I've found it again. Hey, maybe you're a god after all."

Ares screamed and rushed at Goldar blindly.

Goldar moved aside and sliced the god across the middle with his sword. Golden blood spurted across the throne room, and Ares fell.

"Then again, maybe not," Goldar said as Ares disappeared.

There was an ugly sound behind Goldar, and he turned to face Aphrodite, whose face was twisted in anguish. "Care to join him?" Goldar said quietly.

Aphrodite spat at him. "You... you've killed him, you bastard. You aren't even human."

"Obviously," Goldar said boredly.

He raised his sword, prepared to defend himself against the raging goddess, when there was a flash of lightning, and then a dull crash. Lord Zedd had teleported back to the throne room, and had promptly passed out.

Aphrodite and Goldar locked eyes. Aphrodite made a move for Zedd, but Goldar was too quick for her. He swooped in between them and threw Aphrodite back several paces. She tried to advance again, but, while Aphrodite was powerful, she was no fighter, and she was quickly losing power. Goldar, deliberately, slashed at her face, knowing that would work where no other blow would stop her.

Aphrodite screamed in rage at the marring of her beautiful face. She looked terrifying, and for a moment Goldar was almost afraid... but then she disappeared.

"We got rid of the spell!" Squatt and Babboo ran out of Lord Zedd bedchamber. "It was easy when Finster took care of it from his end. Oh..."

They stopped, staring at the prone figure of Lord Zedd.

He was alive. That meant that Tommy chose for him to be alive. That meant that he was passing the decision to Goldar.

Goldar considered as he looked at the monstrous form. He might have been dead, but for the tell-tale moving of his chest. Lord Zedd had made all of their lives a living hell. He'd terrorized everyone, friend and foe alike, he'd destroyed Rita in every way possible sans death, and he was, on top of all that, a troublesome, unpredictable, condescending, sadistic bastard.
Squatt and Babbo looked at him. He heard a gasp behind him, and he knew it was Finster rushing to see if the gods were indeed gone.

Goldar knew what they all wanted to do... wanted him to do. But...

"He is our lord," Goldar said firmly. "He may not act like it, and he may not know how to act like it, but that's reality. We patch him up now and face the consequences later."

Finster coughed, and Goldar turned to see that the old doctor didn't look defiant. "Better the devil you know than the devil you don't," he said resignedly. "Besides, I think he may be in more of a mood to listen to us when he wakes up, especially if I add a little something to his medication."

"Just like you used to drug Rita's beauty potions?" Babboo said.

Finster coughed again, this time looking a little affronted. "I have no idea what you mean. Goldar, if you can carry him to his bedchamber, we can hook him up to his diagnostic machinery."

Goldar steeled himself and picked up the unconscious emperor. He hoped he had chosen the right thing.

"Y... you could have killed him!" Jason said. "And you didn't. Why?"

Tommy removed his hands from his ears. Now that he'd released some of the power, his whole body was starting to glow. He looked like he was struggling to keep control over the power. "Zordon forbade me from using this power because he was afraid I was going to use it to kill Lord Zedd. This power can't be used to kill, or it would destroy its wielder along with the victim. Eltarian energy is purifying and creative, not destructive." He smiled wearily. "Besides, no matter what you said, could you have killed him, Jas?"

Jason didn't say anything.

"But it's not going to do us any good," Trini said. "Kim's still dying. The town is still torn apart. And now Zedd has survived, and he's going to start it all over again."

"I can't account for Zedd," Tommy said, "but... I just said that Eltarian energy is purifying and creative. Ah, hell..." he grinned. "I guess I'll have to show you guys before you believe anything anyway."

Now almost blinding as power swirled around him. He seemed to be almost floating, and he struggled to keep purchase on the ground. He moved back to Kimberly, who was now lying on the ground. "Kim... you still with us?" he whispered.

Kimberly's eyes fluttered open, and she squinted in the bright light. "Going to do something crazy?" she said in a broken voice.

"As always," Tommy said. "Guys, you might need to hold onto something."

He held onto Kimberly. He closed his eyes, he took a breath... and released the power.

The light formed around him, suffusing both Tommy and Kimberly with its light, and then shot outward on all sides in a wave. The cave was blindingly bright, then dark. When the Rangers could open their eyes, they saw Tommy and Kimberly holding each other, eyes shut tight... and Kimberly was on her feet, completely healthy.
"Damn, it's dark," Tommy said, his voice ragged. "Guys, you couldn't..."

Jason turned on the headlamp on his helmet, and the others followed suit. Tommy and Kimberly winced away from the light, and the four Rangers tried to keep the lamps away from their eyes.

"So... what just happened?" Kimberly said. "I... I feel fine."

"You should," Billy said. "Tommy just used Zordon's power to heal you."

"Not just that, I hope," Tommy said. "But let's check. You guys demorph, and let's teleport to the Youth Center." He frowned. "Make sure to aim for the back alley."

"Why?" said Zack. "It's not like anyone is there to see us teleport."

"Just wait," Tommy said cryptically.

They teleported as one for the first time in what felt like more than two weeks... what felt like years... and appeared in the back alley of the Youth Center, the one they used because it was always deserted.

They were immediately aware of some very strange things.

"That's not dusk," Zack said. "The sun's coming up in the east. That's... that's dawn. We weren't in there all night."

"And I know the Youth Center was the least hit, but the street doesn't even looked touched," Trini said. "How did all the grass get mown? Unless..."

She stopped. Billy had already run around the corner. They followed to find him picking up a bunch of newspapers that Ernie got delivered to the Youth Center for the few who wanted to read them. The newspapers looked... new. But there hadn't been a fresh newspaper since the beginning of the siege.

"Today's date. Sunday, April 17. And these are freshly printed," Billy said. He held them up to the others, wanting to validate the evidence.

Trini gasped. "Creativity... will of the wielder... no one dies..." She turned to Tommy, and then called the Command Center. "Alpha... I'm not crazy... but what day is it?"

"Oh, ay-yi-yi, Trini, you may not be crazy, but I think I am! Nothing has changed in the Command Center, but according to the rest of the world, it's... two weeks ago. Namely, the morning Zedd kidnapped Kevin. But... he's still here! Oh, ay-yi-yi!"

The five Power Rangers gaped at Tommy, who looked a little sheepish. "Okay, so I couldn't get the Command Center or the Moon or anything outside of Earth, but I think I got all of Earth. Serpentera should be still crippled, and the gods should still be up at the Moon Palace, but Goldar should have taken care of them by now. And..."

"You're saying that the past two weeks have never happened?" Zack said slowly.

Tommy sighed. "It has for us. It has for our families. Not for anyone else on Earth."

There was a burst of laughter, slightly manic, but altogether relived. Jason was laughing, holding the wall of the Youth Center to steady himself. The rest stared at him for a minute, then joined in, Kimberly last of all.
"What are you guys doing here so early?" Ernie said, getting out of his car, bleary-eyed. "I only came up here to do inventory... what are you doing with the newspapers?" He frowned. "I wouldn't peg any of you for pulling pranks on me."

"No pranks," Zack said, coming out of it and wiping his eyes. "We just..."

"...left some project materials at the high school," Billy finished quickly. "We were just walking by."

"Fine," Ernie said, still frowning but looking slightly less suspicious. "I'll open up usual time if you want to work here." He took the newspapers from Billy, unlocked the door, and disappeared into the Youth Center.

"Guess we better get back up to the Command Center," Jason said. "Our parents will be freaking."

"Especially since Zordon's back," Tommy added.

They all exchanged glances. "We definitely need to get back up there."

"I just remembered," Zack laughed. "It's a school day."

Dr. Taylor rolled her eyes. "The whole family's come down with the flu. I'm already calling in sick for my own work." She smiled. "I can't remember my lesson plans anyway."

"Me neither," Sylvia said.

"Is anyone doing anything today?" Mr. Scott said.

As if they could. As if anyone could even approach doing anything normal that day. Outside the Command Center, the world span on, completely unaware of the tumult of the past two weeks. Inside the Command Center, everything had changed.

After the cries of relief that everyone was still alive had subsided, they'd all gathered and talked. Everyone filled in Tommy on what had happened on Earth, Tommy had given a complete-enough version of his own travels, and Zordon had even admitted to avoiding their search for him. There were a few shocked looks, and Kristen had groused about wasting time looking for someone who didn't want to be found, but there were no angry words. The anger was past. They were putting their lives back together, the lives lived in the lost two weeks. They were healing.

"Where's Kimberly?" Frank said suddenly.

"She walked off a bit ago," Mrs. Kwan said. "I thought it was just to go to the restroom, but..."

Alpha glanced at a console. "She's in the Zord hangar."

Kimberly's parents started to get up, but Tommy was on his feet first. He acknowledged Sylvia's encouraging hand squeeze with a smile. "I'll be right back."

He didn't have to look long, when he got to the Zord hangar. Kimberly's legs were hanging from the wing of her Zord. He expected to hear crying, but there was just silence.

"Mind if I join you?" Tommy said.

There was a harsh laugh. Kimberly's head appeared. "I thought I was going to join you... earlier."

Tommy climbed the ladder leading up to the wing and sat next to Kimberly. She didn't look at him.
"Does..." her voice was strangled. "Does it get easier?"

"Living with yourself?" Tommy said softly.

Kimberly nodded.

"Kind of," Tommy said. "Not at first. Not for a while. But..."


"I couldn't erase that," Tommy said. "Healing you was already risky. Memory... it's a tricky thing. I couldn't take away those memories from you."

"I wouldn't want you to," Kimberly said. "I just..." She cleared her throat. "How can I even face them?"

"Not easily," Tommy admitted. "You already know that. But... is it worth it? Are they worth it?"

"Of course they are," Kimberly said. She dropped from the wing of the Zord, and Tommy followed. "I guess we need to rejoin them, then."

"Yeah," Tommy said. "Just... don't kill yourself trying to be normal for them. They'll understand."

Kimberly laughed. "Not sure if I do."

They stared at each other. They were both remembering... While everyone was blinded by the wave of power, Tommy had impulsively kissed Kimberly. It had been wonderful... but now, there was a distance between them. An awkwardness. They'd killed and healed each other, and now everything was different. They grasped hands, they almost kissed... but the moment passed. They sank into their own thoughts, and went to rejoin the group and try to be normal.
Recovery

Chapter Summary

Book 6: Shadows in the Cave

Angel Grove was back to normal. They'd spent the morning just trying to cope with that truth. Angel Grove... the world... was back to normal.

The buildings were whole, the damage undone, no graves in the back of the high school, and the memories gone. There was no evidence that the gods had ever been there, and the police no longer even had the ransom letter for Kevin. Frank and Kevin had briefly teleported down to put in an appearance for the police, explaining that Kevin had gotten homesick and left his friend's house (Kevin chafed at that explanation: kidnapped by Greek gods and space aliens was much cooler).

At the moment, two weeks ago, when they were supposed to have fought Ares and Aphrodite, they were monitoring a peaceful Angel Grove from the Viewing Globe.

Two weeks ago... was today. It was difficult to grasp.

Perhaps unwilling to rejoin a world that had forgotten, they'd all decided to have one last meal in the Command Center before going home. Zordon had looked taken aback. He hadn't quite gotten used to the Command Center being so domesticated. But he remained quiet. He seemed preoccupied, and perhaps impatient to talk to the Power Rangers on their own.

Most went to the kitchen to cook, Billy theorizing that food bought during the two weeks should not exist. Jason used the opportunity to slip away and head to his office. The door slid open, but before he could enter, he heard,

"So, this is where you've been hiding out."

Zack and Trini were coming up the hallway. They'd disappeared separately a while back. No one had commented, but now they were emerging from a dark corridor with plenty of empty rooms, and they were holding hands.

Jason raised his eyebrows and looked pointedly at their hands. "Speaking of hiding out..."

"Mind your own business," Trini said, smirking. She detached from Zack and pushed past Jason into his office. "I didn't realize you had a room like this."

"I didn't either," Jason said. "Zordon must not have thought it was important."

"Yeah, well, Zordon hides a lot from us," Zack commented.

There was an uncomfortable silence between the three of them. The euphoria of the past few hours was slowly fading, and the relief of no longer fighting settled into an unease with the future.

"It makes sense that he would stay away," said Jason. "It gave us time to save the world."

"I'm not sure that's entirely what Zack meant," Trini said, running her hands over the computer
controls.

Jason sighed and sat down. He felt the full two weeks of stress and fear settle on his shoulders. Everything ached.

"Just because Tommy did the impossible with Zordon's energy doesn't meant that Zordon could have done it," Jason said slowly. He sighed again. "Besides… everything's back to normal now."

One look between the three of them gave lie to his words. While the past two weeks had indeed been erased, nothing was really back to normal. Not for them.

Trini was surveying Jason's information from his search for Tommy. "Speaking of keeping secrets… You know, you could have told us you were looking for Tommy."

"I had to keep everyone on task," Jason said. "And there was really nothing for me to do other than this." He looked down. "I didn't want to get anyone's hopes up. Not if I was wrong."

"I get that," Zack said. "And you get that, too, Trini. You're dancing around the issue."

"The issue?" Jason knew from their shared looks that they had done more than make out in that back room. They had come to Jason with something in mind.

"The clues," Trini said.


"You think we'd forgotten all about that? Because I know you haven't, Jas," Zack said.

"I haven't forgotten," Jason said. "But… It's not like we can. Nothing's changed. Everything's gotten worse, as far as that goes."

The other two looked unconvinced.

"It's not like evil's going to take a vacation," Jason continued. "Tommy no longer has power, both his green powers and those weird powers he was using, so we're down to five Rangers, and if we leave, the ones that are left are… well…" Jason coughed, unsure of how to go on.

Zack grinned. "Okay… let's take those one by one. First… yeah, Zedd's going to be pissed when he recovers, but I don't think he's going to be at his best for at least a few weeks. I mean, his defeat was pretty damn devastating, even before Tommy zapped him with that weird power."

"And, yes, we're down to five Rangers," Trini continued. "We've done that before. We're crippled without Tommy… but not incapacitated."

"And as for Billy and Kimberly," Zack said, "Billy's recovered a lot while you weren't paying attention. He's not the same wreck that he was two weeks ago. He saved Angel Grove from the Pacific Ocean. And Kim… she'll recover. No matter what life throws at her, she just gets stronger. All three of them—Tommy, Billy, Kimberly—they've all gone through hell, they've all changed… but that's what makes them ideal Power Rangers, power or no power."

Jason's eyes widened. "That's why you want to leave. I wondered…"

Zack looked taken aback, but Trini gave a small smile. "I wasn't going to say it," she said.

"What do you mean?" Zack said.
Jason got up from his chair and closed the door, glancing down the hallway to make sure no one was listening in. "It's just… you're right. All three of them have been evil. All three of them have harnessed power way beyond our power coins. All of them… have changed. Hell, Tommy just erased two weeks of time. What human can do that? What human…should do that?"

"He saved everyone…" Zack started.

"I'm not denying that," Jason said quickly. "What I am saying is that… and I think you're thinking the same thing, Zack… that we'll go down those paths. We'll change, too. We'll transform into something that we may not recognize. It's Trini's clue. Nosce te ipsum. Know yourself. We've already started to change…"

Zack was looking down. "I… that arrow. The poison that almost killed me. I wasn't worried about dying. I was worried that it would… I dunno… drive me crazy or something."

"And we all know how I almost lost myself," Trini smiled bitterly. "I was violent. I almost killed Kimberly. What if I keep turning more and more violent? I… I can't keep going like this."

"But do we really have a choice?" Jason asked. "I mean, if not us, then…"

"If there's something that these past two weeks have taught me," Zack interrupted, "it's that we're not the only heroes in the world… or even in Angel Grove. I mean, if Bulk and Skull can turn into resistance fighters, there's heroes who can take our place."

Jason sighed and sank into his chair. "I guess we should talk to Zordon. I just hope he'll understand."

"I think he will," Trini said. "I mean, he's been listening in to our conversation this entire time."

Jason and Zack looked up in surprise, possibly expecting to see Zordon's head in the room with them. Instead, Trini pointed to a flashing light.

"We should talk," Jason said, "after we get the Command Center a little emptier of prying ears. Come on… I'm starving."

The three started filing out of the room, Jason staying behind to cut power. Zack laughed as they left. "Let's just hope we can find better replacements than Bulk and Skull."

Tommy and Kimberly walked slowly from the Zord hangar. There was still awkwardness there, but they were both unwilling to let each other go. The palms of their hands were sweating, but they just increased the pressure of their clasped hands.

They heard a crash, looked at each other in surprise, and ran into the lab that had served as Zack's hospital room for the past two weeks. Billy was gathering a few components from a storage locker, and the box had overbalanced. He was now frowning at a dented piece of machinery, but he smiled when they entered.

"Just gathering a few things to update the security on our houses. Now that our parents know, I won't have to hide everything quite as obsessively, but recent events have shown our security to be woefully inadequate."

"One thing thankfully not my fault," Kimberly said. She sounded like she was trying to sound normal. "Zedd was peeking at us long before he turned me evil."

"No doubt," Billy said. He smiled. "And, don't worry. I'm reporting all my upgrades to Zordon… or
"I will, anyway."

"I guess things aren't entirely back to normal," Tommy said after an awkward pause.

"Not sure they could be, despite your best efforts," said Billy. "But things are better." He started gathering up some machinery, tossing aside the dented one. "Have you talked to Zordon yet?"

Tommy and Kimberly glanced at each other, trying to decide which of them he meant. Tommy decided to take it, though. "Waiting for everyone to go home. Also waiting for those results from the test Alpha ran on me when he thought I wasn't paying attention."

"It has to be done," Billy said. "I mean, you wielded power over time and space. That's not exactly something we can shrug off."

Tommy started to shrug, caught himself, and grinned. "I have a feeling we won't have to worry about that anymore. I mean, I may have used it, but the power was never mine anyway. I was just... borrowing things from people way more talented and powerful than I am."

"Isn't that what we all do?" Kimberly said. She was trying to make her voice light, but her voice tightened at the end. She looked away, knowing they'd both noticed.

"Not me anymore," Tommy said. "No power coin, no... other... powers. Completely a civilian now."

"Would be nice, wouldn't it..." Kimberly said slowly, half to herself.

Tommy and Billy exchanged uncomfortable glances.

The three damaged ones, Tommy considered. Sure, Jason, Trini, and Zack had suffered. They'd had their scars, physical and mental. But it was really himself, Kimberly, and Billy who had changed the most: gone evil, lost powers, died, made horrible mistakes... And yet they were still living. They kept going. They had to.

There was a soft knock on the door, and Sylvia peeked around the corner. "People who save the world don't have to cook, but they have to come eat before it gets cold."

"You know we save the world on a regular basis," Tommy joked.

"Does that mean we never have to cook?" Billy said.

"Don't press your luck, mister," Sylvia said, grabbing Billy's arm and leading him down the hallway.

Tommy and Kimberly glanced at each other, shrugged, and followed, still hand in hand.

The last meal was done. There had been laughing-relieved, slightly wild laughter-and only a few uncomfortable silences. Alpha had joined in for the first time, and though he didn't eat food, he took the time to say goodbye to the Rangers' families, who would be going home, and probably never come back to the Command Center unless there was a reason. And, given the circumstances of their first journey to the Command Center, everyone hoped there wouldn't be a reason.

Slowly, the party broke up. The Taylors left first, Zack with them, wanting to get all of Zack's brothers on a normal schedule. The youngest, Jamie, had started to regard the Command Center as home and cried loudly when he realized they were leaving.

"When are we going to...?" Zack muttered at Jason before he left.
"I'll let you know," Jason said in a low voice.

Kimberly and her family were the next to leave, followed quickly by the Scotts and the Kwans. Finally, it was just Billy, Tommy, and Sylvia left.

Sylvia pried Billy away from a console. "All that can wait until tomorrow. I think we all need two weeks of sleep... and we might need to still clean up from that party that you think I don't know about, if the last two weeks have really been erased."

Billy's eye twitched, but he smiled anyway. That party wasn't exactly one of his best memories... especially since he'd never actually gotten to attend.

"I'll be right down," Tommy said.

Sylvia was about to protest, but Billy held her back. He knew Tommy had been waiting for this opportunity.

After Sylvia disappeared, Zordon actually seemed to relax.

"You really don't like parents up here," Tommy grinned. "Why not?"

Zordon cleared his throat... and now Tommy knew he actually had a throat to clear. Now that he'd seen Zordon in the flesh, he could see past the mask Zordon put on, though that didn't mean he could guess everything that was going on in Zordon's head. "I thought you wanted to talk about your test results."

"I do," Tommy said, deciding to let Zordon divert his attention. "First, though, you'll be happy to know Goldar fell for it. He really thought I gave up my power coin like that." Tommy laughed. "Like I'd be crazy enough to throw it into some random dimension." Tommy swallowed, the laughter dying in his throat. "Where is it now?"

"I have put it somewhere safe," said Zordon. "It will not be useful... not for a long time. Our experiments with it, as well as Rita's influence, have depleted its power."

Tommy smiled bitterly. "Know how it feels."

Zordon closed his eyes. "As for that, you are completely free of Eltarian energy, just as you suspected. You used it all in that space-time manipulation... thank goodness."

"Look," Tommy began, "I know I went against your orders... pretty completely. I know I took a huge risk..."

"Too much of a risk," Zordon cut him off. "You had an inkling of how to use the power from your training with Rita, your experience with the Morphing Grid, and your time dimension-hopping, but you had no way of knowing if you could control it."

"But I did control it," Tommy said. He was uncomfortably aware that Zordon was making a great deal of sense.

"Through luck," Zordon acknowledged. "It might have gone the other way. You have no idea what kind of forces you were playing with... the power..."

"And that's why you haven't done what I did?" Tommy challenged. "You're afraid?"

"Exactly," Zordon said. "I've always known I had the power... and I admit, I used it irresponsibly in
my youth. But no longer."

Tommy looked away. "I'm sorry. I... I know you're right. But... I had to try. No... I'm sorry, Zordon, I knew I was going to succeed. I just knew it. I'm sorry you disagree with me."

Zordon still looked stern, but he was looking softer around the edges now. "It's done now, of course. Not much for us to do except handle the damage."

Tommy grinned. "Good thing about a time erase... no damage. So... unless you need me for anything else?"

Zordon frowned. "No... that will be all. Rest now."

Tommy waved and teleported out.

"No damage, is there?" Zordon said. "Alpha, are you finished analyzing the full medical scan on Tommy?"

"Not yet, Zordon," Alpha said. "There are still some anomalies in his brain scan that I'm running through some tests."

"Let me know when you find anything," said Zordon. "In the meantime, it's best to keep this from the others, including Tommy, until we know more."

"Yes, Zordon," Alpha said. The robot started to contact Jason's sister Kristen, who'd been assisting him with data analysis, but he remembered she was gone. He'd have to adapt his subroutines, he reflected. The Command Center felt rather empty.

Goldar stood in Lord Zedd's bedchamber. He frowned. No doubt about it, it was really creepy in there. Something about the lush red bed hangings right next to the medical equipment. The throne room, even with its unsettling connection to Lord Zedd's mind, was much less creepy.

Lord Zedd was a creepy guy. But... there were worse options. Too many of them. And that's what this was all about.

Goldar heard a knock on the door. He was surprised to see Finster standing there, looking a little shellshocked.

"So, those energy readings you were so panicked about?" Goldar began.

"Can you explain why Earth has gone two weeks into the past?" Finster said.

Goldar gave one short laugh. "Looks like the kid did it."

Finster looked aghast. "You mean Tommy did all that? That... that was the plan?"

Goldar shrugged. "I didn't think he could do it, but I was willing to let him try, as long as he didn't get in my way or blow up the universe or something."

Finster was still shaking his head slowly. "I can't imagine what those humans will think once they realize it's still two weeks in the rest of the universe. The entire solar system was effected, but that doesn't mean the rest of the stars will be in the same place."

"The humans will notice, at least the ones who notice the stars at all," Goldar said. "It will get on the news, they'll debate and study, give the incident a fancy name, and forget it. Never once thinking it
was because a teenage boy had the power of the gods for a few minutes."

That got Finster smiling. "And what about him?" He nodded toward Lord Zedd.

As if on cue, Lord Zedd stirred.

"Leave," Goldar said quietly. "Monitor the room from your lab, and be ready to teleport out with
Squatt and Babboo if it looks like things are going horribly wrong."

There was a glint in Finster's eye as he left, and Goldar knew he was questioning the definition of
"horribly wrong" when dealing with a horror like Zedd.

Goldar waited until Zedd started to move his arms around, until he could gain his bearings. Goldar
didn't want to startle him. Just to... persuade him.

"Wh..." Lord Zedd grunted. He looked like he was trying to move, but he was fairly pinned down
by his life support equipment, and possibly too weak and hurt to do anything about it.

"Welcome back, Lord Zedd," Goldar said, making his words precise and strong. He couldn't show
fear.

"What has been done to me?" Lord Zedd growled, struggling weakly against his medical restraints.

"What has been done to you..." Goldar grinned. It looked like this dark lord reacted just like
everyone else when hurt and confused. "You were hurt rather badly in your battle against the Power
Rangers. What has been done to you is healing. Finster and I hooked you up to your medical
equipment. There were a few close calls, but you pulled through alright. You might even be able to
sit up by tomorrow."

What he didn't say was, mixed in with Zedd's usual medicine, were sedatives and a few uppers. It
was important to put him in the proper mood at this crucial stage.

To Goldar's surprise, Zedd was speechless. He'd expected Zedd to yell about his disastrous battle
with the Rangers, or to swear vengeance against Tommy... but Zedd said nothing. He merely laid
still. Goldar waited, unsure of how to proceed.

"Wh... why?" Lord Zedd said finally.

The question was clear, though Zedd would have never articulated it fully. Why had Goldar and
Finster, who had suffered nothing but abuse and the threat of death under Zedd's reign, who had ever
interest in getting out from under his control... why had they saved him?

Good. It was best to get to the important point while Zedd was still conscious.

"Because you are our lord," Goldar said.

Zedd snorted, and Goldar knew he had missed the point.

"You are mistaken, Lord Zedd," Goldar said. "I'm not saying that we're so brainwashed or
mindlessly loyal that we will follow anyone who claims mastery over us. We are not slaves, neither
are we Putties. That's something you haven't understood, and you will understand, Lord Zedd."

"You dare..."

"You're not listening, but you will listen," Goldar said. He moved closer to the bed, making sure
Lord Zedd could see him. Goldar towered over the helpless form. The message was obvious. If
Goldar so chose, he could kill Lord Zedd. It might mean his life-Zedd would put up a fight, of course-but he could do it. Goldar let that message sink in.

"There's a reason Rita Repulsa hired us. There's a reason lords hire minions. You need us. You need me for my military expertise and fighting prowess. You can make mindless, pre-programmed monsters, but you cannot create what I am. You need Finster. He may be loyal to Rita, but he is at the moment willing to serve you as one of the most brilliant scientists in the known galaxy. You even need Squatt and Babboo... not as janitors to terrorize, but as scientists in their own right. And... you need us to fight for you. To give your title meaning.

"At the same time, you have a duty to us. To be our lord. To use our talents and treat us as ones who have tied our fate to yours. As beings worthy of responsibility and respect according to our very real merit. There's a reason your plan failed: you underestimated people. You tried to rule by fear, thus breeding contempt. I'm not saying you have to gain our..." Goldar couldn't say the word. He could say without hesitation that Rita ruled through love, and that he bore love for his former mistress. But that was in the past. Goldar had come to terms with it. "But you must rule with mutual respect."

"How can you lecture me on how to..."

"You don't have a choice," Goldar interrupted again. He knew that Zedd wouldn't stay conscious much longer, so he had to hammer his point in soon. "That's how the universe works. That's how things in the Alliance of Evil work. You be our lord, we'll be your minions, and we won't bandy about your devastating failure. I'm sure plenty of people would be interested in taking up the fight against Zordon. I've heard the Machine Empire was beginning to build power nearby, and Master Vile might be interested in what you did to his only daughter..."

Goldar knew he had made his point when Zedd grew very still. He'd begun with noble intentions... but he knew it would come down to blackmail.

And Zedd, of course, would know the other side of this. No one wanted the Machine Empire in this district. No one wanted Master Vile active again in this galaxy. It would cause horrible upheavals, an acceleration of the war, and people like Lord Zedd and Goldar would get themselves killed or lost in the shuffle.

It was better the devil you know than the devil who you know is far worse, or however that earth phrase went.

Goldar left the room, left Lord Zedd to his thoughts... and felt easy for the first time in months.

The high school was still standing. It hadn't blown up.

Kimberly wandered the grounds of the high school, alone. She kicked at the ground and wrapped her arms around herself, even though it was far from cold. The air seemed to echo in the stillness around her.

The day before it had been a refugee camp... a haven for those who had refused to serve the gods. It had also been a graveyard, final resting place of those who had died from illness and injuries.

She stared at the plot where she knew the graveyard had to have been. The ground was smooth and unbroken, the people alive now. She'd had to make sure...

She sank onto a bench, a sob catching in her throat, quickly stifled. She didn't want to break the stillness. She didn't want to cry again. She felt like her tears were all dried out, and now she was left empty.
She was so grateful that the death and destruction had been erased, that all the pain she had caused had been swept away. And yet... she felt a little cheated out of remorse. Out of paying for all she had done. No one remembered what had happened, how she had almost destroyed the world, with her master...

Her lip curled at the thought. She felt at her sickest when she thought about her time with Lord Zedd, how she had opened up to him like that. Her only comfort was they had never gone further than that kiss...

Her stomach heaved, and she ran for a bush to throw up. She hadn't eaten much for lunch, but now it was gone. Sweating and eyes streaming, she shakily made her way back to the bench, glad that no one was around to see her. She didn't want to have to explain to anyone how she was feeling.

She knew her parents wanted her home. She'd gone home with them at first, but then it had been too much. Too many careful, questioning glances, too many offers of food. And then silence. She hadn't bothered to explain when she left. Her parents didn't stop her, perhaps thinking of the last time they'd tried.

An angry yell rent the air, and Kimberly jumped up. Had it started again? Already? Her body tensed, even as her mind froze in dread.

Mr. Kaplan rounded the corner, and Kimberly relaxed. No monsters. No gods. Just the normal type of terror: an enraged principal.

"What are you...?!” Mr. Kaplan glared at Kimberly, and Kimberly wondered if perhaps the memory wipe hadn't taken care of everything.

Mr. Kaplan looked Kimberly over, seeming to finally register who it was. "I'm sorry, Miss Hart. Of course it wasn't you. You would never do something as heinous and disrespectful as..."

Throw up in the bushes? Kimberly thought, and was surprised to feel her mouth curl up. "What's wrong, Mr. Kaplan?" She was also surprised to hear her voice sound so normal.

Mr. Kaplan sighed and dropped slightly. "Some prospective students are coming to tour the campus. I was up here to meet them, when I saw..." He gestured helplessly at the side of the building.

Fearing evidence of the lost two weeks, Kimberly actually gave a short laugh when she saw what was really bothering Mr. Kaplan: an entire wall filled with graffiti.

"I'm glad you find this so amusing, Miss Hart," Mr. Kaplan said sternly. "I don't suppose you saw who did this? Why are you on campus on a Sunday anyway?"

Long practice at alibis brought the words to Kimberly's lips without hesitation. "I was just going for a walk, when I started feeling kind of sick. I just wanted to sit down for a bit... but I haven't seen anyone. I mean, it could have been last night, couldn't it?"

Mr. Kaplan sighed and nodded. "Well, as long as you're here, you wouldn't mind meeting with these students? They should be here in about fifteen minutes."

Kimberly couldn't think of a way to get out of it without sounding suspicious. "Sure, Mr. Kaplan. I'll be there in a few minutes.

"Thank you, Miss Hart," Mr. Kaplan said before turning toward the front of the school, muttering angrily to himself about school pride and vandals.
Kimberly smiled and waited for Mr. Kaplan to get out of sight and earshot. "He's gone. You might want to clear out before he comes looking for me."

There was a rustling in the bushes, blessedly not the ones she'd been sick in, and Skull came stumbling out with a sheepish grin. "How'd you know it was me?"

Kimberly rolled her eyes. "You've been doing the whole sleepwalk graffiti again. That's the same design you drew on the side of my house. You know, the time Frank chased after you with a rake?"

Skull didn't seem upset at the memory. "Thought I could clean it up before anyone noticed. It's a Sunday, and I don't need any more strikes on my record."

"I don't think Mr. Kaplan suspects you... any more than usual, I guess," Kimberly said.

She stared at Skull. Awkward, gum-chewing Skull, who had spent the last two weeks designing plastic weapons in the fight against the Putties. Who had been the first to truly stand up to her, and then the first to come to her aid. He'd known where to find her, had grabbed her hand, had tried to lead her to safety... and then when safety rejected her, he'd left safety to shield her against all harm.

Those two weeks were gone. It was almost cruel... but then somewhat kinder. He didn't have to live with the terror and scars life under siege had given all of them. He didn't have to remember her when she was at her worst. He could stay the same cheerful, indomitable Skull that she'd always known. Nothing had to change now.

"You okay, Kimberly?" Skull said, the grin sliding off his face. "You were looking at me really weird. And you were sick before..."

Kimberly's face burned. "It's nothing. Just... must be coming down with something. Didn't get much sleep last night. I thought a walk would help..."

"S'okay," he said. "I obviously got really weird sleep last night, too. Had these crazy dreams."

"You're not going to tell me about those dreams again, are you?" Kimberly said warningly.

"No!" Skull said, looking offended. "I mean, you were in them, but..." He glanced at the school, and for a second, for the briefest of flashes, Skull looked as he had been when he was fighting against the gods. As soon as it appeared, though, it was gone, and Skull grinned. "Gotta book before Kaplan catches me. Besides, I think Bulk has some new scheme cooked up."

"Not for the Skull-mobile," Kimberly said, grinning.

"I wish," Skull laughed. "Top secret, though. Only on a need to know basis."

"You're dying to tell me."

Skull opened his mouth, but then they both heard steps coming from the front of the school, and he turned and sprinted away.

"Miss Hart, our visitors are here," Mr. Kaplan said, just missing seeing Skull duck out of sight. "This is Jim Park, a teacher at Stone Canyon, his brother Adam Park, and his two friends Aisha Campbell and Rocky DeSantos. This is Kimberly Hart, one of our most active students."

It was like a sledgehammer had caught her in the stomach. Kimberly stood up, staring at the three who had been freedom fighters. She'd known they'd come from out of town and had been stuck in Angel Grove when the barrier went up, but she hadn't known the circumstances.
"Welcome to Angel Grove, Aisha... Rocky... Adam," she said, shaking each hand in turn. "Are you guys thinking of moving here?"

Adam eyed his brother and shrugged. He seemed uncomfortable with the whole situation. Rocky had his hands buried in his pockets, looking around at the grounds appraisingly. "Thought we might. Stone Canyon's closing down, so..."

"Rocky!" Aisha said, smacking his shoulder. "We're not supposed to even know that, much less blab it all over everywhere."

"Don't worry," Kimberly said. "Secret's safe with me. Say... Mr. Kaplan... do you mind if I show them around while you talk to Mr. Park?"

"Sounds like a good plan," Jim said, flashing a smile. He looked like an older, much-more-confident Adam, and Adam looked really uncomfortable next to him. "What do you think, Mr. Kaplan?"

"I don't see how much mischief they could get into," Mr. Kaplan said. "Besides, we do have a few things to talk about..." The two wandered off, deep in conversation.

"Good move," said Rocky. "Jim's after a job. He can work his magic on the principal without us hanging around. So..." he clapped his hands and rubbed them together. He was obviously used to taking charge. "Which identical classroom should we start with?"

"That's rude," Adam pointed out.

"But true," Kimberly said, laughing in spite of herself. "There's a juice bar a block away, and it's just about to open for Sunday night hours. I doubt you want to spend all that much time on a Sunday at school."

"Or at all," Rocky laughed. "No offense," he said, suddenly sheepish.

Aisha rolled her eyes. "Come on, before Rocky completely alienates the very first person we meet."

"Cool graffiti, by the way," Adam said quietly as they walked by. "Sort of cubist inspired. Is this some sort of progressive art project?"

Kimberly smirked. "Very extra-curricular, if you catch my drift."

"It's really good," Adam said, glancing back. "Good use of perspective. It doesn't look like much up close, but from where we are, it spells out a word."

Kimberly glanced back, and a wave of cold passed over her. Up close, it had just been a lot of shapes. From where she and the freedom-fighters-who-would-never-be were standing, though, the shapes spelled out Haven.

"When did you know?"

Zack choked a bit. Trini had waited until he had a huge bite of chocolate chip ice cream in his mouth, and he tried to swallow as quickly as he could. The ice cream shop was empty except for two slightly older girls, who looked morally offended by his not-too-graceful coughs and gulps.

"Um..."

"You don't have to answer right away," Trini said, smiling over her own orange sorbet. "I think I know when, anyway."
"Oh, do you?" Zack said. "You think you can pinpoint when I fell for you?"

Trini shrugged playfully. "It's only natural. Weeks spent in bed, with Dr. Trini there to take care of you..."

"You think this is some sort of Florence Nightingale thing?"

"That's when a nurse falls in love with a patient," Trini said. "Which is really odd, since that never actually happened to Florence Nightingale, and she should be more known for revolutionizing nursing and hygiene in patient care."

"So what's it called when a patient falls in love with his beautiful doctor?" Zack said, suddenly entranced by the way Trini was sculpting her sorbet with her spoon.

Trini grinned. "Stockholm syndrome?"

Zack laughed. "You think I fell for you that recently? You really haven't been paying attention."

Trini raised her eyebrows. "Then when?"

Zack turned serious. "You really want to know?"

Trini nodded, also serious.

Zack looked away slightly, remembering. "It was that morning before Power Rangers Day. When we were picking up trash in the park."

Trini looked surprised. "What?... I mean... Why?"

Zack smiled. "I'd been feeling pretty messed up. I mean, all the crap that had been happening ever since the Green Ranger, and the Island of Illusion, and then when Tommy left and all of our other friends decided to check out completely... I thought no one noticed what I was going through. How I had to lead the team but then be shot down by Jason whenever he took a mind. But I always played it off, acted like I didn't care. But you noticed. You were going through some of the same stuff... but you noticed. And cared." He looked away. "No one really worries about me." He started trying to eat the fast-melting ice cream. "So, when was it for you?"

This time Trini looked down at her ice cream. "I'm not quite sure. There was something when we were at the Island of Illusions, when you kept me from falling from that cliff."

"But that was an illusion. You were on solid ground," Zack said.

"And you reminded me of that," said Trini. She looked up. "But we were so distracted. I guess... I've always found a way to be distracted. I use that as an excuse."

She'd laid her hand on the table, and Zack caught it. "I guess I'll have to find a way to keep your attention," he said, half-jokingly.

Trini smiled. "I'm sure you'll think of something."

Billy shook his hand as the circuit spark, the minor burn more annoying than painful.

"Billy, don't burn yourself."

He gritted his teeth at his mother's worry. "It's fine. Just... having to deal with a little more power
than this equipment can handle." He sighed and pressed his communicator. "Alpha, could you send down some of those heavy-duty power relays? These just won't be sufficient."

"Sure thing, Billy," the reply came through. "They'll appear on the coffee table, Sylvia."

"Thank you, Mr. Alpha!" Sylvia shouted unnecessarily.

Billy smiled and shook his head. "I think he misses you all."

"The Command Center must feel rather lonely with him all by himself," Sylvia said.

"He's got Zordon. And, he's a robot," Billy reminded himself.

"Don't you start that," Sylvia said. "It's very easy to be dismissive about what you don't fully understand."

"Yes, mom."

Sylvia sat down on the living room chair, resigned to the fact that she could do nothing to help her son. "How can you be sure this security system will keep that Lord Zedd character from spying on us?"

"I'm using a few concepts a glanced at while I was battling Hephaestus," Billy answered, knowing he was giving a non-answer. "He was able to keep Zedd out."

"He also had the power of Demetrius and her shielding over the high school for help."

"And I'm incorporating the data from the power readings we've collected since Zedd came into power. This should keep him out. Zordon came up with some tests for it. If it works out, I'll install the new security system at every other house... starting with Kimberly's, I think."

The unspoken implication was to protect Kimberly from any revenge attacks... or any creepy spying, given the interesting direction their relationship had seemed to take.

"Dr. Taylor called earlier asking about the security system," Sylvia said. "Of course, she's got all those boys to worry about."

Billy smiled. "Okay, I understand the issue you're dancing around. No, Zordon has said he will not insist on any memory wipes for anyone." Billy looked away from his work to his mother. "You don't have to worry about it."

"I hope not," Sylvia said uncertainly. "It's certainly strange that Zordon wanted us kept in the dark right from the beginning. It's much easier now that we all know." She laughed slightly. "Now I know where you all run off to. I only wish..."

She stopped. Billy kept on with his work, not particularly paying attention, wondering when Alpha would teleport down the equipment he needed, when...

"John knew, didn't he?" Sylvia said.

Billy froze, work forgotten. He turned to face his mother, knowing that his expression was giving everything away.

"I'm right," Sylvia said quietly, her hands clasping and unclasping in front of her. "He knew about both you and Tommy. I... There were a few things that didn't make sense, but that makes sense. When... um... when did you tell him?"
Billy left his work and crossed the living room to his mother, who was near tears. "I didn't tell him. He just..."

"Found out on his own?" Sylvia supplied, her voice a little strangled.

"Listened at doors. When we shared a room at the hospital."

The tears were flowing more freely. "That early?"

Billy sighed and looked down. He had no idea how to make his mother feel better... but he figured she wanted the truth, and he was at last allowed to give it to her. "After I left the hospital, he told me. He had overheard me and Trini talking. He... he wanted to know what had happened to Tommy, and I told him. He asked me to save his son," Billy finished, his own voice strained.

"It would have been easier for him to know... I know that," Sylvia said, her arm reassuringly on Billy's arm. "He had to know. It's just... there was this big secret between us, and now we'll never be able to talk about it. He knew exactly why we were attacked and kidnapped at our wedding, and he wasn't even allowed to share that with me right before..."

"I'm sorry..." Billy said, not sure what else to say.

Sylvia visibly controlled herself. "It's just... no more secrets, please. And you can tell Zordon that. My life has been filled with secrets I wasn't even aware of, and it kept me at arm's length with all of my family. I'm not saying you have to share every detail, or discuss battle plans over dinner... but I get to know the big stuff, okay?"

"Yes," Billy said firmly. He smiled. "I was honestly never more relieved when you found out. So... no more secrets."

Sylvia nodded, and then pushed at Billy. "Except from that horrid Lord Zedd. I'd like to be able to get dressed without thinking he could peek in at any time."

Billy smiled. Yes, it was better with them knowing.

"So, do you have any idea what this is about?"

Trini walked into the office. She had no idea why she'd been randomly called in from art class, and Zack's presence made it even more of a mystery.

She sat next to Zack. "No clue." She felt her face burn. "You don't think..." She lowered her voice, eyeing the secretary who was currently ignoring them. "You don't think he knows about us in the broom closet yesterday?"

"Not a chance," Zack whispered reassuringly. "Not unless he has spy cameras, and I don't even want to think about that. Hey... he's still looking for that graffiti artist. We could be possible witnesses... or even suspects, if you think about it."

Trini rolled her eyes. "Oh, Mr. Kaplan already knows who did that. He just can't prove it." She pondered. "We're both doing that science project, and we didn't turn in our progress report because we've been..."

"Distracted."

"Yes, distracted," Trini said with an embarrassed smile. "But it couldn't be about schoolwork.
Before she could continue her theory, Jason walked in, looking just as confused as they were.

Trini shrugged. "I'm stumped."

Jason sat next to Trini and tried to turn his back so the secretary couldn't see or hear. "Do you think he... remembered?" Jason said, a worried expression passing over his face.

That hadn't even occurred to Trini and Zack. What if Mr. Kaplan had been so affected by the two weeks that he actually remembered what everyone else had forgotten.

"Nah... He would have told us sooner," Zack said, looking like he was half convincing himself.

Before they could work themselves into a panic, Mr. Kaplan walked out. He smiled at the three. "Come in to my office... and don't look so worried. You're not in trouble. Come in."

They crowded in the tiny office, squeezing past the desk to sit in the three chairs that must have been brought in just for them.

Mr. Kaplan beamed at them when he finally sat at his desk. "Mr. Scott, Ms. Kwan, Mr. Taylor, I am delighted to inform you that all three of your applications to the International Youth Leadership Council have been approved. Congratulations."

Jason, Trini, and Zack sat in stunned silence. If they'd been expecting anything, it wasn't this.

Mr. Kaplan's smile faded a little as the silence stretched on. "I must say, I expected all three of you to be a little more excited. You can't have forgotten. It was a particularly rigorous application process, I've heard."

"Uh... yeah!" Zack said. He had actually forgotten all about it, given the recent distractions.

"I didn't think I'd been accepted when I didn't hear back," Trini said. "That was months ago."

Jason remained in stunned silence.

"The selection process took rather longer than anticipated," Mr. Kaplan said. "The committee had to choose from candidates all over the world... and it's quite unusual that three are picked from the same school. Your applications must have been quite good."

"Thank you," Jason said finally. "Mr. Kaplan... are you going to announce it or anything right away?"

Mr. Kaplan sighed. "I understand. I'll hold off on the announcement, and you can tell your friends on your own time... but we're going to have to tell people eventually. What with the increased monster attacks, the school needs the good publicity."

The three let themselves be congratulated a few more times by Mr. Kaplan, and they finally left the office. They walked slowly, not in a hurry to return to class.

"What are we going to tell the others?" said Trini. "I mean, everyone's still recovering from... and now we're leaving."

"We'll have to tell Zordon first," Jason said. "He'll at least be easier to tell, and we can have some backup. Maybe he can help us break it to the others."
"Doubt it," Zack said. "Sounds like one of those things that…" He cleared his throat and said with a deep voice, "You must choose your own path. You know," Zack continued with his normal voice, "what he says whenever he has no idea what to tell us?"

Sounds about right," Trini laughed.

"And, hey, if we can't think of anything to say, they'll figure it out eventually. It'll be pretty obvious something's up if they contact us and, hey, we're in Switzerland."

The three laughed and headed to class.

"What movie are you going to watch?" Sylvia asked. She pulled lipstick out of her purse and started to apply it before she headed out for the evening.

Billy crouched in front of the TV, fumbling with the VCR. Tommy and Kimberly sat together on the couch, bowl of popcorn between them. They'd rearrange after Sylvia left, and Billy would probably have to make a strategic retreat by the halfway mark of the movie.

"Tommy's never seen The Princess Bride," said Kimberly. "We're watching that."

"You've never seen..." Sylvia started.

"Yeah, yeah, everyone's had that reaction," Tommy said. "It's been the scandal of the day."

"Well, you kids have fun. I'll be home by about eleven," Sylvia said.

She was almost out the door when the room was filled with the sound of communicators beeping.

"How have I never noticed that before?" Sylvia said.

"Zordon, we read you," said Billy. Kimberly got up from the couch reluctantly.

"Rangers, report to the Command Center. One of Lord Zedd's monsters is attacking downtown Angel Grove," said Zordon.

"We'll be right there," said Billy, shutting off communications. "So much for movie night," he sighed.

"So much for our break between attacks," said Kimberly, a bit despondently. She was obviously dreading her return to battle.

"We'll do movie night some other time," said Tommy reassuringly. "Go be heroes. I'll be here when you get back."

"O... okay," Kimberly said, startled he wasn't coming with them.

They teleported away, leaving uncomfortable silence in their wake.

"I guess I won't be going out. They'll call monster curfew soon," said Sylvia, putting down her purse resignedly.

Tommy ate some popcorn absently. He was a bit unprepared to spend the evening alone with Sylvia. Yes, she seemed to have forgiven him, and she'd shown nothing but love and acceptance to him… but they hadn't been alone together ever since she'd found out he'd been the Green Rangers.
"Why aren't you going up, too?" said Sylvia.

Tommy was startled out of his thoughts. "Well… um… because I can't do anything. I don't have any powers, so… I'll just get in the way." He picked up the remote to watch TV when a newspaper smacked his head.

Tommy turned to face his attacker and saw Sylvia with a newspaper raised, prepared to deliver another attack. "What was that for?!"

"You're not staying here," Sylvia coolly informed him. "You get up there and help Mr. Alpha with the Command Center."

"I'm not good with computers..." Tommy started, but Sylvia smacked him again.

"You help them plan the battle, or come up with ideas, or, hell, borrow one of Kimberly's pompoms and cheer them on," Sylvia punctuated each suggestion with a smack from the newspaper, which Tommy couldn't avoid no matter how hard he tried. "Just make sure my son comes back alive."

"Okay, okay, I'm going!" Tommy said, teleporting out before another smack could land.

The five were happy and surprised when he showed up and joined them for Zordon's debriefing on the monster. Kimberly looked particularly relieved, and Tommy was suddenly grateful Sylvia had kept smacking him with the newspaper.

Sylvia, meanwhile, took the abandoned popcorn and movie to distract her from worrying.

"I hope you can see this, John," she said to the empty room. "Our boys are saving the world."

Jason, Zack, and Trini stood in the middle of the Command Center. Zordon stared at them, and Alpha fretted at the side.

They all knew what was happening, but the words still needed to be said.

"You said we could give our powers up at any time," Jason started. "We're taking you up on that offer."

"We've been accepted to a leadership organization with a year-long program that will take us out of the country," said Trini.

"We're really grateful for the opportunity you've given us," said Zack, "but now we can help people in other ways."

"So we respectfully resign our duties as Power Rangers, and we'll give the powers to whoever you pick," Jason finished.

The room was tense with silence.

Zordon finally spoke. "Did you rehearse that long?"

They were surprised to see one of his rare smiles, and they broke off in relieved laughter.

"So maybe we overprepared," said Trini. "We were nervous."

"You're the one who wrote the script," Zack said. "You made me memorize it."
"It didn't even sound like us," Jason said. "Who says 'respectfully resign'?"

"This from the people who kept asking me what we were going to say," said Trini.

Zordon joined in the laughter.

"I've known for a while what you were planning," said Zordon. "You didn't need to be nervous. You're all heroes no matter what you choose to do. I couldn't be prouder of you all."

That simple statement affected them greatly, and Zack had to look away and complain about dust in his eyes.

"Oh, ay-yi-yi," Apha said. "I'm so glad you finally said it. I've been on pins and needles waiting."

"I know you have people to replace us, and don't say we can't really be replaced, because you know what I mean," said Jason. "But what about the leadership role? Billy and Kimberly... don't want the job, and I'm not sure the team needs a new recruit as leader. Tommy could do it, but I don't think he'd be comfortable being the Red Ranger."

"I think you're right," said Zordon. "Tommy may not even be able to incorporate a power coin, given recent events. Don't be concerned. Just because you've waited this long to tell me doesn't mean I haven't been making plans. I can't quite share all the plans right now, but we'll need to do a lot to prepare for the power transfer."

"Can we even transfer the power? Don't we need a sword?" said Zack.

"We've had several recent breakthroughs on that field, and I believe we will find the sword soon," said Zordon. "We'll have all of May and June to find it, in any case."

"And someone else needs to make the serum," Trini said. "Alpha can't do it, because it needs to be someone with a power coin to make it work. I found that out when I tried to teach Jason's mother how to make it."

"You'll have time to train your replacement, and you may want to train more than one," Zordon said. "Billy would make the obvious choice, as he can learn the quickest, but I recommend Kimberly."

Trini knew why Zordon said that. It would give Kimberly something productive to do to help with her guilt, and it would help mend their relationship. She hoped Zordon knew what he was doing, because she wasn't looking forward to teaching Kimberly. Besides that moment in the Megazord, they hadn't really hung out. Or spoken to each other in any significant way.

"Just don't tell the others right now," said Jason. "We want to tell them in our own time."

"That is fine, but don't wait too long," Zordon said. "We need their help for our preparations."

"Hey, maybe Trini can figure out what to say," said Zack. "It won't be formal and awkward at all."

Trin glared at him. "For that, you get to write the final oral report of our science project," Trini said. "Let's see how you do at writing speeches."

"Great!" said Zack. "I know lots of science jokes I can use..."

"Come on," Jason said, relieved they had finally gotten this out of the way. "See you later, Zordon."

They teleported out.

Zordon smiled at the space where the three Rangers had just disappeared. "You can come out now,
Tommy, Zordon said.

Alpha jumped as Tommy appeared behind a console, looking white with shock. "I... I just... I didn't mean to..." He held up his math book as an explanation, having teleported up to retrieve it and then caught most of the conversation.

"Don't worry," said Zordon. "I won't tell about your eavesdropping if you act sufficiently surprised when they tell you the news."

Tommy's face darkened as he approached the center. "Jason's right. Even if I could take his powers, I don't want to. I mean... I want to help, and I'm honored, and wow... Jason said I was the obvious choice and that's the greatest thing anyone has ever said about me, but..."

"I understand," Zordon said. "When I said I had a plan, I didn't mean just the authorized attendants of the meeting."

Tommy chose to ignore the comment."If you mean the Green power coin, it's drained," Tommy said. "You said it wouldn't recharge for another two decades."

"I stand by that," Zordon said. "I've been planning something different ever since the Green Candle. Alpha, pull up Project Light on the Viewing Globe."

Tommy looked at the globe and grew speechless as he watched the images.

"It's not something you can accept lightly," Zordon said. "It might not work, so even if you accept it, we need to keep it secret. We don't know what your recent experiences have done to complicate the project. And before we even try, you'll need to pass certain tests, both physical and mental, so you'll need rigorous training and even more rigorous study. This will be asking a lot from you, so if you need time to think it over..."

"I'll do it," Tommy said quietly, tearing his eyes off the images. "I don't need time to decide. I'll do it."

Zordon nodded. "Then let's begin."

Bodies covered the floor. Not victims of battle or slaughter, but of too much fun. Some bodies snored, others switched in dreams and hallucinations, some writhed together in the more orgiastic activities of the orgy... and where there was floor visible was covered in various fluids.

Scorpina wrinkled her nose and tried not to contribute to those fluids. She held up a light and kicked the few who dared complain about the brightness. If she's known she had to go through this hellhole, she would have tried to find another way. This was an all-night club… not in the sense that it was open all night, but in the sense that it was always night there, and always open. As such, it tended to attract the worst of the degenerates.

In this case, though, she needed one of those degenerates.

There was a flash of white, and she grinned. Striding forward, not entirely careful of stepping on anyone, she reached the prone figure she'd been searching for and kicked it.

"One more round, barkeep," the figure muttered.

"You're a long way away from any place that would throw you out," Scorpina said. "And you're not even that drunk, because that's physically impossible for you. Now get the hell up. We're getting out
of here before I pass out from the stench."

Slowly the figure rose, bones clanking against each other. He grinned at Scorpina… but then, he
didn't really have a choice.

"Rito Revolto," Scorpina greeted him. "Finally, you found a place to match your name."

"See you haven't lost your sting." Rito guffawed. "Sting! Get it?" He turned serious. "Now leave me
to not die, already. I think I finally got a buzz."

"No dice," Scorpina said. Too impatient to talk some sense into him while they were standing there,
 she grabbed his clavicle and pulled him out forcibly, ignoring the yells of protest from both Rito and
 all the people they stepped on.

"The hell is this about?!" Rito asked furiously when they got to the empty street, just now bathed in
 early morning light.

"What do you think it's about, genius?" Scorpina said. "You're obviously far behind the times, or
 you wouldn't be wallowing in that filth I pulled you from. I need your help, and you're going to want
to give me that help."

"How do you figure that?" Rito challenged.

Scorpina smirked. "You're going to help me save your sister."

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