Power Rangers: First Night
by Lightwing23

Summary

Set in modern day, this franchise reboot sees Zordon recruiting a new team to fight familiar foes. Rougher, tougher, and darker than the original show, this story takes a more adult bend on everyone's favorite multicolored superheroes.
10,000 Years Ago

Zordon was wrong.

That’s all the Yellow Ranger could think among the carnage that was not supposed to exist here. She turned from the corpse of the dark creature she had felled, back to the village at the base of the volcano below her. Smoke billowed into a cloud thicker than the gray rising from the caldera above. Even though it was hardly mid-day, the sky had grown dark under the shadow of ash and beast. They had seen much of darkness lately, but nothing like this. The shadow shouldn’t be here. Zordon was wrong.

From the village smoke came the shadow, sending thick curls of ashen gray behind its wings as it soared through the destruction it had unleashed. The Ranger’s keen eyes could not focus on the creature; it moved like vapor, flitting in and out of her vision like black steam that only hinted at a solid form. In the distance, her allies raced to her aid in their great machines, bright dots racing to her from the horizon.

But she had another task at hand.

“Serket!” Dreadwing bellowed over the rush of wind. “We must destroy the dragon!”

“No!” she shouted to the hunter. “We must wait for the others! We cannot fight that beast alone!”

Dreadwing notched an arrow. That bow had destroyed almost as many creatures of darkness as Serket’s own. It was why the hunter had been given the name Dreadwing. He struck like a bird of prey. “That is my home. We will save the village, whatever it takes.”

He raced down the volcano’s slope.

Serket sighed. Why had that woman charged her with protecting this man, who insisted in rushing headlong into battle?

She started to leap after him but stopped. The shadow had altered its course. As it grew larger, she realized the awful truth: it was charging straight for them.

She screamed for Dreadwing to find cover. He loosed an arrow that found its target and kept going straight through its translucent body. The shadow roared, and Serket felt the ground quake beneath her. High above, the volcano’s summit rumbled with new intensity. It would erupt, and soon. They wouldn’t want to be on this slope when it did.

Serket scanned the horizon again. Two of the other Rangers were approaching, but that was all. The rest must still be away on their assignments. The two zords that approached were fast, but not fast enough. It was up to her to destroy the shadow, before it destroyed her or her charge. Summoning her own zord was out of the question; this close, the shadow could overtake the great machine in those key moments when it formed. No; she would have to find another way.

Serket took her stance and fired a shot from her power bow. Unlike Dreadwing’s arrows, which were made of wood and rock, hers carried the might and will of Zordon within their golden light. She wondered what the old alien must be thinking, watching as he surely was from his Command
Center, unable to act except to send his six guardians to protect this planet for him. Had he known about this great shadow? He had given each guardian urgent missions across the globe, but she had insisted on keeping the Yellow Ranger near Dreadwing. Something had told the Black Ranger that trouble was brewing within the volcano, and that Serket needed to stay. And so she had. The Yellow Ranger had gone against Zordon’s orders to protect the lover of another woman. Was she mad?

Her arrow lodged into the shadow’s eye, and its roar was like a hurricane. It fell out of its glide and struggled to right itself, shaking its head to try to dislodge the golden arrow as its body solidified into the largest beast Serket had seen in over a hundred years. Serket fired again, and again, and again. She would destroy this creature and protect her friend’s lover, and she would do it alone. Each arrow brought the beast lower and lower. She knew its death was imminent. Just one more shot.

Then the creature changed course, and dove straight to the ground.

Serket let loose a cheer as the wave of dust washed over her. Overhead, the volcano began to gush forth its innards, but she hardly cared. She’d be off the slope in no time, along with…

“My Dreadwing?” she called.

He had been running down the slope, slinging arrow after arrow—

“No,” she whispered. With a great leap, she sailed down the slope to the enormous impact crater.

This close, the beast was even larger than she had imagined. Its black scales still glowed with the heat of the magma from which it had burst just moments ago. Serket was sure that its eye – the one she hadn’t shot – was larger than she, though now its light dimmed and its focus faded. Its talons were as long as the spines down its back, each one the length of two men and sharper than any blade.

But even from the air, Serket saw the body. She landed next to Dreadwing. He lay crushed by the massive creature, his sword forever lodged in its chest where the heart should be. It must have known its time was near. Could it have sensed Serket’s intention to protect Dreadwing? It wasn’t impossible. Servants of the dark possessed strange abilities…

Serket felt a presence beside her and knew that she was here, almost as though she had stepped out of the shadow of the great beast itself. In a flash the Black Ranger pulled her hood back and fell beside Dreadwing’s crumpled body.

“You were supposed to protect him!” she screamed.

Serket was at a loss for words. “I…” she fumbled. “I didn’t…”

But her old friend wasn’t listening. The Black Ranger stood. A strange, wild look came over her eyes. “I must hurry,” she said, more to herself than Serket. “Before he gets here…”

Serket didn’t know what she was talking about. She glanced over her shoulder at the other zord approaching. Did she mean the White Ranger?

The Black Ranger began speaking in a tongue that Serket did not know. She waved a hand over Dreadwing’s body, and Serket thought she could just make out a shimmering something rising from the fallen warrior. Serket was about to protest, when suddenly Dreadwing’s body twitched. It began to rise into the air.

“His soul returns,” Serket gasped. “But, Zordon said—”
“Zordon lied,” said the Black Ranger. “He claimed there was no such power, but here is proof otherwise!” Dreadwing’s body landed on its feet and stayed standing, though his eyes were closed and his head was slumped forward.

“Perhaps he simply did not know…” said Serket, but even as the words came from her mouth she knew it could not be so. He must have known of such power, just as he must have known of the attack on this village. What else was he keeping from them?

“Zordon wasn’t wrong,” said Serket. “He lied…”

“Yes,” said the Black Ranger. Dreadwing opened his eyes. “We have been his pawns for far too long.”

Serket didn’t like that look in her eye. “Rita,” she said, “what are you planning?”

Her hood still down, Rita turned and smiled at her old friend. “Come, Serket,” she said, “and I will show you.”
July 4, Present Day

Chapter 1 – Will

“Yadol!”

“YADOL!”

“Ahop!”

“AHOP!”

“Yool!”

“YOOL!”

The class echoed their master with one last punch, then they straightened up and bowed, mirroring his movements. Dozens of onlookers cheered as the students relaxed and beamed at their parents watching them.

“Great job everyone!” said the master. “Really great job. I hope everyone enjoyed themselves and learned a little bit about what it means to be a martial artist: honor, strength of character, purity of heart. Never go looking for a fight. Only use your skills in self-defense. And above all, respect others.”

“Thank you, Will Weston!” cheered the MC. Will bowed to his class again before leaving the performance space. “And remember, kids: if anyone’s interested in taking more of Will’s classes at the Youth Center, be sure to pick up a brochure at the Holiday Help Desk near the parking lot! And please stick around for our Annual Cedar Grove Cliff-Diving Competition starting in just ten minutes!”

Will pulled a towel from his duffle and dried himself off. Even for early July, and even though a light breeze wafted off the lake, it was hot up on the cliffs. Will was happy to have given a free martial arts class for all the kids at the Fireworks Festival, but now most of the afternoon was gone. He pulled a watch from his bag. Three hours to fireworks. Most of the crowd would probably stay here, at the top of the lower cliffs where some tree cover might keep them cool until the sun went down and the fireworks show began over the lake.

“Not too bad out there,” said a voice. Will's friend Jack clapped him on the shoulder. “It’s only slightly sad to see a seven-year-old master a move in one day that took me a week to get.”

“You've come a long way,” said Will. Jack had always been known more for his technical skills than his physical prowess. If it wasn’t a circuit board in Jack’s hand, it was an inhaler. Bullies liked to make off-color jokes suggesting other things Jack could suck on, but the kid never let it get to him. Will always admired Jack's level-headedness when it came to bullying. All the same, nothing wrong with teaching the guy how to defend himself. Just in case.
“You're a good teacher,” said Jack. “It takes a rare individual to be able to teach both me and Ewan at the same time.”

That was the truth. Where Jack was solid as a rock, Ewan reminded Will of a bat caught in a hurricane. Ewan hadn't bothered with his ADHD medicine since high school. He said it turned him into a zombie. Will wasn’t so sure that was a bad thing in his case. At least zombie-Ewan turned his homework in on time.

The performance cliffs just outside of the city of Cedar Grove curved around a deep bay like a horseshoe, with one end roughly twenty feet higher than the other. Will and Jack looked across the narrow gap to the higher cliffs, where a dozen shirtless men were stretching. Ewan wasn't hard to spot: he was the tannest of all of them, and he wore a red-white-and-blue Speedo that left little to the imagination, just as Will knew Ewan preferred it. He drummed incessantly on his thighs, his chest, his competitors – any surface, really. Ewan could be a great drummer for a band, but both Will and Jack knew that would never happen. Trying to corral someone like Ewan into a weekly band practice would be a colossal waste of time. “Punctual” and “discipline” were not exactly in his vocabulary.

Some old TV theme song began to play in Jack's pocket. In a flash his phone was in his hand. “Jess,” he said, “where are you?” he asked. “You missed Will's… Oh.”

Jack's twin sister. Red-dyed hair, lots of leather, even more attitude, and a mouth that would make a sailor blush. Jack's limitless patience was probably the only reason she was still alive. Any lesser brother would have strangled her to death years ago.

Jack dropped his phone back into his pocket. “Jess said her girlfriend just texted her to break up. She said she’ll be in the car until further notice, where she’ll be, and I quote, ‘chewing that bitch a new asshole so she can fuck herself twice over.’”

Jess' sexuality was a common topic, if only because their parents berated both twins about it every chance they got. The only thing more disgraceful than Jess liking girls, according to their father, was Jack’s “beta-male” personality. The man was convinced that Jack was gay himself, and that the twins had somehow switched brains in utero. Jack had once found a selection of “conversion therapy” brochures on the kitchen table. He’d shredded the lot before Jess ever saw it. She’d probably have burned the house down with lasers from her eyes.

“Her girlfriend couldn’t wait until, you know, a not-holiday?” asked Will.

“Apparently not,” said Jack. “And here I always thought Christina was the more considerate of the two… On the bright side, Ewan won't mind Jess being gone. I'm sure he's more interested in girls watching who are in to boys.”

“True.”

The MC climbed back up the small flight of stairs that led into the gazebo overlooking the lake, but Will was distracted by a girl joining the men about to dive. Even from where he stood, Will could tell that she was stunning, and he wasn’t the only one to notice; all of the other divers stood up straighter and puffed out their chests. Ewan pulled his Speedo down just a little bit, his foot still tapping to some unknown beat. The girl, however, ignored them all. Will almost laughed; she was holding a book. Even as he watched, she noticed it still in her hand, disappeared from view, and reappeared without it, her hand now clutched to her upper arm as if unsure what to do when not holding pages open.

“Who is that?” Jack asked.
Will shook his head. “No idea.”

“I wonder what she was reading.”

Will just wondered if the girl knew what she was getting herself into. A diver’s score was partially based on their dive, and partially on the time it took them to climb back up the cliff. Most guys didn’t have the upper-body strength for that, and most girls wouldn’t even try. If you couldn’t make it, you were disqualified. No girl had ever pulled it off.

“I bet she’ll make the climb,” said Jack.

Will surprised himself by not taking up the bet. He had a feeling that there was something different about this girl, and that she could succeed where dozens of others – male and female alike – had failed.

Chapter 2 – NASA

He glanced down, annoyed that the computer’s alarms had interfered with his daily stare at Abigail, the pretty communications tech two rows down.

Senior Technician Dylan Grant dragged his mind out of its dreamy stupor and read the screen. The rover’s drill had hit an unexpected surface and had automatically shut off, per protocol. Dylan studied the readout, doing his best not to imagine asking Abigail to watch fireworks with him from the roof tonight (working during a holiday? Really, NASA!?). He glanced through the readout several times before comprehending any of it. Then he read through it again, sure that it had to be mistaken.

No, he realized, the info was all there. Au-197. Elemental gold. On Mars. And he was the first one on Earth to know about it.

Dylan’s heart raced. Could he go to the press with this? No, that was against NASA policy. But this was big stuff. He could make a fortune with this information. He could quit his job and live a life of luxury. His mind raced back and forth as the computer downloaded a video stream from the rover. This wasn’t exactly YouTube; the fact that they could get any video feed from fifty-five million kilometers away was no small feat. He considered telling Abigail – would that count as flirting? If he let her tell the press…

The video feed began to play as soon as it finished its download. The rover had entered a cave, per NASA’s instruction. They had hoped to find some evidence of water underground, perhaps, since much of the surface showed signs that the planet had been wet at least at some point in its lifetime. The video showed red walls eerily lit by the rover’s forward-facing headlights. It had located a vein of something shiny – possibly ice – and began to drill out a sample, then it stopped. Dylan watched the feed, awestruck. The vein of ice had chipped away from the wall, but now more chips fell, though the rover didn’t move. Dylan began to panic; the rover might have just caused the cave to, well, cave in, and if that was the case then there was nothing they could do. It took roughly twelve minutes to transmit any new orders to Mars, which meant that everything he now watched happened twelve minutes ago (plus the time it took to download the video). If he tried to signal the rover to get out of the cave, it would take another twelve minutes, and even then—

Something gold flashed in the rover’s light. Dylan wondered if something had come loose from the
rover. The thing looked like a golden rod, but it was moving just beneath the vein of ice, right where the drill had punctured. The quaking of the cave shifted the rover’s camera. It fell out of focus, but Dylan would swear he saw movement in the darkness. Then, just briefly, a face appeared on screen, horrible and demonic. It laughed, flames billowing from its mouth before the rover’s feed cut entirely, leaving Dylan staring at a blank screen.

Chapter 3 – Will

In all, a dozen divers had signed up for the competition: eleven boys, one girl. One by one each took their turns… with varying degrees of success. The first guy was so nervous that he simply jumped, crashing into the water feet-first to a thunderous round of boos. Head cast down, he took his place on the loser’s dock – a makeshift wooden raft that sat at the base of the audience cliffs. Anyone who failed to climb back to the top had to stay there until the close of the competition, when the MC would let down a rope ladder and the audience would reward the losers with a tepid sort of consolation applause. The whole thing was a longstanding local tradition, supposedly passed down since the first settlers found a group of Native Americans cliff-diving as a rite of passage. Will thought that some people got a little too into it: there were groups with homemade signs and t-shirts, guys selling video compilations of past competitions, and more than a few instances of the winner – and losers – getting mobbed so badly that people have nearly fallen off the cliff. They reminded him of some of the parents at his master’s martial arts studio.

The second diver hammed up his jump as much as possible. After a moment, Will realized that he had somehow attached a clown nose to the front of his Speedo. He took off in a sprint and launched himself from the cliff, holding his arms and legs out like a giant X and maintaining that pose until just a few feet from the water, when he broke form just long enough to dive and prevent some serious internal injuries.

“Thought he was going to require your services,” Jack said.

Will had thought the same thing. He was in his second year of pre-med, which perhaps didn’t account for much in a practical setting, but Will had already been prepared to leap into the water and perform some kind of drastic, last-second life-saving maneuver. All of his life he had yearned to save lives, ever since his family… Well, he thought, let’s not dwell on that.

Diver after diver leapt from the high cliff, but no one could climb all the way back, at least until the fifth diver. He was built like a professional rock climber: lithe, muscular, and with enough grip strength to crush a can of peas between his thumb and forefinger. He looked like the perfect candidate for this competition, and even then it took him a good fifteen minutes to make it back to the top. Still, the crowd went wild, leaving Ewan plenty of time to stand on the diver’s perch.

“He won’t go until all eyes are on him,” said Jack.

Slowly, the cheering died down. The only sound now was the light breeze tickling the trees behind them. Ewan’s cliff was a good twenty feet above the viewing cliffs, yet Will would have been nervous jumping from where he and Jack stood. But Ewan… He often said that being somewhere high was the only place where he could empty his mind and focus. Will watched, amazed as he always was, as Ewan’s toes hung over the cliff’s edge. His eyes were closed, and he wasn’t even trembling as most of the other divers had been. Will knew the truth behind that faint smile on Ewan’s face. He’d led a hard life, but up there, Will knew, Ewan felt free.
His leap looked as natural as a bird taking flight. He arched, twisting through the air, his body straight until he began to plummet. He adjusted so that now he somersaulted, which he did three times before disappearing beneath the lake's surface with hardly a splash.

“Damn,” muttered Jack.

“Yeah,” agreed Will. One of the best he'd ever seen, and Ewan had won championships.

Jack pushed his glasses up his nose and folded his arms. “Now we’ll find out if Ewan’s been practicing wall-climbing like he said he was going to do.”

Chapter 4 – A Remote Base on Earth

The first voice, bored and metallic. “Zordon, are you alright? You’re looking paler than usual.”

The second: booming, with more authority than any human could ever hope to convey. “This is no time for jokes, Alpha. I am afraid that our worst fears have come true, and that Rita has been freed from her imprisonment on Mars.”

“I thought you said that this was no time for jokes.”

“I fear she is already on the move. Scan the outer atmosphere of Mars.”

“I… well fuck. It’s her alright, and it looks like she’s bringing the whole gang with her.”

“I had hoped to wait some time yet before putting this plan into action. You and I both knew that she would be freed someday.”

“Ice could only hold that bitch down for so long. But it’s too early, Zordon! You haven’t finished cleansing all of the powers from last time—”

“We will have to deal with that when we come to it. For now, it is time for Power Rangers to walk this Earth once more.”

“Fine. Just tell me what kind of precious saviors you’ve chosen this time and I’ll bounce them here.”

“No, Alpha. We both know how that ended previously. I have something else in mind.”

“Like giving me all the powers at once?”

“No. Something considerably more dangerous.”

Chapter 5 – Will

The crowd burst into applause when Ewan surfaced near the cliff's wall. He exploded from the water and immediately latched onto the nearest hold. The four divers who had failed the climb began to
jeer at him. They were nearly as loud as the cheers from Will's cliff, but if one thing could be said about Ewan, it was that he lacked Jack's patience. Increasingly Ewan slung taunts of his own over his shoulder, but this only made the loser's deck louder. Within minutes Ewan was completely twisting himself around to throw his most vicious insults back at the divers who had failed the climb.

“He'll exhaust himself at this pace,” said Jack.

Will glanced up at the diver’s cliff. The girl stood with the remaining divers, inching close to the cliff’s edge to watch Ewan’s progress. She had been chosen to dive dead last, and at this rate, the sun would set before she got to go.

Will heard the quake before he felt it, but at first he thought he was imagining things. This was Cedar Grove; they didn’t have earthquakes. It wasn't until slabs of cliff began to fall above Ewan that Will’s fears were confirmed. Slowly the sound of rock was overtaken by human screams as the onlookers scrambled away from the cliffs' edges.

Will and Jack fought through the crowd, which was now in full-blown panic-mode. People shoved them backwards as they struggled to get to the edge. Out of the corner of his eye Will could see more and more chunks of rock plummeting from the diving cliff, but with the crowd rushing all around him he could no longer see Ewan.

“Help!”

Will reached the cliff's edge and looked straight down to the loser's deck. One of the divers lay motionless, a great bloody gash ripped along his forehead. Will searched for the rope ladder that was let down at the end of the competition, but Jack was already kicking it over the edge.

“Ewan!” Will shouted. His friend still clung to the cliff, singularly determined to finish the climb. “Ewan! Get off the cliff, now!”

But Ewan only ignored him.

“Will!” shouted Jack. He pointed to the loser's deck. “We have to get him out of there!”

Will looked and saw the other divers scrambling up the rope ladder, leaving the unconscious one to bleed. Will threw his phone to Jack and prepared to jump.

Over the roar from the crowd, few saw the lightning flash. Will only caught its reflection off the water, yet it was enough to throw his mind out of focus as his feet left the ground. Lightning? There were no clouds. There shouldn't be lightning. And it shouldn't be so close.

Wind rushed through his hair, and Will realized with a start that he was falling out of control into the water between the cliffs. He missed the loser's deck by hardly a foot.

The water was colder than he had expected, and it jolted him back to the present. How stupid of him to let something as trivial as the weather break his concentration and almost kill him! He fought to right himself, but because of the way he fell he couldn't tell which was up and which was down. Worse still, the fall had knocked much of the wind out of him, and the water was churning from the quake. He tried to open his eyes, but all he saw was brown muck. If he didn't find the surface soon he could easily drown.

Something gripped his arm and yanked. His head broke the water's surface. Will gasped for air and thanked whatever god might be up there that he was alive.

“Are you alright?” someone yelled over the sound of chaos.
Will wiped his face and saw that the female diver was in the water with him. “I… yeah,” he muttered. “Did you…”

“Come on!” she said, and she took off toward the loser's deck. Will followed, feeling very foolish for having not taken off his shoes or shirt first. He felt like he was dragging an extra hundred pounds through the water. The girl was already up on the deck and checking the diver's vital signs by the time Will tumbled onto the platform. Blood oozed from a gash on his forehead, and he was whiter than Will's now-soaked t-shirt.

“He's still breathing,” she said. “Give me your shirt.”

Will did so. The girl wrapped it like a bandage around the boy's bleeding head. “My name’s Will,” he said. “You in med school?”

“I’m April. Used to lifeguard. Any idea how we'll get him up the cliff?”

Will shook his head. “No chance. He's got to be at least 170 pounds of dead weight.”

“Rescue boats?”

Will looked out to the lake. “There are the boats that shoot off the fireworks,” he said, “but—”

Lightning struck from the cloudless sky. One of the fireworks boats exploded. Lightning struck again and again, each time blasting a boat into blazing cinders. Will cried out in shock. “Did you see that?” he shouted.

“Will!” Will looked up; Jack stared down at him from the top of the rope ladder. “Tie the dude to the ladder! Jess and I can haul him up!”

Will took a deep breath and focused. No boats, no quake. No Ewan. No problems, just a solution. We can save this guy. Will opened his eyes and hoisted the boy into his arms. April took the end of the ladder and wrapped it around the boy like a burrito. Together, she and Will tied the ends to a ladder rung.

“Alright Jack, pull!” Will yelled. After a second, the boy rose a foot or so, then another, then another. Will breathed a sigh of relief and dared a glance at the climbing cliff.

Ewan wasn't there.

“Did you see Ewan?” he asked.

“The crazy climber?” said April. “He was still on the wall when I jumped. Not very smart, given the circumstances.”

“That's Ewan for you.” Will scanned the water for any sign, but there was nothing. “Ewan!” he shouted again. “Ewan!”

The platform shook so hard that April slipped and fell toward the edge. Will caught her arm and pulled her back. “Thanks,” she said. “We need to get out of here.”

Will agreed, but he wasn't sure how. Maybe Jack could let the ladder back down after they got the diver to the top. He looked up to check their progress and saw a large chunk of cliff headed straight for the deck.

Without even the time to warn her, Will tackled April off the deck. They were still in the air when he
heard the deck shatter from the impact. He felt a shard nick his leg as they fell beneath the surface. This time, thankfully, Will didn't need help finding air again.

“What the hell is going on?” he gasped.

April only shook her head.

“Guys!” Jack's twin, Jess. Will could barely hear her over all the noise. “The fuck did you jump into the water for?”

“We're fine, thanks!” Will called back. “But we can't find a way up!”

A new face appeared next to Jess’. “You could climb!”

Ewan. Another miracle for the day.

“Only a complete idiot would do that!” shouted Will.

“Then you should be perfect!”

Jack appeared next to them. “Here!” He threw a rope over the side. It splashed into the waves. Will and April swam to it and discovered that Jack had cut the two ropes of the ladder and tied them together to make one rope long enough to reach the water's surface.

“Smart friend,” said April.

“Engineer,” said Will. “You first.”

April's ascent was not easy. The cliffs shook so violently that Ewan, Jack, and Jess had trouble keeping a hold of the rope. April, for her part, did her best to “walk” up the cliff's side, but more than once she had to leap to one side or the other to avoid falling rock. Will didn't want to think about what would happen if she or the rope got hit by anything. After a few minutes, though, April reached the top, and three pairs of hands grabbed her arms and hauled her to safety.

A bolt of lightning struck the side of the cliff with a blast so loud that Will could feel the explosion shake his entire body. Debris tumbled all around him. One particularly large rock crashed into the waves hardly a foot in front of Will. The water from the splash was like a punch to the face, and for a moment Will was completely disoriented. Dimly he was aware of water washing over him, but he could see nothing and hear only a dull rumble.

Then, something grabbed his leg and pulled.

Will opened his eyes and felt the sting of water. It was too dark to see, but something drew him closer.

Two points blazed with light before him. Will tried to shield his eyes, but his arms felt heavier than ever under the water and the stress of what he saw. The points, he realized, were eyes, the eyes of whatever held him. The light from the eyes cast wicked shadows on the rest of the being's face, but Will could see a sinister smile beneath an expanse where there should have been a nose.

“So helpful,” the thing said. Its voice was a deep rasp, and its eyes danced as it spoke. “What better an example of what happens to those who oppose Rita Repulsa.”

The being surged upwards, taking Will with it. He nearly blacked out from the sudden G-forces, but as his sight came back to him he discovered that they were flying, beating a wide arc around the
cliffs. In the middle of the lake, Will could see a deep ring where the water simply fell, as if a massive sinkhole had appeared out of nowhere. Below him, his friends and April raced away from the cliff’s edge as Will and the creature slammed down in a rough landing.

“Humans,” the thing barked. It held Will from behind, so he couldn’t see what it really looked like. But, given the reactions from the people around them, Will began to suspect that it was better that he didn’t see. Its voice, though, sounded different above water. It was less raspy than before, though it still sounded like it had chain-smoked for the past sixty years. “This one thought he could be noble,” it spat out the word like it was painful to say. “But let his death be an example to the rest of you. Rita Repulsa rules the Earth now, and she will tolerate none of your feeble heroics!”

Ewan clenched his fist, though it was hard to take him seriously when he only wore a Speedo. “Let go of him, you ugly fuck!”

Ewan always had a way with words.

The being laughed – or coughed, it was hard to tell. “You dare insult Goldar, General of Rita Repulsa’s army?” the being asked. “Very amusing! Our army could use someone with your spunk!”

“Spunk you,” said Ewan. “Will, you alright?”

Will started to answer, but the being – Goldar, it had called itself – kneeled him in the back. Goldar released him, and he fell to his knees. Will heard the sound of a sword being unsheathed, metal grating on metal with a deliberate slowness. Goldar laughed again. “My first kill in ten-thousand years,” he said. “How I have ached for this moment. Goodbye, hero.”

A feral scream ripped the air. Goldar grunted and fell to the ground. Will scrambled away, still on his knees. Ewan rushed forward and helped him up. “Okay, buddy?” he asked. Will could only nod. Ewan helped him to his feet. “Where the fuck did this ass-ape come from, anyway?”

Will turned, confused by what Ewan had said. His stomach fell as he realized what had happened. It was Jess who had tackled Goldar from behind. Jack was now trying to get his sister away from the beast, but it wasn't going well. What had somewhat resembled a jack-o-lantern underwater now looked a little bit like a gorilla, only with golden armor and flames for fur. Those eyes shone as brightly as they did beneath the waves, but Will had to wonder why he wasn't suffering from burns, nor were Jess and Jack as they wrestled with the ugly thing.

“Will!” shouted Ewan. “Come on, man! We gotta get out of here!”

Goldar's sword lay on the ground, a chunk of metal wreathed in flame that had to be four or five feet long. Goldar punched Jack in the face and gripped Jess hard by the throat.

“Not without them,” said Will. He dove for the sword.

It was almost too heavy for him to hold, but he did what he could to make it look effortless as he pointed its tip at the throat of Goldar, who lay on the ground with Jess sitting on top of him, her throat slowly being crushed in his vice grip.

“Let her go,” Will ordered. His muscles strained with the sword's weight. How could anyone carry something so massively heavy?

Goldar chuckled. “Or you'll what?”

Will let the sword fall across Goldar's face. Dark ash leapt out of the gash cut into Goldar's cheek. The beast roared and let Jess go.
“You humans will rue the day you crossed us!” he roared.

Goldar's body erupted into flames, and in an instant he was gone. Will dropped the sword and ran to Jess and Jack. The rest of the crowd had scattered ages ago, or so Will guessed. He’d been too panicked to even notice.

“Can you breathe?” Will asked Jess. She nodded, though she couldn't stop coughing. Will looked her over, and then Jack. Both had taken a serious beating from Goldar. Jack's face was almost unrecognizable from the punch he'd taken, and his glasses were shattered. Both of the twins sported several rips and tears in their clothing and skin, though most of the cuts looked superficial. Will just hoped they weren't infected. Even as he watched, Jack pulled a small bit of glasses lens from the bridge of his nose.

“Lot of help you were back there,” Ewan said to April, who blushed and looked away. “What the hell was that thing? And what the hell is happening to the lake?”

“The lake?” Will asked. He turned and looked. The lake had already dropped several feet, and it was losing surface by the second. “I saw some kind of sinkhole out there,” he said. “When that thing – when Goldar was flying with me.”

“Apes are not supposed to fly,” Ewan pointed out. “And lakes don’t just get sinkholes.”

“Anyone’s cell phones work?” Will asked. “Maybe the news has something.” Jess’ cough didn't comfort him, but as long as she could breathe he figured he could get her to a hospital later.

“Signal's out,” said Jack. He winced as he pulled his phone from his pocket. Will suspected that some of his ribs were cracked or broken. Jack opened his phone's waterproof case and showed it to the others. “Whatever's going on is interfering with electronics. My guess is that no one's even been able to get their cars out of the parking lot.” He handed Will’s phone back to him, but it was dead.

“So, how do we get back to the city?” Ewan asked.

Lightning struck, and again and again, near the parking lot. Will heard screams in the distance. Another bolt hit the trees between them and the path that led to the lot. The lightning caught the trees on fire, but even through the flames Will could see people coming toward them.

“Will,” Jack said. “Plan. How are we going to get out of here?”

But Will didn't hear him. He was too busy watching the people among the trees, for as he watched, those people – perhaps a half dozen in total – walked straight through the fire. As they stepped, the flames appeared to shift away from them, and when one of them did touch a flame, it went out in a tiny poof of smoke. The group stepped out of the flames and stopped at the edge of the performance area.

Without a doubt, Will knew that these were soldiers of Goldar's. Where their faces should have been there were only eye holes, the same glowing sockets of Goldar, like these things’ heads were filled with nothing but flame. They wore no clothes, but their skin had the look of dried mud. Their hands were misshapen and large, almost as if they were used for nothing but hitting things.

“Are those… people?” Jack asked. “Why are they just standing there watching us?”

“Those aren't people,” Will said. His back ached from the hit it had taken from Goldar, but he stood and faced the mud men. “Everyone get back.”

“No… fucking way,” coughed Jess. She hauled herself to her feet, coughing so hard that blood...
began to trickle from her mouth. She planted herself next to Will. He was more than a head taller than her, but the fierceness in her eyes more than made up for it. “These things… are invading, Will. We’re not just going to sit back… and do nothing.”

Will was about to point out the obvious – that Jack could barely see, that Jess could hardly breathe, that, as far as he knew, April had no martial arts training whatsoever, and that Ewan still only wore a Speedo. But when the others got to their feet and stood next to him, without a word, without the slightest bit of restraint or hesitation, who would he have been to try to stop them?

It was at that very moment, however, that Will was bathed in a strange white light, his feet left the ground, and he – surrounded by four other beams of colored light – shot through the air with such dizzying speed that Will had to wonder if he had died.
Episode 2: Command

Chapter 1 – Ewan

Ewan McKay had long considered himself to be one of the manliest men he knew. He was in top shape, had scored countless beautiful women, had won more diving championships than anyone else in the country his age, and, by his count, had just broken the Cliff Diving Competition’s speed climb record by nearly a minute during a fucking earthquake.

So one may understand his slight identity confusion when, just seconds after standing by Will against half a dozen mud monsters from hell, he was enveloped in yellow light, flew over what seemed like the entire goddamn Earth, landed inside a dark building in who the fuck knows where, and promptly threw up all over the floor. Not exactly the most flattering course of action for one's self-image. Tenacious D’s “Wonderboy” played in the background of his mind. He could never get songs out of his head, and sometimes his brain’s stupid playlist had a cruel sense of irony.

He swore and stood up, only to get rocked by nausea and vomit all over again.

“Fucking humans,” someone said. There was something bizarre about his voice – not like that fire monkey Goldar, but perhaps not altogether human, either. Though honestly, after seeing everything he’d seen today – earthquakes in Cedar Grove, lightning in a clear sky, some gorilla on fire trying to kill his friends, a surprise flight across the world – having something else speak to him who wasn’t human seemed almost normal as far as Ewan was concerned.

“Whoa,” muttered Will.

“Who…?” said a girl.

Ewan opened his eyes, but he stayed crouched over his throw up. He breathed through his mouth, but even then he could taste the tang of his own sick right beneath him.

A metal boot stepped into his view. “I expect you'll want me to clean that up for you?” It was the speaker from before, and the taunting edge in his voice was unmistakable. Ewan dared a glance up at the speaker's face and almost laughed. It had none. As best as Ewan could tell, this thing talking to him was a robot with a flying saucer for a head.

“Alpha,” boomed a new voice from somewhere else in the room. “See to them. We have little time.”

“Fuckety-fuck,” muttered the robot. “Always picking up after you useless humans. Why couldn't we just make self-driving zords…” The robot grabbed Ewan's shoulders and yanked him to his feet. Ewan's head swam again, but the robot placed a hand on Ewan's spine, and immediately he began to feel better. “And you humans think that machines are the only ones who can be hotwired. Enjoy the free hormones, asshole.”

“The three of you should feel better momentarily,” said the booming voice. It was deep, deeper than the fire monkey's had been, but where Goldar's voice sounded hoarse - like he had just spent the day at some concert – this guy's was calm and commanding. When this voice spoke, you listened. “Teleportation can throw bodies into disarray when they are not accustomed to it.”

Ewan wiped his mouth and looked at the robot's head. It'd be at least a little less creepy if it had eyes. “Don’t like human, eh?” Ewan said. “Let me guess: someone used you as a personal sex bot a few
too many times.”

A burst of heat shot out of the robot's hand and ran along Ewan's spine before disappearing. Ewan yelped and jumped, slipping in his own puddle of sick and falling flat on his ass.

“Alpha,” the other voice said. “Stop it. These humans are different.”

“Right,” muttered the robot. “That's what you said about the last bunch.”

Chapter 2 – April

“The last bunch?” April repeated. “What do you mean?”

“We will explain in time,” said the deep voice. “For now, we must allow your friends to heal so that the five of you can join together and stop Rita Repulsa's onslaught against the planet.”

April Johnson stood and took a proper look around. The room was so dark that she could see no walls; everything just kind of… faded. In the middle of the room stood a raised platform surrounded by panels of the most high-tech-looking equipment April had ever seen. Holographic images floated over the control boards. Some showed some bizarre-looking machines, others projected a human in a strange outfit, and another at the far end looked like it was an image of Goldar. A chill ran down April's spine just at the thought of that monster. When he had flown from the water with Will in his arms, and April had seen those fiery eyes and that wicked smile, she had completely froze. If it hadn't been for Jess' quick thinking, Will – and possibly the rest of them – would be dead now.

She blushed again and cursed her own inaction. She’d always admired people like Will and Jess, who always seemed to know exactly what to do. Not for the first time, April felt like the outsider. The burden.

On the other side of the control panels stood a huge cylindrical tank that seemed to emit light from within. It was cloudy, and as April stepped onto the central platform and stared at the tank, the liquid inside shifted.

“Is something in there?” Will stepped up beside her. He, too, was transfixed by the tank.

“I don't know,” said April.

Ewan appeared on the other side of April. “What is this place?”

“You are on your planet's southernmost continent,” said that same deep voice. “You are safe from Rita's attack on Cedar Grove, but I must send you back soon so that you may fight Rita and her army before she takes over your world.”

“Whoa whoa whoa,” said Ewan, who really needed to put some clothes on. “Slow down there, Voice of God. Can we just take a moment here to give you a collective ‘what the fuck?' Who the fuck's Rita? Who the fuck are you? What 'southern continent' are you talking about?”

“Ah yes,” said the voice. “I have not introduced myself. There is much you should know, but every minute we spend talking in this Command Center brings Rita one step closer to establishing dominion over this Earth.”
“Then just tell us three things,” said Will. “Who are you? Where are Jess and Jack? And what do you want with us?”

The voice paused before it responded. “I believe the Power has chosen wisely,” it said. “I am Zordon. For thousands of years I and others like me have defended your planet from all manner of evil beings. Over time, our battles thinned our numbers until only I remained. Ten-thousand years ago I grew desperate in my fight, and I recruited natives from this planet to help me in defense. Thus, the first human team of Power Rangers was created.”


The robot, Alpha, made a sound suspiciously like a mocking laugh.

“Yes,” said Zordon. April noted this being’s patience. “The Power Rangers. Unfortunately, humanity was not ready for such power. Six humans were granted immense power, but one by one the Rangers of old fell to the darkness. A great foe arose from the ashes of my old Rangers, and it took the ultimate sacrifice of my last surviving Ranger to imprison this foe within the ice caps of Mars.”

“Rita,” said Will.

“Yes. Now she has returned, and I fear she may be more powerful than ever.”

Chapter 3 – Ewan

Ewan was ready to take back what he had told himself earlier, about believing whatever this Zordon fellow had to say. The whole day so far had been batshit crazy, for sure. But what this nut was telling them had topped everything else, even the psychotic firemonkey.

“You put together a group of superheroes ten-thousand years ago,” Ewan said, “to fight some great evil – mastadons and sabertoothed tigers and leopard-spotted loincloths, I’m assuming – and now a ten-thousand-year-old chick who’s been frozen in ice on Mars has just come back and wants to take over the world?”

“Who is she, Zordon?” asked April. “Was she human?”

“She… was,” said Zordon. “She was a human once, until she gave herself to a tremendous evil that roamed the land. It consumed her, and she became a great sorceress. Her powers ensured that she did not age. But luckily, nor do I. I have defended your planet since before humans existed. Rita Repulsa was indeed locked away beneath the ice of Mars, but now she has escaped.”

“That’s why you hate humans so much,” April said to Alpha. The robot crossed its arms and began tapping its metal boot.

“I did hear something about a Mars exploration in the news recently,” said Will. “Jack would know all about it. Where is he, Zordon?”

“Ah yes,” said Zordon, “your second question.” As he spoke, soft lights illuminated an alcove to their left. Six beds lined the wall, and two were occupied. “They suffered greatly in your fight with Goldar,” said Zordon. “The general of Rita’s army is not to be trifled with. They will recover, and
they can hear everything I say now, but the healing beds have placed them in stasis until they are recovered.”

“Goldar hurt Will, too,” April pointed out. “Should he be over there?”

“Goldar has a unique ability to cause severe internal damage when he wishes,” said Zordon. “He was merely toying with Will when he hurt him, so Will's wounds were minor compared to those of the twins. Alpha has limited healing capabilities built in to his systems, and he saw to Will's minor internal bleeding when you were first transported here.”

“And where is 'here', again?” asked Ewan.

“The most remote location on the planet.”

“A Blockbuster?”

“Antarctica,” said Zordon. “Those blessed with my Power may teleport here any time they wish. Time passes more slowly in this building than it does on the rest of the planet, making the Command Center ideal for strategic planning… as well as healing, though I should hope that that will not be necessary as often. You five would be granted the awesome might of the Power Rangers: immortality, increased strength and agility of body and mind, and access to technologies not to be seen by mortal humans for hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

“And with that, I shall answer your third question, Will Weston, though by now it should be obvious. What I want with you. There is no denying that Rita Repulsa has returned to Earth. She is incredibly powerful, and unfortunately the ten-thousand years of banishment have only allowed her power to accumulate, making her more dangerous than ever before. If left unchecked, she will enslave all of humanity and use your race for galactic conquest. She is corruption itself. I am asking the five of you to answer the call of the Power Rangers and form a team that will stop her and defend Earth from certain doom.”

No one spoke. Ewan could hardly believe what he was hearing. A year ago, someone at a party had laced his drink with LSD, and even the shit he'd seen on that acid trip couldn't compare with what this Zordon guy was saying. A team of heroes picked off one by one. An ancient witch who had hunted them down, only to be imprisoned by the last. Five college students being asked to fight against her and an army of who knows how many crazy-ass monsters or else all of humanity would be enslaved.

“Can't the military fight her?” Ewan asked. Seemed obvious enough to him. What would five people barely old enough to legally drink accomplish that a few tanks couldn't?

“Earth's armaments are nothing against her magic,” said Zordon. “Stand back, and observe.”

A hologram rose from the center of the raised platform: a perfect representation of the Earth. As the three humans watched, the image grew larger and zoomed in on downtown Cedar Grove. Hundreds of Rita's mudmen lined the streets, absorbing bullet after bullet from a retreating police force. The image faded just as one of the mudmen grabbed a policeman by the neck, melded its free hand into a sword tip, and rammed the blade into the man's mouth.

“Great,” muttered Ewan. “Thanks for that. I'd been itching for some new nightmare fuel lately.”

“They can only be stopped by the Power Rangers,” said Zordon. “I believe the twins have fully recovered. You may stand and join your friends. I await your decision, humans.”
Chapter 4 – Jess

Jessica Kelly's head pounded. Too much drinking, she guessed. She was undeniably hung over, and she had just had the weirdest dream of her life. Christina had texted her. She’d decided on a college out of state, and she didn’t want a long-distance relationship. She and Jess had had the argument of the century over the phone. Then some other weird shit went down – the kind of shit that only makes sense in dreams, until Jess, her brother, two of his idiot friends, and some other random girl were asked to save the world by a tank of milk. The thought was laughable; Jess couldn’t even save her Communications grade, let alone the world.

She tried to open her eyes, but someone had left the lights on in her room, and their light unleashed a fresh wave of pain through her head. Groaning, she hauled herself to the side of the bed and tried to sit up, but the floor wasn’t where it usually was. Her legs flailed in open air for a moment before she tumbled forward and found the floor with her face instead. Dimly, she was aware that someone had replaced her room's carpet with cold steel. Something wasn't adding up here.

Someone stomped across the room and helped her lean back against her bed. “Are you alright?” It was Will, Jack's med student buddy. Mr. Perfect. Everything that Jess and her brother weren’t, at least according to Mom and Dad. The way their parents fawned over this guy made Jess want to hate him… but that was impossible. The bastard was too nice.

“Get out of my room,” Jess muttered.

“I…” Will fumbled.

“Aw, that’s cute,” said Jack’s other friend. Ewan. Jess had never known why they were friends. Ewan was the biggest dick in the city, the state, probably even the country. You couldn’t help but like Will, just as much as you couldn’t help but hate Ewan.

“Sis.” Jack was somewhere nearby. Something in his voice was off, but Jess was in no mood to figure out what was bothering him. “We're not in your room.”

Jess made to argue, but Will helped her to her feet, and she understood as soon as she opened her eyes.

She hadn’t been dreaming.

“Fuck,” she said.

Chapter 5 – Jack

He hadn't been dreaming. Jack Kelly really was standing in an alien Command Center on the Antarctic continent, and everything Zordon had just said – whether it was true or not – really had been said. The lake really had come under attack, and that Goldar monster was real. The memory of him alone led Jack to believe Zordon's words, impossible though they seemed.

“Jack,” said Will. Even though Jack was feeling better, his glasses must not have survived the encounter, so the room was mostly just a haze of colors. “You alright?”

“Others at the lake were not as fortunate as you,” the voice said. “Many have died today, and they are but the first.”

“You’re a ray of sunshine,” said Ewan.

Jack fumbled forward. Anything more than two feet away from his face fell so far out of focus as to be unidentifiable. Jack was used to it, but it didn't make getting around any easier.

“Alpha,” said Zordon. A bronze haze shifted to Jack's right. He turned to it and received the shock of his life when it came into view. There, standing before him, was a robot.

“Whoa!” Jack gasped. “A fully sentient, multifunctional automaton!”

“Hmph,” said Alpha. “Maybe I shouldn't give you these after all. Sounds like you're all geeked out as it is.”

The robot placed something in Jack's hands. It was a small black machine that looked like the things Jack's dad put on his nose to keep from snoring at night.

“Put it on your nose, Mr. Myopia,” said Alpha. Jack clamped the tiny machine onto the bridge of his nose. Two thin lenses fanned out in front of his eyes, and in an instant the most beautiful room Jack had ever seen came into focus. He became a whirlwind of curiosity, flittering from console to console as he sought to understand the incredible advanced technology of this strange Command Center. The others began to debate while he moved around.

“Can we go home now?” Ewan asked.

“After hearing all of that?” asked Will. “You can't be serious.”

“Oh c'mon Will. As if any of that's real. You can't live for ten-thousand years just by being frozen in ice; even I know that!”

“You can always run away,” offered Jess. “You know, like the way you wanted to run off and leave me and Jack fighting that flaming asshole.”

“If I wanted your opinion I’d have asked your girlfriend, but oh, wait! You don’t have one of those anymore, do you?”

“At least it lasted for longer than one night, unlike any of your ‘relationships.’”

“Guys,” Will stepped between them, “look around. We're surrounded by alien technology. There's no telling what it could do. I mean, you saw what Goldar did to Jack's face, right? And now look at it; he's completely healed.”

“Still ugly, though,” grumbled Ewan.

“Cool it,” said Will. “This is a huge decision, and we don’t have time for jokes.”

“That's right,” chimed in April. “Time may move slower here, but it's still moving, and Goldar and all those mudmen are rampaging through Cedar Grove.”

“Who the fuck are you, anyway?” asked Ewan.

“M-my name is April,” Jack could hear the nerves in her voice. He sympathized: new people made
him nervous, too. “My family just moved here. My mom… I thought maybe the diving contest would be a good place to meet people before the new semester.”

“Well good for you,” said Ewan. “You and Will can join this Zordon guy who we can't even see and pretend to go save the world. I say the rest of us bug out, let the great and powerful Oz pick some other team of schmucks to do his dirty work.”

“He chose us,” said Will.

“He chose poorly.”

“I think we can do this. I mean, if Zordon's right, we could be doing the most important thing that any Earthling has ever gotten to do. Come on, man. Remember how you used to always go as Superman for Halloween, even into high school?”

“Dude,” Ewan shushed Will. “No one needs to hear that. It’s embarrassing.”

“Well, now you can be Superman! With us! We'd be like the Justice League!”

“Better hold it on this ‘us’ crap, Will,” said Jess. “You may be all gung-ho for this superhero stuff, but I don't know if I'm up for it, either.”

“Me too,” said April. “We'd be giving up our lives for this. Everything we've done up to this point would have been for nothing. We'd have to abandon our friends, our families, our futures…”

“We lose those anyway if we don't do this,” said Will. “Our lives would have been for nothing anyway.”

No one had an answer for that.

“You must decide quickly,” said Zordon. “Cedar Grove stands defenseless.”

“Jack,” said Will. “Thoughts?”

Jack’s eye caught a hologram of Goldar. The detail was incredible, and even as he watched, the hologram moved in slow-motion and punched a hologram-Jack dead in the face. Stats appeared under Goldar's fist detailing velocity, kinetic energy, and so on.

“The tech here is incredible,” Jack said. Slo-mo Goldar punched Jack again, which really wasn’t helping Jack’s nerves. “It might be enough to give us an edge. You and Ewan are the only real friends I have. If doing this means watching your backs as well as protecting the city, count me in.”

“Then me, too,” said Jess. She glared at him. “Someone has to watch your back.”

April had been staring at the floor, but now she looked Will dead in the eye. “What you said about us losing everything if we don’t do this, I… can’t ignore that. This is greater than all of us. I'm willing to sacrifice my own life for the sake of Cedar Grove and the rest of the world.”

Will smiled and nodded. “Thank you,” he said. He turned to Ewan. He didn't have to ask; there was only one answer left to hear.

“Can't do it,” Ewan shook his head. “It's too insane. Zordon, shoot me home. I'm out. Have fun in your spandex, bitches.”

“It saddens me to hear that,” said Zordon. “But very well. I shall teleport you to your home, but the rest of you: prepare yourselves for the defense of Cedar Grove.”
Chapter 1 – Will

Ewan made no eye contact as his body turn to golden light and shoot upward through the ceiling. He was gone.

“Now,” began Zordon, “it is time for me to grant the four of you the awesome abilities of the Power Rangers.”

“Like giving an ant a machine gun,” muttered Alpha.

“Where I come from,” Zordon said, “we believe that each organism is composed of seven aspects. When I created the Rangers, I did so by breaking my own essence down into these seven. I kept one – the essence of Wisdom – so that I could guide the Rangers. The other six I imparted to the humans I chose. As they fell to Rita’s forces, I reclaimed their power in preparation for this day.”

“Very comforting,” said Jess.

“I shall explain more when we have time, but for now, step forth, and receive your power coins.”

Alpha stood before them and held out both hands. In each were two golden coins about the size of a half-dollar.

“Only four,” said Will. “If you have the fifth, then what happened to the other two?”

“Ewan would have been the sixth,” said Zordon. “As for the last, that power was unfortunately lost to me forever. Part of me died with the old Rangers.”

Will didn’t want to know what it was like to lose a seventh of yourself. He decided not to ask any more questions.

One by one the four stepped forward and grabbed a coin. Will was last, but he had known which coin was his from the moment Alpha opened his hands, almost as if the coin called to him. On its face was a golden lion with a white mane.

When he touched the coin, a jolt of electricity shot up his arm, and a flash of something indistinct passed before his eyes, like some forgotten memory.

“These coins are linked to my life force,” Zordon explained. “You may experience momentary memories of the Rangers past. Glean what you can, for these memories will serve as your guides in mastering your abilities.”

“I feel… strange,” said Jess.

“What do we do with these coins?” asked Will.

“They are your anchors to the Ranger essences,” said Zordon. “When you possess your coin, you may call upon it and be transformed into a Power Ranger.”

“And how do we do that?” asked Jess.
But Will already knew. Somehow, deep within him, he had the answer. Suddenly, he realized what that brief memory had been about. He knew what his power was.

Will squeezed the coin in his hand.

“Honor,” he whispered, and he began to transform.

Chapter 2 – Jess

Jess nearly shit a brick. Though she stood furthest away from Will, she heard him whisper Honor as clearly as if he'd spoken it just inches from her ear. But that wasn't what shocked her. No sooner had the word left his mouth than Will disappeared in brilliant light that shifted and spun around him in a frenzy of white and gray.

And just like that, a Power Ranger stood before them.

Where once Will had stood there was now a man adorned in dark leather armor from shoulder to foot. Fine patterns of white light pulsed through the armor, the same color white as the cloth hood that enveloped the man's head and neck. On his chest was stamped an image of a white lion. From under the hood, a pair of glowing white eyes stared back at her, though the rest of his face was hidden in darkness. No one looking at him would be able to tell that it was Will, but there he was, standing tall and looking downright scary. Jess could feel the power of this new Ranger just by looking at him.


“I heard him, Zordon,” said Will. When he spoke, Jess heard two voices: Will's in her head, and a different voice aloud. “I heard the last Ranger speak the word.”

“Very good. It is fitting that the leader of the Rangers should be the first.”

“But,” said Jess, “aren't you the leader?”

“I cannot lead,” said Zordon. “That was the sacrifice I made when I created the Rangers. I can guide you, but this team needs a leader out on the front lines, for there may be times when I may not be able to help you. Honor is incorruptible. Honor is humble. Honor always leads to the right solution, and Will embodies all that is honorable and true. He will make a perfect leader for this team.”

“Why does he have to be the leader?” Jess asked. “Why not a girl?”

“Our team needs someone who isn’t incapacitated for a few days each month,” said Alpha.

Immediately Jess and April turned on the robot, raining a verbal storm down on his sexist metal ass. Alpha tried to respond, but he couldn’t get a word in. Slowly, the two girls backed him across the room until the White Ranger slid between them.

“Enough,” he said. There was a calm in his voice, but also a finality. The room grew silent.

“That’s why he’s the leader,” said Jack.

Looking at those eyes was like looking at the sun. Jess had to turn away. “It's real,” she said. “This is
really happening.”

“How did you know what to do?” April asked.

The glowing eyes of the White Ranger turned to April, but she didn’t flinch. Between this and getting on Alpha’s case for what he said, maybe the girl wasn’t a total pussy after all. “Zordon mentioned memories. I heard the last Ranger say Honor, and deep down I just knew what to do. I can’t explain it, really.” He looked down and noticed a black tool belt for the first time. He reached to his side and drew a strange-looking pistol of white, which he spun around his fingers a few times before holstering it again like some wild west gunslinger. The patterns of white light etched in his suit pulsed with each breath.

“So what do the rest of us do?” asked Jack.

Jess recalled what she had seen when she touched her power coin. There had been a face – a beautiful woman in black. This woman had a wicked smile, and her eyes were a pale yellow with cat-like slits. Jess didn't have to guess who that was.

She looked at her coin again. On its face was some sort of lizard with fiery red eyes. She glanced at the others. Jack and April were studying their coins, too. The White Ranger, meanwhile, stared at his gloved hands, which glowed with pure white energy.

“Badassery,” said Jess. She didn’t turn into a Power Ranger.

“I feel something when I look at it,” April said, more to herself than the others. “I can hear the word, but I can't make it out, like someone's speaking to me underwater.”

Jess was getting tired of waiting. She turned to the giant milk tank. “Why don't you just tell us what to do!”

“That would ruin the fun of watching your frustration,” said Alpha.

“You must find the power within yourselves,” said Zordon. “Neither I nor anyone else can find it for you.”

“I know you guys can do it,” said Will. “Feel for the word. It's there. It always has been; you just have to find it.”

“Fuck,” Jess swore.

“That’s not the word,” said Alpha.

Jess ignored him. “We don’t have time for this shit! Our city’s being destroyed, and you want us to sit here and ‘find our inner power’? Screw you. Will, why don't you get your ass out there and slow them down or something?”

“He should not wade into battle alone,” said Zordon. “None of you should. You are a team. One Ranger alone is vulnerable.”

“Then help us, god dammit!”

“Hey,” said April, “it'll be okay.” Jess was surprised how soothing April's voice was. For the briefest of moments, Jess calmed down. And just like that, April's eyes went wide, and she let out a gasp. “Harmony,” she said.
A soft, cool blue glow washed over April and disappeared again just as quickly as Will's white light. In April's place there now stood a woman in armor similar to Will's, but with blue glowing trim and a blue hood. On her chest was stamped a symbol of some kind of bird. From the back of the hood streamed long, sea-blue hair that drifted around her head as if April was underwater. A pair of glowing blue eyes glanced down at her hands in wonder. Jess couldn't look directly at them, either.

“Oh my God,” April whispered. Like Will, her voice was dual: April's in Jess' head, and an echoing other in the air.

“My Blue Ranger,” announced Zordon. “Holder of Harmony. You adapt quickly and will see both sides of any argument. Where there is strife, you will not rest until it is resolved. You are the peacekeeper of the Ranger team. Without harmony, discord flourishes.”

The White Ranger tapped the Blue Ranger on the shoulder and pointed at the cylindrical tank. The Blue Ranger gasped and nodded, as if this confirmed something.

Fuck this, Jess thought. She stamped her foot. “Okay,” she said. “This has gone on long enough. Neither Jack nor I have the slightest idea what our god damn 'words of power' are, and I don't know about him, but nothing's exactly coming to mi—"

A single word from Jack cut her off. “Strength,” he said, and he, too, began to transform.

Chapter 3 – Jack

Jack felt it more than he saw it: dark green enveloped his body, like moss growing over a tree in super speed. Jack's heart accelerated. His muscles tensed, and for the briefest of moments Jack could swear that he saw and understood all that went on within the Command Center.

Welcome to the team, Jack, Will's voice spoke inside Jack's head, though he heard nothing. He opened his eyes and gasped.

Without even looking, he knew that he was wearing the same hooded armor that Will and April now wore, and he suspected that his eyes were glowing, and that they were glowing green. Playing around his vision – which was better than it ever had been – was a heads up display: helpful bits of data like Jack's vital signs, a compass, even what was in Jack's utility belt. Whatever technology the Power Rangers possessed, it apparently included tapping a HUD straight into a Ranger's brain.

He played around with his suit's tech. He imagined a flashlight, and suddenly his eyes glowed with such intensity that the entire room took on a green glow, making Jess shield her face and swear at him. He thought, Off, and the lights dimmed, then he flicked them back on and off again. He thought of stealth, and the pulsing green veins of light throughout his suit dimmed to black. He thought of a map, and suddenly a holograph of the Earth played over his vision, zooming in to some nondescript corner of Antarctica to reveal a cylindrical building that, he suspected, would not be seen with regular satellite imagery.

“Amazing,” he said. He observed his hands, his chest, his belt, everything except the very thing that normally had his undivided attention: Jess. He knew she was watching him, but he was too caught up in checking out his own armor to notice. His HUD scanned each organism in the room as he looked at them and spat out all sorts of information, much like the hologram of Goldar he had seen earlier. Then he tried thinking of the first random topic he could – in this case, steam locomotives –
and suddenly pages of text scrolled past his vision providing every detail Jack would ever want to
know about the topic. Apparently, the suit had built-in wifi. “What any Earthen scientist wouldn't
give for this sort of technology,” he said. “The database is absolutely incredible! Zordon, how long
did it take to compile this information?”

“I have not just been sitting idly by these past ten-thousand years,” said Zordon. “Your Wikipedia is
also helpful.” Only, for the first time, Jack noticed Zordon's voice coming from a specific direction.
He turned and looked at the huge cylindrical tank. There, just beyond the milky clouds, was a face,
humanoid… and yet entirely other. Jack shuddered, though he knew Zordon was a being of good.
The face was staring at him. It felt like Zordon was boring into Jack's soul. “Allow me to introduce
the rest of you to our Green Ranger,” said Zordon. “Holder of Strength.”

Jess laughed. “Oh that's a good one!” she said. “Strength? I think you got the wrong guy.”

Jack had thought the same thing. The moment he had first touched his coin, the word Strength fell
into Jack's mind, but he had pushed it aside. He was convinced, as Jess still was, that there had been
a mistake. Strength? Of mind, at best. Jack had asthma, for goodness' sake. What kind of strong man
carries an inhaler?

“Strength is many things, Jessica,” Zordon answered. “An archway will fall without a keystone. A
house will crumble without a stable foundation.” Zordon paused. “A family will drift apart without
someone to hold it together.” Jack and Jess glanced at each other. He knew what she was thinking:
how much did Zordon know about their lives?

“I think it suits you,” said Will.

“As do I,” said Zordon. Now that Jack knew where Zordon was, it was hard to look away. When he
spoke, his mouth didn't quite match up with the words, almost as if there was a large time delay
between what Jack saw and what Jack heard. “This team will depend on someone with Jack's solid
caracter if you are to overcome Rita and her dark army. Physical strength is meaningless when there
is not an able mind to guide it. Jack, I know you doubt yourself, but in time I believe that you will
find that Strength is indeed your greatest asset.”

“Thank you Zordon,” Jack said. He noticed that when he spoke aloud, his audible voice was
different, just as the others' had been, and finally it hit him why this was. Our voices sound different
so that people won't know who we are! he thought.

The White and Blue Rangers turned to him. That's what I thought, too, April's voice said in his mind.
We can hear each other's thoughts in our own voices.

I wonder how far it can reach, thought-spoke Will.

But one thing still bothered Jack.

“Zordon?” he asked. Jack indicated the symbol on his chest. “Why a crocodile? One would expect
an ape, or a bull, or a rhinoceros beetle.”

At this, Zordon chuckled. “An animal that has evolved so little since the age of the dinosaurs as to be
essentially unchanged? If that does not embody the virtue of strength, then I don't know what does.”

Jess cleared her throat. “Well if you're all done congratulating each other on changing into your nice
little uniforms then I think I'm just going to step outside for a bit.”

“Sis,” said Jack, “it's minus-60 degrees outside. The sun doesn't even shine this time of year.”
“So the fuck what?”

Jack stepped closer, so that only Jess could hear. “So, I want you to figure this out as much as you do. Once you're ready, we can go save Cedar Grove.”

“Jesus, would you stop staring at me with those eyes? It's like some horror movie or something.”

“I bet yours'll be terrifying.” That got a small grin out of her. Jack lived for those grins. With their home life the way it was, Jess was the only one Jack could rely on. Will and Ewan had been his best (hell, his only) friends for years, but family was different. You could find new friends. You couldn’t find a new sister, let alone a new twin. Still, that didn’t stop him from wishing he could find new parents.

Will and April began to speak to Zordon and Alpha about the plan of attack, but right now Jack knew where he was needed most. “We weren’t brought here by accident, Jess. The right word is in there, I know it. What did you see when you touched the coin?”

Jess crossed her arms and continued to look away. “Nothing.”

“Bullshit.”

“I didn't see anything, alright? Didn't hear anything, didn't feel some magical word just begging to be said so that I can wear a hoodie like the rest of you wackos. I still don't get why Zordon was crazy enough to pick the four of us.”

“Five. He picked Ewan, too.”

“And what a great choice that was.”

“I don't know why Zordon picked us, but he did. Will's one of the most selfless, honorable guys I know. I don't think it was an accident that his power comes from Honor. And I don't know April very well, but there is something very peaceful about her. Harmony does seem fitting.”

“Yours is still total shit, though. Strength? Come on. You should have seen your face after that Goldar creep smashed it in.”

“I don't understand it either. But I will say one thing: it took some serious balls to tackle him like you did.”

Jess punched him in the shoulder. Jack didn't feel a thing; perhaps there was more to this cloth and leather than he thought. “Balls?” laughed Jess. “Don't got ’em. You should know that by now. Lord knows Dad tells you that often enough.”

“Maybe you should have gotten Strength.”

Jess finally abandoned her tough girl act. Her arms fell to her sides and her face was downcast. “No, you deserve it, I guess. Weak as you are, it must've taken some real courage to… Oh… fuck.” She squeezed her power coin and looked at Jack. He knew that glint in her eye. She'd found her word. “Courage!” she shouted.

Chapter 4 – Meanwhile…
“…Judy Lang, reporting to you live for CNN. We have received reports from Cedar Grove, where satellite imaging has confirmed that the Cedar Grove lake somehow drained of water after a lightning storm that sources claim may have happened without clouds. CNN cannot confirm these reports at this time, as we are unable to communicate with anyone within the city. Experts speculate that this may be due to some sort of electrical shortage related to the lightning storm. If you have family in Cedar Grove, do not attempt to contact them at this time. Our news chopper is almost within the city, so stay with us as we continue our live coverage of this strange meteorology… even…”

“Feed’s cutting out,” said the pilot.

Outside of town, a lone helicopter approached. CNN’s oldest news copter had burned nearly half its fuel to get to Cedar Grove this quickly. Apparently, it was the only one within hundreds of miles not affected by the freak electrical storm. Something about its ancient computer system, the gearheads had said. The crew had been thrown together at a moment’s notice, and neither were too happy about leaving their families for the holiday, even for a story as out-of-this-world as this one. Lightning in a clear sky, the whole city going dark. Something wasn’t adding up.

The crew spoke little during the flight, and even less once they got there.

This was more than a meteorological event; Cedar Grove was a wasteland.

Most of the buildings were more or less intact, but the only light source now was fire, and lots of it. When they could see through the smoke, which was rare, the helicopter team could swear that all the roads of downtown had been paved with flames. Dark figures strode through the fires unaffected. Unless the pilot’s eyes were deceiving him, dark shadows scampered up the building walls. Here and there, dark things the size of trucks stomped through the streets.

After twenty minutes of filming the wreckage, they found a thin line of Cedar Grove police and state troopers fighting the dark figures. But as soon as the crew started filming, they wished they hadn’t. Their camera’s zoom picked up every bullet that zipped through the figures’ torsos without the slightest impact, and it captured on film the gruesome deaths of over a dozen men and women in uniform. The cameraman vomited out the chopper’s window. The pilot – an old Vietnam vet – felt like he was back in the war, only here the jungle was concrete. Part of him wished for some Agent Orange to dump on these bastards, but CNN had neglected to supply the helicopter with any.

Near the police line, someone with a flamethrower torched a car until it exploded.

“Did you see that?” the cameraman shouted. “That thing’s a demon! Holy shit…”

“Send the feed to the station,” said the pilot. He wanted out of here. Reporters weren’t supposed to put their lives in danger like this. They still didn’t know where this army came from. They might be from one of the countries that like to target the media. They'd already established that civilians were high on their list of targets.

“Can’t,” said the cameraman. “No reception.”

“Then record what you can and we’ll send it back the old-fashioned way!”

“Fuck,” said the cameraman. “You need to see this guy! He's not human!”

“Costume, man,” said the pilot. “Just trying to scare everyone.”

“No, really! He is literally on fire. His sword is the flamethrower! This thing is. Not. Human.”

“Let the station deal with the technicalities,” answered the pilot. “I’m taking us out.”
The pilot had hardly started to turn the chopper when the cameraman verbally wet himself. “Shit! Shit shit shit! He sees us! The demon thing sees us!”

“So what? You said he has a flamethrower? We're a hundred in the air, there's no way—”

The cameraman screamed and leapt out the helicopter door. Hardly a second later, something rocked against the bottom of the vehicle. The chopper's tail exploded off. The heli began to spin…and fall.

It really was like ’Nam all over again.

The pilot fought the controls, but he knew it was pointless. No tail, the rotor probably broken as well. Really, it was astonishing that they weren't falling faster than they were. The pilot knew that jumping out would be impossible. The only parachutes had been in the back, which was now missing. He hoped the cameraman had at least taken one before he'd jumped.

Buildings spun into his view. The screeching beep from his control panel would not shut up, and yet what frustrated him most was not knowing just how in the hell that “demon” guy had knocked him out of the sky with a sword and a flamethrower. There was just no way, no fucking w—

Impact, but something was wrong. Namely, the pilot wasn’t dead. Hell, the chopper wasn’t even on fire anymore. He checked himself. All body parts were still there, nothing was bleeding except his forehead, which he remembered whacking when the chopper was first hit. He looked outside. Unless he was imagining things, he was hovering about three feet above the ground, on a mesh of multicolored light. Finally, he looked out the gaping hole in the back.

There, watching him from atop the multicolored mesh, were four robed and armored people with strange glowing eyes. One of them – the green one– carried the cameraman, who was alive and sobbing hysterically.

“Are you alright, sir?” asked the one in white.

The pilot could only nod.

The one with red eyes nodded at the cameraman. “We caught your friend. Idiot jumped without a parachute.”

“You will be safe if you head west,” said the one in blue. She – for it was obviously a “she” – pointed in a direction. Their voices were strange – otherworldly, even. Every time he tried to remember them, they sounded different.

Again the pilot nodded, but this time he found his voice. “Who… are you?”

The white one took a step forward. “We’re the Power Rangers.”

The green one set the cameraman down, and in unison the four Power Rangers turned and leapt toward the east.

Chapter 5 - Ewan

Teleporting the second time was not as bad as the first, though it still wasn't what one might call fantastic. Ewan landed on pavement and immediately fell to his knees. At least this time he didn’t
Smoke filled the sky all around him, and it was quiet – far too quiet for Cedar Grove suburbia on Fourth of July. He recognized the street corner. Alpha and Zordon, as some kind of sick joke, had teleported him to his mom's house instead of his dorm. He didn't feel like asking how they knew where his mother lived. Creepy alien stalker bastards.

Still wearing only his star-spangled speedo, he took off in a sprint for his house.

His bare foot found broken glass from an exploded car hardly fifteen feet from the street corner. He yelled and cursed the car before hobbling past it along the sidewalk. More exploded cars littered the road, but Ewan was a quick learner, and he gave each a wide berth. For a moment he was thankful for the fires in the cars – all lights were out, and it was well past nightfall now – but then he realized how horrible a thought that was. He decided instead to hope that no one was in the cars when they blew. He didn't have the heart to look inside for bodies as he passed. If he ran fast enough, he didn’t have to focus on the black forms smoking in the car seats.

With every step, his apprehension grew. The entire block was silent. His family lived close to one of Cedar Grove's main highways, and he couldn't even hear sirens or the usual traffic from there. Something was horribly wrong, and unfortunately he had a pretty good idea of what that was. Surely Rita Repulsa wouldn't bother with a small little neighborhood, though. Terrorists never attacked neighborhoods. They attacked the financial district, or City Hall or something. Hell, why weren't they attacking Washington D.C.? Why Cedar Grove?

Ewan froze when he reached the remains of his mother's house. He avoided the obvious warning signs that all was not well – the shattered windows, the smoking holes in the roof, the collapsed chimney. He just wanted to be done with this shit.

The front door looked like it had been boarded up from the outside, but now the boards were hardly more than smoldering ash.

Ewan hobbled awkwardly over the remains of the door and swore loudly. His foot had found more broken glass. He hopped to the downstairs bathroom and pulled the first aid kit out from under the sink, carefully ignoring the dozens of framed photos lining the counter and walls. “Mom!” he shouted. She'd lived alone ever since he went to college. She'd practically begged him to keep living with her, but he'd had none of it. All his other siblings had gone out of state and never come back; Ewan was all she had left, but she was batshit crazy. Four kids from four different daddies, and everyone – father and child alike – had left her as soon as they could. Ewan often said she put the “mother” into “smother.” He had a special ringtone just for her, and he heard it more than his normal one. He never picked up. “Mom!” he called again. “Your favorite son’s home!”

He shoved the dozens of photos of him and his sisters off the bathroom counter and hoisted himself up to have a seat. Four shards of glass lodged in the ball of his foot and another two in his heel. He yelled as he yanked each out, and he yelled some more as he poured hydrogen peroxide over the wounds. The bandages felt good, though, and he was good at applying them. Having a pre-med nerd like Will for a friend had its perks. So did getting into the occasional bar fight.

Ewan lowered himself gingerly off the sink and left to search the house. The downstairs didn't look so bad – the couch was smoking, the TV screen was busted, and all the windows were broken (Ewan stayed far from them) but otherwise the damage seemed like nothing a few insurance claims couldn't handle. Did insurance cover “ancient psycho witch attacks”?

The upstairs, though, was another matter.
A huge gaping hole greeted him from the ceiling of his mother's bedroom, with picture frames thrown everywhere like metal confetti. The dresser was partially hanging out a hole in the wall, and the bed could at best be described as “a smoldering ruin.” No body, though. He checked his sisters' rooms. Nothing.

Finally, Ewan entered his old room.

The few swimsuit model posters he hadn't taken to college had been torn down and ripped to shreds. Dried flecks of mud stuck to the carpet. His bed had a black smoking hole in the middle, and his ceiling fan sat battered and broken at the foot of his bed. The dresser, though, was untouched, except for two new additions: a picture, and a coin.

“The fuck?” he muttered.

The picture was one he hadn’t seen in years. It was him and Mom, just the two of them on a trip they’d taken to New York when he was ten, before it was no longer cool to hang out with your parents. It was December, and the two of them were smiling in front of the huge Christmas tree the city put up each year. They both looked so happy. When did Mom get so crazy? he wondered. A small part of his brain answered, when you and everyone else she loved started leaving.

He shook the thought away and turned to the coin. American coins weren't gold, and he sure as hell hadn't left any money when he went to college. It was about the size of a half-dollar, but much thicker, and on its face was stamped a crazy-looking bird that clearly was not an American eagle.

He picked the coin up to see what was on its back and was rocked by a vision. The most beautiful woman he had ever seen stood atop a cliff overlooking a village in flames. The place looked old – all of the “buildings” were wooden or mud, with thatched roofs – but the people running and screaming from their homes were plainly terrified. Ewan heard them plea to the gods, even from where he stood. He could feel their fear. The woman in black chuckled.

Someone else stepped into view. It was a woman, dressed in the same animal leathers as the villagers. The woman in black turned to greet her.

“Bitch!” spat the newcomer.

The dark woman smiled. Ewan felt a chill run down his spine. It was not a friendly smile. Her yellow cat eyes twinkled. “Now now, Serket,” the woman in black cooed. “Is that any way to greet an old friend?”

“I told you that what happened to Dreadwing was not my fault.”

“Yes,” smiled the dark woman. She swept a hand toward the village. “Just as this wasn’t mine.”

The newcomer reached for something within her clothes. “You'll pay!” she shouted, and then she screamed a word that Ewan knew but didn't understand. The vision faded.

Ewan.

Ewan nearly leapt out of his Speedo. There was a voice inside his head. “Fuck!” Ewan yelled.

It was that Zordon creep. Ewan, if you can hear this, then you are holding the coin. Alpha and I were monitoring your mother's house. Rita's invasion of the city began in the suburbs. You may be wondering where your mother is. I can say that she is alive... but in some ways that is worse than death. Those who do not physically oppose Rita's army are enslaved, and she is not kind to her slaves. If you wish to help your mother, you must take that coin and join your friends.
“Asshole!” Ewan screamed. He didn't care if Zordon could hear him or not. “You knew they were coming for her and you didn't stop them! Why the fuck should I help you!?” He held his coin up and stared at the ceiling. For some reason, he felt like if Zordon was watching him, it'd be from above. Zordon seemed egotistical like that. “Why the fuck did you send this coin and not, oh I don't know, one of your god damned Power Rangers to save my mom! FUCK YOU!”

Ewan. You must listen to me.

“Get out of my head!”

I did not choose the five of you. That was my mistake ten-thousand years ago, and my greatest gamble now. Back then, I chose people whom I thought would be the best, and look where it has led us. This time, I tried something new. I let the Power decide to whom it would bestow its power. I did not choose you, Ewan. In a way, you chose you.

“I don’t have time for your hippie shit,” said Ewan. “Just tell me how to save my mom.” The old bird may drive him crazy, but she was the only mom she had. He wasn’t about to let Rita take her away from him.

I know what it is you saw when you touched the power coin. It seems that the powers have chosen with a cruel sense of irony. The coin you now hold belonged to the first Ranger to fall. Rita lured her out by burning her village to the ground, and now here you are, standing within the ashen shell of your mother's home. I am sorry, Ewan, but all is not lost. You know what to do.

Ewan did know what to do. The word spoken in his vision made sense now. He didn’t want to care for his mother, but somehow, seeing this house without her and knowing that she was locked away somewhere by Rita to be used as a slave… That was too much. Ewan wasn't about to stand for that.

He squeezed the golden coin so hard his palm began to throb. Then he thrust his clenched fist into the air and bellowed the word spoken by the former ranger, followed, of course, with a bit of his own flair. “Spirit, MOTHAFUCKAS!”
Chapter 1 – April

She couldn't believe it. Two hours ago, April had been standing atop a cliff, book in hand, bitterly regretting her mom’s insistence that she get out and make new friends. Now, she, Will, Jess and Jack had just saved a helicopter pilot and his cameraman, and they had done it with alien technology. What was perhaps even stranger was that Zordon had given them no training on how to use these powers. They had simply teleported to the city, seen the helicopter going down, and acted. It was like they had been doing this for years. As one, the four of them had pulled anti-gravity nets from their belts and thrown them across to one another. Until that moment, April didn’t even know she had anti-grav nets. Both the falling cameraman and the entire helicopter landed light as a feather on their patchwork rainbow. The look on the pilot's face had said it all: if they did nothing else right today, at least they knew they had saved two lives.

The four Power Rangers stood atop one of the buildings overlooking the line of mudmen that steadily marched toward the officers. Goldar had disappeared after lobbing that fireball at the helicopter. April feared to imagine where he'd run off to. His gleeful laughter when he saw the chopper explode made her sick.

“Thirty-two mudmen,” Jack reported. “Eight a piece.”

“Let’s get down there and whoop their asses,” said Jess. “I feel like I could take down an army in this suit.”

“Hold on,” cut in Will. “We formed a plan back in the Command Center.” He pulled his pistol from his belt. “It’s not flashy, but it’s our best bet. Jess, you and Jack get to those buildings over there.” Will pointed at two rooftops on the other side of the road, and as he did, April's HUD marked the spots Will meant, like little waypoints on Google Maps. “April, you get on that balcony.” A building on this side of the street, closer to the line of officers. “We hit the mudmen from both sides. They're unprotected down there—”

“Screw that,” Jess said. “I'm not just gonna sit up here and take pot shots. I wanna get up in their faces and watch the life go out of their god damned eyes. Come on!”

Jess leapt from the building.


Jack shrugged. “Leroy Jenkins,” he said before jumping. April had no idea what that meant.

She glanced over the ledge. They were six stories up. She'd dove from higher before, but never onto concrete. She took a deep breath and plunged.

Her HUD kept track of things during the long fall: her velocity, distance to the ground, awareness level of the mudmen, heart rates of the policemen. The line of mudmen reached a car with a civilian inside. One mudman thrust a sticky arm straight through the car window and yanked a screaming woman right out onto the pavement. The mudman drew back a hand that reformed into a blade. Jess landed on his back and fired a pistol shot straight down into his head.
Will landed foot-first on another's head and crushed it instantly. Jack body-slammed three at once. Before she even knew how she did it, April had withdrawn her pistol and shot two mudmen in the chest before landing hands-first on the head of a third. He crumpled to the ground under her, and she tumbled gracefully into a somersault that carried her straight into the path of another. She leapt up from her roll and gave his chin a solid uppercut. He flew over a dozen feet away and crashed butt-first into the windshield of a car on fire, dissolving into a gloopy golden dust.

*Nine down, twenty-three to go*, thought-spoke Will. April thought she detected a hint of amusement in his voice, but she didn't know him well enough to be sure. She could only assume that he, like her, was amazed at how natural this felt. She’d never fired a gun in her life, yet those blue beams from her pistol had taken the mudmen’s heads clean off.

April's HUD detected movement behind her. Without even looking, she ducked left and swept her legs back. A mudman with a club for an arm fell on top of her, and the two of them wrestled for control. Up close, his face was even more terrifying than she had first thought. Pure fire blazed in his eye sockets, and deep cracks radiated along the skin from his eyes. This one had no nose – just a deep gash, like it had been cut off long ago.

The mudman worked his way on top of April. He bared thin fangs of rock and tried to bite her throat as they wrestled. She kneed his stomach, punched his chest, and then rocked herself backward to catch his head between her legs. With a deft, corkscrew-like twist, she propelled herself up and onto her feet and spun the mudman's head halfway around on its neck in one move. He crumpled to the pavement and turned to dust.

*Sexy*, thought Jess. *I hope you don't do that to all your boyfriends.*

April was thankful for her hooded armor; she knew she was blushing madly. *I've never...* she thought, but then she realized that the others could hear her thoughts and she stopped. No need to get into her amazing lack of a love life right now.

As she and the other three continued to fight against the remaining mudmen, a new sound slowly emerged: cheering. April couldn't afford to look – there were still well over a dozen nasty monsters trying to slice her apart – but her HUD told her that the sound came from the officers. As the fight wore on, April was aware that the men and women behind the riot shields were inching closer. April was reminded of Zordon's last admonition before they had left for Cedar Grove: “Under no circumstances,” he had said, “may you divulge your identity to another. Do this, and your power will leave you. I am sorry, but as you come to see the visions of the previous Rangers, you will understand why this must be so.” Jess had objected – after all, why should they risk their lives and take no credit for it – but Zordon was adamant. April, for one, was more than happy to keep this a secret. Her mom would absolutely flip if she found out.

*April look out!*

Something collided with the side of April's head and knocked her to the ground. Her armor absorbed most of the blow, but she was still disoriented. A mudman stepped over her and made to swing his clubbed arm into her face, but a beam of white light blasted through his abdomen and sliced him clean in half. Mud spurted all over April's armor. The White Ranger ran into view and helped her to her feet. Over Will's shoulder, April saw Jack and Jess grab the last mudman by the arms and pull. Both arms ripped clean off and turned to dust. Jack swept the mudman's feet, and Jess bashed the monster’s head with his severed arm over and over until both dissolved to dust.

The officers burst into a massive round of applause.

“Thanks,” April said to Will.
“You're welcome,” he answered. “I'm not even out of breath. These powers are amazing!”

April nodded and smiled before realizing that Will couldn't see the latter.

“We need to move,” Jack said as he and Jess joined them. “These were only the beginning.”

“Yeah,” agreed Will. “And we can't afford questions from the police right now.”

Jess' red eyes drifted to the building tops high above them. “Up?” she asked.

“Up,” Will agreed, and the four of them leapt back into the night.

Chapter 2 – Will

“Zordon, come in.”

Will and the others bounded across the rooftops at a blistering speed, taking at least eight or ten feet with a single step. They knew that the group they had just destroyed was only a small fraction of what remained within the city, and Will was sure that it was only a matter of time before the rest of Rita's forces would learn about what happened. They needed to get away from there immediately, on the off-chance that Rita found out about them and sent reinforcements.

They also had to figure out what in the hell they were going to do next.

Yes White Ranger, answered Zordon.

“We need to restore power to the city. What do we do?”

A pair of Rita's most dangerous lieutenants have hijacked the city's rail system and are using it to carry a machine that emits electricity-draining pulses. This machine is able to transfer tremendous amounts of power to their train while simultaneously absorbing the power from the surrounding area. It is what is causing the rolling blackouts across the city.

Explains why sometimes there’s power, sometimes there’s not, thought Jack.

The Rangers stopped on the roof of an apartment block. “We have to stop them, Zordon,” said Will. “Without power, the hospitals can't help the injured, and no one can leave the city.”

A commendable sentiment, White Ranger, but destroying the machine that Squatt and Baboo are using will remove what little amount of stealth you currently have. In restoring power to Cedar Grove, you will also alert Rita to your presence. She will escalate her attack to draw you out.

“Their names are Squatt and Baboo?” Jess laughed. “You've got to be shitting me.”

You have seen what the element of surprise can do for you, said Zordon. Do not underestimate this. There are many others who must be saved before you can restore power to the city. Do that first, however, and many more lives may be lost.

Will felt his blood boiling. “So we're screwed if we do, screwed if we don't,” he said. He swore loudly. “You expect us to just live with this decision, Zordon? Ignore the thousands who are injured just so that we can take out a few more mudmen?”
Nothing is ever as simple as 'good' and 'evil'. As the leader of the Power Rangers, this will not be the last difficult decision you ever make. I cannot force you to ignore Squatt and Baboo's train. Jess giggled again at the names. But I urge you to consider our long-term goal. You must be patient.

Will clenched his fist. People could die if the hospitals didn't get power soon. But on the other hand, Cedar Grove's firemen and police officers won't be able to search the streets for other injured people until the Rangers clear the city. If they restored power now, Zordon guaranteed that Rita would up her ante, but if they continued to lay low…

Will sighed. He had heard the others' thoughts as he and Zordon had talked, so he knew where they stood. He would go with their decision.

“Alright,” said Will, “we'll leave the train for now.”

“Squatt and Baboo,” giggled Jess. Jack smacked her upside the back of her head.

“Where should we go, Zordon?”

The police station is under siege. You must see to its defense; if Rita gains access to the armory located inside, she will be able to outfit her army with much deadlier weaponry.

“We're on it.”

The four leapt to the next rooftop and continued on. They had hardly gone three blocks, though, when they heard screaming.

“There,” April pointed. Fires raged all through town, but this one was different. An entire apartment building was going up in what was undoubtedly the largest fire Will had ever seen. Eight stories, and only a handful of windows didn't have smoke or fire billowing from them. On the ground floor, the main entranceway was blocked by over a dozen mudmen.

“I'm getting a strange reading from the building,” said Jack.

Will had noticed it, too, but the science that the HUD was spitting out was a little beyond him. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“I can't say for sure. The fire's… hotter than it should be.”

“There's still a lot of people inside,” said April. “We should help them.”

Will was about to reply that, no, they couldn't, and that they needed to get to the police station before Rita got her hands on the armory, but then he remembered his own pleas to Zordon just moments earlier. This was why they were Power Rangers. If they couldn't help those people still trapped in the building, then who could?

“Absolutely,” said Will. “Let's go.”

Chapter 3 – Jess

The four Rangers dropped into a back alley and approached the road that separated them from the apartment block. The Rangers dimmed the light of their suits. The mudmen blocking the apartment entrance didn’t notice them.
“What are they doing?” asked Jess.

*Making sure no one gets out alive, thought Will.*

“Well fuck them.”

Jack chuckled. “In a sense, isn't that what we're about to do?”

Jess didn’t answer. Above the roar of the flames she could still hear screams from the apartments. The thought that people could be trapped inside – that to leave the building would only mean death at the hands of these mudfuckers – pissed her off. She hated bullies, always had. She'd never tell Jack, but more than a few of the assholes who had made fun of him in school ended up in the hospital thanks to her. He never defended himself, so she had to step up and do it for him. And now Rita’s lackeys thought that they could just walk right into town and do whatever they wanted? Jess was ready to show them just how wrong they were.

*The strange readings from inside the building still worry me, thought Will. Know what it is yet, Green?*

Jack shook his head. *No, sorry. It's just… hotter… somewhere inside the building, but what is so unusual to me is that it's almost as though the point that's hottest keeps moving.*

Jess hardly heard them. Something about the flames in the upper-story windows caught her eye. There was something… inviting about them. Jess tried to shake the idea out of her head. Inviting? Come on. Fire isn't inviting. It kills. But the flames kept dancing, and a small voice inside her head said, “Go. Leap into the fire.” The others were discussing what to do about the mudmen in the street and how to save the people inside the raging inferno. Jess let them talk. The dancing flames were so…

A sudden vision exploded into Jess’ mind. A man in the same red hood that she now wore ran through a forest that was completely ablaze. The man stepped straight through the fire, but it did not hurt him. A familiar creature in golden armor fell from a tree in front of the man and forced him to stop. Goldar grimaced with that jack-o-lantern smile and pointed his sword tip. A jet of flame burst forth and enveloped the man, but he did not move. He didn't even flinch. The fire licked his body and played around his face, but he didn't burn. Goldar lowered his sword and scowled. The Red Ranger turned and reached into a fire playing around the base of the nearest tree. He pulled, and out of the fire came a sword of silver with a red hilt, wreathed in flame just like Goldar's own jagged blade. The fire from which he had pulled faded, and as the Red Ranger leapt headlong at Goldar, so, too, did Jess' vision fade.

She gasped, floored by what she had just seen, and processed what the vision was telling her. She hadn't heard a word of what Will and the others were planning. She didn't need to. In the back of her mind, she felt like she knew what she had to do. She looked back up at the flames eight stories up, and the meaning behind the vision hit her.

Without a word, she charged into the street and leapt clear over the mudmen, eight stories into the air, and headfirst through a veil of smoke that poured from a top-story window. She rolled and came to her feet amid a room of fire and ash.

*Jess! Jack's voice shouted in her mind. Jess! Are you alright? What are you doing!*

Jess rolled her eyes. *Christ, he worries about me more than Christina does… did. God damnit.* She glanced around. Everything, from the sofa to the table and chairs nearby, was in flames.
And they didn't harm her.

_I am immune to fire_, she thought to the others. She heard Jack sigh in relief – only someone as dorky as Jack would actually _think_ a sigh.

Next time how about warning us first, huh? thought Will. How'd you know?

_Hey, Jess shot back, you had your little moment of inspiration when you figured out how to transform. I just had mine, okay?_ 

_I'm coming with you_, thought Jack.

_No! The last thing Jess needed was a cooked brother. _No, don't. I'm the only one who can._ Then it hit her what the lizard-looking thing was on her power coin and her chest. It was a salamander, an animal that, in legends, could live in fire. She almost laughed. _I'm a fucking salamander_, she thought, and too late she realized that the others heard her.

... _Are you sure you're okay?_ thought Jack.

Yes dammit I'm fine, now go kick some ass. I got things covered in here.

Jess turned and shoulder-charged straight through the door that led out to the floor's main hallway. The wooden door crunched and splintered all around her, but all she felt was the strength her suit lent her. Had she tried to do this just as plain old Jess, she'd probably have broken a bone. She knew. It'd happened before.

_Being a Power Ranger was awesome._

The heads up display that played across her vision scanned the floor for vital signs. She noticed the “strange readings” that Jack and Will kept blabbering about were coming from about three stories down, but her first order of business was to make sure that as many people got out of here alive as possible. A fresh scream surfaced on her HUD. It pointed Jess to a room four doors down and on the right. She was at the door in less than a second.

Her suit told her that there was a fire on the other side of the door that averaged about a thousand degrees Celsius. Jess didn't know how hot that was, but it didn’t matter. She broke through the door like it was paper, and a burst of flames enveloped her.

All she felt was a light tickle.

The window on the far side of the apartment was closed, and the smoke had built up to a level that would have blinded anyone not wearing a Ranger suit. Her HUD scanned through the dark cloud and saw two bodies on the floor. One of them wasn't alive. Jess made for the other and saw that it was a small child. It screamed when it saw Jess.

“Don't worry,” said Jess. “I'm here to help.” The girl just screamed again. “Dammit, listen to me! Just shut up and let me help you!” Jess grabbed a chair and flung it at the window, which exploded and showered glass all over the pavement below. The girl backed away on her hands and butt, crying hysterically. “Look kid,” said Jess. “Do you want to get out of here or not?”

“Mommy…” said the girl.

“Mommy's dead,” said Jess. She'd forgotten how much she hated kids. They were so stupid. “Come on. We can get you out of here.”
“No! Not without Mommy!”

Jess was through with bargaining. She grabbed the kid, who took to her favorite pastime of screaming again, and leapt out the window with the little brat flung over her shoulder. They landed with a soft thud, and Jess set the girl down. She told the girl to get clear of the building and that more adults would be with her soon to look after her. As Jess turned and leapt back up to the window, she heard the girl sobbing for her mommy again.

“Damn kids,” Jess muttered. For half a moment, she thought about tossing the mother’s body out to the street so the kid would have her precious mommy back, but not even Jess was that heartless. It sounded like something Rita might do. As she dove up through the window she’d just jumped out of a moment earlier, she felt her heart soften, even if only for a moment. They wouldn’t do as Rita would. They were Power Rangers.

Blue, Jess contacted the others. You good with kids?

I… guess? Why do you ask?

There’s a little girl in the streets. Someone needs to look after her.

You got someone out? asked Will. He sounded surprised. Jess would have to remember to hit him later for not having any faith in her. Good job. We’ll—

Red! Jack cut in. Watch it! That hot spot is moving up the building! It’s coming straight for you!

At being called “Red”, Jess remembered another part of her vision of the old Ranger. She entered the floor's hallway, reached into the flames around her, and felt her grip tighten around something. She pulled, and out of the flames came the same sword she had seen before. “Sweet,” she whispered to herself. The sword gleamed orange as flames danced along the blade.

She looked down at the floor. Sure enough, her HUD showed that the hot spot was moving up the building. She felt the floor shake and heard a rumble below. A quick scan told her that no one else was alive on this floor. She held her sword before her and didn’t retreat when she heard a feral roar from the floor below. Her suit told her that her heart was racing. She told it to shut up.

Red? asked Will. He must have heard the rumble, too.

Jess was about to answer, but at that moment something exploded through the floor at the other end of the hallway and sent debris flying. Jess ducked under a chunk of wood that stuck into the wall behind her. A solid wall of smoke bellowed out from the new hole in the floor, but as Jess watched, something crawled out.

Staring at her with the same fire-eyes that Rita's forces seemed to favor was a living hellhound: a massive beast taller than Jess, with steam bellowing from its nostrils. Smoke streamed from each paw, its entire tail ablaze like some whip of pure fire. There was an intelligence in its eyes that would have sent a lesser man running, but not Jess. The hound bared a set of fangs longer than her arm.

She brandished her sword. “Come on!” she taunted. “Fucking mutt! Try taking on someone who'll fight back!” She'd send this beast back to the hell it came from, and she'd do it for the damned spoiled brat outside who hadn't even thanked Jess for saving her. The hellhound growled and lowered the front of its body to the ground. Jess and Jack had had a dog once. She knew that movement well. The hellhound was preparing to pounce.

Guys, she thought, I found the hot spot.
Chapter 4 – Jack

Jack was worried for his sister. So what else was new. She would leap headfirst into a burning building.

*We can still take these guys,* thought Will after Jess told them that she hadn't yet burned to death. *You ready?*

*Yes,* thought Jack and April together.

Pistols out. Aimed. Fired. Jack’s dad liked to hunt. Sometimes rifles, sometimes shotguns, but compound bows were his favorite. Jack had always been a terrible shot. These pistols were different than a rifle or bow, but the Power more than made up for Jack’s poor aim. Two headshots apiece for the three Rangers before the mudmen even knew what hit them. In the time it took the final eight to turn around, beams of green, white, and blue had ripped them apart, and they crumbled to dust on the apartment's doorstep. Their scattered remains played over the small pile of human bodies around the front door.

*Good work,* thought Will as they dashed to the door.

*This suit's a good shot,* said Jack, which made Will laugh.

They stopped in front of the door. “Open it,” urged April.

Jack didn’t have to be told twice. He yanked on the door's handles and was met with a barrage of screams and, unexpectedly, three arm-blades that swiped wildly through his view. He leapt back in surprise, but the damage had already been done. He felt a blade tear along his right forearm. A wet leg kicked out from the doorway and caught him hard in the chest. He tumbled backward through the air and crashed shoulder-first into the side of a car on the other side of the road. Pain ripped through the right side of his body, but he pushed it aside.

He got to his feet just in time to see Will punch the mudman's head clean off its shoulders. April had already taken out the other two. Mudman-dust scattered from where she had stood a moment before, but she had already pushed into the building to see to the people trapped there. Still wincing, Jack ran back across the road.

The glow of firelight from the street cast their shadows down the length of the hall, which thankfully contained no fire and little smoke. Seven humans, some with burns on their arms and legs and most dressed in their pajamas, huddled against the walls.

“What's going on?” asked one of the men. “You… aren't one of them.”

“The city is under attack,” Will answered. “Find a building that has not been burned and hide there. I'm sorry, but that's the best we can do.”

One by one the humans stood and looked past the Rangers to the street. The man who had spoken first was also the first to step out of the building. He moved slowly, and he nursed a badly-burned arm.

“Th-thank you,” he stuttered as he led the people out of the building. “Who are you?”
“We're the Power Rangers,” said Will, though that only seemed to confuse the poor man.

*Blue.* It was Jess. *You good with kids?*

*I… guess? Why do you ask?*

*There's a little girl in the streets. Someone needs to look after her.***

Their HUDs indicated the location Jess meant. April sprinted around the building to take care of the girl. Jack scanned the building to see where Jess was.

*You got someone out?* Will asked her. Jack tried not to laugh at the surprise in Will's voice. Jack knew Jess' heart. He knew there'd be more people saved by his twin sister before the night's end. *Good job. We'll—*

*Red!* Jack cut in. His scan had picked up something unusual. *Watch it! That hot spot is moving up the building! It's coming straight for you!***

Jess didn't respond immediately, but Jack knew that she never did what you wanted her to. She worked on her terms, and she’d respond when she damn well pleased.

April came around the corner of the building with a young girl in her arms. The girl was sobbing. *I think her mother's dead,* April thought. The pain in April's “voice” surprised Jack. Maybe April had a better relationship with her mother than Jack did, not that that was saying much.

*“Emma!” cried one of the apartment dwellers. The woman ran to April and lifted the girl out of her hands. She held the girl close and whispered in her ear. “Emma's my niece,” the woman explained to the Rangers. “Her family lived on the top floor. We thought they’d—”***

*“Her mother didn’t make it,” said Will. “I'm very sorry.”* 

Tears welled in the woman's eyes. “My sister… Thank you for saving Emma. Our family is in your debt.” The woman and the others fled down the street and disappeared around a corner. Just as the trio turned back to the apartment building, the upper floors rocked as if there was an earthquake.

*Red?* asked Will.

Someone cried out from a window on the seventh story and then leapt. Jack and April laid down their meshwork of light under the man's fall. Even after he had landed safely, his eyes were wide and sweat poured down his face. “Monster!” he shouted. He babbled incoherently as he pulled himself off the meshwork and ran away in a random direction.

*“Monster?” asked Will.***

*Guys, thought Jess. I found the hot spot.***

*What is it?* Will asked. An ear-splitting roar more or less answered that for him.

*“We need to get up there and help,” said April.*

*“We can't take the heat like she can,” said Will. “Until we extinguish the fire there's no way we can get to her.”***

The building shook again. Something crashed against a wall on the top floor. Jess graced their thoughts with a creative flurry of swear-words.
“I think I have an idea,” said April. She ran to a fire hydrant nearby and gave it a hard kick with her heel. Its top exploded off and sent a steady geyser into the air. April grabbed what was left of the hydrant and bent it so that the water blasted toward the apartment building. When her hand touched the water, she froze for a moment, much in the same way as Jack had seen the others do when they experienced one of the Powers' visions. Suddenly April gasped and thrust her arms forward. To Jack's surprise, the water flying through the air turned in the direction April intended.

“Alright,” said Will, “didn’t see that one coming.”

April aimed the water at one window after another until it looked like fire in the bottom story was under control. Just as Will and Jack were about to charge in to begin helping others trapped inside the building, part of the upper-story wall exploded. Something tumbled through the air and crashed into the pavement. That something leapt back to her feet, her red eyes blazing and – Jack did a double-take – a flaming sword clenched tight in her hand. Jess leapt straight back through the hole she'd just been thrown out of, and she didn't answer when Jack tried to ask her if she needed help.

“They're going to bring the building down if they keep that up,” said Will. He beckoned toward the building. “Come on! We gotta hurry!”

Jack wasn't about to argue.

While April stayed on water duty, Will and Jack sprinted into the apartment and scanned for life. The upper stories shook from Jess’ fight with the monster. Whatever she was fighting roared again, making the building shake dangerously. Jack knew that Will was right – they had precious few moments to find survivors before the building collapsed.

The two took off down different hallways, but while April's water had helped, the scene still looked grim. Jack's scans picked up way more dead bodies than living. Some burned, some cut down by mudmen, it hardly mattered. The Rangers hadn't gotten there in time to save them all. But we can still save the ones who are left, he thought.

Jack turned and charged through a door to find a woman unconscious from the smoke. He scooped her into his arms, dove through the window, and set her down across the street, near where April bent the water to her will. She nodded at Jack as he set the woman down.

I'll keep an eye on whomever you find, she thought.

Thanks.

Back inside, things became a blur of hallways, doors, terrified people, charred bodies with their clothes burned into their flesh, and one cat who looked more pissed off than scared. Jack had no idea how long he and Will worked, or how long Jess fought the beast on the upper stories. It was like his whole life had become flames, screams, shaking walls. Find a person. Pick them up. Run them out of the building. Run back in. Repeat. He lost track of how many times his suit caught on fire.

Jack set an old man down on the pavement just as Will ran out of the building with two small boys slung over either shoulder. April's water jet now reached to the top story, where Jess and the monster raged on. They hadn't heard from her in some time, but a quick scan showed that the Red Ranger still stood strong.

I think this is the last of them, Will thought as he set the children down. Jack looked at the crowd that he and Will had gathered from the building. So many faces reflected in the fire. That cat eyed him from the arms of a teenage girl.
A massive quake, this one larger than any of the previous rumblings caused by Jess’ fight. Careful! April thought. Jack looked up just in time to see the building’s upper two stories collapse in a great cloud of dust.

“Red!” the three Rangers on the ground yelled. No response.

Red! Jack thought. Jess! Come on, answer me!

There was the sound of metal straining, but for now, at least, the building did not fall.

Rangers, Zordon’s voice cut in. There are several reinforcements headed your way. I believe the people you have just liberated were to be slaves. A battalion of Rita’s mudmen are almost at your location, but be wary: they bring with them an armored vehicle. You must get the humans out of there. I am sending you coordinates for an area of town that should be safe.

Will swore. Red’s down, Zordon, he thought. Do you really expect us to leave her?

Have faith, Rangers.

Chapter 5 – Ewan

The Yellow Ranger tore across the rooftops of Cedar Grove with unbelievable speed. Zordon had teleported him to the edge of downtown: apparently, any closer to his fellow Rangers and he would have risked alerting Rita. Ewan figured Zordon was just punishing him for not choosing Rangerhood from the start.

As Ewan bounced from one rooftop to another, he felt an overwhelming urge to open his arms wide like a pair of wings, silly as it sounded. He fought against it for the first few miles, but a poorly-calculated jump from one building to another that – surprise! – was now just a pile of rubble sent him into a panic, and he opened his arms.

An extra webbing of cloth unfolded from the bottom of his arms and connected to his thighs, turning his armor into a wingsuit. He glided to the streets without making a sound, celebrated his good fortune and good looks with a silent fist pump, and leapt back to the rooftops. The Superman theme song played in his head, and he happily hummed along.

Zordon had given him the other Rangers’ location on his heads-up display and even provided him with some picture-in-picture action. In the top-right of his vision he could see some of what Jess saw. From the looks of it, she was fighting a huge dog on fire… with a sword.

Where the fuck did she get a sword? he wondered. Do we all get swords?

He leapt from a building and saw a much taller one a short distance away. It had a huge flag pole sticking out sideways from its roof. Letting the suit take over – since he had no idea what the hell he was doing – he reached for his belt, grabbed a thin wire, slung it at the flagpole, hooked its other end to his belt, held his arms open, and held on for dear life as the wire retracted, pulling him with incredible speed toward the flag pole. Just before he would have slammed chest-first into metal, the wire unslung itself and retreated to his belt. He flew over the flagpole and high into the sky, using his wingsuit to steer himself toward his friends. When he dipped too low, he repeated the wire trick on whatever high building he could find.
It may not have been faster than running and jumping, but damn it felt cool to glide over the city. The one benefit to the fires below Ewan was the thermals he could catch. The hot air that arose from each fire propelled him even higher. He didn't even come close to touching the ground for miles.

Something broke the transmission of Jess' view. Ewan hadn't been watching it, but he had to hope that the worst hadn't happened.

Yellow Ranger, said Zordon. You must hurry. The others need your help.

Maybe you should have thought about that before you plopped me down on the other side of the city, Z-Man.

Oh for the love of all things artificial, Alpha's voice said inside Ewan's hood. If the Spirit Power hadn't chosen you I'd kill you myself.

Suck it, Terminator. You're stuck with me.

Not if you die.

Ewan touched down on the edge of a tall building overlooking the Rangers' location. An entire apartment block had collapsed on itself. Jess' marker put her location right in the middle of the rubble, which, even as Ewan watched, began to smolder. From his left, coming toward the building, was a massive contingent of mudmen, and behind them, some sort of hovering tank with several cargo cars linked behind it like a train. Ewan's vision zoomed in and scanned the cars. There were humans inside.

Slavers, he realized. His mother might be in there.

“Hurry!” someone shouted. He looked down to his right and found the rest of his friends. Though he had never seen the others in their Ranger uniforms, he knew which one was which. April somehow still looking sexy in blue, Jack and Will looking as intimidating as Ewan did in their green and white, respectively. The three of them led a large group of battered and burned civilians away from the slavers, but they were slow. Too many people were injured. The slavers would catch up to them soon, and with so many civilians around, Ewan wasn't so sure that he and his friends would prevail.

So he thought of the only thing that seemed logical. He decided to attack the slavers by himself.

He turned and ran where the slavers were coming, and as he did he noticed for the first time that his footfalls made no sound at all. Light as the wind, he thought. Then it hit him that, instead of attacking them head-on as he'd so recklessly planned, perhaps some stealthy harassment might be more effective. He ran until he was behind the column of mudmen, then he dropped into the street. Not a single mudman looked behind them. It was only a matter of walking right up to the nearest one and giving its head a quick twist on its neck. The mudman dropped to the ground and disintegrated into ash. Ewan repeated the process on the next, and the next, until he came across two who stood side-by-side. He grabbed either side of each one's head and rammed the two together, but this made a sickening blop! sort of noise that echoed across the street. The nearest mudmen spun to face him, their arms morphing into blades and clubs as they inched closer.

Ewan waved merrily. “So long, fucktards!” he said. He reached into his belt, withdrew a small pellet, and threw it to the ground. A yellow cloud of smoke enveloped him and the mudmen. He leapt high into the air and sailed over to the nearest rooftop.

The entire line of slavers stopped. A mudman barked orders in a strange tongue. Ewan peeked over the edge of the building and saw the mudmen fanning out from the tank-train in a wide circle. He'd
stopped the caravan, but now it'd be next to impossible for him to get to the vehicles and set the
slaves free. He wasn't sure what he'd planned on happening, but this wasn't it.

A massive boom jolted Ewan to his feet. The tank was firing its gun at the buildings around it to try
to lure him out. It fired again, and a building on the other side of the street came down in a cloud of
dust. It'd tear down the whole block in no time if Ewan didn't do something.

He leaned over the edge and yelled, “Hey!” The tank's gun whirled faster than Ewan could have
imagined and fired a shot straight at him. Ewan arched backward and felt the projectile miss him by
mere inches. He stood back up and leapt away from the building before the tank brought it down. He
opened his wings and sailed straight over the mudmen and their tank, which fired a wild shot up at
him that missed by a wide margin. Ewan landed on a building on the other side of the road, no closer
to figuring out what in the hell to do but at least wasting more time to let his friends escape.

Then something down the street let out a sound unlike anything Ewan had heard before, as if some
demon made of pure metal had just screamed at the top of its lungs while running its claws down a
chalkboard. The commotion from the mudmen stopped. Even the tank stopped firing. Everyone
looked down the street, toward the collapsed apartment block.

A jet of flame exploded out of the rubble, arched through the air, and landed in the street before
taking off toward the slavers at an impressive rate. As it got closer, Ewan saw that it was the flaming
dog he had seen through Jess' eyes, and Jess herself sat on top of it, her sword buried to its hilt in the
hound's back. It screamed and tried to buck her off, but she held fast. As it ran up the road, it leapt
back-first into the side of a building to crush Jess between itself and the building's side, but she
would not let go. She twisted the sword, and the hellhound turned in the same direction and ran
straight for the tank, which began to fire. Jess twisted the hellhound clear of the first shot, and then
the second and third, until the hound smashed headlong into the tank's gun and sent Jess flying. As
she spun in midair and began firing pistol blasts at the mudmen around her, Ewan leapt from his
rooftop perch and did the same. Beams of red and yellow crossed in the air that quickly grew thick
with mudmen-dust. When Jess landed atop one of the cargo cars, Ewan landed right in front of her.

“Fuck!” she cried.

“I hope that wasn’t an invitation,” Ewan grinned.

“Hmph. 'Bout time you got your pussy-ass out here. Nice outfit.”

“Likewise. The skirt almost makes you look like a woman.”

Jess grabbed Ewan by the shoulders and threw him headlong off the car. He twisted like the expert
diver he was and smashed both feet into the chest of the mudman Jess was aiming for. Ewan
backflipped off the mudman and stuck a perfect landing.

“Next time warn me!” Ewan shouted. Jess jumped into a crowd of mudmen on the other side of the
caravan. Ewan hardly had time to think before he was mobbed himself.

_Do you hear that?_ asked Jess. _It sounds like… “It's a Small World”. The fuck? Where is that coming
from? Is Rita trying to torture us?_

Ewan laughed. _Part of the curse of being me_, he thought back. He changed the tune to Ozzy
Osborne’s “Crazy Train.” It felt appropriate, given the circumstances. _Always a song on my mind!_

_And nothing else. Jesus Christ this is going to be a long night._

Ewan was hardly aware of the fight. A mix of Will's tae kwon do lessons and the innate knowledge
in the Ranger armor drove Ewan's actions. He dropped into the splits just as five mudmen attacked from all sides. He punched hard and broke the knees of two mudmen on either side of him, then he grabbed two ankles and yanked both counter-clockwise so that he spun like a helicopter. The bodies of the two mudmen he had grabbed crashed into the two mudmen whose knees were broken. The momentum from the spin let Ewan roll onto his back and up into a handstand. While upside-down, he kicked the fifth mudman hard in the face and then shoved off the ground to land feet-first on the shoulders of another nearby. He twisted, and the mudman's head twisted with him. He fell through the mudman's disappearing body. Seven more mudmen sprinted toward him.

“Fuck yeah,” he said.

Ewan saw the tank turn its gun toward him. The hellhound's ass was still just visible, poking out from the end of the gun. Ewan was afraid he knew what the tank was about to try. Sure enough, the tank aimed. Fired.

Just as it shot, Ewan leapt straight into the air. The hellhound-missile rocketed right through where he'd stood a moment earlier and bounced along the pavement before crashing through the glass of a coffee shop some ways behind the caravan.

Ewan landed atop the gun. “I liked that place!” he shouted. He fired his pistol straight down and through the tank's hull. Sparks flew from the tank, and the gun began to spin wildly on its axis. Ewan could hear shouting from inside the tank, so he shot again and again, each time destroying more wiring. The tank's gun bucked under him; it had fired a shot of its own. The surprise gave one of the tank's pilots time to reach up and knock Ewan off the tank. He hit the ground, and the tank – along with the cars attached to it – tore down the street.

“Shit!” Ewan shouted. “Jess, we gotta move!”

Don’t use names, you asshole.

Ewan groaned. More rules to follow. Fine. Ginger Ranger, we gotta move!

He ran down the street after the hovering train, but it was clearly faster than he was. Flustered, he leapt to the building tops and tracked the train with his HUD. It snaked through the streets ahead. If he was lucky, the winding turns might slow it down enough for him to catch up. He raced along the buildings, leaping over streets, past buildings aflame, totally unaware of another, smaller something that also chased the train through the road. Finally, the train's wild ride brought it under Ewan's path. He dove from the building, but just before he landed atop the caravan, the train took a new sudden turn, and Ewan smashed into its side.

He barely held on to a thin rail along the train's wall. The train turned down an alleyway. The pilot must have seen Ewan, for it steered the vehicle to the right to scrape its sides – and the pesky Power Ranger – along the buildings. Ewan pulled with all his might and sent himself flying onto the top of the train just as metal screeched against the building. Ewan stayed low on the roof to avoid being seen. It must have worked, since the train steered back into the middle of the alleyway and slowed down.

As Ewan crept along the top of the linked slave cars, the caravan left the alleyway and turned left, straight toward where Ewan knew Will and the others were headed. If he didn't do something soon, the other Rangers would have to try to fight a tank away from a group of unarmed civilians.

The tank's gun swiveled and fired a shot to Ewan's left. To his surprise, Jess was back atop the hellhound, still steering the beast with her sword in its back. The pilot had seen her, but the damage from Ewan's attack had made the gun unstable. For every shot that fired, it looked like two or three
I got this. Ewan thought to Jess.

_I got this_, Ewan thought to Jess. The tank fired again, and again Jess and the hellhound dodged. _Hurry it up; I can't distract the bastard forever._

Ewan hadn't even realized that that was what she was doing. Feeling some gratitude – but certainly not willing to tell her that – Ewan ran along the cars until, at last, he stood atop the final car. Some kind of hitch connected this car to the back of the tank. If he could somehow cut it…

He pulled out his pistol and fired at the link. The shot bounced off. _I need your sword!_ he thought frantically. They were almost on top of Will and the others.

_It's on fire, you idiot! You can't touch it!_

_Then get your ass over here and cut it!_

Jess climbed to her feet on top of the hellhound, still clinging to the sword lodged in its back. _Jump to the tank as soon as it fires_, she thought.

_Why?_

_Just be a man and take an order, god dammit!_

The tank fired. Ewan and Jess leapt into the air at the same time. Jess slid her sword out the hellhound's back as she leapt. The tank's shot blasted the hound into a million fiery pieces. Ewan could see through the holes in the tank's top as he fell. The pilot had no idea he was coming. Jess landed on the first car and sliced the link clean off. She and the cars slowly began to fall away behind the tank.

Ewan landed inside the cockpit. Two pilots stared at him, dumbfounded. He punched through the chest of one, but the other grabbed him and threw him against the panels. His arm twisted – it was still inside the other's chest, after all – and his vision burst with light and pain. His muscles convulsed from the electricity coursing from the tank through his body. The mudman pulled him away from the console and slammed his head into it again. He felt like his skull was about to burst. He kicked at the mudman, whose grip loosened.

Ewan pulled himself away from the tank's controls and wrestled with the mudman until he had the bastard pressed up against the panel. Ewan noticed the tank's monitor showing that the civilians were hardly a block ahead of them.

“Anyone ever tell you you literally look like a shit with arms and legs?” Ewan asked. He threw the mudman as hard as he could against the side of the tank. The control panel exploded around him. Ewan felt the tank spin sideways and begin to roll. He and the mudman bounced from one side of the tank like they were in a washing machine. Round and round they went, sparks and metal and dust and limbs flying in all directions. The lights inside the tank went out. Then the rolling stopped. There was a screeching of metal scraping along concrete, and then silence.
April, Will, and Jack shielded the survivors of the apartment fire from the tank bouncing toward them. They braced themselves, ready to stop this thing from rolling right over the civilians, but the tank skidded to a halt on its side hardly a foot in front of the Rangers. They could see bodies through a hole that had been blasted into the tank’s roof. Strangely, the hints of a song began to play in April’s mind. She didn’t know it, but it sounded like it was from the 80s. Will’s pistol was in his hand as he approached.

“I think I’m only wearing a Speedo under this suit,” someone groaned from inside. He sounded dazed, but it was clearly Ewan, the diver friend of the others. April breathed a sigh of relief. Will pulled Ewan out of the tank and clapped him on the back.

“Good to see you in uniform,” said Will.

“Yeah, well, you know. Someone had to get out here and save your asses.”

Will tapped the side of his own head. “I take it you’re the reason why I’m listening to Rick Astley’s “Never Gonna Give You Up” right now?”

Ewan gingerly touched a rib and groaned. “Yeah. Kinda got Rick-rolled back there.”

I present to you the Yellow Ranger, Zordon cut in. Holder of spirit. You will need his tenacity if you hope for any chance against Rita’s forces. Ewan is strong and swift like the wind, and his soul is unbreakable. Without him, the Rangers will lose sight of what it means to be human and free.

“You've been waiting for a while to say that, haven't you?” asked Ewan.

... Maybe.

“You take down that tank all by yourself?” Will asked.

“No.”

The Rangers looked past the tank, where a line of hovering cargo containers slowly drifted toward them. Jess stood atop the first car, her fiery sword still in hand. She hopped down and gently pushed against the cars until they were stopped. “Get these open.”

The crowd of apartment-dwellers murmured amongst themselves as the Rangers ran to help Jess open the containers. One by one Jess sliced the locking mechanism and the others pulled the doors open. Each container held the same scene: women and children, battered and bruised almost beyond recognition, cowering away from the doorways when they opened. A few of the braver apartment refugees joined the Rangers in coaxing the slaves out of the containers. In all, Jack said he counted seventy-three people locked away.

“Bring them here,” said the man who had been the first to trust the Rangers and leave the burning apartment. “I'm a paramedic. I don't have any supplies, but I might be able to do something.”

“Thank you,” said Will. “You've been very helpful. What's your name?”
“Jason Scott,” the man said. They shook hands.

Zordon, thought Will, is there anything we can do to help these people?

You have already done them a great service in saving their lives.

They're banged up pretty bad. You should see the burns on this man's arm.

Zordon paused for a moment. Each of your suits contains a built-in supply of healing salve for injuries such as those already sustained by the Green, Yellow, and Red Rangers. As a safety precaution I provided you with an extra supply of healing salve, White Ranger, but I do not recommend that you give it to these people. They are alive, and keeping the salve for yourself may ultimately be the deciding factor between life and death for you or one of your teammates.

Will didn't even hesitate. He found the right pouch on his belt and handed it to Jason. The other Rangers supported the White Ranger's action through their silence. I'm tired of you telling us we can't save people, thought Will.

“Here, Mr. Scott,” he said aloud. “This should help with cuts and burns.”

“So what did you do?” April asked. She didn’t mean it as an accusation; she just wanted to understand. Naturally, she second-guessed herself as soon as she thought the question. What if he thought she didn’t agree with him? What if the others thought she didn’t want to help these people get better? She wilted at the idea and berated herself for saying anything.

That man is a leader, Will thought. He was clearly upset, but April had a feeling that he was angry at Zordon, not her (not that that stopped the little voice in her head, of course). He'll take care of all these people when we leave, which needs to be soon. We can't let the police try to take back headquarters without us. If I get hurt and we could have used that extra salve, then I'll take my scar knowing that one of these people doesn't have to live with one. This is the reality we signed up for when we became Rangers.

April was surprised at his willingness to sacrifice himself, but in her heart she knew that Will was right, and that she absolutely felt the same way.

“Oh fuck,” said Jess. The Red Ranger stood frozen in place as a pretty girl about their age hopped out of the container, her face just as grimy as all the other slaves.

Christina, thought Jack. Are you going to talk to her?

Who's Christina? April asked.

Like fuck I am, thought Jess. She crossed her arms and glared at the girl as she shuffled past. Christina met her eyes, squeaked, and ran.

Ex-girlfriend, thought Jack.

Bitch, thought Jess.

The Green Ranger cast April a sideways glance. Ex-girlfriend... as of about two hours ago.

Jess spun her sword, creating a thin ring of fire. Is it too late to un-save her?
One by one the freed slaves joined with the apartment crowd, and Jason the paramedic saw to each of them in turn. Even the smallest amount of salve from Will's bag had a clear effect; eyes brightened, cuts and bruises disappeared, people gained a fresh bounce in their step. Jason's focus and determination were incredible. Though his left arm was still burned and blistering, he saw to everyone else first. If there was no salve left, he'd be left with that arm. He was prepared to make the same sacrifice that Will was.

April dipped a finger into the pouch and slid the salve over Jason's arm. He looked at her, surprised. “You need some, too,” she said.

Jason opened his mouth to protest, then thought better of it. “Thank you,” he said quietly. April nodded and stood to let him continue his work.

As each slave shuffled past the destroyed tank, April couldn't help but notice that Ewan, now leaning on Will's shoulder, stared intensely at each and every one as they passed. When Jess and Jack returned behind the last slave, Ewan swore and sat down on the tank's gun.

“What's wrong?” asked Will.

“Nothing.”

“Nuh-uh,” said Jess. “You don’t get to mope after what I just had to go through.”

“Shut it,” Ewan growled.

“I thought Zordon sent you home,” said Jess. “Why didn't you just stay there?”

“See, you know what’s funny about that?” Ewan laughed, but there was no joy in his voice. “He didn’t send me home. Maybe if he had, like I'D FUCKING ASKED—” he yelled the last bit at the sky, as if Zordon was God, “then perhaps I’d have stayed there like a good little boy.”

“Where'd he send you?” asked Will.

“Albuquerque.”

“Bullshit.” Will said it like it was a common thing for him to say to Ewan, like they often played this game of lies and call-outs. April had to remember that these four were friends outside of Rangerhood and had been for some time. She had to remember that she was the new one, that her family had hardly been in Cedar Grove for a week. “I know you,” continued Will (“see?” said that voice in April’s head. “You’re an outsider.”), “Something happened, didn’t it?” Ewan looked away. “Hey,” said Will, “what happened? He send you to the university? Is it under attack or something?”

“Zordon didn’t send me to the dorm,” Ewan grumbled. “He sent me to my mom's, the bastard.” He stood up and swore, holding his ribs. Rolling around inside a tank must have hurt. His cloth-and-leather armor had small tears and grease stains all over it. April guessed that the suit's healing effects could only work so quickly. She realized that she was now the only Ranger to have avoided injuries so far. She hoped it would stay that way. She had a bad feeling that it wouldn’t. “You wanna know what happened?” Ewan asked. “Nothing. Nothing at all. You know why? Because no one was there. From Elm all the way to fucking Circle Street. No one was there. They've been taken, man. Everyone.”

April's heart skipped a beat. “Elm to Circle?” she repeated. “Your mom lives in West Riverside?”
“She did, until the fucking slavers took her.”

In an instant, everything April knew was turned upside-down. Ewan's mother lived in West Riverside.

And so did April's.

Her mother had stayed at home when she went to the lake; she had to work early the next morning, even though it pained her to not be able to see April dive. Her younger twin sisters had been trying to convince Mom to let them go to some party, but when April left for the lake her mother had still been giving them an emphatic “no”. No doubt the twins had snuck out, but had they left before the slavers had reached the neighborhood?

“Oh God,” she whispered. Now she understood why Ewan had been looking at each of the slaves: he had been looking for his mother. She scanned the crowd for any sign of her mother or Olivia or Cassie.

“What is it?” asked Will.

April debated telling them. They didn't know her. The small voice in her head told her that no one would care. But… these were her teammates. They trusted each other with their lives now. Still, she didn’t want to worry them, and they might not care, anyway.

“Nothing,” she said. “That’s just… a big neighborhood, right? Rita’s army must be huge.”

Silence followed. Great, April thought to herself, now you've gone and scared everyone. Awesome job, April. Real team player there.

“You think our parents…” Jack said to Jess.

“Slavers wouldn't want them,” Jess answered, but she didn't sound convinced.

No one said anything. What was there to say? In the back of her mind April had known that her family could be in danger and that she was out here to protect them, but now it was real. Now her family, and Ewan's family, and Jack and Jess' family, and maybe even Will's were gone, ripped from their homes to be made servants of a mad ten-thousand-year-old witch. The threat was real. They weren't just fighting for ideals any longer.

Ewan was the first to break the silence. April was beginning to understand that the man loved to hear himself talk. “Jess… Where the fuck did you get a sword?”

The sounds of a man and a woman yelling turned their attention. The five Rangers drew their pistols and aimed at the far street corner… where a pair of police officers appeared in a dead sprint. Both were men, but as they got closer April realized that the skinnier of the two had an impressively high-pitched scream.

“Run!” the larger policeman bellowed. “Save yourselves!”

Will dashed forward. “What's wrong?” he called to them as he approached.

The two officers froze. Their faces would almost be comical if the situation hadn't been so dire. They reminded April of the old Laurel and Hardy shows her mom liked to watch.

“Bulky,” said the thinner one, “weren't the monsters behind us?”
“Quiet, Skull,” said the larger man. “Make no sudden movements. They can't see us if we don't move. They can probably smell fear, so don’t be afraid!"

“C-can they smell pee-pee?” whimpered Skull.

Jess groaned.

Hey, thought Ewan. I know them: Lieutenants Bulkmeier and Skullovitch. They're campus police. And they're morons.

Campus police? thought Jess. Yeah. Explains where you've met them before. She holstered her pistol and flung her sword at the ground, where it disappeared in a bright little poof of fire. Officer Skullovitch squealed and jumped into Officer Bulkmeier's arms. Bulkmeier dropped him immediately and began wiping his arms on his comrade’s uniform, gagging loudly and smacking Skullovitch on the head.

Ewan holstered his pistol. What can I say? I live fast and loose.

“Officers,” Will tried again. “We're here to help you. What are you running from?”

“We are close to police headquarters,” April realized. “They probably came from there. Zordon, what's the latest at the station?”

It appears as though one of Rita’s enforcers has arrived outside the building, Zordon answered. Your assault on the slave train, while admirable, has caused a stir in Rita's forces. I believe you will no longer have the element of stealth on your side. They know resistance is out there, but I do not believe they yet know that there are Rangers.

“Bulk, Skull,” said Jason. April hadn't even noticed him walk up next to her. Did everyone know everyone in this city? “These people are friends. They're fighting against the monsters.”

“Careful Skull,” said Officer Bulkmeier. “They've brainwashed the geek.”

We don't have time for this, thought Jess. Can we just tie them up and go help the real police?

Jason seemed to understand the Rangers' situation. “Don't worry guys,” he smiled. “I go way back with these two. I'll take care of this. You go save Cedar Grove.”

Chapter 2 – Jack

The situation looked worse than the Rangers had feared. Just at the moment when they reached the edge of the roof overlooking police headquarters, a large creature with a flaming sword lopped off the heads of two police officers.

Who the fuck is that? thought Jess. The creature was large and hulking, with a pale, thick armor of bone that stood on the outside of a burned, blackened body. Its ribs were twisted into the image of a grotesque face with flaming eyes, its scapulae pulled up and over its shoulders like protective pads. And its face… That skeletal grin never left its face, and its eyes were deep pits of ash under a charred helmet from some ancient army.

His name is Rito, said Zordon. One of Rita’s most dangerous lieutenants.
Rita and Rito, thought Ewan. That’s confusing.

They are brother and sister, said Zordon.

Their parents were dicks.

Behind Rito was a massacre: mudmen storming through officers, whose bullets went straight through the monsters’ bodies without causing the slightest bit of damage. Many of the cops held their ground and fought hand-to-hand, but few of them lasted long. The station itself was remarkably intact except for a large hole blasted in its side and a pillar of smoke coming from somewhere toward its rear. Several of the street lights were still on, though they flickered as though they might wink out at any moment.

Damn, thought Will, I can’t scan the building. There could be hundreds inside.

Something’s jamming us, thought Jack. Zordon had said that the whole affair with the tank-train had told Rita that there was resistance in the city, so Jack wasn’t surprised to see that their scans were blocked. As an extra precaution, Zordon had asked them to refer to each other by their colors instead of names – even in think-speak. Jack had to wonder: did Rita have the ability to hack into their thoughts? The idea disturbed him more than he cared to let on.

Those officers are dying, thought Will. We have to go! He braced for a jump, but the Red Ranger grabbed his shoulder.

Last time you wanted a plan, thought Jess. Remember?

Last time there weren’t people getting killed right in front of us. Come on! He shrugged her off and leapt for the street.

What? thought April. No! We can’t just…

He just did, thought Jess.

“Our dear Willie has a bit of a shield complex,” said Ewan. The others shushed him, not that it mattered with the sounds of battle beneath them. Will landed in the street and started ripping through the mudmen. Rito turned and stalked toward him, laughing as he dragged his sword tip through the asphalt with each thunderous step.

We’ll keep them occupied out here, Jack thought quickly. You three get inside. Yellow knows a back entrance to the station, and Red and Blue can help with any fires. Slip in while Rito’s distracted and disrupt Rita’s forces before they get to the armory. If worse comes to worse, blow it up. We can’t let her gain access to all that SWAT gear.

You sure you’ll be alright? April asked.

Jack glanced back at the street, at Rito. He was built just like Goldar. Jack would never forget the pain of that monster’s fist rearranging his face. No, he thought to himself. Then to the others, We’ll be careful. Now go, and be safe. He leapt straight for Rito, hoping that his suit would be able to make up for all the courage he didn’t feel right now.
“Aaaaaand… here!”

“It’s a vent, jackass.”

“And much like you, Firecrotch, it blows a lot of hot air. April, you go first.”

The Blue Ranger pierced him with those eyes so electric it hurt to look at them. “Me? Aren’t you supposed to lead us in?”

“And so I shall,” Ewan beamed, until he remembered that they couldn’t see each others’ faces. “But this leads to the back of the kitchen’s oven. If it’s on fire, you can cool it down.”

_Cool it down?_ thought April.

“What?” said Ewan. “Can’t you do that? I heard about what you did with the fire hydrant earlier.”

_You just wanna stare at her ass when we crawl in_, Jess thought to him. Ewan suspected that April couldn’t hear this part, which was probably for the better, since Jess was exactly right.

April bent over to pull the grate off the wall. Ewan pointed at the shapely blue butt. _And you wouldn’t?_

Jess rolled her eyes. “Here,” she said, nudging April out of the way. “I’ll go first. Fire doesn’t hurt me, in case you forgot.” She gave Ewan a pointed look, then turned to April. “You bring up the rear.” She dove into the vent.

“Um,” said April, “okay.”

_Bring up the rear_, Ewan thought to Jess. _Did you just cock-block me with a pun?_

Ewan dropped to his hands and knees and crawled in after Jess and her red leather ass. Ewan had never known why this vent was so huge. It seemed like a pretty major design flaw for a police station. The building was really old though, so maybe it was just a product of a simpler, more innocent age? Ewan tried not to give it much thought, as he did with most of life.

He’d learned of this handy little spot a few years ago, from a flasher, of all people. The guy had once crawled through and flashed half the police force during lunch. One cop, he had stated proudly, had thrown up at the sight of his junk bouncing so close to the mashed potatoes. Ewan himself had never used the secret vent – really, fleeing from the cops was more trouble than it was worth, especially when friends like Will and Jack were always there to post your bail.

“So, we give Rita the beatdown of the century,” Ewan said aloud, “we’re gonna be god-damned heroes. We could ask for anything we wanted – literally anything – and people would give it to us.”

_We’re not supposed to reveal our identities to anyone_, April reminded him. _And we’re supposed to communicate in think-speak as much as possible so that Rita’s forces don’t hear us._

_Gorgeous and a know-it-all, huh?_ thought Ewan. For him, flirting was all about knocking a girl off-balance and catching her, so you come out looking like a hero. Worked every time…

…Unless the girl had a pitbull for a friend. _Blue, don’t listen to him_, thought Jess. _He doesn’t give a shit about any of this. He’d rather get into your pants than fight for the city._

Ewan blushed. Jess was throwing off his game at every turn. Well, no choice now but to lean into the punch. _What can I say?_ he thought as casually as possible. _I’m a lover, not a fighter._
April stammered. Even in a thought, her panic was palpable. She just got cuter every second. I don’t…

Look what you’ve done, Jess, thought Ewan. You’ve made our new friend uncomfortable—

“Ow fuck!” he shouted. Jess had popped her boot backward and kicked him in the face. He fell on his side, clutching his cheek. Even with his armor, that had really hurt. A red leather glove grabbed his shoulder and yanked him through the last little bit of vent. Turns out, Jess had kicked him just as she had reached the end. She flung him out of the wall and through a nearby table, which crashed spectacularly around him. His suit’s reflexes kicked in, and he rolled on his back and smoothly up into a fighting stance.

Back off, Yellow, warned Jess. April’s face appeared in the vent, half-hidden behind the massive oven which Jess had pushed out of the way.

“Or what?” Ewan said. The two girls shushed him, but he didn’t care. “You saw the power we have. Rita’s forces couldn’t stop us no matter how many mud-fuckers she threw at us! We’re bigger than rock stars! This is, like, the best thing that’s ever happened to any of us!”

The best thing? thought Jess. Let me tell you about the “best thing ever,” because I’m having what you might call a “bad day.” My brother nearly died. I nearly died. My hometown is in flames. My fucking girlfriend just broke up with me—

“Really, no surprise there,” said Ewan.

And now I’m stuck listening to you! Do you care about what we’re doing? Like honestly, seriously care? Would it matter to you if we lost? Because let me tell you, it’d be hard to top the shiftest of a day I’ve had so far, but losing everyone I love because some stupid fuckjob didn’t care might just tip me over the edge!

“I get why you’re the Red Ranger now,” said Ewan. “You’re on your period, aren’t you?”

Jess charged.

They’d had their minor tumbles before. Ewan and Jack had been close friends for years, so naturally Ewan and Jess had interacted, and it often went like this. Usually, though, Jack was there to split them up.

And usually, Jess wasn’t a super-powered warrior of doom.

She crossed the kitchen before Ewan had time to say “fuck you.” He just barely ducked under a punch that probably would have knocked his jaw clear off his face. His hand went to his tool belt and pulled out the grappling hook he had used to fly across the city. With a quick flick he hooked the line around Jess’ punching arm and fired the hook at the opposite wall. The tether retracted, pulling Jess along with it. She crashed hard into the wall. Now it was Ewan’s turn to cross the room at blazing speed. He aimed a flying kick that Jess dodged. Ewan’s foot shattered the concrete and got stuck, leaving him awkwardly hanging sideways. Jess grabbed him by the hood and held him there, staring him down.

Our team doesn’t need someone as flighty as you, she thought.

Flighty? He laughed out loud, just to piss her off. Bitch, you have no idea, but I must say… you are really rocking the puns tonight. She clapped the side of his head with her elbow and dropped him. He swung painfully on his leg and smacked against the wall, where he hung until he managed to pull himself free.
Ewan picked himself up off the floor and dusted himself off. *Lots of help you were,* he thought to the pair of blue eyes peering timidly out from the vent.

*That’s the second time you’ve said that to me,* thought April.

*Maybe you should do something about that.*

*Are you two done fighting now?*

Jess cracked open the doors and peered into the hall. Her back was to him. “Nope!” shouted Ewan. He tackled Jess from behind, and the pair of them crashed through the double-doors. They tumbled together, rolling along the ground and punching each other, the sounds of their fight echoing all around them.

Then someone screamed, and Ewan realized that it wasn’t just their fight he was hearing.

Everywhere he looked, mudmen had the upper hand. Bodies lay everywhere, all of them human. This was the main hall of the police station: a wide, long hallway with windowed doors that led to each department’s main offices. Usually the hall was filled with cops and administrators going about their business, sometimes with a cuffed perpetrator – like yours truly – pushed along in front of them. Now, though, the hall was filled with broken glass, broken bodies, and blood. A shit-ton of blood.

One of the others helped him to his feet. He was about to thank her when a muddy fist collided with his face. He swung wildly, missed, and took another punch to the gut. Then red light ripped through his blurry vision, and the mudman disappeared.

*You are beyond worthless,* thought Jess. *You’re actually hurting us. C’mon, Blue.* The Red Ranger ran down the hall. The Blue Ranger raced nervously past Ewan a second later. With a sigh, Ewan ran after them.

Turns out, there were signs pointing them straight to the armory, and Ewan had forgotten where it was. Jess took a sharp left, and just as Ewan was about to correct her, he noticed the helpful arrow pointing left, next to the big bold word ARMORY. The girls were already around the next corner by the time he entered the corridor.

But by the next turn, he didn’t see where they had gone. This damn place had always been a maze (though admittedly, Ewan was high half the time he was here). Ewan refused to let himself feel worthless. There were still mudmen around. He had to keep up with the girls in case they got in a fight. He was useful. He’d taken down a fucking tank… train… thing.

He took another left. He was pretty sure it was this way.

Up until now, the lights in the station had been sporadic at best. Most of the time it was dark, or lit by fire. But this hall was different. It was near pitch-black, so dark that even his suit’s night vision had trouble piercing the darkness. Ewan pressed forward, ignoring the hairs standing up on the back of his neck, or the sinking feeling that grew in his stomach.

*This is the right way,* he thought. *Has to be.*

He saw a figure ahead: robed, hooded, and obviously female. Looked more like April than Jess.

“Hey,” he said. “Much as I like seeing that ass, I think I’ll take point for a while.”

The figure faded into the shadows. Ewan froze. The room darkened even further. He turned to go back the way he had come, but he couldn’t see an inch in front of his face. He saw no doorway, no
friends, no anything. He tried to run, but now his boots felt like they were made of lead.

A voice whispered something from nearby. He knew that voice. He had heard it in his vision.

Rita Repulsa.

“Come out and fight me!” he shouted to the darkness. The whispering voice chuckled softly. It echoed all around him, as though Rita was everywhere and nowhere at once. “Zordon said you were a sorceress,” said Ewan, “but really, this is just sad. You know we have night vision, right?” He stared in one direction with purpose, hoping that maybe Rita was there and would get spooked by his amazing perception.

“Sorceress?” the voice whispered right in his ear. “Is that what he told you?”

Zordon lies, the voice said in his head. I am a Power Ranger, the same as you.

Something cold and metallic smashed against Ewan’s face, and he fell unconscious.

Chapter 4 – Will

It didn’t take long for Will and Jack to realize that this was not a battle they would win.

If it had just been the mudmen, then maybe, but add in this Rito guy and you had a recipe for disaster. It didn’t help that most of the cops didn’t want to leave. They wanted to stay and fight, and a pair of weird vigilantes in hoods weren’t about to change their minds.

Will couldn’t blame them. He knew what it was like to want to save people. He was pretty sure that was why the Power had chosen him in the first place, and really, he admired their determination, even against such odds.

But that determination meant squat as soon as Rito pointed his sword into the melee and let loose a blast of fire. Mudmen and police alike went up in flames. Will had just enough time to grab the officer closest to him and leap out of the way, the man wrestling him all the while. Will let the man go and stood. Jack was at his side. Mudmen gathered all around them, chuckling to themselves as they let Will’s policeman pass by unharmed. Then suddenly the group parted, and Rito stepped forward.


Don’t answer him, thought Jack.

We’re here to keep him distracted, thought Will.

“You know who we are,” Will said aloud. “Rita’s going to lose just like she did last time.”

“Last time?” Rito scratched his head, which made a squeaky sound that would have been comical if he hadn’t been holding a large sword meant to kill them both. “Last time… let me check my diary.” He pulled a small book from a back pocket and began thumbing through the pages, which disintegrated at the slightest touch. Will figured that it must have been as old as he was. It didn’t take long for Rito to get to the last page. He slammed the book shut. “Nope! My diary doesn’t have
anything about a last time. You must be thinking about another suave, sexy skeleton with a sister hell-bent on destroying the world. By the way, either of you fellas have a pack of cigs? All I have is this lighter.” He held his sword in front of him, and a tiny lighter-sized flame popped out of its tip.

The mudman next to Rito helpfully offered a half-used cigarette, but Rito ignored it. The other mudmen encircling Will and Jack were starting to get restless, but at least the pair of them had drawn enough attention for the police officers to get away safely.

“Speaking of Rita,” said Will, “where is she?”

Rito shrugged. “What am I, my sister’s keeper? She’s probably in her palace painting her nails with the blood of the innocent. No wait, that’s what I do in my spare time. Gotta accessorize somehow, you know?”

We’re not going to get any useful info from this guy, thought Jack.

We just need to keep stalling, thought Will.

I think the mudmen have other plans.

Jack was right; these mudmen were ready to attack, and if Rito kept talking about painting nails, it was going to be soon.

Far behind Rito, street lights flickered and went out entirely, then the next set of lights closer to them, then closer, and closer. The whole block was rolling into darkness, and the dark was headed straight for them. Fast.

The mudmen began chattering to each other in a sloppy, swamp-like sort of language. They began to change their hands into various weaponry: swords, clubs, axes. Rito’s skeletal face kept its grin as the tiny flame extinguished from the tip of his sword.

“Welp,” he said, “guess it’s time to kill you now. I bet you guy’ll make great nail polish.”

Been in worse spots, thought Jack. Will couldn’t imagine what Jack had in mind.

The lights, thought Will.

Jack must have noticed them, too. Three seconds. Two. One.

The wave of blackout hit their block, and all the street lights shut down, casting the street in darkness. Will and Jack leapt apart, throwing themselves into the pile of mudmen and trying to keep away from Rito. Just have to keep them distracted long enough for the others to take the station back, thought Will.

I think the blackout was caused by Rita’s drain-train going by, thought Jack. Must be moving fast. Based on the lights, I calculate at least two-hundred miles an hour.

We’ll take it down soon, promised Will. Right now, we’re needed here.

In Rito’s crosshairs, thought Jack.

Chapter 5 – April
April couldn't see the extra heat that Jess claimed was nearby; she could only assume that Jess' fire-resistant suit was just more adept at picking up something like that than hers was. They had raced through a series of halls all pointing to the armory, but something wasn’t right. She got the strong feeling that they were running in circles, and somehow in the process they had lost Ewan.

Destruction was everywhere: wherever April looked, furniture was sliced, equipment bashed in, bodies lay in bloody pools. Something crunched under her foot. April bent down and found dozens of bullet casings littering the floor. Someone had put up a fight. Nearby, she saw a dead officer still holding the remains of a gun that was cleaved in half. The woman’s trigger finger lay severed next to her.

_They had no chance_, April thought.

Jess didn't respond. April was beginning to understand the other Rangers, but this girl remained something of a mystery to her.

April tried contacting Ewan again, but all she got was silence.

_The jamming’s probably blocking the signal from going that far_, thought Jess. _Thank God._

_I hope you're right. If something happened to him—_

_Then he got what he deserved, flying off the handle like he did._

_He wasn’t the only one_, April thought to herself – at least, she hoped it was just to herself. It was hard to tell sometimes. Didn’t the others have trouble keeping their thoughts to themselves, or was it just her?

At an intersection, Jess turned right when the signs for the armory said to go left. They approached a corner and peeked around its edge. There, down the hall, was a pair of double-doors held closed with iron bars. Flickering light and smoke from the crack between the doors told April that there was a fire on the other side. The door rattled from something hitting it; someone was trapped inside with the fire.

Standing before the doors, however, were eight mudmen with guns and night-vision goggles all trained on the doors to make sure no one escaped.

_Automatic rifles_, thought April. _They must’ve gotten them from the armory._

_Which means we were too late_, thought Jess.

The doors rattled again, and this time someone screamed from behind them.

_We’re not too late to save those people_, thought April.

_Shall we?_

_How about we formulate a plan first._ April noticed a small fire that had broken out in the hallway between them and the mudmen.

Jess hesitated, then thought better of it. _Fine. Thoughts?_

April shared them. Seconds later, the mudmen were surprised to see a flaming sword rip through the hallway and impale itself in one of the mudmen's chests. The other mudmen reeled; the flames from the sword blinded their night-vision goggles and gave the two Rangers the time they needed to sprint
down the hall. Jess slid baseball-style into the crowd, grabbed her sword from the dust, and hacked away. April leapt above her and split-kicked two in the head before grabbing a third's head between her legs. She flung herself back and down so that she ended in a handstand and sent the mudman crashing into another behind her.

One mudman, still blind from the fire of Jess’ sword, fired his rifle wildly through the hallway. April felt a bullet rip through her thigh. She cried out and fell out of her handstand. Jess slashed the gunner and the last two mudmen before kneeling beside the Blue Ranger.

“April!” she shouted. “Hey! You alright?”

No, April thought without meaning to send the thought Jess’ way. She didn't want her teammate to know just how much pain she was in, but it felt like someone had impaled her leg with a white-hot poker and left it there. Her entire thigh burned, and when she tried to move, it was like someone twisted that poker through her muscles and pushed it against her bone. “Aaahh!” she screamed. She fought to get herself under control. “G… get the doors open. I'll be… fine.” Jess didn't move right away. April might have been touched had she not been in so much pain. If her suit had any healing powers, it sure was taking its sweet time with them. “Go!”

Through tears and vision blurred from such intense pain, April watched Jess bash the door open. Smoke poured into the hallway, and so, too, did staggering humans. The barracks beyond the door were almost completely in flames. The officers wouldn't have lasted much longer before suffocating.

Jess reentered the hallway with an unconscious officer in her arms.

That was the armory, thought Jess. Rita’s forces torched it for us. This whole mission was one huge waste of time.

Tell that… to them… thought April.

“I don't know who you are,” said an officer, “but thank you.” Jess grunted at him.

“Now what?” asked a second officer.

“Know any close exits?” Jess asked them. “Front's not an option.”

“Parking lot,” one suggested. The others muttered amongst themselves: some were for it, others against. One still argued for going out the front door. April had to endure a string of swearwords from Jess’ mind that only stopped when the other officers told the guy to shut up.

“Anything other than the parking lot?” asked Jess.

No one could think of another way out.

“Alright then. Blue, you good?”

April fought to control her breathing. Just like diving, she told herself. You can do this. Calm yourself. You’re alright. You’ll survive. You’ll get out of here, and you’ll save your family and everything’s going to be okay.

With help from the officers, April dragged herself to her feet. One offered his shoulder for her to lean on. “Lieutenant Stone, at your service, ma’am,” said the officer. “As far as we’re concerned, you’re a bunch of damned heroes.”

April pulled her pistol from her holster and held on to Lieutenant Stone with her other hand. “Let’s
go,” she said shakily.

The officers led the way. Jess handed her unconscious officer to one of the larger men and withdrew her pistol. She kept to the front of the group, and April and Lieutenant Stone fell toward the back. Most of the fighting in the building had died down now. Patrols of mudmen roamed the halls, several of them wearing parts of police uniforms as some sick gesture of victory. April tried to contact Ewan again, and again she got only silence.

Jess stopped the group at a corner. No one said a word; many of the officers stopped breathing so they wouldn't make a sound. Jess peeked a head around the corner before she motioned for the group to follow.


April was still in too much pain for her senses to be working properly, but now her suit’s vision was playing tricks on her. She glanced behind her and swore that a shadow flickered on the edge of her vision, but when she focused on the spot, she saw nothing. Some of the officers mumbled about getting lost or that they had never seen this hallway before, which confirmed April’s suspicions that something was messing with them.

“Here,” an officer whispered. The group stopped at a pair of closed double-doors. “Parking lot. Can’t open this door from the outside without a key. Usually have guards, but…”

Jess nodded. “Let's go, then.”

The moment she and the officer touched the door handles, a high-pitched scream blasted April’s senses. She turned just in time to see something faintly humanoid bounce from wall to wall down the hallway behind them. It flung something at the group. April shoved Lieutenant Stone away and took the full force of the object in her arm, knocking her hard to the ground. The object ricocheted off her and ripped clean through a water fountain hardly three feet away. Water gushed out of the wall and into the air. When it touched April, a vision of the past shoved its way through her pain.

A woman in a blue dress stood at the base of a waterfall. She was gorgeous, one of the most beautiful women April had ever seen. She smiled warmly as she bent and touched the water like it was an old friend. She let it play through her fingers and around her feet. She looked like she belonged in the water.

There was a rustling sound from nearby. The woman's face changed instantly; upon seeing the monster leap through the underbrush, the woman in blue yelled, “Harmony!” and became the blue Power Ranger. The monster stopped several feet away from her.

“Y… you,” the Blue Ranger said, shocked. She dropped her guard. The being standing before her was the Yellow Ranger, but something was off about her. Her suit bore extra armor that reflected no light. Her eyes burned with an intense yellow, but there was something else behind them, almost as though the Ranger under the yellow hood wasn’t the only one in there.

The Yellow Ranger said nothing. A breeze ruffled the brush around them. The Yellow Ranger appeared to reach into the wind, and a strange curved bow wisped into her hands.

“Why are you doing this?” the Blue Ranger asked. “Serket, what has happened to our team? What has happened to you?”

The Yellow Ranger lifted the bow and aimed it at the Blue Ranger. As she tugged on the string, the breeze encircled her and whirled itself into an arrow of dust and air. The Blue Ranger held her hand
out over the water, and a gleaming trident of silver and sapphire leapt from the pond’s surface.

“Don’t make me do this,” said the Blue Ranger. She pointed the trident at her old friend. “I don’t want to hurt you!”

“Long live Rita Repulsa,” the Yellow Ranger rasped. Her voice was dry and almost lost in the wind, but something about it sent chills down April’s spine.

Pain exploded through April’s mind again, almost making her forget about her vision entirely. Chaos reigned around her: a shadow-person stood just feet away, and behind April, Jess was yelling at the officers to get the hell out of there. The shadow stood motionless, watching April fight back tears from her two wounds.

*Red*, April thought. Speaking was too hard right now. *Get the officers out of here. I got this.*

*Like fuck you do!*

*Red,* April repeated. *They'll need you outside. Do it.*

*No!*

April spun and manipulated the water around her so that it blasted Jess in the chest and sent her flying out into the parking lot. April then adjusted the water jet so that it blasted the doors shut. She turned and faced the shadow, ignoring the pounding on the doors and the throbbing in her arm.

April found her voice, even if she couldn't bring herself to her feet quite yet. “Another of Rita's lackeys?” she asked it.

“You are not fit to speak her name,” the monster said. April was shocked; it had a woman's voice, and a high-pitched one at that.

April balanced herself on her good foot and her good arm and pushed herself up into the air. She landed on her good foot; years of diving and gymnastics helped her stay there. “Why are you here?” April asked. She needed to stall so she could figure out what this new vision was telling her.

The shadow chuckled and took a step forward. Light from the windows behind April fell on the monster's legs. There were only two, and the thing stood like a human, but the outline of its upper-body looked strange, like it had an extra appendage.

“To hunt,” said the shadow. “And you have robbed me of prey.”

April's mind was maxed out between keeping herself on her feet, figuring out her vision, ignoring the searing pain, and keeping the shadow busy. Something slammed against the door behind her. It was probably Jess. April ignored it.

“Surely you're here for more than just killing,” said April.

“Others may be, perhaps.” The shadow hissed a little when she said her S's, much like a snake. “But I follow orders, and my orders are to consume all who oppose Rita.”

April adjusted her footing until water from the busted fountain sprayed all over her. Then it clicked. She thrust her hand into the stream of water and caught on something. She pulled, and out of the water came a trident with sapphire-encrusted tips. She pointed its end at the shadow.

“I oppose Rita,” she said.
“Then you oppose Scorpina,” said the shadow. She stepped fully into the light, and April could now see that her name was aptly given. Scorpina would almost be pretty, were it not for the stingers coiled around her neck and the pointed tail behind her. She wore an extremely form-fitting armor of gold and black, and her smile was as wicked and sharp as the barbs on her stingers. Her eyes, though, were insect-like. They were many, and they covered her face like a mob of huge black freckles.

Scorpina took another step forward. April held her ground. Scorpina's tail lashed out from behind her and jabbed at April's bad arm, but she deflected the blow with her trident. Scorpina attacked again and again with her tail, her stingers, her hands, but April deflected them all and even sent back a few jabs of her own.

Unfortunately, she could feel her strength draining. The pain was just too much, and somewhere in her mind she would have sworn that the building itself was sucking the life out of her.

The stinger nicked her shoulder, and the pain from Scorpina's venom was unlike anything April had felt. Darkness enveloped her sight, and before she even knew what had happened, she was on her back, her trident laying just beyond her grasp and Scorpina standing over her.

“Poor little girl,” she cooed. “Thought she'd be brave. Thought she could stop the big bad monster.” April could no longer speak. She tried to move an arm, but the venom prevented it. She was paralyzed. “Poor little Ranger,” Scorpina laughed. She stepped on April's thigh. April would have given anything to be able to cry out and provide some sort of release for the pain she felt, but even her vocal cords were frozen now. She began to wish that she would just pass out so that she didn't have to endure the pain any longer, but her body had other plans.

Scorpina reached into the busted water fountain and pulled out the thing that had hit April's arm. It was a curved sword, made in the shape of a scorpion's tail. Scorpina bent over the downed Ranger and slid its tip across the emblem on April's chest. “Poor Little Ranger thought she could fight alone,” Scorpina sang. “Poor Little Ranger thought she could take Scorpina by herself.” The pain was unimaginable, yet all April could do was sit and allow the blade to slide across her chest. It ripped through armor and skin like they were paper. “But the Ranger was wrong. Scorpina will kill her. Scorpina will bring her to Rita. Poor Little Ranger is all alone.”

“Not alone.” Something smashed against Scorpina's chest and blew her out of April's sight. Someone in a hooded Ranger suit knelt over April and spoke to her, but April could barely hear anymore. The need to sleep was overpowering. She closed her eyes, and the pain ebbed away into dreams of darkness and sorrow.
Chapter 1 – Eight Years Ago

The boy burst through the hospital doors with a man hot on his tail. The boy shouted over his shoulder for the man to leave. The man continued to follow. The boy started to run, but the man was in top shape and easily kept up with him. Together they dodged around nurses and doctors, past beds on wheels and endless nurse stations. The boy moved with purpose, following the signs to the emergency OR. He had to find the room where they were.

Over the hospital intercom, he heard the words “code blue,” followed by an emergency OR room number. One brightly-lit hallway after another, and before he knew it he stood outside the operating room. People yelled orders and machines buzzed and beeped an unsteady rhythm. He had only stood there for a moment when he heard one of the machines let out a high-pitched wail. Flatline. More people yelling, a nurse making rapid, powerful thrusts into the chest of the person on the table while someone else jabbed the body with a needle of clear liquid.

The boy tried to enter the operating room but was immediately grabbed by nurses and placed outside. They asked the man who they were, and he said he was the boy’s martial arts master. They had been at a tournament when they heard the news, he said, and they rushed here. The boy yelled for his family, but the nurse only closed the door. The boy kicked at the door only once before his master dragged him away. He told the boy that everything would be alright, that these were the best doctors in Cedar Grove. He led the boy in calming meditations and ignored the fact that the boy wasn’t even trying to calm down.

The noises within the OR slowly died down. The boy sat on his knees, sobbing, while his master stood guard over him. One by one the machines shut down. The operating room’s door opened. Several nurses slouched out into the halls, followed by two doctors. No one looked at the boy, but he stood when he saw the doctors. He asked them what happened. The doctors walked on, only muttering that they were sorry for his loss. Within the room, three bodies lay covered under white sheets stained red.

“Why didn't you save them!” Will screamed at the retreating doctors. “Why couldn't you save them!”

Chapter 2 – Jack

Three Rangers crashed to the floor of the Command Center. Will was back to his feet and over to the healing alcove in the time it took Jack to come to his senses. The twins pulled each other up and joined Will. April lay on a bed with black gashes in her bare skin and some kind of fang or something lodged in her shoulder. Jack noticed for the first time that April now wore a soft cloth gi the color of the ocean. He looked down and was surprised to find that he, too, wore a light gi, only his was emerald. Will and Jess were now in uniforms of white and ruby red, respectively.

“What happened?” Will asked. His voice was dry; Jack hadn't heard him so bent out of shape since his family had died.
“Rita’s goons torched the armory after taking the good stuff,” said Jess. “Then some fucker named Scorpina attacked us. What happened with you guys?”

“Rito left,” said Jack. “He just stopped and talked to the air, then he exploded, laughing the whole time. I don’t think they cared about the station at all. I think they wanted to bait us into showing ourselves.”

“Zordon, can you save her?” Will wasn’t listening to them at all. If the guy had a flaw, it was that he obsessed over saving people. “And where’s Ewan?”

“Move, flesh sacks.”

The humans stepped aside as Alpha shuffled to the bed and held a small machine over April's chest.

Jess turned away from April's bed and glared at the cloudy tank at the head of the Center. “What the fuck, Zordon? Scorpina ripped right through her! We might as well have been wearing bikinis for all the help your ‘armor’ did!”

“So what happened?” Will asked again. “And where the hell is Ewan?”

Jess told them about their adventure in the police station: how she had Ewan had fought, how they’d lost him after he had fallen behind, how April had been shot, how they'd rescued the officers trapped in the armory, and, finally, how Scorpina had ambushed them and almost killed April. Will never moved from April's bed while Jess spoke. Jack hopped on the Command Center console and began to search for any sign of Ewan.

“I am sorry, Rangers,” boomed Zordon. “I had intended for these first encounters to be a trial for the five of you. Rita's power has greatly surpassed my expectations. Her minions have ransacked every gun store in town, but of course for the truly dangerous weaponry they required the armory. Already Rita has used her dark magic to grant these weapons to her army. I… never anticipated that she could have possibly grown so strong while trapped in her ice prison.”

“Well good for fucking you,” spat Jess. “You and you—” she pointed at Zordon's tank and Will, “totally suck at leading this team. You made the wrong call, Will. You never should have taken on Rito head-on like that. Your actions put her on that table, and now Rita knows that you have a soft spot for saving strangers.”

Will ignored her. “What do you mean by 'trial', Zordon? You knew we’d find that apartment building, didn't you?”

“Yes, and your actions there proved your Rangerhood beyond a shadow of a doubt.”

Jess snorted. “Whoopty doo. I almost died in your little 'trial'.”

“The courage you showed in leaping into a building aflame confirmed that the Power chose you well, Jessica. All of you have continued to show the same strength of character that you showed back on the cliffs above the lake, when you first fought Goldar.”

“Character didn’t protect April from Scorpina’s stinger,” said Jess.

“I did not expect Rita to send one of her strongest lieutenants against you so soon. She has grown bold in her exile.”

“Who the fuck is that new bitch, anyway?”
Zordon paused before answering. “Another of Rita's monstrous creations. One of the most terrible powers Rita uncovered ten-thousand years ago was the ability to convert innocent creatures into raging monsters driven mad by her dark powers. Scorpina was a woman once. I had thought her destroyed by the first Rangers. There is much Rita has hidden from me.”

“If April dies, I'm breaking your little fish tank.”

“Can you save her, Zordon?” asked Will again. The pain in Will's voice was unmistakable. There was no doubt in Jack's mind that his friend was back in the hospital, with his dead parents and sister. Jack did his best to ignore Will's pain and focus on finding Ewan. He had to. Ewan's life may depend on Jack's speed, and right now Will’s grief and Jess’ anger made them useless. It was up to Jack.

*The foundation this team must stand on, he thought.* *Zordon knew tonight would wreck us. I have to stay strong.*

“She will not die,” Zordon assured them. “Scorpina's venom can be extracted and April's wounds healed, but it will take time.”

“Forgive me if I’m skeptical,” muttered Jess.

Will looked as relieved as Jack felt. April would be alright. “What should we do next?” Will asked.

“Hang on,” cut in Jess. “I'm not going anywhere until Zordon tells us more about what we're dealing with. We went into this fight knowing nothing. We blindly followed his orders because he was this huge cosmic head and could speak in our minds and all this shit, and look where it got us.”

Jack shuffled uncomfortably. “I have to admit,” he said, “I'm not comfortable with this, either. We really don’t know anything, do we? Where do Rita’s powers come from? What exactly happened to the old Rangers? And… didn’t you say that you split yourself into seven parts? There’s five of us and you. Where’s the seventh?”

“The visions you have experienced will tell you more than I ever could,” said Zordon. “You will learn the answers you seek in time. Clever as you are, Jack, it will not take you long.”

Jack exchanged looks with Will and Jess. Zordon had dodged all his questions. Something wasn’t adding up here. The equation was off. Unbalanced.

“Now that Rita knows of your existence,” Zordon continued, “you and the rest of Cedar Grove will be in even greater danger. She is one of the most cunning beings I have ever known, and ten-thousand years of her dark power strengthening her mind has only made her more dangerous. You must be ready for anything.”

“Our main priority should be minimalizing civilian casualties,” suggested Will. “With the police station gone, the force won’t be able to coordinate any kind of relief. It’s up to us to get out there and help others.”

“Look where that landed April,” grumbled Jess.

Jack’s console beeped excitedly, but what it showed him made his heart plummet through his gut. “The computer has completed its search for Ewan,” Jack reported, “but…”

“But what?” asked Will.

“But Ewan isn't anywhere, not on Earth, not in this solar system. Zordon, what…”
Jack braced himself for another non-answer. Later, he would wish that that was what he had got.

“I am afraid those readings are dire news indeed, Jack,” said Zordon. “They can only mean one thing: Ewan is being held in Rita's Dark Dimension.”

Chapter 3 – Jess

Silence filled the Command Center. Not even Alpha had a wisecrack, which told Jess more than anything that this Dark Dimension was not exactly a vacation spot in the tropics.

“So…” she began. “Do I even have to ask? What the fuck is the Dark Dimension? It sounds like some stupid comic book lair or something.”

“I'm afraid that this is most serious, Rangers,” said Zordon. “The Dark Dimension is a place of pure evil, an extension of Rita Repulsa's corrupted power that feeds off the dark energy of the universe.”

“Dark energy?” Jack asked. “Like dark matter?”

“Similar, yes. The scientists of Earth have tried to study these two forces for years, but they have no idea what they are dealing with. There is more dark matter and more dark energy in the universe than any other form of matter. In fact, everything you know, everything you see – the Earth, humans, animals, water – all matter in the universe only makes up 5% of the universe's total mass. The other 95% is dark energy and dark matter.”

“That sounds like a lot,” said Jess.

“Your scientists believe that the universe is expanding because of dark energy, and they are correct. Dark matter breeds evil, and dark energy is evil's manifestation in this universe. The amount of dark energy has grown rapidly since life began on your world and others, and if its growth is not quelled soon, the universe may expand to such a degree that each solar system will become isolated within its own galaxy.”

“I don't get it, Zordon,” said Will.

“Tell me: how much easier is it to simply tell a lie when you have done something wrong? How is it that those with wealth and power so often appear to be corrupt beyond reason? Why is it that the nice guy finishes last? The answer lies in what I have already told you. With so much dark energy and matter in the universe, it is astonishing that good has ever overcome such odds, but that is what makes goodness and virtue so powerful: the meager 5% of good can combat the 95% evil. It is this fact which still gives me hope that you will prevail over Rita Repulsa and her evil army.”

Jess turned to Jack and laughed. “You buyin' any of this, Brainiac?”

Jack shushed her, which simply did not happen. “What has Rita done with the dark matter and dark energy, Zordon?” he asked. Jess had rarely seen such a light in her brother's eyes.

“Long ago,” said Zordon, “Rita found a way to tap into the universe’s dark energy, which in turn led her to the hidden world of dark matter that lies just beyond the fabric of this dimension. Only those connected to Rita's power may enter this realm. There, she may take any creature she wishes and bend it to her will. Eventually, her corruption will overtake the creature, and it will become one of her monsters.”
“Can she do that to a Ranger?” asked Will.

“Yes,” said Zordon. “As I said before, Scorpina was a woman once. She was Serket, the first Yellow Ranger.”

“What!” the three Rangers had cried out in unison. Old Rangers turned to monsters? That shouldn’t have been possible. Jess felt a small tug of panic in her breast. If the old Rangers had fallen, then what chance did they have? Shut the fuck up, she told herself. Ranger of Courage, right? You don’t get to be scared.

“How is that possible?” asked Jack.

“When isolated within the Dark Dimension,” said Zordon, “a Ranger’s Power loses its strength. The Yellow Ranger could not call upon her Power to aid her. Slowly, Rita’s darkness corrupted Serket’s mind and separated it from her power. Rita took the Power of Spirit for her own until she was defeated. I have spent the past ten millennia cleansing the Power of her taint.”

“So Ewan…” Will started.

“Will become a slave to Rita's black arts unless he is freed,” confirmed Zordon.

“Then we have to do something!”

“Like what?” Jess laughed. “Infiltrate Rita's base, wherever the hell that is, find her, and ask her nicely to let us into her little playground of pure evil?”

Will’s death glare made Jess take a step back. “If we have to, then yes. We won't let Ewan become a monster.”

“Will, we couldn't even infiltrate a police station with all five of us. What makes you think that three of us will be able to sneak into Rita's base? We don't even know where it is!”

“Indeed you do,” said Zordon. “I'm sure you witnessed it in the lake outside of Cedar Grove.”

“I knew I saw something out there,” muttered Will.

Jess had no idea what they were talking about, and she said as much.

“When all the water in the lake was blasted out,” said Will, “and when Goldar was about to kill me on the cliffs, I saw something out on the lake bed, something like a building, but I couldn't quite make it out. I thought everyone had seen it.”

“Sorry,” said Jess, “but I was a little too preoccupied with Goldar and the fucking apocalypse to notice a building at the bottom of a lake.”

“Nevertheless, it is there,” said Zordon. “But until you master your powers, you will have little hope of infiltrating Rita's fortress.”

“How does Rita move between the Dark Dimension and ours?” asked Jack.

“One's consciousness is transported via special radio waves broadcasted from Rita's fortress. Rita manipulates dark energy to amplify the signal and carry it to her world of dark matter.”

“What if we built a device to intercept these radio waves and use them ourselves?”

“Your insight serves you well, Jack,” said Zordon. “Indeed, it may be possible, but the risk is almost
beyond reckoning. Even if you intercept Rita's signal, there will still be the matter of freeing Ewan from the Dark Dimension's grasp. Also, as I said before, only one's consciousness is held in the Dark Dimension; the body remains here. Therefore, Rita may have taken Ewan's body to her fortress in the event that such a rescue was attempted. You would still have to liberate him from there.”

“It'd be simpler if you fools just found yourselves a new Yellow Ranger,” said Alpha. As he spoke, the little machine he held over April began to beep.

“No,” said Will. “We're saving Ewan. One step at a time. Jack, isn't your professor…”

Jack grinned and nodded. “My thoughts exactly.”

Jess blushed. Will knew more about her brother than she did, and as a twin, she found that both insulting and humiliating. She was vaguely aware that Jack was a research assistant for some dorky scientist at Cedar Grove University, but she had no idea what they did. She just knew that Jack was always on campus, and that sometimes he came home with strange chemical burns on his arms and clothes. Once he came home missing an eyebrow and some of the hair on the right side of his head. Their parents had thrown a fit and had forbidden him to keep working at the University. Naturally, he had gone behind their backs, and Jess had been more than happy to cover for him. The less their parents had control over their lives the better, as far as Jess was concerned.

“Zordon,” said Jack, “I know someone who can help. I work with a professor at Cedar Grove University who is one of Earth's leading researchers of dark matter and dark energy.”

“How convenient,” muttered Alpha.

“He's also a brilliant mechanical engineer. If I can bring him here, I'm sure that he and I can come up with something, maybe make some kind of machine to intercept Rita's signal and get one of us into the Dark Dimension.”

“I am aware of this man,” said Zordon. “But you cannot bring him to this Command Center.”

“Why in the hell not?” asked Jess. “Can't go against your little code?”

“Were a regular human to witness the technology within this stronghold, it may interfere with the technological growth of your planet,” said Zordon.

Jess burst out in laughter. “Please tell me you're joking! Interfere? So rather than have us advance too much, you'd rather Rita blast us back to the stone age. Holy shit Zordon, why do you even exist?”

“Watch it human,” Alpha buzzed, though he was still distracted by the beeping from his machine. Jess began to wonder what it meant, and whether or not it was a good sign. She might have been able to tell if Alpha had any fucking facial expressions.

“If we bring him here,” urged Jack, “then we'll have more time. Literally. Time moves slowly here, and we're going to need the extra tech at our disposal if we want any chance of making this thing work. I think he can do it, Zordon. I've never met anyone so smart.”

The stupid cloud in Zordon's fish tank sighed. “Very well, but while he is here you all must wear your armor. You will have to find a way to convince him to accompany you without telling him who you are. And once he is finished here, I will have to wipe his memory of this place.”

“Anything else, oh wise one?” asked Jess.

Alpha answered instead. “Zordon!” he shouted. “The venom! It's resisting extraction!”
Will swore loudest of everyone. The twins rushed to April's side, where Will still stood. Jess' movement felt sluggish now that she wasn't in her Ranger armor. It might not have stopped attacks from Rita's thugs, but damn had it made her feel fast and powerful.

“Things are worse than I had feared,” said Zordon.

“What can we do?” asked Will.

“I am afraid that Goldar carries the only antivenom, given to him by Rita in case the Yellow Ranger still within Scorpina ever regained control.”

“So teleport Jack's dorky buddy here and let us go after Goldar,” said Jess. She wanted another crack at the monkey freak now that she had a sword of her own.

“I am afraid that is impossible, Rangers,” said Zordon. “The University is under siege by Rita's monsters. I cannot teleport him away while enemies are so close by. Goldar has retreated to Rita's fortress, but he may be drawn out if you reveal yourselves again. You should teleport to the University and do battle with the monsters there to try to lure Goldar away. If he sees that there are only thee of you, he will surely attack. It is risky, but I believe it is the only way for you to succeed in saving both of your friends.”

“Alright everyone,” said Will. “Let’s get back out there. Honor!”

“Strength!” shouted Jack.

Jess took a deep breath and glanced back at April. She looked completely lifeless on that bed. She had been so brave and so stupid to take on Scorpina by herself. Jess refused to let her down, but the sight of the fallen Ranger had suddenly shaken her. She felt downright terrified that she, or Jack, or even Will, might not come back from this. “Courage!” she shouted, as much for her own sake as for her Power. Red flames enveloped her, and for the second time she felt the surge of strength as the Power of Zordon's Rangers roared through her body.

“Alright then,” said Jack, “let’s go find Professor Cranston.”

Chapter 4 – Dr. Cranston

Dr. Bill Cranston peeked out his laboratory's window. Even from the university's top floor, the pandemonium below was readily apparent. The few faculty and even fewer students who had decided to spend their Fourth of July on campus, whether to watch fireworks from the roof or, as Dr. Cranston had, to work in peace and quiet, were running for their lives from the monsters pouring into the courtyard below.

Dr. Cranston wiped his glasses on his shirt and looked again. Bullets from the guns of the campus police ripped through the strange humanoid things as they slowly advanced, but not a single monster fell. They came from all directions, and as the professor watched, a much larger monster that looked like it was made out of pure lightning strode into the central courtyard and barked orders with a voice that cracked in the dry air. Then the monster split in two and stormed off in opposite directions.

The professor knew the university's layout well. All the exits were covered; he would not be able to escape these fiends, whatever they were.
Instead, he set to work on a new device.

He had no idea how long he worked. Time in his lab had a strange way of acting; days could last minutes or weeks. It usually depended on how many other people were there: the more people, the longer the day. Dr. Cranston preferred to work alone; precious few people could keep up with his mind or even understand the way he spoke. Humans were so difficult and confusing; not like machines at all. Machines did what you wanted them to do. No surprises, no emotions. No ulterior motives.

Once he had made his prototype device, the duplicates came with ease, and Bill's mind began to wander. Thinking about time and people and how so few understood him had taken him back to his first and only true love, way back in high school nearly twenty years ago.

Trini. The first besides his parents who really understood him. She was so beautiful, so caring, and he had never found the courage to make a move. They lost contact after she was selected for a world teen summit in Switzerland. Bill heard rumors now and then, mostly from friends of friends and that sort of thing. The teen summit had changed the lives of all his friends. Hell, half of his closest friends had gone, and such success had altered their lives so drastically that it would have seemed almost foolish for them to return to Cedar Grove, even though most of them had done just that anyway.

But not Trini. She never came back.

When he first heard the news that she had died in a car accident, Bill wept for weeks. That was years ago now, yet the very thought of seeing her lifeless form at the funeral still brought tears to his eyes. He could have prevented it, he knew. If he had worked up the courage to ask her on a date, things would have been different. She would have come back to Cedar Grove. She would never have been in that car.

Dr. Cranston removed his glasses, wiped his eyes, and listened to the hallway. There were screams from the floors below, then an explosion that shook the floor and rattled the lab's delicate machines. His time was almost up.

He scooped his devices into his bag and crept to the door. He poked his head out and looked both ways. No monsters yet, but he distinctly heard a strange, garbled speech from the left. Ducking low, he stumbled to the right and down the hall.

The professor had hardly gone ten meters when there was a cry from behind him. He turned and saw five of those strange mud creatures hurrying down the hall after him. He ducked into a lab and pulled one of his devices from his bag. He had taken note of how quickly the monsters were running, and, cross-referencing that with the length of the hall, he calculated the time it would take for the monsters to reach him. He had to time it just right…

“Three,” he whispered, “two, one…”

He punched a button and slung the little device into the hall. The flash of the explosion lit up the dark lab and cast brief shadows onto the walls. Dr. Cranston heard the mud monsters scream. He dared a glance out the door.

His device had flash-frozen the five monsters from the waist down. Their muddy composition rendered them invulnerable to standard ballistics, but temperature was a different story. The monsters flailed about on the floor, their legs completely shattered into a thousand pieces all around them.

“Chalk one up to scientific ingenuity,” Dr. Cranston grinned. He slung his bag over his shoulder and ran back into the hallway.
One of the monsters pushed itself toward the professor and grabbed his ankle with such force that Bill tumbled to the floor. His chin slammed into linoleum, and his glasses bounced off his nose and into the blur that was his miserable natural vision. He reached blindly in the direction they had gone but found nothing. The monster yanked on his leg and dragged him closer. Bill turned and landed a kick in the monster’s face, but its grip didn't loosen. Instead, the monster growled and twisted its wrist. Bill heard a snap and felt the searing pain of a broken ankle. He cried out and aimed another feeble kick, but the monster twisted his foot again, and the pain was so great that Bill could no longer concentrate on anything else except a desperate wish for the torment to cease.

One of the monsters shouted, and Bill felt the grip on his ankle go slack. He wrenched his shattered foot away from the beast and dragged himself toward where his glasses had been. Tears welled in his eyes, which made him even more blind than usual. He told himself to order contacts as soon as he got home. If he got home.

Something grabbed his shoulder, and he wildly tried to slap the thing away.

“Woah,” someone said. Her voice, though it also had a strange sense of other to it, was clearly not that of the mud monsters. With a great effort, Bill turned himself over onto his back and tried to see what had spoken.

A red blur bent over him, and a gloved hand came into focus near his face. “Stand up, Professor.” the woman said.

Bill hesitated, then he grabbed the glove and lurched onto his good foot. He hopped on it for a moment and was about to fall over when a second person caught him. “Here,” the new person – a man, this time – handed him something. A pair of glasses.

Bill leaned on the man's shoulder as he put the glasses back on. As the hallway came into focus, he realized that the mud monsters had disappeared, though the icy residue of the freeze bomb still glimmered on the hallway's floors and walls. The woman before him wore a strange armor of leather and red cloth, with a salamander stamped on her chest and countless scratches and tears in all places. Veins of red energy pulsed in time with her breath. Her face was covered in a kind of deep hood that only revealed her eyes, which glowed with a red light that seemed to come from within. The light flickered as the woman's gaze shifted from Bill's face to his broken ankle and back.

Another armored man, this one in all white and with a lion on his chest, stepped out from the lab in which Bill had hidden a moment before. Bill noticed a faint wisp of something like pale steam that rose softly from the man's white glowing eyes.

“You're hurt,” the man said. “We need to get you out of here.”

Bill winced; his leg throbbed, and the sheer intensity of the pain was making him light-headed.

“What are they?” he managed to ask.

“The mudmen?” asked the woman. “Long story, but basically they suck balls.”

“They're evil beings corrupted by dark energy, Professor Cranston,” said the man on whose shoulder Bill was leaning. Bill was hurt, for sure, but even the pain couldn't keep him from gawking at what the man had just said.

“Dark… energy?” Bill said, dumbfounded. Years of research, of ridicule, of coming up short and feeling like the answer was always just beyond his grasp, and here in a single moment a strange man
validates his entire existence? It was too good to be true.

“Yes. Dark energy. They're taking over the city, and if you don't help us, they'll take over the entire planet. We need you, Professor Cranston.”

Okay, maybe not too good to be true. Bill Cranston's mind wandered back to Trini. He hadn't made a move. He had done nothing, and now she was gone. He wouldn't make that mistake again.

“What can I do to help?” he asked.

The three armored people looked at each other. “Fuck,” said the woman, “that was easy.”

Chapter 5 – Ewan

He became aware of a chilling sensation that trickled up his back over what felt like hours. After what could have been days or minutes, Ewan realized that he was lying down on cold stone. When he first tried to sit up, his limbs refused to work. The second try found him flailing like a marionette with half its strings cut. On the third try, he pushed himself up and onto his knees. As he rose, his vision left the darkness and came into something else.

Black fog hugged the ground up to Ewan's knees, and as his mind cleared, Ewan began to see the room in which he now kneeled.

He was in some kind of octagonal prison. Grey bars lined every side. Yellow candles hung suspended in the air above him, and nothing but black lay beyond in all directions. There was no ceiling, but the blank, oppressive weight of the nothingness above the prison was every bit as effective at containing Ewan as a steel roof.

Ewan climbed to his feet, but he grew painfully light-headed from rising and fell back down to the floor. The jolt of falling knocked his memories back into his mind with such force that it took him some time to sort through them all and remember who and where he was.

He had been in the police station with some friends. They had fought, and he had gotten separated from them. He couldn't remember why, and what had happened next was fuzzy. There was a darkness… and a voice.

“Shit!” he leapt to his feet as the sudden memory of Rita grimaced in his mind's eye. He looked down at his hands. He was still in his Ranger armor, but he felt sluggish and… normal, not at all like the super-awesome Power Ranger that he had been. He felt his head. Still covered. Why hadn't Rita removed it? Revealing his identity would remove his powers, right?

“Hello?” Ewan called. He remembered nothing after Rita hit him. Maybe his friends had saved him, and he was in some weird-ass room of the Command Center. Maybe Alpha was playing some practical joke on him. It seemed like something the stupid tin can would do. “Hello?” he shouted again.

Someone whimpered nearby. Ewan looked in the direction of the sound and saw the ground-fog shift around something. He stumbled to it – his legs still refused to work properly – and felt around the fog for the source. His hand alighted on something soft and warm. It shrank away from him, but he felt around in the fog some more until he found what was unmistakably an arm. It was slender and smooth – definitely a woman.
“I'm not going to hurt you,” he promised. The woman whimpered again, but she didn't shy away from his touch. He pulled on the arm and helped the woman up.

Ewan's eyes nearly bulged out of his head when the woman stood. She was shockingly beautiful, with long dark hair and big brown eyes that looked Mediterranean or Middle-Eastern or... something. What really surprised Ewan, though, was the see-through yellow gown and the unbelievable body under it. He blushed and tried not to stare as he helped her up, but she may as well have been naked for all the good her gown did, and to say that she was well-endowed would have been like saying that this prison was a bit shy on lighting.

“We must get out of here,” the woman pleaded. She was in such a state that she didn't even seem to care about covering herself. She latched onto Ewan's arm and looked up at his face with tears in those gorgeous brown eyes. Ewan was so much taller than her that he could not focus on her face, for her busty form shared the view. He was thankful for the Ranger armor but also annoyed by it, for it kept his body away from hers.

“Where are we?” he asked, choosing to focus on the walls behind the woman. He couldn't speak when he looked at her. When he did, all thoughts just seemed to drift away, and all that mattered was this woman, her transparent clothes, and that pleading look in her eyes.

“We are far from the troubles of Earth,” the woman said. She stopped crying, and with each word her voice began to regain its confidence. “We are in another dimension.”

Faintly, part of Ewan noticed that this woman's accent was one he'd never heard before. “Who are you?” he asked. “And please, don’t say ‘Rita.’ I’ve had enough of her for one day.”

“I am Serket,” said the woman. “I have lived in this Dark Dimension for some time. You could say that I have been trapped here.” She pressed herself against Ewan, who looked down into her face once more and was gripped with the overwhelming desire to remove all of his clothes and hers. With everything that had happened tonight, he could do with a little sex, and this Serket woman didn't look like she would object.

Ewan remembered that it was his turn to speak in this conversation, so he searched the prison for something to say. She had said they were in another dimension, and that she was trapped. Everywhere Ewan looked beyond the barred walls, there was nothing but black. The walls weren't very high, though. Without the strength of his suit, he was sure that he wouldn't be able to just jump over the walls, but maybe…

“Have you ever tried to climb out?” he asked as he tried to tell his armor to scan the walls. No response. Did his Power not work here at all?

“Indeed I did,” said Serket. “You cannot reach the walls.”

“What do you mean? They're right there.”

“Walk toward them then.”

Ewan did so. But with every step he took, the walls shrank away twice as fast. He stopped and turned. Serket had not moved, and yet she was still within arm’s reach. “The fuck?” Ewan asked.

“Dark magic keeps us imprisoned,” said Serket.

“Then how do we get out of here?”

“If I knew,” said Serket with a toss of her hair, “I would have escaped long ago. But I have never
before seen someone with such power.” She stroked his arm, and his mind began to wander back to her. “I have been so lonely.” Her hand moved from his arm to his chest. It circled the emblem with the phoenix before it began to move down past his waist. Ewan let out a small gasp and pulled away from the sex-starved woman.

“Damn!” he shouted. He'd never seen anyone come onto anyone else so strongly. It was like he was living out some cheap porno. He appreciated the attention, but something felt… off. No one was both that hot and that horny.

“What's wrong?” asked Serket. She held her arms out to her sides, as if to invite Ewan into her enormous chest. “Should we refuse the comfort of each other's embrace? If we are to remain here, why not spend eternity in bliss?”

*I will not have sex, I will not have sex*

“Believe me,” said Ewan, “I would love to. You're smokin' hot, but I…” He struggled to think of why he needed to get out of this strange place. He couldn't remember why he shouldn't let this goddess of a woman have her way with him.

“If you would but remove that suit,” Serket continued, “then we could lie down and let the fog envelope us in our love. Forever. Don't you want that? Don't you want… me? Please let me see your face. I’ve no doubt that underneath that hood is a strong, handsome man who knows his way around women.”

Ewan focused again on how he had arrived at this place. He had been with his friends. They had become superheroes. They were saving the city… *My friends*, he thought. *Yes, they are why I need to get out. What would Will do? Ugh, God. Thinking about Will when I have a hard-on sure kills the mood.* He pictured Will standing before him instead of Serket, and any desire for sex that he may have once had vanished so quickly that Ewan almost felt silly for wanting to so it in the first place. On the bright side, his pants didn’t feel so tight anymore.

His sex drive held in check, Ewan looked around the octagon again, but he could find no way out. He took another step toward the walls, and again they retreated from him. Serket grabbed his arm and turned him to her. She looked up into his eyes with such longing that Ewan forgot about Will entirely. She reached toward him and grabbed his hand with a hopeful smile. He let her guide it toward her, where she placed it on her breast.

In a flash, Ewan's mind rocketed from this prison and landed… right back in the prison. There he sat, only now he was the Yellow Ranger of old, holding her knees to her chest and rocking back and forth. She had failed her village. She had failed Rita. Rita had charged her with the task of protecting Rita's lover, the great hunter Dreadwing. The Yellow Ranger had failed.

And Rita had claimed vengeance. She had torched the Ranger’s village and imprisoned her old friend. The Yellow Ranger still couldn't believe it. The very thought that her closest friend had betrayed her was enough to drive her mad.

And so it did.

There was no telling how long the Yellow Ranger sat trapped in the Dark Dimension. Without the sun and moon, without the need for sleep and food, she simply sat and reflected on her misery. The Dark Dimension shifted around her to reflect her thoughts. For a time, she sat on the cliff overlooking her village in ashes, the colors oddly muted by the Dark Dimension's powers. Then the world shifted, and she sat on the volcanic slope where Dreadwing had fallen under the ambush of a dark fiend, its massive body now lying where the Yellow Ranger had slain it.
As she sat staring at the bodies of the fiend and Rita's lover, Dreadwing's body rose to its feet and placed its hands and face in the flames of the dead fiend. The volcano vanished. The Yellow Ranger once more sat in the fog of the Dark Dimension, only where Dreadwing had stood in her memory, a demon now grinned at her. Shades of the shadow fiend flickered through this creature.

“Greetings, failure!” laughed the demon. Its voice was rough and smoky, like the voice of fire itself. “I hope you have enjoyed Rita's hospitality!”

“Burn in the fires of hell,” croaked the Ranger. Speaking had been harder than she had expected, though she no longer wondered how long it had been since she had been imprisoned. As best as she could remember, her whole life had been spent in this prison, and the memories she witnessed were not her own but those of someone else dead and forgotten in some far-off land.

The demon laughed again. “Oh, but I already have! Don't you recognize me? It was you who led me there!”

When she offered no response, the demon strode toward her, buried his sword blade-first into the ground, and yanked the woman to her feet. He glared at her as he held her by her tattered shirt. Where his eyes should have been, there was only fire. Something about the way he walked stirred a memory within her.

“You stand before the great Goldar,” growled the demon. He snatched his sword out of the ground and held its blade against her throat. Now she saw it: the way he moved, the way he held his sword. She knew those movements.

“Dreadwing,” she muttered. Even such a strange revelation could spark no emotion within her. Such was the sapping power of the Dark Dimension. She hadn’t even realized until now that her Ranger suit was gone. Had she taken it off? She could not remember.

The monster laughed. “Pathetic human. Since my death, I have become so much more. Rita's power is beyond anything you can possibly imagine! She offers you a second chance, for Zordon is the one to blame. Zordon ordered the burning of your village, just as he ordered mine. The other Rangers follow a fool and a tyrant who must be destroyed. Join Rita, and nothing will be beyond your grasp!”

Her memories must have been lies. Dreadwing had not died on that volcano top, for here he stood. Rita had done the impossible. She could alter the very fabric of time and change memories. If she could bring Dreadwing back from the dead, then surely...

“She saved you when I could not. My village… She could save them. Bring them back from the dead, just as she did you…” The Ranger no longer remembered Rita as she had been, standing atop the cliff overlooking her village in flames. The Ranger recalled her dear friend, the one who, now, had found the power to return loved ones to life. She could join her friend and atone for her failures. She could save her family. She hardly cared for vengeance on Zordon. That was Rita’s goal, not hers. “Please,” the Ranger whispered. “Lend me Rita's power, so that I, too, may save those whom I love.”

“Heh heh heh, gladly…” Goldar reached into a pocket hidden on his belt and withdrew something that squirmed and fought against him. He held it up near the Ranger's face, and in the back of her dimmed mind she knew the thing to be a scorpion. Goldar placed it on her shoulder, and almost immediately it stung her neck. The pain was intense, yet she hardly cared. The pain would bring her family back. She would be with her friend, and she would save everyone.

“Soon, Serket,” rasped Goldar, “You will become as me: a slave to Rita's Ambition. Cast away your Spirit. Become one with Rita's black Power.”
“Y-yes, Dreadwing. I will serve Rita…”

Her vision clouded. Ewan fell back into himself and jerked his hand away from the woman before him. He looked at Serket again, and for the first time he began to see through her illusion. Where he had thought stood the most beautiful woman in the world there was, in fact, a strange woman with long stingers coiled around her neck and a scorpion's tail protruding from the base of her spine. The stinger peeked over her shoulder like a curious child, and its pointed tip was so long that Ewan had no doubt this woman could impale him if she chose.

He stumbled away from Serket as clarity began to take its hold on his brain. This woman used to be as he was. She had been a Ranger, and she had fallen. Christ, she was 10,000 years old.

“Don't you want me?” the woman asked. Her voice had changed as well. Now it was high and grating; not at all like the sultry bombshell from before. She ran her hands down her own body, and Ewan realized that now she wore golden armor similar to Goldar's.

“I think you're a little old for me,” said Ewan. “Like, about ten-thousand years too old. I usually try to date within my own generation.”

Serket's false smile dropped. Her scorpion's tail tensed and darted from one shoulder to the other. She crossed her arms and frowned at Ewan. “Then let us end this foolish charade. My name is Scorpina. You will know it well before the end.”

“You just gave up,” said Ewan. He wasn't sure that provoking Serket was the best option, but in this Dark Dimension, he had no other weapon but his words. “I saw you. Not really what I would call Spirit material. You were stupid enough to think that Rita would bring back the family that she had killed. Tell me: did she? Did they look like demons, like our dear friend Goldylocks? How many of them are made of clay and have this weird habit of crumbling to dust when you punch their faces in?”

Scorpina's tail lashed out in front of her. It had no chance of reaching Ewan, but its message was obvious: Don't mess with me, dickface.

“You are spirited, I will give you that,” growled Scorpina.

“Got that right, motherfucker,” Ewan grinned. He recalled what Zordon had said when he had first joined his friends in the fight against Rita. I am the Holder of Spirit, he thought. I am tenacious, strong, and swift like the wind. My soul is unbreakable. I am what it means to be human and free. Fuck Rita. He repeated the thought again in his head, and one by one memories began to return to him.

Out loud, he cried, “You won’t keep me here for long, Rita!”

Scorpina screamed at him. The fog near her feet raced up her body and enveloped her in black before falling back to the ground. She was gone.

“You could have ended your life in bliss,” came Scorpina's voice from the void. “You could have given in to your human lust and succumbed to Rita's power with a smile, but we see now that you are foolish, even for a human. You have chosen pain beyond imagining, Ranger, and we will grant it to you. You will beg for Rita's mercy before the end. The Dark Dimension crawls into you with every breath you take. Soon your identity will be known to us. But know this: your suffering will be nothing compared to that of your family.”

Her voice faded, leaving Ewan alone in his prison.
Episode 7: Storm

Chapter 1 – Will

Will dove behind a rectangular structure just as a hail of bullets ripped through the air. Jess was further along the rooftop from him; Jack and the professor were somewhere behind. Will used his heads-up display to scan through the AC generator or whatever it was. At the far end of the roof, a small army of mudmen that poured out of the broken stairwell door. They shifted their fire to Jack and Dr. Cranston, and Will knew that the pipes the two humans crouched behind would not be able to protect them for long.

Will couldn’t understand why Goldar hadn’t shown up yet. He had assumed that Goldar would leap at the opportunity to hunt three Rangers and a wounded human as soon as Rita’s army found them, yet there was no sign of the demon.

Just lots and lots of clay men with assault rifles, pistols, and anything else they could find. Again Will cursed their failed raid on the police station. April had been shot while wearing a bullet-proof suit. Rita had gotten to the weapons first, and she’d even had time to enchant them to pierce the Rangers’ armor.

Dr. Cranston rummaged through his bag and handed Jack something that looked like a large grenade. Jack pressed a button on its top and lobbed it toward the stair door. A blinding flash and a wave of gurgling cries soon followed.

The bullets stopped flying long enough for Will to peek around the side of his AC unit. Where the device had landed there was now a blast zone of ice and mudmen who had been shattered from the waist down. They dragged themselves to their guns and tried to fire, but more often than not they toppled over and shot one of their own. Will took aim with his pistol, and white beams joined red in disintegrating the monsters one by one.

Go! Will thought to Jack. Jack scooped the professor into his arms as easily as he might a duffle bag and raced across the roof toward Jess while the other two Rangers provided cover fire. When Jack reached Jess’ position, he began firing, and Jess took off for the roof’s edge. Dozens more mudmen rushed out of the stairwell, and it wasn’t long before the professor handed Jack another of his freeze-grenades to launch.

This time, though, the mudmen were prepared, and they scattered as soon as the grenade left Jack’s hand. Only three got caught in the blast.

Jess took several more shots and then dove over the roof’s edge. A moment later, she called for Jack to heave the professor over the edge himself.

The Rangers on the roof paused. Something was wrong, and Will knew that Jack had noticed it as well. The mudmen had stopped shooting.

In the newfound silence Will’s enhanced hearing picked up a dull rumbling sound from somewhere far behind him. He turned and saw lightning flash in the skies over the city. A storm was headed this way, and it was moving fast.

Not natural, thought Jack.
You are correct, Green Ranger, thought Zordon. That storm is of Rita’s doing. I sense that there are powerful monsters near you who are harnessing its power. Without the other Rangers, you will have no chance against these fiends.

I’m not returning to base until we’ve gotten that antidote off of Goldar, thought Will.

Our scanners are not picking him up anywhere in the city, White Ranger. Our plan to lure him out has failed.

Goldar is a coward and a bully. He’ll come out if he has the right incentive.

Will was slowly forming an idea, but it was riskier than anything he or the other Rangers had done so far. If this didn’t work out how he hoped it would…

Rangers, urged Zordon, you must be careful. Goldar is not Rita’s only lieutenant in the field.

Green, get the professor off the roof, Will thought.

The rumbling of thunder increased with each passing second, and soon the mudmen began firing again. Will couldn’t hear their conversation over the gunfire, but he could only imagine what Jack must have said to convince Dr. Cranston to agree to be thrown off the roof and to the ground some seven or eight stories below.

White, thought Jack, start shooting when I throw the next cryogenic particle decelerator.

The what?

The freeze bomb.

You always did say Dr. Cranston had a way with words.

We never let him name his papers. On my mark. Three, two one. Now.

Jack lobbed a freeze bomb from cover, and at the same time Will stood and fired. The coordinated attack disoriented the mudmen just long enough for Will to pick off four and for the bomb to land in the midst of another eight. Will ducked back down in time to avoid the blinding flash, then he stood and went as trigger-happy as he could to keep the mudmen from firing at Jack and Dr. Cranston. As the professor disappeared over the roof’s edge, Will ducked back down and breathed a sigh of relief.

White, here, thought Jack. Will looked to his friend just in time to see a freeze bomb being lobbed his way. Press the button on top, thought Jack. We have two left.

Will understood what Jack was implying. You take left, he thought.

Of course.

Three, two, one.

The Green and White Rangers threw their freeze bombs to either side of the stairwell door, causing complete and utter panic in the mudmen forces. The bombs exploded as one, and the two Rangers took off for the roof’s edge. Jack reached it first and quickly disappeared, but Will lingered. He slowed his pace to allow the mudmen time to reclaim their weapons. When he reached the roof’s ledge, he leapt high and felt the bullets streak past. He twisted out of the path of one of the shooters and managed to get a bullet to pass through the side of his suit without touching skin. He cried out in fake pain, then he fell to the ground, rolled, and joined the others in the shadow of a nearby building.
Chapter 2 – April

She would have cheered if she could move. Though April’s body lay unmoving within the Command Center, her mind was tethered to its computer mainframe, which allowed her to monitor her comrades just as closely as Zordon and Alpha could.

But, because of the Command Center’s time distortion, watching the other Rangers was painfully slow, and she found it difficult to focus on them for very long. Instead she spent her time on other pursuits, like watching Alpha develop the Rangers’ new armor. She even tried to use the computers to search for Ewan, but they were too complicated, and she never was very good with machinery.

She checked in with the Rangers throughout their fight atop the roof of the University, which for her seemed to take hours. She marveled at the freeze bombs that Dr. Cranston had made – particularly with the city’s failing lights – and she felt a wave of relief rush over her when Will joined the others on the ground. She had feared that he would repeat her mistakes with Scorpina when he took so long to get off the roof, but his plan to appear injured, not to mention his ability to move so that his armor was pierced but he was not, showed incredible cunning.

The powers chose well, Zordon, April thought. Will’s a good leader. I would have been terrible.

Will has a rare talent, agreed Zordon, but to think that you would be ill-suited for his position is to make an egregious error of judgment on your own part. The Power Rangers are a team, and each of you will serve in a leadership role at some point.

Zordon’s words made April uneasy. Her? Leading? She couldn’t even decide on a college major. My actions landed me here. I was stupid, and now the others are out there trying to get shot so that they can get an antidote for me. I made a big mistake. I never should have fought Scorpina like that.

What you did was very brave, and it has done more for this city than you could possibly know. You may not have won the police station, but your actions have inspired the officers. Observe.

Before her mind’s eye appeared images from around the city. They were from Zordon’s memory; April hadn’t even realized that he had been tracking these people. Sight after sight flashed before her, each one showing the officers she and Jess saved in quick succession. They left the station. They rendezvoused with the officers about to attack the station. They convinced them to leave and help others around the city. They scattered and dug through rubble, searched nearby buildings, tended to the injured. A group of them found Jason the paramedic, and together they led a mass of civilians toward the outskirts of the city.

Your self-sacrifice has started a chain-reaction among the defenders of Cedar Grove, said Zordon. The men and women you saved are spreading the word about you and the other Rangers. They are spreading hope, and right now, that is what this city needs more than anything else in the world. Tell me: did you know that this city used to be called Angel Grove?

April was shocked. Towns hardly ever renamed themselves. No, I didn’t. Why did they change it?

Politics. Business. Other details not worth going into. My point is that the people of this city have now heard of the Power Rangers. They are calling you their “guardian angels”, and many are
even suggesting that the city to return to its old name in your honor.

That’s kind of a silly thing to think about right now. We might not save the town at all; then it wouldn’t matter what they named it.

That is true. However, thoughts like these can make all the difference when hope is all you have. If the citizens of Cedar Grove believe that when this is all over, they will still have a city to rename, it gives them a brighter future to live for. Do you understand?

I think so. But why tell me this? What does this have to do with me? Those people don’t even know who I am.

Neither do you, my dear. The Power of Harmony chose you for a reason. You have control over water, and like water, you adapt to your surroundings but lack a definite shape yourself. Until you discover yourself, I am afraid that your powers will be limited. Water must focus itself if it wants to make an impact; so, too, must you.

Through their sensors linked to the other Rangers, April and Zordon heard a deep rumble from the gathering storm over the University. How am I supposed to discover myself? April asked. And do we even have time?

Until the other Rangers find a cure, time is all you have. No one else can answer the question of who you are but yourself, April. If you would permit me, I would like to transport your mind to a place of meditation used by the old Blue Ranger, before her fall to Rita’s power.

April used the base’s computers to look at her own body lying in the medical bay. Her skin was horribly discolored where Scorpina’s stingers had hit her, but at least the bullet wound in her leg was mostly better. Still, the sight of those stinger wounds sent a dull throb through her body, and her mind longed for the ache to end. Her body launched into a coughing fit that did not stop until Alpha shuffled to her and held a small machine over her chest. With a tenderness April wasn’t expecting, Alpha took a cloth from the table next to April’s bed and wiped some blood from her mouth.

Alright Zordon, April thought. Take me to this place. I have to do something besides lie here and die.

I will, but I must warn you. Scorpina’s venom contains traces of dark energy. Your body has begun to shift into the dark dimension, and because of this, the place I am about to send you will be very dangerous. It will test you, and the April you find within may not be the April you thought you were.

Chapter 3 – Jack

The White Ranger’s landing was unstable, and as he hobbled to the others hidden in the shadow of a nearby building, Will clutched his side and ran much slower than usual. For a moment, Jack was afraid that his friend had been shot.

I promise I’m fine, Will assured them. If we act injured, then Goldar might be more willing to attack us.

Good idea, thought Jack.

Will nodded. We still need to get the professor out of here. He actually is injured, after all.
“Professor,” Jack said quietly, “I’m going to carry you again.”

Dr. Cranston nodded. “I appear to be suffering from nyctalopia,” he said. “Is your visual acuity at sufficient levels to traverse the campus?”

“Yes, we can see. We must get far away from the University before we can teleport to our base.”

“Full molecular translocation?” Dr. Cranston asked, his eyes wide. “What kind of power source are you using?”

“Our power’s one of a kind,” said Jack. “Are you ready?”

“Affirmative.” Jack scooped him up into his arms just as he had on the rooftop.

The Rangers’ suits told them that there were less mudmen to the northwest, but that was where the clouds were gathering. *Something’s not right about that storm*, thought Jess.

*I agree*, thought Will. *Keep an eye out and your guard up. Pistols out. Guard the professor.*

The Rangers raced into the open. Cedar Grove University’s campus was one of the biggest in the country, with dozens of acres of dark buildings and a maintenance man’s nightmare of courtyards, water features, parking lots, bike stands, flower beds, and tress. Jack had been on campus at night many times before, but never with the power as unstable as it was now. Most of the lights didn’t work, and the few that did buzzed on and off like some child was busy flicking the switch up and down. The wind from the storm began to blow in their face as they ran, making the trees rustle and the leaves on the ground twirl into the Rangers’ path. The atmosphere would have unnerved the toughest jock, with the constant rumble of a storm before them and the odd shadows cast by the full moon.

*Hey Green*, thought Jess. *What did the professor say he was suffering from? Is he sick or something?*

*Nyctalopia*. Jack chuckled. Even in their lab, he often had to translate for the other students. *It’s night-blindness. It was his way of joking that he can’t see a darn thing out here.*

*How the hell did he make those freeze bombs if the lights in his lab were out?* asked Jess.

*I’ve told you before: Dr. Cranston is the smartest man I know.*

Jack was thankful that the three Rangers all went to this school, for they knew shortcuts through the grounds that not even their heads-up displays showed. They took one now that led them into a narrow alley between two buildings. Jack could have reached out and touched either building, they were so close together.

The secret alley led them to a courtyard that stood between one of the fine arts buildings and the geology building. Without hesitation, Jess tore into the open and was set upon by a volley of bullets from mudmen hidden all around the courtyard. Will followed with his faked limp, and together they leapt high into the air, fired several rounds with their pistols, and landed on the roofs. Jack was the last to enter the courtyard, but by that time all of the attention was on the Red and White Rangers. He could only imagine what the scene looked like without his suit’s night-vision capabilities, with hot bullets and red and white laser blasts ripping through the darkness.

The three of them continued running northwest, with Jess and Will hopping from rooftops to the ground and back and taking down countless mudmen while Jack, with Dr. Cranston still in his arms, raced along the ground behind them. Jack felt bullets whiz past him, but few of the shots came close
enough for him to worry. The mudmen were numerous, but they were not very skilled.

Lightning lit up the black clouds and, briefly, the entire campus. The full moon soon disappeared. Jack had the strangest feeling that he wouldn’t see it again for some time.

*Almost to the north end of campus, thought Will. Just a bit further, past the psychology buildings. We should be clear for teleportation once we—*

A blast of light tore through the air and into the rooftop Will had been running across. Jack stopped, blinded by the lightning, and heard Will cry out in his mind while his ears rang with the intense crackling of lightning so close by.

His suit helped his eyes recover from the flash, but as the scene appeared he almost wished he could stay blinded.

Will and Jess were gone, and no extra information played over Jack’s vision. His suit gave him no readings, though he could still feel its power. *Rita,* he thought. *She’s jamming our suits again.*

From the rooftops where Will and Jess had stood there came strange, dry laughter.

“Hello, Power Ranger,” a pair of voices whispered. Purple-white lightning flickered from the roof to the courtyard in front of him. A pair of creatures materialized from the bolts, identical in every way. They were humanoid but indistinct, like someone’s veins were turned into electricity and terrorize to go torment the nearest college. Small sparks of electricity fell from their bodies. Instead of feet, they had a root-like network of purple-white lightning anchoring their bodies to the ground. The shadows they cast on the courtyard danced with an eerie light.

*Red, White,* Jack thought. *If you can hear me, get up. And if you can’t hear me, get up anyway.*

No response. Jack tried to keep his heart from tap-dancing all over his ribs. Jess could be dead, and so could Will.

The lightning monsters tapped their heads. “You seem to be a bright one,” they rasped. “Surely you could guess that we can intercept your little transmissions. Your friends were like moving lightning rods up on those rooftops. How could we resist a bit of target practice?”

“Mind telling me who you are?” asked Jack. If he stalled, then perhaps his friends could regain consciousness and help him defeat these… things.

“Yes of course. Where are my manners? We—” they flashed from the base of the broken fountain up onto its cracked top, “are Maelstrom. Storm spirits, if you will.” They gave Jack a mock bow. Lightning streaked through the sky above them, briefly illuminating even the darkest parts of the courtyard. A small fire began in the building that Will had been running across.

Jack’s mind raced. “How do you do.” How could he beat these things and get his friends out of here? “You know that a maelstrom is a whirlpool and not a storm, right? Mal-storm might better suit you.”

“How very rude to mock our name when you haven’t given yours.” The undertone of malice in the monsters’ voice was unmistakable. Another snide comment and Jack might find himself blasted into oblivion.

*Can’t contact Zordon for help. Maelstrom would hear.*

“I’m the Green Ranger. How’s Rita?”
Maelstrom laughed, their heads and chests pulsing with light at each beat. “Busy with your yellow friend,” they answered. “But you’ll see him again soon enough. He has already succumbed to Rita’s… influence.”

Now it was Jack’s turn to laugh. “Doubt that,” he said, though he wasn’t sure if he meant it.

“We were but the vanguard, and already this city has fallen. Can’t you see? You foolish Rangers are only delaying the inevitable. Once Rita establishes her stronghold here, this world will be hers for the taking.”

“Then she should have picked a different town,” said Jack, “because we’re here, and we aren’t backing down until we’re dead.”

Maelstrom cocked their heads slightly. Their whole double-act was getting really old. “I was hoping you would say that. Ready to see that lightning really can strike twice?”

Faster than flesh could move, the monsters’ right arms shot into the air and back down in a sort of chopping motion. Blinding white surrounded Jack as lightning tore down from the sky and completely enveloped his body. He felt the warmth from the heat of electricity, but his muscles didn’t seize.

Surprisingly, he didn’t die.

Instead, the purple-white faded to grey, and he found himself standing on a wide-open plain with a Ranger in blue, and Jack knew he was experiencing his first vision of the past. He had heard the other Rangers talk of them, and it had struck him as odd that he hadn’t had one yet.

Some kind of herd animal raced across the plains to find shelter from the rain, just as the Green and Blue Rangers were now doing. The two of them laughed as though this was a game, and the Blue Ranger said, “Do it again. One more time.”

The Green Ranger pounded his fist into his massive palm. “Gladly!” he boomed. His voice was almost as big as he was. There was no doubt that a man so large could snap someone as slender as the Blue Ranger in two if he chose. If anyone was a holder of Strength, it was this guy.

The Blue Ranger giggled and dropped low to the ground, her dark hair silently billowing down her back like she was a mermaid. The Green Ranger jogged a short distance away, focused his energy into his leg, and stomped his foot as hard as he could. The ground around him rippled in a shockwave that dissipated just before reaching the Blue Ranger, and out of the ground before him popped an enormous hammer of silver, with inlays of emeralds and jade in its head and pommel.

The Ranger caught the hammer by the handle and held it straight up over his head. A bolt of lightning descended from the heavens and struck its silver head. The energy from the strike traveled down the Ranger’s suit and into the ground. He lowered his hammer and chuckled.

“Want to give it a try?” he laughed, obviously unharmed.

“And get burned to a crisp?” asked the Blue Ranger. “No thank you. Besides, you know I can’t even lift that thing.” She pulled down her hood and beamed at him. He removed his hood as well, dropped his hammer so that it fell into the ground like quicksand. In two strides he stood before her, joining her laughter as he scooped her into his arms and kissed her.

Jack lifted off from the plains and soared back into himself. The purple-white that enveloped his vision melted away, and he was left with a new knowledge that gave him hope. I am immune to lightning. Power of stone and earth… I should have guessed.
The Maelstrom duo took a step back and nearly toppled off the top of the fountain. “That should have killed you,” they said in their strange dry whisper.

Now, thought Jack, let’s hope I wasn’t just hallucinating…

He focused all his might into his leg, just as the old Green Ranger had done, and slammed it into the ground, causing a shockwave to roll through the courtyard and a hammer to leap into the air before him. He snatched the massive weapon and pointed it at Maelstrom like some baseball player calling out his next home run. “Rita underestimated us. In her ten-thousand years, I guess she’s forgotten what we Power Rangers can do.”

The monsters snarled together. They lifted their arms and sent a pair of deep purple lightning bolts into the clouds – a signal, Jack guessed. Maelstrom had obviously thought this would be an easy fight. Jack was ready to show them just how wrong they were.

“You so-called Power Rangers are nothing compared to Rita,” Maelstrom said. “By the time Goldar arrives, we will have already killed you and pulled your power coin from your worthless corpse! And then… we will rain destruction down upon your miserable city!”

Chapter 4 – Ewan

Ewan didn’t know how long they tortured him. Pain has a funny way of fucking with time like that. All he knew was that it sucked, and that he was a total badass for not revealing any information.

Then, out of nowhere, he was back in Cedar Grove – downtown, specifically. The entire block was on fire, and it looked like it would start raining at any second, but he was free.

The guys must have gotten me out, he thought. Skynyrd’s “Freebird” began to play in his head. As confirmation of his excellent song choice, the thunder clouds in the distance pulsed in time with the beat.

Yo Z-man, he thought to the Command Center, I’m out of Rita’s hellhole. Where is everybody?

They are at the University, said Zordon. You must hurry.

What, no ‘glad to see you made it? We’re really impressed that you survived’?

No.

Ewan harrumphed. “No respect,” he muttered. He leapt high and used his wingsuit to sail west to CGU.

What happened at the police station? He asked.

Failure, said Zordon. You were weak and impulsive, and it nearly cost the lives of the entire group. Someone screamed from a rooftop just to Ewan’s left. He watched, horrified, as a young girl leapt from the top story to avoid the flames. He banked to catch her, but the angle was all wrong. With a cry of frustration, he pulled away hardly a second before he would have crashed headfirst into the brick wall. The girl screamed all the way to the pavement, which punctuated her end with a sickening crunch. Zordon’s words echoed in his mind. Failure. Lightning cracked nearby.
Aren’t you supposed to encourage us? Ewan thought.

Only those worth encouraging, said Zordon. Maybe you should just go home. Let the big boys take care of the city.

Okay, seriously, did Alpha shit in your tank or something? Rain began to pelt him in the face. He was flying straight into the storm, and now he struggled to stay aloft. Maybe I didn’t do things quite as perfectly as I’d have liked, but you didn’t exactly assemble the best team here. If you hadn’t noticed, we have some issues.

Such as?

Well now you’re just mocking me. I’m starting to think that you’re the biggest issue here. You were tracking my mom, which means you knew that Rita took her. But did you do anything about it? Fuck no! It’d be more fun to send ole’ Ewan to Mommy McKay’s house for some good old-fashioned guilt-tripping so that he wouldn’t leave the team. And now you’re telling me to quit? Fuck you, Zordon!

Ewan hadn’t felt so pissed off in a long time. This alien was toying with him, and he knew it. Ewan was not one to be toyed with. He had a knack for finding people who abused their power: teachers, coaches, police officers, even girlfriends. It was his curse, his own personal cross to bear. Things would be great for a while – they’d be friendly, lull you into a false sense of security – and then bam! They’d pull some shit like this. Below him, scatterings of people had taken to the rooftops, and many of them watched, dumbfounded, as a crazy man in yellow armor sailed overhead. Ewan scanned each face, lingering on one that looked disturbingly like an old girlfriend. He tried to tune out their pleas for help. He couldn’t spare the time.

You still haven’t told me what’s going on at CGU, he thought.

Ewan McKay... said Zordon, as though lost in thought. He was silent until Ewan sent him a short blast of Freebird’s guitar riffs at full volume. The University, right. The White and Red Rangers are battling a terrible foe. Rita has called forth an extremely dangerous stone monster. You must aid your allies and locate the person they are trying to rescue.

Chapter 5 – Jess

Her alarm buzzed angrily in her ear, and slowly, painfully, she opened her eyes. She swore when she realized that, again, she hadn’t dreamed up this shithole of a night, but a peal of thunder drowned her curse out.

Her Ranger suit greeted her by superimposing a full diagnostic scan on her vision, which seemed to be mostly that of the inside of a rundown old building. Her scan told her that she had some impressive bruising all around her chest and some burns on her arms from getting struck by lightning, but the suit had taken most of the blast. She didn’t even remember getting hit by lightning, but it didn’t surprise her in the slightest. Hell, with the way things were going tonight, she wouldn’t have been the least bit shocked to see fucking Godzilla show up downtown.

Her body aching, she pushed some debris off her chest, pulled herself to her feet, and told her suit to stop beeping in her ear. It flashed some warning about future lightning strikes, but she wasn’t about to let that happen again.
She was in some kind of office, complete with an overturned desk and an avalanche of loose papers strewn about the room. Above her, a hole in the ceiling revealed her entrance.

_Damn it’s dark_, she thought. Power was out. Rita’s power-leaching train must be nearby. The suit was the only thing keeping her from being completely blind – well, that and the repeated flashes of lightning. For a moment, she wondered what it must be like to be one of the citizens of Cedar Grove: alone, in the dark, possibly injured, definitely scared out of their minds. They were the courageous ones, not her – at least she could fight back.

And boy did she intend to.

She leapt out of the hole and landed on the roof, where she crouched low and tried to get a hold of her surroundings. They were at the north end of campus. Psychology buildings, she remembered. She hadn’t spent much time up here herself – the radio-television-film majors had most of their classes further south – but she had taken an intro course up here a year or two ago. Fucking nuts, the lot of them. The psychology students she knew were only taking those courses so that they could figure out what had made them all so fucked up in the first place.

Storm clouds blocked the moon and stars. She could see the glow of fires throughout downtown, and when she turned to search the courtyard below, she noticed the building across the way sported a generous fire of its own, as though the courtyard were presided over by a five-story jack-o-lantern.

She tried to scan for the other Rangers, but her HUD shorted out and began showing her readings of the current barometric pressure, temperature, wind currents, likelihood of rain – _Stop, stop stop! Where are the others?_

An explosion answered that for her. A trio of figures flew out of a freshly-made hole in one of the buildings and tumbled together through the remains of the courtyard’s central fountain.

The Green Ranger was the first to his feet. In his hands was a massive silver hammer, which he held in front of him like a shield. A pair of creatures teleported themselves onto their feet and thrust their hands forward in unison. Arcs of lightning leapt from theirs hands toward Jack, but the hammer’s head caught the force of the bolts and forced them down into the ground, where they dissipated. Jack swung his weapon, but both lightning-men ducked the swing with ease.

_Fucking idiot_, she thought, _taking on two of these monsters alone._

Something yellow streaked through the air above her, gliding to a rough stop on the building top across the way. _Bout fucking time you showed up_, Jess thought to the Yellow Ranger. _How is it that you look smug even though we can’t see your face?_

Something was different, but Jess couldn’t place it. Ewan stood there for a moment, watching the fight and paying no heed to Jess.

“Hey guys,” he said. “I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist getting me out of there.” Was it Jess’ imagination, or was he addressing the lightning freaks? Those yellow eyes turned to Jack. “I see Zordon wasn’t kidding about that stone monster. That thing is ugly as fuck.”

“Yellow?” said Jack. “You alright?”

Ewan pulled something from a tool belt. Jess could hardly see it in the gloom, but it looked like a small vial of dark liquid. Ewan tossed it into the air, stood sideways, and made like he was going to shoot an invisible bow. As he drew his arm back, a real bow shimmered into his hand, made of ebony wood and dark topaz. An arrow of wind and dust swirled between his fingers, notching itself
on the bowstring.

The vial fell between him and Jack, and he released the arrow.

The wind arrow smashed through the vial, absorbing its liquid and carrying it with astonishing speed straight at Jack. The two lightning monsters zapped to either side and held him in place as the arrow pierced through his left calf.

If the attack hadn’t been enough to set Jess’ blood to boiling, then the scream of pain from Jack was more than enough to send her leaping clear across the courtyard. Sheer rage flowed through her. Ewan had been a pain in the ass for years, but he’d never stooped to something like this. Ewan had used Jack and Will, and Jess wasn’t sure where the boys found the cash for Ewan’s bail, but this was too much. Jess would slice his fucking balls off and shove them down his throat.

Ewan dodged around her flying kick, and the two began a swift exchange of attacks, her fists against his bow. Jess could sense a darkness coming from the weapon. You fucking sold yourself to Rita, she thought to him, too angry to even speak. I held back when we fought in the station, but not this time!

“Pretty fast for something that looks like it crawled out of Tim Burton’s ass,” said Ewan as he parried a blow. “What hell did you crawl out of?” He thrust a hand forward and blasted Jess off the roof with a gust of wind. She twisted herself in the air and only barely managed to land on her feet. Ewan landed without a sound. Behind him, Jack threw himself at the lightning monsters, using his hammer as a crutch. His left leg dangled, completely limp.


Ewan’s on Rita’s side now, Jess thought to her brother. I'm going to kill him.

This isn’t him. Rita’s controlling him through the Dark Dimension.

Jess frowned. How can you tell?

Because Maelstrom over here laughed as soon as I thought that.

Sure enough, both storm spirits pulsed with laughter. “Very good,” they said as one. “Very smart. Ewan McKay thinks we’re you, and you are just a pair of annoying little elementals that have to be squared away before he can save the world like he so desperately craves.”

Jess felt the color drain from her face. Ewan hadn’t turned. He had been captured, and some part of Jess knew that she was partially to blame.

They must have read her mind, for they laughed again. “Oh he wasn’t hard to manipulate, to tease apart. The Dark Dimension strips you away, layer by layer. It was only a matter of time before we learned his identity, his motivations. This boy spent his whole life being told he's special while doing nothing to earn it. No responsibility, no pressure, right? He is ill-suited to be a Power Ranger, just like the rest of you… and what’s this? Our mistress says that there is another losing herself within the darkness. Your Blue Ranger succumbs to Scorpina’s sting. Your numbers are ever dwindling, Rangers.”

Jess hoped no one could see her shaking. She wanted to teleport away, try to regroup, maybe, or double-check on April. She couldn’t be gone… could she?

She cursed herself for her weakness. The Ranger of Courage wasn’t supposed to think like that. She had to be brave. If Jack knew how scared she was, it would wreck him.
And he was in a bad enough state as it was.

“After we destroy you two,” said Maelstrom, “the White Ranger will be all alone, just as he was ten-thousand years ago. You have failed, Rangers. Give us your power coins, and we might spare your pathetic lives. Who knows? Maybe our mistress will take pity on you and make you her own personal slaves.” Maelstrom chuckled like a rolling thunder. “But I wouldn’t count on it.”

“Why the fuck would you want our power coins?” Jess asked.

*Red*, thought Jack. He sounded like he’d pass out at any moment. *I can… move the earth.*

*You getting philosophical on me?*

No… listen… Ewan danced around Jess, feinting blows but never attacking. He was toying with her. She tried to focus on Jack’s words, but the yellow jackass wasn’t making it easy. *I can manipulate… rocks,* thought Jack, *like Blue could with water. I think… you can…*

*Move the fire,* Jess finished.

“You know we can still hear you,” the two lightning monsters said in unison. They stepped to either side of Jack and picked him up by his shoulders. Almost casually, they held their other hands around his throat and began to squeeze.

*Need that fire,* thought Jack, *now!*

A massive tomb of rock surged upward around the lightning monsters and the Green Ranger. Dust shuddered from it as the monsters fought to break free. Jess could sense Jack inside as he struggled against them, putting every last ounce of energy into keeping them where they were. *Now, sis!* he thought. *Fire needs oxygen, and lightning is fire!*

And Jess had no idea what she was supposed to do.

Instead, her mind raced back to a time some years ago. She and Jack had come home from school to find that Dad had been bounced from yet another job. Mom was bitching at him, as she liked to do even on a good day. The twins tried to sneak through the back door, but Mom saw movement – like a predator – and threw the nearest object at the kids. When she was in a rage, no one was safe. Jess shared her temper, and any time she got angry, she hated herself a little more for acting like her mother.

Unfortunately, the closest thing to Mom was a lit candle. It thumped against Jack’s sweater, which began to smoke. Jess panicked, but Jack somehow managed to stay calm. In an instant he had whipped the sweater to the floor and covered it with a pot, giving his family a brief lesson in thermodynamics as he did. “See?” he’d said, lifting the pot to reveal a flameless, ruined sweater. “Fire needs oxygen to burn. Without it, the fire can’t sustain itself.” Mom spanked him anyway, for ruining his sweater.

Back in the present, Jess had an idea.

She reached out to the fire in the closest building and let her suit take over. She couldn’t explain it really, much like she couldn’t explain how she pulled a sword out of flames. She felt her mind touch the fire, and it touched back, like a half-wild animal she was trying to coax into domesticity. She ignored Ewan, who watched her but did not advance. Slowly, the fire followed her mind. She pulled, and a thin column of flame spiraled out of the nearest window and fell in a coil around the base of the large tomb.
Get out of there or I'll bake you, thought Jess. Jack was too exhausted to think back to her, but the surface of the stone began to shift, and a green hood pushed its way through the rock. Jess fought for control over the fire. It was wild — big surprise there — and it ached to set Jack on fire. Lightning struck the tomb, but the rock reformed before Maelstrom could escape. Lightning struck again and again, this time around the tomb to try to catch Jess off-guard. She leapt aside just in time for a bolt to slam down onto Ewan, who was launched clear from the courtyard.

Jack was nearly free. He pulled himself out until only his impaled leg remained. Then he cried out. Stuck, he thought. Cracks appeared all along the tomb. The arrow won’t go through rock. God it hurts…

Just yank it out! Jess thought.

Can’t. The arrow was… poisoned. It’ll spread unless…

Jess didn’t want to ask, but she had to. Unless what?

Green eyes met hers. You know… what you have to do.

Fire licked Jack’s foot. Jess fought it back under control. Like fuck I’m going to do that! she thought.

More cracks. I can’t fully seal this thing until I’m out, Jack thought. And I can’t get out until you…

Jess swore up and down both their minds. She could hear Maelstrom inside the tomb. Oxygen-deprived though they might have been, it wasn’t stopping them from laughing. She lacks the courage, the monsters thought to them. She can be brave when the choice is easy, but when it’s hard…

Jess screamed and leapt at the tomb, pulling her sword from the fire and slicing clean through Jack’s leg in one swift move. The two tumbled away from the tomb, which sealed its cracks with an ominous crash. Jess lifted her fire until it covered the tomb’s entire surface, making it look like some kind of weird egg-shaped art installation. Probably to protest oil consumption, she guessed. The voices inside died down until they snuffed out entirely. Jess tossed the fire back into its building and collapsed.

Jack lay unconscious next to her, the stump of his leg cauterized by her sword. Could the suit heal something like that? She wasn’t sure she wanted to find out.

And, in the silence that followed, the first drops of rain began to fall.
Will felt like he had just used defibrillation paddles on himself, and then followed that up with a five-story trust fall onto a pair of thorn bushes. His heads up display flashed in and out of his vision. His body ached beyond belief. Rain hit the side of his face in waves. Smoke stung his nostrils.

He climbed off his new thorn bush buddies and observed the carnage. The courtyard had been almost completely destroyed during some fight that Will must have missed. Curved lines of black criss-crossed the grass in ugly scars. The psychology building was on fire. The stone path around the central fountain was shattered, and the fountain itself was all but obliterated.

The Red and Green Rangers lay on its remains, near a strange pile of rubble.

“Guys!” Will called as he ran to their sides. Water trickled down the fountain rubble and puddled around the two Rangers. “Hey, wake up!”


Relief surged through Will. “Are you alright?”

“Fucking perfect,” Jess groaned. Her head fell back, and she passed out.

Will turned to Jack and felt his heart catch. Jack’s left leg was missing below the knee. He was out cold.

*Zordon,* thought Will, *what happened? Where’s Jack’s leg?*

*Your fellow Rangers fought an extremely dangerous foe,* said Zordon.

*How long was I out?*

*No more than ten minutes. The twins were victorious, but at great cost.*

*And the professor?*

*Knocked clear of the fight before it even began. I have marked his location for your suit.*

Sure enough, a gray dot appeared off to the east, and Will soon found an unconscious Professor Cranston sprawled awkwardly over a stone bench, a single leg splayed into the air like a flag to announce his presence. *Legs.* Jack’s was probably round here somewhere. Will secretly hoped he didn’t find it.

He carried the professor back to the courtyard and set him down between the twins. *We need to get them out of here,* thought Will.

*Allow me,* said Alpha. *Get out of the way.* Will stepped back, and the three bodies melted into beams of red, green, and gray before shooting off into the sky. Will was about to follow them when darkness closed around his vision. His stomach lurched as the world shifted around him, turning on itself as the courtyard dimmed. A hand reached through the gloom, and for a moment Will thought to grab hold of it, as though it would help pull him back into reality. But the hand moved straight past...
his and clamped around his neck. It gave a squeeze, and the black gloom fell away like a curtain of black sand.

It took Will a moment to realize where he was. He had never seen the top of the psychology building himself, but there was no mistaking the flames jumping from five stories of windows below his dangling feet. The hand remained clasped around his throat, and at the other end of that hand grinned the same jack-o-lantern grin that had met Will under the water of the lake.

“Goldar…” he coughed.

“Greetings, White Ranger!” said the monster. “So nice to find you all alone!”

“Likewise. Still doing… Rita’s dirty work?”

“Heh heh heh, something like that.” His grip was iron. Will held on to Goldar’s arm to keep the pressure off his neck, but he doubted that he could break Goldar’s hold if he wanted to.

“What do you want?”

“A trade, White Ranger! A trade. You have something we want, and I think we have something you want, though who could possibly know what you see in him?”

Goldar shifted to the side to reveal the Yellow Ranger, his suit practically burned off his body, those piercing yellow eyes muted behind a veil of shadow. Flashes of the old Rangers appeared from the memories of the former White Ranger, and he understood what dimmed Ewan’s eyes. The Dark Dimension had control over Ewan. What he saw right now was anyone’s guess.

“Put me down,” said Will, “and… we’ll talk.”

“No need,” said Goldar. “Give me your power coin, and you can have Ewan back. Who knows? We might even throw his mommy into the bargain, if Rita is feeling generous. My queen is here, you know. She watches from the shadows. How else do you think you came to find yourself atop this rotten building?”

Will’s instinct had been right. Rita had used shadow to teleport him into Goldar’s hand. He had felt something sinister behind that darkness. It was everything he wasn’t: deception, darkness, base desires. *I am the Ranger of Honor. I work in the light.*

“You would kill us even if I agreed,” he said. Goldar’s fingers were starting to dig into his windpipe, but if he shifted just so then he could still speak.

“You are not wrong,” said Goldar as casually as if Will had just told him that his armor was just slightly over the top. “You will all die tonight no matter what you do. Don’t think we don’t know who you are, hero. We have seen echoes of you in this one’s memories.” He clapped Ewan on the back. The Yellow Ranger simply stood there, unfocused. Goldar pulled Will so close that their faces were nearly touching. “You are the brat from the cliffs. Don’t think I’ve forgotten your parting gift.” He traced the scar running along his cheek. Despite himself, Will took grim satisfaction in the way it made his ape-ish face look even uglier.

“What do you need my power coin for?” Will asked. “Why not just take his?”

“That is a power that must be given willingly,” Goldar grumbled. “Even were I to slaughter you both – and I promise, I am very tempted – the coins would return to Zordon before I could lay a hand on them. My mistress learned that the hard way last time.” The rain fell harder now. It *tinked* off Goldar’s armor and steamed in his flaming fur.
From this height, Will could see much of the city around him. He tracked the electrical train’s progress as it zoomed away from the university. Any moment now and this area would have power again. Right on cue, the streetlights buzzed to life, their pale light briefly revealing a black outline standing nearby. Will had only enough time to register the figure’s familiar outline before it was gone.

Goldar shook him to regain his attention. Will’s power coin materialized in his hand. “You want it?” he said. “Here!” He shoved it into Goldar’s eye. The monster howled as white light exploded from the coin. Will felt the hand around his neck let go. He only barely managed to grab the roof’s ledge.

Goldar stumbled around the roof, the coin lodged deep in his eye socket. It blazed with so much light that it was all Goldar could do just to stay on his feet. Will pulled himself onto the roof and charged, but Ewan caught hold of his suit and yanked him backward, nearly sending him clear off the roof.

“This one is mine!” a voice said from Ewan’s hood. It was female, and harsh. Ewan’s eyes dimmed to black when it talked.

“Not today, Rita!” said Will.

“I will destroy the Rangers from the inside,” said the voice. “Just like I did ten thousand years ago!”

“That’s nice,” said Will. At the far end of the roof, the black silhouette appeared on the edge of his vision. He whipped his pistol from its holster and fired a volley of laser blasts toward the figure. The voice cried out from Ewan’s mouth, and Ewan slumped to the ground. Will grabbed him and leapt high off the rooftop. “Zordon!” he cried. “Get us out of here!” White enveloped his vision, and he and Ewan teleported away, the screams of Godlar still ringing in his ears.

Chapter 2 – April

The first thing April noticed was that she was naked.

Well, see-through might be more exact, so that she figured she must have looked like a nudist ghost. Instinctively she tried to cover herself with her arms, but since they, too, were transparent, there was really little point.

The second thing she noticed was that she was home – not her mom’s new house in Cedar Grove, but the one her parents had shared back in Springfield for nearly her whole life. Two stories, family photos over the fireplace, a big-screen TV with a recliner and a couch – for the casual observer, this was the very image of a perfect, loving family. But April knew better. She knew why her mother always wore long sleeves and too much base, why certain nights were best spent studying at a friend’s house, why her mother kept the house looking spotless to a level that would make a hospital look like a dive bar.

To April’s horror, her elder sister Lynn stormed down the stairs. Again April tried to cover herself, but Lynn took no more notice of her than if she were some cleaning product Mother had forgotten to put up. They can’t see me, April realized.

She looked closer at Lynn and realized that there was a sort of aura within her. April knew her sister: big personality, aggressive, short-tempered. She was a lot like Jess, now that April thought of it, which would explain why Lynn looked like a walking torch, as if someone had superimposed an
April’s father stormed down the stairs after Lynn, and April, despite herself, ducked behind the couch. Father looked like a walking bomb. His skin was charred black, and his eyes blazed like Goldar’s. As Father and Lynn began to argue in the den, April realized that she was watching a scene from her memory. She stepped away from the couch and looked back at where she had hidden. There, looking like a teardrop in human form, was April, aged ten.

It was the day Lynn had run away from home.

The scene rippled, blurred, reformed. She was still in the living room, but now Father sat in the recliner, looking the same as he had just a moment ago. The twins screamed playfully down the stairs and out the front door, the two of them shining with a pale glow as though moonlight would burst from their pores at any moment. Father bellowed after them, and as his voice echoed around the living room it revealed April, now about fifteen, sitting quietly on the couch with a book in her hands. Ocean water filled her from head to foot, but it was cold, dark, and unwelcoming.

April couldn’t remember ever sitting there while her father was home. He had always made it clear that when he was home the others were to stay out of his way. April was no fool. She had always done exactly that.

Father turned around in his chair and regarded the April on the couch. He slammed his fist into his armrest, and for a moment Goldar sat in Father’s recliner. The arm of the recliner emitted a black mist that fell to the floor and began to cover the perfectly-vacuumed carpet. Whispers filled the room, and April realized that up until now she had not heard a single sound, making the whispers seem as loud as a stadium of crazed fans.

Then Goldar flashed back to Father, and his skin was a little more charred and the bomb within him a little more volatile.

The April on the couch formed a thick layer of ice on her water’s surface, and she quickly scrambled off the couch and up the stairs. The scene in the living room froze, yet black mist continued to hiss forth from Father’s recliner.

“Amazing, isn’t it?”

April leapt away from the voice at her side and stood with her fists raised.

But standing before her was her old gymnastics coach, looking bright and cheery as always. April couldn’t help but notice, however, that within her coach’s petite frame was a cloudy day.

“Coach Hart!” April gasped. “What… how are you here?”

Coach Hart spread her hands. “The same way your family is here. Tell me about what you just saw.”

April had absolutely no idea what she had just seen.

“I could see… auras,” she said carefully.

“Mm-hmm.”

“And… the auras were like the people they were in.”

“Exactly! You’ve been given a rare gift, even if it’s only temporary.”
“I don’t understand.”

The scene around them shifted, and as they continued to talk, April and Coach Hart found themselves in the middle of various other scenes from April’s past: birthday parties, dinners, holidays – every last one of them ruined by Father.

"No matter who your family is,” explained Coach Hart, “they play an important role in who you are. So tell me: what’s your family like? What do you see?”

April watched her parents in an argument. Father looked about ready to explode, both inside and out. Mother was hardly a wisp of smoke: insubstantial and weak, like she might snuff out at any moment.

“My… father,” winced April. Just the word, father, was harder for her to say than she had expected. “He’s… like a bomb.”

Coach Hart nodded. “Mm-hmm. A domineering man and a worn out, submissive woman.”

“He’s abusive.”

April almost felt relieved to say it. She had never named her father for what he really was, but there was no way around it. In the scene around them, a teenaged April marched right between her parents and pushed them apart. Water flowed from her arms and extinguished the flames that had risen within her father. A small fire began to kindle within her mother’s breast.

“That never happened,” April muttered.

“Not so directly,” admitted Coach Hart, “but you are a spirit of water within a family of flames. What does that tell you about yourself?”

The scene shifted to a different house. April knew it from pictures: the place her parents lived in before she was born. Baby shower decorations littered the living room, which Mother was happily admiring. She was heavily pregnant with Lynn, and within her was a fire that surprised April.

“Water surrounded by fire?” asked April. “Makes me sound like an idiot.”

Father returned from work with a friend from the office. Upon seeing the mess from the shower, Father told his friend something, and the friend left the house. April knew that look in his eye. She didn’t want to watch what was about to happen, not when Mother looked so happy.

“I wouldn’t say that,” said Coach Hart.

“Then what would you say?” Father removed his jacket. “That I’m smart for letting my family walk all over me? That I’m brave for having never stood up to my father? You were right: my family has shaped me. They’ve made me weak.” Father yanked Mother off the couch and gave her a hard slap across the cheek. “I saw what happened when Lynn or Mother tried to fight back, so I never did that.” This time, Father used his fists. “I tried to keep the peace in the family, and look where it got me.” Father left Mother a broken mess on the couch. Aside from the slap, he had avoided her face. Less questions from friends that way. Black mist covered most of the floor by now. April wondered if this had really happened, or if it was just another product of Zordon’s sadistic “meditation”. He had mentioned something about this place being contaminated by Rita; perhaps this was it.

Coach Hart crossed her arms and tapped her feet. “You done?”

"I… yes.”
“Good. Now shut up and listen.” Only Coach Hart could say that and be sweet about it. “You may not realize it, but you were the glue keeping your family together. You gave your mother and your sister hope that some good might yet come out of this family. You protected your little sisters, even when they didn’t realize it. Without you, your family would have burned each other to ashes.” The house around them burst into flames, and through the fire April could see five charred bodies on the floor. The image was almost too much for her to bear.

“You can be many things, April,” Coach Hart continued. “That is the blessing and the curse of water.” Now they stood atop the cliffs overlooking the lake. All of April’s diving competitors stood around her, including Ewan, who looked more like a tornado in a Speedo than a human. On the observation cliff below them, April noticed a pillar of rock and a living constellation—Jack and Will, she realized—as well as a bonfire among the trees beyond that could only be Jess. It was so strange to see the other Rangers for what they were, yet each one made sense, as though April had known the true selves of each Ranger ever since she had first laid eyes on them.

“Diving, huh?” smiled Coach Hart. “Not a far cry from gymnastics. I bet the transition wasn’t hard for you.”

“No,” April admitted. “I just used what you had taught me.”

“Only you learned to land on your head instead of your feet.” The two laughed as the first diver leapt from the cliff. The competition fast-forwarded around them. Compared to the scenes from home, this one was downright relaxing. April didn’t even mind that she was naked anymore.

“So you’re saying that I can be what I want to be,” said April as time slowed down again and Ewan made his perfect dive.

“Absolutely,” said Coach Hart. “None of the others have such limitless possibilities as you. Your Power chose you right: Harmony, able to get along with anyone, see anyone’s point of view. And, hey, being able to manipulate anything liquid is pretty cool too, right?”

“Liquid? You mean, not just water?”

All hell broke loose around them. The sky went dark, much more so than it had in real life. Black mist rained all around them. Lightning struck, and earthquakes ripped the ground apart. Will fell off his cliff, and April knew that it was her time to go.

“Thanks for the help, Coach,” she said.

Coach Hart beamed at her. “Any time, kiddo. You’ve got a long journey ahead of you. Don’t lose yourself in the Dark Dimension.”

“The what?”

But it was too late. April, guided by the April from just hours before, leapt from the cliff, twirled through the air, and plummeted through the dark mist.

Chapter 3 – Dr. Cranston

“Hey. Nerd human. Wake up.”
“Alpha, come on. He just got struck by lightning. Give the professor a break.”

“Please; he didn’t get struck by lightning. He’d be dead. The bespeckled little bastard took a hard fall when Captain Hammer over here got struck. Come on Billy buddy, time to get your ass up. We got work to do.”

Bill felt a gloved hand tap the side of his face. He frowned and swatted it away.

The hand felt like it was made of metal.

Bill opened his eyes and hauled himself to a sitting position. Someone handed him his glasses. He pushed them up his nose, and into his vision came a lion roaring from the center of white armor. Bill looked up, and a pair of misty white lights stared back at him.

“Easy, professor,” said the Ranger. “You took quite a knock to the head.”

“He’ll be fine,” said the other voice from before. “Professor, how do you feel about building a machine that transcends the universe as you know it and establishes a link with a dimension of infinite darkness that may or may not exist on a physical plane?”

“I…” Bill felt like he’d just been run over by a herd of cattle that were tripping on acid. His body ached, and his eyes refused to focus on the room beyond the White Power Ranger. He tried to process the question, but it slipped from his memory before he could answer.

“Oh!” mocked the metallic voice behind Bill. “So eloquent! So Shakespearian! Speak, oh wordsmith of the ages. Speak once more, that our ears may be blessed by the gift of your loquaciousness!”

“Alpha,” warned the White Ranger. “Lighten up. Professor, can you stand?”

Bill wasn’t so sure, but he nodded anyway. His head pounded. He had only been drunk once, but this felt a lot like the hangover he’d suffered afterward. He slumped off the side of the bed. The White Ranger caught his arm and lead him into the middle of the room.

“Where… are we?” Bill asked.

“Our Command Center,” said the Ranger. “This is where our leader lives. Zordon, I’d like for you to meet Dr. Bill Cranston.”

“It is an honor, Dr. Cranston,” boomed a deep voice. It reminded Bill of his grandfather. “I am Zordon, protector of Earth for untold millennia, and these are my Power Rangers.”

Bill let go of the White Ranger’s arm and leaned against a console. He glanced at the technology spread out before him – wondrous science that had to be several centuries ahead of anything ever even imagined by humans. Bill could have spent weeks studying just one of the control panels, and this room had hundreds. But Bill knew that he hadn’t been brought here to study.

“Zordon,” he said, “you are not homo sapien.” It wasn’t a question.

“No, I am not. My Rangers are, however, and they need your help.”

“If you think you can manage.” There was that metallic voice again. Bill turned to look back at the alcove where he had awoken. There, standing in front of four occupied beds, was…

"Wow!” Bill couldn’t help himself. “A fully sentient, multifunctional automaton!”
“God damn,” said the robot, “you nerds all speak the same language.”

“That’s Alpha 5,” said the White Ranger. “You’ll… get used to him.”

Bill glanced past Alpha 5. “The other Rangers,” he said. The Green and Red Rangers who had helped him at the university lay on medical beds next to another Ranger in yellow. The green one was missing part of a leg. A fourth bed appeared to hold a young woman, but the lights were dark around her, and Bill could make out no details other than a feminine form.

“Yes,” said the White Ranger. “The five of us are all there is standing between Rita and world domination.” Bill listened in silence while the White Ranger explained what had happened to Cedar Grove during this horrific Fourth of July. He began to realize just how lucky he was to still be alive. He wondered if any of his old friends were alright, too. But when the White Ranger got to the part about dark energy and dark matter, Bill nearly lost it. Years of research validated in the flash of an instant. Bill would have danced with joy if the world wasn’t on the verge of hostile takeover.

“Zordon,” said the White Ranger, “I… they wanted my power coin. I couldn’t think of any other way, but Yellow…”

“We will speak of your coin later,” said Zordon. “You performed admirably. The Yellow Ranger’s body has returned to us, but his consciousness remains trapped in Rita’s Dark Dimension.”

“The place created by dark energy and dark matter,” said Bill.

“Yes,” said the Ranger. “Our friend is being held captive. We need you to help us build a machine that can transport our minds there so that we can rescue him.”

“That is… not exactly true,” said Zordon.

The White Ranger wheeled around and stared at the large tank of bioluminescent milk. “What do you mean? You think we’re just going to give up on Ew—”

“White Ranger,” said Zordon. The liquid in the tank rippled when the voice spoke. Bill realized that Zordon must be inside that tank. “I have not been completely truthful with you or the other Rangers, and for that I am profoundly sorry.”

“I saw Rita. I know that she was a Rang—”

“This is not about that,” said Zordon. “Shortly before Rita was unleashed upon this era, I discovered that traces of her corruption remained within the Power essences. I am afraid that I did not have time to cleanse them before the attack. I had to prioritize, clean what I could. And, with some careful coordination, I believe I have created an opportunity for the darkness in the last power to be cleansed from within.”

“So what are you saying, exactly? Which powers were tainted?”

“All of them, except yours. Over the millennia I have seen to them as best as I could, and now only one remains.”

“And that is?”

“Spirit, White Ranger. I knew that the Yellow Ranger would fall to Rita’s influence within the police station, just as I knew that the poison from Scorpina – the old Yellow Ranger – might taint a second Ranger. That it would ultimately be the Blue Ranger was both better and worse than I had anticipated, for she has much conflict within her. If she can overcome herself, then she will be a
much stronger ally.”

“You’re saying you sent us to the police station knowing that he would be captured?” The White Ranger slammed a gloved fist on the console before him, and for just a moment his armor flickered and a college-aged kid stood in his place. He looked tired. “Why would you do that?!”

“Now that the essence of Spirit is within the Yellow Ranger, he must cleanse it himself, and do you honestly believe that he would be capable of doing so if I had been truthful with him from the beginning? If I had ordered him to do it?”

The White Ranger didn’t answer, but it looked like much of his anger still lingered. Bill was growing more and more curious about these Rangers by the minute. The boy who had stood in the White Ranger’s place had looked like he could be one of Bill’s students, and the girl on the medical bed – the Blue Ranger, Bill guessed – looked no older.

They’re just kids, Bill thought. He tried to imagine his college-aged self being a Power Ranger. Of everything he had heard tonight, that thought was by far the most outrageous.

“The Yellow Ranger can prevail over the darkness,” continued Zordon. “And he is not alone. Scorpina’s sting passed the taint of Spirit into the Blue Ranger. This allowed me to slip her mind into the Dark Dimension. Should she and the Yellow Ranger succeed, they can escape and return to us, thus freeing the Yellow Ranger of his corruption and at the same time expelling Scorpina’s venom from the Blue Ranger’s body.”

“So in the end they can save themselves,” said the White Ranger. “And we can’t do anything.”

“No, White Ranger. By touching your coin to Goldar’s flesh, your essence of Honor will grant your friends aid in the Dark Dimension. I will speak to you more on this matter later, but for now know that your actions may prove to be the tipping point in your friends’ upcoming battle.”

The White Ranger didn’t look convinced. “God, Zordon, then why the hell did you send us after Professor Cranston? Red and Green almost died! Hell, we all nearly did! Why’d we bring him here?”

“Dr. Cranston’s expertise on dark energy and dark matter will be key in aiding us with a more urgent matter. Dr. Cranston, I have been watching your scientific progress for some time. There is no other human on Earth more qualified for this task than you are.”

“You’ve been watching me?” asked Bill. He had never seen himself as particularly important. Smart, sure, at least for some random dork from Angel Grove… back when it was Angel Grove. What kind of city council decides to change the city’s name? Seriously.

“Yes,” said Zordon. “Your understanding of dark matter is unparalleled. Rita Repulsa draws the vast majority of her minions from the Dark Dimension. I believe that you and Alpha 5 can work together to build a machine that will prevent her from calling forth more monsters. Without your help, I fear that my Rangers may be overwhelmed by sunrise. I realize that this will be no easy task, but—”

“I’m in.” No more hesitation. Bill could help save the world. He was the only one who could.

Trini, if you’re up there, I hope I make you proud.

“Fuck,” said Alpha 5,” that was easy.”

Bill nodded at the Red Ranger. “She expressed a similar sentiment.”
The robot cocked its head sideways in mock curiosity. “Did you just nerd-say ‘that’s what she said’?”

Chapter 4 – Ewan

Tonight was just getting confusing. One minute he was in the Dark Dimension, then he was back in the city kicking ass, and then he was in the Dark Dimension again, this time chained to a pole. It was like Rita was playing good cop bad cop, only the police were entire planes of existence.

He couldn’t help it: he began to laugh.

Scorpina stepped through the dark mist, smiling as she flaunted the cannonball breasts and see-through yellow dress of her disguise.

“You’re finally starting to crack,” sneered Scorpina. “Give me your power coin, and I will make it worth your while.” She slipped a strap off her shoulder, but where once Ewan had found her nearly irresistible, now she just looked desperate.

“I don’t even want to know what kinds of STDs I’d get from a ten-thousand year-old bitch like you,” said Ewan. “I mean, come on. You probably have fangs down there. Tell me, seriously, were you guys the only humans back then? I’m glad to see that Zordon raised his standards after you fuck-ups.”

Scorpina’s bombshell disguise vanished, and her tail-stinger flashed to Ewan’s throat. She looked pissed.

“You mock me?” she whispered.

“All day, sweetheart. I’m still holding out hope for the cavalry.”

She placed her stinger over Ewan’s heart and began to push. Ewan fought to keep from screaming, but his suit did nothing to slow it. He may as well have been wearing nothing but tissue paper.

“Hope,” she spat, “is more an illusion than this infernal place. To hell with Rita’s plan! I will kill you here, and I won’t even use venom to do it. I want to feel my stinger pierce your heart. Your body will awaken in your precious little Command Center, but it will be a mindless husk. I doubt your friends will even notice the difference.”

*My body’s in the Command Center?* Despite the stinger against his chest, he laughed again. *Thanks for the extra hope, Scorpina.*

“You know, yellow really isn’t your color.” Scorpina’s stinger broke skin, but Ewan had to keep talking. If he was about to die, he might as well go down in a blaze of asshole-ish defiance. “It… clashes with your skin. Maybe you… ngh… should have been the Blue Ranger… instead.”

“Do not compare me to such a weak human. Your Blue Ranger was the first to die, and now, you will be the last.”

A new voice: “Think again.”

Something like a javelin punched into Scorpina’s side and took both her and her stinger out of
Ewan’s vision. From the direction of the javelin came perhaps the last thing Ewan had expected to see: the Blue Ranger herself. Without a word she reached behind him with her pistol and shot the chains from his arms. He slumped forward, and she caught him over her shoulder. His arms burned from being tied at such an awkward angle, but the Blue Ranger’s hold soothed his pain.

Then Ewan realized that he was still in the Dark Dimension. This had to be another vision. Rita was fucking with him again. This was her good cop.

He shoved the fake Blue Ranger away and raised his fists.

“Wait, what…” said the Blue Ranger.

“Nice try Rita,” Ewan grinned, “but you should have stuck with the boobs!” It was not the strangest battle cry he’d ever yelled, but even he had to admit that they would be some weird last words. He leapt forward and sunk his fist into the side of the Blue Ranger’s hood. The illusion didn’t even dodge. She just sat there and took the hit, looking too stunned to even move. But Ewan had the upper hand now, and he wouldn’t go down without a fight. Hope was all he had in this dark place. He was alone; there was nothing else.

Chapter 5 – April

She should have expected that, though the “boob” comment was certainly a surprise.

Of course Ewan would think she was some sick vision of the Dark Dimension. The problem was: how would she convince him that she was real? She’d have thought that the trident in Scorpina’s side would have been a clue. This place must have really messed with Ewan’s mind.

April recovered and faced the Yellow Ranger. “Listen to me,” she said. “I am not an illusion!”

If any of the others were here they’d be able to tell him something from his past that Rita wouldn’t know, but I just met this guy today…

Ewan charged.

April dodged his attacks, but for someone who had just spent the past who-knows-how-long being tortured in another dimension, Ewan was fast. She ducked a right hook, leaned out of the way of an uppercut, and leapt backward to avoid a side kick.

“It really is me,” she pleaded. “We just met today. No one from Elm to Circle, right? Speedos, bullshit? Come on, don’t do this.”

Ewan paused. April dared a glance at Scorpina, who was busy dragging herself up from the mist that clung to the floor. To April’s horror, she was laughing despite her wounds.

“Do you like her, Yellow Ranger?” Scorpina cooed. “After I killed her, my venom brought her under my spell. She is mine, and now she will help me kill you.”

“No!” April shouted. She wanted her trident back, but she couldn’t see it under the mist. She raised her pistol. Ewan crouched to dodge the shot, but April aimed at Scorpina and fired.

The blue bolt fizzled into nothing before it reached her.
“What the…” Ewan muttered. April wanted to contact him mentally, but she was afraid of what the Dark Dimension might do. Would it open up their minds to Scorpina’s, or Rita’s? She couldn’t afford to risk it if there was an alternative. She just had to figure out what that might be.

“Please,” she begged. “You have to believe me. Your friends are alive. All of them.” She hoped Ewan would pick up on the fact that she said “your” and not “our”. She was the outsider in this group, and as much as she hated reminding herself of that, she had to use it now to try to get through to him. “Red and I got the police out of the station. And remember the two campus police we saw before that? Like Laurel and Hardy?” She wished she could remember their names; one had been very fat and the other very skinny, and their names had been really weird, but she had always been terrible with names.

Scorpina limped toward them. She tried to hide her wound, but the pain on her face was obvious. April’s trident had done some damage through that golden armor.

“My venom runs within your veins,” said Scorpina. “My power over your mind is strong.”

April holstered her pistol. It would do no good here. “I’ll show you strong.”

She leapt at the monster and kicked, but the Dark Dimension slowed her down, and Scorpina easily dodged. The monster giggled. “Confused, Yellow Ranger?” she called. April attacked again with a roundhouse kick. Scorpina wrapped her tail-like stinger around April’s leg and whipped her into the ground. The mist swirled around her. It wafted into her hood, and suddenly she could hear Scorpina’s voice in her head.

_I see you now, Blue Ranger_, she said. _My venom shows me the struggles you have endured to reach this place. Soon, we will know your identity, just as we learned Ewan’s._

The tail yanked April to her feet. Out of the mist, the Dark Dimension had completely changed. Where once she had been inside Ewan’s minimalist prison, now April was back in her old house, only half of it had burned to the ground. Fire had scorched the walls black and reduced all the furniture to cinders. Ash choked the air. There was no ceiling but the black of the Dark Dimension.

Scorpina and Ewan were gone, but April’s sister Lynn stood in the middle of the living room.

“Sister!” cried Lynn. “Father, he’s…”

Father himself appeared next to Lynn and punched her in the stomach. Lynn crumpled and disappeared into the mist.

April had had it with visions of her family.

Father pulled a pistol from his back pocket. April ducked and rolled toward him as he unloaded its entire clip. She didn’t think he hit her – she had had her fill with gunshot wounds for the day, thank you – but bullets wouldn’t stop her from defeating him. She didn’t care if he was just a vision. He was more than that here. Zordon sent her to this place to find herself, and what she had found was that April Johnson wasn’t going to take any crap from anyone anymore, especially her abusive asshole of a father. And if Scorpina had brought him here to mess with April’s mind, then taking him down would feel that much sweeter.

Father was still reloading his gun when April landed a kick to his chest. He crashed through the charred remains of their sofa. April chased after him, but in a flash he was back on his feet with a leg of furniture in his hand. He swiped, and the wooden leg glowed from the embers still burning on its end. April fell back, and her father pressed his attack. She had expected his swings to be drunken,
wild, but in this Dark Dimension her father was precise. He was fast. And after several swings, he landed a hit.

She felt the end of the wooden leg splinter against the side of her hood. Her house tumbled over on itself, and she fell under the mist.

_Having fun?_ taunted Scorpina. _Your father and your sister… They look familiar to me. I will have the Putties search through our slave pens once I have conquered your mind. You may kill him yourself, so long as you surrender your power to us._

Father and Lynn didn’t live in Cedar Grove. Scorpina was just trying to get under her skin. “G… go to hell.”

Scorpina made a “tsk tsk” sound. _My dear, we are already there._

A hand gripped April and yanked her out of the mist again. Her father held her by the hood. Her feet weren’t touching the ground. Father looked as he had earlier, like a bomb was exploding beneath his skin, but now his features were less human, more monstrous. His face was a blank expression, and no matter how hard she looked at him she knew that certain details were missing. His skin wasn’t that smooth, and his eyes weren’t quite that color. Fire glowed in his pupils. This demonic vision of her father terrified April more than she could ever say.

He punched her in the face. Stars burst in her vision. The burned house around them flickered for just a moment.

He followed up with a hard punch in her stomach that knocked the wind out of her. She watched her breath swirl from her mouth and enter her father’s. Within his body, she could see the air turn a golden yellow and begin to envelop the light from the bomb’s explosion.

Father looked distracted by whatever had just happened, so April swung her legs up and wrapped them around his outstretched arm. She shifted her body weight and brought the two of them down. Her landing was rough, but now she was free from his grip.

April rolled backward, and the two leapt to their feet. She found herself fending off attacks from three fronts: her father before her, the Dark Dimension around her, and, strangest of all, a growing suspicion within her that what she was doing was simply wrong. And while it was already taking all of her brain power just to fend off both her father’s punches and the Dark Dimension’s slowing her down, the belief that she shouldn’t be fighting nagged at her more and more with each passing moment.

And all the while, the bomb and the wind raged against each other within her father.

They battled for some time. April was quickly discovering that time seemed to have a life all its own in this strange place: it moved like a tide, sometimes speeding in, sometimes ebbing out, but always changing so that you never knew if the past sixty seconds had been a minute or an hour. She didn’t know how long they fought, but she felt her vision clearing with each passing moment. April began to notice little details in the house around them that she knew were false. Each one was a constant reminder that she was in the Dark Dimension, and things here were not as they seemed.

_Zordon said I am “adaptable”,_ she recalled. _Maybe I can get used to the Dark Dimension faster than the other Rangers. Is that why he sent me here?_

Something golden began to flicker at the edges of her vision, and she knew that it was Scorpina. She could hear the monster whispering strange things in another tongue, but every time April tried to look
directly at her or try to understand the words she said, they slipped from her thoughts, and her father would press his attack with a new intensity.

He was becoming more distorted. Though in real life Father was balding, here dark hair grew in long sheets on either side of his face, and his eyes were beginning to turn the same yellow as the fierce wind storm within him.

*Kill him here*, said Scorpina, *and you may kill him when we find him in your dimension.*

Scorpina’s promise appealed to the darker side of April, but she forced herself to think rationally. Why would she want to kill her father? He had done terrible things. He had all but ruined their family. But *kill him?*

*That’s not me,* she realized. *I am better than this.*

April stepped back and lowered her arms. “No,” she said. “I am done with your games.”

*Very well,* said Scorpina. *Kill her.*

Father took a step forward but stopped. The burned house began to glow with an eerie light. Everyone looked up. A single pinprick of white had appeared in the Dark Dimension’s black abyss. It grew with each passing moment. April could feel an intelligence behind it. The light was familiar to her, but she couldn’t think why.

*Kill her!* screamed Scorpina. Father twitched but didn’t move. His chest pulsed with explosions, but golden wisps fought against it and kept him in place.

The white exploded into the Dark Dimension as a solid beam of light. It washed over Father, then April, and then everything else around them.

When the white light touched Father, the golden winds within him exploded outward and bathed April in a warm breeze. Father stumbled to one knee. His skin no longer looked charred, and the bomb erupting within him subsided under the golden storm. The long, straight hair connected with his shirt and formed a hood. The golden light raced across his clothes and began to etch out familiar patterns. An emblem burned into his chest so brightly that April couldn’t look directly at it until it faded.

When she did, everything became clear. The Yellow Ranger knelt in Father’s place, the emblem of the phoenix glowing with a warm light in his chest.

*She tricked both of us,* April realized. *We’ve been fighting each other this whole time. I wonder what it was that Ewan saw when he fought me.* Her home had dissolved under the white beam.

They were back in Ewan’s prison. The beam of white light shrank in width before focusing on one of the yellow candles suspended above them. The candle blazed with white energy, and a single white beam shot out of its side and connected it with the candle next to it, and then the next, and the next. This process repeated dozens of times in an instant until every candle was connected in a vast web of light.

"No!” Scorpina screamed as she reappeared. “*I will control you!*” Her hands shot toward April, and the Blue Ranger felt an invisible force tug her entire body toward Scorpina. She looked down at herself. Her body was full of blue ocean water, but something deep black darted between the waves. April felt another tug, and the black slammed against the front of her body in response.

*Venom,* she thought. A third tug almost dropped her to her knees.
“Fuck off!” shouted Ewan. He made to charge at Scorpina, but fat drops of darkness fell from the void, between the connections of the white candles, and into the mist. They plopped between the Ranger and Scorpina, and wherever they fell a mudman formed.

Ewan stopped. More and more mudmen fell between them, but for every one that fell to the floor, three more were zapped into oblivion by the white webbing. Scorpina pulled at April again, and April felt her feet drag across the ground.

Mudmen rained down faster than ever. Ewan leapt into their midst, and the tornado that April had foreseen unleashed itself within him. Mudmen flew in all directions as Ewan brought his fury down upon them. The Dark Dimension couldn’t slow him down, but the mudmen would not stop raining down from above.

Scorpina must have sensed that she had gained the upper hand again, for she laughed that high-pitched cackle of hers. “Poor Little Ranger is all alone again,” she sang. “Poor Little Ranger shouldn’t have come here. Poor Little Ranger was so foolish…” The black tugged April forward once more. The pain from having something push from the inside was excruciating. April fell to one knee. “Perhaps you’re the smart Ranger after all,” Scorpina said. “Bow to Rita’s might and join her, as I have.”

April heard swearing from nearby. Ewan had finally been overwhelmed, and now a group of mudmen hauled him over and dropped him on his knees next to April.

“Get yourself out of here,” he said. “I can hold them off.”

“No; you get out of here,” said April. “I can handle this place better than you can. I’ll be fine.”

Ewan started to laugh but coughed instead. “Please. Don’t turn this into a ‘noble sacrifice’ contest. Go. You’re worth more to the world than I am.”

April was beginning to think that she hadn’t figured out Ewan as much as she thought she had. Do it, he thought to her. I don’t deserve to be a Power Ranger.

No joking. No foul language or crass remarks. Ewan wasn’t kidding. He would sacrifice himself for her. Scorpina’s stinger danced from one shoulder to the other. She looked like she couldn’t wait to strike one of them but couldn’t decide which.

"I can hear you,” she sneered. “Such noble little Rangers.”

I don’t care if Rita can hear this, Ewan continued. And hell, I don’t know much about you, Blue, but cheesy as this sounds, I’ve realized that, hey, the world doesn’t revolve around me. And if I can go down in a blaze of fucking glory so that someone as great as you can live, then fuck, maybe this is what being a Ranger is all about, right?

When April realized that this man was willing to lay down his life for her, that someone truly valued her for the first time in her life, a curious thing happened. Being a Ranger, thought April. In an instant she recalled all that had brought her here and everything she had learned since she had left her body. Water must focus itself if it wants to make an impact, Zordon had said. A small shaft of light from the white candles above them fell on April’s face, and she knew that somehow, Will was there. They weren’t alone.

She could feel power returning to her. Ewan must have felt the same, for he turned and gave her an odd look. The light, April realized. Will had reached them and given them power.

“Let me ask you something,” April said to Scorpina.
The monster’s tail flicked. She crossed her arms. “Unless it is ‘how may I best serve Rita’, I will kill you first for your impudence.”

April ignored her. “Did you know,” she said, “that mist is just water and air combined?”

April leapt to her feet and raised her arms. Ewan understood her meaning and did the same. Will’s white light enveloped the both of them and boosted their powers. The mist rose before them. Scorpina and the mudmen tried to attack, but a blast of wind from Ewan knocked all of them away. April focused all her might into honing the mist, condensing it, fashioning it into a weapon. She could see her arms glowing blue under Will’s light; Ewan, next to her, was golden.

Desperate, Scorpina stretched her hands forward to try to pull April’s venom toward her. The venom slipped right out of April’s body, turning a deep blue as it did so, and shot straight to Scorpina’s outstretched hand. But April’s body must have altered the venom, for Scorpina’s hand began to smoke the instant the blue venom splashed over it. She screamed a blood-curdling scream and leapt backward, tripping over something under the mist and going down with a hard fall.

That something skidded toward the Rangers, and April could feel the pull of her trident nearby. Her mind reached toward it, and up it came, out of the mist and right into her hand. The weapon increased her power tenfold, and all the mist in the prison began to swirl around the trident’s central point.

A thought came from Ewan – not words, exactly, but a sort of picture of an idea. April understood it immediately, and the two set to work. She felt the touch of his mind as they drew the mist to them. She couldn’t believe his determination; this was not the same Ewan who had snuck off on his own inside the police station. This was a Power Ranger.

Mudmen hauled Scorpina to her feet. She clutched her arm; the blue poison had burned her hand and forearm down to the bone. Scorpina tried to summon the mist around her to take her out of the Dark Dimension, but April and Ewan controlled the mist now, and Will’s energy above them now kept anything from entering or leaving.

Ewan raised an arm into the air. The golden wind within him spun out his arm, collected in the air, and shimmered into existence as a beautiful bow made of silver. Topaz gems formed wing patterns within the bow’s body, much like the sapphire water drops in the tips of April’s trident.

“You ready?” asked Ewan.

April nodded and let go of her weapon. The trident did not fall to the ground but instead lifted into the air and slowly fell into the notch of Ewan’s bow. He drew the string back. He and April focused the mist on the trident’s point until it solidified.

“You will never defeat Queen Rita!” screamed Scorpina. She pointed with her good hand while her other hand fell right off her arm. “You will die before the night is through!”

Let’s do this, thought Ewan.

Out loud, he said, “Serket, I’m sorry for what happened to you. If there is any part of you left within that monster, I hope this releases you so that you can finally join your family.”

As Ewan released the string, and the trident rocketed through the air, April couldn’t help but notice the brief look of clarity on Scorpina’s face. April didn’t understand what Ewan had said, but she remembered what Zordon had said to the other Rangers about Scorpina being the old Yellow Ranger, and April could only assume that Ewan had seen visions of her before her fall. She said a
small prayer for the former Ranger as the trident blasted through the first mudman. April and Ewan worked as one to manipulate the water and air around the missile to help guide it through every mudman in the dark prison. One by one they turned to dust. Many tried to run, but the strange nature of the Dark Dimension kept them in place like some demented treadmill. The Dark Dimension became a shower of mudmen dust.

Then the trident found its final mark. Scorpina flew across the prison and skidded to a halt on her back, the trident buried deep in her chest. Tears welled in her eyes. Black smoke swirled from her body in the shape of scorpions scuttling through the air. Her golden armor melted from her body until there was none left. April and Ewan released their hold on the mist and approached.

“Serket,” said Ewan. “You can leave this place.”

Serket, her whole body shaking, managed to nod. Something like a smile played across her face. She tried to speak, but the pain was too much. She looked at Ewan a moment through watered eyes before her body went slack, turned into a fine golden mist, and disappeared. April caught the shaft of her trident.

“If I ever turn into her,” said Ewan, “do the same for me, alright?”

“Are… you crying?”

Ewan turned away. The hood would prevent April from seeing any tears, of course, but his voice had cracked.

“Can we get out of here now?” he asked.

April looked up at the candles. One by one the white left them and shot upward into the black. “White figured out how to reach us,” said April. “Follow the light.”
Dr. Cranston’s willingness to help the Rangers was the first bit of good news that Will had heard all night. The professor quickly joined Alpha in analyzing a series of holographic schematics that were completely beyond Will, and soon the two of them had created a few prototypes. Machines that Will hadn’t noticed before whirred to life, and out popped some small device that the professor gingerly scooped into his arms. Alpha didn’t make fun of him anymore. He must be shocked that a human could keep up with his mechanical genius.

Will was glad the professor was distracted, for he still had questions for Zordon. And the conversation wasn’t going to be easy.

Rita was a Power Ranger, he thought. I saw her. On the roof. There was a black Power Ranger manipulating Ewan from the shadows.

Zordon was slow to respond. You are correct, Will Weston.

Why did you keep something that big from us? You sent us in blind. I mean, between this, and the corruption within the Spirit power, you’ve done nothing but manipulate us all night. How are we supposed to trust you? You lied, Zordon.

Will wished he could see Zordon’s face within that tank.

Everything I tell you now, said Zordon, the others will also hear in time. Ten-thousand years ago, I split myself into the seven aspects of my people, as I have told you before. I retained Wisdom, and the other six aspects I bonded with humans from around the globe: Honor, Strength, Courage, Spirit, Harmony… and Ambition.

Ambition, thought Will.

Yes, said Zordon. Among the scholars of my people, one’s essence of Ambition is considered to be the most dangerous. It is what spurs us to action, for without ambition, what drive is there to accomplish your goals? I knew that it would take a brilliant, powerful mind to maintain control over the Black power, so I chose the most promising of my recruits. Rita Repulsa… you must understand, Will Weston, that any of the powers could be corrupted if the right circumstances fell – except of course for the power of Honor. Therefore, I made a choice: the strongest of my Rangers would wield the most dangerous power, while the weakest would be granted incorruptibility. I believed at the time that this was the wisest course.

Give the hardest job to the most capable, thought Will. Risk management.

Yes. Rita was the best of them all. Bright, capable, determined. She was infectious, a natural leader… but that was where I made my first mistake.

You made the White Ranger the leader instead.

Yes. I tried to balance power, and instead it only caused the very rift that led Rita to her downfall. I do not know when exactly she turned, but one day a great dragon rose from the earth and attacked the home of Rita’s lover, a hunter by the name of Dreadwing. I had some warning of the dragon’s
attack beforehand. This was no ordinary dragon: it was a creature of darkness, it thrived on human despair. I evacuated most of the town and assigned my Rangers other tasks, in the hope that leaving the dragon alone would starve it. But, Dreadwing vowed to defend his home, and unknown to me Rita had assigned Serket, the Yellow Ranger, to guard him. The dragon fell, but in the process it killed Rita's lover. Rita blamed me for my deception, and she used dark magic to resurrect Dreadwing as the demon Goldar. The pair of them then hunted the other Rangers one by one, to turn them or to kill them, and before I knew it only the White Ranger remained, for Rita considered him not worth the effort. To everyone's surprise – including mine, if I am to be honest – the White Ranger used the last of his energy to send Rita and her minions to Mars and trap them there until today.

Will hardly knew what to say. Much of Zordon's story he had suspected. The numbers had never added up, with Zordon's seven aspects and only five Rangers. Will had just assumed that maybe Alpha was the last piece, or something. He had been processing enough about tonight to give it much thought. Why didn't you just tell us this to begin with? he asked.

Rita's powers have grown such that she no longer resembles the Ranger she once was. She fights us now not with her power of Ambition but with the forces of the Dark Dimension. I will not deny that I withheld the truth, but in effect you are not fighting a Power Ranger at all. Would you have been as willing to take on this responsibility if you knew that the enemy once stood in your place?

Will glanced back at the four Rangers lying in their healing bays. Ewan's mind, April's venom, Jack's leg... they'd suffered so many setbacks tonight. They were on the ropes, and Rita was winding up for the knockout.

I understand why you didn't tell us, thought Will, but it sounds like this is the kind of thing that turned Rita and the old Rangers against you in the first place. We are part of you now. We're linked to your essence. So no more lies, alright? No more manipulating.

I have done many things differently this time, said Zordon. Will swore he could hear a smile in the alien's voice. For instance, I do not believe that this White Ranger is the weakest.

Will grinned, then frowned. I gave Goldar my power coin, he thought. That doesn't sound so great to me.

The coins served as conduits for the powers you five have been granted. When I created the original Rangers, I chose those humans myself. The Power didn't take to them as I had thought they would, so I created a focus for each Ranger. None of them were ever able to access the Power of the Rangers without their coins. You five, however, are different. I allowed the Power to choose whom it would, and so the Power lies within each of you.

Why do we need the coins, then?

Under normal circumstances, it would take years before you would learn to access your Power without the help of the coin, but tonight has greatly accelerated the process. All five of you have undergone unique trials that have bonded your souls with your Power.

Will shook his head. Trials? What trials had he undergone? I don't feel like I've done anything, he thought. The others have fought harder, and they've suffered more. They're all on those medical tables now, and I'm not.

When you were prepared to sacrifice yourself to save the Yellow Ranger, you performed an act so honorable that, whether you realized it or not, your Power's bond with your soul strengthened to an incredible degree. That purity flowed through your coin, and it proved to be too much for the
darkness within Goldar. The same process occurred with the Red and Green Rangers when they showed their Strength and Courage in defending you from Maelstrom, and the same is happening at this very moment to the Blue and Yellow Rangers in the Dark Dimension.

So we… don’t need our power coins?

The five of you have grown faster than I could ever have imagined, said Zordon. I believe that all five of you are already so attuned to your Powers that you require your coins no longer.

A weight lifted from Will’s shoulders. I had thought that since I gave Goldar my coin, I wouldn’t be a Power Ranger anymore. I thought maybe you were just making me look like a Ranger so that the Professor didn’t recognize me.

Zordon laughed. No; though the coin helps keep you anchored, it is no longer required. I have never met a human so honorable, Will Weston. When you thought you would sacrifice your powers in order to save Ewan, the Power of Honor became one with you. You are the only Ranger who could have done what you did.

What do you mean?

The other Rangers could not have made that kind of sacrifice. Honor alone is incorruptible. Harmony can become discord. Strength, oppression. Courage, brashness. Spirit is volatile and, at its worst, easy to be led astray. But Honor… Honor, at its most extreme, leads to self-sacrifice, and there is no act more worthy of a Power Ranger.

But I didn’t actually lose anything.

You believed you would, said Zordon, and belief makes all the difference. When Goldar touched your coin, something happened which he would not have wanted. Because your Power is incorruptible, Goldar’s intentions backfired, and an echo of your Honor found its way to the Dark Dimension.

What do you mean?

Zordon chuckled again. Observe your friends.

Will turned back to the medical alcove. All four Rangers lay there: the twins with their battle wounds from fighting Maelstrom, Ewan’s soulless body, April, suitless, with stingers freshly removed and wounds slowly closing. But just as Will was wondering what Zordon had meant, yellow and blue beams fell from the ceiling into Ewan and April, respectively.

“Oh my God,” Will said aloud.

As I said, belief makes all the difference, said Zordon. Your Honor led them out of the Dark Dimension.

Will couldn’t speak. Despite his suit, he felt tears welling in his eyes. He had helped save them. Finally, things were starting to look up.

Chapter 2 – Tom
Things were not looking up.

Tom and the other men threw themselves against the barricades to try to hold back the onslaught. This day had gone so far to hell that Tom Oliver wondered if perhaps he had died.

Every Fourth of July followed the same pattern: teach tae kwon do at the Youth Center, have lunch at Ernie’s Juice Bar – now “Zack’s”, ever since Ernie had passed away – teach more tae kwon do classes, watch fireworks from the roof, go home. But Zack had a surprise in store today. Some old high school friends had moved back to town, and he had decided to “get the ole’ band back together”. Most of the old crew still lived in town. Tom had lunch with Jason from time to time, and he was known to have snuck into a few of Billy’s crazy science lectures. Adam was probably the one Tom saw the most; he ran a rival school across town, and almost every tournament would end with a showdown between Tom’s students and Adam’s.

But somehow, Zack had managed to call all of them to the Youth Center for the day as a sort of “welcome home” party for their other friends, Rocky and Aisha, who were finally moving back to town so that Aisha could start her own veterinary practice. So the seven of them spent the afternoon catching up, laughing about old times, making fun of Rocky’s astonishing weight gain, trying to translate the things Billy said. Tom couldn’t believe that the others still called him Tommy after all this time. Some things would never change.

But the day turned sour when Aisha started to talk about Kimberly. Rocky and Aisha had just moved back from Springfield, where Kim ran a world-class gymnastics facility, but Tom had hoped that no one would bring her up. No one but Billy failed to miss the change in Tom’s demeanor at the mention of Kim’s name. He grew sulky. He slouched back in his chair and crossed his arms. He didn’t want to interrupt his friends, but he would have given anything to change the subject. Kim had hurt him bad. They had been inseparable. They were going to get married. But then she went off to a world gymnastics competition and, what? After just a few weeks she sends him a Dear John letter, and that’s it. Never heard from her again. She never came back to Angel Grove, never called, never answered Tom’s calls.

But what made him feel the worst was hearing Aisha talk about Kim’s divorce. It made Tom happy, and that in turn made him feel horrible. He should have wanted her to be happy, but deep down he knew that he wanted her to feel the rejection he had felt all those years ago. Some grudges die hard, and Tom had held on to his for nearly twenty years.

After that, the conversation faltered. Billy muttered something about a project at his lab and took his leave. Jason got a call from work soon after, and Zack had to prepare for the “Couples Dance Beneath the Fireworks” he hosted every year. Parents who had brought their kids for Tom’s class followed Zack and his wife Angela onto the open floor, and on a whim Aisha dragged Rocky out to join them, leaving just Tom and Adam at their table for seven.

They had only been out there a few minutes when the first quake hit. Couples toppled all over the dance floor. People screamed and ran outside. Paintings crashed from the walls. Glasses fell from the juice bar. The quake wasn’t a long one, but the one that followed was. Tom stayed clear of the windows, but outside he could see odd flashes illuminate the twilight.

Then the power went out.

Every Friday night at Zack’s was Parents’ Night, which included romantic candlelight dinners, so Zack’s stash of candles quickly made themselves useful. Zack and the others were careful to only leave them in places where they wouldn’t fall over and start fires, just in case more quakes hit.

Frightened parents ran back into the Youth Center and announced that their cars weren’t working.
Tom and his friends raced to the rooftop, where they usually watched the city’s fireworks. All of Cedar Grove had gone dark, and now the last traces of the sun disappeared beneath the horizon. Lightning ripped across the sky, and in its wake there formed dark clouds. Even as the group stood gaping at this impossible phenomenon, bolts struck throughout the city, and fires cast distant buildings in an eerie glow.

Tom pulled his phone from his pocket, but it was dead. The others checked their phones, but the results were all the same. Talk spread of a terrorist attack. Zack and Adam raced back downstairs to barricade the doors. Tom, Rocky, and Aisha stayed on the roof and watched, dumbstricken, as dark shapes moved through the streets below. A few of them began to drift toward the Youth Center, and it wasn’t long before people in the parking lot began to scream. Zack bellowed up the stairs for help. As Tom turned to answer Zack’s call, he heard gunshots and saw police forming a line of riot shields down the street. He had to hope that they would hold this attack back, whatever it was.

When he reached the ground floor, Tom was met with one of the strangest sights he had ever seen.

Adam and Zack were fighting some kind of monster. It was nearly human, but it had no nose, and its eyes were pure fire. In the candlelight, the monster looked naked, but its skin was a strange texture, as though its entire body was covered in mud. Where hands should have been it had a pair of club-like extensions, which it now swung about the dance floor with impressive speed.

Tom clapped Zack on the shoulder as he ran by and told him to keep barricading the entrances, and Zack, who hadn’t done any serious martial arts work in nearly twenty years, was more than happy to oblige.

Tom’s first kick landed in the monster’s side and actually seemed to sink in to the monster. He yanked his leg out and barely dodged a swipe as Adam explained that he had had the same problem. This thing was fast. Tom and Adam spent most of their time on the defensive; the monster left no holes in its attack for the two of them to exploit. Candlelight cast inhuman shadows around the walls and the terrified onlookers. Zack tried to rally everyone to help barricade the doors, but few could break away from watching Adam and Tom battle this thing.

Adam ducked under a club and grabbed the monster’s arm. It flung Adam across the room like a sack of flour. Adam landed back-first on the steps that led up to the bar and didn’t get up. Aisha screamed and ran to his side. Even though she was a veterinarian, Tom had to hope that she might be able to help him.

But Tom had his own problems. Now he was alone against this monster, and if he didn’t think of something soon, he and everyone else here might die. If he could at least get this thing away from the crowd…

And that was it. Tom’s brilliant plan snapped into his head. It was a horrible, last-ditch kind of plan, but it was all he had. They had no weapons – this was the Youth Center, after all – and now Tom’s only help was down for the count. Tom repositioned himself and let the monster press its attack. He found himself being driven backward toward the stairs to the roof.

When his foot found the first stair, he leapt off it and scored a solid kick to the monster’s face. Tom scrambled up the stairs and called insults down, and sure enough the monster stomped after him. Tom ran outside just in time to see a fireball strike the side of a helicopter above them. It spiraled downward and would likely crash nearby, but Tom had to focus on not dying right now.

The monster charged onto the roof and straight for Tom, who had pressed his back against the roof’s edge. The monster dove, but just as Tom made to dodge, his foot slipped on the rooftop gravel. The
monster’s club-hand caught Tom hard in the stomach and brought the two of them over the side. Tom felt himself tumbling and reached out. He barely caught on to the roof’s edge and hung on for dear life while the monster plummeted to the sidewalk below. Tom dared a glance down. The monster got back on its feet within seconds. It roared up at Tom, who hauled himself back onto the roof. That fall should have killed that thing, but instead it disappeared around the side of the building, looking no more injured than when Tom had first seen it.

But at least Tom had gotten it away from the others.

The Youth Center had quieted down when Tom returned downstairs. Adam was alright but shaken from the attack. Zack and the others had finished boarding up the windows and putting all the tables and chairs and other heavy things in front any openings.

It was only a few minutes before something began to pound on the doors. Tom and his friends pressed themselves against the barricade. They took turns to conserve energy, for the pounding never let up. Zack had passed out his sports equipment to the adults, but Tom knew that baseball bats and hockey pads would do little against these mud monsters. Soon the pounding became the heartbeat of the Youth Center. Most of the children fell asleep in their parents’ arms. One by one candles snuffed out.

Now Tom checked his analog watch, one of the only things still working since the power had gone out. 3:00 AM, over five hours since the pounding had started. His body ached. No one had heard any news. They still had no idea what those things were, or if anything was out there fighting them. But Tom had to hold out for hope. Surely help was on its way.

Chapter 3 – Bill

The information Zordon had gathered was incredible. His scope was literally lightyears beyond Earth; Bill found extensive files on the other seven planets in the system, Pluto and Chiron, the Kuiper Belt, Alpha Centauri, and dozens of other star systems. But of course it was the Dark Dimension that Bill was most interested in. Zordon claimed that his knowledge of it was lacking, but in one minute Bill had read more information than he could have uncovered in a lifetime. He could hardly contain his excitement; his stomach fluttered and his hands couldn’t stop moving around the console. Alpha made some kind of sexual wise-crack, but Bill wasn’t listening. It wasn’t until the computers finished creating a new model of Bill’s cryogenic mass decelerators that he snapped out of his giddy stupor.

He picked up the new bomb and examined it. The craftsmanship was exquisite, vastly superior to the makeshift pieces of junk he had scrounged up in his lab.

“Not a bad start,” said Alpha. “For a human.”

“Affirmative,” said Bill. He pulled up a hologram of the freeze-bomb’s schematics. “With your advanced technology I was able to increase the cryogenic mass decelerator’s explosive radius by approximately seventy-three percent. With more time, I believe I could even adapt the technology to other forms of weaponry.”

He placed the bomb on the console and minimized the schematics. Already he had become a wiz at flipping through the Command Center’s data files; it was mostly a matter of fine hand movements, and years of mechanical engineering had given him a level of dexterity beyond the average human.
But as he made his way back to the data on the Dark Dimension, he came across files for the Power Rangers themselves. Curiosity quickly got the better of him.

“May I, Zordon?” he asked. Though he wanted to learn about their tech, he didn’t want to do anything to anger the disembodied voice.

You may, said Zordon.

First in the file was a series of schematics for the Rangers’ armor. Bill was surprised to see that the five suits each had unique characteristics. He wasn’t sure why all of the suits didn’t have the same specifications, but he assumed Zordon had a good reason. “I’m supposed to make better armor for them,” muttered Alpha. “Apparently Rita learned some new tricks in the past ten-thousand years. Go figure.”

Bill studied the armor. The tech here was almost as amazing as Zordon’s data on dark energy, but one thing struck Bill as odd. “The mudmen were using guns,” he said. “Judging from these schematics, I would say that Rita is somehow enhancing their firepower; there’s no way a normal assault rifle would be able to penetrate this armor under typical conditions. Have you considered providing the Rangers with external kinetic dampeners? They should lessen the impact of incoming projectiles without decelerating the movements of the Rangers.”

Alpha paused, then tilted his head to the side. “I think I’m in love. Where have you been all my life?”

Bill had always been worthless when it came to social interactions, but at least humans had faces. He had no idea how to answer Alpha, but thankfully the robot turned and hopped on another console to begin new work on the Rangers’ suits. Bill returned to sorting through the Rangers’ files.

“What are ‘zords’?” he asked. He had almost missed the file, but there it was: one “zord” for each Ranger. Whatever these things were, their tech surpassed anything else Bill had seen thus far.

Hopefully, the situation will not become so dire that you will find out, answered Zordon.

Bill decided not to press the issue, but when he returned to the files on the Dark Dimension he found that the computers were busy collecting information from the Yellow and Blue Rangers.

Their consciousnesses have returned to us, explained Zordon. We will learn from them what we can. Hopefully they have gained information that will aid us in stopping Rita from unleashing more monsters within this dimension.

Bill smiled as the White Ranger ran to the sides of his fallen friends. These kids must be close, thought Bill. He imagined his own friends as Power Rangers at that age. Tommy and Jason would have been naturals, and Kim, Zack, and Trini would have been good choices, too, and Rocky and Aisha and Adam... It surprised him how easily he could see any of them donning these suits. He wondered if he would have been allowed to help them out like he was doing now. It would have crushed him to have been left out.

His friends. Were any of them still alive? Were they still at the Youth Center when Rita’s forces attacked? Would he be dead now if he had stayed with them? He moved through the computer system and found that he could look around the city in real time. Though rain now blanketed all of Cedar Grove, the fires refused to let up. Bill wasn’t much of a believer in sorcery, but this strange perversion of science unsettled him. At least some of the fires should have let up. Yet they seemed to be growing.
Mudmen roamed the city in droves, but here and there Bill found pockets of humans still alive. Many of them were led by police officers. Bill had watched from his lab window, helpless, as the campus officers were cut down, their bullets doing absolutely nothing to the monsters.

And suddenly it hit him that he could help more people than just the Power Rangers.

“Hey, Zordon,” he said. “Would it be possible to use your molecular translocation device to provide some of the people of Cedar Grove with my cryogenic molecular decelerators?”

_I believe it would be unwise to provide untrained humans with such technology_, said Zordon. _But I understand your desire to help. While the computers continue to retrieve information from the Yellow and Blue Rangers, I would ask that you redesign your work so that they would not do more harm than good in untrained hands._

“Affirmative,” said Bill. “I think I have an idea. I’ll get right on it.”

_Very good, but your time will be limited. One of the Rangers is about to awaken._

Chapter 4 – Ewan

Ewan opened his eyes and slowly drew a breath. He was out of the Dark Dimension. He could feel it. No more illusions. No more constant visions of death and despair and Goldar’s goddamned grin. No more Scorpina. No more Serket. He was back in the real world. He was himself again.

_Hey man_, thought Will. _You alright?_ Ewan stretched and looked at the figure at the foot of his medical bed. The White Ranger stared back at him with those intense misty-white eyes. The sight of the Ranger suit reminded Ewan that he still wore his.

“Get me out of this suit,” he said.

Will glanced at Zordon’s fish tank and back to Ewan. _Jack’s professor is here_, he explained. _We can’t show ourselves to him._

“Don’t care,” said Ewan. “I’m getting out of this fucking thing.”

_It is alright_, said Zordon. Will still looked confused, but he stepped away from Ewan’s bed and shrugged. Ewan had only to think of his suit going away, and a pale golden glow surrounded his body. The cloth and leather of his armor evaporated into the air until only the faint outline of the phoenix remained on Ewan’s chest. Under the armor, he wore a yellow gi with black trim. Better than a Speedo, at least.

He vaguely recognized the professor. Ewan and Will sometimes visited Jack at the lab on campus. He had only met the professor face-to-face once, and that was only when Jack had forced the guy to come out of hiding for some good old-fashioned social interaction. Now the professor’s hands flew over some consoles on the other side of the Command Center so quickly that for a moment Ewan thought he looked like he was at some kind of rave. The sight would almost have been funny, but Ewan wasn’t in much of a joking mood.

For once, there wasn’t any music playing in the back of his mind. He hated the silence.

He sat on the side of his bed that faced April and buried his face in his hands. He could see the truth
plainly now; Scorpina’s stingers sat discarded in a small basket next to April’s bed. She really had
been attacked by Scorpina in the police station. April had almost died because he had been a selfish
idiot. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Jack and Jess on their own medical beds. At the sight of
Jack’s leg – or lack of one – he lost it.

They’d be fine if it weren’t for me, he thought as the tears began to flow. He didn’t even care that
Will was still watching. Fuck fuck fuck fuck this is all my fault.

They chose their own paths, said Zordon. Do not mistake your ill-conceived actions for stupidity.
Your Power of Spirit was tainted with Rita’s evil. You were bound to the previous Yellow Ranger
and had to overcome her before you could continue your journey as a Power Ranger. There was no
other way.

“Doesn’t change the fact that everyone nearly died because of me,” Ewan said aloud. “Is his leg
really gone? Fuck, no, I don’t want to know. Give my Power to the professor or something. I
shouldn’t be here.”

“Geez,” said Will. “That place really must have done a number on you.”

Flashes of all the things Ewan saw during his days in the Dark Dimension raced through his mind. It
was all he could do to keep from throwing up all over the Command Center floor. Again. “How
long was I gone?”

“A few hours. It’s 3:00 AM now.”

Ewan stared. “You’re tellin’ me I wasn’t even gone a full day?” Somehow, the fact that so little
time had actually passed was the cruelest of the Dark Dimension’s jokes. He tried not to think about
it. “I’m telling you,” he insisted, “give my Power to someone else. Anyone. I’m done.”

“That’s not the Ewan I know,” said Will.

know some nice cheerleaders… if any of ’em are still alive.”

Will shook his head. “The Power chose you, man.”

“Do I sound like the ’Holder of fucking Spirit’ to you now, Will? Anyone would be better at this
than I would. I just…” visions of the person Ewan had fought, who had actually been April, “…
can’t.”

“No one else could have survived in the Dark Dimension for that long. What you did was amazing.
I couldn’t have done that. I’d have cracked.”

“I did crack. Look at me! I sound like a fucking pussy, and I’m crying, god dammit.”

“You hung on while you were in there. Now you’re in shock. That’s normal. It means you’re still
human.”

The Power of Spirit is much more than vivacity, young one, said Zordon. Among my kind, some
refer to our aspect of Spirit as Willfulness.

“And I am willful to find someone better for the job.”

Spirit is that part of all of us that reminds us of who we really are. If the Power of Spirit chose you
then you are key to the identity of this team. To lose you would be for the Power Rangers to lose
their sense of self.

Ewan laughed without smiling. “If I’m the identity of this team then we’re all totally fucked.”

“So you’d just quit?” asked Will. “After cleansing your Power, and saving a whole train full of people. You’d ditch all of us and skip town?”

“It’s not about quitting anymore, Will. I…” he had trouble finding the words. He’d never felt this way before, and the sudden change made him deeply uncomfortable. But Will was his friend. One of the few friends he truly had. Hell, Will and Jack probably were the only friends he had. “Last time,” said Ewan, “when I said ‘no’ and went home, it was because I was scared for my own life. I didn’t want to get hurt like I’d seen Goldar do to you and the twins. When I took the coin, I was stupid enough to believe that I would make it out of this without a scratch. Thought I was fucking invincible. But now? It’s totally different. What I’ve done has caused so much pain – to other people. I’m scared – like, completely shit-my-pants terrified – that if I go back out there as a Ranger, I’ll cause even more harm, and I just can’t live with that. I would die before I see anyone else get hurt because of my mistakes.”

Will and Zordon said nothing. Ewan meant what he said, but putting his feelings into words had perhaps been the hardest thing he had done all night. He was ashamed of how scared he was, and that shame and terror had convinced him that he was no Power Ranger.

I won’t stop you from going, thought Will. But… don’t do this. We need you. Who else is gonna save your mom?

At the thought of family, Ewan tumbled through time and space and landed in the body of the old Yellow Ranger. Serket stood at the edge of a waterfall, her Ranger’s bow in hand and an arrow of dust and air forming on its string. The Blue Ranger stood in the water, her trident with sapphire tips having just leapt from the water’s surface.

“Long live Rita Repulsa,” the Yellow Ranger rasped. “The Green Ranger and I have bowed to our new master. Join us, or die.”

“No!” shouted the Blue Ranger. “I can’t… I won’t fight you! You’re my friend!”

“Blood is thicker than water, and I will save my family, no matter the cost.” Serket loosed her arrow and caught the Blue Ranger in the chest. The Ranger hadn’t even tried to dodge, like she’d never seriously expected the arrow to come. She cried out and splashed into the water, and Ewan fell back into his own body.

“Was that really necessary?” he grumbled.

I saw your vision along with you, said Zordon. Do you understand what your Power is telling you?

“That Serket killed the old Blue Ranger? Oh hey by the way, Rita used to be a Power Ranger.”

“So we heard,” said Will.

Serket was driven mad by Rita’s lie, said Zordon. Rita turned Serket’s own willfulness against her, channeled her toward the wrong path. Serket lacked the inner strength to stand against such manipulation, but you, Ewan McKay, are different. You and Serket stand in odd parallel, yet you could not be more dissimilar. You have lost your families to Rita’s flames of ambition. You have stood imprisoned within the Dark Dimension. Yet, where the Serket whom I knew and loved perished, you endured to be returned to life. The phoenix on your chest is as apt for you as it was cruel irony for her. She buckled under the pressure of the crucible. You were reborn. You have
been given a second chance.

Ewan didn’t respond immediately, and when he did, his words came with slow consideration. “I’d still be in there if it weren’t for April. She saved my life, and you,” he pointed at Will, “I don’t know what the fuck you did, but it worked.”

*I traded my power coin for your body,* said Will. *Goldar’s idea. He meant to trick us, but it looks like it backfired.*

Ewan ran his hand down his side. “I do have a hot body, and you’re a fucking idiot, but… thanks.”

Will looked about as flabbergasted as someone without a face could. *You’re thanking me?* he asked.

*The bond between the five of you is quite remarkable,* said Zordon. *Before this fight is over, it will prove to be your greatest strength. Should you leave, Ewan, that bond will be severed, and the Rangers will not win this battle. It is as simple as that.*

*I can’t believe you thanked me,* Will shook his head. *You never thank me for anything. Seriously, what did that place do to you?*

Back in the presence of someone as pure as Will, Ewan began to wonder if Rita Repulsa was as corrupt as her Dark Dimension. Yet the more he thought about the past few hours, the more obvious the answer became: *yes. Hell yes. Fuck yes.* Rita was a twisted mess of death. Of chaos. Of lust. Of control. She had to be stopped, or the whole world would become one big Dark Dimension.

And Ewan was the only person in existence who had resisted her. God damn it all.

*What did it do to me?* he asked Will. *If we ever find Rita, I’ll show you.*

**Chapter 5 – Tom**

Tom knew that they couldn’t hold out much longer.

His watch now read 3:30, and just in the past thirty minutes they had suffered two very close calls: a muddy hand through the window and an evil face shining through the cracking door. The monsters would break through soon. Help wasn’t coming.

“Guys,” said Tom, “we have to get them away from the Youth Center.”

“Yeah,” said Rocky, “but how? We’re basically stuck in here.”

Tom thought back on how he had gotten the last monster out of the building. “No we’re not,” he said. “Just hold for a little while longer. I have an idea.”

Stupid, he knew, but most of his ideas tonight had been stupid, and so far they had all worked. When he returned to the Youth Center’s roof he was surprised to find rain falling in thick sheets. There hadn’t been a cloud in the sky before the invasion started. The pounding from the monsters must have masked the sound of the storm.

It was almost impossible to see more than a few feet; the power downtown shorted in and out, and the clouds blocked all moon and starlight, leaving only the dim glow of distant fires and the constant crack of lightning.
Though the Youth Center was only two stories tall, its second story was vaulted and much taller than usual, so a jump to the ground was out of the question. Tom leaned over the edge and noticed a window sill below. If he was careful, he might be able to drop down to it. From there, it was a short enough distance to the ground that he could drop and be alright.

He was already soaked to the bone. He had to hope that the extra weight wouldn’t affect his climb. He took several quick breaths to pump himself up, then he dropped over the side of the building.

His fingers slipped on the window frame. He lost his grip and hung on for just a second before he found himself falling again. The lower sill was larger, but though he caught himself, the shock of the fall stretched his arms past the point they should. He cried out and released his grip. The ground rose up to meet him, but years of training kicked in at the last moment. When he hit the ground, he tucked his legs and rolled through a puddle to soften the impact. He lay on his back in the rain, his arms and legs aching, but nothing broken. So far, so good, especially for someone pushing forty.

Tom hauled himself to his feet and ran around the corner. Though he could not see it through the rain, he knew that the Youth Center’s front door lay just beyond the parking lot. Tom slipped between parked cars until he came to his own. It was an older model, made before keyless entry became so commonplace. He unlocked the front door and slid into the driver’s seat, but unfortunately his car – and, he suspected, all the rest – still did not work. Instead he popped his trunk and rummaged through his tae kwon do gear until he found the only thing that might be of help: his competition sword. Not that he ever fought anyone with it – it was purely for form, not fighting – but it might come in handy. He also busted open his old roadside emergency kit for a little something that should grab the monsters’ attention.

He could hear them as he approached the front doors. They were groaning, grunting – it sounded like some sick imitation of a zombie horde. Darkness is on my side, Tom thought. If I can lead them away and then lose them, they won’t find their way back here.

He withdrew the item he had taken from his roadside emergency kit. Here’s hoping this works better than it did in Jurassic Park. “Hey!” he yelled. “Over here!” He looked away and struck the road flare. It lit all the world around him with bright red: the rain-soaked buildings, the abandoned cars, the bodies in the road. He heard the monsters scream, and he dared a glance at them.

What shocked him the most was how many there really were: at least three dozen blinded monsters stumbled toward him. He noticed that their muddy feet stuck to the ground as they stepped, like the rain was causing them to slowly melt. He had seen the speed of the monster that had been inside the Youth Center. He was thankful for any advantage.

Tom turned and ran in the opposite direction slowly enough to ensure that the whole group would follow. Say what you would about these mud monsters – that they were grotesque, that they were powerful, that they were deadly – they were not bright. Every last one followed Tom away from the Youth Center, their feet making disgusting slurping sounds as they dragged their sticky, muddy selves across the pavement.

The rain had given Tom another idea. Angel River ran through the middle of town, and it was only a few blocks away. If Tom could somehow convince these idiot monsters to fall into the water… Tom quickened his pace.

He tried not to focus on the destruction around him as he ran through the streets. His flare cast strange shadows on the buildings. He couldn’t shake the feeling that something was watching him from above, but every time he looked up he saw only rain and darkness.

As he rounded a corner into an alley, his light fell upon a fresh group of mud monsters so close he
could have touched them. He cried out in surprise and swung his competition sword. It stuck in the nearest monster’s neck and didn’t come out. Tom left it, turned, and tore back out of the alley.

He tripped over something as he came back around the corner. The flare flew out of his hand. He rolled across the sidewalk and into the waterlogged street. Disoriented, he pulled himself to his feet. The monsters reached the flare first. The closest one snuffed it out with his sticky foot. Tom turned and continued down the street, not daring to think about the soft thing he had tripped over.

Without the light of the flare, Tom had to slow down. He couldn’t afford to trip again, but now he was running almost completely blind. Between the flare, the lightning, and the city’s lights constantly turning on and off, Tom’s eyes could not adjust to the dark. The world around him came in freeze frames too horrible to dwell upon.

His stomach and knee found the railing for him. He toppled headfirst over the rail, just barely managing to grab on before he would have fallen. He had found the Angel River. His intuition had been right: he was on Caesar Street, which overlooked the river with a scenic dropoff. Tom knew the river to be some ten or fifteen meters below. He could hear the water below his dangling feet. It was rushing much faster and higher than usual. Runoff from the storm must be flooding the river. Its current would be extremely dangerous.

Just what Tom was counting on.

“Hey!” he called. “Mud goons! Over here!”

Tom dropped down so that he held onto the cement of the sidewalk’s edge rather than the railing. No one would be able to see him from the road now. He yelled again and swung himself to the side, monkey-style. Sure enough, several screaming mud monsters fell past him a second later, their voices suddenly muffled by the raging river. More and more fell past, but eventually the monsters grew wise and halted before the rail. They held some kind of brief discussion, and then they turned to leave. His eyes now more accustomed to the darkness, Tom pulled himself up and dared a glance on to the road.

The monsters were going back the way they had come. They might go back to the Youth Center.

His arms still aching from his botched descent of the Youth Center, Tom hauled himself onto the pavement. He tried to ignore the throbbing in his knee. “Miss me?” he called.

Anything to keep them from my friends.

The monsters wasted no time in charging at him. He braced himself, fully prepared to pull as many of them backward over the rail as he could, when something unexpected happened.

Tom’s mind had a hard time deciphering what he saw. A dark void simply appeared around the neck of the nearest monster, like a collar made of the deepest black. Its head detached and plopped to the ground, and its entire body turned to golden dust. A shadow haunted its wake.

The other monsters didn’t even have time to react before the void consumed them, too. Some had dark holes opened in their bodies like the first. Others fell through a black nothingness that opened in the ground. One monster just disappeared altogether.

Just like that, the monsters were gone.

Tom didn’t realize just how scared he had been until that point. His heart was pounding in time with the rain. He body shivered, though the night was warm. And now he stood before this shadow figure who had just dispatched an entire horde of those monsters as easily as Tom might have beaten
his youngest students. *He could kill me,* Tom thought.

Which is why it surprised him when the shadow man slumped onto his hands and knees.

Tom rushed to his side. Even at this close, the figure remained a black shadow. “Are you okay?” asked Tom. He reached for the figure, but it shrank away.

“Y-you must…” it said with a woman’s voice. “You must… help me…”

“Help you? Who are you?”

“The other Rangers… They’re the ones destroying the city. We… have to… stop them…”

“Miss, what Rangers? What are you talking about? What’s going on around here? What are those monsters?”

"I’m dying. You have to take this.” The shadow held up a hand. There, in her palm, shimmered an old coin black with age. There was some kind of animal stamped on its face, but Tom couldn’t tell what it was. The coin glowed black in the darkness, even though Tom knew that what he was seeing should be impossible. “You must defeat the other Rangers. Take this coin and… ngh… it will reveal all.”

“The coin? What’s the coin supposed to do?” But even as Tom asked, he felt his attention pulled to the coin. It would show him incredible secrets, he knew. Even now it whispered to him, its voice too faint to hear. This tiny little thing in the dying woman’s hands held a power too immense for Tom to put into words. He didn’t know why he knew this. He just did. “Who are you?” he whispered.

“Rita. My name… is Rita.” She crumpled forward with one final gasp of air. The coin rolled out of her hands and stopped at Tom’s feet. When he looked back to the woman’s body, it had disappeared.
Episode 10: Ambition

Chapter 1 – Jack

Sixty feet.

Jack thought back on how they had gotten here, leaping through the air halfway between a collapsed apartment building and the city’s elevated train tracks. One by one Ewan, Jack, Jess, and April had awoken back in the Command Center, and one by one they were greeted with an unfortunate truth: they were losing the city. Over half the population had been killed or captured. What few pockets of resistance remained were being hunted down by mudmen and other, darker monsters. Half the city was aflame; the other half was under water.

Jack didn’t even have time to grieve his missing leg. Wake up, Jack! Sorry about your leg. Just use your earth powers to grow yourself a new one made of rock. Now get back out there!

Zordon had teleported them to Southside, Cedar Grove’s slums, and the sight had made Jack sick to his stomach. Rain flooded the streets. Bodies clogged the drains. The whole neighborhood was silent but for the downpour. The sprint to the train tracks would have been peaceful were it not for the human debris. Jack was almost thankful that no one but his friends was around to watch him trip over himself, his new stone-leg making a distinct crack! with every footfall.

Fifty feet.

Everything was different now. No one had objected to Ewan’s return but Ewan. He had changed. They all had. Ewan’s cocky persona was gone, leaving only the real self underneath, the self that didn’t know how to react to the world without its egotistical mask. He was just as scared as Jack felt; they all were. There had been talk of giving up. It was a short discussion.

Forty feet.

They had been through so much tonight. So many struggles. So much pain. Yet it was something Will had said that had ended the discussion: a quote from Plato, and one of Will’s master’s favorites. “For a man to conquer himself,” Will had said, “is the first and noblest of all victories.” No one could argue with that. Everyone had faced inner demons and come out… well, they’d survived, anyway. We’ve conquered ourselves. Now it’s Rita’s turn.

Thirty feet.

Despite the destruction of Cedar Grove, Zordon seemed pleased with how the Rangers were doing. Jack swore that he had heard a smile in Zordon’s voice as he laid out their next mission. For them to stand any chance against Rita’s forces under the darkness and storms, they would have to turn on some lights and keep them on. It was only a matter of getting the Rangers to the right part of town to intercept the train, and here they were, sailing through the air in what felt like slow-motion while the train blasted toward them at two-hundred miles an hour.

Twenty feet.

Their night as Power Rangers had taken such a detour. It seemed like weeks ago that they were pulling people out of the burning apartment. How would things have been different if they had wrested the police station from Rita’s grasp, and the mudmen hadn’t gained their arsenal? What if
Ewan hadn’t fallen for her trap, and April hadn’t been stung by Scorpina? What if Jack still had his leg? No, no time for what-ifs. To argue about how things should have gone would be to argue with reality itself. Maybe in some other universe these things hadn’t happened. Maybe somewhere there existed an Earth where Rita never was, and the Power Rangers weren’t needed. But Jack didn’t live in that universe. Rita was freed, Ewan was captured, April was stung, Jack was dismembered. The others had come out the other side of this crucible stronger than ever, but Jack? Was he stronger now?

Ten feet.

Jack prepared himself for the landing. Dr. Cranston had whipped up some powerful magnets attached to spider silk ropes. It was only a matter of throwing the magnets at the train and hanging on like mad. The train was in clear sight now, blinding them all as its headlight refracted through the millions of raindrops that fell to the tracks. The Rangers had leapt even before the train had come around the bend, but Alpha’s calculations had been spot-on: in a fraction of a second, they would land atop the train, get inside, and shut the whole thing down. But first they had to stick the landing, which meant having the magnetized grappling hook ready to latch onto the train’s metal exterior.

Jack wasn’t expecting the sight that met him once he saw past the train’s headlight.

Dozens of humans, most of them still alive and screaming soundlessly, were strapped to the sides of the train as some kind of sick human shielding. Jack suddenly realized why Zordon wouldn’t let them just destroy the supports of one of the train’s many raised track sections. Jack had no time to collect himself. He wasn’t thinking about what he needed to do. He wasn’t ready to land.

One foot.

He threw too late. Jack’s magnet smashed into a side window and yanked out of his grasp. His feet (well, foot and rocky stand-in, so to speak) hit the top of the train, and immediately he tumbled head over heel over and over again through water and metal and what may have been broken glass. He felt himself suddenly thrown into the void. The train tracks were forty feet above the ground, and Jack was about to experience every inch in agonizing defeat. He had failed the others. They would have to go on without him.

Here was his answer: the crucible had weakened him. He wasn’t tempered steel. He had crumbled under the pressure.

Oh no you don’t! came a thought. The winds around him shifted. Unless he was mistaken, the air and the rain pushed him in a different direction. His tumbling slowed. Two arms caught his.

The White and Red Rangers pulled Jack onto the top of the train. Ewan and April stood behind them, all four anchored to the metal roof with their magnets. Wind and water swirled around the hands of Ewan and April as they released control over their elements. Did you ever know that you’re my hero? sang some old in Ewan’s head. ‘Cause you are the wind beneath my wings…

Jess offered part of her rope. When are we gonna talk about that leg? she asked.

Jack took hold, calmed his nerves, and put the past behind him. Some other time, he thought.

“For a man to conquer himself is the first and noblest of victories.” Plato would have been a one hell of a Ranger.
Ewan was willing to bet quite a bit of money – money which he entirely lacked – that he was the only Ranger comfortable atop this demented train. Part of being the Ranger of wind, he guessed. He was, one might say, in his element.

He pushed the wind ahead of him to ease their progress forward. Their goal was simple: find the machine sucking the city’s power, blow it to fucking hell. And according to Alpha’s scans, the damn thing was in the lead car.

Naturally, there was one nasty wrinkle in their plan: the humans strapped to the train’s sides. Some people might get upset if the Rangers blew up the train while innocent civilians still clung to its sides. Bad for the public image, apparently.

The Rangers briefly debated what to do, but Ewan noticed something interesting about their discussion: when they spoke in thoughts, it was more rapid than if they actually spoke out loud. The thoughts of the other four were beginning to feel like they were his own. He, Will, and Jack rarely agreed on anything before tonight. Now they and the girls hatched a plan about the civilians in a matter of seconds. Look at us, Ewan thought to the others, all grown up and shit.

They pushed on through the rain and wind. Manipulating air was becoming easier with each passing moment. Saving Jack from his fall had almost felt second-nature. Slowly, Ewan began to feel as though he belonged on this team again.

Something roared behind them. Ewan kept facing forward to block the wind. His heads-up display showed him what the others saw: mudmen and other dark monsters climbing out the window shattered by Jack’s magnet.

Sorry guys, thought Jack.

What the fuck are those? asked Jess. Through her vision, Ewan saw black spiders the size of sofas scuttling toward them. Child-sized mudmen rode atop each one with twisted weapons in their hands.


Jess drew her pistol and aimed, but the train hit a bend in the tracks, and her shot went wide.

Use your powers, thought Will. Pistols are too risky. Might hit a civilian. Yellow, keep pushing forward, but let some air through when I say.

Right on, boss, thought Ewan.

Ewan kept his gaze forward while the other four turned and walked backward with him. He watched their fight through his HUD: raindrops collected into a wall and knocked a mudman into the night, fire pooled around the mudmen’s feet until they lost their suction and crumbled, metal from the train itself shifted beneath the mudmen’s feet and kept them off-balance. And all the while Will used his HUD to paint each target and orchestrate their defense.

God damn, thought Ewan. We’re a team.

Ewan couldn’t help but notice that Will was letting the spiders approach. The others followed his lead, but Ewan didn’t like how close the monsters were getting. The nasty little spider-riders waved spears over their heads like they couldn’t wait to try some Ranger-kabobs.

Yellow, thought Will, do it. Will marked the spiders, as if Ewan couldn’t tell them apart from the
others. Jess dried out their feet, April pulled water from their legs, and Jack twisted the metal below them. Ewan adjusted his push so that air blasted over the Rangers’ shoulders and into the heart of the approaching horde. As one, the whole group of spiders – riders and all – lifted off the train and disappeared into darkness.

*If they web-swing back to the train, I’m out,* thought Ewan.

*Let’s just hope there aren’t any more of those,* thought Will.

*Amen to that,* thought Jess.

The rain and darkness were so intense that even through the eyes of the others Ewan couldn’t see the rear of the train. Ahead, they had three more cars to cover before they reached their destination. So far, so good.

*Tunnel coming up,* warned Ewan. The others saw through his eyes and ducked as one. The pressure and sounds intensified around them as brick and dirt ripped past overhead. The quick relief from the rain was nice, but the tunnel was not long, and they quickly stood again.

Ewan felt the thing approach more than he saw it. He stopped moving, and the others did the same. Their thoughts came together so rapidly now that it was more like a single stream of consciousness.

*What was that? Feel something? Yes, from the rear of the train. Look, see something. Be careful.*

A dark mass thudded along the train. This time Ewan turned to look. Its shape was hard to define through the night, but the thing looked like it had too many legs, as though someone had glued several spiders together. Lightning struck and illuminated the monster only long enough to give Ewan a strong sense of dread.

Mudmen climbed the side of the train, but even they halted as the monster approached. Thin black legs scooped a pair of them up and hurled them at the Rangers. Ewan and the others scattered. Jess fired a pair of red bolts at the thing, but the shots disappeared into the void of the monster’s form. It roared and swept a leg over the train’s side. When the leg returned, it held a human.

*Save her!* thought Will, as if the Rangers really needed to be told that.

The monster whipped the human at them. April leapt, still clutching her rope with her right hand, and caught the screaming girl with her left. A thought came from April that they needed some place to put this poor girl that wasn’t the top of a two-hundred-mile-an-hour train of doom. Jack responded by leaping over the side of the train, kicking in a window, and disappearing inside, leaving Jess alone at the other end of her shared rope. Ewan’s HUD combined his and Jack’s vision. The Green Ranger had swung into a compartment full of very surprised mudmen sitting at the tables of the dining car. It looked like they had been playing cards.

The monster grabbed another prisoner and threw him. This time, though, Ewan was ready. He shifted the air around the man and brought him down gently to Will’s arms. Jess swung over the side and joined her brother. A moment later, the two shot an outline of a hole through the train’s roof. Will, still holding the unconscious man, stomped the center of the outline and created a nice new skylight for the diner car. He and April dropped through. Jess leapt back up, followed soon by Will.

*Green’s sealing the car,* thought Will. *Then he and Blue will make their way under us inside.*

*We have to stop that thing,* thought Ewan, pointing to the mass of black and legs. A small crowd of mudmen stood far behind it, not daring to move past. Ewan was proud of the little bastards; finally, some of them had grown brains.
We stop the train, we stop that monster, thought Will, perhaps a bit optimistically.

*Is that thing supposed to be, like, the queen spider or something?* asked Jess. Ewan had thought the same thing, except that this creature looked like a spider with the world’s biggest tumor growing out of its back.

The White Ranger shrugged. *I’d rather not find out.*

Will pulled Jess back to her rope, and the three pushed forward as quickly as they could. The spider queen slung more humans at them, and each time they caught the person and somehow or another – whether it be swinging through the window or having Jack open up a fresh hole in the roof – the Rangers rescued each person and sealed them within the train. Mudmen tried to scale the train’s side to ambush the civilians, only to be blown into the void by the defenders inside.

Unfortunately, the spider moved faster than the Rangers could. Ewan knew that it was only a matter of time, and so did the others. This monster that they had no idea how to fight would be right on top of them before they ever made it to the front of the train.

*Go,* Will thought to Ewan. *We’ll figure something out.*

Ewan swore. He knew Will would say that, even without being able to read his thoughts. Ewan protested with quick, colorful language that would have gotten a slap from his mom if she was around.

Will’s thoughts came too quickly for words. Ewan could move faster on his own than when he tried to shield all of the Rangers from the wind, thought Will. He had to press forward and destroy the machine; the others would try to stall the spider queen however they could. Ewan countered by saying that bad things tended to happen when the team split.

*Not this time,* thought Will. *We believe in you.*

*I don’t think that’s how that works,* thought Ewan.

Will grabbed Ewan’s magnet and threw it forward. It clanged into the side of the next train car, hauling Ewan along with it. He fell with a heavy thud, still barely holding on to the rope, and bounced along the top of the train until he steadied himself.

He sat up just in time to see Jess’ fire-sword slice through the bindings that held the cars together. The rest of the train – the other Rangers, the mudmen, the spider-monster – faded slowly into the night behind him. The monster roared so loudly that pieces of a passing building crumbled, the few remaining windows shattering from the sound.

*So glad I had a say in all this!* thought Ewan.

*It’s up to you,* thought Will. Ewan could hear a smile in his voice. *Try not to let us down.*

*What he means is,* Jess thought, *don’t pussy out this time.*

**Chapter 3 – Bill**

“Hey, Four-eyes. Here.”
Dr. Cranston looked up, surprised. He had been so engrossed in the Command Center computers that he had forgotten anyone else was there. He turned to the robot. It was holding something out for him.

A gun.

“Your design,” said the robot. “Time to shoot something in the ass.”

“My cryogenic molecular decelerator,” said Bill. In addition to helping Alpha and Zordon develop a machine that could disrupt Rita’s connection to the Dark Dimension, Bill had busied himself with adapting his freeze bombs into a more user-friendly weapon. He had finished its design just seconds before, and already here was a working prototype. “This place is incredible,” he said, not for the first time.

“You ain’t so bad yourself,” said the robot. It handed him the gun. It was heavy, about the size of a submachine gun but feeling like it was made of lead. Pale blue veins coursed over its body, collecting at a point just at the base of the barrel. The veins pulsed slowly.

Bill held it with two hands and looked around for a target. In response, spotlights drew his attention to an alcove he hadn’t noticed before. As he watched, a hologram of a mudman shimmered into existence.

Bill approached the hologram slowly, his heart racing and his gun shaking. It’s not real, he told himself. The hologram snarled.

“It’s just a really, really good hologram.”

“Any time, Professor Parkinson’s,” grumbled Alpha.

Bill fired. Despite the gun’s weight, it had massive recoil. The gun flew from Bill’s hand and sent him flying. The Command Center tilted back. A flash of light and pain washed over Bill’s vision. When he could see again, the robot stood over him, shaking its head.

“Smooth,” it said as it held out its hand. Bill took it and climbed to his feet.

Bill frowned. “Do you want us to tell them what’s happening?”

The humans wish to fight back. Your country’s army battles outside the city, but its efforts will be in vain.

“Yeah,” answered Alpha. “Go to the gym.”

Unfortunately, Alpha is correct, said Zordon. This weapon cannot be upgraded further in the time we have remaining. If you choose to give it to any humans within Cedar Grove, it would be unwise to arm anyone who cannot control its power.

Bill wondered what kind of humans had been worthy enough to control the powers of the Rangers.

“How many can you make?” Bill asked.

We have enough supplies for twelve. I have searched the city for those who may be able to handle the gun. I will be sending you and Alpha to each one individually.

Bill frowned. “Do you want us to tell them what’s happening?”

The humans wish to fight back. Your country’s army battles outside the city, but its efforts will be in vain.
“The United States Army is here? Then should we give them one of the guns?”

No. We cannot put this weapon – or any of our technology – in the hands of your military.

Bill nodded. He had expected that answer. “You protect, not provide.”

Yes. Were any of our technology to fall into the wrong hands, it could hasten the destruction of your world. My kind has seen it happen elsewhere. Well-intentioned guardians giving the indigenous people technology for which they were not prepared. They abused their new power. They had no responsibility for it; they had not earned this advancement, and their carelessness destroyed them.

Bill had heard this argument before. It was a popular topic; technology was moving faster today than it ever had before. Humanity’s laws can’t keep up. The kinds of advances usually seen over the course of a century now only took a few years at most. People held no appreciation for the technological power they now held. Hell, Bill’s pocket calculator was more advanced than the computers NASA used to send the first Americans to the moon. Many scientists – himself included – were scared for where the planet was headed.

“So civilians only,” said Bill.

Yes.

“Yet you told me earlier that we cannot put these weapons in unskilled hands.”

I think you will agree with my selections.

“Did you choose the Power Rangers?”

Zordon paused. The Power chose this group, he said. I believe I have learned from its decisions. Tell me, Bill Cranston: what kind of person would you choose to wield the Power of a Ranger?

Bill had considered that very question when the Rangers left for their latest mission. “Someone who wasn’t looking for it,” he said. “Someone who… didn’t take pleasure from having that kind of power. Someone who only used it when they had to.”

The room was quiet but for the hum of machines. Fluid moved within the central tank. I see, Zordon said at last. Prepare yourself, Dr. Cranston. I will now teleport you to your first target. You will be camouflaged as the Rangers are, so do not speak to him as a friend. He will not know you.

Bill’s eyes widened. “Wait, what?” But his vision filled with grey. The Command Center disappeared. He felt himself moving impossibly fast. Oceans shifted beneath him, land, cities—

He hit his feet, a gun in his hand. He stood in a black alley protected from the torrential rain. Buildings burned in the streets, but the fire’s light did not penetrate here. Smoke filled his nostrils, and the sound of rain almost completely drowned out any other.

Yet he heard a yelp of surprise. Bill turned and saw movement in the dark. He suspected Zordon was aiding his vision. “Hello?” he called. No answer. “I’ve… come to help,” he said. “I have a weapon for you to use against the mudmen. It’ll freeze them. It may not kill them, but it’ll slow them down.”

Slowly, a single figure stepped from the darkness. His shirt was torn and saggy from the rain, yet Bill knew that proud face.

His first target was his old friend Jason.
Chapter 4 – Jess

I hope you’re sure about sending him on his own, thought Jess. His track record sucks ass.

Will dodged under a long black leg and fired a shot at the monster. The white bolt disappeared into the monster’s side. It didn’t even seem to notice. Yellow can do this, he answered. The Dark Dimension changed him.

And me, thought April. Jess felt her surprise; she hadn’t meant to transmit that thought to the others.

That’s all well and good, thought Jess, but how the fuck do we kill this thing?

Jess felt a thought from April: images of the rain-soaked civilians they had pulled from the outside of the train. The message was clear: save them first.

One brave mudman slipped around the spider queen and charged at Jess. He wasn’t even a challenge; Jess roundhouse-kicked him so hard he flew straight back into the monster, right where Will had shot it just a moment before. The mudman’s face froze in a voiceless scream as, slowly, the black of the monster swallowed the mudman whole.

Shit, thought Jess. Don’t touch that thing.

Duck! thought Will.

Jess turned and looked ahead of the train. Though they had detached from the lead car, their train still moved at a quick pace. It would still be some time before they coasted to a stop.

And now they were about to go through a low tunnel.

Jess and Will hit the deck hard, the roof of the tunnel passing just inches above them. Jess’ fire sword dropped from her grasp and slipped off the side of the train. They heard the monster collide with the tunnel. There was an ear-piercing roar that reverberated throughout the darkness.

What happened? April asked.

You two alright? asked Jack.

The tunnel ended. We’re fine, thought Will. He and Jess got to their feet and looked back.

The monster stood exactly where it had been. They could see its outline in the rock above the tunnel behind them as if it had burrowed straight through.

The monster’s fine, too, thought Jess. I hate this thing.

The monster roared in response and continued its advance.

Zordon, thought Will, any ideas?

Rita has summoned a Void Spider from the Dark Dimension, answered Zordon. Extremely dangerous. It absorbs power into the sac on its back and then releases it as eggs. Do not touch its body or you will be killed and your essence sealed within the Dark Dimension forever.
You could have told us that before we started fighting it, grumbled Jess.

Experience is the greatest form of wisdom, Red Ranger.

You should write Hallmark cards.

So this isn’t Squatt or Baboo? asked Will.

No, said Zordon. But they are still nearby. You are in grave danger.

Aren’t we always? thought Jack.

Jess tried to figure out what the monster looked like, but even with her Ranger’s night vision the monster was too dark to make out, as if it was made from pure black (which she supposed it was). It picked up another mudman and launched it at Will, who deflected the squealing body into the window of a passing building.

How does it throw shit at us if it absorbs whatever it touches? asked Jess.

It shifts between our dimension and its own, said Zordon. It is vulnerable only when it shifts into this dimension.

So how does it not absorb the train?

Now is not the time for a lesson in trans-dimensional physics.

Great. Thanks, Z.

The Void Spider screamed at them. Grey teeth lined the enormous back-sac. The mouth was so large, Jess guessed that the damn thing could swallow the train if it felt like it.

Jess saw images of an idea from the White Ranger. It wouldn’t kill the monster, but at least it would keep the humans safe. The other Rangers agreed and set to work.

The train moved slowly enough now that Will and Jess didn’t need their magnets anymore. They deactivated them and clipped them to their belts. The Void Spider roared and took several swipes with its extra legs. Will and Jess danced out of the way, but there wasn’t much room atop the train. It was backing them up toward the very front of the train. They’d be trapped soon.

They coasted into the heart of downtown. Skyscrapers passed close by, each one either on fire or partially crumbled. The heat from all the flames invigorated Jess. It made her feel bold.

Distract it! thought Will.

With pleasure, thought Jess. She pulled flames from the buildings around them and engulfed the monster. Now she could see its outline clearly. It looked like three spiders mutated together, with legs and mandibles splayed in all directions, with that bulbous egg sac jutting into the air like some sick, fleshy top-hat. The mere sight of this thing made Jess’ stomach turn somersaults.

Will leapt high in the air while the monster burned. His plan, Jess knew, was to land behind the monster to divide its attention. They would pull it to the rear car while Jack and April got the last of the civilians into the lead car and then separate it. The lead car could coast to safety while they used the magnets to stop the rear cars with the Void Spider still on top.

Instead, a group of mudmen leapt from the buildings and tackled the White Ranger out of the air. They crashed through the side of a building and disappeared.
White! thought Jess. The Void Spider absorbed Jess’ flames and fired a dozen dark blobs from its back. Each one splattered onto the train’s roof and contorted into the same large spiders from earlier. Dozens of mudmen fell from the skyscrapers to form a long shadow behind the Void Spider and its creepy babies.

*You two better hurry with those people,* Jess thought to April and Jack.

*Almost done,* thought Jack. *We need another two minutes.*

Jess snorted. *Looks like it’s up to me again.* She held out her hand. Her trusty fire sword flew from the flames of the nearest building and into her grasp.

“Allright fuckers!” she pointed her sword at the Void Spider and its hundred new friends. *“Come on!”*

She pulled new flame from the buildings and swept it toward the mudmen, but this time the Void Spider was ready. It flung black legs across either side of the train and absorbed the fire. The spider’s egg sac shifted disgustingly on its back, growing slightly.

The dozen baby spiders scuttled around the queen and charged. One jumped on the back of another and leapt off, leaving a trail of webbing between them. The jumping spider flipped, flinging its sister like a yo-yo and catching Jess by surprise. She swung her sword, but the spider got inside her reach and bit her arm. It burned, and in the scuffle her sword slipped out of her grasp. The wind caught it and began to take it away, but she forced herself to focus on the flames just barely contained within its metal. The sword boomerang’ed back to her, slicing through a spider as it went. She twirled with the spider still attached to her arm and heard its carapace crunch as the sword sliced through it. She caught the handle and drove the blade down into the head of another monster.

Jess became a whirlwind, slicing through spiders and webbing as they tried in vain to tie her down. Black, hairy legs flew in all directions, and not far away, the Void Spider snarled while the mudmen stood behind it and watched the fight with an intelligence Jess had not seen in them before. Were they learning? *Could* they learn?

*Guys,* thought Jess, *something’s different about the mudmen.*

*I sense it as well,* said Zordon. *There has been a shift in the Black Ranger’s Power. Be wary; this may mean ill news.*

The Void Spider swept its legs along the side of the train but came up short. April and Jack must have pulled all the humans from the train’s sides. The monster rumbled and jabbed a leg straight at Jess. She fell on her back to dodge the blow and rolled frantically to the side as the spindly leg swept down at her.

Mudmen swarmed her as webbing pinned her to the ground. She tried to pull fire from the buildings, but the Void Spider blocked it all. She started to draw fire from her sword, but a mudman kicked it off the train.

They yanked her to her feet. *Any time, guys,* she thought to the others. But she could see through their eyes: April pulled blood through the veins of a dead civilian to revive her, and Jack was busy with a host of mudmen who had gained entrance to the cars below. No help would come.

The Void Spider shuffled closer to her. It was even uglier up close, which hadn’t seemed possible. Dozens of tiny black eyes reflected the firelight around them. Jess tried to yank free, but the mudmen had planted their wet feet and enveloped her arms in their nasty bodies. The few baby spiders who
remained chittered excitedly.

Far above them, an explosion rocked the upper story of a skyscraper. Jess looked up, but the mudmen didn’t seem to hear it.

That was just fine with her.

The White Ranger dove out of a shattering window, several fresh tears in his armor and his pistol in his hand. Golden dust of fallen mudmen trailed from his body as he aimed. Jess held as still as the train would let her.

Soon the rain was joined by a downpour of white bolts. The mudmen screamed and scattered, but Will’s aim was sure. Those holding Jess in place crumbled to dust. The last few spiders popped, and their webbing came undone.

The Void Spider took a wild swipe. Jess leapt high and to the side, clear off the train. She rebounded off the side of a building and pushed off again, pulling all the flames within the building behind her as she rocketed back to the train fist-first. The Void Spider wasn’t fast enough to block her or the fire that followed. She crashed into the remaining host of mudmen with the force of a bomb and sent every last one flying from the train to a painful, fiery death.

She pulled herself from the small crater she had made in the train’s top. Will landed heavily next to her a moment later.

They were behind the monster. It turned and began to scuttle toward them.

*We’re set*, said Jack.

*Stay beneath*, thought Will. *We’re almost out of downtown. Separate the cars on my mark. Then we’ll stop the rear car and figure out how to kill this thing.*

The buildings around them grew smaller until they passed into the slums. Jess’ heads-up display showed the Blue and Green Rangers advancing quickly under the Void Spider. It would be in range soon. Jess and Will backed up until they reached the rear of the train.

*We’re back in Southside*, thought Jess. They were approaching the spot where they’d jumped onto the train in the first place.

*We already saw that it’s deserted*, thought Will. *Good place to make a stand.*

The Void Spider skittered onto the rear car.

Will thought the command. He and Jess turned and tied their magnet ropes to the sides of the rear car while Jack and April shot the connector. The train lurched as Jack and April kicked the cars apart. Will and Jess threw their magnets off the back of the train and held on to the ropes with all they had.

The stop was so sudden that Jess felt like her arms would rip from their sockets. Metal screamed against metal, the sound only topped by that of the monster itself as the car crashed to a halt. The silence that followed was broken only by the never-ending rain.

Jess hauled herself off a pile of debris and saw that she and Wil had been thrown to the ground below. *Alright, Fearless Leader*, she thought as she helped the White Ranger to his feet. The Blue and Green Rangers peered up at them from the tracks above with their creepy glowing eyes. *What next?*
Darkness swirled away from Tom’s vision. His feet hit the ground, and he promptly fell to his knees and vomited. He hauled himself up and looked around. The room was dark, cavernous. Black mist clung to the floor. The walls were jagged and bare save for a few candles of black wax, and a single chair dominated the center of the room atop a raised platform of volcanic rock.

A throne.

Tom looked more closely at the coin in his hand. It had blackened with age. A dragon roared from its face. It was surprisingly heavy. It had brought him here, he knew. It truly did hold incredible power.

“Older than I expected.”

Tom spun, prepared to fight. A large, muscular man stood in the doorway wearing nothing but a skirt of furs and a heavy sword strapped to his back with leather so old it seemed a miracle that it still held together. Tom did not lower his guard.

“Who are you?” Tom asked. “Where am I?”

“I am Dreadwing,” the man said. His voice matched his body: powerful, expansive, with a hint of menace. “You are in the Dark Dimension, the last stronghold of the Black Ranger. You.”

Tom glanced at the coin again. “A woman gave me this. I think she died.”

Dreadwing nodded. “Rita. She died protecting what is left of your miserable city, and now you must take up her fight against the evil Rangers who would destroy it.”

“Rangers… I don’t understand…”

“For the past ten-thousand years your world has been oppressed by one called Zordon. He claims beneficence, but it is a lie. He seeks to enslave your kind for his own purposes. The Power Rangers were a creation in his quest to rule your world, but one Ranger, Rita, freed herself from his grasp. She was wounded in battle, and she has passed her Power to you. Now, I have answered your questions. Answer mine. Who are you? Why did Rita choose you? You don’t look worthy of the Black Ranger’s Power to me.”

Tom had trouble focusing on what had happened before the Black Ranger had saved him. “I’m… Tom,” he said. “But I can’t… it’s so fuzzy…”

Dreadwing walked toward him, parting the mist on the floor with each step. Without warning he clasped his hands around Tom’s temples. Tom saw images pass before him in rapid succession, all the major events of his life from his first martial arts lesson right up to his arrival in the Dark Dimension. He felt an odd detachment from all the images but one: Kimberly. The sight of her brought back all the old feelings: hope, longing, betrayal, anger. Love.

Dreadwing released his grip. Tom fell to his knees and fought back the urge to vomit again. “I see,” said Dreadwing. Tom found it hard to breathe in this place. Its power was undeniable, but it made him feel ill at ease, oppressed. “Tell me, Master Tom Oliver: what would you do to save those you love the most?”
Tom’s mind went first to Kim. I…” he fumbled. What was he doing here again? He couldn’t remember…

“Answer me!”

The room closed in around him. Tom’s mind narrowed. Kim was all he could think about. She was all he cared about. If he lost her, he would be nothing. Those other memories he had seen, they were nothing compared to her. “I would… do anything,” he said.

“Good. You will need that ambition to summon your new power. Look at me.” Tom forced himself to look up. For just a moment Dreadwing was replaced by a demon in golden armor, but as quickly as the image came, it was gone again. “You have been chosen by Rita to become the next Black Ranger. Just before she died, she passed information to me. Now I pass it to you, so that you may take your vengeance.”

Mist rose from the ground to form a sphere two feet in diameter. Images began to swirl within until Tom was watching something which should be impossible: Kim. In Cedar Grove.

And five Rangers of different colors were beating her in the street while a man watched with arms folded and a sneer across his face: Billy Cranston.

Tom screamed and leapt at the sphere. He fell through it and collapsed within the mists. Rage welled within him. He breathed in the mist and felt it fuel his rage. It felt good. “Where are they?” he growled.

“You will have your chance to kill them all,” Dreadwing assured him. “But first I have another task for you. To slay the snake, you remove the head. Destroy their Command Center and the one called Zordon, and you will destroy the evil Rangers and the friend who betrayed you. You will save your love.”

Tom stood. Blood dripped from his palm and disappeared beneath the mist. He had gripped the coin so tightly it had broken skin, but he didn’t care. He didn’t matter. There was only her.

“Tell me what to do,” he said.

Dreadwing held out a hand. In it was a coin as white as Tom’s was black. “This belonged to one of their Rangers. It will lead you to their base. Destroy it, then seek out the Rangers and Dr. Cranston and wipe them all out.”
Episode 11: Sacrifice

Chapter 1 – Ewan

Ewan pushed through the door that led into the train car, his pistol raised and ready to blast the shit out of whatever might show its ugly face.

Naturally, the car was empty.

Ewan didn’t know what the lead car of a train was supposed to look like, but this one made him wonder if he had accidentally stepped into the engine room of the Starship Enterprise. The floor was silver, the walls absolutely crawling with metal power lines that pulsed yellow and orange in time with the *clickety-clack* of the rails. And at the front of the train sat the very machine he had set out to destroy.

Every power line connected to its sides. It beat in time with the light like some mechanical heart, except the direction was backward; the power appeared to be moving *toward* the machine, not out from it.

*It absorbs the power from the city,* Ewan recalled. *Zordon, where does all this energy go?*

*To Rita and the Dark Dimension,* said Zordon. *Without this machine, her hold over Cedar Grove’s weather will be greatly diminished, and her Dark Dimension will weaken.*

*Give the city power back and make it stop raining? I must be dreaming. Quick, pinch me.*

*I am neither physically present nor do I possess fingers.*

*It’s an expres—* Something slammed into the back of Ewan’s hood. He tumbled sideways and smashed into a wall as light danced through his vision. His pistol clattered away.

Ewan rolled to his hands and knees. His vision quickly returned, but he was sure his eyes were playing tricks on him.

Resting on its knuckles was a large, slender baboon. It regarded him with expressionless eyes, its tail flicking to and fro behind it.

“I take it you’re Baboo,” Ewan groaned as he lifted to his feet. The monkey didn’t move. Ewan realized that the damned thing wore a monocle. The eye behind it looked human, though the other was as ape-like and wild as the rest of its body.

*Zordon, I didn’t expect Baboo to actually be a fucking baboon.*

*She is one of Rita’s most dangerous lieutenants,* answered Zordon. *And where she goes, Squatt is never far behind. Use extreme caution.*

*Extreme caution? Don’t you say that about all of them? Wait… ‘she’?*

Baboo still didn’t move. Ewan sighed; she stood between him and his pistol, and the train was too close-quarters for him to try his air bow.

“Alright monkey,” he said as he stepped forward, “I have important work to do. Don’t cramp my
She swiped with an arm so fast that he couldn’t dodge. It caught him in his ribs and sent him flying against the pulsing walls, which ran a blast of electricity into his body and catapulted him back into the middle of the train car.

Yellow! It was Will, the saintly bastard. How’s it coming?

Ewan struggled to his feet. It’s fantastic, he answered. Thank you so much for sending me on my own.

Will transmitted what he was seeing: all four Rangers desperately dodging that weird black hole with spider legs. Want to trade? Will asked.

Not really. Ewan felt guilty for losing a fight to a monkey, and he didn’t want to admit it to his friends. I’ll be done with this thing soon, he thought. He transmitted what he had seen of the train car – minus the goddamn baboon – to Jack. Any thoughts? he asked.

I’ve never seen a device quite like that before, Jack thought. Extraordinary. Be really careful in destroying it. If it holds as much power as I think it does, one wrong move could wipe out the entire city.

Great. Thanks. Keep up the happy thoughts, won’t you?

Ewan turned his attention back to Baboo. How can I destroy this machine without her polishing the floor with my ass?

“So Babs,” he stalled. “Mind if I call you Babs? Come here often? Me, I tend to avoid public transportation. Always end up sittin’ by the weirdos, you know?” No response. Baboo’s tail swished, but her half-human gaze remained fixed on Ewan’s. “…Well aren’t you just a red-assed little ray of sunshine. Boy, if I had a dollar for every time I’ve said that. Well, I’d have three dollars. Don’t ask. Rush Week at the Greeks. Kinda like tonight actually, but less mudmen and more angry frat guys. Not that it’s easy to tell the difference of course, but—”

He flung his arms forward and sent a blast of air right into Baboo’s stomach. She lurched backward but didn’t fall, so he pushed harder, focused hard on each and every molecule of the air within the train car and his absolute will that they ram themselves into Baboo’s body. He could feel their individual desires, each one wishing to bounce through the vast amount of space between it and the next molecule. He drew the scattered pieces and forced them together into a solid wall of monkey doom.

Baboo’s blue fur stood straight back and her knuckles turned white from digging into the metal floor, but slowly she slid toward the door behind her. She snarled. Ewan tried not to get distracted by the size of her rotten fangs.

He shifted the wind so that it blew the door open. He fought the sudden backdraft – he had almost forgotten that the car still moved at over two-hundred miles an hour. Baboo’s heels slipped through the door. She thrust her arms to either side and clung to the doorframe. No amount of wind would budge her now, but she was far enough away that Ewan could try something else. His left hand shot straight ahead. He turned sideways and drew his right hand close to his chin. His bow of topaz and silver swirled to life in his hands.

“So long, monkey,” he said, and he loosed the arrow.

As the wind-string left his right hand, he tumbled through time and space for about the millionth time tonight until he was, yet again, in the body of the old Yellow Ranger.
The string hummed, and the old Blue Ranger shrieked and twirled into the water in which she stood, her trident splashing heavily to the side. The pool at the base of the little waterfall turned red with the Blue Ranger’s blood. The Yellow Ranger tossed her bow to the wind. She sloshed into the water and turned the Ranger over.

The arrow lodged firmly in the Blue Ranger’s chest. Blue eyes no longer glowed under the hood. The Yellow Ranger chuckled.

Behind her she heard and felt a profound absence that could only mean one thing. She turned, and from the shadows stepped the Black Ranger.

The Yellow Ranger bent her knee. “I have done as you asked, Master,” she said.

Rita’s staff collided with the side of her head and sent her sprawling.

“Fool!” Rita spat. “My magic is more powerful on the living!”

Serket was at a loss. If she disappointed Rita, her master might never bring her family back to life again. She must appease the Dark Mistress. “I… I am sorry, my master.”

"Your idiocy is giving me a headache. Revive her.”

“I… how, master?”

Rita raised her staff to strike again, but the Yellow Ranger jumped out of range. “Are you as stupid as you are ugly!? Wind! Fill her lungs long enough for me to turn her! NOW!”

The Yellow Ranger jumped to the Blue Ranger’s body and pushed air through its mouth. It was difficult work – Rita’s transformation of the Yellow Ranger had largely severed her from her elemental powers – but she made due. She pumped on the dead woman’s chest again and again to push what little blood remained through broken veins. With every thrust, fresh blood poured out of her wound, but soon the body breathed in new life. It choked on a mouthful of blood and began to cough.

Rita wasted no time.

Black mist swirled around them. The Blue Ranger spat a cloud of red and screamed with the life Serket had forced upon her. Birds erupted from the treetops all around them, the scream echoing back and forth through the entire valley. Serket couldn’t bear the sound; she fell to her knees and covered her ears, crying through her yellow hood.

But Rita had the Blue Ranger now. When the mist parted, an ape lay where once she had been. Its eyes were half-human, half-ape, just as the Ranger had straddled the line between life and death upon her turning.

“Arise, Baboo,” said Rita. “For your resistance I have punished you with this new body.” Serket knew the truth: Rita had always been jealous of the Blue Ranger’s beauty. She could have turned her into something truly formidable like she had Dreadwing or the Green Ranger, but instead she chose this naked ape. “Now you will serve me. Defy me again, and you will wish I had left you dead!”

Ewan tumbled back into his own body, which was still loosing its own arrow. The shock of his vision made him falter, and the arrow went wide. Baboo’s eyes locked on the ancient weapon. Recognition filled the human eye. In a blur of blue she flung herself sideways, grabbed a power line, ripped it from the wall, flung it at Ewan, and, while he dodged the power line, cartwheeled into him
to send him flying into the wall.

Ewan groaned and reminded himself to kill Will later. *Might take me a bit longer than I thought, guys,* he thought to the others.

**Chapter 2 – April**

April could feel Ewan’s emotions, just as she could feel the rain around her, the water flooding the streets and saturating the ground, and the emotions of the other Rangers. She knew she was the only Ranger who had such power. It was beyond what they all felt from each other already; those were more like thoughts, fleeting and ever-changing. This was something deeper. April could sense those emotions which the other Rangers didn’t even know they were feeling. If the old Blue Ranger could do the same, then it was no wonder she fell apart when Rita began turning her friends to the side of evil. But April could sense Ewan’s deeper emotions, like someone calling you from the shore of a quiet lake, and she knew that he was hiding something from them.

*I have to trust that he has changed,* she thought. *Perhaps he doesn’t want us to worry about him.*

*Hey,* thought Ewan, *When I pass by wherever you all are, how about tagging in old Green to give me a hand?*

*I have some bad news,* thought Will.

*Good,* thought Ewan. *I was starting to feel a little too perky. What’s up?*

Will transmitted images of the rail lines: when he and Jess had used their magnets to stop the train in Southside, it had pretty much ripped the tracks to shreds. There was no way anyone could repair it before Ewan’s car looped back around.

*I’d say you have about five minutes to figure something out,* thought Will.

*Or the train flies off the tracks and blows away the entire city,* thought Ewan.

*Yep.*

*Why don’t you just stop the car?* asked Jess.

*This thing’s like fucking Speed,* thought Ewan. *You know, that movie from, like, forever ago? I can’t slow it down without touching the controls, and I can’t touch the controls without shocking myself to hell. And yes, before you ask, I already tried my magnet. Just ripped the rope in half without slowing the train down an inch. You sure you can’t repair the tracks?*

*Not in five minutes,* said Jack. *The work is too delicate. Even Rangers have their limits.*

*Yeah. Right, sorry for asking. Leave the world-saving to me.* REM’s “It’s the End of the World as We Know It” began to play over Yellow Ranger Radio.

Jess snorted, though whether that was from laughter or getting hit by a piece of flung debris was hard to tell.

*Zordon,* thought Will, *can you help us?*
There was a long pause. The Rangers danced around dark spider legs with increasing frustration. *Hmm?* Zordon thought suddenly. *Oh, Rangers. The machine, yes. It will be delicate work, Yellow Ranger. If you are to succeed, you will need to rid yourself of Baboo.*

So that’s what Ewan was hiding.

*Baboo’s there?* asked Will.

*Yes,* sighed Ewan. He flashed them an image of a large blue baboon with a monocle. April couldn’t shake the feeling that this monster was somehow familiar to her. Then it hit her.

*That’s the old Blue Ranger,* she realized.

*What, are you psychic now?* thought Ewan.

*I shouldn’t have let you go alone,* thought Will.

*No!* thought Ewan. *I can do this! Just trust me.*

*That’s only gotten us burned tonight,* said Jess. But April felt her soften. The Red Ranger believed in Ewan, even if she didn’t realize it yet.

*Four minutes,* reported Jack.

April and the others were getting nowhere with this Void Spider. It simply absorbed whatever they hit it with, and even when they managed to land a blaster shot on the monster while it phased into this world, it did nothing but make the darn thing angry. Their only consolation was that it was not terribly fast; the four Rangers could leap away and always remain clear of the sweeping legs. But the Rangers were beginning to get frustrated. No one knew what to do, and Zordon had just checked out in their most desperate hour.

April wasn’t so sure she liked being able to know the others’ feelings. She had first noticed it when she came out of the Dark Dimension with Ewan. Zordon had said that each of the Rangers had gone through trials that made them stronger. She supposed that this was just a new trick of hers, but it felt like cheating, to always know how the others felt. It was an invasion of their privacy. No one should have that kind of power, to be able to see inside a person’s soul like this.

The frustration of the other Rangers continued to gather momentum. April felt herself sharing in the anger which she herself did not feel: anger at Rita, yes, and plenty of suppressed frustration at having never found *any* of their families, but mostly anger at Zordon for being of so little help. The others grew bold with desperation. Jess launched volleys of flames which only served to outline its monstrous form. Will edged closer and closer. Jack tried to pin it in place with javelins of rock. And Ewan was trying everything under the sun with Baboo, but his was a losing battle. Baboo was fast, and she knew Ranger weaknesses.

Yet below the rage and the overwhelming sense of the injustice, April found, quite unexpectedly, the bedrocks of each Ranger’s character. Ewan would never give up, no matter the odds. Jess would never back down, no matter the pain. Will would always think of others first, no matter the cost. Jack would never break, no matter the strain. These feelings each found their way into April, right alongside the seething anger. They were overwhelming at first, but slowly April filtered the frustration away until there was only virtue remaining.

Then, hardly even knowing how, she pushed these thoughts right back into the other Rangers.

The change was immediate. Everyone took up the fight with renewed vigor. Their minds cleared of
the fog Rita’s power had lowered over their eyes. It wasn’t an enchantment, of course – not the same kind that had taken Ewan away from the girls in the police station, anyway. This had been a very real sort of magic, that of helplessness in the face of overwhelming oppression. April had found herself under its spell many times before when she faced her abusive father back in her old life. No spell was cast, but she knew the magic all the same.

*I am the holder of Harmony, she thought to herself. Enemy of Discord. Safekeeper of emotions. My friends will not lose themselves so long as I stand.*

The Void Spider thrust a spindly leg underground, which erupted a moment later not two inches from April’s face. She leapt back and found that Will was staring at the broken train tracks above them.

*I think I have an idea,* he thought.

**Chapter 3 – Bill**

Still disguised by Zordon’s powers, Bill sprinted through downtown Cedar Grove to his last destination: the old Youth Center. Between him and Alpha, they had delivered nine of the twelve freeze guns, and the weird thing was, Bill knew most of the recipients. There was Jason, of course, and Police Officer Stone, who Zordon said had helped the Blue Ranger escape a dangerous situation earlier tonight. Then there was a pretty Australian woman Bill didn’t know, named Kat. Then, inexplicably, he had given a gun to Bulk and Skull. Thankfully Zordon wasn’t delusional enough to give each of them a gun, but the decision still made Bill wonder: what did Zordon see in other people that he couldn’t?

A flash of gray light, and suddenly Alpha was sprinting along beside him. “One left,” said the robot. “I have two.”

“All three are up ahead. You know them. But first: how do you feel about a field test?”

Bill nodded. “I think I’m ready.”

“You ‘think’? Here, let me take one of those. Maybe with your four eyes trained on one gun you might actually hit something.”

Bill wasn’t about to argue. Even though Zordon’s illusion over him was also giving him the stamina to race through town, he didn’t want to press his luck and expect the same kind of treatment for his reflexes. But could Alpha shoot? Bill had figured him to mostly be a maintenance robot for the Command Center. Janitors usually weren’t the stars of action films. He handed a gun to Alpha and was embarrassed at how his arms shook from holding the weight for so long.

They sloshed through a flooded street, and suddenly the Youth Center loomed in the darkness before them.

“Shield your eyes,” said Alpha. Then louder he called, “Hey! Mud-fucks!”

Bill didn’t look away in time. Light flooded from Alpha’s face and blinded both Bill and the horde of mudmen in the parking lot. Bill lost his balance and toppled into the water. The sound of Alpha’s freeze guns screeched through the air.
“Zor-damn,” muttered Alpha a moment later. A hand pulled Bill to his feet, brushed him off, and thrust his wet gun into his stomach. “Some help you were. Hop along, Trickshot.”

Bill shielded his face. Alpha’s headlight was positively blinding after fumbling around in firelight for so long.

When his eyes adjusted, his jaw dropped: over three dozen mudmen stood frozen around them. “I do not recall lying submerged for a lengthy duration,” he said.

“There’s a reason Zordon only needs one of me,” said Alpha. He pushed a mudman over as they walked past. It shattered on the ground and disintegrated into golden dust. “Duck, won’t you?” This time Bill acted quickly. He hit the deck, and a thin laser erupted from Alpha’s head and sliced a wide arc through the parking lot. All the frozen mudmen split in two and disintegrated.

The Youth Center’s front doors were shattered beyond repair, and the makeshift barricade behind them was almost gone as well. Bill and Alpha had arrived just in time.

Bill peaked through one of the many holes. “Hello?” he called. “Is anyone alive in there?”

Whispers, a long pause, a shadowed face behind the barricade. “Who are you?” he asked.

Bill sighed in relief. He knew that voice: it was Zack, owner of the Youth Center’s juice bar, and his tenth target. “We’re here to help you,” said Bill. He explained the situation – about the Rangers, Zordon, Rita, mudmen, the freeze guns. After this many times, he had gotten pretty good at it. There were more whispers behind the barricade. Alpha tapped his foot in the water. Bill just wanted to get inside and wipe some of the water off his glasses.

Zack returned to the barricade. “We won’t let you inside,” he said at last, “but we’ll take the guns.” He moved a few things around to make the hole in the barricade a little wider.

“Like fuck you will,” offered Alpha, “we just wiped out every mudman here and you still don’t trust us? You fucking pri—”

“That will be fine,” said Bill. He elbowed Alpha where his ribs would be, though it probably hurt Bill more than the robot. Bill offered his gun handle-first to Zack. “This one is yours, and yours alone,” Bill said. The gun clicked when Zack touched it. “It has synchronized with your biometrics and will disappear when the crisis is over. We have two more out here, but they are for others inside.”

“Who?” Zack asked.

“Rocky,” said Bill, “and Adam.”

Zack frowned, but nodded. He turned and called for each man. Rocky was first – Bill was still surprised at how fat he had gotten. He took his gun with a sincere “thank you”. Adam was next, their last gun to give. He winced in pain as he took the gun.

“You know,” said Adam, “all this talk of ‘guardian angels’, these Power Rangers… Some of us still remember when this city was called Angel Grove.”

Bill smiled. He had never been one for sentiments, but tonight had changed him. He fought for Trini, and maybe, just maybe, she was an angel guarding him. “You are all guardian angels now.”

“But we can’t fight those things, can we?”
“Not head-on. Leave that to the Rangers. Your job is to get out of downtown. Shoot anything you see that isn’t human. Never travel alone. And above all—”

But Bill would never finish that sentence. Gray flooded his vision, and suddenly he was teleporting away, across oceans and continents and islands and lights and ships and ice.

Chapter 4 – Zordon

Stuck for eternity inside the chrono-tank, the seventh essence of Zordon, the last Guardian of the Planet Earth, watched his humans carry out his mission as best as they knew how. They had grown so much in the past few hours. He knew he would never be able to tell them just how proud he was of their progress. Five young humans against the might of the Dark Dimension. The old Rangers whom Zordon had personally chosen would never have stood a chance. These were the right ones for the job. Zordon’s wisdom had not failed him, after all.

He surveyed Cedar Grove. Four of the Rangers battled the Void Spider south of the river. The Yellow Ranger stood alone before Baboo inside the train, with Squatt not far behind them both. Professor Cranston raced toward the Youth Center, and Alpha 5, having just given a gun to a young man named Justin Stewart, teleported to join him. A third of downtown was completely destroyed. Most of the suburbs remained intact but overrun with slavers. Those civilians not yet captured or killed by Rita’s forces clung to the shadows as they made their escape.

And those chosen few who had received freeze guns had, between them, already destroyed over two-dozen of Rita’s minions.

Professor Cranston’s idea about the guns may very well save the city.

Have I made the right decisions tonight? Zordon reflected. He had tried to appear confident and wise before his Rangers, but here, utterly alone in his Antarctic Command Center, he fooled no one. He was scared. His friends, those who had first journeyed to Earth with him, had died so long ago that he couldn’t even remember their names. Splitting himself into seven had been a desperate act. Recruiting humans to join with his essences had been even more so. He was shunned by his kind. The moment he had split himself, his race had branded him an exile. They would never send another Guardian to help him.

If only they had known the truth. It was either split, or watch his world burn. And now he might watch it burn anyway, all because of his own silly mistakes.

Wisdom, he thought bitterly, is little use without knowledge. There is always some piece of the puzzle which I lack, and if the Rangers fail tonight, then we shall see all of my work undone by my own careless choices. What good is Wisdom on its own?

Zordon no longer recalled how long he had been on Earth. Some millions of years, at least. At that time, his kind had been at the peak of their civilization. They had long since mastered the challenges which fate had thrown them: space travel, world hunger, illness, even mortality itself. They pushed further and further away from their home world, seeking new civilizations with which to converse and share their knowledge.

That was when they first discovered Dark Matter.

Zordon himself had led a team to the primitive planet. Its reptilian inhabitants spoke of an old legend
in which their hero had trapped a dragon deep underground, where it could no longer terrorize the good people on the surface. Zordon and his team had foolishly used their technology to locate a strange energy reading deep within the planet. There, they had found a black crystal, which they had taken aboard their ship for study.

Oh, if Zordon could only travel back to that day, when he had set such evil free from its terrestrial prison!

One by one Zordon saw his team change. Conversations became arguments. Arguments became fights. Fights became murders. By the time Zordon had discovered the source, it was too late: Dark Matter had escaped into the galaxy. His people knew that their own foolish prodding had been the cause for such evil. Their exploration teams morphed into protectors, assigned to one planet for so long as that planet resisted evil. Zordon chose the very planet where it had all begun, along with six of his closest companions. But upon their return, they found that Dark Matter had already made the planet its haven, the reptilian inhabitants all but wiped out and the rest of the biological population not far behind.

Theirs was a struggle that spanned millennia. The old civilization was lost, but another slowly rose to power under the gentle guidance of Zordon and his companions. One by one Zordon’s fellow guardians were lost to the battle against Dark Matter, and now, on this lonely planet galaxies away from his home, Zordon’s war would soon reach its climax.

_Earth was my greatest mistake, but tonight it may be my redemption._

Tom Oliver’s consciousness returned to his body within the city. Zordon knew the time had come. The Ranger held the White Ranger’s coin in his hand and began to use it to locate the Command Center.

Zordon set to work.

What knowledge he had was stored in the Command Center’s databanks. He used it now to unlock the last of the technologies at the Rangers’ disposal. This may mean that the Black Ranger could access it as well, but Zordon was out of options. His Rangers would absolutely lose without this last bit of technology from his homeworld.

_May the citizens of Cedar Grove forgive me_, he thought. His mind wandered to Officers Bulkmeier and Skullovich at the head of the large group of souls the Rangers had saved from the slave train earlier that evening. The pair of them fumbled with the single freeze gun, bickering back and forth over who would get to shoot it next. A dark wolf darted across the street before them. Both men screamed. Skullovich pulled the trigger while Bulkmeier held the gun steady. The dark wolf froze and fell over, shattering into golden dust. Spiders, wolves: Rita’s power grew.

But so, too, did hope.

Several of the humans with Bulkmeier and Skullovich spoke in whispers, mostly the older ones who, Zordon knew, had lived in this town all their lives. “Guardian angels,” they called the Rangers. “They saved us; they’ll save _Angel Grove._”

Zordon felt a small wellspring of joy rise within his essence. He looked inside those who spoke and saw in them infinite possibilities. He could only marvel at how far these creatures had come. Here he was, a being of profound advancement, yet he had but seven aspects to himself. These humans had the capacity for anything. No two were alike, not even those born of the same womb. A million aspects within one soul.
They should have no right to hope. Their futures rest on the shoulders of five battered and broken youngsters, a professor who spends his days as an outcast within his own field of study, a homicidal robot... and me. Yet hope they do. What fools, and yet... what beauty, to face such disaster and still trust in a savior.

The shadows around the edges of the Command Center began to darken. The Black Ranger was on his way.

Zordon took one last look at his beloved Rangers. So long as they fought, part of him would always protect this planet. Humans had the potential for true greatness, he knew. There was no other species in the universe quite like them.

Laughter filled the chamber, bringing Zordon back into the present. The Black Ranger strode from a dark alcove looking for all the world like the battle was already won. An immense shadow trailed behind him.

“Greetings, Tom Oliver,” said Zordon.

The Ranger leaned back and laughed. His shadow didn’t move at all. “Oh don’t bother with pretenses, you old puddle,” said the Ranger. His voice was two: Tom Oliver’s, and Rita’s. The latter was much, much louder. “You know who you’re talking to.”

“I do, Rita.”

“And you know why my puppet is here.”

“I know why you send others to do your work for you, yes.” Zordon felt the white Power Coin within Tom’s hand. Tom had used it to get here, but it had also opened up an avenue that Zordon violently prayed he could use. “Tom,” said Zordon, “Rita Repulsa is not dead. She has tricked you into evil. Do not believe her.”

The shadow moved. The Black Ranger slammed a fist down into a console. Sparks flew from the machine. Zordon felt a stab of pain as part of himself was severed from the Command Center. “The human is mine!” That voice was all Rita. “Don’t think you can pull any of your silly tricks. My hold on him is strong.”

Zordon could see that it was. Her shadow wrapped tightly around his body in all places but his left palm, where the white coin rested.

“You weak, pathetic thing,” the Ranger spat. “You infest the humans with yourself and your lies. You control them. You force them to give up their lives for you.”

“Cozy was hardly the word for the Antarctic. Zordon and Alpha moved the Command Center around regularly, as a safety precaution. In all honesty, the main reason Zordon had moved it here was because he was fond of the penguins who nested nearby.

“You weak, pathetic thing,” the Ranger spat. “You infest the humans with yourself and your lies. You control them. You force them to give up their lives for you.”

“No, Rita,” said Zordon. “That is what you have done. My Rangers join willingly, while you enslave your own race.”
“I am no more human than you are, Zordon. Not anymore.”

“I… am sorry for what I did to you. Had I known that the Black power would attract the Dark Matter as it did, I would never have given it to you. It opened your soul, and the darkness consumed you. Please forgive me, Rita.”

_I have waited ten-thousand years to say that._

The sudden change took both the Ranger and his shadow aback. The shadow collected itself before the Ranger did. “Even now you lie,” said Rita’s voice. “These Rangers of yours… I see them now, and I know why you chose them. You wanted to be a father to them, isn’t that right? All of them – every one – has some daddy issues that you thought you could solve so that they’d be indebted to you. You used them, as you used us.”

The shadow twisted; the Ranger fired a volley around the room. One black bolt crashed into Zordon’s tank. Zordon cried out in pain. The room flickered, warped. He saw a brief glimpse of the past, when his original Rangers had stood before him to collect their coins. How could he not have foreseen their downfall?

“It is time to end your misery,” said the two voices.

"End me,” groaned Zordon, “and you… sever your ties to… your own power.”

The Black Ranger laughed. “You and I both know that my Power no longer comes from you. Ending your wretched existence will only strengthen me. I don’t even need the energy from that train.” The Ranger laughed again. “But of course, I’ll gladly welcome whatever I can get!”

“My Rangers will… stop you.”

"Your Rangers will die by my hand.” That voice was mostly Tom’s. “They will suffer for what they have done.”

Zordon searched the essences within the Black Ranger. He had long watched Tom Oliver; in his youth, he would have made an ideal White Ranger, just as Bill would have made a perfect Green Ranger. Funny how fate works itself into loops and unexpected turns. But where once Zordon had seen within Tom the essences of Honor, Duty, Passion, Courage, and yes, Ambition, now he saw only Wrath, Vengeance, Lust, Ambition, Jealousy. Rita kept these at the forefront of the man’s being. She was denying those other parts of him that made him who he was. This was how the Dark Matter changed people. This was how Rita had warped the old Rangers into her monstrous lackeys.

And this was why Zordon had given April the ability to see into the souls of others.

“Do what you must,” said Zordon. His program finished uploading in the background. It was time.

The Black Ranger laughed and pulled a black dagger from the shadows. “Gladly,” he said.

In his final act, Zordon snatched Bill Cranston out of Cedar – no, _Angel_ – Grove and prayed to the gods of his ancient race that his Wisdom had led him true.

**Chapter 5 – Will**
Will’s mind worked quickly, but the others followed his train of thought (so to speak) and agreed that they had no other choice. There just wasn’t enough time to come up with a Plan B. His plan was based off a few too many guesses for anyone’s liking; if they weren’t so desperate, no one would have ever gone along with it, Will least of all.

But they were out of time. T minus two minutes until the train arrived.

The others leapt to their tasks with that kind of vigor that only desperation could produce. Jess pulled her sword from a fiery building and used it to sling fireballs at the back of the Void Spider’s head. The monster turned and gave chase. Jack leapt up to the train rails and began to bend them in the right direction. April held out a hand, and her sapphire trident exploded from the flooded street. She dipped its head into the water and sent a cresting wave at the monster. The tide clashed against Jess’ fire and sent a pillar of steam over the area, outlining the monster in the mist and obscuring its vision while Will and Jack worked frantically at the next part of their insane plan.

_When are we going to see your weapon, White?_ Jess asked.

*I… don’t think I have one._ Will had been wondering the same thing all night, but each time he thought of a sword, or a spear, nothing felt right. Maybe the White Ranger just didn’t get a weapon. Or maybe he just wasn’t doing it right.

_We could all die, Will_ thought to himself. _I told the others I was sure this would work, but… I have no idea what I’m doing._

All of Will’s insecurities flooded his thoughts and blinded him to the task he was supposed to be doing. This whole night had been one long exercise in improvisation. Will was supposed to lead the Power Rangers, but how was he supposed to lead others when he couldn’t even lead himself? In his old life he had gotten into a pre-med program, but that wasn’t medical school yet. His grades this past semester weren’t good enough for the programs he thought he wanted to get into. But did he even want to be a doctor? Was that how he wanted to spend his days? He didn’t know. He just didn’t know. He couldn’t guess what kind of future he wanted; how was he supposed to know what to do in the present? Being a Power Ranger was a class with no teacher, where a failing grade meant the deaths of millions and possibly the destruction of the world. How was anyone supposed to do this and not panic?

Will felt a quiet wave of energy from April’s direction. His mind cleared. His doubts began to lighten. Honor shone through his insecurity and cast a spotlight on that part of him that was willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of others. His master’s voice echoed through his thoughts, something he always said when Will felt unsure: _your parents named you Will for a reason._

And, just like that, he tumbled through time and space and fell into the broken body of the old White Ranger.

Pain seared through his entire body. His right leg lay several feet away in a bloody pool, and both arms hung broken at his sides. His Ranger’s hood was down. Blood stung his eyes, but there was no way to wipe it away.

Rita Repulsa, clad in a gown of black silk that fluttered in a light breeze, stood over the White Ranger and laughed. Cruelty filled her cat-like eyes, and wisps of smoke flitted off the ends of her dress. Around her stood her top lieutenants: Goldar, Rito, Scorpina, Baboo, and some hulking creature that must have been Squatt. All former heroes, all turned to the darkness.

“Where is Zordon now?” Rita taunted. “He has abandoned you.”
The White Ranger fought to speak, but the pain and his own weakness were too much.

Rita absent-mindedly poked at his leg stump with her black staff. The Ranger cried out. Blood gushed from his mouth and washed over the lion emblem on his chest. Were it not for his suit, he’d have been dead long ago. He wondered if he shouldn’t just remove the suit and be done with it. But then Rita would win. He had to hold out, at least a little while longer.

“You think you’re so clever,” Rita continued, “holding out for as long as you did, masking Zordon’s presence from my sight. But I knew we could draw you out eventually. Zordon was wrong. Honor does have a weakness.” Rita leaned close and smiled. “Guilt. A few fires here, a couple of towns destroyed there, and before long that guilt would eat at you. Honor forced you out of hiding. Your own power has sent you to your doom. And with you, Zordon will fall, too.”

The Ranger’s heart sank. Zordon had warned him that the Dark Matter had taken control of Rita, but what she just said confirmed all of his fears: the Dark Matter’s control over Rita was complete. She was no longer a human; she was hardly more than a puppet.

"Earth teems with conscious life demanding for someone to rule them,” said the Dark Matter through Rita’s mouth. “Once I claim this world, other systems will fall to my might. I will have my revenge on the world which spawned Zordon’s kind. I will conquer all until only they remain, an insignificant speck of light within a sea of perfect darkness. No one can stop me!”

Her talk of planets and banishments had given the Ranger an idea. It would end his life, but he had lived hundreds of years. All attachments to his former life were long gone. And he would die soon, anyway. He set to work for one final banishment while the Dark Matter continued its blissful monologue.

“Yes, you fought valiantly. Isn’t that what you want to hear? Honor. Pah! Zordon’s ideals are a joke. Humans are base creatures, good for but one purpose: enslavement. Your Honor has only led you to this moment. Tell me… was it worth it? Do you feel honorable? Those who loved you in life are long dead. No one will remember you. Without others to tell of your deeds, your Honor is as worthless as your broken body is now.” Rita stepped on his shattered arm. He screamed and began to choke on his blood. He would die in a matter of seconds; it was now or never.

The White Ranger thought of teleportation – light travel. He felt the glow from his bloody chest emblem. Rita stomped on his chest and knocked the wind out of him, but he wouldn’t need breath anymore. He focused all his consciousness inward, through his brain, down his spine, and then – bam! – out his chest in a rush of white light that blinded Rita and her goons and carried them up into the stars, as far as the Ranger’s consciousness could take them before he died. His vision darkened as a small red planet approached. The Ranger’s concentration faltered; his body was shutting down.

*You will not stop me*, said a dark voice that was not Rita’s. *I will return! So long as I am connected to this world, there is nothing you can do to prevent my rise. Darkness will fall upon your world. I will blot out your pathetic sun. I will drown your kind in the seas, bury them beneath the earth, cut them to ribbons with the air itself. They will burn until all is ash. You have failed, Power Ranger. Here you banish me, but not because of Honor. You do it as a legacy to yourself. Pathetic excuse of a Ranger. Your weakness only proves my point: humans are nothing without a greater power to guide them.*

The White Ranger’s body failed him. Despair filled his thoughts during those last seconds, as the truth behind the Dark Matter’s words sapped his will to see this banishment through. Honor, the last of the great Rangers, had failed. His light crashed into the red planet’s northern pole just as darkness, sorrow, and death fully engulfed him.
Will fell back into himself, gasping for air. The sweet relief from pain overpowered him, and for a moment all he could do was fall to his knees and breathe.

White, thought Jess, you okay?

He had a vision, thought April. A difficult one. But you have to get up now, White Ranger. The train’s almost here.

Will wondered how he was supposed to do anything after what he had just seen. I died, he thought, not caring if the others heard his despair. I mean, it wasn’t me, but I’ve seen death and felt pain unlike anything I could have imagined. He was so alone at the end… Was that what my parents felt when they died? Or my sister? Will had never allowed himself to think about his family on the night they died, but the stress of today had broken down his old walls.

Will, urged Jess, not even caring about keeping their identities hidden in case Rita could hear their thoughts, come on, snap out of it. The train’s like thirty seconds away.

I just… But there was no way to explain the profound sense of hopelessness that still bled into him from the old Ranger’s memories. He couldn’t bear to think of his family feeling the way he did now; the mere thought crippled him and kept him on his knees, barely remembering to breathe.

There’s a time and a place to mourn, said April with the kind of gentleness that only someone who had been there before could have. But right now we have a war to fight.

Tracks are in place, thought Jack. Yellow, get ready to get out of that train!

Sure thing, thought Ewan. As soon as I get this monkey off my fucking face!

Void Spider’s out of position, said Jack. Red, it’s not following you anymore.

Shit! thought Jess. She threw more fireballs, but the Void Spider had lost interest in the fire it couldn’t see. It began whipping its extra legs through the air.

It’s absorbing the steam, said Jack.

Will, thought April. She didn’t need to say anything else; the warmth in her voice was enough. Will was not alone.

He hauled himself to his feet. His HUD located the Void Spider through the cloud of steam. The old Ranger stared into the abyss and flinched, he thought. That won’t be me! There would be a time and place to mourn, just as April had said. But first things first. Misery had no place within the mind of a Power Ranger.

Get rid of the steam, he thought.

The Red and Blue Rangers did so. Will leapt dangerously close to the Void Spider and fired a volley of white pistol blasts. The monster lashed out at him, but he ducked under the leg and backed up, dodging more and more swipes. Jess tried to join him, but April held her back. The more Rangers, the more likely they could get tangled up with each other.

A few more feet, White, said Jack. Train’ll be here in ten seconds!

I can’t get Baboo off me! yelled Ewan.

Just get out of there! April thought back. Don’t sacrifice yourself to kill her!
Sacrifice, thought Will. *I do what Honor demands.* He held still in just the right spot. A black leg ripped through the disappearing fog and grabbed him around the waist. *This is for my family.*
Chapter 1 – Jack

The train car whipped around the bend at two-hundred miles an hour. Jack leapt clear, his stone leg nearly clipping the front of the train. The train car screeched off the tracks and arched through the air. The Yellow Ranger fell out the car’s rear door, wrestling with a mass of blue fur. The Void Spider opened the strange, enormous mouth on its back and caught the train car between its teeth. The Yellow Ranger and Baboo splashed down into the street. Jack landed next to his sister, hoping desperately that Will’s plan would work.

*When are we going to talk about that leg of yours?* thought Jess.

*I’m fine,* thought Jack.

One long black leg clung to the White Ranger’s waist. Will’s suit was quickly decaying wherever the Void Spider touched him. Crackles of white and dark light sparked from his suit; soon there wouldn’t be anything left between Will’s body and pure Dark Energy.

At least, that’s what Jack assumed this monster was: a manifestation of Dark Energy in this dimension. No one’s power suit had been able to get a proper reading on the damned thing. They were operating on too many unknown variables. It made Jack more uneasy than he cared to say. *Be the Keeper of Strength,* he reminded himself. *Be strong for the others.*

The Void Spider struggled with the train car sticking halfway out its mouth. It reeled backward, unable to phase back to its own dimension while it still touched a Power Ranger. It let go of Will, but the White Ranger leapt forward and clung to the leg. So far, Will’s idea had worked: as long as the Void Spider stayed in contact with a being infused with Zordon’s pure energy, it would be unable to shift back into its own dimension of evil.

The Void Spider seemed to realize this as well. It tried to shake Will off, but he held on with an iron grip, his hands and chest smoking heavily from the contact. Out of options, the Void Spider began to ingest the train car lodged in its throat. Jack had to wait for just the right moment; too early and he would kill them all. Too late, and they would lose their only chance of destroying this thing.

The train car inched further and further into darkness. More smoke curled from Will as he was whipped to and fro.

“Hurry up and blow it,” Jess said from beside him.

"Not yet,” said Jack.

Just then, Jack felt something tear at his chest. He jumped back in surprise. From Jess’ reaction, she’d felt the same thing.

“The fuck was that!? she cried. “What hit us?”

*It’s not us, thought April. Something’s wrong with Zordon.*

*Then we need to go help him,* thought Jess.
No, thought Jack. We’re needed here.

Actually, groaned Ewan, you’re needed here. Help please!

The Yellow Ranger popped out of the flooded street nearby, a screeching lump of dark blue still attached to his body. April sprung into action, sliding across the water’s surface like some kind of street surfer.

Another jolt of pain cut through the Rangers’ chest emblems. Jack forced himself to focus on the Void Spider and was surprised to find that it had almost consumed the entire train already.

Time to act.

He recalled the train’s inner layout from what he had seen through Ewan’s vision. So many conduits; if he could twist just one…

Having no idea whether or not this would work, he sent his power within the train car and felt around for any metal conduits. Metal is just purified earth, he thought. I bent the train rails with my hands; I can bend a metal pipe with my mind.

He felt around the train until he found one of the conduits through which the city’s energy was running. Time to light it up, he thought. Then to the Rangers he added, How about some Fourth of July fireworks?

Hang on, thought Ewan, Greeny tells jokes now?

Jack’s grasp on the conduit was loosening, as if it was moving away from him at an incredible speed. He put all his power into giving it a firm twist. Instantly he lost his hold on the conduit; it was obliterated within an atomic chain reaction that built and built and built until it reached critical mass and released its energy in an almighty explosion that sent beams of light out the ends of each of the Spider’s dozens of legs and orifices. Jack’s HUD tracked the amount of power growing within the Void Spider’s body as the explosion continued to gain intensity. His jaw dropped; the blast was greater than he had anticipated, easily more than any bomb yet created on Earth.

Now he depended on the Void Spider to keep the Rangers from destroying the city and, possibly, the entire country.

I might have overdone it, he thought.

How much fucking energy was in that train!? Jess thought.

The Void Spider’s body looked like space itself, with more and more tiny holes of light shining through its pitch-black exterior. The monster was fighting to stay alive.

And so was Will.

Spots of light hit his body and pushed him away from the monster. His hand slipped; now he clung to the Void Spider with one arm. The black leg waved back and forth so quickly that he couldn’t catch it again. So many shafts of light poured from the monster’s body now that Jack felt like he was at some hallucinogenic rave party.

Jack’s HUD scanned the monster again and sounded an alarm in his ear.

It’s about to blow! he thought to the others. Take cover!
Not without Will, thought Jess.

No! thought Will. Get out of here!

You’re not the boss of me, thought Jess. She sloshed into the flooded street toward the mass of black and white.

I am your leader, thought Will as Jess continued to stomp in his direction. And I say—

The monster’s tumor-mouth opened wide, and a blast of white fire erupted straight out, blowing a hole clean through a nearby building. The monster’s body turned pure-white. For the briefest of moments, everything was silence: the rain hung in mid-air, the monster stopped screaming, the Rangers stopped thinking.

Then the Void Spider exploded.

Jack’s hood protected his eyes and ears from the blast, but even with its aid his head still rung. At the last moment he had made a low wall of rock to fall behind. White light blasted through the street so pure and strong that there were no shadows. The buildings around him crumbled to dust and were swept away. Chunks of the street itself lifted off and were cast into oblivion, yet still Jack’s wall kept him safe.

But as his vision returned to him, the wall was nowhere to be seen. In the end, the blast obliterated it all.

There was nothing in the silence but the light patter of rain.

The sky was darker than it had been before; he could hardly see a thing. He looked down at his hands and tried to scan them but stopped. There were no gloves.

He wasn’t wearing his suit.

He felt his body and confirmed his fears. He wore only his green gi and the slick pair of glasses Alpha had given him. He tried to stand but fell to the side on a foot that wasn’t there. He felt sluggish and helpless. Where was his suit?

Flakes of snow fluttered onto his face. No, not snow. Ash.

His eyes adjusted to the darkness rapidly, until he realized that, as his eyes adjusted, the world actually was becoming lighter. The clouds were separating. The rain was lessening.

When the first streetlight hummed to life in the far distance, Jack understood: their plan had worked. The city had power again.

But I don’t. What happened?

In the growing light he could see the large crater where the Void Spider had been. It had to be at least a hundred meters across, and there, lying at the edge, was a pair of bodies atop a small circle of untouched ground.

Jack crawled on all-threes over debris toward the bodies, cutting his hands on broken glass and uneven concrete. He didn’t shout, in case there were enemies nearby. Was he the only one still alive? He didn’t see where April and Ewan were before the blast. Jess had been running toward the monster. And Will…
If he was dead, then it had been by his own choice. A noble way to go. But Jack hoped desperately that he had somehow survived.

Water sprayed from a busted underground pipe near the edge of the crater. Jack hauled himself around the pipe and slipped and slid his way around the edge of the crater.

Will and Jess lay together on a circle of perfect asphalt. Like Jack, they wore only their Ranger gis. Jess stirred as Jack approached.

“He saved me,” she mumbled, answering Jack’s question before he even had to ask. She stood and tossed Jack’s arm over her shoulder so that he could stand. “Will jumped to me right when the fucker exploded and…” she coughed violently and groaned, holding her stomach in obvious pain.

“Guys!”

Jack turned to see April supporting Ewan on her shoulder. Ewan’s face was bleeding furiously from several claw marks, and he was limping on one leg.

“Is Will…” April started, but she stopped as soon as she saw him lying in front of Jack. Her eyes widened in horror.

Now Jack looked closely at Will and realized what April had seen. Will’s hands and neck had turned a deep black. Jack knelt and opened the front of Will’s gi.

“Fuck me…” said Ewan.

Every inch of Will’s body that had touched the Void Spider – his hands, arms, neck, chest, and especially his waist – was a deep black and covered in blistering pockets of dying skin. Jack wanted to check for a pulse but didn’t want to touch Will’s blackened neck. The smell of charred flesh was overpowering. Jack fought back his gag reflex. Ewan lost that battle nearby.

A light breeze wandered across the crater, and Will stirred. He feebly opened an eye and saw the other Rangers standing over him. “Hey guys,” he groaned. “Where’s your suits?”

“I can answer that.”

The breeze picked up, and Jack realized that there was a shadow growing at the base of the crater. April and Ewan helped Will sit up, though he was in too much pain to move. The shadow in the crater rose into the air as a sphere of black. Below it, shadow itself appeared to solidify. The sphere rose higher and higher until it was level with the Rangers. Then the blackness swirled away, and a lone figure stood atop a pillar of night.

“Greetings, Rangers,” said the figure. It stepped forward. The shadow pillar moved with it as it walked, so that it was always level with the Rangers.

“Who are you?” Jess demanded.

“The Black Ranger,” whispered April. The newcomer stopped and looked them over one by one. His gaze lingered on Will.

“You’re Rita?” Ewan asked. “You sound like a dude. Mars was kinda rough on you, huh?”

“Rita is dead,” said the Black Ranger. “As is Zordon. I have destroyed your Command Center, and now I will destroy you. Yes, even you, Will.”
“How… do you know my name?” Will asked. From the sound of it, it was all he could do just to speak.

The Black Ranger laughed. “Your parents named you Will for a reason.” The color drained from Will’s face. Jack’s mind could barely accept the improbability of what it was witnessing as the Black Ranger removed his hood. “Right, son?” grinned Master Tom, Will’s adopted father.

Chapter 2 – Private Ryan Scott

It had taken them all night to get this far, yet by his estimate they still had fifteen miles to the city.

Private Scott had been enjoying a day of leave for the Fourth of July. He hadn’t seen his family in six months, and for one glorious afternoon of sunshine, and barbeque, and touch football, all had been as it should be.

Then his brother-in-law had come running out of the house. He was shouting something about a terrorist attack in Cedar Grove. Ryan had thought that there had been a bombing, or terrorists had taken a commercial airliner and rammed it into downtown.

He wasn’t prepared for the truth.

The reporter spoke frantically over broken footage taken from a helicopter. The sun was setting behind the downtown skyscrapers while flames and an army tore through the streets. The camera zoomed in on what looked like a gorilla wearing golden armor, who promptly threw a ball of flame at the heli. The footage spun within the broken copter until a sudden stop. The picture froze on four hooded figures in white, green, red, and blue.

“These are our targets,” boomed Major Strong. The man’s voice matched his name perfectly. He stood before Private Ryan Scott and the rest of the patchwork company – nearly two-hundred men and women hastily pulled from leave because they were closest to Cedar Grove. “Cedar Grove has lost all power and communications. We have also lost the drones we’ve sent over the city. Any satellite that tries to scan the city shorts out. We’ve lost nearly half a dozen eyes up there. Whatever these terrorists are using to jam us, we’ve never seen anything like it. We’ve called you all from holiday as a last resort. You boys and girls will be joining another company and one or possibly two armored divisions to take the city back.”

A private raised his hand. The Major nodded at him. “With all due respect sir, do we have any more information? Which companies are we joining? Which armored division? And how many terrorists are there? Who’s leading them? We have no information, sir.”

“You think I don’t know that!?” blasted Strong. No one moved. Strong’s muscles nearly ripped through his uniform. A vein in his bald head was nearly set to blow. “We are facing a new threat here, soldiers. The fact is, there is no more information. Blackout radius around the city is nearly four-hundred miles. I say you ‘might’ be joined by armored divisions because, right now, any machine that crosses the blackout line goes dark faster than you can say ‘ISIS.’ In case you haven’t figured it out yet, we sit right on the edge of that blackout line. It’s two-hundred miles to the city, but since the blackout renders all of our transports useless, we’ve thrown together a backup plan.” Major Strong reached behind him and lifted a bicycle into view. “Hope you’ve all been keeping up with your cardio,” he said. “You’re in for a long ride.”
Chapter 3 – Will

*Your parents named you Will for a reason.*

Will’s mind spun. Had Rita learned his identity when he slammed his coin into Goldar? Was this her way of punishing Will for fighting as a Ranger?

“The fuck’s he talking about, Will?” said Jess. “Who is this guy?”

Will’s mind jumped back to the day his family died. His parents and sister had been on their way to one of his martial arts tournaments when their car got T-boned in an intersection. Drunk driver. Will’s martial arts master, a man named Tom Oliver, had driven him straight to the hospital, where Will watched his family flatline one by one. The doctors hadn’t been able to save any of them. In a cruel twist of irony, the only one who had survived was the other driver.

That was eight years ago now, but Will had never forgotten what Master Tom had told him then. “Listen,” he had whispered, “this is going to be harder than anything you’ve ever faced before. I know how important your family was to you. Your parents, your sister… they were really amazing people, and nothing will ever take that away from them or you. You are their legacy now. You have the opportunity to ensure that their goodness is not forgotten. *They named you Will for a reason.* You have the willpower to get through this.”

“I’m scared,” Will had said. He was just a kid then, barely thirteen years old.

“It’s alright to be scared,” said Tom. “But it’s like the Green Lantern comics, right? The good guys – the Lanterns – controlled their emotions and fought using their will, while the bad guys like Sinestro fought using fear. Green Lantern mastered his fears and became the greatest guardian Earth had ever seen!”

They both chuckled. “I’m not saving the world,” Will pointed out.

“Not the whole world,” agreed Master Tom. “Just your own.” He rubbed Will’s head in that way all children hate. “Heroism starts with you. Your parents named you after the single greatest driving force in the universe. They named you Will for a reason. They knew you would do great things someday. And… I want to help make that happen. I’ll always be there for you buddy. You’re not alone.”

Aching pain brought Will back to the present. His wounds from the Void Spider were moving deeper into his body.

Master Tom smirked at the Rangers from his pillar made of shadow. “Gotta say, I was pretty surprised to learn that you were the Power Rangers,” he said. “You had all the makings of a superhero, Will. Orphaned. Taken in by a brilliant-but-distant master. Trained extensively in martial arts. Eager to help others in a way that you never were. And now the Rangers have become a symbol of hope for the city.” Master laughed. “Why, you’re fuckin’ Batman!”

*He used to think I was the Green Lantern.*

“This… isn’t you, Master,” said Will. Speaking was still difficult. With his wounds looking so bad on the outside, he didn’t want to think about how they looked on the inside. If he didn’t get back to the Command Center soon, his organs would start shutting down.
Master Tom ignored him. “You had all the makings of a hero, Will, you really did… except for one little problem. Heroes don’t exist in real life. This isn’t some comic book. This is the real world. Here, darkness always prevails. Your family is dead, and it isn’t because some lonely comic book writer wanted to make you more relatable or give you some noble struggle, no… It’s because your parents were fucking stupid. They were late for your tournament because your sister wouldn’t get ready, so they were speeding to make up time. And you know what happened, Will? They didn’t pay attention, and they crashed. No heroic tragedy. No great struggle against evil. Just death and darkness. This is the way of life.”

“This isn’t you,” groaned Will. “Rita’s… controlling you.”

“Rita was the only one to see the truth,” said Master Tom. “She showed me Zordon’s oppressive ways. It’s you who was being controlled.”

“Man,” groaned Ewan, “fuck this! Look, Master Tom, or Rita, or whatever you really are. We’ve beaten everything you’ve thrown at us! We’re stronger. Just admit that you can’t win and go back to the fucking planet you crawled from before we send you there. Forcefully.”

The Black Ranger stepped closer, stopped, and looked past the Rangers. “I never liked you, Ewan,” he said. “You always had such a mouth.” A light breeze hit Will from behind, and a blur of blue leapt onto Master’s shadow pillar. “Your victories have been temporary at best.” Baboo crouched next to Master Tom and sniffed the air while he talked. “You have caused our side a few petty setbacks, it is true, but there is nothing you can do to stop us now. I will free this city. Squatt! Here!”

The ground rumbled, and the crater wall behind the Rangers exploded in a shotgun blast of rocks and broken asphalt. The Rangers shielded themselves and Will from the debris. A massive creature flew right past them and landed heavily next to Master. It rose to a towering height; Master Tom looked hardly more than a child next to this thing. Muscles rippled under gray skin and a sleeveless leather jerkin. His pants were tattered at his calves, and he wore knee and elbow pads of metal with small spikes on the ends. His jaw jut so far out from his face that his mouth stood permanently open, with fangs sticking up in front of his upper lip.

“So now we have medieval Hulk,” grumbled Ewan.

“The old Green Ranger,” said Jack. Squatt spat out a mouthful of rock and grinned stupidly at them.

“Yes,” said Master, “a preview of what’s to come for you, Jack. But let’s get down to business, shall we? You’ve slain my master, and now I’ve slain yours, but we’re still not even.”

“Your master?” echoed Ewan. “Rita? We haven’t even seen her! Trust me, we’dve happily knocked her ass off if we could, but unless she turned herself into a mudman somewhere down the line—”

“DON’T,” screamed Master Tom, “LIE. TO ME. I saw her die! I saw the five of you beating my Kim within an inch of her life. You have much to answer for.”

“Who the fuck is Kim?” asked Jess.

“Kardashian?” offered Ewan.

The others looked to Will, but he only shook his head. Kim? Will had never heard of anyone by that name, but then Master Tom had a funny way of avoiding his past.
“I promise you,” said April, “we have never seen Rita or anyone named Kim. Rita has deceived you. She lives, and she is manipulating you from the shadows, just as the Dark Dimension controls her.”

“You deny it all,” said Master.

“Of course we do,” said Ewan. Will wished that he could speak; Ewan’s defiance wasn’t helping.

“I thought you might.” Master Tom reached into the shadow pillar and withdrew a black knife. “Like it?” he asked. “Watch this – well, don’t watch. Listen.” He held the knife sideways to his mouth and blew like it was some kind of flute. To Will’s surprise, a trumpeting blast echoed through the crater, a single note that rang in Will’s ears for some time afterward.

“The more you lie,” said Master Tom, “the worse this is going to be for you. And believe me: your situation is more dire than you could possibly know.”

A pair of mudmen crested the top of the crater’s lip, carrying a body between them. They slid down to Master Tom’s shadow pillar and slung the body at Master’s feet before retreating back the way they came.

“You will tell me what you’ve done with Kim,” said Master Tom. He grabbed the body’s hair and pulled it up onto its knees.

Ewan’s mom.

“Ma!” screamed Ewan. He lurched forward, but April and Jess held him back. “You fuckin’ bastard! I’ll rip your fuckin’ heart out if you fuckin’ touch her! Ma! Ma, can you hear me!!?”

Master Tom yanked Ms. McKay to her knees. In the dim light of the distant streetlights Will could see her face contorted in pain, though her eyes remained closed like she was in a trance.

“And another word,” warned Master Tom. He placed his dagger against her throat. Ewan pulled against April and Jess again, but he said nothing. “Now, where was I? Oh yes. My master has been slain. I watched Rita die after she gave me the coin that helped me become one of you. The Dark Dimension has shown me the truth: Zordon had to be stopped. His self-righteous sense of justice was going to turn this whole planet into a police state. He’d have seen all humans in chains if he could. I destroyed him before he could have that chance. No more Zordon, no more powers for the five of you. Rita was smart, though. She learned how to channel the Black Ranger powers through the Dark Dimension.”

“Hope the Dark Dimension enjoyed the little bomb we just sent,” growled Ewan.

Master Tom pressed the knife closer against Ms. McKay’s throat. “Really Ewan. Shut the fuck up. Rita was smarter than Zordon ever was. She channeled the Black Ranger powers through the Dark Dimension so that, no matter what happened to Zordon, I would still be powerful as ever. Now your precious Zordon has died, and the world is the better for it. He was holding humans back. I have freed us.”

“You’ve fucked us,” said Ewan.

Master Tom yanked his arm to the side. Ms. McKay’s eyes opened and her mouth dropped in a silent scream. Dark blood gushed from beneath her chin. Ewan leapt forward, but in their simple cloth gi uniforms he was just a college kid. No special powers. No super-strength. Ms. McKay slumped into the shadow pillar, and Master Tom spun the knife in his hand and punched Ewan in the gut with its handle so hard that Ewan tumbled through the air. His foot caught Will in the face and
knocked the other Rangers over.

Pain blinded Will. The sudden movement of getting kicked in the face set all his dead skin burning all over his body. He thought he might have cried out. A strong arm lifted him into the air.

“I’ve had to hold your hand for eight miserable years,” said Master Tom. He was hardly inches from Will’s face. As Will slowly tuned out the pain and focused on the now, he realized that Squatt was holding him off the ground by the front of his gi, with Master Tom standing right next to him. Tom’s irises were so black that his pupils looked light by comparison. “You were a burden to me.” Will could still hear Ewan screaming behind him. “His mother’s serving a better purpose now. Haven’t you wondered where all those Putties come from? We made most of them in the Dark Dimension, yes, but really it’s so much better to make them here. They say God created Adam from mud and dust, well, I guess you could say we’ve just reversed the process…”

Master Tom forced Will’s head to the side. Ms. McKay lay next to them atop the pillar. As they watched, dark mud crept up her body until it formed a cocoon. The mud dried, cracked, and broke apart. A mudman rose from the dried clay and looked to Master Tom, as if awaiting orders. A thin line of magma traced across its neck, just where Master Tom had sliced her.

The Black Ranger leaned closer to Will, but when he spoke it was not with his voice. “The ones we make from humans,” said Rita, “are so much stronger than the pitiful things I brought back to Earth with me. When all of this is over, and I am Queen of this pathetic planet, I will turn your lost little Master Tom into the strongest Putty of them all. Who knows? I might even find this ‘Kim’ of his and command him to destroy her. Wouldn’t that be fun.”

"YOU MOTHERFUCKER,” Ewan was screaming. “YOU FUCKING FUCK! I WILL RIP YOUR HEAD OFF AND SHIT DOWN YOUR NECK HOLE!”

The shadow of Rita passed from Tom’s face, and he placed his dark knife against Will’s cheek. Ewan stopped yelling. “It would be a mercy for me to kill you now,” Master said quietly with his own voice. He began to drag the knife across Will’s face. Will wanted to scream, but it just came out as strangled grunts. Master Tom took his time with the cut, letting the blade slide through Will’s flesh ever so slowly. “It would be a mercy,” Master Tom repeated, “but that’s not my Power. I saw you five beating my Kim to a bloody pulp. I will keep you alive only long enough to find her. Then, I will make sure your deaths are as slow as Zordon’s was.” He nodded, and Squatt threw Will onto the chunk of untouched asphalt where the other Rangers were. “Squatt. Baboo. Take them to the palace. Human reinforcements have arrived outside the city, and I must go and greet them.” He grinned widely. “Did you know that Zordon had been keeping his greatest technology from you this whole time? His last act before he died was unlocking it for you. Unfortunately for him, it also granted me full access. Time to go introduce the United States Army to my zord. Oh, and Jack, Jess… One more step out of line, and your parents will be next.”

Black shadow swirled around Master Tom and carried him to the west.

Chapter 4 – April

Squatt, Baboo, and the mudman who used to be Ewan’s mother stepped forward, and as they did, the shadow pillar moved with them. April and the other Rangers tried to back away, but there would be no escape. Jess was mostly uninjured, but Jack was missing a leg, Will was covered in dimensional burns, and Ewan was in even worse shape. He sat on his knees, tears streaming from
his face. He hadn’t moved since the Black Ranger left.

“If they take us prisoner,” whispered April, “we might be able to break free and destroy Rita’s palace from the inside.” But even as she said it she knew it was impossible. Zordon was dead. They had no more powers. They were just kids again, and broken kids at that.

Instead she studied Baboo. That monster was once the Blue Ranger; April had seen her memories. She used to love the water. She had been the glue that held the old team together, but when Rita tore it apart, the Blue Ranger couldn’t handle it. Rita had turned her into a horrible blue beast just because she thought the Blue Ranger was prettier than her. Rita’s insecurities must have run pretty deep to do something so childish.

And April didn’t even know what to think of Squatt. He looked like a thin gray sheet stretched over too much muscle, with a lumpy, disfigured head resting on top. The head grinned at her when she looked at it.

“Heh heh heh,” Squatt chuckled. “Come Rangers…”

“Fuck off, Shrek.”

They heard a dry crackling, almost like lightning, and a jet of ice caught Squatt in the face while another hit Baboo in the chest. A third ice blast crashed against the mudman. A thin laser sliced through its side. Its arm fell away, but the monster snarled and fell behind Squatt before the laser could do any more damage. Squatt roared at the shooter and leapt away in the other direction, Baboo and the mudman clinging to his back as they disappeared in the distance.

April looked up the crater slope behind them just in time to see Alpha 5’s faceless head tilt toward them. “Down here,” he said. “One’s hurt pretty bad.”

Two humans sprinted over the crater’s lip and slid down to them with futuristic-looking guns in their hands. April recognized one: Jason Scott, the paramedic they had saved from the burning apartment earlier that night. Will had given him his spare tank of healing salve, April realized. If he had any left, Will may survive.

The other human got to them first. She was beautiful: blonde hair, blue eyes, and when she spoke it was with an Australian accent. “Hey there,” she said with a quiet, reassuring tone. “I’m Kat, and this is Jason. We’re here to help you.”

“He’s hurt pretty bad,” Jack said. April and Jess propped Will into a sitting position. Blood caked Will’s face, and the black, dead parts of his skin couldn’t possibly look much worse than they already did.

Kat turned. “Jason!” she called. “We need more salve!”

“I’m all out!” Jason called back.

April’s heart sank. She remembered what Will had thought when he gave the salve to Jason earlier that night. *If I get hurt and we could have used that extra salve, then I’ll take my scar knowing that one of these people doesn’t have to live with one. This is the reality we signed up for when we became Rangers.* The looks on the twins’ faces told her that they had realized the same thing.

Jason slid down next to Kat and examined Will. “We can at least stop the bleeding here,” he pulled some rags from his backpack and pressed them against Will’s face. Jack held the rags in place while Jason rummaged through his bag. “What happened to his skin? Those don’t look like burns.”
“No,” said April. “They’re not. There was a monster here, and it touched him.”

Jason frowned. “Was it one of those three we shot?” April looked carefully at the guns. Veins of blue ice pulsed across their frames. Professor Cranston’s design. These were obviously two of the twelve people Zordon had chosen. They were trustworthy.

April shook her head. “A different monster. It caused this crater.”

“And you survived?”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” said Jess. “Figure it out. We’re the assholes who gave you that healing salve in the first place.”

“Jess!” said Jack.

Jess shrugged. “What? We’re powerless now; no harm in telling someone. There was a monster here, and we killed it, but it touched Will with its stupid fucking death legs and if you don’t help him then he’ll die.”

“You five,” Jason said slowly, “are the Power Rangers?”

“We were,” corrected Jess. “We were the Power Rangers. We were the ones who busted your ass out of that burning apartment block. But apparently the alien who gave us all our fancy powers has gone and died, and now the world’s fucked. You should probably leave the city, or the fucking planet if you can.”

April shook her head, but Jess wasn’t wrong. Without Zordon, what could they do? There were no more Power Rangers. Rita never had to defeat the Rangers themselves – just Zordon – and she had done exactly that by misdirecting them. If even one of the Rangers had stayed at the Command Center, they might have stopped the Black Ranger.

Alpha shoved his way between Jason and Kat. “Move aside, meatbags. Let me look at him.” Alpha knelt beside Will. “When we lost the Command Center, I knew it wouldn’t be long before I ran into you five, though frankly even I didn’t think I’d find you so quickly. Stealth is not one of your strong suits.”

“Good to see you too, Alpha,” said Jack. Alpha responded with a raised middle finger.

“The damage is extensive,” Alpha said a moment later. “Kidneys are damaged, intestines are shot to hell. His body’s filling with fluids, and he’s losing circulation in his extremities. And with the intestines gone, he’ll go septic soon. Kid’s been through hell, and he looks it.”

“What about him?” Jason nodded to Ewan, who hadn’t moved an inch since Squatt and Baboo left. “Is he okay?”

“That kid’s never been okay,” said Alpha.

“He just lost his mom,” said Jess.

“Was she that clay person?” asked Kat. “We’ve seen others around the city get turned into those things.” April and the twins nodded. Kat’s shoulders slumped. “I’m so sorry…”

No one spoke. A breeze played across the crater. Jason and Kat were soaked through; April was glad to see that the rain had finally let up. But the sky was still dark. April didn’t know what time it was, but she was pretty sure that it should be close to dawn. Yet it looked like it was still the middle
of the night. Destroying the Void Spider had certainly lessened Rita’s power, but she still had plenty to spare.

_The Black Ranger thinks Rita’s dead_, April thought. _But we never saw her, and I don’t think anyone else would have killed her. And the way he kept talking about this “Kim” person… Rita must have tricked him into thinking we’re bad. It’s the only explanation._ She wanted to offer this idea to the other Rangers, but they couldn’t hear each other’s thought anymore, and she didn’t feel like speaking. The silence in her head, after a night of being telepathically connected to her new friends, was deafening.

“We can’t stay here,” Jason said at last. “More and more patrols are roaming the city, and without you to stop them… Well, we have to get him some place safe.” He nodded at Will, who was looking worse and worse by the minute.

“And you, too,” Kat said to Jack.

“I’ll be fine,” said Jack.

“You two should go on without us,” said April. “There are others you can help. Alpha can keep us safe.”

Alpha snorted. “Better than you ever could.”

Jason and Kat stood and exchanged a look. Kat nodded. “Alright,” said Jason. They turned to leave, but Jason turned back. “You know… even if you don’t have your powers anymore, you five made a difference tonight. Thank you.” He and Kat trudged up the crater’s slope in silence.

“Come on,” said Alpha with none of his usual sass, “I saw an abandoned building that should be safe enough. It’s just down this way. Oh and Jack, here.” Alpha detached a leg and slapped it on to Jack’s stump. Small jets pulsed from Alpha’s knee to help keep him upright. “Another one of Zordon’s failsafe plans,” said Alpha.

Jack pushed himself up onto his new metal leg and tested it. “Better than the old one,” he said. “Thanks.”

“Only a temporary fix,” said Alpha. “The battery life in that thing sucks.” He made his way out of the crater, every other step a little burst of jet that made him look like he walked on an invisible leg, which April supposed he was. Jack and Jess helped Will to his feet. The three of them started awkwardly up the crater wall after him.

“Now can we talk about the leg?” said Jess as they walked off.

“No,” muttered Jack.

“April.” She turned; Ewan spoke slowly, his eyes still locked on the spot where his mother had been turned into a mudman. “Who did you fight in the Dark Dimension?”

The question caught April off-guard. “You mean when we were fighting each other?”

“Yeah. Who was I?”

“…My father.”

Ewan slumped back, still resting on his knees, and put his hands on his thighs. “Guess who I thought you were.” He still wouldn’t look away from the spot.
April shook her head. “Ewan, why don’t we talk about this somewhere safer? We have to get away from this place.” April had already taken her powers for granted. She longed to be able to see and feel Ewan’s emotions, but of course that was impossible now.

Ewan ignored April. He said nothing. Jess called down for them to move their asses. April called back that they would just be a minute. When she turned back to Ewan, he was on his feet. “Give up?” he asked. His affect was flat, his spirit totally gone.

“Yeah.” April already knew, but Ewan had to be the one to say it.

Ewan nodded back at where the shadow pillar had been. “You were her.” He shuffled past her and up the crater after the others.

Chapter 5 – Private Ryan Scott

Private Scott couldn’t tell what was sweat and what was rain. His company had left their base eight hours ago. They had biked straight through the night, and for the past few hours the downpour had been nothing short of torrential. The water weighed them all down, but they were soldiers, dammit. A bit of extra weight wasn’t going to stop them, not when terrorists had taken over an entire city.

They were still half an hour out when they saw the shaft of fire. No one knew what to make of it. It wasn’t an explosion, but it also didn’t look like a weapon. After the shaft of fire, though, the city’s electricity sparked back to life, lighting up the downtown skyline like some eerie postcard or fire and death. The rain began to taper off. Private Scott wasn’t a superstitious man, but he wondered if the fire, and the city lights, and the rain weren’t all connected somehow.

His company gathered along the western highway that led into the city. The pileup of cars was thicker here than it had been on the way in, all on the outgoing side. These people had been trying to escape, and something – or someone – had stopped them.

Private Scott had a bad feeling about all of this. There was supposed to be another company of soldiers already here, but there were no signs of them. Maybe we arrived before they did?

Major Strong called everyone to a halt and updated them on their mission. Satellite feeds were coming back up. The blackout line was receding, so they were working on ‘copter in as many armors as they could, but for now this company was on its own. Reports were sketchy, but most agreed that strange mud-caked men had taken the city. No one was sure what had become of Cedar Grove’s two-million inhabitants.

“Unfortunately,” said Strong, “there are no traces of our ally company anywhere. All of our intel suggests that they should have reached the city at least thirty minutes ago. We cannot rely on their support. I’m going to be straight with you,” said Strong. For just a moment, his face softened, which simply did not happen. It was like Chuck Norris crying or something. “The higher-ups are discussing the possibility of a nuclear strike. We don’t know what these terrorists want or where they came from, but we do know that there are thousands of them. Now—”

A high screech cut him off. Everyone turned toward the city just as a shadow passed in front of one of the skyscrapers. Someone swore; the shadow was huge. No one spoke; hardly anyone breathed. As they listened, Private Scott soon noticed a slow, rhythmic beating sound. The thing screeched again, and under it Private Scott swore he heard laughter.
Then the beating sound stopped. All was silence but for the light rain that continued to fall.

The company was still fixated on the city when the rain stopped, then started back up again, as if they had driven through a tunnel. Private Ryan looked up; though the sky was dark, something even darker glided straight over them. “Sir!” he shouted, pointing. The black spot changed course, growing larger and larger until, at last, the beast slammed down between their company and Cedar Grove.

The highway streetlights barely even began to shine light on the monster. It stood at least eight stories tall, with a wingspan wider than several football fields. Twin eyes, each like spiral galaxies resting in a perfect sea of black, stared down at them. The creature stood on four stout legs. Its body was covered in black scales that seemed to absorb whatever light touched them. It stood silent and unmoving, its black presence pulling the entire company into its depths. *The damned thing looks like a fucking dragon,* thought Private Scott. *But it feels like a black hole...*

A shaft of pale starlight emanated from the top of the creature’s head, and a human stepped out. *It’s a machine,* Private Scott realized. *Who has the technology to build something like this!?*

“Hello!” the person said, her voice amplified by unseen speakers. Private Scott’s eyes must have been playing tricks on him; the person looked built like a man, but that voice was undeniably female. “I am the new owner of this city, and you are trespassing.”

“We are the United States Army!” Major Strong shouted back. Even with his booming voice, he sounded weak and insignificant next to this strange terrorist. “Who are you, and what are your demands?”

“I have already told you who I am,” the man said. “I am the master of this city. My forces have defeated yours. Cedar Grove is mine, and soon my army will sweep across this planet and rid it of you worthless humans. There is no force in this galaxy that can stop me.”

“Right.” Major Strong turned back to his company. “Soldiers, we have our orders. We start with that machine! ATs, to the front!” The soldiers with anti-tank armaments sprinted to Strong’s side and prepared to fire. The person atop the machine dropped through the hatch. “Aim for the eyes!” shouted Strong. “Aaaaaaand…”

Just before he gave the word to fire, the machine leapt to life. Light burned within its eyes as they locked on the company of two hundred soldiers. Strong gave the command, and half a dozen rockets lit up the night sky with mighty explosions. But even through the resulting smoke, Private Scott could see those eyes, like some cosmic jack-o-lantern. The machine opened its mouth, and a great wall of black fire covered them all.
He felt like his body was on fire. No, Bill realized, not fire. Ice. My nerves are reacting to an extreme temperature and cannot differentiate between the two. He opened his eyes. It was dark, and his eyes immediately stung from the cold. My eyes won’t freeze because of the salt in my tears. He lay under a pile of debris and ice. His limbs felt heavy and slow, and his mind lagged in a dull haze. He pushed up against the debris, exposing himself to new freezing winds. He wanted to just curl up under the pile and try to stay warm, but that would accomplish nothing, and he would soon die of hypothermia. Even his dulled brain knew that it had to move soon.

With the sound of shifting junk came another: a sort of quacking. A pair of emperor penguins stood at the base of the debris pile, looking up at him curiously. Upon eye contact, the two turned and waddled off, apparently bored with the whole affair. Bill must not have made a good impression. He was used to that.

The wind blew a burst of snow over him, and he dropped back down among the debris, holding his bare arms against his chest. He was still dressed for an American July; he wouldn’t last an hour exposed to these elements. He dared a glance around, though it was difficult in the twilight. The Earth’s rotation ensured that this part of the globe received virtually no sunlight during its winter, which was now. Bill almost felt like he was back in Cedar Grove, with the darkness and fire all around him.

Fire?

Bill turned. Yes, there was fire! He hauled himself out of the pile and shivered his way toward it, slipping and sliding and nearly falling over the entire time. He stood in the shadow of some ruins, and unfortunately he knew exactly what they were. Zordon’s Command Center, Bill thought. He teleported me here right when it exploded. Why would he do that? And what happened?

Bill crouched near the fire and tried to warm his hands. They were numb from touching the debris, and though a frozen wind still kicked at Bill’s back, the fire was more than worth it. He tried not to think about Cedar Grove, if the Command Center really was destroyed. Had Zordon survived somehow? Bill had assumed he was stuck in that strange tank of his, but Zordon was a mystery. Was his body elsewhere?

Bill’s hands thawed at the expense of his back, and he knew that he had to find proper shelter before his core temperature dropped any more. There was only one choice: find a way inside the ruins. Bill looked for an access point – a door, a window, something – but there didn’t seem to be any. The outer walls were too smooth to climb, and there were no corners, as if the whole building had been a complex of cylinders to match Zordon’s strange tank. Bill’s only choice was search the other side of the building, but that meant leaving his beloved fire.

He took several pieces of debris – a steel rod, some cables, a bit of cloth – and tied them together as a sort of makeshift torch, then he set off.

The building wasn’t large, but this was the coldest place on the planet, and Bill didn’t even have a jacket. His teeth clattered and his torch bounced uncontrollably in his hands, but he placed one foot in front of the other. My friends wouldn’t give up. Tommy wouldn’t. Jason wouldn’t. They’d keep
He walked for what felt like hours of pure frozen agony, though in reality it couldn’t have been more than a minute or two. He eventually found a pile of fiery debris and realized that this was where he had started. There were no entrances. He would die.

The torch slipped out of his frozen hands. He crouched over it and began to consider the possibility of setting his shirt on fire. He could feel his whole body going numb, and his mind along with it. Darkness crept around the edges of his vision. No, have to...

Bill slumped into the snow, his eyes facing back in the direction he had come.

A man stood beside the ruins.

Bill’s torch blew out, and with it went his vision of the man. In the distance he felt his own thought from earlier: Tommy would never give up. A weightlessness came over him, and, finding strength he never knew he had, Bill rose and stumbled in the direction of the man. Jason would never give up. Bill was too frozen to feel pain. Kimberly would never give up. He pushed on, falling over his own numb feet with every step. Zack would never give up. The frozen winds all but blinded him as he stumbled along. Trini would never give up.

As he approached where the man had stood, Bill’s foot found a hidden patch of ice. His body went out from under him, and he tumbled into the wall. He braced himself for impact, but he fell straight through solid material and into a black room.

Warmth (or at the very least a lack of cold) washed over Bill, and he began to feel again. His nerves lit up with fresh pain, and he rubbed his arms, his legs, and his chest violently to heat them up and stop the agony. Feeling returned to him in the form of a thousand knives, his body still convulsing in a vain attempt to warm itself. But slowly the pins and needles subsided, and he allowed himself a look around.

Without a torch, Bill expected total darkness, but a soft luminescence filled the chamber. He looked up; running along the ceiling was the Aurora Australis, a beautiful dance of light waves shifting through the magnetic field of the Earth’s southern pole. For a moment he stood lost in its wonder; a life’s goal had been to see the Aurora Borealis up north, but this was every bit as stunning, and it was just for him.

Then the aurora shifted along the ceiling, and a wave of its light quietly descended through the room to rest on a central panel. In the soft glow Bill recognized this place as the Command Center’s main room. Computer panels lay in ruins everywhere, and on the other side he could just barely make out the shell of Zordon’s tank. It was empty, and it now sported a sizable hole in its front. Bill waded through the destruction, carefully side-stepping as much of the junk as he could, until he came upon the panel lit by the aurora. It was not a panel, he realized, but a raised pillar, its top meeting him at chest-level. Compared to the rest of the room, it looked almost completely untouched.

Resting atop the pillar was something wholly unexpected: a silver coin. It whispered to him as he examined it, but he couldn’t hear the words. He bent closer to the coin and tried to make out its face under the aurora’s dancing light. It was definitely silver, though its color shifted as the aurora’s did, and it was about the size of a United States half-dollar. It looked thick and heavy, and on its face was stamped an image of some kind of humanoid form.

“Zordon,” Bill said out loud. Was it meant for him? The Power Rangers transformed through their coins’ connections to Zordon. Surely Zordon hadn’t meant for him to be a Power Ranger. There were so many who were more worthy than he was; twelve of them raced through Cedar Grove with
cryogenic particle decelerators… assuming that there was still anything left of Cedar Grove. Bill wasn’t worth the trouble. Maybe I could take it and give it to someone else, he thought. That must be what Zordon intended. I can take this coin, repair some of these machines, and return to Cedar Grove to find someone worthy.

Tentatively, he reached for the coin and touched it. It split down the middle with a crack! The Aurora Australis above him faded, leaving Bill in total darkness.

Chapter 2 – Jess

Jess slumped against an exposed beam. Her arm and shoulders ached; she and Robo-Jack had hauled Will halfway across town, all so Alpha could drop them into a demolished apartment block before wandering off again. Jack had laughed when he saw some ruins across the street. “That’s where we got those people out of the fire,” he said. Jess recalled the demon dog thing she had fought and shuddered. If one of those shows up now, we’re fucked.

Their new refuge was in only marginally better shape than the pile of smoking rubble across the street. The front door had shattered, the doorway itself crumbled beneath the destruction around it. The Rangers had to crawl over debris just to get inside the main hallway. Alpha led them through the dark into a back corner dimly lit by something on fire in the next room. Dull orange light danced from the obscured doorway, playing dark shadows all around them. One by one the former Power Rangers plopped into the dust, exhausted from the most hellish night anyone could have dreamed of. Jack lowered Will carefully down into April’s arms before sitting down between her and Jess. His new metal leg clanked as he sat. Ewan crumpled into the dust a moment later, the five of them praying that no mudmen would patrol through here before Alpha came back from “securing the area.”

“How is he?” Jess asked.

April shook her head. Will’s eyes were half-open, but he was still losing color. His breathing was quick and shallow. His eyes were sunken in. Now he didn’t even respond when they talked to him. He would die soon, all because he was stupid enough to use himself to anchor the Void Spider in this world.

“Alpha said the Void Spider’s pure dark matter is changing him,” said April.

“While we’re on the subject,” Jack said quietly, “I’ve been meaning to ask: how did he protect you from the explosion?”

“You didn’t see it?” asked Jess. Jack and April shook their heads. “The bastard finally figured out what his Ranger weapon was: a shield. A big round shield like he was fucking Captain America. He jumped between me and the Spider at the last second.”

“Good timing,” said Jack.

“No shit.”

“How bout we talk about something other than our dying leader,” said Ewan. “Jack, your new leg is looking awfully shiny. What kind of mileage does it get?”

No one knew what to say to that.
“Ewan,” said Jess, “what song is stuck in your head?”

“Simon and Garfunkel’s ‘The Sound of Silence,’” he said.

“It’s too quiet, when I can’t hear your thoughts,” muttered April.

No one knew what to say to that, either.

Jess imagined her parents suffering the same fate as Ewan’s mom. They had hardly seen another soul on their trek across town; by this point, everyone in Cedar Grove was either dead or captured. Jess’ parents were stubborn and stupid enough to try to fight back; they were probably dead. But if they had been turned into mudmen like Ewan’s mom, Jess wasn’t so sure she would be able to fight them.

Fuck, she thought, maybe I’ve changed.

“Anyone believe the Black Ranger’s bullshit about Rita being dead?” asked Ewan.

“We haven’t seen her yet,” said Jack. “It is possible that Goldar is the true threat here. Rita might be dead, and he is just acting on her behalf. It would explain how Master Tom could be the Black Ranger.”

“But he thinks we’re holding some lady hostage,” Jess pointed out. “Someone’s lying to him.”

“The odds point heavily to Goldar,” said Jack.

“No,” said April. “Rita is out there. She’s the one pulling everyone’s strings. It’s hard to explain, but I could feel her on the Black Ranger.”

“Strings or no,” said Ewan, “Master Tom killed my mom and turned her into one of those mudfuckers, and then he set his little attack dogs on us before turning tail to go who knows where. If Rita’s out there, then I haven’t seen her, but Master Tom is as real as anything, and he wants us dead.”

“He’s just being used,” April shook her head. “Like you and I were in the Dark Dimension. It’s no different. Even Scorpina was being used by Rita; you saw her face when we freed her from Rita’s influence. She was finally at peace. We can’t forget who the real enemy is out there, Ewan.”

“Can’t fight someone you can’t fight, April.”


“Sis,” said Jack. “I’ve been thinking.”

“When do you not?” she asked.

Jack ignored her, as usual. “We know the fates of all the old Rangers but one. There’s Rita, of course, and Yellow became Scorpina. White died, and Green and Blue became Squatt and Baboo. What happened to the old Red Ranger?”

“The fuck are you talking about?” asked Jess. “He took on Goldar alone and…” she thought back through her memories of the old Ranger and realized that she had seen nothing of him after Goldar had attacked him in a burning forest. “Shit. I don’t know.” She saw a flash of a charred, skeletal face. “Died, I think.”

Jack frowned. “Based on the others, I wouldn’t count on it. He could be out in the city
somewhere.”

“The fuck does that matter, Jack?” asked Ewan. “We’ve already lost. Rita could have a thousand other dead Rangers out there for all it matters.”

“I just like to know the statistics.”

“Well good! I have some hot new stats for you: one of our parents is now officially a monster,” he glanced at Will, “another got turned into a fucking mudman, and who the fuck knows where the rest are? So what is that, Jack? Two out of…”

“I’m not playing this game, Ewan.”

Ewan ignored him, as usual. “We’ll say two out of seven then – my parents, your parents, April’s parents, and Master Tom. But since there’s no chance in fuck that my dad is anywhere near Cedar Grove we’ll say two out of six of our parents are now part of Rita’s army. There’s your statistics for the morning.”

“Ewan…” said April. “We might still be able to save Will’s dad and your mom. I know Alpha wouldn’t tell us much on the way here, but once he comes back we’ll have some answers. There has to be something we can do.”

“Will’s dad slit my mom’s throat, April. And you think we can still save them – or anyone else, for that matter? We can’t even save ourselves!”

“Not with that attitude we can’t,” said Jack.

“Fuck you, Jack,” said Ewan.

Jack remained calm, like always. Jess usually found it annoying, but right now she was just too tired. “No,” Jack said, “you listen: the past twelve hours have been some of the most dangerous that this planet – not city, planet – has ever faced, and we fought back. We did the best that we knew how, and so did Zordon, and Master Tom, and your mother, and everyone else. Will is dying because he sacrificed himself for the whole world. You saying that we ‘can’t save ourselves’ undermines everything we’ve fought for tonight. Will is better than that, and so are you. Saving ourselves was never the point. We may not have our powers anymore, but that doesn’t mean we can’t fight back and possibly even still take Rita down. It may be that defeating her will reverse her spell and turn your mom back into a human. Or it may not be; we don’t know until we try. I can’t pretend to understand what you’re going through right now, seeing your mom like that, and I can’t say that I would be acting any differently if I were you, but that’s our reality right now, and if there is anything – anything – we can do besides wallow in our own sorrow, then we have to do it.”

“There’s not.” The four Rangers who weren’t being eaten alive by a parallel dimension jumped in surprise. Alpha 5 emerged from the dark of the hallway, two lights flashing from his head and the firelight from the nearby door casting his body in a soft orange glow. “Nice speech, Four-eyes, but we’re basically fucked. Rita’s army isn’t far off, and it has new recruits. Without Zordon’s powers to keep her in check, Rita has upgraded her forces. All of them. They’re rounding up the last few stragglers in the city and gathering them in Central Square.”

Jack slowly slumped forward. Suddenly he looked twenty years older, and very tired. Jess could see his whole countenance begin to crack, and that shook her more than she could say.

“Fuck,” he whispered.
Chapter 3 – Bill

Bill held the two halves of the broken coin in his palm, but the room was so dark now that he couldn’t see his hand when he was inches from his face. *I was never meant to be a Ranger,* he thought. *The coin cracked because I was the wrong person. I should have left it where it was while I repaired the Command Center, then perhaps I could have learned who Zordon meant to have this coin.*

He stood in the black, unsure of what to do next. He dared not move for fear of tripping on unseen debris. Breaking an arm would hardly help matters. Now he had a choice: suffer a long, sightless death inside, or a brief, frozen one outside?

He felt the coin in his hand, pressing the two halves together and using his fingers to feel what the pictures on each side must have been. He had seen the face side, and now he could feel it again – humanoid form in portrait, bald, stately with its severe nose and scowling expression. But as he felt the back he realized that it was covered not with a picture but with words. At first he felt the word “septem,” which was Latin for “seven.” *Latin,* he reflected, *the root language of so many Western cultures...* But even as his fingers slid over the word a second time, the metal under his finger shifted and became “seven.” Then a new word appeared, again in Latin, and Bill silently translated it. Each word shifted into English as he deciphered them, until at last he had translated the message in full.

“Seven from one, and one from seven,” he recited aloud. “Honor, Ambition, Strength, Courage, Spirit, Harmony, united in Wisdom, broken by necessity. Such is Zordon the Desperate, last Defender of Earth. His folly may only be redeemed in knowledge and sacrifice.”

At the last word, the coin’s two halves rejoined, then split again into seven equal pieces which lit the room with gems the colors of the Rangers – shining diamond, lustrous topaz, deep emerald, clear sapphire, dazzling ruby – as well as a dark amethyst for the Black Ranger and a seventh piece that rippled with all of the colors of the rainbow. Bill stood, transfixed by the rainbow piece as it and the other six rose into the air and danced about the room, their colors reflecting off the broken machinery and highlighting the great destruction that surrounded Bill. The spectacle was breathtaking, even more beautiful than the Aurora that had lit the room just moments before. The gems gained speed. Bill could only stare as they circled the room faster and faster until their colors all blended into one, their refracted light becoming more and more blinding as they accelerated.

Soon Bill could no longer watch the pieces themselves – they were too fast and too luminescent – but as they spun he noticed that the different colors slowly melted together to bathe the Command Center in a white light so pure and bright that he wanted to shield his eyes, but he found that he could no longer lift his arms. Wind from the swirling gems blew about his face, playing with his hair and clothes. Bill’s feet shifted – *did I move, or did something move me?* – and soon he found himself facing Zordon’s broken tank.

The light of the coin shards began playing tricks on his vision. He saw flashes of the Command Center as it had been: shadows of a Ranger in black, of the old Bill Cranston and Alpha 5 working on the cryogenic particle decelerators, of the five Rangers in their karate gis – *damn, they really are just kids* – of alarms, of Alpha monitoring a red planet just as something exploded from its northern pole. Bill saw the monitors around him showing scenes from Earth’s past, famous events reaching further and further back in time. He witnessed the rapid de-evolution of human technology in the blink of an eye until, suddenly, a fresh new wave of visions rippled by him in the form of old Power Rangers. He saw a large black man in white, with a lion’s mane of dreadlocks, a dark, angry man in red, a beautiful woman in blue, a massive hulk of a man in green, a wiry woman in yellow, and...
The visions of Rita Repulsa were particularly hard to follow. The air around her shimmered and rippled when she moved, as though he were viewing her underwater. She was exquisitely beautiful, the kind of beauty that could doom civilizations to war and end the lives of countless men. Perhaps it had. She moved with the grace and confidence of a queen, yet in her eyes there was a primal craving befitting her Ambition. Bill Cranston witnessed countless silent scenes play out before him as the old Rangers rewound through their unusually long lives until one by one the six Rangers handed Alpha 5 their power coins.

No, thought Bill. The scenes are playing backwards. This is when Alpha gave them their coins. This is when they became Rangers. Red, yellow, green, blue, white, and finally (or firstly?) black. As each Ranger, played backward, placed their coin in Alpha’s open palm, the corresponding shard of broken coin shot down from high above the room and disappeared into Alpha’s hand as well. One by one the lights went out, shifting the colors in the Command Center and weakening the visions before him until none remained but the rainbow shard. When the vision of Rita Repulsa placed her coin in Alpha’s hand, her yellow eyes shining even in the dim light, the vision disappeared altogether, and the rainbow shard stopped spinning.

Bill’s mind buzzed with information as the rainbow shard floated down and stopped three feet from his face. He stared at it, knowing what this shard must represent if the other six were the Rangers. “Zordon,” he said aloud. No, that wasn’t quite right. They were all Zordon. Seven from one, one from seven. “Wisdom,” he whispered.

Then the shard exploded in a galaxy of light, blinding Bill and knocking him to the floor.

When he finally came to again, Zordon himself stood before him.

Chapter 4 – Jack

He had tried his best to stay positive for the group, or at least to be realistic, but Alpha’s report had cracked Jack’s foundation. He slumped beside Will’s broken body.

“Without you to distract her,” continued Alpha, “Rita is using the Dark Dimension to upgrade her mudmen. They’re faster, stronger, creepier, and they’re coming. There’s nowhere to run – yeah, I know, I’m really fun at parties – and it looks like little Willy won’t be moving much anytime soon. Best we leave him here and go somewhere else. At least it might delay the inevitable for the rest of you.”

“Like hell,” said Jess. “We’re not leaving him behind. He’ll die.”

“He’s going to die whether we leave him here or take him to the best hospital in the world,” said Alpha. “He’s already dead. He touched the Void Spider. Direct bodily contact with that thing only has one conclusion, and let’s just say it isn’t good for your complexion. We need to go somewhere else. Now.”

“Why!?” shouted Jess. Alpha shushed her, but that only pissed her off more (as usual). “Why the fuck should we listen to anything you say? You’ve been no fucking help all night you little piece of shit! We’ve been out here risking our lives for this city while you and Zordon sat down in the Arctic twiddling your thumbs. And then, the moment you find yourself in real danger, you tell us to leave someone behind. You want us to leave Will so that he’ll distract the mudmen long enough for you to make an escape? Fuck you, Alpha!”
She’s scared, thought Jack. She always gets like this when she’s scared. But is she scared for Will, or herself?

The robot tilted its head. Sometimes Jack wished it had a face. Other times he was glad the sassy machine couldn’t emote. Its language was colorful enough.

“Have you ever wondered why I’m called Alpha 5?” the robot asked, emphasizing the word five. The question caught the group off-balance. No one answered. Alpha set his freeze gun on the floor. “No? Didn’t think so. You humans don’t think about anything but yourselves. Well then settle down, Firecrotch, it’s story time.” Jess made to object, but Alpha just talked over her. “After the last of Zordon’s friends died defending this planet, he created Alpha. Just Alpha, the first in what Zordon had thought would be a whole line of automated sentinels. But Zordon’s design was so perfect that he knew he only had to make one. That’s all it took to defend and maintain the Command Center. Well, over the years – that was back during the last mass extinction, you understand – Alpha started working on a little side project. He had a way of objectively analyzing the situation that ole’ Zed-head never could. Eventually, Alpha designed a new version of himself, even though Zordon’s original design had been perfect. Alpha’s was better than perfect. But Alpha had to sacrifice his own parts in order to create Alpha 2 – why he didn’t name himself Beta is beyond me, but at this point it doesn’t bear dwelling on. Whatever he chose to name himself, this sacrifice he did willingly for the sake of Zordon and the planet. Our line has continued this time-honored tradition until me.

“I have seen more than you could possibly comprehend, humans. Your hundred years of life are nothing to me. I have lived more centuries than you have days. Just try to let that sink in, if you can. In that time I have devoted myself to the improvement of both my own form and Zordon’s Command Center. He always valued my counsel, but one key thing separated the two of us: as you may have noticed, I lack emotions. Now while I consider this a benefit, Zordon does not. He thinks that I am heartless, which is true, just as I think his emotions are what caused all of this trouble to begin with, which is also true. He valued Rita more than he should have, and it cost him dearly. You may not believe me, but he ordered me away when the Black Ranger came to destroy the Command Center. It was part of his plan, you assholes. He may have suffered from a terminal case of emotions, but Zordon was the wisest creature in this galaxy. So how about you stop whining about your pitifully short lives and trust that the old bastard knew what he was—” A small light beeped on Alpha’s face. He held a hand up to shush the Rangers. His head tilted toward the door.

Something was outside.

Jack knew the slurpy, wet language of the mudmen by now, but this was not it. If anything, this sounded like some massive cricket was chirping just outside. Upgraded mudmen, Alpha had said. But part of Jack’s mind was still trying to process what the robot had said about his own existence. The last major mass extinction was the Cretaceous-Paleogene some 66 million years ago. The Alphas had lived on a geologic scale, and in all that time they and Zordon hadn’t been able to make an Alpha 6. Zordon had a plan, Jack thought. Alpha said so. He knew the Black Ranger was coming for him. But could his plan have been to just give up? No one can live for so long and not consider death. Maybe he just wanted to die. Maybe his plan was just to end everything.

Alpha turned his whole body to the door. Firelight from the hallway to Alpha’s right caught him in an orange glow, almost as though he stood before them as some new Orange Ranger. Small compartments along his arms and legs opened to reveal an army’s worth of gun barrels and miniature missile launchers, all fixed on the door.

The light coming through the cracks of the broken door blacked out. The chirping stopped. Jack felt himself reaching for his hip before he remembered that he wasn’t a Ranger anymore; his pistol
wasn’t there. Before, he might have been able to feel the mudmen on the other side of the door simply by extending his mind into the earth around them, but he was just a normal kid again. No special powers except the might and glory of asthma.

None of the humans dared to breathe for fear of being heard. No light came through the doorway now. It was impossible to tell if there were two mudmen outside or two-hundred. *If need be, perhaps we can escape through one of the side rooms.* But Jack knew their odds were slim to nil: the old mudmen were already faster than most humans, and with Will in his current state… *Surely Alpha was wrong. There has to be some way to fix Will before he…*

The mudmen outside the door made soft clicking noises. Something sharp scratched against the doorway. Alpha raised an arm to aim a dozen small mounted guns. *Maybe they’ll leave. Maybe they’ll…*

The door jumped aside, revealing a long, thin shadow with a face lit from within. Four arms shone as something like an insect carapace caught the firelight and reflected it back, illuminating the hallway. The carapace lined a thin body with countless black ridges that only deepened in the dim firelight. Dozens of tiny eyes burned across the mudman’s face like so many pinholes. Each of the four arms, Jack realized, ended in hard, pointed pinchers. A pair of thin wings glittered behind the beast.

The mudman’s fiery eyes had just enough time to focus on the killer robot, its mouth opening wide in muted surprise and a pair of mandibles doing a frantic little dance before a hundred bullets ripped through its shell and tore it to pieces. A second mudman leapt high through the doorway to dodge Alpha’s volley, its wings scraping along the ceiling before it fell upon Alpha. The two tumbled to the floor in a mass of orange and black. The mudman sat on Alpha’s chest, digging at his armor with its sharp pinchers and denting the robot’s head with jabs that clanged so loud it hurt Jack’s ears. Guns along Alpha’s left arm wheeled round and prepared to fire, but the mudman made a sound like it was hacking up phlegm, and it spit several nasty black globs at Alpha’s outstretched arm. The goo covered all the gun barrels, rendering them useless. The mudman clicked a strange laugh and punched Alpha’s head again with its four arms.

“Run!” shouted the robot. “Run, you assholes!” A small opening appeared in Alpha’s elbow. He tried to aim a rocket-powered punch at the mudman’s head, but the mudman caught his arm between two of his pinchers and laughed again. It squeezed. Jack could hear Alpha’s metal groaning.

Ewan was the first to his feet, then Jess. Jack froze, unable to stop watching the fight. More mudmen appeared in the doorway at the other end of the hall, all of them huge and many-armed and terrifyingly insect-like with their thin armored arms and their dozens of eyes. The mudman atop Alpha squeezed Alpha’s arms until smoke billowed from his joints, then it pinned both of the robot’s arms to the floor and used its other two arms to pound the robot’s head into the floor.

“We’ve lost enough today,” growled Ewan. He sprinted down the hall, Jess hot on his heels.

“Guys!” shouted Jack. There was no way they stood a chance against the new mudmen, and Alpha was trying to buy them time. “We have to go!”

“Get Will out of here!” Jess yelled over her shoulder.

A small opening appeared in Alpha’s chest and sent a jet of flame straight through the chest of the mudman sitting on top of him. It crumbled to dust. Alpha leapt to his feet. Blades wheeled from Alpha’s wrists, which he used to slice an arm clean off the nearest mudman. Three quick movements, and the monster lost its leg, a second arm, and then its head. The remaining mudman swiped with two right arms and knocked Alpha through a wall. The robot flung himself back into
the hallway, driving both wrist blades into the mudman’s chest. It vanished into dust, but more
mudmen crowded the doorway.

Alpha turned his dented head back to the humans. “No god dammit, I meant run the other fucking
way!” he shouted. “Away from death!” He turned and tried to fire a volley, but the only things to
shoot from his arm were sparks. “Am I still speaking English? Away, you fuckers! I’m trying to be
heroic here!”

“Jack!” called April. “I can’t move Will,” she said. “I’m… ugh… just not strong enough.”

Jack crouched beside his two friends. “I think I am,” he said. “You go and help them.” Jack
nodded down the hall. April looked as though she had expected him to say that. She nodded, stood,
and bounded down the hall with all the grace of a practiced gymnast, leaving Jack alone with his
dying friend.

It’s up to me, he knew.

Jack threaded his arms under Will and tried to move him, but his old friend only screamed in pain
and coughed up blood. Jack hesitated. He didn’t know anatomy like Will did, but he was pretty
sure that coughing up blood was a bad thing. “Sorry buddy,” he whispered to Will, “but we have to
go.”

Jack turned back to Alpha to see if maybe the robot could fight their way out. Several more mudmen
had fallen to Alpha’s assault, but so many more had appeared outside that Jack wondered if the entire
building was surrounded.

Ewan and Jess reached the end of the hall. Ewan grabbed Alpha’s freeze gun and began shooting
indiscriminately, forcing Jess to hold back for fear of being hit herself.

Just as April joined them, Alpha 5 sent a fresh jet of flame from his chest that roared down the hall
and cooked three mudmen to ash. Five more bounded through the dust, twenty pinchers ready to rip
the robot open and possibly the humans as well. Ewan’s blasts knocked the wings and two arms off
of one. Alpha dodged below a right hook and dodged even lower under the mudman’s other right
hook, stabbed its kneecap, hooked his arm upward and fired a jet of flame up the mudman’s crotch.
A thick leg smashed against Alpha’s chest and knocked him into the wall with a loud clang! Alpha
grabbed at his own hips and flung a volley of ninja stars from a secret compartment, catching one
mudman in the face and the other two in the chest. All three continued their advance until the stars
exploded, ripping each monster into a thousand pieces.

“Here,” Alpha turned and threw something to Jess and April, though Jack couldn’t tell what it was
through the darkness. “If you’re going to be stupid, at least try to be usefully stupid.”

“I’m calling you on your bullshit,” said Jess. “I think you have emotions. I think you care
about us.” Jack could hear the grin in her voice, even if he couldn’t see it.

Alpha made sounds like he was vomiting.

Jack grabbed Will’s arm and hoisted him over his shoulder, ignoring his friend’s cries of pain and the
blood that now clung to Jack’s face, neck, and shoulders. He turned to an open door that led into the
next room and began walking. The room was near pitch-black, though, and soon his non-metal foot
rolled on a piece of rubble that he hadn’t seen. He and Will tumbled together into the room in a
cloud of dust. Jack felt pain shoot through his human leg, and he knew that his ankle was in bad
shape.
Doesn’t matter, he thought as he lay in the dust trying not to scream. Will is in worse pain. He pulled himself up on his metal foot and put pressure on his bad. Fresh pain jolted up his leg and almost made him cry out again. In the darkness he could barely see Will, but soon he hobbled to a dark lump just ahead of him and felt flesh. Will groaned at Jack’s touch, but at least Jack had found him. Balancing himself on his good leg, he dragged Will up and over his shoulder, his thigh already burning at the extra weight. For the first time, Jack wished that the amputation had happened at his hip, not his knee.

An explosion of light made Jack turn and almost drop Will again. The battle in the hall had blown away the wall between them. Despite himself, he stood for another moment, transfixed on the fight still raging. The explosion, it seemed, had been from the small things Alpha had given to Jess and April. Even as Jack watched, Jess slung another small object straight at the face of a screaming mudman. The object lodged in the creature’s throat, and a second later its head and chest exploded. Ice beams ripped from Ewan’s gun in all directions, nearly catching Alpha in the back more than once.

But they were losing ground. There were simply too many mudmen. Six piled onto Alpha, and another slipped past Ewan’s freeze blasts and shoulder-tackled him to the ground. At that close range, the girls couldn’t use their explosives. They leapt onto the back of Ewan’s mudman and kicked and punched at its head, but it reached back with its four arms, grabbed Jess by her clothes and April by her hair, and flung both against the wall so hard that they slumped to the floor and didn’t move. Ewan, with the mudman distracted, leapt to his feet, his face bloody from the attack. With a scream he charged the mudman and landed a flying kick against the monster’s face. The mudman turned, hardly phased by the attack, and lifted Ewan into the air.

Jack’s mind raced. Hopeless, he thought. Will coughed up fresh blood on Jack’s shoulder while the mudman began to choke Ewan. The odds are hopeless. But we have to do something. Do I save Ewan… or Will? The three of them had been best friends since the first grade. Ewan had been the school bully, and Jack had been his favorite target. But when Will joined their school, he had stood up to Ewan and positively thrashed him on the playground. Inexplicably, Ewan had welcomed the change (after visiting the school nurse, anyway), and he had begged Will to teach him to fight like that, as had Jack. The three had been inseparable ever since.

Childhood friendships rarely made sense, but Jack had often thought theirs had taken the cake. Will had taught them all to fight, to protect themselves and others. And now Jack had to protect him. Ewan had made his choice, and Will was helpless. Jack knew what he had to do. I’m sorry, Ewan.

But for a moment, just when he was turning his back on the fight to try to haul Will to safety, Alpha rocketed from the pile of mudmen – literally – with jets of flame blasting from the bottom of his foot and detached knee. He flipped in the air and sent a rocket kick into the face of the first mudman to try to pull him down. A second mudman caught his leg; Alpha’s heel-rocket unleashed its full fiery fury into the mudman’s face. The mudman holding Ewan turned at the sound. It looked as though it was trying to decide whether to kill the puny thing in its hands or help its fellow mudmen battle the real threat.

Alpha aimed blasts the heads of two of the mudmen who had piled on top of him and sent white jets through their carapaces and down into their disintegrating torsos. Alpha landed in the dust where they had stood a moment later, his metal head aimed squarely at the mudman holding Ewan.

“Alright fucker,” said Alpha. “Time to—”

A thin jet of dark red flame exploded from the wall and caught Alpha hard in the back. The robot froze in place, and Jack realized that within the red fire was a sword. A large creature barreled
through the wall, clutching the other end of the fire sword that now impaled Alpha’s torso.

The creature ripped the sword up through Alpha’s body and head, cleaving him in half.

“NO!” Jack screamed. The robot’s body crumpled to the floor.

The creature laughed and threw its sword straight down so that it stuck into the floor.

“Did you see that?” the creature laughed, and Jack realized that he knew that voice: Rito, the hulking skeleton he and Will had fought outside the police station. Rito turned and pointed back to the hole he had made in the wall. “I was all like ‘heeeeeeere’s Rito!’ And BOOM! Shishkabot! Heh heh!”

He turned and looked at Jess, April, and Ewan. “Woah ho ho! I know those get-ups anywhere! Rangers! Oh boy oh boy, sis is gonna LOVE this! Putties, grab the two on the floor. They’re girls though, so watch where you grab – I’ll have no pervs serving under my watch, you know! And you there! You stick a claw through his face, and I’ll stick mine through yours. Sis wants all the Rangers alive.” Mudmen surged forward and scooped up the girls. The mudman holding Ewan hit him upside the head, knocking him out, and flung him harshly over its shoulder. “Hmm,” said Rito. He pointed at each Ranger like he was counting them. “My memory’s not so good, but I thought there were more than three. And was it just me, or did I hear someone yell “NO!” like I’d just killed their favorite puppy?” He stomped down the hall. Jack dared not move for fear of tripping again.

Rito looked carefully at each unconscious Ranger in turn, then down at the pool of Will’s blood from when they had first arrived. “That yours?” Rito asked Ewan. But Ewan, still unconscious, failed to respond. “Hey! Hey ugly, wake up! Eh, forget it.” He turned to the mudmen. “Come on! Chop chop! Sis is about to address her loving subjects, and we don’t want to keep her waiting!”

The mudmen marched past Rito and out of the building until he alone stood at the end of the hall. “Everyone out?” Rito called. Something clicked a response from outside. “Great! And since we don’t want Zordon’s little robot to come back all zombie-like and kill us all…” Rito cleared his throat and yelled in a surprisingly good Ronald Reagan impression: “Putties… tear down these walls!”

Jack’s stomach dropped.

Rito laughed to himself and stomped out of the hall. Outside, Jack felt and heard rumbles all around him. They really had surrounded the whole building. My only choice is to get out and be captured, but I’m still not leaving Will. He took a step, ignoring the searing pain from his swollen ankle. Will no longer made a sound. Jack wasn’t sure if he was even still alive. Something fell from the ceiling in front of him. He turned back to the hallway to follow Rito… just as the ceiling caved in and buried the door.

“Has to… be a way…” Jack said. “Has to… AHH!”

The entire room fell around him in a deafening roar. He threw his arms up just as debris blocked out the last remaining fire light. The full building, ten stories at least, crumbled on top of the two Rangers, burying them in darkness and silence.

Chapter 5 – Bill

“Zordon,” Bill breathed. He remained on the floor, unable to process anything but the name of the being standing before him who was supposed to be dead.
“Dr. Cranston,” said the being. It was the first time Billy had ever heard Zordon’s voice spoken aloud and not just in his head.

“But… You… How?”

Zordon stood still, his arms folded behind him. His skin was a pale silver, his strong jaw and hooked nose matching that of the face Bill had seen on the Power coin earlier. But those eyes… Bill felt like they pierced his soul, and they never left his gaze. Bill had to look away.

“I am proud of you for reaching this moment,” said Zordon. “Few would have survived the cold outside. Even fewer would have found the secret entrance, and only you could have done both and then deciphered the message on the last Power coin.”

“But you helped,” said Bill, finally finding his voice. “I saw you outside the secret entrance. You helped me find it.”

Zordon shook his head. “I did not. Your mind, already attuned to the Power coin, led you to the right place.”

Bill realized that he was still lying on the ground. He jumped to his feet and brushed the dust off his thin shirt before wiping his glasses. “What happened, Zordon? I thought you were dead.”

“In a sense, I have been dead since I split my essence into seven,” said Zordon. “It is a deeply unnatural thing, what I did, so much so that from that day forth Nature and I become fundamentally incompatible. I have survived by attaching my essence to other things, be they coins, or humans, or computers. I can never make myself whole again, Dr. Cranston. That is the sacrifice I made for this planet. When I truly die, I will not join my forefathers in the afterlife.”

Bill was stunned. His scientific mind had never considered the spiritual ramifications of Zordon’s actions. “I’m… sorry,” he said lamely.

“You must have many questions for me. Time is greatly of the essence,” a faint smile played across Zordon’s face. “But I will tell you all that I can. A great decision awaits you, as great a decision as the one I made millions of years ago.

“But first, I will answer your question. What happened. You know that the human Rangers control the elements – light and dark, fire and water, earth and wind – but the final essence… Me… controls the strangest element of them all: Time. This is why I am the essence of Wisdom: you cannot have Wisdom without Time. I kept the seventh essence apart because I believed that no human could live long enough to master Wisdom, so I bound the last coin to this Command Center. My hope was that my inherent wisdom would benefit from the vast databases of knowledge stored here, and I would be able to make even better decisions for the benefit of this planet. For a time, I was right.

“But I grew to rely too much on my own ability. Ten-thousand years ago, I chose the humans who would make up my Power Ranger corps. As you have seen, my wisdom failed me and very nearly doomed the planet. For the past ten millennia I have searched for answers. Where was my folly? How did things go so horribly wrong? The answer, of course, lay in the Dark Dimension. I was blind to the full extent of Rita’s ambition; I never thought that she would use our greatest enemy for her own benefit. She and the Black Power were lost to me, and the other powers very nearly so. When the White Ranger banished Rita to Mars, part of me remained trapped there as well. The pain of being so far away from part of myself was… almost unbearable.

“For years I believed that I had to recover the Black Power, but soon I discovered that I could sense parts of Rita’s plan. It was faint, of course– just glimpses, visions – but I decided to play a dangerous
game and leave the Power be. In the meantime I watched the Earth diligently for any signs of Dark Dimension activity. Then, a few days ago, your space program landed a rover near Rita’s position on Mars. I felt her awaken, saw her Power reach Earth and persuade the rover’s programmer to free her from her icy prison. I knew I had to act quickly, but I believed that Time would be on my side, as it had always been.

“My first instinct was to summon the five humans I had been tracking for the past several years – namely, you and your friends Tom, Jason, Aisha, and a woman named Katherine – but I knew that this should not be so. I allowed the Powers to choose on their own, to find the humans to which they were most attuned. Fittingly, both your protégé and Tom’s were among the chosen.”

“Jack,” said Bill. “And his friend, Tom’s son...” Bill’s head swam. Zordon had almost chosen him to be a Ranger. Instead the Power had chosen Jack. Jack! Bill’s favorite student, with terrible asthma and an even worse home life. And Tom had just been telling Bill and their friends about Will earlier today, before the attack. Will’s family had died some time ago. Will had long felt responsible, and that weight may have destroyed him if not for Tom.

*Such broken people*, thought Bill. *Those two have not had easy lives.*

“Yes,” said Zordon, perhaps reading Bill’s thoughts. “And as this war has progressed, my beliefs were confirmed: the Power had to choose, not me. I had made a mistake by separating Wisdom from Nature and keeping it confined to a computer. Alpha 5 believed that he lacked emotions and I did not, but that is not entirely true. I had forgotten what it means to live, and it is life that brings with it Wisdom. My Power is a shell of its former self.

“Tonight I have seen my five Rangers grow tremendously. One by one they have survived crucibles that have transformed them into better Rangers than I could have ever chosen. But my mastery over Time showed me glimpses of the future and of Rita’s plans: she would win, and she had a plan to destroy me. She had created a Ranger of her own. She removed the Dark Dimension’s hold on the Black Power and gave that Power to another, then she manipulated him into coming here, a place where nothing of the Dark Dimension may tread. So I acted as best as I could. Seconds before her puppet destroyed this Command Center, I withdrew my essence from the building and placed it into the rainbow coin which you subsequently found and translated. In translating the message, you unleashed this hologram.”

“Hologram?” said Bill. “So you’re...”

“Yes. This is not my body but a projection of it as it was before I split myself. That tank,” he pointed at the large cylinder that had once housed the weird glowing white liquid,” is where my essence had focused itself prior to the Black Ranger’s arrival here. Rita succeeded in destroying my synthetic body, so to speak, but she did not destroy my mind.”

“I still don’t understand what I’m doing here. It would take me weeks to rebuild this place, maybe even months.”

Zordon’s face remained grim. “And so we get to the heart of the matter. Do you recall the message you deciphered on the rainbow coin, Dr. Cranston?”

“Y- yes,” Bill thought for a moment. “*Seven from one, and one from seven. Honor, Ambition, Strength, Courage, Spirit, Harmony, united in Wisdom, broken by necessity. Such is Zordon the Desperate, last Defender of Earth. His folly may only be redeemed in knowledge and sacrifice.*”

“Very good. You translated it, but have you uncovered its meaning?”
Bill thought on the words. “The first part’s easy. You split yourself into seven because you had to, and you left Wisdom to be like the leader for the other six. But the last part…”

*His folly may only be redeemed in knowledge and sacrifice…*

“You can fix your mistakes,” said Bill. “Through knowledge and sacrifice.”

“‘Yes,’” said Zordon. Bill felt like he was back in school. “This evening has highlighted my greatest folly: placing Wisdom in a machine, keeping it apart from the humans who hold the rest of my essence. In keeping Wisdom separate, I have left myself to try to bestow Wisdom upon others. As a human once wrote, ‘Wisdom cannot be imparted. Wisdom that a wise man attempts to impart always sounds like foolishness to someone else.’”

Bill knew the quote. There was a second part, which Bill also knew. “‘Knowledge can be communicated, but not wisdom,’” he recited. “‘One can find it, live it, do wonders through it, but one cannot communicate and teach it.’”

Bill gasped. Zordon smiled broadly. “You understand what it means to be wise, though you would never consider yourself to be so.”

“Knowledge and sacrifice,” said Bill. “You want to connect your essence to a human, not a machine.”

*He had wanted me to be a Ranger.*

“Yes,” said Zordon. “But… Wisdom is different from the other six Powers. If you accept the essence of Wisdom, I will occupy your body as I did this Command Center. My mind will overpower yours, and you may cease to be. Do you understand?”

Knowledge… and sacrifice.

“I’ll die?” Bill asked.

Zordon shrugged. “For all my wisdom, I do not know. Such a thing has never been done before. I fear that little of you will survive the process.”

*Little of me survived Trini’s death.* Bill’s mind raced as it never had before.

“You knew it would come to this,” Bill said.

“Yes.”

“You’ve been testing me this whole night. You allowed a non-Ranger into the Command Center because you wanted to use me yourself. You wanted to observe me first-hand.”

“Yes.”

“If I accept, it may kill me, but the Rangers will beat Rita.”

“I cannot guarantee that they will win,” admitted Zordon. “But if you do not accept, then I can guarantee that they will lose. Even now the White Ranger is extremely close to death. The five of them are without their powers, and this night has never been more dangerous than it is now.”

“Without their powers?” asked Bill. “Can they not transform anymore?”

“When the Command Center was destroyed, it ripped the connection between them and their
powers. It... is not impossible for them to regain their powers without me, but such a feat would be akin to shooting a rifle from the moon and expecting it to hit Pluto.”

An analogy I can understand. That'd practically be impossible.

"Then you’ve left me no choice,” said Bill. “I think I made up my mind before I even came here. I’ve spent my life inside a lab, away from the world. After the one person who truly mattered to me died, I’ve never cared about what would happen to me.”

“Trini Kwan,” said Zordon. “The two of you would have been truly remarkable Rangers together.”

Bill felt his pulse quickening. He stepped forward, feeling bolder than he ever had before. Closer up, he realized that Zordon was indeed a hologram. Bill could just barely see through him. The rainbow coin spun rapidly within the hologram, where Zordon’s heart should be.

“I want her death to mean something,” said Bill. He reached through the hologram, straight for the coin at Zordon’s heart. “May it find meaning in mine.”
Chapter 1 – Jess

She felt her arm dislocate seconds before she actually felt any pain. The sensation of her shoulder popping out of its socket, combined with the constant jostling that was so severe she might have thought someone had shoved her into a dryer, was enough to wake her from unconsciousness. Her shoulder burned with such intensity that she had to fight to focus on remembering what had happened. They had been attacked. The mudmen had come, but they were different. She and April had attacked one… she had gone flying…

Then the pain exploded from her shoulder and up her neck, and she cried out.

“Hey!” said a gruff voice, “cut that out! No screaming unless ole’ Rito says you can, got it?” the voice didn’t wait for an answer. He resumed talking to whoever was next to him. “Anyways, like I was saying, Sis is gathering all the humans at Central Square for a demonstration. Find the rest of your unit, and be quick about it! Sis hates it when you’re late! Gives her such a headache…”

Something clicked and chirped in response. Jess was buffeted by a light wind as the mudman leapt away. Rito kept talking as if he was still there. “Always with the headaches, I swear. Damn woman just needs some Mitol and she’d be fine, but noooooo it’s all ‘the Dark Dimension will protect me’ this and ‘stop talking to me’ that and ‘please for the love of God put on some pants.’ You know, I may be a charred, undead skeleton, but I still have feelings, you know?”

A nearby mudman chirped quietly, as if unsure how to answer.

“Damn straight,” said Rito. “Between the pain and this guy’s incessant talking, Jess half-wished she could just go back to being unconscious. By now she had realized that she was strapped to a mudman’s back, her arms draped around its hard neck and her wrists tied together. The mudman ran as though it still wasn’t used to its legs, which meant that Jess bounced up and down worse than some Playboy bunny on a trampoline. No wonder her arm had dislocated. Now she just hoped that the same wouldn’t happen to her other arm.

“Sis thinks she’s sooooo clever,” continued Rito. “Manipulating the Dark Dimension to help her take over the world. After the whole police station thing, I was so bored manning the portal generator at the fortress. She probably thought it was funny, putting me as far from the action as possible like that. After a certain point you just gotta cut loose and do your own thing, you know? Rita’s not perfect; she makes mistakes, too. Did you know,” Rito lowered his voice, but Jess could still hear him like he was standing next to her, “that she cleansed the Dark Dimension from the Black Ranger power just so that she could get her little puppet dude into the Command Center? Dumbest idea this side of bellbottoms! Ha! If this guy was able to break from her spell, he’d be a fully-fledged Ranger again! He’d be a god-damned good guy! Oh well, we probably won’t have to worry about that. She has him wrapped around her little finger so tightly that if he moved, the tug would probably make her fart. World conquest gives her the skirt ruffles, you know.”

The mudman chirped a short response. He sounded like he desperately wanted the conversation to end.

“You said it, buddy,” continued Rito. “Ever thought of being a therapist? I just feel comfortable talking to you. You got one of those, oh I don’t know, trusting faces. Can something have kindly
mandibles? Your mandibles look kindly. Don’t know what it is, but they do. Hey: unrelated, but d’you like baseball? I was thinking of getting a new league going once Rita takes over the planet. I was thinking we could be the – HEY! What did I say?!?” Jess stopped bouncing, though her shoulder continued to sear with fresh waves of pain. Something heavy stomped away from her. A mudman cried out. There was a wet crunching sound, like when Jess used to step on the roaches that always infested their garage. Rito continued to shout, punctuating every word with another stomping crunch. “I. Told. You. Not. To. Hurt. The. Rangers!” He stopped stomping. Jess’ mudman stood frozen, not even breathing for fear of angering Rito further. Jess considered crying out from her own pain to get her mudman killed, but she was too weak to do even that much.

“ANYONE ELSE?” screamed Rito, his happy-go-lucky air completely gone. With the grit in his voice he sounded almost exactly like Goldar now. “Anyone else want to go and hurt one of Rita’s most prized possessions? HUH!?” Jess kept still, fearful of which of her fellow Rangers had been injured enough to get their mudman killed.

*Rita wants us alive,* she thought. It was not pleasant information.

“Someone else take that Ranger, and be gentle with her! We’ll see if Rita can fix her face when we get there.”

**April. Fuck, what did they do to her?**

The mudmen resumed their march. None of them made a sound as they hopped along. Jess wished that her own mudman would learn to fucking walk like a normal… what? Human? Insect? Maybe this was how they normally walked. She decided to wish instead for something that rolled along the street, like a stretcher, or a car. *And we are out in the streets,* she knew. As her senses slowly returned to her, she could feel the warmth of burning buildings pass by on either side. She could taste smoke, and with it came visions of downtown. Through the smoke she could feel the skyscrapers and the approaching Central Square just around the corner. The thoughts confused her. She wasn’t psychic, and she knew she wasn’t seeing these things with her own eyes. Yet she would swear that she saw these things as they were, simply by breathing in the smoke that filled the entire city.

*This night has driven me insane,* she decided.

She realized that Rito was talking again. She tried to tune him out, but he was just too loud.

“…Look all that I’m saying is that once this is all over we find the executives at that TV company and torture them for the rest of their lives for cancelling *Firefly.* We can run some string through their ankles, hang them upside-down, roast a few fingers – I’m just spitting here – maybe skewer an eye or two – ooo! We can murder their families in front of them! That was a good damned show and those idiots deserve pain for what they did to it. I don’t see why you have a problem with that.”

A mudman clicked a low-pitched response.

Rito laughed. “Disagreeing with me after I went all Riverdance on your buddy! I like you! You’ve got balls – not that I, you know, like balls… I mean that’s cool, you know, if you do, but… well you guys don’t have balls anyway.”

The mudman chirped sadly.

“Frankie – that’s your name now – Frankie, I think you and I are going to be friends. Not like best friends or anything, or that weird kind of ‘are they or aren’t they?’ friendship that Squatt and Baboo have, but the kind of friend you think about occasionally with that vague ‘oh yeah he is a cool guy’
kinda feeling, you know? You’re alright, Frankie. I’ll put in a good word with the Big Cheese herself sometime in the indeterminate future to see about getting you an upgrade.”

An unsure chirp.

“Oh relax, you’ll enjoy it! Just an hour ago you all were sad, pathetic goo-people, so weak that the Rangers absolutely slaughtered you with such reckless abandon that I’ve played video games on God mode and felt more vulnerable than they must have. But now look at you! You’re faster, you’re stronger, and you’re thoroughly less gooey…er. Once Rita conquers this city and has the whole population under her control, she’ll harvest the humans’ energy for the Dark Dimension to grow her army enough to take over the rest of the country… and then, the world!” He put on a laugh like some overacting James Bond villain. “But seriously, we’ll need an admiral. You interested? We can call you Admiral Fankie Ackbar!”

Rita will sap the energy of every human in the city to fuel her army, thought Jess. Every human lost will be one more power source for her and the Dark Dimension… and she wants us alive. Jess gathered herself and tried to move. She jostled around on the mudman’s back more than usual, but she could not break free. All that she accomplished was fresh pain in her arm. Fuck this shit!

There was a roar of something like an explosion behind her, and several mudmen cried out. The marching stopped, and Jess’ mudman spun around so quickly that it almost flung her clear off its back. Heat blasted her face and lit the inside of her eyelids.

“Hey hey hey!” shouted Rito. “Who started the barbeque!? You there, stop being on fire! Hey!... Oh to hell with it. Let’s go, everybody. You. Don’t move.” Jess’ mudman stayed where he was while the rest of the squad rushed past her. “Give her to me,” said Rito. Jess felt herself being lifted off the mudman’s back and flung over a rock-hard shoulder. Rito jerked suddenly, and the mudman Jess had been riding crunched. “I used to be the Red Ranger too, you know,” said Rito quietly. “I don’t know if you’re conscious or not, but that fire was no accident. And here Sis thought you all had lost your powers. Won’t she be surprised?” He took off in a sprint that bounced Jess around even worse than the mudman had. The pain was immense, but Jess restrained herself. Rito was completely uncaring toward his subordinates; she didn’t need to give him a new reason to hurt her. The fire was no accident, Rito had said. But that’s impossible. We don’t have our powers anymore.

Rito hummed the Scooby Doo theme song as he ran, which Jess took to be her new torture for the flames which must have killed those mudmen. But mercifully she didn’t have to suffer for long. Soon Rito stopped and set her down on her feet. She fell to her knees and was steadied by two massive hands.

“Wakey wakey,” said Rito. Jess forced her eyes open. Rito’s face was inches from hers. To her credit she kept her fear from showing on her face. That charred, grinning skull was a little too appropriate of a face for someone as maniacal as Rito. “Eggs and bakey. Holy piñatas you have one hell of a resting bitch face! C’mon, don’t look so angry. I killed the guy who popped your shoulder out like one of those New Year’s thingies! We Red Rangers have to stick together! Now stand up, it’s time to meet Sis.”

He forced her to her feet. Her vision blackened from the headrush. Rito caught her and held her steady until her vision returned.

Central Square, as its name suggested, sat right in the heart of downtown. Skyscrapers lined two of its four sides, with City Hall marking the western end and the eastern boundary lined by Main Street itself. The skyscrapers miraculously had remained untouched by Rita’s army. Thousands of people and even more mudmen crowded the Square. A large platform made of some kind of black material
stood before City Hall, almost like Rita was running for an election. Black banners hung from the platform, and mudmen with guns paced around a central podium.

Jess looked around for the other Rangers but couldn’t see them in the crowd. Did Jack and Will get away? she wondered, though in truth she didn’t want to know the answer. At the very least she knew that April had been brought here, and probably Ewan as well, so instead she focused on looking for any sign of blue or yellow.

Rito yanked her into the crowd. “C’mon, Coppertop,” he said. “Up to the front! HEY! UGLY! MAKE WAY!” Every mudman parted before Rito, dragging their humans aside. Rito chuckled to himself. “I say ‘ugly’ and they all move! Ha! Classic…”

Rito strode forward with Jess in tow. Every eye – mudman and human alike – fixed on the two of them. The mudmen jeered and pointed at her. The humans, for the most part, looked away from her gaze when their eyes met. They looked beaten, run down. The fight in them was completely gone. Most were burned or bleeding. All were dirty from soot and soaked to the bone from the downpour which had finally stopped. Jess realized that the light here was different; she had spent so long seeing the city in fire light that she almost didn’t recognize the familiar glow of street lights.

Rito leapt onto the black stage, hauling Jess with him. She fell on her face when they landed and stayed there. She hated Rito and the mudmen. She hated feeling helpless. She hated the citizens of Cedar Grove who had just given up. But most of all she hated Rita. She hated her for the obvious reasons, of course – the wanton destruction of her hometown, the slaughter of hundreds of thousands – but mostly she hated Rita for the personal pain she had caused. Turning Ewan’s mom into a monster. Turning Will’s adopted dad into an evil Ranger. Hurting her friends. Hurting her brother.

God damnit, she thought as she realized that she was crying. They will not see me like this! If they knew how scared I was… She thought again of the cruel irony of her becoming the Red Ranger, the Ranger of Courage. Too scared to come out of the closet for years. Too scared to let anyone in and see me for who I am. Too scared to... lose Jack. She punched the ground with her good arm and balanced on her fist. She could feel her knuckles bleeding. She pushed herself onto her feet and faced Rito, who was busy yelling at a mudman who had just brought a mess of blue and blood up onto the stage.

“April,” Jess gasped. She couldn’t see her friend’s face, but the blood was evidence enough that something was wrong.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU ‘HAVEN’T FOUND HIM’?” Rito was screaming. “They aren’t Rangers anymore! They’re just humans! And he wasn’t even fucking conscious! Everyone! Look for a young, ugly little human boy in yellow! And be quick about it!”

A mudman standing at the base of the stage shrugged his four arms and shook his head, clicking away an excuse. Rito pointed his sword at the mudman and unleashed a jet of flame. The humans nearby screamed and leapt back. One woman’s clothes caught on fire. Those around her helped stamp it out, but not after it had burned a good portion of her leg. Her whimpers of pain brought Jess’ blood to boiling.

“Someone shut her up,” growled Rito.

“No,” said a new voice. “Let her suffer.”

A hand alighted on Jess’ shoulder. She brushed it off immediately and spun. Black dress. Long black hair. Slit yellow eyes.
At long last, Rita Repulsa had appeared.

Chapter 2 – Ewan

*Shake it off man, shake it off. You escaped… How the fuck did you escape… How the fuck…*

Ewan crouched behind the counter of Cedar Grove’s downtown Abercrombie clothing store, his heart racing and his mind even more confused than usual. He had woken up on the back of a particularly ugly mudman with only three arms and half its nasty jaw missing. They had been running along Main Street, and Ewan had been thinking of just how desperately he wanted to escape when fire from the buildings around them literally leaped into the street and consumed the whole back of the mudman column. In all the confusion, Ewan found himself catapulted from the back of his captor and through the shattered window of the clothing store. He didn’t know how it had happened. It felt like his old wind power had returned to push him off the mudman’s back, but of course that was impossible.

*The mudman must have thrown me by accident or something,* he reasoned, even if it didn’t make much sense. *Anyway, I’m here now. Time for a change of clothes.*

Most of the store was burned beyond recognition, but here and there he found some shorts and a hoodie which fit him reasonably well. He kept his Ranger uniform shoes but hid the rest of his yellow gi under the counter. He thought about getting some proper underwear instead of his star-spangled Speedo, but in the end he decided that perhaps the tiny bundle of fabric was his lucky charm. After all, he wasn’t dead yet.

*Now what?*

The buildings on the other side of the street were little more than burned-out, lifeless shells, and he knew that the mudmen which had been transporting him had gone off to the right of where he was now. To follow them would be suicide.

He peered out the front door and glanced left. Main Street ran in a perfectly straight line through the rest of downtown, spotted here and there with a few rare street lights that still worked. The world was lifeless, the only movement was that of fire and shadow. *No more God-damned rain, at least.* Ewan didn’t think of his mother, or Alpha 5, or the other Rangers. If any of them were still out there, he hadn’t the slightest idea of where to start looking, and even if he could find them, he couldn’t do anything. No, to think of them right now would break what little spirit he still had in him.

He bolted from the Abercrombie store and tore down the sidewalk at top speed – for about two seconds. Steel groaned in the building next to him, the one from which fire had somehow attacked the mudmen and given Ewan his window of opportunity. Ewan looked up at the building’s top some seven or eight stories up. Was the light playing with him, or was the building swaying?

A large chunk of building fell through the night and crashed into the sidewalk just in front of Ewan. He danced backward, dodging more and more debris until at last the entire building followed suit. Ewan turned and ran all-out back in the direction he had come as the building tumbled into the street, effectively blocking his path.

“Allright,” he said with a mirthless grin, “suicide it is.” He turned and ran after the mudmen.
Death met him every step of the way down Main Street. What had once been the main artery of Cedar Grove was now full of bombed-out shop fronts, bodies in the gutters, cars on fire, dark puddles virtually everywhere that may have been water or blood. *Even if we won*, Ewan thought, *how would the city ever recover? Cedar Grove is dead. This is just... beyond repair.* Rita never had to kill all of the citizens. Destroy enough of the city, and Cedar Grove could never survive. This wasn’t like some Godzilla movie where Tokyo gets flattened and then magically rebuilds before the next film. The reality was that Cedar Grove was dead, or very close to it. *One more casualty for Rita to answer for.*

Slowly, sounds of life met Ewan’s ears. He remembered Alpha saying that Rita’s forces were gathering in Central Square, and he was just about to duck into a nearby alleyway when he saw a small crowd of humans heading in the same direction that he was. On impulse, he ditched the alley and eased himself into the back of the group. An older man was the only one to notice. Their eyes met, but Ewan saw no life left in the man as he returned his gaze to the ground. *Rita’s even killed the people who are still alive,* thought Ewan, though he quickly decided that that sounded too hokey and vowed never to think it again.

Ewan’s band of merry zombies turned a corner and found themselves becoming a part of an absolute sea of humans and mudmen. There had to be well over ten-thousand people there, and more still trickled in from other roads and alleys along the edges. A small grouping of people had gathered on a distant stage, but they were too small to make out.

“What’s going on?” asked one of the people who had arrived with Ewan. Another human was just about to answer when a nearby mudman punched him in the face with its pincher-like fist. The other cowered in silence, and one by one the small group dissipated into the masses.

*I have to get closer to that stage,* Ewan decided. He began weaving through the crowd, and though the mudmen continued to discourage talking, Ewan still caught snips of conversation as he went.

“—hear there’s going to be an execution.”

“Maybe we’ll finally get some answers.”

“...going to kill us all.”

“This voice inside my head... it *commanded* me to come here.”

“Me too!”

“Can’t see a damned thing.”

“I followed a group of those monsters because they had my boyfriend.”

“I told that girl with the crazy ice gun that she could shove it—”

“Have you seen my mommy?”

The last one dropped a pit in Ewan’s stomach. His mom was dead now, a monster in Rita’s army. For all he knew, she could be one of the mudmen in this crowd. He ducked his face and pressed on.

A murmur rippled through the crowd. Ewan stopped and looked up. It was still hard to see the stage from where he was, but now a huge screen of black formed above the stage. On it appeared a face Ewan had glimpsed in flashbacks from the old Yellow Ranger.

*Rita,* Ewan thought. *The bitch only shows her face after she’s won.*
“Citizens of Cedar Grove,” said a rich female voice. Ewan could see no speakers, yet Rita’s voice washed over the crowd, magnified by some unseen force. “I am Rita Repulsa, your new ruler.”

Ewan continued to push forward while the humans in the crowd whispered amongst themselves. One or two grew belligerent enough to be put down by nearby mudmen. The rest were quick learners and remained silent.

“I understand that you Americans elect your leaders with a popular vote,” said Rita. “Where I come from, we do things a little differently.” She waved a hand. A pair of mudmen marched a third figure onto the stage. “Where I come from,” Rita continued, “it was customary to challenge the leader to a duel. If you killed him, you were the new leader.” The mudmen threw their captive at Rita’s feet. Ewan recognized him as the Mayor, though for the life of him he couldn’t remember the guy’s name.

She can’t fight the Mayor, Ewan thought. He wouldn’t stand a chance. The Mayor stayed on his knees next to Rita, quietly sobbing as a trickle of blood ran down through his disheveled hair.

“But I am a fair leader,” said Rita. “And since I am here, I will do things your way. I will put it to a vote: me or him. Who votes for this man?”

A small spattering of hands shot up in the crowd, including a man standing right next to Ewan. The nearest mudmen swiped, and the arm fell to the ground in a spray of blood. The man cried out, clutching his new stump. From the sounds of screams, the other voters shared similar fates.

“Anyone else voting for the honorable incumbent?” asked Rita. No one else voted for surprise amputation. “Alright, hands down.”

Did she just make a pun?

“Now, all those in favor of me.”

Slowly, silently, most hands went up. Ewan pushed ever forward, though he kept his hands down.

“Thank you all for your support,” said Rita, and dammit she almost sounded like she meant it. “As I said, I am Rita Repulsa. For the past ten-thousand years I was kept imprisoned by an oppressive being called Zordon. Did you know that aliens have controlled this planet since dinosaurs roamed? Of course you didn’t. They worked in secret, for if you ever learned of their manipulations, you would have risen up against them, and they didn’t want that. Oh no, they reveled in their secret power.

“But people like me realized the truth. We fought back, and slowly, their numbers dwindled until just one remained. This Zordon has watched all of you. He has noted your sins, your shortcomings, all under the guise of ‘protecting’ you. But this is America! Land of the free and home of the brave! Your forefathers gave their lives so that their children – you – would never have to live under such tyranny. Zordon would seek to control you for his own purposes. In the end, he convinced five of your youth to join with him and maintain his order. My liberators have slain three of them. I have the two survivors here with me. Stand up, ladies.”

“Shit.” Ewan couldn’t help but swear. Jess and April appeared next to Rita, and while Jess looked alright, April’s face had a huge bloody rip down her forehead, through her eye and deep into her cheek.

“These… Power Rangers…” Rita spit out the name like someone had shit in her soup, “have spent the evening undoing this great city. They hid behind masks and false faces just as Zordon has hid in the shadows, but now they have been revealed… unappealing though they may be.”
A few in the audience chuckled. To Jess’ credit, she didn’t rise to the insult. April looked like she was barely conscious as it was.

“Earlier this evening my prime agent infiltrated Zordon’s base and slew him, freeing this planet from his prying eyes and intervening ways. And with his final two minions captured, Zordon’s end is almost complete. By the time day breaks, I will have proven the corruption of these two to you, and you will cheer on my forces as they execute these last vestiges of control.

“Now, some of you may ask, ‘wasn’t it your army that has laid waste to the city?’ It is a reasonable question, and I will not deny that my Putties have indeed destroyed many buildings. But their strikes have not been without purpose. Their targets shared a commonality between them: each building destroyed has somehow enslaved you. How many of you work dead-end jobs you hate, and yet you feel as though you cannot escape? You fear what would become of you without a steady income. Society would not support you and your dreams; it doesn’t care about you. So you toil on, numbing yourself with your work until you don’t even notice the pain anymore.

“And how many of you live your lives enslaved by things? You must have the nicest clothes, the hottest shoes, the latest game, the biggest TV, or else you won’t fit in. This society will not accept you unless you buy the things it demands you buy. Your children know more corporate mascots than they do world leaders. Do you see the truth now? I am not your captor; I am your liberator. I have destroyed those places which are your chains. I will not treat you as your past leaders have. I will not spy on you as Zordon once did. I will allow you to be free to make your own choices. I will restore freedom not seen on this Earth since my youth over ten-thousand years ago.”

No one in the crowd spoke, but fewer were frowning than Ewan would have hoped. He had to admit that Rita made a convincing argument, but he knew they were all lies… weren’t they?

Rita flicked a wrist, and a familiar image appeared on the giant screen. “Who here has used Google Street View?” she asked. The question caught everyone off-guard, but a great deal of people raised their hands timidly. Some even laughed. People were starting to like Rita. Ewan knew, to his shame, that the Ewan of yesterday would have been fully taken in by Rita’s cavalier attitude and wildly attractive form. To his shock, he found himself not blaming those in the crowd who were taking her side.

The image on the black screen was a satellite’s zoomed-in view of the very square where they all now stood. “Did you know,” said Rita, “that the great majority of people who use this fascinating technology do nothing but look at their own house?” The crowd laughed. Several people nodded and admitted being guilty of doing exactly that.

It was the answer Rita had expected. A thin smile flashed across her lips. “You humans have so much at your fingertips, yet you squander it all.” The crowd stopped laughing. “Have you any idea how rare the Earth is? How rare you are? No, because you are too busy cheering on your favorite team when they’re losing, or picking out your newest phone even as the manufacturer gets ready to unveil an even newer model for you to envy. The selfishness of humans is legendary. It is how society has raised you. But it is not your fault. You have been conditioned to care about a sports team that just wants your money. You have been raised to believe you need that new phone, for if you don’t, you won’t fit in with everyone else. You won’t be loved. You won’t have that sense of belonging. You won’t have a family.”

Ewan was close enough to the stage to see everyone clearly now. As Rita talked, more of her henchmen appeared: Squatt and Baboo, Goldar, Rito, a host of mudmen with assault rifles. Ewan glanced around and noticed several more gunmen hanging from the sides of the skyscrapers around the square. Rita’s speech was inviting, but the actions of her army said otherwise.
At the word *family*, several more mudmen marched onto the stage with captives.

“This brings me to my final point,” said Rita. “The myth of family. As I said before, I have onstage the last two fanatics acting under Zordon’s false sense of protection. These people,” Rita waved toward the people being hauled onto the stage, “are what’s left of their families.”

Ewan had seen Jack and Jess’ parents a handful of times. Friends were never welcome at their house, so most of the time Will and Jack came over to Ewan’s, if only because his mother always baked them cookies. Jack rarely talked about his parents, but Ewan had learned over the years that Mr. Kelly was a raging alcoholic, and Mrs. Kelly was a thieving enabler who cheated the system. They called Jack “nerd” and questioned his manhood. Mr. Kelly even challenged him to arm wrestling matches just to prove how weak Jack was. And they fought with Jess any time she was at home and belittled her constantly just because she liked girls, something for which Ewan certainly could never fault her.

Now the Kellys begged for Jess’ attention as though they had always been perfect, loving parents. She stared straight ahead, ignoring them completely.

Ewan assumed that the third adult on the stage was April’s mother, though there wasn’t much of a family resemblance. She cried when she saw April. She tried to break free from her captors and hug her child, but the mudmen hit her across the face and held her where she was. Behind April’s mother, other mudmen corralled a group of about a half-dozen children. They all looked to be around four years old or younger. From their looks, they obviously weren’t related to any of the Rangers.

“My point is this,” said Rita. “Family makes you weak.” Ewan thought of the old Yellow Ranger, how Rita had torched her village, killed her family, and driven her mad with the false promise of reviving them. “Family leads you to forsake your fellow man and make decisions against the greater good of the human race. Family makes it okay for you to turn to an ‘us vs. them’ mentality. It splinters the population and fosters ill will between friends. I have summoned these three, who are the parents of these misguided children, to illustrate my point.”

Rita turned to Jess and April. As if seeing April’s disfigured face for the first time, she made a show of surprise and disdain. She extended her arm, and a long staff leapt from her own shadow and into her hand. She aimed it at April, and just as Ewan was about to scream for her to stop, thin tendrils of shadow swept over April’s face, removing the blood and closing the cut that ran down her face.

Several in the audience cheered at Rita’s apparent benevolence, but just as many booed and shouted for her to kill the oppressors.

“Not a good sign, thought Ewan.

“I present you with a choice,” said Rita. “I will start with you… Jessica Kelly. Whom would you save: your parents, or these innocent children?” Rita ushered the terrified little kids forward so that everyone could see them. They really were adorable, with tangled hair and big eyes and pouty lips and one with a dirty, soggy teddy bear clutched under an arm.

At the challenge, the audience gasped. Many who had been leaning toward Rita now second-guessed. “Surely she wouldn’t kill those people,” someone whispered near Ewan. Ewan tried not to grin; if Rita killed anyone, it would work against everything she had said so far. She had set herself up to fail.

Jess said nothing. She stared straight ahead, her mouth a very thin line.

“You won’t take up my challenge?” asked Rita innocently. “Very well. I will ask you, April Johnson: whom would *you* save?” Rita turned to the audience. “Zordon has forced my hand in
this. I do not wish to kill anyone on this stage, but I must make a point if I am to free your minds. Family – the illusion of preference based on genetics or time or happenstance – is humanity’s greatest form of enslavement. But I get ahead of myself. As I said, Zordon has forced my hand. April Johnson, you have thirty seconds to choose or they all die, even young Jessica. So, do you save these adorable, innocent little children… or your dear friend’s parents?”

Chapter 3 – Will

“Yadol!”
“YADOL!”
“Ahop!”
“AHOP!”
“Yool!”
“YOOL!”

The class finished the last punch and bowed. Their master bowed in response but did not give them the signal that class was over.

“You’ve all trained hard,” said the master. “But not hard enough. You hold too much of yourselves back. If you want to truly succeed in this class, you must give me everything. Who here is prepared to do that? You? What about you?” There was a long pause as all of the students avoided their master’s gaze… except one. “You,” said the master. The students parted to reveal the only student in a white gi. “You will fight me.”

“Something’s not right…” the student muttered to himself. The others shushed him immediately and backed away. Soon all were seated around the edge of the practice mats except for the master in black and the student in white. They began to circle one another, a perfect yin-yang.

“You hold so much back,” said the master. “Why? What are you afraid of?”

The student frowned and shook his head, as if trying to rattle his brain into remembering.

“You don’t have to be afraid of me,” said the master. “I am here to guide you. But you must not soften your blows when you attack me. You must not soften yourself. Harden your mind, sharpen it into a tool you can use to utterly destroy your opponents. Now tell me: what are you afraid of?”

The student continued to circle his master, but a little thought clawed at the edges of his mind, and odd sights danced just beyond his vision. Someone called to him as though from a dream. The voice knew his name, though he could not recall it.

“I am…” he said. “I am afraid of…” Three caskets flashed through his memory. He cried out and leapt at his master, attacking blindly in a rush that the master easily countered. In a moment, the student lay on his back.

“Get up,” said the master. “Do it again.” The student climbed to his feet, but the rage of his visions urged him to attack again. “Focus!” shouted the master as the student found himself elbowed in the
face. “Anger is an expression of fear. What are you afraid of? Tell me!”

The student was about to answer when he heard his name again. Will, said the voice. He stopped and looked for its source, but no one else seemed to have heard it.

_I am Will_, he thought. _Those caskets were my family._

“I know what it is I fear,” said Will.

The master smiled. “Good. Knowing the fear within you lets you exploit the fears of others. Harness it, instill it in your opponent. Fear is knowledge, and you can use this knowledge to your advantage. Make me fear you, child. Focus!”

_Something’s not right_, Will thought again. The master had told him to focus, so he did so. Specific details fell away from his sight wherever he looked, replaced only by darkness. One by one the students around the practice mat blackened and turned to mud. The mat itself dissolved into a dark gray cloud until, at last, Will stood in a misty void with the master and a crowd of mudmen.

Will tried to focus on the person standing before him, but its appearance changed continually: one moment Master Tom, the next Rita Repulsa. Will’s stomach dropped; the master had been this way the whole time. His mind had simply accepted him… or her?

_I am Will Weston_, he thought. Everything was becoming clear now. _I was a Power Ranger. I touched the Void Spider, and… now I’m here. Where am I?_

Master Tom/Rita looked at the room around it. “The Dark Dimension knows your desires and exploits them,” it said with two voices. “You wish for things to be as they were before the attack on the city. You wish you could train with your master again, and you fear the loss of your loved ones. You are not hard to read, Will Weston. Not hard at all. People as _good_ as you are always so predictable.”

Will did not move. He had heard Ewan’s and April’s stories of the Dark Dimension; he knew that escape was futile. “What do you want?” he asked.

The master twitched, as though in pain. When it looked at Will again, its expression was frantic, pleading. “Will!” it cried. “Oh Will, it’s good to see you, buddy!” The master twitched again, and its expression became lofty and contemptuous.

_What the hell is going on here?_

“You are dead, Will,” said the master. “You touched the Void Spider, and Dark Matter consumed you from the inside out. Your consciousness will languish here forever.”

“So you’ve won,” said Will. “Congratulations. Why bother with me then if I’m just a corpse?”

“Because I know you.” The master grinned as both Tom and Rita at once. “Tom and Rita are one. Her memories are mine, and _his_ memories are mine. I know everything about you. In a way, I have you to thank for finding Tom for me in the first place. When you gave me this,” the master pulled a familiar white coin from its pocket, “your essence led me to him. You two are so alike, you know. So honorable, yet so ambitious. You would do anything to get your way… it just so happens that ‘your way’ involves saving others. A rarity in humans these days.”

The master twitched, cried out. It held its head and screamed in two voices. When it regained itself, it looked at Will with eyes that were all Tom’s. “Will, you have to believe me! You can still save youse – AAAAGH!”
Will’s mind raced as the master fought with itself. *This could all be a trick. Rita could be playing with me. I want to believe that Master Tom is fighting her control, but Rita could be using that belief to play me into a trap. But how can I know? I must not trust anything she… or he… says. I have to remain cold.*

“You wouldn’t come to me unless something was wrong,” said Will. “I may be stuck in here, but out there you’re losing to a group of kids you outnumber a thousand to one.”

It was a bluff, and the master called it. “Losing?” it laughed. “We have already won, buddy.” It spat Master Tom’s favorite nickname like venom. “I only came to offer my condolences. You fought so valiantly and died so quickly. Your friends will soon join you here.”

*Will.*

“Now that I know your fears, I know you.”

*Will, trust in Honor.*

“And now that I know you, I can control the White Ranger power and make a puppet out of you like I did your precious master.”

*Honor is incorruptible.*

Will thought he knew that voice, but that was impossible. Zordon was dead… and yet, it didn’t feel like some kind of Dark Dimension trick. *Honor…* he thought. *What is Zordon trying to tell me?*

The master held the white coin in its hand, as if daring Will to step forward and reclaim it. Master and student stood still, neither risking a move closer to the other, the white coin practically screaming for Will to reclaim it.

*Trust in Honor,* Will thought.

“All night,” he said, “we’ve been one step behind you, Rita. We’ve been on the defensive.” He circled to the side, restarting the dance between student and master, yin and yang, light and dark. Rita circled the other way, more than happy to oblige. “You’ve had ten-thousand years to plan for this day. Us? We had about five minutes. Of course you planned for everything. You knew Zordon would choose new Rangers. You knew he’d give them the power coins just as he had you. You knew you could capture one of us, and you even knew that you could get one of us to sacrifice our own coin to save him.”

*With all my heart, I wish to save humanity, even if it means I must sacrifice myself and my family. Master, I am so sorry.*

“But there was one thing you didn’t count on,” said Will. He held out his hand. In it was not a coin but, to the master’s – and Will’s – surprise, a shining orb of brilliant white. “Zordon let the power choose. We don’t need our coins. We never did. It’s in each of us.”

The master’s eyes went wide. It screeched, and it and all the mudmen leapt forward to try to snatch the orb from Will’s hands.

The white orb exploded and bathed Will in warmth. Rather than blind him, the light shone through the black of the Dark Dimension and melted it all away – mist, mudmen, master – until Will could see nothing but pure white.

*Will,* said the voice again.
“Zordon,” said Will.

The voice hesitated. *Mostly,* it said, and for the first time Will noticed a different tone to the voice. It was still Zordon but… lighter.

“I guess I really am dead,” said Will. It wasn’t despair; just a statement of fact.

*May my sacrifice not have been in vain.*

“Thank you for getting me out of there, Zordon.”

*I did nothing. The voice you heard, and the power you displayed, they were all from you. You have done so well, Will. I am very proud of you. But time is woefully against us. The Dark Dimension consumed your body, but Rita ensured its survival in the hopes of using it to form her own White Ranger. You are both dead… and alive.*

“That’s… good? But didn’t you die? What happened, Zordon?”

Silver shimmered into the white before him. A being stepped through, until suddenly Professor Cranston stood before him.

“As I said, there is little time.” The professor spoke with Zordon’s voice. Will’s mouth dropped.

“You saw through Rita’s trick, Will. She sought to play into your fears and insecurities, just as you suspected. She knew that you would mistrust her after learning of the others’ experience, so she believed that she could get you to act cold and distant toward her, perhaps fight her. Had you touched her or your coin of your own free will, you would have been lost forever.”

“She played into my fears,” said Will. “Losing people. I’ve already lost my parents… my sister. The thought of losing Master Tom… That pain is just too much, Zordon. I couldn’t handle it.”

“And yet, you did. Rita allowed aspects of your old master to slip through her façade to try to trick you into believing that he could still be saved. She hoped that you would give yourself up to save him. She wanted you to lose sight of the bigger picture and act to your own selfish ends… As she said, there is much of you in Tom Oliver, and vice versa. She has dominated him in the same way that she could dominate you if you allowed it. She almost succeeded just now.”

“But I’m not ambitious. She was lying.”

The Professor shook his head. “No, she was not. Ambition does not just refer to one’s own worldly gain. It is the length to which one will go to achieve what is most important to him. You will go to any length to save others. Rita tried to play into that by showing you signs of your old master. Had you reached for your old coin, even if it were to save Tom, Rita would have had you forever. But your Honor won out. You sacrificed the chance to save your Master. It could not have been an easy choice, but Honor rarely is. In that sacrifice, you forced a crack in the Dark Dimension, and you escaped.”

“Is he totally gone?” blurted Will. He realized that he didn’t want to know the answer, but it was too late.

“He… is not,” admitted Zordon. “But the more you believe he can be saved, the more you play into Rita’s hand. Focus on saving him, and we will lose. Do you understand?”

Will’s heart wanted to grieve. It felt like he had lost Master Tom for the second time that night. Old feelings from the hospital years ago flooded back. He felt his eyes water, but he forced the thought away. Save the world, or save nothing. In the end, there really was just one choice. No one else
would go through what he had. He allowed his moment of grief to pass before steeling himself. “…I do. So… what’s next?”

Professor Cranston grinned and pushed his glasses up his nose. “I’ve been busy working on my Quad-D: the Dark Dimension Disruption Device. It’s what brought me to you, and it’s what can get you out. Will, it’s time to bring you back. We have a world to save.”

Chapter 4 – Jack

Jack knew that he had manipulated earth. He just knew it. Unfortunately, he found it a little hard to celebrate at the moment. As the building had caved in on their heads, Jack, in desperation, had instinctively tried to pull a dome of rock over him and Will’s body.

And dammit, he had done exactly that.

The building debris thudded harmlessly against the rock that now protected Jack. A deafening roar, a bit of scratching here and there by what he had assumed was a few roaming mudmen, then… profound silence. Jack sat, deaf and blind, next to his fallen friend. Need to slow my breathing, he thought. Limited oxygen. Small space. I’d wager I have… an hour? Maybe a little more if I can calm the hell down.

But he couldn’t. Claustrophobia set in. His breaths became shallow: asthma spread through his airways. The walls pushed in from all sides in the darkness. Jack tried to move the rock again, but this time nothing happened. If he really had called his powers to save him, then now there was nothing to un-save him. He had doomed himself and Will to a slow death of suffocation.

All this rock and no air, Jack thought bitterly, his heart racing and his mind growing hazy. No light, no water, no fire. How wretchedly symbolic. He felt around for Will next to him. Will’s breaths were as shallow as Jack’s, but at least he still breathed.

Jack didn’t want to think about the others. Ewan, Jess, and April had all been captured. Alpha was… The sight of that monster ripping his sword up through Alpha’s body made Jack jump and bump his head on the low rock ceiling. Alpha was gone. He had tried to save his Rangers. He had died for them.

Jack had seen death before. When he was little, his dad used to swerve to try to hit creatures crossing the road, just because it made Jack cry. His dad would always turn to him and say “kid, you need to grow a pair, you hear me? Your sister has bigger balls than you!” Jack used to try to be strong like his dad wanted, but it was never enough. Eventually, he stopped trying. Back then, Jack thought he was just “being more himself.” But I was only rebelling. I used to think that I was mature for bucking my dad; reality was that I was just being the version of myself that Dad hated the most. Part of him liked making his dad angry, and it was that part now that ashamed Jack the most.

I’m not strong, he thought. I’ve always known that. Zordon’s power was a fantasy I wanted to believe. Now he’s gone. They’re all gone. He struggled to catch his breath, as if the darkness itself pressed on his chest.

The image of Jess unconscious and slung over a mudman’s shoulder pushed its way into Jack’s memory. He fought back his anger. She could still be alright. She was totally vulnerable. She could still be alright. She was at the mercy of Rita Repulsa. She could still be… dead. God dammit
get a hold of your thoughts, Jack!

He placed a hand on Will again. Will was cold and no longer moving. When had he stopped breathing?

Jack swore and fumbled around to try CPR. Instead he slammed his head in the rock above him and fell over, swearing again and punching the rock until he suspected he had broken a bone in his hand. He yelled and screamed and cursed the darkness, cursed Rita, cursed everything that had happened in this night from hell. His sister and friends had been taken, and Will, his best friend, lay dead next to him. Jack hadn’t been able to save anyone.

Will would have been able to save me, he thought.

He felt himself crying. He knew from experience that his tears were probably spattered over his glasses by now, but he didn’t care. It was too dark to see.

“FUCK THIS!” he screamed. He kicked at the darkness and felt metal foot collide with rock. He kicked again and again, ignoring the jolting pain that shot up his thigh each time. If he wore himself out, maybe he’d die faster.

Jack heard a faint crack! He stopped and tried to feel the rock with his half-broken hand. He winced when he jammed a finger into the dome. He heard the sound again, only this time he realized that it wasn’t a crack! but someone whispering his name. Jack.

He froze. “Will?”

Jack saw visions of rock and stone bathed in a pale light. At first he didn’t understand, but slowly he realized that these were not visions but the actual rock that surrounded him. There was a light inside the dome. Slowly, he turned to Will’s body.

Tendrils of light threaded their way around Will, starting from his heart and working their way up and down his blackened corpse. Jack could only stare, unsure of what was happening. His glasses, he dimly noted, were indeed tear-streaked. He took them off.

The light inside the tiny dome grew to the point where Jack could no longer look directly at it, and so much light bounced off the rock walls that eventually he just closed his eyes altogether. He didn’t know what was happening to his friend, but it didn’t feel like anything of Rita’s. Jack had used his rock powers after Zordon’s death; maybe Will could use his light powers? As a corpse?

Jack.

A flash lit up the inside of Jack’s eyelids, and then the light dimmed. The feel of the air changed. A breeze played with Jack’s hair, bringing with it the now-familiar smell of smoke and ash. Jack’s breaths came in deep and strong, his asthma somehow abated. Uncertain, he put his glasses back on and opened his eyes.

The rock dome was gone, replaced by a small crater that sat amidst the ruins of the apartment building where Alpha 5 had met his end. Fire and streetlights combined to cast the area in a contrast of light that shifted and danced with the wind, casting shadows about the rubble that reminded Jack uncomfortably of mudmen. Beyond the lights, the city was quiet underneath black clouds that threatened to resume their downpour at any moment.

All of this registered in Jack’s mind, but none of it mattered in the slightest compared to what stood before him. Where Will’s body had lain a moment before, there now stood a man armored in white and silver. The armor was smooth and form-fitting, and as it shimmered in the light it seemed to give
off a bit of its own. The man wore a belt of black adorned with several small pockets, and a gun sat in a holster on his hip while another rested in a smaller holster on his thigh. Instead of a hood, the man wore a sleek white biker’s helmet with a golden lion’s pattern that matched the lion symbol emblazoned on the man’s chest. Eyes glowed beneath the visor with a familiar white light.

“Hey Jack,” the man said.


I believe I owe you an explanation.

Jack jumped. The voice had been inside his head, and it had sounded both like Zordon… and Professor Cranston.

“Professor?” he stammered.

Yes… and no. The air shifted around them. The breeze died, and the fires in the buildings around them stopped their dance. A being of silver stepped through an invisible door and stood beside Will. Its body glowed with an inner light. Its face watched his, featureless, with eyes that burned silver. “Jack,” it said. When it spoke, shadows of other features played across its face. For a moment, it was Professor Cranston again. Will stood with his arms folded, content to let the being speak for itself. “Of all the Rangers, I believe I owe you the greatest apology.”

“What happened?” Jack asked. “What… are you?”

“I am Zordon, and I am Bill Cranston. When the Black Ranger invaded the Command Center, he believed he had destroyed me, when in fact he had only destroyed my bodily anchor to this world. So long as my Rangers survive, so too do I. Bill Cranston merged with my Essence of Wisdom, and…”

The being wrenched its head to the side, as though in pain. “And here we are,” it finished, this time distinctly with the Professor’s voice. It shook its head to regain itself.

“Though not without some difficulty,” it added with Zordon’s voice.

“So now you can leave the Command Center?” asked Jack.

“We are projecting our form to you. Merging with the Professor has altered many things.”

“New suits,” offered Will. He posed helpfully.

“Yes,” said Zordon. “New armor, and new weapons for this war. Too long did I remain static in my Command Center. I did not evolve along with the planet I swore to protect. With Dr. Cranston’s aid, my powers may grow far beyond their former capabilities. But that is for another time.”

“Time…” said Jack. He glanced around him and realized that the world appeared frozen in place outside of their little crater. “Can you stop time!? We could use this against Rita!”

“I have only altered yours and Will’s perceptions of time so that I may bring you up to speed. The world moves as it normally does; I am conveying this information to your mind at a rate faster than Earth’s time-space typically allows.”

Jack stared. He was too exhausted to try to work out what Zordon was saying.

“As I said,” Zordon’s featureless face appeared to grin, “that is for another time. Jack, if you are
willing, I must call on your Strength once more.”

“My Strength?” Jack laughed. “I don’t know if you saw me a few seconds ago, but my ‘strength’ is gone. It was never there. When I tried to save someone, he died and I nearly killed myself. I broke my damn hand on rock that I created!”

Will stepped forward. “But I didn’t die. You saved me, Jack. You’re the strongest of us all. I really owe you one.”

“But the others, man…” Jack fought back the tears. “Jess… they… were all taken.”

“And I can’t get them back alone. Come on. It’s time to suit up.”

“Suit up,” Jack repeated weakly. The sudden turnaround of events had left his mind reeling. “Got it. I’ll just… do that, then. Can we teleport to Central Square?”

Will laughed in that way he had when he knew something Jack didn’t, which was rare. “Teleportation is so yesterday, dude. I’ll get us there in style.”

**Chapter 5 – April**

“April Johnson, you have thirty seconds to choose or they all die, even young Jessica. So, do you save these adorable, innocent little children… or your dear friend’s parents?”

April screamed through a mouthful of blood, but no one could hear her. Rita had made a show of “healing” the cut across her face, but it had all been a trick. She hadn’t healed anything; instead, Rita had woven a spell into April’s blood that prevented her from saying anything except what Rita wanted her to say. And while Rita spoke to the audience, with her back to April, the Ranger could see a face in the shadows that obscured Rita’s back. It stared at her with blood-red eyes and a wicked grin.

Then Rita turned, and the shadow was gone. She gestured April toward the captives: Jess’ parents, soaked to the bone and covered in mud and blood, and…

The “adorable, innocent little children” was April’s mother, wearing a blonde wig that shimmered with Rita’s enchantments. Goldar stood over her, flaming sword in hand and looking as though he wanted nothing more than to drive it through the woman’s neck. April could see another of Rita’s enchantments hanging over a nearby mudman. It was supposed to fool the crowd into thinking that that creature was April’s mother. No one would know that the group of kids was just one person, or that that person was the most important one in April’s life. Rita had manipulated the shadows for a greater game. She would have April choose between saving Jess’ deadbeat parents and her own mother. April couldn’t tell if Jess could see what she could, but she suspected not. The cut across April’s face had all but blinded her; all of her sight now filtered through a vision that she herself did not understand but, she hoped, came from some remnant of Zordon’s powers.

“Fuck my parents,” groaned Jess. She clutched her shoulder, which hung dislocated from their rough piggyback ride to the Square. “Save the kids, April. They don’t deserve any of this. Rita will just spin it so that you condemned those kids to die for my sake.” Jess’ mother wailed. Her father showed a flash of anger that reminded April of her own father.

“Twenty seconds,” said Rita. “Please hurry.” She made a face to the audience as though she was
legitimately concerned about her captives’ safety, but April could see the grin in the shadow.

_Could that shadow be Rita’s true form?_ April wondered. Her skin pricked when she looked at it. She wished it would stop staring at her. She did her best to focus on the task at hand, but her choice was impossible: her mother, whom she loved dearly, or Jess’ parents, whom Jess clearly hated?

_If I don’t choose, Jess dies. But my choice will cause the death of someone important to us! How could I possibly do this? And what does Rita have to gain by masking the identity of my mom?_

“April,” her mother said through tears, “is it true? Are you one of the guardian angels?” April tried to speak, but Rita’s spell kept her silent. The shadow laughed at her impotence. The crowd started to grow agitated. Several began shouting for her to choose. Most, incited by Rita’s speech about how family makes you weak, urged April to spare the children and let the parents die.

“Ten seconds!” cried Rita. “I beg you to choose, young one! Zordon’s spell here is strong! If you do not make a decision, it will kill all of these innocent humans!”

_She puts the blame on Zordon, thought April. Lie after lie after lie…_

April’s time was up. She had no doubt that Rita would not hesitate to kill everyone on the stage to prove her point. _I cannot sacrifice the family of another for this._ She tried to fight back tears, but it was no use.

“Mom,” said April, “I’m so sorry. I have to save the Kellys.” To April’s credit, she didn’t cry, and her voice didn’t break.

April’s mother tried to speak, but Goldar shoved her onto her hands and knees.

“Not what I expected,” said the shadow behind Rita. “Too bad for you, your mother was the only one to hear your condemnation. She will die knowing that you killed her. This is what happens when you try to be the hero, young one. You lose those closest to you. Always. Now, say goodbye to your mother and your Ranger friend. Oh wait… you can’t.”

The shadow’s laugh dissolved into the roar of the crowd as Rita announced that time was up. “She would not choose!” cried Rita. “The parents of her fellow Ranger, two of the lowest, most worthless human beings I have ever come across, or these perfect, beautiful little children! Family makes you weak! Family clouds your judgment! If the human race is to survive, we must eliminate… family.”

“April,” sobbed her mother. She rose to her knees and looked her daughter dead in the eyes. “It’s okay. Everything will be okay. Find your sisters and save them. I love—” Goldar shoved her back down onto all fours.

Rita’s shadow flickered away from her body. It swept along the floor of the stage until it touched the hand of April’s mother. She screamed and tried to pull her hand away, but Goldar kept her down. The crowd gasped; to them, a group of children barely old enough to walk wailed in terror at some unseen force. April tried to call to her mother, to run to her side, to do _something_, but Rita’s spell tightened its grip on her blood. When she moved, all the blood in her body rocked against the sides of her veins. It was pain unlike anything she could possibly have imagined, like someone had ripped all her veins from her body and replaced them with fire. The pain would have blinded her, but she no longer saw with her eyes.

Instead, she was forced to witness her mother’s death.

Rita’s shadow crept up her mother’s arm slowly, delicately, as though savoring the taste of her flesh.
Where the shadow touched, her skin blackened as Will’s had with the Void Spider. Tendrils of black smoke curled off her body. April’s mother screamed herself into exhaustion, all the while held in place by the boot of a cackling Goldar. April could just hear Jess’ voice over the din of the audience. The only voice she couldn’t hear was her own. Soon the wind changed, and the smoke from her mother’s flesh blew straight into April’s face. She held her breath; Rita would not allow her to turn her head away.

After an eternity, the smoldering corpse fell onto its face and shattered in a cloud of ash. April’s mother had come here to escape a husband who beat her. She had come to start a newer, happier life free of abuse. And now she was gone. The crowd gasped when the body broke apart.

“I am sorry,” Rita said to the audience. “Zordon’s power was indeed great. This evil spell was his last effort to undermine me. I cannot combat such overbearing hatred. He… would even sacrifice his own Rangers to exact revenge upon me.”

The shadow crept toward Jess.

“This one will become my most powerful lieutenant,” the shadow said to April. “You are a tricky one to corrupt, but this one…” The face in the shadow grinned, and the shadow increased its pace. “So full of fear. Oh how she wants to fight. I can taste the anger in her…”

“April,” said Jess. “Fight it. Whatever hold Rita has on you, fight it! Don’t let this bitch win!”

“I already have,” said the shadow. Jess turned to it with a look of shock.

*It wants her to know it’s there*, thought April. *It wants to scare her even more.*

“See how the crowd has turned against you?” the shadow said. “They are mine. You Americans are so simple; all it takes is the illusion of enslavement and the promise of freedom and you become like putty, ready to be molded in whatever way I see fit. In half a day I traveled from another planet and took this worthless city with nothing but what the Dark Dimension granted me. Now that I have my foothold, this country will be mine before the week’s end.”

“And then the world?” mocked April.

“Oh my dear girl,” grinned the face in the darkness. “You think so small.”

The shadow fell over Jess’ hand, but no smoke rose. Jess watched the shadow halt with grim resolve. Rito stood over her, plainly shocked that the shadow did not affect her in the way it had April’s mother. Rito’s skeletal jaw hung slightly open, the bones in his brow shifting until it looked as though he had raised a questioning eyebrow.

“So it’s true,” said the shadow behind Rita. “There is still power within you Rangers. My touch should have burned right through her arm. Zordon chose better than last time, I’ll grant him that.”

“Want me to lop her nasty little head off, sis?” asked Rito. Rita shushed him. She turned and smiled at the Rangers while her back was to the audience.

“This one has wreaked havoc on my army,” she said, nodding at Jess. “What kind of leader would I be if I didn’t return the favor?”

The shadow twisted on itself until a thin dark line shot up Jess’ dislocated arm. She winced, grunting through gritted teeth as a deep gash of red followed the shadow’s trail. Blood seeped out of the wound and boiled on her skin, but still she would not cry out.
“Your feeble minds could not comprehend the number of ways I imagined killing you,” said Rita. As she watched the Rangers, the shadow spread out behind her, fanning out over the audience and distorting April’s view of them. “Torture was always involved, of course. But what kind? Do I... boil your toes? Break your bones? Gouge your eyes out? Waterboard you? Close you in a room with my idiot brother for weeks on end?” Rita shuddered.

“In the end, though, the answer lay clear before me. You Rangers believe you have become a team. You have been a thorn in my side all night. Now Zordon and that loudmouthed robot of his are dead, and your little leader has been claimed by the Dark Dimension. One by one, I am picking you apart.” Sweat poured down Jess’ face, though whether it was from the heat of the boiling blood on her arm or the strain of fighting back the urge to scream, April couldn’t tell. “With no one left to protect you, you two are nothing more than weak little girls. How does it feel, knowing that all of your power depended on a man?”

Too late did April realize what Rita was doing. Jess leapt to her feet, toppling a surprised Rito behind her, and charged at Rita with her boiling arm cocked back and ready to throw the punch of a lifetime. Rita’s words had gotten under Jess’ skin as badly as her dark magic had. April tried to cry out to Jess, but Rita’s spell kept her silent.

Jess threw a flailing punch that traveled straight through Rita, whose body darkened and shifted to mist for a moment before re-materializing behind the Ranger. Jess stumbled through, crying out from the pain of her dislocated shoulder. The audience roared its disapproval at Jess. One person near the front even tried to wrestle a gun away from one of the mudmen, presumably to shoot Jess and do Rita a favor. The mudman overpowered the man and knocked him to the ground. Squatt stepped out from behind April and stomped to the front of the stage to help the mudman deal with this new insubordination.

Jess took several unsteady steps but managed to stay on her feet. Her arm steamed. Her face had turned as bright a red as the dye in her hair.

“You have lost the day,” said Rita, as though the attack had never happened. “And now, you’re mine. But we women must stick together, don’t you think? I could make you my most powerful lieutenants, even more powerful than Goldar or my idiot skeleton of a brother.”

“Hey!” said Rito. “I resent being called a skeleton!”

Goldar crossed his arms and spat a tiny fireball onto the stage. It burned through the wood and disappeared below. “At least that skull’s an improvement over your old ugly face,” he grumbled.

“Silence!” snarled Rita. She took a moment to regain herself. “Do you see what I have to live with? You must understand what it’s like, competing in a man’s world. We can change that. We can make this a woman’s world.”

“Then you’re wasting your time on her,” April felt herself say, though they weren’t her words. Rita turned April’s body toward Jess. “Jess isn’t a woman. She isn’t anything.”

For the first time on that stage, Jess looked truly hurt. She said nothing.

“You don’t want her with us?” said Rita as innocently as possible.

“No,” she said through April. “I don’t want her hitting on me. She’s disgusting. Torture her all you like, then kill her.”

No! April screamed inside her own mind. No no no no! Jess’ whole countenance shut down. The
“Your friend is so insecure,” Rita’s shadow said to April. “It’s adorable. Target that insecurity, and she has no wellspring from which to draw her Courage. And you? Sow a little discord, and you’ll crumble to dust just as your mother did.”

And what did the Dark Dimension do to turn you, Rita? thought April. If she couldn’t speak, at least she could still think. How easy was it to destroy you from the inside out? You were a hero once. What happened to your family?

Something almost resembling sorrow flashed over Rita’s face, but then it was gone. “I am the Dark Dimension,” said the shadow. “Rita is as dead as – NGGGHHH!”

White flashed within the shadow’s blood red eyes. Rita fell back, tripping over her black dress and nearly sending her backward off the stage. Baboo leapt from somewhere behind April and caught her. Rita’s shadow flickered and sent a ripple of white across the entire Square. The crowd grew confused, muddled. Some shook their heads and looked around as if seeing the Square for the first time. The mudmen that were scattered throughout the Square looked around, too, as if unsure how to corral the restless humans.

In the front of the crowd, April noticed the man who had tried to wrestle a gun away from the mudman. Though he wore a hoodie to cover his face, April’s strange new vision showed the hurricane within him. Ewan. In the growing confusion, he knocked a pair of people into the mudman, sending the mudman crashing into Squatt. When the two monsters jumped to their feet a moment later, the mudman’s gun was missing. A single shot ripped from within the crowd, and the mudman crumpled to dust with a bullet hole through its head. Squatt roared, but a blast of wind knocked him over the stage and into a column of Town Hall behind them. When April looked back at the crowd, Ewan was gone.

April felt Rita’s spell in her blood loosen its grip. “Jess!” she called, thrilled to hear her own voice again. “Rita was speaking through me! Don’t—”

Pain scorched her insides as Rita regained control. “GOLDAR!” Rita screeched as she shoved Baboo away from her. “Return to the palace, and take them with you!” she pointed at Jess and April with her staff. “Squatt, Baboo, the Yellow Ranger is somewhere in the crowd. FIND HIM!”

Goldar grabbed Jess, who stood motionless with a blank stare that sent an ache through April’s heart. Rita’s words – spoken through April – had broken her. She put up no fight as Goldar handed her off to a group of mudmen.

A fresh breeze ripped through the Square, accompanied by a curious rumbling sound. Everyone turned to the east, at the back of the Square. Something shifted in the sky. The black clouds swirled, looking as though they were fighting with each other, until suddenly they parted, and a brilliant shaft of white light blasted from the heavens and fell directly on the Square. Rita’s shadow retreated from wherever the light touched. The crowd shook off Rita’s spell, and one by one the people came to their senses. Mudmen panicked and tried to fire into the crowd, but the light heated the guns until the mudmen dropped them.

Something massive fell through the clouds, riding the light toward the Square. April could hear Rita screaming for Goldar to take the Rangers, for Squatt and Baboo to hunt Ewan down and kill him, for Rito to just do something useful, but even Goldar’s iron grip on April’s arm couldn’t dampen her spirits. She knew what she was seeing, impossible though it seemed.

A lion made of pure white light leapt down the sun beams with such speed that it must have traveled...
over the entire city in the span of a few seconds. When it landed at the far end of the Square, its massive paws fell over both humans and mudmen, though only the latter were crushed beneath its weight. The lion stood several stories tall and more than a football field long, its tail flicking back and forth and its mane made of a light so bright that no one with normal vision could look directly at it. The lion’s eyes glowed brightest of all, and standing behind them, within the lion’s head, was the White Power Ranger, clad in new armor that shone just as brightly as the creature around it. When the White Ranger took a step forward, so too did the lion.

Goldar yanked April to her feet and threw her toward Jess. The two collided and fell onto the stage floor together. Goldar stood over them in a second, demanding that they stand up. “Get ready to feel what it’s like to get pulled apart from the inside out,” he cackled. “The Dark Dimension’s teleportation has a bad habit of killing humans, heh heh heh…”

“Get off them!” Ewan leapt from the crowd and onto the stage – a distance of some twenty meters at least – and fired a volley of bullets at Goldar. The big monster shoulder-charged through the bullets, grabbed Ewan by his hoodie, punched him hard in the stomach, and flung him as hard as he could. Ewan’s hoodie ripped, and he soared over the Square and crashed through the glass window of a nearby skyscraper several stories up. Squatt and Baboo tore through the crowd and disappeared into the building after him. Goldar dropped a chunk of yellow hood.

“GET THEM OUT OF HERE NOW!” screamed Rita. She was busy moving her staff in a strange pattern through the air, her eyes never leaving the enormous white lion that now strode slowly over the crowd. For the first time, April noticed another Ranger hanging from the lion’s shoulder. This one was clad in armor made of green stone cut in the shape of scales, his helmet showing the face of a crocodile and his eyes glowing within the helmet with a green so electric that it hurt to look at them. From his right hand dangled a long two-handed hammer.

Goldar stepped back, holding April and Jess firmly by the shoulders. “If they die, it’s not my fault!” said Goldar.

“That’s my decision to make, not yours,” said Rita. “Just teleport already!”

Goldar’s grip tightened. April prepared herself for intense pain, but nothing happened. She heard Goldar grunt in surprise. “Mistress…” he said uncertainly.

Rita’s shadow clung to her back, away from the light of the lion. “Curse him,” Rita muttered. “Zordon… he’s blocking me… CURSE HIM!”

Overhead, the black clouds were dissipating. Dawn had come at last.
Chapter 1 – Zordon

Though the building still lay in ruins around him, Zordon picked his way through the rubble simply because he had not been able to do so in ten-thousand years.

*Can you feel it?* Zordon thought.

*Feel what?* thought Professor Cranston.

*Time,* thought Zordon. *I have not walked these halls in millennia. I have lacked a physical form since the dawn of your civilization. To move again – to feel – is almost overwhelming.*

*Oh. Um, happy to help.*

While Zordon’s new body walked through the Command Center, his mind forced its full attention to Cedar Grove. *Continue to repair our systems,* thought Zordon. *I must ensure that Goldar does not take Jessica or April to Rita’s palace.*

*I’m on it,* thought Bill. Zordon’s body turned to the computer consoles around it. He felt his essence shift as half of him – Bill’s half – left the battle in the city and focused on the Command Center itself. It was a feeling beyond explanation, to have half of your body controlled by another. It unsettled Zordon, and he could feel it unsettle Bill as well. Yet this was the price they paid. Bill had sacrificed his humanity so that Zordon could return from the brink. Now they lived as two souls in one form, as the very epitome of compromise.

*I was not sure if this would work,* Zordon thought to himself. *In a way, we have become a more fitting expression of Wisdom.*

*I’d say we’re more like a partitioned hard drive,* answered Bill. Zordon had temporarily forgotten that Bill could hear all of his thoughts, even those he intended only for himself. He had to remind himself that there was no “himself” anymore.

*We must continue to improve our communication skills,* thought Zordon.

*That would be optimal.*

With his attention turned to Central Square, Zordon gripped the air around Goldar and held it closed. The monster was trying to rip a hole in the fabric of space to carry the Red and Blue Rangers to Rita’s palace, and while Zordon lacked the strength to prevent more portals, at least he could prevent this one. The White and Green Rangers had to rescue their comrades, and soon. Even so, it shocked Zordon how much power resided within Goldar.

*Report,* thought Zordon.

*Power at fifteen percent,* answered Bill. *Most of our systems are still down, including communications. Progress is lethargic at best, with the White Lion Zord drawing so much of our energy. It may have been an error to let Will summon it so early.*

*No.* *We surprised Rita, kept her from burrowing any further into Jessica’s mind, but she will not*
remain idle for long. In our absence Rita’s forces have grown far stronger. They sit just beyond our
dimension, ready to be called into Cedar Grove in a moment’s notice. The Rangers need all the
firepower they can muster, and they need it now. Divert as much power as you can to the remaining
zords so that the Lion does not stand alone for long.

Working on it. I’ve also gone over our schematics for a Dark Dimension jammer, but it will take
some time to create a working prototype, especially with the Command Center in such a state.

We walk a delicate path, Professor. Would that we had Alpha 5 here. Both aspects of Zordon
mourned the loss of the robot. Between Bill’s fresh, newly-met perspective and Zordon’s countless
years of having no other companion, the loss was indeed a hard one. They agreed to teleport
Alpha’s remains back to the Command Center as soon as they could spare the time, but both halves
were too focused on other matters to even accomplish that much at the moment.

Affirmative, agreed Bill. Alpha and I had developed the new Ranger suits before… you know… and
those suits look like they may just do the job.

The job will depend on the youngsters inside the suits.

They’re pretty incredible, aren’t they?

Zordon’s mind flashed back to a lone woman smiling up at his tank in the Command Center. His
heart sank. So many mistakes for which he had to atone. He felt Bill’s surprise at the memory, and
he knew Bill felt his sorrow. They are... everything I wished Rita had been.

The White Lion Zord stomped through Central Square, burning Rita’s Putties to dust and providing
light and hope alike to all the humans gathered there. Gone was Rita’s enchantment over the people
of Cedar Grove. The light of the Lion had scattered her spell. The Dark Dimension had tried to
manipulate from the shadows – subtly, beyond perception – but the Rangers had forced it into the
open. Its next move would be swift and deadly. Will continued the zord’s push forward, with Jack
hanging from its shoulder. Yet Zordon knew that the two of them would not be enough. They
needed the other Rangers.

Professor, thought Zordon quickly, let us try something… unorthodox. I ask that you control our
body and continue repairs, while I take full control of our mind and do what I can to battle the Dark
Dimension.

Zordon felt Bill’s amusement. I feel like a student again. Give me the mindless tasks? I am
amenable to this. After tonight, I believe my mind could use a break.

Zordon tried to conceal his nerves. They were entering unfamiliar territory now. Let us hope this
works, he thought before he could help himself.

That’s the spirit, thought Bill. So, which zord should I power up next? The Green Crocodile?

No, thought Zordon. Jack’s battle will lead him elsewhere. Focus your – our – energies on the Blue
Halcyon.

Chapter 2 – Jack

His suit kept him calm. At least, he assumed it was the suit. There was no other explanation for how
Jack wasn’t totally freaking out right now. He had never been a fan of heights. He had supposed that this was why his Ranger power granted him control over rock – there was nothing like the feeling of solid ground under your feet. Yet now he hung several stories in the air, from a machine made of light piloted by a college-age pre-med student. Every surviving citizen of Cedar Grove stood below them, surrounded by mantis-like mudmen with assault rifles trained directly on Jack.

Worst of all, Ewan was nowhere to be found, and April and Jess stood as hostages on the stage with Rita and Goldar… along with Jack’s parents. As Jack’s eyes met with hers, Rita raised her staff and grinned.

*Looks like Rita’s over our little surprise,* thought Jack.

*Time to end this,* thought Will.

Will’s light focused on the mudmen’s guns, heating them until they practically melted in the monsters’ claws. As they lost their guns, the mudmen extended pairs of thin, insect-like wings. They crouched, ready to leap into the air and stop the advancing Rangers.

The White Lion pressed forward. “Rita Repulsa!” said Will, his voice magnified by his zord’s power. “We are the Power Rangers, Guardians of this planet and all that you threaten! You will return our friends to us, take your forces, and leave our planet! This doesn’t have to end in violence!”

As if the humans below weren’t already running, now must of them broke into full-on sprints to leave the Square. Others tried to pick up the mudmen’s dropped guns as they ran past, but they only burned their hands.

Instead, the citizens of Cedar Grove streamed toward the alleys and roads that would take them out of the Square. Several mudmen leapt to block the exits.

But Rita held up a hand.

“Let them go,” she said, clearly amused. “They are almost as worthless as these pathetic teenagers Zordon chose to try to stop me.” Uncertainly, the mudmen stepped aside, and citizens began to flee the Square in droves. Jack and Will glanced at each other, uncertain thoughts streaming between their minds. Then Rita laughed. “Putties! I said you may let them go… but only if they can get past you.”

The mudmen near the exits snarled and leapt into the groups of terrified citizens. They grabbed people, shoved them back. A few mudmen landed killing blows before Jack or Will could react. Jack watched, horror-struck, as a mudman landed between a young woman and an alley, grabbed her with its two lower arms, and pulled her torso off her waist with its two upper arms.

“We have to help them!” Jack shouted.

*We have to save the girls first, thought Will, and find Ewan. We can’t do this alone. That’s our priority.*

Jack forced his attention away from the mudmen blocking exits from the Square. *How can we call ourselves Guardians of this city?* he wondered.

*We have to make the hard choices,* answered Will. *We’re the only ones who can. You ready?*

*We’re already wasting time,* thought Jack. He leapt from the Lion’s shoulder. In mid-air, he raised tombs of rock around as many mudmen as he could. *I have to get to the girls,* he thought. *But that*
doesn’t mean I can’t help people along the way. He pulled jagged spikes of rock from the sides of buildings that pierced the heads of mudmen blocking alleys. They fell to dust, and humans ducked under the spikes to finally escape this nightmare Square.

Jack landed. Immediately, he manipulated the rock below so that it catapulted him high into the air, leaving a small angled pillar in his wake. If all went well, Jack would soon land near the stage. He could see Goldar hauling Jess and April down the stairs and toward a gap between buildings. Jack didn’t know why Goldar didn’t just teleport away, but he also knew when to not ask questions.

When he glanced back at the stage itself, Rito and his parents were missing. Rita stood alone, swinging her staff around in a rhythmic pattern. I have a bad feeling about this, Jack thought.

The Lion charged forward and almost immediately slammed headfirst into a patch of black that had formed in the sky. Jack felt Will’s surprise, and he also felt, through Will’s suit, a hard, metal surface. A dark mass pushed through a black portal in front of the White Lion. It was long, and sleek. Cannons lined its deck, each one manned by several mudmen who stood dwarfed by the sheer magnitude of the machine.

“You brought your heavy artillery,” Rita cooed from the stage. “Now I bring mine.”

The battleship’s cannons opened fire. The Lion roared and stood back on its hind legs, swiping away the blasts with its front paws. When it roared, it sent a beam of pure light ripping across the Square, but the battleship took to the skies and dodged the shot with surprising agility.

Jack forced himself to focus ahead as he soared through the air, but now more battleships fell through black portals and opened fire on the Lion, on him, on the Square below. Blasts sent body parts flying in all directions, and more than a few shells narrowly missed Jack. He watched a ship directly in front of him as it took aim. The mudmen on the deck pointed right at him. The cannon swiveled, fired.

A massive shell rocketed straight at him as he soared over the ship. Instinctively, he swung his hammer, and the head connected with the shell. The shot deflected to the side and continued on a new path straight into the side of the first battleship that had come through. Jack had little time to celebrate, however; in deflecting the shot, physics had altered his leap’s path so that he now fell straight toward the ship that had fired upon him. He landed hard on its deck and rolled to help break his fall. He came out of the roll surrounded by an entire ship’s worth of mudmen. Their insect carapaces glinted in the morning light. Their faces glowed with the inner fire so characteristic of Rita’s nasty minions. As Jack crouched, and more ships of different shapes and sizes poured into the air around him, he analyzed the situation.

This ship looked fairly modern. World War II battleship of some kind, perhaps. To his left, a portal opened and an eighteenth-century man o’ war sailed into the skies with dark sails and a crew of mudmen. Jack hoped that at least one of them wore an eyepatch. He dared a glance around. Every ship in the sky was of a human design, but with Dark Dimension modifications.

Ghosts of wars past, he mused as he stood up, holding his hammer before him in a defensive stance. Dozens of mudmen crowded the deck of his ship. He was fully surrounded. Rita wages war on humans with their own nightmares. No, Jack. You’re distracting yourself. Focus! You have to get off this ship and get to Goldar. He felt his ship begin to rise. A beam of light ripped through the air. The dark man o’ war exploded into golden dust. Jack wanted to ask Will for help, but Will was already helping: he fought Rita’s entire armada alone, while Jack had to only deal with this one ship.

Strength, Jack, he told himself. Strength isn’t just doing things by yourself. It’s about trusting your friends to do their part.
The mudmen before him parted, and a particularly scarred mudman strode through the crowd. The left side of his face was sliced with deep, old wounds, the fire in those eyes dimmed, but there was no mistaking from his countenance that this was the ship’s captain. It barked something at Jack, but his suit’s many powers did not include language interpretation.

“Sorry,” said Jack, “I don’t have time for you. But you know what kind of time I’ve got? HAMMER TIME!” He swung his hammer straight down and into the metal deck. He felt the metal crack, and he used his powers to take hold of the crack and rip it wide open. The ship broke apart below him. He fell through the deck, along with most of the mudmen.

But as Jack fell through, he forced the metal back together above him, pinching mudmen in half, closing the barrels of the deck cannons, collapsing hallways, everything he could think of doing. He entered open air and was surprised at how high up he was. He had felt the ship ascending while he stood on the deck, but he didn’t realize that it had climbed quite so high. The Square stood miles below him, and the dizzying height terrified him, so he turned over in the air and watched the battleship above as he fell back-first.

The ship lurched to the side as smoke billowed heavily from its deck. A few mudmen tried to fly away, but Jack reached into the metal of the deck and pulled it outward, sending a dozen thin spikes out to impale any mudmen who tried to escape. He turned all of the deck cannons until they pointed at the ship and let them open fire on each other. Those with barrels that he had closed simply exploded, but all the others ripped holes in the ship until one lucky shot found the munitions bay. The ship exploded in a mighty ball of fire and golden dust that propelled Jack straight down toward the Square at an alarming rate.

Jack tumbled over himself for what felt like an eternity until his suit helped right his fall. It turned him so that he faced down like a skydiver, which he supposed he now was. But without a parachute, he thought bitterly. As the Square rose up to meet him, though, another dark ship intercepted his path. He reached forward with his mind. This ship was an old Spanish galleon, mostly made of wood, but still with metal cannons. He ripped the cannons from the mudmen’s grasps and fired shots into the captain’s cabin, the masts, the pilot’s wheel. Flecks of black wood littered the air, but still the ship did not go down. Jack turned his body into a dive and held his hammer out before him, praying that this actually worked. Splatting on the deck of an ancient ghost ship was not how he preferred to die.

He exploded straight through the ship like a bullet, his suit mitigating any damage he would have otherwise suffered. Jack blasted out of the ship’s belly in a shower of golden dust, now just a few hundred feet above the Square.

He tried to calm his nerves. Though war still raged all around him, he and Will weren’t faring as poorly as he had expected. Jumping across the Square was a bad idea, he thought. I am the Ranger of stone. He thought of the crocodile, the animal which represented the Green Ranger’s Strength. He thought of how the reptiles stayed just below the surface of the water before striking at their prey. I must be like the crocodile.

In all the confusion, Jack had lost track of Goldar and the girls. Now, they were nowhere to be seen. Jack continued his headfirst dive straight at the ground. I really hope this works, he thought. One hundred feet, fifty feet, ten feet. He hit the ground… and kept going. Suddenly he understood what Ewan and April must have felt like in their diving competitions. The earth simply swallowed him up and let him pass into it like it was water. He could feel the vibrations of the war raging above. He felt the light, rapid footsteps of humans running, the angered stomps of the mudmen. He felt a behemoth of a creature crashing through a nearby building as well as an agile little thing scaling the building’s exterior. That must be Squatt and Baboo, but what are they doing? Even as Jack
tracked them, they reached a high floor of a nearby skyscraper, where something exploded and sent them both flying out into the Square below.

He felt heavy footsteps dragging two struggling people behind it. Goldar, he thought. Jack manipulated the rock around him so that it pushed him toward Goldar, though he stayed below the surface the whole time. Jack felt Will get hit by another volley of cannon fire, and he felt the rumble overhead as several shots missed the Lion and crashed into the Square, killing several humans who were still trying to flee to safety. *They need cover or they’ll all die,* thought Jack. *Will, I have an idea. I need some of your light.*

You... what?

Jack shared his idea through pictures instead of words. Will quickly understood and prepared to fire a light blast at Jack’s command.

Jack stopped his odd swim under the Square and concentrated on every detail around him. For this to work, he had to understand the difference between mudman and human, predator and prey. He also had to make sure he didn’t destroy any part of the city by accident or bring a building down on top of those he was trying to save. He forced himself to ignore the Lion’s battle raging directly above him, though the sound was almost deafening.

Pushing his Ranger abilities to the limit, he manipulated the ground below every human he could sense in the Square and dropped them into pockets below the surface. He closed the holes after each human fell through, just as he had done with the battleship in the air, to prevent mudmen from coming down after them. In the new darkness, Jack created a makeshift maze of interconnecting tunnels. Here and there he allowed small air holes to open to the Square so that people didn’t suffocate.

Now, Jack thought to Will.

The White Lion fired a volley of light into the ground, where Jack had woven rich veins of crystal that led through all of his new tunnels. Will’s light bounced through the crystal and stayed there, lighting the tunnels like exit lights in an airplane. The light streams would lead Cedar Grove’s civilians to safety, or at least Jack hoped they would. At the edges of his powers, he tilted the tunnels upward so that they led into buildings, quiet alleys, anywhere he felt no dark presence. With the tunnels completed, Jack slumped, exhausted.

*That looked so weird,* thought Will. He shared what he had seen from the surface: hundreds of terrified humans screaming as small holes in the ground swallowed them up, leaving dozens of mudmen alone and scratching their heads.

Jack tried not to laugh. *Just clearing the way,* he thought. *You don’t have to hold back anymore.*

Nice going. I lost sight of Goldar though.

Jack turned himself in the rock. It was a feeling he was sure he would never get used to. *I feel them,* he thought.

Diving lower so that he didn’t disturb the tunnels he had just made, Jack propelled himself through rock and dirt. He could feel the vibrations of conversations in the tunnels as survivors struggled to make sense of what had just happened to them. He was thankful for Will’s light; it gave off a warmth that ran deeper than just literally providing a way to see in the darkness. Jack could hear people saying that they trusted it and that it just *felt* right. If Jack had been alone, he’d have only dropped these people into pitch black. *This is why Zordon created so many Rangers,* he thought.
Our powers help strengthen each other.

On the surface, Jack could feel Goldar dragging the girls down a back alley. The girls put up quite the fight, but without their powers Jack knew that there was no way they’d be able to escape. Perhaps being that close to Rita’s forces is preventing them from transforming, he thought. Or maybe they’re gagged and can’t say their word? I wish we could contact Zordon; he’d know why the girls haven’t summoned their powers.

Goldar monster wasn’t alone; a small escort of mudmen traveled with him. They wouldn’t be a match for the new Green Ranger, even if the tunnel stunt had left him drained of much of his power. Jack thought back to the lake cliffs, when Rita had first appeared and Goldar had almost killed them all. Zordon’s medical intervention had saved Jack’s life after Goldar had punched his face in.

Now, it was time to return the favor.

Jack threw his hammer out of the ground ahead of him. It slammed into a mudman’s face and ricocheted away. Jack himself leapt from the ground, caught the hammer, and brought it down on top of another mudman. In one swift move he spun, reached to his hip, drew his pistol, and fired three quick shots. Two mudmen went down, but the third had only suffered a glancing blow. It charged at Jack, who tried to pull up a rocky spike but didn’t have enough power. He dodged one, two, three clawed punches, caught a fourth in his side, leapt over the mudman, grabbed it by the wings, and pulled. The wings came off with a crunch! as though he had just stomped on a roach. The mudman swung an arm blindly behind it, but Jack ducked under, dropped the wings, grabbed the arm, and pulled the mudman back and down. It fell sideways onto Jack’s rising knee. There was another sickening crunch as the mudman broke in half and dissolved to dust, leaving only…

“We-he-hell!” cried Rito, “the Whack-a-mole Ranger!” He held up the humans he dragged behind him. Jack’s parents were covered in mud and blood, but they were still alive. “Here to save your parents, huh? I wish I knew my parents.” He grinned as wide as his skeletal face would allow. “We’d share one hell of a family resemblance now! Heh heh heh!”

From high above, Jack heard the familiar cackle of Goldar and the low, rhythmic beating of his wings growing fainter and fainter. “Yeah,’ continued Rito,” Oldy Goldy figured you were coming, so off he went like the cute little flying monkey he is.”

“Shut the fuck up and let us go!” shouted Jack’s dad. He always did have a way with words. “And you!” Dad turned to Jack, “stop gawking and help! That’s what you’re supposed to do, innit it? Kill this asshole!”

“You tell him, hon,” said Jack’s mom. It was her go-to line when she would rather keep Dad’s anger pointed in some direction other than her own. Jack heard it every day.

“See, this is how I know my sister hates me,” said Rito. “I have to babysit the shitheads who make me look like God-damned Gandhi.”

Jack’s mind raced. The girls were more important to the mission, of course, but these were his parents. Could he really just abandon them? Rotten as they were, Jack was a Power Ranger, and these were people who needed him.

Hints of a song began to play under Jack’s thoughts. He ignored it, unsure of why it was even there. “C’mon, Greeny,” Rito was saying, “unmask and show these fine citizens who you really are. Heh heh!”

The song’s volume slowly increased. Jack made to leap onto a nearby building to pursue Goldar,
but soon he recognized the song, and he knew that it wasn’t his mind that was singing it.

“Here I am,” sang the Scorpions, “Rock you like a hurricane!” As the guitar began to shred, a yellow blur ripped through the air, headed straight for Goldar.

_Gotcha covered, Jack!_ thought Ewan. _I’ll get Goldar and the girls, you take care of Skeletor!

So that was the explosion of wind in that building earlier, Jack thought to himself. Then to Ewan he added, _Good to have you back, bud. Give Goldar hell for me._

For you, for the girls, for my mom; it’s a hell of a list, but I think I might just find the time to address each item in turn. Slowly.

_Ewan?_ thought Will. _Where the hell did you come from?_

_Goldar threw me into a skyscraper,_ Ewan answered cheerfully. _While I picked glass out of my face, I felt my Power return. Is Zordon alive or something?_

_Long story,_ thought Will. _Fill you in later._

_Too long; didn’t read. Got it. I’ll go kill Goldar and save the girls now. By the way, kickass ride, Will._

Rito groaned as the Yellow Ranger flew overhead, propelled by nothing but wind. “Is he flying by farting? I should try that…” Rito muttered.

Jack made the most of the distraction. Two jets of rock rose from the asphalt and sliced Rito’s hands clean off his wrists. Jack’s parents dropped forward, Rito’s bony hands still clinging to their hair. They both cried out, pulled the hands away, and tossed them aside before scurrying over to Jack.

“T’ook you long enough,” said Dad, his protruding belly brushing roughly against Jack’s suit as he turned to glare at Rito. “What the fuck kind of Guardian are you? This whole night that bitch has had her way with the city, and you don’t show up until it’s convenient. Vigilantism is illegal, you know. I should turn you in to the police. In fact, I’d probably be regarded as a hero – AAH!”

Two small pits opened up under Jack’s parents. They fell into the tunnels below. Jack closed the pits after them and added their little tunnels to his wider network. It was more power than he had. He slumped forward, his vision clouding. Opposite him, Rito crawled around the dark alley. He bent low, picked up one of his hands in his teeth, and jammed it against his wrist.

“This one’s my beating hand, if you know what I mean,” he grinned as he screwed his hand back on. He repeated the process with his other hand just a short distance away. Then he climbed roughly to his feet and looked at his arms. Blackened flesh pulled itself off his wrists. Jack’s parents dropped forward, Rito’s bony hands still clinging to their hair. Then he climbed roughly to his feet and looked at his arms. Blackened flesh pulled itself off his wrists.

“I’d have let those fuckers die. That much evil in a human?” He shuddered, his skeletal teeth clicking together. “The Dark Dimension ain’t got nothin’ on those two, yo.”

Jack steadied himself with his hammer. “What can I say? I’m a saint.”

_I couldn’t even bear to talk to them or tell them it’s me. No, it’s better that they think I’m dead._

“I’ve never been much for saints,” said Rito. He circled around Jack, who did the same despite the close quarters of the alley. “But I looooove martyrs!” Grinning ever wider, Rito leapt.
Chapter 3 – April

The city bounced below her with every beat of Goldar’s wings. He held her under one arm, and Jess the other, but there was no use in April trying to fight back. The spell that Rita had woven into the cut across her face still had a hold on her. She had nearly shaken it off when they were on the stage, but as soon as Goldar had touched her…

*He is part of the Dark Dimension,* she thought, *so he shares her power. If I can just get free…* Seeing the other Rangers had brought fresh life to her spirits. They could fight back again. They weren’t beaten. But Rita had stepped up her game, and Will and Jack stood no chance alone. It would take all five Rangers, and perhaps a miracle or two.

The first miracle would be getting Jess out of her funk.

She hadn’t said a word since Rita had used April to verbally attack her. Jess wasn’t fighting Goldar’s grasp. She wasn’t yelling obscenities. Rita needed a complicated spell to keep April in check; Jess had only required words, humanity’s oldest form of magic.

Rita’s spell hadn’t been able to stop April’s unique vision, though. She still saw the world through the mystical lens which Zordon had provided her when she had entered the Dark Dimension. She saw the demon lying under the surface of Goldar’s golden armor. She saw the blaze of light battling the darkness in the Square behind her. She saw her own self, a growing swell of ocean tide, preparing to break. And she saw Jess, a flame so dim it was almost impossible to see next to the fiery might of Goldar.

*Jess,* April thought. She knew her thought had traveled beyond her own mind. Her Ranger powers were back, though she couldn’t transform while Goldar held her. At her name, Jess’ inner spark retreated deeper into herself. *Jess,* April tried again, *I know you can hear me. Please, you must know that what I said wasn’t me. Rita forced me to say those words.*

*Get out of my head,* Jess thought.

April couldn’t help but be encouraged. Some reaction was better than nothing at all. *Jess, you know I don’t think you’re anything less than amazing. What Rita made me say was horrible. She wanted to undo you by making me say the worst thing she could think to say to you.*

*The worst thing Rita could think to have you say to me?* Jess thought. Even in her mind’s voice, the bitterness was unmistakable. *Please. It’s not the first time I’ve heard it. You understand? Rita’s worst – that I’m “not a woman” or that I’ll “always hit on you” if we’re friends – it’s still not as bad as what I’ve heard out in the real world. I knew what Rita was doing. I knew that wasn’t really you talking. That’s not what bothers me. What bothers me is that the worst the Dark Dimension could throw my way was not as bad as what I’ve already seen. It made me think: do I really want to save this world? Why save people when they hate me for what I am?*

*Zordon –*

*Zordon wanted us to believe that Rita’s some being of pure evil, but she’s not. She’s just like the rest of us. Given the opportunity… I’m not sure I’d do any different than what she’s doing now. That’s what terrifies me. And I think she knew that when she made you say those things.*

Her mind retreated back into itself. April was stunned to silence. She wished that she knew Jess better. She was reminded again that, of the five Rangers, she was the newcomer, the only one who
didn’t know everyone else before tonight. She tried to think to Jack, but she felt Goldar’s darkness push itself onto the thought, prevent it from going more than just a few feet away. Without being in her Ranger form, there was no way her thoughts could reach all the way to the Green Ranger far below them.

Unbidden, some rock and roll song began to play in her mind. She didn’t know the tune, but she knew the mind behind it. Goldar spun in the air, the angles of his armor digging roughly into April’s ribs. The Yellow Ranger rocketed through the sky after them, his helmet a beautiful play of golden feathers and his feet pushing pure air behind him. At the sight of him, Goldar laughed.

“Well hey there! he thought cheerfully. Thanks for the help. Now why don’t you and Jess transform and stick that trident of yours up Goldar’s pussy for me?

April explained more in feelings than words. She shared her impressions of the events of the Square, including the part where Goldar had grabbed Ewan and thrown him into a nearby skyscraper. This she shared with a lingering feeling of confusion, as if to say “how in the hell did you survive that?”

She could feel the amusement in his response. He showed her his tumble through the air and a sudden burst of pressurized air from his palms just before he hit the window. The shattered glass still cut him up pretty good, but he had survived. As he sat in some abandoned office space and collected himself, he could sense that Zordon was still alive. Then he saw the White Lion out the window, and he knew that the fight wasn’t over. From there, it had just been a matter of feeling Jack’s pursuit of Goldar, and voila! Here they were.

April was impressed by Ewan’s change of mood. Hardly an hour ago he had almost been as down as Jess was now. Perhaps he, like April, had realized that there would be time for mourning later.

Ewan quickly gained ground on Goldar, who was much slower in the air thanks to the extra weight of the girls. But I swear it’s not ‘cause I think you’re fat or anything, Ewan thought.

April felt Ewan’s desire to fire an arrow right between Goldar’s wings, but of course he wouldn’t dare risk hitting one of the Rangers. He and April tried to tease out a plan, but with neither of the girls able to help, they weren’t sure how to approach this rescue. The slightest misstep could result in any number of bad outcomes.

It didn’t help that Ewan’s flight was draining his power, and quickly. He tried to hide it, but the pursuit was using up what little energy his suit had. April suspected that, though Zordon lived, he was not up to full strength, and so neither were the Rangers. Rita had stacked the odds so heavily in her favor that one may have wondered why the Rangers even bothered to try.

Ewan put on an extra burst of speed and flew closer. Soon, he could almost reach out and grab Goldar. In response, the monster began kicking fireballs blindly behind him, forcing Ewan to dodge and spin through the air. Goldar stayed low to the ground, narrowly missing burned out cars and floating corpses as he went. The streets were still flooded from the heavy rain. April tried to reach into the water and move it, but without her Ranger’s suit it was no use.
“Your friend is spirited, I’ll give him that,” said Goldar. He banked around a McDonald’s sign, arched into a huge pillar of smoke rising from the husk of the restaurant, and shot straight up, flapping hard to gain altitude while staying inside the smoke. April felt Ewan’s elation – the higher Goldar went, the more he entered Ewan’s element, so to speak – but then Goldar laughed again. “Rita wants all of you, but she only needs one alive. Instead of trying to out-fly him, let’s see him deal with… this!” Goldar raised his arms. April felt gravity shift as Goldar continued to rise and the girls did not.

She and Jess were in freefall.

April’s first thought was that of freedom. Out of Goldar’s grasp, she was her own woman again, free of the Dark Dimension. She bent her limbs experimentally, and they responded. She suspected that Rita hadn’t told Goldar everything about how the spell worked. Good.

Ewan surged forward, and April could feel his intention: catch both girls. He was fast enough… probably. He could do it, or so he hoped. The extra burst of speed put even more strain on his limited power. He started for April, but as she tumbled, she could see the street below.

And it was flooded with water.

_Catch her!_ she thought to Ewan. _Don’t worry about me._

Ewan didn’t even hesitate. His course altered toward Jess. _He’s so different from yesterday,_ April thought.

She righted her fall with the expertise of a seasoned diver. The street rose to meet her. She’d hit in seconds. Behind her, Ewan caught Jess and started to pull up.

“Harmony!” April cried. At the same time, a fireball blasted Ewan in the back. He dropped Jess just as April disappeared into the floodwaters.

April screamed, releasing a flurry of bubbles and stirring her surroundings. The floodwater formed a whirlpool around her, swirling faster and faster as Rita’s foul spell was drawn out. Carefully, April dialyzed herself, pulling her own blood out of the wound on her face, through the purifying waters, and back into her veins. Only once this was complete did she allow her transformation to continue. Water clung to her body, hardened to ice, and formed her new armor. Her heart surged with blood that she could control at will. A helmet shimmered over her face and allowed her to breathe again. Clear visions from Will, Jack, and Ewan filtered into her own sight as one by one her suit’s functions came fully online. With a final surge of power, she grabbed the water in the street all around her and flung it into the atmosphere where it belonged, leaving the street just as dry as it should be on a July morning.

She spun, looking in all directions. Ewan walked toward her, an arm reached behind him to feel where the fireball had hit his back. Smoke curled lightly from his suit.

“I had her,” he groaned. “I fucking had her…”

April understood the words Ewan didn’t say. Goldar had escaped, and he had taken Jess with him.

**Chapter 4 – Will**
Had anyone asked, Will wasn’t so sure that he’d be able to explain what it was like to pilot a Power Ranger zord. Exhilarating. Terrifying. Overwhelming. He had become a Lion eight stories tall. He had become light itself.

This wasn’t a weapon he wielded. It was a weapon he became.

His suit translated his thoughts into his zord’s actions. When he wanted to step forward, the Lion placed one huge paw in front of the other. When he saw a dark battleship push itself through a portal, he thought, “Shoot it down,” and his zord let loose a beam of white light from its mouth with a mighty roar. Will was human, and Ranger, and Lion, all in one.

That didn’t stop the pain, though.

Rita’s forces had long since recovered from the surprise of the White Lion, and they were fighting back. Hard. Jack had removed all of the civilians from the Square, and Will had contained the fight as long as he could so that the people could flee through the tunnels, but now the ships blacked out the sky and spread across the city. Will wished that he could talk with Zordon, but he knew that Zordon and Professor Cranston were waiting on getting communications back up while they fought to restore power to the Rangers and their zords.

A volley of cannonballs punched along the Lion’s back and drove its stomach into the dirt. Will felt each hit drum down his spine. The Lion leapt to its feet and charged forward to avoid a fresh volley. More ships circled overhead. They looked like they were trying to contain the Lion within the Square. Will knew that he had to get out.

I need light.

His mind reached for the sunrise, beyond the ships. A solid beam tore a hole through the blanket of ships and landed at the Lion’s feet. The zord leapt up the light like a housecat up a tree, sending blasts left and right as he raced eastward to the sun. Will called forth another beam, and another and another, bending them at different angles around him so that he stayed roughly near the Square. He began jumping between them as the ships launched their counterattack. He dodged, ever rising, but for every ship he shot down, three more tumbled through portals to take its place. This was a battle of numbers that he simply would not win.

While the Lion climbed, Will chanced a scan of the Square below. Rita had vanished in the confusion; Will could still sense the disruption in space where she had teleported away. We forced her hand, but still she uses her minions to do her dirty work, Will thought. We will have to make her truly desperate before she’ll fight us herself.

The Lion’s paw met open space where there should have been light. It tumbled over itself and began to fall, and in the confusion Will realized that Rita’s ships had used their large numbers to block his beam by throwing themselves between him and the sun. He called down another sunbeam and landed with a jarring thud, but the Lion had hardly gone three steps before Rita’s ships sacrificed themselves and eliminated it as well. The Lion leapt just as the light disappeared. It landed atop the deck of a ship, where Will paused to assess his next move. One particularly large battleship fired a railgun that would have ripped a hole straight through the zord. Will dodged, and instead the shot punched a hole clean through the ship he stood upon, crumpling it to dust before he could jump again. Will was forced back to the ground, separated from the sun, his greatest source of strength.

But then the ships stopped firing. Will watched them uneasily. He fired a few light blasts and disintegrated a number of ships, but more poured through portals, their guns trained on the White Lion but their captains issuing no order. Clearly they were waiting on something. Or someone.

A shadow of something darker flashed among the ships. Will could never see it; the shadow danced at the edge of his vision, never appearing when he focused on where it had been. He could feel a
dark presence and knew that something bad was coming, and he had a feeling that he knew what it was.

Then, the shadow revealed itself.

Even in the bright city lights, the Black Dragon zord was nothing but void, a huge patch of starless space cutting through the dark sky. Its eyes were little twin galaxies above a mouth that glowed purple with a dark fire that ached to blast the White Lion straight to hell.

The ships above remained fixed on the White Lion, though Will noticed a number of the mudmen aboard the ships eyeing the Black Dragon suspiciously, as though they still didn’t trust this Ranger-turned-evil.

The Black Dragon glided down to land at the other end of the Square, several hundred meters away from the Lion. “Hello, son!” Master Tom said cheerfully through the zords’ comlinks.

“Master, it doesn’t have to be this way,” answered Will. He hoped his voice wasn’t shaking. He was afraid that it was, despite his best efforts.

“You’re right!” The Black Dragon glanced skyward, as if daring the Lion to do the same. “You have an entire civilization’s worth of guns pointed right at your back. All I have to do is say the word, and your zord’s gone. If you come with me, I can promise your safety.”

He wasn’t wrong, at least about the gun part. “As long as the Dark Dimension’s controlling you,” said Will, “you can’t promise anything.” Here and there, stray beams of sunlight drifted through the swarm of battleships and alighted on the Lion. It invigorated Will. Sunlight pulsed through his body, through the zord. It gave him strength and cleared his mind.

“I can promise that you’ll die if I tell them to shoot.”

Will scanned the ships above and noticed something interesting. He hoped that the scan wasn’t wrong. He formed a thought, and the Lion began to charge up its power, quietly pulling what it could from street lights and the city’s power grid.

“If I come with you,” Will stalled, “then where would we go?”

“Rita’s palace first, of course. The White Ranger may be incorruptible as far as the Dark Dimension is concerned, but I know what you’ll do for family.” Master Tom said the last word with such vicious glee that Will shuddered. “My Mistress is certain that she can convince you to join her side. In fact, she’d stake her life on it… and Jack’s, and Ewan’s, and Jess’, and April’s. Even mine. Everyone can live, if you give yourself up.”

“Goldar already played that card. I traded him my Power coin, and he gave me back Ewan’s body but not his mind. It was a trick.”

“And did you not also trick? You didn’t need that coin to transform. Do not talk to us about tricks, Will.”

The Lion still needed to charge. Just a little longer. Just a few more moments of stalling.

All this talk of tricks reminded Will of a question that had nagged him. “Who is Kim?” The last time they had seen Master Tom face to face, he couldn’t stop talking about someone named Kim and how the Rangers had beaten her senseless. It had to be an illusion of Rita’s; Will certainly didn’t remember beating up some innocent woman.
Sure enough, Will felt the shift in Tom’s emotions: a flash of anger… and a flood of regret. “I said no tricks,” Tom growled.

“Who is Kim?” Will repeated. Rita was manipulating Master Tom with this name. Whoever Kim was, she was the key to accessing whatever part of Master Tom that was still trapped inside the Black Ranger.

Tom was silent for a moment, and then he chuckled. “You know, it’s funny that you should ask. After all, you were the one responsible for me losing her.”

For a moment, Will forgot about the White Lion’s power charging. “What are you talking about?”

“Think about it, Will! I had a life before you were forced on me. I had a plan! Then your parents went and got themselves killed, and suddenly I was stuck with you! That tournament we had gone to that night: did you know that that was going to be my last one? I was days away from moving. I had finally gotten up the nerve to chase the girl I’ve loved since fucking high school, and instead I have some snot-nosed loser of a kid dumped on me. You weren’t the only one to lose something that night. I lost my life because of you… but now Rita’s going to help me get it back. When this is all over, Kim will be mine. I’ll find her. I’ll get back the life that you stole from me.”

Despite himself, Will wondered if there was any truth in what Master Tom had said. Part of him suspected so; after all, the best lies always contained a bit of truth. He knew that Tom had sacrificed much to adopt him, that much was certainly true, but the man had never, in all these years, expressed the slightest bit of regret over what he had done. He had been a good, loving father, a perfect model of the kind of man Will wanted to be. Had he really kept such a secret from Will? It wasn’t impossible.

But right now, it also didn’t matter. The Lion had finished charging.

“You’re right about one thing,” said Will. “There’s almost nothing I wouldn’t do for family. Even this!”

Will let loose an explosion of light so powerful that, to anyone nearby, it may have looked like someone had nuked the middle of Cedar Grove. The Black Dragon screeched and covered itself with its wings, disappearing under the brilliance of the white blast. The explosion washed over the black ships above before a single one could fire a shot, and one by one they disintegrated to dust. Will’s scan had been right: the ships had flown too close together – presumably to block Will from fleeing the Dragon – so now none of them had room to escape the explosion.

Will fell to one knee, and the Lion slumped forward on a leg that would no longer support it. His legs began to flicker even as morning light flooded back into the city, refracting quite beautifully in the golden dust shower that used to be the Dark Dimension armada. Not every ship had been destroyed, however, and even now more portals were opening.

But it was a start.

The Lion’s legs buckled, and Will tumbled right out of the zord as it flickered and disappeared. He fell headfirst into the Square, landing hard on his back and rolling painfully back up to his feet. His head swam; using that much power at once had taken a heavy toll. But his heart was glad: his power surge had destroyed only creatures of the Dark Dimension; the buildings around him looked none the worse for wear. Central Square stood peaceful and quiet, as though Will stood alone in that quiet hour before business men and women arrived for work.

The Black Dragon, he noticed with gnawing uncertainty, was nowhere to be seen.
Far outside of the Square, he felt Jack and Ewan in the same precarious positions. They had their Ranger powers back, but they were nowhere near full capacity, and they, too, had already overexerted themselves against their foes. Even as Will watched, Ewan caught Jess, dropped her as Goldar blasted him with fire, fell beneath the floodwaters, and reappeared to find a new Blue Ranger staring at him. April had transformed, but Goldar had teleported away with Jess. *Zordon had told me that he would prevent Goldar from teleporting,* Will recalled. *Why did he let him go?*

*The hell was that?* Ewan thought to Will. *You okay, boss? Looked like you exploded.*

*I did, but I’m fine,* answered Will. *Good to have you back, April.*

*Good to be back,* she thought.

*First the Void Spider, now this,* thought Ewan. *Are you ever going to stop sacrificing yourself to take down a few stupid assholes?*

*No.* Will turned and faced the rising sun, letting its warmth invigorate him. Now he understood how April felt in the rain, or Jess near a fire: this was his element. They had fought in darkness all this time, but now, surrounded by light, he felt powerful.

*Ewan and I want to go after Jess,* said April. *Goldar took her to Rita’s palace.*

*I know,* thought Will. He felt a thought come from Jack, who was losing his duel with Rito. The big monster performed a deft sweep up with his fire-sword that took Jack’s hammer right out of his hands. *Do it, Jack,* thought Will. Jack sent a thought of recognition and tried to calm his nerves. What Jack was about to do was hardly short of suicide. Rito would either capture him and take him to Rita’s Palace… or kill him. *Ewan, April. Jack’s going after Jess. I need you both in the air. These ships are too much for me.*

*My zord’s not ready yet,* thought Ewan.

*Mine is,* thought April.

*Call it in and start wrecking the ships I didn’t take down. Ewan, fly support for her, but be ready to jump to me in case Squatt and Baboo show up. Plus, a smaller target means bigger frustration for the mudmen.*

*One thing I’ve never been called is ‘small,’ if you know what I mean,* thought Ewan. *But hell I’ll go with it, just this once. What about you, boss?*

The Black Dragon zord slammed down in front of Will, sending shockwaves through the entire city. A light blazed from the top of the Dragon’s head, and the Black Ranger stepped out. He leapt into the Square, landing just feet away from Will. Tom removed his helmet. Will did the same.

*I’ll be right here,* thought Will.

“Oh that was good!” said Master Tom. “I didn’t even notice that you were charging! You had me talking, and the street lights were dimming, and… well, you really are a tricky one, Will. For being the Ranger of Honor, you are one devious son of a bitch. By the way, love what you guys did with the new suits. Thanks for including me in the upgrade.” Master Tom laughed as he tossed his shiny new helmet behind him. It fell into a shadow and disappeared.

“My Honor keeps me focused on what is good,” said Will. “It’s something I learned from the best man I ever met, but what would you know of him? There’s nothing left in there but Dark Dimension. You’re just a mindless puppet, a shell of a human filled with nothing but darkness and
“You know that’s a lie,” he said, to Will’s secret relief. “She let me live. She gave me the Black Ranger powers and showed me the truth. Zordon has lorded over this planet for too long. It’s past time humanity rose up against him and fought for themselves! Think about it! Rita is a human being, and she has lived for over ten-thousand years. Now she fights against a member of the most advanced civilization in the universe, and she’s winning! She is an inspiration. How could you not want to follow her?”

Will started to answer, but his Power had other ideas. His mind fell through time and space and landed in a memory of the old White Ranger.

The scene felt eerily similar to Cedar Grove. The entire village had burned to the ground. Smoke fluttered from a few hollowed-out husks that may have once been houses. A large pile of bodies burned at the far end of the street, which flowed with dark red blood that nearly rose above his ankles. A thin veneer of golden dust lay over the pool of blood, as though someone had tried to cover horror with beauty.

The White Ranger stood with his arms crossed, the other Rangers behind him. Rita huddled over a body, the hood of her Black Ranger suit pulled back to expose her face. An attractive young man was cradled in her arms. His chest was a massive dark stain of mottled blood.

“We had to,” the White Ranger said. “Don’t you understand? This was a tactical necessity.”

“Tactical necessity!?” Rita blurted. Tears streamed from her yellow cat-eyes as she glared at the White Ranger. “His name was Dreadwing, you heartless machine! He wasn’t a tactical necessity, he…”

“Was your lover, yes I know.” The White Ranger sounded almost bored, bureaucratic, like someone dealing with an insurance claim. “But the sacrifice of this village was necessary. Zordon’s analysis was correct: the Dark Dimension corrupted the nearby wildlife, as we had suspected, and by letting this village be attacked, we were able to track and understand what we are dealing with. With the creatures distracted, we were able to flank them and slay that dragon with relative ease. The deaths of these people prevented ours, Rita. Ours and thousands of others.”

“You... no, we… used them as bait,” said Rita.

“A noble sacrifice for the greater good,” said the White Ranger.

“For the greater good…” The White Ranger saw the thoughts that came from Rita – her finding the body of Dreadwing atop the nearby volcano, next to the slain dragon which the Yellow Ranger had shot down just moments before. He felt Rita’s desire for a child with this man, and he saw Rita’s argument with Zordon, who had forbade her from conceiving. A Ranger cannot have familial ties, Zordon had said. It makes her vulnerable to the enemy. This is why you must never even reveal that you are a Power Ranger. No one can know your secret, or they will use it to destroy you. The White Ranger felt Rita’s utter isolation. They had lived for centuries, after all. Their old families had all died or moved on without them, leaving them only each other for company. But the team had grown tired of each other. That many hundreds of years with five other humans, an interdimensional being, and a psychopathic robot were enough to drive anyone mad with desire for other company. Then Rita had found this brave warrior, had loved him, considered starting a new family with him…

But he had been in the wrong place at the wrong time.
“Zordon… wanted him dead,” Rita whispered. “Because he got too close to me. Zordon engineered this. This was his doing.”

There was no arguing with Rita when she was like this. The Dark Dimension had corrupted its prey for decades. The beasts were too dangerous for the Rangers to attack without some kind of plan. They had to see the beasts in action, understand how they moved. Rita knew that as well as the others did, so why was she so upset? This village had to be destroyed. Dreadwing had simply been collateral damage.

The White Ranger saw Rita’s thoughts, but he did not understand them. None of them did. In this one moment, Rita’s isolation had become complete.

And suddenly, Will was himself again.

Jack, Ewan, and April had seen his vision. No one knew what to think.


Will’s mind raced with the memory of his vision and the conflicted thoughts of the other Rangers. Zordon’s decision had led to Rita’s downfall. She had found someone to love after centuries, and in an instant she had lost everything. Ewan recalled a vision of his own, where Serket, the old Yellow Ranger, had witnessed Rita raise Dreadwing from the dead. His body became possessed by the dark energy of the dragon which had slain him, and Dreadwing had become Goldar.

Rita had opened herself to the Dark Dimension for love, and it had consumed her. She had lost herself for the promise of a family.

Master Tom still held out his hand. Will grabbed it, and he used the touch to transfer all his thoughts – the vision, Rita’s brokenness, Will’s own love for his adopted father – over to the Black Ranger. Master Tom seized as Will flooded his mind. He fought it, tried to push the thoughts back to Will, tried to pull his hand away, but the White Ranger had the element of surprise. Will pushed with all his might and held Tom’s hand in an iron grip. Master Tom’s mouth opened in a soundless scream, and he fell to his knees, panting. Will stepped back.

“Your master is broken,” said Will. “Just as broken as all of us. But her anger is misguided. We can free her from the Dark Dimension, but we need your help.”

Tom remained on his knees. Wisps of smoke curled from his glove where Will had touched him.

As much as I like where you’re going with this, thought Ewan, I don’t think we’re going to win with sunshine and happy feelings.

My power literally is sunshine, Will reminded him. You saw what I saw, and you heard Rita’s speech in the Square. She – no, the Dark Dimension – fears the idea of family. Rita loved someone else, and the loss of him broke her. The Dark Dimension isolated Rita and took control over her, and it’s done the same to Master Tom. Rita and my master have made mistakes, but they aren’t the enemies: the Dark Dimension is.

I agree, thought April, but how do we fight the Dark Dimension? Ewan and I were trapped there earlier. It’s a place, not a thing. It’d be like… I don’t know… fighting the Earth itself.

I don’t know, Will admitted. There has to be some way…

Wise words from our fearless leader! Ewan said with feigned enthusiasm.
Slowly, Master Tom rose to his feet. His eyes were wild, unsure. “I…” he mumbled. He tripped and fell forward, then pulled himself up again. “I don’t…” For a moment, he sounded like his old self. Then his voice caught in his throat. A shadow darted across the ground and disappeared under his feet. He arched his back, temporarily frozen in place, and then suddenly slumped forward. Will caught him on his shoulder and heard a soft chuckle close to his ear.

“Nice try,” Tom said with a new, deeper voice that was neither his nor Rita’s, “but I have other ways of keeping my slaves in line. This one, and Rita Repulsa, and all of those other fools will obey me until they die! And believe me: this one will die.”

Master Tom’s arm bent behind him and pulled a black dagger from his shadow. He swiped, catching Will across the stomach. Will’s suit partially turned the blade, but Will still felt it bite through skin. Master Tom’s maniacal grin disappeared as his black helmet materialized over his face. “Quite the rush!” said Master Tom, his uncharacteristic bravado back in full swing. “Thank you for that stirring fantasy. Now back to business. Surrender, or die.” Master Tom laughed. “Let’s face it, buddy: sometimes the clichés really do sum it up the best! Oh and look! The news choppers are here to cover Rita’s glorious rise to power.”

As his own helmet shimmered onto his head once more, Will could see them fast approaching: a small armada of helicopters swarming the city, ignoring the black ships that parted to let them pass. The nation’s morning news was about to get the scoop of the millennia.

Chapter 5 – Kim

“Welcome back as we continue our live coverage of the truly unbelievable events unfolding within Cedar Grove. The story first broke last night, when we received reports of a possible terrorist attack by an unknown force. Unfortunately, the attackers unleashed a continuous electrical magnetic pulse that prevented any of our news equipment from broadcasting within the city. Even the United States Army reported that no satellite could survey the area before suddenly going dark. But we here at CNN are proud to report that the EMP is no longer in effect, and our news choppers have now arrived on the scene. Please be warned: the images we are about to show are extremely graphic in nature.”

Kimberly Hart had gotten up early, as she so often did, and was going through her usual routine of gymnastics stretches in her kitchen while her coffee brewed and the morning news aired.

She wasn’t stretching anymore.

She had grown up in Cedar Grove – Angel Grove, as it had once been in her youth – and many of her old friends still lived there. Or did they? She’d fallen so out of touch with everyone that she wasn’t sure anymore. Did he still live there?

The news chopper beat a steady path over flooded streets and flaming buildings, giant fissures in the earth and great piles of dark shapes that Kim hoped were not corpses. On several rooftops were scattered other dark shapes that stalked back and forth, occasionally taking pot shots at the helicopter and its rivals from other news stations. “The devastation is incredible,” the newscaster said with a somber tone. “It is almost as though the attackers – whoever they are – have learned a way to use the elements to their own advantage.” The woman’s voice cracked. “Who could do such a thing?”

As the news chopper neared Central Square, its camera focused on a pair of figures fighting in a
nearby street. The hulking person was clearly winning; even as the chopper zoomed in on the action, the larger person knocked the smaller to the ground, grabbed his shoulders, and quite suddenly erupted in flames. When the flames disappeared, both figures were gone, leaving only a dismembered leg in a green boot. Kim’s jaw dropped at seeing such a thing on live television, but the reporter pressed on.

“So far, no terrorist groups have stepped forward to claim responsibility, though several have released videos of their leaders supporting this unprecedented attack on American soil. But while the motives of the attack remain unclear, many Americans see a different reason behind the attack.”

The news feed cut briefly to a young man being interviewed on a street corner in who-knows-where. “God has sent his judgment!” said the young man. “God has punished the city for changing its name from Angel Grove!” The feed returned to live footage of the city as the voices of other people echoed this sentiment.

Then the news chopper arrived over Central Square, and Kim gasped.

A huge black creature sat on one side of the Square, which was filled with bodies and covered in a strange golden dust. As the chopper moved across the open space, the creature turned a pair of alien eyes up toward the camera with irises jet black and pupils a starry white that ran in two small vertical slits like a cat’s. Its expression was calm, almost bored. Two people, utterly dwarfed by the black creature, battled viciously in hand-to-hand combat nearby. They appeared evenly matched, their movements too fast for Kim to keep track of. It reminded her of her friends’ old martial arts tournaments, of Adam and Rocky and Jason and… These two even moved like he did, though they wore strange suits of black and white.

“The President has declared a national state of emergency,” the reporter continued. “If you have any friends or family in Cedar Grove, we ask that you do not try to contact them at this time. The Army has taken over all civilian frequencies to coordinate their counterattack as well as their evacuation of the city. At this point, we are still unsure who these attackers are, whether or not they have taken any hostages, or—”

The screen cut roughly to a beautiful face smiling pleasantly at the camera. Behind her sat a dimly-lit throne room, as though this woman was broadcasting from some unused movie set.

“Hello,” said the woman. “So sorry to interrupt, but I didn’t want your misguided news reporters to tell anything but the honest truth. My name is Rita Repulsa. I was born over ten-thousand years ago, right here on this very continent. I’m what you might call the “original” Native American.” She chuckled. “Ten-thousand years ago, I was recruited by an interdimensional being named Zordon to protect this planet in his name, and for a time, that’s what I did. I was little if not a good, obedient soldier.”

Her smile disappeared, leaving a hardened face trying to hide the immense pain behind those yellow eyes. Most would have missed it, but Kim had grown to know that look from her own mirror. “But Zordon was not a gentle master,” continued Rita. “He demanded much of his recruits, and in the end, his twisted concepts of right and wrong caused the deaths of those I loved most. He would sacrifice anything – or anyone – for his own twisted sense of justice. So I rebelled, and in the end, he sacrificed every last one of his minions to lock me away. Now, I have returned. And I need your help.”

Kim watched, entranced by this beautiful woman and the impossible tale she told. She claimed to be the terrorist leader. Her forces must be enormous to have destroyed so much of the city, so how could someone so certifiably crazy command such a following? Ten-thousand years old? That was impossible!
“I said I need your help,” Rita said again. Her gaze shifted left, to where Kim happened to be standing, and for a wild moment Kim swore that their eyes locked. Rita smiled. “There you are,” said Rita. She held her hand toward the camera. “Kimberly Hart, you will come with me.” One by one her fingers came through the screen. Kim screamed.

But when Kim’s neighbor charged through her front door a moment later, her spare key in his hand and the memory of that blood-curdling scream fresh on his mind, she was gone. Coffee boiled unused in its pot. The kitchen TV showed only static.
Chapter 1 – Ewan

“Stand back. I have no idea how this works.”

"And yet you exude such confidence," said Ewan. “Really, it’s inspiring. What’s your secret? Pantene? Grass shots?"

The Blue Ranger cast him a sideways glance. “How can you be so cheerful after everything that’s happened?”

“What? Watching my mother die, seeing my city destroyed, possibly losing all of my friends to an alien being of pure evil? Some of us would rather laugh at our sorrow instead of wallowing in it. The world’s way too dark to be taken so seriously. It’d kill me, and frankly, I rather enjoy living, don’t you?"

“But, after your mom…”

Ewan shrugged. “Do as I say, not as I do. Nobody’s perfect, princess.”

He tried not to beat himself up about losing Jess. Goldar had just gotten the drop on him. He’d done all he could, and now her rescue was in Jack’s hands. If Rito was as dumb as they thought he was, then Jack might just have a chance.

But in the meantime, the other Rangers were about to get very, very busy.

The Blue Ranger spread her arms as they stood in the empty street. Ewan marveled at the Ranger’s new look, with her jagged helmet that looked like it had been formed from pure ice and her new, gloriously form-fitting suit of blue and white that sparkled with tiny crystals. It was like Frozen’s Elsa had suddenly become a Power Ranger.

“Do you want to build a snowman?” sang Ewan.

“Shut up.”

“…It doesn’t have to be a snowman…”

The floodwaters that April had thrown into the sky began to trickle down in a light rain, then a downpour, though April stayed completely dry. Soon Ewan was drenched; he suspected that April could have kept him dry as well, and her most dastardly form of vengeance came in the form of damp armor. The rain splashed into a fine mist that surrounded the Blue Ranger, slowly taking shape around her in a breathtaking show of natural beauty, like they stood at the base of an enormous waterfall. National Geographic would kill for a shot of this, Ewan thought. He felt April’s distracted amusement. Well look at that: she does have a sense of humor!

The mist lifted into the air, taking April with it. The fuck is your zord, anyway? Ewan asked. What creature did Zordon choose to represent water? A trout? Dolphin? Please tell me your zord doesn’t just flop around. Ooooo are you a crab?

The mist grew into a great cloud rising above the city until, at last, lightning erupted within, briefly
revealing the shadow of a great bird. By the time the sound of thunder reached Ewan’s ears, the zord revealed itself.

A blue bird of water and ice shot out of the cloud and let forth a screech that drowned out the thunder. With each flap of its wings, it sent fresh branches of lightning flying in all directions. Its body was squat and fat, like a raindrop, but it had a lance of a beak that looked as though it were formed from pure, deadly ice. There was an elegance to it that commanded Ewan’s attention, just as the White Lion had.

*This feeling,* thought April. Ewan had hardly heard anyone so giddy, let alone someone as serious as April. *It’s… incredible!* The bird spun in the air, diving experimentally and pulling back up into the clouds. Lightning trailed in the zord’s wake. Snow drifted from its icy wings, disappearing before it ever touched ground.

*Woah there,* thought Ewan. *Slow down, girl. How’s a boy to keep up with… seriously, the fuck kind of bird is that? Osprey? Harrier? F-15? That’s a bird, right?*

The sheer force of the weapon she now wielded overpowered her thoughts, as though she could not believe that one person could command such a thing. April’s thoughts came in as though she was talking *past* Ewan, not to him. *I am the Halcyon, Kingfisher of ancient Greek legend. It was said that the Halcyon signifies peace, tranquility, and… Harmony.*

*I don’t see how that’s relevant.*

*It is also said that the Halcyon calmed the wind itself and brought it safely back to Greece.*

April, regaining herself and clearly amused, thought images of their shared time in the Dark Dimension. *Fuck, thought Ewan. And here I was starting to think that the Powers had just chosen randomly.* He sighed. *Guess I’ll never find out how I look in blue.*

*Now I understand why you like flying so much. Well? C’mon, Airhead. Think you can keep up?*

Grumbling, Ewan channeled his power through his legs so that the wind lifted him into the air. *So many fart jokes,* he thought. Thank God his twelve-year-old self couldn’t see him now. He’d never hear the end of it.

The Blue Halcyon dove straight through a line of black ships, leaving a trail of lightning and golden dust in her wake. The zord twisted and slung a volley of icy feathers into the belly of the ships above it, and one by one the ice shards exploded in showers of silver and gold. Storm clouds swarmed the ships, swallowed them up, and blasted them to hell with lightning.

There was no way Ewan would be able to keep up with the zord, so instead he scanned the city below to see what he could do to help. Will’s light-nuke had wiped out practically all of the ships over downtown as well as the mudmen along the ground, but it had not reached Rita’s forces in the suburbs and surrounding areas. April and Ewan would have to play mop up duty before these bastards swarmed inward to fill the power vacuum. He tried not to let exhaustion get the better of him. Flight took a lot out of him, but at this point he could either sleep later or die.

*Ewan,* April thought a moment later. *Civilians.* She thought an image of one of those tunnel exits Jack had created, just on the outskirts of downtown. A group of mudmen approached the exit, clearly intent on venturing inside and wiping out whatever people they found.

*I’m on it,* Ewan thought, and he shifted course. *Will, you still good?*

It took Will a moment to respond, which couldn’t be a good sign. *Been better,* he thought
distractedly. *Keep close. There’s still no sign of Squatt or Baboo.*

You got it, boss.

None of the mudmen heard Ewan coming, and he didn’t deem it necessary to inform them. A wind arrow ripped clean through the back of one mudman’s head and into the chest of another. The mudman spun in his direction just as Ewan’s flying foot caught one hard in its chest. Ewan channeled a blast of air through his foot that sent the mudman crashing through a nearby wall. The Ranger landed, bow in hand but too close to the mudmen to take another shot. Instead he swung the bow into a mudman’s shoulder and knocked the monster aside. Ewan spun and slung the bow over the head of the mudman behind him. He yanked, and the invisible string of wind sliced through the mudman’s carapace. Its head fell left, the rest of its body fell right.

A pincher knocked hard into Ewan’s side. His suit just barely kept a rib from breaking as he stumbled and fought to catch his breath. Ewan reached down, pulled his pistol from its holster, and tried to fire, but the mudman was too fast. It knocked Ewan’s hand sideways, and the shot went wide right. Ewan used the momentum to perform a sort of left hook with the bow still in his other hand; when the weapon connected with the mudman’s face, Ewan channeled wind through it, out the end and into the side of the mudman’s face. Its head exploded in a shower of golden dust, but just as Ewan was about to celebrate his glorious victory, something rumbled behind him. He turned. Coming down the street at an alarming speed was a black tank, complete with an angry-looking mudman poking out the top hatch.

The mudman pointed at him and began clicking frantically to the others inside the tank. The main gun swiveled round until Ewan could see all the way down its barrel. Ewan’s hand went to a pouch on his belt. He flung the pouch’s contents, and a second later a thick yellow gel fell across the barrel’s tip. *Go ahead, Ewan thought, just try and shoot me.*

But the mudman saw what had happened and clicked again. The gun powered down. Ewan swore. The mudman ducked into the tank and reappeared a second later with a small device in his hand. He pulled a pin and reached back to lob it straight at Ewan’s face.

Ewan’s suit reacted with reflexes faster than his own. He turned, planted his feet, aimed his wind bow, and fired a shot before the pin or device ever left the mudman’s hand.

The arrow pierced the mudman’s wrist, cutting the hand clean off and causing the device to fall into the tank. More frantic clicking and a mad scramble as several mudmen tried to squeeze out of the tank’s top at the same time. There was a great flash and a deep rumble as the tank exploded from within, sending shards in all directions. Ewan dodged around the chunks of metal with relative ease. It was the second tank he had taken down that day, only this time he was smart enough not to be inside when it happened.

Satisfied, Ewan kept his bow out as he flew away from the tunnel exit.

He came to a landing on a rooftop and tried to catch his breath. His new suit was more powerful, yes, but Rita’s new mudmen were *much* stronger. Taking down such a small force had consumed more energy than he had expected. From this height, he could feel a breeze ripple across the city. “Maybe I can… use that to recharge a little…” His vision dipped in and out, but as he turned to the breeze he felt his strength returning, even if it was a bit more slowly than he would have liked.

Below, he could hear civilians trickling out of the tunnel.

“Did you see that?” a man asked. “That guy literally flew in and wiped those mantis-things out! And a tank! Took down a tank by himself!”
“Must be one of those Power Ranger guys,” said another.

“You say that like you actually have some idea what’s going on.”

“And you do? That lady in the Square said she’s ten-thousand years old, man! She’s outta her fuckin’ mind! Then that lion thing shows up and literally steps right on top of me and it doesn’t hurt, and then like naval cruisers and old sailing ships and shit start comin’ out of portals and bombing everything… The fuck, man? What is all this? We’re caught up in the middle of something none of us understand. My best friend just died because of something we don’t understand! THE FUCK!”

"Hey, hey,” said another voice. “Calm down. We’ve all lost someone tonight. Let’s just get out of town and let the army or these Power Ranger things or whatever deal with it.”

“Whatever, man. My house is this way. My dog’s probably scared shitless.”

“Can’t be any worse than you were when we got dropped into the tunnel.”

“I don’t like closed spaces, alright!”

“Hey!” came a new voice. Ewan glanced down at the street. Some guy with one of the Professor’s freeze guns was running toward them. “Come this way! I’ll help lead you out of the city!”

“Justin?” said the first voice. “Shit man, are you a sight for sore eyes! Is that a… gun?”

Their voices shrunk as the group followed Justin down a back alley. Ewan slumped down against the roof’s railing, only barely paying attention to the Blue Halcyon slinging ice and storm into the dark fleet above. Ewan broadcasted the memory of what he had just seen to the other Rangers.

Let’s not forget what we’re fighting for, he thought. If we focus on the enemy ahead of us, we risk forgetting the innocent behind us.

Ewan felt the other Rangers agree. Will was about to respond when Master Tom’s dagger slipped past his defenses and cut deep. Will stumbled backward and felt his side. His hand was covered in blood. When he looked back up, the Black Ranger stood flanked by Squatt and Baboo.

Will didn’t even have to think the command: Ewan took to the sky and used his full power to reach Central Square as quickly as possible, making sure to pick off mudmen snipers on rooftops as he raced by. Never a dull moment, thought Ewan.

Uh, guys? thought April. We’ve got more problems.

Ewan glanced right, where the Blue Halcyon weaved through the clouds. A trio of black ships had come together in an odd formation. Ewan’s helmet enhanced his vision; there, on the prow of one of the ships, stood Rita. She laughed viciously and struck the ship’s deck with her staff before teleporting away.

Darkness swirled around the three ships. They drifted closer and closer together until they touched. They began to bleed into each other, to shift and take on a new, unified shape that was grotesque to behold, as if someone had modeled a battleship on what would happen if someone lived inside a nuclear reactor. The new ship was a hulking mass of black that stuck out at odd angles, with every inch of its surface lined with more guns than that of the three original ships put together.

Ewan slowed his flight, unsure of which ally to help. Thankfully, April answered for him. Help Will, she thought. I got this.

Always telling me to help other people, Ewan thought cheerfully. Sometime, my darling, you should
allow yourself to play the damsel in distress.

Ewan resumed his course, praying that he would reach Will before the Black Ranger killed him or, worse, took him to Rita’s palace.

Chapter 2 – Jess

Teleporting had gotten the first true response from Jess since Rita made April say the things she had said in Central Square. It was like getting yanked across the universe by a string tied around your stomach, and landing was even worse. Jess vomited all over Goldar’s beautiful golden armor, winning herself a gloved backhand that knocked her to the floor, where she promptly vomited some more.

“I told you teleportation could be unpleasant, heh heh heh…” Goldar said. He picked her up and flung her into a dark, tiny room. She landed roughly on her side and slid across a cold steel floor. “Don’t worry; we’ll bring company for you soon.” He laughed again as he slammed the door shut, leaving that damned cackle echoing through the halls.

Jess didn’t know how long she sat in the darkness. She thought of nothing in particular, saw nothing, heard nothing. She simply sat inside herself as Rita’s words played over and over again in April’s voice, in Rita’s, in those of each and every person in her past who had said the same thing but were at least a little more normal than a ten-thousand-year-old supervillain.

Jess isn’t a woman. She isn’t anything. I don’t want her hitting on me. Torture her all you like, then kill her. Pain flared in her right arm, where Rita’s shadow had cut deeply and boiled her blood as it ran down her skin. Her chest was sore from Goldar flying with her, and her face throbbed from his backhand. But none of it mattered. If she retreated far enough inside herself, she barely felt any of it. Jess isn’t a woman. She isn’t anything. She felt the familiar return of fear – not for her life, but that Rita’s words were true. She hated that feeling more than anything, but the more she tried to fight it, the stronger it became.

Footsteps. The screech of metal on metal as the cell door opened. Goldar’s silhouette in the door as he tossed someone else in. The body landed with a light thump and the quiet cry of a woman. Goldar slammed the door shut, returning the cell to total darkness.

Jess felt a shaking hand touch her leg. Her new roommate cried out and jumped back. “Hello?” the woman asked. For a moment, Jess had been afraid that the person Goldar had thrown into the cell was April, but that definitely was not April’s voice. “Hello?” the woman asked again. “Are you… okay?”

Jess had no inclination to talk, but she also didn’t want this woman to think that she was locked in with a corpse and start freaking out. Her own fear was bad enough; she didn’t want to have to deal with someone else’s. “Hi,” said Jess. Her voice was raspier than she had expected. It sounded like it usually did when she had been crying.

“Hi,” said the woman, clearly relieved. “What’s your name?” Jess didn’t respond. “I’m Kim.” This woman sounded hopelessly sweet, and sweet was exactly the last type of person Jess cared to talk to right now. “Do you know what’s going on?” Jess remained silent. “Are you from Cedar Grove? That monster said the city was close by, and I saw what had happened to it on the news…”
“Lady, what do you want? Shut up and stop asking questions.”

“I just want to know what’s going on. I’m… well… I’m terrified.”

*At least she can admit it.*

“You think talking to me will help you not be scared?”

“Yes. We can draw courage from each other.”

Jess groaned. She was done with courage.

“So how did you end up in here?” Kim asked.

*She’s not going to stop asking questions.*

“A flying monkey brought me.”

“Flying monkeys, women coming through TV screens… It just seems like one impossible thing after another.”

“Lady, you have no idea.”

“Have you been in the city all night?”

“All my fucking life. Now shut up and leave me alone.”

The more she talked, the *nicer* the woman’s voice became. It was annoying. “You sound so young. It’s alright to be angry, and scared. You’ve been put into a terrible situation. Maybe you lost your friends, or your parents, or…”

“My parents are still alive, those fuckers.”

“You aren’t close with them?”

“I’m not here for therapy. My parents are a couple of fuckhats, my brother’ll die soon if he hasn’t already, and I don’t have any fucking friends.”

*I’m alone, and it’s better that way. No one to disappoint.*

“I’m sorry you don’t get along with your parents.” This Kim person still spoke with such cloying sincerity, as if she understood what Jess was going through. She reminded Jess of April. The pain flared through her arm again, and her heart fluttered with fear. “I can’t pretend to understand what you’re going through. But as long as you’re alive, there’s always something you can do to make things better.”

“You must’ve lived some fucking perfect life then.”

Kim hesitated. “I’ve had some great joys in my life, it’s true. And I’ve had my heartaches. I’m not able to have kids. My husband thought he didn’t want kids anyway, but over the years he changed his mind. He divorced me last year and started dating a girl nearly half his age. It turned my life upside-down. For a while, I was angry like you are now, and that’s okay. I didn’t hide my emotions, but I didn’t brood on them, either. I allowed myself to feel them and let them out.”

“Good for you,” said Jess, though, despite herself, she was no longer as agitated with Kim as she wanted to be.
“I worked through my anger and realized that I wasn’t angry at all, not really. I was scared of what I’d do with my life. I was scared of being alone forever. Once I realized that, I was able to work through my fear instead of trying to fight against it. When you hold your emotions back, they fester inside you, whether they’re good or bad. My best friend in high school, she had this way of telling when I was hiding something, and she’d always take me aside and say, ‘Kim, let it out. Allow yourself to feel or you’ll go numb.’ I… should have listened to her more.”

“Sounds like a damn saint.”

“She was.” Kim’s voice caught in her throat. “Trini… really was. So, I say to you now: let it out. Allow yourself to feel, or you’ll go numb.”

Jess’ wounds hit her with fresh pain. She tried to ignore it. She didn’t want to take this woman’s advice. But since she was stuck with Kim, and Kim was so God-damned persistent and kind, she may as well get it over with and listen to her. Jess felt the pain – really felt it, tracked it as it ran up her arm, through her shoulder, into her chest. The pain made her angry – no, not angry: terrified. Memories lashed out at her with each wave of pain. Rejection. Humiliation. Loneliness.

Let it out. Allow yourself to feel, or you’ll go numb.

Her heart raced. She wanted to stop. It was uncomfortable; surely it was easier to leave these emotions alone and continue on through life as she had. But that hadn’t worked, had it? She had pushed people away, people she truly cared about, all for the sake of avoiding these fears. It was how she had lived her life. It was why she thought her Courage was even more cruelly ironic than Jack’s Strength.

Something clicked in Jess’ mind, though she couldn’t yet put it to words. She turned to Kim to try to explain how she felt, but suddenly the cell door opened. Light flooded around a large shadow with a grinning face that glowed from within.

“You’ve received a royal summons,” said Goldar. “My Queen wishes to meet you.”

“Fuck off,” said Jess. “Tell Rita I’m not coming.”

Goldar laughed. “Not you. Her.” He stomped toward Kim. In the light, Jess saw her for the first time: middle-aged but youthful, gorgeous but… sorrowful. Kim shrank away from Goldar, but she didn’t scream. Briefly, Jess’ eye met with Kim’s. Then the door slammed shut. She was gone.

Jess embraced the pain running through her. She leapt to her feet and slammed her burned fist against the wall. She screamed and slammed her fist again. There’ll always be assholes! she thought, punching the wall again on the last word. There’ll always be cunts, she slammed her fist, and fucktards, slam! and worthless pieces of shit, slam! and if I can’t handle that, then I’m no better than any of them! She slammed her fist one last time. Immediately, it was as though she had struck a match, with her hand as the match head. Red fire blazed along her arm, and as it moved, she felt her pain ease and her fear lessen. She opened her fist and closed it, noting with surprise that the flames didn’t burn her. The fire stopped at her shoulder, and slowly, she felt her mind clear.

Rita had placed a spell on me, she thought, then, No. I did that to myself. I was too afraid to face up to what she said. She knew what could set me off. She knew what could fucking shut me down.

“Hmph,” she grunted, “looks like that backfired.”

Just then, she heard commotion outside. A gruff voice – Goldar? No, Rito.

“We hope you’ll enjoy your stay in Rita Repulsa’s Prison of Eternal Darkness, TM! The name’s
Can’t have other Rita Repulsa’s Prison of Eternal Darkesses popping up around the world and cutting into our business model. Wouldn’t be good for our bottom line and… hey, stop throwing up everywhere! You look like you just watched Gigli in 3D.” Rito made a sound like he might throw up, too.

“How the hell do you know these pop culture references?” groaned a voice. “Aaaaggh!”

Fear hit her like a truck, but this time she let herself experience it. It made her jittery. The flames on her arm intensified. She had to keep from panicking. Her fear told her what was important to her life, and that, unequivocally, was her brother.

Instinct took over. She turned and punched toward the cell door across the room. To her surprise, a dark red fireball spun off her arm and crashed against the door. She punched again, and another fireball hit the door with impressive force, though the door did not budge.

“The hell was that?” said Rito. “Sounded like your mom when she gets out of bed. Ha!” Jess heard Rito’s stomping get closer and closer.

Then the dumb brute opened her cell door.

Rito stood in the doorway, staring at Jess with comical surprise. Jess slung a red fireball off her arm and caught Rito dead in the face, knocking him back into the hall. She leapt after him, eager to hit him with as much force as she could possibly muster. Rito landed on his back and rolled smoothly onto his feet.

“Whoa!” he cried. “How’d you—”

“COURAGE!” Jess didn’t even wait for her transformation to finish. As her suit blazed onto her body, she reached forward with her arm that burned with red fire. She closed her fist and yanked upward, her mind catching hold of the fire around Rito’s sword and lifting it – and him – into the air.

“Hey!” Rito shouted. “Cut that out! Heh heh, get it? Cut out? Because it’s, you know, a sword—”

Jess flung her arm sideways, sending Rito and his sword crashing hard into the wall at the far end of the hallway.

Jess knee-slid to her brother’s side. His skin was pale, and his shoulders bore smoldering handprints from where Rito must have grabbed him. His leg was severed at the ankle, but thankfully it was just the stone leg.

“Jess!” panted Jack. “I’m… here to rescue you…” He tried to sit up, but his hand slipped in his own vomit and he fell hard on his elbow.

“Fucking idiot,” said Jess, though she couldn’t hide the affection in her voice.

“Hey!” said Rito as he hauled himself roughly out of the crater he had made in the wall. “You’re not supposed to be out… are you? Cool arm! Haha! Cool, get it?”

Jess stood. “Yeah. Now get this!”

She shoved, focusing her power into a jet of red flame that engulfed the entire hall. Rito had nowhere to dodge; instead, he threw his arms over his face and disappeared within flames of his own. Jess lowered her arm. The skeleton bastard had teleported away.
I could barely move that arm after what Rita did to it. My Power must be fighting the shadow that cut me.

Jess knelt beside Jack. “Couldn’t beat that stupid Bonerhead, could you?” she asked.

“I… let Rito win,” said Jack. “Thought he’d… take me to you. Wasn’t expecting the teleport to mess… with my head so much. And even though the leg is fake, it still hurts like a bitch. How did you…”

Jess showed him her arm. “I’m not sure.”

Rita burned your arm with dark fire, thought Zordon. She sought to humiliate you by using your Power against you, but instead she created a focus for it. Your arm will never again function as a normal arm would, but in some ways it is now considerably stronger. You have turned your weakness into a strength.

Jess wasn’t so sure that Zordon was just talking about her arm and Jack’s leg.

Hey Zordon, thought Jack. Good to hear your voice again. Communications are back up?

We have done all we can on this end. I had been using a great deal of my power to prevent Goldar from teleporting with you, Jess, but in the end I had to take a terrible gamble: in holding Goldar in the city, I was preventing the zords from fully charging. I allowed him to take you so that your zords would be fully functional when needed. I am sorry for making such a choice, but I hope you can understand.

Jess wouldn’t admit it, but being brought to the prison had allowed her to meet Kim, and Kim had brought her back from the brink of her own cowardice. She decided to skip to more important matters. Where the fuck are we? she asked.

You two are inside Rita’s prison, which lies just outside of her palace. I was unsure such a facility existed until now; I believe that she constructed this place soon after arriving last night as a holding pen of sorts. But we are fortunate: had they taken either of you to the palace itself, we would not be able to break through its defenses and communicate with you, nor would we be able to send you this.

A large object shimmered into existence down the hall.

Is that… thought Jack.

We had to make some adjustments to our Dark Dimension jammer, thought Professor Cranston. We thought we could create a device that would block Rita from contacting the Dark Dimension from Earth, but after your encounter with the Void Spider, we better understood the nature of what we were dealing with. Simple frequency-jamming wasn’t going to do the trick. We had to do something a little more drastic. However, we couldn’t make all the changes we needed with the Command Center in such a state. I can guide you through the rest of the alterations, but it will take some time.

So to answer your question, Jack, thought Zordon, yes, that is a bomb… of sorts. You must set it off as quickly as possible. You will have to be swift: Rito will likely return with reinforcements. But be warned: as soon as you begin to arm this bomb, I cannot hide its power from the enemy. Rita will do anything in her power to stop you.

Jack’s stone leg pulled together and attached to itself like a pair of magnets. “Whatdya say, sis?” He said. He stood and extended an arm. “You up for defending me from bullies? It’ll be just like old times.”
Jess smacked Jack’s hand away and pulled him into a tight hug.

She felt his surprise, then felt his arms tighten around her. Even though they were twins, and even though they had always cared for each other, neither of them ever showed much affection. Now, though, Jess let her full thoughts flow from her mind and into his, and he did the same. She would isolate herself no longer; she realized now that she never had to, so long as he was around. Surprisingly, she felt the same thoughts from him. She’d never known how much he had struggled with the same dangerous thoughts, but there they were.

Sister and brother shared more in common than just their genes. Courage from Strength, and Strength from Courage – neither Ranger thought it in such concrete terms, but at last both understood why the Powers had chosen twins. In many ways, it was impossible to think of one without the other.

“We can pull this off,” said Jess.

“Damn right we can,” said Jack.

Chapter 3 – April

The first volley of cannon fire pushed April’s piloting skills to its limit. She dodged, rolled, blasted projectiles out of the sky with ice and lightning. Several shots wandered dangerously close to the news choppers that now swarmed Central Square; it was only April’s intervention that saved them. But she knew that Rita’s strange new super-ship was testing her, and its next attack would not miss its real target: the Halcyon.

Any other zords ready? she thought.

Zordon’s done all the charging he can, thought Will. The rest is up to us.

Well I don’t know what it’s supposed to feel like, thought Ewan, but right now I’m pretty sure I couldn’t create a Prius, much less a zord.

You’re close, even if it doesn’t feel like it, thought Will. You’re probably feeling a little weak, and I think that’s because so much of your power is going to your zord.

It’s not often that I have performance issues.

Will chose to ignore the remark, which seemed to be a running theme between the two of them. Your power should finish charging soon, but you need to hold off. The fewer zords out at a time, the faster the others can finish charging up. I’m sorry April, but you’ll have to keep that thing busy for a while longer.

April had suspected as much. Divers always have to be flexible, right Ewan?

Will, do you hear that? thought Ewan. She’s making jokes! I’m finally rubbing off on her! As a response, Will shared his vision with the others. Squatt and Baboo leered at him from either side of the Black Ranger. Will’s suit was doing what it could to mend his wound, but if Ewan didn’t reach him soon then a little cut would be the least of his worries. Oh, right, thought Ewan. Save you first. Joke later.
The Blue Halcyon turned and whipped its wing at the super-ship. Feathers of ice slung from the zord, spinning into deadly needles as they flew. The super-ship didn’t even try to dodge out of the way. The ice shards struck its hull and shattered harmlessly. April reached into the atmosphere around her and pulled several branches of lightning into her enemy, but again the ship deflected the attack with hardly a scratch. Its guns swiveled to and fro as the Blue Halcyon dove through the skies, half trained on the zord and half on the news choppers while the gun crews reloaded for the next attack.

April could feel Rita’s power behind the first volley, the same power which had enchanted the mudmen’s assault rifles. April shuddered, recalling the bullet that had torn through her thigh in the police station. *I’d rather not get shot again, thank you.* The guns were almost done reloading. *Let’s see if they can hit something they can’t see.*

April mixed humidity with heat from the city’s fires, and soon a thick cloud formed around the dark ship. The zord could see straight through the cloud as if it wasn’t even there. Mudmen scrambled madly about the ship’s deck. Several pointed their guns in different directions, clearly unsure as to where the zord was now.

April released another blast of lightning, but shadows leapt up from the deck and blocked the mudmen from her attacks. Several of the guns spun in the direction of the lightning and fired. This time, April didn’t have time to dodge.

Cannonballs and large-caliber shells ripped into the Halcyon. Those that didn’t explode on impact simply kept going, punching holes straight through the zord’s chest and wings. April felt each and every hit as though it were her own body. She tumbled through the air, her cry of pain becoming a bird-like screech that rang from the Halcyon’s mouth and echoed throughout the city as a peel of thunder. Some unfortunate office building broke her fall, crumbling into a million pieces under the weight of the massive zord.

*April!* thought Ewan. *Are you okay?*

April struggled to get the zord back on its feet. She hoped that there hadn’t been any civilians hiding in the building. *I’m alright,* she thought. In the police station, she had only been shot once. Just now had been several dozen shots, each single one hurting as badly as the one hours earlier. She focused her suit’s display to show her what Ewan and Will saw. The Yellow Ranger had arrived in the Square and had given Will just enough time to close his wound before the Black Ranger had redoubled his assault, forcing Will back while Ewan struggled to take on both Squatt and Baboo at the same time.

*Even with new powers,* April thought to herself, *we’re still losing. We have to push harder!*

With several massive beats of its wings, the Blue Halcyon returned to the skies. The black ship had cleared itself from April’s cloud, and now reinforcements portalled in on either side. The Halcyon called down lightning through the reinforcements, and a moment later it dove upward, beak-first, through the bottom of another ship.

Yet more ships appeared. *This is never-ending.*

April felt surprise and pain from Ewan and Will. She returned to their visions and gasped: the Black Ranger had called his Dragon into action. It pinned Ewan under a massive paw while the Black Ranger crouched over Will, a dagger to his throat. Squatt and Baboo stood on either side of the Dragon’s paw, waiting for the Black Ranger’s signal to dispatch Ewan once and for all. April would never get there in time to help.
“Well little buddy,” taunted the Black Ranger, “I may not have brought you into this world, but I’m more than happy to take you—”

As one, the Black Ranger, Squatt, and Baboo froze and looked west. The ships around April turned and fled, utterly abandoning the fight. The Black Ranger leapt from Will, landed in his zord, and followed the airships west, barely giving Squatt and Baboo enough time to leap onto the zord’s legs and hang on for dear life.

What the actual fuck, thought Ewan.

Jack’s started arming the Dark Dimension disrupter, thought Jess. That might be what’s pissed them off.

As I live and breathe! thought Ewan. You just saved our asses, Firecrotch!

Your ass is fine, thought Jess. It’s your face that I can’t save.

My ass is SO fine, Ewan happily conceded.

You’re about to have company, thought Will. Lots of it. April?

The ships are headed to Rita’s palace, April confirmed. Every single one. And it looks like… yes, every mudman is flying out that way, too. They’re emptying the city to come stop you two.

Great, thought Jess.

At least this validates that the disrupter should do some real damage, thought Jack. Otherwise they wouldn’t be so hot and bothered about it.

So, party at Rita’s? thought Ewan.

We’d better crash it before her guests arrive, thought Will.

Ewan broke into uncontrollable laughter. Sorry! he thought. Sorry, just… hee hee! Can you imagine Rita doing kegstands…

The Blue Halcyon turned and dove toward the Square. Ewan, Will, April thought. Jump as high as you can.

Two tiny figures soared over the skyline, well past the news choppers still covering the strange scene. April altered the zord’s dive, slowed down, extended her wings.

Hang on tight, April thought to her two passengers. She glanced at the streets below just in time to see the paramedic Jason blast a mudman to bits with his freeze gun. We’re leaving the city to you now, she thought. Jason looked up at the passing zord. He waved with his gun and nodded, as though he had heard her. April focused westward and pushed the Halcyon as fast as it would go. Ewan manipulated the wind around the zord to increase its speed even further.

So it’s back to the lake, thought Will. Where this all began.

No, thought April. It’s where all of this will end.

Chapter 4 – Jess
April’s report was anything but reassuring, and so was Jack’s. Since Zordon and Professor Cranston had not quite been able to finish the disrupter, it left Jack kneeling over some intricate wirework that was way beyond Jess’ comprehension. Jack would be no help when the fight came. And boy was it coming.

Jess felt rather embarrassed about her sudden burst of emotion toward her brother. They never hugged. It simply was not done, even though they had shared a womb for nine months and a room until fucking puberty. Maybe that kind of constant exposure had numbed them to each other. *Let it out. Allow yourself to feel, or you’ll go numb.*

After events like those of the past few hours, Jess didn’t think she’d ever take her twin for granted for the rest of her life… however long that might be. Experiencing her fears instead of shoving them aside had shown her what was most important to her, and the love she had felt for Jack and the other Rangers was so great – and so unexpected – that she was pretty sure she might have even hugged Ewan if he had been there.

*Jessica,* thought Zordon. *I am updating your map of the prison and surrounding area.* A sort of three-dimensional blueprint filled her vision. Rita’s prison was a squat brick of a place, hidden close to the palace under a blanket of rock that anyone would easily mistake as just part of the landscape. A small cave served as its entrance. The prison itself was three floors of cells, built downward so that the top floor – where Jack and Jess now stood – was the closest to the surface. The top floor was mostly abandoned, but the lower two…

*Zordon,* thought Jess, *what are these other dots?*

*Human captives,* said Zordon. *Rita’s purpose for them remains unclear to me. I had hoped that you would have enough time to free them, but Rita’s forces are advancing quickly.* Zordon altered the map to show the outside of the prison. Hundreds of mudmen raced across the dry lakebed from Rita’s palace, and the Black Ranger, with Squatt and Baboo in tow, was advancing rapidly from the city to the east. The small host of mudmen in charge of running the prison, meanwhile, was amassing in the floor just below Jess. They would reach her in mere seconds.

But not if she took the fight to them.

*I’m sick of playing catchup to Rita’s schemes,* thought Jess.

She expected Zordon to correct her, or tell her “no” or say that she was somehow foolish for wanting to make sure that Rita would enslave no one. *Be swift,* he said.

*Hurry back, would you?* thought Jack as he hunched over the machine, his torso half-buried in wires.

*Just try not to blow us up,* thought Jess.

She leapt past Jack, reaching the hard metal staircase in two bounds. Mudmen were already coming up the bottom steps. Jess threw a fireball straight down into the first mudman and herself into the second. Her boot crunched down into the mudman’s head and continued on through the monster’s ashes. She landed at the base of the staircase to find a long, straight hallway with cells lining either side and dozens of mudmen advancing toward her. She could feel her power coursing through her right arm. The mudmen paused, eying the arm with obvious unease.

At the far end of the hallway, a mudman threw a human headfirst into a cell and slammed the door behind him. “Want someone to pick on?” taunted Jess. “Try me!”
The closest mudman punched at her face. She dodged to the side, caught the arm, and thrust her elbow up. The monster’s arm splintered with a sickening crunch, and the mudman fell away, screaming in its strange, high-pitched clicking tongue while its arm dangled at an unnatural angle. Jess leapt over it to kick the next victim in the chest, but the mudman caught her foot and twisted. As it did, Jess hopped off her other foot and landed a roundhouse kick to the mudman’s face.

Four mudmen charged at once. She slung a fireball at the nearest one. As it slammed into the mudman’s chest and burst into flames, she lunged forward, reached into the fire, and grabbed the hilt of her sword. She extinguished the fire before removing the sword, so that now the blade found itself buried deep within the chest of the mudman. She shoved, stabbing the mudman behind the one she’d impaled, then she yanked the sword out and watched the life fade in the mudman’s dozen eyes. The fire on her arm leapt up the sword’s blade, and she slashed her way through the hallway, sending red fire and black heads and golden dust flying.

She lost track of time. The mudmen were never-ending, but so, too, was her rage. Her suit’s visual display showed outlines of humans in the cells lining either side of the hallway. Fuck knows what they must have thought of all the noise.

When she reached the other end of the hall, and the last mudman disappeared, Jess turned, gasping for breath. She threw her sword along the right edge of the hallway, manipulating the fire around it so that the sword sliced clean through the cell door locks as it went. When it reached the far end, she simply pulled it around the other side like a boomerang and cut the rest of the locks.

“Everyone!” she cried as her sword flew back into her hand. “You’re free! Get the fuck out of here! Go upstairs and out the door on the far end! Do not stop running; get clear of the lakebed as fast as you can!”

The cell doors opened slowly, and soon terrified humans streamed down the hall and up the far stairs. Jess noticed a pair of twin girls among the crowd. Even their hair and clothes matched. How’s it coming Jack? she asked, reminded of her own twin.

Glacially, he thought briefly before returning to his delicate work. Jess wondered if Jack’s missing leg was still at the university.

When all this is over, she thought, let’s go find your foot.

Couldn’t imagine a stranger hope, thought Jack. But yes, let’s.

The twin girls were two of the first to reach the stairs that would take them up. Jess leapt down the stairs behind her to free the bottom floor. No mudmen greeted her. Instead, a pair of gun turrets whirred to life in an alcove under the stairs and opened fire at her back. Jess leapt down the hall, away from the turrets, and threw herself sideways. She exploded through a cell door and scared the living shit out of the humans trapped inside. I could sure use Will’s light shield right about now, she thought. Hundreds of bullets crashed against the door frame, though the door remained intact. On second thought, who needs light?

She sliced the door off its hinges. It was heavier than she expected, made of some kind of metal and likely reinforced by enchantments. Jess was counting on this last fact as she cast her sword aside and pushed into the hallway, using the door as a shield against the two auto guns down the hall.

The sound was deafening as Jess pushed against the onslaught. Thousands of bullets pounded into the metal door, each hit like a smith’s hammer on an anvil that sent shockwaves through Jess’ arms. Her feet slipped, but she pressed both arms hard against the makeshift shield and shoved with all of her might. Inch by inch she advanced, two steps forward, one step back, two steps forward.
Her suit flashed an alarm in her vision and pulled up the map of the prison. The mudmen from the palace were almost here. None of the humans had gotten to the door in time. There was no way they could escape with so many mudmen outside.

“Shit,” Jess said aloud. *There has to be some other way out…*

The metal of her door-shield suddenly gave way, and bullets ripped through a small hole near her side. She swore loudly as a bullet pierced her armor. The suit set to work on repairing the damage while she shifted her body away from the hole. She lost her footing, and the gun turrets began to push her back. She could feel beads of sweat trickle down her face under her helmet.

*Need… another way…*

Jess felt a tug at her senses from beyond the prison’s walls. A spark of something deep under the lakebed outside, a giant something sleeping hundreds – maybe thousands – of feet below. At the touch of Jess’ mind, the something awoke. The prison shook. The auto turrets punched another hole in Jess’ shield. If the guns forced another hole in the door, she wasn’t sure she would be able to dodge into another cell before the guns would catch her. She tried to press forward, but the ground shook too violently.

*Jess! thought Jack. What’s going on down there?*

Jess pushed her mind back to the giant below ground. She had thought it a secret weapon of Rita’s at first, but now it touched her mind and filled her soul with warmth… and *Courage.*

*I found my zord,* she answered.

The giant thing punched upward from the magma pocket far below. The prison shook more and more until the far end of the building – including the small alcove housing the twin autoturrets – ripped away, replaced by the creature’s red underbelly as it slithered by. With no more turrets raining hell down upon her, Jess dropped her door-shield and went about cutting the cell locks. By the time she was finished, the zord’s tail was disappearing toward the surface. She sprinted to the hall’s end, pausing briefly as several mudmen fell, burning and screaming, past the gaping hole that used to be the prison’s outer wall.

The zord had literally eaten through the far end of the prison as it climbed through the ground. Jess poked her head out and looked around. Below was a huge gaping hole that led straight down for who knows how far. Two stories above Jess, those twin girls looked down on her from the broken hallway of the prison’s top floor. “That was so cool!” one of them shouted. “But now we can’t get out…” said the other. Indeed, there was no way they could jump from the end of their hallway to the rock some dozens of feet away without falling down the hole made by the zord.

But a Power Ranger could. Jess leapt into the open space, caught herself on the far rock wall, and bounced up through the zord-tunnel. The twins made way for her, cheering happily as she landed with a thud that sent a painful reminder through her body that she had just been shot. From the top-floor hallway, Jess leapt across the small chasm to the cave-like opening her zord hard created. It was a short distance from there to the wide-open space of the lakebed. Sunlight blinded her; the cave faced east, and it was still early morning.

Outside, the zord fought in broad daylight, and Jess got her first good look at the creature she had awoken deep below the Earth. Its body was long and low, with an impressive thick tail and an equally thick neck. It spun its body on legs as wide as houses as it attacked the large ground force advancing from Rita’s palace. The zord’s entire body looked to be made of lava, with swirling reds and pulsing oranges so bright they almost hurt to look at.
“The Red Salamander,” said Jess. She grinned. “Keep em busy for me.” The Salamander glanced at the Ranger. She may have imagined it, but it looked like the great creature nodded at her. She turned back to the prison.

How can I get these people out of here? She thought. She began rummaging through the pockets on her belt. Her suit’s helmet showed the name of each object she touched, with a brief description of its use. Smoke pellets, healing salves, explosive gel, stun powder… Didn’t realize we were armed by fucking Batman. At last, she alighted on a promising item: a new version of the mesh fabric she and the others had used to save the helicopter news guys earlier that night. She pulled out her entire stock, returned to the massive hole in the ground, and threw her nets.

The mesh shimmered red as it fluttered down slowly over the opening, shifting itself to fill the space properly. The far end landed just in front of the twins’ feet and latched on to the metal of the hallway while the rest hardened and became a sort of daredevil’s walkway. It spanned the distance, but it was only a few feet wide. Jess beckoned for people to start walking across. Happily, one of the twins took a step onto the mesh.

Shadows leapt from the metal of the prison hallway and released the mesh. The twin fell, her scream echoing down the tunnel. Jess leapt after her, catching the girl in one arm and the loose end of the mesh in the other. Thankfully the mesh stuck true to the rock outside of the palace, so Jess and the girl dangled at the end of it like they had just cut the ties to some jungle rope bridge from a lame action movie.

Up close, Jess realized that the girl wasn’t actually that much younger than she was – fifteen or sixteen, perhaps. Jess tried not to think of herself at that age – all braces and awkwardness and insecurity as she struggled to find boys as irresistible as all the other girls did. It had not been a happy time, but at least she hadn’t had to deal with being prisoner to a mad witch from Mars.

“Hang on tight,” Jess said, and the girl obliged, practically choking her as she pushed off the rock wall, mesh still in hand, back to the prison hallway and its terrified inhabitants.

“I knew you’d catch me,” the girl said. “We’d heard about you guys all night; whenever the creeps brought new people in no one could talk about anything except the Guardians trying to save the city. It’s about time you came for us. You’re a girl, aren’t you? I knew some of you had to be girls! They got me and my sister on our way to my friend Kyle’s house. Kyle’d bought a whole bunch of fireworks from one of those highway fireworks stands that are only open for, like, two days of the year, you know? You’re helmet’s really cool, by the way. It looks like a… T-Rex or something. So anyway my friend Katie was driving us there. We didn’t want to go but Katie has this huuuuuge crush on Kyle right now. Then the sky goes all dark and these things start falling from the sky, and all of the sudden this, like, floating train thing comes through the intersection and blocks the whole road. Then these ugly guys all covered in mud get out and point guns at everyone and push us into the train. It smelled so bad in there – this one guy threw up all over Cassie’s shoes – Cassie’s my twin – and this other guy crapped his pants…”

Can you hurry and get them out of here? asked Jack, who was practically swarmed by terrified humans desperate to escape. It’s hard to concentrate.

Speak for yourself, thought Jess, only half paying attention to the girl’s verbal stream of consciousness. Then, to herself, Rita’s enchantments must be what’s keeping this stuff from sticking to the metal. She pulled herself up into the hallway and set the girl down next to her sister. The two girls hugged each other viciously. Somewhere in the back of Jess’ mind, she noticed just how familiar the girls looked.

“Rita has enchanted the hallway to keep my mesh from sticking,” Jess shouted to the terrified
crowd. “So I will hold down this end. You will have to run across. When you see the lava creature outside, don’t worry: she’s mine. She won’t hurt you.”

“Lava creature?” some of the prisoners muttered to each other. “This day keeps getting stranger and stranger…”

“You expect us to go across some net bridge that you’ll be holding yourself?” said another prisoner. “You really think you can hold us up? Listen, girl…” The guy started toward her with the kind of condescending look that adults seemed to master somewhere in their 30s. Before the man could tell Jess exactly what he thought of her, she stepped to the side and calmly punched a hole in the metal wall. The man stopped in his tracks and didn’t say another word.

“Thank you for saving me,” the twin said to Jess. The girl threw her arms around Jess’ neck and hugged her quickly before following her sister across the mesh, which hardened as it got further away from the prison. Jess braced herself as she held the other end. She placed a foot against the shattered remains of the wall and aligned herself as best as she could. Two teenage girls were easy enough to hold up, but as more and more people began running across the net bridge, she could feel the weight pushing her suit to its limits. The map of the area materialized before her again. The Red Salamander was making quick work of the mudman army, but now the Black Dragon was almost upon them.

“Hurry!” Jess groaned to the stragglers and those too scared to cross the bridge. “Get a move on!”

The man who had almost scolded her paused by her side. “Thank you,” he said, his head down. “It’s been a long time since I believed in heroes.” He sprinted over the mesh.

“I…” mumbled the man who followed him. He looked close to tears. “I’m afraid of… heights.” Jess didn’t have time for this shit. She kicked the man in the ass and sent him tumbling out onto the mesh, screaming as he rolled. He crawled the rest of the way, crying the whole time and seeming to pause to watch each tear as it disappeared into the abyss below him. He didn’t look back when he made it to the other side.

Just a few more, thought Jess. Only a handful lef—

Fire crackled behind her, followed by familiar laughter. “I could wait for reinforcements,” Rito said, “and hell, Sis even ordered me to. But you know what I said to her? I said, ‘LEEROOOYY JENKKIIIIIINNSS!’”

Rito charged. The people still in the hallway leapt onto the mesh to get away from Rito. The extra weight pulled Jess closer to the edge. Her toes dangled over the precipice while the people depending on her began to scream like maniacs.

“Shut UP!” yelled Rito, his joking side suddenly gone as he sent a jet of flame from his sword at the bridge. Jess side-stepped between Rito and the civilians, taking the brunt of the fire on her back. Normally fire hurt the Red Ranger about as much as a massage, but the Dark Dimension must have corrupted Rito’s fire, for she felt every agonizing second. She kicked backward and sent her own flame through her leg. Rito dodged, and suddenly Jack’s thoughts were in her head with a frantic stop the fire, stop the fire!

Jess stopped and looked behind her. Rito stomped toward her, his skeletal grin turned upside-down. For the first time, she realized that Rito’s sword was made of bone, possibly the same bone that made up most of him. This close up, Rito was even larger than she had remembered, his shoulder pad-like bones thicker, the black of his eye sockets deeper. His skeletal appearance sent an involuntary chill down Jess’ spine.
She ducked under a horizontal slash and then sideways to avoid a downward slash. He attacked a third time, trying to catch her against the wall with a low swipe, but she leapt over his sword and landed a light kick to his stupid face just as his sword got lodged in the metal wall. Furious, he attacked with his fists, and Jess strained to dodge around the blows coming from behind while holding on to her mesh. There were still humans crossing the great void, and she wasn’t about to let Rita claim any more lives.

“You are SO annoying!” shouted Rito. “Hold still!”

Everyone’s almost across, just a little longer. Rito changed his tactics and charged forward, arms open wide. There was nowhere for Jess to run. He caught her in a bear hug and began to squeeze, letting his ugly, rotting bones dig into her body at painful angles. She struggled against his grip, but he was unfathomably strong. Jess felt her grip weaken on the mesh. Rito had caught her with her arms pinned to her sides; there was no way she could break free. Each time she breathed out, his hold became even tighter, slowly pushing the air out of her and preventing her from taking in new breath. To make matters even worse, Rito wreathed his own body in flames, burning Jess’ back, arms, and chest.

She leapt straight up, taking Rito with her. Since he was taller than she was, he slammed head-first into the ceiling. Jess clung tight to the mesh, and the sudden shift created a whip-like motion that flung the last few humans over to safety. But as Jess came back down, Rito’s grip held strong as ever.

How can I break out of this? How can I… Images of those twin girls comforting each other and drawing strength from each other. Jack! she thought. Little help please!

Reluctantly, Jack pulled himself away from the disrupter, but as soon as he saw Jess and Rito, he leapt into action. Jess felt Rito’s body rock as Jack kicked hard into his side. “What the!” Rito shouted. “Didn’t I dismember you?”

“I got better,” Jack growled as he landed another kick. Rito grunted, and his grip loosened.

Got an idea, thought Jack. Hold onto that mesh tight. D’you trust me?

What kind of stupid-ass question is that?

Like I said, hang on. Jack pressed his rock-foot against Rito’s back. Suddenly the foot extended, punching deep into Rito’s spine. Rito and Jess tumbled together over the side and into the dark expanse. They fell until suddenly the mesh tightened, stretching to its limit under their combined weight as the pair swung in an arch downward toward the opposite rock wall.

Rito maintained his grip as the rock wall quickly approached, ready to crush her between it and Rito. “I love pancakes!” he shouted in Jess’ ear. But while he held her arms in place, there wasn’t much he could do to her legs. She swung them up and hit the wall feet-first, standing there briefly like a rock-climber repelling down into the world’s deepest cave. When her feet hit, she thrust her head back and caught Rito square in the jaw. She felt it dislocate and come off completely, disappearing into the hole below. He tried to protest, but with no jaw, every word just came out as a sort of “nugh hhuk.”

Jess pushed off the rock wall as hard as she could, using the mesh to swing the pair of them back up to the prison’s top floor. The sudden shift in gravity loosened Rito’s hold on her. As they swung, she kicked backward, landing a solid hit on kneecap.

At this, Rito let go completely.
Jess spun herself in midair, using the mesh to manipulate her position. She had to move quickly, for Rito’s trajectory moved him away from her. She slung the mesh over Rito’s face and twisted so that it coiled on itself around his neck. He let out a muffled yell as the mesh pulled him back into its swinging path. Jess pulled herself around until, at the apex of the swing, she let loose a fierce double-kick that set Rito straight down at an impossible speed. Jess backflipped through the air and landed next to Jack at the hall’s edge. Rito swung toward the rock in a pendulum arch, fighting to free himself from the mesh that blinded him.

At the base of Rito’s swing, a thin spike of rock pushed out from the wall to meet him. Rock exploded out from Rito’s chest in a sickening crunch. He stopped fighting the mesh around his head. Jack retracted the spike back into the stone. He and Jess watched for a brief moment as Rito’s body went limp, suspended above the chasm by a makeshift noose.

“That was for Alpha,” said Jack.

When Rito’s arms finally dropped to their sides, a red mist fluttered from his body, pausing for a moment before Jack and Jess. Within the mist Jess could just make out a face she had seen in the visions of her power’s past.

“The old Red Ranger,” she said quietly. The man in the mist bowed to her and her brother before disappearing. “I think we just freed his soul.”

“Two old Rangers down,” said Jack, “three more to go.”

“Thanks, I wasn’t exhausted until you said that.”

Jack turned and raced back to the disrupter. Keep defending, he thought as he ran. I still need some time with this thing.

Jess fought to catch her breath. Rito was so stupid to attack before reinforcements got here, she thought. Such was his way, said Zordon. Courage, when corrupted, makes one brash. It was Rito’s habit to rush into battle without thinking. It was in this way that the Dark Dimension cornered him and brought his soul over to its side.

Jess recalled her vision of the old Red Ranger sprinting through a forest on fire. His way had been blocked by Goldar, and Jess had never seen a memory that took place after that. I never wondered where he was going, Jess thought.

He had just received a report from the Green Ranger that Rita was in dire trouble, said Zordon. He did not know that the Green Ranger had already succumbed to the Dark Dimension’s influence, and that it had all been a trap.

Which Goldar sprung. Rita turned on her own brother. Jess found her hands curled so tightly into fists that she feared her fingers might burst through her gloves.

Yes. But now you have freed his soul. I hope you understand the significance of your actions. That man has endured a thousand lifetimes of regret, and you have freed him.

Jess glanced back at Jack hard at work on the disrupter. Rito wanted to kill people. We killed him instead. That’s that.
Chapter 5 – Will

Zordon, thought Will, is it possible to save all of the former Rangers’ souls?

Serket and Rito have found redemption thanks to your efforts, said Zordon. But Rita, Grock, and Monga? I am unsure.

Who the fuck are Grock and Monga? asked Ewan.

Squatt and Baboo, answered April.

Ewan whistled. Those two sure have led disappointing lives when it comes to names.

What about Master Tom? Will asked.

Eh, thought Ewan, his name’s alright.

No, I mean can we save him?

Zordon’s answer was hesitant. As I have said before, I believe it is possible. However, if his redemption is your focus, you will lose sight of the greater task at hand, and Rita may yet win. Will’s heart sank, though he knew Zordon was right. He could not afford to dwell on saving his father while Rita still held the upper hand. Zordon sensed Will’s disappointment. Rita chose Tom Oliver as her Black Ranger specifically to get into your head, Will. The White Ranger defeated her ten-thousand years ago; this is her revenge.

As the Halcyon left the city, they flew over the smoking remains of the United States Army. Great black scorch marks scarred the highway that led to the lakes. Husks of tanks stood eerily silent among hundreds of cars clogging the outbound lanes. So many citizens had tried in vain to escape Cedar Grove. With any luck, there would be no more deaths today.

Jess! thought April. The Black Dragon is nearly on top of you!

Thoughts began to flicker between the five Rangers faster than conscious thought would allow. Together they saw the locations of each other, what each Ranger saw, and just how desperate their situation had become. April piloted the Blue Halcyon through the clouds, using moisture in the air as well as Ewan’s wind powers to boost the zord’s speed while Will and Ewan clung to its wings, but the Black Dragon was simply too fast. It darted from shadow to shadow across the landscape so quickly that it may as well have been teleporting, and now it dove straight for the prison hidden under the lakebed. The Red Salamander stood over a large crowd of humans, acting as a shield to escort the people to safety. It would not be able to help defend the twin Rangers against the Black Ranger or his vicious lackeys.

As the Halcyon approached the lake, they saw Rita’s palace in full view for the first time. All-black, with jagged spikes for turrets and lit from within with deep purple flame. The castle was huge: several hundred feet tall and more than a few acres around. Its very existence was a testament to Rita’s deceptive magic, for nothing so large should have remained hidden for so long. Now it stood for all to see, a dark figure in an empty lake that had until yesterday been one of Cedar Grove’s finest attractions.

Will and the others could see the very cliffs where their hellish night had begun. His heart ached at the sight of the gazebo where he had led a tae kwon do class that afternoon. He wondered if any of those children were still alive.
The Black Dragon smashed headfirst into the side of the prison. Jess’ vision went dark as rubble caved in on top of her. Pairs of hands reached through the rubble and pulled her out. Squatt held her off her feet, and Baboo, who perched silently on his shoulders, began taking quick jabs at Jess’ face. The Red Salamander roared and turned to race to Jess’ aid, but the Red Ranger forced it to stay with the people outside.

*We have to do something!* thought April.

*I’m givin’ her all she’s got, Captain!* Ewan thought.

At their angle in the sky, Will could see straight through the cave entrance that led to the prison. *I need you to remove the clouds. It’s risky, but I think I can help.*

*But without the moisture it’ll slow down the Halcyon,* thought April.

*I will, but what I need right now is light.*

Reluctantly, April dissolved the clouds in the sky before them. The Halcyon’s speed noticeably decreased, leaving Ewan to push his powers even harder. Many of the black ships that had followed the Dragon now turned their sights on the Halcyon. *Hope you know what you’re doing, boss,* Ewan said as he strained to pull as much air as possible behind the zord.

*Me too,* Will thought. He thought back to the old White Ranger and his final moments. The man had reached within his core and pushed outward, riding the light itself to take his body and Rita’s all the way to Mars to trap her there. Light shimmered around him. It clung to his suit like a cloud of fireflies. It grew harder to focus ahead, but Will fought to maintain control. He held the light within him until just the right moment, and then he unleashed his power.

The effect was even more instantaneous than he had anticipated. Will traveled quite literally at the speed of light from the wing of the Halcyon, across miles of lakeside cliffs and dry lakebed, past hundreds of airborne ships, through the cave entrance, and into Rita’s prison. He rematerialized just in time to aim a flying kick into Squatt’s side, sending both the troll and the beast on his shoulder crashing through the walls. Jess fell to the ground, coughing. He helped her to her feet. “Didn’t know I could do that.”

“That should be our team motto.”

The prison rumbled. Several shards of metal fell from the ceiling. The Black Dragon’s face pushed into the hole it had created a moment earlier. This close up, its sheer size made Will’s heart skip a beat. He was smaller than its eyes, which turned to its right, where Jack worked feverishly on the disrupter.

*“Dragon!”* shouted the Black Ranger from somewhere outside, “fire blast!”

Will dove down the hallway and landed between the Dragon and Jack. He pulled his shield of light into being just as the Dragon let loose a rush of white-hot purple flame. Will’s arm burned behind the shield, but he held strong, praying that the shield deflected enough of the fire away from Jack as well as the disrupter. A little red smoke pellet hit the Dragon right in the eye. It roared and pulled back, leaving a gaping hole and pure, unfiltered daylight that surged through Will’s suit. Jess leapt out the hole after the zord just as Squatt and Baboo pulled themselves out of the craters they’d made in the wall. Baboo climbed back onto Squatt’s shoulders, and the big gray ogre shoulder-charged down the hallway straight for Will.

*Pissed him off so much that he’s ignoring the disrupter,* thought Will. *Let’s keep it that way.*
Will had never been in a bull fight, but he suspected that it felt somewhat like this. The floor rattled with every stomp of Squatt’s massive feet. He roared, sending flecks of saliva waving across his cheeks as he charged. Will bounced to the ceiling to dodge, but Baboo was ready for him. She hopped from Squatt’s shoulder and punched Will in the stomach. She held on to his suit and rode him to the ground, where she landed hard on his chest with a flurry of kicks and punches. She cartwheeled off, turned sideways, and whipped her tail around Will’s neck. She lifted him off the ground and held him there as Squatt charged him from behind. Will punched and kicked and tore at the tail, but Baboo did not loosen her grip. Will reached down to his pistol, but Baboo kicked forward and knocked it out of his grasp. Her eyes never left his, those creepy, mismatched, half-human, half-beast eyes.

A flaming sword spun through the hole made by the Black Dragon and sliced clean through Baboo’s tail. Will fell to the ground and rolled away just in time to avoid being flattened by Squatt. Baboo screamed, nearly getting trampled herself. Will glanced out the huge hole in the wall to see the Red Ranger running along the spine of the Black Dragon, which was trying in vain to buck her off. Jess waved at Will, then she pulled her gun from her thigh and opened fire on the man who used to be Will’s father.

*Are Jess and Master Tom fighting on top of the Dragon zord?* asked Ewan. *That’s pretty fuckin’ rad.*

*So happy to entertain,* thought Jess.

*No seriously, it’s awesome. I’m kinda fangirling up here.*

*We’re almost there,* thought April. *But more ships are coming. We need to split their focus between more than just the Halcyon and Salamander or else neither of us will last long.*

*Alright,* thought Will. *Ewan, you’re up. Time to see that zord of yours.*

*Jesus, finally.* Ewan slipped off the Halcyon’s wings and into an open freefall. His descent slowed as air swirled around him, gathering strength until he found himself in the eye of a tornado. Ewan didn’t even try to hide his excitement, despite the severity of the moment. *Fuck… YEAH!!!* The tornado blasted apart in all directions, increasing the Halcyon’s dive by nearly twice its current speed. April fought to maintain the Halcyon’s descent in a way that wouldn’t bury the zord a hundred feet underground.

But soon the great blue bird was joined by another. Where the Halcyon was squat and fat, this was lithe and graceful. Where the Halcyon was jagged ice and short, hard feathers, this was smooth, billowy down and ethereal wisps of golden smoke.

The Yellow Phoenix let loose a screech that could be heard for miles around.

*Shit just got real,* thought Ewan. With two zords now bearing down on him, Master Tom and the Black Dragon took to the skies. Jess leapt from its back, falling through the hole in the wall to join Will, and not a moment too soon: Squatt and Baboo had recovered.

“What one do you want?” Will asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” said Jess. “I’ll fuck up either one.”

“We’ll fight together then. Just… don’t try to ride on my shoulders.”

“Hmph.”
Jess brandished her sword, and Will his shield, and together they raced to place themselves between Jack and the tag-teaming monsters. Baboo massaged the end of her tail, which continued to spout thick, black blood with each heartbeat. Squatt rose to his full height, taking up nearly the entire hallway.

*How much more time do you need?* Will asked Jack.

*About three minutes. If only Alpha was here, then I could cut that time in half. When this finishes, we’ll only have a few seconds to get clear of the building, so be ready to haul ass.*

*Got it.*

Rangers and monsters charged each other at the same time. As the four clashed, the metal around them rattled beneath the force of the battle raging outside. The Halcyon and the Phoenix were hopelessly outnumbered as the Black Dragon and the dark fleet blotted out the sun with their attacks. Every beat of the Phoenix’s wings brought with it a small hurricane that spun the black ships in all directions and sent their shots wide – sometimes into each other, but just as often straight down on top of the prison.

*This building might not last three minutes,* thought Jess, and Will was afraid that she might be right.

He and Jess danced with Squatt and Baboo in the close quarters of the hallway, sword and shield flashing against Squatt’s rock-hard skin and Baboo’s incredible speed. Outside, April’s and Ewan’s vision showed them a bleak landscape of black, devoid of color save for the yellow, blue, and red of the zords raging against the swarm. Though the Salamander proved that the zords could fight without a pilot, Will felt that its autopilot was limited: at best, it could only wreck a few mudmen and stand as a shield against attacks. At worst, it might lose power before the Rangers were ready for their final attack. Will knew the Lion would be useless right now; the threats outside were airborn, and the Lion still needed to recover.

Will didn’t know how many times Jess saved his life during the fight. Her reflexes were a little faster, her aim a little better. His years of martial arts training simply were not as helpful as her natural reflexes and her suit’s excellent fighting skills. They fought as a four-armed unit, her sword in her right hand and his shield in his left, blocking for each other, deftly moving aside to give the other a clear space for a counterattack, pushing Squatt and Baboo back when one of the Rangers lost his or her balance. At one point, the fight even forced them to switch weapons so that Jess could shield herself from Squatt’s powerful punch. As their weapons changed hands, Will’s shield burst into flames and Jess’ sword nearly blinded the Rangers with a sudden flash of light. The effect surprised Squatt and Baboo about as much as it surprised the Rangers.

And still, Will and Jess were losing.

No matter how they moved, neither Ranger could push the monsters more than a few feet back. If Squatt or Baboo was smart enough to remember the reason why all of Rita’s forces had retreated to the lake, all it would take would be for Squatt to go full “raging bull” mode again, and the Rangers probably wouldn’t be able to stop him before he reached Jack. Will’s mind raced through the other Rangers’ visions of the past, desperate for some kind of clue for a weakness. Rita had corrupted Serket while she still lived, but Baboo – or, Monga – had been killed before Rita turned her. Rita had said something about the living being stronger, so perhaps death had made these two dumber.

*Speaking of dumber, thought Ewan, anyone seen Goldar lately?*

*Not since he captured me,* thought Jess.
Rita must be holding her strongest fighter back, thought Will. Don’t give her an opening to unleash him.

Will glanced past Squatt and Baboo. The massive hole in the ground from Jess’ zord loomed several feet behind them. Below, Rito’s corpse still hung from Jess’ red mesh. If Will and Jess were careful, they might just be able to back the pair into the hole. We need to push harder, Will thought to Jess. Attack, now!

A large piece of ceiling caved in just behind Squatt as more cannon fire rained down on the prison. Squatt spun, grabbed the rubble, and flung it at the advancing Rangers. Will slid under on his knees, deflecting the metal with his shield, while Jess leapt up, just barely scraping along the ceiling to avoid it. The metal chunk flew down the hallway, narrowly missing the disrupter.

That was a little too close, thought Will. He and Jess regrouped, standing close together so that Will’s shield could protect them both. Squatt and Baboo stared them down. The pair really was a comical sight: the massive ogre in his tattered clothes and gray skin, the lithe baboon that rode on his shoulders with blue fur and half-beast half-human eyes. But he was nearly indestructible, and she nearly impossible to hit. They were a deadly pair indeed. Had the Rangers attacked the train early in the night to disable Rita’s EMP, as Will had wanted, these two likely would have killed them all. Zordon must have seen that. He had steered them clear until they were at least a little more ready.

Squatt took a step forward, then stopped with a roar and a shake of his head. For a moment, Will thought that more of the ceiling had fallen on him, but now Will saw that shadows fluttered around Squatt’s face and Baboo’s as well. Will heard the echo of a voice whispering something, but he couldn’t tell what. Slowly, as though he fought against his own actions, Squatt knelt into a runner’s starting position.

Jess swore. “Rita’s controlling them,” she said. “She’s sending them after…”

Squatt exploded forward and knocked the Rangers hard to either side.

The Rangers tore after the mind-controlled monsters. Outside, the Phoenix crashed back-first into the lakebed, the Black Dragon landing hard on its chest with teeth gnashing. A dozen ice-feathers punched into the Dragon’s back, giving the Phoenix enough of an opening to blast the Dragon away with wind. The Phoenix righted itself and returned to the skies just as a volley of cannonballs deepened the crater made by its body.

Will’s pistol still lay in the hall, where Baboo had knocked it from his hand earlier. Now he scooped it off the ground as he and Jess sprinted after the monsters. His hand twitched, aching to fire off some shots to slow Squatt down, but any wayward blast could hit Jack or the disrupter. Reluctantly, Will holstered his pistol. He thought a warning to Jack, but the Green Ranger was distracted by his work and the guidance Professor Cranston was giving him. They would finish the disrupter soon, but Squatt and Baboo would reach them even sooner.

Give me a boost, thought Jess.

What? thought Will. I said no shoulder rides.

Jess flourished her sword. Shield. Now.

At full sprint, Will fell into step directly behind her. Jess leapt, and Will leapt with her. Red boots pressed against white shield, and at the same time both Rangers pushed apart, sending Jess rocketing away. She became a red streak that sang down the hall, trailing flame in her wake. With their backs to her, Squatt and Baboo never saw her coming.
A flash of steel. Squatt staggered to the side and crashed into one of the prison cells, taking Baboo with him. Jess corkscrewed in the air, just barely missing the disrupter. Jack didn’t even notice the body flying by. Will approached the prison cell slowly, his shield lighting the dark room. The floor was covered in black blood. Squatt’s head was stuck in the wall, and Baboo lay trapped under his massive body. She assaulted him with everything she had to get him off her, but he didn’t even seem to notice.

There was a high-pitched whine of a machine stirring to life in the hallway.

_Bomb’s armed_, thought Jack.

Jack, Jess, and Will leapt clear of the prison – courtesy of the Black Dragon’s hole in the wall – and were still high in the air when the disrupter went off. For a moment, light waves distorted inward toward the prison, bringing all the world to a dead silence that was almost peaceful. Then a great burst sent everything surging out. Will and the others were thrown even higher into the air by the blast. As his body spun out of control, Will could hear a woman’s scream from the palace and knew without a doubt that it was Rita. Will’s suit corrected his tumble through the air and, as he took in the new scene below, he summoned the White Lion once more.

The disrupter had doubled as a bomb, blowing the prison into a crater so big that it almost went as deep as the hole made by the Salamander. The air shimmered with silver electricity that jumped from black ship to black ship, zapping each one into oblivion as it went. Will could feel it in the air: the disrupter had worked. Rita’s connection to the Dark Dimension had been severed. Above him, a portal opened up to allow another ship to enter the fray, but as the silver energy touched it, the portal destabilized and closed around the ship, slicing it in half and sending its burning remains crashing into the lake below.

As the ships exploded out of the sky one by one, Will felt a fresh wave of power. Sunlight flooded the area, no longer blocked out by the massive fleet.

And with the sunlight, the White Lion zord returned.

Will landed on all four paws and let loose a roar. To his side, the Salamander waddled across the lakebed to catch her master, having seen her charges safely to the lake’s edge. On Will’s other side, the ground shifted around a ridge of rocks that rippled across the surface at an impressive speed. It took Will a moment to realize that he was looking at the Green Crocodile, the last of the zords to enter battle. The Crocodile swam just below the surface of the ground, its emerald eyes pointed upward to catch its master.

As one, the twins landed within their zords and joined the Lion. The Halcyon and Phoenix streaked by overhead, rending the air with their cries. The closer the zords got to each other, the more they could feel their powers aching to combine. Will knew that it was time.

“Rangers,” said Will, acting on the instincts bestowed on him by his Power, “form up!”

“Right!” said the others.

As one, the five Rangers shouted, “Megazord power, now!”

The zords locked on each other’s positions and began to shift their forms. Will shared a memory of his own with the other Rangers, from when Zordon first told him how to summon the White Lion.

_Your zords are incredible fighting forces on their own, each one the fullest expression of the element which your power represents. But they hold a secret. Under times of greatest need, your zords may combine to form Megazords of powers even greater than the sum of their parts. The more zords_
fused together, the greater the power, but I urge you: only use this when absolutely necessary. Use this too often, and the Earth itself will destabilize. Never forget that your powers come from the elements as much as it comes from my essence, and to abuse that power is to abuse the planet itself.

“Megazords?” asked Will, with an emphasis on the plural. “How many different ones are there?”

As many as there are combinations of the six of you Rangers, said Zordon. Yes, including the Black Dragon, for she was not always a force of evil. The ultimate Megazord would of course require all six of you, but if necessary fewer of you could combine. It only takes two, though this upsets the balance of nature. For instance, were the Blue Halcyon and Green Crocodile to form a Megazord, the result would quickly lead to mudslides, earthquakes, and floods all around the world unless more zords were added soon. A combination of the Phoenix and Salamander could rapidly lead to tornadoes made of flame, and so on.

“So the more zords, the more stable the elements are?” the White Ranger asked.

Exactly. Do not combine your zords until it is absolutely necessary, and you have gathered your full team together. The timing of your decision will save – or doom – the planet.

Will’s memory faded to the present. The White Lion was no longer a lion, strictly-speaking. It hovered in the air like a small sun, folding in on itself in ways that should have been painful but mercifully were not. The Crocodile and Salamander rumbled across the ground beneath him, folding, elongating themselves, bending at odd angles, shifting around the Lion’s body. Above, the Phoenix and Halcyon did the same. When the four zords attached to the Lion at the same time, Will’s body seized, and his mind melded into those of the other four Rangers. Their thoughts, their very memories became indistinct from each other. Suddenly Will was a young girl watching her father abuse her mother. He was a timid son of an alcoholic. He was a womanizer. He was a girl struggling to find her own identity. He was an orphan. He was the oldest child, the youngest, the middle, the twin, the only. He was boy and girl, dark-skinned and light, brunette and blond. He raced through five childhoods that intertwined until they were one.

All of these things happened in an instant, though they felt like a lifetime.

When Will came to, gasping for air, he looked down and realized that he had no body. His consciousness sat within the new machine; the Megazord was his body now. He felt the other four with him. All had experienced the same insane mind-trip, and no one was sure what to say next. What could you say, after being completely inside someone’s mind? What could you feel, after experiencing someone else’s entire life?

So, thought Ewan, with our powers combined... we are Captain Planet?

The Rangers laughed, happy to have the tension eased, and now they were able to focus on their new weapon. The five zords had come together to form an enormous humanoid body made of light, one that floated just off the ground like some ethereal being. Will had expected each zord to attach as a specific body part – say, an arm, or the head – but this was not the case. The five zords had blended into each other so completely that it was impossible to tell where one ended and the other began. Each Ranger had something of a focal point – Jess centered within the arms, Jack the legs, Ewan the torso, April the eyes and wings, and Will the brain – but they were too interconnected to discern any meaningful differences.

So, too, were the Rangers’ minds. Despite the Rangers’ foci around the zord, Will could no longer determine where he ended and April, or Jack, or Jess, or Ewan began. As overwhelming as it had been to pilot the White Lion, that was nothing compared to this.
Behold, said Zordon, the Angel Megazord, the result of a combination of all elements but darkness. In this form, balance tips in favor of light. Will, be careful that your mind does not dominate the others. You must take swift action or risk losing a part of yourselves to the White Ranger power.

Rita screamed from the top of her palace again. The Rangers felt her fury, though not one of them was afraid. Dark tendrils of Rita’s power flowed from the palace’s highest tower. They reached into the sky and latched on to the few ships that hadn’t yet been obliterated by the disrupter. The grotesque super-ship that April had fought soared down and became the center of Rita’s new dark spell. She pulled every ship she could into it, growing the monster larger and larger until it stood nearly as tall as the palace itself. Battleships formed its entire humanoid body. Mudmen crawled along its skin like ants. It was a crude imitation of the Megazord floating before it, and though it held several times more power than the three-part ship that had nearly taken down the Halcyon, the Megazord watched calmly as it completed its gruesome transformation.

“Your Megazord is nothing!” cried Rita, her voice magically magnified from the top of her palace. “The Dark Dimension will crush you into oblivion!”

Every last ship in the sky had been added to the creature. Its body was almost nothing but iron and cannons, and all were aimed at the Megazord. Behind the creature, the Black Dragon glided around the palace, suddenly dwarfed by the sheer size of the dark, misshapen ship.

The monster’s guns all fired at once. Thousands of projectiles roared through the sky, fully prepared to rend the Megazord into a million pieces like buckshot through tissue.

What it got instead was a wall of light.

Every last cannonball disintegrated to dust. The Megazord didn’t even lift a finger to defend itself. As Rita screamed her fury, the Megazord reached into the sky, and a massive sword of light, dozens of stories long and more than two stories wide, materialized in its hands. Without a word, it leapt forward and brought the sword down across the monster’s chest, leaving a thin orange line running from right shoulder to left hip. All was silent for the briefest of moments before the monster bellowed in agony and fell to one knee, bleeding golden dust like the sand of an hourglass. Calmly, the Megazord turned its gaze to Rita standing alone on the little balcony of her tower. She stepped back, her face a mixture of rage and terror.

“The Megazord never had that much power!” she screeched. “Black Ranger! I command you to join your zord with my monster, then destroy these upstarts!”

The Black Dragon spun around the tower and dove for the crippled machine at the Megazord’s feet. The Rangers felt the presence of the sixth Ranger within the zord. They recalled what Rito had said as he had carried Jess to Central Square. She cleansed the Dark Dimension from the Black Ranger power just so that she could get her little puppet dude into the Command Center… The Rangers felt Rita’s magic around the Black Ranger; she controlled him externally, much as she had with April in Central Square. A burst of April’s own power had freed her from Rita’s enchantment.

Now it was Master Tom’s turn.

Now you understand the risk I took, thought Zordon. In allowing Rita to attack me, I forced her to cleanse the Black Ranger power of the Dark Dimension’s corruption. Sever her strings, Rangers.

As the Dragon dove, the five Rangers sensed the Black Ranger beginning its Megazord formation with the monster… but something was amiss. Behind Rita’s control, they could sense a presence fighting her will. It tipped the Black Dragon toward the Angel Megazord just as Rita commanded the zord to form up.
Too late did Rita realize the trap she had fallen into. She turned the Dragon and tried to force its escape, but the six Rangers – Tom included – overpowered her. Rita could only watch, horrified, as the Black Dragon shifted into the Rangers’ Megazord, changing its form, tempering its overpowering light with shadow, granting it wings that were at once Halcyon and Phoenix and Dragon. Then the wings shifted again. The Dragon aspect disappeared and became something else. Slowly, the Black Ranger’s body faded into the Megazord.

Master Tom's memories hit the others in a rush. Childhood, high school, Kimberly Hart, martial arts tournaments, Will. So many memories of Will, watching over him, caring for him, loving him as the son he had never had. Then the memories of the Dark Dimension. Goldar’s deception, making him believe that the Rangers had attacked Kim. Tom’s own point of view when he killed Ewan’s mother, his mind screaming as his body performed the act with a grin. Every moment, Tom fought against Rita’s control, but the witch had simply been too powerful.

Until now.

Five minds became six. Zordon’s ultimate weapon now walked the Earth, and as the Rangers welcomed Master Tom into their team, and he strove to seek their forgiveness, Rita slunk back into her tower to prepare her final gambit.
Six minds flowing freely through each other made for some unexpected chaos. Through Tom’s memories of his old girlfriend Kim, April saw Coach Hart, her old gymnastics coach. The memories bled into each other until Tom performed his first handstand with the help of his old flame, and April shared passionate kisses with her trainer. Jack felt Will’s suspicion that Tom regretted adopting him, and indeed, they could see brief memories of Tom wishing for a different life. They also felt Ewan’s initial lust for April; all six Rangers saw her through his eyes as he analyzed every inch of her body, every curve beneath her bathing suit atop the cliffs. They also felt Ewan’s shame, for now he understood what it must be like to live as a woman who had to endure the ever-present gaze of creeps like him. They even experienced Jess’ recent fear that she would lose any of them, and the love she realized she had for her friends, followed immediately by her embarrassment that such private emotions were laid bare to the group.

All of these emotions tumbled over each other in a confusing heap. Jack felt as though their minds had been thrown into a clothes washer, and now memories were mashed up and thrown together for some spectacularly mismatched outfits.

The initial shock of convergence can be overwhelming, Zordon thought to them. This was one of many reasons why I did not reveal the zords’ technology to you so early on. A team with less cohesion than yours could go mad from the confusion. You could lose yourselves in the minds of your friends. Jack felt Tom’s surprise at hearing Professor Cranston’s mind linked to Zordon’s, and briefly the six Rangers flickered through Tom’s memories of the dorky professor in his high school years. Between the Professor, and April’s coach, and Will, Jack began to wonder if there was anyone from tonight to whom Tom wasn’t connected. Then Tom saw Jason the paramedic in the memories of the other Rangers. They felt his recognition of his old friend, and Jack’s suspicion was confirmed.

In time, Zordon continued, you will grow accustomed to functioning as one. Tom Oliver, I officially welcome you to my team of Power Rangers, and I feel I owe you an explanation. Your power may feel different now than it has these past few hours. Tom acknowledged that this was so. Jack and the others felt his intense shame and saw his memories of destroying the Command Center. It is alright, Zordon assured him. It was a feint, a trap of mine that Rita played into perfectly. It was not without its consequences, but the benefits have far outweighed the cost.

The first and most important benefit, of course, is that we freed your soul from Rita’s grasp, and this cannot be welcomed enough. Ten-thousand years ago, Rita Repulsa was banished from Earth by my old White Ranger, and I believe the memory has haunted her ever since. When she returned to Earth, she vowed vengeance on me and, in particular, the White Ranger. Over the course of the night, she obtained Will’s power coin, and though it did not contain his power as she thought it might, it held residual aspects of his essence, which is so similar to yours that Rita may have thought you his biological father. This is why she targeted you. She thought she already knew how to handle the other Rangers as she had in the past, so you became her secret weapon against the White Ranger.

But Rita overplayed her hand. She was overconfident in her own ability, and though it has indeed become great, I do not believe she anticipated the strength of character you possess. I know you felt
Professor Cranston’s presence while you destroyed the Command Center. I know you concealed him from Rita, and for that, I am eternally grateful. For Bill Cranston was the second part of my plan. He and I have already spoken at great length about what his knowledge has added to my Wisdom, but until now he has been unaware of the second, equally crucial part he has played. When Bill Cranston’s essence combined with mine, it altered me – not by a significant amount, for we already share many qualities, but enough to change one of my seven aspects, the only aspect not still connected to me at the time.

Simply put, the Black power is no longer that of Ambition. Tom Oliver is now the Ranger of Cunning, a slight but key difference from Ambition that will prevent Rita from ever reclaiming this power… unless of course she proves victorious today. And though the six of you are even finer Rangers than I could ever have asked for, the odds are still stacked heavily against you. You must remain on your toes: Rita will never admit defeat, even in the face of the Ultimate Megazord.

The Rangers sensed Rita’s power trickling through the air around them. Gone were the tendrils of darkness she had used to bring her battleships together; this power was smaller, more subtle. It reached past the Megazord and disappeared into the wreckage of the prison. Three tiny bodies floated out from the rubble: Rito, Squatt, and Baboo. All three were wrecked almost beyond recognition, and none of them so much as twitched as Rita pulled them toward the palace.

Rita herself reappeared at the palace balcony. “You stole my Ranger from me,” she growled. “You have defied me at every turn, foiled every plot!” Whispers of another voice, which Tom, Will, and April had heard before, echoed beneath Rita’s as she ranted. “You even killed my oldest comrades!” Rito, Squatt, and Baboo hung in the air over the broken battleship monster, which hadn’t stopped bleeding golden dust. “I admit that I underestimated your precious Megazord. I thought my power alone would be enough to stop you, well…” she laughed. “I guess I’ll just have to stir a few more ingredients into the pot!”

Rita flung the three corpses at the battleship. She turned and beckoned at something behind her, and a single mudman leapt from her balcony. It still held the more humanoid form of the early mudmen, rather than the mantis-like newer forms, though it was missing one of its arms. Tom’s mind showed surprise, then apprehension. Ewan’s mother, he thought.

She and the corpses landed on the battleship and sunk into its hull. “I may not have Rangers of my own any longer,” said Rita, “but these corpses should do nicely.” The ship groaned as metal ground on metal, nearly deafening the Rangers. “Behold!” Rita screamed above the sound, “the Dark Antizord!”

She must be the one who named Squatt and Baboo, thought Ewan. It’s really not her specialty.

If they thought this thing was ugly before, now the Antizord was positively repulsive, a sickening parody of the beauty of the Megazord. The guns that covered the battleship’s hull disappeared, replaced by lesions and boils that broke open with the slightest movement. Each wound gushed a thick green-brown pus that ran in bloody clumps. The monster’s surface became a mixture of the mottled, diseased skin of Squatt and the rotted bone of Rito. Here and there were patches of faded blue fur that bristled and crunched like dead grass. The Antizord had two functioning legs and four arms, just like the new mudmen, but it had at least twice as many vestigial appendages: misshapen stumps of extra arms and legs that stuck out at odd angles and wiggled with apparent uselessness.

The Antizord rose onto its two good legs, reached to its side, and broke off one of its own defunct limbs with a grunt.

It looks like death itself, thought Will.
It grabbed the dead limb in two hands and pulled apart, extending the bone until it became a rough imitation of Rito’s bone-sword.

*I believe that is Rita’s point, said Zordon. For our Megazord represents all that is life.*

The Antizord rumbled forward, its extra limbs waving in the breeze. Its speed was incredible; the Megazord barely lifted its sword in time to parry. When the two swords clashed, it rang like thunder across the entire lake and beyond.

The Megazord shoved its foe back and fired a blast of energy from its free hand. The Antizord swiped it away with a casualness that made the Rangers uneasy.

*Its power is incredible,* Will admitted.

*But if we beat it, thought Jess, then we beat Rita, right?*

*I don’t think so, thought Tom. Rita’s planning something inside the castle. I never learned what it was, but I know that she has something else up her sleeve. As long as we stay out here, we’re wasting time. But we can’t just let the Antizord run free, either.*

*Then we have to split up, thought Will, much as he hated to admit it. Master, do you know the palace layout?*

*Parts of it. I think I can sneak inside alone.*

*No. I’m coming with you.*

The Rangers sensed each other’s anxiety, Tom’s most of all. He feared anything happening to Will. He had seen Rita’s power first-hand and knew the dangers. But they also felt Will’s fear of losing another parent. He hadn’t been able to protect his old family, but he could protect Tom now. Jack and the others felt they had no choice; it would take at least four Rangers to pilot the Megazord in its current state, and even then it would be somewhat weaker without two of its pilots present.

But Tom was right: they could see his memories. Rita was planning something in the palace, and unless they stopped her now, she would unleash something truly horrible.

**Chapter 2 – Tom**

Tom shadow-walked to slip him and Will past the palace defenses; it was simply a matter of seeing a nearby shadow, and the darkness simply took them there. Melding minds with five other people – and college kids at that! – had been beyond description. To experience someone else’s life so completely, and to have five others experience the same of you... Tom had known Will since he was very young, and Ewan and Jack almost as long. He knew Jess mostly from anecdotes, and April he hadn’t met at all, yet the girl was so like Kim that it made him a little uncomfortable. But now he knew every inch of their lives, every triumph, every dark secret.

The experience had seen him stripped down, emotionally and physically. He had born all to these five kids, and he had seen them with the same depth. For some time after exiting the Megazord, he struggled to recall which were his memories and which were those of the others.

*This way,* he thought to Will. To the others he added, *Once we’re inside, we won’t be able to*
communicate. Rita has enchantments everywhere.

Understood, thought the other Rangers. The Megazord dodged beneath a rotted slash with the speed of a lightning bolt and punched the Antizord hard in the stomach. Its fist came away covered in pus and rotted flesh and more than a few blue hairs the length of a car. So gross, thought Ewan and Jess.

I feel bad ditching them as soon as the fight starts, Tom thought.

Me too, thought Will. But they understand, and they’re more than capable.

You should see how much you guys have pissed off Rita tonight.

Will chuckled. We have. We saw your memories, remember?

Oh… yeah, I almost forgot. Hey, Buddy…

It’s alright, Master. You never made me feel like a burden, not once, even if you thought it sometimes.

Thanks, Will. Tom used darkness to teleport the two Rangers through an open window, right between a pair of patrolling guards. I’m so proud of you. What you guys have accomplished is incredible.

And what we’ll accomplish with you on our side will just be that much better.

The inside of Rita’s palace was fashioned after an old gothic castle. No expense was spared to detail; every inch of the place had some ornate twist in its architecture or some clever work of artistry. Everywhere they looked, there was Rita Repulsa at her most beautiful. Paintings, sculptures, silhouettes within the fine details of the walls. Everything celebrated Rita in rich golds and deep, deep blacks. Even the torches along the walls looked like the sleeves of Rita’s dress.

But her mudmen were just as ubiquitous as she was, and they were on full alert with the Megazord at their front door. Not only that, but scattered among the mudmen were darker creatures than had been in the city. Rita had kept back her very strongest to protect herself. Fiery hellhounds, creeping spiders the size of horses, and flat-out demons lurked these halls, and any of them alone would prove a match for the two Rangers.

Rita’s throne room is in the central tower, thought Tom. He had to focus; his mind still swam with the memories of the others.

He led them through dark hallways, extinguishing torches and misdirecting monsters by breaking tiny chips off the decorations and throwing them down the hallways opposite where they intended to go. Sooner or later, though, he and Will both knew that they would have to fight. Stealth would only take them so far.

Here and there they caught flashes of the battle raging outside. Sometimes it was through quick thoughts from the other Rangers that breached Rita’s dark enchantments, but as Tom and Will climbed higher and higher, and Rita’s spells increased in potency, the two had to rely on the old fashioned method: looking out the window. The sight of such huge creatures battling so close by made Tom uneasy. They could feel the rumble of the Megazord’s clashes like heavy bass from a speaker. The light from its attacks lit the dark hallway with all the colors of the rainbow. Yet Tom could no longer contact the minds of the other Rangers.

Halfway up the tower, Tom began to have doubts. Nothing looked familiar anymore. They stopped
and glanced outside.

The central tower loomed across from them. *Rita’s enchantments are messing with my sense of direction*, he thought. *We’re in the wrong tower.* Tom cursed their luck just as a nearby mudman clicked in surprise. They’d been spotted.

The palace swarmed to life like Tom had just stepped on an anthill. Hundreds of mudmen crawled along the palace walls outside, and by the time Will silenced the first mudman a dozen more were already rushing up the stairs behind them, trailed closely by snarling dark wolves and pitch-black spiders that scurried along the walls and ceiling.

*Up!* thought Tom.

As they ran, ever spiraling upward, he reached toward the wall and pulled his black dagger from the shadows. Will led the charge with a pistol in either hand. Tom dropped smoke pellets and caltrops behind him to slow down their pursuers. Here and there he also placed deposits of explosive gel. Though the bulk of Rita’s army was below, the two Rangers still encountered plenty of opposition descending from the floors above. But speed was their greatest ally now, and those creatures who dodged around Will’s pistol blasts or Tom’s quick dagger slices joined with the growing tidal wave that followed them.

They reached the top floor sooner than Tom expected. He and Will nearly barreled straight into a large double-doorway made of thick oak. A pair of full-length torches burned an ominous purple on either side. Will pushed the doors open to find a sort of magical workshop, with vials full of colorful liquids and dead animals and body parts lining the walls around a central cauldron. It smelled like something had died in a coffee shop, and the brown contents of the cauldron did not help make the smell any more palatable. Tom reached into his belt and flung the last of his explosive gel across the doorway. “This is gonna be close!” he said. “Blast the ceiling open!”

Will opened fire at the ceiling with both pistols, and as holes began to form, they heard bits of thought from the Megazord.

*Y… alright?* the others thought, complete with images of white energy bolts punching through the roof of the palace’s western tower. The tower, Tom noted, was absolutely covered in mudmen.

*We’re fine,* thought Will. Then to Tom, *So what’s the plan?*

*We jump,* thought Tom. The first wave of monsters was almost to the top of the stairs; the sound of them was quickly growing to a deafening roar. *You ready?*

Will holstered his guns. *Rita’s new skylights have been installed.*

Tom fired a shot at the explosive gel outside the room just as the first mudmen summited the stairs. He and Will leapt as hard as they could, straight through the pair of holes Will had shot through the ceiling. Rita’s central tower was over a dozen stories taller than the western tower, but the explosion from Tom’s gel pushed them higher and, at the same time, blew away the top of the tower and all of the mudmen climbing it. One by one the extra spots of gel caught fire and exploded, creating a chain reaction that spiraled down to the tower’s base. Those few mudmen not caught in the blast made straight for the pair of Rangers sailing through the air, and unfortunately, they were catching up.

*Not to worry!* thought the Rangers in the Megazord. Tom felt his and Will’s bodies being accelerated through the air by invisible wind currents. The Megazord kicked at the ground, sending up a cloud of rocky debris that it flung behind Tom and Will like a shotgun blast that rent the pursuing mudmen to dust.
*One last push and we’re there!* thought Tom.

*We gotcha!* thought the others, but the Antizord pressed its attack and found an opening while the Megazord was distracted. Tom felt the wind collapse behind him, and his ascent slowed.

Rita’s balcony was just ahead, but at their current rate, they wouldn’t make it. Up here, there were no shadows Tom could use to teleport them to safety.

Will turned his body through the air and slowed his jump to bring himself closer to Tom. He grabbed Tom’s shoulder. *Hang on,* Will thought. The White Ranger pulled the two of them along a trail of light. Tom’s mind refused to even *try* to comprehend the speed.

Tom landed, tucked, rolled. When he hauled himself back to his feet, he and Will stood in Rita’s throne room.

The room was dark, lit sparingly by sconces along the wall that glowed with Rita’s trademark purple flame. Gray mist hovered along the floor, as it did within the Dark Dimension. The room itself was of a medium size, and dome-shaped, as if to serve as imitation to Zordon’s Command Center. At the far end, sitting opposite the balcony, was the throne itself.

The throne was as beautiful as the woman sitting on it, the style as gothic as the rest of the palace. It was made of a black material – obsidian, perhaps – that glinted in the purple firelight. Rita watched the pair of Rangers enter without a word, her usual grin replaced by a look of pure fury. To her right stood Goldar, his arms crossed and his usual smirk playing across his fiery face.

To Rita’s left, Kimberly Hart lay on the floor, her arms and legs tied and her mouth gagged.

“I was hoping you two would be the ones foolish enough to come,” growled Rita. “I welcome you to my vengeance.”

**Chapter 3 – Will**

Kim lay unmoving, but her eyes were open, and they watched the two Rangers with a blank expression.

“Surprised, Tom?” taunted Rita. “Don’t be. I let you see only what I wanted you to.” A large group of mudmen landed on the balcony, led by a demon with leathery wings and a twisted face without eyes. Tom and Will drew their weapons, but Rita tipped her staff forward, and a dark shadow leapt between the Rangers and engulfed the devil and his team. Their mouths opened but uttered no sound. Pieces of the mudmen fell apart as the shadow condensed, slowly pulling the creatures toward a central point. Then all of the monsters collapsed into each other, crunching into a single, tiny body within the gravity of a miniature black hole. The monsters disappeared, and Rita waved the black hole away.

“I would still have my western tower if those fools had not chased you,” said Rita. “Now, where were we? Goldar?”

“Your plans,” the monster said with his usual roadkill voice. Will watched him closely. He’d never seen the monster so calm. Cocky, yes, but never quite like this. He looked as though Rita owned the world already, and this meeting was merely a formality. He looked as though the Megazord outside didn’t matter at all.
“Yes, my plans.” Rita held her staff across her lap. She stroked it idly as she talked. “You Power Rangers know nothing of what you are doing. I’m sure Zordon gave you his usual speech about light and dark, good and evil…” She spat.

“We saw what happened to the old Rangers,” said Will. “We saw what happened to you, Rita, and to you, Dreadwing.” Rita frowned. Goldar’s smirk only grew. “And at some level, I agree with you. Zordon forgot what he was protecting. When he sacrificed that village, he let the bigger picture get in the way of individuals. I can only imagine what you must have gone through, to lose the ones you love for something so unnecessary.”

“DON’T,” screamed Rita, “TRY TO RELATE TO ME. You know not of what I suffered! Zordon’s so-called wisdom let him kill Dreadwing out of spite! We gained nothing by letting them die! Nothing!” Rita took a moment to collect herself. She drew a deep breath, closed her eyes, and opened them again. The purple torches around the room pulsed in time with her breaths. “He wanted to alienate us from the rest of humanity. He wanted his Rangers to depend on him, and him alone. Do you know who else does that, hmm? Cult leaders. Zordon manipulated us, as he manipulates you now.” A faint smile played across Rita’s lips, though the smile did not reach her eyes. “Zordon knew of your affection for this woman, Tom Oliver.” Rita prodded Kim’s leg with her staff. Kim’s cry was muffled against her gag. Tom stepped closer, but Will held him back.

“What are you playing at, Rita?” Tom demanded.

“Did you really think that all I fought for was world domination? Did you even once question what my motives may be, or did you blindly follow whatever Zordon told you?”

Will abandoned his fighting stance. He held his hands to either side as a sign of peace. “Honestly, I’m tired of fighting, Rita. I would like to hear what you have to say.”

“You would?” Tom said.

“Everyone deserves to be heard,” said Will.

Rita shared Tom’s surprise, and continued with a hesitant eye on Will.

“Did Zordon ever tell you of the origin of the Dark Dimension?” she asked.

“He said it was a manifestation of evil,” said Will.

Rita smiled. “As ever, that great oaf only told you what he wanted you to know. When his kind first arrived on this planet, they were told of a great dragon locked away beneath the planet’s surface. Zordon and his idiotic band of travelers found this creature frozen within a crystal deep beneath the ground. They were foolish enough to remove the crystal, and, surprise surprise, the dragon’s spirit escaped. It spread its influence, caused mass extinctions on the Earth. It almost wiped out Zordon’s traveling party. Too bad it didn’t.”

“So Zordon made a mistake,” said Will. “He’s spent an eternity atoning for this. It doesn’t explain your actions.”

“Oh, but it does. Haven’t you figured it out yet? Darkness feeds off the light. I sought to take over the planet not to rule it, but to kill it. Destroy the Darkness’ source of energy, and it will die.”

Will could hardly believe what he was hearing. “Humanity is its energy source… So, you went crazy just because Zordon sacrificed a single village, and now you want to do the same for the entire human race!!?”
Rita laughed softly. “I admit that Dreadwing’s death may have affected my sanity. I had already dabbled in powers beyond that which Zordon granted us, so I used it to call forth my lover’s spirit into a newer, stronger form.” She motioned at Goldar. The scratch on his cheek, which Will had given him with his own sword yesterday evening, wrinkled as Goldar chuckled softly. The spider web of white light from Will’s power coin throbbed a steady beat that radiated out from Goldar’s eye. “But while I lay imprisoned on Mars, I had a great deal of time on my hands to think. I served Zordon for hundreds of years as his most loyal Ranger. Our team battled demon after demon after demon, and do you know what happened? More appeared. Their numbers never diminished. If anything, the more we fought, the stronger they became. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized something. The village Zordon sacrificed – Dreadwing’s village: after its destruction, demons stopped appearing in that area. And do you know why? I think you do. You are so very clever.”

“No humans,” said Will. Now he understood.

“No humans,” nodded Rita. “Without humanity, there is no evil. It was upon this realization that I started my preparations for this day. Dark Matter has a consciousness, but it is weak and easily malleable. I knew that I could use it to destroy itself. I would take over the Earth, and I would cleanse it of the light that cast such wicked shadows into the universe. My hope was that you humans of today, you enlightened, civilized beings, would see my power and bow without further bloodshed… but you Rangers complicated matters. In battling you, I had to capture more humans and turn them into my Putty army. I had to feed the darkness because of your resistance. Every Putty you defeated was another innocent lost in the name of your misplaced justice.”

Will tried to ignore this fact. He would grieve for the high loss of life later. “You forced our hand. Don’t try to blame your actions on us. You would kill them all anyway.”

“Ever the pet of Zordon. You wash your hands of any wrongdoing, no matter the pool of blood in which you drown. But this is irrelevant. My plan is almost complete. With one choice, I will topple your team and destroy this world. I will make the sacrifice that Zordon never could. To destroy evil, I must also destroy good, for what is one without the other? Each is defined by the existence of its opposite. I destroy one, and the other will fade into nothing. Tom. Black Ranger… your Power has changed.”

“That’s right Rita,” said Tom. “You won’t control me anymore.”

Rita sneered. “Indeed. But I saw your mind, Tom, when it was still mine to control. I know your desires, and they do not lie with this would-be son of yours. You know the truth. I have brought your lover, and with her comes a choice.” Rita waved her staff. The bindings around Kim fell away. Kim sat up, rubbing her wrists and ankles and cheeks.

“Tommy?” Kim whispered, staring at the Black Ranger. “Is that really you?”

Tom hesitated, then removed his helmet. “Hey Kim,” he said, his voice straining to summit his emotions.

Kim smiled through tears. “I saw you two fighting on the news earlier. I had a feeling that it was you.”

“That’s enough, dear,” said Rita. She waved her staff again, and black bindings jumped from the shadows and tied Kim up.

“Let her go,” Tom said through gritted teeth. “She has nothing to do with any of this.”
“On the contrary,” said Rita pleasantly, “she has everything to do with this. I will destroy humanity, Ranger. Make no mistake about that. I will use the Dark Dimension against itself and destroy its source of renewal. Without the evil we humans cause day in and day out, the Dark Dimension will wither to nothing, and this planet can survive. We humans had our chance, and we failed. But I like you, Tom. I saw your pains, and I want to offer you the choice Zordon never gave me. If you stand down now, I will let you and Kim live. No tricks. You will be safe and comfortable, and you will be happy together until you die, the last of humanity. All you have to do is stop fighting, and let history take its course.”

“No way, Rita,” Tom answered immediately. “I'm not going anywhere without my son.”

Rita waved the comment away like a mosquito. “Oh very well. If family is so important to you, the boy may live, too.”

Will recalled Rita’s speech in Central Square, about how family turned humans on each other. Human in-fighting was like a breeding ground for Dark Matter. Humanity helped spawn the very enemy that the Power Rangers were sworn to fight in its defense. The struggle would be never-ending so long as humans lived. At last Will understood Rita.

Now, humanity itself rested on the decision of Tom Oliver.

Master Tom’s eyes never left Kim’s. So much was said between their unspoken gaze. Will had seen Tom’s memories of her. They had been so close. Tom had already found a place to live in Springfield, where Kim had moved to train full-time in gymnastics. He had spent weeks, months perfecting what he would say to try to win her back. Then Will’s family had died, and, well, Will knew the rest already.

Master Tom said nothing. The two giants raged outside, and from the sound of it, neither had gained the upper hand. But within this throne room, Will had absolutely no chance of contacting the other Rangers or Zordon. It was just him and Tom against Rita and her impossible choice.

Instead, Will found himself glancing to Goldar. The monster hadn’t said a word this entire time, but something about his calm just unsettled Will. He had barely moved a muscle; he simply stood there, smirking at the Rangers. Will’s mind began to wander through the events of the night, the things he had learned about the Rangers’ past, the memories of the old White Ranger. Goldar had once been Dreadwing, Rita’s human lover. He had been killed by a great dragon, which the Yellow Ranger had shot down soon after it destroyed Dreadwing’s village. Rita used dark magic to summon Dreadwing’s spirit back to hi–

Will’s stomach dropped. Goldar’s good eye flickered in his direction, and Will saw the echo of another face moving just behind Goldar’s. Will had seen that face before – in the memories of April, who had seen a face in Rita’s shadow in Central Square. It appeared to manipulate Rita, though she obviously had no idea.

The Dark Dimension controlled Rita. The spirit she had summoned into Dreadwing wasn’t his at all, but that of the great dragon, the same one from the legend Zordon had told them. The answer was right there, in Zordon’s past. They were told of a great dragon who had been locked away beneath the planet’s surface.

Rita wasn’t the mastermind here. She never was.

Tom opened his mouth to speak. Will leapt forward so fast that Rita had no time to throw up a defense. But one had already been set in place, for Will’s body smashed against an invisible wall at the top of the steps leading to the throne. He tumbled back. Tom was at his side immediately.
“Buddy!” said Tom. “You okay?”

“I have to touch her,” Will whispered.

“You… what?”

“Like I did with you in Central Square. Remember?”

Tom’s eyes widened as he recalled their touch that sent Will’s thoughts into his mind. “Together,” Tom nodded.

“Together.”

“Stay out of this, White Ranger,” Rita snarled. “You have caused enough damage tonight. Tom Oliver! I will give you one more chance. Do not waste it. Now, what is your decision?”

“Sorry Rita,” said Tom, “but I choose light, and all the shadows that come with it!”

He grabbed Will’s arm. The two of them turned into shadow and traveled along the ground, where Rita’s throne blocked the light of the torches behind her. The Rangers appeared on either side of Rita and grabbed her arms. Will forced his mind into hers with every ounce of focus he had, and Tom did the same. Rita screamed, tried to force the Rangers away, tried to touch either of them with her staff to blast them away, but they kept hold as black energy surged through one side of her body and white through the other.

Will and Tom thought of good, of the heroic deeds they had seen this night, not just by the Rangers but by everyone else. The army who had fought bravely against the Black Dragon. The people who had survived complete darkness with nothing but each other to cling to. Bill Cranston and his sacrifice for Zordon’s sake. Jason the paramedic and his insistence that everyone else receive healing salve before tending to his own burned arm. Adam and Zack fighting the mudman inside the Youth Center, even though the fight was hopeless. April’s mother, whose final words were encouragement for her daughter. All of those police officers, and fire fighters, and doctors and nurses and EMTs who had seen to their duty first and their own lives second. Even the media who flew dangerously close to the battlezone so that the rest of the world would see the truth. So many had died tonight, protecting those they loved.

The Dark Matter within Rita simply could not handle this new kind of attack. It raged against her body, tried to tear it apart, but Tom’s and Will’s powers kept her together. The darkness tried to steal into the Rangers, but they blocked it at every turn until, finally, it released its hold on Rita Repulsa and disappeared into the room. Her body went limp. Tom and Will let go. Rita’s staff clanged to the floor. The two Rangers stepped away from the throne to give Rita some space.

Rita’s eyes opened. Though still golden-yellow and slit like a cat’s, they had lost their odd, ethereal glow. “I…” she breathed, “I am… me.” Her voice had lost its high, grating quality. She laughed, and truly it was an infectious laugh. “Gods, what did you do?”

“We freed your soul from the Dark Dimension,” said Will, “just as we’ve done with all the other old Rangers.”

Tears welled in her eyes. “You cannot know what this means to me. To be free… Here.” She held out her hands. The two Rangers shared an unsure glance before placing their own hands in hers.

Will’s mind felt the familiar tumble into a memory, but this time he was not the old White Ranger. He flew across the open plains in the Black Dragon as Rita argued with Zordon.
“You mustn’t go against this foe,” urged Zordon, “it is not what it seems! You cannot defeat it!”

“So we just let it roam free?” demanded Rita. “This dragon is unlike anything the world has seen before. If we don’t destroy it, it could burn everything.”

“We are not prepared to fight this creature. Please, Rita. You are my strongest Ranger. I cannot lose you today. We must regroup and create a plan of attack.”

“And leave Serket, Dreadwing, and that entire village to die? We are better than this.” She warped the space within the zord and shut Zordon out of her mind. She could see the great beast approaching through Serket’s vision. The Yellow Ranger seemed to be holding it off, but Rita still had to hurry.

_The others are too far away_, she thought. _And this creature prevents our teleportation. Zordon may be right, but so am I. I will do anything to contain such an evil. I have already contained the evil within this power of Ambition. I can do it. I have to._

So much rode on her shoulders. Taming the black Power had changed Rita. It had strengthened her, but at great cost. She had lost all her family, all her old friends. They had died believing she had abandoned them, all because Zordon forced his Rangers to live apart from the world – “above the rabble,” as Rito liked to quip. The black Power had tried to corrupt Rita’s mind, but she fought back. It promised unspeakable power, but she had turned it on itself, forced it to divulge this power without bending her to its will. She had begun to dabble in mastery over death. She suspected that this aspect of Zordon was what kept the Rangers alive for so many centuries.

And in that time, this Ranger Corp had all but fallen apart. Rita would not be the first to say it, but weak leadership had gotten the better of them. Her Power reminded her that she should have been the leader. She reminded the power to mind its own business.

The great beast screamed in Serket’s vision just as Rita caught sight of the volcano. The beast lost altitude, righted itself, and then crashed into the mountainside. Something was wrong. It should not have been so easy.

Rita leapt from her zord and landed in the shadows beside Serket. She could feel the death nearby and knew that it was Dreadwing. All at once, the stress broke her. Ambition’s darkness flooded into her mind, and, hardly knowing what she was doing, she stormed past her old friend and knelt beside Dreadwing’s broken body.

_I can fix him_, the Power promised.

_Do it_, thought Rita. _I am through with Zordon and his treating humans like pawns._

From within the body of the great beast, a deeper darkness stirred. It resonated with Rita’s power and utterly consumed Rita’s mind.

Will retuned to the present, unsure of how to digest what he had seen.

“Thank you,” Rita smiled. “Thank you for freeing me from the prison of my own power. I—”

A flash of steel so fast that Will’s eyes couldn’t even see it. Goldar’s sword smashed into Rita’s throne, just at the height where her neck had been, but she was no longer there. Will and Tom jumped down the half-dozen steps that led up to the throne just as the top of the regal chair fell forward on itself with a heavy thud.

“The darkness has left me,” Rita said as she stepped from the shadows to stand beside them, “but I am not yet powerless.”
“Stupid bitch,” said Goldar, resting both hands on the hilt of his sword. “How foolish were you, to think that the Dark Dimension did not notice what you were doing?”

The dark spirit that had left Rita’s body now floated out of the darkness of the throne room, over the broken throne, and toward Goldar. The monster dropped his sword and spread his arms wide. “I have subsisted as half a soul for too long,” he said. Black shadow swirled out from his chest like a funnel, collecting into something in front of Goldar’s body.

“We should stop this,” said Will.

“No,” said Rita. “You will have to defeat his complete form if you want to be victorious. He will be more powerful in this form, but so are you.” As the dark thing grew larger and larger, Goldar began to wither beneath his golden armor. The fire in his eyes dimmed. The bright scratch on his cheek faded into nothing. Will and Tom watched, dumbfounded, as the dark spirit within Goldar joined the one that had resided in Rita and slowly formed a body of its own.

The body grew from the torso out. A black heart was covered by ribs, which in turn grew black flesh around it as the skeleton extended to form limbs and a silver skull. But the flesh that grew on this body did not look like muscle, at least not like any kind Will had seen in his anatomy books. Where muscle was smooth, this flesh was lumpy, almost like it was coiled in on itself. In fact, the more it formed, the more it resembled brain tissue.

Goldar’s armor clattered to the floor, leaving an emaciated gray corpse standing frozen behind the new body of pitch black. The golden armor lifted into the air and slowly, delicately, reformed itself around this new entity. As it did, darkness crept into the armor and turned it from gold to a silver that was at once shiny-new and immeasurably old. The armor etched itself all around the body, even forming a grated mouth covering both sinister and cold. The creature hovered a few inches off the ground, but now there was a soft boom, and the creature fell to its feet, completed. Goldar’s old body was gone.

“I have waited for this day for eons,” it said, its voice raspier than Goldar’s. The voice was ancient, and menacing. Despite himself, Will felt a dread in his heart when it spoke. “I have hidden within this cretin, biding my time, waiting for the perfect opportunity while my other half bent the fool Ranger to my will.” It stood to its full height. It was tall, and it appeared male. Will, Tom, and Rita backed away slowly as its glowing red eyes looked past them like they were nothing. “The smell of this planet offends me,” the creature said. It raised an arm. The palace rumbled. The floor shook. Then Will felt something like a hook latch onto his stomach and yank. He tumbled through space and landed, unexpectedly, exactly where he stood.

Yet everything had changed.

The torches along the wall winked out. Will’s feet left the floor. Outside was darkness and silence. Next to him, Tom gasped for breath, clutching at his throat as he also lifted into the air.

No, not air, thought Will. His suit confirmed his fears. We’re in space. Next to him, Kim lifted off the ground as well, and Will realized that she would soon die without oxygen. Thankfully, his own helmet provided him with a steady supply. Rita alone appeared unharmed. She stood anchored to the ground, fury in her eyes as the new creature taunted her.

“I am not the weak and malleable fool that you thought me,” the creature said to her, even though by all accounts Will shouldn’t have been able to hear him in space. “I do not seek the Earth’s destruction. I am Dark Matter. I am the Dark Dimension incarnate. I will throw the Earth into chaos and feed off the atrocities your pathetic humans will commit on each other. Fear me, Rangers! For I am Lord Zedd, and I will usher your race into an age of eternal darkness!”
Chapter 4 – Jack

Rita’s deathly Antizord pressed its attack with its rotting bone sword and its extra arms, flailing them all in wild attacks that the Megazord danced around with increasing desperation. It broke off another appendage and threw it like a dart, reminding the Rangers uncomfortably of Scorpina’s stingers. The diseased projectile lodged itself in the Megazord’s side, and all four Rangers felt the pain burn through them. Jess pulled the stinger out while the boys moved the Megazord away to regroup and April reached within the zord, using the Halcyon’s power to draw the dart’s venom out before it did some real damage.

But the Antizord would not let up. The Rangers dodged a flurry of attacks, but with April focused on removing the venom, the others lost just enough of an edge that the Antizord found an opening. The Antizord landed a hard punch to the Megazord’s body that it followed up with a flurry of hard hits and cuts before ending with a massive uppercut to the Megazord’s jaw.

Jack felt himself tumble through the air, but more alarmingly, he felt the minds of the other three Rangers rip away from his. The Megazord crashed onto its back, and suddenly Jack realized the truth: he was the only pilot still inside the Megazord.

Jack tried to move, but the machine was immensely complex. For one mind to control a six-part entity was nearly impossible. Jack may as well have sat at a desk with six computers and try to type out essays for different subjects on each one, all at the same time.

Jack! thought Jess. Jack! You alright?

Jess and the others stood together out in the open lakebed. The Megazord lay several hundred meters away, a bit of smoke curling from its chin and the dozens of cuts along its multicolored body. A foot the size of a building fell into the ground just ahead of the Rangers. The Antizord glared down at them, and through their shared vision Jack properly understood what an ant must feel like.

Welp, thought Ewan, that’s a big thing.

We have to get back to the Megazord, thought April. Jack can’t pilot it by himself.

I can, he thought to them.

Memory shift. Jack groaned; the last thing he wanted right now was to fall into the memory of the old Green Ranger, but away he went.

Grock lay on his back, breathing hard. His muscles ached, his bare chest covered in sweat and blood from long scratches. He wasn’t sure how much longer he could go on. He felt like his heart might explode from the exertion; no one had ever pushed him so hard like this before.

With a feral cry, Rita finished, her nails digging into Grock’s chest so hard that new cuts opened. She pulled herself off of him and dressed herself while he fought to catch his breath. “Not bad,” Rita said lightly. Grock felt like he’d just come out of a war, and he’d been on the losing side. How did such a petite woman have such stamina? “Monga would be devastated.”

Grock’s eyes widened. “She can never find out!” he said. Now that their forest tryst was over, and his mind was no longer clouded by lust, Grock wondered just what in seven hells he had been thinking. Monga was his lover, not Rita. Why did he now find himself in Rita’s bed? “She cannot
“Break her?” Rita turned, her demon eyes smiling. Grock had never trusted those eyes, but after Dreadwing’s death he had sworn there was something sinister behind them. “Surely our Ranger of Harmony is not so fragile as that.”

“She is a sensitive soul,” said Grock. It had always been one of his favorite things about the Blue Ranger. Ever since they’d met, that fateful day hundreds of years ago when Zordon had pulled him through the skies to his secret Command Center, he had been spellbound by Monga’s beauty and natural charm. He had tried to court her dozens of times, but each time she refused. It was only on Serket’s insistence that she finally relented. “One day!” Monga had said. “And then I beg you never ask me again.”

“See, big guy?” Rito had grinned. He was always grinning. “Stalk an antelope long enough, and eventually it has to go to sleep!”

Grock accepted Monga’s terms. The next day, he used the Green Crocodile to carve out a little waterfall not far from Monga’s village. He took her there, watched her eyes light up at the sight. She splashed through the little pond at the waterfall’s base, laughing as the water caught the sunlight like sapphires. They had been together ever since.

Until now.

What have I done? Grock thought. I am stronger than this. Rita tricked me with her words, seduced me with her flattery.

“She is sensitive,” agreed Rita. “How would she cope, if she ever learned of such a transgression.”

Grock’s nostrils flared. “You seduced me. Witch!” He leapt to his feet, not caring to put on any clothes. They were deep enough in the forest that no one was likely to see. That had been the point of this location, after all. “You have always envied her. You would use me to destroy her heart!”

Rita’s smile knew no bounds. “Yes,” she cooed. “But understand that you fell into my arms of your own volition. I used no enchantments. The foundation of your love has grown weak indeed. I think you should tell her yourself. I shall do so, if you lack the will.”

Grock had heard enough. She was lying; she had to be. She must have enchanted his mind. “Strength!” he bellowed.

Or he would have. His voice caught in his throat. He looked down. A dagger of shadow poked out from his chest, right where his heart rested. He couldn’t breathe; his lung was punctured as well. He fell to his knees and realized that Rita held his power coin. She must have slipped it away from him while they had…

“And the Ranger of Strength is the second to fall,” said Rita. She raised her hand toward him, and her dagger ripped from his flesh and into her grasp. She licked the blade with a tongue that, moments ago, had kissed his skin as passionately as he had ever experienced. “This team’s foundation was as insecure as sand. Even now, Serket’s mind rots in my Dark Dimension. She always was a fool for her old birth place. The sight alone nearly destroyed her, just as the knowledge of your infidelity will destroy Monga. All that will be left will be my fool of a brother and our wretched saint of a leader.”

Grock’s vision began to dip into black. He dragged himself toward Rita. Maybe he could strangle her before he died. He was so much stronger than she. He could do it. He could…
A black staff snapped upside his head, and he fell over. Rita bent down until their faces almost touched. “Turning Serket’s mind is such a tedious process,” said Rita. “Killing you will be much faster. You will die, and I will bring you back, just as I did Dreadwing. Your strength was wasted on others; soon, you will serve only me.”

Jack returned to himself and found that he still lay on his back, though in a distinctly different scenario than he had found Grock. The Megazord had not yet moved, but the Antizord was coming this way.

*The visions always tell us something,* he knew. He had experienced them less often than the others had, significantly less. He liked to think that it was because he needed the least amount of help, but he was sure that was anything but the case. *What is this vision telling me?*

He ran back through it as fast as he could. Grock and Monga were lovers before they were Squatt and Baboo. That wasn’t terribly surprising, given how symbiotic they were now. But that wasn’t the important part. Rita had taken down the Green Ranger soon after the Yellow. She had exposed his weakness and exploited it. Jack transmitted this vision to the other Rangers, and Ewan thought it ironic that sex was the first thing Rita had tried on him in the Dark Dimension, too. *She’s nothing if not consistent, I’ll give her that,* he thought.

But that wasn’t the important thing, either. No one was seducing Jack. That wasn’t his weakness. He turned the vision over and over, ignoring the thoughts of the others as he tried to solve this problem on his own. The Antizord took a rumbling step in his direction. He had to move the Megazord. *Strength,* he thought. *I am the Ranger of Strength. I can do this myself. I am not Grock. Insecure as sand, that’s what Grock was. Under all those muscles, he wasn’t strong at all… but I am.*

The Megazord still lay motionless. He tried again to move it, focused all of his mind’s energy on getting this six-part machine off its back and into action. His mind was strong. If anyone could do this alone, he could.

And still the Megazord didn’t budge.

*Jack,* thought Jess.

He had tuned out the other Rangers, as he often did to Jess and Will and Ewan when he wanted to concentrate on something other than idle chat. But something in Jess’ voice caught his attention. It was a quiet plea, full of the love she had shown him in the prison. He hardly recognized the voice. *Jack,* she thought again, *you’re not alone.*

The realization hit him hard. Rita had isolated Grock and used his weakness against him. *Nothing is strong on its own,* Jack thought to himself. *A rope isn’t a single thread. A building isn’t a single brick. All this time, I thought my mind was my strength, but it’s not. It’s them.* He reached into the thoughts of the other Rangers, felt what he could of their essences and applied those feelings to the Megazord around him. *I am not alone. I never have been.*

The Megazord still lay motionless. Jack’s mind returned to his analogy of trying to use six computers at once. Crocodile, Phoenix, Halcyon, Salamander, Lion, and… Dragon? No, the Black zord was something else, now that Ambition had turned to Cunning. Jack puzzled apart the new Black zord, picked at its inner workings as well as the memories of Master Tom and the thoughts of the other Rangers. If he figured out what it was, then maybe he could control it. As he touched its center, he felt a growl, saw a dark muzzle covered in blood. Golden eyes peered at him, and little by little, the animal stepped out of the darkness and into the light of his mind.
The zord is a Wolf, he realized. Immediately the Black Wolf bowed and wagged its tail. It bounded happily toward him, and he felt its power in his mind. Now he knew the six parts of the Megazord; he just had to fit them together. He thought of the six Rangers and how they interacted with each other. Siblings, friends, a parent, a son, a stranger. Six seemingly random elements combined in one great machine. Life was funny like that. Life, thought Jack. Something clicked in his mind.

Slowly, the Megazord hauled itself to its feet.

Holy shit, thought Ewan. Look at that.

S… Strength of mind, thought Jack as the Megazord tapped its own head.

Well color me impressed, thought Ewan. Hey, Z, looks like we’re proving you wrong. Again.

Jack does not pilot the Megazord alone, thought Zordon. He has tapped into the memories of the other Rangers to simulate multiple pilots. It may be short-term, but it is a brilliant solution nonetheless.

S-sure, Jack thought under the strain. T-that’s what I was… doing.

We still need to hurry back, thought Jess.

Kinda hard to do with Pusboy blocking the way, thought Ewan.

If you can fly around it, thought April, then Jess and I will distract it long enough for you to get back to the Megazord. We can’t leave Jack in there alone for too long. The strain could kill him. Honestly I’m surprised it hasn’t already… No offense, Jack.

Everyone’s ordering me around today, thought Ewan. I kinda like it. He leapt high and took flight. April and Jess leapt away, too, for the Antizord had bent down to try to bury them in the rock with one of its fists. April caught onto the arm and ran along its length. The arm was slick with ooze, but April was the Blue Ranger, and her power extended beyond simple water. Each step parted the nasty green stuff under her as she raced up the sloping arm. Below her, Jess latched onto the creature’s knee.

This is the grossest thing I’ve ever seen, thought the Red Ranger. Zordon had better have showers in that damned Command Center of his.

Jack strained to keep the Megazord on its feet. One foot, thought Jack, in front… of the other… Slowly, the Megazord took a step, then another. Jack felt like his head would explode, but he had to push forward. If the Antizord got to him before the other Rangers did, then their best weapon would be a goner. And if he couldn’t hold the six zords together until the others got back, then it would break apart, and they’d still be goners.

The Antizord soon noticed the Red and Blue Rangers. It stood quickly, but April had trained as a gymnast, and she wasn’t about to lose her balance. She readjusted and kept running up the Antizord’s arm. It reached over with its other arms and tried to squash her. She dodged nimbly out of the way.

But the Antizord had two arms on each side, not one, and the second arm seemed to take her by surprise. Frantically, she reached into the monster’s pus with her mind and drew out all the water it contained. The water condensed, and she pulled her faithful trident into existence just as the second arm clamped down on top of her. The hand impaled itself on her trident and pulled back quickly, launching April hundreds of feet into the air directly above the Antizord. Ewan fired several arrows of wind at the Antizord’s face as he flew overhead, trying to land a shot in either of its mismatched
eyes. Below, Jess placed both hands into an open boil on the Antizord’s knee and focused all of her fire power under the monster’s skin.

The Antizord screamed in pain, but it still had enough control over itself that it ducked a vicious punch from the Megazord. Jack was getting the hang of piloting solo, of pretending that his mind was that of six Rangers at once, but he knew that April was right: if he did this for much longer, he doubted his mind could take the stress. The Megazord may start ripping his mind apart, piece by piece.

Jack leapt wildly at the Antizord before it could harm any of his friends. He tried to punch the thing in the face, but he was too slow. The Antizord cut his arm with its bone-blade, then kicked the Megazord hard in the chest with the leg that Jess clung to. The shock of the kick sent her flying straight into the Megazord. She disappeared, and immediately Jack felt the strain on his mind lessen. I’m comin’, guys! thought Ewan. He weaved expertly through the fingers that tried to grab him until he hit the Megazord’s chest like a bullet. He, too, disappeared within it, leaving April alone as she arced high above the Antizord from being flung.

I’ve got an idea, thought Jack. April, call your trident to you.

While the Antizord reeled from the fire in its knee and the wind-arrows poking out of its face, Jack and Jess landed an uppercut to the Antizord’s chin, just as it had done to them. The Antizord’s head snapped back just as Ewan used the Megazord to create a blast of air over April, who dove straight down, trident-first.

The trident drove deep into the Antizord’s larger eye, so deep that it soon lodged itself in the back of the eye socket and possibly some of the brain beyond. The Antizord wailed and clawed at its face, catching April with one of its many hands and squeezing her hard. The Megazord launched an attack, and the two hulking things began a complex dance of weaving arms as the Megazord fought to get her back. Jack and the others paid close attention to the hand which contained April. If the Antizord landed a punch with that hand, the shock would likely crush her to death. As it was, they could sense her vitals dropping into emergency status. It was getting harder for her to breathe, and her suit was doing what it could to keep all the bones in her body from breaking.

Jack knew that they couldn’t match this opponent in a straight-up brawl, so he changed tactics. Suddenly the ground leapt up around the Antizord’s feet. It fell forward, and for a moment, April’s breathing returned. The Megazord lunged for her, and as soon as its finger touched the small bit of her not covered by the Antizord’s ugly hand, they saw her body disappear, and she rejoined the others within the Megazord.

They knew that he was right: they had to change tactics. Without Tom and Will, this creature would beat them in a fair fight. They had to adapt.

Jess’ mind took command and sent jets of flame from the Megazord’s hands. Ewan added wind to the mix until a tornado of flame encircled the Antizord. Its flesh steamed and the pus along its body hardened and cracked. April pulled moisture into the air around the flame, creating a thick cloud of steam that shrouded the Antizord and limited its vision. Finally, Jack pulled the lakebed up around the Antizord’s legs to root it in place.

The Megazord dove through the cloud and landed a heavy blow with its sword. One of the creature’s four arms crashed to the ground. The Megazord dodged back out of the steam before the Antizord could retaliate. The Megazord turned to its side and beat its Halcyon wings, sending shards of ice and streaks of lightning into the cloud. The Antizord screamed and lashed out at nothing. Jack and the others had tipped the scales. They could end this.
An explosion of black erupted from the palace’s tallest tower. The mudmen that fluttered around the palace towers dissolved to dust, and soon the Rangers realized that everything – the mudmen dust, the other beasts roaming the palace grounds – was floating through the air and collecting in Rita’s throne room.

Dark power surged from the Antizord, and the steam cloud fell away to reveal one very pissed-off-looking monster. It ripped its legs out of the stone, not even caring that its feet remained beneath the rocks. Green blood dripped from the stumps of its legs. It fell forward and clawed its way toward the Megazord with its three remaining arms. Jack and the others prepared to defend themselves, but the Antizord stopped. The ground shook, nearly toppling the Megazord. Unless their eyes were deceiving them, the palace looked like it was lifting into the air.

Will, thought Jack, Master Tom, what’s going on?

A great black shockwave ripped out from the palace. The Megazord was launched clear off its feet, but as soon as it began to fly backward, the blast reversed itself, and suddenly everything imploded toward the palace. Jack and the others could not stop their flight. They would slam headfirst into the palace at hundreds of miles an hour, and it was going to hurt. The Megazord threw its arms in front of its face to dampen the crash.

Then they heard an odd *shoop!* sound. The Megazord fell into lakebed and slid on its arms and face for several hundred meters before grinding to a stop. Slowly, the Megazord climbed to its feet and looked behind it, where they should have smashed into the palace.

But the palace wasn’t there. In its place was a deep, gaping hole.

Will! thought Ewan. Master Tom! They could not sense the White or Black Ranger anywhere.

Rangers, thought Zordon. Jack didn’t like his somber tone. Will and Tom are alive, but...

But what? demanded Jess. Where the fuck are they? The Dark Dimension?

No. They are in space. I am transmitting their coordinates to you. I know you are badly damaged, but you must make all possible haste.

Always wanted to be an astronaut, thought Ewan. Alright everyone. Hang on to your asses. It’s my turn to lead this thing. The Megazord’s wings shifted from Halcyon to Phoenix. Jack? I could use a little boost.

You got it.

Jack manipulated the earth around the Megazord. They felt the ground rumble around their feet. Suddenly, the earth exploded up in a wide pillar under the Megazord that launched them high into the clouds. Then Ewan took over, with April and Jess doing what they could to help boost their rapid ascent.

So, thought Ewan, space, huh? Is there a story with that one, or did Rita just feel like stretching her legs a little?

I am afraid there is much to explain, thought Zordon. Rita has been freed from the Dark Dimension’s grasp, but something even worse has arisen to take her place. Under normal circumstances I would teleport you and the Megazord to their location, but I lack the strength for such a feat. You must put every ounce of what you have into speed. You have a great distance to cover, and Tom, Will, Rita, and the woman Kimberly Hart could not be in greater peril.
**Peril is our specialty**, thought Jack.

*Hey, Jack*, thought Ewan. *About that vision you had…*

*I did not enjoy having sex with Rita, if that’s what you mean.*

*No no, not that – though you know I’m never going to let you live that one down. I just had to ask: don’t you think it’s funny that the old Green Ranger’s name was Grock? Like, G-Rock?*

Jack would have rolled his eyes if he could. Truth was, though, he needed some levity right now. They all did.

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**Chapter 5 – Tom**

No air. Ice crawled along his face. Tom floated inside the throne room, sure that death would come soon.

There was nothing he could do. He kicked his legs, flapped his arms, but nothing stopped his weightless rise toward the ceiling. His helmet bumped through the room in front of him, and Kim…

When they had freed Rita, Kim’s restraints had dissolved, but now she suffered the same fate as Tom. Only Lord Zedd and Rita stood anchored to the floor. Zedd walked between their floating bodies with ease, laughing at their pathetic attempts to correct their paths while Rita simply glared.

*There has to be something I can do,* thought Tom. *There has to be.*

“Humans really are the most wretched creatures,” said Lord Zedd as he strode out onto his balcony. Earth loomed just beyond, a blue backdrop outlined in black. “I can see them. I can hear their thoughts. So much evil. They crawl upon the planet’s surface like vermin.” Lord Zedd snorted in what may have been a laugh or a sneeze. “But I could never destroy them. I find their sins positively delicious!”

The realization hit Tom like a roundhouse to the face. He wasn’t powerless. He was still a Ranger, and out in space, there was hardly anything but shadow. While Zedd stood with his back turned to them, happily monologuing, Tom shadow-blinked to his helmet, put it on, took a deep breath, then blinked to Kim’s side and put the helmet over her head. His movement reminded Rita that she wasn’t alone, so she waved her hand at them, and suddenly Tom was no longer quite so cold. He still couldn’t breathe, but it was a start.

“I allowed Rita to have her fun because it created chaos,” continued Lord Zedd, “and chaos breeds evil. Wipe out humans?” he laughed. “No! I waited until she had killed enough humans to grant me a body that could destroy you. You see, I plan on sending raiding parties to the Earth every so often, just to stir things up, keep the world unstable. Humanity will fear the dark again. And fear, oh how fear breeds such evil!

“But as thrilling as it would be to battle you rabble day in and day out, I would rather go about my galactic rule undisturbed. Speaking of which, I don’t hear you choking. Did you die without my permission?”

Will used the light, unfiltered by any sort of atmosphere, to blink next to Tom. Lord Zedd turned to the pair of them, clearly expecting Tom and Kim to have suffocated. What he found instead was a
a hail of black and white laser beams crashing into his chest. Rita thrust her hands forward, and large, dark shadows spewed forth to thud against Zedd alongside the Rangers’ blasts.

He grunted, more from surprise than pain, as the storm of blasts knocked him off the balcony and into open space. We have to save Kim, thought Tom. She can’t survive long out here.

Right, thought Will. He took Tom’s helmet off Kim and flung it back to Tom. Then, Will removed his own helmet and placed it over her. To Tom’s surprise, he could hear Kim’s thoughts transmitted from the White Ranger helmet.

“Kim! He thought to her. Kim, it’s me! We’re going to get you out of here, alright?”

Tommy! she thought. What’s going on?

It’s a really long story that I can’t even begin to explain. Just hang on, okay? Do you trust me?

I trust you. I’m just… so confused…

I know. We’re going to get you home as fast as we can.

Lord Zedd floated back onto the balcony. Movement in space appeared as natural to him as anything. He had placed the Rangers at a huge disadvantage, and he knew it. This was his realm.

“You think your little pea-shooters can harm me?” he demanded. “I am the ruler of this galaxy! I am a god!”

Rita, Tom thought, can you hear us?

Yes, thought Rita.

Okay. Will: grab Kim and ride the light out of here. Get her back to Earth.

I’m not leaving you, Will thought.

I can survive long enough for you to come back, but she takes priority. You know what she means to me.

I do, but you know what you mean to me.

Even after seeing all of Will’s memories, the comment still surprised Tom. I do, he said, but we have to take the risk, or she’ll die.

Will obviously wanted to argue more, but Lord Zedd had waited long enough. He leapt between them and used his staff to blast the four humans away from each other. Tom, Will, and Rita slammed hard against the throne room’s walls. Kim flew over the balcony and into open space, the White Ranger’s helmet still clinging tightly to her head. Tom yelled after her, but even as he watched, a massive hand plucked her from view, leaving a trail of frozen green pus in its wake. Rita reached a hand toward the window, but nothing happened. She cursed, but the sound did not carry.

Will and Tom each used their elements to shift their bodies out of the throne room. But Will’s light was much faster than Tom’s shadow, and before Tom ever reached the balcony he felt a hand around the back of his neck. It pulled him out of his shadow and turned him around. A pair of glowing red eyes stared hard into his.

“All it would take is a flick of my wrist,” said Lord Zedd. He tightened his grip, and pain shot down Tom’s spine. “How does it feel, knowing that the woman whom you so foolishly love will die? If
the cold of space doesn’t kill her, the sun’s radiation will.” Zedd laughed. When he did, he sounded like Goldar. “Heh heh heh. I think I’ll let the Antizord hang on to her for a little while longer. I want you to watch her die… or should she watch you? I can’t decide. Oh, it’s been so long since I’ve had such a direct impact on the chaos! It brings me such joy!”

*Then he’ll love this.*

A white boot crunched against the metal of Zedd’s mouth. Zedd released Tom, who had to shadow-blink to keep himself from spinning uncontrollably around the room. Will light-shifted across the room to follow up with a kick at near light-speed. It hit Zedd so hard that he blasted through the palace wall and kept going as if it hadn’t even been there.

*The Antizord has Kim,* thought Will.

*I am sorry I could not save her,* thought Rita.

Tom flung Will the Black helmet. They’d have to share until…

*It’s not your fault,* Tom thought to Rita. *Let’s go get her back.* Will placed a hand on Rita’s shoulder, and the three of them teleported outside, into open space.

The sensation was profoundly disorienting. They were in orbit over Earth. North America sat directly below them, covered here and there by wispy gray clouds. Tom felt like they should be falling. Nothing about this felt real, but then, that could be said of this entire night.

*Zordon, thought Will, can you hear me?* He pushed the helmet back to Tom.

*I can,* said Zordon. *It is good to see that you are alright. And… Rita?*

*Hello, Zordon,* she thought. There was no mistaking the weight in her voice. It was the first time she had spoken to Zordon since the darkness has taken over.

*Rita… There is much I would say to you.*

*And I you. But we will save that for another day.*

*Yes… The Megazord is on its way, but it will take some time.*

*There she is!* pointed Tom.

The Antizord floated before Rita’s – no, Lord Zedd’s – palace. It held a tiny human in one of its mangled hands. Before either Ranger could react, it raised that hand to its mouth and threw Kim down its throat.

*NO!* Tom’s mind screamed. He shadow-blinked toward the Antizord, heedless of Will and Rita calling after him. He would cut Kim out of this thing’s body if he had to. He had his dagger ready. His shadow-warp would take him straight to the Antizord’s neck. If he was fast enough, he could…

He smashed into an invisible wall that stopped him cold. The Antizord was still hundreds of meters away. Lord Zedd stood on its shoulder, his staff pointed at Tom and his head thrown back in laughter. “I’ve changed my mind!” he said. “Perhaps I will let you Rangers survive after all. Fighting you is so much more entertaining than spreading chaos among the worthless insects of Earth! Come, attack me, Rangers!”

Still laughing, he melted into the Antizord, which quickly began to change. Everywhere there had
once been evidence of Rito or Squatt or Baboo – the rotted bone, the clumps of blue fur, the grayish skin – these things disappeared under black matter and a silver exoskeleton. Flesh rippled over flesh. The Antizord withered as it changed. It grew even larger than before. Its vestigial limbs disappeared until all that was left was the sleek body of Lord Zedd, standing taller than his palace. Traces of the White Ranger helmet shimmered around Zedd’s face like a mirage.

*I feared that this would be his play, thought Rita. There is little else I can do to stop him, except this.* She threw her arms around Will and Tom and hugged them tight. *Believe in the power of life over death. You can win. And Zordon... I forgive you.* She turned from them and shadow-traveled straight into the growing monstrosity. It dwarfed her so much that Tom hardly even saw the dark speck of Rita Repulsa disappearing into the monster’s body.

*Rita! Tom thought. Zordon! What did she just do? Isn’t that helping Zedd?*

*Rita will not be bent to his will again, said Zordon. Tom was surprised at the sorrow in his voice. She will fight him from the inside.*

The monster finished its gruesome transformation just after absorbing Rita. It looked down at its new body and laughed.

“Go,” said Zedd, his voice deeper now that he was so huge. “Find your friends, and see if you can challenge my might. And you,” he pointed at Will, “try to catch your breath, won’t you?” A black force punched the Rangers hard in the chest. Tom’s body lurched. He and Will tumbled toward the Earth, alone in the black of space.
Chapter 1 – Zordon and Bill

The being that was both Zordon and Professor Bill Cranston surveyed the city through a hastily-repaired scanner. Those few citizens not huddled inside the Green Ranger’s tunnels watched the Megazord in awe. The great machine rose faster than any human rocket, though it left no trail except the golden wisps of warm air that curled off its wings. Ewan and the others were giving the Megazord all they had, but one by one they were leaving their elements behind. Jack felt it first, then April, then Ewan, and finally Jess.

“What’s happening?” asked Bill.

*The Rangers draw much of their power from me, said Zordon, but the rest, they draw from Nature itself. As they leave Earth’s atmosphere…*

“They’re severed from their power sources.”

Yes. *And as I am now, I cannot supply them with enough to defeat Lord Zedd. All they have now is the energy they took with them.*

“Like a battery that they won’t be able to recharge.”

*Indeed. Lord Zedd, meanwhile, has drawn every last trace of the Dark Dimension into himself.*

“So the city is clear of mudmen?”

*Correct.*

Bill’s half of their mind raced. He wasn’t ready to give up. They darted about the Command Center to look for a solution, but all they found was that one of the monitors could pick up the news again. Reluctantly, Bill turned it on. Usually he worked best in silence, but sometimes, having a bit of background noise helped him concentrate.

“…live at Angel Lake just outside of Cedar Grove, where the impossible continues to become reality.” The screen showed shaky camera work that followed the battle between the Megazord and the Antizord. Suddenly the palace and the Antizord disappeared as if drawn through a portal, and a moment later, the Megazord launched itself out of the camera frame to follow. “As you can see, these two enormous creatures fought in Angel Lake, which somehow has completely drained.”

The shot cut to twin girls battling over a microphone. “Rita captured us!” said one.

“Yeah!” said the other. “We were in that prison, like, all night. It smelled nasty.”

“So nasty.”

“How did you escape?” the reporter asked from off-screen.
"The Power Rangers!"

"Yeah! One of them was a girl. She saved us! Then her lava monster helped us get out of the lake before that big gross thing with all the arms tried to get us."

"The… Power Rangers?" asked the reporter.

"That’s right. Rita wanted us to be, like, her slaves. The Power Rangers are gonna save everybody!"

Bill turned down the news. "Why would Rita want slaves?" he asked. "More humans for her to change into mudmen?"

Not all of them, thought Zordon. _Rita wanted to kill all humans, or so she thought. Dark Matter – Lord Zedd – manipulated her mind. Each life taken without consent fueled him until he was able to materialize on his own._

"Life powered him?"

_There is no stronger energy in the universe than life. Lord Zedd manipulated Rita into making human sacrifices._ To highlight this, Zordon directed Bill’s mind to a memory of his own. Zordon had watched citizen after citizen be turned into mudmen for Rita’s army. Bill felt his despair, knowing that he would have to send the Power Rangers to kill these monsters who, moments ago, were the very people the Rangers had sought to protect. _Such an evil act, even when performed under manipulation, would provide Zedd with a great deal of energy. He feeds off the imbalance of nature. That is what he is, Professor Cranston: the essence of chaos. He is the Dark Dimension in its purest, most dangerous form. Any murder, any life taken without consent, grants him immense power, which he has had eons to accumulate._

Bill’s mind clicked as a puzzle piece he didn’t even know he had fell into place. "You said ‘life taken without consent.’ What about life given freely?"

_Lord Zedd would receive none of that power, for it would be good. It was how the White Ranger of old was able to cheat death long enough to imprison Rita on Mars. If life is the greatest form of energy, then the free gift of one’s own life is the greatest form of good. Such an altruistic act would…_

"Tip the scales back in our favor," finished Bill. He turned their gaze to the monitor watching the Megazord climb into low orbit. "I know what I have to do."

Zordon could sense his thoughts. Theirs was two sides of the same brain, after all. _No; you have done enough for the cause already; I could never ask such a thing of you._

"You already did, and I already gave my answer. I did not expect for my consciousness to continue, and neither did you."

_There must be an alternative._

"Something held me in this world. If I offer myself, fully, the equation balances out."

_You are not simply part of an equation, Bill, said Zordon. You are not a number. You matter. Your life is incalculable._

Slowly, it dawned on Bill. The final puzzle piece fell into place.
“You kept me alive,” he said.

_The mere intention of your sacrifice was enough to sustain much of what we have done_, said Zordon. _I… did not want to lose you if I did not have to._

Bill didn’t know what to say. He hadn’t felt truly close to anyone since Trini. “The variables changed,” he said. “We both know that I was not meant to survive the fusing process. Let me go. Let my death mean something.”

Zordon remained silent. Bill thought he was wasting time. At this, Zordon’s mind stirred again. _I understand what must be done. You are correct, Professor. The variables changed. I miscalculated everything about tonight… except you. You were exactly what I hoped you would be._ Zordon began the preparations. _I ask that you trust me. This will take but only a moment._

“Thanks, Zordon. Is there anything I need to do?”

_Only that you understand this: your life meant something. More than you could ever know. I will never be able to express how much I have valued our time together, Bill Cranston. Never before has a human mind been so compatible with mine._

Already, Bill’s mind could feel Zordon’s separate from his. _So this is what death feels like_, Bill thought. Considering the circumstances, he felt oddly calm. Their body sat down and leaned against a broken console. Their eyes closed. They took a deep breath of the cold morning air and let it sting their lungs.

“Before I go,” said Bill, “I wanted to say that I think I know why the Power chose the people it did: they are broken. Those kids are imperfect, and unstable, and damaged. The Power chose them not for themselves, but for you, Zordon. It knew that you needed to see that you are not alone, that the ones best able to care for a broken world are the ones who have had to put themselves back together first.”

Zordon could think of nothing to say to that. Bill smiled. “Goodbye, Zordon.”

*Goodbye, my friend.*

Then, Zordon flooded Bill’s mind with memories, each one centered around one specific person. These were not the fractured memories of a human, mere flashes of images and imperfect recollections; no, Zordon’s memory was perfect, as though Bill stood in the past once more. He was in his high school, watching as two figures met before their class.

“Good morning Billy!” said Trini. She hugged him, and Bill would swear he felt her embrace.

**Chapter 2 – Jess**

*Too late to turn back now! thought Ewan.*

*The palace is up ahead, thought April, and so is… What is that?*

They could just barely see something like the Antizord near the palace, but in the black of space the creature was hard to make out. The Megazord was having a hard time tracking Will and Tom, too, thanks to interference from the Antizord.
Incoming! thought April. The Antizord slung dark blasts at them like some evil meteor shower. As they dodged around the first, they turned and watched it tear by. Then their stomachs dropped as they realized their mistake. The blast would continue down to Earth, surely causing as much damage as a nuke if they didn’t stop it. Frantically, they aimed a blast of light from their hand which scattered the dark blast into nothing. With the blast, they felt a small bit of their power drain and not return. They were cut off from their elements. This was about to become a deadly exercise in resource management.

They turned and threw their sword at the next blast, then used the White Lion power to pull a white shield out of sunlight. This they kept with them to plough through dark blasts while they fired hand beams and rock chunks and ice shards and wind arrows at all the other dark meteors. They took down dozens, but hundreds more rained down upon them. Their light shield fractured, but they pushed on, watching the palace and Antizord through the light of their shield. At this rate, they might lose power before their fight even began.

Exhausted, they punched through a dark blast and felt their shield shatter entirely. They threw the pieces and found that only a handful of blasts remained.

Wait, thought April. Those last two aren’t blasts. Go for them!

They pushed the Megazord toward two much smaller objects falling in their direction, and one by one the Megazord reabsorbed Tom and Will, the latter of which was dangerously close to death without his helmet. As each rejoined their team, the others felt their energy stores replenish, and they realized that these two could draw power from the light and dark of space. Then they saw the two Rangers’ new memories, of Rita’s sacrifice and Lord Zedd’s rebirth, and their hearts sank.

Once, thought Ewan, just fucking once tonight, I wouldn’t mind catching a break.

“Ah!” said Lord Zedd as the Megazord slowed to a stop before him, “the full team at last. This shall be the first of many glorious battles to come!” The dust of all the mudmen slowly rose from Cedar Grove to fuse into Zedd as he talked. “With each defeat, chaos will spread, and my dominion over this planet shall increase!” Cackling to himself, he advanced on their position. His hands were curled around something, but the Rangers couldn’t see any weapon. Quickly they formed the blue trident in the right hand and the white shield in the left. They jabbed at Zedd, but he ducked with blinding speed that gave a merry “fuck you” to physics. The Megazord just barely parried the invisible weapon, but they were too slow to block Zedd’s follow-up attack. Jack used stone to harden their skin just as Zedd’s weapon crunched into their chest. Shards of rock scattered in all directions. Jack caught the shards with his mind and flung them into Zedd from all sides. They bounced off him with no effect.

“What’s this?” chuckled Zedd. “Have you already devolved into throwing rocks?”

“You really put the ‘dick’ in ‘dictator,’ don’t you?” said Ewan.

Zedd charged again.

He was truly fast. He flashed around the Megazord, slashing with an invisible blade that cut the Rangers deep on all sides. Zedd knocked the trident out of their hands, so they replaced it with the black dagger, which was quicker in close quarters. But even the dagger was not enough; soon it, too was knocked away. Their shield was shattered again, so the Megazord flew back and formed the yellow bow. It managed two shots before Zedd closed the distance and kicked the bow away. The Megazord summoned the green hammer, but it fared no better. Zedd twisted it from their hands, grabbed the Megazord’s neck, and began punching it hard in the stomach.
“You have tried all your weapons,” laughed Zedd as he hammered away. “And yet, they are no match for something you can’t even see! Here I don’t even use my weapon, and I still beat you to a bloody pulp! Oh how you bore me. I expected so much more, after the headache you gave Rita. Maybe I will kill you now, after all. I think I prefer boredom to disappointment.” He began alternating between gut punches and jabs to the face. The Megazord tried to block, but they were just too sapped of power. “The legendary Power Rangers – my greatest foes for all this time, and now you stand with your backs to the abyss. How long have I waited for this day, how long have I suffered in the black void alone while you basked in the light!” He spat in their face. “Pathetic worms! Your supposed righteousness is but a form of psychological self-preservation! Goodness is humanity’s greatest lie, and here I will end it.”

We have to get him off us, thought Will.

But how? asked Tom. We can’t shake him!

How about a kick to the nuts? offered Ewan.

Does he even have nuts? thought Jess.

Only one way to find out.

Ewan took over controls of the legs. While Zedd aimed another hook at their face, Ewan swung a foot up and landed a hard shot between Zedd’s legs. He roared in fury, but not pain. He redoubled his attack, still holding on to the Megazord.

Damn, thought Ewan. That always works in the movies.

They felt the Megazord threatening to break apart. The six minds began to separate. April struggled to hold them together, but unless they found a way to break Zedd’s assault and recover their depleted energy, the

Rangers only had a few seconds left.

Suddenly the Megazord lit up like a Christmas tree, blazing with multicolored light. Lord Zedd tumbled back toward his palace.

Rangers, thought Zordon, now is your chance! Rita fights Zedd from the inside, and Professor Cranston has provided you with one last surge of power; you must unleash it now!

The Rangers could feel Professor Cranston’s essence coursing through the Megazord, which was so bright now that they could clearly see Lord Zedd and the weapon he held in his hand. It was a black staff, similar to the one which Rita had used, but with a long blade on its end. The Rangers felt their exhaustion lift. The new energy combined with the remaining stores from each of the Rangers, and suddenly each of the six elements began to take shape around the Megazord: stone armor, wind wings, fiery arms, pulsing veins, dark aura, and light. So much light.

Together, thought Will.

Together, said the others.

The six Power Rangers summoned their weapons at the same time. Each one appeared in a burst of color before disappearing into an ever-shifting mass in the Megazord’s hands. One by one, sword, trident, hammer, bow, dagger, and shield melded together until, quite suddenly, Lord Zedd found himself staring down the barrel of an enormous cannon.
“What’s this?” Zedd laughed. “Is that a little light I see?”

“Yeah,” said the Megazord. “Go toward it!”

The Megazord pulled the trigger.

They rocked back, nearly losing their balance from the great beam that burst from the cannon. All the colors of the rainbow swirled over each other in a prismatic ray of light. Lord Zedd unleashed a beam of pure darkness from his staff. The two met between them and exploded, sending shards of energy spraying in all directions. The force pushed the Megazord back, but the Rangers did not let up. They gave the attack everything they had: every last ounce of energy, every bit of whatever it was that Professor Cranston had given them. Tom and Will pulled every last ounce of power from space, and the other four reached into the depths of their abilities to pull anything they could from the Earth hundreds of miles below them. Lord Zedd pushed harder, and slowly the point where both rays came together began to inch toward the Megazord.

Dark Matter makes up 95% of the universe, Zordon said now, just as he had told them when they’d first met, and all of life makes up the other 5%. But that 5% of good is more powerful than the 95% of bad. Have faith, Rangers. The Power Rangers knew that it was now or never. They would either defeat Lord Zedd right here, right now, or they would die trying. Each of them felt the urge to give every last bit of themselves into this attack. Each knew they would sacrifice themselves to protect humanity: their parents, their siblings, their children, their friends. As one, the Rangers agreed to lay down their lives.

Honor, Cunning, Harmony, Courage, Spirit, and Strength poured into the Megazord’s attack, and the colors intensified. The roar of the attack was deafening, though they heard no sound. All six Rangers pushed their last reserves of energy into one, final blast.

The beam of colored light overwhelmed the darkness. Lord Zedd’s red eyes widened as he realized, too late, what was about to happen. “NO!” he screamed. The beam shattered his staff. Suddenly unimpeded, the Megazord’s blast enveloped Lord Zedd’s body in its light, not stopping until it hit the palace hovering far behind him. The resulting explosion was unlike anything the world had ever seen. Rings of every color radiated out from the palace. Sparks of red, blue, white, and all the other colors popped like the fireworks that had never flown on this hellish Fourth of July.

Then the palace, with Lord Zedd’s body pressed against it, tore apart with a deep, bone-shaking boom. Colors flew in all directions. Debris fell to the Earth and burned up in its atmosphere. When the explosion hit the Megazord, all that the Rangers felt was a calming warmth.

Except there was no Megazord. They had used all their power, and now the zords broke apart and disappeared, leaving six Power Rangers floating in space, broken but victorious. The silence was almost overwhelming.


I have to pee, he thought. All this fucking “saving the world” shit, and I have to fucking pee.

One by one the other Rangers broke into exhausted laughter until Will began to choke, his helmet having been destroyed inside Lord Zedd. The realization brought the party to a screeching halt. Jess and the others looked to Tom, who wasn’t laughing.

He watched the epicenter of the explosion, removing his helmet and handing it to Will, hardly even reacting to the cold of space.
Kim was still in there, Will thought.

She can’t be gone, thought Tom. She just can’t…

Actually, thought Jack, I am picking up something over there. Some kind of weird energy fluctuation.

Fuck, thought Jess. Did Zedd survive?

I don’t know, thought Jack. I—

Rangers! yelled Zordon. Get out of there!

Suddenly the Rangers realized that they were moving. Something was pulling them into the space where the palace had stood.

Teleport us out! thought Will. We can’t move!

I cannot! said Zordon. I have no power left!

Where Lord Zedd’s body had exploded, there now formed a black hole that sucked in all the debris from the palace, all the mudmen dust still rising from Earth. The Rangers fell, faster and faster, gaining speed to a dangerous degree as the stars beyond the energy fluctuation were swallowed up in a darkness so profound that it made Jess dizzy.

One by one, the Rangers broke the event horizon.

Chapter 3 – Rita Repulsa

Ten-thousand years ago, Rita entered the Dark Dimension for the first time. The last thing she remembered was standing over Dreadwing’s body next to the fallen dragon. Now, she stood alone in dark clouds of muted blues and purples. They swirled over each other as a presence greeted her.

“What is this place?” she asked. Her voice echoed in the nothing.

“Your freedom,” it said. “I know the struggle within you. You sense that Zordon has not revealed all his secrets.”

“Yes,” Rita said hesitantly. She wasn’t sure she trusted this voice yet. Something about it was off, even if what it said resonated with her deepest thoughts.

“You sense correctly. I would reveal to you what he will not. He keeps the greatest wonders of the universe from you. I can make you a master over death itself. I know you have already dabbled in the art. Zordon would trap you within his Command Center. With my power at your disposal, you can have a family again.”

Images shimmered before her of the life she had before she had become a Ranger. Parents, siblings, cousins, she had abandoned nearly all of them for the sake for the sake of the planet. Now, hundreds of years later, she nearly never left the Command Center except on missions. The world had not held anything for her in decades. She had numbed herself to this fact for so long that now she felt her isolation as if for the first time. She gasped for air, suddenly suffocating in the darkness of her thoughts.
“My family is the Rangers,” she said, though even she hardly believed herself.

“The Rangers are no family,” the voice said calmly. “Zordon has lied to you about your powers, and he has lied to you about the importance of family. I will show you the truth.”

“Zordon… lied…” said Rita.

Chapter 4 – Ewan

He knew where he was in an instant. One did not simply forget the Dark Dimension.

After everything they had gone through tonight, this was the last place he wanted to be. They had beaten Lord Zedd! They should be kicking back by a pool!

Instead, Ewan tumbled headlong into a chunk of a black stone wall. He slammed against it and bounced through oblivion.

There was no ground here, no up and no down; he may as well have still been out in space. All around him was darkness, the gray mist that was so characteristic of this place, and the shattered remains of Rita’s palace. In the distance, the mist gathered into clouds the size of cities and swirled onto each other to form a black storm. Yet when Ewan tried to manipulate the air around him, nothing happened.

He flopped against another piece of debris, but this time he held on. The chunk of rock tumbled slowly over itself, but at least now it offered him something stable to hold onto while he looked around. The black hurricane was impossibly huge, but so, too, was the space where Ewan found himself. It seemed to go on forever – a big black nothing with no floor, no ceiling, and no walls. Just tumbling debris and one tiny human in a goofy yellow suit.

Wait, he thought, some of that’s not debris… He looked closer. Though much of what he saw was chunks of Rita’s palace, he also noticed hundreds of monstrous bodies dotting the air like black snowflakes. Each one appeared frozen in identical cries of anguish.

To his surprise, he heard someone call his name. Two small dots quickly approached from below him. As they got closer, he saw that one was blue. April, he thought. Thank God.

But once they drew near, he saw that the blue one was not April but Baboo – or, to be more precise, the woman Baboo used to be. Ewan struggled to remember her name. Manga? No. Monga.

She floated before him, and he realized that he could see through her. “Fuck!” he cried.

“I understand that this must be confusing for you,” said the ghost. “But we don’t have much time. In slaying the beast I had become, you Rangers freed my soul. This is the only way I know how to give back to you.”

The second form floated to a stop next to Monga. “M… Mom?” Ewan gasped.

The specter of his mother beamed at him. “Oh honey,” she sobbed, “I’m so proud of you.” Veins of fire traced their way along her skin, as though she had not completely regained herself after spending the night as a mudman.
“The Dark Dimension is collapsing,” said Monga. “Lord Zedd clings to your world, but he absorbed too much power. Between your disrupter bomb, the Megazord’s final attack, and the fight that Rita led within his body, he became deeply unstable. He will soon collapse upon this space, and if you remain in here, you will be lost forever.”

Monga’s soul took off in a direction. “We’ll explain on the way, sweetie,” said his mother.

Ewan sighed. Even now, he hated when she was right. He aimed his jump as carefully as any dive. His mother followed close behind.

They sailed for a small eternity through pure nothing. Ewan simply floated, hoping that his body still pushed forward. He’d had a thousand questions for Monga, but seeing his mother had taken the air from his lungs. He didn’t know what to say to her when she was alive, but now that she was dead…

Monga cast him a sideways glance. “I thought you were the one who could never keep his mouth shut.”

“I’m having an off day.”

“Monga sweetie,” offered Mom, “why don’t you start by explaining how we all got here.”

Ewan grumbled to himself. If we all make it out of here, she’s going to haunt me for the rest of my life. I’ll have a goddamn spirit reminding me to do the laundry.

Monga nodded at Ewan’s mother. “Grock and I perished when you set off that bomb, Yellow Ranger. But Rita forced our bodies into the Antizord before our spirits had fully separated.”

“So Serket and Rito…”

“Are not here,” she said. “Their souls have already transcended. But Grock and I have vowed to aid you while we can. I was unsure you would trust me after everything that has happened, but fortunately for me your mother was here.” Monga gasped. “I… apologize. That was a terribly insensitive thing to say.”

“It’s alright, dear,” said Mom. “It wasn’t your fault! Ewan sweetie, I can’t tell you how proud I am of all you’ve done.”

“I decided I’d try not being a screw-up for a night,” said Ewan.

Mom smiled. “Not just tonight. I’ve always been proud of you.”

“Then you’re crazier than I thought.”

Still smiling, Mom nodded at something floating up ahead. “Your little friend needs you, hon.”

Monga nodded. “Indeed. We must rouse him, and quickly.”

Ewan’s trajectory took him straight into the limp body of the White Ranger, who still wore the Black Ranger helmet. Ewan caught him over his shoulder and heard him grunt as their “flight” changed course.

“Hey Will,” he said, “I gotcha.”

Will mumbled something. He sounded like he was only barely conscious. Ewan would have to carry him in the meantime.
“Just hang tight buddy. We’re getting out of here.”

“Why is it so hard for you to believe that I’m proud of you?” said Mom.

“Even if this place does go on forever,” said Ewan, “I still wouldn’t have enough time to list the reasons.”

His mother pressed on. Being dead certainly did nothing to quiet her down. “You chose paths that made life more difficult, but you stuck to them, and you gathered friends around you who kept you from going astray. I’m proud of you because of what you see in others.” She laughed. “Whether you realized it or not.”

“The others are gathering up ahead,” said Monga. She paused, as though listening to something Ewan couldn’t hear. “Rita has located a rift.”

“Rita?” asked Ewan. “Trusting you is one thing, but that bitch…”

"Ewan,” warned Mom. “Language.”

“Rita was as much a puppet as I,” said Monga. “She will make amends before the end. Indeed, it was her idea to fight within Zedd, to limit his power just at the moment when your Megazord gave its final push.”

A dark spot formed up ahead, with little pops of color around it. One by one, he could make out several of the Rangers, as well as the hulking spirit of Grock and the wispy dark spirit of Rita. She floated alongside a dark thing that looked like a black kayak. As he got closer, Ewan could see stars within it.

“Where is the Black Ranger!?” Rita demanded as they approached.

“Did you not find him?” Monga called back. The spirit of the old Blue Ranger weaved through debris and monster bodies with ease, but Ewan wasn’t so lucky. He and Will fell into a rock and bounced apart. Ewan lost control and tumbled over himself until he collided with something else. He turned to find a mudman’s face staring back at him, the life in its eyes long gone. Ewan placed his feet on the monster’s body and made to jump off it to save Will, but just then another body floated by.

Master Tom, still in his Ranger suit but with no helmet, ran into Will and carried him toward Rita and the others. Ewan did a double-take; Tom also carried Kim, who wore the White helmet. Her body hung limp over Tom’s shoulder.

“So what’s that thing?” Ewan called to Rita as he leapt from the mudman’s body. He felt his body slow as he neared the group, and soon he came to a complete stop. Jess and Jack floated to his side, having just arrived themselves. April floated near Grock, looking immensely relieved to see everyone there. Will, meanwhile, still fought to stay conscious as Tom held both him and Kim.

“It is a tear in the fabric of the Dark Dimension,” said Rita. She nodded at Will. “He created this when he saved you earlier this night, and the woman Kim helped me keep it open just after Zedd perished, though the exertion knocked her out. The rift is as unstable as the Dimension itself. Tom, you must hurry.”

Master Tom appeared to have expected this. He released Will and Kim, and seemingly on his own he floated to the side of the kayak-shaped tear and grabbed an edge.

Immediately it was as though someone had pulled a plug at the bottom of a bathtub. Everything
around them began to pull toward the tear in a vortex, yet none of the Rangers moved an inch.

“I can only hold it open for a few seconds!” Tom shouted, for the wind was already deafening. “Go, hurry!”

Monga turned and smiled at Ewan. “I will always regret the actions forced upon me,” she said, “but I thank you Rangers for granting me some semblance of redemption.”

“Oh!” boomed Grock. “What she said!” The pair of them turned and floated through the opening.

Rita looked from one Ranger to the other. “You will never know the burden you have lifted from my heart,” she said. “Please, do not make the mistake I made so long ago. Remain united as the family that you have become. And… that includes Zordon.”

None of the Rangers quite knew what to say to her. With a sad smile, Rita turned and disappeared.

The rush of wind grew. Tom’s face was covered in sweat. Both hands were locked on the side of this strange window to the real world. All around them, Ewan would swear that more debris began to fill the air. Was it his imagination, or was that country-sized black hurricane coming closer?

“Come on!” Tom shouted. “You have to go!”

“See you on the other side!” Jess shouted. She dove through the tear, and Jack and April soon followed.

But Will wouldn’t budge. “Can you make it out?” he asked the Black Ranger. Ewan couldn’t tell if the pain in his voice was from fighting to stay conscious or fighting to save his father. He suspected it was both.

Tom didn’t answer. “Master!” yelled Will. “Can you make it?”

“I’ll be alright!” Tom shouted over the wind. “Just take Kim and go!”

“Together!” said Will. Tom wouldn’t look at him. “…Right?”

“Someone has to hold this open!” As if to highlight this fact, there was a great groaning sound, and the tear shrank to the size of a paddleboard. “Go!”

Will floated around to the other side of the tear and tried to grab its edges as Tom had done. His hand went right through. “Why can’t I grab it?” he demanded.

Tom’s answer was hesitant. “Rita possessed me long enough to give me a bit of power over this place. I’m the only one who can hold it open.”

“Then hold it from the other side!”

But Tom only shook his head. “It doesn’t work like that, buddy. Please…”

Will still didn’t move. Beside him, Kim stirred to life. She groaned, as though waking from a deep sleep. “T… Tommy?” she said. She tried to pull the helmet from her face.

“It’s now or never, sweetie,” Mom said quietly at Ewan’s ear.

Ewan knew she was right, but now that the moment had come, he couldn’t say goodbye to her. This was their last chance to ever speak, and he couldn’t find the words. The tear in space groaned and shrunk again. Next time it shrunk, he wouldn’t be able to fit through it. “Mom,” he choked, “I’m…”
“I know sweetie, I know.”

“Will,” Tom said through gritted teeth, “you have to go!”

“Not without you!” Will shouted.

“What’s going on?” asked Kim. She dropped the helmet beside her, where it floated aimlessly.

“You have to leave!” said Tom. “Kim, I’m sorry! I’m so sorry, but you have to get out of here or you’ll die!”

“You knew!” said Will. “The second you grabbed that tear…”

Tom strained against the tear. ‘Buddy, listen to me: you’ll go on to do great things, even greater than you’ve already done! But I have to stay here!”

“You know!” said Will. “The second you grabbed that tear…”

Tom strained against the tear. ‘Buddy, listen to me: you’ll go on to do great things, even greater than you’ve already done! But I have to stay here!”

And die alone!?” shouted Will. “We’re not leaving you behind!”

“They’ll argue like this until it’s too late,” said Mom. “Sometimes, people have to be saved from themselves.” Then she placed her hand against Ewan’s cheek, and he swore he felt her warmth again. “Other times, you have to know when to let go.”

Will, Kim, and Tom continued to argue over who wouldn’t leave without whom. Ewan looked behind him. The hurricane was practically on top of them now. The wind shifted; no longer did it pull toward the tear. Instead, it began to pull away from it, toward the hurricane. The time to act was now or never.

“Love you, Mom,” he said. It was the first time he’d said such a thing to her since he was a kid. Her eyes began to water.

“I love you, too,” she said.

Hardly even knowing how to control his body in this place, he launched forward and collided with Will. As they tumbled toward the tear together, Ewan prepared to grab Kim. She turned and saw what he was about to do.

Kim dodged out of Ewan’s grasp.

As Ewan and Will fell into the tear, Kim embraced Tom. “No one should die alone,” she said. Tom’s eyes met with Will’s, and they shared some unspoken thought. Kim swung her arm, and the White Ranger helmet flew through the tear. Then the world shifted around them, and as Ewan tumbled back into the real world, his last image was that of Tom and Kim clinging to each other as the black hurricane consumed them.

Chapter 5 – April

Two bodies tumbled out of the tear just as it closed with a great, booming explosion. Two bodies, when April had hoped for four. No one knew what to say. There was nothing to say.

The five survivors floated through space with all the aimless intention of a leaf on a lake. In a sense, it was calming up here. The Earth was a truly beautiful sight, and they had saved it. But the cost had been great, and now that cost was all any of them could think about. April felt their pain, heard
their thoughts. It nearly overwhelmed her. Tonight she had learned to channel the pain of others, not take it on herself.

No, that wasn’t right. She’d been learning that all her life. Tonight was just an extreme case.

Zordon charged enough power to teleport them out of orbit and into the Command Center. They landed among debris; exhaustion and shock washed over them as they found themselves outside of their suits. Jack fell to the ground, suddenly devoid of the stone leg maintained by his suit. Jess tried in vain to move the arm that burned red in the dim lights of the Command Center.

April watched with unseeing eyes as their wounds were attended to. Rita’s spell had destroyed her vision. She would never see with normal sight again. Instead, she saw the world as it was beneath the surface, and in many ways that was worse. She longed for a time when she didn’t know the broken auras of the other Rangers. They had won, but oh how they had lost. With the battle over, it was time to mourn.

Will curled up against the wall, sobbing hysterically as the others sat down next to him in silent solidarity. Ewan, Will, and April had each lost their parents. Jack had lost his mentor, and April her coach. She thought of Jess’ time with Kim in Rita’s prison and realized that, in some ways, Jess had lost a mentor, too. No one had come out of this unscathed, not even close. The Dark Dimension had targeted their families. It was why Zordon insisted that they never reveal themselves to other people. It was what had driven Rita to the dark places in her soul.

The Rangers stayed in the Command Center for some time, trying in vain to fight through the pain they were allowed to feel now that the battle was over.

Thus began endless weeks of rescue and rebuild. The media talked itself into a frenzy over whether or not the Power Rangers could possibly be trusted. They were inhuman. They were saviors. They were vigilantes. They were outside the law. According to some, the world would be lost without them. According to others, they were responsible for the attack themselves.

The Rangers teleported into Cedar Grove at night and worked under cover of darkness. Zords were out of the question, but Jack could use the earth to raise buildings. Jess aided her brother, fusing steel beams in place and providing a bit of warmth to the thousands of homeless scattered throughout the city. April cleared the last of the floodwaters and, slowly, returned Angel Lake to its former glory. Ewan flew high above the city, scouting out any trouble for them to solve.

One by one, Will found each of the twelve cryo guns that Professor Cranston had made. He thanked their owners in turn, surprised at how many people he recognized from Master Tom’s memories. Each one served as a painful reminder that he hadn’t been able to save Tom, that he had inadvertently caused the deaths of not two but three parents. April felt his pain, saw it in his diminished aura, but for weeks the team said little to each other. After spending so much time as one mind, they all agreed that they needed a little privacy.

April watched over her sisters closely. Jess had saved them in the prison, and for that April would be eternally grateful. Cassie and Olivia had escaped gruesome fates as mudmen, but now they faced an uncertain future, for their mother was dead, and their father… well, that was out of the question. And yet, whenever they looked over their shoulders, they were sure to see a pair of blue eyes watching them from some distant rooftop. They would wave happily, though April never waved back.

Slowly, the Command Center returned to its old state. Professor Cranston had sacrificed himself for the Rangers, but Zordon had given up much in this act as well. Without Bill, he was once again without a body. His mind jumped from console to console, never content to rest in one place until
the Rangers finished repairing the tank where his essence had sat for so many millennia. Weeks into the rebuilding process, Jack found Alpha’s body buried under a great heap. They teleported it back to the Command Center. Jack spent his nights rebuilding the city and his days rebuilding the robot.

April guided the others through their mourning. She did not leave herself out; her mother had been a great loss to her, and so had Coach Hart. The five Rangers had lost more than just family and friends during Rita’s attack. They had lost themselves, as well. Their old selves had died on the lake cliffs, the moment they were teleported to Zordon’s Command Center. They could never return to their past lives. As far as the world was concerned, April Johnson, Will Weston, Ewan McKay, and Jess and Jack Kelly were among the dead of Angel Grove.

For no one called it Cedar Grove any longer, at least no one within the city. The Power Rangers had become its guardian angels, symbols of hope against all odds, and no one was about to let that go. Those who had survived that night knew that the Power Rangers were the heroes of the city, no matter what the talking heads behind distant desks tried to spin.

Many of the city’s leaders had fallen during the attack. During the rebuilding process, Zack Taylor, Tom’s longtime friend and owner of the Youth Center’s juice bar, took on more and more of a leadership role as the Youth Center remained one of the most in-tact buildings in the city. It was his insistence on the name “Angel Grove” that tipped the scales. It was the name that fueled the hope of the citizens that their city was not lost, just reborn.

Through everything, the five Rangers leaned on each other for support. Each knew the other as completely as they knew themselves. Their love for each other ran deeper than any of them had ever thought possible. They had become a family.

And slowly, ever so slowly, the Rangers recovered from their first night on the job.

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