

*"Middle of the night and it's getting so hard to breathe
You can't sleep, can't think, can't hardly dream
Do you fear what the world wants you to be?
Open your eyes and just see what the world is
Open your mind and you're free*

*There's more in this world than we see,
Just leave these illusions behind and run with me
If all of the things that you thought you would be
Pass you by
We'll find what we need in our lives
We'll find what we need in our lives"
~ "Illusions" Ryan Cabrera*

It was finally here, graduation day...for me anyway. Reefside High was holding it's graduation today, some schools, like Starlight Academy, still had another week before their graduation.

I sat in my room looking myself over. 'Cap and gown, check. Black shoes that fit dress code, check. No smudges on my make-up...check. OK I'm ready to go.' I thought to myself as I headed downstairs.

"Ready." I said.

"I can't believe our baby girl is graduating." Mom said about to cry.

"I know, seems like just yesterday we were bringing her home from the hospital." Dad said putting his arm around Mom.

"Guys, can we not? This isn't that big of a deal." I said.

"Sure it is. You're our little girl Anna, you're growing up." Dad said.

I sighed, "Can we just go?"

My hope of it not being a big deal was crushed altogether when I saw who all showed up for my graduation...some people I wasn't even expecting from out of town. Of course my parents were there, so was Uncle Eric and Aunt Tally. Josh, Noah, DJ, Beth, Savannah, Stacy, and Harley were there as well. This is where I got a shock...my ex-team mates were there as well! Richie, Kristy, Steven, Aurora, and even Crystal were there. Aaron and Logan were there as well. I wanted to go ask so bad what they were doing here but I had to go take my place in the line-up. So much for this day not being a big deal.

Arissa

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I arrived in Thousand Oaks and tried to decide where to go next. I couldn't exactly look up the Thunder Ninja Academy in the phone book. I thought about what I knew. From my research on Jay Watanabe it seemed that he attended McKinney University. That seemed like a good place to start. I went over there and after I changed my form to look like Harley I went in the student center and started asking around. 30 minutes later someone finally told me where I could find Jay.

I went to the building I was directed to and looked around.

"Harley? What are you doing here?" someone asked.

"Jay?" I asked, I was hoping he'd recognize me since I had no clue who he was.

"It's so good to see you." He said.

This was obviously him, "Yeah, well I...I have a favor and only you can help me. I figure you owe me after the crap

you pulled.” I said trying to sound bitter, though I didn’t know exactly what he did to Harley, just that it was bad. He sighed, “I know...I screwed up, I’m really sorry, and of course, if I can do anything for you I’ll be glad to help. I need to get back to the Academy though, would you like to come? I’m sure Mom and Dad would love to see you.” I nodded, “I’d like to see them too. Let’s go.”

We arrive at the Academy and took me to go see his parents. I had to admit, the Thunder Ninja Academy was a pretty nice place. Anyway, we got to the office and Cam was in there with LeAnn.

“Look who came to visit.” Jay said.

“Harley! Hey!” LeAnn said hugging me.

“Hi.” I said returning the hug.

“How are you?”

“I’m fine, thanks.”

“Are you hungry?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Let me go put some tea on. I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll help you” Jay said. I think he was nervous around me.

I sat down and looked at Cam. We were alone now, it was a great time to find out about the Gem.

“So what brings you to the Thunder Academy?” Cam asked.

“I just wanted to get away for a bit. I hadn’t seen you guys for awhile and figured I’d pop by and say hello.” I said.

“I’m glad you’re here. I was worried you wouldn’t come by after what Jay did...for the record I’m really sorry he put you through all that.” Cam said.

I nodded. “Thanks.”

“So, how are your parents?”

“Fine. Dad showed me the coolest thing the other day.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, this really cool gem shard. It was awesome.”

“The Gem of Souls...yeah, I have a shard too.”

“You do?”

“Yes I do. When the Gem was shattered three pieces were disposed of but Hunter hid two. He later admitted he had them. We used their power while we needed it but after Lothor was gone we had no need for them so I gave him back one shard and kept one for myself. They became symbols of our relationship.” Cam explained.

“Relationship?” I asked.

“Yeah. Since Hunter was so anti-marriage at the time it was the closest thing to a commitment symbol we had.”

Oh my god...my father was bi-sexual...he had been in a serious relationship with Cam! Ok, from the way he was talking Harley knew about this...I had to hide my shock. “Why was he anti-marriage?”

“He said he didn’t want commitment...of course then he married your mother after being back with her for less than a month so apparently it was just me. But then again Hunter always did love Michelle. They had a very special connection from the time they met. Even I think they’re soul mates now.”

I nodded, “You don’t like Mich...my mother much, do you?”

“There was a time I hated her more than anyone else on Earth, but that’s the past. I’m very happy now. I have LeAnn and Jay...I couldn’t ask for more. And I’ve also come to realize Michelle isn’t a bad person at all, she didn’t try to hurt me, all she did was love Hunter...it just so happened I loved him too.”

I nodded, “But back when you were with...Dad...the Gem...it was a commitment symbol? And you still have it?”

“Yes, what Hunter and I shared will always be special to me. I don’t keep it out or anything but I have it put away in a safe place.”

“Would you mind showing it to me?” I asked.

“Sure, come on.” Cam said leading me to it. I watched him. He kept it safe disguised as a book. This was so perfect. In a matter of hours the shard would be mine!

April

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I had spent the past few days avoiding Derek...and every other Wildcat. Tiffany didn’t notice because she was too busy snuggling with Chris, Jesse was lost in his own world still, Destiny was stressing about finals, but Derek kept trying to

corner me. I didn't want to tell him what happened at that hotel. I was so ashamed.

It was mid-afternoon and I was in the dorm cleaning up my bunk area.

"April..." Derek said coming in.

"This is the girls' dorm Derek, you can't be in here. You'll get written up if anyone catches you." I said.

"I'll take my chances." He said.

"You won't graduate if you get written up now." I said.

"Like I said, I'll take my chances." He said sitting on my bed, "Sit with me."

I sighed and shook my head, "No."

"Why have you been avoiding me Ape? I thought we were close."

"Well, you were wrong."

"Was I? April, you've been distance since your mom and Ed visited. Why? What happened? Did Ed try something?"

"Just butt out!" I cried.

"No...April, talk to me." He said getting up and grabbing my wrist. He turned me so I had to face him.

"I said leave me alone!" I screamed.

"He did try something didn't he? I've notice bruises on you. April! Tell me!"

"YES HE DID!!! THERE! Are you happy now?" I screamed as I started to cry.

"Oh god."

"He tried to rape me and he beat me and I stopped him. I called the cops and he's in jail...it's over...but...he still...he touched me...his dirty fingers were inside my body...he kissed me and I feel so dirty. How can anyone care about me when I hate myself like this?" I cried harder.

"April...I care...I care so much." Derek said pulling me into his arms.

"But I'm so dirty."

"That doesn't matter to me...you're pure enough for me." He said lifting my chin so he could look in my eyes then he lowered his face to mine and kissed me. I was in shock for a second then I returned the kiss. This was the type of kiss I needed. It was a kiss full of passion and true caring, maybe even love. This was the type of kiss I had always dreamed about but never thought I'd get the chance to experience. For the first time ever I didn't want a kiss to end.

Anna

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After graduation everyone went to Cyberspace. I hugged all my friends.

"What are you guys doing here?!" I asked.

"We couldn't miss watching you graduate." Aurora said.

"Besides, I think a Neo Ranger reunion was long over due." Kristy said.

"We're proud of you Anna." Steven said kissing my cheek.

"How are all you guys?" I asked.

"Fine. I finally got permission to move off campus so I'm moving in with Logan." Kristy said.

"And Steven and I are living together now." Aurora said.

"I'm living in a sorority house at McKinney University and I'm dating Jay Wata...oh..." Crystal paused when she saw Harley glaring, "I swear Harley, I didn't know he hadn't broken up with you when I was dating him. He told me it was over."

"And you're still dating him after what he did?" Harley asked.

"He's a good guy Harley. I'm sorry things didn't work out with you guys but he is a good guy." Crystal said.

"Yeah, as long as he's getting what he wants." Harley mumbled. Josh put his arm around her.

"Anyway...Richie, what have you been up to?" I asked.

"I'm in veterinarian school. Soon as I finish I'm gonna join my dad's practice." Richie said.

"That's great. I'm glad you all are doing so well." I said.

"We hear Stacy is a big shot now." Kristy said play punching Stacy.

"Yeah, well I guess...I'm temporary CEO of Fernandez Industries." Stacy said.

"Thought you hated that big business stuff." Richie said.

"Things change." Stacy said.

"And you...why didn't you tell me you were coming?" I asked hugging Aaron the same time I play hit him.

"I wanted to surprise you. Are you surprised?" he asked.

“Totally. I’m so glad to see you.” I said hugging him tight.

“I have a hotel room if you want to go celebrate alone later.” He whispered in my ear as I hugged him. I just nodded.

“Ok, when things die down here we’ll slip away.” He whispered.

Harley

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I saw that Logan and Kristy went to go sit down. I walked over.

“Hi, can I borrow Logan for a second?” I asked.

“Sure.” Kristy said.

Logan and I walked over to a corner. “So, why were you one of the only two Genesis Rangers that never came to see me? I thought we were friends Logan.” I said

“We are friends, but I was in school. I couldn’t get away...and from the looks of things you’re fine.” Logan said.

“That isn’t the point.”

“I’m sorry Har...I am glad you’re ok. I just...I couldn’t get away.”

I nodded, “Fine. At least I found out who my true friends were.” I turned and went to sit with Josh.

Arissa

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I spent the day talking to Cam and LeAnn about my dad...Hunter...and anyway, it was educational. Turns out Hunter was a pretty amazing guy after all...I mean he seemed cool enough anyway, but he was really a good guy. And also turns out Michelle was pretty highly respected around the Thunder Ninja Academy too. I was really beginning to question my mission.

Right before dinner Jay and I went for a walk.

“So how have you been?” Jay asked.

“I’m fine.” I said.

“You seeing anyone?”

“Yeah. Josh McKnight. He’s a really amazing guy.” I said, this pretending to be Harley wasn’t so fun anymore. I remembered how Josh used to be mine and I started to get angry. I had to hold that anger in.

“Really? Josh McKnight...wow.”

“Yeah...you seeing anyone?”

“Crystal Mitchell. She forgave me for lying to her about us.”

“Why did you do it?”

“What? Cheat on you with Crystal? I don’t know Har...it was the distance I guess. I got lonely and Crystal was there. We bonded right away with her step mother being Aunt Haley and everything...one thing just led to another. As for why I never told you...that’s easy, I do care about you and I didn’t want to lose you.”

“You should have just been honest.”

“I know...I’m sorry...and I’m really sorry I tried to pressure you...you’re first time shouldn’t be like that...I hope Josh treats you how you deserve to be treated, lord knows I didn’t treat you right.”

“Thanks.” I said. Was I convincing as Harley or what?

“You wanna go back? It’s getting kind of chilly out here and I’m sure dinner is ready.” Jay said.

“Yeah, let’s go.” I said.

After dinner LeAnn showed me to guest quarters. I got settled and then after everyone was asleep I snuck to Cam’s office and picked the lock. I found the book safe and managed to get the lock on the safe open without breaking it. It took a little time but I did it. I got the Gem shard out then closed up the safe and put it away so it didn’t look like it was touched. I slipped out of the office and locked back up. No one would be able to tell I was there. I went back to the room and slipped the shard into my bag. Now I just had to leave in the morning like nothing was out of the ordinary and I was home free.

April

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After the kiss finally broke I looked at Derek.

“Why did you do that?” I asked.

“Because...” he started, breathless, “I...I love you April and I hated seeing you cry. I just want to do something to make your tears stop.”

I froze, “You love me?”

He nodded, “Yeah, I do.”

I hugged him. “I love you too Derek.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. I do...we should get you out of here before someone catches us though.” I said.

“Ok.” Derek took my hand and we went into the woods. We sat by a tree and I kissed him again. We kissed for awhile then I just leaned against him and he put his arms around me.

“What do you see in me?” I asked.

“Someone who is beautiful and has so much to give if she has the chance. I see someone who has been hurt in the worst way possible and someone I can relate to because I’ve been hurt too. I see someone who can make me feel human again and someone I can maybe make feel human again.” He said kissing my head.

“Wow...I wish I saw all that in me.” I said.

“What do you see in me?” he asked.

“Someone who is stronger than he knows and has a strong heart but so much pain inside. Someone who is missing something and needs to fill that void...someone who I would like to fill that void for and someone who truly understands me and doesn’t judge me for what I did in my past...someone who can maybe help me have a brighter future. And most of all...when I look at you Derek, I see something I never though existed, Michelle always told me it did and I never believed her.”

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Hope.”

Anna

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As things started to wind down I went to the back and helped Savannah clean up.

“Shouldn’t you be out there with your friends?” she asked.

“I’d rather be back here with my big sister.” I said.

“Something’s wrong isn’t it?”

“What makes you assume that?”

“Your phrasing...you need some big sister advice don’t you?”

“Advice in general will do. It’s just...well high school is over...what’s next. I don’t know what I want to do now.”

“Well, you could go to Blue Bay Harbor and be with Aaron or you could stay here and go to Reefside U...if you need a job I could use the help here.”

“Thanks...I don’t know...I don’t know where to go or what to do.”

“I bet if you look inside yourself you’ll know where you’re supposed to be next.”

“You think so?”

“I do. Just trust yourself...go for your dreams and don’t hold back...you’re an adult with only yourself to think of...or you will be a legal adult in a week anyway...this is your time to do whatever your heart desires and find out who you are.”

I smiled, “Thanks Savannah...I do know what I’m going to do next.”

After everything at Cyberspace was cleaned up I told my parents Aaron and I were gonna go hang out. We went to the hotel room he had and went inside.

“I’ve missed being close to you so much.” Aaron said pulling me close.

“I’ve miss doing this.” I said as I kissed him. We made our way to the bed and I took his shirt off.

“Whoa, feeling aggressive?” he asked as I then moved down to his jeans.

“I just want you so much.” I said.

“I get that...” he said.

“You gonna talk or you gonna help me here?” I asked as I fumbled in getting my own clothes off.  
“Are you sure you really want this?” Aaron asked.  
“Yes. I do.” I said kissing him.  
“Ok.” He agreed. He helped me get my clothes off then I pushed him back on the bed, pinning him down. “Hold on a second.”  
“What?” I asked annoyed.  
“Well, this could be a little safer.” he said.  
“I’m on the pill.” I said.  
“There’s other things to worry about.” He said.  
“We’ve only been with each other right? It’s fine.”  
“I just think we should be smart about this.”  
“It’ll be fine...just enjoy it.” I said kissing his neck.  
“You’re on the pill?” he asked.  
“Yes, it’s fine. No babies for us.” I said.  
“OK...just this once.” He said.  
“Ok then.” I kissed him then straddled him and lowered myself on to him. He put his hands on my hips and I closed my eyes and I got my rhythm set. “Oh god...” I moaned.  
“Anna...” Aaron held on to my hips tighter.  
I let out a deep moan. It was so amazing, like I went somewhere else. I had been with Aaron before but it had never been like this. The sick part? When I closed my eyes I wasn’t thinking of Aaron...I was thinking of Trent, which is why I was careful not to use names out of fear I’d call out Trent’s name. It was the thought of Trent, not Aaron, being under me that sent me to climax.

April

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Derek and I finally came in from the woods to help with dinner. When we walked into the lodge hand in hand everyone figured out what happened.
“About time you guys!” Tiffany cried.
“Way to go Derek.” Chris said high fiving Derek.
“Another Wildcat couple? Does this mean I’m stuck with Jesse?” Destiny asked playfully.
“Congratulations guys.” Jesse said softly, ignoring Destiny’s joke.
“Did I hear right? Another Wildcat couple?” Harley asked walking in with Josh.
“Yup.” Derek said.
“About time!” Josh said.
I hit him, “Stop that, that’s what everyone is telling us, it’s annoying.”
“Sorry babe.” Josh said kissing my head.
“Well this is great news...I say we celebrate. Let’s get the kitchen clean and we’ll all have some hot fudge sundaes.” Harley said.
We did exactly that.

That night when I fell asleep it was the first night I wasn’t scared about the future. I felt safe.

Arissa

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The next day I double checked that I had the shard. I did. I went to go say goodbye to Cam.  
“Thank you so much for letting me stay here.” I said.  
“You are always welcomed here Harley. Consider this another home.” Cam said hugging me.  
“Next time bring your father, we all miss him.” LeAnn said.  
“I’ll let him know. Thanks for everything.” I said. I turned and left.

It all went down perfectly!

I went back to Aunt Aria.

“I have another shard.” I said holding it up.

“Very good work Arissa. Even with James gone I think our plan can progress as planned.” Aunt Aria said.

“Only one more shard to go.”

“As soon as you get that nothing will be able to stop us.”

“And it will all be over.” I said softly.

“Your victory is at hand Arissa, don’t sound so sad.”

I nodded, “I’m thrilled...really. Michelle will soon be gone.” I said, though I wasn’t sure that is what I wanted anymore.